

Many in our country were unaware that American civilians went off to war in Vietnam as well as those who served in the military. They might know that we had an embassy functioning in Saigon during wartime but not that our government 'fielded' its civilian employees out to the country's provinces and districts. Employees of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) were directly involved in a pacification program designed to extend the presence and influence of the South Vietnamese central government out to the rural areas of the country. One of those civilian employees writes of his harrowing experience during TET while involved in carrying out his civilian responsibilities in a province.

## **TET ATTACK**

**Chau Doc, Vietnam, 1968**

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**Time in Vietnam: September 1966 Thru August 1969**

**Location in Vietnam: Chau Doc Province--September 1966 Thru May 1968**

**Saigon--July 1968 Thru Aug 1969**

**Employer: United States Agency for International Development (USAID)**

**Positions held: Chau Doc---Assistant Provincial Representative**

**Saigon---USAID Region IV Desk Officer**

I believe the attack started January 31st 1968. Chau Doc Province was located in the Mekong Delta spanning both the Mekong and Bassac Rivers and shared a common border with Cambodia. The capital city was Chau Phu only 2 miles or so from the Cambodian border itself.

Myself and three or four other USAID staff had been following the developments of VC attacks as they moved southwards from the DMZ to just North of Saigon. However, since The State Department had designated our province as "pacified," as was most of the Delta except for sporadic incidents every so often throughout the region, we weren't overly concerned. Surely the VC wouldn't be able to confront and sustain themselves for very long-not this far distant from Saigon!!!

I had spent my usual evening at the Special Forces B-42 compound celebrating the coming of the Vietnamese Lunar New Year--TET! In past years it was rather customary for both sides to agree not to fully engage one another during this holiday and observe a "gentleman's" cease fire for 3-4 days to celebrate with friends and relatives. It was expected by us as well, From B-42 Special Forces Detachment searching the sky one could see red tracer bullets, fireworks and hear small arms fire shooting haphazardly into the dark evening sky. Yes, I even fired off a few rounds myself outside the compound feeling pretty good about myself and the possibility of a few days laid back enjoying quiet time during this most important and valued "local holiday"period.

About 11 pm I drove my International Scout back to the USAID living compound behind the Province Chief's house and probably had another local "33 Beer" or two and went to bed with the sounds of joyful gun shots going off all around the city.

It must have been around 03:30 hrs when I was shaken awake by many loud erratic explosions followed by the staccato-like sounds of repeated ack ack ack gunfire very close to our living quarters. Definitely the noise was more frequent and direct than the friendly fire of just a few hours ago. I sensed something didn't feel right. I had a small but very nice trailer to myself as did two other USAID staff. I could see out through my small windows that the sky was alight with flares and tracer rounds not only upwards but horizontally as well illuminating the area around me. Constant gunfire, explosions, flares, tracers, the smell of cordite throughout the area behind the Province Chief's house--a prime target for any VC attack for certain. I grabbed my trusty Walther PPK pistol and cautiously peeked out through my window to see one or two other USAID people also living in the compound quickly and erratically run to the semi below ground stone provincial guard watch tower near my trailer and I, hunched over, quickly followed. The guard house could hold 4/5 people at most but we were only two I think. It was well built and had two long narrow gun openings facing away towards the town's athletic field and a local housing area of flimsy wooden houses and thatched shacks. We watched all the firings back and forth, back and forth between the VC and the Vietnamese soldiers in their compound beside ours. The local soldiers were taken by complete surprise by the attack because they had their mind set on relaxation and a general stand down during TET. Not so much the VC. We had no radio contact with any American or Vietnamese at all during this time so we were pretty much on our own with one handgun and one semi automatic carbine rifle. We learned later that the CO of the Special Forces compound ordered his men not to leave their fortified compound under any circumstances. They had the military training, certainly not us. We were on our own!!

At daybreak I saw what appeared to be some VC running across the athletic field in front of us wearing what appeared to be light pink arm bands as identifiers. Why they directed their attention on the army compound rather than the province chief's compound next door where we were hiding is a mystery but, obviously, I'm glad they did.

We watched and waited and listened for any signal of a let up as the VC generally broke off contact at sunrise but this was continuing much longer than expected. What was going on???? We had no way to contact anyone externally to enquire or get an update on the situation around the city. Oh Boy!!!

Along about 8 am or so we heard a vehicle barrelling into our housing area coming to an a screeching stop and we peeked out through the small entrance way to see a US jeep with two Americans aboard yelling at us to hop in and they would take us to the "Safe House" which was closer than B-42 and better defended by their forces. I jumped in shot

gun and the others jumped in the back next to the navy Seal manning the 50 caliber machine gun . We turned quickly around and headed to the main gate entrance of the Province Chief's compound. The gate guard was reluctant to expose himself with all the erratic incoming fire but the jeep driver (our rescuer) and eventual Medal of Honor recipient, Drew Dix, yelled at him in profane English and a bit of bastardized Vietnamese to open it or he'd be history. Exiting the compound we sped down the river road toward the "Safe House" on the river's edge. I turned around to see my two colleagues in the back and suddenly noticed the guy on the 50 over my left shoulder was a navy Seal with his face blackened as camouflage. Drew was regular army but the guy in back definitely was a navy Seal. They were working together to get us out to comparable safety down river a bit. Drew leaned over to me and shouted that the VC were in the hospital we had to pass on our way so be prepared for anything. We were going like a bat out of hell to hopefully take them by surprise. Suddenly I saw a pinkish shirt image in the window on the 2nd floor who I think had us in his sights. I fired off a few useless rounds from the Walther then I was suddenly deafened by the loud roar of the 50 caliber over my shoulder which chopped out huge holes in the French built hospital and of course made the person or persons disappear from sight as we scurried by safely towards the "Safe House" on the river.

Once inside the compound gate I made myself scarce as I knew that all the real military types had little or no understanding of why we civilians were involved in Vietnam at all. It was a military operation not an appropriate place for Peace Corps types even though we had, over time, other civilians, USAID nurses, International Peace Corps(IVS) volunteers and eight to ten US government civilian employees in province trying to nation- build with authorized government programs such as teacher recruitment, building 3 room schools, teacher training, youth and sports improvement in the local schools, agricultural improvement in long stem rice yields, animal husbandry improvements for farm animals, road widening and water well improvements both to get local products easier and quicker to market and also to provide access to cleaner more reliable sources of water for the villagers and their livestock. All of these activities and more were carried out together with local provincial Vietnamese Government employees after many meetings with village elders to get their approval and support for these programs. Together we were trying to win over their Hearts and Minds to support, accept and sustain the Vietnamese central Government under often precarious wartime conditions.

Shortly after I arrived at the "Safe House" the lone American USAID nurse was rescued from her house after being surrounded alone both inside and outside for hours by the VC in a daring assault by a US led local team and quickly brought by jeep to the "Safe House" where I was.

Around noon we learned that they were bringing in an American casualty seriously wounded near the town center. The nurse jumped into action immediately and tended to his head wounds as best she could with what was available which wasn't much. Since

we had no way to bring in a chopper because all were tending to situations in other Delta locations more seriously affected than ours, it was decided to bring him down the Bassac River to the neighboring province (Long Xuyen) and hopefully after the three hour trip there would be a chopper available to medevac him to a hospital.

The nurse and I were shuttled out to an ammunition barge in mid river by boat together with the injured person for our trip down river. I was to remain in LX if I/we got there and was tasked to bring back needed food supplies and building material after the attack was repelled to help rebuild damaged sections of the city. Here we were. She and I. The barge was loaded with various ammo supplies for other special operations which were underway at the time. The barge, I was told, was solid as it had a double hull and could withstand most incoming rounds, so not to worry. Neither she nor I had experience in these types of situations. Plus we were going to head along a part of the Bassac River which we weren't sure if it was secure or not. Note: Just before leaving, one of the PBRs (Patrol Boat River) returned to the ammo barge to take on more ammo to continue his up river firefight with the other PBRs. I noticed the helmsman of the boat had blood streaming from his ear and running down the side of his shirt and he shouted to me that he had taken an RPG round near the bow and the concussion I assume caused the ear to shatter and bleed. Nonetheless he reloaded with ammo, waved goodbye with thumb up and took off back up river to rejoin his team which was taking heavy fire from both sides of the narrow river just a few hundred hundred yards away. As he revved up the engine I noticed the American flag flapping from side to side on the back of the boat as it rode proudly back up river to join his comrades in other PBRs in the ongoing combat.

Every time I hear the national anthem since that day I have a visual image of this scene and it has stayed with me for almost 50 years. ( This event has had the utmost on me up to this very day!!!! )

The trip down river was uneventful with no further incidents. Upon landing and off loading the severely wounded Seal plus a Vietnamese woman covered with motor oil to help control her severely burned skin, the Seal was taken to the province athletic field in Long Xuyen so that a chopper could be brought in to take him to the closest Navy hospital. Unfortunately, I learned later, he didn't make. I want to stress that the civilian USAID nurse's medical intervention during that 5 to 6 hour period most assuredly kept him alive until he reached a hospital.

Not surprisingly the USAID nurse, deciding her skills were probably better needed back in Chau Doc, returned to the conflict on the barge to help others who might have needed her expertise. However, I was instructed by my province senior advisor (my civilian boss) to remain in Long Xuyen as long as necessary to arrange transportation for reconstruction building materials like tin roofing sheets, bags of cement and construction rebar, cooking oil and bulgar wheat and a few tents to help rebuild or patch

up temporary housing and basic food stuffs for those needing it after the attack was hopefully put down.

Three days later after the VC was pushed back, I was told by the province senior advisor in Long Xuyen, I was to be given use of three deuce and a half trucks by the civilian USAID staff and with a full load of supplies plus three of their local employees, I began the return trip to my province by road. Each province in Vietnam had a USAID warehouse to store and supply many types of material and food stuffs to assist in local development and rehabilitation activities when needed. I was, to say, not a happy camper on the three hour return trip. There was only one main road and I was on it alone after a major enemy attack. I was the only non Vietnamese for 40 or so miles. Little weapons experience. Three locals whom I didn't know or work with before. I wondered just where did their allegiance lie especially now after the attack, and I had no idea as to where any of the enemy could be at any given time during their withdrawal from Chau Doc. The workers by the way repeatedly threw off many tin roofing sheets as we moved along the road probably to their relatives and friends who were not at all directly affected by the turmoil just an hour or so up the road. I finally arrived back in town with about 60 percent of the material I had started out with but, thank heaven, still in one piece. The remaining supplies were immediately placed in our warehouse which was still standing and then the three local employees drove their trucks back to Long Xuyen.

Such was one example of a US civilian government employee's experience---- his local action, reaction and interaction during a very dangerous three to four day period during the Vietnam War in January/February 1968.

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