

PUT OTHER SIDE
NEXT TO WOUND

COLOUR REVISE

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VIETNAM

VIETNAMISATION: THE PRICE THEY HAD TO PAY

Ten thousand soldiers have broken out of Quang Tri and fled in panic.
Two casualties, fallen by the wayside on the road to Hue, are left to die in the blazing sun.
Photographs by *Donald McCullin*. *James Fox* reports on page 21





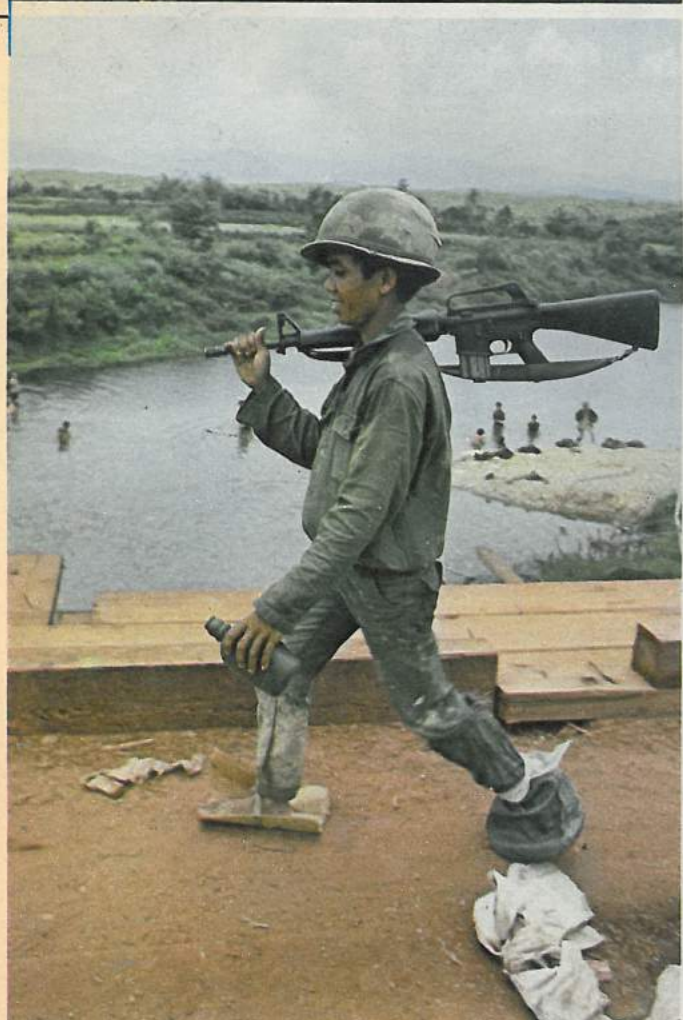
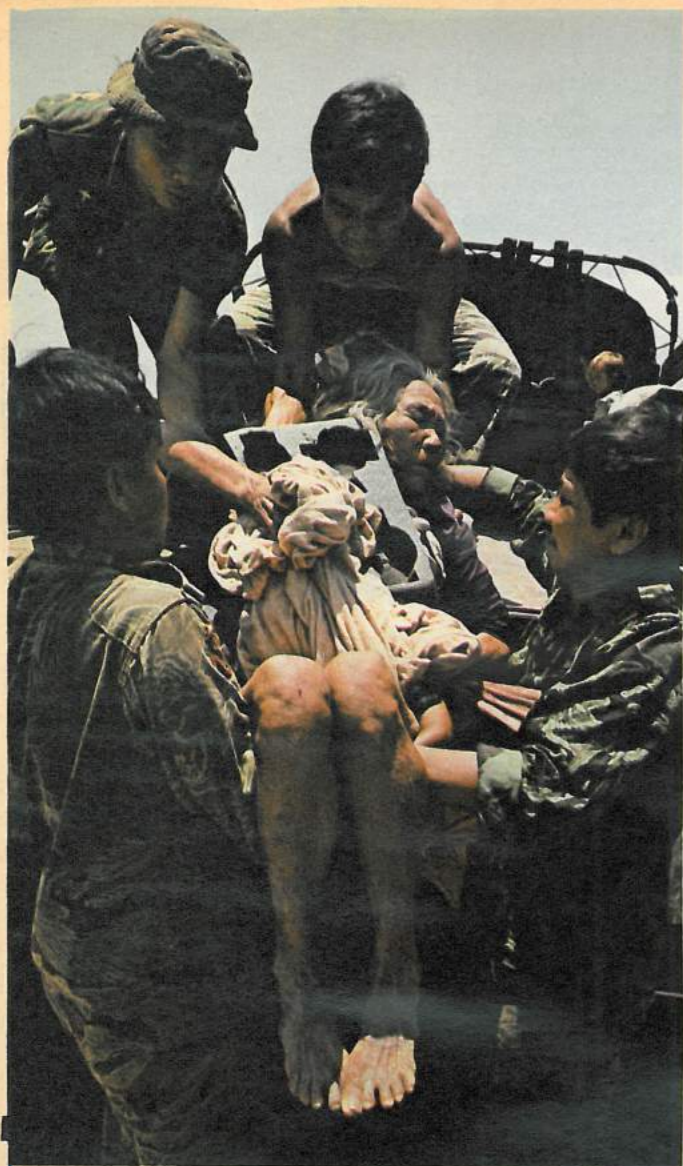
14 This North Vietnamese sapper, sent to infiltrate the outer defences of Dong Hau, has been killed by a Claymore mine in the early hours of the morning. 15



15 Behind his body, which has been kicked to the side of the road, a South Vietnamese commander is briefing his officers before an expected assault by the NVA 15

South Vietnamese Rangers witness a B 52 arc-light -- a radar-controlled bomb strike on NVA bunkers





Top left: this old woman, a South Vietnamese refugee, is lifted by soldiers onto an army truck at My Chan which will dump her further south, away from the front-line fighting. Bottom left: a soldier of the Third Battalion, who has cast off his boots in order to flee more quickly, has found that his feet suffer

severe damage from the blistering heat. Right: a young ARVN Ranger has been wounded in the face by NVA mortar-fire and is awaiting evacuation on the side of Route 13, the road to An Loc. He may lie there for two hours before being transported to the Rear Casualty Receiving Centre at Chon Thanh

The battle for An Loc and Highway 13 was savage and inconclusive, a symbol of the whole Vietnamese war.

The town had been bombed flat and no longer had any significance. Neither side could hold it for long without disastrous casualties. It had become a slaughterhouse where the North Vietnamese and the ARVN (South Vietnamese army) were grinding each other up, sending in more and more men to feed the rapacious war machine, gaining or losing a block of the city or a few yards of road a day.

Before you reach the battlefield, along the road to Binh Long Province, the countryside is green and richly endowed with watery rice paddies surrounded by woods. Then, just before Ben Cat, a small town along Highway 13 which was a Vietcong headquarters during the Tet offensive in 1968, it becomes a miserable wasteland.

B-52 bombs have thrown up mounds of earth and made craters 10 ft. deep and 20 ft. across. At one point a whole convoy lies on its side, truck after truck, in a rusty procession of scrap metal. At the furthest point we could go the road dropped suddenly in front of us, leaving the horizon stretched out only a hundred yards away. It looked like the end of the world. Up from that pit of death, over the hill through the heat haze, came the wounded, covered in blood, some carrying the bodies of their friends wrapped in polythene. The truth was that the ARVN units were taking 50 per cent. casualties.

The 21st Division, whose battalions should have had 800 men apiece, had come from the delta already under-strength with just over 500 men to a battalion. At the beginning of June, battalion strength was no more than 300 to 450 men.

Their departure from the delta had left two provinces virtually in the hands of the NVA and V.C. "If you want to be cynical," said a senior U.S. official in Saigon, "you can say that pacification in the delta was really saturation. As soon as you pull the soldiers out they all come to town." In Chuong Thien Province, which had always been a major V.C. base, the senior adviser told me that the V.C. and NVA could take whatever they wanted whenever they chose. At that exact moment a battle was going on just over a mile from where we were in the provincial capital of Vi Thanh. Whenever the



delta opens up as a major theatre of the offensive, the South Vietnamese Government may simply have no troops left to defend it.

The American advisers on this road were untypically subdued by the situation. In the north, where U.S. military intelligence went from failure to failure, and where, almost believing their own propaganda, they had consistently underestimated the NVA's strength and determination, the advisers always put on a good show for the Press. Between disasters like the fall of Dong Ha, which became the front line after the initial NVA assault on the fire-bases, and the fall of Quang Tri, they would say, "We're really kicking ass out there," and "Charlie came down here expecting to win the war and got his dick shot off."

But on Highway 13, Colonel Burr Willy, a veteran from World War Two and Korea who sits in a bunker near the forward fire-base, says in a weary voice, "We have to get out here and fight them over every damn inch of this terrain." Unless the ARVN soldiers were really knocked out, he said, they were not allowed to leave the battlefield. "They fight with their wounds," said Willy. "They are leaving their wounds open. Flies are pretty good at stopping gangrene because maggots will eat the flesh and keep infection down. Most of these are superficial wounds."

It was the civilians in An Loc, too, who bore the brunt of the bombing and shelling. Some days the NVA

fired 7000 artillery shells into the town. Many of the civilians left early on in the battle and ran the gauntlet through the rubber plantations towards Chon Thanh, often in the company of NVA soldiers who were being bombed whenever they were sighted by the South Vietnamese.

In the refugee camp at Phu Cuong, among the shell-shocked people who crowded in the tents to keep out of the 105 degree heat, I met a 26-year-old woman, Cao Thi Luong, whose right arm was broken and whose left arm was covered in shrapnel scars. She was several months pregnant. Her husband was a police officer in An Loc and she had stayed with him there, braving the bombing and shelling. On May 17 a bomb from a South Vietnamese plane hit her house and killed her father, her brother and her three children. She was herself badly wounded. There were no medics available but the North Vietnamese soldiers put her arm in a splint.

Then she made her way through the shelling to the police station to find her husband, and stayed with him until May 25 - the day he was killed at a police post by a B-40 rocket. The North Vietnamese had arrested her 11-year-old sister, and she was alone.

She walked 12 kilometres along Highway 13 to Tan Khai, where she and her companions ran into an NVA position. After two days the old people and some of the women were freed, and she walked another 11 kilometres to Chon Thanh. "The Vietnamese have suffered so much," said my interpreter, "that anything more doesn't show on their faces."

Some of the refugees spoke of the kind-heartedness of the NVA soldiers. They had shown them where to find water in the rubber plantations, and they had shared out their rice. Others said they were freed by the NVA only after picking up stones and threatening to commit suicide by battering their heads.

But in this, as in most other refugee situations during the offensive, there was little question of the people 'voting with their feet' as the psy-war department would have it. They were above all terrified of the bombing, and there was only one direction in which to run from it.

The soldiers to whom I spoke, sitting in their foxholes waiting to go into battle, were clearly fighting out of no sense of burning patriotism or

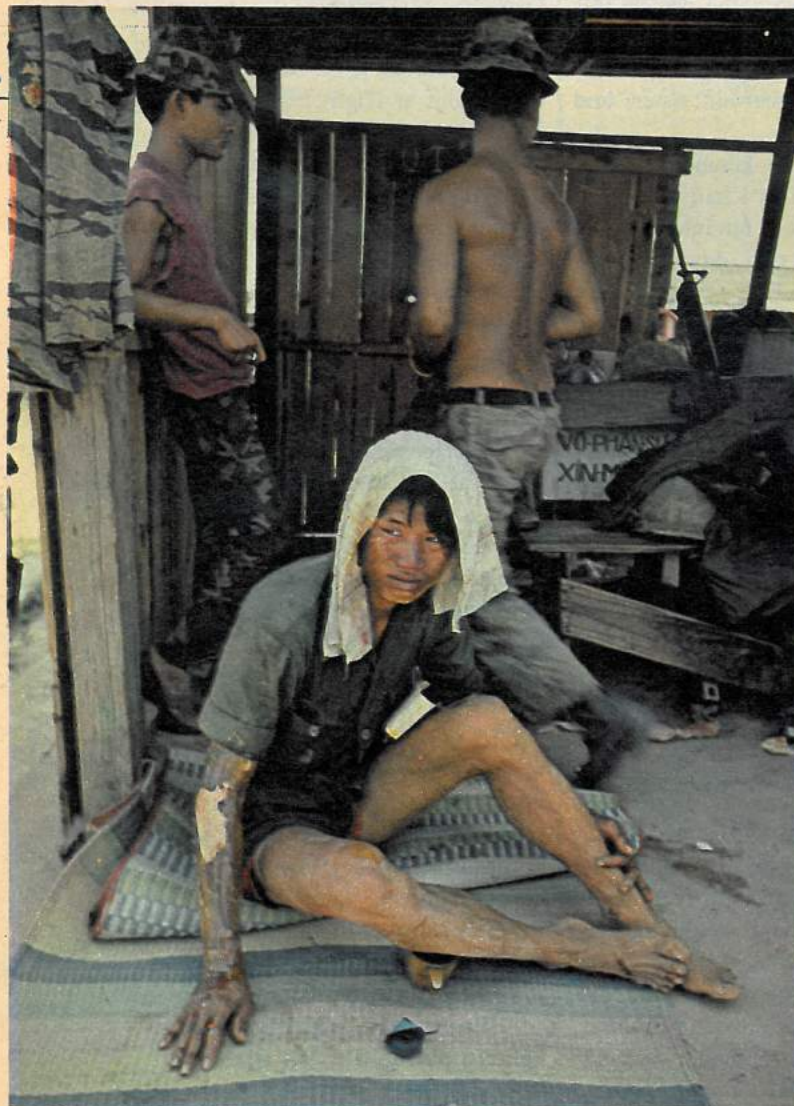
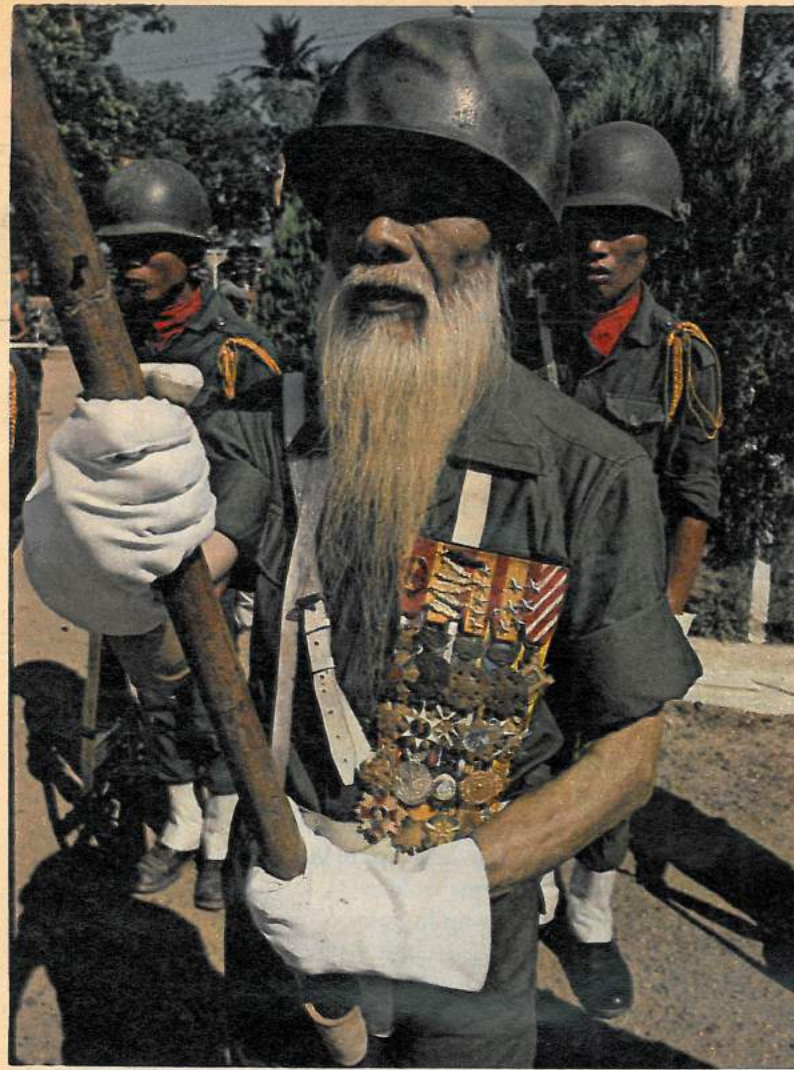
ideology. Their motivation was at a low ebb. Like most Vietnamese they felt their fate lay in the hands of the Great Powers, not in the hands of President Thieu. They gave the impression that the war was none of theirs; that they were fighting for an army of occupation. One soldier from a unit of Rangers, who had been fighting for 11 days on the highway, said when asked when the war would end, "You better ask Nixon about that." For those 11 days they had been trying to join up with another group of Rangers only 500 metres away. "The V.C. are 300 metres from us, and they are the other side. We attack every day, with tanks as well. But we can't get through. The fighting is too hard."

They were only fighting, they said, because the moment they stopped they would be killed. "We get no help from the Americans," said one soldier - a remark that comes up in every conversation with any Vietnamese on any battle-front. "One day some advisers of the 21st Division came up here. When the shelling started they got in their jeeps and ran away."

I am now a soldier of an airborne unit," a soldier on the front at Highway 13 wrote to his brother - the airborne units being the linchpin of the ARVN defence in Binh Long. "I was forced to become an airborne soldier and now I have come to the battlefield of Binh Long. The situation is very bad now. Who knows what will happen? When we finished our training programme we were given no leave. They sent us to Hoang Hoa Tham [the airborne headquarters] and they sent me right away to the 6th Battalion because they needed more soldiers. Let me make a decision later because our life is so miserable. I don't think I can stay here long."

I travelled up Highway 13 one day with a former platoon commander in the regional forces who had been wounded in Hau Nghia Province and discharged. Before his conscription he had taught physics with a Master's degree. His father had been a famous Vietminh general in the early stages of the uprising against the French. Two of his cousins have joined the Vietcong.

"I was lucky. I had got used to fighting during Tet '68 when there was some very heavy fighting near our house in Gia Dinh, on the outskirts of Saigon. I couldn't



Top left: an old Indo-China veteran acts as standard-bearer at a speech by the Province Chief of Hue to inaugurate a local defence unit. Bottom left: an APC driver has been badly burned by an NVA B 40 armour-piercing rocket and is waiting at a hastily erected Casualty Clearing Centre three miles south

of the My Chan river. Centre and right: soldiers of the Third Division, who have been dragged in by friends to the Casualty Clearing Centre or have crawled there by themselves in a state of collapse, are tended by army doctors and field medics before being moved on to a First Field Hospital further south 23

get my family out, so from 1 a.m. until 9 a.m. I hid myself under the bed and beat my fists on the floor I was so frightened. At nine I got the courage to look out of the window and I saw V.C. all around the house.

Sometimes we get on the same radio frequency and have discussions with soldiers on the other side. They have very strong ideology which I don't like. They say why fight for a puppet government? Why not defect, we will never kill you. You must sever the colonial system. Sometimes they seem right and it's very hard to answer them. I tell them I don't think they are sacrificing themselves for their fatherland and I think the best thing for them to do is to try and get money from the American Government for reconstruction." Hardly the most tactful suggestion to make to a member of the NLF.

He said South Vietnamese troops were too often undisciplined. They looted and annoyed the population. "I remember in the village of Tan Hoa, in Hau Nghia Province, the people didn't want to make contact with us. We tried to get their sympathy but they told us that ARVN troops disturbed them too much. They took their chickens and ducks and fruit freely, but when the troops from the other side came they never troubled them."

The looting at Dong Ha, which was evacuated soon after the offensive began, was an ugly sight. The Rangers left to guard the town were like a crowd of children let loose in a toy shop. They staggered about without the slightest embarrassment, and without the slightest reprimand from their officers, with radios and television sets and all the liquor they could carry. I watched them go methodically through one man's house, carefully wrapping up the possessions they wanted and putting them into boxes, then tearing out the contents of drawers and cupboards and kicking open doors. One soldier was walking about with a pink plastic machine gun. A group of soldiers who seemed to have become immune to the smell of death were sitting in the ransacked house of the Province Chief's father. One was dressed in his ceremonial uniform. A man's body lay in an alleyway beside the house and the stench was appalling. The soldiers had lined up all the bottles from his liquor store on the table and were getting drunk. There was not a single house I could see in

Dong Ha which had not been looted.

Perhaps the North Vietnamese were having the same problems in Quang Tri. Their radio broadcast stern commandments from the Revolutionary Committee, warning that theft, murder and rape would be severely punished. "Do not misappropriate the people's property without their approval. Abstain from stealing weapons, vehicles and ordnance, or quartermaster equipment belonging to the army or left behind by the enemy."

To shore up his thin and battered defence line, President Thieu has announced that more young men, 17-year-olds, will be sent to the battlefields. At the other end of the scale the age limit is 43. The target is another 200,000 soldiers, but realistic estimates reckon that it will be impossible to put even half that number in the field. A senior official of the Vietnamese Joint Chiefs of Staff office in Saigon seemed perplexed by the President's intentions. "First we don't know how to solve the problem of training. There are not enough training schools. But the real problem as far as I can see is the problem of pay.

"We have a budget of 320 billion piastres a year. Two thirds of that is the military budget and threequarters of the military budget goes in military pay. It seems to be beyond the budget capabilities." In Saigon huge new taxes on goods and services were levied on the population. Economy-watchers predict that the Government will soon start printing money to pay its bills. People with more than six children will be exempted from the draft. "A man with five children, which is not an uncommon thing in Vietnam, would be worried to death now," said the official. "The army pay scale is quite ridiculous. An enlisted man earns about 12 piastres - and in Saigon it will be a tremendous problem to keep his family alive."

Since it takes nine months to train an officer and only two to train an enlisted man, the conscription drive seems to offer little more than a plugging of defence lines with a mass of young and inexperienced soldiers, and the creation of a fighting force similar to the now non-existent 3rd Division, which turned and fled from the front line in disarray. The excuse for them was that they were young and inexperienced. But they were given the epithet of draft dodgers and criminals, too.

In the first two months of the

offensive the horrors of war were never more lavishly laid upon the South Vietnamese than in the days during and after the fall of Quang Tri. The retreating soldiers of the 3rd Division and Rangers had gone wild with panic and hurt pride on the road south. They were commandeering vehicles at gunpoint, and it was frightening to travel down that road by car. They were leaving their wounded to die by the roadside, and in some cases running over their bodies. Everyone seemed to have run from Quang Tri to save themselves, and most of the men I spoke to had lost their families along the road, or left them behind.

I saw one man come into Hue wheeling a bicycle on which he had tied the bodies of his two daughters, of about three and five years old. Two weeks later in a small village outside Hue I met a 68-year-old rice-farmer from Gio Linh, a town right on the edge of the DMZ, who had first fled to Quang Tri when the offensive started. For 307 kilometres through the rice fields alongside Highway One he had carried his three young grandchildren, walking by day and sleeping in the fields at night. He was almost shaking with old age, and he had bad scars from wounds he received during the Tet offensive. He had 100 piastres left in his pocket. After that was gone he intended to hire himself out as a labourer for the rice harvest.

"If the NVA are coming to Hue," a teacher said to me during those three days, "there is no way we can stop them." Deserters who had stripped off their regimental badges prowled the town, hunted by Marines and Rangers looking for vengeance.

Most people thought that a catastrophe had finally arrived when a Ranger shot a 3rd Division soldier who was trying to escape from a lynching. His body lay on the bridge at Hue for three days, wrapped in a newspaper, according to the regulation that all corpses should be covered in white. Someone had lit some joss sticks and put them near his head. When the people refused to give the 3rd Division soldiers food, they burned the market down.

Anti-American feeling in the town ran high, and a Vietnamese friend advised me to leave. There were rumours of an American deal with the North Vietnamese that were so strong and so widely believed that it

was difficult not to think that there must be some kind of truth buried in it somewhere. For the Vietnamese it was strong enough to explain the headlong flight of the ARVN. Clinging like everyone else to the supreme belief in American bombs - although deeply distrusting American policy at the same time - an ARVN soldier expressed the general feeling of the people. "Why do the Americans let the Communists occupy our country?" he said.

One old but widespread rumour was revived for no apparent reason: that the Americans had let the Communists into Saigon during Tet. The rumour in Hue was that the Americans had promised to concede Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces even before the offensive began. Such rumours seem to grow out of the frustrations of the Vietnamese at being incapable of working out any kind of national destiny without the intervention of world powers. It is simply a deep suspicion. "Why else," said my teacher friend, "did Thieu order the people to evacuate Gio Linh before the offensive, and why did the Americans only start bombing after 50,000 troops had crossed into the South? Their sensors must have picked them up already."

If the people of Hue had known at that point that the NVA had for some reason deliberately avoided shooting the U.S. advisers while they waited helplessly for Green Giant helicopters to lift them out of the compound at Quang Tri, all their suspicions would have been confirmed.

A Marine officer, who was one of those evacuated, said, "They shot all around the compound, we could see the snipers in the buildings around us. But they never shot at us. Why, I shall never know. We were sitting ducks and we would have all been killed." Possibly the death of 120 Americans would have been too strong a twist of the tiger's tail.

Hue was a sad sight as it prepared for the NVA onslaught. Most of the population had fled to Da Nang. The shops were shuttered, and the town was under the control of hawkish Right-wing politicians and two battalions of military police.

The province senior adviser from Quang Tri, Bill Daly, and a few stragglers from his province team hung about Hue with nothing to do. I had known Daly in Quang Tri and had sat in on his conferences. I remembered a stirring speech ➤ 33



Above: a South Vietnamese refugee, injured on the road to Quang Tri, lies in the truck which will take him to Hue. Right: during a lull in a "fire-fight" eight kilometres east of Quang Tri City, a soldier was hit in the groin by a sniper's bullet and is being painfully carried away from the area by field medics



Above: these refugees have briefly returned to the village of My Chan to retrieve those personal possessions which they had to leave behind when they first fled. South Vietnam is littered with dead or dying animals, abandoned by their owners and sometimes destined to be eaten by hungry combat troops



A miniature sandstorm is created by the arrival of an ARVN Medi Vac to rescue wounded from the battlefield



South Vietnamese refugees huddle together against the blast of the helicopters which will lift them to Pleiku



of his, delivered shortly before Quang Tri fell, on the subject of the refugees' sanitary problems. The camp facilities were crawling with maggots, and the refugees were living in horrendous squalor.

Surrounded by his advisers, Daly suddenly appeared to lose his temper over the fact that the refugees would not dig their own latrines but were leaving it to the province officials. "Goddammit if you don't ship a V.C. bullet you get it with the bug. Hell, those are Government officials, tell 'em to get off the can, they're not there to shovel crap. Tell 'em the plague's gonna get them. Tell 'em to kick ass. Tell 'em to get off their butt otherwise I'm gonna ship you guys out here because we're gonna get the plague. Tell 'em if they want South Vietnam, they've gotta dig for it. Excuse me, gentlemen."

Daly had been proud of the fact that two districts in this poorest of provinces had become self-sufficient under his guidance. Now, demoted to insignificance, he was walking around Hue with a brand new plastic badge pinned on his uniform, which read, "William Daly, Province Senior Adviser, Quang Tri". His work had been taken over by the People's Revolutionary Committee.

It is interesting to speculate on the reaction of the NVA to the graffiti on Quang Tri lavatory walls: "Queer, unique and nobody's game - tough red infiltrator." Or, "Withdrawal is something Nixon's father should have done 58 years ago."

As the fire-bases fell north of Kontum, Captain Phuc, the ARVN information officer at Pleiku, would peel off a few red stickers from the briefing map every evening and put them in a pile. Phuc was always cheerful and never seemed to take to heart the significance of the diminishing patches of red on the briefing map. At the MACV (U.S. Military Assistance Command) headquarters, Press conferences would be held in which U.S. advisers who had "escaped and evaded" as the bases were overrun, usually by the skin of their teeth, would tell their epic stories. The most dramatic were those from the fall of the district compound at Tan Canh, north of Kontum, especially for the light they threw on the fighting abilities of ARVN units.

Captain Lloyd Stewart and Captain Terry MacLain were among the nine advisers in the compound when

the salvos of NVA artillery started to land. The night before they were evacuated, several hundred rounds landed on the compound. "We were trying to get the ARVN off their ass to fire their artillery. They felt since they were taking incoming fire they could not man their positions, and that begins a rapid downward spiral," said MacLain. "The ARVN Colonel just said, 'We've been doing this for years, leave us alone.' I advised him to make sure his troops were alerted for the attack. He said, 'My troops have stood to all night. They are all awake.' I went to the operations centre bunker and they were all asleep. We couldn't persuade the ARVN to put people on the ridge line above us to give us early warning, and when we heard tanks coming we couldn't get them to put anti-tank tubes on the road. We had 106 and 90 millimetre recoil-less rifles on the perimeter - they can destroy armour - but they were never fired."

There were 1200 ARVN soldiers at Tan Canh at the time, many of them with anti-tank weapons. But the compound fell after only two NVA tanks had rolled into it, through the front gates, unmolested. "We pleaded with the people to fire their weapons," said MacLain. "They were cowering," said Stewart. "The ARVN have this deep belief that NVA soldiers are 10 ft. tall and an indestructible foe, and the only recourse is to get out as quickly as possible. We got out as soon as the tanks came, since we couldn't exert any influence at all."

The most important life-saver for the U.S. advisers is the Cobra Gunships, one of the most powerful and destructive weapons in the U.S. armoury - a helicopter whose fuselage is only 3 ft. wide and shaped like a shark, and which lays down a wall of machine gun, grenade and rocket fire around the pick-up point to enable UH-1 helicopters to come in and get their men.

The pilots of the 361st Aerial Weapons Company, who fly the Cobras out of Pleiku, must be the last unspoiled relics of battle-crazy, destruction-loving Americans in Vietnam.

Many of them have applied for extensions to stay and fight. Captain Lynn A. Carlson, who was flying gunships in Vietnam back in 1968, has had visiting cards printed which he drops over the target area as he pulls out of each murderous dive. "Congratulations," say the cards, "you have been killed through

the courtesy of the 361st. Yours truly Pink Panther 20." On the other side are various messages: "Call us for death and destruction night and day", and "The Lord giveth and the 20 mm. taketh away. Killing is our business and business is good".

"I always wanted to be a Cobra crew chief," says Carlson. "You see," says his colleague, John Debay, "the NVA are giving us more targets than we've ever had in this war. And we're having a real turkey shoot. We're going out and killing right and left. All we had before was suspected enemy locations. It's something that brought me back to the Nam. When the offensive started I had a dim ray of hope we might stick it out here." Now that the targets are presenting themselves, Debay wants to see a massive build-up of American ground troops. Now is the time, he calculates, for a U.S. military victory.

We've got the equipment to annihilate them. We could wipe out the NVA divisions now and solve this whole problem. Hell, in World War Two we occupied Berlin. I'd like to see this government occupy North Vietnam, break up their chain of military command and show them the peaceful way of life." Looking spiritually moved, Debay mused, "People in the U.S. don't understand this war. Some of the most extreme moments of emotion in your life happen over here. The mutual interest in each other, the kind of companionship among pilots, is pretty difficult to find with other social type relationships."

One of the more soft-spoken Cobra pilots, John MacFarlane, wants to be a Lutheran missionary in New Guinea after he's finished with Vietnam. Was there ever any conflict between his religion and his gunship driving? "Oh, you oughta been here with Father Dodge," he replies. "He always used to say, the faster you get 'em the quicker their souls get to heaven. I feel I'm killing to spare souls. I think the USA is going in the right direction."

On Sundays, to get out of the mental oppression of Saigon and to forget the war, the Vietnamese take to the Bien Hoa Highway which leads out of Saigon to the north west. They stream out on their Hondas to the fruit farms of Lai Thieu, or the rubber plantations of Di An where the gruesome Highway 13 begins. The rubber plantations are a serene pro-

tection from the glaring brassy sun and the heat. The soda stalls provide hammocks to lie in, and the peace is total. It is also the road to the Bien Hoa military cemetery where the full horror of the war in terms of the exploitation of the lives of young men is ceremoniously exhibited in rows of fresh graves, and lines of coffins.

I went there one Sunday with a Vietnamese friend by Honda. We drove past a huge mausoleum which houses the tombs of the three- and four-star Generals, and then through the graveyard to the mortuary. Forty coffins were standing in front of it, all draped in the Vietnamese red and yellow flag, waiting to be buried. The coffins were not very solidly constructed and in the heat of the day the smell of death hung over the place, despite the joss sticks.

In the gloom of a large back room there was a nine-year-old schoolboy, dressed in a white shirt, blue shorts, a tag denoting his name and school pinned on his chest, soldering up the zinc linings of the coffins - the ones that are to be shipped to other parts of the country - with a blow torch. He said he was earning money to pay for his education.

Objects had been placed on the coffins themselves, as an aid to the after-life. On one was a packet of Ruby Queen cigarettes, a bottle of orange soda, some money, and a bowl of rice and pork which the flies were settling on in large numbers.

At the end of the row a frail old man was standing in a dirty white shirt. His name was Do Van Vinh, a rice farmer from a village 20 kilometres outside Can Tho in the delta. He was visibly wasting away with tuberculosis, and had come to Saigon after getting a telegram to say that his 18-year-old son had died three weeks before on Highway 13.

He had to identify the body and saw that both his son's legs had been blown away by a mine. He had been in the army seven months. During that time, his father said, he had only received three letters, in each of which his son had said how frightened he was.

That day he had come to take the coffin back to the delta. The army would ship it to Can Tho, but he would have to borrow money to get it to his village. In the meantime he had put one boiled egg on his son's coffin and, with a paper clip, had pinned a small identity photograph of him on to the Vietnamese Flag ●