

A Captain Tells of Flight From Xuan Loc

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

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TRANG BOM, South Vietnam, April 16—"There was nothing we could do," a South Vietnamese Army captain said here today as he sat by the side of the road.

"The Communists shelled us with thousands of rounds—thousands. Then they attacked this morning with two regiments of infantry. Our casualties were not light, so we ran through the jungle to escape."

The captain had arrived here with a small column of tanks, armored personnel carriers and trucks loaded with troops. They were the remnants of a regiment that had been defending a flank of Xuan Loc, the besieged provincial capital about 15 miles east of here. The city, now in ruins, is 38 miles northeast of Saigon.

Collapse in Morale Seen

Their retreat was part of what Government officers here said was a sudden collapse in the morale of men who had stubbornly held Xuan Loc and neighboring villages against an intensive North Vietnamese attack over the last week. Until today, Xuan Loc had been the Saigon army's first victory since the Communists began their offensive on March 8 and South Vietnamese forces abandoned the northern two-thirds of the country.

"The 18th Division has no more spirit left," the captain said wearily, speaking of the infantry division that together with a brigade of paratroops and some rangers has made up the Government force defending the Xuan Loc area.

"They are afraid," the captain went on. "They are running away."

In the distance shells from the Communists' artillery thudded into the surrounding rubber trees and scrub jungle.

'Refugees' Way Barred

Around the captain, on both sides of the two-lane blacktop road, thousands of refugees milled about behind a barbed wire barricade. They were prevented from going farther west because the Government military police had orders not to let them pass.

"You must remember the lesson of Da Nang and Nha Trang," said a military police officer at the roadblock. He was speaking of the way hundreds of thousands of refugees who poured into those two

cities on the coast in the face of advancing North Vietnamese forces had spread panic and helped lead to their cities' rapid abandonment by the Government.

The situation at Trang Bom is particularly critical because the town is situated just east of the large Roman Catholic community of Ho Nai, made up of people who fled from North Vietnam in 1954. Ho Nai runs into the city of Bien Hoa, which is only 15 miles from Saigon.

Thus if the refugees and fleeing soldiers were allowed to go on, they might indeed spread panic into the capital.

But the decision to hold the refugees here at Trang Bom angered the people who had fled.

"We have been in the jungle for three days, our houses have been destroyed and we are dying of hunger and thirst," said a Vietnamese Catholic priest in a black cassock. "It is a cruel thing to do to people who have run to join the Government side," he said bitterly.

To stop the refugees from pushing past the barbed-wire barricade, soldiers frequently fired bursts from their M-16 automatic rifles into the air. But few of the people paid much attention to either the

sharp reports of the rifles or the heavier, more ominous explosions of both South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese.

Most of the refugees, many of whom lay slumped under leafy rubber trees for shade, came from the Kiem Tan district in Neighboring Long Khanh Province. Xuan Loc is the capital of Long Khanh.

According to refugees and soldiers here, the North Vietnamese in the last two days have penetrated around Xuan Loc on a broad front and now control Route 1 west of the city for a distance of nine miles. People who had escaped reported that the North Vietnamese, mostly youths who appeared to be 16 or 17 years old, were moving with ease through the jungle under cover of heavy artillery bombardment.

"They were so confident that when they caught us they just let us go," a 37-year-old schoolteacher from Kiem Tan said. "They laughed at us for running. They said, 'Wherever you run, we will be there soon any-

way." The teacher was standing beside the road waiting, with little hope, for his father, who had gotten lost in their flight through the jungle. Next to him an empty army truck was parked.

Few Stragglers Appear

It too was waiting, the driver said, but for whatever stragglers from the 52d Regiment of the 18th Division might show up. The 52d Regiment had been guarding Route 20, which runs from Route 1 up to Kiem Tan, and was heavily hit in Communist attacks yesterday and early today.

After two hours, only a few soldiers from the regiment had appeared. There were equally few soldiers moving east along the road as reinforcements. It appeared that either the Government had no more troops, or it did not care to expand them here.

Most of the refugees here are Catholics who fled south in 1954. Some were openly bitter today about declining American aid.

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