

# Abrams Praises South Viet GIs

SAIGON — Anybody who knocks the South Vietnamese soldier had better be prepared to face Creighton Williams Abrams, commanding general, U.S. Forces, Vietnam. If you're the knocker, I'd say you were in for one hell of a fight.

Ever since this great pro became deputy commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam on April 6, 1967, at President Lyndon Johnson's directive, he has been taking the side of the much maligned (in the U.S. and North Vietnam, oddly) South Vietnamese soldier.

The trouble with that hypothetical soldier (or pilot or whatever) is that we tried to teach him too fast, forgot that the French treated him poorly for a century, and we did not understand his thought processes.

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"THE FRENCH NEVER let these people have an army of their own," the general said to Bill Hearst and a few of us the other day in his headquarters. "Never gave them an automatic weapon, let's say. Sure, the French had their pets: Vietnamese who had been educated in France, spoke French, had learned to drink red wine and liked brie, who ate French bread instead of rice, and who could no longer bear nuoc-mam, the traditional Vietnamese fish sauce. The French offered these people citizenship, forgetting the peasants.

"People forget that the basic people of Vietnam, the peasants, are tough as hell," the tough-as-hell general continued. "They threw the Chinese out of here twice. A long time ago they had a couple of sisters as leaders, the Thruong sisters — twin Joans of Arc — who won independence for them.

"But the French didn't understand. They occasionally integrated their units with South Vietnamese, true. But the only Vietnamese who was a commander at Dienbienphu had only the rank of company commander. He's now commanding general of the 1st Arvin (government) division.

"We ourselves are only now understanding that these people are different from us. Take Col. Tho, the chief of Quang Tin Province. He's a pure Vietnamese, untouched by either the French or us. When a simple Viet Cong soldier defects to the government's side in his province, he'll spend several days with him, just talking. His people captured a top Viet Cong intelligence officer who was attached to a North Vietnamese force. Col. Tho took him into his own house. The guy lived in the colonel's guest bedroom for a month!

"When another Viet Cong officer was killed, Tho managed to get the remains and gave him a formal Buddhist funeral."

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GEN. ABRAMS SAID, "No American commander would ever think of doing anything like that. Col. Tho has done some other things we would consider outrageous. For example, 17 Viet Cong came through the lines to his headquarters. They had thrown away their weapons. Col. Tho gave them 17 of our M16s and sent them back! Next day they returned with 34 other guys, and everybody's weapons."

The general is sure in his own mind that the South Vietnamese will go all out to keep from being overrun by the Soviet and Communist China-supplied North Vietnamese after the last U.S. infantryman has been pulled back home. If the South Vietnamese commander in the field can count on U.S. air cover. With U.S. aid, he has already knocked the indigenous Viet Cong out of the box.

Abrams is convinced that if we don't pull out our air cover too quickly, the long and costly process of turning the fighting over to the South Vietnamese will pay off.