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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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Vietnam 1967 *Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan (1968): The Story Behind the Picture*

Editor: This op piece is written with input and documents provided by SACEI readers, especially Bill Laurie, Quynh Dao, James Bruton, in response to Mr. Douglas Sloan's inquiry about Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan. Mr. Sloan, a film maker, is working on a documentary about the general (www.Saigon68.com). We thank our readers for their input and warn them about the graphic nature of the gruesome war pictures.

WAR returned to Saigon, South Vietnam's capital, with regularity especially in the early hours of 31 January, 1968. It was Tet, the holiest of all the holidays in Vietnam. It is a combination of a New Year's Day, a Thanksgiving Day, a Remembrance Day, and a People's birthday. All the offices are closed for the three first days of the year. Each year is identified by a name and the 1968 Tet was called Tet Mau Than. Based on the lunar calendar, everyone is one year older that day no matter which month he was born in. There is some logic in that tradition because having already spent eight months in his mother's womb, the newborn baby should be one year old.

During the 14 years of war that preceded that date, while the countryside was torn and destroyed by Viet Cong (VC) communist attacks, Saigon appeared to be largely untouched. But this was only an appearance like many other things in Vietnam for Saigon was not spared at all.

| Year | Number of attacks | Types |
|-------|-------------------|--|
| 1960 | 1 | |
| 1961 | 0 | |
| 1962 | 3 | |
| 1963 | 3 | |
| 1964 | 6 | -Sports stadium bombing -Kinh Do movie theater bombing -Brink officer billet bombing |
| 1965 | 7 | -My Canh restaurant bombing -Bombing outside U.S. Embassy -Bombing of Tan Son Nhut airport -Bombing of Cong Hoa Stadium |
| 1966 | 15 | -Mortar attack (11 April) |
| 1967 | 4 | |
| 1968 | 9 | -Tet offensive (31-Feb 26 Jan) -Rocket attacks (6, 9 and 14 May) |
| 1969 | 3 | |
| 1970 | 52 | -Rocket attacks (13, 20, and 21 Jul) -Rocket attacks (2, Dec 19 Nov) |
| 1971 | 1 | |
| 1972 | 1 | |
| Total | 105 | |

Fig 1. Adapted from Carvell's Saigon attacked database

Background

According to Carvell who dutifully recorded for posterity a list of terrorist attacks on Saigon (1), the city suffered a total of 105 attacks from 1960 to 1972 (date U.S. troops left Saigon) or an average of 9.5 attacks per year. These attacks ranged from throwing grenades on the local population, detonating bombs in the middle of downtown, shelling rockets on the city, or invading the city itself with a twelve-battalion unit on that Tet day. Attacks were carried out on movie theaters, stadium, hotels, and restaurants with the goal of inflicting the most damage possible on civilian population. Rockets rained down from the sky killing on one occasion my friend, a college student and his whole family. And five innocent civilians died instantaneously. This was the communist war of liberation: an indiscriminate war against innocent and unprotected people.

On 26 January, 1965, two bombs destroyed the My Canh floating Restaurant killing 41 people including 9 Americans and wounding 82 others

(2). The restaurant was a popular dining place set on a boat moored to the Bach Dang pier on the Saigon River. It attracted Vietnamese civilians and Americans alike. On 30 March, 1965, the VC did it again. As a driver tried to park his car in front of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, a cop told him to move it somewhere else. He was wrestled down by the driver's assistant and a few minutes later, a bomb exploded killing 22 people including 2

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Americans and wounding 183 others. These attacks forced the government and the U.S. to take protective measures against the VC. The busy but quiet Saigon became a fortified center. One could see sandbag fortifications, rings of barbed wire strung around government centers, soldiers standing on guard in front of local and foreign buildings.

The attack on Saigon in the early hours of 31 January, 1968 was part of the Tet Offensive (3) or Tong Cong Kich Tong Khoi Nghia (TCK & TKN, General Offensive General Uprising), a grandiose and vicious series of large scale attacks on the cities and towns across South Vietnam. It took five years to implement the process.

The Tet Offensive was the brainchild of communist first secretary Le Duan who believed that only victory over South Vietnam could achieve the revolutionary goals of the Vietnam Workers Party (VWP) and uplift the cause of "proletarian internationalism" (4). The Vietnamese nation has always come after proletarian internationalism in the hands and minds of the communists. Total war with destruction of South Vietnam was first approved at the Ninth Plenum in December 1963. (5). Attacks in South Vietnam increased while the Government of Vietnam (GVN) struggled following the killing of President Diem. However, Hanoi's gamble failed with American intervention: air-strikes in August 1964 and arrival of U.S. Marines in Danang in March 1965.

Hanoi's casualties mounted under Westmoreland's search and destroy missions and bombing expanded to North Vietnam. But by the end of 1965, the 25,000 U.S. air sorties over North Vietnam had failed to curb the rate of communist infiltration into South Vietnam. Hanoi was committed to destroy South Vietnam with the assistance and intervention of China and the Soviet Union. Communist China controlled transport logistics and stationed 170,000 troops in North Vietnam with engineering and antiaircraft units while the Soviet Union provided antiaircraft artillery and heavy weaponry as well as 1,165 advisors to man surface-to-air missiles (SAM). The U.S. antiwar movement had it all wrong. Hanoi communists were the instigators of the war and destruction in Vietnam. In Hanoi, the hawks led by Le Duan and Le Duc Tho fought against Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and the Chinese who urged caution by preparing for a protracted war (6).

As battles raged and were fought to a stalemate in South Vietnam in 1967 (7), Le Duan secretly decided that peace talks could not begin until Hanoi had won a "decisive victory" on the battlefield by launching another TCK & TKN. Purges began in Hanoi to silence the total war opponents. Gen. Van Tien Dung was propped up to lead the war in South Vietnam. On 15 January 1968, D Day was set for the night of 30-31 January to coincide with the Lunar New Year's Day or Tet, therefore the name of Tet Offensive. Due to calendar discrepancies, forces in the central regions (Corps I and II) launched their attacks on 30 January while those in the southern provinces (Corps III and IV) attacked on 31 January (8).

The communists then asked for and agreed to a 3-day Tet truce to lull the South Vietnamese into inaction. As a result, the government sent half of its troops home for the holidays, which put the country at a significant disadvantage in case of any attack. President Thieu even celebrated the Tet at his in-laws' house in the province.

At the stroke of midnight, each household lit its fireworks to usher in the New Year. White smoke fill the air while deafening noises were heard all through town. Teams of dragon dancers went from house to house to exhibit their skills and collect prizes. Tired, people went to bed only to be awakened by strange noises. They thought people were so happy they continued to light up firecrackers through the night. Tired they fell asleep in their beds only to be awakened by martial music on the radio. It was only at that time they realized that Saigon was attacked by the enemy. "Are the VC in town? Impossible," said someone. Running outside, they saw big flumes of black smoke billowing in the air. The Saigonese could not believe it. Although streets were quiet and empty each New Year's Day, this was not the case that year. People furiously drove around to find out what was going on, to enquire about their relatives, and to move themselves and their belongings to safe places.

Tet attack on Saigon

At 4:30 am on 31 January, 1968 Nguyen Van Be a.k.a. Captain Bay Lop led his sapper unit and VC tanks in the attack of an ARVN cavalry camp in Go Vap, a suburb of Saigon. After taking control of the camp, he ordered the commanding officer Lt Col. Nguyen Tuan to show his unit how to drive tanks in order to cause more mayhem in the city. As Tuan rightfully and boldly refused, Be coldly executed Tuan, his wife, six children, and his 80 year old mother by slashing their throats.

The following day (second day of the Tet Offensive), Be was caught near a mass grave with 34 civilian bodies. Having admitted to have killed these people, Be was brought to BG Loan, then national police chief, who was directing a counterat-



Photo 1. Lt Col Nguyen Tuan and his family executed Viet Cong style (9)



Photo 2. Lt Col Nguyen Tuan and his family funeral
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Photo 3. The 1968 photo that won a Pulitzer Prize



Photo 4. BG. Loan

tack against VC forces in the city district. This was how Gen. Loan entered into the picture. Born in Hue, he graduated near the top of his class at the University of Hue and began a career as a jet pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force. An accomplished pilot, he led an airstrike on Việt Cộng forces at Bo Duc in 1967, shortly before being promoted to permanent brigadier general. He submitted his resignation shortly thereafter. As a close friend of Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, Loan was then put in charge of the national police and gained an immediate reputation among Western reporters for his temper and rages at the scenes of Viet Cong attacks on civilian targets (10).

The evidence against terrorist Be was damning: he had invaded the sanctity of a free society, killed innocent people on a holy day, especially during a period in which he and his soldiers had agreed to a truce. Facing an invading army of VC whose chief had cold blooded murdered many people and whose soldiers had caused mayhem in the city district while other VC units attacked hundreds of towns, cities across the country, and right in the middle of an ongoing battle that had just begun, what would one expect the general do in the middle of such a brutal conflict?

Richard Botkin, a former Marine infantry officer, who had served in Vietnam wrote, "Aware that *saboteurs* (italics in the original text) and terrorists did not enjoy traditional rights as prisoners and certain of the man's guilt, the general operated within accepted rules of land warfare in meting out his on-the-spot execution" (11).

Unfortunately for the general and the GVN cause, the still photo—taken by Eddie Adams—that captured the execution did not come with any explanation. It did not tell the audience about the cruelty with which Be himself executed a whole family of eight people including children as young as ten years old and an 80-year old woman by having their throats slashed. Another film crew had also videoed the whole process. With the photograph plastered across front pages of the world's newspapers and the video replayed *ad nauseum* without any explanation, "Gen. Loan immediately became the personification of all that was corrupt and diabolical with the American puppet government" (12). He unknowingly helped galvanize American public opinion against the war in Vietnam.

Aftermath

The general continued to lead his men against the insurgents until he was shot in the leg while charging a VC hideout. He was transferred to Australia for limb salvage and medical care. Due to negative press publicity, he was sent to Walter Reed in Washington D.C. for further care and eventually ended up with an amputation.

In April 1975, he was evacuated aboard an ARVN airplane after his calls for U.S. help were ignored. When his presence in the U.S. was known, there was a move to deport him as a war criminal. The effort fizzled and he settled in Burke, VA, a suburb of Washington, D.C. where he opened a pizza restaurant called "The Three Continents." In 1991, he was forced into retirement when he was recognized and his identity publicly disclosed. Eddie Adams recalled that on his last visit to the pizza parlor, he had seen written on a toilet wall, "We know who you are, fucker" (13). Loan died in Burke from cancer in 1998.

Though it brought him fame, Eddie Adams often regretted the powerful impact of the photograph. He wrote the following in connection to the manner in which the image affected people:

"The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. ... What the photograph didn't say was, 'What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American people?' (14).

Adams later apologized in person to Gen. Loan and his family for the irreparable damage it did to the General's honor while he was alive. When Loan died, Adams praised him as a "hero" of a "just cause (15)."

Quynh Dao, member of International Amnesty Australia wrote:

"General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the South Vietnamese soldier in the picture, passed away in 1998.

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Neil Davis, the courageous Australian war correspondent killed on assignment in Thailand, set out the background to the killing when interviewed for David Bradbury's 1980 documentary, *Frontline*. The Vietcong shot by General Loan had, not long before this picture was taken, led a team of communist terrorists in a killing spree, killing the whole family of a South Vietnamese officer in the process - including his 80 year old mother, his wife and his small children. How often is the background of this photo explained? Eddie Adams, the Pulitzer-winning photographer who took that picture, apologized in person to General Loan and his family for the irretrievable damage it did to his honor when he was alive. When General Loan died, Adams praised him as a hero of a just cause (16)."

Max, from New Zealand, recalled:

"I was a good friend and worked with General Loan and saw him a few times post 75. I particularly got close to him after he came back to Vietnam after his stint in Walter Reed although I had worked with him when he was a colonel in Saigon. He was an honest man, he tended to speak the truth to power which got him in trouble. I particularly recall that when he was living in a humble state house post Walter Reed, about the only possession of worth was a Peugeot 505. When visiting I noted that it was not there. When I asked about it Loan told me that he had sold it in order to give the money to the widow of a fellow General that had recently died in a helicopter crash. He noted that the General was totally honest and if the widow did not have enough money to set up a small boutique, the wife's of other corrupt officers would humiliate her by employing her as a servant. All in all a good and brave man (17)."

Bill Laurie, another Vietnam veteran, added:

"Everyone has seen the photograph of BG Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a VC assassin, and equated this with barbarity and immorality of the war. It **was** immoral but blame devolves on Hanoi. RVN, Laotian, Cambodian troops did not invade North Viet Nam while all of these countries were afflicted with invasion of North Vietnamese regulars, the Hanoi Communist Party Wehrmacht.

Picture at link below shows why Gen. Loan acted as he did. The VC, who was not "a suspect" as some news reports indicated, was an assassin who had killed an RVN officer, Lt. Col. Nguyen Tuan, his wife, their six children. The VC demanded that Lt. Col. Tuan showed them how to operate tanks in his compound. He refused so they killed him. They cut his head off. Other reports indicate the assassin, to escape after his crime, pushed civilians in front of him to serve as a human shield. That is a war crime.

Ask 500 people if they've seen photo of Gen. Loan executing the VC assassin, 484 of them will say they had, and none of them will realize execution of assassins, in civilian clothes, during time of war, is legal, however brutal, in war under international law and laws of land warfare. VC assassinations were not "legal." The Geneva Rules of War stipulate a combatant **MUST** wear distinguishing insignia and uniform (18)."

Conclusion

The Tet Offensive targeted thirty-six provincial capitals, five autonomous cities, and sixty four district capitals in the South. All the communist forces were repelled within a few days except for Hue where they held until 24 February and executed more than 4,000 people (20). There was no uprising for the people rallied to the GVN cause. The communists suffered massive losses (more than 50,000 casualties) causing the southern communist infrastructure to be nearly destroyed. The way the ARVN fought rejuvenated and invigorated the GVN.

However, the brutality and intensity of the attack delivered a political and psychological blow to the U.S. Although successful at repulsing the mind-blowing attack, Gen. Westmoreland had failed to recognize it, prevent it, and kill it in its infancy despite all the modern technologies under his command. President Johnson, instead of delivering a knockout blow to the weakened Hanoi government, wavered then denied Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 troops. He sought for peace with Hanoi and announced he would not accept another term in office (19).

The Nguyen Ngoc Loan affair, although unnecessary and immoral, was just a footnote in the big picture of the bloody Tet Offensive, which took the lives of more than 100,000 people, military as well as civilian. The viciousness and brutality of the planned attack that took five long years of planning, raised the question of immorality in the way the VC waged the war. That unfortunately had never been brought up by the media and the anti-war side. The Hanoi government and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) are responsible for all the moral, physical, and economic consequences of initiating and waging the war.

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NOTES

1. Saigon Attacked Database: April 11, 1966-April 11, 1972. Although the title says 1966-1972, reports date from December 1960 to April 1972. <http://www.tsna.org/documents/56.pdf>.
2. This link shows [the gruesome](http://phulam.com/mycanh3.htm) images of the carnage resulting from the attack: <http://phulam.com/mycanh3.htm>.
3. The South Vietnamese call it the Tet Mau Than Battle; for the Americans, it was the Tet Offensive and for the VC the TCK & TKN (Tong Cong Kich Tong Khoi Nghia).
4. Stein Tonnesson, "Tracking Multidirectional Dominoes" in Westad, Odde Arne. *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders in the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*. (Washington, D.C.: Cold War International History Project Working Paper No 22, 1998), 33-34.
5. Lien Hang Nguyen. *Hanoi's War. An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press. 2012: 49, 64.
6. Ibid: 79-80, 90.
7. Finlayson, Andrew. 1967. A Year of Missed Opportunity. In "Vietnam Veterans for Factual History. *Indochina in the Year of the Goat. 1967*." VVFH, Houston, 2016: 51-57.
8. Hang Nguyen: 108.
9. Lt Col Nguyen Tuan and his family were executed Viet Cong style: <https://haiz00.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/17f02-c491e1bab7ccc3b4ngvcnguye1bb85nvc483nlc3a9m.jpg?w=432&h=640>
10. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/16/world/nguyen-ngoc-loan-67-dies-executed-viet-cong-prisoner.html>
11. Botkin, Richard. *Ride the Thunder. A Vietnam War Story of Honor and Triumph*. Los Angeles, WND Books, 2009: 143.
12. Ibid: 143.
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguy%E1%BB%85n_Ng%E1%BB%8Dc_Loan (Accessed 12/12/2016).
14. Eddie Adams. "Eulogy: GENERAL NGUYEN NGOC LOAN." *Time Magazine* (July 27-1998). (Accessed 12/12/2016).
15. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Adams_\(photographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Adams_(photographer)) (Accessed 12/12/2016).
16. Quynh Dao: http://www.nationalobserver.net/2004_spring_dao.htm
17. Max: personal communication.
18. Bill Laurie: personal communication.
19. Hang Nguyen: 111-115.
20. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massacre_at_Hu%E1%BA%BF (Accessed 12/15/2016).

1967: The Year of Decision Nghia M. Vo

The year 1967 was the "best and the worst years" for Washington and Hanoi, which both decided to escalate the war while South Vietnam ushered in the Second Republic four years after the fall of the Diem regime.

1967 turned out to be the "D" Year (D for Decision) for both Washington and Hanoi for any decision they made could affect the outcome of the war. It was the year when the northern communists Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Pham Van Dong realized they lost the war militarily in South and North Vietnam. But neither Washington nor Hanoi would recognize that the United States would lose the political and psychological war at home.

Saigon and the Second Republic

After four years of political unrest and infighting between the military junta and the Thich Tri Quang led Buddhist Struggle Movement and following approval by the Constituent Assembly, the 1967 South Vietnamese Constitution was approved by the Congress of the Armed Forces then by General Thieu on April 1, 1967. It called for a civilian government with an Executive branch led by a President, a Vice-President, and a Prime Minister; a bicameral Legislature; and a Supreme Court. This was followed by the election of the President and members of both Houses.

There were a total of 17 tickets competing for the presidency. General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky competed on separate tickets. But the military junta did not want to split the votes between Thieu and Ky and forced them to remain on the same ticket. Nguyen Van Thieu was elected President of the Second Republic (1) on September 5 with 34.8 percent of the 4,868,281 votes. The Vice-President was Nguyen Cao Ky. The generals did not win in large cities, but in areas controlled by the Viet Cong, like the High Plateaus and the delta and central Vietnam, which was the stronghold of the Buddhist opposition.

The election of the 60-member Senate took place on September 5 at the same time as the presidential election. There were 48 tickets of 10 candidates each. The large number of candidates caused confusion among the electors. Many voters were confronted with a choice of 6 out of 48 unfamiliar Senate tickets. One paper commented that "the vagaries of the electoral system have produced an almost crazily unrepresentative body of 60 Senators. Almost half of them are Catholics, a good one third are northerners, that is, exiles who abandoned North Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Agreement... By contrast there will be no spokesmen for the more militant wing of the Buddhist Church in the Senate nor, equally important, were any politicians who represent the self-consciously native southerners elected..." (2)

Some U.S. Congressmen who were invited to visit South Vietnam and assess the fairness of the election reported that the elections

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had been as free and fair as circumstances permitted. Some foreign commentators remained skeptical pointing out that the U.S. observers had only spent a few days in Vietnam and that none of them spoke Vietnamese.

The elections of the House of Representatives took place on October 22 with 132 seats being contested by 1,140 candidates. The long list of candidates made it difficult for voters to decide whom to support.

The election of a civilian President, the Senate and the House of Representatives ushered in the Second Republic and put a hold on four years of semi-anarchy that resulted from the ouster of the Diem regime. This was, by far, one of the biggest achievements of the military rule in South Vietnam.

On the frontline, it was only in April 1967 that some ARVN units received the M-16 rifle. "For much of the war, the South Vietnamese were consistently outgunned with predictable results in battlefields outcomes and morale." They were armed with castoff equipment of World War II vintage, such as the M-1 rifle and the carbine. On the other hand, their opponents received the famous AK-47 assault rifle. (3) Some progress was made to insure that ARVN soldiers were fed and housed properly and that their families were cared for. In May 1967, the new deputy commander, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams was given the responsibility to improve the RVNAF.

Washington and the War

The NVA-VC had 280,000 men including Main forces, regional forces, administrative forces, irregulars and political cadres. Of these 50,000 were NVA. The combined U.S., South Vietnamese, and Free World Forces (Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, etc.) totaled 1,173,000 men. (4)

Westmoreland in 1967 decided to unleash this massive force against the NVA-VC inside Vietnam with the goal of supporting the pacification of the countryside. He targeted the major enemy bases in the "Iron Triangle" and the "War Zone C" northwest of Saigon and the "War Zone D" northeast of the capital. The enemy used these bases as supply bases, hospitals, headquarters, training centers, rest areas, etc. From these bases, the enemy would move supplies to forward bases from where they would attack allied forces. Destroying the enemy's main bases would shut down their attacking power and drive the NVA forces there away from the local Viet Cong forces, whom the big units supported.

On 8 January, 1967 Westmoreland launched a three-division operation dubbed CEDAR FALLS into the Iron Triangle. It was a typical "hammer and anvil" operation with U.S. forces playing the hammer part and attacking from the north and the east. The 5th ARVN Division, the Vietnamese Navy, and the U.S. 25th Infantry Division and 199th Light Infantry Brigade forming the anvil part. Except for small unit actions, no major battles ensued. The enemy slipped away in the dense and widespread South Vietnamese jungle. Combined friendly losses were less than 100 killed and a few hundred wounded with 750 VC killed. CEDAR FALLS was a public opinion disaster because it forced the evacuation of roughly 6,000 Ben Suc residents to refugee camps and the destruction of their village. It became a rallying point for the anti-war movement. (5) Ten days later, the base area was "...literally crawling with what appeared to be Viet Cong." The U.S. only found small arm caches, depots, and enough rice to feed a division for a year. (6)

This was followed on 22 February by another multi-division operation against the War Zone C, close to the Cambodian border and nicknamed JUNCTION CITY. Three major battles were fought during this period. Enemy battle losses included 2,728 killed and 34 captured. American losses included 282 killed and 1,576 wounded. Although forced to relocate temporarily to a safe haven in Cambodia, COSVN had not been captured. Enemy activity in War Zone C had been disrupted, but operation JUNCTION CITY was not a turning point in the war. (7)

Pacification in Vietnam during the same period sputtered. Westmoreland was committed to big operations like CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY, not to clearing and holding small hamlets and villages around Saigon. That part was relegated to ARVN commanders who taking their cue from their U.S. counterparts, wanted to wage "big unit" wars instead of the tedious, unglamorous pacification operations. Pacification got a boost on 9 May, 1967 when it was assigned to a civilian, Ambassador Robert W. Komer, deputy commander of MACV. (8)

Komer had tremendous energy and a razor sharp mind coupled with a determination to get the pacification job done. His idea was that pacification had to be assigned to the Vietnamese while the Americans furnished the resources and support. For much of 1967, little progress was made. The 6,500 CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) people (9) had to be welded together and assigned to train and work with the Popular Forces (PF) and Regional Forces (RF). The latter were Vietnamese forces that were spread all over South Vietnam in small districts, villages, and hamlets.

Komer also initiated the Hamlet Evaluation System, which was designed to evaluate the progress of the pacification effort. Eliminating the Viet Cong infrastructure required a massive and sophisticated intelligence effort that required unity of command. (10) Komer left the program in November 1968, more than a year after he began re-organizing it. Gen Nguyen Duc Thang, head of the Ministry of Revolutionary Development then commander of Corps IV from 1965 to 1968 was the Vietnamese counterpart of Komer. A clean and well respected general, he unluckily was sidelined by Thieu because of his connections to Ky. (11) Komer on his departure was replaced by Ambassador William F. Colby who changed the CORDS name to Civil Operations and *Rural* Development Support to stress the need for civilian involvement in the pacification effort. Colby expedited the training and equipping of the RF and PF by distributing 500,000 weapons to the countryside. CORDS was one of the most successful programs of the war. (12)

During 1966, communist battle deaths averaged 5,000 men a month. During the first six months of 1967, their losses (casualties, POW's, defectors, non-battle casualties, and defections) soared to 15,000 men a month. Since the Viet Cong could recruit 3,500 men per month and NVA infiltration ran about 7,000 men a month, they were short of 4,500 men monthly. As a result, they could not wage any major battle in the South and the Viet Cong had lost control of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Vietnamese in the last half of 1966 and the first two

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months of 1967. (13)

On 18 March, Gen. Westmoreland asked for an additional 200,000 troops. The request stunned President Johnson, Secretary McNamara and his deputies. According to the general, troops would be used to go into Laos and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Had he received what he asked for, who knows, the overall situation might totally change? At that time, the indirect cost of the ROLLING THUNDER operation had exceeded its purely destructive effects. Hanoi had to divert 500,000 to 600,000 civilians to buff up air defense or to repair bomb damage. The people in North Vietnam began to experience shortages of food, clothing and medicine. In 1967, the U.S. Navy began mining internal waterways and coastal estuaries adding difficulties to Hanoi. Discussions in the U.S. were entertained about using "iron bombs" against the dikes along the Red River. Dikes had been built through centuries allowing the Red River to flow in a man-made canal above the surface of the surrounding countryside. Had the dikes been breached, farmlands around Hanoi and surrounding villages would be flooded, including Hanoi itself under eleven feet of water. (14)

All these actions would over a period of time severely cripple Hanoi's ability to fight. Although one single action did not matter, the sum of all these actions taken together might finally bear effect. Westmoreland had finally seen "the light at the end of the tunnel." The question was why did it take him that long to realize it and to act? The crucial time was then. Johnson and McNamara, however, had different opinions. Johnson was always afraid that enlarging the war would force the Soviets and Chinese to jump into the war.

The Joint Chiefs came out swinging. They approved the 200,000 men requested by Westmoreland. They suggested that the Reserves be mobilized and that the war could be extended to Laos, Cambodia, and possibly North Vietnam. They also suggested mining Hanoi's ports. In sum, they wanted to "win the war."

McNamara and his allies were horrified by the suggestions. They suggested holding the troops to 470,000 men and restricting ROLLING THUNDER to the southern part of North Vietnam. They then deescalated the war by decreasing U.S. objectives in Vietnam as set forth by the NSAM 288. Instead of promoting an "independent non-communist South Vietnam" or "defeating the Viet Cong," they suggested that "the people in South Vietnam should determine their own future" and "the commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself." In general, the civilians who thought the war was lost recommended a compromise solution in South Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs threatened to resign in mass if McNamara's decisions were approved.

Johnson agonized, fumed, and waffled. He advised McNamara to compromise with the JCS and to let the Stennis hearings settle the bombing issue. McNamara on his trip to Vietnam settled the troop strength issue with Westmoreland and Abrams by increasing it by 45,000 men to a total of 525,000. In August 1967, the hawkish subcommittee of the Senate Armed Service Committee led by Senator Stennis criticized the restraints the civilians placed on the bombing strategy and censured the civilians for overriding the advice of the JCS. McNamara lost the fight and with it the president's confidence. (15)

By September 1967, the Americans had slowly turned against the war: they decided that the war was not making any progress. President Johnson's popularity dropped to 40 percent, a new low for his term in office. The total casualties (killed, wounded, missing) rose from 2,500 in 1965, to 33,000 in 1966 and 80,000 in 1967. Draft calls increased and the Americans were hit in their pocketbook. In September, Johnson called for a 6 percent surtax which Congress approved. The anti-war movement began to take shape.

Johnson then failed or was unable to explain to the American people about the need to wage war in Vietnam. Polls showed that half of the Americans interviewed did not know why the Americans were in Vietnam. By refusing to sell the war to the Americans, he surrendered to the anti-war protestors. The declining support for the war limited the president's choice of strategies. If the people barely accepted the war in Vietnam, they would not accept an expansion of the war into Laos, Cambodia, or North Vietnam. (16)

In this critical year, Johnson wavered and could not make up his mind. Westmoreland in later years criticized Johnson's conduct of the war, "Johnson... hoped the war would go away... but his key decisions were destined to drag the war out indefinitely... We should choose our leaders carefully, broad gauged statesmen, not slaves to the public opinion polls." (17)

As to Westmoreland, by failing to win the war with more than one million men under his command, although half of it was not under his direct command, he had lost it. McNamara in Saigon on 11 July 1967 commented, "We have over a million men here under arms and there are many, many opportunities open to us to increase the effective use of these men, and we will set our minds and hearts to doing that." (18)

Hanoi and the war

Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, who was charged with executing the *Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia* plan or TCK-TKN or General Offensive-General Uprising died on or about 4 July, 1967. He was replaced by Gen. Van Tien Dung. Le Duan, the real mastermind behind the TCK-TKN made sure his plan moved forward by putting pressure and jailing his opponents (19). He based his concept on three assumptions. First, ARVN soldiers lacked motivation and would defect or desert when struck a hard blow. Second, since the people did not support the Government of Vietnam (GVN), they would switch their support to the NLF. Third, the people and the ARVN having despised the Americans would turn against them.

This was a three-pronged offensive, military and political, that would span over many months. In phase I (September-December 1967): attacks would be focused on the bases at the periphery of South Vietnam in an attempt to draw U.S. forces out of the populated areas to the borders of the country. In phase II, there would be a countrywide military assault on South Vietnamese cities, ARVN units, U.S.

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headquarters, communication centers and airbases. In phase III, the people would rebel against the Thieu-Ky government and topple it. In the end, the goal was to bring about a decisive victory and end the war. (20)

Although bold and imaginative, Duan's plan had serious deficiencies. First, it violated the principles of simplicity and mass. It required a lot of coordination, which the VC did not have with their primitive signal coordination. In fact, communication did break down. Duan also spread his forces too thin to have any impact. Had he concentrated his forces against fewer targets, he would have achieved better results. Second, he failed to understand the concept of U.S. mobility. In 1967, the U.S. could move troops to the periphery to foil attacks and bring them back into the interior to counter any attack there. Third, Duan failed to make any provision in case of failure. Having no withdrawal routes would cost the communists dearly during the Tet Offensive. Fourth, he based his plan on wrong assumptions. The ARVN in general fought "with more courage and effectiveness than it had ever done before or would do again." (21) The people did not join the NLF; they did not turn against the Thieu government or the Americans.

By mid-September the communists began their TCK-TKN by attacking Con Thien, Dak To and Song Be. Con Thien was an outpost in I Corps about two miles south of the DMZ and manned by a U.S. Marine battalion. Rising at 520 feet above the flat countryside, it allowed excellent observation over one of the enemy's principal supply routes into South Vietnam. The Marine battalion was attacked by elements of the 324B NVA Division. When the attack failed, the NVA began an intense artillery bombardment on the outpost. The U.S. responded with their own artillery augmented by air strikes. The siege was broken by October 31 following 790 B-52 sorties. (22)

Dak To was the site of a Special Forces camp in the II Corps along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. This is a rugged mountainous area with peaks rising to 6,000 feet. The camp was attacked on November 3 by elements of the 1st NVA Division and 40th Artillery Regiment. Gen. Abrams ordered a spoiling attack by the U.S. 4th Infantry Division reinforced by the 173rd Airborne Brigade and six ARVN battalions. The 3rd Battalion, 12th Infantry drove the 32nd NVA Regiment off Hill 1338 south of Dak To. Similarly, after a four-day battle the ARVN 3rd and 9th Airborne battalions drove the NVA 24th Regiment from Hill 1416 to the northeast. Another hill was taken away from the NVA on November 20 and the enemy broke contact and pulled back into their sanctuaries in Laos. Enemy losses were put at 1,644 killed at a cost of 289 U.S. and 73 ARVN killed. (23)

The border battles were North Vietnamese failures. Having lured U.S. troops to the periphery, Duan and Giap failed to hold them there for a long time.

Conclusion

1967 was the Decision Year for both Washington and Hanoi. Westmoreland tried to hammer the NVS/VC forces in early 1967 in the Iron Triangle and the War Zone C, but the enemy managed to escape into the jungle. Saigon got its civilian government elected and worked on its pacification program. Hanoi then began its TCK-TKN offensive by waging the border war, but Westmoreland slammed them down. Victory was on hand, but Johnson who did not want to "finish" the war, let the anti-war movement wreaked havoc his war initiative, which later led to the fall of South Vietnam.

Westmoreland later concluded, "Our erstwhile honorable country betrayed and deserted the Republic of Vietnam after it had enticed it to our bosom. It was a shabby performance by America, a blemish on our history and a possible blight on our future." (24)

History might have turned out differently had Johnson and Westmoreland acted forcefully in 1967.

NOTES

1. The First Republic was led by President Ngo Dinh Diem from 1955 to 1963. Following Diem's ouster and assassination, the military junta took over the government but was challenged by monk Thich Tri Quang. It took four years for the military junta to assert its control over the government.
2. Keesing's Research Report. *South Vietnam. A Political History, 1954-1970*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, NY, 1970: 118-129.
3. Sorley, Lewis. *Westmoreland. The General Who Lost Vietnam*. Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2011: 131.
4. Davidson, Phillip. *Vietnam at War. The History 1946-1975*. Presidio Press, Novato, CA. 1988: p. 426.
5. Summers, Harry. *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War*. Houghton Mifflin, New York. 1995: p. 116.
6. Davidson 428.
7. Summers 118.
8. Davidson 430-432.
9. Summers, 124. Of the 6,500 members, 1,000 were U.S. civilians and the rest were military personnel. The civilians held most of the top jobs.
10. Davidson, 459-460.
11. McAllister, James. What Can one Man Do? Nguyen Duc Thang and the Limits of Reform in South Vietnam. *J. of Vietnamese Studies*. 2009, Vol 4 (2) 117-153.
12. Summers, 124.
13. Davidson, 435.
14. Ibid, 431, 437-438.
15. Ibid, 462-64.
16. Ibid, 451-455.

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17. Westmoreland, "Vietnam Blunders," *Honolulu Advertiser* (26 March 1978).
18. Quoted in Sorley, 150.
19. Lien Hang Nguyen. *Hanoi's War. An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press. 2012: 90-94.
20. Davidson, 442-446.
21. Ibid, 447.
22. Summers, 126.
23. Ibid, 128.
24. Westmoreland, "Vietnam Perspective," *Military Review* (January 1979) 34-35.

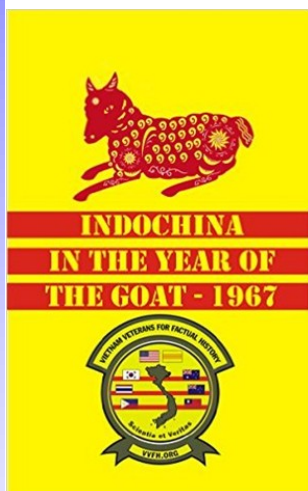
Indochina in the Year of the Goat - 1967

This is a very instructive and interesting series of publications under the direction of Stephen Sherman. Steve served as a Civil Affairs/Psyoops Officer with 5th Special Forces Group in Pleiku and Nha Trang, Vietnam 1967-1968 then as Chief of Plans and Programs for the Vietnam Regional Exchange from 1969-1971. The book summarizes the main events that occurred in 1967 Vietnam: 1) the election of President Thieu and Senate members of the Second Republic of Vietnam; 2) Gen. Westmoreland's search and destroy missions that drove the VC to the borders; 3) first phase of Hanoi's General Offensive designed to pull U.S. troops to the periphery (Con Thien, Dakto, Song Be) in preparation for the 1968 Tet Offensive; 4) the anti-war movement.

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Available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Indochina-Year-Goat-Jr-Santos/dp/1929932677/>



Reconnected After Half a Century USA 2017

Author and U.S. Army retired Colonel James Van Straten, PhD reconnected with two South Vietnamese medical officers with whom he served half a century ago after his book "*A Different Face of War*" was published in 2015. He was thrilled to receive email messages from his old colleagues: Dr. Pham Viet Tu who now lives in Brisbane, Australia and Dr. Tran Tan Phat, who is now a naturalized U.S. citizen living in Midway, California.

When the three officers served together, MAJ Pham Viet Tu was an internist assigned as the Surgeon of the First Corps Tactical Zone, the upper one-fifth of the country, while Dr. Tran Tan Phat was a spine surgeon who served as the commander of one of South Vietnam's largest and most sophisticated military hospitals, Duy Tan General Hospital in Da Nang. Van Straten served as the Senior Medical Advisor to the ARVN in the First Corps area.

Shortly after the Vietnam War ended, both Dr. Tu and Dr. Phat were incarcerated and spent three demoralizing years in Communist reeducation camps. Upon release from the camp, Dr. Tu and his wife made two unsuccessful attempts to get themselves and their six children out of the country by boat. Both attempts failed. With money exhausted, he made a last desperate

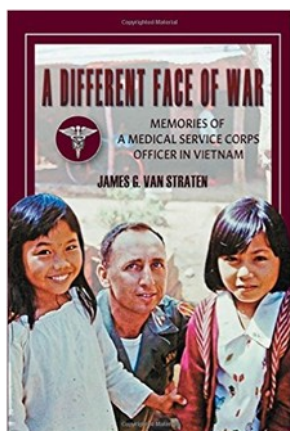
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Reconnected After Half a Century...

attempt. He sent his children out in two groups of three each and told them to make their way to Australia. They made it and in 1992, seventeen years after the war ended, Dr. Tu and his wife were allowed to leave Vietnam to reunite with their children.

Because of differences in medical education, neither Dr. Tu nor Dr. Phat was able to become credentialed as a physician in their newly adopted countries. Demonstrating tremendous resilience, both went back to school to learn a new profession. Dr. Tu earned a Ph.D. in the field of Public Health, while Dr. Phat studied and found employment in the field of electronic medical records.

(From the 2016 University of North Texas Press newsletter)



Dr. Pham Viet Tu and Dr. Tran Tan Phat:
top (2017) and bottom (1966)

Trinh Xuan Thuan: Astrophysicist

An astrophysicist and professor of Astronomy at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, he was born in Vietnam, and educated in French high schools; he got his Bachelor in Physics at Caltech and his PhD in Astrophysics at Princeton. Thuan is the author of many popular books, written originally in French and later translated into English, on the Universe and the philosophical questions it raises.

Beside teaching and doing research at the University Virginia, Thuan is also a frequent visitor to French astrophysical institutions such as the Institute of Astrophysics in Paris. He was the recipient of Unesco's Kalinga Prize in 2009 in 2009 for his work in popularizing science. He received the Kalinga chair award at the 99th Indian Science Congress at Bhubaneswar. In 2012, he was awarded the Prix Mondial Cino Del Duca from the Institute de France. This prize recognizes authors whose work, literary or scientific, constitutes a message of modern humanism. Thuận's areas of interest are extragalactic astronomy and galaxy formation. His research has focused on the evolution of galaxies and the Chemical composition of the universe, and on compact blue dwarf galaxies. (Wikipedia, provided by Tran Nguyen)

- 1993. *The Birth of the Universe*.
- 1994. *The Secret Melody*.
- 2000. *Chaos and Harmony*.
- 2001. *The Quantum and the Lotus*.

<http://www.trinhxuanthuan.fr/en/>



Calvin Tran: Contemporary Designer

<http://www.calvintran.com/>

<http://chicago.gopride.com/news/interview.cfm/articleid/213904>

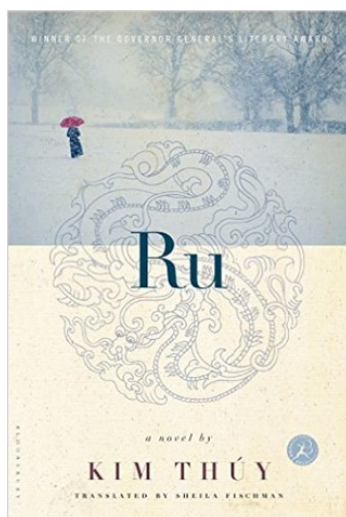
Bravo's *The Ultimate Collection* break out star— has anchored himself as one of New York's most innovative contemporary designer. For more than twenty years, Tran has brought his talent and vision to the fashion industry with cutting-edge silhouettes and architectural bodies.

Having been featured in dozens of publications, including

W Magazine, The New York Times, and the Chicago Tribune, Tran's designs embody modern sexiness with classic elegance. He has a discerning eye for form and flare creating designs that transcend trends to timeless pieces. His style retains inspiration from classic simplicity while tinged with hints of sensuality to reflect the strong contemporary women.



Ru: Kim Phuong



At ten years old, Kim Thúy fled Vietnam on a boat with her family, leaving behind a grand house and the many less tangible riches of their home country: the ponds of lotus blossoms, the songs of soup-vendors. The family arrived in Quebec, where they found clothes at the flea market, and mattresses with actual fleas. Kim learned French and English, and as she grew older, seized what opportunities an immigrant could; she put herself through school picking vegetables and sewing clothes, worked as a lawyer and interpreter, and later as a restaurateur. She was married and a mother when the urge to write struck her, and she found herself scribbling words at every opportunity - pulling out her notebook at stoplights and missing the change to green. The story emerging was one of a Vietnamese émigré on a boat to an unknown future: her own story fictionalized and crafted into a stunning novel.

Available on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Ru-Novel-Kim-Th%C3%BAY/dp/1608198987/>

Demonstrations

A. AGAINST CHINA IN SAN DIEGO

On the occasion of the Chinese ship 546 visiting San Diego, CA, on December 8, 2016, Vietnamese-American civilians and seamen demonstrated against the PRC as well as commemorated the 1974 Battle of the Paracel Islands, which both PRC and South Vietnam claimed as theirs.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Paracel_Islands

During the battle 42 years ago, PRC ships sunk GVN's destroyer HQ 10 and the Chinese went on to occupy the Paracels.



B. DEMONSTRATION IN TORONTO FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

To fight for Human Rights in Vietnam on the occasion of the International Human Rights Day. The demonstration took place on December 10, 2016 in Toronto, Canada.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/116262857@N03/albums/721576738303154>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzHmOko7PWI>

C. DEMONSTRATION AGAINST KISSINGER IN OSLO

To protest Kissinger for selling out South Vietnam to the communists in Paris on 27 Jan, 1973.

The protest took place on December 11, 2016 in Oslo, Norway.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZCMUAP-ZoE&feature=youtu.be>

