

U.S. Pilots Spot 5 MIG Fighters; VC Ambush Takes Heavy Viet Toll

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SAIGON—An estimated battalion of Viet Cong guerrillas ripped a Vietnamese Army company in a highway ambush 22 miles northwest of Saigon Thursday morning, inflicting heavy casualties on the government soldiers.

The ambush was sprung at 10:30 a.m., when two companies of Vietnamese soldiers were sent to clear a VC roadblock set up during the night on the highway between Cu Chi and Trang Bang villages in Hau Nghia Province.

One unit radioed it had been ambushed along the road, then communication was lost. Friendly artillery began blasting the area around the company's position, and a light reconnaissance plane flew in to spot enemy targets.

The aircraft could not enter the area immediately because of the artillery fire, however, and when it did fly over the company's position, the VC had withdrawn.

A government relief force reached the area Thursday afternoon, but reported no contact and found no trace of the Viet Cong. They said the guerrillas apparently had split into small groups and fled. No U.S. personnel were involved.

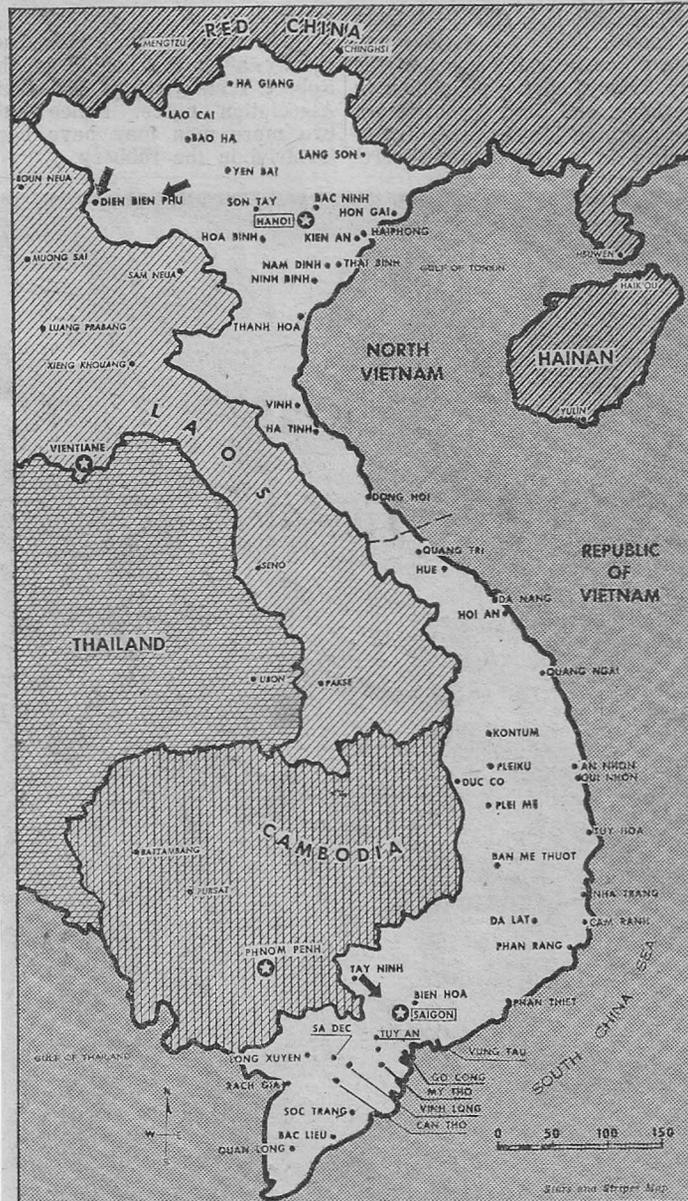
In other ground action, the number of Viet Cong dead in the battle for the My Trang Popular Force outpost Wednesday rose to 69 by body count, with 150 more estimated killed or wounded and carried away by the guerrillas.

Local villagers said they were forced by the VC to bury 84 bodies after the battle which raged around the outpost, 315 miles northeast of Saigon, throughout Wednesday morning.

The guerrillas reportedly carried bamboo ladders up to the camp's perimeter to scale its barbed-wire defenses. Forty-two VC were killed inside the outpost.

A U.S. military spokesman in Saigon said enemy loudspeakers were set up around the outpost, urging the defenders to surrender, but gunfire support from the destroyer McKean silenced the speakers on the first salvo. U.S. artillery spotters in the camp said the morale of the defenders "immediately rose," enabling them to hold back the hordes of attackers though at a cost of heavy casualties.

A spotter later told McKean gunners "we wouldn't be here today if it weren't for your gunfire support. We can't thank you enough; you saved our lives."



U.S. Air Force pilots sighted Soviet-built MIG fighter planes 65 miles east of Dien Bien Phu and other enemy aircraft over the city. Northwest of Saigon, the Viet Cong ambushed a Vietnamese Army company, inflicting heavy casualties on the government troops.

Elsewhere, 13 Viet Cong were killed, 11 captured and 33 suspects were detained in two separate multibattalion government sweeps in the republic Thursday. Both operations, one 110 miles southwest of Saigon and the other 55 miles closer, reported light friendly casualties.