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Life's Many Sides

The best war news

By TON THAT THIEN

The best war news are not those which tell how much munitions was used, how many bombs were dropped on VC held villages, how many were killed on the other side, because in this war there are bound to be many innocent civilians among them. The best war news are those which tell how many innocent people have been spared and saved by our side, thus giving them a reason to believe that destruction and death do not come from us.

For that reason, I consider the US Marines operation in the Song Gia-Vu area, Danang, on January 6, as one of the best war news which I have read for months. You know what happened: a marine accidentally set fire to a number of thatch houses in the village when he burned VC rice suppliers. The commander, Captain R.T. Neal, was angered, and ordered an investigation on the spot. Further dramatic efforts were made to take the children to safety.

Those are good news, because they tell us that with people like Captain Neal in command, there is a lot of chance that the war will not be lost. We are told that this war is a war for the hearts and minds of the people that the majority of the peasants are not really with the communists, and that given the opportunity, they will come over to our side. I agree that so much is true. But would it not be true also that if all the peasants are killed – accidentally or otherwise – there will be no hearts and no minds to win, but only maimed and burned bodies. And dead bodies won't help us defeat the communists.

There is a tendency among some, now that they see huge quantities of weapons, ammunitions, supplies, money, piling up on our side, to forget that this war is still fundamentally a REVOLUTIONARY WAR, in which good politics (and not good military strategy) will do the trick of giving us victory. Our side will begin to win this war when over fifty per cent of the peasants (forget the money grabbing and pleasure seeking selfish people of the cities) will look towards us – even in their secret hearts – as the people who save them from death, destruction, starvation, oppression, forced labour etc... We shall be definitely on the way to victory if the proportions reach eighty per cent. And we shall surely win if more than eighty per cent look to us rather than to the communists for life and progress.

After two, three, five, ten years if, in drawing our balance sheet, we can say that our side saved more peasants than it killed, that our side gave more to the peasants than it took from them (no matter how then we can say that victory will be on our side.)

If each morning, the troops on our side – the SF, RF, Regulars, US Marines, Infantry or Air Cavalry – make it a standard question to ask their mates: "How many innocent people did you save yesterday?", then I have no doubt that our side will win the war.

That is why I was so pleased to read about Captain Neal's action. If all the commanders on our side as well as Vietnamese – take only one minute to ask themselves how many VC and how many innocent people would be killed before calling for an air strike or artillery support, then we shall have the certainty that victory will be ours.

I earnestly hope there are many more Captains Neals on our side, and to hear more about them and their men, instead of statistics of battle deaths and destructions, and the amount of bullets, shells and bombs used.

POSTSCRIPT: In case you wonder what happened to my piece last Saturday, I wish to inform you that I have made a big discovery, with the gracious help of the Government Information Service – or rather Psychological Warfare. Would you be surprised if I tell you that I have discovered BLANK PROSE? From now on, among the word literary figures, I shall rank equal with Shakespeare. Please vote for me when I run for the Nobel Prize in literature. My outstanding achievement will be a book called:

" The use of BLANK PROSE in the cause of democracy"