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Subject: Vietnam Poem
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This poem is part of a collection of poems I wrote about my tour in Viet Nam at Bien Hoa Air Base. I was in MACV as an advisor to the VNAF 3rd Air Division from August 1971 to September 1972.

The Leper Colony

Do you see the little paddles nearly hidden in the grass?

Well, you'd better learn to spot 'em if you want to save your ass.

Now we have to go to Vung Tao 'cause the tester's on the blink,

And the Army ship that's anchored there can fix it in a wink.

There are lots of helicopters. It's a pilot we could use.

So I check with the advisors; I don't trust the VNAF crews.

Joe McGinty says he'll take me, he has nothing else to do.

So I go pick up the tester while he rounds us up a crew.

Joe's a grizzled Army Major on his fourth tour in the Nam,

And he's got more combat hours than the BX cans of Spam.

I once asked him why he did it. He said, "Jim, I'll tell you what."

"This-here war don't ‘mount to shit, but it's the only one we got."

So I strapped into a side seat with my camera in my hand.

I just had to get more pictures of this green and lovely land.

Vung Tao’s a major harbor, and a lot of ships were there,

But we found the Army's depot boat with lots of time to spare.

Joe dropped the Huey roughly on the tiny landing pad,

And I heard him in the headset, "For the first time that ain't bad."

While the Army fixed the tester, Joe and I had time to burn.

Swapping stories in the wardroom, sopping coffee from an urn.

Now to say the Army had a ship might seem a little strange.

But they kept it safe at anchor out of hostile fire range.

It had everything they needed to repair their chopper fleet.

The machine shop was enormous, and they kept it clean and neat.

If they had to put to sea a Navy crew would run the show.

But until the war was over there was no place else to go.

As we headed back for Bien Hoa with the tester good as new,

A request came from the Chaplain as the base came into view.

"Is there anybody out there who can take me on a trip,"

"To the nearby leper colony that has a plain grass strip?"

Good old Joe responded quickly, "This is MACV 263."

"Got a VNAF Huey Padre, you can hitch a ride with me."

We set down at operations and the Chaplain got aboard.

Then they put on several boxes and we saw that they were stored.

He had three armed Air Policemen to escort him on the trip.

"Well the Green Berets are with us," I heard old McGinty quip.

We soon reached the leper's village and we started to set down,

When Joe pulled up the collective and he spun the Huey round.

Well, we nearly lost the Chaplain, who was sitting by the door.

And the AP's were all tangled up and lying on the floor.

I pushed the red mike button and I said, "Hey Joe, what gives?"

"They had the LZ mined," he said. "I just saved you boy's lives."

"They used what we call butterflies. They're pretty hard to spy."

"It's a favorite Charlie trick for knocking Hueys from the sky."

"When the downwash from the rotor bends the paddles to the ground,"

"It fires a ring of claymore mines they've planted all around."

"Turns a Huey into scrap iron and the people into hash,"

"Tell the Chaplain why I did it so he doesn't think I'm rash."

I explained it to the Padre 'cause he had no headset on.

And he placed his hand on Joe and shouted, "Bless your soul, my son."

But the only thing I thought of on our ride back to the ramp,

Was how many men had died before we learned to spot the trap.

Do you see the little paddles nearly hidden in the grass?

Well, you'd better learn to spot 'em if you want to save your ass.

James M. Thompson
Lt Col, USAF (Retired)

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