

Montagnards Escape Cong

Story: SP4 James J. Angley

Photos: SP4 Jerry Kringsel

The fallacy of "all's fair in war" can be irrefutably proven by any one of 118 mentally and physically abused Montagnards who recently waved Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) safe conduct passes to helicopters hovering over their village.

These people had lived peacefully in the jungle-covered mountains near Nha Trang until several years ago when Viet Cong elements moved in and established base camps.

The VC forced the Montagnards to serve as weapons and ammunition carriers,



Mang Quang, one of the first three Montagnards to come to Trung Dung, tapes a message to persuade the other members of his village to escape their Viet Cong captors.



cooks, caretakers, and manual laborers, and to perform other tasks necessary for running a military camp and operations.

The Montagnards literally became slaves, and some remained such for as long as eight years. When a tribesman from a village near My Loc, a 5th Special Forces outpost northwest of Nha Trang, picked up a Chieu Hoi pass, the courses of many lives were about to be suddenly changed.

He and two fellow villagers carefully studied the passes which offered them food, shelter and "open arms". Unsure of how their families would be received by the American and Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) soldiers, they decided

to test the Chieu Hoi program first by themselves.

Going to the My Loc camp, they told their story. CIDG Company 558, located at My Loc along with four American Special Forces members, placed an urgent call to First Lieutenant Thomas A. Ross, of Pensacola, Fla., the operations and intelligence officer of the Special Forces detachment at Trung Dung, a CIDG camp west of Nha Trang.

He and Vietnamese Special Forces Major Nguyen Ngoc, camp commander of Trung Dung, began planning a mission that was to see fantastic coordination among the 281st Helicopter Assault Co., the Nha Trang U.S. Air Force Base, the 8th Psychological Operations (Psyops) Bn., and the American and Vietnamese Special Forces.

The three initial Hoi Chanh's (A person accepting the Chieu Hoi program) were brought to the Special Forces camp. Mang Quang, the most able of the three, was questioned about the situation. He explained the events of the past several years and that his people wanted to "turn themselves in".

Mang was then escorted to the 8th Psyops in Nha Trang, where he tape recorded an appeal to his fellow tribesmen. He explained that the Vietnamese and American soldiers would take good care of them and defend them from their captors of so many years.

Plans were effected to have the villagers evacuated. On



A helicopter crew chief and CIDG soldiers help refugees board the aircraft which will whisk them away from bondage.

August 3rd, two gunships and five "slicks" (transport helicopters) from the 281st moved in over the Montagnard village. Mang Quang, flying in the lead ship with 1LT Ross, acted as a guide and gave directions through an interpreter as to where the VC were located near his village.

Following the Hoi Chanh's instructions, the two gunships swooped down and strafed the enemy base camp. At a preplanned time, the gunships pulled back and a plane from the 9th Air

Commando Squadron, Nha Trang Air Base, with the psyops tape, flew over the area. Via the tape, Mang Quang instructed his people to form in the cornfield near the top of the hill, which was to be the landing zone (LZ).

As the gunships began firing at the VC camp again, the slicks landed a CIDG company and a special CIDG reconnaissance force on the cornfield LZ. Maintaining radio contact with his Vietnamese counterpart, 1LT Michael Sullivan, Columbus,

Montagnards....

Ohio, and the CIDG company secured the LZ while the recon platoon scoured the surrounding area.

Meanwhile, Forward Air Controllers (FAC) from Nha Trang circled overhead to direct close fire support from aircraft and artillery.

MAJ Ngoc received word that nine Montagnards and VC were waving Chieu Hoi passes near the LZ. By the time the slicks returned, 62 people had gathered to be picked up. The half-starved refugees were flown to Trung Dung to begin their life of freedom.

When Mang Quang returned from the psyops mission, the rescued Montagnards were assembled at Trung



Born in Viet Cong imprisonment, this child will grow up free.



Dung. Searching through the crowd, Mang was not able to find his family. He said, "You could give me 10 million piasters and I would give them back...they mean nothing without my family with me."

Another operation was planned, for, in addition to Mang's family, 12 other families were still out there. A new liberation broadcast tape was made. The Air Force FAC's and the 281st helicopters were alerted the following day.

On August 5th, one CIDG platoon and one recon platoon secured the LZ again. Another recon platoon, guided by Mang, was landed at another LZ about 800 yards



Suspicion lines the face of this montagnard woman ... until she's had time to primp.

northwest. The rescue force began a sweep which Mang indicated would take them to a VC camp.

"The camp was located under a very dense growth of trees," said 1LT Ross. "There were six large huts measuring about 10 feet by 12 feet, and a cave complex nearby for protection from allied air attacks." The recon

platoon destroyed the VC camp and continued toward the village which housed the remaining enslaved Montagnards.

Upon reaching the village, Mang took a bull-horn in hand and appealed to the remaining Montagnards to gather at the LZ. He promised that the Vietnamese and Americans would protect

them from the VC. Quickly, 53 more montagnards assembled, among them Mang's family. "You never saw a happier person in your life," said 1LT Ross.

These additional refugees were also taken to the safety of the Special Forces camp. Here, they were cleaned, fed, sheltered and provided initial medical care. On August 6th, a Special Forces medical team conducted a thorough examination and treatment program which found dysentery, malnutrition, malaria and leprosy to be prevalent among the mountain people.

But more was to come. On August 10th, another similar operation, the final one, extracted 47 more people from the enemy's grasp.

From peace, to battle, to enslavement, to rescue, to peace. Today, 118 Montagnards are free because of Mang Quang's determination, and precisioned action between the Vietnamese Special Forces and American units.

