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Sifting the Ashes of Quang Tri

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By Arthur H. Westing

PUTNEY, Vt.—This past summer E. W. Pfeiffer of the University of Montana and I were invited to the Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam on a mission for the Scientists' Institute for Public Information, in behalf of its new task force on scientific aid for Indochina. While there we were asked by the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (the Vietcong) to make a preliminary assessment of the scientific needs of South Vietnam. We were the first Americans to have been invited into that portion of South Vietnam under P.R.G. control.

Quang Tri may well be the most brutally punished area of any in the long history of warfare. This northernmost province of South Vietnam covers over a million acres and supports some 300,000 people. It is a traditionally poor province devoted almost entirely to subsistence farming and fishing. Rice is, of course, the predominant crop, particularly so in the lowlands.

Despite a year of frontline combat experience in Korea, and despite three previous trips to Indochina to study

the war zones of Cambodia and South Vietnam, I was unprepared for the utter devastation that confronted us wherever we turned. Our tour took us through much of the lowland region and some of the central hilly region. Never were we out of sight of an endless panorama of crater fields. As far as we could determine, not a single permanent building, urban or rural, remained intact: no private dwellings, no schools, no libraries, no churches or pagodas, and no hospitals. Moreover, every last bridge and even culvert had been bombed to bits. The one rail line through the province was also obliterated.

The two largest cities—Quang Tri (which we observed from across the Thach Han River) and Dong Ha—were endless scenes of rubble with only a fragment of original wall standing here and there. But buildings and bridges were not the only target; hardly a rice paddy could be found without its disruptive craters, large and small.

The damage we observed can be traced in part to the French, in part to the Vietnamese themselves, and in part to United States naval and ground activities (including, for example, more than 6,000 acres razed by American

plow-equipped tractors). However, the overwhelming cause of the vast devastation was the United States Air Force.

Cam Chinh Village, covering some 37,000 acres and with a population of about 4,200, has been a center of continuing resistance. In 1967 and again in 1968 the village was aeri ally sprayed with herbicides, not only killing the crops but also destroying the fruit trees and the pepper and tea plantations. To this day the most prominent feature of the region is the thousands of gaunt tree skeletons.

In 1972 the village was subjected to massive aerial assault with high explosive fragmentation bombs as well as a bizarre variety of antipersonnel bombs. We found the mother-bomb casings of cluster bomb units everywhere, some being used as water troughs, others as fence posts, road markers, etc. There was little difficulty in locating shrapnel, flechettes (tiny steel arrows), unexploded guava bomblets. A major problem in the recolonization of this war-torn land is the plethora of unexploded ordnance.

The physical details of present-day Quang Tri Province are grim, but the picture changes when the human dimension is considered. The Vietnam-

ese people have a love for their land and an unyielding determination to restore and rebuild what has been laid waste. Everywhere we turned teams of people were working together—building, repairing and filling in. Mud and thatch shelters are springing up all over as temporary dwellings. In Dong Ha we were put up in a just-completed provincial guest house which provided us with pleasant though spartan accommodations. The people everywhere, both young and old, appeared healthy, cheerful, and hardworking; the sounds of reconstruction woke us well before five each morning. Most interesting to me was the carefully balanced plan by the P.R.G. for restoring a normal life out of the ashes of war.

We left Quang Tri Province agghast at the realization that the strategy employed here by the United States was one of systematic aerial destruction of a region inhabited by tens of thousands of civilians. We also left with a renewed faith in the ability of these same Vietnamese eventually to overcome even this overwhelming insult to themselves and their land.

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