

'Run away, Tu,' came the order. Our group rushed forward. I was not accustomed to the firing, but did not feel afraid, all my thought being given to the fate of the liaison-girl. We ran helter-skelter across the field to the bush ahead, and from there to the river, which we crossed safely.

The firing became fiercer and fiercer. I tried to make out the girl's carbine shot, but in vain, and I grew all the more anxious.

As we fled the commandos as swiftly as we could, we arrived at the appointed place earlier than had been arranged. It was a bough in a village. But we had not to wait a long time for our new guide from D. A. post. Our group gathered in a pine-apple field damaged by toxic chemicals sprayed by the enemy, so much so that the plants did not bear fruit. None of us was missing. Some lost their rubber sandals during the race, others their knapsacks when crossing the river. Though the oldest, I did not lose anything.

We were all very tired. The guides allowed us one night's rest. Some did not mind to hang their hammocks and lay on the ground, using their bags as pillows, and soon began to snore. As for me I just drowsed with a disturbed mind. I dreamt that I was on the way to my native province: many villages looked strangely different, the people had been forced to dismantle their houses and to come and live in concentration camps, which they later destroyed; gardens, too, had completely changed. I saw again all the scenes when, together with Sau, I returned to my village, and when we parted with each other for

ever, he handing me the comb which I still kept about me. From time to time, I woke up and thought of those who were behind to check the pursuit of the commandos, especially of the liaison-girl. 'What might have happened to her and the other liaison-agents,' I asked myself. Then I fell asleep from exhaustion.

I heard faint noises of footsteps, voices, and laughs. As at length I woke up, I found it was dawn. Clouds hang like a stripe over the sky. People were talking lively. The liaison-girl was there wet through and with mud all over her clothes. Thus, she had joined us in time.

As I approached the group, they said good-bye to one another. I saw the liaison-girl, more clearly this time. She had fought against the enemy and had just come out of a dangerous place, but looked as though nothing serious had happened to her. Sunburnt, she had shining eyes and must not be more than twenty of age. She was so childish in appearance with her pendent earrings. She stepped towards me. I wanted to express my admiration and gratitude. With a smile I greeted her and said, 'My niece, I was very anxious about you. What is your rank by birth in your family?'

'I'm the first, uncle.'

'Why do they call you Sister Ut? Is it because you are mar...?'

'No,' she replied without leaving me the time to finish my question. 'I'm the first and the last born, because I'm the single child of the family.'

‘What’s the name of your village ? I think I’ve met you somewhere before.’

‘I’ve come from Culao Gieng.’

I shuddered on hearing the name of my native village. Looking at her in the eyes, I pressed on, ‘Culao Gieng of Cho Moi district, Long Chau Sa province, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Thu.’

‘Thu, you say?’ I asked in surprise. ‘Your father’s name is Sau and your mother’s Binh, isn’t it?’

She was so astonished that she failed to utter a word and stood looking at me from top to bottom. Thereupon the guides of D.A. post urged us to be ready for the departure. But I didn’t mind what they said nor feel like hearing anything else.

Neither of us had not come back from surprise. She continued fixing her round eyes on me. ‘The eyes of my niece for sure,’ I said to myself and asked again :

‘Your father’s name is Sau, isn’t it, my niece?’

‘Yes... but how do you know?’

I tried to overcome my emotion and went on with a trembling voice :

‘I’m uncle Ba. Do you remember the day when your father left home and promised to buy a comb for you?’

She nodded lightly : ‘Yes, I do.’

Unexpected meetings like this, you all know, often occurred during the Resistance War. Glancing at the girl, I took the ivory comb out of my pocket.

‘Your father sent you this. He made it himself.’

Her eyes looked bigger in her bewildered face. She took the comb which, it appeared, reminded her of the day when her father parted with her. The sight of this all pained me to the utmost. I knew she was extremely happy and avoided to trouble her happiness. I felt I might lie: ‘Father is well, he couldn’t return home and he asked me to bring it to you.’

She murmured, her eyelids quivering:

‘You’re mistaken, this comb is not from my father’.

I was disappointed and even anxious. I asked her:

‘Your father is Sau and your mother is Binh, is it right?’

‘Yes, it is.’

She was about to cry as tears shone in her eyes. But she contained her emotion:

‘If you’re not mistaken, then you tell a lie’, she said, ‘because you don’t want to pain me. I know my father is dead.’

Her eyes twinkled again and tears rolled down her cheeks. ‘I can overcome my suffering. Don’t be afraid to tell me the truth. I learnt two years ago that my father was dead, then I asked my mother to let me work as a liaison-agent.’

She wanted to say more, but she couldn’t as words died in her throat. She bowed her head and looked to the ground; her hair trembled. I kept silent. My comrades in the groups shouted to urge me to leave. I realized that I could not stay any longer. I asked for ‘Thu’s address and briefly inquired after her mother’s and relatives’ health.

The joy of meeting Thu lasted but a few moments. It was high time to leave. I glanced at her and instinctively said: 'Good-bye, my daughter.' She murmured something I could not hear between her livid lips. From a distance I turned round and saw her following us. She stopped by a ditch. Small rice-plants stirred by the wind resembled waves dashing towards her. Behind her, coconut-trees defoliated by toxic chemicals looked like gigantic fish skeletons hanging in the air. Young leaves sprang up, which, seen from afar, offered the spectacle of a forest of swords raised skyward."

1966



THE SOIL

THUS the underground shelter was completed, the most difficult I had ever known since I began digging trenches and taking a rifle to fight. I squatted down on the damp soil, leaning against a tree with folded arms on my knees, and choking with fatigue.

Gun reports from the HQ of the sub-sector rattled for a while then subsided and everything became silent again. I waited for the shelling to resume, but nothing happened.

"Well, they are done for," so I thought and looked up to the sky.

Above was a canopy with sparse foliage. The faint light of the last flares dropped by enemy planes almost blended with the feeble glimmer of a dawning day. Suddenly, there came the weary, somewhat boresome, whizz of a transport aircraft, the type with a bulky and slightly curved belly which we used to call "shrimp-sauce cargo plane".

Day gradually set in. The jungle exhaled smoke-like vapours that hung about on the trees and became increasingly thicker. "With such a weather, the planes

must wait at least one hour more to come into action," I said to myself.

I yawned then took the woodcutter knife and ran into the forest for some twigs to make a cover for my shelter.

On a horse-shoe line, my comrades of the company were busy with the same job. The soil here was hard indeed, but mine was not too bad a shelter after all. I lay the cover of branches on the entrance, put some earth on it and camouflaged the whole thing with green leaves. All was completed in a little less than half an hour. After washing my hands with my trouser pockets—no water was available—I took a petrol-soaked rag out of the cartridge pouch to cleanse my rifle. I loaded more bullets into the clip and carefully cleansed the bayonet, thinking that like this "it would go deeper into the Yanks' bodies if I ever had to use it".

Applying the rifle butt to my cheek I felt refreshed by the evening dew on it. The sensation delighted me a great deal.

As gently as possible I leant the rifle against a tree, opened my rucksack, took out some more cartridges and put them into the pouch. I also picked up some more tobacco, tore off a strip of paper from my 100-page notebook and slipped it into my sleeve. I bound the rucksack, placed it on the cover of the trench, and the rifle on top.

Now with half a rice ball, a gulp of water to wash it down and a few puffs of tobacco, I could fight the enemy until nightfall.

It was broad daylight. From the forest smoke-like vapours rose higher and higher into the sky. The first sharp sun-rays sliced down to form glimmering strips on the ground. A magpie perching on a branch opened its tiny bill to peck at the drops of morning dew then, while singing, it leapt from one branch to another, its beautiful tail curving up and down as though to beat time. In the ominous morning hush on the battlefield, the song filled me with delight as though I had just come back from a bath in the limpid water of a brook. Huynh, a fellow of mine, who was digging a trench next to me, screwed up his eyes at the bird and smiled like a child. Squad leader Quang also looked up, and soon the whole squad No 7 turned towards the magpie. But we could not enjoy this pleasure for a long time. Quang summoned us to a big well-hidden tree anh said :

“Everything is all right but the camouflage. Do you know that other units annihilated the enemy in the sub-sector ? A squad have even captured an armoured car and used the guns on it to fire back at attacking planes. Today it’s our turn. We must emulate them and knock out adverse reinforcements.”

He made a pause, apparently to think out what more he should recommend us. The magpie went on singing on the tree. Quang cast a hasty glance at it and continued :

“Now you’ve to camouflage the fortifications then take your meals. Afterwards, let everyone get down into his shelter, except the look-out who must also camouflage himself carefully.”

Huynh and I were assigned to mount guard. We returned to our trenches, put more twigs on them and began taking our frugal lunch.

The roar of jets rent the still air. Huynh wiped off his hands on his trousers, mumbling :

“ They are coming”.

Turning to me, he said :

“ Which of us will stand guard first? Well, let me do it first. Go down to your shelter and when I throw a lump of earth on it, come up to relieve me.”

I nodded and took a gulp of water. The bombers had circled twice over us. Above a grove some distance away, a helicopter was buzzing noisily in search of a landing place. The jets swooped down and frantically roared over our heads.

“ The same old trick,” I said to myself, and did not look at them any longer.

The chopper changed its direction and flew straight towards our positions. I hastily pulled down a twig to hide my trench cover and sat down. I tried to secure a most comfortable posture while keeping my rifle from dirt, unpinned two grenades, put them before me, and pricked my ears. The aircraft flew so low, that I feared it might send away the cover. It provoked a strong current into my trench and violently shook the branch I had planted at the entrance as a camouflage device. Bombs were exploding nearby in quick succession which hurled me up and down alternately. Their blasts seemed to squeeze the shelter. I had the impression that I was sitting in a small boat.

passing a wide rivermouth in the flood season. The earth shook under me and the cover was on the point of flying off at any moment. Bomb splinters hissed all around. I heard the dry sound made by the fall of the tree behind me, on which the magpie had perched a few minutes before.

After explosive bombs, the enemy rained napalm, making dull sounds here and there all over the place where the squad was positioned. The smell of burnt jelly came into my trench. Fire was raging outside. I took out my towel, soaked it with some water from the canteen and applied it on my face to guard against possible gas.

Now the planes began to let lose their 20 mm guns, riddling the air with deafening bursts. I felt reassured however and, leaning against the strong wall of my shelter, I rolled a cigarette. The shells could at most pierce through the layer of soil on the cover. I took long puffs at my cigarette and swallowed down the smoke with a great pleasure indeed. The smoke seemed to dissipate my tiredness and stir me to action. I felt like removing the cover to spring out. But there must be more waiting. The adversary was preparing for a landing ground. From experience I knew that this was only the beginning which would be followed by one or two still more fierce bombings before they dared land troops. I was impatient and instinctively recalled the night before when, availing myself of the flares dropped by enemy planes, I dug and dug until I was almost out of breath. That was an unforgettable night in my soldier's life. I frowned at every stroke of my spade against the stone-like earth. All

that, however, would certainly make me remember for ever this particular stretch of land.

I lost in contemplation before my "great work". True, I had dug without let-up for twelve hours on end. During that sleepless night, I must confess, I once felt somewhat dismayed and angry at this rock-hard soil. But the burst of gunfire at the sub-sector headquarters had urged me not to relax. At long last, I completed my work and now the shelter was protecting me from tons of bombs. I ran my hands on the wall and had a pleasant sensation of coolness. I knocked at it with my fingers and felt very happily secure. The light that filtered through the cover showed the smooth surface of the wall as though it had been polished. That might be the result of the friction of my clothes or of the touch of my sweated palms or of both. I made a mental calculation and an idea came to me. I carved the number 200 on the wall of the shelter with the point of my knife.

Really, this was exactly the 200th trench I had dug, and it flattered me to realize in retrospect that this had been achieved in a far-off land which, probably, was made of the hardest soil on earth. An indescribable feeling took hold of me. I vaguely remembered that scores of trenches had been dug at encampments or bivouacs, as many for the people, and at least one hundred on battlefields. Yet, only now did I remember all these things although I had sat, stood, even slept, in over a hundred different shelters at a hundred different places.

A string of bomb explosions nearby cut off my line of thought. A lump of earth, the size of a fist, fell

into my trench. Huynh presumably wanted me to relieve him. I put the two grenades into my trouser pockets, seized my rifle and crawled to the entrance. Here I paused for a while to judge the range of bomb splinters, then got up. I felt dazzled by the sudden contact with sunlight. Seeing me Huynh asked :

“ What are you out for ? ”

“ To relieve you ! ”

“ No, I haven't called you yet. May be it's the earth sent by an explosion, ” Huynh replied while taking from his belt a bandage. I stared at him : “ Got hit ? ” Huynh nodded and held out his left hand : “ They robbed me of a bit of flesh. ” He unrolled the bandage and began to dress the wound.

“ An antiseptic application will do. ”

“ Certainly, ” Huynh said, smiling. I told him :

“ Now come down into the shelter and let me do the job. The second bombing, isn't it ? There will be at least one or two more before they land. ”

Huynh disappeared in the underground. I looked round : bomb craters filled the place where our platoon was positioned, several near our shelters, others some distance away. One bomb had narrowly missed a trench and uprooted many trees of a grove in the vicinity. But all the fortifications remained intact. I felt a great relief and riveted my eyes on the jets circling in the sky. They flew higher and higher. Suddenly from the direction of the rising sun a group of fighter planes came out of the clouds. All of them were as black as soot.

“ The third bombing, ” I said aloud and concentrated on my duty as look-out. The aircraft made only one circle, then swooped down and unleashed their loads on our positions. The explosions shook the earth and gave me the impression that they might fling us out of our trenches. I parted my legs and tried to stick to the wall not to fall down. The explosions ceased now. I wiped off the dirt on my face and neck, and ran my hands on the walls of the shelter. A large fissure was there and the cover had slid aside. Hardly had I turned round when something black streaked down before me. I had only time to duck low: an ear-splitting explosion was heard. I was nearly thrown out onto the ground. Had it not been for a shelter of this type, I would have been “ finished ”.

I had dug 200 trenches in 200 different places, now in coastal areas made of sand, now in the plains of central Viet Nam or in the muddy West, now in the rubber and coffee plantations of the East with reddish soil. In some of those places my job was rendered much easier by their clayed soil. In other, I bumped against the rock-like laterite of barren hills. Each battlefield I had come to, and each shelter I had dug, left me with unforgettable memories. In Gia Dinh province for instance, I had enjoyed the Lunar New Year Festival with the local population, took part in a counter-raid action and fought side by side with a woman guerilla who, some time later, became my fiancée. Now I found myself on this land, very far from my native one, to which I had never dreamt of coming. But the liberation struggle had led me here, and overnight it had become so dear to me, almost as

part of my own self. It had protected me from enemy bombs and bullets, as a mother does her child. I felt as though the soil was my second mother, indeed, and I was a fighter of it. In a few moments, when the adversary landed their troops, I should spring out of its bosom to wipe them out. I should defend every inch of it, for it was ours and not theirs.

The fighter planes had scurried away leaving behind some helicopters which were circling over the open ground in front of us. They would surely drop their troops there. Thereupon, a lump of earth was thrown at me. I turned round and saw squad leader Quang standing behind a tree. He said: "Word has come that they will be here presently. Observe absolute secrecy to welcome them properly. When the sappers' mine went off, hurl your grenades according to plan, and charge them when the bugle sounds. If any of them jump into the shelters, just..." Quang swung his bayonet, smiled broadly and added:

"Anything particular since the morning, Son? Your trenches are still intact, aren't they?, we must be grateful to this soil. Quite a lot of bombs, eh? Now tell Huynh our plan."

I threw a lump of earth into Huynh's trench: he popped out. I told him of the squad leader's order. No sooner had I finished than a flight of fighter planes moved in and swooped down to bomb immediately. I ducked in, but before I could withdraw my hands, a bomb exploded at the other end of the shelter. I felt some dampness on the left hand. I bent over and looked at it. The little finger had been

nearly severed by a splinter. It was attached to the hand only by a bit of skin. I angrily gazed at the planes and tried to lift the finger back to its normal position, but in vain. So I decided to get rid of it to be freer in my movement. After all, it could not heal, I argued to myself. I bandaged the stump which ached a bit.

The aircraft bombed and strafed indiscriminately for quite a while then pulled up. Immediately, from the direction of the rising sun, some groups of three choppers each, rumbled in like a swarm of flies. There was a thunderous noise in the air. As I was standing in the shelter, reporting to the squad leader and Huynh, one helicopter skimmed over the open ground and dropped a red-smoke grenade to mark the landing spot for the others.

"We'll have a good haul, sure!" I nearly screamed with joy and excitement. The enemy were not aware that hundreds of men underground had spread a close-knit net around them. I bent down to put on my rucksack, placed two hand grenades on the shelter edge, carefully loaded my rifle, unfolded the bayonet to prepare for an eventual hand-to-hand engagement. After pulling some twigs over my head, I calmly lay in wait.

The first group of choppers was in front of me. I could see distinctly the soldiers on board. Clad in green uniforms and with each a grenade in hand, they fixed their eyes on the ground. Now the aircraft slowed down and were only five metres above the ground. Three of them slid past me, just a few me-

tres away. The soldiers began throwing grenades then jumped down. Most of them tumbled upon touching the ground, some flat on the face, others on the back, others again hopping on one foot. One got as close as fifteen metres from me. They formed three rows of about a company in all. The American commanders stood up as best they could swaying back and forth like drunkards. They looked aggressive and moved as in a deserted place. They probably thought that had the " Viet Cong " dug in here, all would have been killed by American bombs and bullets. Their demeanour set my nerves on edge.

" You'll be finished in a moment," I mumbled.

Boiling with impatience, I clenched my teeth and grasped a grenade firmly in my hand. It was then that our sappers' mines made three deafening explosions. I tossed my first grenade at the nearest group and, before it went off, I threw another one. Many soldiers were sent to the ground. Not losing a second, our squad, then our entire company, popped out of the shelters. " We begin to pull our drag-net," I thought. Grenades showered on the adverse formation which was in utter confusion. The machinegun manned by Chi swept the ground. Many scrambled for life, screaming with horror. I raised my rifle and aimed at a Yank crawling on the grass. I pressed the trigger: he writhed a while, then lay motionless. The familiar bugle charge from behind the lines resounded. In the twinkle of an eye I sprang out of my shelter. I saw squad leader Quang, Huynh and Hien let loose sustained firings with their sub-machineguns. Many enemies were hit, stood like pokers then tumbled

down. Only a few could fire back some shots. Others took to flight or raised their hands. They could not understand where we had come from, even what had happened. The whole of our company rushed forward like a tidal wave of the Mekong river in the flood season. I jumped over many bodies straight to the Yank. He was still alive : my bullet had gone through his thigh. When a few paces from him I screamed out some unintelligible words, he turned his head and his pistol in my direction. I quickly skipped aside and the bullet snapped past my ear. I clenched my teeth and thrust the bayonet with all my strength into his huge side. The bandit made a curve of his body and dropped the pistol from his hand.

The engagement was like a violent but very brisk storm that swept the area in no more than ten minutes. The battleground relapsed into silence. One only heard the moaning of the wounded enemies and the whizz of jet planes high overhead.

Squad leader Quang ran to me. I handed him the pistol of the American officer and pointed to the bodies of the other enemies I had knocked down. Seeing the white bandage on my left hand, he asked : "Got wounded?"

"Yes, my little finger was cut by a bomb splinter, but I can still handle a rifle."

He stepped towards the dead Yank, took out all the papers from his pockets and slipped them into his own.

Quang looked at me and said after some reflexion :
“Run to the company C.P. right away to escort the captives.”

“What about my duty in our unit?”

“The squad stays here for the coming fight, don't trouble about that.”

“Shall I escort them up to the camp?” I asked with obvious disappointment.

“No,” the squad leader shook his head. “Only to the rear where you'll hand them to the escort team and come back here.”

I smiled broadly, so did Quang who was surely aware of my state of mind. He then urged my other comrades to collect the trophies. I walked towards the captured soldiers standing disorderly in the forest.

The sun beat down on the enemy corpses. The earth seemed to be burning under my feet.

Some of my fellow-fighters and myself had to keep watch on the prisoners from noon till late in the afternoon. From the fire-line came the intermittent rattling of machineguns that put me out of patience. Having gone astray, the escort team arrived only by 4 p.m. Once the prisoners had been handed over, I dashed towards the front-line. Because of several bombings, while I was on the way, I came back some time before nightfall. After reporting on my mission I rejoined my position. Huynh was taking his meal.

“Any more encounter since the morning?” I asked.

Huynh shook his head.

“Why so much firing?”

“It was from other units.”

“What’s the news?”

“They wiped out two companies, and we one. And raising his finger, Huynh added: “With one enemy battalion knocked out, I’m afraid there’ll be no more Yanks to fight.”

“Did they bomb here since I left?”

“They did,” Huynh pointed to the new bomb craters. “They retaliated.”

I looked round and could hardly recognize the place. Bombs and rockets had knocked down all the trees around. The soil was ploughed up and looked like a hoed field.

“Anyone got hurt?”

Huynh shook his head.

It took me a long while to find my shelter. There were three more bomb craters apart from the three I had noticed before I left. The layer of earth on the cover of the shelter had been blown off. I bent low over it and realized with surprise that the entrance had been seriously warped. I jumped in and found that its bottom was cluttered up with lumps of earth. I touched the walls with both hands: they remained intact.

I heard the squad leader calling me. I got out and was told to prepare to move elsewhere. Before I could ask any question, he said:

“We expect them to come in larger numbers to-morrow, at another place.”

Our unit moved on. Again we set out for an unknown land. There I shall dig my 201st shelter, deep in the soil which will overnight become dear to me, and will protect me as a mother does her child. There, too, I shall spring out of the ground to kill any enemy who will venture to come. And the same process will go on and on until the whole of South Viet Nam gets rid of the last Yankee aggressor.