

A Brief Visit to

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Binh Phu,
South Vietnam

Our official greeting came from Le Hoang Oanh a Communist village representative in Cai Lai district 60 miles southeast of Saigon.

"We are happy to welcome the foreign correspondents to visit our liberation areas," he said. "This is the first time the foreign press has come here."

Thus began an 18-hour stay with the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong), South Vietnam's "other side." During those 18 hours we watched an NLF "ceremony of peace" attended by several thousand Vietnamese, walked for more than two hours at night on trails used by NLF troops in mud sometimes up to our thighs and talked at length with NLF political and military officials.

Once during our march, South Vietnamese artillery shells exploded thunderously a few hundred yards away from us. "Now have you seen an example of a cease-fire violation?" an NLF soldier smilingly asked us.

Hoping to get inside an NLF-controlled village, Veronique Decondou of Agence France-Presse, our interpreter, and I had walked in the direction of an NLF flag we had seen waving from a treetop several hundred yards from Route 4, the main highway from Saigon to the Mekong Delta.

FLAGS

We first passed a house with a government flag, then several with no flags, then many with NLF flags. Soon we attracted a group of about 25 people, some of whose startled glances showed that foreigners were not a common sight here. Still, most people were remarkably friendly.

We asked to see village leaders, were loaded into a sampan and taken down a stream. When word spread that we were journalists, people waved NLF flags as we glided by.

Suddenly we saw a few young barefoot soldiers in blue or black pajamas. The rifles they carried included American-made M-16s, carbines and most notably, Chinese-made AK-47s. We knew that we had arrived.



UPI Telephoto

A National Liberation Front flag fluttering over a village showed the Communists were in control

Soldiers waved and called us ashore. We then marched along a path as the number of people trailing behind us constantly grew. They seemed pleased by the surprising catch they had made in the midst of their village. We were led to Oanh, the village representative.

100 PER CENT

We were told we were in Binh Phu village, a 100 per cent NLF-controlled village of more than seven square miles and a population of 6800.

Oanh then took us to see examples of destruction caused by American and South Vietnamese government bombing and artillery.

Oanh asked us to sit down inside a pagoda partly destroyed by bombing or shelling. At least 50 to 60 people gathered around. Oanh then made what seemed to be a formal statement: "The people are happy to receive all journalists, including those who work for the rebel government of Saigon, but on the sole condition that they do their job fairly."

We asked what his job as village representative entailed. "My function is to command politically and militarily with the goal of conquering the American aggressors," he said.

In the midst of our conversation someone handed Oanh a pink slip of paper. It had obviously come by messenger from higher ranked cadres who were informed of our presence. Oanh read it, then said, "The members of this village are very happy to invite you two journalists to spend the night here to celebrate together a ceremony of peace."

Somewhat overwhelmed, we quickly accepted, and

Viet Cong Territory

the people followed Oanh's lead in applauding.

The remarkably tight organization of the village was becoming apparent. Wherever we walked for the next hour, people hailed us on cue from a cadre, with "welcome!" Word of our presence had been passed throughout the village. Youths suddenly appeared to carry our packs and help us across gangplank-like bamboo crossings that stretched between mud walls retaining rice paddies.

While it was obvious that the treatment we received was not spontaneous, it also seemed that no villager carried out his assigned duty with a sense of being put upon. People seemed cheerful and respectful to one another. They exhibited grace and confidence in their actions.

BACKGROUND

As we walked to a villager's house where we would have dinner, Oanh explained a bit of his background to our interpreter. Forty-three years old, Oanh had been a member of the NLF for many years. He said he had been arrested by government troops in 1969, and paid a 40,000 piaster (\$125) bribe which resulted in his release from prison three months later. Villagers donated the money, he said.

During our dinner, I asked Oanh how he felt about eat-

ing with an American after having fought against the U.S. for so many years. "We consider that there are two kinds of Americans," he said. "One we call imperialists, who come with bombs and weapons to kill our people and destroy our land. They are our enemies."

"The second kind of American we call peaceful and progressive. They do not come here to destroy or kill — they are people like Martin Luther King and the movie actress Jane Fonda. We do not see them as our enemies, but as helping us. We really appreciate Americans such as those in the womens' movement who prevent their sons from fighting in South Vietnam."

FARE

We ate outside on a tiny table, lit by a kerosene lamp. The food was substantial and tasty — chicken, beef, soup and rice. This, we were assured, was a "special" meal.

Already tired by our trudge through rice paddies early in the afternoon, we were deflated when told the "peace ceremony" was another two miles away. The two miles turned out to be four.

By the time we began our after-dinner walk, there was no more sun — only a moonless night. Our guides carried flashlights and the kerosene lamp, but they

sometimes we sunk in the mud to our knees and had to be pulled out.

We reached the Bai Ral river, which three years ago was the scene of a bloody battle between NLF troops and the American 9th Infantry Division. We quietly paddled across in a sampan.

VOICES

We soon heard voices on loudspeakers and knew we were close to the site of the ceremony. Just before we arrived a speaker announced that two foreign journalists were coming. As we walked into the clearing, applause greeted us and photographers flashed our pictures.

Our guides said 6000 people were there representing four villages and Cai Lai district town. It was impossible to tell whether that fig-

ure was accurate. The number was certainly in the thousands.

A month before, the ceremony site had been a rice field. Now it contained a makeshift stage with two sets of curtains.

Our entrance marked the end of the meeting's political session and the beginning of entertainment.

MODEL

The performances seemed somewhat derivative of China's model revolutionary operas, but they still had their own unique flavor. In one skit a young girl who supports the NLF chases a "Saigon-government" village chief around the room after he tries to force her to pay him for painting a government flag on her wall.

Making fun of the government's efforts to put flags in

as many places as possible, the girl asks, "What kind of flag is this that must be put everywhere — in the front of the house, in the back of the house, in the bathroom and even on the floor of the boat, so that when you sit down you get paint on your pants?"

Once sentries alerted the audience that a plane was approaching and NLF officials covered all lights so they could not be seen from the air. A few minutes later, about 15 distant artillery explosions could be heard.

The entertainment continued after midnight and showed no signs of stopping. Our guides suggested we leave so that we would have a chance to talk to some high-ranking cadres. We had already concluded that NLF supporters never sleep.

were not enough to prevent us from slipping off the mud walls into the rice paddies. To our companions, who seemed extraordinarily surefooted, our falls were amusing.

We started off with a group of 10 or 15, but after an hour at least 100 people were marching behind us single file. Oanh said the meeting was called only three hours earlier in honor of our appearance, but the news had obviously spread.

Liaison cadres also waited at specific points on the route to direct us for a portion of the journey. We occasionally passed booby traps set for government soldiers just off the trail. The traps were marked by dead vines draped in front of the danger area.

At one point on our trek

south, Vietnamese artillery shells exploded a few hundred yards from us. Everyone immediately hit the ground — I dove head first toward a ditch. "My God, what will we do now," a woman yelled. "Where will we run? Please help me."

Our guides led us to a nearby house where we rested. No one considered the shelling close enough to take refuge in bunkers.

Since the cease-fire began "we never return fire unless they attack us," a cadre said, "but this is an outrage. I think they intend to provoke us."

A few minutes later we resumed our trek. Gaps in the trail became too large to be bridged by bamboo poles. We had no choice but to wade through muddy water,