



General known for war image dies

BY DALE HOPPER
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SPRINGFIELD, Va. —

Nguyen Ngoc Loan, whose execution of a Viet Cong prisoner on the streets of Saigon in 1968 became one of the most chilling images of the Vietnam War, has died at 67.

The former South Vietnamese general died Tuesday of cancer at his home in Burke, a Washington suburb. He fled South Vietnam in 1975, the year the communists overran the country, and moved to Virginia, where he opened a restaurant.

On Feb. 1, 1968, Loan was director of South Vietnam's national police and the North Vietnamese had just begun the Tet Offensive, their huge military push southward. Firefights had broken out all over Saigon, and Loan's police were trying to

rid the South Vietnamese capital of Viet Cong guerrillas.

Loan led the prisoner, his hands bound, onto a street corner and in front of a group of journalists pulled his pistol and shot the prisoner point-blank in the head. The general told the newsmen that the prisoner was a known Viet Cong captain.

Eddie Adams' photo of the prisoner grimacing as he was shot won a Pulitzer Prize for The Associated Press. NBC also showed film of the execution.

Adams said Wednesday that Loan's actions were misinterpreted because of the picture.

"The guy was a hero. America should be crying," said Adams, now a freelance photographer. "I just hate to see him go this way, without people knowing anything about him."

Adams said the man Loan shot

had been seen killing others and that Loan was justified in executing him. At the time, Adams did not know who Loan was, but later spent two weeks with him for a more involved story and visited him in Burke.

"I said, 'General, you haven't changed.' He said, 'Eddie, you've gotten really old,'" Adams said. "I considered him a friend."

The picture was among three that came to symbolize the brutality of the war, said Marco Leepson, spokesman for the Washington-based Vietnam Veterans of America.

The photo of a screaming girl running down a road after napalm had burned off her clothing and the picture of helicopters rescuing people from the roof of a Saigon building as the city fell are the others, he said.

The Tet Offensive had a power-

ful effect on U.S. public opinion because it contradicted assurances from the Johnson administration that the United States was winning the war.

The photograph "was a part of the media presentation of the Tet Offensive and that had a pretty big negative impact on public opinion," Leepson said.

Leslie Cullen, a military history professor at Texas Tech University who specializes in the Vietnam War, said the man Loan summarily executed was involved in killing a policeman and his family.

"Not that such a thing was justified, but people had the impression from press reports that this guy was killing him just to be killing him," Cullen said. "People had a question in their mind, 'Do we support people who do this?'"