

Saigon  
June 3, 1962

Elizabeth Layne  
Editorial Department  
The Reporter  
660 Madison Avenue  
New York 21, New York

Dear Miss Layne:

I am enclosing the article on Viet Nam mentioned in your letter  
of April 26th.

Hoping that it is satisfactory for The Reporter, I am eager to  
hear of your decision on publication.

Sincerely yours,

(Miss) Beverly Deeps  
% Associated Press  
Rue Pasteur 158 D/3  
Saigon, Viet Nam



### COUNTRY IN A CROSS-FIRE

Five minutes after the tiny L-20 departed Saigon's Ton Son Nhut Airport, I saw below me the guts of the Mekong Delta, a chaotic spiderweb of canals, rivers, <sup>And</sup> streams draining the valuable but uncultivated marshland known as the Plain of Reeds. The combination of landscape and water-scape was a glimmering montage of blues, browns and bleges crazy-quilted into an artist's delight. Far below, like mechanical toys, black-robed peasants larksidassically prodded their water buffaloes to plow the rice paddies as their ancestors had for centuries.

From Cao Lanh, the capital of Kien Phong province just 15 miles south of the "eagle's beak" of the Cambodian border, I visited villages and hamlets by jeep, helicopter and by speedboat up the canals and down the Mekong River, which showered me at high tide with undaunted glee. At dusk, the waterways beehived with activity. Clusters of brown-skinned children took their evening baths in river water the same color. A mother precariously balanced herself at the end of her boardwalk to do the day's laundry. Perched at the river's edge, a white-bearded man sucked in the cooling breeze and watched the red-and-blue ~~taxi~~ taxi boat, the small fishing houseboats and the unpainted sampans quietly skimming home from market. The rusty orange fish nets, in harmonizing hues with the tangerine-tiled roofs of rice <sup>farmers'</sup> farmers' homes, had been hung on bamboo stilts to dry. Another day had ended in the delta. It appeared to be a peacefully serene day.

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Yet, this quiet countryside is the noisy front line in this war of no front lines. It is here that the Communist Viet Cong have cajoled, caressed, wooed, terrorized and double-crossed the villagers in a slow, but dynamic scheme to conquer South Viet Nam.

I wanted to discover first-hand the life, emotions, feelings and problems of these people who were mere blobs from an aircraft and blurs from an American-made speedboat.

I found that interviewing them was no safe task. The five villages I visited in Kien Phong province were all strategic hamlets--government fortified centers playing peek-a-boo with the Viet Cong from behind frail bamboo fences and encompassing moats. Provincial officials insisted additional military protection would be needed for me to visit the villages. In Tan-An, a cluster of bamboo cottages nestled among refreshing shade trees, the village chief had been killed one morning two months ago when he pulled open his desk drawer and grenades exploded in his face. In the village of Binh Long Thuan, which had been 100 per cent Viet Cong controlled until last August, guerrilla forces still sauntered outside the bamboo fences in the banana groves only 500 yards away. The day before I visited it, a brave Viet Cong had launched grenades into the hamlet from behind the clump of trees. Two weeks before I visited Dong Nhat, a force of 300 troops would have been needed as an escort. I went in with ten after government forces had swept through the area and established a company command post to hold it. Yet the Viet Cong "province chief" and 200 guerrillas roamed freely only half a mile away.

Shortly after chugging past a cluster of tree branches and stumps which the Viet Cong had used as a<sup>a</sup> barricade across the canal, the small unpainted boat stopped. I skated along the chewing-gum fields and dikes so slippery<sup>g</sup> my guide fell. Reaching Dong Nhi, a small village near the site of three major operations in one month, Mrs. Nguyen Thi The invited me into her thatch-roofed house, spread a reed mat on a ~~low~~ low table which served as a night-time bed and day-time chairs and asked me to sit down.

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The wife of a 31-year-old rice paddy farmer, she had never seen a movie. Though one was shown in the neighboring village 300 yards away the previous night, she was too afraid of the Viet Cong to go. From the loudspeaker in the neighboring village she heard amplified Vietnamese music, but wondered why the people "spoke in such a loud voice." She had never heard a radio in her hamlet; she could neither read nor write; she had no telephone or electricity. She did not know the name of the President of the United States and was not aware that American military advisors were stationed only seven miles away. She was delighted with my visit and my request to photograph her. "It's the first time since I was born I've seen an American or myself in a picture," she explained.

If her life—typical of other villagers—seems as insular as existing within a coconut shell, it is also as haphazardly dangerous as that of a professional soldier. However, hers is a life in floor-holes, not fox-holes. Almost half of the houses I peered into, both in Kien Phong province and on patrols with troops in other parts of the country, had deep holes in the floor—the primitive equivalent of the modern-world's fall-out shelters.

Mrs. The pointed under the low table I was sitting on to her floor-hole. Her sister-in-law, eavesdropping on our conversation, explained she had to stay near the house to take her children into the abyss whenever a barrage of artillery and bullets started. In another village, an elderly man explained he nosedived into his floor-hole when he heard American helicopters buzz over for the first time.

"The population is caught in the cross-fire," said a saintly-looking farmer with a sparsely populated white beard. "We are afraid to go out at night. The government soldiers think we are Viet Cong and will shoot us. Our lives are at the mercy of God."

Mrs. The explained, "The government soldiers came and we wanted to throw them out, but they had guns. Then the Viet Cong came; we wanted to toss them out, but they also had guns."

An even more irate rejection of both sides was voiced by a sickly man, who replied, "There are two vermin in the country—the government and the Viet Cong. They are the same."

Fear of identifying themselves with either side prevented most of the villagers from freely discussing politics, government policies or local Viet Cong tactics.

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"Please don't ask us to say which side is best," one farm laborer pleaded. "We knew our fate," he said, fidgeting with a bamboo twig. "One night we all attended a government meeting; the Viet Cong attacked the post prison. If I say the government is best, the V. C. will kill me." and tried to kidnap us. Some of my friends were wounded--some were killed."

Another stated, "It's useless to talk about politics." I asked him to explain. "It's dangerous," he admitted.

Even an Army of Viet Nam soldier said in broken English, "If I talk politics, my head leaves my neck."

A few mentioned that it was unwise to discuss politics or the war even with neighbors.

How had the war affected the lives of these peasants?

A 63-year-old share cropper, tossing a sarong around his chest and apologizing for not owning a shirt, explained, "After the French war, I became a village chief for the government." He continued, taking down a tin of matted, home-grown tobacco and rolling a cigarette out of coarse writing paper, "But one night the V. C. came and told me to resign. The district chief wouldn't let me, but I did it anyway. The V. C. would have killed me if I hadn't."

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The young handsome son of a Saigon pharmacist complained that in Saigon he wore elegant clothes and lived in a large house, but on his assignment in the provinces he slept in tents and wore dirty fatigues. He added that the military status of his 21-year-old friend in Saigon prevented his studying medicine in the United States on a scholarship.

To the older persons I talked with, "the war" was just an extension of the struggle for independence against the French. When I asked about the current conflict, an emancipated man showed me his bumpily scarred leg badly injured when the Communist Viet Minh detonated a road mine 12 years ago. A 45-year-old woman told of living for years on a houseboat after the French had burned her home.

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But the most widespread effect of the war is the systematic drain on the peasants' pocketbooks, according to the villagers I talked with. Only those families with draft-age sons said the war was a more serious problem than economic pressures.

"The war has made us poor," explained one farmer. "We can have a new life if we have peace."

Rice farmers complained of being unable to cross from their homes, held by government forces, to their farmland under Viet Cong control. A salesman who sold rice, fruit and textiles by paddling his sampan along the rivers was irritated by the diminishing area he could safely travel in.

The increase in taxes and the price of rice were also mentioned by a few villagers as causes for economic headaches.

In Binh Long Thuan, a strategic hamlet brushing the Mekong River, Mr. and Mrs. Phan Van Thanh could weave two colorful reed mats in one day for an income of 40 piastres (six U. S. cents).

"But the starvation is becoming worse," Mr. Thanh warned. "The daily price of rice for my family has increased from five to eight piastres since a year ago this month. But I must sell my mats at the same price."

Mrs. Thanh complained she spent sleepless nights worrying about family finances and that her conversation with neighbors centered around "the famine." Pointing to a hole in the shoulder of her frail white blouse, she lamented, "You will remember our house because it is so poor."

The hand-to-mouth budgeting seemed to give the peasants little hope for improving the life of their children. The key for progress for their next generation seemed to be education.

Both sides of the families of Mr. and Mrs. Thanh were mat weavers. Mrs. Thanh explained that since she could not give her two sons complete educations, they would probably also become mat weavers.

Another mother said her 10-year-old son had no opportunity for schooling and was needed to drive her water buffaloes. "When he grows up, there will be no future here," she commented. "We live for today. Tomorrow will be like today."

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His family talked for half-an-hour about their desire to obtain a government low-interest loan for establishing a small selling business. "But the government loans money only to the rich people," one man said. "Then the poor must borrow from the rich, paying them ten percent interest per month. The rich are all friends of the district or village chief."

A 28-year-old hired laborer, who earns about six cents a day, said "I have no money for educating my sons. They will be very sad and very poor like me." When I asked the peasants how long they thought the internal conflict would continue, most of them laughed or shrugged their shoulders. A young

youth fighter estimated that with the help of the free world, the struggle might end in ten years. A 34-year-old local militiaman, in faded, tattered (mor) the standard of living brought economic complaints from a few peasants.

I saw a 45-year-old irate woman severely scold the district chief in charge of establishing civic improvements. She lashed at him verbally, complaining that the eight-foot-wide road being built would cut a chunk off her rice land and would necessitate chopping down her favorite orange tree. "I had planted it as a baby," she said "an now I can sell the fruit for 500 piastres. A piastres is very big here." A piastres is about seven-tenths of a penny.

She also pleaded that the road construction would not force her to move her wooden house. Her father asked, "every person must build the road in front of his house. But I am sick. How can I do it?"

Another family was frustrated by a local government order to repair their house and to install a latrine. They calculated it would cost 5000 piastres (U. S. \$7). "That isn't alot of money," the husband said, "but we can't start 'til we sell our fruit. We'll still have to borrow 3500 p's from someone."

Every family is to be paid for their work in rice allotments which have yet to be delivered.

Another important government project was criticized by one family. A tenant farmer recalled that after the flood last fall "two Americans drove up in a big car and left lots of rice. But the district chief took most of it away."

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clothes he received 12 years ago by serving in the French army, said glumly, "Viet Nam has always been at war. It will never end."

The villagers I talked with would not discuss which side they thought would win. However, an elderly man said, "The Communists beat the French and now they will beat the Vietnamese." A 28-year-old farmer-fisherman countered that he had seen the big guns and trucks of the Army of Viet Nam while the Viet Cong had little to fight with.

Some of the people were attempting to protect themselves no matter which side won. Kien Phong province had been heavily controlled by the Viet Minh after World War II and by the Communist Viet Cong after the 1954 Geneva Agreements ending French rule in Indo-China. The Communists issued to landless farmers certificates of paddy and garden ownership, which would be valid if they won. In 1958, President Ngo Dinh Diem issued similar certificates on initiating his land reform program. The jubilant farmers swapped the pieces of paper among themselves until each had certificates from both sides for the same plot of land.

A 24-year-old unmarried man worried about his going to war was more interested in discovering my opinion on which side would win than in answering my questions. He appeared to be trying to decide which would be the winning side he should fight on.

What was the peasants' attitudes towards the United States and the American military stationed in Viet Nam?

Though many of the villagers I talked with had received U. S. flood relief last fall, their real knowledge of their free-world ally did not reach beyond the "many cars and big buildings" stage. As one farmer blurted out, "I've only been to Saigon once. How should I know what America is like?"

In the remote areas removed from military maneuvers, some villagers were unaware that American military advisors and support units had been sent to Viet Nam. Others learned of the American arrivals through Viet Cong propaganda attacking "My-Diemism," "My" means American in Vietnamese. Government propaganda had countered, not by explaining the purpose of the American commitment, but by linking Red China, Soviet Union and North Vietnam as the enemies behind the Viet Cong movement.



In Cao Lanh, I interviewed a bright 15-year-old boy who had served as a courier for the Viet Cong, sleeping in the rice paddies and standing along the roadsides to alert the Viet Cong guerrillas when government troops marched into the area. He was told by the Viet Cong, "President Diem has sold our country to the Americans. They have no country of their own."

Two months ago, he was captured by the government forces and put into a political re-education center<sup>7</sup>, where he was taught "The Soviet Union is going to invade South Viet Nam. The Americans are here to help us stop it."

Some of the villagers expressed ~~the~~ feeling inferior to the Americans. As one district chief explained, "The Vietnamese have been under foreign domination for so long, they automatically feel the Americans are superior." A farmer's wife said she had wanted to talk to the Americans she had seen in a Saigon theatre, but she was afraid, ~~he~~ stating "They are educated; we are just villagers."

Others identified the Americans as Frenchmen because "they are tall and strong with round eyes and big noses." A farmer's wife said the only difference between the two nationalities was "the French were very severe. They never smiled."

And so goes life in the quiet Vietnamese countryside centuries away from the United States.