

Security Is Fragile in the Region of Alleged Massacre

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QUANGNGAI, South Vietnam, Nov. 21 — M. Sgt. Earl P. Kelley, on the American senior adviser's staff in this province capital, loves to work with children. So he has been giving informal but well-attended English lessons to the teenagers here.

Sergeant Kelley's experience tells much about the continuing fragility of security here and in the neighboring district of Sontinh, where American soldiers are accused of having murdered hundreds of villagers last year in a drive against what their commander described as Vietcong guerrillas.

Some time ago Sergeant Kelley noticed that the yard in front of the Buddhist temple across the street from the senior adviser's residence, where the sergeant also lives, was — like most of the streets and sidewalks of this shabby town — piled with garbage scattered on potholed stretches of dirt or mud.

'Scrounged' Some Cement

He "scrounged" some cement, he said, and with his help the little yard was turned into a patio.

He thought the bunkers in the temple were insecure, so he helped to rebuild the sandbag bastions that are as common and necessary to the houses of Quangngai as bathrooms are to American homes.

The monks and nuns liked Sergeant Kelley so much that when he asked them to use the temple for his classes they were happy to invite him and his students in for their three sessions a day.

They invited him in for tea when he passed, and Sergeant Kelley was thinking of extending his tour in Vietnam.

But the other evening after class, a gang of teen-agers beat up one of the sergeant's students badly enough for Sergeant Kelley to have to take him to the hospital. They called him names for associating with Americans.

The following morning when the sergeant crossed the street to meet his students a monk came and asked him to move his classes elsewhere, anywhere. The monks did not want a hand grenade thrown into their pagoda, he said.

Security 'Very Transitory'

"Security in Sontinh is very transitory," said an American official with special responsibility in this area.

At the time of the incident in Sontinh district, he continued, 72,000 of 120,000 inhabitants were considered Vietcong.

The figures are based on computer-calculated American security ratings that tend to an optimism often described in nonofficial quarters as wishful thinking.

American and South Vietnamese officials say that despite improvements in the provincial capital and along the north-south highway, little has changed in Quangngai and most of what was changed for the better is subject to instant reversal.

Under the French, the province was neglected and poor and therefore leftist dominated. And nowadays it is called by the Vietcong radio one of the "liberated" provinces of South Vietnam.

Premier Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam was born here, as were four generals of the North Vietnamese Army.

Sontinh district, a marshy coastal region of subsistence rice farmers, has remained predominantly Vietcong despite a number of operations similar to the infantry sweep on March 16, 1968, during which, according to witnesses, as many as 567 inhabitants in the village of Songmy were killed.

Military sources—who asked that their names be withheld because of the news blackout surrounding the investigation of charges against a lieutenant and a sergeant in the Songmy incident—said there had been frequent incidents — firing on American troops from villages, ambushes and booby traps—in Sontinh.

The attempt to pacify the area in which the incident occurred is a textbook example of the frequent futility of these efforts.

New Attempt Made

After the failure of the 1968 operation to root out the Vietcong, a major new attempt was undertaken last January. Twelve thousand people from the eastern edge of the district, the Batgan Peninsula and adjoining territory, were rounded up and flown by helicopters to a site south of here, where those putting up temporary shelters could barely keep up with the flow of refugees.

The number of refugees "generated"—the term for the people forcibly dislocated in this process—exceeded intelligence estimates four-fold, and a high percentage of those moved were old men, women and children—as in accounts of the reported mass killing. The men, mainly Vietcong, go underground in such cases.

Among those moved were the survivors of Songmy. As "pacification" of the cleared region appeared to advance, the 12,000 temporary refugees were shifted progressively northward closer to their homes, or the sites where their homes had stood.

They made the next-to-last lap in fishing boats along the South China Sea coast and hiked inland the rest of the

way, about two months ago, to a region then considered secure.

The 12,000, instead of being scattered in many hamlets where it would be difficult to keep out the Vietcong, are now concentrated in six guarded, camp-like settlements.

Truongan, about a mile from the scene of the slaying incident and the present home of its survivors, is a dense warren of low, tin-roofed shacks where 2,080 live. It is fenced in and guarded by two platoons of male residents organized into a home guard. They are chaperoned by a squad of United States Marines, who organize the defense and teach their skills to the villagers.

But the Vietcong are again all around, their threat to the camp is constant and night attacks are frequent.

Helicopters bringing in visitors describe tight circles in landing to avoid sweeping over nearby paddies. To guard visitors, American troopers in armored vehicles and extra infantrymen were brought in. To visit the camp from here by trail, the road must first be cleared of Vietcong mines. The danger of snipers is constant.

Frequent Vietcong Attacks

But even Quangngai, a tense place of about 50,000 inhabitants with a curious Wild West ambience and a feeling of temporariness, is a frequent target of Vietcong demolition attacks, rockets and bombings.

At night, the sound of outgoing artillery and mortar fire is punctuated by occasional bursts of automatic smallarms fire from around the corner and yellow flares light the night.

The houses in which live the sizable contingent of American civilian and military advisers for the pacification programs — as well as those of the German and Canadian nurses, American Quakers, a British artificial-limb maker, an Indian physician and Filipino technicians — are heavily surrounded by barbed wire, draped at night with Claymore mines. They are guarded by armed civilians day and night, and gates are locked and opened only after the guard has peeped out.