

through a special sense, one that characterizes seasoned gunners. He pulled the trigger. The plane was wrapped in smoke. But streaks of fire kept coming down. "Fire!" Luyen again shouted. Again, Thanh pulled the trigger. Within a split second, the jet reappeared, but its roar had died down to a kind of moan. Like a black dog hit on the head, it staggered and foundered. A tail of black smoke sprang from its rear, getting longer and longer as it fled towards the sea. Something fell away from the fuselage, a shining piece of metal which whirled in the air then fell into the sea. Well, it was simply a piece of its flank which had been knocked off. The gunners shouted in unison, "We've got it!"

Luyen roared, "Bring more ammunition!"

Another plane swooped down. Luyen clearly saw the marking on its wings. "Fire!"

Everything was shrouded in smoke. A pungent smell pervaded the whole area and made the men's blood boil. The guns were blasting away: a real pyrotechnic display.

Thanh wiped the blood on his face. Another aircraft roared in from the sea. The watcher reported:

"A plane from behind."

Luyen dashed to the left to get a better view. However, the planes had shot up to a higher altitude. The watcher reported:

"They are six in all, flying at an altitude of 12,000 metres in three layers: one on top, then two lower down, then the last flight of three."

"Let all of them go to hell!" Thanh muttered to himself, wiping his forehead. A lull came, but the air seemed to be still filled with the echoes of the guns.

Plenty of ammunition had been brought in. The gunners set about cleaning their guns. Tung came up to Thanh, "Let me bandage your wound," he said.

"Never mind," the other said. "We'll do it later."

The hills opposite formed an arc, from which columns of smoke still rose. Thanh knew that from there, other batteries had also been firing at the enemy.

"Get ready!" Luyen said, and turned to get a check on everything. He saw Thanh sitting motionless on his gunner's stool. His eyes shone. Around him, a host of people — cooks, drivers, office workers — were busy wiping the shells and loading the guns.

"Thanh must be exhausted," Luyen thought to himself, and said:

"Let someone replace Thanh."

"I am not tired. I have seen through the tricks of these pirates. Let me give them another thrashing."

Around the gun emplacements, smoke was still rising from the craters. Far from intimidating Thanh, the sight only made him stick closer to his gun. Luyen didn't know what to say. He liked Thanh and the way he had been shooting.

Thanh put his hand to his forehead and suddenly realized that Tung had somehow managed to bandage his wound. Luyen turned and looked at Thanh. Under the white bandage, Thanh's eyes were shining like two embers.

While Luyen's battery was blasting away at the enemy, in the harbour a cargo ship was also coming to grips with the air pirates.

When the planes appeared in the sky, Cao, the captain of the cargo had ordered his crew to weigh anchor and take the ship to a nearby islet where it could take refuge against the attacks. Some sailors, who had been on furlough, jumped in the water and swam to rejoin their ship. Cao put on his captain's cap and spoke in the loudspeaker:

"Hoist the flag of battle! Let everyone join his combat position!"

The ship bristled with machineguns and rifles. A hail of fire came from the sky. A shell hit the stern, penetrated through the deck and opened a hole in the flank.

"The machine room is submerged!" reported a seaman.

"Stop the leak. All on deck, except the chief engineer. Put a machinegun on the bow, before me!" snapped Cao.

The air pirates certainly had not expected to run into such an unusual riposte: infantry rifles firing at jets and cargo ships bristling with machineguns. Hills were turned into fortresses and groundfire came from practically everywhere. In order to avenge the two planes downed, they were bent on sinking this cargo ship.

Cao's ship was zigzagging on the sea to avoid the shells and bombs, when one of the planes dived straight on it. Before Cao had time to

order the ship's guns to open fire, a volley came from a nearby islet. It came from a naval craft, whose grey-painted hull was hardly distinguishable from the rocks. A hail of projectiles came down from the plane and hit the water close to the ship's flank. The water had reddish gleams. A long burst of machinegun came up from the ship, and also volleys of rifle fire, from the bow and from the stern. All the guns on the naval craft were also blazing: Cao felt quite reassured. The naval craft's commander radioed to the cargo ship an order to take refuge at the foot of the rocky islet under the protection of its guns. The plane, like a hawk robbed of its prey, turned on the naval craft. Trong, the commander, was well aware of some of the weaknesses of those jets: when they dive, the dive lasts but a very short time, during which only very limited targets can be hit at. His voice was calm as he ordered:

“Port the helm, twenty degrees!”

The helmsman repeated the order, as he carried it out, “Port the helm, twenty degrees. Done!”

Hardly had the craft executed the manœuvre when a shower of shells came down from the plane and fell close to its flank. Columns of water spewed up, mingled with smoke.

“Fire!” Trong shouted.

The whole of the ship shook. The funnel belched a black cloud of smoke. The flag of battle, which Trong had ordered hoisted right from the first minute of fighting, flapped in the wind.

The plane, having missed its target, flattened out then shot upward. It soon started diving again.

“Starboard the helm, twenty degrees!”

“Starboard the helm, twenty degrees. Done!”

Another shower of shells whipped the water near the vessel. Trong shouted: “Let the rifles and light machineguns open fire, too!”

The rifles started firing by volleys. Everybody was on deck: the cook, the chief electrician, the nurse, the assistant helmsman... Everyone was now a front-line fighter.

A strongly-built petty officer was firing a light machinegun, a leg propped on the ship's railing.

“Port the helm!... Starboard! the helm! Full steam ahead!...” Trong steered his ship on a zigzag course while hitting back vigorously at the enemy. Suddenly he shouted, “Motion astern!” Seconds latter, a huge column of water spewed up near the bow of the vessel. “A bomb,” Trong muttered to himself.

Trong took off his jacket. The men wiped the salt water on their faces, but kept their eyes glued on the enemy. Trong lifted his field-glasses. “Clean the guns,” he ordered. A voice came from behind him: “Give me a gun, I want to fight.” Trong turned round. It was the assistant electrical engineer. “Everything is fine,” he continued, “Please let me have a gun and fight.”

“Good, go and get one,” Trong replied.

Trong took stock of the situation. The vessel was shrouded in spray. Dead fish were floating alongside

the flanks of the vessel. Through his binoculars, he saw fishing-boats taking refuge at the foot of the rocky islet and a hail of shells falling on the sea, raising columns of water.

Noon. A beautiful summer day.

The smoke of battle had not yet completely dispersed, naval craft were like war horses still covered with the dust of the battlefield, the gunners had not yet left their guns, when the people streamed to the combat positions and the wharves to congratulate our fighters and kiss their cheeks blackened by gunpowder and stained with blood. They said to them: "You have fought magnificently. Everybody has seen how accurate your fire was and how it downed American jets."

The American air pirate Alvarez had probably been taken across the ferry. He would soon reach the Rung ferry crossing the Bachdang river. Seven hundred years ago, before Christopher Columbus had set foot on America, at this very place on the Bachdang river a Vietnamese general had defeated an army of invaders whose war horses had trampled on Asia and a large part of Europe.

A foreign cargo ship had just left the harbour when the battle broke out, and so had to cast anchor at the foot of an islet. The ship's captain and a Vietnamese pilot stood on deck, observing the battle through binoculars. After the planes had been driven away,

the captain turned to the Vietnamese pilot and said in English :

“ Uncle Sam has turned tail. Long live the Vietnam of Ho Chi Minh ! Long live the Vietnam of Dienbienphu ! ” And he warmly embraced our compatriot.

Then the ship weighed anchor and resumed its journey, weaving its way among the rocky islets of the Bay, under the direction of the Vietnamese pilot. Never had the latter found the Bay so beautiful. Each islet seemed to have a soul of its own. They were like warriors in battle array.

The captain was reading a map with the help of a magnifying glass. Suddenly he asked the pilot : “ Where did those planes fall ? ”

“ Perhaps somewhere on our way, ” the pilot replied. “ Tell the sailors to look for oil sheets on the surface of the sea. ”

The captain smiled and said jokingly, “ Are they blocking our way ? ”

“ If they do, we shall tread on their carcasses, ” said the pilot. The captain’s laugh filled the steering room.

A moment later, the pilot pointed his finger to starboard. “ In 1946, ” he said, “ President Ho Chi Minh held talks at this place with French Admiral d’Argenlieu whom he warned against any attempt at reconquest. ” The captain nodded his head and remained thoughtful for a while. At last, he murmured : “ It took the French ten years to grasp the meaning of the President’s words. As for the Americans... ”

He added after a while:

"Your country is so beautiful. Haiphong is green with luxuriant vegetation. Halong is of the romantic blue of classical paintings."

He sighed and remained silent for a while. Then he added:

"My country was also very beautiful. It had produced the most beautiful songs of mankind and had vast expanses of green olive fields. But the Americans have come and set up military bases, and ruin has come to my country. Every time I returned to my homeland and saw the American flag fluttering domineeringly over it, sorrow filled my heart and I wanted to leave immediately, never to return again."

The pilot pointed his finger at an islet. "In 1954," he said, "the Yanks came here. Seventh Fleet ships. They wrote this line on a rock: 'U.S. Navy come here—May 1954'. Dienbienphu under French General De Castries was then breathing its last. Now, more than ten years later, they've again come in this month of August. They will probably be able to add something to that writing."

The captain smiled. "They've done so already," he said. "They have added a line written with the blood of the American people and the tears of the Goddess of Liberty."

The two burst out laughing, and their laugh rang out loud over the Bay of Halong, where the tempest had just subsided.

August 1964

the first battle won

THE August sun, like a red-hot steel plate, was broiling the sky over Vinh-Benthuy. From behind the Truongson Range, the West wind kept sweeping across vast ricefields into the city, raising a cloud of yellow dust in the streets already deserted. Mixed with the howling of the wind was the midday music from a Radio Hanoi broadcast through public loudspeakers.

On the Lam river, the steamer X. broke the waves and was heading towards the port. Sweaty crewmen were scurrying to and fro on the deck, busy with a few finishing touches before the ship came into the harbour.

At the M.K. weaving mill, the afternoon shift was at the rush hour. To the buzzing of the electric motors, hundreds of wood shuttles were rattling as if they were racing with one another at an ever-greater speed.

Beneath these glossy black shuttles, trips of cloth lengthened out, rolled up and grew bigger and bigger...

At the bus station, the fourth Doluong-bound passenger car started off.

By the rail track stood a flag-man awaiting the arrival of the train from Hanoi.

Here, at the power plant, the heart of the city, an old fireman, the goggles down on the nose, was closely watching the tensiometers. At the same time, in the central control post in the plant's upper storey, the young engineer on duty, sitting at his desk, was speaking over the telephone to the power team leader in the turbine room. Behind him, the Quyet mountain range stood out against the blue sky splashed in sunlight.

He sat there and could picture to himself the electric currents — like small arteries — streaming to various public offices, factories and pumping stations. Thousands of cubic metres of water were flowing into the parched ricefields in Huongson, Hungnguyen and Nghiloc districts. Lathe-chucks were revolving at full speed on the brand new steel fulcra. Furnaces are in full blast. Wireless sets were sending waves through the air... What would happen if ever one of the mechanisms stopped working, even for one minute? With all this in mind he vaguely smiled with a sense of pride and anxiety about his responsibility. Everything ran smoothly in this city in construction.

All of a sudden, a round of A. A. fire roared, and shattered the quietness of this summer mid-day.

Immediately from all sides a din resounded like the onrush of water. This was a mixed sound: screams and shouts, noise of feet pounding downstairs, and car engines starting up amidst the screeching of iron gates, and rifle-butts clashing with metal objects... And dominating all these noises was a prolonged strange sound which zips as if someone has just torn a huge cloth with fury...

Ban looked through the window just in time to spot a flash of light across the sky, an outline of aeroplanes streaking past as swift as an arrow, trailing behind two straight-lined jets of white smoke.

"Enemy planes!" Ban shouted aloud, and instinctively he sprung up on his feet and ran towards the control panel.

There, Vi, a worker, stayed in front of the many gleaming dials, his hand on the frequency control rod. He looked a bit pale under the neon light, but still riveted his eyes on the pointer swinging before him. He spoke briskly to the engineer.

"Will you please give a telephone call to our men at the furnace. The machines are rumbling down there. I'm afraid they have not heard the alarm. Tell Uncle Khoi to get ready with the escape valve..."

It was too late. Big explosions shook the floor. The window-panes trembled and chunked. Then followed a hail of fire, a cross-fire of guns of various types. From behind the control panel, the alarm-whistle blew in crescendo.

The engineer cast a glance over the electricity distribution chart,

On the grid of power network, studded with red stars, light went out from two of them, and in their places two green points flickered feebly as if to send out an S.O.S. The graph pens swang wildly like buoys on rolling waves and soon dropped to Zero.

The young engineer felt something like an electric current, running from his neck down to his feet. For the first time in his life, he understood what fear was like. Not the fear of death, the threat of bombs and bullets which were making a hell of a noise around him. Nor the fear of a visible enemy wildly moving overhead. It was definitely not all that at this moment. Looking at the lights on the chart he knew that somewhere some high tension transmission lines had been severed, and now the grid of power network showed a frightening drop in consumption capacity. This sudden change might lead to an excessive increase in the speed of the turbines, the machines might break loose like a mad horse and this might engender a loss of electricity on all lines with the result that the whole plant might be crippled...

Here at the power plant, for the cadres and workers, this was just the "visible enemy" to be defeated. "This is the first trial in my life," Ban said to himself. "I will overcome it."

By his side, in front of the control-panel, the worker in charge remained where he had been moments ago, his hand always on the frequency control rod. His composed countenance set his comrades' heart at rest.

Ban ran his fingers all along the rows of buttons, almost automatically. One, two, three, four... the

escape valve, the system of cut-off switches, the signal grid...

He ran towards the telephone and lifted up the receiver. The voice at the other end was inaudible. The aeroplanes draw still closer, somewhere over the roof of the plant while machineguns, rifles and A.A. guns fired without let-up.

Then the voice became more distinct, very calm. "Hello, control centre? Tao speaking."

"Ah! It's you, comrade Director!" Ban spoke aloud, he rather shouted. "Two high-tension lines had been interrupted: the six-kilovolt line leading to the water supply works and the thirty-five kilovolt line to the pumping station. Suggest you to send a shock team on urgent repair mission."

"All right! There's no cause for alarm," answered the Party Secretary and Director of the Plant. In the meantime, keep calm and protect the machines. Everybody at his post. Keep production going on. I'm out here with the self-defence corps."

The voice at the other end of the line stopped short. Ban dropped the receiver, ran downstairs into the turbine room, where Han and Sum, the team leader, were bending over the wheel, trying to shut the gas valves. On seeing him, the latter uttered a loud cry which Ban could not understand at all. By their side, the turbine kept jolting terribly and looked as if it was going to break away along with the platform.

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Meanwhile, the truck carrying the repair party ran at full speed in the direction of the water supply works.

Group leader Hoa, a grey-haired worker was sitting next to the driver. Time and again he glanced at his wrist-watch. There minutes, three long minutes, had elapsed since he had received the order. An electricity break-down meant the whole city without water, which would render many fire engines useless... Thick columns of smoke in front of him put him out of patience.

Along the river, the road rode harder. The car hooted furiously while winding through groups of workers on the way to combat the fire. Here and there on the dyke, aircraft hunting teams moved around combat-pits, shooting at enemy planes. By their arm-bands, Hoa could recognize them as members of the self-defence corps of the oil factory. They constantly changed their positions, shouting at one another, their faces burning red under the sun and amidst gunpowder smoke.

In the sky, the air marauders swooped down and zoomed up. All of a sudden, a plane left its formation and plummeted, like a king-fisher diving on its prey. At tree-top level, it roared again and skimmed along the river, so low that Hoa could clearly see the figures painted in black on its wings. From its nose, streaks of fire blazed down.

"Fire, fire!"

"Aim straight at the pilot's head. Break his skull!"

Shouts and roars make a din on the dyke. Fortified positions, barges and tug-boats still at anchor in the river, spit fire, forming a barrage around the aircraft.

Our driver braked and the car screeched to a halt, jerking all the passengers forward. In front of the car, rockets exploded and a hail of rocks and earth swept through columns of orange smoke.

Hoa snatched his tool-bag, slung it on his shoulder, swung open the door and jumped down:

"All get off. Five comrades unroll the wire along the dyke. Comrades Chinh, Quang and Chung follow me!"

Hardly had he alighted when Quang got a gun-shot in the leg. He limped, trying to catch up with Hoa...

All over, guns of all calibres continue rumbling in a dark sky.

"Hurrah, it's crashing!"

People run past, brandishing their rifles. The repair workers have no time to take notice of what was happening. This is their battle-ground. They rapidly connected the ends of the broken wire and nimbly climbed up a towering electric pole to adjust the repaired line amidst the tense firing.

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At about the same time on the power of network chart the central control room of the Plant, a red star gleamed among dozens of others, signalling that power had been restored in the line connecting with the water supply works.

Engineer Ban and team leader Sum got back to the control centre. Seeing the red star flickered on the chart, they threw themselves into each other's arms, shouting:

"Hurrah, Hoa has won the battle."

In the turbine room and at the steam furnace, all the mechanisms had returned to normal. On all lines, everything ran smoothly after the trial by fire. Not a single worker had abandoned his post during the fight.

The Party Secretary rushed in the control centre of the Power Plant, followed by a self-defence group with rifles slung on their shoulders, their clothes caked with mud and still smelling of gunpowder. He said: "We, workers of the Vinh Power Plant, have won our first battle. Thank you, comrades. Thank you all very much!"

Then he stepped towards engineer Ban, team leader Sum and workman Vi at their posts before the control panel and shook hands with them.

gunners without insignia

ONCE, my unit marched past a desert-like sandy waste land. With their wheels half-deep in the sand, our trucks could not move an inch. The night had fallen and we were quite a long way to our destination. The trucks roared, the wheels turned round and round but in vain. For an hour, we were at a loss when a peasant passed by. Understanding our difficulties, he told us to wait for a while. Soon, thanks to the flare of the vehicles' headlights, we saw groups of people coming from a nearby hamlet, carrying planks under their arms and on their shoulders. A makeshift road was built almost at once with boards of every sort and size taken from beds, doors, tables. The planks were placed in front of our trucks and moved forward as these progressed. The sight of their cracking under the weight of our vehicles worried us all very much. "Don't worry about the boards," said

the villagers. "Just try to shoot some of *them* down here for us to see with our own eyes." There did not end our difficulties. We had to haul our artillery pieces up to the mountain-top without ready tracks. We managed to climb up together with the co-operative members, braving sharp-pointed stones, pulling the heavy guns with cables and hemp strands used by fishermen to lift their nets.

The village at the foot of the mountain formed a beautiful picture. Here and there, some bamboos towered over new thatched cottages. White lanes bordered golden ricefields. A peaceful life was unfolding beneath our guns.

Once these placed in proper positions we had to see to combat preparedness while organizing our everyday life as best we could.

An artillery man is supposed to spend his life sitting and aiming. We often said so to one another, for we never left our position even for a single minute.

The day after our arrival, we dug a well at the mountain-foot where nobody had ever thought of digging one. Water was brought up in mugs, cans and tins, enough for our daily use and for watering our emplacement — at least three times a day — to keep the sand down when our artillery came into action. Some days later, plants and grass on either side of the path leading to us from the well became greener than those around thanks to the water we had spilt along the way.

Here vegetation hardly grew. However, we had enough leaves for camouflage. From here every morning, before dawn, I would look down in wait for "supplies".

In the naked land down there something green appeared, moving in our direction, and as they drew near, they looked like walking rows of trees winding along the lane. It was our daily camouflage provision, leaves of different kinds, brought by school-boys and school-girls. They were cut in the previous evening, and kept fresh in the dew all through the night. Neither their parents nor their mistresses had ever told them to do so. They decided to help the gunners to "blind" enemy air pirates. "Wish you a good plane harvest," some said while deposing their loads.—"Try to get the best marks and you'll see *them* downed," we answered.

It occurred that we had to fight several engagements in succession under a burning sun. As soon as our guns stopped firing—their barrels still hot, spent shells smacking of powder, clouds of smoke and dust rising high in the sky—with throats parched with thirst, we had to clean them in preparation for the next encounter. Then, the well where we got our provision of water seemed to be miles away. But, look, from the foot of the mountain a group of children as small as marbles, raced upward with mugs and pots of water in hands, and cans hanging from poles on their shoulders. When at our emplacements, the vessels were only half full!

"*Nuoc, nuoc**, ours."

The words uttered by those little boys and girls kept ringing in our ears. Their homeland, the homeland of the artillerymen, of us all, we pledged ourselves to defend it. We would not retreat even a single step.

* The word means both water and homeland.

In our gunners' life, we had taken part in many engagements. Yet in this part of Central Vietnam, we saw everywhere the same gentle faces, the same smiles, and received almost the same wishes. This repetition did not by any means blur, but instead, vivified our recollections.

Once, we were ordered to reinforce a unit under threat of attack by enemy planes. The most urgent problem then was how to erect defence works, which accounted, as a rule, for half of the victory. Soon after our arrival, a real construction-site had been set up. A youth shock brigade, who were building a road on the other side of a nearby river, swam across on hearing of us.

"We are capable of removing mountains," their leader said, offering their service. They immediately set to work with their shovels, picks and half-eaten blades. The glaring sun seemed to burn their clothes. Everybody was sweating. Laughters, jokes mixed with the rhythmical creaking of flails bent under the heavy weight of earth loads. A complete network of fortifications was soon built. In the engagement that followed, our ammunition suppliers did not have to carry any shells from the store to the artillery emplacements, the job being ensured by the brigade members. The situation, though extremely tense, filled our hearts with a sense of intense pleasure. None of us was aware that at the height of the fight refreshments were being prepared for us. In the neighbouring

hamlets young girls rushed to the fields to pick up water-melons whereas mothers ran for tea from house to house. They brought them to the outskirts of the village and kept waiting there until the encounter came to an end. There was quite a bustle in the battlefield. Orders from the company commander to the platoons and from the platoons down to each battery, reports on the enemy's movement, and cartridges falling on the platform, were heard, mixed with the air-rending thunder of our guns. Then, shouts arose from bamboo hedges, communication-lines, fox-holes, co-operative yards and schools: "One plane ablaze! Hurrah, hurrah!"

Battery commanders repeated almost incessantly the company commander's order: "Don't look at the burning plane! Aim at the nose of the third one."

The gunners bent up to turn their pieces in the latter's direction. Gunner No. 2 pressed the trigger jerkily with his foot. Without looking at the sky he followed the wonderful trajectories of the shells which, as if lifted by the people's uproarious shouts, soared into the sky, pursuing the enemy aircraft.

It was amidst this tumult that we loaded our guns with the help of some mothers whose sons had been killed by American air raids. School-boys helped us spot and aim at enemy planes, and coop-members assisted us in firing. The barrels turned now to the south, now to the north; they looked now upward into the sky, now downward at the river. As they revolved, we all around turned and turned, forming a sort of huge magic lantern showing ever-changing images. Iron helmets were jostling against palm-leaf hats,

black-haired heads side by side with white-haired ones, while artillery pieces sent "fire-works" into the sky. And outside the artillery battleground was an active beehive of machineguns and rifles of all types, a battleground without front, that of gunners without insignia, unknown ones...

On those burning hot days in Central Vietnam, each battlefield was a hub of sentiments.

That day, we were expecting an enemy attack. The company stood by for the fight, having everything ready, from the dusters to clean guns to the water-bottles. A group of workers from a construction-site in the vicinity came up and volunteered to take part. As we anticipated the violence of the raid, we accepted only young men and told the girls to move back to the rear. The latter refused. One of them even jumped into the gun emplacement and offered to fight with us. She was about twenty years old, with rosy cheeks and starry eyes.

"Brothers, anything easy that I can do?"

"Carrying shells, the easiest job!"

"I want to press the trigger!"

"Well, how can you?"

Vinh, a loader, tall and big, who was standing on the platform, turned round:

"All right," he said, "but just wait, my dear. We, gunners, are jacks-of-all-trades. Now, you just carry shells, then watch and try to imitate us. Come and stay here in the sunshade. If there are violent bomb explosions, hide yourself behind me!"

Then a fight took place. Nga — it was the girl's name—shuttled forward and backward with burdens of shells. Enemy planes attacked from all sides, diving right on us but were beaten off wave after wave. Then, they appeared in swarms, swooping down, strafing and bombing. A battery with its men was buried in the earth. The people flocked in, digging them out. The gun got jammed. Taking advantage of our fire becoming weaker at one point, a few planes swooped heedlessly down there. One volley struck our emplacement. Our piece which had hit accurately at the enemy was suddenly reduced to silence.

“Commander, I'm wounded.”

“No. 4 to replace No. 3; No. 6 to replace No. 4,” ordered the battery leader without turning round. Yet, he knew exactly who had been wounded. Firing resumed. Nga, without a moment's hesitation, jumped onto the post of No. 6. She passed shells to Vinh. The gun kept revolving and Nga went on fetching shells. On the platform, Vinh always had enough for two rounds. In the thick of the fight, as he lifted a shell to load his piece, he fell down on Nga's shoulder. She helped him down to the earth and jumped onto the platform again.

The commander kept waving his flag up and down as if he was stabbing something in the air.

“You're making a splendid show!” shouted the commissar, standing on the mound of the C.P. “Aim right at it!”

The encounter ended half an hour later. The earth seemed to stop moving. In the silence that followed

all over the battlefield I had the impression of waking up from a dream. I looked up at the sky, rubbing my eyes.

The commander posed his flag against the barrel of the gun. "Today our fire's pretty good, more accurate than before," said he, wiping the sweat off his face. "It's timely, uninterrupted throughout the successive operations. No. 2 and No. 4 were the best..."

Suddenly he came to a pause as his eyes turned to Vinh's post; he saw a girl instead.

Nga's hair was grey with sand and smoke. Dark-red stripes barred her shoulders and the front of her green blouse.

Later on, during the stay of our unit, occasionally Nga came to help cook a meal or mend a shirt.

One day, I ventured to ask her why she could manage to do a job without having learnt it six months, a job that her friends were unable to do,

"I don't know," she shook her head.

"You hadn't fought before, had you?"

"I did have, but with rifles."

We soon learnt that she was married and that her husband was serving in the army.

"No wonder! no wonder! A daughter-in-law of the army!" we joked.

"But since August 5th*, he hasn't had any leave," she said with a blushing face.

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* The day the Americans started their first air raid on North Vietnam.

Lan of my unit was a native of Langdo, a village in the suburbs of Vinh. Members of his family came to see us practically every day. His sister used to take home some of our clothes to wash and mend. His mother often brought us boiled potatoes and ground-nuts. Once, his father dropped in on his way home from a town Party Committee meeting to have a chat about production and combat readiness in the town, and to inquire about the South Vietnam situation. As for Lan's younger brother, he was almost all the time with us once his class over. Nothing escaped him and he plied us with endless questions.

He also had a look through the cross-hairs which was a reward for him: he had carried a lot of shells during our latest fight.

Lan's grand-father was seventy but still quite healthy. Each time he came, he would run affectionately his hands on the barrels and the wheels of the guns. He asked us questions about firing technique, and lifted one shell after another apparently to know their weight. He looked at the barrel, then shading his eyes with his hands, he gazed at the sky.

"What guns you have!" he said. "Think of the ones we had in the resistance against the French." Then, sitting on the carriage, he went on. "I am one of your own, you soldiers. Myself, Lan's dad and then Lan, we make three generations of soldiers. But Lan is the happiest of all. There are now plenty of guns and good ones, indeed. In my time, it was rather funny. Well, when young, I was nimble and courageous, so I was entrusted with the task of safeguarding Party

organizations and Central Vietnam Party Committee men coming here on business. In 1930, the armed units were named Red Guard Troops. I was a member but had only a short wooden stick as weapon. In the demonstration that proceeded from Benthuy to Trangthi factory my group was detached to protect the demonstrators. I hid the stick in one sleeve and fought against the 'blue-gaitered troops' * with it. The lamp post over there was the place where we first hoisted the hammer-and-sickle flag in this town.

We resumed our preparations for the next fight with a large measure of confidence, aware of the presence of thousands of people, gunners without insignia behind us, as ready as we were.

* Native troops under the French rule.—Public