Christian G. Appy, Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides (New York: Viking, 2003).

TRAN THI GUNG

"I was stuck in a tunnel for seven days."

The petite woman, whose given name means "ginger," fills little more than half a chair and her toes barely reach the floor. Opening a stylish beige handbag, she removes a photograph from 1966 taken by the combat photographer Duong Thanh Phong. It shows her at age twenty, lying on her stomach in a sun-drenched field, perched on an elbow. A braid of waist-length, jet-black hair falls across her shoulder. She's aiming a*

**Duong Thanh Phong's account is on pp. 247–50.*

rifle, the butt of the weapon against her cheek, the barrel resting on a decaying log, and her right finger on the trigger. Around her waist, a thick belt holds cartridges of ammunition and grenades. "I was a member of the guerrilla force of Trung Lap Ha Hamlet near Cu Chi. I was in so many fights for so many years, I can't possibly remember them all."

Her village, only twenty-five miles northwest of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, had been a center of resistance against French colonial rule back in the early 1950s. To fight the French, villagers began to build a network of underground tunnels to use for hiding, quick escapes, and the storage of food and weapons. By the mid-1960s these had been expanded into hundreds of miles of tunnels, some going down three levels with kitchens, living quarters, hospitals, and storage chambers.

The revolutionaries of Cu Chi were southern guerrillas, Viet Cong, who regarded the Saigon government and its soldiers as mere "puppets" of the United States. They looked to Ho Chi Minh ("Uncle Ho") and the Communist North to support their struggle to drive out the Americans and overthrow the government.

Tran Thi Gung was the only woman in her unit, a detail that comes up in passing, as if hardly worthy of mention.

When the revolution broke out I was just a kid. In 1962, the puppet soldiers came to my house and said, "Your father was a Viet Cong so we killed him. Go fetch his body." He had gone to a meeting with his comrades. The southern soldiers surrounded the building and killed everyone. From then on, I decided to take revenge for my father's death.

Also, the people in my neighborhood suffered from poverty and deprivation and were always brutalized by the police and puppet soldiers. I wanted to do something to liberate my country and help people get enough food and clothing. I believed my mission in life was to continue my father's cause, so in 1963, when I was seventeen, I joined the guerrillas.

My first battle with the Americans was in late 1965 or early 1966, near the Dong Du outpost where some Americans were based. Our commanders informed us that we were going to engage them in battle at Xom Moi hamlet. In preparation for such attacks the people had dug trenches around many hamlets. "Anti-American belts," we called them. Of course there were also underground tunnels everywhere around Cu Chi. We arrived in Xom Moi about four in the morning to wait for the Americans. Just before dawn they started shelling us but we hid in our tunnels. As soon as the shelling stopped we moved into our fighting trenches.

We knew the Americans were unfamiliar with the area, but I felt very scared and very nervous because I was just a small girl and the Americans were so big. When I was a young guerrilla fighter I was smaller than I am today. We

knew we couldn't shoot them from a distance. We had to wait for them to come very close. As soon as I started to fire, I killed an American. After he fell, some of his friends came rushing to his aid. They held his body and cried. They cried a lot. This made them sitting ducks. Very easy to shoot. From then on we knew that if we just shot one American soldier others would rush to him and then we could shoot many more.

After a few minutes they pulled back, taking the bodies of their friends with them. But they didn't pick up all their rifles so I crawled out and grabbed five or six AR-15s. I learned to use an AR-15 right on that battlefield. In time I could use just about any weapon, including B-40 rockets.

When the Americans pulled back we knew they would call in artillery fire, maybe even air strikes. So we grabbed their rifles and ran for the tunnels. There we took a short break and reloaded. As soon as it was quiet we returned to the trenches. The second time they advanced they took more casualties. They were such big targets, so easy to hit, I was no longer scared. They retreated again and once more the shelling began. They did this all day, from six in the morning till six at night. Every time they pulled back I crawled out of my hole to seize more weapons. In that first battle against the Americans I shot so many GIs I was awarded a decoration with the title "Valiant Destroyer of American Infantrymen."

I think the Americans lost many people because they were applying conventional tactics against our ambushes and tunnels. Their shells and bombs were extremely powerful and sometimes they killed people in the tunnels, but it didn't happen as often as you might think. The Cu Chi tunnels had such small openings it was very rare for a shell or bomb to land right in a tunnel. As Uncle Ho said, "A stork can't shit into a bottle, so with our tunnels we shouldn't be scared of American bombers."

When GIs discovered tunnel openings they dynamited them, but the tunnels were so deep and had so many twists and turns, they couldn't do too much damage. It was like an underground maze. Most of the tunnels were just wide enough to crawl through and so cramped. There were only some places where you could sit up, never mind stand. Most of the time we lived in the dark. We used kerosene lamps for meetings but never candles. There wasn't enough oxygen so they went out very easily.

Usually we didn't have to stay underground for more than a few hours at a time. After all, we had to be aboveground to fight, right? But one time I was stuck in a tunnel for seven days and seven nights while the Americans were constantly bombing us. After several days our food supply ran short, so even though we were terribly hungry and thirsty, we just ate a few specks of dried rice and drank a few drops of water. When the bombing ended, American

tanks rumbled through the area and accidentally buried the tunnel exits. Lots of times the Americans were able to block one or two exits, but there was always some way out. This time every single one was closed. Luckily we had American bayonets taken from the battlefield and we used them to dig ourselves out.

In addition to laying ambushes we guerrillas attacked enemy outposts. I always volunteered to sneak onto the bases at night to reconnoiter and draw maps so we could plan our attacks. Once we launched an assault on an outpost of the southern army—the training center of Trung Hoa. It was such a dangerous mission the commander feared I might be killed, so my unit conducted a death ceremony for me before I left. It was called a "funeral mass for the living," but was exactly like a funeral mass for the dead. They read the entire funeral oration in my presence. I just listened. They recited my full name, my birth date, and recounted my achievements in the war—she got such-and-such medal for this, a citation for that, a decoration for something else. They talked about how sad they were that I had been killed in action. They spoke exactly as if I were already dead.

To collect all the information we needed, I had to sneak into the training center five times. By then I knew the post so well, I guided our forces in. And because I was a sharpshooter I began the attack by picking off a few of the men on guard.

Fighting the southern soldiers could be a tough job. We had to be extra careful because they were Vietnamese and understood the way we thought. But when we attacked the Trung Hoa training center, after a brief exchange of gunfire all the southern soldiers scrambled for their lives. One guy I chased suddenly stopped and turned around. "Big sister," he pleaded, "please don't shoot me." I realized he knew me. Since I grew up in the area, I knew many of those guys personally. I shouted, "Hey, where's your weapon?" He pointed to the riverbank. Of course I didn't shoot him since he'd already surrendered.

One time I even captured an American. Actually, three of us captured him but I was responsible for leading him back to camp. Before I met a GI in person, I called them all "American errand boys." But this man was so big and tall I didn't dare call him that and when I led him into camp our leaders were upset with me for not blindfolding him. They said, "Why didn't you do that?" I didn't know how to answer. I hated the enemy but when I captured that American, I felt sorry for him. They told me to blindfold him right away so I used my checkered scarf. We sent him on to district headquarters right away.

I had many close calls but was only badly wounded once. Shrapnel from an M-79 [grenade launcher] hit me in the head. I didn't even realize it until I felt my face covered with blood. In battle your comrades know when you're hit or

killed if your rifle is silenced. When they realized I'd stopped firing they came to my rescue. I'd already passed out. They carried me to a jungle hospital and my wound healed quickly. I was only there for two or three weeks.

During the war I witnessed a lot of killing and suffering. I can't imagine how many GIs I killed. After all, I detonated land mines and threw grenades, both of which could kill many men at a time. I was also an excellent sniper and involved in countless firefights. And, of course, I saw many Vietnamese killed in the war, some right next to me.

Whenever anyone asks me about the suffering of the war, I have a terrible nightmare that very night in which I relive these experiences. I miss my comrades very much and often see them again in my dreams. But I never felt guilty about the killing I did. It was war. Wouldn't you shoot me if you saw me holding a weapon and pointing it at you? I think it was justified. But if I went to America and killed people there, I would feel very sorry and guilty. Since the Americans came to my country, I don't feel guilty.

FREE-FIRE ZONE

JIM SOULAR

"A goddamn chopper was worth three times more than David."

We're sitting in his room at one of Hanoi's "mini hotels." He's back in Vietnam for the first time since 1967 when he served with the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). He was a flight engineer on the enormous, double-rotored Chinook helicopter—the CH-47. "I wanted to come back and see the place at peace. I wanted to put a face on the Vietnamese because I damn sure didn't the first time I was here. They were just 'gooks,' 'slopes,' or 'dinks.'" He decided against traveling with a group of American veterans. "A lot of my veteran friends still hang on to the belief that we could have won the war and I didn't want to hear that." Besides, he prefers being by himself. "I've isolated myself in Montana. It's a good place to hide out if that's what you want."

The taxi ride in from the airport almost undid him. The streets were jammed with every imaginable vehicle—motor scooters, cars, trucks, cyclos, bicycles, you name it—all laying on the horn, all crossing intersections at the same time, and all coming within inches of major collisions. "The thought went through my mind that I survived the war, but I'm going to be killed thirty years later in Hanoi traffic."

I've never been a city boy. I grew up in northern Minnesota, up on the Iron Range—the Mesabi Range. All my family were miners. I spent a lot of time alone, exploring the woods, fishing, and hunting. My dad made a living in the mines, but trapping and hunting, that was where his heart really was. He was an expert outdoorsman, an old-time trapper—muskrat, otter, weasel. I have this image of him on his snowshoes going across the lake and disappearing into the distance following his trap line. It was a twenty-mile loop. Some nights he would make it back, and other times he wouldn't get home until the next day. He was one of the most wonderful, compassionate men I've ever met, one of the few in my family who really understood how Vietnam had hurt me. He

would never come out and say it, but he would do things like just wrap his arm around my shoulder.

In 1965, I went to Hibbing Junior College for a year, but I didn't know what I wanted to be or do so I quit and went into the mines. They were open pit and dirty. You start out doing all the grunt work, hosing down conveyer belts, with crap from that red iron ore dripping all over you. It was nasty. But the money was good for a kid—three dollars and eighteen cents an hour. Before that I had made seventy-five cents an hour delivering groceries.

I knew when I quit college I'd lose my student deferment and get drafted. I had no problem with that because I was a patriot. I believed in the flag, I believed in serving my country. And I was good at it. I went through three flight schools before going to Vietnam and was an honor graduate in two of those and second in the third. When the rest of the guys would be screwing off, I'd actually be studying. As flight engineer I was in charge of a one-and-a-half-million dollar helicopter. You know, wherever it went, I went. I took care of all the maintenance, all the records. It was my ship. It didn't fly unless I said it was ready to, no matter how much pressure I got. There was something grand about that for a nineteen-year-old specialist E-4.

And I loved war. I can't deny that. I loved it. I hate it now, but at the time, as a kid, I loved it. I mean I just loved flying. Every time those turbines started winding up, I just thought, *yeah!* It sounds crazy but after a few months you really became one with your helicopter. I could tell if things weren't working right just by feeling the hull of the ship or listening to the pitch of the rotors and the transmissions. It was noisy as hell because we tore out all the soundproofing so you could see where the bullets went through and what lines were hit.

Whenever we took some rounds or had an equipment failure it was my job to assess the problem. Sometimes the pilots would freak out. "We're losing it, chief, we're losing it. We've got to land." I'd say, "You just keep this fucker in the air, sir. We're okay. We're okay. We can make it." If it was just some electrical malfunction, I didn't want to set down in the middle of the Bong Son plain, and I developed a pretty good sense of just how much the chopper could take.

Each Chinook had one machine gunner for every mission, but we carried two machine guns—one on each side. The crew chief or the flight engineer would man the extra machine gun. I loved being on an M-60 machine gun banging away with that thing. God, there was nothing like a combat assault when you went in with twenty, thirty, forty choppers. I mean Hueys everywhere and gunships and CH-47s—just that energy! It was an adrenaline rush. There are some veterans who never got over that. They became addicted to it.

Most of the time we supplied firebases or put in troops and took them out.

The Chinooks were so big, we could move a whole platoon. We also moved Vietnamese villagers. A lot of times areas that were considered to be in the hands of the Viet Cong were declared free-fire zones. We would go in and tell the villagers that they've got to get out, that after a certain date they would be considered VC and anybody we see we can kill. On one mission where we were depopulating a village we packed about sixty people into my Chinook. They'd never been near this kind of machine and were really scared, but there were people forcing 'em in with M-16s so they didn't have a choice. We got 'em all in and had 'em squatting. There were only four of us with sixty of them. I was up on one of the front guns and the crew chief was in the back. All you could do was hand signals. You put your hand out palm downward to keep them down. We started lifting off and one of the Vietnamese in the back stood up and freaked out. He was in his thirties or forties, hard to tell. I couldn't get to him because all the people were between me and him. We were probably sixty feet off the ground, maybe more. The crew chief just thought, fuck it, you're out of here, and pitched the man out the back end. I remember looking out the side of the chopper when he hit the ground. He just laid there. I'm sure he was killed but we never heard anything about it. There was never any follow-up. I talked to the crew chief later and asked what happened. He said, "The guy just freaked out. I couldn't control him. I got scared he would cause a riot and crash us. So to make my point I threw his ass out of there." I said I might have done the same thing.

But even at that time in the war I felt within myself that the forced dislocation of these people was a real tragedy. I never flew refugees back in. It was always out. Quite often they would find their own way back into those free-fire zones. We didn't understand that their ancestors were buried there, that it was very important to their culture and religion to be with their ancestors. They didn't understand what the hell was going on and had no say in what was happening. I could see the terror in their faces. They were defecating and urinating and completely freaked out. It was horrible. After we unloaded the people the helicopter stunk so bad we could hardly stand it. After we hosed it down we sprinkled bottles of aftershave all the way down the length of the chopper.

One time we were given a mission to go out and extract some supplies out of the field. We were expecting to go out and pick up empty water blivets or empty fuel containers or maybe sling out some empty brass from artillery shells. When we got to the landing zone back in the boonies west of Bong Son we saw this deuce-and-a-half truck coming. The guy gets out and says the colonel wants to build a hootch back at base camp so we'd like you to fly it back. The colonel's unit had dismantled an entire Vietnamese hootch, probably fourteen feet long and ten feet wide composed of all these reeds and straw, sheaves of this stuff. There were a few supporting poles we loaded in, but basically it

was just a bunch of thatch. Even before we fired up the engines there's grass flying all over the place. Apparently it never entered anybody's mind to just say, "No, this is an inappropriate and dangerous use of a government helicopter." Not even our pilots. We fired up those engines and it was like being in a blizzard, all this loose stuff just flying around. By the time we got back to base camp we had that stuff down our pants, and all for this colonel who wanted a hootch back at base camp. Who knows why. He may have thought it would make him unique. And being a colonel he probably had his own hootch mama to go with it. You wonder about the ego of an individual who can conceive of those sorts of things.

We were always on call, always in demand. When we weren't pulling inspections on our helicopters, we were flying, sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. Sometimes we pulled all-nighters to get our ships up and flyable. My whole time in Vietnam, other than my R and R to Japan, I got into An Khe for one day, Pleiku for one day, and Vung Tau for three days.

One of my big regrets is that we didn't know anything about the Vietnamese when we went there and we didn't know anything more when we left. If you had a pass to go down to An Khe next to division headquarters you could go to a place we called Sin City. It was an enclave that was government sanctioned, about three acres of bars and souvenir shops surrounded by concertina barbed wire with a central pavillon. You had to go through a checkpoint gate, but once you were in there you could do anything. There were all kinds of prostitutes and booze. The army was definitely in control of this thing. The bars had little rooms in the back where you could go with the prostitutes. I know they were checked by the doctors once a week for venereal diseases.

I'll tell one story that's always stuck with me. It was up around Kontum. The jungle was just fierce up there, incredibly dense and menacing. We were going in to extract a platoon, about thirty troops. They had to blow a hole in the jungle for us to get in and there was just barely enough room. It was like dropping down a tunnel. It got darker and darker and darker. It was spooky. After that mission, I was never envious of the grunts. They were out there where you can't see five feet in front of you. As we dropped down in there these guys started materializing out of the jungle. They'd been out so long their fatigues were rotting off. I'll never forget this one guy. He came on board and he had about four or five scalps hanging from his belt. You know, every now and then you'd see a guy with a string of ears, but I'd never seen scalps before. That was truly bizarre. These were bad-looking dudes. But I could tell they were just young guys like us.

I didn't sleep much last night. I kept waking up, thinking, God, I'm in Vietnam again, what the hell am I doing here? Then I remembered Joe Talan. He

was the first guy I flew with in Vietnam, a thirty-year-old Hawaiian. He taught me the ropes. The First Cav put together several CH-47 helicopter gunships—they called them Chinook A-Go-Gos. Joe volunteered for them, said he wanted to get closer to the action. He got as close as you can get. I flew by just minutes after Joe's chopper crashed and burned. A couple of Huey gunships were pounding the surrounding area. We couldn't get in there for two or three days because the cinders were still cooking off rounds of ammo from the wreck. We finally brought it back in three small sling loads. There was nothing left of the eight crew members. I was told they went down when one of their blades was hit so I always assumed it was enemy fire. But I just learned recently that the official inspection report concluded that the forward mounting pin on one of its twenty-millimeter cannons broke, elevating it so that it was firing up into its own forward rotor system. In other words, it is very likely that Joe's Chinook shot itself down. All the choppers had nicknames stenciled on the sides. Joe's was called "Co$t of Living." There were three Chinook A-Go-Gos in Vietnam when I was there and they all crashed in various ways. One of the others was called "Birth Control."

Last night I also thought about my best friend who was killed in Vietnam. David's death is one of my greatest sorrows. He died right in front of me and it definitely wasn't at the hands of the enemy. He was shot by another GI in an argument. It was stupid. This guy named Harris pulled a gun on me first. He'd been drinking. He was really toasted. He followed us into our barracks and said to David, "You get Stuvick and I'll get Soular." It just seemed like joking around at that point but David said, "Jesus, Bob, put the gun away. It's just not safe. It's not cool." And Harris took offense to that and said something like, "Fuck you, punk, you don't know anything about anything."

Harris was about thirty-five-years-old, a braggart and a jerk. Talked about how he had been in Korea and mowed down thousands of gooks. But David kept telling him, "It just not safe, Bob. We don't need this kind of horseplay." And Bob said, "You punk, you fuck with me, I'll kill you. I know more about wars and guns than you'll ever learn." We still thought the guy was just blowing off steam, and David said again, "Look Bob, put the damn thing away." Just like that Harris pulled the gun up and shot David in the face.

I went out on a mission the next morning and I still had David's blood on my fatigues. For thirty-two years I've wondered if I could have prevented it. David is still nineteen and I'm fifty-five. When we showed up for the court-martial the guy being tried before Harris was charged with crashing a helicopter. Since he was a crew member, not a pilot, he was not authorized to fly. But a lot of crew members could do a little flying and the pilots occasionally let them. That guy was just trying to move a chopper a short distance to protect it

during a mortar attack. He risked his life to save that chopper and he was sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor. Then Bob Harris was tried and I was the only person called to testify. I told them exactly the way I saw it. Harris took the defense that he had been drinking and was sentenced to five years of hard labor for murder. So the guy that just killed my best friend without expressing one bit of remorse got five years, and the guy who wrecked a chopper got fifteen years. To the military, a goddamn chopper was worth three times more than David. That's when the war started unraveling for me.

Twenty years after the war I had someone contact David's family to see if they were willing to meet me. I didn't want to intrude. The intermediary found out that David's father had died, but the mother wanted to see me. David was from Minnesota, where I was originally from, and as a soldier you tend to bond with guys from the same state. And he was such a good kid. So I went back to Minnesota and talked to his mother. She said the bullet that killed David killed his father also. He never got over it. David was an only son.

I assumed that she had been told the truth, that she knew David had been murdered by another American. But the military hadn't told her the truth. She was told that he was accidentally killed in the barracks and that was it. It crushed her that the government had lied to her. She was in her sixties and suddenly realizing that everything she believed in was false—that the government had absolutely no compunction about lying to her, just as it had lied to us constantly during the war.

When I was getting ready to leave she gave me this big hug and said she was glad because she had always been afraid that David had died alone, that nobody was with him when he died. So I knew that regardless of what pain I might have inflicted upon her, I'd also given her some comfort.

I've always considered myself a good soldier, whatever that means. I did what I was told to do. But everything I'd been raised to believe in was contrary to what I saw in Vietnam. All kinds of questions went through my mind and there were no answers. About twelve years ago, it was really strange; I was looking in the mirror shaving and I realized that I don't hate the Vietnamese. All I have is this deep, deep sense of sorrow that this whole thing happened. A day doesn't go by that I don't think about Vietnam—not just what happened to Americans, but what we did to Vietnam. If circumstances had been different, we might have learned so much from them instead of learning nothing and doing so much damage. They seem to have moved beyond the war. But it's still painful for so many of us. I think of Sisyphus rolling the rock up the damn hill. Just when you think you've got it, it comes rolling back down and you start the process over.

LARRY COLBURN

"They were butchering people."

After a long day, the salesman sits in a bar booth sipping a Coke. Once again, he's asked to recall the events of March 16, 1968, when he was a helicopter door-gunner who helped to stop some of the killing at My Lai. His pilot, Hugh Thompson, landed their observation chopper in the midst of the ongoing massacre to protect a group of villagers threatened by GIs. Thompson and his two crewmen were prepared to shoot any Americans who tried to harm the Vietnamese. Thirty years later, the U.S. Army awarded the Soldier's Medal for Gallantry to Thompson, Colburn, and Glenn Andreotta (who died in combat a few weeks after the My Lai massacre).

We weren't pacifists. We did our job and when we had to kill people we did. But we didn't do it for sport. We didn't randomly shoot people. In our gun company it was very important to capture weapons, not just to legitimize your kill, but psychologically it was easier when you could say, "If I didn't do that, he was going to shoot me."

We flew an OH-23—a little gasoline-engine bubble helicopter. We were aerial scouts—a new concept. Instead of just sending assault helicopters they'd use our small aircraft as bait and have a couple gunships cover us. Basically we'd go out and try to get into trouble. We'd fly real low and if we encountered anything we'd mark it with smoke, return fire, and let the gunships work out. We also went on "snatch missions," kidnapping draft-age males to take back for interrogation. We did that a lot in 1968.

On March 16, we came on station a little after seven A.M. The only briefing I got was that they were going to put a company on the ground to sweep through this village. Normally we'd go in beforehand to see if we could find enemy positions or entice people to shoot at us. It was clear and warm and the fog was lifting off the rice paddies. On our first pass we saw a man in uniform carrying a carbine and a pack coming out of a tree line. Thompson said, "Who wants him?" I said, "I'll take him." So he aimed the aircraft at him and got it down low and started toward the suspect. He was obviously Viet Cong. He was

armed, evading, and headed for the next tree line. I couldn't hit him to save my life. We worked that area a little more but that was the only armed Vietnamese I saw that day.

After that we just started working the perimeter of My Lai-4, -5, and -6 and I remember seeing the American troops come in on slicks [helicopters].* We got ahead of them to see if they were going to encounter anything and we still didn't receive any fire. It was market day and we saw a lot of women and children leaving the hamlet. They were moving down the road carrying empty baskets. As we went further around the perimeter we saw a few wounded women in the rice fields south of My Lai-4. We marked their bodies with smoke grenades expecting that medics would give them medical assistance.

When we came back to the road we started seeing bodies, the same people that were walking to the market. They hadn't even gotten off the road. They were in piles, dead. We started going through all the scenarios of what might have happened. Was it artillery? Gunships? Viet Cong? The American soldiers on the ground were just walking around in a real nonchalant sweep. No one was crouching, ducking, or hiding.

Then we saw a young girl about twenty years old lying in the grass. We could see that she was unarmed and wounded in the chest. We marked her with smoke because we saw a squad not too far away. The smoke was green meaning it's safe to approach. Red would have meant the opposite. We were hovering six feet off the ground not more than twenty feet away when Captain Medina came over, kicked her, stepped back, and finished her off. He did it right in front of us. When we saw Medina do that, it all clicked. It was our guys doing the killing.

The bodies we marked with smoke—you find yourself feeling that you indirectly killed them. I'll never forget one lady who was hiding in the grass. She was crouched in a fetal position. I motioned to her—stay down, be quiet, stay there. We flew off on more reconnaissance. We came back later and she was in the same position, right where I'd told her to stay. But someone had come up behind her and literally blew her brains out. I'll never forget that look of bewilderment on her face.

Around ten A.M. Thompson spotted a group of women and children running toward a bunker northeast of My Lai-4 followed by a group of U.S. soldiers. When we got overhead, Andreotta spotted some faces peeking out of an earthen bunker. Thompson knew that in a matter of seconds they were going to die so he landed the aircraft in between the advancing American troops and

*My Lai-4, the scene of the massacre, was one of six subhamlets identified as My Lai (1–6) on U.S. Army maps. All were part of the village of Song My. Vietnamese residents of My Lai-4 called their subhamlet Xom Lang.

the bunker. He went over and talked to a Lieutenant Brooks. Thompson said, "These are civilians. How do we get them out of the bunker?" Brooks said, "I'll get them out with hand grenades." The veins were sticking out on Thompson's neck and I thought they were actually going to fight. Thompson came back and said to Andreotta and me, "If they open up on these people when I'm getting them out of the bunker, shoot 'em." Then he walked away leaving us standing there looking at each other. Thompson went over to the bunker and motioned for the people to come out. There were nine or ten of them.

We had a staredown going with the American soldiers. About half of them were sitting down, smoking and joking. I remember looking at one fellow and waving. He waved back and that's when I knew we were okay, that these guys weren't going to do anything to us. No one pointed weapons at us and we didn't point any weapons at them.

Thompson called Dan Millians, a gunship pilot friend of his, and said, "Danny, I've got a little problem down here, can you help out?" Millians said sure and did something unheard of. You don't land a gunship to use it as a medevac, but he did. He got those people a couple miles away and let 'em go. I think he had to make two trips.

We flew over the ditch where more than a hundred Vietnamese had been killed. Andreotta saw movement so Thompson landed again. Andreotta went directly into that ditch. He literally had to wade waist deep through people to get to a little child. I stood there in the open. Glenn came over and handed me the child, but the ditch was so full of bodies and blood he couldn't get out. I gave him the butt of my rifle and pulled him out. We took the little one to an orphanage. We didn't know if he was a little boy or little girl. Just a cute little child. I felt for broken bones or bullet holes and he appeared to be fine. He wasn't crying, but he had this blank stare on his face and he was covered with blood.

The only thing I remember feeling back then was that these guys were really out for revenge. They'd lost men to booby traps and snipers and they were ready to engage. They were briefed the night before and I've heard it said that they were going in there to waste everything. They didn't capture any weapons. They didn't kill any draft-age males. I've seen the list of dead and there were a hundred and twenty some humans under the age of five. It's something I've struggled with my whole life, how people can do that. I know what it's like to seek revenge, but we would look for a worthy opponent. These were elders, mothers, children, and babies. The fact that VC camped out there at night is no justification for killing everyone in the hamlet.

Compare it to a little town in the United States. We're at war with some-

one on our own soil. They come into a town and rape the women, kill the babies, kill everyone. How would we feel? And it wasn't just murdering civilians. They were butchering people. The only thing they didn't do is cook 'em and eat 'em. How do you get that far over the edge?

At the end of the day, he went to see Colonel Oran Henderson, the commander of Task Force Barker, who was flying in a command and control helicopter at fifteen hundred feet over My Lai throughout the massacre. "I told him there was needless killing of civilians going on that day, blatant killing of lots of civilians. He took some notes on a legal pad and said, 'Okay.' Didn't hear anything more about it until the trials of Calley, Medina, and Henderson. F. Lee Bailey cross-examined me about the woman we saw Medina kill. He said, 'Mr. Colburn, you said that this woman was moving her arm?' I said, 'Yes, like she was gesturing for help.' He established in front of the jury that she made this quick move and because of Medina's keen combat edge he just turned and fired. Malarkey. I think that's when I realized that there would be no justice for those people who died."

In 2001, Colburn went back to Vietnam to participate in the opening of a My Lai Peace Park and the dedication of a new elementary school in the village—both projects initiated and largely financed by American veterans of the war. While in My Lai, he was reunited with the boy he saved from the ditch, now a man of forty-one named Do Hao. "I have worried about Do Hao for thirty-three years. All these years I've prayed he was four or five years old and had no memory of it, that the horror would be erased. Turns out he was eight. He remembers everything."

"THE WORLD WAS COMING TO AN END"

FRANK MAGUIRE

"The whole attitude was, stand back little brother, I'll take care of it."

"I went to Vietnam because it was there. I was thirty-five, a bachelor, and an officer. I don't think I had a choice." He served three tours in Vietnam as an adviser to the Vietnamese, first in Quang Ngai (1965–66), then An Khe (1967–69), and finally in the Mekong Delta (1970–71). "It was a very sad experience, but for me it was wonderful. I sometimes get a guilty conscience because I enjoyed it so much. People laugh when I say I kept going back because of the girls and the food, but that's not too much of a lie."

The first year was the best. I was a district adviser to the 2nd ARVN Division and I thought we were doing well for the people. There was a sense of progress and security. You weren't looking over your shoulder all the time. The guys in the 2nd Division were getting more confidence in their own infantry and we were involved with a lot of civic action, reconstruction, and local security. I liked my Vietnamese counterpart—he was a good man. We cut ribbons together on several schools and dispensaries. The whole thing started with such high hopes. When I went home in '66, I remember making speeches and telling people we weren't just running around killing people, that we were building and trying to improve people's lives. I felt so good about it and so did the country.

When I went back to Vietnam in '67 I worked in the An Khe district. I lived in what had been a Protestant mission that had Western-style plumbing and a generator. It was a soft life, but I was discouraged. There was nothing for me to do. The 1st Cav took over all the civil operations. If the Vietnamese wanted a road built, they didn't get Vietnamese out there with shovels to do it. They got the 1st Cav engineer detachment to come out with all their graders and bulldozers to put it in. The Americans did things I tried to talk them out

of. One American general looked around and said, "They need a high school." I said, "They do, but they don't have any teachers for this area." Nobody paid attention. They built this beautiful two-story concrete high school and the Vietnamese said, "Thank you, but where are the books and the teachers?" Of course the Americans thought the Vietnamese were ungrateful bastards. The whole attitude was, stand back little brother, I'll take care of it. The Vietnamese weren't developing their own resources.

Shortly after Tet, I heard the word *Vietnamization* for the first time. Of course, it was always supposed to be their war, but it was lip service because all the Americans wanted to get in and win it by themselves. The Vietnamese just stayed in the background. We felt that by giving them new weapons somehow they were going to be inspired soldiers and they weren't. They kept looking over their shoulders. Where are the Americans? As things went on it got worse.

Another indication of where the war was going was the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). One day I saw my radio operator, Foley, with this huge print-out—the HES report. I said, "Let me see that." They had all sorts of questions as to the attitudes, intentions, political leanings of every hamlet in our district. I said, "Foley, where do you get the information to answer all these questions?"

He said, "Oh, I just fill it in." I looked at it and said, "You say everything in the district is fine."

"Yeah, I always do." Then I said, "Foley, you say here there's no VC within two hours of this location."

He said, "Yeah?"

"Foley, there's no place in this whole damn country where there isn't a VC within two hours. When you go out the gate and into An Khe town, do you take a .45 with you?"

He said, "Do you think I'm crazy? Of course I do." So I changed the report and within seventy-two hours I was on my way to Saigon explaining why I had downgraded the evaluations. I met the youngest full colonel I'd ever seen. He was a computer nerd and it was his absolute conviction that when he finished his plan he would be able to predict what was going to happen anywhere in Vietnam at any time. I said, "But Colonel, what you're dealing with are my guesses. My guesses become your facts." He said, "Well, we have a factor built in to take care of that."

One of my jobs was taking the figures from the HES reports and turning them into briefing charts. I remember the time a colonel and I sat up one whole night with a bottle of Scotch, not changing the figures but moving them around and labeling them so it would turn out that we were winning. And in those days after Tet it looked like we were. Tet was a disaster for Charlie. I

never did see another VC. They were all blown away. Anybody we killed after that was North Vietnamese. I could drive from Qui Nhon to Pleiku and back.

It was a weird existence because it was war, yet you were often divorced from war. Every Sunday they had a meeting of all the district advisers in Qui Nhon. I drove down and after the meeting we'd all get on a PT boat with some New Zealand nurses and female doctors and a fifty-five-gallon drum full of beer and go cruising out in the islands and take a swim. There were some fabulous beaches there. And when I got promoted to lieutenant colonel they pulled me into Qui Nhon and my quarters were located right on the beach. I could stand on the balcony and look out at a white beach, a big moon, and mountains rising up above the lagoon. I thought, all I need is Dorothy Lamour.

When I came home I was assigned as an adviser to the Indiana National Guard. It was a kind of preretirement position. Unfortunately, with that job I automatically became the area notification officer. If a soldier or marine in the area was killed in action I had to deliver the news. And if the body came home you stayed with it until it was buried. I had one case where the mother wanted to look at the body and the undertaker said, "If the colonel and I look and say it's him, will you accept our word?" She said yes. So we opened up the casket and there was an army green uniform, complete with necktie and ribbons. Buttoned up inside the blouse was a plastic garbage bag. That was him. A helicopter crash. It exploded and burned and that was all that was left. We lied like troupers to the mother. That's when I asked to be sent back to Vietnam.

When I got back to Saigon in 1970, the city was dead. It was like a bad movie set with papers blowing in the street. There was a lot of frenetic gaiety. I felt defeat and loss everywhere. Friends tried to talk me out of it, but nobody ever did. The world was coming to an end. The VNAF [Vietnam Air Force] officers club outside of Tan Son Nhut had great Chinese food. The whole thing was organized for the American trade. They had girls available and people were banging them under the tables at lunch. Another Vietnamese club was always full of American State Department people and this very senior guy was playing the piano like mad and everybody was getting laid and drunk. It was like dancing on the end of the inferno. And the State Department ran a hotel that came completely equipped with girls for every room. My last assignment was for JUSPAO [Joint United States Public Affairs Office] down in the Delta. Since JUSPAO was a State Department operation, whenever I came to Saigon they put me up in their hotel and the same girl would hop into my bed. It was sanctioned by the State Department!

Everybody was on the make. There was a fat guy out of an old Warner Brothers movie who asked me if I could figure out where he could sell three

P51 Mustangs with ammunition. There was a young Englishman who arrived without a penny in his pocket, bought a barge on spec, and one night with a bottle of cognac I helped him name the twelve tugboats he'd just purchased. Even my Mafia friends in Brooklyn were kind of aghast at all this wheeling and dealing and end-of-the-world activities.

When I was in the Delta, I wrote a report and said that the local Vietnamese troops had picked up all of the nasty habits of unemployed mercenaries of the Thirty Years War. Somebody flew down from Saigon and walked me around for a couple of hours trying to explain that it wasn't really like that. One of the things we did was to support the Phoenix Program. I personally thought it was a good idea but I didn't think it was working. I came to the conclusion that any Vietnamese civilian killed on an operation who couldn't be identified was scratched off the wanted list of the Phoenix Program. We supported the program by producing the "Wanted" posters—photographs, descriptions, and offering rewards.

Some of our young officers and troops didn't identify the Vietnamese as people. It wasn't so much a question of skin color, it had to do with the fact that they didn't have American houses, they didn't have television, their clothes were different, and they ate funny. As some wise guy said, "What can you do with a people that use two sticks to pick up one grain of rice and one stick to carry two buckets of shit?" I remember a helicopter pilot in the Delta who said, "I must've shot up fifteen, twenty sampans and you shoulda seen those little mothers jump in the water. I got most of them." I said, "Were they VC?" He said, "Who the fuck cares?"

When I first got to Vietnam the American province chief gave a tour of the provincial hospital. You took a look at the kids and civilians and he said, "When you call for artillery, remember who's on the other end. We're not here to mutilate or kill these people." Somewhere along the line that kind of attitude got lost. I saw a GI truck driver barrel-assing down a road in Binh Dinh and he sideswiped a little Vietnamese minibus with about ten people on it. He scattered them and their stuff all over the road. Thank God he didn't hurt any of them. They were just shook up and badly bruised. But he never even slowed down. I pulled him over and he said, "What did I do?" Another time in An Khe I was crossing the road and said hello to one of the girls from Sin City. An American tractor trailer went by and brushed her. She just quivered and stiffened up. She was dead. The driver didn't even know it.

I think if we really thought about it, we had no business being there. But by the time I got there, so many Vietnamese people had made a commitment to that government and to us that we owed it to them. We shouldn't have been there in the first place, but hundreds of thousands of people believed what we

told them. The sad thing is, there was a guy named Charlie Holland from Brooklyn. I met him once and we got terribly drunk together. Charlie had been in OSS in World War II and worked with Ho Chi Minh. He and Ho Chi Minh composed a letter to President Truman with an outline of the government they wanted to organize. They never got an answer. If we'd done the right thing, I'd never have made major, but we would have saved a lot of people.

I think it's a national trait that we always feel we know what's better for everybody. It was an attitude of misguided benevolence—that we know what's good for them and they don't really understand what's happening. We really wanted to win their hearts and minds, except we could never find one or the other.

CHARLES COOPER (II)

"All this area was Indian country."

As a major in 1965, he had been "an easel with ears," a witness to President Lyndon Johnson's tirade against the Joint Chiefs of Staff (see pp. 121–23). Five years later he went to Vietnam as a battalion commander. By 1970 he felt "things were going to hell in a handbasket." American troops realized the United States was beginning to pull out of the war while the other side seemed as committed as ever. "We used to say, 'Their guys just care more.' Whatever motivates 'em, or whatever they feed 'em, or whatever they believe in, whether its getting rid of the Europeans or all this Communist pap, they believe it. They were totally unselfish."

This was late in the war and the quality of people in the Marine Corps, and even more so in the army, had really gone down. Thanks to Project 100,000 they were just flooding us with morons and imbeciles.* It doesn't mean they couldn't eat and talk and move around, but they couldn't learn well and they'd get frustrated and become aggressive.

It was also a period when we really had some race problems. I was as concerned about race relations as I was about the enemy. I really didn't know what I was in for. Just a few days after I took over the battalion I'm trying to pick up

*Project 100,000 (1966–71) was launched by the Johnson administration as a program of social uplift. Each year a hundred thousand young men who scored at the bottom of military aptitude tests were to be inducted and provided with special training. In fact, most received little if any remedial education and many went to Vietnam. The military had already significantly dropped its admissions standards before Project 100,000 began, but the program contributed to the social and economic inequities of military service during the Vietnam War.

the pieces and get the outfit back in combat-ready status after they'd just had their butt kicked in a sapper attack. In the middle of that a bunch of guys came to see me saying they wanted to have black studies and black clubs. And then I learned that there was a secret underground society of blacks called the Mau Maus. It went back to the Kenyan story where the Mau Maus rose up and murdered all of the English settlers. At any rate, they were pro–Viet Cong. I don't know if they had contacts with the enemy, but they were very much against any kind of American victory over there.

So the first thing I did when I took over was to close down any access to alcohol. I just turned it all off. I wanted everybody to be a twenty-four-hour fighting marine. That helped a little but then I allowed myself to be talked into allowing a limited amount of beer and we had a Mexican standoff. A white staff sergeant and a few of his buddies went to the enlisted club and got to drinking. A staff sergeant should not even have been in there. Anyway, there were some racial slurs and some fisticuffs. There were no weapons allowed in the club so after the fight they all went back to their hootches and got their weapons and came right back. You had all whites on one side and all blacks on the other and they all had loaded weapons pointing at each other. Fortunately, this motor transport officer appeared on the scene, pulled out his .45, got everybody's attention, and somehow managed to calm everyone down. This guy was just an absolute hero.

Not too long after that one of my rifle companies was involved in a major battle in the Que Son Valley west of Fire Support Base Ross. They ran into a classic ambush and lost about thirteen men, some of their finest people. I was very concerned about this company. They had been under a lot of stress. I flew out and walked back in with them, about four miles, just to see how they were doing. They sounded pretty damn good. They were saying, "Well, sir, sometimes things just turn to shit and you just got to police it up and keep going." So I brought them in that night and let them get a night of sleep without having to be on watch. But we couldn't stop the war, so I had to put them out in the field the next day.

A day or two later they had a couple more men killed. This time it was done by a small child. This kid had waved to the marines while they were on patrol and signaled them to come over. As they closed in on him he reached down and pulled up an AK-47 and started shooting. Two guys were killed and a few more wounded and this kid capered off toward the village of Son Thang.

So this company was doubly depressed. They'd had their butt kicked in an ambush and they were just getting back into the field when they were made to look like a sucker by a little kid. The next night the lieutenant called me asking

for permission to send out four or five guys on an ambush. They called it a "killer team." These teams would put camouflage paint on their faces and do all these little professional things designed to set up an effective ambush. So that night, as usual, I went to sleep in the command center with a radio in each ear. This B company called in and said their killer team had sprung an ambush of about twenty VC and had an estimated kill of four or five. There was just something about it that sounded a little fishy. Five men taking on twenty and not having any casualties of their own just sounded a little too perfunctory. So I got on the net and asked to speak to the company commander. I said, "Ron, this doesn't sound right. Did they capture any weapons?"

He said, "Wait one," and came back on and said, "They got one—an SKS. I asked for the serial number and it turned out to be one they had captured a couple days before. The next morning I sent Lieutenant Grant, my intelligence officer, to check out the site of this alleged fight. He didn't find anything at the supposed ambush spot so he went into the little village of Son Thang—the same one where the little kid had gone a few days before. He comes back up on the line and said he found twenty bodies, all women and children. He said, "This village got blown away and it looks like our troops did it. There are shell casings here." I said, "Oh shit." I called my regimental commander and said "Colonel, we got a real problem and I've got to come see you personally."

The year before I went to Vietnam, I wrote my thesis in the Army War College on the role of the media in Vietnam. Basically it says, be professional but be candid and tell the truth. Don't cover up, ever. That's the bottom line. So the next morning we had all the TV networks and major newspapers out for a briefing. I told 'em basically what I had found and briefed them on the fog of battle up there. I told them this company was probably my most aggressive and proudest unit and they had suffered a lot lately and were bitter. They had been involved in combat with women and children who had killed marines and that all this area was Indian country and a free-fire zone. We routinely fired artillery and mortars and ran air strikes into this area because it had supposedly been cleaned out of all the civilian population. All these people were VC families. But it's a little hard for lawyers to accept the fact that a VC family is part of the enemy.

The first guy that got up was from *The New York Times* and he says, "Well now, colonel, you told us about your mini My Lai." I just blew up. I said, "Look, come on. This happened a little over twenty-four hours ago. We discovered it. We don't know whether these men are guilty of anything or not, but we're telling you now that we think we have a problem and we're going to solve it and if somebody's done something wrong they'll be punished. But

we're not hiding anything. We're fighting a war and the fog of battle up here is so thick you can't cut it. I've just spent thirty minutes explaining to you how difficult it is for these young men to understand who is the enemy and who isn't. We know that the VC live out here and we know their families live in that hamlet, so I resent the hell out of your calling it a My Lai." And the guy apologized. But from that point on, my entire time in Vietnam I had at least one or two reporters with my battalion every day.

One of the problems was we were getting kids who had fought with the 3rd Marine Division up near the DMZ and they were in a blow-away mode. They were at the height of bitterness and they wanted to kill somebody. That was like World War II up there. Everything that moved, you blew away. There wasn't any civilian population to hide the enemy. But the 1st Division was farther south and the rules of engagement were totally different. We were loaded with civilians. When the killer team went out that night they were all hit on the back by lieutenants and sergeants who said, "Get some." That's a marine expression for "kill some of the enemy." Well, they went out to what they thought was the enemy and killed 'em. They went into that village and cleaned it out with hand grenades and M-79 grenade launchers.

For all the media scrutiny, I actually got along very well with the press and came to respect many of them. The day I got on the airplane to come home, out came a media delegation—about twelve guys and one woman. They put a lei around my neck. This lei was made of six canteens tied together with bandoleers and each canteen had a different kind of booze—bourbon, scotch, gin, vodka. They all gave me a hug and a handshake and said, "You know, we've come to love you. Your a pro and you're one of the good things in this crummy war." It was against the law to serve booze to troops going home but I got the airline's okay and I passed out my canteens. When we got into Travis Air Force Base we were singing.

Four men were court-martialed for the killings at Son Thang. Two of the defendants were acquitted, including the patrol leader who admitted to ordering the shooting and himself firing an M-79. General Cooper testified at their court-martial trials. "I know my testimony was pivotal. I said to the jury, 'I think many of you have never experienced the fog of battle like these young men did.' I'm not trying to excuse the fact that they killed noncombatants, but who in the hell was a noncombatant?"

The other two defendents were convicted of unpremeditated murder and given five-year terms that were later reduced. One of them, Sam Green, an inner-city African American who participated in the killings on his eleventh day in Vietnam, committed suicide in 1975.