Isolated Outpost Is Home To Montagnard Families

By GLORIA EMERSON AUG 10 1970
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DAKSEANG, South Vietnam, July 30 — The women among the 260 montagnard families sharing the dark, stifling bunkers here say that they would not leave their husbands.

It is a normal thing for wives and mothers to say, but Dakseang is an isolated camp, a long rectangle of barbed wire, bunkers, sandbags and howitzers in the Central Highlands eight miles from the border with Laos.

There are 247 children living in the bunkers—the well-dressed ones wear Vietnamese Army shirts that fall to their ankles—and they kept still and hid though they were upset when Dakseang was under siege in April and May by 2,000 North Vietnamese.

"We live here and we die here," said a man named Uong, who is a platoon leader.

The soldiers at Dakseang are nearly all montagnards — the generic name for tribesmen of the Central Highlands who are not of the same racial origin as the Vietnamese and who speak different languages. Most Vietnamese do not like the montagnards and call them moi —savages.

"There is no other place to go," Uong said. "We are out on operations for seven days and then we stay here for the next seven days."

Uong, who is 25 years old, lives in a bunker with his wife, his mother, his mother-in-law, three children, three of his younger brothers and a younger sister.

His wife said she was frightened during the fighting, but she insisted that she did not want to leave. The idea seemed to surprise her.

"My son is here," Uong's mother said, as if it was plain that this was all that counted.

Uong, who said his family was always on his mind during the fighting, said he would not send them away, even when the next attack comes — as he knows it will and as they know it will. His children will be all right, he added, for if life is not easy here, at least they are together.

There was a school, but it was destroyed in April, and the men are too busy to teach the children to read and write. Most of the women do not know how.

A 5-year-old boy climbing the sandbags near Uong's bunker could not understand what "peace" means. The word confuses him, for he is not quite clear on what life without war is like. Some of the other children seem to share his confusion.

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Dakseang was once a village, but there is no trace of it now. Villages in Vietnam are such frail collections, of small huts, straw mats, old teapots and ancestral ties that they can easily be erased.

The camp at Dakseang was established in August, 1966, by the United States Special Forces — one of 14 camps whose function is to gather intelligence and to halt enemy movement on supply trails.

The montagnard soldiers are in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group. Originally recruited, trained and led by the Special Forces, or Green Berets, they are still paid by the Americans although technically under the command of the South Vietnamese Special Forces.

Their future is uncertain. The United States Special Forces are to leave South Vietnam by the end of the year. The Vietnamese Special Forces, according to Saigon, are to be incorporated into the Vietnamese Rangers, an élite volunteer group of infantrymen with special training in commando warfare. The montagnards do not know what will happen.

It is their pay that concerns them most, for their families are large and soldiers in Vietnam find it hard to make ends meet. The Americans pay them more than South Vietnam would, and they can just manage.

Some of the montagnard soldiers are deserters, but they see no reason to worry about it, nor do they feel shame.

A montagnard called Brai—it is not customary for a man to have more than one name—was a farmer before he joined the South Vietnam Regional Forces, whose soldiers are assigned to their home districts, or regions.

"They did not let me go on leave when my mother died so I deserted," he said. "She died of malaria, as my father had. I did not desert with my weapon or ammunition or equipment. Another reason why I deserted is that the company commander often beat us. So did other officers."

Afraid of arrest by the Government, he joined the defense group.

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The 11 Green Berets of the advisory team are not men who talk easily with strangers and they dislike civilians. They suspect questions, even innocent ones, which make them even more suspicious. They do not seem at ease with the 14 members of the South Vietnamese Special Forces. The Green Berets seem bored—and able to stand anything but boredom.

When they talk of the montagnards—uncorrupted by the cities, physically superior to most South Vietnamese, less sophisticated in their outlook—the Americans are fiercely possessive. They remind a visitor of the manner in which the British military once talked of the Gurkhas of Nepal.

Because the Green Berets enjoy their own toughness, they appreciate some of the more primitive aspects of the montagnards' habits. They even exaggerate them, and they hope the montagnards will never change.

A young lieutenant has a dog that he never lets off a leash except when it is in his lap. "Well," he said, "if I let it loose the Yards would eat it for sure. Wouldn't want that to happen."