

STARS & STRIPES

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30,000 'INVADERS' HURL BACK S. VIETS

SAIGON (AP and UPI) --South Vietnam's northern quarter erupted Saturday into the bloodiest battlefield since the 1968 Tet offensive, and the commander of government forces said more than 30,000 North Vietnamese troops had invaded Quang Tri Province.

The South Vietnamese, calling it an "invasion" from North Vietnam, reeled back 10 miles from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) frontier between the two countries. They set up a makeshift defense line along the Cua Viet River, also known as the Dong Ha. By nightfall Saturday, the South Vietnamese had abandoned 10 outposts of the DMZ defense line as well as the town of Cam Lo (population 50,000). Streams of refugees had been walking the dusty roads south from Cam Lo since the Communist artillery barrage began Thursday.

A heavy cloud cover stretching for miles on both sides of the mountainous DMZ buffer zone cut allied aerial counter-attacks down to almost zero. Despite the setbacks, Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the northernmost 1st Corps, claimed his forces had killed thousands of North Vietnamese troops. He said South Vietnamese infantry, Marine and armored cavalry units are now engaged in "several bloody battles." Lam, after touring the northern quarter, said three North Vietnamese divisions, three artillery regiments, and antiaircraft units armed with surface-to-air missiles had crossed the Demilitarized Zone to invade Quang Tri Province.

He left no doubt that the offensive Allied officers had been predicting since late last year was under way. Quang Tri city has been mentioned as one of the main Communist objectives. Lam's brief statement was released by the Saigon military command and newsmen did not have an opportunity to question him. A North Vietnamese division numbers about 10,000 men at full strength.

The cloud cover effectively grounded two squadrons of U.S. Air Force F-4 Phantom jets at Da Nang, about 40 planes, and more than twice that number of Navy fighter-bombers aboard carriers in the South China Sea.

The clouds, did not, however, stop U.S. helicopters from flying support for South Vietnamese troops, trying to rescue the handful of American advisers and artillery spotters still in the DMZ area --- and getting shot up in the process. Ten copters were hit but none were shot down.

One American Marine lieutenant died while being carried by helicopter from the abandoned South Vietnamese base at which he had been an advisor, UPI correspondent Stewart Kellerman reported from Da Nang. Three American advisers were still at the town of Cam Lo when it was overrun. Their fate was not known. Communist antiaircraft machine guns at Cam Lo fired on U.S. helicopters. The chopper crew did not return the fire for fear of hitting the civilians remaining there.

The choppers found antiaircraft fire everywhere. "It seemed as though there was a 51-caliber (antiaircraft machine gun) on every single hill," one pilot told Kellerman. "There were muzzle blazes all over the place. Every hill looked like a Christmas tree from the machine gun fire."

Other pilots said they had sighted columns of Communist troops marching south. Gen. Frederick Weyand, deputy U.S. commander in Vietnam, flew to Da Nang Saturday and conferred with General Lam. Military sources said the few dozen Americans not already evacuated from the northernmost Quang Tri Province would be moved out within 24 hours. Lam, after flying over Quang Tri Province by helicopter, was quoted by military sources as saying, "the North Vietnamese are crossing the demarcation line to invade Quang Tri Province."

In Saigon, the South Vietnamese command claimed its troops were still in the area of bases they had abandoned and would take the counter-offensive shortly to reoccupy them. The big rear-area combat base of Quang Tri, three miles north of Quang Tri city, was attacked Saturday night by Communist commandos. They set up recoilless rifle positions at the edge of the base and fired over the barbed wire at the defenders.