

SAIGON AS WAR LOOMED

WE MARRIED in Sydney in October 1958 and left for Saigon the following month. On contract to the then Department of External Affairs under the Technical Assistance Scheme—often referred to as the Colombo Plan—I was to assist the South Vietnamese Ministry of Education in the training of teachers of English at Saigon University.

A month after our arrival Jean wrote home:

FIRST PERSON

Saigon is picturesque and different enough to hold our interest for months. We like it best in the evenings when, wandering along the quay, we listen to the chattering of the people squatting there. There are lots of shrieking children, families eating their supper, and people curled up on mats trying to sleep. And the little sampans and houseboats rock to and fro ...

In another letter I had this to say:

If my initial observations are anything to go by, the Vietnamese are a gentle and intelligent people ... Street hawkers will smile as you refuse to buy their wares. I saw a taxi back into a rickshaw tricycle. No curses, no shouts, no wild gesticulations. The driver of the rickshaw alighted in slow motion with perfect equanimity as a policeman strolled forward to take particulars ... We have been here for only five weeks but already the novelty of first impressions fade. The enormous three-pronged fans twirling silently from ceilings have ceased to be objects of curiosity. The waiters in our hotel kow-towing each time they usher us to our table, no longer appear as stage-managed as they did on our first days ... and we have accepted the custom that on leave taking after a meal in the company of guests, one circumnavigates the table shaking hands with everybody ...

We eventually moved into a flat in Dakao, a few kilometres from the centre of the city, and slowly became acquainted with life in the tropics. At that time I was reminded of a definition of “gentleman” as being “a man who uses a butter knife when breakfasting alone on a Sunday morning”. We received an invitation for drinks at the house of new acquaintances. We had met them at a social gathering. James worked at the British embassy and the invitation had arrived by messenger. Telephones were often out of order and

mail was unreliable. Drivers doubled as messengers.

At official functions ties were obligatory but this was an invitation from a Scottish couple. I had no business with the British embassy, it looked like an invitation to a small private dinner, and I chose an open-necked, short-sleeved shirt. It was a humid tropical evening. As we parked close to the given address I noticed uniformed drivers lounging around their cars. The buzz of conversation from guests wafted across a verandah. As we approached the open wrought-iron gates of the villa we passed a policeman on duty. Men in suits were gathered on the lawn nursing their drinks. It was not going to be the intimate dinner party we had expected. When our host spotted us he came rushing towards us with his hand on his neck. By the time I shook his outstretched hand, he had torn off his tie and pocketed it. James would have used that butter knife on a desert island.

Soon after moving to Dakao, I watched from our balcony a cyclist pedalling down the street at full bore. As he braked, his front wheel locked and he was flung in a semi-circle across his handlebars and to the ground. Shaken, he picked himself up and proceeded to straighten his bike. Within seconds half a dozen pedestrians had collected around him laughing their heads off. There they stood choking in mirth, not showing the slightest signs of empathy. To this day I ponder: does this episode illustrate sheer callousness or just a curious facet of Vietnamese humour?

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By mid-year I felt I had begun to establish my professional credentials. It was around this time that the Minister of Education asked if we could meet once a week at his office. He would like to improve his English. Earlier that year I had sent my first quarterly report to Canberra in which I summarised the task before me as I saw it:

From the professional point of view and as a newcomer to the East, I find that Vietnam provides a fascinating aspect of cross-currents evident in the organisation and aims of the educational picture. The ancient Chinese ideal of knowledge for knowledge's sake is fighting a dragging but probably losing battle against western concepts of utility. But tradition and the old-way-of-doing-things appear to me to be a much more potent force than in western society.

In a later observation I had this to say:

The primary motivator for educational reform is economic. The desire for improved standards of living demands an increased per capita work output and the learning of new technical tasks. When their schools are criticised for not serving the needs of society, developing nations have mainly economic needs in mind ... In an underdeveloped country the gap between the aspirations which are infinite and the means which are finite is very great indeed. Here ... conflicts arise ... between religion and secularism, domestic modes and foreign modes, Saigon and the country, Christianity and Buddhism, Vietnamese and Montagnards, southerners and émigrés from the north ...

WE WERE INVITED to a South Vietnamese parade commemorating a Vietnamese anniversary, where a detachments of South Vietnamese troops marched past. As they assembled not far from our elevated timber stand, I could not help noticing the inept drill. They took an eternity just to line up for inspection. Keeping step presented difficulties. In view of the 1954 defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu, I found this very puzzling.

Among our acquaintances were a French couple, Parisians both. Claude had served with the French army fighting the Vietminh and remained in South Vietnam as the manager of a French manufacturing business. I asked him how it had come about that the French army had been unable to keep the Vietnamese insurgents at bay. Claude explained what was known to every French colonial in Indo-China: Vietnamese southerners and Vietnamese northerners were a different breed. Ho Chi

Minh's fighters were northerners. Tough and resourceful, they made do with a handful of rice all day. North Vietnam had winters with snow and ice. The Vietnamese industrial heartland lay in the north and the communist hierarchy hailed from there. The Vietnamese university with all its research institutions had been in Hanoi. Saigon University was a very recent creation. When French soldiers had gone on leave for rest and recreation, they had gone to Saigon with its bars and casinos and dance halls. The southerners had a much more relaxed way of life.

Our first French dinner at Claude and Francoise's is not forgotten. We had been asked for eight o'clock but nobody seemed to be concerned about the absence of food. We sipped our drinks and talked and were then served with another round of drinks. Hors d'œuvres appeared on an array of trays well after ten o'clock. Once we did attack the delicious repast, all was forgiven, but from then on, if we were invited to dinner by locals—urban middle-class Vietnamese had adopted French ways—we would have a snack at home beforehand.

There was another French couple that we occasionally saw. One day Yvonne mentioned that they were having dinner at her sister's, who would be delighted if we could come also. We had not met her sister, said thank you very much, and duly turned up at the designated address on the appointed evening. It was a traditional Vietnamese dinner with our Vietnamese hostess in traditional Vietnamese garb. During the course of the evening and having a closer look at the two sisters, it became obvious that they were Eurasians. And while one sister looked like a European to the uninitiated, had married a Frenchman, and lived the life of a Westerner, the other sister looked like any other Vietnamese at first sight, had married a Vietnamese, and lived her life as a Vietnamese.

ONE DAY I pulled up at one of the city's petrol bowlers and was approached by a uniformed US army lieutenant. Did I speak English? Did I live in Saigon? Could I suggest where he could take his colleague for an evening out? He was on leave from up country. I turned around and noticed a tall, black, smart-looking US army captain near their car. This was well before America sent fighting troops to Vietnam. These officers served with the South Vietnamese army as advisers.

I did not think the captain wanted to spend the evening at the Chinese opera just across from our Dakao flat. There was good dining to be had at French and Chinese restaurants, but this would presumably not fit the bill either. Then I recalled the Tour d'Ivoire, a ten-minute drive from the centre of town. It was not a cordon bleu eatery but a perfectly respectable nightclub

with a restaurant and a little band. I had been there with my wife and local residents. It was a remnant of the French presence in the country. If one was without female company and wanted to dance, one asked any of the *bao dei-clad* Vietnamese hostesses sitting on high stools at the bar. They were French-speaking but some had a smattering of English.

In the Western world rock was beginning to supplant jazz, but in South Vietnam the bands in hotels, restaurants and night spots still favoured the melodies of the war years. Songs like "Jealousy" and "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" alternated with French evergreens like "J'attendrai". Dinner was not compulsory. One could sip a drink and listen to the music. It seemed the perfect spot for an American military adviser on short leave from the bush.

I suggested to the two young officers that we meet at that same petrol station that evening and I would then take them to the Ivory Tower provided they did not mind if I left them early. At about ten o'clock I guided them up a flight of stairs to the night spot. We had a drink at the bar and chatted with some of the Vietnamese ladies. I was surprised to hear the black American speaking good French. Eventually, the two officers in uniform decided to try their luck on the dance floor. The lieutenant was soon foxtrotting with a diminutive partner, but not the captain. Nor was he ten minutes later either when I said my goodbyes and left. From what I could overhear, the ladies begged to be excused when the captain asked them politely in French. They were tired. They had promised that dance to someone else. They were having a break. Not then—perhaps another time.

It was obvious that I had not done the captain any favours and I mulled over the situation as I drove home through the dark Saigon streets. I was not responsible for this state of affairs and yet I felt embarrassed. I was new to the East and had not expected any colour prejudice East of Suez.

EVERYBODY IN SAIGON was aware of the existence of a revolutionary anti-government movement fuelled by the communist regime in North Vietnam and our embassy had declared many parts of the country to be out of bounds. One afternoon Jean's American friend Nora rang her. Nora was the wife of Ted, an American colleague at the university. She was in a panic. Could we come over? Ted had not returned home. He was more than two hours overdue.

The Viet Cong had sent the driver with a ransom request for a typewriter, some medicines available only on prescription and a small sum of Vietnamese piastres.

We hurried to their house a ten-minute drive away. The government still denied the existence of the Viet Cong but they had killed a Frenchman duck-shooting on the Saigon River and had then apologised in a letter to the French embassy. It had been a mistake. How were they to know, they explained, that he was a French resident with a Vietnamese wife? A couple of young recruits had been after his shotgun. This was soon after an American CIA man had been assassinated as he drove to the coast. A party of Viet Cong had lain in wait for him at a sharp bend on the road to Long Hai, a popular beach resort. They had also killed his Vietnamese driver. This time they had not apologised.

The Viet Cong were killers but not indiscriminate murderers. When the British assistant military attaché spent his honeymoon at a small beachside hotel, a party of Viet Cong in black pyjamas had turned up in the middle of the night. They demanded 100 piastres from every visitor, perhaps fifty dollars in today's money. This was to be a contribution to the "fight for freedom", the struggle against President Diem's dictatorship. They asked this young RAF officer who he was. He explained, showed his credentials, and gave them a 500-piastre note. He didn't have a 100-piastre note on him. The Viet Cong in charge disappeared, returned, and handed him 400 piastres change. He cautioned the British airman: he understood the situation, but suggested he not travel to the coast again.

Apart from teacher-training, the Australian government also provided assistance to the South Vietnamese government in the establishment of a dairy industry. To that end we had two experts at a farm at Ben Cat, about forty-five minutes' drive out of town. One lived at the farm, the other commuted from Saigon two or three times weekly. One day his Vietnamese driver turned up at our embassy with a letter in Vietnamese. Wilfred and his interpreter had been kidnapped by the Viet Cong, who had sent the driver with a ransom request for a typewriter, some medicines available only on prescription and a small sum of Vietnamese piastres.

This was a problem for the embassy. The Vietnamese government did not acknowledge the Viet Cong who, in their official communiqués, were simply "brigands" and "criminal elements". The embassy sent the Colombo Plan attaché to the Viet Cong to discuss the matter but they kidnapped him also. They were all missing for a day or two but everybody returned to Saigon safely eventually, in exchange for what I understand to have been a second-hand typewriter.

Their release had followed the arrival of a senior

Viet Cong cadre who had travelled to the Ben Cat area in order to interview the captives. The Viet Cong's accusation was that President Diem of South Vietnam was the lackey of the Americans, a dictator and a bad man. Wilfred and Australia aided Diem and this was a bad thing. Wilfred asked him whether he knew who Sukarno was. Yes, he knew that he was the President of Indonesia. Was Sukarno a communist? Wilfred asked. The Viet Cong agreed Sukarno was a communist. Was he a good man? Yes, the Viet Cong man agreed again that he was a good man. So Wilfred explained that the Australian government aided Indonesia just as they aided South Vietnam. It was Australia's policy to aid underdeveloped countries irrespective of the colour of their regimes. This made sense to his interrogator, who relented. Wilfred had his interpreter with him and managed to extricate him also even though, initially, the Viet Cong chief wanted to keep him.

All this went through my mind as we drove to Ted and Nora's house. Nora was very upset. We asked her whether she had notified her embassy. Where had Ted gone? What time had he left? As we sat in her living room the phone rang. It was Ted. He had been at a meeting which went longer than planned. We did not wait for him, said our goodnights, and drove home to Dakao.

DURING OUR Vietnamese sojourn I was inundated with stories about the rampant corruption everywhere, particularly in government. Nepotism appeared to be an accepted way of life. In a country of millions, most of the senior government officials and academics had not only known each other since their undergraduate days but were often related.

The Vietnamese authorities responsible for selecting high school graduates for university studies abroad and interested in the most meritorious getting there, were aware of the problems confronting Vietnamese selectors for these Colombo Plan scholarships. It was difficult for them to withstand pressure from family connections, politicians and academics. I was asked by the relevant Vietnamese authority to become responsible for compiling a short list of sixty applicants annually from among the hundreds that applied. A Vietnamese committee would then select forty students from this list for study in Australia and New Zealand. How was such a list to be compiled? Vietnamese Baccalaureate results? Headmasters' recommendations? Interviews? Requested fields of study? Age? Since a good knowledge of the English language was a *sine qua non* for success, this

short list consisted of those who had scored the highest marks in a battery of English language tests which I administered in Saigon and Hué.

During one such test I noticed a girl glancing sideways at the test paper of her neighbour. It was an objective aural comprehension test given to many students at a time. When, after a brief warning and keeping her under observation, she transgressed again, I confiscated her pencil. After the completion of the test the girl approached me and said that she understood she had missed out on the examination but wanted to explain that she had not attempted to cheat. She had looked away because she was embarrassed. She said that, coming from a traditional family, she was not supposed to look at a man. Besides, she hated herself in glasses.

Once home with my bundles of test papers, I ruminated about this unusual explanation. She had either told me the truth or she had lied. If she had told me the truth—and I thought she had—I had done her an injustice. The director of the Vietnamese Direction du Plan agreed with my proposal to retest her. I did so. I had another objective test of the same degree of difficulty. Her scores were well within the top 5 per cent of the hundreds of candidates that year. She was eventually selected for an Australian scholarship. In the event she graduated in Sydney, married an Australian, and lives in Queensland today. Did I do the right thing?

We had become friendly with a South Vietnamese public servant whose Sydney undergraduate daughter, a friend of friends, had asked us to look up her people in Saigon. We found them to be a pleasant family. Her parents had many children and one of them had just completed his Vietnamese secondary school Baccalaureate. Unlike the American high school diploma, this was accepted by all Australian universities as a valid matriculation qualification subject only to proficiency in English. I recalled that the father had told me that one of their sons was going to apply for an overseas university scholarship and when we saw them again, I asked in the course of conversation how he had got on. I was told that he had missed out on selection for Australia and New Zealand. Surely I knew how it was in their country, his father added; unless one had access to someone high up, there was no chance of being awarded such an overseas scholarship. His son had not made the short list and he was unaware that I had been responsible. Where corruption is prevalent, many will see corruption even when there is none.

Although the Viet Cong were active in the countryside, Saigon was comparatively peaceful. I was never

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concerned for my safety no matter where I was at any hour of the day or night. But two years after our arrival, the centre of Saigon was occupied by army putschists and there was shooting in our suburb because we lived close to the radio station that the rebels occupied. They were an elite regiment of parachutists wanting to topple President Diem, who was accused of being too autocratic. I recorded the events as they unfolded.

Friday, 1 November '60. At 7 am Ah-Moy reports that she heard shooting nearby between 3.30 and 5.30 ... Marcel tells us that his driver has just returned ... There had been fighting in Rue Norodom and the dead were still littering the streets ... They say it is not the Viet Cong but a parachute battalion of the army.

At about 8 am there is sporadic shooting far away. Nothing is heard from the radio station occupied by the parachutists. Perhaps a hundred yards from our rear window its transmitting masts jut above the rooftops ... Barbara is on the floor pushing coloured blocks around. Jean helps me mark the two hundred odd papers of Australian scholarship applicants that I tested a couple of days ago ...

My full diary entries are too long to reproduce here. They end around 9 o'clock the next morning:

We are having a cup of tea when there is a burst of firing nearby ... select a safe corner and finish the morning tea sitting on the floor. Ah-Moy has joined us crawling in on all fours from her quarters. Her balcony faces the radio station ... We all keep below the window sills ... The soldiers have reached our four-storey building ... they are well armed with camouflage netting on helmets with pouches around the rim. On their belts dangle hand grenades, torches and trench tools. Between them they carry a mortar and mortar ammunition ... Sudden bursts from I don't know where send us ducking for cover again ... Ah-Moy appears yelling "toute partir maison!" but we remain where we are ... Barbara is still fast asleep in the windowless bathroom ...

The tramp of boots passes our door and continues upwards. A detachment of soldiers makes for our flat roof forty feet above the one-storey dwellings around us ... a grand view of the radio station. At 10 o'clock the firing recommences and Ah-Moy rejoins us on the floor ... All of a sudden there is a terrific boom from the roof. Our building seems to vibrate. We duck and rush back to the lounge ... There are a few more ear-splitting bangs. I think they are mortars though some of our

residents later reckoned they were bazookas ... Suddenly there are shouts of "Cong Hoa" from the radio station. It's all over in Dakao.

I put it all in a nutshell in a letter of November 20 to my father in Melbourne:

All is well and things are quiet ... The coup d'état began at 3.30 on Friday morning and was over by 4 in the afternoon of the following day ... You must not imagine that there were troops all over the city shooting up the place. They had captured five key points and apart from the occasional bursts of firing in the distance, things were pretty much functioning in the afternoon. Throughout that day the radio broadcast contradictory proclamations from government and rebels.

In our suburb, things got "comme le cinema"—as Ah-Moy said on Saturday morning. An armoured division had come to the rescue of the government during the night. We live on the upper storey of a block of flats and that morning we had a grandstand view of street fighting with the radio station as the prize ... before they pressed the triggers of their automatics, the government troops waved away curious pedestrians and cyclists whose heads appeared from doorways whenever there was a lull. The putschists were a crack regiment of parachutists and they were opposed by another government elite unit from out of town, an armoured division. Just after 10 am on the second day we heard the cheers of the victors coming from the radio station around the corner ...

As quickly as the insurgents took over the city, Saigon returned to normalcy. That same week the university flew me to Hué, the old Vietnamese capital, to give guest lectures at the university there.

I HAD PUZZLED for some time about the familiarity with which one of the British embassy's counsellors was able to discuss the work of the Snowy Mountains Authority with me. I had spent some years with the Authority. The British diplomat was not an engineer, had never been in Australia, and I asked him one day how it had come about that he was so well informed about the SMA. He replied that he was seeing President Diem regularly and every time they met Diem would raise the topic of the Authority, which he had visited the previous year and had been much impressed by. The counsellor, at a disadvantage in such conversation, felt that he simply had to find out as much as he could about this hydro-electric construction scheme.

The Snowy made its presence felt in other ways. On leave in Cambodia one week we had spent a day in

Phnom Penh where, booked into a hotel, we went for a walk to look around this city still then untouched by the tourist throng. There was not much traffic on the dusty street, and as a Land Rover passed us I pointed out to my wife with some surprise a kangaroo painted on its side. But before I could finish the sentence the Land Rover braked and out jumped two Snowy engineers I knew. They had seen us and recognised me. They were visiting Cambodia on Snowy business.

The highlights of our Indo-Chinese existence were of course the births of Barbara and Peter. We were fortunate in that Jean was under the care of a well qualified American-trained Vietnamese paediatrician who also happened to be the Minister of Health. This meant that babies could not be born on Tuesdays. That was the day when President Diem's cabinet met. Peter's birth was induced one Monday night.

NOT MANY secondary schools in the country offered schooling to Vietnamese Baccalaureate level but all those who had passed this examination were entitled to enrol at any faculty of the university. The Faculty of Arts had many students and the bulk of the English department consisted of teaching staff from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

At the beginning of my second academic year at the university I was invited to join the teaching staff of the Faculty of Pedagogy. This faculty, situated in the suburbs a few kilometres from the Arts Faculty, had been a closed shop for years. Apart from two or three French members of the teaching staff who were permanent residents, the lecturers were Vietnamese. The undergraduates were all on Ministry of Education scholarships. Upon graduation after three years, they qualified as secondary teachers in government schools.

Like everybody else, the thirty students of the English section had been selected from many applicants. Those studying other teaching subjects were in parallel classes. Once I fronted the students in the classroom, I found them to be the *crème de la crème* of the Saigon student population. It was a pleasure to teach them. While a proportion of students in the various English certificate courses of the Arts Faculty regularly failed the annual examinations, there was no question of failing any of the pedagogy undergraduates. They did their assignments to a man and woman. The third-year classes were no smaller than first-year classes.

When the Australian Minister for External Affairs, Sir Garfield Barwick, paid an official visit to South Vietnam, one of my third-year students at the education faculty told me that she had met him. Surprised, I asked

how that had come about. She related laughingly that she and two friends from the same class—attractive girls all—had been flown to a little hamlet in the north of the country where the minister was to distribute farming implements to the peasantry. The girls mixed with the crowd of local onlookers and, after the ceremony, were informally introduced to the minister as members of the village population who happened to be about. And, lo, the pretty rice-planting daughters of the soil spoke English and could reply intelligently to the minister's questions. I forgot to ask them whether they had stained their teeth with betel nut and dressed in the black pyjama-like clothes that the people in the hamlets wore.

I was now able to concentrate on teaching methods and some broader aspects of secondary education. My synopsis of a course of lectures at the Vietnamese Students' Seminar Association, titled "Education for What?", later published in the Vietnamese English-language weekly newspaper, read:

Slogans for guidance of educators: Education should be "general". It should be vocational to teach us to earn

a living. It should be for democracy. For a world adrift. For usefulness. For leisure. For citizenship. For parenthood. For "life". It should pass on cultural heritage. It should teach appreciation for art, music and good literature. It should train thinkers. It should show how to discover truth. It should build character. It should instil faith. It should teach us to love our neighbour, etc. No educational system can fulfil all these requirements. Selection is necessary ...

Nearly half a century later, this summary is as relevant in Australia today as it was in South Vietnam then.

Saigon was a hardship post mainly because of the climate. There was not much interaction between francophone expatriates and English-speaking Westerners. As the country had been under French rule, medical services still conformed to French norms and the brands of medicines dispensed by chemists and in use at hospitals looked and sounded different from medicines commonly used in the English-speaking world. Among Americans and Brits, French medicos were regarded as an exotic species.

We were young and our family coped reasonably well with the tropical conditions. However, during the 1961 rainy season I began to feel very fatigued and weak. Visits to American and English doctors were unproductive. How long had I been in the country? Three years? When was my home leave due? I was run

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down; nothing that a month or two in Australia would not fix. As a last resort I thought I would chance a suburban French doctor whose shingle I had noticed at the door of a ramshackle old bungalow half a kilometre from our flat. After five minutes with him he said it was very simple. It was either X or Y or a slight case of typhoid. He would send a blood sample to the Institute Pasteur in town. The results would be available in four days. He thought typhoid was the most likely scenario. And so it proved to be. Not to worry, he assured me. Was I married? Yes? No need to go to hospital. My wife would be able to look after me. A week in bed and another two weeks' recuperation. He would send a nurse to give me daily injections.

And that was that. After three weeks I was cured. The doctor told me that he changed places with his medical partner every seven years. He would then return to the small French provincial town where his partner had his medical practice, and his partner would then take his place in Saigon.

AT THAT TIME the South Vietnamese education system was based on that in France. There were no offices for teaching staff at my two faculties and all reading, preparation and marking needed to be done elsewhere. I would sometimes drop in at the Circle Sportif, particularly during the last year of our stay when much of the preparation for the various certificate courses I taught lay behind me. The Circle Sportif, a sporting facility not far from the centre of the city, was a remnant of the French colonial days, but in my time French members were but a tiny minority.

On one such day at the Circle the grey skies opened and dumped torrents of water on its lush green lawns. The rainy season was upon us. The downpour cascaded on the tiled roof of the clubhouse and ricocheted off the stone-paved footpaths. In the club's swimming pool miniature fountains erupted and collapsed. I had left the pool and sat on its edge with my legs dangling in the water.

The club was still deserted. A Vietnamese in his twenties, the only person at the pool with me, sat on the

tiles as I did. I recognised him. It was Truong, Lien's husband. Lien worked at the Vietnamese Ministry of Education. It was not long ago that we had been a foursome at dinner at one of the restaurants in Rue Catinat. Truong was a South Vietnamese fighter pilot who had trained in Algiers and the United States. I said "Truong, how are you?" It was a rhetorical question. He had been taciturn and non-communicative on the few occasions we had run into each other at social functions. To my surprise, with the rain pelting down and nobody else within earshot, he opened up.

It was obvious that he was furious about something. His English was reasonably fluent but, typically for a Vietnamese of his generation at the time, difficult to follow. As I strained to listen I began to make sense of his torrent of words. He had just completed three days' duty with the South Vietnamese air force. His orders had been to bomb specific South Vietnamese villages whose co-ordinates he had been given. They were all villages that had been observed flying the Viet Cong flag. What, he asked me, was the point of dropping bombs on them? Everybody knew that the villagers had no choice. A party of young newly-recruited boys and girls would turn up after dark. They would be led by an older Viet Cong who instructed the village elder to fly the Viet Cong flag. What was the village chief to do? If he refused he risked not only a horrible death but also the life of his wife or children.

Truong said that he was a soldier who had to carry out orders. But he hated himself for doing what he did. He said that if he had to fight French or Americans or indeed Australians in a war, he wouldn't like it either, but war was war. But to kill his own people for no particular rational reason, that upset him.

There was nothing I could say. I do not remember running into him again. While I was back in Australia for good, six years later after five years in Malaysia, the American Marines landed near Nha Trang and the war was in full swing. I read countless newspaper articles about that war and not a single one of the journalists ever touched on the turmoil within the Vietnamese soldiers who were participants in this long and bloody conflict.