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SOUTH VIETNAM TAKES THE OFFENSIVE

- LAM SON 719 -

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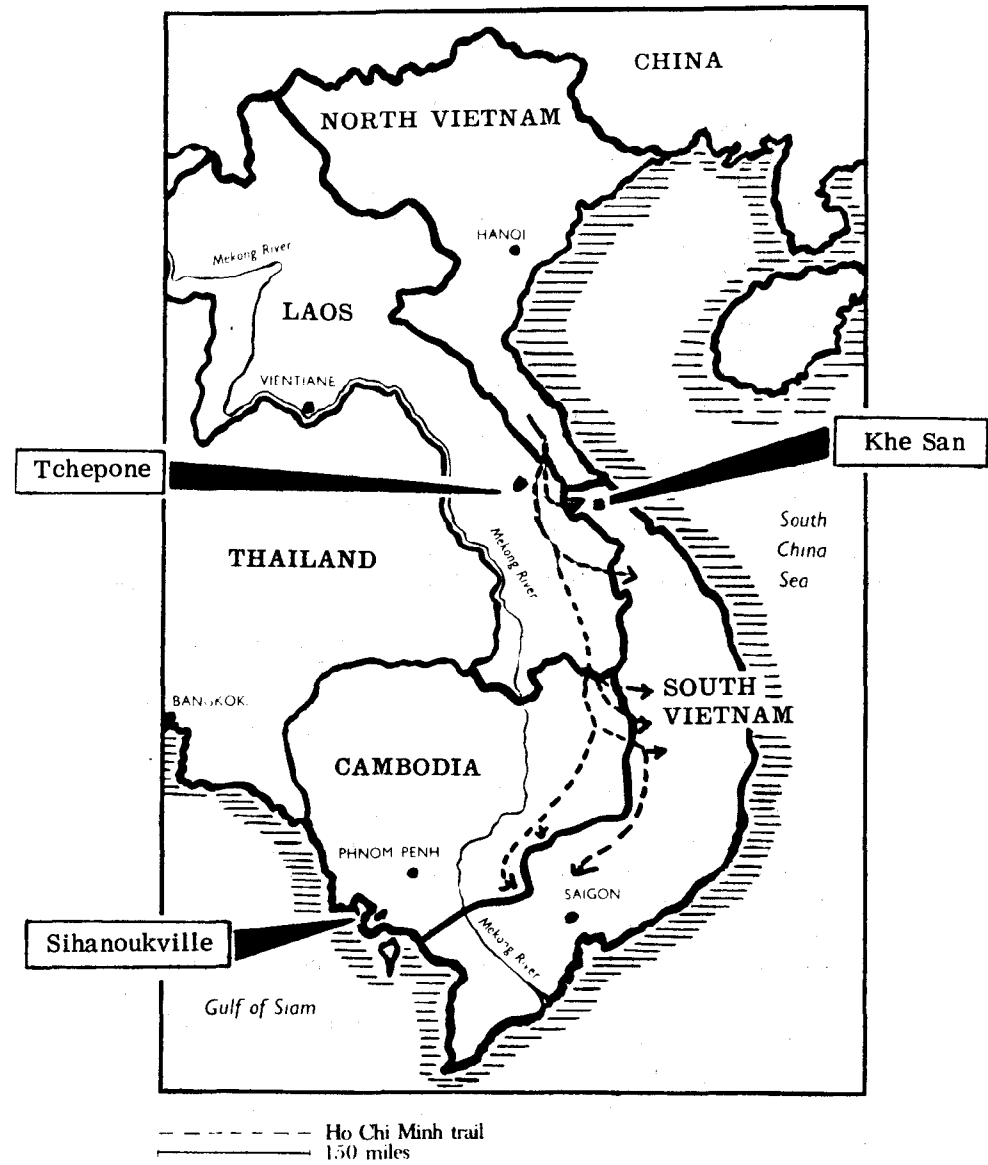
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Introduction

The gradual emergence of the South Vietnamese Army as a force to be reckoned with may be said to date back to the abortive Tet Offensive launched by the communists in January 1968. By successfully repelling this full-scale communist attack, the people and armed forces of the South experienced a tremendous boost to their morale. The growing mood of self-confidence among the South Vietnamese Army was expressed in an unprecedented readiness to engage the enemy. Phased American withdrawals and the so-called "Vietnamization" policy supplied added momentum. Thus two years later, in the Cambodian operation of spring 1970, South Vietnamese troops were seen in action for the first time outside their own borders. Almost exactly a year later (early 1971) a new offensive had been launched: Lam Son 719.

An objective assessment of the Lam Son 719 campaign requires an understanding of the strategic importance of the Ho Chi Minh trail to the North Vietnamese communists. A review of the actual military operations will also shed some light on what happened there, particularly why South Vietnam's forces appeared to leave the field hurriedly and in some disarray after slogging on to Tchepone as the furthestmost point of advance. The long-term effects of Lam Son 719 can be assessed only by looking at it in terms of the total picture - the overall situation in both North and South Vietnam after Lam Son 719. The net result, it now appears, has been that Saigon not only won a battle, but may also be winning the war. This conclusion is based on the facts set out below.



Importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

The North Vietnamese fought bitterly to defend the Ho Chi Minh trail. They sacrificed an estimated 13,000 troops killed in the forty-five-day battle. This was an extremely heavy loss considering they had only some 30,000 troops committed, with another 10,000 in reserve, against South Vietnamese forces numbering about 20,000. North Vietnamese Army troops came from some of the very finest units, including the 308th and 320th division, long held in reserve. Short of manpower, Hanoi was also forced to call on some very young conscripts, down to fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds.

The Ho Chi Minh trail over the last decade had become of enormous importance in Hanoi's campaign to take over South Vietnam and its rich rice lands. Since 1965 the trail has carried a fantastic total of 630,000 men, 100,000 tons of food, 400,000 weapons and 50,000 tons of ammunition from North Vietnam through neutral Laos into outlying villages in the South. But up to the spring of 1970 the trail was only one of two main traffic arteries to South Vietnam. The other road, leading through Cambodia's Sihanoukville, was closed down when Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who claimed neutrality but collaborated with the communists, was ousted from power in March 1970. The loss of Sihanoukville hurt. Through this Cambodian port Communist Chinese ships and trucks had supplied about two-thirds of North Vietnam's military needs in the fighting around the capital city of Saigon and the Mekong Delta - the two key prizes in Hanoi's campaign to seize the South by force. Sihanouk also supplied North Vietnam with rice, medicines and other needs. The Cambodian supply route offered easier and more direct access to the communist border sanctuaries and assault bases in Cambodia than did the Ho Chi Minh trail. For one thing, they were not subject to air or ground attacks because of Sihanouk's refusal to permit hot pursuit of the aggressors fleeing back across the Cambodian borders. The loss of this port was not the NVA's only setback. Intensified anti-communist operations in South Vietnam, plus the joint South Vietnam-US sweep through the hitherto privileged sanctuary areas in Cambodia in the spring of 1970, resulted in many communist casualties and the loss of great amounts of supplies.

Pressed for replacement of men and material, North Vietnam was unable to do much to improve and enlarge the Ho Chi Minh

trail before the end of the dry season in the spring of 1970. Therefore Hanoi began preparations for an unprecedented supply effort to begin during the 1970-71 dry period starting with the end of the monsoons around October 1970 and continuing through to April 1971. Trail traffic rose to an all-time record rate, reaching its peak about the time Lam Son 719 began in early February. This all-out logistics effort is what General Giap was defending.

A Review of Lam Son 719 as a Military Operation

South Vietnam's assault, as outlined by President Thieu when it began on February 8, was "an operation limited in time and in space, with the clear and unique objective of disrupting (this) supply and infiltration network. . . ." Thieu said at the start that South Vietnam's troops would take no territory and would withdraw completely when their job of disrupting trail traffic was done. Neither Thieu nor anyone in his government ever said or intended that the operation would continue beyond the end of March, although there was some newspaper speculation that the intention had been to continue into April. With only 20,000 South Vietnam troops committed, Lam Son 719 was obviously intended to be a raid and not a major battle - even less so an attempt, again, as some speculated, to install a permanent blocking force across the hundred-mile-wide north-south trail network, with its 6,000 miles of roads, paths and waterways. If the latter had been a goal, then far more men would have been needed.

With the numerically superior communist forces dug into prepared positions, bolstered by concentrated artillery and heavy tank support, the basic concept of the Lam Son 719 operation had to be a hit- and run- raid, destroying supplies, trail installations and their North Vietnamese army defenders, as attacking units moved along. The goal was to inflict the greatest possible damage on the enemy with the least possible loss to the attacking forces. This made sense in Saigon, since the Lam Son 719 operation was seen there as only the beginning of a new phase in the war, one which will be fought without American support in the future, and thus requiring all the strength which South Vietnam itself can muster.

South Vietnam had a built-in capacity for hit- and run- tactics because of its air support and air mobility. South Vietnam's advancing forces set up strongpoints for only one purpose as they moved along: not to hold these strongpoints for any length of time, but to lure the enemy into massing for attack, so as to make them vulnerable to air strikes and artillery fire. The strongpoints were abandoned, as part of this tactical plan emphasizing mobility, when their purpose had been served and when enemy pressure threatened to inflict unacceptable losses. On the whole, these tactical moves were accomplished in good order, with weapons and wounded taken

along at the time of withdrawal, but their very nature sometimes resulted in hurried confusion, particularly when helicopter airlifts came under strong communist fire. At times the North Vietnamese outnumbered Saigon's attacking units by as much as three to one. Two to one was a normal situation. As carried out, Lam Son 719 shaped up as a narrow wedge driven due west from a base area around Khe Sanh in South Vietnam to Tchepone about 60 miles away. Of necessity, it had to be a flexible rather than a fixed wedge, however, since otherwise it would have been extremely vulnerable to flanking attacks.

An estimated 15,000 North Vietnamese Army troops were deployed in the area as the operation began. Their initial resistance was limited to harassing fire and probing attacks, as the South Vietnamese spearhead moved westwards along Route 9 toward Tchepone, with supporting units hill-hopping by helicopter on both flanks. Hanoi rushed reinforcements in and by February 17 the North Vietnamese Army totalled between 25,000 and 30,000. Continuing reinforcements increased Hanoi's strength to three divisions, giving North Vietnam a three to one numerical superiority by February 22. Heavy fighting began at this time, with the leading South Vietnamese units then some twenty miles into Laos but still short of Tchepone. Saigon's troops, after being temporarily halted, achieved a breakthrough in early March and took Tchepone on March 6. About March 10, the focus of operations was shifted to the section of the trail southeast of Tchepone, thence back toward the South Vietnam border during the week of March 14, with Saigon's raiders destroying supplies and trail installations along the way.

Lam Son 719 inflicted heavy damage, including an estimated 13,000 North Vietnamese Army dead, many of them killed as they massed for attacks on the tactical strongpoints established just for this purpose. Large amounts of war material were destroyed, including thousands of weapons, tons of ammunition and great quantities of food and other supplies. Base facilities, including bridges, roads and communication centres built up over the last ten years, were wrecked. The communists also suffered heavy tank losses. They had 240 medium and eighty light tanks in the area, their biggest concentration of such weapons since the Indo-China fighting began. They committed 150 to battle, apparently on the advice of Russian experts who always accompany the tank units. Air strikes and artillery fire

destroyed 110 tanks. Five tanks were captured intact. North Vietnam's total losses were higher than in any other single engagement since the war started.

South Vietnam's troops exhibited greater professional skill than at any time in the past. Their kill-ratio vis-à-vis the communists had run roughly five to one in Saigon's favour since early 1969. In Lam Son 719, despite withdrawal under heavy fire as the hit-and-run tactics required, the kill-ratio went as high as ten to one. At least nine North Vietnamese battalions were knocked out of action. The operation demonstrated a shrewd calculation of risks and the employment of superior air and fire power to inflict maximum damage, while incurring minimum loss.

Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared after the conclusion of Lam Son 719: "The South Vietnamese have fought their hardest battle of the war against the best and the most the enemy has to offer. They have done what they set out to do. They disrupted the enemy's logistic support and overall combat capability. The impact will extend well into the months ahead".

Developments Leading Up to Lam Son

What made Lam Son 719 possible? What transformed what had been a weak, ineffectual South Vietnamese Army, unable by itself to defend the country from a communist takeover only a few years earlier, into a professional military organization, capable of a sustained offensive against its communist enemy on the enemy's own ground?

It is true that American helicopters and airpower gave them great assistance in the Lam Son 719 operation, but flying weather was frequently bad, delaying the assault by up to six days at the beginning and frequently forcing South Vietnamese units to fight without air support during the course of the forty-five-day campaign.

Lam Son 719 was really born in the aftermath of the abortive communist Tet Offensive of January 1968. Tet resulted in a resurgence of South Vietnamese patriotism and nationalism, as the people of South Vietnam took pride in the fact that they had not only withstood an all-out communist assault on more than eighty population centres but had inflicted great damage on the attackers. The South Vietnamese Army surprised even itself by the way it fought; so did the popular defence forces in the villages and provincial capitals. They had stood up to the enemy's maximum effort - and beaten it back. Tet began a long build-up in confidence, which included a strengthening of political consciousness, illustrated in the regional and national elections held since Tet, and in an impressive economic development marked by a multiplication of new buildings and new projects all over the landscape.

Vietnamization, accompanied by technical training and a steady supply of modern weapons, has resulted in a new professional army of more than a million men, a relatively small but efficient navy and an air force of 1,000 aircraft which has already taken over the air war in the populous Southern Delta region of South Vietnam and is moving to take over complete control in other areas. There is also an expanding "People's Self-Defence Force", which will encompass an eventual total of some four million people in the countryside. The communists would call it a "People's Army" - and so it is, but it is dedicated to stemming would-be communist aggression.

Ho Chi Minh's death in September 1969 encouraged the South to further resistance, just as it demoralized the Northern invaders. Sihanouk's ouster six months later and the consequent shutdown of the supply route through Cambodia also built up South Vietnamese morale. As the Saigon government became progressively stronger, communist support throughout the country eroded, helped along by imaginative government measures such as the Rural Development and Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) programmes. The former destroyed the Viet Cong underground infrastructure; the latter lured frustrated, one-time supporters of the VC back to the government side.

The Cambodian incursion in the spring of 1970 sent 48,000 South Vietnamese troops outside the country for the first time, attacking the enemy in what had been until then privileged areas, where he could retreat and regroup for new assaults. The South Vietnamese Army's performance in this new experience further increased its self-confidence. These developments and events led up to the Lam Son 719 operation and contributed to its success.

The Situation After Lam Son 719

Perhaps the most important result of Lam Son 719 is the fact that the trail, now open to surprise hit-and-run raids, will never be the same again. With the port of Sihanoukville closed down, communist logistics are in a precarious position. More and more of North Vietnam's limited resources must now be expended in repairing and defending the trail itself. The trail has thus become a self-consuming enterprise. There are no more safe sanctuaries, either in Laos or Cambodia. The net effect is to reduce North Vietnam's ability to interfere with a steady build-up of defensive military strength in South Vietnam and Cambodia. Protracted guerrilla war against a neighbour, along the lines that some of Hanoi's leaders still talk about, is impossible when outside help is cut back to a trickle.

Meanwhile, evidence uncovered during and since Lam Son 719 indicates that North Vietnam is having to contend with worsening morale and other problems.

Letters and diaries found on North Vietnamese Army soldiers killed or captured in the fighting show a wide-spread fear of death and defeat. Other information also confirms such feelings back at home in the North. Despite police state controls, some families have openly protested against the conscription of their sons and, as a result, had their rations cut by the North Vietnamese authorities. Military authorities are also hard pressed to maintain compliance with orders. Despite the strict discipline and threats of punishment, one North Vietnamese Army company, according to confirmed reports, had to be disarmed and sent to the rear to forestall their mass desertion; several company officers were summarily executed.

Hanoi's communist leadership, now confronted with a tacit, tripartite alliance of governments among its intended victims in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, is also running into serious problems with local communist allies in these countries. Nationalism is proving a stronger force than Hanoi's appeal for sacrifice in the name of world revolution and proletarian internationalism. Local communists like the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Pathet Lao in Laos, all now greatly outnumbered by the invading North Vietnamese Army forces, suspect that Hanoi is using such slogans to advance its own national goals. All of these local

communist groups have also been disillusioned by North Vietnam's slave-driving tactics, forcing them to do "coolie" work to support Hanoi's troops. Thus there has been widespread friction and a rising tide of defections to government forces.

In South Vietnam, thousands of Viet Cong have accepted Saigon's appeals to stop fighting and have turned themselves in. In Cambodia, the feuding has escalated to open hostilities as a result of the high-handed way in which Hanoi's invaders have tried to run things, even to the extent of executing some Khmer Rouge communists for alleged disobedience, as occurred in Kratie province in late 1970. Open fighting broke out in Takeo and Kompong Cham provinces in November-December 1970. In the six months up to April 1971 there were at least four instances of large Cambodian communist units, one numbering 600 men, defecting to the government side.

Similar difficulties have become increasingly apparent in Laos. Prince Sisouk Na Champassak, acting Laotian Defence Minister, said in mid-April that communist Pathet Lao were coming over to the government side en masse, deserting their former North Vietnamese allies. Some of the defecting units have had to kill their North Vietnamese advisers before making their way to the government lines. The commander of the Pathet Lao 25th battalion and more than 100 men, for example, defected in late March. The commander said at the time that the rest of his unit and two more Pathet Lao battalions were also seeking to defect. Deep-seated animosity against the North Vietnamese Army was the reason. The North Vietnamese had tripled civilian taxation and ordered many Laotians into forced labour gangs. Pathet Lao officers who protested against this mistreatment were executed as politically unreliable.

Meanwhile, in contrast to a deteriorating economy in North Vietnam, South Vietnam is in the midst of an unprecedented economic expansion as the communist threat within its borders has receded.

Morale, needless to say, has never been higher in the South Vietnamese Army. Nor has it ever been better in the South Vietnam countryside. The ability to mount a sustained strike into enemy territory against the best the communists have to offer and to inflict casualties at a ten to one rate has had an extraordinary effect on the people of the South, who for years had been almost helpless victims of communist aggression and terror. The government's internal security programme, aimed

at rooting out the Viet Cong infrastructure, has also dealt severe blows at the communists in the South.

The change in South Vietnam is amazing to anyone who knew the country before and has seen it in recent years. Food trucks, instead of tanks or troop trucks, now dominate the roads leading to Saigon. Some war-gutted buildings still dot the landscape, but they are greatly outnumbered by the many new buildings under construction.

Security is better today around Saigon and in the Mekong Delta - the two key targets of the communists - than when the war was in its infancy a decade ago. Motorists move freely, by night or day, along roads which were subject to terror attacks little more than a year ago. One newspaper reporter described recently how he hitch-hiked, alone and unarmed, along the 680-kilometre stretch from the demilitarized zone on the northern border to Saigon. He made the trip in twelve days without seeing a single Viet Cong. The city of Saigon itself has been quiet, no longer harassed by NVA-VC terrorists on its outskirts. Rice crops are growing in vast areas of the country in fields that were barren in the spring of 1970. The Mekong Delta has been largely cleared of guerrillas. Saigon's pacification programme has had widespread results in other areas, too. In one western border province, for example, where only fifteen sawmills operated a year ago, sixty-eight are now turning out building materials.

Communists Not Likely to Give Up

On the basis of all the evidence, then, South Vietnam has not only won the battle in the Lam Son 719 operation, but has also won time to build greater military and economic strength. It is getting stronger, better able to take over the burden of its own defence as the United States continues its gradual withdrawal. Meanwhile, the enemy is losing strength and effectiveness.

This is not to say that North Vietnam is about to collapse. The Hanoi communists will be able to harass the South for some time to come. But the North, once confident that it was on the threshold of final victory, now has serious problems which will not disappear overnight. Lam Son 719 is not the end of the story in Vietnam, but barring massive additional assistance from either Moscow or Peking, North Vietnam appears unable to continue an expansionist war on neighbouring territory. Unfortunately, the communists are not likely to give up. They can be relied upon to take military advantage of any relaxation of internal security and to exploit any political, social or economic dissension to keep the pot boiling in Indo-China, as long as they feel they can depend on the eventual sprouting of the prophetic seeds of destruction in these fledgling democracies.