

Little-Known Red General Casts Shadow Across Viet

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SAIGON.

The most important general in South Viet Nam is, perhaps, one whom many have heard of but few have even seen. He is Maj. Gen. Nguyen Don. He is the highest ranking Communist commander in South Viet Nam; some Saigon officials speculate he will be named commander-in-chief of the Communist Viet Cong "Liberation Army," if it ever becomes a regular, conventional army. Gen. Don, trained in Moscow, commands the Communist Inter-Zone 5, which covers the northern provinces of South Viet Nam where for the past month guerrilla forces, reinforced by North Vietnamese units, have waged an impressive, but not entirely successful, offensive against government forces. They have with some consistency employed mobile warfare tactics—which are a step above usual guerrilla warfare tactics.

Much of this Communist offensive has come in Gen. Don's home province of Binh Dinh, which some Saigon officials suspect the Communists will attempt to capture, thus cutting the country into two parts, and then establishing a "mobile capital" for a provisional government to rival the American-backed Saigon government.

NEW GENERATION

Gen. Don is considered to represent the new generation of Communist commanders—none of the Communist generals who fought the Indochina War and defeated the French are commanders in the South. However, North Vietnamese generals, such as Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who adapted Mao Tse-tung's principles of guerrilla warfare to the Indochina campaign, may play an important role by remote control from Hanoi.

There is little confirmed information about Gen. Don, but he is believed to be nearly 40 years old. Born in Binh Dinh Province, 250 miles north of Saigon, the two-star general is believed to have remained in South Viet Nam after the 1954 Geneva accords, which divided North and South Viet Nam, and which provided that Communist troops would move to North Viet Nam. Reliable sources indicate that in 1959, Don, then a captain, moved through the jungle mountain trails to North Viet Nam. During the next two years, he received additional military and political training in North Viet Nam and in Moscow.

In 1961, shortly after the birth of "The National Liberation Front," Don reportedly left North Viet Nam with two eleven-man squads and fought his way through Laos and government-held areas of South Viet Nam back to Binh Dinh Province.

Although still a captain in rank, he was named head of a military and political cadre in charge of Inter-Zone 5, which extends along the populous, rice-growing plains of the South China Sea southward for 300 miles from the 17th parallel.

Viet Cong officers who have served with Don, and have since been captured by the government, reportedly consider him "more intelligent and competent than the older generation generals," although this may be an exaggeration of his ability.

Don's headquarters are, according to government commanders, in Do Xa, a jungled mountainous stronghold in Quang Ngai Province, just north of Don's native Binh Dinh Province. About once a year government forces launch a large-scale operation through the intricately tangled jungles around Do Xa, where they destroy storehouses of food, medicines and administrative buildings but are seldom able to capture or kill any of the command headquarters staff.

FIVE CONDITIONS

The Viet Cong commanders of the five other inter-zones and two special zones into which the Communists have divided South Viet Nam are relatively unknown or unheard of, but reliable sources indicate that they range in rank from lieutenant colonel to brigadier general.

While the Communist offensive in Don's command area has escalated into semi-conventional warfare tactics along a mobile front line, the Communists themselves do not claim the "Liberation Army" to be a regular, conventional army.

According to a captured Viet Cong document, the Communists require five conditions for the formation of a regular, conventional army. These "five conditions for unification" are:

1. Unification in military command. At this time, the "Liberation Army" has reached the inter-zone level (a combination of a number of provinces), but it does not have a unified nation-wide military command under a commander-in-chief.

2. Unification in political leadership. At this time, the political backbone for the Communists in South Viet Nam is the Communist party-directed "National Liberation Front for South Viet Nam." But this is still a front, and not a government.

3. Unification in equipment. The capture of a number of the "new family" of weapons, these Communist copies of Soviet weapons, indicates to military sources that the "Liberation Army" is striving to standardize its equipment.

4. Unification in organization. Adaptation to local conditions.

5. Unification in training.

The Communist calendar in South Viet Nam revolves around two important holidays—Dec. 20, which is the founding of "The National Liberation Front," and May 19, which is the birthday of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh. Observers in Saigon are carefully watching these two dates this year to see whether the Communists within the South create either an official provisional government or a regular, conventional army.

Some Saigon observers, however, believe the "Liberation Army" will not attempt to create a conventional army—as they did in the final phases of the French Indochina War—first, because militarily they are successful at their present stage of development, and second, because large concentrations of troops—of a division in strength—would be vulnerable to the superior firepower and airpower of the American-backed government forces.

Reliable sources indicate that since the Communists have neither a commander-in-chief of a regular army nor a provisional government, they are unable to issue an official medal for meritorious services performed by their troops. This has reportedly caused some grumbling and dissatisfaction among the Viet Cong forces.

Since its official inception in 1960, the "Liberation Army" has had a complex, but very effective, four-tiered military structure. The bottom tier, like the lower level of a large wedding cake, comprises the popular forces—part-time farmers and part-time fighters. They may be responsible for the production of food; there are no precise estimates of their strength, as it varies from minute to minute throughout the countryside.

Above this layer is the guerrilla forces, which operate in platoon strength in the villages. The third level is the regional forces, which operate in at least one-company strength in each district throughout the countryside. These two levels are estimated to number more than 100,000 full-time troops.

The fourth level is the mainforce units, which operate in at least one-company strength in each district and at least one-battalion strength per province, plus regimental strength at the six inter-zone levels. American military officials estimate there are about 35,000 regular troops organized into units in this category. So far, they have not organized in division strength. Paralleling this military organization at every level is the political organization of the unarmed cadres and commissars of "The National Liberation Front"—which revolves around the People's Revolutionary party (Communist). Saigon observers believe that even if "all the guerrilla units leave the country, the Communists through political subversion can still take over the country without firing a shot."

THE FIFTH LAYER

Since the beginning of 1964, a new and entirely different fifth layer has been added to the "Liberation Army" military structure. This has been the introduction of North Vietnamese-born personnel, many of them operating in organized units. American military officials have confirmed that at least 90 per cent of the 4,000 "confirmed" persons who infiltrated from North Viet Nam during the first months of 1964 were born and raised in North Viet Nam. This is in marked contrast to previous infiltration, which had largely been of persons born and raised in South Viet Nam, but who moved to North Viet Nam during the 1954 division of the country, and then again infiltrated back to their native provinces during the recent conflict.

Officially, both the Saigon government and American officials call these new North Vietnamese infiltrators as "Viet Cong," a term which means Vietnamese Communist, but which had largely been used to define the Southern-born Communist who moved to North Viet Nam and then infiltrated back to his native province. American military officials call them "infiltration groups" from North Viet Nam, but are hesitant to label them units of the People's Army of North Viet Nam, commonly called PAVN.

This quibbling over semantics is largely overlooked, however, by American advisers working in the Communist-infested areas where these units have infiltrated.

It is the introduction of these new PAVN units into the Northern provinces of South Viet Nam which has internally escalated the war. These units, operating in battalion and regimental strength, have been able to employ mobile warfare tactics. Last month, these PAVN units held a mobile front-line position of six miles in length for four days—but this was still not a fixed front-line position which characterizes conventional warfare.