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ANATOMY OF FAILURE: LAM SON 719

James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos*. College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 270. ISBN 978-1-62349-017-1.

Robert D. Sander, *Invasion of Laos 1971: Lam Son 719*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 290. ISBN 978-0-8061-4437-5.

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Operation Lam Son 719 (February-March 1971) was the last major offensive by American and South Vietnamese forces during the Vietnam War and the first undertaken by the South Vietnamese without US ground support. As a sequel to the previous year's Cambodian incursion, the operation targeted key supply and staging areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southeastern Laos with the intent of disrupting possible enemy offensives planned for that year. The Nixon administration also hoped it would demonstrate that Vietnamization was working and that the South Vietnamese were ready to fight their own war. Though it inflicted significant damage on opposing enemy forces, the operation went wrong almost from the beginning, crippling most of the elite units that conducted it. Many accounts of the larger war present it as a portent of things to come after American withdrawal. Despite its size and scope, the operation received little attention from historians over the next forty years. In the books under review, James Willbanks and Robert Sander now provide the first full scholarly studies of the operation, each offering insights and information that complement the other's.

Both authors are career Army officers who served in Vietnam. Willbanks (US Command and General Staff College), who holds a doctorate in history and has produced several other studies of the war,¹ has written the more thoroughly researched of the two books, making extensive use of the spate of volumes published around the fortieth anniversary of the Lam Son 719 campaign. Sander actually served in the operation as a helicopter pilot; his own experiences, connections with other pilots, and intimate knowledge of military aviation at the time add significantly to his narrative. He devotes considerable space to the background of the operation, including American involvement in Laos over a decade earlier. His treatment of the topic reflects the best current scholarship.² His careful survey of events that led up to the campaign and prior efforts to interdict traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail offers a broader context than does Willbanks's account.

Willbanks begins with a discussion of Nixon's Vietnamization policy and US commanders' attempts to do as much damage to the enemy as possible before withdrawing their forces. He then moves quickly to the planning for the operation. As both authors note, American concerns about security breaches in the South Vietnamese military led to their exclusion from initial planning. The US military officially began working with the men who would actually conduct the operation only in early January, mere weeks before it was to begin. Willbanks adds here a close examination of the evidence of North Vietnamese advance knowledge of the operation.

It appears that most of the reports that the North Vietnamese received prior to the crossing of South Vietnamese forces into Laos lacked details about the size, the actual timing, operational objectives, and specific location of the attack. A recent article on the 1971 southern Laos operation in the official Vietnamese Army newspaper acknowledges that prior knowledge of South Vietnamese intentions was "very general." Citing the "enemy's tightened security," the article continues: "Because of this, during the last two months of 1970, our ef-

1. E.g., *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2004) and *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2006).

2. See, e.g., William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954-1961* (Lexington: U Kentucky Pr, 2012).

forts to obtain information about the enemy's plan to attack southern Laos did not achieve any significant results." Another account in that article admits that one of Hanoi's best covert agents, Dinh Van De, who served as deputy chairman of the Saigon government's National Assembly, was not aware of any plans to launch an operation into Laos. (61)

Willbanks taps several other corroborative sources to trace North Vietnamese endeavors to learn where and when the offensive was likely to occur. There was certainly at least some chance that a rapid and powerful offensive could, as American planners hoped, take the enemy by surprise.

As insightful as Willbanks is on the intelligence issue, and as thoroughly as he covers the political and military aspects of the planning of the operation, he misses something Sander discovered by talking directly with its participants. One of these was Col. Ben Harrison, at the time a senior adviser to the commander of the ARVN 1st Division, one of the units slated to participate in the attack. Harrison had earlier commanded the 3rd Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division during the siege of Fire Support Base Ripcord in July 1970. The firebase had been established just north of the A Shau Valley, a major North Vietnamese supply and staging area, as part of Operation Texas Star, an intended prelude to a second operation into the A Shau itself. But heavy enemy fire forced US infantry units operating around Ripcord to abandon the base rather than suffer more casualties. "Operation Texas Star and the forced evacuation of FSB Ripcord should have imparted valuable lessons for the planners of Lam Son 719. The North Vietnamese were totally committed to the defense of their northern infiltration routes. They would not, as they had in Cambodia, fall back and allow the South Vietnamese to wreck their strategic supply route" (78).

Ripcord foreshadowed events in Lam Son 719, when the North Vietnamese, having built up their forces and firepower, wore down the isolated US units and bases one by one. Both authors chronicle this, but only Sander makes the connection to the precedent of July 1970.

Willbanks and Sander agree that the impetus for the campaign came not from the South Vietnamese, but from the Nixon administration, and that the American commander in Vietnam, Gen. Creighton Abrams, was expected carry it out, like it or not. They also concur that Washington badly overestimated what the operation could reasonably be expected to achieve. Thanks to the Cooper-Church Amendment, US ground troops were not allowed to fight outside South Vietnam, not even the American advisers who had become integral parts of their assigned ARVN units; such personnel were needed to ensure good communications with the US air and artillery units so essential to the success of the operation.

Since most ARVN units were not trained or equipped for mobile operations, the majority of the South Vietnamese forces would be elite units—Rangers, Marines, and Airborne Divisions—that had never fought as whole divisions, let alone parts of a corps. Consequently, all the staff work would have to be improvised on the fly, as there was no time for adequate training. Many South Vietnamese officers, especially at the higher command levels, were political appointees of limited ability, sometimes more concerned with their political careers than their military duties. Well aware that the impetus for the offensive came from the Americans rather than their own government, they were not eager to risk their units and reputations in an operation their own leaders were unsure of.

As if such issues were not daunting enough, the weather in the region in February and March was generally cloudy and wet, hardly ideal for helicopter operations. But if the operation were delayed, the monsoon would set in and make things worse yet. And, too, the attack plan depended on using Route 9, the old French road that ran west from Khe Sanh to the Laotian town of Tchepone, the final objective of the raid, in order to move the ARVN Armored Brigade, the supposed spearhead of the assault, as well as supply convoys. Though the road was in bad shape even within South Vietnam and barely a track in Laos, operation planners deemed its use necessary, since helicopters alone could not easily provide needed logistical support and would be highly vulnerable to enemy fire. Cognizant of all these difficulties, Abrams and his staff were nonetheless under orders to plan the offensive, and so they did. The plans they presented to Washington were overly optimistic, exaggerating the capabilities of the South Vietnamese units and minimizing probable complications. Willbanks in particular stresses that Abrams had largely given up trying to get his superiors to listen to reason and was now simply telling them what they wanted to hear.

Both authors agree that, despite all the problems, the opening phase of the attack went reasonably well, since the enemy, not knowing exactly where or when it would commence, had not fully concentrated their reserves in the area. The advance up Route 9 was slowed by road conditions, but the tracked vehicles at least were able to advance, and ARVN troops, inserted by air, made parallel thrusts to the north and south of the main attack, established firebases, and located and destroyed enemy supply caches. Then, for reasons still unclear, the South Vietnamese halted and began patrolling around the bases they had set up rather than pushing farther west. This allowed the North Vietnamese to consolidate their forces, strengthen their defensive positions, and launch counterattacks. Drawing on Vietnamese sources, Willbanks writes that:

Unknown to the South Vietnamese and Americans, the North Vietnamese leadership in the Politburo in Hanoi had come to a momentous conclusion. They believed that they had an opportunity to hand the ARVN a decisive defeat. In a 15 February cable, they declared that the developing battle in Laos was a “strategically important and decisive battle because not only will it decide what strategic steps we will take next to inflict a major defeat on the enemy’s ‘Vietnamization’ scheme, it will have a political impact in South Vietnam, in the United States, and throughout the world.” The cable closed by charging the forces in Laos to “make the maximum possible effort” to defeat the South Vietnamese Route 9–Southern Laos operation. (94–95)

While the Americans struggled to persuade South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and his generals to resume the offensive, their enemies began overrunning outlying firebases or forcing their evacuation one by one. Though most of the outmanned and outgunned ARVN units fought well, they had to withdraw. In scenes made famous by American photojournalists, ARVN troops clung to overcrowded helicopters returning to the rear. The courage and skill they and the US pilots had shown in the field went unseen. The world saw only ignominious defeat.

The operation itself, however, continued, as the Americans moved elements of the ARVN Airborne Division by helicopter deeper into Laos, establishing another string of bases extending out to now abandoned Tchepone. Once more they started patrolling and destroying supply caches, and once more the NVA began to counterattack and wear down isolated ARVN units and firebases. American helicopter units were hard pressed to evacuate the besieged troops. Former helicopter pilot Sander describes their predicament:

Understandably, veteran accounts of the action at [LZ] Lolo contain conflicting details. Every crew was totally focused on its task at hand, and the fog of war was thickened by the fast pace of events. Some veterans report that no gunship support was present. One of the Charley [UH1-C helicopter] Model’s deficits was airspeed, and presumably, the gun teams were delayed by their efforts to suppress the enemy at the PZ [pickup zone]. But Charley Model gunships were there and made one, possibly two, gun runs before being shot down. Three Charley Models were hit in the vicinity of Lolo between 1000 and 1015 hours. The limited number of gunships on station simply did not have enough firepower to suppress a determined, and numerically superior, enemy force, let alone survive, and the Charley Model gunships were out of their depth. (162–63)

The commander of the 233rd Aviation Battalion tried to continue the attack for another hour, relying on erroneous intelligence from his superiors, rather than the reports of his pilots actually on the scene. He ultimately lost nine helicopters, providing more fodder for reporters already determined to paint as bleak a picture of the operation as possible.

Willbanks pays more attention to men on the ground, using Vietnamese as well as American sources to track the course of the fighting. The last South Vietnamese units to leave Laos—elements of the Marine Division—suffered the same treatment as all the others. Willbanks notes that the North Vietnamese surrounded one of their positions, FSB Delta, and, preparing to launch their final assault, used radio broadcasts to urge them to surrender, but to no avail.

With the Marines refusing to surrender, the fighting continued into the night; at one point, NVA soldiers were firing 75-mm recoilless rifles directly into the Marine command post. Enemy artillery continued to pound the Marines throughout the night and into the early morning hours. After midnight, the 2nd Battalion reported seeing lights presumably from tracked vehicles to the south. With a previously coordinated B-52 strike called in on their own position, the Marines gathered their walking wounded and set out to break through the encircling enemy, leaving behind six artillery pieces that they attempted to disable before departing. They were also

forced to leave behind their more seriously wounded comrades. One Marine later recalled, “They lay there crying, knowing the B-52 bombs would fall on them. They asked buddies to shoot them, but none of us could bring himself to do that. So the wounded called out for grenades.... I could not bear it.” (152)

Taken out of context, the survivor’s quote fits the standard view of the operation as a disaster, but Willbanks follows it by recounting the unit’s largely successful effort to escape and regroup and noting the damage done to their enemy. In short, they had carried out their jobs well, despite the dire circumstances they found themselves in.

Both authors discuss the campaign’s aftermath. Sander focuses on command issues and attempts to assign responsibility for the faulty planning of the operation (193–95). He places some of the blame on the South Vietnamese, who had been developing plans for a Laotian incursion well before the Americans, but lacked the time before the start of the operation to coordinate properly with US commanders, who had been planning independently until January 1971. He sees Creighton Abrams as too good a general to have made some of the planning blunders, but faults him for accepting orders too passively and sending misleadingly rosy reports back to Washington.

Willbanks shares these views, but investigates a wider range of consequences of the operation. He notes that Abrams and his staff made concerted efforts to train and equip the ARVN for the type of conventional war North Vietnam seemed at the time inclined to fight. The Easter Offensive of 1972 showed some positive results of these efforts: many ARVN units fought more effectively than expected, though they remained too reliant on US airpower. Less than a year later, the Americans were gone and the South Vietnamese were left to their own devices before they were ready to stand on their own—with inevitable consequences.

James Willbanks’s *A Raid Too Far* is the better researched of the two volumes and well conveys the Vietnamese ground-level perspective on the campaign and the internal politics of the Nixon administration regarding Vietnam. Robert Sander’s *Invasion of Laos 1971* does the same rather more superficially, instead concentrating on the air war, especially helicopter operations. Each book has its particular virtues, and anyone seriously interested in the Lam Son 719 campaign will learn much from both.