

In the Jungles With The Viet Cong: The War on Nature Then and Today

George Burchett



George Burchett with a photo of his father, Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett at the photographic exhibition Wilfred Burchett and Vietnam, at the Ho Chi Minh Museum in Hanoi, September 2011. Photo Graham Burchett.

1. The Viet Cong and the Elephants

In April 2015, I was invited by the Cercle des Francophones (Francophone Association) of Hanoi to present the film *Loin du Vietnam (Far from Vietnam)* at Hanoi Cinémathèque. The film was made collectively in 1967 by some of

the great names of new French cinéma: Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, in support of Vietnam's resistance to US aggression.

I was familiar with the film, but decided to do some extra research on the Internet for the occasion.

Quite by chance, I stumbled upon the website of a film festival at Casa de Cinema at the Villa Borghese in Rome titled: *Il vietnam e il cinema francese - Vietnam and French Cinéma*. One of the films in the program was: *Wilfred Burchett in Vietnam, France/Vietnam, 1963, 44min.*

Wilfred Burchett is my father, the Australian journalist, the first to visit the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam (Viet Cong controlled) in late 1963, early 1965.

I knew a film had been made of his visit but had never seen it and had never been able to track it down. And there it was, on the program of a film festival in Rome.

I emailed the organisers at Casa de Cinema, who put me in touch with the AAMOD (Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico) film archive in Rome from where the film was sourced. I contacted them and they kindly made the film available to me.

So I finally watched it for the first time in my life at home in Hanoi. It was a highly emotional experience to watch the almost half a century old black and white footage, first downloaded on my laptop, then on my TV screen.

Eight minutes into the film, a VC postman delivers my father his mail. The commentary says:

"From Europe, your son sends drawings of the jungle and wild animals. He is a little afraid for you, but he doesn't yet know that here the most dangerous animals are American imperialists."



"Have you ever seen so many elephants?" - Somewhere in the Central Highlands around 1963, Still from the film *Journalist Wilfred Burchett visits the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam*



From Europe, your son sends drawings of the jungle and wild animals.

Well, that son is me, artist George Burchett. Yes, these were my drawings "of the jungle and wild animals", inspired by the letters my father sent my brother, sister and me - then living in Moscow - in which he explained why he was away for so long and - to make it more interesting for us - told stories of tigers, elephants, monkeys and other exotic creatures from the jungles of South Vietnam.

Sixteen minutes into the film, my father crosses a river on horseback - very heroic-looking, like some Indiana Jones - and suddenly this extraordinary panorama fills the screen...

The commentary says:

"After an arduous journey you are now in the Central Highlands.

Have you ever seen so many elephants?

Did you know they are the heavy motorised cavalry of the local guerillas?"

Extraordinary. Like some lost world suddenly re-discovered. When this scene was filmed, thousands of elephants, tigers, panthers and other wild animals roamed the jungles of South Vietnam. But elephants played a special role.

From my father's letters from the jungles of South Vietnam:

"There are lots of tigers and elephants; lots of deer and wild pigs around where I am. I found out lots of interesting things about elephants and the more I hear about these animals, the more I like them. They are very, very intelligent and very sensitive. They

worry about things just like human beings. I heard of one the other day who loved his master very much. They had worked together in the forest for many years together, the elephant pulling the trees away from the land being cleared for cultivation and afterwards, carrying the grain and master together back to the village. The master got quite old and died and the elephant wept and was very unhappy. For a whole week he would not eat and then he died.

The elephant becomes very affectionate towards everyone in the family with whom he works. If there are some big rows, between Mummy and Daddy for instance, or between Annichka and George, the elephant simply cannot stand it. He stalks off, deep into the forest and someone must go after him, blowing a certain note on a buffalo horn, and then talk to him nicely and explain that there will be no more quarrelling. Then he agrees to come back."

My father's words merged with the scene of elephants in the shimmering water. It took a long time for this image to reach me, and it reached me in a strange, round-about way. So I invite you, who read this, to look at it very carefully. I've counted about 60 elephants, each with a man riding it.

2. The Past and Future of the Elephants of the Central Highlands

There are about 60 wild elephants left in Vietnam today. Not in one big group like in the image I am sharing with you, but scattered around the few remaining wilderness areas of Vietnam. Another 100-and-something lead a

miserable existence carrying tourists, mostly in Dak Lak province, in the Central Highlands, where the elephants in the still from the film were filmed. These figures are provided by Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. And they are dire. The number of wild elephants in Vietnam is unsustainable and the elephants are on the verge of extinction. Yes, extinction.

What bombs and defoliants could not accomplish, modern man is on the verge of achieving: the total elimination of elephants in Vietnam. The main causes are: deforestation and loss of habitat, man-elephant conflict, poaching. Elephants do not reproduce in captivity. Those who die from exhaustion, malnutrition or disease cannot be replaced. So domestic elephants are also doomed.

Elephants have played an important role in Vietnam's long history of resisting invaders. Elephants carried the Trung Sisters into battle against the Chinese invaders. The virgin lady warrior Ba Trieu also rode an elephant into battle. As did many other great Vietnamese heroes. And elephants were the "heavy motorised cavalry" at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu during the war of resistance against French colonialism and in the jungles of Central and South Vietnam during the war of resistance against US imperialism. They should be treated like national heroes, with the respect due to war veterans.

Saving the elephants of Vietnam should be a national duty and a matter of national pride. Elephants, tigers, rhinos and many other species are being hunted and exterminated to satisfy man's vanity.

Yes, there are economic and social realities that mean that wilderness areas are shrinking to make way for crops and other forms of land exploitation. Everybody understands that. But everybody should also understand that unless we embrace models of sustainable development, not only the elephants of Vietnam

will be doomed, our whole planet will be doomed.

The jungle and its animals were Vietnam's allies in the wars against invaders, colonisers and imperialists. They are now crying for help. But are we listening?

3. Toxic chemicals

The VC postman doesn't just deliver to my father my drawings "of the jungle and wild animals". He also hands him an invitation from Nguyen Huu Tho, President of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam to visit him in his jungle headquarters. The Front President offers to be interviewed by the journalist.



Front President Nguyen Huu Tho

WB - Can you say something about the toxic chemicals that American planes are spraying over rice fields and other targets? Does it affect agriculture and life in general in the Liberated Zones? Does this pose a problem?

NHT - The enemy's increased use of toxic chemicals can cause

serious damage to agriculture and the welfare of the peasants. It threatens the health and even the lives of people living in the Liberated Zones.

Later in the film, we do indeed see the devastating effect of "toxic chemicals" on trees, crops and cattle.

I am not an expert on the matter, but I would think these were probably some of the earliest mentions of the spraying of defoliants - later known as [Agent Orange](#) and used on a massive scale in Vietnam. (For recent research on Agent Orange, please refer to the work of [Jon Mitchell](#), who has written extensively on the subject.)

4. On Life and the War on Nature in the Liberated Zones and After

The film rather skilfully contrasts nature in the Liberated Zones, which generously provides, shelter, food and even relaxation, with the sudden appearance in the sky of "birds of prey" - enemy helicopters, and the destruction caused by the spraying of "toxic chemicals" from the sky.

I don't know in how many places the film was shown and how many people saw it at the time of its making.

But I know from declassified files in the [National Archive of Australia](#) that a copy made its way to Australia.

A document from [ASIO](#) (Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) dated 21 August 1964 states:

COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA INTEREST IN VIETNAM

David Walter Austin REES

(R/13/27)

Wilfred Graham BURCHETT
(B/9/17)

David Walter Austin REES arrived in Sydney by Qantas Empire Airways on 1 August, 1964 having visited Vietnam as the guest of Vietnamese trade unions at the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam.

1. In his baggage, which he did not disclose, was a 16 mm film.
2. On 17 August, 1964, REES called at Commonwealth Film Censorship Office saying that he had arrived back in Australia by air on 1 August and that Customs Officers had allowed him to retain custody of a film which he then produced. He said that he wished to show the film at meetings of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association of Australia and was told that this could not be done until he had obtained a Censorship Certificate.
3. REES' description of the film was as follows:

TITLE: "Newsman Wilfred Burchett visits the Liberated Areas."¹

More details follow, including a summary of the film.

ASIO detected "frequent references throughout the film to toxic chemicals used by American troops on crops; United States chemical

warfare and atrocities exposed to Wilfred Burchett by Liberation Committee. (photographs of dead sheep and goats)" [they are actually buffalo - GB.]²



The "censors" were sensitive to "any aspect which tended to bring disrepute to a friendly ally of Australia." But not to the allegations made in the film. Those were dismissed as "communist propaganda".

More than 50 years after the film was made, people in Vietnam still suffer from the effects of [Agent Orange](#). Although the U.S. government can no longer dismiss the massive use of "toxic chemicals" in the war as "communist propaganda", it still denies its long-lasting effects on humans and nature. The manufacturers of dioxin, aka Agent Orange, refuse to admit any causal relation between their deadly product and its long-term effects on people and the environment.

The Vietnam war - or the American War as it is called in Viet Nam - was a war fought not just against people, but also against nature. Nature was the Viet Cong's strategic ally and therefore considered a fair target to be eradicated in order to deprive the enemy of cover and

sustenance. The war against nature also had another purpose: herd the peasant population into "strategic hamlets", surrounded by barbed wire, where they would be isolated from the Viet Cong.

One of the first to alert world public opinion to this fact was my father, journalist Wilfred Burchett.

This is what he wrote in his book, *The Furtive War, the United States in Vietnam and Laos* (1962) in a chapter titled *War Against Trees*:



© 2017 - George Burchett, *VC Girl*, ink on paper, 9.6.14

The expression "war against trees" was one that stuck in my mind and in subsequent interviews with

refugees and other travellers from South Vietnam, I paid special attention to this. The picture that emerged is horrifying. Wide-scale spraying of chemical agents from planes has been used not only against trees but against food crops with the deliberate intent of starving the peasantry into entering the "prosperity zones" and "strategic villages." Food-killers have been sprayed on areas outside the concentration zones to destroy all surrounding vegetation and further back still to destroy all crops and orchards apart from those grown behind barbed wire.

The South Vietnamese people have now become guinea pigs for testing out new types of weapons, types developed by the U.S. government for the sort of "local wars" which Pentagon ideologists like Henry Kissinger had been urging on Washington for years previously.

From experimental tests on plots of about 10 acres carried out in August 1961, chemical spraying was begun early in 1962 over areas of several hundred acres at a time. **Apart from the insane attempt to destroy a mile-wide strip of trees along South Vietnam's borders with Laos and Cambodia, air-sprayed chemicals have been used to clear swaths alongside roads and rivers, to create buffer zones around the "strategic villages," to clear the jungle from the Hauts Plateaux region—the highlands home of many of the ethnic minorities.** From the 17th parallel

demarcation line down to the southernmost tip of South Vietnam, chemical warfare has been waged against forests, plantations, orchards, and food crops.

The emphasis is mine. Most of the elephant population of Vietnam lives in areas that were early targets of the U.S.-waged "war against trees." Today, there is a new war against trees, this time to clear the forest for cash crops. And

the manufacturers of dioxin, aka Agent Orange, Monsanto & Co are back in Vietnam promoting their genetically modified seeds to the local farmers.

As [Madame Nguyen Thi Binh](#), who negotiated the [Paris Peace Accords](#) (or Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam) on behalf of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam told me at a conference on the effects of [GMOs](#) in Hanoi in June 2011: "George, the struggle never ends".

George Burchett is an artist. He was born in Hanoi, one year after the historic battle of Dien Bien Phu and now lives in Hanoi. He has co-edited two volumes of Wilfred Burchett's writings: [Memoirs of a Rebel Journalist: The Autobiography of Wilfred Burchett](#) (University of New South Wales Press, 2005), and [Rebel Journalism, The Writings of Wilfred Burchett](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

His website is [here](#).

The Wilfred Burchett film can be viewed [here](#)

Notes

¹ NAA A6119 1515, p.36, National Archive of Australia

² NAA A6119 1515, p.37, National Archive of Australia