

Interview: A Soldier in Vietnam

Fifth Estate Collective

Bruce Whitten, age 26, held the rank of Staff Sergeant in the Air Force until he received a general discharge on May 23, 1965. Whitten was assigned to the First Air Commando group and spent two years in Vietnam.

Q. How do the people feel about the governments that have been set up?

A. They don't even discuss them. It just seems to be a taboo subject. You don't speak to an Englishmen about the Queen in a sexual manner and it's like that here. You'll get your throat cut. I never got anywhere discussing that subject.

Q. Do you hear anything about the National Liberation Front from the people themselves?

A. No, usually the people themselves are the enemy so we usually stay clear of the people because you never know whether he's on your side or on the other side. If you start talking with him, you might not walk away. So you usually stay with your troops.

Q. How do you treat the people when you come into a jungle village on your way back?

A. You usually feel them out. If you come in and they're hostile, then you're hostile in return. More or less self defense. If they were friendly, we usually accepted them, traded U.S. cigarettes for food and so fourth.

Q. If they were hostile, what would transpire? Can you relate an incident where it happened?

A. We went into one little village, we were out of supplies as usual because we kept losing them in the jump. They were kind of Anti-American, you know, "Yankee go home", this bit. And all we wanted was to buy or trade some food—you know, we had some material with us, clothing, shirts, things like that usually brought you good food. If they would not give it up, you just plain couldn't have it. So we declared martial law and we looted the city of the chow that we needed and then we moved on.

Q. Describe some of your missions.

A. Well, most of our missions were concerned with harassment, cutting telegraph wires, telephone lines. When we encountered the enemy, we killed them. This was just the policy. You couldn't take a prisoner back, too much jungle, not enough manpower. I mean, what are you going to do with them, it's just a burden:

Q. How about the wounded?

A. Left them. Let their own people take care of them.

Q. What were some of your experiences in Saigon? How was it?

A. When we got there, we would usually tie a good one on. I think about the best thing I can remember is, we went to a bar in Saigon, a bunch of the troops. We had just come back from a mission the day before: and we were sitting very quietly there, drinking and minding our own business, when this slant-eyed gook comes in, sits up at the bar, pulls a pin out of a grenade, drops it behind the bar and makes it. And we're sitting there like a bunch of idiots. I mean this was very common, very common.

Q. Then what?

A. So we just plumb made it out of there. And I got four pieces of shrapnel in my butt to prove it.

Q. It was pretty edgy, I guess you'd say?

A. All the time. And we were always getting in trouble with cab drivers and I can remember one incident. He didn't like Americans and I didn't like Vietnamese, and he had the idea he wanted to kill Americans. He seemed

obsessed with this idea, so we settled right quick like. It was so bad that when we were on liberty in Saigon, we had to wear our 45's.

Q. How about the women in the villages?

A. How about them? (laugh)

Q. Were there any relations between the GIs and the Vietnamese women?

A. Of course. (laughs) Yeah, we had a ball like that. Shack up in a village overnight. That was usually a pretty dangerous thing, you know, to stay in a village overnight. Because the majority of the villages are, you might say, home bases for Viet Cong guerrillas, they come back at night, and they were pretty unhappy to come in to their wife and find an American GI in bed with her. They have a tendency to want to kill you.

Q. How do the women feel?

A. The women seem to love the GIs. We were always welcomed by the women-well, not always. But the bad part is that the Viet Cong guerrillas had women fighting with them and this also wrecks your morals, because, all right, over here you're brought up ... fighting's one thing, but you never fight a woman. Then you go over there and you gotta kill one. I mean, this just tears your moral principles to hell. All this stuff from your upbringing planted in your mind, and next thing you know, she is going to kill you or you're gonna kill her. It just makes you snowed under. You don't know what to do. Take your life and defend what you're raised to believe, or break all your beliefs and save your life. It's a whole new philosophy thrown at you with a split second to decide.

Q. Now that you've been back and learned a little about the situation, how much information do you think our troops are getting in Vietnam?

A. You mean when I was over there?

Q. Yeah.

A. I thought we were getting very little. It wasn't our business to know, really. You could ask the officers, but you wouldn't get any answers.

Q. Do you think it's a war of aggression?

A. Well, actually, the day we even stepped foot on that place, we were aggressing. It no longer was a civil war when we stepped in. Just like the civil war in this country. What would have happened if France would have come in, stepped in on the south's side? Then you would no longer have a civil war.

Q. Do you see this parallel in Vietnam?

A. Same basic principle. All right, so South Viet Nam beats the north. Well what's in it for the U.S.? There's bound to be a payoff; there has to be.

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