

TUNNEL RATS OF VIETNAM

*Vietnam's Little-Known Underground War
And the Men and Women Who Fought It*



Sgt. Pete Rejo-Ruiz, a Cuban-born Tunnel Rat, is shown popping out of a North Vietnamese tunnel.

By Harald Hesstvedt Scharnhorst

Vietnam is a land of incredible beauty: lush tropical jungles, winding, broad rivers and rice paddies. Small villages dot this land, worked by peasants, who have lived there for centuries. Eighty-five percent rural, the few large cities and towns lack urban technology.¹ The peasants live traditional lives of ancestor worship and respect.

Family continuation is dominant. Therefore, possessions, private property and gobs of money are seldom needed. Instead, gold is popular for savings. A father, as head of household, is more custodian than owner. The land will be passed to his children. To a Vietnamese, land is both a sacred and living element, the fountain of life for both villager and peasant through sowing and reaping of rice, the staple protein crop. The Western concept of land ownership and profiteering in a mobile society is alien to the Vietnamese peasant.

Vietnam has a complex history. The Vietnamese have been at war for centuries. Many times, foreigners preyed upon them. The Chinese were a source of resentment and trouble, as were other neighboring countries. Hill tribesmen like the “Montagnards” (better called Degas or Degars) were natural enemies, too.² (The Degars belong to six different ethnic groups.) So were the French natural enemies, who found Vietnam perfect for growing Pará rub-



The Cu Chi Base in 1966, divisional headquarters of the 25th “Tropic Lightning” Infantry Division from Hawaii. Thinking they were safe in their compound, the Americans had no clue they had built their base above an elaborate Viet Cong tunnel system. The division suffered repeated sudden losses from attacks from within. Small numbers of VC attacked at night, did their deadly mischief, and then melted back into the tunnels without a trace.

and underground operations. Several men, with primitive equipment, would pounce on an unsuspecting superior force by night, wreak havoc and melt back into underground tunnels, leaving no trace, without the occupiers having a clue as to what happened or how many were involved.

ber trees for the world’s burgeoning vehicle business, plus the expanding war industry. Michelin Rubber shipped raw materials for processing elsewhere. Michelin needed stable plantations, so the French became “custodians” or “protectors.” Both the French army and the French Foreign Legion served in Vietnam. The French also influenced architecture in Vietnamese cities and towns, which remains to this day.

Vietnam is considered “primitive” by more “advanced” countries, which do not respect the peasant’s ways. Disrespectful occupiers alienated locals, so revolutions developed. The people of Vietnam always considered occupiers “temporary.” They had time on their side, using it ingeniously. How do peasants wage war against an occupier who holds the high ground with superior weapons and ammunition? By guerrilla warfare



Tunnels such as those described here were first dug in the days of the Viet Minh, the Communist nationalist guerrillas who fought the French. (The Viet Minh formed in 1941. The Viet Cong formed in 1954.—Ed.) They were a means of communication between hamlets and villages. Guerrilla fighters escaped detection by French army sweeps or airplane reconnaissance, allowing fighters to rejoin villages at will. These tunnels were dug by hand with small, crude implements.

Soil was removed to the surface one bucketful at a time over time. Everyone was employed in excavation, even women and children. Dirt was distributed so it would be completely undetected. The tunnels were engineered to allow fighters to live underground for extended periods. They had multiple breathing holes, kitchens, weapons



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manufacturing areas, and food supply storage areas, sleeping areas, even hospitals, entertainment rooms and water sources. The tunnels also allowed for burial of dead fighters so the French army would not know how many enemies they had killed. What amazing innovators. Ho Chi Minh warned the French: “You can kill 10 of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose, and I will win.”³

When the French lost the battle at Dien Bien Phu, it was America that “inherited” policing the country for the benefit of the Rothschilds. With a new government established in Saigon and elections for reunification canceled, war was guaranteed.

Dang Thi Lanh was born in Saigon in 1945. In February 1967, her first child, named Tranh Thi Hien, was born in the tunnels of Cu Chi near the Saigon River.⁴ The maternity-ward tunnel-chamber was hung with U.S. parachute nylon to prevent earth from falling on the mother. The birth occurred while a battle was raging on the ground above. The girl grew up normally. The idea of tunnels for birthing and hospitals, plus hiding and fighting, was something U.S. commanders had never come across before.

Americans were never able to establish a “front line.” Instead, it was necessary to construct reinforced city-

like command areas throughout the country, completely independent and supplied to fight. This new concept in warfare was created strictly for Vietnam. Troops were deployed with armor, artillery, helicopters, complete maintenance facilities, hospitals and surgeons to handle all emergencies. Because of poor roads, each area had its own headquarters, fighting an area-war against unseen and unknown enemy forces. Supplies hauled from Saigon to Cu Chi were often attacked by Viet Cong. Americans placed fuel supplies at the tail end of a convoy, so if attacked, disabled tankers would not block a whole column. Eventually, helicopter gunship escort ensured safety.

The poorly equipped enemy was wily and innovative, making deadly weapons out of U.S. discards. Dud bombs were pilfered at great risk for their explosives and metal. Everything from c-ration tins to expended ordnance was made useful. Their explosive devices were crude, but effective. The Americans built airfields to support the war effort. While American military men thought they were secure in their own areas, they eventually realized how vulnerable they really were from tunnels right under their feet. The tunnels ran up to several hundred kilometers.

Cu Chi, outside of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital, became a huge U.S. military base. The place drew



Left, Captain Nguyen Than Lind, the man Col. Eyster praised, commanded the Viet Cong's Cu Chi Battalion. He perfected tunnel engineering by dividing the work scientifically. Old men were assigned to making baskets for carrying dirt. Old women cooked. Stronger young men and women were assigned to dig. Children covered trapdoors with leaves they gathered.

Below, without fear and risking instant death, Viet Cong tunnel fighters open a dud bomb to salvage explosives. Water from a kettle cools friction from the saw as they gently break the casing.

Bottom, a mother and daughter celebrate the birth of a grandchild in the Cu Chi tunnel hospital facility. (Also, see the photo on page 12.)

much manpower and resources. Few men fought; support troops were the majority. All the latest comforts of home were provided to house the men; everything from camp cots and recreation areas to a radio station. The area around Cu Chi was also scorched to provide a modicum of safety. It was an illusion. GIs sleeping in their fancy tents and buildings were often attacked at night with explosives, killing these men in their sleep. Mess halls were another high kill-rate target. The Viet Cong did not spare parked helicopters, either. When the confusion was over, a few enemies were killed, but no trace could be found of the guerrillas who disappeared into the ground. Eventually, the U.S. Army caught on, and the ground was bulldozed to eliminate tunnels. That did not work, either. No normal surveillance by U.S. soldiers uncovered all the entrances and exits. This was to plague the U.S. military from its arrival until departure. America never did win the tunnel war. The U.S. military seldom could control anything outside their perimeters.

The ARVN, the South Vietnamese military, preferred not to enter tunnels; let Americans deal with them was their attitude. As the U.S. military proceeded to destroy tunnels, they discovered that was a big mistake, too, as thousands of documents were destroyed in the process. The result was that special teams were developed and trained to use the intelligence obtained from these documents.⁵ Like everything else military, details take time. By the time documents had been translated and returned to the field units in readable English, they were useless.



There was seldom a “friend” in Vietnam. The South Vietnamese army could not be trusted, nor was it reliable. This was a common complaint by GIs throughout Vietnam.⁶ Civilians were allowed to work on U.S. bases. All reported to the Viet Cong. Local people who worked in graves registration gave accurate counts of American dead to the enemy, regardless of announced casualty figures. All moves made by the U.S. were reported to the Viet Cong. Time and time again, it demonstrated clearly to the Americans that our men never were secure on our bases, either.

One thing that emerged out of all this was the phenomenon of the “Tunnel Rat”—a new specialty of U.S., Australian and New Zealand soldiers who entered the communist tunnel system, with little more than a pistol, a flashlight and a bayonet, to disarm booby traps, deal with any enemy soldiers and try to recover documents for allied intelligence services. Other soldiers frequently referred to Tunnel Rats as insane—because you had to be crazy to take those risks. In fact, they were heroes.

A preferred weapon of the Tunnel Rat was the “Hush Puppy”—a modified Smith & Wesson Model 39 with a threaded barrel to accept a sound suppressor, 14-round magazine and slide stop lever.

The U.S. effort to run a Tunnel Rat school was not particularly successful. Out of 50 candidates, maybe five would be found mentally and emotionally fit to participate. The pressures of moving around in dark, damp and tight tunnels, the ability to be cool around booby traps using vipers, scorpions, claymore mines, poison gas and other deadly means, were more than most GIs could stomach. The few really good Tunnel Rats were those who had the “killer instinct,” could kill with impunity and went “down” with an enthusiasm that would both shock and frighten most of us. Interestingly, the best were small, skinny soldiers with nerves of steel. Many were of Hispanic origin with no scruples for killing. Cuban-born Sgt. Pete A. Rejo-Ruiz was described as one of the meanest, often working alone, killing the Viet Cong in their under-



Sgt. Flo Rivera holds a communist flag captured from a Viet Cong tunnel headquarters.

ground lairs. He was known as the “Human Probe” by his squad. He said, “I loved it. . . . When they told me they had a VC down there I came unglued.”⁷

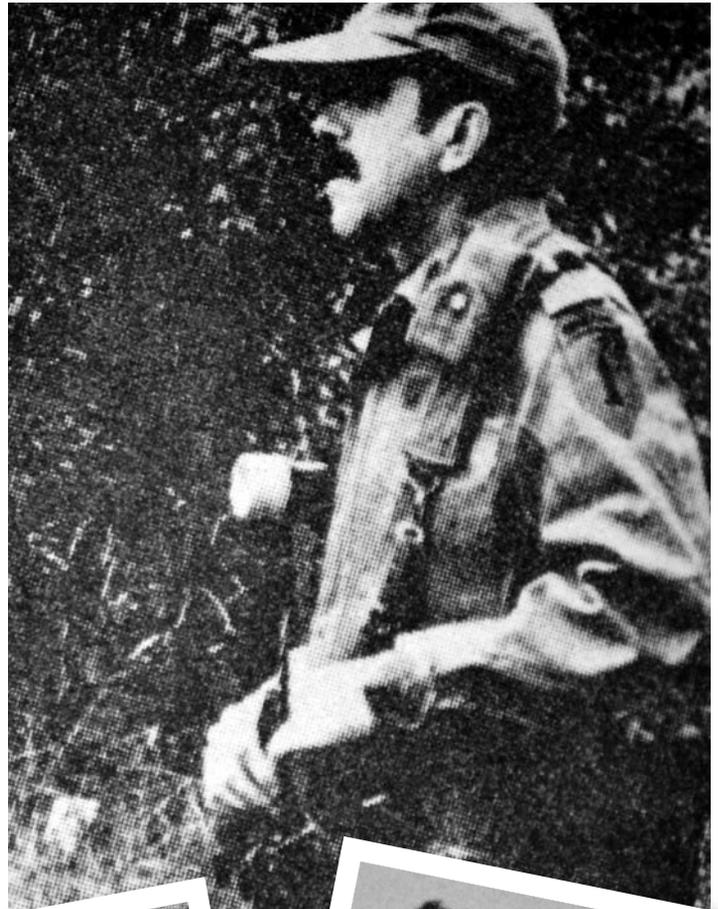
Lt. Col. George Eyster of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division was mortally wounded after being hit by a sniper. His dying words alluded to his desire to “talk to the guy who controls those incredible men in the tunnels.”⁸ It was to prove to be a prophetic comment, as U.S. engineers and Tunnel Rat groups began exploring these well-constructed facilities. The man Eyster praised was Capt. Nguyen Thanh Linh, who commanded the Viet Cong Cu Chi Battalion and was responsible for tunnel engineering during a five-year period of the war.⁹

The use of dogs was not helpful, either. They could not detect tunnel booby traps. Their handlers became frustrated when their dogs were killed or injured. The enemy soon learned that dogs could smell the Viet Cong. Cleverly, they responded by lacing the ground with soap and items with familiar smells, so openings to the tunnels would go undetected by the animals. U.S. soldiers stupidly set themselves up, sneaking prostitutes into their compounds at night. The result: The Viet Cong, to which these girls reported, knew about all the ways to get onto bases. In one tunnel, “rats” discovered a treasure trove of military tactical information, including names of civilian informants working on U.S. bases. In one case, all the barbers were VC informants. It was devilishly clever. Barbers are notorious, natural, even seemingly innocent talkers and listeners.

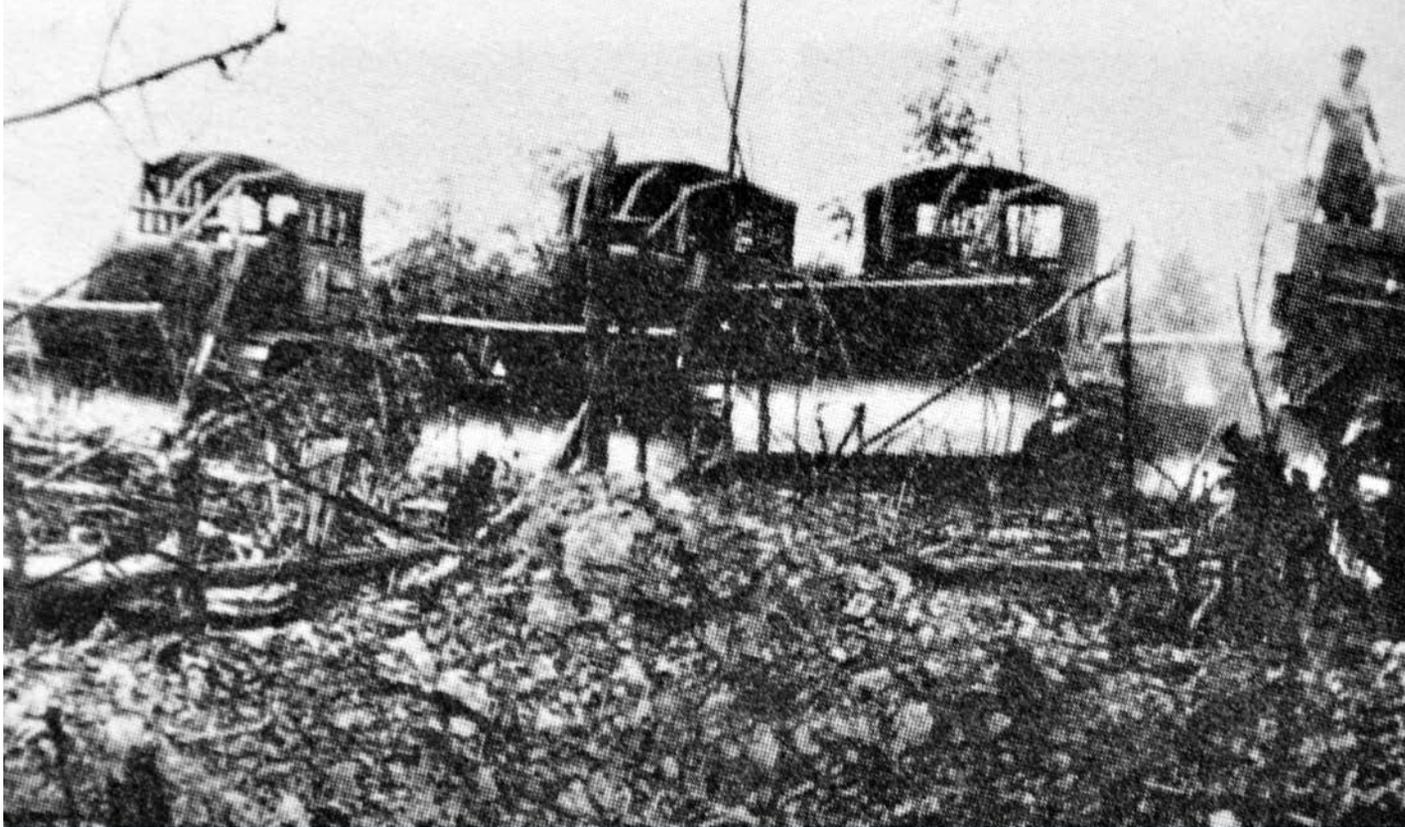
An impressive U.S. “search and destroy” mission, called “Cedar Falls,” in Cu Chi and the adjacent “Iron Triangle” was to prove only that jungle could be reduced to desert and a few tunnel entrances destroyed, but most everything else remained intact. It was not long before the place was repopulated with Viet Cong soldiers. Even though villages were destroyed and populations removed to adjacent areas, the guerrillas were able to communicate with them shortly thereafter. So, no matter what the U.S. military did, it only hardened the native feelings—which was exactly the opposite of the official nonsense bandied about, that it was “important to win the hearts and minds of the people.”¹⁰ Destroying their land, their homes and their kinsmen made that a sick joke.

Another cryptic, comical aspect of the situation was USO shows featuring stars of the day like Bob Hope. While Hope and others were entertaining U.S. troops above ground, VC units were infiltrating the compound with live ammunition within earshot of entertainers. Meanwhile, the VC had entertainers of their own inside their tunnels, singing songs of communist propaganda or patriotism, doing their best to raise the morale of VC troops.

Tunnel hospitals were marvels. Doctors learned by on-



Top photo: Tunnel Rat Sgt. Arnie Gutierrez killed his first guerrilla inside a tunnel. He stated, “I’m not kidding; you could hear a man blink down there.” **Left photo:** In 1966, Tunnel Rat Lt. Dave Sullivan found gold bars inside the tunnels. **Right photo:** Gen. William Westmoreland (left of photo), called the Viet Cong “an army of moles.” Here he decorates Lt. Col. Alexander Haig. Haig’s battalion led the assault on Ben Suc. When American soldiers left, the Viet Cong returned. Haig went on to become a U.S. secretary of state.



Rome Plow bulldozers, called “hog jaws,” stripped 80-yard-wide lanes in the Iron Triangle next to Cu Chi.



A team of Army personnel removes a wounded comrade who was injured in a tunnel.

the-job training. One of the best and most famous surgeons was Dr. Vo Hoang Le, who became chief of medical services for Cu Chi. He carved out tunnel hospitals, operated on patients without painkillers, used parachute-sourced nylon cord as stitches and made incredible efforts to save his men. His father had been executed by the French, so his large family had a history of fighting unwelcome foreigners. He learned his trade from books, from colleagues and hands-on experience. The VC often would pilfer medical supplies from ARNV compounds or U.S. ones, maintaining a huge pharmacy. Items left behind by the military were used for medicine. Malaria, dysentery and parasites were the most common ailments suffered by the tunnel denizens. Dr. Le met his wife in the Iron Triangle. She was a nurse who suffered her own job injuries.¹¹

The tunnel hospitals astonished the Tunnel Rats. Sgt. Bill Wilson, a Tunnel Rat with Company B, the 2nd/28th Infantry (the “Black Lions”), went alone into earthy darkness with a sweatband, a switchblade stiletto and his CO’s revolver. A hospital he explored was eight feet high and over 300 yards long, filled with rolled-up mattresses down the sides. He found medicine donated by Quakers from Pennsylvania and medication and supplies (including oxygen) from French sources. The place was ventilated by a candle which sucked hot, stale air up through an opening in the ground.¹²

Surgeons wore miner’s lamps about their heads, using primitive operating tables to care for wounded. Claymore mine plastic tubes used to insulate wires were employed for blood transfusions. Transfusions were often done directly from someone with a known blood type. Gravity forced the blood into a vic-

tim. There was no way to safely store blood. Amazingly, very few treated this way died. The biggest problem was clean water and disposing of excrement, body parts and noxious fluids. The pressure from serious head wounds was relieved by opening the skull with drills.

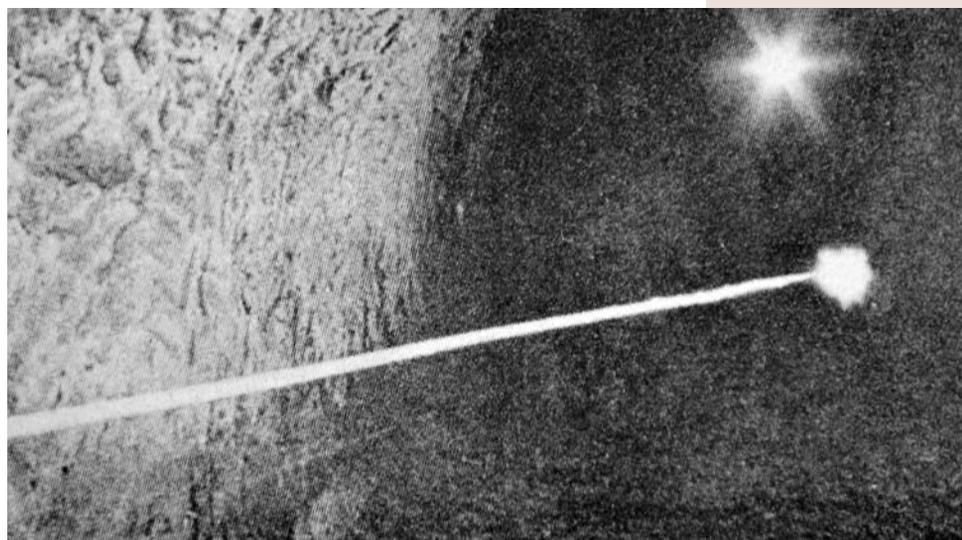
Psychological operations were a successful U.S. ploy. Broadcasting messages from home, appealing to VC soldiers' loneliness, especially in the tunnels where they were isolated from family and friends, worked well. Some Viet Cong "defectors" used the time to recuperate, then went back to their units. Others led Americans to the tunnel mouths, disarmed booby traps and ended up in the ARVN military. They were seldom trusted. Some accompanied Tunnel Rats on actual operations. When the communists took over South Vietnam after the war, men on lists of collaborators were dealt with harshly.

The tunnel war brought about a flurry of ghoulish research and development efforts for the military-industrial-banking complex. Money flowed like water for research and development of new and innovative equipment to penetrate the tunnels. Almost all were dismal failures. Once, when developers from Washington, D.C. came to instruct Tunnel Rats on the use of liquid explosives, the test backfired, injuring some of them. A fistfight between developers and Tunnel Rats was narrowly averted after that incident.¹³

In the end, human ingenuity won out. Lt. Col. Oliver was battalion commander with Task Force Oregon. He developed a strategy that had promise: saturating a given area with his battalion, who used bayonets and metal probes repeatedly stuck into the ground until all air vents and entrances were finally located. Operating like policemen seeking evidence at crime scenes, the whole VC company was dug up with casualties and prisoners taken. The VC commander was forced to show his personnel list, so it was a certainty they had found them all. Though Lt. Col. Oliver was asked to lead a tunnel



One of the biggest finds of Operation Cedar Falls was a tunnel complex thought to be the Viet Cong's 4th Military Region headquarters (above). American Tunnel Rats belonging to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade called in their commander, Brig. Gen. Richard T. Knowles (above left), to supervise the search. He is shown with Platoon Sgt. James Lindsay (holding field phone). Regrettably, Sgt. Lindsay was killed two days later in the tunnel by a booby-trapped explosive.



Left, an unusual photograph taken inside a tunnel showing a tunnel rat holding a flashlight, while firing a special tracer bullet into the void. Men fought and died here.

Life in the Tunnels: An Inside Look . . .



Two Viet Cong nurses inside a VC tunnel hospital.



Dr. Vo Hoang Le, who was the famous tunnel surgeon, and his wife, pictured here in 1974 after the war. He performed amputations without anesthetics. He said, "Half died of shock, but half lived." He did brain surgery with a household drill. Dr. Vo became a national hero in Vietnam. His wife finally died in 1982 of wounds sustained during the war.

school, the military, as usual, failed to take note of his hands-on experience. The information never made its way to "Foggy Bottom" at the top echelon.¹⁴

Sen. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, recalled that President Johnson "believed that with the primitive society the Vietnamese had, they couldn't possibly prevail against the U.S. with its unlimited power."¹⁵

These "leaders" were completely detached from reality.

Commanders in the field thought the same. Few understood the long-term significance of the Cu Chi tunnels. A Tunnel Rat, with his knife, handgun and flashlight, looked and behaved like a samurai warrior. Emphasizing physical fitness, mental alertness and the mechanics of humble fighting tools made him a real professional soldier, far more so than "the typical over-equipped and over-fed GI of the 1960s."¹⁶

Americans finally realized the importance of Tunnel Rats as the war reached its peak in 1968. "Rat Six," of the "Big Red One," was Lt. Jack Flowers, a pacifist who got bitten by the fighting bug, especially after being called a REMF'er, a crude Army insult against non-combatants. The word cannot be written in full in this family publication, but he decided to become as good a combat soldier as anyone.

He joined the Tunnel Rats. His sidekick was Sgt. Robert Batten, nicknamed "Batman." "Batman" was a killer on his third and last tour of duty, an expert under ground, wounded multiple times. "Batman" knew his people and wanted nothing to do with black men, so none volunteered.¹⁷ He also had no use for ARVN, saying: "These . . . little monkeys will never make Tunnel Rats."¹⁸

Sgt. Batten and his men were responsible for over 100 kills over his tours of duty. Lt. Flowers determined to become as good as Sgt. Batten but his sergeant told him he wasn't a killer and wasn't cut out for the job. Sgt. Batten also warned Lt. Flowers not to get in his way if he wanted to avoid being "fragg'd," Army slang for murdering a fellow soldier, usually an officer.¹⁹ Eventually, Lt. Flowers was injured by a grenade, as was Sgt. Batten.

When dirty and grimy Tunnel Rats were getting out

An American Tunnel Rat uses a stethoscope to try to detect below-ground enemy activity.



of the tunnels they always whistled “Dixie” so American soldiers would not shoot them by mistake.²⁰

When Sgt. Batten tried to extend for a fourth tour in Vietnam, he was turned down by division HQ. He had done too much, been wounded too many times, and had already earned a chest-full of medals, so he was sent stateside. He quit the Army for construction work. Lt. Flowers continued to lead his men, alone this time, soon realizing he lacked the skills of “Batman.” The last time he went down, in total panic he emptied his handgun into a dirt wall imagining he was hitting a VC. Three shots were all that was allowed, because six would signal an empty gun. Anyone who broke the rule was done. Lt. Flowers was relieved of command, sent home, became a stockbroker and when interviewed candidly and honestly stated: “‘Rat Six’ was dead. He died in some tunnel in the Iron Triangle. Batman had been right. Charlie [the VC] didn’t get me; I’d gotten myself.”²¹

The communists claimed to believe in equality. They employed females in both nursing and combat roles. Eventually there were female-led woman-only combat units, fighting the enemy. But there were problems. First, the Viet Cong would not allow females to engage in hand-to-hand combat. They



Right, Vo Thi Mo, the ruthless female tunnel guerrilla who softened enough to let three GIs in her sights live.



“Rat-6” and “Batman” standing together. Maj. Gen. Orwin Talbott (left), commanding the Big Red One, congratulates Lt. Jack Flowers on receipt of his Bronze Star (center), with Sgt. Robert “Batman” Batten standing by (right).

also had to deal with their monthly cycles, which created sanitation issues in the tunnels not easily addressed.

Vo Thi Mo was a ruthless and decorated female guerrilla. She once had three American soldiers in her sights, but decided not to kill them. She softened her stance when she observed they were resting and away from their weapons, sobbing and reminiscing over pictures they shared. For the first time she realized, as have many GIs after they went through the pockets of dead VC and discovered pictures of family, that in spite of it all, people are still humans, just from vastly different backgrounds, cultures, beliefs and causes.²²

The heroes who fought on both sides of the tunnel fence were numerous, each ruthless and determined, all doing what they believed in. When the final assault on Saigon itself started, is it any surprise the Viet Cong swarmed out of the tunnels of Cu Chi as they chased the Americans out of Vietnam?

Eventually, the jungle reclaimed the land; the Vietnamese reclaimed the bomb craters. The peasants grew their rice and the country was reunited again. Life slowly returned to normalcy. The winding, broad rivers and the green, beautiful land were at “peace” again—or whatever passes for peace under communist rule. ♦

ENDNOTES:

- 1 *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, by Tom Mangold and John Penycate, 54.
- 2 *War Story* by Captain Jim Morris of the Green Berets, describes his experiences as he fought with the Montagnards against the VC. He served three tours of duty in Vietnam.
- 3 *Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 140.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 6 *War Story*. A common assessment by Green Berets and other soldiers.
- 7 *Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 248.

- 8 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 10 Wikipedia. A common political cliché used by politicians, press and military during the Vietnam era.
- 11 *Tunnels of Cu Chi*, 177.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 177-178.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 212-213.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 222.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 219. “Dixie” was a song not likely known to the Viet Cong, and therefore deemed safe to use as a secret code.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 227.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 238-239.

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- Tunnel Rats:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhCqTqgOviA>.
<http://historywarsweapons.com/tunnel-rats-in-vietnam/>.
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