

TAC NEWS

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Men Against Tanks: The ARVN Defense of An Loc April–June 1972

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In the spring of 1972, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)—supported by U.S. advisors and air power—fought a campaign that has gone largely unchronicled by American historians. This campaign saw the first large-scale use of Soviet and Chinese-supplied armour by North Vietnam, and heralded in the modern age of anti-tank warfare, with both sides employing anti-tank guided missiles more than a year before their widely reported use in the Yom Kippur War.

In battles for places like Fire Support Base Pedro, Kontum, and An Loc, the much maligned ARVN forces fought credible defensive battles to grind the NVA forces to a standstill. While much of the credit for these victories must be given to American air power and naval gunnery support, as well as the American advisors' leadership, the determination and skill of many ARVN foot soldiers in their first major confrontation with North Vietnamese armour made it possible for the South Vietnamese forces to not only stop the communist offensive, but to regain much of the ground lost to the NVA. Perhaps the best example of the nature of this fighting is provided by the two-month siege of An Loc.

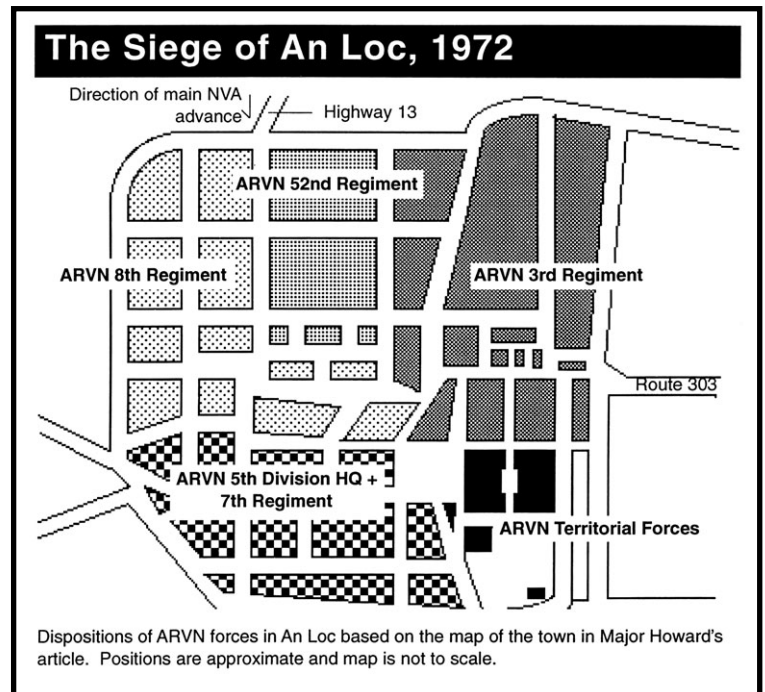
The Strategic Location

In the wake of the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese leadership calculated that the growing strength of the anti-war movement in the United States would prevent Washington from responding to an overwhelming threat to the Saigon government. To capitalize on what Hanoi saw as an opportunity to destroy the faltering ARVN forces without fear of American reprisal, the NVA leadership decided to launch an all-out conventional offensive.

To achieve this aim General Giap, the North Vietnamese commander, planned a three-pronged assault designed to flood the South Vietnamese defenses with two assaults on the northern provinces. A third thrust would be launched from Cambodia directly at Saigon via Loc Ninh and An Loc. These attacks were to be spearheaded by heavy concentrations of T-54 and T-59 main battle tanks, supported by massive concentrations of artillery and rockets, and defended by large numbers of mobile anti-aircraft guns.

The Opening Round: Loc Ninh

The NVA plan for the Easter Offensive in Military Region III (MR3) centered around capturing the main north-south highway QL-13, running from Cambodia to Saigon. Once the communist forces had



captured the major towns along the highway—Loc Ninh, An Loc, and Chon Thanh—the road to Saigon would be open. Just before 0700 on April 5, 1972, elements of the 5th VC Division set this operation in motion by attacking the northernmost objective along QL-13: Loc Ninh.

Supported by artillery and rocket fire, and led by tanks from the NVA's 203 Tank Regiment, the 5th VC Division launched its assault across from the Cambodian border and struck Loc Ninh from the west. The town's defenders, almost 1000 troops of the 9th ARVN Infantry regiment (Willbanks, 14), reinforced by an armoured cavalry squadron, an unspecified number of ARVN rangers, and local militia, successfully rebuffed this attack with the aid of some timely close air support. By the end of the day, the NVA withdrew to the south to regroup.

At 0530 the next morning (April 6), a mixed force of 25 to 30 T-54 and Type 59 MBTs, and Type 63 amphibious tanks, supported by infantry attacked Loc Ninh from the southwest. The U.S. advisors in Loc Ninh coordinated air attacks on NVA positions and directed the fire of AC-130 "Spectre" gunships on the waves of communist

attackers hung up in the town's perimeter wire. The concentrated fire from these gunships broke up the attacks on April 6 and "destro[yed] the better part of an [NVA] regiment" (Willbanks, 16). While the fixed-wing gunship stymied the NVA attacks on Loc Ninh's perimeter, Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) and U.S. Air Force (USAF) fighter-bombers succeeded in interdicting several further troop concentrations with napalm and cluster bombs.

Despite the punishment meted out to the NVA troops by Loc Ninh's defenders and U.S. air support, the communist forces launched a final attack on the town April 7. Supported again by extremely heavy artillery and rocket fire, and led by tanks and BTR-50 armoured personnel carriers, the NVA attackers launched a further series of human-wave attacks that finally succeeded in capturing Loc Ninh and the nearby airstrip by 1630 that afternoon. Simultaneous NVA attacks on the two firebases that supported Loc Ninh, manned by Task Force 52 (a reinforced battalion combat group from the 18th ARVN Division), quickly overran those forces and sent the survivors of both Loc Ninh and Task Force 52's firebases streaming south 15 miles to An Loc. By the evening of the 7th, the NVA was surrounding An Loc—the last obstacle between them and Saigon.

An Loc Encircled

With the collapse of Loc Ninh, the South Vietnamese government demanded that An Loc be held "at all costs" (Willbanks, 21). To shore up the defenses at An Loc, two battalions of South Vietnamese rangers were rushed to the town on April 6. The garrison of the town had grown by that point to a polyglot battle group comprised of the rangers and infantry from two different divisions (some of these the exhausted remnants of TF-52 and the fighting at Loc Ninh), and a scratch force made up of local militia troops.

By the evening of April 7, An Loc was being taken under heavy fire from both north and south. On the high ground dominating An Loc from the north, the NVA had attacked the helicopter base at Quon Loi by first softening-up the defenders with tear and nausea gas (Willbanks, 22) and then overwhelming the two ARVN companies holding the airstrip with a devastating human-wave assault. The survivors of the 7th ARVN Regiment defending the base pulled back to An Loc, closely pursued by the NVA. To the south of the city, ARVN reinforcements moving upon the QL-13 to bolster An Loc ran headlong into a substantial NVA blocking force.

By the morning of April 8, An Loc was effectively surrounded and being taken under fire by heavy artillery and rockets stationed at Quon Loi. The NVA also moved in heavy concentrations of fixed and self-propelled anti-aircraft artillery and rockets. The NVA did not, however, launch an immediate assault on An Loc, preferring instead to settle down to several days of "softening up" before their first direct attack on the city. This delay gave the ARVN time to fly two infantry battalions and recon elements of the 8th ARVN regiment into An Loc on April 12, bringing the total garrison to around 3000 troops, including a substantial contingent of American advisors.

While the situation at An Loc was exceedingly grim by April 12 (the ARVN defenders in the city were outnumbered "6 to 1" [Willbanks, 25] by their NVA attackers), the U.S. advisory contingent was secretly thrilled that the NVA had finally moved into the open where American firepower could be brought to bear on them. As General Hollingsworth, the American commander of Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC), told the U. S. advisors in An Loc:

"Hold them and I will kill them with air power; give me something to bomb and I will win" (Willbanks, 22). Hollingsworth's prediction would be born out by the experience of the next couple of months in An Loc.

An Loc Besieged

As dawn broke over An Loc on April 13, NVA gunners delivered a shattering barrage with everything from light mortars and recoilless rifles to 130mm guns and captured ARVN howitzers. Shortly after sunrise, NVA tanks and infantry began to advance into the northeast quadrant of An Loc down the main north-south artery through town, Ngo Quyen Street. The ARVN troops in that sector, most of whom had never faced a tank before, broke and ran toward the 5th ARVN Division command post in the southern part of An Loc. While it looked as if the NVA tanks were going to trigger a catastrophic rout, a lone private in the local militia stood his ground and knocked out one of the advancing T-54s. This "galvanizing act," as Willbanks referred to it, proved to the inexperienced ARVN troops that their weapons *were* effective against tanks (Willbanks, 25–27) and encouraged the other defenders to fire at the advancing armour themselves.

As the ARVN defensive fire intensified, the inexperience of the NVA tank crews began to show. Frequently advancing without infantry support and, in some cases, completely oblivious to the fact that they were surrounded by ARVN infantry, many of the tanks advanced with crew members exposed in open hatches. Stymied by effective ARVN anti-tank tactics and stripped of their infantry, the road-bound NVA columns were easy targets for the air support called in by their U.S. advisors, while fighter-bombers bombed staging areas around the town, AH-1G "Cobra" helicopters and U.S. Air Force AC-119K and AC-130 gunships concentrated on the tanks. The U.S. Army Cobra gunship knocked out an entire column by destroying the first and last vehicles in a narrow street and forcing the remainder of the crews to abandon their vehicles.

While the effective combination of infantry anti-tank ambushes and air power succeeded in stopping the initial NVA advance short of the city center, NVA troops did gain a foothold in the northeastern suburbs. Over the next several days, the NVA began the laborious process of eliminating ARVN resistance house-to-house, using their tanks to batter a way into a building and rushing in fresh troops to reinforce the assault troops during the night, and then starting the process again the next morning. Despite their slow, grinding success at dislodging the ARVN from their defenses, the NVA advance was further hampered by the massive losses they suffered as B-52 ArcLight strikes were called in to saturate their infantry staging areas. In an effort to destroy An Loc before U.S. power destroyed *them*, the NVA intensified their artillery fire on the city during the evening of April 13 and prepared to stage another assault the next morning.

Attempts to Reduce An Loc

Again on April 14, the NVA launched another combined attack spearheaded by tanks and self-propelled AA guns. This time the North Vietnamese met with more success, penetrating to within a few hundred yards of the 5th ARVN Division's command post where, in addition to the divisional staff, the American advisors had set up their operations center. Once again, the attack was halted by timely air support. Frustrated by their inability to break through the ARVN perimeter, the NVA launched a two-pronged attack

against the city center on April 15. Led by ten t-54s, the attackers again broke through to within a few hundred yards of the 5th Division CP—one tank got close enough to fire a directly into the command bunker, killing several officers—before allied fighter-bombers knocked out nine of the ten attacking vehicles (Willbanks, 35). Again, the combination of a determined defense on the ground with tactical air support resulted in a disaster for the attackers.

Outside of An Loc, ARVN forces were moving to relieve the beleaguered garrison. Over the course of April 15 and 16, the 1st Airborne Brigade was moved by helicopter to landing zones several miles southeast of An Loc. These troops immediately set about constructing a firebase to lend artillery support to the city's defenders and aggressively patrolling the North Vietnamese ring around the city.

Inside An Loc, the defenders' morale was high. Having withstood three days of continual bombardment and confrontations with enemy armour, the ARVN retained control of much of the city (the NVA maintained a foothold in the northern half of An Loc). The hulks of 23 NVA vehicles, many of them Soviet-supplied T-54s, BTR-50s, and ZSU-57/2s, littered the city streets. As the April 16 fighting subsided, the NVA forces paused to regroup.

The Situation Deteriorates

As NVA ground operations ground to a halt, the U.S. and South Vietnamese Air Forces stepped up their efforts to resupply the town from the air. Their efforts were severely hampered by the effective NVA anti-aircraft defenses ringing An Loc. As a result, very few of the air-dropped supplies actually landed within ARVN lines and helicopter missions into An Loc itself became so hazardous that most VNAF pilots refused to fly into the town—even to evacuate the wounded. This decline in morale among VNAF pilots soon spread to the troops on the ground.

On April 19, the NVA launched its renewed attack on An Loc and the airborne brigade's firebases met with mixed success. While the attack on the 5th ARVN Airborne Battalion's positions was repulsed with the aid of close air support and ArcLight strikes on the North Vietnamese staging areas, the 6th Battalion's positions were quickly overrun, with only a small force of survivors making it into the An Loc perimeter. By taking the 6th Battalion's positions, the North Vietnamese dominated not only the northern heights around An Loc, but also the high ground to the east and south of the town. The ARVN were more successful in frustrating the NVA attacks on An Loc itself. As the NVA forces approached the town from the south, elements of the 1st Airborne Brigade (5th and 8th Battalions) succeeded in blocking the NVA attack from that direction. In An Loc proper, the defenders continued to repulse any attempts to seize the city center.

Despite the relative success of the ARVN defensive effort, morale among the troops plummeted; whenever a VNAF helicopter was successful in running the gauntlet of AAA fire to evacuate wounded, it was immediately mobbed by ARVN soldiers desperate to escape the embattled city. The situation was so critical that American advisors feared that another concerted attack on An Loc would succeed in overrunning the town (Willbanks, 46). Offensive operations on the part of the defenders were quickly becoming out of the question. While such an operation by the ARVN rangers—supported by the 105mm howitzer of an AC-130 Pave Aegis—was

attempted on a April 22, it met with only limited success. As a three-week lull settled over the battlefield, it became obvious that the siege of An Loc could not be broken from within by the defenders; they would have to look to an outside relief force.

An Loc Relieved

The final NVA attack commenced on May 11 with early morning assaults from both the north and the west. Following the usual pattern, the NVA commanders pushed armoured columns out ahead of the infantry to create gaps for the follow-on forces to exploit. As Willbanks details, the NVA commanders intended these columns to link up in the city center, "pocketing" the defenders, thereby making it easier for the infantry to mop up any lingering points of resistance (Willbanks, 49). The attackers also attempted to negate the ARVN air power advantage by maintaining extremely close contact with South Vietnamese units to their front and concentrating an unprecedented volume of anti-aircraft fire on any allied aircraft that entered An Loc's airspace. The U.S. Army "Cobra" pilots ran this gauntlet flying nap-of-the-earth and using their mini-guns to devastating effect on the North Vietnamese attackers (Willbanks, 49). U.S. A-37 "Dragonfly" pilots also braved the heavy AAA over An Loc to knock out a T-54 that was firing into the ARVN tactical operations center. A flight of F-4 "Phantoms" attacked an eight-tank column in the western salient, immobilizing several T-54s that ARVN airborne troops then boarded and destroyed with grenades and 155mm powder bags from U.S. howitzers. In the process of halting both NVA columns, North Vietnamese anti-aircraft fire took a heavy toll on allied aircraft. According to Willbanks, three attack planes and helicopters were shot down, as well as two forward air control aircraft.

By the end of the day, it was clear that the NVA attacks had run out of steam. In a last desperate attempt to take the town, the NVA launched an attack late in the evening of May 12, spearheaded by Type 63 light tanks; the NVA armoured regiment had lost so many T-54s in the preceding month that the light tanks represented its only effective combat vehicles. The armoured attack was aimed at the northern and eastern sectors of town, while a diversionary infantry attack struck from the south and west. This attack was disrupted and destroyed by the combined efforts of AC-130 gunships and B-52 ArcLight strikes—once again, air power was successful in dissipating the energy of an NVA attack. Over the course of the next several days, the ARVN defenders were able to push back the NVA advances made on the 12th to their original start lines. By the end of May, a relief force broke through the NVA ring in the south, effectively ending the siege of An Loc; a testament to the generally high quality of ARVN troops (despite the bad publicity South Vietnamese troops receive in the American press), and to the effectiveness of air power when properly coordinated as part of a combined arms doctrine.

RANDOM EVENTS & TACTICAL TIPS

Once the ARVN defenders got over the initial shock of confronting tanks, they became rather adept at destroying them. The tank destruction techniques the defenders developed ran the gamut from conventional anti-tank missiles to hasty field expedients:

- The M72 proved to be a potent tank-killer; it was the most effective anti-tank weapon in the ground force's arsenal.
- A tactic frequently employed at An Loc was for an infantrymen to disable a tank with a mobility kill and to then clamber aboard and

drop grenades down the hatches of the stranded vehicle.

- ARVN soldiers also blew the turrets off disabled tanks by dumping powder bags from 155mm howitzers down the hatch and setting the explosive off with grenades to prevent the NVA from recovering disabled vehicles.
- At FOB Pedro, an ARVN marine hunkered down in his hole until a T-54 stopped right over his head; he then clambered out and threatened the driver with his M16, and captured the whole crew.

American forward air controllers (FAC) were a vital part of the ARVN victory at An Loc. U.S. advisors would coordinate with FAC to control available air assets—if the advisors on the ground are lost or the FAC is shot down, serious minuses should be applied to the accuracy of U.S. and ARVN air strikes.

Aerial supply had a serious impact on the garrison's morale. Roll for supplies to determine not only the level of supplies for the garrison, but for the level of morale as the mini-campaign. If helicopter resupply is employed, players should roll for stampedes of ARVN troops attempting to desert once the city is surrounded.

Air power was the key to ARVN victory at An Loc; the fighter-bombers, helicopter gunships, and fixed-wing Spectres were the top killers in the inventory. Weather should play a factor since poor flying conditions diminish the ability of ground support aircraft to fly missions, and even if they are able to fly, poor visibility affects their ability to hit targets on the ground.

Experimental TOW missile platforms were in service and were instrumental in the defense of Kontum in MR1. If an NVA breakthrough at An Loc seems inevitable (thus threatening Saigon),

it is likely that these Huey gunships would have been diverted to support the An Loc garrison.

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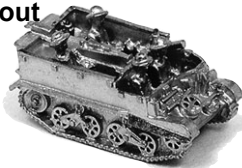
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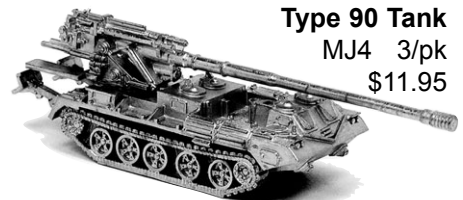


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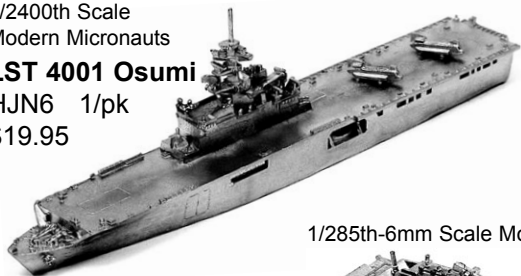
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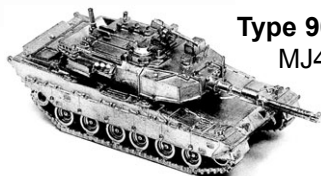
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