

Hesitancy and Confusion Blamed in Saigon Defeat

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 31—Diplomats and military analysts here have managed to piece together an account of the fall three weeks ago of Phuoc Binh, the first provincial capital to be captured by the Communists since their 1972 spring offensive, despite Government efforts to seal off from the public and press the soldiers who got out alive.

It appears, according to these experts, that while some defenders fought bravely, many ran away; that the South Vietnamese Air Force, reluctantly called in to what it considered

a hopeless fight, killed many Government troops with imprecise high-altitude bombing, and that the North Vietnamese further refined tactics intended to lose as few of their own men as possible.

"It is a shame to us all—not only to us, but to any other military man of any rank who had something to do with this battle," said an officer who was sent to defend Phuoc Binh.

Several South Vietnamese military sources paint a picture—one of indecisiveness

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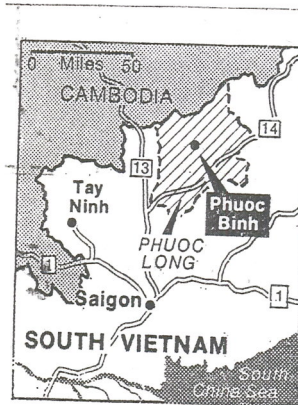
and confusion at the highest command levels, uncertainty about whether the North Vietnamese intended to take Phuoc Binh or slowly strangle it, bad information on the size and quality of the opposing forces in the rolling plantation country around the encircled town. These sources argue that decisions were made with less consideration than is now believed.

Beginning in mid-December, the North Vietnamese easily took four Government-held district capitals and one base camp in Phuoc Long Province, which had never been far from their complete control. Only the isolated province capital, with a garrison of regional and provincial forces totaling 3,000 men remained.

The first Government reinforcements—a battalion of regular troops and three reconnaissance companies, or about 800 men—were reportedly sent into Phuoc Binh on Dec. 23, when the North Vietnamese were already within mortar range of the town, which lies 75 miles north of Saigon near the Cambodian border.

On the first day of the new year, the North Vietnamese chased a small garrison of Stieng tribesmen off the top of Ba Ra Mountain on the southeastern edge of the town.

From this point on, in the



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opinion of several military analysts, the battle was lost. The North Vietnamese could shell the town at will, which they began to do with great accuracy. Reliance on heavy artillery bombardment rather than ground troops characterized the North Vietnamese tactics, as it has in other battles recently.

Civilians—the province capital had a largely montagnard population of 26,000—began to slip out of the town, crossing the Daklung Bridge over the Song Be. So did many montagnard militiamen and some regular soldiers.

Tanks Move In

The first ground attacks came on Jan. 3, but the North Vietnamese put few troops behind their T-54 tanks. Demolition troops cleared obstacles for the tanks.

Many defenders reported later that their American-made, shoulder-fired rocket launchers were useless against the tanks, which had penetrated the southern edge of the town.

"We took aim on one of them, waited, waited until it was well in good range and then fired," said one officer. "Oh, it did not explode. It did not stop."

"To our amazement, the turret was moving, the big gun was pointing toward our trenches. Oh God, we sank down to the bottom of our trenches, crawled away like rats, with our mouths open in amazement."

In their analysis of the battle, Americans believe that the defenders fired the rockets at a range that was too close; to destroy a tank, they must be fired from 30 feet away, they say.

There is considerable uncertainty over the number of tanks knocked out by the defenders. Official and semiofficial counts range from 14 to 29, but while some tanks were certainly hit, one well-placed source said that aerial reconnaissance photos showed no destroyed tanks.

By Jan. 3, the Foreign Ministry in Saigon was preparing a press conference to announce the loss of Phuoc Binh. But the next day the Government sent into Phuoc Binh by helicopter two companies of the elite 81st Airborne Rangers — which fought well around Saigon during the 1968 Tet offensive and at An Loc during the 1972 offensive.

To their dismay, the 200 rangers found that the situation on the ground nowhere resembled the somewhat confident picture sketched by Col. Nguyen Thong Thanh, the commander of the town, in his bunker.

According to one ranger, the colonel described various positions around the town that were being held by battalions and companies that had in fact been reduced to handfuls of men who were looking for a way to escape.

Meanwhile, forced to altitudes of 10,000 feet or higher by intense 57-mm. heavy machine-gun fire, Government fighter-bombers were unable to provide significant support. Still they bombed.

"Never before had I seen such heavy casualties inflicted on our own lines by our own air force," said one member of the 81st Rangers. "The hospital was bombed, three or four military doctors were killed and hundreds of patients were killed, or wounded for a second time."