

Motor City Sister in North Vietnam, Part 1

Linda Evans

1969

Editors' Note: Linda Evans, from Motor City SDS, was one of seven Movement people who went to North Vietnam to retrieve three captured American military men. Their original goal of merely receiving the prisoners and escorting them back to the U.S. was changed as the Vietnamese realized that most of them represented segments of the Movement that were not pacifist, but had actively joined in the struggle of the Vietnamese and were fighting in the U.S. to end the war.

Instead of spending all of their time talking to the released prisoners, they travelled around North Vietnam for eighteen days, seeing the country, and talking with the people. What follows is her impressions transcribed by Barbara Healy. A second installment will appear next issue.

While we were in North Vietnam, we took a trip from Hanoi to the 17th parallel, then to the Bang Hai River which is the border between South and North Vietnam. We were the first Americans ever to take this trip.

The thing we were impressed with was the incredible destruction of the entire countryside. We saw evidence of every kind of bomb and weaponry that was used in North Vietnam; bombs that included napalm, phosphorus bombs (which are much worse than napalm, because even water will not stop the burning), pellet bombs, and fragmentation bombs, which are strictly anti-personnel weapons.

During our stay in one village a time bomb went off. We saw evidence of the use of toxic gases and shelling even while we were there. Entire cities had been bombed and destroyed by American aircraft during the air war.

As we passed from Hanoi to the South, the destruction got worse and worse, and instead of being sporadic, it soon became clear that a war of extermination had been waged on the Vietnamese people.

Nowhere from Thanh Hoa, which is about thirty miles south of Hanoi, to the 17th parallel, was a city left standing. There were no hospitals, no schools, no brick buildings of any kind that had been left untouched. All of them were either skeletons, totally bombed out on the inside, with very few walls standing, or else they had been bombed to the ground and were rubble.

We travelled to the cities of Thanh Hoa, Vinh, Dong Hoi, and Vinh Ling, and saw that churches and pagodas had not even been spared. Factories, universities had all been completely devastated. Cities without any kind of military installations or military bases were destroyed.

From Hanoi to the 17th parallel, every bridge had been completely bombed, and of course rebuilt. They stockpile materials for rebuilding in huge shelters along the road, and immediately after a bombing raid, they begin reconstruction. The roads had been a primary target along with the cities, in an effort to destroy the communications between the southern part of North Vietnam and Hanoi, and hopefully to stop any supplies that were being taken to the South.

American bombing raids were extensive against villages made of bamboo huts and against agricultural cooperatives. Whole fields would be bombed, and the bomb craters along the road make the landscape look like the moon.

The devastation of Vietnam is really incredible, but what's much more impressive is the complete involvement of every aspect of the people's lives in the struggle against the Americans, in the struggle to support the South. This is what people's war means.

In Vietnam, everyone contributes to everyone else's part in the struggle. The people in the mountains cut down trees and bring them down to the people working by the rivers, to prepare the bridges. The women have taken over production in the fields and in factories so that men in the army are free to fight. The children consider it their joy and duty to stay in school and study very hard so that when they finish, they will be able to help reconstruct their society. There is a movement among young women to postpone engagement, marriage, and children, so that they will be able to better take part in the struggle.

The young people in Vietnam have taken what they even call a vanguard role in the reconstruction of society. Teams of mostly young women station themselves in various areas of the countryside and repair the bridges and roads. The people of every village help the youth in the repair and reconstruction of portions of the road near the village that they live in.

In desolate areas near the mountains, and in areas of the country that are not near any village, the youth are totally responsible for repairing the bridges and keeping the communications lines open. They have a slogan that says, "Every drop of my blood will be shed before the communications lines will be broken." And they mean it. Teams of older vanguard youth work steadily at keeping the railroads clear. Both teams are involved in a defense of the country by learning to use anti-aircraft weapons, by helping the army units fight, by caring for the wounded, and by bringing ammunition and food to the gun placements.

The children go to school for six years in a primary school, then to secondary school, then high school. When they reach 16, they pick what they want to do.

In wintertime the kids are in Hanoi. They go to their parents' native villages and get schooling there. All the older kids in the teachers' training schools, universities, and polytechnic institutes have evacuated themselves. They've taken all the machinery and equipment up into the mountains to caves. (They have militia units to protect the area around them as well as the decentralized university).

Now all the schools and hospitals in the villages are underground, in tunnels. They all have trench systems that lead to different shelters. The shelters adjoin the hospitals and schools, you can go right from your class into the shelter. When you say underground it means you step way down into the school. The thatched roof sticks up. The thatch is in a peak, then between the peak and the flat ceiling of the school is all rocks, boards and dirt to protect the kids inside from the pellet bombs, and shelling. All the cattle barns are underground, with adjoining shelter for the collectively owned cattle.

Every family in North Vietnam has about three shelters, one that's close to the household compound, one that's a bit farther away, and one that's quite far away. They're all connected by trenches, so that when there's a bombing raid, close to the house, they can escape. During the bombing raids, special teams go into action. The fire brigade puts out fires. The guidance team spots where the bombs are falling, and tells people where to go by knocking on the shelter door with a special code. The first aid team gives first aid. The rescue team digs people out when the shelter collapses. The village militia is out in the fields in the anti-aircraft placements, shooting at the airplanes all the time.

The army has trained the old men's militia. They're all over sixty years old, and the commander of the one we visited was 67. They were the first ones ever to shoot down an American aircraft at night.

They shot off their anti-aircraft guns to show us how loud they are. You see films of their shooting down planes and the joy that's in their eyes when they shoot down a plane.

The highest honor of a village is how many planes they shoot down. That's the first thing they tell you, before they talk about how much they have been bombed. They have a competition, a socialist competition called emulation. They don't compete for material benefits, but for the honor of having taken part in the struggle.

When they get an award, either a medal or a flag, they hang it in the village "House of Tradition." The House of Tradition has relics of air-craft that were shot down. They have statistics which show exactly why they call it the House of Traditional Victory. It gives a lot of information about the fight against the French, because that's still very close to them. And also about the continuing struggle against the Americans. They talk about how many of their people are in the South.

The people are victorious because before the war, twenty or thirty percent of the cooperatives met their quota of five tons of rice per hectare. About eighty-five or ninety percent of the cooperatives have now met or are over that quota. And this is in the middle of bombing.

We visited one cooperative that had 60 hectares of bomb craters in the middle of its fields. So what they do with the bomb craters is, they fill them up with water for irrigation. They've transformed them into fish breeding ponds. They plant banana trees, casava roots, and vegetables in them. They build special trellises around them for squash. The best squash in the country is grown in the bomb craters because of the nitrate in the soil. The ingenuity of the people is just incredible.

Continued next issue.



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