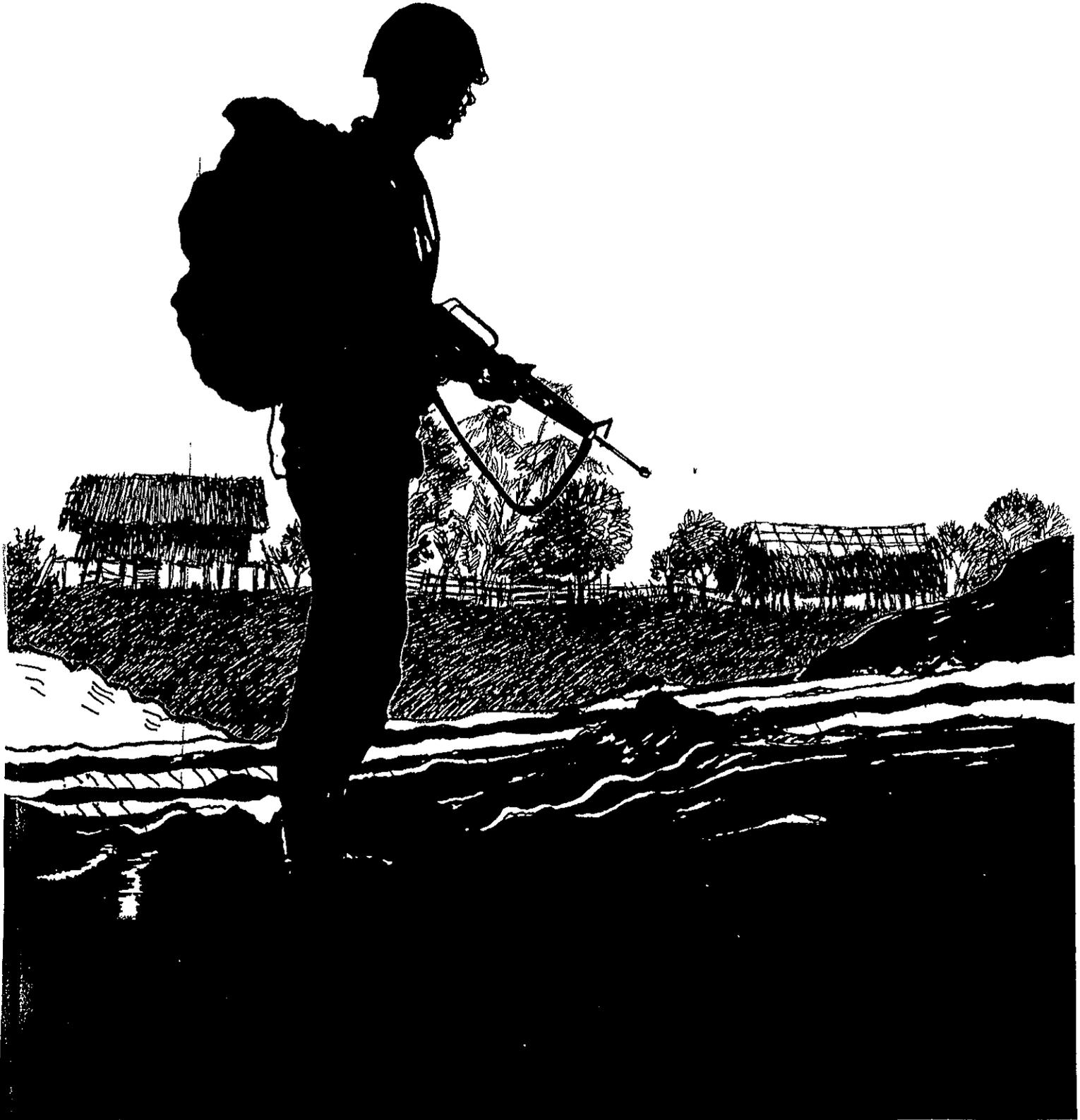


LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN B. HASEMAN

# LOOKING BACK

a lesson in strength



I didn't notice the burnished steel beneath the smiling face the first time I met Nguyen Thanh Liem. He was one of many officers I met during my whirlwind first day of duty as an advisor in Ham Long District, Kien Hoa Province, in the Mekong Delta region of the Republic of Vietnam. Tall for a Vietnamese and with a gaunt, almost ascetic face, Liem impressed me with his air of confidence, competence, and pride.

My assignment as a district-level advisor was one I had specifically requested for my second tour of duty in Vietnam. It gave me a chance to work at the grass roots, with the soldiers and the rural people of Vietnam. I was somewhat apprehensive, because I was not sure that I, a relatively young captain, could provide meaningful advice to troops who had been engaged in a struggle with an enemy for so long. I soon found I could, in fact, provide valuable assistance to my Vietnamese counterparts.

Far more important, though, I discovered I was learning far more than I taught, learning lessons in courage, character, and strength in a culture that had existed for a thousand years. Those lessons have remained and have strengthened me in the more than ten years that have followed. Liem played the major role in my education.

## A PROFESSIONAL

Liem was a first lieutenant in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), assigned as the operations officer of Ham Long District. His duties included planning and leading tactical operations, overseeing the training of all local security forces, and constructing and maintaining outposts and watchtowers. He was a professional. Liem knew his men and his tactics well. His quiet competence in the performance of his duties had won him the confidence of his district chief and a well-earned reputation as a good soldier throughout the province.

Kien Hoa had a long history of strife as a stronghold of the Viet Cong. But by the early 1970s, a highly successful pacification program had achieved major successes in reducing the enemy's political and military strength. In Ham Long District a particularly able district chief had pushed strong civilian pacification and military security programs, and a bountiful agricultural economy had begun to bring material improvement to the district's citizens. But at the time of my arrival in July 1971, local Viet Cong forces still harassed the pacification program and much work remained to be done.

Liem was an easy man to meet but a hard man to know. He had served as district operations officer for five years, and he had seen a lot of American advisors come and go. Not all of them had been what he referred to as "friends of my country." Although he was friendly to the Americans in Ham Long, as a newcomer I sensed from the first the reserve behind his eyes. His gaze said "prove yourself worthy."

As the weeks passed and I found myself becoming accepted by the Vietnamese, he became more open. In fact, Liem and I became closely involved in tactical opera-

tions, and I slowly felt myself beginning to meet his high standards. Those standards came in large measure from his own background.

## VETERAN

Born in the neighboring district of Mo Cay, Liem and his staunchly anti-communist family had fled their home village to escape the Viet Minh and later the Viet Cong forces. Liem grew up in the provincial capital of Ben Tre. Although when I met him he was only 30 years old, he had spent 12 of those years in the Army, rising slowly through the promotion system as an engineer and an infantryman. He was a veteran of the fighting in the infamous Iron Triangle north of Saigon, and had helped repulse the Viet Cong battalions that almost overran Kien Hoa Province during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

As the months passed, our mutual respect and friendship grew. I met his wife and six children and came to know his hopes and dreams. An infectious grin, a constant sense of humor, and a thoroughly professional performance of duty were Liem's chief characteristics. He expected no less from others. His determination and finely honed strength instilled in me a feeling of admiration I have seldom felt for another officer in any nation. His leadership ability, tactical knowledge, innate intelligence, and courage under enemy fire made him the type of officer who is easy to follow but hard to emulate. He was a fine example of courage and character in an army that was too often criticized for its failures. He was a memorable teacher.

Through Liem I came to know the Regional Force and Popular Force troops as the real strength in rural Vietnam. In Ham Long, which had no regular ARVN units, they were the backbone of strength against guerrilla forces whose presence was felt through terrorism, harassment attacks, assassinations, and deadly booby traps. Liem had the soldier's eye for the important. In his outpost visits he demanded strong defenses, effective weaponry, and alert soldiers. Though a complete soldier, Liem was no martinet. I remember the compassion in his eyes while he gave first aid to wounded soldiers, cradling their heads in his lap and comforting wailing families. And when I had to interrupt him at his work late at night, he had time to chat with a lonesome American friend.

Liem's personal courage was exhibited in countless combat situations. On occasion he commanded a small clearing operation in the dense coconut jungles of northern Ham Long. An enemy force ambushed the government column and for a few moments there was sharp fighting. Liem was everywhere, encouraging his men, directing fire, and endangering himself to provide the leadership necessary for survival. Though there were friendly casualties, his leadership rallied the defenders and drove the enemy from the battlefield. His relentless pursuit of the ambushers led to a small but well-earned tactical victory.

He was a very articulate man. Though my Vietnamese

was limited and his English not much better, we held long talks at night and somehow broke the communications barrier. Perhaps mutual understanding helped when we failed to find the right word in either language. But Liem talked at great length about his experiences, and about his strong and honest patriotism. He had great faith in the Vietnamese people and in their ability to persevere over the shattering experience of war. He often talked about how things would be when the fighting ended. It was amazing to me that after a lifetime of warfare he remained confident of attaining peace. He was a realist; he knew peace would be achieved only at great cost and after long and heartbreaking delay. But he always felt there would be peace.

## HEAVY FIGHTING

In August 1972 the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched a fierce invasion of southern Vietnam, and heavy fighting spread into Ham Long. Liem's talents and abilities were invaluable in reacting to the threat. In a three-month period of intense enemy pressure, Liem was a rock of strength. He planned, conducted, and led operations as the right-hand man to the District Chief. He assumed command of a battle-fatigued company in addition to his other duties and in short order rebuilt its shattered morale and strength. By November the enemy was ejected from Ham Long after some of the most valorous combat performances I have ever seen. It was then, I think, that I learned the most from Liem about the limits to which a man can stretch his own strength and still find the reserve to carry on with the mission.

When the cease-fire agreements were signed in January

1973, my tour of duty came to an end. Our parting after 19 months of shared friendship and hardship was a painful one. My last view of Liem was blurred by the emotion of the moment, but I still remember it: a smile on his face and a shouted farewell on his lips. The steel was there too, well hidden, but known to those like me who had had the privilege of knowing him closely and well.

The so-called peace did not end Liem's battle to save his country from a communist foe. Treacherous breaches of the cease-fire continued long after the declaration of peace. On 14 March 1973, Nguyen Thanh Liem's long search for peace finally ended. Viet Cong artillery fired on a small outpost in a jungle clearing. Liem rallied the defenders, sprinting between bunkers to lead the defense against an attacking enemy company. But one shell landed too close and Liem, survivor of a lifetime of war, died in the first month of "peace," his last act one of courage and sacrifice. He would have been proud to know that his outnumbered force repulsed the enemy and retained possession of that small clearing called Tan Long.

In retrospect, perhaps it was best for Liem not to have been forced to endure the years since then, with the bitterness of surrender and defeat to live with. Nguyen Thanh Liem was neither famous nor high in rank. He was merely brave, loyal, a true leader of men, and an honest patriot. He was my friend and teacher, and I will never forget him and what he stood for.

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