

## AN LỘC: THE UNQUIET EAST<sup>29</sup>

By Phan Nhật Nam

Translated by John C. Schafer

Suddenly a small place in the far southeast at the end of Highway 13 becomes famous. Guernica, Arden, or Berlin cannot compare to this place that was eighteen hundred meters long and one thousand meters wide, stretching from the Phú Lỗ Gate to the fence protecting the sector headquarters in the east.<sup>30</sup> This small area became even smaller during the days of "Resist until Death," when the city shrank to about nine hundred meters in length, becoming one square kilometer that during the one hundred days of the siege was pounded by nearly sixty thousand shells, with concentrated artillery fire coming from more than ten locations. But An Lộc endured, the soldiers and people of An Lộc endured, drawing on their limitless reserves of God-given strength.

To survive! God grants this rare and precious gift to our people, but not easily, not indulgently. To stay alive the people and soldiers of An Lộc suffered for three months under a storm of explosions and shrapnel. They came to peaks of dizzying pain. Above a two-hundred-meter hill, a mother, clutching her child in a helicopter, accidentally drops him when the craft suddenly begins to shake violently. When the poor child falls to some far off place, there is no sound of the young body hitting the rocky earth, no sound of the terrible scream of the mother who has lost her child. There is only the sound of the chopper blades and the wind in the quiet of

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<sup>29</sup>In his title for this section, Phan Nhật Nam probably wishes to echo the title of Erich Maria Remarque's novel about World War I, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a work that was translated into Vietnamese and was popular in Vietnam. He also means to contrast the peaceful name of the town (An means "peaceful"; Lộc means "deer") and the unpeaceful events that occurred there.

An Lộc is on the western border of Vietnam, but Vietnamese consider it to be in the eastern region, primarily because this area north of Saigon is east of the provinces south of Saigon that jut westward into the South China Sea. Before the French conquered Vietnam, there were six provinces in the southern region (*Nam Kỳ*). The three provinces north of Saigon, where An Lộc is located, were called "the east" (*miền Đông*); the three provinces south of Saigon were called "the west" (*miền Tây*).

<sup>30</sup>A sector, or "*tiểu khu*," is the military headquarters of a province.

space. From the hilltops we move to a two-meter-deep pit in the heart of the desolate red earth where a father calmly sits arranging the bodies of his wife and five children, straightening the dismembered corpses, making sure the correct arm or leg is placed next to the right body.

The suffering was as long as Highway 13 from An Lộc to Chơn Thành, Lai Khê, Bình Dương. Highway 13, a road of white bones on red earth the color of blood, a road with anonymous graves scattered along Tàu Ô and Tân Khai, streams turned red from the earth and human blood. Bình Dương, An Lộc, Lộc Ninh. How sorrowful are these names! The only peace in this eastern region lay in the hopes and illusions of a suffering people.

In military communications, the letter "A" is spoken as "Alpha" or "Anh Dũng" [courageous]. An Lộc also begins with the letter "A," so I'll call An Lộc "Anh Dũng." This adjective has been used so much it has become common and boring, but there's no other more exact or correct word. Yes, An Lộc is courageous—all of it: the fighting, the living, the dying. Everything there is immersed in and covered by courage. Not exaggerating, but speaking with the truth of a writer who has the simple heart of a soldier, I must affirm again one thing: An Lộc is courageous. The essence of the city, of the people, of the events of An Lộc are best expressed by that simple adjective. With nearly ten years of battlefield experience, after reading I don't know how many pages of military history, I can say that An Lộc surpasses all other battles, surpasses them by far, not one comes close. Knowledge relating to military affairs, ideas of warfare—anyone who spent anytime there knows that all these were smashed by An Lộc. The "myths" of An Lộc have been exploited, but not completely; the heroes of An Lộc are referred to often, but not often enough.<sup>31</sup> I insist on this point because An Lộc doesn't have only General Hưng with infantry regiments 8, 9, 48, and 52; Colonel Huân with the 81st Airborne Commando Group and the 3rd Ranger Group; and Colonel Nhật with the units of the Bình Long Sector.<sup>32</sup> Besides these forces, there was the 1st Airborne Brigade, a

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<sup>31</sup>By "myths" (*huyền thoại*) the author is referring to the heroic performance of the troops that was much talked about in newspapers published in Saigon and in TV and radio reports produced by the government information service.

<sup>32</sup>Phan Nhật Nam refers to the publicly acknowledged heroes of An Lộc: Brigadier General Lê Văn Hưng, commanding general of the 5th Infantry

unit that joined the battle April 7, linking up with forces in An Lộc first on April 16. Later, after the battle of all battles, the 6th Airborne Battalion cleared the two remaining kilometers on the way to Thanh Binh (or the Xa Cam plantation) in 45 minutes of fighting. The second link-up with An Lộc was achieved at 17:45 p.m. on June 8.

### **Home of the Deer**

The distance on Highway 13 from the three-way intersection at Chơn Thành to An Lộc is thirty kilometers. Lộc Ninh is eighteen kilometers further north. Across the border [with Cambodia] is the town of Snoul. Beyond Snoul the road veers to the northwest and goes to Kratié, which lies along the Mekong. Hidden next to the left bank of the river, the road continues northward until it reaches Sưng Treng, an important and strategic location on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. This section is also called the Sihanouk Road to suggest solidarity and harmony, but actually it belongs to Brother Hồ, the Communist. At the beginning of the 2nd Indochina War, communist leaders in the central headquarters in the south were searching for a way to connect a system of roads from the area of the Đá, Chà Là, and Ma streams in Bình Long and Phước Long to the "secret zones" across the border, zones that later would be well-known throughout the world: Fish Hook and Parrot's Beak.<sup>33</sup> In 1970 our troops crossed the border from Bình Long and Tây Ninh. The northernmost branch of the forces crossing the border went beyond Snoul and reached the outskirts of Kratié. Our troops completely destroyed the infrastructure, arms caches, key supply points, and central

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Division, who flew to An Lộc on April 6 to direct the defense of the town and remained until the siege was lifted; Colonel Huấn, who commanded the 81st Airborne Ranger Battalion, a unit that fought bravely and successfully at An Lộc; and Colonel Trần Văn Nhật (not "Nhật," as Phan Nhật Nam mistakenly writes), the chief of the province of Bình Long and commander of the Bình Long Sector. General Hưng was definitely not a hero to his American advisers. Willbank (1993:69) quotes their unflattering appraisals.<sup>33</sup> Fish Hook, about fifty-five miles northwest of Saigon, and Parrot's Beak, an area further south, about thirty-three miles west of Saigon, were areas in Cambodia where the communists had base camps. They became famous during the "incursion" into Cambodia in April 1970, when South Vietnamese and American troops entered these areas looking for the legendary COSVN, the Central Office for South Vietnam. This incursion led to protests in the U.S., including the one at Kent State, where National Guard troops shot and killed student protesters.

headquarters of the communist forces.<sup>34</sup> Two years later, in the first days of 1972, another communist force composed of new troops from the North was sent down Highway 13 as part of a carefully conceived plan to achieve a political and strategic goal. Three top-level regular divisions passed Snoul and poured into Lộc Ninh after clearing Highway 13 with fire from 130mm artillery.<sup>35</sup> After Lộc Ninh is An Lộc, and this small community on the edge of the eastern region was compressed into a place called "Resist until Death." The hell began on the first day of April 1972.

An Lộc is not a city. Actually it is a town in Bình Long Province and also the district capital of the district of An Lộc. There are three districts in the province: Lộc Ninh in the north, An Lộc in the center, and Chơn Thành in the south. All the administrative offices lie along Highway 13, a large smooth road that runs straight in a north-south direction. This road, a dark black line between the rows of green-leaved rubber tree plants, stands out against the reddish brown earth. Its unlucky number and the color of the earth suggest that fate had planned everything: a road with the number of death and dirt the color of dried blood. The two wars<sup>36</sup> prove that there is a cruel god who has arranged for people's suffering. An Lộc—the name is so gentle, gentle as a herd of deer running playfully across a field of fresh grass, peaceful deer with plenty to eat, shaded by a canopy of rubber plant trees and by hundreds of streams with a variety of names from Vietnamese, Cambodian, and highland languages, streams which are the sources of the Bé River in the east and the Saigon River in the west. Lying between these two rivers that flow across an immense plain is Bình Long, the home of the deer. The upper Đồng Nai Region is not simply a nice place. It is the cradle that has nurtured the nation with its resources. Full and wide, the highlands consist of a series of rolling hills that stretch all the

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<sup>34</sup>This central headquarters, or COSVN, was actually only a mobile base camp consisting of primitive huts. The communist forces abandoned the base camp in the Fish Hook area and fled westward before the arrival of ARVN and U. S. troops.

<sup>35</sup>This Russian-made artillery piece, which had a range of 17 miles, was used very effectively in the invasion. Its range exceeded that of the ARVN's 105mm and 155mm howitzers by 10,000 meters (Summers 1995:174). Only the U.S. 175mm howitzer exceeded the 130mm, but South Vietnam's forces had only a few batteries of these (Andradé 1995:40).

<sup>36</sup>Presumably the First Indochina War, in which the French and anti-communist Vietnamese fought the Việt Minh, and the Second Indochina War, of which the Battle of An Lộc was a part.

way to Biên Hòa and Gia Định. The soil is rich and impressive and justifies pride in one's native land.

This is, however, also the land of misery, the land that endures the worst scourges of humankind, the land of hardship and disaster, the land where fire explodes, turning Bình Long into a place of heat and ashes, a place devoid of life.

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### Revenge

Dispersed,<sup>37</sup> scattered, forced to regroup. At 17:00, April 21. The first time this had happened to the 6th Airborne Battalion since it was formed eighteen years ago. But after the dispersion you have to "try hard." The motto of the armed services demanded it. So Đinh<sup>38</sup> and the company commanders tried again, tried with all their hearts. They tried to teach the new replacement troops how to take apart, assemble, and fire their XM16's,<sup>39</sup> how to throw grenades, how to maneuver and how to use camouflage. For a month in Lai Khê the battalion gritted its teeth and worked to retrain each soldier and each squad and platoon leader. For a month the battalion guarded the highway and the base, constantly undergoing training and doing drills in "maneuvering under fire." Eventually the number 6 was knocked over and became number 9.<sup>40</sup> Military historians who take up the story of the battle for An Lộc will not fail to mention the 6th Airborne Battalion of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam.

The historic link-up between the 62nd Company of the 6th Battalion commanded by "Vinh the Kid"<sup>41</sup> and the 81st Company of

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<sup>37</sup>*Tan hàng*, translated here as "dispersed," also means "dismissed" and was the command given to dismiss a group of soldiers at the close of a training exercise. After this command, the soldiers were to reply "*Cố gắng!*" or "Try hard!" Here the primary meaning of *tan hàng* is "dispersed" or "scattered": Phan Nhật Nam is referring to the defeat and heavy losses suffered by the 6th Battalion on Windy Hill.

<sup>38</sup>Nguyễn Văn Đinh, the commander of the 6th Airborne Battalion. Lâm Quang Thi (54) wrongly says this commander's name was Nguyễn Hữu Đinh.

<sup>39</sup>The XM16 was an earlier experimental version of the M16, the standard rifle used in Vietnam by U.S. troops.

<sup>40</sup>In an earlier passage (p. 76), the author associates "9" with glory and victory and predicts that the 6th Battalion will either reach its glorious potential, suggested by the "9" hidden within it, or suffer some terrible fate.

<sup>41</sup>"Vinh the Kid" was Ngô Xuân Vinh, who at 23 was the youngest company commander in the battalion. The author notes that this nickname

the 8th Battalion of Nguyễn Trọng Ni took place at 05:45 on June 8, 1972. Both company commanders were in the same company during the 20th session for reserve officers at the Thủ Đức Infantry School. As their tears flowed freely from happiness and pride, an American adviser, his hands trembling from emotion, took their picture as they clasped their hands.

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"Try to help me with this," said General Minh.<sup>42</sup> "You're the only one who can do it. How old are you? Are you an acting or permanent lieutenant colonel?"

"General, I'm thirty-three," said Lieutenant Colonel Đinh. "I've been an acting lieutenant colonel for a year.<sup>43</sup> I assumed command of the battalion after the Laos operation."

"I'll ask General Đống<sup>44</sup> to make you the assistant to the commander of an infantry division. Lương (chief of staff for Military Region III), take Đinh's name, rank, and serial number and immediately make him a permanent lieutenant colonel."<sup>45</sup>

"Thank you, General. I'll try hard."

"Try to help. This blow is the last one. If you can link up with An Lộc, we'll win; if you can't, then we lose. The problem is simple—just those two possibilities. I salute<sup>46</sup> you for being able to make it back from Windy Hill."

General Minh stood and saluted Đinh, a person five ranks below him and very inferior to him in position. Đinh saluted him in return. This event, which happened quickly, contradicted all the

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was an ironic comment on the fact that Ngô Xuân Vinh was wise beyond his years (p. 72).

<sup>42</sup>Major General Nguyễn Văn Minh, commander of the III Corps military region that included An Lộc.

<sup>43</sup>Sometimes officers were temporarily promoted when someone with a particular rank was needed for an assignment. If they performed acceptably, they became permanently promoted.

<sup>44</sup>Major General Dư Quốc Đống, a member of the Nung minority who was originally from north Vietnam. He was commander of the Airborne Division. Because of his dark complexion, he was called "Black Đống" (Đống Đen).

<sup>45</sup>Capable officers in the airborne, ranger groups, and marines were sometimes assigned to infantry divisions.

<sup>46</sup>The general uses the French word *saluer*.

rules relating to command procedures, rank, and military regulations.

"General, I'll try, I'll give it all I got. I believe I can do it."

"General Minh, this guy can do it," said Brigadier General Hậu, commander of the 21st Division and commanding officer for all the forces attempting to relieve An Lộc, including the 6th Battalion, which was attached to his command. General Hậu repeated that sentence one more time, emphasizing each word: "This guy can do it."

Đình was dazed as he walked out of the operations room. Everything had happened so quickly and contradicted reasonable expectations. "Can I do it?" Đình asked himself.

During the return from Windy Hill the unit suffered heavy losses. It was as if a net of steel had descended and covered them. The 6th was left weak and exhausted. One hundred and twenty-five men remained after the heavy fighting. Phạm Kim Bằng, the Battalion Executive Officer, was seriously wounded. Tuấn, the most outstanding company commander, was dead and every soldier suffered from fatigue.<sup>47</sup> The unit had received replacements, so out of a total of four hundred and twelve, three-fourths were new troops. These replacements were a pitiful bunch of soldiers. They hadn't practiced firing an XM16 and didn't know how to throw a grenade, so how were they going to handle new weapons like the XM202 or the remodeled M72?<sup>48</sup> On top of that, some of them—officers as well as ordinary soldiers—were deserters and army criminals, and some had committed serious crimes and had only recently been given amnesty.

A meeting of all the company commanders was hastily convened.

"All of you see this. On the left is the 15th Regiment of the 9th Division, on the right is the 33rd Regiment." Đình put his finger on the map and indicated a stretch of Highway 13 from the village of Thanh Binh or Xa Cam to Xa Trạch or Đông Phát Hamlet. "These two

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<sup>47</sup>In an earlier section (p. 96), the author explains that Bằng was hit in the eye. Tuấn (Cao Hoàng Tuấn) was killed when a 75mm shell exploded on top of him.

<sup>48</sup>Phan Nhật Nam writes "XM202," but he probably meant the XM203, an experimental model of the M203, a combination grenade launcher and M16 rifle. The grenade launcher was a short tube clamped beneath the rifle (See Hogg 1985:386). The M72 was the M72 LAW (light antitank weapon), the modern version of the earlier bazooka.

regiments have been pinned down for a month and have gradually lost strength due to damage and wounds. We can't evacuate the wounded and they don't have enough food. Air-dropped supplies have fallen out of the area. They can't advance because of the obstacles I've mentioned. So Mr. Hậu and General Minh have decided to use our battalion to enter An Lộc. We don't have to enter completely, only as far as Xa Cam, where we'll link up with the 8th Battalion. The 8th has been waiting for a month for this link-up but nothing's happened yet. That's our job."

"Lieutenant Colonel, you mean just our battalion?" Nghiêm, an operation specialist, asked, frowning.

"Three companies of the 15th Regiment will follow us. When we get there we'll deliver them over to their commander. I'm now the head of the 6th 'Special Battlegroup,' not just the Commander of the 6th Battalion." Đinh said this jokingly, hoping to relieve the tension, but no one laughed, or even chuckled.

"So it's just us alone then," Tùng, the battalion executive officer, said softly, smiling in a pained sort of way.

"This is a duty made of gold, a duty for the best of the best," said Đinh.

"Real gold or fool's gold, Brother Five?<sup>49</sup>

"Pure gold, twenty-four carat gold. We'll have to be confident and determined to do it. We've got new recruits, but they've received a month's training; every day we've given them instruction."

"Yeah, we've taught them every day, that's true, but it's all been theoretical. Not one of the new guys has shot a single bullet. Some of them are from the People's Self-Defense Force<sup>50</sup> and shoot an M16 from the hip as if it were a Thompson submachine gun."

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<sup>49</sup>In Vietnamese, *anh* ("brother") is commonly used before names when addressing an older male person. Tùng's use of *five* continues a practice common during the period of French domination. Vietnamese referred to a colonel in the French army, who wore five stripes (galon), as "*quan năm*," or "officer five." The Vietnamese airborne was modeled on French airborne units that fought in the First Indochina War, and many of its officers had served in the French army.

<sup>50</sup>The People's Self-Defense Force, or *Nhân Dân Tự Vệ*, also called Popular Forces (PF's), along with the Regional Forces (RF's), were territorial, paramilitary units that operated locally—the PF's only in their own villages, the RF's only in their own province. Weapons provided to the PF's and RF's were often of World War II vintage or earlier. Though called "Ruff Puffs" and derided by some Americans (and some South Vietnamese soldiers in



"It doesn't matter. If they keep practicing, they'll be OK. So if nothing changes and the weather's good, it's a 'Go' for tomorrow. That's it for now. Go back and keep them drilling every chance you get. Drill right up until the end. Have them practice taking apart and assembling their weapons. Tell them not to use real ammo but to yell "bang, bang" when they practice firing. Teach each group and watch them regularly. When you disband, don't let them go anywhere to goof off. And tell them we're fighting to revenge what happened to us on Windy Hill."

On June 3rd it rained. The cloud cover was low and the heavy wind blew the rain around. The battalion postponed the helicopters, and soldiers were stuck in their tents. Each squad leader showed his men the fundamentals of grenade throwing and taught them some basic hand signals used when on an operation. The company commanders supervised activities in the heavy rain.

At ten in the morning on the fourth, the 61st Company was lifted by helicopter westward to Đồng Lô, about eight kilometers from National Highway 13. The first chopper landed safely, but the second was knocked over by a barrage of anti-aircraft fire as it was hovering preparatory to landing. The mass of steel carrying forty-two people flopped over like a stone turning in a wet rice paddy. The troops poured out the back door like mice escaping from a fumigated room. They ran northward toward a forest of rubber plant trees. Lộc, the company commander, was screaming and giving directions with his arms. The anti-aircraft fire in the air sounded like wind whipping through leaves in a forest.

The rest of the battalion landed at a spot a little more than a kilometer from the 61st Company. At 12:30 the battalion assembled and moved northward to a rubber tree forest in Đức Vinh 1 Hamlet. The 61st Company, which led the battalion, moved as if propelled by some force. Lộc led his company at an amazingly fast pace and his troops, weighted down with their packs, struggled to keep up with their commander.

"Hurry up, hurry up, we've got to get to An Lộc," Lộc urged his company as they ran through trees already stripped of leaves.

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regular units), they were praised by American advisers at An Lộc (Andradé 1995:498). Using the M72 LAW, three PF soldiers, two of them only 16 years of age, destroyed the first communist tank to enter An Lộc (Lâm Quang Thi 1986:48).

In the afternoon it rained heavily. The rubber-tree forest was deserted. Trees blackened by fire from bombs, their green leaves all fallen, stood against the grayish black sky. The battalion waited in Đức Vinh 1 to receive the three companies of the 15th Regiment.

"You go behind my battalion, we'll take care of everything," Đinh told the major who commanded the three companies.

"Yes, that way," directed Lộc (Commander of the 61st Company). "Keep going like you did when you left the aircraft. Go, Go, sweethearts."

The 6th Battalion walked through the forest in which a bluish fog was rising. By 7:00 it was dark and the rows of trees blended together in the faint light.

"Reporting to 64 (Lieutenant Colonel Đinh), should I go further or stop?" Lộc asked.

"Further. Go to Đức Vinh 2 village and wait near that stream."

"Got it." Lộc pushed his troops to the east.

Gunfire erupted—AK, ChiCom machine gun, and B-40 rocket fire all mixed together at the head of the column.

Đinh grabbed the radio from the hand of a soldier. "What is it, Lộc, report."

"It's over. My men let all those guys meet their idol. It was a short fight, the first one for the new troops. They weren't afraid. They had no experience so they threw themselves at the enemy."

It's funny. The longer you're in the army, the more cowardly you get, the less you boast. The new troops didn't know enough to be afraid. Đinh laughed when he heard Lộc report: "Reporting to 64, my troops saw that the Vietcong couldn't fire quick enough, so they rushed them and engaged them in hand-to-hand combat."

From where the troops were positioned in Đức Vinh 2, it was five kilometers as the crow flies to An Lộc. Đinh opened his radio to the 1st Brigade channel and made contact with the 8th Battalion.

"Are you here yet?" the 8th asked. "We've been waiting for you for more than a month. You're almost here? When will it be, tomorrow or the next day? We can link up. Try, hear me, we're in bad shape here."

"I know you are," Đinh replied. "We'll try our best to get there."

The troops of the 6th Battalion, who were listening to this radio conversation, heard whispers from soldiers clustered around

the radio operator for the 8th Battalion. "The 6th Battalion is coming!" Then the sound of cheers was heard from that quiet hell.

On June 5 we continued northward, passing the Xa Cát Stream and stopping next to the desolate black highway that ran across the red earth. The forest was quiet. On the road, scattered here and there, lay nylon bags of dried rice, clothes, and head scarves that belonged to the people fleeing the fighting and to the dead. Some of the dead, their bodies black and rigid, were lying here and there in various positions—some on their backs, some face down, some with their legs spread apart. In the days before, people fleeing An Lộc could use this route to get to Chơn Thành and Bình Dương, but then the shelling came and they were caught in it. In the sweltering heat the stench from the corpses was overpowering. The battalion vomited all night. "F—— communists are really cruel," said one new recruit, giving voice in a curse to the emotions in his heart. "This is the first time I've seen people die because of them."

Đình was speaking with his commanders before moving up his troops: "Today is 6/6. A day of destiny. At Normandy this was the longest day. Our battalion is the 6th Battalion. Three times six is 18. Add the two digits in 18 and you get 9, a lucky number. Within the number 6 lies the potential to be a 9. Potential is better than full development, which always precedes decline. So this is a lucky day for us. I hope we'll meet the enemy. We'll de-fang them."

"Brother Five [Đình],<sup>51</sup> I like the way you've figured things out," said Vinh, rubbing his hands to express his appreciation.

"Don't brown-nose me now, Vinh. All right, let's go. Companies 64 and 61 will cross the road first, deploy in an east-west direction, and wait for orders."

The two companies, 64 and 61, left their position, lined up along the edge of the road, and then moved out. Nearly 200 people glided over the road with the speed of light and took cover in a garden on the west. The two company commanders yelled into their radios, spreading their troops along a line from east to west. They probed a little, then moved in deeper.

After the 61st and 64th were deployed, the 62nd Company, guiding the battalion headquarters, followed after them toward the north. Vinh "The Kid" had just gotten one platoon deployed when rifle fire broke out on the west.

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<sup>51</sup>See note 49.

Đình got on the radio. "You cover the south, 63. Don't let them get away. 61, 62, 64—you spread out and strike across from the west to the east. Keep going until you get to the railroad tracks. Move across and hit quickly. Do you hear me? Form a human line. You're in the rubber trees, so it's easy to see where you are and coordinate your movement. Are you in place yet? All right, get ready. When you advance, let me know. OK, you're going." The commanders of the three companies—61, 62, and 64—passed along the order by radio to move out.

"Move the way we taught you," shouted the squad and platoon leaders, yelling like crows to mobilize the new recruits. "On the left and right are friendly troops. You'll be firing to the front. Aim low so they can't stick their heads above the ground."

Urged on by their leaders, these new troops responded well: they weren't afraid, they did not get rattled. They were learning how to maneuver under fire in their first engagement on a real battleground. The three companies advanced like the wind from the east to the west, then changed direction and moved from south to north.

Enemy artillery poured down. They ignored it, moving forward so quickly that the shells fell behind them. If wounded, they were moved back to the company headquarters where Tùng, the battalion executive officer, though slightly wounded himself, was able to gather and take care of them. The three companies kept pushing forward. They struck with lightning speed, in the German blitzkrieg style, rushing forward, running and shooting at the same time, their commanders urging them not to let the enemy troops raise their heads. Đình was in the first group with the light infantry, screaming like thunder, using grenades on the secure enemy bunkers. Đình ran and at the same time coordinated the three rapidly moving companies. Finally it was over. It began at eight in the morning and now it was twelve. The 6th Battalion had run and attacked without a second's hesitation. In their successful three-kilometer race they had restored honor to the armed services and the nation.

Considering the fact that the fighting lasted five hours<sup>52</sup> and that some of our new troops were firing their XM16's for the first time, our casualties were blessedly low: one dead, 63 wounded.

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<sup>52</sup>Phan Nhật Nam apparently forgets that he has previously indicated the fighting lasted four hours—from 8:00 A.M. to noon.

Ninety percent of the troops in the enemy battalion were killed in their bunkers. Do you see? New or old soldiers, it's the same: everything is up to us.

Đình picked up the radio linking the company commanders and heard them bragging about the victory.

"Lieutenant Colonel, the 33rd Regiment has seized 57 mm and 82 mm guns."

"Not needed. What would we use them for? As a sacrifice on our fathers' graves? The wounded haven't been evacuated yet, so what's the point in taking the fruits of victory?"

The Battalion stationed troops east of the National Highway. The 15th Infantry Regiment was on the left, the 33rd Regiment behind them, and in front only about one kilometer was the 8th Battalion and beyond the 8th, separated by an open space, lay An Lộc and the three-story administration building with its red-tile roof. The way into the city was blocked by two charred vehicles. With just a slight adjustment of the binoculars, An Lộc lay within view. It was pouring rain. Our troops seized the defense works of the enemy: All we had to do was drag the corpses out and take their place. Ha! Thanks to the VC we had a place to sleep and didn't have to dig a foxhole. The troops were happy. They acted as if it were Tết, running from bunker to bunker exchanging news.

"Fighting is easy, right, Lieutenant?" one soldier said.

"Very easy—as easy as pulling out a cigarette. You guys are new but super soldiers."

At twelve midnight the Battalion was awakened by a strange noise from above: the engine of a chopper. Lightning flashes made its whirling blades visible.

"Ái nữ, this is Phi Long!<sup>53</sup> Ái nữ, this is Phi Long!" General Hậu used his old code sign that he had used when he was assistant commander of the Airborne Division. The literal meaning of *ái nữ* was a beloved daughter!

Đình quickly picked up the receiver on the direct line. "Calling Phi Long. I hear you."

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<sup>53</sup>These radio code words suggest characters from traditional Sino-Vietnamese operas and tales. *Phi long* means "flying dragon."

"Good, Big Brother.<sup>54</sup> Very good. Those other guys also did well. Nghiêm, the operations officer, Vinh Quang and Tùng—how are they?" (Tùng was wounded at the start of the battle and had to hop on one foot, following the Battalion for three kilometers through the jungle.)

"Calling Phi Long. They are all O.K. Tomorrow we will try to evacuate the wounded, and after that's done we'll rest easier and be ready for anything."

"I'll see that you get the help you need. Say hello to Thạch Phanh. He was a sergeant of mine when I was a second lieutenant in this battalion."

"Roger, Phi Long."

"O.K., good bye. Keep up the effort." The chopper circled once more over the area where our troops were dug in and then headed for Lai Khê. Thunder sounded loudly and constantly in the dark sky.

On the seventh of June, there was only one last objective, an enemy position on the right side of the road between the 8th and the 6th Battalions. The 6th Battalion halted temporarily to evacuate the wounded and receive supplies. The 8th probed to try to link up with the 6th. When the enemy counterattacked strongly, the 8th had to withdraw, with losses equal on both sides. Lê Lợi (commander of the 1st Airborne Brigade in An Lộc)<sup>55</sup> ordered the 8th to return to its former position. The most glorious objective, the brightest flower of all, still remained: the link-up with An Lộc. Fate had determined it.

As the crow flies, the 6th Battalion was only one kilometer from the 8th and 1800 meters from the town of An Lộc. The solution to the battle of Binh Long lay in the 1000-meter stretch of territory lying between Private First Class Phương of the 1st Platoon of the 62nd Company and the soldier who guarded the extreme south of the 81st Company. To link up these two soldiers was to fulfill a promise—to prove the fighting ability of the Vietnamese troops and to bring about the collapse in morale of the stubborn enemy troops.

June 8, the anniversary of the founding of the Front's provisional government, ironically became a day of defeat and

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<sup>54</sup>General Hậu refers to Đình as "*Đại sư huynh*," a Sino-Vietnamese word which was used in martial arts schools and pagodas to refer to an older, higher-ranking male classmate.

<sup>55</sup>Lê Lợi was Colonel Lê Quang Lương's nickname. Lê Lợi led an independence movement that drove out the Chinese in 1428. As emperor from 1428 until his death in 1443, he began the Lê Dynasty, a glorious period of Vietnamese history.

destruction for the Front.<sup>56</sup> The provisional government hoped to present itself to the people of An Lộc, with generals and ministers arriving by Citroen *deux chevaux* from their secret sanctuaries via Snoul and Lộc Ninh. But the Airborne troops destroyed their wish.

There was no destination for that illusory trip: the Airborne troops had already seized the territory. At 8 o'clock Vinh "The Kid" and his 62nd Company led an east-west clearing operation and then turned toward the north, the main objective. Something strange appeared: a series of newly dug trenches, the fresh red dirt standing out against the old dark brown, along the side of a hill that stretched in a north-south direction. (The communist troops had hurriedly starting digging communication trenches at 22:00 the night before and by 5 o'clock in the morning had finished them. Their plan was to get some revenge for the battle of June 6.)

"Calling 64 (the battalion commander). I see a system of new communication trenches about 500 meters from here," reported Vinh, who could see them clearly from the hill where he was standing. "The old railroad line runs below the foot of the hill. It's now a dirt road full of weeds."

"Wait there," said the battalion commander. "I'll have the 63rd Battalion cover your rear, then you [the 62nd] and 61 will go down the hill at the same time."

"Roger, 64."

"Use the same strategy as the other day—run and fire at the same time. Don't let them poke their heads up. When you get close to the bunkers use grenades. Watch your friends on the left and right

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<sup>56</sup> The "Front" is the National Liberation Front, an organization of southern revolutionaries that was created and formally presented to the people on December 20, 1960. Its purpose was to topple the Saigon regime and set up a communist government for a united Vietnam. The "Vietcong," literally "Vietnamese communists," fought under the flag of the NLF. In 1969, the Front established a Provisional Revolutionary Government, whose organizing congress was held on June 6-8, 1969, in the Fishhook area (see note 33) near the Cambodian border on the Vietnam side. It is the anniversary of this congress to which Phan Nhật Nam refers. The timetable for the Nguyễn Huệ campaign called for the setting up of a new communist capital of the PRG at An Lộc on April 20, 1972 (Andradé 1995:385). Phan Nhật Nam appreciates the fact that a key battle thwarting the attempt to set up this capital was fought on the anniversary of the founding of the PRG. How much Hồ Chí Minh and the communist party of the North controlled the NLF and the PRG was hotly debated in the U.S. during the war. Nguyễn Thị Định and Trương Như Tảng, who played significant roles in the NLF and PRG, have both described the formation of these southern organizations.

before you advance." Company commanders directed the platoon leaders, the platoon leaders passed orders on to the squad leaders, and the troops discussed among themselves: "Fight like we did the other day. Remember to check my position before you go. At 8:45, when 63 and 64 have finished their blocking action on the south, 61 and 62 will open fire together just like the other day."

"Assault. Assault." Screams, shells—M26, M76, M72—exploded like big fire crackers. Two companies of communist troops, C7 and C8, were turned into corpses by the heavy fire before they had a chance to look up and see the Airborne troops. Our soldiers poured down the hill like a tornado. The communist troops dispersed, evacuating according to the "running strategy." Pairs of soldiers were chained together and then each pair linked in a line.<sup>57</sup> Enemy troops, reeling from the onslaught, abandoned their trenches, climbed up on the railroad tracks and dispersed on the open plain. "Drop your backpacks. Drop your backpacks and chase after them. Don't let one escape." Troops of the 6th Battalion, the new recruits with 16 days of service, abandoned their packs and helmets, clutched their rifles, and chased after the fleeing communist troops, all participants in this marathon organized by death. Shoot that guy. Bang! A body falls into a mud puddle formed by a section of the Quán Lợi Creek. A comrade tries to pull the body away to safety. Another burst of fire and the second soldier falls.

The training session in firing ended when the live targets fell and lay motionless in the marshy land. Only one person from companies C7 and C8 survived: the POW Nguyễn Văn Tiền. Mortar fire from An Lộc ended the lesson and the green rice fields with young seedlings along the creek became pink. "Kill completely, hold your position, stop the enemy in his tracks, strike quickly. Close tightly, fight slowly, fight firmly." The communist troops had these standards for killing. Without intending to, our troops became the ones who implemented them. The two companies were eradicated in two hours and twelve minutes, the only survivor being the prisoner who was so paralyzed by fear that he couldn't talk. I repeat the

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<sup>57</sup>According to stories circulating in the South, communist troops were chained together to prevent them from deserting. Whether Phan Nhật Nam actually saw this or is reporting rumors is unclear. *The Heroic Battle of An Lộc*, the English-language booklet published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reports that dead bodies of the enemy were found "chained together, to their tanks or artillery bases" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1972:31).



name of the single survivor to emphasize the complete destruction: Prisoner Nguyễn Văn Tiền.

Riding the crest of victory, one continues to attack. Vinh turned his troops northward and struck toward his main objective, a four-way intersection at the entry to the Xa Cam plantation. Vinh advanced slowly, quietly, checking each trench, each bunker. The enemy had deployed in an east-west direction. Their lines were not deep facing toward our 8th Battalion, only 100, 80, 50, or 40 meters from our troops. Vinh saw a row of backs wearing Nam Định khaki<sup>58</sup> turn toward him. He smiled bitterly. There flashed through his mind images of the four days on Windy Hill, of the night they followed the stream and fled to the south, of Tuấn (commander of Company 63) blown apart by a direct hit from a 75 mm shell, Battalion Executive Officer Bằng with his eyes smashed, his face soaked with blood. Fire! An entire company opened fire with him; all the weapons set on "auto." Backs of enemy troops flew into the air and you could hear the sound of bullets passing through bodies and pounding into the earth, making the red dirt a brighter, more fiery, and wetter red. The enemy scattered to the west and met the 63rd Company of Thái Trường. *Trường* ["wall"]. A fateful name. Soldiers from the 63rd drove the enemy troops, firing their weapons into the air,<sup>59</sup> yelling at the top of their lungs, playing hide and seek along the slope that dropped down to a valley of blood. Soldiers of the 8th Battalion about 600 meters away got up out of their trenches, clapping their hands in approval of the race they were witnessing. At 17:45 Vinh "The Kid" shook hands with Hồng Ni of the 8th Battalion at a spot 100 meters from the sign for the "Xa Cam Plantation." In front of them, smoke was rising from cooking fires in An Lộc as people prepared the evening meal.

At 18:00 in Lai Khê, Brigadier General Hồ Trung Hậu entered the operation meeting room. "I have only one thing to announce: The 6th Battalion of the Airborne Brigade has linked up with the 8th Battalion." Then he walked out, ending the meeting.

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<sup>58</sup>Khaki uniforms for communist troops were made in Nam Định, a town in North Vietnam and a center of the textile industry.

<sup>59</sup>They didn't shoot to kill because the communist troops were clearly defeated and the objective was to link up with the 8th Battalion as quickly as possible. It is suggested that the communist troops would be taken prisoner.

In the helicopter flying to An Lộc, the general was talking with Colonel Lữ ỡng, commander of the 1st Brigade. This exchange was overheard:

"Did my troops fight well?" Colonel Lữ ỡng asked General Hậu.

"We can't say they fought well," General Hậu replied. "We must say they fought unbelievably well. But even that's not right. We must say they were outstanding, exceptional." General Hậu was a man of few words. This was the first time he was so expansive in his praise.

For me, however, the most beautiful and brightest gift was the image of soldiers from the 6th Battalion giving dried rice and canned fruit to the people. And doctors and nurses from the 1st Brigade setting up an emergency aid station along Highway 13. Rice to allay hunger on the journey. Who, one must ask, caused this pitiful, heart-rending meal of dried rice?

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### Rain of Flowers Fills the Sky<sup>60</sup>

Contrary to what has commonly been thought, it wasn't just parts of An Lộc that got destroyed, not just some clusters of buildings. An Lộc was completely smashed, broken into pieces, reduced to rubble. Nothing remained. No trace of human life was left on the face of the earth. Like a giant termite that lives under a layer of dirt, the town was buried in bunkers deep in the earth, the deeper the better. The ring encircling the town was later pushed out wider on the north and reached close to the airport. During the days of "Resist Until Death," however, this defensive line fell on the 88th abscissa.<sup>61</sup> From this line southward to the B15 chopper landing zone encompassed an area of about 500 by 800 meters. Less than one square kilometer, it was at times hit by 8000 shells, as it was on the night of May 11 and the morning of May 12. Eight thousand shells of the armor-

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<sup>60</sup>This Sino-Vietnamese expression, *Mãn thiên hoa vũ* (literally, "full sky flowers rain"), is the name for a lesson in sword fighting. Here it is used to suggest the intensive shelling of An Lộc. According to *Courageous An Lộc*, Colonel Mịch Văn Trường, commander of the 8th Regiment, used this expression to describe the shells that fell like rain at An Lộc (Ministry of Information 1984:31).

<sup>61</sup>Phan Nhật Nam is referring to the horizontal coordinate on a military map.

piercing type, not counting the rockets and mortars, had fallen on a piece of land as small as Dakao.<sup>62</sup> Each square meter had to have been hit by more than ten shells. The delayed armor-piercing rounds pushed into the earth more than a meter before exploding. They didn't have to hit a bunker directly. If they landed next to it, they knocked down the walls. The people and the soldiers tried to make themselves small and endured hellish fire that came pouring down from above for more than two months. We're not talking about a single burst of shelling, a single hour, a single salvo. Shells filled the sky like rain, they rushed like the wind, closed in like clouds. The shells didn't come round by round as in Tết '68. They didn't arrive in salvos as in the southern Laos operation. At An Lộc the shells overflowed and mixed together like flying rain, filling the space completely during the wet spring days when normally a light drizzle fell. Under the sky filled with those flowers of death, An Lộc shrunk and then disintegrated, flew up into the air like bits of torn paper when the wind blows. One rocket picked up a jeep and flew it into the air. It fell to the ground, then got bounced into the air again before it finally landed on top of a bunker. This mass of steel weighing a quarter of a ton got whirled around like a small tin can hit by bullets in a cowboy movie.

The shelling so filled the sky that death was everywhere, the dead bodies scattered like weeds. Death became something natural. Anyone who lives must die. In An Lộc, death was an expected phenomenon. A family of seven people, a husband and wife and five children, took shelter in a bunker built under the foundation of their house. Above them were several boards, and above the boards bags of sand, making a roof about a meter thick. Unfortunately the people didn't know the destructive power of a 130mm artillery shell of the delay type. Nor did they know the murderous power of 107mm and 122mm rockets. So there is one brief loud blast and the bunker gets thrown into the air, pulverized into pieces, like drops of water when a large stone drops into a pond. Death. Six bodies. The one survivor gathers up the pieces, arranging the mother's corpse, pulling away a child's arm, putting together a son's body, disentangling the leg of a younger sibling. The father slowly chooses each body part of each loved one. What is left in the hardened mind of this man? Nothing, nothing that can be called the mind of a human being. People died in An Lộc. All of humanity died in An Lộc.

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<sup>62</sup>A part of Saigon (Hồ Chí Minh City).

### Portrait of a "Liberator"

The people of An Lộc abandoned their villages to the "liberators" who came from the North—from Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An to Đông Hới, crossing the border near Tchépone and Mường Nồng,<sup>63</sup> moving southward downstream,<sup>64</sup> turning to enter Kontum or the B3 front<sup>65</sup> or continuing to the Fish Hook and Parrot's Beak areas<sup>66</sup> before crossing the border again to enter Lộc Ninh, 18 kilometers from An Lộc. It's a wide road with no obstacles. They came to An Lộc at the beginning of April after six months of travel and were then "able" to be chained inside their tanks, or to trees to shoot airplanes, or to the neck of the person next to them. They undertook this journey to fulfill their oath: "Born in the North, Die in the South."<sup>67</sup> Oh, but that's only a facade, a false exterior designed to hide a breakdown in morale, a spirit crushed by fear and terror. How could you not be afraid? On the night of May 11 and the morning of May 12, 8,000 shells swept the road clean. There were three communist regiments, each with a strength of three full battalions, which were reinforced with a tank company from the 203rd and the 303rd Armored Regiment. They thought they would level An Lộc, kill every puppet soldier, not leave one person alive.

Then came 17 "passes" of B-52's. Each pass was made by three aircraft with forty-two 500-kilo bombs and twenty-four 250-kilo bombs. Seventeen passes 600 meters from An Lộc. The concrete command bunker of the 1st Airborne Brigade shook from the force of the bombs. In strategic bombing, you are always supposed to bomb two kilometers or more from friendly troop positions. The bombing was coordinated by General James Hollingsworth himself.<sup>68</sup> One "pass" in Trầng Bằng was enough to shake buildings in Saigon 30 kilometers away. How could a person endure 17 passes

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<sup>63</sup>Tchépone and Mường Nồng are towns in Savannakhet Province, Laos.

<sup>64</sup>Down the Mekong River.

<sup>65</sup>The North Vietnamese divided Vietnam south of the 17th parallel into four theaters. The B3 theater was the central highlands region consisting of the provinces of Gia Lai (Plei Ku), Kontum, and Đắc Lắc.

<sup>66</sup>See note 33.

<sup>67</sup>See note 57.

<sup>68</sup>Major General James F. Hollingsworth, U.S. Army, was commanding general of the Third Regional Assistance Command. Summers(1995:178) writes: "Hollingsworth's watchword was 'Kill Cong!' 'You hold, and I'll do the killing.'" This is supposedly what Hollingsworth told his ARVN counterparts.

on his head when the sound alone was of such an unimaginable intensity? Afraid? Of course you're afraid. Even if you're made of steel, the steel melts; even if you take some medicine, the pills lose their power. Marx, Lenin, Chairman Hồ, General Võ<sup>69</sup>—all would be powerless in this upside down and cruel space.

You're afraid, but when Nguyễn Đình Nghiêm (service and unit number HT 810042SZ7) writes a letter home to his family in Nghệ An, he tries to hide his fear. He encourages his family to "work conscientiously to fulfill expectations." He counsels his younger sister "to study hard and strive to achieve progress in many areas guided by the leadership of the Party." But toward the end of his letter, unable to restrain himself, Nghiêm writes directly: "Battlefield conditions are very hard, extremely difficult. There are times when two or three years go by and I cannot write, so you, Dad, Mom, and all the family should not wait for my letter." How can you write under 17 passes by B-52's? How can you write under an AC-130 Spectre<sup>70</sup> that shoots three radar-guided 105mm shells per round? Of course you cannot write a letter when it's obvious you cannot live. How can you live, Communists? How can you live and be victorious, Mr. Võ Nguyên Giáp, the stupidest genius in history? How many oceans it would take to wash away this wrong! The resentment piles up to towering heights.

Far from this cruelest of fronts, in the large rear areas in the North, people were encouraged in ways explained in this letter from home addressed to Nguyễn Văn Huru (service and unit number 271003TB004): "This Tết I'll<sup>71</sup> buy and bring back for mother one 5-kilogram package of sugar, the amount the collective allots to those with a family member in military service. Mother said that she would bring flour and eggs but they're too expensive. I said I'd make fifty cakes and some pudding and she agreed."<sup>72</sup> What could

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<sup>69</sup>General Võ Nguyên Giáp, Minister of Defense, the planner of the 1972 offensive.

<sup>70</sup>"Spectre" was the nickname for the AC-130, a transport aircraft that was turned into an aerial firing platform by mounting guns on the side. Ballard (1982:243) lists the successful functions Spectres and Stingers (a later model of this gunship) played in the Battle of An Lộc as follows: "splintering enemy attacks, driving communists out of dug-in positions, suppressing anti-aircraft fire, lifting the morale of friendly troops, interdicting trucks and other vehicles, and assisting air cargo deliveries."

<sup>71</sup>It's not clear whether the "I" ("em") in the letter is the soldier's wife or younger sister.

<sup>72</sup>Apparently, the sister or the wife (whichever it is) of the soldier decided to use her own flour and eggs to make the cakes and pudding.

be more pitiful! For three years you work happily for liberation and your reward is a five-kilogram package of sugar! Who are you liberating and for what, Nguyễn Văn Hữu? How are you going to liberate the South and bring social progress with one five-kilogram package of sugar?

When confronted with An Lộc, logic doesn't help. One is left with only a sad sigh to release the pain in the chest, and swollen eyes that cannot cry. Crying isn't possible.

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