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Vietnam Combat and the Importance of Trust: How I Became a FAO

Colonel John B. Haseman, U.S. Army-Retired

Introduction

Foreign Area Officers (FAO) take a variety of paths to come to this career specialty. My path was unique! I have always considered that my FAO career began during my second combat tour of duty in Vietnam, 1971-1973, when I was a district-level advisor to the Vietnamese armed forces. Those experiences occurred a year or two before the Army FAO program began, but I firmly believe that I became a FAO in the mud of the Mekong Delta in 1971. The U.S. Army officially confirmed it when I applied to enter the FAO program in 1974. I was accepted, and designated as a fully-qualified Southeast Asia FAO with no further training. I believe that the experiences and lessons learned described below are still valid for today's Army FAOs.

The War Story

Even before I returned to the Republic of Vietnam for the second time in July 1971, I thought about what it would be like to be an advisor to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) instead of being assigned to an American army unit, as had been the case my first time (9th Military Intelligence Detachment, 9th Infantry Division, 1967-1968). By 1971, the withdrawal of U.S. combat units from Vietnam was almost

complete and "Vietnamization" was the watchword. I volunteered for assignment to a district- or province-level advisory team.

I found it difficult to anticipate what it might be like. I just knew it would be very different from any work environment I had ever been in. Yes, I'd been in Vietnam for a year during that first tour, and worked with Vietnamese interpreters every day, and a bit with ARVN personnel. But I had not worked full time with Vietnamese military or civilian personnel.

My first experience with the newly-assigned district chief (he a major, me a captain) while the DSA was in the hospital did not get off to a good start. Only a few days after my arrival, one afternoon came word that the enemy had ambushed a small convoy of visiting Vietnamese province officers at a dangerous place on the main road through the district. The district chief gathered a small force of soldiers and sped to the scene to render first aid and provide security. He did not tell me he was going -- I found out from one of the radio operators in the TOC.

This was not a good start to a counterpart relationship! I quickly rounded up our interpreter and drove our jeep to the scene of the ambush.

We found the district chief giving comfort to a wounded province officer. His first words surprised me:

"I did not tell you I was going out here because I just assumed you would not go out to a dangerous area."

Uh oh! He had clearly had a less-than-satisfactory relationship with an American advisor(s) at his previous assignment.

"Sir," I told him, "I am your advisor and I will always go with you no matter where. You have far more experience in fighting this enemy than I do, but I can help you in many ways. From now on, please don't leave me behind."

He nodded, and we got along very well in the ensuing weeks.

The most important event that cemented our relationship occurred only a few days later, on a tactical operation in the dangerous western part of the district. It was the first time I went on a combat operation with Major Manh.

We were well into the operation when a soldier hit a Viet Cong booby trap that blew off his foot and inflicted severe head wounds. His buddies carried him to the road and attended to his wounds while the district chief radioed to the Vietnamese side of the province TOC for a medical evacuation helicopter (medevac). But the Vietnamese TOC told him that there were no Vietnamese helicopters available.

Clearly distraught, he turned to me: "Can you help?"

By that time in the war a firm policy required that U.S. medevac helicopters would respond only for U.S. casualties. Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) helicopters would evacuate Vietnamese casualties. This policy was designed to force the VNAF to be more responsive to ARVN ground casualties. Knowing that, I still went ahead and used my radio to call the U.S. side of the province TOC and requested a U.S. medevac. The duty officer in the TOC knew I was calling about a Vietnamese casualty, and he denied my request.



Second counterpart, Major Manh, District Chief, Mo Cay District. "From now on, please don't leave me behind." He never did.

I got angry. I knew there was a MACV inspector-general team from Saigon visiting the province and district teams, and had full use of our province daily "swing ship" helicopter. At the time they were in the adjacent district. I told the duty officer that a life was in the balance and we needed that medevac. This time the senior American watch officer, a major who out-ranked me, denied my request. I got really angry and *demand*ed that they call the pilots for the inspection party, who were only a short flight from our location, to ask if they would come in to pick up the wounded soldier.

Fortunately, the adjacent district advisory team was monitoring the radio net and the DSA broke into our contentious radio exchange and said he would ask the pilots if they would fly the mission. The pilots agreed to do so, and within a few minutes a U.S. Army helicopter pilot called on my radio (I always carried the advisory team PRC-25 radio). I described the landing zone on the muddy road where we had stopped and put out security. A soldier tossed a smoke grenade to show the wind direction and the place where we wanted the helicopter to land. I stood on the road with my rifle held horizontally over my head to guide him in. The helicopter landed, took the wounded soldier and two soldier escorts on board, and flew them to the Ben Tre hospital. Then, they continued their administrative mission with the inspector-general team. We continued on the operation without further incident. I later found out that the

wounded soldier had survived his serious wounds.

But, now I knew I was in trouble! Senior officers do not take kindly to junior officers demanding anything. Besides, I had challenged a firm policy by calling for an American helicopter to evacuate a Vietnamese casualty.

Several days later, I accompanied Major Manh to Ben Tre for the monthly District Chief/DSA meeting. I was sure I was going to get an ass-chewing from somebody. But as I quickly found out, my counterpart, knowing that I was probably in trouble, had already told the province chief privately what I had done. At the start of the meeting Province Chief Colonel Kim asked me to stand. He thanked me, in front of the assembled American and Vietnamese officers, for what I had done, and praised the high level of the American-Vietnamese counterpart relationship in Mo Cay District.

Saved! The PSA, a very reasonable man, thanked me in public – and told me in private not to do it again.

There is more to this war story. In 1972, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Easter Offensive throughout Vietnam was late coming to the Mekong Delta, but come it did. In July, as I mentioned above, an estimated six NVA battalions invaded Mo Cay District while I was away on my 30-day extension leave. The district chief and DSA, leading a force of two RF companies, confronted an NVA

SECONDS AFTER I TOOK THIS PICTURE OF MAJOR MANH (IN FRONT OF ME), A SOLDIER HIT A BOOBY TRAP OFF TO THE RIGHT. I GUIDED THE MEDEVAC HELICOPTER TO LAND ALMOST EXACTLY WHERE I AM STANDING.

YOUR PARAPHRASE TEXT

regiment of enemy forces and in the ensuing battle the district chief was killed and the DSA badly wounded. A week later a separate NVA regiment crossed the Mekong River and nearly overwhelmed Ham Long District, where I had worked for ten months, from which the advisory team had been withdrawn. The PSA assigned a captain from the province advisory team to help the district chief, but sadly he was killed in action in a major ambush only one day after he got there.

At that point, the PSA called me to Ben Tre and sent me back to Ham Long to be the DSA to a Vietnamese lieutenant colonel. We had worked well together for ten months (I described that relationship earlier) but at that time I had been the deputy advisor. I worried that while I had been effective as a deputy, how would I be received as DSA with a more senior Vietnamese officer? Would the two cultures and the difference in our ranks be a problem? I need not have worried.

"I am so glad they sent you back to help me," he said. "We know you and trust you, and we will work well together."

We did! My orders from the PSA were clear: support and buck-up the district chief's confidence in himself and his soldiers; aggressively deploy tactical air strikes and attack helicopters against the NVA forces; and "go everywhere" with the district chief. I was at Lieutenant Colonel Son's side throughout the ensuing three months. My improved Vietnamese, the District

Chief's English, my very brave interpreter, and our soldier-to-soldier comms all worked. We managed soldier-to-district chief-to advisor-to U.S. forward air controller communications, and it worked! His troops stiffened and fought well against the better-armed NVA troops. The combination of courageous soldiers, confident leadership, and the daily U.S. tactical air strikes that I managed, decimated the invading enemy regiment and the remaining local Viet Cong units. The remnants of that NVA regiment retreated back across the Mekong River. Although friendly casualties were heavier than before, the soldiers fought well. After three months of heavy combat together, we maintained government control of the district. Lieutenant Colonel Son attempted to credit me with his and his troops' victory.

"No sir," I told him. "Your leadership and your soldiers' courage won the fight." True statement.

The Lessons Learned

My counterparts in two different situations, both of whom outranked me, trusted me to be with them in the field, trusted me to fight the enemy, and trusted me to support them with tactical air support and anything else when it was needed. I trusted my counterparts and soldiers. I was confident they would not leave me behind during an operation or during combat. I was confident they would not betray me to the enemy. I trusted them

to protect me when protection was needed. No matter what the different cultures might be, the counterpart relationship cannot succeed without trust. Trust between two officers and two cultures put together in a combat situation cemented the vital personal and professional relationships needed to succeed.

My first counterpart trusted me based on my performance during the time I had previously worked with him and his staff. Despite my junior rank, he knew my abilities and trusted me. We worked very hard to regain control of the district and recover from three months of hard combat against a main force NVA regiment.

My second counterpart, once he saw that I would go with him wherever he went despite the danger posed by a strong enemy threat, trusted me to be there when he needed assistance. He repaid that trust by ensuring that I was not disciplined for my humanitarian act that was, nevertheless, contrary to firmly-established policy. Our relationship throughout the ensuing weeks was rock-solid. Our parting when my assignment ended was quiet but emotional. We shook hands very firmly, looked each other in the eye, and nodded. No words were needed.

The biggest challenge I faced was how to work effectively with a counterpart of a different culture, a counterpart more senior in rank in a society in which rank structure was very important, a counterpart whose

priorities and modes of operation were different from mine. How does one react when your advice is either ignored or seemingly never implemented? The U.S. Army trained us to be pro-active, adaptable, action-oriented. Do something, anything! The Vietnamese did not operate that way. So, it was very important to be careful in choosing issues to present to my counterpart, important to present them in an acceptable manner, important not to protest or argue when nothing happened. If something I had once-upon-a-time suggested did in fact come to pass, it was important that it was always my counterpart's idea, not mine. I had no difficulty with any of these; that's why I was a good advisor.

Needless to say, my eighteen months of experience as a district-level advisor in combat in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam stayed with me through another twenty years in consecutive FAO assignments with counterparts in three different countries, and through more than thirty years as a retired FAO. All of the aspects of those eighteen months as an advisor returned constantly in my life as significant parts of the professional and personal qualities I expected of myself and of my fellow FAOs.

In different assignments, in different countries, with different personalities, always the same factors were at the top of my personal and professional performance and leadership:

- The importance of foreign language

ability. Before all of my later FAO assignments I first went to language school for Thai, Indonesian, and Burmese. Language ability was absolutely essential in my eight FAO assignments. I did not have an interpreter in any of those jobs.

- Understanding as much as possible about a different culture. I was challenged to move from Thailand, to Indonesia (three assignments), to Burma. Each culture was different.

- Knowing the daily, monthly, strategic, and tactical political and security aspects of the environment in which one serves. I was on a U.S. compound in northeastern Thailand, in comfortable embassy assignments in Indonesia, and always in difficulty dealing with the brutal Burmese military junta.

- Understanding the background, aspirations, and personal and political objectives of counterparts. I was lucky to work with professional counterparts in Indonesia, but there was nothing more difficult than maintaining a correct relationship with the Burmese junta.

- And, of course: No FAO can succeed without trust. Shortly after I arrived in Jakarta as the Senior Defense Official/Defense Attaché, the chief of Indonesia's military intelligence command urged me to visit the troubled province of East Timor. "We trust you will tell us accurately what you see and hear." That led to twelve visits to East

Timor, where human rights issues became a major issue in U.S. relations with Indonesia.

My active duty FAO career ended more than thirty years ago. When I started out there was no FAO course of instruction, and I've never participated in subsequent structured FAO training. My experiences were enriched by good mentors, good colleagues both military and civilian, and good common sense. The principles I've listed at the end of this essay are, I firmly believe, as applicable today as they were as I learned them in the field of combat, in school, in language training and cultural briefings, and again good common sense across twenty years of consecutive FAO assignments. The world is different today than when I learned "FAO man-ship" in the mud of the Mekong Delta, and refined those lessons during my FAO career and as a retired but still "active" Southeast Asian FAO.

The most important quality to assure a harmonious inter-cultural relationship was the presence, always, of trust -- to gain the trust of counterparts with a different culture, made even more important by being in combat or having contentious political issues with the host nation. The corollary, of course, was that the American had to trust the counterparts. In my humble opinion, on-the-job training and experience, fertilized along the way by mentors and formal classroom instruction, will serve you well in your chosen FAO career.



My first award as a FAO: Colonel Kim, the Kien Hoa Province Chief, awarded me the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Star, for valor. November 1972, Ham Long.



John B. Haseman, Colonel USA (Retired), Southeast Asia FAO

Colonel Haseman was commissioned in the Military Intelligence (MI) Branch from ROTC, University of Missouri-Columbia, in 1963. He served 2 ½ years in combat in Vietnam, with the 9th Military Intelligence Detachment, 9th Infantry Division (1967-1968); and as a district-level advisor on Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Advisory Team 88 in the Mekong Delta, during which he was one of the few MI Branch officers to be awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge (1971-1973).

Strongly influenced by his Vietnam advisory duty, he entered the Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO) program in 1974, and was accepted with no further training -- no FAO course, already had a masters degree and language training, and was in a "regional assignment." From 1974 through his retirement in January 1995 he "single tracked" as a FAO. His

assignments included Commander Udorn Field Office, 500th MI Group, Udornthani, Thailand (1974-75); Red Team War-Gamer, Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS (1975-1976); IMET Program Manager and Army Division Chief, U.S. Defense Liaison Group Jakarta, Indonesia (1978-1981); Assistant Army Attaché to Indonesia (1982-1985); Senior Analyst for Southeast Asia, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (ACSI), The Pentagon (1985-1986); Defense and Army Attaché, Rangoon, Burma (1987-1990); and Defense and Army Attaché, Jakarta, Indonesia (1990-1994).

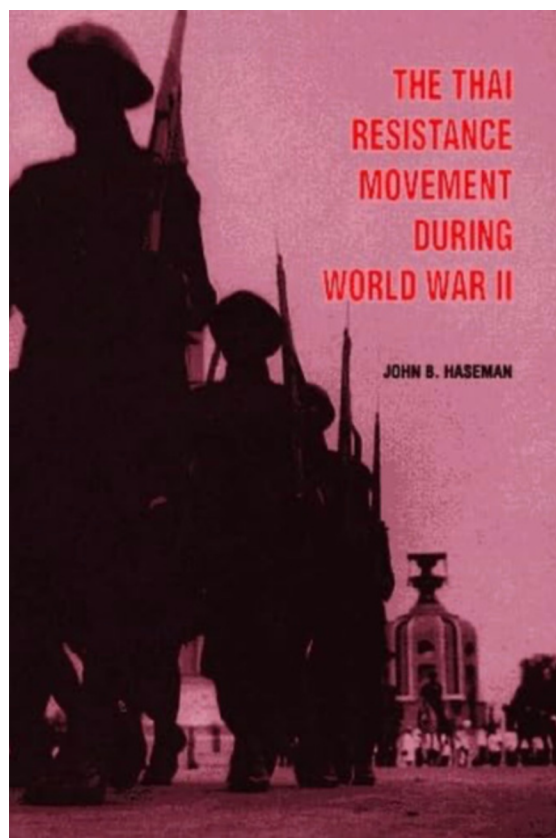
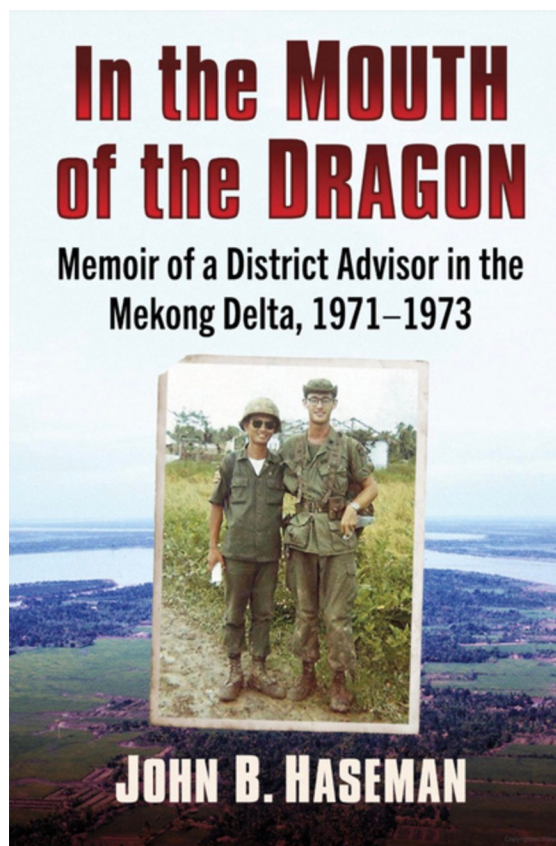
He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science, University of Missouri (1963); a Master of Public Administration Degree, University of Kansas (1971); and Master of Military Art and Science, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (1977). He is

a 1985 graduate of the U.S. Army War College.

He completed formal training in three Southeast Asia languages: Thai (1975); Indonesian (1978), and Burmese (1987).

Colonel Haseman is author or co-author of five books and numerous book chapters dealing with Southeast Asia political-military affairs; more than 250 of his news and analytical articles have been published in journals in the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Australia. His most recent book is *In the Mouth of the Dragon: Memoir of a District Advisor in the Mekong Delta, 1971-1973*, September 2022, McFarland Publishing.

Colonel Haseman was a member of the FAO Association Board of Governors from 2009 to 2024, and is Chairman of the Editorial Board for the FAO Association Journal of International Affairs. He serves as Membership Officer for Counterparts, an organization of former advisors in Southeast Asia. He resides in Grand Junction, Colorado.





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