



I Keep It In My Heart And Wait For You ***Preface: Who Did You Want Me To Tell?***

By
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I understand the anger that has become such an integral part of the Vietnam Veteran's memories of the war. Stories abound of children strapping dynamite to their bodies, then detonating the charge and killing American service personnel. Part of our training was to "...be aware of the 'little old lady' working in her garden..." The inference was that as we passed by, she would take out a machine gun and kill us all.

The logical conclusion to those incidents was to assume that the people of Vietnam hated us. That is one of the many reasons anti-war groups used, and still use, to justify their opinions of the war.

It wasn't quite so cut and dried.

The Vietnamese villagers had a 2,000 year history of hard labor in the rice paddies, a horribly hand-to-mouth existence, to say the least. They had seen little from us, or the North Vietnamese, that would convince them that such a life would ever change. The Americans and South Vietnamese forces were destroying their hamlets, and with it, their heritage; the Viet Cong were terrorizing their villages, assassinating their Village officials, and kidnapping their young men.

From the perspective of the Vietnamese villagers, the "good guys" didn't necessarily wear white hats.

That villager may have been sixteen year old Co Hue, sexually abused by some South Vietnamese Ranger officers. It may have been Co Thien, a 12 year old young lady forced to watch as the Viet Cong buried her grandfather alive, then shot her three uncles. That same Co Thien was later clubbed unconscious from behind with a rifle butt by a passing American GI on the streets of her hometown. That villager may have watched as GIs from a passing American convoy laughed as they shot and killed his water-buffalo just for the fun of it, effectively destroying his ability to make a living in the rice paddies. Or, that villager may have been one of the children of the Village Chief assassinated by the Viet Cong before we arrived in their hamlet.

Is that confusing? Imagine what it was like for them to decide who their friends were. For many of the Vietnamese villagers, there is no doubt that they didn't perceive all the Americans as having ridden into town on white horses.

Consider the possibility that they simply wished we would **all** go home...to North Vietnam and to America.

That confusion can best be summarized in the following story. While I did not receive this first-hand, and perhaps some of the details were lost when I heard it, I have two reasons for accepting it:

- My "source" is irrefutable. It was "first-hand" for her.
- Based on what I experienced in the hamlet, it has the "ring" of truth to it.

In confronting the issue of missing American service-personnel still in Vietnam, I suspect this story could be repeated dozens of times.

A member of the American Body Recovery Team was speaking to a group of veterans. A General now, he was a junior officer during the war. He told of visiting a village to retrieve the remains of a downed American pilot. The village chief took the team to the site. There, beside the remains of the plane, the village chief showed them a neat, well tended grave. The villagers at the time had given the pilot the best burial they could. They then went

back to their village and said nothing. The team recovered the pertinent information to identify the remains. They then headed back the several miles to the village. As they walked, the speaker stated that he turned to the village chief and asked, "Why didn't you tell someone about this when it happened during the war?" After a thoughtful pause, the village chief responded,

"Who did you want me to tell?"

"If I had told the Viet Cong, you would have thought that we were Viet Cong sympathizers. You would have come to my village and punished me and my people.

"If I had told you, the Viet Cong would have decided that the people of my village supported the Americans. They would have come and punished me and my people.

So....who did you want me to tell?"

In all the years I have listened to people spew their anger, as much as I understand it, none have ever adequately answered that question.

When I lived in the hamlet of Phuoc My, many of those I considered friends may well have been Viet Cong, either willingly or unwillingly. That very well could have included some of those who befriended me when I returned in 1996.

However, these people were confronted with much more than the simple peer pressure to take drugs, or to rebel against society, that youth in America confront today. These were life and death decisions. They had to decide which of these two warring factions would be around to take care of them...or to punish them...when the war ended. I hate to use a worn out cliché, but I never "walked a mile in their shoes".

In retrospect, I ask....*Who did you want them to tell?*

"I Keep It In My Heart And Wait For You" is the story of my few months with a **Combined Action Platoon (CAP)** unit, a Marine Corps program that addressed that issue and answered that question. In 114 villages across the I-Corps area of South Vietnam, a squad of Marines and one Navy Corpsman moved into Vietnamese villages and lived there. The Marines said to the villagers,

You can tell us. And later tonight, if the Viet Cong come into town to punish you.....we will be here. We will fight beside you, and, if necessary, we will die with you.

None were ever guaranteed safety. All we really did was guarantee them that we would share the danger. Considering their belief in the inevitability of the war, and since most didn't care who won or who lost, for many of the villagers our commitment to their security made a world of difference.

Far too often CAP Marines and Navy Corpsmen would die for that commitment to the villagers of Vietnam.

I was fortunate to be one of the survivors, and this is my story.