

SEABEE SAFARI

# The Survey of South Vietnam

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*These two Civil Engineer Corps officers were members of a Tenth Naval Construction Brigade Survey Team which made an excellent reconnaissance report on the road system of South Vietnam. This is not the technical report made to Commander in Chief, Pacific, but sidelights taken from the diary of one of the survey parties.*



Entering one village, the Navy surveyors were met by local chamber of commerce representatives. Left to right at top of page they are the Roving Ambassador (note shoes), the President, the Recording Secretary, and the ambitious Vice President shown blowing up a storm of smoke. The entire village population lived in the one large grass roofed structure shown in the center of the page. At left, the pause that refreshes is enjoyed left to right, by LT Thach and SGT Mocc of the Vietnam Infantry; LTJG Ghormley and LT Cobb of the Survey Team; and LTCOL Gibson and SGT Helton of the Army MAAG forces. Mountains in background were typical of terrain traversed after crossing jungle area.



NO YOUNGSTER with kaleidoscope ever -L " gazed upon a more fantastic scene than one brought into focus by a Navy survey crew in South Vietnam during the summer of 1956. Before us lay a gnarled panorama of jungle and mountains besieged by heavy rains and high winds—an area removed from civilization, as we know it. The Seabee job: To survey (1) 40 miles of roads in South Vietnam—roads impassable by jeep or weapons carrier—and (2) 65 miles where no roads existed at all!

These 105 tortuous miles formed the toughest link in a master survey involving some 1,800 miles of existing and proposed roads inside this friendly southern Asiatic country. Two very solid months of work, seven days a week, were required to complete all field work for the nearly 2,000 miles of road survey.

The over-all survey was under the supervision of CDR W. M. Brown, Commanding Officer of Mobile Construction Battalion Ten, who was given this TAD assignment. The Navy survey team included 5 other CEC officers, 6 Seabees and one civilian engineer.

After receiving the last of a multitude of shots in the Philippines, the entire survey team assembled in Saigon with one thing in common—sore arms. The second day we began drawing camping equipment, C-rations, medical supplies, along with 9 mules, 8 jeeps, and several trailers. Our work concerned the highway system of Vietnam and a part of the work was to be done using jeeps for transportation, and a part to be covered on foot. It was the "foot-work" that we were to undertake.

The party we were with was to travel by jeep until the road became impassable and then walk the rest of the way. Chief Builder W. H. Shannon and E. E. Tullis, a GS-12 General Engineer, were with us. We also were very fortunate to have LTCOL Lee Gibson of the Army Engineers and Master Sergeant Charles Helton, both of whom were attached to the Chief, Military Assistance Advisory Group forces of Vietnam. They were to provide valuable liaison between the survey party and the 100 Vietnamese infantrymen who were along to assist us in just getting through the jungle by cutting trail and helping make camp each day, and also as a means of protection in the possibility that there were some communist troops along the way who had refused to go

back across the 17th parallel when the truce was signed in 1954.

After a 4-day jeep ride we reached the end of the line as far as mobile transportation was concerned. Pavement and smooth dirt roads gave way to rain-gutted paths surrounded by lush thickets. Day broke early for us "foot soldiers" the first morning on the road as we headed for a Vietnamese outpost some 12 miles away. There was only a semblance of a road. Bridges were a few timbers tossed across streams for humans to span. Not so in the case of the mules who scrambled down banks, through streams and up again on the other sides.

This first night "on the trail" found us neophyte hikers so foot weary that a crude rice storage building was used instead of pitching tents. As one of the group put it, "We were too tired even to inventory our blisters." Realizing that it takes energy to eat, we downed a hurried up meal of C-rations and hit the sack with a thud.

Testimonials to the lowly leech, louse, and mosquito were many. As if sleep were not hard enough to come by under tents pitched in the middle of would-be roads, insects of many varieties hit tired human targets with a high rate of frequency. The most comforting daytime phenomena were the jungle waterfalls—natural showers that cooled Seabee skins and eased aching, blistered feet.

In these first few days of trail blazing the party remained on old road beds now covered with thick jungle growth, which had to be hacked away for mules to trudge through. Rather strangely, we soon took a dim view of our four-footed friend, the mule. He wasn't the adept animal in this jungle that he was on Grand Canyon trails winding into the Colorado River back home.

Kings of transportation in South Vietnam were the infantry soldiers themselves and their burden-bearing porters, who were far more sure-footed than mules, and carried loads nearly as heavy! These little Vietnamese porters were native recruits in part, although several had been deserters from the French Army and were now serving out sentences for the Vietnam military. These same porters proved valuable as interpreters, as they spoke the language of the native mountaineers—a mat-



SGT Helton and Seabee Chief Shannon waiting to feast on their prize dish, broiled breast of peacock.

ter of importance when the American faction of the party had to communicate with these isolated people.

There is quite a contrast between these mountain people and their civilized counterparts who lived in commercial cities along the coast. Each mountain village is a separate group living alone with practically no ties of commerce. The people are small, undernourished and shy; their existence in this rugged country is a miracle in itself.

Their primitive farming exhibited no evidence of crop rotation. Rather, they burn off a hillside, clean off the remaining brush, and plant taro, corn, papaya, and a variety of rice which doesn't require the usual paddy. When the land no longer will support crops, adjacent land is cleared, burned off, and new yields are anticipated on virgin soil.

Knowledge and practice of sanitation among the hill dwellers also leaves much to be desired. The native folk live in fear of immersing their bodies in water lest they become ill from the practice. The shock of seeing Americans shower-bathing beneath jungle waterfalls was almost enough to grow beards on the traditionally hairless Vietnamese cheeks.

At the end of the third day on foot, Seabees and company made two realistic conclusions: The trip would take much longer than the anticipated 10 to 12 days, and an air drop of rations would be required in a few more days.

Soon the so-called trails disappeared and the

safari found the going tougher than ever. For long periods we stood in head-high sword grass in the middle of a quarter-mile long line of troops and mules. The group's advance echelon swung machetes at the endless sea of grass and thicket, which all but swallowed the struggling pack mules. Somehow, paths were cleared and the mass of humanity surged onward.

On the 12th day of operations, a single day's ration of supplies was dropped to the party by a Vietnamese Army reconnaissance plane. Communicating with headquarters in preparation for the drop had been difficult because the previous evening's camp had been surrounded by mountains, making transmission nearly inaudible. A second drop of one-day's rations came



When you come to a river and can't get across, you just take the bit in your teeth and start wading where the current is slow—as these mules are doing. The troops on yonder bank at left will follow suit or come over in that native boat.

the following morning, but all hands were low on food the day afterward. These air drops of food and supplies were not without their hazards. Planes from Saigon often had difficulty locating the party, which blended into undergrowth and landscape like so many chameleons against their environs.

It was not until the two-week mark, when the supply of food was very low, that an R4D appeared and parachuted rice plus eight cases of C-rations. As these mountain jungles produced little vegetation fit for domesticated animals, the mules, up to this point, were half starved. Quite ironically, the jungles were an open-sesame of good eating to hungry troopers

(at least we thought so then) as we fished successfully in mountain streams while mouths watered to delicious breast of peacock broiled over an open fire. This latter piece de resistance was declared the best meal of all.

The 9th of August was a crucial day as logged in our diary. We were well past the halfway mark in the rugged journey, but were scaling the steepest mountain yet encountered. It proved to be the climax of the trip, and an introduction to Vietnamese hospitality.

At 1600 it started raining in typical monsoon fashion, and as we had reached the peak and started down the other side, equally steep and slippery, we decided against wearing protective ponchos which might hinder our progress and also cause one of us a serious fall on the treacherous slope. It was probably a wise decision, although we got soaked, but good.

Having left the staggering mules and camping gear far behind us in order to make better time, we looked gloomily forward to prospects of making camp that night cold and wet, with no outlook for food and shelter. But the little Viets soon demonstrated that they, like Navy Seabees, "Can Do."

The troops were soon rounding up firewood (how they built fires in a rainstorm remains a mystery) and cutting saplings for lean-tos. And that hot chow they served us—it was the happiest diary entry of the entire trip. A handful of awe-stricken Americans, we were overwhelmed at such wonderful treatment. Before

Here is Vietnamese Infantry Lieutenant Thach and his native porter who could carry a huge load through jungle and swamp without seeming to tire.



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*The entire survey team in Vietnam which won the plaudits of ADM Felix B. Stump, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, for its work, was made up of CDRs W. M. Brown and W. W. Compton; LT H. E. Cobb; LTJGs R. TV. Janopaul and R. G. Ghormley; ENS J. M. Weis; General Engineer E. E. Tullis; and Seabees R. E. Howland, W. H. Shannon, O. K. Wetbom, E. fi. Wilkinson, A. C. McNulty, and B. F. Thornberry.*

anyone could ask "Why?", one Vietnamese sergeant, a veteran of the late war with Viet-Minh communists to the north, volunteered a perfect reply;

"You Americans are half a world away from home and are in this, miserable place to help us. It is up to us to help you as much as we can."

We still had several miles to go—through the same monotonous jungle thickets and across rugged terrain as fatiguing as before, but somehow, it didn't seem quite as bad. Like the early Spanish conquerors of North America who searched in vain for the seven cities of gold, we kept our eyes peeled for the phantom highway that was to take us back to civilization. It didn't materialize and we plodded on to the coast where, with the aid of several air contacts, we were able to connect up with the other survey party and write a finish to the most rugged mission we ever expect to encounter in peacetime.

We had started out to chronicle a 85-mile hike, originally estimated to require 10 to 12 days, and wound up with a 22-day account of a very rough 105 miles which exhausted even the rugged little Viets.

The "back to civilization" feeling was exhilarating. No more knifing through dense sword grass . . . stumbling through masses of vine . . . pulling off clinging leeches . . . wading stream after stream with water-logged boots . . . or navigating rivers with improvised native boats. We could hardly wait to get back to the Philippines where we were to compile our report on the survey, which from a technical point of view was quite a success. We made sure of that because not one of us had any desire to return to the area for a re-check of our findings.