

Battle of Ap Bac (Jan. 1963)

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Vietnamese Ignored U.S. Battle Order

Saigon, Jan. 6 (UPI) Angry United States military advisers charged today that Vietnamese infantrymen refused direct orders to advance during Wednesday's battle at Ap Bac and that an American Army captain was killed while out front pleading with them to attack. The Vietnamese commander of an armored unit also refused for more than an hour to go to the rescue of 11 American crewmen of downed helicopters and an infantry company pinned down by Communist small arms fire, they said.

"It was a miserable damn performance" was the way one American military man summed up the humiliating and costly defeat suffered by the South Vietnamese army at the hands of outnumbered Communist guerrillas in the fight for the jungle hamlet 30 miles south of Saigon.

It was perhaps the strongest criticism by an American military adviser, but others in the battle said it was not an unfair one.

They spoke of the marked "lack of aggressiveness" of Vietnamese commanders, their refusal to heed recommendations of their American advisers, refusal to carry out orders from their superiors and a breakdown in the chain of command of the 7th Vietnamese Division.

As a result, the American sources said, the government troops suffered a needlessly high casualty toll, 65 dead and at least 100 wounded, the second highest since the war against the Communist Viet Cong began.

American advisers who took part in the battle on the edge of the Plain of Reeds recounted sorry tales of the debacle: Government

forces outnumbered the Communists by 10 to 1 and were supported by planes, artillery and armor.

Yet an infantry battalion located less than a mile from Ap Bac flatly refused to advance on the hamlet even though Vietnamese and American officers at division headquarters ordered and pleaded for hours. About 200 guerrillas held Ap Bac.

The battalion commander had been killed and the other officers refused to assume command. Capt. Good was killed while out in front trying to get the Vietnamese to attack.

A Vietnamese captain commanding an armored-personnel carrier company refused for 70 minutes to cross a canal to rescue downed U.S. helicopter crewmen and a company of Vietnamese infantry pinned down by small arms fire.

The captain kept complaining about "heavy enemy fire," even though U.S. advisers urged him to advance because the small arms fire could not penetrate the armored vehicles. He finally gave in to radioed orders and pleading from U.S. and Vietnamese officers and rescued most of the Vietnamese and American wounded.

Then the captain attacked twice but retreated after Communist fire kept picking off exposed machine gunners on the armored cars. U.S. advisers said the captain should have "buttoned up" the armored vehicles and run over the Viet Cong forward positions as he had been trained to do.

Most of the Communists were able to withdraw from the hamlet during the night because a paratroop battalion was dropped on the west side of the hamlet instead of the east, leaving an escape route into the jungles.

An American general narrowly escaped being killed when Vietnamese artillery accidentally shelled their own troops after the fight was over.

The advisers said American patience came to an end Friday when a civil guards company failed to move into a blocking position as ordered, leaving a U.S. Army major alone in a paddy field to face guerrilla stragglers.

Lt. Col. **John Paul Vann**, senior U.S. adviser with the 7th Vietnamese Division, quickly rounded up 60 American advisers, cooks and communications men from his headquarters and sent them to the aid of the major.

The Americans were under strict orders not to fire unless fired upon. They rescued the major and captured 17 guerrillas without suffering any casualties and then returned to their regular duties.

One U.S. adviser said bitterly, "These people (the Vietnamese) won't listen—they make the same mistakes over and over again in the same way."

The Washington Post, January 7, 1963

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