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Open Arms--page 1 (rewrite)

SAIGON, VIETNAM.

On a stuffy, hot day in 1964, Nguyen Xuan Lien sewed crayons of red, yellow and blue into the cuffs of his trousers. He tucked a three-inch dagger and silent-firing pistol, made in Communist China, under his belt and in his simple cotton shirt. Then, pretending to be a construction worker, he sneaked onto the strategic, ultra-secret Bien Hoa airbase, 18 miles northwest of Saigon, where silvery, U-2 spy aircraft touched down and refueled between missions for the American Central Intelligence Agency.

Lien--a 25-year-old North Vietnamese intelligence ~~agent~~ agent--stayed for three months on the base, measuring off and counting the length of the runway, the number of Vietnamese soldiers, kinds of weapons, petroleum dumps and defense bunkers. He slept on the base, under the nose of American-advised Vietnamese guards, persuaded other construction workers to buy food for him and pick up his weekly paycheck. Each night, he turned on his Dick Tracy-type, mini-radio, hidden in his wrist watch, and gave a progress report to his North Vietnamese superiors.

(More)

Deepe

Open Arms--page 2 (rewrite)

When he left the airbase, he drew to a scale larger than the top of a cardtable a detailed map of the installation. Weeks later, Viet Cong guerrillas, using the map, mortared with surprising accuracy the airbase, touching off the prelude to the American escalation of the Vietnam war. The next year, Lien--his name means Spring Lotus--~~and~~ sneaked three more times onto the airbase, even though a 5000-man American airborne brigade protected it, and several times he roamed around Saigon's giant Tan Son Nhut airbase to make more maps for the Communists.

~~Not~~, today, Lien has laid down his pistol, ended his James ~~Bond~~ Bond adventures, forsaken the Communist cause--and is now a law-abiding citizen living in a peaceful village situated midway between the two major airports he had so carefully sketched for the Communists.

"After 11 years as a soldier, including four years as a Communist Party member, I decided I was tired of fighting," he explained simply. Thus, ended his intelligence and reconnaissance work, for which he has studied five years in Communist China. A former second lieutenant in the North Vietnamese Army, he was the youngest and lowest-ranking of eight sons--all military officers--of a North Vietnamese carpenter in Nghe An province, the birthplace of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh situated ~~directly~~ above the 17th parallel separating the two Vietnams.

(More)

Lien is one of the 66,000 ex-Communists who voluntarily switched sides to join one of the most promising programs implemented by the American-supported Vietnamese government in Saigon. The program is appropriately called "Open Arms"--or "Chieu Hoi" in Vietnamese. Its aim is to "welcome back home and forgive past sins" of the "misguided" Vietnamese who once fought with or supported the North Vietnamese Communists or the Southern-born ones, commonly called the Viet Cong. The program promises the Communists an amnesty, full citizenship rights and resettlement in South Vietnamese society, in return for voluntarily giving up their war against the Vietnamese government.

Since the program was initiated four years ago, 66,000 Communists voluntarily came over to the Vietnamese government side--the equivalent <sup>more than</sup> of six Viet Cong divisions. In 1966 alone, 20,000--or roughly two divisions--defected from the Communist ranks. In 1967, the figures are expected to double to more than 40,000. Open Arms officials view the program as a ~~a~~ short-cut to victory. First, it saps the political and military strength of the Communists; an estimated 3000 Allied soldiers would have been killed attempting to eliminate the 20,000 returnees in 1966 on the battlefield with purely military means. Second, the goldmine of pinpoint intelligence information from the ex-Communists adds to the capabilities of the Allied troops to prosecute the war more effectively.

(More)

Deepe

Open Arms--page 4 (rewrite)

Most of the Viet Cong dropout to the government side because of the rugged hardships ~~SM~~ on the Viet Cong side--rather than any over-riding political attraction of any of the Saigon governments. Colonel Phan Anh, who runs the Open Arms program throughout Vietnam, explained this negative reaction this way: "The high rate of Viet Cong defectors has been attained precisely because of unrelenting military ~~press~~ pressure, which has increasingly convinced the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces that they are losing the war. If the Viet Cong thought they were winning, the number of returnees would have been much fewer."

While statistically the number of defectors is impressive, ~~one~~ once the defectors fling themselves into the "open arms" of the Vietnamese government, they often become disillusioned. It is not that the Vietnamese government has failed to fulfill its basic promises of resettlement and aid--it's that the government has only succeeded half-way in most of their projects attempting to help the defectors. An estimated one per cent of the defectors became so disappointed with life in the government zone they have returned to Viet Cong areas. Last year, thirty North Vietnamese defectors were so disgruntled they ~~escaped~~ boldly escaped from the National Chic Open Arms Center in the heart of Saigon. Some defectors complain that government officials, ~~who run the centers,~~ ~~have~~ indulged in gambling and mis-conduct, rather than working hard to run ~~t~~ operate the Open Arms centers effectively.

(More)

Deepe

Open Arms--page 5 (rewrite)

One serious shortcoming of the program--like most government programs--is the lack of talented, dedicated government administrators administrators to make th p the program function well. The corruption some of and inefficiency of the Open Arms officials of the Vietnamese government is openly criticized by some American advisors. Some Vietnamese officials neither like nor trust the Open Arms returnees and are apathetic, if not antagonistic, towards the program. Some Vietnamese officials claim--and a few American advisors are beginning to fear--that the Viet Cong may be slipping "double agents" into the Open Arms program. One of the most ineffective senior Vietnamese officials runs the program in the five northern prov provinces where American Marines have suffered such heavy casualties. But, American and Vietnamese officials have failed in their numerous attempts to have the inept official removed--for he is the relative of the Vietnamese general commanding the corps,

In other cases, government officials were, according to official reports, conspiring with building contractors to cheat on the funds for the construction of Open Arms centers and villages; one favorite trick is to dilute the U.S.-suppi US-supplied cement with too much sand, which allows the remainder to be sold as profit for the officials and contractors.

(More)

Once a Communist such as Lien defects to an Allied unit or outpost, he is taken, usually by helicopter, to the nearest Open Arms Center, one of which has been constructed in each of Vietnam's 44 provinces. There, he and his family live for 45 days; they are given at government expense, food, clothing, <sup>and</sup> rewards for weapons brought in. Some defectors complain government officials are not paying them fully their promised funds; in a few cases, the provincial government official would get a kick kick-back from the local tailor contracted to sew clothing for the defectors. The returnee is screened, interrogated and classified into military or political categories and is then given political indoctrination courses courses "so naive they must have been written by a M. I. T. professor," one American advisor complained. After 45 days, the defector, or returnee as the Vietnamese government calls him, is free to return to his home village, if it is relatively secure from Communist domination, or to find jobs in the cities. Most prefer to return to their village. Roughly 20 per cent serve the Vietnamese government in either military units or in paramilitary duties, such as psychological warfare, intelligence or police work. Most chose to serve the government reluctantly and only as a means of live livelihood; they are given only a one year exemption from the Vietnamese armed forces. As one of them explained: "I quit the Viet Cong because I was tired of war and wanted to lay down my weapon. But, now I must continue to fight on this side."

(More)

Returnees such as Lien who have no relatives living in South Vietnam, or whose home villages lie in the Communist zone, are given the opportunity to live in one of eighteen hamlets especially built for them. A total of 50 of these hamlets, housing 5000 families, are to be completed by the end of this year in one facet of the ~~progr~~ program that is receiving increasing attention by Vietnamese government officials and American political advisors.

Yet, the government is faced with a severe dilemma about the <sup>Hamlets</sup> villages for the 6 Open Arms returnees. Most of the Open Arms <sup>Hamlets</sup> villages lack more than a garden plot-size of land for each family--and even that is generally sandy soil which will produce little. In Quang Tri province, ~~for example,~~ where American Marines are fighting, the hamlet woman pointed to her white sandy soil and said: "This soil is so bad even our sweet potatoews wouldn't grow potatoes and so we had to eat the sweet potato leaves." A few of the ~~villages~~ villagers have pigs--but only if they have enough capital to buy food to raise them, which I don't." Most government lands which could be offered to the Open Arms returnees are in Viet Cong-controlled areas; the little land that can be found for the hamlets <sup>is</sup> are not productive enough or big enough to magnetize future Open Arms returnees. The imaginative idea of using American engineering units to develop new lands and ~~secure~~ <sup>secure</sup> them <sup>now</sup> has thus far been ignored by American commanders. "If we had enough land to offer the Viet Cong, they would come in by the hordes," one frustrated American advisor explained.

(More)

Deepe

Open Arms--page 8 (rewrite)

Some of the Vietnamese government's administrative and economic bottlenecks and dilemmas exist in the National Open Arms hamlet named Phuong Hoang (<sup>EAGLE</sup>Golden Phoenix), where Lien lives. The hamlet houses 82 returnees, 17 wives of returnees, 44 children, three mothers-in-law, 23 American-imported pigs and countless ducks and hamsters. The hamlet lazily sprawls amid sugar cane fields and mangostin groves to the rear of a brand-new, but still ~~was~~ un-opened agricultural technical school.

The hamlet is precisely patterned as though a giant cookie-cutter rather than surveyor's tools fashioned the design. Each of the 28 duplex houses has been carefully constructed on a plot the size of a tennis court. A cement floor--the current status symbol in rural Vietnam--has been laid for each. Villagers then erected a latticework of bamboo frames which are packed with mud, sand, cement and straw for the walls. Each building is topped with 36 sheets of corrugated tin. All supplies--tin roofing, cement, nails, bolts and lumber--are donated by the Vietnamese government from American stockpiles of goods used for the economic development of Vietnam. The villagers ~~are~~ are given certificates that they own their own homes--which they calculated to be worth roughly US\$230 each.

(More)



Deepe

Open Arms—page 9 (rewrite)

Yet, the ex-Communist are beginning to grumble. In the hamlet, the government has promised to distribute 200 square meters of land per returnee for vegetable growing. The returnees complain that the government has yet to do so—but even if it does, the soil contains so much <sup>alum</sup> ~~sium~~ not much could be produced.

The government also promised that 50 of the returnees would be formed into special <sup>SQUADS</sup> designed to propagandize nearby villagers about the Open Arms program; but for four months no paychecks have been received. "This is a very hard life; we lack alot of material things and we need our paychecks," one returnee explained.

In 1966, the government paid each returnee 56 piastres (45 cents) a day for building the hamlet houses, but this year the funds have been cut off. Currently, each returnee receives roughly 11 cents a day for a food allowances; this ~~sum~~ was adequate last year, but rising food costs means that the sum is now barely enough on which to subsist. For the hamlet's pig cooperative, the government donated forty American-hybrid Yorkshires (17 of them died), plus American-imported corn to feed them, but only a few returnees have been given pigs to bring in individual incomes.

Once month an American military medical team stops in the village to assist the sick and an American dental team occasionally visits to pull aching teeth. But, there is no drinkable water near the village. The canals and ditches are filled with bitter alum water; the river with salt water; requests to the government for a daily tank-load of purified water have gone unheeded. Toilet facilities, as in most villages, consist

Deepe

Open Arms--page 10 (rewrite)

of "walking out far enough in the field so the hamlet doesn't smell bad", as one returnee explained.

Many villagers complain they and their children are legal non-persons. The school-age children were born in the Communist zone and hence only a few have birth certificates, without which they are unable to enroll in a nearby Roman Catholic parochial school or any government-run school. While Open Arms officials bless the increasing number<sup>s</sup> of marriages in the hamlet, there are no marriage certificates from the proper government bureau. And, as one ~~newly~~ newly-married returnee explained, "If I don't have the proper marriage papers, my future kids won't have the papers certifying they've even been born--and then they won't be able to go to school or ever<sup>N</sup> get a job."

Because the hamlet lies within the defense perimeter of Tan Son Nhut airbase, it is relatively--but only relatively--secure. One Open Arms returnee complained: "The Viet Cong can attack our hamlet anytime. It's a miracle they haven't done it yet. We have only six rifles here. And we have only one magazine (twenty rounds) of ammunition for each rifle. That's not enough to defend ourselves--it's just enough to delude us into feeling safe."

(More)

Deepe

Open Arms--page 11 (rewrite)

One especially bitter returnee was 26-year-old, Hanoi-born Do Quoc Hung--which means "The national Hero." A former accountant in an Hanoi textile plant, he serves as office ~~clerk~~ clerk on the hamlet council for a monthly salary of 2000 piastres (US\$18). Sent from North Vietnam in July, 1965, Hung, the son of a steelworker, ~~Q~~ served in a special heavy weapons battalion operating in the mountains north of Saigon, where he regularly fired anti-aircraft at American planes and Chinese-made .82 mm. mortars at government installations.

"A North Vietnamese village would be ten times better than this village," he said bitterly, referring to the Golden Eagle hamlet. "In the North, if you want to go to a movie or a soccer game, it is free. We have no entertainment in this hamlet in the South. In the north, ~~x~~ if the children get sick, there's a medic in the village to take care of them free. The schooling is free--even the children's notebooks. Here, the children in this hamlet can't go to school--you can see this hamlet here lacks ~~ev~~ everything."

Hung is one of the sixty North Vietnamese returnees living in the hamlet. Slowly, these bachelors are choosing a normal life with roots in South Vietnam--four recently married and more ~~wed~~ weddings in the hamlet are scheduled. Hung married a Southern-born returnee who once served as a Viet ~~cong~~ Cong production worker, growing rice and vegetables. Another Northerner married the widow of a government soldier who had been killed by the Communists. In many cases, the Vietnamese government donates 10,000 piastres (US\$84) as a wedding gift for the couple to buy household items.

(More)

The ex-Communists--like other Vietnamese citizens in secure ~~the~~<sup>HAM LET,</sup> areas--have the right to vote in both village and national elections. In the Open Arms hamlets, the six-man hamlet council are all former Communists. In the Golden Eagle hamlet, the chief is a wizen-faced, 40-year-old former Viet Cong ~~capt~~<sup>capt</sup> deputy battalion commander named Ho Cong Thanh--his name means "Public Success." A Communist Party member since 1951, Thanh defected in late 1965 because "I was so tired of the war. I started fighting in 1948 (against the French colonialists). I had been fighting for a long, ~~2~~<sup>2</sup> long time." Born in South Vietnam, he lives with his wife and four children in the hamlet where he receives a monthly salary of 2500 piastres (US\$21).

One frustrated American official, explaining the plight of the Open Arms program, said: "It's great we're getting so many returnees--it means the Communists are in trouble. But we have so many problems taking care of them, it's a miracle they don't go back to the Communists."