



The Village

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Few American battles have been so extended, savage and personal. A handful of Americans volunteered to live among six thousand Vietnamese, training farmers to defend their village. Such “Combined Action Platoons” (CAPs) are now a lost footnote about how the war could have been fought; only the villagers remain to bear witness. This is the story of fifteen resolute young Americans matched against two hundred Viet Cong; how a CAP lived, fought and died. And why the villagers remember them to this day.

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Editorial Review

Review

The Washington Post A minor classic about war.

The New York Times A vivid and unbiased portrait of one Vietnamese hamlet in the grip of war...Exceptional insight....West has told this story with honesty and without embroidery, while bringing out its inherent human drama.

Charles B. MacDonald Author of *Company Commander* Unquestionably the best book to come out of the Vietnam war -- human, compassionate, suspenseful, dramatic.

Peter Braestrup Author of *Tet* A superbly honest, readable work that goes beyond journalism to become good literature.

Washington Post Book Review This is the way Vietnam should have been fought -- by tough volunteers who lived alongside the Vietnamese....It will take the sternest dialogue to remain unmoved by West's perceptive and human treatment of the men who fought it....It's an account of brave men at war in a far country, honestly told.

Keith William Nolan Author of *The Battle for Saigon* and *A Hundred Miles of Bad Road* One of the small handful of truly great books to come out of the Vietnam war.

Pacific Affairs Pure Hemingway in the best sense of that characterization....West brilliantly portrays the drama of a war few Americans have known.

Leatherneck Magazine A fantastic, down in the mud and crud book of enlisted Marines fighting to defend a village....West tells of some of the victories and the tragic cost. And he tells it well.

About the Author

Francis J. "Bing" West served in Vietnam as a Marine infantry officer, and later as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Dean of Research at the Naval War College, an analyst at the RAND Corporation, and a lead CNN commentator during Desert Storm. He is currently president of the GAMA Corporation. A frequent contributor to defense journals, West is also the author of *Small Unit Action* in Vietnam, and *Naval Forces and National Security*. His new novel, *The Pepperdogs*, is available from Simon & Schuster. Visit his Web site at www.westwrite.com

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Chapter One

Ap Thanh Lam wanted to go home. In the last six years of fighting, he had stayed overnight in his home village only once. And that night he had hidden in the shadows of a thicket and left as soon as he had killed his man.

Lam was a policeman -- a professional who shunned politics and avoided discussions about ideology. He owed his training to the Viet Minh, in whose Security Service he had worked after World War II. He had broken with the Communists in 1954, and subsequently had fought against them. The Saigon government,

though glad of his services, held him suspect, refused him promotions and transferred him frequently. But Lam was given what he valued most: freedom to operate as he chose. A middle-aged man with an unmistakable air of authority, Lam looked and acted like a cop. Even in friendly conversation he gave the impression that part of him was holding back, watching, listening, judging, respected by the villagers because he did not tax them and hated by the Viet Cong because he could trap them.

Lam rarely accompanied the Army into Viet Cong hamlets. Instead, he let the Viet Cong come to him. When he had a tip that a VC leader might be visiting a government-controlled hamlet, he told no one. That way, there was no chance of a leak. Even his squad of special police frequently did not know where or why he was taking them. The trapped Viet Cong rarely fought. The surprise was too great. A door would suddenly be kicked open and there would stand Lam, backed up by a dozen police with submachine guns.

In May of 1966, Lam was told that Truong My, an important VC cadre, would be sleeping with his wife on a certain night in the VC village of Binh Nghia (pronounced "Been Knee-ah"). Ordinarily, Lam would not have acted on that information. Trying to slip undetected into a VC hamlet was too dangerous. Most likely his police would be spotted by the hamlet sentries and end up in a firefight with the local guerrilla platoon while the VC leader escaped.

But Binh Nghia was different. It was Lam's home. He knew the back paths and hedgerows, the gates and the gaps in the fences, the backyard runs of the children and the houses of VC families.

The evening Truong My was due home, Lam put on the black pajamas and conical hat of a farmer and stuck a snub-nosed .38 revolver in his waistband. Unaccompanied, he left district headquarters and padded barefoot to the bank of a nearby river, where he climbed into a small sampan.

It was dusk when Lam reached the village. The VC sentries saw his sampan turn into the bank, but before they could walk to it, Lam had ducked into a nearby thicket. The sentries walked back to their outpost position without raising the alarm, having assumed Lam was a farmer returning late from the district market.

Lam stayed crouched in the thicket for several hours, patiently waiting for the families to finish their dinners, for the children to go to bed, for the dogs to curl up under the houses, for the women to wash the dishes, for the men to finish their strong moonshine wine, for the lights to go out. The Viet Cong did not mount strong patrols inside their hamlets at night; instead, they guarded its perimeters. By midnight Lam was walking slowly through the backyards with no worry about an ambush and with only mild concern that he might accidentally bump into some VC on the move.

The home of Truong My was near the house in which Lam had been born and where his mother still lived. Lam and Truong My knew each other, but not well, for Lam was ten or fifteen years older. Although since choosing sides neither man dared visit his home on a regular basis, their families were immune from the violence. The relatives and children of both sides were equally vulnerable to reprisals, so no man dared strike the family of another, lest his own family suffer ten times over.

At one in the morning, Lam passed by his mother's house. Its lights were out, but lanterns were still flickering in a few other houses and it was toward one of them that Lam carefully walked. When near the hedge which surrounded the house, he stopped and stood for several minutes in the darkness, listening to the low drone of conversation from within the house and watching for any movement outside in case Truong My had brought a bodyguard home with him.

Once satisfied that Truong My and his wife were alone, Lam moved rapidly. Revolver in hand, he walked up

to the gate in the hedge and felt along its hinges for any booby traps. Finding no trip wires, he untied the rope latch, opened the gate and entered the front yard. Without pausing, he proceeded across the porch and kicked open the front door.

Truong My was sitting at a table in the center of the room, a small cup of tea in front of him. His wife was off in a corner, tending the hearth. The wife was startled. Truong My was not. In the second during which the door had come banging open, the Viet Cong leader knew what would be next. It took Lam only an instant to cross the threshold and level his pistol. But in that same time Truong My had come to his feet, kicking his stool behind him and thrusting the table toward Lam.

Then the first bullet hit him, but it didn't stop him, and he had momentum, and he was close to the doorway leading to the back of the house. But Lam was firing again, and again, and Truong My never reached the doorway. He died in his home while his wife watched.

Lam was not through. He ran to the house next door. There he found a farmer and his wife, who had heard the shooting, shepherding their sleepy children toward the family bomb shelter. At gunpoint, he led the parents back to Truong My's house, where he forced them to pick up the body and follow him at a fast shuffle to the river bank. With his dead enemy draped over the bow, he was paddling downriver toward the district town before the Viet Cong guerrillas in the village of Binh Nghia could organize a search for him.

The corpse lay on display in the district market all day, an object lesson intended to lessen the prestige of the Viet Cong and to demonstrate the power of the government forces. For a week afterward, the district buzzed with the news of Lam's exploit. The Viet Cong district committee swore they would revenge the killing of Truong My, their fury adding to Lam's reputation.

In June, Lam again moved in a spectacular way. He had been closely watching one of the leaders of a local political party. The man had been busy haranguing crowds and organizing support for a Buddhist struggle movement against the Saigon government. Acting on an informer's advice, Lam had the man seized at his home, where a quick search revealed correspondence which identified the prisoner as a member of the Viet Cong Current Affairs Committee. Yet the prisoner spent less than a day in jail before his political friends convinced the district chief it would be unwise to press charges.

There the matter did not end. To teach Lam not to act so independently, the political party started a whispering campaign against him, alleging that he was in the secret employ of Premier Ky and the Saigon clique. These were serious charges, for the Saigon government was never popular in Lam's province, and if Lam was considered a spy for the Ky regime, many of his sources of information would dry up.

Lam's temper was quick, and when he heard what the local political party was rumoring about him, he barged into the district chief's office and laid down an ultimatum.

"Do you know what is being said about me?" he yelled. "That I work for Ky -- that I am not loyal to my province. Those idiots out there would rather see the Viet Cong take this province than work together. They won't believe what their eyes tell them. Well, I'm not going to put up with it. Either you get them to shut up or I'm going to arrest the next politician who hints that I'm getting paid to spy for Saigon. And if the arrest won't stick, I'll cut his tongue out before I let him go."

"You can't," the district chief replied. "And I can't. Neither of us is powerful enough. Let it die down. It might be better if you worked somewhere else for a while."

"Like where?"

"How would you like to go home to Binh Nghia? Your mother would be glad to see you. I gather you didn't stop by to say hello when you went in after Truong My."

"What are you driving at?" Lam asked. "You know I wouldn't last half an hour in the village without troops. And you don't have troops good enough to clear that village."

"I may have," the district chief replied. "Younger Brother thinks he can get some American Marines. The Americans don't like Viet Cong in the village right at the end of their airfield. They will help us if we send in some police and organize a militia. If you want, you can be in charge. It's up to you. It's your village."

Major Richard Braun was called Younger Brother by the district chief whom he advised. Although an affectionate term, it signified that the adviser was in the position of learning, not teaching. Braun didn't mind, since he had no intention of meddling in the Byzantine politics of the Vietnamese. Instead, he took pride in his thorough knowledge of infantry tactics. Every outpost in his district was registered to receive illumination and artillery support. He knew whom to call for night medevacs. He kept close liaison with the neighboring American units.

Braun's reputation for effectiveness attracted senior officers. In early June of 1966, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt visited Braun. Walt commanded the Marines in Vietnam, a battalion of whom were working in Braun's district, which was called Binh Son.

Binh Son is far from the seats of Vietnamese power. It lies in Quang Ngai, the southernmost of five violent provinces called I ("Eye") Corps, three hundred miles to the north of Saigon and four hundred miles to the south of Hanoi. Quang Ngai is one of the few provinces in North or South Vietnam where, even in times of peace, the population has had to struggle against starvation. Unyielding jungle and sharp mountain ranges penned the rice farmers and their families along the narrow green plain bordering the sea, where there was not enough land for a growing population.

Hunger fed politics, and in 1930 famine struck Quang Ngai when a high wind washed the rivers across the rice crops and drove the fish from shore. The French colonial government allowed the local Vietnamese satraps to collect their normal rice taxes from a starving people. Secret antigovernment societies flourished during the next ten years, and the people strongly supported the Viet Minh in their struggle against the French after World War II.

In 1960 the Viet Cong movement started to gain momentum, and four years later the Viet Cong could realistically claim control over most of Quang Ngai's villages and over all the jungle, allowing their main forces to establish a huge base camp in the mountains. The main VC forces then turned on the South Vietnamese regular forces. The latter, so organizationally muscle-bound that they had been unable to wrestle the guerrillas for control of the rural population, found they lacked the strength to win the conventional battles they had been structured to fight. In a series of brilliant battles and marches, the Viet Cong main forces bloodied and befuddled the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units and threatened to seize the capital city of Quang Ngai.

Against that background came the introduction of American combat troops into southern I Corps. Near Quang Ngai's northern border, in Binh Son district, stretched a barren coastal sand spit four miles long. There in March of 1965 troops from the 1st Marine Division splashed ashore unopposed and began to lay the steel matting for the jets which would fly in close support of the infantry. During the next year the

Americans built and expanded their airfield, called Chulai, and clashed with the Viet Cong main forces in several sharp but inconclusive battles. In the populated sections of Binh Son and other districts, the Marines built battalion outposts. General Walt made it a habit to ask district advisers like Braun what he thought of the U.S. battalions.

Braun told Walt that the Marines would be more effective if they worked with the Vietnamese instead of just beating the bushes on their own looking for the VC. Walt asked for a specific recommendation.

"Well, General," Braun replied, "I'd like to see us try a combined unit, a group of Marines and Viets who would eat, sleep, patrol and fight as one unit -- not two."

"If you had them, where would you put them?" Walt asked.

"There's a big village not far from here. It sits along a river which the Cong use to move supplies back up into the mountains. As a matter of fact, it's just south of Chulai airfield. The government forces were chased out of the village a couple of years ago. A platoon of Cong live there regularly now, and sometimes a company or more come in to resupply or rest."

"Why pick there to start?" Walt asked.

"I didn't, sir. The district chief did. He has this outstanding police chief who's being bad-mouthed by some of the local politicians. These pols make the Mafia look like a bunch of Trappist monks. The district chief's afraid this police chief will say the hell with it and transfer to another district. But his family's from this village and his mother still lives there. The district chief says he'll stick around if we make a play for that village. The police want some Americans along if they're going in there. They don't think too much of the local troops in this district."

"How many Marines do you want?"

"The police chief would like a full squad, sir, between twelve and fourteen."

"I'll see that he gets them," Walt replied. "By the way, what's the name of that village?"

"We call it Been Knee-ah, sir."

The residents of Binh Nghia lived in seven separate hamlets, four of which were called Binh Yen Noi and three called My Hue. Sometimes the villagers distinguished numerically among them by referring to My Hue 1 or My Hue 2, etc. It is a large village, encompassing four square miles of land, bordered on the east and south by a tidal river, and on the west and north by an expanse of sand dunes. While the village is clean and neat, its five thousand inhabitants are not rich. The soil is shallow and sandy, and in the fall the brackish overflow from the river leaves a salt crust upon the rice stalks. The scrub grows spindly and keeps the cows and other foraging animals thin. Fish is the final foe of famine for many villagers, but the sea bottom is sandy and weeks can go by without a good catch.

Binh Nghia belonged to the Viet Cong. By 1964 the National Liberation Front was the full-time government in five of the village's seven hamlets and controlled boat traffic moving toward the fishing beds at sea. The village chief and hamlet elders walked three miles each afternoon so they could sleep inside the district compound. In the fall of the following year came the Big Flood of I Corps, an inundation by the rain and sea which exceeded any catastrophe in living memory. Binh Nghia was cut off from outside military aid as

bridges were washed away and roads flooded under. The regular military forces of the Saigon government were occupied with guarding and repairing the district towns and the province capital city, leaving the village militia to cope by themselves. Two strong local-force Viet Cong companies roamed from outlying hamlet to hamlet, village to village, destroying or dislocating the Popular Forces (PF) militia and declaring the villages liberated. Binh Nghia proved no exception. By 1965 the government of South Vietnam (GVN) had conceded all its seven hamlets to the Viet Cong.

Not so the two dozen militiamen whose families still lived in the village. With no place to go and no reason to run farther than they had to, they had flocked to the top of a steep hill surrounded by open rice paddies, about a half-mile outside the village. During the daytime, when there was some assurance of reinforcements from the district, they would dart forward, nosing around the edges of the nearest hamlet, sniping at any exposed VC cadres. At night, knowing they were without support, untrained and cherishing no hope of success, they abandoned the village to huddle at the top of the hill. There they awaited the night when the enemy, annoyed by their pestering defiance, would choose to accept the dozen or more casualties necessary to assault and finish them.

To the men of the 1st Marine Division who were stationed in the district, Binh Nghia was just another village, with nothing peculiar to mark it. If the Marines approached on a large-unit sweep, they would find no traces of the enemy. If they happened to pass through one of its hamlets on a small patrol, they would likely receive some harassing fire from distant treelines. The villagers were uncommunicative, but not sullen. Among the Americans, Binh Nghia had no special reputation.

Still, when the call went out for volunteers to live with the Vietnamese forces in the village, the response was enthusiastic. General Walt had asked the commander of the Marine battalion in the district to select twelve men. The first rifle company polled produced over one hundred volunteers. The primary reason was comfort. For the Marine riflemen, assignment to the village would be an escape from the routine harassments of duty in a rifle company. Many thought they would be out of the dust or mud. They would sleep on cots instead of the bare ground. There would be no more jungles to hack through or mountains to climb -- no more leeches, vipers or trench foot. There would be no first sergeant barking at stragglers. Life in the village would be sweet and easy. Or so it was rumored.

General Walt had laid down two stipulations concerning the volunteers. First, they had to be seasoned combat veterans. That was not a difficult requirement to meet. The Marines had been fighting the 2d NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Division on and off since midspring, and most of the riflemen had been engaged in at least three rough operations. Second, Walt asked the battalion officers to send only men who could get along with the villagers. Major Braun had been emphatic on that point, and it slowed the selection procedure. It took eight days to pick twelve men. The officers were aware from their own surveys that over 40 percent of the Marines disliked the Vietnamese. The problem was particularly acute among the small-unit leaders -- the lieutenants and sergeants -- whose opinions had considerable effect on their men. In addressing the problem, the Marine command had written that its surveys "suggest that of our squad leaders graduating from NCO Leadership School less than one in five marches (sic) forth with a positive attitude toward the ARVN and PF, and that probably one-third go forth with a strong dislike for the local people. This is not just academic. It is costing us lives."

The noncommissioned officer chosen to lead the volunteer squad was known to like the Vietnamese. His name was William Beebe and he was a career Marine. Only twenty-one, he had been in the service for four years, although he was still a corporal. Of medium build but with powerful, tattooed arms, Beebe was a scrapper and a stickler for alertness in the field. On large-unit sweeps, his squad frequently took the point and scouted ahead, with Beebe easily distinguishable from his men by his habit of shouting and waving his

arms. He was forever signaling his men to spread out and pay attention to where they were walking.

But Beebe had another side. He disliked rules and details, and somehow he could not imagine himself making out pay rosters and guard rosters and equipment rosters the way the first sergeant did. When not on an operation, he would run the risk of buying a bottle of local whiskey for his squad. Hard liquor in Vietnam was against regulations, and Beebe had been caught and fined more than once. While his tactical performance was excellent, his relaxed attitude toward garrison regulations had prevented his promotion to sergeant. The village volunteers thought they had the right kind of leader in Beebe. Life in the village would be sweet and easy.

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