THE YANKS AND THE GOOKS

The Deserters

MIKE WALLACE
Mr. Wallace is a CBS News correspondent, recently returned from two months in Vietnam.

During 1966, according to candid statistics released by the Americans in Saigon, one in every five men wearing the uniform of the army of South Vietnam (ARVN) deserted his outfit. Variously tired of the endless war, eager to be at home with their families, disgruntled because others were profiting in safe civilian jobs in Saigon, fed up with corrupt officers or afraid of combat duty in the field, 116,000 Vietnamese soldiers put down their arms and went over the hill.

Though the rate had been building sharply through the three preceding years, desertions reached their peak in 1966. It seemed that as more Americans arrived to take over the brunt of the fighting, more Vietnamese soldiers decided they were content to let Americans do the job. In fact, just over a year ago, the desertion rate had accelerated to the point where only one in every four Vietnamese fighting battalions had enough men to operate in the field.

The American commanders were seriously worried, because they had two special chores in mind for the South Vietnamese army. First, they were counting on the ARVN to secure the Mekong Delta, that densely populated, difficult, rice-paddy country which for so long had been fertile ground for Vietcong recruitment. Second, the Americans planned to have the ARVN take over the protection of the Revolutionary Development or Pacification program throughout the country. They were to be charged with setting up a military shield behind which the villagers in territory ostensibly under government control could plant their crops, clear their roads, build their schools and slowly put together a nation, secure from interference or terror by the Vietcong. It was an emergency, and the American command, concerned also that news of the Vietnamese desertion rate would be circulated at home at the same time that American casualty rates began to rise, succeeded in impressing on their Vietnamese counterparts the need for urgent remedies.

First came a tough new anti-desertion law. Prior to its passage, the Vietnamese deserter had been liable, by American standards, to little more than a slap on the wrist. The Vietnamese Code of Military Justice said that a wartime deserter could be punished by a prison term of from six months to six years, with the possibility of solitary confinement for those who deserted to a foreign country. And even this law was loosely enforced and the sentences handed down tended to be light.

The new law, made effective at the end of last year and now being enforced by the Vietnamese with unaccustomed vigor, makes a peculiarly pragmatic point. It says, among other things, that desertion "must be eliminated . . . to prevent the waste of national funds through training of personnel who subsequently desert . . . ." It decrees death for a soldier who abandons his unit to join the enemy, hard labor for life for one who deserts in the face of the enemy, five years of hard labor for the man who deserts while not in combat.

But the most important provision of the law deals with the conditions under which the deserter shall serve his term. He is no longer confined to prison. Instead, he is assigned to hard labor with a combat or combat support unit. As a result, he finds himself, when captured and convicted, back in the line of fire, doing the most menial jobs; and sentenced to serve longer under those unappetizing conditions than had he simply waited out his tour of duty.

But the Americans understood the need for more than a tough anti-desertion law. At a time of urgent concern for the well-being of the American fighting man, the appalling conditions in which the Vietnamese enlisted man was forced to live prompted American commanders to make recommendations to the Vietnamese about improving the lot of their troops. Vietnamese military pay was minuscule, and living conditions for the soldier and his family were abominable. (Families live in the men in the the base camps.) The headquarters of the Vietnamese Twenty-First Division at V Thanh in the Delta was typical, with garbage strewn about dependents' quarters, the most primitive sanitary facilities, inadequate schools, and mud virtually knee-deep everywhere during the rainy season. The Americans had a name for the Twenty-First's base camp: "Squalor Holler." Accordingly, the American command in Saigon urged upon their Vietnamese opposites higher pay, larger family allowances, more nearly habitable living quarters, improved mail and PX services, promotions and decorations for enlisted men who had demonstrated courage and leadership. In short, they asked that the Vietnamese stop treating their rank and file like combat animals.

The concept was revolutionary to the Vietnamese military mind: but Gen. Cao Van Vien, the South Vietnamese Chief of Staff, working with an American Assistant Chief of Staff, Brig. Gen. Donald McGovern, decided to give it a try. Today, the Vietnamese private with a wife and three children, who must buy all the food he and his family eat, receives the equivalent of forty-three American dollars a month. It's 25 per cent more than he used to make. Today, a radical change is under way at "Squalor Holler" and in numerous other base camps. A genuine effort is being made to replace the dirt floor shacks with tin-roofed, cement-floored hooches. Cigarettes and soft drinks are becoming available at reduced prices at the still primitive commissaries. Mail service has been speeded up, television masts are rising on the parade grounds, social service workers have begun to offer advice and help to the soldiers' wives. The schools are getting better, and little by little, the Vietnamese soldier is beginning warily to respond.

But, generally speaking, he is still no patriot. He feels no kinship, no sense of involvement in the concerns of
the Saigon government Col John Walker, senior American adviser to the Vietnamese Fifth Division, north of Saigon, explains the difficulty:

The soldier has been promised many things but they have not always been delivered. So he remains skeptical.

Our people in the United States are raised from childhood to look on a deserter as a low form of criminal. This is not true in Vietnam. Over the years the soldier has been exploited so he doesn’t have the same feeling about desertion that Americans do. The Vietnamese just don’t consider it bad.

The Vietnamese Fifth Division, which Colonel Walker advises, has one of the worst records for desertion of any in the country. It is stationed near Saigon; the bus that runs past its front gate every thirty minutes costs just 15c for a trip to the Saigon back-alley labyrinths in which a deserter can go underground. But in the Fifth, as in other divisions up and down the country, the tide has begun to turn.

One measure of progress came during the crucial Tet season, over January and February. Tet is an amalgam of our Fourth of July and New Year’s holidays, a time when the Vietnamese likes to go home to his village and his family. Frequently, the soldier who goes home on leave during Tet decides to stay there. Last year, during Tet, there were more than 23,000 desertions. During Tet in 1967, the number was cut just about in half. And since Tet of this year desertions have continued at only half of last year’s rate.

Cheered by those statistics, the Americans prepared a press release and suggested to the Vietnamese that they circulate it. Either from a sensitivity on the whole subject of desertions, or from fear that the downward trend will not continue, or possibly because desertions have increased in the Revolutionary Development teams, which are being hit with increasing and devastating frequency by the Vietcong—for whatever reason, the Vietnamese have not released the figures. Instead the Americans leaked them to reporters in Saigon. The South Vietnamese are in general reluctant to talk much about their troops, and perhaps it’s understandable. Unfavorable comparisons can be made between their performance and that of the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. Those two armies, after all, are of the same stock, essentially the same background as the South Vietnamese. Yet they consistently fight with greater valor, demonstrate a tighter discipline both in their dealings with the civilian population and in battle. And the evident reason is that they are more strongly motivated; they feel a deeper sense of kinship with their top leaders, a deeper involvement in the cause for which they fight.

Perhaps the most crucial difference between the two opposing groups of Vietnamese fighting men is in the officer corps. With the Vietcong, a man achieves officer status by long and arduous performance in the field. Frequently he has come up through the ranks. There is little talk of nepotism and corruption in the Vietcong. But the South Vietnamese army is notorious as a haven for corrupt and frequently cowardly political hacks, officers with no taste for battle and little concern for the well-being of their troops.

This shoddy leadership is not overlooked by the men who do the fighting. It is reflected in the desertion rate which, though declining, remains a powerful indicator that the South Vietnamese army has little stomach for the jobs that have been assigned it. Some American commanders speak spiritedly—in public—of how their counterparts are developing the vital qualities of leadership, of how the Vietnamese troops are beginning to take hold and demonstrate valor and determination in battle. But privately, there are few Americans in Vietnam who feel real confidence in the capabilities of their allies. The desertion rate is coming down. But still, despite the tough new law, despite a raise in pay and markedly improved living conditions, most of all despite the fact that the battle reports indicate they’re on the winning side, still a thousand Vietnamese soldiers every week are willing to take their chances and desert.

**WHAM!**

**TED KOPPEL**

Mr Koppel has been on assignment for A B C. in Vietnam since the beginning of March.

An Australian corporal walks into a snack bar near Vung Tau, South Vietnam. Marching up to the counter he makes his pleasure known: “Eh, Gook! Gimme a hamburger!” WHAM!

A pair of American civilians stand at a corner of the Tu Do Street in Saigon. It is approaching 11 P.M ; almost curfew time. Apparently they are looking for a taxi, but because they have been drinking rather heavily two or three of the midget Renault cabs slow down and then pass them by. The louder of the two civilians poises for the next taxi and then lets loose with a remarkably well-aimed kick at the left-rear fender. WHAM!

WHAM is a caustic acronym coined in Vietnam to represent one of the favorite slogans of American leaders here. It stands for “Winning the Hearts and Minds” of the people. WHAM might also be less imaginatively but more realistically defined as the distance between the ideal objective and the attainable goal. The time is perhaps long overdue for us to give up the naive assumption that
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