

The Red Noose Around Saigon

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SAIGON.

A Communist military stranglehold is tightening around this capital city, while Viet Cong political agents are establishing subversive civilian administrative councils in the villages on Saigon's outskirts, intelligence officials report.

Military intelligence officials say the equivalent of a battalion of Viet Cong already have penetrated the city limits of Saigon. Organized as suicide squads, murder teams and sabotage units, they are ready to strike as soon as orders are received from the Communist command.

Outside Saigon, the Viet Cong have established a double ring of regular forces, under two regimental commands. One command, called the Capital Regiment Headquarters, and comprising three regular light battalions, is known to operate close to Saigon, within Gia Dinh Province. The second, comprising four regular light battalions, operates in a larger circle surrounding the other's area of responsibility. An eighth battalion is now being trained and will bring the Capital Regiment up to full four-battalion strength.

Intelligence officials say the Communists late last year established the two regimental co-ordinating commands, at Cholon and Gia Dinh.

On Dec. 13, 1965, at a special meeting, Viet Cong leaders for the capital region established and named the Capital Regiment Headquarters. The name of the second regiment is unknown.

The Capital Regiment Headquarters has under its control only three "light" battalions: the 3d Battalion northeast of Saigon, the 4th Battalion southeast of Saigon, the 6th Battalion southeast of Saigon. The 5th Battalion is expected to complete its training next month, and is to be assigned northwest of Saigon, the intelligence officials say.

HARD CORE

The seven battalions controlled by the two regimental headquarters each have four companies, of roughly 150 men each, or roughly 600 men per battalion. The battalions are numerically stronger than the average South Vietnamese Army battalion.

These Viet Cong are considered hard-core regulars, recruited in their local villages and provinces. They operate in addition to local village and regional guerrillas—part-time farmers and part-time fighters.

The officials said councils have already been set up to govern the villages once the Communists seize power within South Viet Nam.

North Vietnamese refugees who watched the Communists defeat the French during the Indochinese war 12 years ago recalled that the Communists had established similar administrative councils in Hanoi in 1951—three years before the Communist party took over the government of North Viet Nam. In 1951, these administrative councils had mapped out and organized the Communist party policy on the most detailed problems of governing the city of Hanoi—including the disposal of garbage and sewage.

Other officials say the Viet Cong are recruiting guerrillas from within the city of Saigon and its predominantly Chinese twin city of Cholon, as well as from the villages on the outskirts of Saigon—which the American-backed Vietnamese government officially describes as "pacified."

Included in the recruitment of guerrillas are Vietnamese-born Chinese, who are now working on the side of the Viet Cong. Some Chinese Communist influence is considered to have penetrated the political atmosphere of Cholon, a city of roughly a half-million people.

During a seven-day, 8,000-man operation ending Jan. 15, American paratroopers and

Australian troops cracked the main base area of the Viet Cong's Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh committee. They killed 151 Communists, captured 97, and carried off tons of documents and weapons, which were hidden in a complex honeycomb of tunnels, cement blockhouses and underground defenses.

While the allied forces disrupted the headquarters, the Viet Cong are expected to move back into the Ho Bo woods area.

Last week the noose around Saigon grew tighter. Within a 20-hour period on Jan. 16, in the province of Gia Dinh, which surrounds Saigon, an unknown number of Viet Cong poured small-arms fire into a village 10 miles southwest of Saigon.

Six hours later, a Viet Cong company six miles southwest of Saigon fired mortars at a Vietnamese airborne battalion which was assigned to protect one of the largest military oil depots and American ammunition bases in the capital area.

The next day, the Viet Cong attacked the Thu Duc Infantry and Armored School, which is between Saigon and the Bien Hoa air base. At Bien Hoa, only 12 minutes drive from Saigon, is more than a division of American combat forces.

The Capital Military Region covers Saigon and its Chinese twin-city of Cholon (population: 1,641,000)—a total of 30 square miles—plus Gia Dinh Province, which contains 77 square miles.

MORE ATTACKS

American military commanders have classified Gia Dinh Province as pacified, but the number of Viet Cong armed attacks have been rising steadily. District headquarters barely out of range of the neon lights of Saigon are consistently hit with mortar fire. Almost nightly now, diners at Saigon rooftop restaurants witness flare drops and jet strafing runs.

"Almost every night we drop flares right at the end of the big runway," an American airman at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport said.

"We've got battalions of Viet Cong right around this air base. We have fire fights three times a week at the bomb dump right on the edge of the runway. Nobody goes down by that bomb dump unless he has to. American crew chiefs have to guard all night their individual aircraft parked down near there—but they know they're just sitting ducks," he said.

American pilots often land at night at Tan Son Nhut without any lights on their planes because they feel they are less conspicuous targets.

Intelligence officials say the Viet Cong commander of the Saigon area uses the alias of Muoi Tri, which means Spirit No. 10. Formerly a member of the gangster-pirate Binx Xuyen group, he was captured by the French during the Indochinese War, and was sent to North Viet Nam when the country was divided by the 1954 Geneva Agreements.

These officials say the Viet Cong specialist on commando attacks within Saigon is named Cao Pha, which means Superman. He also fought in North Viet Nam during the French Indochinese War.

The Viet Cong specialist on sabotage is named Hai Den, which means Black No. 2.

The Saigon murder teams operate under the command of La Van Lien, which is a Chinese name. This specialist in assassinations by pistol gained fame in Saigon for killing the French official in charge of security throughout Indochina during the Indochinese War. He, too, was sent to North Viet Nam after the 1954 Geneva Agreement. The Vietnamese government has recently put a 1 million piastre (U. S. \$10,000) price on his head. The Viet Cong political adviser to the Saigon area operates under the alias of Chin Dung (Courage No. 9).