

This account of the fall of Pleiku and the Central Highlands to the North Vietnamese military in March, 1975, is an excerpt from a full summary of the war entitled, Vietnam: Cease Fire To Capitulation, by Capt. William E. Le Gro (1985). It is used here with the permission of Ric Hoffman, SFC (ret.), and the full account may be read on his website ([click here](#)).

Chapter 15 - The Central Highlands, March 1975

Senior General Van Tien Dung was the principal architect of North Vietnam's final offensive against South Vietnam. In his account of "The Great Spring Victory" he described the planning of the offensive (FBIS Daily Report: Asia and Pacific, Vol. IV, No. 110, Sup. 38, pp. 6-10):

. . . during the 20 days of the conference the Political Bureau's assessment of the situation and its discussions were increasingly by the obvious week-by-week achievement of major strategic objectives. . . . While the Political Bureau was meeting, great news came from the south: the main force units in eastern Nam Bo [roughly coterminous with South Vietnam's Military Region 3], in cooperation with the provincial forces, had attacked and liberated Phuoc Binh City and all of Phuoc Long Province.

On 8 January 1975, two days after the Phuoc Long victory, Comrade Le Duan concluded the discussions. The situation is now clear to everybody. We are now determined to fulfill the 2 year plan.

Le Duan went on: Striking a strategic blow in 1975, Nam Bo will have to create an interrelated and interdependent position throughout the region, bring military pressure closer to Saigon, annihilate as many enemy main-force units as possible and create conditions for localities to deploy forces when opportunities arise.

In the Mekong delta region military pressure must be brought closer to My Tho. We have agreed that this year the attack on the Central Highlands will begin. He pointed to a map behind him and said: Attacks must be unleashed toward Ban Me Thuot and Tuy Hoa. The Fifth Region will have to form a liberated area from Binh Dinh Province northward, and the Tri-Thien forces will have to control an area from Hue to Da Nang.

While we discussed the 1975 strategic combat plan, another very important question was raised: Where to establish the main battlefield?

After considering the RVNAF strength, mobility and deployments, the relative strategic value of each major region, and the strength and mobility of the NVA, "the conferees unanimously approved the General Staffs draft plan which chose the Central Highlands as the main battlefield in the large-scale, widespread 1975 offensive."

According to General Dung, North Vietnamese leaders did not expect total victory in 1975. The major, country-wide offensive they were planning for early 1975 was to prepare the way for a "general offensive" that would finish the task in 1976. Nevertheless, they anticipated the possibility of "opportunities" to "liberate" South Vietnam "early or late in 1975."

General Dung reported that on 9 January, one day after the conference adjourned, the Central Military

Party Committee convened to prepare military plans to support the conference resolution. It was here that Ban Me Thuot was selected as the first objective and main effort of the Central Highlands campaign.

The conference had just started when Comrade Le Duc Tho arrived unannounced. He opened the door, entered and joined us in the conference. Later on we knew that the Political Bureau was somewhat troubled because the idea of an attack on Ban Me Thuot had not been clearly outlined in the combat plan; therefore, it sent Comrade Tho to join us and present his idea that such an attack was essential. He said enthusiastically: "We must definitely raise the problem of liberating Ban Me Thuot and Duc Lap. It would be absurd if with almost five divisions in the Central Highlands we could not attack Ban Me Thuot." Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap, secretary of the Central Military Party Committee, concluded the conference by establishing the areas and targets of the offensive, the objectives of the campaign and the orders for deploying and using forces. He also suggested the fighting methods that should be applied, greatly stressing the principle of force, secrecy and surprise, and advised that it was necessary to deceive the enemy into concentration on defending areas north of the Central Highlands.

The Central Highlands campaign was code-named "Campaign 275." At that time on the Central Highlands front, Comrade Vu Lang, the front commander, left for the Ban Me Thuot area with some cadres to assess the situation. At the request of comrades Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, the Political Bureau sent me to the Central Highlands battlefield as a representative of the Political Bureau, the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command to take field command. . . . I told Comrade Tran Van Tra following the Political Bureau conference: "This time I will fight in the Central Highlands until the rainy season. Then I will go to Nam Bo to join you in studying the battlefield situation and making preparations for military activities in the 1975-76 dry season." . . . At this time in the Central Highlands we had the 320th, 10th and 968th divisions - divisions that had gained much combat experience on the Central Highlands battlefield. Toward the end of December 1974 the High Command decided to dispatch the 316th Division to this front.

Isolating the Battlefield

To capture Ban Me Thuot, NVA leadership in the B-3 Front - now personified in General Van Tien Dung - counted on surprise and overwhelming force. The element of surprise was to be enhanced by strong diversionary attacks in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces; once achieved, the advantage of mass, or the concentration of force, was to be prolonged by preventing the RVNAF from reinforcing Ban Me Thuot. The diversionary and supporting attacks began while the three NVA divisions that would take part in the Darlac-Quang Duc Campaign - the 10th, 316th, and 320 - were still converging on their initial objectives areas.

The opening guns of Campaign 275 sounded along Route 19 (QL-19), the lifeline to the highlands, in the early morning of 4 March. Simultaneous attacks closed the highway from the Mang Yang Pass in Pleiku Province to Binh Dinh Province. Enemy sappers blew Bridge 12 southeast of Binh Khe, in Binh Dinh, and infantry struck ARVN territorials on the high ground overlooking the An Khe Pass and the RF unit at the Route 3A (TL-3A) junction. Soon an artillery position supporting the 2d Battalion, 47th

Infantry, north of Binh Khe was overrun. A strong attack by the 12th Regiment, 3d NVA Division, near the An Khe airfield was repulsed, while Phu Cat air base received a rocket attack and sustained light damage.

While Binh Dinh territorials and the 47th ARVN Regiment struggled to hold their positions against the withering NVA artillery, infantry, and sapper assaults, South Vietnam forces in Pleiku Province came under heavy rocket, mortar, and recoilless rifle fire along Route 19 from Le Trung, 15 kilometers east of Pleiku City, to the narrow defiles of the Mang Yang Pass. Fire Support Bases 92 (east of Le Trung), 93 (near Soui Doi), and 94 (north of Hill 3045), all came under bombardment, while a number of their outposts were overrun. Two bridges and a large culvert between FSBs 93 and 94 were destroyed by enemy sappers. General Phu, the II Corps commander, reacted by sending two battalions of the 4th Ranger Group to join elements of the 2d Armored Cavalry Brigade, then clearing parts of Route 19, to proceed as far as FSB 95 in Binh Dinh Province, just east of the Mang Yang Pass. But before the operation could get under way, Base 94 was overrun. Meanwhile, NVA rockets hit Pleiku air base; although the field remained operational, the maintenance area sustained heavy damage.

While the attacks along Route 19 were viewed by General Phu as strong indicators that the NVA main effort would be against Pleiku, the Communists also interdicted Route 21 (QL-21), the other major road to the highlands, which connected coastal Khanh Hoa Province with Ban Me Thuot. Sappers blew two bridges between the Darlac boundary and Khanh Duong in Khanh Hoa Province, and NVA infantry overran an ARVN territorial outpost close to the provincial boundary. The only two available roads to the highlands were closed; the battlefield of the Central Highlands had been isolated in 24 hours of concentrated assaults.

At II Corps headquarters, South Vietnamese officers debated where the enemy's main effort would take place. Colonel Trinh Tieu, the G-2, insisted that Ban Me Thuot would be the principal objective, with intermediate and supporting objectives at Buon Ho and Duc Lap. Based on indications that elements of the 10th and 320th Division had shifted south or had at least conducted reconnaissance in Quang Duc and Darlac Provinces, he told his commander that the attacks in Kontum, Pleiku, and on Route 19 were diversionary, designed primarily to hold the major RVNAF strength in place in Binh Dinh, Kontum, and Pleiku. General Phu nevertheless, believed Pleiku to be the main NVA objective. His reasoning was based on the weight of the current enemy attacks by fire against the 44th ARVN Infantry in Thanh An District of Pleiku and against the Rangers north of Kontum. Having only two regiments protecting the western approaches to Pleiku, he would not weaken this front to reinforce Ban Me Thuot where nothing significant had yet taken place.

Darlac and Quang Duc

Local Route 487 twisted through the forested highlands of southwestern Phu Bon Province between Cheo Reo, the capital, and Buon Blech, where it joined National Route 14 (QL-14) about 60 kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot. At this junction, also the district seat of Thuan Man in Phu Bon Province, the NVA on 8 March, struck the first direct blow of Campaign 275. Elements of the 9th Regiment, 320th NVA Division, attacked the subsector headquarters and the 23d Reconnaissance Company forcing a withdrawal. Meanwhile, the 45th ARVN Regiment on Route 14 near Thuan Man reported contact with

enemy infantry. The fighting continued through the day, but Route 14 was permanently blocked by the 9th Regiment, 320th NVA Division.

On 9 March, the 10th NVA Division launched simultaneous attacks throughout Quang Duc Province. The assault against the Rangers at Kien Duc was repulsed, and the Quang Duc territorials at Duc Lap also held their positions. But south of Duc Lap, at the Dak Song crossroads, heavy artillery bombardment and infantry assaults drove the 2d Battalion, 53d ARVN Infantry Regiment, from its defenses. By noon it was overrun.

General Phu was now convinced that Darlac was the main battlefield and his forces there needed immediate reinforcement. He asked the JGS for an additional Ranger group but was turned down; the JGS had few reserves, and threats to Saigon and Tay Ninh were mounting. Failing to acquire additional combat power from outside the region, General Phu pulled the 72d and 96th Ranger Battalions, 21st Ranger Group, from the Chu Pao Pass and Kontum and flew them to Buon Ho; once there they boarded trucks for the 35-kilometer ride to Ban Me Thuot. He also ordered the 45th Reconnaissance Company at Ban Don to return to Ban Me Thuot.

According to General Dung's account, at 0200 Hanoi time on the morning of 10 March, the offensive on Ban Me Thuot was heralded by the fire from sapper units directed against the Hoa Binh [Phung Duc] and city airfields. Long-range artillery began destroying military targets in the city. From a point 40 kilometers from Ban Me Thuot, our tank unit started their engines, knocked down trees which had been cut halfway in advance, headed for Ban Me Thuot. On the Xre Poc [Krong] River, modern ferryboats were rapidly assembled, while tanks, armored vehicles, antiaircraft guns, and antitank guns formed queues to cross on the ferries. The mountains and forests of the Central Highlands were shaken by a fire storm.

In the early morning of 10 March 1975 heavy rockets and artillery fire fell on Ban Me Thuot, and mortar fire struck the airfield at Phung Duc to the east. The bombardment was followed by infantry and sapper assaults against the ammunition dump on local Route 1 west of the city; the 2d Company, 225th RF Battalion on Hill 559 northwest of the city, and the subsector headquarters at Phung Duc airfield. All attacks were repulsed, and enemy losses were heavy. Just before four that morning, the 3d Battalion, 53d ARVN Infantry, came under heavy attack at the airfield, and NVA tanks were sighted northwest of the city.

Meanwhile, attacks in Quang Duc Province continued as the 259th RF Battalion fought off enemy infantry on Route 12 between Dak Song and Duc Lap and the Rangers held their ground in Kien Duc and Gia Nghia. On 15 March the beleaguered defenders of Kien Duc, however, were finally overrun.

In Binh Dinh Province, General Niem, commanding the 22d Division, reinforced his 42d Infantry Regiment in Binh Khe District with the headquarters and two battalions of the 41st Infantry, but Route 19 was still cut at Le Trung and Binh Khe. Attacking Rangers were stalled at Bridge 31 between Fire Support Bases 93 and 94 in Pleiku Province. Although a heavy rocket attack on the airfield at Pleiku on 10 March closed down operations for several hours, Route 14 between Kontum and Pleiku remained open. A steady stream of traffic surged south through the Chu Pao Pass as the population of Kontum fled the daily rocketing of their city and the imminent threat of Communist invasion. The lines at the

Air Vietnam terminal at Kontum flowed out into the streets as residents sought to buy tickets to Pleiku and points south. Highway 14 was closed on 10 March in southern Pleiku by enemy attacks on territorial outposts in the mountains close to the Darlac boundary.

By mid-morning on 10 March, major elements of the 320th NVA Division had penetrated Ban Me Thuot. The heaviest fighting was in the southern sector near the province chiefs residence, the sector headquarters, and the 23d Division command post. Five enemy tanks were destroyed or disabled near the command post, but one of the VNAF bombs intended for NVA armor demolished the sector headquarters, cutting off all communications. Two more tanks were destroyed near the city's airfield. The small ARVN garrison there fought back repeated NVA assaults and held on to the control tower, but General Phu's effort to fly two RF battalions from Ban Don to Ban Me Thuot was thwarted by heavy enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire. Both battalions were therefore diverted to Buon Ho, which also came under mortar attack on 10 March. Fighting at the airfield destroyed eight aircraft of the 6th Air Division, a CH47, one O-1, and six UH-1s. Four of the seven UH-1s belonging to the 2d Air Division were destroyed on the ground, but air crews managed to fly out three damaged helicopters under heavy fire. The sector ammunition storage site southwest of the city was overrun; 10,000 rounds of 105-mm ammunition were destroyed, and two 105-mm. howitzers were lost.

At the Phung Duc airfield, the 3d Battalion, 53d Infantry took two prisoners who identified the attackers as the 25th Independent Regiment and the 401st Sapper Battalion. Meanwhile, in Ban Me Thuot, the NVA was also taking prisoners. Two members of the ICCS, one Iranian and one Indonesian, had taken refuge with the only American official in Darlac, Paul Struharic, the Consul General's provincial representative. Eight other foreign civilians, missionaries, and their families were with Struharic when NVA soldiers broke into his house and seized them all. Although they were imprisoned in Duc Co, all were eventually released.

By the night of 10 March the NVA had a firm hold on the center of Ban Me Thuot, while the principal remaining ARVN infantry, cavalry, and territorials held positions east, west and south of the city. The 2d Company, 225th RF Battalion, remained on Hill 559, and the 4th Company, 242d RF Battalion still held the main ammunition dump. In a coffee plantation west of Ban Me Thuot, most of the 1st Battalion, 53d Infantry, and Headquarters and 3d Troop, 8th Armored Cavalry, defended their perimeter. The 4th Company, 243d RF Battalion, was dug in on Hill 491 to the south. Small units of the 53d Regiment and territorials were still fighting in the city, but the heaviest combat was at the Phung Duc airfield. There, the forward command post of the 23d ARVN Division fought along with the headquarters of its 53d Infantry, and the 3d Troop, 8th Armored Cavalry. Survivors of the sector headquarters were with some Ranger units west of the airfield.

Very heavy fighting continued on 11 March. ARVN defenders estimated 400 enemy killed, 50 weapons captured, and 13 tanks destroyed, and the 53d Infantry at the airfield reported that the NVA was using flame-throwers in the assault. Isolated pockets of resistance fought on, even though the province chief, Col. Nguyen Cong Luat, was captured.

In Pleiku, the 4th Ranger Group gained no ground on Route 19 in heavy fighting near Bridge 23 and Fire Support Base 93 as the 95B NVA Regiment counterattacked vigorously on 11-12 March. Fighting was widespread but light in the rest of Pleiku. The environs of the city were mortared, the II Corps

headquarters sustained minor damage from a rocket attack, and three A-37 light bombers were destroyed along with fuel storage and a parts warehouse at Pleiku Air Base by 122-mm. rockets.

The disastrous turn of events in Military Region 2 led to the turning point in the long and bitter war, compelling President Thieu to make a decision regarding the conduct of the defense which would create chaos for the RVNAF and opportunities for the enemy. Regarding the northern part of the country as expendable in order to preserve the security of Military Regions 3 and 4, he thought it essential to retake Ban Me Thuot, even though Kontum and Pleiku might have to be sacrificed. He wished to convey this new concept to General Phu in Pleiku, but because of the hazards of such a meeting in that war-torn province, he was persuaded by his staff to meet the II Corps commander in Cam Ranh, south of Nha Trang, on 14 March.

On 12 March, General Phu announced that all organized resistance inside Ban Me Thuot had ceased. The 21st Ranger Group was assembling the survivors of its two committed battalions near the Phung Duc airfield, and the 45th ARVN Infantry Regiment was moving by helicopters to Phuoc An District on Route 21, east of Ban Me Thuot. The next day, as the 320th NVA Division consolidated its gains in Ban Me Thuot, the battle for Phung Duc continued. Recognizing the critical situation in the highlands, the JGS decided to send the 7th Ranger Group, its last available reserve, from Saigon to replace the 44th Infantry Regiment west of Pleiku, releasing the 44th to join the counterattack in Darlac.

The situation in Darlac continued to deteriorate. Quang Nhieu Village in the plantations north of Ban Me Thuot was overrun as was Buon Ho Village on Route 14. The South Vietnamese gave up Ban Don and withdrew remaining RF units. The planned relief of the 44th Infantry west of Pleiku had to be aborted after one battalion and the regimental headquarters were moved because the required airlift could not be marshalled to complete it.

On 14 March, General Phu had assembled in Phuoc An a task force under the command of Brig. Gen. Le Trung Tuong, commanding general of the 23d ARVN Division. In the task force were the 45th Infantry Regiment, one battalion and the headquarters of the 44th Infantry, and one battalion of the 21st Ranger Group. The plan was to attack west astride Route 21 to link up with the tenacious defenders at the Phung Duc airfield: the 3d Battalion, 53d Infantry, which had been there through four days of continuous fighting; the survivors of the 1st Battalion, 53d Infantry, who had withdrawn from west of the city; and the survivors of the 72d and 96th Battalions, 21st Ranger Group.

The counterattack was to be supported logistically from Nha Trang. Another task force of five RF battalions from Khanh Hoa Province was ordered to clear the route between Nha Trang and Khanh Duong.

On 14 March, General Phu flew to Cam Ranh for his fateful meeting with the President. With General Vien, Lt Gen. Dang Van Quang, and Prime Minister Khiem present, President Thieu outlined his concept. General Phu's role would be to retake Ban Me Thuot, using the troops he still had in Kontum and Pleiku Province, and the 22d Division from Binh Dinh Province. With Route 19 cut in Pleiku and Binh Dinh, and no way to use Routes 14 and 21 through Darlac, General Phu had only interprovincial Route 7B (LTL-7B) available to recover his Kontum-Pleiku forces, assemble them in Khanh Hoa

Province, and fight back along Route 21 into Ban Me Thuot. Although many hazards were discussed, this approach was accepted by the President, and General Phu flew back to his headquarters to set the withdrawal in motion. (American officials had no knowledge of the decision.)

That night, 14 March, NVA sappers penetrated the Pleiku ammunition storage area and blew up 1,400 rounds of 105-mm. howitzer shells. The deployments to Darlac had greatly weakened security in Pleiku, and General Phu had already ordered the evacuation of all nonessential military personnel and dependents from Kontum and Pleiku. Colonel Giao, the acting commander of the 6th Air Division at Pleiku, directed the evacuation from Pleiku Air Base. Brig. Gen. Tran Van Cam, the deputy commander for operations, II Corps, was left in command of forces in Pleiku Province. Colonel Pham Duy Tat, commander of II Corps Rangers, remained in Kontum Province in charge of territorials and three Ranger groups, the 6th, 22d, and 23d. General Phu moved his command post to II Corps Rear at Nha Trang and, surprisingly, replaced the captured Darlac Province Chief with Col. Trinh Tieu, his own G-2, whose correct estimate of the NVA offensive he had so tragically rejected. He made one other significant announcement to his staff before he left Pleiku: Colonel Tat was promoted to brigadier general and would command the evacuation of Kontum and Pleiku down Route 7B to the coast at Tuy Hoa. Upon the insistence of General Phu, Tat's promotion was approved by President Thieu at the Cam Ranh meeting.

As the 23d Division's counterattack from Phuoc An began on 15 March, the 53d Infantry's situation at the airfield was grim. ARVN soldiers had withstood nearly continuous artillery and mortar bombardment and had beaten back successive assaults by the 25th NVA Regiment. But the 316th NVA Division, recently moved with great secrecy from North Vietnam, was poised to attack the battered 53d Infantry and Rangers east of Ban Me Thuot.

To block the 23d Division's counterattack from Phuoc An, General Dung ordered the 10th NVA Division up from Quang Duc. The 10th met the advancing 45th ARVN Infantry and stopped it at the Ea Nhiae River, ten kilometers short of its planned link-up with the 53d. The 2d Battalion, 45th Regiment, was shattered in this fierce engagement, and the ARVN counterattack became a withdrawal. The division commander, Brig. Gen. Tuong, was slightly wounded as his helicopter received fire on 10 March. He had himself evacuated and command reverted to the senior colonel in the task force, Colonel Duc.

Behind the withdrawing survivors of the 23d Division, territorials from Khanh Hoa were meeting stiff resistance at Khanh Duong. Fighting for the high ground overlooking the road to Nha Trang, they captured some enemy soldiers from the 25th Independent Regiment, which had apparently slipped around the 23d Division at Phuoc An after failing to dislodge the 53d Infantry at the Phung Duc airfield.

The renewed NVA offensive in Dalac Province, led by the 10th Division along Route 21, pushed the 23d Division task force eastward, first back to Phuoc An, then through Chu Kuk near the Khanh Hoa boundary. Finally, the 23d Division command post reached Khanh Duong and settled there to recover the remnants of its battalions as they straggled in. Without resupply, the survivors of the 3d Battalion, 53d Infantry, on 18 March gave up the airfield and began a tortuous withdrawal eastward. On 21 March, what remained of the 23d ARVN Division was flown to the relative security of Cam Ranh. By this time, the exodus from Pleiku was well under way. The enemy still held high ground in

and around Khanh Duong on Route 21, although the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 40th Regiment, 22d ARVN Division, had been moved from Binh Dinh Province to reinforce the attack. The 3d Airborne Brigade, pulled out of Quang Nam Province on presidential orders to become a reserve in Saigon, was taken off its ships in Nha Trang and rushed to Khanh Duong to halt the pursuing 10th NVA Division. Obviously, the immediate tasks facing II Corps were to regroup its battered forces, complete the evacuation from the highlands, and stop the NVA advance on Route 21 at Khanh Duong. The counteroffensive to recapture Ban Me Thuot would have to wait.

Exodus from the Highlands

The evacuation of South Vietnamese forces from the highland provinces began in great secrecy; General Phu hoped that surprise would make it possible to reach Tuy Hoa before the enemy could discover and react to the movement. Accordingly, only a few staff officers and commanders were told of the plan in advance; the chiefs of the affected provinces, Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Bon, found out about it when they saw ARVN units moving. The operation was prepared only in outline; detailed orders were never drafted or issued. Not foreseeing the inevitable mass civilian exodus that would accompany the military column as soon as the population discovered what was going on, General Phu made no preparations to control the crowds which became entangled in combat formations, impeding their movement and ability to deploy and fight.

The only road available, Route 7B, was a track southeast of Cheo Reo, overgrown with brush, with fords in disrepair and an important bridge out. Aware of the road's condition, General Phu put the 20th Engineer Group in the vanguard. A few military vehicles began the journey to Phu Bon on 15 March, but the main body was scheduled to move over a four-day period, beginning on the 16th. Two hundred to 250 trucks were to move in each echelon, and each echelon would be protected by a company of M-48 tanks of the 21st Tank Battalion. The Ranger Battalions of the five groups still in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces, together with one tank company, would be the rear guard, to depart Pleiku on 19 March. Logistical units with ammunition and fuel trucks and some of the corps artillery were assigned to the first echelon, followed by more logistical and artillery units on 17 March. The II Corps staff, military police, and the balance of the 44th Infantry would move the next day. Territorial units were supposed to provide security along the route, an unrealistic mission since the province chiefs were not issued orders.

According to the best recollections of those involved in the operation - records are scarce, general, and sometimes erroneous - ARVN military units in the withdrawal included the following: one battalion, 44th Infantry / six Ranger Groups (eighteen battalions): the 4th (just arrived from JGS reserve, Saigon), 7th, and 25th Groups in Pleiku; the 6th, 22d, and 23d in Kontum / 21st Tank Battalion / two battalions, 155-mm. howitzer / one battalion, 175-mm. gun (self-propelled) / 20th Engineer Group (three combat battalions, one float bridge company, and one fixed bridge company) / 231st Direct Support Group.

Additionally, there were about 20,000 tons of Army and Air Force ammunition in the supply points, a 45-day stock of fuels, and 60 days of rations, Some UH-1 helicopters and four CH-47 helicopters were sent up from Military Region 4 to reinforce the 2d Air Division. C-130 transports flew civilian and military dependents out of Pleiku on 16 March, but an enemy rocket attack closed the airfield that evening.

The orders for the military evacuation were issued on 16 March; the 6th Ranger Group, defending the northeast sector above Kontum City, had withdrawn to Pleiku City the day before. The 22d and 23d Ranger Groups from north and northwest of Kontum pulled back to Pleiku the next day. Observing the withdrawal, the Kontum province chief joined the stream of traffic flowing south and was killed in an ambush in the Chu Pao Pass. At this time, the small force of the 44th Infantry and the 7th and 25th Ranger Groups were still defending west of Pleiku, and part of the 25th was under heavy attack at Thanh An. General Tat, now in command of the withdrawing troops, moved his command post to Cheo Reo. Altering the plan slightly, he took with him, in addition to the engineers, one of his Ranger groups. This was a prudent modification, since the territorials were not prepared to secure the capital, the road, or the engineer work site. That afternoon, 16 March, Cheo Reo was struck by enemy rockets in the first attack against the town since the NVA offensive began. The withdrawal had been discovered although this rocket attack was probably carried out coincidentally by local forces.

In discussing the final offensive, General Dung describes receiving the first report on 16 March - apparently the source was a communications intercept - that II Corps Headquarters had moved its forward command post to Nha Trang. Later that day, an NVA observation post reported a long column of trucks running south toward Phu Bon. Dung warned the 95B Regiment on Route 19, the 320th Division north of Ban Me Thuot on Route 14, and the 10th Division on Route 21, that the RVNAF was making a major deployment and all should be especially vigilant. Earlier he had asked about the condition of Route 7B and was told that it could not support military traffic past Cheo Reo. With the large ARVN convoy moving into Cheo Reo, Dung was no longer satisfied with this response. Disturbed to learn that the road was apparently usable and that the 320th Division had not moved to block the column, he berated the division commander for laxity and ordered him to attack the withdrawing column without further delay.

Except for the rocket attack on 16 March, the NVA did not interfere with the column in Phu Bon and along the road to Cheo Reo until 18 March. But because II Corps engineers had not yet completed a pontoon bridge across the Ea Pa River beyond Cheo Reo, several convoys were jammed in that town and along the road to the southeast. Late on 18 March, the 320th Division struck at Cheo Reo with artillery, mortars, and infantry. Military and civilian casualties were heavy and wounded still lay unattended on the streets the next morning. Aerial photography taken on the morning of the 19th showed artillery fire still falling in the city and hundreds of vehicles, many of them damaged or destroyed, abandoned along the road and in the streets of Cheo Reo.

The convoy pressed on, fighting as it struggled south. At mid-morning on 19 March, the leading element was at the Con River, eight kilometers east of Cung Son and about two-thirds of the distance from Cheo Reo to its destination, Tuy Hao. But the ragged column stretched back to Cheo Reo where refugees still streamed through the death-littered streets. At a ford over the Ca Lui River, 25 kilometers northwest of Cong Son, a number of heavy vehicles became mired. A VNAF air strike contributed to the carnage and confusion by mistakenly attacking a Ranger battalion and decimating it. By this time, little military order or discipline remained. General Tat no longer had control of the withdrawing forces, and the tank battalion commander was walking, no longer able to command his tanks although at least 10 M-48's were still operational. As the head of the column reached the broad Song Ba, about 10 kilometers east of Cong Son, it found that Route 7B had been so heavily mined by Koreans who had operated in the area that it was impractical to clear the route. Instead, the engineers were ordered to bridge the Song Ba and divert the column to local Route 436, which

followed the south bank of the river to Tuy Hoa. Anticipating this movement, the enemy set up five road-blocks along Route 436 in a two-kilometer stretch east of the Song Ba crossing, stopping the movement of bridge sections from Tuy Hoa to the crossing. The 206th RF battalion, one of the best territorial units, was therefore ordered to attack through the roadblocks from the east, while the 34th Ranger Battalion, with 16 M-113 personnel carriers, would attack from the west after fording the Song Ba.

On 20 March, heavy trucks and tanks tore up the ford on the Song Ba so badly that pierced-steel planking had to be placed on the bottom. This was delivered by the CH-47's, which also began flying in bridge sections to the site about 1,500 meters downstream from the ford.

On 21 March, the column was concentrated around the ford and bridge sites east of Cong Son, but the Ranger rear guard was badly split back at Cheo Reo. The 6th, 7th, and 22d Groups had most of their battalions past the Ca Lui crossing, but the 4th, 23d, and 25th were trapped behind the 320th NVA Division, advancing on Cong Son. On 22 March, elements of the 64th Regiment, 320th NVA Division, attacked blocking positions established by the 6th Ranger Group west of Cong Son, and ARVN engineers completed the bridge over the Song Ba. In a rush to cross, the bridge was overloaded and a section collapsed. But the engineers quickly repaired the span, and many vehicles cleared the north bank of the river that day and night, only to face enemy blocking positions along Route 436 in My Thanh Tay Village.

While the 35th and 51st Ranger Battalions fought as a rear guard in a narrow defile about seven kilometers northwest of Cong Son, the 34th Rangers continued the attack east on Route 436 to clear the roadblocks. By this time, the 6th Ranger Group battalions were the only cohesive fighting units in the column, 3 of 18 battalions that began the long march through the Phu Bon gauntlet.

The 35th and 51st Rangers repulsed a strong attack by the 64th NVA Regiment on the night of 23 March, killing 50 and taking 15 weapons. These two battalions had mustered a force of 15 M-41 light tanks, 8 M-48 medium tanks, 11 105-mm. howitzers, and 21 55-mm. howitzers. Two CH-47s kept the Rangers supplied with rations and ammunition as they fell back through Cong Son. Reinforced by two tank companies, the 320th NVA Division pushed into Cong Son behind the withdrawing 6th Ranger Group late on 24 March.

Meanwhile, the 34th Battalion continued the attack against the blocking positions disposed in My Thanh Tay Village. Even though bad weather prevented air support, the Rangers reduced position after position. By 25 March they had broken the last position and led the shattered column into Tuy Hoa. Now hardly more than a company in strength, the 34th Battalion then turned around to guard the western approaches to Tuy Hoa.

Eventually, about 60,000 refugees from the highlands straggled into Nha Trang, but at least 100,000 remained stranded in western Phu Yen Province without food, water, or medical assistance. One of the most poorly executed withdrawals in the war, and certainly the most tragic, had ended. The 320th NVA Division continued its inexorable march to the sea and by 31 March had Tuy Hoa under fire.