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Sept. 30. 1965

BAO TRAI, SOUTH VIETNAM--The well-coordinated Viet Cong battalion-sized attack near the provincial capital here this week indicates that the American strategic plan to pacify the provinces around Saigon has bogged down.

Attacking only twenty miles northwest of Saigon the four-pronged offensive of Viet Cong battalion 506 of about 500-to-700-man in strength--crippled two government companies occupying the periphery of the strategically important Hop Tac (Cooperation) plan. In Hau Nghia province Viet Cong casualties were also high. This small frontier like town (pop. 5000) is the capital of the province.

"This Viet Cong attack did not put a crimp in the Hop Tac plan," one American explained. "Hop Tac was already crimped in this province. It's almost dead. It has failed--but it hasn't failed totally. It has not met its objectives to pacify the provinces around Saigon, but the momentum of the plan still keeps it intact."



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The Hop Tac plan for the pacification of the seven provinces around Saigon, which began rolling a year ago, was largely <sup>Conceived</sup> ~~conceived~~ by American military and civilian staff officers; General William C. Westmoreland, commander of all American units, and Ambassadors Maxwell D. Taylor and Henry Cabot Lodge repeatedly pushed for the adoption and faithful execution of the plan. The plan calls in the first step for the destruction of the hard-core Viet Cong units in the seven provinces around Saigon--but the well-coordinated Viet Cong attack near Bao Trai this week indicated this first step has yet to be successfully accomplished. The second ~~ph~~ step of the Hop Tac plan calls for the training local militia to safeguard the villages while the regular Army baattalions continue large-scale and intensive military offensives to destroy the enemy. But, in provinces such as Hau Nghia, there are few young men in the villages which the government can recruit for local milita duties.

To execute the Hop Tac plan, the ~~2nd~~ Vietnamese <sup>25</sup> division was moved from the Central Vietnamese coastal plains a year ago ~~ga~~ to reinforce the Saigon area; the resulting power vacuum in Central Vietnam demanded the introduction of American combat troops to prevent its being lost. And now, even the reinforced area around Saigon is considered to be in serious trouble.



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"We have basic problems that are impossible for us to solve," one official explained. "The Viet Cong have ~~more~~ <sup>more</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>then</sup> armed troops as the Vietnamese government in this province. And second, the population is hostile to the Vietnamese government, since for decades this area has been under Viet Cong control.

"The Viet Cong have a minimum of 2500 armed fighters in this province and can jump to 4000 men, depending on the period of their activities. But the Vietnamese government strength is only about 2,000 men.

"We should have a 10-to-1 force ratio of troops in our favor to defeat the Viet Cong---but instead we sometimes have a 2-to-1 force ratio against us.

"We have enough regular army troops to launch offensive operations in the daytime, but if we leave the important towns unguarded at night, the Viet Cong will both over-run the undefended towns and installations and they'll also chew up our units in the swampy battlefield.



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"The dilemma of the Hop Tac plan is that it calls for our regular Army units to remain largely in static positions, without much flexibility for offensive operations against the hard-core Viet Cong units. But, it will be impossible for us to pacify this province without destroying these hard-core units, which we don't have the troop strength to do."

Reliable sources indicate that in the future American combat troops <sup>may</sup> be used in the provinces around Saigon to find and destroy these Viet Cong hard-core units.

While the Vietnamese government provincial staff has ~~said~~ difficulty in recruiting in the area, the Viet Cong units do not. Reliable intelligence sources said that the Viet Cong have recently established "the Thu-Do (Capital) Regiment," composed of mobile battalions of shock troops designed to harass the government elite government troops defending the outer perimeters of the Saigon area. Strength of the regiment is unknown, according to ~~the~~ Vietnamese government sources. The Viet Cong 506th Battalion has recruited so well in this area, that the one battalion was recently split into two battalions. The current strength of the 506th is estimated between 500 to 700 men, organized into three rifle companies and one transportation company. Most of the troops are considered to be local South Vietnamese, but a few of their leaders are known to be North Vietnamese. This battalion shuttles between two

provinces, operating in an arc through the regions lying on the western and southern flanks of the Hop Tac area.



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This week, the Viet Cong 506th battalion attacked the sleeping government units defending the town of Duc Lap, 20 miles from Saigon. One elite government Ranger battalion had gone on a long, tough day-light operation, but returned to the town of Duc Lap, their command post, to set up their night-time defense.

"The Viet Cong knew the Rangers had been on the operation and would sleep well that night, "one official explained. "One element of the Viet Cong 506th battalion crashed into the command area post housing the headquarters company of the government Ranger battalion. By coincidence, the Viet Cong used the route <sup>NEAR</sup> ~~by~~ the small steel-plated <sup>A</sup> airfield where an Air American plane had crashed <sup>2</sup> ~~in~~ the same afternoon, killing the two American pilots and the official of the U.S. Agency for International Development (A.I.D.) on board. ~~Eight~~ Eight Vietnamese policeman were posted to guard the wreckage. Unfortunately, all eight of the men were sleeping together in one hut. As the Viet Cong passed through the area, the eight government policeman fired on them. Seven were immediately killed, one was captured, but their firing alerted the nearly Rangers headquarters company.



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"The Viet Cong had overpowering forces; and rushed directly towards and virtually encircled the command post. One neighboring Ranger company began to rush to ~~the~~ the scene, but government artillery prevented ~~them~~ <sup>it</sup> from immediately reaching the encircled <sup>d</sup> unit. Finally, as the reaction force neared the command post, the headquarters company retreated from the post. Heavy government casualties were left behind--including Vietnamese and American dead but were recovered later."

Simultaneously, two miles further west, other elements of the Viet Cong 506th attacked another Vietnamese regular army company, which also retreated, and at the same time mortared the district town of Duc Hoa and another outpost.

"Simply in terms of government casualties, this was a disaster;" one source explained, "but we also hurt the Viet Cong badly" "We have found 31 Viet Cong bodies so far, An have received intelligence reports that the Viet Cong were burying fifty other bodies in a distant village. And, we think, we killed the Viet Cong battalion executive officer. We estimate a total of 200 Viet Cong killed or wounded because the U.S. Air Force jets started pounding the Viet Cong as they withdrew.



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"Militarily, this engagement was probably a stand-off, but politically, it was a defeat. Everytime, the Viet Cong hit one of our elite units, it takes a long time before the population regains ~~that~~ confidence in the government."

As the official spoke, the whoosh of American jets overhead was followed by the sound of bursting bombs.

"We have a report that the Viet Cong are holding a victory celebration in a village across the river," one officer explained. "We've called ~~in~~ in the jets to break it up."