

FEB 2 1 1965

# PARADOXES OF A STRANGE WAR

SPECIAL TO THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

On both sides of the road 70 miles outside Saigon the flooded, pale green paddy fields gave way to stands of yellow bamboo and clumps of dense green jungle. It was a hot mid-afternoon, and only the riotously-plumed paddy birds soaring on thermals over the ripening rice tassels noticed the passing jeep.

"Cham! Cham!"

The jeep screeched to a stop. In the passenger seat, Kenkichi Konichi, correspondent for the Japanese newspaper Mainichi, was startled out of a warm doze. He squinted ahead in the dazzling sunlight and was suddenly impaled with terror.

Blocking the road were three Vietnamese in army uniforms, rifles at the ready. Still half asleep, Mr. Konichi raised his Japanese camera automatically. His interpreter slapped his arm down and hissed a warning.

The soldiers surrounded the jeep. Mr. Konichi, the driver, and the interpreter climbed out, staring at the raised weapons. Mr. Konichi's heart was pounding and the silence roared in his ears. He raised his hands over his head.

## Sandals

Then, looking across the road, Mr. Konichi saw another Vietnamese standing in the deep grass in the roadside ditch. He wore a black homespun shirt, baggy black trousers and a green woven-bamboo hat. He held a semi-auto-

matic rifle pointed at them and was staring at Mr. Konichi wordlessly. On his bare feet were black sandals cut from the tires of a U.S. Army truck. They were "Ho Chi Minh sandals."

He was a Viet Cong.

While the three Communist guerrillas wearing government uniforms searched and interrogated Mr. Konichi's driver and his interpreter, the Viet Cong commander scrambled up out of the roadside ditch. He looked Mr. Konichi over and laughed.

"This is the first time I have ever seen a Japanese," he said.

Not all the encounters the three Mainichi newsmen had with Viet Cong were so abrupt, so startling. Mr. Konichi was questioned, then released. Shunjiro Ishizuka met his first Viet Cong in a bloody episode ended by a firing squad: This is his story:

The rainy season was ending, and the Mekong River was running high and yellow. In the morning, we set out from the elite Seventh Division's headquarters at My Tho, 40 miles southwest of Saigon, aboard three motor launches. We were to deliver sacks of cement, crates of ammunition and food to Tan Dinh village, a tiny government foothold in Viet Cong territory.

Our three craft had 20-mm. rapid-fire cannons mounted fore and aft, an 81-mm. pursuit cannon and four 7.7-mm. machineguns.

The torpid heat and the fetid stink of the Mekong delta swamps made us drowsy — until the putt-putt of the engines was shattered with a loud "bang!"

Furious activity broke out on deck.

"VC snipers," grunted Capt. King, our American military adviser.

The three launches charged into the mangroves, swans flushed up into the sky. Suddenly, one launch emerged towing a sampan and a captive.

## Two-Time Loser

The captive's name was Phanh Le Thanh. He wore only a pair of black shorts and thick spectacles.

Dragged up on deck, he appeared melancholy, and puffed on a cigarette which he rolled from palm leaf tobacco.

He denied being a sniper. He claimed he was an agent of the American Central Intelligence Agency. He showed us doubtful-looking papers which purported to say he was on assignment for special forces, that he should have free access to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport to board transport planes. A snapshot showed him dressed as a Vietnamese policeman. In Viet Cong country, such documents were suicidal.

Finally, after gentlemanly interrogation, it was certain that he was a Viet Cong and had even been captured before.

After his first capture, he was released when he promised to change his ways, but he had soon returned to his old haunts in the Go Cong district and had become a guerrilla district leader. When a Viet Cong is captured twice he is almost certain to be put to death.

"We can't kill a fellow national the first time," a Vietnamese officer explained. "At the second time, however, he becomes an enemy."

Realizing that his forged papers only served to dig his grave, Phanh Le Thanh offered to lead us to his guerrilla hideout in return for his life. He produced a map and marked an X on a point of Con Cau Island.

Our assault group headed there at full speed.

Twelve Viet Cong were waiting lunch when our troops attacked with grenades and machine guns. The battle was over in 40 minutes. Most of the VC fled, leaving behind one prisoner, two Browning automatic rifles, a Viet Cong flag of red and blue with a gold star and many notebooks of Communist teachings.

On the way back to the base at My Tho, Phanh Le Thanh became gloomier, probably stricken with remorse at betraying his comrades. He confided that he had once dreamed of going to the University of Paris and that he had joined the VC in a fit of jealousy because, although he was bright, he was too poor even to compete with the students in Saigon, much less go

o Paris. He was too poor or even his simplest hopes to be realized. Sanitized - Approved For Release: CIA-RDP75-00001R000400370006-8  
was led away barefoot, by the intelligence officer. By now he must have come to the end of his 25 years of wretched life, before a firing squad.

Later Mr. Ishizuka interviewed another Viet Cong, but this one had made his separate peace for entirely different reasons.

North Vietnamese Army Capt. Tran Qhoc Bar is one of the 17,000 Viet Cong who have surrendered to government forces since April, 1962. I met him (Mr. Ishizuka wrote) in a tidy rehabilitation center 10 miles south of Saigon where many of the prisoners played ping pong to pass the two weeks of political training they receive before being freed to return to normal society.

Very few of these men who have surrendered voluntarily have returned to the Viet Cong.

### In the North

Captain Bar, 35 years old, was born in what is now the northernmost part of South Viet Nam. In 1947 he joined the Indochinese Communist Party and two years later became a regular soldier of the Viet Minh forces fighting the French. After Dien Bien Phu and the 1954 cease fire, he went north to become a political secretary of the Viet Minh Fifth Military District and advanced rapidly. He said he knew personally both North Viet Nam's President Ho Chi Minh and Ho's military genius, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap.

But North Viet Nam was not rich enough to satisfactorily accommodate all those who had come up from the south, particularly Viet Minh soldiers of southern origin. Capt. Bar said their life in North Viet Nam was full of vexations. The land reform program went awry, there was a farmers' uprising and frequent friction between troops of northern and southern origin.

Furthermore, the long-awaited reunification of North and South Viet Nam failed to materialize as the Communist effort to dominate was thwarted by American support of Saigon.

At that point, President Ho and General Giap began their movement to "liberate the south." Capt. Bar was infiltrated into Lamdong, near his home province, in 1960, and put in charge of a platoon of VC regulars. He fought in the central mountains of South Viet Nam for four months. Last June, he slipped away in the fog and surrendered.

Why did he give himself up?

"I had been thinking about it for a long time. The situation is not at the helm of state. South Viet Nam is a good country. This is a war between Communism and capitalism. I am not in favor of capitalism, but I have grown weary of Communism, too. Besides, I am still a bachelor. I have never even had a girl friend."

If the dreaded face of the jungle enemy can exhibit surprising humor, pathos and poignancy, so can the face of the comrade-in-arms — the Vietnamese soldier — display its puzzling paradoxes, as Mr. Ishizuka found out. He tells this story:

When I stayed overnight at a small town in Vinh Binh Province, in the Mekong delta, I became acquainted with two South Vietnamese sergeants, one named Nguyen Van Hoi, the other Le Van Qiet. They were cousins, age 21 and 19. I met them one restless night when I wandered out for a breath of air and found them on guard duty in the mud-caked sentry house.

### Lunch Break

"That doesn't seem suitable for a Vietnamese soldier," I said, pointing at Nguyen's heavy old M-1 rifle. "Why don't you change to a carbine?"

"It's all right as soon as you get used to it," he said, breaking the ice with me. "It packs a big punch."

As we talked away the night, I learned that Nguyen was born in Hanoi and had fled south with his mother and two brothers after his father was executed by the Communists and a fourth son was shanghaied into the North Vietnamese Army. Nguyen was 11 then.

When he became 18, Nguyen enlisted in the South Vietnamese Army, burning with desire for revenge. Two years later, his cousin Le enlisted. They started with a month's pay of 900 piastres, or roughly \$9. They fought well, and when I met them they were being paid about 1,700 piastres, or \$17 a month.

Keeping only a small amount for pocket money, both boys sent the rest home to help their mothers.

They were small and small boned, as are most Vietnamese, but these soldiers do not complain even though they leap into the jungle from helicopters from a height of 30 feet carrying packs that weight almost as much as they do themselves, and live in elephant grass.

But let us contemplate again these South Vietnamese soldiers.

In one operation, the unit Nguyen and Le were with pursued a VC guerrilla group down and drove them to the edge of a Mekong tributary. The VCs were trapped and began a desperate resistance. Just then the South Vietnamese unit commander ordered his troops to break for lunch. The Viet Cong jumped into the river and escaped.

"The American captain grew red in the face with anger," Nguyen told me, "demanding to know why we didn't press the attack."

(I had heard of the incident already from a furious American adviser.)

At another time, when a VC guerrilla group was surrounded, the same unit commander left open another avenue of escape. He is said to have done this three different times.

"We can understand our commander's feelings," Nguyen confided to me. "We became soldiers in order to fight. Therefore we believe it is our duty to win battles and kill as many of the Viet Cong as we can."

"At the same time, for most of the South Vietnamese soldiers, the army is a way of making a living. After one year passes, American soldiers can return home. Even after that we must continue fighting — for who knows how long? We may be alive tomorrow but will we still be staying out of coffins two years from now?" Nguyen asked.

"We receive our pay, support our families and continue fighting until we die. We would like to live if we can. It is not strange, is it, for a commander to desire to keep his men alive?"

Much of what Nguyen said was a matter of fact. Joining the army in South Viet Nam is equivalent to gaining employment.

There are, of course, many intrepid soldiers. During the river attack after Phanh Le Thanh was captured, I saw a Vietnamese corporal plunge naked into the enemy ranks firing a machinegun.

The 21st Division's Ranger Battalion is continually engaged in bitter fighting with elite Viet Cong veterans on Ca Mau Peninsula—and the Rangers generally emerge victorious.

However, I cannot help but realize that the South Vietnamese soldiers have their own view of this war and their own attitude toward it. The men they are fighting are Vietnamese whose faces and food are exactly the same as

Early the next morning, I left the village in Vinh Binh

Province with Sgt. Nguyen and his men. His cousin, Sgt. Nguyen, was in charge of the troops to protect the village.

Two days later, as I was working on an article, Sgt. Nguyen entered my room with a hard look on his face.

"My cousin has died in battle," he said. "That village has been wiped out."

Nguyen said he wanted to give me a memento to remember his cousin and the night we three had talked.

It was a cheap nylon flag of blue and red with a yellow star in the center, stained with blood and oil.

A Viet Cong flag.

The pathos of the fighters, the Mainichi correspondents found, is almost superficial compared with the staggering plight of the Vietnamese peasant caught between the soldier and the guerrilla — peasants whose lives seem doomed to be crushed less by bullets or bombs than by a boulder of despair and cruelty almost too great to heave upon the scales of western justice.

The Mekong delta is often called the granary of South Viet Nam. But this does not mean that all who live there are well off. There are some fabulously great landowners, but there are also many thousands of desperate peasant farmers.

One of them is Tran Van Nam, 29, of the village of An-Binh. Tran's troubles began from the fact that his home faced the national highway running from Can Tho to Soc Trang. About 500 yards from Tran's house is a bridge across the Dau Sai River. The Viet Cong had blown up the road near the bridge, so a strict guard was posted. To make it easier to protect the bridge, the district leader ordered Tran to cut down 200 banana trees, 100 orange trees, 20 breadfruit trees and 29 mango trees. As a result, his annual income of \$180 was wiped out in an instant.

"I didn't receive a bit of money as compensation, and that was the year the mangoes were coming out for the first time," Tran said. Then he added casually, "That district leader was killed the following year by the Viet Cong."

Tran's entire livelihood is thus dependent upon his less than three acres of paddy field. He and his wife work desperately hard at it, hoeing and planting on May 5 of the

lunar calendar, weeding and letting the water in in June, weeding in July, transplanting in August and harvesting the following January. (Between transplanting and harvesting, Tran works as a plasterer to supplement their meager resources.)

Last year Tran's paddies produced nearly four tons of rice, well over the average for South Viet Nam. One ton was sold for \$37. The rest is the family's food for the year — they eat meat only twice a month. Because of the destroyed fruit trees, Tran does not have to pay government taxes. His plastering odd-job makes him only 50 cents a day for those two months.

Putting all these sources together, Tran's family income is only about \$180 a year — and he has a wife and four children. The family expenses for food, clothing (a new dress for his wife once a year) and schooling for the children amounts to more than double Tran's annual income. He is always in debt.

"It is like cutting my own throat," Tran said.

He was asked, "How many years do you think it will take you to get back on your feet?"

"Five or six years," he replied.

It was only a dream the reporter realized as he left his miserable hovel, asking himself if he would live that long.

Fo Xuan Hanh is a 76-year-old landowner who lives in a beautiful red brick house in the French colonial style on a quiet spot facing the Song Bassac River near the center of the town of Can Tho. Mr. Vo is a happy family man, with one son educated in dentistry in France and five daughters educated in Saigon who are married to young men of appropriate station. One daughter and her husband were living in Mr. Vo's house, but of course the son-in-law did no work at all, for he was a landowner, too.

In his youth, Mr. Vo served as a medical officer in the French Army. When he left the army, he entered medical practice in Can Tho. With the money he earned, Mr. Vo bought land because at the time it was the safest form of investment. By 1945, Mr. Vo's land holdings totaled almost 1,600 acres, covering eight villages and producing an annual rice crop worth \$16,000.

Mr. Vo had no idea how many worked for him—everything was taken care of by supervisors in each village. There were many areas Mr. Vo owned which he had never

seen or visited. It was a typical case of absentee ownership. The war for independence from France changed all that, and all income from the land — which had been such a secure investment before — halted.

For ten years, South Viet Nam's landlords "suffered" until Ngo Dinh Diem—himself the son of a rich landowner—launched the land reform program in 1956. The government obligingly bought all land in excess of 250 acres from the landlords, paying in cash and bonds. The landlords thus made their first income in ten years off land that was otherwise useless to them. And the 250-acre limit enabled them to keep 30 per cent of the best land in the South.

The peasants who were supposed to benefit received five acres each—five acres they will hardly be able to pay for within the designated five year period. Even at the completion of the program, there may be 800,000 families in the south with no land at all or with less than they need to feed themselves.

There is some question of just who was intended to benefit from the reform. It has not impeded the Viet Cong, and as an economic move it was a failure.

Mr. Vo benefited. He took the \$2,500 he received for his long-useless land and built 20 houses in Can Tho. Within several years, the rent and interest on his government bonds let him recover all he spent on the houses.

In a crowded, third-class railway coach along a rail line that is blown up every few days, correspondent Kiyoshi Yamamoto met a Vietnamese boy of about 25, traveling with his elderly mother. When the boy discovered that Mr. Yamamoto was a Japanese and therefore a fellow Asian he leaned forward and confided his life story. It was much the same as the lives of other Vietnamese, but the boy concluded:

"The war has continued since the time I was a boy of five or six, chasing the grazing goats with a bamboo pole. The fighting is still going on. Government troops come to our village from time to time during the day. At night, the Viet Cong come. Young men between 20 and 25, except for eldest sons, are running from place to place to keep from being shanghaied by either side."

Suddenly he lowered his voice: "My 23-year-old brother joined the Viet Cong about a year ago. About two months ago, on a night of heavy rain, I woke up and saw my mother giving a midnight meal to two young soldiers.

"One of them was my brother whom I had not seen for nearly a year. My mother and the soldiers were silent. She served rice and the two of them ate. Soon they left, in the rain.

"In the village I am a member of the militia fighting the Viet Cong. But must a brother kill a brother...?"