

THE DAY LỘC TIÊN WAS PACIFIED

Daniel Ellsberg

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PREFACE

From December 1966 until I left Vietnam (with hepatitis) in June 1967, I was Special Assistant to Deputy Ambassador William Porter in Saigon, in his capacity as head of all U.S. civil field operations in Vietnam (OCO: Office of Civil Operations). My job was primarily to make field evaluations of progress and programs for Porter personally, looking in particular at the interaction between military and civil operations.

One morning in December I was talking to Wade Latham, Director of Operations of OCO, who was leaving that afternoon for briefings in Washington, encouraging him to be very frank and realistic in his description before Congress and elsewhere of the prospects (in my opinion, very limited) for pacification in the coming year. I emphasized the need for a minimal, prior level of security from the VC if pacification work were to be effective: and the fact that most areas where pacification work was being attempted did not now have even this minimally adequate security from VC attack, harassment or penetration.

The ultimate aim of RD work was to evoke public participation with the government in efforts of self-protection, to raise the level of security further and make it lasting, without the continual dense presence of U.S. or ARVN regulars. Even in areas of relative security -- usually based on local saturation with friendly regular forces -- there had been little success in inducing people to make this commitment to the GVN or to resisting the VC: because the GVN did not attract their support (and RD Cadre performance rarely inspired a change in their attitudes) and because security from VC retaliation was only relative and looked temporary to most people. But in the "contested" areas where Cadre tended to be assigned, the VC presence was often so obtrusive that it was quite hopeless to persuade people to risk their necks, rather than to cooperate with both sides (depending on which side was represented at the moment by "the man with the gun:" generally, away from outposts and main roads, the VC).

When I finished the story, Lathram urged me to write down just what I had told him, fast, so he could take it to Washington and show it around to illustrate concretely why progress in pacification was slow (or often, non-existent). In the next couple of hours, using notes I had made at the time, I wrote as fast as I could, and managed to hand the memo that follows (as it appears) to Lathram at the airport. Which is by way of explanation how a memo as anecdotal and personal as this came to be written in the Deputy Ambassador's office. (There were those in Washington who needed an explanation, in face of their "Why are you doing this?" or "Whose side are you on?" reactions to its substance and tone. But I should also mention that I never got any criticism from my superiors in Saigon or Washington for writing or circulating -- as I did to old friends -- a memo that was not exactly supportive of official optimism.)

Readers not familiar with the Revolutionary Development concept may need some terms explained, though they are becoming fairly familiar in the newspapers. "Revolutionary Development" (RD) is an American name for what the French call "pacification" and the Vietnamese call "Rural Construction:" coined by White House aides at Honolulu, because it sounded less French and more forward-looking. An RD Cadre team is a 59-man group specially trained to carry out various organizational activities in a hamlet to fulfill the six criteria (described in the memo) of a "pacified" or "secured" hamlet: an achievement symbolized on the RD maps in district and province offices by marking the hamlet (or road, or area) blue, as distinct from red -- "VC-controlled" -- or white, yellow or green -- various colors for "contested." (I have described the concept and strategy of RD in detail, with a critique, elsewhere.) PF are Popular Force soldiers, local, lightly trained and equipped militia operating in squads and platoons at village level; RF are Regional Force, better trained and equipped commanded at province level and operating in a district, generally in companies; ARVN are the regular units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, organized in divisions.

A postscript: On a visit a few weeks later, I checked the quotes in this piece with the deputy district advisor who had accompanied me; his memory confirmed my notes. He told me that the new hamlet chief was not sleeping in the hamlet (a sure sign -- though a common occurrence -- of security inadequate for the achievement of any of the purposes of RD).

The district advisor said that Minister of RD Thang had put heavy pressure on the district chief to come up with his quota of completed hamlets by the end of the year. The district chief wanted to declare three more hamlets pacified ("blue") within two weeks, by running RD Cadre through them fast (mainly taking a census). Of these, one wasn't in bad shape, one was contested, and one -- a hamlet in the (VC) village of Ph^oúc Lam mentioned in the story -- was simply VC-controlled. "I told him I had had it," the advisor said. "He could tell Thang whatever he wanted, but I wasn't going to go along with it, with those last two hamlets." He refused to certify them; in the end, I believe, ceremonies were held for the first two but not the last. I don't know what has become of them since then: or of Lộc Tiên.

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Daniel Ellsberg*

The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California

On Friday morning, 9 December 1966, three neighboring hamlets in Cấn Giuộc District of Long An Province were being formally declared "pacified," joining the fifteen other "secure" hamlets of the 183 hamlets in the district. Revolutionary Development Cadre teams had been working in the three hamlets for about ten weeks, and although the U.S. district advisors were dubious that anything very fundamental had been accomplished or that the area could reasonably be called "secure," the District Chief was satisfied that the six-point pacification criteria had been met and the cadre could move on.

"They're anxious to finish up their 1966 program so they can get started on the 1967 hamlets," the major who was the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) district advisor said. There was to be a formal ceremony at the main hamlet, Lộc Tiên II, to celebrate the acceptance of the hamlets into the "secure" category, with all the district and village officials and the MACV and USAID district advisors taking part. I went along with an interpreter and the assistant MACV advisor, a captain, to talk to some of the villagers and cadre.

At 0820 it was still raining as we got into jeeps in the district headquarters compound. An old woman was keening loudly in a corner of the courtyard, where some newly painted coffins rested on sawhorses in a shed. She was a relative of one of the Regional Force

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(RF) soldiers killed in an ambush the morning before. Other women had chanted and cried, standing around the coffins in the light of candles, through most of the night. In the candlelight -- and now, on a dark morning -- the colors of the wooden boxes were very gay; orange with painted flowers. There were six of them.

The ambush had taken place on the main road from Saigon, a few kilometers south of the district headquarters. A Regional Force platoon, on a mission to clear some dirt roadblocks the VC had put up the night before, walked past a Popular Force outpost without checking in at it -- they assumed the PF had already cleared the road ahead -- and 200 meters further on at 0900 on a bright morning they were hit by a VC company. "I missed that one by ten minutes," the district advisor said. "I was on my way by jeep -- about ten minutes away -- to visit the schoolhouse below the PF outpost. That's where the roadblocks were, at the schoolhouse, and that's where the ambush was. I heard the firing and stopped at the outpost.

The old woman was rocking on her heels on the muddy ground, and she gestured rhythmically with one hand as if, in her wailing, she were lecturing to the little girl facing her. But the little girl was looking past her expressionlessly, once in a while turning her eyes to the woman, whose voice rose and fell and sobbed without stopping. The assistant advisor said: "I've been trying to get the district chief to move the mortuary out of this courtyard. I think it's depressing to the troops that sleep here. And this has been happening too much."

After a while of sitting in the jeep I asked what we were waiting for. "After we came out, the district chief got word that the force he sent out to clear the area between here and the hamlets wasn't through yet" I was told.

"You mean you need a special clearing operation to get to these pacified hamlets?"

"Oh, I doubt if we'll have any trouble today," the district advisor said. "With all the troops they'll have in that village

during the ceremony, with all the officials there, I'm only taking a pistol." His assistant, in the other jeep, shrugged and tapped his M-16. I got out of the jeep and came back with a weapon. About this time the sun came out and a radioman announced that the clearing operation was finished. The district chief and his party emerged from his office, we all shook hands, and the convoy set out.

The three hamlets were a few kilometers northwest of the district town, along red dirt roads. By the time we got there it was very hot. The entrance to the main hamlet was marked by a high wooden arch over the road with the name of the hamlet -- Ấp Lộc Tiên II -- neatly painted across the top: this was one of the accomplishments of the RD cadre. [It fell in the category of "self-help and development projects" -- though the people were supposed to do them themselves (along with any fortifications) to give them a sense of commitment -- which was fourth of the six criteria for a pacified hamlet.] "Their other big contribution was to build the hamlet 'fortifications,'" the major said. "See that berm over there?" He pointed to an earth embankment about three feet high, stretching out from the road and curling around a clump of bamboo in the distance.

"What good is that?"

"Useless. They worked hard on it, I'll say that. The villagers couldn't care less. They know it's ridiculous. It's over a thousand meters long: a real Chinese Wall. It would take a battalion to man it, for it to mean anything, and what they've got is twelve PF. But it helps meet one of the six-point criteria." (The first one: area cleared of VC, and local defenses set up.)

"As a matter of fact, it's been more of a help to the VC," the assistant advisor added. "The Claymore mine they set off last week, one that killed five RD Cadre, they set up on top of that berm -- it's just the right height -- next to the road pointing down toward the hamlet, with the wires trailing outside. The Cadre were just leaving the hamlet, coming up to that sign."

"Are you saying that five Cadre were killed here last week?"
I asked.

"They weren't the only ones. They've had six Claymores here in the last couple of months, four detonations. But the worst thing was last week the VC came into the other two hamlets, just down the road from this one, and kidnapped the two hamlet chiefs that had just been elected; and their families." (Election of hamlet officials is the sixth "pacification criterion.")

How could they be holding the ceremony this week, then?

"Oh, the Cadre held another election quick, and the assistant hamlet chiefs were elected chief."

"Aren't they afraid?"

"Don't worry, they won't be sleeping here at night; they'll be in the district town."

The convoy had stopped at a cluster of building, decorated for the day with banners and slogans. There were a lot of soldiers of different types about; the district advisor pointed out there were even some troops from the 46th Regiment on duty. On one side of the road, classrooms filled with children surrounded a nest courtyard. The ceremony was being held across the road in a garden so filled with flowers and vines that the faces of the officials were hidden when they sat down on the porch. In a corner next to the porch stood the village notables, flanked by a double row of little girls, sitting up straight in white so-dais. They were all pretty, all with long black hair combed smooth down their backs. The district chief and the MACV and USAID advisors took their places under the banners and the vines, and a Cadre leader in black pajamas stepped up to a microphone. The assistant advisor and I watched from across the street, and the little girls stole side glances at us as the Cadre leader began the morning's speeches; the district policeman saw this and smiled. It was a cheerful occasion.

The interpreter translated for us for a few sentences -- "When we came to this hamlet ten weeks ago, there were six VC agents in the hamlet infrastructure...", the speaker was saying (ridding the hamlet of VC "infrastructure" -- agents, informers, political organization --

is third among the pacification criteria). Then we turned back down the road to talk to some of the villagers. First, we visited the new outpost, My Loc, just in back to one side, of the house where the ceremony was being held.

"Don't judge other outposts around here by this one," the MACV captain said. "This is one of the best in Vietnam." It was built as the base for an RF company. We had to work our way through an elaborate maze of barbed wire to reach the moat surrounding the thick mud walls. Inside, the bunkers were covered not only with the usual sandbags but with concrete. Narrow slits in the bunker walls looked out over cleared fields of fire; I looked through one to see the house where the pacification ceremony was going on, the black hair against white silk showing through gaps in the vine leaves. In the center of the little fort was a heavy cement communications bunker; next to it, the familiar wooden arrow, studded with cans of kerosene-soaked sand, pivoted horizontally to point out the enemy to planes during a night attack. The sergeant who had left his hammock to show us around was proud of the post, which was just finished and which Premier Ky had visited ten days earlier. He said it would take more than one battalion of VC, maybe two, to overrun it.

"They're safe enough in here," the captain said. "I think they could hold out in here against 500 men. Of course, whether they make the people around here feel much safer depends on how much the RFs move around outside the barbed wire. Too many posts like this, the VC could walk into the other end of the hamlet whenever they felt like it." Apparently, the presence of the RFs had not deterred the VC from the dual kidnapping of the week before, a few hundred meters down the road.

The ruins of the old post that this had been built to replace lay just across the road, again in close sight of the ceremony. It had been manned by PFs. One night last spring the VC had overrun it, and the reaction force the next morning -- our interpreter had been part of it -- had found the PFs inside beheaded, lying in a row, with their dependents, wives and children, lying by the opposite wall where

they had been machine-gunned. That had happened in this hamlet just nine months before. It would be much harder to destroy this new fort, which had begun construction soon after; but I wondered, looking at the grass-covered ruins of the old PF post (the interpreter warned me not to step inside; it had been mined) how long it really took before the local people unlearned lessons like that.

The houses of the hamlet were widely spaced; the first one we came to was about fifty yards down the road. We passed through a garden, and said good day to a middle-aged woman on the porch, surrounded by children; she was joined by her husband, about 45, wearing shorts. As we asked questions, an old woman peered out at us, through a door, from the darkness of what seemed a very large room.

I asked, through the interpreter, what the RD Cadre had done for them. "They came one afternoon, drank tea, and took a census, the interpreter translated. Had the Cadre ever talked politics, or asked about grievances? "No." Was that all the Cadre had done? "They formed everyone into groupings, organizations." Which organization did the husband belong to? "The men's organization." ("Organizing the people" by interest-groupings, and by age and sex, for purposes of self-defense, was the fifth task the Cadre must fulfill to meet the six-point criteria for a "pacified" hamlet.) What was the purpose of that organization. "When the Cadre came to drink tea, they just told him, 'You are in the men's organization.' He doesn't know what the purpose of it is."

Did the Cadre stay at night in the village? "No. They came in the morning. About five o'clock he would see them wandering back, along the road; he doesn't know where they went." Had VC visited the village in the past year? "Often." Did he think they still would, with the RF post so near? "Perhaps not. But they had come into the neighboring hamlets last week and taken off the hamlet chiefs."

Did he think the new hamlet chief would sleep in the hamlet at night? "Not now; now he sleeps in the district town. But that is because he is not yet confirmed by the Province Chief. When he is

confirmed by the Province Chief he will sleep in the hamlet." Why so? "After he is confirmed by the Province Chief, if he is killed or kidnapped by the VC his family will get death benefits. But not now."

Reflecting on that, we moved on to two houses next to each other, another fifty yards down the road. In the first, we asked an older man and a very old woman many of the same questions, and got the same answers. No, the Cadre had never slept in their house at night; the Cadre went away at night, they didn't know where. The Cadre had been polite, the one afternoon they had called. They were taking census, and they had left a metal doorsign, "22/7" in red letters on a yellow background, which was up on the porch. ("Taking census is what Cadre like to do best," I had been told by advisors in different parts of Vietnam; "in fact," the comment usually ran, "that's about all they do do. That and some fortifications." Interrogation -- supposed to identify grievances and aspirations, along with census data -- is the second of the six pacification criteria.)

Had ARVN soldiers ever taken food, chickens or ducks, without paying for it? "They used to do that, when there was only a PF squad in the hamlet. But now that the RF outpost was there, they don't think the ARVN soldiers will do that any more."

Finally, the captain suggested we visit some houses several hundred meters off the road. As we started along the embankment between two flooded rice paddies, the convoy passed by down the road, leaving the hamlet. People waved at us from the jeeps. The ceremony was over; now Ấp Lộc Tiên II and the other two hamlets would be colored blue on district and province pacification charts: little patches of blue about the size of a grease-pencil stub, because red areas ("VC-controlled") pressed close on either side of the road. "We won't go too close to that line of trees," the captain said, pointing to a bamboo thicket about five hundred yards off. "That's all deep red, beyond that."

As we walked in file, the river chest-high on either side, a distant shot rang out now and then. I had heard the first ones back in the outpost: some far, some fairly close. "Soldiers shooting birds," the captain said. "Or checking their weapons. Or having fun. You can't stop them. Sometimes you hear one answering another: dut, dut...dut. We call it a commo check." Now artillery was firing sporadically, far off. The sound joined birdcalls, wind in the rice, bamboo clicking, low thrumming of a helicopter moving slowly a mile off: Delta sounds on a quiet, hot day.

The captain told me more about the ambush the day before. For three nights, the VC had put up dirt roadblocks on roads in that area: no mines, none were covered by snipers, no harassing of the clearing parties. That was all it took to lull the RFs; that was why they hadn't checked with the PF outpost about the road ahead, or put out a point, the morning of the 8th. That fourth morning, the VC waiting in the grass had caught them relaxed and unalert. Now, for a while, they would be more cautious.

Two hundred meters off the road, a thick grove of bamboo, palms, fruit trees and bushes rose among the rice fields. It looked wild and wholly dense, but through a gap in the vines one could see water, a moatlike fish pond surrounding a bare, clean yard and a shaded hut. "People think there's no cover in the Delta," the captain remarked. "There's plenty of cover. We couldn't be seen from the air right now; there could be a company in here. And look around." Even before the forest began, the paddies were broken by treelines along canals and other thickets as dense as this one. Standing in the shaded path we talked to an old man wearing shorts and shower sandals. He was dignified, his face deeply lined and handsome; his good-looking twelve-year-old son stood by smiling at us, very interested in my camera.

The Cadre had visited his house once, to fill out his family book and take the census. They did not stay in the area at night, because it was not safe for them. VC came every now and then; sometimes they spent the night. Government troops also came once in a while. Some of them paid for food, some took without paying. The

ones who paid did not pay much; but that was all right, he didn't mind. It was the war.

No one from the Government had ever asked him his opinions, he said, but he did not have any opinions about politics; he was an old man, just tending his rice fields, and neither side bothered him very much. The VC collected taxes at harvest time (he also paid rent to a landlord), but they didn't talk politics. The RD Cadre, like the VC, were polite. In one way they were better than the strategic hamlet cadre, because then, three years ago, the cadre had made the people build the fortifications, but the RD Cadre built the wall around the hamlet themselves. (They were not supposed to do this. The point of the Revolutionary Development process -- the aim of RD Cadre activities -- was to encourage the people to involve themselves in their own self-protection, on the Government side. The real point of fence-building -- supposedly, by the people -- was to commit them, by their voluntary actions, to the Government. But it was late in the war really to achieve this very often. The people had been through it too many times.)

The captain started to ask the old man some detailed questions about the VC village two kilometers to the north, and I walked around the thicket to see if anyone else were at home. The fish pond moat surrounded the clearing inside without a bridge that I could see; at one point I looked through the thick, wall-like vine leaves enclosing the moat to see a young woman squatting across from me, scrubbing clothes in the pond. She looked up and smiled. The yard behind her was swept spotless, if dried mud can be called that: dirt with no dust on it.

The captain caught up with me, with the interpreter, and we set off along another embankment. "I wouldn't put too much stock in what that man had to say," the captain said.

"Why not?"

"I asked him what he did when the VC squads came near his house. Who did he tell? He said he didn't do anything; he didn't tell anyone.

I asked him how he thought the war would ever be over, how would there ever be security so that his son could grow up in peace, if everyone acted like that: if he wouldn't even tell the district officials when the VC came through. He said he was an old man. The Government soldiers couldn't protect him -- the post was far away -- and the VC would make trouble for him if he talked to the Government. It wouldn't do any good for anyone, and he didn't want to get into trouble. He said the war had gone on for a long time, and I told him it would go on for a lot longer when people like him refused to take any part in it." The captain was very irritated. I could see the old man's point of view -- we were pretty far away from the road now -- but I didn't argue with the captain.

I wanted to see one more household, so we headed for another clump of bamboo a hundred yards further from the road: "about as far as we ought to go," according to the captain. Again, the house inside was hidden from us till we penetrated the screen of bamboo, brush, and palm trees; then we were in a large dirt courtyard, surrounded by flowers in neat rows and lined on two sides by large ceramic flowerpots. I reflected again on how clean it was possible for a dirt yard to look: in contrast to the rural slums of ^{Can Giuoc}, the district town a few kilometers away, where refuse littered the mud in the yards and ragged holes held stale water and sewage.

A man and his wife, each looking about 55 but perhaps much older, greeted us warmly. After a few questions, they invited us all inside their house, where they had been having tea. The wife brought out new cups; her husband disappeared in back, then came out with a plate of store cookies. We each took one with our tea, and they did, too, then refilled the plate. They seemed pleased to have company. A little later the host -- who had a round, witty face, and who darted, like his eyes, when he moved -- brought out a package wrapped in pink tissue paper and began to unwrap it. I protested, but he spoke to the interpreter and went on unwrapping what seemed to be halvah, which he added to the plate. The interpreter explained, "He says he wants to have some, too," which seemed to be true, so we relaxed.

The house looked prosperous. Dirt floor, neat as the yard outside; heavy, carved furniture, brass lamps, screens, religious scrolls and pictures: very Victorian. The old man listened carefully to our questions and gave long answers, gesturing with his eyes and hands; usually his wife, sitting over on the smooth wooden bed, joined in to add to the answers, sometimes intensely.

We started with some of the same questions, but as the captain had predicted, moving off the road three hundred yards gave a twist to some of the answers. Yes, the Cadre had come by, once. They had taken a census, and left a doorsign. The man suddenly left the table, got a ladder and climbed up to a loft over the bed; he poked around under some tiles for a while, then came down brandishing a yellow sign with red numbers on it. When we nodded, he replaced it in the loft, climbed back and sat down at his tea, waiting for our next question.

After a pause, I asked: "Why isn't it on his door?"

The interpreter listened to his answer and said: "Last week many VC came to the house next to this and took down the doorsigns and tore up the family books. They didn't come to this house, but he thought he had better hide what the Cadre gave him, to keep it safe."

We sat and looked at each other for a while, drinking our tea.

The interpreter was very good. He put his questions in a gentle voice and listened carefully; the people seemed to trust him. He had lived in this area a long time. The MACV advisors respected him very much; they thought he could be a good district chief.

The captain asked the husband what he knew of Ph^ốúc L^âm, the VC village two kilometers to the south. "The people in Ph^ốúc L^âm are much less happy than the people in L^ộc Ti^ên." Why was that? "Because they get much artillery; they cannot live a peaceful life." The same was true, he said, of the VC village two kilometers to the north.

The captain spread out his map and showed me the two villages, one on either side of L^ộc Ti^ên II. "You see how crazy it all is,"

he said; "they talk about this village being secured, while right up there, two kilometers away, there's a VC base area that ARVN won't go near. When ARVN gets close to it they start hitting mines and heavy harassing; they just don't go into it. But the VC come out. And they live there; and the same down below here." The villages were frequently hit by artillery -- "though nobody will go in to find out what's happened" -- but the district chief was reluctant to use air strikes within the heavily-populated district.

Were they bothered by artillery near this house? "Not now," the man said cheerfully. "Last year, when there were only PF's in the outpost, the VC came often and there would be much artillery; but now that there was an RF outpost, he did not expect there to be shelling, even if the VC did probe, unless they attacked the post." I recalled the earlier comment, that the presence of the RF's meant that ARVN was less likely to steal poultry from the hamlet, and began to see an ironic meaning to the (welcome) "security" that a permanent Government presence in the hamlet brought to the villagers.

While he spoke of artillery, the shelling we had heard earlier had grown much louder, closer. Light was reflected off the glass of a picture frame behind the man's head, holding a red sheet of paper with Chinese characters on it; a sudden roll of artillery shimmered the light on the glass like the surface of a pond. "That may be Phôúc Lâm they're shelling right now," the captain said; "though it sounds closer."

"I am a Cao Dai," the man said. He gestured toward the religious ornaments around the room. "I pray every day for peace."

When did he think the war would end?

"I am an old man," he told the interpreter. "I have only a few years left. The war will not end while I am alive."

Who did he think would win?

He pointed up to the sky and answered briefly. "He says Heaven will decide," the interpreter said. "He does not know who will win."

Which, then, would he like to see win? There were only two answers he could give us, I was thinking: he was indifferent; or he wanted the GVN to win. "He does not care which side wins; he would like the war to be over."

Would it make a difference to him if the VC won, I asked. How does he think his life would be different if the VC should win?

"He does not know. The VC who come to collect his taxes do not talk politics; so he really does not know what they would do or what they would be like if they were the Government."

How does he think the long war started? Who began it?

"People in cities have magazines and newspapers, and listen to speeches; they know about things like that. But people who live in the hamlets do not have a chance to learn about such things. He does not know how it started."

On the subject of taxes, he said that his paddies yielded 50 gia (one gia = 20 kilos, a hectare - 2.5 acres) per hectare; of this, the landlord took 20 gia and the VC took 5.

Did either the GVN or the VC troops do any bad things in this area? "Both Government troops and VC troops always behaved correctly." The Government troops did not always pay when they needed food, but that was to be expected.

The glass in the picture frame shimmered violently; but this time it was from a burst of automatic weapon fire that came from only 200 yards off. The captain started up, took his weapon and went outside with the interpreter. The old man and woman paid no attention; they didn't blink as they drank their tea, to the small arms any more than the shelling. I thought: they have heard this summer thunder, in bright daylight, for a long time. The captain and interpreter came back and sat down again; but the captain said he thought we should be going soon.

We asked a few more questions, then got up to go, thanking them for their tea. The man spoke, smiling, to the interpreter, who turned

to me and said: "Now, before you go, he would like to ask you one question."

As he said this, the automatic weapon opened up again, a long burst, this time from no more than 100 yards away. The captain went outside. "What is his question?" I asked. The man spoke to the interpreter.

"He says: You are Americans. He would like to ask you, in your opinion, when will the war end?"

I glanced out the door; the captain was looking watchful, but relaxed. I turned back to the old man, who watched my face intently, with a polite smile, while I chose my words for the interpreter. "Tell him," I said carefully, "that I am glad that he has prayed to Heaven for peace. Say that I think that he is a virtuous man; therefore, I believe the war will end while he is alive."

As the interpreter translated this, the captain stepped inside the doorway and said, calmly, that he thought we should be moving along. I picked up my weapon, but the old man held out his hand on my arm and stopped me for a moment, continuing his question.

"He says that he is a Cao Dai, and though he has prayed for years for peace, peace has not come. However, he knows some Catholics; and they believe that peace will come in the 2000th year. In the Catholic calendar, this is the year 1966. So he thinks that perhaps peace will come in the year 2000. What do you think?"

"Tell him I hope it will come much sooner than that," I said, backing out the door as a third burst sounded, about as far away as the last. The interpreter finished my answer, then came out, as our hosts waved goodbye, and walked quickly past me to the captain; they spoke briefly, and the interpreter moved out around a corner of the thicket.

"With that automatic weapon, it could be a squad," the captain said softly. "Three or four, anyway. I don't know what they're firing at, probably harassing the hamlet because of the ceremony.

We can't very well go back the way we came, now; too open. I think we'd better try to get them before they get us. OK?" He asked me to cover him; he pulled back the bolt on his submachine gun and cocked it; I did the same. As we moved through the bushes around the yard, I glanced back. Our hosts were standing in the doorway, watching; when they saw me looking, they waved again.

On the other side of the thicket, the captain moved in a crouch along a paddy embankment toward a second grove, in the direction of the shorts. It was now very quiet, except for the artillery. When he reached the grove he squatted next to a palm and gestured to me; I moved over to him, bending below the level of the tall rice, trying to remember what I had learned a long time ago about moving quietly. As I came up, he slid into a stream of water, moved across it, climbed up on the bank and disappeared into thick brush. After a moment I followed, feeling the cool water move up my boots, my pants, to my crotch as my boots hit mud at the bottom. Trying not to splash, but unable to avoid the sucking sound as my boots pulled out of the mud at each step, I crossed the stream and crawled up. The captain had moved next to a hut, apparently deserted. As he peered around the far corner, there was a short burst; very loud, though it did not have the sharp crack of bullets aimed directly at us. The captain, however, had pulled back quickly from the edge of the hut, and we moved around the other side and tried to make out movement in the undergrowth. He saw nothing.

In the next twenty minutes, we crossed another stream and a pond, continuing to move around the outer edge of the thicket. The cold water was no longer a shock. The captain was concerned about finding the interpreter. Finally, he said, "If there is a squad, with that weapon, we're not well off here, with just two of us. We'd better try to find Wa. Anyway, I don't think they're shooting at us." There had not been any firing since we left the last hut. On the other side of one more canal we found Wa, who had been circling in the other direction. He said he couldn't tell what the firing was. We walked back along an embankment, keeping a watch to our rear. When

we reached the road, we walked back to the jeep. Our clothes were drying fast in the sun, except for our socks.

I wanted to talk to the hamlet chief before we left, but a villager standing next to our jeep said that he had gone back to the district town with the convoy after the ceremony.

It was now almost noon. As we drove out of the hamlet, past the berm the Cadre had built, we saw several Cadre in a hut next to the entrance arch. I had the driver stop, and they came over to us; one turned out to be the leader of the RD Cadre Group. He had bushy hair and looked about fourteen, but was probably about 18 or 20.

I asked if the Cadre had slept in the hamlets while they were working there. "Yes," the interpreter translated, but smiled slightly at me. Where had they been when the two hamlet chiefs were kidnapped? The answer was: the Cadre groups were "mobile" and they had warned the hamlet chiefs to move with them, but the chiefs were foolish and stayed in their homes.

Did the leader think that the new hamlet chiefs would be safe enough to stay in their hamlets at night? The Cadre leader looked back at the RF outpost as he answered.

"He says that if the troops in the outpost are active and operate at nighttime, the hamlets will be safe enough and the chiefs will sleep in the hamlet.

An "if" answer to a direct question -- like replies beginning, "The plan is," or "It has been ordered, or agreed, that ..." -- was familiar to me after 18 months in Vietnam. The antidote, sometimes, was another question. Did the Cadre leader believe that the troops in the outpost would be active enough, and operate at night? The interpreter looked doubtful about putting the question; "These men are RD Cadre, they are not military..." Ask him anyway, I said, I only wanted his opinion. Did he believe...? The interpreter asked him.

"No."

Then, in his opinion, would it be safe enough, and would the hamlet chiefs stay at night?

"No."

But at this point, the Cadre leader bent over the jeep and began talking quietly and seriously to the interpreter. He talked for a long time; he suddenly seemed much older. At last the interpreter translated, while the Cadre leader looked down the road with a somber expression.

"He says there is no security here. This hamlet is too insecure to be pacified. Twelve PF's are not enough to protect the people. If ARVN troops would come, and stay here, and operate at night, there would be a chance; but when ARVN comes at all, the units leave at four, five o'clock, and at night the VC come. The RF outpost will not make much difference to the people, because the RF's will stay inside their post at night. The Cadre were not here long enough to accomplish anything; but even if they had been here much longer, they could not have changed the people's attitudes, because the people are afraid. The six-point criteria have been met, but only on paper."

How about eliminating the VC infrastructure, I asked. How had that criterion been met? "One member of the infrastructure was shot," one of the Cadre by the jeep answered. "There were six. The other five moved out of the hamlet while the Cadre were there; they will come back now that the Cadre are leaving.

"Anyway," the leader added, "there are other people still in the hamlet who would inform to the VC when they come through. There are many people in the hamlet who really sympathize with the Government: but they are afraid to identify themselves to the Cadre. They are afraid to say anything good about the Government. And that is still true, after ten weeks' work."

After a pause, I asked the interpreter to thank the leader for being so frank with us. We saw that he was sincere, and that he had done what he could.

"Ten weeks is not enough to do anything, in an area like this," the leader repeated. "But it doesn't make any difference; ten months would not have been enough, either. We worked hard, and we did the best we could; but the people do not really want to talk to us because the VC are all around and they are afraid. Maybe somewhere else we can do more. Or here, when things are better."

We offered the group a lift into town, and they all piled into the jeep. As we moved out toward Cấn Giuộc, and dry socks, I asked the interpreter to ask the Cadre if they knew what the firing had been about. Could they hear it?

One answered, and the interpreter said: "He heard some firing. He thinks perhaps it was some other Cadre." I looked at the captain, who said: "Could be. I doubt it, that far off the road. But who knows?"

"Ask them what the Cadre would have been firing about," I said to the interpreter. Another Cadre, hanging on behind me, gave an answer.

"He says they may have been shooting to celebrate, because they had finished their work here, and the hamlets were pacified."