

An A-37 with the various types of ordnance it was capable of carrying. These aircraft provided close air support during the intense fighting in An Loc in April and May.

The house-to-house fighting continued unabated. Lieutenant Colonel Edward B. Bedit, one of Colonel Miller's deputies, later recalled: "The enemy pounded and pounded. He'd hit and take a house, then reinforce at night, and next day take the next house and the next."²⁹

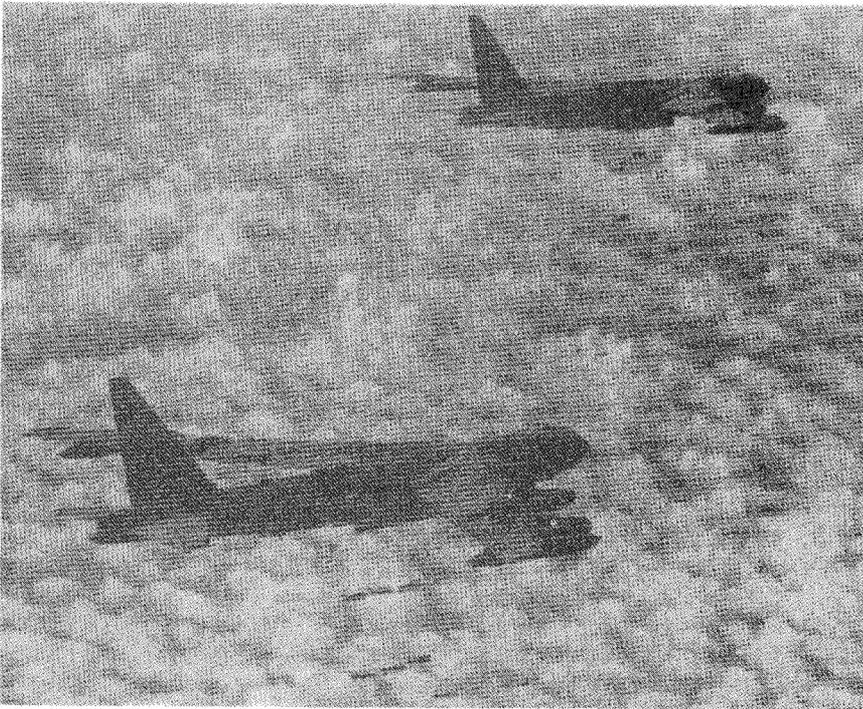
The civilian citizens of An Loc were not immune to the death and destruction going on all around them. One of the NVA T-54 tanks made it into the center of the city, where it rolled into a Catholic church. Huddled inside were old men, women, and children conducting a prayer service. The tank fired its cannon and machine guns, killing well over 100 of the innocent civilians.³⁰

As the battle inside the city raged, General Hollingsworth directed B-52 strikes on NVA staging areas very close to the city. Each B-52 strike, code-named Arc Light, consisted of three aircraft, each carrying up to 108 MK-82 500-pound conventional bombs. The devastation wrought by these missions was immense. One B-52 strike

caught an entire battalion in the open before it reached the northwest approach to the city. The bombs killed an estimated 100 attackers, destroyed at least 3 tanks, and broke the back of the NVA attack on that part of the city.³¹ These strikes would prove the difference between victory and defeat countless times during the next two months.

The NVA increased the heavy shelling on the city, but the ARVN defenders "circled the wagons" and used tactical air power to hold the NVA ground attacks at bay while the B-52s worked on the enemy staging areas. General McGiffert later commented on the effectiveness of the B-52 strikes and the tactical air sorties of 13 through 15 April thusly: "I really believe that without these the city would have fallen, because I think the infantry would have gotten in with the tanks."³²

Air support in all its forms had a tremendous impact on the outcome of every battle. Patrols after the first assault on An Loc



American B-52s like these, flying from Guam and Thailand, were instrumental in breaking up NVA troop concentrations at An Loc



Brigadier General Le Van Hung, commander, 5th ARVN Division, in his command bunker in An Loc

confirmed more than 400 enemy dead, half of whom were killed by air.³³ During the first two weeks of the battle for the city, over 2,500 air strikes were flown in support of the ARVN forces in and around An Loc.³⁴ The U.S. Air Force had been a key factor in the stabilization of a very serious tactical emergency.

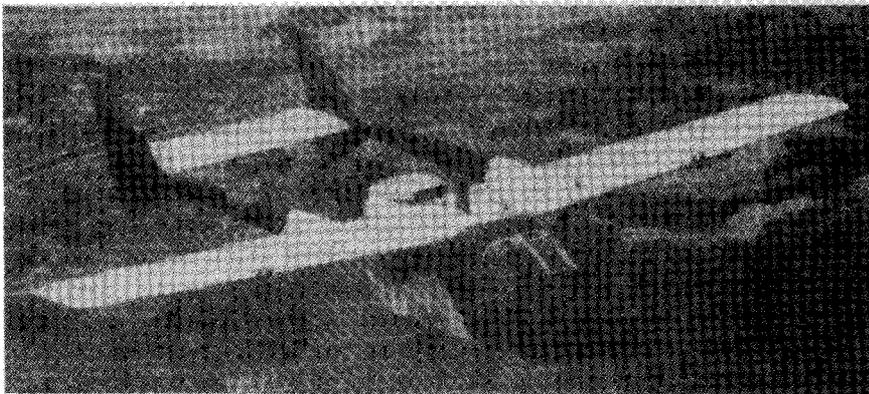
The North Vietnamese forces were undeterred by the heavy casualties inflicted on them by the continuous air strikes. They continued to press the attack, still leading with tanks. On 14 April, one such attack, accompanied by small groups of infantry, came within 500 meters of the 5th Division Command Post in the center of the city before it was beaten back by the defenders.

After two days of intense fighting and relentless shelling, the ARVN morale remained high. Recovering from the initial shock of the armored attack, the ARVN soldiers had rallied and reorganized their defenses. The presence of the American advisers and the around-the-clock tactical air support they controlled demonstrated to the defenders that they were not going to be left to fend for themselves.

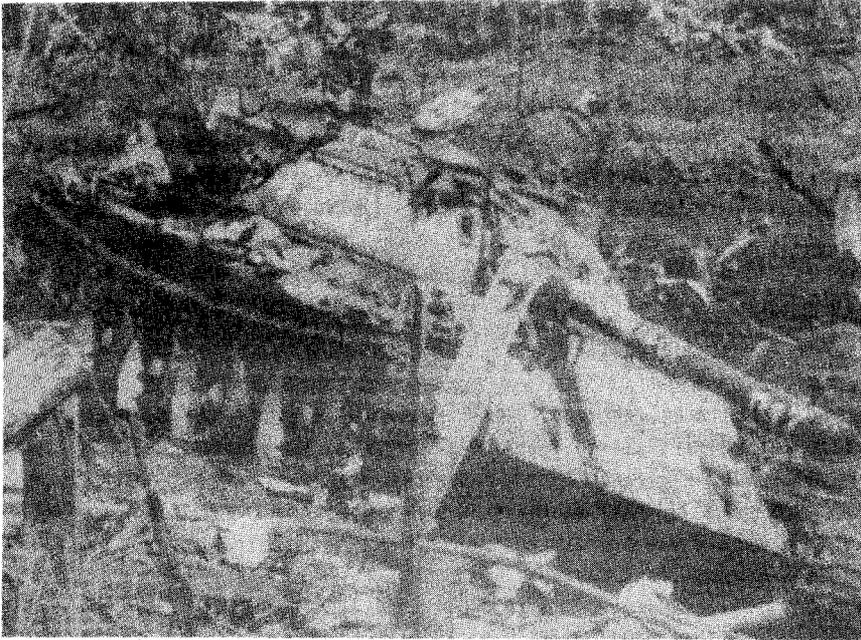
The advisers were busy. Colonel Miller and his fellow American officers in the 5th ARVN Division's command bunker worked twenty-four hours a day, stopping only briefly to grab quick naps. Huddled around a plywood map table, they planned and coordinated the battle. The ARVN commander and his staff had little training or experience in handling operations as complex as those demanded by the NVA attack. The American officers acted as General Hung's staff; they advised him on troop dispositions, planned air strikes, coordinated support, and processed intelligence. They spoke constantly with the forward air controllers coordinating the air support vital to the defense of the city. They also planned the next day's missions and attempted to coordinate the air resupply drops.

The advisers with the regiments and battalions also had their hands full. They advised their counterparts on defenses and tried to bolster their morale. Their primary function, however, was to coordinate the air strikes that had been allocated to their respective units by the advisers in the 5th ARVN Division's command bunker.

To coordinate the allocated air strikes, the advisers talked directly to the forward air controllers (FACs) of the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, who were orbiting over the city in O-2Bs, small Cessna fixed-wing aircraft with push and pull motors. These "good old boys," as one adviser called them, were the true heroes of the air war.³⁵ Their job was to fly "low and slow" over the battlefield to coordinate with the ground troops and direct the aircraft to their targets. The FAC aircraft were unarmed, except for smoke rockets, which were



The Cessna O-2B Super Skymaster, flown by the forward air controllers from 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, during the Battle of An Loc



A North Vietnamese T-54 tank destroyed in the western sector of the perimeter at An Loc

used to mark the targets. Since most of the fighter-bomber aircraft did not have the same kind of tactical radios that the ground forces had, the FACs, who had both kinds, acted as the link between those on the ground who needed the ordnance put on target and those aircraft carrying the ordnance.

The normal procedure was for the senior advisers in the 5th ARVN Division's command post to coordinate requests for air support by talking to what became known as the "King FAC," who parceled out available tactical aircraft sorties to various other FACs who had been given area responsibility for different parts of the city and surrounding area. The FACs talked directly with the advisers on the ground to learn the nature of the target to be struck. They then spoke with the inbound fighter-bombers and directed them to the targets, using smoke rockets and adjustment instructions relayed from the ground. For the duration of the entire battle, the FACs and advisers, working closely together, were able to make the best use of all available aircraft and munitions to help the outnumbered defenders in very tenuous situations.

The ever-present U.S. Air Force greatly bolstered the ARVN's morale, which got another boost on 14 April when General Minh ordered the 1st Airborne Brigade to disengage along QL-13 and move by helicopter to reinforce the 5th ARVN Division forces at An Loc. The 6th Battalion conducted the initial combat assault by helicopter into an area adjacent to Windy Hill and Hill 169, the high ground three kilometers to the southeast of the city. The combat assault was made unopposed, but shortly thereafter, the airborne troopers made heavy contact with the enemy, sustaining moderate casualties. The American advisers with the unit called in tactical air support and the situation stabilized.

The next day, the remainder of the brigade was inserted in the same area southeast of the city. The brigade headquarters, along with the 5th and 8th Battalions, occupied positions east of the city. The 81st Ranger Group assaulted into a landing zone southeast of Hill 169 and began moving toward An Loc. The 6th Battalion began to construct a firebase for the six 105-mm howitzers from a battery of the 3d Artillery Battalion that were airlifted in that morning by CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

The pressure on An Loc increased on 15 April when the NVA once again renewed their attacks on the city in earnest. Two separate tank-led thrusts were made during the course of the day, but both were turned back after pitched battles. The outcomes of both of these battles were extremely close; in the latter attack, the NVA attackers once again almost took the 5th ARVN Division's command post, with one tank making it to within 200 meters of General Hung's command bunker, firing directly into it and killing three division staff officers.³⁶ As the defenders held tenaciously to their small piece of terrain, tactical air support once more provided the difference between victory and defeat. In one attack at 1400 that day, tactical aircraft destroyed nine of ten attacking tanks.

Meanwhile, President Thieu, realizing the criticality of holding An Loc to prevent a direct thrust on Saigon, had earlier ordered the 21st ARVN Infantry Division from its base in the Mekong delta to Binh Long Province to reinforce III Corps' forces. General Minh ordered the new division to attack north from Lai Khe to open the highway to An Loc. By 16 April, the 21st had moved north and was attacking the heavily entrenched NVA forces at Tau O Bridge on QL-13 south of the city. Unfortunately, they were having a difficult time of it and were not able to relieve any of the pressure on the ARVN defenders in An Loc to the north.

By late on 16 April, the battle inside An Loc had abated somewhat. The enemy shelling was still heavy, but there was a lull in the ground attack. After three days of combat, the enemy had lost twenty-three tanks, most of them T-54s.³⁷ Still, the NVA forces held the northern part of the city, and in many cases, the opposing forces were separated only by the width of a city street. Meanwhile, the NVA tightened its stranglehold on An Loc. The city had received 25,000 rounds in the previous 5 days, and it would continue to receive between 1,200 and 2,000 enemy rocket, artillery, and mortar rounds per day.³⁸

General Hollingsworth reported on the 16th to General Abrams, commander of MACV in Saigon, that "there was a great battle at An Loc yesterday, perhaps the greatest of this campaign. The enemy hit us hard all day long with all he could muster—and we threw it back at him. The forces in An Loc realized that they had to fight and they fought well."³⁹

In truth, the fighting ability of the ARVN during the initial NVA onslaught had been less than uniformly outstanding, yielding half of the city in the face of heavy ground, armor, and artillery attacks. However, the fact remained that the ARVN had held, and at least the southern half of the city was still in South Vietnamese hands.

The NVA Change Their Plan

Although the defenders did not know it at the time, the first phase of the battle had ended. The enemy's initial plan to seize the city had been thwarted. The main attack, conducted by the 9th NVA Division, supported by the 3d and 5th Battalions of the 203d Tank Regiment, had been unsuccessful—largely due to the continuous pounding by B-52s, fighter-bomber aircraft, AC-130 Spectre gunships, and attack helicopters. Accordingly, the North Vietnamese modified their plan.⁴⁰

The original North Vietnamese plan had called for An Loc to be overrun and occupied by NVA forces no later than 20 April.⁴¹ Due to the American tactical air support, the ARVN defenders were able to hold out, and the original Communist timetable was no longer achievable. Accordingly, the NVA headquarters ordered a renewed main attack on An Loc from the east by the 9th VC Division, supported by secondary attacks on the airborne brigade south of the city by elements of the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions. In an attempt to negate the impact of American air power, additional antiaircraft weapons were emplaced around An Loc.

By a twist of fate, the revised NVA plan of attack came into ARVN hands on 18 April. On that day, an ARVN Ranger element engaged NVA forces near Tong Le Chon firebase, just outside the city. The Rangers found a handwritten report on one of the enemy bodies after the battle; the report was from the 9th VC Division's political commissar assigned to the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the North Vietnamese headquarters. This report addressed the failure of the NVA attack to take An Loc in accordance with the initial plan. The report cited two reasons for this failure. First, the intervention of American air power had been devastating on the attacking forces. Secondly, the lack of coordination between armor and infantry forces in the attack had allowed the ARVN forces to regroup and reorganize their defenses. The report also contained a narrative of the modified plan to take the city.

With this plan, the enemy was very confident that the city could be seized within a matter of hours.⁴² In fact, the NVA were so confident of victory that Radio Hanoi broadcast a report that the city would be taken and the People's Revolutionary Government established in An Loc by 20 April.⁴³

Captured North Vietnamese soldiers later reported that after the initial attack, their leaders increased efforts to exhort them to do their utmost to defeat the ARVN "puppets." There were also reports that North Vietnamese tankers were found chained in their tanks.⁴⁴ Whether this was actually true or merely a symbolic gesture on the part of the NVA soldiers, it is indicative of the North Vietnamese commitment to take the city.

The defenders inside the city realized that they had only a momentary respite before the NVA attacked once again. On 17 April, Colonel Miller, senior adviser to the 5th ARVN Division, reported to General Hollingsworth that An Loc continued to sustain heavy shelling and that he believed the enemy planned to continue its stranglehold on the city and then attack in mass. Although the ARVN troops still held the city, Colonel Miller was pessimistic regarding their capability to carry on: "The division is tired and worn out; supplies minimal, casualties continue to mount, medical supplies are low; wounded a major problem, mass burials for military and civilians, morale at a low ebb. In spite of incurring heavy losses from U.S. air strikes, the enemy continues to persist."⁴⁵

The situation in An Loc was indeed bleak. The U.S. and Vietnamese Air Forces attempted to resupply the city on a daily basis, but the enemy antiaircraft fire made it increasingly difficult to drop

the supplies so the defenders could recover them. Extremely heavy casualties had been sustained by all ARVN units. Evacuation of the wounded was nearly impossible, because the VNAF evacuation helicopters either refused to fly into the city, or if they made it into the city, they refused to touch down long enough to load the wounded. Those few courageous South Vietnamese airmen who did try to pick up the wounded were usually shot down or their aircraft heavily damaged by enemy ground fire.

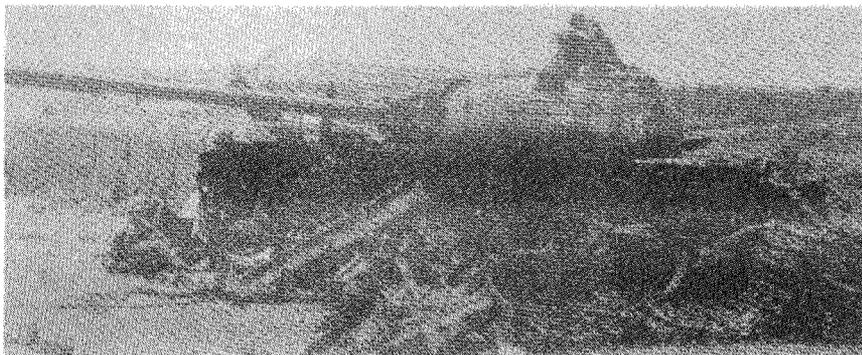
The Second Attack

It was under these conditions that the defenders prepared themselves for the next NVA assault. The attack began in the early morning hours of 19 April, with a massive bombardment by rockets and artillery on both the city and the 1st Airborne positions on Windy Hill and Hill 169, southeast of the city. Following the heavy artillery preparation, the three regiments of the 9th VC Division (271st, 272d, and 95th) conducted the main attack on An Loc itself.

At the same time, the North Vietnamese launched a supporting attack with two NVA regiments, the 275th and the 141st (from the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions respectively), on the scattered elements of the 1st Airborne Brigade around the city. This attack was extremely violent, but the 5th Airborne Battalion was able to repulse the NVA from their positions east of QL-13 just outside the city. Tactical air support and B-52 strikes inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. However, the 6th Airborne Battalion in and around the firebase on Hill 169 was eventually overwhelmed. A small force of about eighty paratroopers was able to break out and was later extracted. Two companies made it into the city and joined the besieged defenders. Stragglers and escaped prisoners from the 6th Airborne Battalion continued to turn up in An Loc for several weeks, but the 6th Battalion as a unit was virtually out of the operation until it was reconstituted in late May.⁴⁶

The result of this action was that NVA forces were able to occupy the dominant terrain previously held by the South Vietnamese paratroopers; these positions provided them unencumbered observation of ARVN defenses throughout the southern and eastern parts of the city.

Meanwhile, the main enemy attack on An Loc by the 9th VC Division did not go as well for the NVA. The 5th and 8th Airborne Battalions assumed positions in the rubber plantation just south of the city and were able to block the NVA thrust from that direction. In An



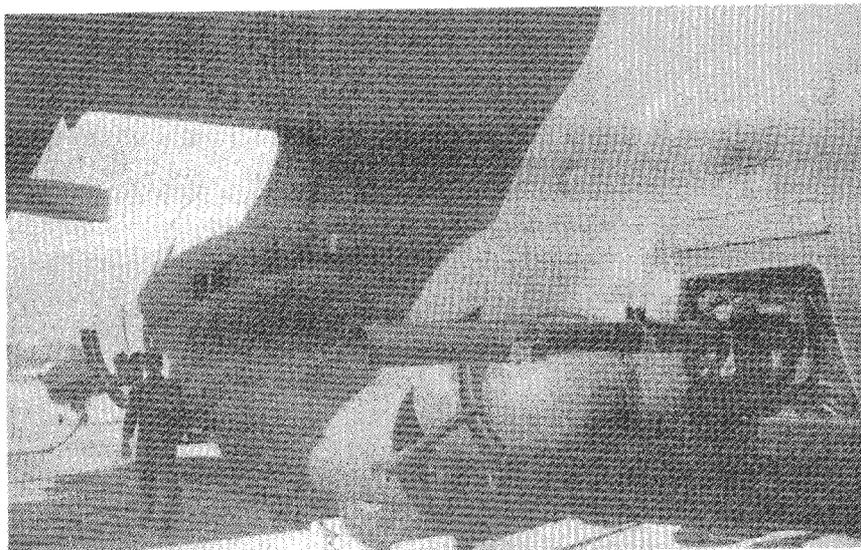
This NVA T-54 tank was knocked out just as it attempted to breach the barbed wire around the Binh Long Province compound near the southern gate of An Loc

Loc itself, the defenders and their advisers continued to repulse repeated ground assaults and employed close air support to bring devastating fire on enemy massed formations attacking all over the city. The fighting was intense, but the air support permitted the defenders to beat back the attacks.

By 22 April, the ground assaults had abated somewhat, but the artillery and rocket attacks had increased significantly, almost to the point of continuous "bombardment" according to one adviser. Nonetheless, the situation had stabilized; the NVA still held the northern part of the city, while the ARVN occupied the southern portion.

That night, the ARVN decided to see if they could improve the situation. The 81st Airborne Ranger Group, which had moved into the city and occupied defensive positions on the perimeter, launched a limited counterattack to eliminate several enemy lodgments in the northern sector of the city. Their aggressive attacks, among the first South Vietnamese offensive actions since the NVA invasion began, were supported by a Pave Aegis AC-130, a specially outfitted Spectre gunship with a 105-mm cannon. Sergeant First Class Jesse Yerta, light weapons adviser with the 81st, employed the Spectre's fire in the form of a rolling barrage to support the ARVN attack. In order to bring the supporting fire in close, Yerta moved with the lead assault element and repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire. He was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that night.

The attack by the 81st was mildly successful, but the tactical situation remained virtually unchanged from 22 April until 10 May. While both sides jockeyed for position and the opposing forces



A Pave Aegis AC-130 Spectre gunship, armed with a 105-mm howitzer, a 40-mm cannon, and 20-mm miniguns. The 105-mm howitzer was very effective against NVA tanks in An Loc.

remained in contact, neither side made significant gains. However, the NVA were able to secure a small salient in the western part of the city.

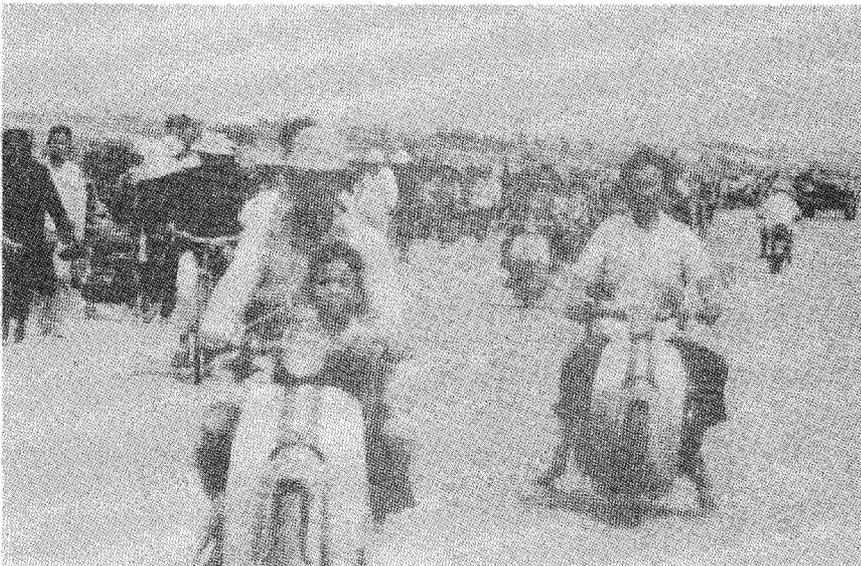
Conditions in the City

During this period, the enemy continued to pour 100-mm tank fire, rockets, and artillery and mortar rounds into the city. Meanwhile, the conditions in An Loc deteriorated to a new low. On at least three occasions, the NVA fired tear gas projectiles in the vicinity of the 5th ARVN Division's command bunker. The defenders lived underground, venturing outside only at great risk. One adviser put the odds for surviving five minutes outside in the open at only fifty-fifty.⁴⁷ The defenders had been brought to a point where they feared to move, shoot, or expose themselves in any way.⁴⁸ Most buildings and other structures in the city had been destroyed by the repeated ground attacks, shelling, and air strikes. The city, once considered one of the most beautiful in Military Region III, was strewn with mounds of rubble, shattered trees, garbage, and dead domestic animals. Captain Harold Moffett, an adviser with the 3d ARVN Ranger Group, later described the landscape as looking "like Berlin at the end of World War II."⁴⁹

The civilian refugees from the fighting in Loc Ninh had escaped to the "safety" of An Loc earlier in the month; they now joined the citizens of the provincial capital in the battle for survival amidst some of the most intense combat of the Vietnam War. By this time, the civilian population in An Loc was estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000.⁵⁰

Suffering from lack of food, water, medical supplies, and shelter, the noncombatants were caught in the crossfire between the defenders and the NVA attackers. The NVA realized that the civilians complicated the problems of the defenders and made every effort to guide additional refugees into the city and prevent them from leaving, indiscriminately killing anyone who attempted to escape the city.

The civilians merely wanted to get away from the fighting, but the North Vietnamese forces had the city encircled, and there was no way out. Still, the refugees tried to escape; some were successful, but many suffered the same fate as a group of 200 refugees who made a run for it on 15 April. Led by a French Catholic priest and a Buddhist monk, they went through the barbed wire and concertina that surrounded the city and tried to move south down QL-13 to safety. They made it to the southern edge of the city before the NVA opened fire with rockets and artillery, driving those that survived back into



The flood of refugees that crowded the roads often obstructed operations against the NVA

the city. This abortive attempt left dead and wounded "laying in ditches like cordwood" all along the highway.⁵¹

This was not an isolated incident. Almost every time a large group of refugees tried to escape from the heavy combat, the NVA's artillery forward observers targeted the fleeing columns and devastated these innocents. This pattern also prevailed in Military Region I and the Central Highlands; President Thieu claimed on 9 May that enemy guns had killed a total of 25,000 refugees trying to escape the 3 major battlefields in the previous 72 hours.⁵²

The human toll inside the city was ghastly; the streets and rubble were littered with bodies, both military and civilian. Province Senior Adviser Corley reported that "the bodies of men, women, and children are everywhere."⁵³ The smell of death permeated the air. Under these conditions, innumerable diseases, including cholera, soon ran rampant through both civilian and soldier ranks. To avoid a full-fledged epidemic, bodies were buried in common mass graves, some containing 300 to 500 corpses, by soldiers operating bulldozers during the infrequent lulls in the shelling.⁵⁴ Many bodies had to be reburied after exploding shells churned up the original graves.⁵⁵

Antiaircraft fire had increased to the point that it became even more difficult to supply the defenders by air. By 26 April, two U.S. Air Force C-130s and three VNAF C-123s had been shot down over An Loc, and every transport that had flown over the city had sustained severe damage from enemy ground fire.

The situation was particularly critical since medical supplies were almost exhausted. The NVA forces had shelled the province hospital and its 300 patients on the night of 13 April, destroying the hospital and killing most of the patients and staff.⁵⁶ The few remaining ARVN medical officers were overwhelmed by the rapidly mounting number of casualties. It remained almost impossible to evacuate the wounded because the few VNAF helicopters that made it near the city usually refused to do anything but hover for a few minutes before flying away. Many of the wounded, particularly the civilian refugees trapped in the city, went unattended. Obviously, this grim situation had a major impact on the defenders' morale.

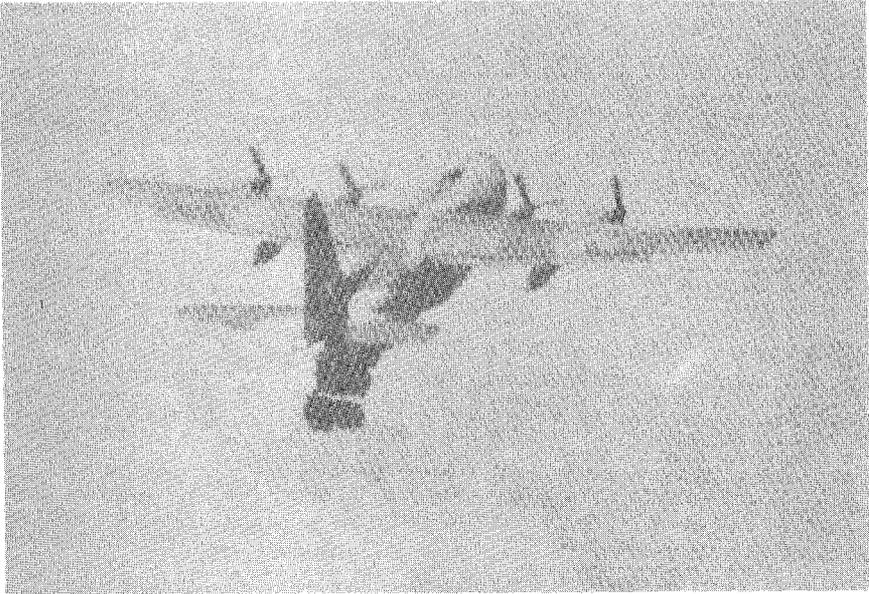
The morale was further degraded by several incidents involving what one adviser called "the olympic wounded."⁵⁷ On at least two separate occasions, evacuation helicopters braved intense ground fire to land in the city to pick up casualties only to have certain "wounded"



Frantic South Vietnamese soldiers scrambling aboard a hovering helicopter at An Loc. Such behavior by able-bodied ARVN soldiers had a devastating effect on troop morale in An Loc, particularly among the wounded.

ARVN soldiers drop their more severely wounded compatriots to clamber aboard the departing helicopters.

The resupply situation changed somewhat for the better when the U.S. Air Force assumed total responsibility for resupplying the city. The amount and range of the various NVA anti-aircraft weapons dictated that the C-130 transport aircraft drop their cargo bundles from an altitude in excess of 6,000 feet. Using the An Loc soccer stadium as a drop zone, the Air Force pilots attempted to deliver much



An example of a high-altitude airdrop from the 61st Tactical Airlift Squadron. Much trial and error was required before the proper procedure was developed and successful resupply drops could be effected in the high-intensity air defense situation over An Loc.

needed food, medical supplies, and ammunition by high-altitude, low-opening parachutes. This technique resulted in less exposure to the aircraft from ground fire, but there was a problem with the packing of the parachute bundles, and most fell outside the drop zone and into enemy hands.

Colonel Andy Iosue, commander of the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing, instituted a new tactic that involved low-altitude drops, but the first attempts resulted in severe aircraft damage from NVA ground fire and several aircraft losses. Iosue then tried the same approach at night, but this did not appreciably reduce the exposure to ground fire, plus it was more difficult to identify the drop zones in the dark. The supply situation in the city became so desperate that often fire fights broke out between ARVN units competing for the few cargo bundles that were recoverable. One adviser observed that the supplies that made it into the city went to the "strongest, swiftest, and the closest to the pallet drop."⁵⁸

One captured NVA officer demoralized his ARVN interrogators, who were existing on brackish water and an ever-decreasing supply of canned fish and rice, when he asked for a can of C-ration fruit cocktail.

He said he had grown very fond of it when his unit had retrieved cases of the stuff dropped by the American airplanes.⁵⁹

On 1 May, General Hollingsworth estimated that during the period 15—30 April, less than 30 percent of the USAF's C-130 tonnage had been recovered by ARVN forces.⁶⁰ As much as 85 percent of the rest of the supplies fell into North Vietnamese hands.⁶¹

As the defenders inside the city attempted to deal with the resupply problems and increasing casualties inflicted by the intense shelling, NVA units surrounding An Loc began to reposition themselves for yet another assault. While elements of the 7th NVA Division in the south continued to block the relief attempt by the 21st ARVN Division, seven NVA regiments were poised for the next attack on the city.

On 6 May, an NVA prisoner from the 9th VC Division informed his captors that his division commander had been reprimanded for not taking the city in April and that the 5th VC Division commander had boasted that his troops would take An Loc in three days.⁶² Other intelligence indicated that the E6, 174th, and 275th Regiments of the 5th VC Division would attack from the east supported by the 271st and



ARVN soldiers rigging loads at Bien Hoa Airbase for an airdrop at An Loc

272d Regiments of the 9th VC Division and the 141st and 165th Regiments of the 7th NVA Division.

Defending against these forces were barely 4,000 ARVN troops, including both regular and territorial forces. At least 1,000 of the defenders were wounded, but those that were able continued to man their defensive positions.

The American advisers on the ground realized that the situation in the city was critical and doubted that the ARVN could hold against another determined attack.⁶³ The South Vietnamese troops knew that they would not be evacuated if they were wounded. Thus, the continuous artillery bombardment had a demoralizing effect on the ARVN's morale and resolve. The advisers were afraid that the ARVN would break if the NVA attacked in force, and the Americans stepped up their efforts to bolster their counterparts' morale. It was under these conditions that the defenders found themselves when the NVA launched their next attack to take the city.
