

# THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

## CONTEXT II: THE VIETNAM TUNNEL RATS

American troops preparing to enter the Viet Cong's underground fortress



### Cu Chi

#### The Underground War

Philipp Cahill, BBC online, April 2000

War is hellish at the best of times. But imagine fighting a war underground in the suffocating, sweltering blackness of tunnels, barely tall enough for a man to crawl, let alone walk.

Here, a wrong turn could send you plunging onto the lethal bamboo spikes of a punji stake trap.

Elsewhere carefully placed trip wires were primed to detonate a grenade or release a box of scorpions onto their unsuspecting victim.

In other places the entire walls of the tunnel seemed to move, covered with an impenetrable mass of spiders and stinging fire ants.

This was the reality of warfare in the tunnels of Cu Chi, the Viet Cong's underground fortress dug beneath the jungles of South Vietnam.

#### Guerrilla network

At its peak the Cu Chi tunnel network covered some 250 kilometres - from the Cambodian border in the west to the outskirts of what was then Saigon.

Beginning in 1948 during the war for independence from the French, the tunnel network slowly expanded. Each tiny tunnel was dug by hand, sometimes at a rate of just one or two metres a day.

As the tunnels grew, arms stores, hospitals, bomb shelters and even theatres to stage politically-motivating plays were added.

Kitchens to supply the tunnels' occupants with food were always built near the surface, but with long chimneys carved out through the ground to diffuse the smoke from the cooking fires and release it at a distance.

Burrowing silently beneath the feet of the American military, the tunnels connected isolated pockets of Viet Cong controlled territory, enabling the guerrillas to mount surprise attacks and then as quickly as they had appeared to vanish without trace.

## Peasant army

To penetrate this underground world, the American military had to take on the methods of the guerrilla soldier.

Frustrated by an inability to overcome a determined but poorly equipped peasant army the most technologically advanced fighting force in the world was forced to adopt the most basic form of hand-to-hand combat.

Out of this came the so-called Tunnel Rats - an elite band of volunteer soldiers, selected both for their bravery and, above all, their small stature. Their motto was "non gratum anus rodentum" - bad Latin for "not worth a rat's ass".

Usually stripped to the waist and armed with just a torch and a pistol, the "rats" would often spend hours at a time inching through the humid, dark tunnels engaged in a deadly game of hide and seek.

With each movement the rats would have to feel for any suspect root or wire that could detonate a carefully primed booby trap.

Some died in the process - many more were dragged screaming from the inky blackness.

## The 'Nam experience

Today, a quarter of a century since the end of the war, much of the tunnel system as it was has collapsed.

But an area near what has been named the "heroic village" of Ben Duoc has been preserved and a section of tunnel enlarged to accommodate the bulky frames of visiting western tourists.

Rumour has it that they have also been sprayed to deter the poisonous snakes, giant centipedes and the like that once used to infest the tunnel network.

Guides - some of whom say they are former VC, but whose age tells a different story - enthusiastically demonstrate the booby traps designed to harass and frustrate American attempts to destroy the tunnels.

Nearby, for a dollar a bullet, a steady stream of western backpackers looking for that "'Nam experience" can have a go at firing an AK-47 or an ageing US-made M16.

Souvenir stalls set up to cater for the war tourist will sell you a pen made from bullets or an "authentic" wartime Zippo lighter engraved with a GI motto, but more likely than not fresh off a production line in the back streets of Ho Chi Minh City.

But in spite of the theme park appearance it is hard not to be impressed by the determination of those who built and fought in the tunnels.

Few other places encapsulate the sheer will-power that the American military was up against - and the lengths that the Viet Cong were prepared to go to in order to evict them.

Left:

Tour guide demonstrates one of the tiny entrances to the tunnel system

Right:

Tunnel rats were armed with only the most basic equipment

