

Viet Women—Friends, Foes and Madame Nhu

Life of Conflict

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SAIGON.

At 10 she was carrying messages to the Communists for her elder brother. At 26 she helped supply weapons and ammunition to Reds fighting the French colonialists. Today, at 45, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh is deputy commander of the Communist-controlled Viet Cong Armed Forces.

Since there have been no official announcements naming a commander-in-chief of the guerrilla military, some experts suspect Mrs. Dinh's appointment was a ploy to gain more support from the women of Viet Nam.

For more and more women are playing an increasingly important role in Viet Nam—on the government side, but principally on the Viet Cong side.

The guerrillas, using for the most part women in the rural areas where they are strongest, recruit females for gathering intelligence, liaison work and sabotage.

Women suspected of serving the Viet Cong act as maids or cooks for foreigners, as bar girls and hostesses in elegant flowing gowns, as student leaders or as peasant women in shabby black pajamas.

As the war in the countryside grows more violent, more of the population is becoming involved—either in the government or Viet Cong forces. The traditional close-knit rural family life is withering from the continuous process of disintegration.

In some instances the Viet Cong have used women as fighters. In one of their first search and destroy missions 35 miles north of Saigon, United States troops of the 173d Airborne Brigade was astonished when three Vietnamese women started lobbing white phosphorous grenades at them.

"I wasn't going to shoot them," an American paratrooper explained. "But when they started throwing grenades at us, they were part of the enemy. It doesn't bother me to see dead women—I saw a lot of them in Korea. But, it made the young paratroopers sick to shoot women."

North Vietnamese women,

wearing the traditional turbans around their hair, have been reported fighting with the recently-infiltrated North Vietnamese units in the central highlands. One Viet Cong female guerrilla was renowned in Long An Province, only 15 miles south of Saigon, for stalking the jungles carrying a submachine gun with bandoliers wrapped around her chest.

Women are also used for smuggling and sabotage. Peasant women are reported to often enter Saigon with grenades coiled inside the buns of their hairdos. Others have plastic explosives and mines in false bottoms of the wooden buckets in which they tote fresh fruits. One Vietnamese typist working inside an American compound was captured with poison hidden inside a packet of cigarettes. She planned to use it to kill Americans. Another Vietnamese woman entering an American billet compound was captured with a plastic explosive in her girdle.

FEMALE CADRE

One Viet Cong woman who defected described the women's roles:

"At the zone level (there are eight Viet Cong military zones in the country), I heard about one woman platoon, who were fighters and were commanded by a woman. They were dressed in green fatigues and were hard-core units. There were also women sewing uniforms and Viet Cong flags. Many well-educated women from Saigon came to our jungle zone to

"Then there are the medical corps women. Also the Viet Cong have liaison teams of women who take messages in secret from one village to the next. Sometimes, the women put the secret message on the bottom of fish sauce (nuoc mam) jars and simply walk through the Saigon government's check points. How can they ever be discovered?"

"There are also women in the quartermaster corps who distribute rice and uniforms; other women are political cadre who help organize all the women's associations in the villages. These female political cadre round up the women in the village, talk to

them, and help organize their elections for village leaders."

With the buildup of American troop strength, the number of Vietnamese bars with their bargirls, singers and prostitutes has mushroomed. Most of these girls do not possess the Saigon government's identification cards, and high-ranking officials still are uncertain how many of the women are working for the Viet Cong.

One singer, Nguyen Thi Nga—which means Miss Moon—recently defected to the Saigon government in the Mekong Delta and told of how she was recruited by the Viet Cong three years ago when she was 13.

First she acted as a liaison; then she applied to be a singer for a Viet Cong village cultural group. She was

taught to sing such songs as "Victory over the American Aggressors," "The Ap-Bac Bugle Sound" and "The People in the North or in the South are Living in the Same House." Guitars and mandolins were her accompaniment.

Her theatrical group entertained villagers on special occasions of meetings, ceremonial days and occasionally she entertained the Viet Cong guerrillas and the regular Viet Cong troops that visited her village. Two of her elder brothers were already serving the Viet Cong, she explained.

The story of Miss Moon's early recruitment recalled the early enlistment of Mrs. Dinh, the Viet Cong deputy commander, in the guerrilla movement.

Born in Kien Hoa Province,

the richest and most beautiful province south of Saigon in the Mekong Delta region, Mrs. Dinh—Dinh means "determined" or "pre-destined"—served the Communist-dominated Viet Minh Front from the beginning of their anti-French fight in 1945 to 1954.

After the signing of the Geneva agreements in 1954, Mrs. Dinh remained in South Viet Nam instead of going North with the multitudes of other Communist cadres. According to her official biography read over the Hanoi radio, after 1954 she was in constant hiding from government forces—at times sleeping in the bushes.

In 1960, she was one of the first to seize weapons from the government and to arm her own group in her native province. On Dec. 20, 1960,

when the Viet Cong formed their political organization known as the National Liberation Front for South Viet Nam, she was appointed to the provisional executive committee—and is still a member at the central level.

In May of this year, Mrs. Dinh was one of the two women among 23 "Heroes of the Revolution" upon whom were bestowed Viet Cong honors.

Another famous Vietnamese woman serving the Viet Cong is Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh. She is unrelated to Mrs. Dinh, but also is a member of the central executive committee. Mrs. Binh has made numerous visits to Communist and neutralist countries in Europe, Asia and Africa in attempts to gain their support for the Viet Cong cause.



The cruel war has many faces, facets and contrasts. On the left, a woman waits with her children on a hilltop near Hiep Duc where they were wounded. On the right, the glittering Mme. Nhu and her daughter on one of their trips.

