

Viet-Report August-September 1965 pp. 27-31

Book Review

WAR ON PEOPLE

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VIETNAM DIARY. By Richard Tregaskis. Holt, Rinehart & Winston (1963) 394 pp. \$5.95.

THE GREEN BERETS. By Robin Moore. Crown (1965) 341 pp. \$4.95.

The world has changed sides since Richard Tregaskis became famous as the author of **Guadalcanal Diary**, and war has been turned upside down. Our allies of a generation ago -- Russia, China, Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh -- have become our enemies now; our old enemies -- Germany, Japan, Italy. Spain -- are now our friends. And war has changed sides, too. A score of years ago we fought to destroy the feudal despotism of the Japanese government. Now it seems that we are committing almost as many men in order to preserve the very same sort of rulers in power everywhere. The government of Saigon is our ally. We have a new kind of war because we have a new kind of enemy. That enemy is not a government, but a people, not the ruler, but the ruled.

This new kind of war has a new name -- "counter-insurgency" -- and it has a new idea behind it. The idea, in the words of US Ambassador Nolting to Richard Tregaskis, is "to cut the Vietcong off from their resources, that is, the people." An unnamed high official of the Central Intelligence Agency puts the idea even more sharply. "We have to take the people away from the VC because the people are the greatest single weapon." Richard Tregaskis' **Vietnam Diary** faithfully records how American soldiers and American weapons are going about this difficult job, the job of cutting apart the bonds which bind the population of South Vietnam to the guerrilla insurgents.

Tregaskis' viewpoint is not that of the ordinary correspondent sent by his newspaper to cover the hostilities. David Halberstam, author of **The Making of a Quagmire**, and Malcolm Browne, who wrote **The New Face of War**, both Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters, were assigned to cover the war after a career spent covering politics or "normal" news. Because both of these men have considerable political sophistication, their accounts of the war are highly critical. They are civilians writing about other civilians; they see that the Vietnamese civilians are not being won over to the cause of the Free World, and therefore they criticize. But Tregaskis is unique among reporters because he perfectly represents the

military mind. After twenty years of chasing wars, of thinking and writing about nothing but wars, of living with military men and only military men, Tregaskis has completely absorbed his environment. He is not a fighting reporter, but a writing soldier.

What he tells his readers about the war represents in every detail the outlook of the field officers and professional soldiers who are fighting against the guerilla insurgents in Vietnam. Most of these officers have only the dimmest idea of what it means to fight a war against an insurgent guerrilla movement. That is to say, they are fighting a "counter-insurgency" war in name only. In fact, their tactics and attitudes are crudely conventional. They make no effort to convince the peasants not to support the Vietcong.

They make little effort to determine whether they are firing at an armed or an unarmed man. They make little effort to conceal their contempt for all things Vietnamese, even for their "allies." To every movement, every hostile presence, every sign of civilization in zones not under control of the Saigon government, they have only one response: firepower.

Once a Special Forces officer upbraids Tregaskis for the futility of such tactics: "This business of killing VC -- you could keep it up till hell freezes over. That's for the birds. What we need is the thing that Magsaysay had in the Philippines -- the hand of friendship. Give 'em churches and schools." But Tregaskis replies with the unruffled complacency of the military man whose orders are to "kill Vietcong": "It seems to me that we Americans have to offer more than the hand of friendship, and churches and schools. We also have to extend great military strength, so that the Vietnamese can meet the Communist threat with the kind of language the Reds understand: force."

It never occurs to Tregaskis that the "Reds" are not the only people who listen when force speaks. The ordinary Vietnamese peasant also understands this language very well, and draws his conclusions accordingly. Before a napalm raid into an area which used to be controlled by Saigon, a pilot explains to Tregaskis why the area is now considered solid Vietcong territory: "You know, the 362 (362 Squadron, which preceded this outfit into Vietnam) were wild men. One chopper would go first, and when the people would go running, the second plane would spray 'em (with machine gun fire)."

What else could these people do but join the Vietcong? The tactics of the Americans left them no alternative but to ally themselves with anybody who promised to get the Americans out. And the American commanders call this "counterinsurgency"! The result of such tactics is to drive more people into the arms of the insurgents. But-and here is the catch -- that seems to be exactly what the Army and Air Force want to do. Why? Because once every peasant in a given area is considered a Vietcong, then the planes and helicopters can at last be used to their full extent in that area. Since everybody is an enemy, everyone and everything becomes a target. This is not intentional brutality; rather, it is the reflex of the military mind. Faced with a situation which is militarily incomprehensible, which requires political decisions before every shot is fired, the military mind immediately sets about converting the situation into one it can understand. From the military standpoint it makes more sense to turn the entire population into an enemy and then wipe them all out, than to undertake the delicate task of responding to the legitimate complaints and legitimate aspirations of the Vietnamese population.

The barbarity of such procedures is entirely impersonal, and there is no hypocrisy in the statement by a young American who is horrified by the savagery of the Saigon army 'soldiers ("Arvins") on a ground raid: "There was a Vietnamese woman with three children. She grabbed one up, the Arvin shot the two older ones and the kid in her arms and shot her in the belly. Would we (Americans) do that? We might kill the woman and the children accidentally, say in a bombing, but not deliberately." Nor is the American who would "rather do anything than check up on the results of a napalm strike on a village" an insensitive creature.

These are the morale-sapping experiences of the men on the ground. But how many of these men make the big decisions? Judging by the big decisions now being made -- more men, more planes, more napalm -- their experiences do not reach Washington. Perhaps if the Secretary of Defense himself were sent to report on the effect of a napalm strike on a village, he would have a better idea why the military situation has deteriorated. Tregaskis wrote at a time when American strength in Vietnam was ten thousand men. For every squadron of "wild men" at that time, there are now ten. For every woman and child napalmed in those days, there are now ten. For every active Vietcong two years ago, there are now at least ten. Future historians who puzzle over the origins of this fearful

symmetry will find much belated enlightenment in Richard Tregaskis' faithful chronicle of the military mind.

The Personal Touch

Special Forces does not napalm or strafe villages. Its officers are "devastated with frustration" at the sight of the effects of a conventional air strike: "Piteously wounded and burned children were dying everywhere; men, women and cattle lay dead, the stench abominable." Special Forces knows that the only effect of air strikes and mass troop movements on the civilian population is to turn everyone into an enemy. Special Forces uses aircraft only for supply and transport, never for attack. Its basic troop unit contains only twelve men, all highly skilled specialists. They make a conscious effort not only to avoid slaughtering the population, but also to provide a measure of educational, medical and sanitary services. The number of civilian casualties inflicted by Special Forces is probably extremely low. By comparison, but only by comparison with the conventional armed forces, the methods used by Special Forces are almost intelligent and humane. Robin Moore's new book, *The Green Berets*, describes these methods in detail.

The action opens at a Special Forces training camp near the Cambodian border. In order to delay an imminent Vietcong attack on his camp, the SF (Special Forces) commander hires a gang of mercenary Cambodian bandits to help his men ambush a VC patrol inside the Cambodian border. The next day, two members of the Saigon army force assigned to guard the camp admit under torture that they are VC agents. That night the VC attack the camp. At a critical moment the Saigon government troops inside the camp fire on their own commanders. However, the SF demolition expert had foreseen this eventuality; he has laid remote controlled mines under his allies' positions and blows them up. The camp is saved.

Scene Two. A "showcase" camp presented to visiting dignitaries as a model establishment is, underneath the whitewash, a powder keg of dissension between the SF and the Saigon-appointed camp commander. The latter is corrupt and brutal to the core; he lives on graft and forcibly drives his men to desert, so that he can collect their pay. The SF attempts to expose him to higher authorities. In order to thwart them, the Vietnamese commander sends the SF into an ambush

laid by his own men, killing one American and wounding another. In the end the commander is transferred to another camp.

Scene Three. For strategic reasons, an SF camp is using a Cao Dai pagoda as an ammunition dump. An old Cao Dai priest and two younger men whom the SF suspect of being Vietcong demand that the SF withdraw from the pagoda. The SF plants radio-controlled mines in the camp and under the pagoda. At the appropriate moment they set off the mines, pretending that the explosions are caused by Vietcong mortar fire. The pagoda is destroyed and the two young men are killed. SF promises to build another pagoda at a different spot.

Scene Four. This SF camp specializes in training "assorted thieves, rapists, muggers, dope pushers, pimps, homosexuals, and murderers" from the jails of Saigon for assaults on the Vietcong. To increase this unit's effectiveness, the SF intelligence specialist recruits a beautiful young female teacher, a Catholic whose father, a Saigon-appointed village chief, had been killed by the VC. The SF fits her with a CIA-supplied diaphragm and orders her to seduce the local VC commissar. She succeeds by this means in gaining information which allows the SF-led company of jailbirds to ambush a VC force. At the same time an SF detail kidnaps the VC commander while he is in bed with the Catholic teacher. This operation successfully concluded, the SF establishes a new intelligence network by opening a whorehouse staffed with loyal agents.

Scene Five. An SF officer leads a unit of fresh graduates of the SV Ranger academy on a successful mission against a company of VC led by a bare-chested French plantation owner.

Scene Six. Under CIA orders, an SF officer is flown into Laos to train a village of Meo tribesmen for attacks on the Pathet Lao (Laotian pro-communists). He cohabits with the bare-breasted Nanette, daughter of a Meo tribeswoman and the SF officer's French predecessor from the First Indochina War. His tribesmen succeed in ambushing Pathet Lao troops and in capturing two Red Chinese advisers.

Scene Seven. At a mountain camp, SF officers lead a unit of Saigon troops in the capture of a tribal village for the purpose of resettling the inhabitants in a "strategic hamlet." But the Saigon troops open fire too soon and many adults and

fifteen children are wounded. Vietnamese Air Force regulations prohibit medical evacuation of civilians, so SF pretends that the children are VC prisoners and tricks the Vietnamese Air Force into taking the children to a hospital and orphanage in Danang. Saigon intelligence officers, "drooling" at the prospect of being able to torture fourteen VC prisoners (one child had died), are furious at the Americans when they discover that they have been tricked.

Scene Eight. This is the story of an SF helicopter pilot's personal heroism, and the Saigon troops' cowardice, in evacuating injured troops.

Scene Nine. Grand Finale. Equipped entirely with communist weapons and equipment (bought by the CIA on the world market and stockpiled by it in Saigon), a sabotage squad of non-Caucasian Americans parachutes into North Vietnam. Sheltered in the mountains by primitive T'ai tribesmen, with sex as in scene six, the team contacts a Catholic woman, a former landowner dispossessed by the revolution, now engaged in opium smuggling; with her help, and with elaborate bribery and gadgetry, the SF team kidnaps and exfiltrates a Communist province chief, kills the police chief, and blows up the province capital's electric power station.

The fact that Robin Moore presents his account of Special Forces activity in the form of fictionalized episodes should not mislead one into not taking this book seriously. The author insists that it is a book of truth, and there are good grounds for believing, as he claims, that the names and places have been disguised while the essential outlines of the truth have not been obscured. One of these grounds for belief is the Defense Department's reaction to its publication: representatives of the Pentagon immediately "persuaded" Crown Publishers to add a note to the book's jacket, stating that this was only one man's yarn about jungle adventure. It is a great deal more.

What insights does **The Green Berets** afford into the effectiveness of the Special Forces' approach to the Vietnamese insurgency? Remembering that the key to this approach is not to destroy villages, but to win the allegiance of the people away from the National Liberation Front (Vietcong), we can make a list, scene by scene, of the Special Forces' accomplishments in this regard. Whose allegiance has the SF captured; and how -- by what means?

One: A gang of Cambodian mercenary bandits ; through bribery.

Two: Nobody.

Three: Perhaps some of the less clever adherents of the Cao Dai religion; by blowing up a pagoda and blaming it on the Vietcong.

Four: Perhaps one Catholic teacher, one hundred assorted scum from the jails of Saigon, and two prostitutes; by clever intelligence work.

Five: A graduating class of the Saigon Ranger Academy, for the time being; by leading a successful action.

Six: A village of primitive tribesmen, especially a bare-breasted half-French maiden; by exploiting traditional tribal animosities and colonial affinities.

Seven: Fourteen Montagnard children, until they grow up and wonder what happened to their parents ; by arranging a medical evacuation for them.

Eight: Nobody.

Nine: One village of mountain aborigines, one female Catholic ex-landlord opium smuggler, in North Vietnam; by bribery.

Even if one considers these accomplishments as typical -- if one assumes that not only one gang, but all gangs of Cambodian bandits, all of the less intelligent Cao Dai, all Catholics, all criminals, prostitutes, and so forth, have been won away from the Vietcong -- this still does not make a very impressive list. Nor is the list of methods used very encouraging. Money cannot buy everyone, and ancient animosities between tribes and religions can be exploited just as well by the NLF, if not better.

What has been the effect of these Special Forces operations on the broad mass of Vietnamese who are not -- no innuendo intended -- bandits, Catholics, jailbirds, aborigines, or Saigon soldiers? The effect has been that NLF propaganda has been able, successfully, to identify the United States with "the gravest evils of present-day society of South Vietnam: prostitution, hooliganism, guillotine operators,

mercenary troops, puppet presidents, corrupted ministers, and immoral generals of the puppet army." (See *July Viet-Report*, p. 31 .) The result has been that more and more Vietnamese have been driven into the waiting arms of the Front, if only out of revulsion. The tactics of the Special Forces have had the same effect as the tactics of the conventional forces, with this difference: the Special Forces kills fewer innocent people in the process.

What the United States has not been able to offer the Vietnamese -- but what the NLF has been able to offer -- is a political vision of the future. A study of NLF propaganda shows that the major theme of its appeal to the population is patriotism, anti-American nationalism. The accounts published in American newspapers of Vietcong deserters confirm that the NLF has been largely successful in rallying the population behind it by promising an end to outside -- especially white man's -- interference in Vietnamese affairs. In a nation which is fiercely proud of its two thousand years of national history and national culture, these appeals have fallen on fertile ground. The fact is that the US has been unable to offer the South Vietnamese a more promising political alternative. It may be that the NLF is practicing monstrous deception, and that the American system is better for Vietnam than the Vietnamese system, but the vital fact is that the vast majority in Vietnam seem to believe the NLF and not the US.

What does our not-yet two-hundred-year-old Republic have to offer to the Vietnamese, who trace their ancestry back for two millennia and more? One of the things we do have to offer is suggested by Tregaskis' remark while flying over miles and miles of bright sand and blue sea; "What Howard Johnson and the Florida Chamber of Commerce could do with this strip of beaches!"

Another contribution might follow from Tregaskis' revelation that American airmen at the Soc Trang air base are relieved of the chores of cleaning the barracks and washing laundry by Vietnamese women. Preference for these jobs is charitably given to the widows of Saigon troops killed in action. Would we expect the widows of our British, French, or German allies to become maids and laundresses to our enlisted men? We have different standards for the Vietnamese. Our soldiers, many of them, are quoted as believing that the Vietnamese feel no pain when they are shot; that they are not-quite-human beings. And so it is natural to assume that the Vietnamese widows would see no indignity in being chambermaids to their allies, or that the mountain tribesmen

see no indignity in becoming heavily-guarded wards of the Defense Department's overseas Welfare State.

Indeed, these two books under review give evidence that relations even between the US and our Saigon allies have drastically deteriorated. The mining of the Saigon troops' positions by a Special Forces officer, detailed in Moore's book, is symbolic of the distrust that appears to prevail. Other indications are in American attitudes. One US officer refers to his Vietnamese counterpart as "that little dickhead," and another calls his counterpart "that sneak-eyed yellow-skin bastard corps commander." And US slang for the Vietnamese Special Forces elite units, the Luc-Luong Dac-Biet or LLDB, is "Lousy Little Dirty Bug-outs." It is a tribute to the personal bravery of the Vietnamese fighting man that he continues to fight at all with such allies. In the face of such demoralizing conditions, and in the face of casualties higher than any American fighting unit ever suffered in any war, Korea included, what is surprising is that the desertion rate is not higher than it is.