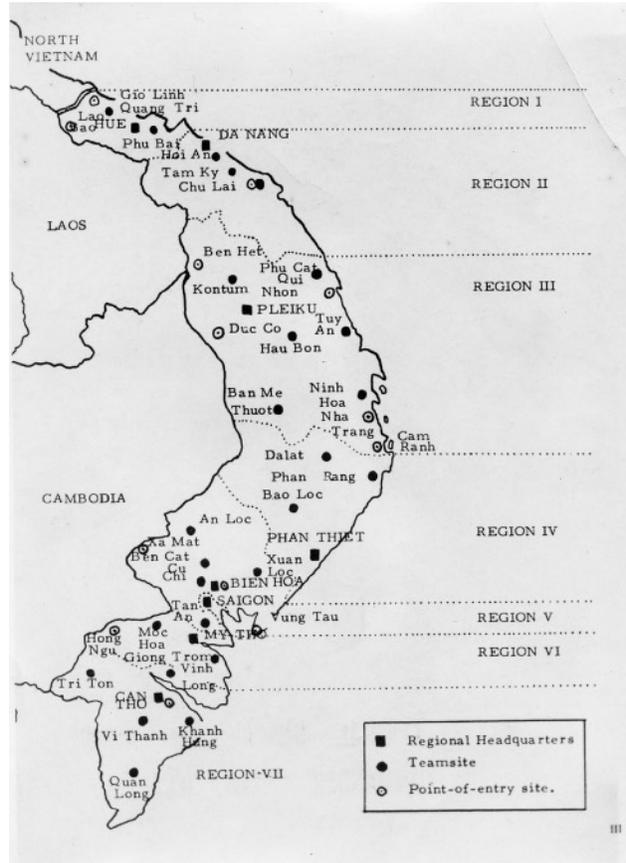


CFDS in VIETNAM, 1973

By Major (ret'd) Justin McNeill, 2017

In January, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed, “ending” the Vietnam War which had been ongoing for 30-plus years with the Americans increasingly involved since the 1950’s. This is not the platform for a discussion of that War, rather it is a brief insight into Canada’s and my involvement in its aftermath. The Peace Accords called for an international contingent to facilitate prisoner exchange and investigate breaches of the ceasefire.

The International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS Vietnam) consisted of military and Foreign Affairs personnel from Canada, Indonesia, Poland and Hungary—two Communist Countries and two non-Communist. Canada’s contingent

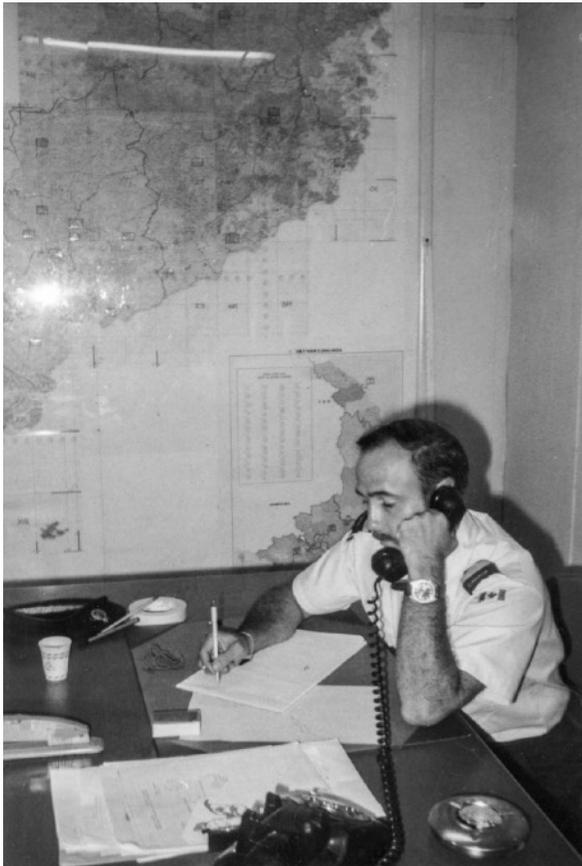


ICCS Map of South Vietnam

was 290 personnel—250 Military and 40 Foreign Affairs. The other countries had a similar makeup.

Shortly after Canada’s deployment, Col Harold Brogan travelled to Vietnam to determine if a Dental Officer was required. His findings were positive and he arranged to pre-position a mobile dental unit.

My first knowledge of any of this was a call from a Medical Sgt at CFB Esquimalt instructing me to report for shots. “What shots?” “Your shots for South East Asia.” “Sorry, but what are you talking about?” “I have a message stating that you are going to Vietnam.” Quick call to Dental HQ, “Oh, didn’t you get the posting message?”



Major Justin McNeil, OpsO

I called Col Brogan and he informed me that I wouldn't be accompanied by an assistant. He had arranged for me to meet the American Dentist at a Saigon Missionary Hospital, as well as a Vietnamese Dentist who knew of several Vietnamese Assistants that had worked with the American Military. I was to hire one.

I had been scheduled to attend a two-week oral pathology course at Walter Reid Hospital in Washington, D.C. Since my posting to Vietnam wasn't for several more weeks, I was allowed to attend the course.

This was fortunate because I met a number of medical military personnel with knowledge of Vietnam.

Shortly after my return to Victoria, I was put on a first-class flight to Hong Kong, then on to Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon. I called the Duty Officer, who wasn't aware that anyone was arriving.

I reported to HQ the next morning. They had been expecting me, but didn't know when. Further, they expected a staff trained dentist, who would work as an Ops Officer and basically do dentistry in my spare time. After some discussion a compromise was reached where I would do half a day in Ops and the other half in the clinic, which, by the way, I had to design and have built.

ICCS consisted of a HQ in Saigon and seven regional HQ's set up across South Vietnam. Each HQ had a number of team sites. The twenty-six team sites in all were

staffed by two to four personnel from each country. These were the people on the sharp end who actually investigated violations.

There were no defined borders between areas controlled by the Viet Cong nor the South Vietnamese Military. Not mentioned in the Paris Peace Accords was the North Vietnamese Military, and, therefore, they did not officially exist. As a result, they



Saigon Traffic



Typical ICCS team site quarters



ICCS Patrol on MeKong River

could not be guilty of violations even though they had over 100,000 soldiers in the South.

One of the few successes of ICSS was arranging and overseeing the exchange of 32,000 prisoners of war.

During the period 29 January 1973 to 31 July 1973 there were 18,000 cease fire violations and 76,000 killed, wounded or missing to all sides combined. It was often said that we were not observing a peace; we were watching a war.



A captured AK47 Maj McNeil donated to the Mess on his return to Canada

I met with both the American and Vietnamese Dentists and was introduced to Nhung, a Vietnamese Hygienist, who had worked with the US Military. During the interview, she showed me reference letters from the Americans. Her English was good, and it was obvious that she knew her stuff. So, I hired her as a combination of receptionist, hygienist and assistant.

Two weeks later the clinic was ready for patients. Since I worked morning in Ops, Nhung would treat her patients then and assist me in the afternoon. With only 290 Canadians in country, and most of them spread out to the area HQ and team sites, my work load was not too heavy. So, half a day was more than adequate. I even had time to do emergency treatment on some of our civilian employees.

My work in Ops was most interesting, but, at times frustrating, especially the phone system. When I had to phone all seven regional HQ's, the first call would be OK, but, then, the Vietnamese Operator would not disconnect me for 10 to 20 minutes. My ambition was to contact all seven HQ's in under an hour



Nhung, Receptionist, Hygienist, DA



Viet Cong POW

—it never happened! Most of the time was spent on logging Sitreps, finding answers and writing the war diary. It did keep me well informed.

Accommodations in Vietnam varied from plush to deplorable. A number of members contracted malaria in spite of preventive medication. Just about everyone had at least one bout of intestinal problems.

ICCS personnel were not allowed to drive vehicles, a very wise decision considering that the whole traffic situation appeared to be one giant game of “Chicken”. Traffic, especially in Saigon, was the source of constant amazement. It was easily the motorcycle capital of the world. Controlled intersections took on the appearance of a start of a cross country motorcycle race; with all drivers gunning motors and

jockeying for position. Interspersed among this plethora of Hondas, was the oddest assortment of vehicles imaginable: Pedit cabs, ancient Citroen taxis, military vehicles, bicycles, three-wheeled trucks and official limousines. One writer stated that the only reason the population didn't die of asphyxiation was that the nightly midnight to 6 am curfew allowed time for the smoke to dissipate.

Air service for getting around the country, was provided by Air America - the CIA Airline - 22 helicopters plus an assortment of fixed wing aircraft. When flying low level, we sat on our flak jackets as a number of craft had received ground fire. Fortunately, only one was shot down, but that resulted in the deaths of nine personnel including one Canadian.



American POW Exchange



Canadians leaving Vietnam on 31 July 1973

Members in the team sites often had to take shelter in bunkers. In addition, two Canadians were taken prisoners for 17 days. For the first week we had no idea of their situation. Even when their return was negotiated, the helicopter picking them up was fired on.

The cease fire violation reports were at times amusing. The four countries were supposed to write an agreed upon report; that only happened a few times. Canadians wrote what they saw, but two of the other countries would not find the Communist guilty of anything. As a result, bridges were not brought down by explosions, but by the wind and a lot of attacks were by bandits. My favourite one was about a school mortared by the VC. Lining up holes in the tin roof with the impact craters on the floor, it was obvious that the origin was an area controlled by the VC. The report read in part “an unknown force, firing from an unknown location, using an unknown weapon...”

A notice in the Ops Section neatly summed up the whole situation in Vietnam:

“all statements about what happened, about what is surely happening now, or about what is promised to happen in the future must, in Vietnam, be considered false or suspect until confirmed personally, and even then what is seen, heard or touched, may be incredible”

It became obvious that the Canadian contingent was no longer serving a purpose in Vietnam, so we departed at the end of July 1973.

Less than two years later, the North invaded and took over the South.