

Montagnard Memories

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Around the 4th month of my tour I got appointed the Civil Affairs Officer. This meant that I would have to visit a Montagnard Village, (Plei Le Lahu), at least twice a week and do everything in my power to keep them friendly to the Americans. They were members of the Jaray (sp) tribe.

The Montagnard were an aboriginal people that lived in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. They had not progressed much further than the stone age. The Women went around topless with just a loin cloth covering as did most of the men. I do not know what their condition is now.

All of them smoked their homegrown tobacco. Even the little children. I have a picture of a 5 year kid smoking a cigarette. He had to hold the cigarette with all his hand. Amazing!

I was to replace a Lt. Roundtree, (later promoted to Captain), Lt. Roundtree was a Rolly Polly. That is the closest I can come to describing him. He was a person that you liked right from the start. No pretensions,....what you saw is what you got. He seemed to get a tremendous pleasure out of life. He appeared to not have a care in the world.

What this appointment meant is that I would have to go outside the base camp,... a secure place. Convoy out by a weather imprisoned jungle road about 5 miles to an insecure place. The road, was of a clay topped gravel, one that could turn into a quagmire in the rainy season and during the dry season, a smooth pathway through the jungle.

The village was located in a glen full of vegetation. There was a stream running to the North, towards our base camp. The first thing that I should have done, was to scout the village by air. I gave no further thought to it. Seemed like a great adventure to me. Lt. Roundtree wasn't worried, why should I be?

I was to be in charge of a small force of 8, one 2 -1/2 Ton Truck, and two - 3/4 Ton Trucks. (3 drivers and a 4 man reaction squad. With me, that made 8). I let the E5 Sgt. take care of the details of personnel, communications, planning, and execution. Mostly I was just along for the ride. This was not my element. I had not been trained for this and he had.

Every Thursday, the visiting party would include our Battalion Flight Surgeon, Dr. Moyer and his corpsman helper.

They would conduct sick call for the villagers. He was perhaps the most welcome of us all, since the villagers had no medical facilities. They depended on their home and folk medicine. Every time the Doctor came over, there was a line of mostly women and children/infants. The lines sometimes stretched to the outside of the village. I figure some people came from other villages when they knew we were having sick call. I never saw such a large number of women and children/infants in our village except when we had sick call. If I had been more paranoid, more insecure, I would have searched every single person coming into the village. To tell you the truth, everything about it felt safe to me, I decided to just trust in my nature. My Natural Instincts.

My interpreter was the Village Chief's Son. I wish I remembered his name,...well, I'm sure he doesn't remember mine. Lt. Roundtree introduced us.

The village chief's son had his right hand blown off by a grenade. He was 15 years old and had found a grenade. He pulled the safety pin and when the grenade started sputtering he went to toss it away and it exploded. The right side of his face and body was badly scarred. It was a miracle he survived, perhaps his hand deflected most of the shrapnel.

He took a liking to me and was my guide throughout my term as the Civil Affairs Officer. He spoke rudimentary English, but we made ourselves understood by sign language.

The village always had dogs, cats, chickens, and pigs running around loose. We managed to make each other laugh with our sounds and imitations of the various animals around the village.

One time I got what I considered a brilliant idea.

Back at our base camp mess hall, we had to separate the edible garbage from the rest of the trash. The edible garbage went into one trash can and the paper, plastic, cigarette butts, cans, bottles, etc. went into another. Naturally some of it got mixed together. Especially the cigarette butts and paper napkins with the edible food.

I had the idea of bringing the edible garbage out to the village as slop for the pigs, chickens, and other animals.

I had the Maintenance Officer assign a welder to cut a 55 gallon drum in half lengthwise and weld some short legs to the halves to make troughs.

One day, I proudly took out the troughs along with the edible garbage to the village. We placed the troughs at the outskirts of the village and filled up the troughs with the edible garbage. I explained to the chief's son that it was food for the animals. We continued into the village to hold sick call. While the Doctor was conducting sick call I strolled out to the troughs to see how my idea was working.

Much to my amazement, I discovered several old ladies and children fighting the animals for the spaghetti, spaghetti sauce, bread, powdered eggs, powdered milk, bacon, cigarette butts, napkins, etc.. They were filling rusted cans and plastic containers with the edible garbage.

I hadn't realized that the villagers needed food that badly!.

From then on, I started bringing them hamburger meat, noodles, sauce, canned fruit, canned vegetables, powdered milk, powdered eggs, C Rations, and anything else we could spare.

I also had the idea of providing the villagers with transportation to the market at the city of Pleiku. Turns out they had to carry their fruits and vegetables, etc., over 8 miles to the city of Pleiku. They toted their produce in large straw baskets strapped to their heads and backs. Not only did they have to carry heavy loads for a long distance, but the Vietnamese Police would set up checkpoints and charge them a tax on their produce.

I arranged for a 2 1/2 Ton truck to transport them to market every Sunday. Not only did it make it a joy to ride to market, but they did not have to pay any more taxes. The Vietnamese never stopped U.S. army vehicles. They just gave the American Drivers dirty looks.

One particular experience that I am proud of was the following:

One time all the Village Chiefs were required to attend a District Convention. A District in Vietnam is comparable to a State in the United States, only a District is much smaller as Vietnam is only about the size of California. The convention was to be held on a Sunday in a huge clearing about 5 miles East of the 4th Inf. Div. base camp. Every other Unit's Civil Affairs Officer took their village chief to the convention by jeep or 3/4 Ton truck. I took my village chief by Helicopter. I signed out an H-13 and met the village chief in a clearing just outside the village. The H-13 is a small Helicopter with a plastic cockpit bubble and a metal skeleton tail. It didn't have any doors so you really got the full feeling of flying.

I had already talked to the chief about my plans and he had agreed to fly in.. On the appointed day, I had to do a lot of talking and reassuring to get him to get into the Helicopter. He was shaking with fear. I finally got him seated and buckled in. He grabbed on to the bubble support bar and the seat in white knuckled terror all the way.

We landed at the convention clearing and he could hardly wait to get off the helicopter. We attracted all the attention as we came in for a landing and when I took off.

I went to pick up the chief several hours later when we were notified by radio that the convention was over. I found my village chief surrounded by about twenty village chiefs. He was the hit of the convention.

Arriving in a Helicopter has given him great prestige. When he walked to the Helicopter for the ride back to his village he acted as if he had been flying all his life. He didn't even need any help to buckle on his harness.

One day I got invited to eat supper with the Village Chief and his closest friends. That was quite an experience. It turned out to be a drunk on rice wine!

When our party arrived at the village, I felt a distinct festive mood. All the villagers were extra friendly and accommodating. When we got close to the village chiefs' living quarters he yelled out in a loud voice. All of a sudden all the village kids, boys and girls, picked up a stick and started chasing after the closest chicken. In short while, a couple of boys managed to kill three chickens. Everybody was laughing and applauding. The boys proudly presented the dead chickens to the village chief. He handed them over to some women close by.

The chief had what we called a hooch. Living quarters made of bamboo and broad leaves.

His "hooch" was toward the West side of the village. It had thick bamboo poles holding the main structure about 7 feet off the ground. The main structure secured a tightly wrapped bamboo floor with bamboo walls covered with broad leaves. Over all of this was an "A" shaped roof. Again bamboo structure covered with broad leaves.

To get to the open "porch" in front you had to climb up a bamboo ladder. To get inside the main living area you had to part hanging leaves. Their version of curtains.

Once inside you were able to peer about 40 feet, through a bamboo and leaf tunnel to the kitchen area. Way in the back were four or five older women cooking over an open fire. You could hear their excited voices. Everything was in subdued sunlight. A cool darkness with a cozy feeling. The exotic smell of smoke throughout.

I was escorted to a place on the floor with a small rice mat. On my right was a tall slender earthen jar. The jar was about 3 feet tall, about 4 inches in diameter at the lip. In the middle, flaring out to about 12 inches and then sloping back down to about 6 inches at the base. Inside the jar were adult rice shoots. The part that shows above the rice paddys. The jar was filled with water all the way to the lip. By the side of the jar was a galvanized gallon bucket with a rusted can floating in it. Stuck into the rice wine was a long hollow bamboo shoot, about 1/2 inch in diameter, that served as extra long straw.

We started out the dinner by having their version of a friendly drink. On top of the rice wine jar was place a flat piece of wood that spanned the jar mouth. The piece of wood had a slit near the center in which another piece of wood was inserted through the slit so that it went into the rice wine liquid. I was made to understand that I was to suck the wine through the bamboo straw until I had drunk enough to make the rice wine liquid level fall below the end of the piece of wood. I then had to refill the jar with the water in the galvanized bucket sitting next to the jar. Once I had refilled the jar with water I had to either leave the piece of wood the same distance into the rice wine or I had the option of pushing the wood further into the liquid and then offering the next in line the bamboo straw to suck in enough rice wine to clear the end of the piece of wood. By the time the bamboo straw got back to me for my second drink the piece of wood was pushed into the rice wine as far as it would go.

During the course of drinking rice wine we were served cooked chicken and rice on banana leaves by the women. The women made quite a ceremony of serving the food. Grinning and giggling all the time.

Needless to say after the 3rd time that the bamboo straw came around, I was quite drunk!.

I wound up crawling on all fours out of the hooch onto the front porch area where I proceeded to throw up over the edge. All the villagers, especially the children, thought it was hilarious that the men got me drunk.

The children all laughed and pointed and had a great time at my expense. By that time it was late afternoon. I thanked the village chief, the elders, and the women who did the cooking. I managed to gather up my team and we returned to the base camp.

I had an awful hangover that night and the next morning.

Looking back on it, what I did was pretty stupid. I allowed myself to become separated from the rest of the visiting party. To this day I don't know what the enlisted men did that day. I imagine they had just a good of a time as I. No one ever complained or mentioned any thing to me about that afternoon.

It seemed that everyone in the village smoked. The villagers cultivated their own tobacco that they carried in a folded cloth stuck into the waist of their loin cloth. They used homemade pipes to smoke their tobacco. The women would stick their pipes into their hair.

When we would give them some of our cigarettes even kids as young as 5 years would take one to smoke. They would hold the cigarette with their whole hand and not with the fingers until the cigarette got too hot. They also carried little Chile peppers that looked like Tabasco peppers. To this day those are the hottest Chiles that I have tasted. When you bit into the very end of one, juice would squirt onto your lips and then your lips would be burning for an hour or so. I used to buy the Chiles from them. They were great to spice up the powdered eggs, soups, the occasional steaks, and all the other bland food served at our mess hall.

One day while wandering along a jungle trail right outside the village, Lt. Roundtree and myself, surprised about 6 young, Montagnard, girls taking a bath. We came upon their bathing spot. It was a round pool about 12 feet in diameter at the bottom of a 10 foot waterfall. Talk about a picturesque scene! Say what you may, the Vietnamese countryside was beautiful place

The girls just giggled and kept on washing themselves. I think myself and Lt. Roundtree were more embarrassed than they. We told the story to all the other pilots in A Company to make them envious. From then on they would fly over the village to see if they could be lucky enough to catch the young girls bathing.... What a bunch of Dorks!



