

CONVOY TO CAMBODIA

The Frenchman's pink-cheeked bride saw only the lush countryside and the fleecy clouds, but others in the convoy were tired to death of the hopeless deadlock and vicious fighting in Indo-China

BY WELDON JAMES



General Ho Chi-Minh during a visit to France, is the Moscow-trained leader of the rebellious Indo-Chinese.

YOU can get the best picture of the current impasse in Indo-China—and the very unpretty war that results—if you ride in an armed convoy from Saïgon into the interior. The impasse is simple: The French want to stay in Indo-China; the Indo-Chinese want them to get out. The war is more complex. The prevailing religion of the country holds that an insult to a dead enemy is considerably greater than to a live one. The guerrillas apply this teaching to any white captives with a

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The fierce, atrocity-marked war against the French often catches civilians like these in the middle.

carving ingenuity and hateful enthusiasm for mutilation that is always shocking to the French, who sometimes avenge the death of a comrade in kind. Hence the necessity for convoys.

The convoy in which I traveled from Saïgon to Cambodia began lining up at five in the morning in a park beside the Saïgon River and under the guns of the French warships anchored there. There were 78 vehicles in the convoy; smaller groups are too susceptible to ambush and annihilation. This convoy, like others, had a heavy proportion of American Lend-Lease trucks, with machine guns frowning from the cab top of practically every third vehicle.

Other trucks and jeeps bristled with armed infantrymen, French and native. Three ancient Chinese-owned busses, overflowing with package-burdened native civilians and freight, were placed deep inside the convoy, a favored spot for the few passenger cars of government civilians.

A snappy French major looked over my police and military travel permits, walked down the long double line of vehicles, spoke curtly to the civilian driver of a bantam-sized Peugeot, and motioned me into the back seat, piled high with luggage and women's hatboxes. At seven we started on the long slow grind toward Pnom-Penh, capital of Cambodia, some 120 miles northwest.

The driver of our car was Jean Garnier, a trim young engineer in the French colonial service now assigned to the public works department of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The charming pink-cheeked girl beside him was his wife, just arrived from Paris to

join her husband for the remaining 30 months of his three-year stay in the colonies. Garnier had a fine house waiting for her in Pnom-Penh, they had just had a second honeymoon of a week in gay Saïgon, and everything was lovely. Even to sharing their car.

Garnier packed a small revolver, a custom in this country, but he was not too worried. Our car was number 47 in the long procession; if the road were mined, the first trucks would get it; if the guerrillas attacked, the front and the rear would get the worst of it, but the convoy had sufficient fire power to take care of itself, and those in the center, unless the attack occurred in the few jungle areas interspersed among the rich rice and rubber plantations, most likely would catch nothing.

"Only the first 50 miles or so are dangerous," Garnier reassured his wife, who looked happily unconcerned, more interested, indeed in looking at the burned native villages and wrecked telephone lines near Saïgon, or in marveling at the fleecy cumulus clouds floating idly over the green countryside. "Once we're into Cambodia everything is peaceful."

He was right. Indo-China, unlike Gaul, is divided into five parts—Tonkin and Annam in the north and east, Cochin China in the south, the tiny kingdoms of Cambodia and Laos in the west. Cambodia has peace; the rest have a vicious, many-sided war. Indo-China's vast riches in rubber, rice, timber, coal, spices, tin, zinc and silk were developed by the French, and in the good old days before the war the colony not only paid for itself but poured millions annually into the rest of the old French Empire. The French say that if it were not for a handful of fanatical agitators among the 17,000,000 Annamites who dominate Indo-China's 25,000,000 people, everything would soon be fine again, and they could be a self-governing people within the French Union.

Frenchmen, rightists or leftists, also agree that if France loses here, it is the ruin of her hopes for a French Union of 100,000,000 people in Asia, Africa and Europe. France would become a third-rate power of hardly 40,000,000 people because, with the 25,000,000 Indo-Chinese, would go Madagascar, Algeria, Morocco, the rest of the French Empire.

The French Played Monopoly

Frenchmen didn't worry much about conditions in Indo-China until after World War II. The late President Roosevelt thought that it was the worst-governed colony in the Far East, with less literacy and more poverty to the square

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literacy and more poverty to the square mile than any other imperial possession—a tight little French gold mine, with keep-out signs ready for most foreign traders, with the natives “happy” on an income of a few cents a day, because if they were not happy they were sure to be clapped into jail.

It may be pointless to dwell upon this now, since the French have promised sweeping democratic reforms and independence for Indo-China within a new French Union—but somewhere in it is the reason for the Annamites’ current “fanatical” fight for freedom and for their troublesome distrust of the “reasonable” proposals of France.

Thus there was an air of alert tension in the convoy throughout those first few hours. Hundreds of Annamite peasants, afoot and in bullock carts, streaming toward Saigon, looked as unconcerned as did Madame Garnier—but then, as the soldiers said during our first stop, one never knows when the peasants may turn out to be guerrillas led by Ho Chi-Minh, the wiry little revolutionary with burning eyes and Moscow training who proclaimed the Republic of Viet Nam (Land of the South) two years ago.

Ten miles out of Saigon one of the forward trucks had a flat, and the entire convoy halted. Machine-gun crews stood by their guns, and green-clad infantrymen, tumbling out of their hot trucks to stretch and stroll during the 20-minute halt, kept their rifles and Sten guns ready.

There were several such halts, sometimes in the open country, sometimes in villages where a single platoon might be stationed. The convoy could not risk the danger of splitting up.

A frankly worried passenger in the truck behind us was Sergeant Marie Parisot of the French Wacs, a chubby, vivacious lass who’d spent an uneasy year in Saigon. She was now bound for leave in the peace of Cambodia. So were many of the soldiers scattered through the convoy, she said; most of them had spent a bad 12 to 18 months fighting or being sniped at in Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, and were passing up the possible delights of besieged Saigon for the rarer pleasure of the peaceful countryside and beaches of Cambodia.

She had a right to be worried. Only a few days before, she had been transferred, along with all other French AFATs (Wacs), from her hotel to a well-guarded barracks. The reason was that some 2,000 Viet Nameese guerrillas had attacked French positions on the outskirts of the Saigon Chinese sector. They managed to drop a couple of shells into the area during a few hours of confused battle.

The attack was not too difficult for the French to repulse, but it gave rise to rumors that the native population of the city was ready to rise in the night and

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massacre all foreigners. The military did not exactly believe this, but they took precautions anyway.

Sergeant Parisot had served with the American Army in France for a year, and she spoke the G.I. language.

"A hell of a place," she said. "No peace, and none in sight. I left France gladly because it is such a sad place after the war. It is still sad, this long after liberation, but this place is worse."

This disillusioned mood seemed to be common among the soldiers. This, and a kind of what-else resignation to longer months of dangerous indecision on the part of the politicians.

"We must compromise," said one. "It is senseless, this fighting. We can hold the country, but we cannot win it unless France sends 500,000 men, and that is impossible."

I pointed out that the officials in Saïgon said they were seeking a compromise, that Emile Bollaert, who had replaced fire-eating Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu as High Commissioner, was supposed to be a middle-of-the-road civilian seeking a fair settlement by negotiation.

"But the government has said it will not negotiate with Ho Chi-Minh," said Sergeant Parisot. "And if not with Ho, with whom? Anyway, there will be more fighting, no matter what, unless we clear out altogether. I say like your boys, 'Give it back to the Indians.'"

Others were not so peace-minded. Lieutenant Guy Michel, a tall young Parisian who had fought in the Resistance before joining the regular army, thought the army still had a job to do. Indo-China would be ruined without the French. Ninety-two per cent of its people could not even read or write, and the handful who could, and were causing all the trouble, were nothing but Communists.

Kill-or-Cure Policy for Commies

He agreed that De Gaulle had sent a lot of Communists in the army to Indo-China soon after the German war ended, on the theory that if they were killed it was no real loss, and if they lived they'd see the unionist if not the imperialist light (a favorite story of some of the French). And some he knew had been "converted." He himself was nonpolitical.

But after nearly two years in Indo-China he was tired of it, and he wished someone would work out a solution. If the enemy would only stand up and fight, just once, it would be all over; but he would not do more than raid and ambush and run.

"Maybe," he said, "the politicians will soon find the right people to bribe." He hoped so. Over the months he had lost six good friends in his outfit, and that was too much.

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I asked him about the atrocities and he shrugged. "If your friend has a girl friend in the village," he said, "and one night he does not return, but next morning the corpse is at the edge of the camp, with parts of the body chopped off and stuffed in the mouth and with the lips sewed together with wire, what do you expect? In the next action his friends will shoot too many people, and if they capture those they think guilty they will not waste gentleness."

But the solution suggested by Lieutenant Michel—a war of extermination against the guerrillas—has not worked very well. Early this year the French army quickly chased the Republic and Ho Chi-Minh into hiding, occupied every city and port (relieving some of its scattered units after bitter 45-day sieges), and still had won no peace. Now, long months later, M. Bollaert, is still seeking the formula that will end the war and save the French Union.

In Saigon, you could see for yourself the black looks of hatred flashed by Annamite eyes toward the lordly Frenchman who, enraged because he thought the native traffic cop too slow in turning the go signal, leaped from his jeep, bawled out the cop, then slapped him smartly twice, before jumping back into his jeep and driving on through the stop sign. Though they did nothing, French spectators themselves disapproved of this: The French-employed cop, after all, was a symbol of French law and order and any such indication that the Frenchman (or the white man) is still a law unto himself is not a good thing these days.

You can talk with Viet Nam sympathizers, literally under the noses and the guns of the French, and get a straightforward line: They want the French to get out. The French can talk about a democratic union if they want to, but behind the talk and the guns and the sudden emergence of a counterrepublic like Cochin China, the Annamites think they see a return to their old colonial status.

Yet not all Indo-Chinese are so extreme. There is, for instance, M. Henri Ho Van Cam, a stout, broadfaced Annamite moderate, who says that being a moderate in Indo-China is a very dangerous thing. He worked for Ho Chi-Minh's Republican government for some months, in a minor administrative post, then quit because he thought it had gone either all Communist or at least totalitarian. He now thinks the French proposals for an Indo-Chinese federation, self-governing within the French Union, could, with some modifications, be made to work.

Mistrusts Viet Nam Republic

A native of Cochin China, Ho Van Cam is all for the idea of a confedera-

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tion, but not for his country to be included in the Viet Nam Republic; he wants far more local autonomy for Cochin China than he thinks the Republic would give it. Ho Chi-Minh, he says, is a great man, but is now under the thumbs of the more extreme of some of his Moscow-trained ministers.

"All of us," he said earnestly, removing his horn-rimmed glasses and mopping his brow, "all of us want our independence, but I think we can get it in the French Union and without all this fighting. It would be a bad thing for our country if the French left at once, because for one thing the Viet Minh bands would not obey well even their own leaders, and they would not respect property. There would be chaos.

"I dare not talk as much as I would like—some of the French may not trust me, possibly, but the Viet Minh (a contraction for Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, the League for the Independence of Viet Nam) hate me and anyone who does not agree completely with them. One is not safe from them even in Saigon.

"Last week a small band came in the night to the house of a friend of mine, another moderate, and took him away. They may come for me some night, despite the curfew, the police, the soldiers."

Which was another reason why convoys are needed, and why, riding in one, you enjoyed the security given by all those machine guns.

The convoy pulled through the danger zone in the early afternoon and came to a halt on the bank of the great Mekong River, 1,900 miles long, wide, sluggish, muddy, Mississippi-like. Later we learned that two convoys had been ambushed and one train blown up that day, but the sight of the Mekong, well inside peaceful Cambodia, was good enough for us at the time.

Ferries to a Promised Land

Two ancient put-put ferries, capable of carrying only two trucks at a time, required hours to deliver the convoy to the sweltering western bank. But there were tea shops in the east-bank village, and tropical shade trees, and everybody tumbled forth to enjoy the peaceful haven. Soldiers left their weapons in the trucks.

In one of the truckloads of vacationists (accompanying several cases of hand grenades, because, although things were peaceful in Cambodia, the army must be prepared to keep that peace) was a Foreign Legion captain — blue-eyed, sandy-haired, and jovial—who shed some light on the Legion's part in the war. He was Denis Chaumet, a regular in the French army, who had fought in North Africa, France, and Germany before his transfer to the Legion and Indo-China.

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"The Legion has about 15,000 men here," he said, grinning, "and it is not true that 90 per cent of them are Germans who signed up as an alternative to staying in labor camps in France. The number is only 70 or 75 per cent."

It was also untrue, Captain Chaumet said, waving idly at the swarm of flies and insects hovering over his tea glass, that the Germans had deserted in large numbers and are now fighting for the Viet Nameese. A few had, of course, and they were fighting for the Annamites—but the main objective of any Legion deserter was to escape to Siam and thence to Australia or America.

"The Annamites," he said, "are inclined to carve up any white man first and inquire into his volunteer sentiments afterward, which makes deserting to them doubly risky. This probably accounts for the fact that we have fewer desertions here than in North Africa—and of these, the percentage of other foreigners is higher than the German.

"The Annamites are also very hard on their deserters. They shoot them. When we overran one of their holdouts in the north, we found 43 freshly executed corpses, 14 German and 29 Japanese, hands tied and all. Surviving villagers said they had been caught trying to escape to Siam."

The captain said there were still about 3,000 Japanese in the Annamite ranks, but that these were not very active. The French had broadcast promises that these would be returned to Japan if they surrendered, and more and more were "escaping" to the French lines.

We finally crossed the broad river, and raced north toward Pnom-Penh, the convoy splitting now that all danger was far behind. Most of the convoy arrived within twelve hours, but our Peugeot, thanks to a failing water pump that necessitated stops for rice-paddy water every two miles for a long stretch, required fifteen.

"Routine," said Garnier, smiling fondly at his weary wife. "All travel is trouble in this country. But think how fortunate we are to be assigned to peaceful Cambodia instead of Cochin, or Annam, or Tonkin!"

Fortunate indeed, all the French would say, because here, at the end of a long road, is the pot o' gold for any imperialist, Socialist or capitalist. A tidy little country of nearly 5,000,000, rich and peaceful, with its own king (a Frenchman is ex officio chairman of the council that elects him), government (a friendly French adviser behind each minister's elbow), and army (two battalions, 1,200 men, French officers) . . . and a people who seem to be quite happy about the French (who say, with a mixture of envy and satisfaction, that the Cambodians and the Laotians both are too fond of making love, too intelligent, and too lazy, ever to take to guerrilla war).

*Ho Chi-Minh***Splendors of the Capital City**

A tidy little country, and a tidy little capital, this ancient city of Pnom-Penh, with its 100,000 people, its palaces (ornately Cambodian and colorful, but built by the French in the last century), its busts of recent kings (sculptured in Paris), its Silver Pavilion with the floor made of 4,700 six-inch squares of silver, its nine-foot 200-pound Golden Buddha, its hundreds of yellow-robed parasol-carrying mendicant priests or *bonzes*, its graceful Buddhist burial mound-and-monument of the Princess Penh, the national heroine who brought the remnants of the Khmers or Cambodians here from the splendid ruins of Angkor Wat centuries ago. And its French quarter, with the houses lost in a forest of shade trees and bougainvillaea along the wide streets and gardens. Just like before the war.

"And that," said an "unconverted" French Socialist to me, "is just the trouble—too many French colonials think we can achieve the same thing in all Indo-China. Just like before the war.

"For the Cambodians I would not say this setup is wrong. They are a backward people, and lethargic, and they like us because we have preserved them from their ancient and modern enemies, the Siamese and the Annamites. They have a long way to go before this façade of independence may be too small a thing for them, and with our help their country is well run.

"But with the Annamites it is different. They are an intelligent, lusty, hard-driving race, and their nationalist drive toward independence, spurred by men trained in French schools, and French ideas, is not to be denied.

"We have muffed things in Indo-China. We have temporized and vacillated and fought and vacillated and fought again, instead of driving toward a sensible compromise of real self-government in the French Union. The Annamites don't have a perfect record either, but one would not expect as much of them as of us. We never schooled very many of them, and we used to jail their leaders for even thinking of independence.

"Now we must still try to reach a peaceful compromise. They need us and we need them. But it may be too late. After the warring of the last two years, I am not sure the white man can stay profitably in Indo-China on any terms."

Meantime the rice bowl of Asia, which used to export more than a million tons of rice a year to its hungry neighbors, is suffering from a military drought. The politicians seem unable to produce the rain of peace, and the world, the French, and the Annamites suffer.

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