# THE ADVISORS IN VIETNAM

## WHO SERVED

## BEFORE THE THOUSANDS DIED

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1963

"NO MAN CAN KEEP A NATION AT WAR EXCEPT BY LIES"

Salvado de Madariaga

Famous Spanish Writer

# PREFACE

Even among Vietnam veterans there are many differences of opinion about what we should have done in Vietnam. There are those who say that we should have fought until we won no matter what the cost. Based on my observations most of those who take this position were not the servicemen who were back in the rear areas and never heard a shot fired nor were they the ones who were on the front line face to face with the enemy day after day. They were usually the ones who occasionally heard a shot fired. They are the ones who flew over a battle field at around 500 feet or landed on the battlefield 30 minutes after a sharp fire fight had ended. They were those who were on the fringe of danger.

There are also many Vietnam veterans who say that if they were Vietnamese they would have been dedicated members of the Viet Cong. Most of these veterans think that we should not have been involved in what appeared to be a civil war. They saw that the vast majority of the people in the countryside supported the Viet Cong. These veterans think that we should have pulled out of Vietnam years before we did. Many of the veterans who take this position spent months in the mud and in the jungle. Often they were in close combat with the enemy and faced death or injury many times during the day.

This booklet tells the story of one Vietnam advisor who had three very different assignments while in Vietnam. One was in an extremely safe and comfortable office in Saigon. Another was as an advisor at division level where on occasions he would observe the war 500 feet below, and make visits to the battlefield after the battle had ended. The third assignment was as an advisor to the Vietnamese infantry regiment that was constantly in contact with dedicated Viet Cong units. A significant number of American advisors died while serving with this regiment, and this regiment was completely destroyed by the Viet Cong during a major battle.

During our fourteen year war in Vietnam why were so many of our leaders, including presidents, secretaries of defense, congressmen, and senior officers so wrong, so often, when telling the American people about what was happening in this tiny, backward nation half a world away from our shores?

It is difficult to determine the starting date of this war for the United States. I picked 1959 because

that was the year that coffins containing the bodies of American servicemen started to pour out of Vietnam. I use an analogy to compare what was happening in Vietnam with a sore on an arm. The war, of course, is the sore. During 1959-61 a small but irritating sore is noticed. Little attention is paid to it. We think it will heal itself and go away. During 1962-64 the sore becomes larger and nasty looking. It is clearly exposed for all to see. We react by sending several thousand advisors. This was like putting an ointment on the sore. Even after the salve has been applied we can still see how nasty the sore is. The ointment prompted many of our brightest and our best to say the end is only months away and we can see the light at the end of the tunnel even though there was no sign of healing.

However, in 1965 the sore was getting so large that we decided we needed to cover it with a band aid. The band aid was the first 50,000 US combat soldiers and marines. By 1967 the sore was so large it could no longer be covered by a band aid so we covered it with a large patch. The patch was the 500,000 well armed and equipped American servicemen.

Finally the sore got so large and bloody and the patch could no longer fool the American people as to how grave the situation was so we took off the patch and came home.

Those who were in the right spots during the 1962 and 1963 were best able to see the sore and understand what was happening. Those who came later could not clearly see the sore because it was covered with a patch.

Why was the US so willing to sacrifice so many lives to take care of this sore in Vietnam? The logic was always flawed. During the early 1950's some of our leaders got the idea that if the VC gained control of their own country they would forever forsake their families and villages and with their obsolete weapons they would storm from one neighboring nation to another knocking over existing governments which would fall like a row of dominos. After enslaving all these nations they would race across the ocean and over run Australia and New Zealand. Then they would set their sights on Hawaii.

During 1963 it became obvious to the Americans on the ground who were in constant contact with the VC and who frequently passed through VC villages that the VC had no interest in knocking over any dominos. So who was responsible for the nine more years of war and the loss of 58,000 more soldiers?

Maybe millions of Americans, in addition to our leaders, share the responsibility for what

happened in Vietnam. Many Americans think that they were in no way responsible for Vietnam because they didn't know what was happening there. This brings to mind a comment made by Albert Speer, a leading Nazi, who after being sentenced to twenty years in prison said, " I knew nothing about the atrocities but because I knew nothing I am guilty."

# PREPARATION FOR WAR

It was about midnight on 7 May 1963, and the temperature had finally dropped to a level where sleep was usually possible, but I knew that there would be no sleep for me that night. I tossed and turned on my narrow bunk while several mosquitoes that had managed to get inside the protective net which I had placed over my bed zeroed in on my ankles.

A number of unusually large rats could be heard running under and around my bunk, and I knew that before long the four huge rat traps would start claiming their victims, but there were always far more rats than traps in the small tin roofed hut that was my home when the Vietnamese 7th Infantry Regiment was in their base camp which was a small compound on the edge of the village of Ben Cat. Located about 35 miles northwest of Saigon. Ben Cat was a Vietnamese government controlled outpost completely surrounded by jungle and small farms that were occupied by the Viet Cong. Two of the most dangerous Viet Cong strongholds in all Vietnam, the Iron Triangle to the southwest of Ben Cat and Zone D to the northeast were rarely entered by government forces. Highway 13, the only road that connected Ben Cat to the outside world was usually blocked by Viet Cong units. Helicopters were the primary mode of travel into and out of this isolated village.

As the senior advisor to the 7th Regiment, I lived with the Vietnamese soldiers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. An American radio operator also lived in the compound, and at times one or two American advisors from one of the regiment's three infantry battalions would also be in the little compound.

Several of the Vietnamese officers who I worked with daily had been with the regiment for many years, and even though for Americans the war was quite new, I was the third senior advisor they had known. The relatively large Americans were a favorite target of the Viet Cong.

As the night wore on, and the rat-traps started to snap, my mind raced back to one of the most tragic days the regiment had experienced since the shooting war with the Viet Cong had intensified several years ago. Only eleven months ago on the night of 15 June 1962, Captain Walter R. McCarthy, Jr. was most likely sleeping on my bunk and most likely his young assistant, 1st Lt. William F. Train III who in a few

days was to celebrate his 25th birthday was sleeping on a bunk near the rear of the hut. Early the next morning they joined their Vietnamese counterparts, who slept in huts about 40 yards away, and they prepared to leave the compound in a convoy which would be travelling south down narrow, winding Highway 13. Most of the Vietnamese soldiers who were going with the convoy were armed with a M-1 rifle, the US semi-automatic World War II weapon which was too large for most of the Vietnamese soldiers to effectively handle. The Vietnamese who remembered this day believed the Americans were armed with lighter, but less effective M-1 carbines, also a semi-automatic weapon of World War II vintage. Much more lethal weapons, such as fully automatic M-2 carbines, were stored in arms rooms in Saigon, not issued to these two Americans who most likely had the most dangerous jobs that the US Army had to offer.

At about 0945 the convoy of seven vehicles, including several jeeps, moved onto Highway 13, and stopped at a checkpoint on the edge of Ben Cat which was manned by a Vietnamese soldier. The soldier reported that there had been a light but steady flow of traffic both ways on Highway 13, and he had not received any report that indicated that the convoy would encounter any problems.

As the convoy headed south uncultivated fields lined each side of the road for the first half-mile, then the convoy entered an area where there were tall trees and thick vegetation on the right side of the road and some scattered farm houses nearby and an open swampy area on the left side. Behind the houses on the right side were small rice paddies and behind the paddies was the most dangerous Viet Cong controlled area in all Vietnam, the Iron Triangle.

Shortly after the convoy entered the wooded area there was an explosion that may have been caused by a mine or a hand grenade in front of a small bus that was a short distance in front of the lead vehicle of the convoy. Immediately, a large number of VC, who were in well prepared ambush positions along the edge of the road, fired on the convoy with rifles and machine guns, and they lobbed hand grenades at every vehicle. The Vietnamese forces were taken by surprise and were outnumbered and no match for the better armed VC forces. A few of the Vietnamese soldiers were able to slip away into the jungle, and they avoided being killed or captured. However, fifteen Vietnamese soldiers and the two American advisors were killed in this short but violent clash.

Several hours' later Vietnamese officers learned that since daybreak the Vietcong had been openly preparing ambush positions along Highway 13, and that everyone using the highway had most likely seen them, but no one had reported this activity to the soldier at the checkpoint. The reason that no report was made was painfully obvious, almost everyone in the area supported the Viet Cong.

As the last rat trap snapped, I thought about the steps that I had taken during the past nine months which had led me to this hot, miserable compound and had thrust me into what I was sure was one of the most hazardous jobs in the United States Army. During June of 1962 I was serving as an instructor at the ROTC summer camp at Fort Lewis, Washington, and I had orders that were sending me to Korea within the next few months. While at camp I met a lieutenant colonel who told me that he was being assigned to the Pentagon and that he would be responsible for world-wide assignments of infantry officers. During our conversation I told him that I was being assigned to Korea, but that I had recently read several of Bernard Fall's interesting books about Vietnam, and that I would be interested in a Vietnam assignment. I had also read that President Eisenhower said that if Vietnam fell to the communist insurgents all of the countries in Southeast Asia would fall like a row of dominos, and then Australia and New Zealand might fall. Would we then be fighting on the beaches of Hawaii? About a month later I was not surprised when my orders to Korea were revoked, and I received orders sending me to a six week Vietnam advisor training course at Fort Bragg and then to Vietnam.

In November 1962 when I arrived at Fort Bragg not one of the instructors had served in Vietnam. The war was still to young for there to be many returnees. Vietnamese civilians were there to conduct language classes, and considerable time was spent on map reading , physical training, and weapons training, but we learned little about Vietnam.

We were informed that of the 17 million people in South Vietnam only about 22,000 were hard-core Viet Cong insurgents, one in 800. These relatively few insurgents were surviving because they were terrorizing and killing the peasants who would not support them. We were also informed that the United States had already spent $7 billion in economic and military aid to destroy this insurgency. This amounted to $360,000 for each insurgent.

A major build-up of Vietnamese forces was also underway to wipe out the insurgents. The

strength of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVIN) was being significantly increased as well as the civil guard and self-defense corps units throughout the country. After these build-ups there would be 40-50 government soldiers for every insurgent, and with the number of US advisors in Vietnam being increased to about 15,000, we would have more than one advisor for every two VC.

In spite of the huge build-up that was taking place we were warned that the VC were tough and determined and that before the insurgency could be eliminated we had to win the confidence and respect of the peasants.

Each week we received combat reports from Vietnam and the reports highlighted the large numbers of Viet Cong who were killed in battles against the ARVIN, but in spite of the number killed the total strength of the insurgents remained at about 22,000. The reports also included the names of the American advisors who were killed in action, usually five or six a month, so in spite of all the favorable combat reports we knew that we could expect some dangerous days ahead.

After completing the course my next stop on the road to Vietnam was the Oakland Army Terminal, where I met several of my Fort Bragg classmates and a number of veteran helicopter pilots who were being rushed to Vietnam as part of the build-up. We were told that in two or three days we would be on our way to the Far East, and we were all anxious to leave as soon as possible because under the current army rotation policy we could expect to leave Vietnam 355 days after we departed from Oakland. Everyone was anxious to get the 355 day clock started and to get out of our miserable barracks. The Eisenhower and Kennedy years, had not been friendly ones for the US Army. During these years there had not been enough money for bare necessities and no money for luxuries. The old World War II barracks where we were housed was cold and bare. The showers and sinks in the latrine down the hall had hot and cold water faucets, but usually only cold water flowed from each tap. Not a single TV or radio was to be found in the barracks, and reading was almost impossible because of the poor lighting.

A cheer broke out the evening that we were told that we would be leaving early the next morning, and at about 0700 we were assembled on the curb. A senior officer from the Center arrived to give us a farewell speech, and just as he finished a clerk arrived and informed us that we would not be going that day

because the planes to Hawaii were filled with civilians going to the islands on vacation. Hawaii was the first leg of our journey. For us Uncle Sam had purchased the cheapest tickets, space available, and so we returned to our cold bare barracks, and we no longer believed that there was a big rush to get us to Vietnam. A day later we were informed again that we would leave the next morning, on 23 December 1962. Once again we were waiting on the curb and heard the farewell speech and once again the clerk arrived to tell us that our priority was too low. On Christmas Eve we were again informed that we would leave the next morning. Early on Christmas morning, demoralized and flat broke, we waited skeptically on the curb. On this Christmas morning there was no officer from the Center to give us a third farewell speech. This time the clerk arrived with a stack of tickets, and as he handed them to me he said that it didn't look like civilians wanted to travel on that Christmas morning.

The Boeing 707 was almost empty, and the few civilians traveling on this Christmas morning asked us why we had picked that day to travel. We were somewhat surprised to find out that none of them knew that we were deeply involved in a war in Vietnam. In fact, most of them had never heard of Vietnam, even though for the United States the war was already over three years old. Perhaps neither Eisenhower nor Kennedy wanted to be known as the president who had led us to war in Vietnam, and they had done a good job in keeping it a secret. The media hadn't helped make the American people aware of the war. You could search through many 1962 editions of Time and Newsweek before you would find one word about the war in Vietnam.

Two days later a blast of hot air swept through the Boeing 707 as the doors were opened, and each extremely tired, sleep-starved, miserably hot soldier staggered out of the plane onto the tarmac at Ton Son Nhut airport on the edge of Saigon. Our trip halfway around the world had finally ended.

As could be expected our first day in Vietnam was devoted to briefings, and the main briefer was the fiery, energetic Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Major General Charles Timmes. Timmes, however, was not the ranking US general in Vietnam. The overall effort was headed by General Paul Harkins, the Commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). We had been informed by soldiers who had been in Vietnam for months that it was not likely that we would ever see Harkins. It seemed that he liked air- conditioned rooms in Saigon much better than hot jungles or rice paddies. However, we had been informed that no matter where we went in Vietnam we might see the fear-

less Timmes; he liked to be where there was action.

It could be dangerous sitting in the front row as Timmes gave his briefing. With his arms swinging and sweat flying Timmes pounded home the message that this war was probably the most important of all our wars. He shouted that if we failed in Vietnam the Viet Cong would join with their Chinese comrades, and they would overrun all of Southeast Asia, and then Malaysia and Indonesia would fall and then Australia and New Zealand would be lost to the Western World. Throughout Vietnam this presentation became known as the "If We Fail Here" speech. During the latter part of his speech he gave us the good news. He let us know that the government forces were growing at a rapid rate, and that they had never lost a battle to the VC. At the conclusion of his briefing he let us know that we were very fortunate because during our year in Vietnam we would see the end of this bitter conflict.

Obviously Timmes was giving a lot of these briefings because each day more majors, captains, and senior non-commissioned officers poured into Saigon. Once in awhile a young lieutenant could be spotted, but almost all new arrivals had at least five years of military service. Hotel rooms in Saigon that had been occupied by one American suddenly had three occupants. Americans hadn't made many friends in Saigon because we had taken over practically every hotel that had air-conditioning and hot water and we were now starting to take over cold water hotels.

One officer who had just about completed his tour said that regardless of where you were assigned in Vietnam you would be miserable. After listening to a significant number of stories about the various types of assignments it sounded like there were three levels of misery.

Misery level one was an assignment in a large and safe city. It was rarely necessary for Americans in these assignments to carry a weapon. In fact, many in these assignments never had a weapon issued to them. Most of these assignments were in offices or shops where there were few, if any, Vietnamese. In these cities there had been a few terrorist activities, but there was general agreement that it was much safer to walk across one of these Vietnamese cities at night than to walk through almost any city in the United States. Personnel in these misery level one locations ate American food in American mess halls and steak was usually available. In most cases they lived in comfortable air-conditioned hotels and had daily maid and laundry service. They could go to well stocked, exceptionally reasonable bars, and

free movies were available every night. Without doubt there were VC spies in these cities, but in most cases these Americans never saw a man or woman who was known to be a VC. To my surprise the morale of the Americans assigned to these misery level one positions and locations appeared to be lower than the morale of those who had far fewer creature comforts, and who were almost daily in harms way.

Misery level two assignments were most likely to be found in or near relatively secure medium sized towns or in the larger military compounds. A significant number of the Americans in these assignments included Americans who were assigned to the ten ARVIN division advisory teams and advisors who were assigned to work with the 39 province chiefs. The province chiefs were appointed by President Ngo Dinh Diem and while several of them were civilians, the vast majority of them were majors. Province chiefs usually exercised command over civil guard and self-defense corps units which in many cases were full-time, active duty soldiers, but they were not members of the ARVIN.

These province teams varied in strength from eight to around twenty. They lived in an environment that was usually secure, but VC initiated activities were fairly common. These Americans usually did not live or work in the same building as did their counterparts. They normally saw their counterparts about twice a week. Most of them lived in air-conditioned rooms or in rooms with large fans. They ate American food in an American mess hall. They also had a bar available, movies every night, and mail several times a week. While most of their time was spent in their compounds some of them made frequent trips by helicopter, to isolated outposts, and some of these advisors accompanied civil guard or self-defense corps units on operations in VC controlled territory. Of all the Americans I talked with in Saigon, the advisors in misery level two assignments seemed to be the most content. These advisors left the impression that they were living on the fringe of danger.

Not many Americans worked in misery level three assignments. Those who did were majors, captains, lieutenants, and senior non-commissioned officers. They all served as advisors. These advisors were with their Vietnamese counterparts seven days a week , twenty four hours a day. These were the advisors to the thirty ARVIN regiments, the ninety ARVIN battalions, and to the ranger and marine corps battalions. Two advisors were authorized at regiment level and three for each of the three battalions in the regiment; however, rarely were that many advisors actually assigned to

these combat units, so it was unlikely that there were more than 300 misery level three advisors in South Vietnam at any given time.

These advisors spent more time in the jungle and rice paddies seeking the Viet Cong than they did in their primitive base camps which were usually located in extremely precarious areas. They would often be involved in fire-fights and occasionally caught in an ambush. These advisors ate every meal with the Vietnamese. Sometimes they would go for many days without receiving or being able to send- mail. . Clean water for them was a luxury and hot-water non-existent. Some would go for many days without seeing another American.

There were also a number of Americans who did not fit into one of the three misery categories. These included Americans who lived in comfort but were often involved in combat. The most visible group in this category were helicopter crews. Decent living conditions for them were necessary and well deserved. Many of these crews were flying obsolete helicopters that were slow and presented an easy target for VC gunners. These helicopters were the life-line for the combat units in the field. Daily, the crews identified and engaged enemy targets, delivered ammunition, and evacuated the dead and wounded. Fortunately, these ancient helicopters were gradually phased out as greatly improved models arrived.

As I listened to the advisors talk about assignments in the three misery levels, I had no idea that I would serve in an assignment at each level.

After several days in Saigon I was sent to the IV Corps Advisory Group Headquarters for several days of field orientation. Colonel Daniel Porter, the senior advisor to the IV Corps, LTC Jonathan Ladd and LTC John Vann, the senior advisors to the two ARVIN divisions in IV Corps, were regarded as the most outstanding advisors in Vietnam. I was informed that they frequently disagreed with the highly optimistic reports that their counterparts had been submitting, and that they were anxiously waiting for the day when the VC would abandon their hit and run tactics and fight a conventional head- to-head battle.

On my second day at Can Tho there was wide-spread excitement in the IV Corps advisory compound. Throughout the day a flood of reports had been received which indicated that a Viet Cong unit, perhaps as large as a battalion, had been spotted in well prepared positions and instead of trying to sneak away these VC were preparing for a set-piece battle. As the day wore on the advisors early

jubilation slowly turned to disbelief and then anger and disgust as the much larger and much better armed government units which were in the vicinity refused to close with and destroy the defiant VC unit. After remaining in their positions for two days, and realizing that ARVIN was not going to launch an attack, the VC faded away into the jungle and countryside. Five US helicopters had been shot down while transporting ARVIN troops to the vicinity of the VC positions, and I later learned that the pilots of two of the downed choppers had been part of our group that left Oakland early Christmas morning.

During this stand-off at Ap Bac I learned two valuable lessons which they never taught at Fort Bragg. One lesson was that even the very best US advisors had very little influence over their counterparts. Although Porter and Vann had pleaded with their counterparts to take action, and they had spelled out the steps that should be taken, they had not been able to get their counterparts to take advantage of this unusual opportunity to destroy a large VC unit. General Harkins, the highest ranking American officer in Vietnam was not able to get senior Vietnamese officers to employ reserve units in an effective and timely manner and the chance to win a significant victory was lost.

A second lesson I learned was that the Americans who were involved appeared to be far more interested in destroying the VC and winning the war than did the Vietnamese. Several months later Vann was to say that some of the senior Vietnamese officials wanted the war to stumble along inconclusively so that they could continue to receive American aid. Based on what happened at Ap Bac, it certainly appeared he was correct. While every American who was in the IV Corps area realized that Ap Bac was a disaster, General Harkins, who did not even bother to come to the IV Corps headquarters during the crucial period of this standoff, declared that Ap Bac was a victory for the ARVIN.

While at IV Corps I had the opportunity to visit a number of government controlled towns in the southernmost part of South Vietnam with LTC Ladd. It was depressing to see how much of this fertile delta was controlled by the VC. In the slow and highly vulnerable H-21 helicopters we flew over hundreds of miles of narrow country roads that had been rendered unusable for vehicles but not for cycles and pedestrians. About every twenty yards the VC had dug a deep ditch across half the road, with every other ditch on the opposite side of the road. Tens of thousands of man-hours were spent making these roads unusable for cars and trucks. After these trips around the Mekong Delta it appeared the number of

VC was in the millions and not 22,000.

After about five days at IV corps I was ordered to return to Saigon where I was being assigned to the Joint Operations Center (JOC) which was located on the edge of Saigon, just a few hundred yards from the South Vietnamese Army Headquarters. This was a cushy, misery level one assignment. Weeks later I learned that an officer who had been my friend for many years had selected me for this assignment.

The JOC was housed in eight tents. In these tents Americans and Vietnamese studied the numerous reports that were received from the field and continually updated maps which showed the locations of all the on-going operations. Occasionally, American or Vietnamese officials would come to the Center for a briefing. We worked with General Harkins headquarters, MACV, exchanging information. The center was open sixteen hours a day and was manned by two shifts of American and Vietnamese officers. We had the opportunity to attend the daily briefings for General Harkins. Unlike the other American generals in Vietnam who wore fatigue uniforms, Harkins wore a khaki or tropical worsted uniform and low quarter shoes just as he would if he was working in an office in the Pentagon. It was easy to understand why the press labeled these briefings as the "five-o-clock follies." The briefings put an optimistic spin on the daily events. We were informed that Harkins liked optimistic briefings, so that's what he got. Each day a report on the significant actions was sent to Washington. I was told the daily reports were called "progress reports", and it would be incongruous to have anything negative in a progress report.

In almost every combat report received from the field the number of VC killed was higher than the government's losses. Rarely was there any mention of a captured or wounded VC. A number of reports indicated that the ARVIN had lost more weapons than they had taken from the insurgents. Reports were received which stated that the VC had been run out of large areas, but subsequent reports revealed that these areas were still under VC control.

The Americans assigned to the JOC, primarily captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels, worked an eight hour shift. We were under absolutely no pressure. We all lived in comfortable air-conditioned rooms,and we had daily maid and laundry service. Outstanding, very reasonable, American mess halls were conveniently located. Nightly entertainment was available at a number of American bars located on top of the US occupied hotels, and we were getting credit for a "hard-ship" tour. However, unlike the high

morale that was exhibited by the Americans at the IV Corps Advisory Group Headquarters in Can Tho, the morale of the Americans at the JOC, and Americans in some of the other offices in Saigon, was extremely low.

Parts of Saigon were beautiful. It did not appear to be a city, in a country, that was at war. Rarely was an American or Vietnamese soldier in Saigon seen with a weapon. In fact, the vast majority of Americans assigned in Saigon had never been issued a weapon. Day and night the streets were jammed with bicycles, motorcycles, and cars. The sidewalks were crowded with Vietnamese and Americans. Many of the Vietnamese males were of draft age, so manpower was available to expand the army.

Daily at work and nightly at the bar on top of the Brink Hotel, probably the largest American billet in Saigon, Americans complained bitterly about their Saigon assignments. Many talked about how hard they had been trying to get assigned to a field advisor position, but their requests had always been turned down.

Knowing that what we were doing at the JOC was not going to have any impact on the outcome of the war, and having a keen interest as to what was really going on in the field, I decided to try for a field advisor position realizing that I might be just one more rejected volunteer.

The major who handled assignments at the personnel office in MAAG Headquarters appeared to be stunned when I told him that I was volunteering for a field assignment. After seeing the startled look on his face I said, "I suppose that you see a lot of people who are volunteering for the field?" He said, "No, you are the first, and I have been here many months." He also told me that within a few hours he would be able to tell me where I'd be going. There was a long embarrassing silence when I returned to the JOC and told the "volunteers" how easy it was to get a field assignment.

While reading the reports and observing the maps at the JOC I came to the conclusion that the most dangerous and deadly region in South Vietnam was the area covered by the 5th Vietnamese Division to the north and northwest of Saigon. This area included the provinces of Tay Ninh, Binh Duong and Phuoc Thanh. In these three provinces were the almost impenetrable VC strongholds, the Zone C, the Iron Triangle, and Zone D. I had mixed emotions when I received a call telling me that I was being assigned as the senior advisor to the 7th Regiment, one of the three regiments in the 5th Division.

Prior to leaving for the 7th Regiment I was directed to get a weapon from the arms room at the MAAG compound and to report to the III Corps Advisory Group Headquarters which was also located in Saigon. The weapons filling the racks in the arms room included semi-automatic M1 rifles and carbines. Both weapons had been widely used twenty years earlier during World War II. Also in the racks were fully automatic M2 carbines. The M-2 was by far the most effective of the three weapons for combat in the jungle and for engaging an enemy during an ambush. I immediately selected the M2. The armorer looked at my orders and said that the commander of the MAAG, General Timmes, had stated that any American who was going to an extremely dangerous area was not to be issued an automatic weapon because there was too great a chance that the weapon would fall into the hands of the VC, and that if the VC ever made an attack on Saigon these automatic weapons would be needed to defend US installations within the city. So the general who was supposed to be looking out for our welfare was sending those of us who were going out to the most dangerous assignments with inferior weapons.

The senior advisor of the III Corps Advisory Group was Colonel Wilbur Wilson who was believed to be the most senior colonel in the U. S. Army. Wilson was known throughout the army by his nickname, "Coal Bin Willie." I had never met Wilson, but I had heard many stories about this unusually colorful and controversial officer. Many who knew him, and who had served with him, swore that he was the most outstanding soldier in the army, and that he should be wearing three stars instead of an eagle. He also had detractors who said that he was the nastiest man in the army. A bachelor, he was often given credit for being the first man to ever utter the oft repeated locution, "If the army wanted me to have a wife they would have issued me one." Most of the Americans in Saigon worked a comfortable five-day week. No such luck for those who worked under Wilson at the III Corps Advisory Group Headquarters, they worked seven days a week. On Saturday and Sunday there was usually no one for them to contact because almost all Vietnamese military offices, just as American offices, worked the forty-hour week.

There were a number of stories as to how Wilson got his unusual nickname. The one I liked best, and chose to believe, was that when he was commander at Fort Campbell he was notified that a M1 rifle was missing from a rifle rack that was secured in a barracks. A thorough search of the area had

been conducted and the weapon could not be located. Wilson went to the barracks, and after hearing what steps had been taken, he pointed to the coal bin located just a few feet from the barracks and directed that it be emptied. Under several inches of coal the rifle was found.

Wilson volunteered for Vietnam during the early days of the war. He did not count the days until his tour in Vietnam would end. He would probably stay in Vietnam until the war ended or until he was forced to retire.

After a long wait in an outer office I was told that Colonel Wilson was ready to see me. I knocked on the door and heard a roar that could be heard throughout the building. It sounded somewhat like "come in." I walked in and standing at attention, saluted and reported. I did not say another word during the 15 to 20 minutes that I was in his office. In a loud, gruff voice he let me know that he was very unhappy with 7th Regiment, and that there had better be a lot of improvement. Finally, the loud monologue abruptly stopped, and he started to read a paper. I decided that this was the signal for me to leave.

As I walked out of his office I couldn't help but wonder how two army colonels, who had similar positions, Colonel Porter the senior advisor of the IV Corps and Colonel Wilson the senior advisor of the III Corps could be so different. One being gracious and considerate and the other abrupt and abrasive. Upon departing I thought thank goodness I'm going to the field, and I won't have to see him anymore. How wrong I was. I was later informed that Wilson was very unhappy and frustrated because he had absolutely no rapport with his counterpart, the young, flamboyant General Ton Tat Dinh, the III Corps Commander. Dinh would often refuse to see Wilson and would not accept advice from the proud Colonel. So at times Wilson needed to blow off steam, and the victim was usually a junior officer who was in the area, and on that day I happened to be there when the steam was released.

From III Corps I was driven to Binh Hoa, one of the larger towns in Vietnam, about 18 miles northeast of Saigon. A busy and safe highway connected the two cities. Binh Hoa was the home of the 5th Division and the 5th Division Advisory Group. LTC Kurtz Miller who had been in Vietnam for six months was the senior advisor. The division was commanded by Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu, a highly regarded Vietnamese officer. Americans who worked with Thieu while he was a division commander were not surprised when a few years later he became President Thieu.

Miller, an outstanding advisor, gave me a very detailed briefing about the area and the problems

which confronted the 5th Division. He spelled out the steps that the 5th Division had taken to gain control of the peasants in areas which were completely dominated by the Viet Cong, and the steps that were to be taken to expand the government's control. This was going to be an extremely difficult task.

The next day a helicopter took me to a cleared spot on the edge of the jungle. It was here that I joined the 7th Regiment. Captain Khe, the S-3 of the regiment, met me at the helicopter. Khe was smaller than most of the Vietnamese soldiers. He didn't appear to be over five feet tall, and he didn't weigh more than 100 pounds. One look at his deeply lined face and you knew that he was no stranger to danger and hardship. I congratulated him on how well he spoke English, and he told me that he was much more fluent in French and Chinese. As if he was reading my mind he asked me if I thought he was old for a captain. He told me that he would never be promoted because for eight years he had fought with the communist Viet Minh forces against the French and Vietnamese government troops, and that those who had fought with the Viet Minh would rarely be promoted to field grade officer level. While with the Viet Minh he served in high-level staff positions and was often in contact with Ho Chi Minh. As the Regiment's S-3 Khe would be one of the two Vietnamese officers who I would be spending most of my time with during the months ahead. The other officer, the regimental commander, was in the jungle on a patrol.

As it started to get dark the patrols began to return to camp, and as one returned I felt a light tap on my shoulder and a friendly voice said, "welcome to the 7th Regiment, I am Major Tuan, the Commander." My first thought was that he couldn't possibly be the regimental commander, he was far too young. He didn't look to be a day over 20, but later I learned that he was 28. He was exceptionally handsome, and he constantly flashed a most winning smile. He wasn't much larger than Captain Khe, and like Khe he also was fluent in French and Chinese as well as English.

After I had been in the field with the regiment for about two weeks, Major Tuan decided to return to the regiment's base camp at Ben Cat, the only town in the northern half of Binh Duong Province that was completely free of VC control.

At Ben Cat I had an opportunity to look at our organization. As was the case with all of the ten divisions in the ARVIN there were three regiments in the 5th Division , three infantry battalions in each regiment and three rifle companies in each battalion. The strength of the rifle companies

varied from 80 to 120. Each company went to the field with a 57mm recoilless rifle and several 60mm mortars. Each company had several machine guns and some automatic rifles, but most of the soldiers were armed with a semi-automatic rifle. The companies were commanded by lieutenants, and there were seldom more than three officers in each company. Over 90 percent of the soldiers were young draftees. Most of these draftees were from the large cities where almost everyone detested the VC. A few draftees were taken from villages in the countryside. A relatively small number of the soldiers were married, and many of them had children. Each soldier was paid about $18 a month, and he received a meager allowance for food. The living conditions for the soldiers and their families were abominable. Most of the families were housed in hovels just outside the small military compound. In many cases more than one family shared a hovel, and some of' hovels didn't have four walls. They cooked their meals in black pots over open fires. Some lived a considerable distance from a sanitation facility. The soldiers enjoyed a higher standard of living when they were sleeping in their hammocks or on the ground in the jungle. Of the 7 billion dollars the United States government had spent so far to improve conditions in Vietnam, it did not appear that one cent had been used to improve the life of the soldier.

Each battalion was commanded by a captain, and the 7th Regiment was fortunate because it had three top-notch battalion commanders. All three had been in the army for well over five years. A three man US Advisory team, consisting of a captain, a lieutenant, and a senior non-commissioned officer, was authorized for each battalion. However, I was to learn in the months ahead that we would rarely have a three man team with any of the battalions. We usually had two, but for weeks the only advisor with one the battalions was a sergeant first class, and during this period the battalion was involved in a number of significant battles.

A Vietnamese regiment bore little resemblance to a US Army regimental size unit. The strength of the regiment, rarely exceeded 1200, not much larger than a US Army battalion. In addition to the three infantry battalions the 7th Regiment had a heavy mortar company that was always used as a rifle company. The mortars organic to this company and the mortar rounds were far too heavy to be hand carried through the jungle. During the time I was with the regiment, I don't remember seeing the mortars taken out of the arms room. Other elements in the regiment included a reconnaissance unit and a transportation unit. Administration in the regiment was held to a bare minimum. The regiment had only

one typewriter. In a US army regimental sized unit you would find over 50 typewriters.

Usually the 7th Regiment had one battalion tied up with security tasks, which included guarding bridges and villages and two battalions in the field trying to locate and destroy the VC or trying to round up peasants and move them to a strategic hamlet. There were times when one of the three battalions was in base camp at Ben Cat.

The regimental commander, his staff, the heavy mortar company, and reconnaissance elements usually accompanied the battalion that had the longest and most difficult field assignment. The total strength of the battalion and the other units which the regimental commander accompanied to the field rarely exceeded 400 men. The regimental commander had few perks. He carried his own pack, and he was armed with a M-1 carbine. He usually accompanied the lead element, and during contact with the VC he was invariably on the front line. About the only perk that the commander and his staff, and the American advisor who accompanied them, had was that they did not do their own cooking. Although two advisors were authorized at regiment, with the exception of a two week period, I was the only advisor at this level. An American radio operator was also assigned to the regiment. He operated the radio at our base camp, and was never taken on field operations.

In 1963 the duties of a field advisor were not well defined. There were differences of opinion, among experienced advisors, as to just what their duties were. This should not be surprising because even our Commander-in-Chief, President Kennedy did not know what advisors were doing. In a response to questions from reporters, he said that there were no Americans involved in combat in Vietnam. This comment was made over three years after the first two soldiers had been killed during a VC attack and at a time when a considerable number of Americans were engaged in combat throughout Vietnam. Either Kennedy really didn't know, or for some reason he was seeking to belittle the efforts of the advisors, or he was trying to deceive the American public. Civilian and military leaders in the Department of Defense knew that advisors were in combat because they authorized the combat infantryman's badge for the advisors, and to be eligible for this badge you must have been in combat. They also authorized the award of the bronze star for the first three years of the war but no higher awards. Maybe they didn't think what we were doing was very important. Certainly they would not intentionally treat the advisors as second-class soldiers. Finally, in mid 1963, higher awards were authorized for Americans serving in Vietnam.

During the first three years of the war there were other ways that the Americans in Vietnam were slighted and treated in a thoughtless manner. During WW II and Korea combat pay was authorized. It was not authorized until mid-1963 in Vietnam. Even a very inexpensive perk, free mail, was denied. At times the absence of this perk had an earth-shattering impact on morale.

Americans in Saigon frequently said that it took weeks, or months, for an advisor to establish good rapport with his counterpart. Of the many Americans assigned in Saigon very few had counterparts, and they rarely saw their counterparts for more than a few hours a week. With such limited contact it could take weeks to establish a good working relationship. In some cases at the highest level good rapport was never established. For example, senior Vietnamese generals did not seek advice from General Harkins when they were developing some of their most sensitive plans. Instead, they were careful to insure that he was not aware of what they were planning.

At battalion and regiment level if it took an advisor three days to develop good rapport with his counterpart, it was too long. At these levels developing good rapport rapidly was possible because advisors at these levels probably spent more time in face-to-face contact with their counterpart in one day than a Saigon advisor would in a month. When you are spending 24 hours a day with your counterpart, which include some harrowing hours, it doesn't take long to develop good rapport.

One of the primary functions performed by regiment and battalion advisors was to discuss pending operations. An advisor had little or no impact in the determination of what major operations were to be conducted. Just as in any army, the Vietnamese commanders receive orders from their superiors telling them what they are to accomplish. The Vietnamese commanders knew far more than the advisor about the capabilities of their subordinate units and commanders and about the strength of the enemy in the area. So in what ways could the advisor contribute? He provided information about helicopter and other air support that might be available, and he served as a sounding board for the commander.

During operations the advisor stays in the immediate vicinity of the commander and when US helicopters or other aircraft are available for support, he maintains contact with them and in coordination with the commander identifies targets. Another function for the advisor while on operations is to participate whenever necessary in a fire fight. This will happen frequently if the commander is usually on or near the front lines. A rather passive but important function is to just be seen where the action is taking

place. This was a morale builder for the combat soldiers. While on operations the advisor must gather as much first-hand information as possible about the VC, the peasants, and the capabilities of the weapons and equipment being used by both the ARVIN and the VC, so he observes all that he can.

A key function of an advisor was to insure that peasants were treated in a considerate and courteous manner, and to insure that they were compensated for chickens, pigs and produce that was taken from their hamlet. Because of the emphasis that Tuan placed on the proper treatment of peasants I never had to worry about an abuse or payment problem.

At the conclusion of every operation an advisor's after-action report was submitted. Vietnamese officers also submitted reports, but their reports were often regarded as being far too optimistic. There were times when the advisor could not possibly have seen everything that took place, so he used some information that was fed to him by the Vietnamese. After being with a Vietnamese unit for a short period of time the advisor tends to identify with the unit, and he too starts putting the best possible face on all events. The advisor soon learns that his superiors like to get highly favorable reports, and they dislike unfavorable ones. This could also affect his reporting. I recall one report submitted by an ARVIN unit, not part of the 7th Regiment, that was operating near our area. The unit reported that 112 VC had been killed in a two hour battle. Another unit went through the area very shortly after the VC had withdrawn. They found only three VC bodies and three weapons left by the VC. In spite of their much smaller report the initial report was the one accepted by higher headquarters.

The duties of advisors when in base camp varied significantly. One task I undertook was to arrange for and accompany US medical teams while they visited local hamlets. These medical teams were always very well received; it appeared that the VC had a "hands off" policy in regards to the teams. They probably left the teams alone because many receiving treatment were VC dependents.

Another function for the advisor while in base camp was to go with the commander on operations in the local area and to participate with a reaction force when the VC were attacking ARVIN positions. The advisor also trained Vietnamese officers and NCOs on how to use and maintain newly issued weapons. One of the new weapons we received was the M79 grenade launcher.

A most miserable and useless requirement I had while in base camp was to prepare, each day, a

detailed operation plan, complete with overlays, for an attack on a VC position. This requirement was placed on the three regimental advisors in the 5th Division for the purpose of impressing visitors. The large stack of plans that accumulated as a result of this exercise was used to show visitors how actively and how aggressively the US advisors were pushing for more operations.

The operations we conducted while in base camp were in areas to the north of Ben Cat. When we did not make any contact with the VC, the operations were called "walks in the sun." When contact was made we were always surprised. We knew the peasants kept the VC well informed about our strength and activities, and because the VC lived in the area they always had the home field advantage. In some cases when we encountered peasants in the field, they would bow respectfully to us, but we knew that on another day they may engage us in a fire-fight. Regardless of the problems and frustrations we encountered, Tuan knew that the only way that government forces could control the countryside was to win the support of the peasants, and Tuan always dealt with them in a most courteous and friendly manner. The hamlets in the vicinity of Ben Cat were supposed to be under government control but in reality they were housing areas for VC dependents. During the past year the 5th Division had rounded up hundreds of peasants, who lived in very small scattered hamlets near their farms, and herded them into five strategic hamlets. Low walls and barbed wire were put around these hamlets. The government had planned to train and arm the peasants so that they could repel attacks by the VC. The plan fell apart immediately because very few men were rounded up, and these few men and the women and children, were herded into the hamlet areas. The males who the government hoped to arm and train to fight the VC were either hard-core VC or active VC supporters, so to secure the hamlets the government brought in members of the civil guard from larger towns. There were not nearly enough guardsman to provide protection for the hamlets, so the guardsman built small strong points on a corner of each hamlet, and from the strong point they would send patrols through the hamlet, but they couldn't secure it.

We did not have a large number of casualties on operations that were conducted in the vicinity of these hamlets. In most cases our casualties were carried back to Ben Cat instead of being sent by air. In Saigon I had frequently heard Americans say that life doesn't mean as much to Asians as it does to Americans. I am certain that those who thought this was true were never around to hear screams, and see the faces, of the women and children when they saw a loved one among the dead.

During my conversations with the Vietnamese officers while we were at Ben Cat I sensed a desire, but also a reluctance, to talk about the possibility of a coup d etat. Ngo Dinh Diem was rapidly losing their respect and confidence, but he was far more popular than his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. The Vietnamese officers were interested in knowing how the United States would react to a coup, and at that time I had no idea what the reaction would be. I asked who the 5th Division would support if there was a coup. At this early date I think that there was only one officer in the regiment who knew the answer to that question, and he was Major Tuan. On this delicate subject he would reveal nothing.

During these conversations I learned that Thieu was given command of the 5th Division by Diem, and that Diem had full confidence in Thieu's support. The 5th Division was closer to Saigon than any other Division and the 5th Division would play the key role in determining whether a coup would succeed. I was also informed that Thieu was paid far more than the regular pay for a colonel to insure his loyalty.

While in base camp, and when possible during operations, the captains and lieutenants on the regimental staff would talk to me about America and about our leaders. I noticed that they were especially interested in hearing about Eisenhower's domino theory. They regarded this as a funny and happy story. The funny part was the thought that any Vietnamese, government or VC, would join forces with the Chinese to start knocking over the dominos. The happy part was when the Vietnamese were hitting the beaches in Hawaii. They would laugh and say that the trip to Hawaii made the VC sound highly attractive, so I stopped telling the domino story.

One day toward the end of April Tuan told me that he wanted to have a very important talk with me that evening when no one else was around. I suspected that this talk would be about what actions the regiment would take if a coup was initiated. When we met Tuan informed that he had just received an order from Thieu directing that available elements of the 7th Regiment conduct a very long and very hazardous operation to the northwest of Ben Cat in the corridor that connected the Iron Triangle with Zone D. Our mission was to destroy the large and well-armed VC units known to be in the area and to round up the peasants that were living in a number of scattered hamlets. We were to move them to a strategic hamlet which was to be located at a spot on the edge of the jungle. The hamlet was to be called Pho Binh. Since 1954 this area had been completely dominated by the VC. In fact, no ARVIN units had been in this area since that time. Tuan smiled and said, "Most of the peasants in that area have never seen

a foreigner, you will be the first."

The main unit that we were going to use on this operation was the 2nd Battalion. This battalion was just completing several weeks of refresher training, and it was commanded by an exceptionally forceful and experienced commander. Word of this operation was not be disseminated until the latest possible moment. Tuan knew that the desertion rate might soar if word got out about the location and duration of this operation. It was easy for soldiers to desert while we were in Ben Cat, but difficult when we were in the field.

Tuan was also worried about the VC obtaining detailed information about our planned action. He suspected that there were VC informers at many levels in the ARVIN; however, he could never have suspected that the general in Saigon who was in charge of the hamlet program was a VC. This was not known by Americans, or the leaders of the ARVIN, until 30 April 1975 when Saigon fell. The day after I had this meeting with Tuan a helicopter landed at Ben Cat. I was always very happy when a chopper arrived because usually the crew brought mail, and they frequently had some old Stars and Stripes on board. It didn't matter how old the papers were. As the chopper landed Major John G. Hayes the lively and effervescent 5th Division G-3 advisor shouted above the roar of the chopper that he had a present for me. He reached in the chopper and pulled out a fully automatic rifle which at that time was called the AR-15, later it became known as the M-16. I had heard a lot about this rifle, but I didn't think I'd ever be be able to have one. Along with the rifle he had a large box of ammo. "Now you can get rid of that piece of junk you've been carrying," he shouted and pointed at my carbine. I asked him if I had to sign for the weapon, and he just laughed and said that there were lots more where that one came from. As the chopper lifted he waved and shouted his usual farewell, "Don't waste your ass." Just a day or two later some VC were spotted in a clump of trees near Ben Cat and I thought I would test my new weapon by spraying the wooded area with automatic fire. With several Vietnamese soldiers nearby anxiously watching, I pulled the trigger. Instead of a burst of fire the weapon jammed after just one round was fired. The metal case of the cartridge was welded in the chamber, and it took a long time to extract it. Fortunately, it did not jam at a critical time. After that I had no confidence in the weapon, and I put it in the arms room and retrieved my ancient but trusty carbine.

As we started preparing for Pho Binh we received reliable reports that the VC had a well trained

and well armed battalion in the Pho Binh area with an estimated strength of 400 men. Also, we were informed that we could expect to encounter at least 200 armed peasants who would support the VC battalion. I contacted the US advisors at division and relayed my concerns about our smaller force being able to defeat the larger VC unit on their home ground where they had the active support of all the inhabitants. I was assured that the 5th Division had a large reaction force and available transport to move it into the combat area on very short notice. I was also assured that we would have top priority for air and artillery support, so it didn't matter if we were the inferior sized force.

The 2nd battalion was in high spirits as they were trucked into Ben Cat. In spite of the large number of soldiers that were jammed into each truck, on one of the trucks they had managed to squeeze in a cow. This was an eye-catcher because with the exception of a dairy farm located about four miles north of Ben Cat, cow sightings were rare in Vietnam.

Even though there were many captains in Saigon, we were always short of captains in the field, so Lt Parker D. Cramer was the senior advisor to the 2nd battalion, and there was no finer lieutenant in the US Army. The brilliant Cramer had no intention of being a career soldier. His term of service would end in a few months, and he had been notified that he had been accepted by both the Harvard and Stanford law schools. After graduating from college with a commission Cramer was assigned to Europe. He could have completed his service in his enjoyable and safe European assignment, but the army asked for volunteers for Vietnam and Cramer was one of the first and one of the few to answer the call. Cramer's assistant advisor was SFC Roy Dennis a most competent and dedicated career soldier. They were an outstanding team.

On 5 May preparations for Pho Binh were almost completed, but we still needed to get several truck loads of supplies and ammunition which were ready for pick-up in Binh Hoa, and Tuan informed me that the next day elements of the 7th Regiment and civil guard troops were going to secure Highway 13 for a truck convoy. To clear the road troops from the 2nd Battalion would start at Ben Cat and walk down each side of the road looking for mines or wires leading to mines. They would also leave small groups of soldiers about 100 yards apart and about 50 yards off the highway to keep an eye out for snipers or VC who might seek to ambush or interfere with the convoy. The battalion would clear the road to a small stream about three miles south of Ben Cat. From that point south to the province capital, the road would be cleared by civil guard units. The convoy would not be allowed to leave the Ben Cat compound until

notification was received that the road was safe.

A short time later Tuan contacted me and told me that he had received a call from Thieu, and that it was urgent that he meet with the division commander early the next morning. The usually very open and frank Tuan went on to say that this was a very secret meeting and only Vietnamese were involved and that no Americans would participate, so I was not to go with him. He said the meeting was scheduled for such an early hour that he could not wait until the road was secured, and he planned to go with a well-armed three vehicle convoy. I didn't ask what was to be covered at the meeting but I assumed it would be about the role the regiment would play if there was a coup while the regiment was in the field. It was widely believed that Tuan was Thieu's favorite regimental commander, and the 7th Regiment could be expected to play a major role in any coup.

At about 0600 on 6 May, after emptying my rat traps, I watched as Tuan and his small convoy moved out at a high rate of speed. About an hour later elements of the 2nd Battalion started to move slowly down Highway 13 to clear the road. It appeared that this was going to be an unusually pleasant and quiet day. It was clear and sunny and the temperature was somewhat lower than it had been during the past week. Weeks later I was to learn that on this day General Harkins was in Hawaii giving a most optimistic briefing to high-level government officials, assuring them that the war was going well, and the end was clearly in sight.

Lt Ngoc, the regiment's assistant S-3 was getting ready to leave as I entered the command post. Ngoc told me that he had decided to go with the convoy because he wanted to get some medicine in Binh Hoa. Moments later Cramer walked in and said that he would like to accompany Ngoc. Junior Vietnamese Officers liked to drive, so I wasn't surprised to see the jeep driver in the back seat as Ngoc and Cramer left to join the convoy that had formed by the compound gate.

Word was received that the highway was clear and the convoy started moving slowly onto Highway 13. The head of the convoy was still in sight when loud explosions and small arms fire could be heard at a distance of less than a mile in front of the convoy. I assumed that soldiers who had cleared the road had made contact with the VC and that the convoy was not involved because it had not reached the point where the action was taking place. A few minutes later Khe called and said that he had just received a report that Cramer, Ngoc, and the driver had been killed in a clash with the VC.

As we raced to the ambush site I thought that this couldn't have happened because the road had been cleared. At the ambush site the jeep was on its side. All four tires were flat. It had been hit by grenades and small arms fire. It appeared that Lt Phoc, rightfully thinking that the road had been cleared, was too impatient to travel with the slow moving convoy and had opened a significant gap between himself and the lead vehicle of the convoy. It appeared that about 10 VC were in ambush positions just waiting for a target of opportunity, and they engaged the speeding jeep. Then the VC saw the convoy approaching, and they left in such a hurry that they did not even take the weapons that were in the destroyed vehicle.

A quick investigation revealed that the lieutenant who was responsible for clearing the road south to a creek had made a map reading error. He stopped about 500 yards short of the creek, and he had not made contact with the civil guard who were clearing the road from the south. Just by chance the VC had picked the small stretch of road that would not be cleared for their ambush site.

The peasants in the area were quickly assembled and questioned. They were not at all cooperative. Not one would admit to having seen any VC in the area or to have seen what took place during the ambush. After the ambush the VC had probably headed for their sanctuary in the Iron Triangle.

At about 04:30 on 8 May after a sleepless night, I cautiously got out of bed. I wanted to make sure that I didn't step on a dead rat. Each trap had claimed a rat, but the traps had been moved. After springing the traps, the rats often had enough life to drag the traps several feet. I looked at my little calendar. I didn't count the days but, I had a big circle around 15 December, the day that I should be leaving Vietnam. That day seemed like a hundred years away.

For me 8 May was a big day in the history of the war. This was the day that the 7th Regiment was going to initiate a major operation, and this operation would determine if the government forces could gain control of an area and over people who had lived in a tightly controlled VC area for almost 10 years. After having watched the initiation and progress of ARVIN operations throughout Vietnam while I worked at the JOC, I knew that Operation Pho Binh was the most important operation in the country.

If the 7th Regiment was in IV Corps instead of III Corps one of the top notch reporters, such as Neil Sheehan or David Halberstram, would probably be with us. The young reporters who were covering the war were generally looked upon with disdain by Americans in Saigon, but they were highly regarded by

the advisors in the field. The reporters spent a great deal of time with units in IV Corps, that were operating in the Mekong Delta, but little time with III Corps units that operated in the jungles and paddies north of Saigon, and I didn't blame them. I remember how well I was treated when I first met Colonel Porter the senior IV Corps advisor, and how harshly I was treated during my initial meeting with Colonel Wilson the senior advisor of III Corps. I couldn't help but think the reporters would be treated the same way that I was, and if I was a reporter and had a choice I know that I'd pick IV Corps.

At this early hour no one knew that on this day something of far greater importance than the initiation of an operation by the 7th Regiment was going to take place in Vietnam. Those of us with the regiment would probably be among the last people in the world to find out about this other important event which would have a significant impact on the outcome of the war.

I couldn't jam anything else into my heavy rucksack. In addition to my hammock, clothes, and shaving gear, I had lots of paper and envelopes, several 15 round magazines, and several pounds of Vietnamese candy which I would never eat. I planned to give the candy to the VC children.

Tuan was going to inspect about 150 of the soldiers who were going on the operation and the battalion commander would inspect the others. I watched as the soldiers, most of them weighing about 100 pounds, prepared for Tuan's inspection. In addition to the heavy rucksacks the soldiers had on there backs, around their necks they had what looked like a long, fat stocking which contained several pounds of rice. On their cartridge belts most of the soldiers had a canteen, bayonet, first aid package and several hand grenades. Most of the soldiers had about eight clips of ammunition in their belts. About every fifth soldier had a couple of pots and pans on top of his rucksack. Many of the soldiers had a live chicken tied to the back of their belts. Almost every soldier had a long loaf of bread tied to the top of his rucksack. For the newcomers there was a surprise in the bread. Each loaf was full of ants. Newly arrived Americans would try to remove each ant; the old veterans would just close their eyes and take a bite.

As I looked at the small soldiers and the load they were carrying I thought that they might not be able to move, but when Tuan gave the signal they picked up their eight pound weapons and started to move out of the compound. In the jungle just a few miles away the enemy was waiting. He would not be

wearing a heavy steel helmet; he would be bareheaded. Instead of heavy boots, he would be wearing light sandals. He would be carrying nothing except a rifle and a few rounds of ammunition. He would be fed by the inhabitants of the area, so he would not need to carry food or water.

The sun was just starting to rise as we left Ben Cat and headed northwest towards the jungle. The silence of the early morning was broken by the crowing of hundreds of rosters and the yapping of a few dogs. We moved in a column of twos until we reached Long Cau, a small hamlet on the edge of the jungle. from this point on we would move in a single file about three-fourths of a mile long. We would not use any trails; instead, we would hack our way through the jungle. We would not make good time, but we were not likely to run into any mine fields or be ambushed.

I couldn't help but think that at the JOC a very wide green arrow pointing northwest would be drawn on the acetate covering the map of Binh Duong Province. Visitors would be told that the 7th Regiment was clearing the VC from this area as they moved toward a planned hamlet site. They would leave the briefing thinking that a large chunk of jungle was now under government control. Instead, the moment after we passed through, the control of the jungle reverted to the VC.

The jungle was cool and relatively safe. The VC couldn't have known what route we were going to take because we didn't know ourselves until we reached the jungle, so an ambush was unlikely. The jungle was thick; visibility was usually less than thirty feet. Our heavy loads, the uneven jungle floor and the thick vegetation prevented us from moving more than a mile and a half an hour.

When Tuan received the call that the head of our column had reached the far edge of the jungle, we moved forward and met the battalion commander who was looking at his map and at a small hamlet about 200 yards away. We were about 400 yards north of the spot where we planned to exit the jungle. Rice paddies separated us from the hamlet. We started to cross the paddy area, and when we were less than halfway across we received small arms fire from a wooded area near the small village. We placed heavy fire on the area, and when the enemy fire stopped we quickly surrounded the small village, and soldiers started to enter the homes. I was the first to enter one of the dwellings. I saw no one in the small two-room hut, but I heard children crying under several boards that covered part of the floor in one of the rooms. I kicked the boards aside and saw ten eyes filled with terror staring up at me from a hole that was about three feet deep. On top of the pile of bodies was an elderly man who was seeking to protect the two

sobbing women who were each clutching a small almost nude child.

The elderly man looked like Ho Chi Minh, but as I was to learn almost all of the very elderly men we encountered in the countryside looked like Ho. The two women calmed down somewhat when several soldiers arrived. A lieutenant told me that the women were afraid of me because the VC had told the peasants that Americans mutilated small children, and at one time the peasants were told that Americans ate the livers of the very young.

I took a picture of my wife and two small children out of my wallet and showed it to them. They smiled and started talking very rapidly. Then I pulled a few pieces of candy from my rucksack and gave it to the children. This was the last time I would give candy to children because I could see how much the soldiers wanted it. From my rucksack I pulled out the Polaroid camera which I hated to take to the field and took pictures of the women and their children. They gave me a big smile displaying their black beetle nut stained teeth. Then I asked them about their husbands, and they told me that they had gone fishing.

All of the village's occupants, about thirty women, one man, and fifty children, were assembled. Tuan was the first to talk to the peasants, and he explained why we were there and that we were going to make life much better for them by putting them in a safe, comfortable hamlet. He also spent considerable time explaining why Americans were there. When he finished the regiments psychological warfare officer took over and pleaded with them for their support. He explained that we were going to the hamlet site and site, and after the hamlet was prepared we would return and help them move to a comfortable hamlet where they would be safe from the VC. The faces of the peasants remained blank while they listened, but I knew it was no sale because the VC we were going to protect them against were their husbands, sons, and brothers.

Tuan had surrounded the village with security posts, but it was getting near dinner time and many soldiers were involved in preparing each meal, so security at this time was questionable. Numerous small fires were lit and feathers started to fly after some of the chickens were untied from the soldier's belts. I could not believe that seven billion dollars had been spent to improve the Vietnamese army, and soldiers were still using such time-consuming, inefficient, and primitive ways to prepare their food when they were in combat. Maybe the Vietnamese wouldn't have liked the American C-rations, which are too salty but

very good. However, a small piece of the seven billion dollars could have been used to develop rice and fish or rice and chicken C-rations.

To our surprise it was a quiet night and the next morning we moved north along the edge of the jungle toward a much larger hamlet. As we advanced a brief firefight erupted during which a VC was killed. A US Army M1 rifle was by his side and 48 rounds of ammo were in his belt. This was very alarming because usually not more than six rounds were found on a VC body.

As we entered this hamlet the peasants were not cowering in holes as they had been in the first hamlet. These peasants did not appear to be afraid of us, and they were more hostile. A few very old men were in the hamlet, as well as a significant number of women and children. One woman told us that the men were all away fishing. A woman pointed at our 57mm recoilless rifle and said that the VC had lots of them. Again the peasants were assembled and were informed of our hamlet plans, and this time the reaction was very negative.

That night we deployed around the village and expected an attack. Early the next morning the peasants left their hamlet and headed toward their fields. Usually peasants did not go to the fields this early. As we were pulling in our security units and getting ready to depart we heard several bugles and a considerable number of automatic weapons opened fire from a tree line to our left front. A few minutes earlier this area had been occupied by our security forces. We scrambled to get in positions from which we could best resist the attack. When the bugles sounded again we started to receive fire from the wooded area directly in front of us. For a few minutes it looked like the VC might be able to overrun our positions, but this threat ended when our automatic weapons started to return the fire. The VC started to lob mortars in and around our positions, but they were not effective. Once in awhile we would get a fleeting glimpse of some VC as they darted between the trees, but usually we were aiming at the weapon flashes and at clumps of vegetation where VC were suspected to be hiding.

After the battle had raged for over two hours the bugles sounded again, and it was apparent that some, but not all , of the VC were withdrawing. It appeared that the VC would be withdrawing to the west and there were some open areas to the west where helicopters could land. We had been in contact with the 5th Division during the firefight and we requested that the quick reaction force be landed in one of the open areas and seek contact with the VC who were heading in that direction. The VC had to be as

tired and as low on ammunition as we were. We were informed that the quick reaction force would not be used for this purpose and when I heard this I realized that this quick reaction force would never be used to support us.

The bugles sounded once more and no more fire was received from the VC. During the fire-fight The medics had been very active carrying our wounded from the battlefield, and now that all firing had stopped the rest of our wounded and the dead were moved to a shady area. We moved through the positions the VC had occupied, and the VC had left their dead on the battlefield, but they had removed their wounded. The dead VC were placed in an open sunny field where they would be observed by the peasants.

We called for helicopters to evacuate our wounded and dead, but we said that we didn't want them to land until we were sure the area was secure. I received a call from the pilot of a chopper who said that he was approaching our area and wanted us to mark the spot where he should land. I told him not to land yet because we wanted to check a tree line where we thought VC may still be hiding. A moment later he called and said that he wasn't waiting and that he was going to land at once. Fortunately, the chopper was not fired on as it skimmed over the nearby trees and landed. As soon as it touched the ground out jumped the absolutely fearless Wilson who had been listening to our reports during the battle, and he was obviously pleased. He was not carrying a weapon, but he had a camera. He asked about VC casualties and I pointed where they were located about seventy yards away. When he left the immediate area I asked a staff officer why Wilson didn't have a weapon. After all General Patton carried pistols and General Ridgeway packed hand grenades. The staff officer laughed and said, "The VC wouldn't dare fire at him."

Wilson looked pleased as he returned to the chopper until his eyes locked in on a small hole about fifteen yards away. "Look at that," he growled. "Someone could step in that hole and hurt themselves. "Get it filled right away." Tuan was nearby talking on the radio and simultaneously telling a lieutenant about steps he wanted taken to secure the area, but he was still able to over hear Wilson's comments. Tuan looked at me in disbelief and said, "I'll get it done for you, but I wouldn't do anything for him." With all things Tuan had to do immediately after this battle, I'm sure that filling the hole would have ranked about 999 on his list. The pilot asked me which direction would be safest for his departure. I made a guess and fortunately it was a good one. The chopper didn't draw any fire as it lifted out of the area.

Tuan received a call from 5th Division which made him very unhappy. The large Vietnamese

H-34 helicopters would not land in our area to pick-up our casualties because the area was considered to be too unsafe. We also had calls out for any available US choppers, referred to as Hueys, to help in the evacuation. It wasn't long until several Hueys could be seen approaching. There wasn't any place in Vietnam that was too unsafe for the Huey pilots when there was an important job to be done. As they landed, one at a time, the ARVIN medics and the crewman quickly loaded the casualties, and after the last chopper had been loaded they headed for Ben Cat where the casualties would be switched to the larger H 34s and from there they would be taken to the hospital.

The first Huey to return for a second load of casualties was filled with replacements. After The last replacement had stepped out of the chopper a crewman pointed to the helicopter's bloody floor and he yelled in my ear, "I don't know how tough a battle you had out here, but I know it wasn't as tough as the battle the ARVIN officers at Ben Cat had trying to get those replacements on these bloody choppers."

We decided to stay in the vicinity of the hamlet where the battle had taken place for several days to see if any of our patrols could make contact with the VC. We had been re-supplied with ammunition but not food. Food carried by the soldiers when the operation started had been consumed, so we started buying pigs and chickens from the peasants, and in some cases the peasants didn't want to sell; they rarely smiled when they were paid. We found a small pineapple field, and fortunately the pineapples were ripe. The fruit was all consumed in a day by the hungry soldiers, and the two US advisors.

One night when Tuan, Khe and I were asleep in our hammocks, which were about ten feet apart, we were awakened by several loud explosions which sounded like 105 artillery rounds landing just a few yards away. Tuan was shouting, "Get on the ground," and I tumbled out of my hammock. After four rounds the firing stopped, and I was reaching for my boots because I thought the VC would make a night attack after firing that concentration. However, Tuan was shouting on the radio; he was not at all concerned about an attack. The day before Tuan had contacted the 105 battery that was located at Dau Tieng and requested that four rounds of fire referred to as harassing and interdiction fire (H & I) be placed on a tree line700 yards away at 2400 and at 0500. The rounds landed about 500 yards short of the tree line. The artillery lieutenant told Tuan that they had not made an error and that the rounds had been short because the artillery pieces were old and worn. Tuan cancelled the 0500 mission. One of our soldiers was killed by these "short" rounds. If these weapons were that old and inaccurate, the seven

billion dollars that the United States spent to improve the ARVIN was not spent on upgrading the artillery. At 0500 four more rounds landed in almost exactly the same spots where the four rounds hit five hours earlier. Tuan immediately grabbed the radio and after a long talk with the artillery commander, he couldn't hide his disgust. The artillery commander said that his shift had come on duty at 0200, and that they did not receive any message telling them not to fire the scheduled 0500 mission.

After our big battle on 10 May, it appeared that the large VC unit, which we identified as the 104th VC Battalion had pulled back to a safe area to regroup. Smaller VC units, most likely platoons, engaged us in short fire-fights almost every day. After these fights we would place the dead VC in an open field and have the local peasants bury them. Later we found out that at night the peasants or VC would return and remove the bodies. American visitors had a morbid fascination with dead VC. When helicopters landed the visitors would immediately head for the VC bodies to take pictures. I don't remember any visitors ever taking pictures of our dead. Our dead all looked alike. They were all in army uniforms. Their haircuts were all the same. They all looked to be about 18 years old. Most of the dead VC were in black pajamas. They varied in age. Some looked as young as 13 and others as old as 60. Their hair was usually short, but it looked like each one of them had patronized a different amateur barber. Unlike the ARVIN dead, many of the VC were not clean-shaven. Within the regiment there was never any celebrating over the VC bodies. The reaction seemed to be that unfortunately we had to kill them, or they would have killed us.

We moved north along the edge of the jungle to the hamlet site, and secured the area and started to clear the underbrush. Bulldozers, engineers, and laborers were to be provided by the Tri Tam District Chief whose headquarters was at Dau Tieng, a village that was located ten miles west of the Pho Binh hamlet site. Dau Tieng was about the same size as Ben Cat, and it was a government held island surrounded by VC. When we contacted the district chief, he informed us that there would be a delay in starting the construction of the hamlet because he couldn't get necessary parts for the bulldozer, and he was having difficulty recruiting laborers.

The day after we reached the hamlet site Tuan received a copy of an old Vietnamese newspaper from a local peasant. Since the start of our operation, we had not received news from any source. Tuan

was livid after he read just a few lines on the front page. He told me that on 8 May something far more important had happened than the initiation of our operation, and he called for a staff meeting.

The article in the small, tattered paper said that in Hue government troops had fired into a crowd of Buddhists on Buddha Jayanti Day, the birthday of Buddha. The Buddhists were engaged in a peaceful celebration, but this celebration was being held on the same day as Catholics were celebrating the silver jubilee of Ngo Dinh Thuc's ordination as bishop. Thuc was Diem's brother. Diem was concerned about the growing influence of the Buddhists; to disperse the Buddhists, troops fired into the crowd. Nine Buddhists were killed and many more injured. Tuan, a Catholic, was as outraged as the Buddhist officers on his staff. They could not believe that soldiers would commit such an atrocity. Tuan said that this incident would make it much more difficult to defeat the Viet Cong. Tuan was also very unhappy that he had not been notified about this incident by radio.

Just a few days after Tuan received the newspaper, we were notified that Colonel Thieu was coming for a visit. While we had several US Generals and a number of other senior US officers visit us so far during Operation Pho Binh, this was the first and the only visit by any ARVIN officer. When Thieu arrived he talked briefly with the members of Tuan's staff, and then he had a lengthy private conversation with Tuan. Tuan said little about his conversation with Thieu, and I was certain that they talked about a possible coup because Tuan talked freely about everything except the coup that we all knew was going to be initiated, but we had no idea when.

In addition to being critically short of food, we were always short of water. From a small nearby creek we were able to get enough water for drinking and cooking. The water was reasonably clear but two water purification tablets for each quart were considered necessary to make it safe. We also had enough water for a helmet full each day for cleaning purposes. After shaving and washing my face I would use whatever water remained in my helmet to wash the part of my body that I thought was the foulest. Usually I would wash armpits one day, the crotch the next, and the feet the third day. However, the rainy season was starting, and this meant more water in the creek. One afternoon the sky turned black, and what some of the Vietnamese said was the heaviest downpour they had ever seen started. We forgot about the Viet Cong because they weren't going anywhere in this downpour, and we all took off our clothes and had a

long and fairly warm shower.

One day while we were on a patrol in a lightly wooded area about a mile from where we were bivouacked a helicopter flew over at about 600 feet. We tried, but failed, to make contact. Usually we could make quick contact with the crews of helicopters that were supporting us. The helicopter made a wide circle and descended several hundred feet. As it passed over us the second time we were sprayed with machine gun fire, and one of our soldiers was hit in the shoulder. It circled again to make another pass and Tuan said, "If he continues firing we will shoot him down." Fortunately, on the next pass we did not receive any fire. Days later a helicopter crew that landed in our area told me that there were many visitors coming to Saigon, and that helicopter crews who were not familiar with our area of operations were taking them on flights over contested areas. The crewman said that we probably made the day for a visitor. He would probably go back to America and tell about the fire fight his helicopter had with a large VC unit.

On 26 May, eighteen days after the operation started, the bulldozer and some laborers with oxcarts arrived. The laborers had been hired to help move the peasants, and to build the huts in the hamlet. A company from the regiment provided security for them as they moved to the hamlet site, and they had a vicious fire fight with a large VC unit less than a mile from the site.

Requests for food were sent daily. We discovered several large caches of brown rice which were obviously intended to feed VC units. The pigs and chickens in the area had all been consumed, so now we were faced with meals consisting of nothing but rice. We were informed that we were not getting food because it was planned that we would be supplied by the unreliable H-21 helicopters, but after the operation started it was decided that these helicopters would not fly to Pho Binh because of the heavy VC fire and maintenance problems. The Vietnamese would not allow their large H-34 helicopters to bring in food and the US would not allow the Hueys to be used for this purpose. One day we were notified that we would get an air drop of food. As the plane approached at a low altitude it was fired upon by the VC and suddenly the plane turned and left the area without making the drop. Days later I learned that one of the stray VC rounds had hit the pilot in the leg, and so the mission was aborted.

One day Colonel Wilson, the man who could make things happen, dropped in for one of his periodic visits. I told him about our critical food problem, and to my surprise I got a lecture about how

expensive it was to transport food by helicopter. He said we needed to get a road opened to take care of this problem. I was stunned by his remarks, and I remember thinking that I hoped he would have a real tough steak that night.

On a number of occasions the regiment's executive officer at Ben Cat was informed that helicopters were going to be available to transport food, so he purchased large quantities of meat and fresh food, and it would spoil because the promised choppers would be cancelled at the last minute.

In the field we ate in four or five man groups. I ate with Tuan, Khe, and the regiment's surgeon. I found a way for the four of us to supplement our all rice diet. About every eight days a helicopter carrying mail would arrive. I wrote home and asked my wife to send small packages containing small cans of meat. After the packages arrived, each night I would open a can of vienna sausages and share them with my three dining companions. A sausage significantly improved a plain bowl of rice, but each day I yearned for a can of C-rations.

Each week it became more difficult to send mail. I carried my stamps in my billfold, and after it had been soaked many times by rain and sweat the stamps became more and more reluctant to stick to the envelope. Some of my letters which were sent on a helicopter one week would be returned the next week for postage because the stamps had fallen off the envelopes before they reached the post office. Needless to say this had a very adverse impact on morale, but those in high places were interested in body counts and not mail problems. Fortunately, during mid-1963, after advisors had been in the field for over three years, free mail was finally authorized.

As soon as construction on the hamlet began we rounded up the peasants and assembled them in an area adjacent to the hamlet site. The laborers from Dau Tieng helped move the peasants belongings in their oxcarts. The laborers were doing a very poor job in constructing the huts, and they were working very slowly. One reason for their poor performance was that they were living on a starvation diet and another was that they didn't trust the district chief. They said that he had never paid them for jobs they had done for him in the past, and most of the laborers expressed doubt that they would get paid for this job. At first we had soldiers watch the laborers because we thought that they might be VC, but after a few days we decided that although they had no use for Ngo Dinh Diem they didn't care who won the war. They just

wanted to get paid.

The bulldozer was constantly breaking down, and it often took several days to get necessary parts to the site. The peasants were angry because we had moved them out of their homes and because they now had to walk several miles to get to their fields. Emergency requests were submitted daily through Vietnamese and American channels for food and other supplies for the peasants. Canned milk for the children, clothes, blankets, and medical supplies were desperately needed, but never received. The officers and men in the regiment collected what money they could spare and contacted the regiment's executive officer at Ben Cat and had him purchase canned milk which he sent to Pho Binh on an administrative helicopter. The regiment's psychological warfare officer who had been telling the peasants how much better life would be once they were under government control said that because of the lack of support he was too ashamed to face them.

As was to be expected able bodied peasants started to desert. Some were found when we were making sweeps through the area but many disappeared. I talked a great deal with a boy who appeared to be about 12 years old. We became good friends. When he disappeared Captain Khe said that he thought the boy would be leaving soon because he was now old enough and big enough to be useful to the VC.

One afternoon as we returned from a patrol we received a call from a pilot informing us that he had General Timmes on board, and he wanted to know if the area was secure. As soon as the chopper landed the dynamic general bounded out the door and headed for the nearest group of soldiers and enthusiastically shook every available hand and told each soldier what a great job he was doing. The soldiers, not understanding a word nodded and smiled. After greeting everyone in the area he turned to me and asked me to tell him about the progress that was being made in the area. I never submitted a phony highly optimistic report which would lead the generals to make ridiculous statements such as, "The war will be over by Christmas," or "We now see the light at the end of the tunnel." Timmes would get nothing but the facts from me.

I could see the astonished look on his face when I told him that absolutely no progress was being made, and that in my opinion the VC were getting much stronger in the area. I spelled out exactly why I had reached these conclusions. I could see that he was shocked and upset, and upon parting he said that

everything I had told him was just the opposite of all the highly encouraging comments he had heard about the progress that was being made in the area.

Two days later my immediate superior, LTC Miller, a frank and honest officer, leaped out of his helicopter and grabbed me by the shoulder and said, "Bob, what in the world did you tell General Timmes?" After I spelled out what I had told him, I asked Miller if I had made and accurate report. He said, "Yes, it's accurate but don't you know Timmes likes to hear good not bad news." Miller let me know that I did the right thing by giving an honest report, but that I needed to be more tactful and break the bad news to him gently and try to mix a few bits of good news in with the bad. I remembered Xeres, the king of Persia about 2400 years ago, had the tongue of a messenger removed because the messenger had reported that the enemy was strong and fighting well. Fortunately, Timmes was more compassionate than Xeres. It was now clear to me why the intelligent, energetic, and daring Timmes was so poorly informed about the progress of the war, and I wished that he would talk to just one Vietnamese, on either side, to get their opinion of the domino theory.

Throughout the entire operation the US Hueys had evacuated our dead and wounded, so we were surprised to hear that an ARVIN H-34 was responding to our call to have wounded evacuated. With the Vietnamese crew on the H-34 was an American medic. He told me that a few Americans had been assigned to work with the Vietnamese on medical evacuations. I got the impression that this was his first trip to the field. As the chopper was leaving a few of what I considered to be harmless shots were fired by VC who were a considerable distance away. Several days later a Huey pilot asked me if I knew that the American medic had been killed as the H-34 was taking off. This was the last time a H-34 came to our area.

Early one morning about 20 soldiers were assembled with all of their equipment. This group was going to be escorted by a patrol to a point in the jungle where it was considered reasonably safe, and then they would continue on their own until they reached Ben Cat. These men had completed the service that was required of them when they were drafted, and now they were going to be separated from the army. Tuan spoke with them for about 15 minutes and thanked them for their loyal and courageous service. You could feel the emotion as the teenagers who were leaving shook hands and waved to the teenagers they

were leaving behind.

As the group faded into the jungle I thought that it was astonishing that they had lived through so many battles, and endured so many hardships, and they had survived. Captain Khe was standing next to me as they departed. I often thought that Khe could read my mind, but this time he was wrong when he asked, "Do you think that it is strange that we are discharging soldiers when we are in the middle of a war?" I told him that I didn't because I was sure that they were burnt out. He laughed and said that before the war was over many of them would fight again. He went on to say that some of them would probably end up fighting for the VC whether they wanted to or not. He laughed again and said, "We train them well for the VC." Then he looked very serious and said, "Regardless of where they go they will always know that we were very decent and compassionate soldiers."

I had always looked upon Khe as the ultimate survivor. He had been in countless battles, on both sides of the fence, for at least 13 years. I am sure that he was a loyal, tough fighter during the eight years he was with the communists, and he was now a loyal, tough fighter with the ARVIN. I am sure that he thought long and hard before he switched sides, but in all the ARVIN there could not be a tougher and more reliable warrior.

During the ten weeks that we had been on Operation Pho Binh not a single reporter had visited our area. I was glad that they hadn't because I got a gentle slap on the wrist for being too blunt with Timmes, and I would probably be even more direct if I was talking to a reporter. Late one afternoon as we were returning from a patrol a helicopter was landing. When I was about 50 yards from the chopper I met Captain Bean who was one of the intrepid Huey pilots who had supported us so well throughout the operation. He pointed toward the chopper and said that Pamela Saunders, a Newsweek reporter, would like to talk to me. I looked and saw this attractive blonde who looked immaculate and then I looked at Bean in his clean well pressed uniform and suddenly I felt like either Willie or Joe, the famous characters in WWII cartoons. My face bore many scratches from using a razor for too many shaves. My uniform was torn and filthy, and I just didn't feel like talking to a reporter, so I thanked Bean and walked away.

After being in the area about two weeks, and after completing less than one-fourth of the wall that was to be built around the hamlet we were notified that the bulldozer was in such bad shape that it was

going to be returned to Dau Tieng where it would have a major overhaul. Only a few very poorly constructed huts had been completed by the laborers, and in groups of two or three they had taken their ox-carts and returned to Dau Tieng. The VC never bothered them. When some of them departed they said that they still had never been paid. Of the several hundred adult peasants that we had assembled at one time only 37 women and 7 very elderly men remained at the hamlet site. It was obvious that Pho Binh had been a vain endeavor.

During the operation I developed a great deal of respect for the young Vietnamese soldiers. Despite their constant hunger, the pressure of being under fire almost daily, the primitive living conditions in the jungle, and being rewarded with just a tiny pittance, they displayed a great deal of courage on the battlefield. They obeyed every order without question. When wounded they hid their pain and they never complained about waiting a long time to be evacuated. They were very considerate when dealing with the peasants even though they knew that these peasants were the mothers and sisters of the VC we were fighting. Even prisoners, as soon as they had been disarmed, were treated as friends.

During the weeks we were in the field I had many opportunities to observe and to talk with the officers about the VC. A question I had often wondered about was why the VC were so highly motivated, and why they fought so hard. Unlike the ARVIN soldier, they were not drafted and then released when their term of service expired. The VC were in this battle for life. Americans had come half way around the world to help win their hearts and minds. From what I had seen their hearts and minds were not to be won. I learned that in the Pho Binh area many of the peasants had been farming "their" land for almost ten years, but to the government they were squatters. If the government gained control of the area the peasants could be pushed off the land, and the absentee owners could take possession. The peasants chafed under the French. They worshipped Ho Chi Minh because they gave him credit for ending French rule. They were curious about Americans, and they couldn't understand why we would support a tyrant like Ngo Dinh Diem. If they knew about the domino theory they would have found it every bit as funny as did the ARVIN. One Vietnamese officer said that anyone who thought that any Vietnamese leader would join forces with the Chinese didn't know anything about the history of Vietnam and how happy the Vietnamese were to get rid of the Chinese after an 800 year struggle.

Our life at Pho Binh was made somewhat bearable by the weekly administrative helicopter which brought the mail and I looked forward with great anticipation to a drink of clean water which the crew usually gave me from the water jug they had on board. Also, on the admin chopper we could evacuate any wounded or ill soldiers. One day as the chopper landed we got two soldiers ready to load, but when the doors opened I saw that all the seats on the chopper, which were usually empty for our use were filled with officers ranging from captain to lieutenant colonel. I asked a major who was sitting by the door what they were doing on our admin chopper. He said, "Haven't you heard? It was recently announced that the air medal would be awarded to anyone who made six trips to the field in a chopper." I grabbed the pilot, a young lieutenant, and asked him what was going on. He told me that the announcement was made about the awarding of air medals several days ago and that ever since there had been REMFs hanging around the choppers in Saigon just looking for a ride to go anywhere, and he was told to take some of them if he had room. Fortunately, our soldiers were only lightly wounded because they didn't get out that day.

A few days later Wilson landed in our area and I told him about our admin chopper. The look on his face spoke volumes. I knew that our admin chopper would never again come to our area with "strap hangers" aboard, and I knew that before the day was over someone in Saigon would deeply regret that he filled our chopper with award seekers. In the months ahead I never heard of a field advisor, many who were on numerous flights into hot areas, ever being awarded the air medal. Perhaps it was awarded to those who were assigned in Saigon who had the time to leave their desks to go on the flights and had the typewriters to type up their recommendations for the award.

Early one morning Tuan received an order that came as no surprise, the 7th Regiment was to terminate operations in the Pho Binh area and return to Ben Cat. The VC had become more active along Highway 13 since we had left our base camp area well over two months ago. The few peasants who were still in the Pho Binh area would return to their homes, and the jungle would soon swallow up all signs of our occupation of the area.

As we left the area I knew that Tuan and Khe shared my thoughts. We could only marvel that three such prime targets could walk out of Pho Binh after so many days of contact with the VC. I know

that we were all sad because there would be no government controlled hamlet in the area but after the first few weeks, each of us knew that Pho Binh was a vain endeavor. On this date I could never have guessed that about five years later a powerful US Army division of over 16,000 well-armed, well-equipped, and well-fed men, supported by ARVIN units and almost unlimited air support, would also be unsuccessful in gaining control of this same area.

Nothing had changed in my little hut at Ben Cat. The same number of hand grenades were in the box a few feet from my bed, and the four rat traps had not been touched. MSGT Fulton G. Parks one of the two US advisors to the 3rd Battalion which was in base camp walked in with a big smile on his face and told me that I should have been there one day earlier because yesterday Wilson had been there to take a look at our area. I had heard that once in awhile Wilson would inspect the base camps of his subordinate units to make sure that their morals were not being adversely affected by pictures of scantily clad ladies hanging on the walls. Obviously these would be pictures not issued by the Army. When he looked at our walls and saw numerous pictures of hams, cakes, steaks, etc. which had been removed from old magazines, he growled, "What is this?" Parks explained that it was customary for soldiers to display pictures of what they missed the most. Parks said this comment triggered a mild growl, but of course, no order to remove them.

After each operation a long and detailed after action report was required, and for the Pho Binh Operation it would be unusually long. In the JOC the after action reports were often closely poured over, usually not for content but to see if some grammatical error could be spotted. A split infinitive or a missing comma was proof to the reader that he was superior to those dolts in the field, and I was sure that some of my former comrades at the JOC would love to spot errors in my report, but that was the least of my worries as I took the dust cover off of my ancient machine. I was thankful that about 18 years ago at Blaine High School I had enough nerve to ignore the taunts of my classmates and take a sissy typing course. Although I was slow and inaccurate my typing skills had served me well on so many occasions.

In 14 long single-spaced pages I spelled out the problems that we had encountered, why the operation was foolhardy from its inception, and why a hamlet project could not succeed in that area. I was well aware that reports such as this one could be harmful to an army officer's career.

In the report I spelled out that it was a foolhardy operation from the start because a much smaller government force could not eliminate a larger, well armed VC unit which had the full support of the peasants. I also pointed out that since we had uprooted them from their homes and had taken all their pigs and chickens and had failed to supply them with basic necessities they were now more anti-government than they were before we entered the area. I was pleased to be able to report that I did not know of a single instance where a peasant had been abused in any way by one of our soldiers. As I read the report over I noticed that it did not contain a single negative comment about the 7th Regiment. I now identified with the unit I advised. Just before we initiated the operation I was told that a senior staff officer at MACV said, "The war will be won or lost in Binh Duong Province, so what Binh Duong wants Binh Duong gets." The way it turned out, we wanted a lot but got next to nothing.

I was told that General Harkins was so upset with LTC John Vann after Vann had submitted a negative report that he talked to Timmes about having Vann relieved. I wondered what the reaction would be to my report, and several days after I submitted it I found out. One of Wilson's senior staff officers told me that during a III Corps meeting Wilson said that everyone had to read my report, and that this was the first time he had ever directed that everyone read a report.

Shortly after we returned to Ben Cat we received information that a VC unit, estimated to be about 100 strong, was bivouacked to the northwest of Ben Cat. At that time our 1st Battalion was located in a position where they could move on the VC from the west and Tuan along with elements of the 2nd Battalion would close on the VC from the east. Hopefully, we could trap them. Both elements of the 7th Regiment were scheduled to move out early the next morning. At about 0100 we received a call from the 1st Battalion saying that they had many killed by a hand grenade. At one company eleven soldiers, including all but one of the company's officers, were lying in a tight circle around a smoldering camp fire. All had shrapnel in their chests and in their legs below their knees. They had all been in the typical Vietnamese squatting position when the hand grenade exploded in the center of the circle. All eleven had been killed immediately. Cards and money surrounded the small bonfire. A number of candles were scattered around the area, and from a nearby tree an army lantern sputtered loudly in the darkness as if it was protesting that it was being called upon to cast its light on what was perhaps the most ghastly sight on

the face of the earth. In addition to the dead, one soldier was slightly wounded. An investigation revealed that the wounded soldier had lost all of his money in the game and in a fit of anger tossed the grenade in the middle of the circle. The operation was cancelled and the soldier was sent under guard to Bien Hoa. I asked Tuan what punishment he would receive. Tuan said that he would be executed.

During subsequent operations in the vicinity of Ben Cat I noticed that peasants who had been our friends several months ago no longer supported us. Vietnamese officers said that the slaughter that took place in Hue on 8 May and the anti-government actions which had been initiated by the Buddhist monks had eroded government support. It was now obvious that there would be a coup in the not too distant future, and I knew that the 7th Regiment would play a key role in this coup.

Even in Ben Cat our support had eroded. One day M/Sgt Parks and I went downtown to get haircuts. We knew that VC often came to town to shop, but during the past year there had been very few VC initiated incidents in the small village. As Parks got in the barber's chair I sat on a chair in the doorway looking down the street with my weapon on my lap when Parks yelled, "I thought you were going to provide security for me." I said, "I am, I'm watching everyone on the street." He said, "Don't watch them, keep your eye on the barber, he has a razor near my neck."

Several weeks after we returned to Ben Cat Wilson stopped for a visit, and I noticed that he took a long look at our pictures of hams and cakes. He asked me how I felt, and I told him pretty good. I had been told a number of times that I looked very pale and thin. He asked me how much weight I had lost since I joined the 7th Regiment, and I told him a little over fifty pounds. I had dropped from 205 to about 150. He nodded and left.

Several days later I received a call from the executive officer of the 5th Division Advisory Group. He told me that replacements, including majors, were arriving and that our new division senior advisor, who had recently replaced Miller, wanted to assign them to field slots. For my last few months I was being assigned as the G-4 advisor of the 5th Division. I thought about my recent conversation with Wilson, and I suspected that he may have triggered this action.

I had mixed emotions. While in the field you always knew that any day you could be one of the casualties, and after all these months with the 7th Regiment I was just starting to think that there was a good

chance that I would see the California coast line again. As the G-4 advisor I would be living in a safe compound in a safe town with about 30 other Americans. The thought of eating three meals a day in an American mess hall seemed to be too good to be true. I would no longer be setting rat traps at night, and I would no longer have the unpleasant task of emptying them in the morning.

In spite of all the creature comforts I would have at division, I had some strong ties with the 7th Regiment. I would never have finer friends than Tuan, Khe, and many of the other Vietnamese officers who I had worked with, and suffered with, during some very difficult and dangerous months. I left my hut and went to the small, bare, windowless building that served as our headquarters. Tuan was looking at a map as I entered the office. I told my close friend and comrade that I was leaving. He told me that I had been with him longer than any other advisor, and he knew that before long I would be going back to the states. He said, "You have been through a great deal with us. We will miss you."

My replacement arrived two days before I was to depart. On my last day I packed my few belongings and emptied the traps for the last time, and I went to the headquarters building to say goodbye to my comrades. Tuan had assembled about 20 officers in a half circle and made a short but very moving speech and then handed me a regimental plaque, a gift from the officers, and a large Vietnamese history book. On the third page he had written, "To dear Major Robert M Bayless, my advisor and my companion during our worse time with guerilla warfare VC forces in Pho Binh – Ben Cat District Binh Duong Province! Maj Vu Ngoc Tuan CO 7th Infantry Regiment."

Tuan and Khe accompanied me to the helipad that was less than 100 yards from our compound. This was the only time I had ever seen an empty helicopter land at Ben Cat. As I climbed aboard Khe handed me my carbine. At this time I had no way of knowing that I'd never fire the carbine again.

## MISERY LEVEL TWO

The assignment at Binh Hoa was what I would classify as a misery level two assignment. It was only miserable because I was half a world away from home. Waiting for me at Binh Hoa were my orders for my assignment in the United States after I left Vietnam, which I thought would be on 15 December 1963. I was going back to the Military Assistance Training Advisor school at Fort Bragg for six months on

temporary duty (TDY) as an instructor and then I was going to the US Army Command and Staff College to attend a course that lasts almost a year.

One of the first things I was told at Binh Hoa was that I was eligible for a mid-tour five-day rest and relaxation (R&R) trip to Hong Kong or Bangkok. No one had ever told me about these trips while I was in the field. Captain Peter Jones who had also served many months in extremely dangerous areas as the advisor to one of the battalions in the 7th Regiment had also been transferred from the field to Binh Hoa, and we submitted our applications for a trip to Hong Kong. Several days later a staff officer in Saigon called and said that our requests were disapproved because the R&R trips were to give servicemen a mid-term break , and Jones and I were not eligible because we were much to close to our rotation dates. Fortunately, a few days later someone with common sense saw our requests and notified us that our requests were approved.

After Pete and I arrived in Saigon we were faced with the problem of getting to Ton Son Nhut airport, about six miles away, to catch our plane. We were stranded at the Brink Hotel near the center of town. The US Navy controlled all local transportation in Saigon. I called and identified myself and asked for a military cab. The sailor who took my call expressed his regrets and informed me that there were absolutely no vehicles available.

We didn't have very much time to get to the airport, so I decided to take another approach. I knew that AF and Army captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels lived at the Brink. Generals, Admirals, Colonels, and Navy Captains lived at the Rex Hotel which was a ten minute walk away, and I knew how much clout a Navy Captain had in Saigon. I called again and said, "This is Major Bayless, Captain Jones has ordered me to get him a cab for two, and he will meet the cab in 20 minutes at the main entrance of the Rex Hotel. Now cabs were available, "Yes Sir," the sailor responded, "Let Captain Jones know his cab will be there as requested." There was a large "Captain Jones" sign on the windshield as the cab, driven by a Vietnamese driver pulled up to the hotel right on time, and Pete and I were on our way to Ton Son Nhut and five days in Hong Kong.

When we returned from Hong Kong we learned that what we had thought was a wild rumor was actually happening. The rumor was that Kennedy was going to cut back on the number of Americans in

Vietnam because the war was almost won. Specific advisory positions were identified which were to be deleted, and our military strength in Vietnam was to be reduced by one thousand during the next few months. I wondered if Kennedy had made this decision because he believed the wildly optimistic reports about the war being won or if he was pulling us out because he saw that we were not making any progress, and he decided that Americans should not be fighting in this Vietnamese war.

Another bit of interesting news that we heard when we returned was that Robert McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor were in Vietnam with a team to get a first hand look at what was happening. One of their scheduled stops was at our advisory group headquarters in Binh Hoa. We were informed that key briefers while they were in Binh Hoa were to be General Timmes, and some other staff officers from Saigon. Our recently assigned senior advisor to the 5th Division would also address the visitors. I wondered why they were coming to Binh Hoa to hear the briefing if it was to be conducted by Saigon personnel.

Prior to their arrival we were informed that a number of us were to be allowed to sit in on this high level briefing and that we may be called upon to answer questions, but we were warned to be very careful of what we said because McNamara and Taylor were brilliant, and that they knew the answer to every question before they asked it. But we also knew that they had been easily misled by overly optimistic briefings in the past, so they might not be too brilliant. Shortly before the visitors were scheduled to arrive we were notified that McNamara would not be with the team. He had to choose between coming to the briefing at Bien Hoa or visiting with some civilian officials in Saigon. He chose the civilians. McNamara had made other visits to Vietnam, and he had left the impression that he didn't want to waste his time talking to enlisted men or junior officers. He preferred to have long conferences with Diem, high-ranking officers, and high-ranking civilian officials. We had heard that when John Vann, perhaps the finest and most knowledgeable advisor in Vietnam, had recently returned to the states. He immediately went to the Pentagon and attempted to present a briefing to McNamara and high-ranking officers. They refused to see him. Perhaps they were afraid that he would tell them some things that they didn't want to hear. I never heard of a single instance where McNamara talked with an advisor at regiment or battalion level. Because McNamara was so aloof, and never talked to the advisors who were in filthy fatigues and dirty boots, he