

deeps

fan s--2--precede

In this operation, government tanks, planes, junks and ground troops attempted to rout the Viet Cong from their stronghold series of tunnels, entrenchments and underground airraid shelters. The operational summary reads: Throughout the afternoon Skyraiders hit the hills and surrounding area but the ground units were not able to take their objectives. Seven assaults against the hills were repulsed by the Viet Cong. Later, it was found that the hills were honeycombed with caves and tunnels leading from foxholes ~~in the~~ to the back of the slopes. Defensive fire from these dug-in positions included sixty mm. mortars and 57 mm. recoilless rifles. During the night, the bulk of the Viet Cong were believed to have moved across the river..."

~~Shankman~~ During the operation, gas was used, but it was "not effective because the Viet Cong had moved out," American military spokesman said. Final results: 88 Viet Cong killed, with reports by the Viet Cong villagers that about 60 additional bodies were taken across the river; 6 Viet Cong captured, 10 suspects, 2 .30 calibre machineguns, and stocks of Viet Cong ammunition. Government casualties: 7 killed, 16 wounded—including two American advisors.

In another case, a Vietnamese tank company and two ground battalions planned to use gas the non-lethal gas in an assault on a similar assault on Viet Cong fixed frontline positions. Associated Press photographer Horst Faas was on that operation—which provided the last necessary evidence for him and Associated Press writer Peter Arnett to write their controversial story. Faas' view: it's better to have a funny ache than to be dead. This is the story of that operation.



deope

faas-2

In an interview with New York Herald Tribune, Horst Faas, a 32-year-old German who survived the bombing of Berlin when he was 10, then worked as photographer in Congo, Algeria & for 18 months before coming to Vietnam 18 months ago, gave a play-by-play of the operation. The story explains why the Vietnamese and American officers wanted to use gas, what the war in Viet Nam is like-- and how Horst Faas covers the war.

This is Faas account of the operation which lead to the famous story about the use of non-lethal gas in Viet Nam:

"Last Friday (March 19th) I went on a routine operation," the roly-poly photographer explained. "I was trying to get back to Saigon afterwards, but it was nighttime and I couldn't drive. So, I stayed overnight with a Vietnamese tank unit outside of Saigon. We got up at four in the morning (Saturday), the tanks were running around and I was introduced to the tank commander. He knew me from coup detats in Saigon and he knew the Associated Press. The tank commander said I could go on his operation. So the tanks started rumbling towards Saigon--14 APC's (armored personnel carriers, which are lighter than tanks).

"I thought we were going on a coup. But our tanks couldn't go through Saigon; we stopped on the road and a truck came from Saigon and distributed gas masks. I asked how many masks. The Tank commander said 451 for 116 troops.



deeps

fan 8-3

"'I will give the others towels,' the tank commander explained. I asked him if he was going to make a coup. He said no they were going on an operation. I still thought it was a political operation though.

"But then we skirted Saigon and headed out to Viet Cong country towards the Cambodia n border. The Vietnamese commander said told me n he might use gas and asked where was my gasmask. I said I didn't have one.

"'I don't have one for you', the tank commander said. 'I don't even have enough for my troops. the (American) information office should equip you with gas masks,' he said, jokingly.

"Then two battalions of troops assembled with the tanks and one of these battalions also had gasmasks gasmasks./ and I saw them putting these gas masks on. The American advisor said these were infantry troops sitting in Tay Ninh (province on Cambodian border and Viet Cong stronghold) but only a few of the Vietnamese officers had ever seen gasmasks before. Inx It took sometime for the Vietnamese to get their masks on and the American advisors were worried these troops might also get sick from the gas.

"The tank commander said he'd give masks to his gunner, driver, the American advisor and maybe to the 21 riflemen--then he would close the turret of the tank and make the charge. The other fellows without masks would have to go without masks. masks. So the troops ran into the village and I bought towels--for 20 piastres each-- (thirty u. s. cents) and these towels were made in Red China.



deeps

fnas--5

"This Viet Cong fortification goes on for miles from the Cambodian border almost to outside of Saigon--and in this fortification are Viet Cong combat villages and everything you can imagine. Intelligence people say its the permanent headquarters for a 500-men Viet Cong battalion and the headquarters for the Viet Cong Saigon-Cholon committee and also the regional headquarters for Viet Cong troops. All these people live their with their families. They've built airraid shelters so hard that the tanks can't crack them by running over them. It's like a big underground mine. Every family has its own airraid shelter and they survive artillery. So the government has tried to catch ~~and~~ the Viet Cong and in many assault cases the Viet Cong stood and fought off government troops. I myself was in this same area on New Years night, 1963, and the 32nd (government) Ranger battalion was caught in this entrenchment--but bombs and rockets wouldn't even knock out the Viet Cong. All the time we were under Viet Cong fire ~~and pinned down for seven hours~~ and pinned down for seven hours ~~and~~ when we tried to assault this position. It's like a World War I frontline with trenches connected to foxholes with tunnel exits. We were supported by planes and artillery, but everytime the bombs hit the Viet Cong simply went underground. Finally the infantry took the Viet Cong positions, but the Viet Cong made an orderly retreat--and the government had 60 -70 casualties...



deepe

fans-4

"So we discussed this all night and of course the Vietnamese wanted to use gas--the idea was to encircle the Viet Cong, make them stand and fight and then we would use gas to take over these positions--

"So at four the next morning, I was sitting on the carrier and we were moving in a long convoy towards the Viet Cong positions. But one truck overturned on a bridge--it was a provisional bridge replacing one the Viet Cong had blown up. When the truck overturned, the American advisor was seriously wounded with brain concussion. The whole convoy was stopped for 45 minutes to take care of this accident--so we were one hour late in getting to the Viet Cong target.

"Unfortunately, the airstrikes were on time--and so there was a one hour gap between the airstrikes and our arrival at the target. We saw the results of the air bombardment--when we got to the target--but there were no Viet Cong. So the Vietnamese commanders could not use gas without a real target...

"Throughout this operation we were always under sniper fire from automatic rifles--from the moment the operation started. This is the worst sniping area in Viet Nam. The snipers pop out of tunnels all along--the troops know this --and keep moving. The snipers pop up out of a hole--but when the government troops get there it's only a foxhole--the Viet Cong goes out the tunnelled in exit in the rear. So all day the snipers were moving around us--the last sniper fire was on the main highway at the end of the operation--the snipers followed us through a rubber plantation and we took two casualties even on the main highway.



deeps

faas--67

"For the assault on these V. C. positions, I hopped off the tanks--it was very bumpy and made me black-and-blue, and it's too shaky for good photographs. Besides all the trees are like fruit trees, but they are V. C. mines instead of fruit--so when there's a carrier assault through the jungle, you have to drive in this undergrowth with mines going off in the trees all around you, and road mines going off underneath you. I went with the infantry instead of the tanks.

"In areas like this, gas is justified--a real assault looks good in the movies, but we lose too many men--the Viet Cong have been dug in ~~freedom~~ here for years.

"On the first assault, the Viet Cong did not resist--so we sat down and re-organized our movements, and immediately the sniper fire started. So we ~~hadn't~~ started moving. ~~Shax~~ But first we had to take out the Viet Cong had grenades in the trees above us and within the first hour two government troops fell in spike traps. One spike went through the troopers heel, through the ankle and up to kneecap--it was very long and sharp.

"So, we saw no enemy and gave up the plan of using gas. The most amazing thing is this big bombardment of air and artillery didn't cause a single Viet Cong casualty. Hundreds of Viet Cong wives and kids came out--but there wasn't a single civilian casualty. They simply went into their airraid shelters--and the ground was like cement. The Viet Cong are like moles--gas would have gone into these tunnels and gotten these people out.



deeps

faas--8

"The trouble is women and kids come out of the tunnels, but the snipers stayed in. When we sat down for lunch in the headquarters company--which was surrounded by four other companies--we came under sniper fire...but the sniper ran away. The government troops ran after him--but it was like trying to catch a cat--ten minutes later he came up again. The government troops got mad...we couldn't send government troops into the tunnels because they are mined at the exit point. We were doing this all day and it was highly frustrating...

"One funny thing happened though. There were three snipers in the tunnel--at one tunnel entrance--one must have been shot because we heard him fiddling with his gun. Five government troops ran for the sniper--he tried to fire but his gun jammed and the other two snipers pulled him down the tunnel and got away. But they dropped their three weapons. One was a Russian M03-44, the second was a French MAS-36 and third was a brand-new U. S. greasegun that wasn't even scratched. It was the greasegun that wouldn't fire properly...the American advisor said the greasegun was always a bad weapon--but he was happy this time it was bad. The government troops were very happy they got the three weapons.



deeps

faas--9

"Another strange thing was American helicopters were flying ~~around~~ above us--the Viet Cong would fire at the helicopters instead of ~~at~~ at us. So the helicopter would drop ~~smoke~~ and we were afraid they would fire at us. That's the most frightening thing--we all jumped into the Viet Cong holes--it made me feel like a Viet Cong when the helicopter flew over. These ~~holes~~ holes are very deep--about ~~go~~ ten feet deep and they can hold four or five people in them. The government made several more charges against these Viet Cong areas--but it was the same thing. The Viet Cong women and kids came out, but the Viet Cong ~~or~~ troops had left--except for the snipers who were always there...the sniper fire was always with us, but the Viet Cong never presented themselves as a ~~tra~~ target, so we never used ~~gas~~ gas. The Vietnamese commander didn't want to use gas just ~~ga~~ against snipers or women and kids. or to use it for their own safety. We went through open areas where the Viet Cong could have hit us--but we didn't want to use gas just to protect ourselves. The commanders wanted a target ~~and~~ the Viet Cong had left.

"It was the Vietnamese ground commander that gave the specific order of when gas was to be used--he would have relayed it to his vietnamese liaison officer in the helicopter above us. The Vietnamese tank commander said he specifically was in charge of giving the order--but he didn't have the opportunity.



deeps

fans--10

"I understand that when this tear-gas stuff was used in Binh Dinh (a northern province), the government troops ran away. Gas is a humane weapon. From a military standpoint, you prevent casualties. The Viet Cong are sitting in their holes and you have to drop thousands of bombs to get them out...they have formidable tunnel networks...You try to find the Viet Cong, to destroy the enemy and fight him—you either have to kill, wound or make him inactive—so if you make him inactive with gas it's better. It's much better to have a tummy ache than to be dead or wounded by mortar.

"In Binh Gia, we had a terrific defeat (in late December) because there were 1000 Viet Cong mixed in with 6000 friendly villagers and the decision was made not to bomb the village. We got defeated as a consequence—the Viet Cong use the civilian population as a human shield.

"There's no such thing as a clean war and gas does not maim you for life like mortar does. The medics tell us that gas is a weapon that's good to be used when guerrillas mingle the friendly population.

"I know bombs very well. I was ten years old in Berlin during World War II—and for two years the planes came every day. I was in Berlin at the end of the war and for two years they bombed every day."