

= Battle of Loc Ninh =

The Battle of L?c Ninh was a major battle fought during the Easter Offensive during the Vietnam War , which took place in Bình Long Province , South Vietnam between 4 ? 7 April 1972 . Towards the end of 1971 , North Vietnamese leaders decided to launch a major offensive against South Vietnam , with the objective of destroying Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units and capturing as much territory as possible , in order to strengthen their bargaining position in the Paris Peace Accords . On 30 March 1972 , two North Vietnamese Army divisions smashed through the Demilitarized Zone , marking the commencement of the Easter Offensive . They quickly overwhelmed South Vietnamese units in the I Corps Tactical Zone . With the rapid collapse of South Vietnamese forces in the northern provinces of South Vietnam , North Vietnamese and Vi?t C?ng forces began preparing for their next offensive , targeting Bình Long Province in the Mekong Delta region . On 4 April , the Vi?t C?ng 's 5th Division opened their attack on L?c Ninh , defended by the ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment . After three days of fighting , the vastly outnumbered South Vietnamese forces , though well supported by American air power , were forced to abandon their positions in L?c Ninh .

= = Background = =

In December 1971 , following the defeat of South Vietnamese forces during Operation Lam Son 719 , North Vietnamese leadership in Hanoi decided to launch a major military offensive against South Vietnam . In what became known as the Easter Offensive , the combined North Vietnamese and Vi?t C?ng forces employed combined arms tactics using heavy weapons that were a radical departure from the low @-@ intensity guerrilla warfare of previous years . Although North Vietnam eventually used the equivalent of 14 army divisions , its leaders did not seek to win the war outright . Rather , their objective was to gain as much territory and destroy as many units of the South Vietnamese military as possible , in order to strengthen their bargaining position at the Paris Peace Talks .

The Easter Offensive began on 30 March 1972 , when the 304th and 308th North Vietnamese Divisions drove across the DMZ and attacked South Vietnamese positions in the I Corps Tactical Zone , which consisted of South Vietnam 's northernmost provinces . Caught by surprise , South Vietnamese General V? V?n Giai ordered his newly created 3rd Infantry Division to withdraw towards the Cua Viet River , where it could reorganize . On 2 April , ARVN Colonel Pham Van Dinh surrendered his 56th Infantry Regiment at Camp Carroll , which enabled the North Vietnamese to take the former American fire base without a fight . Qu?ng Tr? City was captured by the North Vietnamese army on 28 April , following several counterattacks by South Vietnamese units around ?ông Hà .

With the northern provinces of South Vietnam under their control , North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces turned their attention to the Mekong Delta region , which formed part of the ARVN III Corps Tactical Zone . During the Offensive , the objective of the combined Communist forces in the zone was the capture of An L?c , capital of Bình Long Province . The Viet Cong committed three infantry divisions to the mission (5th , 7th and 9th Divisions) . North Vietnamese support came in the form of one artillery formation (69th Artillery Command) , one armored regiment (203rd Armored Regiment) , two independent regiments (205th and 101st Regiment) , and one sapper unit (429th Sapper Group) . The Viet Cong 's 5th Division was to initiate the offensive by taking L?c Ninh , while the 9th Division was assigned to An L?c . The 7th Division was ordered to block National Highway 13 to prevent reinforcements from reaching An L?c .

= = Prelude = =

In late December 1971 , ARVN intelligence in the III Corps Tactical Zone had detected the buildup of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong formations across the border in neighbouring Cambodia . Even though it was obvious that preparations for a major Communist offensive were under way , South

Vietnamese commanders were unable to predict their enemies' intentions. In January 1972, the Viet Cong 5th Division was reported to have taken up positions in Snuol, a Cambodian city located about 30 kilometres (19 mi) west of L?c Ninh. South Vietnamese intelligence also detected the presence of the Viet Cong's 7th and 9th Divisions in Dambe and Chup respectively. Between January and May 1971, the South Vietnamese army mounted Operation Toan Thang TT02, with the aim of destroying Viet Cong main force divisions based in Cambodia, specifically in the Snuol area. But due to the death of General ?? Cao Trí, the commander of the ARVN III Corps Tactical Zone, in a helicopter accident, the South Vietnamese were forced to retreat from Snuol without achieving their objective.

In February and March 1972, South Vietnamese units patrolling the international border with Cambodia detected increased Communist activity in the Fishhook area, most notably the presence of the Viet Cong 5th Division in an area north of Binh Long Province. On 13 March, a South Vietnamese mechanized task force operating in Cambodia discovered a huge depot which contained large quantities of assault rifles, machine guns, rockets, anti @-@ aircraft guns and ammunition in Base Area 354 (Svay Rieng Province) and Base Area 708 (Kampong Cham Province). On 27 March, a Vi?t C?ng deserter from a reconnaissance company of the 7th Division revealed that his unit was surveying a portion of road between Tây Ninh and Binh Long in preparation for its next move. Between 27 March and 1 April, more enemy prisoners and documents were captured by the South Vietnamese army, which revealed that the Viet Cong's 7th and 9th Divisions were coordinating their efforts against an unidentified target.

The movements of Communist forces near the Cambodian @-@ South Vietnamese border during the first three months of 1972 clearly indicated that a major offensive was in the making. However, the whereabouts of the next Communist thrust was the topic which concerned South Vietnamese and U.S. intelligence officers the most. In previous offensives, the Communist had used Tây Ninh as an invasion route, as it was surrounded by Viet Cong bases in War zone C, the Iron Triangle and the Parrot's Beak, Cambodia. South Vietnamese and U.S. military intelligence reached a consensus that Tây Ninh would be the next target for the Communist Easter Offensive. To reinforce that perception, on 2 April, the Viet Cong 24th Independent Regiment overran Fire Support Base Lac Long, defended by elements of the ARVN 49th Infantry Regiment, 5th Infantry Division, about 35 kilometres (22 mi) northwest of Tây Ninh.

The attacks on Lac Long and other outposts in Tây Ninh were a diversion designed to cover the main thrust into Binh Long Province. To initiate the campaign in Binh Long, the Viet Cong's 5th Division (numbering about 9 @, @ 230 soldiers) was ordered to take L?c Ninh, Binh Long's northernmost town. The Viet Cong were supported by the North Vietnamese 69th Artillery Command (3 @, @ 830 soldiers) and the 203rd Armored Regiment (800 soldiers). In 1972, L?c Ninh was a small district town situated on Route 13, home to about 4 @, @ 000 people, mostly members of the various Montagnard tribes. The task of defending L?c Ninh was entrusted to the ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment, 5th Infantry Division, commanded by Colonel Nguy?n Công Vinh. It was supported by the 1st Cavalry Squadron, 1st Regional Force Battalion, and elements of the 74th Ranger Battalion.

Prior to the battle, the 9th Infantry Regiment had occupied the former U.S. Special Forces compound at the south end of the airfield, which was about 0 @. @ 8 kilometres (0 @. @ 50 mi) west of the district center. The district headquarters was defended by more than 200 South Vietnamese Regional Forces soldiers, who operated from a Japanese @-@ built fortified bunker system located north of the airfield. To assist the 9th Infantry Regiment, the U.S. military provided seven advisers. The U.S. advisory team at 9th Regimental Headquarters was led by Lieutenant Colonel Richard R. Schott, who was assisted by Major Albert E. Carlson and Captain Mark A. Smith, and two communication specialists, Sergeant First Class Howard B. Hull and Sergeant Kenneth Wallingford. Additionally, Captain George Wanat and Major Thomas Davidson operated from the north end of the airfield, attached to the district headquarters.

= = Fall of L?c Ninh = =

From the beginning of April , there was a sharp increase in Viet Cong activities along National Highway 13 , which connects Binh Long Province with Saigon . Between 3 ? 4 April , South Vietnamese Regional Force units clashed several times with the Viet Cong , resulting in more than twenty Viet Cong fatalities . Also , the French owner of the Cexso Rubber Plantation in L?c Ninh reported that the Communists had established field telephone lines northwest of the district . However , ARVN Colonel Colonel Nguy?n Công Vinh was reluctant to send reconnaissance patrols to that area . On 4 April , the ARVN 9th Reconnaissance Company operating west of L?c Ninh was destroyed when it came into contact with elements of the Viet Cong main force units . On the same evening , the 3rd Battalion , ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment captured two enemy soldiers during an ambush operation . The Viet Cong prisoners revealed that they were from the 272nd Regiment , 9th Division , and that their unit was moving south to prepare for an assault on An L?c .

At around 6 : 50 am on 5 April , the Viet Cong 5th Division moved across the Cambodian border to stage the main attack on L?c Ninh . The Viet Cong assault opened with a heavy barrage of artillery , rocket and mortar fire targeting the headquarters of the ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment and the L?c Ninh district compound . The Viet Cong simultaneously mounted other attacks throughout the ARVN 5th Infantry Division 's areas of operations in Lai Khê and Qu?n L?i . There was also indirect fire on South Vietnamese positions in Ph??c Long Province , mainly targeting Ph??c Vinh , Sông Bé , and Bo Duc . Following the artillery barrage , Viet Cong infantry , supported by about 25 tanks , attacked L?c Ninh from the west . In the initial assault , they tried to overrun the South Vietnamese regimental compound located at the south end of the airstrip . Despite the ferocity of the onslaught , South Vietnamese soldiers held their ground and fought desperately to hold the enemy at bay ; South Vietnamese artillerymen lowered the muzzles of their 105mm howitzers and fired directly at enemy infantry formations moving through the rubber trees .

Even though the situation was stabilized , the South Vietnamese were forced to retreat into small compounds at the north and south ends of the town . The intensity of the attack on L?c Ninh revealed the true intentions of the Communists ; ARVN Lieutenant General Nguy?n V?n Minh , commander of the III Corps Tactical Zone , and his American advisor Major General James F. Hollingsworth realized that Bình Long , not Tây Ninh , would be the focus of the Communist offensive . In order to halt the Communist advance , Minh and Hollingsworth directed all available tactical support aircraft towards L?c Ninh . Almost immediately , South Vietnamese air force F @-@ 5 and A @-@ 1 fighter @-@ bombers , United States Air Force (USAF) A @-@ 37s from the 8th Special Operations Squadron based at Biên Hòa , attack aircraft from the aircraft carrier USS Constellation , and USAF F @-@ 4 and AC @-@ 130 aircraft from Thailand began flying over the skies of L?c Ninh . U.S. and South Vietnamese tactical support aircraft were directed against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese formations by American advisers on the ground . As the fighting intensified , Colonel Nguy?n Công Vinh ordered the 1st Cavalry Squadron ? commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu Duong ? to withdraw from Fire Support Base Alpha to reinforce L?c Ninh . However , Duong refused , saying he would surrender his unit to the Viet Cong instead . Angered , Captain Mark A. Smith reportedly threatened to destroy the 1st Cavalry Squadron with American air power if the squadron didn 't fight .

Schott , in recognition of Smith 's combat experience and knowledge of the Vietnamese language , allowed him to take control of the situation . From that point on , Smith virtually controlled the South Vietnamese forces . A few moments later , elements of the ARVN 74th Ranger Battalion and the 3rd Battalion , ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment notified the regimental command post that they had broken out and were fighting their way back towards L?c Ninh . Meanwhile , the 1st Cavalry Squadron began moving west towards the Cambodian border with the Viet Cong , with the rest of their tanks and armored personnel carriers .

On the afternoon of 5 April , the Viet Cong 's 5th Division launched another major ground assault on L?c Ninh from the west to try to break through the defenses of the southern compound . American AC @-@ 130 and AH @-@ 1 Cobra gunships stopped the Viet Cong formations in their tracks , as supporting North Vietnamese tanks were either destroyed or forced to pull back . Despite having suffered many casualties as a result of U.S. air strikes , the Viet Cong continued their assaults well into the evening . In order to deal with the onslaught , Smith continued to direct the AC @-@ 130

Spectres against targets around Loc Ninh . Vinh , on the other hand , was either planning to surrender or desert when he ordered two of his soldiers to open the gates of the command compound at around 10 pm . Throughout the night , the North Vietnamese 69th Artillery Command continued bombarding South Vietnamese positions around Loc Ninh , as the Viet Cong massed for another assault .

On the morning of 6 April , South Vietnamese forces reported hearing the sound of tanks moving toward the southern end of the district airfield . At about 5 : 30 am , the Viet Cong launched another attack from southern Loc Ninh , with the support of about 25 T-54 and PT-76 tanks . Viet Cong infantry initially managed to breach the South Vietnamese lines , but the attack soon stalled , and neither side gained a clear advantage . In the afternoon , elements of the Viet Cong E6 Regiment forced their way through the compound gates , but air strikes from U.S. AC-130s stopped them from advancing any further . By that stage , however , the ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment had absorbed a significant number of casualties ; it only had 50 soldiers left , while another 150 wounded were in the hospital bunker . The defenders in Loc Ninh were cut off from outside help since heavy 105 mm calibre North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns effectively prevented resupply and medivac flights into the area .

In an attempt to save Loc Ninh , Brigadier General Lê Văn Hưng , commander of the ARVN 5th Infantry Division , ordered Task Force 52 to move north to reinforce the beleaguered 9th Infantry Regiment . Task Force 52 consisted of the 2nd Battalion , 52nd Infantry Regiment , and the 1st Battalion , 48th Infantry Regiment ; both units had been transferred from the ARVN 18th Infantry Division in late March to serve as a border screen for General Hưng 's forces . Lieutenant Colonel Nguyễn Bá Thịnh , commander of Task Force 52 , ordered the 2nd Battalion to advance towards Loc Ninh . The unit was ambushed at the junction of National Highway 13 and Route 17 . Unable to withstand the Viet Cong 's superior firepower , it was forced to withdraw . To prevent Task Force 52 from evacuating to either Loc Ninh or An Loc , the Viet Cong pursued Task Force 52 and bombarded their bases with heavy artillery throughout the day .

Meanwhile , on the afternoon of 6 April , the South Vietnamese inside Loc Ninh were slightly reinforced by the 3rd Battalion , ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment , along with the men of the 1st Cavalry Squadron at FSB Alpha who had refused to surrender . Furthermore , wounded South Vietnamese soldiers who were still able to fight made their way back to the defensive perimeter to await the next wave of attacks . During the night , the South Vietnamese compound descended into chaos when North Vietnamese artillery scored a direct hit on the hospital bunker , killing a large number of wounded men . Later on , another round of rockets struck the South Vietnamese artillery compound , striking the ammunition storage bunker , which exploded . From the eastern side of the district , the Viet Cong tried to penetrate the defense line at Loc Ninh , but were beaten off . Realizing that the situation had become hopeless , Vinh took off his uniform and told his to surrender .

At 7 am on 7 April , the Viet Cong massed for another ground assault from the north and west of Loc Ninh , with support from heavy artillery , tanks and armored personnel carriers . As the Viet Cong closed in , Vinh and his bodyguards ran out the opened gate and surrendered . Several South Vietnamese soldiers also tried to surrender , but they all returned to their positions after Smith stopped a South Vietnamese officer from raising a white T-shirt up the flagpole . By 8 am , the ARVN 9th Infantry Regiment was completely overwhelmed when the Viet Cong overran the southern compound with their superior numbers . At around 10 am , all tactical air support was called off in order to clear the way for B-52 strikes against Viet Cong formations west of Loc Ninh . However , the B-52 strikes could not prevent the Viet Cong from overrunning Loc Ninh . By 16 : 30 , the Viet Cong were in complete control of Loc Ninh District .

= = Aftermath = =

The fight cost both sides dearly . The true extent of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese casualties is largely unknown , but due to their exposure to American firepower , the Communist forces undoubtedly suffered heavy losses . Nonetheless , the successful capture of Loc Ninh exceeded Communist expectations , as they had thought that the South Vietnamese would hold out longer .

L?c Ninh became the seat of the Provisional Revolutionary Government , the capital of Communist @-@ occupied territories in South Vietnam . The South Vietnamese , in their efforts to hold the district , lost more than three thousand soldiers killed or captured ; only about fifty soldiers actually reached An L?c . The Viet Cong also captured all seven American advisers and an embedded French journalist , Yves @-@ Michel Dumond , in L?c Ninh ; they were taken to a prison camp in Kratié Province , Cambodia . Dumond was released on 14 July 1972 . On 12 February 1973 , the Americans were released in accordance with the Paris Peace Accord .

As L?c Ninh was succumbing , other Communist formations turned their attention to the provincial capital of An L?c . At 9 am on 7 April , Brigadier General Lê V?n H?ng ordered Task Force 52 to abandon its bases , destroy all heavy weapons and vehicles , and withdraw to An L?c , following their failed attempt at reinforcing the 9th Infantry Regiment . As Task Force 52 tried to break through National Highway 13 , they ran into another large Viet Cong ambush . It would take the soldiers of Task Force 52 about a week to reach An L?c , infiltrating through Viet Cong and North Vietnamese positions along the main road . Late on 7 April , the Viet Cong 's 9th Division attacked Quan Loi airfield , just 3 kilometres (1 @.@ 9 mi) north of An L?c . Elements of the ARVN 7th Infantry Regiment defending the area were unable to hold off the Viet Cong , so they were ordered to destroy their equipment and join other South Vietnamese units in the provincial capital . The next step in the North Vietnamese offensive was the " Battle of An L?c " .