



1st Lieutenant Harold L. Vail, Catkiller 27

THE FOLLOW-ON TO TET

Tet was to set the stage for events leading up to 1st Lieutenant Harold Vail's flight on 27 March 1968. The name of the offensive comes from the Tet holiday, the Vietnamese New Year, when the first major attacks took place. The Tet Offensive was one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War, launched on January 30, 1968 by forces of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam against the forces of South Vietnam, the United States, and their allies. It was a campaign of surprise attacks against military and civilian commands and control centers throughout South Vietnam.

In the early morning hours of January 31, 1968, a division-sized force of PAVN and Vietcong soldiers launched a coordinated attack on the city of Huế; their strategic objective was to "liberate" the entire city to help sweep the Communist insurgents into power. At 02:33, a signal flare lit up the night sky and two battalions from the PAVN 6th Regiment attacked the western bank of the fortress-like Citadel on the northern side of the city. Their objective was to capture the Mang Ca Garrison (ARVN 1st Division headquarters in the Citadel), the Tây Lộc Airfield, and the Imperial Palace. The PAVN 4th Regiment launched a simultaneous attack on the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) compound in the new City on the south side of the river.

The Viet Cong set up provisional authorities shortly after capturing Huế in those early hours. They were charged with removing the existing government administration from power within the city and replacing it with a "revolutionary administration." Working from lists of "cruel tyrants and reactionary elements" previously developed by VC intelligence officers, many people were to be rounded up following the initial hours of the attack. These included the Army of the Republic of Vietnam ARVN soldiers, civil servants, political party members, local religious leaders, schoolteachers, American civilians and other international people.

Cadres called out the names on their lists over loudspeakers, ordering them to report to a local school. Those not reporting voluntarily were hunted down.

The communists' actions were based on a series of orders issued by the High Command and the PRG. In a 3500-page document issued on Jan 26th, 1968 by the Trĩ-Thiên-Huế Political Directorate, the political cadres were given specific instructions: 'Operating in close support of the regular military and guerrilla elements, the political cadre were to: destroy and disorganize the Republic of Viet Nam's (RVN's) administrative machinery "from province and district levels to the city wards, streets, and wharves;" motivate the people of Hue to take up arms, pursue the enemy, seize power, and establish a revolutionary government; motivate (recruit) local citizens for military and "security" forces .. transportation and supply activities, and to serve wounded soldiers . . . ;" "pursue to the end (and) punish spies, reactionaries, and "tyrants" and "maintain order and security in the city".

On February 1st, the provincial administration, having taken control of Hue, issued a directive that ordered the troops, in part, "To wipe out all puppet administrative organs of the puppet Thiệu-Kỳ (President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, Vice President Nguyễn Cao Kỳ) clique at all levels in the province, city and town down to every single hamlet.

On the same day, the Liberation Front radio announced, "We tell our compatriots that we are determined to topple the regime of the traitorous Thiệu-Kỳ clique and to punish and annihilate those who have been massacring and oppressing our compatriots...we ask our compatriots to...help us arrest all the U.S.-puppet cruel henchmen. A March 6 document written by a VC sapper unit commander recounted that his unit "participated in the killing of tyrants and the digging of trenches" A March 13, 1968 entry in captured documents reviewed the successes of the attack on Hue. "Enormous victory: We annihilated more than 3,000 tyrannical puppet army and government administrative personnel, including the Deputy Province Chief of Thua Thien." A report written by the commander of the 6th Regiment on March 30 stated that they had captured thousands of "local administrative personnel, puppet troops, and cruel tyrants" and successfully "annihilated members of various reactionary political parties, henchmen, and wicked tyrants." It also stated that they had "killed 1,000 local administrative personnel, spies and cruel tyrants."



Burial of 300 unidentified victims

In June 1968, American 1st Cavalry troops captured top-secret PAVN documents that included a directive written two days before the battle began. It included the following instructions: "For the purpose of a lengthy occupation of Hue, we should immediately liberate the rural areas and annihilate the wicked GVN administrative personnel. Specific Mission

We must attack the enemy key agencies, economic installations, and lines of communications. We must also annihilate the enemy mobile troops, reactionary elements and tyrants.

As the cleanup campaign continued into March, the 220th often provided support for the Vietnamese Army. The Vietnamese Rangers, properly known in Vietnamese as the Biệt Động Quân, more commonly known as the ARVN Rangers, were the Rangers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Trained and assisted by American Special Forces and Ranger advisers, the Vietnamese Rangers infiltrated beyond enemy lines in daring search and destroy missions. Initially trained as a counter-insurgency light infantry force by removing the fourth company each of the existing infantry battalions, they later expanded into a swing force capable of conventional as well as counter-insurgency operations.

When the VC and NVA forces opened the 1968 Tet Offensive in the major cities of Vietnam, the maroon beret soldiers were rushed to the scene and were an active force in defeating the Communists threat. By 11 March 1968 massive search and destroy sweeps are launched against Viet Cong remnants in the surrounding countryside. While, 22 March would, without warning, result in a massive North Vietnamese barrage on the Marine Base at Khe Sanh.

The preceding events were to define the conditions that surrounded the Phu Bai airfield and military complex on 27 March. The South Vietnamese Rangers, their continuing sweeps through the area, had come upon a large Viet Cong contingent near the Phu Bai airfield. 1st Lieutenant Vail's actions that day would result in a complete route of enemy forces and result in his receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phu_Bai_Combat_Base

CITATION:



HEADQUARTERS
1st AVIATION BRIGADE
APO San Francisco 96384

GENERAL ORDERS
NUMBER 5500

"NGUY HIEM"

11 August 1968

AWARD OF THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

1. TC 320. The following AWARD is announced.

VAIL, HAROLD L. 05331683, SSAN [Redacted], FIRST LIEUTENANT, TRANSPORTATION CORPS,

United States Army, 220th Recon Aplt Co, APO 96308

Awarded: Distinguished Flying Cross

Date action: 27 March 1968

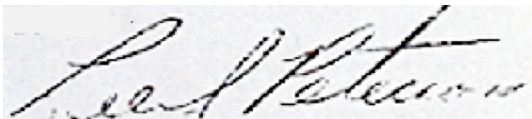
Theater: Republic of Vietnam

Reason: For heroism while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary actions above and beyond the call of duty: Lieutenant Vail distinguished himself while piloting an O-1 aircraft in support of South Vietnamese Ranger operations near Phu Bai airfield. As the ranger force made contact, Lieutenant Vail immediately called in accurate helicopter gunship strikes against twelve Viet Cong attempts to withdraw. Meanwhile the lead elements of the sweeping unit reported approximately 150 Viet Cong fleeing in the opposite direction. Lieutenant Vail quickly diverted the gunships to the new target. With complete disregard for his own safety, Lieutenant Vail flew continuously over the target. Receiving intense ground fire while directing repeated gunship and fixed wing attack aircraft strikes. His effective guidance of friendly air support inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and allowed friendly ground units to cut off their escape routes. His immediate responsiveness and professional control of air power accounted for 37 Viet Cong kills by air, 82 prisoners of war, and 11 weapons captured. Lieutenant Vail's outstanding performance of duty is in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

Authority: By direction of the President under the provisions of the Act of Congress, approved 2 July 1926.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

OFFICIAL:



HERB D. PRATHER
COL, INF
Chief of Staff

LEE S. PETERSON
1LT, AGC

Asst Adjutant General

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
Lineage and Honors

HEADQUARTERS
1ST AVIATION BRIGADE
(NGUY-HIEM)

Constituted 25 April 1966 in the Regular Army as Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Aviation Brigade
Activated 25 May 1966 in Vietnam
Transferred 2 February 2011 to the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, with
Headquarters at Fort Rucker, Alabama

CAMPAIGN PARTICIPATION CREDIT

<u>Vietnam</u>	
Counteroffensive	Tet 69/Counteroffensive
Summer-Fall 1969	Summer-Fall 1969
Winter-Spring 1970	Winter-Spring 1970
Sanctuary Counteroffensive	Sanctuary Counteroffensive
Counteroffensive, Phase VII	Counteroffensive, Phase VII
Consolidation I	Consolidation I
Consolidation II	Consolidation II
Cease-Fire	Cease-Fire
Counteroffensive, Phase II	Counteroffensive, Phase IV
Counteroffensive, Phase III	Counteroffensive, Phase V
Tet Counteroffensive	Counteroffensive, Phase VI

DECORATIONS

Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1969-1970
Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1970-1971
Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1971-1972
Meritorious Unit Commendation (Army), Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1972
Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1966-1967
Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1967-1968
Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1969-1970
Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1970-1972
Republic of Vietnam Civil Action Honor Medal, First Class, Streamer embroidered VIETNAM 1971-1972

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY:

ROBERT J. DALESSANDRO
Director, Chief of Military History
[Lineage and Honors Information as of 25 May 2011]

Transcribed and arranged by Dennis D. Currie, Assistant Editor, www.catkillers.org