

“WE ARE FRIENDS,” VIET CONG TELL VISITING U.S. NEWSMAN

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NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT-CONTROLLED TERRITORY, South Vietnam—Our official greeting came from Le Hoang Oanh, a Communist village representative in Cai Lai district 60 miles southwest of Saigon.

“We are happy to welcome the foreign correspondents to visit our liberation areas,” he said Tuesday afternoon. “This is the first time the4 foreign press has come here.”

Thus began our 18-hour stay with the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong), South Vietnam’s “other side.” During those 18 hours we watched an NLF “ceremony of peace” attended by several thousand Vietnamese, walked for more than tow hours at night on trails used by troops in mud sometimes up to our thighs, and talked at length with NLF political and military officials.

Once during our march South Vietnamese artillery shells exploded thunderously a few hundred yards away from us. “Now have you seen an example of a ceasefire violation?” an NLF soldier smilingly asked us immediately afterward.

Hoping to get inside an NLF-controlled village, Veronique Decoudu of Agence France Presse, our interpreter and I had walked in the direction of an NLF flag we had seen waving from a treewtop several hundred yards from Highway 4, the main route from Saigon to the Mekong Delta.

We first passed a house with a government flag, then several with no flags, then many with NLF flags. Soon we attracted a group of about 25 people, some of whose startled glances showed that foreigners were not a common sight here. Still, most people were remarkably friendly.

Leslie, a member of the Times bureau in Saigon, is the first American correspondent to have entered and returned from Viet Cong territory in South Vietnam.

We asked to see village leaders, were loaded into a sampan and taken down a stream. When word spread that we were journalists, people waved NLF flags as we glided by.

Suddenly we saw a few young barefoot soldiers in blue or black pajamas. The rifles they carried included American-made M-16s, carbines, and most notably, Chinese-made AK-47s. We knew that we had arrived.

Soldiers waved and called ashore. We then marched along a path as the number of people trailing us constantly grew. They seemed pleased by the surprising catch they had made in the midst of their village. We were led to Oanh, the village representative, who asked for our name cards. After we turned them over, he gave his welcoming statement, which was greeted by cheers. We were stunned by our ease in moving to the other side. A woman handed each of us iced tea.

Everywhere we looked there were NLF flags. We were told we were in Binh Phu village, a 100% NLF-controlled community of more than seven square miles and a population of 6,800.

Oanh quickly outlined an afternoon tour for us, then took us to see examples of destruction caused by an NLF soldier and a few children

carrying flags on long bamboo poles as the tour's trail constantly grew longer.

Oanh showed us houses burned to their foundations, shattered rooftops and bomb craters. Though he said much of the damage had been done since the ceasefire began, this did not seem creditable. One bomb crater filled with brackish water obviously had not been made in the last three days, despite our host's claims to the contrary.

A few people spoke heatedly to us as we passed. We learned later that they had mistaken us for members of the International Commission of Control and Supervision set up in the Paris ceasefire agreements, and were demanding payment for war damage done to their houses. The ICCS has not yet begun working outside Saigon.

Most villagers were jovial and relaxed. They displayed no fear of being discovered or attacked even though we could see battle smoke twisting up a few miles away. They seemed proud when we took pictures of them with NLF flags.

Oanh asked us to sit down inside a pagoda partly destroyed by bombing or shelling. At least 50 to 60 people gathered around. Oanh then made what seemed to be a formal statement: "The people are happy to receive all journalists, including those who work for the rebel government of Saigon, but on the sole condition that they do their job fairly."

A man whispered in Oanh's ear, and he announced that we could now take notes. Then he said he was willing to answer questions.

We asked what his job as village representative entailed.

“My function is to command politically and militarily with the goal of conquering the American aggressors,” he said.

Then we asked how many people were members of the NLF in the village. “Because this is a question of defense,” Oanh said, “I can’t say how many people there are. But I can say the front represents the whole population of the village, all religions, and also men who work with the Saigon government.”

In the mist of our questioning someone handed Oanh a slip of pink paper. It has obviously come by messenger from higher-ranked cadres, who were informed of our presence. Oanh read it, then said, “The members of this village are very happy to invite you two journalists to spend the night here to celebrate together a ceremony of peace.”

Somewhat overwhelmed, we quickly accepted, and the people followed Oanh’s lead in applauding. After another formal statement, in which we were told to write “what our conscience dictates,” we left the pagoda and were hailed by another group of villagers. “Welcome the correspondents!” they chanted. “Welcome peace! We support peace! Welcome!”

The remarkably tight organization of the village was now becoming apparent. Wherever we walked for the next hour, people hailed us on a cue from a cadre with “Welcome!” Word of our presence had been passed throughout the village. Youths suddenly appeared to carry our packs and help us across gangplank-like bamboo crossings that stretched between mud walls retaining rice paddies.

Although it was obvious that the treatment we received was not spontaneous, it also seemed that no villager carried out his assigned duty with a sense of being put upon. People seemed cheerful and

respectful to one another. They exhibited grace and confidence in their actions.

The children who it was now clear had been assigned to carry NLF flags at the front of our parade seemed genuinely to enjoy it.

As we walked to a villager's house where we would have dinner, Oanh explained a bit of his background to our interpreter.

Oanh, 43, had been a member of the NLF for many years. He said he had been arrested by government troops in 1969, and paid a 50,000-piaster (\$125) bribe which resulted in his release from prison three months later. Villagers donated the money, he swaid.

Oanh carried a flashlight, radio and lighter, all of which he said he had taken off bodies of soldiers of the American 9th Infantry Division in 1969. Oanh lost his right thumb when it was struck by shrapnel in combat against that unit the same year.

Whenever the interpreter referred to the "VC" or "North Vietnam," Oanh corrected him, saying that the proper terms were the National Liberation Front and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

With at least 20 villagers huddled inside the tiny earthen-floored house, we and Oanh had a chat. Oanh stated what became a continual theme of our visit to the other side—would we write the truth?

"You came here unexpectedly," he said. "We have nothing to hide. We hope that what you see is the truth." He then asked us if we had believed what we had seen so far. We said we had been impressed.

He asked Veronique what the French Communist Party flag looked like, then asked both of us what parties we belonged to. I answered that as a journalist I did not belong to any party.

During our dinner I asked Oanh how he felt about eating with an American after having fought against the United States for so many years.

“We consider that there are two kinds of Americans,” he said. “One we call imperialists, who come with bombs and weapons to kill our people and destroy our land. They are our enemies..

“However, the ceasefire is an agreement of reconciliation and we don’t see anyone as our enemy anymore

“The second kind of American we call peaceful and progressive. They do not come here to destroy or kill—they are people like Martin Luther King and the movie actress, Jane Fonda. We do not see them as our enemies, but as helping us. We really appreciate Americans such as those in the women’s movement who prevent their sons from fighting in South Vietnam.

“You can recognize friendship easily. If we were not friends we would not sit down and eat at the same table. If we were not friends, we would not talk about the things we are talking about now,” Oanh said.

We ate outside on a tiny table, lit by a kerosene lamp. The food was substantial and tasty—chicken, beef, soup and rice. This, we were assured, was a “special” meal.

Already tired by our trudge through rice paddies early in the afternoon, we were deflated when told the “peace ceremony” was another two miles away. The two miles turned out to be four.

By the time we began our after-dinner walk, there was no more sun—only a moonless night. Our guides carried flashlights and the kerosene lamp, but they were not enough to prevent us from slipping off the mud walls into the paddies. To our companions, who seemed extraordinarily surefooted, our falls were amusing. They walked behind us, ready to grab us if we slipped.

We started off with a group of 10 or 15, but after an hour at least 100 people were marching behind us single file. Oanh said the meeting was called only three hours earlier in honor of our appearance, but the news had obviously spread. People waited on the trail until we passed by, then joined the end of the column. No one seemed surprised to see two Westerners.

Liaison cadres also waited at specific points on the route to direct us for a portion of the journey. We occasionally passed booby traps set for government soldiers just off the trail. The traps were marked by dead vines draped in front of the danger area.

There were also frequent breaks in the path, with only boards or poles to walk on for one or two yards. One gap was filled by a piece from a crashed American cobra helicopter.

Commenting on the use of these difficult paths by NLF troops, one cadre said, “We have no airplanes. We have no tanks. All we have are men with legs of brass and shoulders of steel. Those are our tanks.”

At one point on our trek South Vietnamese artillery shells exploded a few hundreds yards from us. Everyone immediately hit the ground—I dove head first toward a ditch. “My god, what will we do now?” a woman yelled. “Where will we run? Please help me.”

Our guides led us to a nearby house where we rested. No one considered the shelling close enough to take refuge in bunkers.

Since the ceasefire began, “we never return fire unless they attack us,” a cadre said. “But this is an outrage. I think they intend to provoke us.”

The old man who lived in the house where we rested said it had been struck by shelling five times since 1965, and caught on fire three times.

A few minutes later we resumed our trek. Gaps in the trail became too large to be bridged by bamboo poles. We had no choice but to wade through muddy water; sometimes we sunk in the mud to our knees and had to be pulled out.

We reached the Ba Rai River, which three years ago was the scene of a bloody battle between NLF troops and the American 9th Infantry Division. Our guides said the NLF had sunk more than 20 American boats in that battle. We quietly paddled across in a sampan.

We soon heard voices on loudspeakers and knew we were close to the site of the ceremony. Just before we arrived a speaker announced that two foreign journalists were coming. As we walked into the clearing, applause greeted us, and photographers flashed our pictures.

Our guides said 6,000 people were there representing four villages and Cai Lay district town. It was impossible to tell whether that figure was accurate. The number was certainly in the thousands. People sat in trees as well as on the ground.

A month before, the ceremony site had been a rice field. Now it contained a makeshift stage with two sets of curtains. When we arrived, the curtains were open. An NLF flag—a yellow star against a red and blue field—provided the backdrop.

Our entrance marked the end of the meeting's political session and the beginning of entertainment. This consisted of songs and skits. Songs included "Liberation Troops Going to War," "Enjoying Peace," "In Memory of President Ho," and "Salute to My Liberated Country."

Music accompaniment usually consisted of a generator-powered electric guitar and mandolin. Both male and female performers wore lipstick and heavy rouge.

The performances seemed somewhat derivative of China's model revolutionary operas, but they still had their own unique flavor. In one skit a young girl who supports the NLF chases a "Saigon government" village chief around the room after he tries to force her to pay him for painting a government flag on her wall.

Making fun of the government's efforts to put flags in as many places as possible, the girl asks, "What kind of flag is this that must be put everywhere—in the front of the house, in the back of the house, in the bathroom, and even on the floor of the boat, so that when you sit down you get paint on your pants?"

Once sentries alerted the audience that a plane was approaching and NLF officials covered all lights so they would not be seen from the air. A few minutes later about 15 distant artillery explosions could be heard. In neither instance did anyone at the performance show apprehension. Asked if he feared the artillery, an NLF cadre said only, "If it comes, it comes."

The entertainment continued after midnight and showed no signs of stopping. Our guides suggested we leave so that we would have a chance to talk to some high-ranking cadres. We had already concluded that NLF supporters never sleep.

We went on another walk, this one only 15 minutes, to the cadre's house. When we arrived, two men, one dressed in white and the other in black, were sitting at a long table waiting for us. Though they identified themselves only as village level cadres, their demeanor and the deferential attitude of others towards them indicated they were high-ranking province officials.

Both rather stern and reserved, the men submitted to an interview only after asking several questions of us.

"The Saigon government claims that it controls 90% of the population," one said. "When you write a story, do you report this statistic as fact?"

We answered that we gave sources for such statistics and tried to determine if they were true.

No matter how specific our questions were, the officials' responses invariably tended toward the rhetorical. For example, when we asked them to explain the elements of organization, one merely mentioned his own position, then said, "In this capacity, we would like to tell you that the fighting continues tonight when it was supposed to stop two days ago. We would like to tell you to make the people of the world understand the situation of our people."

A vague sort of diplomatic sparring went on for almost two hours. At that point the discussion broke off and we were served yet another meal.

After eating, we were taken on another journey, this one mostly by motorized sampan on the Ba Rai River. As we pattered through the water, our NLF guide sang to himself and checked his position by

shining a flashlight on the shore. In plain view of anyone who happened to be on either side of the river, we apparently were not in jeopardy.

The boat stopped at a house where we were to sleep for an hour before covertly being escorted back to the government side. Before we crawled onto wooden sleeping platforms, the NLF soldiers gave us large glasses of hot sweetened canned milk.

Our plan for returning to the government side was to get up at 5 a.m., then take a sampan up the Ba Rai River almost to the district town. We would then disembark and walk along the river bank to the town. We wanted to reach it half an hour before the 6 a.m. lifting of the curfew, and before the sun came up.

NLF soldiers had told us that our car, which we had left on the highway, had been towed away. It therefore was probable that someone was aware of what we had tried to do and might be looking for us.

Unfortunately, we overslept half an hour. By the time we and our escorts got into the sampan it was well past the lifting of curfew. Frightened, we knew we had no choice but to take the risk of being caught.

With sunrise rapidly approaching, the sampan's motor would not start for 15 anxious minutes. It finally came to life. But after a few minutes on the river the propeller became fouled by floating plants and the motor stalled. We tried to pull the plants away and paddle with our hands.

Finally the motor was restarted, then stalled again. Other sampan operators came to help us, and were surprised to find two Westerners in the boat. Fortunately, they said nothing.

We started the motor a third time, and made it to the shore just as the sun was rising. Then on foot, we walked by the last government checkpoint outside the government-held district town without being challenged.

From Cai Lay we took a bus to Saigon.