

The ford

LIKE a youthful force the road wound its course around sprawling hills. But it came to an abrupt stop. Before it lay a major stream. The current roared down impetuously although it was now in the heart of the dry season. Foam splashed white on both banks.

The whole group stopped. They put the spades down and everyone looked anxiously at the current. Their pointed iron picks, their dust-covered hoes and axes, their strong, round arms which were at all time ready for action were like hung up in the air.

Before them was neither a steep slope, nor a high mountain, nor a forest. Before them was a stream, a turbulent stream.

The youthful road as well as the bulldozer rumbling behind them seemed to be taken aback and fell silent. The sun was dazzling. The road builders

remained helpless before the rush of water, and the challenging white of the foam splashing against the rocks on the banks.

Dan broke a twig and flung it into the stream. The twig made a few twirls then was swept away, leaving only a green leaf that bobbed up and down in the foaming water.

«Dear me, look how it flows!»

«But the stream is not large, I bet it's only a score metres to the other bank,» said Kim Dung, the company leader, looking over Dan's shoulders with a frown.

«Well, if we are allowed to swim, I'll need only a few strokes to reach the other bank. The Duong river in my village is many times wider, yet we crossed it daily swimming beside our buffaloes.»

Kim Dung broke into a broad grin.

«To swim and to build a road across a river are two different things. The trucks could not make a few strokes to reach the other bank as you pretend to do.»

The whole group gathered beside the stream.

The young foreheads knitted and everyone looked anxious. Behind them, the newly built road stretched like a silk ribbon.

The meeting broke up. The teams returned to their temporary bamboo huts. To guard against enemy planes, they put out all the lights. In the dim light of the crescent moon, the whole road-mending company

set eagerly to prepare for a crucial job the next day. The baskets for carrying earth were urgently repaired. New handles were put to the spade and hoes. From the smithy came the puffs of Thuc's bellows. He was sharpening the picks and straightening the prising iron rods. The sounds of hammers reverberated against the mountain cliffs in the dark winter night.

No one wanted to sleep. Tomorrow a new campaign would begin. There was too little time left. They felt that so many things were still lacking.

All the members of Company 9 of the Young Volunteers Brigade were highly exalted thinking of the moment when they would move to-morrow the first clods of earth to build a ford at this stream crossing. Everything was new, everything seemed difficult because no one of them had got any experience in this kind of work.

At the command office, company leader Kim Dung was discussing with two other young women entrusted with the building of two new roads: Tran Thi Dieu, assistant secretary of the trade union branch in charge of the «Trade Union Road», and Pham Thi Thanh Tam, secretary of the Ho Chi Minh Youth Union branch, in charge of the «Youth Road». The three bent over the blueprint, engaged in heated debate.

The crow of a game-cock came from the hillfoot. Kim Dung stood up.

«Well, let's agree on that plan. At four and a half tomorrow morning we'll set out. Don't forget to bring along your flags and banners.»

They broke up and returned to their huts. The tense and stirring atmosphere of the successive debates kept Kim Dung wide awake late in the night. Her daughter had fallen asleep she did not know when and was muttering something in her dream. She tucked her in and bent down to kiss her long then turned to the wall trying to doze off a while.

Dawn broke. The morning mist floated about like white smoke. The young road builders put on each a camouflage cloth on their shoulders and set out in the rumble of drums and in the wake of twenty six banners bearing witness to the meritorious records of the company.

Two shock teams, like two pointed prongs, went some distance ahead, weaving their way amid high elephant grass toward the stream. Company leader Kim Dung and trade union secretary Bich Dan, each holding an iron-beam, prised the first stone into the stream. The stone rolled down with a rattle that was also the signal for the start. Then everyone followed suit by prising and carrying stones, digging and shovelling earth.

Mrs Tham, 44, sprang to the lead of the earth carriers with two baskets dangling rhythmically on the shoulderpole. She did it as nimbly as any teenaged girls. Tra, another member of the company, did not want to be outstripped and she tried her hardest to catch up with Mrs Tham. The previous night, the two had challenged each other to chalk up the highest mark in earth moving. And they vied with each other to carry the heaviest load and make the most trips.

A distance away Hong Tan and Bich Phuong, two of the «cultural figures» of the company, in rolled sleeves were prising stones to roll them into the river. Tan began a sailor song that was taken up by the others at the end of each phrase:

«A stone.

«Heave ho!

«To fill the deep stream,

«Heave ho!

«To bash in

«The head of a yank aggressor,

«Heave ho!

«And crush his bones

«Heave ho, ho, hō!»

After each «Heave ho», a stone was rolled into the stream. The stones rolled and pushed one another. The picks sparked fire as the «heave hos» became more and more forceful.

Ly wiped the sweat on her forehead and said pantedly:

«Can anyone of you strike another tune? I'm fed up with her heave-hos».

«Why don't you do it yourself?»

«But I am no singer!»

«Phuong, where is Phuong, why does she not call the tune?»

«My voice has got gruff somehow I can't!»

«Stop that rubbish affectation, madam!»

«Okay, I'll, but will you support me?»

«Hurrah Phuong, come on!»

Phuong heaved up a heavy stone then stretched up to clear her throat. A crystalline voice rose in the dampy morning air:

«Hey, ho! This road I build is a road of affection and love. For your truck to cross ravines and bombs. Hey ho!» Everyone chimed in. The rocks fell like avalanches into the water.

«Look, she's again thinking of her lover.» And the girls thumped at one another back giggling.

The sun had risen above the mountain. The mist was gradually diluted and melted away. The rocks continued to fall into the stream, sending up geysers of crystallike water. Only now could the road builders fully appreciate the velocity of the current. It flowed at a terrific speed. Hardly could any stone resist the flow. Even the heavy baskets of pebbles were swept down to the lower reaches. The stream roared menacingly like a monster ready to swallow up everything the women dropped in. Finally, the jerry-built pier was itself swept away. Tra and the whole 8th group jumped down to plant more stakes and rebuild the pier. The icy cold water made everyone shiver. The women teeth clattered under the impact of cold but their eyes shone with determination and their faces were beaming challengingly.

The day wore on and the sun began to decline. Yet the stream remained indomitable. Some of the girls began to lose patience.

Mrs Ly put the spade down and asked sneeringly:

«When do you think we can finish it, Mrs Dien?»

I've told you. It's not a matter to joke with. But you

have let your impulse prevail. Now you can see the result for yourself ».

Dien wanted to recriminate but inwardly she herself felt distraught. She went straight to the rock pile. Since early morning she had been anxiously watching the sluggish pace at which the « trade union road » was built. So much stone and earth had been dumped into the stream without being able to stem the impetuous current.

From the hilltop came the crystalline voice of Nguyet over a loudspeaker. « The shock unit of the youth has set a brilliant initial record: completing the pier and the road bed ».

« So, the girls have outstripped us, Mrs. Dien ». Mrs. Tham put down the two baskets of earth and ventilated in earnest. She was drenched with sweat although it was in the midst of winter.

« Now, Mrs. Dien, as far as I can see, we can't compete with the girls. There must be some other way or we'll only be dropping grains into the sea ».

« Yes, I also want to discuss the whole thing with you and others in the team. Compared with the youth, we are moving at an appallingly slow pace ».

« Look, the stream is as deep as it was in the morning! ».

That night, the shock group held an emergency meeting. But no solution came. Dien was gloomier than before. After entering the mosquito net, she still lay wide awake.

For two months now, she had not seen her four-month-old daughter. She had to send her to grandma.

She could not take her along in such conditions as these.

Either because she missed her baby or was too much concerned over her unaccomplished responsibility, Dien could not sleep. She tossed about all night. Outside, the stream continued its unending, challenging roar.

Before day break, she already set out for the brook and told some of the girls to go into the jungle to fell trees, and make a kind of gutter. She remembered she had seen a conveyor belt somewhere at a coal mine. Why not make a stone conveyor here?

After constructing the conveyor Dien climbed up the hill and prised a rock. The rock rolled along the conveyor in the eager expectation of everyone. Arrived at half-way to the brook, the rock suddenly lost speed then came to a halt, what's the matter with it? Dien uttered a sigh of despair. Leaving the pick she ran together with other women to the scene. Someone was giggling behind. Without turning Dien knew it was Mrs Ly, the avowed opponent of the whole project. She frowned and turned to Tra, Tham and Hong Phuong. « We cannot let it fail, comrades ».

Suddenly Hong Phuong cried out with joy :

« Ah, I've seen why it didn't roll on, Dien ».

« Why ? » Dien asked anxiously.

« Because we haven't got the necessary slope. Look, it's too level ».

Dien clapped her hands :

« That's right ! What a blockhead I am ! How can it roll on such a horizontal plane ? ».

The four of them set to rearrange the supports of the conveyor to make it more sloping. Then they hurled rocks into the conveyors. The rocks rolled down, the one pushing the other, raising clouds of dust. And like a real avalanche they were rushing into the stream, sending up geysers of water which in splashing against the banks, made the reeds bend very low.

Shouts of acclaim arose amidst the frantic beating of drums and gongs. The rock avalanche and the turbulent stream went into a violent clash. Mrs Ly hugged Dien's bony shoulders and said apologetically: "Will you pardon me, you're really marvellous!"

Further in the rear was the supply service of the campaign. They were the wicker-work team of Nguyễn Thi Hoa and Nguyễn Thi Bích Nu who were splitting bamboo and making baskets with their dextrous hands. Huge piles of baskets were urgently transported to the road building sites. Thousands of bamboo poles were shifted to the front. They worked day and night, in the forest, at their makeshift houses, felling bamboo, plaiting ropes, splitting wicker. The military campaign was urging them to make haste.

From the hillfoot came the endless puffing of the bellows. Thuoc, Nhung and Vuc, three assistant-smiths, their faces smeared with coal-dust were busy repairing heaps of broken spades and hoes sent back from the building sites. Now and then Kim Dung would drop in and ask:

«Are the hoes ready? Where are our picks? They are dying of cold over there waiting for your tools!»

The three could hardly keep up with the rush of the work.

They looked haggard after many sleepless nights. The cooks had to bring the meals to them at the smithy itself.

On the third day of the campaign, Dao, the fiance of Thuoc, came to see her. Before he had finished asking her questions, Thuoc excused herself and ran to the workshop. Dao was completely put out. Left to himself at the visitors room, he toyed with a pictorial review, leafing it over and over again without understanding a word.

From the smithy hammer strokes continued to resound. Dao sat up and out of curiosity he went down to the hillfoot and entered the smithy. He saw a sweaty, besmeared Thuoc handling a sledgehammer on an anvil.

That night, when taking Dao to the brook, Thuoc recounted to him what had happened in the afternoon. She said that as the road building campaign went into the crucial phase, the three women assistant smiths could not handle the big quantity of broken hoes. Finding a stock of disused picks left over from the time of the railroad building, they decided to repair them to make up for the shortage of picks. «That's how our double-blade picks came into being», she said. Dao felt he had understood the work of his fiance better than ever before.

The weather worsened with every passing day. The northern wind from the Long Range was biting cold. The road to the construction site became sticky with laterite red mud. Many times a day the cooks headed by Mai Thi Tho slogged under rain across the muddy terrain to bring the meals to the two shock teams. The nearest market was a dozen kilometres away. Yet, Mai Thi Tho went there every-day to buy provisions. One day on her way back from the market Tho was overtaken by a law flying US aircraft. A bomb splinter cut through the conical palm hat on her head. Tho was delighted to see that the baskets of sea fish remained intact. Quickly she stood up and carried the fish home to prepare the afternoon meal.

That was how the men and women in the rear line worked, those who did not take direct part in the fight against the turbulent stream.

Under lacerating rains, in the rumble of falling stones and through consecutive sleepless nights of the road builders, the brook gradually dried up. Then the bulldozer came into action. The driver with a beaming face geared up and drove his machine to the road bed.

The two anti-US roads emerged from the water as if they had been lifted up by some giant, youthful arms. And the turbulent stream finally was vanquished. It became docile, winding its limpid current to newly built culverts.

The courageous women who were rightly called «three responsibilities» women have completed their

work four days ahead of schedule. The two roads built by their hands baptized «Trade Union Road» and «Youth Road» ran parallel like two companions in arms.

On the inaugural day which was a festive day for the road building brigade, a truck driver stopped his vehicle and watched the newly completed fords. As if to test the efficiency of the women's work he drove back then pushed on. The tyres of the heavy truck could only make hardly perceptible dents on the smooth road bed. From the cabin the driver leant out and waved to the girls with his cap then sped off.

The trucks rolled past the fords in endless lines carrying with them the youthful vitality of the roads.

Tran Van Thai, an elite worker

TRAN Van Thai works at the «April 20» state - farm. He is a 19-year-old lad, fairly tall with shining eyes that spells intelligence and also some mischievousness. He was just a small boy when he came to the farm and was often called «the kid» by the other workers. Yet, after only one year he has grown up beyond recognition, and is held in esteem by everyone for his diligence and his creative spirit. Take the timber-sawing for example. Many had to learn for months without getting the saw-line straight. But it took Thai only half a month to be expedient in the job. His saw line is such that you would bet it belongs to an experienced worker. Thai is as applied in work, as assiduous in learning, and devoted in every job he is assigned to.

Born in Thailand, his childhood was not a happy one: selling ice-cream, working as a boot-boy,

newsboy, roaming the streets looking for customers. He had long dreamt of returning one day to the country, to his native village. After repatriation he was sent to work at the State farm. Here, an entirely new world was opened to him. Everyone cared for him and was ready to assist him. The Working Youth Union branch at the State farm sent him to a refresher course and took him to youth meetings that made him better understand his task and better love his country and his work. Thai gave his all for the new task like a fledgeling before the dawn of a new day.

But one day the Americans sent planes to bomb his farm. Production activities were threatened. The whole farm embarked on urgent, busy days. Thai was assigned to the homeguard unit of the farm and given a K44 rifle. He was only too happy with his gun and kept it day and night by his side. Seeing a bird flying past or a branch within firing range he would raise his gun and take aim. He was so eager to open fire one day at the marauding aircraft.

To tell the truth, the first time he heard the roar of jet bombers Thai shook in all limbs. Covering his ears with both hands he ran into the nearest bush and came out only after the planes had gone. Now he was ashamed of himself remembering those moments. In fact, things have completely changed now. Side by side with his comrades in the homeguard unit he fought bravely against enemy planes at any moment of the day. The enemy showered bombs and rockets on the farm, killing and wounding many of his friends. His

hatred for the enemy and his desire to avenge his friends gave him strength and courage. Once, during a bombing raid he crossed several hills and brooks to come to the rescue of Mrs Xuan's home which had caught fire. He managed to salvage many things including a sewing machine. Today, Mrs Xuan still spoke of him with profound admiration.

On another occasion, Thai and his group were at work when the planes came. Hardly had they jumped into a ditch that the earth shook violently under the impact of bomb explosions. Stones and dirt fell like showers into the ditch.

«Let's get out, it's too risky to stay here!» he cried out and jumped out only to see that his friends had been completely buried under an avalanche of earth. Without hesitation he sped out. Meeting Công on his way, Thai called out :

«Come on quick, they've been trapped over there, in the trench!».

The two rushed back and began digging with their hands. Losing not a second Thai ran to the storehouse, broke the lock and took out spades and hoes. They dug in earnest and pulled out the first man. They dug on and took out the second then the third.

Thai was startled to see that the man just taken out was his own father. Containing his grief, he went on digging. In the end, the two succeeded in saving all the five victims. Whereupon other workers arrived and gave them a hand. The five soon completely recovered and resumed their work at the state farm. Thai and Công were cited for their devotion and

valour. Sometime later, Thai was admitted into the Working Youth Union.

Nevertheless, the fight that left him with the deepest impression was the one against a group of US helicopters on September 20, 1965.

The sky was heavily overcast. Occasionally the sun would peep out of the clouds. At about 2 p.m., no sooner had Thai arrived at his workplace than four «Thunderchiefs» roared in. They came out of the clouds and dived straight on a nearby bridge. Thai ran to a fortification and pointed his gun skywards, ready to open fire when the planes would come within firing range. Anti-aircraft guns of all calibres roared off on all sides. Suddenly Thai saw an F 105 belch smoke then burst into flame... The fireball grew larger and larger quickly and streaked down across the sky. Thai and his friends jumped of joy:

«It has caught fire, hurrah!»

From the fireball, ejected a purple parachute. Thai turned to the commander of the local self-defence unit and said quickly:

«Allow me to go out and catch him, comrade!»

Before the commander had answered, Thai already darted off. Before him were precipitous mountain ridge. Normally, to reach the hill-top he had to crawl on his fours with utmost care. Today strangely enough, he crossed them without difficulty, jumping from one rock to another like an antelope.

His clothes had been torn up by the razor-sharp rocks he did not know when. His feet were bleeding. But Thai did not take the least notice because his eyes

were riveted to the falling parachute with the pilot dangling below like a frog hung by a hook.

Group after group of rescue aircraft circled in the sky in an infernal roar. Some of them swooped down very low. But Thai did not fire a single shot because he knew he must spare the ammunition for the hunt for the pilot and the helicopters. Presently, a chopper came looking like a giant dragon-fly. Thai dashed on. Drops of sweat crept into his mouth. Never before had he felt so strong.

The forest where the parachute fell was now only a few scores metres away. The three broke off and closed in from three different directions. Thai already saw the parachute, half of it hung on a tree and the other spreading on the ground. The pilot was hiding somewhere. Thai ran to the parachute and gave it a violent pull. Rat-tat-tat... A burst of machine gun was fired from an AD 6. Thai looked up:

«F... your mother! You can't cow me!» He pulled twice more at the parachute. The enemy fired frantically. He pulled harder. The two AD 65 winged over the place and sprayed hails of gunfire. By now the chopper had lowered to almost tree top. Thai held firm his rifle. The chopper continued to lower, its rotors whirring noisily in the air. Thai could see the pilot and other crewmen looking down inquisitively on the bushes. An implacable hatred filled his heart as he thought of his friends Hang, Lien and others murdered by the Yanks. He wanted so much to send them each a round of his rifle. But the recommendations of the commander still rung in his ears: capture them

alive, don't kill them. The chopper had almost touched down. Gunfire of the militia came from all sides with hissing sounds. Thai also fired at the chopper, very calmly, round by round. The body of the craft had been riddled in many places. Panic could be clearly seen on the crewmen's faces.

«We must fire at the rotor-blades if we want to capture them alive» Thai said to himself.

He aimed at the rotors and cracked two shots.

A hissing sound produced by some flying thing made him duck low. That was a broken rotor blade falling a few yards away. The chopper tried to climb up but soon it lost balance and fell to the ground like a stone with a dull thud. Three Americans crawled out of the wrecked aircraft, each holding a shining carbine. An idea flashed through Thai's mind:

«If I came out now, my rifle would be no match for their quick-firing guns.» Thai stood behind a big tree, his rifle pointed at the enemy.

«We must capture them, not kill them.» Thai again recalled to himself.

Hardly had the first American got up that Thai sent a bullet over his head. The man dropped to the ground and rolled into a nearby ditch. The second in his turn was startled by a bullet whizzing close to his chest. All the three rolled into the ditch. Like an arrow Thai sprang up. By now the militia and army men had arrived and the Yanks were tied up in next to no time. They were marched to the detention place, walking with bent heads between rows of rifles, bayonets, spears and sticks. Thai and

another worker were ordered to stay back and guard the helicopter.

Darkness spread rapidly from the Jungles. A cold wind rustled among the trees. Only then did Thai feel pain all over his body and terribly hungry. He instinctively thought of his family, his mother and younger brothers and sisters at home. At this hour, they must have dined and his mother must be sitting and doing some needle-work near the kerosene lamp while his father would be busy with some small repairs and his brothers and sisters would be learning their lessons or huddling together around a pictorial review. Now the whole family must be enormously fearing for him. One thing is certain: mum could not help crying. She was so fearful of the planes and so quick in tears.

Thai was so eager to relate the whole story to his mother. He would tell her:

«Look, mum, don't be afraid of the Yanks. They are big indeed but have little guts. Your son himself has scared them out of their wits».

Thai smiled all to himself. Thai was so much carried by the joy of victory that all the pain and fatigue of the chase seemed to have evaporated. He turned to his comrade:

«Let's dig a trench to protect ourselves in case the enemy would send planes to destroy the chopper».

Manh agreed. The two set to dig a ditch. Afterward, they sat huddled against each other, their guns firm in hands. From a nearby jungle came the

braying of a deer followed shortly by the howling of a bear.

Again the AD 65 came and dropped a string of flares that filled the sky with their morbid vacillating light. Thai commented with a sneering laughter :

«Look, they are searching for the pilot and crewmen who must be now well in a certain prison reserved for them».

A gust of wind shook the branches as if it were a sign of approbation by the jungle.

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