

## Reporter's View

# A New Look at Red Slaughter

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### Saigon

Hundreds of South Vietnamese were killed in April trying to escape from Quang Tri city before its fall. The slaughter was indiscriminate, by definition, a massacre.

But from evidence at the scene and in the aftermath, the action April 29-30 was not "a deliberate North Vietnamese army massacre of helpless civilians," as State Department spokesman John King described it.

The carnage suggested a cold-blooded North Vietnamese resolve to stop all traffic on Highway 1, in callous disregard of civilian targets. But there was no evidence of a deliberate intent to single out the civilian refugees.

### REPLY

In Washington, the State Department said it stood by King's statement.

More than half the victims were South Vietnamese soldiers and Washington's estimate of 1000 to 2000 dead seems inflated.

Interviews with survivors of the massacre and a visual inspection of the death site indicate 200 to 600 dead. Panic was a major contributing factor to the bloodshed.

North Vietnamese forces surrounded Quang Tri and cut Highway 1, its southern escape route to Hue, a week before the fall of the province capital.

South Vietnamese marines who were given the job of reopening the highway fought their way to within eight miles of Quang Tri. Three convoys of South Vietnamese troops and civilians tried to flee southward on Highway 1 between April 24 and 30.

### AMBUSH

They were ambushed by North Vietnamese forces entrenched on both sides of the highway, four to eight miles southeast of Quang Tri.

This correspondent was with South Vietnamese marines who fought their way to the southernmost ambush site April 30. Wounded survivors who passed the advancing marines said their convoy had been hit by mines, mortars, rocket grenades and small-arms fire from North Vietnamese dug in as close as 20 yards to the roadway.

According to the State Department, the North Vietnamese used anti-personnel artillery shells with fuses set for air bursts, which "shredded the refugee column."

But frontline witnesses reported no air bursts before April 30. Any such would have killed troops of the enemy's own ambush force as well as the fleeing South Vietnamese.

Air bursts were fired by

North Vietnamese gunners April 30 - May 1 and many civilians were hit. By then the civilians were intermingled with South Vietnamese rangers fighting their way out of Quang Tri.

Only a small portion of one ambushed convoy was visible from the South Vietnamese lines in those last hectic days before the fall of Quang Tri.

#### SLAUGHTER

The full savagery of the slaughter did not become apparent until two months later, when Saigon's paratroopers returned to the scene at the spearhead of a counteroffensive. This correspondent was with the paratroopers.

Hundreds of wrecked vehicles and corpses littered a four - mile stretch of Highway 1. Four out of five vehicles were military — jeeps, trucks, tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery pieces and ambulances. Civilian vehicles included buses, motorcycles and bicycles.

Civilian and military vehicles were jumbled so close together it was obvious the North Vietnamese could not fire on one without hitting the other.

#### PANIC

The concentration of wreckage at certain points also indicated panic on the part of the South Vietnamese.

Convoy drivers appeared to have been so intent on fleeing Quang Tri they continued to drive into withering fire even after lead vehicles were hit and the highway was blocked.

Graves registration workers found 186 civilians dead at ambush sites. Of these, 76 were claimed by relatives. The other 110 were buried in a mass ceremony at Phong Dien August 1.

#### TOLL

It is not known how many military dead were recovered. South Vietnamese officials did not announce the military toll, and informants only knew of a burial service for 40 unidentified soldiers.

It appears, however, that most of the victims were soldiers because most of the wrecked vehicles were military.

Several hundred bodies are believed to have been destroyed by decomposition over a two-month period in Quang Tri's searing dry season and by napalm dropped by American planes to prevent the enemy from using South Vietnamese military equipment at the ambush sites.

All this would seem to account for a maximum estimate of 600 dead. This is based on visual inspection by this reporter, interviews and the accounts of other experienced field reporters.

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