Return to The Roots

Nguyễn Tài

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Preface

For a long time now, my friends have told me that I should record the stories of my life. I often replied that there was nothing out of ordinary. As for police matters, there are specialized agencies in charge of that. As for other matters worth mentioning, it wasn't yet the time to bring many of them up.

Yet, they kept urging me to write: even without any plan to publish, it could at least be for my family and loved ones.

On December 11, 1996, I had just crossed the "cổ lai hy" milestone–seventy years of age. So, at the start of 1997, I decided to compile this volume, *Back to the Roots*.

Back to the Roots is a collection of thirty short memoirs, arranged chronologically. They tell of my beloved family, the leaders who nurtured my growth, the friends who shared hardships with me, and the people across Vietnam who sheltered and helped me through the wars. Many have since passed on; to them I offer my deepest, most affectionate respect.

Spring of Đinh Sửu (1997)
Nguyễn Tài
(Tư Trọng)

1. My father Nguyễn Công Hoan, his children and students

Around 1930, I was still just a child. After graduating from the Hanoi College of Pedagogy, my father began his life as a schoolteacher—what we jokingly call "gõ đầu trẻ"[3]. His first post was at the Hải Dương town elementary school. Later he moved to Nam Sách district in the same province.

To mark the occasion, he even wrote a short story titled *GODAUTRE* in French style. A few years later, he wrote another story for children, *Tấm Lòng Vàng ("A Golden Heart")*. Although written as fiction, it was in fact based on a true incident from those years in Nam Sách—an incident in which my parents themselves were directly involved.

According to the civil service regulations of that time, every government employee had to spend a few years working in the highlands. So after his years in Nam Sách, my father was assigned to Lào Cai, where he taught at the town school. My mother and the children, however, remained in Hải Dương.

Perhaps because he was lonely living by himself, for a time my father brought me up to Lào Cai. During the day, while he was teaching, I would play with Chồ, the son of the school handyman.

Our house stood next to the railway, with only a thin concrete fence. What I loved most was watching, every morning, a few men running alongside a small rail trolley. Once it gathered speed, they would leap onto it and ride a long stretch down the tracks. (Only later did I understand that they worked for the railway service, responsible for inspecting the line and reporting any damage in need of repair.)

When I was in Lào Cai, my father sometimes took me out with him. Years later, when I was grown and read the short stories he published in the column *Xã Hội Ba Đào Ký ("Turbulent Society")* of the journal An Nam, I recognized in them the scenes of the gambling houses in Cốc Lếu– places I had passed by as a child, though at the time I hadn't understood what they were.

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Around 1933, my father was transferred from Lào Cai to teach at the Kiêm Bị school of Kinh Môn district, Hải Dương province. Every Sunday he would return to Hải Dương town to be with the family, since Kinh Môn was only about twenty kilometers away.

When I was still a child living in Hải Dương, my father once took me back with him to Kinh Môn. My grandaunt Đúng, my grandmother's younger sister, also lived there, in a neighborhood along a hillside street lined with small shops. One day my father brought me to visit her by bicycle. Our house stood at the foot of the slope.

On the way back, as we rode downhill, the bicycle brake suddenly snapped. We went hurtling straight ahead and crashed into the wall of a house at the bottom. Both of us were thrown to the ground. I landed face down, unconscious, with my stomach slammed against a big stone, leaving a swollen lump. I was rushed to the district hospital, which stood on a hill near the school.

When I woke, I found myself still lying on the hospital table. My father, too, had been injured: the broken brake lever had cut into his thumb, bleeding heavily until they bandaged it.

* * *

A few years later, my mother and the children all moved to Kinh Môn to live with my father. Besides the three of us siblings, there were also Uncle Bông (later called Thành), Thụ (my cousin's son), and Các

[3]Literally "knocking on children's heads," a Vietnamese slang.

(my mother's younger cousin). All of us stayed together and went to the same district school in Kinh Môn.

The school had only three classrooms. The beginner class, for seven-year-olds, was taught by thầy[4] Khản in the last room. The next class up, the preparatory class for eight-year-olds, was taught by thầy Đản in the middle room. My father taught the three higher grades in the first room. I myself was placed in the preparatory class with thầy Đản, since I had missed the beginner class because of a bout of smallpox when I first started school. As a result, I struggled with my studies. Even so, at the end of the year I was promoted to the next level, Elementary, though I was still behind.

I was worst at mathematics and dreaded it most —who could have guessed that years later, by the time I reached middle school (what would now be high school), I would end up among the best in math!

When I sat for the Sơ học yếu lược exam—the certificate awarded after three years of primary school—my father was away, grading papers elsewhere. During the exam at the Kinh Môn school, I remember people gathering outside the classroom windows, opening their black umbrellas and writing out the solutions in chalk on the fabric for their children and nephews to copy inside.

The proctor in my room, a friend of my father's from another school, went even further: he wrote the full set of answers on a sheet of paper and quietly told me to copy it down onto my exam. That year, I ended up ranking first in the district on the Sơ học yếu lược exam. The whole family laughed about it.

* * *

At the Kinh Môn school, there were many lively moments.

* * *

One time, before we had moved there permanently, my father brought my elder brother and me to the school to play; we even sat in on a class. While we were sitting quietly, my father assigned my brother Tài Khoái (my elder brother, who later died in 1947) to learn by heart the poem *Vợ Chồng Người Bán Than Trên Núi (The Charcoal Sellers on the Mountain)* by Tản Đà. Near the end of class, my father called on Khoái to recite. He stood and delivered the whole poem flawlessly from memory— while many of the pupils, despite repeatedly studying it, still could not.

The school stood on the hillside. In the afternoons, after class, it was time for physical exercise: each group of students followed their thầy up to the hilltop, which was level enough for drills. During recess, or after the exercises, we often took leaves of wild pandan, big enough for several children to sit on, and slid down the grassy slope like a sled. At that time we did not yet know that in cold countries people had real snow sleds.

The hill was high and windy, perfect for flying kites. The only trouble came when a string snapped and we had to chase the kite across one hill to another— down a slope, up another, tiring work, though as children we thought only of the fun, never the effort. The real nuisance was the sharp burrs in the grass, which clung all over our clothes and took ages to pick off at home, making it impossible to hide from our parents.

* * *

At the foot of the school hill grew a tall silk-cotton tree, blazing red when in bloom. When the flowers withered and fell, they gave off a foul smell. Its fluffy white cotton, however, was waterproof; we tossed

[4]Thầy: Vietnamese term for teacher, used with respect, similar to "master" or "sir."

it from the hillside and watched it drift through the air, a delight for children. During recess, the older pupils often competed to hurl stones at the tree to see who could strike it.

In Kinh Môn town, there was at that time a half-French customs officer. He carried a hunting rifle on his shoulder as he patrolled for contraband alcohol, often passing by the school. One day, as he walked past, the older pupils were throwing stones at the silk-cotton tree. By chance, one stone missed and struck him instead. Furious, he tried to chase down the culprit. The students taunted him, shouting in broken French and Vietnamese, "Le Français porte le cái bắp cầy!"—"The Frenchman carries a corn cob!"— mocking his rifle by comparing it to a cob of corn, an insult that revealed their resentment toward the French.

This only enraged him further. He soon learned that the stone-thrower was Mạc Văn Chục, a pupil in my father's class. Chục's family lived far from the school, on the road to Phú Thái station, so he cycled back and forth every day. The officer lay in wait for him at a crossroads with his gun, intending to shoot. Poor Chục was so frightened he did not dare return home that evening. Only after my father intervened did the man give up his attempt at revenge.

* * *

When I was a delegate for Hải Hưng province in the Eighth National Assembly, there was one time in 1990 when I returned to meet voters in Kim Môn district (Kim Thành district had by then been merged with Kinh Môn). As a child, I had thought the old three-room school on the hillside was enormous. On that visit, I saw only a small house still standing where the old school had been. I could not tell whether the original building had been torn down and rebuilt, or if that little house was in fact the very same school from 1933 or 1934. That day I asked around, but no one could give me an answer.

* * *

In 1936, my father was transferred to teach in Nam Định city, at the Jules Ferry School—also known as the Cửa Bắc School. He taught the second-year secondary class. There were three such classes: one taught by Vũ Văn Ninh, whom the pupils called "Ninh the Hunchback"; one taught by Nguyễn Tảo, nicknamed "Tảo the Short"; and one by my father.

In our household there were, as before, several cousins and siblings studying together, just as we had in Kinh Môn. But unlike in the district town, Nam Định city had a cinema. My father set a rule: according to each child's monthly class ranking, whoever kept or improved their standing would earn a ticket to the movies; whoever slipped in rank would get no ticket. Looking back, it was a simple way of encouraging competition within the family.

One month, some of the cousins and brothers did not earn tickets. But that month the cinema was showing a Charlie Chaplin film—too good to miss. Knowing how fond my father was of me, everyone conspired and asked me to speak to him, to let all of us go see Chaplin this time. Those who had lost their ticket this month would promise, even if they won one the next month, not to go. My father agreed, and in the end everyone was happy.

One year, during the Easter school holiday, my father took my brother and me to visit the historic sites of Lê Lợi in Thanh Hóa. My brother, who had a gift for drawing, sketched many views of Lam Sơn in pencil. On the way back we stopped in Ninh Bình town to visit Non Nước Pagoda. There we saw the footprint of a mandarin, carved deep into the surface of a stone. My father told us the story of that footprint and cursed roundly the arrogance of the official who had it made.

* * *

When I moved up from the first-year secondary class to the second year, I entered my father's class.

In those days, each school year had several rounds of exams. That day, the test was on memorized lessons. The name of every pupil in the class was written on a small slip of paper, folded into quarters. Whoever went up to recite would finish, then draw a slip and read aloud the name written on it. The student whose name was called would then step up to the board for their turn. Next, they would draw another slip with the title of a lesson written on it, and had to recite that lesson on the spot.

Schoolchildren, of course, are always mischievous.

That day, I don't recall exactly what encouragement from my friends led me to it. My real name was Nguyễn Tài Đông, but when it came time to write our names on those folded slips, I mischievously wrote it in reverse wordplay, turning it into "Đỗng Tài Nguyên." Then I tossed it in with the rest for the draw.

During class, the exam began. After a few pupils had recited, one drew a slip and called out: "Nguyên!" The whole class froze in confusion—there had never been anyone named Nguyên in our class. I, of course, knew at once. I stood up and started toward the board, giving a wink to the boy who had drawn the slip. But he didn't understand, and kept holding up the paper, calling again and again: "Nguyên! Nguyên!"

That drew my father's attention. He took the slip to have a look. By then I had reached the blackboard and drawn for my lesson. I launched straight into recitation, and the class, hearing me read smoothly from memory, was certain I would be marked highly, as had the others who recited well.

But when it came time to grade, my father gave me a big "egg"—a round zero. The reason: my prank of twisting my name into wordplay.

Hà Nội, June 26, 1996

2. A request to eat fish

Speaking of Sài Gòn, my mother often recalled one story.

In 1936 our family was living in Nam Định. My father was teaching at Cửa Bắc School (Jules Ferry), and also writing. His book *Kép Tư Bền* had sparked a lively literary debate at the time.

When the school had a three-month summer vacation, friends in the South invited him to visit. My father made a trip through the provinces of Central and Southern Vietnam. Wherever he went, he sent letters or photographs home.

Passing through Huế, he had to set aside nearly half a day to sign his books as keepsakes for readers there.

After visiting many provinces in Cochinchina[5] (as it was then called), my father went over to Cambodia–then called "Cao Miên"– to see an old friend, Đào Trọng Đủ. In his letters home from that leg of the trip, he wrote that after touring the palaces of Angkor, he went on an excursion to Koh Kong[6], a small island on the border of Cambodia and Siam. He also wrote ahead to say he would return to Nam Định by the express train from Saigon.

One day, the "wire-house"[7] delivered a telegram from my father: It gave the exact date he would arrive back in Nam Định, and—most unusually— asked my mother to have fish ready for him the day he returned.

My mother couldn't make sense of it. Had he gone so long without eating fish that he had to telegraph about it? Or was some friend from the South coming back with him who especially liked fish?

Still, knowing my father loved *Canh nấu dấm*[8], she went to Rồng Market in front of our house, bought a big fish, fried part of it, and with the rest made a delicious pot of sour soup.

By noon, my father knocked at the door. Before he even put down his luggage or washed his face, he asked: "Where's the fish?"

My mother was puzzled—no friends had come home with him. "What fish dish is this for?" she asked.

My father held out his hand. In it was a small bamboo cage, and inside, an adorable kitten.

"For this Siamese cat!" he said. "A genuine Siamese.[9] It was brought back from Koh Kong!"

The whole family burst out laughing, delighted by my father's playful, mischievous streak.

Hà Nội, August 23, 1996

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[5] Name used under French colonial administration for southern Vietnam.

[6] Cambodian island that used to belong to Thailand.

[7] Old Vietnamese phrase for the Post & Telegraph office.

[8] *Canh cá nấu dấm*: a Vietnamese fish soup with vinegar or souring agents.

[9] *Mèo Xiêm*: Siamese cat breed, historically associated with Siam (Thailand).

3. Where are the *rươi*[10]?

Perhaps it's the same in any family: when the head of a household has a favorite dish, everyone else tends to pick up the habit—and the taste.

I don't know from which generation, but in our Nguyễn clan certain foods have been handed down from long ago to my father's time, and then to ours.

Every year the family must make *mắm tôm chua*[11] and *mắm rươi*[12].

"Sour, spicy, salty, astringent, with pork belly" pretty much sums up the prep for *mắm tôm chua.*

But *mắm rươi* is indescribable. Not to mention the making of the paste itself— you first have to buy the *rươi* in season: "the twentieth of the ninth month, the fifth of the tenth" on the lunar calendar each year. Nor are we even talking yet about eating it raw as relish, or steamed into a custard— and if you steam it, you must do it right. Just the fresh-herb platter alone already runs to many kinds: cabbage, mustard greens, celery, chrysanthemum greens[13], aromatic herbs, mandarin peel, slivered scallion, and ginger. Of course, you still need pork belly. Skip any of these and the flavor falls short.

From before the August Revolution[14] my father had already loved these two kinds of *mắm.* At ordinary meals he didn't drink, but whenever there was *mắm*, he insisted on a few cups of rice liquor.

On *mắm* days the family lingered at the table longer than usual, yet we always finished before my father. He took his time, and at the very end he would inevitably haul out the whole lot of colonial officials–French and Vietnamese–and give them a thorough scolding to conclude the meal. By that sequence we could always tell whether his *mắm* meal was nearing its end.

Still, perhaps because the family didn't drink, it felt almost like eating alone; so he never seemed as happy as when close friends came to share the *mắm.*

Of course, with friends present there could be no end-of-meal tirade against the officials.

After 1954, now and then he would invite literary friends— Tú Mỡ, Nguyên Hồng, Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Hoàng Trung Thông, and others—to the house to drink and eat *mắm.* Once, after the meal, they all lay down for a nap, woke refreshed, then said their goodbyes, each heading home. Truly, those were cheerful meals and drinks together.

* * *

Back in Nam Định, around 1937, one afternoon my father told my mother: a friend from faraway Sài Gòn had just arrived and would join us for dinner. Asked if he could eat *mắm rươi*, the friend said yes; so serving our family's traditional dish would be just the thing.

With the late notice, my mother hurried to Rồng Market to buy provisions—assorted herbs and pork belly— so the *mắm rươi* could be ready in time to welcome the guest.

By dusk my father's Saigon friend arrived. They ate and drank for a little over an hour— the meal nearly done, it seemed.

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[10] *Rươi*: seasonal tidal ragworms used as a Northern Vietnamese delicacy.
[11] *Mắm tôm chua*: a Huế-style fermented shrimp relish, pleasantly sour, spicy, and aromatic.
[12] *Mắm rươi*: a fermented paste made from *rươi.*
[13] *Rau cải cúc* (also called *tần ô* or garland chrysanthemum/shungiku).
[14] The 1945 August Revolution in Vietnam.

Suddenly the whole house heard the Saigon friend call out loudly: “Where are the *rươi*?”

Everyone burst into smiles, though no one dared laugh aloud.

Because the *mắm rươi* was already on the tray. My father’s friend from Sài Gòn had followed every step just as my father did: adding the condiments and *mắm rươi* properly to his bowl; and he had enjoyed the *mắm rươi* from start to finish.

And yet here he was asking, “Where are the *rươi*?”

It turned out he had thought *mắm rươi* meant there was still another dish yet to be served!

A hearty laugh was had by all.

Hà Nội, August 22, 1996

4. The Hardships of Schoolteacher–Writer Nguyễn Công Hoan

Speaking of the difficulties the French colonial authorities caused my father, many people may only know the episode of his novel *Bước Đường Cùng ("The Dead End")* being banned in 1938.

In fact, the story cannot be understood correctly if one isolates it to that single incident. While he was teaching in Nam Định, my father was "punished" by the colonial administration and reassigned to teach in the village of Trà Cổ, Hải Ninh Province[15] that meant being sent "up-river" a second time—contrary to the civil–service rules of that era–the first time having been Lào Cai.

This happened before the banning of *Bước Đường Cùng*.

* * *

In 1936, when the Popular Front[16] came to power in France and political prisoners in Việt Nam were granted amnesty, my father was teaching at Cửa Bắc School in the city of Nam Định.

Our family lived on Paul Doumer Street[17] facing Rồng Market. At that time my uncle Nguyễn Công Bông and my elder brother Nguyễn Tài Khoái were studying in Nam Định in the same class as Phạm Văn Cương (Nguyễn Cơ Thạch) and Phan Đình Đống (Mai Chí Thọ).

Thus I learned that Đống's elder brother, named Phan Đình Khải, a political prisoner from Côn Lôn[18] had just been released and was living right in Nam Định. Later, Khải took the name Lê Đức Thọ.

I saw Phan Đình Khải come to visit my father. But unlike other guests who usually sat in the living room, the two of them would each time carry chairs out to the balcony to talk.

Only later did I understand: it was so that Khải could watch whether any secret police were tailing him.

That connection with Phan Đình Khải at the time was one of the factors that led my father to write *Bước Đường Cùng*.

* * *

Many have said that my father was "transferred" to Trà Cổ by the French because *Bước Đường Cùng* was banned. In truth, the decision to send him to Trà Cổ had already been made before he wrote *Bước Đường Cùng*. The deeper cause was that the French colonial authorities had begun to sense "a problem"—something they had just detected and deemed worthy of close attention.

* * *

In the early 1930s, when I was only four or five, I sometimes heard the family mention my fourth uncle, who had left home and vanished.

Some said that back in our village he often shut himself in his room to study hypnosis. After he disappeared, an acquaintance in the village reported having glimpsed on a train to Sài Gòn someone who looked like him–but in a flash he was gone.

Only when Phan Đình Khải was released from prison and returned to Nam Định did he tell my father news of my fourth uncle.

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[15] Hải Ninh was an old province in northeastern Vietnam; today its area largely belongs to Quảng Ninh.

[16] The French government formed in 1936 under Léon Blum.

[17] Now Trần Hưng Đạo Street in Nam Định.

[18] Côn Lôn/Côn Lôn đảo: today Côn Đảo archipelago, used by the French as a penal colony.

Arrested in Sài Gòn, my uncle gave only the name Phạm Văn Khương, and said his family had all died. (Later I came to understand this name: my grandfather was Nguyễn Đạo Khang; Khương is how Khang is pronounced in the Southern accent—easy to remember and an expression of affection for his family.)

My uncle was sentenced to death by a colonial court for "communism and sedition." Like Phạm Hùng, though in a different case (the Nhà Bè affair).

Later, after denunciations in the book *Indochine SOS*[19] by the female communist journalist André Viollis, and intervention by the Red International, both Phạm Hùng and my uncle had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment, and were exiled to Côn Lôn.

Khải told us this that at Côn Lôn, when mail arrived, other inmates would cheer, "Ah! I've got a letter!" But my uncle–counted as having no surviving family–never received any. So once, just for a bit of fun, on mail day he suddenly cried out, "Ah! I don't have a letter!" Hearing only the shout, friends rushed over, thinking he'd finally heard from home, only to catch the punch line.

According to Khải, by that point it was no longer necessary to hide my uncle's identity, so he finally let our family know.

* * *

Under the new policy of the French authorities, and with Khải's guidance, our family was thereafter able to send letters to my uncle. Using the name Phạm Văn Khương, my father noted his prisoner number and the outside holding jail associated with Côn Lôn on the underside of a stone frog used as a paperweight.

Also likely following Khải's advice, our family roasted bran and mixed it with molasses sending parcels to Côn Lôn many times to help prisoners suffering from beriberi[20].

Weeklies and monthlies could be sent, but daily newspapers were not allowed. Money could be sent as well, but the prison authorities held it in custody, disbursing it to inmates little by little.

Sometimes our family did receive letters from Côn Lôn. "Letters," in truth, were only a preprinted slip with a few blank lines, just enough for the prisoner to fill in the recipient's address, report on his health, and add a few words of greeting to the family.

* * *

It was likely from that point that the French authorities realized that the prisoner whose death sentence had been commuted to life, known only by his own statement as Phạm Văn Khương with "no surviving family," was in fact the younger brother of the schoolteacher–writer Nguyễn Công Hoan.

His real name was Nguyễn Công Miều Later, after August 1945, he used the name Lê Văn Lương.

Which is to say that schoolteacher–writer Nguyễn Công Hoan had a younger brother, a "die-hard communist," then imprisoned on Côn Lôn.

What's more, former Côn Lôn political prisoner Phan Đình Khải, residing in the city of Nam Định, had visited our house many times.

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[19] *Indochine SOS* (1935), reportage by French journalist André Viollis exposing brutal abuses in French Indochina.

[20] Beriberi: disease caused by Vitamin B1 deficiency.

And on top of that, schoolteacher–writer Nguyễn Công Hoan had just joined the French Socialist Party, Indochina branch, in Nam Định, and had attended the May 1 rally, the first to be held publicly at Hà Nội's Exhibition Grounds.

Therefore, this person must be watched, and handled with caution.

In my view, the foregoing story was the true, underlying reason that the French colonial administration in Indochina resolved to "punish" my father—both in his life as a writer and as a teacher.

* * *

Thus the French colonial authorities forcing my father to go "up-river" a second time—against the civil-service rules of the day—was not the end of it.

After a year in Trà Cổ, they "transferred" him again, this time to teach in the town of Thái Bình.

In his very first year there, French secret police searched our house and arrested him that same afternoon. They had found and seized a book, *Stalin, the Man of Steel*, which they claimed was banned. He was released pending trial so he could keep teaching in Thái Bình, but he was simply waiting for his day in court.

The French secret police expected the Native Court in Thái Bình to convene and sentence my father to prison.

Then something no one foresaw: back during the Popular Front period, guided by Phan Đình Khải, my father had joined the French Socialist Party, Indochina branch, in Nam Định. Several French schoolteachers there also belonged to the Socialist Party; they were "Socialist comrades" with my father.

They met him and learned that his birth was registered in Hà Nội. By law at the time, anyone born in Hà Nội could not be tried in the Native Court; he had to be tried by the French Court, which sat only in Hà Nội and Nam Định.

They then discovered that the "banned" book was merely a Trotskyist[21] publication attacking Stalin, and in fact was being sold openly in bookshops—therefore not a banned book at all.

They went directly to the presiding judge of the French Court in Nam Định to intervene. As a result, the French Court there declared my father not guilty.

The French secret police in Thái Bình suffered an unexpected defeat. But they never took their eyes off our family.

* * *

After the August Revolution of 1945, my father was appointed Director of the Censorship Office for the North in Hà Nội, under the Ministry of Information and Communications, headed by Trần Huy Liệu.

He often joked that perhaps because under the French the censors had banned *Bước Đường Cùng* and given me such a hard time, now the superiors entrusted me with this post–so I could better empathize with fellow writers and journalists.

* * *

[21] anti-Stalinist socialist current active in Indochina in the 1930s.

Why my father, then teaching in Thái Bình, came up to Hà Nội to work right after the August Revolution–very few people knew. Nor did he consider it something to brag about.

Here is the story:

After the Japanese coup against the French on March 9, 1945, my father was still teaching in Thái Bình. He took part in the Việt Minh's open activities there. As the movement surged, the Japanese caught wind of it and began repression.

A few days earlier, a young man claiming to be an old student had come to visit, but my father couldn't recognize him. An acquaintance warned us he was Japanese secret police, sniffing around for an angle, so we should be careful. My father didn't care–only after he was arrested did he see the warning was true.

The Japanese arrested him in Thái Bình, then brought him to Hà Nội, and jailed him in the basement of the Shell oil company building on Gambetta Street (now Trần Hưng Đạo Street).

At that time in our family, some were still imprisoned, others had gone underground to work in the resistance. Only my mother remained at home, nearly driven mad with grief and fear, as threats pressed down on every side.

After August 19, 1945, the Japanese in Hà Nội had to hand over some detainees to the Revolutionary side; my father was among them. Thereafter he was assigned to the Censorship Office for the North, and he stayed on in Hà Nội from then on.

* * *

This story was closely bound up with my elder brother, Nguyễn Tài Khoái.

The Second World War had broken out. The French colonial regime in Đông Dương tightened the screws on civil liberties— relaxed only briefly under the Popular Front in France.

At the end of the school year, my father was away in Hải Phòng, serving on an exam board.

One night someone shouted at our gate: "Mr. Hoan! The *Quan đốc* is calling!"[22] (meaning he had urgent business at night). When the gate opened, a jumble of French and Vietnamese secret police—dozens—poured in. As they pushed through they barked, "Where's Bông? Where's Khoái?" (my uncle and my brother).

They sat the two down on the spot, hands cuffed, then searched the house, ransacking everything–especially books and papers. After that they led the two away. Later we learned they were held at the French police office in Nam Định.

In this sweep my uncle Nguyễn Công Bông was sentenced to five years and exiled to Sơn La. My brother Nguyễn Tài Khoái was arrested the same year, but for lack of evidence and because he was still a minor, he was released and allowed to continue his studies.

Two years later, my brother was arrested again right in class, along with several schoolmates. This time the Thái Bình court sentenced him to two years. He appealed in Hà Nội, and the term was reduced to one year. After serving his sentence, he was put under house arrest with our family in the town of Thái Bình, required to report monthly to the French police office.

[22] *Quan đốc/Đốc học*: district/provincial chief school inspector under the colonial system.

But even while under surveillance, he slipped away to work in the underground. Soon he was arrested a third time and received a five-year sentence, imprisoned at Hỏa Lò, Hà Nội[23].

Early in 1945, amid the ravages of the famine, a townsman brought word one day that my brother was being escorted from Hà Nội back to Thái Bình to stand trial once more. At noon, because the jail had not yet received prisoners, he waited in the courthouse yard. When our family arrived, the escorting guards allowed us to speak with him. We learned he had been brought back to Thái Bình for an additional trial, connected to another case that the secret police had not known about before.

Before the August Revolution of 1945, our home served as a contact point and meeting place for cadres of the Thái Bình Provincial Party Committee, who were still operating underground.

After March 9, 1945, my brother was released from jail in Thái Bình and joined the revolutionary mobilization right there in the town. After March 9, 1945, my father took part in the Việt Minh's open activities in Thái Bình, which is the context in which the Japanese arrested him.

As for my brother, when word came that the Japanese were about to arrest him again, he received an order to leave Thái Bình secretly for another location. Later, Lê Quang Đạo told me that at that time he and my brother were working together in Bắc Giang.

After the August Revolution of 1945, my brother Khoái served in Hải Phòng, Nam Định, and Thái Bình, then returned to Nam Định near the time of the Nationwide Resistance. While he was in Hải Phòng, there was a trip to Hà Nội for a meeting; that was the last time the two of us saw each other, before he passed away in mid-1947 in Nam Định.

My parents were heartbroken greiving for him.

* * *

In 1948, I received a letter from my father sent from Việt Bắc[24], informing me that because of my brother's death, my father decided to join the Indochinese Communist Party.

Hà Nội, August 8, 1996
On the anniversary of the August Revolution.

[23] Hỏa Lò Prison in Hà Nội, used by the French for political prisoners.
[24] *Việt Bắc*: the northern resistance base area during the First Indochina War.

5. How I first met Uncle Hồ

At that time I was not yet nineteen.

In the Youth for *National Salvation unit of Hoàng Diệu Citadel*[25] (Hà Nội's pre–August Revolution codename), after the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945 I was admitted to the Indochinese Communist Party.

At dusk one evening, while I was engrossed in work with my comrades, Vũ Oanh came looking for me at my lodging—against the usual rules of secret communications.

He said it was urgent: at first light the next morning I was to set out for military training in the resistance base area.

He handed me a poll-tax card[26] and a tiny strip of rolling paper saying it was an introduction note. He then briefed me on the meeting place, what to bring, and how to respond on the road.

To be sent to train for fighting the Japanese— what joy could compare!

That night I only had time to hand my network over to another comrade, go to a safehouse to borrow an old brown peasant outfit, a *nón lá*[27], and gather a little money chipped in by the brothers. That was all I had for the journey to the base.

Guided by the couriers, our group of several dozen reached Vân village, where our side was in control day and night. Only then did we have the chance to meet as a group. The comrades chose An (later known as Lê Vinh Quốc) as leader in charge of liaison; I was assigned deputy leader, responsible for propaganda and mass work along the route. In the group were comrades who are still in the army today, such as Lê Ngọc Hiền.

We traveled by day, rested by night, slipping through forests and wading streams, until at last we reached Tân Trào. The courier told us to sit and rest under the banyan tree[28] and wait for senior cadre to arrive.

Seeing we had just come up from the lowlands, villagers gradually gathered to ask questions. I did as my assignment required.

As I was speaking, an elderly man—indigo shirt slung over one shoulder, indigo trousers rolled to the knee— came to listen, then put many questions for me to answer. I told of the famine below, of bodies along the roads that I myself had seen; I explained how the Japanese had kicked out the French yet continued to oppress and exploit our people; I spoke about the Việt Minh Front and its national salvation policies. He asked me: "What have you young people come here to do?" I answered that we had come for military training to drive out the Japanese and win independence for our people.

From that exchange, I remember his words exactly, such as: "Before the French came to seize our country, the people in the lowlands were enslaved first, those in the mountains after. Now it is independent up here first; in time the people down below will be independent too."

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[25] *Đoàn Thanh niên Cứu quốc thành Hoàng Diệu*

[26] colonial tax identification under the French

[27] Vietnamese traditional conical hat

[28] The famous Tân Trào banyan, a landmark of the Việt Minh base area in 1945.

A representative from higher up came to meet us: an old felt cap on his head, a suit jacket of cloth dyed with black, trousers rolled to the knee, bare feet; most striking of all, a leather shoulder strap and a large pistol at his hip.

He introduced himself as Văn. He asked about our route, our health, warned us about malaria, and told us to wait a few days before beginning training. Among us were comrades who had lived in Hà Nội and recognized him as Võ Nguyên Giáp[29].

After the group meeting, Văn spoke privately with An and me, giving instructions. In that narrow conversation, we told him that some comrades knew his real name. Văn told us to remind anyone who knew to keep it secret.

From then on, every couple of days, the two of us would go to Mr. Tiến Sự's house to report our work to Văn.

On the first evening in Tân Trào, during our unit's nightly session reviewing the day's work, I relayed the old villager's remarks; we concluded among ourselves that in the base area the people's understanding was high— perhaps even higher than in the lowlands.

One day we went to cut palm leaves for roofing. I carried my bundle back first and was resting when a comrade hurried in, grabbed my arm, and whispered something strange: to shorten his path he had slipped behind Mr. Tiến Sự's house and had seen the very old man I had spoken to on our first day talking with Văn. He even overheard the man say: "You fellows are doing that in a very foolish way."

At the time we regarded Văn as the highest-ranking cadre there so this was very strange.

Let me also add: in my family many had long been active in the revolution; my uncle and my brother were in prison. So I had vaguely heard the name Nguyễn Ái Quốc[30], along with rumors that he had died of tuberculosis.

After hearing what was overheard at Mr. Tiến Sự's house, I spoke with An and insisted that only someone like Nguyễn Ái Quốc would dare speak that way to Văn. We agreed to find a way to test our hunch.

At our next regular session with Văn, just before leaving, we said there was a secret matter to report. He permitted it. I began: "About the old man…" The moment he heard that, Văn lifted a finger to his lips, signaling me to stop. Without answering, he told the two of us: "Let it be just between you two— don't spread it further."

He gave no confirmation— and yet it was as good as an answer.

My heart pounded. That night I lay awake, tears streaming. I thought of my uncle and brother still in prison.

I whispered to myself: if Cụ Nguyễn Ái Quốc has returned to the country, the revolution will surely triumph; the day I see my loved ones again is not far.

* * *

[29] Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013) was Vietnam's preeminent military commander and strategist—the architect of the 1954 Điện Biên Phủ victory over France and a key leader of the People's Army in the wars against the United States—later serving as defense minister and statesman.

[30] Alias of Hồ Chí Minh.

Later, recalling that scene, I understood that Bác was immersing himself among the people to grasp the real situation and gauge their understanding.

But I also tell myself: had I known, under that banyan, that he was the leader who founded the Party, the teacher of Việt Nam's revolution, I would never have dared to speak so boldly, while still so naive, in front of Him.

December 1994

6. Creating Newspaper in The War Zone

When the first course of the *Anti-Japanese Military Academy*[31] came to an end, Văn (Võ Nguyên Giáp) appointed me to take Lê Hiến Mai's place at the Liberated Zone's printing house since he was assigned to lead a troop back to Sơn Tây.

At that time, the newspaper *Nước Nam Mới* (*New Vietnam*), published by the Liberated Zone, had only put out a few issues.

According to Văn, the printing house was a secret location; once assigned there, one was not allowed to go anywhere else. Indeed, the printing house was deep in the forest; in Tân Trào, only one person knew its location, who led me there and then went back.

Hiến Mai introduced me to the three comrades who had already been working there, and explained to me the tasks of the newspaper as well as the printing work itself.

There was no printing machine as I had imagined; only two white stones, called *lithos*. The newspaper was printed on blue paper, each issue about one quarter the size of a modern daily sheet, and it had four pages in total.

The larger stone was big enough to print two pages at a time, while the smaller one could print only one page. Therefore, we had to write and print page 1 first; while that was being done, we wrote pages 2 and 3; at the same time, we had to smooth out page 1 again so that it could be used to write and print page 4.

Anyone who has worked with lithography knows that the stone must be polished flat, without any bumps or pits, and that the letters must be written in reverse, in black ink directly on the stone. Then one rubs lemon juice over it to make the letters stand out, rolls ink evenly across the surface, and finally uses a roller to press the paper onto the stone, so the ink adheres to the page. If the roller is not applied evenly, the print comes out faint or missing letters.

At the printing house of *Nước Nam Mới*, the roller was nothing more than a short bamboo tube, half the width of a newspaper page, wrapped in a piece of bicycle inner tube, with a chopstick through its core so that both hands could hold and roll it from the ends.

I counted once–it took about a hundred rolls of that bamboo roller to finish printing a single page. From that alone, one can imagine how many times the roller had to be turned to complete all four pages of the newspaper, and how much effort it required each time the number of printed copies increased.

Văn told me that the movement was growing rapidly. In the past, the newspaper had come out only once in a while, each issue with just a few dozen copies. Now, he said, we had to shorten the time between issues, and each printing should reach several hundred copies.

There were only four of us. One person specialized in writing the reversed letters; the remaining three worked on polishing the stones and printing. We worked together day and night. The hardest part was printing at night. There were no oil lamps. We lit the place using rolls of banana leaves soaked in resin from the trám tree.

Those "candles" often exploded. When they burst and hit our hands or legs, they burned painfully. But worse still was when they hit the stone. If the sparks landed on a blank spot, it was not too bad—we

[31] The Anti-Japanese Military Academy held the graduation ceremony for its first course on July 13, 1945.

could scrape it lightly and keep printing. But if they struck a line of text, even in just a few spots, sometimes we had to polish the entire stone smooth again and rewrite everything from the beginning.

Printing a newspaper back then was nothing like printing today. At a reunion of old Liberation Army comrades held in Thái Nguyên in 1992, as we reminisced about those days, Văn mentioned the newspaper *Nước Nam Mới*. According to him, he was the editor-in-chief at that time, and I was in charge of editing and printing. Back then, I never thought of myself as the editor of *Nước Nam Mới*. Still, in that role, I have a few unforgettable stories to tell.

Once, after finishing the printing of an issue, I brought it to Tân Trào to give to Văn for distribution. He handed me a drawing, but it bore the name of another newspaper — *Việt Nam Độc Lập*, clearly marked as the paper of the Cao Bằng base. This issue was made up only of drawings, titled "Rescuing an American Pilot," with about eight or ten illustrations.

They depicted an American airplane shot down by the Japanese, the pilot parachuting to safety, landing by chance in a Việt Minh base area, being rescued and cared for by the Việt Minh, and finally guided across the border to return to the Allied forces.

I asked Văn, we were making *Nước Nam Mới*; why were we now printing *Việt Nam Độc Lập* from Cao Bằng? Văn only said that it was urgent; we needed just a few dozen copies, and they had to be delivered right away.

I returned to the printing place, and we agreed to print this issue as quickly as possible. None of us could draw, and I myself had no artistic skill, so we had to copy from the original sketches, drawing and writing the reversed letters by hand. Within just a few days, it was done. I immediately brought the printed copies to Tân Trào and handed them to Văn. He praised me for finishing the printing in time to send the papers abroad.

At that time, we had already built a small airfield, and it so happened that an Allied plane was landing. This event showed that the Việt Minh had a strong base and forces, and that we were cooperating with the Allies.

We were all deeply encouraged by the success of this work.

But a few days later, I received a few verses — some praising, some teasing. They said, in essence: "The Việt Minh base must have been so harsh that the American pilot, tall when he parachuted down, had become short by the time he reached the border."

I compared the printed copy with the original drawing, and indeed, because I hadn't paid close attention while sketching, the American pilot in the later panels appeared shorter than the Việt Minh guide.

As I mentioned earlier, we had to print the pages one by one — first page 1, then pages 2 and 3 together, and finally page 4. That created many difficulties in arranging and printing the articles on the two lithographic stones of different sizes. When an article was too long to fit on the front page and had to continue on the next, it was always a headache for me.

Once, even the following page didn't have enough room (since we didn't have typefaces of varying sizes like today), so I had no choice but to cut out a few sentences to make everything fit.

Unexpectedly, one day I received an article submitted for publication. It told the story of a propaganda officer who spoke with great passion and eloquence, but when someone later asked the villagers what he had said, they replied that they had no idea what his talk was about.

The article ended with a few lines that I still remember to this day: "Hundred bows, thousand bows to our comrades in propaganda — when you speak, please make it so the people can understand. And as for our comrades in journalism — please stop cutting off the beginnings and endings of articles, leaving readers unable to grasp the full meaning."

At that time, to be honest, I wasn't very pleased with that piece, but Văn had instructed that it must be printed, so I went ahead and published it in full.

Later, when I met Văn, I complained to him about it. He only laughed and said, "If they're right, we should accept it and learn from it." Then he quietly revealed to me that the drawing for "Rescuing an American Pilot," as well as the article criticizing propaganda and journalism, were both written by "Ông Ké" — that is, Uncle Hồ himself.

I once mentioned how I had secretly come to know who "Ông Ké" really was. So when I heard that, though I still felt a bit resentful, I could find nothing more to say. After all, it was something from when I was nineteen.

Years later, when I read Uncle Hồ's book *Sửa đổi lề lối làm việc (Rectifying the Working Style)* I finally understood its full meaning.

Once, when I visited the Revolutionary Museum and saw that they still kept a few issues of *Nước Nam Mới*, I suddenly felt deeply moved, remembering Uncle Hồ's words of advice sent to me long ago, when I was making the newspaper in the resistance base of Tân Trào.

September, 1994

7. Old Minh

At the end of September 1945, when I returned from Tân Trào to Hà Nội with Lê Giản and was assigned to Nha Liêm phóng Bắc Bộ, "old Minh" was already there. After the August Revolution of 1945, the Party placed him in Công an because he had long experience being arrested by French intelligence and spending years in prison. He headed the Phòng Chính trị (now An ninh chính trị) under the name Bùi Đức Minh.

The same age as my father, he had once been an elementary school teacher and the two knew each other well. In the days of Nguyễn Thái Học, he joined the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, left teaching, and went underground. He was arrested by the French in the early 1930s. While in prison, he was awakened to Communist ideals, left the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, and joined the Communist movement early on. Afterward he was arrested again several times, tortured harshly, and imprisoned, but he continued to stay away from his family to serve the revolution until victory.

Despite his age and experience, we still called him "Anh Minh" in those days. (Only later would people call someone of his age "Bác" or "Chú.") Never conceited, he treated us younger officers as equals.

* * *

One morning in late 1945, Hoàng Văn Hoan — whom I had met in Tân Trào — came to Nha Liêm phóng. He looked for Lê Giản but did not find him, so he met me instead. As we walked along the upstairs corridor, he asked me to take him to see "Hách." I said there was no one by that name. He insisted there was.

I asked Hoàng Mỹ, and he replied, "That's old Minh — who else?"

After that meeting, the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng cải tổ appeared (to counter Vũ Hồng Khanh's faction). In the list of founders was the name of "old Minh." From then on, the Quốc Dân Đảng — especially Vũ Hồng Khanh (whom Minh often called "giáo Giản") — saw him as a sworn enemy. They ordered their men to find a way to assassinate him.

But every day, "old Minh" still walked calmly to Nha Liêm phóng to work.

He enjoyed traditional opera (tuồng). Despite threats from the Quốc Dân Đảng, he sometimes went alone to the Quảng Lạc theater on Hàng Bạc street. He wore a dark silk tunic, a folded turban, and leather sandals with rounded toes, and carried no weapon. He told me that carrying a gun only caused trouble when meeting the Chinese Nationalist troops.

Once he invited me along. Only then did I see how skillfully he could disguise himself. I saw him every day, yet with only a small piece of beeswax in his mouth he changed his appearance so much that if I had met him on the street without knowing, I might not have recognized him.

Later, Trần Quốc Hoàn told me a story from the underground days. Once, Minh escorted Hoàng Văn Thụ to Vân Nam. They took the train toward Lào Cai and planned to jump off when it slowed at a bridge to avoid inspection at the main station. Each jumped off in turn.

A railway patrol soldier happened to see Thụ as soon as he touched the ground and held him. Seeing this, Minh hurried back to Hà Nội to report to the Central Committee.

Fortunately, Thụ later returned safely as well. He told us how he explained to the soldier that he was going to Lào Cai to do business, saw one guy get off the train, thought the train had reached a station, and jumped off by mistake. A few coins slipped into the soldier's hand convinced him to let Thụ go.

The journey to Vân Nam had to be abandoned. As for Minh, it gave him quite a scare — for had Thụ been arrested, he would not have known how to explain to the Central Committee.

* * *

In 1951, Công an issued rules prohibiting the use of torture. But right after the August Revolution in 1945, interrogation was still rough. However, Minh told the younger interrogators:

"You beat people with batons or crank electricity. It leaves marks and gives you a bad name. The method Lutz used on me was worse — and left no injuries."

Lutz was a notorious French intelligence officer. According to Minh, his method was extremely difficult to endure yet left no trace.

One young officer volunteered to let Minh demonstrate.

Minh tied his elbows with rope, then lifted his arms to the glass door handle. Suspended so that only his toes touched the floor, he could not stand firmly.

Then Minh used two fingers and tickled his ribs. The officer burst out laughing uncontrollably, tears running down his face, his body curling with pain and laughter. After a short while, he begged to be let down, unable to bear the strain. There were no marks on his body.

Another time, we captured a Quốc Dân Đảng ringleader who was also named Minh. Our interrogators reported that he could not withstand electric shocks and fainted repeatedly. Old Minh said, "I've known him for years. He's experienced. Let me make him reveal himself."

They brought the man to Minh's office. We watched. Minh attached a hand-crank generator and tied wires to the prisoner's ears, hands, and feet. He turned the crank lightly; the man moaned. Suddenly Minh cranked hard. The man screamed and fell to the ground.

We were about to help him up when Minh let go of the generator and hopped around the table on one foot, laughing: "A! I got you! I got you!"

He ordered him taken back to the cell. We asked why. Still smiling, Minh explained: "I disconnected the wires before turning hard. He thought I was going to shock him, so he acted it out himself."

Back in the day, we all admired his sharp and witty mind.

* * *

During the national resistance against the French, Minh was appointed Giám đốc Công an Khu X. At the annual national Hội nghị Công an toàn quốc, he often hosted the meetings — sometimes in Tuyên Quang, sometimes in Phú Thọ. Colleagues told me many good stories about him.

At that time Việt Trì was not yet occupied. Vĩnh Yên and Phúc Yên were still free zones. Boats from Tuyên Quang to Việt Trì often traveled at night to avoid French aircraft. There were complaints about the Trạm kiểm soát của Công an at the Việt Trì landing.

One rainy night, a boat arrived at the checkpoint. An officer stood in the station and told passengers to climb up and present their travel passes. People grumbled — in such rain, it would be easier if he came down to the boat.

A man on the boat called out: "Officer, please come to the boat and check our papers. If we all climb up, we'll be soaked."

The officer heard him, but shouted: “Which bastard said that? Come up here!”

The man who had spoken stood up — a stocky, middle-aged man in brown clothes and a nón lá. He stepped to the prow and said:

“Which bastard? Your Director said it. Your Director said it.”

Everyone stared in surprise. The quiet man who had chatted cheerfully earlier turned out to be the Giám đốc Công an.

Naturally, the young officer was later disciplined, and the checkpoint changed its ways.

After the Border Campaign victory, Minh was appointed Lãnh sự Việt Nam tại Côn Minh, where many overseas Vietnamese lived, and where he himself had once worked underground.

After the liberation of Hà Nội, he returned to the Bộ Công an and served as Giám đốc Vụ Lao Cải, overseeing prison camps, until illness forced him to retire in 1960. He passed away a few years later.

All who lived and worked with “old Minh” respected and loved him deeply.

Hà Nội, September 20, 1996

8. The birth of the newspaper Công An Mới[32]

Before the August Revolution of 1945, the Party had already established the Đoàn Cảnh sát cứu quốc, with Nguyễn Ngô Học, Thịnh, Ấp, and others in its Executive Committee.

In 1946, after the decree merging Liêm phóng and Cảnh sát into Việt Nam Công an Vụ, and the creation of Nha Công an Trung ương, the Đoàn Cảnh sát cứu quốc was expanded into the Đoàn Công an cứu quốc. At that time, I was the Party cell secretary, and at the congress of the Đoàn Công an cứu quốc, my colleagues elected me Secretary of the Đoàn.

After the August Revolution of 1945, because the new Press Decree made it easy to publish newspapers, we in the Executive Committee discussed creating a newspaper of the Đoàn, to be called newspaper Công An Mới. We considered it the newspaper of the Đoàn, not of Ngành.

In those days, because the Party had gone underground, the Central Committee instructed that agency leaders — even though they were Party members — should not attend Party cell meetings, but instead take part in Đảng đoàn meetings. The Party cell secretary also was allowed to attend these as well.

In one Đảng đoàn meeting, I reported the plan to publish the newspaper of the Đoàn Công an cứu quốc. The permit for newspaper Công an mới had already been issued by the Sở Kiểm duyệt Bắc Bộ, with me as the responsible signatory in my role as Secretary of the Đoàn Công an cứu quốc.

Hearing this, Lê Giản asked me about its content, its writers, its management — how everything would be arranged. To be honest, I had little experience, apart from having helped with the newspaper Nước Nam Mới in the Tân Trào base under the direction of anh Văn.

In the end, Lê Giản concluded that although the permit had been granted, the Đoàn did not have the capacity to run the newspaper. It would be better for Nha Công an Trung ương to take on the task. Thus, the newspaper Công an mới was still published, but under the management of the Nha Công an, and became the official newspaper of Ngành, distributed widely.

Several issues came out in 1946. Then the nationwide resistance war against the French began, and newspaper Công an mới ceased publication. During the resistance years, Nha Công an published only an internal bulletin, called Rèn Luyện.

Therefore, it can be said that newspaper Công an mới was the forerunner of today's newspaper Công an nhân dân —not the internal bulletin Rèn Luyện.

For that reason, newspaper Công an nhân dân today is only fifty years old.

Hà Nội, November 1996

[32]Công An Mới: New Public Security

9. The decisive blow: the discovery of the Ôn Như Hầu affair

Over fifty years of struggle and growth, the lực lượng Công an nhân dân Việt Nam fulfilled its responsibilities. Working in many areas, both inside and outside the country, the achievements and victories of our entire force across the nation have shown that the Công an nhân dân xứng đáng là "thanh bảo kiếm bảo vệ mình, tiêu diệt địch."

However, in the fifty-year history of the Công an nhân dân Việt Nam, there are few instances in which a single case — just one — allowed the Công an to contribute directly and decisively to safeguarding the revolutionary government, the Party, and national independence; and to bringing down the prestige of a political party with a long history that had let political opportunists seize control. That case was the discovery at 132 Duvigneau(1) and 7 Ôn Như Hầu(2), with the opening action taking place at 132 Duvigneau, Hà Nội, on 12 July 1946.

At that time, I was responsible only for small tasks in the Sở Công an Bắc Bộ. But because of special circumstances, I witnessed certain important details amid a rush of fast-moving events. By recounting these details, I hope to contribute a little to reconstructing this historical event of our sector.

In September 1945, returning from Tân Trào to Hà Nội with Lê Giản, I was also assigned to the Sở Liêm phóng Bắc Bộ. At first I followed "confidential" work for the leadership. When the "neutralization" of the Công an took place in 1946, I moved to the Phòng Chính trị (now An ninh chính trị) to do research work, while still keeping certain confidential tasks and serving as the secretary of the Party cell.

At that time, comrades with families lived at home, but several of us lived together in a house at the corner of today's Trần Hưng Đạo and Trần Bình Trọng streets. Living there, apart from Lê Giản (Tổng Giám đốc Nha Công an), and Hoàng Mỹ (Phó Giám đốc Sở), were Bùi Đức Minh (Trưởng phòng Chính trị), Phạm Gia Nội, Bùi Văn Thái (Phòng Quản trị), and myself. In the large upstairs room, there was one big bed, a long table for meetings, and a wooden floor where, if space ran out, we spread mats to sleep.

As we know, after the Chinese Nationalist forces withdrew from northern Việt Nam following 6 March 1946, the French brought some of their troops into Hà Nội and several northern provinces (even as they were already waging war in the South).

The Việt Nam Quốc dân đảng, previously backed by the Chinese Nationalists, had set up public headquarters in Hà Nội, issued newspapers openly attacking the revolutionary government, and even took over the Ngũ Xã area, turning it into an anti-revolutionary base in the capital. Taking advantage of the policy of forming a Liên hiệp Government, and with seventy Quốc hội deputies belonging to them, even after the Chinese withdrew, they continued all their activities and opposition as before.

Our Công an still regarded the reactionary Quốc dân đảng as a dangerous adversary. Thus, in addition to facing the French, it was natural for us to conduct regular surveillance and keep track of their activities.

As I mentioned earlier, though I did not work in trinh sát, I worked with comrades in the research section, so we had access to reports on the enemy situation.

At that time, there was also a particular Party directive: to preserve secrecy, leaders of agencies, though Party members, did not attend Party cell meetings, but instead took part in Đảng đoàn meetings. The Party cell secretary, however, attended both. Initially Hoàng Mỹ was the secretary; with this directive, I

became the Party cell secretary and was also elected Secretary of the Đoàn Công an cứu quốc. Because of this role, and because we lived together, I learned many important matters within the sector.

I will not go into the strategies or operational details of the trinh sát forces of Nha Công an or Công an Bắc Bộ at that time. I only recall that alongside the Political Trinh sát force led by Lê Hữu Qua, Nguyễn Tạo at Nha Công an also had his own independent trinh sát group; and Lê Giản had a team of his own led by Mạnh (a Party member in the cell I headed — Mạnh later died on the night of 19 December 1946).

Back then, although Nha Công an had been established, it occupied only a single house facing today's Trần Bình Trọng. Other houses on that street were occupied by Phan Mạnh Hân and Vũ Đình Khoa; later Nguyễn Tạo also lived in one. It was easy to see one another.

On the morning of 12 July 1946, just at dawn, Nguyễn Tạo came to our corner house. He woke us and showed us a flyer whose ink was still wet. It was issued by the Quốc dân đảng, calling for the overthrow of the revolutionary government.

Lê Hữu Qua lived with his family on Lò Đúc Street, so he was not there that morning. Only Lê Giản, Hoàng Mỹ, Bùi Đức Minh, Phạm Gia Nội, and I were present. At the time, Hoàng Hữu Nam, Thứ trưởng Bộ Nội vụ, often came to meet the Công an leadership at our house.

If I remember correctly, after seeing the above evidence, Lê Giản contacted Hoàng Hữu Nam. A little later, Hoàng Hữu Nam arrived. He examined the document and left with Lê Giản.

Later I heard that when cụ Huỳnh Thúc Kháng saw the evidence with his own eyes, he exclaimed, "Bọn này đểu!" As Quyền Chủ tịch Nước (while Bác Hồ was in France) and Bộ trưởng Bộ Nội vụ, cụ Huỳnh agreed to suppress them.

What happened afterward is well known, for the case was tried publicly.

I only want to emphasize this: without concrete evidence like this, it would have been impossible to persuade cụ Huỳnh to make such a swift decision.

The action began with the search and arrest at 132 Duvigneau, where the flyers were being printed. Throughout the day, other headquarters in Hà Nội were searched. Among them, the main target was 80 Quán Thánh. 7 Ôn Như Hầu was also searched, but in the beginning we did not yet know the horrifying crimes committed there.

I recall several details:

– The arrest of Phan Kích Nam at 7 Ôn Như Hầu. At first, relying on his status as a Quốc hội deputy, he drew his sword to threaten us. Our Công an, though not fully aware of who he was, arrested him anyway. We had to treat him properly throughout the day. By afternoon, we obtained an official document from the Ủy ban Thường vụ Quốc hội. When it was read to him, Phan Kích Nam collapsed, turned pale, and bowed his head. At dusk he was taken to the detention area inside the grounds of the Sở Công an.

– The documents seized at 80 Quán Thánh were the most numerous. I sorted and read them immediately. Among them I found a record of a meeting between the Việt Nam Quốc dân đảng and the Đại Việt Quốc dân đảng. In essence: the two sides agreed to set aside internal differences; to drop "Việt Nam" and "Đại Việt" in their public name, using only "Quốc dân đảng" both to conceal matters from Việt Minh and to project greater strength to the public; organizational distinctions would remain internal.

– The discovery of the murders at 7 Ôn Như Hầu began because that house connected to a house on phố Ha-Le(3), where we had information and had paid attention. One man held there for ransom was still alive, and from him we learned that the reactionaries had thrown victims into hồ Ha-Le (Thiền Quang today); and later we discovered others buried under a banana tree in the yard of 7 Ôn Như Hầu. This discovery, once made public, filled the population with disgust. With the public trial, the reactionary Quốc dân đảng was completely unmasked. Afterward, the policy was set to dismantle their organization nationwide.

– Their conspiracy to collaborate with the French in overthrowing the revolutionary government, combined with robbery and murder, gave the revolutionary State full grounds to place the Quốc dân đảng outside the law. This was a decisive political blow.

Some have claimed that Nguyễn Tường Tam, Đỗ Đình Đạo, and others were arrested at this time. I recall that this was not the case.

If it had been, how could the following events have occurred?

Nguyễn Tường Tam, then Bộ trưởng Bộ Ngoại giao, absconded with a large sum of public money. Later, when I worked in the South during the anti-American period, Nguyễn Tường Tam returned to Sài Gòn for a time. The Sài Gòn press praised him loudly. Then, for some reason, he took his own life, and the press again made much of it.

Vũ Hồng Khanh also lived in Sài Gòn and attempted to revive the Việt Nam Quốc dân đảng, but without success. After 30 April 1975 he turned himself in, attended re-education, and wrote extensive statements.

During the resistance against the French, Đỗ Đình Đạo lived in inner Hà Nội.

Nghiêm Kế Tổ, then Bộ trưởng Kinh tế in the Liên hiệp Government, went to France with a negotiating delegation but was exposed for illicit dealings. When he returned to Hà Nội, after 12 July 1946, I asked Trần Kim Xuyến (from Bộ Thông tin — later killed in action) to photograph him under the pretext of a commemorative picture, so that Công an would have his image.

The case at 132 Duvigneau, which initiated the complete dismantling of the reactionary Quốc dân đảng — both its forces and its political influence — has gone into history as a major victory of the Công an nhân dân Việt Nam.

I believe that within just one year of its founding, the Công an Việt Nam devised its own methods (drawing on the people, and using the enemy's own agents against them), and from a single concrete case amplified the results into a political blow that struck the entire reactionary organization, while simultaneously crushing a French plot to stage a coup in the capital even as they were invading the South. It was a brilliant achievement: one strike against two enemies.

It is a lesson in revolutionary spirit, self-reliance, and creativity.

Hà Nội, 5 March 1995

(1) Phố Duvigneau: now Bùi Thị Xuân (2) Phố Ôn Như Hầu: now Nguyễn Gia Thiều (3) Phố Ha-Le: now Nguyễn Du

10. A few stories from Hà Nội in the early days of the nationwide resistance

To mark fifty years since the start of the Toàn quốc Kháng chiến against the French colonialists' second invasion of our country— signaled by the opening shots in the Thủ đô and Hồ Chủ tịch's immortal Call to Arms— I think there is no need to say anything more about politics. By now, we have enough documents of the Đảng and Nhà nước to study that great resistance, whose conclusion shook the world. As for literature, although we still do not have a novel worthy of the scale of that sacred war, no one would dare claim that such a work could be written in a mere fifteen minutes. So I will simply recount a few small memories of how one person, just in his early twenties at the time, took part in the preparations and stepped into that long resistance.

After the South had begun its resistance on 23 September 1945, even though our side showed goodwill, as Bác Hồ wrote:

"We want peace, we must make concessions. But the more we concede, the more the French colonialists press forward, for they are determined to seize our country once again!"

In the North, they had already captured the town of Lạng Sơn. After the French stirred up trouble in Hải Phòng, a tense, warlike atmosphere settled over Hà Nội. At that time, I was working in the Sở Công an Bắc Bộ. I had just begun learning to drive a car so I could use it when needed for work. In mid-December 1946, one night well past midnight, I was asleep when Hoàng Mỹ— Phó Giám đốc Sở Công an, who lived in the same house— shook me awake. He told me to get dressed immediately; there was urgent work. We went down to the yard and over to the Sở. Two cars were already there. Our comrades were loading files onto the vehicles. These were the files we used every day; they had to be taken to a backup location. Hoàng Mỹ had long been a skilled driver. He said, "I'll drive one car, you drive the other." I replied, "I've only just started learning. I'm not sure I can handle driving at night." He answered, "The backup place is confidential, so we can't let just anyone drive. And you'll be working there too." So off we went. His car went first; mine followed behind. At Ngã Tư Sở, my engine suddenly died. After checking for some time, Hoàng Mỹ concluded that my battery had run out of power. We still had to go on, so he came up with this solution: "You sit in the front car. I'll drive the one behind. The rear car will push the front one. Your car has no lights, but just steer by the light of my headlights behind you and follow the road." We continued along đường Láng. Our backup site was a Frenchman's house in the suburbs (the owner of the paper mill at that time, about halfway down đường Láng). We had barely arrived, when Ngô Ngọc Du also turned up. (He was then Phó Bí thư Thành ủy Hà Nội and Bí thư Ngoại thành; later he became Thứ trưởng Bộ Công an.) He said, "I just managed to jump into the roadside in time. Otherwise I'd have been killed outright by some car with no lights that suddenly came up from behind and shot past me." Hoàng Mỹ and I looked at each other. Then Hoàng Mỹ said, "That was our car. It broke down at Ngã Tư Sở, but we still had to get these files here." Truly, anh Du must have had blessings from seventy generations. As for me, it gave me quite a fright. All we could do was laugh together.

When the French Foreign Legion massacred our compatriots on Yên Ninh Street on 17 December 1946, right in the Thủ đô, the atmosphere of war completely enveloped Hà Nội. Our Party cell's last meeting inside the city was held on the night of 18 December 1946 at the trụ sở Công an quận Hàng Trống (now quận Hoàn Kiếm). Tasks were assigned to each person. During the meeting, the sound of French army trucks on the street outside made the air both tense and solemn. We did not know that this would be

our last meeting with comrade Mạnh, Đội trưởng trinh sát đặc biệt of Nha Công an —a gentle yet resourceful man— who had contributed so much to trinh sát work in 1945 and 1946.

Only a few days after the night of 19 December 1946, our Liên khu phố I was surrounded by the enemy. Despite the danger, it was still possible to enter and leave Liên khu phố I. The liaison path ran along a sandbank, and at one point we had to crawl under the Long Biên Bridge, even though enemy guards were posted above to protect the bridge. More than once, the enemy discovered our people and shot them. Some of the dead were buried by the enemy head-down in the sand, like planting an upside-down banana tree on the path across the bank. Near Tết, Trần Quốc Hoàn (then a phái viên of the Trung ương assigned to Khu ủy XI) and Lê Quang Đạo (then Phó Bí thư Khu ủy XI) went in to visit Liên khu phố I. On their way out, comrades in Liên khu I gave Đạo an alarm clock as a keepsake. As they crawled under Long Biên Bridge with the giao liên team, everyone had to go on their bellies. The alarm clock couldn't be kept in a pocket; it had to be held in the hand while crawling on elbows. For some reason, right then the clock started ringing— "reng, reng". Everyone's heart nearly stopped. It was funny too, but no one dared laugh. Fortunately, the guards overhead did not hear it. Back at base, Hoàn told us the story and challenged us to imagine the look on Đạo's face as he played his part in that tragic little comedy.

Suspicion of Việt gian was widespread from the very first days of the Toàn quốc Kháng chiến against the French. Around Hà Nội, many women were arrested on suspicion of being Việt gian. After an air raid, if dân quân found a small mirror in a woman's pocket, she could be accused of using it to signal planes. Or if the trim on her trouser legs had colors like the French tricolor, she could be suspected too. Only later was it concluded that our women simply liked to keep up appearances, and always carried a small mirror to check themselves. As for the colored borders on the cloth, they came from foreign-made black fabric used for trousers; tailors simply used the edge of the fabric as-is rather than hemming it.

Then there was the story of the "tắc bọp" gun. People passed rumors that the French had given Việt gian special "tắc bọp" guns to fire signal shots for their planes. But no one had ever actually caught a single "tắc bọp" gun to see what it looked like. At that time we were stationed near pháo đài Láng. There, on the night of 19 December 1946, one of our artillery units opened fire on the "Xi-ta-đen" (the French name for the old Thành, where French troops were stationed under the 6 March 1946 Agreement). That same night, a cảm tử team of ours was assigned to infiltrate Gia Lâm airfield and destroy the enemy's planes. In reality, the man tasked with bringing signal flares to Gia Lâm left too late. By the time shooting started, the bridge was under curfew and he could no longer cross. The cảm tử team at Gia Lâm, hearing the gunfire, went ahead and infiltrated the airfield anyway. The battle did not succeed as hoped. Without any flares, they could not signal the results to the Bộ chỉ huy. Yet newspaper Thủ Đô, following the original plan, reported that we had destroyed a number of enemy planes at Gia Lâm. Everyone was delighted, certain that the enemy would not be able to fly planes quickly from Sài Gòn to bomb and strafe the North. Then, near noon on 20 December 1946, we heard the sound of engines. Several enemy planes came and attacked pháo đài Láng, catching everyone by surprise. After dropping bombs, they raked the area with machine-gun fire. There were many "tắc bọp" sounds. Surely there must be Việt gian nearby! Some pháo đài Láng fighters rushed off in the direction of the "tắc bọp" noises to arrest whoever was signaling. They burst into a shelter and found only the pháo đài's commanding officer sitting there, taking cover from the planes. No one knew what to make of it. Much later we learned that the enemy used dum-dum rounds. At the time, we did not know this and thought the sounds came from guns fired on the ground, so people spoke of Việt gian firing "tắc

bọp" guns. If that day it had not been the pháo đài's own commander but an ordinary civilian, it would have been hard for him to escape being branded a Việt gian firing "tắc bọp" signals for the French.

Once the fighting began, everywhere Dân quân and Tự vệ (whom the French called Việt Minh carré because their side caps had a square star) and the Vệ quốc đoàn set up checkpoints and guard posts. Going out at night and running into a checkpoint manned by Vệ quốc đoàn was the most unnerving. They liked to stand hidden in the dark, spotting you from far away, but letting you come close before cocking their rifles with a loud "rốp" and shouting: "Who's there? Stop. Hands up!" It could startle you badly. If a gun went off by accident, the consequences were obvious. There were also checkpoints staffed by female dân quân. Some would shout: "Who's there? Stop. Hands up. Turn around. No… I'll shoot now!" So men passing such checkpoints often tried to tease them. Someone must have taught the women how to get their own back. One cold, rainy night, a man passed through a checkpoint staffed by female dân quân who recognized him as someone who liked to make mischief. He heard: "Who's there? Stop. Hands up. Turn around. Lie down. No, I'll shoot now!" He had no choice but to do exactly as ordered. Back at his unit, cold as it was, he took a bath immediately so he'd have an excuse to wash his clothes, then went straight to bed and kept silent. Unfortunately, someone learned of the story and spread it around. From then on, young men began to "keep their distance" from those "lady dân quân".

In the early days of the Toàn quốc Kháng chiến in Hà Nội, the Ủy ban Kháng chiến khu XI issued a Thẻ bài Hỏa tốc for people on urgent business. Presenting this card allowed one to pass checkpoints quickly. At that time, Vương Thừa Vũ was Quân khu trưởng khu XI. At some point he either lost or misplaced his own Thẻ bài Hỏa tốc, which bore his name and title clearly. Fearing villains might get hold of it and abuse it, he signed a general notice that anyone found carrying a Thẻ bài Hỏa tốc bearing the name Vương Thừa Vũ was to be detained and reported immediately. He considered that sufficient caution and felt reassured. One night, returning from duty through a village outside the city, he, too, obediently presented his Thẻ bài Hỏa tốc. After examining it by storm-lamp, the dân quân shouted: "Comrades, we've caught Vương Thừa Vũ!" He thought to himself, "So soon after fighting has begun, has the countryside already filled with Việt gian?" Hot-tempered by nature, he ordered the guards with him to arrest the dân quân at the checkpoint and interrogate them at once. It turned out that after losing his original card, he had a new one made with the same name, Vương Thừa Vũ. The checkpoint had also received the notice about the missing Thẻ bài. They were simply following instructions— and had caught the real Vương Thừa Vũ. So there was the story of Vương Thừa Vũ signing an order that led to his own "arrest".

Vương Thừa Vũ was famous for his temper. He once smashed several telephones because the line kept cutting in and out. Among the main regiments fighting in khu XI was one led by Phùng Thế Tài. He was a good man, but no less hot-tempered than Vương Thừa Vũ. Back then, even before ranks were formally introduced, he already had the nickname "quan năm đòn gánh". Once, the people caught a Vệ quốc soldier "involved" with a village girl in a haystack. The command considered it a rape case and decided to convene a field court-martial to sentence him to death as a warning. Vương Thừa Vũ appointed Phùng Thế Tài to preside over the court in the area of Tây Mỗ and Đại Mỗ. When the trial ended, Phùng Thế Tài returned and over dinner told Vương Thừa Vũ that he had acquitted the accused. Vũ did not understand why. Tài, meanwhile, could hardly speak for laughing. What had happened was this: The Vệ quốc soldier admitted to moral misconduct, and so was facing the expected severe sentence. But before the "death sentence" was pronounced, the presiding judge asked the "victim" if she had anything to say. After a long hesitation, she stammered: "Em… em… cũng xin… ủng hộ một tý ạ." ("I… I… would also like… to support him a little.") The whole audience burst into laughter. And

Phùng Thế Tài himself could no longer keep a straight face. In khu XI, the phrase "ủng hộ một tý!" became a well-known anecdote.

On the night of 19 December 1946, we were near pháo đài Láng. Hearing our artillery fire into the Thành where French troops were garrisoned, we cheered with joy. After the French captured Ngã Tư Sở, we withdrew to Mễ Trì, then to Đại Mỗ and Tây Mỗ. While Liên khu I was still encircled by the enemy, Hoàng Mỹ—Giám đốc Công an khu XI— assigned me and Lê Tuấn (also called Thuần) to open a training course for Công an khu XI to prepare them for wartime work. We borrowed the đình of La Dương village (one of the "three La" villages) as our classroom. The course lasted about a month. At night we slept on straw in villagers' homes. Going into the resistance, each of us had only two sets of clothes; Lê Tuấn brought along one red flag with a yellow star. On cold nights, with nothing else to cover ourselves, we had to pull the flag over us. (Nowadays, at funerals, only leading cadres have their coffins covered with the flag.) We divided the teaching between us. Tuấn, coming from the main-force army, taught military subjects. I lectured on investigation, building networks, secret work, and so on. The students came from all backgrounds: Công an cadres working in city districts; young street vendors selling newspapers and breakfast food; shoe-shiners, hat-cleaners; and some of the urban poor who had gone into the resistance along with the mass organizations— those who had worked as live-in helpers, water carriers, and the like. They joined the resistance naturally and voluntarily. I will never forget the closing day of the course. We all shared a very plain meal that many of us still remember when we meet again today. The celebration was entirely home-made performances. Most memorable were the items from the newspaper sellers, breakfast vendors, shoe-shiners and hat-cleaners of Hà Nội. Anyone who lived in Hà Nội then remembers the morning street cries that were part of the city's character. Without anyone on stage, the audience—who were all from Hà Nội— suddenly heard calls of "Báo! Báo, ơ…" Some people quietly wiped their eyes. Then came "Bài hát Người Hà Nội" by Nguyễn Đình Thi, which the youngsters had learned who knows when. It stirred up even more strongly the image of the resisting Thủ đô. From that course came the first Công an cadres assigned to build networks in areas under enemy control, including inner Hà Nội, immediately after Trung đoàn Thủ đô withdrew from the city. Chung from quận IV, entering the Thành with a "returnee" family cover, was appointed Trưởng khu (chef d'ilôt) around today's Hàng Cót. This group was later exposed; both Chung and Minh were imprisoned and sent to Côn Đảo until they were exchanged back in 1954. Many of the youngsters at that time later became giao liên; some grew and advanced to become cadres and Party members of Công an Hà Nội throughout the resistance. Not a few went through prison and exile. Even now, some have already retired.

One of the early achievements of our trinh sát teams came from a group that entered enemy-occupied outer districts of quận IV. They brought back to the leadership a military map and a compass taken from an enemy unit. The price for that success was that chị M. was raped by African colonial troops. I was deeply moved and distressed when I heard their report in person. Throughout the resistance, there were many such shining examples of Công an Hà Nội cadres and fighters who deserve to be remembered and honored, far more than can be recounted here.

As for myself and my friends of that generation, that is how we entered the nine-year resistance. Even now, whenever I think back, I cannot help but feel affection and sorrow for the men and women of Công an Hà Nội, many of whom remain nameless, who contributed to victory in the resistance through their own great sacrifices, without ever demanding reward or recognition. Hà Nội, 19 December 1996

11. Stories About Tigers

By mid-1950, French colonial forces finally carried out their plan to push outward from the Hà Nội area and occupy Phủ Lý and Vân Đình, threatening what remained of the free zone on the right bank of the Red River in Liên khu Ba.

Our Hà Nội agencies, then based in the districts of Ứng Hòa and Mỹ Đức of Hà Đông Province, had to withdraw temporarily toward Quốc lộ 21, near Cầu Rậm and Chợ Bến.

At that time, we also faced the task of merging three separate units with similar functions, all operating in the Hà Nội area. We needed a relatively quiet place to reorganize and arrange personnel, so we temporarily moved into làng Mát.

Anyone who traveled from the lowlands up to Việt Bắc in those days had to pass through Kim Bôi and Hạ Bì in Hòa Bình, past places like Chợ Sồ, Sào, Rạnh… Làng Mát lay along that vital route.

* * *

It was a small Mường hamlet, remote and sparsely populated. Some mornings, waking up, we could see clearly the tracks of a mother tiger and her cub circling the stilt house.

Here, at night, tigers sometimes came to snatch the pigs kept under the houses.

Local people who went into the forest had even encountered tigers sitting calmly by the roadside.

People shared their own experience: When going anywhere, one should carry a bamboo or wooden pole about two meters long on the shoulder; if a tiger pounced, the pole would catch in its mouth, preventing it from biting the person.

Others said: If, on the road, you come across a tiger sitting like a statue at the forest's edge, and you run away in fear, it will chase and attack. But if you hold its gaze until it turns its head away, then walk on steadily, it will not pursue you.

There was also a rumor: Whenever fighting broke out along Quốc lộ 21, once the gunfire subsided, a gray tiger would appear to look for the bodies of the dead.

* * *

One night, while we were sleeping, we heard a commotion in the hamlet— the sound of gongs, pots, pans. That was how the local people frightened tigers. Bamboo torches glowed red. Everyone clearly saw a gray tiger, walking on three legs, with a pig clamped under its remaining front leg, running from a house up into the forest.

The next day, our unit discussed ways to help the villagers deal with the tiger.

A few handy comrades collected bamboo and built a small cage. We had a small herd of goats, so we chose a young one and placed it inside the cage. Then we went up the hill to find a patch of dense cogon grass, full of leeches— a place tigers often passed. We tied the cage securely to stakes in the ground and rigged several grenades with pins removed, expecting that when the tiger reached for the goat, it would trigger the grenades. Several of our best marksmen braved mosquitoes and leeches and lay in ambush.

Indeed, the gray tiger soon caught the scent. It approached, cautiously observing. Then it suddenly darted from one side to the other past the cage. It moved so fast that none of the marksmen could follow it in their sights; they fired blindly.

Just then, the tiger lunged in and grabbed the cage.

Grenades exploded loudly. When the smoke cleared, there was no tiger— and the goat and cage had vanished as well.

The tiger was too clever and too fast to be hit at all.

So all our effort was wasted— we lost both bait and trap.

* * *

But our stories with tigers weren't over yet.

At that time, our unit—like many others— used a military-style cover name. The Thành đội, which issued such designations, was led then by Vy Hải. He gave us the code name "Tiểu đoàn 30." He joked: "People are afraid of you all—like they're afraid of tigers. So I'll call you '30'." ("Ba mươi" is slang for "tiger.")

Each morning and afternoon, we assembled to salute the flag and take roll call.

One evening, after dinner, people drifted to the stream to wash bowls and hands. Suddenly a pistol shot rang out— "đùng"— followed by a tiger's roar.

Everyone rushed toward the sound. There was Chính, coming from the far bank, his face still tense. He said he had just approached the stream and found a gray tiger sitting there. He was carrying a pistol, so he drew it and fired once. The tiger roared and bolted up the hill where the workhouse was (and where many comrades slept).

It wasn't time yet for the evening assembly, but we quickly sounded the gong to gather the unit and check roll. One man was missing: Ba.

People said he hadn't come down for dinner— he must still be up at the house on the hill, and perhaps had been attacked.

We ran up the hill. The house was empty. Around it, we found tiger tracks. We circled the house and shouted his name, but heard nothing.

We searched under the tables, under the beds— nothing.

Then faintly, we heard a small trembling voice:

"A… ai… cứ… cứu… tô… tôi… với…"

The sound came from a roof beam. Looking up, we saw a lumpy chăn trấn thủ on the beam. When we called out, the blanket shifted and fell to the floor. From inside emerged Ba's head— his limbs shaking, his face drained of color.

We helped him into a chair. One hand still clutched the edge of the blanket. The other hand trembled, but between his thumb and forefinger was a manh-xơ-lam— a razor blade for shaving.

Once he had calmed down, he told us:

He had been tidying his papers before dinner when he heard the gunshot and the tiger's roar. Moments later a gray tiger dashed past the house.

Alone and terrified, he grabbed the chăn trấn thủ and covered himself so the tiger wouldn't see him. He didn't dare hide under the table— the tiger might sniff him out.

So he climbed a support post and lay flat on a roof beam.

Still afraid the tiger might find him, he prepared a way to defend himself. He searched everything on him— only the manh-xơ-lam was sharp enough. So he held it tight.

Still puzzled, we asked: “What were you planning to do with that razor blade?”

Ba answered, still shaking:

“Để… nếu… có bị con hổ vồ… thì mình dùng cái manh-xơ-lam này thiến cái dái của nó.”

(“So… if the tiger attacked… I’d use this razor blade to cut off its balls.”)

* * *

That night, the entire “Tiểu đoàn 30” held a session to review the incident.

Every detail of Ba’s plan to “castrate the tiger” was retold.

All we could do was bow down in both admiration and helpless laughter.

Hà Nội, 26 August 1996

12. Struck by Heaven but Not Killed

During the Resistance against the French, in 1948, I went from Hà Nội up to Việt Bắc to attend the national Công an conference. From Vĩnh Yên, I followed the foothills of Tam Đảo to reach Sơn Dương district of Tuyên Quang province. There, I had to stop at a Công an post to report to the Văn phòng Nha Công an trung ương. I met several comrades from other Khu who were also waiting there.

The Công an post was a small bamboo house roofed with gồi leaves, hidden under a large tree with thick foliage. That day, it was raining.

I asked to use the post's telephone to call the Nha Công an trung ương. The telephone was placed in the innermost corner of the post, on a bamboo table beneath the trunk of the big tree whose leaves covered the entire roof.

Telephones in those days were magneto telephones. One had to crank a handle to reach the Bưu điện switchboard and have them connect the line.

I was holding the receiver, waiting for the Bưu điện to connect. Suddenly a loud thunderclap exploded. Everyone saw a bright green streak of light flash down from the sky and pass through my body. At the same time, they heard an ear-splitting crack of thunder.

As for me, I was stunned because a burst of light flashed before my eyes, and I heard a violent explosion such as I had never experienced. The receiver flew out of my hand and fell to the ground. The telephone set in front of me exploded into pieces.

Then everything fell silent again, like the stillness of the forest. It was still raining.

People rushed over to see if anything had happened to me. They told me what they had seen and said everyone thought I had been struck dead on the spot. When they saw I was still alive, they were astonished.

Afterwards, comrades often joked and called me "the guy struck by Heaven but not killed." Many said that meant I would live a long life.

* * *

Whether I live long or not has never mattered much to me. But since I am someone "struck by Heaven but not killed," I should recount the times I narrowly escaped death, to test the saying.

* * *

During the nationwide resistance against the French, at the end of 1947, we were in the Bương Cấn area of Quốc Oai district in Sơn Tây province. I avoided placing our office near the market and chose instead a small hamlet called Trại Do. It was a poor hamlet with some Catholics, and there was a small church in the village.

Quốc Oai was an area where houses were built of laterite blocks dug from the soil and dried, then used to build walls with lime mixed with molasses, for in those days cement was scarce. The earth was red; when it rained, shoes and sandals became caked with mud. But tea and jackfruit grew very well there. There were even hamlets named Ao Sen and Đất Đỏ.

Our office was set in a house with a small yard, where a few tea bushes and jackfruit trees grew. One day, the French attacked phủ Quốc Oai, about ten kilometers from our office. People returning from the market brought us the news. But knowing the enemy had only infantry, at that distance we stayed

where we were, keeping our papers and belongings neatly packed so that we could move only if they came closer.

By early afternoon we suddenly heard explosions booming at the crossroads on the main road. At that time we had no experience, and our office had no shelter against shelling. Hearing the loud blasts, we guessed they were artillery shells.

We spread out and lay down at the base of several jackfruit trees.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion right near our house. Smoke billowed thick for a while before it cleared.

I was lying at the foot of a jackfruit tree when I felt something brush my left shoulder. I reached up and found my shirt torn and my skin slightly bleeding. I looked toward the tree trunk and saw a gouge in the bark. Lodged there was a small, sharp piece of steel. It turned out to be a small fragment of an artillery shell. From that, I realized the fragment had skimmed past my shoulder, struck the trunk, and stuck there. If it had flown just a little lower, it would have hit me.

Later I learned that the enemy had 105-millimeter guns, which reached much farther than our 81-millimeter mortars. If the road distance was ten kilometers, the straight-line distance was even shorter. Our location was within the range of the 105-millimeter artillery.

* * *

Around 1948, one noon I was on a work trip passing through Đồng Quan market in Thường Tín district of Hà Đông province. At that time the place was lively and well known. There were cafés and ice drinks of all kinds. There was even a brothel.

I had barely reached the entrance of the market when I heard the sound of enemy aircraft. Machine-gun fire from the planes swept the market, striking the stalls on both sides of the road. The earth was torn up and dust rose into thick clouds. There was no time to take cover. Even if we had wanted to, there was no place to hide.

After one strafing run, the planes flew away and did not return.

We hurriedly pedaled our bicycles out of the town, intending to get far away from Đồng Quan to avoid danger.

Passing through the street, we saw a house still burning. But strangely, from underground came the sound of a phonograph. In those days phonographs were spring-wound machines using plastic records.

It turned out the shop owner had dug an air-raid shelter. They had been listening to music when the planes arrived. The owner carried the entire phonograph down into the shelter. So the machine kept playing.

* * *

During the resistance against the Americans to save the South, I had many strange brushes with death.

In 1966, the armed reconnaissance unit of the Ban An ninh Khu Sài Gòn – Gia Định was stationed in a hamlet of An Tây commune in Bến Cát district of Bình Dương province. I came there for a meeting with the unit. Before we even began our work, enemy aircraft arrived to strafe and bomb the hamlet.

We went down into a bomb shelter dug beneath a large bamboo clump.

Suddenly a bomb exploded right above our heads. My ears rang. My head reeled. Earth rained down on us.

When the planes had flown away, we climbed up to the surface. The entire bamboo clump had vanished. Only a dark scorched patch remained on the ground. If that bamboo clump had not taken the blast, everyone in the shelter—including me—would have been finished.

* * *

From the end of 1965, the American 25th Division "Tropic Lightning" had taken position at Đồng Dù in Củ Chi. The American 1st Division "Big Red One" was based at Lai Khê in Bình Dương. They had 175-millimeter long-range artillery with rocket-assisted shells. With this kind of shell, you only heard the "departure" sound after the shell had already exploded near you. From Lai Khê, they regularly fired 175-millimeter shells across the Sài Gòn River into the liberated areas of Củ Chi district.

At that time, every night we had to sleep inside artillery shelters.

* * *

Once, during a Khu uỷ meeting, we rotated meeting locations among different offices to keep things secret and safe. One night, the senior leaders were meeting in an underground shelter. The lamp was carefully covered, to avoid being spotted by enemy night-time reconnaissance aircraft.

Suddenly we heard loud chatter and laughter above the roof of the meeting shelter. We looked up to see what was happening. It turned out the guards were playing tú-lơ-khơ and were enjoying themselves too much. A hurricane lamp was burning brightly "so they could see the cards clearly."

* * *

Another time, the meeting was moved to the Bộ Tư lệnh Quân khu. There they had just dug additional sleeping shelters, so the roofs were only covered with sheets of corrugated iron against the rain. They had not yet laid beams on the roof or covered it with earth.

Anh Năm Xuân, anh Tư Trường, and I slept in the same shelter. Our hammocks were strung along its length.

That afternoon, after dinner, I was lying in my hammock listening to the radio. Suddenly I noticed artillery fire being walked in from afar. I told the two comrades, "Watch out, they may be firing toward us."

Before I could finish speaking, we heard the whistling sound—meaning the shells were close. Still holding the radio, I jumped out of the hammock. The three of us crawled into the side niche of the shelter just in time.

A shell exploded right on the edge of the shelter's opening. Earth and stones flew everywhere. Black smoke filled the shelter.

When things were quiet, we stepped out of the niche. Comrades from nearby shelters ran over. They found the three of us with our faces blackened.

My hammock had been pierced from end to end by shrapnel. My document case, which I had not managed to bring into the niche, had also taken a piece of shrapnel. It pierced halfway into the box before it was stopped by the papers inside. If I had not jumped out of the hammock in time, my whole body would have taken a line of shrapnel.

Afterwards, comrades sewed me a new hammock and stored the damaged one as a keepsake. Later, the storage area was hit by a bomb and the hammock was destroyed.

* * *

When we were in ấp Dược of Phú Mỹ Hưng commune, American artillery fired continuously every night from dusk until around five in the morning. We no longer built large shelters for many people but dug individual artillery shelters instead. Each was just long enough that at night you could place two tầm vông poles at the ends and hang a hammock for one person. By being dispersed, if something happened, casualties would be fewer.

One night, while everyone was asleep, we heard 175-millimeter shells exploding in the area. As for me, I clearly felt a shell explode right above my shelter's roof. My ears rang. My head ached. My hammock swung inside the earth. But as I was still conscious, I knew I was alive. For fear of more shells, we waited until morning to look.

Sure enough, the shelter I slept in had had a large chunk of the termite mound above it blown off by a 175-millimeter shell. I survived thanks to that termite mound.

A termite mound is formed when termites eat underground and excrete soil mixed with their saliva, building small towers above the ground. This soil is very hard—sometimes harder than cement—and sparks fly when you strike it with a hoe. The ấp Dược area had many termite mounds.

The guards came up with the idea of digging artillery shelters beneath these mounds. They only needed to dig down about a meter, and the termite mound already formed the upper half of the shelter above ground. At night, placing two tầm vông poles across the entrance was enough to hang a hammock and make a safe sleeping shelter. The mounds were spaced five to ten meters apart, so individual shelters were well separated.

Although the 175-millimeter shell exploded right on top of my shelter, it hit the mound and only blew off a section. Down below, I was not hit by the blast pressure, which went upward. I only suffered ringing ears and a spinning head from the sound.

* * *

Yet this was not as strange as another time when I narrowly escaped death in Củ Chi.

Whenever I went to a cấp uỷ meeting, I always rose early to reach the meeting place on time. Usually I left at five in the morning. The American base at Lai Khê typically fired artillery from about eleven at night until nearly five in the morning. After that, it seemed they woke up, washed, ate, and stopped nighttime shelling. From five in the morning until evening, the daytime forces took over. They sent "bà già" aircraft to patrol, and only when they spotted something unusual did they call for artillery or fighter-bombers.

That day, for reasons I still do not understand, Ba Phước—the guard—said, "Let's eat early and leave early today." So we departed before five in the morning. The two of us rode two bicycles along the red-dirt road through the rubber plantation, hoping to move quickly before enemy aircraft might patrol.

Just past Hố Bò, we heard shells exploding in the distance. Then the explosions drew closer along the stretch of road we were on. I told Ba Phước, "Watch out, it's going to reach us."

No sooner had I said that than we heard the whistling. We jumped off our bicycles and pressed ourselves against the trunk of a rubber tree. The bicycles kept rolling by inertia for a few meters before collapsing.

A violent explosion erupted above us. Flames flashed. Smoke engulfed everything.

We found ourselves still conscious. Each of us called out to the other to see if we were hurt. We felt our arms and legs and found them intact. We stood up and looked around.

The trunks of the surrounding rubber trees were packed with steel darts.

It turned out that day the Americans were not using regular shells that exploded on impact. They were using air-burst shells that detonated a few meters above the ground for greater effect. They were also using shells that scattered thousands of steel darts upon exploding.

Fortunately, we had not been standing upright. Had we stood, we would have been struck by the steel darts.

By lying against the trunks of the rubber trees, we were below the line where the darts embedded themselves—about thirty centimeters above the ground.

* * *

Preparing for the attack and uprising during Tết Mậu Thân 1968, the liberated communes in Củ Chi had been bulldozed flat by American troops. We had to cross through An Tịnh (Trảng Bàng) and temporarily move to An Ninh commune (Đức Hòa), on the bank of the Sài Gòn River by provincial road 10, to continue our work.

This was a weak area. A ngụy outpost stood right on road 10 at the turnoff into the commune. There were no large sweeps as in Củ Chi, but small groups of ngụy soldiers could still push into the hamlets, looking for food and supplies. The most dangerous were the Americans, who used helicopters to suddenly drop troops for searches.

We had been there only a few days when, one morning at around nine, enemy helicopters came roaring in. In no time the hamlet was full of American soldiers. The du kích fired a few shots to raise the alarm, then had to slip away, because they could not “take on” such forces.

The two guards and I went down into a secret shelter dug at the base of a bamboo clump.

After a while, we heard rustling above us, and through the air hole earth fell down onto our heads. The young guards did not know English, so they paid no attention. But I clearly heard the Americans saying to each other, “Here! Here!” At the same time there was a sound like an iron probe poking into the earth around the bamboo clump. Our hearts nearly stopped.

Then suddenly it all went quiet.

I whispered to the two guards that the Americans were right above us.

Our guns were loaded, and we had loosened the grenade pins. If they found the shelter’s mouth, we would have to throw the lid open and fight our way out, then run. We could not simply lie still and let them open the lid and take us.

But it stayed silent.

The air in the shelter grew suffocating. I have a weak heart, so I felt it more quickly than the others. I had to lie face down on the ground to breathe the cooler air where there was still more oxygen, yet I could hardly bear it.

We agreed that we would have to open the lid. Better to fight and die than suffocate in the shelter.

We had just made ready when we again heard rustling above the mouth of the shelter and a voice calling, “Come up! Come up!”

Could it be someone captured by the enemy and forced to point out our shelter?

We kept silent and listened.

It was clearly anh Bảy Bình’s voice.

Again he called out: “Anh Tư, the Americans have withdrawn.”

We pushed the lid up. Bảy Bình stuck his head down, smiling.

The comrades pulled me up first. When I was stretched out on the ground, I lay there gasping for some time.

Had it been only a little later, I do not know how things would have turned out.

* * *

Around the third or fourth day of Tết Mậu Thân 1968, I was in Khánh Hội when we received word that the next day the enemy would sweep the neighborhoods there.

Since I had already sent giao liên ahead to scout the route, I decided to leave for Bình Thới.

From Cây Bàng ward, after we had walked a bit from the house, cô Hai Tre, our giao liên, hailed a xích lô to take the two of us to Nancy pier. From there we took a xe lam toward Chợ Lớn.

The xe lam only ran one section before it had to stop, as we entered an area with new fighting. We had to get off and walk. Along the road the enemy had strung barbed wire, leaving only a narrow passage. We saw men in dark glasses pacing about, whom we took to be secret police. But if we had hesitated or turned back, we would have aroused suspicion. We walked calmly through. Only when we had gone some distance did we look for another xe lam to finish the last part of the journey.

Along the way we saw people from the workers’ quarters, clutching blankets and clothes, trudging along in groups; some had blood streaming down their faces.

Looking into the workers’ quarter, we saw American “bird-dog” helicopters pouring machine-gun fire and starting many fires. Knowing our armed forces relied on the workers’ quarters, the Americans aimed to wipe them out. Later they rebuilt those areas with brick houses, giving profits to contractors and making it harder for our forces to maintain bases.

When we reached Bình Thới, we went to the house of anh chị Ba Trương.

Hai Tre then went back to district 4 to bring the remaining armed security guards who were still at the pagoda back to district 6. On the way, chú Kẹn was stopped by the police, who suspected him of being a draft dodger. But Tám Tiếm and Út Đắng slipped through and were again hidden in Bình Thới pagoda.

A Biệt động unit was temporarily stationed in the pagoda. When we asked, they said that that night they would go to meet cánh Hai Sang, Bí thư of Bình Tân district, and that anh Sáu Dân was said to be there. I needed to meet anh Sáu Dân, so I arranged to go with them that evening.

Around eight at night, we joined the Biệt động unit and set off for Bình Tân.

Not far from the pagoda, we suddenly heard German shepherds barking. I told the Biệt động commander, "Be careful, there may be American troops nearby."

I had barely finished speaking when enemy machine-gun fire poured toward us. Rounds striking the gravel road sparked. We leapt down into the roadside ditch. Bamboo thorns tore our clothes and scraped our arms and legs.

When the shooting stopped, we called to each other to move away at once.

At a stretch with houses, comrades took cover in doorways and gate recesses. I stood behind a comrade carrying a B.40.

The commander ordered a B.40 round fired toward the enemy machine gun. The B.40 gunner fired. I saw a flash of flame shoot out behind the tube, dazzling my eyes. If I had not been standing slightly off to the side, the flame would have blasted straight into my face, and I might have been badly burned or killed on the spot.

I called to everyone to move at once, before the enemy called in artillery. We moved. A few minutes later the enemy indeed fired artillery onto the area where we had just been hiding.

Back at the pagoda, seeing that we could not continue that night, I left Tám Tiếm and Út Đắng with the Biệt động unit and returned in the middle of the night to anh chị Ba's house nearby.

People fleeing the fighting were sleeping in rows on the veranda and floor of the house.

I went inside and washed. By lamplight I saw a cut on my wrist; I did not know whether it was from bamboo thorns or from hitting my hand on the gravel road. My automatic watch had stopped.

The next morning, a column of American tanks surrounded the pagoda.

There was news that a sweep in that area was imminent. Hai Tre and I decided to move to Bà Điểm. On a Honda motorbike we played the part of civilians fleeing the fighting, each of us carrying a blanket. Near Tân Sơn Nhất, traffic was jammed and we had to ride through the fields.

When we reached Bà Điểm, we went to the home of anh Năm Tấn.

We stayed there one night. The next day we saw enemy tanks crawling through the fields. One parked right near the house. The family shut all the doors and told me to stay quietly inside. American soldiers walked around the area but did not enter any house.

The day after that, seeing things quiet, I borrowed a motorbike and rode back to Củ Chi to reestablish contact with the An Ninh units in the city.

On the road, I met a convoy of American vehicles going in the same direction.

At a stretch where there were potholes full of water, I had to swerve. An American jeep behind me overtook my bike and almost collided with it. As it passed, a soldier raised his carbine and took aim at me. I do not know whether he meant it as a joke or not. I stopped the motorbike. Only when their convoy had gone some distance did I see him lower the gun.

Much later I learned that on that same day, American tanks had surrounded Bình Thới pagoda and wiped out the entire armed unit sheltering there. So Tám Tiếm and Út Đắng must have shared that fate. Tám Tiếm's wife in Hóc Môn sent word many times asking for news. Út Đắng's family was in An Tịnh. He had a sweetheart named Hoa from Đức Hòa. To this day, no one knows where they were buried.

* * *

After the first phase of Tết Mậu Thân 1968, we moved to the Gò Đen area of Long An, then called Phân khu 3, along highway 4 to better direct operations in Sài Gòn.

We rotated our office location. Sometimes we were in Phước Vân, sometimes in Long Cang or Long Định.

One day, while we were in Long Cang, the enemy launched a sweep. Our armed forces coordinated with the du kích, both fighting the sweep and providing protection.

In that area the youth were excellent. They refused to join the enemy army, and even those who were drafted sometimes escaped and came home. Such were the enemy sweeps, but whenever they slipped out of the sweep's path, the young men would find some rice wine to drink.

That day was the same. Hearing machine-gun fire at the entrance to the hamlet, we knew the sweep troops had spotted some young men in a wine shop trying to run.

The comrades told me to go down into a secret shelter dug at the edge of a dry, raised field. A security team took position along the bank of a nearby canal.

The sound of machine guns grew closer to where I sat.

I began to hear the crackling of burning grass around me. Then the sound of grass burning right above the lid of my shelter. Smoke drifted in, making it hard to breathe and stinging my eyes.

I used a dried areca spathe as a fan, waving until my arm was tired, but it did no good. I finally thought of a way. I urinated onto a cloth and used it to wipe my face so my eyes would sting less. Smoke still poured in.

After a while, the sound of burning grass died down.

I guessed the enemy had passed this spot. But strangely, the guards did not report anything. Perhaps the enemy was still lurking nearby in ambush.

I was suffocating. Perhaps I would have to throw open the lid and climb out.

Then I thought it through. The grass that had burned above the lid had turned to ash. If I opened the shelter, it would be exposed and could no longer be used, because no one could spread ash back in exactly the same way as the original layer.

As I was still hesitating, I heard noise above the lid. Then the lid was lifted from outside.

It turned out the guards had gone to check the situation and, once they were sure the enemy had pulled out, they came to call me up.

* * *

Also in Phước Vân in 1968, the family that owned the house where we stayed lived legally under the enemy administration. Even so, they let us set up our office in their home.

Without telling the owner, the guards built a secret shelter for me right in the garden.

The shelter was made from the largest kind of earthen water jar, which local people called a “mái” water jar. It was big enough for a person to slip into and sit cross-legged inside.

The area was low-lying. Each day, floodwater flowed into the ditches and then receded. To bury the “mái” in the ground, we had to fill it with water so it would sink. If we tried to bury it empty, groundwater would push it up like a floating ball, and no human effort could keep it down. Only when the soil around the jar had dried could we bail the water out. Then the “mái” would stay buried in the earth.

Every morning, we had to secretly check the shelter and bail out any water that had seeped in through the air hole. If we forgot and trouble came when the shelter was full of water, we would have to abandon it.

Sitting for long periods in such a secret shelter, you were not soaked and chilled, but your arms and legs were cramped and uncomfortable.

At that time, anh Sáu Châu was living with me.

Anh Sáu Châu was from An Nhơn in Bình Định. He had gone North in 1955 as part of the tập kết and returned to the South before I did. At the Ban An ninh Trung ương cục, I met him. He was gentle in temperament and conscientious in his work. So when I went to the Ban An ninh Khu Sài Gòn – Gia Định, I requested that he come work with me.

When he confided in me, he had a private sadness.

After the Geneva Agreement, he married and only a few days later left to tập kết. He thought he would return in two years, but more than ten years had passed. His home was right by Bình Định town, a weak area. After he reached Nam bộ, he asked people to “reach out” to his family, but no one was found. He only heard that his wife had married someone else.

At the R, he reported to the Party cell and asked permission to start a new family. The cell did not agree. The reason was that many comrades who had tập kết to the North had reported similar cases; after fellow villagers vouched for them and they remarried, they later received letters from their former wives in the South. Anh Sáu Châu respected discipline and submitted to the cell’s decision. He told me privately and swore he had no reason to lie to the organization. I could not give a different opinion, though I trusted him and felt for his situation.

Back in Củ Chi, he sometimes helped us maintain contact with inner-city bases. There was one woman cadre, gentle and kind, whose husband had been killed. Anh Sáu Châu was sometimes assigned to give her political and professional training. On one occasion, when I came to a safe house used to meet inner-city contacts, I saw the two of them talking quietly and clearly in tune with each other. I thought that if Sáu Châu were allowed, building a family with her would make a beautiful couple.

Returning to Phước Vân.

Sáu Châu had been living with me there for several months.

Once, I had to go back to Củ Chi for a meeting with the armed reconnaissance unit. Whenever I was in Phước Vân, if the enemy swept the area, I always used the secret shelter made from the “mái” water jar along the row of coconut trees and considered it the best place.

That time, because I was away, when the enemy swept the area, Sáu Châu used my shelter. The sweep lasted from morning until afternoon, and then the enemy withdrew.

From inside the secret shelter, Sáu Châu opened the lid. He had just emerged halfway, with his upper body above the ground.

Suddenly an American helicopter flew straight in from afar. No one knows whether the pilot saw anything or not, but an air-to-surface rocket exploded and flew straight into Sáu Châu. He was killed on the spot.

When I returned to Phước Vân, he was gone.

I grieved for him, not only because he had never found happiness in his private life. He was also younger than I was. How could he die before me?

More than twenty years passed.

In 1990, I finally had the chance to visit Phước Vân again.

The old lady who had housed us had died. Her daughter, chị Hai, had also passed away.

Her grandson, who had been a child then, had built a thatched house on the family land.

He showed me the "mái" I had once used as a secret shelter. He had dug it out of the ground and used it to collect rainwater for drinking.

My heart stirred. Images of those earlier years came back.

Was this water jar the very shelter that Sáu Châu used on the day of the sweep, when he died at its mouth?

If I had not gone away to that meeting, would it not have been me who took the rocket instead?

Anh Sáu Châu, many times I have told myself that you died in my place that day.

* * *

In 1970, when we were in Châu Thành, Bến Tre, one day the enemy swept Phước Thạnh commune. I was in the upper hamlet, while anh Sáu Thành's office was in the lower hamlet. Just after midday, we heard bursts of automatic fire, followed by enemy artillery into the office area.

The guards and I went down into a shelter. As I stepped down, I suddenly fainted and collapsed. Fortunately the guards pulled me back up immediately. Had I gone alone, I would have died face down in the water that nearly filled the shelter.

By late afternoon the enemy withdrew. When I returned to the office, I learned that our unit had lost six people killed that day. Later we heard that the sweep was based on an informer's tip, so the enemy had hit the office exactly. They began the sweep, then pretended to pull back to make our people relax. Sure enough, some went home to boil water, others climbed out of their shelters for fresh air. A flanking enemy unit moved in and shot anyone they saw.

Anh Sáu Thành was shot dead on the rim of a secret shelter. Beside his body and a machine-gun ammunition box, papers and documents were scattered all over the ground.

We had agreed on a system. Each person had a machine-gun ammunition box for documents. These metal boxes had very tight rubber seals. In a sweep, we buried the boxes in the mud and dug them up

afterwards to work again. Each of us then had only our weapon to fight with, and if we fell, the documents would not be lost.

I never understood why anh Sáu Thành carried his document box out to the secret shelter with him, so that when the enemy searched, they scattered everything. I would not see the consequences of this until I myself was captured.

* * *

In any case, all of the above were brushes with death at the hands of a distant enemy.

After 23 December 1970, I was unlucky enough to be captured. This time it was no longer a matter of facing the enemy from afar.

It was a direct confrontation. They used many methods to try to force from me the bases and secrets that I knew. From March to November 1971, I endured long periods of torture.

At the end of November 1971, they suddenly stopped torturing me.

Then came the 1973 Paris Agreement. But the enemy still refused to return me to our side.

On 30 April 1975, when our troops attacked Sài Gòn, a bộ đội unit freed me from the prison at 3 Bạch Đằng run by the Trung ương Tình báo of the ngụy regime.

After my release, I learned of two matters related to my life and death during my imprisonment.

First, in late 1971, our side released an American non-commissioned officer and entrusted him with a letter from the Mặt trận Dân tộc giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam, signed by anh Trần Bạch Đằng, proposing to the Americans an exchange of myself for an American officer. That was why the ngụy intelligence service had to stop torturing me from that time on. Throughout the period from late 1971 until just before 30 April 1975, I could not understand this strange change.

Second, after 30 April 1975, ngụy intelligence personnel sent to reeducation reported that on 26 April 1975, before fleeing Sài Gòn, the American CIA, through Nguyễn Khắc Bình—Đặc ủy trưởng Tình báo trung ương and concurrently Tổng Giám đốc Cảnh sát of the ngụy regime—had ordered them to kill me "quietly." But seeing that our troops were already at the gates of Sài Gòn, the lower-level staff did not dare carry out the order, fearing heavier guilt before the Cách mạng. Frank Snepp, on the other hand, wrote in his memoir published in 1977 that the CIA planned to put me on a helicopter and throw me into the East Sea. As for me, I clearly remember that at dinner on 26 April 1975, the pickled gourd soup had a strange taste, so I did not eat it and poured it all away. Whatever the real events, the outcome was that I survived.

In short, the enemy did not succeed in killing me, either physically or mentally.

A cheerful friend once remarked, "You were born in the year of the Tiger. Heaven's lightning could not kill you. How could the enemy ever kill you?"

December 11, 1997.

13. Journeys and Encounters

In mid-1950, the French army pushed outward and occupied Vân Đình and Phủ Lý, narrowing and threatening the liberated zone of Liên khu Ba on the right bank of the Red River. At the same time, they conducted heavy sweeps in the outskirts of Hà Nội, which were deep within the temporarily occupied zone; as a result, the resistance movement inside Hà Nội also showed signs of slowing down.

The Bí thư of the Đặc khu ủy Hà Nội was Trần Quốc Hoàn, who at that time used the alias Nguyễn Quang Thành. While resistance activities in Hà Nội still followed the old methods, Hoàn, a veteran revolutionary who had lived through many periods of struggle, began thinking about how to sustain and further develop the resistance movement in Hà Nội.

At that time, the Điệp báo office of the Nha Công an and the Hà Nội Tình báo unit had just been merged into Công an Hà Nội. With Nguyễn Phủ Doãn as Director of Công an, Hoàn discussed with me that I should temporarily hand over my responsibilities at the base in order to carry out a new mission assigned by the Cấp ủy.

I needed to enter the inner city so that, through contact with both organized and unorganized supporters, and through my own direct observations, I could report back to the base. These reports, together with reports from the two inner-city Quận ủy, would help the Đặc khu ủy determine whether the movement could continue under the old pattern or whether our methods needed to change.

* * *

In August 1950, Trần Hoàng Bá from the Công an liaison network arranged a secret trip for me. We crossed the Đáy River above Vân Đình at dusk. We walked through the Miêng fields in the rain—half the village Buddhist, half Catholic—then crossed road 22 above the Vác crossroads, where the French had a post. We waded through the flooded chiêm rice fields into the village of Bồ Nâu in Thanh Oai district, which was enemy-controlled but where we still had a secret base.

As soon as we arrived, we learned that the previous night the enemy had swept through the village and destroyed the secret shelter at our base house. The situation was very tangled. We needed to stay the night and all the next day, and only move onward at night toward the outskirts of Hà Nội, then enter the inner city. But it was impossible to continue that same night. The enemy knew the pattern of our night-time liaison routes into the outskirts, so they often ambushed the area between the Ngọc Hồi culvert and Văn Điển.

Seeing that the situation was unsafe, Bá insisted that I return to the liberated zone and wait for another trip. We had to leave that very night.

It was still raining. Our clothes were soaked and we shivered with cold. On the way back, we again had to wade through the chiêm fields, water up to our chests, in some places up to our necks. Each time we climbed over a field ridge, we had to scrape off the leeches clinging all over our bodies.

Near road 22, we lost our way. Fortunately, the Vác post suddenly swept a searchlight across the fields, giving us a reference to regain our direction.

By the time we reached the Miêng fields, it was already well past midnight. If we did not move quickly and cross the Đáy River before dawn, it would be dangerous.

It continued to rain. We were exhausted and sleepy. The field ridges were slippery as grease. Because our eyes could no longer distinguish the color of earth from the color of waterlogged fields, we frequently slipped and plunged into the mud.

At last, we reached the base in a weak-zone village along the Đáy River in Mỹ Đức district.

* * *

Near Tết that year, I resumed the plan to enter the inner city. This time, Bùi Đức Việt escorted me.

Having learned from the previous attempt, I discussed with Việt how we might travel in a manner different from the usual liaison routes, which the enemy already knew and often ambushed.

In the morning, from Hữu Văn village—still a liberated area of Chương Mỹ district—we crossed the river into Tốt Động village, also in Chương Mỹ but now a weak zone.

Ahead of us, a middle-aged female giao liên, living legally under enemy administration, walked some distance in front to scout for enemy presence. She carried a shoulder pole loaded with bundles, including a set of Western clothes I would later wear.

The two of us followed behind, dressed in brown peasant clothes, wearing conical hats, covered with straw rain capes, pistols and grenades tucked behind our backs.

Near noon, we reached the stone road of Quảng Bị. We sat in a cornfield to wait while the giao liên checked the situation. The northerly wind was bitterly cold. When she signaled that it was safe, we crossed the road and entered the village. From there we waded across the Đáy River into Thanh Oai district. It was the dry season, and the water only reached our calves.

On the far side of the river was the Kim Bài area. We climbed onto the dyke and could clearly see road 22—when vehicles passed and when none did. Walking straight through the fields, we crossed road 22 in broad daylight. After that the giao liên remained behind. Only the two of us continued.

That night we waded across the Cầu Chiếc River, the water icy cold. We arrived at a base to rest. The next day, before full dark, we were already near the Văn Điển area. Because we had covered so much distance earlier, we avoided passing through at the late hours when the enemy usually set ambushes for liaison groups. We could see all movement on the road clearly. And at a time when the enemy least expected it, just below Văn Điển, we crossed national road 1—but at a point different from the usual liaison path.

Our direction was toward Yên Mỹ village, but we did not enter the village. Instead we walked along the foot of the dyke straight toward Nam Dư Thượng.

Near Nam Dư, we suddenly heard drums and gongs clanging loudly. Knowing there was trouble in the village, we waited at the foot of the dyke. Near midnight, when all was quiet, we waded through fields, slipped through a bamboo hedge, and entered the house of our base contact. We learned that soldiers had entered the village earlier. We ate the last cold rice balls we had brought, then slept right there in the kitchen atop a pile of dry corn stalks—used by the family as firewood—without feeling any aches at all.

At dawn the next day, the family went to the market to buy food, pretending to prepare for a death anniversary, in order to gather information.

By early afternoon, there were no soldiers. The giao liên from that village walked ahead along the field paths, carrying her goods. I had already changed into Western clothes. Barefoot, I followed behind. When we reached Tương Mai village, I stopped by a pond to wash my feet and put on shoes. Then we went to the main road and hired a rickshaw to enter the city.

* * *

The place I needed to reach was the maternity clinic of Dr. Nguyễn Bách. There, I would meet his secretary and hand him a handwritten note. That note was the signal that would help me establish contact with Kim Tấn, a Công an officer in the inner city.

It was still raining. There were no police on the streets. The rickshaw had its canvas hood drawn tightly.

The maternity clinic was right at the Hàng Kèn slope intersection. When I arrived, I met the secretary of Dr. Bách at once. (I will call him Ba in this chapter.) He sat at a table near the entrance and invited me to sit in the chairs reserved for visitors.

Not long after, Dr. Bách asked him to accompany him somewhere.

I waited, reading almost the entire Catholic Bible placed on the guest table. Dusk was approaching, and Ba still had not returned. The midwives told me that Ba lived in the small attic room in the clinic, so it was common for him to come back late. At dinner time the midwives directed me to a stall across the street selling cơm tám and giò chả, where I had my meal. Then I came back to sit and wait. It was already late when Ba finally returned. He told me that Kim Tấn came there only once a week. He had just come the previous day. So I would have to wait until the next week.

That night Ba lay under his blanket reading secret documents by using a light bulb placed inside a punched-out condensed-milk can, both to shield the light and to warm himself.

The next day Ba told me to stay in his room. For meals I had to go out to the food stall like before. But by late afternoon, whether they sensed something or simply felt sympathetic, the midwives invited me to eat dinner with them so I would not have to go out.

* * *

If I had to wait like this for a whole week, it would be troublesome. That evening, I told Ba I wanted to go out into the streets for a while. Inside, I intended to seek contact on my own. I remembered the address of Ngọc "đen" at 110 Bovet Street (now Yết Kiêu).

Once out of sight of the maternity clinic, I hired a xích lô to Bovet Street. I walked straight into number 110. The family was having dinner—some sitting, some standing. Seeing a stranger enter suddenly, they were startled.

But I had already caught sight of Kim Tấn. He was about to slip into the back room. I softly called out. He turned and saw me. Recognizing me, he reassured the family.

After a short while, Kim Tấn took me to number 11 on today's Phan Bội Châu Street. On the rooftop was a small attic room. The owner of the house was a base contact of Ngọc "đen," and a relative of lawyer Vũ Văn Hiền, one of Hà Nội's prominent intellectuals whom the inner-city press called a "trùm chăn." The house was privately owned, but the small ground-floor rooms were rented out. This rooftop attic was where Ngọc "đen," Kim Tấn, and Phan Khắc Trình often met.

When we arrived, Ngọc "đen" was already there. He told us that Trình was expected later.

No one had imagined I would enter the inner city. They were overjoyed to see me.

That night, the four of us squeezed onto a small wooden bed. They made me recount everything about "outside." We talked until morning.

At dawn, they left one by one. Kim Tấn would inform Ba at Dr. Bách's clinic that he had already met me, so Ba would not worry. Ngọc "đen" told the host family—who were our base contacts—to let me eat with them that day.

* * *

I stayed there one day. The next evening, Ngọc "đen" took me to Wiélé Street—now Tô Hiến Thành—to the home of the Huấn Linh family, patriotic intellectuals. I played the role of a private tutor for their children. (The location is now the headquarters of Công an quận Hai Bà.)

The first night, sleeping on a mattress with a cotton blanket, I lay awake thinking of the comrades in the liberated zone and could not sleep.

* * *

At that time, several inner-city Công an personnel from Hà Nội had been arrested and turned by the enemy—men like Tốn, Hùng đen, and Hùng khoèo. They were extremely dangerous; they had identified and caused the arrest of several Hà Nội Công an officers. They knew my face very well, so the comrades decided that I should only go out onto the streets at night.

I arranged immediately to meet Trần Sâm and Tiến Đức to convey Hoàn's ideas. At that time, each of them was Bí thư of one inner-city Quận ủy.

* * *

A few days later, my meeting with Trần Sâm was arranged at the home of Lê Bằng, son-in-law of Professor Mai Phương, on Nguyễn Trãi Street (now Nguyễn Văn Tố). Bằng gave us his bed, and we talked through the night.

The next time, Sâm arranged to meet me at Bovet Street (now Yết Kiêu). This was the house of Nguyễn Văn Chế, brother-in-law of Trần Duy Hưng, the first Chairman of the Hà Nội Administrative Committee. Chế had been our Chánh Văn phòng of the Nha Công an in 1946 but was unfortunately trapped inside the city when the resistance broke out. Chế knew me. Seeing me working secretly inside the city made him both anxious for my safety and glad to see an old comrade again.

I had to arrive the night before, sleep there, meet Sâm the next day, then wait until dark to return to my own shelter.

(Later, Chế moved to the corner of today's Điện Biên Phủ and Tống Duy Tân streets, and again let us use his home as a meeting point. After 1954, Chế was admitted to the Party.)

* * *

Tiến Đức wanted me to attend a full Quận ủy meeting. So during Tết, he arranged for me to go to a house in Hàng Đũa alley (now Ngô Sĩ Liên). This house belonged to Quốc Minh, a Quận ủy member. I arrived the night before and stayed there so I could attend the meeting the next day. Quốc Minh was already waiting for me, and we both stayed the night.

That evening, just as we were about to sleep, we suddenly heard loud Western voices at the gate. The homeowner quickly helped Quốc Minh and me climb up a ladder to the attic, which had been prepared as a hiding place.

After a while, things became quiet, and the homeowner called us down. It turned out the French and Vietnamese police were raiding a gambling den in the house next door. They had no suspicion about this house.

Quốc Minh was frightened. He had arranged for me to come to his base house. If I had been caught there, he did not know how he would ever explain it to Hoàn.

* * *

However, if I wanted to make contact and understand the feelings and aspirations of base cadres and ordinary people outside the organization, always slipping around "by night" like this would never meet the Cấp ủy's requirements. So I told the comrades that they should set meetings during the day as well, and that I would still find a way to go.

After that, I was able to meet many cadres, Party members, and mass-base contacts, and at those places I sometimes talked with people outside the organization without their having any idea who I was.

The reports I sent back to Hoàn, together with those from the two Quận ủy, helped the Cấp ủy gain a much clearer view of the inner-city situation than before.

By 1952, the Đặc khu ủy decided to shift the mode of activity in inner Hà Nội, combining secret illegal work with legal and semi-legal work. This new line remained in force up to the Điện Biên campaign and the Geneva Conference on Indochina, by which time the movement had gathered new momentum.

* * *

One evening, near dusk, I was pushing my bicycle along Wiélé Street toward Phố Huế when two policemen blew their whistles and stopped me. I got off the bicycle, switched on the generator, lifted the front wheel, and spun it so the light came on. Pretending to be checked for riding without lights, I said, "It isn't dark yet, so I haven't turned on the light."

One of the policemen told me to show my identity card. He looked at my face and compared it to the photo. Then, with one finger, he flicked the photo pasted on the card. The picture stayed firmly in place. He handed the card back and told me I could go.

Later, I heard that the enemy had discovered a number of forged identity cards where the photos were stuck on with rice paste. If you flicked the photo with a finger, it would peel right off. That policeman had followed his superiors' instructions exactly, looking for fake papers.

But our "identity cards" were made with entirely genuine materials taken from the enemy: the card stock and the lead printing plates were originals from them. Our Công an base contact was a worker at the printing house that made identity cards for the Sở mật thám. After each print run for the enemy, those materials were secretly passed to us. We simply printed and forged the signatures. As for the photos, we used the same kind of glue the enemy did, so they were also firmly attached. For that reason, the enemy found them hard to detect.

* * *

Around this time, I met Dr. Phạm Khắc Quảng.

Quảng had been labeled by the enemy as a "trùm chăn" intellectual. In reality, he did not "hide under the blanket" but actively supported the Kháng chiến. I will not recount here all his dedicated activities while living in enemy-controlled areas, activities that later led to his being Chairman of the Uỷ ban Mặt trận Tổ quốc of Hà Nội after the liberation of the capital.

I will only tell of my first visit to him at his bookstore on Tràng Thi Street. The day we had arranged happened to be the day Bảo Đại came to Hà Nội. Police guarded the streets, including the length of Tràng Thi. Even so, I went to the shop. Quảng calmly and cheerfully led me into a back room to talk.

Through later meetings, I learned that, at that time, few people could have imagined that in his home he kept a secret bookcase full of prohibited books in French, many of them published by the French Communist Party. Because he ran a bookshop and received shipments from France, those banned books were "mixed in" with regular books inside the crates. Quảng showed me, and lent me to read, journals and books such as Littérature Soviétique (Soviet Literature), La Chute de Paris (The Fall of Paris), La Tempête (The Tempest), and L'étoile (The Star), which would not have been easy to find even in the liberated zones where I had been working.

* * *

In mid-1951, we managed to bring a radio transmitter–receiver into inner Hà Nội and set up an operator for it.

Then one day I received a radio message from Hoàn, calling me back to the base on urgent business, with the instruction that I should return to inner Hà Nội immediately afterward.

By then, our secret liaison routes had been repeatedly attacked and could not be used. Even if they could, there would be no way to guarantee the timing spelled out in Hoàn's message.

I discussed the matter with Trình, Ngọc "đen," and Kim Tấn, and we agreed the only option was to travel openly. We decided that Hương Kế, a trusted and experienced giao liên, would guide me. We would use a car borrowed from a base contact, with a reliable driver who was also with us. The route would go past the Đại Ơn post, across the Bùi River toward Tiến Văn and Hữu Văn, where a liaison station existed, and from there on to Hoàn's base on road 21.

I reported to Hoàn by radio that I would arrive on time.

One summer morning, a car took me to Hàng Bồ Street, where we entered a large shop. Ngọc "đen" was already waiting inside.

A few minutes later, a touring car arrived. On board, besides Hương Kế, were several small children. When I got in, all the seats were filled. She had prepared paper horses, paper hats, incense, and votive offerings in a large basket.

The car went through Hà Đông town straight toward Hòa Bình. After Mai Lĩnh, we reached the Đại Ơn church, where there was a notorious French post, and the car stopped. We both got out, and the car immediately turned back to Hà Nội.

The post commander at Đại Ơn was a red-faced Frenchman with a thick beard and a pipe clenched in his mouth, standing in front of the post.

We walked straight toward him, our arms full of paper horses, paper hats, and votive offerings. I greeted him, "Bonjour Monsieur." Then we walked past him. He said nothing at all. One stage of the journey was safely behind us.

From there, we cut across the fields toward the river. Seeing no reaction behind us, we kept going until we reached Dót Dét village by the riverbank. In the hamlet, we inquired about the situation and learned it was calm. We went down to the ferry landing and crossed the river to Tiến Văn and Hữu Văn, villages in the liberated zone of Chương Mỹ district. Bá was waiting for me there.

Hương returned via Quảng Bị on her way back to the inner city to report that the trip had gone smoothly.

From Tiến Văn and Hữu Văn, following the Chân Chim and Đồng Mít route, we reached Miếu Môn on road 21, and that very night I arrived at Hoàn's base.

He had just come back from a meeting with higher-level leaders. He briefed me on the plan to open the Hà Nam Ninh campaign (Hà Nam, Nam Định, Ninh Bình), while deceiving the enemy into thinking we would attack toward Ứng Hòa and Mỹ Đức in Hà Đông province.

Công an in the inner city, together with the Quận ủy, were tasked with regularly and promptly reporting on the movement of enemy troops and weapons. The Quận ủy and other sectors were also to prepare propaganda for the coming victories.

The next morning I again took road 21 up to Miếu Môn to return to the inner city.

But this time it would not do to pass via Đại Ơn again.

So we chose the Chuông market route. Làng Chuông lies just below Đôn Thư—my mother's native village—so I knew the roads, though I still had to be careful around those who might recognize my face.

Our plan was to cross the Đáy River into Viên Nội village, where we had a liaison base. From there, a giao liên would guide me openly to road 22. After that, I would go on my own, taking a public bus to Hà Đông and then a city bus to Hà Nội.

From Miếu Môn, our first stage was to reach Phú Khê and Phú Hữu, a village on the Đáy River in Mỹ Đức district, opposite Viên Nội in Ứng Hòa. When we arrived, the villagers told us that for several days in a row, Senegalese soldiers had been deployed and spread out along the Viên Nội dyke, thoroughly checking everyone who went to the river.

We used binoculars to see for ourselves and confirmed what the villagers had said. Watching all day, we saw squads of Senegalese soldiers moving downstream, spreading along the dyke to lie in ambush for several hours. When they withdrew, they went back the same way, and once one squad had left, another came to replace it. This went on day and night.

Remembering the failed liaison trip in 1950, Bá grew very uneasy.

I reassured him, saying, "If we keep observing, we will eventually find a gap in their deployment."

Sure enough, after a day of observation, we saw that each ambush squad left at a fixed time, with a gap before the replacement squad arrived. Timing it, we found that the ground was left empty for about ten to fifteen minutes.

I asked Bá and Bôn, the liaison team leader with bases in Viên Nội, whether that amount of time was enough to wade the river, cross the dyke, and reach the hamlet where our base was.

We analyzed further. If we chose midday, the soldiers would be hungry; the outgoing squad would likely leave early, and the incoming squad, having just eaten, would dawdle. The gap might be even

longer. Moreover, since their deployment began, they had not once had to open fire, so they probably believed that nothing was happening and had grown complacent.

After careful calculation, we decided it was possible.

The next day at noon, we carried out our plan. Everything unfolded as expected.

Once inside the village, a female giao liên led me along the fields between Viên Nội and Chuông. Some people were returning home from Chuông market at the same time. We reached road 22 safely. Just then, a bus from Vân Đình to Hà Đông arrived, and I got on.

Passing Bình Đà, I saw large enemy tanks lined up side by side under the trees. I smiled to myself and thought, "They have taken the bait and are reinforcing the wrong sector."

At Thạch Bích, where there was a notoriously brutal post, the bus stopped. Passengers had to get off and present their papers to the secret police. That day I wore large dark glasses like those used by many mật vụ in Hà Nội. I walked straight up beside the men checking papers, stood with my hands on my hips, and pretended to peer at the passengers' documents as they passed. When the last passenger had been checked, I casually climbed back onto the bus.

Not one of the secret policemen checked my papers.

At the Hà Đông bus terminal, I changed to a large city bus to Hà Nội. By then it was late afternoon, and the bus was already packed.

When we reached the Cửa Nam terminal, now on Hai Bà Trưng Street, I got off and walked some distance to shake off any possible tail. Feeling that all was clear, I turned into Ngọc "đen"'s base at 11 Phan Bội Châu Street. I left a brief note there to summon the comrades for an urgent meeting, then waited for nightfall and took a xích lô back to my lodgings.

We had one base contact working at the Đồn Thủy military hospital (now the 108 Hospital). Wounded and sick enemy soldiers from all over the North were sent there, so our contact could grasp very accurately how the enemy's forces were deployed throughout the region. We also had another base contact working as a clerk in the Intendance (French army logistics), so we knew exactly which units were being supplied with weapons and ammunition.

Within just a few days, by radio, we had sent all the necessary information to Hoàn.

There is no need to recall in detail the Hà Nam Ninh victory in 1951, where General de Lattre's son was killed in action. I will only add one small, unexpected story of my own.

Some time later, Kim Tấn told me that on the day I rode the bus from Hà Đông to Hà Nội, an old acquaintance of mine from years before had been on the same bus. He was now a mật thám. He had recognized me and later told a friend that he did not want to report my presence because he knew my family. That friend then informed Kim Tấn and warned that, if I really was in the inner city, I should be extremely careful.

It gave me quite a scare.

* * *

Yet even that was not as strange as another encounter I had that same year, right in the heart of Hà Nội.

As part of a program to study the women's movement in the markets, I went one day to meet a woman base cadre at her home near the cemetery area, on what is now Nguyễn Công Trứ Street. (The cemetery has since been cleared and replaced by an apartment complex.) The house shared a common gate with several other small houses, each with a different owner. I had been there once before, so I knew the way and did not need to ask.

At the appointed time, I pushed my bicycle through the gate. Before I reached the cadre's house, I met a man pushing his bicycle out. We arrived at the gate at the same moment.

I was jolted. His name was V. He had worked at the Sở Công an Bắc bộ in 1945–46. For some time we had had word that he had "dinh tê" and was now a mật thám. He knew me very well from my days at the Sở Công an.

He had already seen me and stopped his bicycle. But he stammered, "Who… who are you here to see? I… I'm not home…!"

I did not answer. If I had spoken, it would have been even easier for him to confirm my identity.

He finished his sentence, then pushed his bicycle out the gate and rode off.

I quickly analyzed the situation. His panic meant he was afraid of me. He surely knew that I now headed the Công an Kháng chiến, the force that had eliminated Việt gian inside this very city. Fearing me, he had left immediately. He might still go and report to the secret police.

I went straight to the cadre's house, explained what had just happened, and told her how to respond if questioned. Then I rode out to Phố Huế, blending into the crowd, and turned into one or two side streets to see if anyone was tailing me. Seeing nothing suspicious, I stopped at another base and waited until night to return home.

Later, the cadre sent word that V. had asked her whether anyone had come to her house that day. She told him no, and deliberately suggested that anyone he might have seen had probably come to collect payments at some other house in the alley.

* * *

Afterwards, I often thought about why, on two occasions, enemy agents who knew exactly who I was had either panicked or not dared to have me arrested on the spot.

I can only explain it through another story, also true.

In 1948, the Nha Công an invited the poet Lan Sơn to write about Công an work. He spent some time working with us at Công an Hà Nội.

By 1952, I was informed that Lan Sơn had returned to the inner city and was teaching at a private school called Minh Tân. At that time, Trần Vân, a Công an officer from Hà Nội, was "going social" to work under legal cover in the inner city. I arranged for him to study at Hàn Thuyên School while also taking a job, which turned out to be at Minh Tân. (Trần Vân later became a Đại tá An ninh and is now retired.)

At that time, I was still in charge of Công chức vận—work among civil servants—in the inner city. I thought we might persuade Lan Sơn to take part in our efforts, because I believed he was not opposed to the Cách mạng.

I wrote him a personal letter and asked Trần Vân to deliver it, proposing a meeting. He agreed, and gave me the address of his rented room on the upper floor of a house on Quán Thánh Street.

On the appointed night, in the rain, I rode there by bicycle. After I entered the room, Lan Sơn stepped out onto the balcony to look around, then came back in. Before we talked about anything else, he asked his first question in French: "Tu as ton garde-corps là-bas?"

By that he meant, "You have your bodyguard nearby, don't you?" He clearly assumed that, as a senior Công an cadre, I must have such protection.

I did not answer. It was better to let him feel reassured.

In reality, revolutionaries working underground in enemy territory could not possibly have a bodyguard tagging along everywhere they went.

* * *

Still, those two chance encounters with known enemy agents who either panicked or did not dare report me could not be explained by any scruples on their part. The explanation must be similar to what lay behind Lan Sơn's question.

In other words, they assumed that I always had a bodyguard with me. If they made a move against me, they would be the first to suffer the consequences.

* * *

Such was the way the people living under enemy control sheltered and helped me.

And such was the protective force of the Kháng chiến, even in the enemy's own stronghold.

* * *

In my thoughts, I always cherish a vivid image of the Công an giao liên fighters, both men and women, in those years of Kháng chiến.

Hà Nội, 6 September 1996

Footnotes

(1) Dốc Hàng Kèn: The section of Bà Triệu Street between Trần Hưng Đạo and Nguyễn Du.

(2) "Dinh tê": In the context of the Kháng chiến, "dinh tê" meant leaving the resistance zones to return to areas under French control, or going back into the "thành," that is, the towns and lowland cities.

14. A Struggle

Trần Quốc Hoàn was reassigned by the Central Committee to serve as Vice Minister of Thứ bộ Công an. So Lê Thanh Nghị, then Bí thư Liên khu ủy Ba, concurrently served as Bí thư Đặc khu ủy Hà Nội. The Standing Committee of Đặc khu Hà Nội, around 1954, was headquartered in the Xích Thổ area, now Hoàng Long district.

Around June 1954, a representative of the Central Committee arrived in Liên khu Ba and convened a meeting with delegates from Khu Tả Ngạn and Đặc khu Hà Nội. The purpose was to inform us about the upcoming Geneva Agreement, particularly the temporary division of Việt Nam into two regions.

The Geneva Agreement was signed. The French military immediately withdrew from Nam Định and Phủ Lý. Trần Quốc Hoàn sent a telegram assigning me to meet Công an Khu Tả Ngạn and Hải Phòng to relay several operational directives.

Just as I returned to our unit, the Standing Committee instructed us to relocate the entire base to the area along Route 1, within the districts of Phú Xuyên and Thường Tín. We had barely finished the move when another directive arrived: I was to join the Hà Nội delegation going up to Việt Bắc to attend a training course in preparation for taking over Hà Nội.

The site chosen was the cải cách ruộng đất school in Đại Từ district. There I met Trần Danh Tuyên, newly appointed as Bí thư Thành ủy Hà Nội by the Central Committee. We were discussing the course curriculum when one day Tuyên and I were told to report to the Ban Bí thư Trung ương Đảng for instructions.

When we arrived, we ran into Song Hào and Lê Quang Đạo. They were working with the Central Joint Commission for the Ceasefire, headed by Văn Tiến Dũng on the Vietnamese side. That noon, I was ordered to follow Song Hào and Lê Quang Đạo to receive a new assignment.

I already knew Song Hào from Tân Trào before the August Revolution. As for Lê Quang Đạo, he had been Bí thư Thành ủy Hà Nội, and I had worked with him for many years. Carrying nothing prepared, I rode with them in a jeep toward Phủ Lỗ on the Thái Nguyên road.

That evening, Văn Tiến Dũng assigned the tasks.

Only then did I learn that the Geneva Agreement contained a provision unprecedented anywhere in the world. Two countries at war, once agreeing to a ceasefire, were to transfer cities to each other peacefully.

Văn Tiến Dũng tasked me to work directly with Lê Quang Đạo to study the Agreement in preparation for negotiations with the French. For Hà Nội, the Agreement included military transfer and administrative transfer.

After hearing my assessment, Văn Tiến Dũng approved the proposal to withdraw Trần Vỹ—also from Thành ủy Hà Nội—who had been assigned to the Hà Văn Lâu delegation inside Hà Nội, and bring him back to the Central Joint Commission. That way, Thành ủy Hà Nội had two members participating here: Trần Vỹ for military transfer, and I for administrative transfer.

The subcommittee for Hà Nội under the Central Joint Commission consisted essentially of two working teams: one for military transfer, one for administrative transfer. The military transfer involved mapping out the withdrawal schedule of French forces and defining the lines our forces would move to. The administrative transfer, as written in the Geneva Agreement, consisted of only a few sentences,

including the key points “ensure administrative continuity” and “an advance administrative team shall enter first.”

The French side assigned De Bresson, legal adviser of the French Embassy in Sài Gòn. I returned to Thành ủy to request several specialists from various sectors who were attending the training course.

Upon return, I learned that the Central Committee had reassigned Trần Quốc Hoàn to serve as Bí thư Thành ủy Hà Nội. He assigned to me lawyer Dương Văn Đàm for legal expertise, along with several others—I still remember Bùi Văn Các—each with specialized knowledge.

At the first joint meeting, both sides admitted frankly that nothing like this had ever happened anywhere in the world. We asked the other to present their views first. Văn Tiến Dũng had already instructed me to let the French speak first, so we could study their position and refine our own accordingly.

During negotiations, Thành ủy Hà Nội continually sent me reports from the inner city. We learned that, besides forcibly moving civilians south, the French were also shipping large quantities of machinery, documents, and equipment from offices to the South. Meanwhile, the workers and staff under our influence were hiding items so they could be returned after liberation.

Studying the Geneva text, I saw clearly the clause requiring “no interruption to administrative work.” In meetings, I strongly criticized the French for violating the Agreement. At first they denied it, but eventually they admitted it—though they argued that only regularly operating offices had to comply.

I pointed out that the only intermittently operating office in any country is the National Assembly—yet Hà Nội had no National Assembly building. I told De Bresson: “You are the legal adviser of the French Embassy, and you make such a statement. I ask permission to broadcast your words on radio.”

Knowing they would be disgraced if we publicized it, the French returned to the next session saying they “did not oppose compensation for removed assets” and blamed “forces beyond their control.” Seizing on that, I insisted that this position be written into the administrative transfer agreement.

As for the “advance administrative team,” neither side yet knew what it would entail. We kept the wording straight from the Geneva Agreement. But when it came to implementation, the French asked us to specify our plan. I said we would send a small group about ten days in advance. They agreed.

However, when Công an Hà Nội compiled a list from the city’s telephone directory showing hundreds of agencies, Thành ủy instructed me to raise the number to several dozen. The French again agreed.

Right before signing the agreement, Thành ủy instructed me to raise it again—this time to over one hundred people—to ensure each office had at least one or two staff members. At the meeting, I told the French, “We have a minor supplementary detail,” and they agreed to hear it. When I presented the need for over one hundred personnel, they said they needed approval from higher-ups—but finally agreed. After all, the whole matter had no precedent in the world.

In the final days of drafting and signing, the French attempted a few last disturbances, but finally the agreement was signed. That same afternoon, the advance administrative team departed for Hà Nội.

Around one hundred specialists had gathered at Phủ Lỗ. We briefed them on the agreement and emphasized the importance of creating handover minutes at each office, with attached asset inventories. Thành ủy Hà Nội appointed Trần Danh Tuyên—then Phó Bí thư Thành ủy and officially Vice Chairman of the Military Administration Committee—as head of the team; I was deputy.

Doctor Hoàng Đình Cầu was tasked with securing accommodations for the whole group. He proposed using the De Lanessan Hospital—now Military Hospital 108—because all French wounded had already left; the buildings were spacious and only needed cleaning. His suggestion was approved.

On the evening of 2 October 1954, French transport trucks carried our advance team from Phủ Lỗ into Hà Nội. They did this because the agreement had only just been signed that afternoon, and because bringing us in at night reduced negative political impact for them.

Beginning 3 October 1954, our specialists were escorted to Hà Nội's administrative offices. Workers and staff there helped us by providing original inventory lists. We required the French to produce current lists for comparison, forming the basis for future compensation claims. We also used the telephone network—already under our quiet control—to coordinate between offices and our team at De Lanessan Hospital. By 9 October 1954, the work was complete.

On 10 October 1954, everyone knew what would happen next.

Immediately after the liberation of Hà Nội, I was assigned to continue working at the Central Joint Commission for the Ceasefire. My tasks included drafting the agreement on the 300-day transition zone, and working on the compensation subcommittee.

As my duties in Hà Nội increased, I eventually handed the compensation work over to Dương Văn Đàm, who continued until the French finally signed compensation documents worth several million French francs—I no longer remember the exact amount.

* * *

Forty years have passed. Our first daughter, born during that time, was named Hòa Bình. She turns forty this year.

I still remember that after 19 December 1946, there was a song that ended with the words: "Tomorrow we will return to the Capital…"

Those children of Hà Nội, those who fought for Hà Nội and for the whole country, kept their pledge from the first day of the national resistance against French colonial invasion.

That night of 2 October 1954, in the trucks carrying the advance administrative team into Hà Nội, many quietly wept on the road back to the city—before the official takeover.

Hà Nội, 1994

(1) Thứ bộ Công an was the initial name for the Nha Công an, split off from the old Bộ Nội vụ. Only in late August 1953 was it renamed Bộ Công an.

15. Administrative Transfer and the Takeover of Hải Phòng

According to the Geneva Agreement, after the takeover of Hà Nội and Hải Dương, the final stage was the takeover of the 300-day zone, including the port city of Hải Phòng. The takeover of the 300-day zone and Hải Phòng carried significant meaning. As Hồ Chủ tịch once wrote: in the past we had only the night, now we have the day; before we had mountains and forests, now we have the sea.

* * *

After completing my assignment for the takeover of Hải Dương, I thought I would finally return to the responsibilities assigned to me in Thành ủy Hà Nội. Unexpectedly, I received instructions from the Ban Bí thư to continue working with the Uỷ ban Liên hiệp đình chiến trung ương on preparations for the takeover of the 300-day zone and the city of Hải Phòng.

The Uỷ ban Liên hiệp đình chiến headquarters had already moved from Phủ Lỗ to the area below Phú Thái railway station on the Hà Nội–Hải Phòng line. The Vietnamese delegation was headed by Văn Tiến Dũng. The French delegation was led by General De Brébisson.

Throughout the resistance war against the French, I had worked in Hà Nội, so I was familiar with the situation and the work there. As for Hải Phòng, I only had a few childhood memories, and later learned more through friends, but I did not truly understand the city in depth.

At this time, reports from the local Đảng bộ to our delegation at the Uỷ ban Liên hiệp đình chiến indicated that the French side was trying to move office property and government assets to the South; even some property belonging to Hà Nội was still being held at Hải Phòng Port. These actions violated the Geneva Agreement. If the struggle over the transfer of Hải Phòng was handled well, it would benefit not only Hải Phòng but also Hà Nội.

Following the Central Committee's instructions, the steering committee for the struggle and takeover of the 300-day zone and Hải Phòng was chaired by Đỗ Mười, Bí thư Khu ủy Tả Ngạn. He summoned me, along with Nguyễn Khai. Under his assignment, I was responsible for the negotiations at the Uỷ ban Liên hiệp đình chiến in order to reach an agreement on the administrative transfer of Hải Phòng, as had been achieved in Hà Nội.

At that time, the Khu ủy Tả Ngạn was based in Hải Dương. The Standing Committee of Thành ủy Hải Phòng was located south of Phú Lương Bridge. I met with Hoàng Mậu, Trần Kiên, and Tô Duy to discuss Hải Phòng's situation, and also worked with Khu Công an to help form Công an Hải Phòng.

Each day, I and several comrades who had experience drafting the administrative transfer agreement for Hà Nội went to the Uỷ ban Liên hiệp đình chiến headquarters to work with the French on the new document.

When preparing for Hà Nội, the French had sent a legal adviser from their Embassy in Sài Gòn to negotiate with me, and later even added a technical adviser from the French Embassy in the United States. They all said that nowhere in the world had warring parties ever peacefully handed over cities to each other, as stipulated in the Geneva Agreement.

But for Hải Phòng, perhaps believing they now had experience, they assigned only a lieutenant colonel of the French expeditionary army to represent them. He came from a noble family, was arrogant by habit, but in fact understood very little and likely just followed orders, making the work unnecessarily complicated.

In the administrative transfer agreement for Hà Nội, after intense struggle, the French had been forced to accept a clause on compensation for removed assets—a development beyond the Geneva Agreement. For Hải Phòng, this became the most contentious point. The French refused to recognize the precedent of Hà Nội. Our side insisted. All other issues were settled; only this point was deadlocked.

One day, the head of the French delegation asked Văn Tiến Dũng for permission for De Bresson—the same person who had negotiated with me about Hà Nội—to meet privately with me to discuss the difficulties. Văn Tiến Dũng agreed. Bùi Văn Các and I met De Bresson. It was only an exchange of positions, not a negotiation. But shortly afterward, the administrative transfer agreement for Hải Phòng was signed.

I reported the results to the steering committee. Đỗ Mười decided we had to quickly organize the advance administrative teams to take over in the sequence of the French withdrawal—from Móng Cái, then Hồng Gai and Quảng Yên, and only then Hải Phòng; Đồ Sơn being the final point from which the French would depart entirely from the North.

Following the experience of Hà Nội, all departments of Khu Tả Ngạn were responsible for forming the administrative apparatus in Hải Phòng, from which selected personnel would be placed in the advance teams.

At the same time, under a decision of the Ban Bí thư Trung ương Đảng, a new Thành ủy of Hải Phòng was formed, along with the Uỷ ban quân quản and Uỷ ban Hành chính Hải Phòng. Central-level cadres assisting with the takeover included Lý Ban, Hoàng Sâm, and myself, who was also appointed to the new Thành ủy.

At a meeting point in Đông Triều district—with Đỗ Mười present—I briefed several comrades of the former Hồng Quảng region on the content of the administrative transfer agreement for the 300-day zone, highlighting points requiring strong struggle and methods that would ensure the greatest advantage for us.

After that, together with Hoàng Mậu and Tô Duy in Hải Dương, we formed the advance administrative teams for Hải Phòng. The members were fully briefed on the agreement, on the key issues specific to Hải Phòng, and on how to rely on local workers and staff to ensure solid, documented handovers at every office.

According to the agreement, the advance teams would enter Hải Phòng ten days before the official takeover. To ensure local familiarity, Đỗ Mười assigned Hoàng Mậu, Tô Duy, and me as the leadership group for the advance teams, with me as the head. Tô Duy went in advance to choose a place for the teams to stay.

To house about one hundred people and keep them separate from the population, the French assigned the old Bouet military camp near the port, now empty, for our accommodation.

To move all personnel into Hải Phòng, many trucks were needed. We had recently received several large and well-made buses from Czechoslovakia, and we decided that specialized staff would ride in the trucks, while the Czech buses would carry the kitchen workers with their pots, pans, and baskets. We wanted the people of the city to see that under our system, ordinary laborers were respected. Indeed, when the convoy entered Hải Phòng, crowds poured out to watch and talked excitedly.

During the Hà Nội takeover, our advance teams had stayed inside Đồn Thủy hospital (now Military Hospital 108), where we used the telephone system to coordinate. In Hải Phòng, the French—citing

security—demanded escorts for any movement and provided no telephone connections in the old camp. Each team had to manage its own work on the ground. Fortunately, we were well prepared from the Hà Nội experience, so the teams knew how to struggle effectively, rely on local staff, prepare thorough handover minutes, list missing assets, and force the opposing officers to sign. In this, the contributions of local unions were significant.

* * *

On 13 May 1955, our army entered the city. Along with other civilian sectors, they took over the offices and institutions where our advance teams were already waiting.

By noon, our forces and civilian personnel had completed the takeover of Hải Phòng. The last French units withdrew through Đồ Sơn and departed by the military port.

The North of our country was completely free of colonial forces.

The entire city seemed to glow with the red flag bearing the gold star. For countless people, a new life was beginning. The revolution of our entire nation had entered a new phase.

* * *

The return of the beloved children of the largest port city in the North had become a reality. After so many difficult years—from Đèo Voi to the enemy's rear areas in Tả Ngạn, and for some, clinging to life inside the occupied city—their faith and love for Thành Tô had sustained them, and now they stood on the streets of Hải Phòng as victors.

May 1995

16. My First Trips Abroad

My father told me this:

After 1955, the Hội Nhà văn Việt Nam began engaging in international activities. My father represented our Association at the Asian–African Writers' Conference held in India.

At that time, Nguyễn Cơ Thạch was serving as the Consul General of Việt Nam in India, and he assisted the delegation of the Hội Nhà văn Việt Nam with much valuable experience in international work.

Our Writers' Association had no English-speaking member to accompany the delegation. So our Consulate General in India had to provide an interpreter to help my father communicate with writers from Asia and Africa.

Many foreign writers gave my father books as keepsakes. My father brought home a scarf from the Burmese Writers' Association, covered with signatures of many writers attending the Conference; to this day, some of those signatures remain visible. One African painter gave my father several small color paintings of African figures on cardboard; when he returned home he hung them in his room, and they still exist.

When meeting several Chinese writers, although my father did not speak Chinese, he knew enough classical chữ Nho to express himself, so the two sides could converse through "written dialogue."

He said: "When reading my speech at the Conference, I only had to read the first few sentences. Then the interpreter read the entire English translation that had been prepared in advance. Near the end, I only needed to read the last few lines myself." My father called that the way of working he enjoyed most.

* * *

My father also told this story:

In 1960, the Soviet Writers' Union invited him for a visit. It was his first time in the Soviet Union, and everything felt new.

At that time, Nicolin had already learned Vietnamese in order to study Vietnamese literature. He had translated several of my father's short stories into Russian and published them there. In that collection was a story titled "Đàn bà là giống yếu." The illustrator drew a very large, round woman on the cover. Anyone who saw it could not help laughing. My father brought a copy home. (Later I gave it to a Russian friend working in Hà Nội at the time, so he could read it for amusement when homesick.)

When my father worked with the Soviet Writers' Union, Nicolin served as interpreter. They also spoke directly in Vietnamese, so they could talk deeply about literature.

In Việt Nam back then, we were not familiar with certain Soviet practices. My father was invited to speak on Radio Moscow. Afterward, they immediately paid him an honorarium as if for publication. And for the stories that Nicolin had translated and published, when my father arrived in the Soviet Union they handed him a substantial payment in roubles. Buying gifts for the family used only a little of it; the remaining roubles he could not bring home.

So my father invited his Soviet writer friends—whom he met during that visit—out to the Bắc Kinh Hotel in Moscow for a banquet. He simply handed over all the remaining roubles to the restaurant so

that the entire group could “eat through” the amount. After the meal, one Russian friend said he had never in his life spent that much money on a single banquet.

Then one day, an officer from the Vietnamese Embassy in the Soviet Union came. He said that Hồ Chủ tịch had instructed him to bring the Embassy car to pick my father up and take him immediately to where Hồ Chủ tịch was staying.

Hồ Chủ tịch was attending a Communist Party conference there. My father could not imagine what could be so urgent that Bác would summon him.

He asked, but even the Embassy officer did not know the reason.

My father worried—had he said something inappropriate on the radio? But once Bác had called, he had to go.

He arrived, met Bác, and was invited to sit.

He asked, “Why did you send for me?”

Bác replied: “I read the newspapers every day. I saw in the ‘Visitors’ column that you had arrived in Moscow. I happened to be free today, so I asked them to bring you over to visit.”

Hearing that, my father felt all the cold in his body leave him. Bác, despite so much work, never missed reading the daily newspaper, and noticed even a tiny announcement.

My father realized that meeting one’s countrymen abroad is always a joy for anyone.

At the same time, he found himself quietly amused. To Bác, meeting a writer was something ordinary, done with simple warmth. Yet just moments before, he himself had been so frightened—almost out of his wits.

Hà Nội, 12 September 1996

17. Protecting Uncle Hồ on His Visits to Southeast Asia

In 1958, Bác Hồ visited India and Burma (now Myanmar). In early 1959, Bác visited Indonesia.

Knowing Bác's temperament, Prime Minister Nehru instructed the Protocol Department of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that no rigid ceremonial procedures would work on Ho Chi Minh. And indeed, that was true.

During the visit to Nehru's private residence, on the way back to the Presidential Palace (where Bác was staying), the motorcade suddenly stopped. No one understood what had happened. Then they saw Bác step out of the car, right in the middle of the street. This stretch of road was not far from the back gate of the Presidential Palace. And so Bác simply walked. Indian people along the road poured out to greet and cheer him. Upon reaching the back gate, Bác walked straight in, passed the canvas tents of the Indian guard units, and turned aside to visit them. The guards were completely taken by surprise. Everyone was deeply moved by Bác's attention. The unit commander, his eyes almost welling with tears, said to a cadre of our delegation: "Truly great, and yet truly simple."

In New Delhi, there was an ancient tower of considerable height. Our security staff inspected it beforehand and found that reaching the top required climbing roughly a hundred worn and narrow steps. Even healthy people would feel exhausted. So when Bác arrived, they suggested he only observe from below. But Bác brushed it aside and said that having come, he should climb all the way up—slowly would be fine. And Bác began his ascent.

At the top, Bác stepped out onto the viewing platform. Down below, a large crowd of Indians had gathered after learning that President Ho Chi Minh was visiting the tower. From above, Bác waved. The cheers erupted loudly.

When Bác descended, our security staff worried constantly he might slip. The steps were narrow, and there was no way to support him safely. So one person went ahead to receive him from below, and another followed behind. But Bác simply said, "Don't worry. I can manage."

Eventually, Bác reached the ground. The Indian crowd surged in to greet him again, cheering until the motorcade finally drove away from the area.

At a public meeting, Bác readily answered questions. Someone asked: "What does it mean to reunify Vietnam by peaceful means?" Bác answered immediately: "It means that Vietnamese from both the North and the South sit down together to discuss the affairs of the country." The audience burst into applause.

At a press conference, the number of reporters exceeded the organizers' expectations, so there were not enough chairs. Bác asked everyone to move the chairs aside. Then Bác sat directly on the floor and told the reporters to do the same. That way, everyone had a place to sit. The reporters laughed happily—Bác's spontaneous idea satisfied everyone. The press conference happened in this manner, something never before seen in the world for a head of state.

In Burma, visitors to the Shwedagon Pagoda, and in Indonesia, visitors to Borobudur Temple, all had to remove their shoes. Most people spent a long time untying their shoes and socks. Bác, wearing his usual rubber sandals from home, slipped them off instantly. Reporters traveling with the delegation seized the rare moment to photograph and film Bác's sandals—both the sandals themselves and the way he removed and put them back on. No other head of state in the world had sandals like these.

During the visit to Indonesia, right after arriving in Jakarta and before any official program began, Bác asked to tour the city incognito. The Indonesian side had assigned three military officers—one from the Navy, one from the Army, one from the Air Force—to accompany him. But Bác said he needed only one, so the Air Force lieutenant colonel took him. While passing a canal in the capital, they happened to see a man relieving himself in the open. Bác saw this; the lieutenant colonel turned red with embarrassment. But Bác immediately remarked, in essence, that developing a country in all aspects required immense effort and time. The lieutenant colonel later wrote a memoir-style piece recounting this, expressing his deep emotion at Bác's understanding, saying Bác's words erased all his embarrassment.

Also in Indonesia, when visiting the port city of Surabaya, after an exhausting program and a late-night banquet and performance, the hosts urged Bác to rest. But Bác wished to make a quiet visit to the residence of the local Islamic Sultan. The hosts were caught off guard, but since it was the guest's request, they arranged it. They called for the security team and escort cars, but Bác refused, saying only one vehicle was needed. They had no choice but to comply.

Thus, in a single car, Bác sat in the back with the Indonesian Air Force lieutenant colonel as guide and interpreter; one of our security officers sat beside them; and in the front seat, along with the driver, two of our security cadres squeezed into one seat. The car drove a long, winding route until they reached a walled compound—the residence of the Sultan. It was past midnight when they returned.

The next morning, Bác and the delegation continued their schedule, flying on to visit Bali.

September 5, 1995

18. Cipher Service in the Struggle Against Special Forces Infiltration

The years around 1960 were the time when Mỹ–Diệm in the South shouted slogans about "marching North" and "filling the Bến Hải River." At the same time, they began sending groups of commando–spies into the North. According to the analysis and directives of the Secretariat of the Central Committee at that time, these commando units were not only meant for reconnaissance or material sabotage. They were also intended to provoke reactionary elements inside the North, preparing for a real invasion of our territory. Therefore, a wide mass–movement had to be launched to raise vigilance and mobilize the population against commando infiltration throughout the North.

* * *

I will not recount here the vast public movement for vigilance against commandos. I will focus only on the professional struggle of our Công an—an essential component of the overall movement—during those years.

* * *

Capturing commando agents and bringing them to public trial—to alert the masses and expose the enemy—was painstaking but not difficult. The real problem was: how could we continue uncovering their plans, intentions, and methods? That responsibility belonged to Công an. When we had not yet obtained information from other sources, counterintelligence had to attempt what it could. Through various investigation files, we had already deepened our understanding of the enemy.

Based on general counterintelligence experience and earlier investigation cases, the Ministry's leadership directed us to open special long–term operations against commando groups. These operations differed from ordinary cases.

Each captured agent had to be fully interrogated on missions, areas of operation, radio procedures, intelligence methods, sabotage skills, recruitment, and organizational structure. Most importantly, we had to extract precise information on safety codes, alarm signals, and emergency protocols assigned to each group—so that if their commanders suspected anything, we could detect it.

We would then use the enemy's own radios—those issued to the commando teams—to communicate with their headquarters. We would feed them fabricated reports consistent with the missions originally assigned. Through this, we would continue to uncover the enemy's intentions.

To do so, at minimum we had to persuade or control the group's radio operator, using him as the one to tap out the transmissions. We could not substitute him with our own operators. The enemy had recorded onto tape the rhythm and "handwriting" of each radio operator—much like each person's unique handwriting.

If other members of the captured group were willing to surrender and "atone by merit," that was even better. They could help draft the reports using their own writing style and level of literacy—far more convincing than if we wrote them ourselves. (Later our comrades became so familiar with their style that we could imitate it when necessary.)

However, encoding each outgoing telegram had to be monitored closely. If we let the commando group encode it themselves, they could write one thing for us to see but encode something different, or embed

alarm signals. Similarly, during radio sessions, if we were careless, the operator might slip in secret codes.

Therefore, each special–case task unit of the Cục Bảo vệ Chính trị had to include radio operators, cipher specialists, and security personnel.

At the same time, the Party's Ban Nghiên cứu Chính trị và Xã hội—under Trần Quốc Hoàn—supervised radio sessions. They monitored incoming and outgoing messages to detect inconsistencies.

The Ministry had only a small radio division and a separate cipher office at the time. Because I was both a member of the Party Committee of the Ministry and Director of the Cục Bảo vệ Chính trị, coordination with these units was smooth.

Cipher officers in these operations decoded every message alongside the commando operator to verify accuracy or detect anomalies. Meanwhile in Hà Nội, the supervisory unit decoded every intercepted message independently and sent their results to us.

Before any radio session between a captured group and enemy headquarters, the task unit had to report via our own secure channels to request authorization. Cipher officers therefore also handled encoding and decoding these internal communications.

Our commando teams used American radios with long–range shortwave. Our own operators, however, were forbidden to transmit on those same devices. They used different sets, on long–wave frequencies, so that even if the enemy detected activity, they could not determine that two sets were operating from the same coordinates.

At first there was only one such operation. Then more appeared, in multiple provinces. Thus, many task units had to be formed, and more radio and cipher personnel mobilized.

All these units operated deep in the forest—rain or cold—bringing their own food, far from families. Life was extremely harsh. Yet every comrade willingly endured hardship because they knew the stakes were high.

We had to be in the forest because the enemy had dropped their commando teams precisely into rugged highland areas. If we transmitted from Hà Nội, it would be discovered eventually. Failure would not only ruin a single operation, but jeopardize a major strategic plan of the Ministry and affect national security.

Looking back, I still feel deep admiration for the comrades who served in these units. Their contributions deserve full recognition.

Since this chapter focuses on cipher work, I will not recount other lessons. I will, however, list several cipher comrades who served in commando–counterintelligence operations from about 1960 to early 1964, when I was still in the North: Phan Bạch Liên. Trần Quang Hơn. Trần Quang Giai. Đặng Văn Long. Nguyễn Quang Phiệt. Nguyễn Văn Một. Vũ Trọng Nội.

After 1964, many more participated, but I was already in the South and cannot record their names here.

* * *

One amusing story should be added.

Through our controlled operation, the enemy believed completely in “their” commando team under our control. They promised to air–drop supplies on moonlit nights. But one night they failed to drop supplies and instead dropped an entirely new commando team elsewhere.

This taught us an important lesson. So on another bright moonlit night, when they promised supplies again, I suspected they might instead drop a team in the central region—on the way North or on the way back—or skip the supply drop in favor of a new insertion.

At the appointed time, I ordered an urgent cipher message to all provinces of the former Khu 4. I told them to watch closely for enemy aircraft dropping commandos. The cipher office prepared and dispatched the message immediately.

That night, Công an Quảng Bình captured an enemy commando team exactly because of that timely telegram. The local unit was convinced the Ministry possessed extremely advanced detection equipment. I let them believe it. Such a misunderstanding was only beneficial. Now, after decades have passed, the secret can be spoken: The most sophisticated machine was the human brain. The cipher unit that night worked with remarkable speed and accuracy.

* * *

Looking back more than thirty years later, I believe all those cipher comrades fulfilled their missions honorably. And they can rightly take pride in having lived through a time worth remembering.

19 March 1995

19. Heaven's net and earth's snare against commando-spies

After openly sabotaging the 1954 Hiệp định Genève, Ngô Đình Diệm rejected a general election to unify the country by peaceful means. He then spoke aggressively about filling the Bến Hải River and marching North.

But contradictions inside the enemy camp in the South continued to grow. Even after Diệm eliminated the opposing religious sects, there was the incident of a ngụy pilot bombing Dinh Độc Lập, followed by the failed coup of 1960.

During this period, the Mặt trận Dân tộc giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam was formed. Its appearance pushed divisions in the enemy ranks even further.

* * *

To regain some initiative, the Mỹ–ngụy authorities decided to send commando-spies into the North. The first groups parachuted in around 1960. One notable point was that they did not keep the operation secret, but announced it openly.

When Công an and local people in several areas captured these commando-spies, they found that most were former ngụy soldiers or reactionaries. Their hometowns were in those very places. They had followed the enemy to the South in 1954, and were now recruited, trained, and sent back to operate as intelligence agents and saboteurs — especially to set up bases among people on the spot.

The Ban Bí thư Trung ương Đảng received reports on the situation. It then directed the Đảng đoàn Bộ Công an to devise a comprehensive response to the enemy's schemes, both immediate and long-term. For the commando-spies in particular, the instruction was to raise vigilance and launch a broad public movement to prevent and combat them — whether they arrived by parachute, by sea, or by land.

* * *

Following that direction, the Đảng đoàn Bộ Công an served as the core force assisting the Ban Bí thư. They issued guidance to Party committees, local authorities, and related sectors, and organized many conferences to share experiences from successful captures. They also publicized the enemy's espionage methods, based on the confessions of those arrested.

Trials of commando-spy cases, when held publicly, were widely reported. This helped raise vigilance and mobilize the public, while striking at the morale of the commando-spies the enemy intended to send. At the same time, the State's leniency policy was publicized for those who surrendered or rendered meritorious service.

In areas where enemy infiltration was likely, detailed plans were made for close coordination among forces — especially between Công an and the xã, bản militia. These plans covered both preventive measures and the pursuit of commando-spies once they appeared. Many places held practice drills.

Families whose relatives had once been ngụy soldiers, ngụy officials, or reactionaries who had followed the enemy to the South were informed clearly of the State's policies. If any commando-spies came to make contact, they could advise them to surrender or report immediately to Công an.

Because of this careful preparation, after the first few cases when we were caught off guard, we were later able to take the initiative. People had become highly alert. Seeing a stranger in the area, anyone would find a way to notify Công an or the local militia at once. This was a crucial factor — one the

enemy never anticipated. Since Công an and the militia understood the terrain well, the pursuit of commando-spies was usually quick and orderly.

* * *

A few cases may be mentioned.

Enemy aircraft were shot down in Ninh Bình as they entered inland from the sea. Several spies died; the survivors were captured along with their equipment. Although their map had burned, what remained was enough to prove that this flight was meant to drop commandos by parachute into a northern location. The case was tried publicly in Hà Nội.

Another case involved underwater commandos infiltrating the coast of Quảng Bình. They planned to plant mines to destroy our Navy's ships at Sông Gianh port. They were captured with full evidence. This case, too, was tried publicly in Quảng Bình.

The case of several commando-spies secretly landing on the central coast to make contact with bases in the old Khu 4 was also notable. Some of them even had the task of reaching Hà Nội. Because of our operational measures, combined with the help of local people, Công an quickly detected them.

One of them used forged papers issued by the đặc khu Vĩnh Linh. He was discovered when he checked in at a small inn in Vinh. When he reached Hà Nội, he was closely monitored.

Sensing that he had been exposed, he made a rather complicated move — one clearly planned in advance by his commanders. Taking advantage of the State's leniency policy for those who voluntarily surrendered, he went straight to Sở Công an to turn himself in, hoping that once things quieted down he could continue his intelligence work.

Knowing this, we needed to expose his deceit. I had to handle the matter myself, because it could not be done roughly; we needed objective evidence, obtained through proper professional work, to prove his false surrender.

Based on reports from the local area about unusual signs along the Hà Tĩnh coast, we went there to investigate. Under the sand on the beach, we found maps, personal items, and documents issued by the enemy's espionage command for him to use when returning to the South. This strongly suggested that he was indeed the same person who had infiltrated the Hà Tĩnh shore.

To determine objectively that he was the infiltrator, and at the same time reveal his false surrender, we could not simply confront him with the items recovered from the beach. Professional skill had to be met with professional skill.

At that time, national highway 1 had no bridges as it does today, and passengers had to cross many ferries. Whenever a passenger bus reached a ferry, everyone had to get off for safety. According to his initial statement, after crossing the giới tuyến at Vĩnh Linh, he took a passenger bus straight from Vĩnh Linh to Hà Nội — as his forged papers claimed.

To test this, I asked him a question, recording it on tape. I asked, in essence: "What did you see along the road?" He answered: "I slept the whole way." I asked again: "Was there ever a time when someone woke you up?" Thinking I was asking about roadside document checks, he immediately replied that no one ever woke him.

But this was clearly untrue. Traveling from Vĩnh Linh to Hà Nội required crossing the Quán Hầu ferry, the Sông Gianh ferry, the Bến Thủy ferry, the Ghép ferry, the Hàm Rồng ferry, and more.

I then had him write a full statement and certify that he bore responsibility if any part was false. After that, I pointed out to him that he had lied, and therefore was no longer eligible for the leniency policy for those who truly surrendered.

Faced with this, he confessed. His statement matched the evidence we had recovered from the Hà Tĩnh beach. When he reached quốc lộ 1, he had hitched a ride on a truck to Vinh. There he was detected. This case was later tried in Hà Nội.

There was also a humorous detail. When we returned to the Hà Tĩnh coast and spoke with the local residents, the trưởng Công an xóm confirmed that on that day he had been slaughtering a duck. He saw a stranger coming in from the sea, passing his house, and asking for the way to quốc lộ 1. He simply showed the man the way, without checking any papers. Had he checked and seen the man carrying documents from Vĩnh Linh, he would have suspected something immediately.

It shows how easy it is to talk about vigilance — and how difficult it is to practice it consistently.

Perhaps the enemy in the South believed that areas with Catholic communities would be safe havens for them. Once, they sent a spy who was a Catholic, landing by sea, to make contact with a reactionary figure among the all-Catholic population in the old Khu 4. It was the neighbor of that reactionary who noticed something suspicious and promptly informed Công an. The spy was caught in the act. The neighbor was also a Catholic. Clearly, with or without religious faith, any citizen could have a strong sense of patriotism.

In another incident, the enemy dropped a group of commandos by parachute into Khánh Mậu commune in Ninh Bình — also a Catholic area. But whether Catholic or non-Catholic, the people there captured the entire group and handed them over to Công an.

The enemy did not know that Khánh Mậu was then the “leading flag” commune of Ninh Bình in the movement for Public Security and Order.

For the mountain regions, the enemy in the South believed it safest to recruit from among the lang đạo who had migrated. So they dropped a commando team by parachute into an area of Hòa Bình Province, with the team leader belonging to an old quan lang family. But his family in the locality had always been treated properly and understood the Government’s policies. When he came to make contact, they advised him to surrender. He volunteered to make amends.

With the Minister of Public Security’s approval, we allowed him to use his radio to communicate with his commanders in the South. At that time, our air-defense forces had only recently been formed and were still young. After discussing the matter with anh Trần Quốc Hoàn — then Minister of Public Security — one day anh Văn Tiến Dũng, then Chief of the General Staff, invited me to a meeting, with anh Phùng Thế Tài, then Commander of Air Defense and also a friend of mine, present. Anh Văn Tiến Dũng asked the Ministry of Public Security to help the Air Defense Forces train by using this commando case.

I thought of the commando group in Hòa Bình, since the Air Defense Forces were often deployed at dốc Cun. The plan was simple: the commando group would request an airdrop. The supply plane would have to fly over dốc Cun on its way to them. That would give the Air Defense Forces an opportunity to shoot.

Indeed, as expected, one night an enemy plane flew over dốc Cun. At that time, our troops had only anti-aircraft guns — no missiles — but they hit the plane. Damaged, the aircraft dropped all its cargo to lighten itself, then sped away, trying to reach the Vĩnh Linh demarcation line.

From experience, enemy planes often flew north to drop commandos on moonlit nights. So during the bright phases of the moon, everyone watched for night flights. The technical units of the Ministry of Public Security also had to work very hard.

One evening, the officer on duty reported an unusual signal detected by the technical team. I immediately sent urgent messages to the provinces of the old Khu 4 to stay alert. Just a few hours after the message went out, Công an Quảng Bình reported that, acting on the Ministry's order, they had captured an entire commando team that had parachuted into the mountains of Tuyên Hóa district. In this case, the Bí thư Tỉnh ủy personally oversaw the efforts of Công an, the Tỉnh đội, and the Dân quân in the pursuit. Localities came to have great trust in the Ministry's technical units.

It may be said that air infiltration had become too obvious, so the enemy command shifted to using the sea. They did not expect that we had already prepared coastal defenses against commando-spies.

One dark night, Công an vũ trang on patrol in Vịnh Hạ Long noticed something strange. A large sailboat, bigger than the local fishing boats and shaped unlike the boats in this region, appeared. At that time, we had no motorized boats. Yet despite a headwind, this vessel was sailing swiftly against the wind. It was very suspicious.

Our men gave chase. As soon as they pulled alongside, several of our armed officers, skilled in close combat, jumped aboard and secured the people on the boat. A search revealed that the vessel carried a powerful engine and was loaded with radio equipment, explosives, and supplies for a commando team intended to infiltrate the Hạ Long Bay area by sea. This case was later tried publicly in Hồng Quảng Province.

The Kuomintang special agents in Taiwan, supported by the Mỹ–ngụy authorities in the South, also used the sea route. They sent a commando team to the island of Trà Cổ in Hải Ninh Province, intending to pass through Vietnamese territory to enter the Thập Vạn Đại Sơn region of China near our border. But the Dân quân, Công an xã, and people of Trà Cổ captured the entire group, led by a Kuomintang special-agent lieutenant colonel. We handed them over to China for handling, and the Chinese authorities expressed great thanks to our Government and people.

* * *

Thanks to the high vigilance of our people, and the readiness and determined spirit of Công an and the local Dân quân, not a single enemy group escaped the "heaven's net and earth's snare" laid by our people.

Later, even the Pentagon — the U.S. Department of Defense — admitted in its White Paper that the plan to send commando-spies into North Vietnam in the 1960s had completely failed.

* * *

The achievements of Công an (including Công an nhân dân vũ trang), the Dân quân, and our people from 1960 onward — capturing and eliminating commando-spies regardless of where they came from or how they entered — helped prepare both morale and forces to defeat the air war launched by the United States beginning in August 1964. They had boasted that they would bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age.

Looking back, we are deeply proud of the wise leadership and direction of the Ban Bí thư Trung ương Đảng. We are proud of the close unity and coordination of our armed forces. We are proud of the heroic people of Vietnam, who themselves sustained a broad and unprecedented movement to resist commando-spies and gave strong support to the professional security forces to complete their tasks well.

Taking lessons from the past, all our people — as well as the armed forces of our State — continue to heighten vigilance against the enemy's new schemes and methods aimed at creating "peaceful evolution" in our country. We are determined to defeat every dark scheme of theirs, to firmly protect the revolutionary State of the people, by the people, for the people, and to safeguard our beloved Vietnam.

Hà Nội, June 1995

(1) The former provinces of Hồng Quảng and Hải Ninh are now Quảng Ninh Province.

20. Going South on the unnumbered ships

In the 1960s, I was a member of the Đảng đoàn Bộ Công an, directly serving as Director of the Cục Bảo vệ chính trị (that is, An ninh chính trị).

After the Mặt trận Dân tộc giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam was established and the need to develop many fields of work increased, the Bộ Công an began training special classes of officers to send to the South. At that time, the Phòng Phái khiển — precursor of today's Cục Tình báo Công an — was still placed under the department I headed. A specialized section serving the South began to take shape.

* * *

One day, anh Hoàn — then the Minister — told me to draft a set of guidelines on intelligence work for the Đảng bộ in the South, for the Party Central Committee to send in. I felt that since we had no government apparatus in the South, and mass mobilization was still the primary task, the people's viewpoint had to be emphasized. The draft I gave anh Hoàn, as far as I remember, was approved without revision. A short while later, anh Hoàn told me that the Party Central Committee had already sent it to the Đảng bộ in the South.

Later, when I went to the South to work and met the comrades in charge of that field, I heard them mention that document. They said it had been very helpful in guiding local work. Privately, I was pleased to have contributed something useful to the movement in the South. Of course, I did not say that I had helped shape the content of that document.

* * *

To return to the Ministry's special training classes for An ninh officers going to the South. I recall that the first classes were intended to supply cadres for Khu 5. To maintain secrecy, the organizing comrades borrowed several rooms in the collective housing of the city's Sanitation Company, on the road from Ô Chợ Dừa toward Thành Công, near today's Hoàng Cầu. The access road was foul-smelling; few would imagine that a secret class was held inside. I went to give lectures there, and at the closing session, several Khu ủy 5 comrades also attended.

* * *

Around the fourth quarter of 1963, I joined the Vietnamese delegation in border talks with the Chinese side. The meeting took place in Nam Ninh, Guangxi, China.

Our delegation was led by đồng chí Nguyễn Quang Việt, Deputy Minister of Public Security and Political Commissar of the Công an vũ trang. Included were the Directors of Public Security and the Chiefs of Staff of the Military Regions bordering China. From the central level were the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Công an vũ trang and myself from the Ministry of Public Security.

The Chinese delegation was led by Li Tianyou, Deputy Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army, with representatives from the Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan Military Regions, as well as the Navy Command. It should be noted that shortly before the talks, we had captured an entire commando group from Taiwan, aided by Ngô Đình Diệm's agents, who had landed on the Trà Cổ coast of Hải Ninh intending to enter the Thập Vạn Đại Sơn region of China. We captured them and handed them over to China, so the Chinese side was particularly interested in the cooperation and assistance we had provided.

The talks ended. On November 1, 1963, our delegation waited for the international through-train from Beijing passing Nam Ninh to return home. While waiting to go to the station, some comrades in the

delegation turned on the radio to listen to the news. Suddenly, the broadcast announced that the coup to overthrow Ngô Đình Diệm had succeeded. Everyone began talking excitedly, all in good spirits. As for me, I thought a great deal about the changes taking place in the South.

* * *

The next day, we arrived in Hà Nội. It was a Saturday. I stopped by anh Hoàn's house to tell him about the talks, though it was not yet the delegation's formal report. My house was right next to his. My working relationship with anh Hoàn had always been close — not only in the Ministry of Public Security, but from the days of the resistance against the French, when we were in the Thành ủy Hà Nội.

During our conversation, we spoke about the situation in the South. I told anh Hoàn that perhaps the time had come for me to go directly to the South to work. Anh Hoàn also seemed interested in my thought, but said he would report to the Ban Bí thư first. I understood his hesitation.

I was then a member of the Đảng đoàn Bộ, directly serving as Director of the Cục Bảo vệ chính trị. In that position, I not only held many secrets of the Party and the State, but at that time I had also successfully directed many operations that had never been done before. Moreover, the Mỹ–ngụy forces were sending many commandos to the North, and I was directing the struggle effectively. If I went South, it would be useful — but who would replace me?

I suggested to anh Hoàn that anh Viễn Chi could take my place.

A few days later, anh Hoàn met me privately. He told me that the group of Politburo comrades in charge of the South had received my proposal. They were glad and considered it very valuable. They instructed anh Hoàn to keep it secret and arrange everything quickly. Later on, I came to understand the Politburo's strategic thinking about the possibility that the enemy's "special war" might fail, and that we had to take advantage of the moment.

At a meeting of the Đảng đoàn Bộ, anh Hoàn raised the matter, and everyone agreed.

I continued directing daily work, but at the same time prepared to hand over to anh Viễn Chi — not only immediate tasks, but also long-term plans for each area of work. As I recall, the handover between us took about a week, perhaps a little more.

* * *

Anh Phạm Hùng had known me for a long time. One day he called me over and told me he would brief me on the Resolution regarding the South. He also said that he was arranging my trip, since he was responsible for that matter. According to anh Phạm Hùng, I would go by sea. It would be faster than walking along the Trường Sơn, which would take too long. Later I learned that anh Trần Văn Trà and Lê Đức Anh were also arranged to go by sea. Anh Phạm Hùng said he was choosing a vessel with plenty of experience. As for the timing, that depended on the movements of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, which was spreading out to control the Gulf of Tonkin.

* * *

Thinking about the many rivers and waterways in the South, and knowing that my swimming was poor, I decided I had to remedy this weakness. In the Cục Bảo vệ chính trị there was anh Hồng, nicknamed Hồng Sáu because he had six children. He was a strong swimmer and had known me since 1945. I told anh Hồng privately and asked him to keep it secret.

During the bitter winter days, he took me to the Quảng Bá swimming pool. There he coached me — not only standing on the bank, but getting into the water with me.

I suddenly remembered a time during the resistance against the French, one cold December night in the rain, when anh Đức Việt, who handled giao liên, guided me into inner Hà Nội. We had to wade across the Chiếc bridge river, freezing to the bone.

This time too, on terribly cold days, we went to train. After each session, anh Hồng came back to my house, and we recovered with a glass of sugar water and a few butter biscuits — which, at that time, was already quite good.

It should also be said that comrades preparing to go South usually stayed together, eating and resting under a special regime. For me, to keep the secret, I continued living at home and maintained normal routines.

* * *

In the Ministry, there was anh Chín Kiềm, who had worked in Công an in Sài Gòn during the resistance against the French and now oversaw support for the South. He prepared everything for me with a kind of care I can never forget. All supplies were kept at his office.

Knowing I would travel by sea, anh Kiềm built several metal containers and packed into them high-quality radio sets we had seized from enemy commandos, medicines, and even books for the comrades in the South. He said that once inside, traveling by small boats, weight would not matter.

In truth, when we arrived, the heavy items had to be sent by giao liên along a separate route. And I still struggled with my own bag like anyone else.

* * *

One time, anh Phạm Hùng asked me to come to his house. Only then did I learn that he was ill. Lying on his bed, he briefed me on the Resolution of the Central Committee and the Politburo regarding the Southern Revolution. One point struck me: even then, he told me that we might be able to capture and hold Sài Gòn. It was not until the Mậu Thân 1968 campaign that I realized this had been a long-considered strategic idea.

After waiting a long time without being able to depart, I once suggested to anh Phạm Hùng that he allow me to go by land. But he firmly refused.

Seeing that departure before Tết was unlikely, anh Phạm Hùng told me to stay calm, celebrate Tết, and we would arrange matters afterward.

* * *

As for my family, I was allowed to tell them the truth — except the small children. My parents were very sad and worried, because my older brother had already fallen during the resistance against the French. But they still agreed that I should go South.

At that time, my parents were living in Võng Thị village near chợ Bưởi. The whole family still gathered to celebrate Tết, though each of us silently felt that this might be the last Tết together for an unknown time.

On New Year's Eve that year, our daughter Hòa Bình — our first child — was ten years old. She usually lived with her grandparents and attended the village school. That day she stayed with my wife and me

at our quarters inside the Ministry, and we took her out to walk around Hồ Gươm to welcome the New Year.

I still remember that my father, returning from an overseas trip, had brought Hòa Bình a pair of leather shoes — something rare for children at the time. But the shoes were a little big. Walking for long would hurt her feet, yet she wanted to wear them for Tết. So I softened some paper and stuffed the toes to make them fit.

She enjoyed that walk so much, feeling as though she were already grown up. She had no way of knowing that this was the last night she would go out with her father before a separation whose end we could not foresee. To her, it was only joy — especially when, on the way back, we met her maternal grandfather by chance at a phở stall.

At Lunar New Year of 1964, my parents were still living in Võng Thị village. The whole family gathered for Tết, but everyone knew that after the holiday I would certainly leave. In the courtyard, the entire family assembled. My parents sat on chairs; my sister and her husband, my wife, my sister's four sons, our two daughters, and two sons all stood around them. I set the camera on automatic mode and ran into place. That photograph still exists today.

During Tết, anh Long — Director of Public Security of Hà Nội, who had earlier worked in the South — came to Võng Thị to see me and invited my wife and me for a meal. We accepted. At his house, he said that although the Ministry kept things secret, he knew I was about to go South, so the meal was meant as a farewell. After the meal, perhaps because the liquor was too strong, my wife suddenly fell ill and had to stay in the hospital. Knowing I would soon depart, she was worried she would not be home when the time came; she later had to find a way to give the hospital a false explanation so she could be discharged.

I myself went into the hospital to have my tonsils removed, but because there was a cadre conference to study Resolution 9 of the Central Committee, I was released early. Listening in the main hall was fine, but when it came time for small-group discussion, I still could not speak; when I tried, my voice was unclear.

* * *

Several times I had been told to get ready to leave, and each time it was postponed at the last moment. Anh Phạm Hùng had to stay in the hospital because one of his legs showed signs of atrophy, smaller than the other. I often came to visit him and ask about the trip. Anh Phạm Hùng told me that the transport group had been selected, but we were waiting for a moment when the U.S. Seventh Fleet loosened its patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin, and we would go immediately.

One evening, I was told to go to anh Lê Duẩn's house. During most of the meeting, anh Lê Duẩn spoke and gave instructions. Besides matters relating to the Ministry of Public Security, he also gave messages for me to convey to the Trung ương Cục.

The Đảng đoàn Bộ Công an held a farewell meal, with my wife present.

One evening, the Ban Bí thư invited me to dinner. Present were anh Lê Đức Thọ and anh Lê Toàn Thư — the comrades responsible for cadre work for the South. My family also attended: my wife and I, my parents, and my uncle Lê Văn Lương.

When I told this to anh Phạm Hùng in the hospital, he said that he had informed the Ban Bí thư that such a gathering was necessary, because in the Ministry of Public Security I was, up to that point, the highest-ranking person ever sent to the South.

* * *

At last, I was told to make final preparations, and this time it was certain.

Within the Ministry, I had completed my handover to anh Viễn Chi. We had already spread the story that I was preparing to go for long-term study in the Soviet Union. In my family, we agreed to use the same explanation for my children, in case they were still too young and might accidentally reveal something. The comrades in the Cục Bảo vệ chính trị likely guessed the truth, but according to secrecy rules, no one said anything; still, they looked at me in a way that showed they understood.

One noon break — in those days we did not work through lunch as people often do now — the deputy directors of my department asked me to stay at the office. There were anh Sanh Châu (now deceased), anh Sỹ Huynh, and anh Kim Tấn. They said that because of secrecy they could not all go somewhere together to give me a farewell meal, so they brought cold dishes to the office instead.

The departure date was set for 21 March 1964.

I went to the hospital to visit and say goodbye to anh Phạm Hùng. He embraced me and, with tears in his eyes, told me to try my best to adapt quickly to the situation in the South. At that moment, I did not imagine that he himself would one day also go South.

* * *

On the afternoon of 20 March 1964, my parents came from Võng Thị to my quarters at the Ministry and stayed the night. The next day, my sister and her husband also gathered at our home. My children were allowed to stay home from school and be with me. At the farewell lunch that day, my mother cooked sour fish soup — my favorite — but no one wanted to eat.

At noon on 21 March 1964, after resting a bit, it was time to leave.

My youngest son, Cu Đại, whom I often spoiled, refused to leave my side; perhaps something warned him that the adults were not telling him the truth.

When the moment came, I embraced and kissed each member of my family. My father, his voice trembling, said only one sentence: “Go, my son.”

Since the cover story was that I was going to the Soviet Union, and since that day was Saturday, when the weekly international train departed, Cu Đại guessed that I would have to go out through the Ministry gate. He threw the ball he had been playing with out the window into the courtyard. Then, despite the adults trying to stop him, he ran down the stairs to wait for me at the Ministry gate. I came down the stairway. My heart ached for him, because I was not going out through the gate.

I crossed over to anh Hoàn’s house. Passing the Ministry hall, I saw that people were listening to the news. At anh Hoàn’s house the comrades of the Đảng đoàn Bộ were already gathered, along with anh Chín Kiềm.

Traveling South with me on that trip was anh Nguyễn Hoàn, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Công an vũ trang.

Two passenger cars were already waiting. Our belongings had been loaded.

One by one, anh Hoàn and then each comrade in the Đảng đoàn Bộ — those who had worked side by side with me since the Đảng đoàn Bộ Công an was formed in 1957 — took commemorative photos with me. Each of them embraced me before we parted. From the window of my house, looking over toward anh Hoàn's, my family watched as well. By then, little Đại had gone back home. I waved to my family one more time.

We got into the car at about two in the afternoon. Anh Ngô Ngọc Du, then Deputy Minister in charge of Organization, and anh Nguyễn Quang Việt, Deputy Minister and Political Commissar of the Công an vũ trang, got in to see us off.

* * *

Our first stop was on what is now Lý Nam Đế Street, to contact the unit in charge of the sea route. Once it was certain that the trip would not be postponed, we set off for Hải Phòng. At dusk we stopped in Hải Dương for dinner, then continued.

Reaching Hải Phòng, we went to the Hải quân Command. After waiting there a while, we went on to Đồ Sơn. There we met three army officers assigned to travel on the same ship with me. Anh Du and anh Việt stayed behind, giving me a final embrace before we parted.

We used vehicles from the Hải quân Command to go out to Đồ Sơn.

The car went straight to the jetty. The ship's engine was already running.

As soon as we had brought our things aboard, the ship set off.

* * *

The ship we traveled on was a steel vessel. According to what anh Phạm Hùng had told me, it had only recently begun operating. Its tonnage was probably around one hundred tons, used for transporting weapons. Only specially assigned personnel traveled with it.

Our quarters were in a compartment at the stern; up front was the weapons hold, followed by the command area.

The captain met us and laid down secrecy rules: we were not to ask each other's names and would address one another by rank order in the family. The ship posed as a fishing boat. If inspected, it had arms for self-defense; and if exposed, we were to blow it up as a last resort.

The crew warned us that we would get seasick and that vomiting was normal, but that we had to try to eat — as much as we could manage — to regain strength.

The ship followed the route along international waters. The sea that day was at force 7, with waves sometimes washing over the deck.

No sooner had we left than everyone began retching. We were laid low, only getting up when we had to go to the toilet. We learned that on that trip it was not just we passengers who were ill — the whole crew was, except for the radio operator.

In a quiet moment, I asked about the crew's situation and learned that when at base they received only ordinary rations, and it was only when going on a mission that they were given combat allowances. I thought to myself that it really ought to be the reverse: at base they should be fed well, because on trips like this, whatever they ate they brought back up, leaving them with no strength for work, let alone combat.

Among the crew, I felt the most sympathy for the mechanic. He was always down in the engine room. Once I tried going down for just a few minutes and could not endure the lack of air and the heavy smell of oil. To work in such conditions, and yet whenever a voyage ended safely and the ship returned to the North, the crew would load the vessel with mangrove firewood and dried fish to help units in the North improve their living conditions.

When I reached the South, I immediately wrote a letter to be carried back by ship to the North, pointing out this unreasonable policy. I remember suggesting that policy officials should be sent to make one or two voyages so they could set regulations that fit reality, instead of sitting at desks and issuing impractical rules. I do not know whether my letter ever reached anyone or did anything to help the crew.

Once in the South, I heard about the Vũng Rô incident. After 30 April 1975, I asked after the ship I had traveled on, whose captain the crew called Phước, and learned that he had died on a later voyage. Years later, when I watched the film "Tiếng gọi của biển" on television, about the "tàu không số," I could not hold back my tears.

Though we were in international waters, whenever we saw merchant ships or unknown vessels, we avoided them. At night, when we encountered large ocean-going ships, ours felt like a person standing at the foot of a brightly lit high-rise building. By day, looking out over the vast ocean, our ship was just a tiny dot. Yet it still floated and still moved forward.

We endured the waves and wind for several days. Then one day the captain announced that the sea was calm, force 3 or 4, and that we could come up on deck to sit. I saw the crew take out their weapons and begin cleaning them. When I asked, I was told that we had crossed the 17th parallel, though we were still in international waters.

After cleaning their weapons, the crew organized a bit of entertainment. It was nothing fancy — some sang, others performed tuồng, or told stories and teased one another for laughs. In the midst of such perilous conditions, they still kept a revolutionary optimism. I was deeply moved and full of admiration for them.

Later, there was a comical story. Some comrade had heard vaguely that I went South by sea and embellished it into a tale that I traveled by submarine, just like some far-fetched spy novel. The reality of the Vietnamese revolution is that it was made up of deeds that were both simple and immensely great, carried out by very modest people — many of whom fully deserved to be called heroes.

* * *

The ship kept going. Then one night, as I lay half-asleep, I heard a strange rumbling sound. When I asked, I was told there was a problem.

The crew worked over the engine and checked around the ship. I will never forget the mechanic who spent hours down in the engine room that day.

The captain called a cell meeting, which we were invited to attend. Only then did we learn that the ship's "log" device had been bitten off by what was probably a very large fish.

Previously, I had thought that having a compass was enough for a sea-going vessel. Now I understood that as a ship travels, waves and wind affect it. You cannot simply read the speed off a dial and know how far the ship has gone. Large ships have modern instruments for this, but on our vessel, to

determine how far we had actually traveled and where we were, we had to rely on the “log” mounted under the water.

It was this failure of the log that caused complications for our ship, and led to unexpected situations in my later work in the South.

Our ship’s mission was to land at a harbor in Trà Vinh.

The first mishap was that instead of passing outside Lý Sơn Island, we went between the island and the mainland.

One morning, estimating that we had reached the waters off Nam Bộ, we saw a ship in the distance flashing signal lamps to question us. The captain ordered that we not reply and turned the ship back out toward international waters to avoid the unknown vessel.

It turned out that instead of passing outside Côn Đảo, we had mistakenly gone between Côn Đảo and Vũng Tàu. The ship that had signaled us may well have been an enemy patrol vessel.

Under the scorching sun, the ship kept moving. When the other vessel was out of sight, we held another cell meeting. The captain and most of the crew believed it would be difficult to reach the Trà Vinh harbour exactly. So that night they would still try to find the correct inlet, but at the same time send a radio message to the North to report the ship’s situation and ask permission to land at Rạch Gốc in Cà Mau, a harbour they knew well, guided by the Hòn Khoai lighthouse.

That night, we tried to approach Trà Vinh. In the dark, all we could see along the shore was a long black band, likely a line of coconut trees. But how could we tell it from the coast of Bến Tre? The captain decided to turn back out to sea and wait for instructions.

Once again, we faced a tense day on the open ocean, waiting both for nightfall and for orders.

Finally, a coded message arrived, approving entry at Rạch Gốc.

* * *

The ship headed further south, still waiting for darkness.

After calculating the time, the captain ordered a course toward the shore, with orders to watch carefully for the Hòn Khoai lighthouse.

Night fell. The ship was close to land, but the Hòn Khoai light was still not visible. Some crew members wondered if we had mistakenly entered the mouth of the Sông Hậu.

As we drew nearer to shore, the ship suddenly ran aground. The tide was still low, not yet rising. The crew used poles and even got into the water to sound the depth. The captain ordered that we find a way to back out to deeper water in case we ran into the enemy.

After much effort — and probably with the help of the rising tide — the ship was able to turn, its bow pointing out of the muddy water. Gradually, it worked its way back to the open sea.

Barely a kilometer out of the shallows, the crew suddenly shouted with joy: they could see the light of Hòn Khoai.

It turned out that the spot where we had gone aground was shielded by a spit of land that had blocked the lighthouse from view. Now we were sure. Everyone felt relieved and cheerful. It had been a real fright.

The ship continued on, with steady hearts.

Late that night, the captain ordered us to sail close to the shore to make it easier to find Rạch Gốc, the intended harbour.

After following the coastline for some time, we suddenly saw lights from inland, flashing green and red irregularly. Clearly these were signals from the reception team.

The captain ordered the ship's signal lamp to reply.

After that, since he knew the harbour well, the captain directed the ship to turn into what looked like a clump of trees.

In fact, it was a small creek just wide enough for the ship, with dense foliage overhead that blocked the bright moonlight that had shone on us when we were still at sea.

The ship slowed and then stopped.

A small boat came alongside, and we dropped a rope ladder so its occupants could climb aboard. It turned out to be an acquaintance — a man the crew called anh Ba Cụt, because he had lost one arm. Later someone told me that anh Ba Cụt had once sailed north with the leaders, unable to endure the repression of the Ngô Đình Diệm regime, and had gone to ask the Central Committee for armed struggle. Now he was back in his native region, in charge of the harbour, receiving ships carrying weapons to support the Southern movement.

After some conversation, anh Ba Cụt told us that our ship had given the wrong signal and should by rights have been fired on. But seeing that the ship's profile matched ours, the shore team had held their fire and waited to see who we were. Another close call. We did not understand how the radio communications had been handled, because our ship had definitely been cleared in advance to use that harbour.

Anh Ba Cụt said that another ship was also expected that night, so it should be arriving soon.

Indeed, not long afterward, a second ship came in.

Later, when I reached Khu 9, I learned that the ship arriving after ours was carrying anh Lê Đức Anh. That ship had left ahead of us but, for some reason, had to stop en route, so it departed earlier yet arrived later.

In the end, both ships reached their destination. The voyage took about seven or eight days.

The harbour comrades took us to our lodgings, while forces were mobilized to unload the weapons.

Our temporary shelter consisted of huts built on mangrove trees. To go from one hut to another, we had to cross "monkey bridges" made from mangrove trunks.

The comrades prepared fish meals for us. In the North at that time fish had to be bought with ration coupons, and getting fish to eat did not mean eating freely. Seeing so much fish on the table, I asked if this was a special treat for guests, since there was more than we could finish. They laughed and said that here every day was like that; one only had to set nets and collect them to have enough fish.

At night, even with the mosquito net tucked in carefully, we still woke up bitten. Once I noticed that the comrade sleeping next to me had his elbow resting right against the net, and there hung a whole "apple of mosquitoes" clinging to the netting at that spot. It turned out that the first mosquito landed on

his arm, the next one landed on the first, and so on, each continuing to suck blood until they formed a cluster the size of an apple. Only then did I truly understand what people meant by "Cà Mau mosquitoes."

I also suffered from what people call "land seasickness." Whether sitting, lying, or standing, I felt the world pitching and rolling as if I were still on the ship. It took several days before things steadied.

* * *

Over the next eleven years of living and working in Nam Bộ, I gradually came to understand this beloved region of our country more fully.

But I have never forgotten the images from that first time I set foot on the southernmost tip of the country — a land of deep suffering and great heroism, and also of many legends.

A new phase of struggle in my revolutionary life began there.

* * *

After 30 April 1975, it was not until 1990 that I had a chance to return to Cà Mau. The Bí thư Tỉnh ủy Minh Hải then was anh Tư Hườn. Back in 1984, he and I had attended a course on economic management together at the Academy of National Economy in Moscow. He arranged for someone to take me to Năm Căn. At that time, the road from Cà Mau to Năm Căn had not yet been completed, so we still had to go by motorboat, which took nearly half a day.

Năm Căn had changed greatly compared with 1964, when I first arrived there.

A cannery had been built. Many shrimp ponds had been formed. But sadly, the mangrove forests had been devastated. The endless, dense mangrove stands were gone.

The district comrades helped me get back to Rạch Gốc.

There, the situation with shrimp and mangroves was similar to what I had seen along the way.

Along the canals, houses stood close together. Large fish traps and nets were spread out in even greater numbers than before, since people could now make a living openly without hiding as they had under the Mỹ–ngụy regime. Television antennas were everywhere.

Near the trụ sở of the xã People's Committee, a cải lương troupe was hanging a banner for its upcoming performance.

Comrades in the Đảng ủy and the People's Committee told me they were preparing to erect a statue right there of thầy giáo Ngọc Hiển, the Communist teacher who had led the uprising to seize Hòn Khoai.

They took me to visit the home of đồng chí Hai Dĩa, who had been in charge of the Rạch Gốc harbour in 1964, and had welcomed many ships carrying weapons to the South — including the ship that first brought me to the beloved South, at the Đất Mũi, the country's furthest point.

Anh Hai had passed away. Chị Hai received me and reminisced about old times. I lit incense at his family altar.

* * *

Images from twenty-six years earlier came back vividly to me.

Đồ Sơn, Rạch Gốc, the Hồ Chí Minh trail at sea, the unnumbered ships, Captain Phước, the mechanic whose name I never learned, the crew of the ship I traveled on, and so many other fighters I never had the chance to know. Who had survived, and who had fallen?

* * *

In any case, for the rest of my life I will always remember those people. And I will never forget that one journey in my life.

On the twentieth anniversary of the liberation of the South Hà Nội, 6 January 1995

(1) Cầu Chiếc Bridge crosses the Nhuệ River in Hiền Giang Commune, Thường Tín, Hà Nội, linking national highway 21B with national highway 1A.

21. The hearts of the Southern people

Speaking broadly about the South, there are countless good things that could be said. And even if one keeps speaking, it would still be incomplete.

So let me begin with my first reflections on the deep affection that the people of the South had for the revolution, shown concretely in the way they supported the cadres and fighters resisting the Americans at that time.

* * *

At the end of March 1964, by sea, on one of the unnumbered ships, I arrived in the South to take part directly in the resistance against the Americans. The first place I set foot in the South was Rạch Gốc, in the Cà Mau cape region. From there, I traveled across the Southern plains to reach the base of the Trung ương Cục miền Nam, then located in the Dương Minh Châu war zone of Tây Ninh Province.

Leaving Khu 9, the local comrades arranged for me to travel with a group of cadres from the region who were going to study at the Party school of the Trung ương Cục. They did this so that if anything happened along the way, I would have comrades to assist me. In those days, even cadres returning from the resistance had to keep their identities secret — let alone reinforcements from the North who still spoke with a strong Northern accent.

At each rest stop along the route, the comrades in the group reminded me to speak as little as possible to avoid drawing attention. The appearance of a cadre who spoke such distinct Northern Vietnamese, traveling from Khu 9 toward the forests, might reveal the existence of the Hồ Chí Minh trail at sea.

But none of that could fool the children — and especially not the Má.

On the day we were about to leave Cù Lao Long Phú to continue our journey, the representative of the Women's Association said they had prepared a small farewell gathering for us. The Má had pooled money to make bánh xèo, a favorite dish.

At the start, one of the Má stood up and said: "Today you children leave your families and your Tổ quốc to go fight for the liberation of the people, so the local Women's Association has prepared this little gathering to wish you strength on your journey …"

Hearing this, anh Hai Hồng — my peer and close friend — nudged me with his elbow and winked with a smile.

After the meal, the comrades in the group all said: "Today the Má mainly wanted Tư Trọng to eat bánh xèo — the rest of us only got to eat alongside."

I did not understand what they meant until the comrades explained:

People in the Khu 9 region often considered this place to be Vietnam. Anything farther out — whether Central or North — they called Huế. So when the Má said "leaving your families, leaving your Tổ quốc," she really meant: "You are the one who has come all the way from that distant Tổ quốc Huế to Vietnam to fight."

Later, during the eleven years I worked in Nam Bộ, I — like all other comrades, whether originally from the North or the South — was sheltered, cared for, and protected by the people of the South. And the more one was from the North, the more affection one received.

It was not only in the liberated communes of Củ Chi, where we had our headquarters for many years, but also in rural areas such as Trảng Bàng (Tây Ninh), Đức Hòa (Long An), Gò Đen (Long An), Cai Lậy (Tiền Giang), Mỏ Cày and Châu Thành (Bến Tre); or in Bà Điểm (Hóc Môn) near Sài Gòn, and even in the inner city itself — everywhere my comrades and I received protection and wholehearted help from people who had never been related to us in any way.

There was one quite special and moving story that I have never forgotten. After the enemy bulldozed and wiped out the ten liberated communes of northern Củ Chi at the end of 1967 — just as we were preparing intensively for the Mậu Thân 1968 offensive — we had to temporarily stay in An Ninh Commune, Đức Hòa, Long An. At that time we needed to buy a boat to carry weapons into the inner city of Sài Gòn. I assigned anh Bảy Bình to use false papers to go to Đức Hòa town to find one.

While looking around, he was stopped by a patrol, questioned, and held for document checking. His companion hurried back to the base to sound the alarm. But only a short while later, anh Bảy Bình returned safely.

When asked what had happened, we learned this:

As soon as the soldiers took his papers, the local people gathered around and surrounded them. Some said, "This man is just doing business, buying a boat — why are you seizing his papers and trying to arrest him?" Others were even bolder; one reached straight into the soldier's pocket and pulled out the fake ID belonging to anh Bảy Bình. Then some people blocked the soldiers, while others led anh Bảy Bình to the xe lam stop and helped him board a vehicle heading back to Trảng Bàng. At the boundary of An Ninh Commune, the person escorting him told him to get off, while he himself continued on.

In the end, anh Bảy Bình never learned the names of those who saved him; and the people never asked who he was or what unit he belonged to. Such is the heart of the people toward the revolution.

There was also a humorous story. At that time, after Mậu Thân 1968, the enemy was rapidly "pacifying" the countryside. We went to Định Thủy Commune, Mỏ Cày, Bến Tre — a weakly held area because it was close to the enemy. I told the protection team to keep their weapons hidden but within easy reach, so as not to bring trouble to the household.

The houses in the hamlet were cramped, with only one bed, reserved for old ông Hai. His children came during the day to take care of him and then slept in huts out in the fields at night to avoid artillery fire. At night, my comrades slung hammocks among the coconut trees. As for me, to avoid unexpected rain, I hung my hammock under the roof of the pigsty.

After the first night passed, on the second night, as I was about to go to sleep, I heard ông Hai calling out loudly, "Where's Ba? Where's chú Ba?" At first I thought he was calling someone else. Then the protection comrades told me he was calling for me. I entered the house and ông Hai told me I must not sleep in the pigsty, but come share the bed with him. No matter how I refused, he would not let me.

That bed had always been off limits — even his grandchildren were not allowed to lie on it, not even for a moment. It should be noted that ông Hai was Catholic, and whenever artillery fell nearby, he refused to go into the shelter, saying "earth must not be above my head." Sometimes he even went into the yard to light incense at the altar. Such was the affection ông Hai had for us cadres.

In Định Thủy as well, so many people helped us with all their hearts. Although we were T4 cadres, not T2 ones. At chị Ba's house, where we stayed for long periods; and ông Tư, ông Sáu, and ông Chín —

they never hesitated to escort cadres on open routes, and many times used their own boats, disguised, to carry weapons from the border back to Bến Tre for our unit.

Such were the people of the Xứ Dừa of chị Ba Định.

In the inner city, even under strict enemy control, many families who knew we were resistance cadres still sheltered and hid us. After the first and second Mậu Thân offensives, there was one family whose house the An ninh T4 armed reconnaissance team had used as a weapons cache. Unfortunately, the comrade responsible for that cache was killed, and no one in the unit knew the location to reestablish contact. Yet, on the day Sài Gòn was completely liberated, that family invited the unit to come and handed over the entire weapons cache intact.

If the enemy had caught anyone keeping weapons in their house, they would have been imprisoned for at least ten years. But the family preserved the cache safely for seven years. Truly silent devotion to the revolution — and truly remarkable courage.

On 30 April 1975, a unit of our troops freed me from the Mỹ–ngụy prison at 3 Bạch Đằng. I was making my way back to a safe house, with not a single đồng in my pocket, wearing borrowed clothes, my beard and hair unkempt.

On the street, I met two young women. Seeing that I looked unusual, they asked after me. When they learned my situation, they brought me onto a bus headed for chợ Bến Thành, then said goodbye — but not before buying me the next bus ticket and asking an elderly woman traveling the same route to tell me when to get off at Bình Thới. To this day, I still keep that bus ticket and the few hundred đồng they gave me. Sadly, I never learned the names of those kind-hearted young women.

On the night of 1 May 1975, I slept at the house of anh chị Ba Trương in Bình Thới. Their house had been burned by the enemy during the second Mậu Thân offensive. It was raining heavily, and water leaked everywhere; only one spot in the house remained dry. Anh chị Ba insisted that I sleep there. Fearing the area was still unsafe, anh Ba and his son stood guard in case bad elements came to harm me. How could I sleep? So we all stayed awake, sitting together around the dry spot, talking until morning. I had known that house only since the first Mậu Thân offensive. Yet our bond was already so deep — that is the heart of the people toward the revolution.

* * *

As for me, I can only recount a few stories as examples. If we were to record all the stories told by all the cadres and liberation fighters over the long years from 1954 to 1975, we would need many large volumes to capture the heart of the Southern people toward the revolution.

This was a decisive factor in the victory of the Southern Revolution — something the Mỹ–ngụy forces never had, and could never have. Their failure was, above all, because they did not have the people's support.

That too was one of the great lessons of my revolutionary life.

April 1995 On the 20th anniversary of the liberation of the South

(1) T4: Khu Sài Gòn – Gia Định. (2) T2: the central southern provinces: Tân An, Mỹ Tho, Gò Công, Long Xuyên, Châu Đốc, Sa Đéc, and Bến Tre.

22. Returning to the roots

In April 1995, I traveled from Hà Nội to the South to attend several gatherings of comrades who had fought together during the resistance against the Americans.

On 2 April, there was a meeting of cadres and fighters from the Ban An ninh Trung ương Cục miền Nam. On 9 April in Củ Chi, there was a gathering of cadres and fighters from Ban An ninh T4 (Khu Sài Gòn–Gia Định) who had lived and fought together in Củ Chi. On 16 April at Dinh Thống Nhất, there was a meeting of former cadres from the various Bans and sectors of the Trung ương Cục miền Nam, along with several delegates from the old B2 zones. On 22 April at the Công an of Hồ Chí Minh City, there was a gathering of cadres and fighters from Ban An ninh T4 during the anti-American period.

The day 30 April 1975 entered history as a great victory of our entire nation. The South "went first and returned last"; the South belonged to the whole country, and the whole country had once been present in the South. Go to any cemetery for martyrs in the South: beside the graves with names, there are always many graves with blank headstones. Everyone understands that these are the graves of fighters from the main-force units, whose hometowns were somewhere in the North. Now that "Bắc Nam sum họp, Xuân nào vui hơn" (in Bác Hồ's words), we forever remember the martyrs.

For me personally, that day was also the day our troops freed me from the Mỹ–ngụy prison; so I am deeply grateful to the Party, to the Army, and to our people (including my own comrades) whose victorious struggle allowed me to escape death and regain my freedom.

The enemy not only violated the Paris Agreement and refused to release me. Later, when personnel from the American–Saigon intelligence services surrendered for re-education, some reported that on 26 April 1975 their American and Saigon commanders had issued an order to kill me. But as our forces were already closing in on Sài Gòn, the lower-level agents, fearing additional crimes, did not dare carry it out. (This matched the account in the memoir of Frank Snepp, a CIA officer, who wrote that their plan was to put me on a helicopter and drop me into the sea.)

My family regards 30 April 1975 as the day I was reborn, when the South was completely liberated and our country was reunified.

Amid the great victory and happiness shared by the whole nation and by my family in particular, I always remember the martyrs — especially the comrades who fell on the battlefield before victory — as well as the people and safe houses who sheltered and helped me and my comrades during the hard years. So, between the reunion gatherings mentioned above, I took the opportunity to visit old bases, places where comrades had died, and the families they left behind.

Time did not allow me to visit every place and every family. And wherever I went, people wanted me to stay longer, but I had to apologize.

Let me mention a few of the places I visited.

I visited chị Năm Tấn. Her husband, anh Năm, was Deputy Chief of Ban An ninh T4, and was killed after the Mậu Thân offensive in Phân khu I (his grave was only found in recent years, as bombs had erased all traces). Anh Năm and I had spent much time living together in Củ Chi and had worked very well with each other, although his hometown was right in Hóc Môn while mine was all the way in the North (Hưng Yên).

I also visited several families of fallen comrades from the former An ninh T4, and the places where some cadres of Ban An ninh T4 had fallen after I myself had been captured.

I visited many families who had helped us in earlier years, in many parts of the South.

I also visited, and through the Công an of the various provinces where An ninh T4 had once been based, conveyed my gratitude to the Party organizations and mass organizations in those localities for their wholehearted support.

Each visit had its own meaning.

In March 1964, I had entered the South by unnumbered ship. The first place I reached in the South was Rạch Gốc, in today's Năm Căn district of Minh Hải Province. Back then, đồng chí Hai Dĩa (real name Bông Văn Dĩa) organized the harbour to receive the unnumbered ships and welcomed us. He was later awarded the title Hero of the People's Armed Forces.

In 1990, I had already returned here once. By then, anh Hai Dĩa had passed away; only chị Hai remained. This year, I returned to Rạch Gốc and visited their family again. She was eighty-five years old; the family lived modestly, even though anh Hai was a Hero, and they had a son who was also a martyr. When I returned to Hà Nội, I reported this situation to the Prime Minister for consideration.

Meeting old people in familiar places, my heart was deeply moved — especially when I compared the conditions of the families of those who had made great contributions with the wastefulness of public funds by corrupt officials.

During Christmas 1965, with the approval of the T4 Party Committee, I entered Sài Gòn for the first time to conduct field research. That trip allowed me to draw conclusions that helped Northern cadres newly arriving in the South strengthen their resolve to operate in Sài Gòn. The taxi driver who took me around was anh Tư, the elder brother of Tám Trọng (an officer of An ninh T4). I will never forget how, on the night I stayed at his house, anh Tư pretended to be repairing his vehicle and kept a lamp burning at the door all night, ready in case of a house search or neighborhood sweep, to keep me safe. This year he was retired. He was delighted to see me again and to recall old memories.

During the first Mậu Thân offensive in 1968, I had stayed at the home of anh chị Ba; their house was burned by the enemy in the second offensive. Their eldest son, Nhơn, had gone out to the liberated zone to join the Giải phóng. After I was freed from prison, I came here to seek contact with the Organization. That night it rained heavily, and the house leaked everywhere. The family gave me the hammock — the only dry spot. Anh Ba and one of his sons, who had picked up an AR15 dropped by soldiers on the street, took turns keeping watch, thinking that the area might still be unsafe. How could I sleep? So everyone gathered in the driest corner of the house, talking into the night.

In 1990, when houses were cleared for the Đầm Sen road project, anh chị Ba had to move elsewhere, without leaving me their new address. This time, I had to ask many comrades before I could find and meet them again. The whole family was overjoyed to see me.

Công an Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh — which traces its origin to An ninh T4 — has been awarded the title Hero of the People's Armed Forces by the Hội đồng Nhà Nước.

Our Công an's achievements come from our own efforts, but in every situation we also had immense help from the people. That is why we must always remember the role of the people; and why we must never forget the grassroots bases among the people, those who helped us — especially in the difficult years of the revolution before victory on 30 April 1975. I hope that both earlier and later generations in the Công an of Hồ Chí Minh City will work to preserve and promote the fine traditions and the honorable title of the unit.

I regret that I did not have enough time to visit everyone I wished to.

Especially because, due to an oversight on 1 May 1975, to this day I still do not know the names or addresses of the two young women (who must now be nearly forty, perhaps already mothers) who, knowing only that I had just been freed from prison, helped me lovingly to reach Bình Thới — and thereby helped me find the home of anh chị Ba mentioned above. If I knew their names, I would certainly have visited them to express my thanks.

These are all my thoughts and faith in the heroic people of our Motherland.

18 May 1995

23. Around the book Bất Khuất

(Recorded from the account of anh Nguyễn Đức Thuận)

1 — Early in 1964, I went to the South to take part directly in the resistance against the Americans. I will not recount here my journey to reach the base of the Trung ương Cục miền Nam (R), then located in the Dương Minh Châu war zone of Tây Ninh. I only record here the story of meeting anh Nguyễn Đức Thuận in mid–1964 at the Office of the Trung ương Cục miền Nam, just before he returned to the North.

2 — That day, several of us from Ban An ninh Trung ương Cục had gone to work with the Thường vụ Trung ương Cục. After dinner, we rested for the evening, to continue work the next day.

Guests stayed in a hut with a thatched roof and no walls. (If rain blew in, sheets of nylon would be hung as walls; otherwise, it was left open.) Each person had his own hammock to rest and sleep in. There was a table made from a plank resting on four wooden stakes, and two planks on either side serving as benches.

As we were drinking tea, a few comrades from other huts came to sit and talk. Among them, with comrades I already knew, was a slightly short man with bright eyes. Anh Sáu Hoàng, Deputy Chief of Ban An ninh Trung ương Cục — one of the cadres who had stayed in the South after the Genève Agreements and who had arrived at the Trung ương Cục with me — asked if I recognized him. I hesitated; I could not quite recall where or when I had met him. Anh Sáu Hoàng introduced everyone to each other. Only then did I realize that the man who seemed familiar was anh Nguyễn Đức Thuận, newly released from prison after the coup that overthrew Ngô Đình Diệm on 1 November 1963.

I suddenly remembered: in 1948, in the North, when I was at the Liên tỉnh ủy Lưỡng Hà (Hà Nội – Hà Đông) under anh Lê Quang Đạo. That summer, the enemy had staged a parachute drop into Vân Đình town — based on intelligence they had gathered suggesting they intended to capture our delegation from the South traveling to the North. On the day of the drop, I happened to be working in Thanh Oai district, so after the enemy withdrew, I returned to the Liên tỉnh ủy Office (then located in a village below Vân Đình) to see whether anything had happened. There I met several comrades from the Nam Bộ delegation to the North. Among them was đồng chí Nguyễn Đức Thuận, Deputy Secretary of the Xứ ủy. He was a Northerner but had been imprisoned on Côn Đảo. After the August Revolution of 1945, he was released and joined the resistance in Nam Bộ. I remembered his face, his smile, and his straightforward manner of speaking, even though it was our first meeting.

Before arriving at the Trung ương Cục Office that day in 1964, I had not known that anh Thuận had stayed in the South after the Genève Agreements and had been arrested by the Ngô family's secret police. So we gathered around and asked him to tell us the story of his imprisonment, and of the comrades imprisoned with him. We listened late into the night, questioning him whenever something was unclear; and he answered immediately.

3 — I remember clearly the stories he told.

Among them was this: when the enemy used high-powered lamps to shine directly into his eyes during interrogation, whenever the commander walked away, the guard would turn off the light. (It was unclear whether the guard sympathized with the revolutionaries or simply felt human pity.)

I also remember how he deliberately trained himself to answer every question with only the word "Không." So whether he was conscious, or delirious under torture, he would say only that word and not accidentally reveal anything.

I could see that anh Thuận told us his story with complete honesty — surely the same as what he had reported to the Organization, as required of anyone captured by the enemy and later returned.

4 — Later, I heard the following matters, which I now record here.

After our troops freed me from the Mỹ–ngụy 3 Bạch Đằng prison at noon on 30 April 1975, my health was weak, so in August 1975 I was sent for treatment in the German Democratic Republic with a delegation of Southern cadres. There I heard that the book Bất Khuất had been published. Some Germans, analyzing it scientifically, said that the book did not seem accurate. Their reasoning was that physiologically, a person cannot endure continuous exposure to high-powered lights for the many days described in the book.

When I returned home at the end of 1975, I found and read Bất Khuất. What I read matched what I had heard in Germany.

At that time, anh Thuận's house was right next to mine (on Hàng Bông Nhuộm). Since we had known each other in the South, I once went to ask him why the book contained such descriptions. He said that he had only recounted the truth, and had not written it himself. But the writer had omitted the detail about the guard turning off the lamp when the commander walked away. He had known nothing about the publication.

I went to ask my uncle — đồng chí Lê Văn Lương — about this. He told me that Bất Khuất had been published during wartime; perhaps people feared revealing secrets (such as endangering the guard who had turned off the light), and so they removed that part of anh Thuận's account.

Thus, in my view: anh Thuận was completely truthful. But the publishers had unintentionally created a misunderstanding that anh Thuận exaggerated to glorify himself — something contrary to fact, and contrary to science.

5 — I feel the need to record all this. Because now anh Thuận, and my uncle Lê Văn Lương, have both passed away. Anyone who ever heard anh Thuận tell his story during the anti-American years in the South has a responsibility of conscience to make the truth clear, so that people understand the real anh Thuận.

Hà Nội, 14 August 1996

24. Tết ceasefire during the American war

From the time the United States was still waging the "special war" (Saigon troops with American advisers), the Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam had unilaterally declared ceasefires during Christmas and Tết Nguyên đán. This put the opponent on the defensive, forcing them to issue similar announcements to answer public opinion.

During these times, anyone standing along the footpaths leading into the liberated zone of Củ Chi could fully grasp the meaning of this custom, and how deeply it had taken root in people's hearts.

On the first buses and xe lam heading toward Củ Chi, the seats were filled, and people spilled out onto the roads leading that way. Turning off the paved road, long lines of people followed the forest paths winding through the rubber plantations, toward communes like Nhuận Đức, An Nhơn, Trung Lập, and others. Their hands were full of gifts. Talking, chatting, laughing. Everyone eager to walk faster, to reach the meeting spot, to see loved ones again. Here and there, reunions happened along the paths. Faces lit up with indescribable joy. Some hurried to the homes of families they had known before; some chose a clear patch of ground in the rubber forest to sit and talk with their relatives. As noon approached, the crowds grew even larger.

From inside the base area, not only cadres and fighters of T4, but even some cadres from R used the ceasefire to request permission to return to T4 to meet their families.

It was a bustling atmosphere that lasted through the day and night.

At certain points, the Uỷ ban Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng T4 organized exhibitions of books and newspapers; or displayed paintings and photographs portraying the struggle of the Quân Giải phóng; or scenes of daily life in the liberated zones.

Elsewhere, there were meetings between Mặt trận cadres and people coming from enemy-controlled areas. There were discussions about the Mặt trận's platform, and answers to questions about its policies.

At night, there were film screenings by Điện ảnh Giải phóng, or performances of revolutionary opera and music.

Those coming from the enemy's side who stayed to watch the performances would leave their bicycles or motorbikes in a field. There were no tickets. After the show, they returned to the field, and each person took their own bicycle or motorbike. Nothing went missing. People from the enemy-controlled areas were astonished at the "self-disciplined" order of the liberated zones.

Couples — lovers or husbands and wives — could borrow houses from acquaintances as places to talk privately.

Among the visitors from enemy-controlled areas were many Saigon soldiers. Most had been conscripted, and felt no hostility toward "our side." In fact, these were also convenient moments for binh vận cadres to meet their contacts.

But few knew that during such times, some had to hurry about heavy tasks. These were the giao liên specialists operating inside enemy zones; and those providing logistics for the armed units inside the city. Because the ceasefire created a relaxed atmosphere and lighter enemy patrols, they made full use of the opportunity to transport bulky newspapers, and even guns, ammunition, and explosives into the city.

* * *

In mid–1965, the first American combat units were deployed to South Việt Nam, turning the U.S. invasion into a "limited war."

After the American sweeps in Central Việt Nam in early 1966, the two U.S. divisions — the "Big Red One" and the "Tropic Lightning" — together with several independent brigades, launched their first major sweep into Củ Chi. Củ Chi guerrillas killed many American troops. By practical action, the guerrillas of Củ Chi helped affirm the conclusion that guerrilla forces could indeed inflict painful blows on American troops.

In this first test of fire, the tunnel system showed its effectiveness. American soldiers, trained in regular, conventional tactics, advanced in formation. When one was shot at a guerrilla position, they would radio for helicopters to evacuate the wounded, then call for artillery barrages, then reform themselves in perfect column formation and continue advancing. The guerrilla position would snipe again. And the entire "by-the-book" pattern of American troop movement repeated. A guerrilla fired a single shot "through the apples," wounding several Americans at once. In that spot alone, nearly ten were killed or wounded.

There was an unforgettable comic episode. A young nurse was captured by American soldiers. Knowing that guerrillas were hiding underground, they forced her to crawl into the tunnel to call on them to surrender. She descended into the tunnel. The Americans waited above. The result was like the story of the monkey guarding the bamboo tube.

After that major sweep came Tết Nguyên đán — and another ceasefire.

* * *

During the sweeps aimed at forcing all villagers from the liberated communes of Củ Chi into strategic hamlets — carried out directly by American troops — our people resolutely resisted and clung to their land, refusing to leave their hamlets. They said their buffalo and cattle could not be moved. The Americans brought flat-bottom boats and pushed their livestock aboard.

Our comrades observing the situation saw enemy helicopters lifting a large artillery piece. Certain that there would be less bombardment that night, they were surprised when shells still fell. Later they learned: A farmer had insisted he could not leave because he had an ox-cart, long and cumbersome, with big wheels. The Americans called a helicopter to lift the ox-cart away. From a distance, the large round wheels looked like those of an artillery gun, so the guerrillas mistook it for artillery being moved.

At that time, when American troops camped overnight in Củ Chi, they were sometimes hit by our mortar fire. The next morning, guerrillas from nearby hamlets would come to search for weapons and equipment. They found bayonets, canned meat, canned milk, and even dried egg yolk. Most surprising was the discovery that ordinary soldiers had only sandbags for protection, while officers each had a personal "steel coffin" to sleep in, to avoid casualties during shelling.

When the U.S. Army bulldozed and leveled all vegetation in the ten liberated communes of Củ Chi for three straight months, every afternoon at the same hour their units would regroup. Then a heavy-lift helicopter (with two rotors) would descend, lowering a large tank with tall legs, filled with water brought from Clark Base in the Philippines. It was water for the soldiers who had been on the sweep that day to bathe. A bag of clean clothes was also lowered; and the next morning, another helicopter arrived to take the soiled clothes for laundering. Stranger still, after bathing, another heavy-lift

helicopter would come. Through binoculars one could see flashes of colorful dresses. They later learned that prostitutes were flown in for the Americans' nightly entertainment.

They were indeed "princely soldiers" unlike any others in the world.

* * *

Typically, after a sweep, if a ceasefire occurred soon after, our comrades would use those days to repair and strengthen bunkers and sleeping shelters that had been damaged by the enemy.

Once, after a sweep, with many days still to go before Tết, our unit had to dig a new sleeping bunker. That night, the roof frame was still unfinished, but comrades decided to sleep inside anyway — safer than sleeping on the ground. Unexpectedly, enemy planes dropped "tactical bombs" in the night (in the North they were called "coordinate bombs"). One bomb struck directly on the still-unfinished bunker.

No one could have imagined it: the bomb hit exactly at the foot of one comrade, severing his foot cleanly. He survived. The bomb did not explode; it burrowed into the ground. Later, guerrillas dug it up to use the explosives for making anti-tank mines; it was a bomb weighing several hundred kilos. Had it exploded, all six people sleeping in the bunker that night would have been killed.

The comrade who lost his foot was anh Hà Minh Trí. He was the one who had once been sentenced to death by the enemy for attempting to assassinate Ngô Đình Diệm in Buôn Ma Thuột. Today, Hà Minh Trí still works in Tây Ninh, walking with an artificial leg.

* * *

To be careless during the Tết ceasefire — celebrating with bright lights — was dangerous, because once the ceasefire ended, the enemy would have precise targets to strike. In Châu Thành, Bến Tre, after Tết, the Trinh sát vũ trang unit of An ninh T4 was hit by a surprise bombing. Anh Ba Hiệp, the unit chief, was killed. Chị Ba, carrying an unborn child, also died in the same bombing.

* * *

At Tết Nguyên đán of early 1966, after the major American sweep into Củ Chi, during the ceasefire, anh Thép Mới returned from R to Củ Chi to visit me. After we talked for a while, he said: "I didn't get to join you in fighting the sweep. But at least let me go down into the tunnels to see what they're really like."

Nothing was easier than accommodating a guest.

We climbed down into the earth. Thép Mới sat with his back against the tunnel wall, eyes half closed. No one knew what he was thinking. Only after half an hour did he return to the surface. His face was bright with excitement.

Now Thép Mới rests forever in the Motherland's soil.

Hà Nội, 30 October 1996

25. When we heard the tracks of American tanks rumbling overhead

In 1965, the United States landed troops in the South, turning their "special war" into a large-scale ground war. The base of Khu Sài Gòn – Gia Định (commonly called T4) was located in the ten liberated communes of northern Củ Chi district. From the moment the Americans deployed their own forces, aside from major sweeps involving several divisions and brigades into Củ Chi (within T4) and Bến Cát (in Bình Dương Province — today Sông Bé), which they called the "Iron Triangle," they also conducted brigade-level sweeps into Củ Chi at least once a month.

In 1967, the Khu ủy T4 convened, but because the base was no longer safe, the Trung ương Cục instructed us to travel to their headquarters for the meeting. At that meeting, anh Nguyễn Văn Vịnh, envoy of the Bộ Chính trị from Hà Nội, attended and conveyed the policy for the Tổng tấn công planned for early Mậu Thân 1968. I wrote a separate report on that matter for the historical agencies, so here I only recount one memory.

After the Khu ủy meeting, I returned to Củ Chi. My unit was stationed in ấp Phú Hiệp, Phú Mỹ Hưng Commune, near ấp Dược, beside the Sài Gòn River. My task was to disseminate the policy and prepare for the Mậu Thân operations within the area assigned to me.

As soon as I arrived, the enemy launched a sweep. As usual, a brigade-level sweep would end within a few days. We stayed in place, ready to cling to the tunnels if necessary. I also sent word calling the An ninh cadres from inner Sài Gòn out to Củ Chi to discuss work.

For some reason, this time the enemy used fewer troops but swept far longer. Over a week passed and they had not withdrawn. Scouts reported: the Americans were sweeping from Bùng Binh (Trảng Bàng) toward ấp Dược, where we were. Wherever they advanced, their tanks bulldozed down the trees; at night they regrouped; the next morning they continued. Before the tanks pushed forward, B-52s carpet-bombed the area; sitting in the bunker, avoiding shrapnel, the earth swayed like a hammock.

On the day the sweep approached ấp Dược, anh Hai Yên, Chief of An ninh Quận 4 (inner city), arrived in Củ Chi following my summons. The giao liên had to cross countless ambush points to bring him safely to me.

At dawn the next morning, enemy artillery barrages struck directly onto our location. As soon as the shelling ceased, helicopters air-assaulted American troops into the area. Our protection team and the village guerrillas had to fight the American infantry at distances of only five or ten meters. Eventually they withdrew into the tunnels.

Inside the tunnels, taking advantage of the time, I informed anh Hai Yên of the Bộ Chính trị's assessment and the policy for the Tổng tấn công planned for early 1968. At that time we still used the concept "Tổng công kích, Tổng khởi nghĩa." We worked in complete darkness — no candles in the tunnels — I spoke from memory, and anh Hai Yên absorbed every word.

Above us, on the surface, directly over the section of tunnel where we sat, we heard the clattering tracks of American tanks and armored vehicles — roong roỏng.

Near noon, scouts reported that American troops suspected some civilian graves were tunnel entrances; they were blasting them with explosives. Explosions boomed overhead. Then the enemy discovered a camouflaged entrance to an anti-artillery shelter — the spot where I normally worked each day; from

there a hidden passage led down into the tunnels. American troops were now concentrating their explosive charges at that very place.

The tunnel segment connecting our location to the guerrilla section had already collapsed under the weight of a passing American tank. Although the enemy had not discovered the tunnel, they had cut us off from the village guerrillas. We buried our documents deep inside the tunnel, preparing to fight if the enemy broke in.

Looking at my watch, it was past noon. Time felt strangely stretched.

By around five in the afternoon, the rumbling tank tracks grew quiet. We assessed that they had regrouped, just like on previous days. As usual, the heavy-lift helicopter would arrive carrying bathwater for the American troops (brought from the Philippines, because they claimed Sài Gòn water was not clean enough), then deliver prostitutes in bright blue and red dresses; and the next morning would return to retrieve everything before the sweep continued.

Scouts confirmed they had indeed regrouped. We waited until dusk, then emerged one by one to relocate toward Hố Bò, which had not yet been swept.

The area where we had been stationed — normally thick with vegetation — was now completely bare, an empty plain. No one could recognize the familiar place unless they had just climbed up from the tunnel beneath it.

A few days later, when the enemy swept into Hố Bò, we had to withdraw temporarily to Sa Nhỏ, a hamlet where people lived openly under the enemy, though not legally in their eyes.

There, a startling sight greeted us. In earlier years, Củ Chi's forests were so dense one could not see more than a few hundred meters. Now from Sa Nhỏ we could see the communes of southern Bến Cát on the far side of the Sài Gòn River — nearly ten kilometers as the crow flies. Not a single tree stood upright.

Even so, every day, American "cá rô" helicopters (small jet-type craft) flew low patrols, dipping their noses to blow aside clumps of grass to check for anyone hiding. The slightest suspicion brought volleys of artillery.

We arranged for anh Hai Yên to return to the inner city.

On the night of the Mậu Thân offensive, I met him again in Quận 4. It was anh Hai Yên who personally eliminated enemy agents in one neighborhood and rallied the people to rise up there.

In later years, when the South was fully liberated and the country reunited, whenever we met, anh Hai Yên would recall how he and I sat together in the tunnels, discussing the Tổng công kích, Tổng khởi nghĩa in Sài Gòn, while the tracks of American tanks clattered overhead. He joked: "Only Communists, in moments like that, could still hold faith and revolutionary optimism."

* * *

Now, anh Hai Yên has retired to his hometown in Xuân Đỉnh, Từ Liêm, Hà Nội. His real name is Dung, formerly a Colonel in the Công an. Unfortunately, he has suffered a stroke, sometimes with paralysis on one side, and still has difficulty walking.

This Tết, when I visited him, he happily recalled again the time when the two of us heard the tracks of American tanks rumbling above our heads …

March 1995 On the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Sài Gòn

26. Remembering that spring

In those days, the base of the Khu ủy Sài Gòn – Gia Định as well as Ban An ninh T4 was located in the ten liberated communes north of Củ Chi district (in today's Hồ Chí Minh City).

After our victory at Bình Giã, the Mỹ–ngụy "special war" was in reality bankrupt, forcing the United States to deploy American troops directly and wage a full-scale ground war in the South.

From 1965 onward, after American troops entered the southern battlefield, they considered the areas of Bến Cát and Củ Chi on both sides of the Sài Gòn River to be the "Iron Triangle." Thus, they stationed Division 1, nicknamed the "Big Red One," in Bến Cát – Bình Dương; and Division 25 ("Tropic Lightning") in Củ Chi, to protect Sài Gòn and destroy our liberated zones in that region.

They launched dozens of sweeps — some at division scale — and every month at least one brigade-level sweep, with aircraft, artillery, and tanks, hoping to wipe out the Củ Chi base. The base was repeatedly bombed by B-52s, and subjected to nightly artillery fire; during the day, aircraft bombed continuously.

In the autumn of 1967, the Khu ủy Sài Gòn – Gia Định convened a meeting. For safety, following the suggestion of the Trung ương Cục, the meeting had to be moved to their base in the South. Unexpectedly, anh Nguyễn Văn Vịnh, envoy of the Bộ Chính trị, arrived and conveyed the Party's assessment:

If in the coming dry season the enemy was no longer capable of launching a strategic counteroffensive, then we would seize the initiative and strike directly at the urban centers, with Sài Gòn as the focal point — possibly at the beginning of 1968.

Hearing anh Vịnh relay the Politburo's decision, all comrades in the Khu ủy were excited; each had long wished for that day.

After the meeting, I returned to Củ Chi to organize the security-related work assigned to our sector. At the same time, American forces conducted sweeps and bulldozed all houses and trees in the ten liberated communes north of Củ Chi. They did this relentlessly for months, leaving behind only a flat plain.

According to the Khu ủy's direction, the mission of An ninh T4 during the Tổng tấn công and uprising in early spring 1968 was to eliminate the cruel and bloodstained agents, especially the ringleaders, to support the masses in rising up.

Because the Củ Chi base was no longer safe, we temporarily moved to several communes along the Vàm Cỏ Đông River in Đức Hòa district, Long An Province, to prepare our work.

A few days before Tết, I received the superior's order with the specific date and hour of the Tổng tấn công and uprising in Sài Gòn: the night of the first day of Tết.

I summoned the key cadres of the An ninh units from inner Sài Gòn to An Ninh Commune (on the Vàm Cỏ Đông riverbank) to convey the order.

On the evening of the 29th of Tết, comrades gathered in a thatched house, under the flag of the Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam and the light of an oil lamp.

We held a ceremony to read the proclamation of the Uỷ ban Trung ương Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam on the Tổng tấn công and uprising. Almost everyone present was moved to tears upon hearing the proclamation. On behalf of the leadership of Ban An ninh T4, I gave Tết greetings to

the comrades and the units. We passed around a bottle, each taking a small sip of liquor, exchanging New Year's wishes and pledging to fulfill our assigned tasks.

That entire night, no one could sleep; everyone only wished for dawn so they could return to their units in the inner city in time.

At noon on the 30th of Tết, using false papers, an inner-city contact escorted me by motorbike into Sài Gòn. I stayed first at a location in Bình Thới. The family had prepared a Tết meal for me, but none of us had the appetite to think about eating.

I spent the time meeting the key cadres of the An ninh T4 units to check their preparations. Some units had received their full complement of weapons; others had run into problems in transport and had not received full supplies.

Seeing some comrades anxious, I told them: "Use whatever weapons you have, whatever kind you have, to carry out your mission."

The night of the 30th of Tết was filled with the atmosphere of the holiday ceasefire, so the soldiers and police of the Sài Gòn regime were noticeably relaxed.

But on the morning of the first day of Tết, foreign radio broadcasts reported that our forces had attacked Huế. By that evening, when I went out to assess the situation again, I saw that the enemy had deployed troops in segments across the streets; soldiers clustered with their rifles along the sidewalks; and at important locations, they had strengthened defenses.

To facilitate command, comrades brought me to another safe house in Khánh Hội ward.

Near midnight on the first day of Tết, I turned on the radio to monitor events. Because Đài phát thanh Sài Gòn broadcast 24 hours a day, at the start of each hour, after announcing the time, they usually aired a few news items followed by music. When the moment to attack arrived, I heard only static after the time announcement, with no news broadcast. Knowing the plan ahead of time, I judged that the biệt động assigned to seize the radio station had succeeded.

But after waiting several minutes and hearing no broadcast of the proclamation of the Uỷ ban Trung ương Mặt trận Dân tộc Giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam, I thought something must have gone wrong there.

From Khánh Hội, I also heard small-arms fire from the direction of Dinh Độc Lập, but could not determine what had happened.

Not until the morning of the second day of Tết, through foreign radio, did I learn that our biệt động had attacked the U.S. Embassy in Sài Gòn, fought heroically, and had reached the Sài Gòn radio station, but could not complete the planned broadcast.

Through giao liên, I received reports from An ninh T4 units. The private residence of U.S. Ambassador Bunker was so heavily defended that our fighters could not break in. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu had gone to Mỹ Tho for Tết and was not in Sài Gòn.

In addition to eliminating enemy agents in various parts of the city and warning collaborators without blood debts, an armed squad of An ninh T4 was assigned to guide a main-force battalion attacking the Tổng Nha Cảnh sát from the south of Sài Gòn. They encountered fierce resistance. Later I learned that nearly the entire squad had died heroically in that battle; some severely wounded comrades had been captured and imprisoned.

Another armed security unit protecting Tiền phương 2 south of Sài Gòn fought bravely to keep the command safe. One inner-city security unit attacked the Embassy of the Philippines, which at that time had sent troops to fight alongside the Mỹ–ngụy forces.

After the first phase of the Tổng tấn công và nổi dậy, higher command ordered further attacks on the urban areas. The An ninh T4 fighters both overcame the enemy's intense surveillance to hold their positions and build additional bases, and continued transporting weapons into hiding places.

Brave and resourceful, the An ninh T4 fighters achieved many operations that resounded across the city. Among them were the grenade attacks (explosive and incendiary) on Thiếu tướng Kiểm, Chief of Staff of the Special Bureau of the ngụy Presidency; the attack on the motorcade of Prime Minister Trần Văn Hương in one of the areas considered safest by the enemy; the bombing of the parking lot at the entrance of the Tổng Nha Cảnh sát at rush hour; the bombing at the Quốc Thanh Theater, where ngụy police and secret agents gathered to entertain themselves; and twice managing to slip a vehicle carrying H.12 rockets through layers of enemy checkpoints to the gate of the Tổng Nha Cảnh sát — only to have a faulty fuse scatter the rockets, killing the operator.

Not to mention the intelligence work, which gathered vital information and established certain assets that remained useful until 30 April 1975.

In both the dramatic and the silent achievements, we must not forget the contributions of the female giao liên — from the older women, the sisters, to the teenage girls of fifteen or sixteen. Many were captured and brutally tortured, yet never broke, keeping their secrets and revolutionary integrity. Some were killed; others, released from prison, still bear permanent injuries from the torture.

Twenty-six years have passed. Those An ninh T4 fighters who took part in the Tổng tấn công và nổi dậy — many now rest forever beneath the earth, such as anh Năm Tấn (Deputy Chief of An ninh T4), Năm Phụng, Năm Mai, Tám Phong (members of the leadership), and many others whose names cannot all be listed at once. Some comrades remain alive and active — Năm Thu, Ba Đạo, Hai Cầu, Út Cạn, and others. Some endured long imprisonment — Hai Minh, Tư Phong. Some are now retired — Ba Dũng, Tư Hổ, Ba Mẫu, Sáu Sinh, Chín Hà.

Each lives in a different place, but whenever we meet again, we always recall the memories of that spring — the spring of attack and uprising — and never forget the dear comrades who did not live to see our nation's final victory.

Spring of Ất Hợi — 1995

27. A “double” victory

After I was captured on the Cửu Long River at the end of December 1970, they took me from the interrogation office of the Cảnh sát in Bến Tre, to the interrogation office of the Cảnh sát and Quân báo of Tactical Region IV in Cần Thơ, then to the intelligence office of Sư đoàn 7 ngụy in Bình Đức, Mỹ Tho. Finally, from early 1971, they transferred me to Sài Gòn and locked me up at 3 Bạch Đằng, the headquarters of the Central Intelligence of the ngụy regime.

At that time, my real identity had not been exposed, and none of the traitors had yet come to point me out. I still maintained the false identity of Captain Nguyễn Văn Hợp, an intelligence officer who had just gone South on a weapons ship into Vàm Mang Cung in Bến Tre, which Sài Gòn newspapers had reported captured in November 1970, while those on board had supposedly escaped earlier.

American and Vietnamese interrogators were questioning me.

Besides the two American interrogators who alternated to cross-check, they also used technical devices and various “tradecraft games” to evaluate my statements.

* * *

One day, the younger American who usually questioned me stepped out for a while. When he returned, an older American came with him, carrying a wooden box. The two of them spoke privately in English. When they finished, the younger one said through the interpreter: “I have to go, this man will continue with you.”

The older American opened the box. Through the interpreter, he explained what I was to do and requested that I answer his questions. He opened some books. They were all pictures. One section was just different eyes; another, various noses, mouths, eyebrows, and so on. Then ears, hair, and whole faces.

He placed a board about the size of a notebook on the table, with two small metal pegs fixed onto a little rectangular piece. He brought out several boxes full of transparent mica sheets. On each sheet, printed in black, there was either a nose, or a mouth, or an ear.

He explained: among the four people who supposedly traveled with me on the ship and left Bến Tre before I did, I was to recall each face. Looking at the books, whenever I saw eyes, a chin, or ears that resembled that person, I was to note the reference number and pick out the mica sheet with the same number. Each sheet had two holes punched in it so it could fit onto the two metal pegs on the board. Once one piece was fixed, I was to select another and place it on top. When I finished one face, I would do the same for the next.

Because those “four people” were completely fictional, invented by me, I now had to keep thinking, imagining and fabricating four faces. I pretended to search among the mica sheets. From morning until late afternoon, I finally assembled four faces.

It was clear that with such a method, they could instantly see a composite face, photograph it, and use it for immediate search. I realized at once that the Americans suspected those four “companions” of being intelligence officers as well, or at least considered them worth tracking, so they used this method of facial reconstruction.

As I assembled, the older American wrote down the code of each mica sheet. I, for my part, had to memorize them as well, in case they forced me to do the process again later.

* * *

One morning, I was not called for interrogation at all. I assumed there would be no session that day, as it was nearly time for the prison rations. Unexpectedly, right then they summoned me. The new interrogation room was not far from the previous one.

When I entered, the younger American interrogator was sitting in a corner, and another American sat in front of a set of machines. I guessed he intended to use a polygraph test (measuring heart rate during questioning). But compared with what I had heard about such instruments, this one was compact, about the size of a doctor's briefcase.

They said: "Today we want to check whether you are telling the truth or lying. We have prepared questions in English with Vietnamese translations. You may read them first; if any question is unclear, you may request a correction. After that, you may answer only 'yes' or 'no', nothing more."

The questions were based on my previous statements and were not difficult. Only one question posed a problem: "Are you an intelligence officer of the Bắc Việt Công an?" I objected: in my country, those are two separate agencies. If they asked like that and I answered "yes," it would not be accurate; if I said "no," it would also be inaccurate. I demanded they split it into two questions, so that if they asked about intelligence, I could say "yes," and if they asked about Công an, I could say "no," and it would be correct, lest they later accuse me of lying. We argued a long time, and finally they agreed.

Then the test began. They wrapped a belt around my chest, attached wires to my ears and fingertips. They blindfolded me and made me sit straight. The interpreter stood behind me, reading each question slowly. After each question, I said either "yes" or "no." We went on until after noon.

The next morning, right before lunch, they called me again. I myself had not expected a second round of testing. When I arrived, the American said: "You probably thought we were finished, didn't you?" Then the test continued with a new set of questions, using the same method as the day before.

At the end, the polygraph specialist said: "Now choose a number between 0 and 9. This time, when I ask, you are allowed to lie. I will show you how effective the machine is."

By then I understood the principle of the test. So when he came to the number I had chosen and I answered "no," I simultaneously took a deep, nervous breath on purpose. My aim was to let the machine record a strong reaction when I lied, so that, based on this, he would later review the tapes secretly recorded during my previous interrogations, compare them with the polygraph readings, and conclude that my earlier answers had all been truthful.

After the test, he examined the recordings for a moment, then correctly stated the number I had chosen. I knew then that he had been deceived, but I pretended to be impressed by the machine. They sent me back to my cell.

Several years later, when my identity had been exposed and the enemy refused to exchange me under the Paris Agreement of 1973 — though they no longer interrogated me — one day a guard told me: in early 1971, after the polygraph tests, the Americans had accepted my false identity. If no one outside had inadvertently revealed who I was, they would never have found out. And in any case, if they had already known my real identity then, they would not have bothered with those tests.

* * *

After the polygraph sessions, Sunday came and they rested. On normal days, I would review my statements to prepare for questioning; on Sundays, when the enemy rested, I would analyze more deeply to anticipate their next moves.

But that Sunday night, they suddenly called me in for questioning. It was a psychological ploy, the reverse of what one would expect.

This time it was another American with the same interpreter. He introduced himself as a psychology specialist. He said: "There will be no conclusions about truth or lies here, so you need not be afraid." He boasted of having worked in psychology for twenty years and having been in Việt Nam for three or four years.

He read questions through the interpreter and asked me to answer. For example: "In what year did the Lady Trưng rise up?" "Who wrote the Gia huấn ca?"

Then he read strings of numbers, starting with two digits, gradually increasing to more. After hearing the series once, I had to repeat it immediately. If I made a mistake or forgot, he simply noted it.

He brought out drawings and asked me to explain their meaning. He produced wordless picture sequences, jumbled, and asked me to arrange them in meaningful order. He showed a drawing of a hand, then gave me cut-out pieces from that drawing and asked me to reassemble them into the complete hand.

For each task, he timed me with a stopwatch and scored me for correctness.

Among the questions, one was: "Why is land in the city more expensive than land in the countryside?" I answered that I did not know, but I found it strange that "dead land" could be more expensive. He pressed me for further explanation and wrote detailed notes on a separate sheet. Perhaps something had caught his attention. I then explained that rural land produces food, while in the city once a building is erected the land's productive use is gone.

He asked another question: "If someone told you that you would die in six months, what would you do in those six months, assuming you had every means available?" I replied that, if that were my fate, I would spend that time working for my Tổ quốc with all my strength.

He asked about my family situation. I said I felt at ease, because my family was being looked after.

At the end of the session, he asked if I had anything to say. I replied: "Americans do not understand the psychology of Asians, nor of the Vietnamese."

* * *

I was kept in solitary cell No. 3, at the end of the row. Around mid–February 1971, one afternoon after interrogation, as I passed solitary cell No. 5, I saw a newcomer and quickly asked, "Just back from the island?" I had no time to hear a reply.

That night, I heard tapping on the wall in the rhythm of Morse code ("moóc"). I did not know Morse, so I did not understand. (At one interrogation, an American had grilled me on why, as an intelligence officer, I had not been trained in radio.)

I suspected this was a setup to test me. If I had known Morse code but had concealed it in my statements, and now answered the tapping from the adjacent cell, they would use this "conversation" to expose me. So I stayed silent.

The next morning, on my way to interrogation, I let the guard walk ahead. As I passed the peephole of solitary cell No. 5, I quickly said: "Letter A, tap once; letter B, tap twice." Then I walked straight on.

That night, the prisoner in cell No. 5 began tapping exactly as I had suggested. So the two of us were now able to "talk."

But I still suspected he was a plant.

Moreover, by coincidence, at noon the next day the guards suddenly called me out for a haircut. At the processing room where haircuts were done, as the barber was nearly finished, he asked: "You're Thông, right?" I was startled and replied, "I am Hợp." The guard snapped at him: "Hoàng Trí Thông is in the other cell." So I learned that man's name.

Night after night, through halting tapping, we talked. Piecing things together, I gathered this:

He asked my name and when I had been captured. I answered in line with my fictitious statements, still wary of a trap.

He said his name was Thông; that he was from Công an vũ trang Yên Bái; that he had gone South to work in Mỹ Tho Province as An ninh đô thị; that he had been captured in a secret bunker with a weapon and therefore had claimed to be a Tỉnh đội officer. He said that in Sài Gòn he had been held in a cell at the Bộ Tổng Tham mưu ngụy, and that due to urinary problems he had been sent to a hospital — though he did not know which one. At this camp, he had not yet been interrogated. A few days later, he said he had been questioned in a room along the side of the prison.

I found this strange. My interrogations took place in a row of rooms I reached by crossing a courtyard. How could his interrogation be in a room along the outside wall of this camp?

Seeing that I had been captured at the end of 1970, he asked about the situation outside. I told him about the coup in Cambodia.

Each time we tapped, it took a long time to grasp each other's meaning, and we often mis-tapped.

* * *

Our troops entered Sài Gòn and freed me from the 3 Bạch Đằng prison at noon on 30 April 1975.

Afterward, when I reported to Bộ Công an, I told them about the man who called himself Thông, who had tapped on the wall to communicate with me in early 1971 at 3 Bạch Đằng, and whom I suspected of being an enemy agent. I reasoned that the enemy had devised this plan so that, if I let down my guard and trusted this "fellow prisoner," I might inadvertently reveal my true identity.

Bộ Công an investigated. At Công an vũ trang Yên Bái there was indeed an officer named Thông. But he had never gone South.

They continued checking, using the name of the wife and child that the "wall-tapper" had given me. They eventually found another Công an vũ trang officer, a close friend of the real Thông. This man had gone South, been captured, and defected — and had used the name Thông.

In the end, the traitor confessed that in early 1971, after surrendering, he had followed the enemy's plan, tapping on the wall to talk with the prisoner in the next cell (me), to help them verify that prisoner's statements.

* * *

Thus, in that unusual situation I experienced, this can be considered a “double victory” for me: both in a battle of wits and in counterintelligence.

* * *

It is clear that, with unwavering revolutionary resolve, regardless of circumstances or place, anyone can still do useful work for the Tổ quốc and for the people.

* * *

This match of minds, staged right inside the enemy’s prison at 3 Bạch Đằng in early 1971, had to wait until after 30 April 1975 — more than four years — before a “referee with sufficient authority” could officially declare the winner and the loser.

Perhaps even in international tournaments between chess grandmasters, no game has to wait that long.

Hà Nội, 29 August 1996

28. Tết in the prisons of the Mỹ–Ngụy

People often say: “A day in prison is like a thousand years outside.”

I was arrested and imprisoned for exactly four years, four months, and ten days; and I was held in solitary confinement from beginning to end.

It began in Bến Tre, then they transferred me to Cần Thơ, then to Bình Đức, and finally to Sài Gòn until I was released.

In Sài Gòn, whenever they tortured me, they sent me to the detention center on Trần Bình Trọng street; the rest of the time I was in 3 Bạch Đằng.

Every time they escorted me, they blindfolded me, sometimes even stuffed my ears tight, and of course shackled both hands and feet.

They moved me at night, for hours, and only when putting me into a cell would they remove the blindfold and the earplugs.

On the day of liberation, I finally saw that the rooms they had kept me in — which I had thought were separated by who-knows-how many kilometers — were all within the compound of 3 Bạch Đằng, some only about twenty meters apart.

The first Tết I spent in prison was early 1971.

At that time the enemy still did not know my true identity.

I was held in the last solitary cell of the row.

At night, sewer rats the size of kittens ran out from somewhere and bumped into me.

During the days of Tết, the guards all took time off.

One afternoon, reflected through shards of glass embedded in the wall as spikes, a beam of sunlight suddenly shone into my cell; a round white spot, moving slowly.

I sat watching that ray of sunlight.

And that became the idea for a poem I attempted to write in prison, titled “NẮNG” (“SUNLIGHT”), with the following lines:

“Hôm nay lần đầu tiên Có nắng rọi trong phòng Ngoài kia chắc nắng đẹp Chan hòa nắng tươi vui.

Xà lim chiều vắng lạnh Không tỏa hết bàn tay Trườn trên tường đốm nắng Như sức sống long lanh.

Giơ tay mừng đón nắng Lòng những tưởng bồi hồi Miền Cờ Sao nắng đẹp Sức sống bay thăm tôi”.

During that same Tết, one night, for reasons I still do not know, a few guards secretly turned on our radio — I could not tell whether it was đài Hà Nội or đài Giải Phóng.

Suddenly, I overheard part of a commentary praising our Giải phóng quân for fighting well and winning big on Đường 9 – Nam Lào.

My heart filled with indescribable joy.

That truly was a Tết gift for me that spring.

After that, for various reasons, the enemy discovered my true identity.

They tortured me relentlessly from March 1971 until November 1971.

Only later did I learn that, outside, there had been a plan to release an American POW and propose exchanging me before the conclusion of the Paris Conference.

Although the torture stopped, the Americans still tried to interrogate me for information; of course, I had to defend against any slip that could harm us.

In 1972, they put me in a specially designed cell.

It was about four square meters, with a steel door lined with rubber for soundproofing: electricity, water, even air were all controlled by them from the outside; the walls were painted stark white to create psychological pressure, and five lightbulbs burned day and night so the prisoner could not distinguish day from night.

After 30/4/1975, our technical officers examined the cell and found hidden microphones in the walls, and on the ceiling an infrared camera that allowed them to monitor my movements at any moment.

There was only a bird-cage slot for receiving food.

Guards were not allowed to speak to the prisoner.

Toward the end of 1972, probably near Tết, the American interrogator — seeing no benefit in continuing — threatened to hand me back to the ngụy, implying renewed torture, hoping to force me to talk.

One night, while asleep, I suddenly heard a loud explosion, surely hitting near the prison compound.

I knew it was our artillery.

When I was captured, it was during the period when the enemy was carrying out "rapid pacification of the countryside" after Mậu Thân 1968; at that time I was in Mỏ Cày, Bến Tre, and had seen Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's helicopter land to celebrate their "pacification" of Bến Tre.

So now, hearing our heavy shells reaching Sài Gòn, I immediately sensed that their "pacification" had failed.

The sound of our artillery exploding inside Sài Gòn made me think of it as the voice of comrades and compatriots, signaling that the balance of the war had shifted.

And that became the subject for another poem I attempted, titled "Tiếng người" ("The Voice of the People"), expressing my wish at the time — that I might become the target for our artillery gunners to strike directly at the enemy's headquarters; and even if I were to die, when victory came, comrades would still be able to distinguish the body of a revolutionary from that of the enemy.

Early 1973, just before Tết, the American interrogator informed me that the Paris Agreement had been signed; but he said he did not yet know what would happen to me.

Seeing I was not being released, I protested in many ways, but they continued holding me in solitary confinement, refusing to move me to the section with other POWs.

Late 1974, I protested and criticized them not only for violating the Paris Agreement by not releasing me, but also for their inhumanity — keeping me from sunlight for years.

Cornered, they allowed me "sunbathing".

But after a few sessions, they suddenly stopped.

Only after liberation did I learn that at that time our forces had struck Buôn Ma Thuột, and the enemy retaliated against the prisoners.

Right until I was freed from the Mỹ–ngụy prison on 30/4/1975, I was told by our leaders that the American–ngụy command had ordered my execution, but the lower-level guards — later confessing this during their cải tạo — did not dare carry it out because our forces were already near.

Had they killed me as planned, I would never have had the chance to write down the poems I had composed in prison and memorized; nor could I have recounted these Tết memories from the Mỹ–ngụy prisons in Sài Gòn, from late 1970 until 30/4/1975.

Xuân 1995

29. Independence Palace, May 1, 1975

Around noon on 30 April 1975, a battalion of our troops advanced into the 3 Bạch Đằng area and freed me from the prison of the Central Intelligence of the Sài Gòn regime. Comrade Du, the battalion commander, took me to the place where his unit's command was stationed, at the former Navy Headquarters on Bạch Đằng street. That afternoon, the brothers shared dry rations and canned food with me. We talked throughout the night. They asked about my imprisonment and about Sài Gòn, and told me about their fighting and the situation in the North. I asked anh Du to help deliver a letter to the Thành ủy Sài Gòn.

* * *

On the morning of 1 May 1975, anh Du told me: "Our unit has to continue marching. If we bring you along and something happens, it would be a pity. So I will hand you over to another unit staying in Sài Gòn, so you can meet the Uỷ ban Quân quản and the Thành ủy."

Then anh Du drove me by jeep to Dinh Độc Lập. Along the road, weapons, ammunition, and the uniforms of ngụy soldiers lay scattered. On this first day of liberated Sài Gòn, the streets were full of people and vehicles. The regime's "cảnh sát công lộ" had likely disappeared. At intersections, people avoided each other on their own, and traffic kept flowing.

Near Dinh Độc Lập, the crowd was dense. After weaving for a long time, the jeep reached the fence. Anh Du asked a soldier on guard to go inside and report that he needed to make contact. A moment later, anh Du went in first. I remained outside the fence to wait. It gave me a chance to see and hear things never seen under Mỹ–ngụy rule, and unlikely ever to happen again at Dinh Độc Lập.

* * *

People around me said to each other: "In the past, you had to sneak past here. A barbed-wire line forced everyone far from the fence; no one could come close or gather like today."

Many red banners were raised, with slogans such as "Chào mừng Uỷ ban Quân quản" and "Chào mừng ngày 1/5," likely prepared by our cơ sở nội thành.

The iron gate of Dinh Độc Lập, having been rammed down, could no longer be closed. Our troops placed several soldiers there to guard.

An older man was asking a soldier about his hometown and education. He turned to the person next to him and said: "They talked about a bloodbath. These Northern soldiers—tú tài level, and gentle."

Another man, together with a monk and a priest, asked another soldier questions, and seemed satisfied with the answers about policies toward intellectuals and religion in the North.

Someone else, after learning that a soldier was a platoon leader, told a companion: "Officers and soldiers are the same; the only difference is an extra pistol."

A middle-aged woman kept stroking a soldier's shirt and told another woman: "In the past, when 'the troops' were about to go on a sweep, they came to take from us. These Giải phóng soldiers only thank you politely, then set up their own pot to cook."

Looking inside the fence of Dinh Độc Lập, the scene was truly unique.

In the yard, here and there, large pots of rice were steaming. A few tanks stood in place. On the lawn, soldiers gathered in small groups, lying down to rest.

Anh Du and another cadre came out to get me. Anh Du returned to his unit. I followed the cadre into the compound.

Talking with the soldiers, I learned they had rushed in by motorized convoy from Đà Nẵng, fighting along the way. They had marched day and night without rest. They were sleepy, but now too happy to sleep. After constant movement, they had not been able to bathe. Here, with water available, they washed freely, which explained the clothes drying everywhere and on the grass. Some soldiers were bathing under the fountain at the "phủ đầu rồng" in the courtyard.

At the same time, reporters with cameras hanging from their necks were hurrying to find out which tank had entered first and who had planted the flag. On the front steps, cameramen were filming a unit running into the main building with a flag. I learned that another unit had been assigned to take the palace, so the reporters had followed that one. But that unit met heavy resistance and was delayed. Under orders, whichever unit reached the palace first entered. Thus the unit that actually took the palace had no photographers with them, and now the reporters were searching for them to document it.

The sun was harsh. Seeing I was still weak, the soldiers told me to rest inside.

The basement of the building served as the command post of the unit that had taken Dinh Độc Lập. There was also an advance team preparing for the Uỷ ban Quân quản. Representatives of the Uỷ ban had not yet arrived, but many people were already asking to enter to greet them, and the soldiers had to postpone these requests.

By noon, the soldiers shared their meal with me. I learned that the entire Cabinet of Dương Văn Minh was still being held upstairs. Since noon the previous day, they had not eaten. They could not eat our dry rations and canned food. The soldiers therefore took a truck, brought along a former ngụy officer stationed inside the palace, and went out to buy food for them.

* * *

By late afternoon, the representatives of the Uỷ ban Quân quản still had not arrived. The officer in charge of the advance team told me to return to an old cơ sở for the moment, and I could meet the Uỷ ban later.

That night, 1 May 1975, I slept at the home of anh chị Ba Trương in Bình Thới. Their house had been burned during the second phase of Mậu Thân. It rained heavily and leaked everywhere; there was only one dry spot. They insisted I sleep there. Worried the area was not secure, anh Ba and a nephew kept watch. I could not sleep. So everyone stayed awake, gathered around the dry spot, talking until morning.

The next morning, chị Ba went to the market to prepare a meal to celebrate my release. A car stopped in front of the house. The person running in was Nhơn, their eldest son. During the second phase of Mậu Thân, he had left home for the liberated zone and joined our unit; later he was selected by anh Sáu Dân to join his protection unit.

Seeing me, he hugged me tightly and cried, saying everyone had thought I was dead. He said he had come to Sài Gòn with chú Sáu, and that chú Sáu had allowed him to visit home briefly. He said he would immediately inform anh Sáu Dân.

A few hours later, the sound of a police siren came. Anh chị Ba feared the ngụy might still cause trouble and told me to hide. The car stopped right outside. Footsteps rushed in. Voices asked urgently, "Where is Tư Trọng?"

Anh Ba panicked and tried to block them from going inside. Looking through the curtain, I saw it was anh Hai Sơn, then anh Sáu Ngọc. I stepped out and reassured anh Ba that they were our own people.

It turned out that after hearing from Nhơn, anh Sáu Dân had ordered the An ninh team to fetch me immediately in case anything happened. But their sudden arrival had frightened the family.

* * *

Those were the scenes I witnessed in the first days of a newly liberated Sài Gòn. They have remained deeply imprinted in my memory.

4/1997

30. Tết Tears

I have lived through many Tết holidays, in many periods of my life, and in many different circumstances. From the Tết of my childhood, surrounded by family. To the Tết of my years in the revolutionary movement, far from home, but happy among comrades and the people — whether in the free zones of the North, or the liberated areas of the South. Tết in temporarily occupied Hà Nội. Tết Mậu Thân in the middle of Sài Gòn. Tết in prison. Each Tết carried its own character.

But there has never been a Tết with as many tears as the story I recount below.

* * *

After the liberation of the South and the reunification of the country, the beginning of 1976 brought me a Tết once again spent in the warm atmosphere of family — after eleven years apart, a separation I once feared would never end. It was during that very Tết that something unexpected happened.

Hằng, my cousin who worked at the Hydrometeorology Service, sent word to me. She said someone she knew, having heard I had returned to the North, wished to meet me about a family matter. She did not mention a name. It made me wonder all day who it could be.

On the afternoon of the second day of Tết.

I had just seen off some friends visiting for the holiday. Then the doorbell rang. A woman in her forties stepped inside. Her face looked vaguely familiar — some features seemed unchanged — but I still could not recall exactly who she was.

As soon as she sat down, she burst into tears. Through sobs, she said, “I am the wife of anh Chi…” Then she wept again.

At once, images and events from twenty-five years earlier came flooding back before my eyes.

* * *

In 1951. Inside Hà Nội. The city still under temporary occupation. A multi-household dwelling near the end of phố Xăng-xôm (now Triệu Việt Vương).

I went there for the first time at dusk, carrying a small wooden box tied with cord. After handing the box to the man who answered the door and gave the correct password, I arranged the next meeting and left to reach the car waiting near the wall of Nhà Diêm.

Inside that wooden box was a homemade radio transmitter. Anh Trần Quốc Hoàn, Secretary of the Hà Nội Special Zone Party Committee, had given it to anh Trần Sâm for use inside the city. Whether due to unfamiliarity or mechanical fault, the device had never managed to make contact with the base. When I met anh Sâm, he complained about it and asked me to send it out to the base for repairs. I agreed, without revealing that I already knew someone in the city capable of fixing it.

The handover itself was almost comical.

According to plan, I went to phố Phủ Doãn, to a motorcycle repair shop — a liaison point for anh Sâm. I handed the owner a note with the simple signal: “Deliver the repaired vehicle to the bearer.” Without a word, he gave me a newspaper-wrapped bundle.

I stepped outside, heading toward the car waiting on the corner of Tràng Thi. But something felt wrong.

Anh Sâm had told me the transmitter was in a small, light wooden box. Yet this bundle felt heavy and round, like a roll of giò lụa. I returned to the shop. I said, "Mine was light — why is this so heavy?" Calmly, he answered, "Grenades. If they weren't heavy, what would they be?"

Of course I had no business receiving grenades. He had mixed up someone else's package. I handed it back and left.

When I told anh Sâm, he confirmed the mistake. Through anh Ngọc "đen," a security officer, the correct device was finally sent to me.

Meanwhile, inside the city, we had a talented radio technician — an employee in the Météo office of the occupation administration. He was already a covert intelligence source, providing valuable information. Brave enough to repair a prohibited device at home, he agreed to help, hiding it among various radios and spare parts scattered openly on his workbench.

That man was anh Chi.

From that time on, I visited him occasionally for political discussion and operational matters. His wife understood the risks he took; yet whenever I came, she was warm, steady, and discreetly kept watch outside so we could talk. Once, after a quarrel, she even "reported" anh Chi to me. I advised him not to strike his wife. He listened. Their home returned to harmony.

Later, as newer American transmitters were brought into the city, the older homemade unit remained hidden in his house. We simply told him to find a safe place to keep it.

* * *

Now I realized: the woman before me truly was his wife — the wife of the intelligence source who, twenty-five years ago, had taken the risk of repairing that transmitter. No wonder I had not recognized her at first — hardship had taken its toll.

But why was she crying during Tết?

I calmed her and asked her to tell me everything.

* * *

She said:

"I knew that in July 1954, my husband and several others in the intelligence group were transferred from Hà Nội Public Security to the Central Intelligence Service. Anh Chúc accepted the new mission and went South. My husband did not want to go — partly because of family, partly because he longed to live in an atmosphere of freedom after years under occupation.

Just before the liberation of Hà Nội, the intelligence people gave him a radio transmitter belonging to chị Vân to repair. But no one came back to pick it up. He hid it in the ceiling and then forgot about it after liberation.

In 1965, someone denounced him. Security forces searched the house and found the transmitter. They accused him of espionage and arrested him."

She paused, then continued:

“At that time, I worked in a factory. The Party cell had planned to admit me as a member. When my husband was arrested, the Secretary called me in. He said: ‘If you divorce him, you may still be admitted. Otherwise, no.’

I told him: ‘We have lived together for many years. I believe he is not a spy. Even during the occupation, he worked secretly for the Resistance — cadres came to our home. If necessary, ask them. I cannot divorce him.’”

Her voice shook again.

“The children were shunned at school. Life became very hard. I had no one to turn to. Later, for reasons I still do not know, my husband was released — but the document only said ‘temporarily released,’ not cleared. He lost his job. He struggled to find odd work to feed the family. Then one day, he was struck by a car and passed away.”

She broke down once more.

* * *

I had left for the South in 1964. From there, the Central Office for Security communicated with the Ministry every day by radio. Many questions about old matters were sent in for me to answer. But this case had never been mentioned.

She continued:

“Someone told me you had returned from the South. Through chị Hằng, I found a way to reach you. I hoped you still remembered and could speak for him.”

* * *

I am not someone who forgets. Nor someone ungrateful.

I consoled her, asked her to go home, and wait for news.

* * *

After Tết, at the office, I requested to read the entire case file. Then I invited the veteran Public Security officers who had worked with the wartime intelligence group, including those who knew anh Chi. Everyone agreed: the group was reliable, and anh Chi even more so.

I asked the officer who handled the case: “When I was in the South, the Ministry still communicated with me directly by radio. There were matters only I knew. Why was this case never sent in for clarification?” He answered vaguely.

I said: “If you made a mistake, then say so. You arrested him wrongly. Why was he released only as ‘temporarily released’?” No one could answer.

We drafted a formal record, signed by all present. It was sent to the department responsible. I insisted they issue a written document clearing anh Chi’s name.

Yet nothing moved. Weeks passed. Months passed. Almost a year.

In the end, I had to write directly to the responsible superior. Formally, I stated: “For justice, and for the humane policy owed to someone who served the Resistance inside occupied Hà Nội, the facts are clear. If you do not resolve this, I must report directly to the Minister.”

And that is what I did.

Why? The reason was obvious.

When Minister Trần Quốc Hoàn read my report and reviewed the file, he exclaimed: “How could anyone treat such a person that way?”

He immediately ordered the department head to issue the exoneration. He also instructed staff to go directly to the neighborhood committee to publicly announce the clearing of his name.

* * *

Another Tết came. Without notice, chị Chi visited my home again. Through tears, she told me what had happened since the exoneration.

She no longer worked at the factory. But now, neighbors treated her family with respect. Old colleagues visited to share her joy. Her children were welcomed again at school, admitted into the Young Pioneer and Youth Union.

She thanked me. I replied only that I had done my duty. And I regretted that my eleven years in the South had prevented me from helping her sooner.

She cried again. But I knew these were no longer tears of injustice.

* * *

I am not one who cries aloud. But my eyes stung.

Perhaps those tears she shed were, in a way, a precious reward from the people — given to someone like me in Public Security.

In a lifetime of serving in this work, how many officers ever receive tears like those, freely offered, on a Tết I will never forget?

Hà Nội, 2 November 1996.

(1) Nhà Diêm: This area lay on the southeastern side of the Thăng Long citadel. In September of the Year of the Dog (1154), King Lý Anh Tông (1138–1175) built the Nam Giao altar here for the Heaven-worship ceremony. In 1890, the land containing the Nam Giao altar was handed over to a company to build a match factory. In 1956, the Trần Hưng Đạo Mechanical Plant was constructed on the same site. From 2004 onward, the plant was relocated to make room for the Vincom Bà Triệu commercial center.