

Vietnam Feature Service

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Tet offensive
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Miscalculation!

Communists turn Tet holiday truce into treacherous

TERROR OFFENSIVE THAT FAILED

The Viet Cong launched their biggest offensive of the war in South Vietnam during the first week of the 1968 lunar new year. Militarily, the offensive failed; the communists were repulsed and suffered heavy losses they could ill afford. Politically, the offensive was defeated; the people firmly rejected the enemy's call for a general uprising, and the government of the Republic of Vietnam stood firm. Psychologically, the offensive boomeranged; it reinforced urban opposition to communism and brought a greater sense of national purpose to South Vietnamese citizens who bore the brunt of the terror attacks.

Massing in the dark of the moon (traditionally regarded by Vietnamese as a time of lurking dangers) and striking as the thin sliver of the new moon first became visible, the communists shattered the holiday truce they themselves had proclaimed. With mortars, rockets, guns and explosives and with guerrillas, terrorists, saboteurs, propagandists, hard-core Viet Cong troops and North Vietnamese Army regulars, 60,000 strong, they attacked 35 major population centers throughout the country. Among objectives hit were Saigon and three other cities, 26 provincial capitals and several other large towns. Fifteen airfields and a number of military positions also were attacked, but the principal targets of the marauders were thickly populated centers.

Civilian casualties were heavy, including men, women and children gathered for family celebrations of Vietnam's most important holiday.

The sneak offensive -- planned, according to intelligence sources, as far back as last September -- scored a number of initial successes. But the gains were temporary. Lacking reserve or rescue forces in many sectors and diluting their strength by attacking so many widely scattered targets simultaneously, the Viet Cong saw their units isolated and chopped up one by one. And nowhere did the South Vietnamese public respond to the communists' appeal to rise in support of their campaign. The enemy offensive was checked, and most areas overrun in assaults that started before dawn on Tet (the lunar new year holiday, January 30) were back in government hands before the end of the first week of this Year of the Monkey. By the time the moon was full, the enemy's combatants -- 50,000 main force and local troops, plus 10,000 guerrillas and cadres -- had been cut in half by casualties and the offensive wave had subsided.

But scattered pockets of resistance remained to be brought under control from Hue to the Mekong Delta, and the possibility of a second wave of offensive attacks could not be discounted. Fifty thousand North Vietnamese Army troops massed in or near the Demilitarized Zone at the 17th parallel did not take part in the Tet terror offensive, and may form the striking force for the next phase of the communist campaign. This next phase may have as its objective the capture of the Republic's northern tier of provinces in I Corps.

Communists Bled White

The communists who took part in the Tet offensive suffered grave casualties at the hands of reaction forces -- more than 12 dead for every South Vietnamese or allied serviceman killed. In seven days, said the U.S. forces commander,

General W.C. Westmoreland, the communists lost more men than the Americans had lost in seven years.

Between dusk on the eve of Tet (6 p.m. Monday, January 29, when the short-lived cease-fire went into effect) and midnight the following Monday (February 5), the communists lost 21,330 of their troops killed. This figure, which was to climb in subsequent days, did not include the uncounted dead whose bodies were removed from battlefields by retreating Viet Cong forces. A total of 4,727 Viet Cong suspects were rounded up in the same 174-hour period, while 4,432 individual weapons and 796 large crew-served weapons were seized from the enemy. These losses will not be quickly replaced. Many of the Viet Cong killed or captured in street fighting were specially trained, seasoned cadres familiar with their urban areas of operation. A communist defector who had earlier come over to the Republic's side after years in North Vietnamese Army commands (Lieutenant Colonel Huynh Cu) said one such city-wise cadre killed in street fighting was a greater loss to the communists than 10 soldiers killed on a rural battlefield.

Allied fatalities during the week totaled 1,729, including 1,169 ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers, 546 American, and 14 from other free world forces, such as the Koreans and Australians. Allied wounded totaled 7,185, including 3,995 ARVN, 3,084 American and 106 other free world forces.

Civilian casualties, according to early reports, numbered at least 3,071 killed and 7,945 wounded. Municipal and provincial hospitals were so crowded the Ministry of Health ordered emergency measures and recruited medical personnel from the military and volunteer physicians from foreign communities in South Vietnam for special hospital duty. In Saigon alone, public hospitals admitted 2,407 civilians wounded in the first week's fighting. Some Viet Cong

bands used crowds of civilians as shields during street fighting. In the Delta, Viet Cong hordes used women and children as shields to invade Bac Lieu and burn down more than 1,000 homes. In Dalat, Saigon and elsewhere, civilians were seized as hostages to insure their neighbors' compliance with Viet Cong orders. The communists brought their terror tactics with them when they invaded the cities, giving urban residents of South Vietnam a taste of what rural residents had lived with for more than a dozen years. In Saigon, the Viet Cong captured an ARVN armored unit training center, beheaded its commander with a bayonet stroke (he was Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Tuan, whose family lived with him in the ARVN compound) and machine-gunned his wife and six children. In Ban Me Thuot, five American missionaries, two of them women, were slain by the Viet Cong, who also razed the mission's leprosarium and two churches. The fate of the 2,000 lepers was unknown. In Hue, the mayor said the Viet Cong executed 300 civilians -- government officials, civil servants and technicians -- and buried them in a common grave.

From Quang Tri to Ca Mau

The roll of communities that reeled under the lash of war was long, and in them suffering was great: Saigon and its twin city, Cholon; the incorporated cities of Da Nang, Hue and Dalat; the Mekong Delta provincial capitals of Can Tho, My Tho, Chau Phu, Vinh Loi, Ben Tre, Ca Mau, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Moc Hoa, Vinh Long and Sadec; the provincial capitals of Bien Hoa, Khiem Cuong, Phu Cuong and Xuan Loc in the III Corps area around Saigon, and the more northern towns of Phan Thiet, Nha Trang, Tuy Hoa, Qui Nhon, Kontum, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, Hoi An, Quang Tri, Quang Ngai, Tam Ky, Tan Canh, Ninh Hoa and others.

The communist offensive set new groups of refugees migrating -- an estimated 475,000 total, including at least 125,000 in the Mekong Delta, 167,000 in Saigon--

Cholon and 89,000 in its Gia Dinh suburbs, 2,000 in Bien Hoa, 2,000 in Hue. Property damage was heavy. Preliminary estimates indicated at least 30,000 structures, mostly homes, were destroyed throughout the country. Nine thousand houses were razed in the Saigon-Gia Dinh capital district, including 3,000 in Cholon alone. In Kontum, Tan Canh and Saigon, among others, the communists set up their strongpoints in churches, pagodas and hospitals. When surrounded, they set fire to blocks of houses to cover their escape, shooting at firemen as they retreated. The use of fire by the communists was reported from a number of towns, not only as a means of escape, but as a terror tactic. Some Viet Cong bands made raids for the sole purpose of burning down houses. Apparently this tactic was designed not only to spread fear and dismay among the people, but to leave the government with a huge rehabilitation problem after the communists withdrew.

Despite the confusion of battle, compounded as it was by Tet vacations, the new government of the Republic of Vietnam continued to function well during the crisis. This fact was another major defeat for the communists, because one of the basic objectives of the general offensive -- as mapped in Hanoi after last fall's successful national elections in the South -- was to discredit the Republic's elected leaders and pull down the government. But government offices mobilized staff members for work under difficult and often hazardous conditions. Although the main government radio station in Saigon was destroyed by the Viet Cong attackers, its Quan Tre transmitter 19 kilometers away was undamaged. A makeshift studio was quickly outfitted and the station remained off the air only a few hours. By both radio and television, Vietnam's leaders addressed the people in the early hours of the Viet Cong offensive, calming fears appreciably by replacing rumors with facts. The new refugee problem was

tackled with despatch, and facilities were provided to house, feed and clothe those displaced by the fighting. A special government task force was formed under Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky to handle the work of relief and rebuilding. With the cooperation of the U.S. agency CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), a multi-million-dollar "Operation Recovery" was launched to repair the scars of battle and assure the people that the Saigon government cares more for their welfare than the communists do. The government was successful in enforcing curfew regulations that cut the potential toll of lives lost to Viet Cong snipers and that kept streets free for the swift movement of reaction forces. The National Police, while losing more than 200 men in action, performed well in helping to restore law and order. The government set up depots to sell rice at controlled prices. Power sources were given special protection, and while garbage piled up in the streets for a time, most essential public utilities and services generally were maintained. In a situation that could have toppled weaker governments, the new regime in Saigon kept a firm grip on the reins and did much to blunt the force of the communists' blow.

Battle for Saigon

The government and its allies had ordered a 36-hour cease-fire starting on the eve of Tet, while the communists announced they would observe a seven-day cease-fire. But the truce was less than nine hours old when the Viet Cong launched their offensive, starting with rocket attacks on Da Nang and the invasion of Nha Trang. The government cancelled its cease-fire orders in I Corps. Then what was left of the holiday truce was shredded to bits by coordinated communist attacks in two dozen provinces. President Nguyen Van Thieu declared martial law after Saigon was invaded early Wednesday.

Targets in the capital city hit by the Viet Cong included the U.S. Embassy's new Chancery compound, the nearby Independence Palace of Vietnam's leaders, the Philippine Embassy residence, U.S. military billets, the Vietnamese naval headquarters and Joint General Staff headquarters, the sprawling Tan Son Nhut airport, the radio station and a number of police stations. At the U.S. Embassy compound, all 19 Viet Cong attackers were dead by the time the grounds were swept clear by U.S. paratroopers who were landed by helicopters on the Embassy's rooftop helipad. Killed in the defense of the compound were five American servicemen and a Vietnamese employee of the Embassy. The Chancery building, which at no time was entered by the enemy, sustained minor mortar-shell and grenade damage.

In the battle for Saigon the communists committed 12 to 15 battalions -- 4,000 to 4,500 men commanded by a brigadier general. The government and its allies sent more than 11,000 troops to the capital's defense, 7,000 of them South Vietnamese Rangers and other seasoned ARVN troops, 4,000 of them American. By week's end only 700 to 1,000 Viet Cong remained at large in Saigon and Cholon, half of them organized in a single surviving battalion dug in near a racetrack in an outlying section of the city. The rest were dead, wounded, captured or retreating northeastward, harassed along their road and river "exfiltration routes," said military communiques, by repeated air attacks. Elsewhere, only in scattered Delta areas and in the northern city of Hue, the old imperial capital, did the enemy continue to maintain relatively large forces and to control sizeable urban neighborhoods as the new year's first week drew to a close. Allied reaction forces were gradually reducing these pockets of resistance.

Propaganda Campaign

In areas they held for any length of time, the communists sent propagandists door to door, urging the people to rise in support of the Viet Cong "liberation" campaign, topple their government and install a new coalition government including communist officials. Viet Cong flags and banners were unfurled and pro-communist demonstrations were demanded by the invaders. In Saigon on February 1, the Viet Cong forced 200 civilians to carry VC flags and march through the streets. National Police intercepted the marchers in the Phu Lam area of western Cholon and escorted them to safety. In Nha Trang and other towns, particularly in II Corps, the communists used similar tactics, but nowhere did they win any spontaneous support for their cause. Reports from around the nation told of local people cooperating with police and armed forces in helping to round up Viet Cong remnants. In Saigon, particularly in strongly Catholic neighborhoods where the people already were organized under parish leadership, the residents formed self-defense groups. Though armed mostly with staves and tools, they set up barricades, conducted house-to-house searches for Viet Cong guerrillas, and turned a number of the invaders over to police and government troops. In Qui Nhon, where the Viet Cong-appointed "province chief" of Binh Dinh was assassinated as he entered the radio station to broadcast his plea for public support, the people marched in an anti-communist demonstration while large areas of the provincial capital were still controlled by the VC invaders.

By their firm refusal to cooperate with the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese people proved how erroneous was the judgment of communist authorities who, according to a document recently captured in Quang Tin, had concluded "that the time has come for a direct revolution and that the opportunity for a general offensive and general uprising is within reach." The general offensive

was short-lived, and the general uprising never materialized.

"We have known for several months," said President Lyndon B. Johnson in Washington, "that the communists were planning a massive winter-spring offensive. We have detailed information on Ho Chi Minh's order governing that offensive. Part of it is called a general uprising. We know the object was to overthrow the constitutional government in Saigon and to create a situation in which we and the Vietnamese would be willing to accept a communist-dominated coalition government." That objective failed, said the President. In Saigon, President Thieu agreed the basic aim of the Tet offensive was to force the formation of a coalition government and thus "to communize all of Vietnam under Hanoi." But, he added, "the back of the Viet Cong attack has been broken."

There was speculation in Saigon political circles that the offensive may have been aimed at improving the communists' military position in the South and thus strengthening their bargaining position in anticipation of possible peace negotiations. If this was their purpose, however, the tactic failed, for the communist terror attack, launched during a truce, angered the South Vietnamese people and reinforced their determination not to be forced to the negotiating table at the point of a gun. The Saigon press pointed out that the offensive had brought war to the doorsteps of many city residents for the first time. Facing what their rural cousins had experienced for years, a number of urban dwellers who previously had ignored the war or had been apathetic about the campaign to counter communist aggression and subversion suddenly gained a sense of commitment to the national cause. And the Tet offensive created an army of new refugees. For the first time, most of them were city residents. These victims of communist callousness and terrorism, said Saigon newspapers, can be

expected henceforth to have a strong sense of allegiance to those fighting communism.

Military sources meanwhile speculated that the nationwide offensive may have been designed as a diversion to draw attention, and possibly allied defenders, away from the Khe Sanh front, where five enemy divisions are poised along the DMZ. There was no weakening of allied defense in the Khe Sanh area during the Tet offensive, however. In fact, giant B-52 bombers stepped up their attacks on enemy positions on that front during the week.

Westmoreland's Analysis

Putting the event into perspective, General Westmoreland told the Saigon press on February 1 that the enemy's Tet offensive was part of a three-phase plan. "As I reconstruct the situation," he said, "it seems to me that the plan that we have seen unfold during the last several months was drafted in Hanoi and approved by the authorities there during September of last year. The plan was in three phases. The first phase, which started the latter part of October and continued to the middle of January, involved both a military and a psychological warfare campaign. The psychological war campaign had two major parts. The first was an international campaign designed to stop the air strikes in North Vietnam. The second was focused at the people of those countries providing troops to assist the South Vietnamese in their struggle against communism and toward the people of South Vietnam itself. And this involved the throwing out of the peace feelers at Hanoi, and secondly, starting rumors suggesting that a coalition government was in the offing.

"The military campaign during this first phase involved attacks in four places within South Vietnam, designed to inflict casualties on the ARVN forces, the Americans and the free world forces, to force us to deploy large numbers

of troops to counter their offensive and hopefully to secure pieces of real estate that they could call their own." He identified the four places of attack as the Dak To area, the Con Thien area, the Cambodian-border area of Phuoc Long and Binh Long, and the Delta area of Dinh Tuong province where Route 4 runs to Saigon.

"The next phase of this master plan," said General Westmoreland, "we have seen unfold during the last several days. D-Day for this phase was set at Tet, despite the fact that the communists had made quite a point that they would observe a cease-fire at Tet. This was a deceitful and treacherous act by the enemy. He knew full well that Tet, the traditional Oriental new year, was a time for visiting with families and relaxation. He assumed that security would be at a low ebb during that period. This second phase was designed to infiltrate populated areas, with emphasis on seats of government, provincial and district towns, to destroy government installations and military headquarters, and at the same time to shell and attack airfields in order to influence our ability to react to his initiative. This marks a change in strategy by the enemy -- he is using North Vietnamese forces to spearhead his terroristic attacks...

"His Phase III is yet to come. This will be his main effort and will involve the commitment of the largest number of troops ever committed by the enemy to date. This will involve a major campaign in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. He has prepared himself for this campaign, having concentrated large numbers of troops that have moved into and south of the DMZ and from Laos into western Quang Tri. This phase involves the establishment of a major logistic system in Laos to support this campaign and, during the preparatory phase, which started at the beginning of the dry season in Laos, he has been moving unprecedented quantities of supplies by truck and other means from North Vietnam

into Laos . . .

"In summary," said the American commander, "the second phase of the campaign (the Tet offensive) was a bold one. It was characterized by treachery and deceitfulness. It showed a callous disregard for human life. It has brought about considerable destruction in a number of towns and cities. The enemy has paid dearly . . . How long will he be able to keep up this tempo? I give him the capability of continuing this phase of the campaign for several more days. There is, however, evidence to suggest that he is about to run out of steam. On the other hand, he does still have some reserves that are yet to be committed. We are aware of these and are watching the situation carefully, and I am confident that any further initiative can be blunted.

"With respect to the third phase which is yet to come: the enemy has massed a number of troops in the Quang Tri-Thua Thien area. Since the 17th of January I have concentrated heavy air strikes into the area . . . These massive air strikes have no doubt hindered the enemy's plan, but I still give him the capability of attacking in force at any time in that area. When he does attack, he will have to accept great risk because of the preparations we have made and the fire power available to us."

In Washington, President Johnson also stressed that part of the enemy's master plan was "a massive attack across the frontiers of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese units," and he added: "I am confident that our men and the South Vietnamese will be giving a good account of themselves."

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