

Montagnard Med-Cap

The Montagnard tribes are mountain living groups of villages and hamlets that inhabit Vietnam, Laos and Northern Cambodia, that had their own set of rules, traditions and way of life. Those villages within Vietnam's territory were hard to comprehend. They had their own language or dialect that most Vietnamese couldn't understand. Their territory was big game country, thus they built their homes on stilts to keep elephants and tigers from entering. They were backward and isolated from the rest of Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese were unable or neglected to include the Montagnard people in government sponsored programs.

Much of the Montagnard region was contested territory. The allies oversaw the Montagnard villages by day and the VC and NVA controlled the hamlets by night. The enemy forces took food, water, cattle or hostages to carry arms and war materials for the VC and NVA. Often taking hostages in retaliation for the Montagnard people aiding the U.S. forces. The Montagnard tribes were abused society. I believe the Montagnard people, at least tolerated the American presence, if not generally liked our attention to their needs, with us asking for nothing but their knowledge of enemy troop movements.

The Montagnard villages I visited, the people seemed tight lipped, because any VC sympathizers in the hamlet would tell the VC or NVA of any suspicious acts that took place, during their absence. The consequences was undoubtedly death, thus the tribes people walked a tight rope, living in the contested area.

The army in Bam Me Thout was housed in a hunting lodge, that dated back a century. It's been said that Teddy Roosevelt stayed there while big game hunting in the region. In the vicinity of Bam Me Thout many Montagnard villages existed. The Civil Affairs or PSYOP units attempted to visit each village at least weekly.

The Med-Cap Team was a jeep full. A medic, interpreter or two and someone riding shotgun. This trip we drove down a dirt road into the jungle, until spotting some homes on stilts. I saw no visible means of sustenance. The Med-Cap troops informed me, this village was a hunter/gather village. Saying they use snares and primitive traps to catch animals and gather berries and fruits that the jungle provides.

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Entering the village the children ran to the jeep, with adults close behind. The Med-Cap Team greeted the village chief then set up the medicines and medical supplies. The Montagnard/Vietnamese interpreter told the people wanting to see the medic to form a line. The second translator was English/Vietnamese. One at a time the medic check over the patient's problems, while the interpreters quizzed the patient of enemy troop movements near by., with hopes of getting information useful to set up ambushes of incoming troops.

The majority of the patients had sores or cuts. For these the medic provided antiseptic and bandages, or a bar of soap to wash themselves clean. The translator then instructed the patient on how to use soap and water to clear up the sores. Sore throats or tooth aches weren't uncommon. The worse cases, the patients were taken back to base camp for a doctor or dentist to evaluate the ailment. The entire Med-Cap took 2 hours and the medic saw about half the 75 person village.

Besides Med-Caps the civil affairs team constructed a cement base around a natural spring, that was the sole source of water for the village. The spring was used for washing clothes, for a bath, wash cook pots and drinking water. On the cement the villagers didn't get muddy trying to get to the spring. other such projects were done within limited resources all over the country.

Every time I went to Bam Me Thout, the lodge was mortared or rocketed. Running under the big timbers of the lodge foundation was the safest place from flying shrapnel, but prone to be infested with hungry mosquitoes.

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