

# Captured North Vietnamese Soldier Tells of His

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PLEIKU, South Vietnam, Feb. 16—When Pt. Bui Van Au left his native village near Hanoi last fall to begin the long march to South Vietnam, he says, his parents and relatives cried for a long time. For no soldier from their village had ever returned after infiltrating into the South.

Private Au's journey ended three days ago when his company of 80 men was spotted by an American observation plane in the Central Highlands near Kontum. Air strikes were called in, killing almost all of his comrades, and Private Au was captured by an American helicopter pilot who swooped down on the survivors.

Private Au, who says his mission was to bolster North Vietnamese strength in the Highlands in preparation for a major offensive, discussed his experiences on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in an unusual interview today. In the past, the South Vietnamese Army has seldom allowed interviews with enemy prisoners.

Although the Central Highlands has remained quiet this week, American and South Vietnamese officials in Pleiku, the headquarters of Military region II, which includes the Central Highlands area, still believe that the Communists will launch a major attack here by this weekend.

## Division Infiltrated

The capture of Private Au, and the discovery that his unit, the 304B Division, had just infiltrated into Kontum Province from North Vietnam, added to the expectation that Hanoi would launch its predicted Tet offensive in the Highlands.

"Actually, the Tet offensive has already begun," said John Paul Vann, the chief American official in Military Region II. "It began last week with a series of small-scale attacks in Binh Dinh Province on the coast and an attempt to cut the highway up to the Highlands."

Mr. Vann, a short, intense man, believes that some of the isolated South Vietnamese Ranger camps along the Cambodian and Laotian borders, such as Benhet, may be temporarily overrun.

But, he argued, the disparity is great between what the Communists have told their men they will do and what they are now capable of achieving. The Communists have somewhere between 35,000 and 60,000 men, most of them regular North Vietnamese soldiers, in the mountainous, jungle-covered Central Highlands.

But the South Vietnamese

and their allies have 220,000, and they are well prepared for any offensive, Mr. Vann asserts. "Actually, I welcome a Communist offensive," he said. "For after the enemy expends himself and loses many of his men, he has to stay quiet until next year and gives us a chance to expand our control."

Since a prolonged North Vietnamese siege of Fire Bases 5 and 6 in Kontum Province last spring, enemy activity in the Central Highlands has been at its lowest level since the build-up of the war in 1965, Mr. Vann added.

Private Au, who was interviewed with another member of his unit, Private Nguynne van Minh, in South Vietnamese headquarters in Pleiku, appeared tired and nervous, but in good health. He spoke through a South Vietnamese Army interpreter.

A slight, boyish-looking 20-year-old with close-cropped hair and an easy smile, Private Au said that his officers had told him very little about conditions in South Vietnam, except that his unit was to help liberate the South Vietnamese from the Americans.



Associated Press

John Paul Vann, the chief American official in Region II, said the Tet offensive had already begun.

"At home in my village, the people didn't pay much attention to the war," he said. "The war has been going on so long,

who knows when it will end. Besides, they are more interested in planting their crops."

Private Au, who was drafted last May, explained that he had not been happy about joining the army. "None of the soldiers from my village who have gone off to the South have ever returned, and I can remember only one time when anyone in the village got a letter from a relative who had been sent south." Private Minh told a similar story.

Other North Vietnamese prisoners have previously reported that until the last year or two the Ho Chi Minh Trail network has been largely a one-way

street, with few soldiers ever going back to the North.

Private Au's unit marched during the day, but it was hard going, with steep mountains and mud up to the men's knees. At first they got food, at stations along the way, but as they moved farther south they were given only rice and salt and were often hungry.

"We could hear air strikes in the distance," Private Minh reported, "but we never experienced any ourselves until three days ago. The worst problem was the fear—we didn't know what to expect—and all the marching. We got so tired."

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## Hard March South