

A Viet Soldier Looks at War In Letter Home

By Peter Osnos

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SAIGON—From atop some sandy hill near the Demilitarized Zone, where the fighting is still fiercest, marine private Vo Phuc Huynh wrote his sister a letter last month about the war he is in and the prospects for peace.

"I think," he said in a neat script on schoolboy's copy paper, "that the battle here will be difficult to end. There may be a temporary lull, for the sake of politics, but permanent peace will be very hard."

Huynh, a 21-year-old high school dropout, is a reluctant warrior who played hide-and-seek with military and police authorities for more than three years before landing in the marines. It wasn't punditry that prompted his observations on when the fighting would subside.

Since the cease-fire won't bring peace, as far as he is concerned, Huynh was advising the family to continue efforts to buy his 18-year-old brother out of the infantry.

"You tell father to try once more with Mr. Dat," he wrote, "and if brother is assigned to the artillery branch, that will be all right, it won't be necessary to go to a more expensive branch." (The expense entailed is the bribe to a defense official who can arrange a safer assignment.)

Vo Phuc Huynh's letter is a vivid account of life in the combat he long sought to avoid; the terrible fear of his first real battle, the exhilaration of survival. It is one of those rare chances afforded Americans to learn the private thoughts of a simple Vietnamese, unencumbered by the distortions and formalities of an interview.

"This letter may worry father, mother and the family," Huynh said, "(But) so far I am safe. I pray God and Buddha will help me always during my days in this sterile, dangerous desert."

Describes Exploits

The letter was made available by Huynh's family. (All the names are pseudonyms). Three times in the past two years, Huynh himself has described his exploits for The Washington Post, first as a determined draft-dodger, later as a deserter and then as an inmate in a military prison from which he escaped last December.

Huynh has never thought of himself as a malingeringer. He was, he said on each occasion, just a young man who didn't want to fight because he didn't want to be killed, like hundreds of thousands of other young Vietnamese. He had a girl friend he has since married and now a baby son.

The hardships of being a soldier—service that can only end in death, crippling injury or old age—was more than Huynh wanted to bear, especially for a government that meant nothing to him and against a foe he couldn't hate.

After he escaped from jail a year ago, Huynh lived with his family in a Saigon suburb. The time was uneventful except for visits from police agents he had to bribe not to turn him in. With time, it became harder to keep the authorities at bay and Huynh grew restless as a fugitive, unable to ride his motorbike or visit freely with friends.

So he turned himself in and became a marine. After training, he was sent to Quangtri Province and there on Dec. 19, after dinner, he sat down to write a letter home.

For 12 hours that day, he began, his unit had been in battle. It started at 4 a.m. when the battalion was shelled. "There was worry on every face," he wrote, "I too was frightened hearing the 130-mm. guns and the Communists shouting 'attack!'"

Then in the morning his unit was dispatched to support a squad besieged nearby. "On the road," Huynh recalled, "my brain strained, my eyes were wide open. . . . There was an awful silence and remnants in the sand: a helicopter with only a rotor and its engine left, some scattered dried bones, a burned and rusted Communist anti-aircraft gun."

The squad was relieved, but the fighting went on: "On the hill overlooking the battlefield I was fascinated from the first minute. I shot with sharp eyes and hands at shadows appearing and disappearing behind sand dunes, bushes and deserted temples. I wore a helmet and a bullet-proof vest, but my friends attacked in their uniforms and with bare heads. It looked as if it were a mock play, full of fun, my sister."

Fight With Enthusiasm

As the day progressed, Huynh said, his fear disappeared and he fought with enthusiasm: "I was calm and able to protect myself from stray bullets. I saw two Communist companies of nearly 200 men break contact and run toward another field. It made me shiver to see them. My god! They ran under the heavy shelling as if they had iron skin. There were no airstrikes, so most escaped. But they left a small unit to fight until death to cover the others' withdrawal."

The battle ended at 4 p.m. "Wounded men were helped to our hill to wait for armored cars that would carry them to battalion headquarters," he wrote. "How sad I felt when seeing them. One was hit by a bullet through the lung to his back. He was in agony but still wished to survive and asked over and over if a car was available."

"Not far away, two poncho-wrapped packages were heavy against the wind. They were waiting to be flown to the cemetery in Saigon. Everyone was relieved but tired. The red color of blood was clear, I became so sad, perhaps I'm not used to the evacuation scene after a battle. But that's war!"

He wrote of the cease-fire and the arrangements for his brother and then he concluded:

"I wish good luck to the family, with better work and more money so that father and mother could be relieved of concern. I also wish you sister, your husband Nguyen and my nephew Duong much more luck and happiness than my wife and I.
"Huynh."