

MAR 21 1972
NYTimes

ENEMY REPULSED IN HILLS NEAR HUE

Saigon's Forces Win Early
Round in Annual Struggle

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY
Special to The New York Times

FIREBASE PHU XUAN, South Vietnam, March 20 — South Vietnamese forces, after a week of sharp battles in the mountains west of Hue, appear to have won the first part of an annual struggle to prevent the Communist forces from attacking the populated lowland cities from their jungle base areas.

Battlefield activity in the hills south of this artillery base has tapered off in the last day or so, but South Vietnamese officers are asserting that between March 5 and yesterday, 513 North Vietnamese soldiers were killed in heavy fighting that also took the lives of 42 South Vietnamese soldiers and wounded 186 others.

More significant perhaps than the results of the fighting is the fact that the South Vietnamese have done it mostly by themselves this time.

The United States 101st Airborne Division, which used to provide the Vietnamese with rear-area assistance and with helicopters left the country earlier this year. In this operation the Vietnamese flew their own helicopters and provided most of their own air strikes, calling on the Americans only for 60 bombing strikes by B-52 and the aid of a few helicopter gunships, which they themselves do not have.

Name of Base Changed

Even the name of artillery base Phu Xuan, which has poured out thousands of rounds of 105-mm fire for the troops that did the fighting about six miles to the southwest, is indicative of the change. The American airborne troops used to call it Bastogne.

The fighting here has not been particularly large by the standards of war in this northern military region, where it is easy for the North Vietnamese to bring large forces into battle and reinforce them.

But senior American civilian and military advisers in the rear-area headquarters in Da-nang regard it as a hopeful sign that the South Vietnamese are assuming the sole burden of defending their two northern provinces.

"I think the North Vietnamese want to concentrate on Hue this summer," said one of these officials the other day, "and this year the South Vietnamese are going out to stop them before they can do it." The current operation west of Hue began March 5, before the end of the rainy season on the eastern side of the mountains and a month earlier than the South Vietnamese usually start their operations there.

The biggest clash, last weekend, pitted three battalions—roughly 2,000 soldiers—of the South Vietnamese Army's First Infantry Division against an approximately equal number of troops of the Sixth Independent North Vietnamese Army Regiment. The crucial battle occurred Friday and Saturday, at a hill called Cu Mong, or 640, for its height in meters.

According to the South Vietnamese regimental commander, Lieut. Col. Nguyen Bui Quang, who briefed a group of correspondents who had been flown here by the South Vietnamese Army, the weekend's fighting resulted in 235 North Vietnamese soldiers killed and a quantity of weapons captured.

His own troops suffered 15 killed and 70 wounded, he said. A half-dozen of the caskets, draped with South Vietnamese flags, were stacked up at the Hue Airport today for transportation back to cemeteries in Saigon.

Enemy Withdrawal Reported

"We used tactical air strikes and B-52's to cordon off the area to the south of the mountain," Colonel Quang said. "Then we advanced. We disputed each meter of terrain, trench by trench, and took the hill Sunday."

But before the hill was seized, the North Vietnamese counter-attacked with hundreds of rounds of mortar fire and with at least two battalions, and did not break off the fighting until yesterday.

Colonel Quang said that the Sixth North Vietnamese Regiment was withdrawing to the west, back toward its base areas in the Ashau Valley and across the border in Laos. He reported that in the last day or two his troops had met with only sporadic resistance, in the area of the weekend fighting.

There was little evidence of the fighting visible today in a quick tour of the area by helicopter, except for the long parallel craters where some of the B-52 raids had blasted away the trees from the steep hillsides.

A South Vietnamese A-37 fighter-bomber swooped in on Hill 640 to drop bombs on enemy positions remaining on the hill, but on the ground it was quiet today.

Back at the rear headquarters for the First Division, at Camp Nguyen Hue—which was Camp Eagle when the 101st Airborne was there—the commander, Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, said he did not think by any means that the fighting was finished.

"We think the Sixth Regiment has been reinforced by part of the 324th North Vietnamese Army Division, and the Fifth Independent Regiment is also there, so we think the enemy has the capability of launching more operations," he said.