

Confessions of a Vietnamese Conscript

When Vietnam Veterans Against the War conceived of the Winter Soldier Investigation, they hoped that Vietnamese witnesses, from both the North and South would be able to contribute testimony to the war crimes being committed against their country. Thus, they chose Detroit as a location, knowing that the U.S. government would not permit Vietnamese to enter this country. They arranged for the Vietnamese to come to Windsor, Canada, just across the Detroit River, where they could participate in the investigation via closed circuit television. As events transpired the Canadian government arbitrarily refused to allow the Vietnamese to enter at the last moment. Thus, they remained at the Moscow airport throughout the hearings.

However, during the hearings a leaflet was distributed which graphically detailed the life of one South Vietnamese citizen caught-up in the horrors of the war. Originally published in *Fellowship* in 1969, its person-to-person message makes it worthy of publication again.

Michael McCarthy

A VIETNAMESE CONSCRIPT

by Thu-Van

As far back as I can remember, there has always been some kind of war going on in my country. When I reached draft age at the beginning of 1966, village authorities summoned me and put me in the army. I never had any taste for war. I abhorred killing. I knew I ought not destroy life, for it is contrary to the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Life belongs to God; if I destroyed it, I would have to pay the price, if not in this existence, in the next one. No one escapes Heaven's punishment.

Besides, the sight of blood made me sick. As a child, I trembled violently as if with malaria when I was ordered to kill a chicken—applying the sharpened knife to the animal's neck, and sawing back and forth. Blood squirted

out like a fountain! That blood followed me all day, its nauseous smell on my hands. I saw red everywhere. I couldn't eat chicken. I had begged my mother: "Don't kill the chicken, Mother. Let her lay eggs and we'll eat the eggs."

At the Quang-Trung Training Center they put a gun into my hands and taught me how to kill. I was sent first to Phy-Cuong, a VC infested area Northwest of Saigon. I was put in a position "kill or be killed," so I killed in order not to be killed. Our post was surrounded by the VC. They threatened every night to overrun the post and massacre all of us. We kept shooting in the darkness to scare them away. They kept pouring mortar shells upon us. For each of us in the platoon, only the preservation of his own life mattered. For me, the chicken, the brother blood, the Buddha teachings, the long nose foreigner, the red devil—no longer meant a damn thing. I was twenty. I wanted to live and would shoot anybody in order to live.

My hands no longer trembled. I became a very good soldier. My courage astounded me. I knew now the secret: put a man in the position of killing or being killed and the most blood-shy will become a good soldier. And once his hands are stained with VC blood, he'd have to go all the way to the well with you, for the VC would not forgive him. I felt that all of our rulers knew that. That's why I was sent to Phu-Cuong first—to get my hands stained.

Soon, I came to realize that the other guy, the VC—who could well have been me—is also put in the same position by his leaders: "kill or be killed." He had to kill me in order not to be killed by me. By that time our platoon was transferred to the Mekong Delta.

There seemed to be some kind of tacit agreement between the VC and us: "We won't kill you, so you don't have to kill us. Live and let live. You go your way and I go mine. Each of us

has a duty to do—though none of us has volunteered for it—so let's do it. We won't bother you and you won't bother us." We tried to avoid them and they tried to avoid us. If we happened to run into each other, we fired some shots for a show, and when the show was over each of us went our way. Our sergeant was a very understanding man. The VC sometimes passed near our post. We sent a red balloon or a flare bomb in the air—our way to say "hello" to get credit for our silence. In exchange, our men went shopping in the village market unbothered. And we slept well at night. Our superior officers in the district province headquarters were well satisfied with our performances: for months, there were no VC attacks in our area. The village was listed as "pacified" on the Saigon map, and as "liberated" on the VC map and as a "compromise" in our minds. Everybody was happy.

From time to time, my mother's letters reached me. I would have liked to go home for a visit, but could not get permission, although our village had been raided many times, it was considered relatively safe. No order to evacuate had come as yet. The VC were quiet, trying to turn everyone from the government, even the assistant village chief, a cousin of mine.

One day a letter came from mother, dictated as usual to my sister: "Kho qua! O my son, what ill fortune has fallen upon our family. Our house was burned. For a week we have been in a refugee camp without a roof. It's called Binah Hoa, peace and tranquility — all sand and sun. We have had a hard time trying to get an envelope and stamp to send this letter off to you, for we are kind of prisoners. But thank heaven we're still alive and together.

happened. We were in bed one night when bombs and shells thundered above our heads. We scrambled into

(please turn to page 9)