

SOUTH HOLDING ON

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Saigon Units Are Said to Be Resisting Drive Against Xuan Loc

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Friday, April 11—Heavy fighting raged in and near Xuan Loc yesterday as Communist forces, bolstered by tanks and heavy artillery, maintained their pressure on Saigon, only 38 miles away.

Reports from the area said that the defenders were not abandoning territory as Saigon troops had done in the last few weeks in retreating from northern parts of the country. Airborne troops at Xuan Loc were fighting, but Communist soldiers were said to be slipping past them on both sides, chopping at their flanks and moving closer to Saigon.

The battle in the Xuan Loc area, now in its third day, and the fighting along the road leading west toward Bien Hoa were viewed here as a critical test of how determined the South Vietnamese forces are to defend Saigon.

Back-and-Forth Battle

Government spokesmen said last night that Communist gunners had fired 1,000 artillery shells into Xuan Loc, a city that until recent days had 100,000 residents and is now virtually destroyed.

Thick columns of smoke rose over Xuan Loc in what was apparently a seesaw battle, with Communists seizing much of the city for a while, then being driven back by Saigon troops.

By nightfall, officials said, the main Communist force, identified from prisoner interrogations as the 266th Regiment of North Vietnam's 341 Division, had been forced out of the city. However, Communist commandos were said to have continued stubborn resistance near what was left of the market place.

South of Saigon, meanwhile,

an increase in Communist probing attacks was reported, with several sharp encounters in areas previously generally free of Communist infiltration. These forays, occurring in the principal rice-producing area of South Vietnam, further increased tensions here in the capital.

Reporting on armed incidents in the delta in the previous 24

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hours, a Saigon spokesman said yesterday that they included a clash near Can Tho, a provincial capital 125 miles southwest of here. He asserted that 92 of the attacking force had been killed, and put Government casualties at 5 wounded.

Closer to Saigon, Communist troops were reported continuing their efforts to sever Route 4, the major road connecting the delta with Saigon. They succeeded in cutting it for a few hours Wednesday about 18 miles from the city and reportedly did so again yesterday in the same general area.

But the road, a two-lane blacktop highway that winds through rice paddies now seasonally dry, was reopened later in the day.

The Saigon spokesman said that in all the incidents during the previous 24 hours, government troops had killed 105 of the opposing force while losing 17. He said also that 22 weapons had been captured.

Quiet Till Last Week

Until late last week, the Delta had been generally quiet, with Communist forces concentrating their efforts on the northern two-thirds of South Vietnam, where they scored major gains in the last month in brief fights or because of large-scale, unorganized South Vietnamese retreats.

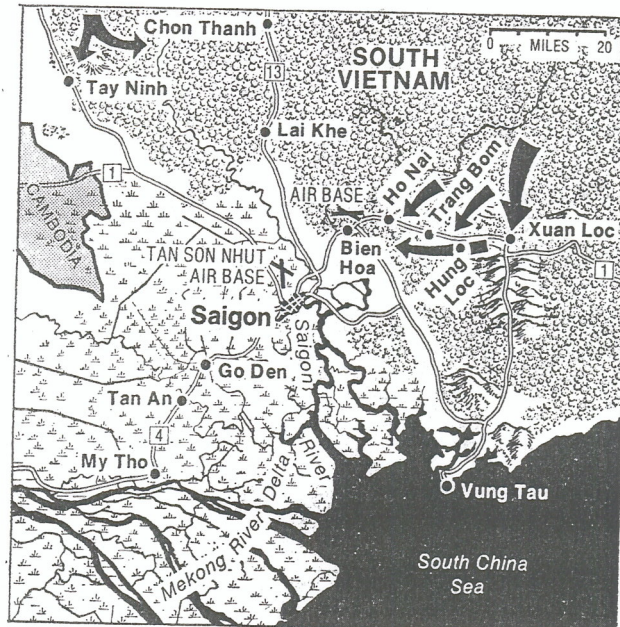
In many cases it took only a few rockets and mortar rounds—or just the sight of some strangers on the edge of town—to send civilians and soldiers into flight. The few units that did stand and fight were soon outflanked by Communists moving into areas vacated by retreating units.

There was some concern here in Saigon that the same might be happening in the battle for Xuan Loc, as indications were reported that Communist troops were bypassing Saigon units, slipping through abandoned rubber plantations, fields and dense jungle.

Northwest of Saigon, in the Tay Ninh area, Communist gunners sent more than 40 rockets into the city, damaging portions of the market and some houses. But Government troops reportedly continued to resist the Communist advances.

Intelligence sources at Tay Ninh reported large numbers of enemy trucks moving eastward from that area toward Chon Thanh in neighboring Binh Long Province. This could be a move to test the Saigon defense perimeter from the north, since the northwest has so far held.

In other military activity, South Vietnamese naval forces, cruising near Phan Thiet on the central coast, shelled a Communist convoy, reportedly destroying four trucks and two artillery pieces that were being towed.



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Fighting continued at Xuan Loc but some Communist forces were reported bypassing the provincial capital. Northwest of Saigon, Government troops continued to resist Communist advances toward Tay Ninh, while enemy trucks were reported moving eastward from the Tay Ninh area toward Chon Thanh.