

## Le Ly Hayslip

*Excerpt from her memoir When Heaven  
and Earth Changed Places*

**Published in 1989**

In many ways the Vietnam War was a fight to control the countryside of South Vietnam and the loyalty of its people. Before the war most of the people in South Vietnam lived in small, rural villages and supported their families by farming. They tended to be quite poor, and few of them could read or write. They lived simple lives that emphasized the importance of family ties and cultural traditions. They did not know or care much about politics. But when the war began, the South Vietnamese peasants were caught in the middle.

The Geneva Accords of 1954, which ended the war between France and Communist-led Viet Minh forces, divided Vietnam into two sections. The northern section, which was led by a Communist government under Ho Chi Minh, was officially known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam but was usually called North Vietnam. The southern section, which was led by a U.S.-supported government under Ngo Dinh Diem, was known as the Republic of South Vietnam.

The peace agreement also provided for nationwide free elections to be held in 1956, with a goal of reuniting the two sections of Vietnam under one government. But the South

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Vietnamese government refused to hold elections. North Vietnamese leaders remained determined to reunite the country, by force if necessary. Within a short time a new war began between the two sections of Vietnam. In 1965 the United States sent troops to join the fight on the side of South Vietnam.

### **The war for the people's support**

One of the Communists' main weapons in the Vietnam War was a group of guerilla fighters known as the Viet Cong that operated in the South Vietnamese countryside. The Viet Cong mingled with the villagers and tried to convince them to support the Communist efforts to overthrow Diem's government. They used several methods to gain the support of the peasants in South Vietnam. One of these methods was propaganda, or spreading information in order to promote their cause and reduce support for the opposing cause. For example, they told the villagers that Diem was just a puppet of the United States. They claimed that Ho Chi Minh would bring freedom and independence to the Vietnamese people. They also taught the villagers patriotic songs and sayings.

But the Viet Cong also used violence to convince the rural people to support their efforts to take over South Vietnam. "Viet Cong efforts were always supported by terror. *Terror* is defined as the deliberate use of murder, torture, and fear, mainly against the defenseless, to gain a political objective. For the Viet Cong, terrorism was 'education by violence,'" Albert Marrin wrote in *America and Vietnam: The Elephant and the Tiger*. "Terrorism provided a daily reminder that Saigon [the South Vietnamese government] could not protect the people. This was important for two reasons. First, it kept citizens in fear. A Viet Cong threat had to be taken seriously, since its agents could strike anyone whenever it pleased. Second, it kept the Viet Cong's own followers in line."

On the other side was the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam, or ARVN. These forces, with the help of American weapons and equipment, tried to prevent the Viet Cong from taking control of the countryside. One method used by the ARVN was to turn rural villages into fortified hamlets. They surrounded the villages with trenches, stakes, barbed wire, and armed guards in order to prevent the Viet Cong from entering.

But this strategy was not very effective. The Viet Cong still found ways to make contact with the people. In addition, the fortifications often disrupted the lives of the peasants and caused them to resent the government.

In many cases the rural people of South Vietnam became trapped in the middle of the dispute between the Viet Cong and the ARVN. Both sides competed for their loyalty and were willing to use intimidation and violence to keep it. This situation created terrible fear and suffering for the peasants. "We had to appease [go along with] the allied forces [of South Vietnam and the United States] by day and were terrorized by the Viet Cong at night," Le Ly Hayslip recalled in *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*. "We obeyed both sides and wound up pleasing neither. We were people in the middle."

Some of the rural people in South Vietnam continued to support the government. But many others were influenced by the ideas that the Viet Cong spread among them. The Viet Cong claimed that they were fighting to liberate the country from foreign control and reunite the Vietnamese people under one government. These ideas appealed to the villagers. "Freedom meant a Vietnam free of colonial domination," Hayslip noted. "Independence meant one Vietnamese people—not two countries, North and South—determining its own destiny."

Some of the South Vietnamese villagers became convinced that the United States was just another in a long line of foreign powers that wanted to control Vietnam. "Because we peasants



**Vietnamese peasants in the Mekong delta take cover.**  
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knew nothing about the United States, we could not stop to think how absurd it would be for so large and wealthy a nation to covet [wish to possess] our poor little country with its rice fields, swamps, and pagodas [temples]. Because our only exposure to politics had been through the French colonial government (and before that, the rule of Vietnamese kings), we had no concept of democracy,” Hayslip explained. “What for [Americans] was normal—a life of peace and plenty—was for us a hazy dream known only in our legends.”

In the following excerpt Hayslip recalls a series of incidents that took place around 1961. At that time she was twelve years old and lived in a small village called Ky La near Danang in central Vietnam. The war between Communist-led North Vietnam and U.S.-supported South Vietnam was just beginning. Like many other South Vietnamese villagers, she became caught in the middle of the dispute between the Viet Cong guerilla fighters and the ARVN forces.

**Things to remember while reading the excerpt from Le Ly Hayslip’s memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*:**

- As North Vietnam and South Vietnam competed for the loyalty of the rural people during the war, villages and even families were divided over which side to support. In fact, Hayslip’s family was divided by the war. One of her brothers, Bon Nghe, went to North Vietnam to join the Communist rebels. But one of her sisters, Ba Xuan, was married to a policeman who worked for the South Vietnamese government in Danang. This situation made it even more difficult for Hayslip and her parents to choose between the Viet Cong and the ARVN when these forces came to their village.
- The ARVN built fortifications around Hayslip’s village to protect the people from the Viet Cong. But as soon as the soldiers left, the Viet Cong returned and tore down the fortifications. At this point the Viet Cong leader spoke to the villagers. His speech showed the combination of propaganda and intimidation that the Viet Cong typically used to maintain control over the South Vietnamese villages.
- Like many other South Vietnamese peasants, the people of Ky La were torn between cooperating with the ARVN sol-





diers and helping the Viet Cong. In the beginning they feared and distrusted both sides. They cautiously supported whichever side was present. Over time, however, it became clear that the South Vietnamese army could not protect them from the Viet Cong. In addition, Hayslip and many others in her village began to believe the Viet Cong propaganda. They eventually began resisting the government forces and actively supporting the Viet Cong.



### ***Excerpt from When Heaven and Earth Changed Places:***

*Before I was twelve and I knew better, I played war games with the children in my village. . . . Some of us pretended to be **Republican***

Le Ly Hayslip

**An elderly Vietnamese woman carrying a boy leaves Tan Uyen, South Vietnam, after a Viet Cong attack in 1968.**

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**Republican:** Forces representing the South Vietnamese government; also known as the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam, or ARVN.

**Surly:** Irritable or threatening.

**Viet Cong:** Vietnamese Communist guerilla fighters who worked with the North Vietnamese Army to conquer South Vietnam.

**Old war:** The First Indochina War, which took place between France and Communist-led Viet Minh forces in Vietnam, 1946–1954.

**Viet Minh:** A Communist-led nationalist group that worked to gain Vietnam's independence from French colonial rule.

**Ky La:** A small village in central Vietnam.

**New war:** The Vietnam War, between Communist-led North Vietnam and U.S.-supported South Vietnam.

**Hanoi:** The capital city of North Vietnam.

**Danang:** A coastal city in central Vietnam.

**Rations:** Food for one meal.

soldiers (who were just like **surly** policemen), while others would be **Viet Cong**, who we supposed were only gangsters. When one force was too badly outnumbered, some of us switched sides, although others refused to play the game at all unless a certain person was “the enemy” or was “on my side”—whichever side that happened to be on that day. The **old war** between the **Viet Minh** and the French seemed a lifetime away (it had been many years since **Ky La** had seen fighting and the village, in fact, had been renamed “Binh Ky” by the new Republic as part of its total break with the past), and armies of this **new war**, the Viet Cong and the Republic, were both filled with Vietnamese. “How bad can this be?” we asked ourselves during rests between mock battles. “A family feud? A spat between brothers?” We had seen plenty of those in our own families. We could not imagine such a war to be real.

Still, I never enjoyed the game. When I played a Republican, I always imagined that the laughing face at the end of my stick-rifle was my brother Bon Nghe, who had gone to **Hanoi** and who might one day come back to fight around Ky La. When I played a Viet Cong, I could think only of my sister Ba in **Danang**, who, being married to a policeman, locked her door every night out of fear of “those terrorists” who blew up power stations and cars and took potshots at the officials for whom her husband worked. I could not accept the idea that either my brother or my sister must somehow become my enemy.

In school, the pressure to take sides was enormous. Our teacher, a villager named Manh, who was paid by the government, asked us, “What will you do if you see a Viet Cong, or hear about someone who’s helping them?” We answered in chorus, “Turn him in to the soldiers!” Manh praised us for our answer and told us that the Republicans would pay our families big rewards for every Viet Cong we helped them capture. Still, when we played among ourselves, there was no shortage of Viet Cong fighters, and the children who pretended to be Republicans usually did so halfheartedly. . . .

Republican soldiers were now a familiar sight in our village. Unlike the French, they tried to be kind and often helped us in the fields. Although I was just a flat-chested girl of twelve, I liked the way these handsome young men looked at me and teased me and shared their **rations** when it was time to eat. My mother warned me away from them, though, telling me I would endanger the family if I talked too much. “What business is it of theirs,” she would say, “about who married who, or whose relatives worked where and for how long?” I had yet to learn that in the war that was about to begin, many peo-

ple would be killed simply because they were related by birth or by marriage to the wrong person—someone who was an enemy to the person who held the gun. . . .

The first time I saw a Viet Cong fighter up close it was just about dark and I was cleaning up our kitchen. I happened to gaze out the window to the house next door, which (although it was owned by Manh, who had been my teacher) was often used by villagers for gambling. Without a sound, a half-dozen strangers scampered into Manh's house and then shouted "Nobody move!" The oil lamp in Manh's window went out and people began running from the house. At first I thought it was Republican soldiers raiding the gamblers, as they had done several times before, but it soon became obvious that this was not that kind of raid.

Manh was the last one out, led at gunpoint with his hands atop his head. I could hear his familiar voice arguing with the strangers: "But—I don't know what you're talking about!" and "Why? Who told you that?" I leaned into the window to get a better view when I saw one of the strangers standing just outside. He wore black garments, like everyone else, and had on a **conical** sun hat, even though it was already dark. His sandals were made from old tires and his **weapon** had a queer, curved ammunition clip that jutted down from the stock like a banana. He seemed to be keeping an eye on the dusty road that ran by Manh's house and he was so close to me that I was afraid to run away or even duck down for fear that he would hear me.

Suddenly one of the strangers barked out an order in an odd, **clipped** accent (I found out later this was how everyone talked in the **North**) and two of his **comrades** prodded Manh to the edge of the road. I could still hear Manh begging for his life when two rifle shots cut him short. The strangers then ran a Viet Cong flag up the pole that stood outside our schoolhouse and left as quickly as they had come. The leader shouted over his shoulder: "Anyone who touches that flag will get the same thing as that traitor!"

The guard who was standing by my window glanced over and gave me a wink, showing he knew I had been there all along and had learned the lesson he had come to teach; he then followed his troops into the night. . . .

[Hayslip is shocked by what she has seen. She protests to her father that her teacher was a nice man. Her father calms her down and explains that Manh's careless words had gotten him in trouble. Her father then warns her never to talk to the South Vietnamese soldiers.]

**Conical:** Shaped like a cone.

**Weapon:** The Viet Cong soldier carried a gun made in the Soviet Union, which was different from the American weapons used by the South Vietnamese troops.

**Clipped:** Shortened or abbreviated.

**North:** Communist-led North Vietnam.

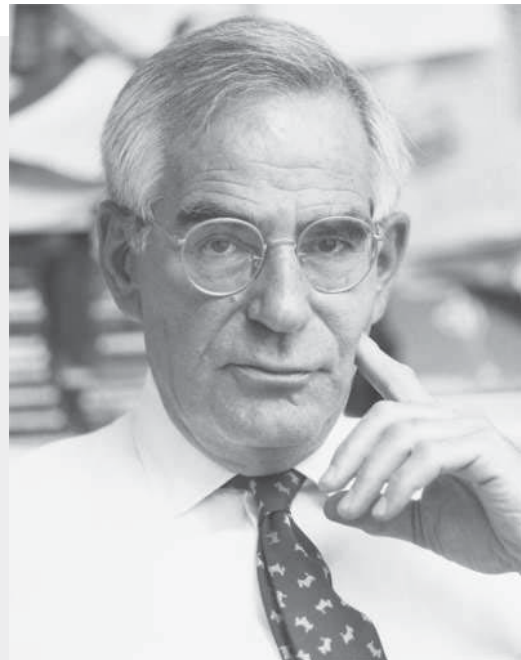
**Comrades:** Fellow soldiers, especially Communists.



## An American Reporter Witnesses the Peasants' Terror

While traveling through Vietnam in 1962, David Halberstam of the *New York Times* saw firsthand the terror that many peasants felt at being caught in the middle of the war between the South Vietnamese armed forces and the Viet Cong. The following is an excerpt from a report that was reprinted in his book *The Making of a Quagmire*:

*About a hundred yards away we came upon a dead peasant lying in the yard of his hut with a poncho spread over him. Two huts further on, a desperately frightened old man of eighty was genuflecting [kneeling in respect or worship] in front of the American and Vietnamese officers and telling them that he had never heard of the Viet Cong. How many times had this old man had to tell Government troops that he knew no Viet Cong? How many times had he had to tell the Viet Minh [Communist-led nationalist*



David Halberstam. Reproduced by permission of AP/Wide World Photos.

*group that worked to gain Vietnam's independence from French colonial rule] or Viet Cong that he knew no Government troops? "The war," a young Vietnamese said to me bitterly later, "only lasts a lifetime."*

**Girders:** Materials used as structural supports for buildings.

**Ambushes:** Traps in which hidden people wait to attack.

*On the very next day, the Republicans came back to Ky La—more than we'd ever seen—with trucks full of steel **girders** and cement and barbed wire. They chopped down the Viet Cong flag and told the farmers to build defenses around the village. The ditches left over from the French occupation, now overgrown with weeds, were made deeper and bamboo trees were cut down to make spikes and watchtowers. During the weeks of construction, the soldiers told us to stay indoors and keep our houses dark at night. As soon as the sun went down, the Republicans set up **ambushes***



around the village and waited for the dogs to bark—a sure sign that intruders were lurking outside.

But nothing happened. After a while, the Republican troops pulled out and left us in the hands of the “Popular Force”—the *Dan De*—local villagers who had been given small arms and a little training in how to use them. Because the war seemed to leave with the soldiers, the **PF** officials declared peace and *Ky La*, despite its new necklace of stakes and barbed wire, tried very hard to believe them.

Unfortunately, the peace didn’t last very long. A few days later, my father awakened me in the middle of the night and took us to the place where the Republicans had left their biggest **cache** of materials, including some long metal poles. Within a few minutes, we were joined by most of our neighbors. One PF officer said, “Here—take these poles and hide them so that the Republicans won’t find them. Our **fighters** need them for protection against enemy tanks.”

Without further discussion, we took as many poles as we could carry and hurried off to bury them outside our house. “Oh yes,” the PF officer added. “If you have a watchdog, give him to a relative out of town or boil him up for supper. We can’t have any dogs barking the next time our freedom fighters come to the village!”

Although I wanted badly to ask my father what was happening, I obediently helped him carry some twenty poles to our house. By the time we finished burying them, a huge bonfire had been started in a clearing behind our house, with most of the villagers—including the children—collected around it. In the light of the dancing flames, I recognized the handsome Viet Cong soldier who had winked at me on the night my teacher Manh had been killed. He just strolled around, cradling his weapon, wearing the amused smile I’d seen many young men wear when they eyed pretty girls at the market. The Viet Cong **cadre**, and many of the villagers, piled onto the fire everything the Republicans had given them to defend the village. . . .

[Then the Viet Cong leader speaks to the villagers.] “We are the soldiers of **liberation**! That is how you will call us. We are here to fight for our land, and our country! Help us stop the **foreign aggression** and you will have peace. Help us win and you will keep your property and everything else you love. *Ky La* is our village now—and yours. We have given it back to you. . . .” [When the Viet Cong soldiers finish tearing down and burning all of the fortifications built by the Republicans, they prepare to leave the village. Then the leader speaks again.] “Down the road you will find two traitors. I trust they are the last we will see in *Ky La*. We must leave now, but you will see us again.”

**PF:** Popular Force.

**Cache:** Storage of food or supplies.

**Fighters:** The Viet Cong.

**Cadre:** Core group of trained personnel.

**Liberation:** Freeing the country from foreign rule.

**Foreign aggression:** A reference to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.



A soldier helps an injured woman while her daughter watches at an aid station in Cholon, a Chinese suburb of Saigon.

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**Informers:** Someone who supplies information to others.

**Vengeance:** Punishment given to make up for an injury or offense.

*Everyone in the crowd looked at everyone else, wondering which two had been taken. When the Viet Cong were out of sight, a few men began putting out the fire, afraid it might spread to the houses, but most simply went back to their homes. A few minutes later, we heard gunshots on the road to Danang. My father and some others went out to bring back the bodies but as we had already guessed, one was the younger brother of Manh—a victim because of his family connections. The other was a village busybody—a veteran of the Viet Minh, who, after a long imprisonment, had become a government **informer**. He came to our house often and asked my mother about my brother Bon, making her—and all the other mothers who had sons in the North—worry for their lives. Now the informer himself had been informed against and I felt, deep in my young girl’s heart, that he, like Manh, had gotten what he deserved. It was my first taste of **vengeance** and I found that revenge, like the blood that once ran from my nose during our war games on the playground, tasted sweeter than I expected. It made even a puny little farm girl feel like someone important.*



## Kit Carson Scouts

During the Vietnam War hundreds of former Vietnamese Communists defected from the North and became valuable agents for the American side. In October 1966 the U.S. military created an official program to recruit and train former Viet Cong guerillas and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers. General Herman Nickerson, a Marine commander and history buff, called the former Communist agents Kit Carson Scouts after Kit Carson, a famous soldier and frontier guide of the American West.

The Kit Carson Scouts were particularly useful during combat patrols. They led U.S. military units to enemy

camps, food supplies, weapons, tunnels, trails, and booby-traps on many occasions. They also served as interpreters, helping the American soldiers to communicate with the South Vietnamese. In some cases Kit Carson Scouts were sent into South Vietnamese villages to talk with peasants and encourage them to cooperate with U.S. forces.

When the U.S. military withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, most Kit Carson Scouts became soldiers in the South Vietnamese Army. After NVA troops captured the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon in 1975 to win the Vietnam War, most of the former Communists who had helped the Americans were sent to prison.

*The next morning, as we buried the two victims, the Republican troops returned. This time they came into our houses and searched for evidence that might link us to the enemy. The soldiers drafted some workers and made them clean up the remains of the bonfire the Viet Cong had left. They **interrogated** everyone, separately and together, to find out what had happened and, more importantly, what was going to happen next. They were especially displeased with the PF officers and arrested one of them—the wrong one, we noticed—and drove him away in a jeep. Like everyone else, I said nothing. The man was never seen in Ky La again. . . .*

*That night, I slept with my mother while my father and brother Sau Ban and several Republican soldiers slept by the door. I had a terrible dream of ghosts floating through the village and into our house and into my mouth and nose and I couldn't breathe. I woke up to find my father's hand over my face and his voice whispering for me to lie still. He held me for a long time—not for comfort, but to keep me from moving—and I went back to sleep. In the morning, the soldiers were*

**Interrogated:** Questioned.

**Dismay:** Sudden fear or worry.

**Infiltration:** Secret entry of Viet Cong forces.

**Unnerve:** Make very nervous; cause to lose courage.

gone and word passed quickly that a half-dozen Republicans had been murdered in their sleep—throats cut from ear to ear. “The dogs—where are the dogs?” I heard a Republican officer cry in **dismay**. He wondered what had happened to the watchdogs of Ky La.

The **infiltration** and midnight murders seemed to **unnerve** the Republicans, and thereafter they stayed in the village only during the day. As soon as they were gone and the sun had set, the Viet Cong came back. . . .



### What happened next . . .

As it became clear that the ARVN soldiers could not protect the peasants from the Viet Cong, more and more South Vietnamese villages came under Communist control. Even villages that seemed peaceful during the day, like Hayslip’s, were often taken over by the Viet Cong at night. By 1964 U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reported that about 40 percent of the South Vietnamese countryside was under Viet Cong “control or predominant influence.”

In Ky La the Viet Cong began organizing the villagers to dig tunnels, carry information, and stand guard for them. They even enlisted the help of Hayslip and other children in stealing weapons, first aid kits, and other supplies from the ARVN troops. They gave the children little awards and placed their names on honorary lists in recognition of their help.

Hayslip was often selected to help the Viet Cong set booby traps for ARVN soldiers. “Surprisingly enough, although we knew how deadly these traps could be, we kids had no second thoughts about helping the Viet Cong make them or put them into place,” she recalled. “To us, war was still a game, and our ‘enemy,’ we were assured, deserved everything bad that happened to them.”

When the United States sent combat troops to Vietnam in 1965, they lived under the constant threat of terrorism by the Viet Cong. American foot soldiers patrolling the South Vietnamese countryside fell victim to booby traps and sneak attacks on a regular basis. The U.S. forces took a number of



steps to fight the Viet Cong. For example, they launched bombing missions in the countryside, conducted search-and-destroy operations in the villages, and sprayed poisonous chemicals over the land to destroy the enemy's jungle hide-outs. But these tactics failed to wipe out the Viet Cong and caused even more suffering for the South Vietnamese people.

By the late 1960s the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) took over more of the responsibility for fighting against the ARVN and the Americans. Although the Viet Cong lost some of its visibility in the later years of the war, many people in South Vietnam continued to support the Communists. "The government came after the Viet Cong with boats, planes, tanks, trucks, artillery, flamethrowers, and poisons, and still the Viet Cong fought back with what they had, which was mostly cleverness, courage, terror, and the patience of stones," Hayslip wrote. "Even when things were at their worst—when the allied forces devastated the countryside and the Viet Cong themselves resorted to terror to make us act the way they wanted—the villagers clung to the vision the Communists had drummed into us."

**A man showing reporters his son's mutilated hand after an attack on their village by American troops. He tells newsmen that 370 civilians were slain in the hamlet of Tu Cung on March 16, 1968.**

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### Did you know . . .

- In 1993 Hayslip continued telling her life story in a sequel to *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* called *Child of War/Woman of Peace*. She wrote this second book with the help of her oldest son, James Hayslip. It focuses on her life after she left Vietnam and settled in the United States in 1970.
- Director Oliver Stone turned Hayslip's two books into a movie, *Heaven and Earth*, released in 1993. The film stars Heip Thi Le as Le Ly Hayslip, Tommy Lee Jones as her American husband Steve Butler, Joan Chen as her mother, and Cambodian refugee Haing S. Ngor as her father.
- Hayslip founded the East Meets West Foundation, a humanitarian relief organization with the motto "Working Together to Heal the Wounds of War." The foundation helps both American veterans and the Vietnamese people. One of its programs encourages American veterans to overcome their feelings of guilt about the war by returning to Vietnam and building schools and hospitals to help the Vietnamese people.

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