

# Town of Hoaian Fell Even Before It Was Attacked

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PLEIKU, South Vietnam, April 20—Hoaian, a district capital, was yielded to North Vietnamese forces yesterday before they had even attacked it, a witness to the operation disclosed today, and the defending troops fled in disorder.

Hoaian, in the central coastal province of Binh Dinh, was abandoned to the Communists because the South Vietnamese High Command believed that reinforcements could have been drawn only from even more crucial areas.

An American present during the evacuation said enemy pressure had been mounting for 10 days but the expected attack had not materialized.

The decision to abandon Hoaian was made Tuesday when it became apparent that reinforcements would not reach the town, which was defended by the equivalent of four companies of regular troops—the mangled remains of two battalions of the 40th Regiment, 22d Division.

Abortive efforts were made on two occasions to break through the powerful North Vietnamese ring around the town, according to the source, who was evacuated to Pleiku, 70 miles to the southwest.

## Civilians in State of Panic

"Still, they did not attack us at Hoaian, the American said. "They were all around us in the hills, two kilometers away, and we knew they were massing. Civilians came to us in a state of panic, talking about the North Vietnamese who were out there. We lost all our militia units—they just piled up their arms and faded away."

"The South Vietnamese troops just wouldn't do anything offensive—no patrolling, no going out to meet the enemy, nothing," he added.

"The North Vietnamese out there, of course, were just the opposite. Once saw one of them

standing on a hill while an F-4 Phantom was coming down on him, and he stayed there, face to face, firing his rifle at it."

According to a supposedly secret evacuation plan, the defenders were to begin their withdrawal from Hoaian about noon yesterday, with armored personnel carriers leading the way. The force was to move along the road to the coast, establishing a new district headquarters on Route 1, the main north-south highway.

"If we could have gotten some reinforcements the day before," the American said, "it would have been a tremendous psychological help. When they didn't arrive, I knew we were in for trouble."

The departure was evidently no secret. As a throng of vehicles, soldiers and civilians poured out of the area, the North Vietnamese were waiting.

## 'Our Side Broke and Ran'

"They attacked and poured in all kinds of fire," the American related. "Our side broke and ran. The armored personnel carriers, which were supposed to stay with the troops, just headed up the road at full speed, with the commander on one of them."

"By the time American armed helicopters arrived, the only radio that could have guided their strikes was out of action."

The American said that it was the South Vietnamese forces' first contact with the North Vietnamese army and they "fell apart."

For two weeks heavy casualties are said to have been inflicted on the enemy in Binh Dinh, Pleiku and Kontum Provinces, in the central part of the country, but there have been other serious reverses for the Government side.

The roads in the area, which had been cleared by American units and were generally safe until two years ago, are rapidly returning to the critical situa-

tion that prevailed in 1965, when American ground forces formally entered the war.

The most dangerous roadblock is on Route 19, the arterial road that winds eastward from Pleiku through the mountains to Ankhe and then descends to the coastal valley ending at the port of Quinhon, on the South China Sea. All of Central Vietnam, including military installations here in Pleiku, are usually supplied on it.

For 11 days, a well-entrenched North Vietnamese force has kept the road closed at a point about eight miles east of Ankhe. A strong South Korean force has suffered some 200 casualties in fruitless ef-

orts to dislodge the roadblock. Despite an airlift, which keeps the supplies flowing to Pleiku and elsewhere, the diet of the soldiers here has become somewhat bleak; even coffee has disappeared.

Worst of all, in the view of military experts here, the real enemy offensive is yet to come. Intelligence on where the main enemy units are operating is poor.

The Government soldiers, many of them inexperienced and reluctant fighters, are spread thin on extremely difficult terrain. At the same time the North Vietnamese continue to get reinforcements from across the nearby Laotian frontier.