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*Chieu Hoi*

SAIGON, VIETNAM

In 1961, as a frail, 15-year-old Nam joined the Communist Viet Cong 21st Mobile Regiment, which for years thoroughly terrorized ~~Myanmar~~ South Vietnam from the northern 17th parallel to the outskirts of the capital city of Saigon. In late 1964, he was a squad leader when the regiment attacked a Vietnamese government unit in the Ba Gia mountain camp. The government regimental commander was killed on the spot and the regiment decimated within 30 minutes. "It was easy. The government's deputy commander was a disguised Viet Cong," confided Dang Da Nam--whose name means "Beautiful South."

The next year, as a battalion of U. S. Marines secured the strategic Banang airbase for bombing raids against North Vietnam, the 21st Regiment struck again, mortaring and assaulting the sprawling complex. It was sensational--enough to warrant American President Lyndon B. Johnson to telephone directly from Washington to Banang demanding an explanation from the American Marine general.

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But, in one major battle, Nam's kid brother in the reconnaissance unit of the 21st Regiment was wounded, his leg shattered by a mortar shell. Viet Cong medics treated him. Nam picked up and hid the bottle of medicine the medic had injected into his brother two hours before he died--and was later told the medicine was poison. "Then I knew many other wounded Viet Cong had been killed the same way," Nam explained.

Nam then not only defected from the Viet Cong but also retaliated against them by betraying his own 12-man squad. He led the squad into a pre-arranged ambush set up by Vietnamese government soldiers. Three of his former comrades were killed. The Viet Cong counter-retaliated by capturing his girl friend and shooting his 67-year-old grandmother through the heart in front of a staged "people's court" of villagers.

Today, Nam fights with the U. S. Marines against the Viet Cong in the same village he once battled the Americans. "After the Viet Cong killed my grandmother, who raised me as a orphan, I decided to devote my whole life to a killing Communists," Nam said with a passionate hatred burning inside him.

Nam is one of 60,000 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 "Chien Hoi" in Vietnamese. It is patterned after a similar program used by the British government during the Malayan Emergency in the 1950's.

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The aim of the program is to "welcome back home and forgive past sins" of the "mid "misguided" Vietnamese who once fought with or support the North Vietnamese Communists or the Southern-born ones 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 began four years ago, 60,000 Communists voluntarily came over to the Vietnamese government side—roughly the equivalent of six Viet Cong divisions. In 1966 alone, 20,000—or roughly two divisions—defected from the Communist ranks. In 1967, the figures are easily expected to double to more than 40,000. Open Arms officials view the program as 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. 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.

The Open Arms program was a significant part of both the closed-door discussions and official declarations at both the seven-nations Manila Conference last October and the Guam Conference this spring where U. S. President Lyndon B. Johnson met Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky and other South Vietnamese government leaders.

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Another Communist defector is Nguyen Han Lien--whose name means Spring Lotus. Lien told this correspondent of his James Bond adventure experience.

On a stuffy, hot day in 1964, he sewed crayons into the cuffs of his trousers. He tucked a three-inch dagger and silent-firing pistol, made in Communist China, under his belt and 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 U. S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Lien--a 25-year-old North Vietnam Vietnamese intelligence 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 slipped on the base, under the nose of American-advised Vietnamese guards, persuaded other construction workers to buy food for him and to pick up his weekly paycheck. Each night, he turned on his ~~Diex~~ mini-radio, hidden in his wrist watch, and gave a progress report to his North Vietnamese superiors.

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

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But, today, Lion has laid down his pistol, ended his James Bond adventures, forsaken the Communist cause—and is now a law-abiding citizen living in a peaceful village situated midway between the two major airbases he had so carefully sketched for the Communists.

"After 11 years as a soldier, including ~~for~~ 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 had studied five years in Communist China. A former second lieutenant in the North Vietnamese Army, he ~~was~~ is 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 above the 17th parallel separating the two Vietnams.

Once a Communist such as Lion ~~is~~ or Nam defects to an Allied unit or outpost, he is immediately taken 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, rewards for weapons brought in and superficial political indoctrination. The returnee is screened, interrogated and classified into military or political categories and ranks. Then, the defector, or returnee as the Vietnamese government calls him, is free to go to his home village, if it is relatively safe from Communist domination, or to find jobs in the cities. Most prefer to return home. Roughly 20 per cent choose to serve the ~~the~~ Vietnamese government in either military units or in paramilitary duties, such as psychological warfare, intelligence or police work.

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Returns such as Lion who have no relatives living in South Vietnam, or whose home villages lie in the Communist zone are given the chance to live in one of 18 hamlets especially built for them. A total of 50 of these hamlets, housing 5000 families, are to be completed by the end of 1967, in one facet of the program that is receiving increasing attention by Vietnamese government officials.

Lion lives in the Open Arms hamlet named Phuong Hoang (Golden Eagle), which houses 82 returnees, 17 wives of returnees, 44 children, 3 mother-in-mothers-in-law, 23 American-imported pigs and a countless number of ducks and hamsters. The hamlet lazily sprawls amid sugar cane fields and mangroves groves to the rear of a brand-new, but still un-used agricultural technical school. Roughly ten air miles from the northeastern fringe of Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airbase, the hamlet is constantly buffeted by the jet voices of American bombers, transports and helicopters circling in a dancing traffic pattern above it. Normal conversation in the hamlet below is regularly erased by the jet din; Lion smiles olfishly as he watches the orbiting planes and recalls his previous escapades mapping the jet airbase.

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ned as though a giant cookie-cutter rather  
gn. Each of the 28 duplex houses has  
size of a tennis court. A cement flour-  
stram--has been laid for each. Villagers  
ames for the walls, which are packed  
e walls. Each building is topped with 36  
l supplies--tin roofing, cement, nails,  
ne Vietnamese government from American  
oods used for the economic development of Vietnam. The  
villagers are given certificates that they own their own homes--which they calculated  
to be worth rough roughly 70 pounds each. Each morning and afternoon, in rain  
or sun, the villagers continue their metjicu meticulous task of building 22  
more duplex houses; then the village will house 100 families.

Because the hamlet lies within the defense perimeter of Tan Son Nhut  
airbase, it is relatively--but only relatively--secure. Vietnamese government  
soldiers in nearby villages provide protection. In its one year of existence, the  
hamlet y has yet to be attacked. But one-quarter mile down the road, Viet Cong  
guerrillas stole government papers from a neighboring village headquarters,  
threatened to kill the village chief and smashed office furniture with  
machetes, hammers and rifle butts. (A x Vietnamese hamlet is an administrative  
sub-division of a village). Giant, eight-engine B-52 SAC aircraft occasionally  
bomb so close to the hamlet that chunks of the fragile mud walls shatter to the  
lo floor. Smaller American tactical fighter-bombers regularly launch airstrikes  
four miles from the hamlet, sending mushrooms of smoke into the sky.

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The ex-Communists--like other Vietnamese villagers in secure 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 Golden Phoenix hamlet, the chief is a wisen-faced, 40-year-old former Viet Cong 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 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 (roughly 7.4 pounds sterling).

The increasing number of Communist defectors--the chief index of success of the program--is creating more administrative administrative and economic headaches for the Open Arms officials. The Golden Eagle hamlet is typical of many of these problems, which the ex-Communists are beginning to grumble about. 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 alum not much could be produced.

The government also promised that 50 of the returnees would be formed into special squads designed to propagandize ~~nearby~~ nearby villagers about the Open Arms program; but for four months no psychos have been received. "This is a very hard life; we lack a lot of material things and we need our psychos," one Northerner explained.

Once a 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 hamlet. 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.

Open Arms or Arms officials, well aware of the problems, are working hard to find solutions. But some solutions can not be found for 5 years. The amount of productive land in secure, government-controlled zones that can be distributed to Open Arms returnees will continue to be very limited and relatively poor quality until large chunks of the countryside are pacified or until the general intensity of the whole war diminishes.

"It's great we are getting so many returnees—it means the Viet Viet Cong are in serious trouble," one Open Arms official explained. "But we have so many problems taking care of them, it's a miracle they don't go back to the Communists." But few of them do. Explained Spring Lotus Lion, Chinese-trained former airbase map artist deluxe, "Even this drab life on the nationalist side is better than fighting in the jungles with the Communists."