Sergeant Pellerin with Montagnard child

Montagnard village of Pleidoch three times a week to help the sick.

I watched Pellerin treat a young woman, badly burned when she had rolled into a fire a few nights before; her leprosy-deadened senses had not alerted her to the pain. A small boy waited to lead us to his sick father. Seeing the child lifted the spirit of the intense young medic. "When I got here, nearly every kid in this village had trachoma, an eye infection," Pellerin said. "Now we would have to go looking for a case to treat."

• Sgt. 1st Class Lonnie Johnson—jack-of-all-help. When the 36-year-old Green Beret learned that a mother in the remote mountain village of Dongbathin was having difficulty in childbirth, he made his way to her home, carried her to a truck and raced to Camranh, where a Navy doctor successfully delivered the baby. After a Vietcong rocket killed eight Nhatrang civilians last September, Johnson found tin and wood to build the survivors a new home. Last Christmas he gave 1500 orphans toothpaste, soap, candy and nuts collected from fellow servicemen.

As Johnson and I sat on our bunks at a Special Forces camp at Pleiku, I asked him why he has done so much for the Vietnamese. "I was raised by my grandparents, who were sharecroppers on a farm in Alabama," he said. "We were very poor. I got one pair of overalls to last a year. My shirts were made from fertilizer sacks. When I got to Vietnam and saw these people and their children, I remembered what it was like. I made up my mind I was going to do everything I could for them."

Everywhere I traveled in Vietnam, I saw men like these. Yet their amazing humanitarian accomplishments are nearly always overlooked amid daily battle reports and domestic conflict over the war itself.

"The number of our GIs who devote their free time, energy and money to aid the Vietnamese would surprise you," declared Bob Hope at the end of his latest Christmas tour of U.S. bases there. "But maybe it wouldn't," he added. "I guess you know what kind of guys your sons and brothers and the kids next door are."

Destructive of dignity
and boundlessly bureaucratic,
this program to help provide needy
Americans with their daily bread
deserves immediate demolition

Our Food-Stamp Fiasco

By Lester Velie

At 5:45 one morning last March, I joined a queue in a black neighborhood of decaying row houses in Washington, D.C. The sun would not rise for another half hour, but already a dozen men and women faced stoically into a 20-mile wind that drove the 28-degree cold into their very bones. They were waiting to enter one of the city's 14 food-stamp-certification offices.

A government man has described food stamps as "our first line of defense against hunger." The poor trade in the cash they ordinarily spend for food and get a stamp bonus which boosts their food-buying power at the store. But only one of every seven eligible families—some 3.5 million out of 25 million needy Americans—uses the stamps. The program is, in fact, a disastrous flop, and the hungry are no nearer being fed than before the stamps' introduction in 1965. Why? To find out, I had decided to view the scheme through the eyes of the poor.

Appalling Ordeal. By sunup, 24 applicants were waiting, among them a 28-year-old whose baby was expected in a week, an aged pensioner bareheaded in the cold, an ailment-ridden unemployable leaning on a cane, and a welfare mother worried about the infant she had left with a teen-age baby-sitter.

At 7:20, a clerk opened the door and began to take names and addresses in a ruled ledger. The 45 applicants crowded forward, but only half of the queue had been reached when the clerk shouted, "That's all

we can handle today!" Since it would take the certification officer —when he arrived—up to a half hour to question each applicant, only some 20 people a day could be processed.

Applicants shouted their anger and disbelief. One 32-year-old wife of an unemployed laborer, who had borrowed two bus tokens to make the trip, protested tearfully that this was her third turnaway in a week. At nine the certification clerk arrived and placed a stack of "food-stamp-program eligibility sheets" in front of him. Each contained 47 spaces for information and certification. The clerk called in the first applicant.

Did the applicant live in the District? The rent receipt or house deed to prove it, please. The clerk then called the landlord to verify address as well as rent. Income?* Another call, this time to the employer. Any other resources—Social Security, veterans' benefits, welfare and alimony-support contributions? The documents to prove it, please.

The zealous clerk inched ahead with his boundless questions, receipt perusal and telephone calls. By 5 p.m., he had cleared 22 applicants. Some of these had put in an 11-hour-waiting day for food bonuses that ranged from $28 monthly to $106 (for a family of four with less than $30 income monthly).

Visits to eight states showed me that the ordeal of certification is no less appalling elsewhere. In Bexar County, Texas, the food-stamp applicant may have to travel 25 miles to the lone certification office in San Antonio. Crittenden County, Arkansas, requires the working poor to produce an employer's estimate of prospective earnings over the three-month duration of the certification. Employers of field hands may overestimate earnings, to hide the payment of below-minimum wages, and so render the applicant ineligible. Others don't believe in "coddling the poor" and won't sign at all. In South Carolina the state Food Stamp Handbook says that applications must be held up "pending further study, through home visits and other necessary methods."

"Funny Money." Such embittering certification ordeals cause many of the eligible poor to give up. The persistent ones emerge with a blue certification card only to find they have other rivers to cross—buying the food stamps, for instance. The stamps are currency (critics call them "funny money"), printed in 50-cent and $2 denominations. To minimize the danger of theft, local welfare officials arrange with banks, credit unions and check-cashing outfits to sell the stamps. The poor then must come back another day, wait in another line, and suffer a further beating to their dignity, for many banks don't like food-stamp buyers to mingle with regular-money customers. They screen off the stamp lines, or force buyers to wait outside at the drive-in window.

*A crucial question, for in the District of Columbia more than $3600 net income yearly bars a four-member family from the stamps. In South Carolina, it's $1920—$37 a week!

What's worse, food stamps *cost* money. True, the minimum entry fee is only 50 cents—but the Office of Economic Opportunity estimates some 1,300,000 Americans have no cash income whatever. In Jasper and Beaufort counties, South Carolina, for instance, Sen. Ernest F. Hollings found so many families lacked the fee—and were starving—that he shamed the Department of Agriculture (whose Food and Nutrition Service division monitors the program) into providing free food stamps for them.

But elsewhere it still takes real money to buy the funny money. So, to the poorest of our poor, who literally don't have a penny in the house, the food stamps are out of reach altogether. And, unless the homemaker performs a virtual miracle of money management, they are out of reach for many other poverty families as well. For the stamps may be sold only once or twice per month, and the buyer must put up a big chunk of his cash to get them.

Imagine yourself a mother of three children, with a welfare income of $250 monthly ($125 paid twice a month), from which you must squeeze rent, gas and light, clothes for the kids, doctors' bills, and food for four. "We figure you spend about 28 percent of your income for food," say the food-stamp people. "Call it $72. Put up that $72, and we'll let you have $106 in food stamps—a bonus of $34." Fair enough? Trouble is, you're allowed to buy food stamps only twice a month, and thus must put down $36 in cash for stamps—*i.e.*, buy two weeks of food for cash, paid in advance. Since there probably won't be enough left for first-of-the-month bills, chances are the welfare family will forgo the food-stamp bargain.

Uncle Knows Best. Also, to eat off the food stamps, you've got to be regular. Miss a month at that food-stamp window, and you may lose your certification. The regulations say so. It doesn't matter that you're a farm worker with no cash during the off-season, or a migrant worker who follows the harvest and so can't show at the same place, or are laid up by illness. You've got to start the certification treadmill all over again.

Nevertheless, some people actually do make it to the store, stamps in hand. There you will find that Uncle Sam knows what's good for you better than you do yourself. Although you may have put up as much as $2 per $3 worth of stamps, you're not free to buy what you wish. Beer, for instance, is out. So are canned Argentine hamburgers, which may be the only beef a poor family can afford. For imports, too, are forbidden. No soap, paper towels, toilet tissue, toothpaste, say the regulations. Are you a diabetic whose doctor prescribes special, low-sugar foods? Your ghetto store probably doesn't carry them, and the better neighborhood store which does won't take stamps.

These hidden dissuaders that keep the hungry away from stamps are

matched by dis-incentives that cause states, counties and towns to shun them, too. For food stamps constitute a second, separate welfare system that piles additional burdens on state and local taxpayers.

For instance: Although the stamp money is a gift from the federal Treasury, the town or county pays as much as 90 cents to a bank or credit union every time a stamp user buys a batch of stamps. Local welfare officials must also hire administrators and certifiers, and rent office space—the government pays only five eighths of the cost of certifying non-welfare recipients. Thus, Illinois state and Cook County taxpayers must dig up $516,000 a year, over and above regular welfare costs, to provide 130,490 Cook County poor with food stamps.

No wonder, then, that today only about *half* of U.S. counties participate in the food-stamp program.* And those that do are usually loath to tell the poor about them because greater use increases costs. The stamps are no bargain to the federal government, either. To give away $228 million in stamps last year, the U.S. Treasury had to spend $22.5 million in printing and administrative costs—which means almost $1 of cost per $10 of food.

*The Food Stamp Act of 1964 gave the states and their communities a choice: Keep the old surplus-commodities distribution program—which provides some 22 free foods such as flour, beans and potatoes at the county seat or urban armory once a month—*or* distribute stamps. You can't have both, Congress ruled.

Costly Merry-Go-Round. *Why* this costly, roundabout way of getting food to the hungry? Why not simply give them cash? Because the food-stamp program was designed to help the farmer, and only incidentally the poor. You can read it in the preamble of the Food Stamp Act of 1964, which says the act's first aim is "to strengthen the agricultural economy." As farm welfare rather than poor welfare, the benefit must come in a form that can only be spent on something that helps the farmer—food. As farm-welfare legislation, food-stamp reform is also at the mercy of legislators who refuse to believe that hunger exists in America or who believe that the poor are "shiftless drones," not to be trusted with cash.

Actually, as the President's Commission on Income Maintenance has shown, the poor are neither drones nor untrustworthy. Fully one third of our poor are in families whose breadwinner works full time, 40 or more hours a week, 52 weeks a year. Trouble is, at the $1.60 minimum wage, his earnings fall below the poverty line. Add to these the workers who aren't covered by minimum wages, those who work seasonally, low-pay civil servants and servicemen with big families and you have some 15 million Americans who work but are poor. The other ten million are mostly the aged, the disabled, the deserted mothers who care for dependent children.

Are these poor untrustworthy? Last year, when the Department

of Health, Education and Welfare asked the states to test a simplified declaration form for welfare recipients, a sample follow-up audit in Alabama revealed that fewer than two percent of welfare applicants gave false information (in Iowa, 1.3 percent; in Maine, one percent).

Stamp Out Stamps! Congress is considering four major food-stamp reform measures. But virtually every economist and poverty expert who has testified during the last year has urged: Let's throw food stamps out *altogether* and give the hungry the cash. The switch could be accomplished easily through the distribution machinery of President Nixon's Family Assistance Plan.* To the cash income that the plan would give to poor families, Congress has but to add a cash benefit, equivalent to a food-stamp bonus.

The President, according to his Urban Affairs Counselor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "has the strongest possible feeling about employing an 'income strategy'" rather than such circuitous schemes as food-stamp plans. But the Administration has hesitated to tack food cash benefits on its Family Assistance Program for fear that the additional cost will jeopardize its passage.

Congress, however, seems readier to take the added step than seemed possible only a few months ago. Under the leadership of Chairman Wilbur D. Mills, the powerful House Ways and Means Committee has voted favorably on the Family Assistance Program, indicating early acceptance by Congress. Furthermore, during committee deliberations on the plan, an amendment to tack on a food-stamp bonus as cash lost by only two votes. Chairman Mills has said privately that when the Family Assistance Program is in place and working—say, two years from now—he will champion the conversion of food stamps into cash.

But why delay? Two years is too long to ask the hungry to wait.

*See "Four Professors and the Welfare Revolution," The Reader's Digest, January '70.

Timely Talk

IN HISTORIC Williamsburg, Va., my husband and I visited the kitchen on the grounds of the Governor's Palace, where we were welcomed by a woman in the costume of a household slave.

The room was filled with all sorts of cooking utensils. Knowing that the buildings had been destroyed by fire and reconstructed, we wondered if all of the utensils hanging from the walls, ceiling and fireplace were authentic. My husband asked, "Is everything in this room an original, or are there some reproductions?"

"Everything is original," she replied. "Except me. I'm a reproduction—but after 5 p.m. I become an original." —Contributed by Polly Dunham