I visited the Quynhlap leper sanatorium after the thirteenth American air raid. Under a canvas tent temporarily pitched on the slope of a rocky mountain, a pale and frail body curled up on a stretcher put on the ground. Doctors, assistant-doctors, nurses were crowding around, washing and bandaging the gaping wound in the flank of the wounded person. It was a girl of eighteen with an oval face. She stared at the blue immensity of the sky, over the sea. In her twisting pain her hands tightly gripped the edge of the white cloth covering her body. Some fingers were contracted, deformed, flat and a bit short. The flesh between the thumb and the index finger had sunken, a “muscular atrophy,” as the doctor put it.

The American pirates did not spare even those patients afflicted with a most dangerous disease. Hien and her younger sister Lanh were native of Quangbinh
province and left orphan in their young days. Unfortunately affected with leprosy, they were brought to Quynhlap hospital some years ago. Lanh, the first to be pronounced out of danger, was adopted by a cadre. Hien was also about to be cured and sent back home when she was hit by bomb and bullet splinters.

These were not isolated cases. There were even more moving scenes. May, eighteen years old, native of Thaibinh, got everything ready to go home but for the travelling expense. She would never receive it nor see again her home town, green all the year round with rice plants and azolla. An American bomb had buried her. People rushed to her rescue, striving to bring her back to life by artificial respiration but to no avail.

Binh, a handsome and amiable boy of eighteen, had gone through the first two air raids safe and sound. The evening he was preparing to leave the hospital, American planes, like mad dogs, swarmed in and killed him.

On the edge of a big bomb crater, I found a wooden board "Medical Administration Office". A bullet bored a hole through it. The roof and the two side walls of the office were destroyed. Fragments of mortar, tiles, bricks and glass lay on broken chairs and tables, inkpots, papers and files. The front wall which surprisingly stood erect still bore the list of thirty-one patients out on June 10th. I read the names, one after another, in silence and wondered, painfully whether they had been out before the night of June 12th when the cruel air pirates rained bombs and
rockets on this sanatorium. So far, it had been impossible to find out who was missing and who was alive...

I picked up one of the medical files. Name, age, marks of leprosy, deformity... and this was the hunt for Hansen colibacilli, a steady and intensive hunt: + + + , + + + ,+ followed by a victorious minus. Suddenly another plus appeared. Anxiety, worry. Another wave of attack. Complete victory: three minus abreast, the strike was vigorous. These simple plus and minus implied the many efforts of doctors and assistants in testing, nursing, and watching. They also reflected the anxiety and hope, the sorrow and joy of the patients through long years of treatment. Yet, in the twinkling of an eye, the American pirates wiped these things out. They were nothing less than a kind of malignant Hansen colibacillus, the most disgusting mark of leprosy of mankind that should be eradicated, too.

The quarters for disabled patients were one of the worst-hit areas. Out of the 241 patients, 36 were killed. Out of the 28 Chinese patients, only one half survived. During the air raids, many assistant-doctors and nurses, not caring about contamination prevention, which required them to wear white gowns, respirators and gloves, ran in to tend the surviving patients, supplying them with food, water, milk, sugar. Even able patients took part in the digging out of those who had been buried. Those whose limbs were not yet seriously hurt gave a helping hand to the disabled, those whose sight was still good led the blind. They helped one
another out of where bombs and rockets were fiercely exploding.

None of the hundred and twenty red-roofed, white-walled houses laid out in close and regular rows like those of a beautiful district town, was left untouched. The Red Cross flag lay, rumpled and caked with mud, among bomb splinters and broken lamp poles with wire clustering around. Flowers, bruised and withered beyond recognition, littered the ground.

In the operating room, the enamel basins were crushed, the two legs of the light-green operating-table broken. The slogan on the wall read: "Love... as you love your dear ones." Bits of mortar which had fallen took away a few words.

I visited a number of patients' wards. There were eight big rooms with four beds in each. On the wall, there were pictures of "the Island of Birds", of two smiling artistes. Piles of books on night-tables were covered with dust: text-books of algebra for the seventh and tenth forms, the "Art and Literature" monthly, the "Army's Literary Review", Lenin's Selected Works...

"The patients followed the news with greater interest than we did," said a nurse. After meal-time, everybody listened attentively to news-reading. They clapped their hands when hearing of victories in North and South Vietnam. A woman with both hands amputated clapped her stumps. Many illiterate women could read some months after coming to the hospital. Those whose fingers were mutilated held their pens at the joint of their flexed arms to write. Those who had gone through
the second and third forms attended complementary courses regularly up to the sixth and seventh. Teachers were selected from among patients themselves.

"Every year," she added, "we would choose some forty patients and train them into nurses. All of these fulfil their duties satisfactorily, taking good care of their fellow-patients. Even under heavy enemy fire, many of them refused help to reach the shelters; 'Just go to the trenches, don't worry about me.'"

Another nurse told me of the pleasant days here — unfortunately now a thing of the past — with tears in her eyes.

"Those were stirring days," she said, "In rest times the patients played ping-pong and volleyball. Boys had their own teams, girls formed theirs. There were youngsters not much taller than that table, who played awfully well. There was also a theatrical group with many numbers on its repertoire (some were composed by the patients themselves) to which they wanted to add foreign plays.

"A meeting-hall with a large stage and beautiful red velvet curtains was built for them. Next to the hall was a garden grown with many sorts of flowers. In a number of wards, the watch-word 'a flower pot for each night-table' was realized. The patients planted plenty of fruit-trees: lemon, orange, custard-apple, jack even coconut. For their own consumption, of course. Everything ran smoothly before the air pirates came..."

The young nurse suddenly stopped short, frowning her eyebrows. She was obviously striving to control herself.
Rooms for biochemical tests, for anatomy-pathology, for detecting parasites and microbes were no more.

I was overwhelmed with indignation when I visited the children's quarters. The houses stood on a beautiful rise. In the verandah I saw some wooden boards with these writings: "Le Van Tam group", "Vo Thi Sau group". Their roots were either thrown down or smashed. Tiles were dangling threateningly at the end of a wire. Among the ruins, I saw a row of children's books, a paper unicorn's head, a paper kite, a tuft of red and blue threads, a tiny rosy plastic duck, a Ha-dong silk scarf on a bed, and a wall newspaper named "Young bamboo shoots". I picked up a brand new copy-book and saw on all the first pages these words carefully written in block letters: Study diligently.

Will Lyndon B. Johnson assert again that American bombers only hit concrete and steel targets?
That the soil is poor in Quangbinh province is well known to everyone. The long and narrow tract of flat land has been under constant attack by the white sand from the seacoast, which year in year out has been nibbling deeply at the cultivated patches.

With the Southern wind blowing on, the mixture of soil and sand gradually turns white, while the shallow paddy plants desperately strive to spring up, in leek-like tiny leaves.

The southernmost part of the province is fertile, but there again water-logging is playing havoc with the crops. In autumn, waters from the Truongson Range and typhoons from the South China Sea usually sweep over the whole area and in a single night entire fields are submerged by water. Buffaloes have to take a deep plunge in order to get a mouthful of rotten grass. People have to take refuge on the bare sand hills.
The autumn crops having failed dismally, the inhabitants strenuously tried to make up with the winter-spring crops. One had to labour hard day and night and forego even the pleasures of the New Year's Day. Yet, when harvest came, American pirates also extended the scope of their attacks to the whole of the province. Sunbeams were playing on the golden paddy ears. A sweet and fragrant smell floated in the air. Suddenly, a crashing noise was heard, and one saw a black object darting at top-speed in the sky. A woman hurriedly ran off... but was held back by a neighbour. "What, you want to kill all of us with your panic?"

Red with anger, the woman retorted:

"Why should I kill you? It's the children I am worrying about. You have none, but I've got a whole brood of them."

This drew a comment from the co-operative manager: "Our people are not panicky. They simply lack practice. And we have no organizational experience either."

After this incident, the co-operative was reorganized into many small teams, working like a chain of production with clearly defined norms, fair rewards and due fines. Children were entrusted to the care of schools and nurseries, adequately provided with air-shelters and trenches. Women no longer had to go to market, all their purchases being handled by the marketing co-operative. In addition, allowances were paid to air-defence and observation teams on duty.

"Thus, we managed things roundly," the manager said. "The grain was gathered and divided up in no
time, the yield largely exceeding that of previous years. Time was running out, yet there were not enough rice seedlings. To make things worse, the buffaloes had nibbled away part of them. As all of these were pastured at night, God knows which buffaloes under whose care had wronged the co-operative. Further, insects had begun to attack sizable tracts of seedlings and cultivated land. With the latest hot spell of Western wind roasting up the white sand, the more elevated fields were seriously drought-stricken. Every brigade requested that pumps be brought into action. But there were not enough pumps. The Party Committee debated until late in the night, without being able to solve all these and other ticklish problems. Thereupon an envoy of the district armed forces stepped in with his faded tunic, his sweat-soaked back and his pants splashed through with mud. He came to propose, on behalf of the command of the regional armed forces, to set up an anti-aircraft position to defend the small bridge situated on a road running near the village. As if to anticipate the long sleepless hours ahead, the co-op manager quickly rolled a cigarette as big as a thumb and started puffing away at it, his thin cheeks sunk in. With a tired yet happy smile, he turned to me, saying:

“You see, there is no end to our troubles.”

The village seemed almost deserted, as all the inhabitants had gone to work since early morning. The silence was barely disturbed by the noise of chisels and hammer from the neighbouring farm-tools workshop.
five-room thatch house still smelling strongly of resin on the other bank of a newly-dug canal. Logs of wood ferried from the Truongson Range by the land reclamation teams were laid in piles on the grass. Many of the young men had gone and only old folks remained here, practically submerged by the huge piles of newly sawn wood and chips. Yet, they were now shouldering a much heavier work-load than when the staff had been at full strength. Orders covered a wide range of goods ranging from boats, norias, improved grass-cutters, brick moulds, boxes for security lamps and many other items. When we came, a plump militia girl was pulling a long face at a silver-haired old man:

"You told me that you had seen the model and would make it in no time. Why didn’t you do it?"

"My young niece, I must do this first."

The old man rapidly drew a sketch on a piece of neatly planed piece of wood.

"Throw it away, please. I have told you that I am not going to marry now."

"What a funny thing you said! Boys wed girls, and not the other way round."

Merry laughs greeted the old man’s remark.

We soon learned that the girl had just returned from a course of light machinegunner. She badly needed a support for her gun, and grew extremely impatient each time she thought of the bridge. The bridegroom had specially come back on leave for the wedding, and the co-operative decided to present the couple with a bed.
She was on the verge of tears, when the manager intervened: "Well, let's have a compromise. As priority must go to military affairs, please take care of the machinegun support first."

The old man acquiesced in, while throwing a mischievous look at the girl:

"As for the bed, I shall spare some time to make it. Will that do?"

"Yes, very good."

The girl answered with an innocent and good-natured laugh which, surprisingly, seemed to convey a somewhat greater sense of joy than her radiant eyes could express.

Suddenly somebody shouted in a piercing voice:

"Aircraft!"

A dark brown stain trailed over the sky above the workshop in a heavy and persistent drone. The manager turned to me: "Another AD-6. Let's go and see how things are there." We put on our camouflage sheets and went to a grove near the paddy fields. Two AD-6's winged on slowly and lazily like two gangsters ostentatiously walking with a sleepy air while ready to stab with their knives. Suddenly, the planes broke their ranks. One AD-6 surged forward, drew a circle and then dived down, the second plane followed suit. Two crashing detonations, then two columns of smoke rose up in the mountains, first of milky white colour, then rapidly turning dark grey, with now and then several blazing red patches. The two gangsters quickly disappeared in the direction of Laos.
The seemingly quiet paddy fields again livened up, with several groups of people re-appearing and resuming their work here and there.

Under a cluster of bamboo-trees nearby, two persons who had just been discussing in a friendly tone, now suddenly came to heated arguments:

"The rice seedlings have been affected by insects. You knew it. Why then haven't you sprayed insecticides? Without insecticide spraying there can't be transplanting, you hear me?"

The lanky technician ended his sentence with a terrific show of temper. His partner, the brigade leader — a stocky and dark-skinned man — gave an equally tough reply, his short-haired head swinging with an air of fierce obstinacy.

"Then, we shall spray insecticides after transplanting. Will that do? If we don't transplant in time, the earing paddy plants will be destroyed by heavy rains. Then, you will have mud instead of paddy."

The technician retorted:

"Everybody has his own responsibility. Intensive farming requires that we strictly adhere to technical prescriptions. I object to transplanting seedlings which are not up to technical standards. As for keeping in time with the farming season, that is your responsibility, not mine."

"All right, let it be so. But whose responsibility is this: not enough cattle, buffaloes have to be sent to grass at night and in the early hours under the care of children. When do you, technician, devise the necessary measures to provide additional food to the cattle?"
"What a question? Look here, almost all the members of my technical group have gone. I should have three more heads and six more arms if I were to do all that."

"Then you'd better count how many persons there still remain in my team. And the new tasks in connection with the bridge."

Meanwhile, the AD-6's had came back. The two men retreated behind the bamboo cluster. The manager looked at them and smilingly remarked: "When it comes to manpower shortage, all wranglings and arguments end up... People become more co-operative... Oh, these gangster planes have come back, they're flying very low. Look, they are winging to one side. Perhaps, they are going to attack the bridge, Now, let's hurry up. More trouble, it's sure."

And so we hurriedly thrashed out a few more problems and went straight to the brick-kiln right in the open field between the bridge and the approaches to the village. There were only a few men here, engaged in digging the earth and supervising the disposition of firewood in the kiln, the majority of workers being women and young girls. A group of girls were casting the clay, others were carrying the clay bricks into the kiln, running swiftly on a small bridge of wooden boards. Their rifles were neatly disposed in stacks around the kiln, from where they could run to the combat positions in a few seconds.

The brick-kiln clerk, also a girl, was busy measuring the piles of firewood and arduously making calculations.
The manager asked her in half-joking tone:

"When are you going to light up the stove? Mind you, if you don't produce enough bricks and tiles for the co-op members after the winter labour they will bring you to trial."

The girl replied confidently: "How can they? The kiln has been enlarged and now has enough space for 30,000 bricks each time. We are going to light up the day after to-morrow."

"The day after to-morrow? Good! Then can we reduce the personnel?"

The last sentence caused a flutter among the passing brick carriers who immediately gathered around the manager and plied him with questions:

"Uncle, there is order to call up the shock youth, is that so?"

"No. But the District Committee wants to mobilize the youth for some time..."

A cheerful exclamation greeted the manager's words.

"Oh, that means A.A. guns are coming. The bridge is still there."

We conferred with the brick-kiln team leaders on the tasks arising from the new situation. All young men and women would be mobilized to serve the battle areas in the afternoon and night time. The girl clerk sat still, listening to us, taking notes and making calculations. But when we were leaving, she ran toward us and after much hesitation asked the manager:

"Uncle, A.A. guns are coming, aren't they?"
The manager looked at her with paternal eyes, and lowering his voice, he said:

"And what if they don’t come for the time being? Look, my niece, more courage, less nervousness."

The girl ruefully lowered her head, her toes feverishly crushing a lump of earth... Then she suddenly turned about and ran straight to the kiln. Sensing something unusual I started pestering the manager with questions. He watched her running away, and sadly replied:

"Ah, you don’t know it. Her husband is an artilleryman. They got married last New Year’s Day. Ten days later, he left for the front. For several months now, no news, not a single letter from him..."

Letters had come from several other artillerymen, native of this village. But again, none from the husband of the brick-kiln clerk. In the evening, the leaders of various production teams came to her house. Everyone tried to make things more lively than usual, to cheer up the atmosphere... But all that couldn’t detract the mother from her gloomy thoughts, "What irrelevant talks," she thought. Then she retreated into her room.

The girl listened intently to the conversation, and briskly stepped toward the manager:

"Uncle, I have got everything ready to hand over my job. Please let me go and serve at the front line."

While the girl’s request was being discussed, we heard the eldest son of the family speak in a loud voice:
"Now let's go to the question of ploughing."

This was indeed the toughest problem. For the fields under his team's responsibility, around the bridge, were mostly on high ground and not all of them had been ploughed so far. Night ploughing was the only way out.

The father who had sat silent throughout the meeting suddenly said to his son:

"Let me plough this night."

*

The best labour force of the village was working here on the construction of gun emplacements. In the starlight, a hoist of people were busily digging and levelling the ground. Little talk, little laughter, only the heavy pounding of beetles on the earth. Having left their own combat positions to the artillerymen, the militia now shifted their trenches to the other side of the bridge. Each one was working hard at his or her own fox-hole.

A young voice remarked:

"The hole is pretty deep. It's good for hiding, but not very convenient for shooting. You will have to lean backward for that."

A girl's voice — presumably a girl of rather small size — answered, "There are stairs. Just move your feet aside, and you will see them..."

"Ah, yes, all right!"

In between the two combat positions the ploughmen were working. There were no shouts, only intermittent
smackings of whips and the heavy breathing of buffaloes.

Suddenly, somebody whose back was scratched by a buffalo's horn, snapped out:

"Father, why are you keeping so close to the gun emplacement?"

"Really?"

The old man replied with affected surprise, and gave the buffalo another slash with his whip.

"The gunners will come, but not until 3 a.m.," the manager said. The secretary of the women's organization will arrange hot tea for them. As for food supplies, we shall give them part of our flock of ducks. In fact, duck-breeding is no more advantageous as the season is already over. The other problems may wait until tomorrow morning. But there is something that cannot wait: the District Committee has just sent here additional boats and ordered us to provide another five tons of paddy. Please find out the team leaders, and ask them to get the necessary quantity of paddy from the scattered stores."

Again, another hide-and-seek game to find out the team leaders in various hamlets. It was not until midnight that I came back, as promised, to the village office. By then the long file of paddy carriers, heading toward the transport boats on the river side, had already disappeared behind the clusters of bamboo-trees.

A new moon was hanging over the paddy fields wrapped in a thin veil of fog, which dimmed out
everything, except the bridge. It stood out in a black, straight, short yet sturdy line over the horizon. The still of night was disturbed only by the roar of aircraft and the bomb explosions in the Truongson Range and at Donghoi town. The earth shook slightly, bamboo groves fluttered. Then, the whole village again lapsed into silence.

Nocturnal stillness has settled down over this land which however has not slept any night.
HARDLY had I stepped into the telephone exchange and wireless shelter, than my eyes caught sight of two telephonists sitting in front of a huge panel with glittering copper plates. The battle had started. Here, the dividing line between normal life and war was most striking. Not solely, because of the roar of aircraft engines. Indeed, I heard them diving on, and past the shelter, accompanied by fierce bursts of A.A. guns, and the earth-shaking bomb explosions which sent various objects in the shelter flying helter-skelter. This difference could be sensed very clearly from the expressions of Tuyet and Bong, the telephonists, now suddenly pricking up their ears, now readjusting their sitting postures. I tried to visualize the situation in the town and the development of the battle through the reaction on their faces, particularly that of Tuyet, and through their brief questions and answers.
On the panel, a copper plate bearing a certain number, suddenly dropped and started vibrating nervously. Sitting at her post and reacting quickly to each call, the telephonist, with the ear-piece neatly set on her dark hair, could visualize through the signals the many dark points then moving truculently like small-pox pimples on the azure skin of the sky.

"Mars, you want Star? All right. Hello, Star, where are you?"

Suddenly, the electric light went out, and the fan stopped working.

"Comrade electrician on duty, please!"

The neon tube again lighted up. But a minute later, it again went out following a terrible explosion. The shelter was now plunged in utter darkness, except for the minuscule six-volt lamp fed by two small batteries lying in front of the two telephone operators. Bong calmly called the mechanic-electrician, while Tuyet went on with her passionate voice:

"Morning Star? Speak to Mars, please."

"Hello, Mercure, Ocean, Moon... this is the Sun..."

"Mars, Mars, where are you again? Fighting going on in Star?"

"Yes, Mars, direction 302. From the North-West?"

"Attention, direction North-West. Hello, listen to order from Mars..."

"Hello, a proposal from Venus!"
"Venus, Venus, speak up! Speak up!"

Her colleague, Bong, diligently maintained contact with the various districts, Namdan, Thanhchuong, Do luong, Nghiadan, Nghiloc... Her reports came in uninterrupted:

"Comrade, Thanhchuong does not answer."

"Nghiadan maintains steady contact."

"You want Quy nhua, don't you?"

The shelter was again flooded with electric light. But none of us and least of all, Tuyet and Bong, took notice of it.

One after another, the planes dived down upon us, rocketing and bombing nobody knew which targets amidst the deafening fire of A.A. guns and militia rifles which together with the shaking ground seemed to spit at the attackers the seething wrath of this small town. The girls remained surprisingly calm. Their calmness soon influenced me, as well as their sense of responsibility, and their concern for the outcome of the battle. Bombs might well destroy our shelter, but we didn't care, we were not a bit afraid. The girls' senses seemed to be riveted on the telephone panel. Their fingers rapidly moved on, planting and removing the plugs, readjusting the plates, connecting and disconnecting the lines. It seemed as though it was these very fragile fingers that kept the blood flowing regularly through the veins and arteries of the town, the province, and the whole military zone. Arteries and veins, these are indeed the right word! The telephonists are fully aware that
in emergency cases, if the organs code-named as "Mars" and "Star" are the brain while those code-named after other celestial bodies are the militia formations, army and security units and the various battle areas, then they, telephone operators, are the heart or part and parcel of it. And as such, they must maintain the incoming and outgoing flow of blood, standing at their post, and working unremittingly, untiringly.

* * *

The bombs had blasted away the roofs and the walls, fragmentation bombs had practically riddled the office with holes. Yet telephone operator Phuc of Thanhchuong district remained at his desk and maintained the communications between the local command and the various departments and battle areas. The same was performed by girl telephonist Thu Ha in Nghiadan district. District post-office director Que, used to advise his staff to remain calm even in circumstances of utmost danger. Yet, when that hour came, she insisted on working alone at the telephone desk and admitted no one else. But Thu Ha was adamant. She decided that as a youth she would be more useful if she stayed at her post in these grave hours. And she did; although that was not her working day. She was, in fact, visiting her parents and playing with her baby brother when enemy planes came and ruthlessly showered hundreds of bombs over her native town. She swiftly took the boy to the shelter and dashed to the post-office—her battlefront.
No telephonist at any time should let a telephone desk unoccupied, Thu Lanh, an apprentice postal worker at Thanhhoa, abode by this rule. On coming across an unattended telephone desk, she immediately filled up the vacuum at the very time the place was raided by tens of American aircraft. She did the same thing at another office where she was sent on mission. On a third occasion, she sat at a field telephone desk right in the battle area, working single-handed to ensure communications for a whole day. On that very day, thirty seven American jets were blasted out of the sky, their wreckages crashing with sky-rending explosions over the whole area. The telephone-office was rocking violently like a small boat on a rough sea. Yet, Thu Lanh unflinchingly went on with her job. The local air-defence commander long remembered the extraordinary emotion he experienced when hearing amidst the piercing roar of engine and crashing detonation of bombs and shrapnels, the sweet, yet calm voice of the telephonist. She was seated far away, but she felt all along that she was quite close to him. The battle went on till the evening. Only then did the officer remember that both the girl and himself scarcely had a bite since morning. Meanwhile, the post-office director who had worked practically the whole day to repair the broken telephone lines, also came back. The girl with her dark eyes wide open, sweetly asked, "Uncle, tell me where I can have some water to drink?"
A month, then a few days before these furious attacks, every staff member was approached by the post-office director of each locality: "My friend, let's talk frankly. Can you keep calm in conditions of danger? If you find it too hard, I can arrange for you to be shifted to another post. Don't worry, nobody will underrate you for that. What is essential is that we must have a contingent of resolute workers in the forthcoming battles."

Ever since the American aggressors extended the war to North Vietnam, not a single staff member of the G.P.O., either at provincial or district level, had applied for transfer. At the very time when U.S. bombs and rockets were blasting away houses and buildings all the postmen and women I met, be they telephonists, line-repairers, drivers, radios, messengers or responsible officials, had only one desire: to fight at their post. The day 458 bombs were showered on Nghiadan district centre, Que, the post-office director casually told Hien, his assistant, "In case I am out, you'll come in and replace me!"

The line-menders — these G.P.O. shock troops — always stand by at the Telephone-Exchange along with the jeep and sidecar drivers waiting for a signal to rush out. Their colleagues at District Exchanges rode off on their thickly camouflaged bicycles. It is their job to be on the move precisely when bombs are exploding. Their destination is not the shelters or communication trenches but the edge of bomb craters still warm and filled with the acid smell of tolite, fluor, and misted with gun-powder smoke. They must
reach the targets which the enemy planes are expected to attack anew, and the craters on which bombs are expected to fall again.

They do not merely sit there and wait, for orders. They anticipate them:

"No answer from the power station?"

"The line to Caucam is broken, isn't it?"

An affirmative nod, and they dashed out to the danger spot. There, with bombs and rockets raining down all around, Dao Bo, a postman of Thanhhoa province, his hands firmly clutched to the railguard of the bridge, tried to pull and connect the two ends of the broken line with his mouth. Hardly had the line been repaired than another formation of U.S. planes came over with a new hail of bombs and machinegun fire. The line was again broken. Dao Bo rushed from behind a gun emplacement, snatched back the wire practically under the nose of a jet plane and joined the two ends. At one end of the wire was his native province, the other end led to Hanoi; the wire itself is the vein—as called by postmen—and inside the vein flows his own blood. Reacting almost spontaneously, he had time and again dashed out to grab the line from the enemy's claws. And he succeeded.

Another postman, Tien, had hardly reached the top of the telegraph pole when enemy planes came up. The frail girl who sat in a state of extreme tension at the exchange was overwhelmed by astonishment when the broken line suddenly buzzed up again. How could Tien perform such a feat?
"Death is certain. But if die I must, I shall die right here, on top of the pole, after repairing the line." And so, Tien won his battle.

I must say something more about Thu Ha, the telephone-fighter. Pressure of work was at its height in the Nghiadah exchange, and Thu Ha had to sit up for a whole night at her desk in the woods. At one moment all the lines were broken. All the line-repairers were mobilized and sent to the field. What was the use of sitting at the telephone panel when not a single line was working? Thu Ha was a telephonist, not a repairer. She could have packed up and reported on this situation to her superiors. But she did not do so. Today's fierce air raids might be followed by still fiercer ones next morning, and, who knows, her telephone exchange—a subsidiary one, no doubt—might be required to replace the main exchange post.

And so, without being a professional line repairer, Thu Ha set out to connect a broken line. She didn't go, she groped her way in the dark from one bush to another, holding in her hand one end of the broken line. She fumbled on and on until the other end could be found and the connection re-established.

While on its way to Hanoi, a postal car was chased by U.S. aircraft. Thang and Trung immediately stopped the car. A rocket slashed down the tree behind which Thang sought shelter. Another rocket exploded nearby, one of its numerous splinters cutting through the sole of Trung's rubber sandal.
Yet, nobody thought of his own fate. Everyone’s thoughts were focused on the car in flames. “Trung, let’s try to save the mail!”

The enemy planes were diving down, but Trung stood up and dashed into the blazing car. Snatching from the fire each parcel and bundle, he gathered all his strength and threw them as far as possible.

And what about Thang, the worker from south Vietnam? At a time when his own life was at stake, an extraordinary decision came upon him: save the car engine at any cost. With his old military cork helmet, he took mud and splashed it all over the engine.

The planes were still roaring overhead, rockets exploded all around. “I could even see the pilot’s cap,” Thang confided later. A miracle was accomplished: the two postmen from Nghean did save from the enemy’s claws all the parcels and letter bundles. And not only that: the car engine was saved too.

I kept pressing the rough hands of this simple, modest and taciturn worker...

A postal car had been hit by enemy bombs. Truc groped his way in the dark, on the paddy fields now transformed into a battleground with a lot of delayed-action bombs. Like a shadow, he wandered from one bomb crater to another, trying to pick up each and every letter, newspaper which, as a result of the bombing raid, had been scattered all about. On two occasions he had narrowly escaped, delayed-
action bombs. Swept off his feet by the blast, he managed to get up and went on again with his unusual work in this sinister environment. After all the letters and parcels had been collected a violent fit of cough overtook Truc who, holding his hand on to his chest, spat out blood beside the postal bundles. What prompted him to perform this extraordinary feat? Truc softly said: “We must not let the enemy snatch away whatever is in our hand. I am sure any other postman would have done the same.”

* I cannot forget either other postmen working in the underground shelter, and in particular deputy-chief Chuc, whose ever-smiling face looked much younger than his age. Dressed in a brown shirt, one hand holding a pencil and the other always thrusted in a pocket, he was the very image of self-control and serenity amidst the hustle and bustle in the shelter, the deafening explosions of A.A. guns and bombs and the roar of low-diving planes which seemed at times to enmesh all of us in an intricate net. From the laconic scraps of information conveyed by the girl telephonists, he tried to size up the situation on the postmen’s battlefront, calmly and sometimes with a slight touch of humour. Like a boxer who makes light of the opponent’s blows, he reacted to each bit of bad news with a soft, somewhat contemptuous smile, and hit back almost instantaneously:

“Thang and Trung, go to X. please.”

“Truc, go to Y. please.”
"And you, Nuu, to Z. please."

Thus, at their "Commissar's" order, the shock-troopers quickly left the post-office and dashed out like arrows to their "frontline".

I should also mention the telegraphers who worked in an adjoining room. In these minutes of extreme tension, they had to concentrate all their mind on the work and exert almost superhuman efforts to ensure that coded telegrams were accurately transmitted. Except for their moving fingers, they all looked like sitting statues, giving no ear to the roar of aircraft engines, the crashing detonation of bombs, the quaking of the floor and the shaking of the walls. Yet, at the height of enemy bombing raids, these stone-like operators did not stop giving full play to their creativeness. Victory required that all operational cables be conveyed at top-speed, without infringing, however, on the regulation that each telegram should be transmitted twice so that they might be properly checked up. The problem was how to halve the transmission time while ensuring maximum accuracy. The problem was solved by Duy Hai, a telegrapher, who installed two wireless transmitters, both conveying simultaneously the same cable.

In the absence of messengers, Minh Sinh, a girl telephonist, took the telegrams and ran to hand them to the command staff: "This is no time for dawdling through the communication trenches, I must take the shortest path." With these thoughts, she dashed out of the trench and ran across the hill.
The battle came to an end. Tuyet suddenly disconnected the plug, took off her ear-piece, her tired face lit up by a happy smile. She automatically took a cup of syrup which somebody brought to her, while another girl briskly stepped in.

Victory! Victory!

Cheers broke out in the streets above, amplified by ever-mounting hurrahs from the underground shelters and trenches....

I asked Tuyet:

"Three planes shot down, isn’t it?"

My question was submerged in a flood of similar questions coming from practically all the other inmates.

The girl proudly answered:

"Eight planes, in both Nghean and Thanhhoa provinces. In our district town alone, three planes. One F. 8U has been shot down on the spot. Look! People are rushing to the wreckage."

A staff member, whose tour of duty had just ended, dashed out with a shout of satisfaction. In a voice which was still panting, Tuyet hastily shouted after him:

"Quynh, don’t forget to bring me a fragment of the wreckage. Don’t forget, do you hear me?"

Like a philatelist, Tuyet has been patiently collecting fragments of U.S. aircraft wrecks. She duly wrote on each fragment the date and the names of the places from where accurate shots were fired which definitively plucked the wings of these birds of prey.
tempest over halong bay

15:30 hours, August 5, 1964: the following events happened at the Baichay ferry near Hongay town, in the gulf of Bacbo.

"Yank! The Yank is there!"

"Hey compatriots, the Yankee pirate is there!"

"Where? Where? Where is the Yank?"

Shouts succeeded one another, tinged with joy and satisfaction. In the twinkling of an eye, the people had swarmed onto the landing stage. They trod on the holes made on the ground by rockets, from which smoke was still rising. An old worker, his face stained with coal dust, carrying a pickaxe in his hand, was standing at the foot of a flax tree. Cupping his hand above his eyes, he looked towards the Baitho Rock, murmuring to himself:

"... and the rocks are silent ..."
“Yanks? More Yanks coming?” — then turning to a young man he asked, “Tell me, you who have good eyes, where are they? I don’t see any.”

“Who?” the young man said.

“Yanks. People are shouting about Yanks. Where are they?”

The other burst out laughing. “The Yank is there, crawling on the ground. He is no longer in the sky.”

“Only a while ago, he was just diving and weaving in the sky!”

“Yes, sir,” the young man said with a mischievous laugh, “but just one shot and down he went!”

The old worker now understood. He elbowed his way through the crowd, saying:

“Let me have a look at the pirate... Aha... here he is!”

There the Yankee air pirate stood, his head bent, casting furtive glances at people and things around.

He had bruises on his face and one of his leg was broken. Not that any of the people had beaten him up: it was simply the result of his forced dive into the sea. His face was as expressionless as a grindstone; not a glimmer of light in his eyes, which were about as alive as two pebbles. Were it not for his lips, which were muttering something, one would believe him to be a corpse. He said something, and then put out his hand; long, hairy, trembling fingers. He was probably asking for something. Ah, he was hungry.

He would do well to himself of the opportunity to get a close look at Halong Bay, about which tourists
from the five continents had written such lines as: "This marvellous landscape has left in my mind unforgettable memories." He had better think of his unfortunate comrades, who had less luck than himself. They had died in the air, burned to death, or had been eaten by sharks.

There stood Baitbo Rock, and there the Daugo Grotto. He and his comrades had flown over these two rocky islets, but now, he was at their foot. Quite a bewildering change! Said he after his capture: "I was scared stiff by your first shots. And then other shots came up and I was seized with panic. When my plane was hit, I baled out."

All this sounds sincere enough. Let us tell the Yankee pirate something about what had happened to him that day.

* * *

Noon of August 5, 1964. A glamorous summer day.

The sea was calm and of a glittering blue. Clouds capped the peaks. In a little fishing boat at anchor, a fisherman was sitting in the shade, sipping a cup of tea. The rocky islets scattered in the Bay looked like a pack of bears basking in the sun.

Gracious yet severe, poetic yet powerful, Halong was looking at its image mirrored in the blue waters of the sea, and took pride in its beauty.

On top of Hill A2, in an observation post, a man was listening to a report radioed in by a lookout on the high seas:
"Enemy planes sighted, flying towards the coast. Eight in all." The man made his report to the anti-air raid command, which ordered the A.A. batteries to get ready for the fight.

"The enemy is coming..." A battery commander had hardly time to lay down the receiver and stand up when the roar of plane engines thundered overhead. Eight jets had started bombing and strafing Hangoay town.

The gunners were ready in their positions, their eyes scanning the sky.

"Fire!!"

Two planes, which had just dived on Hangoay, were coming up again as the first volley was fired from the battery. The shells burst into greyish smoke in the air. They formed a tight network around one of the planes.

The watcher put down his range-finder and rubbed his eyes. All the gunners shouted: "He's got it!"

From amidst the greyish cloud of the flak bursts a plane emerged, all ablaze, trailing a column of black smoke. It tried to fly to the sea. A dark spot sprang from the flames and blossomed into a parachute which floated in the air.

The Command Post received the following report: "Enemy plane set afire. The pilot has baled out."

The Chief of Staff looked at his watch: 14:36 hours.

All this had taken but fifty-two seconds.

When the carcass of the plane was later picked up, it bore the traces of many projectiles, splinters of flak shells and also rifle bullets. Yes, all kinds of weapons
had been fired at the pirate. Hongay had been bristling with guns, swords, spears and knives for self-defense, like a hedgehog which had rolled itself up, presenting all its spines.

Along the wharf, cranes were loading barges with coal when the planes came. Shells and rockets exploded right at the feet of the cranes. The planes flew at almost the level of the tops of the cranes, it seemed, and the pilots could be clearly seen.

It was a truly sudden and violent attack. It caught the crane operators somewhat by surprise, but only for the first second. They got down from the cabs after stopping the motors of their cranes and making sure that all safety devices were on. Then they snatched their rifles, which had been resting at the very feet of the cranes. The platoon leader shouted: "All in the combat trenches!"

Their combat trenches lay along the wharf. They got down there, but their guns were pointed up. It was then that a flight of planes wheeled round after strafing the ferry. Right away, the workers opened fire. They were not only firing at U.S. planes, but also at the arrogant truculence of the American aggressors.

Several workers jumped out of their trenches to take a more accurate aim at the planes, taking cover behind a heap of coal or a tip-truck. The platoon leader ran along the wharf, firing angry bursts from his light machinegun.

Now, there were nobody left in the trenches. All had jumped out, and it seemed that cartridges were
jostling with each other in their bags, asking to be fired first!

A member of the self-defence corps in Bachdang market place clambered up a hill behind the market carrying a light machinegun and an ammunition case. Every time a plane came within range he would fire a burst, then continue his climbing.

At the Cocham power station, during the whole battle, a squad of militiamen took up position on the roof with two light machineguns and infantry rifles. They knew that in battle, to be deprived of electric power means to be deprived of eyesight and hearing, and to be crippled. And so did telephone exchange operator Vi Thi Men: that was the reason why in spite of bombs and shells, she stuck to her post, ensuring all necessary telephone connexions. Said she: "I was a bit frightened at the beginning, but I quickly got a hold on myself."

It was a truly heroic battle. All stood up valiantly to the cruel enemy, and all saw due punishment meted out to him. Everybody felt that he or she had contributed to the common victory.

In the battle that just happened, we struck back with everything we had in hand. Indeed rifles were not the last in the range of weapons used by the people of Hongay against the air pirates: an old fisherman and his son used even a fishhook and an oar!

After he had fallen into the sea, the Yankee pirate swam for a while, sustained by a life-buoy, like a frog. All around him were silent rocky islets. He was trying to get to one of them, where he hoped he would find a
refuge, when a fishing-boat turned up and sailed straight towards him. On the bow stood two armymen with their guns levelled at him. Beside them, he saw an old fisherman holding a knife with a shining blade, and behind him a younger man with an oar in his hand.

"Hands up!" they shouted.

The pilot tried to dive under water, but he could not. The boat was already on him and the barrels of the soldiers' rifles almost touched his head. "Hands up!" one of them cried and bent over to seize him by his jacket. But the pirate persisted in trying to escape. The old man then took out a fishhook and, by hooking it on the back of his jacket, fished him out of the water. Now his face was above the surface of the sea. He looked at the old man who, brandishing a knife, shouted, "Come, quick, you son of a bitch!" His son dashed forward, took the Yank by his helmet and hauled him on the boat, where he was bound hand and foot. At this moment, a dozen other boats came along-side, carrying armed police, coal miners, coast guards...

"Where's the Yank?" everyone asked. The boats were bristling with swords, spears and guns. The American pilot was exhausted; he lay on his back, looking at the sky and heaving deep sighs. A short distance away, his half-sunk plane was sending up columns of smoke, and there were large sheets of oil all over the water. The U.S. flag painted on the fuselage had been dotted with a few score more stars — the bullet holes — and was slowly sinking together with the plane. Only the tail was still sticking out of the
surface of the sea, like a gigantic tombstone on the grave of the corsair's wild dreams.

The commander of a naval craft said: "We've downed two planes. Here's one. Let's look for the other, it can't be far." The boats fanned out in all directions for the search.

The pilot captured — his name was Alvarez — was put aboard a naval craft and taken to Hongay. Press reporters and photographers were waiting for him.

"Where's the Yank?" they asked.

Seeing the cameras directed at him, Alvarez bent his head. The "knight defender of freedom" was so ashamed of himself he didn't dare to look up. The photographers had a hard time trying to get a good picture of him.

We would like to tell the American air pirate to look up so he could see to whom this sky and this land belong, so he could see the proofs of his own crimes, the stretch of railway track melted by his rockets, the fish killed by his bomb and now floating in the river, the body of the woman worker, a mother of four children, killed by his bombs, and bullets at the ferry, her skull broken, her body half charred.

Now let us go back to the first minute of battle.

At the gun emplacements of Battery A, commander Truong Thanl Luyen, his eyes glued on the enemy planes, shouted to his men:

"They are jets! We must act quickly!"
Before, behind, on the right and on the left of the battery, columns of greyish smoke were rising. The roar of jets mingled with the crash of guns, ours and the enemy's, and also with the crackle of small-arms fire. There were explosions everywhere, in the sky, on the earth, on the hills and on the surface of the sea. A veritable tempest was sweeping the whole of Halong Bay.

The enemy planes had been dispersed by our ground-fire. They had scattered and shot up at a higher altitude. But within a few minutes they were coming back like hungry birds of prey.

Luyen followed them with his eyes. When they made their first circle overhead, they had flown too fast and his gunners had not been able to get them in their line of sight. Luyen was terribly angry. "It was probably those bastards," he thought, "who have just attacked Honme and Honngu!" Anger, frustration and complicated trigonometric calculations mingled in his mind.

"Fire!" he shouted, jumping out of his trench, as a jet dived. A volley came up. The shells exploded in the sky and formed a cloud of smoke around the ash-grey plane.

"Fire!" he shouted again. His fist moved up and down like a hammer striking on an invisible anvil. The shells exploded. The sky was shrouded in more smoke. The watcher strained his eyes looking through his field-glasses but he saw no plane hit. The jets continued to describe loops in the sky and each time they dived, streaks of fire sprang from their wings.
Battery commander Luyen stood like a stone statue, his eyes flashing fire. His head was bursting with the roar of the planes and the crash of the guns.

Tung, a loader, saw blood on the forehead of Thanh, a gunner. He came up to him, saying, "Thanh, you are wounded." But Thanh didn't hear him. Only when a trickle of blood ran into his eyes did he realize that something had happened to his forehead. He wiped the blood with the back of his hand and again grasped the trigger of his gun. Putting a bandage on Thanh's wound, Tung said:

"Let me bandage your wound."

"Leave me alone," Thanh shouted. "Bring some more shells."

"Let me bandage your wound first."

"Let me fire on those sons of bitches first!"

On the left, two planes were swooping down. Luyen raised his arm and signalled his men to get ready. "Look straight at them," he said, "take accurate aim!"

"They are within range," Thanh said.

"Never mind," Luyen said, keeping his arm motionless.

One of the planes, black-painted and fish-headed, was making a vertical dive. Thanh kept his eyes glued on it and followed it with the sights of his gun. The blood trickled onto his lips but he didn't care.

Luyen brought down his arm in a violent gesture. "Fire!" he shouted. Thanh didn't hear the order, the noise being too deafening. But he got it nonetheless,