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IVY LEAF

FAMOUS FOURTH

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20 Aug 67 Ivy Leaf

'Cacti Green' Get 14-Year Old NVA Draftee

DUC PHO — Drafted at 13 and sent to South Vietnam at 14, a young private's career in the North Vietnamese Army came to a sudden and lucky end recently when he surrendered to Company C, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry in the hamlet of Chi Trung.

The tiny infiltrator was in a little, bare hut near the hamlet dressed in black pajamas when Staff Sergeant Meredic Dube's squad from the 2nd platoon moved in and surrounded the structure. He came out of the door, hands up, and yelled; "Chleu Hoi"

Staff Sergeant Dang, the battalion's Vietnamese interpreter, asked the youth a few preliminary questions for Captain John H Cavender, company commander, and suddenly shook his head and looked puzzled.

"He is North Vietnamese. He speaks with their accent," SSG Pang said.

Tells His Story

His story then came quickly and willingly.

lie was drafted at 13 years of age in June 1966. He took three months of infantry training at the North Vietnamese training center at Hoa Binh — with 100 other 13-year olds in his training unit.

"He said they were drafting youths his age a year ago and still are," related SSG Pang.

The North Vietnamese boy was put into an infiltration unit and sent on the long, arduous walk toward battle in the south, carrying only a rifle. He said he was the only 14-year old in his unit but villagers in the area—being won over by the "Cacti Green" battalion's pacification programs have reported many "very young" soldiers showing up in NVA units which had been in the area.

On May 19 his battalion was walking toward a rendezvous with death at the foot of a tunnel-laced mountain two kilometers south of chi Trung. Eight-one of his comrades died when the "Cacti Green" caught the NVA unit and mauled it in a 30-hour battle.

Sick With Malaria

The boy was lucky, he didn't go to that fight. Sick with malaria, he was left without his weapon, to the mercy of local Viet Cong. He was told that when he was well, he would be picked up by his unit. They never came.

Villagers fed him and cared for him "... because I was just 14," the boy related. "They did not worry about me, they felt sorry for me and said I was too young for fighting anyway," he added.

However, after recovering, the local Viet Cong made him pay for his keep by working at planting rice. The thin, half-starved boy showed hands with the palms cut and festered from this work. He said that his clothing was taken and that he had gotten a new set of pajamas to replace the ragged farm clothes.

He had to walk for two hours in another village and buy them with the few plasters he had been paid.

Unit Didn't Return

As the weeks went by his battalion failed to return. The U.S. troops had harried it out of the area with a pursuit, which hit it hard again after the fight on the mountain.

Patrols of the Ivy Division soldiers and aggressive sweeps in the region kept it cut and pressured the local VC day and night so that the boy could not rejoin his unit.

He was frightened when the big Americans approached the village, but tired of a meager subsistence, he willingly rallied.

The boy was quite scared on his first helicopter ride to the 3rd Brigade command post at LZ Montezuma for further questioning.



Makes A Friend

He got out tagging behind 1LT Jeffery C. Chandler, company C's executive officer, who towered more than two feet over the 85-pound boy soldier. Shrinking from the blast of the Huey's rotors as they walked toward the headquarters, the boy reached up and took the big lieutenant's hand. He had found a new friend.

Trying American chow, he ate up a storm, He tested ice cream and cold sodas. Volunteering to go back to Company C and show them trails used by the VC, he

was given a pair of Jungle boots — far too large, but worn proudly — and clean clothes.

Attending a MEDCAP in the area where he rallied, he made a visible impression on the villagers who looked at the face of this new version of "the enemy" and puzzled over the men in the north who had sent a boy like this to fight.

Company C hopes he can go through the Kit Carson scout training program and come back to them as an adopted son. He had already decided that the American Army treated him better than the Communists by his second day with the Ivymen.