

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Films Montagnards

The Montagnard tribes are mountain living groups of villages and hamlets that inhabit Vietnam, Laos and Northern Cambodia See photo (1), that had their own set of rules, traditions and way of life. Those villages within Vietnam's territory were hard to comprehend. They had their own language or dialect that most Vietnamese couldn't understand. They were backward and isolated from or neglected to include the Montagnard people in the government sponsored programs.

Much of the Montagnard region was contested territory. The allies oversaw the Montagnard villages by day and the VC and NVA controlled the hamlets by night. The enemy forces took food, water, cattle or hostages to carry arms and war materials for the VC and NVA. Often taking hostages in retaliation for the Montagnard people aiding the U.S. forces. The Montagnard tribes were an abused society. I believe the Montagnard people, at least tolerated the American presence, if not generally liked our attention to their needs, with us asking for nothing but their knowledge of enemy troop movements.

The Montagnard villages I visited, the people seemed tight lipped, because any VC sympathizers in the hamlet would tell the VC or NVA of any suspicious acts that took place, during their absence. The consequences was undoubtedly death, thus the tribes people walked a tight rope, living in the contested area.

In areas where big game animals see photos 2 and 3, had their habitats, the Montagnards elevated their homes several feet off the ground. See photos 4 to 8. Around Bam Me Thout it wasn't uncommon to see ladders at the entrances to homes. See Montagnard MED-CAP at this web-site. Where wild animals weren't a danger the Montagnards built their homes on the ground see photos 9-17.

The most backward villages still relied on hunter/gather means of survival. Setting traps and snares for wild animals and collect the bounty of the jungle in the form of fruits and berries. Most villages advanced to soil cultivation see photos 18 to 21, but still the people looked in rice paddies for snails see photos 22 & 23.

Some Montagnard children were bundled up in blankets with facial features resembling Eskimos see photo 24-27. Most Montagnard children looked more Vietnamese see photos 28-29

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The Montagnard villages didn't have electric. The people didn't have autos. I recall seeing only one ox cart type wagon for hauling big loads. Few Montagnard people were privileged to own a bicycle. The masses walked everywhere they travelled. See photos 30-35. On market day some looked like refugees as they headed to town.

Most Montagnard villages seldom exceeded 250 people. Many hamlets averaged 75 people or less. When the civil affairs unit showed up the entire village turned out to greet the visitors as seen in photos 36 & 38.

Photos 39-41 show tobacco products were used by all ages. Men and women in Montagnard villages smoked pipes. Cigars resembling ice cream cones were smoked by young girls and cigarettes by young boys.

In larger Montagnard villages they had set aside a few speciality homes. The high pointed roofs in photos 42-45 illustrate the bachelor house. Other houses were set off for unmarried girls. See photo 46. called the Choui Hoi House

The weaving of cloth see photos 47-53, consumed much of the Montagnard womens time. Some were woven for family needs to keep warm in the cool mountain nights. Other woven products were taken to town on market day to trade or sell for products and goods the Montagnards didn't have. The men meanwhile used their handicraft in constructing cross-bows to sell on Market Day. G.I.s from all branches of service considered a Montagnard Cross-Bow as a prized trophy see photos 54-55

Working out of Pleiku, the photo team met up with a crusty cavalry sergeant that recently arrived from Ft. Carson, CO. By the late 1960's the army had few horse mounted ceremonial units left on active duty. He possessed knowledge and training vital for Montagnard Civil affairs work. He told us we were going to a backward village. He said they had small Shetland like ponies and the ponies roamed free, while the women carried heavy loads. He would show the villagers how to make a pack saddle.

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Using branches and twine readily available around the village the serge showed the Montagnard men how to make a simple pack saddle for their ponies. Taking loads from the women he loaded the small horses, demonstrating to the Montagnards that the ponies could be used as beasts of burden, rather than the women. While there he performed veterinary work as well. see photos 56-60.

Attending to the hygiene and health of the Montagnard people, the civil affairs units of Bam Me Thout, Pleiku, Kontum and other communities, conducted hundreds of MED-CAPS a week to remote and isolated Montagnard villages on a routine schedule. See photos 61-64

The cavalry sergeant wasn't finished with the photo team, telling us we should cover a ceremony that afternoon. Arriving at 4P.M., seven villages had showed up, each bringing a crock of moonshine. The serge tells the photo team that some villages started walking at noon to get here. He informs us we're the Honored Guests. It was certain this event had been planned before today. Without phones or cars, it would be impossible for seven villages to show up spontaneously.

I had heard all about drinking a MEASURE'S WORTH of Montagnard home brew. I really didn't want any part of the deal. But International Relations could be at stake, even though I felt the team had been hoodwinked.

James Mc Intosh of DASPO and this photo team, told me the Montagnards will use anything that will ferment, melons, rice, bananas, mangos, cantalopes, oranges to name a few ingredients. He says somewhere along the way they add yeast to the fermenting mess. Then just before serving they add the water.

He tells me, the Montagnards put a branch across the mouth of the crock, with a twig about one inch sticking down into the crock. The idea is to drink from a reed straw, to the bottom of the small twig. That's called drinking a MEASURE.

Continuing he informs me, that once the water is added to the concoction of yeast and fermenting fruit and vegetables the whole thing expands. If you drink slow, the crock will overflow and you'll never finish the MEASURE. He tells me, if you drink fast, before it expands to much, you'll get drunk PDQ.

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Armed with this forehand information, I knew what to expect. The sergeant took some 5 gallon water cans from his jeep to fill the crocks. The photo team wasn't expected to drink ONE MEASURE, but a MEASURE from each village's crocks. Everyone on the team refused to drink. No one knew the oriental mind or the Montagnards, or what would constitute an insult for them. Refusing to drink could equate to a slap in the face. and jeopardize weeks, months and thousands of manhours of work to gain the rapport the U.S. had with these Montagnard villages.

I grabbed the reed straw from the first crock filled and began to drink. It seemed the faster I drank the faster the mess expanded. I remember it had a bland taste. Then I stuck the straw from the second crock and sucked on both of them. The second crock's liquid was sweet, like it had watermelon or strawberries in the crock. By now both crocks were overflowing. The Montagnards were laughing at two straws at one time.

Getting nowhere, but drunk fast. I still had five more crocks to taste. I just moved down the line and took three reed straws and began drinking. The taste ranged from sweet to tart, like grapefruit. By now my head was spinning and the Montagnards laughing. No way could I drink a measure.

I staggered to the last two crocks, grabbing both of the reed straws, I started drinking, before I fell over drunk. The photo members helped me up to barf before getting to the truck. The whole episode took only 15 minutes. The last thing I remember, it was hard to be insulted with a grin on their faces: See photos 65-6b.

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