



I Keep It In My Heart And Wait For You Part I: The War In Viet Nam, 1967

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In 1967, while living in the hamlet of Phuoc My, Quang Tri Province, Viet Nam, serving with a USMC Combined Action Platoon, I had the opportunity to meet the people of Viet Nam on a personal level. One of those people was Co Van Thi Hue. One day Co Hue, a sixteen year old young lady at the time, was being molested by several South Vietnamese Ranger Officers. Two friends and I managed to remove them from the hamlet, thereby earning the love and friendship of this charming Vietnamese child.

In 1994, a group of friends returned to Viet Nam and located Co Hue. She still lives in the hamlet. The following is a sometimes light, often reflective, narrative of my experiences both in 1967 and my return trip in May, 1996. While I am far from an expert on Vietnamese culture, perhaps some of my experiences will show you a little about this polite society.

I did not return to Viet Nam because I had fought a war there. I returned to visit with ban cua toi (my friend) Co Van Thi Hue and any other of the villagers who may have remembered when they had a few Marines living in their hamlet.

Part I Section 1: Introductions

In a letter to me recently, my friend Co Hue said, **"I keep it in my heart and wait for you."** She was referring to my promise to return to Viet Nam to visit with her next year. To the Vietnamese people, friendship is of the heart. In thinking about my visit, she has tucked her anticipation into a corner of her heart. She can retrieve it occasionally and savor the thought.

The Vietnamese people consider friendship a lifetime commitment. Co Hue had no way of knowing if I felt the same way. When I left her village in mid-summer, 1967, she could only wonder if that was the end of our friendship. She could not know if I kept the picture she had given me when I left. Twenty-eight years passed, and she heard nothing.

Co Van Thi Hue, 1973: She Sent This To Me After We Located Her In 1994

Even as Co Hue was wondering if we were still friends, I was wondering if she was still alive. Childhood had been a struggle for her, confronted as she was at every turn by the war. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and local Viet Cong, as well as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and their American allies, all walked the paths of her village. They sat in her parents' cafe drinking beer.

Co Hue was constantly reminded that children her age were dying every day in Vietnam. A few died because they chose sides in the conflict. Others were caught up in battles throughout Vietnam. They could not escape the indiscriminate killing zones of high tech warfare.

For that reason, our friendship was heavily influenced by the war. To understand, you need to know what life was like in Phuoc My in 1967.

That was the year that I, as a 23 year old Marine, experienced Vietnamese life as it had evolved over thousands of years. From 1965 through 1972, a few thousand Marines were able to be a small part of everyday Vietnamese life in dozens of villages. We went beyond simply seeing this lifestyle from the distance of an American military base. While living in villages across the countryside from Da Nang to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), we came as close as possible to actually



becoming a part of that village. We Marines were members of a US Marine **Combined Action Platoon** (CAP). We did not see the Vietnam of Da Nang or Saigon, culturally diluted as those metropolitan areas were by western influences in the 1960's. We stepped back in time hundreds of years and viewed grass roots Vietnam from the inside. It was a world of thatch roofed huts, rice paddies, water buffalo, and beautiful children.

In a world dominated by deadly enemies, the children of Vietnam learned quickly that their lives depended on their ability to walk two paths. They could anger neither the Viet Cong, nor the Americans. At an age when American teenagers had not yet decided between political candidates in a voting booth, Vietnamese children were expected to choose sides in a life and death struggle. As they neared the age of accountability, their lives became a tightrope spanning two heavily armed and extremely deadly enemies.

Adding to the influences that daily engulfed these children, there were those adults in each village who simply wished to walk both paths. Centuries of warfare had taught them that little ever changed in their daily lives. This was just one more conflict accompanied by idle promises. They just wanted to be left alone to work their rice fields, earn their daily wage, and tend to their families.

Co Hue, a 16 year old from Lai Phuoc Hamlet, Trieu Ai Village, Viet Nam, was one of those children. She gave us a rare view of historic Vietnam in its purest form. In 1967 we saw this tightrope existence in eyes set in a beautiful porcelain-like face that seldom smiled. When two other Marines and I were able to be at her side during a very distressing experience, we made a very special friend for life.

An understanding of Co Hue's childhood provides us with a microcosm of what life was like for all the children of the hamlets in Vietnam during the war. Our understanding is like a puzzle. We can see the whole only by assembling bits and pieces of what we experienced while living in her village. Years later, as I reminisced about this shy child, I could better comprehend how she had reacted to us when we arrived in her village. As I began to see how well she had adapted to her circumstances, I came to understand why she had never permitted us to know her well. My appreciation for Co Hue grew with each passing revelation. This understanding grew naturally to encompass all the villagers of Vietnam.

She was born in 1951, three years before the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu. When she was four, the United States began training South Vietnamese soldiers to resist the Vietnamese Communists (Viet Minh). Her hamlet is just south of Dong Ha, in Quang Tri Province. The French encountered tremendous resistance from the Viet Minh in Hue and throughout all of Quang Tri Province. Long before the mammoth American involvement of the late 1960s, the hostility so evident was her constant companion. By the mid-1960s, other parents in the province were sending their children to live with family in the relative safety of Da Nang or Saigon. They saw war in the near future. Co Hue was not so fortunate. She had no choice but to stay and endure long years of hardship.

Me at CAC Papa 2, Phuoc My Hamlet, Trieu Ai Village, Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, 1967

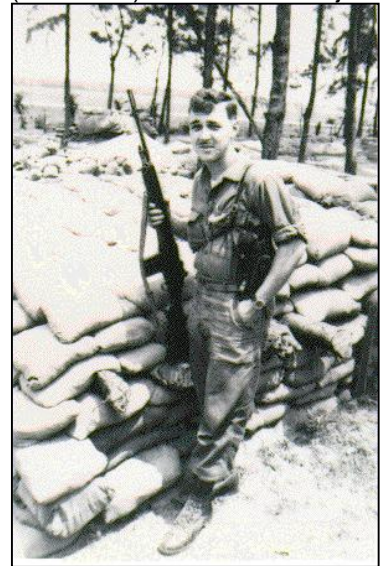
When I knew her in 1967, Co Hue's childhood playmates were killing each other. Some of her childhood friends were Viet Cong; others were our allies, local Popular Forces (**Militia**).

Victor Krulak Lt. Gen., USMC, Ret., alluded to these divided loyalties. In his forward to **Our War Was Different** [Footnote1](#) he wrote,

“The Vietnamese knew who the guerrillas were and where they hid; the Americans knew how to kill them.”

The War in Vietnam was actually two wars. One was taking place against the battalions of the Peoples Army of Vietnam. The other was in the villages. It was being fought against hard core and local guerrillas. The lines were clearly drawn, but only the people of the villages could define those lines. They were the key to our efforts in Vietnam.

In her hamlet of Lai Phuoc, Co Hue's neighbors would tend to their family responsibilities during the day, then go their separate ideological ways at night. Villagers who had visited over the back fence in the afternoon would lie in ambush for each other at night. They had to segregate their military duties from their personal responsibilities if they were to ensure the safety of their families. If they met on the battlefield, all bets were off. Killing your neighbor in the heat of battle was permissible in the convoluted society of Vietnam in 1967. Reporting them to the Americans was not. This practical honor



system was intended to ensure the survival of next of kin.

In an ideal world, political concepts of human dignity and civil rights are learned by observing respective ideologies as they are applied to everyday circumstances. In that same ideal world, Co Hue would have been able to watch the people of both armed camps. She could then have made her decision based on how each group treated her day in and day out. The highway running through her village, and the paths that wandered her hamlet, would have been the ultimate testing ground.

Unfortunately, wars are not won with words and ideologies. Wars are won with weapons wielded by people. Ideologies suffer when subjected to the often racist whims of human nature. So Co Hue learned that she could trust very few people outside her village. If an American unit passed through Lai Phuoc, there was always the risk that someone in the group would toss a tear gas grenade into the marketplace. If word spread through the village that the Viet Cong were planning a visit, there was always the possibility that they were recruiting 16 year old girls.

Before the arrival of the small Marine unit in Lai Phuoc, responsibility for protecting Co Hue from marauding bands of Viet Cong was in the hands of the local Popular Forces (PFs/Militia). Poorly equipped and trained, this local militia was just a minor irritation to the VC.

[Footnote1](#)

Al Hemingway, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland