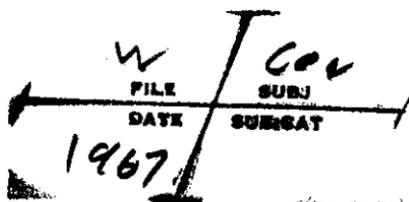


IX



Keep Them Rolling

(H. Salisbury)

At 4:30 on a chilly Christmas morning I found myself sitting in the dark and deserted lobby of the Thong Nhat Hotel. I shivered a little as the cold air swept in from the outside with the slow turn of the revolving door. It was, I thought, just about the hour when, as a kid, I had awakened in my icy bedroom and slithered out from under the warm covers to sneak into the parlor and see whether Santa Claus had really come and whether, after all, he had gotten the letter about the toy train. Four-thirty A.M. on Christmas morning was not an hour when anyone but Santa-excited children were apt to be awake. I was awake now only because I had been told the night before to be dressed and ready to leave on a trip to the south. I had asked to see the countryside and, specifically, some of the areas which had been attacked by American

bombers, and I was being taken somewhere to the south—just where was not very clear to me.

I sat, waiting for my interpreter to appear. There was a line of milky neon lights which ran around the molding of the lobby, but they had been turned off. I could see a small tropical pine which had been set up for the Christmas party in a green porcelain urn and decorated with wisps of red and white cellophane that looked as if they might have come from cigarette packages. Beyond the tree was the bar with its sign saying that it closed at 11 P.M., and behind the bar was an array of bottles. There was one of Gordon's gin. Another of Stolichnaya vodka. One of Bulgarian slivovitz and innumerable bottles of Vietnamese wine and spirits. Not a very appetizing display at this ghastly hour of the morning.

Presently the interpreter showed up and we got into the car and started out through the dark streets. There was little traffic in the city, but I was startled to see a solitary man beside a boulevard patiently digging a manhole air-raid shelter. I wondered whether it was his own project or whether he had been assigned to dig it in his free hours—the latter, I suspected.

We were driving out of Hanoi to the south, moving down Route Nationale No. 1, and the traffic thickened as we neared the outskirts of the city. It was raining lightly and had been raining more heavily a few hours earlier. There were few lights, but I could see that we were passing through an industrial area. We fell into a long line of truck traffic, mostly big military two-and-a-half-ton trucks turned out by the Likhachev factory of Moscow, a product I was very familiar with from my long years in the Soviet Union. They moved down the highway steadily with a variety of burdens—I could not make out exactly what because of the murk and because each truck was carefully camouflaged with a canopy of boughs and tropical leaves. This, I was to learn, was the constant dress of motor vehicles outside of Hanoi, and most of the vehicles inside the city had also acquired a permanent tropical decor. The black Volga in which I traveled was not camou-

flaged—not on this day, which was Christmas, when the truce supposedly was in effect. But on subsequent trips I learned to expect that the Volga would be decked out in a fishnet in which leaves would be inserted.

Camouflage was not confined to trucks and cars. Most North Vietnamese men wore pith sun helmets, women wore broad conical straw hats and schoolchildren wore a heavy plaited straw hat which was said to be almost impervious to shrapnel fragments, and all these headpieces were turned into a kind of bird's nest of leaves and twigs. Even bicycles were camouflaged and babies carried on their mothers' backs were sometimes decked out in leaves.

But such things were difficult to see in the darkness. Meanwhile, I was surprised at the heavy truck movement southward, but the longer I stayed in North Vietnam, the more familiar I became with the traffic pattern on the highways. The trucks formed up in convoys in Hanoi in the late afternoon. During the day they were scattered about, but toward dusk they collected at loading points and then began to roll out of the city as darkness fell. There was little or no movement of trucks or supplies southward except after dark. But once night came the highways bustled with movement which continued, so far as I could see, until dawn.

I watched the procession of trucks roll down the highway that chilly Christmas morning. They were using their headlights, although these were dim and hardly sufficient to see by. At first I thought that this was because of the Christmas truce and that normally they must proceed down the highway blacked out. But I was mistaken. They used dim lights in the northern part of North Vietnam because the Americans did not engage in night bombing there. I didn't know why that was, but it was our policy. In southern North Vietnam, however, bombing went on around the clock, with flare planes illuminating the targets at night. And in southern North Vietnam, I was told, the trucks drove blacked out. But it was also true that in that part of the country there was little reliance on trucks and more on bicycles or human backs.

On this first morning of mine on the highway the bulk of the movement was by truck. Occasionally we would encounter bicycle brigades or work brigades, possibly going out to perform specific tasks. All during the first hours the truck convoys steadily moved south. Not without occasional interruption. The murky weather, the slippery roads, the dim lighting caused accidents. In one ten-mile stretch there were two traffic jams due to truck collisions. Here and there I noticed trucks in ditches. It seemed obvious that there was a fairly heavy accident toll in the movement of supplies southward, leaving aside the damage which was done to the convoys by American bombing.

Gradually dawn came and I could see that we were traveling across flat, open rice-paddy country, crisscrossed with canals or streams. Alongside the highway for considerable distances ran the railroad, and with the arrival of daylight I could observe for the first time the substantial evidences of our bombing offensive and its results.

There were bomb craters beside the highway and frequently along the roadbed of the rail line, which was a light, single-track system, a bit narrower than the standard American gauge. The railroad was operating, and from time to time we passed freight trains with a string of small boxcars, looking a bit like toys in contrast to my mind's image of American rolling stock. Bridges had been one of the chief objectives of our air attacks, and nearly every one we crossed had been damaged. But in this area, not far from Hanoi, the bridges had been repaired by one means or another and we moved across them without much delay—although some had only one instead of two traffic lanes.

Not long after daylight we passed through a town that seemed to have been almost obliterated by bombs. "That's Phuly," my guide said. "We'll stop there on the way back." I caught only a glimpse of Phuly, but there seemed little to see. On both sides of the road there were ruins. Along one side I saw a twisted string of small boxcars.

On our return trip we stopped in Phuly and I had a

good look at it. It was a long, narrow town about forty miles south of Hanoi that had once lain beside the main railroad. I say "once" advisedly. There was no more town of Phuly—at least so far as I could observe. It was all gone. Just ruins of buildings strung out along the highway. Of the market, which lay between the highway and the railroad, only a few gaping walls remained. An official said that the town had been attacked five times on October 1 and that there had been two more attacks the following day. On October 9, he continued, there had been nine more attacks. More than a thousand bombs had been dropped in the assaults, I was told, many of them five-hundred- and thousand-kilogram bombs. None of the raids, said the official, had ever been announced. Phuly had had a population of ten thousand before it was attacked. Now only a handful of people were left.

I could see one obvious military target in Phuly. There was a small siding, a few strips of track where, I supposed, cars were shunted off. I thought I understood what had happened here. The American planes had come in to take out the railroad and the siding. Along with the tracks the town had vanished. It would take a long time to restore the town, but the railroad was working again. Indeed, while I walked through the ruins a train slowly passed by.

It was possible, of course, that there were more military objectives in Phuly than were visible to my eye. There was a bridge across a river and the highway itself. Possibly there were depots of one sort or another. But whatever the targets were, they had hardly been very imposing. This was obvious from the insignificant wreckage.

The grim World War II joke came into my mind: "One of our cities is missing." Now it had happened here in North Vietnam. Not to a city but to an obscure railroad town.

For the full distance that the railroad paralleled the highway—and we struck off from Route Nationale No. 1 after a time—I saw heaps of the light steel rails which are used by the Vietnamese system, cords of railroad ties, sometimes neatly stacked, sometimes simply strewn across the countryside,

newly crushed gravel and stone for repairing the roadbed and great tangles of steel rods which, I supposed, were used to strengthen the bed and possibly the highway—although for the most part the highway seemed to be kept in repair simply by filling in bomb craters with the clay soil which everywhere surrounded us.

The longer we drove, the more impressed I became with the quantity of railroad repair material at hand. I estimated after the trip, and the impression was strengthened on my other trips about the country, that the North Vietnamese had enough rails and other supplies available to construct a couple of more railroads, should they desire.

The railroad and the highway, running side by side across the completely flat terrain, crossing and recrossing canal after canal and river after river, represented a bombardier's dream. Nothing could be easier to locate and hit from the air. There was no possible way in which the rail and highway network could be concealed, no way in which the American planes could be confused. It was like flying over a relief map in which the targets were outlined in red neon lights. Not only was the network plainly visible from any altitude, but it was incredibly vulnerable because of the streams and canals, each of which had to be crossed by a bridge. Knock out one, two or three bridges and the whole transport system from the North could be immobilized.

I imagined the target planners at their conferences. Certainly, air power could readily interdict the movement of men and supplies from North to South—or impede it so decidedly as materially to affect the ability of the Vietcong and their parent organization, the National Liberation Front, to carry on the war.

Yet here I was traveling along this dream target for strategic bombing and I could see with my own eyes that the movement of men, materials, food and munitions had not been halted. How could this be? We had been attacking the North for two years, and our bombing operations in this area of the Hanoi-Haiphong complex had been in full prog-

ress for more than a year. We had certainly destroyed sections of the railroad time and again. I could see bridges that had been blasted beyond repair. I bumped over stretches of highway that had been relaid several times. Yet traffic was moving. It was moving in very large quantities. And this, I quickly learned, was not just because a Christmas truce was on. This was the normal pattern in the North. The traffic flowed out of Hanoi and Haiphong night after night after night. It rolled down the highway and down the railroad. Never, so far as I could learn, had it been seriously impeded. Difficulties, yes. Barriers, no.

The way this was accomplished was one of the most important aspects of the war. It provided the clue to North Vietnam's ability to continue fighting against the United States despite the massive air power we had mobilized.

The secret of the North Vietnamese success was not hard to grasp. It lay in a massive investment of manpower, labor and matériel and a careful utilization of national resources.

It was really no great trick to keep the highways open. They were usually, but not always, tar surfaced. They were simple roadways laid over the clay soil. If bombs cratered a highway, all that was needed was to round up a repair gang with shovels. The holes could be filled in and the road resurfaced in an hour or two.

More difficult were the bridges. But here I was impressed by the ingenuity and practicality of North Vietnam's solution. If a bridge was damaged but traffic could be handled on one lane, that single lane was kept open while the other was being repaired. If the bridge was completely knocked out, a pontoon was put into service. The pontoons could not have been simpler in concept or easier to put into place. They were made by lashing together the required number of shallow flat-bottomed wooden canal boats, of which there were countless numbers available along the canals and streams. These sturdy boats, three feet wide and perhaps sixteen feet long, made an excellent bridge. A surface of cut bamboo poles was laid across them, without even being lashed or

nailed in many cases. Or, if available, a surface of bamboo planks. The trucks lumbered over the pontoons with a roar as their wheels hit the loose poles, but the pontoons seemed sturdy enough to bear the heavy traffic. In most cases where a permanent bridge was knocked out, two pontoons were pressed into service—one to handle traffic moving south, the other to accommodate the empty trucks returning north.

Foreigners who had watched the pontoons being put into place said this seldom took more than a couple of hours. The boats and bamboo poles were kept available at every bridge, the expectation being that sooner or later the bridge would be knocked out.

The problem of keeping the railroad operating was more difficult. Trains could not run across pontoons. To repair a steel-girdered railroad bridge was not a task of a few hours. If it could be done in a few days, that was fast action.

But here, too, native ingenuity was called into play. If the rail line was blocked by destruction of a bridge or trackage, bicycle brigades were called up. Five hundred men and women and their bicycles would be sent to the scene of the break. They would unload the stalled freight train, putting the cargo on the bikes. Each bicycle would handle a six-hundred-pound load, balanced across the frame with a bar. The bicycles would be wheeled, not ridden, over a pontoon bridge, and on the other side of the break a second train would be drawn up. The cargo would be reloaded and moved on south.

Meantime the work of repairing the trackage or the broken bridge would go forward.

So much time, manpower and material were being invested in keeping the railroad in operation that I seriously pondered the military advisability of the effort. It seemed to me that allocating the same manpower and material to the trucking operation would be more efficient and economical. The truck route could not be interdicted for more than a short time, regardless of the intensity and frequency of American attacks. Why not abandon the railroad?

The answer was not readily forthcoming. It was obvious that the North Vietnamese took enormous pride in keeping the railroad going. It was a symbol of their ability to overcome the enormous technological advantage of the Americans. Just as a factor in morale perhaps it was felt that the sacrifice was worthwhile.

Another aspect was that Communist China was the principal provider of steel, rolling stock, angle irons, signal mechanisms and other equipment for the railroad. Indeed, it was said that Chinese railroad battalions were helping to maintain the sections of the line which came down across the Chinese frontier to the north. China had a special interest in keeping the railroad open, for trackage in North Vietnam provided the most convenient access between two Chinese cities, Nanning and Kunming.

There was another consideration. The railroad operated on coal which was provided by North Vietnam's own mines. And, if necessary, the boilers of the small old-fashioned locomotives could even be fired with wood. But trucks were utterly dependent upon gasoline and oil and every gallon had to be brought into North Vietnam by tanker from the Soviet Union or Rumania. Cut off the gasoline and oil and highway traffic would largely be limited to bicycles and human backs. Perhaps the railroad was kept in repair as a reserve against the possibility that the flow of fuel might be ended should we, as many in North Vietnam anticipated, ultimately begin a systematic bombing of Haiphong, the major North Vietnamese port.

Already our attacks on petroleum storage capacity had been one of our most successful military blows. Our initial attacks on Haiphong in early July, I was told, destroyed at a single blow the storage tanks there. Subsequent air strikes against small depots in the Hanoi and Haiphong area had eliminated all the consequential storage facilities in the country.

I could see the consequence of this as I drove across the countryside. Wherever I looked, or so it seemed, I saw strewn about the nearby fields or along the highways and cross lanes

fifty-five-gallon steel drums, in which North Vietnam's petroleum supplies were now stored. The random dispersal of these drums by the thousands in city, town and rural rice paddy insured that they could not effectively be attacked by American air power. The dispersal, of course, was not without cost to Hanoi in manpower and matériel. It was inconvenient to have to collect the drums from rice paddies and village backyards whenever a convoy of trucks had to be fueled. But it was typical of the rough-and-ready techniques by which North Vietnam managed to carry forward its war effort with no great interruption despite the incredible weight of American firepower.

Not merely gasoline and oil were dispersed over the countryside. As previously noted, railroad and highway building materials were scattered higgledy-piggledy in every direction, so that I was seldom out of sight of them. The only rule seemed to be to keep them fairly close to some road so that it would not be too difficult to reassemble them when needed.

And the same system was employed with other equipment. I saw crates and bits of machinery, large weapons cases, huge boxes which contained, I guessed, shells and munitions, hardware of the most diverse sort, simply staked out in fields, let down beside rural roads, cluttering paths that led to rice paddies—indeed, in all the time I rode about the countryside I think I was never more than two or three minutes out of sight of some kind of supplies and equipment which had come to rest in the most unlikely setting.

While I was in Hanoi an article appeared in an aviation publication by an Englishman named Norman Barrymaine describing a visit he had made to Haiphong. He told of quantities of supplies which, by his description, had been piled up along the highways. He attributed this to the disruption of transportation. The North Vietnamese were unable, he thought, to move their needed munitions and guns to the South. He painted a sad picture of the roads between Hanoi and Haiphong and said the peasants talked of the highway as the "road that was"—meaning it no longer could be traversed.

It often took four days, he reported, to travel from Hanoi to Haiphong.

His portrait was almost diametrically opposite to the conclusions at which I arrived, although some of the elements were the same. The practice of storing military supplies in the open, dispersing them in fields and along roads, to protect them from enemy bombing, was not invented in Hanoi. It was widely used in World War II. I saw it in Russia, where, sometimes, it seemed that half the machinery and munitions in the country had been scattered into the fields. I saw it in the islands of the South Pacific and in the hedgerows of England. It was a common, sensible military precaution—especially if, as in North Vietnam, the enemy had absolute command of the air.

So far as the clogging of the roads between Hanoi and Haiphong was concerned and the difficulty of moving supplies out of the area, my impressions did not jibe with Barrymaine's. Nor did his impressions accord with those of Western diplomats in Hanoi who moved between Hanoi and Haiphong freely without any special interruption. They had often been subjected to air attacks in the course of such trips and reported that the bridges not infrequently were knocked out. But they never had to spend several days on the trip.

The diplomats did report that trips from Hanoi to Haiphong, like almost every trip outside the North Vietnamese capital, were normally undertaken at night because of the dangers of American bombing. I met no one who had taken longer than three or four hours to make the forty-mile journey, unless delayed by many hours spent in air-raid shelters. One explanation of Barrymaine's impressions became clear much later when I heard he had spent only a day or so in Haiphong and had not been permitted to leave the harbor area.

There was no question that the Haiphong Harbor was badly jammed with shipping, that it was attempting to handle much more traffic than its facilities could accommodate, that ships were slow in being unloaded and that supplies accumulated on the docks and wharves despite every effort of the

North Vietnamese to disperse them quickly lest the harbor be bombed.

But that was another story. That was a by-product of the Soviet-Chinese tensions. It had nothing to do with the effectiveness or noneffectiveness of American bombing.

After extensive examination of the results of the United States bombing attacks, after discussing the situation in detail with the North Vietnamese, with the Western diplomats in Hanoi and with the extremely well-informed and remarkably outspoken East European diplomats there, I concluded that the military consequences of the bombing were almost identical with those which had been achieved in North Korea.

In North Korea the United States Air Force had ruled the skies. It was able to bomb at will against the Chinese when they entered the Korean War, crossing the Yalu River. It was able to attack by day and night all the supply trails and roads down which the Chinese troops and their supplies poured. But it was never able to halt that Chinese stream. It inflicted heavy casualties, but it did not keep the Chinese from moving south.

The same story on different terrain, on terrain which was much more to our advantage than the difficult valleys and mountains of North Korea, was being spelled out in North Vietnam. Strategic air power or even tactical air power was not able to halt the movement of a determined, tough and skillful enemy. At best it could only slow down or make more difficult his movement of men and supplies. And, as I was soon to learn, there were countervailing factors which, from my viewpoint, canceled out the minor military value of the enormously expensive United States bombing effort.

X

A Visit to a Military Objective

Every war propels some obscure city or town into the limelight, a community which has existed in respectable anonymity for hundreds of years and now suddenly is on everyone's lips. Chance, historical accident, is responsible for this. There was nothing about Guernica which would have caused anyone to predict that it would be a name to survive the fading memory of the Spanish Civil War. Coventry was an ordinary English Midlands cathedral town until it was blitzed by the Germans and Stalingrad was a dreary Soviet industrial city before the battle. No one would have guessed in 1939 that Rotterdam would become a headline name in 1940.

Before Christmas Day, 1966, I had never heard of Nam-dinh. Possibly I had read the name somewhere but, if so, I did not remember it. But after Christmas Day, 1966, I would

never forget Namdinh. Nor, I think, would many other Americans. Namdinh became a catalyst, a kind of prism through which the United States bombing offensive in North Vietnam took on human dimensions. For the first time we began to see beyond the barrier of meaningless military terminology, the banal vocabulary that turns reality into a kind of etymological stew.

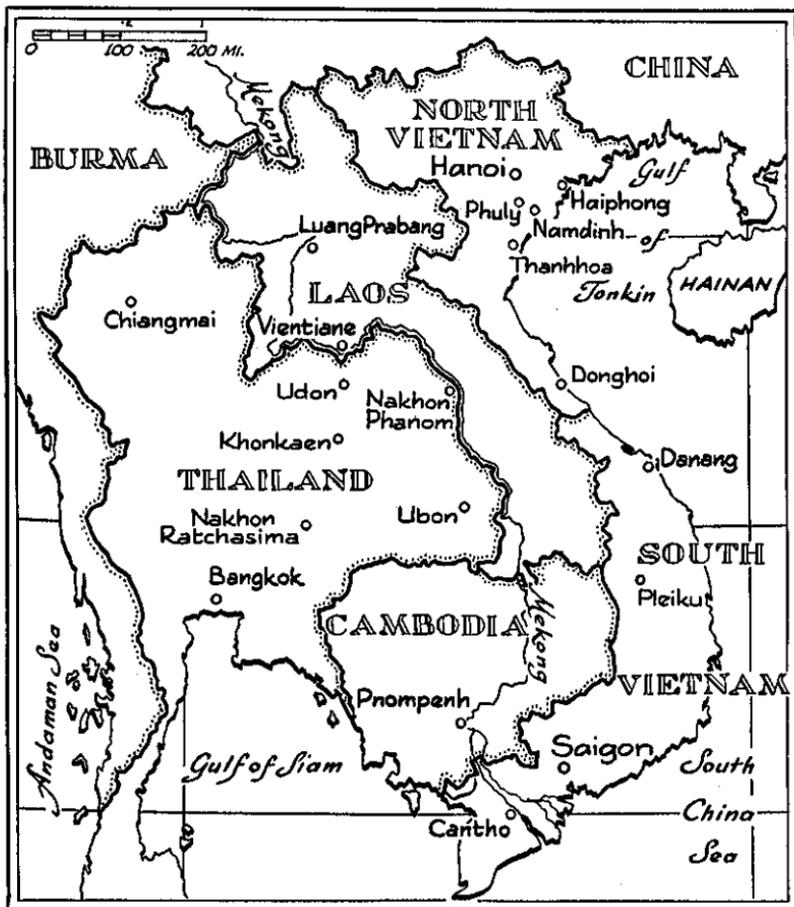
Namdinh is not much to look at. We drove down to it along Route Nationale No. 1 but branched off the main highway fifteen or twenty miles north of the city and veered to the east. At one point we took a detour of several miles through paddies and small villages, traveling along a newly widened and improved road which ran for considerable distances along the top of levees or barriers which had been thrown up to separate the endless rice fields with their ever-flowing water. The detour was necessary because a bridge was out—destroyed in an American attack only a day or two earlier.

We came into Namdinh from the north, and almost all the streets we drove through bore signs of bomb damage. Because we had started out so early there had been no time for breakfast, and now I was invited to sit down in one room of what seemed to be a kind of municipal office to drink some tea, eat some bread and butter (which came from the hotel in Hanoi) and have some tangerines and fragrant small bananas.

Two local officials briefed me about Namdinh, and from them I learned that it was a textile city of about ninety thousand people before most of them had been evacuated. They said Namdinh had been repeatedly subjected to United States attack—fifty-one or fifty-two raids up to that moment, including four on December 23. There had been, I was told, American reconnaissance planes over the city during the night, and thus far on Christmas morning the alert had sounded twice.

Nguyen Tien Canh, a member of the Namdinh Municipal Council, a small alert man dressed for the cold weather in a

blue quilted jacket, said that Namdinh was the third largest city in North Vietnam and was situated about twenty miles from the Gulf of Tonkin. He described it as a center for the production of consumer goods, particularly textiles. Its large



textile plant normally employed thirteen thousand workers, 70 percent of whom were women. About ten thousand residents were engaged in handicraft production. The principal industries, in addition to the big cotton textile works, were a silk mill, a fruit canning factory, a farm tool plant, a rice mill and a cooperative which made thread.

Namdinh might be North Vietnam's third largest city, but if this was all it produced, it hardly sounded like a prime target. The officials, including the Mayor, a petite woman named Tran Thi Doan, who had been a textile worker herself, insisted that so far as they were aware the city possessed no military objectives whatever.

Of course, definitions of military objectives are apt to differ between the civilians who live in a town and the men in the planes dropping the bombs. The residents of Namdinh reinforced their contention that the city could not be considered an important target area by insisting that it had never been mentioned as a target of attack in a United States communiqué.

The question whether Namdinh possessed significant military objectives and whether it had been mentioned in a communiqué later became the focus of a brush-fire controversy, touched off in Washington by the Pentagon. The Pentagon insisted that Namdinh, in contradiction to the portrait painted by its inhabitants, was a formidable military objective. It possessed a railroad line, a main highway, river transshipment facilities, naval facilities, oil storage dumps and other impressive installations. It was not correct to say it had not been mentioned as a United States target. By careful researching of available records it was found that on three separate occasions in the spring of 1966 the name Namdinh had been pronounced by the United States military briefing officer in Saigon. The briefing officer's references to Namdinh took several days to unearth and then were forthcoming only upon the inquiry and insistence of correspondents in Washington.* The mentions of Namdinh by the briefing officer, moreover, had been so inconsequential that the name of the city had never appeared in any *New York Times* war dispatch out of Saigon. Indeed, *The New York Times* Index showed only

* Neil Sheehan says that the communiqués about the Namdinh bombings were issued on April 29, May 19, and June 1, and the bombings took place the previous days. The communiqué of April 29 said the bombings were directed against the Namdinh railroad. The communiqué of May 19 said the Namdinh railroad was bombed. The communiqué of June 1 said the bombings were directed against the Namdinh naval facility and railroad yard.

one reference to Namdinh more recent than 1954—a mention of the city in an article by James Cameron, the British journalist who visited North Vietnam in 1965.

This was hardly surprising. Like most of the “military objectives” which I was to see in North Vietnam, Namdinh seemed much more imposing in the language of a Pentagon spokesman than when viewed with the naked eye.

It was not a big city. It never had been. Now, under the effects of wartime evacuation, it was largely abandoned. There was little traffic in the streets. Once, the city officials contended, there had been 3 senior high schools, 6 junior highs and 20 primary schools with a total of 24,060 pupils. Not all of these institutions and children had been evacuated. There were still 172 primary school classes, 78 junior high and 8 senior high school classes in the city. There had been a school for training medical assistants, a vocational school, a trade school for construction workers and two normal schools. All these had been transferred to the countryside.

The textile factory, according to the officials, was still operating but had been hit in nineteen attacks. When we drove through the battered area of the plant, it immediately became apparent that the term “operating” was a euphemism. I saw one unit where it was obvious that some activity was being carried on since a pipe was emitting steam. It was equally obvious from the shattered walls, windows and roofs of most of the textile sheds that the bulk of the plant had been abandoned.

The silk mill had been destroyed, and no pretense was made that it was still working. The thread cooperative had been devastated—along with half the buildings on the street where it stood.

After my dispatches began appearing in *The Times*, Arthur Sylvester, then the chief spokesman for the Pentagon, urged that I walk down the main street of Namdinh, where, he said, I would find a large anti-aircraft installation. I only wished I could have taken him with me on the stroll. My car

had passed down the main street and turned at an intersection. No anti-aircraft installation was in sight that day. Nor was one in sight on New Year's Day when some other visitors were in Namdinh. The nearest thing to a military installation which I saw on Namdinh's main street was a rather pretty militia woman, or traffic officer. She had a small revolver on her hip, but I doubted that it would have been effective against a supersonic attack bomber.

I got a thorough lesson in American air technology in Namdinh. I was not familiar with the names and types of the current generation of United States fighting aircraft. But everyone in Namdinh knew them by heart. They rattled off the designations—F-105's, F4H's, RB-57's, A3Z's, A4A's, A6A's. According to the residents of the city, the chief weight of attacks came from aircraft based on the Seventh Fleet carriers which stood offshore in the Gulf of Tonkin. Namdinh, they said, was a favorite target of the Seventh Fleet. The people were equally familiar with the technology of bombs. They spoke of MK81's, MK83's, MK84's, 70-mm. rockets and bullpups the way American teen-agers mention the latest pop recording artists.

According to the inhabitants of Namdinh, the first serious raid on their city occurred June 28, 1965. This was carried out by two F-105's and two F4H's, they said, and took place about 7:30 on a cloudy morning. Two bullpup missiles had been fired into the area of the textile plant, they asserted, and ten persons, including three children, had been killed and twelve wounded.

Many attacks, they said, had occurred at night, although U.S. planes do not usually attack at night in the North, and on occasion as many as twenty-seven planes had participated.

One of the worst attacks I was told, had hit Hang Thao (Silk Street) at about 6:30 A.M., April 14. This was a heavily populated thoroughfare, and normally there were 17,680 people living in the quarter. However, because of evacuation, only 2,300 remained. The bombs fell just at the moment when fac-

tories were changing shifts, and 49 people were said to have been killed and 135 wounded. It was also asserted that 240 houses were destroyed.

Another bad attack was launched in Hoang Van Thu Street, the residents said, not far from Silk Street, on May 18. Normally this section had a population in the thousands, but evacuation had brought the number down to 230. It had been an area of busy shops in the center of the Chinese quarter. Nearby was the big Roman Catholic church and many temples. At 11:04 A.M. two F4H planes emerged from the clouds, according to the residents. It was raining and had been raining for some time. Water was deep in the streets and many shelters were overflowing. Eight bombs, they said, fell in the area in a south-to-north bombing run. People were unable to get into shelters and some who did were drowned. There were thirteen killed and eleven wounded in the attack, I was told.

We drove about Namdinh, through the textile area, and stopped in Silk Street. For blocks and blocks I could see nothing but desolation. Residential housing, stores, all the buildings were destroyed, damaged or abandoned. I felt that I was walking through the city of a vanished civilization. Here and there a handful of young men and women were at work, patiently pulling down lumber from broken houses and neatly stacking it. Many of the streets were so devastated that no one could live in them. Others had simply been abandoned in the wholesale evacuation.

I saw only one enterprise which seemed to be functioning at close to the normal rate. This was the rice mill. All about it were evidences of bomb damage. The mill itself had been hit, but no vital portion had been struck. As we walked up to it, two young women workers were practicing military calisthenics, racing over a series of low hurdles, rifles in hand, then throwing themselves sprawling on the earth at the end of the course and taking aim at imaginary targets. Inside the mill I saw stacked beside almost every production post a rifle. Some were propped beside open windows. Each worker had his tin helmet and a first-aid kit. Air-raid shelters were built

into the plant on the ground floor, some of them concrete embrasures under the milling machinery. At the sound of the air-raid sirens the workers would grab their rifles and take up posts at the windows and on the roof to fire back at the American planes. Those who had no guns went into the shelters.

It was not only the city of Namdinh which had been savagely damaged. The area of destruction continued outside the city. We drove out along the Dao River dike and came upon a band of a thousand or more young men and women constructing a great supplementary dike to hold back the waters of the Dao from Namdinh. This construction work had been undertaken, the officials said, because of repeated American attacks on the Dao dike system. Six bombs had hit the dikes on May 31 and July 14, they said. I saw several large craters and filled-in portions of the dike which indicated their story had some substance. There was no doubt in the minds of the Namdinh officials—and of the Namdinh citizens—that the dikes were being deliberately attacked by United States aircraft. The danger to the city from such attacks was extreme. The whole of Namdinh is six, eight or even fourteen feet below water level during the rainy season. A breach of the levees would destroy the community. So seriously did the North Vietnamese regard this danger that they not only were building the massive new earthen wall outside the city. They had constructed supplementary dikes running right through Namdinh itself as partial insurance against a breach.

As I walked through Silk Street and saw the battered tower of the cathedral with its strings of red pennants and its white star of Bethlehem mounted for Christmas, looking out over a sea of destruction, I could not help but think of other scenes of wartime desolation, the earliest of which I had seen as a child in the *London Illustrated News* and the *Midweek Pictorial*: the shattered walls of Ypres and Rheims, the gaping craters I walked past every London morning between Park Lane and the North Audley Street mess, the chasms where workers' apartments once stood around Leningrad's Narva

gates, the Evangelical church in Berlin's Kurfurstendamm which might serve as a memorial of all war's desolation for all time.

Now it had happened to another city, a remote city in a remote country, a city whose name meant nothing to practically anyone in the whole of the United States, a city so obscure that we would have to hunt for it on the map of a country whose name most of us could not pronounce.

What earthly meaning could be extracted from this destruction? What military purpose was it serving?

It was hard to comprehend as I sat in the air-raid shelter outside the Namdinh municipal headquarters talking with the Mayor, a woman whose petite figure suggested an age much closer to twenty than forty. Hardly had we gotten back from looking at the Dao River levees than the air alert sounded, at 2:26 P.M. We went to the bunker and sat there looking out at the sunshine which had just succeeded the day-long clouds.

A great deal of Namdinh, said Mayor Doan, had disappeared—probably 13 percent of the city's housing, residences for 12,464 people. Casualties had been, considering everything, remarkably low—only 89 killed and 405 wounded, she said. But, of course, she added, 80 percent of the city's population had been evacuated and not many more than fifteen thousand people remained in Namdinh. My impression that it was a ghost city was borne out by her statistics.

Why had Namdinh been attacked so heavily and so often?

"The Americans think they can touch our hearts," said Nguyen Tien Canh, meaning that the Americans thought they could intimidate the population. It was his belief that by a silent unannounced assault on Namdinh the United States was seeking to give North Vietnam an object lesson. This is what we can do to Hanoi if we wish—that was supposed to be the moral. So the officials of Namdinh thought.

There was no way for me to know whether their belief had any justification. All I knew was that Namdinh had taken a remarkable weight of high explosive and steel. The people

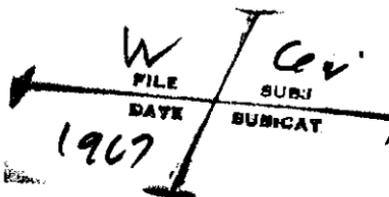
of Namdinh and their residential areas had suffered heavy punishment—regardless of what might or might not be the intent of our military strategists.

I wondered as I sat in the shelter waiting for the all-clear—which finally sounded at 2:47 P.M.—whether there might be some vital military objective in Namdinh which was not visible to my eye, some secret installation which we were relentlessly trying to destroy or cripple. It seemed unlikely, but the whole story of Namdinh had a quality of unreality, like some terrible dream in a Dada painting. One could almost imagine our bombers coming again and again and again, attacking and attacking, trying to hit some phantom which ever eluded them because it never had existed.

I put my thoughts down on paper when I returned to Hanoi on Christmas evening and sent a dispatch off to *The New York Times* which shocked the Pentagon and produced a rash of denials, assaults on my personal reliability and hastily fabricated explanations. But after all the statements and all the verbal brickbats had been hurled, the mystery of Namdinh remained. For even by the Pentagon's least strict definition there were no very remarkable targets in Namdinh. True, materials going south passed through the city. True, there was a railroad, a (small) freight yard, an area along the river bank where boat and barge cargo was sorted out and reshipped. But it didn't amount to much. This, I was to come to find, was one of the tragedies of the Vietnam war, and perhaps the fatal fallacy in our whole bombing policy. When you totaled all the "military objectives" in North Vietnam, they didn't total much. The best of them from the military standpoint were the roads and railroads. We were hitting these with a tremendous amount of muscle. But the stuff still went through. North Vietnam was paying a tragic price in order that the architects of our bombing policy might prove its validity. But I wondered whether, in the end, the heaviest price might not be that paid by us Americans for our stubborn pursuit of a military theory which seemed to have little connection with

reality. Would we not in the end suffer more deeply for permitting this folly to continue than the poor, battered, destitute people and their habitations upon which we insisted on imposing the grandiose title of "military objective"?

XI



“Prepare for the Worst”

(H.S. 7/156w)

One morning I visited the March 8th Textile Factory on the outskirts of Hanoi, a big cotton-fabricating plant whose name honored International Women's Day, celebrated on March 8 in Communist countries. Construction of the factory had begun on March 8, 1960, and the plant had gone into partial production on March 8, 1963. It had not been finished until March 8, 1965, shortly after the launching of the American air offensive in North Vietnam, and by that time some of its units already were being evacuated to other parts of the country.

On the morning I visited the plant, a very dismal morning which even the customary cups of hot China tea did little to brighten, it was not operating at a very high level of efficiency. As we walked through the shops, some of them half empty due

to the evacuation of workers and machinery, the girls were huddled in groups, gossiping and laughing. They hardly looked up when the deputy director of the factory strolled through with a foreign visitor.

The plant had employed seven thousand workers, 70 percent of them women, at the peak of its production, but now two-thirds of them had been evacuated, along with various units of the factory, to villages thirty-five to sixty miles from Hanoi. Although the deputy director, Mai Xu Tan But, insisted that production was being maintained at normal levels, this hardly seemed credible to me.

Working conditions in this plant were equal or superior to those in most industries in Hanoi. The women worked an eight-hour day with a half-hour lunch break. The factory was on a three-shift basis. Workers averaged three dong a day in pay and got a 20 percent premium for night work. The base pay was two dong a day, and the rest was incentive payments and premiums for good production. The deputy director earned 145 dong a month, which was very high by North Vietnamese standards. Average pay for a worker in North Vietnam ran about 70 dong a month and few officials earned more than 150 dong. It was hard to calculate the purchasing power of the dong. It bore a nominal value of 3.53 to the dollar, but I doubted that this had much relationship to reality. The workers in this factory, according to Mr. But, averaged 78 dong a month and spent about one-third of their wages on basic items. Some were extremely inexpensive. The plant provided housing at a cost of only 1 percent of wages. Free transportation to and from work was provided, either by bus or bicycle, so that the principal outlays were for food and clothing, both of which were strictly rationed. Electricity, however, was very costly, and many workers did not have electric lights in their apartments.

The factory offered free medical and social services, but these facilities, it was said, had been evacuated to the provinces. The machinery in the plant came mostly from China, but some items were of Soviet origin. Possibly reflecting the

factory's dependence upon the two great Communist countries, the director's office was decorated not only with the customary portrait of Ho Chi Minh, before which stood a tall vase of salmon-pink gladioli, but also with colored photographs of the Kremlin and the Tien An Men Square in Peking.

There was another exhibit in the plant which I found duplicated in most institutions I visited in North Vietnam. Next to a case in which cotton goods manufactured by the factory were displayed, there was a small heap of bomb fragments, pieces of American rockets and other military debris. This had been picked up, the director said, after the December 13 bombing of Hanoi. At least one rocket had exploded on or just above the glass roof of one large plant building, I was told, shattering the glass and doing minor damage. As we walked through the loom rooms, the patched-up roof and shards of glass on the cement floor provided visible evidence of the recent attack.

The partial evacuation of the March 8th textile plant was typical of industries in Hanoi. Some elements of almost every enterprise in the city had been moved out of the capital in the government's program of "preparing for the worst"—preparing for a sustained American bombardment of Hanoi and Haiphong.

North Vietnam had been deliberately conditioned to expect this escalation of the war. Not because President Ho Chi Minh wanted the war to be stepped up to this level but because he and his colleagues felt that escalation was the consistent pattern of American strategy, reflecting what Hanoi regarded as the frustration of U.S. officers at their inability to compel the North Vietnamese to yield.

As one North Vietnamese told me, the Americans first began to bomb just north of the 17th parallel. Then they extended their attacks to the 19th, to the 20th, to the 21st parallels. They ranged into the northern, the northwestern and the northeastern parts of the country. In July, 1966, they penetrated the areas of Hanoi and Haiphong. Now bombing was going ahead in every region, every province of North

Vietnam. In these circumstances it was natural to prepare for the worst—the systematic bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong.

The country would fight on despite the attacks on the capital and its principal port. This was the determination of the leadership, and it was this for which the populace was being prepared.

Plans had been completed for the removal from Hanoi of all industries and facilities which could be moved. Some enterprises, it was conceded, could not be evacuated and would have to be abandoned or else try to operate under saturation bombing conditions in the event the war took this turn.

As to the future of Hanoi, the North Vietnamese displayed remarkable aplomb. They expected that their capital would be wiped out. They were not despondent. They already had in preparation architectural plans for the construction of a new capital. They would not rebuild Hanoi, at least not as a seat of government. They had picked a new site not far distant where the new capital would be erected once the war was over. After all, they said, Hanoi is a small old ugly city. It symbolizes the French occupation. After the war we will build our own capital. In fact, we have been thinking of doing this in any event.

It was true that Hanoi was run-down and shabby. The only buildings which looked fresh, bright and newly painted were the Presidential Palace, which had been the Governor General's residence, and the impressive Government Guest House, another palace that dated from French colonial times.

Half of Hanoi's population was supposed to have been evacuated to the countryside, but many of the evacuees flowed back into the city, week by week and month by month. This was particularly true of wives or husbands who found separation difficult and unpleasant. As for children, they were all supposed to have been sent from the city. But many remained. It was the personal responsibility of parents to evacuate their children and find someone in the country with whom they could live. Obviously this had not been done systematically or consistently.

Except for the finery displayed on Christmas Eve, the people's clothing had little of the brightness and color which we associate with street life in the East. The women wore their black sateen trousers, white shirtwaists and, in the currently cool weather, a cotton-padded jacket. The dull and shabby garments reflected the basic shortages which existed and which the North Vietnamese made no attempt to conceal. "Our girls don't look so pretty this year," one young man told me.

The shops were a discouragement. Some had closed. Others would have been better off closing for there was little on their shelves to buy. A special store had been established for the diplomatic colony to give foreigners access to the best of such consumer goods as were available. A visit to the diplomatic store was a commentary on the shortages which existed in the ordinary shops.

One afternoon I went to the diplomatic store, just across from the lovely Lake of the Restored Sword in the heart of Hanoi. What did I find there? The list was depressing:

Crudely cut women's slips and panties in bilious shades of blue and pink rayon, printed handkerchiefs in blue and brown squares resembling those sold in Moscow's Stolesnikov haberdashery stores in 1951, Chinese soap, white candles, little tin kerosene lanterns, a push-pull clown with a bell attached (from China), playing cards (from the Soviet Union), and can openers.

Another room was devoted to what passed for art goods or, I suppose, things you might buy for presents. Here I found lacquer ware of North Vietnamese manufacture, rather poorly done, cigarette boxes of wood and carved stone, rubber boots from Hanoi, plastic raincoats from China in pink and blue shades and plastic shopping bags, also in pink and blue.

On the day I visited the shop the items which seemed to be attracting the most attention were the plastic raincoats and raincoats and the rubber boots.

The section of the diplomatic store which did the most business was the food department. Here I found many diplomats shopping. Here I met some of my Soviet newspaper col-

leagues, and here I saw some Russians—burly men, tieless, with a rugged outdoor look about them—buying *Moskovskaya* vodka. They looked like, and probably were, construction workers from eastern Siberia, sent down to Hanoi to carry out some special tasks. I did not believe they were military men for they did not have the disciplined, close-shaven bearing of the Soviet Army officer.

What was there to buy in the food section? Bulgarian plum jam, jars of pickled Russian cucumbers and pickled Russian cabbage, Borzhumi mineral water, two kinds of Russian vodka (*Moskovskaya* and *Stolichnaya*), very large and fancy boxes of chocolate from China, gumdrops, Rumanian brandy, canned Russian crabmeat, Chinese powdered milk, Chinese tea, Chinese English-style tea biscuits in English-style tin boxes with English labels (very expensive) and, most improbable of all, half a dozen old boxes of Colman's mustard.

What could the Hanoi citizen buy in his own shops? Not very much.

Because of the severe shortages, many basic items of food and clothing no longer were being distributed through stores. The products were being delivered directly to the citizens through the factory or office in which they worked or at the apartment or neighborhood in which they lived.

This was not merely a matter of insuring equality in the division of scarce items. It also related to the dispersion of supplies to minimize losses from bombing. For example, the food supply of the country had been radically decentralized. Each province and each locality now had taken on responsibility for distribution rather than vesting it all in central Hanoi agencies. Supplies were sent directly to provincial centers and it was up to the provinces to see that their people were provided for.

What were the rations? The most important was rice. Rice was the basic diet of Vietnam. So long as the rice ration was maintained, or so Western diplomats thought, North Vietnamese morale and fighting capability would not be seriously affected. The ration ranged from 8 kilograms to 20 kilograms

a month, depending on the category of person—the smaller rations for evacuees, children and the aged, the larger for production workers.

The average was said to be 13 kilos, with students getting 15 and production workers 18 to 20. Persons evacuated to rural areas received 8 kilos, the theory being that they could more easily supplement their diet from local food resources. Apparently the ration had been maintained fairly well—in March of 1964 it was said to have averaged 14 kilograms a month. But there had been cuts in other kinds of food. Actually, in December, 1966, 10 percent of the ration was being provided in maize. The cost of the rationed rice, I was told, was very low—4 dong for 10 kilos.

Sugar was rationed at the rate of $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 kilo a month, depending on the recipient's category. The meat ration was 300 to 500 grams (10.5 to 17.5 ounces), and might be provided in the form of lard or fat.

Vegetables and fruit could be bought in the open market in fairly large quantities. Chicken was on sale (but not always) in government stores at 4 dong a kilo. In the peasant market it sold for double that price, or 8 dong.

The tightest item was meat. Although the basic diet of the Vietnamese is rice, they customarily eat it with meat or fish as well as vegetables. The ordinary North Vietnamese was getting very little meat under wartime conditions.

Clothing was also short. It was rationed at the equivalent of five or six yards of cloth per person per year, not much more than a cotton shirt and cotton trousers for a man or one dress for a woman.

Supplies of some essential items often vanished for a week or two at a time. This was also true of cigarettes, matches, soap and paper. In the countryside salt was often difficult to obtain.

So far as I was able to discover, there was not much of a black market. Peasants could sell part of their produce freely for whatever the traffic would bear. But they were compelled to deliver to the state at state-fixed prices the bulk of their

output. However, like peasants in any Communist country, they managed to keep enough food for their own needs and always had some to sell to city dwellers at prices that were two, or three or four times those of the state markets. Eggs, for example, were almost impossible to get in state stores, but were always available from peasants at high prices.

Despite short supplies, the government had cut some prices—largely, I thought, for purposes of morale. Bicycles, for instance, had been reduced by 30 percent. They now sold for about 200 dong. The price was the same for both Hanoi-built bikes and Chinese bicycles. The Hanoi factory had been scheduled to reach a production of 100,000 bikes in 1965, but the war had prevented it from attaining this goal. Now, with the enormous strain of moving men and material, the Chinese imports were vital in keeping North Vietnam's transportation running.

Bikes were not sold freely. To buy one required a special permit, issued through your factory or organization. On the black market a 200-dong Chinese bike fetched 1,000 dong. One evening, walking through the dark Hanoi streets, I encountered a crowd of some two hundred men and women quietly standing with their bicycles. I thought they were being dispatched to the South. Then I saw two large trucks crammed with new bicycles. The people had assembled to turn in their old worn-out bikes for new ones.

The best present you could give your girl friend in Hanoi, I was told, was not a box of candy, a bouquet of roses or even a diamond ring. It was a new bicycle chain. This and other spare bike parts constituted one of the major shortages in the country. The North Vietnamese were remarkably law-abiding people. Foreigners thought nothing of leaving a hundred dollars in cash in a bureau drawer. No servant would touch it. But bikes were different. No one left a bike without a padlock on the wheel, for bicycles were the one thing the North Vietnamese stole.

Bikes were not the only items on which prices were cut.

Medical supplies, medicines and bandages were reduced 50 percent. Radios were cut 30 percent to a range of 100 to 200 dong. But I did not find them to be very common. An official proudly told me that Hanoi did not jam the Voice of America. "We like our people to hear the V.O.A.," he said. "They can see what lies the Americans tell. For instance, it was very amusing for the people of Hanoi to hear the V.O.A. deny there had been any raids on their city on December 13 and 14."

There was not much ease or relaxation about life in Hanoi. I missed the vibrant street activity of oriental cities like Bangkok or Pnompenh or even Vientiane. Eastern diplomats frequently took breathers in Vientiane—which by any other standard would hardly have been considered a lively capital.

The tenor of life in Hanoi reflected the inevitable consequences of war. The old State Opera House, which had been the pride of the French capital and of which the North Vietnamese were very fond, was closed because the government would not permit so large a group of people to congregate in any one place. It was the same with church services. Mass was permitted only at 6 A.M. and 6 P.M. The shopping and commercial life of the city had been turned upside down. Shops opened now at 5 A.M. They closed at 8 A.M. They did not open again, for the most part, until late afternoon. The city assumed a semivacant aspect. There were no taxis. Only officials had the use of cars, and these were not too plentiful, mostly Russian Volgas or old Pobedas. There were streetcars, old and badly in need of new paint, battered buses in jungle camouflage and quite a few pedicabs, but they seemed as much used for the transportation of bulky bundles and light freight as for the conveyance of people.

Yet life went on. There were beer parlors and bars which began to fill up in the late afternoon and which were jammed by 6 P.M., with hundreds of bicycles parked outside. There were many small restaurants. And around the lovely little lakes which form islands of greenery in the midst of the city there

were still waterside cafés. Young people strolled through the parks along the lake fronts and idled away the late afternoon, eating a kind of sweet bun filled with onion fragments and drinking delicious *café au lait* or Hanoi beer. (Hanoi was very proud of its beer, which it insisted was the best in the East.) There were flower stands around the lakes and pretty girls to sell bouquets to flustered young men hurrying back from the front to visit their sweethearts.

And in the last days of my stay I saw along the sidewalks, again and again, men and women patiently chopping pumpkins into great mounds of thin slices. This was to make the traditional sweetmeat for Tet, the lunar New Year, which lay only three weeks off—candied pumpkin meat.

The war was on. North Vietnam was engaged in a struggle for life or death. But the holiday preparations went forward as, I imagined, they had a thousand or two thousand years ago. And when Tet arrived the city would be given over to the holiday spirit. I wished that I might have stayed to see it. For Tet was the great festival of Vietnam.

"It is so lovely," a Frenchwoman said to me. "At Tet they close off some of the principal streets to all traffic. You can only walk in them. The streets are nearly hip-deep in flowers. For now the flowers will be coming in from all over the country."

The first flowers of the tropical spring came with Tet. Everyone in Hanoi would be in the streets, walking through the drifts of flowers, drawing in the heady perfumes, enjoying once again the renewal of the earth's spirit.

Hanoi might be preparing for the worst. But the lovely Hanoi women, with their supple figures, their grace, the elegance of their movements, would dress again in their finest silks. There would be flowers in their hair and they would walk, waist-deep in blossoms, as they had for past centuries, with their admiring men at their sides.

It was true that, as Ho Chi Minh had warned his people, they must prepare for the worst. But they would also enjoy the present—and the past—at least for a fleeting interlude.

Tet had been celebrated long before this war, long before the Communists, and, I thought, long after the memory of this war has joined the legends of the wars with the Mongols and the Mings, Tet will remain as the great manifestation of the spirit and tradition of the Vietnamese people.

XII

Bonne Année

The crow of a village cock and the bark of a stray village dog ushered in 1967 to me. I was deep in the North Vietnamese countryside, eighty-five miles south of Hanoi, sleeping on a straw mattress in a wooden slatted bed in the clay-floored headquarters of the An Hoa farm commune.

On New Year's Eve, after dark, we had left Hanoi and driven in our camouflaged Volga sedan south along Route Nationale No. 1. Dark though it was, I could see fresh bomb damage since my last expedition down the highway, a week earlier. I also saw new repairs—some of the bridges which had been out of service a week ago now were back in use.

We drove slowly through the night. The truck convoys were heavy, as usual, but the pace was steady. At intervals along the highway and on the outskirts of each city, including Hanoi, there were sentry posts and sentries who carefully