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Saigon, Vietnam

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SAIGON, VIETNAM

The biggest chewing-out I ever received was from a veteran veteran Marine Corps sergeant. Dressed in a camouflage uniform of the Vietnamese airborne, and wearing their strawberry red bat beret, I waited at the forward U. S. Marine Corps command post on "Operation Starlight" last August.

"Why are you wearing that red beret," the sergeant, a veteran of both Korea and World War II, yelled. "That will make a pretty target."

I explained that I had rushed to the battle area so quickly I didn't have time to find a helmet; that correspondents were not issued helmets.

~~and the sergeant said I was a coward~~

"What's wrong with you," he continued with high-pitched irritation. "Didn't they ever teach you how to steal? What do you think this is— a powder-puff war?"

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He then proceeded to curse thirty-some Marine privates, huddled around
the regimental radio set--without their helmets.

"We were never taught to fight a war like this," he ^{HESSED,} sputtered,
as the battle casualties began pouring into the rear area. ~~XX~~ "And
even what we learned we never practice. Look at those snuffies," he said,
pointing at the privates. "We never taught them to huddle up in a bunch
like that."

Taking a final, fiery glance at me, // he sputtered, "This just
is not the same Marine Corps." He turned on one heel and spun away.

I sheepishly hid my red beret in my uniform pocket and asked the
regimental commander if I could accompany the ground troops into the battle
area. I already knew the mission would be to relieve an armored column
two miles away that had been pinned down, ~~isolated~~ and surrounded by the
Viet Cong for almost thirty hours.

"No, you can't go with the line companies—but you can go with the
battalion headquarters," he said in a soft Southern drawl. I protested
vigorously—but decided that was better than nothing.

I was introduced to the battalion commander, wearing a faded uniform
and ~~was~~ carrying a huge plasticized map, who asked if I was sure I wanted
to go along.

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"Oh, yes, we the press are among the be blessed," I replied, drawing an ~~image~~^{imag} imaginary halo above my head. He laughed; the troops moved out through the helmet-high bushes; I stopped to take photographs of the bullet-riddled, burned-out tank; several hours later, we ~~arrived~~ relieved Supply Column No. 21--which is where I had wanted to go in the first place. For thirty hours, the column was isolated by hopping Viet Cong bands. ("It was just like whooping Indians encircling a prairie wagon convoy," one corporal explained.).

Several months later, I followed the sergeant's advice and swiped a helmet. On the airstrip of the battered, once-besieged Plei Me Special Forces camp, in October, I found the helmet of a dead Vietnamese soldier--with a dime-sized bullethole in the middle of it. I knew he wouldn't need it anymore.

I was late days later to rue my words to the battalion commander that correspondents are "among the blessed," when Dickey Chappelle was killed by a mine she never saw. (She died with a little flower in her helmet).

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Her death accentuated the ultra-protectiveness and super-chivalry of American commanders in allowing a woman to accompany their units into battle, or even, when I visit front-line units, I'm ordered to return to the base camp by dusk. ("Men get killed all the time," one Marine captain explained. "But if a woman gets killed, it's a big insult to the commander and he's asked alot of questions.")

This is just one of the problems of being a woman correspondent in a war zone with nearly 200,000 American troops. The commanders are more cautricious; the old-time veterans are ~~never~~ openly insulted and sometimes whi won't even speak to me.

But, the multitudes of others are openly fascinated to have a woman around. It's like living in a ~~goldfishbowl~~ bubble. It's often insisted that I make a foxhole-to-foxhole tour in the frontline areas to talk with the privates and corporals. These foxhole ohitchats--rather than interviews with ambassadors and generals--are the most amazing. My personal rule of reporting is to listen to the "Saigon commandos", but to talk with the privates and sergeants to find out what's going on.

Automatically, the first two questions the privates ask are: ~~How~~ ~~long~~ Where is your home in the States? (Nebraska and then New York). How long have you been in Vietnam? (Four years).

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I'm often more astonished with the troops than they are with me.

I remember in one foxhole, the private- had brought along his tape recorder and listened to surf music throughout the day. In another foxhole, a private explained how the first night he couldn't tell the difference between a duck and a Viet Cong paddling through the water. ("Now, I can," he explained. "The Viet Cong swishes") Another explained how he had nonchalantly sat through the whole night while a Viet Cong sniper pumped small arms fire into his foxhole--and he laughed the next morning that he hadn't been scratched.

One night, while the 173rd Airborne Brigade was bivouacked in on its first offensive operation into the jungled Communist stronghold of D-Zone, the company next to us--about 500 yards away--received mortar fire sporadically throughout the night. But, the Negro sergeant was much more emotionally worried about the discrimination against his white wife on Okinawa--and he cursed segregation as the mortar rounds rained around us. In another case, a young young private from Los Angeles was much more upset about the autumn rioting in California than the sniper bullets buzzing into the operational area.

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~~And~~ ^{But}, men in a man's world expect more from a woman.

Perhaps, my biggest challenge is that most of the fellows stationed here expect me to be a living symbol of their wives and sweethearts they left behind in the United States. And they expect it even in the field.

I should be ~~fine~~ ² feminine, but not fragile; I should be able to change from a sportsdress to a flightsuit as most women change housedresses. I should look fresh in fatigues during a 5 a.m. downpour. Or scaling a slippery rice dike on a dark patrol.

They expect me to be ~~a~~ typical Americana even with cold water instead of cold cream; soup chinoise instead of cheeseburgers, fatigue uniforms instead of a cotton frocks. (In 1962, when I first visited the Marine helicopter squadron in the Mekong Delta, the commander snapped, "You'll wear fatigues all the time. We don't want women wig with legs down here."). Always, it's more important to wear lipstick than a pistol.

Of all the men in the country, it is ~~some of the~~ the ones I have met for only a moment that I remember the longest....U. S. Airborne medic Levy, who so delicately bandaged a blister on my foot before an over-night patrol..."You never take care of my footsies that way," the sergeant cracked...the young medic went ~~home~~ ² home "under a fifty-star flag," killed by friendly artillery. There was the Airborne sergeant who ~~surprised~~ ² once on an operation made my morning coffee in a

peach can--now sent home with a wounded leg. There was the ~~F-28~~ ^T pilot who took me on a bombing raid in 1963--and three missions later, made a low

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strafing pass trying to cut off the heads of the Viet Cong with the plane propellers—but he never pulled up. ~~He~~ His grave was a rice paddy dike.

I arrived in Vietnam on Valentine's Day, 1962. It was golden luck reinforced ~~x~~ by women's intuition—I sensed that a major conflict would be shaping up in Asia before I left America in April, 1961.

My reporting life has vacillated with the giant flipflops in the Vietnam situation. In early 1962, I traveled only in the provinces. On my first helicopter combat helicopter mission, in the old banana-shaped H-21, the pilot explained that he used his "Grey Ghost" ~~for~~ to hunt ~~git~~ tigers and "to chase butterflies." Today, exactly four years later, divisions of America's most modern choppers roam that same high plateau area. The correspondents' fad of riding helicopters quickly faded; today they talk of B-52 SAC bombers and double-the-speed-of-sound Phantom jets. In 1962, I remember driving ~~him~~ without escort along dusty Route 19 in the northern provinces; today, there are more than two American and Korean divisions protecting the area. In 1962, I made trips to the "revolutionary" strategic hamlets; today, American ~~brigades~~ ^{brigades} are securing those same villages.

The Vietnamese generals I interviewed then are now out of power—or out of the country. The colonels are now generals—working side-by-side with American tactical units.

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Then, in 1963, the battle shifted to the streets and pagodas of Saigon; saffron-robed Buddhist bonzes were more influential than newsworthy than fatigue-clad generals. Then began the era of the coup d'etat.... on the first one in November, 1963, my apartment situated half-a-block from the Presidential palace was looted by fleeing Diemist troops and riddled with machinegun bullets. (One bullet shattered a book called "Problems of Freedom—South Vietnam.").

I covered the September 13, 1964 abortive coup in a taxi, racing to the Saigon suburbs to interview the Vietnamese coup-leaders and then fleeing back to the center of the city to cable before the tanks sealed off the post office and the Vietnamese colonel kicked me out of the building.

So, to me, the war is not simply a war, but a hellish, dancing madness. Politics is as important as military operations; Vietnamese sentiment is more a pivotal than American theories. One of the most difficult of all problems for a correspondent is to twist one's mind to feel—one can rarely understand—a foreign culture of a different century. To do that type of reporting, one must be lucky enough to work with knowledgeable, professional Vietnamese journalists. In my case, they are the unsinkable Pham Xuan An—the dean of the Vietnamese press corps—and Nguyen Hung Vuong, who is always late—² sometimes as much as a week. Together, we form the most undisciplined triumvirate in recent Vietnamese history, spending hours sipping coffee with Vietnamese officers, Buddhist leaders, or visiting fortunetellers, prayer meetings and an occasional opium den.