"When the enemy comes,
the women must fight"

WOMEN IN THE VIETNAM WAR

by ELIZABETH WINDSCHUTTLE

Late last year, four Australian women visited Vietnam to reciprocate an earlier Australian tour by Vietnamese women. We went via Bangkok and Vientiane to Hanoi. Before we left, we were told we would probably not go to Saigon. Few westerners had been in the South since the war ended, and we didn’t think any special exception would be made in our case. There was only one plane a day from Hanoi to Saigon. It was a DC-4 which carried no more than 30 passengers. So, when our delegation of four, plus a guide and an interpreter were offered the flight, it came as a surprise. Not only were we to be among the first to visit Saigon since the end of the war, but we were taking up six coveted seats in a plane at a time when the first major conference on reunification was being held in Saigon. We were being treated in a far more privileged way than we had expected.

We were in Vietnam as guests of the Vietnamese Women’s Union but we had brought with us western concepts of what such an organisation would be and had underestimated how influential it was. In our first ten days in North Vietnam, however, we had come to realise that the status of women there was far better than our own in Australia. Women had equal, and often more than equal, representation in all activities of the society. We were four civilians, but as guests of the Women’s Union we were treated like important politicians or officials would be in Australia, meeting with the heads of the main government departments and armed forces. The Australian Embassy staff in Hanoi joked with us, somewhat enviously, about the privileges we were receiving.

Although we had gained some appreciation of the quite different role of Vietnamese women, we were still not prepared for the surprises of Saigon. When we arrived at the central offices of the Women’s Union in South Vietnam, a beautiful cream-painted, green-shuttered French colonial building, our hosts announced off-handedly that it had been the former military command headquarters and private residence of General Westmoreland.

That day, sitting in Westmoreland’s reception room, we learnt the reason for the position that women enjoy in Vietnam now. We met peasant women guerilla fighters from the provinces, women officers from the armed forces, schoolteachers turned urban revolutionaries, women from the upper classes of the "old" Saigon regime under the French,
including a Vietnamese princess who had long worked in support of the liberation forces. The status of women was tied to their crucial role in the struggle for national independence. Vietnam would not have become free from the French or the Americans were it not for its women.

Most western commentators have failed to see the significance of the role of women in the war. Hardly a news reporter had any conception of what they were doing. Journalists portrayed women as passive victims of the war, not as active agents in it.

News reports invariably assumed that all Vietnamese troops, guerillas and militia were male; that all political prisoners were men; that support services such as medicine, ammunitions and agricultural production were mobilised and run by men; that anti-aircraft gunners were male.

Even people who have studied and written about Vietnam from a sympathetic position have not considered the sex of those involved. One well-known Australian anti-war activist and author on Vietnam showed rank disbelief when, on my return home, I began talking of the wartime achievements of women.

WOMEN AS SOLDIERS

The Vietnamese did not defeat the Americans by adopting conventional methods. No agricultural society facing the greatest war machine that human history has produced could have done that. They won because they developed a successful strategy that combined military action with revolutionary politics. At our meeting at Westmoreland’s house, we were introduced to one of the originators of that strategy, Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh, Deputy Commander in Chief of the People’s Liberation Armed Forces. Her official title is General and she was second in charge of the South Vietnamese armed forces during the war.

The offensive that Madame Dinh led in Ben Tre province in 1960, and for which she had earned her military post, became the model strategy for all liberation forces throughout the South. It combined both what the Vietnamese called “armed struggle” and “political struggle”. The insurgent forces in Ben Tre involved large numbers of peasants. They stormed the militia posts of the American-backed Diem, ousted Diem’s village administrators and replaced them with local peasant self-management committees.

Madame Dinh mobilised peasants who had been involved in earlier resistance against the French. Their weapons were bamboo sticks and kitchen knives. Her “army” held a tiny liberated zone in Ben Tre. Her actions provided the model for other provinces in the South to follow.

It was mainly after 1965 when the US sent troops into the South on a massive scale, that the movement to have women join the army increased.

Women became full-time members of the armed forces in the south. Many of them held leading positions. About 40 per cent of the regimental commanders of the PLAF were women. They were troops who dealt with the American mobile reserves, initiated offensive operations and attacked major US concentrations. All were volunteers who received no salary and when not in combat, helped in harvesting, building homes and schools, and administering free medical care and medical training.

Women also formed a major part of regional guerilla forces, full-time fighters who operated in the region where they lived. They engaged US forces in the same area, lay ambushes, encircled bases, and attacked posts.

Women in local self-defence units, or militia women, were not full-time soldiers but fought when their area was attacked, pinning down local forces and keeping their posts permanently encircled.

A higher percentage of women were in the local militia and regional guerilla units than in the PLAF. The local militia kept villages fortified with trenches, traps and spikes. These defences were decisive in wearing down the morale of Saigon and US troops.

During the Tet Offensive in 1968, the National Liberation Front staged a military and publicity coup by taking over the US Embassy in Saigon. Blazoned across the front pages of newspapers all over the world were photographs of the NLF flag flying from the roof of the Embassy. But no newspaper mentioned that it was a women’s commando group that forced the occupation of five of the seven floors of the Embassy, killed two hundred US personnel, and compelled Ambassador Bunker to escape in a helicopter.

We learnt that the leader of this offensive at
the American Embassy was Le Thi Rieng, a
former Vice President of the Women’s Union,
and a member of the central committee of the
NLF. Within hours of the occupation, while US
and Saigon officials were still reeling from the
attack, Le Thi Rieng was executed.

Most of the guerilla fighters in Cu Chi
province were women, and they earned for the
province the nickname of the “Iron Triangle”,
so called because guerilla persistence in this
area led to it being the most heavily
bombarded and defoliated area in the south.

We saw Cu Chi later. There is hardly five feet
between one bomb crater and the next. The
Americans have sewn a highly noxious weed,
over six feet high, and as far as the eye can see,
covering fifty per cent of the province and thus
preventing rice production.

We met some of these women, in Cu Chi
itself, forty kilometers from Saigon.

“The US and Saigon administrations
realised the crucial role of women in this
province”, said Ms Phuoc, a middle-aged
peasant woman, “because in 1968 and 1969,
almost the entire female population of Cu Chi
were forced into concentration camps. They
knew women were acting as guerillas, liaison
and infiltration forces.”

“Many of the women escaped from the
concentration camps at night and returned to
guerilla activity in their local areas. The
women destroyed most of the 42 fortresses in
their area, as well as producing and providing
food and medical assistance to other guerilla
fighters. Our battalion was called the Iron and
Steel battalion.”

We drove further into the province. The road
became impassable and we transferred to a
jeep. It was overcrowded and the jeep lurched
along a boggy track. We stopped and Ms
Phuoc led an inspection of a network of
tunnels and underground shelters which she
had helped build and in which she had lived for
months at a time. The trapdoor into the tunnels
was just big enough to accommodate her
slight body.

“The trapdoor was covered over with leaves.
You couldn’t tell it was there”, said Ms Phuoc,
demonstrating for us. “When they came”, she
said, “we could hear the American soldiers
above us. Sometimes they urinated on the
ground over our heads.”

Almost as an after thought she added, “This
was the main headquarters of the NLF in the
South”.

In the final push that won victory in April
1975, women were in the forefront.

Tens of thousands of women rushed to
occupy the different provinces in the South.
“We seized thousands of military posts, and
took over administrative bases, factories and
schools. We captured military stores, weapons
and took prisoners. Women planted the PRG
flag everywhere”, said Ms Hanh of the
Women’s Union.

“Millions of women throughout South
Vietnam called on Saigon troops to
surrender”. It was this strategy that caused the
inner collapse of Thieu’s army. “Women were
directly responsible for the fall of the 25th
division in the south-east, divisions 7 and 9 in
the south, and division 21 in the south-west. In
Saigon alone, 300,000 troops collapsed, and
women guerillas headed the invasion of
Thieu’s Presidential Palace.”

With us at the meeting were some of these
women. Ms Xuan was amongst the guerilla
fighters who led the army into Saigon. Pham
Thi Duyen, a peasant woman, led guerilla
fighters in Tu Duc province. They took over the
district administration, captured Thieu troops
and forced a general surrender in the province.
Ms Duyen led her troops to free prisoners from
the local gaol and to take over the main
electrical power station serving Saigon.

Ms Hanh then turned to a young woman
alongside us, perhaps 18 or 19 years old.
“Sister Nguyen Thi Phuong had a baby only
five months old. Early on the morning of April
30, with her baby tucked under one arm and a
gun in the other, she forced two colonels and a
captain of Thieu’s army to surrender. Her
troops captured an important US petrol and oil
reserve and two hundred military lorries and
trucks”.

For some of the guerilla women, however,
the end of the war was a bitter experience. A
number of women who engaged in full-time
guerilla action left their children with friends
and relatives, and in many cases, in
kindergartens. Though many of these
kindergartens contained children who were
orphans, they were not orphanages as we
know them. Such fine distinctions, however,
did not bother those Americans who “rescued”
children they considered “orphans” from
these places in the dying days of the war, flying
them out in Gerald Ford’s Operation Babylift
to the USA, England and Australia where they
were adopted out, or in one hideous case
My wish is to ride the tempest, tame the waves, kill the sharks. I want to drive the enemy away to save our people. I will not resign myself to the usual lot of women who bow their heads and become concubines.

- Thieu Thi Trinh, the woman who led insurrections against the Chinese in 248 A.D.

Vietnamese women have perhaps the longest traditions of all in military action. A number of women fighters who led attacks on the Chinese during the 1,000 years that China occupied Vietnam are still remembered. The best celebrated are the Trung Sisters who, in 40 AD trained 36 women as generals to lead a peasant army of 80,000 to drive out the Chinese. For three years they held off Chinese attempts to restore themselves but in 43 AD the sisters were defeated by superior numbers and arms. They then chose the traditional Vietnamese response to defeat - suicide.

The Trung Sisters have become part of Vietnamese mythology and their story, with many embellishments, is a central part of the country's oral history, providing one of the main inspirations for resistance to foreign domination. Every spring, on the sixtieth day of the second moon, the people of Hanoi celebrate the anniversary of their death.

Another part of this oral history is the story of Trieu Thi Trinh, a 20 year old peasant woman who in 248 AD led an army of thousands and drove out the Chinese. She held them at bay during the course of 30 battles but was finally defeated and also suicided.

The idea of the woman fighter became, through such stories, identified with the very concept of Vietnamese nationalist opposition to foreign control. Chinese domination was identified as a patriarchal domination and so a rebellion led by women was the appropriate mythological response. Myth and action have sustained each other. The mythology has encouraged women to become fighters throughout Vietnamese history and their battle field exploits have continually provided the basis for further stories.
Had the Americans been aware of the military history of Vietnamese women they may well have approached the war with different tactics.

But, of course, few generals read history. This left open the opportunity for women to conduct one of the most effective campaigns of subversion to which any army has been subjected.

Peasant women serving GIs doing washing, shining boots, selling food and drink regularly gained entrance to US bases. Inside they would chart the precise measurements of targets that, as guerilla fighters, they planned to shell that night.

Next day, inside the base once more, they would check on the accuracy of their mortar attacks, and if necessary, rechart their measurements. As they paced out the distances they would defer politely to any GI who happened to pass. Next night, they would shell the base again according to the new measurements.

Even Madame Dinh entered one US base disguised as a peasant woman.

We were also told that many prostitutes in Saigon were informers for the NLF.

For us, the attitude of Americans towards women in Vietnam was epitomised by a badge we saw on a hat of a captured American pilot, now exhibited in a war museum in Hanoi. It depicted the cartoon dog Snoopy saying "Life's a Bitch".

The attitude of men to women in North Vietnam and the achievements gained by women in that country in the twenty years since independence contrasted starkly with the unmitigated degradation and violence that women in the South endured at the hands of the US regime.

Throughout the war the North provided a constant reminder of what sort of life was possible. Women workers in the North enjoyed equality with men in all fields, and had gained child care, maternity pay allowances and other reforms that western women have still to win. In the southern cities life for women was chaotic, exploitive and devoid of any social welfare measures.

The women we met in Saigon made no secret of the fact that they suffered far more under Americans than at any time under the French.

Ms Hanh described the war experience.

“While there was killing, raping, bribery, corruption, forced concentration of women and children into camps and strategic hamlets, the worst effects for women were the wholesale operations of genocide, epicide and biocide in the air war. Forty five per cent of our land in the south is now unarable. There are one million widows and 500,000 orphans. Toxic chemical devastation has left hundreds of thousands of women infertile and an indefinable number of women giving birth to malformed foetuses, not only now, but for many generations to come. It is understandable that one of the most sacred slogans of all Vietnamese people during the war was that 'when the enemy comes, the women must fight' “.

WOMEN IN THE NORTH

The role of North Vietnamese women was different but no less significant. Whereas women in the South participated in the armed struggle, in the North they were in self-defence, civil defence units, anti-aircraft and militia groups for the defence of their factory or village.

While nearly all Northern women received some military training, and became experts in the use of anti-aircraft weapons and hand-to-hand combat, few were actual members of the regular army. Those who were, served in highly skilled and often dangerous jobs as bomb defusers, medical and liaison workers, as support troops and supply carriers.

Women were mainly responsible for the clearing away of devastation after the bombings. They dug shelters, rebuilt roads, bridges, houses, schools and factories. They cared for the dead and the wounded.

Rice production in the North had to be sufficient to boost supplies to PRG governed areas or liberated zones and to members of the PLAF as well as sustain food production for the north. It was necessary therefore to greatly increase agricultural production in the North during the war.

In the North seventy per cent of the food production was carried out by women and they were responsible for an increased productivity in these years.

The increased productivity was not only a result of land reforms and the collectivisation of food production. The degree of workers' control given to its main workers, women, led
them to set and fulfill their own targets.

Women workers in the North held strong political convictions about their productive contribution. A slogan of the North Vietnamese Women's Union was "Let the women of the North shed more sweat so their sisters in the South could shed less blood".

There are many well known examples where North Vietnamese women interpreted this slogan quite literally. After Le Thieng Rieng, the Vice President of the South Vietnamese Women's Union was executed for her activities in the Tet Offensive in 1968, women in one northern province alone worked 44,392 extra days to avenge her death.

Women in factories during the war had their own slogans. At Nam Dinh textile mill it was: "Every meter of cloth is a bullet against the enemy."

The women in the mills worked hard and for long hours during the war. They often walked miles to work. They did not see their children for long periods of time, particularly when the children were evacuated to the countryside to protect them from the bombing.

Women workers not only made the main contribution to food and industrial production, they also defended their workplaces.

Nam Dinh textile mill in Nam Ha province, 100 kilometers from Hanoi, was twice bombed heavily. In the Johnson bombings in 1965, the whole mill, including creches, kindergartens, workers' dining rooms and clubs were almost totally destroyed. It was devastated again in 1972 in the Nixon bombings.

At Nam Dinh women formed their own self defence units. In 1972 a women's defence unit of 15 shot down a US plane and captured the US pilot. In Nam Dinh we met two women from this unit.

Women in agricultural production in the same province formed 20 self-defence units. They used anti-aircraft weapons to defend roads and bridges, dug trenches, rescued the wounded from bombed buildings, gave medical assistance, and carried food to other fighters. After the bombings they reconstructed roads and bridges, and cleared away devastation.

We met one young mother, Thanh Nham, who earned the title of Heroine of the Armed Forces, for defusing bombs that "exploded on contact".

It is interesting to compare Vietnamese women's conditions with those of Australian women during World War II. Their work and sacrifice are very similar but the situation was actually very different. Australian women took over men's jobs but the job categories were reclassified so that women earned less than a man would have for a particular job. There was no proper child care. In North Vietnam none of this occurred.

**MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN**

It is possible to identify two different middle classes in South Vietnam, one created by the French and one by the Americans. The "old" bourgeoisie of Saigon were wealthy landlords and civil servants who had prospered under French colonial rule when France had constructed the "Paris of the Orient" in the nineteenth century. The "new" bourgeoisie were those who founded new industries to serve the Americans after 1964 and whose numbers were supplemented with wealthy, often Catholic, refugees from the North from the 1950s. While there were many families that overlapped both groups, many more remained distinct. The main difference was that the "old" bourgeoisie detested the Americans.

Amongst our Women's Union hosts in Saigon were women who belonged to "old" families.

We visited a school, Minh Khai, in Saigon, at which some of our hosts had completed their secondary studies in preparation for university, or, as was more often the case, a suitable marriage. The grandeur of the buildings and grounds make our present-day Australian private schools for girls seem pathetic imitations by comparison. The "old" bourgeoisie of Saigon was very rich.

Minh Khai school provides a classic example of the alliances forged amongst the "old" bourgeoisie against the Thieu and American regimes. Not only former pupils, daughters of the rich, but most of the teaching staff of recent years were active and outspoken opponents of the Saigon and American administrations.

"Eighty per cent of primary teachers, 45 per cent of junior secondary teachers and 30 per cent of senior secondary teachers were involved in anti-war activities," the current Vice-Principal told us. "A former principal of the school was interned for six years by Thieu. She has now been reinstated."
Women guerrilla fighters in a self-defence village sharpening stakes for traps to use against their enemy.

"Many of the school's old pupils, in spite of their bourgeois lifestyle, took part in the protest movement," she said.

The women we met at the Women's Union and the teachers at the school were part of a mass movement amongst the "old" bourgeoisie that opposed the war. They either became revolutionary supporters of the PRG or members of the Third Force - independent opponents of the Diem, Ky, Thieu and US regimes. They despised the newly ascendant nouveau riche class of merchants and profiteers who lived off these administrations.

They had seen their lifestyle, a combination of the best traditions of both Vietnamese and French cultures, replaced by a vulgar imitation of the American way of life. The strength of their resentment, as of all Vietnamese people we met in the South, is evident everywhere now.

In a war museum in Saigon, prominence is given to a display of the influence of American culture in Saigon. Row upon row of crude comics, cheap paperbacks, film posters represent the popular culture which flourished in the war years.

More overt are the photographs of Vietnamese women stripping in nightclubs, their eyes and noses reshaped, their breasts and hips inflated with silicone. One sign summed up the Saigonese view of the essence of American culture: "Car Wash and Get Screwed".

WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE

The role of women in the "political struggle" (as distinct from the
armed struggle") in raising the political consciousness of people in the South, was crucial. By their example, women persuaded people to become active in the war effort. They organised protest demonstrations and rallies and mounted a mass movement to encourage Saigon soldiers to desert. The women in this movement came to be known as the Long Haired Army.

Hundreds of thousands of peasant women in the South demonstrated against the use of chemicals and defoliants. Demonstrations were often held simultaneously in thirty or forty provincial and district towns. The women piled branches and dead livestock in view of Saigon troops, to embarrass Saigon officials and to rally sympathy amongst rank and file troops, most of whom were conscripted from rural villages like their own.

The Long Haired Army was responsible for a mass defection of Saigon troops. Between 1963 and 1973 the number of defections reached nearly 450,000.

Other women, not part of this movement, formed groups protesting on individual issues. They included the Association of Mothers of Combatants, the Association of Mothers with Children in Gaol, and the Association for the Defence of War Orphans and Widows. These were mostly from the urban middle class in Saigon. Thousands of them also belonged to a mass women's movement which developed in 1970 called the Women's Committee to Defend the Right to Live.

We met in Saigon a Buddhist nun with saffron robes and shaved head the Venerable Thich Nu Huynh Lien who told us that many religious people had opposed the Thieu regime. In 1967 Nhat Chi Mai, a Buddhist teacher, immolated herself publicly in Saigon. Venerable Lien said that her religious compatriots were alluded to jokingly as the "Cropped Hair Army".

"When the Long Hairs and the Cropped Hairs fought together they always won", she said. "Sometimes we fought with weapons, sometimes we propagated amongst the Thieu troops".

"The Cropped Hair Army clashed with Thieu police often. On one occasion one of our nuns was beaten with an iron mask. We were all pleased about this, because the assault was being shot by eighty-five television units from all over the world".

In 1974 there were nearly 250,000 political prisoners in South Vietnam, and nearly half were women.

Ninety per cent of leading members of the Women's Union were imprisoned, serving sentences ranging from one to seventeen years.

In 1969, for the first time, large numbers of women were incarcerated at the notorious prison island of Con Son.

We met one of these women in Saigon. Thiuvn Ngoc Anh, a schoolteacher, who spent 12½ years in Con Son and was released before the end of the war only because she had cancer and was not expected to live. Inside, she told us, women were subjected to the most inhumane treatment, torture, starvation, infestation of rats, vermin and disease. Incurable gynaecological diseases were often the result of prison treatment specially intended to humiliate women, such as the denial of washing water during menstruation.

We asked Ms Anh how was it possible to survive this treatment for such a long period. Her answer was simply: "Solidarity amongst the women. Only this could help us survive." Prison became a school where the inmates taught each other that the only way to remain human was to join with other prisoners.

"There were small protests at first, such as not saluting Thieu's flag. Individual women were repeatedly punished until finally all the women refused to do it and the guards found it difficult of punish everyone", she said.

The confidence of Vietnamese women today is a direct result of their role in resistance over a long period, and more recently in the war effort. The experience of shooting down a B52 or F111, or learning to take control of a factory, has developed in Vietnamese women a self-sufficiency probably unequalled by women anywhere in the world. The Vietnamese call this process "tu giai phong" or self-liberation.

The politics of reunification will be very interesting. Because they have been confronted for so long with such an acutely sexist regime, women in the South talk more openly about the sort of issues Western feminists are concerned with. Northern women have lived with some of these reforms - equal employment, child care - for so so long that they appear to take them for granted. The heightened awareness of the southerners will bring the woman question to the centre of the political debates on reunification. New feminist initiatives seem the logical result.