

The First Tet Offensive of 1789

The original Tet Offensive in 1789 was a masterpiece of surprise that became the model for the 1968 attack

By Spencer C. Tucker

In January 1789 the Vietnamese defeated a Chinese army and drove it from Vietnam. What might be called the first Tet Offensive is regarded as the greatest military achievement in modern Vietnamese history. Just as the 1904 Japanese strike on Port Arthur foreshadowed their 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, this 1789 offensive should have been a lesson for the United States that Tet had not always been observed peacefully in Vietnam.

Strangely, the 1789 victory goes largely unmentioned in Western histories of Vietnam. For example, Joseph Buttinger in *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* devotes less than a sentence to the offensive, and Stanley Karnow in *Vietnam, A History* does not mention it at all.

In the mid-18th century Vietnam was divided in two, approximately along what became the DMZ of the 16th parallel during the Vietnam War. The Trinh lords ruled the north and the Nguyen family held sway in the south. Each family hated the other and ruled in the name of the powerless Le king at Thang Long (present-day Hanoi).

Widespread corruption throughout Vietnam led to increased demands on the population for tribute and also to peasant uprisings, the most important being the Tay Son Rebellion against the Nguyen in the south. That rebellion was led by three brothers, named (coincidentally) Nguyen Nhac, Nguyen Lu and Nguyen Hue, from the village of Tay Son in present-day Binh Dinh province. The Tay Son, as the brothers and their followers came to be known, advocated seizing property from the rich and distributing it to the poor. They also attracted support from powerful Chinese merchants who opposed restrictive trade practices. The rebellion thus began with peasants and merchants opposing mandarins and large landowners.

The Tay Son built an army in the An Khe Highlands in western Binh Dinh province. The area was strategically important, and there they drew support from disaffected minorities. The brothers were also aided by the fact that the youngest of them, Nguyen Hue, turned out to be a military genius.

In mid-1773, after two years of careful preparations, a Tay Son army of some 10,000 men took the field against the Nguyen. Soon the Tay Son had seized the fort of Qui Nhon; they next took the provinces of Quang Ngai and Quang Nam, and by the end of the year they seemed poised to overthrow the ruling Nguyen family altogether. At this point, however, in 1775, a Trinh army moved south in the name of the Le dynasty and took Phu Xuan (present-day Hue). The Trinh defeated the Tay Son in battle and announced they would stay in the south to put down the rebellion. The Tay Son managed to survive only by reaching accommodation with the Trinh, until the latter tired of their southern involvement and withdrew into the north.

The Tay Son were then again free to concentrate on the Nguyen, although it took the rebels 10 more years to defeat them. In 1776 they attacked the Nguyen stronghold of Gia Dinh province and took Sai Con (later Saigon and present-day Ho Chi Minh City). Only one Nguyen prince, Nguyen Anh, escaped; he and a few supporters fled into the swamps of the western Mekong Delta. Having now defeated the Nguyen, in 1778 Nguyen Nhac proclaimed himself king, with his capital at Do Ban in Binh Dinh province.

Later Nguyen Anh mounted a counterattack, recapturing Gia Dinh and Binh Thuan provinces. In 1783, Tay Son troops led by Nguyen Hue again defeated Nguyen Anh and forced him into refuge on Phu Quoc Island, whereupon a desperate Nguyen Anh called in the Siamese. In 1784, Siam (present-day Thailand) sent between 20,000 and 50,000 men and 300 ships into the western Mekong Delta. Harsh Siamese occupation policies, however, caused many Vietnamese to rally to the Tay Son.

On January 19, 1785, Nguyen Hue lured the Siamese into an ambush on the My Tho River in the Rach Gam-Xoai Mut area of present-day Tien Giang province in the Mekong Delta and defeated them. According to Vietnamese sources, only 2,000 Siamese escaped. The remaining Nguyen family members then fled to Siam. The Battle of Rach Gam-Xoai Mut near My Tho City, Dinh Tuong province, was one of the most important in Vietnamese history because it halted Siamese expansion into southern Vietnam and greatly benefited Nguyen Hue, who then emerged as a national hero. The Trinh in the north were unable to capitalize on this situation because of trouble in their own domain. Bad harvests beginning in 1776 led to disorder, and there was a secessionist struggle. Trinh Sam, head of the family, died in 1786, and his two sons, Trinh Khai and Trinh Can, fought one another for the throne. Eventually Trinh Khai took control in the north, but his youth and physical weakness combined to produce governmental paralysis, undoubtedly to the liking of army leaders who had helped install him in power.

Nguyen Hue now took advantage of the situation to try to reunite Vietnam. He marched an army north under the guise of rescuing the Le kings from Trinh control and won considerable popular support by promising food for the peasants. In a brilliant May-June 1786 campaign Nguyen Hue captured first Phu Xuan, then Quang Tri and Quang Binh provinces. By July, Tay Son troops had reached the Red River Delta and defeated the Trinh. King Le Hien Tong reached accommodation with Nguyen Hue by ceding some territory and giving him his daughter Ngoc Han in marriage. Le Hien Tong died in 1787, and his grandson, Le Chieu Thong, succeeded him.

While Nguyen Hue was restoring the Le dynasty in the north, his brothers controlled the rest of the country. Nguyen Hue dominated the area north of the Pass of Clouds (between present-day Hue and Da Nang) from Thanh Hoa; his brother Nguyen Nhac held the center, with his capital at Qui Nhon; and Nguyen Lu controlled the south, from Gia Dinh near Saigon.

Nguyen Anh was again active in the south, in Gia Dinh province, and Nguyen Hue returned there to assist his brothers in putting him down. Nguyen Hue sent the royal elephants south with the Le treasury and then sailed for Phu Xuan. He left behind his lieutenant, Nguyen Huu Chinh, who had deserted the king and joined the Tay Son cause, to defend Thang Long.

Nguyen Huu Chinh, however, took advantage of Nguyen Hue's absence to advance his own interests. He and King Le Chieu Thong attempted to gain power for themselves, fortifying the north against Nguyen Hue. The Tay Son commander, then at Phu Xuan, sent one of his generals, Vu Van Nham, north with an army to attack Thang Long. In subsequent fighting Nguyen Huu Chinh was killed and the Le king fled north. Having secured the capital, General Vu Van Nham then took power himself, ruling as king. It had occurred to Nguyen Hue that Vu Van Nham might do this, so he sent two other generals, Ngo Van So and Phan Van Lan, after him. They defeated Vu Van Nham and executed him. Nguyen Hue then invited the Le king to return, but he refused.

In the midst of these developments, Nguyen Hue was again forced to shift his attention to the south to deal with Nguyen Anh. Before leaving the north, however, Nguyen Hue ordered the Le palace razed. After sending the royal treasury south by ship, he left behind a garrison of 3,000 men in Thang Long.

King Le Chieu Thong, meanwhile, was in Bac Giang in far northern Vietnam, but he sent his mother and son to China to ask for assistance from the emperor in reclaiming his throne. Sun Shi-yi, the viceroy in Canton and governor of Kwang-tung (Guang dong) and Kwang-si (Guang xi) provinces, supported military intervention in Vietnam. He believed it would be an easy matter for China to establish a protectorate over an area weakened by a protracted civil war. Chinese Emperor Qian-long (Kien Lung, 1736-1796) agreed, but his public pronouncements stressed that the Le had always recognized Chinese hegemony in sending tribute. He said that China was intervening merely to restore the Le to power.

In November 1788, a Chinese expeditionary force commanded by Sun Shi-yi and assisted by General Xu Shi-heng crossed the frontier at Cao Bang, Tuyen Quang and Lang Son. These columns then converged on Thang Long. The Chinese force, estimated at up to 200,000 men, advanced smoothly into Vietnam, and the Chinese troops gave no cause for Vietnamese hostility en route to the capital. In fact, Chinese and Le edicts stating that the intervention was merely to put down the Tay Son usurpers attracted some Vietnamese support. At the same time, the Chinese demonstrated that they were in Vietnam to stay; along the route to Thang Long they established some 70 military storehouses.

At the news of the Chinese invasion, many of the Tay Son troops manning the northern outposts fled. The Chinese easily won a series of small battles in early and mid-December. Faced with overwhelming force, Ngo Thi Nham, a Tay Son adviser, argued for retreat. He pointed out the overwhelming Chinese numbers and that the Tay Son troops were dispirited. He said that northerners were deserting, and that 'to attack with troops such as these would be like hunting a tiger with a band of goats.' He also added that defense of the capital would be difficult because the people there were not committed: 'the danger would then be from within...and no general...could win under those conditions. It would be like putting a lamprey in a basket of crabs.' Ngo Van So, Nguyen Hue's commander in the north, agreed, and Ngo Thi Nham then ordered ships loaded with provisions sent south to Thanh Hoa and dispatched the remainder of the Tay Son troops overland to fortify a line from the Tam Diep Mountains to the sea.

Meanwhile, the Chinese took Thang Long. After throwing a pontoon bridge across the Red River, on December 17 they entered the city with little resistance. For this success, the Chinese emperor made Sun Shi-yi a count and gave him the title 'Valiant Tactician.' Xu Shi-heng became a baron, and other Chinese officers were also given titles of nobility or advanced in rank.

Sun Shi-yi planned to renew the offensive against the Tay Son after the lunar New Year celebrations; meanwhile, he would remain in Thang Long. He positioned his troops in three principal locations. The main force was in open fields along the two banks of the Red River, connected by pontoon bridges. South of the capital the Chinese held a series of defensive positions centered on Ngoc Hoi, in the suburbs of Thang Long. The third part of the army was to the southwest, at Khuong Thuong. King Le Chieu Thong's small Vietnamese force remained in the capital.

The Chinese were overconfident. Because they had thus far experienced little resistance, they believed the Tay Son were militarily negligible, and that it would be easy for them to bring all Vietnam under their control. Resources were scarce in the north, however, and it would be difficult to sustain a large force there. The Chinese governor of Kwang-si province reported to the emperor that it would take at least 100,000 men just to man the supply lines to Thang Long.

Events now worked to undermine China's position. For one thing, the Chinese treated Vietnam as if it were captured territory. Although the Chinese recognized Le Chieu Thong as king of An Nam, he had to issue his pronouncements in the name of the Chinese emperor and personally report every day to Sun Shi-yi. Le Chieu Thong also carried out reprisals against Vietnamese officials who had rallied to the Tay Son, and seemed oblivious to the poor treatment his people were receiving from the Chinese. Even his supporters were upset, agreeing that 'from the first Vietnamese king, there has never been such a coward.'

Meanwhile, typhoons and disastrous harvests, especially in 1788, led northerners to believe that the king had lost his 'Mandate of Heaven,' and they began to distance themselves from him. Vietnamese in the north especially suffered because they had to feed the Chinese from their own meager food supplies. Thus the psychological climate in the north came to favor the Tay Son.

While this was transpiring, Nguyen Hue had been busy with military preparations at Phu Xuan (Hue). At the time he had some 6,000 men in his army. Spies in the north had kept him well informed of Chinese intentions, but he faced a difficult decision. Nguyen Anh was again causing problems in the south, and Nguyen Hue had to determine which was the greater threat. Although he ultimately decided that the Chinese were the bigger problem, Nguyen Hue sent a trusted general south to deal with Nguyen Anh should he try to take advantage of the situation. On December 22, 1788, Nguyen Hue erected an altar on a hill south of Phu Xuan and proclaimed himself king, in effect abolishing on his own the Le dynasty. He then took the name of Quang Trung.

Four days later, Quang Trung was in Nghe An recruiting. This province, with its high birthrate and low rice production, has traditionally been recognized as one of the best places in Vietnam from which to recruit capable soldiers. Many men agreed to join the army, which reportedly grew to 100,000 men with several hundred elephants. To instill confidence, all new recruits were placed under Quang Trung's direct command.

In an effort to widen his appeal, Quang Trung played on nationalism, declaring:

The Qing have invaded our country... In the universe each earth, each star has its particular place; the North [China] and the South [Vietnam] each have their own government. The men of the North are not of our race, they will not think our way or be nice to us. Since the Han dynasty, they have invaded us many times, massacring and pillaging our people. We could not stand that. Today, the Qing have invaded us again hoping to reestablish Chinese prefectures, forgetting what happened to the Song, to the Yuan, and to the Ming. That is why we must raise an army to chase them out. You, men of conscience and courage, join us in this great enterprise.

At the same time Quang Trung sought to deceive his opponents. He sent a letter to Sun Shi-yi falsely declaring that the Tay Son wished to surrender. This led the Chinese to become even more over-confident and neglect military preparations.

On January 15, 1789, Quang Trung put his forces in motion and, at Mount Tam Diep, joined up with forces under Ngo Van So. Although he had earlier accused Ngo Van So of having retreated before the enemy, Quang Trung now said:

In the art of war, when an army is defeated the general deserves death. However, you were right when you decided to give way to the enemy when they were at their best in order to reinforce our troops and to withdraw to hold strategic positions. That kept our men in high spirits and made the enemy more arrogant. It was a cunning operation... This time I personally command our troops. I have made my plan. In 10 days we will drive them back to China and it will all be over. But as their country is 10 times larger than ours, they will be very ashamed of their loss and will certainly take revenge. There will be endless fighting between the two countries, which will wreak havoc on our people. Therefore after this war I would like Ngo Thi Nham to write to them in his elegant manner to stop war completely. In 10 years' time, when we have constructed a rich and strong state, we won't have to fear them anymore.

Quang Trung learned from his spies that the Chinese planned to begin their offensive southward out of Thang Long on the sixth day of the new year in an attack on Phu Xuan. He planned a spoiling attack and ordered his soldiers to celebrate Tet early, promising that they would be able to properly celebrate later in Thang Long. On January 25, the last day of the year, the Tay Son left Tam Diep to take the offensive.

Nearly half the Chinese army was near the capital. Sun Shi-yi's remaining troops were deployed on a north-south line along the major road connecting Thang Long to the approaches to the Tam Diep Mountains. The route was protected by the natural defenses of the Red River and three other waterways—the Nhuc, Thanh Quyet and Gian Thuy rivers. The line was flanked to the west and to the east from Thang Long by posts at Son Tay and at Hai Duong. This forced the Tay Son to attack the main Chinese line at some distance from the capital and reduce successively the most important forts. Sun Shi-yi believed that, in the unlikely event of a Tay Son attack, this disposition would give Chinese reserves time to intervene. It also ensured that the Chinese could maintain contact between all three major elements of their forces and protect their lines of communication back into southern China. But it emphasized offensive, rather than defensive, operations.

Sun Shi-yi was not initially concerned about a Tay Son attack. When it became obvious that the Tay Son troops were about to go on the offensive, he belatedly sent troops to reinforce key posts and his best general to command the defensive line to the south. In the process of strengthening the forts, the Chinese arranged them so as to wear out the attackers; each fort closer to the capital was stronger than the last.

Quang Trung's troops moved north rapidly in five columns to converge on Thang Long. Quang Trung commanded the main force of infantry, horsemen and elephants transporting the army's heavy artillery. It would strike Ngoc Hoi, the principal Chinese position south of the capital and headquarters of the Chinese general commanding the south.

To force the Chinese to disperse, Quang Trung sent part of his fleet, commanded by General Nguyen Van Tuyet, to the port of Hai Phong. It was to destroy the small Le force there, then attack the Chinese east of the Red River and support the main force in its drive on Thang Long. Another part of the fleet sailed north to the border provinces of Yen The and Lang Giang to harass Chinese lines of communication north.

The fourth group of Tay Son, commanded by General Bao, had horsemen and elephants as well as infantry. It would take a different route from the main body but would join it in the assault on Ngoc Hoi.

The fifth Tay Son column, led by General Long and including horsemen and elephants, was to make a quick and sudden attack on Thang Long to dispirit the Chinese. It was to destroy Chinese forces southwest of the capital, then move east to Sun Shi-yi's headquarters and attack Chinese troops withdrawing from other directions.

In the middle of the night on January 25, Quang Trung's force took the outpost at Son Nam in Nam Dinh province defended by the Le king's followers, who had been celebrating the New Year. It then rapidly seized one after another of the forts defending access to the capital. On the third day of Tet, January 28, the Tay Son surrounded the important post of Ha Hoi, some 20 kilometers southwest of the capital. Caught off guard, the Chinese defenders there surrendered with their arms and supplies.

On January 29 Tay Son forces reached Ngoc Hoi, 14 kilometers south of the capital and the last Chinese fort before Thang Long. The strongest Chinese defensive position, it was manned by 30,000 well-trained troops and protected by trenches, minefields, pit traps and bamboo stakes.

Quang Trung waited a day for Long's column to join up from the southwest. At dawn the next day the Tay Son struck from two directions. Elephants led the attack and easily defeated the Chinese horsemen. The Chinese then withdrew into the fort, which was attacked by elite Tay Son commandos formed in groups of 20 men, who protected themselves by holding over their heads wooden planks covered with straw soaked in water. The attacking troops immediately came under heavy Chinese cannon and arrow fire. The Tay Son infantry employed small incendiary rockets called hoa ho.

Mounted on an elephant, Quang Trung directed operations. Vietnamese historians tell us that his armor was 'black from the powder smoke.' As soon as the assault force reached the walls and ramparts, the troops threw down their shields and fought hand to hand. After intense fighting, the Tay Son emerged victorious, and large numbers of Chinese, including general officers, died.

The other Tay Son columns were also successful. General Long's force defeated the Chinese at Khuong Thuong, and their commander committed suicide. General Bao's troops at Dam Muc also ambushed Chinese troops retreating from Ngoc Hoi to Thang Long. The Vietnamese killed thousands of the northern invaders. The Chinese defensive line south of the capital was completely shattered. The Dong Da post, now within the city of Ha Noi, was taken after a day of fierce fighting. The Chinese commander there hanged himself.

Sun Shi-yi learned of the defeats at Ngoc Hoi and Khuong Thuong in the middle of the night of January 29, about the same time the Tay Son entered the capital's suburbs. With fires visible in the distance, Sun Shi-yi did not bother to put on his armor or saddle his horse but mounted it bareback and fled over the Red River, followed by others on horseback. The Chinese infantry soon joined the flight, but the bridge they tried to use in their escape became overburdened and collapsed under their weight. According to Vietnamese accounts, the Red River was filled with thousands of Chinese bodies. King Le Chieu Thong also fled along with his family and found refuge in China, ending the 300-year-long Le dynasty in Vietnam.

On the afternoon of the fifth day of the New Year Quang Trung's troops entered Thang Long. As their commander had promised, they celebrated Tet there on the seventh day of the New Year. Quang Trung then sent out orders to his generals to pursue the Chinese, hoping to capture Sun Shi-yi. His intention was to frighten the Chinese so much that they would give up their dream of conquering Vietnam. He promised, however, to treat humanely all those who surrendered, and thousands of Chinese troops did so.

Modern-day Vietnamese know this campaign by a variety of names-the Victory of Ngoc Hoi-Dong Da, the Emperor Quang Trung's Victory over the Manchu, or the Victory of Spring 1789. Today it is still celebrated in Vietnam as the country's greatest military achievement.

Quang Trung profited from Chinese errors. Instead of continuing his offensive to destroy the Tay Son, Sun Shi-yi had halted. Confident of his superior numbers, he had underestimated his adversary and relaxed discipline. But Quang Trung had carefully prepared his campaign. As historian Le Thanh Khoi noted, in the course of a 40-day campaign, Quang Trung had devoted 35 days to preparations and only five to actual battle. His lieutenant's wise decision to retreat from the north had freed up sufficient troops. Another key was the attitude of the civilian population, which rallied to the Tay Son in their march north, providing food, material support and tens of thousands of soldiers. This gave Quang Trung the resources needed to take the offensive. He also managed to preserve military secrecy until the time of his attack. Being on the offensive also helped offset his 2-to-1 numerical inferiority. And his attack on the eve of Tet was a particularly brilliant stroke because it caught the Chinese off guard, when they were getting ready to celebrate the lunar New Year.

Once launched, Quang Trung's offensive went forward without pause over five days. Attacks were usually launched at night, to create maximum confusion for the enemy. Days, meanwhile, were spent on preparations. Quang Trung reportedly organized his forces into three-man teams, two of whom would carry the third in a hammock. They would then change places periodically to minimize march time. The rapid and simultaneous nature of the attacks prevented the Chinese from bringing up reserves, added to their confusion and kept them from shifting their resources.

Quang Trung's offensive covered nearly 80 kilometers and took six forts—a rate of 16 kilometers and more than one fort a day. Counting the retreat from Thang Long, his troops covered 600 kilometers in only 40 days. Considering the state of Vietnamese roads at the time, this was an astonishing achievement. The offensive, concentration of force, excellent training, effective use of combined arms and rapid mobility gave the Tay Son victory. Numbers were not as important as morale; the attackers were clearly motivated by the strong desire to free their country from foreign domination.

Quang Trung can be regarded as one of the greatest of Vietnamese leaders, a commander who won two of the most important military victories in Vietnamese history. He reunited the realm, repelled the Siamese and saved his country from Chinese domination. Contemporary Western missionaries in Vietnam compared him to Alexander the Great. But Quang Trung was more than a military hero; he was also one of Vietnam's greatest kings. If anything, Quang Trung's reputation has grown since 1975—he is regarded as a king raised from the people. Ironically, during his own time many Vietnamese regarded Quang Trung as a usurper because he did not come from a noble family. Evidently they preferred a bad king from a good family to an effective king from a poor family.

Recognizing the need for peace and accommodation with China, Quang Trung immediately sought normalization of trade relations with the Chinese after the battle and pledged fealty to their emperor. He further requested permission to travel to Beijing, a trip he made in 1790. Meanwhile, in December 1789 an imperial emissary presented him with ritual confirmation as king of An Nam.

Quang Trung showed himself willing to work with capable individuals, regardless of their past loyalties. This helped attract the best men to his service. He reorganized the army and carried out fiscal reforms. He redistributed unused lands, mainly to the peasants. He promoted crafts and trade, and pushed for reforms in education, stating that 'to build a country, nothing is more important than educating the people.'

Quang Trung also believed in the importance of studying history; he had his tutors lecture to him on Vietnamese history and culture six times a month. He wanted to open trade with the West, and Western missionaries of his day noted that they were able to carry out their religious activities with more freedom than before.

Quang Trung was the first Vietnamese leader to add science to the Mandarin examinations. He also introduced a Vietnamese currency and insisted that Nom, the demotic writing system combining Chinese characters with Vietnamese, be used in court documents.

Unfortunately, Quang Trung's reign was brief—he died of an unknown illness in March or April 1792. Many Vietnamese believe that had he lived a decade longer their history would have been different. Quang Trung's son, Quang Toan, ascended the throne, but he was then only 10 years old. Within a decade Nguyen Anh, the surviving Nguyen lord, came to power and proclaimed himself king as Gia Long, establishing the Nguyen dynasty.

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Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History

The Great War 1914-1918

Battles that Changed History: An Encyclopedia of Worldwide Conflicts