(U) Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series

(U) "Nothing Left to Give Up": SIGINT and the Fall of Saigon, April 1975 (Part I)

(U) On 30 April 1975, the city of Saigon, capital of South Vietnam, fell to the forces of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). This event marked the end of a struggle to reunify Vietnam begun in September 1945 by the nationalist-communist party, the Viet Minh, under Ho Chi Minh. The United States had been involved since 1950, first helping the French, without success, to hold onto their Indochina empire, and then itself militarily intervening in 1965. In January 1973 the United States had signed a peace agreement with North Vietnam, which allowed Washington to withdraw from the conflict. However, no one in Hanoi or Saigon believed that there was any chance of a permanent peace; both sides grimly prepared for the final struggle.

(U) By the end of 1974, after almost two years of intermittent clashes between both sides to gain better military and political advantage, Hanoi came up with a plan to end the struggle. It called for a large-scale assault in the strategically vulnerable Central Highlands of South Vietnam. Some leading politicians in Hanoi were concerned about an American intervention, especially with air power. (U.S. air strikes had played a major role in blunting North Vietnam's spring 1972 offensive.) So a scaled-down version was substituted. A three-phase offensive would begin at the end of 1974. A limited attack along the Cambodian-South Vietnam border would start in December. A second phase would commence in March 1975 in which the North Vietnamese would seize a number of outposts in the highlands. Then the northerners would consolidate their position during the rainy season. By the end of 1975 they could start the final push that hopefully would end in victory in the spring of 1976. However, the North Vietnamese minister of defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap, allowed for the chance that a "strategic opportunity" would arise. If so, he said, then the PAVN had to be ready to exploit it.

~~(S)~~ In the United States, the consensus was that Hanoi was planning a final offensive. A CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, issued in late December 1974, asserted this possibility. It also anticipated that the communists might press for a final victory if conditions seemed propitious, committing its strategic reserve for the final attack. This was a sobering assessment of Hanoi's intentions. What no one could predict was Saigon's resilience in the face of the expected attacks. Although Saigon's forces outnumbered Hanoi's in almost all significant categories, such as men, artillery pieces, and aircraft, the regime was politically weak. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was better than most critics would concede; but it was a military with a history of dependence on U.S.

Declassified and approved for release by NSA on 04-10-2007 pursuant to E.O. 12958, as amended.

air support and advisors. In this battle, neither would be present. Also, Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, had committed to a strategy of complete defense of all areas. This, in effect, tied down almost all of Saigon's forces to a static defense. Hanoi's forces were free to pick the time and place of attack.

(U) In Washington the Ford administration and Congress were in no mood to re-intervene in future fighting. Congress had limited the amount of military aid to 700 million dollars. Critics claimed this was not enough, but only half of this amount would be spent by the time Saigon fell. In his January 1975 State of the Union address, President Gerald Ford did not even mention Vietnam, despite then ongoing fighting. In a press conference a few days later, he said that he could see no reason to intervene.

~~(S//SI)~~ By this time, Vietnam had become a target of secondary concern to American SIGINT. It had been displaced by a strategic interest in the People's Republic of China. The last major field site in the region, the Army Security Agency's site at Ramasun, Thailand, saw most of its tactical intercept support resources removed in favor of [redacted] From a high of nearly 8,000 cryptologists in late 1969, there were fewer than 100 in 1975 left in South Vietnam. [redacted] EO 1.4.(c) Their mission was restricted to advice and logistical support. Three people served as technical advisors to the South Vietnamese SIGINT organization's field stations, known as technical centers, in Saigon, at Pleiku, in the Central Highlands, and Danang, which was along the coast. But there were no U.S. SIGINT assets in South Vietnam. The only support that could be mustered consisted of the occasional aerial intercept mission such as Combat Apple [redacted] and some coverage from the field station at Ramasun, Thailand.

[redacted]

~~(S//SI)~~ In December 1974 the North Vietnamese began their offensive. They surrounded the provincial capital of Song Be. Within a few days the city fell. The lack of a strong South Vietnamese effort to defend the city and the nonintervention by the Americans

convinced the North Vietnamese leadership to go for a larger prize in the Central Highlands. Also, the battle established some dangerous precedents: and the extremely effective battlefield work of Hanoi's own tactical COMINT units known as Technical Reconnaissance Units (TRU). EO 1.4.(c)

(U) Hanoi now set its sights on the Central Highlands. Two cities were logical targets: Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku. The communist military planners chose to take Ban Me Thuot, which was south of Pleiku. By taking this city, a communications hub, the North Vietnamese would have the options of attacking north or to the east and threaten to cut South Vietnam in half. Hanoi had to somehow distract the South Vietnamese military, to convince them that their main attack was aimed at Pleiku. To accomplish this they had to deny Saigon (and American intelligence) access to information that would reveal the communist plan. The North Vietnamese devised a deception plan. One division would "demonstrate" near Pleiku and Kontum by maneuvering in the open and generating much radio traffic. Meanwhile, three more divisions would silently move into place around Ban Me Thuot. One of the units, the North Vietnamese 316th Division, had to move south almost 500 miles from central North Vietnam through Laos and across the mountains to south of Ban Me Thuot. Could the communists avoid detection and pull off a surprise?

~~(S//SI)~~ In the end they succeeded. Although some aspects of the plan were compromised by defectors and prisoners from the communist side, the South Vietnamese commander of the region was convinced that Pleiku was the main target. In part, this assessment was Meanwhile, the TRUs, exploiting the South Vietnamese communications, kept the North Vietnamese forces commander, General Van Tien Dung, fully informed of Saigon's thin defensive posture at Ban Me Thuot.

(U) On 10 March, five PAVN regiments, supported by tanks and assault teams stormed Ban Me Thuot. The next day the city fell, along with a deputy division commander and its communications center complete with radios and cryptomaterial. Desperate to recover the city, the regional commander ordered a counterattack. Two regiments flown in by helicopter landed east of the city. However, they ran into two advancing communist divisions which had been alerted to their presence. The remnants of the ARVN units

retreated to the east. On 14 March, President Thieu and the regional commander met to discuss the strategic situation. A decision was made to withdraw from Pleiku, reassemble those forces and try to retake Ban Me Thuot. Unfortunately, the decision was made without much warning. The next day, the commander and his staff left Pleiku. The main forces were to pull out the next day. Panic set in, and there was a general exodus of civilians and local defense forces. There was only one road out to the east, and communist forces closed on it from north and south.

EO 1.4.(c)

~~(S//SI)~~ Lost in the pell-mell retreat were the personnel of the Pleiku Technical Center. The [redacted] had been withdrawn earlier, as had the center's equipment. But the withdrawal turned into panic-ridden rush, and the site's personnel and dependents had to leave with the refugee troops and civilians. Some 600 left Pleiku on 15 March. Attacked by communist troops, cut off by ambushes, 200 or so survivors managed to reach Danang on the coast.

(U) Events in South Vietnam had reached a crisis stage. The road to the sea was now open. The only defense lay in the coastal cities and Saigon. Could South Vietnam hold on to these places? And, if not, what about the Americans? The major concern for the NRV would soon turn from advice and support of the DGTS to evacuation planning.

~~[(U//FOUO)~~ Robert J. Hanyok, Center for Cryptologic History, rjhanyo, 972-2893s]

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Content Owner: Feedback
Web POC: Feedback

Last Modified: by nsr
Last Reviewed: February 28, 2003
Next Review: 365 days

SECRET//COMINT//X1

DERIVED FROM: NSA/CSS MANUAL 123-2
DATED: 24 FEB 1998
DECLASSIFY ON: X1