

# 'Turning Point' of War for Hanoi

The writer of this dispatch is a freelance journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for his disclosure of the My Lai massacre.

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## Hanoi

The defeat of South Vietnamese troops during the Laos "incursion" a year ago was a disappointment to American military planners, but it has been widely described in Washington as only a setback along the inevitable road to successful Vietnamization.

In North Vietnam, however, the Battle of Route 9, as it is known here, is presented as an epic turning point

in the Indochina war and a heroic victory second only to the 1968 offensive at the time of Tet, the lunar new year.

The operation, code-named Lamson 719 by Saigon, involved 45,000 of the most highly-trained South Vietnamese troops, supported by a vast array of U.S. aircraft, artillery and supplies in February and March 1971.

## GOAL

The initial goal was to cut all communications along the Ho Chi Minh trail in eastern Laos from the border to the city of Tchepone, about 25 miles to the west. Instead, the South Vietnamese forces were sent

fleeing in full retreat within weeks.

American correspondents in South Vietnam were refused permission to observe the battles in Laos and officials discouraged interviews with participants. But there is no such reluctance here. Last summer the national military museum in Hanoi was converted into a virtual shrine commemorating the victory.

The display includes dozens of photographs of Pathet Lao and Viet Cong troops attending planning sessions before the battle, moving supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail and attacking in Laos.

There are also scenes of deserted Vietnamese fire

bases housing many seemingly undamaged artillery pieces and thousands of neatly stacked shells.

## POSTER

A large poster apparently prepared by the third brigade of a South Vietnamese paratroop division bears a greeting to foreign correspondents. North Vietnamese said the poster had been made in advance for press briefings which Saigon officials expected to conduct after the capture of Tchepone.

The widely circulated photograph of soldiers clinging desperately to the sides of an evacuation helicopter was prominently displayed in the museum. Museum director Trans Manh Thuyen said many helicopter pilots

were forced to apply thick grease to their skids to make it more difficult to grab hold.

The North Vietnamese claimed a toll of 23,400 South Vietnamese killed or wounded during the two-month operation, more than half the original attacking force. The statistic is far larger than the official total, although some roughly equivalent figures were reported unofficially later.

## POINT

Other North Vietnamese claims, which were of course impossible to verify, included 230 personnel carriers, tanks and other vehicles destroyed or captured; 72 cannon destroyed, more than 700 helicopters and airplanes

shot down, and four supply dumps destroyed.

"According to our estimates," Thuyen said, "this was a turning point in the whole Indochina theater. It was the first time the forces were employed under the new Vietnamization formula" — using South Vietnamese troops and American support and firepower — "in such a major fashion."

A ranking Vietcong official in Hanoi similarly described the battle as a sign that "basically the Vietnamization policy has failed."

"Of course," he continued, "It doesn't mean that Vietnamization has failed completely yet but that from now on the U.S. policy only has to fail."