

## **VIP TREATMENT FOR PRESS**

### **Binh Phu: A Lesson in How Viet Cong Village Operates**

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Binh Phu, South Vietnam—Soon after the leader of NLF-controlled Binh Phu village learned that his two unexpected foreign visitors were journalists, he began giving orders.

“Be sure to provide double protection for our guests,” Le Hoang Oanh told the village security cadre.

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**This is the second dispatch from Leslie about his experiences in Viet Cong territory.**

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Next Oanh commanded three messengers to report on our presence to the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) district secretary, the chairman of the village revolutionary committee, and ordinary villagers, respectively.

The orders were given firmly and were carried out immediately.

Veronique Decoudu of Agence France Presse, an interpreter and I had cautiously entered Bing Phu Tuesday after walking several hundreds yards off a South Vietnamese government-controlled highway. This was in Cai Lay, a district of Dinh Tuong province in the Mekong Delta 60 miles southwest of Saigon. Now, after being welcomed heartily, we had been given our first lesson in how an NLF village operates.

During our 18-hour visit to Viet Cong-controlled territory, we were in three villages covering roughly 17 square miles. In that time we observed a “ceremony of peace” attended by several thousand people, walked on trails used by NLF soldiers, and talked with NLF military and political officials. Our visit obviously was too short to reach any conclusions about how the Viet Cong functions, but it provided much raw material.

**Security**—Before we entered NLF territory Tuesday, we watched a battle unfolding several miles from Binh Phu. Villagers had raised NLF flags when the ceasefire began Sunday, and South Vietnamese government troops attacked to gain control of the territory and take down the flags.

In Binh Phu we could hear the battle and see columns of smoke rising above it. We asked Oanh why South Vietnamese troops didn’t attack his village as well.

“Since the ceasefire began,” he said, “when rebel troops pass by here, the people do what they can without actually fighting back to get the soldiers to leave. Maybe in some other areas the Saigon troops have cruel officers using cruel tactics and the people haven’t succeeded in getting them out.”

People in these NLF villages showed no fear of being attacked. “They [Saigon troops] can’t come in here,” one cadre said confidently. “If they tried, they would suffer many casualties. Our army would fight them off.”

During one trek we passed a small cemetery, its gravestones surrounded by tall grass. A sign in front said: “Cemetery of Dead Heroes.” That graveyard is as good a symbol of any of what seemed a total lack of government presence in the area.

Nevertheless, the South Vietnamese government does not recognize Binh Phu as Viet Cong-controlled. According to the most recently declassified hamlet evaluation report, dated Nov. 30, 1972, Binh Phu, for example, is a village with “marginal [government] security operations and law enforcement” and “regular covert activity of VC infrastructure and sporadic overt activity at night.”

The Viet Cong did take precautions against against government intrusions. We passed several places where signs or dead vines indicated the presence of booby traps or mines. If government troops threatened to enter the area, the warnings could be removed.

One official said that people in the NLF area could travel with impunity from one side to the other. That notion was reinforced when a villager escorted us back to the government zone Wednesday morning.

The soldiers we saw were generally young and well-built. They were either barefoot or wore thongs. We met about 10—a significant percentage—who smoke with northern Vietnamese accents.

**Communications**—Oanh, Binh Phu’s village representative, carried a radio at all times, as did other cadres. He said he listened only to Hanoi and NLF broadcasts— never to Saigon stations. We were given a copy in Vietnamese of the Paris ceasefire agreement that we were told had been taken down from a Hanoi broadcast. Though we would have like to take it back to Saigon to compare with other versions, we did not for fear of being caught with it while returning to the government side.

Messengers were used to communicate locally. An official said that only high-level cadres were allowed to send written messages. Ordinary orders were sent verbally so there would be no record of them.

**Terminology**—People in the NLF area referred to the South Vietnamese government as either the “rebel government” or the “Saigon government.” North Vietnam was always called by its formal name, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

People called themselves members of the “Provisional Revolutionary Government,” “National Liberation Front,” or “the Front,” but never “Viet Cong.” Despite its wide usage, “Viet Cong,” which means “Vietnamese Communist,” is considered pejorative.

**Nutrition**— At various times in our 18-hour stay we were given coconut milk, hot sweetened milk, iced tea, hot tea, water cookies, and two full meals. “In liberated areas you must eat plenty so you can run from the shellings,” said a high-ranking official with whom we ate a meal at 3 o’clock in the morning.

Viet Cong fields were planted with miracle rice, which the United States introduced to South Vietnam. Oanh said the farmers did not sell their rice; what they did not eat themselves, they gave to the army.

**Meetings**—The “ceremony of peace” we attended was a variation on meetings held “since the revolution began,” a cadre told us. Before the ceasefire they were held irregularly—two or three one month and then one the next month. But in three days following the ceasefire seven meetings had been held in different parts of Cai Lay district, he said.

The revolutionary songs, dances and skits performed at the ceremony portrayed the war as a struggle of all Southeast Asian people, not just of Vietnamese. One dance, onomatopoeically called “sock-bom-bo,” was in praise of Cambodian women living in South Vietnam who crushed rice to feed the NLF army. Though the dancers were Vietnamese, they wore Cambodian saris.

Another dance saluted Montagnards, the minority people ethnically separate from Vietnamese who live in Vietnam's highlands. Oddly, the dances seemed to be imported from Russia rather than the highlands.

Songs gave credit not only to soldiers but to workers in rear areas. Actors dressed as South Vietnamese soldiers, students, laborers and farmers stood together to sing "Enjoying Peace."

Village and district level cadres sat on the ground to watch the performance with everyone else. They were treated deferentially but did not seem to receive special privileges.

During the meeting people were asked to give money to support the entertainment team. Contributions were few and ranged from 20 cents to two dollars. We were told \$15 was collected. The only currency we saw in use was that of the South Vietnamese government.