

Chapter 6

Fighting a Guerrilla War

When President Johnson decided to escalate the war by sending American soldiers to Vietnam, these men were given the near-impossible task of rooting out an unseen enemy in hundreds of small villages throughout the country. Because the Americans did not trust the South Vietnamese Army, it was assigned the easier task of guarding the 'secure areas'. U.S. soldiers were given the difficult job of clearing enemy forces out of what was considered 'hostile country.' The enemy might be gathered in battalion strength one day, and completely disappear the next. Villagers who appeared to be friendly might be working with the National Liberation Front. It was almost impossible to distinguish between those who sided with the Government of Vietnam and those who backed the NLF. It was equally difficult to define who actually was a member of the NLF. Was it a woman who worked in the association of the old people and/or a child who carried messages for the Vietcong? Was a teen-age boy forced to dig tunnels for the V.C., and/or a wealthy farmer who felt he had to pay taxes to the NLF, an enemy of the U.S.? Or was the enemy a woman whose husband was jailed as a suspected NLF organizer and/or an entire village, angry at the terrible treatment it received from Government of South Vietnam (GVN) officials.

Added to these difficulties were dilemmas caused by anti-guerrilla warfare. In 'search and destroy' operations, U.S. troops were sent to unfriendly villages to look for hidden supplies of food prepared to feed the enemy. But how was one to know whether the rice buried in the villager's hut was intended for the Vietcong or simply hidden from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam?



US soldier and family of suspected Vietcong

How could an American soldier know for sure that the young boy with his hands behind his back was holding a grenade or a piece of fruit? And, how could Americans be certain that fire from a seemingly peaceful hamlet was a sign that a strong contingent of enemy troops were in the area, or was simply intended by a lone gunman to alienate another village by drawing return volleys from US soldiers?

The following accounts, reported in the words of Vietnam veterans, describe the problems they had in fighting against an unseen enemy and their reactions in the face of uncertainty.

The Only Vietnamese I Ever Got Close to

I met this girl in a village store. She was about 17 or 18, sort of pretty and very shy. I guess she was the only Vietnamese I ever got close to. By then I spoke a little of their language and I found she was studying English and math. I said I could help her in both subjects and twice we took a short walk to the end of the village. She was afraid of me at the beginning, but later she got over it, and I started to look forward to being with her.

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One day we were on this patrol. It was raining, and suddenly, we were caught in an ambush. Our guns returned the fire. We hit them hard and then called in the gunships for support.

Then, maybe thirty minutes after, the firing stopped and we moved out to look for the wounded and to take a body count. There was a bunch of bodies around, all V.C., and all women. One of them was my little girlfriend, now dead, bullets through her head and chest. She had an automatic near her. I was shocked. She was a V.C.³

They Said I Was Doing My Duty

We were outside Bac Lier, out on an eighteen-man patrol with fifteen ARVN's. Our orders were to move ahead and seek out, and not hesitate to shoot at anything suspicious. We were about ten kilometers from town when there was some shooting. It lasted about ten minutes.

My God, how I remember that damned day. Hot and sticky – the mosquitoes were driving¹ me crazy. And there was this little boy, about eight or nine. He was climbing out of a tree. I grabbed him and blurted out in Vietnamese – what little I knew – 'Who are you and what are you doing here?'

He was afraid of me and pulled away. He had his hand opened behind his back, like he was hiding something. 'Grab him,' someone screamed, 'he's got something.' I made a move for him and his hand moved again. 'Shoot'.

Because of my training, because I was afraid and this was the first enemy I had come across, I fired at him. again, and again until I emptied my whole M-2 carbine at him. When I look again, he was cut in two, with his guts all around. I vomited. I wasn't told; I wasn't trained for that. It was out-and-out murder; I can never forgive myself and I can never forget it. They're the enemy, but they're fighting for their country. Then I told the psychiatrist and the Catholic chaplain, they said I was only doing my duty.⁴

It Was a Big Thing to Kill a North Viet in Battle

A platoon had been ambushed; we were sent out to help, but got pinned down ourselves in a rice paddy, for a whole day. It was my first contact with North Vietnamese. We managed to circle the village while they tried to break out. Finally, they pulled out, leaving this guy who had been carrying a Chinese rifle. He had a bad wound.

By now we were all fed up with gooks. We'd lost a lot of men that day and nobody wanted to doctor him. Nobody. Also, nobody wanted to call for a dust-off (evacuation by helicopter) so my platoon sergeant said I should finish him off with my .45. I went up to where he was lying and moaning and waited for about thirty minutes, hoping he'd die first; then I closed my eyes and fired – and missed. I didn't want to kill him. I remember very well just sitting there looking at him. And he wouldn't die. Finally, the sergeant came up and said I'd have to do something. Was I chicken? So I fired.

³ Quoted in Murray Polner, *No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1971, pp. 102-103

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 82

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When I walked back to the other men, they were all proud of me. It was a big thing to kill a North Viet in battle and this, so to speak, was in battle. He was an enemy and we didn't even have enough coptors to take out our own wounded. It was a battle. Everyone said I was a good soldier.⁵

They Were Sent to Kill a Whole Country

They (those who opposed the war) couldn't stand the system lying to them. They found themselves, if they were in combat, killing people who were innocent. They're going to come back home and ask themselves why? There is no reason this time like when Hitler or the Japs were around. They were sent to a foreign country to kill a whole country, and now we have the god-awful lifetime job of having to atone for it. At least some of us do.⁶ ⁷

Why Don't Anybody Talk About That?

I've seen VC kill civilians deliberately. I never saw Americans do it deliberately. Why don't anybody talk about that?

One time we were on guard and I heard some crying coming from a nearby hamlet. The next morning we went to see, and with my own eyes I saw. The VC had come and gone and left a sixty-five year old man hanging and a small girl dead. So who's doing what killing and what terrorizing?⁸

We Were There to Help

On one patrol we were in another village giving out C-rations to two women and five kids. My buddy was at the well and a medic was treating the kids for some kind of infection. All of a sudden some women grabbed their kids and went inside their hooches [huts]. Twenty seconds later we were under fire by VC and we took three casualties. One of our guys got hit in the jugular vein. Those women could have saved our guys, who were in that god-forsaken place to help them, to give them what we had in our country Instead, they said nothing. We were there to help. The Vietnamese are so stupid they can't understand that a great people want to help a weak people.

The Vietnamese are afraid of the VC. They take all the Americans have to offer and give us nothing, and give the VC all they have and take nothing. It doesn't make sense.⁹ ¹⁰

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. If the teacher directs, prepare two or three of the stories to tell to your class. What do these stories tell you about the problems faced by soldiers fighting this war?

5 Quoted in ibid., p. 39.

6 Quoted in ibid., p 78.

7 Pictured in Gerald Danzer, et. al., *The Americans*, McDonald Littell: Evanston, Illinois, 1998). P. 981

8 Quoted in ibid., pp. 21-22.

9 Quoted in ibid., p. 23-24.

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