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Veterinary Activities in Vietnam

George G. Baker, D.V.M.*

Presently in Vietnam there are about seventy veterinarians serving in the United States Army Veterinary Corps. Their primary duties are food inspection and sentry dog support. Veterinarians are also involved in joint military-Vietnamese civic action projects concerned with veterinary medicine, animal husbandry, and public health.

During my tour in Vietnam from March, 1968 to April of 1969, I was attached to the 176th Veterinary Detachment JB. The initials JB designate a fifty man veterinary unit whose primary mission is food inspection. Our headquarters were in Cam Ranh Bay II Corps with substations in five outlying locations.

During the first eight months of my tour I was involved in supervising food inspection activities at Cam Ranh Bay and our substations. Food inspection involved the surveillance of all foodstuffs, fresh, frozen, canned, and dry, upon receipt, at issue, and during storage for wholesomeness. Extremes of heat, 120°F, and moisture, monsoon rains, coupled with a lack of adequate storage facilities and handling equipment created a maximum number of problems for inspection personnel.

The sheer volume of food made inspection difficult and time consuming. Cam Ranh Bay supplies the majority of rations for troops in II Corps. During 1968 this meant three meals a day for approximately 75,000 troops plus a 45 to 120 day supply of most items. Total poundage for receipt, storage and issue inspections for our unit for one month averaged one hundred million pounds.

The last four months I was attached to the 91st Evacuation Hospital at Tuy Hoa. Part of my duties here were to provide medical support for the 981st Military Police Sentry Dog Platoon plus the various scout and tracker dogs assigned to units working in the area. Much preventive medicine had to be practiced to control external and internal parasites and infectious diseases. Heat prostration, lacerations, gastro-enteritis, and dermatitic conditions were the most common problems seen. During medical emergencies dogs and their handlers rate equal space on medical evacuation helicopters.

Civic action was a voluntary activity, but one I enjoyed and profited from. Co-

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operating with the Vietnamese animal husbandry chiefs, which are comparable to our county extension agents, we were able to carry on a modified large animal practice and consultation service. Our activities included "house calls" for various treatments, organization of a swine raiser's association, helping design cookers for edible garbage, TB testing, a rabies eradication program, plus consultation on numerous animal husbandry problems. There are four Vietnamese veterinarians in Vietnam. Their activities, like those of most Vietnamese with professional training, are controlled by the government. All are currently employed in administrative jobs in Saigon.

Working with the Vietnamese on civic action projects can be frustrating. Initially there is a language barrier. This barrier not only exists between English and Vietnamese but also to a certain extent within the Vietnamese language itself. Few Vietnamese are familiar with even simple medical terminology and even fewer can interpret those terms into English. Thus eliciting any sort of history was a major accomplishment.

Most Vietnamese have a limited education. For them tradition, social custom and religion play an important role. As a result a technical explanation of many of their problems is futile. On occasion, change may be entirely impractical for them.

For example, by tradition most Vietnamese farmers castrate their hogs at three months of age when the testicles are fully developed and completely descended. They always suture the incisions since they have neither the knowledge or equipment to repair hernias. We suggested the farmers castrate at one month of age and leave the incision open to avoid unnecessary stress, reduce infection, and make hernias easier to repair. This proved to be disastrous. When the farmer attempted to market
Captains Denniston and Baker prepare to treat a hog at the Ba Gien Swine Cooperative while on a civic action mission.

Hogs castrated in this manner at ten months of age, the people balked at buying the hogs because they did not see any evidence of scrotal development or incisions. They consequently thought the farmer was trying to sell them cryptorchids.

Benefits flowed both directions from civic action activities. During civic action I was able to observe many disease conditions including cases of hoof and mouth disease, rinderpest, rabies, hog cholera, and erysipelas. The contact with the people allowed me to better understand their problems, feelings and motivations. It was an enjoyable yet occasionally frustrating activity.

Captain George Baker (I.S.U., 1967) restrains a dog while Mr. Que, Vietnamese animal husbandry advisor, examines it during a rabies vaccination clinic.

Captain Larry Mahr (I.S.U., 1966) and Specialist 5 James Whittit prepare to go on a civic action mission. The jeep is equipped with two way radio, water, insulated and regular drug containers.