

PHAN NHẬT NAM AND THE BATTLE OF AN LỘC

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*This article focuses on a translation of excerpts from *Fiery Red Summer*, an account of the Spring Offensive of 1972, by Phan Nhật Nam, South Vietnam's most famous war reporter. The introductory essay provides background on the offensive and suggests why it and the battle for An Lộc, arguably the most important battle of the Vietnam War, have received little attention from U.S. historians. The translated excerpts from *Fiery Red Summer* that follow describe how the 6th Battalion of the 1st Airborne Brigade of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam fought bravely to link up with troops defending An Lộc, thereby helping break the communist siege of the town. Both the essay and the translation suggest that to understand an event such as the battle for An Lộc one must consider multiple perspectives.*

Introduction

In the spring of 1972 communist forces launched an offensive they called Nguyễn Huệ, after a national hero who in the spring of 1789 surprised Chinese troops outside of Hanoi and soundly defeated them. To the Nguyễn Huệ campaign, which became the largest engagement of the Vietnam War, North Vietnam committed 14 divisions, 26 separate regiments, and supporting armor and artillery units—virtually its entire army. Attacks occurred in three regions of South Vietnam: across the demilitarized zone in Quảng Trị Province; in Kontum in the central highlands; and in Bình Long Province, where the fighting centered around the capital of An Lộc, a town about 70 miles north of Saigon (see figure 1). The attacks took place in the spring around Easter, and Americans refer to them collectively as the Spring or Easter Offensive. But because the

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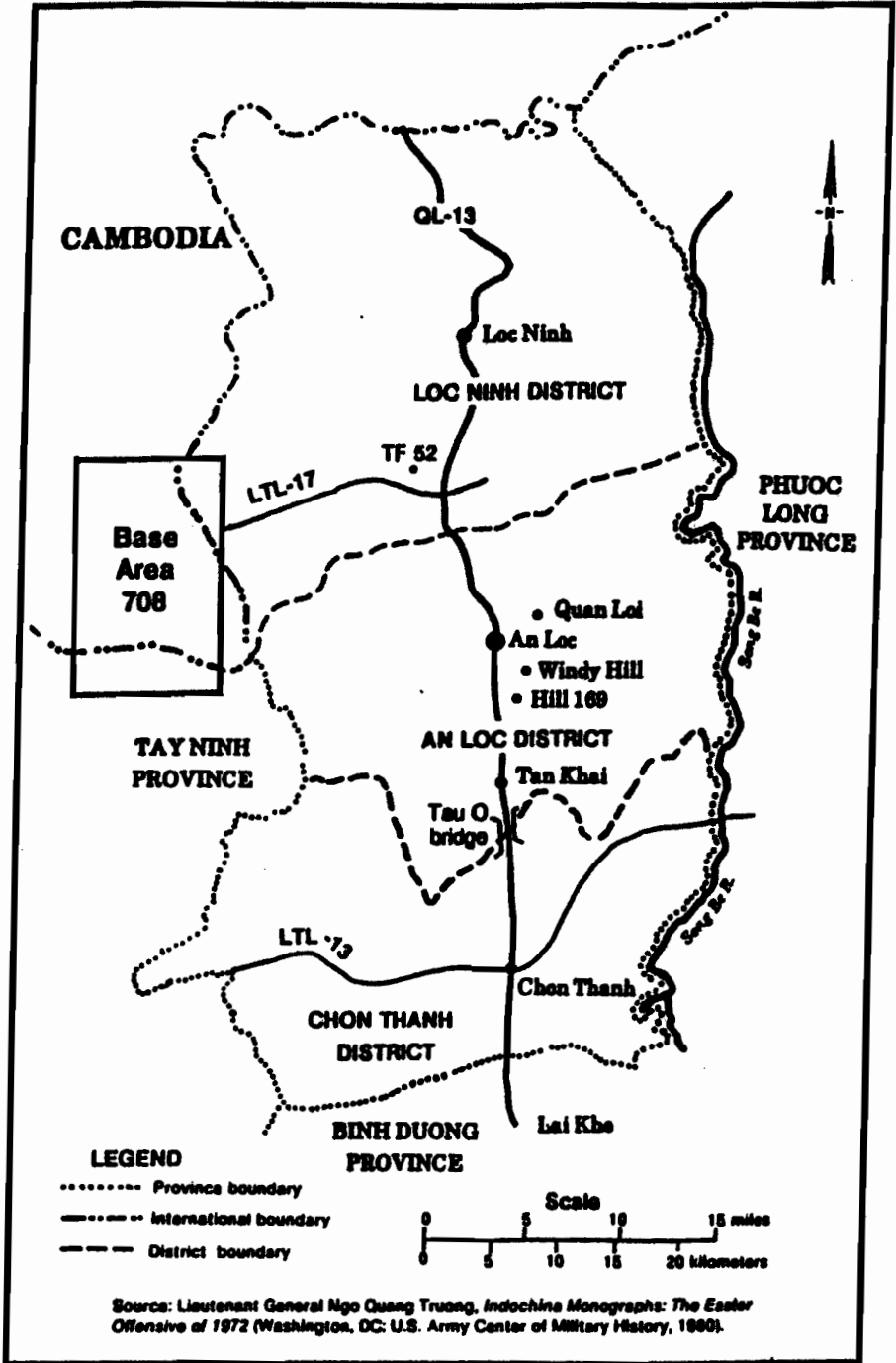


Figure 1

artillery fire was so intense and the casualties heavy, famed Vietnamese news reporter Phan Nhật Nam refers to this period of the war as "the fiery red summer" (mùa hè đỏ lửa), which is also the title of his war journal, one section of which, "An Lộc: The Unquiet East," I have translated below. In this introductory essay, I provide background information that will help the reader understand Phan Nhật Nam's story and will, I hope, demonstrate the idea that "truth" depends upon one's perspective. Only by considering accounts from various points of view—American, North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese—can we truly understand an event like the Battle of An Lộc.

Why This Particular Work

I have chosen to translate "An Lộc: The Unquiet East" because the author, Phan Nhật Nam, is South Vietnam's most famous reporter of battlefield action. Phan Nhật Nam is a pen name; the author's real name is Phan Ngọc Khuê. Born in 1943, he served in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) for 14 years (1961-1975), most of the time in the regiments of the 2nd Airborne Brigade. When he wrote *Fiery Red Summer*, he was no longer in the Airborne but was still in the ARVN working as a battlefield journalist.²

Another reason for selecting a part of *Fiery Red Summer* for translation is that the Easter Offensive was downplayed by the U.S. media at the time and has been rather neglected by American historians since. It did warrant front-page coverage for some weeks in the *New York Times* and other U.S. newspapers: the siege of An Lộc, for example, was featured prominently in the *New York Times* in daily dispatches filed by such famous or soon-to-be famous reporters as Malcolm Browne, Sydney Schanberg, and Fox

²His stories appeared in these Saigon newspapers: *Sóng Thần* (Tidal Wave), *Đời* (Life), *Diều Hâu* (Kite), and *Tiền Tuyến* (The Front). Before 1975, he published five other books in addition to *Fiery Red Summer*. To my knowledge, only one of these—*Peace and Prisoners of War: A Sad Memoir of Vietnam and Prisoner Exchange* (1989)—has been translated. Originally published in Saigon in 1974 as *Tù Binh và Hòa Bình*, this book describes events relating to the release of prisoners as called for by the Paris Peace Treaty of 1973. Captain Phan Nhật Nam was assigned to the Prisoner Exchange Section of the Four-party Joint Military Commission, the group that handled the details of the prisoner exchange.

Butterfield.³ But compared to the coverage of the battle of Khê Sanh, where the artillery fire and casualties were much lighter, the journalistic coverage of An Lộc would have to be considered restrained.⁴ Retrospective treatments of the campaign are similarly cursory.⁵ Almost all American histories of the war mention it, but their brief summaries of the siege of An Lộc generally are overshadowed by much more extensive discussions of the Tet Offensive that came before An Lộc and the final collapse of Saigon that came after. The first books to discuss details of actual battles of the Easter Offensive were G. H. Turley's *The Easter Offensive* (1985) and Neil Sheehan's *Bright Shining Lie* (1988). The title of the former suggests coverage of the entire campaign, but in fact Turley focuses only on the battles near the DMZ in Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên provinces. Sheehan's much acclaimed book, on the other hand, foregrounds the career of John Paul Vann, the famous senior U.S. adviser for Military Region II who was instrumental in orchestrating the defense of Kontum in the Central Highlands. *Bright Shining Lie* includes detailed descriptions of the fighting that went on around Kontum at that time.

The battles in Binh Long Province, however, including the siege of An Lộc, have received much less attention from U.S. historians. Dale Andradé claims in *Trial by Fire* (1995), the only full historical account of the Easter Offensive, that the offensive had theretofore been "uncharted territory" for U.S. historians and that

³An excerpt from a dispatch by Sydney Schanberg that reports on the June 8 linkup between the two Airborne battalions, the event that is the focus of Phan Nhật Nam's account, appears in figure 2. Schanberg, who later covered the fall of the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia, is the reporter made famous by the film *Killing Fields*.

⁴In an attack on An Lộc that began after midnight on May 11 and ended on May 12, 8,300 rounds of artillery fire fell within the perimeter of the ARVN 5th Division (Doglione 1972:98; Andradé 1995:472). According to Clodfelter's *Vietnam in Military Statistics* (1995:202), "The NVA bombardments of An Loc, Quang Tri, and Kontum in 1972 vastly surpassed those endured by American forces at Con Thien and Khe Sanh, where the top incoming total for a single day had been 1,300 rounds." At the battle for Khê Sanh, where there was an American base, 205 American Marines lost their lives (*Vietnam War Almanac* 1985:217). In the Easter Offensive (March 30 through July 22, 1972), 13,180 South Vietnamese soldiers were killed (Clodfelter 1995:201).

⁵As one reason for the neglect, Willbanks mentions that most (American) works on the war are either historical overviews or first-person accounts. Detailed accounts of battles are rare. See the author preface to *Thiet Giap!* (1993).

ANLOC IS REACHED BY A RELIEF UNIT

Advance Element Links Up
but Town Still Is Cut-Off

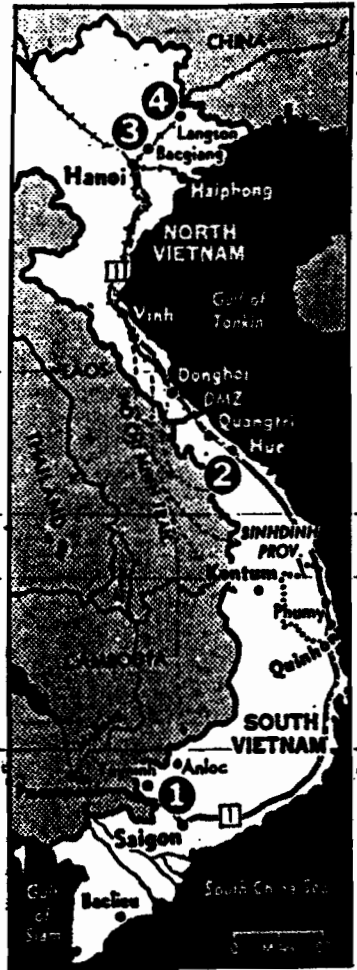
By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Thursday, June 8—A Saigon command spokesman reported this morning that an advance element of the South Vietnamese relief column that has been trying for two months to break through to surrounded Anloc "shook hands" yesterday afternoon with a rear element of the government garrison there.

But the crucial road to Anloc remained cut by the North Vietnamese in several places, which means that the province capital, which is 50 miles north of Saigon, has not yet been actually relieved.

The South Vietnamese spokesman, at a briefing for Vietnamese newsmen, said the meeting of the relief elements and the Anloc defenders took place at the city's southernmost defense line slightly less than a mile south of Anloc. He acknowledged, however, that "the main mission of the relief force is to clear Highway 13 and this mission has not been completed."

Other military sources said that the advanced relief element that linked up with the defenders consisted of airborne troops who had been lifted into the area by helicopter. These sources cautioned against premature optimism about breaking through the enemy encirclement of Anloc, stressing that until sizable convoys can move freely on Highway 13, taking in fresh troops and carrying out the large numbers of wounded, Anloc will remain under enemy siege.



THE NEW YORK TIMES/June 8, 1972

Enemy attacks cut a road near Saigon (1). Clashes continued near Hue (2). Power plant at Bac Giang (3) and a rail yard and a bridge near Langson (4) were hit by U.S. jets.

Figure 2

"not a single book devoted to [the Battle of An Lộc] has yet been written" (548). Strictly speaking, this is incorrect: in 1993 James H. Willbanks, a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Army, had authored *Thiet Giap! The Battle of An Loc, April 1972*, a 98-page booklet published by the Combat Studies Institute of the U.S. Army Command and the General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. But while *Thiet Giap!* (the title means "armor" in Vietnamese) includes detailed descriptions of the battle for An Lộc, it is written for purposes of officer training and not for a general audience. Andradé's point is therefore well taken: until *Trial by Fire* appeared in 1995, no extensive popular accounts of the Easter Offensive campaign in Binh Long Province had been written.

One wonders why this was so, since by all accounts, American and otherwise, the Battle of An Lộc was the most important single engagement (at least symbolically) of an offensive that was itself arguably one of the most, if not *the* most, important campaigns of the war. Major General James F. Hollingsworth, head of the Third Regional Assistance Command, commented soon after the siege of An Lộc was broken that he thought it would "go down in history as the greatest victory in the history of warfare" (*Time* 1972).⁶ General Paul Vanuxem, former Commander of the French Mobile Units during the First Indochina War and a trusted adviser of President Thiệu, concurs. Writing in the June 7, 1972, issue of the French periodical *Carrefour*, Vanuxem claims that "An Lộc should have fallen at the first impact. Two months later, An Lộc still stands. Everything being equal, with the exception of Stalingrad only, there is simply no equivalent feat in the military history of the contemporary world. An Lộc has become a symbol. . . . Against the finest arms, An Lộc still stands as a symbol of our world, of our liberty, of our honour, and of our future" (qtd. in Lâm Quang Thi 1986:1). Phan Nhật Nam, too, writes in laudatory tones, saying that An Lộc "surpasses all other battles, surpasses them by far, not one comes close." Famous European battles—Guernica, Arden, Berlin—

⁶According to Davidson, former head of MACV's intelligence section, Hollingsworth was "a big, brash, tough, loud-mouthed Texan, given to excessive braggadocio" (1988:699), from which description one might suspect he exaggerated the importance of the Battle of An Lộc. If so, his hyperbole is shared by General Vanuxem and by Phan Nhật Nam, as shown in the text, above. One should note that Davidson grants Hollingsworth his due in saying that it was he "who saved An Loc" (699).

cannot compare, he says.⁷ Lâm Quang Thi, deputy commanding general of I Corps during the 1972 offensive, contrasts the ARVN victory at An Lộc to the Việt Minh victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and finds the former more impressive: while the 15,000 defenders at Điện Biên Phủ faced 30,000 attackers, the ARVN at An Lộc faced 18,000 attackers with only 6,350 men; while the French perimeter was sufficiently large that some interior points were beyond the range of enemy artillery, all of An Lộc was within range of the communist guns; and while at Điện Biên Phủ the French had tanks and the Việt Minh didn't, the reverse was true at An Lộc—only the communist forces had tanks (1986:66-67). Professional historians, though somewhat less hyperbolic than this, nonetheless share in the opinion that the Easter Offensive was an especially critical action. Dale Andradé (1995), for instance, says that “[i]n terms of troops committed, types of advanced weapons used, casualties sustained, and damage done, [the Easter Offensive] was by far the biggest” offensive of the Vietnam war (back cover; see also p. 11). He claims that the Battle of An Lộc was “arguably the most important [battle] of the offensive” (548) and that it was “certainly the largest siege of the entire war” (371). Douglas Pike, an acknowledged expert on the Vietcong and the People’s Army of Vietnam, calls An Lộc “the single most important battle in the war” because it thwarted General Giap’s hopes for “a knock-out blow” (1986:229).

⁷For the contexts of these comments by Phan Nhật Nam, see the first and the fourth paragraphs of my translation from “An Lộc: The Unquiet East,” the text of which follows this essay.

People compare the battles of the Easter Offensive to famous World War I and II battles because they resembled these battles in significant ways. In the Easter Offensive, General Võ Nguyên Giáp switched from the Chinese style of guerilla warfare to the large-scale frontal attacks championed by the Soviet Union (Andradé 1995:36). The communist plan to attack in three separate locations required an incredibly large and complex movement of men and material. To prepare for the Nguyễn Huệ Offensive, North Vietnam had requested and received large numbers of modern weapons from the Soviet Union, including large T-54 and lighter PT-76 amphibious tanks. This was the first time that tanks, particularly the larger T-54's, had been used extensively in Vietnam, and their presence increased the similarity to warfare in Europe. James Webb, a Vietnam war veteran and former Secretary of the Navy, says the battles of the Easter Offensive were “more reminiscent of Passchendaele in World War I, or the Battle of the Bulge in World War II[,] than any previous fights in Vietnam” (1985:vii).

Although a small town of fewer than 15,000 inhabitants, An Lộc assumed tremendous symbolic significance as soon as the siege began.⁸ Partly this was because it was close to Saigon and because President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu personally had vowed to hold it at all costs. To ensure that it would not fall, he committed his elite place guard—three battalions of the 1st Airborne Brigade—to assist other units in the struggle.⁹ An Lộc also became important because the ARVN success in its defense was aggressively promoted by the public information apparatus of the Saigon regime. South Vietnamese counterattacks in Quảng Trị and Kontum had also been successful, but those victories were not as useful for propaganda purposes. The city of Quảng Trị, capital of Quảng Trị Province, had fallen and was not retaken until 80 days later, after heavy fighting and massive bombing had reduced it to rubble—hardly an image of victory. And although the fighting around Kontum was dramatic and intense and Kontum City never fell completely into communist hands, the central highlands are far removed physically and psychologically from the heavily populated coastal cities. An Lộc, on the other hand, is just a short drive up Highway 13 from Saigon, and certain features of the fighting there were easily exploited by Thiệu's Ministry of Information: An Lộc was a small (1000 by 1500 meters) besieged garrison whose defenders were greatly outnumbered by the attackers and which for two months was pounded relentlessly by communist artillery. The obvious similarity to Điện Biên Phủ and other famous beleaguered fortresses made it of great appeal to the public imagination.

Saigon began promoting the Battle of An Lộc as an ARVN victory soon after the siege was broken. On July 7, President Thiệu was flown into An Lộc by Lieutenant Jack Dugan of the 12th Aviation Group, their Huey surrounded by Cobra gunships so as to discourage fire from any remaining North Vietnamese soldiers. President Thiệu conferred medals on General Lê Văn Hưng, commander of the 5th ARVN Division, and gave one-rank promotions to all soldiers who had taken part in the fighting. Standing in what remained of the 5th Division compound, the

⁸Andradé (1995:373) argues that "the significance of the battle for An Lộc was overblown by both policy makers and the press. The city itself became a symbol out of all proportion to its true importance."

⁹It is the exploits of these three Airborne battalions, and especially the 6th, that Phan Nhật Nam chronicles in his "An Lộc: The Unquiet East."

president explained the significance of the battle for Bình Long Province as follows: "Bình Long is not the symbol of one battle Bình Long is a national as well as an international symbol. The Bình Long victory is not a victory of South Vietnam over Communist North Vietnam only, the Bình Long victory is also a victory of the Free World over the theory of people's war [and the] revolutionary war of world communism" (qtd. in Andradé 1995:494-95). Pictures of the president congratulating General Lê Văn Hưng appeared in newspapers and later in *An Lộc Anh Dũng* [Courageous An Lộc], a 1972 Ministry of Information publication that describes the siege, explains how it was broken, and praises the fighting men and the officers who led them. A long chapter compares the French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ to the ARVN victory and argues that at An Lộc the ARVN prevailed over an enemy force stronger than the one that defeated the French. Some sections are written by Vietnamese journalists who were in An Lộc: three and a half pages from Phan Nhật Nam's account of the 6th Battalion's retreat from Windy Hill and Hill 169, for instance, appear here. A shorter, 65-page English-language version of the book, titled the *Heroic Battle of An Lộc*, contains photographs, some of which reveal the almost complete destruction of the town, as well as excerpts from editorials in U.S. newspapers that praise the ARVN victory.

Although North Vietnamese leaders must have been disappointed in the outcome of the Easter Offensive—they had, after all, failed to capture a single province—the communist press's celebratory effusiveness matched that of its counterpart press in the south.¹⁰ One account published by the People's Army Publishing House, for example, comments as follows: "By June 1972, after nearly 3 months of fighting, we had won a great victory in annihilating the enemy and liberating land . . ." (War Experiences Recapitulation Committee 1982:147). After listing in detail the ARVN units wiped out and the territory liberated, the account goes on to claim that the offensive succeeded because it "contributed to the essential smashing of the U.S. imperialists' 'Vietnamization' strategy":

¹⁰That the offensive did not meet expectations may explain why General Văn Tiến Dũng replaced Võ Nguyên Giáp, chief architect of the campaign, as commander of the People's Army not long after the offensive was concluded.

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The 1972 strategic offensive carried out by our soldiers and people in the south placed the puppet army in a perilous situation. The Nixon administration had to recklessly carry out a strategic policy that was beyond the framework of the "Vietnamization" strategy, i.e.,[.] it had to "re-Americanize" the war. They mobilized very intensive air and naval support for the puppet army's counterattacks and brought the system of advisers back into action at the regimental level to take direct command of the fighting. (148)

According to an article in the North Vietnamese army newspaper *Quân Đội Nhân Dân* on April 20, 1973, the favorable terms Hanoi achieved in the treaty signed in January 1973 were the direct result of the success of the Nguyễn Huệ offensive:

The glorious victory of the resistance marked by the Paris agreements reflects a balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy on the battlefield in a protracted struggle *whose peak was the 1972 strategic offensive* in South Vietnam and the struggle against the U.S. war of destruction and blockade of the North. The struggle at the negotiating table is of very great importance, but basically it reflects the realities of the battlefield.¹¹

The thing to note in these passages is not their rhetorical tenor per se but rather the extent to which the rhetoric reflects how important this engagement was to the North Vietnamese. Clearly, for them, as much as for the Americans and the South Vietnamese, it was a crucial campaign involving great amounts of men and materiel and yielding far-reaching consequences.

It is thus remarkable that this episode in the war remained for so long relatively "uncharted territory" for U.S. historians. Andradé's explanation for this neglect is that the campaign simply came at a bad time, and no doubt he is partly right. The attacks occurred after the number of American soldiers in Vietnam had been greatly reduced and after Americans at home had grown tired of the

¹¹Elliott (1974:36-37) discusses this article. I've used his translation, but the emphasis is mine.

war. Regular reports of the fighting appeared in newspapers, but they failed to excite the American public, including would-be historians, whose attention soon shifted to the Paris Peace talks and the prospect of an end to the conflict. The relatively few American casualties is possibly another reason the Easter Offensive and the Battle of An Lộc have not received much attention in American accounts. By the end of March 1972, U.S. troop strength had been reduced to 95,000 from 500,000 three years before, and the three combat battalions remaining in country at the time of the Easter Offensive were all committed to the defense of American installations elsewhere. When enemy attacks on Bình Long began in the early days of April, there were 85 Americans in the province, a handful of whom served on the ground as advisors (Whitney). Within the ARVN compound in An Lộc there were usually around six American advisers to the 5th Division. The 6th Battalion of the 1st Airborne Brigade, the exploits of which are the focus of Phan Nhật Nam's account, had two: a Major Morgan and a Lieutenant Ross Kelly.¹² Americans also served as pilots for a variety of aircraft—Cobra (helicopter) gunships, Spectres and Stingers (transport aircraft turned into gunships), A-37 planes (light aircraft used for close tactical support), and, of course, the B-52 bombers based in Thailand and Guam. The tactical air support for Vietnamese units was a crucial, some say *the* crucial, element in the ARVN victory. But by far the bulk of the fighting and dying was done by Vietnamese.¹³ According to Clodfelter's *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 13,180 Vietnamese and only 149 Americans were killed during the offensive (201). If Nixon's Vietnamization policy was designed to

¹²Phan Nhật Nam mentions an adviser named Morgan and indicates that he along with Lieutenant Colonel Đinh, the commander of the 6th Battalion, and an Operations Specialist 3 named Nghiêm were injured in the assault on Windy Hill (see below). Phan Nhật Nam never mentions Kelly though he does mention that an Adviser Peyton was injured when the 6th Battalion was driven off the hill. Phan Nhật Nam describes Đinh binding up Peyton's wound (1972:92).

¹³On the importance of American air support: "Clearly, the single most important factor in the North Vietnamese defeat was U.S. air power" (Andradé 1995:536). Robert Thompson, the well-know counter-insurgency expert, concludes that while "it is untrue to say that the battles were won solely by American air power, it would be true to say that they could not have won without it" (qtd. in Andradé 1995:536).

change the color of the corpses, as one critic said it was, it had succeeded.¹⁴

The Easter Offensive in Perspective: Phan Nhật Nam as South Vietnamese Corrective to American Accounts

In U.S. accounts of the war, of course, one hears from only one side: Sheehan's *Bright Shining Lie*, Andradé's *Trial by Fire*, and Turley's *Easter Offensive* all highlight American heroics while relegating the Vietnamese to the status of secondary characters who are often described in condescending or derogatory terms. Some Vietnamese associated with the Saigon regime believe American writers ignore the AVRN's real successes because they contradict firmly held notions of South Vietnamese cowardice and incompetence. Nguyễn Mạnh Hùng (1993:19), for instance, faults Sheehan for constantly criticizing ARVN troops while lauding the Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers as "always heroic, well-trained, and well-led." Such accounts, he says, fail to consider "the impact of a combination of communist propaganda, threats, and various other devices of social control employed by the communists to command obedience."

Accounts dealing specifically with the Battle of An Lộc hold true to this form. Andradé, Turley, Willbanks, and others make it clear that many American advisers and pilots performed heroically under very difficult conditions, but they suggest that some ARVN units were not willing to fight, an attitude they attribute in part to cowardly, unmotivated, or incompetent officers. One particularly infamous case described by Turley is that of Lt. Col. Phạm Văn Đĩnh, commander of the 56th Regiment of the ARVN 3rd Division at Fort Carroll, a key artillery base near the DMZ. Turley tells of how, after shelling by communist forces became intense, Phạm Văn Đĩnh and 1,800 of his men surrendered without a fight, leaving two U.S. Advisers—Lt. Col. William Camper and Major Joseph Brown—to

¹⁴Vietnamese casualties were higher than American throughout the war, but not by this much. Communist troops, of course, also suffered heavy casualties. According to U.S. government-Government of Vietnam estimates (probably inflated) nearly 50,000 communist soldiers were killed in the Spring Offensive (Elliott 1974:23; Clodfelter 1995:201).

fend for themselves.¹⁵ Another incident is that involving one Captain Moffett and included as follows in Andradé's *Trial by Fire*:

At the division command bunker, Colonel [William] Miller [senior adviser to the ARVN 5th Division] heard one of his advisers come up on the radio, screaming that the line was coming apart all around him. It was Captain Harold Moffett, an adviser with the 3d Ranger Group, who was seeing even his elite unit crumble before the onslaught. But he knew they had to hold or the battle was lost, so Moffett took matters into his own hands. Standing on the road in front of the retreating South Vietnamese soldiers, Moffett held his rifle defiantly and demanded that the ranger officers do their duty and make the troops stand their ground. It worked—the rangers turned back and the line held, at least for the time being. (1995:430)

It is significant that Andradé bases his telling of events on only one source: a tape of an oral interview with Captain Harold Moffett. Though events may have transpired more or less as Moffett says, one is curious about how they would have been rendered by a Vietnamese writer. Unfortunately, Phan Nhật Nam does not mention this particular incident—he rarely mentions American advisers at all—but he does describe other events and ARVN officers that are also dealt with in American accounts, so some opportunities for comparison exist. We can take, for example, Phan Nhật Nam's and Andradé's separate accounts of the battle for Windy Hill and Hill 169, two strategic points of elevation two miles southeast of An Lộc. This battle took place during the week of April 14-21, at which time the defenders within the town of An Lộc were literally fighting for their lives.

Andradé's account stresses the feats of First Lieutenant Ross Kelly, Deputy Senior Adviser to the 6th Airborne Battalion. In Andradé's version, Kelly is always brave and in control while the Vietnamese airborne troops are "nervous," given to disorder, and, especially, poorly commanded. For instance, it is Kelly who "call[s]

¹⁵Camper and Brown and two faithful Vietnamese radio operators left Camp Carroll shortly before the surrender and were picked up by a CH-47 helicopter that, luckily for them, was in the area (Turley 1985:159-76).

in the Cavalry to come to the rescue" during the assault on Hill 169, the Cavalry being Cobra gunships piloted by Americans (434). He spends "most of the night [of April 14-15] calling in support from AC-119 and AC-130 gunships which rotated in and out of the area. By dawn the North Vietnamese had had enough" (436). Six days after the Airborne troops take the hills, the communist forces direct heavy artillery fire on the 6th's positions and then attack with infantry and six tanks.¹⁶ The Airborne battalion must abandon the hills and retreat to the southeast, at which time Kelly is again described as playing the key role. He receives a call from Major Jack Todd, Deputy Senior Adviser to another Airborne brigade in the An Lộc area, who tells Kelly that he has arranged for a B-52 strike near the 6th's position to give them "breathing room so they [can] make their escape" (443). After the strike, Kelly says "That's the signal" and tells the Vietnamese troops, "We have to move now" (443). Kelly then leads the severely mauled battalion to a place where they can be picked up by Vietnamese Air Force helicopters. The reader is left with no doubt that Kelly is in charge from start to finish. Not only this, but as much as Kelly is heroic, his ARVN counterpart, Lieutenant Colonel Đinh, commander of the 6th Airborne Battalion, is incompetent and cowardly. Here, for example, is Andradé's description of Đinh's behavior before the breakout—on the night of April 20, when his 6th Battalion is surrounded:

He ordered some of his men to dig a foxhole, then he climbed in, hunkered down, and refused to come out. The airborne soldiers milled about looking for cover and waiting for orders, only to be told that there were none. Đinh refused to discuss anything. The battalion operations officer, a man respected by Americans and Vietnamese alike, took Lieutenant Kelly aside and told him gravely, "Đinh has made his peace with dying." (443)

Phan Nhật Nam's account differs significantly from Andradé's both in fact and perspective, as it focuses on Lieutenant Colonel Đinh and his company commanders and never mentions Lieutenant

¹⁶Andradé (1995:442) mentions in passing that all six of the tanks were destroyed, "mostly by South Vietnamese soldiers."

Kelly.¹⁷ Đình is characterized as every bit the hero throughout. In the assault on the hills, he remains calm and in-command even after being wounded by shrapnel from a 75mm artillery shell. According to Phan Nhật Nam, the 6th Battalion learns of the coming B-52 strike not from Major Todd via the radio conversation with Kelly but from Colonel Lương, commander of the 1st Airborne Brigade, who himself radios the information directly to Colonel Đình. Phan Nhật Nam recounts this conversation in detail, including the fact that Đình asked Lương to arrange for the firing of eight smoke bombs, after the B-52 strike, to provide additional cover for the battalion's escape.¹⁸ "The moon is very bright," says Đình to his commander when making the request, "and those pirates [the North Vietnamese troops] have me surrounded so tightly there's not an opening for a single man" (1972:98; note: this and all subsequent page references to *Fiery Red Summer* [Mùa hè đỏ lửa] are to the 1972 Vietnamese-language reprint). Next, he addresses his company commanders: "All of you tell your men to divvy up their ammunition, carry all the wounded, and go single file, one man right behind the guy in front of him. The 62nd Company will go first, then the 60th and the artillery unit, and the 61st last. Vinh [62nd Company commander], choose a really good guy to lead the way. . . . The direction is southeast. Take a compass reading to be exact" (99). These authoritative commands suggest a different person entirely from the craven officer that Andradé describes "hunkered down" in a foxhole, refusing to emerge to "discuss anything" or to give any orders.

How does one explain the radical differences between Andradé's account and Phan Nhật Nam's? One possibility, of course,

¹⁷According to Phan Nhật Nam's recollection, First Lieutenant Kelly was not in the command post of the 6th Battalion during the period April 14-21. In a letter to the present author, he explains what he remembers about him:

I believe that he was with the 61st Company which was on Hill 169. The battle took place on Windy Hill (Hill 175). Of course, Hill 169 was also attacked on the 17th, 18th, and 19th. But the main objective was Hill 175. . . . To summarize, the 61st Company with Ross Kelly was the least threatened company in the 6th Battalion. The 61st Company was the unit that protected the rear during the retreat from the area of the fighting.

¹⁸In a later radio conversation Col. Lương tells Lt. Col. Đình that the smoke bombs aren't possible.

is that one of them deviates from the true facts more than the other, or that they both deviate equally but in different ways. In this respect, it is significant that neither author actually witnessed the events described. Andradé's account is based on his interview with Kelly, which took place on February 5, 1992, twenty years after the battle. Phan Nhật Nam based his version on interviews he conducted at An Lộc, where he had arrived on June 9 from Quảng Trị Province, where he had been with the South Vietnamese Marines during the battles there in May.¹⁹ He finished his account soon after the battle was over.²⁰

Certainly, more participants should be interviewed before a final verdict is rendered on factual accuracy, but Kelly's portrait of Đính as an abject coward is questionable. If Đính did act as Kelly says, it seems unlikely that Phan Nhật Nam would have made him a hero. Moreover, Đính's performance later in the war was far from cowardly. In mid-April 1975, for instance, Đính very capably led his 1st Airborne Brigade (he assumed command when Colonel Lê Quang Luông was promoted) when they and the ARVN 18th Infantry Division defended the town of Xuân Lộc, 35 miles northeast of Saigon. American Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson was sufficiently impressed with the defense to say that "In this final epic stand, [the] ARVN demonstrated for the last time that, when properly led, it had the 'right stuff'" (1988:790).

No doubt another reason for the difference between Andradé's account and Phan Nhật Nam's is the fact that they were intended for different audiences, the former for American readers, who it is presumed want to read about Americans and American heroism, and the latter for Vietnamese readers, who presumably want to read about Vietnamese heroes. The author's awareness of audience informs the telling of every incident, large or small. Note, for example, how Phan Nhật Nam describes the "historic link-up" of the 6th and 8th Airborne Battalions:

The historic link-up between the 62nd Company of the 6th Battalion commanded by "Vinh the Kid" and the

¹⁹When the fight for Windy Hill took place in An Lộc in April, Phan Nhật Nam was at the Kontum front with the 2nd Airborne Brigade.

²⁰On page 126 of *Mùa hè đỏ lửa*, Phan Nhật Nam says he is writing on June 20, 1972.

81st Company of the 8th Battalion of Nguyễn Trọng Ni took place at 5:45 on June 8, 1972. Both company commanders were in the same class at the Thủ Đức Infantry School for reserve officers. As their tears flowed freely from happiness and pride, an American adviser, his hands trembling from emotion, took their picture as they clasped their hands. (1972:101)

Here, the Vietnamese occupy center stage, are personalized and identified by name, while the anonymous "American adviser" is portrayed not as a participant but as a mere spectator and recorder. Note, too, that the American is described as being moved by the drama he is witnessing. He probably would not include this scene in his after-action report, but if he did he certainly would render it differently than Phan Nhật Nam has, particularly if he shared the view of the deputy commander of the Third Regional Assistance Command that the Battle of An Lộc was "an American show in its essence."²¹

As an aside, it is interesting to note that these two differing accounts of the battle raise questions about the success of the American advisory effort. I have already pointed out that communist writers claimed the offensive to have been a success in so far as it required Americans to reenter the conflict to assist the South Vietnamese with strategy, logistics, and tactical bombing, thus proving Nixon's Vietnamization policy a failure. Although intended as tributes, narratives by Americans of the heroics of American advisers—accounts that stress how the advisers saved the day by taking over the direction of the battle—can be seen to support the communist view: despite eighteen years of effort, by 1972 American advisers still hadn't succeeded in creating a South Vietnamese army that could operate without them.

In his balanced evaluation of the American military advisory effort, Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuân Viên (1980:190) speaks of the tendency of advisers "to overtake and patronize" the South Vietnamese, a practice that "seemed to edge ARVN commanders toward a passive role, especially since modern warfare required so much skill in the employment of U.S.-controlled combat support

²¹Brigadier General John R. McGiffert made this comment in an interview with Willbanks (1993:75).

assets."²² Lt. Col. Chu Xuân Viên also points out that most U.S. advisers in ARVN combat units stayed only six months. As a result, there was very little continuity in the advisory effort. General Ngô Quang Trưởng, former commander of the 1st Infantry Division and IV Corps and the last commander of I Corps, says that on average "each tactical commander had experienced some relationship with from 20 to 30 different advisers over the war years" (1980a:73). Such rapid changeover, as Lt. Col. Chu Xuân Viên (1980:190) diplomatically puts it, "did not help build the kind of working relationship conducive to steady progress and improvement." Six months simply was not enough time for an American to develop a sufficient understanding of "the social environment in which the unit operated and to which he was bound." In particular, he says, the American love of the good life made it nearly impossible for the advisers to relate well with the South Vietnamese soldiers:

It seemed that no American could survive without his PX, his compound, and his daily bath. In time American compounds and PX's became monumental institutions of American culture in Vietnam. To the underprivileged Vietnamese, these constituted a whole world apart, a world so distant that Vietnamese seldom really felt close to Americans in a cultural sense. . . . An ARVN officer, if criticized for not keeping pace with American drive, was usually heard retorting, "If I lived that kind of life, I could do the same." (197)

Lt. Col. Chu Xuân Viên concludes that exposure to the "unattainable good life" of the Americans created in ARVN soldiers a "complex of inferiority and sometimes bitterness, which accounted for the distance they always tried to keep from American advisers in order not to be hurt" (197).

²²Lt. Col. Viên is summarizing conclusions reached by other contributors to the *U.S. Adviser*, a monograph published by the U.S. Center of Military History. The other contributors include some of the highest-ranking officers in the ARVN. For harsher criticism of American advisers, see Lâm Quang Thi 1986:69-95. General Thi says that at the heart of the problem was "a basic American ethnocentric attitude regarding other countries which consisted of judging other people by using American customs and standards" (70).

Background Information on the Translated Passages

A few comments on how the battle for An Lộc developed will help readers appreciate the translated excerpts from Phan Nhật Nam's account of it in *Fiery Red Summer*. When Lộc Ninh, the capital of the district to the north of An Lộc, fell to the communist 5th Division on April 7, ARVN defenders retreated to An Lộc. On this same day, the 1st Airborne Brigade, which had arrived in Lai Khê (see figure 1) two days earlier, was ordered to push north up Highway 13 to An Lộc. At first, the advance proceeded without incident. When the brigade reached the Tàu Ô Stream about 8 miles south of An Lộc, however, it encountered heavy resistance from elements of the communist 7th Division, whose assignment was to block any relief efforts moving north. Even with the help of B-52 strikes and supporting artillery fire, neither the 1st Brigade nor the 21st Division, which tried later to open the highway, could dislodge the firmly dug-in communist troops.

With their advance up Highway 13 stymied, the ARVN commanders decided to drop the 1st Airborne Brigade by helicopter onto two hills, Hill 169 and Windy Hill (Đồi gió), so as to prevent the enemy from using the high ground there as a base from which to fire upon An Lộc two miles to the northwest. This operation was carried out successfully on April 14, although five men were killed and 58 wounded, including 6th Battalion Commander Nguyễn Văn Đình (hero of Phan Nhật Nam's account), an operations specialist 3 named Nghiêm, and a Major Morgan, who was serving as Senior Adviser to the battalion.²³

Meanwhile, An Lộc itself was in danger of being overrun. The communist 9th Division, supported by a tank battalion equipped with medium-sized Soviet T-54's and PT-76 light amphibious tanks, attacked on April 13. Although the ARVN had the bazooka-like M-72 Light Antitank Weapon (LAW), which proved very effective and was a great boost to ARVN morale, by April 16 the communists controlled the northern half of the town.²⁴ One Soviet weapon that

²³See Phan Nhật Nam (1972:74) and Lâm Quang Thi (1986:54).

²⁴No one seems certain when tanks were first used by communist forces. According to Summers, it was when nine Soviet PT-76 tanks were used to overrun the U.S. Special Forces camp at Lang Vei on February 6, 1968 (*Vietnam War Almanac* 1985:217). Both South Vietnamese and U.S. officers agree that a lack of experience with tank warfare, particularly a failure to coordinate infantry and tank movements, was a major reason for the

was especially troublesome to An Lộc's defenders was the Strela missile, a shoulder-fired, heat-seeking weapon that could knock low-flying aircraft out of the sky. These missiles, combined with heavy artillery and anti-aircraft fire, made it very difficult to airlift supplies into An Lộc and take the wounded out. Supplies had to be dropped by parachute from high altitudes, and they often landed off target and fell into communist hands.

On April 15, Colonel Lữõng, Commander of the 1st Airborne Brigade, ordered the 6th Battalion to remain on Windy Hill while he accompanied the 8th and 5th Battalions westward toward An Lộc. The 8th made it to the eastern edge of the city fairly easily. The 5th encountered stiff resistance from heavily dug-in troops along the railroad line, but it too finally made it to the city and effected the link-up with the beleaguered defenders. When Colonel Lữõng at last met General Hưng, commander of the forces within An Lộc, the two shared one of the last available beers in the town.

Although Phan Nhật Nam describes the events of April 17 elsewhere in his journal, the link-up on which he lavishes such rhetorical flourish in the excerpt below (he calls it a "glorious link-up in military history" [1972:115]) is a different one that occurred near the end of the siege, on June 8, between the 8th and the 6th Battalions. Phan Nhật Nam's focus on this later action is a little puzzling since by June 8 the tide of the engagement apparently had already turned in favor of the ARVN.²⁵ The climactic point had come on May 11-12, when an estimated 8,000 artillery and mortar shells fell on An Lộc and the communist forces penetrated to within 200 meters of the headquarters of the ARVN Fifth Division.²⁶ They were subsequently beaten back in a feat that Ngô Quang Trưởng (1980b:134) attributes variously to the "sheer physical endurance of ARVN defenders," the "combat audacity" of such elite forces as the 81st Airborne Ranger Group and 1st Airborne Brigade, and timely strikes by B-52's. In a letter to the present author, Phan Nhật Nam explains that he emphasized the later link-up because it was the one that broke the siege. The link-up in mid-April, he says, was intended

communist defeat in the Easter Offensive (See, for example, Ngô Quang Trưởng 1980b:121 and Willbanks 1993:27).

²⁵Lâm Quang Thi (1986:57) calls the first link-up, not the later one, "possibly the most memorable moment of An Lộc." He doesn't even mention the June 8th link-up.

²⁶See footnote 4.

only to reinforce the troops defending the town and as such did not succeed in establishing a connection with the two isolated regiments to the south of the town—the 15th regiment of the 9th Division and the 33rd regiment of the 21st Division.

Clearly, the June link-up *was* important. By late May the besieged city could sometimes be resupplied by air, but flying helicopters into An Lộc remained a risky operation, especially with the presence of the heat-seeking Strela missiles. The *New York Times* reported on June 1 that there were many wounded in the town waiting to be evacuated and that some otherwise healthy soldiers were so afraid of being wounded, of never being evacuated, and of dying eventually from infection that they refused to leave their bunkers (Whitney 1972). After the June 8 link-up, however, the perimeter around the town was greatly enlarged, and on June 9, twenty-three helicopters, now able to land safely, brought in supplies and fresh troops and evacuated the wounded (Ministry of Information 1984:28-29; Lâm Quang Thi 1986:63). By June 12, the last of the communist troops were driven from the city, and General Hưng declared the siege broken.

Perhaps a second reason Phan Nhật Nam chose to emphasize the later link-up is that the paratroopers in the 6th Battalion exhibited remarkable bravery in the final assault that achieved it. In *Courageous An Lộc*, a reporter says that Commanding General Hậu of the 21st Division told him "the 6th Battalion surprised all friendly units in the final battle before linking up with An Lộc's defenders" (Ministry of Information 1984:28). The Airborne had a reputation for valor, so it was perhaps not only their bravery but also their recuperative powers that impressed their comrades. The troops had been mauled badly when they were driven off Windy Hill and Hill 169 on April 20, and the battalion had to be rebuilt with fresh recruits. Phan Nhật Nam appropriately entitles his account of the June 8 link-up "Revenge" to indicate that the 6th was motivated by a desire to punish those who had killed their comrades in the earlier engagement.²⁷

²⁷Willbanks (1993:38) comments on the aftermath of the Windy Hill Battle: "Stragglers and escaped prisoners from the 6th Airborne Battalion continued to turn up in An Lộc for several weeks, but the 6th Battalion as a unit was virtually out of the operation until it was reconstituted in late May."

History Written on the Run: Phan Nhật Nam's Journalistic Style

The writer and literary historian Võ Phiến (1992:205) makes a distinction between the Vietnamese words *bút* (literally, "brush") and *ký* ("to sign" or "to record"). Võ Phiến argues that when used with reference to literary genres, *bút*, suggests feeling, creativity, and artistry—a more personal kind of writing—whereas *ký* suggests careful observation and accurate description—a less personal recording of events. Phan Nhật Nam calls his work a "*bút ký*" or "literary journal," by which he suggests a combination of accurate observation and expressions of feeling. Within the Vietnamese context, *bút ký* is an appropriate term for *Fiery Red Summer*. But the translation of *bút ký* as "literary journal" may not be entirely accurate, since it might lead Western readers to expect an account told from the first-person point of view, while *Fiery Red Summer* is written predominantly in what Western critics call the "omniscient third person," though the narrator occasionally intrudes to make personal comments in the first person. If *journal* suggests an account less carefully crafted than, say, a memoir or a novel, then it is an appropriate term for Phan Nhật Nam's work. In one personal intrusion, Phan Nhật Nam says he is writing "An Lộc: The Unquiet East" on June 20, or in other words only twelve days after the second link-up occurred. His account is definitely history written on the run. One senses that the urge to record, to get down on paper what happened, takes precedence over artistry. *Fiery Red Summer* is thus more *ký* than *bút*.

Some readers may be put off by Phan Nhật Nam's braggadocio and gloating over victory, but this swagger was part of the paratrooper persona and it appealed to many readers, especially men in the armed services—always an appreciative audience for Phan Nhật Nam. June 1972 was a proud time for the Republic of Vietnam. "Never before," General Ngô Quang Trưởng (1980b:14) writes, "had the RVN's [Republic of Vietnam's] strategic posture been so good, its bargaining position so strong and its prospects of national survival so promising." It was a heady time for supporters of the Thiệu regime, and Phan Nhật Nam's rhetoric expresses the mood of that summer.

The dominant tone of "An Lộc: The Unquiet East," however, is not that of self-satisfaction in victory but rather one of sadness at the human suffering brought about through the awesome power of both Soviet- and U.S.-made weapons. The author frequently expresses

grief for fallen comrades. For instance, after Cao Hoàng Tuấn, Commander of the 62nd Company, 6th Battalion, dies heroically on Windy Hill (the battalion renamed the hill "Đồi Quốc Tuấn," the Hill of Tuấn the Nationalist), Phan Nhật Nam bids him farewell: "Goodbye forever, comrade-in-arms, goodbye forever, Tuấn, goodbye Windy Hill, Đồi Quốc Tuấn, a name so strange and small in comparison to glorious An Lộc. Every hell may have its own kind of fire but all fires consume human life" (97). Phan Nhật Nam also expresses compassion toward the noncombatants, those trapped in An Lộc who faced constant shelling and food shortages, and those along Highway 13, many of whom were killed in the crossfire as they tried to escape. In his concern for the civilian population, Phan Nhật Nam reflects an attitude that apparently was especially intense among the airborne units at An Lộc—the 81st Airborne Ranger Group and the 1st Airborne Battalion. According to Ngô Quang Trường (1980b:126), these two units "earned the most admiration and affection from the city's population. . . . [They] not only fought well and courageously but also proved particularly adept at winning over the people's hearts and minds."

And, finally, Phan Nhật Nam grieves for the geographical landscape itself, which should be as peaceful as the name An Lộc ("peaceful deer") suggests but now is turned into a hell on earth. The names of towns and rivers, which originate from Vietnamese, Cambodian, and tribal languages, are for him poetic in their sound and evocative of the time before the war. As an "insider's" account, "An Lộc: The Unquiet East" contrasts sharply in tone with American sources such as Andradé's, which dispassionately point out the strategic or military insignificance of An Lộc and include little to compare with Phan Nhật Nam's heartfelt comments about the Bình Long region. The title of Andradé's first chapter on An Lộc, "Hell in a Very Insignificant Place" (an echo of Bernard Fall's famous account of the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, *Hell in a Very Small Place*), and his reference to the town and surrounding area as a "small, insignificant patch of ground" (1995:371) are characteristic of the American attitude.

In an interview with a reporter from the *New York Times*, Phan Nhật Nam describes his last action as a reporter in the war. On the morning of April 29, 1975, a C-119 gunship that had been protecting the airport and the fleeing South Vietnamese was shot down by

North Vietnamese gunners. Phan Nhật Nam went to the wreckage, took some photographs, and then began to cry. "At that moment," he says, "I realized that I was dead. In my mind, I had died in the war. And in my mind, I have been dead from that moment until today."

Nor was this the full extent of Phan Nhật Nam's suffering on account of the war. In the final chaotic days of the Saigon regime, he became separated from his family at the airport. Not knowing for sure whether they had made it to the U.S. (they had), he remained behind to help in the evacuation of others and ended up spending 14 years in communist reeducation camps before international pressure forced his release. Brought to the U.S. under the Orderly Departure Program in 1993, he was reunited with his family in southern California and now lives in Texas. His comments in the above-cited interview with the *New York Times*, however, suggest that peace of mind continues to elude him: "My family is now an American family with American feelings. I am still Vietnamese with Vietnamese feelings. We have no common language" (qtd. in Mydans 1995).

Perhaps Phan Nhật Nam finds most solace through writing. He has produced some half dozen books since arriving in this country. In his most recent work, *Preserving the Fire in Winter* (Mùa Đông giữ lửa), a title clearly chosen to echo his famous *Fiery Red Summer*, he continues to honor the soldiers who fought for the Republic of Vietnam. In the prologue to *Stories That Need to be Retold*, he explains why he sticks to this theme: "I continue to write about soldiers. To write about war and suffering. About people who have suffered. I cannot write about anything else. There is nothing else. If I don't write about these things, I will prove myself ungrateful and people will have the right to curse me. We live today because of the blood of the soldiers. The blood of those who have died" (1995:9). It is not difficult to understand why many Vietnamese exiles, and especially those who served or had friends or relatives who served in the armed services of the Republic of Vietnam, appreciate Phan Nhật Nam's work. Surrounded by reportage like Sheehan's that emphasizes ARVN incompetence, they appreciate accounts that present their own point of view.

Though some former South Vietnamese officers have described the defense of An Lộc in print, and though two American military historians have recently analyzed the battle, this heroic

Phan Nhật Nam and the Battle of An Lộc

action is a story that is in danger of being forgotten. As if to speed this process, An Lộc has been renamed Bình Long on new maps issued by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The value of Phan Nhật Nam's "An Lộc: The Unquiet East," therefore, is that it does not let us forget. It reminds us that men in the South Vietnamese armed services, like those in both the communist and the U.S. forces, were, as the title of an American account of another battle suggests, "soldiers once . . . and young."²⁸

Acknowledgements and References

Acknowledgements and the list of references begin on page 98.

²⁸*We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young*, an account by Moore and Galloway of the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965.