

My American War in Viet-Nam, Tom Sykes

1] **1961: US Army in South Viet-Nam:** New Kennedy Administration [V-P Johnson & Sec. of State, Dean Rusk] decided to bolster US presence in South Viet-Nam. I was an Army specialist in Cap St. Jacques [Vung Tau], Can Tho, & Saigon. I was a very, very small part of these initial forays there, and I, with 90 other American intelligence specialists, spent 6 months to train Vietnamese soldiers to monitor, collect, and send communication intelligence on to the South Vietnam Army [ARVN].

In July that year, I had dinner with others—3 Americans, 1 Canadian, 1 French, and 1 Vietnamese. We had back and forth conversations about many topics that have since slid into unmemorable details! However, one topic remains with me...more than 60 years later! “Why is the United States supporting the Ngo regime in Viet-Nam? Even when many Vietnamese say that this regime is cruel, corrupt and confusing?” Later in the evening, our Americans spoke together and concluded then that the United States policy might consider supporting an alternative regime?

“Could Be? [Peut Etre?]”

Me? Left Viet-Nam in January 1962, went back to Japan, left the Army in April 1962 [as my Army enlistment concluded] and went on to a more complicated and interesting life! I did keep side-glimpses about Viet-Nam: Ngo regime was overthrown in a military coup in 1963. And... a merry-go-round series of alternate military regimes replaced it.

2] **1966: Tom’s Pursuits:** That year, having completed two degrees in political science at the University of Washington, I considered other directions:

I had passed the US State Department’s Foreign Service examination and its follow-up panels.

I was solicited by Duke University, given its fellowship, and began doctorate studies there.

Choices ahead? I was a single, 25-year-old male, US Army veteran, 2 degrees, moderate French fluency...and having spent 6 months in Viet-Nam. US Department of State said they would keep track of my studies and, perhaps, could wait a year for me to consider starting as a Foreign Service officer? Duke University continued to support my studies, with international research directions. So, I spoke to those with knowledge and expertise, who said Foreign Service officers were sent to Viet-Nam to work in fortified hamlets.

“Could Be? [Peut Etre?] Certainement Non!”

Me? By 1966, I kept abreast of all situations about Viet-Nam and was generally opposed to US policies there. So, I chose to turn down the Foreign Service direction, stayed with my more academic pursuits at Duke, passed my exams there, went off studying legislative politics in India for two years, and was awarded Fulbright and Woodrow Wilson fellowships.

3] **2014-15: Recent Glimpse:** Retired for 10 years have had [with Sarah] many cycling, walking, and cross-country skiing trips with VBT. We went on a cycling trip from Hanoi to Saigon. Had glimpses of my previous experiences in the now-unified Viet-Nam. Toured CuChi tunnels along the Mekong River...an area I remembered from 1961! A retired, disabled Viet Cong soldier pointed to us that the Americans ‘tried’ to occupy this area during the days. But only the Viet Cong controlled this area during the nights!

We had a final VBT dinner at the former house of Henry Cabot Lodge, American ambassador in late 1960s! A retired Vietnamese history professor spoke to us [in French and English] on a number of topics. He said that Viet-Nam has had many wars: Japanese [1940-45], French [1945-54], American [1955-75]. But Viet-Nam triumphed, finally achieved its independence in 1975, and eventually built a renewed connection with the United States!

“Could Be? [Peut Etre?] Certainement Oui!”