



**INDOCHINA
IN THE YEAR OF
THE MONKEY - 1968**



CONTENTS - 1968

| | |
|---|-----|
| Introduction: Indochina in the Year of the Monkey | 3 |
| The Situation in 1968 | |
| <i>MACV Command History 1968</i> | 6 |
| Heroes: Robert Howard | |
| <i>James McLeroy/John Plaster/Alex Quade</i> | 10 |
| Intelligence, Warning and Surprise, Tet 1968 | |
| <i>Lewis Sorley</i> | 27 |
| Myths and Realities of the Tet Offensive | |
| <i>James S Robbins</i> | 42 |
| The Battles of Lang Vei and Kham Duc | |
| <i>James D. McLeroy</i> | 53 |
| BG Nguyen Ngoc Loan: The Story Behind the Picture | |
| <i>Nghia M. Vo</i> | 75 |
| The Battle for Hue | |
| <i>Nghia M. Vo</i> | 85 |
| War Stories from the Year of the Earth Monkey – Tết Mậu Thân | |
| <i>various</i> | 91 |
| Rolling Thunder Revisited | |
| <i>Earl Tilford</i> | 117 |
| “A Psychological Victory” Media and the Tet Offensive | |
| <i>J. Keith Saliba</i> | 135 |
| The Power Shift in RVN | |
| <i>Frank Scotton</i> | 154 |
| The Presidency, the Viet Nam War and the Election of 1968 | |
| <i>Joe De Santos</i> | 157 |
| Year of the Large Massacres | |
| <i>Paul Schmehl</i> | 166 |
| The Viet Nam Peace Movement in 1968 | |
| <i>Dr. Roger B. Canfield</i> | 178 |
| Vietnamese Voices | |
| <i>various</i> | 247 |
| Stanley Karnow | |
| <i>Bill Laurie</i> | 262 |
| Our Wrap Up: The Big Picture 1968 | |
| <i>James McLeroy</i> | 268 |
| References | 270 |

Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan (1968): The Story Behind The Picture

By Nghia M. Vo

WAR returned to Saigon, South Viet Nam's capital, with regularity, especially in the early hours of 31 January, 1968. It was Tet, the holiest of all the holidays in Viet Nam. For the Vietnamese, it is a combination of a New Year's Day, a Thanksgiving Day, a Remembrance Day, and a People's birthday. The nation and the people are taking a break to celebrate the New Year, to pay off debts, to make amends with friends and foes, and to wish other people well. All the offices are closed for the three first days of the year. Since each year is identified by a specific name, the 1968 Tet was called Tet Mau Than. Based on the lunar calendar, everyone is one year older that day no matter which month he was born in. There is some logic in that tradition because having already spent eight months in his mother's womb, the newborn baby should be one year old.

During the 14 years of war that preceded that date, while the countryside was torn and destroyed by Viet Cong (VC) communist attacks, Saigon appeared to be largely untouched. But this was only an appearance like many other things in Viet Nam for Saigon was not spared at all throughout the war years.

Background

According to Carvell who dutifully recorded for posterity a list of terrorist attacks on Saigon¹, the city suffered a total of 105 attacks from 1960 to 1972 (date U.S. troops left Saigon) or an average of 9.5 attacks per year. These attacks ranged from throwing grenades on the local population, detonating bombs in the middle of downtown, shelling rockets on the city, or invading the city itself with a twelve-battalion unit on that Tet day. Attacks were carried out on movie theaters, stadium, hotels, and restaurants with the goal of inflicting the most damage possible on civilian population. Rockets rained down from the sky killing on one occasion my friend, a college student and his whole family. Thus five innocent civilians died instantaneously. This was the communist war of liberation: an indiscriminate war against innocent and unprotected people. Hanoi did not care whether civilians were present or not at the target sites or whether it was a holiday, truce or not.

¹ Saigon Attacked Database: April 11, 1966-April 11, 1972. Although the title says 1966-1972, reports date from December 1960 to April 1972.
<http://www.tsna.org/documents/56.pdf>

| Year | Number of attacks | Types |
|-------|-------------------|---|
| 1960 | 1 | |
| 1961 | 0 | |
| 1962 | 3 | |
| 1963 | 3 | |
| 1964 | 6 | -Sports stadium bombing -Kinh Do movie theater bombing -Brink officer billet bombing |
| 1965 | 7 | -My Canh restaurant bombing -Bombing outside U. S. Embassy -Bombing of Tan Son Nhut airport -Bombing of Cong Hoa Stadium |
| 1966 | 15 | -Mortar attack (11 April) |
| 1967 | 4 | |
| 1968 | 9 | -Tet offensive (31-Feb 26 Jan) -Rocket attacks (6, 9 and 14 May) |
| 1969 | 3 | |
| 1970 | 52 | -Rocket attacks (13, 20, and 21 Jul) - Rocket attacks (2, Dec 19 Nov) |
| 1971 | 1 | |
| 1972 | 1 | |
| Total | 105 | |

Fig 1. Adapted from Carvell's Saigon attacked database

On 26 January, 1965, two bombs destroyed the civilian My Canh floating Restaurant killing 41 people including 9 Americans and wounding 82 others². The restaurant was a popular dining place set on a boat moored to the Bach Dang Pier on the Saigon River. It attracted Vietnamese civilians and Americans alike. On 30 March, 1965, the VC did it again. As a driver tried to park his car in front of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, a cop told him to move it somewhere else. He was wrestled down by the driver's assistant and a few minutes later, a bomb exploded killing 22 people including 2 Americans and wounding 183 others. These attacks forced the government and the U.S. to take protective measures against the VC. The busy but quiet Saigon became a fortified center with guards watching building entrances. One could see sandbag fortifica-

² This link shows the gruesome images of the carnage resulting from the attack:
<http://phulam.com/mycanh3.htm>.

tions, rings of barbed wire strung around government centers, soldiers standing on guard in front of local and foreign buildings.

The attack on Saigon in the early hours of 31 January, 1968 was part of the Tet Offensive³ or Tong Cong Kich Tong Khoi Nghia (TCK & TKN, General Offensive General Uprising), a grandiose and vicious series of large scale attacks on the cities and towns across South Viet Nam. It took five years to implement the process.

The Tet Offensive was the brainchild of communist first secretary Le Duan who believed that only victory over South Viet Nam could achieve the revolutionary goals of the Viet Nam Workers Party (VWP) and uplift the cause of “proletarian internationalism.”⁴ The Vietnamese nation has always come after proletarian internationalism in the hands and minds of the communists. Total war with destruction of South Viet Nam was first approved at the Ninth Plenum in December 1963.⁵ Attacks on South Viet Nam increased in intensity and numbers while the Government of Viet Nam (GVN) struggled politically and militarily following the murder of President Diem. However, Hanoi’s gamble failed with American intervention: airstrikes in August 1964 and arrival of U.S. Marines in Danang in March 1965.

Hanoi’s casualties mounted under Westmoreland’s search and destroy missions and bombing expanded to North Viet Nam. But by the end of 1965, the 25,000 U.S. air sorties over North Viet Nam had failed to curb the rate of communist infiltration into South Viet Nam. Hanoi was committed to destroy South Viet Nam with the assistance and intervention of China and the Soviet Union. Communist China controlled transport logistics and stationed 170,000 troops in North Viet Nam with engineering and anti-aircraft units while the Soviet Union provided anti-aircraft artillery and heavy weaponry as well as 1,165 advisors to man surface-to-air missiles (SAM). The U.S. antiwar movement had it all wrong. Hanoi communists were the instigators of the war and destruction in Viet Nam. In Hanoi, the hawks led by Le Duan and Le

³ Stein Tonnesson, “Tracking Multidirectional Dominoes” in Westad, Odde Arne. *77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders in the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*. (Washington, D.C.: Cold War International History Project Working Paper No 22, 1998), 33-34.

⁴ The South Vietnamese call it the Tet Mau Than Battle; for the Americans, it was the Tet Offensive and for the VC the TCK & TKN (Tong Cong Kich Tong Khoi Nghia).

⁵ Lien Hang Nguyen. *Hanoi’s War. An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press. 2012: 49, 64.

Duc Tho fought against Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and the Chinese who urged caution by preparing for a protracted war⁶.

As battles raged and were fought to a stalemate in South Viet Nam in 1967.⁷ Le Duan secretly decided that peace talks could not begin until Hanoi had won a “decisive victory” on the battlefield by launching another TCK & TKN. Purges began in Hanoi to silence the total war opponents. Gen. Van Tien Dung was propped up to lead the war effort in South Viet Nam. On 15 January 1968, D Day was set for the night of 30-31 January to coincide with the Lunar New Year’s Day or Tet, therefore the name of Tet Offensive. Due to calendar discrepancies, forces in the central regions (Corps I and II) launched their attacks on 30 January while those in the southern provinces (Corps III and IV) attacked on 31 January.⁸

The communists then asked for and agreed to a 3-day Tet truce to lull the South Vietnamese into inaction. As a result, Saigon sent half of its troops home for the holidays, which put the country at a significant disadvantage in case of any attack. President Thieu even celebrated the Tet at his in-laws’ house in the province.

At the stroke of midnight, each household lit its fireworks to usher in the New Year. White smoke fill the air while deafening noises from firecrackers were heard all through town. Teams of dragon dancers went from house to house to exhibit their skills and collect prizes. Tired, people went to bed only to be awakened by strange noises. They thought people were so happy they continued to light up firecrackers through the night. Tired they fell asleep in their beds only to be awakened by martial music on the radio. It was only at that time they realized that Saigon was attacked by the enemy. “Are the VC in town? Impossible,” asked someone. Running outside, they saw big flumes of black smoke billowing in the air. The Saigonese could not believe it. Although streets were quiet and empty each New Year’s Day, this was not the case that year. People furiously drove around to find out what was going on, to enquire about their relatives’ safety, and to move themselves and their belongings to safe places.

⁶ Ibid: 79-80, 90.

⁷ Finlayson, Andrew. 1967. A Year of Missed Opportunity. In “Vietnam Veterans for Factual History. *Indochina in the Year of the Goat. 1967.*” VVFH, Houston, 2016: 51-57.

⁸ Hang Nguyen: 108.



Photo 1. Lt Col
Nguyen Tuan and his
family executed Viet
Cong style⁹

(NY16-Feb.1)DEATH OF A MILITARY FAMILY IN SAIGON SUBURB--South Vietnamese soldiers stand near bodies of a South-Vietnamese commander of a training camp and command center and members of his family after the camp was retaken from the Viet Cong in a northern Saigon suburb today. The commander, a colonel, was decapitated by the Viet Cong and his wife and six children were machinegunned. On ground near the corpses are toys and food. At right are sandbags behind which the children hid. (AP Wirephoto via media from Saigon/1600 10 16 68)



Lt Col
Nguyen Tuan
and his
family
funeral

Saigon 1968 - Đám tang gia đình Trung tá Nguyễn Tuấn
Bởi manh hai

⁹ Lt Col Nguyen Tuan and his family were executed Viet Cong style:
<https://haiz00.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/17f02-c491e1bab7ccc3b4ngvenguye1bb85nvc483nlc3a9m.jpg?w=432&h=640>



Photo 3. The 1968 photo that won a Pulitzer Prize.



Photo 4. BG Loan¹⁰

Tet attack on Saigon

At 4:30 am on 31 January, 1968 Nguyen Van Be a.k.a. Captain Bay Lop led his sapper unit and VC tanks in the attack of an ARVN cavalry camp in Go Vap, a suburb of Saigon. After taking control of the camp, he ordered the commanding officer Lt Col. Nguyen Tuan to show the VC unit how to drive the tanks in order to cause more mayhem in the city. Aware of the consequences of his action, Tuan rightfully and bravely refused. Be coldly executed Tuan, his wife, six children, and his 80 year old mother by slashing their throats.

The following day (second day of the Tet Offensive), Be was caught near a mass grave with 34 civilian bodies. Having admitted to have killed these people, Be was brought to BG Loan, then national police chief, who was directing a counterattack against VC forces in the city district. This was how Gen. Loan entered into the picture. Born in Hue, he graduated near the top of his class at the University of Hue and began a career as a jet pilot in the South Vietnamese Air Force. An accomplished pilot, he led an airstrike on Việt Cộng forces at Bo Duc in 1967, shortly before being promoted to permanent brigadier general. He submitted his resignation shortly thereafter. As a close friend of Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, Loan was then put in charge of the national police and

¹⁰ Photos from Wikipedia.

gained an immediate reputation among Western reporters for his temper and rages at the scenes of Viet Cong attacks on civilian targets.¹¹

The evidence against terrorist Be was damning: he had invaded the sanctity of a free society, killed innocent people on a holy day, especially during a period in which he and his soldiers had agreed to a truce. Facing an invading army of VC whose chief had cold blooded murdered many people and whose soldiers had caused mayhem in the city district while other VC units attacked hundreds of towns, cities across the country, and right in the middle of an ongoing battle that had just begun, what would one expect the general do in the middle of such a brutal conflict?

Richard Botkin, a former Marine infantry officer, wrote,

“Aware that *saboteurs* (italics in the original text) and terrorists did not enjoy traditional rights as prisoners and certain of the man’s guilt, the general operated within accepted rules of land warfare in meting out his on-the-spot execution.”¹²

Unfortunately for the general and the RVN cause, the still photo—taken by Eddie Adams—that captured the execution did not come with any explanation. It did not tell the audience about the cruelty with which Be himself executed a whole family of eight people including children as young as ten years old and an 80-year old woman by having their throats slashed. Another film crew had also videoed the whole action. With the photograph plastered across front pages of the world’s newspapers and the video replayed *ad nauseum* without any explanation, “Gen. Loan immediately became the personification of all that was corrupt and diabolical with the American puppet government.”¹³ He unknowingly helped galvanize American public opinion against the war in Viet Nam.

Aftermath

The general continued to lead his men against the insurgents until, in May, he was shot in the leg while charging a VC hideout. He was transferred to Australia for limb salvage and medical care. Due to negative press publicity, he was sent to Walter Reed in Washington D.C. for further care and eventually ended up with an amputation.

In April 1975, he was evacuated aboard an ARVN airplane after his calls for U.S. help were ignored. When his presence in the U.S. was known, there was a move to deport him as a war criminal. The effort

¹¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/16/world/nguyen-ngoc-loan-67-dies-executed-viet-cong-prisoner.html>

¹² Botkin, Richard. *Ride the Thunder. A Vietnam War Story of Honor and Triumph*. Los Angeles, WND Books, 2009: 143.

¹³ Ibid 143.

fizzled and he settled in Burke, VA, a suburb of Washington, D.C. where he opened a pizza restaurant called "The Three Continents." In 1991, he was forced into retirement when he was recognized and his identity publicly disclosed. Eddie Adams recalled that on his last visit to the pizza parlor, he had seen written on a toilet wall, "We know who you are, fucker."¹⁴ Loan died in Burke from cancer in 1998.

Though it brought him fame, Eddie Adams often regretted the powerful impact of the photograph. He wrote the following in connection to the manner in which the image affected people:

"The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them; but photographs do lie, even without manipulation. They are only half-truths. ... What the photograph didn't say was, 'What would you do if you were the general at that time and place on that hot day, and you caught the so-called bad guy after he blew away one, two or three American people?'"¹⁵

Adams later apologized in person to Gen. Loan and his family for the irreparable damage it did to the General's honor while he was alive. When Loan died, Adams praised him as a "hero" of a "just cause."¹⁶

Quynh Dao, member of International Amnesty Australia wrote:

"General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the South Vietnamese soldier in the picture, passed away in 1998. Neil Davis, the courageous Australian war correspondent killed on assignment in Thailand, set out the background to the killing when interviewed for David Bradbury's 1980 documentary, *Front-line*. The Vietcong shot by General Loan had, not long before this picture was taken, led a team of communist terrorists in a killing spree, killing the whole family of a South Vietnamese officer in the process - including his 80 year old mother, his wife and his small children. How often is the background of this photo explained? Eddie Adams, the Pulitzer-winning photographer who took that picture, apolo-

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nguy%E1%BB%85n_Ng%E1%BB%8Dc_Loan (Accessed 12/12/2016)

¹⁵ Eddie Adams. "[Eulogy: GENERAL NGUYEN NGOC LOAN.](#)" *Time Magazine* (July 27-1998). (Accessed 12/12/2016).

¹⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Adams_\(photographer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Adams_(photographer)) (Accessed 12/12/2016).

gized in person to General Loan and his family for the irretrievable damage it did to his honor when he was alive. When General Loan died, Adams praised him as a hero of a just cause.”¹⁷

Max, from New Zealand, recalled:

“I was a good friend and worked with General Loan and saw him a few times post 75. I particularly got close to him after he came back to Viet Nam after his stint in Walter Reed although I had worked with him when he was a colonel in Saigon. He was an honest man, he tended to speak the truth to power which got him in trouble. I particularly recall that when he was living in a humble state house post Walter Reed, about the only possession of worth was a Peugeot 505. When visiting I noted that it was not there. When I asked about it Loan told me that he had sold it in order to give the money to the widow of a fellow General that had recently died in a helicopter crash. He noted that the General was totally honest and if the widow did not have enough money to set up a small boutique, the wives of other corrupt officers would humiliate her by employing her as a servant. All in all a good and brave man.”¹⁸

Bill Laurie, another Viet Nam veteran, added:

“Everyone has seen the photograph of BG Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a VC assassin, and equated this with barbarity and immorality of the war. It *was* immoral but blame devolves on Hanoi. RVN, Laotian, Cambodian troops did not invade North Viet Nam while all of these countries were afflicted with invasion of North Vietnamese regulars, the Hanoi Communist Party Wehrmacht.

Picture at link below shows why Gen. Loan acted as he did. The VC, who was not "a suspect" as some news reports indicated, was an assassin who had killed an RVN officer, Lt. Col. Nguyen Tuan, his wife, their six children. The VC demanded that Lt. Col. Tuan showed them how to operate tanks in his compound. He refused so they killed him. They cut his head off. Other reports indicate the assassin, to escape after his crime, pushed civilians in front of him to serve as a human shield. That is a war crime.

¹⁷ Quynh Dao: http://www.nationalobserver.net/2004_spring_dao.htm

¹⁸ Max: personal communication.

Ask 500 people if they've seen photo of Gen. Loan executing the VC assassin, 484 of them will say they had, and none of them will realize execution of assassins, in civilian clothes, during time of war, is legal, however brutal, in war under international law and laws of land warfare. VC assassinations were not "legal." The Geneva Rules of War stipulate a combatant **MUST** wear distinguishing insignia and uniform."¹⁹

Conclusion

The Tet Offensive targeted thirty-six provincial capitals, five autonomous cities, and sixty four district capitals in the South. All the communist forces were repelled within a few days except for Hue where they held until 24 February and executed more than 4,000 people.²⁰ There was no uprising for the people rallied to the RVN cause. The communists suffered massive losses (more than 50,000 casualties) causing the southern communist infrastructure to be nearly destroyed. The way the ARVN fought rejuvenated and invigorated the RVN.

However, the brutality and intensity of the attack delivered a political and psychological blow to the U.S. Although successful at repulsing the mind-blowing attack, Gen. Westmoreland had failed to recognize it, prevent it, and kill it in its infancy despite all the modern technologies under his command. President Johnson, instead of delivering a knockout blow to the weakened Hanoi government, wavered then denied Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 troops. He sought for peace with Hanoi and announced he would not accept another term in office.²¹

The Nguyen Ngoc Loan affair was just a footnote in the big picture of the bloody Tet Offensive, which took the lives of more than 100,000 people, military as well as civilian. The viciousness and brutality of the planned attack that took five long years of planning, raised the question of immorality in the way the communists waged the war. That unfortunately had never been brought up by the media and the anti-war side. The Hanoi government and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) are responsible for all the moral, physical, and economic consequences of initiating and waging the war.

(The author's Biographical Information may be found on page 90.)

¹⁹ Bill Laurie: personal communication.

²⁰ Hang Nguyen: 111-115.

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massacre_at_Hu%E1%BA%BF (Accessed 12/15/2016).

Biographical Information: Nghia M. Vo

A graduate of the Saigon School of Medicine, he served a few years as physician in the ARVN. He completed his residency in Connecticut and did private practice before joining the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

He is the author of *The Bamboo Gulag: Political Imprisonment in Communist Viet Nam* (2004); *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (2006); *The Viet Kieu in America: Personal Accounts of Postwar Immigrants from Viet Nam* (2009); *Saigon. A History* (2011); and



Vietnamese Legends: Analysis and Retelling of 88 Tales (2013). His upcoming book in conjunction with Van Nguyen Duong is titled: *Inside An Loc. The Battle to Save Saigon* (2015).

As the President and Founder of Saigon Arts, Culture, & Education Institute (SACEI), he edits the SACEI Forums on Vietnamese culture and history, organizes SACEI Conferences, and writes monthly newsletters.