

# Story Of The Black Virgin Mountain: Nui Ba Den

*The Mountain of the Black Virgin is a Powerful and Mysterious Symbol.*



A giant green cone, a massive piece of tree-covered granite, soars up out of the endless rice fields and jungle into the clouds. To millions of Vietnamese who live in its long shadows, it is a political symbol, a source of cloudy legends, and enigma. To pilots and strangers within its sight, it is initially a navigational marker and then gnawing mystery. The few pilots who glide over the peak when its clouds have lifted briefly still feel this strange atmosphere.

Below on the tip of its cone, is an isolated two-acre camp spotted with huge boulders and rocks. Bunkers and small permanent buildings nestling within the rocks bristle with antennas.

American lookouts, sitting on rocks dangling over the slope, stare up at the visitor briefly, then resume their watch of the tree line below them. They watch for the enemy prowling on the mountain below them. The mountain is Nui Ba Den (Black Lady Mountain, or Mountain of the Black Virgin,) a 3,000 foot pyramid of trees and solid granite 18 miles from Cambodia in Tay Ninh province.

The camp on its summit is an American radio retransmitting station maintained by U.S. soldiers and signal men from 15 different units. This combination of visual prominence and American occupation of the top make Nui Ba Den a powerful symbol. To millions it means that the Viet Cong are not capable of winning the war.

Nui Ba Den's importance as a symbol has a long history. Before a U.S. Special Forces unit took the top in a helicopter assault in May of 1964, the Viet Cong had camped on the same ground. Before then, the mountain and its pinnacle had belonged to the Viet Minh, the Japanese, and the French.

The mysterious aura which permeates Nui Ba Den today is the product of two factors-the mountain's legend and its physical appearance.

Legend has it that prior to 1700, when Nui Ba Den was still in Cambodian territory, a Cambodian chieftain lived on the mountain with his son and a 13 year-old daughter, Nang Denh. A Chinese Buddhist monk, wandering through the region, came to the chieftain and asked for a place to live and spread the teachings of Buddha. Nang Denh's father built the monk a temple called Chua Ong Tau (Chinese Monk's Temple) whose ruins can still be seen on the foot of the mountain's Eastern slope. The pretty, young daughter in time became a devout disciple of Buddhism and when her father proposed her marriage to the son of a neighboring chieftain, the girl went into hiding on the mountain. Soldiers dispatched to find the girl eventually found a section of her leg in a stone cavern on the mountain's slope. Having vowed herself to the Buddhist non-acceptance of married life, the girl had apparently killed herself rather than break the vow.

Years later, a priest who practiced Buddhism on the mountain for 31 years claimed to have seen her walking on the mountainside. He built her an altar, the Shrine of the Black Virgin, which still stands on the mountain's slope today.

The mountain's appearance has this same air of the supernatural about it. When low-ceilinged clouds blanket the floor of Tay Ninh province and rain slashes across it's rice paddies, helicopters will be landing in clear weather on top of Nui Ba Den. When the entire horizon ringing the mountain is clear and cloudless, Nui Ba Den will have a big puff of cotton cloud on it's top and the soldiers in the peaks camp will be huddling from the rain under panchos and in buildings..

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Because of the crucial nature of the work and the threat of the Viet Cong on the slopes below, the men on top of Nui Ba Den put in long, arduous working hours.

"The men work hard all day 12 to 14 hours. At night they will pull guard for another 4 to 6 hours. It's hard work but it's vital and something you can take pride in, " Captain Scripture explained.

Mail, camaraderie between the men, and what Captain Scripture refers to as "probably the best food in Vietnam" make up partially for the discomforts of the mountain. Occasionally, when the weather and security permit, the men are allowed to go to Cu Chi or Tay Ninh to go shopping or have a night out.



*Even on a clear day, the clouds float level with the mountain peak camp. The smoke from a trash fire replaces the haze which usually coats Nui Ba Den's summit.*



*Circling above the cloud-capped mountaintop, resupply helicopters watch for holes to appear in the mist. Within a few minutes the top may again be lost to sight.*