

IVY LEAF



NVA Officer Reveals Life In Hanoi

Story By CPT David R. Fabian

LIEUTENANT X had been extensively trained as a recon specialist in North Vietnam prior to his infiltration south. After serving four months in South Vietnam with the 320th Regiment Recon Company as a Master Sergeant, he received a battlefield commission and became the executive officer of the 19th Recon Company, 320th Regiment, 1st NVA Division.

He participated in the battles of Chu Do, Chu Ben and Hill 800 in Kontum Province in 1968. In late summer his unit was moved further south toward Ban Me Thuot. While on a recon mission, he was found wounded by an alert 4th Division LRP team.

The desire to live had been sapped from his body. Now he suffered the grave mental anguish of a severely wounded soldier who had been abandoned by his fleeing comrades.

Perhaps he felt as though death had smoothed her lap and beckoned him to rest his head. Or perhaps he felt that his battered body had begun melting into the thickly carpeted jungle floor.

The desire to destroy the enemy, however, still pulsed, and with what little strength he could muster, he cradled two grenades beneath his body, intent upon killing his American captors in a final gesture of hostile defiance.

To his surprise, the NVA soldier found his foes to be compassionate. His wounds were immediately tended, and he is alive today to tell the story of his tour with the North Vietnamese Army.

What follows is the first in a series of weekly installments which will make known to Ivy men the contents of a lengthy interview between the NVA officer—we shall call him Lieutenant X—and intelligence experts. The comments made by Lieutenant X during the interview were offered freely and sincerely.

The IVY LEAF wishes to acknowledge the efforts of Major Billy J. Biberstein, Commanding Officer, 13th Military History Detachment, who transcribed notes of the interview into narrative form.

Here, however, the narrative has been abridged and in part specially rewritten to meet practical demands. No factual material has been altered in any way.

Part I

GENERALLY SPEAKING, I enjoyed a relatively good childhood. Although my father died before my birth, my mother was able to manage household and financial affairs throughout my early childhood because she was successfully renting sections of our 50 hectares of rice fields to neighbors. When I was six years old, however, my mother and I - I should mention that I was an only child - moved from Nam Ha, the place of my birth, to Ngol Cao village in Ninh Binh Province in North Vietnam. We did so because we wished to escape the fighting being waged by the French and the Viet Minh.

"While living in Ngol Cao, I attended school for eight years, earning the equivalent of a high school diploma. I recall enjoying mathematics a great deal, but I felt I had little aptitude to appreciate and understand literature.

"In 1960 I joined a high school youth group. For me, membership in the group was a new experience. Perhaps it was because my mother was fairly rich, or perhaps it was because I was cherished by her as her only child, but prior to joining the group I led what would be referred to as an irresponsible and reckless teen-hood. My social life was very active. There were always folk festivals, dances and movies.

"The high school group matured me. It was not a communist organization, however. My first experience as a member of a communist youth organization occurred later when I was drafted into military service. I am not certain, but I think that every NVA soldier must be a youth group member."

"Personally, I am not pleased to be under the communist regime. Before it became prominent in North Vietnam, my mother was able to sell our farm products directly to the people, but after they (the communists) came, she was forced to sell all her products to the cooperative."

(At this point in the interview, Lieutenant X mentions the numerous hardships his mother encountered when trying to sell crops at the cooperative, the loss of personal property, and the rationing of foodstuffs in North Vietnam).

"The North Vietnamese people do not like it under the yoke of the communist party either, but they dare not express their true feelings and anti-communist sentiments for fear of punishment. If they do speak out against the ideologies which have been imposed upon them, they are immediately arrested and sent to a reform center for one to four months. If they are guilty of more flagrant violations against the government, the sentences are longer

NEXT WEEK: Lieutenant X will tell about his military training in North Vietnam.

**IVY LEAF
23 March 1969**

Lieutenant X And The Road South

By Cpt David R. Fabian

Lieutenant X had been extensively trained as a recon specialist in North Vietnam prior to his infiltration south. After serving four months in South Vietnam with the 20th Regiment Recon Company, as a Master Sergeant, he received a battlefield commission and became the executive officer of the 19th Recon Company, 320th Regiment, 1st NVA Battalion (Division?). He participated in the battles of Chu Do, Chu Ben, and Hill 800 in Kontum Province in 1968. In late summer his unit was moved further south toward Ban Me Thout. While on a recon mission, he was found wounded by an alert 4th Division LRP team.

PART III

"I cannot give you specific examples of how a man is disciplined when he fails to carry out an order because I can honestly say that I have never seen this happen. The discipline is very good. While there were several fights between the soldiers, they were instigated because of petty frictions. Cadre merely separated soldiers in these cases.

"I must admit that in our Army the soldiers complain frequently about their hard times. Frequently I have overheard them talk back to cadre. Yet there is not much that the cadre can do except ignore such comments because most of the men have malaria and such comments are always attributed to their state of feverishness.

"I always make it a point to observe my own men closely and issue orders only to those men I am certain can and will comply. During an operation, if there was ever any doubt in my mind as to whether or not an order would be followed, I would not order anyone else to comply. I would do it myself.

"On February 6, 1968 we departed Hoa Binh Province, traveling via Route 12 by truck to Nghe An Province. From there we moved through Ha Tinh and Quang Binh Provinces in North Vietnam into Laos. I was able to learn very little about Laos since I never had much chance to meet the people. Mainly we moved on what was classified as a military road which wound through jungles and forests.

"Nor did I come to know the Cambodian people. In theory and practice the country is neutral. I am not aware of why we use the country. I can only compare our movement there with the movement in a chess game. The NVA has made the right move and uses Cambodia. I suppose the South Vietnamese could also exploit the Cambodian countryside if they knew how to.

"My only acquaintances with the South Vietnamese were made as I talked with South Vietnamese laborers who were controlled by NVA forces. Otherwise, during my Infiltration I never passed through villages or hamlets.

"We arrived in Kontum Province on February 28, 1968. Dismounting from trucks northwest of the tri-border area, we moved on foot the remainder of the way. To get into the Kontum area we moved through Laos and we infiltrated in into Polie Kleng by moving parallel to Route 14, staying about seven kilometers from the highway.

"During the first week of March we received the general plan of attack and were issued our specific mission. The ultimate mission was to liberate Kontum City. Elements of the B3 Front were to secure Highway 14 from the northeast of Kontum and the 320th Regiment was to secure Chu Do and Polie Kleng, thus securing Highway 14 from the west. When these units were positioned, armor and additional infantry units were to move from: the Cambodian-Laotian border south to Highway 14 and attack Kontum City. Chu Do was to be an Intermediate objective of my unit and Polie Kleng the ultimate objective.

"On March 8 my unit received the order to recon Polie Kleng. For this mission eighteen of my men were selected, together with the regimental commander, two battalion commanders, and all company commanders and platoon leaders. We moved by day and rested by night, arriving on March 18 at a position which was but a two hour distance from Polie Kleng. We established an observation post and prepared defensive positions to return to during the night.

The entire recon party was organized into three groups. One group had as its mission the recon of the Polie Kleng airstrip, the second was to determine the best northern approach to Polie Kleng.

The recon was to last ten days. My group was successful in penetrating the city, where we were able to measure the distances between fences, foxholes, and other fortified positions with string. We later withdrew using the same route, and all three groups reassembled at the observation point on April 11. The main body of the regiment was then ordered to move from the assembly area near the Laotian-Cambodian border to our location in preparation for the attack. The regiment arrived on April 17, 1968.

"On the same day we received information from division level that American forces had moved into Chu Do. My unit was to accomplish a hasty recon, so we departed immediately. The regimental commander and all officers temporarily remained behind, but designated another meeting place named Chu Barat, which was two hours from Chu Do where we were to report upon completion of the recon.

Following dry and shallow creek beds, it took us approximately seven hours to get to Chu Do. Along the way we were subjected to artillery fire. Since there was only one wire fence around Chu Do, we were able to move in close to locate and plot enemy positions. Upon determining that there was one under strength battalion located there we returned to Chu Barat.

"The attack was launched on the night of April 23. During the attack all recon personnel remained at Chu Barat. Although I can't be certain, I believe three battalions attacked. Two

companies were kept in reserve. The Infantry battalions were discovered prematurely while moving into Chu Do. American artillery was fired on our forces from Polie Kleng.

"Meanwhile our own artillery support was not accurate. We were unsuccessful in the attack, and we suffered many casualties. I heard that we had 260 men killed, 50 missing, and a large number of wounded. After the attack the regiment withdrew and took three days to bury the dead. It was then that we moved from Kontum Province into the Dak Dam area of Cambodia and prepared for operations against Ban Me Thout.

NEXT WEEK: LIFE IN THE NVA

IVY LEAF
30 March 1969
Enemy Officer Tells Of Daily Life
By CPT David R. Fabian

Lieutenant X had been extensively trained as a recon specialist in North Vietnam prior to his infiltration South. After serving four months in South Vietnam with the 320th Regiment Recon Company, as a Master Sergeant, he received a battlefield commission and became the executive officer of the 19th Recon Company, 320th Regiment, 1st NVA Battalion. He participated in the battles of Chu Do, Chu Ben, and Hill 800 in Kontum Province in 1968. In late summer his Unit was moved further south toward Ban Me Thout. While on a recon mission, he was found wounded by an alert 4th Division LRP team.

Part IV

"DURING THE DAYS when I am not on operations my life in the North Vietnamese Army is very easy. I wake at 6:00 a.m. daily, brush my teeth and bathe. At 7:00 I breakfast with my fellow officers, and then I join the men of my company and generally chat with them until 10:00. We talk of personal matters—home, family, and of course, sex. After lunch I nap until about 2:00 p.m.

"Our food is usually rice and canned meat. It is brought from China and prepared for us by the two cooks attached to my company. The canned meat is usually pork, and we tire of eating it so often.

"In the afternoon I go fishing with one or two members of my company. Never do we stray more than two kilometers from our base camp. We are very careful with members of our units who appear to be worried or whose morale is low. We watch them closely and accompany them continuously.

"At 6 p.m. I eat supper and then gather with the rest of the company for a meeting held by the political officer. This is a daily meeting during which the political officer praises NVA heroes and slanders the South Vietnamese government. He also rants about the numerous great victories we are achieving against the US units. I do not think the political officer is very effective; the soldiers fail to listen attentively, and they become bored quite quickly with his speech.

I think their failure to heed his words can be attributed to the fact that he never accompanies us on our combat operations and he never sees us take casualties. Hence the soldiers do not put any stock in his stories.

Sometimes I join my men after the political meetings and we sing songs and tell jokes and try to cheer each other up.. We go to bed at 9:00 p.m. If we are located far enough away from the enemy, we sleep in hammocks; if we are close to the enemy, we sleep in trenches and foxholes.

"When we are in the mountains avoiding contact our most vulnerable elements are the combat patrols we send out and some of the companies we have guarding our outermost perimeter. Food is no problem when we are avoiding contact. The rest area itself is always around a source of running water.

"It is easy to distinguish our officers during battles because they will always attack with the headquarters element, which consists of the CO, XO, radioman, and runner. Officers wear neither pistols nor insignia of rank in battle.

"Prior to any attack we prepare a lengthy plan. All units involved must follow the plan faithfully, and an individual soldier must execute all orders even if many get killed. The attack must be launched at all costs. The plan always includes how to gain entrance to an objective, the location of key points to be destroyed, and the best routes to exfiltrate.

Artillery support is fired prior to the attack to confuse and pin down the enemy. Unfortunately, we sometimes fail to lift the fire and it kills our own men. If the enemy pins down our attacking force, we use artillery to aid in a retreat. Finally we employ artillery fire when we decide to break a major contact.

"When the battle subsides, we pull back to rest and bury the dead. It is NVA discipline that you always try to recover a comrade's body. We have no religious rites for the dead: merely bury them unceremoniously. The victim's personal effects are kept by his friends. The same unit is rarely used to attack an objective a second time if they have suffered numerous casualties. Anytime heavy casualties are inflicted morale is very, very low:

Often we must resort to a control technique to help weak soldiers. That is, we will organize into three-man cells. Selection is not based upon friendship; but by picking two skillful men to support one weak one by offering advice and encouragement.

"My reconnaissance unit is usually briefed on our mission at least one day prior to moving out. For our movement we use maps and compasses to navigate. The maps are either 1:100,000 or 1:50,000 scale. They are French-made but contain Vietnamese writing. Our division supply element can provide these maps for any area very soon after request. We conduct the recon in three-man groups, one compass to a group.

"The special equipment we usually carry consists of radios, binoculars, notebooks, and knives. I inspect every man as well as the condition of his weapon and gear. During movement to a recon objective we usually travel about three kilometers an hour, breaking for 10 or 15 minutes. Rarely will we travel more than a day and a half without sleeping.

At 3:00 p.m. we find a night camp-site. Upon arrival at the recon site, we usually establish an OP approximately one or two hours away. We penetrate the objective, locating heavy weapons. If we are successful we withdraw using the same route; if we are discovered we return fire immediately and attempt to disengage and withdraw.

"In our reconnaissance of cities we are normally met by Local Force liaison people at prearranged locations within or close to the city. They escort us to the points of attack. If there

are ARVN soldiers in the area we will disguise ourselves as ARVN; otherwise we wear civilian clothing. Normally challenge and passwords are utilized to recognize liaison people."

NEXT WEEK: MAKE-UP OF THE NVA

IVY LEAF

LT X; Reconnaissance Mission

By CPT David R. Fabian

Lieutenant X had been extensively trained as a recon specialist in North Vietnam prior to his infiltration south. After serving four months in South Vietnam with the 320th Regiment Recon Company, as a Master Sergeant, he received a battlefield commission and became the executive officer of the 19th Recon Company, 320th Regiment, 1st NVA Battalion. He participated in the battles of Chu Do, Chu Ben, and Hill 800 in Kontum Province in 1968. In late summer his unit was moved further south toward Ban Me Thuot. While on a recon mission, he was found wounded by an alert 4th Division LRP team.

PART V

WHEN WE COMPLETE our reconnaissance mission, we return to our unit as soon as possible. We never rely on civilians or others to relay our information. After the attack we normally take two or three weeks off to rest, treat the wounded, and conduct "lessons learned" meetings concerning the significance of our recon in terms of success or failure of the attack.

"When you do a good job in the NVA you are rewarded by being promoted and/or given a certificate of commendation. I was extremely happy when promoted; I knew my leader recognized my good performance. Recently in South Vietnam, the NVA has started to award the Medal of Victory to our soldiers. However, neither I nor my men had earned them.

"As frequently as possible, we are taught about American perimeters. As part of the study, we employ sand tables. On recons we just crawl slowly through the wire; cutting the bottom strands. "If we are detected while inside the camp and must make a hasty withdrawal, we use wooden planks or ladders to go over the top of the wire. In training we have a man lie on the wire so that we may run over him, but we never do this in combat operations.

"We have one doctor and one medical specialist working in each regimental dispensary. There are also two medics assigned per company. The doctors in the NVA are very good, very professional. They provide good medical care for our casualties. Those who are seriously wounded are sent back to North Vietnam. I might add that during the time that I was in North Vietnam, I never saw a wounded soldier. When they go north the government keeps them in medical centers because they don't want the people to see them.

ALTHOUGH WE TAKE the malaria pill, most of us are still afflicted by the sickness. I believe all 70 men in my unit had contracted malaria at one time or another, and it was in various degrees of seriousness. We also take B1 vitamins daily. I am not at all certain how much good these tablets do. Curiously, three of my men contacted paralysis, feeling absolutely no pain throughout the body. They were evacuated to a hospital complex and I never saw them afterward.

"The only women in the NVA are the nurses who work in hospital complexes. They do not accompany the units into combat. Very seldom did we have sexual contact with them while in

the NVA. However, sometimes along the infiltration routes we met women at the communication and liaison stations in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

The women seemed to like us very much. We were nice to them, giving them gifts as well as NVA money.

"The Political Officer always told us that if captured we would be tortured and killed. When I was wounded and left behind by my comrades I expected to be killed. Of course now I know differently. After I received medical aid, an ARVN major showed me a South Vietnamese brochure on treatment of prisoners, and it was then that I realized I would not be mistreated or killed.

I WILL NEVER FORGET the day I was left behind wounded. We had finished our recon of the Ban Me Thuot area and were returning to the base camp area when my unit of eight men became surrounded. Artillery was fired on us and I received a serious wound in the stomach and another wound in the left thigh. I was angered that my men were leaving me, but knew they had to do it lest they be wounded or captured. I gave my friend my pistol, machine gun, watch, ring, and map. I kept only my compass.

"I placed two grenades under me.... I was going to use the grenades on my enemies, and if possible kill them if they indicated that they would mistreat me. Leaving the grenades with the wounded is not our policy – I just thought I might be able to kill some of you.

"Instead of being mistreated, though, I was given medical treatment as soon as I was found. I could have later killed a medic, US captain, and two other men because I was never searched. After the medical treatment my fears vanished and I surrendered the grenades. . . ."

Next Week, The Conclusion

IVY LEAF
Lt X Tells Personal Thoughts
By CPT David R. Fabian

Lieutenant X had been extensively trained as a recon specialist in North Vietnam prior to his infiltration south. After serving four months in South Vietnam with the 320th Regiment Recon Company, as a Master Sergeant, he received a battlefield commission and became the executive officer of the 19th Recon Company, 320th Regiment, 1st NVA Battalion. He participated in the battles of Chu Do, Chu Ben, and Hill 800 in Kontum Province in 1968. In late summer his unit was moved further south toward Ban Me Thuot. While on a recon mission, he was found wounded by an alert 4th Division LRP team.

PART VI

"I DON'T KNOW HOW you could convince other NVA soldiers that ARVN's do not kill or torture prisoners. One way might be to let some NVA captured by ARVN return to their units. However, I think that if I were released and went back to rejoin my unit I would be watched very closely at all times....

"The only soldiers who enjoy being in the NVA are the young hot-blooded ones. Most of us are merely draftees who do not enjoy the struggle. We do grow accustomed to some of the hardships. We don't care about not getting paid, for example, because there would be

nowhere to spend the money. Very frequently we are faced with food and equipment shortages, which definitely affects troop morale.

"The North Vietnamese soldier is superior to the ARVN. but the ARVN can rely on artillery support. The American soldier is strong and more intelligent than the NVA soldier, but he is not familiar with the terrain of the countryside, which I feel is a marked disadvantage. The US soldier is also very noisy when navigating the terrain.

"I do not know if we are trying to force Communism on South Vietnam or not. I don't think this war can be won by military might. The military activities are merely in support of the political struggle. Yes, I have heard of the peace talks over radio Hanoi but I have no opinion regarding them. I think the only answer is a North Vietnam and a South Vietnam. There are just too many differences on each side. Once divided the country should be controlled by an International Commission at the DMZ. The UN cannot control it since they would oversimplify the problem as Communism versus the Free World.

"I WAS STILL IN North Vietnam when last year's Tet offensive started. According to radio reports, the NVA had achieved great victories After my infiltration I saw that it was quite the opposite. . . . The people in North Vietnam are like the deaf and the blind — they are not aware of what is actually going on, they believe only in what the communists tell them.

"Our leaders are speaking erroneously, they are lying to us. Yet if we refuse to fight our families will be harassed by the government. I would suggest that you exploit this type of propaganda. Nothing of the truth is broadcast to the North Vietnamese people or the NVA soldiers so the fact that our families are being harassed cannot affect the morale of our troops....

"I have heard of the Chieu Hoi program but I do not know exactly what it is. I also heard a little about it from one of the airplanes, but I and my men paid little attention to it since the voice sounded so insincere. I have also seen lots of the psyops leaflets but they seemed to make little impression on the NVA soldiers.

IF THE AMERICANS WERE to let the South Vietnamese put the ideas into poetry the leaflets would be much more successful. The Vietnamese are a very poetic people. I and all the men in my unit knew the lines to one of the poems used by the South Vietnamese. The best way to tell of good will is through poetry, and we thought of these lines very often:

Since I have been away from you while following my comrades into Laos and then in Central Vietnam along mountain trails, being sunburned by the sun near the coastal area, I have suffered all kinds of hardships. The age of youth is similar to a blossom of a flower. Due to the cost of peace we do not fear difficulties. During six months of day movement and night rest I have worn my boot soles and shirt collars. . . . Oh, wise Mother, I remember our home. In the evening our house is covered by the shadow of the sweet melon vine, and I am sorry that my hand has committed a crime.