

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 1

LE MY -- AMERICAN TEARS

LE MY, SOUTH VIET NAM--The English translation of Le My --a complex of Vietnamese villages protected by an American Marine battalion only seven miles from the strategic Danang airbase--means literally "the most majestic of the beautiful."

By coincidence, the same Vietnamese words of Le My also mean "American Tears." This is the name used by the Vietnamese-language newspapers in Saigon.

Here at Le My, a Marine battalion is conducting a significant experiment in civic action, or people-to-people program, in an attempt to "win the hearts and minds of the people," If the experiment succeeds, according to official reasoning, then this might be the nation-wide answer to winning the war. A full squad of American generals and influential dignitaries have visited the complex of villages; the most prominent was Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara on his recent trip to Viet Nam. The most recent dignitary was an admiral from the Thai Navy.

(More)

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 2

"If we study this concept in depth, it might be a means of winning the war in Vietnam," one high-ranking Marine Corps source explained.

The experiment is not a complete flop, but it is, in fact, far from being a total success. The experiment in people-to-people program may at best be described as the first, but meagre step towards a full-scale American political strategy, which would include economic and agricultural experts, political analysts and sociologists--but so far, this is far out of the reach of official American thinking or planning.

(More)

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 3

When the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment of the III Marine Amphibious Force arrived in the Le My complex of village, they began full-scale night patrolling to ward off Viet Cong units, plus more sporadic day-patrolling. In addition, the young Marine troops, without mandatory orders, and almost on their own because of their spontaneous generosity, started attempts to win over the people to their side. The Viet Cong political and military cadre had told the population that the Marines would only kill the people; at first the Marines met with lukewarm apprehension. Then the young troopers began to give candy to the children; today six-year-old Vietnamese girls wear sergeants insignia on their ~~gx~~ somberos; small Vietnamese boys wear Marine corps caps. The Marines gave some their C-rations to the children and to the needy refugees. More Cokes, wash basins, flimsy pillows began to be sold in the drab, straw-roofed market place, providing some economic uplift to the villages. The Marines repaired two the bridges blown out by the Viet Cong guerrillas months ago, thus connecting for marketing and communications the village areas to the city of Danang.

(More)

Deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 4

Marine Corps units in Hawaii sent clothes to be distributed to the needy Vietnamese; "sometimes that got to be pretty laughable," one American company commander explained. "The clothes turned out to be coats and evening dresses. It was a panic to see the peasant girls getting dressed in an evening dress."

Perhaps, most important, as one village Vietnamese chief explained. "The Marines didn't tease the girls." A number of Eur-asian orphans still in the village were an every-day reminder that the French troops a decade ago did not behave so admirably.

But, the heart of the Marine Corps program people-to-people program was the medical aid services. Marine corpsmen accompanied each military patrol and treated 30-40 cases a day in the outlying villages. Then the battalion established a static aid station near the market place in the village.

"At first we were getting only 70-80 persons a day," the Marine Corps doctor explained. "Then for one month the total rose to 200 cases a day. At first many refugees came to see us daily. There was alot of sickness, especially among the children from eye and skin diseases, mostly because of filth.

(More)



deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 5

We handed out 1000 bars of common bath soap a month, and alot of the disease diminished. Now we treat about 150 cases a day. Most of the people say nothing to us, but several old women bring us bananas and pineapples in an attempt to re-pay us."

As the confidence of the people grew, the Marines received better intelligence information from them--old men in black pajamas began to warn the Marines of Viet Cong grenades, boobytraps, of Viet Cong who infiltrated into the hamlets overnight or of large Viet Cong units in the area.

Still, if the people were pro-money or pro-medicine, they were not necessarily pro-marine or pro-Vietnamese government or anti-Communist.

To answer the question of whether to the Marines are losing or winning the people, one must examine the population statistics. These statistics from Vietnamese government sources are imprecise--sometimes one Vietnamese village chief contradicts another--but they serve in a crude way to measure the population trends. (One of the first things the Viet Cong do when they seize control of a village is to organize the population into associations by age groups and labor forces--but neither the Vietnamese government nor United States Marines worry much about a census of the population).

(More)

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 6

First, Le My is a name for a military outpost, but not for a political or administrative division of the Vietnamese government. The Le My village complex is composed of three villages. One of these is Hoa Thanh, with a population of 2,800 , 95% of whom have been Catholic for generations. The Marines neither won nor lost the Catholic population, but entered into a natural alliance with them. "We were against the Communists because they are atheists," one Catholic explained. "We were against the Communists before the Marines came and we will be against the Communists when the Marines leave--even though we know it means death."

In the remain other two villages, predominantly Buddhist, or at least non-Catholic, are estimated in the words of one village chief "to be 2/3rds two-thirds pro-Communist and one-third sitting on the fence--but even those sitting on the fence may be tilted towards the Communists rather than the government."

(More)

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 7

About six weeks after arriving in the Le My area, the Marines conducted an operation to rescue 400 persons in a Viet-Cong-controlled village across the river. The operation proved to be controversial since the highest ranking Vietnamese commander, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, forbade the use of Vietnamese army units in the operation until the incoming population had been screened to detect the Communist elements. The Marines--with the Vietnamese Army unit--conducted the operation anyhow; as a result the Vietnamese province chief was fired by General Thi.

But, a breakdown of the 400 incoming refugees ~~shows~~ shows a trend of the strength of the Marines and their civic action program. Roughly 100 of the 400 were considered pro-Communist; they fled the pro-government and the Marine area and returned to their former village. "These people had sons or husbands or brothers with the Communists and regretted having left behind their homes and fields," one Vietnamese village chief explained. This seems to indicate, however, that the Marines program is neither dynamic or comprehensive enough to attract and to hold the pro-Communist elements--which now clearly comprise the majority of the peasants.

The second one hundred fled to a pro-government area closer to Danang, "because they did not trust the Marines," according to one village chief. The third 100 was settled in one of the Buddhist villages and are now existing on government relief goods.



deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 8

The fourth 100 were Catholics and were settled in the Catholic village of Hoa Thanh, where they were given daily 305 grams (about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ ) of rice and seven piastres per person a day from government refugee funds.

"But these emergency relief funds run out in after six months," the village chief of the Catholic village explained. "There's no land for them to farm; there's not much for them to do. They've been on the relief rolls two months now and they have four months to figure out what they'll do. There's nothing we can do to help them after that."

Hence, while the Marine Corps program has not attracted and held the left-wing pro-Communist elements among the 400 refugees, there's no assurance, at the other extreme of the spectrum, that, after the Vietnamese government relief runs out in four months time, that the Marines will be able to hold the 100-right-wing, pro-Catholic elements.

(More)



deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 9

In addition to the 400 refugees brought in from the Viet Cong-controlled area, 59 other families have also come into the perimeter of the Le My complex. One village chief said "they came by their own free will"; one of the villager village refugges, however, said he and his family came to the Marine-secured area when his village council warned him that the village in which he was staying would be bombed and shelled. According to the Vietnamese village chief, 40 of the families have been given seven piastres a day as part of the Vietnamese government emergency relief goods, but have yet to receive their five-grams-per-person daily allotment of rice. The remaining nineteen families have received neither rice nor money.

One of the most basic problems--but not the sole one--is the growing desperation Vietnamese economic situation at the village level; the war is increasingly bleeding the country white.

(More)

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 10

As one Vietnamese village chief in the Le My complex explained, "Most of our people are very poor; there's not enough fertile land and not enough water. Each of our two rice crops a year produce enough to feed the farmer for only two months; some of the land produces only three times the amount of rice we must sow. The richest people in the area own two hectares ( 3 acres) some people own one-tenth of a hectare but most are land-less.

"Now we have to buy rice to import into the area-- we buy it from the government at black market prices. Mostly we buy the red rice--what we used to feed to pigs. The white rice is too expensive.

"Some people do labor work forv each other; some go out into the forest to cut wood. Since the Marines have come, some try to buy soft drinks and beer for them; we get some profit but not much.

"In the early '60's, alot of people used to cut wood in the forests. We could send 500 to 700 people into the forests to cut the big trees; they could make 200 piastres a day (about \$3) and stay out in the forest about a week.

"Even now with the Marines here, we can go only where the Marines go--a maximum of 4 kilometers. The patrols are temporary and afford no protection to the woodcutters. Now only 30-40 people in the village are woodcutters; they make at most only 50 piastres a day--even though the price of lumber

deepe

tears--article 5 of 8 article series

page 11

has risen, they can't get the big trees for the best lumber."

Hence, even with a full battaliom of American Marines in the Le My complex, the security and related economic situation has not been pushed back to the 1963 level--when the Viet Cong strength was much smaller than now.

Perhaps, the most telling incident of the impoverished economic situation has been the grab-fest from all sides to get the Marines trash, the tin cans and cardboard are re-sellable. At first, the Vietnamese army soldiers in the area usurped the right to have it, the Marines gave the right to the chief of the Catholic Hoa Thanh village. This angered the Vietnamese troopers and for several weeks the Marines had to send their truck own escort with the garbage trucks. Last week, the unescorted Vietnamese garbage trucks were stopped and the Vietnamese troopers threatened to beat up the son of the village chief.

But still, even with a battalion of Marines in the area, the most fundamental problem of all is the establishment of security.

TOMORROW : LE MY -- FOX FORT