

Story of a 'Have-Not' Exploited by the Reds

South Viet Nam, going through its fifth change of government in the year since the overthrow of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime had a new chief of state yesterday—Phan Khac Suu, a civilian. In his first day, he asked the resigning strongman Premier, Nguyen Khanh, to stay in office a few more days until a new Premier is named.

As if internal turmoil weren't enough, Viet Nam's relations with neighboring Cambodia worsened. The Cambodians claimed they shot down a Vietnamese plane that crossed into their territory, and indications were that it may have been the C-123 transport that crashed Saturday near Cambodia, killing eight Americans. If "attacks" continue, Cambodia warned, it will be forced to go to war—with Red China's help. Yesterday another U. S. service man—the 217th—was killed when his Skyraider crashed near Saigon.

These are merely the latest developments in the struggle for order in Viet Nam. In the background, the Communist Viet Cong push continues. This third of seven articles describes how the Viet Cong seek to win popular support.

By Beverly Deepe
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SAIGON.

Phan Thi Thanh had the misfortune to be "elected" a local Communist official.

She was born 25 years ago in the small village of Huynh Lion, 400 miles north of Saigon and 25 miles west of the old imperial capital of Hue. Her mother died when she was 16. Her two older brothers went to North Viet Nam with the Communist guerrillas at the close of the French Indochina war in 1954. She lived with her deaf, blind 78-year-old father.

Thanh cultivated an acre and a half of riceland, exchanging labor with the neighbors, and two and a half acres of garden, raising fruits, vegetables, pigs and chickens. "Many men intended to marry me," she confessed, "but they couldn't live with my father. He's a burden."

She said the Communist guerrillas during the Indochina war taught her to read and write, "but I read the newspapers slowly and my writing is of the popular level," she explained, cupping her fingers around a hand-rolled cigarette.

She told the story of her unhappy election:

"One night, 30 Viet Cong guerrillas came to our village with rifles and grenades. They asked the people to assemble. There are about 80 to 90 adults in the hamlet; about 60 to 70 of these are women. The women are two-thirds of the population because the men are in the army or elsewhere.

"The people told the Viet Cong: 'If you come here the national army will come and kill us.'

"The Viet Cong replied: 'Don't be afraid; we have soldiers to protect you.'

"Then, when the people were assembled, they asked us to make demonstrations. We demonstrated for four consecutive nights—in the daytimes we were busy destroying the government strategic hamlet (the fortified hamlets established by the government, supposedly the keystone of the pacification effort). We were busy during the day tearing down the bamboo fences and the Viet Cong rolled up the barbed-wire fences. The people told the Viet Cong: 'If we destroy this, the national army will come,' but they replied that the army would not kill the people."

HAMLET DECAYS

The strategic hamlet had been set up near by two years ago, and Thanh had helped work on it, digging trenches and building the bamboo fences, for a total of six cents. Then it decayed. The hamlet chief quit under Communist threats, and the Viet Cong kidnaped his assistant. Thanh went on:

"We used to have combat youth too, trained by the government for one month and given rifles and a radio to defend the hamlet. However, a few months before, they were dissolved, so they gave their rifles and radio back to the village council. When the Viet Cong came to the hamlet, they asked three combat youths to join them and gave them weapons. These were later killed in the big battle.

"While the Viet Cong stayed in the hamlet for four days, I cooked rice for them twice, but they gave me the rice.

"The Viet Cong called the people to meetings which were generally held in the open yard under the sky. Only one Viet Cong did the speaking, while two others sat and listened. The one who did the talking was strong, healthy, a little fat, in fact.

"Sometime I understood and sometimes I didn't; but even when the people did not understand, no one dared to ask questions. He asked the population to volunteer for various jobs—like destroying the strategic hamlet.

"Then one night, the Viet Cong asked me to round up the women to come to a meeting. There are about 60 women in the hamlet, but only 30 came to the meeting—the others were busy with their children.

"At the beginning of the meeting, the cadre spokesman said that with the revolution the Viet Cong must liberate the women so they would have their deserved place. He said

they would organize a committee of women in order to guide the women and lead their activities.

"He asked who would be elected and suggested two capable persons. One is named Huong and the other was me. The women said they didn't know if they could elect me because I had served on the women's committee under the government too. But the cadre spokesman replied that they could elect anyone who was capable and could look after their interests.

"Then the women replied they did not know who to elect and suggested the Viet Cong appoint someone. So he appointed Huong as chairman and me as vice-chairman. He asked the women if they accepted and they said yes.

"I was not very happy or proud. I said I didn't want to accept. It would be dangerous. The national army could come and beat me. But he said I should take charge of the women because I have the past experience.

"Then one day the government troops came. Cannon shells fell on the hamlet. No one was killed, but everyone was terrified. When the Viet Cong fled, I asked them to take me along. They were not very happy to take me, but didn't force me to stay. I told them I wanted to go because I was elected vice-chairman of the women's association and if I stayed the government would arrest me and torture me.

"The Viet Cong fled toward the river, and the national army was coming from the other side. There was a lot of shooting. Eight Viet Cong were killed. I was shot in the finger and captured.

"The government said I was a Viet Cong and was feeding them and acting as a liaison agent for them."

A high-ranking military officer said she would be executed.