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Invasion of Laos, 1971: Lam Son 719

Robert D. Sander

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In 1971, while U.S. ground forces were prohibited from crossing the Laotian border, a South Vietnamese Army corps, with U.S. air support, launched the largest airmobile operation in the history of warfare, Lam Son 719. The objective: to sever the North Vietnamese Army's main logistical artery, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, at its hub, Tchepone in Laos, an operation that, according to General Creighton Abrams, could have been the decisive battle of the war, hastening the withdrawal of U.S. forces and ensuring the survival of South Vietnam. The outcome: defeat of the South Vietnamese Army and heavy losses of U.S. helicopters and aircrews, but a successful preemptive strike that met President Nixon's near-term political objectives.

Author Robert Sander, a helicopter pilot in Lam Son 719, explores why an operation of such importance failed. Drawing on archives and interviews, and firsthand testimony and reports, Sander chronicles not only the planning and execution of the operation but also the maneuvers of the bastions of political and military power during the ten-year effort to end Communist infiltration of South Vietnam leading up to Lam Son 719. The result is a picture from disparate perspectives: the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations; the South Vietnamese government led by President Nguyen Van Thieu; and senior U.S. military commanders and army aviators.

Sander's conclusion is at once powerful and persuasively clear. Lam Son 719 was doomed in both the planning and execution—a casualty of domestic and international politics, flawed assumptions, incompetent execution, and the resolve of the North Vietnamese Army. A powerful work of military and political history, this book offers eloquent testimony that "failure, like success, cannot be measured in absolute terms."

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