

INTERVIEW WITH NGUYEN VAN PHE
SAPPER - SPECIAL PROJECTS BRANCH
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- Q. Would you please to introduce yourself and tell us your name, your age, your birth place and your rank when you were still with the liberation army?
- A. I am Nguyen Van Phe, 27 years old. I came from Hoa Hiep, district of Tuy Hoa, province of Phu Yen. Out there, I was assistant company commander of a sapper company.
- Q. Where did you operate?
- A. My unit has its TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility) in the province of Darlac.
- Q. How long had you been with the Viet Cong?
- A. Since 1960.
- Q. In how many battles id you participate?
- A. About 54 battles or fights.
- Q. Among the battles in which you participated, do any of them stands out in your mind as really rough?
- A. There were a few. The most vicious one was the battle at Chu Ty. Our C-6 had 28 people and after the battle there were only three of us left. The second one was at Buon Bong in the province of Darlac. We threw in a battalion and after the battle we had some thing like 47 casualties. We succeeded in removing 17 of them but the other 30 bodies and the remaining wounded were left in there. The third battle was in Ea Tun. The battle was a sea saw battle and there were no casualties. We fought for a day and there was no wounded at all. It was a tough one though. It was a defeat for the Viet Cong had a whole battalion and they could not lick a company of Truong Son or montagnards. It should be considered as a defeat. The fourth battle was the attack into the city of Ban Me Thuot, during the Mau Than Tet. One of the companies sent in consisted of twenty people and when they

retreated there were only 9 of them. In all there were one thousand three hundred and twenty-seven soldiers killed and wounded in that battle.

Q. Did you ever attack a refugee village?

A. We had to hit a few of them. They were really quite bloody struggles. We attacked Kim Chau Phat, twice and Trung Hoa once. We were unable to seize Kim Chau Phat on either occasion and there were many killed. When we attacked Trung Hoa on the night of March, 23, 1968 we seized only a few hamlets and we lost too many killed. When we came in we asked them whether or not they had weapons and rifles; they told us no but when we turned our back to them they threw grenades at us. There were something like some seventy of us killed and wounded. Most of those killed were killed by the people by means other than bullets from rifles.

Q. From your observation, what do you think about the fighting spirit of those refugees?

A. If the South, the whole population in the South fought like the refugees, then we could not do a thing. They have a tremendous fighting spirit. And therefore, whenever our soldiers received orders to hit a refugees' village, they were all scared. They were afraid of grenades from the little kids.

Q. Did the little ones also fight?

A. Yes, they also fought. They had promised their mothers that they would fight the communists. Therefore having to hit the refugees' villages meant a nightmare of an experience and often we had to leave those who were killed or wounded in action right there where they fell. We could not remove them.

Q. Was it easier to hit the regular troops?

A. It was easier for the Viet Cong to fight against the ARVN or the U.S. troops. We could recognize them. It was much more difficult to hit the refugees' villages. We could not recognize the soldiers from the plain civilians. None of them had any rifle in their hands; yet all of them could hit at us when they wanted. So, our people out there are all afraid of the refugees. They are not afraid to hit a company of ARVN regulars but they are afraid of hitting a refugees' village.

Q. Is there a policy that calls for hitting the refugee villages?

A. There is! If there was a stubborn village, then they knew about that thru their internal security men and underground organization. Then, they would decided to hit the village as an example to punish it. They thought they could use that punitive raid as an example for the other village. Usually they failed miserably. They would hit and then they would be defeated.

Q. Do you think that the liberation fighters were well treated?

A. Out there, if the liberation army soldiers had success in their recent raids, then they would treat them like a spoiled children. But, in case they got licked with many wounded and killed, the Party cadres would start making problems for the soldiers. They would charge that the combatants did not pull together and use all the resources, or make every effort. They would accuse the soldiers of being afraid. And did not want to make a real sacrifice for the cause and soon... . They also might accuse the combatants of getting too chicken... (unintelligible) They might declare that in order to get food, the combatants would now have to forage, to get the food from the enemy, and in other ways they would have to work hard for the food.

Q. What about the problem of the wounded, out there?

A. I have seen many cases at the hospitals and I was very sad and moved. They did not have milk and sugar for the wounded. To feed them, they offered them only manioc with rice, at the three to one ratio. In the battlefield, if you got wounded and you could manage to get along with them, without too much help, they would take you with them. But, if you proved to be a burden to them, they would leave you behind. If you were wounded and you did not have much chance to survive, then they would bury you alive.

Q. Could you provide us with an actual example?

A. All right. At the battle on March 23, 1968, we worked along with the K-39 battalion to hit the district or sector headquarters of an ARVN unit. When we had made the preparation, they said they could get something like 50% of assurance of a victory. When we attacked, we were hit by a recon company from outside and with

my own two eyes I saw some 19 wounded. I was not one of the porters, but I saw the four of them who were most seriously wounded. I was a guide and led the way. When we made a stop, the company commander of a company from the K-39 told me: "Comrade, Phe, you stay here and lead the way for the others, the bearers of the 15 wounded will move out now." I thought that I was to be a guide, but, later, I found out that I was supposed to work with 16 others, all Party members, to bury alive four badly wounded men, some of them were still protesting aloud. The others said that this is the Party's policy and if the enemy planes were around they would detect those killed and would be able to make an accounting of the number of casualties as a result of their strikes. That would be bad and counter to the Party propaganda. To protect the Party we had to bury them. And so, they then bury four people. Some of them were still breathing hard and some had their eyes open and were looking at us. They were dumped into the fighting bunkers in a sitting position. After we finished burying them, I made a note in my diary, for this was the darkest day of my life. I had never seen anything worse in my nine years of fighting in there, I questioned myself, what I would do if I ever was put in a similar situation like the four who were buried alive.

Q. How did you feel about that burial of the live comrades-in-arms while they were still looking at you?

A. I had many disturbing thoughts. I felt helpless. Just a little while before they could still move like any of us. We had all faithfully followed the Party and all its teachings and now the Party was going to unmercifully bury its own men alive. I was deeply troubled. But you see I was under Party control and even though I protested deep in my heart and I had to go ahead and do it. I thought my time might come up like it did to these men and I felt sorry for them and for me. If I were still with my loved ones, my family, I would at least get a blanket or a sheet to cover my dead body, if not a casket. Therefore, I had much pity for the four combatants. They were right there and I could only look at them and I could not say anything. And so you see, I have given much thought about all of this and my attitudes have had to change since then.

Q. Are you a member of the Party?

A. I have been a Party member since 1966.

- Q. Among the fights you had against the ARVN and the Allies, which one was the most successful?
- A. Generally speaking there were no successful battles. We had managed to seize some points and we could not hold on to them. Many a times we seized the strong points and then the planes came in and strafed the places. Throughout my nine years with them, we succeeded in seizing some strategic hamlets which we could hold on to. But we could never fight and hold on to and keep the positions when we fought against the ARVN or the militia.
- Q. Did your family earn any special privileges, because you joined the Liberation Army?
- A. I was away from my family at the time and I don't know if they earned any special privileges or not. But I think I can safely say that they got no special privileges. When I joined them, my family was under the control of the GVN. I don't know what happen to them and I believe they are still with the GVN and so they could have received some help from the GVN. The Viet Cong could not help them. The only thing, I know that the Viet Cong could do, was to collect taxes. The people in the family of men who had gone to serve in the Liberation Army back there had to fulfill their duties which were to pay taxes to keep the struggle going on. During my nine years with them, nine years full of hardships and dangers, I didn't get anything out of it. And during that time they fired a 122mm Russian rocket into my family's house because people had gathered there to pay respect to my brother in law in a ceremony held there; the round killed four people in my own family.
- Q. What was the reason which had led you to defect?
- A. Well, the thing that really changed everything was... well, I changed after the burial of four wounded. Besides, I always thought about my family, my parents. I had applied for a leave of absence and they told me: "If you want to see your family you must first ask the trigger of this rifle. Your rifle has not yet killed enough Americans and the puppets and this means that your family has not yet enjoyed a moment of happiness. Now, if you want to go home to see them, you should first go out to kill all the Americans, go chase all the Americans from the country."

The second point is that we had heard about all the sacrifices we would have to make to save the nation and I asked them about the prohibition against raising a family. Mentioning this problem of raising a family would make them argue back by mentioning the importance of the role of the cadres and of the member of the Party. Sometime back I loved a woman but then she attended a school for officers and after she had finished school she changed. She told me about the role of the cadres and the duties of the Party members and so on. She just broke off and severed the ties with me. She told me that I had no right to have a family at this time. She reminded me about Ho Chi Minh a man of seventy years old or over. He has no family and I am only twenty seven years old and who was I to think I had a right to start a family. She reminded me about my duties to the Party and my role of a leader of the company.

The night of the 12th when our K-39 attacked the ARVN artillery unit, I was reluctant to send them into attack for the place was very muddy. So I ordered them to withdraw. When we got out they opened fire. One of the cadre told me that I was unrealistic and that I was always thinking about my family, and I was not too eager to sacrifice for the cause and so on. He also told me to be on my guard when he came back to the unit, for he was going to denounce me, something like that. So I had reason to be angry with them. I was with them for nine years and now they were treating me like dirt. They have no considerations for the human being, for individuals. They treated us like dirt, fed us almost nothing, some rice, some vegetables and some sesame. So I reasoned that it would be better to be killed with the GVN side; here we can at least be buried with a piece of decent cloth to cover us. It would be much better than to be with the Viet Cong.

- Q. When did you rally to the GVN and where?
- A. I defected on May 13, 1969 at Dat Ly, in a land resettlement center in the province of Darlac.
- Q. Could you tell us about how you felt when you rallied to the ARVN forces?
- A. I have personally received and read many leaflets and at first I did not believe in them much. When I saw the faces of the RF's and the people there, I started to have some good feelings.

Then I was transferred to the district of Hoa Binh, I was kindly received by the officers and the Colonel, Chief of the province, I found out that I had been misinformed. I had been wrong, for I had killed many civilians and soldiers. And so I told the others that I hoped that the people and the nation would forgive and be lenient with me, a man who had committed many mistakes, I had heard a lot of propaganda and therefore, I had not seen the reality. Seeing the reception given to me there, I was so moved that I could not say anything. I wanted to be pardoned and I would strive to work hard to make it up later.

- Q. After your stay in the Center there, have you anything to offer to the GVN for your contribution?
- A. I hope that I could make the rangers, the recon units or the special forces. I could do anything that needed really, but to tell the truth, I am a little weak these days. I could not join the Navy or the paratroopers, because of my health. I can still join any of ground forces, to serve the country. Should you want me to make a sacrifice for the country in any battle, I am ready to sacrifice myself without saying a thing.
- Q. Thank you for talking with us.