**A Tale of Two Soldiers
James Fox***New Statesman, 09/06/1972*

The Mekong Delta, with its stubborn unwillingness to be pacified, must havemystified and infuriated the American military more than any other region of Vietnam. The province senior advisor of Choung Thien, Colonel John Meese, a seasoned pessimist of the delta war, made the personal discovery recently that all the houses in the village of Vinh Vien had between three and five bunkers built under them. They had been there, he reckons, for 20 years. ‘Why must I discover this,’ he says, ‘Why must I go down to the 415 battalion which has worked in the delta all its life and tell?’
 The colonel, seeing his work going to waste, has come to the conclusion that the war in the delta will never end. ‘The only way things will ever be solved is that the VC and the GVN just live and let live, and everyone go back to raising their crops.’ That surely is an index of US exasperation. At 39 Meese is the youngest senior adviser in Vietnam and he has been in the ‘counter-insurgency business’ for 15 years. Every once in a while he entertains Sir Robert Thompson in the officers’ mess at Vi Thanh and they go over the ground together. He was in the special-forces – ‘We had a lot of animals with us, and animals are hard to keep in tow.’ He has worked for the CIA and he has been a regular soldier. His counter-insurgency beat was South America, and he studied Chuong Thien province with State Department paper flown from Washington, while he was putting down rebellion in Venezuela. ‘I wanted the most difficult and challenging province to end my career’, he said, ‘I must confess I’m terribly disappointed.’
 Meese came to the delta with a cross to bear. ‘When you get into the business of special-forces and you do the kind of things that had to be done you’re not sure what you’ve done is right or wrong. I felt I hadn’t really contributed to pacification because I’ve been in the destruction business. So I came here to right some wrongs I feel I might have done before.
 ‘I always argued’, said Meese, ‘against large scale US involvement. The US as a community don’t understand counter-insurgency at all. In Venezuela we cleared the problem up in 18 months, but then we were using local forces. The US army knows nothing about solving or eliminating urban insurgency. We destroy the city and we build them a new one. Okay. That’s how we handled it in Santo Domingo, although the trouble there was they didn’t tell us the good guys from the bad guys and when we went down there we didn’t know whose side we were on.

‘But I’m a different breed of cat to the normal US type you see down here. I never expected results. A lot of the things I accomplished in the first eight months have gone down the tubes as far as expanding a secure environment is concerned. But I never believed, in all honesty, that we had a secure environment. I predicted that a dark cold of gloom, an impending disaster hung over the province. And it came true. Goddammit we should have had small ranger type companies, train ‘em in Malaysia, pick the best, pay them enough to make it worthwhile. Then get US types, the dregs from the bottom of the barrel who love this type of work and you throw them out in the briar patch with 100 tough guys and you could have plugged this infiltration. Now you can’t even begin to address the VC infrastructure here because you have such a bad security situation.
 ‘Pacification was never as good as people said it was. There were a lot of false illusions. Nobody had really weighed the ability of the guerrilla or the VCI. Apart from the main force we’ve got 1500 documented VCI in this province. That’s a lot of influence. And we’ve got some 700 guerrillas who’ve never been touched or bothered. So you’re talking about 2000 hard core guys who have always been involved in the conflict. Pacification has not taken hold in this province, nor in many other areas in the delta. It was the US syndrome that no-one wanted to go home from here and admit they hadn’t achieved anything. When General Desobry left in 1968 he wrote, “I’ve pacified the delta”. Well that’s the biggest bunch of bullshit I’ve ever heard in my life. The delta was no more pacified when he left than it will be when I leave.’
 The showplace for reporters, the few that venture into the delta, is the town of Mo Kay in Kien Hoa province – the province was 75 percent occupied by the VC in 1968 – and the neighbouring village of An Thanh where the VC had their headquarters, their ‘international capital’, from 1963 until 1969. The district senior adviser at Mo Kay is a young fresh-faced American major called Brian Reed, imbued with purpose and optimism to an extent that makes you wonder how the State Department can keep turning them out.
 He spent several months in the US in a class with 12 other majors, studying every detail of the district. ‘When 12 majors can con an address from the Secretary of the Army, you know it’s pretty important,’ he says of his graduation day, ‘I’m Vietnamese except for the eyes. We had 12 weeks of language, Vietnamese culture, Vietnamese government. The US is making a tremendous effort to bridge the cultural gap and the advisers are well-oriented. To a man they believe in what they’re doing.
 ‘Up till 1969 the VC influence was very, very strong. But with long hard pacification we’ve got access to anywhere in the district. What I see now is a gut reaction. The people are supporting the GVN.’

 On his last tour in Vietnam, reed was a missile officer. The biggest problem he saw then, he said, was apathy among the leaders. ‘But this district chief’, he says, ‘is aggressive beyond what I ever imagined. They’re not 20th-century executives, but they are unbelievably aggressive, and violently anti-American. Towards the end of the adviser’s tour, the district chief had cut off the adviser’s water supply and the adviser had cut off the district chief’s electricity supply. The district chief bought a generator and the adviser had his water shipped in by the army. It was Reed’s arrival which broke the stalemate.
 We paid a visit on the village chief at An Thanh and on the way met a motorised cyclo bouncing over the stones, ‘See that,’ said Reed, ‘Transportation is a priority commodity for the Vietnamese. They just love running around.’
 The delta around Chuong Thien and Kien Giang is a place of awe-inspiring beauty. Its meadows, which produce two rice crops a year, and its waterways on which everyone can travel to every remote corner of almost any province with their outboard motors would be a paradise in peacetime. It has always defied the might of the US in its own special way. But it has been scarred in the process.
 Flying low level in a helicopter over the paddy fields one day, there was a sudden explosion of automatic weapon fire, and I thought we were under attack. The pilot had stuck his M-16 out through the canopy and was shooting up the rice paddys for amusement. On his helmet was the inscription, ‘Help Mead America’.*Can Tho, Vietnam*