

Failure to Prepare: The Inability of Security Force Assistance to Win in Vietnam

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Failure to Prepare: The Inability of Security Force Assistance to Win in Vietnam, by LTC Nathanal J. Patton, US Army, 34 pages.

This monograph is a structured focused analysis of Operation Lam Son 719 that explores the failed attempt at security force assistance to South Vietnam. The operation took place between January and March, 1971 and resulted in over 1,900 killed and 7,700 wounded – mainly South Vietnamese. The US Army lost over eighty-two helicopters in support of the operation. In the end, the operation was a minor success and not worth the cost in blood, treasure or political capital. Expanding the war into Laos created significant political turmoil in the United States, which in turn increased the rate of troop withdrawals from Vietnam. For the United States, the war was ending and combat troops were gone in 1973. Promised continued support from President Nixon, the South Vietnamese would continue to fight a losing battle until 1975. Much of the blame for the mixed result of Operation Lam Son 719 is placed on the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces leadership, the limited time the operation was planned, and low morale, but this study demonstrates that the assistance approach Military Assistance Command Vietnam took was also a significant cause. Security force assistance did not help South Vietnam from losing the war; it merely prolonged it.

Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Acronyms	vi
Illustrations	vii
Introduction	1
Literature Review	6
Methodology	9
Case Study: Operation Lam Son 719	14
Findings and Analysis	26
Conclusion.....	33
Bibliography	35

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Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CHECO	Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations
CINCPAC	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command
CINCPACAF	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Air Force
CINCPACFLT	Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FSF	Foreign Security Force
GVN	Government of Vietnam
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JP	Joint Publication
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAF	Marine Amphibious Force
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PACFLT	Pacific Fleet
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SFA	Security Force Assistance
USARPAC	United States Army Pacific
USASCV	United States Army Support Command Vietnam
USPACOM	United States Pacific Command
VC	Viet Cong

Illustrations

Figure 1. Map of the Ho Chi Minh Trail 11

Figure 2. Map of Operation Lam Son 719 17

Introduction

In the space of a single generation, America had traversed the Second World War, the Korean War, and a decade and a half of Cold War crises. Vietnam proved one exertion too many, the sacrifice that was too unbearable because it was so at odds with traditional American values and expectations.

—Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*

In 1969, the United States was in a brutal contest, eager to stem the spread of communism from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam into the Republic of Vietnam. Up until 1969, the United States imposed a strategy to search and destroy the insurgency in the south that opposed the democratic government. These insurgents were known as the Viet-Cong. The strategy was effective, though costly for Americans. Between 1956 and 1959 the death toll was only four in three years. After 1959, it rose annually to a staggering 16,899 by 1968. In total, nearly 49,000 Americans died in Vietnam in thirteen years of conflict (1956-1969).¹ The death toll, along with significant social pressure from the growing protests against the war, changed the United States strategy at the behest of President Richard Nixon. The new strategy was called “Vietnamization” and focused on training and modernizing the South Vietnamese military to eventually assume the role of defending their country and enabling a gradual withdrawal of American forces. When announcing the new strategy via a nationally televised speech on November 3, 1969, President Nixon said, “The defense of freedom is everybody’s business, not just America’s business. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened In the previous administration, we Americanized the war in Vietnam. In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace.”²

¹ “Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War,” National Archives, accessed August 19, 2017, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>.

² Richard Nixon, Nationally televised speech: November 3, 1969, “Address to the Nation on Vietnam,” The American Presidency Project, accessed January 27, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2303>.

Through the early 1970s, the war effort in Vietnam changed from searching and destroying insurgents to training and equipping the South Vietnamese to continue the fight. How do you train and equip foreign security forces (FSF) to change from countering an insurgency to executing offensive and defensive operations? That was the challenge handed to the commander and staff of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in 1969. Success would enable the Republic of Vietnam to defend herself and provide the United States the ability to strategically withdraw from the war while stopping the spread of communism in its tracks. With political pressure mounting in Washington, DC, MACV urgently needed to prove that Vietnamization would work by demonstrating the preparedness of the South Vietnamese military. To demonstrate preparedness, the command chose two large-scale, corps-level operations led by the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) and assisted by the United States. The first was the campaign into Cambodia in 1970 which was successful, but the second, an offensive into Laos in 1971 was not.

The Cambodian campaign included 30,000 Vietnamese and 50,000 American soldiers. This operation, while militarily successful, was a political nightmare for the Nixon Administration, which in turn placed more emphasis on a Vietnamese-led, United States-assisted operation. In February 1971, the RVNAF launched an offensive into Laos and became embroiled in a two-month long conflict that was a catastrophic failure. Operation Lam Son 719 verified that the South Vietnamese were not yet ready to assume the responsibility for the war and the hopes of speeding up "Vietnamization" took a setback.

Historically, the US military has supported foreign governments by training and assisting security forces to conduct independent military operations. When the security forces demonstrate the capability to successfully plan and execute offensive, defensive and occasionally counterinsurgency missions at the operational level, the United States declares security force assistance (SFA) mission accomplishment. The outcome of Operation Lam Son 719 (1971),

demonstrated that the South Vietnamese military was not fully prepared to conduct offensive operations without significant external support from the United States.

The purpose of this monograph is to discover why strategies to develop a FSF to conduct operational level missions often fall short of expectations. By employing a single case study methodology to discern the causes for the failure experienced during the corps-level operation into Laos in 1971 called Operation Lam Son 719, it will likely demonstrate common themes for current operations in Iraq. Chronologically presented, it will examine the circumstances and execution of the operation focusing on corps-level operations and the enablers that were or were not present.

The recent conflict in Iraq highlights the attempts of the United States to build a nation's military and the initial failure of that endeavor. In Iraq, the forces that were trained and equipped by the United States were insufficiently prepared in 2014 to stop the Islamic State from claiming significant territory and spreading its ideology. There are distinct similarities between "Vietnamization" in Vietnam and the efforts to "train and equip" security forces in Iraq. The significant difference between Iraq and Vietnam is that in Iraq, the United States continued to support Iraqi forces to defeat the Islamic State while in Vietnam, the United States turned her back on the South Vietnamese. According to current doctrine,

[s]ecurity force assistance (SFA) activities are conducted to organize, train, equip, rebuild/build, and advise foreign security forces from the ministerial/department level down to the tactical unit level. SFA activities are most effective when conducted by carefully selected, properly trained, and well-experienced personnel (as trainers or advisers). In addition to being subject matter experts (SMEs), they should also have the sociocultural understanding, language skills, and seasoned maturity to relate more effectively with and train foreign security forces (FSF). Ideally, SFA activities help build the FSF's capacity to manage and maintain their own forces independent of sustained USG efforts.³

³ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 3-20, *Security Cooperation* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), II-8.

Training and assisting foreign security forces requires a methodical approach to providing instruction to execute tasks, operate equipment and incorporate enablers at both the tactical and operational levels. Future planners should examine Operation Lam Son 719 to gain insight into the challenges of preparing foreign security forces to lead their nation's security efforts.

For this monograph, the operational level will be restricted to mean army corps, both from the United States Army and the Republic of Vietnam, while external support refers to American military SFA provided to the FSF during the actual execution of missions. This study will also explore the United States' national strategic goals for the conflict in Vietnam during the Nixon Administration and how those political ambitions impacted the operational objectives, particularly as the United States was trying to end the conflict.

This monograph will rely on two hypotheses to test the validity of the thesis. The first hypothesis asserts that if the FSF can integrate the warfighting functions of intelligence, fires, sustainment, movement and maneuver, protection, and mission command, then they are prepared to execute independent operational-level military missions. The second hypothesis asserts that if the FSF is trained to execute independently at the operational level, then the United States will no longer be required to provide significant support. The hypotheses will be tested by answering the following questions:

1. What was the United States' national strategy for Vietnam in 1971?
2. What operational approach did the US military take to train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces?
3. Did the US military train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to integrate the elements of combat power for offensive operations?
4. Did the US military training focus on the offensive, defensive or counterinsurgency operations?
5. Did the US military train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to conduct operational level missions?

6. What impact did the outcome of Operation Lam Son 719 have on the United States' strategy for Vietnam?

This monograph is limited in scope to unclassified and declassified primary and secondary sources available either online or at the Combined Arms Research Library. These sources are also either written in or translated into English. The focus of this study is limited to corps and division-level operations in Zone 1, specifically from Khe San into Laos from the fall of 1970 through April 1971 (see figure 2 on page 17 for a map of the Military Regions). This period includes the events leading up to the execution of Operation Lam Son 719 from January 7, 1971, to April 6, 1971.

This monograph is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, the literature review includes a detailed discussion of operational art and the terms strategy, operational objectives and political aims. The third section describes the methodology of the research. Section four portrays the historical case study of Operation Lam Son 719. Section five provides the findings and analysis of this operation. Finally, section six provides the conclusion of this study and the potential impacts on future planning to gain insight into the challenges of preparing FSF to lead their nation's security efforts.

Literature Review

This section examines the literature researched to develop an understanding of political aims, strategy and operational objectives of Operation Lam Son 719. The section identifies the sources applied to provide an understanding of the strategic policies and techniques used to train the RVNAF to eventually assume responsibility for their national security. Relying on the theoretical lens of operational art, expanding key terms, and evaluating relevant literature develop the criteria to assess how effective the United States' efforts were in developing the Republic of Vietnam's military capabilities.

The theoretical lens of this monograph is focused on operational art exercised at the corps-level to provide the ends, ways, and means to execute major operations, organize, and employ military forces in offensive, defensive and counter insurgency missions. The operational artist aligns tactical actions in time, space and purpose with strategic goals while providing adequate resources for execution. Resources include accurate intelligence, fires, maneuverability, sustainment and appropriate command and control. To understand the theory of operational art, this monograph relies on three theorists: Shimon Naveh, Georgii Isserson, and Alexander Svechin to provide context.

In Naveh's view, Operational War differs from the Tactical in "quality and quantity," and from the Strategic in "substance." Therefore there is a need to define and understand the three levels of war, particularly the operational level.⁴ Operational Shock is a Russian term with origins in WWI. It posits that complete destruction of a military is not possible, so instead, you should focus on putting the opposing military in a state that it can no longer function. Operational Maneuver expresses the ability of a tactical body to perform its mission and success depends on the appropriate combination of three qualities: protection, mobility, and firepower. This monograph seeks to demonstrate Naveh's operational level of war through maneuver.

⁴ Shimon Naveh, *The Cummings Center Series*, vol. 7, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 3.

The Soviet theorist, Georgii Isserson provides insight into another aspect of operational art, his assertion that the offensive or maneuver warfare is the basis of future war.⁵ By including elements of 'Deep Battle,' adding depth to tactical formations provided the artist options, options to exploit a gap or seam, and to reinforce success or failure. He predicted that aviation and motorized forces would enable rapid battlefield maneuver to enable deep operations.⁶ Isserson also posited that the commander of these formations must be near the action, located to make critical decisions quickly while directing efforts.⁷

When discussing operational art, Alexander Svechin provides the most comprehensive theory, in that an operation is a conglomerate of quite different actions: including drawing up the plan of the operation; logistical preparations; concentrating one's forces at the starting position; building defensive fortifications; marching; and fighting battles which lead to the encirclement for destruction of a portion of the hostile forces and the forced withdrawal of other hostile forces. Tactics and administration are the material of operational art, and the artist sets forth a whole series of tactical missions, and a number of logistical requirements and success depends on solving the correct problem and providing the successful material needed for an operation.⁸

The need to understand how to apply operational art to future planning is vital to preparing FSF to lead national security efforts. The events that played out in Iraq in 2014, when the Islamic State invaded from Syria and rapidly seized territory and Iraqi efforts to halt them were inadequate, are vivid reminders of how vital US security force assistance has become. The United States Army is now creating Security Force Assistance organizations, beginning with

⁵ G S. Isserson, *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 2nd ed. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2013), 108.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁸ Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy* (Minneapolis, MN: East View Publications, 1992, original printing 1927), 69.

brigades in Fiscal Year 2018 and eventually building a division and corps capability. These organizations must not only be able to train tactical tasks, but also focus on operational and strategic capabilities to ensure long-term success. The more evolved a FSF becomes in its ability to apply operational art, the better overall security will be provided for that nation.

Several books have been written about Operation Lam Son 719, though none analyze the operation through the lens of operational art. Historian James Willbanks provides the most recent account, but he concludes that strategic leaders, specifically the senior leaders of the Republic of Vietnam Army, were the primary cause for the lack of success.⁹ Keith Nolan provides a historical account of the tactical actions of the operation while claiming that low morale was the cause of failure.¹⁰ The intent of this monograph is to fill the gap between what occurred strategically and tactically and focus on elements of operational art in providing SFA by the United States Army XXIV Corps and Army of the Republic of Vietnam I Corps.

The knowledge developed during this literature review enables this monograph to logically evaluate the preparedness of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to execute offensive operations using the elements of operational art. As the United States Army builds dedicated security force assistance units, it is imperative that they focus not only on tactical development but also on improving the FSF's ability to link those tactical actions to strategic goals.

⁹ James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 164.

¹⁰ Keith William Nolan, *Into Laos: The Story of Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719, Vietnam 1971* (New York: Dell, 1988, 1986), 10.

Methodology

This monograph uses the structured, focused approach to analyze a single case study and construct the findings section.¹¹ The structured, focused approach allows the monograph to develop research questions and develop significant details not easily collected by other research methods. As the approach is structured, the method is repeatable for future testing of similar cases or if new information becomes available.¹² The most significant advantage of this approach is the overall gain of knowledge of the specific case, and as there is only one case study, it will be significantly in-depth. Unfortunately, this study is being conducted by only one person, leading to a potential bias that could influence the findings. Also, since there is only a single case study, the findings may not translate to similar circumstances.

By employing a single case study methodology to discern the causes for the failure experienced during Operation Lam Son 719, it will provide an in-depth look at the application of the elements of operational art while attempting to build a FSF. The outcome will attempt to identify common themes for current operations in Iraq and future large-scale security force assistance missions. This case study will provide an excellent example of security force development at the corps-level to identify what worked and what did not work. Ultimately, this operation delayed North Vietnamese efforts to execute offensive operations in South Vietnam but did not stop them from invading four years later in 1975, overthrowing the government in Saigon and ultimately winning the Vietnam War.¹³

In 1969, President Nixon declared that under the new policy in Vietnam, called "Vietnamization," the United States would train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to

¹¹ Alexander L. George, *Case Studies, and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³ Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*, 203.

assume responsibility for executing the war against North Vietnam.¹⁴ Successful completion of this operation would enable the United States to withdraw from the conflict without appearing to abandon the cause to stop the spread of communism. In 1970, the United States led a successful operation with Republic of Vietnam forces into Cambodia to eliminate North Vietnamese supply centers, strongholds, and forces operating there.¹⁵ On the heels of this success, the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam developed a plan to strike another blow to North Vietnam along the famed Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.¹⁶

The North Vietnamese had used the Ho Chi Minh Trail to fight the French since the late 1940s. Running about 1000 kilometers from Hanoi in North Vietnam through Laos to South Vietnam, the trail was not a single road *per se*, but rather a system of interconnected trails, villages, depots, and roads. It was well camouflaged, highly trafficable and provided one of two lines of communication available to the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese used the trail extensively to supply manpower and materiel initially to the guerilla Viet Cong and as the war progressed, for the North Vietnamese Army.¹⁷

¹⁴ Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, Indochina Monographs Series (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1979), 9-11.



Figure 1. Ho Chi Minh Trail. National Museum of the Air Force. *FAC in SEA: The “Other War” - “Out-of-Country,”* accessed January 20, 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2009/Jun/17/2000551414/-1/-1/0/090617-F-1234P-033.JPG>.

Operation Lam Son 719 was designed to interdict and sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail at a critical juncture just west of the northern area of South Vietnam.¹⁸ The initial objective was to seize Tchepone, a key crossroad on the trail. From Tchepone, the operation would search and destroy any supply depots and fuel storage facilities and eliminate enemy capabilities in the area. The Operation would be executed by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam with US Army

¹⁸ Richard M. Johnson, *Lam Son 719: Perils of Strategy*, 3.

artillery, aviation, and Air Force support. The initial timeline anticipated a ninety-day operation and included engineering, armor, airmobile and airborne elements.¹⁹ Operation Lam Son 719 did not share the same success as the operation into Cambodia the previous year.

This monograph will test two hypotheses using six research questions. The first hypothesis asserts that if the FSF can integrate intelligence, fires, sustainment, maneuverability, engineering and command and control, then they are prepared to execute independent operational-level military missions. The second hypothesis asserts that if the FSF is trained to execute independently at the operational level, then the United States will no longer be required to provide significant support.

To test these hypotheses, this case study will ask six specific focus questions and also explore the strategic context in which Operation Lam Son 719 was planned and fought. First, what was the United States' national security strategy for Vietnam in 1971? On initial impression, it would appear that the United States was more interested in saving face by getting out of Vietnam without appearing to have lost the war. Second, what operational approach did the US military take to train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces? It appears that the US focused training on counterinsurgency operations at the tactical level to aid in defeating the Viet-Cong that were executing a guerilla war in South Vietnam and there was no focus on corps-level operations. Third, did the United States military train the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to integrate the elements of combat power at the corps-level for offensive operations? The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces relied very heavily on United States support, specifically with coordinating close air support, adjusting artillery and airmobile operations. Fourth, did the US military training focus on offensive, defensive, or counterinsurgency operations? The answer to this question is likely that the focus of training for the Republic of Vietnam Army was on counterinsurgency operations. Fifth, did the US military train the Republic of Vietnam Armed

¹⁹ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 33-35.

Forces to conduct operational level missions? With the outcome of Operation Lam Son 719, the initial impression is that the Republic of Vietnam Army was ill-prepared to execute operational level missions. Finally, what impact did the outcome of Operation Lam Son 719 have on the United States' strategy for Vietnam? The operation was hailed as moderately successful and proof that *Vietnamization* was indeed working, so the planned troop redeployments could continue without interruption. Ultimately, Operation Lam Son 719 delayed the North Vietnamese from successfully taking Saigon until April 1975.²⁰

The primary sources used for this monograph include after-action reports published by both XXIV Corps and 101st Airborne Division, two United States Army headquarters supporting Operation Lam Son 719 along with multiple Center of Military History publications and Department of Defense directed studies. There have also been several monographs published on the operation, one of which from the Indochina Monograph Series is titled, "Lam Son 719" by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Buy Hinh. In it, Hinh provides significant historical insight from the South Vietnamese perspective.²¹

The structured focus approach methodology applied to operational art at corps-level operations executed during Operation Lam Son 719 in 1971 facilitates the goal of this monograph. Using a structured analysis to answer specific research questions to confirm the hypotheses will enable a deep and clear understanding of which elements did or did not work and why will aid future security force assistance efforts. This section will be followed by the case study of Operation Lam Son 719.

²⁰ Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*, 203.

²¹ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 1-8.

Case Study: Operation Lam Son 719

This section is a detailed case study of Operation Lam Son 719 to provide empirical evidence to the focused questions outlined in the methodology. This in-depth study begins with a look at the strategic context and the political environment in the United States that led to the planning of this two-month long operation in 1971 followed by an overview of Operation Lam Son 719.

In late 1970, Military Assistance Command-Vietnam was in the process of drawing down American fighting forces in Vietnam. From a peak strength of about 549,500 in 1968-1969, only 344,000 were left by the end of 1970 and by April 1971, the strength would be reduced by 150,000 more.²² The withdrawal was intended to be gradual, ensuring the South Vietnamese Army could assume the mission, but with popular dissatisfaction with the war at its peak, the White House accelerated troop redeployments. With shrinking US forces and the knowledge that the North Vietnamese were planning significant operations against the south in 1971 and continued to resupply both the Army and Viet Cong using the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam looked to sever that artery and stop future enemy operations. This operation would also provide a significant test to President Nixon's *Vietnamization* concept, as the only ground forces permitted into Laos would be the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces due to the Cooper-Church Amendment, which restricted American ground forces from crossing the border.²³ The Cooper-Church Amendment was enacted in January 1971 in response to US operations in Cambodia and the public opinion that President Nixon was expanding, not ending the Vietnam War. The amendment prohibited the use of

²² Graham A. Cosmas, *United States Army in Vietnam: MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 178.

²³ Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*, 35.

appropriated funds to enable US forces operating outside of South Vietnam, thus reigning in the President's war-making power and ensuring the war would end.²⁴

General Creighton Abrams, MACV commander, approved the concept in December 1970 and briefed the American Ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Thieu, and South Vietnamese Chairman of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien for concurrence. Overwhelmingly, the South Vietnamese supported the concept and began independent planning. Although this would be the first corps-level operation executed by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, success was expected especially after the overwhelming triumph in Cambodia in 1970.

Due to the legislative prohibition on American ground forces operating in Laos, the operation would be executed solely by RVNAF without their embedded advisers. The operation was led by Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam's ARVN I Corps, consisting of approximately 17,000 troops in the 1st Airborne Division, 1st Infantry Division, Vietnam Marine Division²⁵, 1st Ranger Group, and 1st Armor Brigade.²⁶ I Corps was supported by the American XXIV Corps with elements of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), along with engineer and artillery support.²⁷ Operation Lam Son 719 was planned to be a four-phase operation. The first phase was called "Operation Dewey Canyon II" and required elements of XXIV Corps (US) to secure a ground route to the Laotian border after an artillery raid into the A Shau Valley by the 101st

²⁴ Amy Belasco, Lynn J. Cunningham, Hannah Fischer, and Larry A. Niksch, *Congressional Restrictions on U.S. Military Operations in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Somalia, and Kosovo: Funding and Non-Funding Approaches*, 16 January 2007, accessed January 27, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33803.pdf>, 2.

²⁵ The 1st Airborne Division and the Vietnam Marine Division constituted the Vietnamese Strategic Reserve Force. Their employment was at the direct control of President Thieu.

²⁶ US Department of the Army, *XXIV Corps After Action Report for Lam Son 719, 30 January 1971 thru 06 April 1971*, 14 May 1971, accessed August 26, 2017, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=8850508001>, Annex A.

²⁷ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 35–52.

Airborne Division (Airmobile). The RVNAF was to move north and assume positions in preparation for their attack against enemy positions in southern Laos. In Phase two, I Corps (ARVN) was to attack on February 8, 1971, with two reinforced divisions along Route 9 into southern Laos and occupy fixed firebases in preparation for operations against Tchepone. Phase three commenced once the RVNAF seized Tchepone and included search and destroy missions of enemy caches in the immediate vicinity. The final phase had two options, depending on the success of phase three: attack southeast along Route 922 into Base 611, or withdraw along the infiltration route back to Khe Sanh. For phases two through four, US forces were to continue to secure lines of communication and provide logistical, aviation, artillery and tactical air and B-52 support.²⁸

After establishing forward basing at Khe Sanh and establishing blocking positions along the Laotian border and demilitarized zone, the US forces entered into the operational defense. The buildup of ground routes and the enhancement of Khe Sanh became the priority, as this would be the primary source of sustainment in South Vietnam for both aviation and ground units.²⁹

²⁸ US Department of the Army, *XXIV Corps After Action Report for Lam Son 719, 30 January 1971 thru 06 April 1971*, 14 May 1971, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

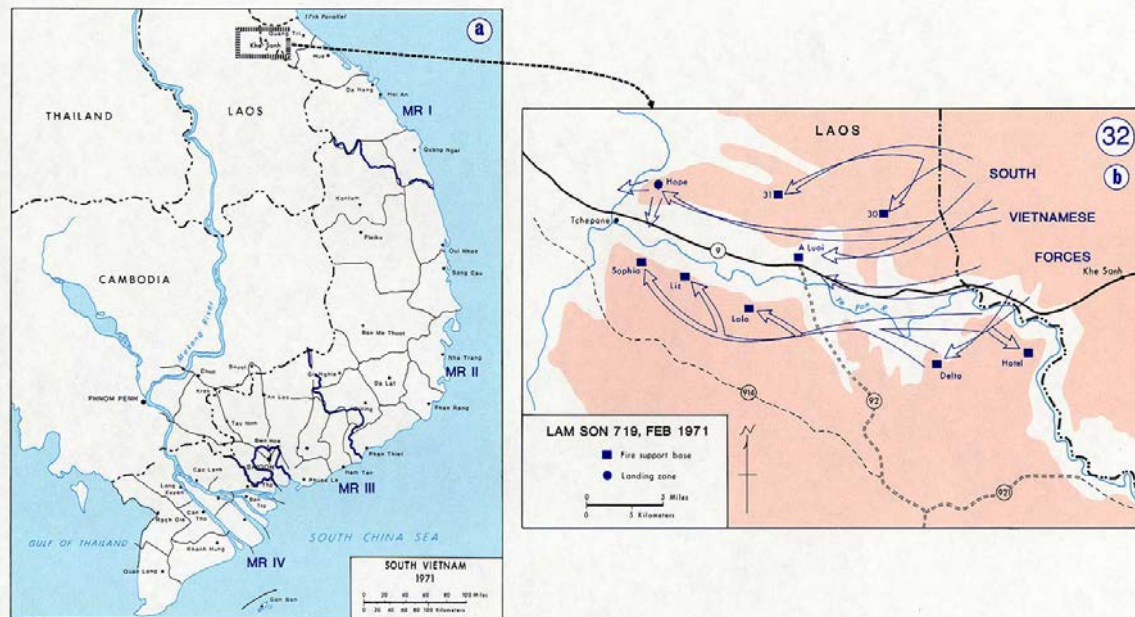


Figure 2. Operation Lam Son 719. Department of Military History, US Military Academy, *United States Military Academy Atlases*, accessed January 20, 2018, <https://www.westpoint.edu/history/SiteAssets/SitePages/Vietnam%20War/vietnam%20war%20map%2032.jpg>.

The operation was difficult from the very beginning. Fighting against a numerically-superior and highly motivated enemy, the RVNAF fought bravely, but without their unit advisers, the South Vietnamese had difficulty coordinating air and artillery support.³⁰ Challenging terrain for mechanized forces and the restriction of a single route bogged down the advance nearly from the start. The delay of the RVNAF enabled the NVA to react quickly and conduct multiple attacks against the small, isolated forces. These effects were compounded by inadequate leadership and experience at both the corps and division levels, as the majority of their capability was in low-intensity conflict, not in coordinating large-scale battle. Adding to the difficulty, the commanders of the airborne and marine divisions, who as part of the national reserve considered

³⁰ Cosmas, *United States Army in Vietnam: MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 331.

themselves responsible directly to the Joint General Staff, often ignored the I Corps (ARVN) Commander's orders.³¹

In the end, Lam Son 719 was costly in men and materiel. More than 1,700 South Vietnamese were killed and over 6,600 were wounded. The loss of equipment included ninety-six artillery pieces, fifty-four tanks, eighty-seven combat vehicles, and numerous small arms and radios, much of it abandoned during the withdrawal. Out of the RVNAF forces engaged, the armored brigade was ineffective for combat following the operation. The Ranger group and airborne division were both marginally effective, while the 1st Division and the marine division returned from Laos combat capable. Americans lost 215 killed and 1,100 wounded. The most significant loss to Army equipment was aircraft. Overall, eighty-two Army helicopters were destroyed in support of the RVNAF and more than 600 were damaged, but repaired. There were several points during the operation that the number of mission capable helicopters was barely enough to support the South Vietnamese.³²

For the public, the Nixon Administration reinforced the MACV's statements that Operation Lam Son 719 had slowed down North Vietnam's operational timeline and caused significant loss to NVA forces and supply networks. Privately, Nixon and Kissinger concluded that, even though the operation had accomplished suitable effects, it fell short of expectations and promises and likely was not worth the domestic political controversy the invasion of Laos caused. President Nixon even considered firing General Abrams but decided that it was not worth the hassle as the war was near its end.³³

³¹ Cosmas, *United States Army in Vietnam: MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 331.

³² *Ibid.*, 335.

³³ *Ibid.*, 337.

Structured Focus Questions

The first question is what was the United States' national security strategy for Vietnam in 1971? Evidence suggests that President Nixon had three options to consider: a total withdrawal; end the war with North Vietnam through a blend of military and diplomatic pressures; or a gradual transfer of responsibility for the war to South Vietnam, enabling the United States to redeploy combat forces gradually.³⁴ A unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam was unacceptable to the Nixon Administration and according to Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, "A 180-degree reversal of a major American commitment extending over four administrations by a president heretofore identified with a conservative foreign policy would have produced profound disillusionment among America's allies . . ." ³⁵ Kissinger preferred the second option, which had three components: Congressional endorsement to pursue the war; negotiations in which every concession would be considered short of permitting a communist takeover; and an altered military strategy to defend heavily populated areas while attacking the logistics capacity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia and Laos.³⁶ Kissinger notes the reason for the President's selection of the final option:

The American people seemed to be asking their government to pursue two incompatible objectives simultaneously: they wanted the war to end and America not to capitulate. In seeking to navigate American policy through these contradictions, Nixon chose the third option—the so-called route of Vietnamization—not because he thought it was a brilliant *deus ex machina* but because, in his judgement, it kept in relatively safest balance the three key components of America's extraction from Vietnam: sustaining America's domestic morale, affording Saigon an honest chance to stand on its own, and giving Hanoi incentive to settle.³⁷

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 679.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 680.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 681.

President Nixon intended to balance the need to demonstrate to his domestic audience that he was ending America's involvement in the war by strengthening the South Vietnamese military. This position was clearly in line with the emerging "Nixon Doctrine" published on 18 February, 1970 titled: *U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy for Peace*, in which “the United States will participate in the defense and development of allies and friends, but that America cannot—and will not—conceive *all* the plans, design *all* the programs, execute *all* the decisions and undertake *all* the defense of the free nations of the world [original emphasis].”³⁸ The "Nixon Doctrine" was the guiding doctrine for United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) and MACV in 1971.

The second question asks, what operational approach did the US military take to train the RVNAF? The evidence suggests that the approach varied based on the perceived threat and the timeframe in which the training is analyzed. In the early years of American advisory teams, pre-1959, the effort was to train the South Vietnamese to fight a conventional North Vietnamese Army and defend against an invasion from the north. This approach was patterned from successful advisory operations in China, Greece, and Iran. In 1959, the operational environment changed in South Vietnam, and the training focus shifted from a conventional fight to fighting a counterinsurgency.

The Viet Minh or Viet Cong grew in influence and violence in the early 1960s, and the advisers shifted the training focus accordingly. In 1963, through a series of twelve coups in eighteen months, the leadership of the central government was overturned so often that the United States feared a total collapse of South Vietnam. It was that fear that led to the buildup of American combat forces. From 1965 until 1969, the United States assumed the majority of the fighting while the South Vietnamese Army “. . . was devoted almost entirely to pacification

³⁸ US Department of State Publication, vol. 1, *Foundations of Foreign Policy 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2003), 199.

security missions and, in the minds of many, had been relegated to a secondary role in the conduct of the war.”³⁹ Another problem with training the South Vietnamese was caused directly by the increased US presence, in that by 1966, “. . . U.S. forces had been given first priority for men, money, and materiel, and the basic mission of strengthening the Vietnamese armed forces became a second priority. This change immediately lowered the quality of advisory personnel and the availability of the more modern equipment for the Vietnamese Army.”⁴⁰ The double-edged sword of American military power not only reduced the training of South Vietnamese military to a secondary mission but also introduced an over-dependence on American weaponry, sustainment and air power.

The third question asks, did the US military train the RVNAF to integrate the elements of combat power for offensive operations? Evidence suggests that the training requirements were evaluated and adjusted throughout the conduct of the war and before Lam Son 719, the South Vietnamese were incapable of combined arms maneuver.

In June 1971, with the reduction of both U.S. conventional and advisory forces, a question arose regarding the Vietnamese armed forces capability to employ air support and effectively direct air-ground operations. The high-intensity combat operations in Laos and Cambodia made it evident that the armed forces staffs needed strengthening in planning and coordinating fire support, airmobile operations, and logistical support. To ensure this goal received proper command emphasis, in August 1971, the MACV commander admonished his U.S. advisers to urge their counterparts to conduct command post exercises and war games which would include exercises in multiregiment operations at corps level and multibattalion operations at regiment level. Concurrently, the MACV commander recommended that the chief of the Joint General Staff direct his corps commanders to place command and staff emphasis on measures to strengthen battlefield reporting procedures.⁴¹

³⁹ US Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: the Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army 1950-1972* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 128.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 109.

The United States was trying to incorporate the lessons learned from the experience in Cambodia and Laos to improve the combined arms effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Army that was apparently lacking before Operation Lam Son 719.

The fourth question asks, did the US military training focus on offensive, defensive, or counterinsurgency operations? Evidence suggests that the primary focus of training varied on the threat that South Vietnam faced, but was primarily defensive, although training conducted was inconsistent at best. According to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis report titled *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War 1965-1972*, “About 35% of all Regular Force Battalions received no training in 1969; another 18% conducted 10 days or less of training.”⁴² Therefore, the issue may not be what the training consisted of, but rather how often and how well the training was conducted. The report also states, “It is clear that severe problems exist in training the RVNAF ground forces . . . much has been accomplished to improve the ground forces training. However, we believe more emphasis has been placed on equipping the RVNAF than on training them.”⁴³ Key factors that led to the training deficits include limited ARVN trainers to staff the training centers and schools, insufficient training facilities, and a significant lack of company grade and mid-level non-commissioned officers.⁴⁴

An additional indicator that the limited training focused on the defense was demonstrated in the planning and execution of Operation Lam Son 719. According to Hinh, an ARVN Infantry Division commander, Operation Lam Son 719 relied heavily upon establishing fire bases:

In our case, the operational plan called for the advance of infantry forces through a series of fire support bases The use of fire support bases had been successful in South Vietnam, but this success depended a great deal on the

⁴² Thomas C. Thayer, ed., *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War*, Vol 7 (Washington, DC: Office Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, 1975), 44.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

overwhelming firepower and initiative of the United States forces in the face of a less endowed enemy. To be effective in lower Laos, it was apparent that fire support bases would have to enjoy the same conditions . . . fire support bases were apt to become defensive positions tying down sizeable forces which otherwise might be used for the offensive.⁴⁵

Regardless of what the training focus consisted of or the proficiency level of the I Corps (ARVN) forces was, the tactics were defensive.

The fifth question asks, did the US military train the RVNAF to conduct operational level missions? The evidence suggests that the US military never trained the RVNAF to conduct any operational level mission without significant US involvement. Operation Lam Son 719 was the first time the RVNAF operated in a corps-level operation and, according to Willbanks,

[T]he Airborne and Marine Divisions had never worked as divisions and were accustomed to brigade and battalion operations only. They had no experience in large-unit maneuver warfare. The commanders and staffs were not accustomed to working together Additionally, the Airborne and Marine Divisions were national strategic reserve forces and normally answered to President Thieu and the JGS.⁴⁶

The resultant lack of prior training and development of relationships produced the eventual outcome of the operation. As noted in the BDM Corporation Report,

Not only was de jure unity of command lacking and coordination ineffective between the ARVN and US Corps Commanders, but the ARVN Corps Commander lacked effective command of all participating Vietnamese units. The Marine Division responded only to orders from Saigon but not always. The Airborne Division responded to JGS orders in Saigon. The Armored Brigade Commander appeared to turn off his radios and respond to no one else's orders. The Ranger Group was so battered from the beginning that it quickly became ineffective The only Vietnamese subordinate commander who would talk with the Corps Commander was CG, 1st Inf Div (ARVN).⁴⁷

As mentioned above, upon the completion of Operation Lam Son 719, “[T]he MACV commander admonished his US advisers to urge their counterparts to conduct command

⁴⁵ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 55.

⁴⁶ Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*, 55.

⁴⁷ The BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Volume VI, Conduct of the War, Book I, Operational Analyses* (McClean, VA: PN, 1980), 4-62.

post exercises and war games which would include exercises in multi-regiment operations at corps level and multi-battalion operations at regiment level."⁴⁸ This emphasis indicates that MACV realized that there was a lack of training and preparation of the ARVN to execute a corps-level operation.

The final question asks, what impact did the outcome of Operation Lam Son 719 have on the US national security strategy for Vietnam? Evidence suggests that the outcome, while mostly a tactical failure with regards to the losses sustained by the RVNAF, did have some positive effects, most notably for President Nixon and the success of *Vietnamization*. According to Hinh,

It [Operation Lam Son 719] permitted President Nixon to announce, only one day after the last raid into Laos had ended that an additional 100,000 troops would be withdrawn between early May and the end of November 1971. The withdraw would reduce total U.S. combat strength in South Vietnam to 184,000. So, in the final analysis, although LAM SON 719 was not a complete tactical success, it certainly helped the RVN and the U.S. to achieve some of their more important strategic objectives.⁴⁹

The success that the United States touted publicly likely helped strengthen the bargaining position with North Vietnam during the Paris Peace Talks that were occurring between Kissinger and the Hanoi representative, Le Duc Tho. Unfortunately, the impact did not assist with the breakthrough until October 1972 when, according to Kissinger, "Le Duc Tho abandoned his standard demand that America overthrow the Saigon government, and agreed to a cease-fire. From then on, matters moved rapidly to a conclusion."⁵⁰ The result of Operation Lam Son 719 was that it allowed the Nixon Administration to continue to claim a successful *Vietnamization* policy and provide evidence to the American public that the end of the war was in sight.

⁴⁸ US Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: the Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army 1950-1972*, 109.

⁴⁹ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 167.

⁵⁰ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 687.

This section was a detailed case study of Operation Lam Son 719 intended to provide empirical evidence to the six focus questions. It began with an overview of Operation Lam Son 719 and described the strategic context and the political environment in the United States that led to the planning of this operation in 1971. Once the context was defined, the six focus questions were answered with empirical evidence. The next section of this monograph, Findings and Analysis will provide a critical look at Operation Lam Son 719.

Findings and Analysis

This section explores the findings and analysis from the focused case study of Operation Lam Son 719 to determine the support of the original two hypotheses. The first hypothesis asserts that if the FSF can integrate intelligence, fires, sustainment, maneuverability, engineering and command and control, then they are prepared to execute independent operational-level military missions. The second hypothesis asserts that if the FSF is trained to execute independently at the operational level, then the United States will no longer be required to provide significant support. The findings rely on the six structured-focus questions and the evidence provided in the case study while the analysis demonstrates either support, non-support or providing a mixed outcome to the hypotheses.

The first question asks, what was the United States' national strategy for Vietnam in 1971? The evidence suggests that President Nixon intended to balance the need to demonstrate to his domestic audience that he was ending America's involvement in the war by strengthening the South Vietnamese military. This position was articulated in the "Nixon Doctrine" which was the strategic guidance published for USPACOM and MACV in 1971. This strategy ensured that the South Vietnamese took responsibility for the war through the approach of *Vietnamization*.

The Nixon Administration demonstrated a shift in policy with regards to Vietnam. During his campaign, Nixon promised to put an end to what was seemingly becoming an endless war of attrition, an expenditure of American blood and treasure that the American public could no longer tolerate. This strategic decision to end the war, not win the war, was of unfortunate consequence for the South Vietnamese. In the efforts to bring American troops back from Southeast Asia, the United States, through the National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, sought an agreement with North Vietnam that was advantageous to reach the American objective without consideration for what South Vietnam needed or desired. Once the agreement with North Vietnam was completed, the South Vietnamese were merely left with promises of support from the United States that became completely hollow once Congress refused to provide continued

funding for Vietnamization and the Nixon Administration became embroiled in domestic controversy with Watergate. Once American lives were no longer being lost in a faraway land, the public stopped caring about helping South Vietnam's fledgling democracy.

The problem in Vietnam was complicated and complex with no easy or fast solution. The experiences of World War II and Korea provided few answers in fighting the counterinsurgency, and once the government in South Vietnam lost the confidence of the Vietnamese people in 1965, the United States became fully committed, but with little strategic direction or anticipated termination criteria. By 1969, the American public opinion had completely shifted from a majority of support to a majority of ending the war at any cost. The Nixon Administration rode that wave of discontent that led to the Paris Accords in 1973 and eventually sealed the fate of South Vietnam.

The second question asks, what operational approach did the US military take to train the RVNAF? The evidence suggests that the approach differed depending on the timeframe. Until 1959, the training focus was on a conventional fight with North Vietnam. Between 1960 and 1963, the insurgency of the Viet Minh or Viet Cong grew in influence and violence, so the focus shifted to counterinsurgency. In 1963, the South Vietnamese government went through eighteen months of significant turmoil and the United States feared a total collapse. The result was that from 1965 until 1969, the United States significantly increased troop presence and assumed the majority of the fighting. This change caused a shift in priorities; no longer was the United States focused on advising and training the South Vietnamese Army, they were fighting the war. This focus led to a South Vietnamese dependence on American weaponry, sustainment and air power without the resources, time or experience to develop their own.

With the political turmoil in South Vietnam in the mid-1960s, the Johnson Administration decided to shift the focus of the American military effort from advising to direct involvement. This change allowed President Thieu to use his military to remain in power while US troops engaged the enemy. Unfortunately, this adjustment to American involvement in

Vietnam was never fully explained to the American public which eventually led to significant unrest, a loss of trust in the US government and eventually the collapse of South Vietnam. Had the South Vietnamese been able to establish a central government that was acceptable to the majority and the focal point of US involvement was training South Vietnam, the results of the conflict would have been much different. It is unlikely that significant troop involvement would have been necessary, the high dependence of South Vietnam on American firepower would not have been developed, and the RVNAF would have had the time to develop experience and stand up to the enemies they faced. Operation Lam Son 719 demonstrated the clear failure of the United States to develop the South Vietnamese capability to execute corps-level operations by 1971, but what is unknown is whether the operation could have been different had the Vietnamese government been stronger, the fighting done by the RVNAF instead of the United States and the focus remained on training and building capabilities. The results of similar corps-level operations by the early 1970s would have ended much differently.

The third question asks, did the US military train the RVNAF to integrate the elements of combat power for offensive operations? The evidence demonstrates that before Lam Son 719, the South Vietnamese were incapable of combined arms maneuver. The South Vietnamese heavily relied on the United States for fire support, air support and heavily depended on logistics support. This is not to say that the South Vietnamese were incapable, but due to the issues discussed earlier, the focus in training and assistance provided to the RVNAF ran counter to defeating the North Vietnamese. The United States was focused on breaking the North Vietnamese will and neglected to teach, coach or mentor the South Vietnamese for four years of the war. When the result of Operation Lam Son 719 indicated significant shortcomings in combined arms effectiveness, the MACV leadership adjusted the training focus to incorporate lessons learned, but it was too little too late to have any effect. By 1971, the United States was looking for an exit strategy, and while Operation Lam Son 719 was unsuccessful, the Nixon Administration chose to emphasize the positives to claim success in Vietnamization and ultimately the abandonment of

South Vietnam. The unknown is given more time, could the RVNAF have learned and integrated the lessons learned from Operation Lam Son 719 and executed additional corps-level operations?

The fourth question asks, did the US military training focus on offensive, defensive, or counterinsurgency operations? As demonstrated earlier, the evidence suggests that the primary focus of training varied on the threat that South Vietnam faced, but was primarily defensive. Operation Lam Son 719 demonstrated that while the ARVN executed an operational offense, they insisted on fighting from the tactical defense. The establishment of a series of defensive positions, firebases, to conduct further operations was exploited by the North Vietnamese leading to the near-decimation of several South Vietnamese organizations. While the focus for training was on executing defensive operations, unfortunately, training was not always the primary focus, especially during the period of heavy US involvement after 1965. It is apparent that the United States was too involved in fighting North Vietnam to provide quality training to South Vietnam and instead, turned to modernizing the RVNAF. The lack of training focus had a snowball effect that began at the initial training institutions that persisted to the units and affected the training centers. Key factors that led to the training deficits include limited ARVN trainers to staff the training centers and schools, insufficient training facilities, and a significant lack of company grade and mid-level non-commissioned officers.⁵¹

The training that the United States focused on during the conflict was bound to shift as the enemy changed. That the adjustments were made in accordance with the operational environment demonstrates that the South Vietnamese were capable of flexibility, but Operation Lam Son 719 indicated that the RVNAF was incapable of executing corps-level operations without significant US involvement or assistance. The reliance on US airpower, both rotary and fixed-wing support, firepower and sustainment were significant shortcomings that the South Vietnamese never overcame before succumbing to the North Vietnamese.

⁵¹ Thayer, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War*, 45-46.

The fifth question asks, did the US military train the RVNAF to conduct operational level missions? The evidence demonstrated that the United States did not train the RVNAF to conduct operational level missions. As mentioned above, upon the completion of Operation Lam Son 719, "...MACV commander admonished his U.S. advisers to urge their counterparts to conduct command post exercises and war games which would include exercises in multiregiment operations at corps level and multibattalion operations at regiment level."⁵² The adjustment to emphasize large-formation exercises indicates that MACV realized that there was a lack of training and preparation of the ARVN to execute corps-level operations. Unfortunately, the results of this renewed emphasis were never realized since the United States was nearly completely focused on withdrawing from South Vietnam.

The final question asks, what impact did the outcome of Operation Lam Son 719 have on the US national security strategy for Vietnam? The evidence indicates that the result of Operation Lam Son 719 was a tactical failure, but was touted by the Nixon Administration as a success of *Vietnamization* and provided a stronger bargaining position for the United States during the Paris Peace Talks. The biggest result of Operation Lam Son 719 was the ability for the Nixon Administration to continue to claim a successful *Vietnamization* policy and provide evidence that the end of the war was in sight for the American public. Operation Lam Son 719 provided some positive effects for South Vietnam, namely experience in corps-level operations fighting a conventional enemy, but with the significant losses of Rangers, Marines and Airborne troopers, the negative effect on the morale of the RVNAF was difficult to recover. The United States apparently did not consider the effect of Operation Lam Son 719 on the South Vietnamese, as the only requirement for the United States was to end the war with honor. The

⁵² US Department of the Army, *Vietnam Studies: the Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army 1950-1972*, 109.

Paris Peace Accord was the ultimate objective for the Nixon Administration, and once that was achieved, the United States essentially turned their backs to South Vietnam.

The findings listed above lead to the analysis of the two hypotheses. The first hypothesis asserts that if the FSF can integrate intelligence, fires, sustainment, maneuverability, engineering and command and control, then they are prepared to execute independent operational-level military missions. The evidence above supports this hypothesis. The integration of the elements of combat power is crucial for any combined arms operations, specifically at the corps headquarters. Operation Lam Son 719 shows that a lack of integration of these elements leads to failure. While there are many variables and factors as to why Operational Lam Son 719 was unsuccessful, the demonstrated failure of the I Corps (ARVN) to integrate these functions was the key cause of the failure.

The second hypothesis asserts that if the FSF is trained to execute independently at the operational level, then the United States will no longer be required to provide significant support. The evidence suggests that this hypothesis provides a mixed outcome. Throughout the case study of Operation Lam Son 719, the United States was significantly involved in nearly all facets of operations with South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese did not execute a successful independent corps-level operation before the United States declared success and withdrew. While there was a potential for the South Vietnamese to learn and grow from the experiences of Operation Lam Son 719, there was not enough time or emphasis to reap any benefit. The shift in strategic focus for the United States overshadowed any potential growth opportunity for the South Vietnamese; therefore this hypothesis cannot be supported nor refuted.

This section explored the findings and analysis from the case study of Operation Lam Son 719 and demonstrated that the first hypothesis was supported while the second produced a mixed outcome. The findings provided the empirical evidence to support the outcomes of the two hypotheses. Both hypotheses were intended to provide a level of support for the original thesis of this monograph. The thesis stated that historically, the United States military has supported

foreign governments by training and assisting security forces to conduct independent military operations. SFA mission accomplishment is declared when the FSF demonstrates the capability to successfully plan and execute offensive, defensive and occasionally counterinsurgency missions at the operational level.

The outcome of Operation Lam Son 719, demonstrated that the South Vietnamese military was not fully prepared to conduct offensive operations without significant external support from the United States. The evidence suggests that this thesis is unsupported. The decision to declare success in Vietnam was not based on demonstrated capabilities of the RVNAF, but rather a political decision made by the Nixon administration based on domestic public pressure to end the war. The results of Operation Lam Son 719 were white-washed to show the public that the South Vietnamese could continue the fight without US assistance, but the result of Vietnamization did not keep North Vietnam from achieving ultimate victory over South Vietnam by 1975.

Conclusion

This monograph explored the failings of security force assistance to prepare the RVNAF to execute independent, large-scale operations during Operation Lam Son 719. I Corps (ARVN) was incapable of successfully executing offensive operations into Laos in 1971 against a determined enemy. Many brave and tough RVNAF Soldiers and Marines lost their lives in the two-month struggle to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the resulting loss of confidence within the RVNAF and the inability of the United States to continue support South Vietnam led to its capture in 1975. Historians typically place the failings of the RVNAF on leadership, specifically the I Corps (ARVN) commander and the limited amount of time used to plan Operation Lam Son 719. This study demonstrated that while leadership was a key component, it was accompanied by failings across all warfighting functions, the largest deficiency was in gathering accurate intelligence about enemy strength and composition in the area of operations. An accurate picture may have required another look at the operational approach I Corps (ARVN) took.

The empirical evidence produced in this study supports the thesis that the outcome of Operation Lam Son 719 demonstrated that the South Vietnamese military was not fully prepared to conduct offensive operations without significant external support from the United States. From a lack of focus on training leading up to the operation with an emphasis on multi-battalion and multi-regimental training after the operation, it is evident that MACV also understood the same problems. Unfortunately, the political climate did not permit continued assistance, as President Nixon made true on his campaign promises to bring our troops home, regardless of the impacts in Vietnam.

Future SFA planners can use Operation Lam Son 719 to learn from and ensure the same mistakes in training large formations are not repeated. Current events in Iraq highlight the potential outcome for South Vietnam, had the United States remained to assist in 1973. Unfortunately, the political climate surrounding President Nixon and the Watergate scandal refocused national attention and Vietnam was all but forgotten. Such is not the case in Iraq, even

after the initial setbacks and defeat of the Iraqi Army, the United States returned in force to provide assistance, equipment, and training to enable the Iraqis to contain and eventually defeat the Islamic State. Time will tell if the United States will claim Iraq as an SFA success.

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