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25 August 1972

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The ARVN Setback in the Que Son Valley of MR 1

1. A review of intelligence available prior to 19 August, when Que Son district town and Fire Support Base (FSB) Ross were lost to the enemy, indicates that the enemy's objectives and timetable during these attacks in Que Son district were known beforehand. A lieutenant from the 270th NVA Regiment, 711th Division, who was captured on 23 July, revealed the general timing of the enemy's current drive and spelled out the specific objective of each enemy regiment. Prisoners and agents had earlier reported the presence of enemy tanks and artillery in northwestern Quang Tin province which were to be used during attacks in the Quang Nam lowlands. These reports were confirmed by Forward Air Controllers, and air strikes resulted in numerous secondary explosions, as well as the reported destruction of several enemy artillery pieces and tanks. This gave a clear advance indication of the enemy's buildup of heavy weapons to support the NVA 711th Division in further attacks in Que Son district. Furthermore, interviews in late May with both the 2nd ARVN Division Commander and the Quang Nam province chief revealed that they were aware of the enemy's objectives and strength even at that time.

2. Enemy activity in northern Quang Tin province and Que Son district of Quang Nam province from April through June of this year gave other indications that the 711th Division was planning an attempt to move into the coastal area south of Danang. Although the 2nd ARVN Division failed to retake several firebases and Hiep Duc district headquarters in northern Quang Tin province during May, the 2nd Division's 5th and 6th Regiments later did hold FSB Ross until relieved by the 51st ARVN Independent Regiment. This in turn ended the 711th Division's first campaign to seize Que Son district town and FSB Ross.

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3. Enemy movements and attacks in Que Son district during late July and early August followed the pattern set earlier in May and June. First, attacks in the mountains bordering Que Son district inflicted heavy casualties on one battalion of the 6th ARVN Regiment and a Ranger battalion, forcing other ARVN units back into the lowlands. The enemy seized Outpost Lion, southwest of Que Son district town, on 23 July. By 30 July, two of seven ARVN infantry battalions from the 2nd Division and two Ranger battalions had been rendered combat ineffective. Several RF/PF outposts were overrun or abandoned, and continuing small-scale attacks by fire hindered ARVN movements as enemy forces maneuvered into better attack positions. ARVN and RF troops did conduct limited counterattacks at this time to regain lost outposts and claimed to have inflicted significant losses on enemy forces. The 2nd Regiment, 3rd ARVN Division, reinforced ARVN forces in northeast Que Son district during early August. Meanwhile, the 711th Division's attacks in Que Son district were coordinated with the Viet Cong Front 4's campaign in the Quang Nam area, which included a heavy rocket attack on Danang on 3 August. Attacks by fire, ground probes, and harassment continued in Que Son district, in coastal Quang Nam province, and in northeast Quang Tin province. Gradually the NVA forces isolated ARVN and RF forces in Que Son district by maintaining pressure against ARVN infantry units and initiating scattered small-scale attacks. Five ARVN attempts to retake Outpost Lion, which dominates the area southwest of Que Son town, between 24 July and 15 August failed.

4. Intelligence reports and enemy patterns of activity indicated the enemy would conduct major attacks in Que Son district during the August "high point." Other reports indicated that activity in Que Son district would be coordinated with attacks on Danang and other targets in the Quang Nam lowlands on or about 19 August, the anniversary of the proclamation of the DRV. The MACV Disum and Station sitreps carried items on the increasing enemy pressure in the Quang Nam/Que Son area almost every day over a period of weeks prior to the night of 17/18 August. On that night NVA forces infiltrated the area between the 5th ARVN Regiment at FSB Ross and the Que Son district headquarters, which was held by RF forces, effectively isolating them. On 18 August, NVA 130mm field artillery, firing for the first time in Quang Nam province, demoralized the ARVN defenders of FSB Ross while the NVA

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31st Regiment pinned them down with continuous mortar and recoilless rifle fire and the occasional use of SAGGER wire-guided missiles. Three kilometers to the east, the 38th NVA Regiment blocked the GVN line of communications. Relieving ARVN forces at FSB Baldy in northeast Que Son district were pinned down by artillery and mortar fire while the ARVN 2nd Regiment remained immobile in the northern foothills of Que Son district. Other NVA forces enveloped the Ross-Que Son town area from the south, cutting Route 534. Danang and other GVN population centers and ARVN fire support bases within supporting distance of Que Son district were hit with attacks by fire to prevent the reinforcement of ARVN units already in the area. The 270th NVA Regiment, the 3rd Regiment of the 711th Division, and the 409th NVA sapper battalion reportedly cut Route 535 between the landing zone near FSB Baldy and Que Son town, blocking ARVN reinforcements. Brigadier General Hiep, the commanding general of the 2nd ARVN Division, requested permission from MR 1 Headquarters to abandon FSB Ross at noon on 19 August, but was refused and was ordered to hold the position.

5. By early morning of the 19th, NVA soldiers had occupied two-thirds of the firebase, but were later reported to have been driven out. Reports indicated that heavy artillery attacks demoralized the ARVN defenders, who were further confused by a heavy tear gas concentration when stored CS rounds were hit by artillery fire. The NVA attackers gained control of FSB Ross through small ground probes rather than by a large-scale assault. A report that ARVN had regained control of Ross apparently caused a cancellation of air strikes which might have hindered the enemy. Back at the landing zone near FSB Baldy, a relief column scheduled to depart at dawn failed to move until 1600, apparently because of confusion and lack of coordination. By then it was too late, since Que Son district headquarters was abandoned by the RF/PF defenders at 1300 hours and at 1600 hours FSB Ross was evacuated by the 5th ARVN Regiment.

6. A general retreat of GVN forces toward FSB Baldy occurred during the night of 19-20 August. Some semblance of order was restored during a lull in NVA activity which probably reflected a need to regroup. Friendly losses appear to have been heavy. The 5th ARVN Regiment was rendered combat ineffective; equipment losses included eight M-41 tanks, 22 artillery pieces, at least 16 APC's, and one TOW missile launcher.

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7. On 21 and 22 August an ARVN counteroffensive made only very limited progress despite preparatory B-52 and tacair strikes. The 711th NVA Division appeared at this time to be regrouping for further attacks on the flanks of friendly forces in eastern Que Son district. Sensitive sources indicated that the 711th NVA Division headquarters and its forward element had moved to within seven and two kilometers respectively of the landing zone near FSB Baldy. Enemy 130mm artillery had apparently also moved forward and was registering on Baldy with light ABF.

8. FSB Baldy, which guards the gateway to the Quan Nam lowlands, was, as of 23 August, occupied by remnants of the 5th ARVN Regiment and one battalion of the 6th Regiment. Six battalions from the ARVN 2nd and 6th Regiments and three RF battalions formed a defensive line about six kilometers east of FSB Ross. The situation had apparently stabilized, at least temporarily.

9. A major factor in the debacle probably has been poor leadership of the 2nd ARVN Division. The commanding general, Brigadier General Hiep, was rated as poor by U.S. advisors when he commanded the 1st Armor Brigade. The 2nd Division itself was considered a good unit because of low desertions and a seemingly good combat record against VC local forces. However, there has been consistent reporting suggesting that previous as well as current Division and Regimental commanders have grossly exaggerated or fabricated operational claims and minimized their own losses. The lack of aggressiveness, poor coordination, failure to support RF/PF units, and the collapse of the defense of FSB Ross can only be explained by problems of leadership at the Regimental and Divisional level.

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