

Excerpts From Hanoi General's Account of Drive

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HONG KONG, April 25—Following are excerpts, in unofficial translation, from the account of North Vietnam's Chief of Staff, Gen. Van Tien Dung, of the spring offensive of 1975 that led to the Communist victory in South Vietnam.

From July through October 1974 the General Staff agencies were busily and urgently working. The battlefield situation was changing to our advantage.

The morale and combat strength of the puppet troops were clearly declining. Since early that year, 170,000 men had deserted. Their total manpower had decreased by 15,000 men since 1973, with a heavy loss in combat strength.

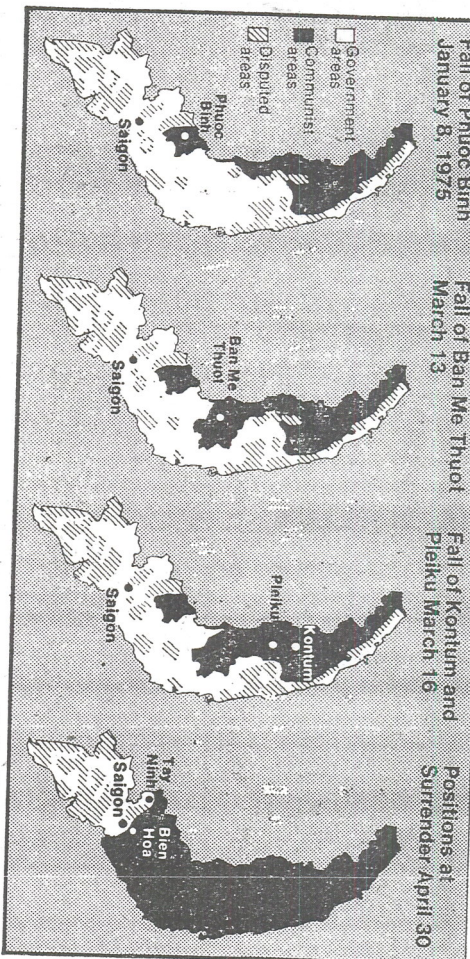
In fiscal 1972-73 the United States had given the puppet troops \$2.168 billion in military aid. This aid was reduced to \$964 million in fiscal 1973-74 and to \$700 million in 1974-75. Nguyen Van Thieu was then forced to fight a poor man's war.

Enemy fire power had decreased by nearly 60 percent. Its mobility was also reduced by half. The enemy had to shift from large-scale operations and helicopter-borne and tank-mounted attacks to small-scale blocking, nibbling and searching operations.

Strategy Conference

The cool fall weather of October 1974 reminded our military cadres of the coming campaign. The Political Bureau and Central Military Party Committee held a conference to hear the General Staff present its strategic combat

1975 Communist Advances From Hanoi Strategy Talks to Fall of Saigon



GEN. VAN TIEN DUNG: "Great news from the south: The main-force units, in cooperation with the provincial forces, had attacked and liberated Phuoc Binh city" . . . "Ban Me Thuot was a rapid victory" . . . "On 16 March the enemy was retreating from Pleiku" . . . "Was it true that the thunderous blow we had dealt at Ban Me Thuot had produced such a shattering impact?"

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plan.

At this conference a problem was raised and heatedly discussed: Would the United States be able to send its troops back to the South if we launched large-scale battles that would lead to the collapse of the puppet troops?

After signing the Paris agreement on Vietnam and withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam, the United States had faced even greater difficulties and embarrassment. The internal contradictions within the U.S. Administration and among U.S. political parties had intensified. The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the entire United States and precipitated the resignation of an extremely reactionary President—Nixon. The United States faced economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis.

Comrade Le Duan drew an important conclusion that became a resolution: Having already withdrawn from the South, the United States could hardly jump back in, and no matter how it might intervene, it would be unable to save the Saigon administration from collapse.

The conferees unanimously approved the General Staff's draft plan which chose the Central Highlands as the main battlefield in the large-scale, widespread 1975 offensive.

Many meetings preceded the Political Bureau's extremely important conference lasting from 18 December 1974 to 8 January 1975.

Great News From South

While the Political Bureau was meeting, great news came from the South: The main-force units in Eastern Nam Bo [the three around Saigon], in cooperation with the provincial forces, had attacked and liberated Phuoc Binh City and all of Phuoc Long Province. This was the first province in the South to be completely liberated.

The Political Bureau was resolved to mobilize the greatest efforts by the entire party and all troops and people in both parts of the country during the 1975-76 period, to step up the military and political struggle in coordination with the diplomatic struggle with a view to quickly and comprehensively changing the balance of power in our favor.

This strategic determination was reflected in the two-year 1975-76 strategic plan. According to this plan, wide-

spread, large surprise attacks would be launched in 1975, creating conditions for the general offensive and uprising in 1976. Thus in 1976 we would launch the general offensive and uprising to completely liberate the South.

On Jan. 9, 1975, one day after the conclusion of the Political Bureau conference, the standing body of the Central Military Party Committee went into session.

While in session, we received reports that the enemy had dispatched an airborne division from the Central Highlands to Da Nang. This

indicated that the enemy had not yet discovered the presence of our forces and our preparations in the Central Highlands. Only at this conference of the standing body of the Central Military Party Committee did the idea about mounting an attack on Ban Me Thuot become clear-cut.

Enemy Misjudged

The enemy misjudged our designs. He believed that if we attacked the Central Highlands we would attack its northern part. Therefore he concentrated forces to defend Pleiku and Kontum. He left lesser forces in Darlac in the southern Central Highlands. Ban Me Thuot City, the Darlac provincial capital, with a population of 150,000; was a political and economic center of the enemy, and the 23d Division headquarters was located there. The enemy was also mistaken in his assessment of us. He believed that in 1975 we were not strong enough to attack major provincial capitals and cities and that even if we attacked them we would not be able to defend them from counterattack. Therefore, although Ban Me Thuot was a vitally important position, prior to our attack the enemy had not deployed very strong forces there, and those that were there had many gaps.

When the decision to attack Ban Me Thuot was definitely taken, I hastily prepared to go to the front.

I promptly organized a group of cadres to accompany me to the western Highlands. The group had the code name A-75. Due to the importance of the campaign, my movements had to be kept under the strictest secrecy and everything had to be done to distract the enemy's intelligence. According to plans, after my departure the press would carry a number of reports on my activi-

ties as if I were still in Hanoi. Daily, the Volga sedan would make the trips from my house to the general headquarters at 7 A.M. and 2 P.M. and from the general headquarters to my house at 12 noon and 5 P.M. sharp. Late in the afternoon the troops would come to the courtyard at my house to play volleyball as usual, because I have the habit of playing volleyball after the afternoon working hours with them.

A Pretended Illness

My personal secretary, who lived with his family in a community area, would pretend serious illness on the eve of the departure. An ambulance would bring him to a hospital, and the next morning he would begin his journey from the hospital. According to what had been decided upon, in all communications, information, liaison and discussions during this campaign, Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap would be referred to as Chien, and I as Tuan.

According to our intelligence reports, on 9 and 10 December 1974, on the fourth story of the Independence Palace, Thieu held a meeting with the commanders of army corps of military regions of the puppetees so as to assess our activities in 1975. They arrived at the following conclusion:

In 1975 we might fight on a scale larger than that of 1974, but it would not be as large as that of 1968 and would be less than that of 1972. We still were incapable of striking at big provincial capitals or cities, and even if we did strike at them we would be unable to hold them. We were only able to attack small and isolated provincial capitals such as Phuoc Long and Gia Nghia.

Our aim was to achieve success to pressure them to implement the Paris agreement on Vietnam. They believed that in early 1975 our direction of attack would be to strike at the Third Military Region, mainly Tay Ninh, in an attempt to use Tay Ninh as the capital of the P.R.G.S.V. [Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam].

30,000 Built Road

Because of this assessment, they did not change their strategic deployment of maintaining strength at two ends—the first and third tactical zones. Neither did they greatly reinforce the second tactical zone that included the western Highlands.

The strategic route east

of the Truong Son [Annamate] range, which was completed in early 1975, was the result of the labor of more than 30,000 troops and shock youths. The length of this route, added to that of the other old and new strategic routes and routes used during various campaigns built during the last war, is more than 20,000 kilometers. The eight-meter-wide route of more than 1,000 kilometers, which we could see now, is our pride. With 5,000 kilometers of pipeline laid through deep rivers and streams and on mountains more than 1,000 meters high, we were capable of providing enough fuel for various battlefronts. More than 10,000 transportation vehicles were put on the road.

As for us, we continued to go farther into the area our vehicle's number plate was repainted and the marking TS-50 was added to it. This marking meant priority No. 1 for the Truong Son troops.

On the way, we met Division 316 going on a military operation. This was the first time this division had used 500 trucks to move its men and equipment to the battlefront. An order had been given to this division: From the time its men set out until the time they opened fire, they must have absolutely no radio contact, so as to keep their operation secret. We intercepted an enemy radio message saying Division 316 could no longer be seen and no one knew where it was going.

Leaves and Elephants

On arrival in the Central Highlands, I established the command post west of Ban Me Thuot, near the headquarters of the front command. Our residence was in a green forest adjacent to a forest. The dry leaves of the trees covered the ground like a yellow carpet. Whenever someone walked on these dry leaves, they cracked as crisp griddle-cakes do, and the noise could be heard in every part of the forest. A small spark might set the forest afire. Combatants of signal and communications units had to work hardest here. Whenever a fire broke out and destroyed communication wires, these combatants set out to quench the fire and returned with their bodies as black as coal miners'. Another problem was caused by herds of 40 to 50 elephants which snapped communication wires, even

though some of these had been hung on high tree branches.

A comparison with the enemy over the entire area of the campaign showed that our infantry was not much superior to the enemy's. However, because we concentrated the majority of our forces in the main area of the campaign, we achieved superiority over the enemy in this area. As for infantry, the ratio was 5.5 of our troops for each enemy soldier. As for tanks and armored vehicles, the ratio was 1.2 to 1. In heavy artillery, the ratio was 2.1 to 1.

The enemy had not yet clearly realized that our forces were on this side of Ban Me Thuot since he could not detect our movements. In the coming days it would be necessary to continue to make the enemy believe that our main thrust would be toward Kontum and Pleiku to provide an opportunity for our plan. It would be necessary to intensify activities in Kontum and Pleiku in the coming days to further confirm the enemy's mistaken belief.

By maintaining the element of surprise concerning the target, the time and the fighting method, isolating the enemy and bringing into play a decisively superior force without the enemy's knowledge, we would insure fewer losses and quicker victory in battle.

A Lost Diary

The front command reported that a group of officers of our artillery regiment had had an engagement with the enemy west of Ban Me Thuot on 5 March while on a reconnaissance mission. One of our combatants was wounded and captured with his diary. I thought: "We will attack Ban Me Thuot within four days. What will the enemy do in the coming days? So far, he has misunderstood us as far as our main offensive target is concerned, but

if similar incidents revealing our secrets continue to occur, the enemy will certainly reassess the situation. He is now intensively seeking to understand our intentions." I telephoned comrade Vu Lang to remind him to closely check the implementation by each soldier of all regulations on the preservation of secrecy.

At 0200 sharp on the morning of 10 March, the offensive on Ban Me Thuot was heralded by the fire from sapper units directed against the Hoa Binh and city airfields. Long-range artillery began destroying military targets in the city. From a point 40 kilometers from Ban Me Thuot, our tank unit started their engines, cut through trees and headed for Ban Me Thuot. Modern ferries were rapidly assembled, while tanks, armored vehicles, antiaircraft guns and anti-armored car guns formed queues to cross on the ferries. The mountains and forests of the Central Highlands were shaken by a fire storm.

From the command post, I could clearly hear the regular and rapid explosion of our shells. I called Hoang Minh Thao and we talked over the telephone. Here is a report on some aspects of the situation that day.

No sooner had the artillery opened fire than the lights in the city went off. The city airfield was ablaze, and so was the airfield depot. Tanks were moving under trees and waiting. Sappers had occupied the city airfield.

"The Battle Is Over"

Basically, the battle was over by 1030 on 11 March 1975. "Basically, the battle is over"—these words were jotted down on the incoming message record by an opera-

tions cadre at our command post. Our men's elation cannot be described. I told our men present at the command post: The fact that it took us only a little more than a day and a night to attack and occupy so large a city proves that the enemy can find no means to resist our strength.

On 15 March and on the morning of 16 March we received a number of technical news items and some comments by Western radio stations. For example, a United States news agency reported that on 15 March the price of a Pleiku-Saigon air ticket rose to as much as 48,000 piasters. Why were there so many people competing for air tickets to Saigon on 15 March?

At 1500 on 16 March Hanoi sent a message saying that the forward command post of the enemy in III Corps had moved to Nha Trang.

At that time we were still concentrating on Ban Me Thuot.

Enemy Retreating

At 2100 on 16 March the comrade on alert duty received the news that the enemy was retreating from Pleiku: A convoy of trucks had passed the Vinh Thanh crossroads to move along Route 7. The ammo dump in Pleiku was exploding, fires had broken out in the city. Our command headquarters was alive with activity. A map of communications lines in the Central Highlands was spread out on the table. Flashlights and magnifying glasses were traced along Routes 19, 14 and 7 on the map to determine blockade points, shortcuts and attacking directions, and the nearest units and Route 7 were calculated to set the time for action.

Our unit had not yet any concrete information about this route and had yet to enter into close pursuit of the enemy. I severely criticized the top unit leader. I emphatically told Comrade Kim Tuan: "This is a shortcoming, a reproachable mistake. At this time the slightest hesitation, mistake, fear of hardship or delay would mean failure. If the enemy escapes, you will be responsible."

Now a whole regular corps of the puppets was hastily fleeing in retreat, abandoning the Central Highlands — a strategically important region.

Why such a retreat? And who had given the order for it? Was it true that the thunderous blow we had dealt at Ban Me Thuot had produced such a shattering impact on the enemy? It was true that the enemy had been stunned and rendered strategically confused. The enemy had again made another grave strategic mistake.