

ILLUSTRATIVE CONDITIONS OF OPERATIONS OF
USOM PROVINCIAL REPRESENTATIVES IN VIETNAM

GENERAL

USOM Provincial Representatives are responsible for maintaining close liaison with Provincial Chiefs and for traveling extensively throughout their provinces to insure that the counter-insurgency operations which we are supporting are being adequately administered and that our supply and support is being properly applied. This involves liaison not only at the province capitol level but with district officials, and visiting strategic hamlets. In some provinces, there are as many as five to six hundred strategic hamlets which are already constructed and occupied. Many of these are "combat hamlets" which are small enclaves in Viet Cong territory and regularly under attack.

In order to do their jobs properly, these USOM provincial advisors as well as MAAG Sector advisors, must visit as many of these as possible for these are the very ones which are of most concern to the U.S. in the war effort. Vietnamese security escorts are usually provided for trips into the most dangerous territory. However, the location of what is "dangerous territory" cannot always be foreseen. Often times, the security guards are inadequate or poorly trained. On other occasions, because of the urgency of following up on certain work, our provincial advisors take risks by proceeding without the adequate security guard in order to accomplish urgent tasks.

This matter of providing security guards for U.S. officials has another difficult aspect. In order to provide proper security as compared to the known Viet Cong threat, security escorts would have to be very large, company or battalion strengths, in many areas. We cannot afford in most instances to permit the Vietnamese Government to divert this many troops from much needed combat exercises in order to protect fully our officials.

In some areas to which USOM personnel have had to travel, particularly in connection with the installation and maintenance of village-hamlet radios in embattled combat hamlets, security escorts of battalion size have been provided and these forces have had to literally fight their way into the hamlet and then fight their way out again in order to accomplish the USOM task. The many security problems, casualties and narrow escapes of these Public Safety village-hamlet radio installation teams are omitted from this paper which is devoted to Rural Affairs personnel. However, it should be noted that much of their work has been equally if not more hazardous than that described below.

USOM officials concerned with rural work oftentimes have to ride in Vietnamese or American combat helicopters or military aircraft because of the insecurity of road and rail travel. Railroad sabotage averages about one sabotage incident per day - often accompanied by personnel casualties as well as loss of USOM material and supplies.

As has been frequently noted in newspapers, riding in these military aircraft, literally under combat conditions, is a hazard within itself and a great many American personnel, and even more Vietnamese personnel, have been lost while on business or administrative travel not intended to be combat missions. Merely landing on many of the up-country airstrips which our personnel frequently visit, places them within range of Viet Cong fire as they are landing and taking off. In fact, a Pan American 707 landing at the Saigon Airport recently had one of its jet engines shot out by rifle fire.

Much of the flying over Vietnam involves operation over Viet Cong territory, oftentimes over Viet Cong strongholds and war zones. The Viet Cong are becoming increasingly well equipped with anti-aircraft weapons. Even without these anti-aircraft weapons, aircraft operating on routine administrative missions often have to hedge-hop at extremely low altitudes, or rapidly gain a great deal of altitude, so as to be out of range of small arms fire.

Two years ago, when A.I.D. undertook to join the direct counter-insurgency war effort in Vietnam, at the direction of the President, USOM personnel had virtually ceased any operation or travel in the countryside because of the dangerous security conditions. Within the past two years, the USOM Mission has been drastically recast and the necessity emphasized of extensive operation in the rural areas if we are to accomplish our assigned mission which is equally vital to that of the U.S. military, by testimony of high military officials themselves as well as U.S. policy from Washington.

SPECIFIC ILLUSTRATIONS OF OPERATING CONDITIONS

A few illustrative examples of the operating conditions of some of our USOM Provincial Representatives follow.

Earl Young, Provincial Representative for Long An Province, immediately adjacent to Saigon, reported that in visiting three strategic hamlets in his area of responsibility in one morning, that his helicopter was fired on by Viet Cong each time that it took off.

Near this same area, one of our Chinese contract technicians was killed in a VC ambush on a main road near Saigon which is frequently used by our personnel. Supposedly friendly local inhabitants in a nearby strategic hamlet turned hostile on the survivors of the same party when they sought refuge there.

Hatcher James in Dinh Tuong Province is so surrounded by Viet Cong that he generally has to accompany Vietnamese Army combat operations in order to visit the hamlets for which he is particularly responsible.

The Provincial Representative in An Xuyen province operates in an area which is dominated almost completely day and night by the Viet Cong. He lives in the provincial capitol of Camau where last month the Viet Cong mortars were set up so close to the city that they occasionally blasted the screens out of the MAAG Sector Advisor's house and hit the Province Chief's house.

In many of these provinces, most roads are mined regularly by the Viet Cong. A number of our personnel have already narrowly escaped being killed by mines. Ed Navarro, Tay Ninh Province Provincial Representative, George Melvin, Regional Supervisor for the Delta, and myself were only 30 seconds and one vehicle away from a vehicle which was blown up by a Viet Cong mine, killing the three occupants on a road 100 yards from the city limits of the province capitol. Had we been riding in the second vehicle, as is conventional with officials, rather than the first vehicle, we would have been killed. This is the second time in recent weeks when Navarro has been only one vehicle away from a mine explosion.

Immediately after the second instance where Navarro narrowly missed being killed by a mine, the Province Chief offered for future trips of all nature to send a large contingent of Civil Guard to patrol each side of the road at some depth into the fields and forests whenever Navarro traveled. George Melvin, the USOM Regional Supervisor, who had been riding with Navarro, asked the Province Chief not to do this, saying that this would tie down too many troops which are needed badly in combat, and that our USOM people were there, prepared to take the same chances as the Vietnamese Provincial officials.

Navarro frequently travels into War Zone-C to visit combat hamlets which we are supporting and to assist in the evacuation of personnel from Viet Cong area. In order to gain maximum impact with the "civic action," which he helps support, he must operate in very close support of these operations which are generally associated with close combat.

In Vinh Binh Province, representatives of a hamlet in a Viet Cong area made representations to the Province Chief that they would like to join the GVN and have a strategic hamlet provided for their protection. Because most of the Province Chief's meager military forces were tied down in combat operations, he took only one platoon of Civil Guard and accompanied by the USOM Provincial Representative, Mr. Robert Warne, visited the hamlet to initiate preparations for establishing a strategic hamlet there. Just outside the hamlet they were ambushed and fired on by Viet Cong forces. The Province Chief immediately took command of the platoon and initiated counter-offensive action, moving out in flanking action, and leaving Mr. Warne unarmed and unprotected in the middle of an exposed rice paddy throughout the fire fight.

Accompanied by the Province Chief and a company of Civil Guard, Mr. Dwight Davis, Provincial Representative to Kontun Province, set out on a mission to provide emergency food and other supplies to a Montagnard strategic hamlet occupied by refugees who had recently voluntarily left Viet Cong territory. As they neared the hamlet, the Province Chief received a radio call from a nearby hamlet (strategic) that had been attacked and overrun by the Viet Cong. He immediately changed course to proceed to relieve the overrun hamlet. Within about two kilometers of the overrun hamlet, the

troops had to leave their vehicles on the road and proceed by foot cross-country. Mr. Davis could either stay unprotected in the vacant vehicles or accompany the troops. He readily chose to accompany the troops, soon acquired a carbine from a casualty and moved with the troops during their fire fight which routed the Viet Cong from the hamlet. Then utilizing his extensive first aid experience (with Dr. Dooley in Laos) he set about treating the numerous casualties in the hamlet.

Bob Burns, Provincial Representative in Phu Yen Province, and the Province Chief were on a trip to visit a strategic hamlet in two jeeps at the time they were ambushed by Viet Cong equipped with automatic weapons. Both vehicles were hit and crashed into a roadside ditch.

In Quang Tin Province, Mr. Zollers reports that every night there is small arms fire on the edge of the provincial capitol where he lives, and that the small guard contingent assigned to his house is of such a poor quality that he finds them sleeping most of the time at night.

At one of the more secure provinces, Darlac, the end of the secure zone, where one can travel without security escort, ends at what might be called the urban area of Banmethuot, with the exception of two roads that go about five kilometers to large strategic hamlets.

While on a trip to an area in need of assistance in Kien Giang Province near the Cambodian border, Mr. Burt Fraleigh, Deputy Assistant Director for Rural Affairs, traveling in a military helicopter encountered a combat operation underway and was ordered by radio to land short of his objective. He spent the rest of the day at the field post observing the fire fight while his aircraft stood by for use for transporting troops and evacuating casualties.

Mr. Rufus Phillips, Assistant Director for Rural Affairs, accompanied by a MAAG officer, a Vietnamese officer and myself, flew in an army aircraft, hedge-hopping at tree top level to avoid ground fire over the more heavily infested Viet Cong territory, to Camau, the capitol of An Xuyen Province, to review with the provincial staff the provincial pacification plan which USOM, together with the MAAG, was supporting. The review was held at the edge of a small sod airstrip in one end of a building, the other end of which was the command post for an active combat operation which was currently being conducted from this airstrip against the Viet Cong in a nearby area. The airstrip was crowded with helicopters lifting troops to the nearby combat area and evacuating casualties, and with other aircraft. At the time of our take off from the crowded airstrip, a slight cross wind caused our aircraft to collide with three successive helicopter rotors and crash from an altitude of about 50 feet into a swampy area just beyond the end of the airstrip. Despite extensive damage and much spilled gasoline, there were no fire or casualties. However, the security problem surrounding Camau, the provincial capitol city, and its airstrip was so serious that our aircraft was considered to then be in Viet Cong territory and

a military guard was immediately sent to surround it. Our party then proceeded to hitch-hike aboard one of the combat helicopters returning to the nearby Soc Trang air base where part of the party had to remain overnight while the remainder hitch-hiked another ride to Saigon on an Army liaison aircraft.

Inspection trips of this nature are carried out quite frequently by USOM and MAAG staff in order to insure closer coordination, more realistic planning and the best possible support of AID-MAP-supported provincial pacification operations. It is not at all uncommon for such "administrative" trips to encounter active combat operations. Even more frequently, they encounter hazardous flying conditions, crowded combat airstrips - and almost always fly over Viet Cong territory.

In an effort to expedite a critical rural well-drilling project, Mr. Dunn of USOM Rural Affairs spent 50,000 piasters of his own funds several months ago to buy (in one day) essential materials on which there has been long delays in regular USOM procurement. As of December, 1963, it was not certain whether he would be able to recover these funds by reimbursement from AID.

The same applied to Burt Fraleigh's \$300 which he personally paid for a commercial shipment of seed needed for rural improvement work, after AID/W and USDA had failed to provide adequate quantities in response to months' old requests.

Dwight Davis scheduled a flight to return to his Kontum Province from Saigon, because of his concern with getting an air shipment of essential equipment into his province, even though he was ill with an intestinal ailment. While suffering from amoebic dysentery, intestinal worms and perhaps other ailments, he was returning to his province, taking along medications to doctor himself.

Mr. Harwood a provincial representative, contracted a serious case of tuberculosis while working upcountry in his province, necessitating prolonged hospitalization in Tripler Hospital, Honolulu. It is felt by his Supervisor that his illness (a recurrence) resulted from exhaustion from overwork in the provinces.

Most of these provincial representatives live and eat under hazardous health and security conditions in primitive and remote provincial towns in which most Americans, including many stationed in Saigon, hardly deign to remain overnight.

Most of these men have families from whom they are separated most of the time. These families generally live in Saigon as there is only one or two cases where it has been arranged that families can live in the provincial capitols. In addition to the normal difficulties incident to family separation it's not terribly comforting to either these men nor their families to be separated during times such as the recent major coup in Saigon.