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Tuesday, August 8, 1967 -- 4:25 p.m.

Free file

Mr. President:

This is a long letter to ask you to read; but I think you will be glad when you've finished.

It's the clearest account you're likely to get of what one of Bob Komer's corps deputies does for a living.

Cottrell is a tough, dedicated Foreign Service Officer.

W. W. Rostow

WWRostow:rln

(Copy of letter from Sterling Cottrell to John Steeves)

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Office of Civil Operations CORDS/IV Corps

Can Tho

17 July 1967

The Honorable John Steeves
Director General of the Foreign Service
Department of State
Washington, D. C.

Dear John:

Now that I know a bit about what we are doing in Vietnam, I'm brooding about the fact that there aren't more FSOs around here. I think the reason is that they just don't realize how important the problem is, what it involves, and how much we need the finest talent we can get. If they did, I think we would have more volunteers than we could handle from the upper as well as the lower ranks of the Foreign Service.

Personally, in my ignorance and because I had a soft job in Caracas, I would never have volunteered. I came without objections only because I'm proud to be an FSO. Also, I was told that Ambassador Bunker wanted me, and, as you know, any FSO who ever associated with him would follow him to any part of the world.

Knowing what I do now, I'm sorry I didn't volunteer a year or two ago because this is the most important foreign problem the U. S. has; the reputation of the U. S. is at stake; we must solve this problem or lose face, reputation, and respect all over the world; and failure will mean we will just have to fight the same problem in some other place in the near future. Foreign Service Officers are dedicated to serve their country where the need is greatest; so where should every Foreign Service Officer want to be? A year or two of hardship to their families by their absence is really something that, as good Americans, families can understand and put up with in the national interest. Who should protect the U. S.? Someone else?

I see a crying need here for generalists from the Foreign Service of all ranks to mix with the specialists from AID, USIA, CIA, Defense, etc. In IV Corps (the Delta), we have 16 Provinces and only two FSOs as Senior Provincial Advisors. They are excellent officers and I am sure I will be able to point to them as shining examples of what FSOs can do here. Both of them are new but they're off and running; i. e., Nick Thorne slept in a hamlet the first night he arrived in his Province. He is able, dedicated, and has guts.

John, I think many FSO jobs are going by default to the military and to AID. If we in the Foreign Service regard ourselves as an elite corps -- and we do -- then we damn well have to prove it when the going gets tough, or step down. The Army and AID are carrying the flag here in IV Corps, and in a way that fills me with nothing but admiration. Those guys are down at village level doing every conceivable civilian job, as well as helping repel the Viet Cong.

I ran into one Captain yesterday in a miserable village who was voluntarily teaching English classes at night, without even knowing Vietnamese. He did it by sign language. He drew a picture of a pig and yelled "pig"! at the class. They yelled back, "pig"! A week ago, I lunched with six guys in a province town. A sergeant excused himself early. Said he had a date to pull the intestines out of the scrotum of a big boar and stuff them back into his belly where they belonged. I asked him how he liked his work and he said, "Never had a better job"! He was acting as an Agriculture Advisor in uniform. Aren't there enough patriotic boys coming out of Agricultural colleges who are willing to help us? We need them badly. FSO ought to be in Vietnam in much greater numbers and there are excellent reasons why they themselves should want to be here for career reasons, as follows: as Deputy for CORDS in IV Corps (I am one of two Deputies to General Desobry, Senior Advisor IV Corps), I have on my "payroll"; 437 civilian Americans, 321 military advisors, 178 third country nationals and 978 Vietnamese. I have a wider variety of functions than most embassies. My staff divisions are: Administration, Plans and Programs, New Life Development, Refugees, PsyOps, Public Safety, Chieu Hoi, and Revolutionary Development workers. My branches are: Public Health, Education, Agriculture, Public Works, Public Administration, Logistics, Cultural, and Political Reporting. In my headquarters at Can Tho, there are 84 Americans, including seven American girls.

I am responsible for everything American in the 16 provinces, which have 87 districts. The provinces' advisory effort is headed by a Senior Provincial Advisor and a Deputy Provincial Advisor (my Ambassadors and Minister Counselors). Three hundred and fifty-three Americans, plus TCNs and Vietnamese comprise their staffs. They are a mixture of AID, USIA, CIA, State, Special Forces, Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. Most of them are specialists in their respective fields. The total number of U. S. personnel varies in each province but it ranges from 20 to 50. There are all kinds of jobs in the provinces that could or should be filled by FSOs who can apply their generalist experience.

The jobs of Senior and Deputy Provincial Advisor are held by the equivalents of FSO-3 and 4. Of my Senior Provincial Advisors, 8 are Army, 2 Special Forces, 2 FSOs, 2 AID, and 2 USIA. The Deputies follow the same general pattern. Here is where the crying need is for FSOs, with no reflection on the splendid job now being done by the officers from other agencies. These jobs are nation-building in the midst of a war, and call for executive talents which we have among FSOs. This is the finest crucible I know for training FSOs, who should be lining up begging for these jobs in their own career interest as well as in the national interest. In fact, I believe you should seriously consider getting the Promotion Panels to agree to promote almost automatically to the next higher class any FSO who serves a term in Vietnam and who receives a decent efficiency report. The experience is worth two or three tours at normal posts. This is true of men from all the other services. I am sure they go out of here much, much better officers than when they arrived. And furthermore,

they deserve a promotion for the sacrifices they make and danger to which they are constantly exposed. How about it?

At the present time we only have two civilians (AID) at the district level, among the 567 military advisors, who are doing civilian type jobs on the side, voluntarily (each province has 5 or 6 districts). The whole machinery from Washington to Saigon to Corps Headquarters to provincial level has to get results at the district level, where you finally meet the 14,000,000 Vietnamese people on the ground, in hamlets, villages and district towns. This is where most of the Vietnamese programs are carried out -- in the mud along the banks of the canals. Our Public Works program, for example, is expressed in helping to build small foot bridges across the canals so that villagers can get their pigs to market, or building schoolhouses in the mud with AID cement and rebar. This is where the Public Health Program translates into a tin roof over a 3-room shack, with a Medical Advisor, dispensary and a few cots. This is where the Agricultural Program, designed in Washington, finally filters down to a pair of pigs in a cement sty designed by the Agriculture Advisor to keep them alive until they have piglets, which are distributed to other villagers, etc. etc. This is where the Communist infrastructure in a hamlet and in a village is laboriously rooted out by one Army Intelligence Lieutenant with a card file, assisting the Vietnamese at village level. This is where the Public Safety Program helps train a few ragged villagers to maintain law and order, and here is where the battle for the Delta will be won or lost, and here is where FSOs should be.

Day before yesterday, I took Nick Katzenbach down to hamlet level. We slogged through the mud and Nick almost fell into a canal two or three times. When he saw these programs translated into real life, we put a cherry on the parfait by introducing him to a Chieu Hoi who had defected from the Viet Cong two days previous. Three days previous he had been zapping the villagers. Now he wanted to go straight. The day after Nick left, a Viet Cong battalion hit this village at 3:00 a.m. Those ragged little villagers, whom we had helped train into a Popular Forces unit, repelled the attack, called for help, got a quick reaction from U. S. Spooky aircraft and VNAF A-1s. Between them, they clobbered the Viet Cong, killing 51 and losing only three! This is what the war in Vietnam is all about. Helping people who are willing to fight and die to remain free and build themselves a better life; i. e., three pigs, a dispensary, a school room. Is there any better cause? What represents any better the principles we Americans say we stand for? Liberty, justice, etc?

I admit that almost everyone over here gets emotionally involved -- I am no exception. A 15-year-old Vietnamese girl works as a maid next door. She fled to Can Tho from a small hamlet nearby, after she watched her mother and her father being disemboweled by the Viet Cong in the hamlet square. This brings out every protective instinct you have, including a rage that makes you want to tear those bastard VC apart with your bare hands!

But coldly and objectively, we've taken on a good cause and a big job. It's tough and expensive, but should Americans back down for those reasons? No one out here that I know thinks so, except a few newsmen who write sob stories for the fainthearted at home.

Oh, oh! There go the windows of my prefab unit rattling again from bomb blasts a mile or so away. This happens every other night. The reason is that, in the Can Tho area within a radius of five miles, we have the Headquarters of the Vietnamese IV Corps, a Vietnamese Air Force airfield, a U.S. airfield, a commercial airport, a Vietnamese Navy base, and a U.S. Patrol Boat River base (PBR). It's a juicy target area for the Viet Cong and they keep skulking around at night with small mortar crews, and let fly. To oppose this, we have a system of mobile ground patrols, and a gunship (armed helicopter) overhead all night long. When the mortar fire is spotted, they attack and call for help. We then hit with artillery and fighters. This causes the windows to rattle! Simple, isn't it? Last week we caught an entire battalion of Viet Cong on one of these forays about five miles from here, and we killed 215. One of our better nights. The odd thing is how soon one gets accustomed to living amidst this kind of thing. Nobody bothers even to look up when fighters go screaming over Can Tho to attack Viet Cong on the outskirts. None of us go around armed, but most have a double barrelled shotgun in the bedroom. A couple of weeks ago the ARVN came to the compound and ran off a Viet Cong sampan that was parked in a canal 15 feet from my bedroom. Glad they did. Wonder what they were up to? Well, never to mind!

Let me tell you something about my parish. (Sort of a sloppy Post Report for prospective FSOs).

The Delta is one big triangular mud pie, interlaced with canals like the veins in a leaf, and intersected by two big rivers, the Mekong and the Bassac, which run from Cambodia through the Delta to the sea. Russian, Chinese, and other weird flagships move peacefully up the Mekong carrying supplies to the Viet Cong. They move without hindrance because the Mekong is an international waterway. I am at Can Tho, on the Bassac.

The "big unit" war in the Delta is like one giant chess game. Three ARVN divisions (each has responsibility for roughly one-third of the Delta) are supported by modest USAF, USN, and USA units, and by Vietnamese Air Force and Navy. These three divisions conduct large unit operations, mainly against the seven Viet Cong base areas along the coast and the Cambodian border. They also chase the Viet Cong main force battalions which roam around, and the Viet Cong provincial battalions, which are relatively stationary in that they move around in each province.

The chess analogy means that the Vietnamese division commander will decide that tomorrow he will make a move. He loads X number of battalions in U. S. helicopters and starts out to an area selected on the basis of intelligence from Chieu Hoi, prisoner, agents, or captured documents. He gets in his command helicopter with his U. S. division advisor and they hover over the area, directing by radio his "chess pieces" to land on that "square" or another. If no Viet Cong are flushed, he picks up his battalions and drops them in another likely spot. If his judgment is correct, he finds the enemy battalion (probably hidden in a coconut grove or dug in the jungle) and a battle ensues. All hell breaks loose with air strikes by fighters, Spookies (C-47s with Gatling guns), gunships (armed helicopters), artillery, and then the ground troops. The mobility provided by helicopters is great in the Delta. It gives an immense advantage to the Government of South Vietnam in the chess game. (Bill Coles will understand this especially well).

We're proud of our 3 Vietnamese divisions. One is so good that I understand General Westmoreland has stated that he would command it with as much confidence as he would an American division. The other two are not far behind.

We are gradually but surely wearing down the Viet Cong battalions in the Delta, and we are winning the war down here, not dramatically, but steadily. Two proofs: Several Viet Cong battalions have been mauled so badly they have been disbanded, with the survivors joining other Viet Cong units. We are now picking up Viet Cong prisoners who are 13, 14, and 15 years old. A significant fact. They are having trouble recruiting and are scraping the bottom of the barrel. This is not the old Viet Cong where every man was 20-25, tough and seasoned. They now frequently break ranks, run, and drop their weapons.

Which reminds me, I'd like to shoot down a popular misconception. Before I came to Vietnam, I heard lots of stories about the Vietnamese being unwilling to fight -- so why should we? This is sheer nonsense. Example: Two days ago I stood in a Vietnamese command post watching helicopters land and disembark Vietnamese troops who had just come from a tough battle. They slogged through the drenching rain, many of them limping from wounds, while I kept dry under shelter. They were filthy dirty and wet clear through. After a night's sleep they were being sent out next morning to fight again. And they fight. And we support them. And we should.

In "small unit" actions, the going is tougher. The Viet Cong companies, platoons and squads sneak around at night zapping the villages and hamlets, which have protection from locally recruited Regional and Popular forces. The Viet Cong always attack in superior numbers, using surprise and well-rehearsed plans. Therefore, it is impossible to provide adequate forces to protect any given village. However, we are wired for sound. When the attack comes, the local forces radio for help and then fight like mad. (in most cases) to hold off the

Viet Cong until the Spookies, gunships, A-1s, fighters, and fireflies arrive. Real morale building! (A firefly is a helicopter with intense lights to illuminate the battlefield. They blink on and off -- thus "firefly.") These forces have been disposed around the Delta so they can get anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes. The Viet Cong may do their dirty work in 15 minutes, but our crowd then chases them and generally bags a bunch. This is somewhat discouraging to the Viet Cong, to put it mildly, but they are a tenacious bunch and persist. However, despite all the news stories of failures of the Vietnamese at the village level, they are getting rapidly better and better, and given time, I am certain we and the Vietnamese can cause these Viet Cong small unit actions to fade away, to borrow a phrase from McGeorge Bundy. The Vietnamese peasant does have the will to resist, if he is organized and given a minimum of sustained support. For example, the other day General Desobry and I in a helicopter corkscrewed down into a miserable village. We corkscrewed, not because of hills or weather, but because the village was surrounded by Viet Cong, who live in the area. The only reason the village was "free" was because a U. S. Lieutenant, a Sergeant, and 3 enlisted men were there. They had decided to "liberate" it and had dropped in to organize the defenses. At first the villagers wouldn't speak to them. They had been hit by the Viet Cong three times, but our boys finally got to them and asked if they were willing to fight. They said "with what?" Our boys said they'd train and arm them, and the villagers agreed. Now they have a damn good small force. The Sergeant told us he was puckered because the other night he took the villagers out to lay an ambush and catch some Viet Cong prisoners because he wanted to find out what the Viet Cong were up to. The ambush was good. Eight Viet Cong walked into it, but the villagers got shaky and zapped all 8! The Sergeant chewed them out but good. Said he'd made it perfectly clear he wanted prisoners, not dead Viet Cong, and by God, he was going to take them out again that night and they'd better obey orders or he'd quit training them!

This squad was sleeping, cooking, and everything else in one good size living room in an old beat-up French style "Charles Addams" kind of house. They had to quit playing volley ball near the house because snipers kept zapping at them (danger of puncturing a good volley ball).

The night before we dropped in, one of the boys was sitting on the front porch when a flaming mortar came in (they usually don't flame). The one was fizzling like a defective firecracker. It hit the rail he had been sitting on when he jumped. It chipped the cement but failed to explode! Some stupid Viet Cong mortar-maker had goofed.

Then the squad took us to see their civic action work in the village -- pigs, beautiful vegetable gardens, walkways, dispensary (which they originally located too near a temple. The spirits disapproved so the boys moved it down the path).

This is one example of civic and military operations under the most trying circumstances. Who says you must have security or your civic action can't operate? Not me! I've been there, Charlie, and have seen miracles performed.

In contrast (and the Delta is full of contrasts despite my mud-pie description) I coptered in for lunch the other day in Long Xuyen. My Americans there have a mess and bar in an old Foreign Legion post. Beautiful, romantic and equipped with two attractive Australian nurses (also well equipped). There leaning against the bar (not the nurses) was my old friend Tom Martin, ex-USIS Labor Information Officer in Caracas. After two dry martinis on the rocks, and a couple of New York cut steaks (medium-rare), I informed Tom that this soft life in Long Xuyen (where they have hardly heard a shot fired in anger for over a year) was too good for him, and I was going to transfer him to Bac Lieu. Tom thrives on trouble. He was one of those four guys who were held for two weeks by Communists in a mine shaft in Bolivia. Remember? Caused me and the Secretary and even the President a big headache. They finally escaped by themselves. I haven't forgiven Tom for that, so off to the salt mines for him! The point I want to make is that life in the Delta is not all pig pens and hand grenades. There are real tough spots and very nice spots (you might say it's spotty!)

I'll probably ruin my one-man recruiting drive if I dwell only on the hairy spots! For example, I live in a 12-unit prefab compound. Mud all around us, but inside the compound it's spotless. We planted palm trees, grass and brick walkways. I have a big fat cook named Tuba, and a rail-skinny maid named Hi, both for a total of \$35 a month. It's no Caracas Country Club, but I've named it Palm Springs. Others live in apartment buildings and small houses around town. The food is excellent. Wonderful fruits and vegetables, fish, shrimp and lobster. Nobody goes hungry in the Delta, not even the poorest peasant. This area has a great future.

Another contrast: Two weeks ago General Desobry and I coptered up to Chau Doc to attend the 28th anniversary of the Hoa Hao religious sect (2 million members in IV Corps). It was the damndest sight I ever saw! A combination of the Rio Carnival, the New Orleans Mardi-Gras and the Tournament of Roses. Every truck in town was decorated with flowers as a float and moved down the main street between carnival throngs. Then we "reviewed the fleet" at 8:00 p. m. A line of battleships moved slowly up the river and passed in review. They were really big rice barges, but with super structures built like pagodas. All lit up like Christmas and swarming with costumed people. One barge was built like a turtle, with a big, bobbing head and flippers. Some crazy character with a .30 caliber machine gun was shooting tracers off the stern. There were fireworks and fire water in abundance. Then when we left the gaiety and flew home, we passed over a fire fight on the ground. The Viet Cong attacking a village not ten miles from the big festive occasion we just left! What a people, and what a country! I say they have a right to live, and not under Communist domination!

The health hazards are less than in most places. Very few Americans catch anything -- unless they're fighting in the rice paddies. Moral is, if you stay above the mud and not in it, you stay healthy. Lead poisoning is always a danger, but so are slippery bath tubs.

Another thing, John, why aren't there more FSO Admin types out here? Every one of my 16 Senior Provincial Advisors badly needs a young Admin. Assistant, and so do all my big divisions in Can Tho. They could sit in a province town in relative safety and have a paid box seat to the biggest show in the world. Believe me, they would never have it so good.

When I started writing this letter I did not intend to drag it out so long, but I suddenly got the idea of killing a flock of birds with one stone. I want FSOs, and at the same time I can send copies to personal friends to whom I don't have time to write. Now I won't have to write anyone again. Clever? And my address, for all to write the troops at the front (I am troops at the front) is: APO San Francisco, 96215. So, come with the flood of morale building letters!

Hallelujah!

/s/ Sterling J. Cottrell
Deputy for CORDS

P. S. Merryll writes that she has a couple of recruits for me -- the boy in the hardware store in Carmel, and her hairdresser at Pebble Beach. Maybe I don't need FSOs after all. Maybe all I need are Americans with guts, who still believe in liberty and justice for all. Don't they hardly make that kind no more?

P. S. S. Use this letter in any way you see fit, John. With a good bit of editing, it might be useful in the News Letter or the Foreign Service Journal, or the wastebasket, as you see fit.

SJC