

A Viet Village in Shock

--Aftermath of Slaughter

By Michael Putzel
Associated Press

Ba Ren, Vietnam

The funerals are over. The rebuilding has not yet begun.

Ba Ren, as the Americans call it, or Phu Thanh, as it is known to the Vietnamese who live here, still is in shock. Before dawn on Thursday, the Viet Cong came into the village and slaughtered 114 people, most of them killed by grenades tossed into family bunkers.

One of the hamlets in the village, Thanh My, was virtually leveled by Viet Cong mortars and by fire.

Yesterday some of the villagers sifted through the rubble of their homes, no longer looking for bodies but for any

possessions that might be salvaged.

A dwarf walked along a path weeping, a garden hoe over his shoulder. In his hand, wrapped in a piece of paper, were the charred little hands of his 12-year-old son. He said he found them in the burned-out bunker of his home.

He could not find the rest of the body.

Near the center of the hamlet was a house made of cardboard from American C-ration boxes. There was smoking rubble on all sides, but the house showed no signs of damage.

Several women from two Viet Cong-controlled hamlets a few thousand yards away

came to the Ba Ren market and carried away the bodies of the six Viet Cong killed during the attack.

Some of the local people stood nearby watching but did not interfere.

American Marines drove into town with truckloads of lumber and empty ammunition boxes for the people to use in rebuilding Ba Ren.

A Vietnamese Christian Association in Da Nang, 18 miles to the north, sent several hundred tons of American wheat and rice. The food and a dozen sheets of new tin roofing were stacked at the battered village headquarters.

Marine Maj. Tom Pentacost, a psychological warfare advisers in the province, said the Viet Cong attacked Ba Ren because it was a pacification area, and the Viet Cong wants to destroy the government's pacification program.

Lieutenant T. S. Miller, 27, of New Kensington, Pa., commander of the Marine pacification team stationed in the village, said that Ba Ren also was comparatively prosperous, and the villagers had been cooperating with the Americans.

Similar villages in the area have been hit by Viet Cong gunners in recent months, he said.

Captain Nguyen Van Ching, whose Regional Force troops guard the bridge at the northern end of the village, said the Viet Cong's primary objective was the

army compound at the bridge but they failed to reach it and destroyed the town as they pulled back.

One American officer called this "the official whitewash."

"They are trying to justify not leaving the compound to try to save the village," he said. "They're trying to claim that they successfully carried out their mission of defending the bridge."

Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the South Vietnamese military commander for the northern provinces, said the attack on Ba Ren was part of a terror campaign the enemy is resorting to because he cannot successfully attack American and government military forces.

Miller, asked if the village could have been defended, said: "Of course. But the RFs never leave their compound at night. They could have been out in ambushes around the village."

He said the only ambushes were manned by his squad of Marines and a platoon of Popular Force militiamen. Many of the latter left their posts to go their families in the hamlet after the shooting began.

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