



The Tet Offensive: A Reporter Looks Back

Dan Southerland



Reporter Dan Southerland covering fighting in Vietnam in May 1968.

It was 50 years ago, but I still vividly recall the attack on Saigon. Like many others, I woke up in the South Vietnamese capital on Jan. 30, 1968 thinking that I heard firecrackers exploding to celebrate Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. But as I walked near the Saigon River waterfront, I realized that what I heard was automatic weapons fire, not firecrackers. In the predawn hours, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops had launched the Tet Offensive throughout South Vietnam.

The Communist and South Vietnamese sides had separately announced that they would respect a two-day cease-fire for the Tet celebration. But the Communists had broken the truce.

I'd had nearly two years' experience reporting for United Press International (UPI) in Vietnam. But I'd never heard shooting like this before in the South Vietnamese capital.

Saigon had suffered in the past from terrorist incidents, such as grenade attacks. And in June 1965, a Viet Cong fighter had detonated two bombs that destroyed a floating restaurant located only a few blocks from the UPI office. As many as 48 people died.

But suddenly, in the early hours of late January 1968, the Vietnamese city which I'd always considered to be a relatively safe haven had now become a combat zone.

At the UPI office, I found the bureau chief taking calls from field reporters and trying to reach American officials to confirm details of a Viet Cong attack on the U.S Embassy in Saigon.

Not far from the office, the Viet Cong had attacked South Vietnamese Navy headquarters. Two American soldiers whose truck convoy was ambushed near that location had met in the street with a UPI reporter, then carefully made their way with him into the office and thrown themselves on the newsroom floor.

One of them shouted that the reporters and bureau chief who were taking dictation and typing up stories while shooting was going on nearby were "crazy" not to be taking cover.

American and South Vietnamese forces defeated the attackers in Saigon within a few days, but elsewhere throughout South Vietnam fighting continued in many locations. It took the Americans and South Vietnamese nearly three weeks to regain control of the old imperial city of Hue.

But in most of the country, the South Vietnamese forces fought better than many of their American advisors had expected, with the Communist side suffering high casualties. Some estimates of the number of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese killed came to 30,000 or many more.

In numerous cases, however, the allies used artillery and air strikes to dislodge the Communists, causing a large number of civilian casualties.

Civilian casualties

About five weeks after the attack on Saigon, I traveled south from Saigon into the Mekong Delta to report on the damage done during Viet Cong attacks on most of the cities in South Vietnam's major rice-growing region.

Together with other reporters in the city of Ben Tre, I interviewed civilians who had been caught in the middle of gun battles when American infantrymen reentered the city to retake it from the Viet Cong under the cover of air strikes and artillery fire.

The Viet Cong outnumbered the South Vietnamese Army's force in Ben Tre six to one, because roughly half of the South Vietnamese there had left their posts to celebrate the Lunar New Year holiday.

Authorities said that some 1,000 civilians were killed in the city, which was more than American, South Vietnamese, and Viet Cong casualties combined.

I later visited an ethnic Cambodian hamlet in the Mekong Delta that had been largely destroyed by U.S. Army helicopters after the Viet Cong invaded it. The Viet Cong were driven out, but the people had fled and were afraid to return without being guaranteed protection.

The number of refugees in South Vietnam already registered with the government in 1967 numbered 2.1 million. Refugees fleeing battles during the Tet Offensive numbered at least one million.

A Communist defeat

According to military historian James H. Willbanks, the Communists had three goals in mind when they launched their nationwide offensive at the end of January, 1968:

- 1) To provoke a "general uprising" among the South Vietnamese people.
- 2) To shatter the South Vietnamese armed forces.
- 3) To convince the Americans that the war could not be won.

It was clear early on that the Communists had failed to achieve the first two goals.

No uprising occurred in any location that I'm aware of. South Vietnamese citizens didn't rush out to welcome the Viet Cong. In numerous battles, the South Vietnamese Army took heavy losses but fought bravely against the Communists and regained territory that had been lost. Communist casualties were much higher in the end than those suffered by the Americans or South Vietnamese.

After the war, the North Vietnamese leadership admitted that they had "set their goals too high" and made several mistakes in launching the Tet Offensive. They overestimated support for the Communists in the South, while "grossly underestimating the strength and resilience" of the South Vietnamese Army.

A Psychological Victory

But in the end the Tet Offensive proved to be a psychological victory and a turning point in the war.

As Willbanks explained in an article published recently in "Vietnam" magazine, the offensive achieved psychological successes, particularly in the early phases.

Images of some 20 Viet Cong inside the U.S. Embassy grounds shocked people in the United States, although 19 of the guerrillas who broke through the walls around the embassy were killed. One was captured.

It was later learned that the Communists had planned for a much larger Viet Cong force to arrive once sappers had cut through the compound walls, but that second group failed to make it to Saigon on time. As a result, none of the guerrillas made it into the embassy chancellery, the main building housing embassy offices.

Based on erroneous reports from military policemen outside the embassy, news agencies initially reported that the guerrillas had penetrated the embassy. They had to correct the initial reports. But the early images of dead guerrillas inside the compound stayed with some American television viewers.

According to Willbanks, the fighting that raged in Hue, Khe Sanh, and throughout South Vietnam "shook the confidence of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, causing many Americans to question the advisability of continuing the war."

Myths About the Tet Offensive

According to some accounts written over the years, U.S. media reporting on the Tet Offensive was largely responsible for undermining American support for the Vietnam War. But a new book by historian Edwin E. Moise of Clemson University, makes a strong case that this is incorrect.

Moise's book is titled *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War*.

It appears, however, that one newsman did have a major impact: When Walter Cronkite of CBS concluded that the war had reached "a stalemate" this did affect President Johnson's views.

But most important, in my view, in undercutting American support for the war were statements in the months preceding the Tet attacks from General William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam.

Prior to the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland had on several occasions asserted that the U.S. had succeeded in destroying many Communist units and was winning the war.

It came as a shock then to many in the U.S. when the Communists showed that they possessed the capability of attacking 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five major cities, 64 district capitals, and numerous villages and hamlets.

The photo taken by Eddie Adams of the Associated Press of South Vietnam's National Police Chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a handcuffed Viet Cong prisoner in Saigon on Feb. 1 also had a huge impact in the U.S. But as Adams later explained, "pictures don't tell the whole story." The prisoner had just killed the wife, mother, and six children of a Vietnamese officer on the outskirts of Saigon.

Did anyone see this coming?

It's often said that the Tet Offensive came as a complete surprise, and it certainly struck me at the time that it was. But we now know that U.S. Intelligence officers had intercepted numerous Communist radio communications in the months leading up to Jan. 30, 1968 indicating that "something big" was being prepared by the Communist side. No one really seemed to know, however, just how big it would be.

But Lt. Gen. Fred Weyand, commander of the American forces in III Corps, the region surrounding Saigon, took the threat seriously, according to Moise's new book. Weyand, Moise says, moved "significant American forces" away from areas near the Cambodian border area prior to the Communist attack on Saigon and closer to the Vietnamese capital.

Another persisting myth has it that Vo Nguyen Giap, the schoolmaster turned defense minister who masterminded the Communist attack in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu which drove the French out of Vietnam, must have been the key planner behind the Tet Offensive. Thanks to new research done by American scholars, we now know that Giap was opposed to launching the Tet Offensive and was isolated from decision-making on the issue in 1967. Communist Party First Secretary Le Duan led a purge of officials close to Giap and patriarch Ho Chi Minh, who also opposed launching the offensive.

Moise says that another myth about Tet holds that the Communists had organized highly coordinated attacks. In many ways, he says, the attacks were badly coordinated. Confusing communications from Hanoi as to the start date caused some units in central Vietnam to attack a day prior to Jan. 30.

I recently found one of my old notebooks from early May of 1968. It contains descriptions of Viet Cong units getting lost on the outskirts and in the streets of Saigon.

Lasting personal memories

On a personal level, I'll never forget several colleagues who were killed during a second wave of attacks on Saigon in early May of 1968.

Charlie Eggleston, a UPI photographer, was killed by a Viet Cong sniper on May 6, 1968. I remember Charlie as a likeable guy who was always out in front of the rest of us. In this case, he was carrying a rifle when he was hit.

The Viet Cong killing of four Western journalists in the Cholon district of Saigon a day earlier, on May 5, had a profound impact on me. Four Australian journalists and a British colleague were unarmed and riding in a mini-moke when Vietnamese civilians warned them that a Viet Cong unit was up ahead. After it was too late for them to turn back, the Viet Cong opened fire on the mini-moke. A Viet Cong officer then drew his pistol and pumped bullets into two of the wounded men despite shouts from Australian journalist Michael Birch that they were "bao chi, bao chi"-- meaning press, press!

Frank Palmos, a freelance journalist from Australia and the one man who survived the killing, said that the Viet Cong commander had "seemed to enjoy his work" of firing bullets into wounded men. Palmos fled into a crowd of Vietnamese who tried to protect him as the Viet Cong officer fired wildly in his direction.

In 1988, Vietnam's Communist government issued a statement of "profound regret" for the killings, saying that it was "clearly a case of mistaken identity," which it clearly was not. The journalists were unarmed. Their mini-moke carried no military markings. They had no military escort.

After that attack, I started carrying a pistol in my pocket, which was one of the stupidest things that I did during the Vietnam War. I never learned how to use that pistol, a revolver. But if I were captured, I might have been regarded as a combatant and immediately shot.

Rocket Attacks on Saigon

One of my jobs for UPI from late 1966 into 1968 was to follow up on Viet Cong-instigated explosions in the streets as well as on Viet Cong rocket and mortar attacks to report on the casualties. It was invariably Vietnamese civilians, not soldiers, who were killed and wounded in these attacks.

In one case, during what one historian called the heaviest rocket attack of the war, I drove a UPI mini-moke into an area on the outskirts of the city and found that many of the civilians there had been wounded. But no ambulance would dare to go into the area.

So I stopped being a reporter and started shuttling the wounded from the shattered area to an ambulance. I think that it may have been one of the better things that I did during the war.

In late May I reported that a mortar attack killed two teenage girls and wounded 24 other civilians near the city's waterfront. The shell was fired from the other side of the Saigon River, where, despite their setbacks, the Viet Cong were still able to fire rockets and mortar shells into the city in the early morning hours.

One had to wonder what the Communists hoped to accomplish by doing this. South Vietnamese officials speculated that they were trying to show that they were still a force to be reckoned with in the lead-up to peace talks in Paris.

One man's story tells it all

Viewing this in retrospect, the rocket attacks that killed mostly unarmed civilians could be seen as a sign of the disarray into which the Communist forces had fallen toward the end of the battle for Saigon.

Also symbolic of this disarray was the plight of a Viet Cong prisoner whom I got to interview in early May, 1968 thanks to the South Vietnamese rangers whose operations I was following. It was rare for a reporter to get to interview a Viet Cong prisoner.

Le Van Duc, a 26-year-old farm boy from a province south of Saigon had been wounded in the right arm. He told me that was tired. He wanted to go home.

Duc described how he had changed into civilian clothes and walked through Saigon's back alleys to get out of the ruins of the battle zone and into a street where life was proceeding more or less normally.

He hailed a three-wheel cyclo driven by the leg power of a man wearing short pants and a sun helmet. He told the cyclo driver that he wanted to get to a bus station, where he hoped to find a bus heading south to his native Long An Province. On the way, Duc passed a North Vietnamese soldier who was also dressed in civilian clothes. He, too, wanted to leave the war. The two shared the cycle. It was first time that either man had been in Saigon and they were a little lost. Vietnamese rangers stopped the cyclo. They asked the suspicious looking men to produce their identification papers. They had none. The rangers took them away.

In my interview with Duc he said, "We were told our purpose was to liberate Saigon and set up a new government. Our political cadre told us we would succeed." "Our job was to attack government installations and police stations in the Fifth Precinct. But government units spotted us and fired on us before we could get to our objectives."

Why did his company fail to do its job?

"We didn't have the factor of surprise," Duc said. "And there was the moonlight. It was difficult to move around in the moonlight."

Dan Southerland is RFA's founding executive editor.

