

THE WAR

Phu Vinh's Irregulars

One recent night in the village of Da Loc, in the Mekong Delta, seven civilians lay quietly in the mud. Cold rain dripped down their necks from the leaves of banana trees overhead. Suddenly, they spotted more than 20 black-pajama-clad figures creeping across the ripening paddies. At close range, the ragtag villagers opened fire with ancient rifles and M-1 carbines. The Viet Cong attackers fled swiftly, leaving behind four dead and a prized Browning automatic rifle.

The villagers were members of the Popular Self-Defense Forces, a civilian militia movement that is fast taking hold in the Mekong Delta province of Vinh Binh. Despite the search for peace, the fighting in Viet Nam continues, and as always, civilians are heavily involved. In the long history of the war, many things have been tried to make effective use of civilians—strategic hamlet enclaves, the regional and popular forces, which are a uniformed militia based in their home area and thus more familiar with local conditions than regular South Vietnamese or U.S. troops. But few past programs seem to have caught on so well as the new popular-defense outfit.

Two Differences. Says Eugene Bable, a ranking U.S. official in the Delta: "You can say the villagers are doing it to save their own skins. But it was their skins before, and they remained passive." Two things have made the difference. The first spur was the deadly 1968 Tet offensive, which brought the war home to urban Vietnamese as never before. The Viet Cong occupied large sections of Phu Vinh, capital of Vinh Binh province, and killed 13 civilians before they were driven out. The second

factor is a swashbuckling ex-actor named Tom Hayden, at 27 the No. 2 U.S. representative in Vinh Binh province. He set the example by helping turn his Phu Vinh irregulars into a disciplined and effective fighting force.

The irregulars were started by Hayden two weeks after Tet as an early-warning network of civilians who, in their spare time, would help government forces defend Phu Vinh. Hayden, who once spent a summer in the U.S. working as a forest ranger, got local merchants to contribute fire-fighting equipment and taught his men how to use it as well as the Bren guns he scrounged. Early in May, he led his 500 irregulars, smartly uniformed in black shirt and trousers, with a yellow scarf at the neck, on a 24-hour parade through Phu Vinh. That display produced an additional 50 volunteers, and today his force has swollen to over 3,000.

The training is rugged, and weapons and ammunition are scarce. The long night watches stretch from dusk till past dawn. The irregulars get no pay, and must provide their own uniforms, bedding and food. The reason they do it is clear enough. Says one, Le Chi, a middle-aged maker of mosquito nets: "I protect my city. If during Tet we had had a self-defense, the V.C. would not have come in. Now they can't burn our houses again."

Poster Image. In coastal Khanh Hoa province, the self-defenders proved good enough to rouse the Viet Cong to print a poetic broadside:

*Khe Sanh had seven lines of fence
But American and puppet troops ran away.*

*Here you have only one fence of
barbed wire.*

How should it prevail?

Defiantly, the Khanh Hoa defenders replied:

*Khe Sanh had seven lines of fence.
The Communists withdrew by running.*

*Here there is only one fence of
barbed wire.*

We challenge the V.C. to pass through.

The initiator of all this, Tom Hayden, is a recruiting-poster image of an American. Handsome and a rangy 6-ft. 3-in., Hayden wears the black uniform of his irregulars and drives around Phu Vinh in his Jeep, a Swedish-K sub-machine gun at his side and a .45-cal. pistol on his hip. He was a champion discus thrower at Long Beach College, later worked as an aerospace systems analyst and as a television actor (*The Rounders*, *The Young Marrieds*).

Hayden served in the Marines before going to Viet Nam 20 months ago as a civilian with AID, the U.S. foreign-aid agency. He has been nominated for two Purple Hearts for wounds during and since Tet, for the Bronze Star with a V for valor when he rescued four wounded Vietnamese troops from an ambush late in March, and for the South Vietnamese *Chuong My* medal—the highest a civilian can win.

Political Commitment. Of the irregulars' effect on the people of Phu Vinh, Hayden says: "Before Tet, they were fat, dumb and happy. After Tet, we looked around and saw that the people were scared to death. Now they aren't complacent, but they are confident. They think the V.C. can't get in here again. They are our great hope for the future down here." On the spread of such commitment may well rest the success of the South Vietnamese government in the trying times of war—or truce—that lie ahead.



HAYDEN DEMONSTRATING BREN GUN TO MILITIAMEN.
Tet was a factor, and then came the actor.