

WS-FYI-NMIA

The Communist Paradise

(unedited original)
translated from
Viechavie
original)

I was born and grew up in a family in North Vietnam. In 1954 my parents, brothers and sister and I, went down to South Vietnam to get away from the communist regime. My parents talked to me a lot about the communist regime. Consequently to a certain extent I understood communism, and precisely because of this I chose a military career, just to have a chance to fight for freedom. I am very sorry that I and my comrades in arms, in spite of having arms in our hands, failed to defend our country, and we have to pay a very high price because of our mistakes, and with all ~~farxum~~ all the tragic results of the humiliation reserved for the defeated, the cruel and subtle tortures of seven years in jail, and the loss of family happiness.

Now I am in a free land, but in Vietnam there are still hundreds of thousands of friends who are still there, dying gradually in the concentration camps with hatred and sorrow accumulated in their hearts. It is possible that what I am writing down here is not entirely exact in terms of periods of time and locations, because I was moved from one place to another for many years, but I write entirely the truth of what happened to me during all the time I spent in various concentration camps of the communist regime. I simply want to tell the truth without any intention to make propaganda or make things darker than they were, although I do not understand why I am still alive, coming back from the long days when I thought there was no life possible for me anymore.

I was present in Saigon during the final days of the South Vietnam regime, and living in the capital of the country I had no problems or troubles until the day I presented myself on June 28, 1975 to go to the reeducation camps. Before that day, the communist regime had announced in its newspaper the place, time and date for people to go to register, from the higher ranks down, with the specification that everyone

should bring food for 10 days. I had been promoted to 1st Lieutenant but my promotion had not yet been registered, so I presented myself as a 2nd Lieutenant at the Marie Curie school in Saigon at 3 pm. At midnight along with 37 others, I was put in a covered Molotova truck to go to Hoc Mon, to the camp of the former ARVN 5th Brigade of Engineers. Here everyone had to receive three months of political education, each morning from 8 to 12, afternoon from 2 to 6 and at night from 7 to 10. From the first day they talked to us about the glory of the workers, the crimes of the Americans and their lackeys, about American imperialism the enemy of the people of Vietnam and the peace-loving peoples of the world. All these ~~numerous~~ subjects were prepared in advance for the cadre who came to teach us, who had ranks of Major down. The garage of the 5th Brigade served as a classroom for us. No tables, no chairs, the teachers. everyone hunched down on his heels to listen to ~~numerous~~ arguments. We were very fed up with these lessons because we had to listen to arguments which totally condemned us. During the first month, not counting the hours for the lessons, we had to prepare continually a statement detailing in every way possible what we had done in the past. Their slogan was "state exactly what you have done, the truth about what you have done, and everything you have done, so that the Revolution can help each of you to get reeducated."

After one month of political education and statements we were all assembled to listen to a critique of what went wrong or right during the previous month. This day we had the privilege of having a Major as a teacher. He was exactly like the other teachers. It meant that we had to listen to this kind of one-way argument without authority to express our opinions. One special thing should be noted here: The teacher we had at that time cried every time he mentioned the name of Ho Chi Minh. In a second session, after he talked everlasting about the meaning of

the victory of the revolution, and the crimes of the Americans and their lackeys, he looked up and pointed his finger ~~at~~^{WAS} a very young Second Lieutenant and asked the young man to stand up with this question: "Please tell us voluntarily, during the time you were an important element of the American and lackey regime, how many times did you use your power to burn the houses of the people and rape the women and the girls ?" All of us were flabbergasted, and the young 2nd Lieutenant knew nothing about how to react and stood silent without answering, because if the answer was no, it meant we had not learned our lesson, and if yes it was contrary to the truth because we had not committed these crimes. So how could we say yes ? Besides, we had been taught that we could not afford to have an opinion. You could answer only if the teacher asked you, and the answer could only be in the spirit of the lesson. After a little while the young 2nd Lieutenant was allowed to sit down, and the teacher, obviously satisfied with himself, resumed the teaching saying you have been educated under the Americans and lackeys so you forgot everything about your origins, while we communists fought to defend our country, and if by chance we were wounded or taken prisoner you killed us and sent our bodies to the medical students for experiments. After the lesson we were all sent back to camp for lunch and we were all amazed ^{how} ~~that~~ the communists had indoctrinated their people so that the cadre could believe these incredible things.

Living here three months ^{WAS} as I described it. Each one had a ration of 18 kilos of rice per month. My group of four men got a big bowl of rice, two pieces of bean cake and a small ball of vegetables. Beginning the fourth month the ration stayed the same, but because the kind of rice given to us was old already, by the time it was cooked it had lost all the vitamins in it, so the majority of us got sick with beri-beri and leg sores. All lost weight, and for those with beri-beri, since

we had no medicines for it, we had to get dirty water from the cooking pots ~~for~~ them to drink. We also got tree-bark from the forest and cooked it.

Through the revelation of one of the camp leaders we thought we might be released on September 2, National Day, so we tried to do our best, hoping for the day, in spite of the fact that ten days before many of my friends had tried to escape from camp. One of my neighbors, 2nd Lieutenant ~~Max~~ Nan succeeded in getting out with two of his friends. Further down in my section ~~Max~~ another 2nd Lieutenant who had been in President Thieu's bodyguard also succeeded in escaping. Before doing so he wrote the words from Ho Chi Minh himself, "there is nothing more precious than independence and freedom" and left the message at the edge of the place where he slept every day. In the section where higher officers were kept in our camp there was another escape attempt, but one of the escapees was killed and the other wounded. He was Major Vu Tuong Tinh who had served in the ARVN Security Section with me. That is all I personally knew of, but there were other attempts also from other sections, of which our camp had five.

September 2 passed but none of us was released, and we began to receive instructions to plant vegetables and in such a way that each ~~man~~ must produce 21 kilos of vegetables a month. As far as fertilizer was concerned we had to get it from the latrine. There was a large pit 50 metres long by two metres wide and two metres deep, and each morning we had to take it from there and mix it with water. It was repulsive with many worms in it so we used shovels to do it, but the cadre in charge of the camp did not agree and told us to use our bare hands. When they say we hesitated to use our own hands, they convened a meeting and said to us: "You have your minds set up in the mandarinal way so you do not see the glory of using your own hands. Only when you see this

kind of thing without repulsion, and only when you smell it without saying it smells bad, only then will you have become a progressive man."

Every day after eight hours of labor we were gathered at night in the courtyard to listen to the can bo ^(cedre) criticizing us. Sometimes they talked about science and technology. At this time Vietnam had hopes of finding oil along the coasts, so the instructor talked about the technology of extracting oil and the technology of the communist regime. He said that the government could extract oil directly from the land, but in drilling that way they would have to evacuate the population from two provinces, Thai Binh and another, ^{and} but they did not want to disturb the people, so the government decided to drill at sea. Our oil is of very good quality, the teacher said, and the quantity is many times greater than the Middle East, and we only have to drill 100 metres. Clear oil comes out and we can use it right away. We listened to him, laughing at him, but we could not afford to do so openly. After a minute of silence and looking at the instructor with all his satisfaction at the technological advances of the communist State, I took my courage, raised my hand and asked if I could have an opinion. He answered "what is your name? Then you can have an opinion." So I asked, "Mr. Canh Bo, please let us know if the drilling ^{rigs} ~~mix~~ are produced here or imported from abroad." He answered, "your mind is constantly obsessed by the idea that we have to rely on other people. There is nothing difficult about these rigs. The government is mass-producing them now, and within three years Vietnam will become a superpower. The American imperialists were the most famous among the imperialists, but we chased them out and they didn't even have time to take their flags with them. We did this very easily, so the production of rigs is an easy matter."

In 1976 we were moved to Long Giao in Long Khanh province. Thirty-eight prisoners were put in a Molotova which moved out at 5 p.m. The trucks were entirely covered and we were so overcrowded that some people asked authorization to let in a little air, but it was refused. At 1 a.m. we arrived. It was dark and raining when we were summoned by name. Every 11 persons would be assigned a building. They were leaking and very dirty but we were too tired and all of us slept on the floor. The next day we had off, to prepare ourselves for what they call the glory of labor, and from then on began our eight hours in the sun. We had to plow up the former helicopter pads, but the instruments for doing it were made of soft metal from former Strategic Hamlets which hurt our hands when we hit the cement, but we could not afford to stop. As far as food was concerned, we went from the 18-kilo ration to 17 to 15. Sometimes we got some bean cakes, and the main item was coarse salt. Sometimes in our hour of glory we caught~~z~~ a rabbit or a snake and we brought it back to camp for 200 people to eat. Because the majority of us thought of the day of returning home, or expected some sort of change, we lived in hope in spite of the very strict discipline of the camp.

Every day on our way to work we passed by the Conex ^(containers) on which were eight prisoners who had tried to escape from the camp. (Before I begin to tell the story of the Conex, I don't understand how these people could survive hundreds of days in this kind of hell.) Among the eight men inside, I knew three of them. One was named Cong, another Tung. Both had tried to escape. Another named Su had been accused of opposing the workers ! In each Conex were put four of them day and night, except for noon and evening meals each lasting 15 minutes, and they were given a five-litre can for a toilet which they could only empty once in 24 hours. In summer in Long Giao it is very hot - almost burning - and in spite of that each Conex

had only a few holes in it for the air to come in. They were allowed to wash once a month, for 15 minutes. The food ration was cut to nine kilos a month, plus salt. By the third month it looked like these people had only bones. In these circumstances every time we brought rice for them, we tried to press the rice down hard when the can bo wasn't looking, because if he saw it, he would reduce the ration right away. Somehow our system was discovered by the can bo and they took over delivering the food themselves.

One day after lunch we heard thumping noises coming from the Conex, along with curses blasting Ho Chi Minh, communism and so forth. It looked like it was too hot and the people inside the Conex had gone crazy. The guard threw open the door and pointed his gun at them, but the prisoners continued to blast Ho Chi Minh and taunted the guard to shoot them. But the guard said, "it will not be ~~as~~ easy like that. If we kill you it would be the waste of a bullet. The Revolution wants you to live so you can realize the dimensions of your crimes."

During all our time in Hoc Mon we had had to face hunger and thirst, but it was for the first time, so to a certain extent bearable. At Long Giao we worked very hard and the rations given us were diminished, so if we could find something eatable, provided it didn't kill us, we ate it. We began to eat rats but after a little while rats became rare, too. Then we began to put our hands on insects, but unfortunately these kinds of insects depended on the season and the only thing we could do was to wait for moonlight so we could catch frogs. Sometimes while clearing the forests we ran into some kinds of leaves. Some of us would try them, and if there was no reaction we would all rush to eat these leaves.

Since we lacked everything - food, medicine and hygienic conditions - the majority of us became exhausted and could not perform the way they wanted us to. At that time 80% of the population of South Vietnam had a family member in one of the camps, so popular opinion was stirred up and, in addition, the issue of human rights began to be raised in international circles. The communist regime therefore decided to let us write letters to our families and to let the families give us some supplies. The letters had to be along the lines decided in advance by the can bo. For instance we had to write that we were in good health and that the Revolution was taking care of us in every aspect and that the humanitarian decision to let us receive supplies was to hasten our reeducation. All the letters had to be left open so that the can bo could censor them. If anyone wrote letters not along the prescribed lines, he could be compelled to do additional work, and sometimes was forbidden contact with his family for three or six months depending on the degree of violation. This was the most effective way to compel us to work, because the communists knew we were desperate to see our parents and families.

Our work at that time was mainly clearing the forest and planting potatoes. We also had to cut down trees to collect wood. The minimum quota for each of us per day was two lengths of wood four metres long and about 25 centimetres in diameter, one piece in the morning and one in the afternoon because the distance from camp was four kilometers. From time to time we were allowed to rest, but we could not communicate with or receive anything from the ^{local} population.

During my stay in Long Giao I had the opportunity to meet my mother once, my wife and children twice. In May 1977 after much checking and rechecking I was classified as a "dangerous element" because I had had many contacts with the Americans and because I had gone to the Cay Mai school. They said the Cay Mai school was directed

by the CIA. Consequently they decided to send me to North Vietnam. later I thought that this trip would be a trip of no return because for the next four years, in the cruellest hell that one can imagine, I had to bear the most barbarous tortures of the century and, the most important to me, my father died in 1979 and in the same year my wife deserted ^{our} the three children and remarried another man.

As on other trips before, all of us were assembled in a courtyard, heard the list of those whom had to go, and about 40 of us were put in a well-covered truck and at midnight brought to the area of Newport, close to Bien Hoa. When we arrived I saw many other officers brought in from other camps, and in the harbor in the background, commercial ships. We embarked on these ships, and each group of 200 was put in a compartment of the hold, with an opening above our heads just big enough to pass two cans of 20 litres each. We were given a ~~minimum~~ kind of Chinese military rations for the voyage, 250 grams each, but most of the time we could not eat it because of seasickness. The hygienic conditions were horrible partly because we vomited and partly because the cans given to us were not enough for our needs. We asked for permission to empty the cans, but the can bo said we must wait exactly 24 hours before emptying these cans. Consequently many of us had to sleep on the floor in the filth. Finally, on the evening of the fourth day they announced that we had arrived in the socialist country. The ships anchored at a small port near Haiphong, and at eight o'clock at night we left the ships.

On this day more than at any other time I realized the humiliation inflicted on the defeated. We were like a group of men walking between two lines of hunting dogs who were ready to tear us apart, and followed by security men who prodded us like

herded animals. After we passed through this gauntlet we were ordered to take a little rest to receive our new ration. After four days and five nights in the ships we had practically nothing on our stomachs, so we were very hopeful that the fresh food would help us a little. One of the security men announced to us that we had landed in the northern socialist country and that consequently everything should be along the model of a man in a socialist country. He said, "You eat when you are ordered to eat and stop when ordered to stop." After that the female can bo gave us our rations, each wrapped in leaves, and after all rations were distributed the security man ordered us to begin eating. I opened the leaf and found half a cucumber. That was all. I looked at one of my neighbors and he had the same. The whole eating period lasted 15 minutes, after which we received water in half a condensed milk can and were ordered to proceed again to the railroad station. It should be noted here that we had come from South Vietnam and, prior to coming here, had been supplied by our families and thus had a load to carry.

The distance between the port and the railway station was about one kilometer. It was a bit cool when we arrived because it was late at night already, but we felt o.k. By groups of 50 men we were put into railroad cars. The whole train was for the transport of cement so everything was covered with it to the point that cement covered our faces and made it difficult to breathe. At 9 a.m. the train stopped at a place in the province of Yen Bay. Here we were welcomed by an organized mob of people throwing insults at us, and stones too, and the security men warned us, "You see how the population hates you. From this minute on you have to behave accordingly. You cannot do anything without my order, because otherwise the population will kill you and you will have to bear the consequences of it."

Away from the train we had no longer the energy to carry our luggage on our backs despite the fact that we knew, from our experiences in other camps, that we had to hold on to our personal belongings. I say this to describe in what condition our physical and moral status was. When we came~~em~~ to a river an officer of the rank of Lieutenant Colonel appeared and talked to us:

"I know ~~that~~ you have come from the South. You are tired, but if you have brought personal belongings with you, you must make an effort to keep them because we will have little to give you at the new camp."¹ After listening to him we tried our best to bring everything along with us.

After crossing the river we were put into trucks. We followed a winding uphill road until in the afternoon we reached a place they called a camp. We stopped there, and it was announced that the camp was actually two kilometers away. We carried everything on our backs, climbing a small hill and then down to a creek. We moved very slowly because the forest was dense. Following the creek we arrived at a place they said was the camp. I saw nothing of a camp, just a bamboo forest. We took a little rest, were given a little water, and the can bo said to us "This is your camp." We hardly had time to put down our personal belongings when they ordered us to bring all these things for identification. Before that a political cadre talked to us and said: "You have the authorization from the Party and the State to come here so that you can get reeducated. From now on you have to live the way we live in the socialist country. It means you must put aside individualism. We identify your belongings because we want you to live the simple, civilized life. Each of you will be permitted to keep two personal belongings, one for containing rice and the other for containing water. Each of you will be permitted

two pieces of clothing which includes what you may have on your body right now. Apart from that everything - food, medicine - is confiscated from you and will be held for the common use of all of you. Money, gold, clothes - you have to register everything, and when you have proved you have learned your lessons, the camp authorities will give it back to you." Now only I understood what was the purpose of what the Lieutenant-Colonel told us. He said it on purpose so that our belongings could be confiscated by his men. Immediately after that each of us was given a machete so we could clear the forest right away and have a place for sleeping that night. Finally we stopped at night after clearing a small place, and the can bo told us to listen to his talk now. He said to us that he understood we had just arrived from the South and that we were a little bit tired, but the kind of work done by 200 of us was inferior to the kind of work done by a ten-year old boy in the socialist country. He talked a lot about American imperialism, their lackeys, about socialist countries where everything is perfect, about beloved Uncle Ho, but we were too tired to listen and wanted only to go to sleep.

The night was cool and we slept well. We were woken up at 5 a. to start a new day. Four hundred of us were divided into four groups in two camps about one kilometer apart. My camp was Camp 1, with 200 men. Twenty men stayed in camp to cook rice, while the rest of us went out to clear forest. For the first time in this so-called socialist country I saw men looking exactly like the ghosts we have seen in movies, with tattered and patched clothes, legs like bare bones and only the two eyes staring out. Through discreet questions we learned that these people were officers who arrived in the camps in 1976. They said that for the time being we were still stronger

that they, but don't worry, "you stay here and eat the rice of the socialist land for a few months and you will be like us." I didn't ~~believe~~ believe it, but it was the truth because after a few months from 63 kilos I went down to 38, and by then we understood what everlasting hunger meant and also the kind of ~~hate~~ hate they had created among the local population regarding our presence. From the young child just beginning to speak to the old lady of 70, all of them threw insults at us saying that we have no more human characters but were like cannibals. We realized by then that their propaganda machine was fantastic because, in spite of this kind of standard of living, they continued to believe in the words of Ho Chi Minh, "after we defeat the Americans we are going to rebuild our country ten times bigger," and they still believed that their difficulties and poor conditions were our fault. Facing this brutal reality we could do nothing.

Our food ration diminished gradually. In the morning we had 65 ~~25~~ or 67 kernels of corn (I counted them), and at the main meal, 650 kernels. In addition a little salt put in water and sometimes some wild plants from the forest. We gave up hope. We did not think we would ever go home again and became convinced that we would die here. Talking about the forest in North Vietnam, I have to say that there was practically nothing we could get from it for eating. From time to time after work we got authorization to go down to the creek to bathe, and we sometimes succeeded in catching a small crab or fish, and since regulations prevented us from ~~make~~ making a fire, we ate them raw. Perhaps due to the fact that after two years of liberation our ^{had} stomachs ^{got} used to this kind of food, somehow we survived. In the conditions of the communist camps every slight illness could easily lead to death because there was no medicine and our physical resistance was poor. We were very afraid of getting dysentery, the

most dangerous illness, because we came to see hundreds of men dying from it.

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When I was in South Vietnam, talking in terms of philosophy, personally I understood a bit about communism, and I think that during the time ~~for~~ of President Ngo dinh Diem the psywar against communism did have some successes, but later on with the corrupt regime of Nguyen Van Thieu the psywar machinery was set up in a perfunctory way and did not have much impact on the population, while the communists knew exactly how to use the weapon of psywar. They succeeded in creating among the population in the North a kind of hatred against us because, they said, we helped the Americans to wage war and caused the calamities in the country. The young generation in North Vietnam did not know how they were deceived by their leadership so they carried within themselves a rather solid ideal, and that was "My Cut, Nguy Nhao" - get rid of the Americans and the lackeys will fall, so that the country could be liberated and happiness could be brought to the population in the two zones. It was due to this kind of deception that the Hanoi leadership became successful in their conquest of South Vietnam, but it is also because of that that they are going to be isolated themselves. In fact the population in the two zones - north and south - no longer have faith in them, and world opinion condemns them for their flagrant violations of human rights.

As far as we prisoners were concerned, after being brainwashed we knew nothing but to live within four walls and behind the barbed wires of the prisons. We knew nothing about the outside world and were fed only propaganda. We listened to what they said to us

about the socialist regime, for example nowadays in North Vietnam there are no more classes, everybody is equal, and even the children have special laws protecting them. ¶ I think that after twenty years of socialism there are changes in North Vietnam but the truth is, not the way they~~re~~ describe it. Because ~~they~~ ~~truth~~ ~~is~~ as soon as I set foot in the socialist country which they claimed is the heart of the world, I saw only poor people, emaciated children, deserted streets and dilapidated houses which are never repaired. The communist cadres talked like parrots, but five days after I arrived in Yen Bay I knew I had really come to the communist paradise. I met only people with an intellectual level so ~~is~~ low that I could not understand their educational system. Children of four or five years knew only dirty words, and on the walls of the elementary school we saw only dirty slogans.

Every day we woke up ~~in~~ at 5 a.m. to have physical exercises. The climate in the mountainous area was very harsh, very hot in day time but very cold at night, and each night we could sleep only for three hours because we were too hungry, and the work demanded of us was always increased. We were a group of 200 people, but we had to clear completely the hills around our camp so that rice could be planted. Each of us had to clear 50 metres per day but none of us could finish the work because ~~the~~ forest was too dense, and on Sunday we had to trample down the road, so practically speaking we had no time to rest. After a month of struggle we finished the clearing of the ~~hills~~ and began to plant corn and rice, and speaking of planting rice I cannot forget one incident.

Before planting rice, we had to learn how to plant rice. We were told that in each hole we had to put 8-10 seeds only. Some of us obviously put more than 10 seeds. Some days later the can bo

inspected the area and found out that from one hole there were more rice shoots than there should be. He conducted an interrogation and asked who was responsible for this parcel of land. Naturally with our very organized system, divided into groups and cells, the investigation soon pinpointed the responsible man. The can bo said nothing at all, but he called for a meeting of all of us at night for self-criticism. He said: "During the period when you were trained to plant rice, no one asked questions. It means that you knew very well what you had to do, but you continued to put in more seeds than necessary, so it means that you deliberately wanted to sabotage. For the Socialist State, even if you put in 100 seeds it would be of no importance, but the problem is that by continuing to do wrong things when you know you are wrong, you have already in your mind the idea of opposing the Socialist State. If one man could do it, another 100 men could do it. How can we build our socialist country under such conditions ?" And so the conclusion was that those who committed these crimes would have to accept the discipline of seven days in irons on half-rations. And of course this discipline was intended to help the man improve himself.

After the planting of rice was accomplished we began to do new things. We had to cut bamboo, and for each of us the quota was 70 bamboo poles a day, six meters long and six to eight centimeters in diameter. To get the bamboo we had to climb over two mountains and find a cutting place close to a creek so that we could put the cut bamboo poles into a ~~mort~~ of raft and tow it down the creek because it would have been impossible to carry it out. This was a time of much suffering for ~~us~~ us because most of us lacked experience. We tried to cut the bamboo as quickly as possible and if we cut the

roots at the base the falling trees could hit you. Also if the tree was not cut completely through it could split exposing slivers as sharp as a knife. In going into the forest we had to cope not only with wild animals but also with leeches. We could do nothing and against the leeches. When they had satisfied their hunger ~~they~~ would drop off, the bleeding would continue, but we could do nothing as we had to finish our quotas. By evening many of us had clothes stained with blood.

Cutting the green bamboo (Tre) was difficult, but easy compared with cutting and flattening the brown bamboo (Nua) into "plates" of a ~~metre~~ square. Our quota was 28 plates per day, and even if we skipped lunch or continued to work while eating the most we could finish was 25. Many people later on asked me the question, if you could not finish the 28 plates what would they do to you ? I would reply that with the communists there was no humanitarian concern, they were adept at brutality and had many ways to kill people. We had about 100 men in our group and at least ten of us did not reach the quota, so the usual result was a self-criticism meeting at which all of us were so tired that we wanted only to be left alone, and in our exasperation some of us would denounce our comrades. The can bo would then simply ask if there was any objection to ~~punishing them~~ imposing punishment and no one would dare say anything, so the man who did not meet his quota would have to make a confession acknowledging his mistake and promise to do better, with a penalty for failure of being permitted no letters or contact with his family and being put in irons indefinitely on rations of nine kilos per month. We had been born into a society where family feelings are very important. Parents, wives, children, brothers are our joy and hope, and the communists knew that, so the penalty they applied to us was most effective.

As soon as we had finished flattening out the brown bamboo we received orders to go out and cut Vau ~~p~~ - a larger kind of bamboo 13-14 metres long and 15-20 centimeters in diameter. We had to cut eight of these per day. Getting one of these Vau was extremely difficult because they are interlaced in the forest and we had to cut in such a way that they would fall into the valley so we could bring them back to camp. They had then to be carried one at a time because they were too long. Unfortunate were those who brought back to camp an undersized pole because it would be rejected by the can bo, and next day the quota would be eight poles plus whatever was refused the day before.

It was during this period that we began to suffer from exhaustion and poor hygiene. When we had checked in our personal belongings for confiscation they let us keep two cans, one for water and one for ~~fmmt~~ rice. One evening it was reported that one machete was missing, and immediately the 200 men had to go back into the forest with torches to try to find it. Of course we couldn't. So we were ordered back to camp for a meeting at which the camp commander personally took charge. He said that the missing machete meant that someone in the camp plotted to escape. We didn't know if he had information or only guessed, but two days later two men from Group 2 named Binh and ~~Ghanh~~ did escape. Once again we received orders to surrender all our personal effects, and this time we ~~received~~ ^{had} orders to turn in anything made of aluminum, iron or steel, keeping only any plastic unensils. Up to now we had managed with two condensed milk cans for food and water but now were left only with bamboo. We told the political officer~~m~~ that if he took away our utensils we would have nothing ["] for water or rice, but he replied, if I leave these metal things in your hands you will be tempted to use them for

escaping from the camp. You will have to overcome these difficulties by using bamboo because in our time when we fought against the Americans to save the nation, the difficulties were one hundred times greater than what you have right now." Unfortunately, in using the bamboo ~~fix~~ containers for rice and water we tended to get diarrhea. From our ~~m~~ daily ration of corn we used to ~~say~~^{SAVE A} few dozen kernels at lunch and dinner for the next morning. Only with that, we thought, could we go out walking. But the truth was it solved nothing at all. We were simply cheating our own stomachs.

We can here stop describing our work with the various kinds of bamboo, and switch to the problem of how to build dams. There was a small valley of around two acres surrounded by mountains, with only a narrow exit for the water. We used mattocks to dig up rocks and stones to fill in the gap and hold back the water, but we could not do it. Just one rainw would be enough to wipe it all out. Having failed in building the dam, we were ordered to cut trees for building a storehouse. When we learned this we were hopeful that when the rice was harvested, perhaps they would give us one or two solid meals, but we were destined to be deeply disappointed because as soon as we had finished the storehouse we received orders to move to another camp. Now began a new stage in our lives in the camps, a "glorious" one in the days ahead.

One day before the move we were ordered to go into the forest to cut large bamboos and gather ~~xxx~~ big leaves and deposit them at the storehouse. Next day at 3 a.m. they woke us up and told us to assemble with our personal belongings to go to the other camp. The camp commander personally talked to us and said: "Here we do not have the conditions any more to help you make progress, so we have decided to move you to another place where you will have better

conditions. The majority of you will follow me to the new camp, while the rest will remain here with my assistants to collect and harvest the rice." At 4 a.m. they distributed the food ration. Two of us had died already, 30 stayed behind and about 160 were divided into four groups. When we reached the road there were four Molotovas waiting for us. They put 40 of us in each truck, with a 20-litre can for a toilet. The trucks then took off along the winding mountainous roads at quite high speed. At first we refrained from using the can, reserving it for those who were carsick, but later on we had to use it, and by midday it was full. We then used our bamboo drinking cups for urination, and the leaves in place of toilet paper. Each time the truck stopped the contents of the can would spill out, but no one paid attention to it any more because we were too tired to pay attention to anything.

By evening we arrived in Lao Kay, our new camp. As soon as we jumped down from the trucks we saw right away a lot of yellow uniforms of the C^ong An (Security Service, like the KGB), and from this moment we understood that we were being delivered over to the professionals. We saw our former camp commandant talking to the security people but we paid no more attention because we had become accustomed to the lying ways of the communists, especially if they are Vietnamese communists.

(to be continued)

With these security people who were professionals, the organization inside the camp was tighter so they gave us one week of rest, during which time we had to redo our resumes and then were registered in different books. I was assigned to the transportation group. Each group was of 40-45 persons. Four of us would pull a cart carrying sand from the creek, four round trips in the morning and three in the afternoon. We had to be four to a cart because the road was very difficult, crossing two streams. Two of us would be in the water getting sand and passing it to the ~~other~~ two above so they would pour it in the cart. When the two persons in the creek got too cold they switched around, and we worked like that until late in the evening. We were very much afraid of the days when there was a drizzle because the water became very cold and felt like needles in our bodies. The place where we got the sand had formerly been inhabited, so we found a kind of plant in the forest called la lot. Normally these leaves, when served with spices & leaf bark are wonderful to eat, but without the fatigue they were difficult to swallow, but we were too hungry and found these leaves very attractive especially since we knew we could not get killed by them. In order to get authorization to gather these leaves we had to work hard so as to have 5-10 spare minutes at the end of the day. We would send a representative to the cadre, and if he agreed, we went out to get the leaves and in this way cheat out stomachs for a few hours.

By the time we had arrived at this new camp (Phong Quang) it was almost winter time and we had to face the harsh reality of winter. When it was too cold we were permitted not to go out for sand but to plant rice instead. In the beginning many people were afraid of leeches, but after a while there were too many leeches so we just let it go, and each time we lifted up our legs we had to use our hands to get rid of the

leeches. We looked at ourselves and everyone looked like a phantom walking painfully in the road. Since many years we did not have a real good meal, while the potatoes and manioc we planted was used to feed the pigs and fish belonging to the can bo. When we saw the potatoes and manioc we really envied them, but none of us dared do anything because at any time the butt of the AK rifle was ready to strike at us, backed by all the hatred of the can bo.

Speaking of my group, the cadre took three of us to plant potatoes. Our group considered that the planting of potatoes was the task of the entire group, while we hoped every day that when harvest time came we could share 1/3 of it. One evening the ~~xxxxxx~~ can bo said that tomorrow would be the day for harvesting the potatoes. That night every one of us was dreaming of eating potatoes. In the morning the can bo ordered four of us to follow him with a cart while the rest would go out to get sand as usual. This day we worked very hard trying to rush back to camp to receive our ration of potatoes, but all hopes were dashed when we met the four men with the cart. They said the harvest was excellent but we had to bring everything for the cadre's pigs. They suggested to the cadre to boil one potato for each of us but he said no, all the potatoes are for the animals, while your ration is furnished by the State already. This night in camp we didn't sleep at all and next day we made another proposal to the can bo, if we cannot have the potatoes, how about the leaves of the potato plant ? He agreed to that and we sent two of us to get the leaves, and that night we had plenty of boiled leaves for soup.

With the communists any commemoration day was aleays a day we had to work harder just to c~~e~~lebrate it. For instance on the memorial day for the founding of the Party we had to double our work so we could offer everything to the Party. So we were very afraid of memorial

days.

We were in full winter now. We didn't have enough corn to eat, nor enough clothes to cover our bodies against the cold, and it was a pity to look at us. We couldn't sleep at night but would wait for the day to go out working and get an authorization to light a small fire to warm us up so we could start to work. Sometimes we were given some kind of bread instead of corn. Many of us used this bread to pass the time at night. For example we would cut the bread into small bits half the size of a grain of corn, and with these small portions would spell out the names of our families, starting with grandparents, then parents, brothers and sisters, wife and children and then use a sliver of wood to pick up each bit for eating, starting at the youngest ones first. So by the time we finished eating it would be midnight. We would go to sleep, and then in a little while it would be too cold and we would have to stand up again, and after two or three times like that would come the dawn of another day.

By now I had reached the halfway point of my seven years in the communist prisons. What is left is what I would call the next glorious period of this unhappy chapter in my life. I will try to describe it as faithfully as possible so that those who are still dreaming of a communist paradise can open their eyes, so that together we can raise one voice to compel the communists in Hanoi to consider the release of the soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam who are still rotting hopelessly in the communist jails camouflaged under the beautiful name of re-education camps.

For all the time I was in Lao Kay we suffered from all sorts of hardships, and in addition we had no hope at all, to the point that the majority of us prayed for a sleep at night from which we would not awake in the morning. Every day we looked at the slogans on the walls talking about happiness and independence, and more and more realized how false they

were. They showed us a lot of magazines describing the atrocities of the Germans under Hitler, but when we looked at those prisoners of the Germans and we looked at ourselves, we found no difference at all, except that the German camps were far ~~more~~ spacious than ours.

Now we come to the year 1978, the year in which the communist Chines prepared to teach a lesson to those who had betrayed them. Thanks to that we had the opportunity to leave this paradise of Phong Quang and move to another paradise in Nam Ha, a camp known to be perfectly suited for re-education. As far as transport was concerned it followed the same pattern of similar trips in the past, with two men tied together so that by the end of the trip we were in a sort of bath of urine and excrement. we arrived at Nam Ha at 6 p.m, and 90 of us were put in a small room and locked in with an iron bar. The first thing we saw was a kind of brown spots on the wall, like flowers. We didn't know what it was, but later it was explained to us that those who were in the camp before us/tryed to count the number of lice they killed by squashing them against the wall, but later on there were so many they didn't count any more and just arranged them to look like flowers.

After a night of nightmares we were awakened about 5 a.m. All of us were dirty and hoped we could go out for some sort of bath. We waited until 8 a.m. whn a group of security men came and stood in the front door of the room. We were impatient and sked them if we could go out to the toilet. They turned to us and asked us right away, "Have you not already learned the regulations ? You should know that before you ask for something you have to wait for authorization from the cadres." So we were condemned to silence again. After 20 minutes a cadre said he would authorize a representative from the group to talk. We knew if we expressed our opinion they would use it an an excuse to give us some sort of political lecture, but we delegated one of us to present our request about our elementary

need to go to the latrine. The cadre countered by asking, "How did you come here, by walking or by truck?" He well knew we did not walk the hundreds of kilometers from the Lao Kay camp, but as soon as our representative replied that we had come by truck he blasted at us right away, saying "You came by truck and you say you are tired. How about our going along the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam to South Vietnam to fight against the Americans to save the country?" The Government and the Party will take care of all aspects of your activity here, but in our socialist system we plan everything in advance, and not in the loose way of the Americans and the puppet regime. Now the camp will give you something for breakfast, and water, and after that the problem of the latrine will be taken care of later." After a little while breakfast and water were brought in. For three of us we received a 20-centimetre piece of bread and a can of water. Later, at ~~midday~~ midday, instead of a piece of bread for three people we received a piece for each person along with a spoonful of salt. Ninety of us were housed in a room fifteen metres long and four metres wide, with four small windows. All of us were so dirty and the smell was such that we couldn't stand it any more. At 3 p.m. a group of security men arrived, well armed, and gave us permission to go to a small creek about a kilometre from the camp. There we saw there was a little pool about 40 metres long and 20 metres wide. We received orders to take our bath, but not close to the creek. There were other prisoners from the other rooms, so there were a few hundred human beings in two pools and we had to wash ourselves and our clothes quickly. From then on we had two times to go the pool, ten minutes each time for us and five minutes for our clothes. Here the water was very clear, and it belonged to an area where the Viet Minh had their camps during the French war. According to one of the soldiers guarding us, the Nam Ha camp ~~had been used~~ was used for American prisoners and so was

comparatively well equipped.

We had three days of rest before beginning our labor activities. All the work sites were around the camp at the edge of the mountains, and there was a security man responsible for each section. The crops here were squash, peanuts, turnips and green beans. Of these squash was the only one that did not need care. For the others we had to bring water from the creek and sewage from the camp for fertilizer, so each morning we had to bring four big containers of sewage for a distance of around two kilometers. Sometimes we had to use our hands to mix the human fertilizer, but fortunately each time we used our hands we had a few minutes more for washing ourselves. Once we had to work under a cadre named Trong. We were working on a new parcel of land where there were so many roots so that at the end of the day we did not finish our work. Having no more time he brought us to a little pool where normally we washed the containers of human fertilizer and ordered us to wash ourselves in the same pool, so ~~that~~ in the end we had to use our drinking water rations to wash our hands.

Concerning green beans and peanuts we regarded them as very, very precious because we could use one part for seeds and one part for eating, but at the end of the day the can bo realized that we had eaten part of the ~~xxxx~~ seeds already, so the next day they mixed the green beans with DDT and only then gave the seeds to us. But even so we managed to hide a part of the seeds, waiting for the time to go to the creek to wash away the DDT and eat ^{them} it. As soon as we finished planting beans and turnips we would plant manioc and dig water wells. Digging wells in a mountainous area was quite a problem. We had to ~~dig~~ figure out where we could dig, not too far from the creek. After digging down some 30 - 40 centimetres we would run into rocks, and our tools were only picks

and shovel. Eventually we succeeded in having wells of around two metres deep. After expanding the area we then had to dig fifty holes per day of around 60 centimetres deep and 60 in diameter, and in each one we put leaves to make fertilizer later.

The whole camp in Nam Ha was divided into three parts, with a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Sedurity Forces serving as camp commander. I belonged to Camp B which was divided into many groups most of which were assigned to crushing rocks. This was the most difficult and dangerous work. Each of us had a target of one cubic metre of rocks but we couldnt do it and the quota was reduced to .8 cubic metres. Each morning we picked up our tools and went to work, sometimes drilling holes to insert explosives in the rock. To drill these holes we had to use a sledgehammer and spike, with one man hammering and the other holding the spike. All of us got hurt. Some of us, by exerting too much effort, had hemorrhages with blood coming from the mouth. For example, Nguyen Tien Ich, a former police captain, was a well-built man but after two months of crushing rocks he could not stand it. Right in the middle of his work blood came out of his mouth and we had to carry him back to camp. There a so-called doctor looked at him and said he had too much blood and some vessels broke but it was nothing to worry about. We said to ourselves he can talk this way to these people in North Vietnam where everything the Party says has to be right but he didn't know that we from the South knew a little about such problems.

During this whole period of time none of us was supplied by our families so our health was very bad. In some of the groups in Camp A people died of malnutrition. In my group of 45 men, two-thirds of them became unable to work and five men could not even stand up. Particularly we had two men, Nguyen Quang Danh and Nguyen Hung Chang. These two were just waiting to die, but as long as Danh could get up to go to the latrine he had to go to work, so the only thing we could do was to take

turns carrying him from one place to another.

We were always asked to do more and more, expand more and more. Normally in our work every day we found rats which came to eat the beans. One day I found two small rats. I crushed them to death but didn't know what to do with them. At my side was Dang Thien Nguon, formerly Lieutenant Colonel and director of the Air Force flight school. Nguon saw me with the two rats and asked if he could have them. I said yes, and at the same time he also killed a third and larger rat. He didn't know what to do with them as the regulations forbade making fires for cooking. There was only one place where they had boiling water for us, guarded by two security men. Nguon said that the only thing to do was to move closer to the fire, wait for the two guards to move away and then put the rats in the fire. It happened exactly the way he foresaw, and as soon as the guard left the place Nguon put the rats in the fire and then came back to work as if nothing had happened. After a little while we smelled the odor of burning rats. We pulled the rats from the fire and to avoid the notice of the guard Nguon went off to fetch water. As soon as I did this Nguon while I stayed behind to work on the rats. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxwithxhim~~ ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ came back without a word and put the heads of the rats in his mouth. I was scared and unable to eat it so I watched out for the security man to come back. I didn't know how Nguon did it, but that night when he came back to camp he asked me to join him and from ~~the~~ a little can brought out the bodies of the rats. He asked me to eat with him but I could not do it, but I saw him eating ^{them} with a little salt with great relish. I tell this story in detail just to describe the state we were in. We ate everything provided it didn't kill us, sometimes even snails. That was why a lot of us got sick, and even when we got back to our families did not recover entirely.

The Nam Ha camp belonged to Phu Ly Province. In this region there was a large swamp, abandoned for many years, of about ten acres. We were told to transform it into ~~an~~ an area for rice and for fish culture, which was extremely difficult because the roots were old and thick. It required two men to uproot one, and each time we did it there was a lot of mud everywhere. Because the pool had been abandoned for many years we did not find many fish but from time to time found a few turtles and snakes. I remember one man, Le Ngoc Boi, a former police lieutenant, who was just a small man. I saw him putting his hands on a snake. The snake bit him and slithered away into the water. Boi plunged right in after him. The snake swam to the other side of the pool, but Boi caught him by sitting on him, cut off his head, put the body in the fire and then ate him with great appetite.

After clearing the pool we had to make dikes, and then began to plow ~~out~~ the land. For some strong people two would take charge of one plow, one playing the role of buffalo and the other guiding the plow. Normally during these hours the security men kept watch over us. There were many roots and it was very hard to plow, but as soon as we stopped or slowed down the security man would raise hell, saying that the buffalo eats only herbs "but you, you eat rice and corn, so how can you be so lazy." The security man told us to plow deeper but each time we did it, it would be harder for the man to pull, so each time they were there we tried to do it, but each time they went away we pulled the plow up high again. After preparing the land for planting rice we began to dig canals for fish culture, each canal being 200 metres long, $2\frac{1}{2}$ metres deep and 11 metres wide. Each of us had to dig more than one metre per day. It was winter time and very cold. Each morning when we went out working we had to have a little fire to warm our hands before starting to work. We would work without interruption from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. If the group did not

meet its quota it had to stay on until the job was finished. We tried to do our best to get back to camp early because it got colder and colder in the evening.

This part of our work was considered successful so the camp commander awarded two pigs to the two most successful groups, one pig each. He asked five of us to go along to choose the biggest pigs. We thought the pigs would weight at least 30 - 40 kilos each, but when we arrived we saw ~~xxxxxxxx~~ seven pigs of which the biggest weighed eleven kilos and the rest less than ten. Each pig was for 45 men, ~~who~~ along with two kilos of rice and some onion.

Realizing that our health was declining and that production got lower and lower, the security men organized working sessions in which we could write our families so that they could come and supply us. The cadres said it was a policy of clemency from the Government and Party, to create good conditions for our re-education. ~~We~~ could have a family visit every three months, but when we met with our families we would have to mobilize their spirits. They told us, "if you say something which could create worries among your family you will be disciplined, and depending on the case you could be cut off from seeing your families again." We were very concerned because for many years we had not seen our loved ones, and if it happened that through emotion you could not control your tears, it could be very dangerous. But how could we control our feelings ? Most of the time when the parents, brother or sister or children saw the condition we were in, they cried. For our part we had to be very calm and control our feelings because the security man was there watching us and monitoring our conversation. Most of us were supplied from home this way, but a number of families couldnt help because, through two changes of currency and the control of all assets, the communists had robbed us. Besides, the majority of those who had worked for the Government of Vietnam,

by the time they came to work for the Government had families to take care of, and when they went to the re-education camps their wives at home didn't know what to do to survive. So most of the time they relied on parents or brothers. In some cases they could hide away some of their belongings and help us, but in many cases the communists confiscated everything and the families had nothing to help us with. In some lucky cases they managed to get money ^{just} for one trip from South Vietnam to North Vietnam. In any case, the majority of those who were not supplied from home died slowly from exhaustion. We tried to help each other, but there was a limit to it since, for ourselves, we had little or nothing, too.

The digging of the canals was judged to be good work, so the camp commander informed us we would have a good New Years (Tet). From each group they took some men for cutting paper flowers, gathering leaves for wrapping cakes or preparing for ~~hazket~~ ~~ha~~ volleyball or chess. They authorized the security men to kill pigs and sell them to us. Of course we were forbidden to have cash, and if any man was caught with cash he was put in manacles right away, but for buying pigs from the security men cash was apparently acceptable after all. We had three days of holiday during Tet. Each of us had to clean up an area of the camp. On the eve of Tet we were allowed to have a bath and wash our clothes. At 6 p.m. each group had a visit from a cadre who announced to us that President Toan (successor to Ho Chi Minh who died in 1969) wished us a happy Tet. At 11 p.m. another intellectual cadre came and distributed cigarettes to us, one to each man, two small candies and a package of tea. ^{as Tet gift}

After this Tet ceremony we felt depressed and sad and our only thoughts were for our families, our parents, brothers and children. I do not mention our wives because it looked as though ^{most of us} had no more wives to think of. In these circumstances I remembered a saying:

"You are a soldier and you have to win. Otherwise you will die." I found this saying very significant. Surrender to the enemy, and especially surrender when you still have arms in hand, is something unacceptable. If we compared ourselves to some cases, for instance Generals Nguyen Khoa Nam, Le Nguyen Vy, Tran Van Hung and a number of other unknown soldiers who sacrificed themselves rather than surrender, all of us including myself were cowards. And this includes those other leaders, Generals and Colonels, who without even seeing the enemy abandoned their troops, leaving them like a snake without a head. It was because of that that the enemy came into Saigon as to an empty place. But going back to the Tet incident in the communist camp, at exactly 12 midnight the chief of the camp came to wish us a happy Tet with the special message that on the second day of Tet we could go back to our glorious labor again.

During the whole period of my re-education, it was at the Nam Ha camp that I spent most time. At the beginning of 1981 I was transferred somehow to a camp in South Vietnam, and this helped me a lot in my attempt to escape from the communist paradise. I was transferred to Fire Base 5 of the former ARVN ~~base~~ camp at Ham Tan. The activities here were similar to the ones in the North Vietnam camps but with the difference that in South Vietnam the soil was more fertile and gave us back comparatively more food, and also we were close to our families and our health improved. In our camp in South Vietnam I saw some cases of prisoner release, but unfortunately I had belonged to a branch of the army, military security, and saw no future for me at all. But precisely because the communists seized South Vietnam ~~threw~~ ^{survive} those people in the South who had helped them before now had their eyes opened somewhat, while the cadres coming down from the North whom Hanoi had considered its staunchest began to lose confidence in the propaganda of their leaders. They saw that the people in South Vietnam were not hungry, nor oppressed. They realized that if South Vietnam was lost

it was because people in South Vietnam wrongly believed that after the war and the unification of the country everyone could go home and continue his normal life. They had never been educated by the Saigon regime about the real communist man.

Once in the South, the communist cadres saw the clear difference between the two zones. They looked at themselves and found themselves backward, and with their salary that could not keep them alive they became corrupt and did not execute correctly their instructions from above. Realizing that without bribing people I could never get home, my mother through intermediaries offered gold to members of the committee in charge of releasing prisoners so that ^{they} he would add my name to the list of prisoners to be released. And so, on January 1, 1982 I was released. Each month thereafter, between the 1st and the 5th, I had to present myself to the local security authorities. At this time the communists were busy building a hydroelectric dam at Tri An, near Bến Hoà. They needed 25 southern laborers and we former prisoners ~~were~~ back from the camps became the target, so the security people put me on the list. My mother was very concerned about it and helped me with plans to escape from the country.

In February 1982 I tried to escape with my children but unfortunately ran into a trap and ~~I~~ was almost caught by the security people in Saigon's District 1. After that my mother had only enough money left for me to try to get out alone. Thanks to a relative in Baria we escaped with 92 others in a boat 10½ metres long with one engine. On the second day at sea we ran into a big storm and thought we were going to be swallowed by the waves.. We lost hope, but fortunately after a few hours the storm diminished and on the third day we reached an Indonesian oil rig, and the door of liberty was opened to us from then on. I stayed almost a year in a refugee camp and was finally admitted to the United States on April 29,

1983, exactly eight years after my homeland was buried under the communist regime.

My homeland is still there. The witnesses are still here. What do the people who led us to defeat think of the people of Vietnam and of the soldiers who sacrificed themselves to bring them to power and glory ? If because of cowardice they were afraid of losing their families and had no courage to stand up for the great causes, let them stay silent and let others ~~people~~ speak out. I have heard that there are many Vietnamese Generals who refuse to be Vietnamese, but I think they should reflect that although one swallow cannot make a summer, there is need of one swallow to lead the others.

Nguen dinh Tuyn