

# Nearly 1,000 Enemy Dead

# Loc Ninh a Bloody Disaster for Reds

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LOC NINH, Vietnam—It was dark and cold in the bunker and over the crackle of the radio a young U.S. Army sergeant could hear the gunfire and grenades of the Viet Cong.

The Communists had overrun the U.S. adviser's subsector compound and hoisted the yellow-starred flag of the Viet Cong over the outpost. Systematically they swept through the area, killing men, women and children.

In the concrete bunker 25 feet below, the only American still alive in the compound, Sgt. Jerry Kittrell, shouted into a microphone: "We've been hit. We've been overrun. Charlie's on top of my bunker."

Then the district chief and subsector commander, Capt. Tran Minh Cong, got on the radio and ordered artillery, and air strikes to pound their position. The gamble worked.

The overrunning of the outpost marked the opening round of the battle for Loc Ninh, a week-long struggle in which the Communists lost nearly 1,000 men killed and countless hundreds wounded.

The allied defenders lost 30 killed and 116 wounded.

Like a bad poker player who loses a fortune but continues drawing cards in an effort to recoup, the Communists returned to Loc Ninh and the surrounding area again and again, each time leaving scores of their dead in some of the bloodiest battles of the Vietnamese.

"Gentlemen," jolted Army helicopter pilot Fred Poff, "what we do is head north until we're 28 feet from a sign that says Cambodia—then we're at Loc Ninh."

Actually eight miles from Cambodia, Loc Ninh is surrounded by vast rubber groves thick enough to make it appear from the air that the village, runway and military camps have been cut with scissors out of a thick, green carpet.

## Town Contains Plantation

Rubber is the entire economy; Loc Ninh is the home of the nation's second largest plantation.

Loc Ninh is the nerve center for a district with about 15,000 persons, a former railhead for shipping rubber south to Saigon and nests along Highway 13, Saigon's main link with the big cities of Cambodia and Laos. More important, Loc Ninh is a district capital.

Up the runway from the village are district headquarters, Vietnamese soldiers, and a U.S. Special Forces camp staffed by 11 Americans and 338 local defenders whose families live nearby.

Until recently, Loc Ninh had been a peaceful little workday place which the Viet Cong saw as a source of income—they stopped the rubber workers on roads and took a percentage of their wages—but not much else. A "live and let live" attitude prevailed.

Then, last month, the Reds stopped a bus en route to Loc Ninh from Saigon and told its occupants they were going to capture a district capital to counter the propaganda the government would reap from the inauguration and National Day. On the night of Oct. 15, the district headquarters was probed by a small group of attackers.

Last Saturday a team of Com-

unist propagandists filtered into the village and warned the population: "We are going to take over this village at any cost, and we'll level it if we have to."

At the same time, U.S. intelligence came up with a captured letter from a North Vietnamese soldier to his family saying his unit had orders to take the place at all costs—and hold it.

The first mortar round came in at about 1:30 a.m. on Sunday, Oct. 20. There were two Americans in the camp, Kittrell and Airman Louis B. Arnold.

Arnold, an ordained Baptist minister whose job at Loc Ninh included tending the sick and injured of the village, was wounded during the barrage of between 400 and 600 mortar rounds. The shelling, coordinated with barrages on the U.S. Special Forces camp and four hamlets in the area, lasted about 90 minutes.

Besides the two Americans, there were 105 regional and Popular Forces troops in the compound, in addition to about 200 women and children, most of whom were in their bunkers. Suddenly, about 3 a.m., the mortars stopped and within moments about 1,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars were at the barbed wire perimeter surrounding the triangular outpost. They blew the wire open and about 200 stormed the place.

Arnold, the wounded airman, was cut down by automatic weapons fire while trying to get to a bunker from his prefabricated hut. He was killed. "God, I hated to see him get it," said Kittrell. "He was doing such a damn fine job here."

From their bunker, Kittrell and the South Vietnamese captain called in artillery and anti-personnel bombs and machine gun fire from the air. "Damm, that sounded good," said Kittrell.

Even before dawn, the call for reinforcements went out and by daybreak the first of three battalions of the 1st Inf. Div. touched down in huge C-130 aircraft, flown in from Lai Khe to the south.

## Red Intruders Trapped in North

Gradually, with the help of a company of South Vietnamese troops, two companies of local irregular troops, and two squads of the U.S. "Big Red One," the Communist intruders were trapped in the northern sector of the outpost.

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The total allied casualties were two Americans killed, and 14 South Vietnamese killed and 37 wounded.

The women and children also suffered: 50 killed and 20 wounded.

It was only the beginning.

By Sunday afternoon, the Viet Cong had control of the village of Loc Ninh. It is estimated that of about 6,000 residents, some 4,000 of them had moved out of town as the Communists moved in.

## Reds Held Place For Three Days

For the next three days, Loc Ninh belonged to the Communists who met all allied attempts to enter the village with machine gun fire.

But American and South Vietnamese units patrolling the thick plantations ran into small groups of guerrillas and killed a dozen of them before dusk. The second American was killed during this time.

"They were darn persistent, sir," said Lt. Michael Zosenko, a platoon leader of the Dogface Battalion of the Big Red One's 1st Infantry.

By Monday night, through medium-sized contacts in the rubber plantations a total of 230 Communists had been killed in the fighting, compared to six Americans killed and 14 wounded.

On the next day, in the heaviest fighting of all, the Communist casualties soared.

Capt. Gerald W. Hailey and Lt. Jerry Hazlewood, now commanders to Vietnam who were assigned key defensive points at Loc Ninh, knew the Communists would be back.

Hazlewood's platoon dug fox holes and bunkers all day Monday, preparing a perimeter defense at the southern end of the runway. To shore up the defense, Hailey had a South Vietnamese battalion that had been moved into the district compound.

It was no surprise to either man when the first mortars and rockets started popping in at a half hour past midnight that Halloween morning. "Those mortars were coming in like raindrops," said Pfc. Antonio Taylor of New York City—lasted about 70 minutes.

Then, in burning waves, at least 2,000 Communists charged from all directions into Hazlewood's platoon, toward the Special Forces camp, and by swarms onto the barbed wire perimeter of the triangular district headquarters.

Methodically, they set up three machine guns facing Hazlewood's platoon and dueled with the American gunners from a distance of only 50 yards. Behind the Hazlewood platoon,



Soldiers of the 2nd Bn., 28th Inf., 1st Inf. Div., move out cautiously in the village of Loc Ninh during the street fighting that saw American and Vietnamese troops push the Viet Cong from the village. The six-day battle around the town has been one of the worst defeats the Communists have suffered in the war. (USA)

an American artillery battery leveled its 105mm gun and fired 400 rounds through U.S. positions into the charging Communists, blunting the attack.

Just as methodically, Hailey's battalion was throwing back a series of four Viet Cong assaults, first from one side and then another. Ammunition was running low in both units, and when the urgent call went out for air strikes, so too came the order to conserve ammunition.

On Thursday morning it paid off.

Large Communist forces—some of them armed with flamethrowers and bazookas hit the allied positions. They suffered one of the biggest defeats of the year.

The Americans and Vietnamese held them off the perimeter while warplanes dropped bombs on them. More than 100 dive bombing attacks and about 5,000 rounds of artillery fire took a heavy toll among the suicidal attackers.

The allied count was one killed and 11 wounded. The Viet Cong suffered 525 killed.

On Friday, the Communists tried again, but this time on a smaller scale. They attacked a position of the Big Red One, four miles north of Loc Ninh. At one point they pushed civilians in front of them. Twenty-eight more were killed. The American toll: Three killed and 34 wounded.

Before he left Vietnam after attending the inauguration of South Vietnam's new president, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey said he believed the Communists had been trying for propaganda victory during his visit.

"I think the Viet Cong intended to put on a big show—they hoped to capture the headlines," he said.

"What they captured is a lot of lead."