

## Vietnamese Conscript

# 'All of us are detainees ...'

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punished for entertaining the VC. It told us we would be taken away for interrogation, and also that we were going to begin a new life free from VC terrorism. After the bombs and the fire, leaflets rained down like butterflies. People wished they could feed or clothe themselves with them. Your sisters said:

"Even if they promised us gold, I wouldn't want to go."

"At dawn we were led to the choppers. They didn't put black sandbags upon our heads as they did with many others. A young soldier about your age escorted us. I told him you were in the army. He laughed and said: 'All of you say that, but we'll find it out ourselves. If you're not pro-VC, why didn't you report them to the authorities?' I showed him your picture in uniform and he said the authorities would see to it that I don't have to worry. But it takes time for them to see to it, believe me. We have been here a week and they have done nothing. Some have been waiting here over a month."

"All of us are 'detainees.' No one knows why, or what 'detainees' means. We are treated as VC, but as you know the true VC are not here. We sleep in the open. There are so many of us that there is apparently not enough room for everyone. Every day brings in more truckloads of new 'detainees.' We received some blankets and some rice. An old goat, the guard of the camp, tried to rape your sister one night. I wanted to report the incident, but people advised me not to. His daughter is married to a very big American, so the old goat is powerful. No day passes without a death in the camp. One woman gave birth on the road. And people keep coming like black ants. We live near a US base, and they bring us leftovers from US canteens, half-empty cans of food. The children throw themselves upon them like starving wolves."

"Everyday we beg some porridge made with maize, rice and milk, at one of the kitchens set up to keep us from starving. The ladies there are very nice. They are Americans, too, but look as if they were a different kind from the soldiers who came to the village. They are extra nice, but their porridge gives us diarrhea and there are no latrines. We live like pigs in pigsties."

"The madams came to round up girls for 'jobs.' Very good pay, they said. 'What kind of job?' I asked. Waitresses, bar girls, maids, laundresses for the GIs. Some of the girls go. They dress up like someone going to the office, and say they're going 'to work,' but what kind of work I ask you—prostitution. I forbade your sisters to go. You know that no decent Vietnamese man would take them later even with a pair of tongs, if they had been mixed up with Americans. So I spend my time watching them, for the soldiers are roaming all over the place. It's an awful thing to have sons,

but it's worse to have daughters in these troubled times."

"We sit here all day long in the dust, the sand and the sun, not knowing what to do with ourselves. Waiting. Waiting for what? Would they let us return to the village? We still have the rice field and buffalo. Oh, the buffalo! Your buffalo. I'm afraid they killed it, poor thing."

"Thank heaven, we're lucky enough to be together. Other people lost their families, running for their lives. With one in one camp, and one in another, it's a long time before they can locate each other again. The woman next to us cries all night. She was on a visit to her mother when the bombing began and her three children may be burned alive, since the eldest was only eight. No one knows their whereabouts. There are many children without parents here. O the ladies and gentlemen at the dispensaries are extra nice and try to help all they can. But the devastation is too big! Although they are building hundreds of sheds every day, we are still in the open."

"Can you send us some money at once? Otherwise your sisters will have to go 'to work'—you know what I mean. This bothers me a lot, because it would destroy our future. So many girls have to sell themselves to eat. How can they stand by when brothers and sisters are crying from starvation? Your father would die a second time if I let your sisters go. How would I face him in the land of our ancestors? Can you ask your captain to write a letter

in our behalf to the director of the camp so we may go home? I wish you good health. May the bullets miss you. Your mother."

"Could you ask permission to come here to help us? We are in the camp at Tra Long, five or six kilometers south of Da Nang. Sister Mai."

My viscera is still on fire although the letter is two months old. I don't know if my family is still there. How can I send them money? Where are

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