



# MASSACRE AT DAK SON





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**T**HE VIET CONG struck out of the jungle at midnight. Thatched huts of the mountain people of Vietnam flared up, one-by-one, before the flamethrowers until the whole refugee hamlet of Dak Son was ablaze. The mountain people—Montagnards—afraid to run, afraid to stay, sought refuge in the trenches they had dug beneath their houses to protect themselves from a more conventional war of mortars and rifle fire which they had come to know.

They were not prepared for methodical massacre. There was no defense against grenades that marauding Viet Cong tossed on top of them as they huddled in the dugouts.

The attack continued until daylight. Then the Viet Cong force, estimated at 300, pulled back into the jungle near the Cambodian border. In their wake they left more than 200 mountain people dead—mostly women and children. Another 300 persons of the 2000 population of Dak Son were missing, some dead, others wandering injured and stunned. Some who managed to escape were hiding in the jungle.

The massacre of December 5 at Dak Son was the worst attack against civilians of the long war in Vietnam. In addition to those killed and missing, another 50 persons were hospitalized in the Phuoc Long provincial capital of Song Be, about a mile from the burned hamlet. Most of them were suffering from severe burns from the flamethrowers used in the early morning attack.

The Viet Cong were reported to have sought revenge against the Montagnards of Dak Son because they had moved into the Government-controlled hamlet in the first place, had refused to leave and would not furnish male recruits as soldiers and bearers for the communist forces. Several recent Viet Cong attacks against Dak Son had been repelled by the 56-man local defense force. This time the VC struck as an organized military force and overwhelmed the defenders.

*(An eyewitness account of the tragedy of Dak Son, written by Don Jones, one of the first reporters on the scene, follows.)*

*Nearly every hut in Dak Son II (foreground) was burned to the ground. This new hamlet was inhabited by Montagnards who recently had come there from Viet Cong territory. Old Dak Son on the other side of the dirt road (background) was scarcely damaged. Three rows of barbed wire fences were cut by the VC troops who beat the white path as they entered the hamlet.*



...why?

...why

by C. Don Jones

DAK SON, Vietnam—As our helicopter approached for a landing that morning, tiny figures moved down the winding trail that leads from the hamlet of Dak Son to the refugee camp at Song Be. Then the tiny figures became people whose anguished, tear-stained faces told of the tragedy they had just lived through.

A day and a half had passed since a Viet Cong force had rampaged through Dak Son, throwing grenades and setting fire to the tiny huts with flamethrowers.

Why?

Why had the VC attacked this simple mountain hamlet? Why had they destroyed these tiny dwellings?

Now all that was left was black patches of earth with pitiful remnants of a household—cracked earthen jars, blackened cooking pots, fused brass bracelets that once adorned the wrist of a woman.

Why? Why had the VC attacked so many innocent women and children whose burned and grotesque bodies now lay scattered all over the hamlet?

Some of the answers came from the surviving villagers. The people of Dak Son had been punished because they chose to live in this Government-built hamlet rather than under the control of the VC.

These are probably among the simplest and most primitive people in the world. They are Montagnards, or mountain people, who still wear loin-cloths and pursue a way of life little changed over the centuries. Now the survivors squatting among these ruins wailed a funeral dirge. The words were incomprehensible to me, but the sound was universal—the sound of the human voice in grief.

I learned that the Viet Cong had premeditatedly punished only half of Dak Son, the new refugee hamlet called Dak Son II. Residents of Dak Son



the women and children?





## . . . why?

II had fled as a group last year from VC-controlled areas about eight kilometers away, and with the help of the Government of Vietnam had built Dak Son II across the road from the old hamlet. Time and again the Viet Cong had warned the people to give up their new hamlet and return. They had refused. Now they had been punished.

A platoon leader of the defending forces told me the attack was the fifth in the last six days. Each attack until then had been repulsed. In one attack, two Montagnard defenders had been killed. In another, four water buffalo, which the VC drove ahead of them, were slain in the fighting. As I walked among the ruins of Dak Son, trying not to smell the stench of burned flesh from the bodies of women and children all about me, I noticed that beneath each of the destroyed homes there was an underground shelter—a sort of a cave. The dugouts were to protect the families from mortar attacks and had been dug at the encouragement of the Government.

It was in these very dugouts that many of the people died, some from flamethrowers directed down the mouths of the shelters, others from hand grenades that the VC tossed in them.

I stayed at Dak Son five hours viewing the worst atrocity of the Vietnamese war . . . the body of a woman with the blistered remains of an infant lying across her exposed breasts where he had fed . . . the bodies of little children blotched bright red where the burning napalm of the VC flamethrowers had struck them . . . other bodies with layers of burned flesh peeled back from bloated arms and legs.

How many were killed? We may never know. Certainly at least 200 and probably more.

As our helicopter rose into the air I still could not answer that plaguing question:

Soldiers die in battle, often horribly. Civilians in this war and others have been innocent victims to the clash of troops. But this was cold, calculated massacre. This was the Massacre at Dak Son.



*Morning after the Massacre at Dak Son, survivors searched for their families. The bodies of two burned babies were placed in a wicker basket (left). A young woman (right) weeps over the loss of her family. Victims were almost all women and children who had, as usual, sought refuge in the dugouts beneath the houses whenever shots were fired. They were not prepared for the flamethrowers. One man returned to the hamlet to find 13 members of his family killed in the attack.*



# A hamlet is destroyed — mothers and child



Children die, few survive





# THE MONTAGNARDS OF SOUTH VIETNAM

**V**ICTIMS OF THE MASSACRE at Dak Son were Montagnards of the Stieng group, one of the smallest ethnic groups in the southern mountain regions of Vietnam. All together they number about 20,000 in three western Vietnamese provinces bordering Cambodia. In Cambodia their numbers are greater.

The term "Montagnard" which came into common usage during the French colonial era, refers to probably the oldest inhabitants of what is now South Vietnam. Montagnards number some 700,000, representing 40 distinct ethnic communities.

Archaeological evidence is scanty, but it is thought that these dark-skinned peoples came into the area in ancient times and that successive invasions of Mongoloid peoples from China drove them into the highlands and pressed them southward down the mountain chain of Vietnam.

Despite the complexity of languages, neighboring Montagnards are, in general, sufficiently familiar with one another's language to communicate, assisted by conventional sign language.

Politically and economically, the village is the unit of overriding importance. Knowledge of outsiders has been extremely limited. Each village is largely self-contained and handles its internal political affairs through an elected council and a headman.

Characteristic ways of thought and behavior have set them apart from the rest of Vietnam. The typical Montagnard—as seen by the lowlander—is a non-Vietnamese-speaking dark-skinned inhabitant of the remote mountain areas. He is clad in loincloth, grows wet and dry rice and other crops by rudimentary techniques and occasionally stalks wild boar, wild goat and other prey with a crossbow.

Montagnard culture is rich in legends, many having to do with the first appearance of life on earth. Most Montagnard groups worship an entire pantheon of spirits, some good, but most evil. The evil spirits must be appeased on numerous occasions, such as the building of a house, the birth of a child, the presence of an epidemic. The cele-

bration characteristically entails sacrificing a buffalo and drinking rice wine.

With the expansion of French control in Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth century, contacts between the Montagnards and the rest of the population increased steadily. The French, interested in the highlands for plantation agriculture, gave them special status and steered them separately. Some learned to speak French.

After 1954 the Vietnamese Government incorporated the highlands into the centralized structure, bringing the Montagnards under direct Vietnamese administration. The aim of the Government is to integrate the Montagnards socially, economically and politically into the framework of Vietnamese national life—an objective made more urgent by the campaign of the Viet Cong terrorists against the mountain people.

The new Vietnamese Constitution affirms the equality of all Vietnamese, irrespective of ethnic origin. It also provides for Government assistance to enable the Montagnards to preserve their culture, while improving their educational and economic status. Government programs on behalf of the Montagnards are administered by the Special Commission for Montagnard Affairs, with provision for raising the Commission to cabinet status. The Special Commission is headed by Paul Nur, who is of Montagnard origin. Assisting him is Lt. Col. Ya Ba, highest ranking officer of Montagnard origin in the Vietnamese Army.





*Dressed for a wedding festival (above) Montagnard women stroll down the hamlet street, gayly smoking their pipes. Most days there is work to be done (top right) such as grinding paddy, the basic food. Houses, simply constructed, and the surroundings are kept neat. Floor of hut (right) is of bamboo and built well above the ground. Here, meat from a sacrificial buffalo has been distributed to the neighbors, and this couple prepares it for cooking. In the background is framing for a thatched roof of a new house. Some Montagnards own elephants (below) which they capture in the jungle and train by secret ways. Elephant and master hire out by the day to work in the forests. Clothed for the heat and hard work, a young man (bottom, right) clears a plot to be used for planting food crops.*







## DIEU DO ESCAPED

**D**IEU DO is three years old. He was luckier than many little boys the night of the Massacre at Dak Son. According to his mother, he was asleep in her arms when the attack began. Shots woke him up, then a Viet Cong soldier entered the house, and there was a big flame. Dieu Do started to scream. Severely burned herself, Dieu Do's mother ran with him out of their burning house into the jungle night, down through the valley, across a stream and on to the provincial hospital a mile and a half away. There doctors and Buddhist nurses treated the little boy and dressed his burns. His mother also was treated and hospitalized. Next day, Dieu Do, already a favorite of the hospital staff, was able to be carried out for a walk.





**A FAMILY OF FIVE DIED IN THE FIRE**



*These bronze bracelets, once worn by a Dak Son woman, were fused on her arm by intense heat from her burning hut. Bracelets made by the Montagnards are presented by husband to wife and passed from mother to daughter. A single bracelet worn on the right arm by a man or woman denotes sacrifices by the family—usually buffalo. It may be inscribed or notched for each of many sacrifices.*

*Here the melted bracelets remind of tragedy. In happier times they are given to strangers as tokens of friendship. For he who drinks wine with the Montagnards and is presented a bracelet is protected from harm.*



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