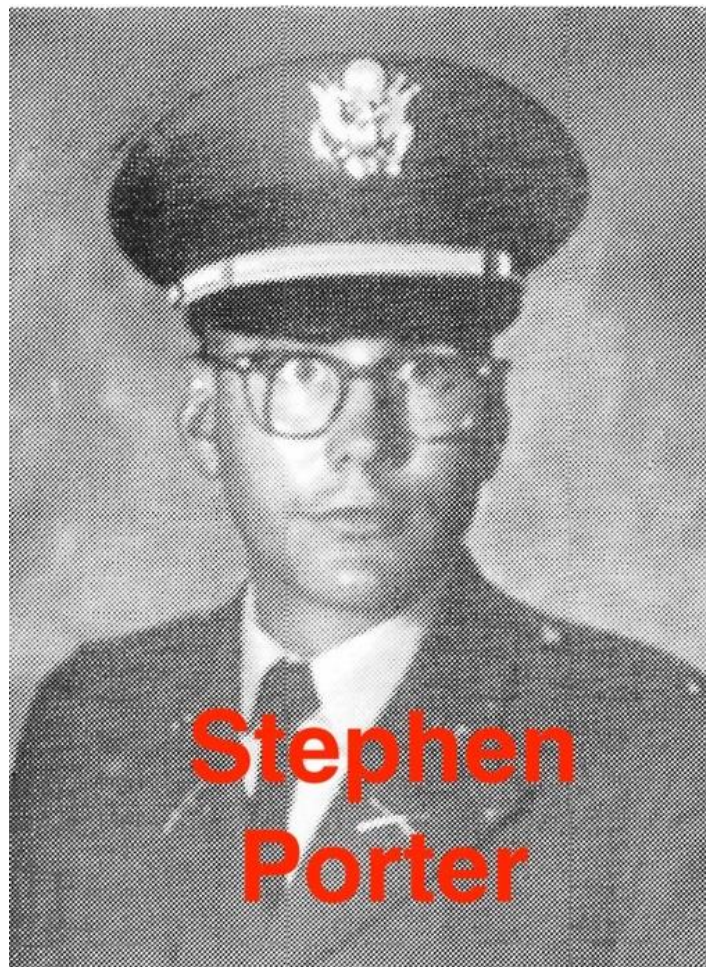
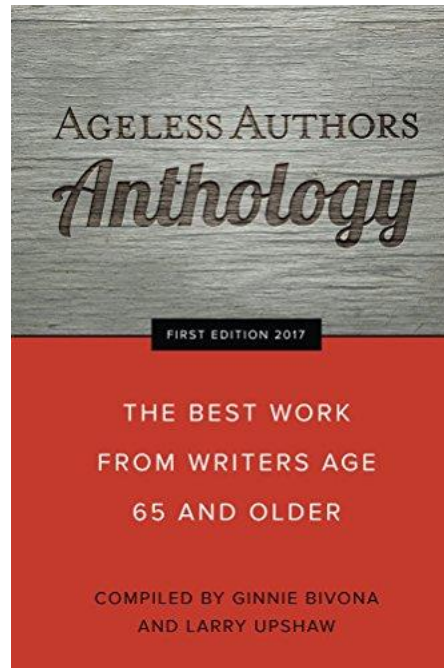




## *50<sup>th</sup> Company, August 1, 1969*

Recently, Stephen Porter, a 50<sup>th</sup> Company classmate from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon had a short story published in the Ageless Authors Anthology about an incident during his time in Vietnam, titled "Rice Paddy". It took second place in the writing contest. It's an easy read and relatable. Per Stephen Porter, "The story is mostly fiction, but I did have an interpreter named Phi and I did manage to get my jeep stuck in a rice paddy (but without the drama of a fire fight or blowing up a water buffalo.)"





The Ageless Authors Anthology proves that while old age may rob you of some function, Father Time doesn't necessarily take away your creativity. This volume is an extraordinary collection of poetry, essays and short stories from the Ageless Authors Writing Contest exclusively for writers age 65 and older from across the country. A second contest is now underway at [agelessauthors.com/current-contests/](http://agelessauthors.com/current-contests/) and the best writings will comprise the next edition of Ageless Authors Anthology in the fall. For this book, 52 senior writers contributed work that showcases the experience inherent in this older group. Some of the writers are widely published, while others have been toiling away in relative obscurity and this is the first time they've published their work. These writings are entertaining and memorable. Ageless Authors is the brainchild of Dallas writers Ginnie Bivona and Larry Upshaw, who compiled the work for this collection. Bivona is an 86-year-old novelist and poet who started writing in her fifties. Upshaw is a 70-year-old former journalist, ghostwriter, and marketing executive. They set out to prove that no one has to shut off their brain when they reach a certain age. "Ageless Authors captures the best offered by seasoned writers," says Vermont essayist Jean Yeager. "I'm grateful to be judged against my peers. We may be the fine aged wines of the writing world." Ageless Authors Anthology makes a great present for family, friends and especially seniors who are struggling to keep the creative fires burning.

RICE PADDY

by

STEPHEN C. PORTER

I stopped the jeep as Mr. Phi pondered the route most likely to lead us back to our district headquarters before the certain rain began. The black clouds boiling along the southern horizon signaled the beginning of the monsoon season.

Phi gazed out across the flat, patchwork quilt of rice paddies. The narrow road we were traveling snaked around the wet fields and past a distant hamlet in a time-consuming serpentine. The paved highway to Gia Dinh was an hour away if we stayed on the road.

“Think we could cut straight across on one of these wide paddy dikes?” I asked.

My head was throbbing and I could see us being caught in a downpour--with no top on my jeep.

When my interpreter didn't answer, I leaned forward, trying to see his face. Squinting out from under the green camouflage helmet, Phi resembled a box turtle.

“Am I being inscrutable?” he asked solemnly.

“I wish I'd never taught you that word.”

“Is it not a good word?”

“It's a very descriptive word. And sometimes you try a little too hard to match the description.”

My stomach began cramping again as Phi refocused his attention on the terrain ahead of us. Finally, he said, “I think to proceed carefully would be correct.”

“I'm not sure what the hell that means,” I said, “but I'm going across the paddy.”

We had spent the day in the neighboring province of Hau Nghia on a liaison visit to several villages near the Parrot's Beak area not far from Cambodia.

As an intelligence officer in the province that surrounded Saigon, part of my job was to obtain information on suspected Viet Cong infiltration routes.

Phi, a civilian, was visibly uneasy when we made these frequent journeys away from the Saigon area. I increased his discomfort by making him wear the steel helmet whenever we took the jeep outside Gia Dinh. The helmet swallowed his small head and looked out of place with his unvarying uniform--neatly pressed white cotton shirt, baggy gray pants, dusty leather sandals.

We had completed our circuit of outlying villages by early afternoon. I hoped to be back at the province HQ filing my report by 1700 hours and heading for happy hour at the Massachusetts BOQ; however, protocol required that we visit the remote compound commanded by a tough ARVN colonel named Tranh.

Tranh's battalion of local militia called Regional Forces/Popular Forces, known to the advisors as "Ruff/Puffs," was responsible for the protection of the district. Despite the civilian bureaucracy, Col. Tranh was the real power in the region.

He greeted me with his customary bravado. After watching the movie "Patton," he had begun carrying a swagger stick and wearing a pearl-handled .45.

I presented him with a carton of Marlboros--part of the monthly PX ration.

"Ah, cowboy cigarettes," he said, pantomiming a quick draw. Tranh was a great fan of American TV shows on the Armed Forces Network.

He ignored Phi altogether. He had no use for civilians.

My hopes for a brief visit dissolved when the colonel announced that he had invited several officials from the surrounding villages to join us for a luncheon of roast duck.

After eight months in Viet Nam, my digestive system had developed an uneasy tolerance for most native dishes--even the foul-tasting fish sauce, nuoc mam. I had successfully avoided a case of the trots for several weeks and wasn't eager to put my bowels to the test again.

We sat down under a thatched pavilion and my stomach held up pretty well until the wizened old village chief from Vinh Loc produced a set of dirty shot glasses and a plastic milk carton filled with homemade rice whiskey called ba xi de.

Encouraged by Tranh, the old man asked, "you fini with me, eh co van?"

This began a favorite sport--insisting that the American advisor toss down a glass of the raw whiskey with each of the Vietnamese.

Accustomed to this ritual, Phi watched impassively from the far end of the table. Through bleary eyes, I looked for his signal--a slight nod--that told me I had consumed enough of the rotten booze to satisfy my counterparts.

After what my interpreter deemed a decent interval, I stood up unsteadily. Pointing to the dial of my Seiko, I had Phi convey my appreciation for the information and the fine meal. Phi was also accustomed to such lies.

Col. Tranh walked me to my jeep and summoned an aide who brought me a farewell gift of six bottles of bitter beer call Ba Muoi Ba.

“Six pack to go!” Tranh proclaimed. We exchanged salutes and I eased myself into the jeep, grasping the steering wheel for support.

Determined to maintain my military bearing, I drove out of the compound and down the narrow dirt road. Once we were out of sight, I leaned out the side of the jeep and threw up the whisky, the duck, and the nuoc mam. No heaving or spasms; it all came up in one efficient gush.

I wiped my mouth with an olive drab handkerchief, and then put on my steel helmet.

Phi sat in stoic and polite silence until the jeep started moving.

“That goddamn Tranh gives me a case of the ass. Putting me through that drinking game in the middle of the day.”

“Case of the ass?”

Yeah. It’s an expression. You know, like a case of the clap.”

“The clap?” he asked, smacking his delicate hands together.

“Forget it, Mr. Phi. And put your steel pot on. We’re in Indian Country.”

And so in an effort to beat the monsoon, we bumped along the top of a paddy dike, my guts rumbling and my head pounding and Phi grasping the metal bars under his seat cushion, trying to hang on.

Distracted by the sight of a small boy herding a huge water buffalo, I never saw the break in the dike.

The nose of the jeep plunged down, jamming the front tires into the soft red mud, almost sending Phi through the windshield.

I threw the vehicle into reverse, trying to back out of the mire, but succeeded only in wedging the left rear wheel as well. I felt like I might throw up again.

“You okay, Mr. Phi?”

He tapped his steel pot.

“Good crash helmet.”

Still queasy, I dismounted from the jeep and heard the sucking sound of my boots sinking into the mud.

The boy herding the water buffalo stopped next to the jeep and stood thigh-deep in the water, watching me with alert brown eyes as I made my slippery circuit of the disabled vehicle.

The close proximity of the buffalo only added to my irritation. While it was fascinating to watch those massive, ill-tempered beasts being led and goaded by small children, it was a sight I preferred to observe from a safe distance. With a wary eye on the buffalo, I completed my inspection.

“Shit. We’re stuck, Mr. Phi. This jeep’s going nowhere.”

Phi ignored my grasp of the obvious. He had taken off his helmet and was standing at the front of the jeep, first scanning the paddies that surrounded us, then surveying the hamlet whose grass houses were only a hundred yards away. The sour odor of garbage mixed with the smell of rain heavy in the air. Our eyes met briefly, and I saw the faintest hint of uncertainty pass over his smooth face like the low clouds now blowing across the sky. Then the slight and constant smile returned.

“Does this give you another--umm, case of the ass?”

Off to the south, a dull rumble of thunder accentuated the seriousness of our situation. “Looks like we don’t have a lot of options,” I said. “Unless you have a brother-in-law living in that hamlet who owns a wrecker service, I think we’ll have to hike out of here.” Phi looked back at the way we had come, then turned and studied the distant tree line marking the Gia Dinh highway.

“It is a very long walk back to Col. Tranh’s compound,” Phi said.

“But Tranh can send one of his trucks to pull the jeep out of the mud. I can’t just leave it here.”

Phi looked at the sky. The sun was being swallowed by a huge, brooding cloud. “It will rain soon. A large rain, I think.”

Two young boys walked out from the hamlet to the place where Phi and I stood pondering our predicament. They watched us shyly, afraid to come too close.

The buffalo herder was less cautious and began talking to them with great animation and many gestures. Ignoring Phi and me, he stomped around the jeep, taking exaggerated steps in his bare feet. Then, placing his hands on his hips, he shouted:

“Shit! Stuck!”

The other boys howled with laughter and even Phi started chuckling. The boy had been doing a great impersonation of the angry American officer.

Soon more children appeared from the hamlet. With each arrival, the buffalo boy repeated his pantomime, stomping around the jeep with a serious expression on his face.

“Shit! Stuck!” he would cry, and the whole audience would squeal with laughter.

I dug around behind the seat of the jeep and pulled out my M-16 and a web harness containing two grenades and an ammo pouch with two extra magazines. Along with a .45 pistol, this was my standard traveling armament. I had left a neatly rolled poncho on the bed back in my quarters at Tan Binh.

“Think we should go ask the hamlet chief to watch the jeep until we get back?”

Phi looked at the hamlet for a long minute. Finally, he said, “No, I do not think so. This hamlet chief is not known to me.”

“Well, I’m sure that fine beer won’t be here when we get back.”

“Like you say, ‘easy come, easy leave’.”

He replaced the steel helmet on his head, and then said, “Before we go, I am needing to drain my lizard.”

He had learned that expression from me and the other advisors. He stepped down behind the paddy dike and relieved himself while I buckled on the harness and slung the rifle on my shoulder.

When Phi climbed back up on the dike, the uncertainty had returned to his face.

Glancing around, I realized that the children had disappeared, as though they had silently submerged into the dirty waters of the rice fields. The buffalo stood alone, tossing its massive head restlessly.



I don't know which I saw first--the bullets splattering the mud or the puffs of smoke from the garbage heaps outside the hamlet. In a split second I knew we were under fire.

I dove into Phi like a fullback laying the perfect downfield block. I knocked the slender man into the muddy water as I heard the deadly, unmistakable clatter of AK-47s.

Phi gasped for his wind, but nodded that he was okay as we crawled up against the embankment. His brown eyes were wide with fear; I could only guess what he saw in mine. We were well-protected by the paddy dike, but the shooting continued, the rounds thudding into the other side of the dirt wall.

We had landed close to the jeep and the rifles seemed to be spraying bullets up and down the length of the dike.

"We'd better get away from this jeep. If they hit the gas tank, it'll blow all to hell."

Phi raised his head slightly, listening. I was still clutching my M-16, but had given little thought to returning fire.

"I don't think they will shoot this jeep. Maybe they would like to have this jeep."

Although the two AKs were firing into the dike on either side of the vehicle, the obvious target hadn't been hit.

I motioned to Phi; he and I rolled over several times until we came to rest directly under the place where the jeep was mired.

Pulling myself up to the top of the embankment, I could see through a space between the mud and the underside of the vehicle. The puffs of smoke from the hamlet indicated two shooters about twenty yards apart, concealed in the stinking refuse piles behind the line of huts. They were aiming carefully, avoiding both the jeep and the water buffalo, which was sloshing about in the paddy between my vantage point and the hamlet.

By wedging the barrel of my weapon underneath the jeep, I would have a field of fire. But if I did start firing, would my enemies change their minds about saving the vehicle? And could I really see anything to shoot at?

While I was pondering these matters with great indecision, the firing stopped.

Simultaneously the first big drops of rain began pelting the camouflage cover of my helmet. From across the paddy, a high, thin voice shouted something in Vietnamese.

“They would like your jeep, Trung uy,” my interpreter said.

“I really hate it when you’re right, Ong Phi.”

“He says we can go. Leave jeep.”

“Would they settle for a six-pack of warm beer?”

The rain was falling harder now, plastering Phi’s black hair across his forehead. His steel pot was submerged somewhere in the rice paddy.

“I can’t just abandon U.S. Government property to the enemy,” I said, without much conviction.

Dammit, I thought. If the VC bastards hadn’t opened fire, they could have had the jeep without a fight by waiting until Phi and I were out of sight--assuming they could haul it out of the mud before we returned with Tranh’s Ruff/Puffs. Now I was putting my life on the line for a hunk of olive drab steel.

The voice from the hamlet shouted over the sound of the rain.

Phi said, “He asked again for the jeep.”

“If John Wayne were here, he would tell the sons of bitches to come and take it.”

Phi hesitated. “Maybe we should not make them angry with our reply.”

“Then don’t say anything. Let ‘em guess what we’re up to.”

“What are we up to, Trung uy?”

“I wish the hell I knew.”

The rain was blowing in sheets now, a billowing curtain of water. The poncho would have been nice.

“Listen, Mr. Phi,” I yelled into his ear. “You’re a civilian. You don’t have to be here.

Just slip off through that paddy behind us while this rain is falling. You can angle over to the highway and get back to Gia Dinh.”

“I will go to Col Tranh’s compound and get help,” he said over the wind.

“No. Too far and too dangerous. There may be beaucoup VC in that hamlet.”

He put his hand on my shoulder.

“You come, too.”

“I can’t. Here, take my pistol.” I unsnapped the holster, but Phi shook his head violently. “I am not a soldier. I will go to Col. Tranh.”

He held out his small, wet hand and I squeezed it.

“You don’t even like Col. Tranh.”

“That will make disturbing him more pleasant.”

With that, Phi slid down the side of the dike and started moving through the water in a low crouch. He turned back to me, a goofy smile on his face.

“See you later, alligator,” he called.

“Yeah, yeah, after a while, crocodile. Now get the hell out of here.”

I watched his slender form dissolve into the storm. He would be exposed when he climbed over the next criss-crossing dike, but with the driving rain and near darkness, he stood a chance of being unseen--especially if I created a diversion.

I rolled to my left, away from the jeep, checking the flash suppressor of my rifle for mud.

I rose up and fired a burst of six at the garbage piles, then ducked down behind the cover of the dike. At least the bastards would know I was still armed, if not dangerous.

The AK-47s opened up again, but through the downpour, they sounded far away. I strained to listen for any sound coming from the direction Phi traveled. I heard nothing and rolled back under the protection of the jeep.

The rain continued to fall steadily as darkness settled in. No more shots were fired from the hamlet. With only two extra magazines, I had to conserve my own ammunition. I considered trying to reach one of the VC with a grenade, but decided even Joe Namath couldn’t throw that accurately.

The buffalo was getting agitated, and through the storm, I could make out its dark form clambering over a dike.

I wondered how long it would be before the Viet Cong tried to circle around on either side of me. My watch had stopped at 4:37. How long had Phi been gone--and would he come back?

Why should he come back? He had told me on several occasions that his life was in danger because he worked as a translator for the Americans.

This calm and gentle man was an enigma. Among the Vietnamese, he was an intellectual. An educated man who loved books and spoke both English and

French. When he wasn't painstakingly re-copying intelligence reports, he could be found at his desk, reading well-worn volumes of world history and European classics like *Les Miserables*.

About his personal life, I knew little except that he was married and had five young children. I had never met his wife, but on R&R in Hong Kong I bought her a silver bracelet, for which Phi thanked me profusely. My gift to him was more practical--a black alligator belt to hold up his baggy trousers.

At Christmas I had gone to the PX near MACV headquarters and bought an assortment of toys for his children. A few nights after Christmas, Mr. Phi came to my quarters for the only time. Four of his five offspring were perched precariously on his Suzuki motor scooter.

They had come a considerable distance to bow politely and thank me for their presents. It was an unnecessary and risky gesture, and I told him so. Phi said simply that it is important to show gratitude.

Thinking of that as I huddled under my jeep, I knew that Phi would go to Col. Tranh. The rain finally stopped, but the wind continued, blowing the clouds and revealing occasional patches of clear night sky. My wet fatigues and jungle boots felt heavy, and I knew my feet must be as shriveled and wrinkled as my hands.

Lying with my back to the embankment, I could see in the distance the airplanes taking off from Tan Son Nhut Air Base. One set of blinking lights ascended at a forty-five degree angle, then banked to the east and leveled off. A freedom bird, heading back to the world with a cabin full of happy GIs and a cargo bay loaded with body bags.

Looking in the other direction, toward Cambodia, I spotted a distant helicopter gunship flying low. Then a flash of light, as hundreds of red tracer rounds from a mini-gun drifted to the ground. I watched the helicopter spraying some far-off target, silently willing the chopper to fly in my direction with its big Xeon light mounted in the door. But soon the lights were lost beyond the black horizon.

Although adrenaline had cured the ache in my guts, fatigue was beginning to take its toll. Despite my perilous situation, I could feel my energy and my vigilance draining away.

My mind drifted off in long thoughts to other places and happier times. A piece of a song came back to me and I remembered sitting in a circle around the embers of

a dying campfire at Inspiration Point on an unseasonably cool night during Bible camp, singing in low voices:

‘Someone’s praying, Lord, Kum Ba Ya...’

I must have dozed off. I’m not sure for how long. The water buffalo woke me, thrashing and grunting somewhere behind me. The clouds had moved in again and a light drizzle was falling.

A man’s voice shouted in alarm. Someone trying to slip around behind me had stumbled into the buffalo.

I yanked one of the grenades from my harness and pulled the pin. Taking a deep breath, I flipped the handle off and lobbed the grenade in the direction of the noise coming from the next rice paddy.

I buried my face in the mud and waited what seemed like an eternity for the concussion. It came with a spray of paddy water, mingling with the rain.

The water buffalo let out a bellow that became a terrible, gurgling roar. But I was sure I also heard a human scream.

Hoping I couldn’t be seen, I stood up and fired off the rest of my magazine into the sounds coming from the paddy. The buffalo’s wail diminished to a low moan. I heard no human sounds, and as the rain began falling harder, it was impossible to see anything.

I loaded a new magazine, sure now that the other VC must be someplace close by, and wondering how many others might have joined in the attack.

In that moment, I was sure that I was about to die. My body was shaking, and I pressed against the muddy dike to steady myself. There was nothing to do but wait.

Then I heard a low rumble. Trucks. Several of them. Peering around the jeep, I could see their headlights probing the hamlet. Mr. Phi had brought the cavalry.

The rain stopped with the dawn; Phi and I went with Col. Tranh to inspect the jeep. In the rice paddy next to the vehicle, the dead water buffalo was half-submerged and already buzzing with flies in the morning heat. Several of the Ruff/Puff’s tugged at the carcass, revealing gaping shrapnel wounds along one flank. A soldier

digging in the mud and water under the beast shouted triumphantly as he pulled out a slime-covered AK-47. There was no sign of the owner, and rain had washed away any footprints or blood trail. The colonel smacked his thigh with his riding crop and said something that caused his men to laugh. Phi translated.

“Col. Trinh says you are a great hunter of buffalo.”

Several men from the hamlet began butchering the animal where it lay.

“I guess I owe that buffalo a lot, Mr. Phi. He ran some pretty good interference for me.” “Interference?” he asked.

“Yeah, like in football.”

He still looked puzzled.

I put my arm around his narrow shoulders and said, “Ong Phi, it’s time you pulled your nose out of those books and learned about something really important--the Super Bowl.”

One of Col. Trinh’s trucks pulled the jeep out of the mud, and after some cleaning, we got it started and were back on our way by noon. Phi slept most of the way to province headquarters.

Weeks later, I learned that shortly after we left, Col. Trinh stood the hamlet chief and his deputy up against the tin wall of the meeting hall and personally executed both of them with his pearl-handled .45--as a warning to the VC sympathizers in the area.

Tricky Dick Nixon ordered a Reduction in Force that allowed me to leave Viet Nam a month before my tour was scheduled to be over.

Mr. Phi foresaw the end before I left. He knew that once the Americans pulled out, South Viet Nam could not stand.

“What will you do?” I asked him on the afternoon I cleaned my things out of the small desk we shared in the district compound at Tan Binh.

“My brother is a farmer in the central highlands. I will take my family there. I will become a farmer, too.”

I studied his smooth face for a moment to determine if this was one of his jokes.

“Excuse me, Ong Phi, but it’s a little hard to imagine you as a farmer. When I was a kid growing up in Lubbock, I used to visit my grandfather’s farm in the summer. He had rough, callused hands and his face was creased like an old boot. I remember the day he had his first heart attack and drove his combine off into a ditch. That’s when I decided that being a farmer sucks. You may come to the same conclusion.”

Phi said, “I cannot stay here. The Viet Cong will know that I worked for the U.S. My family will not be safe, and I will be killed. So I will go to the highlands and learn to be a farmer--to save our lives.”

“Some Vietnamese are leaving--going to America,” I suggested.

“Only the rich, and the politicians, Trung uy.”

I gave him my 35 mm camera and a new Seiko watch. It didn’t seem to be nearly enough.

We promised each other we would keep in touch, but I received only one letter. It arrived eight months after I got home, while I was studying for my first set of law school exams. The letter was in an airmail envelope bearing the return address of some sergeant in II Corps--the usual way the Vietnamese were able to send out letters to the U.S.

*Dear Lieutenant:*

*I and my family are well. We are now living in the highlands. You were*

*right. Farming is very sucking.*

*My brother is a good farmer. He will teach me how to do the work. And my children can learn better.*

*I brought my books and have some time to read. All of the Americans are going back to the USA now. When they leave, I think the NVA will come here soon.*

*A Vietnamese poet wrote a poem that says:*

*‘I see you in the green of the long grass and in the rising of the golden sun, and I recall the days we spent together.’*

*My memories of you are very green. You showed me great kindness, and I will never forget your friendship.*

*I hope that you and your family are having good fortune. Have you been buffalo hunting lately?*

*Yours truly, Vu Hong Phi*

I sent back a letter in care of the sergeant, but never received a reply. I suspect that the NCO's tour of duty had ended prematurely with the big pullout after the Paris peace talks.

When Vietnamese refugees started arriving in the U.S., many of whom were neither rich, nor politicians; I hoped that Phi would be among them. But I never heard from him again.

His education and his former assistance to the American advisors may have cost him his life. But I prefer to think that by day he walks the rice paddy fields he helped clear out of the jungle, his rumpled pants still held up by a worn alligator belt.

He stands and stares off into the distance, watching and waiting. And at night, he takes down his precious books to read to his children and perhaps his grandchildren. And yes, Mr. Phi, my memories of you are also very green.

Rice Paddy