

From Chapter 9 – Dodging Bullets in Vietnam

The fishermen were hit doubly hard; not only was their catch and product stolen, but on the high seas they were not allowed to have ocean navigation charts, marine compasses, or two-way radios. Why? How can a fisherman navigate dangerous waters without such equipment? The South Vietnamese Navy's theory was that if a poor fisherman in his homemade boat had this equipment, he automatically was involved in smuggling supplies to the Viet Cong!

Here was the incongruous part: the fishermen from the same fishing village banded together and sailed and fished together. One would have a compass and the navigation charts, and another boat would have a two-way radio, used sparingly and mostly for emergencies so as not to be interdicted by the South Vietnamese Navy. But interdicted they would be; their charts, compasses, and radios would be confiscated, and all the fishermen would be fined for "obviously helping the Viet Cong." Miraculously, several weeks after the confiscations, the same exact items would be presented for sale to them in the local bar by some mafia-type Vietnamese criminal. We were told this happened repeatedly in the later years of the war.

My eyes were opened while visiting a very successful shrimp company with a fleet of trawlers, a shrimp processing and freezing plant, and a modern hog farrowing and carp fishery complex that used the hog wastes. The owner had connections in high places in the South Vietnamese government, and most of the

equipment I saw had, at one time or another, belonged to the U.S. Army or Navy. There was not even a pretense to hide the serial numbers or manufacturers. I do not know how the Vietnamese acquired this expensive equipment (boilers, compressors, blast-freezing and packaging equipment, quick-chill freezing and long-term, low-temperature holding rooms), which was worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, even when it had been used. I inquired about the situation back in Saigon with the USAID officials there. They just shrugged their shoulders.

One day Professor Harlan Lampe, a great marine economist from the University of Rhode Island, and I were traveling to the little fishing village of Fuc Tui to interview fishermen about their catches and where they were fishing. We had a South Vietnamese military escort and a representative of the directorate of fisheries with us, both of who spoke English. The army lieutenant had a powerful radio with him since we were traveling through the Mekong Delta jungle country. Many places in the delta were, from time to time, overrun by the Viet Cong. The VC would swoop down from the hills where they had been hiding since the night before to make a "tax collection" raid for their cause from the peasants.

The lieutenant would radio ahead to the next bridge at which there should have been a sergeant or corporal and a squad of privates with heavy weapons guarding the bridge. If he did not receive a radio response to his coded calls, we would stop while he called zone headquarters to see what was going on and to determine if it was safe for us to proceed. Sometimes the word was that the bridge had been blown up early in the morning and

the troops killed, and we would have to detour and try another route. Other times, zone headquarters would raise the soldiers who had either been snoozing or for one reason or another away from their radio.

This particular day we were rolling along between bridges for a stretch of about fifteen miles, enjoying watching the Vietnamese peasant farmers and their families threshing and winnowing rice in their small fields. Men and women were cutting the ripe rice with large knives, somebody was running a small threshing machine with a small, stationary gasoline powered motor, and others, usually the teenagers and children, were winnowing the harvested grain—that is, getting rid of the chaff. They used large woven baskets for the winnowing, and it was picturesque to see the baskets being deftly thrown up and down in the air in a rhythmic syncopation. We watched group after group as we drove and radioed the morning away heading toward our objective.

Suddenly as we watched one group of peasants near the end of one field, perhaps a half mile away near a jungle hill and woods, they threw up their equipment and began to run toward the highway we were traveling on. Coming out of the jungle at the edge of the field, also on the run, were Viet Cong soldiers firing their weapons into the air. Our driver floored the accelerator on our carry-all. We asked what was happening and what the danger was.

The lieutenant replied, “Oh, the VC are collecting their taxes—they will just take all the rice the farmers have threshed and bagged since early this morning. They don’t want us, and they

won't kill any of the farmers, unless the farmers try to avoid paying their 'taxes;' we really aren't in any danger as long as we keep going!" I was not as blasé as he was. Harlan Lampe said that he hoped the VC were not going to "tax the fishermen we are about to visit while we are interviewing them."

On one of our visits to Can Tho, which is on the Mekong River Delta, one of the USAID workers suggested that we try the famous Mekong River Pepper Crab, as prepared in one of his favorite open-air restaurants overlooking the water. We all went—a party of about eight. The pepper crabs were selected from a batch of live ones and dropped unceremoniously into a fifty gallon drum on top of a roaring wood fire. You could tell from the marvelous odor wafting out of that drum of boiling water, spices, and other secret ingredients that this was going to be a meal to remember.

Naturally, the crab was served with steaming rice, different kinds of local vegetables, and the usual nuoc mam sauce for the various delectables to be dipped into. Sitting at tables covered with plastic tablecloths, we were given metal nutcrackers, with which to crack the cooked crab, and the ever-present chopsticks, which I must say I was quite accomplished at using by this time. (Learn to use them in Asia, or go hungry.) The meal was so delightful, and the price was ridiculously low by American standards.

As we entered the place, we noticed that hanging around just beyond the railing that separated the raised restaurant floor from the surrounding streets was a bunch of teenagers who looked to be perhaps eleven to fourteen years old. There were also several

old men, perhaps in their seventies. None of them was dressed well; they were pretty much in rags. As we ate, they started moving closer and closer to the railing just beyond our tables. We became satiated with our more than ample meal, and all of us had leftovers, either on our plates or in serving bowls on the table. Then a strange thing began to happen. With much jostling and yelling in Vietnamese, it appeared that the teenagers were fighting for pecking order. The old men joined the haranguing, and the teenage boys started to beat them and the small boys. It was appalling. They were all fighting for the right to eat our leftovers, according to the local USAID workers. They were starving, emaciated, and had no sources of income.

Finally, as several of the bigger, stronger ones started to brazenly enter the restaurant over the fence, the owner shooed them away, then asked us if we were finished with our meals. When we said we were, he took our plates with the leftover scraps and threw the food into the street. Such a scramble for food scraps I had never seen before, even as a kid growing up in Depression-stricken Pittsburgh. Watching that sad scene took the pleasure out of what had, before the fight, been a most enjoyable culinary experience.

"South Vietnam Will Be a Recreation and Vacation Paradise"

That was the conclusion of the mayor of one of South Vietnam's coastal cities, revealed to us when Harlan Lampe and I were there looking at shrimp trawling and processing facilities one day in late 1974. The mayor was a sharp businesswoman who was

involved in the shrimp business and a number of other activities. She entertained us royally at a marvelous dinner party at one of the city's five-star hotels, which she also owned.

We promised to visit the mayor's office the next day for a presentation of the master plan, developed by the city's planning group at the mayor's prodding (at great cost to the city) and using foreign architects and their services. The presentation included all kinds of scale models, detailed schematic diagrams, blueprints for the main buildings, a redesign of the city's streets, new beaches, a redesigned harbor, commercial district, vacation housing, and more. It was a very professional master plan.

There was one problem though, as far as Harlan and I were concerned. The planners seemed oblivious of the inroads being made by the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong in the Northern provinces. Both of us felt that the South Vietnamese Army could not stem the tide without massive assistance from some other source, especially since the U S. military had almost completely departed. As I have indicated, corruption was so rampant at the higher levels, both in the private sector and the government, that it seemed the country was doomed to fall to the communists—and soon.

When we presented our concerns to the mayor privately the next day, we heard loud denials that the South would ever fall to the North and the communists. The mayor also indicated that the master plan for the city would be useful no matter who controlled the country. It seemed to Harlan and me that this was evidence of the mayor's real feelings. A sort of blanket resignation, shared by other South Vietnamese officials we knew, that the South would

either be victorious or make an accord with the North Vietnamese and that in addition, the South's economic prowess was so great and badly needed by the communists that accommodation was practically guaranteed.

While neither of us could deny that the plans would be useful and valuable to whoever held power, we doubted that many high-ranking officials appointed by the South Vietnamese government, such as the mayor, would retain their positions. In fact, rumors were heavy that many South Vietnamese officials were already bailing their families out of the country for the United States, France, and other European countries. Several years after the fall of the South, we heard that the mayor had also left South Vietnam for France, having sent money to that country and to Swiss banks during the war. I have no proof of this, but many former officials were accused of similar actions.

On all of our trips to the fishing villages on and around the South China Sea and the Gulf of Siam, Professor Lampe and I were curiosity items—a previously unseen form of homo sapiens. Most of these Vietnamese, especially the children and teenagers, had never seen a civilian American or Western Caucasian up close in their lives. In the war zones where they lived and worked, this was due partly to their survival instinct.

Typically, Harlan and I would arrive in a fishing village with our Ministry of Fisheries interpreter/guide, our Vietnam Army protector, and driver, and within what seemed like only seconds, a crowd of twenty to one hundred people would gather. The teenagers would crowd closest to us to hear what was being asked

of the village chief and elders, the smaller children were behind them, and the women and elderly stood in the rear.

While we asked economic and technical questions of the elders and fishermen, which were laboriously translated by our Ministry of Fisheries counterpart from English into Vietnamese, the circle grew smaller. We heard whisperings behind us. Soon the teenagers literally would be surrounding Harlan and me. The first time this happened, I felt a bit claustrophobic—we were quite closed in. Then I felt a sensation on my right arm. I looked down, and the most brazen of the teenage boys was feeling the hair on my arms with his fingers!

Those Vietnamese teenagers had heard that American G.I.s had hair all over their bodies, something that Vietnamese men had very little of. The biggest risk-taker of the teenagers was being encouraged, hence all the whispers behind us during the questioning of the elders, to go and feel their arms and tell the Vietnamese kids what it felt like.

The first time this happened, I swiftly turned around having sensed what the boy was doing. As if I had a machine gun cocked and aimed, all the teenagers and younger children surrounding us fell back in a mad dash. Then as we all realized the humor of the situation and Harlan and I laughed, they all guffawed too, and our friendship was restored.

Cultural differences around the world are absolutely mind-boggling, and this was just another new one for both Professor Lampe and me. Obviously, it also was one heck of a learning experience for those Vietnamese kids, to be retold over and over

again in the next years by the bold teenage boy who felt the hair
on the arm of the North American!