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Romances, Rapes, and Casual Encounters, 1960–75

[In the firefight] our whole orphanage was destroyed, except for one wall. All the nuns and orphans tried to crouch down and hide behind it, but another shell hit and the wall collapsed, falling on us. Nine of the fifteen orphans, some of whom were Amerasian like me, were killed.

—Amerasian Nan Bui

The war affected different parts of Vietnam in different ways at different times. Whereas some areas in both the North and South were crushed by bombings, suffering, and death, in other parts of the South, where large numbers of Americans were stationed, life often was like a mammoth out-of-control party. Drugs and prostitution were everywhere, and there were vast amounts of money to be made by Vietnamese and some foreign civilians, through bribery and corruption as well as through increased business. Many poorer Vietnamese were drafted into the military like young Americans were. Other Vietnamese were driven by war in the countryside into the cities, where some found jobs working for the Americans as cooks, servants, and clerks, and others became destitute and homeless. Some Vietnamese women, many in their teens, often became prostitutes because there was no other way for them to earn a living.

In the southern cities of Vietnam, particularly in Saigon, bars, dance clubs, and brothels quickly sprang up to serve the growing number of

Americans entering the country, as well as the large number of Vietnamese military, officials, and others enriched by American spending and aid. Prostitutes crowded streets and alleys, especially in the Ton Dan area of Saigon, soon famous for its pleasures. Bars tended to become known as “black” or “white,” drawing almost entirely one or the other racial group of American troops. Vietnamese women who worked in “black” bars often were looked down on by other Vietnamese, including other prostitutes.

“When you are homeless, with your village destroyed by war, what do you do?” says a former Vietnamese prostitute. “In the rural areas you probably would not go hungry, but once you were driven into the city, there were hundreds like you.” Brothel madams would go to bus stations and other sites where refugees gathered to offer newly arrived country girls food and shelter in exchange for work as brothel maids. Most eventually “graduated” to prostitution, sometimes because they were not allowed to leave.

“Even if you got a babysitter or maid job, the man of the house almost always abused you, but the more you ran away the worse it got,” says the same Vietnamese woman. “There were a few factories, but for every job, ten people wanted it. Most of the prostitutes then were between fifteen and twenty years old. They had to make a living, and many were supporting their families, too. The American men were also very young, most just teenagers themselves. But Vietnamese girls didn’t consider them young because we ourselves had matured early and grown up fast. The Americans’ bodies were so gigantic and they looked so powerful in their uniforms that we assumed they were also smart. But actually, they knew nothing about life.”

Most of the Americans treated the Vietnamese women “very well,” she says, able to buy gifts and take them to restaurants and clubs—things most Vietnamese men couldn’t afford. “The American guys were young and lonely, and death was so nearby. Often the women they lived with were like moms to them, because the women, even young, were more mature. I think most of the young soldiers were looking for a relationship, but when they had one, they still went fooling around, because there were so many, many women out there.”

Most of the fancy brothels then were owned by the wives of very high Vietnamese officers or officials, says a Vietnamese woman who lived in Saigon during that time. “Wives of a Vietnamese captain or lieutenant might have a smaller, poorer brothel. Brothels weren’t licensed, but the bars and restaurants they operated from were, so

Vietnamese government and military connections were important. All the brothels had to pay off not only the Vietnamese government, but also gangster organizations.”

Tu Do Street in Saigon was lined with whorehouses, and in many areas in Vietnam pimps on motorcycles would carry Americans to prostitutes and back. The women cost about \$3–\$5. According to “The XY Factor: Sex in the Vietnam War,” a 2003 documentary on the History Channel, at many U.S. bases prostitutes sold hashish, heroin, and blow jobs through base fences. The tens of thousands of U.S. construction workers in Vietnam during the war made five times the salary of GIs, and frequently had long-term relationships and families because they stayed for years at a time. Americans could also get “rent-a-girls,” paying a woman a flat rate to live with them for a week, month, or year. Vietnamese women who spoke some English could earn as much as \$11 per day, or \$50 for five days.

The same source reported an example of “Disneyland East,” a twenty-five-acre compound near the U.S. base at An Khe in the Central Highlands where the U.S. First Cavalry was stationed. After one-third of the GIs there contracted venereal diseases, the compound, patrolled by military police and enclosing forty concrete whorehouses behind barbed wire, was established. There, a “quickie” cost \$2.50–\$5, and prostitutes were required to carry “entertainers’ cards” and were given regular health checkups by U.S. doctors to ensure disease-free sex for U.S. troops. The system appeared to be modeled on one the military had used for years in the Philippines, and which had produced thousands of fatherless half-American, half-Filipino children, most also left abandoned and destitute. Male Vietnamese officials helped establish the compound.

Venereal disease rates were so high during the Vietnam War—twenty-eight cases for every 100 men serving there—that several strains became resistant to the usual quick-cure shot, said the documentary. A slang term arose among GIs—P.C.O.D., for “Pussy Cut-Off Date.” Because no one was allowed to leave Vietnam for America until their VD was cured, men would try to abstain from sex for several weeks beforehand.

American military personnel didn’t own brothels, “but some American civilians did,” a Vietnamese woman says. “I knew one who operated a hotel and bar where prostitutes worked. He bought out a certain Vietnamese prostitute from her madam and made her his business partner, because this prostitute knew some very tough Vietnamese Special

Forces guys, gangster types, who would protect the business. In those times there were many very gorgeous prostitutes. An American could buy one out of prostitution by getting the madam to calculate how much she would have made if the prostitute kept working. I remember one, the most beautiful girl I ever saw. An American bought her out, but her customers, military South Vietnamese, continued to visit her at the American's home. She had at least five kids, both Vietnamese and Amerasian. Two she gave away at birth at the hospital, and one was by a Vietnamese captain who was her boyfriend on the side. This woman had a very serious gambling habit, and any money she didn't lose, she gave to him."

Although the battlefields were still mostly far from Saigon, an under-current of violence crept into the city and into other areas near American bases. "I remember another prostitute whose father, brother, and sister lived with her," the same Vietnamese woman says. "She supported them and sent her brother and sister through school. One day she was in bed with an American major and someone threw a grenade into her house and killed both her and the major. I don't know if the grenade thrower was Viet Cong, or a former lover, or a gangster, or what."

In Vietnamese culture premarital chastity for women had always been strictly enforced. Little was known there then about birth control, and there were none of the modern birth control pills and devices that began appearing in America in the late 1960s and the 1970s. As for condoms, most men were unwilling to use them, especially with prostitutes. When Tiger's mother became a prostitute at seventeen, unwanted pregnancies were common. "If a woman had a baby, she had to hide it somehow and pretend that nothing had happened," says a former Vietnamese prostitute. "Otherwise, she couldn't work."

So as with all wars and occupations throughout the history of the world, mixed babies kept being born and were often abandoned. But not all mixed pregnancies were the result of prostitution or of relationships. Out in the countryside, there were sometimes brutal rapes during village burnings and massacres, some of which must have resulted in births. A. J. Langguth, in his book *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954–75*, recounts the March 1968 massacres at My Lai and area villages when U.S. troops under Lt. William Calley burned, killed, or raped entire populations. At one point, writes Langguth, as U.S. troops marauded raping and murdering through nearby Binh Tay, a soldier named Gary Roschevitz "lined up seven women between the ages of eighteen and

thirty-five and ordered them to strip,” intending to rape them all, “but the first woman became hysterical, the others screamed and Roschevitz opened fire on their naked bodies with his M-79 grenade launcher.”

The American government, American military, American media, American aid workers, and American soldiers themselves were well aware of the growing number of homeless, hungry Amerasian children. The U.S. military sometimes gave food or medical care to Amerasians and their mothers. A few private and religious American institutions and individuals operated orphanages and sometimes sent babies out of the country to be adopted, and also sometimes contributed food and medical care for Vietnamese and Amerasian children. A Vietnamese woman who went to live in Saigon when her own village was attacked during the war claims that “Americans didn’t build those orphanages just for Amerasian children, they built them for the Vietnamese orphans they created when they destroyed their villages in the countryside. After they killed many people and burned a village, there would be all these children left, and the Americans would bring them to the cities.”

In the United States, Americans were becoming ever more sick of the Vietnam War, and protests against it were beginning to spread into mainstream America. In early 1969 newly elected President Richard Nixon announced a plan to “Vietnamize” the war by gradually withdrawing American troops so Vietnamese troops would do most of the actual fighting. In June 1969, as secret peace talks were held in Paris, Nixon announced the first withdrawal of American troops—25,000 soldiers. By December 60,000 U.S. troops had been brought out, some of whom probably had already fathered or conceived Amerasian children. By December 1970 only 280,000 U.S. troops remained in Vietnam. In 1970, faced with media reports of up to 100,000 Amerasian children (mostly abandoned) in Vietnam, the U.S. Department of Defense issued this statement: “The care and welfare of these unfortunate children . . . has never been and is not now considered an area of government responsibility, nor an appropriate mission for the DOD to assume.”

Alan “Tiger” Hoa

It was into the world of bars, brothels, loud music drifting from doorways, and prostitutes in sexy outfits calling out to passing soldiers that Tiger’s eighteen-year-old mother, working partly to support her family,

met and became pregnant by a black American sergeant in about 1971. Her family was poor, and all its members were expected under Vietnamese tradition to work hard and contribute to the family's survival. If that included working as a prostitute, then so be it.

Tiger's family was comprised of his grandfather, his mother, an aunt—seven years younger than his mother—and six brothers. Two of the brothers were disabled, one unable to walk but intelligent and able to contribute to the family by sewing piece work, and the other, who died as a young adult, mentally impaired. Khue, the oldest brother, had all the privileges and responsibilities the Vietnamese give to the senior male child, who is expected to help the parents supervise and protect the younger siblings. They in turn are expected to respect and obey him. The other brothers, in order of age, were Lam, Binh, and the "baby," Truong. Tiger's mother began work as a bar girl as a young teenager. Her family says she lived with the U.S. sergeant for a time, and that her oldest brother Khue once even went to meet him. The family says the sergeant was "very in love" with Tiger's mother.

Throughout the war, geopolitical events and policies of various governments were affecting thousands of Amerasian children. For example, the U.S. policy of assigning most soldiers to Vietnam for only twelve or thirteen months meant that relationships would be brief. After Tiger's teenaged mother became pregnant, her family says the sergeant asked her to go to the United States with him, but that while she went back to Hoc Mon to tell her family goodbye, his ship was "called away." She returned to find him already gone, and never heard from him again. "She was very sad," says her eldest brother Khue.

Eleven years after arriving in America with his wife, their three children, and Tiger, Tiger's Uncle Khue lives in a small but comfortable rent-subsidized apartment in Little Saigon. After Tiger's mother's death, the responsibility for Tiger's welfare fell to her extended family, which could have abandoned him, but instead took over his care. In 1990 Khue used his special position as oldest surviving male to win a bitter family quarrel over who would get to accompany Tiger to America. Now in his early sixties, Khue has the appearance of a man who has lived a rough life. He is a devout Buddhist, who manages to send money from the United States not only to family members but also to the temple near the family home. Khue has always worked hard and still does, spending hours each day sewing piece work. He even developed a side income driving neighbors to the airport or on other errands. His family's income is supplemented by food stamps and Aid to

Families with Dependent Children (his two youngest children were born in America, so were automatically citizens).

The family responsibility that comes with being the oldest brother is a heavy one. From America, Khue must send money to his wife's ten-member family in Vietnam as well. He also sends small sums of money to Tiger in prison, so Tiger can buy cheap cigarettes and toiletries. Tough and perceptive, Khue seems more realistic and open than his siblings; or perhaps he feels he can talk more freely in America than they can talk in Vietnam. Khue spent long hours on the road as a truck driver during the postwar years in Vietnam, and bartered for food and other goods with scarce salt, the way richer men might barter with gold. He has a detailed knowledge of the names and spellings of towns throughout many parts of Vietnam, as well as the new names and spellings given them after the new government came into power in 1975.

Closing his eyes a moment to summon old memories, Khue says: "When Tiger was born, in 1972, his mother gave him to her older brother Lam and his wife to raise." The couple was childless, and took Tiger so his mother could return to work as a prostitute. Khue maintains that despite whispers from neighbors and other problems that came with having a half-black child, the family never considered abandoning Tiger. "No one tried to make Tiger's mother give him up," Khue states somewhat toughly. "In the family we loved him, but his mother loved him the most, very much, so she kept him and raised him, unlike other families where he would have been thrown away because of his blackness. She loved him because he was the first son, the first grandchild [a very important role in Vietnamese culture] and also because he was fatherless. People can say what they want, but our family keeps our children. We raise our children, and they can say whatever they want to say." Yet Tiger says he always felt left out and unloved by his family.

A year after Tiger was born, his mother had a little girl by a Vietnamese man. This daughter was also turned over to Lam to raise. Not long afterward, Tiger's mother had a son by a Vietnamese man who left her. Tiger was only a toddler when his mother died of malaria at the age of twenty-three.

Nan Bui

Nan believes she was born in 1972, although her birth certificate says she was born in 1970. The nun who took her in as a baby had no real

certificate, so simply used the certificate of one of many children who had died. Nan had several brushes with death during the war. She was a tiny three-month-old and very frail when her grandmother brought her to a Saigon hospital, dying of malnutrition, dysentery, and a high fever, probably caused by drinking polluted water. Nan's mother, she said, had left the infant with her. A nun visiting the hospital urged the grandmother to let her take Nan in hopes of saving her life. Nothing was learned at that time about Nan's American father, except that he was African American.

The nun took Nan to a small Buddhist orphanage at Binh Long. "There was a firefight near our orphanage when I was about three years old," says Nan, "and our whole orphanage was destroyed except for one wall. All of the nuns and orphans tried to crouch down and hide behind it. But another shell hit and that wall collapsed too, falling on us. Half the people in the orphanage were killed, including some nuns and nine of the fifteen orphans who lived there, some of whom were Amerasian like me. My nun carried a baby in her arms and one on her back, and the other nuns who survived—and the older orphans, aged four and five—each grabbed up and carried a smaller one. We were all running, running. . . . I remember running over many dead bodies." An American helicopter saw the children, "and swooped down very low to try to save us. I don't remember what happened next, but my nun told me when I was older that someone threw out a rope, and she lifted we children up into the helicopter one by one. Finally she threw the baby up to someone who caught it in the doorway, and then she was the last to climb aboard."

The six orphans who survived were eventually taken to Nhiet Chi Mai, a large Buddhist orphanage near Bien Hoa built by Americans. "Everyone passing on the highway between Saigon and Bien Hoa had to pass Nhiet Chi Mai," says Nan. At the time, it was crowded with about 200 orphans. Many of them—maybe half—were Amerasians.

Nan's most precious possession is the box of old photographs and a small black-and-white photo of the Buddhist nun who protected and loved her until the nun's death when Nan was ten. That photo is always the first thing Nan puts up in a new home.

Son Chau

Sometimes the stories of the Amerasians begin with a love story. Son Chau's mother Du has often told him of her romance with his American

father—perhaps embellished, consciously or not. “I met Son’s father in 1966 where I worked at the U.S. air base delivering papers to offices—I had met several American men, and one tried to match me up with others, but I was afraid of them,” says Du. The twenty-year-old American sergeant apparently was in charge of the Vietnamese civilian food workers at Thap Cham air base at Thap Cham and Phan Rang when she met him. They lived together several months. “He was a very good man, very good to me,” she says. “And he was good to the little boy I had then, who was about four.” The boy, by a Vietnamese father from whom Du had separated, later died in an accident. Du’s life before meeting Son’s father was also sad—so much so that she had once sought to commit “suicide by tiger.” Taking with her a baby daughter whom she could hardly feed and keep alive, she would spend hours sitting near the entrance of a tiger’s cave near her home, hoping it would attack and kill her and her child and end their misery. The baby later died of a fever.

“My mom said when my dad first meet her, she was twenty-seven, he was twenty, and he have a lot of chances to look for the young, pretty girl,” Son says as he looks through old photos. “Also, my mom is not smart. But she is sweet. So that’s one thing I think my American dad did right.”

Du became pregnant with the sergeant’s baby. But before it was born, the sergeant was rotated back to the United States. “He wanted her to go to America with him, but my mom was too scared, and also he said she would have to leave behind her four-year-old son. My mom did not love my dad as much as he loved her, and she sometimes tried to run away and he would go after her. She worried that if she went to the U.S., she would not know how to ever get back to Vietnam. When he had to leave to go back to America, he cry and cry, he even try to run away from his base, and the military police had to come take him, arrest him. Also he had taken some little things from the base store for her to sell. And he said that maybe when he got back to the U.S. they would put him in jail.”

Du went to see the sergeant off at the airport. She says he cried and that it was raining, and like in a scene from an American movie he put his coat around her shoulders while his fellow soldiers kept calling to him to hurry, and he took off his gold watch and made her swear to give it to their baby when it was born—especially if it was a boy. She says he gave her a \$100 American bill, a large amount then, to use “if something happens.” Six months later, on July 5, 1967, Son was born.

He was a handsome little boy who looked a lot like his father. At that time in South Vietnam, having a half-white Amerasian baby could be a status symbol in some circles. Sometimes such a baby even could be sold for as much as 10,000 dong (about \$10 U.S.), a month's salary then, if it was "cute."

When Son was eight months old, Du "lost" the gold watch Son's father had left for him. She says someone "put a voodoo spell" on her and "made her give it to him." Some Vietnamese say such incidents are not uncommon, that voodoo practitioners—usually from one of Vietnam's tribal minorities—often approach people in the market, which is what Du says happened to her. "The voodoo man said he wanted to borrow the watch to wear to a wedding," she says. "Then he tapped me on the shoulder." Once that happened, she says, she "couldn't resist . . . because if a voodoo-spell person taps you on the shoulder you have to obey." She handed over the watch, and never saw it or the voodoo stranger again. Or maybe Du just sold the watch. Certainly, she needed money. Years later, when Son was a young boy taunted by other children because he was part American, he would sometimes reproach his mother for having been involved with an American, and reproach her for the loss of the watch, his father's gift to him.

One letter from the sergeant in the United States, living another life, far from the war, reached Du, she says, but she is illiterate and didn't answer. In any case, life was hard and she and her children needed to live. Du had met another American soldier, and in early 1969, when secret peace talks to end the war were being held in Paris, Du became pregnant with his baby. In October 1969 her second Amerasian baby was born—a girl, Linh, also born after the father had left Vietnam. Du says very little about Linh's father except that he was good to Son. Linh was born with her leg twisted, and Du took her to the American military base hospital where Linh was given a special shoe and treatments to straighten her leg. Apparently the hospital sometimes helped Amerasian babies and their mothers, especially once the fathers had gone. For most other help, Du offered prayers to Buddha.

One day in about 1971 when Son was four and his half-sister Linh was two, Du smoothed their hair and gathered their few belongings. The \$100 left her by Son's father had long since disappeared. As Son now says simply: "Life was hard. She spent it to survive." The children were always hungry, and Du was distraught and exhausted. An American woman doctor at the U.S. military hospital was offering to pay Du a million dong to let her adopt the two children. "We had no money or

food at that point," explains Du, "and this doctor said she would take the children to America and give them a good education and good future. But when I got to the hospital I changed my mind. I just couldn't bear to let them go."

The doctor and others tried to convince Du it would be best for everyone if she let the children be adopted. But Du cried and cried, and finally took Son and Linh back home. "I just couldn't bear to lose them," she says. "I was afraid they would grow up and come to look for me someday and not find me. I was afraid I would lose them forever, just because of money. So I decided I would rather suffer hunger and hard times than let my children be taken to America without me and never see them again." Du thinks that Son looks a lot like his American father and that his personality is also similar. "Son was always very stubborn and determined, but still always a good little boy, very brave, very smart, very adventurous, and friendly," she says.

Perhaps Du exaggerates her great love story with Son's father; but perhaps not. Certainly there were true love stories to be told from the war. An older Vietnamese woman who had her own love affair during the war says: "Looking back now, I think: The parents of the Amerasians, the soldiers and the women from both sides, Americans and Vietnamese, were very young, and both groups came from generations that had children born in earlier wars—in the case of the Vietnamese, the French babies, and in the case of the Americans, babies from World War II. Looking back I see so many beautiful things . . . the love between man and woman. . . . We created many babies and many beautiful moments, many loves, many heartaches too. That's why so many GIs want to go back to Vietnam. There are bonds between America and Vietnam; there is a major bond, like it or not."

"And when the war ended, that was happy news in many ways, but not for the love couples. To them the war was always secondary, the love was the primary thing, and the love couples were heartbroken. The women had first lost their families and villages and their ancestors' graves, then had come to the city as refugees and created new bonds and loves. And then one day the man took off and you never saw him again. He never even saw the baby you had by him, or knew if it was a boy or girl, if it was beautiful or a monster, if it had ten toes and fingers, nothing. But every American and every woman knew from the time the woman became pregnant that someday the man would leave, and the child would become fatherless. Usually the American dad would give

the mother money when he left—but only a couple of hundred dollars, big deal.

“Still, although the war created a lot of sadness, without the war the love wouldn’t have happened either, and the children wouldn’t have happened. The Vietnamese woman and American man would never have met if there had not been a war, and in their memories now both should put the love first, so they don’t regret so much the bad things they did, the ways they acted, things that still haunt them so much that they even commit suicide.”

Another former Vietnamese prostitute now in America, after delivering a scholarly explanation of Vietnamese culture during the war, paused, then added shyly of American soldiers she had known then: “They were so sweet.”

Yet sweet or brutal, lovers or rapists or casual customers of prostitutes or whatever they may have been, the soldiers were leaving, and leaving their children behind, almost always in terrible circumstances.

Louis Nguyen (Luu Quoc Viet)

Louis’s father, a black American Army sergeant, met Louis’s mother, Luc, in 1968 in Bien Hoa where she was working as a seamstress. He told her he already had a wife and daughter in the United States, but said they were separated. Luc liked the sergeant, who may have been in his twenties. The two lived together several months, but the sergeant was gone, probably rotated back to the States, when Louis was born in 1969. When Louis was about twenty months old in 1971 (the year the long-drawn-out Paris peace talks broke down temporarily) Louis’s father returned to see him. “I don’t remember that,” says Louis, “but my mom says he loved me. I was his only son. She says he wanted her to come back to the United States with him, but she didn’t want to go, and he asked her to give me to him to take back, but she said no again. That was the last she heard from him. Maybe my mom and he got disconnected. We moved around a lot, and in Vietnam when that happens you can get lost to people—there’s no telephone directories or those kinds of records. Maybe—maybe he tried to find us and couldn’t.”

Many Amerasians say their mothers were asked by the American fathers to go to the United States, or at least to let them take their Amerasian baby with them to America. But the ties of the mothers to their Vietnamese families, especially their parents, were very powerful and

very culturally binding. Whether many fathers actually offered to take the mothers or children to America is uncertain, especially considering the difficulty, if not impossibility, of battling red tape and then resettling with a new family in America. Some fathers did try to take the mothers and children—some even succeeded, particularly in the last desperate days of the war as the country was collapsing, and rules were flaunted. Other fathers may have made the offer but were less than sincere. The Amerasians who say their fathers wanted to take them to America clearly find it comforting.

After his father's return visit, Louis and his mother never heard from him again. That year Luc had a second Amerasian son, two years younger than Louis. That father was a friend of Louis's father, another sergeant who had served with him in a motor pool. One day that man disappeared, and Luc never heard from him again, either. The war continued, with peace negotiations stalled. The treaty had been drawn up between U.S. and North Vietnamese negotiators, and the South Vietnamese leaders felt its terms were detrimental to their interests. But Nixon continued withdrawing U.S. soldiers, and by December 1971 only 140,000 were left in Vietnam.

Louis remembers a little about the war. When he was three, he and other neighborhood children would be herded into a space beneath a house when planes passed over. "We heard bombs—boom! boom! boom!" he says. "Afraid? Of course we were! Sometimes we would stay there all day, or sleep there all night. But mostly we children would behave very quiet. In Vietnam, if children don't mind, the parents hit right away!"

Sara Phuong and Miss Dao (Chi Lien)

In the early Vietnam War years, Miss Dao had not yet begun to take in orphans. In 1963 long-simmering resentments of the Vietnamese Buddhists—the religion of more than 80 percent of the population—came to a head over the Buddhists' belief that the nation's much smaller Catholic population was being given favored treatment by Vietnam's U.S.-supported Catholic president, Ngo Dinh Diem. When Diem refused to let the Buddhists display their flag as they had always done at an annual national event, the call went out to Buddhists all over the nation to protest. Miss Dao was one of thousands of nuns and monks who flocked to Saigon. Members of her order walked barefoot across the country to

the demonstrations. She took part in lengthy fasts and silent nonviolent protests. She saw monks and nuns, including the nun Huynh Lien, beaten and jailed by government police. In one protest a monk, Quang Duc, burned himself alive in the first of a series of self-immolations by monks and nuns, including one elderly nun who later set herself afire and burned to death as Miss Dao watched.

“I was a young nun [during the demonstrations], just doing what my teachers told me to do,” Miss Dao says, “although as time went by I came to have strong feelings about social injustice. I wanted to fight not just for humanitarian things, but for fairness and justice so people could have a better life. My feelings and understanding grew gradually as I studied, and the longer I did the more open-minded I became.”

The suicides horrified the American public. Although the U.S. anti-war movement was still small, the suicides raised serious questions about the war in the minds of many Americans, and hastened the U.S.-sanctioned coup that brought down the Diem regime in November 1963. Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu fled, but were quickly found and immediately assassinated by South Vietnamese coup members.

But the war itself continued. Weeks after the coup, President Kennedy was assassinated, and Lyndon Johnson, his successor, increased U.S. “advisers” in Vietnam the following year. In March 1965 Johnson had sent in the first U.S. combat troops—25,000 Marines—to defend Danang airfield. By December of that year, 200,000 U.S. troops were in Vietnam, and by December 1966 there were 400,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam.

On January 31, 1968, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong (their supporters in the South) had launched the surprise Tet Offensive during Vietnam’s New Year’s holiday season, attacking almost every major city in the South. Miss Dao was then in her thirties and living in Quang Tri province. Each morning, her group of nuns made their regular barefoot walk through town to the market where they were given small donations of vegetarian foods. The donations were the only food that, under their vows, they were allowed to eat.

On those walks, Miss Dao saw many small children affected by the fighting. They were orphaned, injured, or simply lost or abandoned, sobbing with helpless sorrow and fear. One day in 1968 during a heavy bombing raid, Miss Dao rushed into a shelter with seven other people. Minutes later it was struck by a bomb and everyone else inside was killed. Rescuers digging through the wreckage found a three-month-old baby girl clutched in the arms of her dead mother. “I was the only one

to help the baby," says Miss Dao. She took the child, whose real name she never knew, and named her My Duyen. The baby was wounded, and had a piece of shrapnel embedded in one ear. She needed much nursing to live, and was the first orphan Miss Dao adopted. Her temple was already crowded and facing a continuing shortage of food. "But if I didn't take the baby, who would? It was war, and no one took care of no one then," says Miss Dao.

As the fighting dragged on, intensifying, Miss Dao saw abandoned or orphaned babies and children everywhere. While the war lasted, the orphanages of Vietnam were packed. "During the war, I saw so many suffering, sad little children, and I just couldn't bear to leave them all alone in the streets," she says. "I took more and more and more orphans into the temple, and finally we established an orphanage there, and I was made head of it." Some temples refused to take crippled children or half-black Amerasians, but Miss Dao took in any child she was able to feed. "Doctors would bring us abandoned newborns, often crippled," says Miss Dao. "Or relatives or friends of the mother would bring babies, usually only hours old, after the temple gates were locked for the night, so no one could see them do it. The mothers were too ashamed to bring a baby themselves." But of the many orphans she took in, not all could be saved. A dozen, both Vietnamese and Amerasian, died. Some had malaria, polio, or infections. Some died crippled by their mothers' failed self-abortions. Others were just too weak to survive. One tiny girl baby, her umbilical cord still attached, was brought to the temple by a railroad worker who found her abandoned on the train tracks. Miss Dao nursed her for three months, "but she was just too weak to live," she says.

Miss Dao remembers a morning in Qui Nhon when she unlocked the gates and found a newborn baby in a small basket, brought in by someone during the dark night hours. But the baby was dead. Hungry pigs that roamed the neighborhood had killed it, and eaten away most of its face.

To raise money to care for the orphans, Miss Dao sought funds from the U.S., South Vietnamese, and British governments. Sometimes she got food from various aid agency warehouses or from well-off Vietnamese families. She formed a close friendship with the Catholic nun, Sister Mai, and the two shared food for their different broods of orphans whenever supplies fell short. But the long years of struggle brought almost unbearable strain. As the war spread, nuns and monks throughout Vietnam who were caring for orphans found it an increasingly difficult

responsibility as the number of children soared. The war and its aftermath would repeatedly test the values, moral courage, and religious commitment of those who cared for them. "But I believed when I first became a nun at sixteen that I needed to sacrifice to help people less fortunate," Miss Dao says, "and today I still believe the same. I myself raised many orphans, although only eleven were Amerasian."

One day in 1972 a South Vietnamese soldier brought to Miss Dao's temple a baby boy about two months old. The baby was very weak, close to death, with a horrible infected open wound on his throat. The soldier wept. He told Miss Dao he had found the baby "hanging in a tree like a little naked baby bird," bleeding and near death, beside a house where no one else was left alive. From the bodies he saw strewn in pieces, it appeared that soldiers had tossed a grenade into the house while a family was having lunch, killing everyone but the baby, who was flung up into the tree. On some impulse the soldier had taken the child with him as he moved fighting from place to place. But now he was forced to face the fact that the baby would soon die unless he found help for it. And if it died, it would need a proper burial according to Buddhist beliefs, and regular remembrance ceremonies each year or its soul would wander lost and miserable throughout eternity. Other orphanages had already turned the baby away, refusing that responsibility. "The soldier cried and cried so hard, pleading with me to help the baby, so afraid it would die. He begged me to raise it if I could save it, and if I could not, then to see that it had a proper burial." Miss Dao protested; her already overburdened temple was not supposed to take in any more children, and was always short of food.

"But he reminded me of the Buddhist proverb that 'Saving one child is worth more than building nine temples,' and that Buddhism is more about caring for life than about worshiping Buddha. The soldier made me open up my understanding of Buddhism, to see that loving is everything, and that you have to make the effort to love." She took the tiny boy and miraculously nursed him back to health. But she never saw the soldier again. "I don't even know if he lived through the war," she says.

During more prosperous war days when American money was still pouring into Vietnam, some people even sought to buy white Amerasian orphans. But Miss Dao always refused their offers. She says one man from Europe or America who visited her orphanage wanted to buy Sara, then a toddler, who, although half-black, was quite appealing. Again Miss Dao refused. "Some orphanages did sell orphans, and a lot of people came to buy my orphans, but I would starve before I would

allow it," Miss Dao says firmly. "I loved my orphans like my own children, and I would beg or steal or die before I would give them up."

But now the Americans were pulling out, and international political events that would greatly affect the little Amerasians were developing rapidly. On January 27, 1973, shortly after President Nixon's second-term inauguration, a cease-fire agreement was finally signed, partly achieved through secret promises by Nixon and Kissinger to the North Vietnamese to pay reparations once the war ended. In return, the Vietnamese agreed to make every effort to find and return the remains of 2,400 missing Americans, 800 of whom were listed as Missing in Action with the rest presumed dead. The American public and Congress knew nothing of Nixon and Kissinger's secret pledge, but the Vietnamese believed it would be honored. On March 29, as the Watergate scandal involving Nixon escalated back in Washington, the last U.S. troops departed Vietnam. On April 1, all U.S. prisoners of war were released to return to America. Now, with almost all the American fathers gone home, only about 6,000 American military and CIA and about 9,000 American civilians were left in Vietnam, mostly concentrated in Saigon.

Although America continued its halfhearted support of the South Vietnamese military regime, giving South Vietnamese President Thieu large amounts of U.S. military aid, much of which he apparently siphoned into his own pockets, no one was surprised when in early 1974 the civil war between North and South broke out again.

On August 9, 1974, a disgraced Nixon resigned the presidency as revelations about his involvement in the break-in and burglary of Democratic headquarters in the Watergate apartment complex and the White House cover-up afterward led to a congressional committee's vote to bring impeachment proceedings against him. That year Congress also voted not to extend any more money or aid to the South Vietnamese government. The demoralized troops of the corruption-riddled South Vietnamese regime were no match for the North Vietnamese military's dedicated, driven cadres. Although some South Vietnamese troops continued to fight on bravely, others gave up any pretense of true resistance in the final days of the war, and desertions were common. As final battles hit the central and southern parts of Vietnam where the Amerasians lived, people were now seeing some of their worst days of the war. As the 1974 fighting began, U.S. troops had been in Vietnam openly for nine years and American "advisers" and clandestine agents had been present for more than fourteen years. The Amerasians they left behind, still mostly infants and young children, were among the victims of the renewed bombing, shelling, and killing.