

## **AFTER 40 YEARS OF THE TET OFFENSIVE IN THE VIETNAM WAR**

### **HALF OF THE TRUTH DECIPHERED**

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In commemoration of the Tet Offensive of 1968, Dr. Bai An Tran, a former RVN judge and professor of criminology at the Vietnamese National Police Academy, wrote a new perspective, regarding Eddie Adams' Pulitzer Prize winning picture.

#### **The first war the US has ever lost**

One of the most significant political characters that have made the USA become a superpower nation is the bipartisanship. All-important national issues have been deeply viewed by both sides positively and negatively. So why did America shamefully lose the Vietnam War? The answer is that the Americans were half blinded. They just saw half of the truth of the Vietnam War. A half loaf of bread is still a loaf of bread; however, half of the truth is no longer the truth, but a falsity. The historical fight in which anti-war activists hid its half truth was the general attack by the North troops in almost all territories in the South during Tet (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year) in 1968, 40 years ago, and the main thing that changed the public opinion in America was the photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing an officer of the North on a street of Saigon.

#### **The Vietnam War**

The 1954 Geneva Agreement divided Vietnam into the North and South. Each side chose a different political system: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North followed Communism and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the South followed the Free World. However, as soon as the Agreement was signed, the North had the plan to invade the South with forces. Their cadres carried out guerrilla activities to attack the RVN troops and destroy villages in the South. Then, they expanded the Ho Chi Minh Trail along the borders of Vietnam and the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia to move troops, weapons and ammunitions provided by China and Russia from the North to the South.

At the end of 1967, when the US troops in Vietnam reached 500,000, North Vietnam picked Khe Sanh to wage a battle hoping this fight would bring the defeat to the Americans, similar to Dien Bien Phu to the French in the 1950s. This was also a diversionary tactic to draw American and Vietnamese attention towards Khe Sanh in preparation for their surprise general attacks in major cities in South Vietnam during Tet in 1968.

## **The Tet Offensive**

Tet is the most important holiday for the Vietnamese. As in past years, North and South Vietnam governments agreed to a three-day ceasefire during this occasion. With this agreement, 50% of South Vietnamese officials, officers and soldiers were off duty to be with their families. Even President Nguyen Van Thieu left Saigon to be with his in-laws in My Tho to celebrate Tet. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese troops went ahead with their plans, transporting weapons day and night to prepare for the offensive.

In the solemn spirit of Tet, people came to churches and temples to pray for peace in the New Year. Sounds of firecrackers and lion dance drums welcoming Tet suddenly were mixed with the communist guns' popping sounds. Houses were burned and destroyed amidst the weeping from women and children.

In the first hours of the attack, communist troops took over Saigon Radio so its broadcast was temporarily stopped. General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the Police Commander, and other RVN military units retook the control of radio station shortly after. The communists were not able to broadcast their propaganda.

NBC Reporter Don North was at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon during the communist attack and filed the following report: At 2:45 in the early morning of January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968, communist cadres, with red banners around their arms drove a Peugeot car and a taxi, slammed into the embassy gate and opened fire. They got inside and took control of a chamber, but encountered strong defense from the guards. After 6 hours of fighting, 4 US Military Police and one marine were killed, along with all 19 communist cadres.

## **Aftermath**

In total, the United States estimated that 45,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers were killed, 6,000 were captured, with the number of wounded being unclear. The USA, South Vietnam and allied Australian and South Korean forces suffered 4,324 killed, 16,063 wounded, and 598 missing. <sup>1[2]</sup>

The ancient capital of Hue suffered heavy damage. Twelve thousand communist troops took over Hue on New Year's Eve. The Truong Tien Bridge collapsed from mines. It took 26 days before the RVN troops, with support of artillery power from US battle ships, retook control of Hue. Tragically, sorrow and mourning spread in the city when the Viet Cong buried alive more than 7,000 civilians and South Vietnam's government officials in mass graves scattered around Hue and its vicinity.

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## **General Loan's execution**

In the morning of the second day of Tet, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968, when general Nguyen Ngoc Loan was leading a fierce fight near An Quang Pagoda in Saigon's Chinese quarter, two of his officers brought to him a communist cadre who had murdered many innocents in cold-blood in the past couple days. He was Captain Nguyen Van Lem, alias Bay Lop.

Minutes before he was captured, Bay Lop had killed a RVN policeman's wife and all of his family members including his children. Around 4:30 A.M., Nguyen Van Lem led a sabotage unit along with Viet Cong tanks to attack the Armor Camp in Go Vap. After communist troops took control of the base, Bay Lop arrested Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Tuan with his family and forced him to show them how to drive tanks. When Lieutenant Colonel Tuan refused to cooperate, Bay Lop killed all members of his family including his 80-year-old mother. There was only one survivor, a seriously injured 10-year-old boy.

Nguyen Van Lem was captured near a mass grave with 34 innocent civilian bodies. Lem admitted that he was proud to carry out his unit leader's order to kill these people. Lem was in his shorts and shirt. His arms were tied from the back. The pistol was still in his possession. General Loan executed Nguyen Van Lem on the spot.

Eddie Adams, a photographer of AP was on scene. He took the picture. General Loan explained to Adams: *"This Viet Cong killed many Americans and many of my men."*

## **The photo tragedy**

The anti-war protestors have used the photo of general Loan's execution as a tool to distort the just cause of the Vietnam War. They argued that the Vietnam War was dirty and should be terminated by the immediate withdrawal of the American troops. Many violent demonstrations occurred throughout the USA. Finally, the US government and the North Vietnam signed the Paris Treaty in 1973. Then the US Congress cut the military supplies to South Vietnam. As a result, the Saigon government collapsed on April 30, 1975.

Now is the time to review and unveil the main meanings of the photo.

### **Factual view:**

Eddie Adams won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for this photograph, but he felt very sorry. *"Two people died in that photograph," he wrote, "the recipient of the bullet and general Nguyen Ngoc Loan. The general killed the Viet Cong, I killed the general with my camera."*

Also, Adams added that the photograph does lie, even without manipulation. It is only a half-truth. What the general's execution photograph didn't say was:

- The North created the fight at the time of ceasefire.
- The general shot a villain who had committed atrocities during a ceasefire.
- The general is a devoted Buddhist who spent a lot of his time to build hospitals in Vietnam for war casualties.

When Adams visited general Loan at his pizza parlor in Virginia, USA, he reported that Loan said: *"You were doing your job and I was doing mine."* Adams admired him and both became close friends.

One of his aids, Colonel Tran Minh Cong, witnessed: *"General Loan is an educated general of South Vietnam. He is courageous, simple, generous and talented. He is really a hero of our country."*

General Loan died of cancer on July 14, 1998. Adams sent a card expressing his profound regret for ruining the general's life. He praised general Loan as a hero of a just cause. His eulogy was published in Time on July 27, 1998. *"This picture really messed up his life. He never blamed me. He told me if I hadn't taken the picture, someone else would have, but I've felt bad for him and his family for a long time. I had kept in contact with him; the last time we spoke was about six months ago, when he was very ill. I sent flowers when I heard that he had died and wrote, 'I'm sorry. There are tears in my eyes'."*

Adams attended the General's funeral and said: *"General Loan was a hero. America should be crying. I just hate to see him go this way, without people knowing anything about him."* Six years later, Adams died at the age of 71.

#### **Legal view:**

Among the four parties involved in the Vietnam War, only South Vietnam did not sign the Geneva Agreement for the prisoners of war and publicly refused it on February 18, 1974. This fact cannot be used negatively to prove prejudice because up until 2005, only 192 countries accepted this Agreement.

Even after signing this Agreement, each country gave an explanation in its own way. For example, the USA denied treating the North Vietnamese captives as prisoners of war, because the North troops were so cruel and uncivilized in fighting by killing women and children. On the contrary, North Vietnam also refused to treat the US captives as prisoners of war because the US was involved in the so-called "colonial war". So both countries defined differently the meaning of "prisoner of war".

Ronald P. Cundick, a member of the US Army Office of the Judge Advocate General, wrote: *"In practice, American POW's (Prisoner of War) held by the Viet Cong and by the North Vietnamese were often mistreated and used as political hostages and propaganda tools".* On the other side, *"if the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of August 12, 1949 (GPW) had been strictly observed, few Vietcong would have been entitled to POW status."*

So, the Geneva Agreement did not protect Nguyen Van Lem for prisoners for two reasons:

- South Vietnam did not sign it.
- He was a member of the National Front of Liberation of South Vietnam (aka Viet Cong, organized in 1960 at the direction of the Northern Communist Party).

Consequently, the war between the RVN troops and the Viet Cong was a civil war. It was a fight of the insurgents against the South government. At that time, the South government didn't recognize the Viet Cong under the law. This means that law did not protect the Viet Cong as other citizens. Furthermore, any citizen who committed murder with a firearm, as Lem did, would be executed right on the spot because of the severity of the crime. The police officers, instead of shooting Lem on the battlefield, led him to present him to General Loan. This was like a death row inmate being led to the execution courtyard and executed not by the squad team, but by the Commander of Police himself. The method of execution for capital punishment at that time was death after the inmate was blindfolded and tied to the pole at the execution courtyard to be shot.

### **Conclusion**

General Nguyen Ngoc Loan legally executed Viet Cong Captain Nguyen Van Lem under special circumstances. That was what Eddie Adams meant when he said his photo just represented half of the truth. The Vietnam War was a noble one. It was the war against communism, which the Republic of Vietnam fought with great support from the US and from other countries around the world. Even though having been abandoned by the USA, the soldiers and people of the Republic of Vietnam continued their fight against the communists until the last minutes. The flow of Vietnamese refugees since 1975 around the world was not the surrender in desperation, but the beginning and the dawn of the new strategy against communism to liberate Vietnam. Years later, the Vietnamese joined the Free World to celebrate the triumph when communist regimes collapsed one by one in the 1980s and 1990s. I believe that day will come in the foreseeable future, when the remaining communist regimes in Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea and China will be gone.