

## 5 The Battle of Lang Son, February–March 1979

“Friendship Pass. How bitter the name . . .”<sup>1</sup>

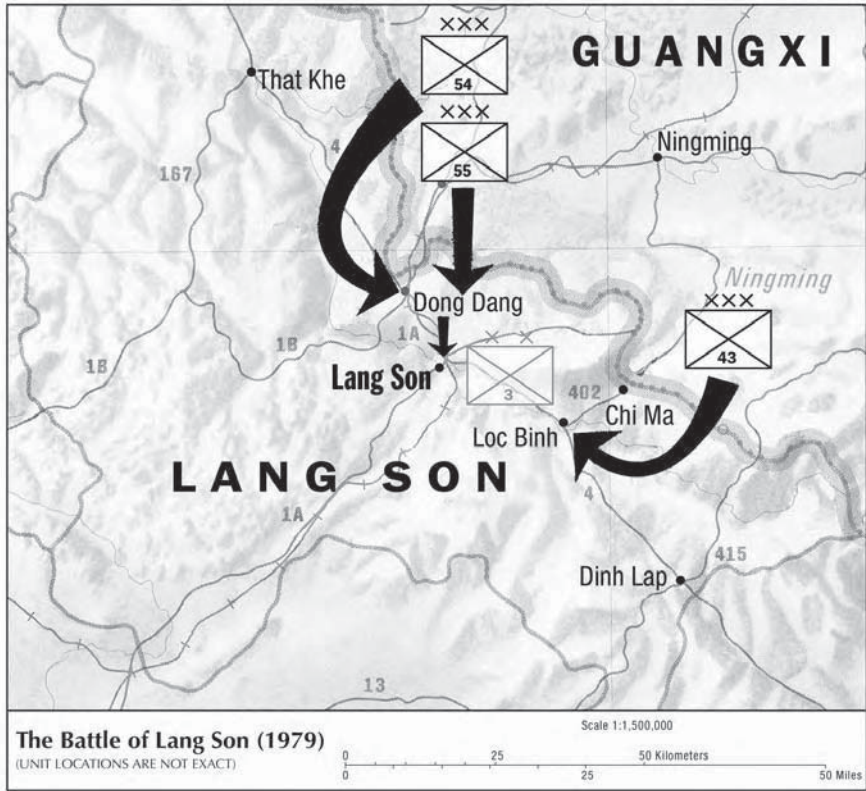
Nguyen Duy, “Lang Son, 1989”

Friendship Pass, a narrow gap between low hills and karst outcroppings, is a route frequently used by Chinese armies seeking to invade Vietnam. When PLA tanks rolled south through the pass in February 1979 toward Lang Son, the small city about eighteen kilometers south of the border that is the first significant town on the road, they followed a route the Sung, Yuan, Ming, and the Qing armies all had used. In each invasion in the past, the Chinese had encountered defeat or, at best, a costly victory. History was about to repeat itself (Map 9).

When the Chinese and Vietnamese armies clashed at Lang Son in 1979, the flaws of the PLA’s Maoist training were brutally exposed. During the Chinese Civil War, the first campaigns in Korea in 1950 and 1951, and the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the Chinese army had fought “battles of quick decision.” At Lang Son, the PLA fought a slow, indecisive battle using tactics better suited to the nineteenth century than the late twentieth century. Its logistics failed it, and the advance as a result was spasmodic rather than the planned series of smooth, focused thrusts. And it did not use its artillery effectively, failing repeatedly to clear the way for the assault waves of Chinese infantry. Time after time, the infantry rushed into a storm of automatic gunfire that precise artillery fire might have silenced.

The relationship between the leaders and the led (*guan bing yizhi*) in the Chinese armies nonetheless was good, and the strong bond between cadres and conscripts kept the morale high:<sup>2</sup> the soldiers enthusiastically followed the orders of their leaders, and even when repeated attacks failed they were ready to attack again. But this combination of high individual motivation with weak artillery support, a flawed logistics system,<sup>3</sup> and the misplaced trust of the Chinese leadership in the tactics of massed infantry formations was a fatal mix. In 1979, the PLA demonstrated that, after almost twenty years of Maoism, it was a catastrophically ineffective army.

This chapter examines in detail the battle of Lang Son that was first mentioned in Chapter 4 and identifies the problems the PLA encountered in that



Map 9 The Battle of Lang Son (1979).

bitter fight. To both sides, Lang Son was the most important battle of the campaign, and the force that attacked Lang Son was as good as or better than the forces that China threw into the assaults against Cao Bang and Lao Cai. The conduct of the campaign in the Lang Son area and its results are as a result a good indication of the best that the PLA could do in 1979.

### The build-up

From a military point of view, Lang Son, 18 kilometers south of Friendship Pass and a mere 154 kilometers north of Hanoi, is the most important point on the 1,281-kilometer border between China and Vietnam. During the Sung Dynasty, Vietnamese strategists estimated that it would take the Chinese army only four days to cover the distance between the pass and Hanoi (then known as Thang Long) using the route through Lang Son.<sup>4</sup> In 1979, it took less than a day to drive the route in a truck or car.<sup>5</sup>

Lang Son's history as an invasion route for Chinese armies and its proximity

to Hanoi were important factors in the Chinese selection of the city as the primary axis of attack for the 1979 invasion. One other factor made it irresistible, however: Lang Son is the meeting place for Vietnam's national highways 1A, 1B, 4A, and 4B and the railroad for China.<sup>6</sup> (The Vietnamese were so sensitive about these lines of communication that the *Atlas of Land Routes*, a "secret" volume published by the PAVN General Logistics Department in 1980, does not show the road and rail lines that ran to the border.)<sup>7</sup>

In late 1978, the PLA General Staff Department assigned to the Chinese 55th, 54th, and 43rd Armies the crucial mission of seizing Lang Son. The 55th Army, a Guangzhou Military Region unit, had a relatively short distance to travel to the border area. The 54th and 43rd Armies, Wuhan Military Region units, in contrast came 1,000 kilometers by rail and road to their jumping-off points. Each of these armies had three infantry divisions, an artillery regiment, and an anti-aircraft artillery regiment. At full strength, each army would comprise about 43,000 fighters and cadres.<sup>8</sup> The Chengdu Military Region also contributed to the assault force, at a minimum supplying three regiments, identified only as Unit 56037, Unit 56039, and Unit 56229.<sup>9</sup> In total, the PLA deployed about 130,000 soldiers to ensure a quick decision at Lang Son.

South of the border, the Vietnamese General Staff Department had in mid-1978 assigned the defense of the town to the 3rd PAVN Division. The division, commanded by Nguyen Duy Thuong, had been established in September 1965 in Binh Dinh province, in the former Republic of Vietnam. It had been a constant problem for the Americans and South Vietnamese during the Second Indochina War, and in April 1975 it ultimately had spearheaded the attack against Saigon.<sup>10</sup> At full strength, the 3rd Division had about 9,950 men on its rolls,<sup>11</sup> in large part members of the division's three founding North Vietnamese regiments that had infiltrated into South Vietnam in the early 1960s. For the defense of Lang Son, the local force battalions of Lang Son City, Van Lang, and Cao Loc districts had been assigned to the 3rd Division, and the 166th Artillery Regiment and 272nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment additionally had been sent from the First Military Region reserve.<sup>12</sup> The total number of defenders probably was about 13,000. They were outnumbered ten to one.<sup>13</sup> Although the Vietnamese could count on a friendly local population, the odds were heavily against them.

Striving to make the best of its chances, the 3rd Division dug in. By January 1979, its soldiers had built almost 20,000 field fortifications, including sixty kilometers of defensive trenches, and had shifted an estimated 113,500 cubic meters of dirt. Camouflage, minefields, and a variety of cleverly placed obstacles made the fortifications even more formidable. The soldiers of the division also sweated through technical and tactical training and all the while were instructed and cajoled by their commanders and political officers to be ruthless on the battlefield.<sup>14</sup>

There are five natural approaches to Lang Son from the north, east, and south,<sup>15</sup> each with its own road. The Chinese planned to attack along all of these routes, filling them with fast-moving forces of two, three, or more divisions. The attack was to be an application of Mao's dictum that Chinese armies should fight

“battles of quick decision on external lines” (*wai xian de su jue de jin gong zhan*). There was to be a quick, decisive victory at Lang Son.<sup>16</sup>

In the extreme northwest, the 163rd Division of the 55th Army, supported by an additional tank battalion, was to move from its attack position on the border at markers 15 and 16 to **cut Highway 4A**. This would **deny Lang Son resupply or reinforcement from Cao Bang**.<sup>17</sup> Having secured the highway, the 163rd was to turn south to **seize Hill 386 and Hill 438**. Highway 4A is less than 150 meters west of the border at marker 16 and the straight-line distance from marker 16 to Hill 438 just 3.5 kilometers.

The 164th Division of the 55th Army and an additional tank battalion were to attack south from Friendship Pass to seize the town of Dong Dang (CH: *Tong Deng*), less than four kilometers away. Having achieved this intermediate objective, it was to move on to Lang Son, a further fifteen kilometers to the south. The 164th's route was to take it directly down the road and rail lines in the long valley to Lang Son.<sup>18</sup>

The third division of the **55th Army, the 165rd**, was not scheduled to participate in the first phase of the operation and was most probably **held in reserve**.

To the east of the 55th Army's positions, the 54th Army of the Wuhan Military Region assembled near border markers 19 and 20. The 54th was to send a force on a wide **flanking movement** to the east of Dong Dang, to **seize the hamlet of Tham Lung that lies astride Highway 4A** and thus to **isolate Dong Dang from Lang Son**.<sup>19</sup> The straight-line distance from border markers 19 and 20 to Tham Lung is no more than eight kilometers, but the intervening terrain comprises a series of hills with elevations in the range of 600 to 800 meters. To arrive at Tham Lung in time to place an effective **block on the highway**, the men of the 54th Army would need to move very fast. In support of this attack, another Chinese unit was to **attack and seize the hamlet of Ban Roi to open a route**, according to the Vietnamese, via which a pack-horse unit would resupply the soldiers around Tham Lung.<sup>20</sup>

About twenty or thirty kilometers to the southeast, responsibility for the second major drive toward Lang Son was given to the 127th Division of the 43rd Army. Launching its attack from a position between border markers 32 and 33, the division had the hardest approach to its objective of any of the Chinese units deployed against Lang Son. Ahead lay thirty kilometers of narrow, unpaved road, winding from the Chinese border through the tiny villages of Ban Xam and Luc Quyen and eventually to an intersection with Highway 1A at Cao Loc. If it succeeded in pressing this far, the division would gain a route into Lang Son through the city's northeastern subdistrict of Ky Lua.<sup>21</sup>

The third Chinese assault on Lang Son was to come up from the south of the city. Striking out from their assembly areas near border markers 43 and 45, the 43rd Army's 128th Division and 129th Division were to push through Chi Ma (CH: Zhi Ma) and assault Loc Binh (CH: Lu Ping), about ten kilometers distant and a key town astride Highway 4B.<sup>22</sup> Capturing Loc Binh would isolate the Lang Son battlefield from the coast. Once the town was secure, the Chinese divisions would drive north to attack Lang Son from its southern quarter.

Command of the Chinese operations on the Lang Son Front was given to Xu Shiyu, the commander of the Guangzhou Military Region and the man responsible for all Chinese forces that were attack out of Guangxi province. Xu was a prominent member of the Chinese military aristocracy. Seventy-three years old in 1979, he had served in the army during the Civil War and the Anti-Japanese War, commanding a cavalry regiment on the Long March and in 1937 serving briefly with the same 129th Division that he was to command in 1979 as part of the 43rd Army. He had commanded the Nanjing Military Region from 1954 to 1974 and the Guangzhou Military Region since 1974.<sup>23</sup> The CCP had recognized the political value of Xu's service in 1969 by elevating him to the Politburo of the Central Committee.

Xu's last combat service had been in 1949, but in his role as commander of the invasion force he was in any case far from autonomous. He had an enormous amount of supervision and assistance, first and foremost from Deng Xiaoping, the Chief of the PLA General Staff Department and Vice Chairman of the CCP Military Affairs Commission. Deng controlled every aspect of PLA operations on all fronts,<sup>24</sup> and according to Ruan Ming he believed the Vietnam invasion would go as quickly and as smoothly as had Chinese attacks in the past.<sup>25</sup> During the Civil War, Deng had served as the political commissar of Liu Bocheng's Second Field Army, when he had participated in battles in central China that truly had been "battles of quick decision." Serving in senior party and government posts in the 1950s and 1960s, he again had watched the PLA conduct quick, decisive campaigns: during the 1962 conflict with India. For example, the Chinese had conducted two separate attacks, each of a few days' duration, in the Northeastern Frontier Agency and on each occasion had penetrated about 100 kilometers into the Indian territory.<sup>26</sup> Deng additionally could not fail to note the speed with which foreign armies had conducted recent campaigns. In 1945, the Soviet army had rapidly defeated the Japanese in Manchuria in a decisive campaign that lasted from August 9 to 16, 1945.<sup>27</sup> The 1973 Arab-Israeli war had seen Israeli armies making thirty- and forty-kilometer gains in a day; the North Vietnamese had conquered South Vietnam in less than sixty days; and, most recently, the contentious Vietnamese offensive in Cambodia had achieved its objectives with just a few days of fighting. Deng Xiaoping was aware of the many problems that faced the PLA, but he clearly felt that a rapid, decisive attack on Vietnam remained within the capabilities of the Chinese armed forces.

Deng's oversight of operations may have been welcome. In many ways, Xu needed all the help he could get. His command included two major areas of operations, Lang Son and Cao Bang, and in the Cao Bang area alone, he probably had five armies or major elements of armies in action, drawn from two or three separate military regions. Only a little more than a third of the Chinese forces that were to invade Vietnam from their assembly areas in Guangxi belonged permanently in Xu's Guangzhou Military Region. Additionally, if the war lasted longer than a week, the soldiers would need to be resupplied – and the resupply of a huge, heterogeneous force is a complex problem for any army.<sup>28</sup>

Xu's counterpart on the Vietnamese side was the much younger Nguyen Duy Thuong. Thuong had fought in South Vietnam in the early 1960s, but his first engagement of note did not come until 1969, when he served as Deputy Commander of the 12th Regiment of the 3rd Division in fighting against South Korean troops in Binh Dinh province. Thuong came to command the 12th Regiment, and during the North Vietnamese offensive in early 1972 he had led the regiment in an attack that blocked National Highway 19, isolating South Vietnamese forces fighting in the Central Highlands. In 1975, Thuong was promoted to Chief of Staff of the 3rd Division, from which position he led the division's attacks along National Route 1 that led to the fall of the Saigon government. When the Second Indochina War ended in 1975, he commanded the 3rd during its service as a garrison division in southern Vietnam. By February 1979, Thuong had more than ten years of combat experience with the 3rd Division.

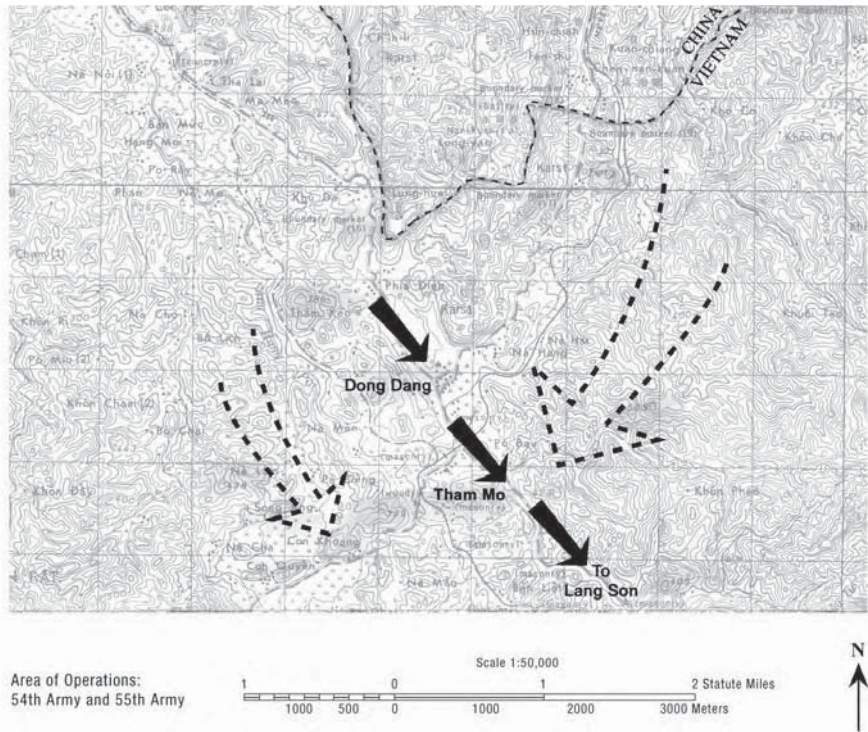
Like Xu, Thuong undoubtedly received advice and supervision. In 1979, Vietnam's most celebrated general, Vo Nguyen Giap, was in the last year of his service as the Minister of Defense. The Chief of the PAVN General Staff Department was Van Tien Dung, the architect of "The Great Spring Victory" that had decisively ended the Second Indochina War, and Chu Huy Man, an important leader in the final offensive of the war against the Saigon government, was chief of the General Political Department. Both Dung and Man visited the 3rd Division in late 1978, and while there is no record of any high-level meetings they may have held, it is almost certain that their visits were more than simply morale builders for the troops.<sup>29</sup> Thuong nonetheless had a good record as a field commander, and the Hanoi generals seemed content to let him make his own decisions.

The plan for the Vietnamese defense was simple. The 3rd Division's 12th Regiment would defend the area north of Lang Son and stop the Chinese advance from Friendship Pass along Highway 4A. The 141st Regiment would defend the eastern and southeastern approaches to the city. In Lang Son itself, the 2nd Regiment was held as the divisional reserve, supported by the 68th Artillery Regiment. The division was additionally supported in Lang Son by elements of the First Military Region's 166th Artillery Regiment and the 272nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment, by three local force battalions, and by a few militia.<sup>30</sup> The only organized militia operations in the Lang Son area otherwise were in the vicinity of Loc Binh and in Mau Son and Long Dau, along what was to be the Chinese 128th Division's line of march.<sup>31</sup>

### **The attack from the north**

At 05:00 on February 17, while morning mist still covered the hills and streams along the border, the first Chinese artillery shells fell in the Lang Son area (Maps 10 and 11). Overnight, the Chinese had infiltrated the border, cutting telephone lines and sabotaging important buildings in Dong Dang. Sometime before midnight, Lao Majiu, a member of the 165th Division's Reconnaissance Company, had become perhaps the first Chinese soldier to die in the battle of



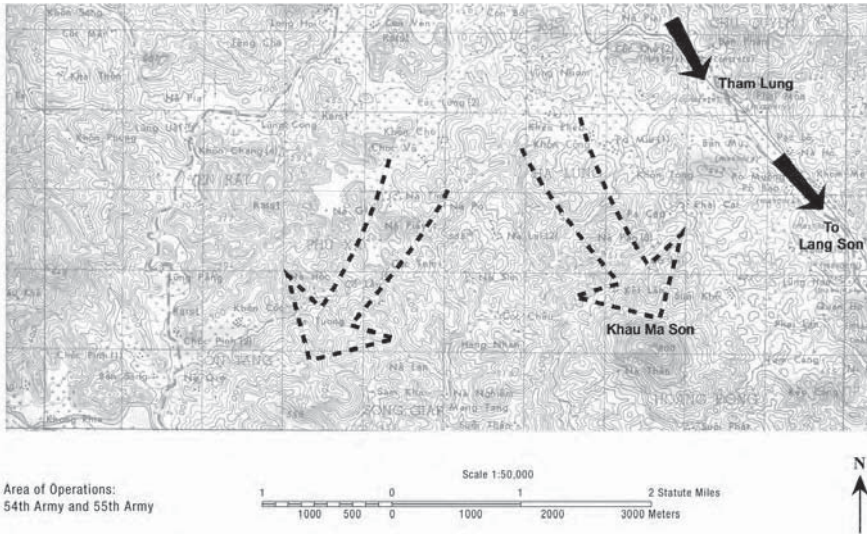


Map 10 The northern approach to Lang Son: the Dong Dang–Tham Mo area (1979).

Lang Son.<sup>32</sup> Now, as the Vietnamese returned the Chinese artillery fire, the battle began in earnest.

The first objective of the Chinese 55th Army was Hill 386, about 1.5 kilometers south of border Marker 16. The PAVN soldiers defending the hill said that they “were surprised to see rank after rank of enemy troops surging toward their positions like a swarm of ants.” The Chinese soldiers poured across the flat open area between border marker 16 and the defenders on the hill “like a massive flood,” shouting “Da, da!” (“Hit, hit!”) as they ran. The sound of bugles and sirens accompanied the charge. This human wave swept toward the Vietnamese defenders and crashed over their defensive positions. Resistance on Hill 386 ended quickly, with 118 Vietnamese killed. The survivors faded away south to more defensible terrain.<sup>33</sup>

The Vietnamese continued to hold out in isolated pockets near Friendship Pass and in the town of Dong Dang, but the bulk of the Vietnamese force had dug in further south, along a series of low hills that crosses the valley about three kilometers south of Friendship Pass and 1 kilometer south of Dong Dang. At the center of this line lay Tham Mo hamlet, on a low hill a few hundred meters south of the intersection of Highways 4A and 1B and the railroad tracks



Map 11 The northern approach to Lang Son: the Tham Lung–Khau Ma Son area (1979).

that run from Lang Son in Vietnam to Nanning, in China. One kilometer to the east of Tham Mo is Hill 423 and beyond that the commanding hill in the east, Hill 505. About 750 meters to the west of Tham Mo, across a gap through which run Highway 1B and the railroad, is Hill 339. A long, low spur runs off to the northwest from Hill 339 for about 1,000 meters, affording a commanding view of the low-lying land before Tham Mo and across Dang Dong. A further 1,000 meters to the west of Hill 339 is Hill 438, and beyond that is a forbidding series of steep hills intersected by narrow trails and box canyons. The Vietnamese 12th Regiment had set up its headquarters on Hill 438. The Tham Mo line was not a perfect defensive position, but it was very close.

After taking Hill 386, the Chinese moved against the Tham Mo line, several battalions of the 165th Division testing the Tham Mo fortifications, while soldiers of the 164th Division attacked the French Fort, a collection of stone structures on Tham Mo Hill and Hill 339. In the same way that they had assaulted Hill 386, the PLA troops raced up the slopes in waves. This time they were supported also by tanks, arriving in small groups of two or three from the north on Highway 4A.

The Chinese soldiers were repulsed with heavy losses and responded by attempting two envelopment maneuvers. To the east, an ambitious move to cut around behind the Vietnamese line was already underway, in the form of the wide hook toward the village of Tham Lung.<sup>34</sup> Unit 33980 of the 54th Army had been charged with crossing the ten or twelve kilometers of sawtooth hills to seize Tham Lung.<sup>35</sup> The second attempt involved a strike at the hamlet of Con Khoang, in the rear of Hill 339, and was altogether less imaginative, requiring as



it did that the attacking force drive between Hill 438 and Hill 339. If Con Khoang could be taken, however, the Chinese would be able to assault each hill in the line in sequence with an attack from three sides.

The Vietnamese spotted the Chinese enveloping force.<sup>36</sup> Regimental Commander Nguyen Xuan Khanh and Regimental Political Commissar Dong Si Tai ordered the last uncommitted company on Hill 339, the 3rd Company of the 6th Battalion (63rd Company) to move to Con Khoang to stop the envelopment. When the 63rd attacked, at around 09:00, it caught the Chinese in the open in low ground and rice fields. Although fighting at odds of four and five to one, the Vietnamese had the advantage of cover and drove the Chinese soldiers back toward a Vietnamese platoon that had moved into a blocking position astride their route of retreat. The outcome was devastating. According to the Vietnamese, a Chinese prisoner later admitted that “on 17 February one of our battalions was almost completely annihilated at the foot of Hill 438.”<sup>37</sup>

The battle along the Tham Mo line continued until 20:00 on February 22, with the Chinese fighting ferociously to break through. The Vietnamese 3rd Division history reports, “Each day they [the Chinese] launched seven to ten separate assaults, sometimes using almost an entire division to attack positions held by less than two battalions of our troops. . . . When we crushed one of their regiments they simply sent in a new regiment to take its place.”<sup>38</sup> Every available soldier was thrown into the attack. Although the Chinese militia usually performed transportation or police roles in rear areas, in the battle on the Tham Mo line, they found themselves in the center of the action. In just one example, militia deputy platoon leader Lu Tiangui found himself leading combined patrols of 55th Army soldiers and militiamen on Hill 339.<sup>39</sup>

Enemy gunfire was not the only trial for the Chinese soldiers in the line. Less than one week into the campaign, when fighting north of Lang Son was at its most fierce, Chinese units began to report shortages of food and water. Unit 53514, a 55th Army unit engaged in the attack on Hill 339, reported that its higher unit had not sent food for several days and that its soldiers had not eaten in two.<sup>40</sup> Unit 53515, another 55th Army unit, also reported a food and water shortage. Cadres acted “heroically” to ensure that the troops and the wounded got the last scraps of food and the few drops of water that remained, but the Chinese supply line, despite extending just four or five kilometers into Vietnam and less than thirty kilometers from the railhead at Pingxiang (VN: *Bang Tuong*), had failed.<sup>41</sup>

The resilience of the Vietnamese defenders forced a change of tactics upon the Chinese, and on February 22, these bore fruit when the 163rd Division, the 55th Army’s reserve division, finally broke through the Tham Mo line. The Deputy Divisional Commander, Song Baoshun, and Deputy Divisional Political Commissar, Li Shengfu, conceded that massed frontal attacks were failing and directed their units to instead make small-unit assaults around the flanks of the Vietnamese positions.<sup>42</sup> The Vietnamese immediately noticed the change, remarking that the Chinese had “lost their enthusiasm” for large group assaults.<sup>43</sup>

The new Chinese tactics were not universally applied, however. To the rear

of the Tham Mo line, the Chinese units attacking Tham Lung persisted with the massed infantry attacks. The enveloping Chinese force had arrived near Tham Lung late on February 17 and from positions on Hill 409 immediately attacked several hills near the hamlet. On February 18, a Vietnamese counterattack by the 3rd Division's reserve regiment, the 2nd Infantry Regiment, pushed the Chinese back to their assembly areas on Hill 409, Hill 611, and Hill 675, thus setting the pattern for the next few days. Artillery fire from both sides continued at all hours.

The Vietnamese, however, were able to strengthen their positions by reinforcing a pair of tiny settlements, Ban Phan and Phai Mon, to the immediate north and east of Tham Lung. They also emplaced a battery of rapid-fire eighty-five-millimeter guns on Hill 417, in an elevated position a little more than 1,000 meters south of the hamlet. On February 23, the Chinese tried to seize Phai Mon, with initial disastrous results: hundreds of PLA soldiers troops were sent forward in six waves, and every attack failed. After twelve more attacks during the course of the day, Tham Lung and the surrounding hills fell, but the Chinese losses were appalling.<sup>44</sup> According to a Vietnamese intercept of Chinese communications traffic on the evening of February 23, more than 1,000 Chinese soldiers died that day in the Tham Lung attacks.<sup>45</sup>

For the next three days, from February 24 to 26, there was little combat in the Lang Son area. Despite the breaking of the Tham Mo line, Vietnamese 3rd Division troops continued to hold out in pockets in Dong Dang and the hills around Highway 4A, launching harassing attacks on the Chinese line of communications. The invading Chinese forces were obliged to hold back and seek them out, but in the meantime they also regrouped. The 160th Division and 161st Division of the 54th Army appear to have moved up to lead the attacks, with the 55th Army prepared to move against Lang Son. The Vietnamese withdrew those of their troops that could be disengaged and set up a new defensive line from Coc Chu to Hill 417, on the western side of Highway 4A at Tham Lung.<sup>46</sup> The defenders on this line were charged with limiting Chinese egress from Tham Lung and ensuring that the highway remained closed.

At 06:05 on February 27, the Chinese assaults resumed. Fighting during the early part of the day was tentative and inconclusive, as the Chinese sought to assimilate the change from massed attack columns to small assault groups, but at 14:00, the Chinese found a weakness in the Vietnamese defenses. Whether by luck or through skill and a formidable resolve, a Chinese unit, probably Unit 53503,<sup>47</sup> broke through the Vietnamese lines and seized Khau Ma Son (CH: *Koumashan*), a vital 800-meter peak about four kilometers west-northwest of Lang Son. From Khau Ma Son, almost all the key road junctions near the city can be observed and interdicted. The peak also overlooked the Vietnamese 12th Regiment's defensive line from Coc Chu to Hill 417, about five kilometers to the northeast, and its defensive positions near Choc Vo, about five kilometers to the northwest.

The seizure of Khau Ma Son put Chinese infantry behind the Vietnamese main line of defense, and a mere three kilometers from Highway 4A. If the

Chinese had acted quickly, they could have marched down the slopes from Khau Ma Son, cut the highway, and left the 12th Regiment stranded behind Chinese lines. Lang Son would have lain open to assault. But it was the Vietnamese who reacted first. The 3rd Division commander moved troops from the Coc Chu–Hill 417 line, which was now exposed and of no tactical value, to a new set of positions that linked Quan Ha and Keo Cang. The new positions once again blocked Chinese access to the highway.<sup>48</sup>

The Vietnamese commanders were also reconfiguring their forces elsewhere on the Lang Son Front. On February 28, the 42nd Regiment of the 327th Division was moved up into the line. The 327th had until this time been held in reserve near Chi Lang, south of Lang Son, to contain any possible Chinese breakthrough. The 42nd deployed around the district of Ky Lua, about one kilometer north of Lang Son City and five kilometers from its center, to defend against the approaching forces of the Chinese 43rd Army that was by now approaching from Ban Xam and Luc Quyen. Dug in around Ky Lua, the 42nd also supported the badly weakened 12th Regiment in its defensive positions on the Quan Ha–Keo Cang line, about two kilometers further north.<sup>49</sup>

This reconfiguration of the Vietnamese defenders left only the 3rd Division and the freshly installed 42nd Regiment to protect Lang Son. All other Vietnamese units on the Lang Son Front were now positioned below and to the west of the Ky Cung River, the waterway that wraps around the city to its south. The 1st Corps, comprising the 308th, 312th, and 320B Divisions, was assembled along Highway 1A, on the road to Hanoi.<sup>50</sup> To the rear of the 1st Corps, PAVN units in Hanoi were placed on alert and the people of Hanoi set to building fortifications along the Cau River and in the Tam Dao hills. The Vietnamese leaders had not lost sight of their strategic goal: defend Hanoi.

From February 28 to March 4, the two sides fought a series of ferocious battles as the Chinese tried to break through to Lang Son. After the fall of Khau Ma Son, the battle along the Dong Dang–Lang Son axis broke down into a series of seemingly disconnected fights, but it did not get easier for the Chinese. Although the 12th Vietnamese Regiment was by now greatly reduced in strength, it continued to actively contest the hills along Highway 1B: one battalion ambushed a Chinese unit on the highway on March 2, and other battalions and companies fought on for Hill 607 and Hill 649.<sup>51</sup> Further west, in what would prove to be the deepest point of Chinese penetration in the battle, PLA troops near Ban Lan continued to face tactical and logistical problems. Defending an unidentified hill against repeated Vietnamese attacks, one company of Unit 56037 lost one-third of its men over the period March 2–10. The Chinese soldiers were moreover fighting without support, as the company's parent unit had stopped sending food to its beleaguered troops. The company quartermaster had to resort to making a round trip of ten kilometers, twice a day, to bring in the 25–30 kilograms of supplies that kept his men fed.<sup>52</sup>

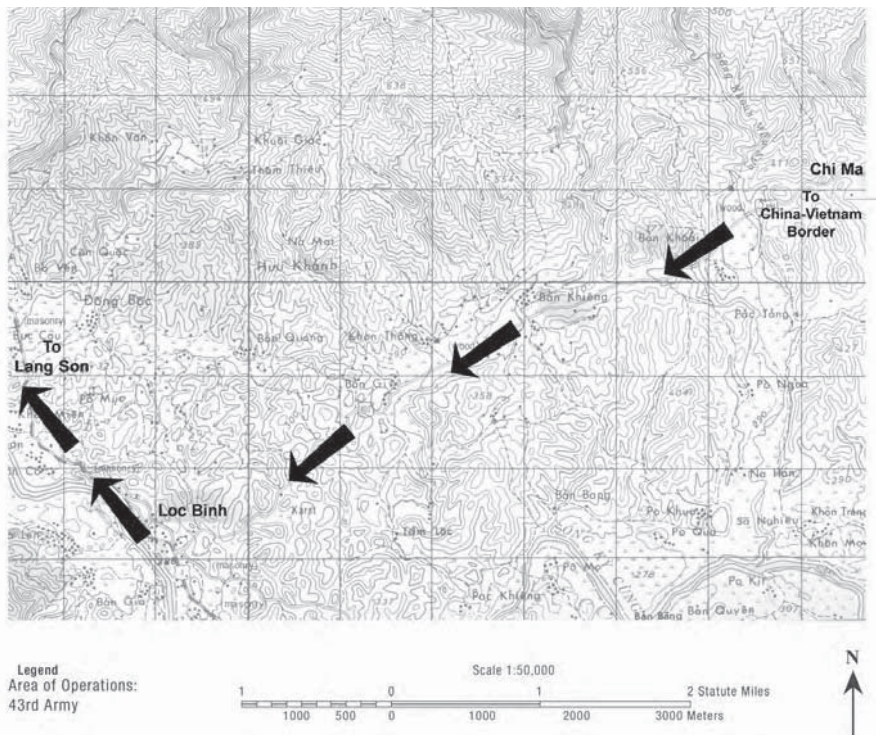
On March 2, the General Staff in Hanoi reconfigured the defending units in the Lang Son region into the 5th Corps and ordered the 3rd Division to abandon the defense of the city. The battered 3rd was made the corps reserve and on

March 4 was instructed to reorganize for future operations. The 12th Regiment, however, which remained cut off from its parent unit, was ordered to hold its position in the hills along Highway 1B.<sup>53</sup> Few details are known of the fate of the 42nd Regiment in Ky Lua, but it may be presumed that it had been instructed to withdraw from Lang Son at the same time as the 3rd Division.<sup>54</sup>

### The attack from the south

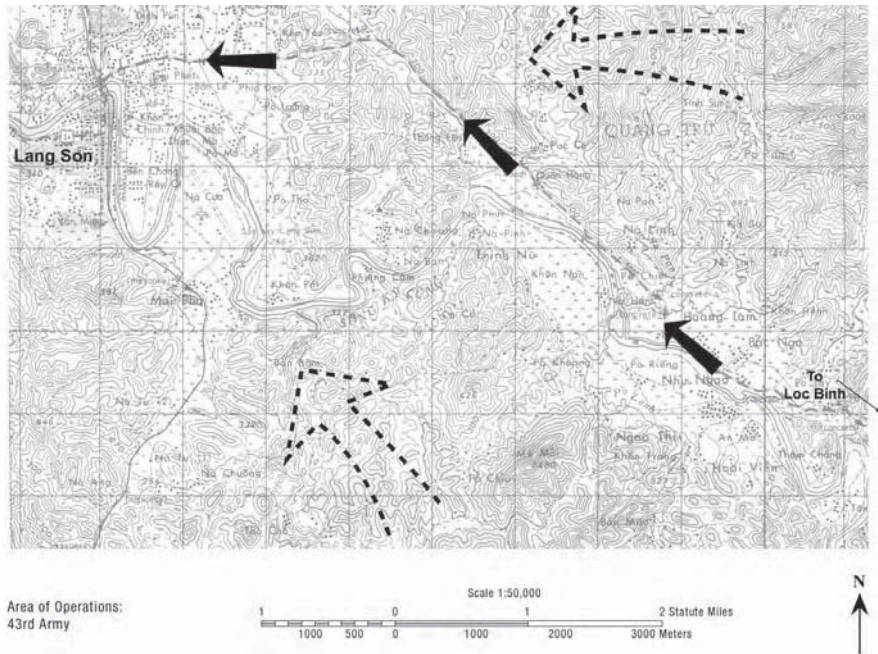
Attacking from the south and east of Lang Son, the Chinese 43rd Army traversed a greater distance to the same objective than did the 55th and 54th, but its experiences in the two and a half weeks after February 17 were otherwise all too similar (Maps 12 and 13). The 43rd had two routes into Lang Son from the border; straddled across these and with almost limitless opportunities for ambush waited the Vietnamese 141st Regiment.<sup>55</sup>

Moving west on the northernmost of the two routes, a fair-weather, loose surface road that ran from border markers 32 and 33 to Highway 4A in Ky Lua, the Chinese 129th Division immediately ran into trouble. By February 27, it had been fought to such a crawl by the 141st Regiment that it had progressed only five kilometers to Ban Xam. By March 2, and having committed its last reserves,



Map 12 The southern approach to Lang Son: the Chi Ma–Loc Binh area (1979).





Map 13 The southern approach to Lang Son: the Loc Binh–Lang Son area (1979).

the 129th arrived in the Ky Lua district of Lang Son, but too late to influence the battle. The Vietnamese had already begun shifting the 3rd Division out of the city.<sup>56</sup>

On the southern approach to Lang Son, the 127th Division and 128th Division crossed the border at Chi Ma (CH: *Zhi Ma*), pushing ten kilometers along a fair-weather road to the small town of Loc Binh (CH: *Lu Ping*).<sup>57</sup> As was the experience of the 129th Division, progress was slow: Loc Binh fell only on February 28, after eleven days of fighting. Lang Son still lay twenty-two kilometers away, north on Highway 4B.<sup>58</sup> Vietnamese resistance remained strong, but it was imperative for the Chinese units that they increase the tempo of their advance, and they sought to do so with persistent massed, frontal attacks. They attacked in such tight bodies of soldiers that as one man fell another would immediately appear in his place (*qian pu hou ji*).<sup>59</sup>

The Chinese advance crossed the Ky Cung River at Phieng Phuc (CH: *Pianfu*), following a line through the hills to the west of Highway 4B. The Vietnamese defenses on Me Mai hill (CH: *Mimaishan*) eventually succumbed to the Chinese offensive; Mai Pho airfield and Hill 391, to the southeast of Lang Son, fell on the night of March 4; and the two divisions entered the city on March 5.<sup>60</sup> The Vietnamese defenders had begun their withdrawal three days previously.



The resistance of the badly outnumbered Vietnamese on the approach to Lang Son had been so effective and Chinese losses so great that the PLA had been compelled to make early reinforcement of its front-line units. Among the units unexpectedly thrown into the battle were the cadets of the Guangzhou Military Region Infantry School (*guangzhou junqu bubing xuexiao*), who joined the 43rd Army near Loc Binh and fought on to Lang Son.<sup>61</sup> The soldiers from the school made at least one notable contribution to the operation.

Artillery instructors Zhang Shulin and Shi Ling noticed that artillery support of the Chinese infantry was poor. The PLA artillerymen fired their guns with little awareness of the exact location of their targets. Their fire direction on occasion was simply based on observation of where the infantry appeared to be shooting. At other times, they would simply lay down a general barrage, in one example recorded as 250 rounds in seven minutes,<sup>62</sup> and would then cease firing. Sufficient defenders invariably survived these barrages for the Vietnamese to resume their defense almost undiminished. The PLA furthermore had little understanding of how best to deploy its artillery on the battlefield. Artillery is least effective when fired at close range without the use of sights and without proper target selection, yet the Chinese gunners, citing Mao's enthusiasm for "exterminating the enemy at close range" (*jin zhan jian di*), commonly would push their guns to within 150–200 meters of the Vietnamese.<sup>63</sup> Not only did this limit the accuracy of the gunners, but it also put them within easy range of the small arms fire of their targets. In its enthusiasm for Mao's military principles, the PLA had reduced the effectiveness of its artillery to that of Napoleon's artillery 160 years earlier. Zhang and Shi, from their vantage point in the front lines of the Chinese assault, showed the gunners how to calculate firing data and thus, in the later stages of the battle for Lang Son, to provide precision support to the hard-pressed infantry.<sup>64</sup>

## **The Vietnamese defense**

The February 28 deployment of the Vietnamese 42nd Regiment to the defense of Ky Lua marked a significant development in the defense of Lang Son. It was evidence that the Vietnamese had begun to build a defense in depth between Lang Son and Hanoi; it was also the first deployment of a reserve Vietnamese unit, foretelling the arrival of new divisions in the areas south and west of Lang Son.

The Ministry of Defense in Hanoi, having reassessed the Chinese threat, began to review its defense. On March 2, it established the 5th Corps in Military Region One, pulling together under a single umbrella the 3rd, 327th, 337th, 338th, and the 347th divisions.<sup>65</sup> On the same day, it ordered the 3rd Division to abandon the defense of Lang Son and to fall back as the corps reserve. Two days later, the new corps headquarters ordered the 3rd Division to begin reorganizing itself for future operations.

Rather than throw additional divisions into the battle for Lang Son City, the leadership in Hanoi clearly had decided to limit the Chinese penetration

into the city. Lang Son was sacrificed to the PLA in return for the opportunity to build a much stronger defense, using fresh divisions, to the south and west of the Ky Cung River. As part of this defense, the remainder of the 327th Division was moved to the area south of Lang Son, and the 337th Division was ordered to set up defensive positions south of the Ky Cung River near the Khanh Khe Bridge.<sup>66</sup>

The fresh divisions also deployed in defensive positions along Highway 1A in the vicinity of Dong Mo, 37 kilometers south of Lang Son. Steep mountains border the highway at this point as it passes through a valley about four kilometers long and up to one kilometer wide. Dong Mo is the modern name for Chi Lang, which in 981, 1076, and 1427 had proven its worth as a defensive position. Three invading Chinese armies had already been ambushed in Chi Lang, and there was every reason for the Vietnamese to believe that a fourth could fall to ambush in 1979.<sup>67</sup> Finally, further south, the 308th Division of the 1st Corps took position south of the Cau River, along the Nhu Nguyet line.<sup>68</sup>

### **The lessons of Lang Son**

For the Chinese, Friendship Pass has become a “bitter” name. Although the PLA had a ten-to-one advantage in numbers of troops and had comparable weaponry to the PAVN, and although it had established an extraordinary ability to fight “battles of quick decision,”<sup>69</sup> it had failed to fight an effective and efficient campaign. It was ineffective because its tactics did not translate into rapid advances, and it was inefficient because it lost large numbers of troops to attain small gains.

At the root of the PLA’s inefficiency was the inefficiency of the subsystems of the PLA “machine.” The artillery doctrine of the PLA was stuck in the age of centralized area targeting, denying the infantry precision artillery support and wasting ammunition in barrages against dispersed Vietnamese fortifications. The logistics system was a failure: in the PLA’s most important battle for more than twenty-five years, its troops were within days of crossing the border short of food, water, and clothing. And the personnel system was flawed: restaffing depleted troop units with militiamen or cadets, regardless of the quality of the individual, was a sign of a broken system.

The political system, in contrast, worked well. The assaults on the Tham Mo line and on Tham Lung demonstrated the effectiveness of the cadres in motivating their soldiers, who repeatedly would pour forward in human waves (CH: *ren hai zhan shu*; VN: *chien luoc bien nguoi*) against resolute and equally committed Vietnamese defenders. Despite the evidence to the contrary, the Chinese troops continued to believe that their massed attacks could overcome any odds. It is the final irony of the battle of Lang Son that this Maoist indoctrination of the Chinese soldier – the key to motivating him – was also the root cause of battlefield inefficiency and ineffectiveness. When the political system worked, the PLA did not.