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Months After Siege, Anloc a Silent Ruin

By Peter Onnos

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ANLOC, Jan. 10 — The long siege of Anloc is ended and today the city is a shred of government-held property in a swath of bomb-scarred no-man's-land.

U.S. commanders and South Vietnamese President Thieu hailed the battle of Anloc last spring and summer as a brilliant victory, but the only way into the city is still by helicopter and the garrison of militia and rangers patrol only a few miles in any direction. There is too much talk of cease-fire for greater risks.

Anloc, the capital of Binhlong Province, never figured much in the fighting

before the Communist offensive last spring. Then, in what may have the last major offensive of the war, it was attacked by the North Vietnamese, battered by both sides and wiped out.

On one day in May, more than 7,000 artillery rounds hit the town, military authorities reported. It has been two weeks now since the last Communist round was fired. The fury, at least, has passed.

The bodies have finally been collected into mass graves. There are 1,000 dead in a covered hole across a dusty roadway from rubble that was once the provincial hospital. Hundreds more have been buried where there used to be a market.

An official guess is that 3,000 civilians died.

A small stone soldier, a memorial to the fallen of a previous conflict, still stands on its concrete pedestal, a lonely relief against the prevailing bleakness.

A simple, stucco Catholic church also came through largely intact and on Christmas Day, officers said, it was crowded with Vietnamese soldiers. Very few were Christians, but they came anyway and no one really knows why.

When the church bell chimes in a wooden tower as it did yesterday afternoon, it sounds hollow in the empty streets.

In the outskirts, countless acres of rubber trees, neatly

lined in rows on the orders of the French planters who put them there decades ago, now are twisted and crushed into the red dirt. Here and there is the hulk of a tank, a truck, a helicopter, a civilian bus.

Anloc's 40,000 residents are gone, except for a few of the very old who couldn't bear to flee. In all, said Col. Nguyen Thong Thach, the province chief, there are 360 civilians in the town, mostly merchants selling beer and cigarettes to the soldiers at inflated prices.

Bunkers and Huts

The government troops, a total of about 6,500, live in bunkers. The civilians camp in meager huts. No one yet cares to rebuild, so lush red

bougainvillea winds wildly around the debris of ruined homes.

A splintered scaffold rests against the remains of a two-story building where construction must have stopped on the day the destruction began.

Second Front

The bombardment of Anloc started in early April when the North Vietnamese opened a second major front in their spring offensive. A major push had not been expected in this area.

It was said they wanted Anloc as capital of their provisional government, that they would raise the flag only 60 miles from Saigon. They used tanks and heavy artillery and about three infantry divisions in the assault, but slowly they were driven back.

The surrounded, outnumbered

is bound to be a struggle about who goes where, officers said.

"It is one of the imponderables of the cease-fire," said

bered South Vietnamese held together, while the United States hammered the area with massive air strikes on a scale comparable to the raids last month on Hanoi and Haiphong. The pounding went on for weeks that became months and then subsided in mid-summer.

As the South Vietnamese defenders were worn down in fighting that at times went house by house, the government mounted a multidivision relief column and sent it up Highway 13. The two-lane byway became a bloody symbol of futility. The column would inch forward, the Communists would strike back.

A few troops finally made it, but the divisions have long since been withdrawn. From here to Chanthanh, the nearest town 15 miles to the south, Highway 13 is deserted. Looking down from above, there is nothing moving, no sign of life at all.

Locninh Spared

To the north seven miles, just this side of the Cambodian border, is Locninh where the Communists have set up an administration. The town was spared obliteration because it was seized so fast, but South Vietnamese officers say the population (about 10,000 at its peak) has been drifting out complaining of food shortages.

If a cease-fire finally does take place, the people of Anloc will want to come back. Many are from surrounding villages that are held by the Communists, many have their fields where only Communists troops patrol. There

Lt. Col. William Nolde, the ranking U.S. adviser of the five that are here" and nobody has any idea how it will work out."

For the moment then, Anloc is suspended in time. The battle is over, but the peace has not yet begun.