

British Journal for Military History

Volume 7, Issue 2, July 2021

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Stefan Aguirre Quiroga

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 19 July 2021

Citation: Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, 'Women as Turncoats: Searching For the Women among the Kit Carson Scouts during the Vietnam War, 1966-1973', *British Journal for Military History*, 7.2 (2021), pp. 184-188.

www.bjmh.org.uk



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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Women as Turncoats: Searching for the Women among the Kit Carson Scouts during the Vietnam War, 1966-1973

STEFAN AGUIRRE QUIROGA*

Independent Scholar

Email: stefanaguirre@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This Research Note explores the presence of South Vietnamese women as defectors and addresses the question of whether women combatants were employed by the United States as Kit Carson Scouts during the Vietnam War. Through fragmentary source material, it is possible to determine the presence of women who had fought for the People's Liberation Armed Forces in every stage of the defection process. The existence of women Kit Carson Scouts is also proven, showing how the initiative and agency of women defectors led their employment but that the United States Army was reluctant to use them in combat.

Starting in the fall of 1966, the Kit Carson Scout Program made it possible for South and North Vietnamese soldiers who had defected from the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF, commonly referred to by the pejorative *Viet Cong* in traditional American historiography) and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN, or the North Vietnamese Army) to volunteer to serve together with United States and other 'Free World' forces during the Vietnam War. The origins of the programme can be traced to an incident in the spring of 1966. After a PLAF soldier defected to the South Vietnamese government in the village of Thanh Son, Dien Bau District, Quang Nam Province, the PLAF began to spread rumours in the village that the United States Marine Corps (USMC) had executed the defector. In order to fight back against the rumours, a decision was made to bring back the defector to the village to dispel the planted rumours. The operation was considered a great success and subsequently led to the idea of using defectors as auxiliaries. The USMC inaugurated the programme and remained the only force to employ Kit Carson Scouts until authorization was given

*Stefan Aguirre Quiroga is an independent scholar from Sweden, whose research interests focus on marginalised voices and participants in nineteenth and twentieth century military history.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v7i2.1562

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to extend the programme to all American units in South Vietnam in April 1967. The programme grew from six scouts in 1966 to over 1,500 scouts by the end of December 1968. The programme drew its name from the legendary 19 Century American frontiersman and Army Scout Christopher 'Kit' Carson (1809-1868). In their capacity as Kit Carson Scouts, supposedly following in the footsteps of the historical Kit Carson, these soldiers functioned as guides, interpreters, and as combat soldiers in order to assist American soldiers find their enemy. The scouts were treated as American soldiers; they wore American uniforms, were armed with American weapons, and were given a range of benefits, including high wages and access to American medical care.¹ In the majority of personal accounts and archival material referring to the Kit Carson Scouts the soldiers have always been identified as men, but women also fought as combat soldiers in the PLAF. Is it possible that there might have been women Kit Carson Scouts? Did women defect from the PLAF? Who were the women associated with the Kit Carson Scout Program? The lives and ultimate fate of the Kit Carson Scouts is difficult to reconstruct due to the scarcity of source material. The experiences of their wives, women defectors, and the possibility of women Kit Carson Scouts have proven to be even more difficult to uncover. This Research Note briefly considers traces of the presence of women found in the fragmentary source material concerning the Kit Carson Scouts and *Chieu Hoi* program with the purpose of attempting to answer these questions and uncover the possibility of women Kit Carson Scouts.

The path to becoming a Kit Carson Scout began with defection. In 1963, the government of the Republic of Vietnam (hereafter referred to as South Vietnam) initiated a programme to encourage the defection of individuals who were currently in rebellion against the government. In its shortened form, the programme was known as *Chieu Hoi* ('to return', also known as the 'Open Arms' programme in English, with the individual defectors known as *Hoi Chanh*). Approximately 150,000 South Vietnamese and 2,000 North Vietnamese defected during the war.² Some of them were women. One unnamed South Vietnamese woman defected to the 9 Infantry Division Intelligence Detachment on 10 April 1968. She had once been the leader of a PLAF women's auxiliary group but made the choice to defect when she found out about the death of her brother, a soldier in the 514 PLAF Battalion, that had been

¹For scholarly research on the Kit Carson Scouts, see Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, 'Phan Chot's Choice: Agency and Motivation among the Kit Carson Scouts during the Vietnam War, 1966–1973', *War & Society*, 3, 9 (2020), pp. 126-143; Tal Tov, From Foe to Friend: The Kit Carson Scout Program in the Vietnam War, *Armed Forces & Society*, 33, 1 (2006), pp. 78-93.

²J.A. Koch, *The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam, 1963-1971*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1973), pp. 20-22; A. Sweetland, *Rallying Potential Among the North Vietnamese Armed Force*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1970), p. ix.

kept from her by the PLAF. Despite being stopped by the PLAF in her initial attempt to leave her hamlet in the Mekong Delta, the woman ultimately succeeded to defect. Another example is Tran Thi Ho Le, an 18-year-old PLAF medic and squad leader of an all-women mortar squad from Nhon Thanh Trung in Long An Province who defected in July 1968.³ What happened to women like Tran once they had defected?

After the defection, defectors would be sent to provincial *Chieu Hoi* centres where they underwent interrogation and political re-indoctrination. This process lasted approximately six weeks and upon completion, the defector would be offered vocational training so as to facilitate their re-entry into civilian life. At the different *Chieu Hoi* centres there were classes specifically for women, such as sewing classes that were meant to refresh pre-existing skills in order to provide women with additional means of obtaining an income in their villages. One such class at the *Chieu Hoi* centre in Tam Ky was attended by unnamed woman who had served as a PLAF platoon leader. Women also found other types of employment after their period in the *Chieu Hoi* centre. American construction companies, for example, hired women as 'truck drivers, machine shovel operators, and general construction workers.'⁴

During and after their period in the *Chieu Hoi* centre, women defectors were actively involved in military operations. For example, an unnamed former PLAF nurse led soldiers from the 9 Infantry Division to the hospital at which she had once worked, an act that resulted in several PLAF casualties and even more being captured. Women participated in the different incarnations of the Armed Propaganda Teams, a unit consisting of defectors who ventured into territory controlled by the PLAF in order to spread the message of the South Vietnamese government. It was during their six-week stay at the *Chieu Hoi* centre that the defectors could volunteer to become a Kit Carson Scout. Among them were women defectors who openly expressed their desire to join the Kit Carson Scouts. Their interest in the programme led to the only known employment of women Kit Carson Scouts that began in 1968. In order to overcome barriers that prevented communication with South Vietnamese women in villages, the 9 Infantry Division chose to recruit women Kit Carson Scouts (or Tiger Scouts as they were known as in the 9 Infantry Division). They were deployed on 'NITECAP' missions through which a unit resembling an Armed Propaganda Team known as the Integrated Civic Action Program (ICAP) infiltrated Mekong Delta hamlets in the evenings and provided medical care, propaganda lectures, and even showed Disney films dubbed in Vietnamese to villagers. Yet what is evident by the missions that women defectors and the women Kit Carson Scouts received is that

³'VC ladies abandon guerilla auxiliary', *The Old Reliable*, 24 April 1968, p. 3; 'Hoi Chanh escapes enemy ahead of death sentence', *The Old Reliable*, 8 January 1969, p. 8.

⁴Richard Merritt, 'Hoi Chanh given new life', *Southern Cross*, 22 May 1970, p. 3; Koch, *Chieu Hoi Program*, p. 81, 86.

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they were non-combat in nature. The 9 Infantry Division leadership were reluctant to use women scouts in combat. Although they received the same benefits and wages as men, women scouts were not used in missions where they could possibly face combat, despite the fact that all women scouts would likely have had past combat experience. The military intelligence that the women scouts collected were vital and they performed an important role that all Kit Carson Scouts played, but the chance to achieve their full potential in the field was deprived of them due to American prejudice against women as combatants. American reluctance notwithstanding, the presence of women Kit Carson Scouts would not have been possible had it not been for the initiative of women who sought access to the programme. Ira A. Hunt, Jr., who at the time was chief of staff of the 9 Infantry Division and one of the men responsible for their recruitment, did not take credit for the idea of employing women as scouts. Hunt stated that the 9 Division only borrowed it 'from some girls in the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) Centre. They wanted to work for the Tiger Scouts'.⁵

Not all women associated with the Kit Carson Scouts were defectors themselves. For married South Vietnamese men of the Kit Carson Scouts, the safety and support of the wives, children, and parents they had left behind was a crucial factor in their decision to defect and volunteer for the programme. After the defection of their husband, the wife of a future scout would sometimes be brought under the security of the South Vietnamese government in the *Chieu Hoi* centre. In one documented case, the wife of a future scout facilitated the defection of her husband, Truong Kinh, from the PLAF. This is an early hint at the involvement of the wives of Kit Carson Scouts in the continued military life of their husbands. While it is uncertain whether or not the families of scouts were allowed to live with the scout in military installations while he was on active duty, there are hints of their presence, as well as to the interaction and the relations that existed between American soldiers and the wives of scouts. After the fall of Hoai Nhon in 1972, the unnamed wife of a scout escaped from the town and provided intelligence to American forces about the occupation of the town by the PAVN. In a more tragic case, American soldiers from the 25 Infantry Division, 5 Infantry Regiment, gave financial aid to the widow of their scout Ngo Dau who had been killed in action. When that money did not suffice, the soldiers arranged for the widow to be employed as a food handler in the 1 Battalion's Rear Mess.⁶ The two

⁵Wayne Campbell, 'VC nurse leads 2-39 to hideout', *The Old Reliable*, 2 October 1968, p. 1; Koch, *Chieu Hoi Program*, pp. 22-24; Ira A. Hunt, Jr., *The 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam: Unparalleled and Unequaled*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), pp. 89-90; David Hoffman, '9th Infantry Mobilizes Female 'Tiger Scouts'', *The Capital Times*, 19 December 1968, p. 3.

⁶John T. Wheeler, 'Ex-Cong Now Kit Carson Scouts - Band Used to Ferret Out Guerrillas', *Chicago Tribune*, 22 October 1969, p. 34; Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive (VNCA), Texas Tech University, Dale W. Andrade Collection, 187

examples suggests that the camaraderie and trust between American soldiers and the Kit Carson Scouts could also extend to the families of the scouts.

In conclusion, as with many topics related to the Kit Carson Scouts, it is difficult to draw generalised conclusions from fragmentary sources. Yet the insight that we are given through these traces of women in the available source material holds the potential for adding nuance to several aspects of the Vietnam War that have traditionally been steeped in stereotypes, such as representations of civil-military relations in South Vietnam from the perspective of South Vietnamese women. Far from being passive victims or faceless foes, South Vietnamese women defectors and the wives of the Kit Carson Scouts are examples of the shifting allegiances and family culture that was the reality for many women during the war but which has not yet been explored in full. Furthermore, the role that women Kit Carson Scouts played in the 9 Infantry Division opens up new aspects that have eluded researchers in the past. The participation of martial women was not limited to the PLAF or North Vietnam and although the women scouts seemingly did not participate in combat, they still played an important military role in similarity to their male counterparts and displayed their own agency in desiring to volunteer to be scouts.⁷ This is not something that should be overlooked. Further research is necessary to piece together the agency of these South Vietnamese women to join the increasing body of scholarship into the lives and experiences of women during the Vietnam War.

24992407002, Memo from J. Green - re: The Fall of Hoai Nhon, 18 May 1972, p. 1; 'Bobcats Aid Widow', *Tropic Lightning News*, 3 March 1969, p. 1.

⁷For more on the participation of South Vietnamese women in uniform, see Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, 'South Vietnamese Women in Uniform: Narratives of Wartime and Post War Lives', *Minerva Journal of Women and War*, 3, 2, (2009), pp. 8-33.