

# Thiet Giap! The Battle of An Loc, April 1972

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by

Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks,  
U.S. Army, Retired

50th Anniversary  
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## FOREWORD

The Battle of An Loc was one of the most important battles of the Vietnam War. It took place during the 1972 North Vietnamese Spring Offensive, after most U.S. combat troops had departed South Vietnam. The battle, which lasted over two months, resulted in the virtual destruction of three North Vietnamese divisions and blocked a Communist attack on Saigon. The sustained intensity of combat during this battle had not been previously seen in the Vietnam War.

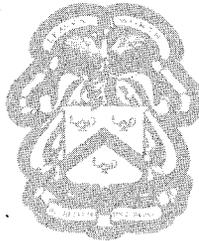
Although this battle occurred after the high point of American involvement in Vietnam, when U.S. forces were in the process of withdrawing from that country, Americans played a key role in the action. South Vietnamese ground forces and their U.S. Army advisers, working in close cooperation with U.S. Army and Air Force air support, proved a combination capable of resisting defeat and seizing victory.

Because the Battle of An Loc did not involve large numbers of American troops, little has been written about the battle or American participation in it. Jim Willbanks' study focuses on the conduct of the battle and the role American combat advisers and U.S. air power played in defeating the North Vietnamese forces during the spring of 1972.



September 1993

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Colonel, Field Artillery  
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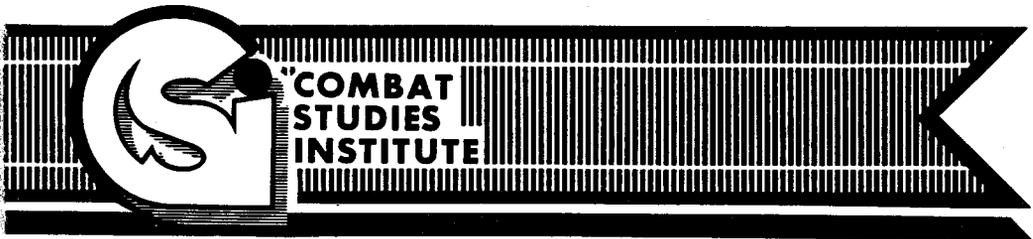
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To all the American men and women who answered their nation's call and served in the Republic of Vietnam, but especially to those who made the supreme sacrifice with their lives, to include Brigadier General Richard Tallman, Lieutenant Stanley Kuick, Major Richard Benson, First Lieutenant Richard Todd (killed by incoming artillery in An Loc on 9 July 1972), and Lieutenant Colonel William B. Nolde, the last American who died in Vietnam before the negotiated cease-fire went into effect. (Nolde was killed in An Loc on 27 January 1973, just eleven hours before the guns stopped firing.)



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## PREFACE

The genesis of this paper goes back to 1972 in a hospital ward in the 3d Field Hospital in Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. Having just been evacuated from the besieged city of An Loc, I thought that someday I would attempt to write of the desperate battle that was fought there during the massive North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

Twenty years after the fact, as part of a master's degree program at the University of Kansas, I began drawing together the many aspects of this key battle that blocked the North Vietnamese attack on Saigon. The result is the following study.

Aside from the obvious personal interest that this battle held for me, I also wanted to address the critical contribution of U.S. advisers and American close air support to the eventual South Vietnamese victory in defeating the 1972 North Vietnamese offensive in Military Region III. The body of literature on the war in Vietnam grows daily, but the emphasis of most of these works falls within two categories: historical overviews and first person accounts. These books usually focus on the height of American involvement, when large numbers of U.S. troops and units were actively conducting combat operations. Very little has been written about the American commitment in the latter part of the war when U.S. participation was embodied in a handful of advisers who remained with the Vietnamese units in the field and the few air elements left in country.

This paper focuses on the role of U.S. advisers and American tactical air power in the latter part of the war, specifically the 1972 Easter Offensive. While I was a participant in this battle, this study is by no means a memoir or a personal account. The purpose of this paper is to examine the battle of An Loc to determine the contribution made by the American advisers and flyers.

I have relied on my own personal experience for context but have attempted to document the story of the battle from multiple sources. My research drew heavily on primary sources, such as unit histories, official communiqués, operational summaries, intelligence reports, after-action reports, and a limited number of first person accounts. The research also considered the South Vietnamese point of view by examining the U.S. Army Center of Military History Indochina Monograph Series, in which former senior South Vietnamese military leaders discuss a variety of issues germane to the Vietnam War, including the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) performance during the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion.

A limited number of North Vietnamese sources are also considered. While these works are very political in nature, they provide a glimpse of the Communist perspective and the strategy that led to the North Vietnamese decision to launch a large-scale offensive in 1972.

Most primary sources for this study are available in the Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

I am indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Ramsey III and Colonel Richard M. Swain of the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for giving me the opportunity to publish this study.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of groups and persons that I would like to thank for their contribution to this effort.

First, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Ted Wilson of the University of Kansas for his kind guidance and encouragement in what has become a reconstruction of one of the most significant emotional events in my life. I greatly appreciate his patience, indulgence, and wise counsel.

I am also indebted to Mr. Dan Doris and the staff of the Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for their superb and timely assistance during the research for this paper.

I also express my appreciation to my fellow instructors in both the Center for Army Tactics, the Directorate of Joint and Combined Operations, and the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for their insight, comments, and recommendations for improving this study. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Mr. Don Gilmore for his professionalism and expertise in editing this paper.

A special heartfelt thanks goes to my wife, Diana, who served on the home front and supported me through the difficult times addressed in this study. I also commend her and our children, Jennifer and Russell, for their support during the preparation of this paper. Lastly, I am grateful to my mother and father, Master Sergeant (U.S. Army, Retired) and Mrs. James E. Willbanks, for their unfailing love and support over the years.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The sun had just come up in An Loc, the capital city of Binh Long Province in South Vietnam; it was 13 April 1972. The author, at the time a U.S. Army infantry officer serving as an adviser with the army of South Vietnam (the ARVN), was on the roof of a building putting up a radio antenna. It had been a relatively quiet night with regard to enemy probes and ground attacks, but there had been a significant increase in the number of incoming rockets and artillery rounds. The ARVN infantry task force that the author advised had just moved into the city the day before. It had withdrawn under intense North Vietnamese Army (NVA) pressure from two firebases to the north that it had previously occupied.

I and Major Raymond Haney had joined the regimental task force after the original advisory team members had been wounded and subsequently evacuated during the withdrawal from the north. The replacement advisory team arrived in An Loc by helicopter on 12 April to find the city nearly panicked. Artillery rounds and rockets were falling steadily on the city, and the helicopter that brought the officers into the city hovered only long enough for them to jump off the aircraft into a freshly dug hole in the city soccer field as artillery rounds impacted near the landing zone. During the evening, the South Vietnamese soldiers prepared for the inevitable North Vietnamese attack, and they were up early for whatever the day would bring.

As I finished installing a radio antenna, I heard a tremendous explosion and ran down the stairs to the front of the building. Frantic South Vietnamese soldiers ran by shouting, "Thiet Giap!" I had never heard this phrase before, but as the soldier ran around the corner of the building, it became all too apparent that the cry meant "tank"; advancing down the street from the north was a line of North Vietnamese T-54 tanks! So began the Battle of An Loc, described by Douglas Pike as "the single most important battle in the war."<sup>1</sup>

For the next four months, a desperate struggle raged between 3 North Vietnamese divisions (estimated at over 36,000 troops) and the greatly outnumbered South Vietnamese defenders, assisted by their U.S. Army advisers. The 66-day siege of An Loc would result in horrendous losses on both sides and would culminate with South Vietnamese forces blocking the North Vietnamese thrust toward the South Vietnamese capital in Saigon.

Although this battle occurred after the high point of American commitment in Vietnam, American forces were active and key

participants in the action. The American advisory effort had become increasingly more important as American combat troops were withdrawn. During the Battle of An Loc, American advisers on the ground, working in consonance with American air power, would prove to be the key ingredients to the South Vietnamese victory.

The Battle of An Loc, although one of the key battles in the entire Vietnam War, has been discussed only briefly in the literature about the war. The purpose of this study is to examine the battle in detail to determine the extent of the American contribution to the victory. This battle will then be compared with the performance of the South Vietnamese forces against the North Vietnamese invasion of 1975 in an effort to assess the impact of an absence of American participation in the latter action. The focus of the study will be on the American military's role in thwarting the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion; it will not debate the relative merits and demerits of the Vietnamization process or the efficacy of the eventual American withdrawal from South Vietnam .

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## II. THE NORTH VIETNAMESE SPRING OFFENSIVE

The North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972 consisted of a massive, coordinated three-pronged attack designed to strike a knockout blow against the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. In the offensive, the North Vietnamese used conventional tactics and introduced weaponry far exceeding that employed during any previous guerrilla campaigns.

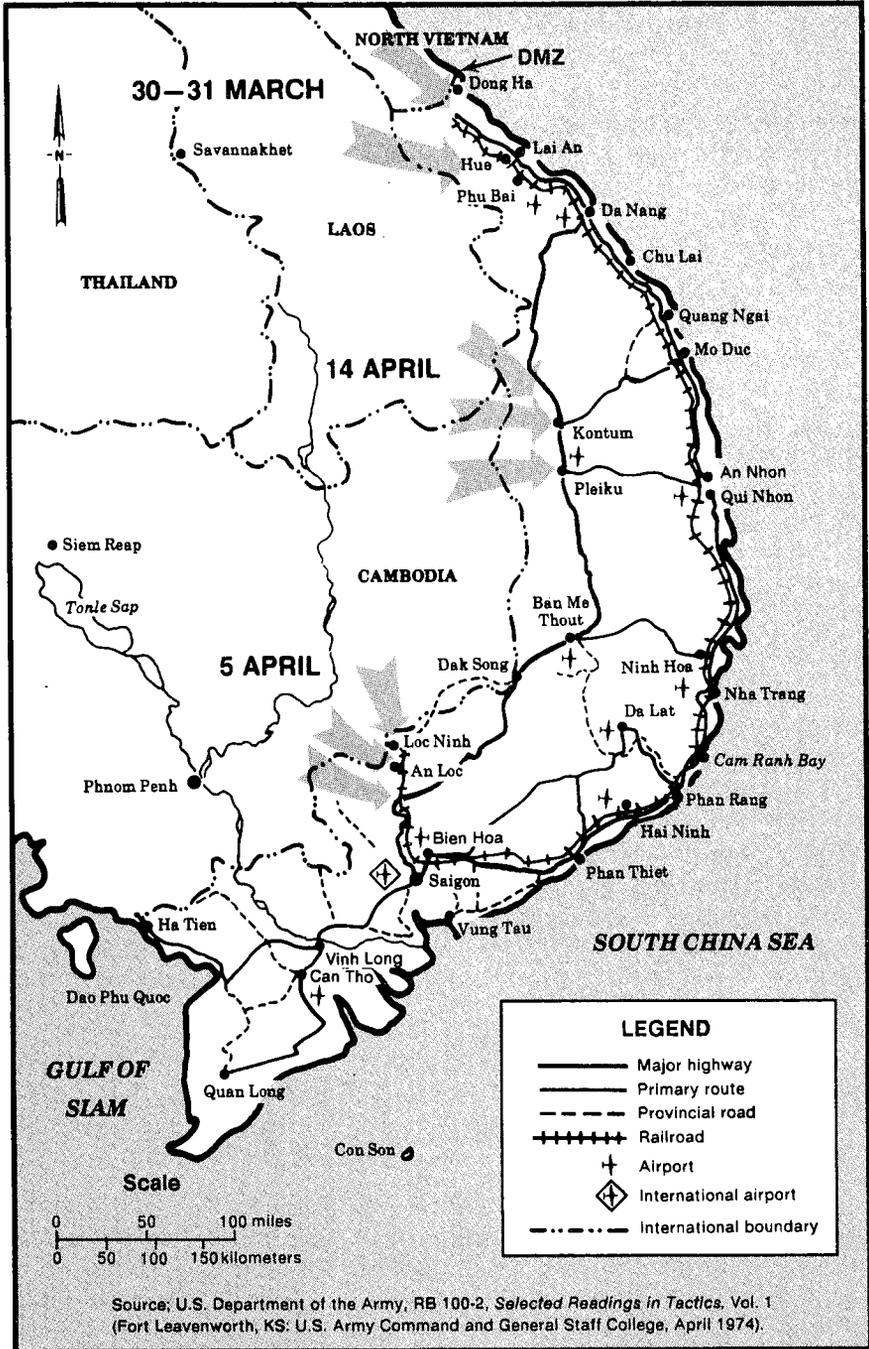
This was a radical departure from earlier North Vietnamese strategy. The NVA decided to employ conventional tactics for this offensive for several reasons. First, they did not believe that the Americans, with only 65,000 troops left in Vietnam, could influence the strategic situation. Furthermore, they did not think that the political situation in the United States would permit President Nixon to commit any new troops or combat support to assist the South Vietnamese forces. Additionally, they believed that a resounding NVA military victory would humiliate the president, destroy his war politics, and perhaps foil his bid for reelection in November.<sup>1</sup>

### *The North Vietnamese Strategy*

The architect of the North Vietnamese campaign was General Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu. According to captured documents and information obtained from NVA prisoners of war after the invasion, Giap's campaign was designed to destroy as many ARVN forces as possible, thus permitting the North Vietnamese to occupy key South Vietnamese cities, putting the Communist forces in a posture to threaten President Nguyen Van Thieu's government. At the same time, Giap hoped to discredit Nixon's Vietnamization and pacification programs, cause the remaining American forces to be withdrawn quicker, and ultimately to seize control of South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

A subset of Giap's strategy called for a Communist provisional government to be established in An Loc as a precursor to the assault on Saigon.<sup>3</sup> Although the North Vietnamese hoped to achieve a knockout blow, a corresponding objective was to seize at least enough terrain to strengthen their position in any subsequent negotiations.

The offensive began on 30 March 1972, when three NVA divisions attacked south across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam toward Quang Tri and Hue. Three days later, three more divisions moved from sanctuaries in Cambodia and pushed into Binh Long Province, the capital of which was only sixty-



Map 1. NVA Easter Offensive, 1972

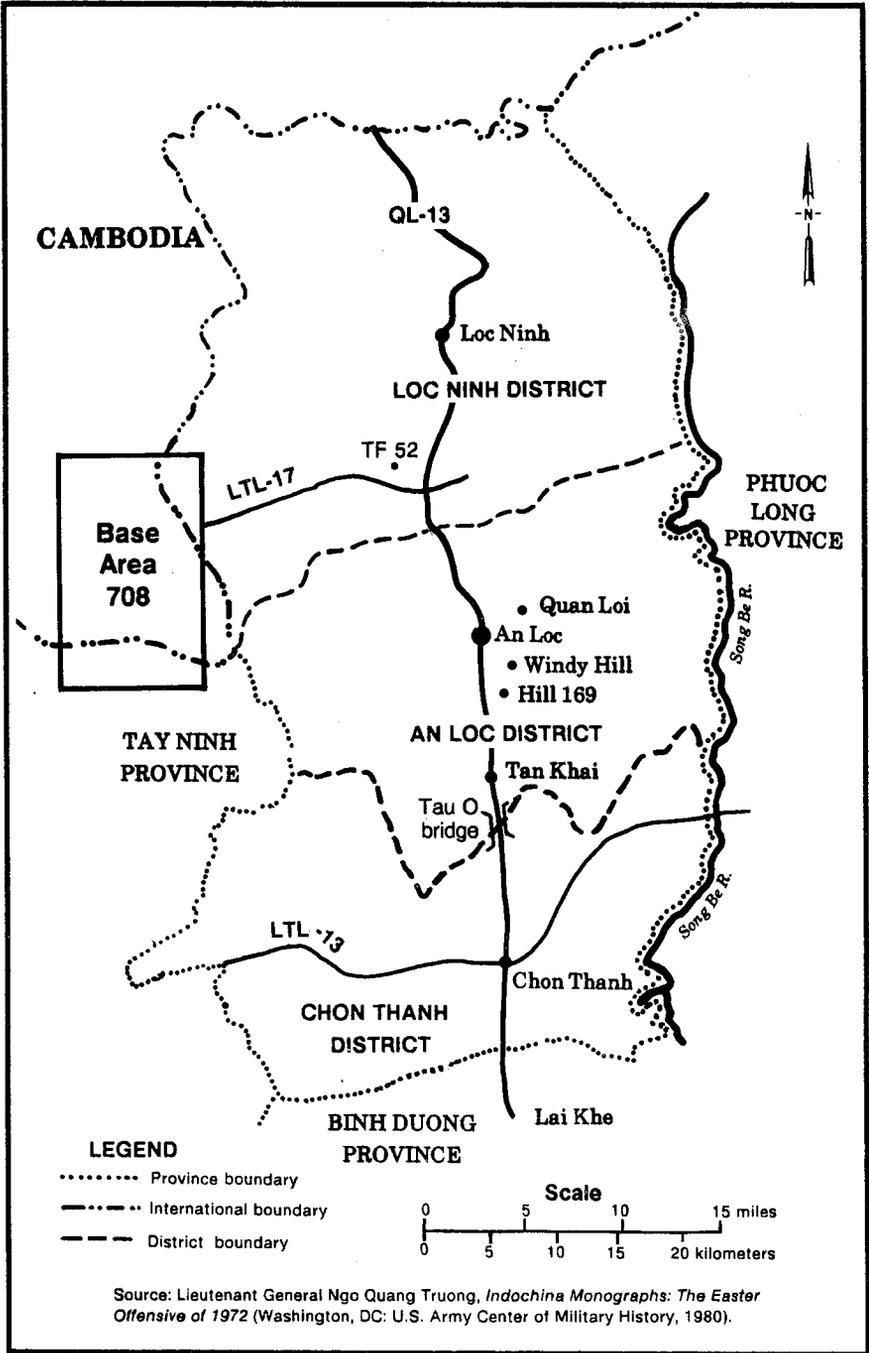
five miles from the South Vietnamese capital in Saigon. Additional North Vietnamese forces attacked across the Cambodian border in the Central Highlands toward Kontum (see map 1). A total of 14 NVA infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments (including 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles) participated in the offensive.<sup>4</sup>

The North Vietnamese invasion was characterized by large-scale conventional infantry tactics, accompanied by tanks and massive artillery support. The enemy thrusts were initially successful, particularly in the north, where the NVA quickly overran Quang Tri, threatened Hue and Kontum, and generally routed the defending ARVN forces.

### *Military Region III*

Military Region III (MR III), comprised of the eleven provinces that surrounded Saigon, was located between the Central Highlands and the Mekong River delta. The enemy activity in this region began in the early hours of 2 April with attacks by the 24th and 271st NVA Regiments against elements of the 25th ARVN Division in several firebases near the Cambodian border in northern Tay Ninh Province. The North Vietnamese attacked with infantry and tanks (American-made M-41 tanks previously captured from ARVN forces), supported by heavy mortar and rocket fire. Although there had been earlier intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese were making preparations for offensive operations, there was little indication that there would be attacks on the scale of those in Military Region I. While intelligence had shown an increase in enemy activity in Tay Ninh Province in March, the general feeling at Headquarters, MACV, was that the enemy would not try to attack the towns along Highway QL-13. It was felt that ARVN operations along the Cambodian border would prevent the NVA from massing for an all-out attack like the one at Quang Tri in the north. Thus, while the South Vietnamese were surprised at the ferocity of the enemy attacks and the use of tanks, the attacks themselves coincided with expectations that any significant attacks would occur in Tay Ninh.<sup>5</sup>

The initial assaults on the outlying South Vietnamese posts would prove to be diversionary attacks designed to mask the movement of three North Vietnamese divisions (5th VC, 7th NVA, and 9th VC) taking up their final attack positions in Binh Long Province.<sup>6</sup>



Map 2. Key locations, Binh Long Province, MR III

Binh Long ("Peaceful Dragon") Province is located in the northwestern portion of Military Region III and is bordered on the west by Cambodia (see map 2). The capital of the province is An Loc, a city of 15,000, which lies only 65 miles north of Saigon. An Loc, a thriving and prosperous city surrounded by vast rubber plantations totaling 75,000 acres, sat astride QL-13, a paved highway leading directly from the Cambodian border to the South Vietnamese capital. Because of its proximity to Cambodia and the accompanying Communist base areas, the city had endured the rigors of war since the early 1960s. Due to its strategic location between Cambodia and Saigon, An Loc figured prominently in the North Vietnamese strategy. Seizure of An Loc would provide a base for a follow-on attack on the South Vietnamese capital city to seize President Thieu's seat of government.

At the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive in MR III, the Saigon government had only a single division, the 5th ARVN, operating in this critical area. This division, a regular South Vietnamese infantry division, was dispersed throughout Binh Long Province.

### *The Vietnamization Program*

By this time in the war, President Nixon had instituted his "Vietnamization" program, designed to turn over the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese. During the 1968 election campaign, Nixon had pledged to bring American troops home and secure an honorable peace in Vietnam. As part of this plan, he directed that a "highly forceful approach" be taken to cause President Thieu and the South Vietnamese government to assume greater responsibility for the war.<sup>7</sup> This program, first called "Vietnamization" by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, sought to make preparations to turn over the war to South Vietnam. This was to be accomplished by a progressive buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while, at the same time, steadily withdrawing American troops. The ultimate objective was to strengthen ARVN capabilities and bolster the Thieu government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the Communists from North Vietnam.

In order to accomplish program objectives, Nixon directed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the senior U.S. military headquarters in Vietnam, to provide maximum assistance to the South Vietnamese to build up their forces, support the pacification program, and reduce the flow of supplies and materiel dispensed to

Communist forces in the south.<sup>8</sup> Between 1969 and 1972, the Thieu government, with American aid, increased the size of its military forces from 825,000 to over 1 million. American military aid provided the ARVN with over 1 million M-16 rifles, 12,000 M-60 machine guns, 40,000 M-79 grenade launchers, and 2,000 heavy mortars.<sup>9</sup> The ARVN military schools were improved and expanded to handle over 100,000 students a year. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was increased to 9 tactical wings, 40,000 personnel, and nearly 700 aircraft. By 1970, the South Vietnamese military was one of the largest and best equipped in the world.

Equipment and numbers were not the only answers to the problem of the South Vietnamese becoming self-sufficient on the battlefield. In order to improve the quality of the ARVN force, MACV increased the advisory effort. This program was not a new effort; Americans had been serving with Vietnamese units since 1955.<sup>10</sup> However, the importance of the advisory program had increased as the number of American combat units dwindled. By 1972, most U.S. ground combat forces had been withdrawn, and the only Americans on the ground in combat roles were advisers who served with ARVN forces in the field.

The American advisory structure closely paralleled that of the Vietnamese military command and control organization. Headquarters, MACV, provided the advisory function to the Joint General Staff (JGS), the senior headquarters of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).

Just below the JGS level were four South Vietnamese corps commanders who were responsible for the four military regions that comprised South Vietnam (see figure 1). Their U.S. counterparts were the commanders of the four regional assistance commands, whose responsibilities included providing assistance, advice, and support to the corps commander and his staff in planning and executing operations, training, and logistical efforts. As the corps senior adviser, the regional assistance commander, usually a U.S. Army major general, exercised operational control over the subordinate U.S. Army advisory groups in the military region.

Under the U.S. regional assistance commander in each region, there were two types of advisory teams: province advisory teams and division advisory teams. Each province in each military region was headed by a South Vietnamese colonel. His American counterpart was the province senior adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The

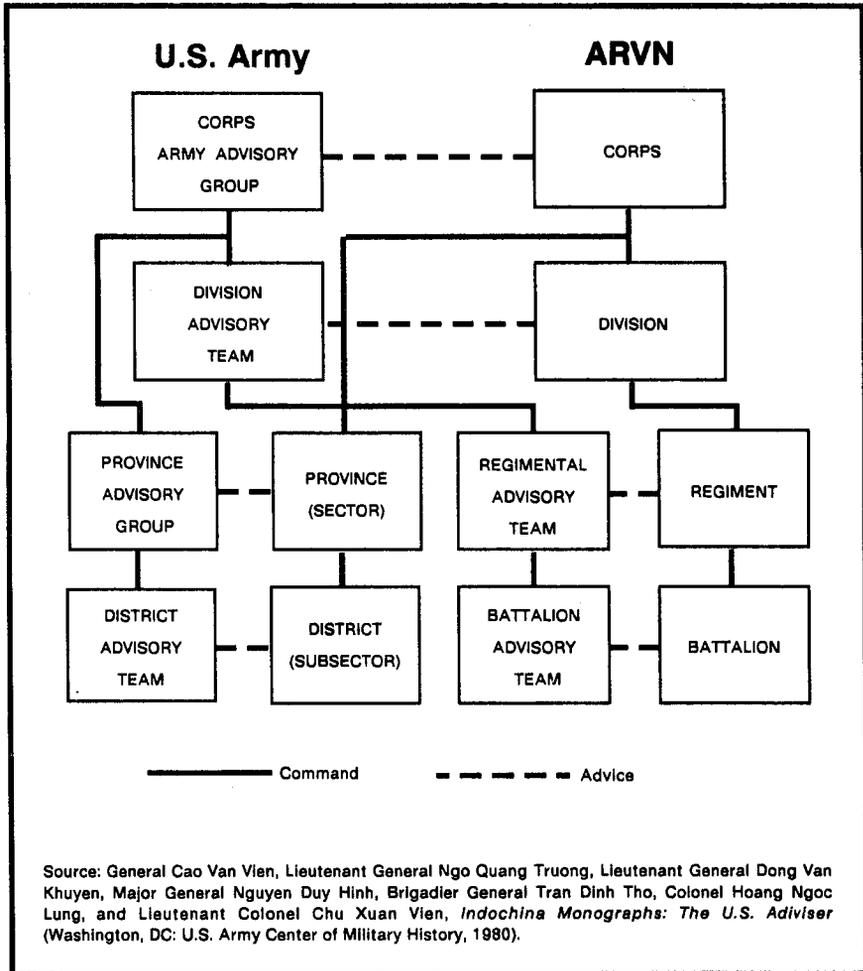


Figure 1. Organization, U.S. Army advisory structure, 1972

province advisory team was responsible for advising the province chief in civil and military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs. Additionally, the province team advised the regional and popular forces, which were essentially provincial militia.

There was a division combat assistance team (DCAT) with each ARVN infantry division. This advisory team's mission was to advise and assist the ARVN division commander and his staff in command, administration, training, tactical operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and certain elements of political warfare.<sup>11</sup> The division

senior adviser was usually an Army colonel, who exercised control over the regimental and battalion advisory teams.

Each ARVN division usually had three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and several separate battalions—such as the cavalry squadron and the engineer battalion. The regimental advisory teams were normally composed of from three to five U.S. Army personnel (they had been larger earlier, but the drawdown of U.S. forces in country gradually reduced the size of the American teams with the ARVN units). The regimental teams were usually headed by an Army lieutenant colonel and included various mixes of captains and noncommissioned officers. The separate battalion advisory teams usually consisted of one or two specialists, who advised the South Vietnamese in their respective functional areas, e.g., cavalry, intelligence, engineering, etc.

Elite ARVN troops, such as the airborne and ranger units (and the Marines in MR I), were organized generally along the same lines as regular ARVN units, except the highest echelon of command in the ranger units was the group (similar to a regiment). The airborne brigades were organized into a division. There was also an airborne division advisory team headed by an American colonel. Each of the airborne brigades was accompanied by an American advisory team, which was headed by a lieutenant colonel and was similar, but somewhat larger, than those found with the regular ARVN regiments because they included advisers down to battalion level.

U.S. Army advisers did not command, nor did they exercise any operational control over any part of the ARVN forces. Their mission was to provide professional military advice and assistance to their counterpart ARVN commanders and staffs in personnel management, training, combat operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and psychological-civil affairs operations.<sup>12</sup> As U.S. combat forces withdrew from South Vietnam, the U.S. Army advisers increasingly became the focal point for liaison and coordination between ARVN units and the U.S. Air Force, as well as other elements of U.S. combat support agencies still left in country.

By early 1972, there were just 5,300 U.S. advisers in the whole of Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> Only a small fraction of this number were actually involved in advising units conducting combat operations. In Binh Long Province, the 5th ARVN Division, in and around An Loc, was accompanied by a small division advisory team consisting of ten to fifteen advisers who worked with the division headquarters and several small teams of two to five persons with each of the division's

subordinate regiments. (The rest of the division advisory team were at the division base camp in Lai Khe.) The division senior adviser at the time of the North Vietnamese offensive was Colonel William ("Wild Bill") Miller. In addition to the division team, there was also a province team, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Corley, with the Binh Long Province headquarters in An Loc. Most of this advisory team, except Corley and a small party, would be evacuated after the start of the battle. Other American advisers accompanied the ARVN reinforcements that would be brought in during the course of the battle. These few Americans (never numbering more than twenty-five during the course of the battle) would find themselves in the thick of the combat action once the North Vietnamese attack began in earnest.

Although there were few American forces operating on the ground in combat roles in Vietnam, U.S. tactical air power was still much in evidence throughout the theater of operations. U.S. Air Force and Marine aircraft operated from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand, while the Navy and other Marine aircraft operated from carriers in the South China Sea. B-52 heavy bombers flew missions in both North and South Vietnam regularly from bases in Guam and Thailand. Prior to the 1972 offensive, the B-52s had been used mostly in the strategic role, but during the Eastertide battles, the big bombers were used increasingly in the tactical support role. Additionally, U.S. Army armed helicopters continued to fly ground support missions throughout South Vietnam. The availability and responsiveness of this American aerial firepower would prove critical in the conduct of the battles to come.

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