

THE WORLD

THE WAR

Picking Up the Pieces

Still stunned by the speed and brutality of the Communists' countrywide onslaught, South Viet Nam and its allies last week began the enormous task of recovery. The job was not made easier by the fact that no one knew for sure exactly what had happened, or why; nor was there any certainty that it would not happen again. The full significance of the Communist general offensive still hung on the next move by North Viet Nam's Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap—and whether he would or would not mount an assault on the U.S. Marine position at Khe Sanh.

Whatever Giap is up to—and weeks may pass before the outline of his campaign becomes apparent—he has already undeniably succeeded in devastating a large part of Viet Nam. With roads out and bridges down, telephones dead and all other kinds of communications clogged, the South Vietnamese are still painfully piecing together the extent of their human and material losses. At least 3,000 civilians were killed and another 350,000 made homeless, adding to the country's already overburdened refugee rolls. Hospitals overflowed with some 7,000 wounded civilians. Food was in short supply in some places, private businesses and public services at a standstill in others. The roll of cities and towns nearly literally leveled to the ground reads like a grim Vietnamese gazetteer.

Pleiku, a highland town of 66,000, was 50% destroyed and 11,000 of its people made homeless. Ban Me Thuot was 25% destroyed, had over 500 civilian dead and 20,000 refugees. In the Delta, Vinh Long was 25% destroyed and burdened with 14,000 new refugees. Ben Tre (pop. 35,000) was one of the hardest hit towns in all Viet Nam: 45% destroyed, nearly 1,000 dead, and 10,000 homeless. Many sections of Saigon were heavily damaged and 120,000 people left homeless. Estimates of the damage to Hué ran as high as 80%. One out of five of Dalat's 82,000 people was without a roof over his head.

The U.S. Naked. If the instructions and exhortations to his soldiers before the battles can be credited, Giap's ambitions in the general offensive were boundless. The attackers were led to believe that they were really going to take and hold the cities and towns and bring the war to a quick and victorious end. The South Vietnamese government was to be smashed. The Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) was expected to desert to the Viet Cong in wholesale units. The Communists confidently anticipated that the population would welcome the attackers in a great popular uprising. The result would leave

the U.S. naked as Giap's only remaining antagonist in Viet Nam.

Nothing of the kind happened. And to further coat Giap's pill with bitterness, he took losses that most other states' armies would consider unacceptable. The allies estimated that more than 27,000 Communists died in the attacks and, even allowing for considerable inflation of the figure, the ratio of enemy dead to those of the allies was worse than 7 or 8 to 1. Of the 28 provincial capitals seized across the country, not one remained totally in enemy hands. An astonishing total of more than 5,000 Communist suspects were taken. By contrast, the allied dead numbered 2,707—920 of them Americans, 1,733 South Vietnamese and 54 other allied soldiers.

A Matter of Mystique. On the other hand, Giap scored some very substantial gains. Ever since the U.S. came in force to Viet Nam, General Westmoreland's oft-reiterated strategy has been built on denying the Communists a major victory and assuring the South Vietnamese that the Communists could not hope to occupy even a district capital for more than a few hours. In their assault on the cities, the Communists did better than that, and nearly two weeks after the initial attack, the Viet Cong flag still flew over portions of Hué, with all its symbolic significance as the country's ancient capital.

In his blitzkrieg, Giap showed that not even American power could protect urban Vietnamese from Viet Cong guns. The demonstration equally undermined the South Vietnamese government's stature in the minds of many South Vietnamese. Whatever the harsh military facts of the campaign's outcome, the attacks enhanced the mystique of the Viet Cong as a stealthy, dedicated foe, unmindful of death. The V.C. took the initiative away from the allies and, temporarily at least, reversed the image of allied momentum in the war. Pacification will inevitably be set back by the immediate priority of reconstruction. Most important, perhaps, Giap managed—whether ultimately for his good or ill—to create in Washington and across the U.S. a fresh and profound agonizing about the war.

Asking for Arms. As damaging to Giap as his losses was the failure of the populace to rise—a failure that prevented him from consolidating his early gains in the streets. In some places in Saigon, Hué and Dalat, networks of sympathizers aided the raiders' infiltration and guided, fed and hid them until they struck. But the great mass of the country's city dwellers, long accustomed to thinking of war as something that happened only to peasants out in the paddies, rejected the Viet Cong call to arms. Their first and human response was to take no sides at all, simply to

lock their doors and hide in order to stay alive.

But now that the bulk of the street fighting is over, growing numbers of civilians are coming out angry and incensed at the Viet Cong. South Vietnamese police are receiving an unprecedented number of telephone calls and scribbled messages tipping them off to Viet Cong hideouts. Some civilian groups such as the Confederation of Vietnamese Workers came forward and asked for arms to aid in the defense of the cities, and the government is considering the creation of a home guard, provided that a way can be found to keep its weapons from falling into the hands of the Viet Cong. In Qui Nhon, more than 1,500 townspeople gathered to demonstrate in support of the government. And defeated Presidential Candidate Dr. Phan Khac Suu, accused of being a Viet Cong sympathizer, led a host of Vietnamese politicians usually at bitter odds with the government in condemning the Communist attacks and calling for national unity.

Not a Single Unit. Communist hopes that the South Vietnamese army would crumble under the onslaught proved equally hollow. Although nearly half the ARVN soldiers were away from their posts throughout the country on four-day Tet leaves, those on duty fought

JOHN CANTWELL



Forlorn amid the rubble of their former homes, destroyed in a savage battle between ARVN troops and Communists, these Saigonese suddenly find themselves refugees in their own city.



Devastated by fire and shell, the buildings of Qui Nhon, a coastal city of 111,000, mutely recall the recent Viet Cong assault.

WALLY TERET



Children form a futile bucket brigade to save their father's machine shop in the Cholon section of Saigon, seized by the Reds and bombed by the allies.



bravely and well—and in fact bore the brunt of the subsequent battles in the streets and took the majority of allied casualties. There was not a single instance of an ARVN unit surrendering or going over to the invaders.

The crisis also brought about a stepped-up mobilization, which the U.S. military command has long encouraged. President Nguyen Van Thieu announced that henceforth every able-bodied man over 17 years of age would receive military training, also ended deferments for students and civil servants. The demobilization of soldiers who have completed their military service will be stopped, and veterans mustered out will be recalled to active service. The measures would add some 65,000 men to

tons and special arm bands. Armed with complete dossiers and photographs of government officials to be arrested and executed, they methodically went from house to house with clipboards and notebooks, looking for their quarry.

The problem likely to plague South Viet Nam the longest is the widespread destruction of its cities, its towns, its homes. It was the Viet Cong's decision to bring the war into the midst of the cities, and the initial damage was wrought by Communist guns and mortars. But the bulk of the actual destruction occurred during the allied counterattacks to oust the Viet Cong. For allied commanders, these posed a grim dilemma that was summed up bluntly—and injudiciously—by a U.S.

LE MINH



RUINS OF BEN TRE'S MARKETPLACE

Lesson for city dwellers in what the peasants have long recognized.

the 650,000-man ARVN. Thieu also announced that the nation's taxes would be raised.

Dossiers & Photographs. The city dwellers learned in the Communist offensive what South Viet Nam's peasants have long recognized: the Communists' ruthless application of terrorism in waging war. The attackers were ordered to seek out and kill the families of all South Vietnamese officers they could find, as well as police and government officials and their families. In Saigon, a band of Viet Cong seized several civilians, including a Korean newspaperman and the information officer of the Korean embassy, blindfolded them and summarily shot them in a Cholon street.

In Ban Me Thuot, the attackers used civilians as human shields, pushing from 1,000 to 4,000 people ahead of them in four separate marches. In Hué, U.S. Marines found two executed Americans, their testicles cut off. The North Vietnamese units who took Hué were accompanied by political commissars wearing gold-colored Ho Chi Minh but-

major involved in the battle for Ben Tre. "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it," he said. The Viet Cong had nearly the whole town under their control. The ARVN defenders were pinned down in their barracks, the U.S. advisory compound was in danger of being overrun, and the Viet Cong were within 50 yards of the provincial tactical operations center. "They are our friends in there," said one of the Americans ruefully. "We waited until we had no choice."

For bringing such destruction into civilian areas, the Viet Cong lost more people than they gained. But the South Vietnamese government undoubtedly was tarred by the same brush. Saigon was blamed for not being able to keep the Viet Cong out of the cities in the first place—and then for having to devastate wide areas to get rid of the enemy. Who lost the more remains to be seen. "It depends," says the I Corps U.S. commander, Marine Lieut. General Robert E. Cushman Jr., "on how fast the government provides assistance to rebuild homes, offices, roads and bridges."

Mobile Rice. The government is moving to do just that. While fighting continued on the outskirts of Saigon, some 2,500 Revolutionary Development workers were brought into the city to help collect garbage and assist at 73 emergency refugee centers that had been hastily set up. Trucks loaded with rice have been scattered throughout the city to serve as mobile grocery stores, by week's end were daily selling more than 300,000 lbs. of rice at official prices to head off incipient hoarding and black-marketing of food.

Vice President Ky's National Recovery Committee was allotted \$5,000,000 to begin to heal the wounds of the enemy attacks. Architects are already at work mapping plans to rebuild the most heavily damaged cities, and aerial photographs to speed their designs have already been taken of each city. Each refugee family has been promised—and some have already received—20 sheets of roofing, five bags of cement, several yards of lumber and \$50 to rebuild and refurbish their blasted homes.

A fresh round of Communist attacks could, of course, upset all the recovery efforts. Despite his high losses, Giap still had considerable Viet Cong strength left, as the bloody fighting still going on in Saigon and Hué demonstrated. In fact, large numbers of NVA units were never employed at all in the general offensive. If Giap tries a second-round countrywide assault, though, he will have a far tougher fight on his hands than that of the last two weeks.

There will be no *Tet* truce hamstringing the allied response, and no element of surprise. The allies have learned some lessons in the art of street fighting with guerrillas and in the use of artillery and air support over urban areas. The allied command is carefully rethinking the deployment of its troops to defend and reinforce the cities and towns in the event of attack. Next time around, the allies will be as ready as they can be. Knowing that, Giap may well not try again, or at least not in the same way. After all, Hanoi's general has built his reputation on surprise.

Battle of Hué

Almost uniquely in Viet Nam last week, it was possible to follow clearly the progression of one battle: the block-by-block struggle of the allies to recapture the city of Hué from the North Vietnamese units that swept into it two weeks ago. The North Vietnamese had arrived to stay, and students from the University of Hué acted as their guides, in some cases donning the uniform of Viet Cong regulars. As the ancient capital of Viet Nam, Hué was a prime piece of captured real estate for propaganda purposes, and the NVA fought for every inch of it against ARVN troopers and a battalion-size force of U.S. Marines that moved in from the south.

At first, the Marines found the going not only tough but unfamiliar, since they had to retake the streets almost house by house. "The first two days, it

was a matter of learning this sort of thing," said one Marine commander, Colonel Ernest Cheatham. "The Marines haven't fought a fight like this since Seoul, back in 1950." As more and more blocks fell to the Marines, they commandeered brightly colored Honda motorcycles, small buses and cars, to ferry themselves back and forth to the action.

Gradually, the battling turned the once beautiful city into a nightmare. Hué's streets were littered with dead. A black-shirted Communist soldier sprawled dead in the middle of a road, still holding a hand grenade. A woman knelt in death by a wall in the corner of her garden. A child lay on the stairs, crushed by a fallen roof. Many of the bodies had turned black and begun to decompose, and rats gnawed at the exposed flesh.

Predawn Derring-Do. Every so often the Marines came across pockets of American civilians, some of whom had been successfully hiding out for nine days. When they liberated the Thua Thien province headquarters, the Marines tore down the Viet Cong flag, one of dozens the Communists had planted throughout the city, and raised the Stars and Stripes. Their commander had told them to run up the South Vietnamese flag, but two Marines had died and two others had been wounded in taking the building; they were not about to be denied the satisfaction of raising their own flag (though it later had to be lowered to conform with South Vietnamese law).

Meanwhile, the ARVN forces were making slower headway against the NVA defending the thick-walled battlements of the Citadel. They first tried to use armored personnel carriers to spearhead their attack, but the long straight streets of the old quarter enabled Communist gunners to knock them out from half a mile away. With only three of their original twelve APCs still operative, the ARVN troopers started the same house-to-house combat as the Marines on the other side of the fetid Perfume River.

In a predawn bit of derring-do, Communist frogmen swam down the Perfume and neatly dropped the center span of the last remaining bridge over the river, despite the fact that the allies held both bridgeheads. Boats thus became the main means of evacuation and supply, and each boat ran a gauntlet of NVA sniper fire. But at week's end the NVA pockets of resistance were slowly shrinking, and all of the city except a part of the Citadel had been seized by the allies.

Battle of Saigon

Except for Hué, the most serious city fighting was in Saigon. Once a gracious, languid island in the midst of war, Saigon last week was a city rimmed by fear. Every half-hour the radio grimly warned: "The Saigon-Cholon area is not considered secure. Firefights and sniper fire are expected to continue.



Do not travel on foot. All vehicles must have an armed escort." Flak-jacketed American MPs, weapons at the ready, roared along the tree-shaded boulevards. Trigger-happy police fired frantically in the air to halt vehicles approaching checkpoints and barricades strung about the city. Tough ARVN marines and paratroopers blasted their way through narrow alleys in running gun battles with the Viet Cong. 700 to 1,000 of whom were believed still mingling with the city's population.

Vietnamese Skyraiders rent the air with ferocious whines as they dive-bombed sections of the city, notably the Chinese quarter of Cholon, which was honeycombed with Viet Cong. The planes sent refugees scattering in all directions and plumes of smoke shooting into sunny skies that mocked the city's agony. In six of Saigon's nine districts, 24-hour curfews were still in effect, meaning that those districts harbored at least small bands of guerrillas still operating as units. Electricity and telephone service was sporadic, most restaurants and shops remained closed, and Saigon was cut off by air from the rest of the world.

The only large-size enemy unit still fighting, some 400 men, held its ground near the Saigon race track. Although General Westmoreland had at first acceded to South Vietnamese wishes to clear the city with ARVN troops, by week's end U.S. help was clearly needed; soldiers of the U.S. 199th Infantry Brigade were helilifted onto the race-track turf to join the battle.

Fall of Lang Vei

The week's only successful Communist stab was made at Lang Vei, a hilltop U.S. Special Forces camp four miles southwest of Khe Sanh on Route 9. Basically a post for interdicting Communist movement into the South and for overseeing allied patrols into nearby Laos, Lang Vei was defended by some 400 South Vietnamese and Montagnard irregulars and 24 Green Berets, operating out of a deeply dug bunker made of three feet of reinforced concrete and two-inch steel plate, complete with its own ventilation system. As much as any place can be in Viet Nam, it seemed an ideal outpost, immune to artillery attack and so situated that ground troops would form a carpet of corpses if they dared attack up its hillside.

Crucial in a Sense. But Giap had a surprise for Lang Vei: nine Soviet light tanks, equipped with thin armor but powerful guns, the first Communist use of tanks in the entire war. The tanks deployed in classic fashion east and west of the outpost, then rolled right through the camp's wire and up onto the bunker roofs, followed by North Vietnamese infantrymen. "We heard them," says a Green Beret, "but we never thought they were tanks. We thought they were our generator acting up." Soon the Communists started shoveling satchel charges, grenades, napalm and tear gas down the air vents in an effort to dislodge the defenders.

The allied force fought back fiercely,

firing from the bunkers and even rushing out in the open to face the tanks; they knocked out several of them with bazookas and recoilless rifles. But the defenders were badly outnumbered and scrambled back inside to call down air and artillery strikes directly on top of their own bunkers, built to withstand 250-lb. bombs. Finally, the Green Berets called for mock bombing feints by U.S. planes; while the NVA were ducking, they broke and ran, escaping from

the camp. Some were picked up by helicopters and others worked their way back to Khe Sanh on foot, but Lang Vei had fallen, and with it ten of the Green Berets and 225 of the irregulars, all presumed dead. Its loss did not materially affect the defense of Khe Sanh itself, said a top U.S. officer, but "it is crucial to us in the sense that we want to know what's coming over the Laotian border." And he added: "We thought we could hang onto it."

During the attack on Lang Vei, Communist gunners poured nearly 1,500 rounds inside Khe Sanh's perimeters as a diversion—some six shells a minute in the heaviest NVA bombardment of the war. Giap also launched probing artillery and ground attacks on Marine outposts on surrounding Hills 861 and 558, both supporting positions of the Marines at Khe Sanh. His men were beaten back twice, suffering 106 dead the first time and 124 the second.

KHE SANH: READY TO FIGHT

TIME Correspondent Don Sider spent several days at Khe Sanh last week ducking incoming shells and observing the unique quality of life in the besieged Marine base. His report:

A chill, grey mist hangs over the jumbled hills around Khe Sanh and drifts down onto the base's metal runway. The morning mist often lasts into the afternoon, the bright sun of recent weeks is lost in monsoonal overcast, and the air is raw and wet with winter. The camp seems to have settled into a dull, lethargic pace to match the dull, damp weather that envelops it. In a mood of resignation, Marines go about their life-or-death work, digging into the red clay, filling sandbags, bolstering the bunkers they know are their one protection against the real rain: the whining rockets and the mortars that come with no warning—just the awful cracking sound as they explode.

The dash for cover is part of every man's routine. "It's a *modus vivendi*," says Protestant Chaplain Ray Stubbe, 29. "The men run for shelter, but they don't cringe when they get there." Except for an occasional case of what the corpsmen call "acute environmental reaction" (shell shock), the Marines at Khe Sanh are taking their ordeal with considerable composure. Only their unwelcome bunkermates—the rats—become frantic under fire. When the "incoming" starts, the rats race for the bunkers and wildly run up to the ceilings made of runway matting and logs. One sergeant has killed 34 rats, establishing a base record.

Khe Sanh grows steadily shabbier. More and more "hardbacks" (metal-roofed shacks) are tumbled by the incoming; day by day the protective sandbags and runway matting rise higher on bunkers. Even so, the bunkers cannot withstand direct hits. A rocket or mortar round will collapse a bunker and likely kill its occupants. The Seabees are finishing strong underground bunkers for the control-tower crew of Khe Sanh's airstrip and the evacuation hospital, rushing to complete the work before the threatened battle erupts. Meanwhile, the doctors must make do in cramped quarters: the operating room is an empty metal box used to ship mili-

tary goods and measuring only 8 ft. by 6 ft. by 6 ft.

The top Marine at Khe Sanh is Colonel David E. Lownds, 47, the mustachioed commander of the 26th Marine Regiment, who oversees the defense of the base from an underground bunker left over by its original French occupants. Sitting in a faded lawn chair, he seldom rests, night or day. He keeps constant watch over the nerve center, a labyrinth of whitewashed rooms lit by bare bulbs and bustling with staff officers and enlisted aides. Is he worried about the huge enemy concentration surrounding him? "Hell, no," says Lownds. "I've got Marines. My confidence isn't shaken a bit." He fully recognizes his stand-and-fight mission: "My job is to stay here. My job is to hold. I don't plan on reinforcements."

Several large U.S. combat units are ready at nearby bases for just such a necessity, but the fact is that there is neither space nor cover for them at Khe Sanh. Its buildup completed, Khe Sanh is waiting to fight. Last week, to cover their attack on nearby Lang Vei, the North Vietnamese hit Khe Sanh with a massive barrage of up to 1,500 rounds of 60-mm. and 82-mm. mortars and 122-mm. rockets—50% more than Con Thien ever received in a single day at the peak of its shelling last year. Fortunately, the Reds' aim was bad: they scored no direct hits and caused no serious wounds or deaths.

Not all the metal was incoming. Even under that pounding, Khe Sanh's artillerymen fired back 3,000 rounds. Fighter-bombers rake the surrounding hills on a seemingly nonstop basis, while B-52 strikes lay a carpet of bombs on suspected enemy positions four to six times a day. This outpouring of U.S. airpower may have delayed the Communist attack on Khe Sanh, though some officers wonder about the effectiveness of bombing against dug-in artillery and troops and trucks moving under triple-canopy jungle.

Nonetheless, airpower is what keeps the entire effort at Khe Sanh afloat. Because there is no really passable road in the area and the North Vietnamese control the ground, the mammoth supply needs must be flown in by helicopters and C-123 and C-130 trans-

port planes. Because of the danger of incoming fire, supply planes now unload in as little as three minutes. Caravans are shoved down their rear loading ramps while the transports taxi slowly toward takeoff. Airdrop systems are planned in case heavy fighting or poor weather prevents any landings at all.

Most Marines at Khe Sanh feel more than ready for the battle they know they are there for, but they are becoming impatient. The waiting is wearying and frustrating, as day by day they undergo incoming, see friends wounded and killed (total casualties equal 10% of the base's men), and remain unable to fight back. "I wish they'd come and get it over with," said Pfc. Larry Jenkins, 18. Despite their perilous position, Jenkins and his comrades at Khe Sanh are spoiling for a fight.



Another "incoming" has just hit a tent, seriously wounding three Marines. Corpsmen struggle to get out the wounded.