

The countryside of the Mekong Delta begins at the Saigon city limits. There is no transition. Instead of leading to suburbs, the city streets suddenly give way to the flat rice fields, vegetable gardens, fruit groves, and regularly spaced lines of trees that form the landscape of the delta all the way to the southernmost tip of South Vietnam. The delta represents a marvelous blending of the elements of land and water, and its roads and canals have been well traveled over the years by French and American soldiers pursuing the elusive prize of pacification.

The following story takes place in one of the little hamlets a few miles south of Saigon that are but a short bus ride from the neon lights and skyscrapers of the city and yet are a world apart. Few Western writers ever have a chance to see this other world. No—I should say they see it, but they cannot feel it, become a part of it. Only the villagers themselves can do that, because they live there, and they and their families have seen both the French and the Americans

come and go, duly noting their similarities and differences, seen the bridge across the river put up, washed away, and put up again, seen the countryside remain pretty much what it always was, that is to say, what foreigners would call unpacified.

Pity the poor writer who travels the road or, more likely these days, takes a helicopter to the hamlet. All he sees is the bustle of that day's military operation, the girls in their bright dresses. He is probably not aware that the girls are a recent intrusion on the hamlet's life and profoundly upset its sense of justice; and although he may be told the story of the sharp little clash in the Rung Sat, he certainly ignores the fact that the Rung Sat has served as a haven for bandits of various sorts for centuries. He will view the incident of the five Americans in soot camouflage as heroic, and the villagers will view the same incident as quixotic.

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When the Americans Came

NGUYEN TAN BI

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THE small hamlet of Phu Le suddenly became very lively. Everybody in the hamlet had the feeling that something strange had suddenly happened to their daily life. It was not because a theatrical troupe was passing through this rather gloomy hamlet. It was because of the arrival of the American troops.

Some years ago, in the wake of the revolution of November 1, 1963, (the coup d'état in Saigon overthrowing President Ngo Dinh Diem, officially referred to afterward as a "revolution") American troops had suddenly landed on the coast of Central Vietnam, opening a new phase in the Vietnam war.

At Phu Le hamlet, the inhabitants had learned of their coming only by word of mouth or through the newspapers. They had felt the American presence by watching numerous formations of helicopters flying in a certain direction where a military operation was being conducted. They had seen American planes but never a citizen of the USA.

Each person talked of the Americans according to his own knowledge. In short, everyone was doing what is called "buying a buffalo by photo."

One morning, however, a convoy of large GMC trucks loaded with American soldiers arrived in the village along the road from Tan Qui Dong. On the side of each truck was painted a white star over a line reading "U.S. Army."

The convoy consisted of more than twenty vehicles, not including jeeps. Most of the villagers were curious. They came out of their houses to look at the place where the

vehicles had stopped. They wanted to see what the difference between the Americans and the French was, but to them it was difficult to detect any difference at all.

Like the French expeditionary force, the Americans were both black and white. All of them were tall and big. The convoy stopped before the hamlet school, which was closed for summer vacation. The Americans began carrying supplies and ammunition into the school. Coils of concertina barbed wire were spread around.

The school was transformed into the military camp of an American company. The quiet, dull life of Phu Le suddenly became very lively and exciting.

IT could be said that Phu Le was the last portion of land of Nha Be district. It bordered on the Long Phu Tay area of Long An Province. The Doi River was the natural border between Can Giuoc and Nha Be districts, which were linked by the Rach Doi bridge. The end of this bridge on the side of Phu Le was guarded by a regional force platoon and the one on the other side by a whole company. At times the bridge was put under the responsibility of Long An Province, at others under that of Nha Be district. But now it had been put under Can Giuoc district.

The bridge was built long ago, when the French were still here. The soil is alluvial, and since the piers of the bridge had no firm foundation it became weak. No heavy vehicle could cross it. Even worse, many of the floor boards were broken. The public works officials had never thought of repairing it.

The range of military activities of the American company covered also the Long Phu Tay area. So the American captain who commanded the company had new and thick planks of pine wood brought in to board over the bridge, so that jeeps and four-ton trucks could pass. The newly planked bridge brought new life to the Long Phu Tay and Phu Le areas.

Repairing the bridge flooring was a temporary solution. The Americans brought some technicians down to study how to repair the piers of the bridge to make them stronger. They also brought in a lot of bridge-building materials and stored them at the other end of the bridge.

But before the repair work could start, one night, after a heavy downpour, the strong current pulled the bridge down with all its spans. From then on, both sides of the river were separated. However, the Americans seemed determined to rebuild the bridge. Unfortunately, after the Tet offensive, the Americans withdrew from Phu Le and did not return. All the materials that had been intended for the repair work gradually and mysteriously disappeared. Up until now, the public works officials, who seem to have been very busy with important works for the postwar reconstruction, have not had time to think of the present need of the people. So the bridge has never been rebuilt.

BEFORE the arrival of the Americans, life here seemed to be suffocating. By nightfall, houses on the edge of the hamlet had already closed their doors. Government soldiers returned to outposts or lay in ambush somewhere. The VC [Vietcong] had managed to sneak into the hamlet at least fifteen times every month. So far, Phu Le and Nguyen Van Chan hamlet of Long Phu Tay had been under the pressure of the VC's Ba Vu sanctuary in the mangrove swamp of the Rung Sat, one kilometer away. The VC came by way of Hiep Phuoc and Long Duc, which they used as footholds for launching subversive activities in the neighboring areas, such as Can Giuoc and Nha Be. Furthermore, they had also taken the direction of Da Phuoc and Bung Xeo to infiltrate into Saigon.

But after the arrival of the Americans, no VC could infiltrate the hamlet. To show that they did not hold the VC in high regard, one evening five Americans with soot smeared over their bodies burst into the Ba Vu sanctuary in an outboard motorboat. Around midnight, the sound of gunfire was heard from the direction of Ba Vu. People also saw flares in the area.

The next morning, an old fisherman brought a wounded American out on his boat. He was the only survivor. An operation was launched immediately. An American unit rushed into the Ba Vu area and found the other Americans dead but, surprisingly, still in their boat with their weapons. On the river bank here and there were bodies of some VC. It was believed that the Communists had been attacked by surprise. Although they succeeded in killing the attackers, they were afraid that more would

come, and so they ran away without bothering to carry off the bodies of their comrades or pick up the Americans' weapons. A black lieutenant said later: "VC number ten."

Nobody knew what he meant. Were the VC cowards or very dangerous?

TO know the characteristics of the Vietnamese people, a foreigner should come to the countryside. One of these characteristics is the way the Vietnamese drink their wine. The French drink Martell cognac or champagne, the Americans drink Scotch whisky or bourbon, and the Vietnamese, mostly peasants, have their rice wine.

There are two kinds of rice wine. One kind is distilled by the Binh Tay distillery. This kind is produced and sold legally, but is not good. It is weak, and drinkers have said it can cause headache. The second kind is illegally distilled by the peasants. It is produced with local ferments and locally made facilities. It is very strong and is the favorite of connoisseurs. French and American drinkers have to buy their liquor, while the Vietnamese peasants can produce their own wine. If distilling rice wine were not forbidden by law, the peasants could certainly contribute their part to the restoration of the national economy.

After the Americans' arrival, business became bustling. Merchants bought great quantities of Coca-Cola to sell back to the Americans, who drank Coke in the way the Vietnamese drink water. However, shopkeepers did not neglect to provision their shops with the popular rice wine.

One day a number of black and white Americans came and drank Coke at Mrs. Hai's shop. They were accompanied by a Vietnamese interpreter. At a table opposite them was a Vietnamese in his fifties. He sat with one foot on the rung of the stool and the other on the ground. The man, whom the shopkeeper called Uncle Nam, asked Mrs. Hai for a quarter-liter bottle of rice wine. He also asked her whether she had anything to eat with his wine. Mrs. Hai said she had dried squids. He then ordered one and asked for a dish.

The man did not pay any attention to the Americans and they did not pay any attention to him, either. But when Mrs. Hai brought the squid and a dish to him, the GIs began to stare at him in the way people watch a magician.

The man impassively uncorked the bottle and poured wine into the dish. Then he struck a match and set fire to the dish of wine. The burning wine began to roast the squid. He was as clever as a professional cook. After the roasting was done, the dish of wine continued burning. He blew out the fire and poured the remaining wine back into a glass. Then he began sipping it while chewing shreds of dried squid.

Overcome with amazement, one of the Americans could not help asking the interpreter "What is he drinking? Alcohol?"

The American had seen the white wine burn and believed it was alcohol. He might have been thinking that if the man could drink alcohol he should be an extraordinary drinker. The interpreter might have guessed what the American was thinking, and so he told him "No, it's not alcohol. It's Vietnamese whisky."

"Vietnamese whisky!" the American exclaimed.

"Yes, Vietnamese whisky," the interpreter assured him.

A Vietnamese adage says: "Where there is honey, there are flies." Only five days after the Americans arrived, public girls with their multicolor dresses were seen around. These girls had the talent of clinging to the GIs.

When the girls came, people who up to then had been nobodies suddenly turned into heroes by giving them protection. In this small hamlet no one had an adequate knowledge of the law. So the law could be distorted easily. The girls had come to ease the GI's nostalgia for home, but they suddenly turned this small hamlet into a redlight district. How could the village officials ban prostitution? Not only this small hamlet but throughout the war-torn country, where there were Americans, there were prostitutes. These girls, who required no capital to set up their trade, made a lot of money. What did they do with their easy earnings? They gambled. The laws of the land were ignored here.

Many GIs were also attracted to gambling, so certain areas were put "off limits" to them.

It was said that one day, after an operation during which some GIs were killed, the captain commanding the company became angry at the girls for no reason. He ordered his troops to round them all up and take them away by helicopter.

At first, people thought they had taken the girls back to Saigon. But it turned out later that they had carried them to remote hamlets and left them there. Some hamlets were secured, some were unsecured. The girls had to hire the local people to transport them back. Anybody who envied the prostitutes their easy way of making money should have changed his mind. The girls could not bear this dishonor. They cried so piteously that even indifferent people felt sorry for them. After all, they were Vietnamese citizens.

THE Americans were very rich. If someone did not agree with this, it meant that he did not know anything at all about the American expeditionary troops. In their base they had more than enough radios, tape recorders, cameras, record players, cigarettes, tinned foods, and so on. So whenever the troops went out on an operation, some of their belongings were certain to be stolen. The culprits were always the children and reckless gamblers who had lost all their money. One day after many things had been stolen, the Americans lost their heads. They had no hope of catching the thieves red-handed, so they organized a house-to-house search with the help of the local soldiers.

Early that morning, they deployed around the hamlet. All the inhabitants were told to leave their houses and let their houses be searched. The searchers were both Vietnamese and Americans, but the operation confirmed many of the villagers in their belief that foreigners had no respect for their right of privacy.

Some refused to leave their houses, arguing that if they did not remain present during the search they would be

sure to lose their belongings.

One such was the wife of a regional force trooper named Ba. When this happened, Ba was with his unit on the other side of the bridge and did not know about it. Mrs. Ba had a child. This was another reason she refused to leave, shouting at the soldiers, "What are you doing? Why do you want to search the people's houses without allowing the owners to stay inside?"

Meanwhile, the soldiers carried on their search of her house despite her protests. It was not clear what they took from her house, but afterwards she was seen sitting with her infant in her hands, weeping. It seems her case was brought to the attention of the local authorities, but at the time the woman was killed during the Tet offensive some weeks later, it was still unsettled. After that, it was forgotten forever.

THE American company was stationed at Phu Le for nearly two months. During this period it had created turmoil in the small hamlet. Every night the inhabitants heard the same explosions of mortar fire and saw flares brightly lighting up this poor little corner of the sky. From time to time, they saw helicopters landing on the village road to pick up or unload US troops. This had excited the curious children of the hamlet.

Some people had become prosperous from washing clothes for the Americans. In front of their houses they had nailed small signs on which they had written the word "Laundry," which they had learned from the interpreter.

Suddenly one morning, while the disturbance was going on, the people woke up and found to their surprise that the school area was deserted. All the Americans had gone away during the night. The news spread quickly from mouth to mouth.

"The Americans have gone, all gone. . . ."

"Will they come back again?"

After their departure, some people began to worry. They asked the local troops whether the Americans would return, and when the latter answered that they did not know, they began packing their things and leaving the hamlet. They were the people who had done business with the Americans or washed their clothes. They feared that without the Americans around, the Viet Cong would come to the hamlet at night and threaten their lives.

All of a sudden, life at the hamlet returned to its old tempo. Many were content at the sudden departure of the Americans. "It will be better thus," they said. Fathers who had not dared to allow their daughters to go out of their houses felt relieved.

The Americans had arrived suddenly and departed the same way. During their two months' stay, they had provided the hamlet with security. On the other hand, they had upset the whole pattern of life at the hamlet to the point where the villagers despaired of bringing life back to normalcy again. The Americans had handed out Salem and Pall Mall cigarettes to the youngsters and taught them how to smoke. They had given the youngsters a chance to see what debauchery was and some of the children had become thieves.

The Americans had fought in this hamlet a purely military war with weapons and munitions. They had ignored psychological warfare. ■