

# South Vietnamese Drop Napalm on Own Troops

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

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TRANGBANG, South Vietnam, June 8 — Standing in the company command post here today, Sgt. Nguyen Van Hai watched incredulously as a South Vietnamese plane mistakenly dropped flaming napalm right on his troops and a cluster of civilians.

In an instant five women and children and half a dozen South Vietnamese soldiers were badly burned, their skin peeling off in huge pink and black chunks.

"This is terrible, the worst I've ever seen!" said Sergeant Hai, a six-year veteran, as he tried to comfort a wounded man. "It is very bad for my soldiers — now they will not want to fight."

In fact, as the flames from the napalm flickered out, his soldiers ceased firing at the North Vietnamese soldiers entrenched nearby in this district town, 40 miles northwest of Saigon. The South Vietnamese, members of the 50th Regiment of the 25th Infantry Division, have been trying for three days to drive the enemy out of Trangbang's marketplace and reopen Highway 1 between Saigon and Tay Ninh, on the Cambodian border.

## Major Drive Feared

Although overshadowed by the more spectacular battles at Hue, in the North, Kontum, in the Central Highland and Anloc, farther North of Saigon, the recent fighting here at Trangbang and along nearby parts of Highway 1 in Haunghia Province is causing serious anxiety to allied officials in Saigon.

They fear that the North Vietnamese, who are operating in small company-size units, may be cutting the highway in preparation for a major drive on Saigon from the Parrot's Beak section of Cambodia, adjacent to Haunghia Province.

Over the last week, American intelligence analysts say, large numbers of North Vietnamese from the Fifth, Sev-

enth and Ninth Divisions, have been pulled back from Anloc and regrouped in the Parrot's Beak area.

Accidental bombing like today's is not a rare occurrence in Vietnam, but such mistakes are seldom reported in the official United States or South Vietnamese daily military communiqués.

## An Earlier Accident

Yesterday, for example South Vietnamese Air Force A-37 Dragonfly fighters mistakenly bombed South Vietnamese paratroopers seven miles southwest of Mychanh, on the northernmost defense line above Hue, according to a Saigon officer. Nine paratroopers were killed and 21 wounded, but the accident was not officially announced.

Sergeant Hai said that he could see little excuse for the incident at Trangbang, which began when a forward air controller, flying over the area in a small observation plane, marked the enemy positions with two white phosphorous rockets. From the ground it was unclear whether the air controller was American or South Vietnamese.

At the same time, the South Vietnamese troops identified their own lines by shooting off a purple smoke grenade. The opposing positions, judging by the two sets of smoke, lay about 150 yards apart, with a large pink pagoda marking the South Vietnamese soldiers' most forward area.

Two A-1E Skyraiders—single-engine, propeller-driven aircraft now flown only by the South Vietnamese—then began their bombing runs, diving in steep arcs until they almost touched the tree-tops. The first Skyraider dropped six bombs just to the left of the pagoda, more than a hundred yards off target. Then the second, with the napalm, swooped even farther over Government lines, unloading its deadly canisters

beside a yellow masonry farmhouse serving as the South Vietnamese command post.

A South Vietnamese soldier who escaped without being burned said to an American visitor: "Vietnamese pilots Number 10"—which in soldiers' slang means the worst.

Back up the highway toward Saigon, a large crowd of travelers had gathered, blocked by the fighting from continuing on their way. A 10-year-old boy was selling ice-cream cones, and passengers on a bus had littered the road with the husks of fruit that another peddler had sold them.

Some of the passengers had made the trip up the highway for each of the last three days without getting through, a familiar experience for war-weary Vietnamese.

"This war has been going on longer than any war in history," remarked a man who was squatting on the highway with his family. "We Vietnamese have suffered terribly. Why is it we cannot get together and settle this war?"

Some of the napalm had hit a large blue signboard, leaving sticky grayish shreds on it. The sign read in Vietnamese and English: "The people and authorities of Trangbang welcome visitors."

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**MISTAKE:** Misdirected strike of bombs by South Vietnamese Skyraider exploding on Highway 1 near Trangbang



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**ACCIDENTAL NAPALM ATTACK:** South Vietnamese children and soldiers fleeing Trangbang on Route 1 after a South Vietnamese Skyraider dropped bomb. The girl at center had torn off burning clothes. Details on Page 9.