

A Survey of the Situation  
In Quang Tri Province Case # NLJ 02-149  
Document # 6

1. Current allied operations and intelligence reports indicate that there has been a large buildup of Communist forces in the Lao/Vietnamese border area north and south of Route 9, and in the area just north of the six-mile-wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Vietnams.

2. In response to reconnaissance reports of a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) concentration just south of the DMZ, US Marine and South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) forces initiated Operation HASTINGS in northern Quang Tri Province on 7 July. Subsequently expanded to include seven US and five ARVN battalions, Operation HASTINGS established sporadic and often heavy contact with major elements of the PAVN 324B Infantry Division in this area during most of July and in early August. By 3 August, when the operation ended, the allies had killed 882 enemy soldiers (body count), captured 15, and seized 254 weapons. The allies lost 147 killed (126 US) and 488 wounded (448 US). Most of the fighting in Operation HASTINGS took place along the thickly forested ridges and ravines of the central part of the province, away from the flatlands on the coast where most of the population resides.

3. Defector, prisoner, and reconnaissance reports indicate that units of the 324B Division began their infiltration across the DMZ in May. This is the first known major NVA troop movement via this direct access route to South Vietnam. All three 2,500-man regiments (the 812th, 803rd, and 90th) plus a 110-man control headquarters infiltrated within a few weeks. This was the shortest period that a unit of this size has taken to enter South Vietnam. The presence of most of the division in Quang Tri Province was officially confirmed by COMUSMACV on 22 July.

## Reasons For Use of the DMZ

4. There are several possible reasons why Hanoi decided to use the DMZ as a major infiltration route. First, it was quicker. A defector from the 812th Regiment stated that his unit's trip--over the coastal plains of North Vietnam and through foothills in the DMZ into Quang Tri's mountainous interior--took only 12 days; the trip through the Laotian corridor takes about 40. Second, it was safer. Until recently, the DMZ was not bombed, while the trail complex through Laos has been under constant air attack. Third, the shortness of the trip through the DMZ meant less attrition. The 324B Division had fewer men stricken with malaria at the end of its trip than units which have traveled through Laos. Finally, the use of the DMZ meant the North Vietnamese could utilize forward supply dumps north of the Zone.

5. In this connection, exploitation of North Vietnamese documents captured during Operation HASTINGS reveals that all food for the 324th Division is being procured in North Vietnam. This tends to confirm US pilot reports of rice stores scattered along Route 102 just north of the DMZ and captive statements that their units were responsible for transporting rice across the Ben Hai River in the DMZ. The extensive supply facilities detected in this area suggest that Hanoi has made detailed plans to resupply Communist troops in the South via the DMZ and may have been using this shorter route for some time. In the past, Communist units operating in South Vietnam are believed to have relied almost exclusively on locally gathered food.

6. Since early July, shortly after the 324B Division had moved into South Vietnam, a communications complex was formed in a 95-square-mile area which extends across the Demilitarized Zone into both North and South Vietnamese territory. Some ten NVA radio stations--some of which represent 324B elements--have been firmly located.

## Objectives of the Buildup

7. The short-term objectives of the North Vietnamese apparently were to secure the major communication routes reaching into Quang Tri's central and western mountains. There are two such routes: Route 9, which connects Laos with Route 1 on the South Vietnamese coast, and the Ba Long Valley, cleared a year ago by ARVN. According to a second lieutenant from the 812th NVA captured on 9 July, troops of the 324B Division were to capture the towns of Cam Lo and Dong Ha--both astride Route 9--and the town of Ba Long, just inside the entrance to the Ba Long Valley. Of the alleged objectives, Dong Ha appears to be the most ambitious; it is in the center of Quang Tri's thickly inhabited plains at the juncture of Routes 1 and 9.

8. Prisoner interrogations indicate that other Communist forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces were to attack allied reinforcements. An unidentified division in Laos was scheduled to attack along Route 9 to ensure a free flow of food and weapons into South Vietnam from Laos. The 304th Division was reportedly in reserve in North Vietnam just above the DMZ.

9. Ultimately, the North Vietnamese apparently hope to "liberate" Quang Tri. The enemy may estimate that his chances for success in a large offensive are now better in I Corps than in any other area of South Vietnam. The two northern provinces of South Vietnam--Quang Tri and Thua Thien--were part of North Vietnam's Military Region IV during the French war. Therefore, this is "home" territory to many NVN units, and their knowledge of the terrain is considerable. In addition, as noted, the area is readily accessible to North Vietnamese supply dumps north of the DMZ. Nearby sanctuary in both Laos and North Vietnam may also be a factor of major importance in the Communist strategy. These military considerations, together with the fragile political situation in I Corps--so evident this spring--adds to the probability that the Communists hope to mount a major offensive in the northern I Corps area.

10. In spite of the heavy casualties sustained by elements of the 324B Division thus far in Operation HASTINGS, MACV believes that the division retains the capability of initiating multiregimental attacks and, if reinforced, of initiating a divisional-size thrust into central Quang Tri Province. An offensive could be supported on the south by two other PAVN regiments--the 6th and 95B.

#### The Government Situation in Quang Tri

11. Despite the recent battles and the nearness of the DRV, Quang Tri and its neighbor, Thua Thien Province, are far more secure than the other three I Corps provinces to the south. According to MACV figures of 31 May, the Viet Cong firmly controlled only 2.5 percent of Quang Tri's 270,000 people. The government reportedly controlled 46 percent, and most of the rest were contested. Since the bulk of the populace lives in the lowlands, it is outside the areas of normal Communist military strength in the province.

12. Evidently the Viet Cong have been experiencing difficulties in recruiting in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. Viet Cong guerrilla strength in the two provinces is reportedly low, and many members of theoretically southern Communist battalions in the area are in fact from North Vietnam.

13. General indifference to the Viet Cong cause in Quang Tri, however, is not accompanied by any strong feelings of loyalty toward the government. An American observer who had been stationed in the province for a year and a half remarked in mid-June that ideology plays a minor part in the local people's allegiance. Most are politically apathetic. Even the Buddhist "struggle" movement, which flared heavily in nearby Hue and Da Nang, failed to stir greatly the people of Quang Tri. There were demonstrations in Quang Tri city, but they lacked zest. Many of the participants coming in from the countryside were reported to have done so because they liked the bus ride.

14. Some causes of the civic indifference are apparent. The provincial administration, long beset by factional disputes, is inefficient even by South Vietnamese standards. The distribution of USAID commodities, such as cement, has been reported almost nonexistent to district villages outside of Quang Tri city. Pacification of disputed hamlets is going slowly, possibly because many members of the local pacification teams in the area joined simply in order to avoid the draft.

15. Despite the weakness of the government, the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese may well have a hard time expanding their influence in Quang Tri by means other than massive introduction of NVA regulars. Refugees, although few in comparison with other provinces, are reported firmly against the Communists, and the collection of intelligence in the area has greatly improved over the last year. A report in March from a US adviser to the ARVN 1st Division (which operates in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces) stated the opinion that the local population did not identify with Viet Cong main force battalions in the region, probably because the battalions were composed mostly of North Vietnamese draftees. Presumably the people would be even more prone to inform on units clearly labeled as northern, such as the 324B Division.

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