



A Big One for The ARVN Forces

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AFTER an initial success, the North Vietnamese Army has lost the first battle for Quang Tri and Hue. There is no mistaking Hanoi's heavy defeat, if you spend three days seeing the ugly sights of war and talking to commanders of all ranks in the two provinces where the enemy made his main attack.

The loss of the first battle does not necessarily imply that the North Vietnamese Army will also lose the second battle. But given the character of some of the stuff people at home are now being told, the plain fact of ARVN's victory to date needs to be plainly recorded.

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UNDER the enormous confusion of the bitter day-to-day fighting, the pattern of what has happened so far is also very plain. The initial enemy success was scored against the newly formed South Vietnamese 3rd Division.

Units of the 3rd were holding the string of firebases along the DMZ. The firebases were softened up with the kind of immensely heavy artillery barrages the North Vietnamese have never used before. In the ensuing assaults by the enemy, the firebases then fell without exception.

Fortunately, the 3rd Division's able commander, Brigadier General Vu Van Giai reformed what remained of his force. Meanwhile, the corps commander, General Hoang Xuan Lam, rushed reinforcements northward.

On April 4 this produced the situation that roughly still endures today. Despite the regrouping and reinforcement, almost

everything still favored the North Vietnamese. But at this point the enemy commander on this front, General Chu Van Tan, made his fatal mistake. His mistake was to pause and so he lost his momentum, and with it, his best chance.

Tan's pause lasted until April 9, when he mounted a massive and classic attack. One division, led by tanks, thrust south toward Dong Ha. Another division, also led by tanks, thrust eastward at a point in the line guarded by ARVN marines at Firebase Pedro. Still another division, with still more tanks, pressed forward at Firebase Bastogne.

All three North Vietnamese columns were beaten back with fearful losses.

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THE BIG THRUST on April 9 was a dismal, sanguinary failure for over a week thereafter. There was hard fighting, but there was no important enemy thrust. Then on April 18, Tan ordered a second major thrust. It was patterned on the first. But this time the North Vietnamese had lost both drive and hitting power and the second thrust was easily repelled.

Since then, the South Vietnamese have been moving forward, cautiously and methodically, and Tan's forces have been losing ground. The first battle for Quang Tri and Hue is really over, in fact.

One must wait to see the result of the second battle. Yet it is worth noting that the biggest single battle of the present fighting has been, on balance, a solid, deeply reassuring success for the South Vietnamese Army. There have been little battles elsewhere that were not successful. But to date, ARVN has won the big one.