

# Michelin Rubber Plantation

by Specialist 5 Arnold Braeske

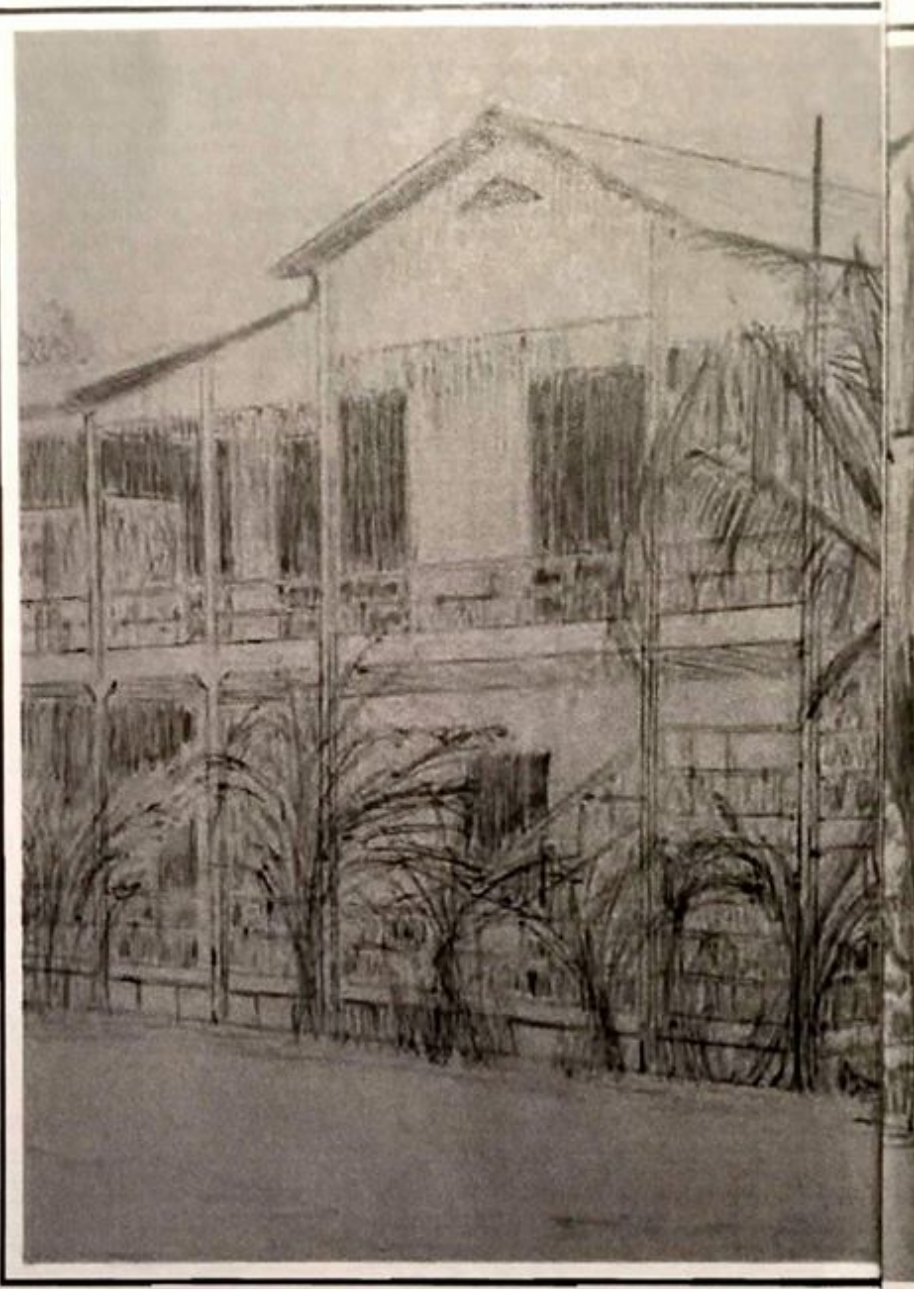
The words "Michelin Rubber Plantation" have an ominous ring to U.S. soldiers fighting in the III Corps Tactical Zone (IICTZ). Like the notorious places 10 miles away Ho Bo Woods, War Zone "C," the Iron Triangle—the Michelin Rubber Plantation has also exploded with vicious fighting.

"The Michelin" has led a life other than that of a battlefield, however. It has been a crucial area of Vietnam's economy, and is one of the more famous, French-owned rubber plantations of the "Indo-China" era.

The 35 square miles of rubber trees that make up the plantation are located at Dau Tieng, 45 miles northwest of Saigon. This wooded area, halfway between Cu Chi and Tay Ninh, has been a favorite route of heavy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltration from Cambodia and an area of a deeply imbedded VC infrastructure.

In 1925, however, when the colonial government conceded the plantation area to the Michelin Company of Plantations and Pneumatics (Tires) of Vietnam, the region was little more than a thick woods teeming with wild animals.

Throughout the late 1920's, Tonkinese people, contracted by Michelin from North Vietnam, cleared the brush off the land that now forms the plantation. The *Michelin Societe* (French for "company") then built a large rubber processing factory on



the bank of the 50-foot wide Saigon River in what is now the tense village of Dau Tieng.

Scattered throughout the rubber, 24 nearly identical villages—each complete with schoolhouse, pagoda and Catholic church—were constructed to house the workers in the plantation. And a 300-bed hospital was built inside the plantation in 1930.

In what is now the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division headquarters

at Dau Tieng, the *Michelin Societe* built 22 yellow and red, two-story buildings to serve as offices and houses for the French managerial staff. Some of the buildings, classified more properly as mansions, are today surrounded by U.S. tents and temporary buildings of the 3rd Brigade. In the brigade area are also the two swimming pools and the aircraft landing strip built by the French.

At its peak, this immense planta-

## *French-owned symbol of pre-war elegance*

For the next eleven years, security in the plantation area was provided by a strange assortment of military units.

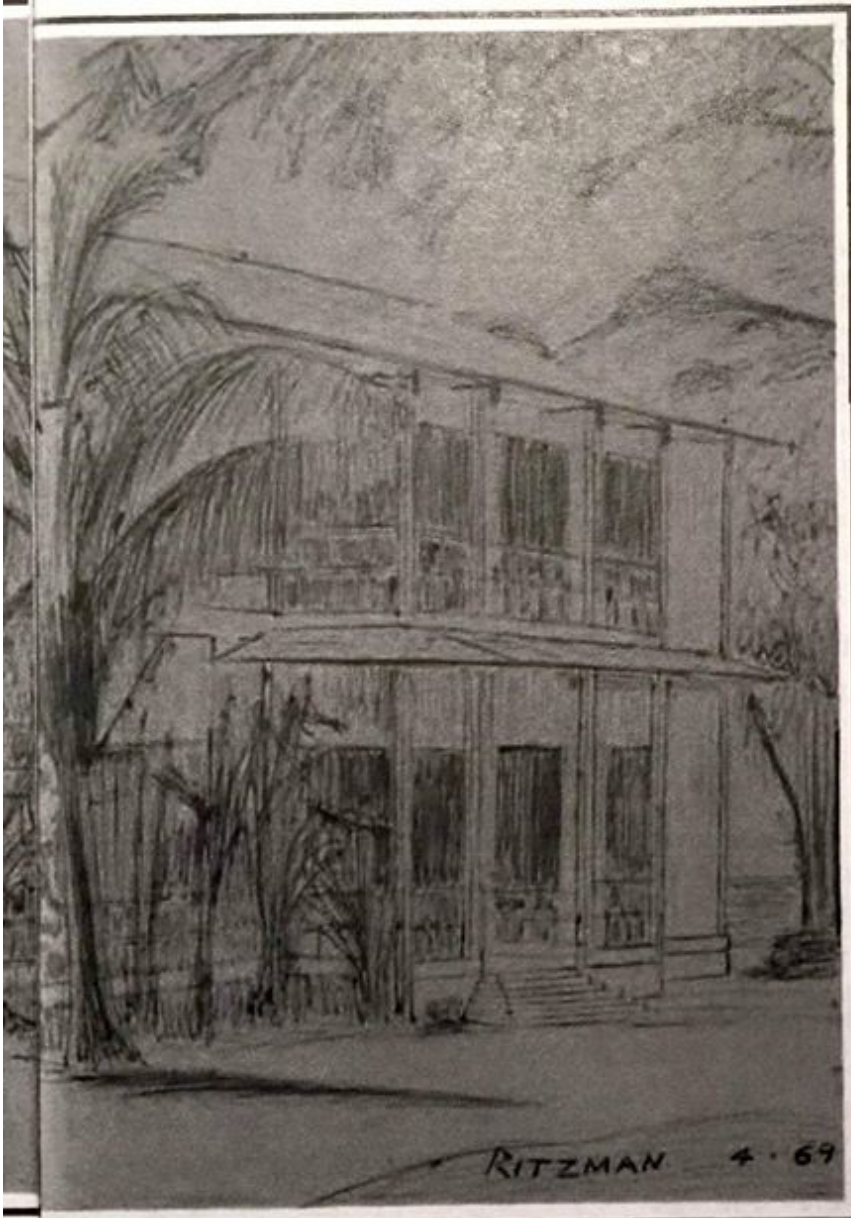
In 1947, an armored squadron of the 2nd Moroccan Spahis, outfitted with halftracks and scout cars, prowled through the plantation. Then in 1950, the 9th Regiment of Tirailleurs, composed of Vietnamese and Algerian riflemen, were assigned to control local Viet Minh activity. They were aided by a unit called Commando "46-P," a group of 150 Cambodian counter guerrillas.

The last major French unit to camp on the current site of the U.S. 3rd Brigade headquarters was the famous 13th Half Brigade of the French Foreign Legion. Two battalions of the 13th Half Brigade stayed at Dau Tieng from 1951 until January of 1954, when they left for Dien Bien Phu. At Dien Bien Phu, the 13th was the unit that fixed bayonets and charged the Viet Minh when their own ammunition was used up.

The departure of the last French-backed troops from the Michelin came in 1956. From that time till the present, life in the Michelin Plantation has been marked by reduced rubber output and increased VC-NVA and allied ground fighting.

The plantation today is listless and idle compared to its prime years.

Of the nearly 5,000 employees the plantation once had, today only 1,200 remain employed there. Of the



tion had a staff of 25 Frenchmen living at Dau Tieng and employed 4,500 Vietnamese rubbers workers. Three company planes then shuttled between Saigon, Dau Tieng and Michelin's other plantation at Thuan Loi conducting business. In its prime, the Dau Tieng plantation was producing 7,000 tons of pure latex rubber a year.

For the French employees then at Dau Tieng, the social life offered

by fellow Frenchmen on nearby plantations, or Saigon, an hour away by automobile, was a pleasant one. But these peaceful boom years ended with World War II. At that time, the French left Vietnam and a Japanese battalion was stationed in the Michelin Plantation for the duration of the war.

When the French returned to Dau Tieng in December, 1945, they brought security troops with them,

French staff, only five are left in Vietnam, all living in Saigon. For reasons of security the French have not gone into the rubber rows of the plantation since 1965, but once a week the French manager of the plantation visits Dau Tieng by plane to discuss business with his Vietnamese manager.

Today, the hospital in the plantation and most of the villages have been abandoned. The majority of the 2,000 people living in the plantation in early 1969 were clustered at its southern end, near Dau Tieng, to avoid harassment and taxation by enemy soldiers.

Only a third of the plantation is actually worked for rubber today. The balance of the plantation's rubber rows crowded by undergrowth,

are untapped.

The town of Dau Tieng itself, runs at a turtle's pace. A few employees busy themselves maintaining equipment and cleaning tanks and vats while mechanics work on the engines of old, square-hooded Citroen trucks, and Peugeots.

In the 3rd Brigade basecamp, the yellow, red-tile-roofed buildings that Michelin built in the 1920's show the spattermarks of hundreds of incoming rockets and mortar rounds, many of them launched from the plantation itself.

This present condition of the Michelin Plantation at Dau Tieng is the result of 25 years of war. What will become of it in the future will be determined by the three parties that affect it strongly—VC-NVA troops,

#### *Plantation well near Dau Tieng*

the French, and allied military forces. All are concerned for its preservation, but for differing reasons.

The VC-NVA use the plantation as a sanctuary and the entire region around it for an infiltration route from Cambodia to Saigon. Although the enemy knows that by his very presence in the plantation he turns it into a battlefield, the VC-NVA do not want the Michelin destroyed. Working on the assumption that they will win the war, they view it as a future money maker.

The French people in the Michelin Society view the plantation with both a financial and sentimental eye. Although these 35 square miles consti-

*Vietnamese infantrymen on patrol in the plantation—potential economic power, current tense battlefield*



78  
S. a-  
on  
te  
gh  
it  
of  
k-  
ill  
ire  
lin  
yth  
Al-  
ti-

CLAYLAND



ELAND



French fortification at Michelin (1952)

MICHELIN SOCIÉTÉ

ture only a fraction of the holdings of the International Group of Michelin and could easily be liquidated, the Society has continued to operate the plantation at a financial loss since 1963. All of the money made from the plantation is reinvested in Vietnam, some of it in the bicycle tire factory which Michelin runs in Saigon. Financially, the French managers are hoping for better times.

Most of the Michelin Society employees in Saigon have another bond with the plantation, one that has nothing to do with finances. It could best be described as an emotional tie. Denis Breuchard, the manager of the Michelin Plantation, has been with the plantation since 1946. Though he has not been inside it since 1965, his attachment to it is still there.

"The feeling they have for the land is strong," said one U.S. officer. "A farmer would understand it."

The U.S. position regarding the Michelin Plantation is generally sympathetic toward preserving the rubber. U.S. officials are aware of the financial value of rubber to Vietnam (at one time its leading export) and of the eight years involved in raising a rubber tree.

Nevertheless, U.S. units have run into bloody contact nearly every time they have swept the plantation. U.S. commanders have occasionally come across strolling groups of five or six



MICHELIN SOCIÉTÉ



MICHELIN SOCIÉTÉ

North Vietnamese workers contracted by Michelin built defense against the Viet Minh in early 50's

Viet Cong so confident in their sanctuary that they were without weapons.

So, to combat the enemy's feeling of security in the plantation, American units have requested and received permission to destroy bunker systems by air, and to clear limited fields of fire with Rome plows. However, much of the fighting continues to be bloody,

dug-in firefighting among the rubber rows.

The difficulties of the Michelin Rubber Plantation have been difficulties suffered due to the war. Progress during war isn't easy. But regardless of these setbacks and the semi-dormant state it is in today, the Michelin remains one of Vietnam's brightest natural resources.