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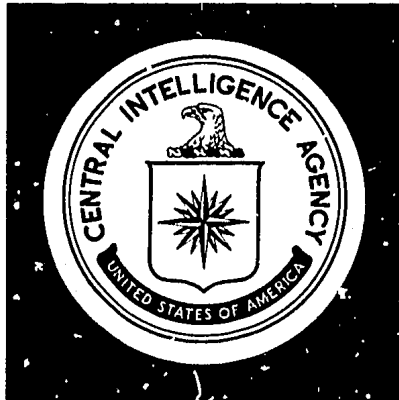

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

North Vietnamese Armor

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June 1972

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
June 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMOR

Background

1. During the 1971/72 dry season, Hanoi has deployed to South Vietnam the largest concentration of armor committed to the war.⁽¹⁾ The use of tanks outside of North Vietnam prior to 1971 was limited to units of battalion size or less. The first use of tanks by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in South Vietnam was in support of a ground assault against Lang Vei, Quang Tri Province, in February 1968. Tanks were again used against Ben Het in Kontum Province in March 1969.

2. During Operation Lam Son 719 in southern Laos in the spring of 1971, the NVA apparently committed at least one and possibly two armor regiments, although only two battalions were specifically identified in the fighting.

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[redacted], two armor regiments were destined for South Vietnam (one to B-3 Front and one to COSVN) in early 1971. These

1. In addition to the armor used against South Vietnamese forces, the North Vietnamese Army has used a few tanks in northern Laos primarily in the Plaine des Jarres area and in the Laotian Panhandle against Royal Lao Government Forces. In northern Laos the [redacted] Armor Battalion probably has no more than 15 tanks at the present time. In the Laotian Panhandle, some 18 tanks are reported to be currently committed against friendly forces in the Bolovens Plateau area. These tanks may have been left in southern Laos after Lam Son 719 by the [redacted] Armor Battalion, which apparently returned to North Vietnam after the fighting to be refurbished. Currently, the [redacted] Armor Battalion, reportedly has been committed this dry season to the B-3 Front. In addition to Laos, a large number of tank sightings have been made in Cambodia over the past few months, primarily along the lines of communication running south from Laos and in Kompong Cham Province, where COSVN's major units prepared for the current offensive. Recent evidence indicates that Communist forces are training with tanks west of the Mekong near Kratie. The current number of tanks in Laos and Cambodia is estimated to be at least 50.

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two units were diverted, however, to fighting in Operation Lam Son 719, after which they were further delayed from proceeding south by the rainy season and possibly by mechanical difficulties. They finally deployed to their original destinations during the current dry season. In addition, at least two more armor regiments [redacted] have deployed into Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces of Military Region (MR) 1, and it is possible that the remaining identified regiment [redacted] has also deployed there.

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Organization

3. The North Vietnamese Armor Command was formed in June 1965 in the Hanoi area and consisted of a headquarters and the [redacted] Armor Regiments, with a complement of about 3,500 men. Since then this command has grown to at least five armor regiments or equivalents, including the four currently known to be operating in South Vietnam. We estimate the total strength of the Armor Command is about 10,000 men.

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4. Little detailed information is available on the structure, manning levels, and activities of armor units in North Vietnam. To date, only three armor regiments have been clearly identified [redacted]

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[redacted] We have been unable to detect the creation, structure, or activities of armor units except from prisoners and ralliers. According to one rallier, about 200 NVA cadre underwent armor training in China and the USSR prior to the formation of an NVA armor capability, but there is scant evidence on the volume of tank deliveries to North Vietnam.⁽²⁾

5. We are uncertain when the expansion of the Armor Command was started, but a decision to build a sizable armor capability probably was made some time after the offensives of 1968. [redacted]

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[redacted] It is also clear that there was some further buildup in armor in 1971 after the losses sustained during Lam Son 719.

6. In North Vietnam, an armor regiment generally has three battalions with an authorized inventory of about 35 tanks per battalion. The battalions that deployed to South Vietnam this dry season, however, arrived with somewhat fewer than 35 tanks per battalion because of losses in transit resulting from terrain, maintenance difficulties, and air strikes. Prisoners [redacted]

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2. There is no information on either seaborne or overland delivery of tanks to North Vietnam except from interrogation reports.

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[redacted] indicate that each of the battalions of their units had 32 and 24 tanks, respectively. In addition, a prisoner [redacted]

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[redacted] indicated that his battalion had only some 24 to 27 tanks, although it originally had 36 tanks⁽³⁾ in December 1971, prior to its deployment to South Vietnam. On the basis of the description of the number of tanks in two of the battalion's four companies, another prisoner [redacted]

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[redacted] suggests that his battalion may have had as many as 40 tanks in December 1971, prior to its infiltration. Because of losses incurred en route, however, the unit arrived in South Vietnam in May with only about 32 tanks.

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Inventory

7. On the basis of order of battle information obtained since the end of March 1972, we estimate that at the start of the current offensive the NVA had more than 500 and possibly as many as 700 tanks.⁽⁴⁾ An estimate made before most of the current information became available - and now out of date - provides the only breakdown by type of tanks, as follows:

| <u>Type of Tank</u> | <u>Number</u> |
|---------------------|------------------|
| PT-76 | 90 - 100 |
| T-34 | 130 - 145 |
| T-54 | 190 - 215 |
| T-63 | 30 |
| Total | 440 - 490 |

8. Recently acquired information permits an expansion of this list. Aerial photography of T-63s near Dong Ha and in northern Laos suggests a substantial inventory of this vehicle, and a Chinese-made T-59 was

3. From the prisoner's general description of the type of tanks in his unit, three of the 36 are probably the ZSU-57-2 tracked vehicle, a twin 57-mm self-propelled automatic antiaircraft gun carrier. Such vehicles were first identified in South Vietnam by Forward Air Controllers in Kontum Province in April. Subsequently, a ZSU-57-2 was captured at An Loc in Binh Long Province.

4. This estimate includes tanks in units and stocks.

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captured in Quang Tri Province in April 1972. [redacted] reported that China supplied 30 T-63 and an unknown number of T-59 tanks to North Vietnam as early as 1968. [redacted] however, [redacted] the captured T-59 was produced in China during 1970.

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9. The NVA tanks currently being used in South Vietnam are armed as follows:

| <u>Type of Tank</u> | <u>Armament</u> |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| PT-76 (Soviet amphibious) | 76-mm gun |
| T-63 (Chinese amphibious) | 85-mm gun |
| T-34 (Soviet) | 85-mm gun |
| T-54 (Soviet) | 100-mm gun |
| T-59 (Chinese) | 100-mm gun |

1972 Spring Offensive

10. The NVA initially deployed 320 to 400 tanks to South Vietnam for the current offensive. The large scale use of armor during the current offensive reflects a North Vietnamese adaptation of armor tactics that were used successfully in Operation Lam Son 719 in early 1971. In that campaign, armor was used to obtain increased firepower and a shock effect. The enemy's use of tanks this dry season, however, has not been without problems. NVA commanders have not consistently and effectively coordinated infantry cover for their tanks. Furthermore, Allied tactical air support and the improved use of the M-72 antitank weapon by South Vietnamese forces have tended to reduce the effectiveness of NVA armor. Finally, the NVA has had problems in getting all the armor to planned areas of employment on a timely basis.

11. Testimony [redacted] suggests that at least the latter stages of the expansion of the Armor Command were poorly planned and inadequate provision was made for training. One prisoner [redacted] stated that a number of troops in his battalion were inadequately trained and poorly motivated. He added that some replacements received prior to infiltration were former deserters and that others were new recruits who had received only two months of basic

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infantry training. Of the some 30 officers in the unit, only about half had received extensive tank training. In addition, there was a shortage of non-commissioned officers with armor training. Moreover, only 60 of the approximately 175 men of his battalion were classified as veteran non-commissioned officers and soldiers with training in armor, but none had ever had combat experience with an armored unit. These factors plus the low level of morale of the troops seriously affected the combat readiness of the battalion at the time of its infiltration. A second prisoner captured [redacted] indicated that no one from his unit, which was involved in attacks on Fire Support Base (FSB) November, had ever received field training in coordinating the movement of tanks with infantry units.

Military Region 1

12. The North Vietnamese have deployed [redacted] Armor Regiments to Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces during the current offensive. These regiments, combined with a large amount of artillery, have provided North Vietnamese ground forces in MR 1 with the highest level of firepower ever attained by the NVA during the war. The [redacted] estimated to have originally deployed with a total of some 165 to 200 tanks, including T-54s, T-59s, and T-63s, which are being used in South Vietnam for the first time. In addition, there also are a large number of tanks in the A Shau area - probably around 25 tanks (a battalion-size group), although there could be as many as 50 tanks there. Although their subordination is unknown, these tanks are reportedly to be used in support of the [redacted] Division, which is targeted against friendly FSBs west of Hue City and against Hue City itself. Moreover, a small number of enemy tanks, including T-63s, also have been reported recently in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces and may possibly be from the armor group identified in A Shau.

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13. The continued substantial presence of NVA tanks in MR 1 in the face of heavy losses (see paragraphs 18-20, below) suggests that additional tanks have been deployed to the area during the offensive. We as yet do not know, however, whether these additional tanks are from the [redacted] Armor Regiment, which was being held in reserve in North Vietnam, or from a replacement pool.

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Military Region 2

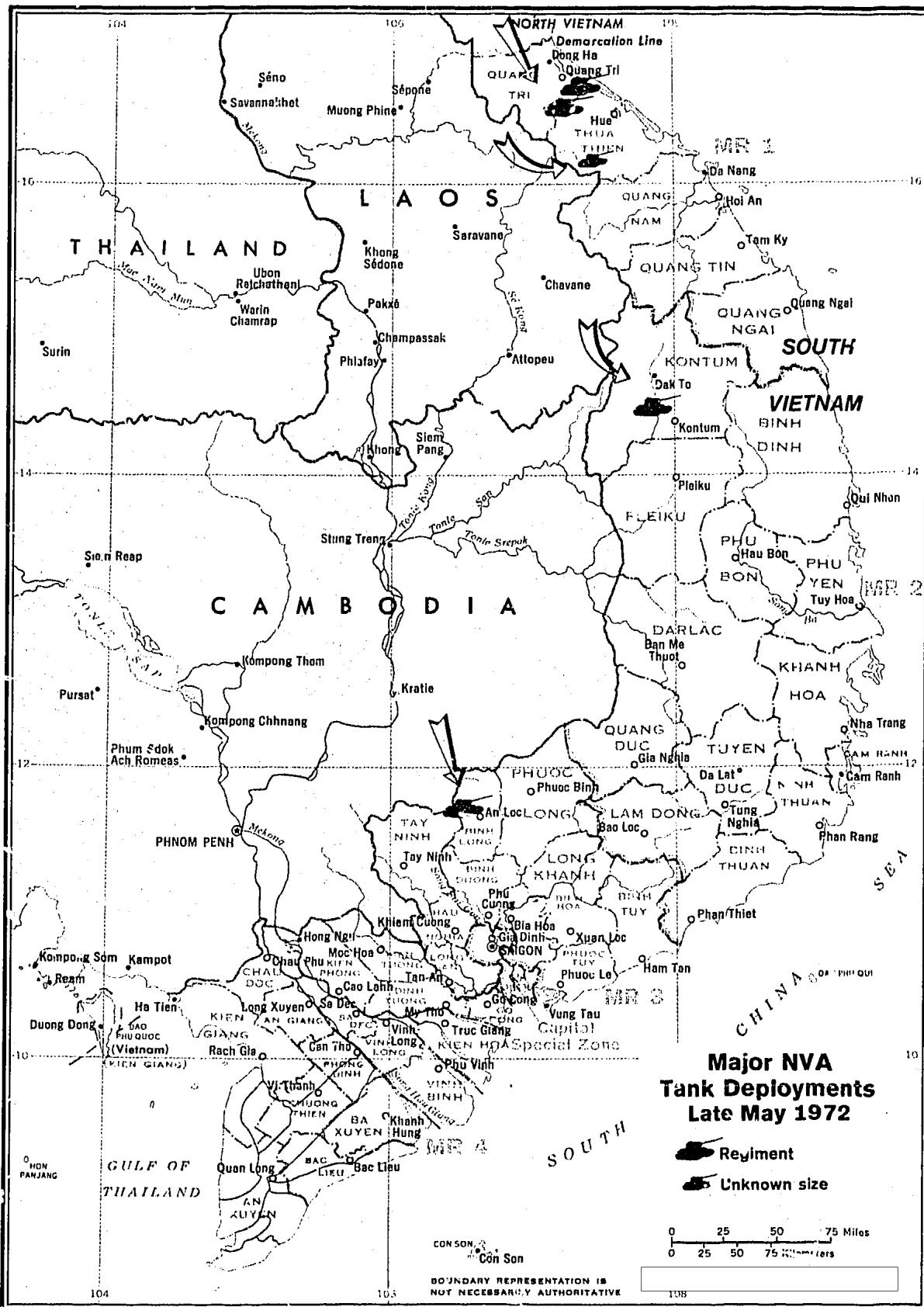
14. Since early 1969, NVA tanks have been used on a limited scale in the B-3 Front area of MR 2 against remote FSBs. These tanks probably belonged to the [redacted] Battalion of the [redacted] Artillery Regiment, which has an estimated 10 to 15 tanks. This dry season, however, Hanoi appears to

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have reinforced its forces in the B-3 Front with at least two battalions⁽⁵⁾
 [redacted] containing some 50 to 60 tanks.

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15. Enemy tanks initially proved effective in MR 2. On 24 April a multi-regimental assault supported by about 25 tanks succeeded in overrunning the South Vietnamese 22nd Infantry Division's forward headquarters at Dak To. Also, the [redacted] NVA Regiment of the [redacted] Division was supported by tanks when it overran FSB Delta west of Kontum City. More recently, however, the more effective use of the M-72 antitank weapon by South Vietnamese forces and the introduction of antitank weapons on helicopter gunships blunted the enemy's initial armor-supported assaults against Kontum City.

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Military Region 3

16. NVA armor is being used in MR 3 this dry season for the first time. Thus far, its use has been centered primarily in and around An Loc City, Binh Long Province. Although the units involved still are unknown, it is estimated that at least the equivalent of an armor regiment, with about 80 to 90 NVA tanks, has been committed to MR 3.⁽⁶⁾ Some 30 of these arrived in the province as late as 5 May. In addition to NVA armor, Communist forces have made considerable use in both Binh Long and Tay Ninh Provinces of friendly tanks and armored personnel carriers, many of which were captured during the heavy fighting at Snoul, Cambodia, in May 1971.

17. In the early stages of fighting in MR 3, enemy armor was quite effective because of South Vietnamese troops' fear of tanks and because of the adverse weather conditions, which prevented effective air support of friendly forces. Since the South Vietnamese Army discovered that its antitank weapons operate well against even the enemy's T-54, however, it has been more successful in standing up to and destroying enemy armor. Most enemy tank losses, however, have been attributable to massive Allied air strikes.

5. Although one battalion is believed to have been previously committed to southern Laos since as early as 1969, it may have been originally trained by or part of the [redacted] Regiment. The other battalion may be a relatively newer unit also trained by the regiment.

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6. One armor battalion is reported to be from the [redacted] Armor Regiment; however, it may only have been trained by the regiment in North Vietnam for this offensive and may not be an actual subordinate battalion of the unit.

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Losses

18. As of 1 June, 421 enemy tanks are reported to have been destroyed or captured in South Vietnam since 30 March. Of this total, some 265 (or 63%) occurred in MR 1, 49 in MR 2, and 107 in MR 3. Although enemy tank losses within South Vietnam unquestionably have been heavy, these reported losses are almost certainly inflated - they exceed the estimated initial deployment of tanks to South Vietnam. The loss figures, therefore, probably include some armored personnel carriers (particularly in MR 3), some destroyed friendly tanks, and almost certainly some duplication of NVA tank "kills." It is not possible to make a firm estimate of actual tank losses, but analysis of the reporting of tank losses that occurred during Operation Lam Son 719 suggests that the actual number of tanks destroyed or captured may be only about 60% of reported losses, or on the order of 250.

19. A substantial number of tank crews also have been lost, and - based on what little we know of its training problems - it is doubtful that the NVA is in a position to replace all these crews. A recently captured prisoner [redacted] indicated that his battalion suffered 200 casualties out of an original strength of 450 men in its attack on South Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri Province in late April. Moreover, some armor units are apparently being formed on an ad hoc basis from other types of NVA units in northern MR 1 because of the considerable loss of armor personnel. Prisoners recently captured near My Chanh indicate that their unit - originally an infantry battalion - was converted to an armor battalion after it infiltrated into South Vietnam in order to provide replacements [redacted]

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20. The reported losses of NVA tanks in MR 1 exceed the estimated number of enemy tanks originally deployed to that area. Although actual losses probably are considerably below the level claimed, the extensive use of tanks in the fighting in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces has resulted in heavy losses, and additional NVA tanks have had to be brought into the area from North Vietnam since the original deployment. Despite the fact that some armor replacements have been received, it is not believed that the North Vietnamese have been able to make up all their tank losses.

21. Reported tank losses in MR 2 have not been as large as those for other areas but they are significant, given the number of tanks estimated to have been committed to the area. Evidence suggests that the NVA may have lost as many as 75% of the tanks brought into the highlands area this dry season. Tank losses in MR 3 also are considerable relative to the number believed to have been committed from North Vietnam, reflecting the heavy fighting in Binh Long Province. An unknown number of these

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losses, however, are tanks captured from the South Vietnamese by the Communists either during the recent fighting or in Cambodia last year. Given the level of enemy tank losses to date and the onset of the rainy season, the capability of NVA armor in MRs 2 and 3 probably will be considerably reduced over the next several months.

Conclusions

22. Over the past few years the North Vietnamese have significantly expanded their Armor Command. It totaled at least five regiments or equivalents with an estimated 10,000 men and more than 500 and possibly as many as 700 tanks at the start of the current offensive. About 55% to 60% of North Vietnam's total tank inventory appears to have been committed initially to support the current offensive in South Vietnam. Hanoi deployed at least four regiments or equivalents with at least 320 and possibly as many as 400 tanks to South Vietnam, including the first known use by the NVA of the Communist Chinese T-59 and T-63 tanks. These figures on initial tank deployments, however, do not reflect the entire NVA commitment of armor against South Vietnamese forces - they do not include replacements for losses, particularly in MR 1, or the use of captured South Vietnamese tanks.

23. Despite the large amount of armor committed to the fighting, poorly coordinated North Vietnamese infantry-tank tactics, countered by Allied tactical air support, and the improved use of the M-72 anti-tank weapon by South Vietnamese armed forces have blunted the effectiveness of the NVA's armor. In addition, prisoners suggest that at least the latter stages of the expansion of the Armor Command were poorly planned and that inadequate provision was made for training.

24. From 30 March through 1 June, 421 enemy armored vehicles had been reported destroyed or captured in South Vietnam, of which some 63% were in MR 1. Although the total loss figure almost certainly is overstated, there is no question that enemy tank losses have been heavy, perhaps about 250. Moreover, a substantial number of tank crews also have been lost and it is doubtful that the NVA will be able to replace all these crews. The high level of losses and continued use of armor in MR 1 strongly suggest that additional NVA tanks have been brought into the area from North Vietnam during the fighting, either from reserve units or stocks. These replacements, however, have not been sufficient to make up all of the losses. In addition, the considerable number of tank losses in MRs 2 and 3, coupled with the onset of the ~~dry~~^{wet} season, will mean a reduced capability in the use of NVA armor in these areas during the next three to four months.

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