After THE LONG-HAIRED Heroines

Vietnamese women were icons of the revolution. But today little remains of the legend. Carlotta McIntosh set out in pursuit of the new Vietnamese woman.

The midday sun traces dark leafy patches on the city streets and the hum of bicycle traffic fills the lunchtime air. At the pavement restaurants of the commercial centre of old Saigon, office workers sit on low wooden stools, eat noodles and sip tea in the dense shade of tamarind trees. A young office worker in a cream silk tunic over wide bottomed trousers passes on her way home to lunch, her waistlength hair a flash of black silk in the noon sun.

It's Graham Greene's Saigon. The Continental where he stayed in the 1950s is being renovated for the current influx of tourists and the Americans have gone. The names of the hotels may have changed but the French-built government buildings remain. Cheeky cyclo drivers still hustle for customers outside the old Caravelle, Rex and Majestic hotels - and on Sundays the Cathedral bells ring out across the shaded boulevards and walled gardens of the residential quarter.

To millions of Greene aficionados Phuong, in The Quiet American, represented all Vietnamese women. She was the ultimate stereotype - gentle, sexy and patient; impatient only for an American husband who would give all the security and comforts she lacked. Behind that cliched image lies a different story.

As the last US helicopters lifted off the American Embassy in 1975 the liberation fighters, many of whom were women, advanced towards the gates of the Independence Palace. They were equal partners in their nation's struggle, but were soon to find out that the battle was just beginning. The so-called "Long Haired Troops" bore arms, spied, killed and died for the resistance. Almost half the Viet Cong were women. As in so many other liberation struggles, women were indispensable to the ultimate victory. And yet their position in Vietnam today in no way reflects that contribution. Only 17% of the deputies to the People's Congress are women. In a predominantly peasant society Vietnamese women are defined by traditional values and the old Confucian saying: "one man is worth a hundred women".

After the war the former 'long haired ones' turned their attention to improving the ordinary fortunes of women, their health and the education of themselves and their children. The deputy commander-in-chief of the Liberation Army of the south was a woman. Now, the former Viet Cong general, Nguyen Thi Dinh, heads the eleven million strong Women's Union.

Its Saigon headquarters is a graceful mansion in the residential quarter where rich businessmen and foreign diplomats once lived surrounded by servants, well kept gardens, Mercedes Benz and chauffeurs. Today, former guerrillas carry out social programs to address the array of the problems confronting Vietnamese women.

While the Americans may have gone, the poverty remains. Prostitution is one problem that hasn't gone away. Up to one million prostitutes plied their trade on the streets and in the bars of the war-torn Saigon, which gave refuge from aerial bombings and the terror of the US scorched earth practices. The Women's Union has developed a working strategy for dealing with prostitutes. First offenders get a stern lecture on the spot, second offenders are given a stiff choice: re-education in a reform school, or manual labour on outlying communes.

But a greater problem is the popula-
tion blow out - from 50 million in 1975 to 64 million in 1988. Family planning is a priority for the Women’s Union. With an economy in dire straits - as the constant flood of Vietnamese refugees testifies - the post-war population explosion calls for desperate remedies. Despite these pressures Vietnam has resisted drastic measures like that in China which forbids more than one child per family. The union has developed a complex set of strategies aimed at encouraging, rather than forcing, people to limit the size of their families. Government workers whose families go over the three children limit are penalised with the loss of their yearly bonus. The Vietnamese government tries to encourage sterility by offering a bounty of two thousand dong (equal to about a third of a government worker’s monthly salary) to men who volunteer to have a vasectomy.

But in 1988, when I was in Vietnam, the deputy-chair of the Women’s Union in Saigon, Nguyen Ngoc Van admitted that the family program had failed in the countryside, where larger families mean more hands to help on the farm. Male children are preferred as waitresses, army drivers, and prostitutes - any guise that would serve as a cover for gathering information about the enemy’s movements.

Nguyen Ngoc Van is an elegant woman, her black glossy chignon pulled back tightly in the style favoured by the women of Saigon, her cream silk shirt a perfect foil to her merry black eyes. During the war she commanded a network of reconnaissance troops, mainly women, who posed as waitresses, army drivers, and prostitutes - any guise that would serve as a cover for gathering information about the enemy’s movements.

While fighting on the battlefield has ended, the Vietnamese people now are fighting a different war. Dioxin was one of the chemicals in the defoliant, Agent Orange, dropped on forests and paddy fields by US troops trying to flush out the Viet Cong. Today young women born during the height of the war are lying in a cancer ward in an ill-equipped hospital in Saigon. Eighteen year old Rose Hong was a victim of the war. When I saw her she lay on a narrow cot in the cancer ward of the Tu Du Hospital for Mothers and Babies - her complexion sallow from anti-carcinogenic drugs, her pregnancy terminated and her future prospects of motherhood dim. As a baby in Tay Ninh Province, in what was then South Vietnam, Rose suckled dioxin-laden milk from her mother’s breast.

There’s an unforgettable room at the Tu Du Hospital for Mothers and Babies: the walls are lined with shelves of bottles containing deformed foetuses. Vietnam cannot afford the research to prove a direct link between the cancers and dioxin, but the incidence is abnormal and much higher than in the north where no defoliants were dropped.

The social workers of today were the guerrillas of yesterday, but long before them the first wave of women fighters attained much fame and recognition. These were the women who fought in the Viet Minh, the national liberation army that humiliated the French at the Battle of Dien Ben Phu in 1954.

Some of that first wave of revolutionary heroines included Madame Ho Thi Bi, a legend in her lifetime. At 70 years of age Madame Ho looked harmless as she posed proudly for a photograph in the garden courtyard of the Women’s Museum, her toothless gums stained red from chewing betel nut. But this grandmother wasn’t ordinary. As a young woman and a peasant who could neither read nor write, she led a platoon of battle-hardened escapees from the French Foreign Legion against French army outposts and won. Ho Chi Minh dubbed her the ‘Heroine of the East’. Vietnamese women have lived through many hair-raising experiences of adventure and romance. Yellowing photographs of nationalist war heroines stare from the museum’s glass cases, their stories mostly undocumented. Madame Ho is lucky. Her story has been carefully recorded by a team of young women historians.

Madame Ho and Greene’s Phuong belong to the past. Phuong no longer waits in the apartment on the Rue Catinat to light Fowler’s opium pipe. The war is finished, the “quiet American” is dead...the revolution is old hat.

Enter the new Vietnam woman. Picture a dinner at the Hall of Unification - formerly Independence Palace. The heavy chandeliers tremble as a female rock singer stomps out a tribute to the Dee An hydro-electric power station for the foreign visitors. Hill tribe women perform a stylised song and dance routine dedicated to the Motherland. Slender bodies bend, eyelashes flutter and heads tilt provocatively to songs of patriotism and romance.

No clenched fists or agit-prop theatre here, and absolutely no feminism - the red velvet flag and gold star of the revolutionary forces above the stage are the only visible symbol of revolution.

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MATTERS ARISING

In SEARCH of the NULLABOR Laptop

Once upon a time we were told that computers would eliminate all the drudgery from our lives. Now it seems they've become lifestyle accessories. Jim Endersby muses on the rise and rise of the ubiquitous laptop.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there are a few of us over the age of ten who are actually 'computer literate'. You can easily tell who we are: we can distinguish a 'bit' from a 'byte' and lace our conversation with (barely-understood) terms like 'ram', 'risc' and 'dos'.

Those of us who read the computer section of the paper before the sports news are beginning to notice a few things stirring in the hi-tech undergrowth.

Of course, even the most computer indifferent are aware that the beastly machines are increasingly invading every area of human life. From the ones that thud and whine as they blast aliens in the laundromat, to the ones that retain your cashcard advising you to 'contact your branch' (at three am on a Sunday morning), computers are getting hard to avoid.

Well, speaking as a computer semi-literate, I can assure you that this is just the beginning.

Consider, if you will, the laptop.

Assuming that you’ve been trekking in the Himalayas for the last three years and consequently don’t know what a laptop is, they are small, battery-powered, portable computers. Smaller than the average briefcase, more expensive than the average secondhand car and rapidly taking over the personal computer market.

Toshiba - in Australia at least - sells only laptops and now sells 15 different models, with two new ones launched this month. Their newest laptops are every bit as powerful and sophisticated as the great big heavy ones that take up most of your desk. As soon as a new processor chip (the real guts of any computer) comes onto the market, the laptop manufacturers incorporate it into their latest model, making it as fast and powerful as the latest desktop. Toshiba now dominates the laptop market - which is the fastest growing section of the computer market.

But the real beauty of the laptop is not that it leaves you more desk space to cover with desktop photocopiers, personal fax machines and the sort of telephone that now requires a training course before you can operate it.

Those are just fringe benefits.

The real advantage of laptops is that you can take them anywhere. The batteries will allow you to spend several hours away from a power point, and you can recharge them from the cigarette lighter in your car.

Real freedom, however, comes when you add a modem to your laptop. A modem is a little box, small enough to slip into your pocket, which allows you to transmit computer information down an ordinary telephone line. Add to the modem and laptop a portable phone - and you can sit in the middle of the Nullabor, buying and selling shares in Hong Kong, playing chess with a mate in New York, cooking the books for your subsidiary in Melbourne, even writing articles for ALR. You are ‘on-line’ and the electronic world is your oyster.

But of course most of us who use computers are not going to be out and about in the Nullabor; we’re going to be working from home. Maybe. Ever since the modem first appeared there have been predictions of a massive growth in electronic homeworking. We were about to be liberated from the drudgery of commuting. Office blocks, we were asked to believe, would be a thing of the past. Even the days of cities were numbered.

So far these predictions appear to be unfulfilled, perhaps because we all hate the bloody machines - or maybe it's just that the variety of jobs which directly use computers is still fairly limited. But that may be changing.

As the power and speed of computers continues to increase, the range of jobs they can tackle will expand. There are two things that everyone expects will totally transform the things computers can do which, in turn, will revolutionise the way computers use us - oops! - that we use computers.

Although modern computers are fantastically fast, chomping through several thousand calculations a second, they are still far too slow for certain uses. Things like DeskTop Publishing (DTP) and Computer
Aided Design (CAD) soak up huge amounts of memory and require very fast processors, but they fade into insignificance compared with the demands of computer information systems.

The current state of the art solution to information storage is a very sophisticated device. It permits users to absorb the data at their own pace; pick it up and put it down whenever they like. You can start at the beginning and go through the information in sequence (serial data) or skip bits, read the conclusion first, check the index, absorb several different sources simultaneously (parallel data); the system uses no power at all and the whole device is compact enough to fit in your pocket. It’s called a book.

For computers to equal books as sources of information, never mind surpass them, they’ll have to do a lot of catching up. Computers are getting smaller and faster but they’ll need to be a lot easier to use before we’ll forsake libraries.

A book, in computer jargon, is ‘user friendly’ - few of us are frightened by them - whereas computer information systems range from ‘user indifferent’ to ‘user downright bloody hostile’. Even having the words ‘Don’t Panic’ in large friendly letters on the cover of an electronic ‘book’ isn’t going to solve all the problems.

The two things that will really make the difference are optical computers and optical data storage. Currently (no pun intended) computers use electricity to send messages to and fro within the computer and from one computer to another. The optical computer will use lasers, mirrors and lenses to make light do the same job - but about a thousand times faster. As every schoolchild knows, there’s nothing faster than light.

Optical data storage is basically the same technology as the compact discs now being used to play music. When applied to computers it will mean more information, in a smaller space, that can be retrieved much faster.

Computers that can ‘think’ even more quickly than the today’s fastest supercomputers will be able to perform some of the clever tasks that science fiction writers have only dream of - like talking to us and understanding what we say. Then the computer information system becomes library and librarian rolled into one and even the most timid of us will be able to cope with it.

Computers have already transformed much of the technology of printing (ALR uses DTP, for instance). Linking up computer information systems with all the other innovations already around in the publishing world - CAD, bubble-jet printers, WYSIWYG screens, etc - could mean, for example, that bookshops may disappear. The computer would simply print you a copy of any title when you want it.

Students could simply ‘grab’ the electronic pages they need from books, magazines, reference works, or wherever and insert them directly into their essays or theses. Our electronic journalist, sitting in the Nullabor with the laptop, modem and portable phone, could zap copy directly to the office, where it’s edited and assembled into pages (all on a computer screen, of course). And the ‘newspaper’ is then ‘published’ into the electronic data storage and retrieval systems which will by then infest every home, school, library and workplace.

People will read their paper (probably complete with moving pictures, soundtrack and coffee-making facilities) on a computer screen and only take a printout of any sections they actually want to keep.

The other spin-off from the optical computer will be that the world’s first genuinely unbeatable chess computer will finally be built. An optical computer will be able to analyse every possible move in a game, while the hapless Grandmaster is still considering his opening.

But you don’t need either to panic or celebrate just yet: the world’s first optical computer has only just been unveiled by Bell Laboratories, in the USA (the people - incidentally - who invented the transistor). It may well be a revolution in the making but at the moment it can’t do much and still looks like a heap of expensive junk.

I reckon Gary Kasparov has a few years at the top yet.

JIM ENDERSBY is a computer autodidact.
In the second of a two-part series, H.G. 'The Immortal' Nelson looks at the thespian tendency in our contemporary wielders of the willow.

I was out in the shed last weekend, feet up on the deck with a lite handy wondering if all those big boof-headed sports stars clogging up the TV with beer ads are the answer to letting us know there is more of the same down at the local in the walk-in cool room.

After an hour or two camped in front of the crystal bucket I spat the dummy.

This current spate of mindless drivel that ropes in anyone who has played sport in the last twelve years to promote some brand of tins or other has gone too far. It's a farce, a sham-mozzle, a joke!

In the old days there were just two former greats flogging the brews. They were glimpsed playing golf with big clubs, scaring birdies; or breaking club house windows; having a go at lawn bowls; or playing darts with a bunch of rowdies; or bobbing up in a boat fishing and catching ... surprise, surprise, old boots. Talk about... Laugh.

Talk about product identification.

You remember them. The latter day Hoges and Strop, the Zig and Zag of the 'eighties, Freddie and Tangles, Maxie and Dougie, Walker and Walters. Is it too long a bow to draw to say these were the finest exponents of the beer flogging caper ever?

Somehow, I doubt it.

Sure, Max and Doug's supremacy was challenged briefly by that magnificent even if prophetic 'They said you'd never make it' series with the likes of The Great White Shark getting among them on the greens and off, and Wayne Gardiner laying rubber and belting down beers on a Mediterranean boat.

Beautiful blokes doing beautiful things and drinking themselves stupid if they weren't stupid to start with.

Then there were the impossible mission ads. You know the sort of thing, the scoreboard at the MCG shows Australia staring down the barrel of defeat in a one-day fixture. The last two are in. Twenty-two runs are needed from the fiftieth over. Up one end the gormless youth from the Hay plain playing in his first international and up the other the tubby, but wily, Tasmanian opener with the drooping mo who has carried the bat.

I don't have to go on, in the next sixty seconds Australia wins. The tension is so great and the ad is so wonderfully crafted that everyone deserves a beer. No, everyone needs a beer.

But what are we offered today? The Bob Shearer putting lesson because the plane is delayed? The Graham Wood mini-series where an elaborate gag is played on Woody based on his liking for the suicide single at the top of his dig, often resulting in him or his partner scurrying back to the rooms before the beer has had time to get cold?

The Whit's big night out where a man and mates are out on the tear, cutting the rug and painting the town puce?

There are cameo appearances from Swampy Marsh, who just happened to be standing around signing a few autographs and a host of others who, quite frankly, should know better.

You can call me old-fashioned if you like, but none of these efforts says to me: 'Do it, HG. Get down to the pub and put another slab on the tab'.

And so last weekend I found myself asking when is the Australian Cricket Board going to bite the bullet and demand that all cricketers go to acting classes and get degrees in drama and fine arts before lurching out of the nets and onto the nation's TV screens.

It's all very well hailing the arrival of a next Don Bradman and lauding new stars like Greg Campbell, Darren Lehmann and even Mark Waugh. I have no doubt about their cricketing skills. But can they cut it when the director calls action?

I think we should be told... because as sure as my name is H G Nelson, we are going to see their bonces on the crystal bucket down the business end of my games room sooner or later.

In conclusion, there is one name missing from this ordinary line-up of talent that I set out mid-spray; one man who has the runs on the board lager-wise; a man who even now holds the record for the number of slabs downed on the Sydney/London leg. He is a man who knows beer and could persuade me. That man is one Stumpy Boon. And who knows, Stumpy may even be able to act.

H.G. NELSON is the alter ego of Greg Pickhaver, and along with Roy Slaven, present This Sporting Life on Saturdays, 2-6pm, on ABC Radio, JJJ-FM.