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Comments

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The Battle of An Loc. By James H. Willbanks. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. 226 pages. \$29.95. **Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Gregory A. Daddis**, author of *Fighting in the Great Crusade* and Instructor, Department of History, US Military Academy.

Despite the devastation and anxiety generated by the three-month struggle for An Loc during the 1972 Easter Offensive, a sense of satisfaction pervades James H. Willbanks' account of what one historian has called "the single most important battle" in the Vietnam War. After the Americans had endured years of frustration in attempting to identify and destroy an elusive enemy, the North Vietnamese Nguyen-Hue Campaign finally provided American military leaders an opportunity to bring their superior firepower and technology to bear in a conventional operation. As one US advisor assigned to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) airborne brigade noted, this was "the war we came to fight."

The realization of battle under "normal" rules did little, though, to further US goals of fostering a more stable government of South Vietnam, and a careful reading of *The Battle of An Loc* warns that while battles may be necessary in war, they are not always sufficient in attaining political objectives. While the fighting in Binh Long province may have saved Saigon from North Vietnamese occupation in 1972, it nevertheless did little to wean uneven ARVN forces from their reliance on US support. More important, as Willbanks properly argues, the "Nixon administration used the South Vietnamese victory at An Loc to declare the President's Vietnamization policy a success," thus providing clear evidence that the United States could fully disengage from Vietnam.

These strategic-level conclusions are well balanced by a tactical and operational overview of General Vo Nguyen Giap's 1972 campaign to destroy ARVN forces, occupy key South Vietnamese cities, and discredit Nixon's Vietnamization and pacification programs. Willbanks, a faculty member of the US Army Command and General Staff College and an advisor during the battle of An Loc, brings a wealth of historical and personal experience to a narrative written in clear prose. Detailing Giap's planning assumptions for an invasion that would include the equivalent of 20 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infantry divisions, the author illustrates

how American forces were well on their way to drawing-down in Vietnam at the same time Giap was preparing for his Easter Offensive. A core group of American advisors, the “glue that kept . . . [the ARVN] together,” and US airpower would be the difference in checking the three NVA divisions assigned to take An Loc.

Throughout April and May, the NVA would launch three separate attacks with hopes of seizing a base for subsequent operations against Saigon. Willbanks makes clear the unparalleled intensity of fighting that leveled An Loc and surprised even the most experienced of American advisors. The angst is palpable as the author describes the confusion created by NVA and ARVN forces being “so closely intertwined; from the air, the pilots had a difficult time separating friend from foe.” Tactical air support from US Air Force F-4s, AC-130s, A-37s and B-52s, as well as Army Cobra attack helicopters, proved indispensable in blunting NVA attacks.

Readers should be cautious about drawing lessons from Willbanks’ reverential discourse on airpower in Vietnam, however. While he rightly asserts that air support “provided the difference between victory and defeat” during the battle for An Loc, airpower did little to assist in the pacification effort or to disrupt support for the insurgency throughout Vietnam. This is not a book to be used in maintaining an argument that American airpower, properly employed, would have won the war.

No less significant than airpower was the role of American advisors, whose mere presence, according to Willbanks, “was the embodiment of the US commitment to stand by the South Vietnamese in time of dire peril.” US officers are depicted as frustrated professionals counseling apprehensive ARVN commanders and staffs with “very little training or experience in handling operations as complex as those demanded by the NVA onslaught.” Here readers may be unhappy with the author’s tendency to stereotype combatants along national lines. While US advisors are without exception calm and cool under the pressures of direct combat, their Vietnamese charges are often portrayed as little more than impediments to an efficient prosecution of battle. Vietnamese Air Force pilots are depicted as undependable and reluctant fliers, while US airmen bravely defy the nine battalions of North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire that eventually surrounded An Loc. Only occasionally does Willbanks refer to the competence of the ARVN soldier.

There is timely perspective to be gained here for those currently attempting to build armed forces capable of confronting national security problems without direct assistance from the United States. Patience and resolve, all while guarding against American hubris, are essential aspects of working with allies who may be judged as less able. Building armies is not a task that is quickly accomplished, especially when cultural and language barriers exist between American advisors and the units to which they are assigned. Of note, one of the US advisors who played a leading role in repelling the NVA onslaught in the early stages of the An Loc battle was a young captain with extensive knowledge of the Vietnamese language.

Much more than presenting just a personal account of battle, James Willbanks has succeeded in offering an insightful version of what General Ngo Quang Truong called “the longest and bloodiest siege of the war.” For those readers aiming to gain a better appreciation for the final stages of American military involvement in Vietnam or for those seeking to better understand the difficulties in prosecuting coalition warfare, reading *The Battle of An Loc* would certainly be time well spent.