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THE WORLD OF THE SNUFFIES

DANANG, SOUTH VIET NAM--"Look, I have only 33 days left in the Marine Corps and they can't possibly court-martial me in that time," the young private from upstate New York explained in front of an open-air bookstore during busy Saturday afternoon rush. "So let me tell you something--if we don't change our tactics, we're going to lose this war."

He walked up to three of this squad-mates standing in the middle of the busy sidewalk and explained, "two of my friends are privates, but we've been to college a little bit; the sergeant here has been in Korea; we know what's happening--and we all think if we don't change our tactica we'll lose this war.

"You see that woman and that child," he continued, getting increasingly agitated, and pointing to the passing pedestrians. "We'll lose all these people; I hate to see it--but we will lose them. You saw that last operation we were on--how many Viet Cong did you see? I didn't see one--and if we don't change, we'll flat lose this place."

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The operation referred to by the New York private was one of the two basic military tactics used by the Marines--called the "big sweep." The two-day operation, which began last week, employed two infantry companies plus tanks, anti-tanks and troop-carrying amphibious tractors (which one privated called "swimming coffins") to sweep a sand-blown peninsula only six miles from the city of Danang. But even before the operation began, the Marine commanders were receiving reports the Viet Cong was already moving out of the area. The Marine troops were awakened for the operation at 1:30 for breakfast is out of their mind," one private explained. He rolled over til 3 p.m. when the troops were loaded on trucks and taken to the amphibious tractors fro 5:30 for the beginning of the operation which started at 5:30.

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The tanks, anti-tanks and amphibious tractors sped down the beaches, creating a galing sandstorm; one of the two of them fell into holes and had to be pulled by tank retrievers; when the forested gullies became impassable, they veered into a long column through the rice paddies. "We'll catch hell for this," one of the crewmen explained. "The generals said we shouldn't go in the rice paddies--it hurts the peasant's livelihood--and we shouldn't run over the ancestral graves, which are very important to the peasants. Our am-tracs can swim--but they can't fly; what else can we do?"

Then the am-tracts sped through a village, past the house were an elderly Vietnamese woman, wearing the white color of mourning, watched in near tears. A younger woman ran out of her house to pull away an earthen waterjug out of the route of the passing am-tracs and tanks; a small boy ran out to retrieve a vegetable basket. One woman began to scream about her rice being ruined; a Vietnamese national policeman beat her on the head with his rifle butt. "That really surprised me." one American private explained. "Both the policeman and the woman were Vietnamese; I thought the Vietnamese government officials were supposed to be helping the people but he started hitting her till she shut up and ran away."

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From noon until dusk the Marine troops searched thoroughly each house in each of the village, but as the private explained, found no Viet Cong. Not only had the Viet Cong, but almost the entire village population--except the oldest of men and women and the smallest of infants--had moved in out of the area before the Marines arrived. Following the two-day operation, the Viet Cong were expected to move back into the area and resume their daily round of political and military activities.

At the other end of the spectrum from the "big sweep," the second tactical method of operation is called aggressive combat patrolling--this is considered the heart of the Marines defensive--offensive role. The small-unit patrolling actions are clearly the biggest military gamble of the war--that the patrolling ~~action~~ will not only stop company and battalion-sized Viet Cong military attacks, but will also stop the small group, or one man, infiltration of Viet Cong terrorists, saboteurs and political cadre. High-ranking Marine sources believe that the one-man Viet Cong still penetrate through the patrolling lines and said that even with the Marines patrolling around a village, the Viet Cong political infrastructure within a village has yet to be smashed. This is the task of the local village chief, the Vietnamese local militiamen and the newly-created political action teams, which act as a counter--~~sub~~versive intelligence net.

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"But frankly, we don't think the Vietnamese political action teams are doing **much good**," **one American** commander explained. "One village chief said they hadn't done nay work in the past three days."

Currently, Marine sources indicate the Viet Cong disengaged from any large-scale actions with the Marines because of several small-scale, but sharp defeats and because of the overwhelming Marine Corps strength in firepower and airpower. However, these sources say the Viet Cong have not been degeated; the Viet Cong are expected to re-assert themselves in strength at some time--no one is guessing when.

Between the big sweeps and the little patrols, lies the ghoulish, almost-nightmarish world of the Snuffies, as the Marine privates and corporals are called, who is daily faced with a series of nervous dilemnas to which no solutions have yet beenfound.

"I've done things in the Marine Corps, which in civilian life I'd never have thought possible," one Marine corporal explained. "We go on patrol night-afterf-night, getting only two hours of off-and-on sleep in the foxholes. Sometimes, we think we can't endure, but after awhile your body gets used to us.

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"Then the captains tell the sergeants to do something-- and of course the sergeant is not going to do it. He gives it to us Snuffies to do. Snuffies is an old Marine Corps word that they call us privates and corporals. I sometimes wonder what the Marine Corps would be without us."

As one Marine officer and battalion commander explained, "The greatest of all miracles is a Marine Corps private. He goes on and on and never complains. For \$83 a month, he's expected to be a fighter and a \$10,000-a-year ambassador."

One of the problems facing the Snuffies is that the whole of the Vietnamese countryside has literally gone underground. Beside each house in each Vietnamese village is a large, earth-covered bunker into which the family jumps during fighting or bombing raids. Some of these family bunkers lead into a lay labyrinth of tunnels, used by the Viet Cong for exits and entrances into the village.

"Some of the family bunkers fan out into 3 or 4 tunnels which lead into the next village, or into a river from which they can swim away from the village," one Snuffie explained. "Some of the tunnels are split-level.

"Of course, when we go into a Viet Cong combat village, the fences and gates are boobytrapped; the Viet Cong have placed steel or bamboo spike traps along all the rails;

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their snipers fire from us at the houses and then they disappear into the tunnels, If we mortar the village, the houses burn up and they saw we are killing innocent civilians--but we feel the people are helping the Viet Cong. If we throw grenades into the tunnels, we hit the women and kids."

One Snuffie described the Viet Cong's use of bamboo drums--which his squad could readily imitate.

"In our foxholes around some of the Viet Cong villages, each dawn they come out with this very fast beat on their drums," he explained. "Then the whole village gets up and goes to the field. At dark, the Viet Cong come out with this same beat--and all the villagers know this signals an attack and they go to their houses. We can do anything we like during the daytime, but at 5:30 is dinging time--and the Viet Cong snipers started in. One Marine Company brought up our bugle from the rear to give the Viet Cong a musical counter-attack.

"The first night I was in a foxhole around the village, I was really scared," he continued. "I couldn't tell the difference duck paddling through the rice paddies and a person. But now I can tell the difference. Though we had swept through the village in our rear, we were still getting sniper fire from the village itself--and we couldn't return the fire.

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"We don't like this sniper fire at all. If they want to fight--let them come out and get us," he explained. "We could easily beat them.. But one night, the some sniper sat there and dinged at our foxhole the whole night. One bullet grazed my arm and one nicked my helmet. I ddidn't even fire back--there's no use firing at a ghost."

One Western observer who has repeated patrolled with the Snuffies, summed up the situation as, "they'll die as heroes-- but unless something's changed they'll still lose."