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General Do Cao Tri

Letter from Saigon (March 4, 1971)

THE DEATH OF A HERO

Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri, one of South Vietnam's top military commanders and hero of the Cambodian campaign, is dead.

In the truest tradition of Asian military behavior, which wants soldiers to "die buried in the hide of their horses," Gen. Tri gave his life to the nation last Tuesday morning. He was killed while aboard a helicopter to join some of the 20,000 men busy hunting for the Communist high command, suspected to be headquartered in the Northeastern Cambodian province of Kratie.

But in death as well as in life, Gen. Tri always showed something unique that distinguishes him from his contemporaries and makes him the center of quite a few controversies. To an aide he found writing a letter just before the fatal crash, Tri reportedly said: "Writing home? What's the use? In wartime, if you don't return home, your family must assume you to be dead."

Hardly an hour later, Gen. Tri left the world of men without a word to his wife and children. He was 42 years old.

FIGHTING ALL HIS LIFE: Born in 1929 of well-to-do parents, Tri had a happy childhood and an equally carefree adolescence. He went to the best schools, frequented the best families, and seemed destined for a life of ease in the bourgeois world of Saigon.

With his good look and easy manners, Tri could have been perfectly happy if he had only gone after pre-war criteria of happiness: a cosy house, a pretty wife, and a bunch of intelligent children (nha giao, vo dep, con khon). Quite a few of his friends have just sought these and they are still quite numerous in Saigon, vaunting how clever they have been all their lives.

But Tri's character and the important events that were to shake Vietnam out of the lethargical peace of the forties precluded such a conception of life. In his late teens by the end of World War II, Tri was faced with the task of selecting a career. He chose the Army by entering the Military School of Nuoc Ngot at the age of 19 and had been a soldier ever since.

The First Indochina War brought Tri around the embattled peninsula, where he made himself a name by taking part in the most difficult actions. "Un vrai baroudeur", old time associates have often described him.

YOUNGEST GENERAL: Tri's feats in the late forties and early fifties were little more than those of a young daredevil, however. Probably he did not fully realize what he was doing and whether it would prepare him for what he would want to do in his later years.

But the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and the period of intense internal troubles that followed were to bring Tri to political maturity. A young colonel at the time, he was given by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem, the task of spearheading an attack on the Binh Xuyen, a piratic organization of considerable military strength, which had control over most of Saigon.

Col. Tri and his men in the Airborne Brigade did a splendid job. Within a few weeks, they reduced the French-backed Binh Xuyen to a headless serpent. Normalcy was restored in Saigon, where Diem soon proclaimed a republican form of government with himself at the helm. To recompense Tri, President Diem made him a two-star general and an adviser on military affairs.

As peace gradually came back with the defeat of the religious sects,¹ Gen. Tri appeared to be contented with his position. The youngest general officer in the Army, Tri diverted his attention to other fields.

DON JUAN: Bad and not so bad tongues have it that Tri was at a loss on what to do in the relative peace of the late fifties. They also say that the youthful general took a growing interest on "speaking flowers" and soon gained the reputation of an irresistible Don Juan.

In his lifetime, Gen. Tri never went on the record to deny this. Whatever the truth may be, Tri went out of favor with the rigidly moralistic Diem for a few years until the late President sensed a growing military threat from North Vietnam.

Gen. Tri was then sent to the Northern provinces to face the Northern threat. Close friends of the general were to disclose that Tri, while keeping some Hue young ladies busy, still found time to prevent the many agents dispatched by Hanoi from fomenting troubles in the First Military Region, which stayed relatively quiet until early 1964.

Diem's death in 1963 marked the starting point of five years of tribulation for the late President's favorite general. Ousted from power in 1964, Tri was held virtually a prisoner in Dalat and, then, sent into exile.

EXILE AND COMEBACK: The man who sent Tri into exile soon was to be thrown out of the country himself. But Gen. Tri had to live in utter poverty for two years in Hong Kong before good luck once more smiles at him.

Reputedly a personal friend of General Nguyen Van Thieu, who became in mid-1965 Chairman of the National Leadership Committee or Chief of State, Tri was soon dispatched to Seoul, Korea, as South Vietnamese ambassador and minister plenipotentiary. It was the beginning of a dramatic comeback and the start of a new career cut short by Tuesday's aircrash.

In his ambassadorial days, Gen. Tri reportedly spent most of his time studying Communist strategies and tactics and devising counter moves for them. He was given the opportunity to put his ideas into practice in mid-1968, when a fatal misfiring

I - In 1954, when the Geneva Agreements were concluded which divided Vietnam into two, South Vietnam nominally came under former Emperor Bao Dai. But the country was divided into a dozen fiefs under the control of local warlords, the most important being associated with the Binh Xuyen, the Cao Dai, a religious organization in Eastern Cochinchina, and the Hoa Hao, a Buddhist sect in the western provinces of the Mekong delta.

incident resulted in the resignation of Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, commander of the Third Corps Area.

President Thieu, then, called Tri home, installed the man at the III Corps Bien Hoa headquarters, and reportedly told him to pacify the eleven provinces around Saigon within a year's time.

PATTON OF THE PARROT'S BEAK: Tri did a splendid job. A year after he took over from Gen. Khang, the situation in the Saigon area improved so dramatically that U.S. troops were moved out of this supersensitive area altogether.

Historians will certainly not give all the credit to Tri, tracing probably the beginning of the end of the Viet Cong insurgency to their Tet 1968 attacks, but Tri led his troops from victory to victory until he could assure the Saigon population that they could celebrate their New Year festival in peace in the early days of 1970.

A couple of months later, Tri led his troops in a series of blitzkrieg-like operations throughout southeastern Cambodia, hitting at Communist base areas, routing their defenders, and turning the North Vietnamese hordes hundreds of miles away from the nation's borders. Tri's role in this campaign was to earn him the nickname of "Patton of the Parrot's Beak."

But Tri had not given the full measure of the new man he was. This only came about late last year, when he brought troops under his command to the relief of the Cambodian city of Kompong Cham.

TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE: There, in a military demonstration "worth being recorded in textbooks," as a U.S. general put it, Tri and his troops broke the month-long Communist siege and reopened Route 6 in the direction of Phnom Penh in a week's time.

Early this year, when President Thieu ordered the important Laotian invasion, Gen. Tri was given a more difficult task. To keep the world press from paying too much attention to the northern front, Tri was told to launch a diversionary thrust deep into the heart of Cambodia.

For the first few days, the diversion nearly succeeded in stealing all headlines from the basically much more important Northern push. Within a week or so, Tri destroyed at least two regiments of the crack Ninth NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Division and pushed his troops in the direction of Kratie where the enemy high command was suspected to be headquartered.

According to top military sources in Saigon, Gen. Tri had launched, on the eve of his death, a new operation aimed at dislocating enemy resistance along Route 13, which hopefully will result in resecuring control of the entire Northeast for the Phnom Penh government.

HERO'S DEATH: But fate was not to let Tri fulfill his mission. On an inspection tour last Tuesday, the General lost his life in an aircrash north of Tay Ninh City.

Gen. Tri died quite a few years too early. But like Napoleon Bonaparte and other great military leaders, he did not have to live thirty six thousand days to prove his worth.

South Vietnam has lost a genuine hero. Whoever will have to wear Gen. Tri's boots may find them too big to his own liking.

STEADY ECONOMIC PROGRESS IN VIETNAM

Saigon, February 25. - With security conditions in South Vietnam steadily improving, the U.S. aid effort here is shifting away from war-related programs to increasing emphasis on social and economic development.

That is the recurring theme of the annual economic report issued on Feb. 1 by the U.S. Aid Mission to Vietnam.

While 1970 brought some disappointments -- for example, continuing inflation during the first half of the year with consequent decline in real income for some groups, notably soldiers and civil servants -- the report states that most of the year's goals were achieved or bettered.

The report makes these key points:

- The nation is in transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy, and both the government and AID are directing their efforts toward this end.

- A series of economic and fiscal reform measures now provide a more stable economic base.

The reform package implemented last September and October, unlike the disappointing austerity tax measures of October 1969, succeeded in tightening liquidity, raising the cost of speculation, and dampening black market demand, with all of these things combining to reduce the inflation rate substantially during the year's final months. A 17 percent pay increase to soldiers and civil servants was a modest "first step" toward restoring their purchasing power.

- The government's far-reaching land reform program (Land-to-the-Tiller) demonstrated concern for the condition of the rural citizenry.

The goal of the revolutionary land reform program is to eliminate tenant farming in South Vietnam by turning the tenants into landowners, with transfer of 1 million hectares (2.5 million acres) over a three-year period at no cost to the new owners; the U.S. government is helping to cover the cost of compensating the previous owners. In spite of delay in administrative preparations, the program has reached 20 percent of its goal.

- Rice and protein production are steadily increasing and obstacles to distribution are being overcome.

Agriculture, with most attention riveted on Land-to-the-Tiller, quietly enjoyed an unbroken string of successes ranging from better seeds to record harvests and featuring such factors as crop diversification and improved credit. The swine and fowl populations rose 10 to 15 percent respectively, for the second year in a row. The fish catch went up 10 percent, and favorable security conditions began to attract significant new capital investment in that industry.

- Progress in improving health services, public services, and public administration is steady.

Public utility services, telecommunications, and land, water, and air transportation moved significantly closer to a peacetime basis in 1970, with improvements in planning and management as well as in physical infrastructure. Results in the health field permitted USAID to determinate some projects and reduce personnel in others; focus was on three specific areas: a direct medical care program, improving capability by upgrading administrative practices and increasing the training and number of health personnel, and development of communicable disease prevention and control programs. Expected progress was made in education and training of civil service administrators, in improvement of tax and customs collections, in training personnel and providing equipment required in modern statistical services and data processing, and in improving logistical operations.

- The educational system, with 85 percent of Vietnamese youngsters in school, has nearly reached its quantitative goals, making it possible now to concentrate on improvement of quality.

The authors of the official report admit that, in spite of this progress, the tasks at hand are far from complete.

Economic stabilization continues to be a priority goal, and a broader tax base is required to support the essential government services. This dictates a need to increase productive investment, both domestic and foreign.

The U.S. government will continue to help the Vietnamese government improve its administrative practices and to promote efficiency in government operations.

"The primary goals of USAID," the report concludes, "continue to be those of advising the government and the private sector in making adequate plans for development, and to interest other free world nations in providing needed assistance in the future."

Vietnamese legend

THE GOLDEN AXE
Adapted by George F. Schultz

There was once a very poor man who lived near the forest. He was able to earn enough for a bare existence by cutting firewood, which his wife would barter for rice in the market place.

One day, when this man was cutting wood at the river's edge, the axe slipped from his hands and fell into the water. Although the woodcutter searched for it everywhere, it was not to be found. Discouraged, he sat down on the bank, lowered his head sadly, and wondered how he would be able to earn a living in the future.

When the man raised his eyes again, he saw a little old man standing in front of him. The newcomer asked the woodcutter the reason for his unhappiness. The latter described what had happened and added that the lost axe had been his most valuable possession. Only with it would he be able to earn his daily rice.

"I am the dragon of this river," said the old man sympathetically, "and I am going to help you. If you will wait here for a minute, I will recover your axe for you."

With these words the old man plunged into the water. A few moments later, he reappeared, holding a golden axe in his hand.

"Is this your axe?" he asked.

"No," replied the woodcutter, "that is not mine. My axe was made of iron and had a wooden handle."

The river-dragon plunged into the water again and then emerged holding aloft a silver axe.

"Is this axe yours?" he asked.

Again the honest woodcutter replied in the negative.

The dragon then submerged for a third time. When he reappeared, he was holding a very ordinary iron axe in his hand.

"Is this your axe?" he asked the woodcutter.

"Yes," came the reply, "that is mine, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your assistance."

"You are an honest man," said the river-dragon then. "For that reason, in addition to this iron axe, I am going to give you one of silver and one of gold as well."

It was difficult for the simple woodcutter to find words with which to thank his benefactor. He picked up the three axes and returned to his cottage.

The evidence of all this new wealth soon aroused the speculation of the woodcutter's neighbors. With the exception of one man, however, they all wished him well.

This man was full of envy and was greatly desirous of obtaining for himself a golden or silver axe. From the woodcutter he obtained an exact description of the place on the river bank where the miraculous event had taken place. The greedy man then found an old, rusty axe and went there with it. He threw the iron axe into the water and pretended to be greatly troubled because of its loss.

The little old man appeared before the man and asked the cause of his trouble. Falsely the man described his loss and begged for the old man's assistance.

"You shall receive justice," was the reply. Thereupon, the old man plunged into the river and reappeared with a golden axe in his hand.

Before the dragon even had time to ask the question, the man shouted, "That's my axe. Give it to me at once."

"You are lying," replied the dragon angrily. Raising the axe high in the air, he struck the liar a blow on the neck, killing him instantly.

Since that time, no one has ever tried to obtain a golden axe or even a silver one from the river-dragon's hoard.

Note. This story is probably of Buddhistic inspiration but Confucianists would also approve of its moral: Greed is indicted and punished; honesty is rewarded. It also illustrates Vietnamese belief in the supernatural river-dragon, a generally beneficent creature, who is said to inhabit the depths of every stream and to be able to assume human shape at will.

NEWS IN BRIEF

GENERAL TRI DIED IN HELICOPTER CRASH

Saigon, February 24. - Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, Commander of the 3 Corps and 3 Military Region, died Tuesday morning in a helicopter crash at an area 1 Km from Tay Ninh province capital.

Lt. Gen. Tri was reported flying for on an inspection tour of the Cambodia battlefield.

Four officers who accompanied Lt. Gen. Tri aboard the helicopter and the chopper crew were killed in the crash accept Mr. Francois Sully a correspondent of Newsweek Magazine who was seriously wounded and later died in the hospital.

The remains of Lt. Gen. Tri was laid in state at Tay Ninh military hospital.

Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, Military Governor of Saigon - Gia Dinh concurrently commander of the Capital Special Zone (CSZ) was appointed Tuesday acting Commander of the 3 Corps and 3 Military Region in replacement of Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri.

Sources from the Defense Ministry said Lt. Gen. Minh still cumulates the functions of Saigon-Gia Dinh Military Governor and the CSZ Commander.

U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker expressed his emotion at the death of Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, Commander of the 3 Corps and 3 MR in a helicopter crash at 9:45 a.m. Tuesday in Tay Ninh province.

The statement reads as follows:

All of us who knew Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri were shocked and saddened to learn of his untimely death. He was a courageous officer and a fine person. His dedication and drive were an inspiration to all, Vietnamese and Allies alike, who worked with him.

His loss is a great one to his family, his friends, his country and their allies. I knew General Tri well and I feel a personal loss. My deepest sympathy goes to his wife and family.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF LT. GEN. DO CAO TRI:

Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, a Buddhist follower, was born in November 20, 1929 in Binh Truoc, Bien Hoa province.

He was graduated from the "Do Huu Vi Officer Class in 1947, from the French Auvour Infantry School in 1948, from the Staff and Command course in Hanoi in 1953, from Fort Leavenworth Staff and Command course (U.S.A.) in 1958, and from Fort Risler (U.S.A.) in 1958.

He was married and had 6 children.

Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri assumed the post of Commander of the 3 Corps and 3 MR since August 5, 1968. Earlier he was the Airborne Brigade Commander (1954-1956), 3MR Commander (1956-1958), I Corps Commander (1962-1963), 2 Corps Commander concurrently government representative in the 2 TZ (1964) and RVN Ambassador to the Republic of Korea (1967-1968).

Lt. Gen. Tri was awarded several medals such as the National Order 2nd class, the Army Distinguished Service Order first class, the Gallantry Cross with gold star (17 times), the Training Service Honor Medal first class, the Staff Service Honor Medal first class, the Psywar Medal, the Police Merit Medal and the Administrative Service Medal first class.

He also received several medals of friendly countries including France, Thailand and the Republic of China.

PRES. THIEU ON LAOS CAMPAIGN

Vung Tau, February 23. - President Nguyen Van Thieu Monday morning said the RVN incursion in Laos is aimed at foiling the Communists' dark scheme of occupying the central provinces.

In an elaborate analysis on this point before nearly 3,500 teachers and policemen at the National Training Center in Vung Tau, President Thieu said after sustaining defeat on the South Vietnam and Cambodian battlefields, the Communists attempted to take over the five Northernmost provinces of the RVN to make a bargain.

According to the Chief Executive, the RVN Armed Forces have got enough strength to shift from a passive to active mood at present, therefore the enemy are no longer allowed to make action by themselves but must be destroyed at their root.

President Thieu also outlined the results of operation Lam Son 719 in which 1,700 enemy have been killed, a large quantity of their military equipments seized or destroyed. Particularly friendly forces have destroyed three oil pipelines in the Ho Chi Minh trail area.

However, he added, the enemy will still remain stubborn and wait for some kind of military or political victory in South Vietnam.

President Thieu asserted that as the leader of the nation he will not let the Communists score any military achievements either in the emergency state of the country or at the dawn of peace.

As for the enemy scheme of gaining political success, said President Thieu, it will depend on the people's decision especially in the forth coming, presidential and Lower House election.

That decision, he said, is the vote the people will use to choose their representatives and Chief of State.

At the opening of the two-hour talk, President Thieu briefed the audience on the Communists' aggression against South Vietnam will all their cunning tricks.

According to him, the anti-Communist fight is not a duty of the government or Armed Forces respectively but must be participated by the entire people.

The President made it clear that his "4 noes" peace stand covers a non-coalition, non-neutrality, non-territorial concession and non-permission for the Communist party to operate in the South. It is because, he added, accepting only one of these four points would not be different from encouraging the aggressors to enslave us.

President Thieu also bared the scheme of Red China shown in the 2,200 word blue book issued by Lin Piao on September 2, 1965 which said the Communists intended to take over South Vietnam to use it as a springboard to occupy the whole Asia within the scope of their strategy "occupying the rural areas to encircle the cities".

The President expressed the hope that everybody will firmly keep their confidence and vigilance against all Communists' schemes and help the government settle the present war to build an independent, free and progressive South Vietnam.

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