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**THE VIETNAMESE AIR FORCE. 1951-1975.
AN ANALYSIS OF ITS ROLE IN COMBAT
and
FOURTEEN HOURS AT KOH TANG**



USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series Volume 3

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**THE VIETNAMESE AIR FORCE, 1951-1975.
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Volume 3

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Abstract

As the final days of Vietnam unfolded, the question was raised, "What happened to the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF)?" This monograph addresses that question in considerable detail. In order to sift out the story, three periods in the life of VNAF were selected—the Tet offensive of 1968, the Easter offensive of 1972, and lastly the March offensive of 1975. By examining each of these time periods, the factors at work in each period could be isolated so as to determine the performance of the VNAF.

The role of the USAF was dominant in the 1968 and 1972 offensives. Although VNAF had grown in size to about 44 squadrons and 42,000 people by the time of the 1972 offensive, application of airpower at the major points of the enemy assault was U.S. Further, the bombing of the North Vietnam heartland during these two periods was the compelling leverage that resulted in the initiation and pursuit of active negotiations to stop the war.

The intervening period between the peace agreement of January 27, 1973 and the North Vietnamese offensive of March 1975, was marked by fundamental changes in the character of the NVA forces and their deployment for battle. The NVA moved its center of logistics near the DMZ and into South Vietnam proper. The magnitude of SAM and AAA defenses constituted a major departure from those of the 1968 and 1972 campaigns. The VNAF, structured for a low scale war, was confronted with an enemy having the most sophisticated air defense weapons of the day.

The Cooper-Church Amendment had a profound effect on the morale and outlook of South Vietnamese leaders at all levels. No longer was there a lever to deter the North Vietnamese from building up forces for an all-out fight for a military victory. Only the threat of resuming the bombing restrained North Vietnam. With the amendment, this threat was neutralized. Finally, whereas U.S. airpower had been decisive in halting the 1968 and 1972 offensives, that firepower would no longer be available. Confronted with these factors and the curtailment of money and equipment, Vietnamese leadership stood at the crossroads on the brink of the 1975 offensive.

VNAF throughout its short history was never given the stature and equality of command relationship essential to success in battle where air and ground forces must work as partners. In 1975, the division of VNAF into separate packages and assigning them to the command of Corps/MR commanders negated the demonstrated potential of airpower to support an army under stress. Whether VNAF could have slowed the enemy advance until a new de-

fense line could be established is questionable under the circumstances, but the parcelling out of VNAF to the Corps/MR commanders assured the inability of VNAF to do such a job.

From the analysis of the three campaigns the following general conclusions emerge:

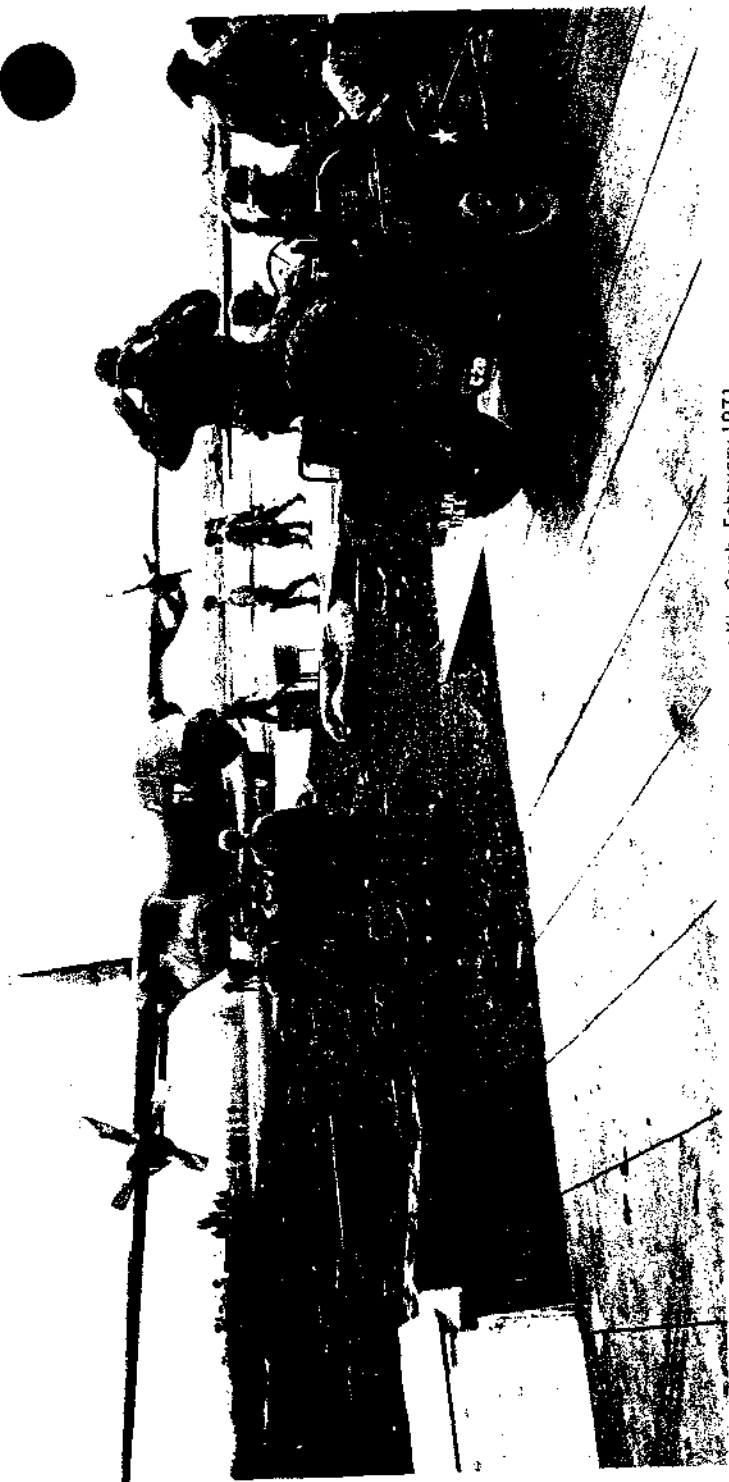
A. The lack of centralized control of VNAF fragmented the employment of the force. Thus, VNAF was not used where and when it should have been to have had the most effect on the ability of the NVA to fight.

B. VNAF was designed to fight in the permissive environment of the 1968 campaign. By 1975 the enemy had produced an environment calling for the sophisticated Air Force that fought over the heartland of North Vietnam.

C. Interdiction limited the capacity of the NVA to maintain a decisive military capability in the 1968 and 1972 campaigns. With the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam, there were no restraints on the build-up of NVA forces and logistics. As a result, they could sustain a campaign of indefinite duration in 1975.

D. There was no overall integrated planning for the conduct of the war. The Joint General Staff was not empowered to do the necessary planning for the employment of all four military regions and VNAF. Further, the JGS did not have a balanced representation of airmen throughout the staff to assure proper planning for the employment of VNAF forces.

E. Interdiction limited the capacity of the NVA to maintain a decisive military capability in the 1968 and 1972 campaigns. With the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam, there were no restraints on the build-up of NVA forces and logistics. As a result, they could sustain a campaign of indefinite duration in 1975.



C-130 taxis on newly constructed runway at Khe Sanh, February 1971

D. II—III and IV Corps *

The defense of installations in these Corps areas was accomplished by shifting troops between threatened areas. C-130s and helicopters played a major role in moving troops where the enemy was causing the most trouble. Close air support was there when it was needed. During a typical day more than 300 close air support sorties were flown and more than 9,900 personnel and 4,400 tons of equipment were moved. The flexibility of airpower was never more evident.

"TET" Statistics 30 Jan — 25 Feb 68

	VNAF	USAF
No. of Close Air Support Sorties	4,648	16,833
No. of Interdiction Sorties	1,535	
No. of Reconnaissance Sorties	216	
No. of Airlift Sorties	814	
No. of Troops Moved	12,200	*
No. of Tons Moved	230.3	*
Tonnage Expended	6,700	*
Combat Losses (in SVN)	19	44
No. of Aircraft Assigned	362	1,772
No. of Personnel	16,277	58,434

* Not Available

E. Summary

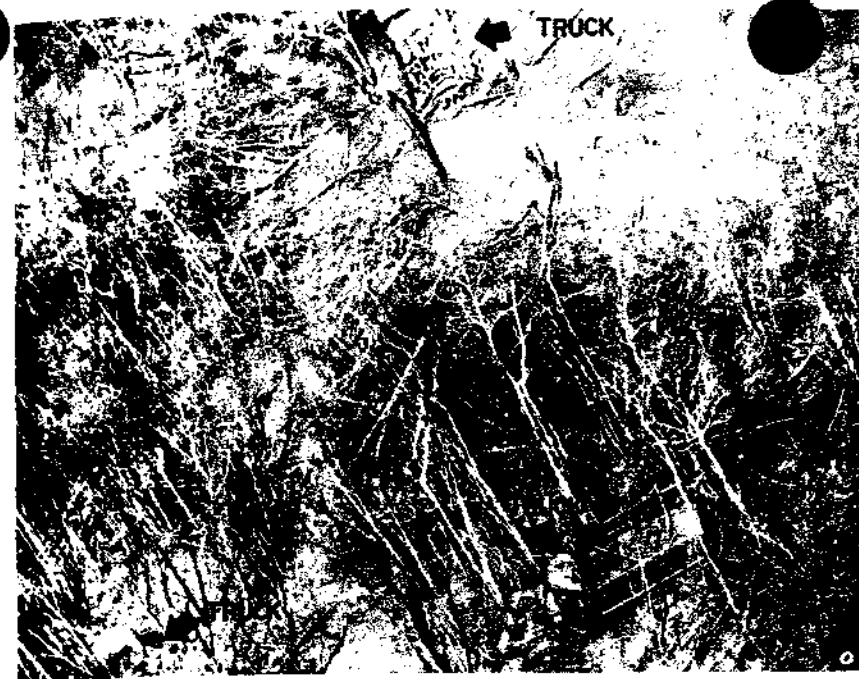
1. Centralized control of the air was decisive in holding Khe Sanh and the other key points throughout the country.
2. More than 3,100 close air support sorties were flown during the first week of the assault.
3. No major cities with the exception of Hue were held for more than three days by the enemy.
4. The enemy was not able to exploit initial success with regular Divisions partly because of the beating they took from air attacks when formed for the assault.
5. The TACs was the main instrument by which the Air Commander was able to move the air effort from Corps to Corps.
6. FACs played a major role in the control of air strikes since they were on the scene, and could bring the strikes in close proximity to friendly forces.

* "Corps" was used to denote the four major subdivisions of South Vietnam during the period when American participation was prevalent. Subsequently, the term "Corps" was replaced by "Military Region," i.e., I, II, III, IV Corps became MR I, II, III and IV.

view of the obvious intent of the North Vietnamese to wage a massive offensive against South Vietnam, such bombing should not be restrained to these logistical concentrations, but should be against the total structure of North Vietnam and its will and capacity to continue the war. Protective reaction strikes from a military point of view had no real effect on the preparation of the North Vietnamese to launch an invasion of South Vietnam. From a political aspect, such strikes likewise had little effect. The magnitude was insufficient to drive across the view to the North Vietnamese that they had better cease preparation for an enlarged war if they didn't want their country subjected to a full-scale air offensive.

The rate of infiltration on the lines of communication in Laos were the highest to date. Even though about one-third the input of logistics was coming out the other end, the North Vietnamese increased the total amount of goods to such an extent that stocks were accumulating in MR II, III and IV sufficient for a limited offensive. The interdiction campaign was destroying trucks at an unprecedented rate. The North Vietnamese were forced to request immediate replacement for some 5,000 vehicles. The fair weather road network in Laos grew from some 820 KM in 1966 to 2,710 in 1972.

The lack of authority to bomb all of Vietnam made it infeasible for the air campaign in Laos to have the desired effect on the enemy's movement of logistics. The enemy supply lines were more vulnerable in the north than in Laos



Although some got through, enemy trucks took a heavy toll along the Trail.

because of open terrain, less opportunities for by-pass, more sophisticated modes of transportation, concentrations in the ports and marshalling yards, and greater difficulty in dispersal and concealment. On the other hand, the LOCs in North Vietnam could be more easily defended than those in Laos, but the vulnerability of these LOCs in the North was the logical place to concentrate the interdiction program.

As the intent of the U.S. became apparent the North Vietnamese began to deploy more of their anti-aircraft and SAM units into Laos and above the DMZ. The first AC-130 went down over Tchepone in March of 1972 and was an indication of the defenses that would eventually spread into the DMZ and finally into South Vietnam. With the threat of a renewed air offensive against the homeland relatively low, defense units that had engaged strike forces in the north could be moved closer to the ground battle to protect the vulnerable LOCs and the build-up of forces for the coming offensive.

The South Vietnamese armed forces had gained considerable confidence and poise from the successful invasion of Cambodia. Though some difficulties were experienced in the control of large ground force units, on balance ARVN demonstrated in fighting besides U.S. troops considerable improvement from the Tet offensive of 1968. The North Vietnamese had figured ARVN would bolt which would make the takeover of the main cities a certainty. VNAF performed very satisfactorily against a higher intensity of ground fire than they had previously experienced. As a consequence of the Cambodian invasion, not



North Vietnamese "truck park" along Ho Chi Minh Trail—located by reconnaissance flights and destroyed by USAF fighters.