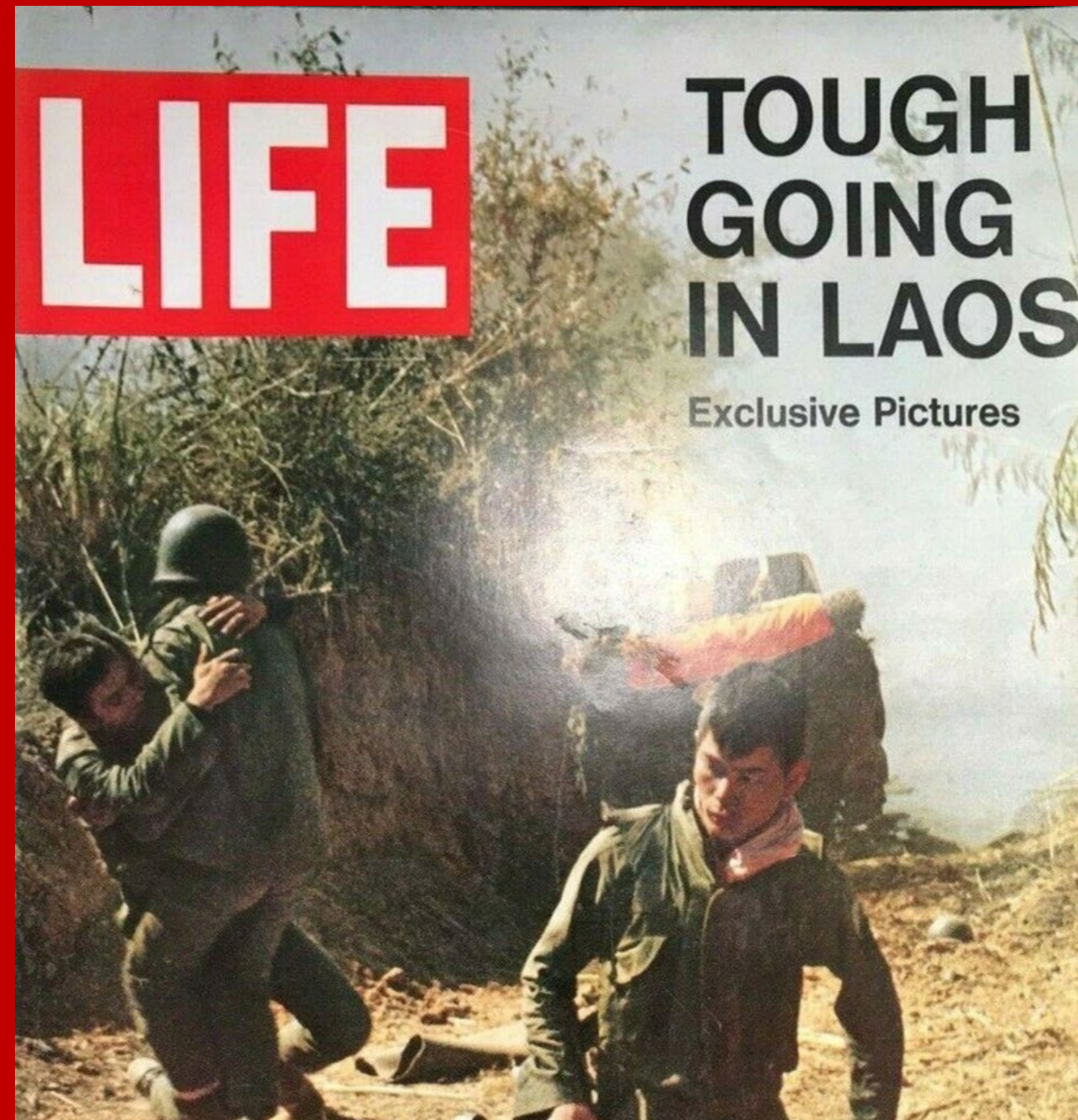


**Lam Son 719: The  
Invasion of Laos,  
February-March 1971**  
**The test of  
Vietnamization**

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# The Vietnam War in the year 1971

- Nixon has been President since 1968
- US is looking for “Peace with Honour”
- US military is attempting to achieve all its designated goals, yet still withdraw
- Significant US ground forces are still in place, but will withdraw soon
- Nixon administration is still very aggressive militarily
- Success in 1970 – invasion of Cambodia
- Part of the ongoing Vietnamization plan



# Vietnam: An impossible problem without no easy solution

- Which alternative is worse for Nixon?
- Weakening of the US position in SE Asia,  
AND
- becoming the first US President to lose a war  
OR
- Continue to fight in Vietnam and risk the alienation of the US populace, political upheaval and risk his re-election
- Loss of political support regardless of whatever strategy he pursues



# “Vietnamization”

US still wants to win – after all this time

Nixon willing to do anything – but has no real strategy at first

**Vietnamization is the “new plan”**

Beat back communism in SE Asia – using airpower

Quiet domestic opposition

Reduce US casualties

Make the S Vietnamese fight the ground war

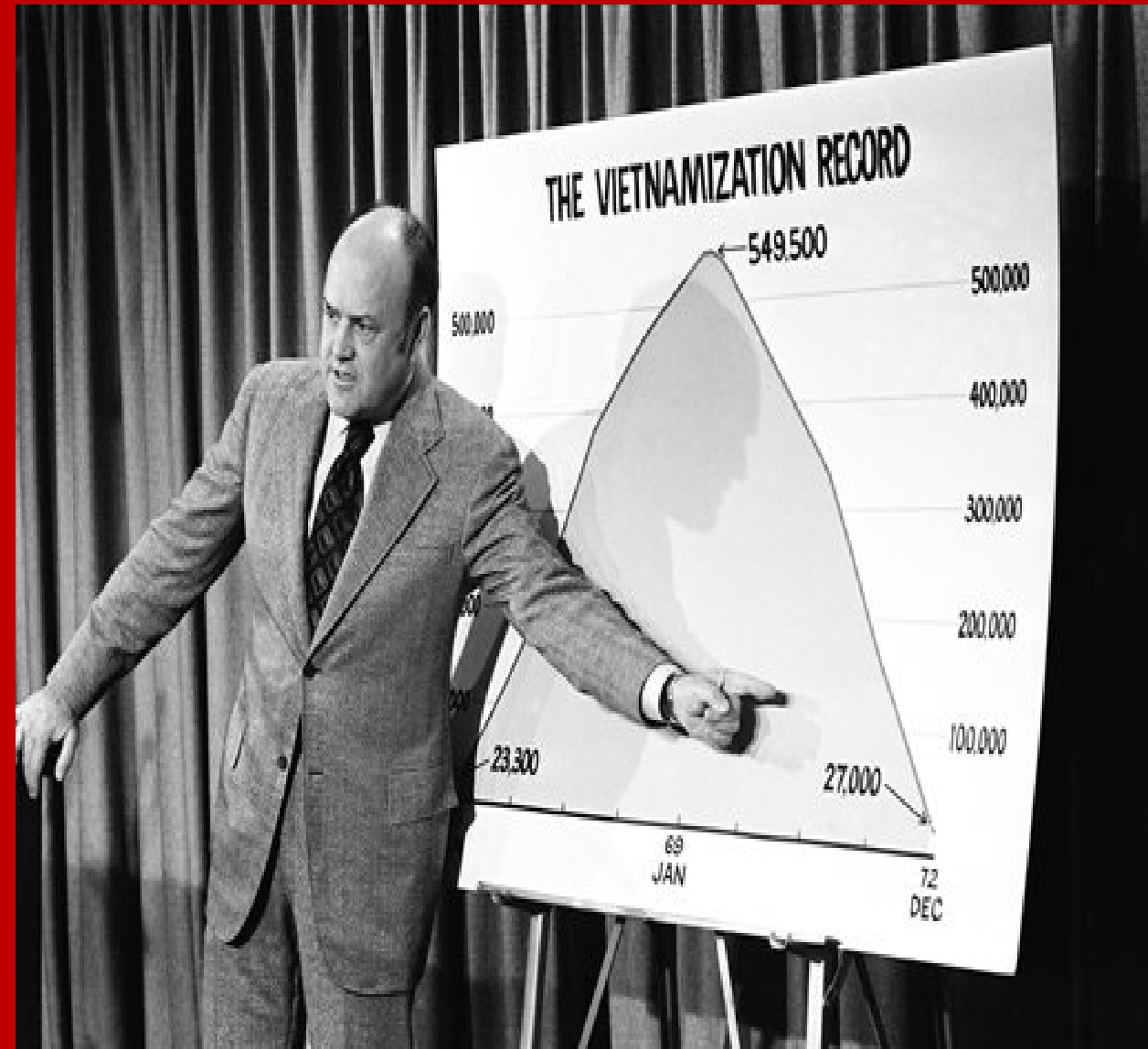
End the US draft eventually

Win hearts and minds in Vietnam – spending money on Vietnamese villages and defending them

Phoenix program

Detente – thaw relations with USSR and PRC

Force peace talks



# Setting the scene

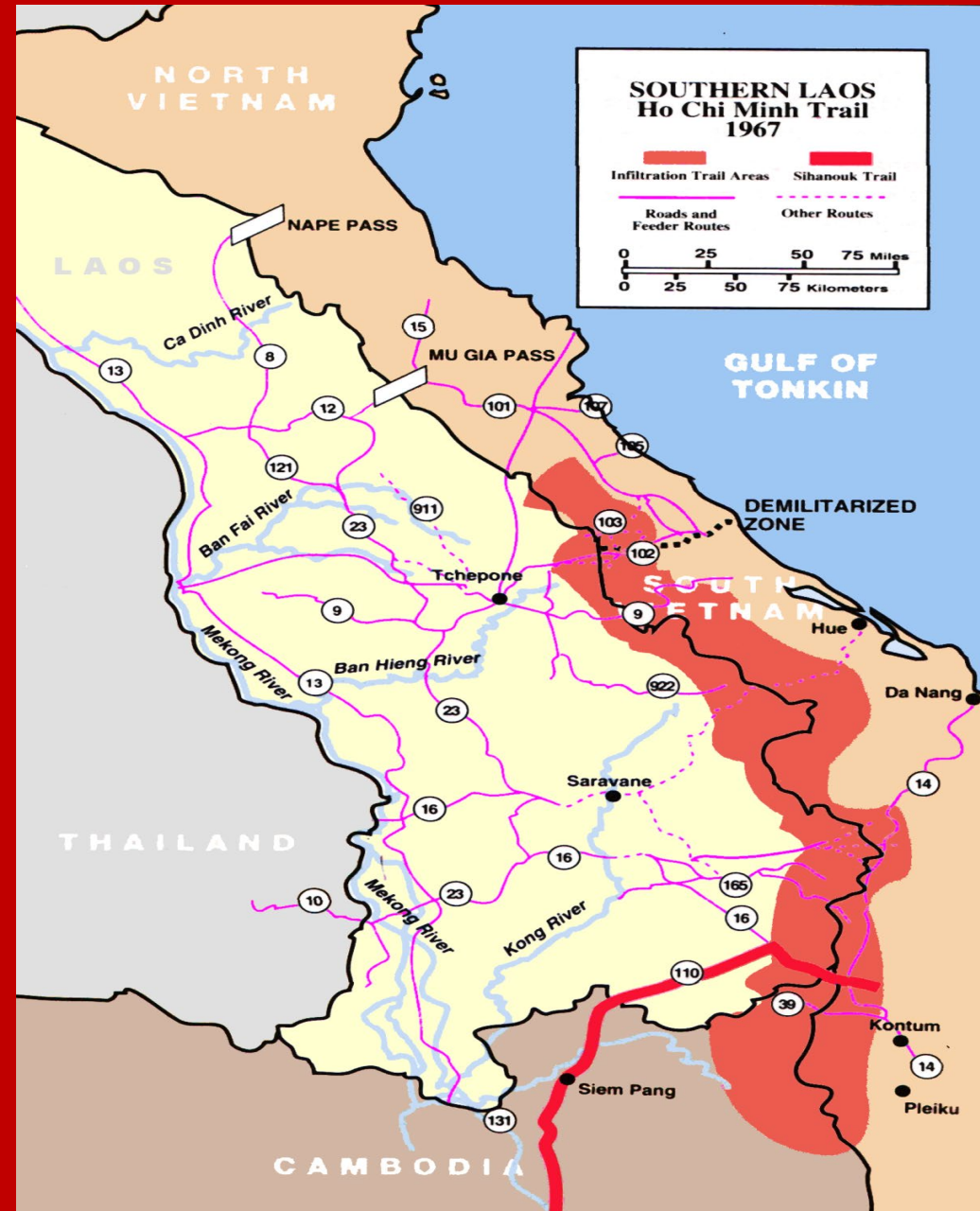
Ho Chi Minh trail

A massive achievement

Target of an air campaign that is not working

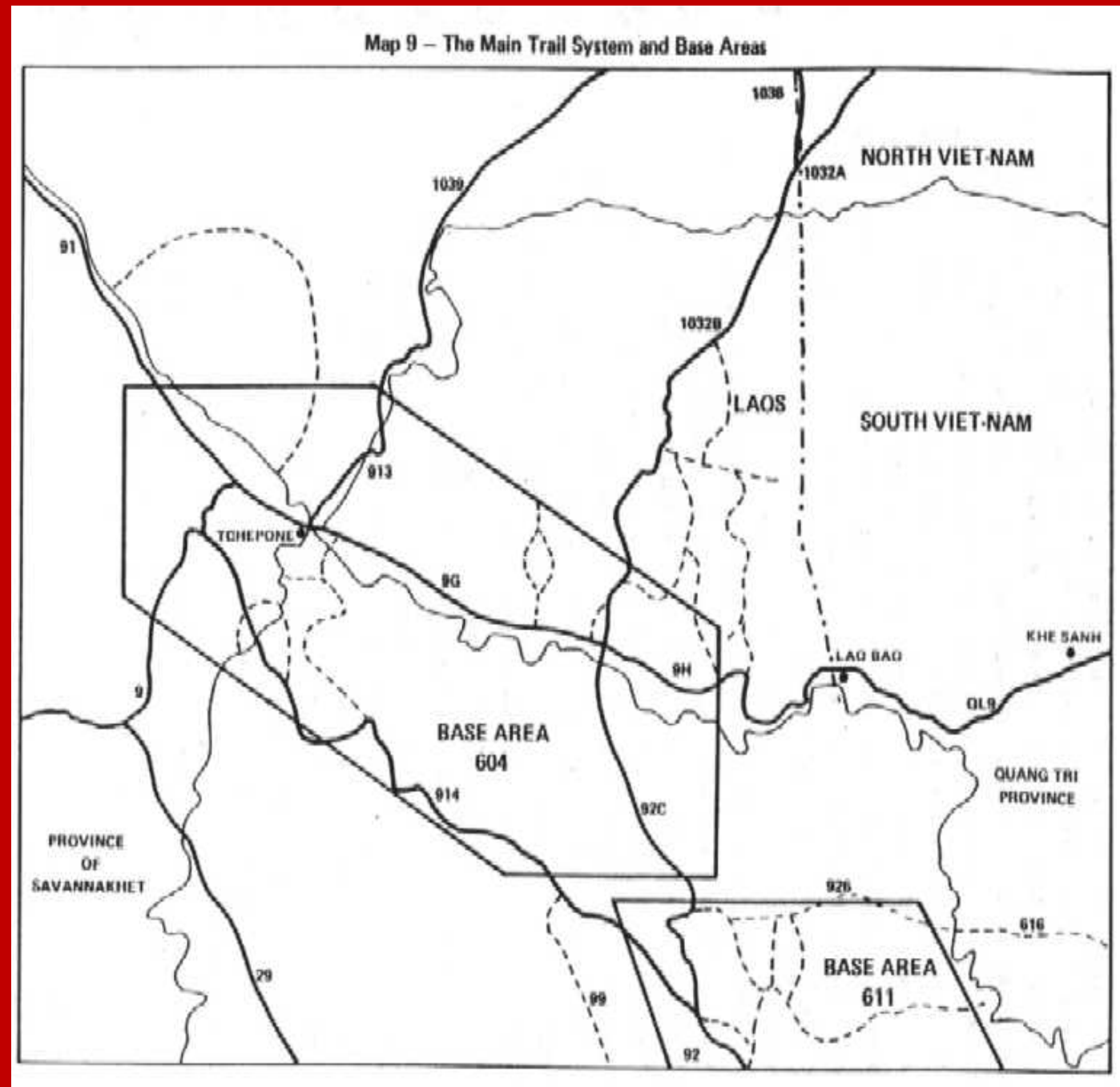
NVA dry season offensive might come

Large parts of Laos are basically run and controlled by the NVA



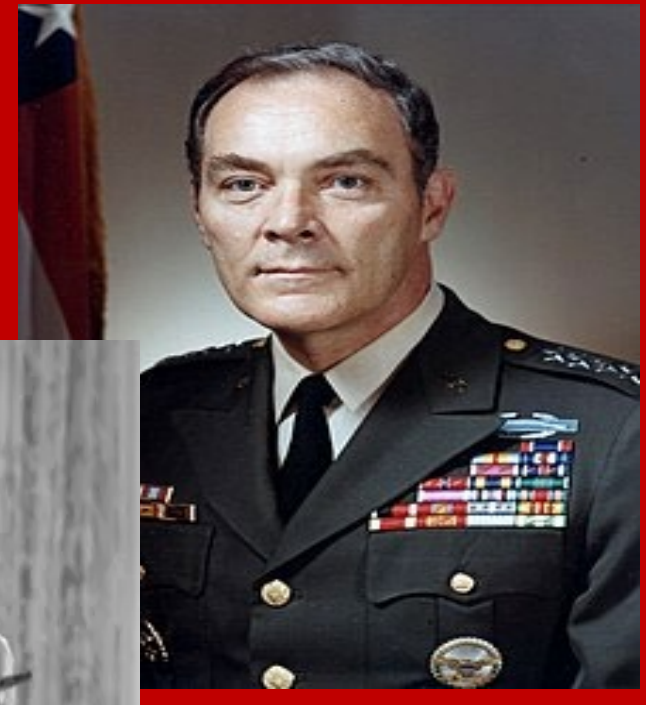
# Setting the scene

- Laos is a key chokepoint in the Ho Chi Minh Trail
- But MACV is hesitant – could the ARVN attack it alone ?
- Laos is the most bombed area on earth
- Tchepone is the key hub – in the eyes of MACV
- Huge NVA operational area
- Powerful NVA forces nearby to the south and north



# The plan to invade of Laos – where did it come from ?

- 1970 port of Sihanoukville is closed in Cambodia to the N Vietnamese (70 % of traffic)
- Increased logistical activity is noticed by MACV – An offensive ??
- Kissinger, Haig – impetus
- Nixon is intrigued
- Cambodian success in 1970 must be continued
- Another victory for the ARVN ??
- Cut the H C M trail in half !!!!
- Peace deal as a result ?
- Lam Son 719 is the codeword for the operation



# They never wanted it – Passive resistance

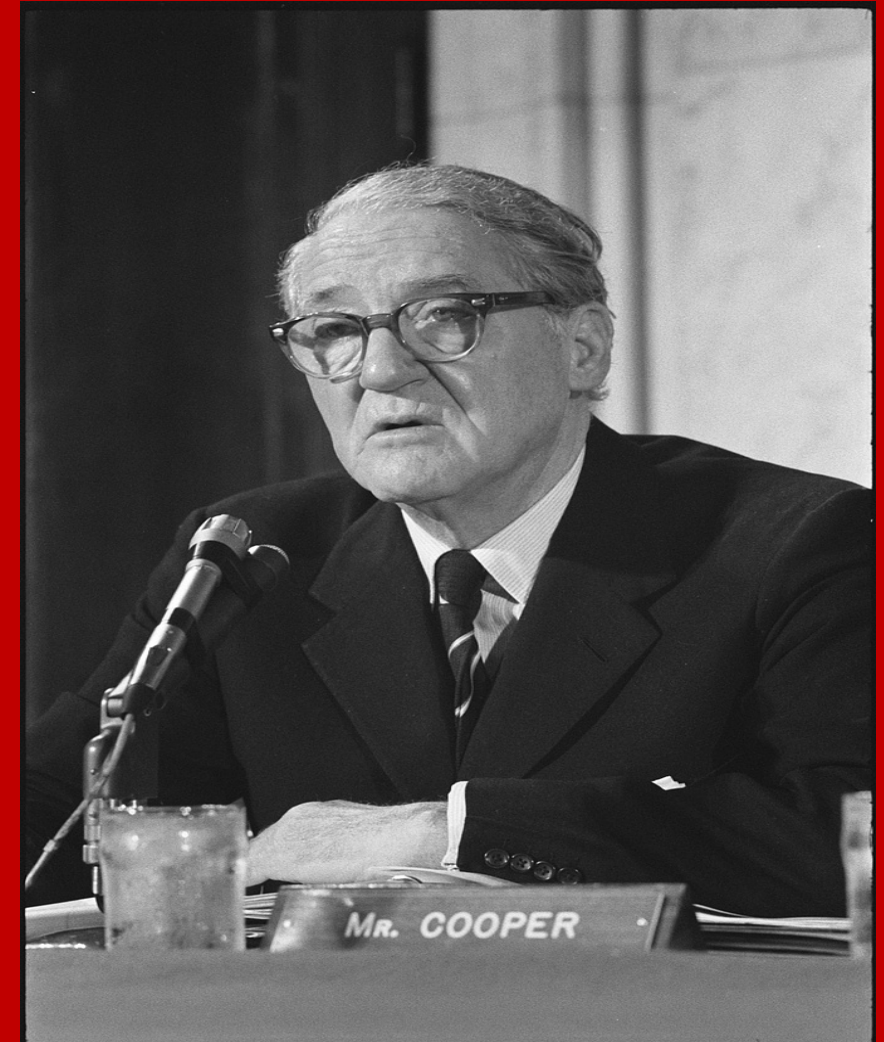
- MACV is hesitant
- Abrams is hesitant
- Thieu is hesitant
- ARVN is largely led by incompetent political generals
- S of Def is Laird hesitant
- Despite powerful US forces
- What if it turns into a disaster?
- Everything gained in Cambodia in 1970 could be lost





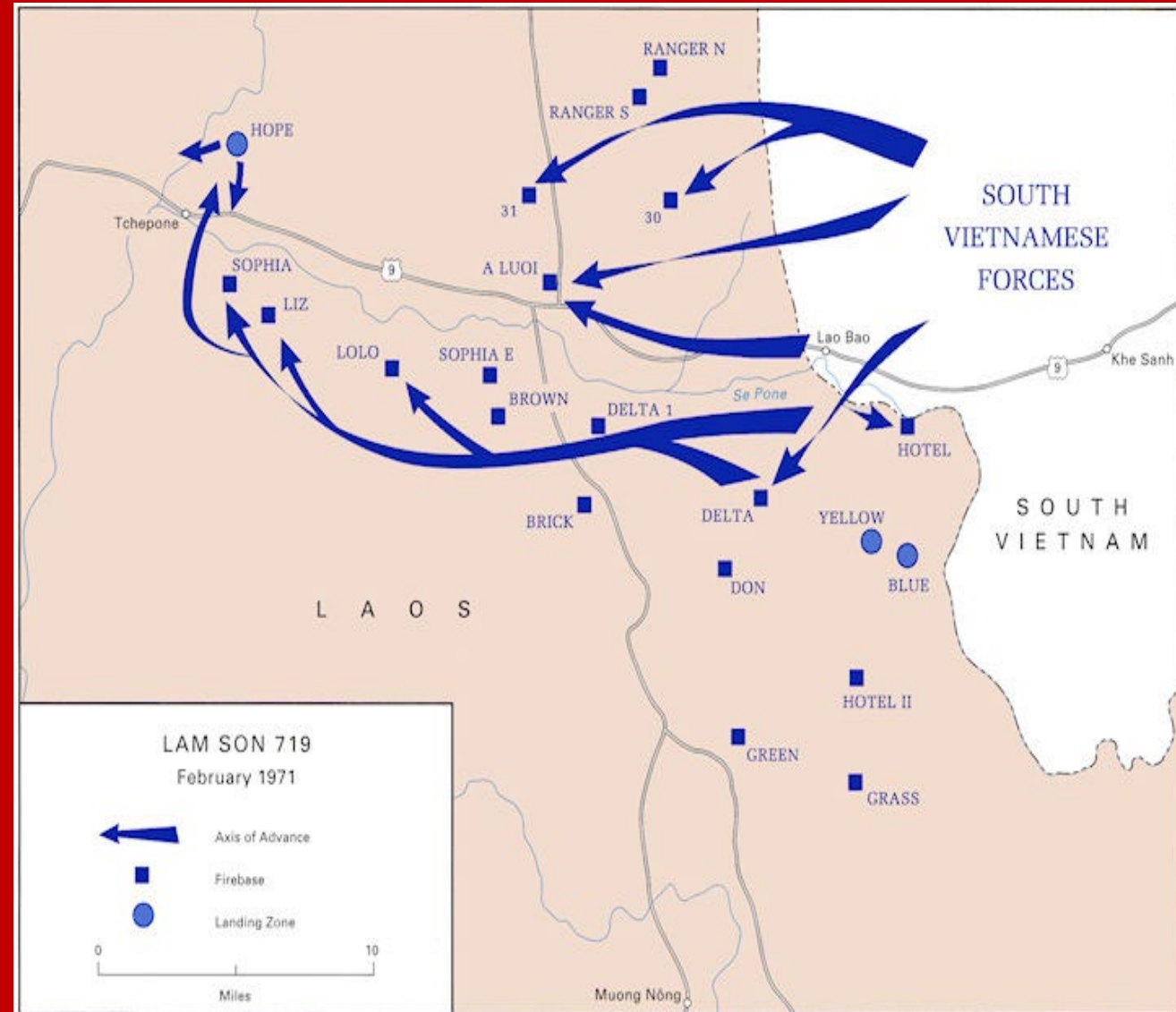
# US military - hands tied behind their back.....and facing other issues

- Cooper-Church Amendment Dec 1970
- Jan 1971 Congress declares no US ground forces allowed outside of S Vietnam
- Still very powerful US forces present – XXIV Corps - these could have attacked
- US is cognizant of Chinese, USSR possible involvement
- Insane situation defying all military logic that victory can be negotiated in a “limited war”
- Denied the chance to attack and win by a government that would see them die and did not deserve their valour or sacrifice
- Morale, discipline and drug issues



# The plans - Phase I and II

- Dewey Canyon II
- Clear up to the old Khe Sanh base, Lang Vei and the border
- Rebuild everything
- Lam Son 719 – ARVN part
- Withdrawal after objectives “achieved”



# LS 719 - Top Secret ? Is the ARVN ready to conduct a corps level attack?

- Operational security is poor
- News media is everywhere
- S Vietnamese communist infiltrators and traitors
- Dewey Canyon gives it away
- Front page news in the US
- US and ARVN force press towards border – XXIV Corps commander Lt General Sutherland, I Corps Commander Lt General Lam

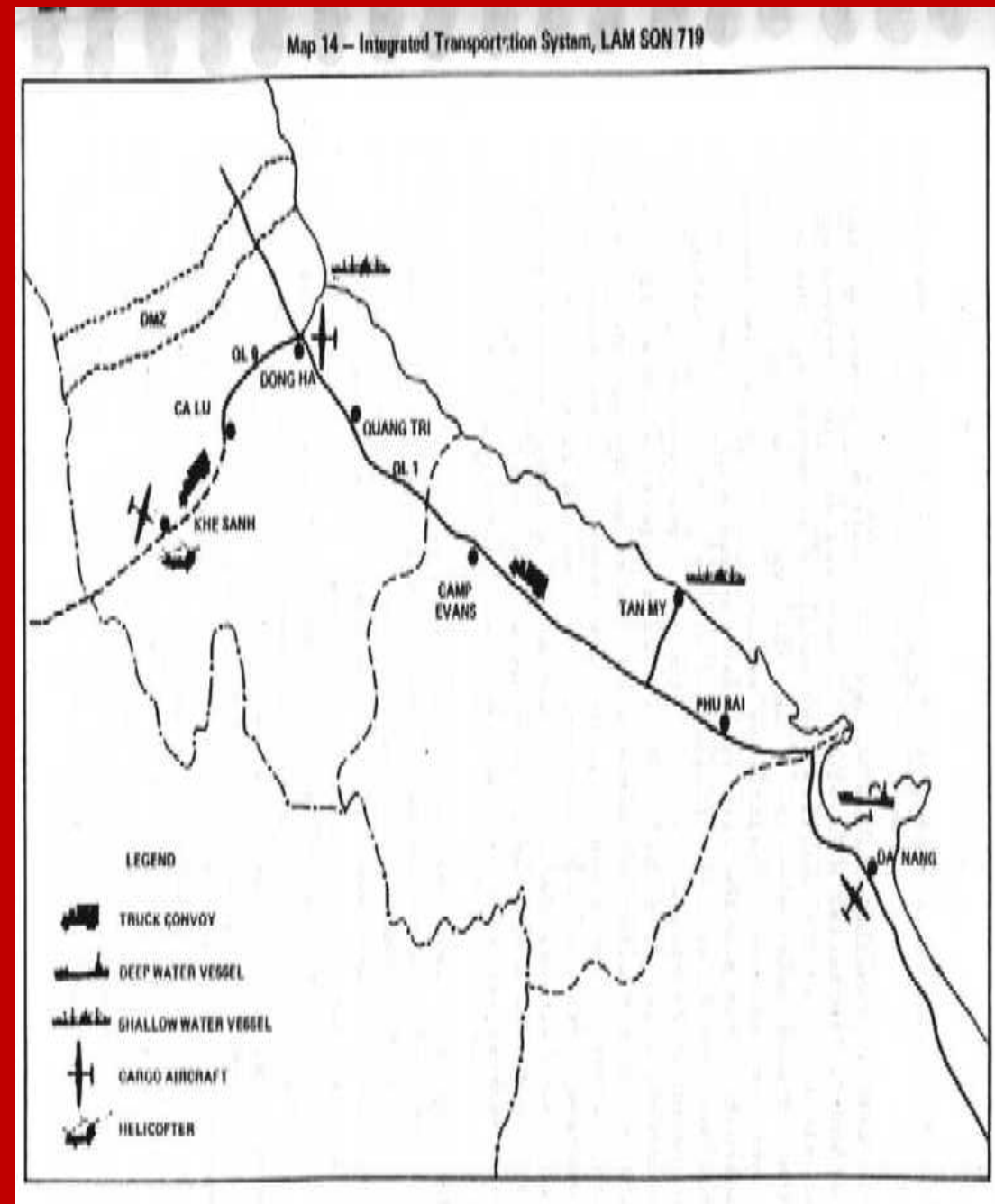


# The US MACV objectives

- Cut and destroy the Ho Chi Mihn Trail in Laos— logistics arteries and supply caches
- Good experience for the ARVN
- Vietnamization can continue !!
- Delay or inhibit future NVA major offensives
- Make use of US forces while they are still there
- Follow up success in Cambodia and the closure of Sihanoukville port
- Allow US forces to withdraw
- Possibly set the conditions for a peace treaty

# The logistics

- Trucks to the FSBs, Khe Sahn and Lang Vei
- Blocking positions within S Vietnam to project this build up
- Massive helicopter bases set up
- Air logistics from Da Nang
- Route 9 rebuilt and improved
- Massive airmobile effort
- Moving the majority of ARVN elite divisions to northern S Vietnam

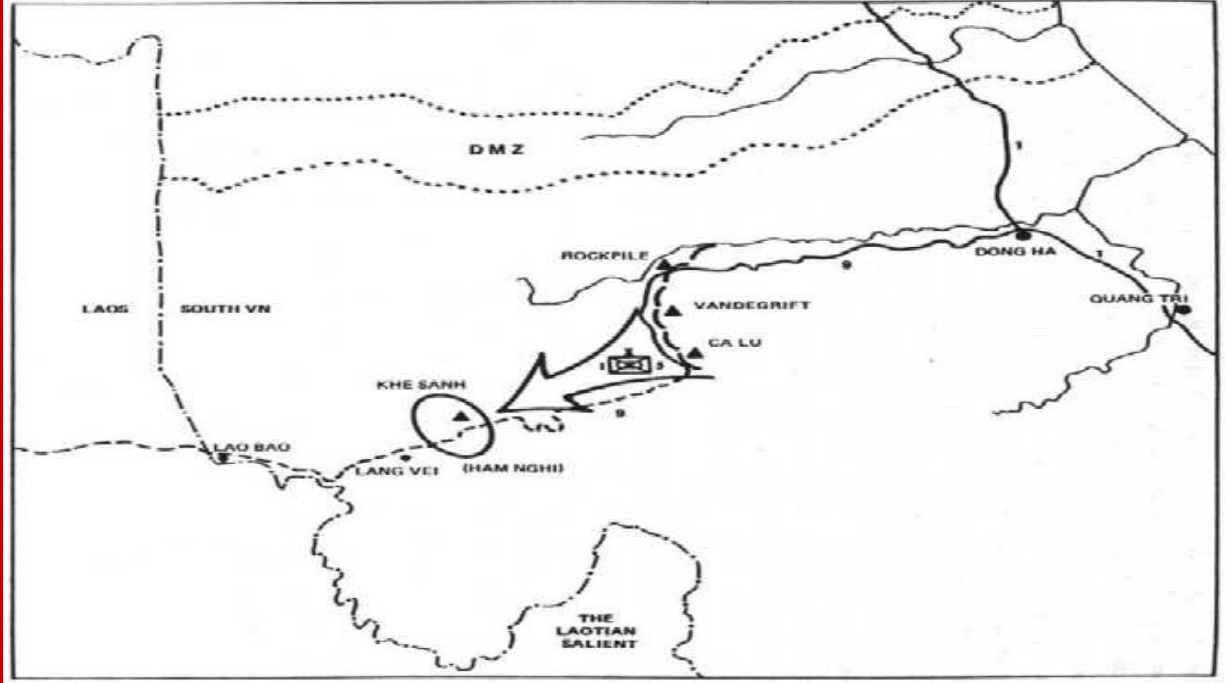


# 30 January Dewey Canyon II begins !

- US 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division brigade – Tanks, APCs
- 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, part of the 23<sup>rd</sup> (Americal) Division forces – airmobile attack
- 30 Jan the armoured columns roll
- Khe Sanh is seized
- Feint in the A Shau Valley to the south and feint towards N Vietnam by USN amphibious forces
- No major NVA opposition



Map 10 – Operation Plan, Phase I (Dewey Canyon II)



# The ARVN attacks 8 February 1971

- From the air and the ground - the I Corps front moves forward into Laos
- Best ARVN divisions – cream of its army – pushed down the Se Pon River valley on Route 9
- HUGE US support
- Firebases and LZs in S Vietnam
- USAF bases within Vietnam – Da Nang still in operation
- Lt General Hoang Xuan Lam – political I Corps Commander



# The ARVN armoured columns stall !!

- Not used to major convention division level (AND Corps level) operations
  - Disorganization – lack of impetus
  - HQs too far away - Lack of verbal orders
  - Units are static, not maneuvering
- FSBs are fortified, but vulnerable
- Engineering effort is needed to press forward
  - ARVN I Corps leaders are not dynamic –it's not their plan!! - they are worried about their flanks





Ground traffic becomes impossible – it turns into a helicopter war

ARVN begin endless patrols of the area from their FSBs

Logistics = helicopters

NVA AAA effort is stepped up

This stifles the advance even more





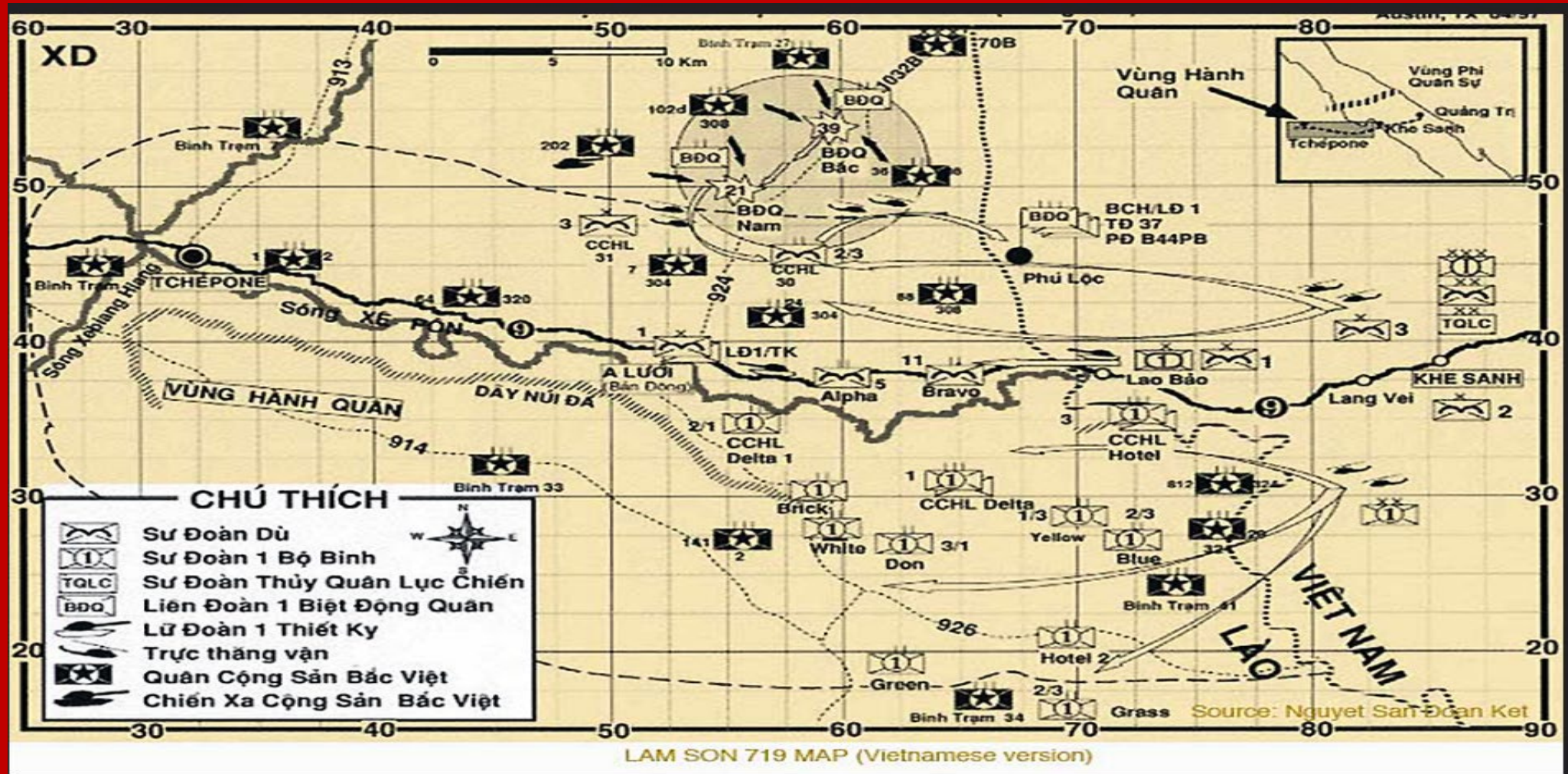
... Chinook helicopter unloads a stream of supplies extracted  
at Hai Loc, South Vietnam. This was a staging area where the supplies were  
moved out along Route 3 on their way to the front. Few of the operation was  
... (AP Wirephoto/See AP Wirephoto (rb50300stf)1971.

# The NVA gradually react – Early March

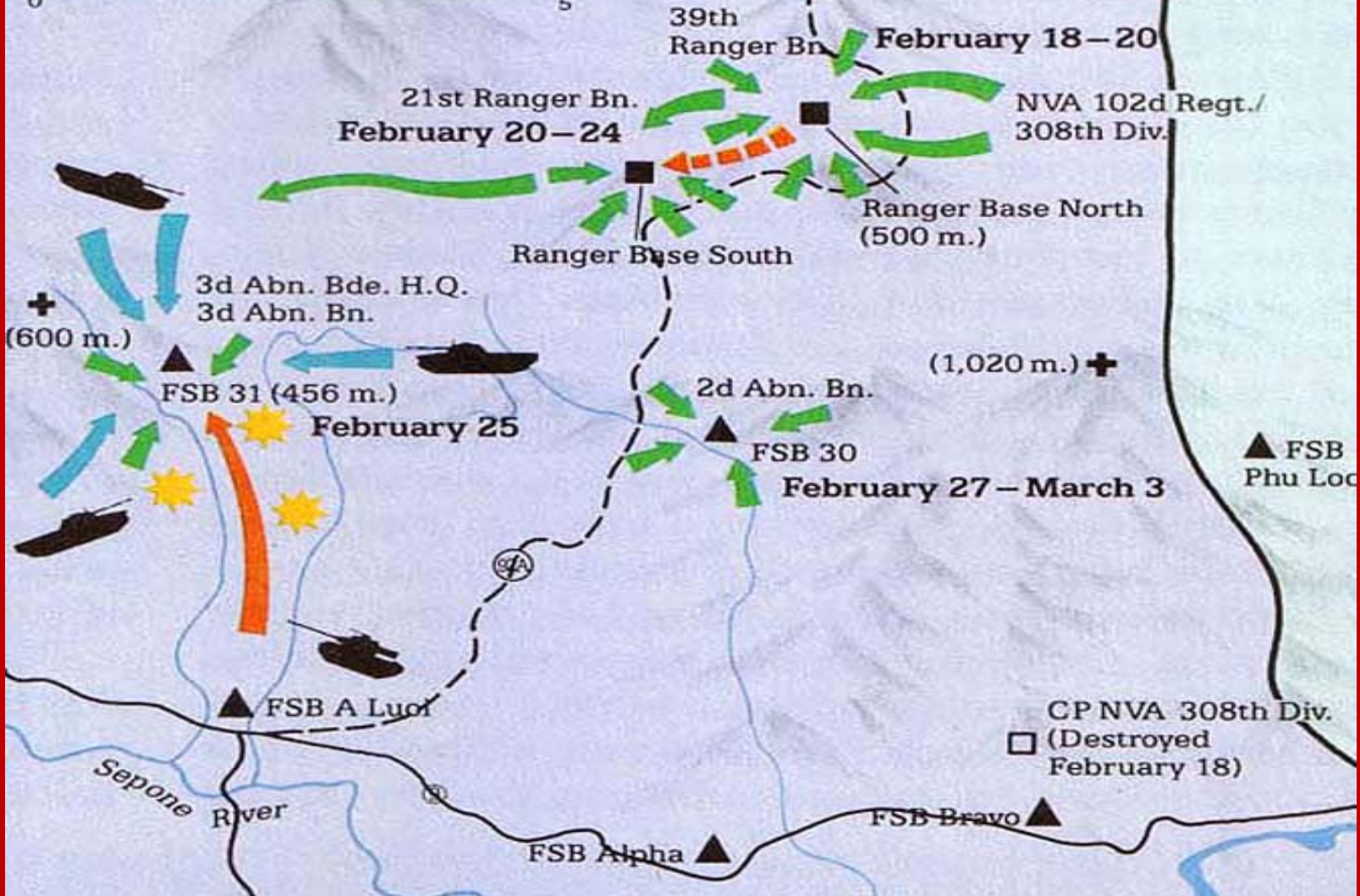
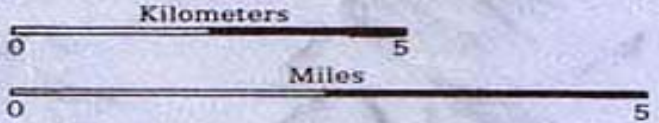
- Massive effort is made to re-route Ho Chi Minh trail to the west
- Hanoi decides the US naval task force off N Vietnam is a feint
- B-70 corps – 304<sup>th</sup> , 308<sup>th</sup> , 320<sup>th</sup> Divisions are in the area
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Division moves up from the south
- NVA artillery outranges ARVN artillery pieces
- NVA T-55 tanks outclass the ARVN M-41 Walker Bulldog tanks
- NVA General Le Tron Tan arrives to coordinate a counteroffensive
- Slowly, they gain numerical superiority over the ARVN 2:1



# The NVA attempt to crush Ranger N and S 18 Feb 1971 (one example of multiple attacks)



# The Northern Bases



# Meanwhile ... Plan B – airmobile attack north of Tchepone

- 15 Feb Abrams and Sutherland fly to Lam's HQ
- Try to get things going
- Suggest an airmobile attack to seize Tchepone
- Push more forces south
- Symbolic achievement
- Tchepone is not part of the NVA road network





# Tchepone falls – a pyrrhic victory

- ARVN Marine units inserted to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Inf Div positions
- ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Inf Div then assaults Tchepone
- Abrams and Sutherland put pressure on Lam and Thieu to stay in Laos and fight a major battle there with all US supporting assets
- This is the conventional battle that has been sought since 1965 !!!
- 3 March the airmobile attack is launched, and LZs established
- 6 March - largest airmobile assault of the war on Tchepone – it is seized







# VIETNAM HELICOPTER PILOTS ASSOCIATION

## 1994 MEMBERSHIP DIRECTORY

Volume 11

October, 1994

# LOLO



# President Thieu orders withdrawal – “Victory is achieved”

- Political capital is gained
- Fall RVN elections
- More ARVN and Marine forces are inserted, but the S Vietnamese want out
- Replacement for Lam – III Corps General Do Cai Tri – killed in a helicopter crash
- NVA activity spikes as they move in more forces to outnumber the ARVN two to one and inflict damage



# The NVA goes for it – cut the ARVN off and destroy them at An Loi

- Several assaults at once on FSBs and LZs as the ARVN and Marines begin to withdraw
- Heavy combat as the NVA attempt to cut them off
- Heavy USAF airstrikes to beat back NVA tank supported attacks
- Large number of NVA AAA, field artillery and rocket units in action
- B-52 air strikes





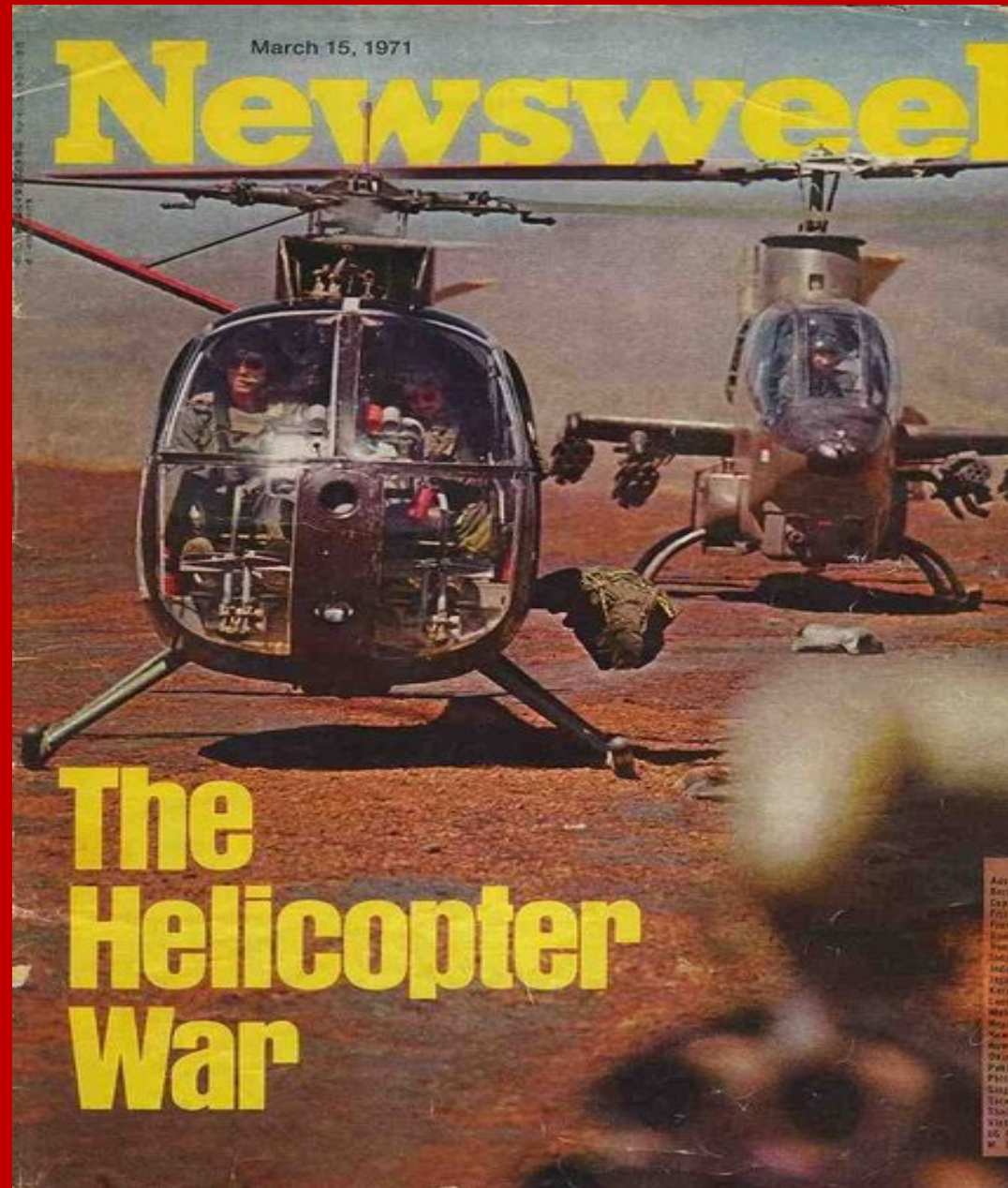
Color by  
[facebook.com/ak.pk.3](https://www.facebook.com/ak.pk.3)

Desperate scenes at some ARVN units at the FSBs and LZs as the NVA move in



# The combat rages

- Massive USAF air effort
- Huge number of ground attack sorties
- Massive helicopter operations
- NVA fight very hard in successfully executed operations using conventional warfare tactics
- US Army aviation gives its all
- Large number of US helicopters are shot down or badly damaged



# Back in Washington – Nixon is given poor information

- What reports are given to Nixon and his key staffers rarely are in touch with reality
- Often the info is inaccurate
- Nixon believes the US military leadership is incompetent and refusing to execute
- The decision is made to replace Abrams, and this will occur during the 1972 Easter Offensive



# The withdrawal – with the NVA snapping at their heels

- Withdrawal begins 6 March
- ARVN units barely make it back to the lines of US forces in S Vietnam
- Avoid major destruction – escaping Laos by 25 March
- NVA came very close to accomplishing the annihilation of ARVN units
- The NVA claim the “Route 9 – Southern Laos Victory” was a complete success and claims inflated numbers of ARVN and US dead and destroyed equipment
- NVA actually expanded their transport network to the west and transport more supplies with increased truck traffic in the summer



# Detached from reality – the spin on TV and in the newspapers

- Crazy claims that do not correspond to events on the ground
- Nixon claims victory and presents further evidence of ARVN Vietnamization
- 7 April Nixon praises Vietnamization on live television
- LS 719 is seen by the anti-war movement and congress as an expansion of the war, not part of a wind-down



# NVA losses

- Very unclear how many killed, wounded – the ARVN claims are huge
- Certainly, thousands
- Large numbers of scarce NVA armoured vehicles and trucks are destroyed
- Large losses are inflicted due to US airstrikes
- Much of the AAA defenses in the area are destroyed



# The impact on the ARVN – the failure of Vietnamization

- Huge loss of confidence
- Some ARVN units did fight well, others poorly
- Huge training and resource investment by the US in their military is not returned
- No real drive or determination to engage decisively with the NVA



# The losses – RVN and US forces

- US Forces:
- 215 killed
- 1,149 wounded
- 38 missing
- ARVN and RVN  
Marines
- 1,146-8,843 killed
- 4,236-12,420 wounded
- 1767 missing or  
captured



# Temporary decimation of the US Army helicopter force

- 108 helicopters of all types destroyed
- 618 badly damaged
- 20 % of these are write offs
- Makes the US Army question the airmobile doctrine in the face of an enemy with powerful weapons, ready to fight



# Where did this leave Nixon, Kissinger, and Abrams ?

- More conciliatory position for future negotiations
- Forced to rely upon US airpower even more
- More desperate for a solution or quick end to the war
- The South Vietnamese are seen more than ever as a political and military deadweight
- The South Vietnamese now actively seek to delay US withdrawal

