

programs in a chapter near the close of the book is extremely awkward, and certainly dispensable in the form presented.

A deeper failure is Peterson's inability to probe further the inability of the CAP program to expand. As he points out, while championed by many senior Marines, CAPs and its corollary enclave strategy was actively resisted by the commander of US forces in Vietnam, General Westmoreland. Peterson sheds little new light on this top level debate. He fails to acknowledge, however, that resources were not directed into the CAP program for quite another reason as well. While pointing out that NVA/VC forces escalated the hinterland war to draw US forces away from the villages, Peterson criticizes the decision by US forces to go after the bait. By late 1967, however, Lt. Gen. Lewis Walt, a founder of the program, and commander of all US Marines in Vietnam, acknowledged that the NVA threat could not be ignored. Consequently, it was not purely the misdirection of resources that hampered the growth of CAPs but rather the scarcity of total resources in face of a rapidly expanding threat that saw CAPs starved of support. Despite these problems, Peterson's account is presently an indispensable guide to America's village war in Vietnam.

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Endnotes

1. See Rice, pp. 101-103, and Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 174-76.

Vu, Tran Tri (pseud.). *Lost Years: My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps*. Translated by Nguyen Phuc (pseud.). Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1989.

On 25 June 1975, Tran Tri Vu reported to Nguyen Lam School near Cholon for reeducation with some trepidation and a seven day supply of food and medicine. Vu was a former reserve ARVN lieutenant seconded to the Ministry of Education; reeducation for junior officers was supposed to last a week. He was released 23 December 1979, 1,632 days later. During that time he was indeed reeducated. (Given the Vietnamese fondness for puns, perhaps that gave him his pseudonym; "vu" means "wild or uncultivated." Another meaning, with diacritical mark, is "season or harvest.") In six jungle camps he learned much about himself, about human nature, and about the nature of the Vietnamese revolution.

Like the Chinese, the Vietnamese Communists were determined to modify the thoughts and actions of the southerners and make them supporters of the new regime. The camps were places to bend the prisoners' wills and to

isolate opponents from the rest of the population. Inmates included all sorts of people, from notorious members of the old regime to highly decorated combat soldiers, from Catholics to members of the National Liberation Front who were not sufficiently obedient to Hanoi.

The first exercise for everyone was to write a detailed autobiography that listed "war crimes" for which they owed a "blood debt" to the people. Cadres threatened to check each account against the mountains of captured records. Fear, uncertainty, and the threat of being sent to the north were used by the cadres and the *bodoi*, the common soldiers guarding the campus, to control the prisoners, who by some estimates numbered 200,000 - 400,000.

After categorization Vu was sent to do hard labor. The prisoners started by building the camps. Food was often only a small bowl of watery rice gruel, and medicine was non-existent. Many died. Later, they cleared land and grew food, which kept them busy and too exhausted to rebel. Work was interspersed with indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism and in the beauties of the new regime. After long lectures in impenetrable jargon, the men formed discussion groups run by cadres who made sure that they discussed.

Since few of the inmates were used to manual labor, life was hard. Vu became a skilled carpenter and head of the building team. However, he preferred field work, even though it was harder, because it allowed him to gather plants to supplement his meagre diet. (He became expert in locating herbs to cook in the aluminum can that served for a mess kit.) Few would have survived had they not bribed cadres and *bodoi* to be allowed to buy food. The middle-aged veterans of the jungle war were incorruptible, but the rest were eager to buy watches, bicycles, and radios on the black market. Vu rented a radio from a guard and listened to the BBC news for a time.

Informers infested every barracks. Punishments included torture, and confinement in small airless boxes; men were constantly shifted about, some to the north and some to their death. Vu, however, concentrates on the desperate search for enough food to survive and for an official to bribe to obtain release. Despite the revolution, bribery and family connections still ruled Vietnamese society. He also observed the primitive incompetence of the *bodoi*, who understood neither machines nor farming methods. The prisoners planted rice with sharpened sticks until, after endless negotiations, they were allowed to use hoes. Rice beetles destroyed crops because of poor cultivation, and many areas were cleared that were unsuitable for farming. Rice was poorly stored and much of it was eaten by vermin, or - in spite of the prisoners' hunger - was fed to the camp pigs. Vu managed to steal some.

Just before the first Tet of Vu's captivity, the first releases occurred (two informers), and the first escapes were attempted. A year later family visits were allowed. They brought food and medicines, some of which were "confiscated" by the *bodoi*. The visiting women hired guards and began to travel in convoys, because they were robbed, raped, and murdered when they travelled alone. Wives told of resistance and spontaneous revolts outside. Police and cadres were attacked and beaten after dark. In 1977, at Bu Loi, near the Cambodian

border, Vu heard of the first successful escapes, and new prisoners included people recently arrested, captured members of the resistance and juvenile delinquents. Clearly, Hanoi was having trouble ruling the south.

Sometime in 1978, Vu was categorized as an “ultra-reactionary” and transferred to Ham Tan, a prison for political prisoners and criminals run by the police, who were more brutal than the *bodoi*. Here, Vu records the first discussions of why they lost the war. Most blamed the Americans for being too impatient and for not understanding peoples’ war, and for seeing Viet Nam as the helpless pawn of the great powers. When Vu suggested that perhaps they had done something wrong, he was overruled. He also met several aged NLF members, who tried to explain how the communists thought and who sadly, but with little surprise, recounted their post-war betrayal by Hanoi.

Vu was released after his wife bribed an official. Before he left he had to write one more criticism, this time a denunciation of someone else. After his long “reeducation,” he knew just what to do. He confessed to breaking camp regulations by building furniture from government materials, thus denouncing himself and in the process naming the cadre who had profited from the sale of the furniture. He asked for forgiveness.

Vu has written a compelling memoir, one that makes the reader care deeply about him. This reviewer opened it after a long day grading seminar papers, and the next thing I knew it was 2 a.m. Some questions remain. We learn little about Vu’s earlier life. He has a brother and a wife and daughter. His syntax, even in translation, is not oriental; his thought processes are western. He speaks French, and his in-laws live in France. He is Catholic. He went to the South Vietnamese equivalent of Officer Candidate School; his secondment to a Saigon ministry suggests that his family had enough wealth and connections to keep him out of combat, although that backfired, because the northerners defined anybody seconded to a ministry as a CIA agent. He seems to have had little contact with Americans, and he currently lives in London. His tastes are those of the intelligentsia. He claims he had no previous writing experience, but his memoir is carefully organized, fluidly written, and quietly moving. He does not rant, which endows his story with enormous moral authority. Just before his release, he was recognized by a man, who said, “I, too, was writing articles for Chu Tu’s daily.” A translator’s footnote identifies Chu Tu as the editor of “one of Saigon’s leading dailies.”

Whoever Tran Tri Vu is, he has written a work deeply imbued with humanity and courage. He did not lose those years. He survived. And prevailed.

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