



Both sides of the civil war in Vietnam agreed to a cease fire in January of 1968. This happened every year of the war, to that point, because the Tet Festival—an extremely important event to the people of Vietnam—was about to begin.

The military leaders of North Vietnam, however, never intended to participate in the cease fire to which they had agreed. Instead, their plan was to attack key areas in the South during the cease fire. This became known as the Tet Offensive.

Among other areas of attack during the Tet Offensive, particularly in the ancient capital city of Hue, the North Vietnamese targeted training camps for South Vietnamese soldiers. One of those camps was located in an area known as Go Vap, north of the Southern capital of Saigon (today called Ho Chi Minh City). The Go Vap Armor Camp was under the command of Lt. Col. Nguyen Tuan.

Tuan was not alone in the camp when it was visited by a group of Viet Cong (a name given to North Vietnamese communist guerillas). He was there, with his wife, his children and his 80-year-old mother.

Nguyen Van Lem, who was also known as Captain Bay Lop, was the leader of the sabotage unit sent to the Go Vap Armor Camp during the Tet cease fire. The saboteurs took control of the camp.

Bay Lop, and his fellow Viet Cong, wanted Col. Tuan to show them how to drive tanks. Tuan refused. As a result of his refusal, Tuan was beheaded.

When South Vietnamese troops retook the training camp, they were stunned at what they found. Bay Lop had not stopped with the murder of Col Tuan. The soldiers also found the bodies of Tuan's wife, six children and his mother. Only a 10-year-old boy, who was seriously injured, survived.

An Associated Press (AP) photographer took a picture of the death scene. The AP gave that picture this caption:

South Vietnamese soldiers stand near bodies of a South Vietnamese commander of a training camp and command center and members of his family after the camp was retaken from the Viet Cong in a northern Saigon suburb today. The commander, a colonel, was decapitated by the Viet Cong and his wife and six children were machinegunned. On ground near the corpses are toys and food. At right are sandbags behind which the children hid. (AP Wirephoto via radio from Saigon) (See AP wire story).

The gruesome picture, which this caption describes, is not provided (or linked) here for obvious reasons.

On or about February 1, 1968, Bay Hop was captured near a grave containing the bodies of 34 civilians. He admitted that he'd carried-out the orders of his unit leader, resulting in these numerous deaths, and was proud of his actions.

Two officers brought Bay Hop to General Loan, who was head of the South Vietnamese national police and aware of the Tuan killings. In Saigon, at the time, General Loan drew his weapon—a .38 Special Smith & Wesson "Bodyguard" revolver—and shot Bay Hop in the head. He did this in the presence of Eddie Adams (an AP photographer) and Vo Suu (an NBC News television cameraman).



Adam's photo and Vo Suu's footage were published and broadcast around the world. People were told about the shooting; they were not told about why the shooting occurred.

Did General Loan commit a war crime?

Although this question is still debated, the man he shot was not wearing the uniform of either side (North or South Vietnam). International law allows the immediate execution of assassins if they are captured. Depending on one's perspective, Lem was either an assassin (to people in the South) or a martyr (to people in the North).

The photo, at the top of this page, depicts mourners gathered around the open graves of the Tuan family. They were buried after the Tet Offensive was over.

Credits:

Burial photo of the Tuan family by an AP photographer.

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Media Stream



Burial of the Murdered Tuan Family

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