
A Tale of Five Generals: Vietnam's Invasion of Cambodia



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Abstract

The December 1978 to January 1979 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was a meticulously planned, modern combined arms operation led by some of Vietnam's most talented and experienced generals. In spite of a preemptive attack by Cambodia, Vietnamese forces, using six coordinated corps-sized combined arms mechanized columns, along with a division-sized amphibious assault along the coast and air strikes conducted by captured American-made attack aircraft, quickly crushed the fanatical Cambodian resistance in a swift, blitzkrieg-like campaign. Within three weeks the Vietnamese controlled all major roads, harbors, airfields, and population centers in Cambodia, forcing the remainder of Pol Pot's Cambodian armed forces to flee to the Thai border for sanctuary.

THE Vietnamese conquest of Cambodia in December 1978–January 1979 was arguably one of the seminal events of the last half-century in Southeast Asia. In little more than two weeks, Vietnamese motorized columns swept across the border, captured Cambodia's capital city of Phnom Penh, and shattered or dispersed virtually every unit of the genocidal dictator Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge (KR) army. However, while its command structure was shattered, Pol Pot's army was not completely destroyed. Thousands of KR troops fled to safety along the Thai-Cambo-

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dian border. There, with the sanctuary of Thai territory at their backs, they would rest, regroup, and rebuild to fight again.

The military aspects of the Vietnamese invasion have received almost no attention outside of Vietnam. Some authors have said that the Vietnamese originally planned to take only that portion of Cambodia east of the Mekong River and that it was only after the sudden collapse of KR units along the Vietnamese border and Pol Pot's panicked order to abandon Phnom Penh that the Vietnamese decided to move on to take the entire country.¹ In fact, a review of Vietnamese records now available reveals that the Vietnamese invasion and conquest of Cambodia was meticulously planned from the outset and that it was executed by some of Vietnam's best and most experienced combat leaders.

The story of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia is the story of five generals: Le Duc Anh, Chief of the High Command's Forward Headquarters in South Vietnam; Le Trong Tan, Commander of the Vietnamese Army's General Staff and Commander of the Cambodian Offensive Campaign; Nguyen Huu An, Commander of Vietnam's 2nd Corps; Kim Tuan, Commander of 3rd Corps; and Hoang Cam, Commander of 4th Corps.

Background

By early December 1978 the Vietnam-Cambodian border conflict had grown from a few scattered skirmishes to full-throated war. Only a few short years before, the two adversaries had been allies against the United States, and in fact portions of the KR army had originally been formed, trained, and equipped by the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese communists and the Cambodian communists had each won final victory and seized complete control of their respective countries within a few weeks of one another in April 1975. By that time, however, relations between the two communist parties and armies had already become strained, the result of longstanding ethnic hatred, ideological differences, and perceived slights and betrayals over the years.

The initial skirmishes between the two nations were fought in May 1975, when newly victorious KR soldiers seized several Vietnamese-held islands in the Gulf of Thailand and crossed the Vietnamese border in several locations in the Mekong Delta. The Vietnamese armed forces, using ground, naval, and air forces (including newly captured U.S.-made jet attack aircraft and helicopter gunships), quickly recaptured the lost territory in a series of fiercely fought engagements.²

1. Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War After the War* (New York: Collier Books, 1988), 345–46.

2. People's Air Force, *Lich Su Su Doan Khong Quan 371* [History of the 371st Air Division] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House [Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan

The differences between Vietnam and Cambodia deepened over the next several years as the two nations took opposing sides in the bitter Sino-Soviet split. The Vietnamese grew steadily closer to the Soviet Union, while Pol Pot's regime planted its feet firmly in China's camp.

Following the communist victory in 1975, the bulk of the Vietnamese army was either demobilized or reassigned to "economic construction" duties. In the summer of 1977, however, after several large KR attacks that slaughtered hundreds of Vietnamese civilians living along the border, Vietnam began to remobilize its armed forces. Its troops were sent out to the Cambodian border to recapture lost territory and to conduct cross-border "retaliatory" raids into Cambodian territory. Elements of 4th Corps were the first units to be deployed to the border, and by the end of 1977 two of the Vietnamese army's four strategic reserve corps, 3rd and 4th Corps, were fully committed to the border war against Cambodia.³

Heavy fighting raged throughout 1978 as both sides struck back and forth across the border all the way from the Central Highlands in the north to the Gulf of Thailand in the south. In addition, a series of purges and mutinies within the increasingly paranoid Pol Pot regime sent thousands of disaffected KR soldiers fleeing toward the safety of the Vietnamese border, where the Vietnamese organized them into a pro-Vietnamese "resistance army."⁴ By early December 1978 Vietnamese forces, supported by a number of battalions of the new Cambodian "resistance army," occupied a major foothold inside Cambodia stretching from Mimot to Snuol in Kompong Cham and Kratie Provinces.⁵ Farther to the north, Vietnamese troops held another large chunk of Cambodian territory along Route 19 in extreme northeastern Cambodia.⁶

Dan], 1997), 229–30; People's Air Force, *Lich Su Khong Quan Nhan Dan Viet Nam* [History of the People's Air Force of Vietnam] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1993), 319–20; 7th Division, *Su Doan 7, Binh Doan Cuu Long, Tap Hai* [7th Division, Mekong Corps, Volume Two] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1990), 31–32.

3. 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam* [The Lam River Division] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1984), 191–92; 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 34–37; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen, Tap 2* [Central Highlands Corps, Volume 2] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1985), 68–69. See also Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 192–225.

4. Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 246–55; General Phung Dinh Am, *Mot Thoi De Nho* [A Time to Remember] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002), 267–68.

5. 303rd Division, *Su Doan 303: Doan Phuoc Long* [303rd Division: Phuoc Long Group] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1989), 134–37; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 339.

6. Colonel Nguyen Van Hong, *Cuoc Chien Tranh Bat Buoc* [The Unwanted War] (Ho Chi Minh City: Ban Tre Publishing House, 2004), 35, 47, 62.

On 2 December 1978 a ceremony was held in the newly “liberated” town of Snuol in Kratie Province to publicly announce the formation of the new pro-Vietnamese Cambodian “resistance” organization, called the United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea (UFNSK). The Front, headed by Heng Samrin, paraded its new army and proclaimed its intent to overthrow the Pol Pot regime.⁷ The Vietnamese now had a Cambodian cover organization behind which they could hide their upcoming invasion of Cambodia, just as North Vietnam hid behind a similar front, the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam, during Vietnam’s earlier war against the Americans.

Preparations for War

Military preparations for the Vietnamese attack were almost complete. The Vietnamese army spent all of 1978 drafting and training new recruits, calling up reservists, rebuilding understrength units, and converting military “economic construction” groups back into regular combat units.⁸

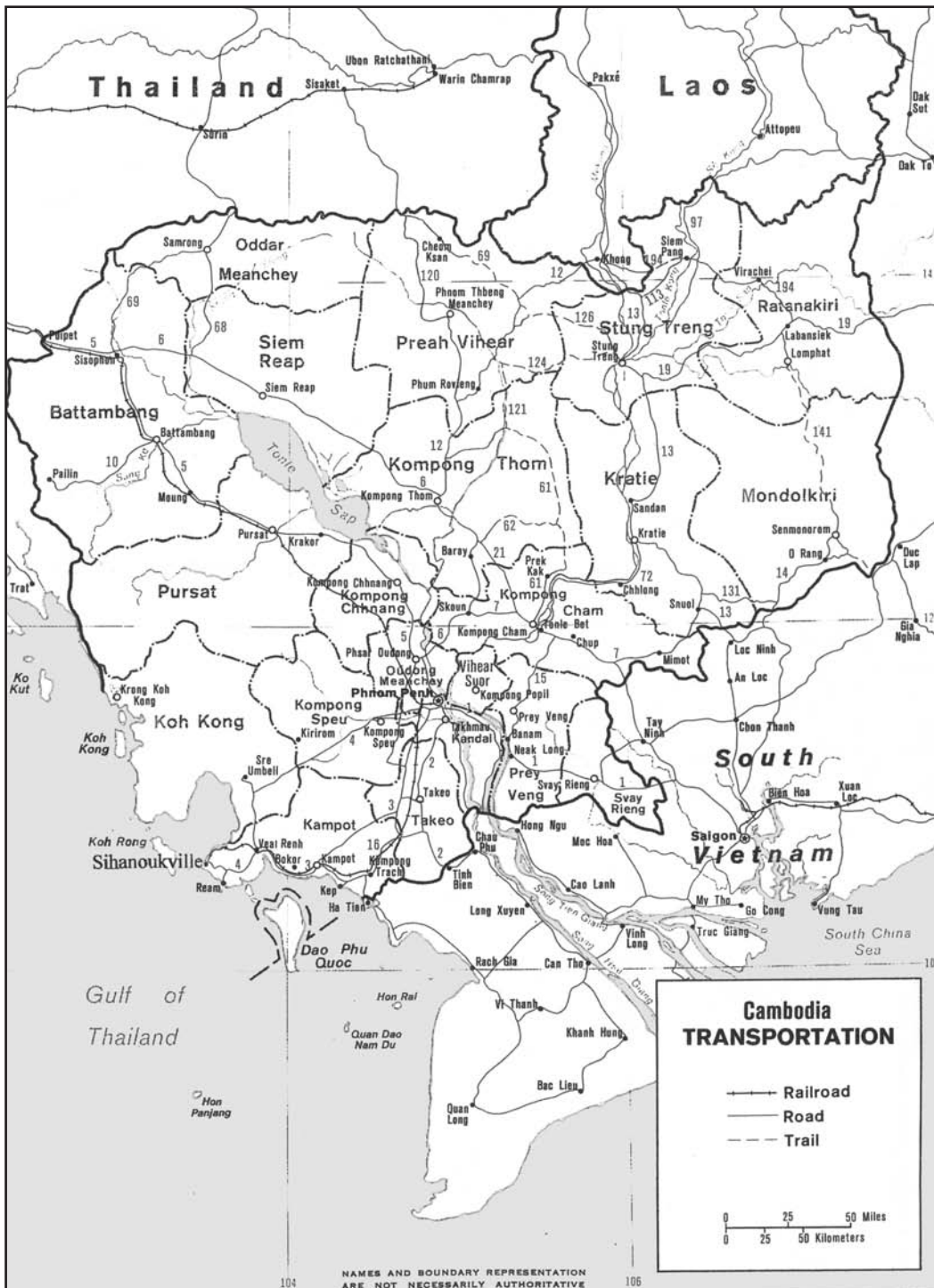
In the summer of 1978, the Commander of the Vietnamese General Staff, General Le Trong Tan, traveled to the Soviet Union with Communist Party Secretary Le Duan to inform the Soviets, in general terms at least, of Vietnam’s plans and to request assistance. In September Le Duan made the timing of the Vietnamese plan clear when he told the Soviet Ambassador to Vietnam that the Vietnamese Politburo had decided “to solve fully this question [of Cambodia] by the beginning of 1979.” Le Duan told the Ambassador that the only way China could stop Vietnam would be to send large numbers of Chinese troops to defend Cambodia. The next month, when a Soviet diplomat expressed concern that China might indeed send forces to block the Vietnamese invasion, a senior Vietnamese Party official replied, “China will not have time to dispatch large military units to Phnom Penh to rescue the Kampuchean regime,” indicating that the Vietnamese planned to overrun Cambodia quickly to present the Chinese with a *fait accompli*.⁹

In October 1978, as Vietnam’s 2nd Corps worked feverishly to rebuild its depleted formations, a senior officer from the General Staff in

7. Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 339; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 110–11.

8. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2 (1974–1994)* [2nd Corps History (1974–1994)] (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1994), 351–53; 303rd Division, *Su Doan 303*, 127–28; Hong, *Cuoc Chien Tranh Bat Buoc*, 48.

9. Dimitry Mosyakov, *The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives*, *Vostok* [Orient], n. 3, August 2000 (in Russian). English translation accessed at <http://www.yale.edu/gsp/Mosyakov.doc> on 9 October 2003; Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 108–9, 212, 215–16.



Hanoi flew south to the corps headquarters in Central Vietnam, hundreds of kilometers from the Cambodian border. The officer gave 2nd Corps advance warning that the corps would soon be sent to fight on the Cambodian front. He added that when the actual order was issued, the corps must be ready to move south very quickly.¹⁰

In early December 1978 General Le Trong Tan flew south to take up his post as Campaign Commander and put into motion the plans he had drafted. Tan placed the 372nd Air Division, equipped with captured U.S.-made F-5 and A-37 fighter-bombers, UH-1 helicopters, and C-130, C-119, and C-47 cargo aircraft, on combat alert. He also ordered that a squadron of MiG-21s from the famed 921st Fighter Regiment, based near Hanoi, be sent south to provide air cover against a regiment of MiG-19s that Pol Pot's air force had just received from China. On 18 December the MiG-21s arrived at Bien Hoa, a few miles north of Saigon, and by 25 December the MiGs were ready for action.¹¹

As soon as he arrived in Saigon, General Tan gave the order for 2nd Corps to move south as quickly as possible. The corps was directed to move to assembly positions in the lower Mekong Delta and to be ready to attack no later than 30 December. The Commander of the 2nd Corps, Nguyen Huu An, and his senior staff flew to Saigon on 16 December to receive their final mission orders. On 22 December General Tan approved the 2nd Corps attack plan.¹² In the meantime, two of 2nd Corps's three infantry divisions and the corps combat and support units began to depart from Hue and Danang (2nd Corps's third infantry division, the brand-new 306th Division, was left behind because it had not yet completed its training). Moving its troops and heavy equipment a thousand kilometers by air, sea, road, and rail, by the end of December, right on schedule, the entire corps was in place in its assigned assembly area near the Cambodian border in the lower Mekong Delta.¹³

The Plan

Le Trong Tan's offensive plan called for a massive force of eighteen infantry divisions, plus naval infantry, armor, artillery, and supporting units, to launch a simultaneous assault all along Cambodia's eastern

10. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 353.

11. People's Air Force, *Lich Su Su Doan Khong Quan 371*, 260-61. The Cambodians did not use the MiG-19s during the fighting because no pilots had yet been trained. The Vietnamese captured the MiGs when they took Phnom Penh. See Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 342.

12. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 356-57.

13. *Ibid.*, 357-60.

frontier. The invasion was scheduled to begin on 1 January 1979.¹⁴ The Vietnamese attack force was divided into seven major attack elements:

General Hoang Cam's 4th Corps, with four infantry divisions (the corps's own 7th, 9th, and 341st Divisions, plus the attached 2nd Division) and three pro-Vietnamese Cambodian (UFNSK) battalions, would attack up Route 1 through Svay Rieng Province directly toward the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.¹⁵

General Kim Tuan's 3rd Corps, with four infantry divisions (10th, 31st, and 320th, plus the attached 302nd Division) and three UFNSK battalions, would attack from northern Tay Ninh across Cambodia's Kompong Cham Province to the Mekong River.¹⁶

Military Region 9 (MR-9) forces, three infantry divisions (4th, 330th, and 339th), would attack across the border north from the Tinh Bien area in the lower Mekong Delta through Takeo Province toward Phnom Penh.¹⁷

General Nguyen Huu An's 2nd Corps (304th, 325th, and the attached 8th Infantry Divisions) would attack west from the same Tinh Bien area to support the MR-9 attack on Phnom Penh and to capture Kampot and the southeastern coast of Cambodia.¹⁸

Military Region 5 (MR-5) forces, two infantry divisions (307th and 309th) and the 198th Sapper Brigade, would attack west on Route 19 from Vietnam's Pleiku Province to destroy KR forces in northeastern Cambodia.¹⁹

Military Region 7 (MR-7) forces, two infantry divisions (5th and 303rd), the 117th Sapper Regiment, and three UFNSK battalions, would advance from the UFNSK base area around Snuol to take Kratie City on the Mekong River.²⁰

14. 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 126.

15. 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen* [10th Division, Central Highlands Corps] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1987), 189; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 277–78; 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 127, 155, 156, 159. The Vietnamese may have exaggerated the number of UFNSK troops who actually participated in the invasion.

16. 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, 189; Colonel Nguyen Van Bieu and 3rd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Su Doan 31 Lam Hong (1974–1999) (Luu Hanh Noi Bo)* [History of the 31st "Lam Hong" Division (1974–1999) (Internal Distribution Only)] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002), 213–14.

17. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 363, 369, 373, 380; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 315.

18. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 361; 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, 189.

19. Hong, *Cuoc Chien Tranh Bat Buoc*, 70; Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Quoc Minh and Captain Bui Duc Hai, *Lich Su Doan 198 Dac Cong* [History of the 198th Sapper Group] (Vietnam: Sapper Command, 1991), 85–88.

20. 303rd Division, *Su Doan 303*, 133; Sapper Command, *Bien Nien Su Kien Lich Su Binh Chung Dac Cong Quan Doi Nhan Dan Viet Nam (1967–1997) (Luu*

A division-sized naval infantry force (101st and 126th Naval Infantry Brigades) would make an amphibious landing on Cambodia's southeastern coast to capture Ream and Sihanoukville (Kompong Som) harbors on the Kompong Som Peninsula to deny the Pol Pot regime the use of Cambodia's only deep-water seaport.²¹

The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Corps attack columns included each corps's own organic armored, artillery, antiaircraft, and engineer brigades, and each of the smaller attack columns, including the naval infantry, had its own smaller armored and artillery elements. The invasion would be a classic conventional military operation employing superior numbers, mobility, and firepower to quickly destroy or disperse enemy units, eliminate enemy command posts and nerve centers, and seize the enemy's main roads and lines of communications, thereby destroying the enemy's ability to command, control, and support any forces that survived the initial assault.

Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, was the focal point of the offensive. Three attack columns were aimed at the city: the 4th Corps column coming up from the east straight toward Phnom Penh, the 3rd Corps column striking across Kompong Cham to cross the Mekong River and then turn south to approach Phnom Penh from the rear, and the MR-9 column, moving up toward Phnom Penh from the south. The attack by the MR-7 force in Kratie would cover 3rd Corps's right flank, and 2nd Corps would cover the MR-9 column's left flank by striking northward about forty kilometers, paralleling the MR-9 column's advance, before turning southwest toward its primary targets, Kampot City and the port of Sihanoukville.

The Generals and Their Foe

The attack plan clearly reflected General Le Trong Tan's long experience and training. Although General Le Duc Anh, the Commander of the High Command's Forward Headquarters in South Vietnam, was nominally General Tan's peer, Anh had risen through the ranks as a political officer and later a headquarters staff officer in southern Vietnam. Although he had joined the Vietnamese communist army in 1945, he did not receive his first real military command assignment until 1969, when he was appointed to the post of Military Region 9 (MR-9) Commander.

Hanh Noi Bo) [Calendar of Events in the History of the Sapper Branch of the People's Army of Vietnam (1967–1997) (Internal Distribution Only)] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1997), 103.

21. Pham Hong Thuy, Pham Hong Doi, and Phan Trong Dam, *Lich Su Hai Quan Nhan Dan Viet Nam* [History of the Vietnamese People's Navy] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1985), 324–28.

Up to that point, Le Duc Anh had never commanded anything bigger than a platoon. In April 1975 Anh led a corps-sized unit for a few weeks during the final attack on Saigon.²²

In contrast, the other four key Vietnamese generals involved in this attack had all risen through the ranks as military commanders, not political officers, and each one possessed a wealth of combat experience.

Le Trong Tan had risen quickly through the communist ranks during the war against the French. He commanded the 209th Regiment in the heavy fighting of the 1950 Border Campaign, France's first serious military defeat of the Indochina War. Tan fought at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the penultimate battle of the war against the French, as the commander of the fabled 312th Division. During the war against the Americans, Le Trong Tan served alongside Le Duc Anh for five years (1964–69) when the two men were deputy commanders of the communist military headquarters for South Vietnam. Later Tan commanded all communist forces in three of the key battles of the latter stages of the war: the defeat of the 1971 South Vietnamese incursion into southern Laos, the late 1971–early 1972 communist offensive in the Plain of Jars in Laos, and the spring 1972 North Vietnamese attack in South Vietnam's Quang Tri Province. In addition to his skills as a battlefield commander, Tan was an outstanding staff officer. In 1973, while serving as Deputy Commander of the North Vietnamese General Staff, General Tan was appointed to head a small four-man staff cell responsible for planning North Vietnam's final offensive to defeat South Vietnam. Working for two years, Tan and his team drafted the plan that resulted in the April 1975 North Vietnamese victory over South Vietnam. During the 1975 offensive, Le Trong Tan shed his staff officer's hat for a few months to return to the role of battlefield commander. He led the North Vietnamese column marching down the South Vietnamese coast and commanded the Eastern Front, which included 2nd and 4th Corps, during the final attack on Saigon.²³

Nguyen Huu An, 2nd Corps Commander, was perhaps Vietnam's finest "fighting" general. Joining the army as a private in 1945, he rose quickly through the ranks. He was a battalion commander in the 174th Regiment during the 1950 Border Campaign. At Dien Bien Phu, An, now

22. Ministry of Defense Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Dien Bach Khoa Quan Su Viet Nam* [Military Encyclopedia of Vietnam] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1996), 462.

23. *Ibid.*, 468–69; General Le Huu Duc, "Xay Dung Ke Hoach Giai Phong Mien Nam Trong Hai Nam" [Developing the Plan to Liberate South Vietnam in Two Years], article in *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* [People's Army] newspaper, 9 and 10 March 2005, accessed 12 March 2005 at http://www.quandoinhandan.org.vn/news.php?id_new=41487&subject=2. See also Le Trong Tan's memoir of the war against the French: Le Trong Tan and Do Than, *Tu Dong Quan Den Dien Bien* [From Dong Quan To Dien Bien Phu], 2nd ed. (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002).

the commander of the 174th Regiment, led his troops in the toughest sustained combat of the entire battle: the fight for control of the key French position known as Éliane 2. General An led Vietnamese troops in battle in Laos in 1962 and 1964, marched at the head of the 325th Division during its trek down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Vietnam in late 1964, and fought for three years, 1965–68, in South Vietnam's Central Highlands. There he was the North Vietnamese battlefield commander in several of the bloodiest battles of the war against the Americans, including the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965 and the Battle of Dak To in November 1967. General An served under General Le Trong Tan as a division commander in the early 1971 campaign in southern Laos, as Tan's deputy commander in the Plain of Jars campaign, and as a division commander under Tan during the latter stages of the 1972 fighting in Quang Tri. By this time An had commanded three different divisions in battle: the 1st, the 308th, and the 325th. General An became 2nd Corps Commander in January 1975. Again under Le Trong Tan's command, An led the corps in the final assault on Saigon in April 1975. By December 1978 he had been 2nd Corps Commander for almost four years.²⁴

Another of Vietnam's foremost combat leaders was 4th Corps Commander Hoang Cam, whose true name was Do Van Cam. He had risen through the ranks in the 312th Division and had been one of Le Trong Tan's protégés. Cam served as a battalion commander in Tan's 209th Regiment during the 1950 Border Campaign. When Tan assumed command of the 312th Division, Cam moved up to take over 209th Regiment, and in that capacity he fought at Tan's side and under his command at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. Even though Hoang Cam was a native of North Vietnam who had never before set foot in South Vietnam, shortly after his arrival in the South in 1965 Cam was appointed as the first commander of the new Viet Cong 9th Division. Cam led the division through two years of heavy fighting, 1965 through 1967, against the U.S. 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions in the rubber plantations northwest of Saigon. He directed a corps-sized Vietnamese force fighting in Cambodia in 1971 and was Deputy Commander of the communist B2 Front during the 1972 "Easter" offensive in South Vietnam. Hoang Cam was appointed 4th Corps Commander when the corps was formed in 1974. He led the corps at Xuan Loc, northeast of Saigon, in the heaviest fighting of the entire 1975 communist offensive. During the final attack on

24. Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Dien Bach Khoa Quan Su Viet Nam*, 561. See also Nguyen Huu An's memoirs (Nguyen Huu An and Nguyen Tu Duong, *Chien Truong Moi* [New Battlefields], 2nd ed. [Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002]); General Hal Moore and Joseph Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . And Young* (New York: Random House, 1992); and Vo Nguyen Giap and Huu Mai, *Dien Bien Phu: Diem Hen Lich Su* [Dien Bien Phu: A Historic Meeting Place], 2nd ed. (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2001), 260–63, 364–67.

Saigon in April 1975, Hoàng Cam's 4th Corps fought under the command of Le Trong Tan's Eastern Front headquarters.²⁵

The least known of the Vietnamese generals was 3rd Corps Commander Kim Tuan (true name Nguyễn Công Thiên). Joining the army in 1946 at the age of nineteen, Tuan had spent virtually his entire career in the 320th Division. He had commanded infantry units at every level, from platoon upward. Tuan assumed command of 320th Division in 1971 and led it until early April 1975, from the bloody attacks of the 1972 Easter Offensive in Kontum Province to the March 1975 North Vietnamese attack in the Central Highlands. After serving as Deputy 3rd Corps Commander for two years, Tuan became 3rd Corps Commander in the spring of 1977.²⁶

While the KR army the Vietnamese generals would face was substantially smaller than the Vietnamese army, it was not a foe that could be taken lightly. Vietnamese order-of-battle charts listed nineteen of a reported total of twenty-three KR regular infantry divisions as being deployed along or near the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, with the bulk of these stationed in the Eastern Region, from the Mekong River north to Kratie Province. The Vietnamese reports probably overestimated the true strength of the KR Army, which Cambodia expert Steven Heder estimates totaled fifteen functioning divisions at the time of the Vietnamese invasion.²⁷ In addition, a Cambodian division was less than half the size of a Vietnamese division (Vietnamese divisions totaled about 8,000 men, while even a full-strength KR division had fewer than 4,000 men), and many Cambodian units were even smaller as the result of casualties sustained during the constant fighting.²⁸ However, the KR units were well-armed with new Chinese weapons, their commanders were battle-hardened veterans of long years of ferocious combat, and many KR sol-

25. Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Dien Bach Khoa Quan Su Viet Nam*, 357–58; Giap and Mai, *Dien Bien Phu*, 100, 260. See also Hoàng Cam's memoirs (Hoàng Cam and Nhat Tien, *Chang Duong Muoi Nghin Ngay* [The 10,000 Day Journey], 2nd ed. (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2001).

26. Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Dien Bach Khoa Quan Su Viet Nam*, 557; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 56; 320th Division, *Su Doan Dong Bang, Binh Doan Tay Nguyen, Tap Ba* [Lowlands Division, Central Highlands Corps, Volume Three] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1984), 154, 314.

27. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 355, 361, 366; 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 123–24; Steve Heder, Information/Education Division, United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), "Note for the Force Commander," 26 May 1992.

28. E-mail from Steven Heder, 28 March 2005. As an example of the depleted state of many KR units, Vietnamese order-of-battle reports indicated that as of mid-December 1978, the combat strengths of each of the three regiments of the 260th KR Division, based in Kratie, ranged from 150 to 190 men, only half the strength of the average Vietnamese battalion—303rd Division, *Su Doan 303*, 138.

diers were fanatical fighters. In addition to Pol Pot's regular infantry divisions and territorial forces, the KR army also included a marine division, a navy division, large tank and artillery units, and an air force division that, after the invasion began, proved to be surprisingly effective as an infantry unit.²⁹

A Premature Beginning

The Khmer Rouge did not idly sit back to wait for the Vietnamese attack. Recognizing the meaning of the massive Vietnamese build-up along the border, beginning on 20–21 December 1978 the KR launched a series of multi-divisional preemptive attacks across the border from Tay Ninh south to the lower Mekong Delta. Some of these attacks penetrated so deeply into Vietnamese territory that they threatened to disrupt the Vietnamese attack preparations.³⁰ As a result of the attacks in the Tay Ninh area, Hoang Cam's 4th Corps requested and was granted permission to begin its attacks on 23 December, a week ahead of schedule.³¹ The other columns were also authorized to begin their attacks early, and MR-5 led the way, starting its attack on 22 December.³²

After overcoming heavy initial resistance and losing two of its supporting tanks to KR rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), the MR-5 column advanced quickly down Route 19. While 309th Division fanned out to clear Ratanakiri and northern Mondolkiri Provinces and pushed into northeastern Stung Treng, 307th Division pushed forward down Route 19. Using sappers to mount surprise attacks to secure bridgeheads on the opposite shore, the division crossed the Srepok and Mekong rivers on pontoon bridges constructed by combat engineers. By 1 January 1979 MR-5 forces had taken the Stung Treng Province capital, secured a

29. 7th Division, *Su Doan* 7, 161; 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan* 2, 361; and 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 290.

30. 7th Division, *Su Doan* 7, 125; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 260; 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan* 2, 363; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 118, 121. An early December 1978 "confession" by a former senior KR officer describes a KR Party meeting held in the fall of 1978 to discuss plans for KR attacks into Vietnam in Tay Ninh Province and the Mekong Delta. While the information in such confessions is often highly suspect, similarities between the plan described and the actual December KR attacks suggest that the December attacks may have been based on this earlier plan. See confession summary titled "Yeum Sâm-ol alias Nhâ, untitled fragment, 7 December 1978," E-mail from Steven Heder, 28 March 2005.

31. 7th Division, *Su Doan* 7, 126.

32. Hong, *Cuoc Chien Tranh Bat Buoc*, 72.

foothold on the western bank of the Mekong River, and were preparing to press on westward into Preah Vihear Province.³³

The MR-7 attack units, 5th Division moving in from the east and 303rd Division moving northwest from Snuol, pushed forward toward a scheduled link-up for a joint attack on Kratie City, located on the east bank of the Mekong River. The advancing units encountered heavy resistance. On 28 December Cambodian T-28 aircraft (small U.S.-made propeller-driven aircraft the KR had captured in 1975) flying from the Kompong Cham Airfield bombed Vietnamese units crossing the Te River, more than twenty kilometers southeast of Kratie City. Meanwhile, elements of two KR divisions attacked the advancing 303rd Division, inflicted significant casualties, and almost overran the division command post. After their attempt to stop the Vietnamese advance failed, KR forces began to evacuate Kratie City. The city fell to Vietnamese forces on 30 December with little resistance.³⁴

During the last week of December 1978, General Kim Tuan's 3rd Corps moved west from northern Tay Ninh Province and fanned out into the rubber plantations and villages of Kompong Cham. The corps's four divisions advanced toward assigned assembly positions to prepare to attack five KR divisions that held a defense line running all the way across Kompong Cham Province, north to south, about halfway between the Vietnamese border and the Mekong River. The Vietnamese infantry divisions sent deep penetration units out ahead to sneak behind key enemy positions while the bulk of the Vietnamese force moved forward with tanks, artillery, and heavy equipment. The attack was scheduled to begin on the morning of 31 December. As they crept forward through the enemy lines, some of the deep-penetration elements were spotted and engaged by KR troops. The deputy commander of 10th Division was seriously wounded during a reconnaissance mission, and on 30 December a battalion from 10th Division was pinned down and forced to fight a desperate day-long battle for survival.

During the advance, six Cambodian Air Force T-28s, apparently the same aircraft that had attacked the MR-7 column, bombed elements of the 31st Division along the main road to Kompong Cham City. A flight of MiG-21s from the Bien Hoa Airbase flew a reconnaissance mission to identify the airfield from which the T-28s were operating. Once the T-28 airfield was located, Vietnamese C-130s with MiG-21s flying fighter cover flew several pallet-bombing missions (dropping pallet-loads of bombs by

33. Hong, *Cuoc Chien Tranh Bat Buoc*, 72–76; Minh and Hai, *Lich Su Doan 198 Dac Cong*, 86–87.

34. 303rd Division, *Su Doan 303*, 140–44; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 120; 3rd Corps, *Lich Su Lu Doan Phong Khong 234* [History of the 234th AAA Brigade] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1998), 285.

pushing them out the rear doors of the aircraft) that knocked out the runway and halted the T-28 attacks.

On the morning of 31 December, under cover of a heavy artillery barrage, Vietnamese tanks and infantry launched the attack. Vastly outnumbered and outgunned, the KR units were quickly overwhelmed. By the end of the day, except for the main headquarters of the KR defense line, which still held out stubbornly despite repeated attacks by 320th Division and eighteen sorties by Vietnamese jet bombers, Kim Tuan's units had overrun all their initial objectives and were in hot pursuit of KR forces desperately trying to retreat back to safety in Kompong Cham City, on the other side of the Mekong River. After regrouping its forces, on the morning of 1 January 320th Division captured the main KR headquarters after an hour of heavy fighting. Kim Tuan ordered his forces to push forward quickly and to eliminate any KR units they encountered. On 3 January, 320th Division reached the eastern side of the Kompong Cham ferry crossing, across the Mekong River from Kompong Cham City. The division then turned and, led by two supporting armored companies, roared south down the road to capture the Prey Veng Province capital in a blitzkrieg-like advance. Meanwhile, the rest of the corps fought a series of battles as the units cleared the remaining pockets of KR resistance in Kompong Cham Province.³⁵

Before 4th Corps could begin its planned offensive up Route 1 through Svay Rieng Province, it had to eliminate the KR forces that had burst across the Vietnamese border on the night of 20–21 December and seized a foothold in Tay Ninh Province west of the province capital. The KR had penetrated as far as the Vam Co Dong River, ten kilometers inside Vietnamese territory. General Hoang Cam ordered his 341st and 2nd Divisions to surround and destroy the invaders. On the morning of 23 December Vietnamese heavy artillery and dozens of air strikes pounded the KR units while 4th Corps and Tay Ninh provincial troops, supported by tanks and armored personnel carriers, began to systematically eliminate dug-in KR troops. General Cam sent his 7th Division up Route 1 more than fifteen kilometers into Cambodia to cover the southern flank of the corps counterattack. On 27 December the last pocket of KR holdouts on Vietnamese territory was eliminated, and Hoang Cam began to redeploy his units to launch his main offensive.³⁶

35. Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 121–25; 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, 189–95; 3rd Corps, *Lich Su Lu Doan Phong Khong 234*, 285–86; Bieu, *Lich Su Su Doan 31 Lam Hong*, 217–21; People's Air Force, *Lich Su Su Doan Khong Quan 371*, 262.

36. 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 127–28; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 260–67; information on air strikes taken from battle map on display in Vietnam's Air Force Museum, Hanoi—author's personal observation, November 2004.

Meanwhile, in the lower Mekong Delta, Khmer Rouge Southwest Region forces launched a preemptive attack across the border on 28 December. The attack overran MR-9 units defending the border and captured a large chunk of Vietnamese territory along the wide Vinh Te Canal that runs along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border in the lower Mekong Delta. The KR incursion presented a serious problem to General Nguyen Huu An's 2nd Corps. The KR had captured the point where 2nd Corps and MR-9 forces planned to cross into Cambodia, and the capture of the Vinh Te Canal gave the KR a strong natural defensive barrier to block the Vietnamese attack before it started.

After securing permission from Campaign Headquarters, on the morning of 31 December MR-9's 4th Division and 2nd Corps's 9th Regiment/304th Division launched a counterattack to clear the border. After a fierce twenty-four-hour battle, the Vietnamese finally succeeded in driving the KR troops back to the western bank of the Vinh Te Canal. In the late afternoon of 1 January, under cover of an artillery barrage and twelve A-37 bombing sorties directed against KR command posts, 2nd Corps's 219th Engineer Brigade began building a pontoon bridge across the canal. On the morning of 2 January 1979, as soon as the bridge was completed, the 304th Infantry Division and 203rd Armored Brigade led the corps across the bridge and into Cambodia. By noon on 3 January 2nd Corps and the MR-9 attack force had destroyed or dispersed all KR forces along the border of the lower Delta. The headquarters of the KR Southwest Region pulled back to Takeo City. With the route across the border now clear, the 2nd Corps and MR-9 attack columns could turn their attention to their primary targets.³⁷

Target: Phnom Penh

In 4th Corps's area of operations, after their units that had penetrated across the Vietnamese border were crushed, KR forces pulled back from the Vietnamese border and formed a new defense line running north to south across the western end of the "Parrot's Beak," the long neck of Cambodian territory that jutted deep into Vietnam between Tay Ninh and the Mekong Delta. Over the past year KR military forces in this area had been decimated in heavy fighting and in a series of brutal purges ordered by the paranoid Pol Pot.³⁸ However, in spite of the strains on their morale the KR units continued to put up stiff resistance.

Instead of making the expected frontal attack up Route 1, General Hoang Cam decided to send his 7th Division forward north of Route 1 to

37. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 362–66.

38. David Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 155–56; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 250–55.

attack the center of the KR defense line. After penetrating the KR defenses at Don So, the division would then drive southwest down to Route 1 west of, and behind, the Svay Rieng Province capital. This would shatter the entire KR defense line and open the way to Phnom Penh. Supported by fifteen tanks and armored vehicles and by U.S.-made 105mm and 155mm howitzers, 7th Division launched its attack on the morning of 1 January. In the face of heavy resistance, the attack stalled at the Don So Bridge and along a line of thick rice-paddy dikes where KR forces were dug in. After losing two tanks and suffering “heavy” personnel losses, 7th Division was still stuck at Don So when the day ended.³⁹

That night, Hoang Cam ordered the division to commit its reserve force to make a redoubled assault the next day. The deputy corps commander explained General Cam’s intentions to the 7th Division commander as follows: “If we shatter the Route 10–Don So line, the enemy will retreat and conduct a strategic pull-back and regrouping of his forces. That will give us an opportunity to push forward and achieve total victory. If the Route 10–Don So line falls, enemy forces in the northeast and in the southwest will also be forced to retreat.”⁴⁰

The division resumed the attack the next morning, this time using all three of its regiments. In spite of a curtain of artillery fire and supporting air strikes, progress continued to be slow and costly. As soon as one line of rice-paddy dikes was captured, the attackers immediately were hit by fire from defenders dug in behind the next line of dikes. By the time darkness fell, even though 7th Division had not yet captured the Don So Bridge, it had made enough progress for Pol Pot and his commanders to see the handwriting on the wall.

In the late afternoon of 2 January Vietnamese intelligence intercepted a KR radio message ordering enemy defenders east of the Mekong to fall back to defend the Neak Luong ferry crossing, where Route 1 crossed the Mekong River only sixty kilometers from Phnom Penh. Hoang Cam immediately ordered his entire corps to advance. However, when the main KR force pulled back it left behind a number of die-hard units to delay the Vietnamese advance as long as possible. The KR delaying tactics, and the fact that many of the Vietnamese troops had to advance on foot because 4th Corps did not have enough trucks to transport all its personnel, slowed the pace of the Vietnamese advance. Not until the afternoon of 3 January did 7th Division finally capture the Don So Bridge, and the division did not reach the Neak Luong ferry crossing until the night of 5 January. Late the next day 4th Corps’s 341st Division arrived at Neak Luong.

39. 7th Division, *Su Doan* 7, 132–37.

40. *Ibid.*, 132–33.

The Vietnamese advance sent a wave of panic through the KR leadership. On the night of 2 January the KR ordered that key elements of the government, the Chinese Embassy, and Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had been held under house arrest since 1975, be immediately evacuated to Battambang. After a hurried drive to Battambang on 3 January, the KR reassessed the situation and decided that they might be able to hold the line after all. On 4 January the government, the Chinese Embassy, and Prince Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh.⁴¹

The reasoning behind Pol Pot's strategic decision to pull his forces back to the far side of the Mekong River was clear for all to see. The river, which was a kilometer or more wide at the major crossing points, formed a natural barrier of formidable proportions. By stationing some forces to defend the western banks of the ferry crossings at Kompong Cham City and Neak Luong while the rest of the KR army massed to the south to block the MR-9 attack column, which did not have to cross the Mekong to reach the capital, the KR might still be able to stop the Vietnamese from reaching Phnom Penh.

In Kompong Cham City remnants of retreating KR units joined new units sent up from Phnom Penh. KR infantry dug in along the western bank of the river and set up machinegun and mortar positions capable of laying down blistering barrages against any boats attempting to cross the river. Farther back, KR tanks and armored personnel carriers waited for the attack, and 122mm, 105mm, and 155mm artillery positions were established west of the city, where their guns could hit Vietnamese troop concentrations on the other side of the Mekong as well as any force that tried to cross the river.

General Kim Tuan and his 3rd Corps staff worked feverishly to put together a plan to cross the river and then drive south to attack Phnom Penh. Campaign Commander Le Trong Tan had planned for this contingency. He had given 3rd Corps an additional combat engineer brigade equipped with Soviet-made river-crossing equipment. Using the motorized ferries, motorboats, and pontoon sections of the 7th and 249th Engineer Brigades, 64th Regiment/320th Division and a force of amphibious tanks and armored personnel carriers would force their way across the river and clear the city on the opposite bank. The 3rd Corps assault force (a regiment of the 10th Division and elements of the 273rd Armored Brigade) would then cross the river and advance on Phnom Penh.

On the night of 5 January a small force of reconnaissance troops, engineers, and infantry tried to cross the river covertly to secure a foothold on the opposite bank. The effort was defeated by heavy KR

41. Ibid., 135–48; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 277–82; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 300–301; Yun Shui, “The Collapse of the Phnom Penh Regime,” trans. Paul Marks, *Critical Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (2002): 497–500.

artillery and mortar fire that stopped the Vietnamese force as soon as its boats hit the water. General Kim Tuan decided to overwhelm the defenders with sheer firepower. At first light on the morning of 6 January corps and division artillery pieces, anti-aircraft guns (ten 37mm and 57mm guns of the 234th AAA Brigade), mortars, recoilless rifles, and tanks opened fire on KR positions on the opposite bank, blanketing the entire shoreline with fire. After an hour-long artillery barrage, under cover of smoke assault boats carrying an infantry battalion pushed off from the eastern shore. Although many of the boats were hit, a foothold was secured on the opposite bank. A company of amphibious tanks swam across the river and drove up the western bank to fan out into the city, and two more infantry battalions crossed the river. Kompong Cham City was cleared by 8:30 in the morning.

That afternoon the Phnom Penh assault force, 28th Regiment/10th Division and its attached supporting units, with a total of 120 vehicles, began to cross the river. At dawn on 7 January the assault force set out for Phnom Penh, led by six amphibious tanks and a number of U.S.-made M-113 armored personnel carriers. Fighting its way past several KR ambushes and making an assault crossing of the Tonle Sap River in the late afternoon, 28th Regiment arrived on the outskirts of Phnom Penh after dark and pushed forward into the city.⁴²

After pushing up Route 1, 4th Corps's lead element, the 7th Division, arrived at the Neak Luong Ferry late on 5 January. An effort to sneak a force across the river under the cover of darkness failed, so the 7th Division commander decided to make a forced crossing into the teeth of the enemy's fire. The next morning, under the cover of a heavy artillery barrage, troops of 7th Division's 165th Regiment, supported by a UFNSK battalion, crossed the river in twenty prefabricated assault boats to seize a bridgehead on the western bank. The crossing was difficult, and the western bank of the Neak Luong Ferry Landing was not fully secured until the late afternoon of 6 January.

Unlike 3rd Corps at Kompong Cham, which had been reinforced by an entire engineer regiment that specialized in river crossings, 4th Corps had only the limited motorized ferry equipment of its own 25th Engineer Brigade. Corps Commander General Hoang Cam knew that he did not have enough equipment to transport his trucks, tanks, and armored vehicles across the river quickly enough to launch the attack on Phnom Penh that the corps had been ordered to make the next morning.⁴³

Le Trong Tan had foreseen this problem, too, and had a plan ready to solve it. A Vietnamese Navy force was standing by on the lower

42. Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 128–36; 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, 195–201; 3rd Corps, *Lich Su Lu Doan Phong Khong 234*, 286.

43. 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 148–58.

Mekong River, just inside the Vietnamese border. At midday on 6 January, as the lead elements of 4th Corps fought to secure the bridgehead at Neak Luong, the Navy's 811th Patrol Flotilla (with fifteen U.S.-made PGM and PCF gunboats) and the 962nd Naval Transport Regiment (with nineteen LCM landing craft carrying the elite commandos of the 113th Sapper Regiment) sailed north up the Mekong into Cambodia. Fighting its way past several KR ambushes by landing the embarked sappers to overrun KR gun positions along the riverbanks, the convoy arrived at Neak Luong several hours before midnight. In spite of the darkness, the landing craft immediately went to work transporting tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery pieces, trucks, and personnel across the river.⁴⁴

Early the next morning, 7 January 1979, 7th Division's assault force (141st Infantry Regiment, 2nd Battalion/26th Armored Brigade, and the 2nd UFNSK Battalion), moved off up the road toward Phnom Penh. The rest of the 7th Division, together with 4th Corps armor and artillery elements, followed behind. Bringing up the rear of the 4th Corps column was the 273rd Regiment/341st Division. The advancing force encountered only scattered resistance along the road to Phnom Penh.

During a meeting on the night of 5 January Pol Pot had told Cambodian Prince Sihanouk that it would take the KR only a few months to win the war. The next day Sihanouk flew out of Phnom Penh on a Chinese jet aircraft. That afternoon, after learning that the Vietnamese had crossed the Mekong in two places, the KR government began to evacuate the city. The Chinese Embassy and all Chinese advisors left Phnom Penh on the night of 6 January. Pol Pot himself flew out of the city by helicopter early on the morning of 7 January. As 4th Corps approached the city from the southeast, the rest of the KR leadership and KR military units stationed in the city streamed west out of the capital by train, by truck, and on foot. The 3rd Corps's attack column, moving down from the north, did not arrive soon enough to block their retreat.

By noon on 7 January 4th Corps troops had secured control of the Cambodian General Staff Headquarters and the Royal Palace. Shortly after dark 4th Corps troops linked up with the 3rd Corps attack column in the northern outskirts of the city.⁴⁵

44. Thuy et al., *Lich Su Hai Quan Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, 328–29; 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 158–60; Sapper Command, *Bien Nien*, 103–4.

45. 7th Division, *Su Doan 7*, 160–68; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*, 282–84; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 302–16; Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 164; Yun, "The Collapse of the Phnom Penh Regime," 500–501; Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–79* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 450–53.

Target: Sihanoukville

In the Mekong Delta to the south, 2nd Corps Commander Nguyễn Huu An had to solve several problems as he prepared to attack his primary objectives.

First of all, his corps had been given a dual mission: to support the MR-9 attack northward to take Phnom Penh and at the same time to drive west to “liberate” Kampot on Cambodia’s southern coast, link up with and support the Navy’s amphibious landing on the southeastern coast, and assist in the capture of Sihanoukville, Cambodia’s only deep-water seaport. General An would have preferred to take the direct route to Kampot and Sihanoukville by driving due west along the coastal highway. However, to cover the right flank of the MR-9 attack column, General An’s orders specified that 2nd Corps must first strike northward to Chhuk, a district town on Highway 3 forty kilometers northwest of Kampot City. There the corps was to turn southwest to drive down the highway to Kampot. In addition, General An had also been ordered to hold back his 304th Division to serve as the campaign reserve force to support the attack on Phnom Penh. This left General An with only two divisions to conduct his attack: 2nd Corps’s own 325th Division and the attached 8th Division from MR-9.

General An’s second problem was related to the first. Of the nine infantry regiments that made up his corps’s three divisions, General An could rely on only four of the regiments. The 8th Division was an MR-9 unit. It was an unknown quantity to An and was totally untrained in combined arms mechanized operations. In addition, 2nd Corps’s own 325th Division had been eviscerated over the course of the previous year. In May 1978 the division’s 18th Regiment was detached and sent south to reinforce Vietnamese units fighting in the Mekong Delta, and the division’s 101st Regiment was still in Laos fighting a stubborn insurgency there. The division’s two new replacement regiments, the 18B and 111th Regiments, were only two months old, their troops were all raw recruits, and their leaders were a collection of officers and noncommissioned officers drawn from throughout the army, men who had never before worked together. Only 325th Division’s 95th Regiment and the three regiments of the veteran 304th Division had the training, experience, and unit cohesion needed for the difficult task ahead.

General An’s solution to his problem could have been taken straight out of an American command and staff college textbook. He shifted the 304th Division’s 24th Regiment to 325th Division and sent 325th Division’s new and inexperienced 111th Regiment to 304th Division in its place. This gave the 325th and 304th Divisions two trained, veteran regiments each and ensured that both divisions could be used effectively in mechanized assault operations. The two divisions’ other two regiments

and the attached 8th Division would be used primarily for mopping up and security duties.⁴⁶

On 5 January, as the MR-9 attack column drove north toward Takeo, 325th Division began its move to the northwest. KR forces under the Southwest Region's fanatical commander, Ta Mok, were dug in at Tuk Meas on Route 16, halfway between the border and Chhuk. It took two full days of fighting, until the evening of 6 January, for 325th Division to shatter the KR defenses and secure the Tuk Meas area. Meanwhile General An sent 8th Division west to secure the Kompong Trach district capital at the intersection with the coastal highway.

In keeping with his reputation as a fighting commander who led from the front, on the morning of 7 January General An took personal command of his lead assault regiment, the 24th. An led the column on the dangerous drive up from Tuk Meas to Chhuk on an unimproved dirt road through flat, exposed rice paddies. The Vietnamese heavy tanks, trucks, and artillery pieces had a hard time negotiating the narrow road, and the column was hit by several KR ambushes. A number of artillery pieces and trucks were destroyed in these attacks, and General An's own corps headquarters element suffered a number of casualties in an ambush that destroyed An's radio communications van and temporarily cut him off from the rest of the column. The attack column reached Highway 3 in the afternoon of 7 January. By that evening, General An's troops had shattered the KR division defending Chhuk and had secured control of the town.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, MR-9's attack column had run into heavy resistance in Takeo. The column was bogged down trying to push through the province capital. On 6 January 304th Division, standing by in reserve near the Vietnamese border, was placed on alert. If the MR-9 column failed to reach Phnom Penh on 7 January, the next day 304th Division would be sent to Takeo to push through the town and take Phnom Penh. However, 4th Corps's capture of Phnom Penh on 7 January freed the division for a new assignment. On 8 January, as General An and 325th Division fought their way southwest down Route 3 toward Kampot City, General Le Duc Anh authorized 304th Division to turn west to aid the rest of 2nd Corps in the drive to "liberate" Kampot Province and assist in the capture of Sihanoukville. General Anh had little choice in this decision—the Navy's amphibious assault operation had run into serious trouble.⁴⁸

46. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 369–70.

47. *Ibid.*, 370–72; General Rear Services Department Science Section [Ban Khoa Hoc Tong Cuc Hau Can], *Lich Su Su Doan O-To 571 (Luu Hanh Noi Bo)* [History of the 571st Truck Division (Internal Distribution Only)] (Hanoi: [Ministry of Defense], 1981), 187–88.

48. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 372–73.

After establishing a Navy command post on Phu Quoc Island, about twenty to thirty kilometers off the coast of Cambodia's Kampot Province, on 4 January 1979 two squadrons of the Vietnamese Navy's largest combat vessels (including several large former U.S. Navy patrol ships captured in 1975 and two Soviet-built "Petya" class frigates) and a large number of small gunboats assembled off Phu Quoc Island. Vietnamese Navy ships transported the 126th and 101st Naval Infantry Brigades to Phu Quoc Island, which was to be the staging area for the amphibious assault. Two battalions of 130mm long-range guns, capable of firing almost thirty kilometers, were set up on the northern tip of Phu Quoc Island and on another small Vietnamese-held offshore island to support the landing operation.

On the night of 5 January the Navy Forward Headquarters on Phu Quoc received its final attack orders from Campaign Headquarters in Saigon. A few hours after dark on the night of 6 January the 126th Brigade was to go ashore on a beach at the foot of Bokor Mountain, midway along the coastal road between Kampot City and Sihanoukville. The four large ships of the 1st Navy Squadron would make a feint toward Sihanoukville Port to pin down KR forces while the other warships provided naval gunfire support and screened the transport vessels from possible attack by vessels of the KR Navy.

Just after dusk on the night of 6 January, as the landing craft started in toward the beach under cover of darkness, a small force of eighty-seven elite Vietnamese sappers that had landed covertly the previous night burst out of its hiding place and assaulted and captured a KR artillery position covering the beach. The ships opened fire, and the two 130mm artillery battalions began shelling enemy gun positions and key road intersections. Small gunboats of the outnumbered and outgunned Cambodian navy sortied from Ream and other small harbors along the coast, but they were immediately fired on by the larger Vietnamese ships. The KR vessels were all sunk or driven off, but one of the Vietnamese ships was hit and many of its crew were killed or wounded.⁴⁹

An amphibious landing is one of modern warfare's most difficult offensive operations, and the Vietnamese were still new at the game. When the landing craft hit the beach, the troops found that they had to cross a wide tidal mud flat to reach solid ground. While three battalions of naval infantry and all the naval infantry's amphibious tanks and armored personnel carriers managed to land during the night, none of their trucks were able to reach the shore, and three more battalions that had been scheduled to land that night were forced to pull back from the beach to wait for better landing conditions.

49. Thuy, et al., *Lich Su Hai Quan Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, 322–26.

The plan called for the naval infantry to send a large advance force down the coastal highway to secure two key bridges and the Veal Renh road intersection, which led out onto the Kompong Som Peninsula. The advance force was directed to halt at the intersection to wait for the arrival of reinforcements from the rear. However, Marines of all nations are notoriously aggressive, and apparently the Vietnamese naval infantry were no different. In spite of the fact that none of the trucks and only half of the troops had made it to the beach, the local commander formed a small battalion-sized assault force, crammed his troops atop twelve tanks and armored personnel carriers, and sped off down the road just before dawn. KR troops encountered along the way scattered into the jungle. Encouraged by the lack of enemy resistance, instead of halting at the road intersection and waiting for support as ordered, the eager assault force commander kept on going toward Sihanoukville Port. Eventually, the inevitable happened. The force was hit by a powerful KR attack in the early afternoon. The advance force fought all night and through the next day, 8 January. Isolated and alone, it suffered extremely heavy losses and was virtually destroyed.

Desperate to rescue the beleaguered advance party, the Navy called for air strikes to keep the attackers at bay while it feverishly tried to put the rest of the landing force ashore so it could push up the road toward Sihanoukville. The landing operation proceeded very slowly, however. By nightfall on 7 January three more battalions of the 126th Brigade and two battalions of 101st Brigade had arrived on the beach, but the trucks did not make it ashore until the next day, 8 January.⁵⁰

General Nguyen Huu An spent the day on 8 January pushing his 24th Regiment down the road from Chhuk toward Kampot City to try to link up with the naval infantry, but his troops had to cross difficult terrain and a mountain pass in the face of stubborn KR resistance. General An's force did not reach Kampot City until the next day, and Kampot City was not finally secured until 1:00 in the afternoon on 9 January. Moving along the coastal highway and with most of the route in front of it already cleared by 8th Division, 304th Division arrived in Kampot City a few hours later.

Since 304th Division was still fresh, General An ordered it to move out as fast as possible to relieve the naval infantry and take Sihanoukville. With a unit of M-113 armored personnel carriers leading the way, the division's 66th Regiment, followed by 9th Regiment, drove straight through the night.

By dawn on the morning of 10 January 66th Regiment had linked up with naval infantry forces, which still had not managed to reach

50. *Ibid.*, 326–27; People's Air Force, *Lich Su Su Doan Khong Quan* 371, 261–62.

Sihanoukville, and was sitting on the approaches to the harbor city, ready to attack. The 9th Regiment was still far behind, having been delayed when a bridge collapsed under the weight of one of the regiment's lead tanks. Avoiding the mistakes made by the naval infantry, 66th Regiment secured the high ground above the city first before launching a coordinated assault supported by naval infantry units. At 7:45 that morning General Le Duc Anh landed by helicopter at the 2nd Corps forward command post to direct the final attack, but he was too late. The attack had already begun, and shortly after 8:00 in the morning Sihanoukville was in Vietnamese hands. When 304th Division's 9th Regiment and the tanks of the 203rd Armored Brigade arrived a few hours later, they were sent to attack Ream Port, fifteen kilometers east of Sihanoukville. With naval gunfire support provided by Vietnamese ships that sailed right up to the harbor docks, Ream was secured by the early afternoon.⁵¹

The Drive Around the Great Lake

On the morning of 8 January, the day after Phnom Penh was captured, 3rd Corps Commander General Kim Tuan recommended to Campaign Headquarters that his corps be used to clear KR units in Kompong Thom Province, north of Phnom Penh, or in Kompong Chhnang Province, northwest of Phnom Penh. However, Campaign Commander Le Trong Tan had a much more ambitious mission for General Tuan's corps, which now had only three divisions after the attached 302nd Division was sent north to help clear Kratie Province. General Tan ordered Tuan to send one of his divisions off in a lightning assault all the way around the Tonlé Sap, a vast lake northwest of Phnom Penh that was more than 100 kilometers long and as much as 50 kilometers wide.

Kim Tuan chose 10th Division for this difficult task. Keeping 320th and 31st Divisions behind to conduct mopping-up operations, General Tuan told 10th Division's 28th Regiment, which had just arrived in the northern outskirts of Phnom Penh, to turn around. Tuan sent the regiment back the same route it had come to secure a road junction on Route 6 east of the Kompong Thom Province capital. The 10th Division's 24th Regiment was ordered to march up Route 6 to take Kompong Thom City. Once the road was cleared, the division's assault force, 66th Regiment, the same 66th Regiment that had fought the bloody battle of the Ia Drang Valley against troops of the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division in

51. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 372–75; Thuy et al., *Lich Su Hai Quan Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, 327–28.

1965,⁵² would pass through its two sister regiments and drive straight to Siem Reap City at the northwest end of Tonlé Sap Lake.

By noon on 9 January Kompong Thom City and the Route 6 road junction were secure. Mounted in thirty-six trucks and accompanied by tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and anti-aircraft guns, 66th Regiment moved out at 6:00 that evening. Catching enemy troops manning roadblocks by surprise and shattering them with the speed and force of its assault, the column covered almost 100 kilometers in the first two hours of the advance. As the column continued northwest toward Siem Reap, a large KR truck convoy loaded with troops drove out from a side road into the middle of the Vietnamese column. In the black of night, the KR troops, who were retreating back to Siem Reap, mistook the Vietnamese column for KR forces fleeing from Phnom Penh and simply joined the column, driving along beside and between the Vietnamese vehicles. When the two sides finally recognized one other, a tremendous firefight broke out. In an hour of fighting, the outnumbered and out-gunned KR convoy was overwhelmed and all twenty-three KR trucks were captured or destroyed.

The Vietnamese column arrived at Siem Reap City at first light on 10 January. The KR defenders were caught completely by surprise and fled in all directions. In a matter of hours the regiment secured control of Siem Reap City and the fabled Angkor Wat temple complex north of the city. Tenth Division's 24th Regiment and MR-7's 5th Division arrived in the newly captured city before nightfall.⁵³

The next morning, 24th Regiment sped forward another 100 kilometers and occupied Sisophon district town at the intersection of Route 6 and Route 5, less than 50 kilometers from the Thai border. After turning the town over to 5th Division, early on the morning of 12 January a mixed force made up of 24th Regiment, a battalion from 66th Regiment, a company of M-113 armored personnel carriers, and artillery and anti-aircraft guns drove southeast out of Sisophon down Route 5 to attack KR forces gathering in Battambang City. Fighting its way through several roadblocks and bypassing several destroyed bridges, the force reached Battambang and took the city before the day was over.

Meanwhile, fleeing KR forces were beginning to regroup in Pursat, over 100 kilometers southwest of Battambang on Route 5. Vietnamese forces moving up Route 5 from Phnom Penh reported that increasing KR

52. There were two 66th Regiments in the Vietnamese Army, and there were also two 24th Regiments. The second 66th Regiment was part of 2nd Corps's 304th Division. Likewise, one of the two 24th Regiments was assigned to 10th Division, and the other was part of 304th Division.

53. 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, 201–4; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 137–40.

resistance south of Pursat was slowing their progress. General Kim Tuan ordered 10th Division to attack the KR from the rear.

In the afternoon of 13 January, 66th Regiment, accompanied by armored vehicles and a contingent of UFNSK troops, set out down the road toward Pursat. Twenty-four hours later, on the afternoon of 14 January 66th Regiment launched its assault on Pursat City. Under fire from both the front and the rear, KR resistance quickly crumbled. After fighting that lasted for less than an hour, 66th Regiment secured the city. Later that afternoon, a few kilometers south of Pursat City 66th Regiment linked up with Vietnamese MR-9 forces pushing up from the south-east. In just six days (9–14 January), the 3rd Corps combined arms force built around 10th Division had driven more than 400 kilometers, fought dozens of battles, and captured four major cities and towns. Even against the rapidly disintegrating KR forces, it was a truly impressive accomplishment.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The fighting was by no means over, but the conquest of Cambodia was now essentially complete. At noon on 17 January, following two days of heavy air strikes by U.S.-made F-5 fighter-bombers and after a three-hour naval gunfire preparatory barrage, eight battalions of naval infantry and an attached battalion from 304th Division conducted a massive amphibious assault on Koh Kong City and nearby Koh Kong Island along the southwestern coast of Cambodia near the Thai border. In spite of sporadic heavy resistance, by the end of the day the city and the surrounding area had been secured.⁵⁵

Cut off and without any source of resupply, many KR units continued to resist in the hills and jungles of Kampot, Kompong Speu, Kompong Chhnang, Pursat, and Takeo Provinces. The forces of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Corps, along with MR-9 forces, fought a series of heavy battles against KR forces that included tanks and heavy artillery. Although Vietnamese units occasionally suffered significant casualties, the eventual outcome was not in doubt. By March 1979 the remnants of the KR army, except for scattered bands hiding in the rural countryside, had been pushed into the remote mountain jungles along Cambodia's southwestern border with Thailand. Vietnamese forces began massing in Battambang for a major push to destroy this last KR bastion.⁵⁶

54. 10th Division, *Su Doan 10*, 204–6; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 140–43.

55. Thuy et al., *Lich Su Hai Quan Nhan Dan Viet Nam*, 329–31; 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 376.

56. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lich Su Quan Doan 2*, 376–84; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 145, 152; 341st Division, *Su Doan Song Lam*,

On 17 February 1979 more than 600,000 Chinese troops launched a massive attack across Vietnam's northern border all along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier. Although the Vietnamese had achieved their goal of toppling the KR regime before the Chinese had time to stop them, the bulk of the Vietnamese army, including three of the army's four strategic army corps (2nd, 3rd, and 4th), was still fighting in Cambodia. The KR were not yet defeated, and now troops, veteran troops, were needed on the Chinese border to reinforce the Vietnamese effort to hold the border with a defensive force that consisted primarily of territorial and militia units and raw, newly formed divisions. Only five veteran divisions were left in all of North Vietnam, and three of these, North Vietnam's elite 1st Corps, were being held back in reserve, to be committed only if the Chinese managed to break through to threaten the vital Red River Delta and Hanoi.

On 27 February, ten days after the Chinese invasion began, General Nguyễn Hữu An and his 2nd Corps received orders to redeploy to the Chinese border area as quickly as possible. After turning its areas of responsibility over to other units, the corps rushed north 2,000 kilometers to the Chinese border. In mid-March, just before the Chinese completed their withdrawal from Vietnamese territory, elements of 2nd Corps's 304th Division went into battle against Chinese forces in Cao Bằng Province. Soon thereafter, General An left 2nd Corps and was transferred to the post of Deputy Inspector General of the Army. An finally retired from the army in 1992.⁵⁷

General Lê Trọng Tấn left the Cambodian campaign to return to Hanoi, where he resumed his duties as Commander of the General Staff and directed the defense of Vietnam's northern border. General Tấn remained in this same post until he died a sudden, and some say mysterious, death in 1986 in the midst of a major leadership crisis in the Vietnamese armed forces.⁵⁸

General Lê Đức Anh, the political general, continued to direct operations in Cambodia. In 1981 he was appointed commander of all Vietnamese "volunteer" forces in Cambodia. He served in that position until 1987, when he became Minister of Defense following the deaths or forced resignations of three other generals, one of them Lê Trọng Tấn, in the 1986 army leadership crisis. In 1992 Lê Đức Anh rose to the pinnacle of power when he became Vietnam's chief of state.⁵⁹

290–311; 7th Division, *Su Doan* 7, 177–84; Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tây Nguyên*, 145–46.

57. 2nd Corps Headquarters, *Lịch Sử Quân Đoàn 2*, 386–93; Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Điển Bách Khoa Quân Sự Việt Nam*, 561.

58. Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Điển Bách Khoa Quân Sự Việt Nam*, 468–69.

59. *Ibid.*, 463.

General Hoang Cam turned over command of 4th Corps a few months after the invasion of Cambodia. After serving under Le Duc Anh for two years as Deputy Commander of Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, and then for four years as a military region commander in Central Vietnam, he became Inspector General of the Army. General Cam served in that post until his retirement in 1992.⁶⁰

Kim Tuan, 3rd Corps Commander, did not share the good fortune of his colleagues. On 13 March 1979 General Tuan moved his 3rd Corps Headquarters forward to Battambang City to plan the offensive against the remnants of Pol Pot's army massed near the Thai border in southwestern Cambodia. Three days later he left Battambang to drive to Siem Reap for staff consultations. Forty kilometers north of Battambang City Tuan's convoy was hit by a massive KR ambush. Most of the large convoy was overrun and General Kim Tuan was severely wounded. He died the next day, 17 March 1979.⁶¹ Three months later, in June 1979, 3rd Corps left Cambodia and was redeployed northward to help defend the border with China.

By the end of the year, the offensive Kim Tuan had been planning when he died had driven all major KR units out of their mountain strongholds in southwestern Cambodia, but the KR army was not destroyed. It fled across the border into Thailand, where it licked its wounds, rested, and received new equipment and supplies for a new war—a protracted guerrilla conflict. For ten more years Vietnamese units in Cambodia fought KR and Cambodian nationalist guerrilla groups operating out of sanctuaries in Thailand as the Vietnamese worked to recruit, equip, and train a new Cambodian army. After gradually turning over responsibility for the security and defense of the new pro-Vietnamese Cambodian state to this new Cambodian national army, the Vietnamese Army completed its withdrawal from Cambodia in the fall of 1989. A total of perhaps 30,000 Vietnamese soldiers are said to have been killed during the twelve-year Cambodian War (1977–89), but Kim Tuan was the only Vietnamese general officer to die in battle in this long and brutal conflict.⁶²

60. *Ibid.*, 357–58.

61. Central Highlands Corps, *Binh Doan Tay Nguyen*, 152–53; Military Encyclopedia Center, *Tu Dien Bach Khoa Quan Su Viet Nam*, 557.

62. The Vietnamese government has never released any official figures for Vietnamese losses suffered in Cambodia. The most authoritative figures available are those provided by General Le Kha Phieu, at that time the Deputy Vietnamese Commander in Cambodia, in a press conference held in Phnom Penh in July 1988. According to Western press accounts, Phieu told Western journalists that 55,000 Vietnamese, both soldiers and civilians, had died since the war in Cambodia began in 1977. *Far East Economic Review*, 14 July 1988, p. 14; *Los Angeles Times*, 1 July 1988; *Washington Post*, 1 July 1988.