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## The First Year of the Philcag in Vietnam

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## Special Report

### *The First Year of the PHILCAG in Viet Nam*

**T**AY NINH is a province of South Viet Nam on the Cambodian border. Its capital city, also called Tay Ninh, is about 100 kilometers (or half an hour by air) northwest of Saigon. The province juts like a salient into Cambodia, so that it is bounded by Cambodia on three sides: the north, the west, and the southwest, the common frontier being 210 kilometers long. This easy access to and from Cambodia makes Tay Ninh an important province to the Viet Cong.

It is also an easy province to hide in. Of the total land area (385,000 hectares), almost two thirds are forest. Only 64,000 hectares (one sixth of the total) are under cultivation. In the forest areas, the chalky ground is hard and dry in the dry season, which makes it ideal for the type of trenches with interconnecting tunnels which the Viet Cong use for their hiding places. The tunnels I saw in Thanh Dien forest are not as elaborate or as sophisticated as those discovered elsewhere by the Americans in the so-called "Operation Cedar Falls", but they afford effective shelter even from mortar fire and they are carefully camouflaged.

The entire province is flat country, cut up by rivers and streams, so that the forest areas can be cleared and irrigated and turned into good agricultural land. The entire country is dominated by the highest mountain in South Viet Nam, called Nui Ba Den (Black Lady), which looks somewhat like

our Mount Arayat. Like Arayat it rises out of the plains in solitary grandeur, and (also like Arayat) the country around its base is sanctuary for dissidents. The mountain itself is not much more than 3,000 feet high. It is sacred to the Cao Dai religion as well as to the Buddhists. North of Nui Ba Den the forests are said to be still inhabited by elephants and tigers. Indeed there was a time when the entire province was known as the Elephant Country.

The cultivated areas are planted to rice or kenaf or fruit trees or rubber. The province population is estimated at 280,000 people, some of whom are refugees from other provinces where the fighting is more intense. The capital city of Tay Ninh is not very large by Philippine standards, with a population of some 10,000.

Only 3 per cent or less of the province population belong to the Viet Cong. But, as in Central Luzon, this small percentage has been terrorizing the 97 per cent and collecting taxes from them. The Viet Cong dominate half of the land area and about one-fourth of the roads. The majority of the hamlets in the peopled areas, however, are under government control. There are 136 hamlets, grouped into 45 villages, which in turn are grouped into four Districts. Of the hamlets, 92 are said to be "pacified"—i.e., with a hamlet chief loyal to the government in effective control. The remaining 44 hamlets are in Viet Cong hands, or are still open to harassment.

The Province Chief (military governor) of Tay Ninh is Lt. Col. Ho Duc Truong, who had previously served in the Cao Dai army against the French. He is assisted by two deputy governors, one for civil administration (Mr. Le Phu Nhan), the other for security (Major Le Van Thien). All three are young, energetic, educated. All three are fathers of fairly large families. They represent the best elements in Viet Nam.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Col. Truong is 46, has five children, speaks English and French fluently. He fought against the French, was associated with Trinh Minh The in the nationalist movement. From the Cao Dai army he joined the Army of the Republic. Mr. Nham (pronounced Nyan) is 42, with four children, and has studied both in the United States (Michigan State and Washington) and in the Dalat National Institute

The religious dissensions that exist in some places in Viet Nam do not exist in Tay Ninh. The majority (60 per cent) belong to the Cao Dai religion, and it is in Tay Ninh, not far from the capital, that the "Vatican" of the Cao Dai "Pope" is situated: it is an 80-hectare estate, with an impressive temple and some splendid buildings. The Cao Dai are closely linked to the Catholics who form some 15 per cent of the province population. The remaining 25 per cent are Buddhists or Confucianists or Taoists or animist.<sup>2</sup>

One Catholic village of considerable interest, not far from Tay Ninh City, is called Cao Xa. The original Cao Xa was in North Viet Nam. At the time of the partition in 1954, the entire village of some 5,000 inhabitants decided to flee from the Communist North and seek a new home in the South. They were led by their parish priest, a Vietnamese Dominican, Father Du (pronounced Zu). They went by sea to Saigon, then overland to Tay Ninh where they carved out of the forest a model village, with church, two schools, shops, and several hundred hectares of farm land. Father Du speaks little English, but he is fluent in Spanish which he learned from the Spanish Dominicans in Hong Kong. Even before I visited Father Du in Cao Xa I had already seen evidence of his influence. One of the Vietnames fortresses in Than Dien

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for Public Administration. He is a man of broad vision. Major Thien is 39, speaks English and French, and like Truong was also in the Cao Dai army. When I asked him how many children he had, he answered wryly: "Seven and a half." Truong and Thien belong to the Cao Dai religion, Nhan is Catholic. I visited Col. Truong and Mr. Nhan on four or five occasions, besides one briefing session that lasted over an hour. This was in January and February of 1967. On my next visit to Viet Nam six months later, Mr. Nhan had been replaced as administrative assistant.

<sup>2</sup> The Cao Dai religion was founded in the 1920's in Saigon, although its national headquarters have since moved to Tay Ninh. The great temple was constructed in the 1930's. Its theology appears to be eclectic, taking elements of Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Sun Yat Sen and Victor Hugo are among its heroes, and it is said that Magsaysay was considered for canonization. Bishop Olalia of Lipa had a cordial conversation with the Cao Dai Pope during his visit to Tay Ninh. The Dai, like the Catholics, are strongly anti-Communist.

forest which I visited with General Tobias is garrisoned by Catholics. The District Chief who took us around (Captain Tuyen) told me when we were leaving: "Every member of that garrison is a Catholic, recruited by Father Du."

The active fighting in Tay Ninh province is done by the army under Colonel Truong, and by an American Light Infantry Brigade. There are also several American civilian agencies for civic aid, all of them coordinated (until recently) under Mr. Edmundo Navarro, PMA class '40, an officer in the Philippine Army during the Japanese War who has since become an American citizen.

But most of the civic action in Tay Ninh province is done by the PHILCAG, which is the Philippine contribution to the allied effort in the Viet Nam war.

#### WAR ON TWO FRONTS

The current war in Viet Nam is being fought on two fronts. The first is against an armed enemy; the second, against a state of affairs that helps the enemy.

The armed enemy in this case is a well organized army of Vietnamese Communists (popularly called Viet Cong), directed from Hanoi and supplied with men and materials from and through North Viet Nam. Against this armed enemy a large share of the fighting is borne by the Americans, aided by the armed forces of the Republic of South Viet Nam and by fighting troops from other countries, notably, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, and Thailand.

The fight against this armed enemy is particularly difficult because, although well organized, the Viet Cong are employing tactics of guerrilla warfare, where the enemy is often invisible. It is because of this guerrilla warfare that the second front becomes important: namely, civic action among the people, in order to prevent (or to correct) a state of affairs that would tend to help the guerrillas.

There is a well-known dictum attributed to Mao Tse-tung that guerrillas are like fish: they thrive in friendly waters. In this case, the waters are the people in the hamlets and villages of South Viet Nam. As long as the people are

unprotected and live in poverty, disease and discontent, they remain a prey to the guerrillas who terrorize them, take away their crops, draft their children into guerrilla service, and hide among them. The central government in Saigon can have no influence on such hamlets, whose real rulers are the Viet Cong guerrillas.

But once the villages and hamlets are protected against guerrilla assaults, and once the people begin to live in health and prosperity, it would be to their advantage to resist the terrorism of the guerrillas. The waters, so to speak, become unfriendly, and the fish can not thrive.

The active military defense of the hamlets must be done by the population themselves, in conjunction with the armed forces of South Viet Nam. But the civic action designed to raise the standard of living of the people must be done by civic action groups, working in cooperation with the native population.

The more acceptable a civic action group is to the native population, the greater the likelihood of success. This is where the Filipinos in Viet Nam have been singularly blessed. The success of the PHILCAG must be measured, not only by material standards (which in this case are impressive), but also by the enthusiastic response of the Vietnamese to the Philippine effort.

#### REPUBLIC ACT 4664

The PHILCAG (Philippine Civic Action Group) is a military unit of over 2,000 persons under the command of Brigadier General Gaudencio V. Tobias, a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy and a veteran of the Japanese War, as well as of Korea and the Huk campaigns in Central Luzon.

The PHILCAG was created by Republic Act 4664 approved by the Philippine Congress in a special (and stormy) session in May 1966 and signed into law by President Marcos in June of that year. By the terms of that Act, the President, in compliance with the request of the Republic of South Viet Nam, was authorized to send to that country "a Civic Action

Group consisting of engineer construction, medical, and rural community development teams" which should undertake "socio-economic projects mutually agreed upon" by the governments of both countries.

The law specified that this Civic Action Group should be protected "by its own security support" (i.e. not dependent for protection on either the Americans or the Vietnamese). Accordingly, the largest component of the PHILCAG is the security battalion, under Colonel Rafael Zagala composed of three rifle companies and two supporting companies of tanks and artillery. Thus, although the PHILCAG is not a fighting unit (in the sense that its mission is not to fight), it is combat-ready and is prepared to defend itself and its operations against any armed attack. Thanks to this support the casualties of the PHILCAG have so far been very light; without it, the casualties would have been enormous from snipers, land mines, booby traps, and from direct shelling of the base camp.

The law further specified that all personnel of the PHILCAG must "at all times be under a Philippine command" (i.e. at no time under American or Vietnamese control). This is one reason why General Tobias maintains two headquarters, one at Tay Ninh to direct operations, the other in Saigon for better coordination with the Vietnamese and American and other national high commands. He is represented in Saigon by the Deputy Commander, Colonel Ceferino Carreon, and in Tay Ninh by the Chief of Staff, Colonel Eduardo M. Garcia. Both of these senior officers, however, occasionally reverse roles, Col. Carreon going to Tay Ninh and Col. Garcia to Saigon.

The law also stipulated that only volunteers might be sent to Viet Nam. This may help to explain the high morale among the Filipino soldiers in Viet Nam. They are not draftees sent abroad against their will: they are professional soldiers, most of them seasoned in many campaigns; and each of them is in Viet Nam by his own choice.

What R.A. 4664 did was to enlarge the scope and the amount of the already existing program of Philippine aid to Viet Nam. There was already in Viet Nam a Philippine Con-

tingent (PHILCON) of doctors and nurses and medical assistants, provided for by R.A. 4162, enacted by the Philippine Congress in July 1965. Four successive medical contingents (called PHILCON I, II, III and IV) had served in Viet Nam, the fourth (PHILCON IV) being integrated into the PHILCAG in October 1966.

#### OPERATION BROTHERHOOD

Both the PHILCON and the PHILCAG were revivals under military auspices of an earlier Philippine program under private auspices of medical and civic aid to the people of Viet Nam. This was Operation Brotherhood, organized in 1954 by Oscar Arellano and supported by the Jaycees of some twenty nations. Some 200 Filipinos (doctors, nurses, and others) and some 50 persons of other nations had served under OB at a time when thousands of refugees were swarming to South Viet Nam from the Communist North. OB has since transferred its operations to Laos, but its memory is still fresh in Viet Nam, and in particular in Tay Ninh where three members of the OB team had lost their lives in a river while returning from a mission of mercy.

#### TO VIET NAM IN SIX STAGES

The details for the work and deployment of the PHILCAG were defined by two military working agreements, one with the Republic of South Viet Nam (Mata-Tam Agreement, 3 August 1966), the other with the American Armed Forces (Mata-Westmoreland, 20 July 1966). Both agreements were signed for the Philippines by General Ernesto Mata, at the time Chief of Staff, now Secretary of National Defense.

Some members of the United States Congress have referred contemptuously to the PHILCAG as "mercenaries". This is technically incorrect. The salaries of the 2,000-man contingent are paid by the Philippine Government, out of the thirty-five million pesos appropriated for the support of the PHILCAG by R.A. 4664. However, the equipment needed for the work in Viet Nam (including the bulldozers and other heavy machinery) are supplied by the United States. The food rations are



supplied by the Free World Military Assistance Organization (supported by American funds). This arrangement is no more "mercenary" than the "bayanihan" custom of the barrios (in Visayan, "hunglos"), where the neighbors come to help with the planting or harvesting. They offer their services free, but while working, they are fed by the owner of the fields whom they are helping to plant or harvest.

Even before the law was passed, elements of what was to become the PHILCAG were already engaged in active training. As a result, by July 1966 when the PHILCAG was formally constituted, it was ready for action as soon as an adequate base camp could be constructed in Viet Nam.

The first to go was an engineering team of three officers led by Captain Francisco Gatmaitan, whose task was to survey and lay out the base camp in Tay Ninh province. They arrived in Viet Nam on 28 July 1966.

They were followed, on 16 August, by 100 officers and men under Major Fidel V. Ramos, Operations Officer (G-3) of the PHILCAG. Most of these belonged to the Advanced Planning Group, charged with coordinating with the various Vietnamese and American agencies involved in the transport and reception of the PHILCAG. Also included in this group were three Civic Action Teams of doctors, dentists, and propagandists ("psychological warfare"), who began immediately to go to the various hamlets, giving medical and dental aid to all comers. The reception was at first cool, but by the time the main PHILCAG body arrived, the people were already on friendly terms with the Filipino soldiers who had come to Viet Nam not to fight but to do good.

The third group, which went to Viet Nam on 9 September, consisted of 60 men—drivers, cooks, and maintenance experts. This group was led by Captain Jose M. Lizardo, Public Relations Officer of the PHILCAG.

On 14 September, General Tobias arrived with his staff. Two days later, the first large contingent arrived in Cam Ranh Bay. There were 741 officers and men, under Colonel Ernesto Achacoso, who were transported from Manila in Philippine Navy LST's. From Cam Ranh they were airlifted to Tay Ninh.

On 26 September, the Deputy Commander of the PHILCAG, Colonel Carreon, arrived with a group of doctors, nurses, and artillery-men. They traveled by air from Manila to Tay Ninh, via Saigon.

Finally from the 15th to the 19th of October, the remaining troops (over 1,000 in number) were airlifted directly from the Manila International Airport to the Tay Ninh airfield aboard American military transports (C-130's), which made the three-hour crossing back and forth for five days. In charge of this contingent was Colonel Eduardo Garcia, Chief of Staff.

Because the PHILCAG arrived in Viet Nam at the height of the rainy season, the task of constructing the Base Camp was particularly difficult. The men had to work day and night, often in mud and rain. Tents were set up, and ditches were dug for bunkers, protected by sand-bags. Within a few weeks, there were enough bunkers for every unit to run to in case of armed attack. This explains the fact that on the several occasions that the Base Camp has been shelled by the Viet Cong, extensive damage was done to the tents, but the PHILCAG personnel suffered very few (and very minor) casualties.<sup>3</sup>

The work of the PHILCAG is many-sided, but its main projects are four. The largest project is the clearing of a large forest (called Thanh Dien) and converting it into a resettlement area for some 2,000 families displaced by the war. The second largest project is the construction of roads and bridges in Tay Ninh Province: this is a help both to the civilian population and to the military operations. The third project of the PHILCAG is the daily program of medical, dental and hygienic help extended to the individual hamlets of Tay Ninh province. These three projects are all undertaken by the PHILCAG proper.

The fourth project used to be undertaken by the PHILCON, now integrated in the work of the PHILCAG. This is

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<sup>3</sup> When the PHILCAG Base Camp was shelled during the night of January 28-29, there were four casualties, although all of them minor. Among those slightly wounded were Father Milanes and Dr. Saul. Captain Rueda's bed was directly hit, but he himself was safely in Saigon, making the Cursillo.

the work of the Filipino surgical teams in various provincial hospitals of South Viet Nam.

#### SURGICAL TEAMS

A Surgical Team is ordinarily composed of two doctors (of whom at least one is a surgeon), two nurses, and several medical technicians. Because of the extreme lack of surgeons (and in fact of medical personnel of all kinds) the Vietnamese provincial hospitals are understaffed. The Filipino Surgical Team takes over the entire surgical department of a hospital, being responsible for all operations as well as for the care of the patients in the surgical wards.

There is one Surgical Team in Tay Ninh, and several in My Tho and in Binh Duong, and one rural team in Hau Nghia. As of 30 June 1967 these Surgical Teams had treated a total of 99,320 cases, of which 1,532 were major operations. Their total mortality was 126. These figures include the patients in the Station Hospital within the PHILCAG Base Camp, under Colonel Castillo.

In My Tho, capital of Dinh Tuong province, the 68-year-old French-built hospital is crowded. The four Filipino doctors, four nurses and five technicians attend likewise to outpatients who number between 180 to 200 daily. The hospital in Phu Cuong (capital of Binh Duong province) is likewise crowded. Many of the patients are war casualties, suffering from blast injuries. In addition to the work in the hospital, the Filipinos also attend to the refugees who are living in tents in a new refugee center some ten minutes away from the hospital. Three times a week, they visit the Vietnamese "returnees" (i.e. Viet Cong who have surrendered) in the Chieu Hoi camp, as well as in the Catholic refugee camps.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> My informant concerning My Tho was my old friend Dr. Joaquin Javier who holds the rank of lieutenant in the air force. Concerning Binh Duong, my informant was Lt. Erlinda Batilo, a nurse. Dr. Javier is from Bangar, La Union; Miss Batilo is from Barotak Nuevo, Iloilo, and is a graduate of the nursing school of the Central Philippine University of Iloilo. Both of them went to Viet Nam with the PHILCON, and have since been integrated into the PHILCAG.

One of the Filipino medical-surgical teams is stationed at Bao Trai, a small village which serves as the capital for the rice-producing province of Hau Nghia. The Filipino doctors, dentists, and medical attendants work among the rural population and in the provincial dispensary, assisting the local *medecin chef*. Every day long lines of patients come for treatment. The danger from Viet Cong attack is so great and the living quarters are so poor that only male personnel are sent to Hau Nghia. No women nurses are sent there.<sup>5</sup>

In the provincial hospital of Tay Ninh City, however, the Filipino personnel have been given more decent quarters. The danger from Viet Cong attack has forced the present team-leader (Captain Ray Vito, M.D.) to have air-raid shelters constructed. At the time of my first visit to Tay Ninh (January 1967), the surgical team then in residence (headed by Captain Manuel C. Reyes, M.D.) had treated over 4,000 cases, of which 743 were emergency operations.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I visited Hau Nghia by helicopter in August 1967, accompanied by Major Fidel Castro who had been assigned by General Tobias to organize my trip. We had a very interesting visit with the Province Chief, Lt. Col. Ma San Nhon, a very energetic administrator who is also a regimental commander in the Vietnamese Army. He had studied at Fort Benning in the United States and had taught at a special services school in Okinawa. The *medecin-chef* or provincial health-officer was Le Van Trang. Both he and the province chief were very appreciative of the help rendered by the Filipino medical personnel, namely, Capt. Amador Ragotero M.D. of Cabanatuan, Capt. Servando Kuizon M.D. of Cebu, Capt. Reynaldo Agoncillo D.D.S. of Taal, Sgt. Valeriano Braca of Rosales, Sgt. Rogelio Triño of Tigbauan, and Sgt. Pedro Sanchez of Guadalupe.

<sup>6</sup> One case occurred while I was there which seemed to me particularly dramatic. A child had been born without an anus. It had of course no chance of survival unless an operation was performed—two operations in fact, for a compensatory opening had developed in the esophagus, with the danger that fluid from the mouth or stomach could get into the lungs. The need for an operation was explained to the parents: and then, as there were not sufficient facilities in the provincial hospital, Dr. Reyes brought the child to the Base Hospital of the American 196th Brigade. There, far into the night, six doctors (five American and one Filipino) worked in two teams upon the one-day old baby. And then late at night, Dr. Reyes and the Filipino nurses returned to his quarters being conveyed there by a PHILCAG

The Filipino nurses, for their part, have an added opportunity of doing good, besides that of attending directly to patients. They are assisted in the wards by Vietnamese nurses who have received only a six-months' summary instruction. Contact with the better-trained Filipino nurses (whose training lasts from four to five years) would therefore be of considerable help to the Vietnamese nurses.

#### MEDICAL AND DENTAL AID TO THE HAMLETS

Far more colorful, and perhaps no less taxing, is the work of the Civic Action Medical Teams that go to a different hamlet every day. These teams include doctors and dentists, as well as a seven-man combo headed by Sergeant Ricardo Perez of Toledo, Cebu, which is perhaps as good a musical group as any these Islands have produced. The arrival of the Civic Action Teams at a hamlet is a festive occasion. The combo starts playing, the "psychological warfare experts" set up their stands, the doctors set up their tables with their supplies of medicine, while the dentists set up their chairs across the way. By noon they will have treated close to a hundred patients. There is a long lull at the siesta hour, for the siesta is sacrosanct to the Vietnamese. Then the bustle starts again, and by closing time in the afternoon, another hundred patients shall have been treated.

Even statistically the work of these five Civic Action Teams in Tay Ninh province is impressive. By January 1967 they had visited 50 hamlets, 30 of which were visited more than once. They had treated a total of 66,327 patients.

By July 1967, they had treated a total of 80,357 medical and 35,899 dental cases.

If to these figures are added the number of patients treated by the Surgical Teams in the hospitals of four provinces, we have a grand total of over two hundred thousand Vietnamese patients treated by Filipino medical and dental personnel. This

armored carrier. Two days later, when I was leaving Tay Ninh, I inquired about the child, and was told that it was still holding its own. The child eventually died despite the noble effort to save its life.

alone represents a major contribution from one Asian country to another during a time of dire need.<sup>7</sup>

#### BABY BATHING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

There is more to these visits of the Civic Action Teams than the medical and dental treatment of patients. One very amusing project of the PHILCAG is the baby-bathing program. The project was begun with some trepidation and on a very small scale. Some textile companies in the Philippines had donated children's clothing for distribution by the PHILCAG in Viet Nam. It was suggested to General Tobias that this could be used as a means of inculcating certain hygienic practices: it was therefore proposed that the clothing would be given to children under six, only on condition that the children should first undergo a thorough bathing administered by soldiers of the PHILCAG. As it was not known how the Vietnamese would react to the project, it was tried in one hamlet with great discretion. Warm water was brought in a motorized water-tank, along with basins, towels and plenty of soap. Those who were thus bathed were provided with new clothing. The experiment was an instant success. The mothers loved the idea and watched their children being bathed. They even asked that infants-in-arms be likewise bathed—a request that was granted provided the mothers did the bathing. Many visitors to the PHILCAG in Tay Ninh have watched with great fascination the spectacle of Filipino soldiers in uniform bathing, one after another, a long line of Vietnamese urchins.

Other projects have likewise been introduced. Filipino soldiers have taught the ex-Viet Cong returned how to make

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<sup>7</sup> The physicians whose work I saw in the hamlets included Drs. Angel Torio, Ernesto Madarang, and Eduardo Saul. The dentists included Dr. Julianito Manalo of Candelaria, Quezon; Dr. Guillermo Sazon of Castillejos, Zambales; Dr. Domingo Cuevas of Lubang, Occidental Mindoro; and Dr. Gregorio Ramirez of Maragondon, Cavite. All of these have the rank of Captain, except Dr. Ramirez who is a Sergeant: he has been longest in the service—17 years. The two team leaders who have furnished me the most information were Captain Eduardo Ermita of Balayan, Batangas (whom I first met in Saigon and later in Tay Ninh), and Captain Alfeo Rillera of Naguilian, La Union, whose teams I kept meeting in the various hamlets.

cement toilet bowls and pipes for rural use. These are made while the villagers watch. The completed products are then distributed and installed in the various homes.

There is also a very popular side-show which we might perhaps call "Operation San Miguel". Every week the San Miguel Corporation of the Philippines donates 1,200 cases of San Miguel Beer to the PHILCAG. Instead of returning the empty bottles to Manila (a costly operation) and instead of throwing them away, these bottles are collected and brought to the hamlets by the Civic Action Teams. While the combo plays and while the doctors and dentists treat their patients, a PHILCAG enlisted man demonstrates how these beer bottles could be converted into drinking glasses. A fire is lighted, a wire hoop is heated, and then the neck is knocked off from the bottle. What is left is a very neat drinking glass—still bearing the indelible label "San Miguel". There must be some hundred thousand of these drinking glasses among the hamlets of Tay Ninh. In advertising terms, this must be worth a considerable amount.

During these visits to the hamlet, the Filipino soldiers fraternize on the most friendly terms with the villagers. The measure of their acceptance is the fact that, while they have on many occasions shared their own food with the villagers, the villagers have also on many occasions invited them to partake of theirs.

This friendship between PHILCAG and the Vietnamese peasantry is encouraged by a program which General Tobias calls "PHILCAG to People Program". Each unit of the PHILCAG has adopted one particular hamlet and extends to the people of that hamlet every kind of aid that can be given. This means seeking out their sick and bringing them to hospital in PHILCAG vehicles. It also means helping to mend fences, build school houses, etc. In some hamlets prefabricated buildings have been put up (prefabricated in Pasay and the parts shipped to Viet Nam) for school houses or government headquarters. The work is done by the PHILCAG, with the aid of the villagers.

## THE ENGINEER AND CONSTRUCTION BATTALION

I confess to a certain feeling of envy when I watched the engineers at work. In the Philippines we have become used to very slow work or no work at all: it takes years to build a bridge, months to repair a road, and many roads deteriorate for lack of repair. This explains the chronic dissatisfaction that our people feel towards government and is at the bottom of our poor morale. In Viet Nam things are done promptly and well. Buildings go up in days; roads are repaired in weeks.

This has led some people to ask: Why should the PHILCAG work in Viet Nam? Why not do the work in our country instead? The answer of course is that the PHILCAG would only be too glad to do the work in the Philippines if politics—and the constant lack of money or equipment or supplies—only allowed them to do it.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that, while over-all supervision is done by senior officers of long experience, the individual projects are headed by young engineers fresh from college. In the town of Long Hoa, the road network and the other projects are done by a team headed by Lieutenant Rolando Ancheta of Bacolod, a graduate of the Mapua Institute of Technology, who has been in the army only three years and a half. In Tai Hoa, a 20-meter-wide road has been constructed across the rice fields, leading to a projected bridge to be thrown across the Tay Ninh River. The amount of filling required is enormous: at one point the ground level has had to be raised four meters. The entire project is done by a thirty-man team headed by Lieutenant Amerigo Ariosa of Cebu, who had studied in the vocational schools of that city prior to his entrance in the Philippine Military Academy from which he graduated in 1964.

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<sup>8</sup> The second largest component of the PHILCAG (next to security) is the Engineer Construction Battalion, headed by Colonel Ernesto Achacoço, of Zambales, a veteran of 17 years' service in the army. He has taught in the Command and Staff College of the Philippine Armed Forces as head of the engineering department. His operations officer is Major Ricardo Albano. The logistics support officer (of entire PHILCAG) is Major Mario Buan.



But the biggest engineering project of the PHILCAG is that connected with Thanh Dien forest, to which we shall now turn.

#### THANH DIEN FOREST

Thanh Dien forest (pronounced Tan Jen) was a dense tropical jungle covering an area of some 4,500 hectares. It had little value as timberland, but its potential value as agricultural land was enormous. It was also strategically important, for it was very close to the capital city of Tay Ninh, and many of the villages and hamlets were situated on the edge of the forest. For this reason, it had been an effective hiding place for the Viet Cong.

Hence the need to clear it, and to convert the jungles into agricultural lands for the homeless families dislocated by the war.

The task of clearing this forest and of creating a resettlement center had been entrusted to the PHILCAG. Every day the bulldozers pushed the jungles farther back, and as the area was cleared, the engineers moved in with their other equipment to create the roads and lanes of the new community. This community now consists of a residential area of one square kilometer, with provision for church sites, shopping centers, government buildings, and park land. The rest has been divided into residential lots of 300 square meters, to be distributed to some 2,000 homeless families from other provinces. Beyond this residential area, each settler will be given several hectares of farm land. Thus, what was jungle six months ago may be a flourishing and productive community in a few years.

It is a great project, but it is being paid for not only by Filipino sweat but also with Filipino blood. It is in Thanh Dien forest that most of the casualties have occurred. Six days before my first visit to Viet Nam, Sergeant Domingo Molina was shot through the helmet by a sniper; he died instantly. Shortly after my latest visit to Viet Nam (September 1967) two PHILCAG men were ambushed near the

entrance to Thanh Dien forest. Their jeep was wrecked and they died instantly. Other casualties have occurred within the forest itself, mainly from land mines and booby traps.

Yet, even in Thanh Dien, there has been a perceptible change. When I first visited the forest in January 1967, everyone had to wear steel helmets and armored vests ("flak jackets", they are sometimes called). The area bristled with riflemen, tanks, armored carriers and mortar emplacements. Six months later, in August 1967, I could hardly believe my eyes as the helicopter circled for a landing. What had been a dense forest was now a huge settled area, with streets at right angles; each family living in a rough cottage, surrounded by a sizable yard, sufficient for a well, a truck garden, and a poultry or pig pen.

Captain Jaime Echeverria, who had been in charge of security arrangements during my first visit, had taken me in an armored carrier, forcibly cutting a path through the thick jungles. The path which we were the first to break through is now a highway, called Molina Avenue, after Sergeant Domingo Molina who was the first to die in the area. A marker has been set up in his honor, at the head of the avenue.

Captain Echeverria calls his security command the Bayanihan Unit. And in fact there is a "bayanihan" atmosphere at work in Thanh Dien. As the jungle underbrush was burned and the larger trees were felled, the Vietnamese peasants came swarming in droves, in oxcarts or tricycles or bicycles or on foot, to cut up and gather firewood. There was a somewhat amusing contrast between their light casual attire (the traditional two-piece suit and conical hat) and our heavy costume of jungle boots, metal helmets, and flak jackets. That was perhaps the essence of guerrilla warfare. Who could tell, among the hundreds who came in oxcarts or tricycles, if one or other did not carry a grenade, or a booby trap, or a land mine?

We left the forest shortly after 3 o'clock one afternoon, and at 5:30 I was saying Mass in the Base Chapel when the telephone in the sacristy rang. Father Milanés rushed in to answer

it, and then rushed out. I learned subsequently that he had been summoned to attend to several American casualties of a Special Forces squad who had been injured not too far from where we had been that afternoon. Four of the Americans were killed. Father Milanese (the PHILCAG chaplain) and the American chaplain of the 196th Brigade had a working arrangement whereby the chaplain nearest to the scene should be called to attend to Catholic soldiers in case of emergency.

#### THANH TRUNG HAMLET

Near the edge of the forest is a small hamlet called Thanh Trung. It is one of the hamlets that comprise the village of Thanh Dien after which the forest is called. It is in such villages and hamlets that one can see the effect upon the people of the civic action work of the Filipino soldiers.

I visited Thanh Trung on three occasions. The first was with General Tobias and his staff. It was a formal visit. The other two times were more casual allowing for more informal conversations with the residents through an interpreter.<sup>9</sup>

In Thanh Trung is a school house which was in a state of disrepair when the PHILCAG first arrived. The classrooms were being used, despite the fact that they had no walls. The PHILCAG repaired the sagging roof, put in louvered walls and windows and doors. They constructed a slide and a seesaw in the yard and fixed up the fence. Across the road they put up a prefabricated building for use as village and hamlet headquarters.

When the PHILCAG first came to Thanh Trung, the people kept aloof—doubtless suspicious of their intentions. Today

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<sup>9</sup> The interpreter was Staff Sergeant H. Long, 26 years old, a native of Saigon and a painter who had attended the Fine Arts College of that city. Drafted into the Vietnamese army, he studied English in the Armed Forces Language School, and was attached to the PHILCAG as interpreter. I was accompanied on one visit by Captain Floro Alibanggo of Guihulngan, Negros, as security officer, and by Mr. Palermo Soriano of Manila, who had gone to Viet Nam with the Cursillo team and who kindly offered his services as photographer.

one cannot go into Thanh Trung without being mobbed by the children who hold one's hand and follow one about. The people who at first merely watched while the PHILCAG worked, gradually began to come and offer their services. They helped drive in nails, or took up spades to dig draining ditches.

I was struck by a piece of information given me by the Village Chief (Phan Than Koi) and by the Hamlet Chief (Trung Van Ton). They said (as translated to me by Mr. Long the interpreter): "The Viet Cong used to come and make us pay taxes to them, or forced us to dig trenches for them." The Filipinos never asked them to do anything, yet they were digging ditches of their own accord to help the Filipinos in their work. In Asian terms, they had been shamed into working for their own hamlets by these foreigners from the Philippines.

But there is another thing I learned: Filipinos are no longer considered foreigners. "We have the same color of skin," is the way they put it.

Incidentally, I asked the question, "How do you like the Americans?" The answer was diplomatic: "The Americans have done much for us: but we like the Filipinos because they do not fight."

But one man burst out: "We are afraid of the Americans because they apprehend Vietnamese who are not Viet Cong." That is of course a built-in difficulty in guerrilla warfare. The Americans are daily losing their lives for the Vietnamese: they have to arrest those who seem suspicious or are found in suspicious places. But how does one distinguish between the Viet Cong and the harmless Vietnamese peasant?

There was another odd thing. Among the hundreds who flocked to Thanh Dien, one saw women or old men or children. There were no young men between the ages of 15 and 30. They were perhaps with the Army. Or with the Viet Cong.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORK

In our frequent discussions at the end of the day in Tay Ninh or in Saigon, I put several questions to General Tobias

or to members of his staff. One question was this: Granting that the PHILCAG are doing a great deal of good from a humanitarian point of view, what political advantage, if any, is accomplished by all this in the conduct of the anti-Communist war?

They answered by quoting Mao Tse Tung: guerrillas are like fish that can thrive only in friendly waters. The work of PHILCAG helps the people and wins them over to the side of constitutional government. It stiffens their resistance to the Viet Cong. The waters thus become unfriendly and the guerrillas cannot survive.

I also asked about morale. The morale of the PHILCAG is obviously high. How explain this?

General Tobias' answer showed considerable wisdom: "Some commanders try to keep up morale by indulging their troops with extra passes, extra privileges, and such things. These do not really help. Morale is high when there is a sense of achievement."

Perhaps one can add another factor which General Tobias did not mention, but which he, in his own person, eminently exemplifies: Morale is high when there is a sense of direction.

The PHILCAG personnel—a least those whom I met—do have a sense of direction. Many of them have a very highly developed sense of compassion, and all whom I have met have a very high sense of civic duty.

In the case of many, this sense of civic duty and of compassion is really a sense of Christian charity. They are Catholics. They have an excellent chaplain, Captain Pedro Milanes of La Union. General Tobias himself and many of his officers and men have made the "Cursillo"—or Little Seminar in Christian Living. This has given a spirit of Christian charity to all their civic work.

It was General Tobias and Colonel Zagala and the other "cursillistas" in the PHILCAG who brought the Cursillo Movement to Viet Nam. Through their efforts, an American Vin-

centian, Father Robert Crawford, became interested. He in turn got the Archbishops of Saigon and Hue and the Bishop of Da Nang interested. Upon invitation from Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh of Saigon, a Filipino Cursillo team of three priests and fifteen laymen (headed by Bishop Alejandro Olalia of Lipa) went to Saigon and gave the first Cursillo in January, followed by a second team that went in March 1967. A Vietnamese Jesuit priest, Father Augustine Ly, volunteered his services as interpreter, so that the talks given in English could be picked up through the earphones in simultaneous Vietnamese translation.

Since then, the Cursillo has been given several times in Vietnamese, and there is every reason to hope that the movement will spread to other dioceses in Viet Nam. The Archbishop of Saigon himself gives several of the meditations, and it is interesting to note that the text of these meditations, had been translated into Vietnamese by a Vietnamese lady journalist, who herself is not a Christian but a Buddhist, Miss Le Hong.

The Philippine Ambassador in Viet Nam, Luis Moreno Salcedo, had an amused comment on all these proceedings, of which, incidentally, he was one of the most enthusiastic promoters. He said: "Soldiers are ordinarily instruments of death: but our Filipino soldiers in Viet Nam have come not to destroy but to build."

Perhaps the best commentary—though indirect—on the PHILCAG work was the remark made by Colonel Ho Duc Truong, Province Chief of Tay Ninh. He had had a business meeting with General Knowles and his staff of the 196th U.S. Brigade, and with General Tobias and his PHILCAG staff. Afterwards he invited the entire company to luncheon, to which also the present writer was invited. In a lull of the conversation, and apropos of nothing in particular, Colonel Truong turned to General Tobias and said: "You know, General, for the first time in twenty years, the people in the hamlets around Thanh Dien have begun to enjoy family life."

General Tobias replied, "Colonel, will you please repeat what you have just said so Father Bernad could hear it?"

I heard the remark, and I here record it. It seems to me the best commentary on what the allied forces have done in Tay Ninh.

There is another point perhaps worth recording. It was an unusual anniversary, celebrated in an unusual manner in Tay Ninh.

On 27 August 1955, three Filipinos, members of Operation Brotherhood, drowned in a river some distance from Tay Ninh City. One of them was a physician, Dr. Jose Aleos. A second was a nurse, Miss Adela Pimentel. And a third was an interpreter, Miss Yvonne Ocampo, who was of mixed parentage (Filipino father, Vietnamese mother). They were returning in a boat from a medical visit, when their boat capsized and they were drowned. The vietnamese authorities at the time erected a marker on the river bank near Long Yen Village, where they had drowned.

Twelve years later, on 27 August 1967, it was my privilege to officiate and to preach at the twelfth anniversary of their death. It was a Sunday. The parish church in Tay Ninh City was packed. The Vietnamese Catholic residents were present, as were several hundred officers and men of the PHILCAG, headed by General Tobias. The Mass was concelebrated by the PHILCAG chaplain (Captain Milanes) and myself. After the Mass, the solemn absolution was sung by the parish priest, Father Peter Le Van Phat, assisted by the parish choir. Then we were conveyed to the Tay Ninh airport where American military helicopters took us over the spot where twelve years before the drowning had occurred. We could see the marker, but as it was deep in Viet Cong territory we could not land. Instead the helicopters circled several times over the spot while floral offerings were dropped over the marker and upon the river.

It was a dramatic gesture: and in part also ironic. For while we were engaged in a peaceful act of piety in honor of three members of Operation Brotherhood who had died in line of duty, the gunmen in our helicopters had to have their guns at the ready. We were flying very low, much lower than

was safe in Viet Cong territory, and it was conceivable that we could be shot at from the ground.

We returned safely without incident. But the experience was not without its lesson. In Viet Nam (as elsewhere) even a mission of mercy (or in this case a mission of piety) must often be done at personal risk.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE PHILCAG

What is the future of the PHILCAG? It is difficult to say. On the one hand, there is a desire on the part of the Government to maintain our civic aid to Viet Nam. As this is being written, there is already in training a contingent of volunteers who will go to Viet Nam to replace part of the present personnel. Heading the new contingent is Colonel Ceferino Carreon who will eventually replace General Tobias as commander of the PHILCAG.

On the other hand, there is a determined effort, both in Congress and in the press, to prevent new appropriations for the continued stay of the PHILCAG in Viet Nam.

Some of the objections to the PHILCAG are merely petty and are unworthy of those who make them. It is said, for instance, that the Filipino soldiers in Tay Ninh are enjoying themselves in air-conditioned bunkers. It is also said that they are making themselves "rich" in Viet Nam. It is obvious that those who make these remarks have not been to Tay Ninh—or to Bao Trai, or Quang Tri.

But some of the objections are serious and deserve serious consideration. It is, for instance, urged that we can not really afford 35 million pesos a year, which is what is required to maintain the PHILCAG.

It is ironic in this connection to note that members of the United States Congress have contemptuously referred to the PHILCAG as "mercenaries" because — allegedly — the Filipinos are in Viet Nam at United States expense. This allegation — besides being rude — is also inaccurate. The Filipino soldiers in Viet Nam receive their pay not from Uncle Sam but from



the Philippine Government. It is true, however, that the *operational* cost of their work in Viet Nam is being paid by the United States. Their engineering and military equipment and even their food and lodging is all paid for by the Free World Organization, which in turn gets its money from the United States. The situation there, as has been pointed out earlier in this report, is similar to the "bayanihan" work in Philippine villages, where everyone comes to help in the planting and the harvesting of each other's rice crop. Nobody gets paid for his work, but it is not considered "mercenary" to take one's meals at the expense of the owner of the field which is being planted or harvested.

In the long run, we must make up our own minds about Viet Nam. Either it is worth our while to go to help an Asian neighbor, or it is not. If it is, then we should go, even if it should cost us 35 million a year. If it is not worth our while to help the Vietnamese, then we should pull out of Viet Nam.

In no case should we go to Viet Nam merely because the Americans want us there. Apparently, they don't.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For much of the background information in this article, I am grateful to General Tobias and his G-2 staff for placing at my disposal the information available in the staff office. To General Tobias likewise I am grateful for his hospitality both in Tay Ninh and in Saigon, and for his kindness during my entire visit. I am also grateful for many kindnesses to the following: to Ambassador Luis Moreno Salcedo, to Father Milanes, to Captain Andaya, to Captains Zosimo Carlos and Teodoro Directo (who shared their bunker with me), to Captain Albano (who accompanied me on my trips as photographer), to Captain Ermita, to Colonels Garcia and Carreon, to Major Fidel Ramos, to Sergeant Pablo Dalec who drove my jeep, to Majors Castro and Iumin, and Captains Echeverria, Alibango, Castro, and the two Lizardos. Also a special word of thanks to Captain Jose Magno, the General's aide-de-camp, whose insights into the Vietnamese situation and to that in Central Luzon I found especially illuminating. My trip to Viet Nam was made possible by the kindness of the staff of Operation Brotherhood, in particular Oscar Arellano, Bonifacio Gilego, and Rolando Concepcion. I must also confess that in the present article I have incorporated some matter that had previously been published in my articles which appeared in the *Weekly Nation* and in four installments in *The Manila Chronicle*.