



Beverly Deepe photo

*After the battle of Kannack—Viet Cong dead are hauled away.*

# Viet's 'War of the Prairies'

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Eleven years ago the French referred to it as *La Guerre des Grands Vides*—The War of the Wide Open Spaces. Today, American advisers call it "The War of the Prairies."

It is a 20-mile stretch of dusty red clay road through a valley of stubby grass. At the eastern end of the An Khe Valley lies the An Khe Pass, guarded by a Special Forces camp and the shell of a mortar-battered roofless villa which 11 years ago was a French command post. At the western edge lies Mang Yang Pass.

These two passes control Route 19, a 102-mile road, paved for portions through the mountains, but dusty red in the Valley. Route 19, 250 miles north of Saigon, controls the flow of traffic and communications on the east from National Highway 1 and the city of Qui Nhon to route 14 and the II Corps headquarters city of Pleiku on the west.

The security of the strategic high plateau bordering Laos—through which passes the Communist infiltration routes collectively called the Ho Chi Minh Trail—rests on the security of Routes 19 and 14 and the cities and camps along the two roads.

Eleven years ago, attempts to secure this plateau cost the French the major part of the famous Group Mobile 100, which, though composed of 3,500 French troops equipped with tanks and artillery, was practically annihilated in a series of Communist ambushes.

## HISTORY RECALLED

Last month, American advisers on the Plateau began to recall with a little foreboding the tragedies of Group Mobile 100.

The reason: a number of Communist battalions, well-equipped with Soviet-type weapons, infiltrated from North Viet Nam and began their attacks. The battalions reportedly were composed of North Vietnamese recruits.

So far, the South Vietnamese government forces have fared much better than Group Mobile 100, despite some sharp attacks and ambushes.

These are the actions which have brough back to mind Group Mobile 100:

In an apparent attempt to repeat their 1954 success of isolating and encircling the high plateau area, a Communist regiment on Feb. 20 deployed along a five-to-six mile front from Man Yang Pass on the Western edge of the An Khe Valley to the old French villa in An Khe town.

Brig. Gen. Nguyen Huu Co, II Corps commander ordered all military convoys to stop using the road.

In the next four days, government forces failed to penetrate the Communist frontline. One Special Forces company was sent out, broke through at one point, continued up Route 19 toward An Khe, only to be ambushed a second time and almost wiped out. A second company was sent in relief and was pushed back. A third company was ambushed and badly hit.

The II Corps Command then moved an elite Ranger battalion by helicopters to the An Khe end of the six-mile Communist line. The landing was made successfully and the following day the Rangers linked up with ambushed company. The 220 men of the regrouped government forces then were besieged by a Communist counter-attack.

It was then, that Gen. Co requested—for the first time in the war—the use of American jets "to keep down the heads of the Communists. Eight B-57 jets made passes down one side of Route 19, eight F-100s strafed the other side of the road. In the alley between the jets, American helicopters "bouncing from the jar of the bombs" slipped in to airlift the 220-men to safety.

## ATTACK RENEWED

After four days of holding a six-mile front line position, the Communists withdrew.

Nine days later, the Communist troops again assembled and two elite government airborne battalions were helicoptered along Route 19. At dusk on March 5, the two airborne battalions met head on two Communist battalions and routed them. Communist losses were officially listed as 11 dead bodies counted and estimated 200 carried off. The government troops suffered two killed and 33 wounded.

To gain control of the An Khe Valley, the Communists had to crush three Special Forces camps defending it. For this task, the Communists moved in their Battalions 801 and 580, composed mostly of teen-aged North Vietnamese newly infiltrated from North Viet Nam.

Their first target was the Special Forces camp at Kannak, five miles off Route 19.

At 2 a. m. March 8, the Communist battalions launched a three-pronged, five-hour attack against Kannak camp. Snipping the four-tiered outer perimeter barbed wire with wire-cutters, they sneaked down a gorge and prepared their home-made bangalore torpedoes (TNT inside a bamboo stick) to blow gaps in the second line of barbed wire.

"It was pretty hairy," an American sergeant explained. "I was carrying ammunition between mortar positions all night—but I had to do it on my hands and knees. They were pouring mortars and recoilless rifle fire in on us."

After the battle he drove away a truckload of the 30 government dead—wrapped in rain ponchos and rice mats.

But the Communists had suffered more. One hundred dead were left behind; an estimated 200 were carried away.

"But they still have three battalions in this valley alone," an American adviser explained. "They can do what they want whenever they want."

"This is the closest thing to Korea I've ever seen," an American adviser and veteran of the Korean war explained. "This battle was just like T-Bone Hill and Pork Chop Hill. We held one-half of the position and they held the other half. We have bunkers and they attack in human waves just like in Korea."

"The Viet Cong are becoming very sophisticated with infantry battalion tactics, attacking our reserves, using mortars as supporting fire."

"We are getting more Communist units in here all the time; they are better equipped and well led. They are using orthodox infantry tactics—they even have command posts in the rear and we've captured some of their telephones they use to call their frontline troops."

"We aren't fighting guerrillas anymore. These are regular units using regular infantry tactics."

Last week an American military spokesman said Route 19 was open. But an American adviser in An Khe Valley explained, "Sure, it's open for civilian traffic but the military would not dare go down Route 19 with anything less than two battalions."