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AIR SUPPORT BJT 440
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OVER HIGHWAY 1, Vietnam AP - The gray sky is so low it is like flying indoors, but the air is full of planes and helicopters trying to slow the North Vietnamese advance below the demilitarized zone.

The roads are full of refugees fleeing south toward Hue.

All Easter morning South Vietnamese Skyraider pilots brought up from the south sat with tight faces in their trailer quarters waiting for the clouds to lift from Da Nang. Vietnamese helicopter pilots cranked up their engines and shut down again as the tower gave them "no go."

"Where do those North Vietnamese get their weather forecasts?" asked an American colonel. "If it hadn't been for this weather they'd have been blown away by now."

For most of the day the beleaguered bases from the mountains to the coastal plain across South Vietnam's northern sector had only Naval gunfire and jets bombing through the clouds for support.

It was mid-afternoon by the time the helicopters and Skyriders reached the battlefields.

From the air the fleeing civilian vehicles look like ants filing down the sandy coastal plain. Circles freckle the ground below-shell holes mingling with the grave mounds of peasant ancestors. There are thousands of refugees, from Gio Ling, Dong Ha, and Quang Tri. This trek is nothing new to them.

They are in cars and trucks, on bikes and motorcycles, crammed into buses with latecomers perched on with the luggage. Many are on foot, belongings slung on their backs or bouncing on the ends of sticks on their shoulders.

Hundreds of trucks crawl up the road toward Quang Tri, carrying ammunition and soldiers. A few have tree branches stuck in their sideboards, apparently for camouflage.

Overhead, American Cobra gunships wheel and dive. Skyriders drone northward and return. Smoke plumes streak the low horizon and explosions rumble in the distance.

In Quang Tri, refugees crowd around makeshift shelters. But some of the townspeople tend their gardens, and the children look up and applaud the circling helicopters.

Lt. Col. Dang Van Phuoc, commander of the helicopter wing, goes in for a landing. Two shellbursts miss his chopper by a few hundred yards. He heads for another pad. His eyes shine. He does not like sitting behind a desk, he says.

It is too late for Quang Tri base.

On the way back, Phuoc stops at what once was Camp Evans to lecture his squad. A young Skyraider pilot comes up and tells with his hands how the ancient planes knocked out five tanks north of Dong Ha. At least something has been accomplished.

But it is expected to rain again in the morning.

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