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Cham towers

Letter from Saigon

WHY I DEFECT

Editor's Note: Nguyen Van Phe, a Viet Cong for ten years, defected in late 1969 when he was assistant commander of a sapper company in the highland province of Darlac. Phe recently gave a few journalists an interview on the basis of which the following account is written. Through the pen of NNP, Phe, a 28-year-old veteran of some 54 battles, relates hereunder how he came to defect the Viet Cong movement.

I had been with the Viet Cong for nearly a decade when I witnessed an extraordinary development, which was to give me many disturbing thoughts and finally prompt me to shift side.

It was on March 23, 1968, when in conjunction with the K.39 Battalion, my company mounted an attack on the headquarters of an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet-Nam) unit and a village called Trung Hoa in the province of Darlac.

We had made intensive preparations for this attack and our commanders had promised us something like a fifty-fifty chance of victory. But when we started assaulting the ARVN position, we were hit by a reconnaissance company from the rear. There was no choice but to withdraw.

With my own eyes, I saw 19 of our soldiers wounded, four of them seriously, in addition to a number of fatalities.

After a couple of hours, when we had retreated deep into the jungle, carrying the dead and wounded with us, the operational commander ordered the column to stop. It was then that one of the company commanders of the K.39 Battalion came up to me and said: "Comrade Phe, you have been chosen to stay here and command the rear section. Fifteen of the wounded comrades, their porters and every one else will move out of this area right now."

BURIED ALIVE: At first, I thought I had been chosen to cover the retreat simply because of my knowledge of the local terrain. But I was to find out quite soon that those staying behind with me, the four severely wounded soldiers and 16 others, all of them Party members, had been intended for an altogether different mission.

After a while, one of the 16 Party members informed the entire group that we were expected to inter the dead and bury alive the four badly wounded comrades. I do not remember what I said but I was evidently shocked at the announcement and those slated for burial protested as loudly and as vehemently as they could. But the others said it was the Party's policy and could not be resisted.

To mitigate my revulsion, I guess, one of the Party members also said: "If enemy planes were around, they would detect us and besides strafing us they would be able to make an accounting of the number of casualties as a result of the recent ground action and their own strikes. That would be bad and counter to the Party propaganda line. To protect the Party we have to bury both the dead and the wounded."

And so, they buried the dead bodies and the four wounded men, who were still breathing hard. At least two of these had their eyes wide open, turning them on each of us pleading but finding no answers....Their eyes, I shall never forget.

The four men were dumped into a couple of fighting bunkers, we found in the vicinity. They were dumped in a sitting position. The burial mission was speedily accomplished, after which I made a note in my diary.

DARKEST DAY: It was the darkest day of my life. I had never seen anything so very bad in nine years of fighting. And even after we left the place, I found myself wondering what I would do if I should ever be in the situation of the four who had just been buried alive.

Other disturbing thoughts were to come up in my mind many months after this ugly incident. In other words, I felt restless and helpless.

Just a little while before, the victims could move like any one of us. We had followed the Party faithfully. We had followed its teachings faithfully. And now, the Party was ordering to unmercifully bury its own men alive.

But I was under strict Party control and although I protested deep in my heart I had to go ahead and do what I was told. Still, I thought I might some day be in the same situation of the four men I helped to bury and I felt sorry for them and for myself, too.

The thing that really changed my way thinking was the sight of the four men I helped to bury on that day of March 23, 1968. But a while after this, a series of three developments contributed to making it impossible for me to postpone the moment on truth.

THREE DEVELOPMENTS: I had been fighting in the highlands for many years without a home leave. I had always been thinking of my parents and wanted to see them badly. But when I applied for a few days of leave, my commander told me:

"If you want to see your family, you must first ask the trigger of your rifle. Your rifle has not yet killed enough American and puppet troops (ARVN soldiers) and this means that your family still is in no position to enjoy a moment of happiness. Thus, if you want to go home and see your parents, you should first go out to kill all the Americans."

The second development took place soon after this lesson of revolutionary conduct. I guess that all Vietnamese by now must have heard of the need to sacrifice one's personal happiness for the success of the Revolution, a Viet Cong euphemism against raising a family.

Sometime back, I loved a girl and I thought that my feelings for her were reciprocated. But she joined the Revolution, too, and soon was made to attend a school for officers. After she finished school, she apparently changed her mind. After telling me about the duties of Party members she broke off with me. Ho Chi Minh, she said, "never got married. Who do you think you are to have a right to start a family?"

Then, came the night of May 12, 1969, when troops under my command, once more in conjunction with the K.39 Battalion, were ordered to attack an ARVN artillery base in Darlac province. I had been in this area for some time to know that the assault would cost us dearly.

So, I ordered my men to withdraw when it became evident that the longer we stayed the more casualties we would suffer without being able to achieve anything.

This point of tactics, however, was taken lightly by my superiors, who charged me with being unrealistic and not too eager to sacrifice myself and my men for the cause. One of the cadres even told me to be on my guard for he was going to denounce me.

In reminiscing all these developments, I am still angry with the Communists. I had been with them for nine years and now they were treating me like dirt. Without any consideration whatsoever for individual human beings, they treated their soldiers like dirt.

So I reasoned that it would be better to be killed on the ARVN side. On this side, at least one can expect to be buried covered in a decent piece of cloth.

On the following day, on March 13, 1969, I surrendered at Dak Ly, a resettlement center in the province of Darlac.

This is not to say, however, that I did not have my fears in shifting side the way I did. In my previous fighting years, I had witnessed situations clearly indicating the Viet Cong were not liked by those on this side of the barrier.

I particularly have in mind what took place in March 1968 at the village of Trung Hoa. There, following a series of nasty battles in the course of which we lost many men, we only succeeded in occupying a couple of hamlets.

When we came into those hamlets, however, things were rather unexpected. We asked the villagers whether they had weapons and rifles. They, of course, said no but when we turned away, they threw grenades at us. There were something like 70 of us killed or wounded in that manner.

What was rather shocking to me was that little kids also fought us. They fought mainly with grenades. Apparently they had promised their mothers that they would fight the Communists.

The population of Trung Hoa was mainly composed of refugees (from North Vietnam). They had a tremendous fighting spirit. They apparently did not like anybody or anything associated with the Communists. That is the reason, I think, explaining why our troops were all scared when they received the order to attack a refugee village. They were afraid of grenades from little kids.

54 BATTLES: But to be completely truthful, the burial of wounded soldiers, the refusal of my superiors to grant me a leave after nearly a decade of uninterrupted fighting, the desertion of the woman I loved, the nonsensical attack on the artillery base... were not the only factors contribution to my decision to shift side.

I had taken part in 54 battles or fights and none of them had really resulted in one hundred percent victories for us.

A unit with which I was, the C.6, consisted of 28 people but after the battle of Chu Ty, only three were left alive. At Buon Bong, where we deployed a battalion, we had 47 casualties. In this particular case, we succeeded in removing 17 men but the others were left behind.

Most important of all these battles was the attack on the City of Ban Me Thuot during the Tet 1968 offensive. To give you an idea of the losses we suffered, let it be simply said that a 20-man unit counted only nine when all was over. In the battle for Ban Me Thuot, 1,327 of us died.

Still, when I decided to shift side, I was worried about the welcome reserved for me. I had read many leaflets sent from the sky by the Government of Vietnam but I did not believe in their contents very much.

But when I surrendered at Dak Ly and saw the faces of the people and militarymen there, I started to have some good feelings. Later, I was to find out that I had been wrong for nearly a decade of killing.

From the time I joined the Communists in 1960 until the day I surrendered nine years later, I spent the best of my thinking abilities and physical energy on killing many civilians and ARVN soldiers.

PARDON: And so, I told myself I would tell the people at Ban Me Thuot that I hoped the people and the nation would forgive me and be lenient to me. After all I had only been misled. I was fed much propaganda and no truth.

The reception reserved for me at Ban Me Thuot, however, literally confounded me. I was so moved I could not say anything. I wanted to be pardoned and I was pardoned.

My only hope now is to work hard, to do anything the nation wants me to, to make up for the many mistakes I made in nearly one decade of fighting against my own people.

THE BIRD IN THE GOOSEBERRY TREE

A Vietnamese Folktale

Adapted by George F. Schultz

There once lived two brothers whose parents died and left them a small farm. By working hard they were able to produce enough to make a living. A few years later, each brother married; unfortunately the elder brother married a lazy woman and he too became lazy, leaving all the hard work to the younger couple.

The younger brother and his wife labored from dawn to dusk and obtained a better harvest than the farm had ever before produced. The elder brother and his wife feared that they would demand a large share of the harvest for themselves and therefore ordered them to leave the farm.

The younger couple then went to live in a little thatched cottage that had a gooseberry tree in the front yard. They did not complain of their lot but went to the forest for firewood, which they sold in the market-place; they also hired out as common laborers. They saw very little of the elder brother and his wife, who kept to themselves on the farm.

The happiest days of the year for the younger couple were those when the fruit of the gooseberry tree began to ripen. They took good care of the tree throughout the year, keeping ants and insects away from it. It became a beautiful, green tree and its shade covered their entire garden.

One morning, when the branches of the tree were laden with delicious gooseberries, the younger brother and his wife went out with a basket to pick them. Suddenly the tree began to shake and tremble as if someone were climbing through its branches. Looking up, the man and his wife saw that a huge bird, the like of which they had never seen before, was calmly eating the ripe gooseberries. It ate its fill and then flew away. Every morning thereafter this same bird would appear to feast on the fresh fruit. At the end of a month, it was evident that the quantity of fruit on the tree had diminished considerably. The couple finally decided that it was high time to speak to the bird about it.

"Dear Bird, there will be no fruit left if you continue to eat like that," said the younger brother's wife, half seriously and half in jest.

"I will pay a gold coin for every gooseberry eaten," replied the big bird, turning its head slightly and nodding. "Make a bag three spans in length to hold the coins." It repeated these words three times and then flew away.

The younger brother and his wife had been greatly surprised to hear the big bird speak. They thought about its words and decided to do as it had instructed. The wife sewed together some pieces of brown cloth, which she gave to her husband.

The following morning, they felt a strong current of air as the bird landed in front of their cottage. It turned its head and uttered some strange cries in greeting. The man left the cottage with the bag in his hand; as the bird squatted on the ground, he seated himself on its back and wrapped his arms around its neck. The bird

then regained its feet, craned its neck forward, and left the ground.

The bird and its passenger flew over dark mountains and vast, green forests before reaching the great, blue ocean. The man was frightened as he looked down and saw the billows breaking against the rocks of the shore. Finally they reached a small island, the surface of which was covered with multicolored stones producing a dazzling light. The bird hovered over the island and the man feared that he would be dashed against some huge boulders. But finally they came to rest near the entrance to a deep cave. There were no signs of life on the island.

The bird gave the man a sign to enter the cave and take what he liked. At the entrance he observed several kinds of precious stones; some of them were red as blood and others, green as cats' eyes. Gold and silver coins were strewn about in great profusion. The younger brother was quite content to gather some of the gold and diamonds near the entrance and did not go far into the cave fear of losing his way. When his bag was full, he seated himself on the bird's back and signaled that he was ready to depart.

The bird nodded, craned its neck forward, and uttered some strange cries, which were echoed by the rocks. Then he flew over the seas, forests, and mountains as before, finally coming to rest in front of the cottage.

The younger brother's wife was overjoyed to see that her husband and the bird had returned safely. She ran out of the house, caressed the bird, and told it to feast on the gooseberries. When it had eaten its fill, it uttered three cries and flew off.

* *

When the elder brother and his wife learned of their younger brother's sudden wealth, they hurried to his cottage in order to find out how he had acquired it. After hearing his story, they begged him to take their farm in exchange for his thatched cottage and the gooseberry tree. Much to their surprise, the younger brother and his wife accepted the offer.

The following day, the elder brother and his wife moved into the cottage and the younger brother and his wife went to live on the farm. The elder brother and his wife did no work as their only concern was to watch the gooseberry tree and await the big bird's return.

One morning, a gust of wind shook the roof of the cottage and the top of the gooseberry tree began to shake and quiver. The couple ran out of the cottage and saw that the bird was perched in the tree calmly eating the gooseberries.

"We have only this tree!" they cried. "How can we live if you stuff yourself with our fruit?"

"I will pay a gold coin for each gooseberry eaten," replied the bird. "Make a bag three spans in length to hold the coins."

The elder brother and his wife were very happy to hear these words and bowed low to the bird, which took flight immediately as if displeased with this obsequious gesture. Then the couple began to argue about making the bag. At first, they

wanted to make several bags; but fearing the bird's displeasure, they decided to make one bag three times as big as the bird had directed.

The next morning, when the bird landed in their yard, the elder brother and his wife left their meal and went outside. The wife bowed to the ground and the man climbed onto the bird's back. It left the ground and flew through silvery clouds, over forests and mountains, and finally came to rest on the small island, just as it had done previously with the younger brother.

The elder brother was dazzled by the sparkle of so many diamonds and other precious stones. Once in the cave, his greed got the better of him and he worked feverishly to fill his large bag with gold and gems. He also filled his pockets and became so heavily laden that he could barely drag himself along the ground.

The big bird uttered shrill cries of warning when the man failed to return on time; it was late in the afternoon before he appeared. Then he tied the heavy bag to the bird's neck and signaled that he was ready to leave.

The bird was so heavily burdened that it could hardly leave the ground. But the elder brother was overjoyed to think that he was a rich man and would be home again. He dreamed of the large mansion he would build and of the fields and gardens that he would be able to buy with his gold.

While the man was daydreaming, the weather changed for the worst. The blue waves of the sea turned gray and rose higher and higher. As the wind grew stronger, the big bird tired; its head drooped and its wings became weaker and weaker. The heavy bag of gold and gems came loose and fell into the sea, dragging the elder brother down with it. He struck the water and was pulled down and down by the weight of the stones in his pockets; he was never seen again.

And what about the big bird? It rose from the surface of the water and flew off to the mountains and forests.

Note. This story demonstrates the belief of the Vietnamese people in the law of causality, that is, the relation of cause and effect. "Good begets good and evil begets evil" is a common saying that forms the very basis of Vietnamese morality. Although this is primarily a Confucianist teaching, the illustrative story given here is of Buddhist inspiration.

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIN. LAM MEETS WITH CHIEFS OF RVN DIPLOMATIC

MISSIONS IN AMERICA

Saigon, April 24, 1971 - Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam Wednesday presided over a meeting of chiefs of RVN diplomatic missions in America held at the RVN Embassy in Washington, D. C..

Attending the meeting were the RVN Ambassador to the US, the Permanent Observer to the UN, the Charges d'Affairs at the Vietnamese Embassies in Argentina and Brazil and the Consul General to San Francisco.

Sources from the Foreign Affairs Ministry said, Minister Lam informed at the meeting the Vietnamese diplomats of the latest events at home in the political, military and economic fields. The Foreign Minister also recalled the major principles of the RVN government's foreign policy and President Nguyen Van Thieu's peace initiatives put forth since the opening of the Paris peace talks.

Besides, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Xuan Trang, Deputy Chief of ARVN Joint General Staff for Personnel gave a briefing on the present national military situation particularly the achievements scored by the RVN Armed Forces on Operation Lam Son 719 in Lower Laos.

After a discussion on the over-all situation, the meeting considered a number of problems concerning RVN diplomat offices in America.

On this occasion Minister Lam answered many questions raised by the diplomats concerning activities under their responsibilities, the sources said.

RED TERRORISM, SABOTAGE PROTESTED TO ICSC

Saigon, April 22. - In a protest note lodged to the International Control and Supervision Commission (ICSC) Secretariat General in Saigon on April 21, 1971, the Vietnamese Mission in charge of relations with the ICSC severely condemned the acts of terrorism and sabotage committed by the NVA infiltrated troops on the territory of the Republic of Vietnam in March 1971.

According to the note, the North Vietnamese sappers deliberately perpetrated 169 acts of terror including 33 assassinations; 17 abductions; 115 blasts of handgrenades, mines and TNT charges; and 4 cases of harassment of blowing up the passenger buses. As a result, 381 civilians were reported killed, 840 wounded and 211 kidnapped last month. Seven typical incidents were singled out in the note to enlighten the ICSC on the barbarous acts of the North Vietnamese aggressors. Thus, during the first quarter of this year, the communists committed 511 acts of terror and sabotage resulting in 894 civilians killed, 2231 injured and 390 kidnapped.

The note pointed out: "Having lost all hope of military victory, the North Vietnamese communists have particularly intensified their terrorist activities against the innocent civilian population. They keep on extending misery and mourning to the people of the South. The great number of the victims scored by the communist crimes speaks for itself about the acts of cruelty of the North Vietnamese communists".

The Vietnamese Mission charged that the Hanoi rulers have internationally injured the life and private property of the civilian population in defiance of the 1954 Geneva Agreement on Vietnam.

The ICSC was urged to undertake urgent investigations on the aforementioned cases and take appropriate measures to prevent the Hanoi authorities from committing similar crimes against the innocent people of the Republic of Vietnam.

HUE UNIVERSITY TO BECOME COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY

Saigon, April 23. - Hue University is turning out to be a community university after a 14 year period of activities "with a view to contributing more effectively to the local development."

Professor Le Thanh Minh Chau, Hue University Rector, in his recent briefing to the Educational and Cultural Council said: "It's high time for the university education to adapt itself to reality, meet the national needs and center on professional practice profitable to masses."

The teaching and research program therefore must cover such subjects as national reconciliation, democracy building, social reform, measures to boost production, development and development planning, he said.

In addition, according to Prof. Chau students must be given a thorough knowledge of the historical, economic, political and cultural background of the Vietnamese society.

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