



Jim Ray

## 1ST TANKS CIVIC ACTION OFFICER PHONG BAC HAMLET - 1967

After my tour as Platoon Commander 2d Platoon Charlie Company, my last five months in country were spent as the S-5 Civic Action Officer for the 1st Tank Battalion. Battalion Headquarters was located just across the road from the hamlet of Phong Bac which was a rural suburb of Da Nang. The Command Post (CP) was in an area considered secure during the day but not at night. The camp was comfortable since it was “near the rear with the gear.” That meant hot food, a warm bed, and a Vietnamese “house mouse” Le Thi Chuan to take care of my hut, clothing, etc. While none of us needed someone to take care of us, and it came out of our own pockets, it was just another effort to integrate ourselves as closely with the civilian population as possible. There was still danger to be sure, from mortar attacks and from not being careful cruising through the surrounding hamlets with the natives. But it was nothing like what I had just come from.

Soon after reporting into the battalion headquarters, I found myself on the way to headquarters Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon to attend a Civic Action and Psychological Warfare school. Saigon, once the “Pearl of the Orient” is now the communist city of Ho Chi Minh. This was a pleasant interlude, which gave me an opportunity to see a lot more of the countryside, as well as tour the capital and visit places that appeared regularly in the press. We flew there in a C-130 that made stops at Pleiku, and Cam Ranh Bay before landing at Tan Son Nhut airport northwest of Saigon.

Like all large Vietnamese cities, much of it had been built during the French colonial period and reflected that architectural style. Upon checking in, I had to surrender my pistol because Saigon was considered secure. While there were no active nightly firefights, I felt safer out in the countryside because I was armed and had my men around me. In Saigon, I was unarmed and was staying by myself in a room at the Catinet Hotel on Duong Tu Do Street. This was one of the main streets which started on the river front and ran northwest to the Saigon Basilica. It was obvious to me the VC could be anywhere in Saigon they wanted to be because there was little visible military and police protection. During the Tet offensive the next year, this would prove to be true as they initially roamed the city at will and it would have been a bad time to have been in that little hotel room with or without my pistol.

I took most of my meals at the Continental Palace Hotel, which was also on Tu Do street and was where the diplomats and press corps stayed. I traveled on foot around the city and captured pictures of all of the sights that appeared safe to visit. The hotels were French in style and were complete with “water closets” and ancient open cage elevators which slowly and noisily moved its passengers from floor to floor. The principal mode of transportation was bicycles and motorcycles and there were literally thousands of them.

The class on psychological warfare was interesting and provided me with some of the basic principles

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regarding what my role was to be as a Civil Affairs Officer interacting with the village chiefs and Vietnamese military officers. The information passed out in the class, my observations of Saigon, my combat experience in the field, and the state of our divided nation left me somewhat pessimistic about our chances at "nation building."



The most pleasant experience about leaving Saigon was getting my pistol back and rejoining armed American military forces. We made two stops on our return trip to Da Nang. The first was at Nha Trang, a well-tended resort town where I saw a beautiful 40 foot high snow white marble statue of Buddha on a mountaintop. The second was at Quang Ngai, which was the provincial capital where Chu Lai was located.

My new job which was to be the S-5 Civic Action Officer and I would report directly to the Battalion Commander who was LtCol Richard M. Taylor. Taylor was a conventional Marine officer and gentleman in every respect who had commanded C Company, 1st Tanks when the 1st Marine Division had fought its way out of the Chosin Reservoir in Korea. My job was to function as the Civil Affairs Officer representing the battalion commander to Le An, the hamlet chief of Phong Bac. Phong Bac was a fishing and farming hamlet in a strategic location south of Da Nang where a major road crossed over the Song Cau Do river which had one of the few remaining intact bridges supporting military and civilian traffic moving south toward Hoi An and Dai Loc.

This particular hamlet had been the responsibility of the 3rd Tank Battalion under LtCol William Corson who had a unique background with several tours of duty in Asia and spoke several languages. He had stepped down from command of 3rd Tanks in February 1967 to run the Combined Action Program (CAP) for the Third Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) in Da Nang. When I arrived on the scene, the 3rd Tanks Civic Action Officer, Lt Bill Lochridge, was in the process of turning over responsibility for the program to the 1st Tank Battalion and he briefed me on what was underway while preparing to leave to rejoin Corson with CAP. His career had been similar to mine in that he had done a stint in the field as a platoon commander before donning his civic action hat. The program they had initiated was very ambitious and he had done a good job in getting it initially organized.

It was a hard act to follow. We inherited a Civic Action office, a small staff, a large Pig Breeding Farm, and an introduction to the Phong Bac Hamlet Chief Le An. We got the general idea what the pig farm project was all about from Lochridge and the remnants of the Civic Action Team which included the Civic Action Chief Gunnery Sergeant Arnold, 4 troopers, an Army veterinarian, and a Vietnamese ARVN interpreter. The project had attracted a lot of attention and we were present at a big ceremony on the Pig Farm project along with public affairs photographers and Vietnamese and military dignitaries. We never saw the public affairs people again, which was helpful. I was not seeking publicity and it gave me the opportunity to figure out what needed to be done on a professional basis without outsiders looking over my shoulders. My marching orders from Lt Col Taylor was it was important to follow up on what had been started and to do

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whatever I believed needed to be done and he would back me up.

The centerpiece was the pig breeding farm and the basic idea was to create a model hamlet that would show the world what American democratic and economic methods could do for an emerging nation. While getting modern pig sties and 20 pink Yorkshire pigs in place was no small accomplishment, actually making the project work was the challenge. Vietnamese, or Chinese pigs were dark, squat, could be carried in baskets on shoulder poles, rarely exceeded 150 pounds, and would eat anything. American Yorkshires were a healthy pink and could get into the 600 pound range which greatly impressed the locals, but unlike their Vietnamese cousins were finicky about their food. The theory was we would sponsor this project as a cooperative and sell shares in it to the local farmers. As the pigs matured, they would be bred, and the piglets would eventually be moved to the farms of the members, and in time, create a large population of Yorkshire pigs.

From the time, we arrived in late October until I left my tank platoon in March, we were involved in almost constant skirmishing actions as well as large scale Operations Arcadia, Glenn, Searcy, Stone, and Teton II. About two days after bringing the platoon up from Chu Lai, we found ourselves near the hamlet of Khai Tay (1) at BT053684, which is about 1 ½ miles southwest of Marble Mountain. We conducted an informal County Fair to support a civic action team whose mission was to get the villagers out and provide medical assistance to the children and drill them with a little government propaganda. Well the local VC didn't care too much for this so they decided to bring our unit under fire from the hamlet of Man Quan (2) at BT046685 which was about 500 meters west. We had a pretty lively firefight going and the end result was we killed one of them and one of my tank commanders, Sgt Maddox was wounded. It was a relatively minor affair in which we had our hands tied behind us because we couldn't leave the lightly armed civic action team to pursue the bad guys.



This was a most amusing assignment for a city boy. Fortunately, Captain Wendlant, an Army veterinarian assigned to the project was a real country boy and was just as amused as I about the assignment. We got along famously. He heard a lot of war stories from me and I learned a lot from him about the care and feeding of farm animals.

It was left up to me to work up a plan of action best representing the general idea we had inherited and presenting it to Le An, the Hamlet Chief to get his approval and cooperation. The plan was to sell shares in the cooperative to people in the hamlet of Phong Bac and get them to collectively manage the farm and determine how to begin distribution of the piglets once the breeding process was underway. This is where the clash of cultures took place. I had to negotiate with Le An through an interpreter who was assigned to my unit. He was an Army of Vietnam (ARVN) Staff Sergeant named Ngyuen Duc Thu. As I did not have command of the Vietnamese language, I was never sure if my intentions were being faithfully presented.  
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My suspicion was there were probably things going on underneath the table and the Americans operated as a bank whose resources were distributed in accordance with time-honored deals between the natives.

The situation I was in was a good example of the problem we had in the short tour periods of Marines coming and going and the time it would take the new arrivals to get up to speed. While some of this had probably been worked out prior to my arrival, I managed to get a list of some 15 farmers to buy shares and begin to support the farm themselves. Exactly what sort of deal Le An worked out with them I was never completely aware of, and didn't really care as long as we were making progress toward implementing the basic plan. While the farmers in the cooperative became increasingly involved, we still had to help feed the pigs with swill from the mess hall because the food the natives tried to feed them was not suitable for pigs of this size or temperament.

During my tour, the pig farm prospered because we made sure they were fed and had medical attention. I am not sure however, that the assumptions had been completely thought through. Did the Vietnamese farmer need pigs of this size? Based upon the kind of food they fed to their small native pigs casts doubt upon whether or not the benefit of larger pigs with more meat justified the cost of feeding and keeping them healthy. As long as Americans were available to feed them with mess hall swill and give them medical attention things were fine. But whether or not they could economically take care of them by themselves was a question with an unknown answer. I followed up on the 1st Tank command chronologies all the way through to March 1970 when the battalion left to return to Camp Pendleton and we were still feeding them mess hall swill and would often lose piglets. It would be interesting to know how many, if any, descendants of those Yorkshire pigs remain in the hamlet of Phong Bac today.

The pig project still attracted attention and as the Civic Action Officer I had the task of squiring around a lot of senior officers on tours of the project. One was LtGen Krulak who commanded all Marines in the Pacific as Commanding General Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPac.) He was accompanied by MajGen Robert Cushman who the Deputy Commander of III MAF in Vietnam and MajGen Nickerson who was the Commanding General, 1st Marine Division (1stMarDiv). It was no accident that General Krulak made the time to visit this project because he was locked into a political battle with General Westmoreland over the proper method of conducting the war.

Westmoreland was intent upon fighting a conventional search and destroy strategy going after the VC and NVA wherever we could find them which was often in areas of their choosing and far away from the coastal villages where 90% of the population and resources resided. This is how we ended up in the Hill fights and the siege at Khe Sahn. This not only allowed the VC to remain active in areas we had already largely pacified but exposed Marine units to operations in unfavorable conditions. Krulak and the top Marine commanders believed that pacification was a more appropriate strategy and organized the Combined Action Company (CAC) approach and Civic Action programs at the battalion level in their respective TAOR's for that purpose. I had already participated in one of these operations with 3/1 early in my tour as a platoon commander.

The Civic Action program 1st Tanks had inherited, largely the result of LtCol Corson, was probably the most ambitious one and was the reason he was selected to join III MAF in Da Nang and run the CAP program. I suspect Krulak and the MAF and Division commanders were most interested in seeing how well the programs could be maintained when they were passed on to the succeeding units and Civic Action Officers. I had no idea at the time what was going on at higher levels, but they must have been satisfied that the transfer of responsibility for the Phong Bac program had been successful. The major problem with the

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programs and the conflict with Westmoreland was the operating forces was having to bleed off combat Marines to staff these programs without being authorized to augment them with replacements and that issue was never resolved.



I initiated a number of projects of my own during my tour. While always suspicious of the side deals that I assumed might be cut between the natives, I knew that as long as I achieved the stated goals, the people intended to be helped would be helped. The first project was to build a 3 room concrete block school right beside the Buddhist pagoda, which was situated on a plateau across the road from the Tank Battalion CP. The deal I cut with Le An was for them to draw up the plans for the school and give me an estimate of how much lumber, concrete, and corrugated metal roofing material was needed. I would then procure the materials and they would build the school themselves. I went over the plans with the Seabees and we roughly validated their estimate. It didn't appear to have been grossly inflated, but I am sure there was sufficient slack for whatever deals might be cut and that was acceptable to me as long the school was built to the plan specifications. It took them about two months to build the school and I went by there often to see what progress was being made and pressed Le An whenever I saw things slowing down.

Le An and I were the featured attendees at the dedication ceremony and I was proud to have initiated the project. It was gratifying to see the dozens of kids dressed up in their blue and white school uniforms show up who would be attending the school. One of the reasons this project had been successful was they built the school themselves, not us and that gave them ownership. I never had to get involved again with the school other than to stop by every so often to say hello to the teachers and students. After the ceremony, the Buddhist priest gave me a tour of the pagoda and I took a picture of the statue of Buddha inside. I later got back to him and gave him copies of the pictures I had taken.

Another successful project was an outdoor movie theater I had the Seabees build into a cliff outside the Tank Battalion Command Post. The purpose of the theater was to attract villagers to see movies and then proselytize them about the government. Most of the movies were cartoons and I was amazed at the number of people who showed up. We had benches to seat about 250 people but we often had many more than that in attendance. The attendees were mostly kids, their mothers and older people. The kids were cute and their elders were polite and respectful. They loved the cartoons and sometimes we showed them twice.

Another one of my major projects was the building of a medical clinic in the market place, which had probably been part of the original, if undocumented plan. This was a joint project with the government whereby we would provide the materials to build the clinic and they would staff it with nurses trained by our medical corpsmen. Once again, I asked for plans, provided the materials and they built it. It was nothing more than a stall in the market place but was sufficient for us to hold sick call each day. We provided the  
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medical supplies and the nurses treated minor ailments and gave shots to the kids. One of the nurses was Thuan Thuy, who was an extremely pleasant lady in her mid-thirties.

To help me get all of this done, I had a pickup truck, an office, and a staff of about 16 people. Gunnery Sergeant Arnold was my section chief and there were four other Marines, all of them inherited from my predecessor. They were all good Marines who tried to do a good job in an unconventional assignment. In addition to my interpreter, I had a Vietnamese secretary named Cho who was in her early twenties. She wrote and spoke excellent English and was a good typist. She was a Catholic whose family had fled the communist takeover in the north. She was very bright, very circumspect, and devoted to her religion. She once took me to Da Nang High School, which she had attended and to the cathedral where I met the Bishop of Da Nang. I was also responsible for the two nurses, six housekeepers (House Mouses) and two young girls, who tended bar in the Officers Club.



**House Mouse - Le Thi**

**Bar Maids**

**Nurse - Thuan**

I was also impressed with my second interpreter, Duong, who replaced SSgt Thu, after he was wounded in an impromptu firefight with a fellow ARVN soldier at the Hoa Vang District Headquarters. I had been selected to compete for attendance at a data processing officer's course and was studying a computer programmer's test preparation book one afternoon when Duong noticed I was working on one of the math problems. Like Cho, he had graduated from Da Nang high school and to humor him I showed him the problem I was working on. It was an algebra problem, and he proceeded to solve it in about 30 seconds. They both appeared well informed about current events, read and wrote English well, and seemed bright in every other way.

Along with Duong's demonstrated ability to rapidly solve the algebra problem, I concluded their secondary education system was probably superior to ours. I suspect there were two factors with the first being that only the bright ones got the opportunity for extended education. The second was probably the culture of parental expectation, which seems to be the most important, given the excellent academic track record of the boat kids who came to our country not speaking a word of English, yet a few years later were graduating from high school as valedictorians. It has always bothered me that I have never met a Vietnamese expatriate from Da Nang since the government collapsed so quickly those from the Saigon area were the only ones who had sufficient warning to leave. This was one of the tragedies of our disgraceful exit.

They were all nice people but I also had no doubt that some of them had been compromised by the VC, who were still active in the hamlet, but kept out of sight. An example was we once found a map in one of their spider holes that pinpointed where each officer's bunk was located in the tank battalion compound. In spite of Phong Bac being a "secure" hamlet, my team and I were always in danger of a serious ambush,  
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as we moved lightly armed throughout the hamlet. There were, however, no incidents during the day and only a few at night within the hamlet, during my tour. I suspect our relative safety was in some ways the result of a two way street. We got some intelligence from the people and the VC got some on us as well. I also believe it was the way we went out of our way to connect personally with the people that gave us the degree of safety we experienced.



One of the pleasant duties I had was to travel to other small hamlets in and around the “secure” hamlet of Phong Bac. Many times we traveled by motorboat east on the Song Cau Do River. Vietnam is truly a beautiful country and viewing it from the middle of a river provides a perspective not often seen. On the one hand is the beauty, and on the other hand is the knowledge that you could easily be in the wrong place at the wrong time and get caught in the middle of a river with people shooting at you. The fishing villages on the side of the river were picturesque as were the people in their boats that we passed. On one such trip, I saw people dredging sand from the river bottom and putting it into their boat to sell to contractors for making concrete. On another occasion, a young woman was bathing in the river beside her boat and demurely moved around to the other side as we passed. I am glad that I had an opportunity to get to know the people and see how they conducted their daily lives because that helped me leave Vietnam with a healthy respect for its people, in spite the vicious war taking place around us.

The hamlet itself was centered upon a marketplace, just off the main road leading down to the Song Cau Do river crossing. The marketplace had a few shops where people conducted various businesses but for the most part it was where the wives of the farmers and fishermen came to sell their produce and seafood. Alongside the main road were houses intermittently sprinkled with shops. One of these was a bicycle repair shop operated by a Frenchman who had elected to remain behind with his native family when his countrymen departed. Behind the rows of houses and shops were the rice paddies and vegetable gardens interspersed with the houses the farmers and their families lived in.

Although I usually had Duong my interpreter with me when I went into the hamlet and other places, I would often go with just one of my men. You would be surprised how well you can communicate by just knowing a few commonly understood words, expressions, or phrases that are often nothing more than Pidgin English. For example, number one always meant this was the best, and number ten meant it was bad. Number “ten thou” meant it was exceptionally bad. “Dinky Dow” meant someone was confused or a little crazy, and “cum biac?” meant I don’t understand. You heard that a lot even when you knew they probably understood what you were talking about. When you saw someone you know, you would say “chow” for hello and “tom bit” for goodbye. Most of the ARVN officers and educated people from Da Nang knew enough English that you could easily carry on a conversation with them.

Although my daily activities were taking place in a relatively “secure” rear area, in fact the location of the tank battalion was right on the south edge of the Southern Sector Defense Command which protected the

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Da Nang rear area compounds. It was also about a half mile from the important bridge spanning the Song Cau Do and opposite “mortar alley” where the VC launched their mortar attacks against the airfield. Throughout history rivers have played a dominant role in military tactics. In Vietnam, using them was the principal tactical strategy of the VC and the destruction of bridges spanning the rivers was their greatest defense against a modern, mechanized military force. Once a bridge is down, you can only cross the river with helicopters, amphibious tractors, Mike Boats or find a place shallow enough to ford on foot.

The result of this was the north side of the Song Cau Do, was “secure” and the south side belonged to the bad guys, particularly at night. It is a lot easier for a guerrilla to cross a river when all he has to worry about is a rifle, bandoleer of ammo, a bag of rice, and perhaps an explosive satchel charge to carry. The average Marine carries about 60 pounds of equipment, was not native to the area, and wasn’t as adept in night tactics. This made it difficult to rapidly respond to VC tactics when they decided to attack at places and times of their choosing. The 1st Tank Battalion CP was the most southern defensive position protecting Da Nang and the important 3rd Marine Air Wing compound and the airfield. For this reason we were tied into each of the other unit’s patrolling and fire support schemes. I was one of three officers who split the duty every third night by standing Combat Operations Center (COC) watch officer in the heavily fortified command bunker. It was my job when on duty, to continuously touch base with both my own bunkers and roving patrols, but also with the COC watch officers of the adjoining units to exchange information, see that the patrols didn’t come into contact with each other, and coordinate rapid reaction to emergencies.

During my tour with tank battalion headquarters, the VC launched two significant rocket attacks against the airfield and a sapper attack against the bridge over the Song Cau Do that brought down its center span. In March they lobbed about 20 rocket rounds into the airfield from the other side of the Song Cau Do, making a random hit on a troop barracks and killing several Marines from the 3rd Marine Air Wing (3dMAW). It happened at about 0300 in the morning and I clearly heard them swishing over our heads before hitting the airfield. They hit again a couple of weeks later with little affect. In July, on one of the nights I was standing COC watch officer, the VC hit the airfield again with rockets. I happened to be standing outside the command bunker and was looking toward the airfield when I began seeing flashes and fires starting up. The VC had launched from Mortar Alley across the river once again. One of our headquarters platoon tanks which was on outpost duty saw the flashes and returned fire. The problem was by that time, the rockets had already been launched and a few hit the fuel depot. In late August, about 8 days before I rotated back to the states, they struck again, this time at the bridge. They launched a ground attack against the Marines in the bunkers and at the same time floated a sapper down the middle of the river. He attached a satchel charge to the pier holding up the center span and when it detonated, dropped it into the river. This is what they were after and it was a big victory for them at the small cost of 5 attacker KIA’s.

I was now at the end of my tour and believed I had done a good job following up on the ambitious program

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3rd Tanks had started. LtCol Taylor thought so as well and awarded me the Navy Commendation with Combat V. Later on, I followed up the 1st Tank command chronologies all the way through the battalion leaving the country and returning to Camp Pendleton in March 1970. The Civic Action Officers who followed me did essentially the same and not only kept the program intact like I had done but also expanded it into other surrounding hamlets as well.

Given my tour as a platoon commander in active combat and its impact upon the peasants in the field, I got a well-rounded view of Vietnam by also getting to work with the better educated natives in both Da Nang and Saigon proper. In spite of our VC and NVA enemies, I left the country with a high opinion of the native population ranging from watching little kids hopping on top of water buffaloes and navigating them with a switch and interacting with the educated ones in the cities. When you factor that in with the success the boat kids coming to America had speaks volumes about them not only as individuals but their culture as well.

I look back on my tour as an important stage in my life and career. I had the good fortune of following up outstanding leadership training at Quantico with an opportunity to apply it in situations where it really counted. It caused me to learn hard lessons fast about what was and wasn't important. A chance conversation with the battalion adjutant, Warrant Officer Carl, the first day I checked into the tank battalion, led to my being selected for a tour as a data systems officer which paved the way for my future career as a pioneer in a field that would in time envelop the military, commercial, and private sectors. My being a member of the first OCS class that was expanded for the Vietnam war put me in front of the great troop buildup, and resulted in my being selected for promotion to Captain in less than two years, a process normally taking five.

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