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**The Vietcong in Saigon:
Disciplined but Gullible**

James Fenton helped to cover the fall of Phnom Penh and of Saigon for The Washington Post and remained in the South Vietnamese capital for several months after Communist-led forces took it over. This is the second of two articles.

By James Fenton

Special to The Washington Post

LONDON—In the days immediately after the fall of Saigon, the soldiers of the revolution found themselves surprisingly wealthy, as everyone wanted North Vietnamese currency. The soldiers bought watches, transistor radios, cameras and clothes.

The radios generally conked out; the watches gave up the ghost after 24 hours or so; the cameras were stolen by the "Saigon cowboys," and the soldiers learned about the morals of Saigon.

There were endless stories and jokes about their innocence and peasant ways, and satirically minded Saigonese said that if you wanted to sell a soldier a watch, the thing to do was persuade him to put it in his mouth, close his eyes and put his fingers in his ears.

If he then heard the watch ticking, that meant it was of good quality, and any other way of listening to a watch was said to be unreliable.

I've tried this method with several watches, and never was able to hear a thing. I presume that during this process the soldier's pockets would be picked.

The soldiers of the revolution are known both to the Vietnamese and to those foreigners now in Vietnam by the usually affectionate term "bo doi." Many Americans will remember their discipline in war. Their discipline in peace is similar. So far, they simply have not misbehaved as occupying soldiers.

Accustomed to poverty and possessing practically nothing, they arrived in Saigon visibly astonished by what they saw. I do not know what they had been told to expect, but they had clearly never seen such wealth as they then encountered. They would wald through the streets hand-in-hand simply gaping.

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I never managed to have a very good conversation with the revolutionary soldiers. They were soon told not to talk to foreigners, and it was difficult

to get any impression of what the war had been like for them.

Once a North Vietnamese did begin speaking frankly.

"I always liked going into battle," he said, "because the atmosphere was so good. Everybody knew they were going to die. They had no food, and nothing to drink for days. If a man had something to eat, he would share it with you, and if you had nothing to give in return, you would show him the letter you had just got from your wife.

"Everybody loved each other, be-

cause they all knew they were going to die.”

At that point he remembered he was talking to a foreigner. He became embarrassed, and we said good-bye.

My impressions from three months in postwar Saigon are exceedingly partial. I did not know what was happening in the countryside, because I was not allowed to travel there; I do know something of the dilution of the victorious troops—they even promised a French friend of mine that they would help in the liberation of France, with military assistance if necessary.

This was in contrast to their attitude as the war came to a close. For example, there were six days between the abandonment of Dalat by the Saigon forces and the arrival of the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government. Finally, the chaos being uncontrollable, a delegation of Buddhists was sent to look for the Vietcong, who were most reluctant to come and take the town over. They did so eventually with a force of 30 men.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government is supposed to draw support from some sections of the bourgeoisie—the Saigon National Liberation Front committee includes store proprietors and even a former general of the South Vietnamese army. But it did not have much support from any of the bourgeoisie that I met.

Rather, the middle class all seemed to hit on the same notion at once: sidewalk cafes. They set up stools, and tables, with vases of flowers, and brought dishes from home. Walking the length of Tu Do Street, the main downtown thoroughfare, one day, I counted 70 of these stalls—not to mention the cake vendors, cigarette stands, booksellers, manufacturers of Ho Chi Minh sandals or carts of dried squid.

The sidewalk cafes generally were set up under borrowed parachutes, which provided shade. The parachutes were hung between trees, and their varying colors and billowing shapes made the city utterly beautiful.

The most opportunistic enterprise was set up by a man outside the reeducation center. He made plastic covers for the new certificates for the simple soldiers of the old government. Their reeducation courses were only for three days.

Several times the soldiers came with loudspeakers and cleared the cafes off Tu Do, but in a few days they would reappear. For a time the future of Saigon's middle class seemed less bleak, and it was the Indian summer of the bourgeoisie.

Alan Dawson, of United Press International, who stayed on in occupied Saigon until early this month, reported the following on his departure:

The Saigon I left showed little change from six months ago, although the cafes and Ho Chi Minh sandalmakers that sprouted along Tu Do Street—now renamed “Uprising Street”—have been closed down.

Other streets also have new names: A main drag is now called Nguyen Van Troi, for the “hero” who was executed for trying to kill former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara during one of his visits to Saigon. And former John F. Kennedy Square, in front of the city's cathedral and the main post office, is now called Paris-St. Cloud, after the site of the 1972 U.S.-Hanoi truce negotiations.

Captured U.S.-made planes and helicopters fly the skies of Vietnam. From the Window of the UPI bureau, we saw daily test flights by Huey helicopters, with yellow stars on their tails.

The economy of South Vietnam was so battered by 30 years of war that the nation—already far behind other Southeast Asian countries in economic development—must now fall back even further.

“We must go backwards, however regrettable that is” said an official. “We must establish self-sufficiency as the first priority to rebuilding the economy. To do that, our people must go back to the farms and the fishing boats.”

I saw no overt harassment or retaliation in South Vietnam, but it is clear that the future rice farmers of Vietnam will be those who opposed the Provisional Revolutionary Government in the past.

The operation to move out more than half of Saigon's inhabitants to the farms was still voluntary when I was there, however, unlike the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh and other Cambodian cities.

Propaganda teams visited each ward of the city frequently to try to persuade the jobless and the poor to go back to the fields. When a family did decide to move, free land, transportation and food and money enough for the first six months was provided immediately.

Letters that former Saigon army officers sent home from their indoctrination courses made it clear that when reeducation is over, they would be packing up their families and moving to the countryside.

“They will learn to rub elbows with the peasants and help our country,” the official said.

Many of the senior officials who opposed the Vietcong in the past are walking around Saigon free to come and go as they please.

The last two presidents of the Republic of Vietnam—Tran Van Huong and Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh—live at home and walk the streets when and if they please.