GUNNERS
WITHOUT
INSIGNIA

INDOCHINA ARCHIVE
MONOGRAPH FILE

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Faced with increasingly heavier setbacks in their aggressive war in South Vietnam, on August 5, 1964, the American imperialists started the "escalation war", chiefly by air strikes, against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with the hope of forcing the Vietnamese people to accept surrender terms which they call "peace negotiations".

They have been grossly mistaken.

The Vietnamese people deeply cherish peace, but peace in independence and freedom. As President Ho Chi Minh has said, for the Vietnamese people "there is nothing more precious than independence and freedom". That is why, for the past two years, though countless up-to-date American planes have bombed and strafed populated towns and villages, bridges and dykes, schools and hospitals in North Vietnam, the people here are determined to defend their Fatherland, and to support
their Southern compatriots in repelling the American aggressors. They have been staunchly carrying out fighting and production. When this booklet is in the press nearly 1,500 American aircraft have been downed and a good many American pilots captured in North Vietnam, and with them the “U.S. Air Force absolute supremacy” has been debunked.

The nine reportages which appear in this booklet were written in the first days of the “escalation” to North Vietnam. The reader will acquaint himself with patriotic citizens like worker Tran Vi, engineer Ban (The First Battle Won), Tuyet and Bong (The Postmen), Nga (Gunners Without Insignia), etc., who have fulfilled their duties amidst the explosion of bombs and the roaring of planes, confident that when a people are united and determined to defend their independence and freedom along a correct line, they will surely get the better of the aggressor however cruel and equipped he may be.

Hanoi, September 5, 1966

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
beside the grave of an American airman

Poor dog. He’s now three feet under ground, yet his mother, brothers and sisters are still praying for his survival. They believe him to be still alive, just as last year he had parachuted onto a snow-covered river bank without a scratch. On another occasion, he had baled out three hundred metres from the ground; his parachute did not open and he fell on a thick heap of snow, again without a scratch.

This time, Dickson’s parachute again failed to open but he had less luck.

Lieutenant-pilot Dickson — fair hair, A-type blood — is now resting here for eternity, on a sandy beach of Vietnam, separated from his homeland by the whole width of the Pacific Ocean. Vietnamese fishermen, on whom he had just showered bombs and bullets, had

* UPI, February 8, 1965.
buried him in a little sandy spot. They had been thoughtful enough to grow a wild pineapple plant, so that one could distinguish where Dickson's head was, under ground, and where his feet. It was an old plant, with a scraggy stem, and most of the leaves had been cut off, probably so that the sandy mould could more easily be seen.

I forget whether it was morning or afternoon when I visited his grave. The woman guerilla who accompanied me stopped and pointed her finger at a sandy mould: 'There he lies,' she said. The first thing I saw was the old pineapple plant. A few remaining withered yellowish leaves were trembling in the sea breeze.

Enough evidence now enables me to tell Dickson's mother and family not to let themselves be fooled any longer by those very men who had fooled Dickson himself. Contrary to what they have been saying, Dickson is dead. Let his family pray for the peace of his soul.

The very day the guerillas picked up from the beach the plastic shield over Dickson's cockpit and the helmet with his name handwritten on it, it was broadcast on the other side of the Pacific that Dickson had safely returned to his base.

Later, it seemed, it was said that he was missing. And so we had to confirm to them that we had every evidence of what had happened to Dickson. And not only him, but another American airman, who had landed not far from him, but who had been more lucky, having no need of a wild pineapple plant to mark his head from his feet.
Standing beside Dickson's grave, I would like also to record some of the "feats" achieved by these American airmen.

I had seen traces of their shells on a wall quite close to the office of the International Control Commission team, in the garden in front of that office, in a half-destroyed storehouse of the State Trade Service filled with earthenware.

Their bombs had fallen on a hospital too, wounding a parturient woman. Four buffalo boys had died of their bullets when trying to seek cover.

In another place, over an area of not more than one hectare, they had rained no less than one hundred and thirty-five bombs, and countless shells and bullets. The peasant who had come to plough his field when the bombing was over bent down at each step to pick up five or six splinters of various sizes. And I haven't mentioned the duds.

Twenty-three planes, jets and propeller-driven, black and grey-painted, had bombed and strafed for one full hour.

But the fishermen of Central Vietnam have been wont these last few years to look at the sky over their native land through the sights of their guns.

Little evidence is needed on the savagery of the American raids. I would mention but one illustration: after each battle, our gunners used to pick up quite a few sparrows near their parapets. These were not dead, they had not even lost a feather. But the explosions had so shaken them that they had fallen on the ground. A few days later, when the men set them free,
they just hopped about and hesitated to take wing, as if still stricken with fear. The soldiers fed them with rice and water put in containers they had made out of plane debris.

The American airmen have said quite a lot about the dense network of ground fire they had encountered. Most illustrative is perhaps this remark by a Saigon-based captain: “Groundfire came up as thick as the flour from a sieve turned skyward.”

The man had not exaggerated. Let me describe some of the debris of the downed planes, planes that had been hit by projectiles from the “sieve” and turned into “sieves” themselves. A metal plate not bigger than a tray bore twenty-eight holes—I had counted very carefully—two as big as a bowl, eight through which you could stick your forefinger, and the rest of miscellaneous sizes. Another, about the size of the palm of your hand, bore six holes, and a fragment of a fuel tank, eight.

We have been using to bring down their jets with weapons of all calibres, including rifles.

In the obstetrics department of a hospital, the waiting-room for would-be fathers was very nicely decorated. A round table stood in the middle of the room, and in the vase on the table, there were always fresh flowers. There was also a small plaque with these words: “Welcome to this world!” A U.S. jet’s shell penetrated through the roof, bore a hole in the table then exploded on the floor. The room was strewn with splinters but the flower vase and the plaque were miraculously intact. At the same moment, from the next room, came the cries of a newborn baby.
The doctors, assistant-doctors, druggists, ward orderlies, clad in white and with a red cross on their caps, were now combatants.

Red-scarfed young pioneers bringing ammunition to the people's militia under enemy fire; old boat-women ferrying combatants across rivers; ploughmen taking hold of their machineguns and firing at attacking planes, sometimes with the barrel of the gun resting on the shoulder of one of them... When first hearing such stories, I had carefully noted the names and places; but then I realized that such events took place everywhere, wherever fighting occurred. They were not particular to any province or village.

Many singers had come here. They had sung the praise of Bé Van Dan* before the new Bé Van Dans of our time; they had sung “The Song of the Plane Hunters” beside the carcass of a newly-downed U.S. aircraft; they had sung the exploits of the famed “Battalion 307” of Nambo before navy men who only the previous night had sunk an enemy vessel, the boughs camouflaging their ship's guns still fresh and green. Never had they felt so moved before, and never had an audience been so moved by their songs.

I could tell you many such stories, but let's talk about the American airmen again. Let me tell you the story of Lieutenant-commander Shumaker, a crack pilot of the U.S. Navy.

* An army hero who, in the battle of Dienbienphu, had rested the barrel of his squad's machinegun on his shoulder to allow the gunner to aim more accurately at the enemy —Publ.
"American plane set afire!" This warning of the look-out man resounded in the loudspeaker, "The pilot has baled out. Hunt him down!"

Many similar warnings were successively issued: plane downed, pilot baling out, hunt him down...

The sky had darkened. It was crisscrossed with streaks of fire flying in all directions.

Over Donghoi, one plane was set ablaze and was burning like a torch. Only the tips of its wings could be seen amidst the flames. It tried to flee to the sea but could not. It gave out a roar and pointed its nose upward. Its tail belched fire. It was then that something white was ejected and opened into a parachute. Hanging from the parachute was, as it was learned later, Shumaker, a pilot who had been selected as candidate cosmonaut of the United States.

Shumaker's jet was having terrible jolts as it jinked through the air. Space around him was misty with flak bursts and fiery meteors shot past, weaving a deadly network from which he vainly tried to escape. He foundered and then came straight down. He pressed a button and was ejected from his plane. Hanging in the air, he might no longer dream of setting foot on some celestial body millions of light-years from the earth! Radio stations all over the United States were going to broadcast news about his miraculous flight.

He freed himself from his parachute and started scampering like a rat. Hey, cosmonaut, why don't you stop for a moment and plant the U.S. flag on that very spot you've just set foot on. No, he kept running like mad, without casting a glance at what was around
him. Ah, on this celestial body, there are trees, rocks, and even human beings... He heard people shouting after him. His knees gave way under him. A few steps more and he flung away his radio-set, then his black life-buoy, then his pilot's seat that had been sticking to him and hampering his movements. The bushes around him were quite low, so he put himself on all fours. He crawled about for a while and finally wormed himself into a thicket. There he sat, gasping for breath, not daring to make any noise in breathing. Before the cosmonaut's eyes, fiery meteors were waltzing. He felt so dizzy he had to clasp a nearby stump and didn't pay the slightest attention to the burning carcass of his plane a mere hundred metres away.

Footsteps were soon heard coming from all directions. Branches cracked. A bayonet and a spear flashed towards him. "Hands up!" someone shouted. Before he could realize what was happening to him hundreds of people were rushing at him. Thus the would-be cosmonaut had landed on no strange planet, but quite close to the village he had tried to raze to the ground. Slowly he stood up and raised his hands; a tall body, a face smudged with smoke, dirt and sweat, and unwonted paraphernalia — knife, hatchet, gun and ammunition, helmet, boots, pen and pencil, etc.

A militiaman took out a coil of rope and tied him up. Then he was led away.

He was led back to where his plane was lying. Its nose had dug a big hole in the earth; its wings had broken away; only the tail looked some part of a plane.
Shumaker was whining and wailing. He said something in his language, but nobody understood what he said. So he tipped his head to one side and rubbed it against the rope on his arm and started whining again. His guard loosened the rope, and finally took it off altogether. He walked on, tramping on plane debris which were strewn on the ground like splinters from the bombs he and his fellow-pirates has dropped on the nearby hamlet.

Gunners and guerillas recalled his sly manœuvres in the air, when he had dodged and woven and jinked to avoid our ground fire, and his frantic bomb and cannon attacks.

The first thing he owned up to was: "I was scared stiff when flying in the air, but I felt reassured after my capture." He knew we wouldn't illtreat him. And so he turned insolent. When interrogated, he only declared the things we knew already from his identification card, that is his name, date of birth and serial number. He said he was an officer and owed loyalty to his country. Everybody boiled with anger but kept calm. As the fighting was still going on, he was pushed into a car and taken up a hill slope. The car stopped and his guard began pushing him out. All of a sudden, he collapsed on the floor of the car and refused to step down. His face, which was red like the comb of a fighting cock, turned pale like a clout. He dropped on his knees and repeatedly made the sign of the cross, muttering unintelligible things to his guard. He believed he was going to be shot. No, the questions were simply reiterated to him, and this time his mouth, which had just spouted a bombastic discourse on
“loyalty” to his country, gave altogether different answers!

Dickson certainly didn’t know anything about the story I just told you, for he had passed into another world, one that is “freer” than his own “free world”; four days before those events. His own plane was a jet. Its debris had been picked up by fishermen not far from the shore, from twelve fathoms deep. Fishing out these debris had given the men a lot of trouble, but a great deal of pleasure too.

When Dickson’s jet had plummeted into the sea, the fishermen had immediately sailed out in their boats to get him. The fighting was still going on and other planes were circling overhead. The fishermen only found a pilot’s helmet and a plastic sheet. A few days later, after the carcass of the plane had been taken out of the sea, the men again went fishing. After a while, they all thought they were going to haul in a good catch: the net was so heavy. They pulled and pulled, but suddenly they stopped pulling, stopped their nostrils, spat and retched. Then they tied the net behind a boat and tugged it shoreward. To the question shouted by people standing on the beach, surprised at such an early return, the fishermen answered, still retching: “Yes, quite a catch... A shark... A man-eating shark... He stinks... You’d better keep off...”

The “shark” was dragged ashore. His skin had blackened and his body was swollen and looked as if it were going to burst. The flies swarmed on him...
But I'd rather spare you the details, and instead give you an excerpt of the report made by the Nhantrach village militia:

"A corpse was fished out and taken ashore, west of the place where a U.S. aircraft had fallen into the sea on February 7, 1965. It wore a pilot’s dress, carried a white parachute, a pilot’s seat, a parachute bag, a yellow life-buoy punctured by bullets. Black boots. No helmet. Fair hair. Swollen face. The skin had begun to come out; so had most of the hair in front of the head, and some in the back. The man had with him thirty-odd objects, among them: four maps, three one-dollar bills, a report on Southeast Asian peoples, an identification card issued to Dickson Edward Andrew, born September 3, 1937, a ration tin, a still for distilling sea water... Besides, there were two whetstones, a bushknife, a saw, a chisel, two small surgical knives, a half-eaten chocolate bar wrapped up in tin foil, still bearing the traces of teeth... That was not all. There was also a supplication printed in nineteen languages on a piece of silk bearing the American flag on the top left corner, each version being printed in a square. The languages were: Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indonesian, Chinese, Lao, Thai, English, French, etc. Here is the English text:

"I am a citizen of the United States of America. I do not speak your language. Misfortune forces me to seek your assistance in obtaining food, shelter and protection. Please take me to someone who will provide for my safety and see that I am returned to my people. My government will reward you."

"Rush in and shower bombs and bullets on them, and if you are shot down, just show them this piece of
cloth!" The U.S. government is indeed full of solicitude for its airmen: it tries to foresee everything that might happen to them. Not everything, though! For the Nhantrach fishermen had to render Dickson a service that had not been foreseen on his printed supplication: to put him in a hole and grow a wild pineapple plant on top. Now, he can rest in peace; nobody will touch him.

No, Dickson, that fair-haired lieutenant with A-type blood, no longer needs anything, not even the lies of his government or the prayers of his family. And he hardly cares any more for "loyalty" to his government.

He couldn't know that life was going on, in the very place he had wanted to raze to the ground to "avenge" his fellow-pirates at Pleiku*. On the night of the eleventh of the same month, a young militiawoman got married: among the flower vases decorating the wedding hall, there was one made out of an empty cannon shell cartridge, one that had been fired that very day by Shumaker himself. That very evening too, young pioneers who had carried ammunition to the militia, wrapped up in their red scarves, put their scarves back round their necks and again went to school. They would resume learning the song on Be Van Dan. Some would probably look sleepy, but their teacher would most certainly refrain from scolding them. The old boat-woman would continue to ferry.

* Such was the pretext put forward at the time by the U.S. government for bombing North Vietnam—Publ.
people across the Nhatle river, telling them the while about the planes that had fallen ablaze into the water that morning. The obstetrics department of the hospital had been evacuated; the infant born that morning during the bombing had ceased crying and was probably sucking the breast of its mother. The lights on the two gates of Thay wall were on as usual, both the one that looks southward, and the one that looks northward...

People were drinking beer, eating cakes; some were counting the shell traces, others were putting a shelter back into good shape.

Along the river bank, under the young palm trees, co-op teams were preparing fish. The nice scent of the cooking made one think of good meals after good fights.

All these pleasures of life could not be tasted by Dickson. He was lying under a patch of sand that had turned yellowish and a scraggy wild pineapple plant without a single fresh green leaf. He could neither hear the song of the waves, nor see the brown sails putting out to sea. He could not know that in many countries, the emblem of the United States was being smashed and smeared, and that in his own country, the youth are hoisting the flag of the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation in the streets of many cities; he couldn't know how many planes had been brought down over Vietnam, and how many of his friends had lost their lives.

February 1965
THE sun was shining over Hoxa. A spring sunshine of the colour of amber. Yet the atmosphere was full of silent tenseness. Under the golden beams, this small town close to the temporary demarcation zone looked deserted. Along the main street, doors were closed. During the day, the people evacuated to the neighbouring countryside, in anticipation of sneak attacks from the turbulent and perfidious enemy.

Along the highway, only a few cadres and militiamen were seen. Even bicycle handle-bars carried camouflage branches. A road repairer silently filled a few pot-holes with earth and pebbles.

On a byroad, a few score militiamen and some soldiers were digging into the damp, clayey earth. They had dug a funnel-like crater about six or seven metres deep and were looking for a dud.
Not far from there, other militiamen were digging trenches. The earth was moved some distance away and used to fill up a few bomb craters. There were a few young women among them. A girl wearing a black blouse, with the legs of her trousers rolled up to the knees, and an army helmet with a parachute cloth camouflage cover, looked at me as I came up: a dark-red rose was stuck at the side of her helmet, and it gave me the impression of a sudden, broad smile.

The alert sounded. The drone of planes added to the tenseness of the atmosphere. The personnel of some public office were dispersing through the network of trenches. A woman, carrying an arm-load of files, was making her way along a trench, dug head-deep in the hard earth. I followed her. The trench seemed never to end. "We've hardly travelled a third of it," she said with a note of pride in her voice. "The trench reaches far into the fields. It's one hundred per cent safe."

Two gaping craters appeared on the tiers of an open air theatre: they looked like two monstrous mouths bragging about perfidious schemes.

The alert was renewed. The drone seemed to come this time from a farther distance, somewhere near the sea. It sounded like the humming of bees, or green flies. From a trench in the yard of the secondary school, the barrel of a rifle was pointed skyward. As the drone faded away, I saw a militiaman jump up, clapping his rifle. He put back in order his cartridge belt, which he wore over an old jacket of brown cotton. I came up to him: it turned out that he was a
teacher. He took me to the self-defence group of the school: about four or five young teachers, rifles at the ready. One of them said jokingly, "We are working both under Education minister Huyen and General Giap." Another added, "In the Exhibition room of the school, we are displaying a few bomb splinters bearing "U.S. aid" markings, so that the children may see concrete proof of U.S. - puppet collusion in crime."

The school had been one of the main targets of the aggressors. The two-storeyed building was battle-scarred. Windows had been smashed by the explosions. Savage fury or just blind hatred? Probably both. On the edge of the yard, a half-destroyed shelter. Here a bomb had killed one teacher and several pupils, boys and girls. A man coming to pick up the body of his child had said, his voice hard and his eyes dry, "Let us remember, and avenge our dear ones."

Yes, all of us shall remember, for ever...

Dusk fell. The streets became alive with people. In a barber's shop, scissors were clicking. The library was brightly lighted. People crowded into the State restaurants. Life was going on at the same rhythm as usual, a lively tempo in which there was, however, no trace of hurry. As if they had given each other rendez-vous, buyers and sellers filled the market-place. A pork butcher's stall was surrounded by customers. Housewives queued up to buy fish sauce. Hens were cackling: at this time of day, they would rather have some place to roost. A hand-cart loaded with cassava roots came
out of the market: the planting season was in full swing.

In the bookshop, I noticed a young boy of about twelve, a fifth-former perhaps. He bought a small volume of the children's books series, and started reading it on the spot, standing under a bluish neon light.

From down south came the muffled sounds of two explosions, then a few seconds later, two other ones. Puppet soldiers were firing their big guns at random.

Standing at the foot of the tall flag mast, on top of which an immense gold-starred red flag was fluttering over this end of the Hienluong bridge, I listened to a member of the people's armed police talking about a tragi-comic event which had happened recently to the puppet administration on the southern bank of the river.

The 8th of February last, a flight of American and puppet planes crossed the demarcation line and launched a furious attack on Hoxa. The puppets on the southern bank of the river beat gongs and drums as a sign of rejoicing. One of them climbed on top of their flag mast to get a full view of the raid, "Things are afire," he shouted at the top of his voice. But his joy was short-lived. Only a few seconds later, he lamented, "Planes are afire, too."

Running against intense ground fire, the enemy planes soon turned tail and fled south, jettisoning
their bombs at random. The puppets, believing that Northern planes were carrying out reprisal raids were struck with panic and hastily crawled into makeshift shelters.

The enemy command brazenly ordered a ceremony to be held in celebration of the General’s * escaping death. A member of the Southern police confided to our own policemen, “When the Americans sent planes to bomb the North, they are like a snake whose head has been hit and whose tail is writhing in convulsion.”

The longer the puppets’ faces, the more joyful our compatriots on the southern bank felt. Clandestine meetings were held on the nights of the 11th, 12th and 13th, in which enemy plane losses over the two zones were made known to the people.

It was people living on the southern bank who had informed our police, through all kinds of channels, each time enemy planes hit over the North, had crashed in the South. They reported, like active press correspondents, details on the people’s protest struggle against the enemy’s jettisoning of bombs on Southern villages and fields. Over K. hamlet, they dropped twenty-four bombs, none of which exploded. One hit a house however, which collapsed. The people evacuated the hamlet. Then they went to the police post to protest. The police said, “They even dropped bombs on us. What could we do? You’d better go to district chief Nghí to protest. We are only low-ranking officials.” So, the people went to the district centre. The district chief

* Nguyen Cao Ky’s—Publ.
came to inspect the places where the bombs had fallen, but of course stood at a respectful distance from them. A company of engineers was sent to delouse the bombs. But when the latter came they shook their heads, saying, "Those are delayed-action bombs. We don't want to risk death." Then they made as if they were going to leave. The people grabbed their sleeves, protesting, "It is you who make the bombs, you must know the way of unpriming them." Finally the district chief had to promise a reward of one thousand piastres for each bomb destroyed. The engineers demanded that contracts be established, so that if any of them died, their families would receive the rewards. Only twelve bombs were exploded, the remaining were left lying deep in the earth.

On C. hamlet, they dropped fifteen bombs. Nine fell on a three-sao* field belonging to an elderly woman, where they exploded. The owner of the field went to see the village official and shouted to his face, "You've been saying you are here to protect us! Is that the way to protect us, to drop bombs on our fields? Now, I want my son back too!" (Her son had been pressganged into the puppet army some time before). The village official tried to find some kind of excuse, "The planes didn't bomb your field on purpose. It was because the bombs weren't well strapped." — "Nonsense!" snorted the woman; "why didn't they fall then on the way from the U.S. here? Why did they fall on our place?" The other had to promise to pay damages for the rice destroyed. The

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* One sao equals 360 square metres — Publ.
woman also demanded that the crater be filled up so she could till her land. "If you don't do that," she said, "I'll go to your superiors!" She didn't forget to write a letter telling her son about what had happened.

During those days when U.S. planes attacked the North, A. hamlet, a coastal hamlet south of the demarcation line, also suffered damage. Jettisoned bombs killed a number of fishermen. Their corpses were carried by their relatives and fellow-villagers to the seat of the local puppet administration. Said the angry fishermen: "You told us that whenever planes turn up we should hoist the three-striped* flag. We did that, but the planes bombed us all the same. How many stripes do you think we should add to the flag to gain more respect for it from American airmen? Every time they bombed the nationalist flag, you just stayed mum. It's really a big shame!"

How worthy of our love and respect those people on the southern bank are! They are simple, gentle yet resolute. How close to them we feel these days!

A few months ago, I already had occasion to come to Vinhlinh, although at that time I didn't come quite close to the Hienluong bridge, as I am doing this time.

In those days, the puppets, at the instigation of their American masters, were stepping up provocative activities.

* Puppet — Publ.
Day and night, treacherous shots would suddenly break the stillness of the atmosphere, fired from a bush or a window on the southern bank. They fired on boats, on people, on grown-ups, on children. Once they fired on a group of women rice-transplanter. A man who ran up to give them help was shot dead.

But we never fell into the traps of those provocations. Yet, prompt punishment was meted out to the provocateurs each time. Once Liberation armymen turned up in broad daylight and killed their chief-tain, the commander of the military post, who owed our Southern compatriots many blood debts. But the provocations continued. A pompous funeral was organized by the local ruffians for the puppet post commander. The guerillas let most of the burial procession pass unharmed, but set off a land mine under a truck loaded with local thugs, killing and wounding about twenty. That made them draw in their horns!

Many policemen still remember the heart-rending scream of an old man living on the southern bank, which tore the stillness of a night a few years ago: "Compatriots of the North, they have arrested my whole family!" The memory of that cry for help still gives them pain in the heart. But now, things have changed. Last night, and tonight too, we have heard muffled sounds of artillery from the South: the puppets have been firing random shots into the liberated areas. They are so afraid they need the sounds of heavy guns to boost their morale.

Yes, the liberated areas have been expanding, and are now lying quite close to them. Old resistance
zones in Thuathien and Quangtri provinces are now back in the hands of the Southern liberation troops. The grip of the enemy has been broken in coastal areas and in the hinterland as well.

Tonight, as I sit watching a performance by the Central Song and Dance Ensemble, which has come to celebrate the victories of our Vinhlinh compatriots, I feel as though Liberation armymen were sitting besides me, among their Northern comrades and compatriots. It is as if we were holding a preliminary celebration, pending the great festival to be held by our entire people when they are reunified. It seems to me I have only to reach out to touch the Liberation armymen’s arms and shoulders...

On my way, I visited some combat positions of the people’s armed police. The place was crisscrossed with communication trenches. At one place, the trench was enlarged to hold a few plank beds, and there was a thatch roof overhead. The fighters were all very young. Their serene faces bore no traces of the hard fighting life they had been leading. A song was coming from a little loudspeaker propped on the edge of the trench. Suddenly, the alert sounded. All snatched their guns and dashed to their respective positions. One, who was having a haircut, hastily brushed his neck and rushed out. When the alarm ended, he resumed his haircut; his comrades and I resumed our talk on art and literature.
On the emplacements of an anti-aircraft battery, I saw the same young faces. Beside their guns pointing skyward, the gunners were sharing their meal with singers and dancers who had come to perform for them. After the meal, they sat in small groups, talking about their lives and experiences, past and present...

Following those days of trial by fire, many men and women of valour have emerged in Vinhlinh. Nguyen Van Niem rested his squad's machine gun on his shoulder to allow his comrades to fire more accurately at enemy planes. Look-out men Nguyen My Man and Tran Ngoc Mai stuck to their dangerous posts under enemy bombing. "As long as no contrary order comes from the company commander, we shall remain here," they said. Old Mrs. Thi brought tea to gunners in full battle. Telephone technician Nguyen Dinh Dong, caught in a bombing, was buried by an explosion. He disengaged himself, joined his post, worked all night to set up a field telephone exchange. Operator Nguyen Thi Minh Sinh stayed at her post although bombs were exploding all around. Many, many others carried on their duties in spite of terrible dangers: Red Cross truck drivers, school teachers, etc.

Heroism has become something common here. Old Mrs. Minh Sinh was quite surprised when she heard her daughter's name mentioned over the radio. And when I had an interview with the twenty-year-old girl, I noticed how shy and unassuming she was. She was particularly embarrassed when asked: "What did you think at that moment?"
At that moment, bombs were exploding all around the telephone exchange. The house was shaking and plaster was falling from the ceiling. The thing foremost in her mind was: Listen well, put the right plug in the right socket so as to ensure good connexions. Quite close to where stood her stool was the entrance to an air-raid shelter; but she did not think for a moment of abandoning her post.

New trials are awaiting Vinhlinh. But all its people and its armed forces are fully ready and determined to stay the bloody hands of the aggressors.

And I wouldn’t be surprised at all if some day I would read about the feats of the pioneer whom I met at the bookshop, bringing to the militia ammunition wrapped in his red scarf.

March 1965
The last flare had died down after casting a flickering light for quite a time. It fell somewhere, not far from the bridge, over a row of fir-trees. The evening star began to twinkle. The ferry place immediately resumed its normal bustle with passengers' loud noises, the crushing of gravel under their boots, a popular song from a transistor, men and women in dark coloured dresses going to and fro.

"What's the time, Hoang?" I asked the ferry chief when the silhouette of his lanky stature passed by.

"Eight fifteen," he said, not even looking at his watch. But I believed it was the most exact time we could get at the ferry. He cursed at the Americans in the lowdest language then sat down beside me, and struck a match to light a cigarette.

"Who struck the match? Want a rocket?" a croaky and authoritative voice was heard from one of the men.
sitting in the darkness, who seemed to be very angry at having to wait for the crossing.

"See anything on the other bank, my timorous friend?" Hoang snapped back, after puffing away at his cigarette. His voice dominated the din on the ferry. "Here, we know better than any of you when we can light a cigarette. Rockets? To hell with them. Look, a lot of duds still lie there."

The croaky voice which did not expect such a violent reaction fell silent amidst the free laughter provoked by Hoang's remarks.

"Has the boat arrived?" I asked.

"May be it's nearing," Hoang replied, cupping his hand to hide a yawn.

I took out my cigarette-box, and lit a match. No one growled. At the other end of the bridge the red light looked like a glowing ember. It was the ear and mouth of the ferry. Should the far drone of aircraft be heard, it would automatically be put out and all activities on both sides of the river would come to a stop.

"They made it a hellish day today," I ventured a conversation.

"Yes, but it was worse on some days. We had many trucks to ferry."

"You are having a hard time, indeed."

"But we've got used to it," Hoang replied and yawned again. We fell into silence.

"The boat is back from the other side, isn't it?"

"No, that's the car engine."
"Was there any day you couldn’t ferry all the trucks?"

"No, never, as far as I can remember."

He flicked off his cigarette ash and continued: "They could not fly all the time over our heads. We have more time than they. Only the night is too short in summer."

Hoang uttered a string of obscenities. That’s his habit whenever he referred to the American aircraft.

Hoang is native of South Vietnam. He was still a young man when regrouped to the North in 1954, according to the Geneva Agreements. He got married in 1959 and is now father of two children. Many had addressed him as ‘uncle’.

In 1962 he was made head of a road maintenance service, looking after more than ten kilometres of road including the BX bridge.

His main task consisted in ensuring that no rut was left on this road section. He was a hard-working man although in his innermost he did not feel very enthusiastic at this job. His family lived in Thaibinh, the native province of his wife. In his spare-time, he would repair the shacks of his team, take the cows to the pasture, look for poultry or water the vegetable garden. The property of his road maintenance service was comparable to that of a well-to-do peasant. And the credit for the building of this property went to Hoang himself. The workers held him in great esteem in spite of his taciturn and ascetic appearance.
Hoang exclaimed with pleasure and stood up. I followed him down to the landing stage. Bomb craters were seen all around. American planes had dropped several tons of bombs in the previous afternoon. But the building of a new one not far away was nearing completion. The local population had worked all night and when the day dawned all the trucks had been ferried to the other side of the river.

At night the acrid smell of gunpowder sprung from the craters.

The engines of the cars and trucks started rumbling in the silent night. First, I could distinguish the droning which I had been awaiting, that of a small tug. Then it was the sound made by the trucks of big and medium types. Every driver was eager to get his own onto the ferry boat first. A military truck turned to the left and moved ahead, followed by two well-camouflaged command cars, shrieking their horns all the time.

Hoang became all alive. He ran up stretching wide his arms:

"Pull back, you old bloke. Let the command cars go first."

"Look, we are transporting emergency merchandise." The driver leant out of the cabin and insisted, but judging by the timid rumbling of his engine one could see that he had little hope of being given the green light.
“Cars go ahead,” Hoang ordered. The truck roared angrily and turned to the road-side to make way.

The tug had reached the landing stage. The ferryman shouted orders to put down the gangway. The truck drivers rushed toward Hoang, tumultuously asking him to let them go at the first crossing. They pushed their permits into Hoang’s hands. Hoang firmly waved them away:

“Don’t insist. You can see for yourselves the military truck there.”

I heard a hoarse voice:

“Comrade ferry chief, I suggest...”

I jerked my head in the direction of Hoang. Only then did I realize that he was the same man who had protested against Hoang’s lighting a cigarette. Apparently he did not feel like talking to Hoang.

“Move on, comrades armymen,” Hoang spoke clearly and loudly for everyone to hear him. The driver was disappointed. Only two command cars and the military truck were allowed to take the first crossing. “Hurry up, friends, there are a lot more of vehicles.”

Then “they” came, upsetting Hoang’s schedule. The bridge was bombed three times. First, they missed. Hoang’s platoon of workers joined the fight beside the regional forces and the militia in the bridge area. The ground fire forced the pirates to zoom up. One plane was hit and fled in flames, in direction of the sea. The bridge remained intact. After the raid Hoang mounted
the bridge and looked down. Enemy bombs had filled the neighbouring ricefields with sinister craters which looked like as many huge reddish or black furuncles. Hoang had written to the provincial military authorities, asking to enlist again. The old wound at his leg had completely healed, causing him no more pain for many years now.

There was no personal reply to himself, only a letter published in the local paper to demobilized armymen in the province who wished to rejoin the army. The letter welcomed their patriotism and asked them to stand by for the call-up.

Every day Hoang and his mates went to the bridge with their rifles to take part in eventual fights. The third time, one of the scores of bombs dropped by the enemy fell on the bridge, damaging one span. The pirates lost two more aircraft. Hoang felt angry at himself though, as if he had lost the battle. The same night the chief of the communication service sent for him and received him at his own house. The hands of the clock on the table strewn with papers, pointed to two.

After sipping a cup of hot tea and replying to the endless questions about the road-section, his family and himself, Hoang could no longer contain his impatience. He went straight to the point:

"You probably want to know if I’ve been prepared to rejoin the army. If so, I can tell you straight away that I can go tomorrow."

The chief of the communication service burst into laughter and after a long effort to suppress a cough due to the cigarette smoke, he said:
I know you have applied for re-enlistment. But I want to talk of another thing. Do you think we can surmount the difficulty. Anyway, there must be a ferry-boat. We must see to it that the traffic continues as before the bridge was damaged. It will be of course slower but we must ensure safe crossing."

"But I am of any use in this question to be consulted. You can see for yourselves what is to be done."

"You are an able cadre of the service."

"You mean..." Hoang looked inquisitorily into his interlocutor’s eyes and felt anxious.

"I want you to take charge of the ferry, too."

"But I’ve applied for rejoining the army," Hoang replied with a note of dissatisfaction.

"Look, excuse me if I tell you a common place, but communication is also a battle-line. There is no less danger in it, isn’t it?"

"I don’t know anything about how to handle a ferry-boat," Hoang said after a moment of silence.

"We’ve assigned some men to the job."

"When will we have the ferry-boat?"

"Tomorrow evening," the chief of the communication service replied, pouring more water into the teapot. "No, this very night," he added, looking at the clock.

"What about ferry workers?"

"They will be there presently together with the boat."

"Have we got a tug?"

"We’ve to wait for a few days."
The same day, the road maintenance workers and the village militia completed a temporary landing stage on each side of the river. In awaiting the tug Hoang and his team handled the boat with bamboo poles and had aches and pains all over their shoulders and backs. Two days later, a grey-painted tug was sent to the place. Everything was brand new, from the engine to the anchor. Hoang was very happy to receive it, and as time went by, he completely forgot his application for re-enlistment. He had really regarded the ferry as his own battlefield. True, here people were also engaged in a veritable fight where they might get killed by bombs and rockets in face-to-face encounters.

Enemy planes had attacked the place on one hundred occasions at least, not counting of course the times when they dropped flares and flew away because they detected nothing. Of late they undertook more intensive raids with the apparent aim to cause havoc and thereby slow down the traffic across the river. The tug was damaged by bomb and rocket splinters. The boat itself was more seriously struck, the stakes and cables on one of its side having been blasted away; a rocket made a large hole in it, which was quickly filled up. And the crossings went on, uninterrupted.

The last trucks jammed at the ferry had also made safe crossings, including the one conducted by the driver who had attempted to overtake the command.
cars. The young driver, in a demonstrative show of anger, jumped down and slammed the door violently once his truck has driven onto the boat. Hoang looked at me with a smile. He had been used to such outbursts and showed no sign of vexation.

As soon as two salt-laden vehicles had crossed the river the red light on the other bank went off. Immediately the tug took the boat a distance away to the hiding place. The roar of a passing jet had been heard. Hoang took my hand and led me to the workers' shelters. The remaining trucks on this side hastened to move back, the camouflage leaves on their frames making a rushing sound as they passed the trees on the road-side.

A flare dropped by the enemy plane illuminated the area. It was followed by others and a few seconds later a "Thunderchief" roared overhead. The flare shone on Hoang's weary face. He sat cuddled in the shelter, attentively reading a slip of paper with big and bad hand-writing. Nhan, a ticket-seller and nurse at the ferry, with her everpresent medical chest on her side, told me in a subdued voice:

"It's a letter from his wife. I've just brought it to him."

"Anything particular?" I asked Hoang.

A bomb explosion shook our shelter. Earth splashed on us. Hoang flicked the dust off the paper which had turned yellow in the dying light of the flare, folded it and thrust it into his shirt pocket.

"The youngest boy has got measles."
All was dark again in spite of the starry sky. Only a moment later could we distinguish things around.

Most of the bombs had fallen into the river, only one hit the old ferry. The tug again wailed its siren and brought back the ferry-boat.

A silhouette came up. I immediately recognized the truck-drivers who had been waiting for the boat since the planes had dropped the first flare. Night at a ferry gives travellers a sharp sense of observation. The many unknown truck-drivers are simply called "the man with a cap", "the man in boots", "the bare-chested one" and this one was "the short man". I had seen him trying to accost Hoang and I knew he held no "priority permit".

"Comrade ferry chief..."
"What's the matter?" Hoang asked, rather roughly. "Can you allow my truck..."
"What do you transport?"

Day in day out, Hoang had been keeping strictly to the crossing regulations so that this had become almost a reflex for him. Priority order was determined by the nature of goods, though all could pass through in the end. The "short man" showed sign of embarrassment.

"What kind of goods are yours?" Hoang asked again.

"June 1st, the Children's Day, is approaching..."
"Show me your permit?"
"Here it is."

The driver clumsily took out a folded paper and handed it to Hoang. I looked across the river. The red
light was still there. I hit my electric torch to help Hoang read the paper.

"What? Sweets and puppets?"

Hoang raised his head and stared with astonishment at the driver.

"Yes, there are some other things but all is children's toys," said the driver in a guilty voice. "Look, we are nearing June 1st."

I wondered what kind of priority children's toys might enjoy and felt sorry for the driver. How long would he have to wait at this dangerous ferry should another "first priority" convoy come up. Indeed, I already heard the rumbling of engines some distance away. I looked back at the driver. He was still standing there with apparent disappointment, the folded paper remaining in his hands.

"Only a few days left," he sighed and turned away.

The ferry-boat drew ashore. A command car hurried down.

"Hello, comrade," Hoang called out after the driver who had left. The latter turned round, apparently somewhat surprised.

"Hello, comrade with the puppets," Hoang shouted louder.

"Me?"

"You follow the command car."

Another truck had started its engine. But Hoang went up and barred its way:

"Next time, old chap."
And turning to the short driver, he said:
"Comrade, hurry up, and take care of your goods."

The truck went out of the line, swaying down the landing stage as if it was afraid of crushing its sweets and toys while "the man with a cap" angrily switched off his engine. Hoang realized he had been too flexible in regulating the traffic or, more exactly, without abiding by the written regulations. Then he stepped toward the angry driver: "Understand me. It's full of sweets and toys for the Children's Day. We are just a few days from June 1st. Got any cigarette?"

Though still unapologetic, "the man with a cap" took out a cigarette and lit it for him.

The ferry-boat left the riverside.

Hoang followed it with staring eyes and I perceived a tint of sadness in his look.

"What a stupid man I am. I've forgotten everything. The Children's Day is coming and I haven't thought of sending anything to my boys at home. Thank you, old chap, you'll be given first priority at the next crossing."

He left the truck and walked down the landing stage. I followed him. Suddenly, he said confidentially:
"My wife wrote that the younger boy was seriously suffering from measles. Know anything about that disease? I've only two boys, and the older has never got it. Should it be peace-time I would not fail to take some days' leave to see how I can help. To hell with Johnson!"

Hoang spat noisily on the ground.