

MACV Army "A" Team Films Montagnard Boarding School

The Montagnard tribes are mountain living groups of villages and hamlets that inhabit Vietnam, Laos and Northern Cambodia, that have 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 any 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 an abused society. I believe the Montagnard people, at least tolerated the American presence, if not generally liked our attention to their needs, with the 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 province and City of Kontum in the central Highlands of Vietnam is home to numerous tribes of Montagnards, with villages and hamlets ranging from 75 to 250 people, mostly to the mountainous West of the city of Kontum. From this location a request for pictorial support came to MACV, to cover the dedication of a Montagnard Boarding School. Whether the request originated from the Vietnamese Civilian government, American civilians or U.S. military is lost to history, but MACV Army "A" Photo Team got the mission.

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I visited a half dozen Montagnard villages while in Vietnam, they ranged from very primitive hunter-gather type of life style to much further advanced agriculture and animal husbandry knowledgeable villages. I never heard of formal schooling among the Montagnard tribes, villages or hamlets. The only schooling was the traditional "HAND-ME-DOWN" skills and crafts the parents would teach their off-spring, to survive in their environment. Possibly one Montagnard village I visited might have had electricity.

For these people of strange solitude to break with centuries of tradition, took far sighted courage and leadership of all involved and a major attribute for a common cause. It took strong rapport uniquely local to Kontum Province, The Province Chiefs personal involvement and a very strong determination realizing the Americans could teach the Montagnards more in a few days than they had known in a life time. Still the strong family bonds must have persisted and separating a child from the parents for a week at a time must have been unthinkable. Yet the trust in the U.S. promises to provide a formal education for Montagnard children prevailed.

I never saw a Montagnard on a motorized vehicle or other mobile transit, other than a few on bicycles. They walked miles from the village on market day to trade, barter or sell their goods and wares. Then walk miles back home. For a child to walk miles Monday to school and back again Friday showed further determination of the Montagnard Tribes to have their children succeed in life.

I give much credit to the Kontum Province Chief, not only did he speak at the Montagnard Boarding School dedication, along with U.S. officials, but without his blessing the school would never have opened. Bam Me Thout had a similar opportunity. There the civil affairs people showed me nearly vacant lots, where schools should have been in session for Vietnamese and Montagnard students. All I saw was some 2 X 4's sticking up, while the province chief was constructing himself a new home, with the childrens school building materials. I had heard of graft and corruption, but this was my only eye-witness to corrupt acts.

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The civil affairs people drove the photo team around Bam Me Thout showing us various locations where one room schools should be in session. What was visible were vacant lots or bare beginning of construction. At one site we stopped to see the work done. There was somewhere around a 15 X 20 foot concrete foundation. However with further inspection, the civil affairs NCO lifting his foot slammed his heel onto the foundation, up came sand. He said this was supposed to be a six inch concrete foundation. What was present was 5 3/4 inches of sand and only 1/4 inch of cement.

Continuing our tour of Bam Me Thout we stopped on a street adjaeted to three or four (WHITE MICE) Vietnamese Police cars guarding a construction site. The civil affairs NCO informed the photo team, there was all the U.S. purchased building materials for the schools at the new house for the provience chief. We saw the house was well into construction.

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Written July 2004