

TO: The Old Team

DATE: June 8, 1968

FROM: Ed Lansdale *Σ 4*

This is a parting word or so with all of you before SLO quietly fades away from the Viet-Nam scene, as all good soldiers should. Cal Mehlert and I leave in mid-June. Dave Hudson, Charlie Sweet, Reggie Miskovich, and Martha Devlin will stay a bit longer for the finishing touches, with Dave finally closing the doors at the end of June.

As usual, Viet-Nam insists upon being different from any other place in the world and has its own unique way of saying farewell. Figuring that we would be too busy with all the minutiae of closing up shop to get out to the provinces for visits to combat areas, the Vietnamese considerably have brought the combat right into town. We can get all the sights, sounds, and smells at our convenience, right here. For those of us so forgetful of our health that we tend to read in bed late at night, the enemy tactfully has his sappers blow up power stations to douse the lights and then sends in his 122mm rockets to suggest that we pull blankets over our heads to shut out the noise and get our beauty sleep.

Although the rains come with the afternoons now, some of the flowering trees and shrubs still hold their blossoms. The great mass of vivid blooms along the streets and in the yards was one of the sights of the enemy's Tet offensive. Maybe the Communist generals thought: ah, this is a pretty time of the year in Saigon, so let's all go in and visit it. (I trust that you have watched the battling in such places as the Hue Citadel and the An Quang pagode on color TV to notice the spectacularly flowered background.)

Another familiar sight around the streets of Saigon-Cholon are the kids. The primary schools are filled with refugees, so this means that the kids cannot go to school and now have to play at home or in the streets. And what do they play? Just what you think they play. They have made guns out of sticks, with tin cans and wire stuck on to show that they are up to date with the more Buck Rogerish looking weapons of the Americans and of the enemy's imports from Czechoslovakia. Having all the kids at home, instead of packed away in school, presents problems for some of our friends. Pham Duy is at home with a cardiac condition and cheerfully told me that it probably was caused by

being shut up on the ground floor of his home with his large brood of youngsters. (Many of our friends now live just on the ground floor, due to enemy shelling. General Thang's family lives in the garage. His father is making school desks out of old packing crates and says that he is going to start a school in the garage for the four Thang youngsters. He made wooden guns for the two little boys and I noticed that grandpa was the target for some of their "shooting." Oh well, so was I. Incidentally, the Thang youngsters "shot" with healthy yells of "pow," unlike the kids along the street who bark out "pok." Vietnamese kids use the same "uh-uh-uh" as American kids, to denote automatic fire, but not the peculiar mouthing of "crrrh" American kids apparently have picked up from TV sound effects, probably from ricochets.)

The house at 194 Cong Ly continues to be favored by peace. While I'm sure that this is due to the upright character of its inhabitants, I wonder a bit if the big new apartment house next door has anything to do with it. You will recall that the property is owned by Lawyer Trinh dinh Thao and I presume he collects rent from the large assortment of Americans now living in his apartment house. Anyhow, the Communists have made him the Chairman of their latest "front," the Alliance for whatever it is. I presume he antes up his rent collection for the enemy coffers and they like the gold coming in, whatever else they say about capitalism. Thus, they would be foolish to have their gunners, who are rather poor shots, try to hit our place which they could easily miss and wreck their own real estate. Now, wouldn't they? All we know about Thao is what Thang, my former driver, once told me that Thao was in debt to the Chinese banker who was executed for corruption a couple of years back -- and General Don saying that Thao is noted in Saigon for the way Thao's wife caught him with his mistress years ago in the belfry of the Saigon Cathedral. (Thao doesn't sound too bright, does he?)

Nhut, the son of Trinh minh The, has gone into the Armed Forces as a volunteer to become a helicopter pilot. The day he got his uniform, he put it on and rushed over to show me. Thus, I can report authoritatively that my suspicions, that every quartermaster sergeant in all the armed forces in the world must belong to a secret fraternity sworn to misfitting recruits, continue to be confirmed. Only Nhut's ears kept his uniform cap from completely covering his face and he will have to double his weight, particularly growing a huge beer paunch, before filling out the uniform itself.

He was so proud of being in the Vietnamese Air Force that I didn't have the heart to tease him. I told him solemnly that all of us free men were counting on him to defend his home and country. His eyes (and nose) were hidden by the huge cap, but he assured me just as solemnly that he would.

Every so often, the sheer youth of so many of the people involved in this long, long war seizes me. They look so doggone young, even younger than Americans of comparable age. Of course, this is actually true, since a Vietnamese is counted as one year old when he is born and takes on another year at each Tet. The general mobilization here not only takes in the 17-year-olds for ARVN, but includes 16-year-olds for the new self-defense organizations. In April, as the enemy tried new attacks to follow up his Tet offensive, the Boy Scouts were called out to help with the refugees. It was somewhat startling to see these skinny little youngsters in kerchiefs and shorts tramping along the streets close to so much terror and destruction, following the pennant of the Beaver Patrol or Woodchuck Patrol or Golden Dragon Patrol or whatever, on their way to do their "good turn daily" among the massive misery of the refugees. Whenever I see such things, I figure that this war must have another secret fraternity, of TV cameramen pledged not to see and film these events.

As you would guess, we are having a departure party at 194 Cong Ly to say goodbye to one and all, several hundred of them. All packed in upstairs, to test whether or not the floor actually will collapse according to dire predictions in the past. Due to the early evening curfew, we are doing it in the afternoon. And, it will be subdued, without the usual music or singing. (There has been too much tragedy all around us in town; a gay affair wouldn't lighten the gloom, but only look callous, which we are far from feeling.) The English part of the invitation speaks of our "umpteenth" departure. Bich translated it for the Vietnamese part, with "umpteenth" becoming "khong biet la lan thu may," (literally: "don't know is number what"). The protocol officer at Foreign Affairs called up to check on this, saying that the new Minister wondered if it was a joke. The gals read him the Vietnamese part of the invitation; he laughed and said that he understood. Since then, the expression has been picked up and is circulating rapidly through Vietnamese circles. It seems that we have added to the riches of Vietnamese slang vocabulary.

Now, about the SLO fund. You folks responded heart-warmingly to join us in taking care of our own. Since Dave Hudson was the custodian of the fund, I've asked him to give a little final report which can be attached to this. This was a real boost to some hardworking, loyal Vietnamese who had lost practically everything but their lives. I'm sure they'll never forget the hand up by their American comrades to get them on their feet again. Thank you!

We are working hard at getting all of our staffers well-placed for the future. I'm sure we will succeed in this, although it is too early to tell just where all will land. They have chalked up a considerable debt of gratitude from us, of which we are quite aware. I just regret that I cannot pack them up and bring them home with me. (Incidentally, my present plan is to be at 4503 MacArthur Blvd. NW, Washington, D.C., 20007, for a few weeks, and then go to the University of Hawaii in September for the academic year, hopefully to help start a new fellowship program involving Asia. I might even write a book. After June, Dave plans to be on vacation through the summer and then in Washington in September. Cal plans to be at 10310 Fleming Avenue, Bethesda, Md., 20014. Charlie plans to be at 101 Kay Street, Ithaca, N.Y., 14850. Reggie hopes to be at either the Department in Washington or at the UN. Martha has another seven months at the Embassy in Saigon.)

Vietnamese friends, as you might expect, are trying to fatten us up for the exodus. Tran quoc Buu and the CVT had a farewell cocktail party for us at CVT headquarters, with an impressive crowd of Farmer-Workers Association and GVN brass present. Cal accompanied me to Tay Ninh for a farewell lunch at the Cao Dai Holy See with Superiors Sang and Phuoc. Our Air America chopper put us down at the strip inside town, just as a large group of CIDG walking wounded came down the road from a Mike Force scrap with the VC close by Nui ba Den. They said they'd taken 70 casualties themselves, but had dished out much more to the enemy, who were almost all North Vietnamese regulars. The business suits of Cal and myself were a marked contrast to the jungle fatigues of this bloody and bandaged group of Vietnamese. After the goodbyes at the Holy See, I hopped over to PHILCAG and said goodbye to the Filipinos there, shaking hands all around. Leonard Chang and the CATM gang are having us all for one of Leonard's "spicy" dinners. (I trust his wife will slow him down on adding too many red peppers.) The Filipinos at ECCOI are giving us a feed, as are both General Thang and Cao Dai General

Cao. I'm ducking further invitations, so that I won't outgrow my clothes.

So, after almost three years of persevering effort, we close the Senior Liaison Office, American Embassy, Viet-Nam, amidst more noise than when we opened it in mid-1965. It's a time when I should lean back and reflect on all the wondrous things we did in three years. The trouble is, I don't feel like leaning back, or pontificating. We took some clobberings. We sure didn't do a lot of the things we set out to do. However, Viet-Nam went ahead with starting some fine things for the future and I doubt that they would have been done if we hadn't been present. The Vietnamese have made it plain to me that they have drawn strength from us and from the principles we taught and lived by. This feeling is surprisingly widespread. Also, many of our ideas and proposals have borne fruit, even to the point where I have to listen to briefings by American officials on the great projects they are carrying out -- and which actually had birth with us. Even though some of these briefings go on to boring lengths, they really are music to my ears.

Maybe we've been an American conscience at work in Viet-Nam. I know that our voices have been heard, loud and clear. And, we've had a lot of positive things to say. Perhaps the best thing of all we did was to demonstrate some new judo in the art of "people's warfare," by turning the advisory effort around in a meaningful way. We gave the Vietnamese a real chance to advise the Americans, to save Viet-Nam. This bit of pioneering may well become the method in which Americans work abroad to preserve our free way of life in the future. One U.S. observer noted that we were the one group of Americans accepted over on the Vietnamese side of the glass wall between the USG and the GVN. Maybe so. However, as we pack up, many of the U.S. officials here are moving in to work more closely with the Vietnamese than I've ever seen before. Several of them have even been kind enough to note that we have been an inspiration in this. (I waited for them to borrow money from me after such pretty speeches. They didn't. So, maybe they meant it.)

There are a lot more Vietnamese having a much bigger say about their future today than there were when we arrived in 1965. We did our bit to bring this about. So, if we didn't do all the important things we had in mind originally -- we sure did a whale

of a lot of them! I'm proud to have been here with each of you
and am deeply grateful for the comradely help.

As we march on into history, join me in a resounding cheer for
our Vietnamese comrades: "Viet-Nam Cong Hoa muong nam!"
And, that old vulgar SLO advice to the Communist enemy:
"Du Ma Anh!"

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