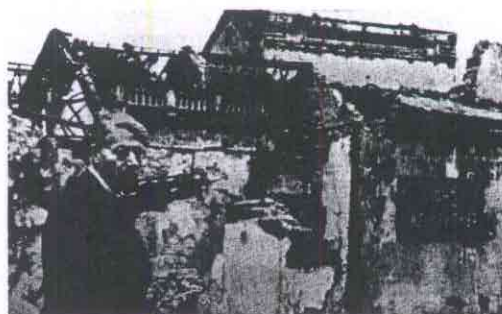


Witness in Hanoi

by John R. MacArthur



When in December 1966, Harrison Salisbury reported civilian casualties on a residential street in Hanoi (above), the news contradicted the Pentagon and became a watershed in the relationship between the media and the military. Now, a generation later, Dang Quan An (right), is living proof of who was telling the truth.



As a tourist destination, Pho Nguyen Thiep in Hanoi has little to recommend it. Just one block long and perpendicular to the bridgehead of the massive Long Bien railroad bridge, where it ends, the teeming, densely populated street doesn't even rate identification on the hotel maps of the Vietnamese capital. Close by the Red River embankment in the Old City, just north of the lovely but relatively modern legacy of French colonial architecture, Pho (for street) Nguyen Thiep would seem, at first glance, to be of interest only to Sinologists studying the Cantonese roots of some of its residents or the Chinese structures in the surrounding neighborhood. But for journalists, particularly those curious about the history of war reporting and censorship, Pho Nguyen Thiep should be the first stop on any Hanoi itinerary. For it was here thirty years ago that the U.S. government found itself caught in a lie about war — certainly the first really well-publicized lie of the period.

So many lies about Vietnam would follow the one about Pho Nguyen Thiep that by 1975, when the war ended, it seemed that no self-respecting reporter would ever again believe a government statement concerning the American military. Yet today the headlines announce a gulf war syndrome “coverup” by the Pentagon, which follows on the extensive record of largely unchallenged government decep-

tion and censorship surrounding the invasions of Panama and Grenada, as well as the gulf war. The lesson of Pho Nguyen Thiep, it would appear, is well worth relearning by the press — which is why I went there last September to report a story that not only marked a watershed in government-press relations in Vietnam, but that also severely eroded the public's trust in the war-time claims of President Lyndon Johnson.

Of course there were many events that could be called turning points in the Vietnam war and its coverage, but for dramatic impact, it would be hard to top the reporting of Harrison Salisbury, starting with his Christmas Eve 1966 account in *The New York Times* of American-inflicted civilian casualties on Pho Nguyen Thiep — coming as it did when the Johnson administration was denying that U.S. bombs were dropping on innocent North Vietnamese bystanders.

His first dispatch, published on Christmas Day, was remarkably understated given the sensation his coverage ultimately caused. The *Times* played it in the lead position on the front page, but with just a one-column headline whose top deck announced: “A Visitor to Hanoi Inspects Damage Laid to U.S. Raids.” Not until the jump page, in the ninth paragraph, did Salisbury's leisurely feature arrive at the actual news: “Christmas Eve found residents in several parts of Hanoi still picking over the wreckage of homes said to have been damaged in the United States raids of Dec. 13 and 14. United States officials have contended that no

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SALISBURY — LIP/CORBIS-RETMANN; DANG QUAN AN/MACARTHUR

attacks in built-up or residential Hanoi have been authorized or carried out." Then Salisbury was permitted the closest thing to sarcasm that could be found in the sober news pages of the 1966 *Times*: "This correspondent is no ballistics expert, but inspection of several damaged sites and talks with witnesses make it clear that Hanoi residents certainly believe they were bombed by United States planes, that they certainly observed United States planes overhead and that damage certainly occurred right in the center of town." Obviously, American pilots in that pre-smart-bomb era were aiming for the Long Bien bridge, technically outside the Hanoi city limits, and had dropped some of their explosives short of the target.

Salisbury wasn't the first Western reporter to visit North Vietnam during the war, but as he told me years later, "in many cases what you're reporting is not so important as the critical time when it's reported." Whatever the timing, Salisbury's direct contradiction of White House and Pentagon dogma

during his two-week stay in enemy territory touched raw nerves. The administration counterattacked — a Pentagon spokesman, Arthur Sylvester, for just one example, denounced the work of "Harrison Appallsbury of the New Hanoi Times" — but the government was forced to acknowledge that civilian areas had been hit by "accident."

The eminent historian Barbara Tuchman, in *The March of Folly*, wrote that after Salisbury's visit to North Vietnam, "Johnson's rating in the polls for handling of the war slid into the negative and would never again regain a majority of support." Salisbury's historic 1966-67 reporting clearly accelerated a tide of opposition to the war that had been rising slowly since the early '60s, fed by the work of correspondents like Malcolm Browne, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett, and David Halberstam, and by 1968 the tide seemed to reach flood level. That was the year of the Tet offensive, and the year Lyndon Johnson, at the end of a televised address to the nation announcing a partial halt to the bomb-

ing of the North, also announced that he would not seek re-election to the presidency.

As influential as Salisbury's reporting was, it did contain one significant flaw. In his memoir, *My Life and The Times*, the paper's executive editor in 1966, Turner Catledge, conceded that the *Times* had erred with some of Salisbury's early dispatches by not attributing casualty figures to the North Vietnamese government: "Quickly, with an air of triumph," he wrote, "U.S. government officials declared that Salisbury's casualty figures were the same as those put out by the government of North Vietnam." A "silly" point, according to Catledge, since Salisbury hadn't claimed to have counted the bodies himself. But a crucial point in a journalistic way, as Catledge also acknowledged: "I'm sorry to say that we in New York compounded an editorial slip that gave Salisbury's critics something to harp on. . . . To end the issue, we noted in later articles that the figures came from North Vietnamese officials." The

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"silly" point may have cost Salisbury a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 when the advisory board rejected the 4-1 recommendation of the international-reporting jury and voted 6-5 against Salisbury. Turner Catledge said the vote was unquestionably dictated by politics: "I was convinced that my colleagues made their decision on political rather than journalistic grounds; indeed, they made no bones about it. They supported the war, so they voted against Salisbury." Politics aside, the "editorial slip" Catledge acknowledged gave the anti-Salisbury contingent a journalistic rationale. As John Hohenberg wrote in his history *The Pulitzer Prizes*, "Those who opposed Salisbury argued that . . . he had failed to give the sources of casualty figures" in some articles and that "there were other reportorial deficiencies in his work."

So, despite my admiration for Salisbury's courage, energy, and accuracy, when I retraced his steps down Pho Nguyen Thiep in September I wanted to make sure he had gotten the story right. More than a generation on, I could hear the sneers of Arthur Sylvester and his Johnson administration colleagues hissing in my ear, and I thought I'd be careful. At 44 Pho Nguyen Thiep, with the help of my government interpreter, I found Dang Quan An, whose pregnant wife and two-year-old daughter had been killed in the December 13, 1966, air raid. Dang, a wiry man of fifty-nine, told me his version of that unhappy afternoon, now memorialized on the front of his rebuilt home by a bas-relief sculpture of a woman holding a baby with her fist upraised in defiance toward the sky.

He said he was at the garages of the United Bus Company in a southern section of Hanoi, where he worked as a mechanic, when the attack took place around 3:15 P.M. As best Dang was able to reconstruct the story, his wife and daughter were on the second floor of the three-story house and reverberations of an explosion caused the roof and the ceiling to cave in on them. "It wasn't a direct hit; I was told it was a rocket fired at the bridge that missed," Dang said. "Maybe it was a bomb. I

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saw the bomb crater next to No. 50 on the street and I know another bomb hit in the back of No. 50." Dang said the explosions also killed two middle-aged women, bringing the total dead to five that day, just as Salisbury had reported. The American pilots did damage the stone bridgehead that runs parallel to Pho Gam Cau (Underbridge Street) at the end of Pho Nguyen Thiep. I could see where it was patched up.

Eventually, Dang remarried and had six more children, but No. 44 remained in ruins long after the "American" war ended in 1975. Over the years Dang requested compensation from the government without success. One explanation for the denial might be that as an ethnic Chinese, or Hoa Kieu, Dang came low down on the government's list of deserving war victims. Anti-Chinese sentiment flared again in Vietnam during the Chinese invasion of 1979, and many Hoa Kieu took the opportunity to emigrate. One of those was Dang's younger brother, Nhan, who resettled in 1980 in London, where he started a successful take-out restaurant. In 1991, Nhan sent his older sibling enough money to rebuild his house. A government monument to the bombing victims came down, the little one went up on the front of the house, and Pho Nguyen Thiep was returned whole to its pre-1966 bustle. Today, without careful investigation, you would never know that thirteen houses had been destroyed in a very famous air raid.

Nevertheless, after interviewing Dang and examining the street, I still wasn't entirely satisfied with my reporting, or Salisbury's. I wanted to know that I hadn't been set up by my government guide. Perhaps Dang was too perfect a witness.

A couple of days after my first visit, I went back to Pho Nguyen Thiep without my guide. When I got out of the taxi, in front of No. 44, I gestured to a bystander and said Dang's name. A few minutes passed, and I saw Dang approaching from the end of Pho Nguyen Thiep, as he strolled through an open arch in the Long Bien Bridge. He was still friendly, smiling, and bereaved. ♦