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SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY VOLUNTEERS ON PARADE
Birds of a very different feather.

DICK SWANSON

short-stock M-16 rifle in one hand and cakes and gifts for the troops in the other. Two months ago, she and her husband were both killed in a helicopter crash en route to the besieged Special Forces camp at Duc Lap.

Female Conscripts. On the other side, the Viet Cong has taken full advantage of the martial tradition of Vietnamese women, a tradition that goes back to the two Trung sisters' fight to repel Chinese invaders in A.D. 39. Running short of male conscripts, the Communists have lately recruited all-female combat units. Women now make up an estimated one-third to one-half of V.C. main-force troops.

Though the South Vietnamese army and police have some 7,700 female volunteers in staff and clerical jobs, a proposal to draft women outright was turned down: such a measure would cripple the country's economy. Of the city of Saigon's labor force of 330,000, fully 250,000 are women. They work as construction hands, substitute for men in manpower-short professions, own or run most of the capital's jewelry, clothing and tailoring shops, its restaurants and bars and some of its largest businesses. Nguyen Duy Thu Luong, for example, owns pharmaceutical laboratories, directs the Nam Do bank and runs the Park Hotel, where U.S. military briefings are held. Huynh Thi Nga, 25, runs the family-owned Saigon Motors, and is an expert mechanic.

Flying Saucers. South Viet Nam's housewives have a proverb that "a wise woman makes a mandarin out of her husband," and publicly Vietnamese women are usually models of submissiveness. At home, though, the Vietnamese wife is known as the "minister of the interior," while her husband is the "foreign minister." In practice, that means that he brings his paychecks home to her and she dispenses pocket money to him. She pays all the big bills. If they eat out, it is generally the wife who discreetly picks up the restaurant tab. When she throws a temper tantrum, her husband speaks of "flying saucers" at home. In the Hoa Hao sect, a wronged or thwarted wife has been known to tie her husband's hair to a bedpost while he is sleeping, then wake him up and beat him until her wishes are granted.

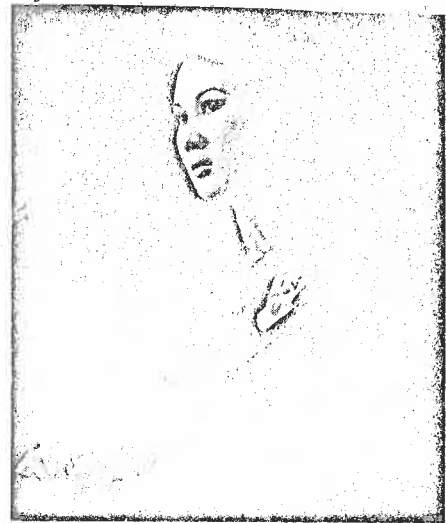
At the higher levels of military and government life, the wives often become the chief agents in an underground network of graft. The network is called System D, from the French word *débrouiller*, meaning to make it or to muddle through. As the system is generally operated, an officer or official who wants a promotion has his wife call on a general's or minister's wife, bringing cash. The practice is so common that prices have been more or less standardized: \$4,200 for a colonelcy, \$17,000 to \$42,000 for an appointment as province chief (depending on the province), and a minimum of \$850,000 for a deputy ministry. In a subtler variation, the pay-off takes the form of an afternoon card game. The applicant's wife loses the correct amount, and no one loses face.

Docking Fee. Thus, it is not surprising that women have amassed some of the largest fortunes in South Viet Nam. At least a dozen are estimated to be worth more than \$5,000,000. The wife of one former port director became rich by charging a fee for every ship that docked at Saigon. Others make practical use of military information that their husbands bring home. Before a unit is moved, for example, a wife who owns bars or brothels near by will unload the locations on unsuspecting buyers, then pick up land cheaply at the new location. Before the U.S. 9th Division moved out of Nha Be last December, there was a rush of real estate trading around the base in November.

For all their new freedom, power and influence, the women of South Viet Nam have lost none of the charm that has captivated generations of Westerners. They can be so bewitching that some 500 G.I.s have braved the tangles of red tape that the Army purposely puts in their way and brought home South Vietnamese war brides.

"They twitter and sing," wrote Novelist Graham Greene of the women of South Viet Nam. In their diaphanous silk *ao dais*, they can readily appear as delicate and inconsequential as so many songbirds. In fact, Vietnamese women are birds of a very different feather. Heiresses of an ancient tradition of matriarchy, they have become, under the pressures of two decades of war, Asia's most emancipated women. They fight, politic, run businesses and their families and, through their husbands, probably control much of South Viet Nam's endemic corruption.

More than in most nations in wartime, South Viet Nam's women also serve—sometimes even as tactical consultants. Frequently a soldier's wife, on the advice of her astrologer, will tell her husband when to go into battle and when to stay home. The husbands listen. Officers' wives follow their husbands to the battlefield and sometimes share their fate. Duong Thi Kim Thanh was a former airborne nurse and South Viet Nam's first woman parachutist. She regularly accompanied her husband, Brigadier General Truong Quang An, to the front, carrying a commando's



MADAME KY

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MADAME THIEU