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# THE TUNNELS OF CU CHI

## A Remarkable Story of War in Vietnam

TOM MANGOLD
AND JOHN PENYCATE

CASSELL

where he worked as a stockbroker, Jack Flowers ruminated on the end of his war. "Rat Six was dead. He died in some tunnel in the Iron Triangle. Batman had been right. Charlie didn't get me; I'd gotten myself."

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# VO THI MO—THE GIRL GUERRILLA

She has a small handsome face with perfect white teeth that miraculously survived the calcium deficiency of the tunnel diet. Her skin is silk-soft, its texture belying her thirty-eight years. The malaria has left a tendency to early fatigue, as if she were aware before others of the rising heat of the day. The other scars remain mercifully invisible beneath her simple blue cotton work suit—the leg wound, the scar on the chest (both the least and the most painful to a woman), and the bullet fragment embedded forever in the top of her right arm, like all shrapnel wounds, an aching reminder of temperature changes. She is a truly reluctant heroine who needs help remembering the names of her medals. She has killed many tunnel rats. Her name is Vo Thi Mo.

In fact, there is nothing new about Vietnamese heroines. They have long occupied a cherished place of honor in the nation's history. Trung Trac led the first major Vietnamese insurrection against the Chinese in 40 A.D., together with her sister, Trung Nhi, and a third titled lady, Phung Thi Chinh, who supposedly gave birth to a baby in the middle of the battle and continued with the infant strapped to her back. When the Chinese counterattacked two years later, the women committed suicide by drowning. Two centuries after that, an even more famous heroine, Trieu Au, a sort of Vietnamese Joan of Arc, also launched a revolt against the Chinese conquerors. Gloriously defeated, she too

killed herself at the age of twenty-three, implementing the by now traditional policy of death before surrender.

Vo Thi Mo was never forced to make the choice, but at the time she took to the tunnels of Cu Chi to fight the Americans, she was the inheritor of a uniquely Vietnamese feminist tradition, one of advanced emancipation by Asian or European standards. Vietnamese women can inherit land, share their husband's property, take charge of most financial matters relating to business and home, and of course, fight in war.

Even before the Americans came, the National Liberation Front created special women's associations, particularly in the safer Communist-dominated villages and hamlets—including naturally the fiercely nationalistic Cu Chi district. The women helped families whose sons had joined the regional forces. They took care of guerrillas who needed help, organized health education classes, and set up small maternity clinics and medical dispensaries. Others were carefully trained by the district party officials to proselytize uncommitted young men and even the ARVN troops.

One of the people credited with actually beginning the guerrilla war against the Saigon government, on 17 January 1960, was Nguyen Thi Dinh, a peasant woman from Ben Tre province. She was to become deputy commander in chief of the National Liberation Front's armed forces.

The elite members of the women's associations in Cu Chi became a fighting force in 1963. There was nothing very new about young women joining battle, fighting together with the men; what *was* original was the decision to create an exclusively female guerrilla fighting force. By 1965 a special company—C3—had been formed under the command of Tran Thi Gung. Her leadership was praised by her contemporaries as being bold, imaginative, and utterly ruthless. She died of illness in 1973, when a new female company commander, codenamed Trong, was appointed.

An early photograph shows two members of C3 posing rather rakishly in their uniforms—black pajamas, webbing belt, linen hat, and the distinctive black-and-white check scarf slung round the neck and tied with a huge knot. The rest of the equipment was VC standard issue, including Ho Chi Minh sandals and, in the early days, "Red Butt" K-44 carbine rifles.

Within a year of C3's formation, the women scored their first significant combat success by overwhelming the small ARVN guard post at Phu My Hung and killing the commander. The unit was so respected that it was offered, and accepted, training with a detachment of the Viet Cong's F-100 Special Forces group. By the time Vo Thi Mo had become a deputy platoon leader within C3, the women had learned, and applied with considerable enthusiasm, the techniques of small-unit infantry fighting, the use of sidearms and rifles, the application of hand-grenade throwing, the wiring and detonation of mines, and assassination.



Vo Thi Mo was hardly a surprise candidate for officer status in C3. Her father had been a Viet Minh and fought the French with an old World War II rifle, and when that simply fell apart, he fought them with bamboo spears. Resistance against foreigners who occupied their land was endemic in the Mo household; it grew with the maize and the peanuts in their smallholding. She had a sister and nine brothers, of whom the sixth, the eighth, and the ninth all died in the war against the Americans. She was fifteen and still helping with the housework when her home was obliterated by bombs at five in the morning of the first day of Operation Crimp. Her parents had been warned the day before of the impending American assault and had taken the precaution of getting up before dawn and taking themselves and their daughter into the tunnel shelter their home, like nearly every other home in the hamlet, possessed.

"It had been a prosperous area, there were many fruit trees, many cattle; life had not been easy but we had lived well enough by our honest endeavors. When the Americans came, they devastated the area. They bombed and shelled until ten in the morning, and then their troops landed at the Go Lap, An Phu, and Dat Thit plantations."

Reasonably safe inside the tunnel, the fifteen-year-old contemplated the destruction of her home, her family's land, their cows, their ancestral graves, and their way of life. All this was being done by a country of which she knew only one thing: its name. From where she crouched, there were no larger concepts than her own small and insignificant existence; the slow turning of the land's fruitful cycle. Even if she had believed the notion that the defense of the "free world" began here, and in this way, it would not have stopped the tears and the pain. It was no consolation that her father revealed a secret—their tunnel shelter was in fact connected with another tunnel and another, and they could make their way out of this hell, safely and silently, to a place where there was no death. It was no consolation that he told her that there were stores of cooked rice, rice mixed with sugar, and

clean water to drink. The fifteen-year-old's pain as her childhood was obliterated ended only when a sharper emotion enveloped her. The hatred of the American soldier that was born in the flames of her burning home grew into her bones. For many months it was a comfort, a pillow to the cheek, a reason to stay alive. Within a year, she would be leading other women—widows, the orphaned, the homeless—in a long and painful battle to regain their heritage. They would be based inside the tunnels of Cu Chi.

Ironically, it took a man to describe some of the hardships the women fighters faced while living in the tunnels. There is a strong sense of modesty among the Vietnamese, shared by both sexes, which runs to the point of prudery by Western standards. However, Major Nguyen Quot, who spent nearly a decade in the Cu Chi tunnels, explained that life inside for women was particularly hard and unpleasant. "Women who had their periods had considerable difficulty in keeping themselves clean. If there were water shortages, and that happened frequently, or if the women had to stay down because of the fighting above, then personal washing problems were very great. Women often sacrificed water for cooking, to wash their clothes, but then of course it was almost impossible to dry them underground, so they would wear damp clothes until body heat dried them. In the early days we did have toilets—the large jars—but as life became more arduous because of the bombing and shelling, the jars became a luxury. There were times of great personal hardship."

Vo Thi Mo found it possible in the early days to go above ground and wash in water-filled bomb craters during the predictable shelling lulls. Fortunately, the heavy field artillery from Cu Chi base and the batteries at Trung Hoa worked to a timetable. In 1966 there were still usable wells, although after a time, these were deliberately polluted by the enemy with bodies of dead animals. There were times when conditions for a woman inside the tunnels were so unpleasant that she considered herself lucky to be able, as a guerrilla, to leave the underground caverns to go up and fight. Sometimes it meant the chance of fresh water from inside the strategic hamlets, or as a treat some soap, or even a change of clothing.

Vo Thi Mo's first real battle took place at Xom Bung hamlet in the village of Cay Diep. She was already second in command of the village guerrilla platoon and was nominated at a meeting to lead an all-female hamlet guerrilla squad. A reconnaissance-in-force infantry unit from the 25th Infantry Division base at Cu Chi was advancing toward Bu



Lap hamlet. They were attacked by her platoon; a helicopter brought reinforcements and, following a short and inconclusive firefight, the Americans withdrew and Vo Thi Mo took her squad into a tunnel to rest while she kept guard above. Within a couple of hours she heard the ominous rumble of tanks, approaching from the Rach Son bridge. They were rolling down Road Number 15, which had already been carefully mined and booby-trapped with iron spikes and punji stakes. Vo Thi Mo brought her girls back up to prepare for the tank battle. It was a textbook guerrilla warfare confrontation. On the one side, a heavily armed M-48 medium tank—the mainstay of U.S. armor in Vietnam—versus a handful of teenaged guerrillas, carrying obsolete Red Butt K-44 carbines and a few hand grenades, fighting from a road mined with homemade explosives and spiked with bamboo traps.

"I saw the tank when it was about 500 meters away," explained Vo Thi Mo, "and I called my squad to their positions. The girls were very nervous and some had never seen such a huge tank, and so near, and coming nearer. The mine that blew it up had been planted by the hero To Van Duc (the man who invented the cane-pressure mine, which brought down helicopters). The tank stopped immediately, and was quite badly damaged. It stopped by a small hut where we had been staying. The enemy fired their guns fiercely while they tried to repair it. They worked on the tank from eleven until four in the afternoon, but they could not repair it. We had been firing our rifles at the Americans, but we hit no one."

The Americans sent a second tank to help the first, and it too hit a mine, which brought it shuddering to a halt. Vo Thi Mo's squad found themselves fighting both broken-down tanks from trench positions between them. When they ran out of magazines for their rifles, they hurled grenades at both tanks. Slowly, inch by inch, and only by using their massive self-defense machine guns and personal weapons, the Americans managed to repair one tank, inch it toward the other (which was too badly damaged for local repair), and eventually tow it away. It was, like most battles, one that produced no victors or losers, although the Americans might have drawn some early and ominous after-action conclusions from achieving only a standoff in a skirmish between two M-48s and a handful of girl guerrillas and one ten-year-old messenger boy.

The district committee was not enthusiastic about allowing units from the C3 female company to come into close contact or hand-to-hand fighting with the Americans. Curiously, the committee did not object

to the women's fighting the ARVN soldiers at close quarters, but generally they were persuaded away from the kind of combat that might lead to capture by the GIs. It was not a golden rule, it was effectively unspoken, but it was almost certainly based on cultural and racial prejudice rather than battle experience. Vo Thi Mo was consequently discouraged from fighting the American tunnel rats when they followed in hot pursuit during a battle. However, from what she saw, she was not always impressed by their performance. "Once after a battle we withdrew into the tunnel, went down into a lower level, moved along a bit and emerged to the upper level again. A tunnel rat was not far behind us. American people were big and could not get through all the trapdoors. This one got through to the lower level but when he came up again, he could not pass through the opening. I was with Uta, an old guerrilla, who is now dead. He was guarding the second trapdoor. When the American tried to pull himself through, he became stuck. The old man stabbed him and he died. We left him there."

In fact, deliberately luring tunnel rats to their deaths inside the holes was an early Viet Cong tactic and often involved a particularly unpleasant way of killing them. Two or three tunnel rats would be encouraged to proceed without hindrance down one level, as Vo Thi Mo has described. Even the Viet Cong could not predict the girth of the lead tunnel rat, but what was inevitable was that he would have considerable difficulty when trying to wriggle up through the narrow trapdoor that led back to ground level. He had to come up head first. There was no choice.

Originally, this one dreadful moment of weakness was exploited by the tunnel defenders by shooting the man as he emerged. But soon they refined a more practical technique. As the unfortunate point man cautiously put his arms and head through the hole, a guerrilla would wait with a sharpened bamboo or even an iron spear, which he would plunge through the GI's throat with tremendous two-handed force. The soldier remained impaled, his body wedged in the trapdoor, a grotesque human cork in a bottle, held in place by the spear resting on both sides of the shaft. The tunnel rats below could neither throw grenades up nor pull their dead point man back down. Their only option was to return the way they had come. Naturally, the Viet Cong had made appropriate plans for their perilous return journey.

Vo Thi Mo recalled the Americans' fury when their comrades died in this way. They would respond by hurling satchel charges or grenades down the tunnels, but of course this did not cause much structural damage. "When they used gas it was more of a problem for us," she explained, "but we started to isolate the gas by keeping specially shaped rubber-tree trunks in the tunnels and then using them as plugs in the narrowest part of the tunnel, to prevent gas passing through. It worked well and sealed the tunnel, but we did run out of rubber trees after the Americans began using Agent Orange to poison our land."



She stayed close to the Cu Chi base in the belt, and with her girls organized the first of the spy rings that riddled the 25th Infantry's base. Next she led sniper attacks on the GIs foolish enough to snatch midday dips in water-filled bomb craters, just outside the perimeter wire. Using the tunnels dug under the rice fields that flanked the Ben Muong bridge, Vo Thi Mo's girls were able to use spider holes only 500 meters away from the base. The GIs had to learn through bitter experience that swimming-hole trips, even just outside the wire, were potentially fatal.

Late in 1967, Vo Thi Mo was in charge of a twenty-four-woman platoon of guerrillas ordered to combine with a male VC company to attack a large ARVN military post at Thai My, to the west of Cu Chi town. Her platoon was part of the second strike force, which included a male platoon. She was also second in command of that force.

ARVN military posts in the Cu Chi district usually had short and exciting lives. In an area that remained unpacified throughout the war and was the center for Viet Cong activity near Saigon, it was difficult to maintain even a nominal government presence. The ARVN soldiers had long since reached an accommodation with their Communist countrymen to stay out of all tunnel activity—that dangerous chore was left mainly to the Americans. The South Vietnamese soldiers were poorly paid, they were for the most part draftees who had not been able to bribe their way out of service, and they were often commanded by corrupt officers. With a handful of heroic exceptions, the ARVN was an unreliable fighting force, the more so in Cu Chi, where it was perpetually surrounded by a hostile population. Not surprisingly, the Thai My military post was ringed by no less than eleven fences, four of which were barbed wire. The post had one perimeter guard post standing just inside the extensive wire protection, while several hundred yards from that stood the main ARVN HQ block, where the majority of the defenders had their fighting and sleeping positions. To attack the post successfully required either very heavy munitions, which the guerrillas did not then possess, or the deft use of what explosives they

had, together with the commando-style ability to scale those eleven fences.

The plan was for the attackers to make full use of the moonlight, poke DH-10 claymore mines through the wire barriers, and blast a path through the formidable protection and into the guard post as quickly as possible. When the assault began, the main group managed to explode their way through only five fences. Vo Thi Mo's girls had torn through a full nine when the assault ground to a halt. Several of the mines had been kept in the tunnels and had been ruined by damp and failed to detonate. The attack flopped. The entire plan was reset for the following month, to coincide with the best moonlight. And this time, because of her previous success, Vo Thi Mo was promoted to second in command of the primary assault group. It comprised two of her girls and one man. Each carried two DH-10 claymores, properly checked for damp this time. At first everything went successfully. All the mines exploded as planned, the group vaulted over tangled barbed wire, crawled over and under each new obstacle, blasted with explosives where the body couldn't go. Within five minutes they had reached the perimeter guard tower. So far, so good—except that Vo Thi Mo had left her trousers on the barbed wire. She stood somewhat awkwardly, carrying her new AK-47, wearing the black pajama top and briefs. But the fighting had to continue.

The perimeter guard tower put up little resistance, and Vo Thi Mo sent her messenger boy (the same ten-year-old she had used during the tank battle) to return through the wire to ask permission from the VC command outside to take the main post. Because Viet Cong guerrillas were subject to strong and disciplined central control, even in the very heat of battle, the messenger had to run through fire again and again to take action reports *to* the command, and new orders *from* the command back to the front. Vo Thi Mo was cleared to attack the main post and ordered to bring back prisoners if possible. As she fought her way as far as the ARVN HQ, she found two soldiers hiding in an underground shelter. She ordered them to surrender, which they did, and as she reached for the electric wire in her pocket to tie their hands together, she realized she had no trousers and no wire. The ARVN prisoners simply gaped at the unusual battle dress of this extremely attractive seventeen-year-old.

It was at this moment that a rather illogical thought seized her. She became obsessed with tying her prisoners up. Normally, she would have used the black-and-white scarf that she wore, but she had discarded it for this raid because the white squares would show up in the moonlight. The luckless messenger boy was again instructed to pick his way through the narrow path blown through the eleven fences and ask command for a couple of scarves.



But by now, the main ARVN guard post had begun a counterattack. Vo Thi Mo was momentarily frozen with two prisoners. One tried to escape and she shot him on the spot, the other took the force of a hand grenade thrown by one of his own comrades from the tower. Vo Thi Mo looked round and saw that the second strike unit was still having problems reaching the ARVN HQ, too. For several dangerous minutes the Viet Cong attackers were pinned down. Then the boy messenger returned, without the scarf, but with the order to retreat. She took her badly wounded prisoner back through the wire and returned safely to her own base. The operation, in which several ARVN soldiers were killed—the remainder were subsequently evacuated to Phuoc Hiep—was regarded (with little real justification) as an unqualified success.

Shortly after this attack, the Communists began their Tet offensive of 1968. Vo Thi Mo was wounded during Tet and while in the hospital received a personal telegram from Mme Nguyen Thi Binh (who was then a member of the Central Committee of the NLF), announcing the award of the Victory Medal Class Three (the highest class) to the entire female platoon, specifically for its conduct during the two assaults on Thai My.

In the two years that she fought with all-female C3 company, Vo Thi Mo's hatred for the Americans grew. She was once in a tunnel when a direct bomb strike killed a pregnant woman who was within days of delivery, and another who was breastfeeding her child at the time of the strike. "The first time I killed an American, I felt enthusiasm and more hatred. I thought I would like to kill all the Americans to see my country peaceful again. Many people in my village were killed by bombs and shells. In one shelter, over ten of my friends were killed by napalm bombs. You know how napalm burns. When we pulled the bodies out, they had only burned and crooked limbs. These battles kindled my hatred. I did not think of myself, I did not think of the hardship. The Americans considered the Vietnamese animals; they wanted to exterminate us all and destroy everything we had."

It is in the light of this emotion that her last Cu Chi action remains a paradox, unless one can hold to the comforting view that a woman's innate compassion and tenderness may overcome even her blind hatred. In a curious incident that might not have taken place had the protagon-

ist been a man, Vo Thi Mo, the American-killer, ended her military service in Cu Chi.

The action took place at Cay Diep later that year. There had been a series of battles with the Americans at two different locations. The women's platoon was temporarily integrated with a larger mixed Viet Cong company. During the first encounter with the U.S. infantry patrols, the Communists had suffered sufficient casualties to be forced to withdraw to a rear tunnel base. As usual, Vo Thi Mo allowed her platoon to go below for water and rest while she maintained guard at the spider hole. With her was her faithful messenger boy. She had been there only about twenty minutes when two GIs walked straight out of the undergrowth and sat down just ten meters away from her rifle muzzle. A few minutes later they were joined by a third. Vo Thi Mo could hardly believe her good fortune. The men were unprotected, seemed to have sprung from nowhere, had taken not the slightest defensive measure, and were now sitting targets in front of her heavily camouflaged spider hole. It would take just three bullets and the Americans wouldn't even be able to reach for their M-16s, carelessly flung by their knees. She tightened her grip on the AK-47; she was already lying down, spread-eagled. All she had to do now was hold her breath and squeeze the trigger.

The three Americans sat in a small triangle. They took out some letters and photographs and showed the photographs to each other. Vo Thi Mo, consumed with curiosity at this first human action she had ever observed of the enemy, held her fire. The men read the letters to themselves and then to each other. She watched, transfixed. What they were doing was what soldiers everywhere do. Having sentenced them to death, she was inclined to give the victims a few more seconds alone with their thoughts of their loved ones. Her small guerrilla companion looked sideways at her and raised an eyebrow.

The Americans took out some cookies and sweets. They talked to each other, and ate. Then after a while they began to cry. One took his handkerchief and wiped the other's eyes, then his own. Vo Thi Mo remained baffled. Were these three really sadistic killers, pillagers of the land? Or were they unwilling conscripts forced to come to Vietnam, now broken men, missing their loved ones, yearning only to return home? For the first time since she had watched her home destroyed by American bombs, Vo Thi Mo allowed a grain of doubt to enter her mind. What she was a silent witness to was so remarkable and so eloquent that language was not necessary.



At that time, the Front had decreed that anyone who killed three Americans would automatically receive the Military Victory Medal Class One (for six, you earned a Class Two, and for nine Americans killed, you would receive a treasured Class Three—body counts were not uniquely American). She was a finger squeeze away from the award.

After the three had wept for some time, the GIs tore up the letters and photographs and put the remaining food with them in a small heap in the center of the triangle. The messenger boy, who was also armed with a Red Butt rifle, quietly lifted his weapon in an obvious move. Vo Thi Mo placed her hand on his arm and shook her head. The moment had long since passed. The line between duty and murder had been crossed. She understood that. Whatever she felt, it was something that neither the Front nor her own training could suppress. No amount of hatred could lead her to destroy these three young men, only a little older than she, who cried in secret just like the Vietnamese. When the three got up, she let them walk away.

There was a short party inquest. The messenger boy was ordered to give evidence, but he loved Vo Thi Mo and spoke only for her. The district headquarters political commissar was angry but listened carefully to her explanation. Whatever he may have felt as he heard this seventeen-year-old girl explaining why she had pardoned the three GIs, he suspended judgment, pending an on-the-spot investigation. In all solemnity, a small political team, together with the girl and the little messenger boy, returned to the place outside the spider hole. In the dirt, just as Vo Thi Mo had explained, they found the letters and the torn photographs and the sweets and cookies. They were as baffled as she had been. There was no formal verdict. Suddenly, the Communists started laughing and teasing. In a good-natured way, they jeered: "You have become kind and human to the Americans. The American killer has become the American lover." It was the end of the matter.

There is no logical explanation for this strange behavior by the three Americans. The letters and photographs may have belonged to comrades killed during earlier fights that day, or they may have been from their own families. There is one possible answer. As American infantry losses rose during the war, more and more American troops, when sent out on patrols, sweeps, or search-and-destroy missions, began to develop their own special kind of search-and-avoid tactics. They would leave base, strike off on their own into the jungle, find a secure area, and simply goof off for the time allotted to their mission.

Sometimes they established their own perimeter security, and then they would sleep, write letters, smoke, eat their rations, and let the hours pass. They would then pack up and return to base, reporting negative contact with the enemy. Vo Thi Mo's description of their behavior could also suggest that the three soldiers had been smoking marijuana, which was widely used by GIs, even in the field. The symptoms of smoking are excessive emotional reactions, including laughing or crying, and sudden food cravings. Some of the more sophisticated search-and-avoid missions involved taking unregistered previously captured Viet Cong weapons and turning them in as evidence of an engagement with the enemy. If it was indeed such a mission that Vo Thi Mo refused to fire at, then it was, if nothing else, a small victory for natural justice.

Vo Thi Mo stayed with the C3 Women's Company until the end of the war. Just one year earlier she had married an irrigation engineer in a simple party ceremony in a forest near the Cambodian border. After the war she returned to Cu Chi. Miraculously, both her parents had survived. All three went to the site of their ancestral home. There were so many bomb craters, and still are, that it was impossible to reconstruct a house there, and will remain so. Reluctantly, a new family home was taken in Tay Ninh, where Vo Thi Mo's husband now works. They have three sons and one daughter.

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# TUNNEL RAT SQUAD

By 1969, as far as the Big Red One was concerned, tunnel rat strategy had been honed down to a sharp edge. The old days of on-the-job training and the vagaries of combat experience were giving way to organization and professionalism. There was real divisional enthusiasm and support for the tunnel rats of the engineer battalion that had taken over responsibility for the job from the original chemical detachment.

At the Cu Chi base of the 25th Infantry Division, tunnel rats were less organized. They were still drawn from the infantry platoons who could be expected to discover tunnels, or from the 65th Engineer Battalion, who had a broader responsibility for destroying the Viet Cong tunnels. Their approach included the use of Rome plows (used extensively during the Cedar Falls operation) to tear up the earth above tunnel complexes, a tactic that lacked the finesse of the small, mobile, and trained tunnel rat squad. The 25th Infantry's Operation Kole Kole, which ran from May until December of 1967, found 577 tunnels, but the copious after-action reports scarcely mention tunnel rats. Unlike the Big Red One, farther north across the Saigon River at Lai Khe, the 25th Infantry did not give priority to detecting and destroying the tunnels. General Fred Weyand, who commanded the division when it first arrived, did not feel unduly concerned about their existence. "They were there, they'd always been used by these people