

Section 4, You Americans Will Never Understand Vietnam

Winning the Hearts and Minds and Keeping Score – John Foote

Before I went to my MAT, I was briefly assigned to the Provincial MACV HQ and was given the task of filling out the Hamlet Evaluation System Report (HES). The infamous HES Report was Secretary McNamara's early attempt to computerize the metrics of "victory." It was long and involved and had to be answered for every village in the province. Anyway, I consulted around with more experienced folks (I will always love Woody Woodmansee, our Police Advisor, for his sage advice) and dutifully filled out and submitted the required report on Pacification. I did this to the best of my ability. The next day I was summoned by "the Colonel," who, by now, had agreed with my own self-evaluation that I was the worst 2LT ever to leave Benning. He, in a rather elevated tone, asked what the f--k I thought I was doing. Did I know that "in one fell swoop I had lost one-half of the goddam Province to the goddam commies?" I realized in that "one fell moment" that the HES Reports that had been filed by someone before me were false, because they said that we had pacified places that we KNEW were not safe. These were places where none of us could have, or would have, spent a lonely night without a perimeter in place. I don't recall that I was under many illusions about the war before I got there, but there were few illusions left thereafter. And my modest command of Vietnamese let me ask the locals what they thought of us. They were most kind and discreet and told me that they had a pretty good idea that one day we would not be there, but that they would still be.

Vietnam really never leaves us, even those for whom there wasn't the trauma that others faced. I personally found my time there rewarding. I came very much to respect the Vietnamese with whom I worked. Just this past week I had a new client come in for consultation — Lam Nguyen in the Americanized version of what would have been Nguyen Lam in Saigon. Lam told me that he had been eleven when Vietnam fell, and that his father, an enlisted soldier in the motor pool, came rushing home and told the family to go to the docks immediately. Five people climbed on the family Vespa, and two sisters rode a bike. When they reached the water, his father found a friend and paid him his last piasters. They were permitted to board a barge heading out to sea. Saigon fell the next day. Lam, as good an American as any of us, has spent the last many years as a Fairfax County cop.

Villages Had Divided Loyalties – Good and Bad Guys Co-Existed – Mike Eberhardt

My team made a visit to a village that was located at the tip of our district. The only access was by water, so we took our trusty twin-motored boat and headed toward the village. Upon arrival we were greeted by the Village Chief, an elderly man who was very gracious. He gave us a tour of the village which was comprised of typical Delta homes:

mud walls up about five feet or so, then thatched walls and a roof made of woven banana leaves cut into strips. I don't remember the number of homes, but I suppose there must have been 30 or so. They were scattered throughout the area where banana and other types of trees and brush were plentiful. There was a path about four-feet wide that connected the various dwellings.

After the tour the chief took us to his "office," a closet-size structure made of the same materials as the houses. A small table was the only piece of furniture. On the wall was a poster-size sketch of the village. Someone, possibly the chief, had hand-drawn the layout of the village. Each dwelling was represented by a box with a roof. Lines represented the various paths throughout the village. The most interesting aspect of the village layout was the use of map pins. There were three colors of map pins, and each dwelling had a pin stuck into it in the "roof." The chief told us that one color represented a "pro-government" supporter. A second color represented those who were supportive of the Viet Cong. The third color designated those who were actually VC! I was a bit taken aback by this and, through my interpreter, expressed my surprise. The chief explained that all the people in the village were neighbors. They may not agree politically with each other, but many were related to those who were on opposite sides of the war. They lived together in peace because they were not at war with one another. The rule was that those who were VC could go anywhere else and do what they had to do (mainly kill Americans and Vietnamese who opposed the VC). But when they were in the village they were not allowed to harm anyone. In other words, the "war" was somewhere else, but not at home.

I think that this was the point when I realized that we would never win this conflict. Our government did not have a clue about what was happening at the people-level in rural areas. They were farmers and fishermen. They only wanted to grow their rice, gather their coconuts, catch fish to sell, and live in peace. I actually do not believe life changed for most of the inhabitants after the government fell, other than the violence stopped. Life returned to what it had been for generations. Somehow I think this might well be how it is among most who live in isolated areas in the countries where there is conflict. Some form of government (accommodation, if you will) has usually been in place to establish rules that people have lived by. Life on a subsistence level does not usually get involved in politics.

Vietnamizing the War – John Foote

Our work with MACV was part of the "Vietnamization" of the war, which essentially meant turning over combat responsibilities to our Vietnamese allies so that we could "declare victory, turn out the lights, and go home." Maybe we who were MAT officers were meant to be part of the pacification process, but at the Province Advisory Team 47 compound I know for certain that the young enlisted guys were smoking so much weed that most of them had been "pacified" for months. (There were bunkers that officers

literally were not allowed to enter.) As best I could tell, Vietnamization in my area consisted in turning over the Province's Big Red One bases to the ARVN, including all of the support artillery, and claiming that this showed we were winning. (See any parallels to "Iraqization" and "Afghanistanization"?) By the time of my 7th or 8th month, I was no longer getting American fire support, and we all got very antsy when calling in ARVN fire missions. There was, we discovered, a certain lack of accuracy, if the missions came at all.

My Vietnam experience was colored very positively by the fact that I spoke some Vietnamese. (It seems I had maxed the Army Language Aptitude Test that we all took when we first joined up.) After a stint with some of our OCS class at Fort Bliss in the Second Armored Division, I was sent to thirteen weeks of Vietnamese language training. The Army had closed the year-long course at the Presidio by then, and the short course was all that was left. I was never fluent, and have long since forgotten most of my training. (Who knew that Arlington County, Virginia, would become more Vietnamese than Saigon — I even ran into General Ky there once.) That said, I grew sufficiently conversational in my heyday that I once tried to teach a weapons class to Popular Force recruits in one of our villages. I needed much help from my interpreters, but it won me some chops that day. I found that the young Vietnamese enlistees always appreciated our effort to speak their language and showed exceptional kindness.

Mobile Advisory Teams in my AO usually consisted of one officer and one senior NCO, with a Vietnamese RTO and an interpreter. We were sent on patrols or contact missions with the Regional Forces in our Provinces, but very rarely with ARVN units. The Cambodian incursion had occurred just before I got to my Team, and it had driven the VC and NVA back into deeper jungles. After that, the Vietnamese units I was with never made much intentional contact, principally because **THEY KNEW EXACTLY WHERE THE ENEMY WAS, AND DAMNED IF THEY WERE GOING TO GO LOOKING FOR THEM THERE!** I thought this showed remarkable good sense, even if it was not exactly a winning strategy. We were in the rubber plantations of III Corps, and the "Swiss" guys who ran the plantations were our best intelligence. Whenever their big lumbering biplanes took off, we knew something was going to go down somewhere in the AO, and soon.

Christmas Season with the RF/PF – Bob Hines

I was a tank platoon leader for four months in Quang Tri Province, 1-77th Armor, attached to the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). My instructions one day were to pick up an RF/PF (Regional Force/Popular Force, commonly referred to as "Ruff Puffs") platoon and set up a defensive position with them for the night. Frankly, I had absolutely no idea of what to expect, since I'd never even heard the expression Ruff Puff, but I really could have guessed. When we linked up outside their village, just as the American advisor (a major) was explaining what a real fighting force they were,

someone took a shot at us from one of the houses. Not a real good start. Anyway, we made it through the night, the sun is coming up, and I'm sitting on top of my tank, when I hear singing. Not just singing, but a Christmas carol, "Silent Night," being sung in Vietnamese! Now I really wasn't in the mood, but the little guy did a pretty good job. So I took his picture, which I've kept all these years. Most people who look at the picture think that he must have been in the process of getting dressed. But no, it shows him in his complete uniform: boxer shorts and fatigue shirt. Only the platoon leader wore pants. Good Times!

Flying to the Cuckoo's Nest – Peter Nowlan

When I reported to Travis AFB for the flight to Saigon, I had with me a small bag with reading materials for the flight over. Between saying good bye to Kathy, who had accompanied me to the West Coast, and greeting many OCS classmates who were reporting for the same flight, I misplaced my reading materials and did not have them when I boarded the plane. I knew I couldn't sleep for the duration of the flight, so I asked around to see if anyone had extra reading. As luck would have it, Joel Erkenwick had an extra book, but he was reluctant to loan it to me. He warned me that the topic may be a bit heavy for the flight to Viet Nam. Well, since no one had a dime novel filled with smut for my reading pleasure, I pressed Joel for his extra book. Joel lent me the book, and I read "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" on the flight to Nam. Thank you again, Joel. It may not have been light reading, but it kept me occupied, so I guess we can chalk that up as "mission accomplished."