

CHAPTER THREE

Punishing the Agreement Violators

After the Political Bureau meeting we met with the Military Commission of the party Central Committee to discuss the specific implementation of the Political Bureau's Resolution. On 1 June 1973 the B2 delegation met to discuss the contents of a preliminary guidance message to be sent back to our theater and make preparations for our return. I still had a lot of specific things to do with the General Staff, the Political General Department, the Rear Services General Department, and the combat arms commands, so that they could clearly understand the actual situation in our theater, listen to our opinions, and give their specialized guidance, and to obtain their valuable assistance with regard to planning, materiel, and technical matters. I then hastily prepared to set out.

I was about to return to the green jungle, the battlefield aflame with combat, and my combat units after a period of absence. I felt very anxious and happy. That spontaneous happiness enabled me to discover a feeling that had long been inside me: I regarded the base as my home, the battlefield as my home area, and the cadres and men of the organs and combat units as my relatives. When I was assigned the mission of leaving the battlefield to go to Saigon and participate in the Four-Party Joint Military Commission I thought that I wouldn't return and I felt anxious and nostalgic, as if sadly bidding adieu to my home area. Now that I was about to return to the base and the battlefield, I was as happy as if I were about to return to my old village and my loved ones. Perhaps the decades I had lived on the battlefield, in the wide open spaces, with constantly changing scenery, the jungle birds, and the fish, had conditioned my soul to respond only to the green jungle. Or perhaps I had yearned all my life for independence and freedom and had pledged to take up arms and fight until the final objective was attained, so my life had been tied in with the battlefield. That was not entirely the case. Even as I take pen in hand to write these lines I understand even more clearly the nostalgic reason for the life and society of soldiers during many long years of war. How beautiful and how noble is the sacred comradeship for the goal of liberating the homeland and the people. During the difficult days of hunger and thirst we shared each piece of jungle root, and each bit of firewood and custard apple, and shared with one another each drink of spring water we had brought from the other side of the mountain. On the Truong Son route, every year, after months of carrying heavy burdens, climbing mountains and fording streams to the point of exhaustion, we shared each spoonful of sugar or bit of salt, or offered one another our last quinine tablet to help one another reach the objective. Each human life was precious and the homeland needed every soldier, but we regarded our joys and sorrows. If one heard that the other won a battle and did a better job than he did, he would enthusiastically study the other's example. If one heard that the other had been defeated he would be worried and seek ways to help out. Everything was for the common cause. Everything was for the revolution. One for all, all for one. Such was life in the "green jungle." Such was life among comrades in arms in two wars of resistance, in the Duong Minh Chau, War Zone D, Dong Thap Muoi, and U Minh Forest bases. Love for one's

comrades and fellow unit members, the jungle, and the streams were immense and unlimited. That was love we learned from Uncle Ho, from his immense love for the nation and for the workers and fighters. That love transcended space and time and was the same everywhere and at all times.

Anyone who had lived such a life would be indulgent and nostalgic. It was not that the battlefield had captivated me, but that my heart and morality made me attached to it.

All along the Truong Son route during that trip south there was much less enemy bombing and shelling. All activities became much more pleasant and animated. From one troop way-station to another and from one segment to another there was specialization and efficiency was many times higher than in the past. The men were happy when they met our delegation traveling south from Hanoi. Everyone wanted to know whether there was anything new with regard to lines and policies. Had the Political Bureau issued a resolution on the new situation and missions? The cadres in charge of the units and stations whispered in my ear, "What does B2 intend to do?" and "What are the prospects?" They promised to do all they could to aid the battlefield. I was very moved. Those comrades would give us their all-out assistance and support the battlefields, but that area itself was a battlefield. They were not only aiding the battlefields but were also fighting heroically under fierce bombing and shelling, no less so than at the front. They had a truly noble spirit of thinking only of their comrades and the total victory of the revolution. The same was true all over the country during wartime. Millions of people acted as one, believed in the party, and worked, fought, and sacrificed everything for victory, for the success of the revolution in the South, and for the unification of the homeland.

Of course, it was unavoidable that certain backward elements would violate discipline in a cowardly* manner: some were afraid of dying and sought ways to avoid going to the front, but they were a small, insignificant minority.

During that arduous, dangerous trip I dreamed of the battlefield. After the victory we would have a country extending from Lang Son to the Ca Mau Peninsula, from the border to the islands, with an immense sky and immense seas. We would have 40 to 50 million Vietnamese who lived new-style lives. We would build a new society, a socialist society, and would create the new socialist man, just like the society and people the heart and morality of which had formed me. It was necessary to eliminate the bad customs which the way of life of selfish individual competition in the artificially prosperous society and consumer society left behind by U.S. neocolonialism. We had to put an end to thankless habits and vile individual desires which resulted in husbands mistreating wives, children abandoning their father, and friends being changed depending on one's needs of the moment. The new society had to be a society in which there is no oppression, exploitation, or injustice, in which everyone is able to develop their talents and participate in building the nation and

* That is, fearing death and remaining in the rear, or transferring to other, less dangerous units.

in a free, well-off, happy life for everyone. The new man must be exemplary, virtuous and talented.

Virtue is manifested in behavior between people, between the general and the specific, in the family and in society. Everyone must love and respect each other, and be faithful, sincere and loyal. Such people have nothing in common with people who smile cordially in one's presence but betray one behind one's back, who "stabs you in the stomach with a dagger while praying to Buddha." It must be Vietnamese morality and communist morality, which combine to form the virtue of Ho Chi Minh.

Talent is manifested in the specific results of completed tasks and missions, not in superficial boasting and exaggeration. If words are not accompanied by action they have no value, theory not demonstrated by reality is only empty theory. Every individual must be exemplary in study, work, combat, production, and one's way of life, and life in an exemplary, close-knit family and an orderly, harmonious society. If we are not exemplary no one will listen to us, and if families are not harmonious and exemplary there is no way to create an orderly, just society. I think that our society of the future must be a pure society made up of pure people. That society differs from the Maoist society described by comrade P.P. Vladimirov in his book "Yanan Diary":

"The principled nature of the party is replaced by reverent minds, a personality cult, and a self-effacement of the individual. The self-effacement had, in general, become a characteristic of life in Yanan. While trying to avoid making waves at any price, and keep one's position, or even rise higher, people appear to have gone crazy. Honor, virtue, friendship, etc., are forgotten."

Such people clearly are not communists. Such a society is not a socialist society.

I had a dream about a road. I had an enthusiastic exchange with the comrades in the Command of Group 559 at the Group's headquarters. We decided that once the revolution succeeded and our country was unified we would develop that Route 559, the eastern Truong Son route, the famous "Ho Chi Minh Trail," into a truly modern Ho Chi Minh road. It would be a highway running north-south along the Truong Son, following the old 559 route, which would be improved, broadened, and meet standards. Along the way there would be erected monuments to commemorate the feats of arms of each segment of the road, of the heroic martyrs, so that future generations could always know about the backbone road of the homeland which passed down the length of the nation, a road that unified the nation even then. That backbone extended from Hanoi, the nerve center, and from the socialist North to the South, which was engaged in a life-and death struggle. In the future, if we were capable of doing so, we would also build a parallel railroad. The Ho Chi Minh highway and the Ho Chi Minh railroad would in fact be backbone routes for a country that was developing strongly. All of our dreams would become reality. We were sacrificing ourselves in combat to achieve success so that future generations could continue to build a rich and strong state so that our people can have a civilized, happy life.

At the end of June the water level of the Sekong River had risen and the current was flowing swiftly. Two well-built boats of Group 471 (under the 559 Command) took us downstream through many rough rapids. Each time we passed through a rapids my entire body shook. A soldier sat in the stern, his hand on the tiller and looking ahead intently. Another stood imposingly on the bow, his two hands clutching a long pole, prepared to push the boat away from dangerous boulders sticking up out of the water or submerged below the surface. Meanwhile, the boat continued to rush along with the swift-flowing current. Many times I thought it was about to be smashed to pieces against a rock. We got out of a vehicle and boarded a boat, then left the boat and resumed the journey by land. On each occasion we were greeted warmly and given all-out assistance, and the partings were reluctant. It is impossible to remember all of the people along that wartime route. They included cadres and enlisted men and there were females and males. They were all alike: they had calm expressions in the face of danger and had bright smiles and loved their country, and had a will of iron. We became friends immediately after we met, and parting was difficult.

As soon as I came ashore I met comrade Cuu (Colonel Huynh Van Cuu), deputy head of the Regional Protection Bureau, accompanied by several others, who had brought several "command cars" to take us back to the base. Cuu was a cadre who specialized in organizing our official trips and visits to the battlefield. He was very experienced in insuring safety and rapidity. I hugged him and firmly shook hands with everyone. He looked me over and said, "You look thinner but are still firm. When we heard that you were returning we were all happy. I thought that I wouldn't have the opportunity to escort you again!" "Did you think that I would remain in Saigon?" I asked, "In fact I wanted to stay there, as a member of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission and Concord, if it were set up. But the enemy wanted no part of it. They don't want peace, but only war, so I had to return to the green jungle with you."

Our convoy arrived at the base at dusk. Over a period of half a year many things had happened, but the scenery, the land, and the sky at the base were practically the same.

Comrade Tam Hoa, i.e. Nguyen Xuan On, the chef de cabinet of the Regional Command, along with comrade Le Van Xup, a bodyguard who had been an aide since I first returned south, and Misses Xuan Thu and Huong of the military medical team, and Lien and Tam of the mess team, ran out to the gate to give me a rousing reception.

When I entered the house I looked around. In the rich green garden there were fresh greens, fruit trees, bananas, grapefruits and luxuriant pink plums. Comrade Chin Dung, who was old and had served with the old 309th Battalion during the anti-French resistance, and now diligently tended the garden, boasted to me about his accomplishments and observed, "For a long time now the enemy have reduced their bombing and strafing here, so the vegetation is healthy. When peace is achieved this entire denuded jungle area will become fruit orchards and fields of green vegetables. I will be able to return to my home village of Cam Son in My Tho and live out my old age." Chin Dung

turned around and continued his introductions. "This is the young man Tai and this is Miss Thao. The secretarial team will prepare for their wedding so that we can drink some wine in celebration.

While Thao and Tai were blushing and trying to hide their smiles, Kien Chien, the deputy chef de cabinet, and the youths Diep, Cach and Luu of the Civil Affairs Team laughed aloud and shouted encouragement. Everyone crowded around asking all sorts of questions. I didn't have time to respond adequately to any of the questions. It was truly moving, as if we were a family. I suddenly asked comrade "Five Poison" (i.e. Nguyen Van Hoanh), my secretary, to take from the car the gifts I had brought from Hanoi and distribute them to everyone. He was called by that name because his name was Nam [Five] and he was a chemical corps cadre, and to distinguish him from comrade "Five Red Medicine," a military medical doctor who also worked at the organ. The gifts didn't amount to much, a package of "Capital" cigarettes for the men and needle, thread and hair clasps for the women. They had only sentimental value.

As if suddenly remembering something pleasant, brother Tam Hoa pulled me to one side and asked, "Do you know that the puppets have openly complained, demanding that you return to Saigon? It's so funny. They said that Hanoi had placed you under 'house arrest,' and that Hanoi must return you to them!" "It's nothing but a psychological warfare trick," I said. Tam Hoa continued, "When brother Hai Khiết,* a member of the Joint Military Commission, reported that you had gone to Hanoi for good they became enraged. They threatened our delegation that if Lt Gen Tran Van Tra did not return they would send vehicles to take away our entire delegation. They may really do that, for the puppets have stopped at no vile act in the past. Thus our comrades there must have plans to fight to defend themselves. The tense situation has lasted several months. I'm really concerned about them."

I replied, "We will struggle to force them to observe the Paris Agreement. They won't dare do anything to our people, for we are strong legally, politically, and militarily."

After I rested a few days COSVN held a meeting to disseminate Resolution 21 and organize its implementation. Toward that end, a conference of military administration cadres from all over the B2 theater was held in September 1973 in an attractive bamboo grove in the base area. In attendance were large numbers of leadership cadres of the provinces, military regions, mass organizations, and regiments and divisions. The discussions were very seething and enthusiastic. Those comrades reported on the actual situations in the localities and units, our good points and deficiencies during the recent period, related them to theory and to the resolution, and evaluated what was correct and what was incorrect. The main features of the situation--the question of whether we or the enemy were stronger, whether there should be two areas, whether our forces should be consolidated on the spot or withdrawn to, how we should retaliate, etc.--were analyzed. The discussions were very specific

*Bui Thanh Kiet, a senior colonel and deputy head of the military delegation of the PRG of the RSVN to the Two-Party Joint Military Commission.

and dealt with each detail and aspect, so that implementation could be correct and in order to avoid leftist or rightist deviation. Especially, those comrades spent a good deal of time discussing the military proselyting policy after the agreements. According to one view, we had to stress political struggle and military proselyting should be our strategy; it was necessary to use many military proselyting stratagems by the masses to paralyze the enemy's military operations, and that was a form of attack. We had strong military forces but we would avoid using them, for using military forces would be very entangling and would cause a lack of mutual confidence and tension. We had to dare achieve national conciliation and eliminate enmity.

Such one-sided views were based on our subjective thoughts and desires and did not take into account the actual plots and acts of the enemy, and would cause the lower echelons to have pacifist, rightist thoughts and cease to fight. One cadre said of the lower echelons, "The men have been fighting for decades. Isn't that enough? Now we must "be green on the outside and red on the inside," promote military proselyting, and transform supporters of the enemy into our supporters." According to another, "We still have troops, weapons, and ammunition. We can take what we need from the United States and Thieu and we will not have to worry about insufficient supplies, etc." Although they dared not say so openly, in their hearts the lower echelons wanted to say to such cadres, "We don't want to keep on fighting merely to satisfy our personal desires. We want the country to be at peace and for the killing of the people to cease. But if the enemy launches sweeping and land-grabbing operations and shoot at us, and plot to eliminate the revolutionary gains we have made recently, what are we to do? Put up our hands and shout the slogan 'Peace forever'?" No. We sincerely did not want a recurrence of the grievous naivete of the 1954-1959 period. In my heart I still mourn the many comrades who fell in battle--with weapons in hand but not daring to fire--during that period, and mourn the many local movements that were drowned in blood. Because they were afraid of being criticized and of acting contrary to the (military proselyting) policy, the guerrillas in My Tho had to attack on the sly (without the knowledge of the upper echelon) the enemy outposts that had been set up illegally in their base area. In Mo Cay and Ben Tre, where our troops had to retreat continually in the face of enemy land-grabbing operations and not retaliate against them, they lamented, "How could we sink any lower?" and ultimately were able to recover the district's base area by retaliating on their own accord.

After the conference of military administration cadres, I met with the military cadres to discuss the details of the military plan for the 1973-1974 dry season, the first full dry season since the signing of the agreements. In essence, the plan reconfirmed our explicit attitude of observing and defending the agreement, and thus punishing the violator. We endeavored to do what we had declared we would do: resolutely and actively punish the enemy, even in the places from which they launched the agreement-violating attacks. If we were to carry out that plan we had to be strong politically, legally and militarily, and strong not only with regard to forces but also with regard to our deployment of the various kinds of forces in the various areas, in accordance with a strong strategic posture which provided for all contingencies. We had to consolidate and rectify our armed forces on the spot and had to develop

the position and strength of the revolution in all three areas: our area, the enemy's area and the contested area. All localities had to use all political forms to proselytize and win over the enemy troops, and force the withdrawal of or wipe out the outposts and positions illegally set up in all areas after 28 January 1973. It was necessary to insure the democratic rights of the people--their right to travel and earn a living--and their right to dismantle the strategic hamlets and return to their old village if they so desired. We had to annihilate all forces launching attacks, carrying out sweeping operations, robbing the people, or interfering with the people's livelihood. All such activities were illegal. We informed our delegation to the Two-Party Joint Military Commission of our plan so that it could coordinate its struggle at the conference table.

A review of the situation since the agreement was signed showed that there had been many changes in the B2 theater. Between January and April 1973, in all military regions and provinces the enemy had used all types of troops to attack and encroach upon our areas, and endeavored to achieve pacification, herd the people, conscript recruits and clear terrain. Especially around Saigon they used bulldozers to flatten the people's houses and gardens, and used soldiers and prisoners to cut down vegetation, clear out mangrove trees, set up additional outposts, and sent out "Phoenix" spies to uncover, arrest and kill patriots they called "Viet Cong infrastructure." After May 1973, thanks to the close guidance of COSVN and the Regional Command, and of the local leadership echelons, we retaliated fiercely so the enemy forces were stopped and were gradually repulsed. Outposts which had illegally been set up were wiped out, surrendered, or were withdrawn, increasingly larger numbers of enemy troops deserted, and the enemy's regular and local units were hit hard and revealed weaknesses and suffered increasingly larger losses in the various areas.

The situations of our side and the enemy developed in two increasingly contrasting directions. For our part, the cadres, enlisted men, and people realized that the United States had been defeated, the puppets had weakened, we were victorious, and our status was improving, and were enthusiastic and confident and participated positively in all tasks of opposing the enemy. For the enemy's part, the officers and enlisted men of the various kinds of forces realized the truth--that the United States had been defeated--and were tired of the war, were afraid the war would continue, and wanted peace. When carrying out our military operations they did so perfunctorily, and sometimes did not carry out the operations at all but falsified their reports (this happened at the regimental and battalion levels). The number of draft-dodgers and deserters increased steadily. The forces controlling the people were also negative and relaxed their control. Therefore, the people struggled and engaged in livelihood increasingly far from home, and one by one returned to their old villages and our liberated area. At the same time, the upper-echelon Americans and puppets, who were very obstinate and subjective, drafted one plan after another and ordered the lower echelons to implement them. Thieu instructed the sector (provincial) echelon as follows:

1. Expand your territory, gain control of the population, maintain the area under your control, maintain security, and do not lose a single village or

hamlet. (The overall norms were to control 11,000 of the 13,000 hamlets in South Vietnam, and that by February 1974, 65 percent of hamlets must be Class A--tightly controlled--hamlets.)

2. Take and defend all strategic lines of communication.
3. Annihilate the enemy armed forces and supply and transportation forces in all areas, especially those crossing the border.
4. Isolate and blockade the enemy economically, and sabotage and destabilize the enemy's base areas and liberated area.
5. Step up monitoring, espionage, and the use of airborne reconnaissance commandos to grasp the situation, study objectives, and draft contingency plans while awaiting the opportunity to retake the areas we held prior to 29 March 1972.

He also issued specific instructions to each area:

1. In the areas under our control and the cities, wipe out the seeds of uprising and prevent uprisings by patrolling, ambushing, eliminating the Viet Cong infrastructures, tightly controlling the people, stepping up psychological warfare, organizing the people, consolidating the governmental administration, normalizing the people's lives and creating conditions for economic restoration and development.
2. In the consolidation area (i.e. the contested area), made up of the Class and Class D hamlets, push back, stop and annihilate the Viet Cong political and military forces; restore and consolidate the governmental administration, raise the level of security, expand the area under our control, and use political and economic means to bribe the people, but rely principally on military means. The territorial military forces will gradually be concentrated to carry out attacks in that area.
3. In the Viet Cong mopping-up area (i.e. our liberated and base areas), concentrate on attacking the transportation corridors to achieve an economic blockade, and on reconnaissance and intelligence activities. Depending on the situation, use air power and artillery to attack supply depots and transportation facilities, win over the people, maintain a government in exile, and create instability. Maintain military activities and draft plans to retake the area.

With regard to their pacification plan, they stated that it was necessary to launch many pacification campaigns in each sector and military region, as well as nationwide, and increase the density of small unit operations; set up many additional outposts; and bulldoze the terrain in the contested area and our liberated area. In 1973 alone their norm was to destroy 12,000 hectares. In areas under their control, they were to relocate the people, set up hamlets, clear wasteland, and encroach upon our liberated area. Their 1973 plan called for the relocation of 100,000 people and the establishment of 20 hamlets in the provinces of Long Khanh, Phuoc Tuy, Binh Tuy, Lam Dong, Kien

Phong, Ninh Thuan, and Dac Lac. Expenses would total 50 billion puppet South Vietnamese piasters.

The enemy made the following national objectives: taking and holding as much territory as possible; endeavoring to control the people, especially the peasants; and increasing actual military and political strength. Military Region III and Military Region IV constituted the enemy's heartland. On 6 March 1973 Thieu met with the Military Region commanders and province chiefs and said, "I place the life-or-death struggle on the shoulders of the high-ranking commanders of those two military regions (Military Region II and Military Region IV).

Thus the puppet Thieu regime not only ignored the Paris Agreement but took advantage of it and of the honesty of its adversary, which believed in peace, stability and national concord, and endeavored to consolidate and develop their forces, step up their land-grabbing attacks, and eventually completely eliminate the liberation troops and the PRG of the RSVN. If we were not vigilant, if we were rightist and gave ground, the puppet forces would become increasingly strong and their position would improve, and the situation would have developed differently. Clearly, after the end of April we reacted and retaliated, while the enemy revealed weaknesses and deficiencies, were stopped and retreated. Following the Political Bureau conference COSVN, in a spirit of debate, guided opposition against the enemy more resolutely and the situation on the battlefield developed increasingly to our advantage.

Even in the period from January to April, when we were losing much of our land and population on the other battlefields, in Military Region 9 (western Nam Bo), where the enemy concentrated the largest number of troops and which they regarded as the center of their land-grabbing attacks--especially in the Chuong Thien area and the area between Can Tho, Soc Trang, Ca Mau, and Rach Gia Provinces--we held our ground. We were able to do so because comrade Sau Dan (Vo Van Kiet) at that time secretary of the Military Region 9 Party Committee, agreed with the military region command, headed by comrade Le Duc Anh, that the enemy would never willingly observe the agreement, that war was still war, and that nothing had changed. Therefore, the main-force regiments of the Military Region remained in place and, along with the local forces and guerrillas, operated as usual, attacked resolutely, retaliated fiercely, and annihilated entire enemy battalions (the 3d Battalion of the 16th Regiment of the puppet 9th Division and the 86th Ranger Battalion). That clearly did not indicate that our forces had weakened and the enemy forces had become stronger since the agreements, as some comrades imagined.

By means of those activities, Military Region 9 liberated an area 20 kilometers long along the Nuoc Duc Canal in southern Chuong Thien, and a number of other areas. The population of those newly liberated areas amounted to 600,000, in 11 villages and 152 hamlets, not counting the people in the contested area who returned to our area to produce. At the same time, Military Region 9 wiped out all of the land-grabbing outposts illegally set up by the enemy, after which the garrisons of some enemy outposts that had been established prior to the agreements also fled in panic. The heroic actions and brilliant specific results of the soldiers and people of Military Region 9

were outstanding and unique in comparison to the other military regions, and were praised by the Political Bureau and set an example for the other battlefields. But surprisingly those specific acts were completely contrary to a whole series of policies at that time, just after the signing of the agreement: that we should urgently stabilize the situation, create two zones, one controlled by us and the other controlled by the enemy, withdraw our forces to the rear so that they could be consolidated, and not use troops rashly but struggle politically, principally by military proselyting. Using military proselyting, using the masses to paralyze the enemy's military operations and neutralize the enemy's outposts, were types of attacks, as mentioned above. Especially, the actions of the military forces of Military Region 9 were based on the viewpoint that there had been no agreements, that nothing had changed, and that it was necessary to keep on fighting. That was an incorrect understanding of the Paris Agreement and the new strategic phase. But it was correct in that it correctly evaluated the obstinacy and perfidy of the enemy, just like during the Geneva Agreements period, and resolutely retained the revolutionary gains that had been made. It was in accord with the actual situation and was not illusory and utopian. "Luckily," that was a distant battlefield, so upper-echelon policies were often slow in reaching it and the rectification of mistakes was often not prompt. Let us here mention one point: reality is extremely valuable, whether it is the reality of something mistaken or something correct; it is the basis of theory and of policies and lines. Any theory, policy or line not based on reality is mistaken.

In one of their long-range plans the enemy intended to:

"Between February and August 1973, endeavor to occupy and control the major part of the territory of South Vietnam.

"Between September 1973 and February 1974, endeavor to consolidate the gains that had been made and defend them solidly.

"Then, in 1974 or at latest 1975, there would be a political solution and a general elections to make things legal. There will be only one governmental administration (i.e. that of Thieu) and one strong army (i.e. the Army of the Republic of Vietnam). The war will wither away. The Viet Cong will only be an opposition party which engages exclusively in political struggle, nothing more and nothing less.

"Otherwise, we will use large-scale warfare to completely eliminate the Viet Cong in 1976 and 1977."

With regard to the economy, to accompany that political-military plan they drafted a long-range 1973-1980, 8-year plan which was promulgated on 20 May 1973. The plan was divided into three periods:

"1973-1974: restoration and rebuilding.

"1975-1976: development and consolidation.

"1977-1980: self-sufficiency and a reduction of aid."

The aspirations, plans and acts of the enemy were one-in-the-same from the very beginning.

On the basis of the actual developments on the battlefield between them and the middle of the rainy season, we could see what the schemes and actions of the enemy were. We studied the implementation of Resolution 21 of the party Central Committee and concretized it in the form of COSVN Resolution 12, on the basis of which we drafted the B2 theater's operational plan for the 1973-1974 dry season. After presenting the plan and obtaining the approval of COSVN, I reviewed the plan for the last time and approved it in September 1973 so that the staff and the battlefields could have time to meticulously organize its implementation and report to the Military Commission of the party Central Committee.

The main battlefield that was selected was the Mekong Delta, which the enemy had selected as the focal point for their pacification, land-grabbing, population-grabbing, and plundering activities. We had to stay the bloody hand of the enemy and resolutely punish them. We had to regain and retain the liberated area we had prior to 28 January 1973. In order to attain that goal we had to closely coordinate our activities with the other battlefields and not allow the enemy to make peace in places they were weak and at a disadvantage in order to concentrate troops to attack in places where they had the advantage and in places strategically important to them. We decided to strengthen the forces--both the manpower and weapons of Military Regions 8 and 9, the delta battlefield, so that those two battlefields could fulfill their mission of being the principal battlefields in that phase. At that time, a problem that was posed within the ranks of military cadres, as well as among the civilian cadres, was how the forces of the delta should be strengthened.

Since we had selected the delta as the main battlefield we had to deploy strong forces of all three types there in order to defeat the enemy. Thus many main-force troops were concentrated there.

In the short range as well as in the long range, the question was whether the two sides should continue to fight in the eastern part of the theater like two water buffaloes clashing with each other or whether we should surprise the enemy by selecting another area, i.e. the Mekong Delta, in which to concentrate our forces and attack.

Those who shared that opinion wanted to redeploy our forces and send the region's main-force troops to augment the rural areas in the delta. They thought that to liberate the highly populated, rich delta would be to win the war. In fact, that was not a new viewpoint but had persisted for a long time. According to that viewpoint, we had to liberate the rural areas before liberating the cities. It was contrary to our party's line regarding the anti-U.S. war. That was a strategy of attacking in all three strategic areas: the lowland rural area, the jungle-and-mountains area, and the cities. It was a strategy of attacking with both military forces and mass political forces, and of always combining offensives and uprisings. Therefore, the position of cities was very important. In that strategic offensive the main-force attack would be the decisive blow, but our increasingly well-equipped main-force

units could be concentrated to fight on a large scale in an open delta area with many rivers and canals and with marshy terrain. In that area the enemy held the lines of communications, which were defended by a system of strongly fortified outposts. The enemy also had fleets on the river and had complete control of the air. Our experience had shown us that when fighting the U.S.-puppet troops it was best if we concentrated troops in regimental units equipped with light military equipment. If divisions were organized, they had to be light divisions, and the method of command and tactics could not be the same as on the jungle-and-mountains battlefield. At the same time, we had to develop extensive guerrilla forces, large numbers of elite sappers, and strong local troops in order to wage marvelous, continuous, seething guerrilla warfare and revolutionary people's war, flexibly combine the three types of troops on all kinds of terrain, and in all kinds of weather, by means of the three combat columns, combined campaigns, and both military forces and the political forces of the masses. We were entirely capable of fighting in that manner, had large numbers of revolutionary people, had superiority and had experience. Each battlefield was different with regard to conditions, missions, objectives and capabilities. We had to have appropriate methods for organizing and deploying forces and could not be imitative, and certainly could not base our actions on our subjective desires.

The Regional Command had always affirmed that the eastern Nam Bo battlefield, including Saigon, the principal battlefield of B2, was the war-deciding strategic battlefield which would determine the outcome of the war. There we were capable of bringing into play the great role of main-force units. The terrain was favorable for the concentration and use of large main-force units and the use of all weapons and technical facilities. It was an area in which we were capable of organizing, deploying and stockpiling rear services facilities and materiel-technical support facilities for a large army and for major campaigns. That battlefield had an important strategic position. We could threaten the enemy, force the enemy into a passive defensive position, and annihilate much enemy manpower, combining lightning attacks with storm-like uprisings to smash the U.S.-puppet war center and ultimately knock out the enemy there.

The delta battlefield played a very important role throughout the course of the war, for both we and the enemy relied on the treasury of people and materiel there to build up military, political and economic forces and change the balance of forces between the two sides. At times we made it the main battlefield in that sense, but only at certain times in the course of the war, such as during that dry season and the rainy season of 1974 or, in the past, in 1962 and 1963. However, it was not the battlefield that would decide the war. Therefore, B2 had long made its strategic deployments and force deployments on the basis of the role and position of the battlefield, in a strategic offensive plan of a truly revolutionary war. It was vital that the eastern Nam Bo main-force units not be weakened; on the contrary, they had to be further strengthened. I remember that in 1965-1966, when the Americans were sending large numbers of troops into South Vietnam, a number of comrades in charge of the city of Saigon directly asked me, "The Americans are bringing in large numbers of troops and strong weapons, and are changing over to a limited war, so should we change our strategic line? Should we disperse

our main forces so that we can wage a protracted guerrilla war in order to defeat the enemy? I emphatically said no. I explained the passive, fire-extinguishing role of the Americans; that they had large numbers of troops but were not strong and we were still attacking them; and that we would not disperse them to fight as guerrillas but would organize many additional divisions--at that time only one division had been organized in B2--and advance to the formation of crops. There was absolutely no question of changing the strategic line, or of defeating the enemy by waging a protracted guerrilla war. However, that attitude did not die away entirely; the struggle against it was prolonged. A long time had passed since then. The Americans had to get out and the puppets were aggressive but that aggression was in its death throes, so the eastern Nam Bo main-force troops had become even more important. We had endeavored to strengthen the main-force units of eastern Nam Bo and decided to reinforce the forces in the delta by many different means. We would positively and quickly send many additional troops, weapons and ammunition, and facilities in order to promote the development of the three types of on-the-spot troops; assign to the regional main-force divisions the mission of urgently organizing and training a number of technical combat arms companies and battalions so that they could be sent down to the military alliance; send to Military Region 9 the 1st Regiment of the main-force 1st Division of the Region, which was operating in the Bay Nui-Ha Tien area; step up close guidance of plans and modes; and guide a plan for closely coordinating the battlefields, including those of the main-force units, so that the enemy could not concentrate on attacking in the lowlands as they saw fit.

During that dry season B2 carried out the task of protecting, consolidating, and expanding the communications-transportation corridors connecting the Regional base in eastern Nam Bo with the Dong Thap Muoi base, and on down to the U Minh Forest base, along three routes:

--The route along the Kampuchean border to Bay Nui, Ha Tien, Rach Gia and the U Minh Forest.

--The My Tho route through Ben Tre, Vinh Tra and Ca Mau.

--The river route via the Tien and Hau rivers.

At the same time we strengthened the route connecting eastern Nam Bo with the great rear area via the Truong Son 559 route. With the agreement and positive assistance of the Rear Services General Department, the Regional Rear Services Department worked with the military regions in urgently building up the materiel reserves of the region and the military regions, starting with the beginning of the dry season, so that they could continue to take the initiative and develop strongly.

The weapons and equipment supplied by the General Staff to B2 in 1973 were being received and transported efficiently. But there was as yet no upper-echelon distribution plan to transport and stockpile the supplies for 1974 early and positively. If we waited for a decision, we would lose transportation time and slow things down, and if unexpected obstacles were encountered, the stockpiling plan could be upset. I had been thinking about that problem

since I attended the plenary meeting of the Political Bureau in Hanoi in May, but could find no solution to it. I went to meet with comrade Dinh Duc Thien, then head of the Rear Services General Department. Comrade Thien was straightforward and enthusiastic; enthusiastic toward his friends and comrades and toward the common endeavor. A large man, he was a person who dared to think and to do, was open, kind, easy to get to know, and especially was good-natured. The military cadres of the north and south, the old revolutionary cadres who had been active in the past, both men and women, and the enlisted men, knew about and sympathized with his good nature and folksy "obscenity." After I explained the problem and expressed my concern that I had not been able to resolve it, he laughed it off and said, "There's no problem. Why can't a battlefield commander think out the solution to such an easy problem?"

I was surprised and looked at him inquisitively. After hesitating a moment he said very slowly, with a very sympathetic expression, "Let me be the chief of the general staff for an hour. I will immediately sign an order giving B2 several thousand additional tons of weapons, then I will sign similar orders for the other military regions."

I burst out in laughter when I realized that he was joking. I joked with him in turn, "If I had unlimited powers, I'd let you be the 'Son of Heaven' for 24 hours so that you could be granted all your wishes and marry a beautiful princess just like Hassan did. But I won't assume responsibility if you, like Hassan, are sent to an insane asylum and receive 50 lashes a day!"*

We laughed together merrily. But then he presented a plan: "If you agree, I'll lend you in advance 2,000 tons of weapons of various kinds from the total to be distributed to B2 in 1974."

I was extremely happy. We had reached agreement about a loan. He did not forget to emphasize, "Later I will deduct what supplies I'm sending you in advance. Tell your men to take good care of them. If you use them up and demand more, I'll have you all thrown in jail."

There remained the problem of transportation. I was certain in advance that the people responsible for transportation would be prepared to take on that additional difficult task. That turned out to be the case.

It was a dry season in which the two sides were trying to gain control of the land and the people. The enemy's objective was to gain control of the areas they controlled prior to 29 March 1972. They acted as if the Paris Agreement did not exist. Our objective was to retake the areas under our control prior to 28 January 1973. That objective was legally in accord with the Paris Agreement. The central focus of Military Region 9's plan was to punish the enemy troops for encroaching on our U Minh base area and retaking the highly populated areas in Go Quao and Giong Rieng in Rach Gia, and in Vinh Long and Tra Vinh, which made up a strategic area between the Tien and Hau Rivers. The central focus of Military Region 8's plan was to punish the

* From a story about a dreaming youth in the book "A Thousand and One Nights."

enemy for occupying the heart of our Dong Thap Muoi base and retake the highly populated Cai Be and Cai Lay areas in My Tho Province, which lay astride strategic Route 4, the backbone of the delta, along with areas in Ben Tre Province which bordered Vinh Long and Tra Vinh in Military Region 9. Another objective of those dry season activities of the two sides was to control rice. On 24 August 1973 Thieu convened in Can Tho a so-called Rice Conference. The quota they set for that dry season was stealing 1 million tons of rice. On 29 August 1973 the puppet general Vinh Nghi, commander of Military Region IV, directed the 16 province chiefs in the delta to steal and turn over more than 400,000 tons of husked rice (equal to 1 million tons of paddy) by the end of 1973. We had to combine punishing the enemy with breaking up that rice-stealing plan, protect the people's property and build up our stocks. Military Regions 8 and 9 were not the only ones fulfilling that mission. Military Region 7 (eastern Nam Bo) and Military Region 6 (southwest Trung Bo) also had to combine retaliation with gaining control of the rice harvest so that they could have rice stocks and readily available rice.

During that dry season the regional main-force units also had a rather difficult mission. In addition to gaining time so that we could build, consolidate and organize, especially the combat arms, step up tactical and technical training and improve our ability to carry out coordinated combat arms operations, and support the localities, the 9th and 7th divisions were deployed along the enemy's intermediate defense line of Saigon in the provinces of Tay Ninh and Binh Duong to coordinate with those provinces and help them fulfill their dry season missions. The principal missions of those two divisions were to threaten the intermediate line and inner line (the outskirts of Saigon) of the enemy's Saigon defenses and to pin down the 5th, 25th and 18th divisions, and the ranger groups of the puppets' III Corps, so that they could not withdraw to reinforce the delta or launch attacks in other places, and so that they could not complete and strengthen the defenses of their capital.

More must be said about the enemy's plots and acts in the Saigon area, as part of their general strategic scheme, after the agreement. Prior to 1972, Saigon was protected by three solid defense lines. With our "Nguyen Hue" campaign and our 1972 dry-season military operations throughout the region we smashed the outermost defense line and penetrated the middle defense line, so that only the inner line remained intact. Thus the defenses of Saigon were rather thin and unreliable. After the Paris Agreement was signed the Saigon puppet regime launched sweeping operations to occupy the contested areas and our liberated area, and consolidated and filled out the areas under their control. Especially, they paid all-out attention to bolstering the defenses of Saigon, their nerve center. They continually launched large and small operations to wipe out our political and guerrilla infrastructure in the outskirts of the capital. After launching those sweeping operations they used bulldozers to flatten the gardens and houses of the people in such areas as Cu Chi, Hoc Mon, Thu Dau Mot, etc. They used deserters from their army who had been captured to cut down the vegetation in the Lai Thieu and Thu Duc areas and the nipa palm groves at Binh Chanh, Nha Be, Can Duoc and Can Giuoc. They set up additional outposts, placed obstacles, laid mines and dug antitank trenches in the Bien Hoa area in order to further strengthen the capital's inner defense line.

In places they did not control, such as our long-established guerrilla bases around Saigon, including the six maquis villages at Thu Duc, the Rung Sat Zone, Duyen Hai, An Son, Lai Thieu, Tan My, Binh Ly, Hoc Mon, and the three villages of southern Ben Cat--which they called the "Iron Triangle"--Vuon Thom, Ba Vu, Tam Tan, Binh Chanh, the Can Duoc area, Can Giuoc, Nha Be, etc., they bombed and shelled day and night, pursued a scorched earth policy, created a "free fire" area, and tried to eliminate those guerrilla bases. The puppets' 1973-74 dry season plan was to take 60 of our liberation base enclaves in eastern Nam Bo, especially around Saigon. They plotted to restore the middle defense line by retaking Route 2 at Ba Ria, the Dat Cuoc area north of Tan Uyen, the Dau Tieng, Long Nguyen, and Thu Dau Mot areas, the Boi Loi area in Tan Ninh, Ho Bo, An Nhon Tay and Cu Chi. They launched a large, division-sized operation in the Long Nguyen and Dau Tieng areas, which were in our liberated area and were gaps in their middle defense line to the north. But we defeated them, wiped out entire puppet battalions, and prevented them from attaining their objective. But strengthening the defenses of Saigon was still a matter of life and death, so they still did not abandon their plan to occupy our areas so that they could restore their defense lines.

Our plan was to not only hold on to the liberated areas, stop their encroachment, and annihilate the troops carrying out the sweeping operation, but also to prevent them from completing their defenses of Saigon according to their plan to form a strategic enclave, thus forcing the puppet III Corps forces to always be passive and on the defensive in an unstable battlefield position, and to always worry that the Saigon defense line would be penetrated. Furthermore, their very skimpy strategic reserves could not withdraw to the other battlefields. That created an additional fierce contradiction for the puppet troops with regard to Thieu's stupid strategic line of spreading his troops out to defend every place, in order not to lose a single village or hamlet, thus forcing them to always be passive strategically and tactically, and to have no way of escape from that entirely disadvantageous situation.

The Regional main-force 5th Division directly supported the delta by counter-attacking the enemy troops encroaching in the Kien Tuong area along the Kampuchean border, and expanded the corridor connecting eastern Nam Bo with the delta via the western part of Tay Ninh Province. Meanwhile a small main-force detachment, along with sappers, punished the enemy in the Bu Bong and Tuy Duc areas in Quang Duc Province to protect the corridor connecting with the Truong Son 559 route, while also supporting the soldiers and people of Military Region 6, in which enemy troops were encroaching in the Binh Thuan and Binh Tuy areas.

Bu Bong was an enemy strong point near the Kampuchean border. The enemy troops stationed there continually launched sweeping operations and attacks in the surrounding villages, raided our transportation corridor, and used artillery to interdict that corridor day and night, which created considerable difficulties for the transportation of supplies to us. In order to punish the enemy at the point of origin of their violations, and to begin the 1973-74 dry season campaign, we used the 429th Regiment, a strong sapper regiment reinforced by an infantry detachment, to take that 4 November 1973. Then we expanded the liberated area around Bu Bong and took the Tuy Duc intersection,

thus insuring that our transportation corridor was unimpeded and safe. Just as we had hoped, the puppets sent the 22d Division of their II Corps, along with three Regional Force regiments, and an armored regiment which was land-grabbing in the Ninh Thuan-Binh Thuan coastal area to attack us, in hopes of cutting our transportation corridor. We retaliated fiercely, wiped out part of their manpower, held on the entire liberated area, and created conditions for our forces in Military Region 6 to effectively oppose the enemy in western Phan Thiet.

Also in order to carry out our warning that we would punish the enemy where their attacks originate, on 5 and 6 November we used artillery of the 13th sapper regiment to shell Bien Hoa AFB and destroyed a number of aircraft and installations at the air base. For a long time enemy airplanes had taken off from that base to bomb such places in our liberated area as Loc Ninh, Bu Dop, Lo Go and Ka Tum, and the enemy used the Rang Rang airfield, which was situated in the midst of one of our base areas (War Zone A), for target practice. At those places we shot down 30 enemy airplanes between October and December 1973. Beginning in November 1973, every time the enemy bombed and strafed our liberated area we shelled, or carried out sapper attacks on, enemy airbases. Furthermore, we inflicted even more painful blows by destroying enemy fuel depots no matter where they were located. On 2 December 1973 the Nha Be gasoline depot, the largest fuel depot in South Vietnam, was infiltrated by sappers of the 10th Regiment who blew up a large number of tanks. Millions of liters of gasoline and oil were destroyed and smoke and flames rose hundreds of meters into the air, lighting up the Saigon sky. That resounding feat of arms of the 10th Sapper Regiment let the enemy know that we would do what we said, and warned them to watch out. That tank farm on the outskirts of Saigon was surrounded by a thick network of marshy rivers and canals. It had been attacked many times in the past, so the enemy had taken very careful precautions. They increased their forces, changed their defensive employment, placed obstacles and laid mines, used dozens of German Shepherd dogs and used radar, etc. Before the attack I personally reviewed the plan and all details had been prepared. Bay Uoc (Colonel Le Ba Uoc), political officer of the 10th Regiment, reported that "The unit selected to carry out the attack, made up of more than 10 cadres and enlisted men, entered the depot area for a first-hand inspection and inspected each fuel tank. We guarantee that the attack will be victorious."

The sappers' tradition was to penetrate through to their target and win a certain victory. The men of the 10th Regiment made good on that pledge.

Thus at the beginning of the rainy season we and the enemy were both very active all over the B2 theater. We achieved rather close cooperation among the military regions and between the local and main-force units, stretching out and pinning down the enemy everywhere, and winning many victories. In the Mekong Delta the enemy had to change the focal point of their activities. Between the signing of the agreement and the end of the 1973 rainy season the enemy took the Hau Giang area in our Military Region 9 and concentrated the entire 21st and 9th Divisions, a number of ranger and Regional Force units, and river patrol boats in order to carry out land-grabbing operations. Because

they met with fierce retaliation, the enemy could not achieve their objectives and suffered heavy losses. Although they set up a number of additional outposts in such places as Bay Nui, Ha Tien, and Song Trem in the U Minh Forest, in many other places we expanded our liberated area and the enemy's plan to take the area which included parts of four provinces was completely defeated. At the beginning of the dry season they had to send some river patrol boats from Can Tho to Cat Lai in eastern Nam Bo and send the 9th Division to Kien Tuong and some ranger battalions to III Corps, leaving behind in the Hau Giang area only the weakened 21st Division and a number of ranger battalions and Regional Force troops. They concentrated their troops in the Tien Giang area of our Military Region 8 principally to encroach upon Dong Thap Muoi and the Kampuchean border area, interdict our transportation corridor to the Mekong Delta, and cope with our 5th Division. By concentrating troops there they intended to hold the area southwest of Saigon, a very important area between Saigon and the Mekong Delta, so that Saigon would not be isolated and so that the puppet regime could have a base that was strong socially, politically, militarily and economically. That clearly demonstrated the U.S.-Thieu scheme to closely combine Military Region III and Military Region IV (the old Cochin China) into the vital strategic area of all of South Vietnam. They strengthened those two military regions in all regards so that they could advance to defeating the enemy or, if necessary, withdraw into a strategic enclave there in order to continue to exist. But that scheme was carried out only half-heartedly, with a lack of spirit, by a greedy and blind strategy: "Under all circumstances it is necessary to hold on to everything and not lose a single village or hamlet to the Viet Cong." That is usually the case: people who lack actual experience and are short on courage and boldness think one way and act another. As they act they are scared to death, even in their thoughts.

The overall strategic design of the B2 Command at the beginning of the 1973-74 dry season may be summarized as follows: keeping the pressure on Saigon, keeping the enemy pinned down, and forcing them to passively defend their capital--their nerve center--so that we could take the initiative in effectively punishing them for violating the agreements, expand our rear area and the highly populated areas, and create an unimpeded supply corridor so that we could stockpile material--technical means. We would improve our position and strength and change the balance of forces in a manner favorable to us in all regards. We deployed the 9th and 7th Divisions and the sapper and commando forces (I will say more about them later) around and close to Saigon, and even inside the capital, along with the local forces, guerrillas and popular mass forces, to struggle against and punish the enemy in order to lay siege to Saigon and prevent the enemy from acting freely. We deployed the 5th Division and sappers in Kien Tuong to draw the enemy in that direction and prevent them from concentrating their attacks in our highly populated Hau Giang area. We opened the Bu Bong-Tuy Duc corridor to connect the 559 route with the corridor in western Tay Ninh, the eastern Nam Bo route, the Mekong Delta route, and the other routes, in order to transport supplies to and build up reserves on the various battlefields for that important strategic period.

We expanded our rear area so that our bases and liberated areas could be integrated, support one another and form a solid bloc, while in forward areas we actively developed the guerrilla forces, local troops and organized masses.

Having gained experience with regard to our method of attacking Saigon, and the enemy's defensive methods, during Tet 1968, we studied and drafted a contingency plan for a general offensive and uprising, if it should occur. For as stated above, the Americans and puppets had obstinately sabotaged the Paris Agreement, refused to observe the ceasefire, and launched increasingly larger military operations against us, so of course the war continued and developed and could end only with the victory of one of the sides. In diplomatic negotiations, on the basis of each other's strength the two sides should make concessions to and understand each other. But in war, to hesitate and be unprepared is to die. The enemy, furthermore, planned to completely annihilate us in 1976 and 1977. We had to prepare in advance for a general offensive and uprising so that we could win total victory. In 1968, on the basis of the situation, the terrain, and the key objectives within the enemy's capital, we delineated five offensive directions and deployed our forces in those directions. We used the method of coordinating military attacks with mass uprisings and outside attacks with inside attacks, with the inside forces being the revolutionary masses, the commandos, and the sappers, followed by the shock troops and local forces, and the outside forces being the main-force units. During Tet of 1968--a real, large-scale exercise--we won a great victory. It was not a complete victory only because the situation and balance of forces did not permit it. Now, the enemy's objectives had not changed very much. The basic changes were in the situation and in the balance of forces between the two sides. The forecasting of the situation and the planning strategic contingencies must be done early, for only then can we carry out some specific tasks of the strategic contingency plan. Such preparations require time and we cannot wait until things become too clear, which causes haste and prevents preparations from being made in advance, perhaps to the point that the opportunity is lost. In 1972, because we lacked foresight and did not prepare in advance, when we defeated them in Quang Tri the enemy left Hue practically wide open but we did not take full advantage of that favorable opportunity. Of course, in addition to lacking foresight and advance preparation we also lacked flexibility and failed to boldly exploit that opportunity. Strategic commanders must be able to think broadly and deeply, look far ahead, foresee how the situation will develop, and make preparations in advance. By his efforts he must create conditions for the lower echelons to win certain victory. By his dynamism he must propel and guide the situation in the direction of winning victory for us. By his daring, he must act promptly when an opportunity arises.

Beginning in September 1973 the Regional Staff, along with the B2 strategic intelligence operatives who had been planted in the headquarters organs of the puppets and Americans, reviewed the enemy objectives we had to take, monitored the situation on a daily basis, and kept abreast of the enemy's plans and orders. It must be emphasized that during the war the B2 theater--which encompassed the jungle-and-mountains, lowland and urban areas, including Saigon, the enemy's capital--was an all-encompassing battlefield and one with the largest enemy forces and many important strategic and campaign objectives. All developments there affected the overall situation, so the upper echelon authorized the Regional (B2) Command to organize and guide its most important secret strategic intelligence element, which also aided the upper echelon.

That intelligence unit helped us learn the details of many U.S.-puppet plans and obtained from the enemy a number of valuable documents, so we were able to promptly assess the situation and take effective countermeasures. Our intelligence agents, except for a small number who became corrupted--it was inevitable that some would be--had a loyal revolutionary nature. Many of them heroically sacrificed their lives, many achieved merit, and many of them become Heroes of the Armed Forces. In accordance with the force organization and deployment that had been approved by the Regional Command, I assigned comrade Ba Tran the mission of withdrawing the 367th Regiment--one of our sapper-commando groups that had been responsible for the Phnom Penh (Kampuchea) battlefield to help our friends but for which there was now little need--in order to reinforce Saigon. We had completed the organization and deployment of our commando and sapper regiments inside the capital and in the outskirts. At the B2 level we organized a Sapper Command--called Group 27--headed by comrade Dang Ngoc, who called himself "Phong." Si was a robust, sincere cadre who was ready to struggle in defense of justice and was not afraid of personal danger, which was a precious virtue, especially at a time when there were unwholesome phenomena in society. Si himself was a sapper cadre who had matured in combat. He was calm, resolute, said little but did much and finished what he began. On 30 November 1973, when I inspected the 27th Group, it had more than 6,000 cadres and men who were trained and experienced in combat. In addition to the headquarters organ the group consisted of forces which engaged directly in combat and were deployed in the various areas in the outskirts. North of Saigon there were the 115th and 119th sapper regiments; east of Saigon there were the 116th Regiment at Long Thanh and the 10th Regiment at Rung Sat; west of Saigon there was the 117th Regiment and the 113th Regiment, which was responsible for Bien Hoa. We were forming an additional regiment south of Saigon. Group 27 also directly controlled a sapper regiment that had achieved many feats of arms: the 429th Regiment. With regard to commandos, within the city there was organized Group 316, commanded by comrade Nguyen Thanh Tung (i.e. Muoi Co). It was organized into many "Z," each of which was responsible for an important objective. The sappers and commandos were deployed by area or objective. They had the missions of continually consolidating their organization, training in combat skills, studying and grasping the objectives they had been assigned to take, perfecting their operational plans, and training the cadres and men on the terrain and around the objectives for which they were responsible. They also had to immerse themselves in the masses, understand the people in the area they were operating, and create a political base to serve as a source of support from them. On 15 December 1973 comrade Dao, the political officer of the Sapper Command of the High Command, who had come south to inspect the sapper situation in the B2 theater, said, "The B2 sappers have developed and matured, have participated in combat and campaigns with good results, and at present have been assigned missions and organized and deployed in accordance with a new strategic status. That is due in part to the guidance of the Regional Command, which drafted a strategic plan early and has specific guidelines and modes. Furthermore, the sappers have a tradition and have much combat experience." He also contributed many valuable opinions regarding the organization and training of B2 sappers.

During the 1973-1974 dry season there was another problem that was no less vexing for us: the defense of the Loc Ninh liberated area, the regional base.

For a long time the enemy had continually threatened and attacked that area by air, and was determined to prevent us from stabilizing our base area, despite having to pay the price of losing many airplanes to our anti-aircraft forces. The puppet III Corps had a plan to use strong forces to take Loc Ninh and were only awaiting the opportunity and order of its supreme command and U.S. master. Aware of that, we had to prepare a plan to stop and defeat them in order to hold on to our base area. The questions were what forces we should use, how many troops we should use, what our fighting method should be--defensive, counteroffensive or offensive--and whether we should fight on a small scale or a large scale? When could the enemy attack? Should we deploy forces in advance to await the opportunity to strike a lightning blow against them? If so, how long should we wait? Would we tie down our limited forces in a passive status? We had to think carefully about a whole series of such problems in order to make correct decisions at a time when the battlefield was in a state of flux.

The Military Commission of the party Central Committee sent us a message which emphasized that Loc Ninh was not only important militarily but had a great political significance in the present situation. Therefore, the enemy was continually plotting to take it. We had to hold it at all costs, immediately send a main-force division there, and draft a plan to counterattack and annihilate the land-grabbing enemy troops.

Carrying out the order of the Military Commission, we immediately convened a conference of staff, political and rear services cadres to study a plan to defend Loc Ninh. The discussion was quite animated. Everyone realized the importance of defending that base, as the Military Commission had just pointed out. It was also a matter of the honor and prestige of our Liberation Army.

We assessed the general situation in the B2 theater and in the region, reviewed the enemy's forces, and estimated their method of attack. Which forces could the enemy use? What would be the scale of the attack, what would be the points of origin? What were their other capabilities? We knew that in order to attack Loc Ninh the enemy would mainly draw their forces from III Corps, with the puppet 5th Division serving as the backbone, along with part of the 25th and 18th Divisions, a number of ranger units, and the 81st Airborne Brigade, part of their general reserves. It was certain that they would use Lai Khe, the base of the puppet 5th Division, as the starting point, and that the main line of attack would be along Route 13 through Binh Long, a city that had been heavily damaged. But the 5th, 25th, and 18th Divisions also had to concern themselves with defending Saigon and with mending its defense lines, which were then in tatters. Especially, the puppet 5th Division was responsible for defending Saigon to the north, a very important direction, and faced large enemy forces and our liberated area, which restricted its freedom of movement. They were also well aware that taking Loc Ninh would be no easy matter, and that one or two divisions alone would be insufficient. The experience of the clashes over a period of many years on the eastern Nam Bo battlefield, even when the U.S. troops were still there--the "Big Red One" 1st Infantry Division, the "Tropical Lightning" Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, their most modern division, etc.--which the puppet troops had often accompanied, could not escape smelling defeat. Could the enemy send additional forces from

the 1st, 2d, and 4th Military Regions? That would be very difficult, and not many forces were available, for if they were to carry out the "don't lose a single hamlet or village" strategy and grab land in order to become the masters of all of South Vietnam, as they aspired to do, where would they get the troops to concentrate in one spot?

Thus in order to attack Loc Ninh they would have to have a meticulous plan, make very careful calculations, use many forces and have skilled command--something even they were suspicious about. What then should we do? We reached the decision that we would, by means of a plan to gain the initiative, force the enemy to concern themselves with defending Saigon, tie their hands and feet, and prevent them from sending forces from Saigon to attack Loc Ninh. Thus we would not bring in a division to defend Loc Ninh but would, on the contrary, move up close to Saigon and prepare to strike at their heart if they adventurously set out to attack us. At Loc Ninh we organized a front made up of local guerrillas and headquarters guerrillas, combined with the regional anti-aircraft and mechanized forces there and a recently consolidated main-force regiment, the 201st Regiment, serving as the backbone. Those forces would appear everywhere, wear down and stop the enemy wherever they attacked, even on the fringes of the base. Meanwhile, our main-force units would, if necessary, leisurely concentrate at a predetermined assembly point and strike lightning blows to annihilate enemy units which we selected. That was the valuable experience of our counteroffensive campaign against the U.S. Junction City operation in northern Tay Ninh in 1967. Westmoreland was struck a painful blow in that operation, and after the dazzling blow of Tet 1968 he had to endure the disintegration of his military career, even though at one time he had been called "the most skilled U.S. general." Thus we carried out the order of the Military Commission creatively and in a manner completely in accord with the situation in the B2 theater at that time. We pressured the enemy, forced them to defend Saigon, struck them a mortal blow, and ended for all their plots to consolidate and complete the Saigon defense lines and to concentrate forces to attack and take Loc Ninh.

That was in May 1974, when the puppet III Corps was eager to take An Nhon Tay in order to link up with Ben Cat along Route 7 and across from Thai My-Go Noi (Trang Bang)-Provincial Route-15 An Nhon Tay to Rach Bap-Ben Cat. Their plan was to make the Rach Bap post a fortified bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Saigon River. A post that would be placed on Provincial Route 15 at An Nhon Tay would serve as a bridgehead on the western bank of the Saigon River and connect with Route 7, Go Noi, and Trang Bang. Thus they would create an intermediate defense line which, although it contracted a bit in comparison to the old one, would form a continuous, solid defense line north of Saigon. Once that plan was fulfilled, the forces of III Corps would be relatively free to concentrate in order to attack Loc Ninh or some other place. In order to carry out that plan, in March and April they assigned a number of additional ranger battalions and armored squadrons to the 25th Division, which attacked from Dong Du to Trung Lap along Route 2 past Cu Chi and Trang Bang, and Go Noi on Route 7, setting up outposts in order to encroach on our liberated area and clearing away vegetation. They used forces stationed at Jinet and Rach Bap to attack north in the direction of Bung Cong in a coordinated, mutually supporting operation. Having grasped the enemy's plan,

we resolutely retaliated against the land-grabbing and smashed the enemy's plot to complete their defense line along Route 7, east and west of the Saigon River.

West of the river, the independent 16th Regiment, under the direct control of the Regional Command, along with the "Determined To Win" Battalion of the Saigon Military Zone, and the local forces and guerrillas of Cu Chi, fiercely retaliated against the puppet 25th Division and successfully defended the An Nhon Tay liberated area east of the river. In mid-May our 9th Division, which was stationed at Long Nguyen in Ben Cat District, deservedly punished the enemy at Jinet, wiped out that post, and isolated the Rach Bap post, the garrison of which was forced to flee in panic. We liberated a segment of Route 7 east of the river from Rach Bap to Kien Dien and directly threatened Ben Cat. Meanwhile the 7th Division, coordinating with the 9th Division, attacked and heavily damaged the Phuoc Hoa base on Route 16 near Tan Uyen, wiped out some enemy manpower and armored vehicles, and forced the abandonment of a number of illegal land-grabbing outposts. Thus the enemy was unable to carry out its plan and was unable to take An Nhon Tay to extend its area of control west of the Saigon River. On the eastern side of the river we took a 10-kilometers-long area, pushed the enemy farther from the river, and connected our Long Nguyen base north of Route 7 with our An Thanh base, i.e. the three villages south of Route 7 in Ben Cat District, the famous "Iron Triangle." The northern doorway to Saigon was not closed, but was opened wider, and the enemy's defense line was not completed but was further breached. The enemy responded vehemently to that development. They concentrated there most of the III Corps forces, the entire 3d Armored Brigade, and strong air and artillery support, and launched one counterattack after another over the course of several months but each time was defeated. The enemy was able to concentrate such forces in part because of the insufficiency of the activities of our 7th Division in the area of Phuoc Hoa in Tan Uyen District. It was unable to draw in and disperse the enemy in order to reduce the burden on the 9th Division. But our liberated area there was kept intact. Thus in May and June just one of our divisions--the 9th--effectively coped with practically all of the forces of the enemy's III Corps in an extremely fierce, heroic and resourceful manner, stood its ground, maintained the liberated area, inflicted heavy losses on the enemy and created a great strategic advantage for us.

By the spring of 1975, only 9 months later that area had been further expanded to the rear and became the starting point of one of our important offensive columns in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Our 9th Division had been worn down because it had to fight continuously for nearly 2 months with an enemy force that was more than three times larger, but the campaign and strategic value of those battles, as well as the political significance of their effect on the morale of the puppet troops and the psychology of the people in Saigon, were very great. Frank Snapp, a CIA specialist stationed in Vietnam, where he was responsible for strategic research and analysis and for drafting "field evaluations" for the CIA to serve the drafting of policies by the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and in Washington, wrote of those battles during the summer-fall fighting as follows: "Although the North Vietnamese troops only launched probing attacks to the north and northeast of Saigon and had themselves recently been battered, the South Vietnamese 5th and 18th divisions suffered heavy

losses, especially in the "Iron Triangle," and were now exhausted and no longer capable of fighting."*

At that time there was some criticism of those battles, that it was unnecessary to suffer such losses and that it was a mistake to select that area for the battles. That was because such people did not fully understand the significance of destroying the enemy's ability to defend the Saigon enclave during the final strategic phase, and the significance of forcing the enemy to assume a passive defensive position and tying their hands so that we would be free to act on the critical battlefield during that decisive period. The accomplishment of those objectives required a process of resolute struggle, resourcefulness, and bravery, especially at a time when there was not much difference in the balance of forces between the two sides (although if we had not been strong we would not have been able to accomplish that). That our strength was able to overwhelm the enemy was as clear as day, so what's the use of arguing." That was also an important test for better understanding of the enemy on that strategic battlefield, of their strength and capability, and how they reacted.

Evaluations of different battles only express the evaluation of a strategic period and the role of each part of the battle. But the battlefield commander must have specific and actual understanding of our position and strength and those of the enemy. He must seek every way to place the enemy in an unfavorable position and place ourselves in an advantageous position. He must promptly and correctly evaluate each strategic period and know what must be done to promptly prepare for the successful war-deciding battle on his battlefield, especially when that battlefield will play the role of ending the war. With regard to strategy, unlike tactics, he waits until the final hours before breaking through.

In June 1974, the Regional Command reviewed all aspects of the situation in B2 after a dry season of challenges, challenges to the actual strength of both sides on the battlefield and to the will of both sides and the implementation of plans they drafted in the 1973 rainy season, with both sides trying to win victory. The beginning-of-season rain poured down in torrents, foreshadowing a season of heavy rainfall, like every other year in B2. The enervating mid-day heat of summer had given way to a comfortable coolness. Here and there the green jungle was sprinkled with the gold of ripe "gui" fruits. The soldiers of eastern Nam Bo were familiar with the bittersweet taste of the "gui" fruit. Since there were deficiencies in all regards, and meat and fish were scarce, "gui" fruits were valuable foods to our main-force troops. How delicious were the pots of soup consisting of wild green and ripe "gui" fruit. It was a sweet-sour soup which cooled one's insides. During operations in the mid-day heat of summer, when they were carrying heavy loads, if the troops drank a small glass of "gui" juice during their 10-minute break they would have enough energy to reach their destination. During the meeting held to review the situation, everyone was able to drink pleasing "gui" juice, but what was the most pleasing were the brilliant results of our dry-season activities in all parts of the theater, at a time when the enemy had entered the threshold of a period of essential defeat. We had completely bankrupted their insane

*From the book "Decent Interval," by Frank Snepp. Published by Random House, New York and Toronto, November 1977.

plan to retake all areas they held prior to 29 March 1972, an excessively greedy plan which regarded the enemy lightly and was the clearest evidence that they were trampling the Paris Agreement. They were defeated in their plan to pacify the highly populated areas and the areas under their control were not only unstabilized but were reduced. They were unable to steal the planned amount of rice from the people and to blockade the enemy economically. Except for the Dong Thap Muoi base of Military Region 8, which they took and in which they set up nine large and small outposts, they failed to take or destabilize 60 "Viet Cong" guerrilla enclaves in eastern Nam Bo and around Saigon. They remained intact although the enemy caused trouble at times. Not only was the enemy unable to mend their lines defending the capital, but those lines were further penetrated, both to the north (Route 7 at Rach Bap in Ben Cat District) and to the east (Route 2 at Ba Ria), which caused the enemy's defensive position to become even more vulnerable and unbalanced. They could never gain the initiative on that battlefield, even though Thieu had told his military region commanders that that battlefield--Military Regions III and IV--was "of life or death importance to all of South Vietnam." Furthermore, they had become bogged down in a defensive position and their forces were spread out all over. They wanted to take and pacify the highly populated coastal areas in Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan, but had been drawn to and suffered losses in the mountains and jungles of Quang Duc. They wanted to expand their control and plundering of rice in the rich Hau Giang area but they were drawn to Kien Tuong, along the Kampuchean border, by the enemy and tied down there. Afraid of exposing its western flank, III Corps had to send six task forces to attack the Queo Ba and Duc Hue areas, so it had to accept the loss of Route 2 at Ba Ria, thus shattering the middle defense line of Saigon at that point, while we connected our two base areas north and south of Route 2. They were not only unable to concentrate forces to take the enemy's famous Loc Ninh base but had their hands full trying to defend their nerve center! From that point the enemy corps was capable of concentrating forces in a certain area only if the other areas were not being attacked. Their strategic reserves were too small, at that time consisting solely of the 81st Airborne Ranger Brigade. The airborne and marine divisions were tied down in Tri Thien [Quang Tri-Thua Thien]. There seemed to be nothing the General Staff or, more accurately Nguyen Van Thieu, could do to affect the situation in a certain military zone than watch as one disastrous defeat followed another. That was the result of a stupid strategy which did not correctly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the two sides but greedily wanted to hold each village, hamlet, and outpost and not give an inch to the "Viet Cong." Their forces were spread thinly all over the place, to the extent that they no longer had any mobile reserve forces.

That situation of the enemy, which lasted until the end of the war, caused the enemy forces, which were three or four times larger than ours, to be annihilated piece by piece, until they were totally annihilated.

After May, the enemy also realized that it lacked strategic reserves, so it decided to withdraw the Airborne Division from I Corps to serve as general reserves, but in carrying out that decision, it could only bring the division to Saigon brigade by brigade, slowly and over a long period of time. Even during that dry season there were events that allowed the enemy to evaluate

its capability and realize how mistaken its strategic line. Throughout the dry season, especially during the latter months, most of the IV Corps forces in the Mekong Delta were drawn to My Tho and the Kampuchean border in Kien Tuong. In Hau Giang, the 21st Division had to disperse into battalions but still could not bolster the morale of the regional and self-defense forces. Many outposts were abandoned and many villages and hamlets were lost. The IV Corps commander had to take the initiative of abandoning a number of small, squad and platoon-sized outposts in order to reinforce more important outposts of company size or larger to obtain additional troops and make up for attrition. Only when they had no other choice and faced the peril of annihilation were they willing to abandon some outposts, villages and hamlets. They began that task during the dry season of 1974 and eventually had to abandon the Central Highlands during the 1975 dry season.

The tendency of defeat for the U.S.-puppets and victory for us in the war, which began with the 1973-1974 dry season and ended with the total defeat of the enemy, had its origins in an erroneous strategy that was pursued from the beginning by the Americans and puppets: the strategy of defending all parts of the country, of spreading troops thinly to prevent the "Viet Cong" from taking a single inch of the land, in accordance with Thieu's "four no's" policy.

How about the army that propped up the traitor regime? Although the Americans endeavored to strengthen and equip it so that it could replace the U.S.-troops, the fighting quality and numbers of the puppet army continued to decline. After the Paris Agreement they feverishly conscripted troops and rapidly increased the number of regular and regional troops. Beginning in June and July, their troop strength steadily declined. They admitted that between January and May 1974 the number of troops lost in combat and through desertion was more than 100,000, an average of more than 20,000 a month. During that time, the number of youths they conscripted to supplement their armed forces amounted to only a little more than 10,000 a month. Their IV Corps suffered the highest losses; each battalion had only about 200 troops--some units had only 150 to 180 men--and there was no way to build up those units. The ratio of equipment losses rose to a high level. Of more than 1,800 aircraft of the various kinds, they could use only about 1,000. Of their more than 100 F5 jet aircraft they could use less than half. They were forced to take such stern measures as making a census of their troops and opposing the evils of "ghost soldiers" and "rear echelon warriors." Even the table of organization of the General Staff declined by 20 percent. Unnecessary units and miscellaneous support units were eliminated. Troops were taken from self-defense units and put into regional force units, and were taken from regional force units and put into regular units. Conscripts were brazenly rounded up and monks were taken from pagodas and forced to do military service. Even so, their situation did not improve in the least, but continued to decline.

For our part, by the end of the dry season we had retaken all the areas we had held prior to 28 January 1973, including the area north and south of Route 4 in My Tho, in which the enemy feverishly grabbed land after the agreements.

We not only expanded the liberated area to more than 20 villages with a population of more than 300,000 people, principally in the Mekong Delta. That was a result of our punishing blows; when we wiped out one illegal land-grabbing outpost, the enemy troops abandoned four or five others in panic. (When we annihilated an enemy battalion on a land-grabbing operation in violation of the Paris Agreement, the enemy abandoned three or four nearby hamlets.) Clearly, the puppet troops were aggressive when we drew back, but when we resolutely attacked they became dispirited and ran for their lives. In all three areas our organized mass forces, guerrilla forces, and local troops were developed. The contested area was extended into the area under enemy control in all military regions in the B2 theater. The main-force troops of the military regions and of the Regional Command were augmented, trained and rationally deployed to create a potent offensive status, especially in eastern Nam Bo and around Saigon. While we held on to the base areas and the guerrilla enclaves in eastern Nam Bo and around Saigon, our rear-area base areas were expanded and consolidated to the greatest extent ever. It was an integrated liberated area extending from Quang Duc Province to Phuoc Long, Binh Long, and Tay Ninh along the Kampuchean border. Our Loc Ninh base was connected with the large liberated area of Long Nguyen in Ben Cat District because we wiped out the Nha Bich outpost on the Be River and the puppet's Tong Le Chan outpost--which was secretly abandoned during the night--on the Saigon River. Those two puppet ranger bases were isolated in our liberated area. The enemy tried to hold them to serve as staging areas from which to send spies deep into our area to gather intelligence, and to send rangers to attack our transportation corridor, supply depots, and organs, if we were careless. They would also be tactical bridgeheads for large-scale operations to take our bases in the future.

After the agreement, one of the enemy's difficulties was supplying those two positions and rotating its garrisons, for it was surrounded entirely by our liberated area at the conference table of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, and later of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission. On the basis of Article 3(b) of the Protocol on the ceasefire in South Vietnam we continually demanded that the Americans and puppets discuss the determination of military transport corridors, so that one side could pass through an area controlled by the other side when necessary. But the Americans and puppets obstinately ignored us. Once, out of humanitarianism, although no such agreement had been reached, we allowed puppet helicopters to evacuate wounded from the Tong Le Chan base. But we resolutely refused to allow enemy military vehicles, military boats, or military transport planes with the mission of supplying food and ammunition or bringing replacements to pass through our area before an agreement had been reached as called for by the Paris Agreement. In April 1975 the enemy troops at Nha Bich, foolhardily launching an operation to open the road to Chon Thanh to obtain supplies, passed through our area. Our 7th Division punished and wiped out the troops carrying out the operation, as well as those in the outpost. The enemy knew that they had made a mistake and were completely silent and bit their lips. Having learned from that experience, the enemy troops at Tong Le Chan, taking advantage of an overcast night, secretly abandoned the post and fled through the jungle to safety in their area. Then the enemy played a slanderous propaganda trick by claiming that we had wiped out the Tong Le Chan camp, thus violating the Paris Agreement.

Their protest led nowhere because there was no evidence. But our rear area was expanded and filled out. The Loc Ninh base was connected with the "Iron Triangle," only about 30 kilometers from Saigon. Also during that dry season our transportation corridors from the rear to the front--from the Truong Son route to the eastern Nam Bo base, and from there to the military regions--were unimpeded. Even the most distant and difficult places, such as the central coastal areas of Military Region 6 and the U Minh Forest in Military Region 9, received shipments of fresh troops and materiel, some for supplementation, some for reserves.

Thus after the 1973-1974 dry season the situation in the B2 theater had become clear. Our position and strength had grown. The enemy was caught in a passive position which it could not reverse because it was becoming increasingly weak but its methods were outmoded and confused and its extremely obstinate and illusory political and strategic line was continuing to sabotage the Paris Agreement and seeking ways to completely annihilate its adversary. Such was the situation at the beginning of the 1974 rainy season.

We were not the only ones who analyzed the transformation of the situation after the end of the 1974 dry season in that way. On the American side there were also people who realized, more or less, that that was the case. Weldon A. Brown wrote in the concluding part of his book "The Last Helicopter," as follows:

"David Shipler, a NEW YORK TIMES correspondent and an experienced observer in South Vietnam during the last months before the collapse of South Vietnam, declared that the illusion of American strength had blinded Thieu. Shipler observed that in the summer of 1974 Hanoi had begun to step up its pressure all over South Vietnam. Shipler wrote that during that critical time an American diplomat predicted that if Washington continued to supply weapons to Saigon, but didn't pressure Saigon into a political accommodation, Washington and Saigon were certain to lose the war."

It is praiseworthy that an American diplomat was able to realize the reason for the inevitable defeat of the Americans and puppets, and when it began.