

Vietnam Revisited: Conversation with William D. Broyles, Jr.



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Discussion with William Broyles

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SIMMONS: To set things in context, let me tell you a little bit about our visitor today.

Bill was my aide during the first part of my second tour as assistant division commander of the 1st Division. I inherited him from my predecessor. I was truly pleased with his background. He had been a platoon leader for half of his Vietnam tour before coming to division headquarters. His academic background was particularly attractive. After graduating from Rice in 1966 with a degree in history, Bill attended Oxford, where he studied something esoteric involving politics, philosophy, and economics and received a second B.A. and an M.A. During this long stint in England, he contracted a severe case of Anglophilia, from which he has not yet fully recovered.

BROYLES: "-Phobia" is more accurate, I think.

SIMMONS: Then Bill joined the Marine Corps and came out to Vietnam, leaving there in the fall of 1970 to teach at the Naval Academy. I hoped that this experience would turn him into a career officer, but somehow Annapolis didn't have quite the hold on him that I hoped it would. After teaching philosophy there for one academic season, he left active duty and returned to Texas. After working in the Houston public school system for a time, he became a founder, mainspring, and editor of the highly successful Texas Monthly magazine, eventually becoming editor-in-chief. About two years ago, he left Texas to become the editor of Newsweek magazine. I haven't had a chance to ask him about his present institutional

base (if any), but I know that he has spent a good deal of time in freelance writing. There is a piece in a recent Esquire that I've heard good things about, though I've not seen yet. Incident to his recent return trip to Vietnam, upon which we'll focus our attention today, Bill is writing an article for Atlantic Monthly, and is up against a tight deadline.

So much for background. Today, Bill will set the stage for discussion of his areas of particular interest, in seminar give-and-take fashion. We'll go at this until Mr. Frank's eyelids begin to close, which is a sure sign that we've gone a bit too long. Then we'll break for lunch, and continue the round table discussion at the officers club. This afternoon, Bill will probably want to tackle some of you singly, to amass details in areas of particular interest.

BROYLES: Thank you very much, General. Do not be alarmed by the size of this draft (about 40,000 words so far) that I've brought along. I thought our discussion would be improved by my use of the actual words of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong generals I met, wherever possible. Much of what we'll be discussing is their view, and not necessarily mine. But I think it will be good to present their views to you as directly and as forcefully as they presented them to me. In the context of the Westmoreland vs. CBS News trial, you will be getting the outtakes, and not just the edited version.

There are four general areas I'd like to cover:

- o First, the discussion with general officers in Hanoi (and

one in Saigon).

- o Second, the discussions with Viet Cong veterans in Quang Nam province, about the texture of the war and its impact on their lives. I want to contrast their experiences with those of American company-grade veterans, to see where they differ.

- o Third, the air war in the North, to look at the profound effect it had upon the North Vietnamese civilians.

- o Finally, I have some general observations about Vietnam today, and some comments about the nature of society there and its view of the war and its aftermath.

I went to Vietnam on the 28th of September this year, and came out on the 25th of October. My two weeks in the North were spent mostly in and around Hanoi, although I made some side trips to the Red River delta; to the textile manufacturing town of Nam Dinh, target of heavy bombing; to the mountainous province that borders China. The rest of the time, I went all over South Vietnam, driving from the DMZ to the delta, and talking to a lot of people.

I remember two things most vividly:

- o The Vietnamese phrase that did most to open doors for me was, "Khong Lien Xo," or "I am not a Soviet." As soon as Vietnamese people discovered that I was not a Russian, I was received with some warmth; but when they learned that I was an American their spontaneous reaction was one of incredible warmth and affection, at all levels. I have some thoughts about that phenomenon, which I'll get to later.

- o The second vivid impression was that practically all

signs of war had been obliterated from the landscape, whether in the streets of Hanoi or the countryside, north and south. If I had not known a war had taken place there, I would not have guessed it from what I saw.

I drove around Hanoi for an hour and a half, looking in vain for evidence of the bombing. Flying again (as I had with General Simmons) over some of the toughest areas of I Corps--Go Noi Island; the Arizona Territory--I saw only rice paddies, peaceful villages, little kids going to school, boys on water buffalo. No sign there had ever been a war fought there. Former defoliated areas along the Mekong had coconut-producing palm trees again.

Along Route #1, from Da Nang to the DMZ, all signs of American presence have disappeared. All the Army and Air Force installations at Red Beach, gone; Camp Eagle, gone; Camp Evans, gone; Marble Mountain facilities, gone. All that remains is red earth and an occasional piece of barbed wire. This really got to me, thinking of all the people and activity that had been there--air fields, supply depots, vehicles, computers--all gone. I remember thinking that Carthage must have looked like this.

Da Nang used to have one of the busiest airports in the world. Now they will handle two flights a day when they are really busy. I was struck by the incredible quiet there. Before, with all the bustle and activity, I had a sense of history being made. This time, standing near empty hangars in near-absolute silence, I sensed only nothingness. The distant mountains and the overwhelming quiet dominated the scene. It's as though the country had reverted to a

pre-historical cultural state; as though history never happened there.

I met several officers of general rank. The first one I met was General Man (not the commander of Plei Me [Ia Drang] battle), who is the editor of The Military Daily. I asked him how they set out to fight the Americans at the beginning of the war. I quote him directly:

From the beginning we concluded that we could not defeat the American Army by military means alone. You were too strong. But, we knew we had one great advantage. Our whole nation fought. We were united. You were not. That was your weakness and our goal was to attack that weakness however we could.

I asked General Man about the current controversy in the Westmoreland vs. CBS News trial--over whom to count in the Viet Cong/NVA order of battle. He stated (as would many others) that they viewed their resources as "seamless" from the armed regular soldier all the way down to the unarmed peasant who scouted American forces and positions as he worked in the paddies. He went on,

Our regular forces compared to yours were small, but everyone could fight with whatever he had. If we had a gun, we'd take a gun; if we didn't have a gun, we took a sword; if we didn't have a sword, we took a knife; if it wasn't a knife, it was a stick. We took whatever we had and fought the aggressor. You were the aggressor. There were tens of thousands of American and puppet troops there when we seldom had more than one regiment of the regular forces. Why couldn't you defeat us? Because we had tens of thousands of others--scouts, spies, political cadre...

None of this really changed the war, I broke in. What it took finally was North Vietnamese troops.

"Yes, that's true. But that only became possible after you left, and the self defense forces were crucial in getting you out."

He tried to press the point. "If you were given the order to attack the Da Nang airbase and destroy the planes there, how many troops would you have needed? The way you fought, you would need several divisions. We did it with precisely 30 men. It was a new kind of war that we invented, and it was possible only because we had the support of the people."

The next general I talked to was named Bui Tin. He's a bit like the Kilroy of Vietnam. Whenever anything significant happened, he was there: At Dienbienphu in 1954; down the Ho Chi Minh trail in 1963. He received the surrender of General (Big) Minh at the Presidential Palace in Saigon in 1975. Bui Tin said that the NVA viewed the Americans as having three basic weaknesses:

- o The first was the one-year personnel rotation policy. No sooner had a soldier begun to learn the country than he was sent home.

- o The second weakness was in the basic approach of trying to win the hearts and minds of people while trying to kill them with bombs.

- o The third weakness was in America's choice of an ally. Ninety percent of the puppet government was corrupt; the remaining ten percent were not enough.

I tried to pin down General Man and Bui Tin about the original decision to send forces from the north into the south--when and why?

According to General Man:

In 1964, we were on the verge of victory in the south. We concluded that you would not let the puppets be defeated. The Politburo convened a special meeting to mobilize the

people for a long war with the Americans, to plan the strategies and to lay the ground for the struggle.

Bui Tin's story was different. He traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1963, to gather information for a report to the Politburo on the status of the Viet Cong in the South. Bui Tin's conclusions differed both from those of the Americans at the time, and from the North Vietnamese party line, as expressed by General Man. According to Tin's analysis, the Viet Cong were far from victory in the winter of '63 and the spring of '64; instead, they were in disarray. They could go no further without significant aid, even if the Americans stayed out of the war.

On the basis of Bui Tin's analysis, the North Vietnamese decided to commit their forces to the south. Several of the people I interviewed told me that they had gone down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1964. But when I began to show some interest in the timing of their travels, they modified their earlier statements: "That was really...the North Vietnamese forces didn't really reach the battlefield until after the Americans arrived." They were quite sensitive about admitting anything that could indicate that they entered the war before the Americans committed troops. But I think that in truth they were in place in the south and ready to go by the time we arrived.

I tried to get the North Vietnamese view of the battle of Plei Me (Ia Drang) and two other battles near Chu Lai: Ap Giang (Operation Starlite) and Thanh Mountain, for which I've been unable to find an American designation. [Supposedly a battalion of U.S.

Marines was annihilated there, which does not square with the historical record.] In talking to several generals about these battles, I found certain common threads in their descriptions.

I talked at length with General Hoang, who is now the chief historian of the Vietnamese Army. During the battle of Plei Me (Ia Drang) he was aide-de-camp to General Man, the North Vietnamese commander (not the General Man quoted earlier). These were Hoang's reactions to America's entry into the war with troop units:

We cannot indulge in wishful thinking. We are facing a modern army, very mobile, never short of firepower.

When you sent the 1st Cavalry to attack us at Plei Me, it gave us headaches trying to figure out what to do. General Man and I would stay awake in our shelter trying to figure out how to fight you. We were very close to the front and several times the American troops came very near us. With your helicopters you could strike deep into our rear without warning. That was very effective. We had to organize our rear to make it [just] as prepared to fight as our frontline troops.

Another general, the commander of the 2d VC Division talked to me about this, and how they developed their tactic of "grabbing them by the belt"--he actually grabbed me by the belt to demonstrate--to counter these initial American advantages. Aside from staying outside of American artillery fans, the NVA and VC could also neutralize our indirect fire capability by engaging our units at very close range, inside the minimum ranges of our weapons. They could not match the aerial mobility provided by American helicopters, but they could neutralize it to some extent by maintaining superior ground mobility to American troops once they had debarked

from their helicopters. An effective switch on the "grab them by the belt" tactic would be to lure American heliborne forces outside the effective range of their artillery, into situations where their ground mobility was limited once they had landed. Under such conditions, the North Vietnamese/VC always felt confident of victory.

The NVA/VC see Plei Me (Ia Drang) as a great victory for them, despite the claims of [Colonel Harry] Summers and others that American use of mobility and firepower at Ia Drang heralded a new type of air assault warfare that proved quite effective against NVA regular forces, as indicated by comparative casualty counts. The body count argument is remarkably unpersuasive to the Vietnamese. Time and time again, they will brush aside any reference to losses, saying:

Of course we had sacrifices; of course we had losses. But we were learning. The Politburo said simply to fight the Americans and learn your fighting techniques as you go along.

Aware that the Americans considered the Ia Drang action a success, the North Vietnamese watched the 1st Cav's new-found confidence in its firepower and mobility grow steadily into a pervasive fire support base mentality. That in turn proved to be the best thing the NVA/VC had going for them, because they could always count on American forces to remain dispersed, [rather than concentrated for decisive action] and to rely heavily on helicopter mobility instead of improving their capability to move over the ground. They could count on our offensive operations never going beyond the artillery fan.

General Hoang went into more detail about this phenomenon:

The 1st Cav came out to fight us with one day's food and a week's ammunition. They sent their clothes back to Saigon to be washed. They depended on water brought by helicopters in cans. We were amazed at how dependent you were on your logistics. You were prepared for a different war, to fight an enemy like yourselves.

Hoang continued:

Our mobility was only our feet, so we had to lure your troops into areas where their helicopters and artillery would be of no use. And we tried to turn those advantages against you to make you so dependent on them that you would never develop the ability to meet us on our terms, on foot, lightly armed, in the jungle. You seldom knew where we were, and you seldom had a clear goal, so your great advantages ended up being wasted and you spent so much of your firepower on empty jungle. You fell into our trap. Your forces were divided. For example, from 1966 through 1967 you had some nine hundred operations and could not concentrate on our regular troops [at the right time and in the right place], so your advantages were wasted.

This theme runs through all the NVA/VC discussions of the war from 1965 through 1968. But during the action they refer to as Westmoreland's second campaign of 1967, they had become concerned about the possibility of a shifting in the strategic balance of forces [in favor of the Americans.] General Tuan, the "grab them by the belt" commander of the 2d Viet Cong division, explained it like this:

In the spring of 1967 Westmoreland began the second campaign. It was very fierce. Certain of our people were very discouraged. There was much discussion on the course of the war. Should we continue our main force efforts, or should we pull back into a more local strategy? By the fall of 1967, though, we concluded that you'd done your best, but that you'd still not reversed the balance of forces on the battlefield. The strategic position had not changed. So we decided to carry our one decisive battle, to force the issue, to escalate the war.

Despite the decision, Tuan and others remained properly respectful of American air power, among other things, recalling their earlier experiences. As Tuan recalls:

When the Americans entered the war we spent all our time trying to figure out how to fight you. Everyone from the lowest soldier to the highest general talked about it constantly. It was a matter of life and death. The incredible firepower and your mobility were our biggest concern. I myself saw the first B-52 raid on Highway #13 on June 8, 1965. I will never forget it. Ten groups of B-52's dropped their bombs not four kilometers from me. It was horrible. Two or three units were simply blown away. Our losses were huge. We had to admit you had terrible strength. How could we preserve our forces and still engage you? We decided we had to force you to fight our way--piece by piece. The result was interesting. We had to get so close that your artillery and airpower was useless. As a result, our logistics forces--which were farther away from the Americans--took far greater losses than our combat units that engaged them.

Bui Tin summarized the situation succinctly:

Of course, we had heavier losses in 1965. But we learned. We learned to build special shelters; how to decoy artillery and airplanes; how to tie you to your fire bases and your helicopters, so that they worked against you. We were at home in the jungle and you wanted only to get back to your bases to shower and get a letter from home. These factors count more than firepower, and we learned how to use them against you.

General Man talked about Khe Sanh and the 1968 Tet offensive:

Westmoreland thought Khe Sanh was [another] Dien-bienphu. Dienbienphu was a strategic battle for us. We mobilized everything for it. We at last had a chance to have a favorable balance of forces against the French. The situation would not allow it. We wanted to bring your forces away from the cities to decoy them to the frontier [to enable us] to prepare for our great Tet offensive...

SIMMONS: Say that again, loudly. That's a very important point.

BROYLES: (Quoting):

We wanted to bring your forces away from the cities to decoy them to the frontier [to enable us] to prepare for our great Tet offensive.

SIMMONS: For a moment, I'd like to talk a little bit about the strategic significance of Khe Sanh. I don't want to put too fine a point on it, but it is obvious from this quote that the North Vietnamese view of Khe Sanh was closer to the Marine Corps view... less like the MACV (i.e., Westmoreland) view...and much less like the Air Force (i.e., Nalty) view, with respect to the so-called Great Debate: Was Khe Sanh meant to be a battle of decision or not? Was it the main effort or was it a secondary effort? This quote of General Man's is certainly not conclusive evidence, but it is a most interesting find.

BROYLES: To be realistic, we should consider the possibility that the North Vietnamese originally set out to make Khe Sanh a battle of strategic significance but were forced by our strenuous defense to change their minds.

SIMMONS: If they had meant Khe Sanh to be a strategic objective, it went badly for them.

(UNIDENTIFIED): They say their strategy was what it turned out to be. Making a virtue of necessity.

BROYLES: Yes. That's exactly how they behave.

SIMMONS: But their perceptions of us are remarkably pointed.

They seem to know a lot more about us than we knew about them.

SHULIMSON: In the North Vietnamese official history (I don't know how good the translation is, but that's what I'm depending on.), they're saying that the Tet offensive decision was made in July 1967, rather than the fall of that year.

BROYLES: I don't think that's inconsistent...

SHULIMSON: There also seems to be some debate within the North Vietnamese hierarchy about this time, as to whether they are on the right course...

BROYLES: In 1967?

SHULIMSON: Yes, in '67. In other words--at this point--they seem to be facing the prospect of kicking off a war of large units, in addition to the war of smaller units already underway. Perhaps the dichotomy between big and small unit wars is not quite as sharp for them as it is for us, but they still faced the central question of whether they could match us in combat between large units. Otherwise, I think your quotes line up what Douglas Pike has said, about the inseparability of the military and the political aspects of the Vietnamese concept of "struggle."

BROYLES: That's just the point I was about to make. Let me quote General Man again:

Ignoring the political [aspect] leads to military defeat. We never separate the two. We mounted the offensive to show that you could not defeat us as you had planned. Of course, we suffered great losses but the losses

were acceptable given to the success.

Later I asked Bui Tin about this acceptance of heavy losses, especially in light of the great uprising of the people against the South Vietnamese government that the NVA/VC seemed to expect. At first, he seemed to deny that this was part of the strategy, saying, "We could not have the people go out lightly armed against the heavily armed American troops..."

BATHA: Although I wasn't there at the time, I later heard of masses of people with Viet Cong flags walking boldly down the streets, thinking there would be an uprising. They were slaughtered. I recognize, though, that there were other subplots involved in this phenomenon.

BROYLES: Whenever I began to talk of things like that, I would tend to get the same answer. This is what Bui Tin said about it:

It is true that our forces and their allies took great losses. After 1968 most of our forces were sent into the south. Some companies were wiped out. In Saigon, we suffered terrible losses but we [still] did not lose even one-third of all the Viet Cong forces.

I replied that seemed like a lot to me. It would be like the Americans losing 175,000 men. But Tin just shrugged it off:

We had hundreds of thousands killed. We would have sacrificed one or two million more, if necessary.

This willingness to sacrifice is summed up in a brief saying of Ho Chi Minh's, which can be found on signs at the entrances to practically every village in Vietnam:

NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM.

Everyone--from generals to widows to small children--has this saying planted firmly in his mind, and quotes it freely when asked about the sacrifices of the war. Wherever I went, I did not find anyone who expressed any degree of regret for anything he had to do.

When I went to Hue, I spent a great deal of time talking to a pair of Viet Cong who currently serve as the Provincial Vice Chairman of the Peoples Committee and of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Both of them were in Hue back in 1968, at the Citadel and elsewhere. The first thing they asked me was if I had seen the documentary, "Vietnam: A Television History." (Laughter) I replied that I had. "Well," the Viet Cong said, "We watched it too. We all watched it. And we remember scenes of Marines throwing hand grenades, in village after village, all over I Corps. Why did you do that? These were peasants and workers. All they wanted was to live in peace. This is what filled us with the rage to fight."

As they talked, I recalled arriving in Thanh My with General Simmons and seeing the civilian casualties inflicted by Viet Cong and NVA. Their bodies laid out in rows. It was horrible. So I told him about seeing that, and we started arguing. I asked him if he had been in Hue during Tet 1968. He quickly responded, "Yes, I was in one group [that was] in the Citadel. Street to street we were fighting. It was a glorious time."

This seemed to be part of some heroic mythology-building that had characterized the comments of many of those I interviewed. But I had little tolerance for that at the time because my two most

vivid memories of Tet 1968 are the destroyed Citadel and all those civilian bodies laid out.

"Well, what about all those people you killed?" I asked.

For the first time during my visit, cracks began to appear in that incredibly bright and shiny patina of hospitality. I began to sense that things were perhaps a good deal different from what they were being made out to be. For example, these two ex-Viet Cong leaders looked like movie stars. Now, all the Viet Cong I ever saw out in the bush were peasants. They were dedicated to their cause and good fighters and all, but they were rough-hewn--right off the farm. These guys across from me looked like they had just come from discussing a movie deal. They wore turtleneck sweaters and glasses, and looked very intellectual. And when I asked about the killing, a look crossed this guy's movie-star face that suddenly made me very glad that I was his guest and not his prisoner.

Anyway, this Viet Cong officer started to deny that the killing had ever taken place, with a remarkable tautology:

...It was impossible. We were the people. How could we kill ourselves?

Then he launched into a tirade about all the atrocities the Americans had committed:

...nailed our fingers down. Tore out our finger nails. Ripped bodies. Ripped babies from their mothers wombs. Eaten human hearts. Worn strings of ears around their necks...

I remember thinking that if he went this far, he was capable of making up anything he wanted. He must have sensed my skepticism, and changed his tune, just a little.

Maybe the bodies were those of our own Viet Cong patriots who had been killed by the vengeful South Vietnamese after the fighting [for control of Hue] was over...

I did not buy this either, and kept pushing him for a straight answer until he finally said:

Well, look--war is very fierce; the people were very bitter; they hated their [South Vietnamese civilian] oppressors, and perhaps a few people --some of the more brutal criminals--were spontaneously killed.

This is a national mythology they are creating, which admits neither error nor wrongdoing, and has no room for ambivalence, ambiguity, or moral subtlety. A new panoply of heroes is emerging from the war: 20th Century Patrick Henrys and Nathan Hales, whose stirring words are recited and remembered. For example, the man who tried unsuccessfully to blow up Secretary of Defense McNamara during one of his visits is remembered and revered for saying, "So long as a single American soldier lives on this soil, we can never be free!"

In developing this national mythology, populated with flat, two-dimensional heroes and martyrs, they do not go so far as stating that the end justifies the means, no matter how extreme. On the other hand, there appears to be no particular uneasiness attached to the thought that they might have committed evil deeds in pursuit of a justifiable end. They just don't seem to think about it and don't like to discuss it.

I'd like to say just one more thing to wrap up my general comments. I asked a number of people to identify the worst period of the war--for themselves, anyway--and General Tuan's answer was

particularly striking:

After Tet 1968, the following period, through 1970, was very difficult for us. The fighting was very fierce. We were often hungry. I was a division commander [2d Viet Cong division] and I went hungry for days. We had no rice to eat. It was very, very bad. But we did not have to beat you the way the Allies beat the Nazis. Our goal was only for you to withdraw so we could settle our affairs. That was our goal and we achieved it.

Some of the former Viet Cong leaders I talked to, speaking frankly, said that America's entry into the war had sealed the doom of the Viet Cong and virtually guaranteed that South Vietnam would eventually be subjugated to the North Vietnamese:

The worst thing you did in this year was to come in. During the long years you were here, we [the Viet Cong] were destroyed. The North Vietnamese took over the war, and then they took over the country. But if you had not come in 1964, we could have won. We would have had a much different country now.

General Tuan did not seem to go along with this. He felt that even though the burden of combat shifted almost entirely to the North Vietnamese after Tet 1968, the ultimate result [a unified Vietnam under Hanoi's control] was inevitable.

I could say much, much more in the way of general commentary, but I think the time has come to open the question period.

FRANK: I'll lead off. What are the circumstances under which you went to Vietnam, and how did you arrange it?

BROYLES: I had applied to go in 1983--about a year before I actually went. I had two goals in mind: First, to talk to Vietnamese people about the war and about the effects of the war on both the major cities and on the countryside; second, to re-visit the areas where

I had fought, to see how they had changed. Halfway through 1984, I had still heard nothing from the Vietnamese. But, on 15 September I got a call saying that my visa had been approved. It almost goes without saying that I would have liked to have had this discussion before I departed on the trip. (Pause) One question I wanted to ask all of you is whether our views of those early 1965 battles differ much from those of the North Vietnamese?

BRAESTRUP: Well, Doug Pike thinks that from the North Vietnamese viewpoint those early battles were a form of testing, trying out ways to fight the Americans...[which tracks with your quotes].

BROYLES: Sort of like a Broadway play trying out in New Haven, then...

BRAESTRUP: That's Pike's interpretation. But I have a question about the tactical situation during Tet 1968. I don't know what level of detail you got into during your discussions, but I have never understood why they seemed to make so many mistakes--tactical omissions--at Hue. They never blocked the river. They never blocked Highway #1. They reinforced piecemeal...

SHULIMSON: I wondered about the same thing...

BRAESTRUP: I was there as a reporter talking with Ernie Cheatham and others, and we all wondered why, with all the forces they were supposed to have in the area, they weren't doing any better against the bob-tailed Marine battalion and the handful of U.S. Army combat troops initially on scene. The North Vietnamese and VC had Hue by

the short hairs, but the Marines kept getting through. Maybe it's the same old story about their original plan of getting knocked out of whack and their being too inflexible to adjust...

SHULIMSON: I'm not sure, either, but it seems funny to me that they were able to achieve great surprise in Hue, to get in and take over the city. Then once they did that, they seemed to have no other aim. They just waited there to be wiped out. They fought bitterly, but there was no re-deployment of forces and they reinforced piecemeal as Peter has said.

BRAESTRUP: They brought in a couple of battalions they had supposedly moved over from Khe Sanh.

SHULIMSON: That leads to another question, about the relationship between Khe Sanh and Hue. Did you by any chance ask them how many divisions they actually had at Khe Sanh?

BROYLES: They would not tell me.

SHULIMSON: We have indications of four divisions.

BROYLES: Whenever I asked for specifics, like troops strengths, they would always say, "I don't have the exact figure..." or "You know as well as I..." They seemed to wish away anything they didn't feel like talking about or thinking about.

SIMMONS: I'd like to tackle that, by going back to Peter's question about the tactical mistakes at Hue vice elsewhere. Don't you really think this might have happened because of the level of sophistica-

tion of their command and control? The system and equipment they actually had to work with? They could do a good plan--up to the moment the battle was joined. You can make an analogy to the Western front in World War I. That's just about where the Vietnamese were in their technology. They could bring their forces to battle, but once their forces were committed there was very little they could do to change whatever their units had originally been assigned to do. It was the battalion commander's fight from that point on. At Hue, the fog of battle was probably so thick that they might not have known whether the road was cut or the river was blocked or what opportunities existed to take such actions.

BROYLES: I talked to them about this. Compared to all our helicopters and communications gear, they had practically nothing. They communicated by messenger. They'd hand a piece of paper to a guy and tell him to take it over to the next company or whatever. And the messenger might or might not find his way...or get captured...or get killed...

BRAESTRUP: Didn't this change over time, though?

BROYLES: They had radios, too--but they said that they were always afraid to use them.

SIMMONS: Were they aware of our radio intercept capability--of the extent we were "reading their mail?"

BROYLES: Yes. They said that they could use radios only in extreme emergencies. Radios were never used as ordinary tactical tools.

SIMMONS: I'm thinking now about an analogy between Belleau Wood and Hue. Once those Marine battalions went into the woods at Belleau Wood, regiment and division lost control of them. They were out there on their own. I think that's what happened to the battalions at Hue.

BABB: Back in 1970, when I was stationed at Eighth and Eye, then-- LtCol Cheatham was the executive officer of the Barracks. One evening, he had a gathering of some of his company commanders at Hue: Ron Christmas, Chuck Meadows, Mike Downs...They talked about the very things we are discussing now. LtCol Cheatham said that he kept waiting for the other shoe to fall, but it never really did at Hue. The NVA and VC were very ferocious, and Cheatham kept expecting more things to happen. In fact, there were times when he wondered if his battalion was going to get its ass kicked. But it never happened, even though the ferocious fighting continued.

BRAESTRUP: I think the same was true during the 1972 Easter offensive. I was up in northern I Corps with LtCol Jerry Turley, the senior Marine advisor on scene, and he was dumbfounded at the failure of the North Vietnamese to push past the Cua Viet River line at first. Everything seemed to be going their way, but they just stopped. Then late in April they made their second push and broke through. Along Highway #1, their advance toward Hue was blocked only by an understrength battalion of Vietnamese Marines-- about 400 strong--and their two American advisors, who calmly held their ground while the entire 3d ARVN Division retreated past their

positions. I remember Turley saying, "What the hell are they doing, letting the roadblock stop them? Why aren't they taking their tanks and moving around our flanks?" The area was flat and sandy-- the old "Street Without Joy." There was no opposition out there except for some Rangers and regional forces who weren't even talking to the Vietnamese Marines. The weather wasn't bad. But the NVA ran into this Marine battalion and lost a couple of tanks, so they stopped. Over and over again, I get this feeling that once they had made their big planned attack, they weren't ready to follow up and exploit their initial successes. But that was worth four or five days of combat. At the end of four or five days, a division would be completely used up, and would have to be pulled back and rebuilt. The idea of feeding in replacements and sustaining a major unit through, say, 185 days of combat is incomprehensible to a relatively primitive society.

(UNIDENTIFIED): We should remember that the North Vietnamese had limited political objectives as well as military ones, both in 1968 and 1972. In 1968, they obviously wanted to capture Hue and hold it for political reasons. In 1972, they wanted the province capitals of An Loc, Quang Tri, and Kontum. Their logic was probably the same as the Germans' in going after Paris and Moscow.

SHULIMSON: He has a point. Very few NVA troops were used during the 1968 Tet offensive outside of I Corps. Most of the fighting outside of I Corps was done by Viet Cong. This implies a limited objective, probably the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam...

SIMMONS: Well, their military region included those northernmost provinces, which were isolated from the rest of I Corps by the Hai Van mountains. And I guess that they expected to get at least those two provinces plus Hue, both in 1968 and 1972. Then, of course, there was also the classic strategy of cutting South Vietnam in half...did they talk about that as a recurring strategy?

BROYLES: They talked about both--detaching northern provinces in 1968 and 1972, and about cutting the country in half.

BRAESTRUP: But aren't the North Vietnamese saying--despite the failure of these strategies until the very end--that this apparent lack of military success really didn't matter so long as they won in the end. I talked to Stanley Karnow when he got back from Vietnam. They didn't get into as much detail with him as they did with you, but they did say:

Sure. We had heavy losses during Tet, but it didn't matter. We had heavy losses on other occasions, too. But they didn't matter either. What mattered was that we won.

And you remember the famous Harry Summers quote, where he told the North Vietnamese colonel:

"You know, you never defeated us on the field of battle."

And the Vietnamese replied:

"That may well be true. It is also irrelevant."

Then there is the famous Oriana Fallaci interview with General Giap, where she told the general that the Americans claimed that he had lost half a million soldiers. And Giap replied, "The exact number." Then he let his head drop as casually as if it were quite

unimportant, as hurriedly, as if perhaps, the real figure were even larger, according to her.

It was Pike, I think, who pointed out that where they had us was in what we had in our heads...so a lot of the discussion about things we're interested in doesn't interest them at all. The war cost them twice as much as it might have or should have, and to us that is important. To them, it's not. Is that what you got?

BROYLES: Basically, yes. Whenever I tried to interpret victory and defeat in terms of casualties, their reaction was, "What are you talking about? Losses are not how you measure victory and defeat."

BRAESTRUP: Did you talk to them at all about Laos and Cambodia?

BROYLES: I did, but not in detail.

One thing I was particularly interested in was talking to the guerrillas about their experiences. We talked about weapons, for example. They found captured M-16 rifles (with ammo) to be in relatively abundant supply. And they were extremely impressed with the M-79 grenade launcher. That was the one weapon they wished they had. And they had (to me, anyway) this completely inexplicable respect for the M-72 (LAAW), that one-shot cardboard throwaway tube. My men didn't like to carry it, because once it got wet out in the jungle, it would not fire correctly.

SHULIMSON: The M-72 worked well in Hue, though...

MILLER: It was partly a matter of education. The South Vietnamese

Marines were down on the M-72 for the same reasons, but the advisors, realizing that they had few anti-tank alternatives, got hold of some undamaged LAAWs and held extensive firing practice until the South Vietnamese regained confidence in the weapon and took pains to care for it in the jungle. This was in 1971. A year later, the VNMC scored some impressive tank ambushes with LAAWs during the NVA Easter offensive.

BROYLES: In addition to weapons, they talked about how they negated our fire support base strategy and our firepower--even turning these advantages against us...

BABB: I sat on a fire base for the better part of five months during 1968 and 1969. You would often find an artillery battery co-located with the headquarters of an infantry battalion on a fire base. Or in the case of an operation, a series of fire bases. And sitting on those fire bases I would often think, "You know, right at this very moment there are bad guys outside this fan [of friendly artillery coverage] and those guys are moving. And sure enough, we would take enemy fire from time to time. And then the bad guys would move outside the fan again. In my opinion, we did not once strike a blow for freedom during those five months. This was in late '68 and early 1969, when the 3d Division was testing the fire base concept. We were totally ineffective in sending patrols through the gigantic valley the Viet Cong were using, so they were able to move freely--either outside the range fans or within the minimum range of our artillery.

MILLER: The South Vietnamese had the same problem during LAM SON 719. They set up a string of fire bases that overlooked Route 9 in Laos. The bases were not mutually supporting and the South Vietnamese infantry units did not control the spaces between them. Each base in turn was surrounded, and the attacking NVA dug and crawled their way closer and closer to the defensive perimeter, until NVA soldiers were lying on their backs and firing up through the tactical wire at re-supply helicopters, medevac birds, and the like. Then on the first low visibility day when close air support was negated, the NVA would bring up their tanks and overrun the fire base. Then they would start in on the next fire base, which would have to face a proportionally stronger NVA force. They plucked those bases like ripe grapes, one by one.

BABB: I think that most infantry and artillery officers who are honest with themselves would say that the fire base concept as we employed it was largely ineffective...totally ineffective.

BROYLES: I'm not sure what the alternative would be.

BABB: I'm not sure either. But that one didn't work. I remember then-Brigadier General Jaskilka, the CG of Task Force Yankee, visiting our fire base. "Are you being effective?" he'd ask. And several of us replied, "We don't think so, General. Kill the operation. Let's get the hell out of here."

BROYLES: It took me a couple of tries--to change the subject--to get to Marble Mountain, which of course bore few signs of the

air facility and all the other activity there. There was a cave located there that had not been known to the Americans while they occupied the area. Even now, you could not see the entrance from 15 feet away. I went inside, and saw a huge grotto, with a roof that must have been 75 feet high. There were beautiful Buddhas carved into the rock, brightly painted. There was also an official-looking plaque, which looked incongruous among all the religious artifacts. I asked my interpreter to read it: IN THIS CAVE FROM 1966 TO 1969 WAS A FIELD HOSPITAL OF THE LIBERATION FORCES. Now, I know that from inside that cave you could have heard helicopters taking off from the Marine air facility. You could probably even hear the conversations of Americans nearby. They had an entire field hospital set up in there and not one American ever knew it...

FRANK: Considering all the attrition they suffered, did they always keep their objective in sight, or might they have been close to a time when they would have given up?

BROYLES: I had the feeling that every single North Vietnamese and Viet Cong was programmed not to quit. The North Vietnamese operating in the south had a different attitude from the Americans on their one-year tours. They weren't trying to get back to their families or to school. They were there for the duration--not a prescribed short tour.

BRAESTRUP: I'd like to go back to LAM SON 719. The Americans had a similar plan--called the "Highway 9 Plan" back in 1966. And that was why Westmoreland wanted to hold Khe Sanh, even though he could

not say that at the time. [After a two-week reconnaissance in force earlier in 1966] Westmoreland put the Marines in to Khe Sanh in September 1966. I had visited it just before the Marines went back in. It was a regular summer resort, manned by Green Berets and Bru tribesmen. They had airplanes in little underground hangars and bugle calls every night. It was like a dream. The commander of the outpost was Winston Spencer Churchill Hutton III, a West Point graduate. A terrific character. I wrote a story about it for the New York Times, and said that it looked like another Dien-bienphu in the making, which will not be ranked among my better predictions.

But I digress. The point is that Westmoreland has said in his memoirs--and other people have said, as well--that Khe Sanh was important primarily as a staging base for a LAM SON 719-type operation into Laos, in case Lyndon ever changed his mind about not widening the war. Now, Westmoreland had many faults (even though the Marine Corps seems untiringly polite in discussing them--though not always) and illusions. And one illusion he shared with many other military men was that he (or they) could bring Lyndon around to his way of thinking. So that was the reason for hanging on to Khe Sanh, from 1966 on.

SIMMONS: Let me give you another reason. Westmoreland may have thought that he was holding Khe Sanh as a jumping-off point for an excursion into Laos...perhaps. But for a more immediate reason for LAM SON 719, you have to look to Lieutenant General Lam, the I Corps commander. I know from face-to-face contact with General Lam

that during the 1970-71 period of withdrawal of American resources he was keenly aware that his capability of conducting the war in the American way was fading. He could not longer count upon a super-abundance of ammunition, airlift, and communications. So he wanted to push westward while he still could. And he particularly wanted to go into Laos. He had gone into Laos as a lieutenant, serving with the French...along Route 9. And he wanted to repeat that operation.

BRAESTRUP: Oh, great!

SIMMONS: I heard this from his own lips.

(UNIDENTIFIED): Didn't the Americans push LAM SON 719?

SIMMONS: I think it was a coincidence of desires. Let me just say that I was not particularly impressed by the generalship shown by CG of XXIV Corps at the time, but Lam was the one who provided the real impetus for going into Laos.

(UNIDENTIFIED): So the Americans weren't really in charge...

SIMMONS: Well, it's like the raft going down the Mississippi covered with ants...and every ant thinks he is in control. You can see this in the various monographs by South Vietnamese leaders that CMH has turned out. I had very little faith in these monographs at first, assuming that they would be self-serving and so on, but I think they're very revealing. Very revealing. You know, the South Vietnamese were much less our puppets than they were accused

of being or even than we presumed them to be. They had their own perceptions about who was in charge and who was running the show. I think that our advisors were certainly aware of that.

MILLER: [As a former advisor] I agree. But in addition to Lam's personal desires, don't you think that LAM SON 719 was also driven by the earlier success of the Cambodian operation, which in effect dried up the Delta for the NVA and the VC?

SIMMONS: Sure. But I wouldn't underestimate Lam's own personal influence. He thought he could pull the Laotian operation off. He thought he could do it. (Pause) Maybe we ought to shift gears...

BROYLES: Just to wrap up the ground portion...Even after making allowances for hindsight, the North Vietnamese seemed to be very clear in analyzing our weak points. They saw four basic weaknesses: First was our over-reliance on firepower and helicopter support. The second weak point was the lack of support for the war back in the United States. The third was our partnership with an unworthy ally. And the fourth point, which they kept coming back to over and over again, is that we Americans were trying to fight a Vietnamese war when we were not Vietnamese. All the Vietnamization in the world could not change that. Even General Hanh in Saigon told me that. He said, "You made us be anti-Communist, but we had nothing positive to put in its place." And at every level in a war like this, at some point the basic allegiance of the individual comes into question. It holds true for Americans as well as Vietnamese. But we can talk more about this later on. Let's move

on to the air war.

To begin with, I am just a grunt, and I had no particular knowledge of the air war when I made my visit. But when you visit Hanoi, you realize that the air war was the big one--the real war--for them. The North Vietnamese call it their second Dienbienphu. They regard our air attacks as our own version of their Tet 1968 offensive--our attempt to break their will by attacking their rear, and creating a psychological separation between their front and their rear.

They were very repetitive in their basic propaganda line. I was on hand for the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the liberation of Hanoi from the French, and I heard the comparisons with Dienbienphu and Tet over and over again. They also said things--repeatedly--like, "You did not break our will. You only made us more determined. You brought the war home to every house in the North."

I had expected Hanoi to have the look of an East Berlin, which I'd seen in the early 1960's. But as a matter of fact, it looked exactly like a sleepy French provincial town. There was no evidence that it had ever been bombed or otherwise affected by war. I spent an hour and a half, driving around with my guide, trying to get him to show me damage from the war. We couldn't find any. We went to one of the streets that was known to have been hit during the Christmas bombing of 1972. There was supposed to be a memorial there, to all the civilians who were killed in the bombing. We kept asking where the memorial was, but no one seemed to know.

Finally, we found it in a tiny little park with a gate. There was nothing else there.

We went to the famous Bach Mai hospital, which was hit by mistake in the 1972 raids. They still display pictures of Jane Fonda visiting there. The hospital itself has been largely rebuilt, but the staff still has vivid stories about the bombing. They described the living patients mixed with the dead. The water pipes burst and there was flooding.

We had to break through the rubble and uncover the entrances with our bare hands to get the wounded out. Power was out and the storeroom where we kept our antibiotics and bandages was destroyed. It took almost two weeks to extricate all the dead and the smell of bodies filled the hospital. Three students were killed. But war was war. So we rebuilt the hospital but we never got around to fixing the basement. The shelter is still filled with rubble and water. After the Paris agreement, Kissinger came here and promised us three million dollars to rebuild the hospital, but we never got it.

One thing that is particularly interesting about this aspect of the war is the near reverence they hold for the B-52 bomber. To them, the B-52 symbolizes America's technological superiority. The most popular exhibit in their military museum is the wreckage of a B-52 that had been shot down by MIG-21s. To them, B-52 strikes are the things most worth talking about. And when they start talking about these raids, their faces actually change. They say, no-- they'll never forget. The memory of B-52 strikes will stay with them longer than anything else in the war. It's the one thing they feel the most free to talk about.

(UNIDENTIFIED): Might they be prone to remember every American air

strike as a B-52 raid?

BROYLES: No. They know the difference. You can go to any village, and they can tell you exactly what types of planes were carrying what types of bombs. They know when they were attacked--the exact dates...how many missions... how many runs. It was extraordinary. They know everything. They can describe the different modifications made to the F-4s and A-4s. They know more than I do about our own aircraft.

BATHA: Maybe we should increase the distribution of our "For Comment" edition of "The Air War in Vietnam..."

BROYLES: Listen, they would go for it. This was a life and death thing for them, and they are very knowledgeable. No confusion on their part at all. Those kids in the military museum were looking at the pieces of the downed B-52 like they were seeing a great mythological beast that had been slain.

I went to the textile town of Nam Dinh, which had been hit hard. The People's Committee had the records. You have a seat and they bring out the folders. They have folders on everything, with careful notes and photographs. They have divided the air war into two periods: the Lyndon B. Johnson period and the Richard M. Nixon period. One person is in charge of each period. A woman opened the file on the LBJ period and read,

...During this period Nam Dinh was bombed 189 times, including 82 night raids. Sixty percent of the houses were destroyed...

She gave me lots of examples. Here's one:

...on April 14, 1966 there was a raid against Hang Tau Street at 0645. The children were getting ready for school. Many of them were among the 49 people killed. Two hundred and five homes were destroyed...

And another:

...On June 12, 1972 we had the largest raid on Nam Dinh. Twenty-four planes attacked, dropped 102 bombs: pellet bombs; pipe explosive bombs. Many people died...

I asked them, "Why did the Americans bomb here?" This is what they said:

...The Americans would bomb whenever they saw lights or crowds or any signs of life. There were no military targets. It was just psychological. They destroyed dormitories, schools, kindergartens, hospitals...

BRAESTRUP: In other words, civilian targets only...

BROYLES: Many people, they said, were "killed" twice in these records. They would be wounded in one raid, carried off to a hospital, then bombed again. One of the Vietnamese said, "You know, the Americans bombed so much that after a while our people began to get bored by it. The siren would go off and we wouldn't want to get out of bed or leave the table to go to the shelter. 'Not again,' we would think. 'Not now...'"

BRAESTRUP: You ought to have a footnote on this. I refer to the infamous Harrison Salisbury trip to North Vietnam in December 1966. He was taken to Nam Dinh, where he met with that same People's Committee. And Salisbury came away from that meeting saying that there were no military targets. And later, the famous letter from

the Navy aviator came in, saying, "If there were no military targets, then why did Nam Dinh light up with antiaircraft fire every time we got anywhere near the place?" You'd better believe there were military targets there...

BROYLES: Certainly. And I said to them, "Look--Nam Dinh is not quite the helpless provincial town you have been portraying. There are gasoline storage tanks here...heavy equipment...there were anti-aircraft batteries..."

But the Vietnamese usually came up with a way to justify what they did. I remember talking to one American pilot before my trip to Vietnam. He said that during one of his bombing runs he missed one of his targets and accidentally hit a church. He was amazed to see the church blow up, with huge secondary explosions. It was obvious that the North Vietnamese had been keeping ammunition and high explosives in the church. When I asked my hosts about this, here's what they said:

We would not have had antiaircraft gun sites or have kept ammunition in our churches if you had not been bombing us. We were not attacking your planes on their carriers. You were attacking us. We had to protect ourselves.

Then I asked them what it felt like to be out in the open, trying to shoot down airplanes. They said that they had so many volunteers that they had to have elections to be gunners. Everybody wanted to get out there and shoot down airplanes. They seemed to have a childlike wonderment when they talked about the bravery of American pilots who flew straight into the teeth of the SAM defenses. But their obvious admiration was tinged with pity. It must have

been the way that Wellington's infantry thought about the French lancers they encountered. The Vietnamese marveled at the way the American pilots kept diving into such intense antiaircraft fire.

(UNIDENTIFIED): Did the North Vietnamese show any hatred toward the Americans, despite their admiration for the bravery of the pilots?

BROYLES: Well, yes. They always said they had great hatred. And I asked practically everybody this question, "Do you have hatred toward the Americans?" And the answer was usually:

Yes. You bombed our villages and you bombed our cities. But we realize that you were victims of the imperialist warmonger clique in Washington...

FRANK: Do you think there was a possibility that there would have been an all out aerial assault...

BROYLES: Over and above the Christmas bombing?

FRANK: No.

SIMMONS: That's our mythology of the war--correction, the Air Force's mythology of the war.

BRAESTRUP: Pike's argument is that they would not have called off the war. They just would have said, "Let's not do it this way."

BROYLES: They claimed that they shot down the first B-52s in 1972. Three of their Mig pilots made the kills. One of these went on to become a cosmonaut, for the soviets. I talked to him for nearly an

hour. I was really interested in how it felt to him to be shooting down a B-52 because of the transition he had been through--from a boy who herded water buffalo, to aircraft mechanic, to jet pilot, to cosmonaut. After being a jet pilot for nearly 20 years, he now has about a thousand hours of flight time, counting his combat time. This seems like an incredibly small amount of time for a 20-year pilot. Isn't it?

BATHA: Yes, it sure is...

BROYLES: Well, to go on...when I'd question them about their reaction to an all-out air assault, they would just fall back upon their version of history. The never did want to give a thing away to me. They would say that:

...In 1945, we controlled Hanoi, and we made a decision to leave it in order to go back into the mountains. We were perfectly prepared to leave Hanoi if we had to. Even the Christmas bombing of 1972 did not matter that much, because even before that bombing started we had won Kissinger's approval for keeping forces in the South.

It was the same old line every time. Their reasoning would run along the lines of, "We're not saying that the bombing forced us to the negotiating table, but even if it did, it did not do anything to help you win the war." In other words, no answer. No results.

BATHA: Another aspect of the air war was the mining of Haiphong harbor. What did they have to say about that?

BROYLES: I didn't get into that, but now that you mention it, I

wish that I had.

SHULIMSON: I have a different question. A Marine veteran of the Combined Action Program has just been given permission to visit Vietnam. And two Congressional subcommittee delegations are making the trip. One, headed by Sonny Montgomery, is over there now. The other, headed by Stephen Solarz, is going there on December 16th. Does this indicate a certain opening up of the Vietnamese society? Do you think that they would be willing to release some of their records on the war?

BROYLES: I don't know. I think the situation is a lot more complicated than it appears on the surface. Part of it goes to their overall foreign situation. They are trying desperately to establish better relations, especially with us, but they have a number of fears. They saw what we did in Taiwan, under pressure from the Mainland Chinese. They are terrified about the prospect of becoming dependent upon Soviet support, then having the Soviets hand them over to the Chinese. They are taking very modest first steps to discard some of the Marxist ideology, to improve industrial planning. But the highest ranking officials, the older guys, have a remarkably conservative view of the world and of their society. They talk constantly about patriotism, discipline, unity, and sacrifice. It's like talking to Jerry Falwell. They see the effects of Western culture on their country--left over from the war and still coming in--and they see these effects as being tremendously corrosive. The south is remarkably unchanged. They've put in a

few co-operatives, but ten years have gone by and I think they've made a basic decision not to make the South like the North. And I think that basically the South has remained unchanged.

FRANK: What's happened to all the American gear that was left behind?

BROYLES: Well, going back to a point I made earlier about the near-total absence of signs that a war was every fought there, you just don't see much evidence of American gear. The Russians may be using some of it, but on my drive past Cam Ranh Bay I didn't see much, in my casual eyeballing.

SIMMONS: How about the railroad, and all the bridges that were cut? They've not restored the railroad, have they?

BROYLES: The railroad runs from Hanoi to Saigon.

SIMMONS: Really? And they've replaced all the bridges...

BROYLES: There were two ways to get from North to South, going overland. One is the railroad and the other is Highway #1. South of Chu Lai, there is nothing on the road. It's like driving in West Texas. You see no cars. And the railroad takes almost forever, constantly late, but it does run. But since there's no traffic, I don't see how they can have much commerce moving between North and South. Back in 1975, there was a great deal of back and forth, because everybody was trying to see their families. But my guide, who was from the North, had never been in the South before.

BABB: You spoke earlier about the lingering effects of the Western culture that has been imposed on the South. Do the Northerners have a perception about how many generations it may take to overcome that kind of thing, if ever?

BROYLES: Actually, things are moving in exactly the opposite direction. For example, on the thirtieth anniversary of the revolution in Hanoi, they had a big concert in Lenin Park. They had a program of popular and patriotic music, and they had five rock and roll bands. The first four of these bands were from Hanoi. Pretty humdrum. But the fifth band was from Saigon, and was led by a guy who came bouncing out on the stage like Mick Jagger. Suddenly, the kids in the audience came alive. They went wild. And after the Saigon band finished, the patriotic music started up again, and everybody went home.

BRAESTRUP: They lost the war, after all! (Laughter)

BROYLES: It's really happening. In Hanoi, people have told me that through 1981, it was just like wartime. Everybody was riding bicycles. Now you're starting to see motorcycles; you're starting to see cars. And some of the old timers are beginning to wonder if it was worth it to continue fighting and endure all the hardship for thirty years or so, just so their offspring can wear long hair and ride around on their Hondas and listen to rock music. The kids really like American things. They would rather have American blue jeans than the ones they can get from Taiwan. They will give you letters to take to their relatives in California. In the bars, they look down on the East Europeans and the Soviets, and keep saying

things like, "American number one. Number one. Really good." I think that many people in Vietnam know that we can give them what they want in the future...and the Russians can't. I went around I Corps with a kid who had just come back from seven years in the Soviet Union. He was a hand-picked Communist. And the first thing he asked me was about Michael Jackson. I said, "Don't you like Russian music?" It was evident that he didn't like it as much as he liked rock. So this clearly is what's happening. And I think the Vietnamese leadership is coming to the point where they are going to have to make a tough decision. Either they are going to have to acknowledge the pervasive influence of Western culture on their society, and find a way to accommodate to it, or else they are going to have to try and stamp it out ruthlessly, with some type of upheaval that is similar to the Chinese cultural revolution, maybe toned down a bit.

FRANK: What about the MIAs?

BROYLES: I spent a lot of time on that. I went to the JCRC in Bangkok before I entered Vietnam, and got some names to check on. Everywhere I went in Vietnam, I asked about the MIAs. I talked to a number of Europeans, and I got many answers like, "Oh, yes. We saw this American on a working party in such and such a place..." But you could never track anything down. No first-hand witnesses. Always somebody else who saw the MIAs. For instance, "Go and find this Swede at such and such a place." So I'd go there and find a Swede who matched the description. But he'd answer, "Oh no, that's not me. The guy you want went back to Sweden."

I only found one true eyewitness, a Canadian. He said that he was in a boat going down the Mekong when he saw a blond man wearing shorts, walking along the river bank. When the Canadian got closer, he heard the man talking to himself in English. But when the blond man saw the Canadian, he slipped into the jungle and disappeared. I told this story to a Vietnamese official, and he said only that there might still be a deserter or two on the loose. I couldn't get anything out of him. So I switched the subject to the question of recovering the remains of American servicemen. The Vietnamese official then said an interesting thing:

Look, put yourself in our place. You've been to all these cemeteries. Every village has a cemetery. Now, we lost hundreds of thousands of men in the war. But all of our fighters are buried in the South, away from their home villages. They are not in those graves in their village cemeteries. We don't know where the graves of half of them are. How can we go out and tell our people that it's more important to look for Americans than for their own sons and fathers?

(UNIDENTIFIED): Bill, could you summarize what effect you'd like your trip to have on your intended readers...

BROYLES: Well, the trip left me very perplexed. After going back and seeing the places where we fought, remembering all the people I knew who died there, all the energy and effort expended, the military and national reputation that was at stake...the regenerative quality of the land and the culture make it all seem like such a waste, because Vietnam today looks much as though nothing ever happened there. Obviously my Vietnam experience brought about many changes

beneath the surface in my life, but it is still hard to escape the feeling that nothing today is any different. That it was all for naught.

Another thing I am carrying around is anger about the final stage of the war. I think that it's possible to understand what we did up until the 1968 Tet offensive. Then we decided that we had made an incorrect analysis of the situation. We had done our military best and had not been defeated militarily, but we decided as a nation that the commitments we had made were beyond our willingness to fulfill them. So what makes me bitter about the war is the way it was dragged out between 1969 and 1973. While all the wheeling and dealing was going on, people were getting killed... American troops were getting killed...and no longer for a good reason, after we had decided to pull out. Richard Nixon spent more days as a wartime president than Roosevelt. And that to me was unconscionable.

I asked some of the Viet Cong if they had many cases of post-traumatic stress syndrome or anything like that. Now, these are people who lived in tunnels. I went down in some of these tunnels, and I wanted out pretty quickly--in about thirty minutes. But they lived in those things. For ten years. They were bombed. They were napalmed. In terms of sheer punishment, the war was much worse for them than for us.

But they have none of these delayed stress symptoms.

One woman told me that the moment she hears a helicopter, she falls to the ground. But she adds, "Of course, I don't hear many helicopters anymore..."

They talked about several differences between the Vietnamese and the American experiences.

First, the war for them was sort of a shared national experience, on the side that eventually prevailed. Everyone shared in it...the long family separations...the suffering. But since they won, the sacrifice was worth it. In fact, the only time they use the actual word "sacrifice" is when they are talking about death.

The second difference is that they have been too busy to think about the hardships they suffered. One man told me, "We've been so busy rebuilding the country, it was so hard to win, it never occurred to us that peace could be a problem."

Finally, they're just not as introspective as we are about these things. There's no self-preoccupation. If you are used to working in a rice paddy for sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, it takes a lot to make you start feeling sorry for yourself.

BRAESTRUP: I think that one of the problems with the whole Vietnam thing is that the war is depicted--and Newsweek is a prime offender, along with me-- as kind of an apocalyptic experience. You know the bit: "No war was ever so horrible to the people fighting it as the Vietnam war..." This is part of a pervasive psycho-babble, generated by psychologists and others who are trotting out their old anti-war biases as their last line of retreat. They say the reason for the stress syndrome is that our people were forced to do things they didn't want to do, to inflict all kinds of brutalities, by the nature of the war itself. Well, historically, that just doesn't stand up. So a lot of the psycho-babble is extraneous and histori-

cally kind of peculiar.

Which brings me to a second point: A big difference for the Vietnam veterans is the treatment they got when they returned home. Now, I went into the Korean war, which had its own little moments of pleasure. You had to look hard enough to find those little moments and not listen to the psycho-babble. Now, there tends to be a leap of memory past my war. They always compare Vietnam to World War II, when they talk about veterans coming home. This is not unusual, because nobody pays any attention to the Korean veterans. When we came home from Korea, nobody in the media or academia treated us as victims or psychopaths. We just came home. No one paid much attention to us. It was not a popular war, but we were not scapegoats. But when the Vietnam veterans get home, there were people who spat at them. That's the difference. And that has a real effect on how you review your own experience. The whole Vietnam Memorial hassle was quite clearly a search for recognition for what they'd done. They wanted to be treated like other veterans. And that was what the fight over the flag pole was all about.

BROYLES: I think that's all true.

SIMMONS: If you only have one war, what do you compare it with? If you have three wars, four wars, five wars, you have something to compare. From my perspective, Vietnam was a remarkably comfortable war. You had a twelve-month tour...you had R&R...you came back from patrol to the fire support base and you had the steak and shrimp waiting for you...you had your stereo set. It was not that way in World War II. And it was not that way in the Korean war.

I didn't think we were going to have these psychiatric problems. I thought all these supports would preclude that...

BRAESTRUP: You didn't have them there; you had them back here...

SIMMONS: Well, yes and no. And another point: remarkably few people in Vietnam actually did any fighting.

BROYLES: True.

SIMMONS: Very few. And look at all those veterans who turn up at the Vietnam Memorial and other places. If all the guys who say, "I was with the Special Forces" were really with the Special Forces, then they wouldn't have needed the Marine Corps.

BROYLES: There's another point to make on this. Some of the people I know, who either volunteered or were drafted, were not the best-adjusted members of our society in the first place. They were not exactly the backbone of their community. So I think you'll find that some of the people--by no means not all--who have real problems now, after the war, are people who quite likely would have had problems anyway. But, I don't want to minimize their problems.

(UNIDENTIFIED): No, I don't want to minimize this either. But I will say this. You look at a profile (I'm talking of a demographic profile of individuals who are in veterans hospitals, under therapeutic treatment for post-stress syndrome) and look at socio-economic levels...at educational levels...and there are some revealing things there. These individuals were likely to have had

difficulty...I couldn't document this and wouldn't even try. Post-stress syndrome really takes the form of a lot of people searching for a cause.

SIMMONS: May I suggest that this is a good point to break for lunch...

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