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WHEN Correspondent Don Neff arrived in Viet Nam for the first time eight years ago, a favorite topic of conversation was the primitive state of Communist equipment. "There was even a story going around," he recalls, "that the V.C. had a new antiaircraft weapon: a catapult that shot ten-foot arrows." Back for his fourth tour of duty last week, Neff loitered over besieged An Loc in a light U.S. reconnaissance plane knowing that the Communists now have sophisticated Soviet antiaircraft guns as well as modern tanks.

If the weaponry and strategy had changed, many faces were familiar. "It was like Old Home Week for scores of reporters," Neff says. Veteran war correspondents who thought that they had seen the last of Indochina have returned recently to help their successors cover the North Vietnamese invasion. For our cover story on Hanoi's General Giap, Neff concentrated on reporting an overview of the fighting and its ramifications as seen from Saigon. David DeVoss, meanwhile, journeyed north to Hué to provide an account of that city's mass evacuation. Rudolph Rauch traveled to the threatened Central Highlands town of Kontum, then spent a night on ambush patrol outside Phu Bai with a group of G.I.s.

As company in Hué, DeVoss had Photographer Dirck Halstead, an old Viet Nam hand who is on assignment for TIME. For Halstead it was a time for reflection as well as reunion. "Of the ten photographers in our group here in 1965 and '66," he says, "only four of us are still alive."

That brave cameramen are constantly in harm's way was again demonstrated by Photographer Ennio Iacobucci, whose pictures accompany Halstead's this week. Iacobucci found himself trapped in Quang Tri with 80 U.S. advisers. The North Vietnamese barrage was so intense that rescue helicopters could not get in for days. The only newsman still with the group, Iacobucci phoned periodic reports of the battle's progress back to Saigon. The Italian freelance also called friends to say goodbye—prematurely, as it turned out. Helicopters finally were able to take the advisers and Iacobucci to Danang. "In four years in Viet Nam," he says now, "I have never been so scared."

In New York, Associate Editor Timothy James wrote the story, drawing on both the correspondents' files and his own considerable background. He had written five previous cover stories on the war in two years, and he visited Viet Nam in 1970.

As the military and diplomatic developments spurt and twist, no one can predict the outcome with any certainty. As Neff puts it, the only real constant in Viet Nam is the ever present element of surprise. Therefore, he says, "I no longer bother saying that I'll never be back."