



Lieut. Thomas A. Horner

An American GI in Vietnam Asks: "WHAT AM I DOING HERE?"

A RIFLE CRACKED. A bullet crumped into the dry rice paddy, and First Lieut. Thomas A. Horner hit the dirt, just as a submachine gun opened up. The 20 men on Horner's patrol dived for cover behind the low dikes that contain the water in the fields during the rainy season.

The rifle shot marked the 18th time that Tom Horner, a member of our "peacetime army," had come under direct fire from the Communist Viet Cong during seven months in Vietnam. The fire was coming from a jungle-covered hill 150 yards away in an area where the Vietnamese patrol had been trying to flush out a group of about 15 VCs.

Now Horner watched the patrol start forward in two groups. One group laid down a cover fire while the other moved a few yards closer to the hill. Now sprinting, now crawling, the patrol leap-frogged to concealment in the dense underbrush near the hill.

Then the fight was over. The VC disengaged, as they always do when outnumbered, and disappeared. They had fired 3,000 rounds at Horner's patrol and had been answered with 2,500 rounds. One member of the patrol was wounded in the shoulder. Blood on the ground indicated that the VC had had some casualties, too.

"Except that more men were involved, it was a typical action," says 24-year-old Horner. "A long search, a lot of firing—and nothing obvious accomplished. Sometimes you feel that fighting the VC is like trying to bottle fog."

"I've been on about 70 patrols in areas where we know VC were in strength. We made contact with them about a quarter of the time. The other times, we just walked."

"In the dry season, our brains fry. In the rainy season, we never dry out. But it's got

to be done to keep the VC off balance, or they'd be stronger than they are. It's a strange war."

The strange war has its origins in "current events" which Tom Horner studied in 1954 while a student at Acalanes High School in Lafayette, Calif., near Oakland. The French gave up Indo-China, and the major part of the colony was divided into the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam, bordering China and, to the south, the non-Communist Republic of Vietnam. The partition didn't satisfy the Communists.

In 1959, the year Tom Horner went to Officer Candidate School and decided to make the Army his career, Red guerrillas began infiltrating the country. Once there, the Viet Cong were as indistinguishable from loyal citizens as, say, natives of Delaware would be in New Jersey.

By 1961, 25,000 hard-core VC were in the country, and they could rely on help from a shifting group of 80,000 to 100,000 sympathizers. After the rainy season, they opened large-scale hostilities. They mined roads and attacked outposts and villages in an effort to seize control of outlying provinces. To help the government resist them, the U.S. agreed to equip and help train an army of 150,000 men. At the time, Tom Horner had a pleasant, peaceful assignment in France. Now, two years later, he's in a tropical jungle dodging bullets.

An Answer Comes Eventually

"What am I doing here now?" asked Horner recently at his station in the steamy river town of Long Xuyen (pronounced Lawn Zwin). "In some moods, I wish I knew myself. I volunteered to come here for a standard one-year tour. My country was involved in a war, or so I thought, and if I wasn't ready to fight in it, then I had no business in the Army. My wife Judy wasn't happy

about the separation, but she felt I ought to make my own decision about it. I don't regret my decision, but being here a while has sure helped round out my education."

Tom didn't understand at first that he wasn't in Vietnam to fight a war. Like 12,000 other American soldiers, airmen, and Marines, he's there only to train Vietnamese to fight. But while most of the Americans in the country are assigned to training depots and support echelons, Tom's job, along with a few hundred other officers and NCOs, is to evaluate training results and to observe how Vietnam troops use American equipment on the battlefield.

The Enemy Must Shoot First

This doesn't mean that he goes up against the enemy unarmed. "Of course, I carry weapons," he says. "But only for self-protection. I can't fire first. I have to wait until I'm fired upon."

Thus Tom often finds himself in the unenviable role of a duck in a shooting gallery. Last November, for example, he was on an aerial photography mission over Co-To. The light plane was skimming the treetops: "I spotted VC emplacements in our line of flight. They weren't shooting. They've learned to hold their fire against aircraft until they can get off concentrated volleys at close range. I knew this, and so did the pilot, but there wasn't a thing we could do about it even though I had a Tommy gun and grenades. We had to fly over and take it."

"We got a few hits in the wing, but they weren't crippling. Once they fired, I could have answered it, but we were moving out of range, so what was the point?"

Despite the hazards of being a sitting duck, Tom prefers being out on operations to some of his other duties. "In the field you know what you're fighting. Even when you don't see VC, you know they can see you and

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