

W
FILE / SUBJ.
DATE / SUB-CAT.
1168

SOUTH VIETNAM
The South

11/1/76
Two years after liberation



Sculptor Thai Binh is erecting a statue of President Ho Chi Minh immediately after hearing the news of his death.

I came to HT at nightfall one day last September. A heavy shower had just stopped. People were hurrying along village lanes: elderly ones to their production meetings or anti-illiteracy classes, and younger ones, men and women to the drill ground, carrying a wooden board with movable targets, and rifles slung over their shoulders.

From afar a loudspeaker announced: "Everybody is invited to take part tomorrow in the building of new combat positions and the digging of new communication-trenches". Gun reports were heard from the other side of National Highway No I. On this side, puppet troops at NB fired sporadically from their post. The population's hustle went on, undisturbed. Walking in front of me was Mrs Nam, an elderly woman, president of the village People's Revolutionary Committee and member of the provincial People's Council.

"For nearly ten years", she told me "Our village has successfully faced up to despite its location in the immediate vicinity of adverse posts."

The following day, Thong — a guerilla deputy company commander — took me around to see the ruins of the former "strategic hamlet" and the new fighting village built in its place by the population during the last nearly two years. We went along endless combat ditches and climbed up gun emplacements of widely different shapes and sizes. This intricate defence network formed a veritable labyrinth. Had it not

been for Thong's guidance I could not have found a way out. I asked the guerilla commander:

"What is the total length of the communication-trenches in the whole village?"

"Eighty kilometres. Not counting twenty thousand underground spike traps."

"Quite an achievement!" I thought to myself.

Having walked from one end to the other of a hamlet, I came to the next and stood on an open space littered with bricks scattered over the trunk and branches of an old, huge uprooted tree. "This place", Thong said, "was called the 'Temple of Literature' area. There was a temple with a traditional roof curved at the lower end, a marvellous 'eight-fairy grotto' and a venerated centuries-old tree. The local people were proud of the cultural relic bequeathed them by their ancestors. But the Americans and their agents had levelled the site with bulldozers to build a 'strategic hamlet'."

I read this inscription on a lonely stele:

Tortured to incapacity:	378
Detained in the provincial prison:	60
Deported to Poulo Condor Island:	4
Killed on the spot:	35

100 hectares of ricefield and 50 hectares of orchards plundered.

All the graves in the village had been flattened, with no traces left.

All that was written in black in a frame with this line at the bottom of the stele:

This blood debt must be paid for by the enemy. Never forget it, countrymen!

Thong took out a cigarette and, glancing all around, he said with a strong resolve in his voice: "That's right! They must pay for this debt. We have risen up, the whole village has risen up, dismantled the 'strategic hamlet' and wrested back our right as masters of our land on February 8, 1968. That day we had only a few rifles

and scant ammunition, so people staged the uprising mainly with sticks and spades. Now we have an entire guerilla company complete with all the necessary paraphernalia". "In less than two years since liberation. "Thong went on. "The Americans and the puppets launched about sixty attacks. Six hundred got killed, at least a hundred by spike pits set by patriotic mothers and children."

We strolled farther along the trenches for a few moments and dropped in on Uncle Tho, head of the Peasants' Association for Liberation. As we stepped in, the old man was laying the map of the village on a plank bed. He had pinpointed all the places where norias worked by hand and automatic pumps had been installed to water the paddy and sugar fields along the river Tra Khuc.

Uncle Tho answered with obvious satisfaction my question on rice and sugar yield, "There's no more sight of paddy plants and sugar canes killed by drought as in the early 60s. We brought in bumper harvests in 1968 and this year thanks to the zeal of mutual-aid teams. With norias and pumps we provide enough water to our canes. The PRC has redistributed the lands to the peasants. Landlords and wicked thugs packed up and fled with their masters after the dismantling of the "strategic hamlet."

The head of the Peasants Association showed me some figures in his note-book — the amount contributed by the members from early last year:

Paddy to feed Liberation troops 1000 ta (one ta = 100 kgs).

Amount spent on the building of schools, maternity houses, etc. in terms of paddy 500 ta.

As I jotted down these and other figures, uncle Tho added: "We owe much to the resistance. Resistance needs are immense but our contributions are still modest. We'll do better after the next main crop."

"The headmaster said that will be for next year" was the immediate answer. "Do you know how many schools we have here?"

Aware that I did not, comrade Thong replied in my place, "Fifteen in all and more than one thousand pupils."

Leaving uncle Tho's family, we went on our way along the trenches, in the light of a new moon. I met the soldiers' adoptive mother Vui, teacher Thao — member the PRC and PC — the guerilla girls Hieu, Mui, Hoa and Giang, and Chinh of the Revolutionary Youth Organization. Talking with them as with Mrs Nam, the PRC president, Comrade Thong, the guerilla commander, and old Tho, the leader of the local peasants, I found distinct features in each. But they all resembled, on one point: open-hearted simple-minded, zealous in resistance work, and scrupulously mindful of the interests and security of their countrymen. And for this they were held in high esteem by the latter as their own dear ones.

It was a great pleasure for me to look at the strongly — built and alert guerilla girls, gun barrels shining in the moonlight, moving toward National Highway No 1. Before setting out there, they had assembled and discussed their plan under a slogan in red ink on a light-yellow cloth hung at the village gate: "We are determined to defend the revolutionary power."

I fully realized what they were up to, especially now that their native place had been enjoying freedom and happiness since liberation.

November 1968
MINH PHUONG