

Vietnamese Conscript

'Why kill your brothers...

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they now? Ah, those damned VC, why did they bring slaughter to my village? And the National soldiers—couldn't they not keep their bloody, greedy fingers off the families of those who are on their side? I felt a kind of revenge, killing VC here, and hearing that the Nationals were badly mauled in the northern provinces: they both deserve it.

Yesterday, we went on a search and destroy operation. The Americans put pressure on the top; the top puts pressure on us; and we do the dirty work, so our officers can line their pockets. Our mission was to clean up the area south of the city of Cantho.

There is hardly a night the VC does not send mortar shells into the American air field there. They hate the planes—understandably. Most of the destruction comes from the air. The countryside is so rotten that we have to clear the hamlet house by house. My guess is that the Nationals have "coexisted" here a bit too long.

One day we went on a joint operation with the American Rangers. As we were moving along a tortuous waterway, Charlie began sniping at us from the bushes on shore. Then, mortar and machinegun fire raked us. The rear was cut off and ambushed. We retreated into the nearby village and dug in there. We had to bomb the village. When we entered, only women, children and old people were

there as usual, either alive or dead. But why couldn't the other units which were supposed to block Charlie's retreat find him either? No deep bunker was possible. The area is so flat, water fills any hole more than one meter in depth. But Charlie was gone—a ghost!

My unit served as guides as we moved into the hamlet. Old village women came to us, pleading:

"We are just peasants. My husband and sons are in the National army. We're with the government."

Others in tears joined their palms and bowed like "stars worshipping."

"Mercy! Mercy! Do not destroy our bowl of rice. Our children will starve. Mercy! Mercy! Don't burn our house. We'd have to take the earth for a mat." As usual, the women were swearing and appealing to Heaven as a witness and kids screaming.

These women must be VC propagandists, otherwise, how can they express their grievances so well? They import us not to destroy their homes so they can shelter the VC who snipe at us, not to destroy their crops so they can share them with Charlie, or pay taxes to Charlie. Fool someone else, you old fools, perhaps the Americans, but not me.

I let their words go in one ear and out the other. We took all of them to the choppers. The wind blew the fire from one hut to another. All the houses looked to me like excellent sniping positions. We had orders to

destroy all the bunkers so the VC couldn't use them again.

We ordered everybody out. Under a rather well-to-do house, someone didn't want to get out. I called several times. I hesitated between a grenade and the machinegun; finally, I shot inside. There were children's screams.

Du me. I swore, what must I invent now to explain this? I waited a few minutes and then went in. At the end of my flashlight, an old woman and some children, all with greenish and blackened faces. I asked them why they didn't get out; they said they didn't dare. I dragged the old woman out of the hole. She didn't want to leave or let the children to be taken away, although two of them were wounded. She was really a character. "Shoot me if you want," she said, "but I want to wait here for my son and daughter-in-law. How will they find us if we move?"

Probably a VC mother. I thought. I put the gun at her back and walked her to the chopper while the medics took the wounded children away.

Suddenly, the woman began to talk to me:

"My son is in the National Army. Like you. Mistrusting me is like mistrusting your own mother. Why kill your own brothers and sisters? Go home and watch the Americans bomb your mother and burn your house. My son is a conscript like you."

She began to search in her inside pocket:

"Do you want to see his picture? Isn't he a nice-looking boy? I'm going to write to him to tell him no complaint to his superiors about this mistake. He was just promoted to sergeant. I'll tell him to come home to protect his family. Those were his children. Their mother went to visit him."

My gun became suddenly heavy. A strange chill went down my spine. I heard my mother's soft voice, reading her letter aloud:

"Why don't you go home and watch ... Why don't you go home to protect ... I felt the greatest fear of my life as a soldier. The eyes of the woman were warm.

"Shut up! Shut up!" I shouted, to drown out her voice. "Shut up or I'll widen your mouth to the ears to teach you how to lie."

I was horrified to death. I was no longer able to see in that woman an impersonal tool of the VC, bent on my destruction, but, instead, oh horror, a *person*. Worse, a mother, in so many ways a replica of mine. What have I been doing to all of them?

She continued, tears running down her wrinkled cheeks, in her frighteningly soft voice:

"You were drafted. My son was too. Your mother is worried to death about you, and so am I about my son. We are from one house. You know the saying, don't you, 'skin pot boiling its own flesh'? We came from the same root: why must we kill each other?"

I was struck dumb. In front of us, at the impressive helicopters, tall Americans came and went, talking a language none of us understood. They are herding the people we brought them into the helicopters. A great sense of shame swept over me. While I am here, pointing my gun at this woman's back, her son may be over there pointing his at my mother's back! The screen of unawareness (Buddhist phrase) had dropped away.

I had a violent attack of nausea. All my childhood fear of blood came back. I put my hands to my mouth to keep from vomiting. But they stank of the human blood. They looked like two black spiders, completely alien to

me. I suddenly understood why a soldier from another unit had chopped off his right hand. We thought he had gone out of his mind. And what about the sergeant in the First Corps who burned himself? What about the monks and nuns who did the same?

After this operation, I fell sick. I vomited until the bile came out and have since, whenever I see or smell blood. I even vomit at the meat in my bowl. At the military hospital, they can't find the cause of my illness. But the doctors say combat will be the best prescription for me. Kill or be killed—that will cure me. They say they can make good killers even out of monks.

I have been granted two weeks' leave for recovery before active duty. I'd like to escape, but where? Everywhere in my country there is killing. I know the Cambodians shoot at everyone crossing the border, but I think it would be worth trying. First, I want to find my mother. People at the camp said they went back to the village. I returned to Tan-Hoa, but they weren't there. I looked at the desolate countryside, once so full of children's laughter: at the heap of ashes besides the blackened mud walls, the blue broken pieces of my father's incense bowl, the broken jars where we kept drinking water. In the courtyard were my mother's betel vines, still growing tender green and beautiful. I saw the huge craters in the rice field, and the many heaps of freshly dug earth—the new tombs. How many of my friends were buried there? Where are all the others?

I looked down at my uniform and something stuck in my throat. What am I doing with a gun and a uniform? What am I pretending to defend when I am unable to defend what is dearest to me: my mother and my home?