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DEATH ZONES AND DARLING SPIES

STUDIES IN WAR, SOCIETY, AND THE MILITARY

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Preface

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but
if faced with courage, need not be lived again.

Maya Angelou, at Clinton presidential inauguration, 1993

November 8, 1960. Brisk gusts descended with the twilight hour as Sam Lubell and I entered Rockefeller Center in Midtown Manhattan, headed for the news studio of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). We were geared up to assess the soon-to-arrive ballots cast in the presidential election between Democrats Senator John Kennedy and his running mate, Lyndon Johnson, versus Republicans Vice President Richard Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge.

I cradled a dog-eared cardboard box of notes Sam and I had handwritten during the campaign to record his pioneering doorbell-ringing technique of interviewing voters. My one-time professor at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and now my boss, Sam was a big name in political journalism, thanks to his syndicated newspaper columns and award-winning book.¹ His reputation prompted NBC to contract him to predict accurately the winner of what proved to be the nation's closest presidential race up to that time and to do so ahead of the computers pitted against him by the other two network stations.

Throughout the night I answered phone calls bringing us latest results of voting in selected precincts where we had earlier conducted interviews. By matching the phoned-in results with our earlier statistics, Sam beat the other networks' computers to project accurately that Kennedy would win the popular vote. Not in my wildest dreams did I then imagine that these four politicians would influence so profoundly what would happen in Vietnam — or even that I would be in Vietnam. Yet Kennedy was

president when I arrived there, Nixon was when I left, and Lyndon B. Johnson was sandwiched between them, with Henry Cabot Lodge twice serving as U.S. ambassador to Saigon.

May 2001. I was one of some four dozen combat correspondents whose work had been selected for an exhibit designed to trace 148 years of war reporting starting with the Crimean conflict of 1853. Displayed at the Freedom Forum's Newseum in Washington DC, these "War Stories" illustrated "how correspondents deal with the challenge of reporting the facts of war accurately," especially when their coverage contradicts official pronouncements (as mine had done). I was also among those included because of my seven continuous years of reporting on the Vietnam War, from 1962 to 1969, longer than any other Western journalist up to that time.

In addition, based on my series of dispatches from and about the siege of the beleaguered Khe Sanh outpost, the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1969 had nominated me for the Pulitzer Prize in International Reporting. I remember chuckling as I read the nomination letter. "Most of Beverly Deepe's readers presume she is a man — for her beat in Vietnam is rough, tough and dangerous," *Monitor* managing editor Courtney R. Sheldon told the Pulitzer Prize committee. "Yet Miss Beverly Ann Deepe, who hails from little Carleton, Nebraska, has been reporting the war and political developments from Saigon and military outposts such as Khe Sanh for seven years now. She holds her own with hosts of masculine correspondents — and asks no favors."²

The "War Stories" exhibit, accompanied by photographs and a North Vietnamese trenching tool I had sent, was organized by experts selected by the Freedom Forum.³ The exhibit was on display from May to November 2001, bracketing the cataclysmic hijacking of four airliners on September 11 that resulted in the leveling of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, destruction of parts of the Pentagon just miles from the Newseum, and the deaths of nearly three thousand civilians. Those horrifying attacks set in motion a chain of global events that ultimately prompted me to write these memoirs.

Why Another Book about the United States and Vietnam

I began to write these memoirs forty-some years after leaving Vietnam and three years after retiring from teaching and researching journalism and communications. I was spurred by sensing that the U.S. reaction to 9/11 had begun to degenerate in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the neighboring countries into another bloody, agonizing Vietnam-like experience. I became painfully aware that many shortcomings in U.S. policy and actions that I had noted in my reporting from Vietnam were arising again nearly a half century later in another part of the world. Not only was the Vietnam War a failure for the United States, but it was also a humiliation because U.S. government leaders failed for decades to study this defeat and to learn from it. Instead, they replayed its strategic shortcomings.

Nor was I alone in beginning to make this brutal assertion about the United States having squandering time, blood, treasury, and legitimacy after Vietnam. When they faced a growing insurgency in Iraq, some U.S. officials recognized the essence of U.S. failures in Vietnam found in my seven years of reporting. In 2006, for example, former vice chief of staff of the army Gen. Jack Keane explained on national television that in Iraq “we put an Army on the battlefield that . . . doesn’t have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency. . . . After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war.”⁴

On the nonmilitary side, too, U.S. civilian leaders failed to assess and dampen grievances against U.S. policies abroad and may have even inflamed outrages by invading Iraq in 2003. In January 2005, when rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq was deemed critical, national security advisor Condoleezza Rice told Congress: “We didn’t have the right skills, the right capacity to deal with a reconstruction effort of this kind.”⁵

My memoirs may be more relevant now than at any time during the last forty years as Vietnam’s shadow is cast more starkly over the United States’ current so-called war on terror centered in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East.

Fast-Forward Forty-Plus Years: New U.S.
Counterinsurgency Policy

Upon completing the first draft of my memoirs, I discovered that the U.S. government had issued in two parts a new counterinsurgency policy. First, it released the *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* on December 15, 2006, while “our Soldiers and Marines [were] fighting insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq.”⁶ Second, in 2009 it released a civilian interagency *Counterinsurgency Guide*, which it described as “the first serious U.S. effort at creating a national counterinsurgency framework in over 40 years.”⁷

I was taken aback when I studied the new policy because it admits to four specific U.S. failures. First, the new policy recognizes that an insurgency is foremost a political struggle, unlike the premise four decades earlier in which most U.S. resources and efforts in Vietnam focused on conventional military operations and activities. Second, it establishes the fallacy of relying on the body count of deceased persons, which was used so extensively in Vietnam, as a measure of progress. Third, it criticizes the U.S. Army’s building, training, and equipping of Vietnamese soldiers “in the U.S. military’s image.”⁸ Last, it notes the U.S. “sustainment failure” in Vietnam, explaining, “South Vietnam’s agrarian-based economy could not sustain the high-technology equipment and computer-based systems established by U.S. forces and contractors.”⁹

In my dispatches I had described some of these failures. In 1968, for example, after covering the citywide destruction of the one-time imperial capital of Hue, I criticized Gen. William Westmoreland’s concentration on search-and-destroy operations conducted in the remote jungles instead of adopting what I dubbed a “people-perimeter” strategy.¹⁰ Nearly forty years later I was surprised to read that my “people-perimeter” strategy had morphed into what the new policy calls a “population-centric approach,”¹¹ designed to address the political nature of the insurgency.

In one dispatch I remember well, I quoted a Western diplomat’s alert: “Westy [General Westmoreland] obviously cannot command a machine he doesn’t have. And he doesn’t have the political-economic-military

counterinsurgency machine he needs to wage this war.” I added my own perspective: “At a higher level, this was not simply General Westmoreland’s dilemma in Vietnam; it would be an American dilemma in other underdeveloped countries for the next decade.”¹² The policy also maps out tomorrow’s conflicts, warning of the “near certainty” that the United States will engage in counterinsurgencies “during the decades to come.”¹³

My Vietnam Reporting Trove of Forty Years

For these memoirs I rely mainly not on memory but on a collection of materials I systematically amassed in my Vietnam War reporting and shipped out of Saigon when I departed in 1969. This trove consists of three separate chunks. Most important were copies of the full-page broadsheets of most of my articles published by the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. In Saigon I had these copies bound in one volume that was covered in royal blue satin embossed with golden phoenixes and lotus blossoms like that worn by Vietnamese on special occasions. On the black spine of this volume I had imprinted in gold ink, “To my parents with love and thanks.”

The second chunk consists of fifteen bound volumes of flimsy tissue carbon copies of dispatches I had written (my scoops, my rejections, my cables scolding and being scolded by my editors, suggestions to and from them for stories, some memos of my random thoughts). These loose-leaf flimsies were sent to a local bindery and bound in buckram-colored leather. The result: two volumes contain “rejected articles”; two contain dispatches and correspondence to and from *Newsweek* from Vietnam and Laos (September 1962–February 1964); six contain my dispatches and correspondence with the *New York Herald Tribune* (1964–mid-1966, when that newspaper ceased publication); four contain my carbons, memos, and letters to and from the *Christian Science Monitor* (May 1967–January 1969); one contains carbons of my dispatches and correspondence to and from the *Economist*, *London Daily* and *Sunday Express*, *North American Newspaper Alliance*, and the *Pittsburgh Gazette* (1961–68).¹⁴

For the third chunk I encased in plastic bags the remaining bulky documents, appropriately labeled, and tied them with heavy string.

These included my notebooks, copies of the Vietnamese government's English-language versions of *Vietnam Press*, the British Information Service translations of Vietnamese newspapers, U.S. and South Vietnamese military and civilian communiqués and organizational charts, old French maps, annual reports from U.S. and Vietnamese agencies, and a bundle containing excerpts of Mao Tse-tung's choicest writings. I discovered that I had some 54.8 linear feet of these documents that were packed in 170 plastic, dirt-, bug-, and water-proof packets. Upon opening these packets in 2008, I found that they were completely intact, despite several relocations, some forty years of storage, and water that flooded a room where they were stashed. This trove of documents was then painstakingly compiled by my husband, Chuck Keever, into databases that proved essential for guiding me through these primary materials (see appendix 1).

A Unique, Lipsticked Panoramic Perspective

From this treasure trove I selected for these memoirs vignettes and episodes that provide microcosms of larger issues or paint slice-of-life portraits of key aspects of the war, that freeze-frame events and thinking as they occurred *at the time*, and that give immediacy, intensity or veracity to my observations and experiences. Extensive quotes from participants I interviewed *at the time* and my eyewitness descriptions are taken from my notes written with some shorthand that I had learned in a correspondence course in high school or using my own abbreviations and typed up soon afterward as news dispatches or drafts. Far more than I could remember after forty years, these wafer-thin papers preserve an accurate chronicle of what I witnessed and experienced, thus permanently recording a lipsticked reporter's perspective about a man-made and male-conducted war reported mostly by newsmen.

I was as a twenty-six-year-old freelance reporter when I arrived in Vietnam in February 1962. For the first seven months I freelanced and so did not face the burden of covering daily events on deadline that beset the eight Western reporters tied down in Saigon. I set out to explore the life, emotions, feelings, and problems of South Vietnam's rural villagers,

who constituted about 75 percent of the country's estimated 16.1 million population.¹⁵ These early reporting odysseys gave me a panoramic perspective and unique baseline to eyewitness the war while it was being led, governed, largely fought, and suffered by the Vietnamese. This period was the most critical of the war as well as the least examined in the thousands of books about U.S. involvement written since.¹⁶

With 1962 as a baseline, I am able to use a unique, personalized, topical approach in the opening chapters of this book to begin telling the story of key segments of the Vietnam War that I covered. I then discuss the evolution of that topic during my seven years of reporting. Instead of being an exhaustive account of all that I covered or adhering to a day-to-day chronology, these memoirs flow from one defining topic to another.

By preserving on paper or film what I observed, analyzed, and was told *at the time*, I have chosen not to reconstruct quotes and events years after the fact, to create composite persons, to indulge in the luxury of hindsight, to crawl inside people's heads or hearts to second-guess motivation and feelings or to include fictionalized materials. I kept in mind that memoirs are commonly defined as a record of events about matters coming "within the personal knowledge of the writer, or are obtained from particular sources of information,"¹⁷ and as such they usually emphasize "what is remembered rather than who is remembering."¹⁸

But these memoirs are more than just my re-reporting of the Vietnam War or my instant replay of the history that I witnessed. Instead, in split-screen fashion I also incorporate information that was classified at the time but has since been made public about how, at the highest levels of the U.S. government, officials made critical decisions about Vietnam that reporters in the field did not, and could not, have known. I often include information from official documents and analyses that are contained in the forty-three top secret volumes known as the *Pentagon Papers*. Described as "a history based solely on documents,"¹⁹ the unprecedented, highly classified *Papers* were leaked in 1971 to selected newspapers, which analyzed them, and were released in full to the public by Senator Mike Gravel of Alaska. The *Papers* pulled back an opaque curtain of secrecy

to stun the public — and me — by exposing the inner workings of U.S. decision making within Washington, between Washington and Saigon officials, and between U.S. officials in Saigon and the Vietnamese. As Gravel observed at the time, the *Papers* reveal that U.S. decision makers at the highest levels of the executive branch gave little consideration to the costs of their policies that would be borne by the Vietnamese — “the very people we claimed to be helping” — and they treated the U.S. public in contempt by forcing it “to subsist on a diet of half-truths or deliberate deceit.” He concluded, “No greater argument against unchecked secrecy in government can be found in the annals of American history.”²⁰

Along with my horizontal, on-the-ground reporting, I move vertically to incorporate high-level policymakers’ once secret, but now revealed, decisions, which provide the backstory for events I describe unfolding in Vietnam. These memoirs hinge together bottom-up and top-down narratives. Readers can view online or on DVD many personalities, places, and battles that I describe.

A Treasury of Acknowledgments

In writing these memoirs, I alone am responsible for errors of omission or commission. Yet these memoirs would not have been made possible without the direct or indirect help of countless Vietnamese and Americans who served, suffered, or died in Vietnam. For editing and structural assistance I thank Bridget Barry, Elizabeth Gratch, and Heather Lundine of the University of Nebraska Press, Carolyn Martindale, and two anonymous reviewers. I am grateful to James Pickerell, a photographer I teamed up with years earlier in Vietnam and Washington DC, for permitting me to hold and study dozens of his personal wartime photos; he currently publishes www.Selling-Stock.com, which deals with issues related to the marketing of stock photography. I also appreciate the scanning and restoration by Ed Roeber, of Hawaii Pacific Photo (www.hppdigital.com), of the photographs in my personal collection published in this volume.

I am indebted for the love, support, and sacrifices bestowed upon me by my late father, my mother, and my sister. Last, this volume would not

have happened at all without the support and help of my husband — moving around dust-encrusted boxes, compiling two databases, and divining the past with me. He is the joy I serendipitously encountered forty-plus years ago in the midst of that joyless war.

Beverly Deepe Keever, PhD, MLIS, MSJ

DEATH ZONES AND DARLING SPIES

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Map 1. Places in Laos and South Vietnam discussed by author. (Map by Erin Greb, copyright Beverly Deepe Kever)

Introduction

From Midwest Dustbowl to Mystical Vietnam

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

William Faulkner, 1950

The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.

Barack Obama, 2008

The farmhouse still had that lived-in look, although it had been uninhabited for eleven years. All the windows in the house were intact, adorned with stiffly starched, sand-colored curtains. At the beginning of the gravelled driveway leading to the house stood a red metal mailbox holding a crimped-up tin plate bearing the name of the owner: Martin Deepe, my father.

Dad had wanted a son to carry on the family farm. Instead, my parents got me, on June 1, 1935, after they were barely able to reach the Hebron hospital by crossing a decrepit bridge submerged by a flash flood. Twenty months later came another daughter, Joan, their last child. Without sons to take over the family farm and with their two daughters leaving to pursue other livelihoods, my parents eventually rented their land, barn, and bins and moved in 1996 to the Thayer County seat of Hebron, leaving empty buildings to deteriorate until this fateful day.

The farmhouse was hardly aware of the violent death awaiting it on that Monday, July 2, 2007. It had been a wrenching decision for my mom, Doris Deepe, “to put the house down,” she said, using the euphemism usually reserved for putting to sleep ailing farm horses and pets. “This is

the only place that was really home,” she told me. Because Mom could not bear to witness the end of the house, garage, outhouse, cellar, and even the mailbox that held so many memories for her, I was the sole family member to attend this death knell. A hulking Komatsu with dinosaur-like jaws first smashed the upstairs bedroom and within twenty minutes had transformed the once-upon-a-time home into a heap of rubble. Five minutes later the sun broke through the haze and puffs of dust. A breeze fanned wild, gold-tipped brome grass so that it resembled prairies of the past.

That evening Mom and I drove to the burial site of the home where she had lived for forty-three years. Mom was ninety-two—in age and probably in weight. She was much frailer than she had been as a young bride beginning seventy-one years of marriage. Her hands, folded in her lap in the passenger’s seat, evidenced bumps from a broken wrist, arthritis in her knuckles, and crippled fingers from years of watering chickens, hoeing gardens, canning produce, cooking, laundering, and even helping Dad hack weeds in the fields or lay out irrigation tubing. I turned the car off the graveled county road, headed up the driveway, and swung the car around so that its nose faced the U-shaped void framed by two rows of centuries-old evergreens on the north and west. Mom and I peered at the gently rounded mound bigger than a tennis court where the house and other structures were buried. The mound was much bigger than the one that had covered Dad’s coffin only fifteen months earlier. Stillness permeated the evening coolness. “Amazing grace,” Mom whispered. “It’s eerie.”

A solitude and serenity hung over the spot. A dove cooed in the distance, momentarily breaking the silence. “It’s better than it was,” Mom said. “It wasn’t a home anymore.” She summed up: “The house is at peace.”

From an Old Frontier to a New One

The buried farmhouse had been built around 1890 and witnessed the settling of the rolling hills and flatlands of southeast Nebraska after Pony Express riders and pioneers in covered wagons plied the Oregon Trail only a dozen or so miles away. Some pioneers stopped to homestead on free or cheap government-dispensed land, depleting “the timber, grass

and game of the Pawnee, Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshoni, and other tribes.”¹ Bloody encounters between whites and the “painted devils of the plain” were described at the time in the *Hebron Journal*, established in 1871. Today Hebron (pop. 1,565) claims to stake out the geographic center of the United States; lamppost banners lining its main street proclaim it the “capital of the Oregon Trail.”

These banners and newspaper accounts ignore the dispossession and despair of the native peoples that loom large in the more sweeping perspective provided by historian of the West Patricia Limerick. “All the cultural understanding and tolerance in the world would not have changed the crucial fact that Indians possessed the land and that Euro-Americans wanted it,” Limerick notes.² This crucial fact gave rise to what she calls the “legacy of conquest.” She asserts, “Conquest forms the historical bedrock of the whole nation.”³

The dependency of the United States on expansionism — or blocking the perceived expansionism of its enemies — came to be stretched across the Pacific Ocean in the 1960s to involvement in South Vietnam. The legacy and imagery of that conquest across the American continent was used by John F. Kennedy to proclaim a “New Frontier” that helped to underpin his policy to deny communism to South Vietnam. In his nomination acceptance speech on July 15, 1960, Kennedy told Democratic convention delegates: “We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier. . . . The harsh facts of the matter are that we stand on this frontier at a turning-point in history.”⁴

From “the Knob” and Country School

Mom and Dad were married on August 28, 1934, the driest year recorded in the High Plains. The next year, when I was born, the drought was even worse.⁵ My parents moved onto the heavily mortgaged, 160-acre farm of Dad’s parents, John and Anna Deepe, before I was born. Grandpa Deepe had emigrated from Germany in 1887 at the age of sixteen, attending high school until he was twenty-four so that he could be proficient in English and arithmetic. He lived alone in a sod house for a while and, after marrying Anna from Austria, purchased and moved in 1912 to his own farm.

Mom and Dad had a bleak existence. Dad cultivated the gumbo-like soil with horses, but the drought and poor farm prices produced little income. The wooden house was so thin walled and isolated that Mom named it “the Knob” and routinely described it as “unfit to live in.” There was no telephone, no electricity, and for some time no battery-powered radio. During the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s Mom crimped wet towels around the windowsills to catch the red earth swirling about. Winter winds were so frigid that Mom often had to keep Joan and me warm by dressing us in our little blue snowsuits and placing us on the oven door of the cook stove. Oblivious to my parents’ hardships, Joan and I had immense fun. We played with Old Shep, helped water the chickens and hoe the garden, rode our spunky Shetland pony, and herded in the cattle grazing on prairie pastureland.

I started my education at home. Mom, who had taught in a country school before her marriage, drilled my sister and me on spelling and phonetics. For my first Christmas, when I was only six months old, Mom gave me a book; Dad laughed at her, scoffing, “This kid can’t read!” Mom retorted that I deserved a book, thus jumpstarting my love of reading and writing. Mom was also a saver. To this day she has preserved our first curls after they were shorn, our toddler booties and bonnets, and later on boxes of clippings of my magazine and newspaper articles from Vietnam, marking some things, including Christmas issues of women’s magazines: “Save forever!” Years later, in Vietnam, I often thought of her as I wrote my dispatches, hoping that she would understand them.

In 1941, when I was six, I began my eight years of education at Coon Ridge School, which Dad had attended for eight years a generation before me. Organized in 1871,⁶ the school was named in honor of the raccoons that prowled the playground and neighboring farm buildings. Dad often drove me there over the five miles of dirt road. But during decent weather Joan and I walked home, stopping along the roadside to pick a bouquet of wildflowers for Mom.

The one-room country school was small and spartan, but the no-nonsense teachers were excellent. During my years there no more than a dozen pupils were enrolled in any one year. On warm days the meadowlark’s

songs and farm-fresh breezes wafted in, but in the winter so did the frigid blasts that sent us huddling around the coal-burning stove in our coats and scarves. Without electricity lighting was poor, and I soon needed eyeglasses. An outhouse was a necessary fixture, rain, snow, or shine. During recess we played hide-and-seek on prairie grass once trod by buffalo and American Indians.

In the one room I could hear lessons discussed in the upper classes. I was intrigued to hear the geography studies of advanced students, and these lessons stirred my desire to travel the world, not to write travel articles but to witness for myself how other peoples lived and worked. Here I first read Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, which sparked my dream of seeing China. I also learned geography from V-mail, those tissue-thin, reduced-size letters that Mom's four brothers sent home from overseas during World War II. *Guadalcanal*, *Iwo Jima*, *Okinawa*, and *the Solomon Islands* became household words as V-grams arrived and we tracked news from Pacific combat zones. After finishing the eighth grade, I took my four years of high school in nearby Belvidere.

I graduated from high school in 1953 and enrolled at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, spurred by receiving a Regents Scholarship and by Mom's insistence that I get the college education she had been denied by the Depression. I double-majored in political science and journalism, took a number of courses in Asian Studies, and graduated in 1957, having been selected as a Phi Beta Kappa for academic excellence and Mortar Board for campus leadership. That same year Mom and Dad bought the farmhouse, other buildings, and a quarter section near the Coon Ridge School, living there for the next forty-three years in the home that I saw "put down." At last Dad was his own boss on his own land; he was not a tenant farmer like many in the area, having to shell out rent money to landlords. The hard life of these tenant farmers stuck with me years later in Vietnam when I reported on the war fought in rice paddies owned by big landowners and rented out to dissatisfied peasants.

After graduation I landed a summer job in the regional bureau of the Associated Press (AP) in Des Moines, thanks to key assistance from the head of the university's journalism school. That fall I was admitted

into the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism with the substantial help of a scholarship from the New York Newspaper Women's Club. While at Columbia, I worked part-time for one of my professors, Samuel Lubell, who had parlayed his pioneering public opinion polling into syndicated columns and an award-winning book. After graduating in mid-1958, I was selected by the Young Women's Christian Association as one of forty U.S. students nationwide to visit the Soviet Union for forty days as part of the first student exchange initiated by the two governments. That trip became my launching pad for Asia. I wrote a five-part series on Soviet life for Associated Press Newsfeatures and then told the head of the office that I would return in two years with a proposal to write articles for him from and about Asia. I had formed a pact with two young women I met on my Soviet trip, vowing that we would save our money and then take off for Asia.

Upon returning from the Soviet Union, I worked as Lubell's assistant in New York for two years. He and I analyzed voting returns of precincts across the country to select those barometer precincts that mirrored the nation and then, practicing journalism from the bottom up, we rang doorbells in those areas to ask voters how they were going to cast their ballots in key 1958 congressional and 1960 presidential races.

Working for Lubell did not pay much. But I often worked weekends, traveled a lot on an expense account, and built up a nest egg of funds. I became used to traveling light, fast, and on a moment's notice over the eastern half of the nation. When I left New York after the 1960 election, I mentally carried with me Sam's grassroots interviewing approach and his note-taking and filing system. I was ready to leave for Asia, but my two girlfriends who were to go with me backed out. With my nest egg in hand, I decided to go alone. I returned to AP Newsfeatures with my proposal to write from and about Asia and was given a list of suggestions for articles and letters of introduction to AP bureau chiefs in Asia.

I was twenty-six when in April 1961 I eagerly took off for my dream trip around the world, allotting just two weeks for a tourist's stop in South Vietnam. I was mainly hoping to see China, although the Communist country was then closed to U.S. citizens. I succeeded in visiting

the port of Shanghai on a Polish steamer but was not given permission to disembark. I wrote a feature story that AP Newsfeatures requested on the ship-side view of Shanghai, based on what I could see from the deck and hear from Polish sailors. I also made a quick study of other parts of Asia. I lived with and taught English to Japanese students, hired interpreters to talk with South Koreans about the 1961 military coup d'état that I witnessed outside of Seoul, interviewed prostitutes in Hong Kong and Macau, visited opium dens in Singapore, and traveled by tramp steamer to talk to descendants of headhunters in British-held Borneo. AP bought some of my airmailed or teletyped dispatches and distributed them to newspapers worldwide.⁷

"Things Are Really Heating Up in Vietnam"

By the time I reached Hong Kong, AP's bureau chief there, Roy Essoyan, had just returned from South Vietnam and suggested I go there. He had covered the offloading of the first U.S. banana-shaped H-21 Shawnee helicopters, but when the first of them crashed due to mechanical failure, Roy wrote a wire story that embarrassed the Pentagon. It then barred correspondents from future rides on U.S. helicopters manned by U.S. crews — and Roy wrote another wire story exposing the U.S. government's withholding information from American taxpayers, despite their funding of the war. The story caused more negative publicity for the Pentagon, so it relented and again allowed accredited journalists to ride aboard U.S. aircraft, space permitting. This authorization gave journalists unparalleled mobility throughout the course of the war to swoop into battlefields, even during the fighting, or into isolated outposts and villages. Roy advised me to head to Saigon, adding, "Things are really heating up in Vietnam."

Even as Roy was briefing me, President Kennedy, on February 7, 1962, was affirming to journalists in Washington his policy to help protect an independent South Vietnam from "a subterranean war, a guerrilla war of increasing ferocity," which he painted as one of aggression directed by Communist North Vietnam, rather than a civil war waged by homegrown insurgents against a heavy-handed South Vietnamese

government.⁸ Kennedy's rationale for involvement was continuing the "domino theory," the belief that Communism would spread by toppling one non-Communist regime after another. Kennedy also saw in Vietnam the necessity to defeat a war of national liberation model of warfare, like that which had enabled Mao Tse-tung to seize control of China in 1949 and which was now being trumpeted outside its borders.⁹

A day after Kennedy spoke in Washington, the United States established in Saigon its Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), headed by Gen. Paul D. Harkins, as it tried to exert more influence on South Vietnam's anti-Communist military efforts. But in escalating the U.S. military presence in Vietnam, Kennedy brushed aside the prophetic warning given to him in 1962 by French general Charles de Gaulle: "You will, step by step, be sucked into a bottomless military and political quagmire."¹⁰

I followed Roy's advice. Instead of staying in South Vietnam for two weeks, as my globetrotting schedule called for, I served as a correspondent there for seven years. I never imagined that I would witness and report on the rise and stalemate of U.S. power there and the ghastly destruction of such a mystical country and many of its people. As then secretary of defense Robert McNamara, a key architect of Kennedy's policy, wrote later, the Vietnam War was to become "among the bloodiest in all of human history."¹¹ Vietnam was also to become the United States' longest war. As Gen. Bruce Palmer Jr. noted in 1984, "Exactly twenty-five years from 1 May 1950 — the day President Truman authorized the first U.S. military assistance to Indochina — Saigon and the South Vietnamese government fell to the communist regime of North Vietnam, on 30 April 1975. Thus ended the longest conflict in American history." And, he added, it would end as "the first clear failure in our history."¹²

Paris-like with Unknown Tomorrows

I departed Hong Kong on a small passenger-cargo steamer bound for Vietnam, which is shaped like a verdant boot forming the outer, seaside rim of a peninsula jutting out from the great Asian land mass. Vietnam was divided in 1954 by international agreement. Being about the size of

1. I wore civilian clothes when I first traveled to the Central Highlands and interviewed these highlanders. (B. Deepe Collection)

Washington state, U.S.-backed South Vietnam was slightly larger than Communist-ruled North Vietnam; the population of each was estimated at about sixteen million — roughly double the size of New York City.

My steamer lazily glided from the South China Sea about fifty miles inland up the Saigon River, past huge fronds of a seemingly unending mangrove swamp. The lush greenery trapped the breezes so that the air hung oppressively under the blazing sun. I arrived on February 14, 1962, as a freelancer with my Olivetti Lettera 22 portable typewriter, a Yashica camera, and one suitcase; my dresses with hemlines reaching midcalf seemed frumpy as other Western women began donning miniskirts. I

wore these frumpies for travel and reporting until I could buy a military outfit on Saigon's black market. Without a regular paycheck I existed on my nest egg and erratic income earned from selling articles and photographs, with my loving parents covering overdrafts of my Nebraska bank account. As a fellow correspondent later wrote, "Beverly Deepe, one of the first young vagabonds to land in the tiny Saigon press corps, was the girl next door, a symbol of the rapidly fading apple-pie fifties."¹³

I disembarked near the foot of one of Saigon's main boulevards, where U.S. helicopters had only months earlier arrived on the flat top of an American ship while throngs of skeptical Vietnamese watched. When, on December 11, 1961, thirty-three Shawnee helicopters manned by four hundred ground and air crewmen arose from the deck of the aircraft carrier and fluttered toward the airport, the crowd roared, a Vietnamese friend later told me. Helicopters went on to become the war's iconic images, creating signature bookends of the beginning and the ending of the United States in Vietnam, as CH-46 Chinook helicopters desperately rescued panic-stricken Americans and Vietnamese fleeing North Vietnamese troops and tanks from a Saigon rooftop on April 30, 1975.

The arrival of these Shawnees symbolized a new phase of public knowledge of the U.S. war in South Vietnam. President Kennedy dispatched entire U.S. combat support units to operate or handle helicopters, aircraft, rivercraft, intelligence, and logistics to reinforce Saigon government forces, which were already being advised by individual U.S. officers and GIs. It would be the fourth time in history that the United States established a wartime advisory and training mission of such size.¹⁴

These newcomers expanded the number of U.S. military in South Vietnam to about 6,000. The number was nearly tenfold the limit of 685 U.S. military advisors allowed in South Vietnam under international accords agreed upon on July 21, 1954, at the end of the French Indochina War. Seven months before the Saigon arrival of these helicopters and other combat support units, on May 11, 1961, Kennedy had secretly ordered 400 U.S. Green Beret soldiers and 100 other military advisors to South Vietnam. As the *Pentagon Papers* revealed in 1971, this increase "signaled a willingness to go beyond the 685-man limit on the size of the

2. I relied on cyclo pedalers like these to skirt me through Saigon's hurly-burly traffic. (B. Deepe Collection)

U.S. [military] mission in Saigon, which, if it were done openly, would be the first formal breach of the Geneva agreement.”¹⁵ Also, as the American public was to learn years later, breaching this international agreement was Kennedy’s secret order initiating covert operations against North Vietnam and Laos conducted by U.S. Special Forces and by South Vietnamese units trained and paid by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.¹⁶ I later was able to describe these kinds of covert operations in connection with the Tonkin Gulf incidents that catapulted the United States into a massive air war against North Vietnam and a buildup of its troop strength in the South.

3. My walk-up apartment with a mirrored bookcase would a year later be shot up and looted during the first of many coup d'états. (B. Deepe Collection)

Upon my arrival I was enchanted with Saigon. Its wide boulevards were lined with majestic trees that reminded me of France and garnered it the nickname the “Paris of the Orient.” Main government buildings, the opera house on the city square, and the high-steepled Catholic cathedral at the head of a main avenue carried the imprint of the French colonialists. More than Paris, however, Saigon exuded a relaxed pace necessitated by muggy days that made a midday siesta a must. The streets were teeming with bicycles pedaled by lithe women in flowing *ao dai*, the national dress fashioned with a Mao-styled collar and nipped-in waist from which flowed to the ankles two sheer panels that fluttered over pantaloons. For

transport I hailed pedicabs powered by emaciated Vietnamese men or nabbed rickety blue-and-white taxis.

I was lucky to find an apartment to rent in the heart of the city just blocks from the central market and the palace of President Ngo Dinh Diem. The apartment was on the second floor above an automobile repair shop fronting a major one-way street leading from the airport. My walk-up apartment, No. 5 at 101 Cong Ly Street, was austere. The floors were of concrete. The bamboo sofa and chairs were covered in crumpled cotton slipcovers. Housekeeping chores were time-consuming, and to do them, I hired a young Vietnamese woman, who then moved in to share my apartment. There was no stove; instead, charcoal was burned in a ceramic hibachi for cooking and for boiling the city's water, which was unsafe to drink, even in Saigon's best hotels. There was no refrigerator, so the maid shopped at the nearby central market daily to buy pineapples and live chickens that she killed and plucked in the kitchen. From my second-floor living room window, I could peer down into a Hindu temple that was alive with worshippers, incense, flowers, and tinkling bells.

But below this surface nonchalance Saigon was electric with an air of uncertainty mixed with danger. I chatted with American GIs in mess halls or at airports who nervously wondered how they would fare during their one-year tour of duty. Pro-Communist guerrillas were launching 120 attacks a week, and, as the *Pentagon Papers* reveal, U.S. officials feared insurgents would soon be able to establish a "liberated area" somewhere in the country. Sidewalk cafés that had once provided a relaxed ambience were banned by the Vietnamese government in the wake of a grenade explosion at one Saigon establishment that had been aimed at Americans but wounded two Germans instead.¹⁷ Saigon became a floating life of fleeting acquaintances, hidden dangers, and unknown tomorrows.

On February 27, two weeks after my arrival in Saigon, I heard the bombing of the Presidential Palace just blocks up the street from my apartment. Dissident Vietnamese government pilots in low-flying fighters were strafing it. Upon hearing gunfire that day, Mert Perry of *Time* magazine was the only reporter to get the news to the outside world before

the Vietnamese government cut telegraph communications connecting Saigon to the outside world. The quick-thinking reporter had picked up the telephone even before he knew who was strafing the palace. His example taught me that it was not enough to gather the news; one also had to get it out of the country. Later I instinctively grabbed my Olivetti to cover Saigon's recurring coups d'états, quasi-coups, and false coups and rushed to the post-telegraph office before it was shuttered. To my astonishment my advisory to editors in London of my mad dash to the cable office was published in 1964 as the lead story on the foreign page before I could even identify the coup makers.¹⁸

Reporting without Deadlines

During my first seven and a half months in Saigon I freelanced stories gathered by traveling to the surrounding countryside. I was struck by the beauty of Vietnam and its mystical, magical fusion of cultures from both China and India. Vietnam's landscapes often reminded me of the mist-covered mountains and straggly evergreens I had viewed in scrolls of the countryside of ancient China.

Freelancing was a laborious, unlucrative, time-consuming process. I mailed story ideas from the antiquated Vietnamese post office to news media outlets or sent completed articles on speculation, gambling I would be paid for them. But not having to meet regular deadlines permitted me to travel for extended periods to cover the two-track war of insurgency and infiltration. I visited locations where U.S. combat support units were being stationed; I hitched rides by helicopters, aircraft, jeeps, and riverboats; I even rode an elephant.

Almost everywhere I visited, great changes were taking place. U.S. junior officers were arriving in all of the forty-some province capitals to advise and assist South Vietnamese military officers administratively and logistically. I searched out and interviewed women performing extraordinary duties, such as Patricia Smith, a doctor sent from Seattle by a Catholic organization who was treating dozens of frail mountain tribes inhabitants in a pink dispensary in the highlands city of Kontum, and an intelligence officer, Maj. Anne Doering, who had been born in

4. I rode an elephant in 1962 before these beasts became casualties of the war.
(B. Deepe Collection)

Haiphong and was the only Women's Army Corps representative in Vietnam. These and my other dispatches, distributed by AP Newsfeatures to subscribing newspapers nationwide, painted a lipsticked, though not rosy, portrait of Vietnam.¹⁹

Saigon's All-Male Press Corps, Mostly Male War, and Me

My freelancing gave me little chance to mingle with other correspondents. Upon arriving in Saigon, I found the resident Western press corps consisted of eight other journalists, four of whom worked for wire services: Agence France-Presse, AP, Reuters, and United Press International.²⁰ All

were Caucasian. All were male. When I left Vietnam seven years later, I had outlasted all of them.

These journalists working for the U.S. media were young. The youngest, age twenty-four, was Michel Renard, a Belgian freelancer for Columbia Broadcasting System. Neil Sheehan, who covered for United Press International, and I were twenty-six. The oldest, at thirty-three, were *Time-Life's* Mert Perry and *Newsweek's* François Sully. Malcolm Browne, age thirty-two, was a lanky, blond chemist-turned-correspondent who filled me in on newsy developments as I read the incoming and outgoing wire copy in AP's spartan office on Rue Pasteur. Shortly after my arrival, David Halberstam, then twenty-nine, took over the *New York Times's* coverage from Homer Bigart, fifty-four, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner whom the Saigon government came close to expelling for his critical articles. Halberstam continued the *Times's* criticism of the government, but he left five weeks after it was toppled on November 1, 1963,²¹ telling friends that covering the war had become too risky.²²

From this original group of eight correspondents, the U.S. government accredited a peak number of 645 journalists by the end of March 1968, prompting Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, the chief U.S. military information officer from 1967 to 1969, to assert, "That's far too many, especially when most of them stayed in Saigon." Sidle estimated that only about 75 to 80 correspondents regularly went into the field but added that "young reporters who stayed a year or longer eventually became quite good." The top U.S. commander for much of the war, Gen. William Westmoreland, observed that with the "constant turnover" in reporters, "providing the press with background and perspective was like trying to paint a moving train."²³

I had hand-carried to Saigon letters from news media outlets that permitted me to become accredited by both U.S. and Vietnamese officialdoms. Journalists reporting from Vietnam needed to be accredited by U.S. and Vietnamese governments, which required documentation that the journalist was writing for a media outlet. Accreditation gave journalists access to military transportation, quarters, and rations, if available, and allowed them to accompany military operations. "It was

5. The South Vietnamese government issued my accreditation card for *Newsweek* just before it was toppled in the November 1963 coup d'état. (B. Deepe Collection)

the first war in which reporters were routinely accredited to accompany military forces yet not subject to censorship,” a media historian notes, thus giving them “extraordinary freedom.”²⁴

In 1965, when the U.S. buildup of troops was under way, Westmoreland did consider ordering press censorship but decided it was too complicated to censor television stories and written articles created by non-U.S. journalists and sent to their home countries. Besides, correspondents would then only smuggle their copy to neighboring cities to be sent (as I had done during the 1963–64 crises that blocked or delayed the Vietnamese government’s telegraph operation). Westmoreland indicated the ultimate decision was up to President Johnson, who confided in 1972 at the LBJ Ranch a few months before his death that during the early days of the war he felt he should have imposed press censorship, despite the obstacles.²⁵

After U.S. combat troops arrived in South Vietnam in mid-1965, journalists who were accredited by the U.S. military command had to agree

to adhere to fifteen voluntary guidelines relating to release of information about upcoming operations, adequacy of supplies in isolated outposts, and accuracy of incoming shells.²⁶ Several correspondents violated the guidelines and had their accreditation revoked.²⁷

Like most other correspondents, I did not carry a weapon and was not embedded with any one unit for long periods of time, as was the case in earlier, conventional wars. In another revolutionary change news from the first uncensored U.S. war was delivered into living rooms, and viewers worldwide experienced history while it was happening.

Reporters' "Declarations of Independence"

I had arrived in Saigon without any preconceptions about whether the United States should have become involved in Vietnam, although I knew some journalists believed that the United States had to fight the war.²⁸ Vietnam was not discussed at all during the 1960 presidential campaign, for which I had done political polling, and after the election I was too preoccupied with my upcoming travels to hear the soaring rhetoric of Kennedy that captivated some U.S. journalists.²⁹ Besides, I had been drilled in my journalism schools to remain a disinterested observer, to avoid taking sides or becoming emotionally involved, to concentrate on accuracy and fairness, and to use brainpower to explain complexity. So, I focused on gathering the best evidence of what was happening in Vietnam and what it meant.

I was one of a group of Saigon-based journalists who was credited with spearheading an era in which reporters wrote new "Declarations of Independence" by rising up "to challenge — and change — the rules of the game." Journalists were no longer willing to accept statements by the U.S. government at face value and disseminate them uncritically.³⁰ I was so absorbed with my work during these early years that I was unaware of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that constitutionally protected the public's right to challenge the government and its officials. In writing for the Court's 9–0 decision in March 1964, Justice Brennan stated, "We consider . . . a profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open, and that

it may well include vehement, caustic, and sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials.”³¹

Even so, press coverage of the war continues to be debated by scholars, policy makers, and top brass. As one professor observed in 1990, “Questions about the role of the news media during the Vietnam era are as common as questions about the war itself.”³² Some accused us of producing antiwar coverage that caused the U.S. defeat. President Nixon declared in 1971, “Our worst enemy seems to be the press!”³³ At the other extreme some accused us of being little more than a propaganda arm of the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments.³⁴ Yet a scholar commissioned by the army to study U.S. information policy and press performance during my seven years in Vietnam concluded, “It is undeniable . . . that press reports were still often more accurate than the public statements of the administration in portraying the situation in Vietnam.”³⁵ The *Pentagon Papers* note that even the U.S. Embassy was often caught by surprise by developments in Vietnam and “had no effective system, either through overt or covert contacts, for finding out what was going on.” During the 1963 political protests leading to the overthrow of the Diem government, the *Papers* state, “the U.S. press corps was reporting a far different view of both the war and the Buddhist crisis, one which was, in retrospect, nearer the reality.”³⁶ Writer Michael Herr aptly described the Vietnam press corps of 1968: “We all had roughly the same position on the war: we were in it, and that was our position.”³⁷

Continuous (Often Lipsticked) Perspective

During my seven continuous years of reporting in Vietnam, I acquired an institutional memory and an array of valuable local sources that few other Americans had, giving me a unique perspective.

During those seven years the top levels of the government and the armed forces of South Vietnam changed eight times, and these changes trickled down to the countryside, leading to further instability. In March 1964 thirty-five of the forty-one province chiefs at work three months earlier had been replaced, with nine provinces having three new province chiefs and one province having four.³⁸ Besides the Vietnamese

revolving door, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon changed five times, the top U.S. general three times, and the U.S. Mission, which coordinated all American agencies, had been reorganized three times. By 1967, the *Pentagon Papers* reveal, officials in Washington were secretly assessing that the U.S. Mission in Saigon was “badly organized to conduct almost any kind of large and complex operation, let alone a war.”³⁹

In contrast, throughout the entire war the United States confronted a core leadership of battle-tested Vietnamese Communists. They were led by revered president Ho Chi Minh and his masterful general Vo Nguyen Giap, who had teamed up decades earlier to fight the Japanese during World War II and then the French colonialists. All the top brass of the North Vietnamese army who accepted the surrender of South Vietnam in Saigon’s Independence Palace in 1975 had fought twenty-one years earlier as junior officers at the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu.⁴⁰ To these North Vietnamese and to the insurgents fighting the Saigon government in the South, the war came to symbolize U.S. imperialism linked to their old French colonial masters.

My gender afforded me a distinct perspective in a war zone dominated by male soldiers, officials, and reporters. It enabled me to go beyond traditional battlefield coverage and male-focused controversies to report much-needed stories about the views of Vietnamese women and others on how the war impacted their lives, about the political, economic, and historical factors underlying the conflict, and about why the pro-Communist guerrillas and cadre fought so vigorously.

The U.S. command accredited 467 women as correspondents from 1965 to 1973, when U.S. combat troops withdrew. Of this number 267 were American. Most arrived in or after 1965, when U.S. combat troops arrived. The war killed two, and disease killed a third; Vietnamese Communists captured two in Cambodia.⁴¹

With more women reporting the Vietnam War than any previous conflict, a media scholar concludes, it was “a turning point — to some extent a watershed — for American women as war correspondents.” Another media scholar argues that women correspondents in Vietnam were “revolutionaries before the feminist revolution of the 1960s formally

began.” My arrival in 1962 was four years before the establishment of the National Organization for Women and a decade before the founding of *Ms.* magazine. Female journalists in Vietnam established themselves as equal to their male peers, one scholar observes, and “in doing so, they staked out a lasting place for their gender on the landscape of war.”⁴²

Sixty-six Journalists Killed Reporting the Vietnam War

During my seven years I volunteered to write one exceptionally sad story and mailed it to the Overseas Press Club newsletter in Washington DC. It was the obituary of famed photographer-writer Dickey Chapelle, the only American woman ever killed while covering a combat operation.⁴³ She had covered seven wars and conflicts around the world, including trudging with U.S. Marines during the battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa in World War II. Twenty years later, patrolling with a new generation of marines on November 4, 1965, she was killed by an exploding land mine. AP photographer Henri Huet captured on film her trim body crumpled in blood. Six years later Huet himself perished when North Vietnamese antiaircraft weapons shot down the helicopter in which he was riding. In all at least sixty-six journalists were killed in South Vietnam from 1955 to 1975, almost equal to those killed in the four years of World War II.⁴⁴ “Civilians suffered almost as greatly as soldiers in the Vietnam War,” one researcher wrote. “Most American civilian casualties were media people.”⁴⁵

In a *National Geographic* article published six months after her death, Dickey Chapelle described the most bewildering, still inadequately answered enigma of the conflict: “As I fell into the hypnotic rhythm of the patrol — we were moving between trees and cane fields, stepping high so we would not trip and clatter on the uneven ground — I was obsessed by a question that had plagued me on other walks in other wars: Why?”⁴⁶

6. Famed photographer-writer Dickey Chapelle was struck down by an exploding mine and received last rites from Chaplain John McNamara on November 4, 1965, thus becoming the only U.S. woman killed in action covering a combat operation. (AP Photo/Henri Huet)