ON THE 17th PARALLEL

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE — HANOI 1965
HUU THAI

ALERT
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A gangster intrudes into the house of a peaceful man, breaks his furniture and visits cruelties upon his wife and children. Out of patience, the master of the house gives him a sound beating. The thug whipped out his revolver and shoots at... the man's brother, saying, "Tit for tat, I am only using my right of self-defence."

A bandit can thus be a sophist at a pinch. Unfortunately for him, like the master of the house, the brother is a man who knows how to defend himself.

Such is the nutshell the story we will be telling you below.

Quangbinh — Vinhlinh, February 1965

The winter has been mild. The newly-transplanted rice plants grow vigorously and stretch their green carpet as far as the eye can see. In the dry fields, maize and sweet potatoes grow side by side and not an inch of land lies fallow. In 1964, thirteen typhoons wrought havoc in Quangbinh and Vinhlinh; the end-of-year crop suffered heavy losses, many houses were swept away, roads and small dykes were badly damaged. But in February 1965, when we visited the region, there were no more traces of these storms. The Tet festival * had been observed with dignity, the kids had had their toys and new garments and all households had had their banh chung and banh tet **.

* and **: The Tet is the lunar new year festival on the occasion of which big rice cakes (the banh chung and banh tet) are made by all families.
"Formerly, we would have died of hunger or would be roving about in search of food," an old man told us. "Never in my life have I seen our province recover so promptly from such a trial. One would say a miraculous rejuvenation."

"It's true, we have rejuvenated," another old man chimed in. "Formerly we would have installed some altar to invoke the genii, then we would do nothing but cry our despair. Today we are not yet rich but we have learnt one thing — never to remain idle, but react and fight."

These old folks' words reminded us of a recent past. Life in Quangbinh-Vinhlinh has never been easy. Here, the land is but a narrow stretch, the mountains virtually touching the sea. The rivers, as smooth as a mirror in normal times, grow furious when swollen by the typhoons. Such is the land of Quangbinh and Vinhlinh. Bent under heavy taxes paid to the feudalists and colonialists, the peasants had furthermore to face a cunning and tough enemy which compelled them to be constantly on the alert. Blown by the wind from the Pacific, the sand creeps day and night into the fields, invades the villages and relentlessly assaults the ricefields and dwelling houses. Some villages have such a revealing word as "Buried" added to their names. For generations, the inhabitants of Quangbinh and Vinhlinh have been waging an unremitting struggle against the sand; each inch of cultivated land has been conquered from the sand; each bamboo tree, each cassava plant has to be watered, tended and protected like a suckling. The Vietnamese passionately love their Fatherland. The Quangbinh-Vinhlinh
inhabitants are even more than patriotic: they cherish their soil — the soil they have wrested from the sand— and the smallest bush they have grown at the price of untold hardships.

The French expeditionary troops called this region a "street without joy". They had thought that a few posts would be enough to control this narrow strip of land wedged in between mountain and sea. However, despite the mopping-up raids carried out by armoured cars and the bombings and strafings by airplanes during nine years, Quangbinh-Vinhlingh province remained indomitable. The "street without joy" became for the French expeditionary corps an abyss which engulfed pitilessly its most seasoned battalions. To enter a village having apparently no defence work always proved a costly operation in the end. Remnants of blockhouses built along National Highway No. I, lined with filao-trees are proof of the trouble the French troops ran into when they invaded the region.

We often stopped at the roadside to gaze at the green riceplants and the red tiled roofs which looked so pleasant amidst the dark green of the filaos or the light-green of the bamboo-trees. What a contrast with the greyness of the thatched houses and parched ricefields of yore! Along the seacoast stretches a dark strip of filaos, a forest of filaos still under ten years of age but forming an inviolable fortress. Man has got the better of his centuries-old enemy, the sand, and the wind, whistles melodiously day and night in the foliage of the filaos as if singing this victory. Millions of filaos have been planted in a few years. On dog-days, thousands of men walked on the hot sand to water the
YOUJin'glUaos so that they may become this murmuring forest which checks the invasions of the sand.

We stopped on the edge of a ricefield and saw on the surface of the water among the riceplants a thin green sheet of tiny starry spots — azolla, a fertilizing plant which, it was formerly believed, could be grown only in some regions of the Red River delta; this plant has now come to this locality, 700 km from its habitat. For centuries, it never left the region of Lavan. We remembered that we had set foot in the cradle of the "Strong Wind"; here in Quangbinh, by dint of hard work and creative innovations, the Daiphong (Strong Wind) co-operative has been able to grow on this barren soil the best crops of the country. Who could fully imagine the tremendous amount of labour spent by the Quangbinh farmers over these ten years to improve this land wrested from sand and gravel! Canals, dams and dykes criss-cross in all directions; in the culverts, the water flows from ricefield to ricefield and sneaks even between the rows of sweet potatoes. With a broad gesture, the man in charge of agrarian question pointed to this gentle land of water and ricefields and, with some emotion and pride in his voice, gave us some figures: 342 hydraulic works of all sizes built within a few years to irrigate and drain 53,000 hectares of land, a big project is nearing completion at Camly with a water reservoir of 43 million cubic metres to water 5,000 hectares; 14,000 hectares of newly-cleaned land, a food production doubling the 1936 figure, a per capita production of 325 kilogrammes of paddy as against 250 kilogrammes in 1960, despite a yearly demographic increase of 3.7 per cent.
In Vinhlinh district, we went up the hills, a region in which the expression “meal of the day before yesterday” was formerly used to designate the fact that people had a meal only every other day. Farmers who were tending pepper plants said that by 1970 the plants would give their best crops and yield the cooperative at least ten times more than rice or maize grown on the same area. The following small detail is more informative than figures: here plans have been mapped out for the next five years and this proves that every day the inhabitants eat their fill. On the hills near the 17th parallel, we could not refrain from gazing at the other bank of the Benhai river: the South. After a few minutes’ silence, a man in our group whispered, “My mother lives there, 30 kilometres from here; it is ten years since I have not seen her.”

Ten years... If you ever talk to the Quangbình-Vinhlinh inhabitants on this subject, you will have sleepless nights. That school was built in 1959; that road in 1961; the same year our fishermen joined co-operatives... Have you seen those big junks returning every evening? Pay a visit to Quangphu, and you will know how our fishermen live and work today... Look at that road built along the wharf at the mouth of the Nhatte river, encompassing the site of the old citadel of Dônghới. This small town is quite beautiful with its promenade on the banks of the Nhatte river now nicely lined with coconut-palms, from which one
can gaze at the junks laden with fish with their sails swollen by the sea breeze. The Donghoi people have carefully restored the ruins of the Master’s Rampart (Luythay). Don’t fail to visit Canhduong, a village which had given a hundred battles to the French and never allowed a single enemy soldier to trample on its soil; this village is now a big workshop bustling with all kinds of activities. Come and see Hoxa hospital in Vinhlinh; just imagine a mere district hospital equipped with X-ray apparatus, where important surgical operations can be performed!

Ten years... For the inhabitants of Quangbính-Vinhlinh, the words also evoke the time of separation with their dear ones, with relatives and friends whom they can see on the other side of the Benhai river, but cannot talk to; they conjure up all the pain and anger of the South which is so near — hatred so long contained and ready to flare up at any moment.

The American press informed us that President Johnson had had a gloomy Christmas. Like a cancer, the South Vietnam problem has corroded all aspects of American politics. News from South Vietnam is definitely bad; the mercenary troops are melting away; the American advisors attract the blows of the Liberation National Front as magnet attracts iron. Westmoreland proved no better than Harkins, nor Taylor than Cabot Lodge; to try and get a “puppet” who can keep on his feet in this jumble in Saigon
would be tantamount to trying to square the circle:

"Ten years already!" Johnson mutters. He is the third president to wear himself out in this task. Helicopters, amphibious cars, napalm, phosphorous bombs, toxic chemicals, supersonic planes, all have been used in South Vietnam. He runs his finger angrily over a map of Vietnam: the Camau Cape, the southernmost tip, seemed to challenge him. Gloomily, he clenches his fists and casts a look beyond the 17th parallel.

* * *

It was fine weather on that day of February 7, the first Sunday after the Tet festival. Everywhere a festive mood still prevailed. In the town of Donghoi, people thronged the stadium where a football match was to take place; others were playing the "bai choi"; in the surrounding villages, others availed themselves of the fine weather to go and plant trees along the roadsides. Suddenly the alert sounded. Hardly had the inhabitants time to get into their shelters when American planes turned up.

The new hospital, the pride of Donghoi, with its red-tiled roofs and snow-white walls amidst the ricefields, was under particular attack. Within two hours, six waves of jet planes dived on it and its buildings were hit by dozens of rockets. The consulting ward had its roof blown off and its walls blasted open, just after

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* A game of cards in which players sit on an elevated stand (choi).
the last patient had been evacuated to the shelters. The maternity home and infant wards were also hit. But the emergency service was ready. Donghoi had known for months that Washington had evil designs on its schools and hospital. Calmly doctors and nurses comforted the patients and carried them one by one to the shelters. As it was Sunday, some doctors and nurses were away, but they were back beside their patients soon after the alert was heard. The first rockets whizzed around the hospital; Thia, a nurse, had carried twenty little children to the trenches, but remembering that one of them had had a convulsive crisis and another an important haemorrhage, she ran back to the hospital to fetch medicines, hugging the walls to protect herself from bomb splinters and shrapnel. On this hospital the Americans dropped hundreds of shrapnel bombs. Fancy a small orange jam tin with six brass winglets, filled with explosive. On the lid one can read: *bomb fragmentation Blu 3/B*. When the bomb explodes, hundreds of small bullets fly in all directions, wounding and killing people nearby. Many did not explode and remained buried in the sand, or hung on the bushes or clung to other objects, and the slightest shock against the lid would be enough to release a volley of bullets. A real marvel of American technique.

After her operation for glaucoma, Mrs. Thuyet was ordered to remain motionless in her bed. She did so, thinking that “they would not bomb a hospital, the more so since it is standing all by itself and has a plainly visible red cross painted on the roof”. But she
received a bullet through her arm and had to be carried immediately to a shelter. Four other patients were also injured.

On the afternoon of February 8, it was the turn of Hoxa school, or rather of the whole of the Hoxa school sector (Vinhlinh). Here, at the foot of a hill flanking the national road, only a few kilometres from the 17th parallel, stood the buildings of an education sector: a nursery school, an elementary school (7 to 11 years of age) a junior secondary school (12 to 15) and a senior secondary school (15 to 18). This was formerly a rubbish dump. After liberation the local population cleared the place and widened it by cutting into the hill, brought their own bricks and bamboo and contributed labour to build school-buildings for more than a thousand children. The teachers, vying with one another in patience and cleverness, made all kinds of tools and apparatuses, and collected plants and animals; friends in the Soviet Union, China and African countries sent in gifts which filled the children with admiration.

At 2 p.m. the children had already filled the classrooms. Their teachers were still busy bidding farewell to a parting colleague. Suddenly the roar of plane engines were heard overhead. The younger pupils rushed into their shelters while the teachers and senior pupils in the school defence unit, took up their weapons and gained their fighting positions. Several successive waves of Skyhawks, Skyraiders, F.8U Crusaders came and dropped bombs on Hoxa. About fifty bombs fell on the school sector. The teachers' room crumbled, tools and apparatuses were blown to pieces,
and many class-rooms damaged. Three children and one teacher were killed. A shelter heavily shaken by an explosion would have collapsed on the children who had taken refuge there had not the self-defence militiamen come to their rescue. A woodworkers' shop in front of the school was completely razed; one shivers at the thought that some of those bombs might have fallen on the shelters crowded with hundreds of children. Near the school lived a cripple named Tram who could not go to her shelter in time. Her house was reduced to ashes and the only thing that remained of the poor woman was her mutilated arm which had been flung by the blast scores of metres away.

Among the pupils victims of the bombing there was little Minh Huong who had come from South Vietnam several years ago. Her mother, Mrs. Nguyen, braving all kinds of dangers had taken Minh Huong, her only daughter to Vinhlinh, when she reached school age, for in the South they build airfields and prisons but no schools at all. Mrs. Nguyen had wanted to send her daughter to a school where she could learn the joy of life and the reasons for living. She crossed the 17th parallel, settled in Vinhlinh where for several years now, she has lived sparingly on the fruit of her labour to bring up her child. For years, she lived happy watching her daughter growing up in body and mind. Every night, before going to bed Minh Huong whispered into her mother's ears what she had learned at school and her dreams for her future. And now U.S. bombs and rockets had taken her away from her mother for ever. On our way to see Mrs. Nguyen we had expected to find a bereaved mother in tears. But
if her features were contracted with pain, her eyes were dry. She told us, clenching her teeth: “We shall avenge her!” We also visited Mrs. Thanh, a young woman whose first daughter, little Lan, 7 years old, was killed on February 8 at Hoxa school. We found Mrs. Thanh putting in order the things of her late daughter: a blouse, a small flower-printed scarf, a toy and those trifles which so delight a child. Sobbing, Mrs. Thanh said: “Her father, who had been working far from here, has just come back. We have both sworn to do anything and go anywhere to avenge our daughter. Then she burst into a cry: “Blood will have blood!”

Everywhere children were the first victims. In Dong-hoi, four little boys who jumped out of their shelter to look at the planes, were killed by a volley of bullets. Poor kiddies, they did not know that when a plane with U.S. signs flew past, it was death on the prowl. In a coastal village we visited after the raid of February 11, three children had been killed. Mrs. Minh, and three of her five children, had been seriously wounded. In this village, hundreds of unexploded small shrapnel bombs were found after the raid.

It would have remained something of a mystery for us why U.S. planes had so savagely attacked hospitals and schools in Quangbinh-Vinhlinh, but for the hint given us by the story of little Minh Huong, the little girl who had fled the South with her mother and come to study in a school in the North. This new life which is blooming North of the 17th parallel and too close to this line which Ngo Dinh Diem had regarded as the border of the U.S.A., bitterly reminds the Washington
ruling circles that the northern half of Vietnam has definitely escaped the grip of U.S. capitalism. Those brand new hospitals and spick-and-span schools with children studying, singing and dancing just a few kilometres away from the 17th parallel make Kennedy, Johnson and their likes lose their sleep. In South Vietnam, men and women are fighting for their own freedom, but also to defend the schools and factories which have been built in the North. As a rule, every time socialism bears a fruit in some part of the world, the U.S. imperialists immediately plot to wreck it.

— To arms! Aircraft are spotted... kilometres off the seacoast.

No sooner had the alarm been given than the roar of plane engines was heard, as all the Quangbinh-Vinhthang localities lie along the seacoast. But hardly had the first planes come in sight when from all sides anti-aircraft guns, machine-guns, sub-machine-guns and rifles spitted shells and bullets. It was Sunday, but everyone was at his post. The Quangbinh population had been on the look-out: For these last two years, commandos coming from the South had been trying to sabotage economic establishments and frog-men had sought to destroy port installations. All were captured by the people and the armed forces before they could carry out their dark designs. Everyone in Quangbinh knows the story of an old inn-keeper who detected a group of saboteurs through their way of eating the rice soup she had sold them. Pirate-ships had come to bomb coastal villages; had stopped and searched fishing-boats: fishermen had been taken by force to the South. On August 5, 1964, aircraft of the Seventh
Fleet had bombed the estuary of the Gianh river. As for the Vinhlinh people, who live along the 17th parallel, they are ready since long; here enemy provocations are daily happenings. The February raid didn’t surprise anybody.

By groups of 4, 5 and 12, U.S. planes circled over the area, but as soon as they came down on a target, a concert of gunfire broke out on their passage. People said that it was like crackers let off during the Lunar New Year’s festival. In fact, the big explosions of anti-aircraft shells in the midst of uninterrupted small arms fire reminds one of the bursting of the bigger petards amidst the continued crackling of crackers.

For not only the anti-aircraft gunners and the P.T. boats were ready but also all the people’s militia groups belonging to the Đồnghội workshops, agricultural co-operatives and fishermen’s co-operatives. No sooner had the alarm been given than workers and peasants took up their arms — which always lay at hand in workshops or on the edge of ricefields — and posted themselves in trenches or in foxholes. The fishermen also took their rifles from the hatches and pointed them skyward.

“‘I have understood,” a foreign journalist told us, “what a people’s war is like after a few days’ stay in Quảngbình during the February raids.’” What had strongly impressed our confrère, used at home to the spectacular display of regular forces, was less our anti-aircraft guns than that multitude of armed groups scattered all over the countryside and at every street corner, ready to fire on any enemy plane within range. What caused surprise among foreign journalists was
the quickness with which young peasant girls, busy transplanting rice seedlings in the fields, had, immediately after the alarm, seized their rifles and their belts loaded with grenades to go and take up position in trenches. Everybody was in arms; from behind any bush or tumulus, could appear at any time an armed group ready to send a volley of bullets at a plane which had come low, or fall upon a commando who believed they had landed on a 'soft' spot. The enemy plane not only ran the risk of being hit by an anti-aircraft shell, but was caught in a veritable set of small-arms fire.

"I now understand why you have been able to down so many planes," a journalist told us when he was shown plane wrecks riddled with bullets of all calibres. On the lid of an auxiliary fuel tank, the size of a man's palm, we saw as many as three bullet holes. The faster the plane, the easier bullets, even of small calibre, penetrate into its fuselage. Within three days — February 7, 8 and 11 — 22 jet planes had been downed, many others damaged, a number of which might have fallen into the sea or South of the 17th parallel. Following each raid, aircraft, vessels and helicopters of the Seventh Fleet scoured the sea off the Quangbinh-Vinhthanh coast in the hope of finding the pilots who had fallen into the sea with their engines. On February 13, a few kilometres from Donghôl, the corpse of one of them, Dickson, was fished up by fishersmen.

On the 11, at 13.15, barely twenty minutes after the alarm was given, the plane of U.S. lieutenant-commander Shumaker was hit and crashed on the hills.
north of Donghoi. The pilot baled out. The people's militiamen of the neighbouring villages rushed immediately to the spot and found Shumaker hiding himself in a bush looking ghastly and trembling with fear. He confessed: "Your ground fire greatly frightened me. I don't know why I felt reassured after I landed by parachute and was captured."

In fact, when a plane dives on a target, between the pilot who darts down at full speed, showering bombs, rockets and 20mm. shells and the armed groups on the ground which want to shoot him down, the encounter lasts hardly half a minute. This is a crucial moment when a man must show what he has in him. The airman knows that a well-aimed bullet is sufficient to bring him down. Likewise the gunner on the ground knows that he may be reduced to pulp by this avalanche of fire swooping on him at full speed. At that last moment, Shumaker's nerves gave in, whereas those of his opponents held out. The chances are that Shumaker, who had experienced this terrible impression of being a target for numberless bullets, will never again attack a target in the D.R.V. In fact many planes had dropped bombs at random without daring to dive on set targets.

Shumaker, a pilot of the Seventh Fleet, once chosen as a cosmonaut, had certainly received an intensive training; at the last moment, when he was to risk his life, he could not say that he lacked training but only that he could not tell himself for whom and for what he was going to die. Facing the Shumakers and Dickasons were fighters of the Vietnam People's Army, well-trained too, but by far not so well armed. There were
also the people’s militiamen — those workers and peasants who had often trained with mock wooden rifles and now for the first time faced jets. However, they did not tremble; they remained with their eyes wide open staring at the planes pouncing on them. The nerves of barefooted young peasants proved steadier than those of the over-trained pilots of the U.S. navy.

— Angle... inclination... fire!
Standing on the edge of a trench, with a few camouflage twigs on his back, a man imperturbable in spite of the rockets and shells whizzing and exploding all around him, gave orders. From time to time, he shouted:

— Let us avenge our southern brothers!
— Let us avenge Nguyen Van Troi!
— Let us avenge our compatriots killed by the enemy in Quangbinh.

Sometimes, a low-flying plane roared past as if to rouse especial anger from his men, the officer shouted:

“That’s the very plane which has demolished the hospital. Don’t miss it!”

Gun reports followed one another in the midst of continuous small arms fire. Suddenly a plane came whirling down with a long trail of black smoke. A huge hurrah was heard. From all trenches, people emerged, jumping for joy, embracing each other, and clapping their hands. Those cries of joy were frequent enough.
for the planes facing our dense network of fire, showed themselves to be more vulnerable than Washington had thought. Some people could not refrain from darting out of their trenches to shout to their hearts’ content. But the battle went on. Officers and political cadres hurriedly called their men back and remained the only people to stay outside the trenches to keep watch.

Looking at many officers and political cadres thin and bespectacled one would think they were office clerks, not seasoned militarymen; among the people’s militia men, nothing distinguished them from peasants, neither their clothes nor their gestures, except perhaps a certain way of speaking in short and concise sentences: It was not the first time that these men went into the fire of battle, they had fought at Dienbienphu, or made guerilla war against the French troops for many years. Under their command twenty-year-old young men whose infancy and boyhood had been steeped in the “legends” of the Resistance were receiving their baptism of fire. They knew by heart the story of Phan Dinh Giot blocking up a loop-hole with his body to allow his comrades-in-arms to storm an enemy blockhouse, that of Be Van Dan resting the two-legged prop of his group’s automatic rifle on his shoulders for it to fire at attacking enemy troops.

The armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the regular troops and people’s militia men, are thus formed — the seniors having known many years of resistance, the juniors being heirs to a tradition of indomitable heroism. The latter have moreover seen land formerly belonging to landowners allotted to
their parents and have gone to school, a privilege unknown to their parents; they know, at least through stories told by their elders, the misdeeds and crimes of the feudalists and colonialists. They know that the feudalists driven away by land reform have fled to the South, and that there, the French colonialists have been replaced by even more ferocious ones, the Yankees.

For the last ten years, old and young have passionately followed the combat of their southern brothers. Millions of men are burning to meet their parents and friends in the South again; their hearts have quivered with pain and anger at the news of mass massacres, tortures, and savage crimes perpetrated by the Yankees and their lackeys. Day and night, hatred is brewing in their hearts, a wrath that "shall last for ever." To the "legends" of the anti-French Resistance are now added the epics of the liberation struggle of the South Vietnamese people. The Yankees, when murdering the patriot Nguyen Van Tröi, had thought that they could frighten the Vietnamese people, but they only fanned up new flames of hatred, and all the Vietnamese youth, from North to South, are fully acquainted with the least deeds and gestures of the young hero.

— Let's revenge our southern brothers!  
— Let's revenge Nguyen Van Tröi!

These words are enough to suppress all wavering and drive away this instinctive fear which urges man to flee and take shelter when a plane dives on him, spitting fire and death. When one knows that during World War II the Japanese command was obliged to chain Japanese antiaircraft gunners to their guns, one
understands that to deliberately face a plane which swoops down on you is not easy. This heroism has however become common among our people, for each Vietnamese fighter is aware of the amount of efforts that has gone into the building of these schools and hospitals for which he feels so much joy and pride. And here came the Yankee air pirates who want to reduce them to ashes! All Vietnamese fighters, whether they belong to the regular army or to the people’s militia, are aware of the sufferings endured by their southern brothers who are heroically fighting in South Vietnam.

Passing through the ranks of the armed groups during those days of February, we noticed the same spirit everywhere. They were all impatient to "get" their plane, not hiding their disappointment when the Yankee planes dived on other trenches. They explained to us their technique which was quite simple: as soon as the plane’s tail is no more visible and the plane looks like a big round spot, this means that it is diving on you. You then run the risk of receiving a big bomb or shower of rockets, but don’t shut your eyes, look at the enemy in the face, and press the trigger! You then have every chance of hitting him.

When asked the reason for this courage, they answered: “Facing the enemy’s firing squad Nguyen Van Troi had no weapons in his hands, he none the less tore off the bandage covering his eyes and looked the enemy in the face. It was the enemy who looked down. We at least have a weapon in our hands.”

On the afternoon of February 7, a unit of the security forces was on patrol not far from Donghoin town
when Yankee planes attacked the region. The men had only light weapons, and were on open ground. Neither a shelter nor a trench at hand. They rapidly took up position. The planes began to circle at low altitude, seeking out their prey. A prop was needed to point their automatic rifle at the sky, and even, a mobile prop to follow the planes in their evolutions. A young combatant quickly seized the automatic rifle and put its bipod on his shoulders. As the gunner hesitated, he shouted: “Fire on them! Quick! Let’s avenge our southern brothers! Let’s avenge Nguyen Van Troi! Le, a poor peasant, chairman of the Phuxa agricultural co-operative, was working that day at an hydraulic work with his comrades. When the alarm sounded, all scattered while the armed groups, taking their weapons which they had laid on the edge of the rice-fields, ran to their position. Suddenly the planes came down and flew very low; they had to jump out of the trench to pursue them. The automatic rifle of a group needed a prop, and Le offered his shoulders. On the single day of February 7, four combatants did like Le, following Be Van Dan’s example at Dienbienphu. Needless to say that their shoulders were scorched, and their ear-drums greatly suffered. But what a joy when they saw the wounded planes crash on the ground and explode, giving out a high column of black smoke.

On February 11, we were present at the combat in a village north of Donghoi, with a group of the local people’s forces. Shells and rockets ploughed the sand around the trench where the group stood. All of a sudden a bomb made a length of the trench cave in, and
some combatants were buried under; others quickly came to extricate them from under the debris and were happy to find them unhurt. And each immediately resumed his fighting position. When the incident was over, we heard a woman's voice calling from some distance away: “Hullo! the machine-gunner, it's good to keep your calm, but try to take a more accurate aim, aim straight at the enemy! Is everybody all right?” Someone answered her, in a teasing voice: “The man is all right, he still has all his limbs.” The woman who had called out was the group leader's wife. She had met the man who was to become her husband at the shooting range where both were having firing practice. Both were first-rate sharp-shooters. Now either of them was at the head of a self-defence unit. When one of them was shooting, the other watched and made remarks.

On February 8, when the alarm was given an anti-aircraft group saw two men come, panting. They had run a long way to reach the anti-aircraft battery and asked to serve. Being sailors on leave from their ship and unable to rejoin it they hastened to join the nearest artillery unit. They were admitted to the group, and served during the combat. The alarm over and the sailors gone, the gunners realized that the mariners had forgotten to give their names.

When the alarm was sounded Tung, the cook of an anti-aircraft group, obstinately asked to serve as a combatant. He was appointed ammunition carrier. And here he was, as nimble as a squirrel, running to and fro under the shelling, carrying munitions boxes heavier than he.
Thau was a liaison agent to the anti-aircraft group; a shell exploding nearby stopped all telephonic communication with the command. The group leader hesitated to expose a man for the repair. But hardly had he time to think over the matter when he heard Thau shout: “Comrade group leader, I’ll go!” Then the young man jumped out of the trench and went off to repair the wire.

Among the fighters as well as the unarmed people one witnessed thousands of examples of that calm courage. Mrs. Lan Huu, a teacher, was heading for the Hôxa infant school when the planes turned up. Children from 3 to 7 years old were going with her. Frightened, they ran in all directions; some rushed into the ricefields where they ran the risk of being drowned; others stood in the middle of the road staring at the planes. Bombs and rockets began to fall. One by one the young woman led twenty children to a shelter. A shell exploded nearby. Panic stricken, the children wanted to jump out of the trench. Mrs. Lan Huu succeeded however in quieting them. Eight bombs in all exploded near the group but owing to her calmness and authority the teacher managed to keep all the children in the shelter. The alarm over she immediately ran to her house to inquire after her children; she had thought of doing so right at the beginning of the alarm, but when seeing her pupils so dangerously exposed in the road, she made up her mind to stay with them.

Minh Sinh, a twenty-year-old girl, blushed red whenever a journalist put the least question to her. But on February 8 during the air attack on Hôxa she
stayed on at the telephone-exchange even after cracks had appeared on the ceiling of her room because of the explosions. Asked if the bombing had frightened her and if she had ever seen an American in her life, she said: "I have never seen an American, but I know that U.S. imperialism wants to put the letters of slavery back on us. Yes, I was frightened but I recovered myself when thinking of my southern brothers."

For fifty years, old Mrs. Suot had carried a considerable number of people across the Nhatle river in her sampan; it was in this way that many militants had been able to escape from the enemy's clutches during the anti-French resistance. Thin and wrinkled, she was still quite alert. During the February raids, under the bombing and shelling; she plied to and fro on the river, ensuring liaison for the groups of people's militiamen scattered on the banks. When we interviewed her, she pointed to her village, saying, "Formerly we had only tumble-down huts, but look at our village now! Can we let it be reduced to ashes without trying to defend it?" We then looked at Bac-ninh, a village clinging to the sand-hills, right in front of Donghol, and we visited it. A narrow stretch of sand no more than one kilometre across in its widest part. Nothing but sand. But man had hung to this sand, shrubs had grown, and for ten years...

The Party secretary of the village pointed to the belt of filaoes* bordering the sea, the new school, the tile-roofed brick houses scattered among the trees.

* A kind of pine-tree.
and made us visit a workshop where thirty girls were weaving fine fishing nets with golden silk threads. We did not fail to notice a pile of rifles in a corner of the workshop. "When the alarm is given," we are told, "each takes his rifle and runs to his fighting position, which has been fixed in advance."

"Here we have a double line of defence," the Party secretary explained to us, "one running along the sea shore to watch for pirate ships, another in the village to protect ourselves against the planes. During the alarms young boys and girls team up and watch for all dangers of fire or all suspects who may try to sneak into our village."

Along the banks of the Nhatle, junks were ready to put to sea. "You continue fishing in spite of enemy threats?" we asked. "Sure!" they answered. "Our men carry weapons with them, and are ready to repulse any attack. This month we have even overfulfilled the norm of the plan, and have decided to maintain this tempo. For some years already the government has been supplying rice to our village, and sending cadres to teach us to improve our techniques; we have set up co-operatives, and production has unceasingly risen. We cast our nets with one hand while clutching a rifle in the other."

Bacnhinh quietly works, but bristles with rifles when enemy air planes, or ships are signalled. So is Quangbinh-Vinhthinh and so is the whole of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a vast construction site where each applies himself to production work, but also an immense fortress, where any peaceful citizen can become a fierce fighter. We have crossed Hatinh,
Nghean, Thanhhoa... provinces, from the 17th parallel to the doors of Hanoi — everywhere it was the same spectacle. The ricefields are tended like gardens, smoke is pouring out of the chimneys, the construction sites are crowded with people; but everywhere trenches and shelters are ready, day and night armed men are on the lookout. The people’s war! Here the entire people are ready to fight against any enemy. On our long journey, we visited many a market, and took our meals in many an inn. Not a price had been raised, not even that of a banana. For our people are confident; they place confidence in their government, their Party, their friends all over the world. They know that no force in the world can rob them of their independence and liberty.

Armed with this confidence, they just go ahead with their work. Quangbinh, attacked three times in February, nevertheless announced the 20th of this month that 26,000 hectares had been planted with summer rice-plants — over 99 per cent of the norms of the plan and 5 per cent more than last year — that 11,600 hectares for dry crops had been planted with seeds, 5,000 hectares more than last year, and that 1,800 hectares are under industrial crops, three times more than in 1964.

While rice seedlings were being transplanted, the Lyhoa River was obstructed by a sand bank built up by sea-currents. Immediately 5,000 young people coming from several villages set about clearing the river bed so that the fields might not be flooded. Everywhere in the country, the same enthusiasm inspired the youth; in Hanoi 100,000 young people
pledged to carry out the three “readys” : ready to fight, ready to join the army and ready to go wherever the country requires them to.

Can we leave Vinh Linh without mentioning the Van-kieu, an ethnical group living on the Truongson Range, at the sources of the Benhai river? Up to 1955, they ate nothing but wild roots, covered their naked bodies with strips of bark, and lived in grottoes. Since the liberation, they have learnt to grow rice and maize, cover themselves with clothes, rear cattle and build houses. Every evening the adults would attend literacy classes and complementary education courses. The planes and commandos coming from the South have not spared their village of Huonglap which borders on the Laotian frontier; but here also, guns are kept ready and the people even more determined than anywhere else not to forgive the Yankee vultures.

On the pilot Dickson shot down on February 7, one found a square piece of cloth bearing the following words : “...Give me something to eat, take me to a safe place... the U.S. Government will reward you.” The peasants who had fished the airman’s body out of the sea burst out laughing when they read those lines : What! Is that all he would have told us, to beg for food and to promise dollars?

We found the words all the more comical since one of the wings of Shumaker’s plane bore an escutcheon with the inscription “Black Knights” and the image of a fierce-looking armour-clad warrior. These knights of the “free” world, these U.S. supermen thus could say nothing but ask for food! If ever one of our