

Vietnam's Crippled 'Cobra' Tamed

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Saigon—The tough killer-cop they called "the Cobra" has become as gentle as a kitten.

Maj. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, remembered by the world because of a famous photograph that showed him shooting a Viet Cong prisoner in a Saigon street, now spends his days on visits to orphanages and children's hospitals with candy and ice cream bought from his own pocket.

"Loan is a hopeless cripple himself . . . he identifies with crippled kids," said an American doctor who has witnessed his visit to the prosthetics center where war victims and children with birth defects are fitted with braces and artificial limbs.

The scene is always the same. Loan arrives unannounced in a three-jeep convoy loaded down with cases of soda and boxes of candy and ice cream. He braces himself, and bent over his canes, he hobbles among the children while his aides distribute the goodies.

"He's been here a couple of times," said the Rev. Robert Crawford, a priest from



Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of 1968 shows Maj. Gen. Loan shooting a Vietcong prisoner in a Saigon street.

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Philadelphia who runs a home for 85 youngsters crippled with polio. "The kids never saw so much ice cream in their lives. Loan's face just lights up as he moves among them. Each time he comes, the nuns stand by in horror, figuring they'll be up all night looking after dozens of tummy ache cases.

'Kids His World'

"He always seems reluctant to leave. His aides tell us the kids, the crippled ones, are his world now. He understands them."

Still independent and furtive as in the days when he was chief of South Vietnam's national police, Loan declines all interviews on his charity work with cripple children and steadfastly refuses to have reporters or photographers accompany him on his hospital visits.

"If he sees a camera anywhere around, he turns the jeeps around and heads back to his house at Tansonhut," said a Vietnamese colleague in the Defense Ministry. "Loan doesn't care a damn any more what the world thinks of him."

A Vietnamese nun with the Sisters of Charity, who watched him pick out the most deformed child in her ward to spoon-feed ice cream, thought perhaps the general was "lonely like that little girl. It's more than just the friendship of two crippled people; it's as if only they understand each other."

Ruthless Politician

Fierce and shrewd, Loan got his nickname "the Cobra" for his swift, ruthless suppression of the 1966 Buddhist riots in Saigon, Hue and Danang that threatened to topple the regime of his close friend, then-Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky.

Loan swooped down on the pagodas where arms were being stockpiled in the same secret way he now swoops down on orphanages and hospitals.

At one time he was the most powerful politician in Vietnam outside Independence Palace itself. In addition to heading the national police, he was director of military security with power

to arrest and imprison people without a warrant. Loan moved so aggressively in cutting down enemies of Nguyen Van Thieu and his vice presidential running mate Ky in the months before the 1967 presidential elections that the U.S. Embassy maneuvered behind the scenes to curtail his power.

Those were the days when the roly-poly Loan gloried in another title, "the Hatchet."

Famous Photograph

His face, and that of the Vietcong prisoner he killed at point-blank range with a revolver in the 1968 Tet offensive, became known throughout the world through the Pulitzer Prize photo taken that February day by Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams.

Three months later, in the mini-Tet offensive, Loan provided an example to his men by moving forward alone, ahead of a tank, down an alley of fishing shacks where Vietcong snipers

were holed up and firing on the buildings of the Agriculture Ministry on the outskirts of Saigon.

There was a burst of automatic weapons fire and Loan was carried from the alley.

For the next several years, Loan underwent repeated surgery for his damaged spine and crippled legs, including two operations at Washington's Walter Reed Hospital.

As his condition grew worse, friends revealed, Loan became moody and bitter. He often told his comrade and fellow recluse Ky that the world remembered the prisoner he shot but quickly forgot that on the same day, his closest friend, an officer who commanded the armored corps training school, was beheaded by the Vietcong and his wife and five of their six children were killed by grenades thrown into their house.

Now saddled with his infirmities, the man who once

was an air force general leading Skyraider bombing raids has a title, an office and a make-work job in the Saigon Defense Ministry.

Sources in the ministry say Loan's condition has worsened in recent months, that his legs have begun to

atrophy and his black moods have become blacker.

The tough cop, they say lives only for those kids on crutches and braces in the homes and hospitals all over town—especially the ones as hopeless and lonely as himself.