

## Vietnam '67

From Operation Cedar Falls to the March on the Pentagon to the siege of Khe Sanh, 1967 was the pivotal year for America's war in Vietnam. Running from January 2017 to March 2018, this in-depth look at the "long 1967" will rely on historians, veterans, archival footage and never-before-seen photos to explain how this critical time changed the war, and changed America.

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Huynh Ngoc Chanh, a former enemy Vietcong soldier who worked with American Marines as a scout in an initiative dubbed the Kit Carson Program.

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## First Person

*Stories from the Vietnam War, told by the people who experienced it*

‘My Boys’

I first met Vo Van Tam and Huynh Ngoc Chanh in late 1966. Officially, in Vietnamese, they were “Hoi Chanh Vien,” roughly “members who have returned to the righteous side” — enemy Vietcong soldiers who had flipped to the South Vietnamese cause and went to work with Americans as scouts. We called them Kit Carsons.

The idea was the brainstorm of a Marine counterintelligence team in Danang. The first defectors assigned to the program had little training and communicated with us through South Vietnamese interpreters, but the scouts mistrusted their South Vietnamese countrymen. So the Marines decided to search for an American with Vietnamese language skills. They found me, and soon I was working with Tam and Chanh.

Tam had been an assistant platoon leader with the 409th Sapper Battalion, an elite unit charged with assaulting fortified positions. Chanh had been an assistant platoon leader with the 38th Local Force Battalion operating primarily in Quang Ngai Province. Both had been wounded and had defected to get medical care.

The three of us spent much of the first half of 1967 accompanying Marine units on combat operations. Living and fighting alongside Marines in the field, we were involved in active combat almost every day. Together we were an odd trio, and Marines everywhere wanted to hear their stories and ask me what it was like to live with two defectors. Did I trust them? How did I know they were not spies? The answer was yes, I trusted them completely. Both scouts took special care to protect me, and I may owe my survival in Vietnam to their dedication and alertness.

“My boys,” as I called Tam and Chanh, offered vital insights about how the Vietcong interacted with civilians. We entered caves and tunnels together to search for documents. More than once, a hand on my shoulder stopped me from moving through a booby-trapped hedgerow or stepping on a mine in the road hidden by a piece of dried animal dung. During one large operation, we began to draw friendly fire when one of my scouts fired his carbine at his former comrades-in-arms.

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Tam once recognized four members of his former platoon among a group of captives and called to them by name, and he later participated in their interrogation. Both men were continually pointing out people and places where enemy fighters and weapons lay hidden. We shared foxholes on operations and lived in the same tent back at the base, although we spent most days out in the field.

It took time, but eventually I grasped what motivated Tam and Chanh. Although these Kit Carsons had been soldiers of the National Liberation Front and had undergone extensive indoctrination in communist and socialist thinking, I never once met a defector who had been a member of the Communist Party. And Tam and Chanh never expressed hatred for their countrymen on the other side. They regarded the war as a popular movement to free their country from foreigners and empower a legitimate government of their own choosing. They just disagreed on how to do that.

Eventually I moved on; I kept in touch with Tam for a brief time, but lost contact by the end of 1967. I worked again briefly with Chanh in early 1968, but he was rounded up and sent to a government camp after the Tet offensive, destined to be drafted into the South Vietnamese Army. I got him out before he was drafted, but I had lost touch with him by the time I went back to the States in mid-1968. I never heard from him again. I assume he survived the war. If he did, he would probably have been sent to a reindoctrination camp. But I don't know. — *Allen Sells served in Vietnam as a Vietnamese language-trained Marine and later became intelligence chief for the Marine Combined Action Program in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces. He was awarded a commendation medal with a combat "V" by the U.S. Secretary of the Navy for this work.*

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