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SAIGON'S FORCES SAID TO RETREAT TOWARD KONTUM

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South Vietnamese Reeling
Before Tank-Led Assault
in Central Highlands

ANOTHER KEY ROAD CUT

Invaders Have Seized More
Than Half of 3 Provinces
—4 Die in U.S. Copter

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Tuesday, April 25—South Vietnamese forces in the Central Highlands, reeling from an enemy assault with tanks and artillery on their positions near Dakto, were reported falling back southeastward toward the provincial capital of Kontum last night.

Reports from American and South Vietnamese officers in the field said that the forward command post of the South Vietnamese 22d Division at Tancanh, 25 miles northwest of Kontum, came under point-blank fire at dawn yesterday from some North Vietnamese tanks of an estimated force of 20.

In the fourth week of their offensive in South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese now effectively hold more than half the territory of three South Vietnamese provinces: Kontum, Quangtri in the north just below the demilitarized zone, and Binhlong, 40 to 60 miles north of Saigon.

Airfield Abandoned

At Pleiku, John Paul Vann, the senior American adviser in the Central Highlands, said that the attack on Tancanh began at 7 A.M. and that by the afternoon, the North Vietnamese were largely in control of it. He said Government forces had also abandoned an airfield called Dakto 2, three miles west of Tancanh, after the North Vietnamese infantrymen and tanks attacked it.

Nine American advisers were evacuated from Tancanh, Mr. Vann reported, and all the South Vietnamese artillery pieces based there were destroyed to prevent their use by the North Vietnamese.

The United States command said that one American helicopter was shot down at Dakto yesterday and that its four crewmen were killed.

The South Vietnamese High Command said that its forces had been engaged in heavy fighting all around Tancanh and that they had abandoned their positions at Dienbinh, the next town south on Route 14 on the way to Kontum.

Reinforcements Thwarted

Route 14 was cut at several other points between there and Kontum, as well as farther south between Kontum and Pleiku, and it appeared that the province had been effectively cut in two by the enemy attacks yesterday.

South Vietnamese paratroop reinforcements that tried to reach Tancanh by road both from the north and the south yesterday apparently did not succeed, according to reports reaching military headquarters in Saigon.

Strikes on enemy positions

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by American and South Vietnamese planes were severely cut back by cloudy weather, according to officers in Pleiku, and large-scale B-52 strikes through the overcast failed to stop the North Vietnamese tank onslaught.

The attacking force was estimated by Mr. Vann to be of division size, or about 10,000 men. It skirted the string of Government bases on a ridge west of Tancanh and Kontum designed to prevent enemy advances from jungle hideouts in northeastern Cambodia. Thus the direct assault on the South quarters was clearly unexpected.

As the North Vietnamese continued to press their offensive, there were these developments:

In the air war the United States command said American planes carried out more than 100 strikes yesterday against targets in North Vietnam, including some by B-52's against warehouses, storage areas and a railroad bridge at Thanhhoa, 80 miles south of Hanoi. The bridge has withstood years of bombing by Air Force and Navy planes. One B-52 was reported lightly damaged and had to land at Danang, as North Vietnamese ground crews fired 10 surface-to-air missiles at the attacking planes—this brought to 600 the number of missiles the American command says have been fired at planes over Laos, North Vietnam and South Vietnam since the offensive began at the end of March. Sunday afternoon, the command said, an F-4 Phantom was shot down east of Donghoi and the guided-missile destroyer Benjamin Stodert was struck by North Vietnamese coastal military fire but no one was injured. [Newspapers in Hanoi said two American planes had been shot down while on bombing raids in the Donghoi area and the province to the north of it, Agence France-Presse reported.]

On the northern front in Quangtri province, three North Vietnamese tanks forded the Cua Viet west of the South Vietnamese lines of defense at Dongha Sunday but were reportedly destroyed by Government armored and infantry forces. Saigon said 131 North Vietnamese were killed and two taken prisoner, while seven South Vietnamese were killed and 44 wounded.

On the third major front, just 60 miles north of Saigon, South Vietnamese forces were reported still in control of the southern half of Anloc after another small tank assault by the North Vietnamese Sunday. But fighting spread well to the southwest at Dautieng, where an attack on a forward headquarters of the South Vietnamese 18th Division was reported repelled yesterday, and five B-52 missions dropped hundreds of bombs on North Vietnamese troop concentrations around Anloc.

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All Reserves Used

All of South Vietnam's strategic reserve forces have now been thrown into battle on the three major fronts, and in the last few days there has been some hasty reshuffling.

On Sunday the Saigon command withdrew some of the paratroops that had been manning positions in the Highlands and sent them south to reinforce the defenses closer to Saigon, and transferred some ranger troops down from the Quangtri front to fill in the Highlands.

The commitment of the strategic reserve as well as some other units normally assigned to guarding populated areas has allowed enemy forces to make major gains in several districts in the Mekong Delta and in Binh Dinh Province on the central coast, where the Vietcong flag is reported flying over Hoaian District, which was given up without a fight last week.

Regular Government forces are said to be weakest and worst led in the Central Highlands, and the 22d Division, whose command post fell yesterday, has been called one of the worst.

Fire Bases Battered

What has happened to the Government forces in Tancah, Dakto, and artillery bases on the ridge west of there—Fire Bases 5 and 6, Delta and Yankee—was not clear last night. All came under intense bombardment early yesterday.

American advisers in the Highlands were engaged in trying to assess what had happened, and the small helicopter of Mr. Vann, the senior United States official in the area had to land once because it came under enemy ground fire and a second time because South Vietnamese troops trying to flee Tancah grabbed the skids as it was taking off and tipped it over. Mr. Vann was unhurt.

A South Vietnamese officer in Pleiku who was interviewed by telephone yesterday said that the Tancah post was penetrated by tanks at dawn.

"It was one of the worst days yet for the South Vietnamese forces," said an officer in Saigon.

North Vietnamese Crafts Sunk

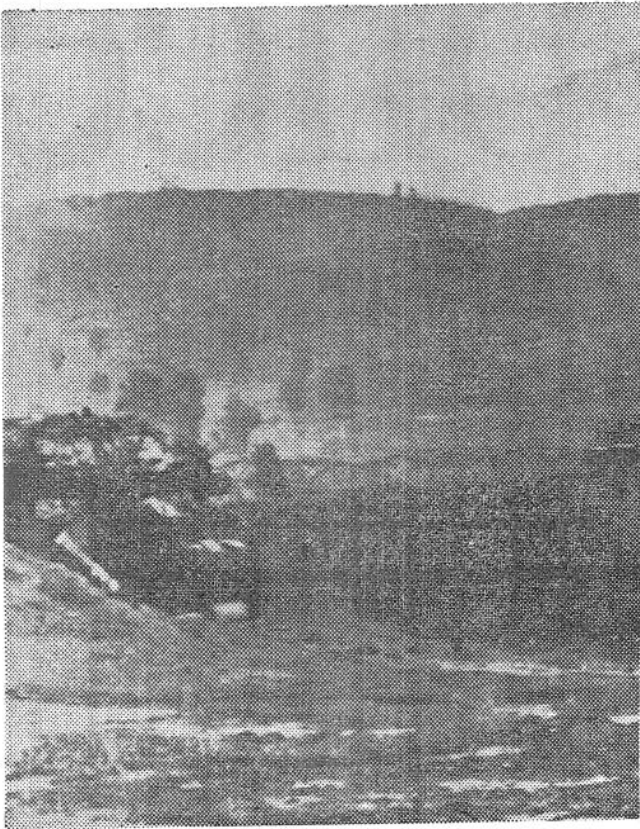
SAIGON, April 24 (UPI)—A South Vietnamese Navy destroyer sank a North Vietnamese trawler today in the Gulf of Thailand near Phuquoc Island and captured 16 of the 22 crewmen aboard, military spokesmen said. Secondary explosions indicated the 100-foot craft was carrying ammunition, they added.

Cambodian Post Said to Fall

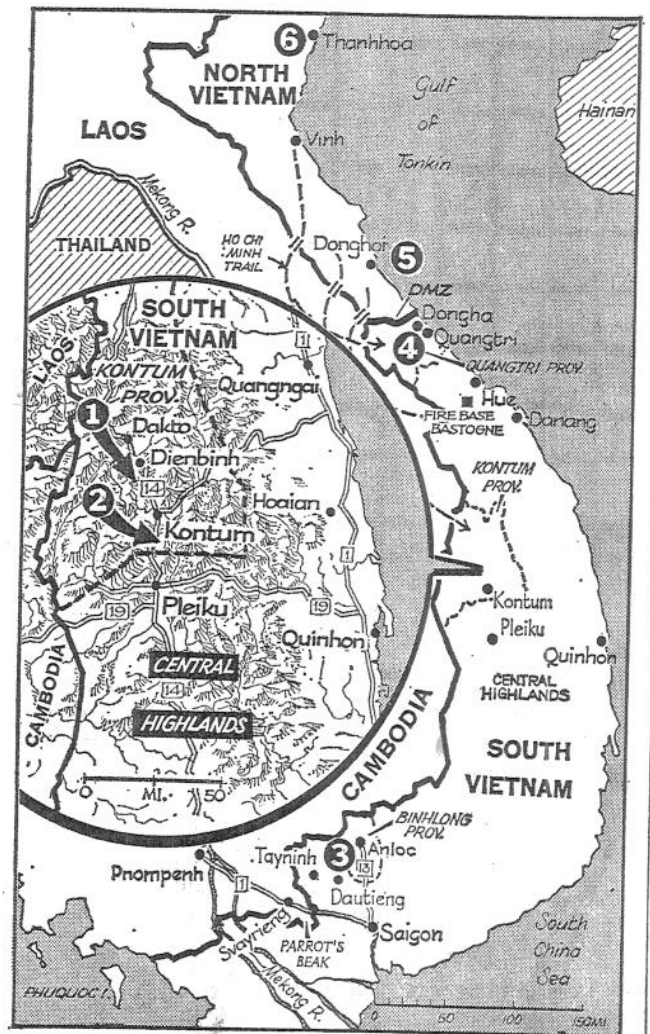
PNOMPENH, Cambodia, April 24 (UPI)—Enemy troops attacking in waves reportedly overran a Government outpost west of the besieged provincial capital of Svayrieng today, giving them control of a 60-mile Cambodian stretch of Route 1 connecting Pnompenh and Saigon.

A Cambodian command spokesman said the fate of Government troops at the outpost at Spean Tram was unknown. The outpost is six miles west of Svayrieng, where the situation was called "still critical."

Fighting during the last week has given the enemy effective control of all Cambodian territory east of the Mekong River along the border with South Vietnam, with the exception of Government strongholds such as Svayrieng.



BEFORE TANCANH BASE FELL: South Vietnamese tank (Friday. Base was overrun by North Vietnamese heavy tanks.)



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Attacking enemy units in Central Highlands (1 on inset map) forced Saigon units to retreat toward Kontum. Key road between Kontum and Pleiku (2) was cut by foe. South Vietnamese clung to half of Anloc (3) and in the north fought off attacks in Kongha area (4). U.S. jet was downed near Donghoi (5), and over 100 strikes were flown over North Vietnam, some near Thanhhoa (6).