

A Fighting General

Do Cao Tri

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, June 3—At least a dozen times in the last month when his troops were stalled on Cambodian battlefields, Lieut. Gen. Do Cao Tri has swooped down to them in his helicopter, strode to the front of their ranks and assumed temporary command to get them moving. Once, in his impatience, he scrambled atop an armored car and, jabbing his swagger stick toward Vietcong sniper positions in a Cambodian farmhouse, shouted and order to charge, giving it all the authority he could muster in his compact 5-foot-4-inch, 140-pound frame.

Seconds later he found the armored car on which he was standing leading the charge—40 yards in front of the rest of the troops.

Early in the campaign an American adviser suggested that before pushing on from Prasaut to Sveyrieng they finish cans of beer they had just opened.

"We are going right now!" General Tri replied. "You can finish your beer when we get there."

It is the combination of impatience and fearlessness that has made General Tri the most conspicuous allied commander of the Cambodian operation. And it is something he does not appear to mind after three years of standing in the longer shadows of his American counterparts in the tactical zone around Saigon, where they relegated his troops to relatively minor combat roles.

His Rating Has Been High

Although it is only in the last month that General Tri has emerged into the public eye—an emergency he has helped somewhat by allowing reporters to share his helicopter in Cambodia almost daily—he has for several years been considered by military observers to be the best fighting general in the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Until now he has disavowed politics and has had every appearance of a non-political general, a rarity in the South Vietnamese military, which sprouts politicians out of the barrels of its guns. Now his exploits and those of his troops have made him a hero and a celebrity, and he is beginning to be eyed with some concern by politicians who themselves are former generals with those assets.

At 40 years of age he is fit, dashing and handsome, and he appears to have a long career ahead if his luck on the battlefield holds. President Nguyen Van Thieu, among others, seems concerned that he spend at least

the next part of that career as a military man and not a political-military man like, say, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky.

Born into a prominent and wealthy Buddhist family in Bienhoa, near Saigon, on Nov. 20, 1929, Do Cao Tri received his high school diploma in 1946 from the Lycée Pétrus Ky, a public school in Saigon, and became the first member of his family to choose a military career, joining the French Army.

He was a member of the first graduating class of the officer school in Vungtau, one of three established by the French. Late in 1947 he went to France for advanced



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A do-it-yourself leader

training in infantry and airborne tactics. Two years later he returned home to fight the Vietminh, the Communist movement of the period, as an airborne company commander.

Threat to Ngo Dinh Diem

Between combat assignments during the next decade he took advanced courses in Hanoi and in the United States.

In 1955, during one of President Ngo Dinh Diem's early squabbles with his generals, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Vy was arrested and held at the Presidential Palace. Do Cao Tri, then a 26-year-old lieutenant colonel, telephoned Mr. Diem and threatened to commit his airborne battalion to destroying the palace and "everything in it, including you," if he did not release General Vy within an hour. Mr. Diem complied.

The episode, both General Tri and observers of the incident insist, was not political. Rather, General Tri said, a military man has honor and to arrest one of the stature of General Vy was an insult to his military subordinates and must not go unchallenged. Now General Vy is Minister of Defense.

President Diem never trusted the young officer after that, but because of his outstanding military record he was promoted to general and assigned to command the First Infantry Division at Hue. In 1962 he became commander of the I Corps region, which is below the demilitarized zone, and in 1964 took command of the II Corps region, the country's largest.

By late 1965 General Tri and Marshal Ky had developed a dislike for each other that has persisted. Marshal Ky, who had assumed control of the Government, was threatened by a Buddhist-inspired revolt. General Tri, like many generals who were Buddhists, was exiled by Marshal Ky, a Roman Catholic. He lived in Hong Kong for a while, then in Paris, and finally, in 1967, paid a visit to Washington to see Gen. Tran Thien

Khiem, then Ambassador and now Premier.

Reportedly at the urging of Americans who saw a real need for military leadership, President Thieu invited General Tri to return to South Vietnam but gave him no post. Later in the year he was named Ambassador to South Korea, where he served with dissatisfaction until mid-1968, when Mr. Thieu desperately needed military leaders after the Vietcong's Lunar New Year offensive. Called back, General Tri was named to his present post as commander of the III Corps tactical zone around Saigon.

Replaced Friend of Ky

He replaced Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, an old friend of Vice President Ky, at a time when Mr. Ky and Mr. Thieu were quietly dueling for power in their new administration.

General Tri lives in a huge villa on the Dongnai River in Bienhoa with his wife and six children. The first thing a visitor sees as he walks in the front door is a huge stuffed tiger, teeth glistening. The General also maintains a villa in Saigon. He likes to play tennis and has a special eye for beautiful and well-educated women.

Two months ago a Senator accused General Tri of corruption and the General challenged him to a duel. The Senator has since produced no supporting evidence and General Tri has dismissed the charge, saying his accuser was jealous of his inherited wealth.

While most people have been greatly impressed with General Tri, a few professional evaluators contend that he personifies what is wrong with the South Vietnamese Army.

"Good commanders here like to do everything themselves," an American said. "They must learn to delegate authority if they want to develop broad leadership. Without doing it, the number of generals like Tri in the South Vietnamese forces will continue to be small."