

CHAPTER FIVE

Beginning of a New Phase

I arrived at Hanoi before the Political Bureau meeting began. I reported to the General Staff on the situation in the B2 theater and listened to briefings on the overall situation and on the situations of the other theaters. I inquired about the possibility of assigning additional forces, weapons, and facilities to the B2 theater, something I had worried about a good deal, so that the theater could meet the requirements of the current situation. All along the route, and in Hanoi, a thought that never left my mind was that we had a good opportunity and that if B2 received some additional forces it would win a big victory and thus considerably affect the course of the war all over South Vietnam. Comrade Le Ngoc Hien, at that time in charge of operations at the General Staff, informed me that our reserves of weapons and ammunition were still very thin, especially large offensive weapons, artillery and vehicles. Thus the upper echelon had directed that their issue and use be very tightly regulated. We had to use weapons captured from the enemy to fight the enemy. With regard to forces, he could only let me know about the number of troops that would be sent to the theaters. The B2 theater had to set aside 40 percent of the troops supplied it for the Mekong Delta, in order to strengthen the provincial and district forces. In addition, it was necessary to rapidly develop militia and guerrilla forces so that the on-the-spot forces would be sufficiently strong to fight the enemy, so that the main-force troops in the military region could be more concentrated and mobile.

With regard to the 1975 plan, he informed me that the General Staff intended to make the Mekong Delta the principal battlefield, to concentrate all efforts on smashing the enemy's pacification plan, gaining control of additional people and resources for the revolution, and changing the balance of forces significantly in our favor. Eastern Nam Bo would concentrate on opening unobstructed corridors to the battlefields and on tightening the noose around Saigon. The only main-force blow would be in the southern Central Highlands, with the objectives of extending the strategic corridor past Duc Lap in order to complete that route and annihilating enemy manpower. We would save our strength for 1976, when we would carry out a large-scale strategic annihilating campaign, advance to a general offensive-general uprising, and win a complete victory.

The year 1975 would be divided into three phases:

--Phase 1, from December 1974 to February 1975. During that phase only B2 would be active because it had already drafted a plan.

--Phase 2, from March to June, would encompass all of South Vietnam.

--Phase 3, beginning in August, would be a phase of small-scale activity in preparation for 1976.

When I listened to the General Staff briefing on the plan I was anxious and worried, for the spirit and content of the B2 plan were not in accord with

those of the General Staff. The Regional Military Party Commission and COSVN assessed that the situation in the theater had changed in a very fundamental way, that our position was improving and we were winning many victories, while the puppets were on the decline. We could not allow them to recover, or give the United States time to shore them up. Thus in 1975, from the beginning of the dry season, all over South Vietnam we had to attack strongly and were certain to win a great victory and create a new opportunity for the decisive phase of the war. The B2 dry season plan had been based on that spirit and had been reported to the party Central Committee, and we had recommended that the Political Bureau and the Military Commission of the party Central Committee draft a plan to guide and coordinate all of South Vietnam. But according to the General Staff plan, only the B2 theater would be active during the first phase, which was certain to limit our victory, and the enemy could cope with our attacks more easily. The 1975 plan of the General Staff called for only small-scale attacks, the disruption of pacification, the opening of supply corridors, and putting pressure on Saigon, in preparation for the large-scale fighting which would begin in 1976. It thought that the opportunity would not stand still and wait for us, but that it would slip by and the situation would develop in a different direction without our strong and timely influence on it.

Later, during a private working session with Le Duc Tho, he said to us, "The situation is very clear and the tendency is also clear and cannot be reversed. We must have a strategic plan for the 2-year 1975-1976 period. The opportunity in 1976 will be very important. We must go all-out to prevent the enemy from withdrawing into large strategic enclaves in 1976.

"Our materiel stockpiles are still very deficient, especially with regard to weapons and ammunition. The situation in our country and the situation abroad are very complicated and it will be difficult to augment our strategic reserves very much. Therefore, we must limit the fighting in 1975 in order to save our strength for 1976, when we will launch large-scale attacks and win a decisive victory. Only if our strategic intention for 1976 is clear can we have a direction for guiding plans and activities in 1975. We should not and cannot prolong the war indefinitely."

Because the meeting was not held to discuss plans I merely presented my opinions in brief. I strongly agreed that the enemy would try to withdraw into strategic enclaves after they had been heavily defeated, and we had to guard against that eventuality by many different means, beginning at an early date. We should not limit the fighting in 1975 in order to save our strength for 1976. On the contrary, only if we attacked strongly in 1975 could we victoriously conclude the war in 1976. The opportunity was at hand and should be grasped in order to create further opportunities. We must not let the opportunity slip by. Our COSVN had discussed and reached agreement about that problem and would submit a detailed report to the Military Commission of the party Central Committee and the Political Bureau.

I studied the messages sent to us from the theater. Only after reading a message from Le Duc Anh did I learn that B2, implementing a message from Van Tien Dung and brother Ba (comrade Le Duan, the general secretary), had adjusted the

plan with regard to the B2 forces, i.e., we would not attack Dong Xoai, would not use large main-force units, heavy artillery and tanks, but would only launch small-scale attacks. Thus Military Regions 6, 7, 8 and 9 and Saigon-Gia Dinh in the B2 theater would continue to act in accordance with the plan we had drafted, with a little readjustment: the regional main-force units would not fight on a large scale and would not attack Dong Xoai but would be sent to attack the Bu Dang or Bu Na areas on Route 14 far to the north. In addition, the General Staff had decided to assign to B2's 7th Division and 429th Sapper Regiment the mission of preparing to attack Gia Nghia during the second dry season phase (March 1975) in order to coordinate with the principal focus of the campaign organized and commanded by the General Staff: Duc Lap (in the southern Central Highlands). I was even more disturbed, for the overall B2 dry season plan encompassed the entire theater and not only closely combined the lowland and jungle-and-mountains areas and the local and main-force troops, but also actively prepared for the second dry season phase and for all of 1975. To readjust the plan and shift around forces in that manner would be to hinder the B2 plan and enable the enemy to react strongly, especially in the delta. Why was that so? We drafted the B2 1974-1975 dry season combat plan on the basis of an assessment and evaluation of the common situation of ourselves and the enemy, in order to attain an important part of the objectives of a strategic phase, as mentioned above. In order to win victory in the various parts of the B2 theater, as planned, the plan had to include measures to keep the enemy pinned down so that they could not be free to move forces to cope with our attacks in places of their choosing, and we had to divert and disperse the enemy. Our B2 theater had two strong divisions--the 9th and 7th--which had achieved many feats of arms in fighting the puppets and Americans in eastern Nam Bo. Especially, the 9th Division was the first main-force division in South Vietnam to travel the long route from Binh Gia, Bau Bang, Dau Tieng, Tet Mau Than and Loc Ninh to the present. The enemy continually monitored each movement of those divisions in order to find out about our intentions and operational plans. During the first phase of the dry season we had intended to use only part of the 7th Division and the independent regiments. The rest of the division was to remain in place in the Tan Uyen and Phu Giao areas in Thu Dau Mot Province. The 9th Division, stationed in Long Nguyen area of Ben Cat District, would not yet participate in the fighting but would carry out feints in order to tie down III Corps forces in the intermediate area and in the outskirts of Saigon so that they could not be sent elsewhere, especially to respond to our attacks in the Mekong Delta. The plan was based on the enemy's assumption that during the dry season we would attack to liberate Tay Ninh Province so that we could make Tay Ninh City the capital of the PRG of the RSVN. We would use feints to make the enemy think that they had guessed right and so that they would tie up forces in the defense of that area. Meanwhile, we would use a regiment of the 7th Division, reinforced by a company of tanks and two companies of heavy artillery, to launch a surprise attack to take Dong Xoai, and use regiments 271 and 201, along with local forces, to liberate Route 14 within the enemy's Military Region III. We sent another regiment of the 7th Division to block the only road between Phuoc Vinh and Dong Xoai and had a contingency plan to annihilate enemy reinforcements brought in by air. The Dong Xoai position was the key base in Phuoc Long Province and along that stretch of Route 14, for it was the throat, the doorway, the lifeline connecting the entire province with the other areas of the puppet

III Corps. If Dong Xoai were lost the rest of Phuoc Long Province and Route 14 would be isolated and it would become difficult to supply that food-poor mountain region province. The objective of our liberation of Route 14 was to open up a corridor to the east in order to transport weapons, ammunition, and food for stockpiling in the War Zone A base and east of Route 20 in preparation for the column that would attack Saigon from the east. That corridor had to pass through Dong Xoai, or near it, and extend northward. If we could not liberate Dong Xoai, our transportation corridor would continue to be blocked, i.e., the objective of the plan would not be attained. If we were able to take Dong Xoai, the enemy troops in Phuoc Long would be desperate, which would create conditions for us to liberate the entire province if necessary. Thus although Dong Xoai was only a position, a district capital and a relatively fortified subsector, it was an important link of the overall dry season B2 plan, and an opening battle that would surprise the enemy and inspire our armed forces. If we did not attack Dong Xoai and open up the corridor to the east, but sent the 7th Division from the area, it was clear that the B2 plan would be considerably affected.

For that reason, I was very worried. I promptly reported my thoughts to Pham Hung and Hai Van (Phan Van Dang, a member of the standing committee of COSVN). Hai Van, who was present in Hanoi, joined the B2 delegation, which now had three members. We recommended that we be allowed to meet with the Military Commission of the party Central Committee and the General Staff so that we could express our opinions and request that we be allowed to retain our old plan and that the 7th Division not be sent to the Central Highlands. The meeting took place on 3 December. I explained as best I could B2's dry season plan and the justifications for it--on the strategic, campaign and battle levels--perhaps not eloquently but clearly and sincerely, for the sake of our theater and in the common interest. One comrade asked what would happen if we attacked Dong Xoai and the enemy reacted by sending in a division, and suggested that we would be forced to use all of the 7th and 9th Divisions to wipe out those reinforcements, thus tying up our main-force units at the very beginning of the dry season. I had to explain in detail our situation and that of the enemy in the theater as a whole, and asserted that if the enemy responded they could not send more than a regiment to Dong Xoai. (In fact, when we did attack Dong Xoai the enemy sent no troops to save the puppets there, and even when we attacked the Phuoc Long provincial capital the enemy sent only about 200 rangers of the 81st brigade.) I was able to make that assertion and reflect the actual situation because we in the B2 theater knew the enemy and the terrain well, and knew what roads the enemy would have to use to go to Dong Xoai and Phuoc Long, what their manpower and air transport capabilities were, and our capabilities and methods for stopping and annihilating them. I had confidence in our plan to keep the enemy pinned down in Saigon. When a military commander on a battlefield briefs and reports to the upper echelon he must have a strong sense of responsibility and must be accurate, clear and definitive.

I requested that the 7th Division not be sent to the Central Highlands because in the present strategic phase we believed that it was necessary to send additional forces from the other theaters to eastern Nam Bo and apply pressure in the Saigon area, and not send forces in the opposite direction, away from

Saigon. That was not a matter of localism but was in the interests of the strategic phase and of 1975. If needed for the General Staff plan, I agreed to send the 429th Sapper Regiment to Gia Nghia, which would be sufficient. During that meeting it was agreed not to transfer the 7th Division but only the 429th Regiment. I was very pleased and expressed deep gratitude for the attention given the lower echelon. As for attacking Dong Xioai, that matter had not been fully resolved. Many participants expressed opinions, but no conclusion was reached:

--We should take the initiative in using our main-force units and not let the enemy draw them out, wear them down, and try them out.

--We were fighting mainly to wipe out enemy manpower. It was not necessary to hold land during the coming phase, so it was not necessary to attack Dong Xoai.

--The 1975 situation was not urgent. We should be prudent, so there was no need to attack Dong Xoai.

--The strategic foci of 1975 would be the lowlands, Gia Nghia, the transportation corridors, and Tri Thien-Da Nang.

--Only by large-scale enemy-annihilating blows could we change the balance of forces in our favor and transform the situation.

Pham Hung expressed disagreement with such reasoning. He said, "This is a matter not only of Dong Xoai but also of the B2 plan. If we change it, I'm afraid that the lowlands and the common direction will be affected. We must understand that in this war we attack the enemy by both military forces and political forces; we attack and arise, arise and attack, and advance to a general offensive and general uprising. Therefore, on the basis of many conditions, there must be many ways to transform the situation; annihilating large numbers of the enemy is not necessarily the only way to bring about a transformation. For example, when we control several million people and master the battlefield, numbers are not a decisive factor. The fact that the enemy's military forces are large is not a sign of strength. We must first of all reach agreement with regard to our battlefield, and which phase we are in, and only then talk about what actions we should take."

After that meeting Pham Hung, Hai Van, and I often discussed and evaluated the situation, the present strategic phase, and the overall plan and the B2 plan in particular, on the basis of the discussions in COSVN before we left, in order to prepare for the coming Political Bureau meeting.

I thought that in war, annihilating large numbers of the enemy troops in a few battles or in a few campaigns is a real requirement for transforming the situation. That is entirely correct, if not the only condition in a conflict between the regular armies in an ordinary war. But in the national liberation war against U.S. aggression, our line was not a regular, ordinary war. Confident in the strength of the people, who arose to determine their own destiny, our party advocated a revolutionary war combined with an armed uprising of the people. We had to use military forces combined with popular mass forces.

We fought the enemy with weapons, politically, and by proselyting enemy troops. We had to carry out attacks and uprisings simultaneously, culminating in a general offensive and general uprising. The nature of our war was both opposing foreign aggressors and waging a civil war against the militarists and comprador capitalists in our country. For that reason, the revolutionary consciousness of the people was a notable strength, a valuable strategic weapon. The political program of our National Liberation Movement was a rallying point, a flag, a rallying of the masses to advance to the creation of a new life, one with freedom, independence, well-being and happiness. It was a strength, a factor in victory and not merely in transforming the situation. If that was true strategically, our war was also unlike ordinary wars with regard to campaigns and tactics. During decades of fighting the Americans and puppets, we continually searched and thought about, experimented with, and made appropriate changes in, our fighting methods, in order to achieve the greatest possible effectiveness and expend less blood, rice, ammunition, etc., so that we could fight for long periods of time, if necessary, and bring about decisive victories in relatively short periods of time. We did not fight the enemy with their methods but forced the enemy to fight our way. We did not compete with the enemy with regard to materiel and technology, or merely in terms of military strength, but with regard to will, determination, intelligence, bravery, cleverness, virtue and persistence, and with regard to both force and position. Our country's patriotism and thirst for freedom and happiness would inevitably defeat the slavery and exploitation of the Americans and puppets. Therefore, if we continued to think in the old way, only understood things the way we understood them in the past, and continued on our usual path, that would be completely inappropriate to the new phenomena and to a new war, which was not a carbon copy of the previous war. If COSVN and our Regional (B2) Command concluded that immediately after the 1974 dry season there had been a clear transformation all over South Vietnam, that we were victorious and on the ascent and the enemy had been defeated and was on the decline, and then took the stand that it was necessary to attack continually, carried out all tasks during the greatest season ever, and then drafted an all-round plan for the 1974-1975 dry season and for all of 1975, in order to win a decisive victory, we did not do so thinking that only when we launched attacks to annihilate the enemy on a large scale would the situation be transformed. That change in the situation was clearly due to a large number of factors, military and political, military forces and popular forces, material and spiritual, domestic and foreign, on the part of the enemy and ourselves, and with regard to position and force. When a certain point is reached, forces will undergo a qualitative change. Guidance must be responsive in order to realize that point and understand the new quality that has appeared, and not wait for or try to bring about a large-scale annihilating blow in order to transform the situation.

Due to such a concept, and on the basis of the actual situation on the battlefield, we concluded that that point had arrived, the situation had been transformed, the opportunity was evident, and if in 1975 we attacked strongly the opportunity would give rise to other opportunities, which we would endeavor to grasp in order to win victory. That was a matter of the science and art of the leadership and guidance of war and revolution. Regarding 1976 as an important opportunity was correct, but was only correct if we would work to

create that opportunity throughout the course of 1975, and even prior to that. An opportunity does not create itself, so we should not sit and await the opportunity. An opportunity has objective conditions but it must be created primarily by subjective means.

A few days later, after supper, I was walking along the corridor emerged in deep thought when the telephone rang. Pham Hung invited me to go with him to visit brother Ba [Le Duan] at his home. I was pleased, agreed immediately, and set a time to arrive at Pham Hung's house so that we could go together. Up to that time, because I was busy and had many things to worry about, I hadn't had an opportunity to meet with brother Ba. At exactly 1930 hours Pham Hung and I arrived. Brother Ba came to the door, greeted us warmly, and led us into the living room. He appeared to be healthy, agile and very happy. Not waiting for us to inquire about his health, he asked whether the change of climate we had experienced in Hanoi had affected our health. Then he inquired about the comrades in COSVN and the Regional Military Party Committee, then about a number of others he knew in the military regions and provinces. But that was just a way of starting the conversation. He then went directly to the point and talked about matters everyone was thinking about. That was characteristic of him. When he met with cadres he spoke, spoke that the cadres could understand clearly and deeply and remember carefully. When during a conference, a cadre stood up to make a comment about something about which he was concerned, brother Ba would begin to talk and often would talk 5 to 7 minutes at a time, then let the cadre continue. He said, "The situation is very good and we are winning many victories. We are winning because we are strong, strong politically and militarily, in the rural areas, in the cities, among the people, with regard to our fighting methods--main-force fighting, guerrilla fighting, sapper fighting, fighting by female troops, etc. Only by such combination can we win. Combination with regard to strategy, forces and revolutionary methods. In fighting us the United States used a global strategy: they fought us and the socialist bloc. We also must use a global strategy. Independence, democracy and socialism cannot be separated from one another. We must use the combined forces of Vietnam and the world. We must use combined revolutionary methods to the highest degree, attack and arise, arise and attack, and use political forces and military forces, main-force units, local forces, and guerrillas, fight in all three areas, and use the three offensive spearheads. That is science. In order to have a correct line there must be such correct methods.

"Militarily, in the present phase we must think, think, continually think, think, to clarify the problems. In 1975, how will we win victory? What political and military developments will there be in 1975? Have you wiped out any subsectors yet? Can you hold Rach Bap? What are the deployments in eastern Nam Bo? With regard to the encirclement of Saigon, how does the present phase differ from the past 2 years? With correct deployment, victory is 60 to 70 percent assured. How should we fight during this phase? Annihilate and achieve mastery, achieve mastery and annihilate, or what? Should we fight to annihilate all of the enemy or to rout all of the enemy?

He spoke in such a way as to explain, and asked a series of questions that needn't be answered. Perhaps he brought up matters, provoked ideas, and

gave guidance so that the cadres would have to think and try to come up with the right answers by themselves. But I noticed that he was concerned with the defense of Rach Bap and with breaking up the enemy's strongly defended defensive enclave at Saigon. He was concerned about the deployment of our forces in and around Saigon, to form a solid offensive battlefield position. It was true that correct deployment was 60 to 70 percent of a victory. I truly believed in that saying. Intelligence, resourcefulness, courage, and meticulousness should be used when organizing and deploying forces to form a solid strategic battlefield position, for only then can one talk about defeating the enemy. The strategy of Sun Tzu of the Warring States period in ancient China paid much attention to deploying formations and arranging forces. According to that strategy, "Generals reach the peak of military art only when they know how to bring into play the greatest strength of the forces at their disposal, when they know how to change those deployments so that they can be appropriate to the changing circumstances, and when they know how to create an opportunity to cause the enemy troops to become divided and dispersed, so that strength becomes weakness and many becomes few."* A person who is a general in the present era, an era of revolution and science, with the leadership of a Marxist-Leninist Party, must know not only how to arrange the forces at his disposal into the most rational formations, but must also know how to create forces, organize many kinds of forces with many fighting methods, and combine all types of military forces with the political forces of the masses, forces in our country and forces abroad. He must know not only how to deploy formations to attack the enemy at the front but also in the enemy's rear area and within their ranks.

Just after Pham Hung finished speaking of the prospects of our winning victories during that dry season, I asked brother Ba, "You just sent a message instructing us not to attack Dong Xoai. Why did you do so?" He replied, "The General Staff reported to me that you were going to throw main-force units into the fight from the very beginning of the dry season. To attack Dong Xoai, and then fight a whole series of other large battles, would not be appropriate. We must fight in such a way as to conserve our strength. In the present situation you must always have available powerful forces so that when the opportunity arises you will be able to win victory." I explained to him my intentions and method of using forces. I said that at the beginning of the dry season we would still have a strong reserve force: the 9th Division and a number of regiments. Pham Hung added, "We won't have to use large forces to attack Dong Xoai but are certain of winning a victory. We have thought things over carefully." Brother replied, "If that is so, then go ahead and attack. There's no problem." I couldn't believe what I heard and immediately asked for a confirmation, "So you'll allow us to take Dong Xoai so that we can complete our corridor to the east, as called for by our plan?" He replied, "But you must be certain of victory and not use large forces." When I heard those words I felt as if a great burden had been lifted. I was very happy and couldn't wait to send a guidance message to the theater. That night I drafted a message so that Pham Hung and Hai Van could approve it and send it to COSVN and the Regional Command instructing them to carry out the original plan, i.e., to begin the dry season main-force activities by attacking Dong Xoai. But it

* AIR UNIVERSITY REVIEW, 1981, July-August issue.

was too late. Implementing the directive of the party Central Committee, the B2 Command had changed the plan and would not attack Dong Xoai but would only use small units to attack some small posts on Route 14 in the Ba Dang or Bu Na areas. It was too late to return to the old plan. On 6 December a message was received from Le Duc Anh, who reported, "On the day we received the message from brother Ba we convened a meeting of the Regional Military Party Commission to adjust the plan, rearrange our combat formations, send the tanks and 130 mm back to the base area, explain the situation to the troops, etc. Therefore, we cannot begin the attack in the Route 14 area before 12 December, while all over the B2 theater the fighting will begin during the night of 6 December and the early morning of 7 December. If we return to the old plan now we will have to rearrange our deployments, move the tanks, explain the situation to the troops, etc. Under the guidance of the COSVN standing committee, we should carry out the adjusted plan and not delay the date of the offensive. We will proceed in accordance with our 5 December message to the High Command, brother Bay (Pham Hung), and brother Tu (Tran Van Tra)."*

Prior to that, when I departed from the theater on 16 November to represent the B2 Command, brother Le Duc Anh e.e. Le Duc Anh, sent the following message to the High Command:

"Received brother Dung's message of 24 October. We are reporting some points the High Command must know immediately.

"...The winning of a good victory during the first phase of the dry season will create additional conditions for winning great victories throughout the dry season and in 1975. If we wait until phase 2 before attacking strongly, the 1975 victory will be limited. Therefore, we recommend that the High Command approve the plan we have drafted....

"Everything will be reported (by Pham Hung or myself)** in detail directly to the High Command."***

On 18 November brother Sau Nam sent the following message:

"...Received message 484 from brother Dung, with opinions of brother Van**** and have just received message 491 from brother Ba. We have discussed them and concluded that we do not yet fully grasp the intentions and overall plan of the Central Committee and its Military Commission as regards the relationship between the B2 theater and the other theaters in the South. We will carry out the directive of the upper echelon and adjust our plan as follows:

*From the archives of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

**Note by the author.

***From the archives of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

****Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap.

"1. With regard to regional main-force units:

"--During Phase 1, the main-force operations will be intended to wear down and annihilate part of the enemy's manpower, and draw in and stretch out the enemy so they cannot concentrate in the delta and around Saigon, help the localities retain their rice, and free the people, while also continuing to consolidate, train and conserve our strength so that during Phase 2 they can operate strongly, in accordance with the requirement of coordinating with the other theaters, as directed by the Central Committee.... Meanwhile, we will continue to prepare for the Phase 2 high-point, such as by preparing the battlefield, training troops to attack objectives along the lines of using portable artillery--nothing heavier than 85 mm direct-fire guns--and without using tanks or 130mm artillery.

"These are some adjustments in Phase 1 plan. After brother Hai Nha* returns and brother Tu** goes north to make his report, we will make additional changes as directed by the High Command.

"But to guard against the possibility that brother Tu may arrive in Hanoi later than expected and before Hai Nha returns, recommend that the High Command provide additional guidance so that we can implement it in time."***

The matter of Hai Nha's return, mentioned in the message was, according to Hai Nha, as follows:

"In November 1974, after being released from Hospital 108 in Hanoi I prepared to convalesce at Sam Son beach. Le Ngoc Hien came to see me and inquire about my health. He said that the General Staff needed someone who was capable and reliable to take orders to the B2 theater and report on a number of situations and the 1975 plan, and asked me whether I was healthy enough to return. I was very pleased to be able to return to the theater immediately to participate in the fighting, so I said that I was healthy enough to undertake that important mission. Brother Hien accepted my offer and told me to go to meet with Le Trong Tan, deputy chief of staff, the following night. As scheduled, I went to meet with brother Tan, who said, 'We need you to return to B2 immediately, and take instructions, regarding the 1975 plan and the intentions of the Military Commission of the party Central Committee. Pham Hung and Tran Van Tra are about to come north. But they have been sent a message telling them not to come, because you can return to report on the decisions that have been made up here. The 1975 plan does not call for large-scale fighting but for the conservation of weapons, ammunition, and forces, and for training, in order to await the 1976 opportunity.' Brothers Tan and Hien gave me a detailed briefing so that I could take mental notes and brief others when I returned. They told me to meet the following morning with Van Tien Dung, the chief of staff, to receive my mission and instructions.

"The next morning

*Maj Gen Lyong Van Nho

**Tran Van Tra

***From the archives of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

"The next morning I went to meet with brother Dung at the 'Dragon House,' at that time the offices of the Military Commission of the party Central Committee and the Ministry of National Defense in Hanoi. After inquiring about my health he asked whether I fully understood my mission. I reported that brothers Tan and Hien had briefed me in detail, and that I understood the mission. He asked me to repeat what I had been told to make certain that I understood everything. I repeated everything from beginning to end. The main contents were the following.

"I will return immediately with instructions for B2 from the General Staff. Brothers Hung and Tra would no longer have to come north.

"In 1975 we will not fight on a large scale, but will be concerned only with disrupting pacification in the Mekong Delta. In eastern Nam Bo, the main-force units will not fight on a large scale. B2 intends to attack Dong Xoai and Phuoc Long, but the General Staff disagrees. It should only fight on a small scale and take a few small positions on Route 14. This year it should fight on a small scale in order to conserve forces and await an opportunity. It should not use tanks and heavy artillery without the case-by-case approval of the General Staff.

"Brother Dung said, 'Your understanding is correct! It is necessary to conserve forces and await the opportunity. This year we will only fight in the delta and disrupt pacification. We are still very short on ammunition, especially heavy artillery shells. We should not fight on a large scale, then not have the forces to fight when the opportunity arises. You must understand that staff cadres such as yourself are responsible for making recommendations to the commander, and that the commander does not bear sole responsibility. So you now fully understand the opinions of the upper echelon. But I will compose a message going over the same points, so that brother Ba can sign it and send it to the B2 theater in advance.'

"I also took along that message from brother Ba (i.e. message No 491, referred to above in the message from Sau Nam to the General Staff) and delivered it to brothers Sau Nam and Hai Le."*

As it happened, Pham Hung and I, not having received that message, set out on the designated day and, fortunately, did not meet Hai Nha. If we had met him, perhaps we would have hesitated a little between continuing and returning. However, as early as mid-October we had recommended the holding of a meeting of the Political Bureau and all theaters in the South, so even if we had encountered Hai Nha and he had passed on to us those opinions of the Military Commission and told us not to go to Hanoi, I'm certain that we would have requested permission to continue our journey so that we could report directly our assessment and evaluation of the situation, based on the actual conditions in the theater, of COSVN and the Regional Military Party Committee, and to recommend an operational policy for 1975, in order to fulfill the 1975-1976

*"Sau Nam" was Le Duc Anh, deputy commander of the Regional Command. "Hai Le" was Le Van Tuong, deputy political officer of the Regional Command.

2-year plan. It is very important that the lower echelon report on the situation accurately and promptly, and recommend its opinions bravely and with a sense of responsibility. The upper echelon must do everything necessary to solicit the opinions of the lower echelon, listen closely to the opinions of all sides, and seriously and objectively analyze and consider in order to reach correct conclusions. To do so is to insure success. That has always been the truly democratic and centralized working method of the Political Bureau of the party Central Committee. We felt that we had a responsibility to go to Hanoi to accurately report on the situation.

So that our comrades back in the B2 theater could be at ease when guiding the activity phase we sent a message to COSVN and the Standing Committee of the Regional Military Party Committee that was signed by both Pham Hung and myself. It included the following passages:

"After a preliminary exchange of opinions with a number of comrades in the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee, a high degree of unanimity was reached regarding the assessment and evaluation of the overall situation and the direction to be taken in the coming period. But more specifically, there are still many problems that we must continue to discuss, especially our dry season plan.

"We will recommend that our old plan for the Regional main-force units be left unchanged...."*

After learning that B2 was operating in accordance with the adjusted plan I sent back a guidance message (message No 567/ZK):

"...After Bu Dang and Bu Na, go all-out to take Dong Xoai which, although not a large position, will have both a campaign and strategic effect. The 7th Division may be used to attack Dong Xoai...."***

On 20 December 1974 brother Sau Nam sent a message reporting that "On Route 14 we have completely liberated the segment from bridge 11 near Dong Xoai to beyond Bu Dang on the border of the Kien Duc subsector.... At Bu Dang, Vinh Thien and Bu Na we captured four artillery pieces and 7,000 artillery shells, more than 3,000 weapons of the various kinds, and more than 300 POW's, and are continuing to track down others."****

On 27 December 1974 there was another message:

"...In order to avoid missing the opportunity for a campaign to win a big victory when conditions permit, we have readied a tank company to serve as a reserve force. On 26 December we wiped out the Dong Xoai strongpoint complex without using tanks."*****

*Archives of the Committee to Recapitulate the War in the B2 Theater of the Ministry of National Defense.

**From archives of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

***Ibid.

****Ibid.

Immediately afterward we received the following message from Hoang Cam, commander at the Phuoc Long front:

"Group 301* to R,** copy to General Staff: Attacked Dong Xoai subsector at 0035 hours 26 December. By 0830 had taken all of Dong Xoai subsector."

-Nam Thach-***

Thus Route 14 within the sphere of responsibility of B2 had been completely liberated. Our rear area base and transportation corridor had been expanded. Although our attack plan had been changed and then changed again, and our forces had been deployed and redeployed, and we had to attack gradually and step-by-step, from a small scale to a large scale and more slowly than we had desired, the enemy troops still were incapable of reacting and did not send any infantry reinforcements, but were resigned to the loss of all three subsectors: Bu Dang, Dong Xoai, and, before that, Bu Dop which had been taken by a local battalion of the Phuoc Long Province unit. The enemy also sent in airplanes to strafe and bomb, but to no effect. The enemy troops remaining in Phuoc Long were perplexed and very shaken up. In view of that favorable situation we requested permission from brother Ba and the Military Commission of the party Central Committee to liberate all of Phuoc Long Province, as provided for by our old plan, should the opportunity arise. I expressed the opinion that our troops could fulfill that mission and said that I was certain that the enemy was incapable of sending strong reinforcements to Phuoc Long if it were attacked. I explained the campaign and strategic value of liberating Phuoc Long Province. After carefully weighing the situation, they agreed. I was delighted, but in order to insure victory I requested permission from brother Ba to use a company of tanks and a company of 130mm artillery. I promised that I would personally command the operation to insure success. He agreed. Phuoc Long was a mountain-region province with rough terrain. To the north and east of the provincial capital there were many high mountains, and the deep, swiftly flowing Be River flowed through those areas. To the west and south the land was more level, but at the southern gateway to the province was situated Mt. Ba Ra, the highest mountain in that area. It is 735 meters above sea level and had many rock cliffs, large boulders and green vegetation. The enemy had long ago set up on the peak of that mountain a wireless communications relay station and an observation post equipped with optical and electronic equipment capable of monitoring a large area. If necessary the enemy could use a regiment to use the complicated, dominating terrain of that mountain to strongly defend the Phuoc Long provincial capital. Because of the rough terrain of Mt. Ba Ra and of Phuoc Long Province, during the period of French domination the French colonialists used the Mt. Ba Ra area as a place for concentrating and keeping under surveillance the patriotic political activists. Many of our cadres and party members were detained there for many years, living apart from society, miserable and sick because of rampant malaria. They

*Forward HQ of the Regional Command.

**Code designation of the Regional Command.

***Hoang Cam.

included such women as Hai Soc Ba Diem, Nguyen Thi Luu, Nguyen Thi Dinh,* Hai Be An Giang, Hai Ninh Hau Giang, and many others. Five kilometers to the west of Mt. Ba Ra there was situated Phuoc Binh, a relatively bustling district seat. In Phuoc Binh there was an intersection of roads going to Bu Dop, Dong Xoai, the provincial capital, and to Route 14, at the Lieu Duc intersection. In Phuoc Binh there was also a relatively good Class-2 airfield, the province's air base, that was used for Phuoc Long Province and to support air force operations in that entire mountains-and-jungles area.

Because of the natural terrain of that mountain region province and the enemy's defensive deployments, if we were to attack and liberate Phuoc Long Province with our limited forces we had no other choice than to first take Dong Xoai in order to isolate all of the remaining troops in the province. We had to take, at any cost, the communications station and observation post on Mt. Ba Ra and the Phuoc Binh intersection and airfield. Only thereby could we punch through to the provincial capital and annihilate the enemy troops, whose defensive deployments relied on the rough and complicated terrain consisting of mountains, rivers, lakes and ponds.

We sent a message to the B2 Command to guide the development of the Dong Xoai victory by rapidly taking Mt. Ba Ra and the Phuoc Binh airfield and completely liberate Phuoc Long Province. I did not forget to mention that we had been authorized to use a tank company and a 130mm artillery company. I composed the message, signed it, and had the General Staff send it. But that afternoon, when sitting before a map, studying the enemy's deployments in Phuoc Long Province and envisioning how the enemy might react to our attack, comrade Le Ngoc Hien arrived. He handed me the message I had written and said that he had not yet sent it because I had stated that we had been authorized to use tanks and heavy artillery, which the upper echelon had forbidden us to do. I was a little perturbed, because I was afraid that that message, like the one a few days previously (instructing the B2 Command to implement the original dry season plan) would be received too late. To express my displeasure, I told comrade Hien that as a theater commander I should have the right to send a command message to my forces. I was not about to have my message censored and be forced to amend against my wishes. I had received permission to use heavy weapons and bore full responsibility. I requested him to send the message and told him that he would be responsible if it arrived late and we missed the opportunity.

Thus everything necessary to liberate Phuoc Long Province had been amicably agreed to. There was unanimity from top to bottom. Later, during discussions held to recapitulate the war, a number of cadres who did not understand the situation thought that the liberation of Phuoc Long Province along the lines of "peeling off layers of defense" from the outside in, from Bu Dang, Bu Na, Dong Xoai, Phuoc Binh, then the provincial capital, was a matter of fighting at first on a small scale and then on a large scale, that it differed from another method of using strong forces to strike at the center, at the enemy's

*Maj Gen Nguyen Thi Dinh, formerly deputy commander of the Regional Command whom the PLA cadres and men usually affectionately referred to as "Sister Ba." During the period of the 1960 simultaneous uprising she was secretary of the Be Tre Party Committee. At present she is chairman of the Vietnamese Women's Federation.

heart, and then attack from inside out, like a blossoming flower. That is an interesting description, but it is not in accordance with the truth. A lesson based on such a conclusion would have no value. Military strategy is a science. It cannot be understood by muddled thinking remote from reality. With regard to attacks on provincial capitals, there are hundreds of ways to attack hundreds of provincial capitals--a different method for each provincial capital--and not just two ways. The selection of a fighting method is not based on the subjective thinking of one person or another, but must be based on a series of specific factors: where is the provincial capital located, and what are its campaign and strategic positions in the enemy's defensive system? What key objectives must be taken to liberate that provincial capital? How are those objectives distributed on the battlefield? What are the fortifications and forces defending it? What are the terrain and vegetation of the provincial capital? Where will the enemy troops make their stand? Where will the enemy reinforcements originate and by what facilities will they be brought in? What are the scale and capabilities of our forces in all regards? What are the staging area, approach route, etc? Even by asking such simple questions it is evident that the selection of a fighting method must be based on the actualities of space and time, and on our situation and that of the enemy; we cannot sit and think about an existing fighting method then automatically apply it to a provincial capital, making adjustments as we go. The skill of a commander is demonstrated in his ability to grasp the actual situation, and accurately analyze the enemy's situation, our situation, the terrain, the important objectives, and the opportunity that is to be created or already exists, in order to make a decision that is appropriate, creative, and leads to victory. That is not to mention the developments, the factors which arise every minute and every second and must be dealt with. Often battles in fact end in a way unlike that envisioned in the original plan. Sometimes a plan is very good but the person in direct command of the attacking unit makes a mistake in dealing with a complicated development, or deals correctly with a disadvantageous situation, with the result that the battle ends in a very different way. In making recapitulations it is necessary to the objective historical truth to make an accurate analysis, in order to learn valuable lessons.

Thus prior to the Political Bureau conference our delegation, representing B2, had endeavored to report on and discuss our position and won the approval of the Political Bureau and party Central Committee for the dry season plan B2 had drafted on the basis of unanimity in evaluating our actual situation and that of the enemy. We had been authorized to attack Dong Xoai and Phuoc Long. On 22 December Pham Hung sent a message to the Standing Committee of COSVN which included the following contents.

"1. The opinions brought back by Hai Nha reached B2 before we had arrived at our destination. During our work sessions it was decided that the 1975 plan envisioned to COSVN and prepared after the June 1974 conference is entirely correct. You must oversee, and closely monitor and guide its implementation, especially during the present dry season phase. We and the others here are very pleased over the results of the first phase of the dry season. Because of the developing situation you considered things carefully and made rational, timely changes, but the 1975 plan remains essentially as we drafted it. If we are able to fulfill the 1975 plan, especially during the present dry season,

In the second phase of the dry season campaign there will be coordination among the theaters, which will be the best way to insure the fulfillment of our dry season plan and does not represent a major change."*

On 29 December, Pham Hung and I signed the following message to the Regional Military Party Committee and the COSVN Standing Committee:

"1. The situation at the beginning of the dry season in our theater is that the localities and units have endeavored to win victory and have achieved rather good results, although some places are still not up to par. We are very pleased and are confident that we have many good prospects for attaining and surpassing the plan if the various echelons firmly grasp the situation, are not subjective and complacent, and are prepared to overcome difficulties in order to win greater victories. We will thereby have a solid basis for the coming phases, in correct accordance with the strategic design. Those of us here are very pleased and are endeavoring to guide all aspects so that the plan can be carried out well..

"2.

"Because of the decision to win a bigger victory this year and create conditions for the coming period, our aid plan has been adjusted. We have been authorized the full amount we requested--27,000 tons--not the 11,000 tons reported earlier. We are now discussing and arranging transportation. Thus you should study the truly appropriate and economical use of those supplies, and pay attention to increasing supplies to the military regions and to using them well, accompanied by utmost economizing...."***

During the period prior to the Political Bureau meeting I had the time and the opportunity to meet with a number of cadres I knew who worked with the Ministry of National Defense and the General Staff. Because of the nature of their missions they monitored the situation on the battlefield on a daily basis and also know the latest news about me. To meet and chat with them was a rare opportunity. We discussed with one another everything from what was going on in the capital to what was going on in our theater, so we could not escape talking about our work. Some responsible cadres informed me about the General Staff's plan to attack Duc Lap and extend our transportation corridor. It would use three main-force divisions of the B3 theater and the General Staff, reinforced by a tank battalion and a battalion of 130mm artillery. It was certain that the strategic corridor would be extended and that the B2 theater could be supplied more easily and rapidly. The B3 staff and comrade Vu Lang were enroute to study the battlefield and make preparations in all regards. I asked why it was necessary to use three divisions, tanks and heavy artillery to take Duc Lap, which was merely an isolated subsector, and a few small positions on Route 14.

*Archives of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

**Ibid.

They replied that the objective was not only to take Duc Lap and a few small positions but also to draw in the enemy in order to inflict losses--perhaps large losses--on them. We would take the initiative by selecting the battlefield and drawing in the enemy in order to inflict large losses on them, as well as extending our corridor.

I expressed to those comrades my opinion that the terrain around Duc Lap was rough and restricting, that Route 14 passes between relatively high mountains and there was thick vegetation, so the enemy would not be so stupid as to send forces there so we could annihilate them. Would not the enemy react mainly by using their air force to strafe and bomb our formations? Furthermore, at that time the enemy realized that they needed their forces for much more important objectives than distant, remote Duc Lap. Although we needed Duc Lap to extend our strategic corridor, it did not have much bearing on the enemy's strategic defense plan for South Vietnam as a whole. If we were going to send such strong forces there, why not strike directly at Ban Me Thuot instead of attacking Duc Lap? If we liberated Ban Me Thuot, we would take an objective of campaign and strategic importance and shake the entire Central Highlands. Our corridor would automatically be extended and solidified. Such forces would be sufficient to attack Ban Me Thuot, where the enemy was vulnerable and which it regarded as a rear area divisional and regimental base. Although the province was large and the terrain was advantageous, it was weakly defended, the enemy had few forces there and, especially, the enemy would not suspect that we would send such large forces there and attack Ban Me Thuot. Furthermore, such a move would be appropriate to the present strategic phase of the war, in which we had to launch large-scale attacks to annihilate the enemy and liberate land, and to create a major opportunity. We were no longer in a period of extending our strategic corridor.

They argued as follows:

That matter required further discussion, but if the time had come to launch a large-scale Central Highlands campaign more than those forces would be required. The General Staff was drafting such a plan. We would use large, overwhelming forces and begin with a direct attack on Kontum, annihilating the enemy and liberating that province. Then we would immediately attack the headquarters of the puppet II Corps at Pleiku. We would wipe out the 22d and 23d Divisions and the puppet forces there and liberate the entire Central Highlands. By beginning with an attack on Kontum we would have favorable conditions, for it was adjacent to our vast liberated base, road network and 559 supply depots, which were sufficient to support the campaign. We had many favorable conditions for concentrating large forces and using all kinds of technical equipment.

I disagreed. I smiled and said in a pleasant voice, "You are indeed soldiers of the king. You have fought, and always think about fighting, with plentiful forces, weapons and ammunition. That is far different from us, poor soldiers on a distant, difficult battlefield who count every bullet and are very envious of you. So that is why Le Ngoc Hien the other day reported to the General Staff that in 1972 there were consumed in South Vietnam as a whole 220,000 heavy artillery shells, and that Quang Tri alone consumed 150,000 of them!

I think that to attack Kontum and Pleiku is to attack where the enemy is strongest. They have built up their forces over a long period of time. To do so would be to fight the enemy on their terms. The enemy has long predicted that we would attack Kontum so it has concentrated its forces and attention there. Although we were capable of concentrating large forces and preparing all necessary conditions, the enemy was on guard and we would not have an easy time of it. But to attack Ban Me Thuot would be to completely surprise the enemy and to attack the enemy's undefended rear. They would be quickly annihilated and disintegrated and we would not have to use large forces. If their rear area was taken, the enemy in the forward area would be perplexed and shaken. Ban Me Thuot was an important strategic position, for the large "Hoa Binh" airfield was located there, strategic Route 21 connected Ban Me Thuot with Ninh Hoa and Nha Trang, and beyond Ban Me Thuot lay Gia Nghia and Dalat, so if Ban Me Thuot were lost the entire puppet II Corps in the Central Highlands would have at its disposal only Route 19, which passed through rugged mountainous terrain and was easily cut, and only the Pleiku airfield would be left for receiving supplies and reinforcements. The other routes, such as No 5 and No 7, also passed through mountainous terrain and there were many bridges, which were very weak, and it was not certain that they could handle the traffic, especially mechanized equipment. If we cut off those roads, it was certain that hundreds of thousands of people and the enemy's technical equipment would be endangered and could not be rescued. I compared the effect of attacking and taking Ban Me Thuot on the remaining Central Highlands provinces to chopping down a large tree at its base: all of its branches and the trunk would have to fall. Only such an attack would be an effective campaign and strategic blow which would afford us a certain victory and a big victory.

I reported that conversation to Pham Hung and Hai Van and discussed the situation with them in detail. It was my belief that an attack on Ban Me Thuot would have strategic significance in the present phase of the war and that it must be considered. They agreed that we should abandon Duc Lap and launch an attack directly against Ban Me Thuot. We recommended that Pham Hung discuss the matter with the comrades in the Political Bureau.

On 18 December 1974 a joint meeting of the Political Bureau and the Military Commission of the party Central Committee, attended by representatives of the theaters in South Vietnam, began in an atmosphere of victory which had spread from the B2 theater. By that time the entire B2 theater had begun the first phase of the dry season and had won many victories. In the Mekong Delta the enemy's pacification plan had been shattered. We had liberated many villages and hamlets and expanded the rural liberated areas at Tieu Can, Tra Cu, Cau Ke, and Duyen Hai in Tra Vinh, Mo Cay and Giong Thom in Ben Tre. We had liberated the Hung Long subsector in the Hau Giang area and the Tuyen Nhon district seat in the Tien Giang area. That was the first time we had taken and held a subsector and district seat. We had wiped out a battalion, and inflicted heavy losses on three other battalions, of the puppet 21st Division reaction force sent to Hung Long. We had mastered segments of the Ong Doc, Cai Tau and Bay Hap Rivers in Ca Mau, the Xa No Canal in Can Tho, the Co Co River in the My Tu District of Soc Trang Province, the Vam Co Tay River in Kien Tuong, etc. In eastern Nam Bo we had liberated Route 14 north of Dong

Xoai, taken the Lo O-Mt. Giam high point, liberated a number of villages in order to isolate the Hoai Duc and Tanh Linh district seats in Binh Tuy Province, surrounded the Mt. Ba Den position, and wiped out a number of enemy outposts in Tay Ninh Province. In the outskirts of Saigon, the forces of the Saigon provincial unit, along with the sappers, had stepped up their activities against the enemy, overran outposts, created enclaves in the Cu Chi, Hoc Mon, Go Vap, Binh Chanh, southern Thu Duc, Long Thanh, and Nhon Trach area, and shelled and interdicted the Bien Hoa air base. Only 2 weeks into the dry season in the B2 theater good results had been attained in annihilating the enemy and liberating areas, and in popular uprisings to achieve mastery, which indicated the resounding victories that were to come and the clear decline of the puppets. Those actual developments on the battlefield said more than any reports or interesting theories.

The conference concentrated on discussing the 1975-1976 2-year strategic plan to complete the national democratic revolution which the Political Bureau had posed during the rainy season. COSVN and the Regional Military Party Committee (i.e. the B2 theater) had also discussed that plan since our regular session held to review the situation during the first 6 months of 1974. The foresight of the supreme leadership and the thoughts of the lower echelon of a typical battlefield coincided. Theory and practice were in synchronization. But the specific developmental process, the steps that were to be taken, and the measures that were to be applied required much more discussion if unanimity was to be achieved. That was inevitable. If everyone agreed readily to a proposal or if there were no differing opinions, that would be proof of a pitiful poverty of intelligence and thought.

At the beginning of the conference the representatives of the B2 theater and Military Region 5 reported on our situation and that of the enemy, on the actual situation on the battlefield, on the direction and prospects of their future activities, and on their recommendations and requirements. For B2's part, we presented a succinct briefing on developments since Resolution 21 of the party Central Committee, during the dry season--and then the rainy season--of 1974 and the specific results in the Mekong Delta, in military Region 6 and 7, and in Saigon itself. I reported in detail on our objective of preventing the Saigon puppets from strengthening their defense lines and from being able to withdraw into an enclave in the future, by activities in the Route 7-Ben Cat area and by liberating Rach Bap. We brought the conference up to date on the development of our political and military forces, especially the organization and deployment in the outskirts of and inside Saigon, which formed a tight encirclement of the puppet capital. We reported on COSVN's assessment and evaluation of the recent situation and the new factors that had appeared, and concluded that we were strong and on the rise and the enemy was weak and on the decline. We reported especially on the 1975 dry season: we had to attack strongly and win big victories all over South Vietnam in order to victoriously conclude the war in 1976. Finally, we did not forget to recommend that B2 be provided additional materiel, weapons and personnel--requests to which COSVN had agreed--first of all a main-force division at the beginning of the 1975 dry season in order to strengthen the 4th Corps. We recommended that a plan be drafted to coordinate the activities of all theaters in South Vietnam, and that the High Command order the organization of a strong

strategic reserve force in order to promptly win a decisive victory when the opportunity arose in the main theater. We recommended that since the eastern Nam Bo battlefield, which included Saigon, was one on which large numbers of the enemy would be annihilated and on which the war would be concluded, and the reserve force would surely be used there, it should be deployed immediately in the Central Highlands so that it could act promptly when necessary. We emphasized that our 1975 operational plan was based on the results that were attained in 1974, and on a situation which had developed in a manner extremely advantageous to us, and that its guiding principle was that we must rapidly and continually develop our attack and place the enemy in peril. We must not hold back, lest we miss the opportunity.

After the various theaters reported, comrade Le Ngoc Hien, on behalf of the General Staff, presented a briefing on the 1975 operational plan. The plan was based on the assessment that the enemy had to remain on the passive defensive and try to defend what places it could defend. They had weakened organizationally and with regard to morale. We were winning victories but still had deficiencies and weaknesses. The plan set forth a whole series of norms for the battlefields with regard to liberating land and people; annihilating and routing the enemy; decreasing their troop strength, and preventing them from making up their losses; wiping out the enemy's material-technical reserves, etc. The plan included provisions regarding the building up of our forces during the year, the creation of unimpeded corridors, and materiel reserves and rear-area services in the various areas. In 1975 we had to do a truly good job of completing all preparatory tasks in order to insure that we could fight on a large scale and that the General Offensive and General Uprising would be victorious in 1976.

He reported in detail on the current status of our military forces on the battlefield and at the central level, and on the quantity of technical equipment and ammunition available in the various areas and in reserve and their planned allocation and use on the battlefields during the 2-year period. With regard to heavy artillery shells, he reported that of the total on hand (100 percent), more than 10 percent would be used in 1975, 45 percent would be used in 1976, and the remainder, nearly 45 percent, would be kept in reserve.

Thus as it began its deliberations the conference had been fully briefed on the battlefield situation and had been briefed on the 2-year plan and the 1975 plan by the General Staff and the battlefields. The conference debated in an atmosphere of vigor and enthusiasm. I don't know what the others were thinking, but I was moved beyond words. That conference would determine the conclusion of the nation's 30-year war. Had there been any other people who had to take up arms and endure terrible death and destruction over a period of 30 long years of bitter, endless struggle, as had the Vietnamese people? In our war against the United States to liberate and unify the homeland there were many instances of three generations--grandfathers, fathers and sons--rushing to the front, sometimes in the same unit. There were many instances of whole families or groups of families being killed by the bombs and shells of the enemy during sweeping operations. And in our country there is practically no family, from Hoang Lien Son and Cao Lang to the Ca Mau Peninsula, Phu Quoc, and Co Dao, which has not lost at least one member. We had endured countless

sacrifices and hardships for that day, the day that would determine a glorious feature. What a heavy responsibility we had! Every thought and every opinion expressed during the conference seemed to bear the weight of 4,000 years of history, of tens of thousands of sorrowful burdens, and to be watched by millions of pairs of eyes of the Vietnamese people, the oppressed people of the world, and our friends in all five continents. Many of the comrades spoke enthusiastically, and some spoke many times.

Everything evolved around our assessment and evaluation of the situation at home and abroad. If we attacked strongly, how would the puppets react? What would the United States do? Would it dare intervene, or did it have other schemes and plots? What were the best revolutionary methods we could apply? What steps should be taken during the 2-year period? How about 1975? And 1976? Two years of fierce fighting would not be brief, but they would be the last 2 years of more than 30 difficult years, so the end seemed so near. When concluding the conference, brother Ba said, "Prepare yourselves: 2 years are short but sometimes they can be long." And when expressing his opinions, brother [Pham Van] Dong said, "When will the puppets collapse? We may not have to wait until 1976. It may come quickly, and not gradually." [Vo Nguyen] Giap and many others stressed, "The decision to complete the national democratic revolution in the 1975-1976 2-year period is correct. But our planning must provide for the contingency that it could end in 1975, or perhaps not until 1977. Only then can we be prepared to take the initiative."

Pham Van Dong paced back and forth, thinking and then stopping to express an opinion, his face always rosy, his voice firm. He said, "In evaluating the enemy, we must answer a few questions, but without thinking in an outmoded way. We are in a new phase. The United States has withdrawn its troops in accordance with the Paris Agreement, which it regards as a victory after suffering many defeats with no way out. Now, there is no way that they could intervene again by sending in troops. They may provide air and naval support, but that cannot decide victory or defeat." Then he laughingly said, "I'm kidding, but also telling the truth, when I say that the Americans would not come back even if you offered them candy." Everyone laughed in delight. He continued, "For our part, the most important factor is that a revolutionary movement has arisen in the south. It is very new, and is both military and political. Military violence at the highest level is accompanied by political violence. Both Military Region 8 and Military Region 9 have reported thusly, which is very good. The situation will develop very rapidly. Truong Chinh arose, put on his glasses, glanced at a notebook he was holding in his hand, and began to speak in a solemn voice. He was always like that. He was always careful, as if not wanting to make even a small mistake. He paid attention to each word and comma in his articles. His speeches always had a beginning, a main part, and a conclusion. I did not take notes, but will here mention only a few of his ideas. He said, "The enemy is under pressure from three sources: our military attacks, the military struggle of the masses, and economic-technical difficulties. Therefore the enemy has weakened very rapidly. The enemy army has not been able to resolve the contradiction between holding on to land and people and fighting a war of mobility. But it is still viable, had not yet suffered heavy losses, and can still obtain recruits. It still receives large amounts of U.S. aid and holds the important strategic roads. For our part,

we have grown stronger in all regards. We have the initiative on the battlefield. In 1974 we fulfilled our plan. If we can also take Phuoc Long, that will be eloquent proof that we have become much stronger. The enemy has the tendency to form defensive enclaves. It will be difficult for us to prevent them from withdrawing into enclaves around the large cities. It will be difficult for us to attack the enemy once they have withdrawn into large, fortified enclaves, and attacks on cities are very complicated. Will the United States step in? In fact, it still has 25,000 military advisers in civilian clothing. If the United States senses danger it will intervene, but it will be difficult for them to intervene with infantry and their use of air and naval forces must be circumspect and limited. We must create conditions for striking a strategic annihilating blow, but we must not limit ourselves to just one annihilating blow."

Every day news was received of victories in the B2 theater. Most encouraging was the news from Tra Vinh, a delta province and a principal focus of the first phase of the dry season, that we had annihilated many of the enemy, overrun many outposts, and liberated many villages and many people. Everyone attending the conference, especially, of course, the B2 delegates, were very pleased. The actual events on the battlefield had verified our evaluation of the situation as if the soldiers and people of that distant battlefield were particularly directed in the discussions at that conference. When making his speech, Le Duc Tho presented the following evidence: "In December our forces in the Mekong Delta eliminated more than 500 enemy positions and in a period of only a month attained 70 percent of the norm for the 6-months-long dry season.... In eastern Nam Bo, we have taken all of Tanh Linh District and a number of villages in Hoa Duc District in Binh Tuy Province. In Tay Ninh we have surrounded the Mt. Ba Den base and wiped out a battalion of the 49th Regiment of the puppets' 25th Division. In Phuoc Long Province we have taken the Phuoc Binh airfield and subsector and Mt. Ba Ra, and are now attacking the city." Everyone attending the conference was anxious to learn the results of the Phuoc Long battle. Suddenly, one day, while we were in session, a comrade from the Operations Section of the General Staff, brought and read a message from the battlefield which reported that "Because the enemy has sent in the 81st Airborne Ranger Brigade to reinforce the city and have put up a stiff resistance, we have temporarily withdrawn our troops to reorganize and study the situation before resuming the attack." I was astonished and unbelieving. I was sitting almost opposite brother Ba who, after he had listened to the reading of the message, looked directly at me as if to ask why. I had requested permission to attack Phuoc Long and to use some heavy artillery and tanks. I had assured him that we were certain to win a victory and that the enemy could not reinforce the city. If we failed to take the Phuoc Long provincial capital, it would be difficult to conclude that my other evaluations were correct. The operational ability of our main-force troops in eastern Nam Bo would clearly have been proven to still be very low. Actual results on the battlefield are the most accurate yardstick for measuring the level and leadership-command ability of the cadres and the fighting effectiveness of the armed forces. But I still thought that the situation was not that way at all, and still had confidence in the B2 troops and cadres and was certain that Phuoc Long would be liberated.

There was a basis for my confidence. I had lived with the B2 main-force troops from the time of the formation of the first battalions and regiments more than a decade ago. I had contributed my small part by looking after each cadre and weapon, and being concerned with training and combat, during one period after another and onto the present time. I had participated with them in nearly all of the important campaigns in the B2 theater. I understood them as I understood myself and had as much confidence in them as I did in myself. I regretted that I could not be present to share the hardships with them in that strategic battle for Phuoc Long. But I always believed that with me or without me they would be what they were: resolute and determined-to-win main-force units.

How about the command cadres? A unit is no better than its cadres, people who had become steeled and had come of age in the course of hundreds of large and small battles, and most of whom served in two resistance war periods. I had assigned them very difficult missions, given them extremely strict orders, and shared with them difficult, dangerous moments as well as glorious victories. I based my thoughts and actions on them. Each of my lower-echelon cadres who fell represented the loss of part of my body and soul. Until the day I die I will never be able to erase the image of comrade Tran Dinh Xu, a commander who was calm and steadfast under all circumstances and who sacrificed his life heroically while serving as the commander of the Saigon Special Zone in 1969, or of comrade Nguyen The Truyen, a very brave division commander who entered the puppet capital during Tet Mau Than in 1968 and later died during the fierce fighting in the outskirts. Nor could I forget comrade Nguyen Van Nho (Hai Nho), from Tan An, who was a resolute old guerrilla who participated in the Nam Ky uprising in 1940. He disregarded all hardships and dangers. In 1968 he set up his headquarters on Route 1 near Ba Queo to command the troops attacking Tan Son Nhat airfield from the west. He sacrificed his life heroically in 1969 while serving as the deputy commander of Military Region 8. There were many other such cadres. The person directly commanding the Phuoc Long battle was comrade Hoang Cam, who had been the commander of the first division formed in the B2 theater and who was now the corps commander. Over a long period of combat he and his unit had fulfilled even the most difficult missions assigned them. The person who had replaced me as regional commander, comrade Le Duc Anh, had many times served as my chief of staff. In 1973, while serving as commander of Military Region 9, he resolutely retaliated against the enemy and won glorious victories. The other cadres who were then on the battlefield were also resolute cadres who had passed many challenges. I was able to evaluate their capabilities and deficiencies, so my confidence was well founded.

I knew that our first attack to liberate an entire province, with complicated terrain and strong defensive works, would not be easy and that there would be difficult moments and that the battle would ebb and flow. But the ultimate result would be that our men would win. Convinced of that, I calmly expressed my opinion to the conference that once we had taken Phuoc Binh and Mt. Ba Ra the enemy could not make a stand in the city for long and it was certain that they could not send large numbers of troops there. I was still confident that our troops would take Phuoc Long within the next few days. I immediately sent a message to the theater inquiring about how the battle was really going and stating that it was necessary to send in sufficient reinforcements to overwhelm

the city. The next day we received a message from the B2 Command stating that our troops had not been withdrawn, but that there had been an erroneous report from a cadre at the front, and that the independent 16th Regiment and the 2d Regiment of the 9th Division were being added to our forces in order to annihilate the enemy troops in the city. I felt relieved. Before brother Ba concluded the conference we received the following message from the B2 theater: "During the afternoon of 6 January 1975 our troops eliminated all of the pockets of resistance that the enemy had retaken on 5 January by using 250 airborne rangers who had just been sent in.... Our policy is to continue to mop-up the enemy remnants defending the city and in the rest of the province. If the enemy launch a counterattack, we will annihilate each enemy regiment and division, both those sent in by air and those arriving by road. We will create conditions for our attacks in areas that threaten the enemy, hold down our losses to a minimum, and protect the lives and property of the people." We also received a message from the B2 Staff: "During the early morning of 3 January we launched an all-out attack on the Phuoc Long subsector and city, and by 1530 hours on 6 January we had killed or captured all of the enemy troops and completely liberated Phuoc Long Province."* I sighed a sigh of relief and was liberated from all of my worries of the past few days.

The news that we had completely taken Phuoc Long City arrived while we were in session. Everyone jubilantly stood up and shook hands with one another to celebrate the victory. The B2 delegates were not the only ones whose hands were shaken. That showed that the victory had a common significance, not just for the B2 theater. It signified something about the fighting capabilities of our army and the weakness of the enemy army. A new page of history had been turned and a new phase had begun. No one directly expressed what he was thinking, but facial expressions and mannerisms said more than words, and everyone seemed to be in agreement. After several minutes, everyone returned to their seats. Brother Ba said, "For the first time a province in South Vietnam has been completely liberated. That province, furthermore, is near Saigon and we have expanded our important base area in eastern Nam Bo. That event reflects more clearly than anything else our capability and the reaction of the puppets, and especially of the United States." Everyone expressed agreement with and approval of that statement. Did the cadres and men who participated in the battle of Phuoc Long--the 7th Division, the 3d Division, the 9th Division, the sappers, and the local forces, guerrillas, and people in Phuoc Long--especially the comrades who fell there, understand the value of their feat of arms? Did they know that they and the soldiers and people of the Mekong Delta, by their actions during Phase 1 of the dry season, and not our B2 delegation, had reported most specifically and eloquently about the actual situations of ourselves and the enemy in the present strategic phase of the war to the Political Bureau of our party Central Committee, which is the supreme revolutionary leadership organ and determines all victories of the revolution. I sent back a message lauding the victory, but could not fully describe the scene at the conference and my own emotions.

*Archives of the B2 War Recapitulation Section of the Ministry of National Defense.

What was the enemy's assessment of the Phuoc Long affair? According to the U.S. study "The Collapse of South Vietnam," "The report thereafter tried to outline the collapse of that 'hard defense line' structure, beginning with the loss of the Phuoc Long provincial capital on 6 January 1975. According to many respondents, the loss of that city meant that South Vietnam had begun to disintegrate...."

Buu Vien regarded the loss of that province as having an important significance.

"To test the resolve of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam, and especially to probe the reaction of the U.S. Government, the truth is that the communists selected an easy objective. The loss of Phuoc Long had a great significance. It was the first time in the history of the Vietnam war that a province had fallen to the communists."

Immediately after Phuoc Long was lost, what did the Americans and puppets in Saigon think and do, and what did the puppet generals think? Duong Hao, in his book "A Tragic Chapter [Mot Chuong Bi Tham], published by our People's Army Publishing House in 1980, wrote that:

"Later, when relating the consequences of the Phuoc Long defeat, Col Pham Ba Hoa, chief of staff of the puppets' Logistics General Department, said that "The frantic days of the fighting at Phuoc Long were tense days for all officers at the GHQ of the puppet army, especially after Phuoc Long fell. It may be said that all of us were stunned. An atmosphere of worry enveloped everything, and grief pressed heavily on everyone. Grief not only because of the defeat at the very gateway to Saigon, but also because the loss of Phuoc Long resulted in large losses: 6,000 to 7,000 troops killed or routed.

"The main factor was that the Phuoc Long defeat reflected the position and strength of the ARVN forces. They were attacked at only one place but didn't have enough forces left to cope with the attack, so what would happen if they were attacked in many places? Phuoc Long was an event that demonstrated quite clearly the effectiveness of the 'Vietnamization' strategy that had been carried out during the past 6 years. In the past, the ARVN was able to escape from many perilous situations because it was saved by U.S. aid. The United States supplied all kinds of equipment to make up for losses and provided powerful fire support, even infantry support, so that the ARVN could have the strength to resist. Now, after the painful defeat and the loss of a province, the United States did nothing, although Mr Thieu often met with Martin to request intervention by the United States. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Vietnam also sent an official diplomatic note, then General Khuyen held a conversation with Smith (head of the DAO). All of those efforts amounted to nothing.

"That situation made us extremely confused and pessimistic. It may be said that Phuoc Long was a test of strength between the two sides and that the result was evident."

The conference continued. Le Thanh Nghi, as was his custom, spoke softly and slowly; regardless of the attitude expressed by those around him, he continued to speak until he had said all that he wanted to say. After analyzing the situation he commented on the plan, and emphasized that additional forces should be sent to the B2 theater, the sooner the better. There had to be general strategic reserves and reserves for each of the important theaters. But how could the corps making up the general reserves be sent to the main theater in time if it is kept in the north? Le Duc Tho stressed that it is necessary to pay adequate attention to coordinating the three fists. Only if we attacked strongly and won big victories in 1975 could we be in a better position in 1976. Van Tien Dung said that forces could not be sent immediately, that it was necessary to build up our forces and give them combat training, then there were the problems of materiel and rear services, roads, etc. Furthermore, additional forces could not be sent to the B2 theater until the Central Highlands campaign was over, and no other divisions were available. The 316th Division could not be sent to eastern Nam Bo until May 1975. Upon hearing that brother Ba looked at us and said, "We fight in our own way, which is to combine the political, military and strategic fists. Otherwise we cannot be victorious. Because of the common difficulties, a few months' delay won't hurt anything. We must not disrupt the Central Highlands plan." I remained silent but I said to myself: we'll continue to fight in the way popularly known as "having the right ratio of rice and fish," i.e. no matter how many forces we had we would use them in the most appropriate way. But we were determined to win a big victory.

On 8 January 1975 brother Ba concluded the conference. To paraphrase him, he said, "The conference included the participation of Military Region 5 and Nam Bo, and it is very encouraging that there was a high degree of unanimity and determination to complete the democratic national revolution in the 1975-1976 2-year period, as proposed by the Political Bureau. We have thought a good deal and discussed a good deal, and we have reached a higher degree of unanimity among the battlefield commanders.

--In 1959-60 the mass movement was very strong but our military forces didn't amount to much.

--While fighting the United States we were strong militarily but the enemy used all barbarous methods to suppress the masses.

--Now we are stronger both militarily and politically, so we are capable of creating combined strength.

"Therefore, it is necessary to grasp even more firmly the laws of revolutionary war and the mass revolutionary movement. They are one in the same....

"At present we have the initiative on the battlefield in winning control of the people and the right of mastery. We have created an integrated strategic position extending from Tri Thien to Nam Bo, and on to the Mekong Delta. We have created very strong and mobile main-force fists. We have created such fists in the Mekong Delta as Military Regions 9 and 8, which are continuing to develop. We have created an overwhelming staging area around Saigon, which

is a very great strategic advantage. A mass movement has begun to arise in the cities. Those things prove that we are strong. On the basis of those strengths, we are preparing to carry out our 2-year plan.

"The puppets are on the decline in all ways, militarily, politically and economically, because of our attacks and because of their inherent weaknesses.

"How about the United States? It has suffered many defeats, including the defeat of its global strategy. After it became involved in Vietnam, the United States became weaker and found itself endangered. If it returns now, it will lose everything. Even so, we must be on guard. The United States might use its air and naval forces to a certain degree. If we do not attack strongly and rapidly, but prolong our attacks, the United States will intervene to a certain extent to save the puppets from total defeat.

"But something that must be stressed is that even if the United States intervenes we are still determined to fight and are still determined to liberate the south and unify the homeland, for the simple reason that we do not want to be enslaved and lose our country. We want freedom, independence and unification.

"Our revolutionary guidelines and methods are as follows:

"Attacking and uprising, uprising and attacking, the three offensive spearheads, the three strategic areas, annihilate and achieve mastery, achieve mastery and annihilate, and advancing to a general offensive and general uprising.

"What must we do in 1975?:"

"--The eastern Nam Bo main-force units must win a clear-cut victory in the Nam Bo lowlands in order to create an integrated liberated area from eastern Nam Bo to the Mekong Delta. We must liberate more rural areas and liberate more people. We must tighten our encirclement around Saigon and wipe out the puppet main-force units defending Saigon, so that even greater pressure can be exerted on Saigon. We must enable each locality to become stronger and fulfill their missions and be sufficiently strong to take advantage of the opportunity. We must strike a strong blow in the Central Highlands, and attack Ban Me Thuot. Military Region 5 must pay attention to the Binh Dinh, Da Nang-Tri Thien and Hue areas.

"We must take subsectors and district seats and then take district seats and cities.

"Only if we can accomplish those things in 1975 can we achieve our objectives in 1976, so 1976 will be a result of 1975.

"We still have difficulties, but we are determined to overcome them in order to advance to fulfilling our missions. For the sake of national independence, socialism, and peace in Southeast Asia and the world, we must win a complete victory. We have a responsibility to our people and to the people of the entire world."

When concluding the conference, brother Ba did not mention what decision had been made about the attack on Ban Me Thuot. I thought that perhaps he was leaving that decision up to the Military Commission of the party Central Committee prior to that. I had the opportunity to explain to him that in order to liberate all of Phuoc Long Province, which had complicated terrain and which the enemy paid attention to defending, B2 used a total of two divisions, in combination with the local forces. Those two divisions were under strength and had been formed by combining independent regiments. They were not strong units and they were supported by very few heavy artillery pieces and tanks, but we were able to fight over a prolonged period and launch one attack after another, even after we had lost the element of surprise. If we attacked Ban Me Thuot, we would have three divisions and strong tank and heavy artillery forces, so we were certain to win a victory.

After the conference I was extremely enthusiastic and confident. It was now only a matter of waiting and hoping that the Military Commission would decide whether or not to attack Ban Me Thuot so that we would have a basis on which to draft B2's plan for the second phase of the dry season, for the decision about whether or not to attack Ban Me Thuot would affect all theaters in the south. I believed that if we attacked Ban Me Thuot the pace of the war would be greatly accelerated. Thus the B2 plan had to be well coordinated or we could not promptly take advantage of the situation. I decided to find out about that before returning to the B2 theater.

On 15 January our delegation met with brother Ba to receive our final instructions. This time he went into very specific detail about the fighting methods, the annihilation of enemy units, and the depletion of their reserves. With regard to the deployment of our forces in the Saigon area, our commandos and sappers had to be strong. He continued to stress the necessity of combined forces and a combined strategy. He spoke about the nature of the main-force fist, the lowlands fist and especially the cities. He said that it was necessary to pay all-out attention to the mass movement, which had to become a high tide, the spearheads of which were the women, youths, middle school students, college students and trade union members. In political leadership and guidance in Saigon we had to be very alert for the political situation changed very rapidly, every day and every hour, so we had to be resolute and acute as was Lenin.

It was difficult to win political power, but it was a hundred times more difficult to maintain political power so we had to begin to think about that problem immediately. We had to be determined and be confident of winning big victories in 1975.

On 20 January we met with Le Duc Tho so that he could give us additional advice about a number of matters. He said, "Our leadership and guidance experience has always been to evaluate fully the enemy and ourselves. Then he told us that a decision had been made about Ban Me Thuot. He said, "I attended the regular meeting of the Military Commission and informed it of the Political Bureau's decision to attack Ban Me Thuot. The Commission only received the order, and did not further discuss it."

In his book "The Great Spring Victory," Senior General Van Tien Dung wrote that "Just after the meeting began comrade Le Duc Tho suddenly opened the door, entered and sat down. We were aware that the Political Bureau was not satisfied when it saw that the decision to attack Ban Me Thuot was not yet an explicit content of the operational plan. Thus comrade Le Duc Tho came to emphasize to us that it was necessary to attack Ban Me Thuot. He said very emotionally, "We absolutely must liberate Ban Me Thuot. We have nearly five divisions in the Central Highlands, so surely we can take Ban Me Thuot."

We were very pleased by that decision and thereafter we continually thought about the possible developments in South Vietnam as a whole and how to draft the B2 operational plan so that we could coordinate activities in the delta, in eastern Nam Bo and in Saigon. It was certain that we would have to run and could not take our time. I remembered brother Ba's unforgettable expression during an urgent period of the war, "We must run while forming ranks and not wait until we form ranks before running."

On 24 January 1975 our delegation set out to return to the B2 theater, full of animation and excitement. I could not stop thinking about the objectives we had to attack and on how to use forces. A very difficult mission awaited us. We had to get back to the B2 theater quickly.

The results of the activities of the first phase of the 1974-1975 dry season all over the B2 theater were truly brilliant. We had won big victories and surpassed all norms that had been assigned. I had been worried that if only the B2 theater was active during that phase we would encounter many difficulties because the enemy could concentrate on countering our moves, but that did not occur because the enemy was clearly confused and passive and had seriously weakened. Although the enemy had concentrated the air power of the 2d and 4th Military Regions on countering our attacks in Military Region 3--at Phuoc Long and Binh Tuy they flew more than 100 fighter-bomber sorties a day and used as many as 160 helicopters--they could achieve nothing on the battlefield. They transferred the 4th Ranger Group from Kontum to Long Binh, which was then replaced by the 8th Ranger Group which came down from Duc Duc, and sent the 4th Airborne Brigade and then the 2d Airborne Brigade from Da Nang to the Hoang Hoa Tham base and the 4th Marine Brigade from Tri Thien to the Song Than base, not to carry out a counterattack but to strengthen their defenses north and northeast of Saigon. The results we attained during the phase from December 1974 to February 1975 were greater than in any previous phase. We completely liberated a province, 4 districts, 72 villages and 489 hamlets, and essentially liberated 52 other villages. We liberated 584,800 people. We wiped out 22 battalions, inflicted heavy losses on 25 puppet battalions and overran 1,548 military posts, including a sector, 8 subsectors, 3 strategic zones and 88 subsector branches. We destroyed 108 airplanes, 110 boats and 494 vehicles, killed 56,315 of the enemy and captured 12,122 weapons, 786 radios, 118 vehicles, and 2 airplanes.

Although those figures were very significant, they still did not fully reflect the value of the victories won during the first phase of the 1974-1975 dry season in the B2 theater. Those victories were results not only of the first phase but also the entirely logical development of the victories of the 1974

dry season and rainy season. COSVN and the Regional Military Party Commission foresaw those victories when they realized the transformation that had taken place on the battlefield with regard to the balance between ourselves and the enemy by the end of the 1974 dry season, after which we continued that trend by means of our activities during the rainy season and the first part of the 1974-1975 dry season. The soldiers and people of the B2 theater understood the enemy's situation and their own, so they attacked and arose tirelessly from the 1973-1974 dry season to the 1974-1975 dry season; the more they fought the stronger they became, and the greater their strength the more their position improved. During that time the puppets, who began to decline during the 1974 dry season, were attacked continually all over the place; the more they declined the less capable they were of reviving. The actual situation proved that COSVN's assessment and evaluation of the situation was correct, and that therefore its policy was correct.

For the first time in decades of war a province (Phuoc Long) had been completely liberated. That province, furthermore, was a border province of the enemy's Military Region III, the strongest military region, which had the mission of defending the U.S.-puppet capital and war headquarters. That event occurred at a time when the puppets still had forces totaling more than 1 million troops in theory and nearly 1 million actual troops, who were strongly armed with U.S. weapons and facilities, and were built up, trained and commanded by the United States in order to carry out its strategy of Vietnamizing the war. Even so, the Americans and their puppets could not send a main-force unit to respond to our attack and defend the gateway to Saigon. As for the United States, it had to stand to one side and look at the puppet regime, a child it had painfully given birth to decades ago and which now was on the threshold of a dangerous period of rapid decline. The liberation of Phuoc Long was no different from a sword pointed at the throat of Saigon. The Saigon puppet regime, like an obstinate, excessively parsimonious person who would rather die than lose an inch of ground, spread out its troops to defend every faraway place. As a result, it was defeated everywhere it was attacked and could send no reinforcements. Instead, it ordered 3 days of national mourning for Phuoc Long! In fact, that was the funeral of the traitorous Thieu regime, the terminal period of which began with Phuoc Long.

Also during the first phase of that dry season another outstanding event terrified the Americans and puppets: the offensive and uprising of our soldiers and people in the Mekong Delta, which demonstrated that the ability of villages to liberate villages, districts to liberate districts, and provinces to liberate provinces was real and that that was a correct policy. In a little more than 2 months we wiped out 15 enemy battalions, knocked out of action more than 34,000 of the enemy, and overran 168 military posts, including 2 subsector-district seats, 2 strategic zones, 11 bases and 65 subsector branches. By the attacks of the armed forces and the 3 types of troops, in coordination with uprisings by the popular masses, 51 villages and 414 hamlets were completely liberated and 49 other villages were essentially liberated. Some 48,900 people were liberated. Especially, the area in which the greatest victories were won and in which the revolutionary movement was strongest was the Tra Vinh-Vinh Long area, the No 1 focus of Military Region 9 and a vital area of the Mekong Delta. If General Gavin was closely following the course of the

fighting, he was aware that his strategem of withdrawing into a strategic enclave in the Mekong Delta had been bankrupted and could no longer be carried out.

Even in Saigon and its outskirts, in which the enemy paid much attention to strengthening defenses and suppressing uprisings, an area to which the enemy sent more and more forces as they were increasingly defeated in order to save their necks, the revolutionary movement was also seething during that phase and we won notable victories. During that period, in the outskirts we completely liberated 3 villages, 37 hamlets, and 17,000 people, and essentially liberated 4 other villages. The enemy had to withdraw into their outposts and in many places did not dare sleep in the posts at night and did not have confidence in their fortifications and weapons. The control of the puppet regime was weakened and the people could move about more freely, to the degree that the people living in the city came to the outskirts to contact the revolution and receive missions from the revolution. That situation was almost identical to that of Tet Mau Than. Those activities did not involve main-force troops, tanks or heavy artillery. He had only sapper units, commandos, local troops and guerrillas, but those small, elite units exerted an effect because they knew how to cooperate with the people who thirsted for freedom and peace and who arose to achieve mastery.

During that dry season we also liberated the Tanh Linh and Hoai Duc areas in Binh Tuy Province to serve as a future staging area to cut Route 1 and as the starting point for the attack on Bien Hoa and on Saigon from the east. We also took a relatively broad strip along the Van Co Tay River to create conditions for our forces to cut Route 4 when necessary and to surround Saigon and cut it off from the delta.

We also began to effectively interdict Bien Hoa AFB and the enemy could do nothing about it. Especially, to the north of Saigon, which had enormous strategic importance, we rendered the enemy deaf and blind by taking both of the important observation and communications relay stations--in fact two enemy fortresses--Mt. Ba Ra and Mt. Ba Den, two high points.

The victory of the 1974-1975 dry season helped us to have better understanding of the enemy and ourselves, and of their strength and ability to act, while at the same time helping us to understand ourselves and our actual capabilities, the Revolutionary measures that had to be taken, and where we stood in the final stretch of the long path we had traveled over 10,000 days of warfare.