it be like that? Weren't they afraid of bullets or death? All his comrades coming from the village were unanimous about this. "A cloud of flies" they said. They also spoke about a kind of armored vest the Yankees wore which protected them from bullets. Was that true? And apart from their protected chest and belly, could one kill them with a shot somewhere else? They hunted guerrillas like rabbit hounds. This yes—there was nothing to fear about this. In the past, the puppets did the same. But a bush is enough for a guerrilla to become invisible in under the very eyes and nose of these stupid hunters. Summed up, only one thing tormented Phong: why did they come like a cloud of flies when they heard a shot? Was it because they are many? Only at My Thuy were there many. But how was it that the Yankees scorn death? And their strange behavior silenced the guerrillas' guns. Torn by uncertainty, the tiny group of My Thuy guerrillas had let themselves be decimated. Anguish reigned in his village.

Was there a way to vanquish the Yankee devils? Not only Phong, but all those who had a weapon to fight these aggressors from the other side of the ocean asked this with anxiety. During my stay in My Thuy, the head of the hamlet's guerrillas told me how he had found the answer to this tormenting question.

More than two months after the massive invasion of the G.I.s, Phong, burning to be in the village, arrived at his home with an automatic rifle. During the last days of his study course, he had not been able to sit still.

He arrived as night fell and stopped, shocked in the street. It was blocked by thorny branches. No light visible. No response to his calls. He went around the house, pushed aside the hedge and entered the garden.

It looked as though a cyclone had hit it. The orange and apricot trees were cut off at the ground. Grass covered the paths and Phong had to walk over broken branches. His foot smashed an orange, and Phong has the feeling that he was stepping on a thorn. How his father had treasured these oranges!

Something scratched his forehead: it was a piece of the roof hanging from a beam. On the veranda he found other sharp pieces under his feet. The wall against which he liked to sleep in other times was half destroyed.

It was lighter in front of the house and this permitted him to study the courtyard where his mother and hit young sisters used to eat under the moonlight. Now it was invaded by rank weeds.

The roof had fallen through in many places and there was not one piece of furniture except a bed with a mat in tatters. Phong looked at this spectacle of desolation and breathed the smell of mildew which permeated everything. He went to a leather box in the corner, opened it. His fingers touched thick clammy layers of mould without finding a single grain of rice. He picked up two notebooks and a few toys of his little sisters.

His heart was wrenched. Dropping the notebooks on the box, he fell on the bed.

He understood that the pale light which illuminated the courtyard came from the lights of Phu Bai. A red signal blinked like a human eye. Somewhere far away, artillery thundered. The young man suddenly shivered, as if seized by fever, thinking of his mother and his sisters. In what prison was the poor woman detained this time? He knew perfectly well why she was arrested. He had never told her about his activities. She never opened her mouth to complain or reproach him. Only once did she tell him, "My son, you must be more careful and not let yourself be seen by three policemen as the last time. Because when you leave, everything falls on me." Two days before, Phong had stalked the police on Highway No. I.

Another time, he had come home late in the night. His mother had just been arrested. In the light of his flashlight he saw his two sisters asleep. He wanted to awaken them, but tears coursed his cheeks and he went away in silence, planning to return the following night. But fever kept him many days in the house of a sympathizer and he could not get back as he planned. And then one night, his younger sister came to see him with a big bowl in her hand. She was pale and thin but she had brought him some chicken broth in spite of all the dangers... He was moved to the depths of his soul, but in order not to bring trouble down on his host, he had to scold her and send her back.

This picture made his heart bleed. The red light which blinked perfidiously behind the branches of the

filao tree seemed to mock him. Hell! Phong got up abruptly and left the house the same way he came in.

He planned to stop at T.'s house to learn what happened. But the gate was locked from inside. The guerrillas' usual way in and out of the house at the rear was blocked off. Listening carefully, he could hear whispering inside. T. and his wife! He gave the usual cry of a bird. The voices became silent. But no one came. He repeated it. The lamp suddenly went out behind the shutters. Phong understood that many things had changed while he had been gone. The red light of Phu Bai blinked... blinked... blinked... but now behind a clump of bamboo.

Three guerrillas, late in the night, are going from Hamlet 4 to Hamlet 5. The moon has risen with the fresh breeze from the sea. Phong has been back in the village four days. The situation is far from satisfactory. But going this night with Xe and Tieu toward Hamlet 5, the sight of the familiar hills makes him feel better. He has decided to reorganize the underground network and to test the Yankees.

He is convinced that the circumstances make it necessary at auy cost to begin operations again with the greatest tenacity. The G.I.s are becoming more and more insufferable, pushing their actions farther and farther out from the perimeter of their garrisons.

Coming to a crossroad, Xe, who carries a heavy basket on his back, stops suddenly and points to a bush: " Here is where Si fell."

Si was Phong's older brother. The two guerrillas were there when it happened. A big American tank had chased them. Si, hit by a bullet, died here. Phong looks at the bush, his eyes wander over the houses in the neighborhood. Each time he passed this hamlet in the past, he used to stop and chat with the people, drinking a cup of tea and smoking a cigarette. Now, even though the roofs are still there, they seem deserted, cold and lifeless. He remembers Si's joy each time he took part in an engagement. How can it be... no longer here... As Tieu wipes a tear from the corner of his eye, Phong turns on his heels and says abruptly, "Let's go."

From the moment they arrived, the Yankees have hammered on Hamlet 5, suspecting that the guerrillas and regional troops were meeting there. Besides, the hamlet is on their way every time they make a raid in a certain part of the liberated area. The three men halt on a hill at the edge of the hamlet. There is no light.

"Stay here on guard, Tieu," says Phong. "It will soon be dawn."

He walks a little farther, then turns towards Xe: "Wait for me here."

Before his companion has time to ask what he's going to do, he disappears in a grove. Phong has just

remembered the two mines he planted there before he left for his study course.

Hearing his exclamation of joy, Xe asks, "What is it, Phong?"

Phong has put his hand on the wires which lead to two mines still intact. He replaces them and comes out of the grove. "My 'pineapples' are still there," he says.

The houses seem abandoned. It was the same during the time of the strategic hamlets when the curfew lasted all night. Impossible for everything to become again as in the past. According to the reports of the guerrillas, there are still people living here, but nobody knows where they bury themselves to sleep at night. Phong and Xe go into the house of an old sympathizer. The ashes of the stove are still warm, the sweet potatoes cooked, but not even a cat is there.

"We'll wait here for daylight," says Phong. "Go and tell Tieu to stay on guard."

Xe returns several minutes later with a cover to an underground hiding place on his shoulder. "The cover was broken. I changed it so we can disappear the minute we need to. I told Tieu that we had set up our headquarters here."

"Today," Phong answers, smiling grimly, "I don't feel at all like hiding, but like opening fire!"

"Same with me. The gardens are good enough to hide in."

"Yes, but you were correct to replace the cover. We feel freer in our movements when there's nothing to

worry about," adds Phong, not wanting to deceive Xe who has worked hard to put the hiding place back in good shape.

They go into a field of tea bushes behind the house. Phong puts a piece of plastic on the top of the shelter.

Here, they will be safe from an unexpected shelling. He takes out a ball of rice which the two eat with good appetite.

"I would like to see," Phong muses, "how they come like a cloud of flies."

"I have seen it many times. You have to be quick, old man."

"Yes, I will see. Now, let's get some rest."

They lie down on the plastic sheet and feel the cold soil bite their backs. Since Phong's return, the guerrillas have approved his decision to go underground as little as possible and to live again above ground and fight the enemy. Nevertheless, some still fear the charge of the G.I.s at each rifle shot. It is necessary to test this — this morning if they can. Impossible to believe that they are not afraid of our bullets! Phong is plunged into his thoughts while Xe's snoring becomes regular.

The sound of hurried steps. Phong starts. He sees the big figure of Tieu, topped with the famous hat of the Liberation soldiers.

" What's up, Tieu ? "

" They're coming. "

" Many ? "

"Crawling with them!"

Xe has waked up. The two men get up with a bound.

"Let's go. Put everything away."

They strip down to their underpants, take off their sandals, wrap them with their trousers in a piece of nylon and push it all into the middle of a bush. Then, tying their camouflage cloth around their necks, they grab their rifles and trot behind Tieu towards the hill.

On a rise, they can see flashlights sweeping to and fro in the darkness. "Ah. So you want to be zealous!" Phong says to himself. They hear the muttering of a walkie-talkie and begin to discern the tall silhouettes of the Yankees walking in fight groups on the second hill away from them. Returning from a mopping-up operation, Phong guesses. For five days, in fact, three U.S. battalions have been operating in the peripheral region outside the base.

The three men go back to the hamlet to talk it over. They do not know whether the enemy is coming back from a mopping-up operation or beginning a new one.

Every minute the sky becomes lighter, clear and limpid like a mirror. A reconnaissance plane appears and begins circling over the hamlet. Meanwhile, the sharper flapping sound of helicopters.

Tieu, who is observing them from the field of tea bushes, calls out, "Hey, Phong! They're landing troops on the hills!"

Phong and Xe run to join him. G.I.s, black and white, in helmets, battle fatigues, and armed to the teeth, are jumping out of helicopters. The guerrillas can even see their black boots.

As Xe exclaims "The party begins!", Phong turns. Another detachment, walking out from Phu Bai along the national road, turns off at the place where Phong buried his mines. A sudden explosion. The G.I.s pull back and fire wildly into the hamlet.

The detachment from Phu Bai closes in on the village, those on the hills covering them. In the blink of an eye the three men find themselves caught in the bottom of a long net. Phong realizes at once that any way out is blocked.

Bullets whistle into the houses. Roofs hit by incendiary bullets burst into flame. The firing becomes heavier from every side.

"We go?" roars Phong.

Tieu is red in the face from excitement. "There are many of them," he says. "How shall we do it? Which column shall we hit first?"

"So much the worse for them if they are many. They want to mop up, we'll break their back!"

Phong opens his small kit bag, takes out a gauze bandage and puts it in his pocket ready for emergency He checks his automatic. The others do the same. Sparks seem to come from his eyes and he says, "From now on, follow my orders. We must stick to them."

Seeing Tieu red as though drunk, Phong remembers what he said. "We have to fight to the end," he says. "Don't hope for help. Use your initiative."

He has not yet been able to work out a battle plan and tells himself that they'll see what to do once they get into it. Realizing that their position at the foot of the hill is not good, he says, "We're handicapped here. We'll have to drive them off one of the hills so we can dig in up there."

A plan of action already found. Behind a screen of trees, they crawl towards a height where helicopters continue to disgorge their troops. Phong turns and says, "Aim straight, men."

His eyes burn. Gripping his automatic rifle, he advances towards the enemy, telling himself in a low voice : "Now we shall see if you're afraid of bullets or not !"

They have passed the cover of the trees. The enemy is thirty meters away, separated by open space, a little too far for the guerrillas. Phong and his two comrades flatten themselves on the ground. He is dissatisfied. The machine gun muzzles above swing back and forth, searching for any moving targets in front of them. Phong has a machine gunner in his sights. He wants a better target, but can't find an officer. He steadies his aim on the machine gunner. As the G.I.s

get ready to advance down the slope, he orders in a low voice, "Wait until they're close."

Behind them, the detachment from Phu Bai has entered the hamlet where the houses are enveloped in thick smoke. Several G.I.s burst into the same hut where the three had stopped a little while ago.

Before them, the G.I.s. begin advancing down the hill. Deployed in battle formation, the G.I.s walk, bodies tense—living targets. Phong has not taken his eye from the machine gunner in his sights. His bead is fixed on a type with a long nose, a freshly shaved chin and a rather strange air, who has nothing of the attacking soldier about him. His thin lips seem to sketch a smile. The sight of this grimace makes Phong furious. So!—you rejoice at all the fires you started! As the G.I. comes closer, head up, Phong's automatic slowly raises to keep the sights on the heart.

"Fire!"

The machine gunner drops in his tracks. Another falls. A third throws his rifle down and runs. "Attack!" Phong cries, without even realizing that he has given the order. His comrades have yelled "Attack!" at the same instant so that their shouts were amplified and sounded like a whole company. The three leap up and charge towards the enemy, firing rapidly. The G.I.s, scared to death, divide and flee in two directions to avoid the hail of bullets.

The three are half way up the side of the hill. Phong decides to reach an old tomb on top of the hill, but the G.I.s hold it and are spraying them with bullets.

Impossible to advance. The three turn down the hill and run towards the hamlet.

But the enemies in the hamlet come out to meet them, attracted by the firing and particularly by their shouting. Phong throws himself behind a tomb next to the path and commands, " Here ! Aim straight and they'll retreat !"

The three fire on the G.I.s from behind the tomb. Their accurate fire forces the G.I.s to fall back towards the houses. But behind the three men, the enemy has regrouped. Those who hold the tomb on the top of the hill join the others and advance down the slope. Without doubt they know now that there are only three of them. It is impossible for them to remain at the tomb, their position is untenable.

" The tea hill," says Xe.

The hill is near them, but Phong hasn't considered it because it is right in the middle of the hamlet. Now there is no other solution.

" All right, " Phong answers. " Let's go, but be careful."

This hill is also occupied. Taking advantage of the slightest uneveness of the ground, dodging behind the tea bushes, the guerrillas resist fiercely. The enemy, unable to locate them exactly and afraid of firing on each other, are also very cautious.

The sun is at its zenith and bathes the battlefield in a torrent of heat. The guerrillas are now only two men, Phong and Xe. When his automatic had jammed

Tieu was sent back to inform our men. His comrades covered his retreat with withering fire. Since then, they have changed places many times until they finally occupy a tomb on a height between Hamlet 5 and the village of Phuong Chanh. They repulse one attack after another. The G.I.s try to get them with precision fire and shells from individual mortars.

Suddenly everything becomes quiet. The G.I.s have to rest from this homeric pursuit which they have followed since dawn. Xe cleans his rifle and leans with satisfaction against the tomb and half closes his eyes.

"They're resting," he says. "We, too, Phong?"

"Yes, rest."

The sun makes their eyes pop. And what a thirst burns the throat! The Phu Bai airfield sprawls a few kilometers from them, shining like a mirror. Radio and high tension towers flank the base on all sides. Helicopters ascend and descend like dragonflies. Powerful machines. The other day, Phong saw one of them carrying an entire blockhouse under it. Military vehicles crawl like crabs along Highway No. 1 and other strategic roads. Not a breath of wind. The puppet flag hangs like a limp dishrag. The filao trees of Mount Thien Thai are almost yellow from the sun. Ah! If it were only possible to bathe in the Le River so close. Phong looks around the horizon without relaxing his vigilance.

"Look, Phong!"

Xe, still leaning against the tomb, holds up his camouflage cloth. Four bullet holes. Xe drops his arms and says, "Look at yours."

Phong finds two.

"I would say," comments Xe, "that U.S. bullets are afraid to touch our skin." He is silent. Then: "You saw how they fell on us like flies?"

Phong nods his head. "Exactly. But it's possible to make them run. You only have to hit them with everything you have."

Two o'clock in the afternoon. The enemy begins firing again from the hill in front of them. Watching the tracer bullets, Phong realizes that their trajectory is too high to touch them where they are. It was more serious before when the bullets were hitting the walls and knocking out the mortar.

Picking up his automatic rifle, Xe only says slowly, "Let them waste their ammunition. Wait until they come closer and see what they get!"

But Phong has a new doubt. Why this sudden bad aim of the enemy? He raises himself on the wall to look around. He starts. G.I.s have crawled up behind them only thirty meters away. He jumps down. "They're climbing towards us," he tells Xe. "Put a full clip in your automatic."

Grenades hit the walls outside and explode on the ground. The two automatics spit a stream of bullets. Several G.I.s fall. The others scramble back as fast as they can.

The tomb is invaded by the smoke of the grenades. Phong waves it out with his camouflage cloth and jokes: "It's enough just to hit them hard, I told you."

He suddenly realizes that Xe is bleeding heavily from his nose. He has been hit by a grenade fragment. Xe has put a compress on his wound, but every time he takes it away the blood flows fast again.

From the next hill comes a voice in Vietnamese with a comical accent: " Surrender! Surrender! Save your life, otherwise you will die! "

The voice makes Phong furious and he lets out a string of oaths. Opening his mouth to swear too, Xe begins to bleed hard again. He is forced to put the compress back on. Seeing his white face, Phong knows that his comrade is exhausted. " We're in a good position here," he reassures him. "We don't have to shift anymore, Xe. "

He takes his own gauze bandage and puts a quick dressing on his companion.

A moment later, the whirring sound of a helicopter is heard. The machine, head bent forward in flight, comes into sight. Even here they are landing troops? Phong rakes it with fire, it pulls up suddenly and then lands at the edge of Phuong Chanh village. G.I.s come out of it. Reinforcements. Reinforcements for a whole battalion which has been checked since morning by only three guerrillas!

The new soldiers move around impatiently and seem eager to go. Firing indiscriminately all around, they advance towards the two men. A column of smoke erupts near the tomb. Another one. Smoke gas! Phong and Xe can no longer see each other clearly and they hear the yelling and firing coming nearer.

"We've got to move," says Phong.

He takes Xe's hand and leads him outside in the heavy curtain of smoke. They run and tumble down the slope and reach a stream. Once more the enemy is outwitted. The G.I.s separate into two columns in pursuit.

Xe gets another bullet in his shoulder. Phong wants to bandage him, but he pushes his comrade's hand away and says, "Useless, old man."

The enemy closes in from two sides. Phong changes the clip of Xe's rifle and realizes that Xe now has only ten bullets left. The wounded man can only shoot with his left hand, supporting his rifle on something, sparingly firing one bullet at a time. When his automatic is silent, Phong turns and sees his comrade lying motionless on his back beside the stream. He has spent his last bit of strength with his last bullet.

Behind a smoke screen, enemy soldiers charge towards Phong. The young man stands up calmly and fires. Nothing happens... the clip is empty. He throws his last hand grenade into his pursuers, jumps down on the bank of the stream and runs towards My Chanh as fast as his legs can carry him. The G.I.s have seen him. Yelling, they chase after him. Phong dashes off the path, hurls himself into a bush and curls up motionless. He holds his rifle by the barrel, now useful only as a club.

.. G.I.s pass before his eyes. With great calm he covers himself with the high weeds around him. He hears a furious fusillade of shots from the stream where it flows past Phuong Chanh. If he had not hidden here, he would have run straight through that point. Then firing in Phuong Chanh itself.

The sun is still high in the sky. The firing from the brook intensifies with every moment. From the dull plop of the bullets, they are firing into the water. They pay respect to our talents as underwater swimmers, thinks Phong. Yes, but so long as the sunlight lasts, they won't leave the area. A battalion which has been flinging itself about like madmen since dawn needs to get something for all its trouble!

From four sides, the vice slowly tightens. For Phong, the battle is over. He can add it up now and recall each phase of the battle in order to learn from it. The enemy lost at least thirty men. The inhabitants of My Thuy. Hue and Da Nang will know the exact number tonight when the bodies are taken back to Phu Bai. Tonight also, Phong will meet with his men. Today the enemy came like a cloud of flies, exactly as the comrades said, But, after all, they are only flies. You only have to hit them hard and they scatter. Like all flies, afraid.

New helicopter noises. They are coming to pick up their dead. A flash, and a fire suddenly flames on a hill near Hamlet 5. Why this incendiary bomb? Ah... that's it! They want to wipe out all traces of the day's battle. Suddenly, Phong feels a real cyclone of wind hit him from above The weeds hiding him flatten out on the ground, completely exposing him. A helicopter

is landing right on top of him! It happens so suddenly that Phong forgets to throw himself on the ground and make himself as small as he can. He is camouflaged only by the cloth around his body. The G.I.s in the helicopter have certainly seen him. In any case, he won't let himself be captured. He has a sort of weapon in his hands — the empty automatic rifle. He remains sitting, motionless as a statue. Even though nothing but unpredictable things have happened to him since morning, he is strangely calm.

The helicopter lands a few meters from him. The weeds straighten up little by little and cover him completely again. Phong opens his eyes wide, grips his automatic as a club and waits for the inevitable moment when the G.I.s will step on him with their long legs.

One leg, then another slid to the ground. One G.I. comes down from the machine. He does not seem in any hurry and moves away slowly. He must be alone. Thin and very tall, he turns his back to Phong and looks towards Phuong Chanh. Seeing the long antenna on his back, Phong realizes that the Yankee carries a walkie-talkie. Under his arm he has a very light weapon. He has not yet seen the guerrilla. But Phong knows that danger is stalking him. The blades of the helicopter begin to turn again and the air blast uncovers Phong a second time. But the Yankee only watches the helicopter go away. Phong pulls the weeds back up around him and remains immobile.

From time to time the G.I. speaks over his walkie-talkie and a guttural voice answers him. Phong

understands that he is an observer dropped here to try to discover him, that he doesn't dream for a moment that Phong is only a few steps away. The G.I. does his job so "seriously" that not once does Phong get a good look at his face.

Another plane comes to launch incendiaries on the battlefield. The firing has completely died out. The sun descends slowly in the west and twilight paints the forest, mountains and plain violet. A gecko lizard scuttles away with a gloomy rustle. Phong sees the G.I. cross himself, mumbling who knows what. Of course. He is saying his prayers. In the deserted evening, lost in the middle of a hostile nature, after a bloody battle in which a number of his companions were cut down, the Yankee is afraid. He calls on his god to help him.

An hour later, the helicopter returns to pick him up. Until the moment he is picked up, he has only stared out towards Phuong Chanh.

Phong gets up and stretches calmly. He sees that all the Yankees have left the area and the scout was the last. He says "Damn," in exasperation and frustration. He had let a chance go by to smash another fly. The Yankee can thank that god of his that he still lives!

I am talking with Quang when a young man in black pants and undershirt, wearing a student's hat, bursts

into the room. Seeing his automatic rifle hanging heavily on his shoulder and his lively movements, I guess that he is a liaison agent. The young man's eyes grow wide and he shouts, "You, Quang?"

He leans his rifle against the door, hangs his hat on a beam, and flings himself into Quang's arms, who in spite of being warned, falls on his back on the bed. They box and wrestle furiously and I have to retreat into a corner. In spite of his height, Quang can't get the other one down. The little one presses with all his weight and keeps him from getting up.

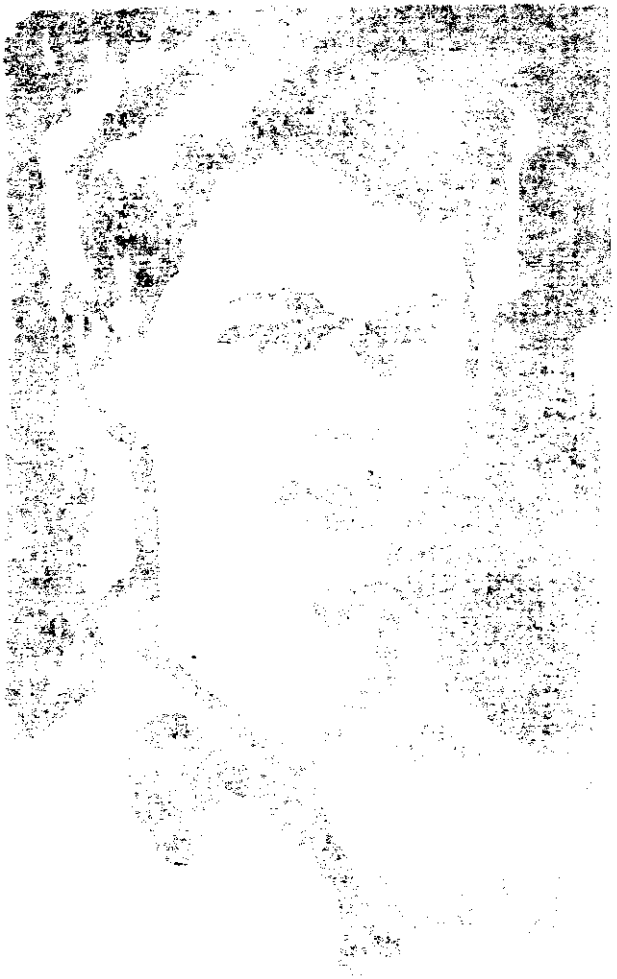
"Enough? Surrender?" he cries at Quang.

"You tricked me, I surrender," gasps Quang, his face red from exertion.

The little liaison agent gets off, laughs with satisfaction, showing a double row of white teeth. "It's necessary to exploit surprise with an adversary stronger than you are. It's the secret of success... So, when did you arrive?"

Quang turns to me and introduces him: "Comrade Nguyen Viet Phong."

Nguyen Viet Phong, guerrilla leader of the area, the ace of the Quang Tri - Hue - Thua Thien? It's him. He has been described to me, but even so I am astonished by his youth and small size. When we arrived, he had gone to give his service record to the provincial level cadres because he has been honored to be chosen to participate in the next Congress of Heroes and Elite Fighters of South Viet Nam.



Meanwhile, after glancing at his automatic rifle leaning against the door, Quang asks, "Is that the automatic ?"

"Yes. It's as heavy as a brick bed. I have just shown it to the provincial comrades. I feel like sending it back to the Sector cadres."

Quang picks up the rifle and shows it to me. It's a Garand, an individual automatic rifle, as the Yankees call it. We notice on the stock some scratches and the mark of a bullet, rather deep.

"How did you manage to take it away from the Yankee ?" Quang asks.

"I did the same thing to him that I did to you," says Phong, breaking out laughing.

Some time ago, the district cadres promised a reward to the first guerrilla to capture a Yankee alive or get his gun. In full daylight, Phong lead a group of armed men behind enemy lines to reach a U.S. military bureau on Gia Long Avenue in Hue. He jumped on the sentry, killed him with a bullet and took his Garand. His men lobbed grenades into the house and swept the rooms with fire. Then they left calmly, long before a G.I. company from the Phu Bai airfield arrived to the rescue. The next day, a whole bunch of U.S. officers came to the place to investigate. They studied clues, asked a lot of questions and then went away at the end of the morning without finding out who or how their installation had been attacked.

Today, 2,000 G.I.s are stationed at My Thuy. But the situation is completely different from before the

battle of Hamlet 5. Because My Thuy has become a liberated village.

A liberated village, with a U.S. garrison of 2,000 men on its territory? Yes. It is classified as a liberated village, not only by the province, but also by the Sector, for all its affairs are regulated by the N.F.L. The enemy could not put the smallest puppet administration on its feet there. The inhabitants of My Thuy do exactly what the citizens of the Liberated Areas do.

It seems strange, but it is true. In reality, the Yankees who swarm in the village do not see what's under their very noses. They see absolutely nothing of what goes on, for they have no puppet agent in the village. The guerrillas come and go almost as though they were thumbing their noses at them.

The enemy hasn't found anyone in the village he can trust. Everybody is against him, and he feels it. And the G.I.s. are afraid. Even of children. In the past they brought them into their tents to play with them. Now they pull their knives as soon as a child approaches. Death hangs constantly over their heads.

Powerless to uncover their adversaries, they can be attacked suddenly anywhere, any time. Shots, grenade explosions, mine explosions... night and day. It is terror for them. They no longer dare to come like clouds of flies when they hear some explosions. For they know that it means runing towards a great disaster, without being able to save the victims.

In silence I contemplate Phong, who is showing Quang an album with a deluxe cover. Only photos of

famous sites in Hue. Phong loves curios, small souvenirs, but if someone is interested in them he gives them away with the greatest pleasure. I try to sort out some characteristic traits of this small man with a clear complexion who speaks and smiles, completely at ease, without any affectation. He has killed 112 enemies, of whom 34 were Yankees, destroyed 12 trucks and armored cars. He likes to get himself up as a school student on his expeditions. It was he who, on Highway No. 1, liquidated the criminal An, a bloodthirsty puppet bastard of the My Thuy area. When he laughs, his thin lips take on a most candid, almost naive and innocent air.

Looking at him closer, you discover some characteristics that no school student would have. His thin eyelids emphasize the dark circles he has under his eyes from staying up at night. A fine curved forehead, absolutely smooth, over which flits the shadow of intense reflection. Also his light complexion is not that of an adolescent. You feel that it is marked by illness. It is the counterpart of his rough and troubled life. In reality, his person presents nothing particular. He has the look of a poor and provincial student, open and friendly, nothing more. My Thuy is near Hue. A few years ago, Phong had to quit school and for some time made his living in the city repairing bicycles.

It is perhaps because Phong is no different than any other young person of My Thuy that the people could at once judge the real power of the U.S. Army. After the battle of Hamlet 5, they said: "We thought they were deadly to see them so swaggering. But one single

brush with our Phong and our Xe and they collapsed."

Phong is delighted when he comes to this sentence. He is proud of being called "our Phong" by the people of My Thuy, where young and old, in a unanimous united effort, make fools of 2,000 G.I.s armed to the teeth.

When we reach the provincial command of Thua Thien, we learn that the Americans launched an operation on P. village just after we had left it. It looked as if they intended to establish themselves there, at least for some time. During the first engagements, the village guerrillas put more than a hundred of them out of action.

A few days ago, the rain began to fall endlessly. After midnight, the cold awakes me in my shelter. When we were leaving to come here, several comrades told me that the winter here is very mild. So I have neither blanket nor warm clothes. Now I shiver because a piercing cold penetrates my back and my chest. No doubt the rain and being deep undergound have their part in this. The comrades of the Propaganda-Education Service who are lodging us have allowed us to hang our hammocks in this completely bombproof shelter. Every night, B-57s operate here until morning. Knowing it is impossible for me to fall asleep again, I go back up into the house.

Big logs still feed the dying fire. I shove them together and blow on them. The flames flare up at once, pushing back the cold. Three cadres are sound asleep on a big bamboo bed. The one who has covered his head with a scarf, his body with parachute cloth and sleeps in his sweater, is Bao. An older man, he wears glasses. Since my arrival yesterday, I have always seen him writing. The one using a mosquito net for a blanket is Comrade Thi, who is always laughing and warming himself at the fire. When he laughs, his eyes almost disappear. The third, who works in the Information Agency, has just arrived from Phong Chuong, a village in the costal region. They are all sound asleep, but if a bomb whistled over their heads, in a twinkling of an eye they would hurl themselves into the shelter. It has become a conditioned reflex, just as a mother awakens at the slightest movement of her nursing baby.

The rain falls in a cloudburst. My comrade Xuong has called the sound of heavy rain on the leaves "the Song of Tri-Thien". After each pause, the rain begins again even harder... Near my woodfire, I feel perfectly warm. If only I had a cigarette, my sense of well-being would be complete. Because of the military operations, tobacco is becoming scarce. Each pack of cigarettes is consumed in honor of visitors. Liberation fighters know nothing of selfishness. Only Ban still has some tobacco. He smokes sparingly, but never alone. After each meal, he gives everybody a pinch, just enough to roll one cigarette. A little more to visitors. But I don't dare to wake him up now just to ask for a cigarette.

5

Like noisy blows against the house, the gusts of rain come one after the other. This morning the political officer of the provincial command told us that last night an old woman and two children in the village of P. died from the cold. The Yankees have arrested many old women and all those who are nursing babies. They lock them into enclosures around their barracks to keep us from attacking them. How can women and babies stand the cold, sleeping in the open? At this very moment, I think, perhaps others are also dying. Listening to the political officer's story — it was during lunch — everybody stopped eating, with pained heart. This new crime is told everywhere by telephone. Since this morning, and even now in the night, enemy losses are certainly higher than in previous days. Because, in this affair, compassion is not simply for others in their grief. The grief has become intensely yours, magnified ten times. It cries for vengeance.

That old woman dying in the darkness, huddled up and grinding her teeth in anger, was it the mother of the Tu house where we stopped the other night? And was Tu's baby, who had played so innocently with the meal tray, one of the two dead babies, his little body blue in the biting cold? And was it Mrs. Tu herself who, only yesterday morning, hair tousled and uncombed, broke into an enemy quarters at the head of a demonstration to denounce the crimes of the Yankees?... But perhaps nothing has happened to the Tu family. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean the tragedy

hasn't happened to others. It floats over all the roofs I saw in the village of P. The girl with the white arms and the crystal laugh of the other night, what is she doing at this hour? The two guerrillas who smoked their pipe at Tu's house have certainly attacked the invaders many times since then. Tu has such an affable air... His oldest son with his brilliant eyes... Those girl vendors of Thua Thien... All those I saw only dimly the other evening now parade in my memory very clearly. All those who are dear to me are fighting this night. But it is not any more the first round. Over all this plain, everyone knows what the Yankees are like and how to punish them.

IV

Spring 1966. For the first time a large unit of the Liberation Army descended to the plain. In Tri-Thien this happened later than anywhere else.

In the heavy night the fighters saw above them an entire moving universe of stars. They had the impression that some of them, falling, had changed into trembling drops in their eyes. Apart from the piece of sky violently illuminated by the enemy post at D., which gives off a strange and suffocating heat, the entire plain was in deep shadow. The few villages liberated during the rural uprising had been invaded again in 1964. They had been mopped up and cleaned out many, many times before the enemy finally succeeded in turning them into " strategic hamlets ". Here, darkness didn't begin with the setting of the sun but with the blowing of whistles announcing the curfew.

The fighters were entering a new phase of the war. Leaving the forest, their souls quivered like the starry sky, or like a lively breeze chasing waves of the sea towards the shore. They had left these villages to preserve their lives. Now they were returning to rescue the lives of their loved ones existing obscurely here in the plain somewhere in this darkness.

The night is heavy everywhere in the south of our country. But here near the Ben Hai River, it became longer and more melancholy. The North, with its serene life, its factory chimneys growing more numerous each day, its green collectivized fields stretching out of sight from Cua Tung, worried the enemy. If the enemy's tyranny were the rule elsewhere, here it became outrageous beyond belief, reaching its abomination into every detail of life.

For those women whose husbands had been regrouped in the North, a written "repudiation" was not enough. They were forced to take another husband. The arrest and killing of old resisters was deemed too simple. It was necessary also that the members of their families "denounce" them in public before the assembled population, curse them, insult them to their face, even hit them as the "authorities" demanded.

A pole had to be set up in front of each door. At the slightest thing suspicious, the people were obliged to run up a flag by day or a lighted lantern by night to inform the authorities. Everyone was supposed to keep a bell, drum or clacker in his house to make noise whenever anything happened according to a long detailed list prepared by the authorities. No lights at

night was rigorously enforced. A knife had to be kept at the head of the bed. A shadow or a noise, and you had to jump up, strike out blindly and sound the alarm.

One story. One day an old man was called before the puppet head of the district. Without even lifting his eyes from his papers, the official, a big swollen fat man, began the interrogation :

" How many children do you have ? "

The old man did not hide anything. One son, gone to the North. A married daughter...

Interruption : " What does her husband do ? "

" I don't know. They left me in 1955. I am really to be pitied, I haven't seen my son, nor my daughter nor my son-in-law. "

Continuing to keep his eyes on his desk, the lackey launched his point. " What ? Your Quy hasn't come back ? The commander of the Viet Cong battalion doesn't visit his father ? He's been back here a long time, you know ! "

" No, I don't know. I don't go out anymore at my age. "

The other shot out : " How many tons of rice have you harvested for the Viet Cong ? You must know because you're responsible for collecting it, eh ? "

Without even leaving the old man time to answer, the fat one went on : " Enough for today. Go into the next room, you need a rest. "

That night, the poor old man was tied to a post of a barbed wire fence in the middle of the courtyard. Ten

days later he was brought again in front of his tormenter.

"Last time you said 'I don't know' to all my questions," he said. "This time I want to trust you, and the proof is that I am setting you free — on one condition: let us know as soon as Quy comes back. Just to be sure that you don't forget it, do as I tell you — no matter what you are doing and even when you sleep if possible, keep repeating 'I must tell the authorities when my son comes back.' Do you understand? I don't ask anything else of you. From time to time I will send someone to see if you have any news. If you forget what I recommend, I will call you here again..."

The enemy spent all their energy to invent slanders against the revolutionaries and communism, in the hope of bringing people "back to the national cause". But these puppet bastards believed neither in their own inventions nor in the excellence of their "cause". They relied solely on coercion and terror and manoeuvers to dupe the people.

During these terrible nights of anguish, a sleepless mother would often hear someone scratching lightly at the door: "Mama! Carefully — open the door for me!"

The voice of her son! How could he have come back... and why at this moment?

The voice would beg, "Mother, it's me. I'm back. Open, for god's sake!" The woman would forget her knife and tiptoe noiselessly to the door, her heart beating wildly, legs trembling, ready to fold her child into her arms. I heard you, my son.

Don't speak, you will wake someone. Here I am, here I am! With a shaking hand she would lift the bar from the door and open it a crack. She would slip through — and then a harsh voice would grate out: "Quick, to the post, old woman! Fell for the trap, eh?"

The police would loom out of the darkness and grab the poor woman, just like that.

And even if a poor woman did not show herself outside. It was enough to remain in bed motionless, torn with doubt and not knowing what she must answer — enough for disaster to fall on her the next day. Not to give the alarm in the night to such a call at the door was irrefutable proof that she did not want to break off from the "Viet Cong".

Night and day one lived in dread of falling into their traps. A woman who sympathized with the "Viet Cong" would come back from the market and find a note in the bottom of her basket, telling her to meet a militant in the same place she had met him once before. From him, or the police? Should she keep the rendezvous or throw the note in the dogs' faces? Fishermen would see a man enter a grove and hide. One of ours in difficulty, or only a police trick to make us show our hand? Should we give the alarm? But what if he is a real fugitive? Better act as though we saw nothing. Yes, but if others give the alarm, what will happen to us?

With this kind of trickery, the enemy tried to separate every villager from those who had gone to join the revolution. It was extremely difficult to avoid

mistakes in such a situation. The sufferings inflicted on the population could be counted not only from the number of those wearing mourning. It was also necessary to count those secret wounds which bled silently in the night in the hearts of mothers, wives and all who kept faithful to the revolution against the storm...

In certain places on the plain of Tri-Thien the population had lost contact with the revolution for long years. When the French troops left, the Diem soldiers arrived, soon followed by the American soldiers.

The specialists in psychological warfare tried to blacken the revolutionaries in the eyes of the people, describing them as ferocious monsters. Their cartoonists-without-imagination did not know how to satisfy their masters. But in order to earn their daily bread without much effort, they decided to take the most hideous soldiers of Chiang Kai-shek as their models. If their propaganda arsenal included the most incredible lies, peddled without caring whether they were believed or not, the Diemist posters were stamped with even more insane stupidities. One of these posters, for example, depicted seven horrible " Viet Cong " crouched on the stem of a papaya leaf, insects so thin that they didn't even break the leaf! It was Goebbels who said that if you repeat the most unbelievable things often enough,

in the end they get, into people's minds and come to be believed. And our stoolpigeon diemists had made this their creed.

They knew that when anyone thinks of the revolution, he has a concrete image of a revolutionary. For a long time, the wonderful memory of the militants had comforted those who lived in sorrow and darkness. The enemy tried in every way to suppress this invisible support. Not without some result. Thus, the youth who had always lived in an enemy-controlled region wondered, perplexed, if the Liberation troops were made up of hairy beasts with bamboo legs, as they were told. Those who had known the militants worried about them: "Certainly they must be old and unable to do anything by now from having to burrow in the unhealthy forests and mountains and eat only grass and moss!"

But one day, a miracle happened.

That day, as the sun was getting ready to come up out of the sea and only the clouds behind the filao groves were yet touched with pink, the Liberation soldiers appeared. This time it really was them. The people knew that the silhouettes which had walked cat-like on the road the night before were not puppets disguised for some mission of treachery.The men of the revolutionary army with their cotton hats, their khaki uniforms, some with a colored shirt, their shiny new rifles with the red stock slung over tbeir shoulders, headed towards the hamlets.

The girls stared. How young and strong they were! Completely different from the caricatures on the enemy

posters with which the police had flooded their village. Different also head to foot from the " government " soldiers. It was absolutely true. Their skin which had become white and clear in the shadows of the forest had already taken on a nice color from the sun. Not at all like the sunburned skin of the puppet soldiers. Their hale and hearty faces contrasted sharply with those of the "government" soldiers which were marked with fatigue and anxiety. The incessant changing of stations and their worry about how to protect themselves from the blows of both the revolutionaries and rivals within their own ranks had chiselled its way into the faces of the puppets. The clear, bright look of the Liberation soldiers contrasted sharply with the dull, hunted and cruel faces of the puppets, crossed at times by a bit of regret at having lost their human conscience. Everything in the Liberation soldiers was different: their way of expressing themselves, of standing, of walking... They also brought something else with them which the girls caught immediately but could not define. It was the air of the liberated areas where life is completely different, where man is master of his destiny and develops his capacities and feelings without hindrance.

The dream is always more beautiful than reality, we say. Nevertheless, that day the people of Tri-Thien lived something more splendid than the most beautiful of dreams.

As soon as they got rid of their packs, the soldiers began to dig defences around the village. The enemy lost no time in converging from four directions, not

counting landing men from helicopters. A combined operation to encircle this bold detachment. Planes and heavy artillery pounded the village. But the Liberation soldiers didn't seem bothered. They waited calmly until the moment the tanks and armored amphibious carriers had come within a few meters and then opened fire with their small arms. Old people climbed up in the trees, risking their lives, to enjoy the rare spectacle of the steel monsters — whose very roar was enough to sow terror — writhing and burning like straw. The men repulsed one after the other the assaults of the swarming enemy. From time to time, they charged out of their trenches and pursued the fleeing enemy, many times more numerous than they were, firing into their midst. The women and girls, paying no attention to the bombs and shells, prepared tea and food and carried it to the men's positions. The wounded were evacuated rapidly. Carried into the village's mud and straw huts, they were given first-aid at the hands of the people. The battle went on from sunrise to sunset. And in the night, the men broke through the encircling enemy ranks like water through their fingers.

The Liberation fighters had come and gone, like the whirlwind. They had no time to get acquainted with the people or tell them anything. But it was enough. Everything became clear again.

In T. hamlet, a group of the P.L.A.F. by mistake lodged in the house of the district representative, who had fled as soon as they arrived. His wife did as all the villagers did: she invited them to eat and drink

in the evening after they had worked all day digging their defences. When they left, the group head gave the woman a Quartermaster Corps receipt listing the number of rations they had eaten so that she would be paid. Everyone thanked her warmly before disappearing.

The husband returned two days later. His wife took him to the chicken coop as soon as he arrived. "Look at the brood of chicks, " she said. "Are all twelve of them still there?"

The man had not recovered from his surprise when the wife pulled him by the arm to the garden and showed him the papaya tree.

"There were three ripe papayas the day you left. They're still there, you see?"

Then she turned towards the haystack and demanded, "Has anything changed in this stack?"

The husband still didn't understand what she was getting at.

"You told me," the wife said, "that the Viet Cong would burn everything in this house and kill all of us. Well, as soon as you ran away they came. They stayed here one entire day. What did they burn? Whom did they kill?"

The husband stood gaping like a fish. The wife began her attack: "Remember what the soldiers of the 'republic' did in our place in a few moments? The baby chicks stolen. The papaya stripped of even the last unripe fruit. The pile of hay half gone. Now I ask you:

who, the Viet Cong or the soldiers of the 'republic', respects the goods of the people ? What's left for you to tell the neighbours now ? "

During their march, interrupted by frequent battles, some of the men got lost. This was the case, for example, of young Mai Van Khuyen who came under fire for the first time.

Wounded in the leg, he could only walk with the support of a comrade. Because their pace was too slow to reach the mountain before dawn, his comrade hid Khuyen in a bamboo grove and went for help and a stretcher. But when he returned, it was impossible to find the grove where he had left Khuyen because it had been swallowed up in the dark . He could not retrace his steps in this enormous stretch of white sand.

Little by little the sky grew lighter. Khuyen guessed that his comrade had become lost, but still hoped he would come back. His situation was not encouraging, he was lost in the middle of an occupied area absolutely strange to him. With much pain, he crawled deeper into the bamboo grove so he would not be seen. His comrade did not come back that day. Too seriously wounded to walk alone, there was nothing to do except stay there, waiting. Another day without any sign of his comrade. To quench his thirst, he had to crawl many times a day to a low place where water had collected. But he was also hungry. He was exhausted, and cramps gripped his stomach. Before his very eyes just outside the grove was a field of sweet potatoes. Ah yes, but they belonged to the people. Khuyen ate

what wild plants around him were eatable. But after two such "meals" nothing was left.

Strength drained from him little by little. In addition to this, his wound, now untreated for several days, made him suffer cruelly. The sweet potatoes could help him live until help came. But it was prohibited to touch the property of the people. He kept thinking: I haven't done anything yet for the revolution. On top of this, how can I break discipline? But then, he reasoned, it was absurd to let himself die of hunger. One had to live to do his part, even a little, for the cause of the revolution. He couldn't let himself take the sweet potatoes, but certainly the people wouldn't mind if he ate just the leaves? His eyes remained glued on the green field. He hesitated, torn by contradictory ideas, arguing for and against. Finally, he took a handful of sweet potato leaves, choosing the oldest ones, those which were useless, and devoured them greedily.

On the ninth day, he lost consciousness. A storm blew up in the afternoon. Two small children taking care of buffalos came into the grove to get out of the rain. And thus Khuyen was discovered. The children's parents carried him into the hamlet, put him to bed, treated his wound and fed him. Everyone was astonished that he had held out for nine days without eating anything.

"How can a Liberation soldier be such a fat-head?" an old woman gently scolded him. "In front of you an entire sweet potato field, and you let yourself nearly starve to death! If you had dug in the field, we would have discovered you a lot sooner!"

"Old mother," Khuyen answered, "Liberation soldiers do not touch even a piece of thread or a needle which belongs to the people."

The usual answer of all our men in such circumstances. But here, it had the effect of a bombshell. The people had known all kinds of soldiers, "natives" "republicans", "foreigners", yellow skins, white skins—every kind of color bringing every kind of trouble. But they all looked alike and to say "soldier" meant repression and inhumanity. If they paid you a tiny price instead of stealing from you, sacked the village without many beatings, you could consider yourself lucky. And here is a man who comes to spill his blood to liberate you—and lets himself starve to death instead of taking your sweet potatoes! The news flew in whispers around the village and people came to see with their own eyes this strange phenomenon. But Khuyen could not stay in the village long without being discovered by the police. The people made him clothes, a new mosquito net and nylon hammock and then took him to the mountains to give him back to his unit.

Older people who had already had the occasion to meet revolutionary troops said, "They are just the same — the Liberation soldiers of today are the Ve Quoc Doan* at the beginning of the August 1945 Revolution."

What is remarkable is the fact that in spite of years of oppression, everyone knew perfectly well what he

* "Defenders of the Country", the name of the first units of the Liberation Army of Viet Nam.

had to do when the P.L.A.F. arrived. As a "quartermaster corps", the people gave food and drink to the troops and first-aid to the wounded. They also gave precise and prompt information on every enemy movement.

The liberated areas expanded like ever-widening circles of light under the tread of the Liberation soldiers. And as they came, the inhabitants of the plain arose in an irresistible storm.

V

At the end of 1966 and the beginning of the second dry season, Johnson doubles the stakes in his game. The U.S. invasion forces reach more than 400,000 men. His armed forces, including puppet and satellite troops, are more than one million. In spite of these reinforcements and in spite of intensive bombing on both sides of the 17th parallel, the hammering arrogance of the aggressors has come down a notch since last year.

No more swarming like flies every time they smell the presence of Liberation forces somewhere. Before each operation they are now prudent and circumspect. During their mopping-up campaigns, if they think we are about to counter-attack, they promptly retreat like a snail pulls back into its shell when its head touches a blade of grass. But the Liberation fighters are no longer content to wait for the enemy in solid positions around the outside of the villages. On this battlefield, which even

a year ago the Yankees considered as effortlessly safe, our men now rove looking for G.I.s and puppets to exterminate. To hit them in their fortifications, it is necessary to penetrate deeply behind their lines and deal with their reinforced concrete blockhouses. To attack them in open country is not very easy. In one place in the afternoon, by night time the Liberation men are already miles away. Knowing each other perfectly, the two adversaries make tight moves to win in this game.

The operational base of An Lo is on Highway No. 1, on the bank of the Bo River 17 kilometers from Hue. It is a big garrison built in the time of the French. For twenty years its some forty brick buildings have not received a single bullet. Its semi-underground bunkers from which the French learned to fear the artillery of the Viet Minh, are still there, scattered in every corner of the post like skulls with empty eye sockets. The "republican army" has erected others, higher and thicker, at angles, which have a more serious air. The principal building, shaped like a cross with one arm cut off and standing squarely in the center of the post, the high water tower for drinking water, the wide streets lined with filao trees crisscrossing the post — all speaks of the great security which reigns there. As soon as they return from an operation, the troops have the habit of getting rid of all the equipment they carry, dressing in their most elegant clothes and going at once to roam around the streets of An Lo. In the afternoon, you can see them swimming in the clear water of the Bo River. Half-dressed puppet soldiers, torses tatooed with pinup girls, eyes hidden behind black glasses, take sun

baths on the little bamboo docks along the river, laughing and calling obscenities to the women passing in boats.

Strategic hamlets from a wide barrier around the entire base. Hamlet houses touch the barbed wire. In this "security belt" swarm the collaborators once obliged to leave their villages and now waiting for better times. They circulate rumors and slanders about the revolution. The more the people are taken in by these, the more secure the collaborators feel. They are particularly good at smelling out the revolutionaries, but never forget to spend the night other than where they ate their meals. They agree that the best refuge at night is in a boat anchored in the middle of the current and even then boarded secretly only after night falls. The garrison is absolutely sure of its guard of very intelligent dogs and men who know very little about the revolution. From time to time they brag, "The Viet Cong claim they are looking for us. Why don't they come here to An Lo? Whom can they fight with at Phong Son?" Every time the people hear this bragging and boasting, they know that the puppets already see the P.L.A.F. in a different way, even if the P.L.A.F. has not yet been able to attack An Lo.

At the beginning of December 1966, the puppet troops of the First Infantry Division reach An Lo with heavy packs on their shoulders. Neat and clean uniforms. But sombre faces. The women vendors recognize the familiar figures of the officers of the Third Battalion. The newcomers rarely come into the town and do not do many bad things, contrary to their usual behavior after a mopping up.

Behind the heavy crenellated walls of rammed earth, great excitement and agitation reigns. It is not the usual shouts of encouragement at a football game or verbal disputes at card games, but the movement of trucks, shouted advice and orders, angry cries of officers who are becoming nervous and irritated. Soldiers come out of the barracks from time to time, assemble in the courtyard, then disperse and go back in again.

At night, searchlights on top of the watch towers sweep the surrounding countryside, probing into bushes, fields of vegetables and paddy fields. From time to time, a trail of fire streams out into the dark over the roofs, as if a demented hand pulled a phosphorescent thread across the velvet of the night. The tracer bullets die out rapidly and their detonation vanishes as quickly. Their whine in the air provokes in the awakened people the unpleasant impression of the crack of a whip. From time to time, the heavy artillery of Tu Ha fires an intimidating salvo, and the shell mounts the sky like a glowworm, then like a drop of water suspended in space, it flares violently and lights up the base with a brilliant and garish blue light. Everything — the water tower, the barracks, the barbed wire posts, the bamboos, the banana trees — everything that was asleep — suddenly stands out starkly alive. The tiny red lamp on the altar of the nearby pagoda pales. And when the intense light dies out, the buildings and the trees once more sleep, slipping into the blackness as if they had never existed.

That night as soon as the inhabitants of An Lo go to bed, they hear motors roaring on Highway No. 1

coming from the direction of Hue. The noise approaches, the earth trembles. They can distinguish now the clatter of the treads of tanks and half-tracks on the pavement. They whisper, "So it's tomorrow!" In effect, before each mopping up, the enemy has the habit of deploying armored vehicles along the road. And people ask themselves, "Which village will the somber-faced soldiers put to fire and blood this time? Or will it be their turn to take a heavy beating?"

Around midnight, an old man in An Lo who suffers from insomnia hears the "Who goes there?" of a sentry. The usual cry, without fear or menace, which all the sentries shout when something attracts their attention, some unusual noise, even if they know very well that it comes from the wind or a rat passing near the barrier. The man is simply keeping his senses sharp without alerting his comrades. The thing he hears is too uncertain and doesn't seem to contain any danger?

The old man is used to these cries close by, generally only answered by the silence of the night, if one doesn't count the croaking of the frogs. The sentry's query was about the same as a house owner clearing his throat when an unusual noise in the wall of his house awakens him. But this time there followed a sharp, curt volley of shots. An unusual volley. Later, when he relates these facts, the old man will claim that it sounded different from any he ever heard in his life.

Everything this night begins with that "Who goes there?", heavy with the sleep of a sentry on guard at a corner of the post.

Everyone tells of the destruction of the operational base at An Lo in his own way.

The pharmacy owner is awakened in his bed by a strong explosion. Another from the direction of the post. And then, no more isolated explosion — he can no longer separate them, they come in a rolling, continuous thunder. Flashes follow one after the other, the blasts whipping his face.

" My god," he whispers in a strangled voice, " B-52s are dropping their bombs by mistake!"

He throws himself into the shelter, thinking in despair, it is really the end this time, the absolutely unforeseeable end.

Then he remembers his wife and baby. He shouts to them, but he cannot hear his own voice. But there she comes with the baby in her arms, sobbing and wailing to break your heart. The man puts his head on his knees but continues to see burst of fireballs, the same ones which he remembers from the first B-52 raid in the Truong Son. Now it will be their turn! Only one bomb will do it. One violent flash and everything will be finished. No more bookkeeping, no more profit and loss. No more petitions to address, no more need to know who has fallen and who is on top. One flash is enough — it is terrifying. But the fatal minute does not come. The explosions become further and further apart. Machine guns start to stutter in the post. Voices answer each other, voices he never heard before.

Only a half an hour after the attack, people know for sure that the Liberation troops are operating.