

# 'The Story Of An Army That Failed'

Editors Note: Tran Van Dinh, South Vietnamese journalist and lecturer who now lives in Washington, D.C., is a regular columnist for Collegiate Press service. This is the first in a series of columns on the Vietnamese armies.

By TRAN VAN DINH  
Collegiate Press Service

On Sunday, September 17, the major dailies in Washington, D.C., carried a full page article about the ARVN (Army Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam) written by Peter Arnett, the Pulitzer Prize winning war correspondent for the Associated Press in South Vietnam.

The Washington Post headlined the story: "South Vietnamese Army fights 5½ Day Week;" the Star: "South Vietnam's Army Found Increasingly Ineffective." The Star apologetically wrote in an editorial that "in view of the fact that Arnett is a respected newsman and since AP carried the story, we feel an obligation to present it to our readers."

The article, which reveals nothing new or sensational, should have been titled: The Story of an Army That Failed." The failure of the ARVN is an old story.

It has been both recognized by the people in the U.S. and the Vietnamese people. The steady increase of the U.S. land forces committed to the fighting in South Vietnam (23,000 in 1964, 450,000 in 1967) is a clear admission of the failure.

Also, only a few days ago, Saigon ousted four generals (according to my information, there will be at least two more on the

(See ARMY on Page 2)

# Army

(Continued From Page 1)

list) and 38 officers from major to colonel (more in the future). Only two of 44 generals in the ARVN in 1963 are still holding their rank. Others were dismissed and sent into exile abroad.

The reason invoked by General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, President and vice president "elected" is: corruption and inefficiency, mainly corruption.

This presumes that General Thieu and Marshall Ky are above corruption. Administratively speaking, if there is such a large scale corruption (and there is), the responsible are those who are commanding that Army in the last two years at the very top, General Thieu and Marshall Ky.

TIME, no leftist magazine, in the September 15 cover story on General Nguyen Van Thieu, wrote mildly and nicely: "There is little doubt that he (Thieu) has occasionally accepted the shadow prerequisites that go with high office throughout most of Asia (why Asia and which Asia?) On his lieutenant general's salary of \$509 a month, he has reportedly managed to accumulate considerable acreage and can afford to send Mme Thieu to Paris now and then for a shopping spree."

Madame Ky, on a Tokyo shopping spree and nose-straightening operation was careless: she lost a handbag containing \$1,500 U.S. dollars in cash last year. Ky's salary, of course, is smaller than Thieu's.

The Atlantic Monthly of September 1967 revealed an opium smuggling scandal which involved Colonel Khu Duc Hung, the South Vietnamese Military Attache' in Laos, a member of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan's (Ky's right hand man and chief of police) military police.

The South Vietnamese ambassador to Laos, Pham Trong Nhan (a career diplomat and a friend of mine) asked Saigon to recall Colonel Hung when he was informed of the colonel's smuggling. Instead, Saigon dismissed the ambassador.

Later when Saigon wanted to nominate a friend of General Ky and General Loan as ambassador, the decent Laotian government said no.

Wrote the Atlantic "It is impossible to estimate police profits from the opium and gold rackets and other extracurricular activities. A former cabinet minister gave as his informed opinion that secret funds available to Ky's supporters from these and other sources ran to three billion piasters or more than 25 million."

Late March, news dispatches (Washington Post March 24) carried the story of Ngo Van Dieu, a major in the South Vietnam Air Force who had flown in his military plane to avoid charge of "embezzling \$19,000." Major Dieu was known in Saigon as an important member in the opium smuggling ring. Saigon information available to me at the time were that the major was "hot" with General Thieu's rival secret police who was beginning

to expose his case. Ky had to let him go.

General Duong Van Minh (Big Minh, exiled in Bangkok whom Saigon refused to let him go back to run in the recent Presidential elections) revealed in an interview published in the Far Eastern Economist Review of August 2 that a South Vietnamese official was dismissed because he has made public his confiscation of two tons of opium. General Minh added that "the CIA confirmed his story."

The opium and gold smuggling the most lucrative business in Saigon, is run by the police controlled by General Loan, the closest friend of General Ky.

With this large scale corruption at the top, what good is it to punish small fry -- the majors and the colonels?

Several fundamental questions have to be asked in the case of the failure of the ARVN.

1. Who train the ARVN, equip it, pay it, and support it since 1954? The answer is obvious: The U.S. and the American taxpayers. For the U.S. to blame the failure of the ARVN, is just like a father who blames his delinquent son, accusing him of being his son and a young man.

I am not defending the ARVN and certainly not its leadership. I know more about its corruption than Mr. Arnett, having observed it for several years both inside and outside. It is no use to expose here all the cases: the list is too long and would be obscene to the readers.

Often I conversed with junior officers and simple soldiers and I am aware of their inner tragedy. They are insulted by faults not of their own by the people who pay them.

2. Why is that the Vietcong soldiers -- the North Vietnamese

who are as Vietnamese as the ARVN's soldiers, speaking the same language, descending from the same ancestors, sharing the same history, the same hopes, eating the same food -- are such good fighters whom the American journalists and soldiers respect and praise?

Recently when I discussed the ARVN problem with a senior ARVN officer, he said cynically, "Their lack of fighting spirit denotes their measure of patriotism. Why should they fight under present circumstances?"

Perhaps this is a brutal reply to the problem but I have no doubt that my compatriot is not expressing a lone opinion. Cases of conflicts between Vietnamese and U.S. officers increase with the degree of control of the U.S. Army over the ARVN. I understand the U.S. Army dilemma which actually is the basic weak point in the whole U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam.

3. In many conversations with the American man in the street, I am given the impression that it is the first time Vietnam has an army and a government (if one can call the Saigon regime a government) and Vietnam has never been a nation. The question is: Who defeated the all powerful Mongolian armies in the 13th century? Who constantly repulsed foreign invasions before the U.S. came to Vietnam?

The war in Vietnam is a tragedy of great magnitude and in any

(See ARMY Page 5)

# *Army*

(Continued From Page 2)

tragedy there are only victims. This is no time for recrimination or anger or frustration. The source of all tragedy is ignorance of the environments, of human conditions and of the essence of the problems man has to face. To answer the above questions, to shed a light on the problems of the ARVN is to go into a study of the historical development of the Vietnamese Army, the ARVN (Army Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam), the VPA (The Vietnamese People's Army, North Vietnam), and the LASV (The Liberation Army of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong Army.)