

W Fict

1966

TRAN MAI NAM

THE NARROW STRIP OF LAND

THE NARROW STRIP OF LAND

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE - HANOI

*THE NARROW STRIP
OF LAND*

TRAN MAI NAM

W
FILE

Fid¹⁹⁶⁶

SUBJ.

DATE

1966

SUB-GAT.

THE NARROW STRIP OF LAND

(The Story of a Journey)

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

HANOI — 1969

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Narrow Strip of Land is the report of a trip taken during a mission in the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from mid-1966 to the beginning of 1967. Its author, the writer Tran Mai Nam, war correspondent of the People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Viet Nam, has put down his impressions.

Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces are situated in the extreme north of South Viet Nam. The first is crossed by the 17th parallel. The second contains Hue, the ancient imperial city, today almost completely obliterated by American bombing and shelling. The two provinces form a narrow strip of land between the sea on the east and the Truong Son mountain range on the west, the natural frontier with Laos. Here, the year is divided into two seasons: the dry season from March to August and the rainy season from September to February, often marked by catastrophic floods. The population, estimated at nearly 800,000 people, lives

primarily on rice cultivation done by rudimentary means.

In the history of the armed resistance against the French colonialists (1946-1954), the people of the Quang Tri - Thua Thien sector wrote many great and famous pages. That part of National Highway No. 1 which crosses the area was called "The Unhappy Highway" by the French expeditionary forces. Since 1954, Quang Tri and Thua Thien have been confronted with increasingly greater numbers of American and puppet forces. Two G.I. battalions in 1966 became five divisions in 1968. Even so, this gave the American commander General Rosson no satisfaction, for the pressure of the People's Liberation Armed Forces never relaxes in spite of this enormous American pressure-play.

On the contrary, the Americans have been dealt heavy blows of such crippling violence that the 6,000 Marines trapped in Khe Sanh were forced to flee in a precipitous and unforgettable rout in June 1968.

The Narrow Strip of Land will give the reader a better understanding of the extraordinary and victorious struggle of the South Vietnamese people under the banner of the National Front for Liberation against the most formidable invasion in our history.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Hanoi, 1969

I

We march in the desolate gray of the forest. Around us, giant trees, their foliage stripped by poison chemicals, thrust their stark branches into the sky. Their ghostly silhouettes march across a low and cloudy sky, heavy like a soaked quilt. Our feet tread on many seasons of fallen leaves, the last of which show a startling green over the rust color of the others. Over them all the rains have hastened the rot.

In the distance a space opens up. Uprooted trees lie fallen at every angle. A country of the Apocalypse as though some Furie in an impotent rage had turned his axe without rhyme or reason against these inanimate, harmless forest beings.

Our eyes have become red from watching such devastation. Everywhere in South Viet Nam, only bombs and sbells. But here, on these mountains green with heavy growth, such a rage against nature seems

insane. One finds himself thinking: "But what do they want?" Is it possible that the superforts fly all the way from Guam, so far through the air, just to change the color of this forest? Is their objective the fields of manioc and corn, or this impenetrable jungle with its streams and turbulent rivers?

Yesterday afternoon, the chief of the relay station called us into his hut of branches in the deep shadow of the undergrowth to go over the details of the route we are to travel. His explanations, in almost an undertone, took on an unaccountable tone of gravity. The effect of this gripped us, not only because of the tone of his voice, but because the way ahead of us was particularly difficult. A way with little cover, full of sharp climbs, and every prospect of frequent bombing by planes and artillery. Tight surveillance by reconnaissance planes over sections of our route, to say nothing of unpredictable brushes with patrols of the enemy's special forces. Passwords, special signals, recognition signs, both for the day and the night, in case contact is broken. The chief told us everything, not even forgetting to tell us what to do in case we had wounded or dead.

This morning he had introduced us to two Liberation soldiers who would be our guides. Both were very young. One had dry and curly hair, a thin figure and olive skin. He was the leader. The other, slightly pockmarked and with great round eyes, wore black trousers and shirt, revealing the round, white arms and legs of an adolescent. We looked at him with uncertainty.



"Are you already eighteen, comrade?" I asked him to get more acquainted.

The young man stuttered some incomprehensible words. When I repeated my question, he answered in a more understandable voice, as though he wanted to change the subject, "Of course I'm eighteen!"

We begin our journey. U.S. Air Force planes above never stop their annoyance. Like masked gangsters, the B-57s hide behind the clouds, carrying out their bombing by coordinates. The whistle and explosion of bombs sows thunder in every corner of the forest. Formations of Phantoms, the howl of death coming from their jet engines, streak towards the North on the other side of the Ben Hai River. But most annoying of all is the continuous growl of the reconnaissance planes.

Our road becomes tougher and tougher. Road? It is not even a path! Just a simple track opened by our guides in the low brush on the sides of the mountains, sometimes only crude steps cut into the bare rock. Often, having crawled under the trunk of a fallen tree, you straighten up again triumphantly only to find yourself jerked violently to the ground, caught by a branch hooked in your pack. In many places we cannot walk upright, but have to use our hands and feet to jump from branch to branch like monkeys.

Now we are marching at a good pace. Suddenly our young guide stops to take off his sandals, too heavy with mud. He pushes them to one side of the trail with his foot, covering them with hastily-cut palm leaves without even checking to see if the camouflage is good. Amused by this, I am just about to point out a better

hiding place when he quickly returns to his place at the head of our file.

His cotton hat has made him too warm and now hangs behind on his shoulder, leaving a squarish head with hair in a brush cut. The heavy pack he carries on his back and his way of walking bent forward give him the air of a little panther. Completely occupied with studying the trail, he pays no attention to the roar of the planes above, training his eyes on every bush and every crevice in the rocks, automatic rifle in his hand ready to fire. Reassured, we congratulate ourselves on having been given these good guides.

We go north. This is the narrow strip of land of our motherland. When I studied geography in school, I had imagined Viet Nam as a slim young girl with a wasp waist. And here under our very feet is this waist, tightened as if with a corset! From this height the eastern limits of our country do not seem far. There is the ocean before us, almost touching the feet of these mountains. From here to that turquoise mirror with the emerald reflections seems only a few hours' march.

On this narrow battlefield, our positions and the enemy's were bound to become interlocked like the pieces on a chess board. The same hamlet shelters both adversaries, both use the same paths. The same path we are following is also full of the traces of a pell-mell retreat of American Marines. Many green bulletproof vests lie abandoned with the words still legible on them: "Don't forget to wear it, it will save your life". Someone has pulled rectangular pieces of white plastic from the stuffing and scattered them on the ground.

The area looks like the aftermath of a card party broken up by the police from which the players have fled in panic. There, radio batteries. A little farther, empty tin cans, bayonets still in their metallic cases, empty gold-colored rifle cartridges lying everywhere alongside multicolored candy wrappers. Countless empty cigarette packages.

Any move from one place to another in this area is carried out like a military expedition. The men of the Liberation Army move only with a loaded rifle.

A wooded hill rises in front of us. Our young guide advances only with the greatest caution, halting frequently to search the surroundings and listen carefully. There was no morning rain, only a cold wind from time to time. Now it rises to a gale, violently tossing the branches and shaking down on us so many heavy drops of rain from the leaves that it sounds like waves on the seashore.

Reaching the top of the hill, our guide stops again, narrowed eyes searching. He picks up a pebble and throws it into a grove hidden by the white mist. Frightened birds wheel up with terrified cries. The boy turns towards us, smiles and motions for us to approach.

He waits for us, face red dripping with sweat. "Puppet rangers!" he tells us, pointing with his finger to the tree under which he stands.

We see bullet holes. Not long ago, the puppet rangers had come in helicopters and set up an ambush here. One of our couriers was killed in the fight that followed. But we knocked down four of the enemy and

forced the others to flee. Telling us the facts succinctly and in a whisper, our guide beams, as though it had happened far away and had had nothing to do with him. But as he turns to take the lead, he again becomes grave, thoughtful and cautious. A sure sign that we must be on our guard.

After we ford a stream, a wide path opens before us. Our guide waits for us at the bottom of a small slope. It is clear that he wants to tell us something. We catch up with him. In the same whispering voice, he says, "Here, comrades, they bomb and shell often and at random."

"Is this the famous 'saddle path'?" someone asks.

"The same."

And he resumes his march calmly. The day before, the relay station chief had gone into great detail about this section of the route, a special target of the enemy. Many bombs had in fact fallen precisely on this path we are treading. The trees are still covered with red mud thrown up by the blasts. He had told us to cover this stretch in a hurry. Our guide says that the planes bomb at random. But surely only madmen would drop bombs capable of wiping out whole sections of forest and digging craters thirty meters wide? Even so, seeing him increase his pace, we understand that it is necessary.

The sun came out only late in the morning. A joyless sun whose pale rays made the steaming jungle suffocating.

A stream winding between hills disemboweled by bombs bars our way. It is one of those pretty water courses which tumbles down from the range in the west where day after day the blue mountains block off the horizon in a continuous line. From these mountains comes sweet life-giving water which miraculously cools the hot sands of the narrow strip along the coast.

We have gotten into the habit of counting the stages of our trip by the number of these streams. Each one marks off a section of tough climbs, arid hills, and each is a true barrier through which we must force our way. They are clear calm waters with many fish, but after several hours of heavy rain suddenly change into roaring torrents full of rapids. Many groups such as ours, caught by the sudden and violent rise of the water, have been forced to camp for several days in the forest, eating only rice soup, wild roots and leaves, before they could get across. Enemy planes choose these capricious rivers as targets because they have a north and a south bank. The Americans will stop only when they have changed them into ugly gashes on the face of our country. Someone told us that in the northern half of Viet Nam, the Cua Tung, the Kien Giang, the Quan Hau, the Gianh, the Ron, the Lam rivers have all been made into such gaping wounds.

We see white foam on the surface of the river blocking our way. The water is rising. The last rain has turned the path down to the river into mud, a red line

traced clearly against the green of the trees and vegetation torn up and churned by the bombs.

Our young guide halts at the top of the slope. A reconnaissance plane is following the course of the river. Its noise and sneaky slowness exasperate us. The chief of our group, who has been walking behind, comes up and proposes that we find a good place to rest. Then he turns towards his comrade. They have not talked together since we left. Nevertheless, everything has gone like a well-oiled machine.

We squat in a grove not yet touched by poison chemicals. Thinking of our coming climb in the mountains, one of us had said when we left, "Up there, there won't be a green umbrella like this to hide us. We'll need dead branches and leaves. The L 19s fly so low that you can see the pilot clearly as he leans out and sometimes smiles at you!" Actually, after each spraying of poison chemicals, it takes less than six months for new green to appear, because the low trees are not usually killed.

My friend Quoc easily finds an armful of tender leaves, installs himself on top of the pile and calls it his "soft mattress". He tries to protect the extraordinarily wide trousers which he stubbornly wears in spite of the advice of those who know the forest underbrush.

The plane circles above the ford, banking often to get a better look at the surface of the water. Not a soul on either bank. What attracts his attention? We feel anxiety taking hold of us. If our crossing is held up, we'll miss our rendezvous with the guides of the next section of the trip and be forced to retrace our

steps. With this sun, it wouldn't surprise us to see a storm break in the afternoon or tonight. We know from experience how the rains of the Truong Son are! The rain doesn't come with the music of raindrops, it falls without interruption like a raging cataract pouring through a hole in the sky. The rivers become angry, bucking horses. In such a storm we would be reduced to endless waiting in some relay station, simmering with impatience.

Quoc approaches our guides. The wide brim of his cotton hat shades his eyes without hiding an extraordinary light in them. "Will we be able to cross, comrades?" he asks.

Because of the nature of his mission, Quoc is more in a hurry than the rest of us. The guides look at each other. You can read the uneasiness of concern for the group in their young faces. "We'll have to wait until the plane leaves," the leader finally answers.

"Are there any other fords near here?" Quoc insists.

"Yes, but the water is far more rapid. Some of you can't swim."

Xuong has been listening like us but remains silent. When we see him silent, we can be sure that there is some river to cross during the day. The rivers worry him more than the B-52s, B-57s and enemy commandos. "Are the waters swift? Will we cross on a raft or have to swim?" he asks himself anxiously.

"What a disaster if we're held up!" Quoc remarks.

Silence from the guides. Then: "It is still too early," the head of our group says. "Take it easy. We'll tell you."

Returning to us, Quoc takes a cellophane pack containing small pieces of tobacco stems, dry like bamboo sticks, which he breaks. Rolling them in a piece of newspaper, he lights his emergency cigarette, shielding the flame with his hat. It is evident that he prolongs this occupation to lull his impatience.

From time to time, the guides talk in low voices. Only fragments of sentences, just enough for them to understand each other. But we know that they are discussing how to get us across the river in time so that it doesn't harm our missions. What sort of missions they do not know, but all of them are important in their eyes. They are looking for a way to fool the spy plane, "the Old Maid", this snooping woman whose beady eyes can detect the slightest wisp of smoke in the forest. Special equipment for detecting our radio transmitters. Photographs so clear that things painted green can be distinguished from the natural green of the forest. And waiting behind the spy plane are the big planes, guns ready — B and F series planes ready to take off at the slightest signal.

My eyes suddenly see a wild orchid growing on the rotten trunk of a tree next to the path. I marvel at its vigorous, supple stem and thin leaves of shining green. Long ago, when I was a child, I watched my grandfather raise an orchid exactly like this one. He had a passion for these flowers, delicate like the wings of a butterfly, which bloom once a year, give off

an intoxicating perfume and last a long time. Here in this forest, then, is where these marvellous things come from — from rotting tree trunks like this one.

The murmuring of the guides reaches my ears.

“Will it be a commando parachute attack, or is the plane watching something in the river?”

“I think it’s a rope in the river...”

They think that perhaps a group - which forded before us has left their rope in the river. This would cause a suspicious ripple on the surface.

“I’m going down to make sure.”

“Not you. Let me ...”

The guides lower their voices. They do not want us to feel their anxiety.

The young guide disappears among the fallen trees along the path leading down to the river bank.

The “Old Maid” goes on muttering above the ford. With wide eyes we search the bank of white sand. If someone shows up there, the pilot cannot help but see him and at once a hail of bullets will hit the water. Then what will happen to the young man?

Everything is deadly quiet except for the noise of the water breaking against the rocks. Surely the guide must have reached the bank by now. After all, it isn’t

far. Everything must have gone fine, for the pilot has not spotted him, just as he has not seen us. Yes, but how oppressive the atmosphere is! Quoc rolls a new cigarette of tobacco stems and the hard part of the leaves, which he had been wise enough not to throw away when he had plenty of tobacco.

Suddenly the plane tilts on its side. Has the pilot seen something?

"In case he fires," the trip chief calmly commands, not taking his eyes off the river, "take cover without being seen."

The plane comes around and over the ford again, banks more sharply this time. Quoc forgets to light the cigarette he has just rolled. I am as tense as a piano wire. I imagine the clear eyes of our guide hidden below meeting the grim, searching eyes of the pilot. The brute's lips move. The little microphone under his chin bobs up and down as he transmits something.

But the plane passes into the distance. It does not come back immediately as before. The growl of the engine grows fainter, it becomes a small black speck in the sky and disappears over the top of a mountain. Gone for good? Not possible, I think. But everything has become calm again. Even the roaring of the water seems strangely calm.

The trip leader turns to us, visibly satisfied and says, "All right, comrades, get ready."

A slight cough comes up from the river. The man picks up the pack of his comrade and hoists it on his

shoulder. From his wince, I expect him to fall. But no, the additional weight only causes him to bend a bit.

"Let's go," he says.

We quickly strap on our packs and follow him. Filing between the fallen trees, we slip down. I am still puzzled by what made the plane leave.

The young guide is waiting for us at the edge of the river.

He turns as we arrive, smiling with irregular, but not ugly teeth. He is dressed only in his underpants. With his slightly round belly, he looks even more like a boy. He is covered with sand.

"Was it a rope?" his comrade asks.

"No. The rope has been pulled up on the other side."

"What was the plane after?" grumbles the other, thoughtfully. Then: "Let's go. We have to cross quickly, comrades."

The river pour down before us, transparent and noisy. Some ten meters downstream there is a waterfall, not very high, but enough to be dangerous for anyone carried over it by the current. A big rope of twisted fibers is tied to a tree on the other side.

I look at the swirling water and estimate my strength. I am carrying a heavy pack, a wide belt in which I have a pistol, a large can, a ball of cooked rice and a first-aid kit. Not counting my sandals.

Meanwhile, a group of Liberation soldiers arrive. While we are wondering what to do with our things, they have already packed theirs. Slings their rifles

across their backs, they throw themselves noisily into the water. In the middle of the river, the large nylon sack which holds their things and floats them across begins to turn with the current. Some of them lose their footing and the current begins to take them rapidly towards the falls. But those in charge of safety go after them and help them to the other side.

For these young men it's a game to face the water. Their laughter and jokes would convince anyone. In the flick of an eye, they have all gained the other side. They climb the bank and disappear among the trees. They have passed like a quick summer storm.

Everything is calm again. But us, we are still on this side, and on the trail it is always necessary to cross such danger points as this in a hurry.

The trip leader takes off his black clothes. His thin body carries the scar of a large and deep shoulder wound. A disabled veteran! There are many of these no longer able to fight who continue to work as guides.

"We have to use the rope," he says to his young comrade. "The current is strong and some of this group can't swim."

Everybody is pleased. Quoc, with bad grace, is resigned to showing his thin thighs which look like unsharpened pencils. He and I tie a round life preserver on the flat chest of Xuong. As an extra precaution, we knot our hammock ropes together as a security line and tie it to his back. With all his equipment, he looks like a deep sea diver.

To stretch a rope through galloping water is not easy. The two guides cross the river to get the rope



tied on the other side. Then they throw themselves into the water and swim towards us with the free end of the rope, using the current. But in the middle, the turbulent water begins to sweep them towards the falls. They drop the rope and quickly rejoin us on the bank. After several attempts, their skin becomes livid with the cold. We offer them some skin cream against the cold, but they prefer to wait and use it after the rope is brought over and tied on our side.

They do not hurry as before. Haste has been useless. Folding their arms against their bodies and hunching up against the cold, they look thoughtfully at the irascible torrent.

The trip leader murmurs in an exasperated voice, "We can't wait here in the open until some group happens to come this way and brings us the rope!"

His comrade looks at him a moment and smiles. We do not know why. His blue lips seem to make his smile bigger. Then they discuss rapidly in a low voice. Quoc wraps himself in a piece of parachute cloth and joins the conversation.

This time the young guide crosses alone. When he arrives with the rope at the middle of the river and starts losing his footing, the other, from this bank, hurries out into the current to help. The two fight with all their energy against the current and the rope is finally on our side.

We climb and climb endlessly. Really an incredible slope. All around us the green of growth is untouched. The trees are centuries old. The forest is open and airy. From time to time a cloud passes by and all the scene becomes unreal. The place must be wonderful, but we are too worried and exhausted by the climb to really be aware of it. At times, one has the impression that the man behind pulls you back for fun, but no, it is simply the weight of your pack. No matter how hard you have tried to lighten it, it seems like a hundred kilograms on your back. You are tense and the veins on your forehead swell with your rapid pulse. Eyebrows do not keep the sweat out of your eyes and they sting intolerably. Your breathing buzzes in your ears. All this drains you of strength and like a punctured balloon you find yourself deflated in less time that it takes to say.

Our young guide turns towards us. His face has become very red from his exertions. "Another effort, comrades!" he says. "Up there..."

He seems almost to add, "... we shall refresh ourselves". But with what? The trails of the present resistance war are no longer at all like they were in the war against the French. This struggle against the most ferocious enemy of mankind, a hundred times harder than in the past, has demanded the participation of all those who used to run some kind of business along these trails. No more tiny inexpensive food places in the middle of the forest. Our guide can only mean that "up there" we will simply "refresh ourselves" by eating the rice ball hanging at our waist.

Xuong, who walks behind me, raises his voice : " What did he say, the little cherub ? "

I repeat exactly what I just heard. Xuong stops, wiping his face with a handkerchief. " Refresh ourselves with what ? " he demands.

" I don't know myself. "

" A real kid, our guide. "

He lets his imagination go : up there is a fine tangerine tree or at least a wild tamarind. I force myself to believe it in order to forget for a moment my burning thirst and the load which is crushing me.

From the top, a light-hearted voice interrupts : " Hey, hurry up. You're making revolution, not taking a stroll in a public park... The soldiers told us they met you on the bank of the river ages ago. We almost thought you'd fallen into the hands of the enemy. "

It is the new guide for the next section of our trip who has come to relieve the others. Afraid of missing him, we have force-marched since crossing the river. Our guide doesn't explain why we are late — that it was due to us, his travelers.

" Is it heavy ? "

" Of course. "

We reach the top of the hill, to be welcomed with a frank cordiality. " Your bones must be broken, comrades. Get rid of your packs, eat your rice and rest a little. From here to the next relay point, the going is smooth as velvet. "

It is no exaggeration to say that we dump our loads promptly. But even that takes an effort !

The clouds hang from the peaks. At the foot of the mountains the plain appears crystal clear with its verdant villages, paddy fields gleaming like mirrors and strategic roads crossing it like long and wide zebra stripes of red. Farther off are the marvelous white sand dunes like a mirage against a blue sky and sea on which the horizon is hard to distinguish.

A breeze from far away, cooled by the mountain, penetrates the pores of our skin and bathes us with a marvellous freshness. Our fatigue miraculously disappears.

Sitting a little way off, our young guide stretches his arms wide and fills his lungs. "The wind," he says. "...Refresh yourselves!"

Ah. This is what he meant before. He had simply wanted to announce the existence of this providential breeze which the mountain reserves for those who climb its slopes day and night.

After we have drunk in as much of this life-giving breeze as we can, we start eating our rice balls with crushed peanuts and a little salt.

Our new guide has only grilled rice. We invite him to eat our food with us, but he explains that he doesn't like balled rice eaten with salt. On each trip, he asks the cook to grill him a handful of rice. It smells good and it warms you up, he tells us.

He opens his food can, shakes some grains into the palm of his hand and munches them with a good appetite. He divides his small ration generously among us so that we can taste it. When he laughs the lines in the outer corners of his

eyes prove that he is no longer very young. But the features of his face are very handsome. Even the dark circles under his eyes add to his charm.

"Did you see the commandos land from helicopters a little while ago?" he asks his colleagues.

"Where?"

"From here I saw that it was near the river. I was pretty sure you had already come far beyond it."

"Ah. That was the reason...We wondered why the reconnaissance plane flew over the river so long."

"Be careful on your way back, otherwise you'll run right into the middle of them."

"Bah! Now that the travelers are safe and sound..." The previous chief of the trip doesn't finish. But we understand: the only worry our guides have is the security of their travelers. They themselves don't give a damn for the commandos.

The young guide smiles: "I'm afraid that they have landed right on the sandals I hid on the road," he says.

"Where did you leave them?"

"At the foot of Hill C."

"Well, you have your rifle. Beat on the enemy to get your sandals back."

"Of course." He turns to look at his rifle resting against a tree, as though to make sure it is there.

"Since you're only a kid, they won't answer back!"

The joke makes the young man blush to his ears.

Our guides succeed each other with each section of the trail. They are not alike. The one in charge of us this time has a very open and friendly character.

Knowing how tired we are, he takes some of the load from each of us. Gathering it all together in a bundle, he puts it on his own shoulders. The route is less exposed to commando attack, but it is not "smooth as velvet" as he had told us. It is still the tough mountains.

He regales us with a thousand anecdotes all along the trail. The habits and dress of the mountain people, their revolutionary spirit. The battles of Ba Long, Cam Lo, Khe Sanh. Irascible travelers or particularly affable ones in the groups he has guided. Stories of his native village...

Other guides, to urge us on, often answer our questions about the route by saying that it is far and we have to hurry. But this one is different. "We'll be there soon," he invariably says. When a section happens to be particularly hard, he announces: "We'll soon be through this!" According to him, no hill is too high. His intention obviously is to calm his travelers and keep them in a good humor. Should they get impatient, he would see to it.

Finally, when one of us thinks his answers are too optimistic, he turns to telling a story, supposed to have come straight from the mouth of a cadre whom he recently guided on the trail.

"A rather old cadre," he begins, "happened to come to this mountain for the first time. He found the route a hundred times tougher than any he had travelled over

during the resistance against the French. One afternoon, he was dead tired from a day of marching. The guide answered each of his questions by telling him that it wasn't very far now to their destination. That night, exhausted, the cadre ordered his group to make camp in the open; they would continue the next morning.

'But it's only a few more steps,' the guide interrupted.

'With you, those steps are seven leagues each,' retorted the cadre, who didn't trust him any more. 'No matter what you say, we camp here for the night.'

"They pitched their tents, strung up their hammocks, found wood, went for water, built a fire and cooked their rice in the forest. Our man naturally had to help too, like the others. Of course, all of this would have been avoided if they had reached the relay station. They were able to rest only after two hours of this hard work.

"The next day, they set out again on the route. After ten minutes of walking, the guide turned to the travellers and said, 'Comrades, we have arrived.' There was the relay station!"

In spite of our fatigue, we burst out laughing. Even so, it is only after two hours of exhausting march that we reach the next relay station. Night has fallen. Newly built, it consists only of a hut of branches with a floor covered with leaves which crackle under our feet. We are too many. In addition to our group, there are also some artillery cadres and the men of the station. The chief of the relay station is a tall man with white hair. Dressed in black, he wears socks and clean, neat sandals. He is the image of comfort. Receiving us with a great

warmth, he recommends that we open our tarpaulins and spread them out so that we can lie down and wait.

He himself begins to prepare us a meal, without doubt to give his guides who have just come back a rest. But some of the guides busy themselves around him or go to get the water for him. He cuts banana flowers into thin slices and decants a broth to make us a soup. A guide from the mountain people who has come in after us puts a small bird into the pot, neatly plucked and cleaned. Our guide also throws in three red crabs which he has caught at the edge of a stream.

It grows colder and colder. After we wash, we have to put on our sweaters. Xuong, who has just shaved in honor of the "triumphant crossing" of the last river, seems many years younger. He writes something in his diary. Quoc paws around in his things looking for a spice to liven up the soup, all the while keeping up a running dialogue of advice on how to use the bird and the crabs to the best advantage. Sitting on a beam, I calmly watch the relay station chief prepare a perfect cuisine, as good as the ones I used to watch my mother prepare when I came home from school.

When one of the artillery men turns on his transistor to get the evening news, an open fire is lighted. At once, everything becomes animated.

One has to spend a night in the mountains to appreciate a fire. A magic flower with red pistils and marvellous yellow petals. Capable of pushing back shadows from the huts, of dispersing the cold air, of enlivening men with its gay warmth and beauty. The fire draws us and we hold our stiff hands to the

flames. We gaze into it as if to discover its miracle, as though seeing it for the first time.

When everything is ready, we put our packs and bundles in the corner and serve the food. Hosts and guests mingle together at the rice and the soup. Everything is divided. The light from the fire is not enough to see clearly—it is screened off as a defense measure—and the artillery men generously use two of their electric torches and hook them to the roof, counting on the Americans soon to provide them with more batteries. We are too many around the tray. The guides give the travellers the best seats and sit a bit back, even if it means passing their bowls to us to refill.

Never have I tasted the true flavor of rice until this trip in the Truong Son. I've been told that it's the excellent spring water which brings out the flavor. If this is true, there are certainly other factors. The dinner tonight seems particularly appetizing. I find in it the good smell of the mountain, the sweetness of the plain and the saltiness of the sea. With its proteins and vitamins, our meal is complete and good.

As we congratulate him, the relay station chief smiles. His teeth are white and regular, in spite of his age. His smile is charming, although it makes him older because of the lines in his face which accompany it. He seems extremely pleased that we appreciate his talent as a cook.

We suddenly realize that he has long ago put his bowl aside.

“ But uncle, are you through already ? ” Xuong asks him.

He quickly puts his hand over his bowl to keep us from refilling it. “ I’ve had mine. ”

Why do you eat so little ? ”

I look around me. Most of the guides have left their places. One of them comes back through the half open door with his bowl and aluminium spoon already washed.

“ But what kind of business is this ? ” shouts Quoc. “ You rationed yourself for us ! ”

“ But no, no, ” the man protests energetically, against the evidence. “ While you were eating one bowl, we finished off three. ”

There is just enough space on the floor for the travellers and the old head of the relay station to stretch out side by side. The guides sleep in hammocks hooked above us, one above the other in two tiers, some of them up near the thatched roof.

A hard section of the Tri-Thien route has been covered. We think of our guides, as we do every evening. During the entire afternoon, after the two young men had shaken hands with us, saying “ Good trip ! ”, our thoughts have not left them. We fear something might

happen to them on their way back. I have the impression that on the more exposed sections of the way, those responsible for this route planted the most beautiful flowers—the most proved guides for the most dangerous sections.

“Good trip!” they had said. It was not a banal wish. We know that they are ready to sacrifice everything they hold dear to make this wish come true. More than that they give their travellers many other things, which we can only gather under one vague word, “affection”. They take pains day after day to find the way to get us over the dangerous parts as fast as possible, only because they are concerned for our safety.

The two artillery men talk together in low voices. Snatches of phrases just enough to make themselves understood. Under this shaky roof which a heavy rain would collapse, the officer who arrived this evening with his broken sandals in his hand, discusses passionately the best way to smash the Yankees in their fortified enclaves. He turns towards us to ask about the trail over which we have just come. When I enumerate the difficulties, he continues: “Why don’t we dig a tunnel like we did at Dien Bien Phu?”

“The distance is far too great.”

“But no! The troops who besieged Dien Bien Phu dug something like 400 kilometers of trenches. It’s impossible to believe that our people, all together in a mortal fight with the Yankees, can’t dig a tunnel even 2,000 kilometers long!”

I have to admit that his idea is not unreasonable.

"Surely," he adds, "in such a tunnel, what could they do to us, even if we marched with banners?"

"Yes," the old chief of relay interrupts, "if we had to, we could dig a tunnel ten times as long. But it's not necessary—yet. In the North, the most furious bombings haven't stopped our convoys. Here in the forest, they can't stop the advance of our barefoot Liberation soldiers. A torn-up trail is replaced at once. And after all, we can always pass through the bomb craters. Why should it matter? Since when has the Liberation Army been afraid to get its feet dirty?"

The artillery men are already sound asleep when we hear the sound of shelling from an enemy garrison. Planes search the night. So much the worse for the pilots who are deprived of their sleep!

The guides continue speaking in low voices. The old chief of relay joins their conversation. He is two or three times their age, but he gets along very well with them, even when the talk is of things not generally interesting to older people.

The guide from the mountain people—heavy eyebrows and gray eyes—who walked behind us on the last section without once talking to his comrades, now becomes astonishingly loquacious.

"When the revolution wins in the South," he says, "I'll go walking in Hanoi and attend meetings and so I will meet Uncle Ho. Then I will go to China to see Tien An Men Square and after that to the Soviet Union to walk in the Kremlin."

The conversation continues on the theme: "When will the revolution win in South Viet Nam?"

"I will wait for that day to get married... to a singer... even ugly, so long as she can sing well. She will lull me to sleep every night with her songs..."

"I," says the talkative and handsome one, "I will tell my wife to kill a pig to celebrate the event. Then, she will carry me on her bike to the city. What rejoicing there'll be, my friends!"

Our comrade has his own ideas. Under each of his words is hidden joking. A jovial character with contagious gaiety. I do not know if he is really married. If so, it is certainly to a pretty girl who loves life as much as he does.

The old chief of relay suddenly asks, "And Toan? Is he asleep already? Did anyone remind him that he has to prepare breakfast early tomorrow morning?"

"That one!" someone answers. "He's always forgetting something. He didn't say anything about it. We'll need many balls of rice for all these travellers."

"Wake him up and remind him."

"No," says the handsome one. "Let him sleep. I'll take care of the breakfast. I don't know what's the matter with me, but from 3:00 o'clock in the morning I can't seem to sleep... Sh-h! Let's speak in a low voice so that we don't wake our guests..."

This reminds me of the blue circles under the eyes of our guide. Lack of sleep, certainly. How can a

man with such a jolly character have insomnia? And what does he think of during those hours while he waits for sleep to come? Not necessarily gay things. These he saves for his friends, his chief and his travelers. In this land where the enemy tries to destroy the slightest thing that moves, who can say that apart from the national tragedy we all share he does not have a death in the family to avenge? I am convinced that during his sleepless hours the guide thinks of very serious things, perhaps of the tragedies which have happened to him or his dear ones.

The theme of the triumph of the revolution goes on steadily. Everyone agrees that credit for victory must also be given to all those trees and plants on the Truong Son which sustain the life of so many revolutionaries. Banana trees, bamboo, tamarinds and a dozen different improvized vegetables found on the spot... Our friends try to classify them in order of their merit.

The night is truly deep and a little awesome on these heights. The lone eagles and the talkative and mischievous chimpanzees must be asleep at this hour. Bands of elephants pass majestically through the forest breaking everything and making new trails under their heavy feet. Supple tigers, with a proud walk, search for their prey in some devastated corner of the forest which the Yankees have had to abandon in a hurry. Gray boas, spotted panthers, black bears, the fighting Indian oxen called gaurs, wander in the blackness.

Before dawn, all of them will have gone back to their holes and lairs, and only their footprints will remain for us to see. Then it will be time for the Liberation soldiers who are our guides to put on their cotton hats and black clothes, and to take to the trail again, packs on their backs and rifles slung over their shoulders. Forward! — the ceaseless movement begins again from one end of the Truong Son to the other.

I suddenly regret that I am not a poet who can sing the merits of our guides.

II

Many are the roads which lead to the revolution. For some the road offers no difficulty. For others, it is more tortuous. The people of the Truong Son seem born to make revolution.

In February 1955, the "denounce Communists" campaign began in Tri-Thien, baptizing and at the same time abusing the name "patriot". Three waves came within a few months. Veterans of the earlier resistance were chased from the plains, forced to flee the narrow green valleys of Tam Giang and the filao groves and make their way to the jungle.

But the machiavelian enemy wouldn't stop until they had deprived the revolutionaries of every refuge. They sent troops into the jungle.

Then the systematic destruction of the Kinh (or Viet) villages began, even though the soldiers were of the same race. They raided the national minority villages

to capture the Kinh who had taken refuge there. The mountain people were herded together at bayonet point to watch the massacre of these people from the plain indiscriminately called "Viet Cong"* . Occasionally even some of the mountain people were executed. But this meant nothing to the butchers—"Error is better than negligence". What was essential was to make the mountain people understand that it was better for them not to hide the Kinh, who were always executed when they were caught.

The mountain people were confronted with a very clear choice: these revolutionaries deprived of their right to live, without a grain of cereal or a pinch of manioc flour, without even a weapon—or authorities and troops armed to the teeth, who could determine life or death as they pleased. Without hesitation, the mountain people chose the revolutionaries.

It was also a choice between two ways of life. On the one hand, an easy existence with their villages spared, their houses, their fields, their paddies, their tame elephants, their animals, their pigs, to say nothing of their right to a new axe, salt and enough money to buy the beautiful things coming up from the plains. On the other hand, rice without salt, fire, pillage, shelling and other horrors certain to fall on them quickly.

Knowing exactly what they were doing, the mountain people chose the dangerous life and the revolution.

* Literally: Vietnamese communists. A derogatory term for patriots.

Having no firearms, they still use the crossbow and sharpened spikes. Anything used to kill wild beasts in the forest can also be used to kill human beasts. The enemy being more intelligent than the wild beasts, it is only necessary to have more ingenuity. The old ones have their wisdom, the young their strength. Put them together and you have every variety of trap! Buried sharpened spikes to pierce the feet. Lateral spikes to get the heart and entrails. Spikes hung in the trees to sow death from above. Combinations of spikes, coming from every direction, from which the enemy cannot escape even if he has wings. Make every blade of grass and every leaf help with the hunt, so that these monsters with human faces meet death with every step.

The mountain people do not do things half way. Of every hundred baskets of rice they harvest, 95 go to the revolution. They—everybody, not just a few families—keep only 5 for their food and seed. Many cadres and Liberation soldiers are necessary to get rid of the enemy. What will they eat if we hold back on our contributions?

And the high regions became revolutionary bases, a safe refuge for these outlawed by the enemy.

“Reach our bases... reach our bases...” became the order of the day. These massive mountains which form a jagged line in the west, hidden morning and night in mist, became the new horizon of those suffocating on the plain. Not only because up there each tree can provide a roof safe both from the eyes of the human hounds and of wild beasts, but because every inhabitant

takes the revolution as his very life. One finds there men of good heart, ready to help those in trouble, men who are comrades. You don't come here to hide, but to work to reconquer your stolen freedom.

Enraged at these "refractory people", the enemy did not know how or with what to tame them. Tired of trying, they fell back on their bombs and shells, completely and massively.

No chain of mountains on this planet has been hit with as many bombs as the Truong Son range. No hut that shows its roof to the sun remains standing long. The enemy becomes insane with rage when he sees a thread of smoke coming up out of the trees in the late afternoon or a gleam of a fire escaping from a hut on a winter night. The houses built on piles conform exactly to the dimensions of the trees, and these in turn are constantly threatened by poison chemicals.

The aggressors lose their heads as soon as they see some spark of life in the forests below. At the slightest sign that fields are being cultivated, the B-52 planes, which they call flying superforts, and the B-57s built to carry tactical A-bombs, come and drop hundreds of bombs on them.

This genocide goes on systematically and the aggressors do not even try to hide their determination to destroy every human life on the mountains. They fight not only men but everything which can sustain men.

But although this insane colossus has great strength, it has no eyes. Rarely does it strike accurately. The only thing it is capable of doing is to create temporary

difficulties for the mountain people when it destroys their fields with bombs or poison chemicals.

Lack of salt. Lack of rice and manioc. In certain areas they were not able to harvest anything for three straight years. Famine struck. One day, the people got wind of the fact that the Liberation Army had gone away and left some rice stored in the forest. They went there to borrow a few sacks for food and seed. But when they arrived, there were no army men guarding it. Wild boars had damaged the gate and bamboo fence around it. The rice was all there, but no one to ask if they could borrow. What to do? They repaired the damage and went away.

It is raining. The taciturn yet ferocious mountain tops, the forest of yew trees, cedars and plane trees, surround themselves with an oppressive layer of vapor. Water everywhere, in the sky and on the earth. The hills, the mountains, the land, the rocks, everything seems to liquify under our feet. The path which claws its way round the mountain sides is now only roots washed bare, devilishly intertwined roots which trap the feet. They seem alive with countless slimy bloodsuckers with an infallible sense of smell and greedy mouths. Like capitalists

attracted by the smell of gold, they attach themselves to you as you go by.

There is something satanic in the rains here. The water whips your face without stopping. The wind twists through the forest like an invisible dragon, making the leaves and branches tremble with fear. The roar of torrents and cataracts deafens you.

The brims of our cotton hats fall down limply over our ears. In spite of a piece of nylon wound twice around our necks, the water manages to get in under our clothes. Water outside our "raincoats", water inside. Drops of rain and condensed vapor mix with sweat. Our rice, wrapped up so carefully in "hermetic" sacks begins to sprout. At my side, the pistol, heavily greased, lies in a holster full of water. Spots of rust appear on it and my heart contracts. The packs on our shoulders seem to have doubled their weight. When we reach the relay station tonight, will there be anything to light the fire with to dry our things? In such weather we cannot hope to dry them on a line, even if we hung them up to dry for fifteen days. The air is just as saturated with water as our clothes. Even if you dried them next to a fire, in a few hours they would become mildewed again. You feel penetrated by water, heavy, sticky, uncomfortable, and you have the intolerable impression that mushrooms are about to grow on your holster, your clothes and even on your skin.

A chimpanzee with light brown fur is crouched at the foot of a tree. Ku Rang, one of our group, lifts it up by the arms. It is dead, but the body

has not yet stiffened. Strange, there is no wound! It has not been hit by a bomb fragment, a bullet or an arrow. Round and plump, it has not died of disease. It has simply become numb with cold in the rain and fallen out of the tree. It is really freezing cold. We feel it most when we stop for a moment to rest.

Since morning, we have been marching behind a Liberation Army transport unit made up mostly of women. They carry strange things in the baskets on their backs. Wooden boxes reinforced, some oblong and big as a man, others square and up to a meter wide. Others are covered with zinc. The unusual thing is that these boxes, which are normally carried in closed wagons or carefully covered trucks, are hoisted on the backs of these young women. It is not necessary to lift them to see that they are heavy; the straps cut cruelly into their shoulders. Nevertheless, these women have plowed through mud, crossed hanging bridges, steep hills and swamp land, places even difficult for men to pass.

The solitude becomes more and more complete. People on the plains think that there are many places in the Truong Son where man has never set foot. Before the revolution spread its flames into the mountains, these high peaks only interested explorers. People told awed stories of tigers with three paws, or elephants with one tusk... Nature gave the region many treacherous mountains where only people with bold

hearts dared to venture, and slopes so steep that even elephants would collapse on them.

Today, however, the proud and severe mountains bow under the calm tread of these young women. Rhythmically, without any apparent hurry, they walk in front of us, their crushing loads on their shoulders. Lithe and supple, they walk gracefully, hands on their hips and elbows slightly behind to give more support to their shoulders. With almost aery steps they cross foaming streams on a single tree trunk. They weave through thick high grass. They walk along tiny narrow paths dangerously clinging to the sides of mountains. They climb hills which lose themselves among the clouds.

When the wind roars or we come to a difficult place, I look at these young women and they seem to say to me: "The weather is not so bad, the way is still possible." And I ask myself: "How can they walk so lightly with all that stuff on their backs?" A strange idea comes to my mind: those loads, trails, streams, this rain, even the storm, are just products of my imagination. The only real things are those young women who walk so supplely and harmoniously.

Our group stops suddenly before a tree trunk which has been knocked down and whose rust-colored bark is already feeding tiny white mushrooms. It lies across a stream, blocking our way, and we must go around it.

On the other bank a group of *dan cong** comes out and waits for us to pass. An old man with a shiny

* Volunteer civilian workers, especially those in supply, transport and other services to the front.



head and a few tufts of long hair over his ears, wearing only a loin cloth, shakes my hand and, interrupting himself every minute, says to me: "It's raining... I had a rain cloth... today torn apart... All wet... After the reunification... I will build me a big brick house... When it rains I will stay at home..."

His lips open in a big smile, showing upper incisors completely worn down to the gums. He carries a big basket wrapped in shiny leaves, the two fiber straps pulling on his bony shoulders. He stays there, bending a little, one hand on his belly like all the mountain people who carry heavy loads, the other hand high over his shoulder, holding a large palm leaf to protect his load from the rain. Puffs of wind rattle the leaf as if angrily trying to tear it to pieces. From what I understand of the old man's mumbling, he carries salt. In these mountains, salt is more precious than pearls. I have heard that mountain people, even though they have been deprived of salt for several years, rigorously refuse to touch even a single grain of the salt they carry on these trips, simply because it belongs to the revolution.

One of my companions approaches the old man. "Good morning," he says. "It's hard to make revolution, isn't it?"

The old man turns, fixes him with wide eyes and raises his voice: "Yes... but if we are afraid of difficulties... we will have to live with the Americans."

"Right. You understand the truth better than we do."

"So... you only wanted to test me."

Meanwhile, some string instrument is being tuned. You can distinguish the brisk notes, strummed with a light hand, clearly above the drumming noise of thousands of drops of rain, the howl of the storm and the roar of the waterfalls. The musician is a girl, small, dressed in a jacket with pink flowers and a skirt with a red and white strip at the bottom which clings wetly to her legs. She is hidden under an enormous load carefully wrapped with a big waterproof cloth. A sort of tiny guitar hangs on her breast like a piece of jewelry. She hums to herself: "To the people's army, the revolutionary army, goes all our love..."

Her soft singing is full of charm and gaiety and seems to defy the storm.

"So young and already on the road?" my companion asks her seriously. "Are you old enough to work with the *dan cong*?"

The girl stops playing. Her brilliant eyes turn on her questioner, whose badly shaved beard gives him a rough appearance.

"How can you ask that, comrade? Do the American bombs not touch the young too?"

The girl's warm voice disarms my companion. She would like to add something, but stops herself. Her small fingers run over the strings of her instrument again. She continues to smile.

We rest at the bottom of a hill before attacking it.

The girls carefully cover their loads and come to sit on the rocks in the battering rain. They begin quietly smoking. Their pipes are made of clay or from empty cartridge shells.

After quite a while, we see Ku Rang catching up with us, painfully climbing the slope. Last night he had a fever. Nevertheless, this morning he refused to remain at the relay station and joined us again with his load.

To see his unruly hair, his questioning eyes and his heavy step we are surprised to learn that he has seen a lot of the country and knows far more than others apparently more experienced than he. He is one of those young mountain men whom the puppet power had taken to Hue and then by plane to Saigon. There they made him take part in manoeuvres of the "republican army" and let him watch motion pictures. Ku Rang admired the bicycles and motor scooters. But he soon discovered many things which didn't jibe with their propaganda. The young mountain man opened his eyes and began to see the real nature of the puppets. When he returned, he threw himself into revolutionary activity.

For four years he has worked in transport. This is the first time he has carried a load to the military subsector in the company of a cadre. He doesn't know how to swim. When we crossed the Y. River, we put him on a bamboo raft. He stood near the back of it, his load still on his shoulders. When the raft suddenly began to sink under his feet, he gave a cry of fright, but bent down and gripped the raft with his hands as

the water mounted. Bending his back and balancing his load, he kept the raft from turning over while the others pulled it swiftly to the bank. Ku Rang came out of it well, but his bundle of things drank a lot of water. He had been told to unload and sit down in the middle of the raft. When everyone was safe and sound on the other side, there was a general sigh of relief. Only Ku Rang remained silent, a little way apart from the others.

"I failed in my duty," he said. "I was told not to let this load get wet." He was so mortified by the accident that his cadre had to console him.

"The bundle is well wrapped and what's inside won't get wet. Don't worry."

It was useless. During the night, fever seized him. And from then on, closed in on himself, he didn't tell us any more stories.

Today his sunken cheeks make his shaggy hair look like a horse's mane. His companion loaned him a hat with a broad brim to protect him from the rain. But the water ran down his face and we didn't know if it was rain or perspiration.

"Can you go on?" I ask him when he arrives up the hill.

"Of course...why not?"

He puts his precious load down on a rock and turns towards the comrade who accompanies him: "Do you know the cadre Sac, comrade?"

"Which Sac?"

"The one who used to work in A Rum village."

His companion shakes his head. "No. Why?"

"The girl who was just playing the guitar wanted to know. She is from Ta Oi and Sac once stayed at her house. Her parents gave her fifteen measures of rice to give to Sac if she ever meets him on the trail."

The cadre knits his eyebrows and grumbles: "How can she find Sac if she doesn't know where he is! Her basket's already heavy enough under the rain! What an idea, carrying fifteen measures of rice to give a comrade when you don't even know where he is!"

He takes out his tobacco tin and with nicotine-stained fingers rolls a cigarette, looking down the hill.

The group of *dan cong* goes on. It is going down towards the plain and does not rest here.

I watch them pass in the cold rain.

The veterans have on them the indefinable mark of a past epoch. I suddenly feel very close to them, these people of whom I had formed a totally wrong idea from reading foreign books about them and with whom I have never had any contact.

Here is the small musician, who throws us a quick glance with her bright eyes. She must be convinced that we are going to tell her where Sac is. I am afraid of the moment when I will read disappointment on her face. The straps of her basket seem to bite into my own shoulders.

My new friend takes a long draw on his cigarette to keep the rain from extinguishing it. "It's you, Miss; who asked about Sac?"