

Thuyet

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Thuyet

the novel

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ONE

FREEDOM FIGHTERS...

Shall we go send them dinners and fresh suits,

And give their fasting horses provender

And after, fight with them?

Henry V, Act IV. Shakespeare.

The Freedom Fighters...

1966: Vungas and the Mexican Standoff...

JAAGO AND RUDJINCZKY LAUGHED AS THEY YELLED "NOSTROVIA".

The two men skulled their glasses and automatically hurled them over their shoulders. In their cultures it was normal. Pham tensed on Gary's right side. Khai's uncle, the owner of the café, must have returned, watching from the darkness of the corridor.

Khai loosed his strangled warning, too late.

Uncle jerked his pistol free: cocked it: then jammed it against Gary's head. *Fuck.*

A millisecond later, nine pistols, all cocked, were pointed at Khai's uncle's head. Every muscle in Gary's body went taut. Sensory images etched into his brain. The sombre half-light etched details of the Uncle's German Luger into Gary's brain, which ordered, "*Freeze.*" His left unmoving eyeball memorized its dull sheen. He *felt* Troy across the room with 'Bessie'. He *smelled* Jaago a nanosecond behind. Pham stiffened beside him. Gary *heard* Rudi suck in his breath, his Biretta aimed from Troy's left. The sharp click of a Tokarev 7.62mm Russian pistol reminded him that Vinh, a Viet Cong, had become a 'friend'. Hai's pistol, the other VC, rang metallic. Three Vietnamese Rangers pointed Colts. Khai's face had paralysed in fear.

A strange halo descended... Silence reigned ... It was a Mexican standoff.

Tensed, like a deer poised for flight, Gary waited for his brain to explode.

The Freedom Fighters...

It all started one Friday with, "Okay. How many for a soldier's night in Vunggas."

It was September 1966 and the marquee filled with Staff looking forward to a relaxed weekend. Duties had been allocated, Gary had written his personal letters home and felt self-indulgent. Commander of the First Australian Reinforcement Unit (1ARU), he and his staff reclined in deckchairs. He'd decided that it was time to take full advantage of a break in Viet Cong activities for the first time since the Battle of Long Tan on 17th August, four weeks earlier. Gary had missed Long Tan by a hairsbreadth. Inside the wired-in and mined perimeter of the First Australian Task Force base, (1ATF), most officers and men relaxed. Long Tan had been a close call. Those diggers rostered for leave had already left by GMC truck for Vunggas.

"Depends what you mean by a soldier's night sir?" Frank leered across the room.

Frank delighted in demeaning Vietnamese women in the brothels in Vung Tau. Then he'd rush back to describe them in graphic detail. His exploits had become a bore.

Gary countered quietly, "Not what you've got in mind, Sergeant."

"You mean no more fucking those slant-eyed slopes, Sir." The man smirked.

One of Gary's roles was to brief each induction fresh from Australia about respecting Vietnamese, especially their women. Frank had scant respect. Gary's jaw tightened.

He bristled, "That's right, Sergeant. It's to be a men's only night. Strictly celibate."

The Freedom Fighters...

Frank blundered on, "But sir?"

The officers and senior non-coms in the room looked up sharply, glanced at each other. Some had an 'in-country' Vietnamese girlfriend. None liked Frank's attitude.

Gary seethed. "Not your style, Sergeant." Through his teeth. "This is big boys stuff."

Frank missed three important cues. Being addressed by rank distanced the man: he'd missed Gary's sotto voice: and he'd been insensitive to the silence in the room. Gary turned his back. The others studiously returned to chatting, reading or just sitting.

Ignoring Frank pointedly, Gary said, "Look, you guys. This'll be different." He fractionally raised his voice. "Men only. No bar-girls." There was no immediate response. He perceived some tension in the silence.

Some looked at Gary and quietly shook their head. Others already held a can of beer. Many preferred hard liquor mixtures. Gary liked his 'bourbon and coke' UDL.

The staff members looked forward to a quiet weekend of drinking.

"No fucking takers, Boss. They're all screwing local slope-heads but they just haven't got the balls to admit it." Frank challenged someone to contradict him.

An officer alongside Frank whispered "Shut up while you are ahead, Sergeant. The Boss has warned you. He's not in the mood to put up with any more racist crap."

The Freedom Fighters...

“Frank.” Staff-sergeant Howie, growled, “Shut the fuck up, man.”

Frank’s watery blue eyes glowered beneath blond bushy eyebrows.

Gary chose not to notice. “One more time then I’m off.”

Rudi called out, “Okay, Boss. I’m a starter.”

As he rose he lifted his guitar over his head. “Do I bring this along, Skipper?”

Rudi had arrived in Australia as a refugee and a seasoned veteran of the 1956 Hungarian resistance. He looked after the IATF end of the logistics of re-supply. Rudi stood six-foot-six in his socks. A craggy mop of jet-black hair topped a suntanned and well-muscled body. Popular with everyone, his guitar went everywhere with him. Rudi had Gypsy ancestry.

“Any more for any more? Remember no bar-girls... no boocoo boom boom.”

“Count me in, Skipper.”

As short as Rudi was tall, with blond hair and steely-blue eyes, Jaago had more war experience than all the others put together. His infectious laughter echoed around the marquee and his eyes grinned from a lank greyhound frame.

“Any reasons we can’t leave now?” Gary turned to his Second-in-Command.

The Freedom Fighters...

“No, Sir.” Gary’s 2i/c, Roger, beamed.

He relished being in charge of the unit over the weekend. Keen, enthusiastic, Roger had been in the same battalion with Gary in Oz and they were long term friends. Mature sergeant-majors, Rudi and Jaago were just the kind Gary wanted around for his planned soldier’s night. Solid, reliable and hard-asses in a tight corner.

“I take it you’d prefer your own driver, Sir. Jinx’s reliable and can stay close by.”

Without waiting for Gary’s reply, Roger nodded to a Corporal, “Wanna go, Jinx?”

“Fucking oath, Sir.” Any excuse to see his ‘in-country’ Vietnamese wife.

“Okay. Then you’re aboard and I’ll get someone else to do your roster. Frank, you’re it, mate. Jinx will brief you. Boss, let Jinx know where and when to pick you up.”

Frank’s face fell. “Fuck it, Sir. Give me a break. My balls are heavy as lead. I’m due for time-off this weekend. Some slope shielas were gunna suck ‘em dry.”

“I’m real glad about your balls, Sergeant. The Army knows exactly what to do with unspent energy. You’ll man the command post for two nights.’

“The CP, Sir? But I...”

“If you’re not knackered by then I’ll get you a fistful of Bromide from Staff Howie. We wouldn’t want any of your precious energy to go to waste now would we, Staff?”

The Freedom Fighters...

Staff-Sergeant Howie grinned. "No problemo, Sir."

"Aw... come off it, Sir!"

"Complaint Frank? I'll be glad to make it three. Staff? Like Sunday night off."

Frank didn't wait. Realising he was outranked and outnumbered, he unraveled himself out of his chair, lurched to a sloppy vertical and slouched off, his drooped shoulders mute testament to Roger's victory. He stopped at the edge of the duckboards, looked back as though for one last crack, decided against it and left.

Gary chuckled inwardly and caught others trying to hide their smiles. Frank was an asshole just barely tolerated. Gary winked a '*Thank you*' to Roger, who nodded in return. He gave a thumbs-up '*One for the goodies.*'

"Okay, saddle up. Roger, can you set Jaago up with a pistol? I don't want you two lugging SLR's around all night. Jinx, you've already got a pistol. I'll take that spare M-79 of mine and ride shotgun. Then we'll be on our way."

"Okay, Sir. Jaago, take my Browning. Use your under-over M-16 riding co-pilot with Jinx." Roger didn't pause. "My M-16'll do me until you guys get back. Just don't lose it, Jaago. This isn't a Yank outfit. They drop weapons everywhere. Here's a packet of bullets for the Browning. Test all weapons in the fire-trench before you leave."

One of the reclining officers looked up and smiled. "You just made my day, Roger."

The Freedom Fighters...

He stood up to unbuckle his pistol pouch. He motioned to Rudi. "Rudi. Leave me your SLR. I conned this Birretta out of a Yank pilot. He reckons it's the one Sean Connery used in 'Goldfinger'. You'll find a couple of packets of bullets in the small pouch. Like Roger said, just don't lose the fucking thing."

"Thanks, mate." Touched by the immediacy of their responses, Gary added, "Rudi and Jaago. All you'll need is a razor and a toothbrush. The rest we'll make out as we go. Jinx, look after your own needs. Troy wants us to meet him at Cyrno's."

"Your CIA mate, Sir?" Jaago's face lit up.

"That's him, Jaago, Troy rang earlier and can't wait for us to join him. Let's go."

Rudi beamed. "The bastard you met in the Delta three years ago?"

"That's him, Rudi."

"Fucking fantastic, Sir. I'm dying to meet him after listening to Jaago's crowing."

Gary's heart leapt. "It's going to be great, Fellas."

Jaago's excitement surged. "Lead on, McDuff."

"Wish I was going with you, Sir, but someone has to keep the home fires burning."

Roger hadn't met Troy, whose reputation had reached legendary proportions.

The Freedom Fighters...

Roger acted as safety officer as Gary test-fired his semi-automatic Browning and his M-79. Jaago fired his 'under-over' and pistol into the fire-trench. Rudi followed Jinx. Then all re-loaded and safety-checked their weapons. The routine saved lives.

Onto Jinx's Land Rover and they were off. A chorus of well wishers followed them. Through the 1ATF checkpoint and just two clicks down the old Route Coloniale 15, Gary picked up his friend, Pham, at the Hoa Long checkpoint.

"Bonne nuit, mes amis." Pham spoke passable English but excellent French. The men in the vehicle spoke French with varying degrees of proficiency and answered Pham's courtesy in turn. None of the Aussies spoke or understood Vietnamese.

Pham, a short, stocky Vietnamese, commanded the Army of the Republic of Vietnam troops that were the ARVN Hoa Long garrison. Hoa Long straddled the highway south to Vung Tau and north to Saigon. The Australians created this 'friendly hamlet' after their total destruction of Long Tan. That Viet Cong village had been just two clicks too close to the Task Force base and ceased to exist after Operation Enoggera in July 1966. The only one in the vehicle not 'in-country' during that time was Gary.

The trip to Vung Tau, formerly Cap Saint Jaques, would prove uneventful. Gary and Rudi had walked the road many times with 1 ARU new arrivals for acclimatisation and familiarisation, with Jinx as escort vehicle driver and Jaago as gunnery chief. He sported a vehicle-mounted 'point five-0 cal' in case of ambush. This was an American machine-gun Roger managed to purloin on one of his forays to Qui Nhon. On these Vungaas walks, October's humidity saturated everyone. Today proved different.

The Freedom Fighters...

Gary enjoyed their late afternoon drive: the cool air on his face: the wind through his hatless Marine-style hair: and the airstream as it fumbled his jungle-green clothes. Along the route Gary recognised small family groups going about their evening cooking and cleaning chores. These were the swamp peoples. Poor fishermen who eked a precarious living on the crabs and fish among the mangroves. Gary knew each hootchie as far as the Cat Lo coastguard base ten clicks short of Vung Tau.

Feeling the absence of Maggie, his 'point five-0', Jaago cradled the under-over M-16 in the ready position across his lap. The others yielded him 'point-man' responsibility and he basked in the confidence of this bunch of professionals. His slitted eyes penetrated the greenery on each side of the road. Jaago could scent trouble.

War was hard to imagine this evening. The descending sun bounced off the tips of foliage. Its warm ambience graced them while it glistened gold and orange on the patches of water as they flashed past the swamp each side of the highway.

Gary was glad their rank insignia merged with their jungle-green outfits. No need to advertise. Not the Aussie way. The crisp features of the swamp-people faded as dusk approached but he was still able to recognise some and waved in acknowledgement of their smiles. His M-16 aimed at them across his lap, 'just in case'.

Jinx virtually lived in and for his baby, the vehicle. His Vietnamese 'wife' had moved from Saigon to Vung Tau to be near him and he looked forward to spending the weekend with her. He longed to marry and take her back to Oz. His vehicle was safe at her place. Jinx hated Frank for the way he took advantage of Vietnamese poverty.

The Freedom Fighters...

Frank debased Vietnamese girls and debauched them at every opportunity. But Frank outranked him so Jinx had to button his lip. He cooled now in sunset's glory. He appreciated his new boss, Gary, after the exchange in the marquee. Roger, he already had a good working relationship with. He respected both for their moral stance.

Rudi, as arse-end-Charlie, kept a sharp lookout. He felt nervous. They were sitting ducks in the Land Rover, which could only go in one direction.

Gary had already determined the best way to drive was like the 'Hounds of Hell'. He'd been shot at on previous trips but only single shots. The Viet Cong who patrolled the swamps seemed to be lousy rifleman. Probably rookies looking for an easy kill. All the occupants had ever heard was the crack as the round zipped overhead or behind. Never in front. Almost unconsciously, Gary continually scanned for changes since his last walk. He could only whisper to himself... *Thank God we never heard the shots in front.* That would mean some bastard had learned to aim off.

It was dinnertime. Smoke rose from cooking pots and woks. Periodically an old woman would interrupt her cooking and raise her hand to acknowledge their hurtling vehicle. Kids would rush from inside their homes to wave.

Rudi yelled his nervousness as they tore past. "Any one of these hootchies could house Victor Charlie, Boss."

Jaago's weapon followed his eyes in random but slow arcs, like a Maestro conducting a slow concerto with the rush of wind his orchestral backing.

The Freedom Fighters...

Laughing into the cooling wind, *Dawai* Pham recited something in French. In response to Gary's question he explained it was an old Vietnamese proverb and, because he spoke little English, asked Gary to translate to his friends.

Gary yelled above the slipstream. "Heaven does not punish when people are eating."

"Tell that to Israelis caught during Yom Kippur."

Gary smiled. Jaago had spent some time in an Israeli kibbutz and had been there during the Yom Kippur war. They jointly admired Israel's redoubtable warriors and often exchanged heroic war stories. Gary envied Jaago's life experiences.

Away from the rushing vehicle, the stillness of approaching dusk caused the smoke to spiral straight up. Nuoc mam and fresh-fish cooking smells rose from each hearth. Nuoc mam was a liquid drained from salted fermented fish and it nauseated most westerners but Gary savoured its unique aroma. It was quintessentially Vietnamese and very different to the Chinese and Malay fish sauces he'd loved in Malaysia.

As the odour wafted by Gary identified then relished the ingredients: a little chilli: then the overriding redolence of garlic: and finally the subtle flavouring of lime. He doubted that these kitchens would stoop to use labels marked *thuong hang*, the up-market variety of *nuoc mam*. Their ingredients measured moments in millennia. Cyrno's, where the group likely headed, would stock it. Connoisseurs sought aged *nuoc mam* like a fine wine. More likely these swamp people made their own from the plentiful anchovy off their coastline.

The Freedom Fighters...

Sitting on the sides of the road, gangs of kids called, “*Uc Dai Loi* number one. We like you” as the vehicle sped past.

Rudi watched them closely “Fucking kids...” Other words were lost in the bluster.

The warriors smiled and laughed at him as Rudi echoed this refrain all along the Route Coloniale to Vung Tau. It was hard to realise these kids acted a double life as pimps and cockies for the Viet Cong. It was too easy to love their joy and spontaneity and to liken them to children back home. There, comparison ended. ‘Sometimes too hot, the eye of heaven shines’, often identifying them as soldiers. Their faces held an innocence that belied the fact they had never known anything but war and conquerors. Many were and looked old before their time.

Jaago had seen such faces in Europe. His face must have looked like that, then.

Rudi had seen these faces too in Hungary. Anxiety at remembrance caused ripples of sweat to appear on his brow, which he unconsciously wiped to clear his eyes.

Jinx would call back “*Uc Dai Loi* number one...” and give the thumbs up sign.

Jaago always pointed his weapon in their direction. Then he scrutinised the area behind the kids intently as the Land Rover rocketted past. Jaago took no chances.

A week before, Donno’s ‘Hearts and Minds’ vehicle in Hao Long had been perforated with a machine-gun burst. He’d been handing out lollies to youngsters like these.

The Freedom Fighters...

A flock of marsh geese broke cover and squawked into the slowly reddening sky.

Startled, Gary instinctively pointed his Browning. In front he heard the click as Jaago re-set the safety on the M-16.

Jaago quietly said. "Geese". Without turning around, "It's okay, Sir..."

Gary's taut shoulders relaxed and he admired Jaago's sharper reflexes.

They all laughed. Gary began to think of their destination. He looked forward to another meeting with his friend Troy. He'd dispatched a telegram to Troy within three weeks of his arrival. '*Yankee go home. Uc Dai Loi now in charge.*'

They'd had a momentous re-union and Troy got himself posted to Baria, the capital of Pham Tuy province. The two mates were within thirty kilometres of each other. Troy was billeted at Cyrno's, the only French-style hotel left intact in Vung Tau.

Everyone held on grimly as they swerved to miss the potholes in the roadway before the bridge. Jinx caught the edge of a large one and they bounced a little.

The VC had destroyed the original bridge operating against the Yanks and before the arrival of Aussie troops. A Baillie bridge now spanned the river but the roadworks each side were appalling.

Gary voiced their thoughts. "VC have done it once. The bastards will do it again."

The Freedom Fighters...

Once the potholes receded they all visibly relaxed but remained vigilant. They could only start to relax totally once past the Cat Lo US Coastguard base. Very few incidents had happened within the precincts of Vung Tau. Both the allies and the VC used Vunggas as a haven to relax from the war, an anomaly everyone respected.

Troy waited as they drew up outside the familiar lines of Cyrno's, the old French Colonial hotel and restaurant. His face brightened as he scanned Gary's crew. Troy had begun life twelve years before Gary and had been 'in-Theatre' since WWII's end.

Like Jaago, Troy had seen and done much. Seven years older even than Jaago, the old man of the Aussie group, Troy was balding prematurely but still a rare specimen of Gary's idea of the ultimate warrior. At six-foot six, he stood a fraction taller than Rudi. He always seemed to walk on the balls of his feet and moved noiselessly as though he'd spent his whole life as a hunter. He had. Primarily, he hunted men.

Gary noted as each of his party met Troy's approval.

"Troy always reminds me of Sean Connery as 007, Sir." Jaago whispered, "Less the slicked-down jet black hair." Then Jaago smiled as he shook Troy's hand. "We've met once before, Sir."

Gary watched a frown pass as Troy tried to remember.

He anticipated that with Troy: his motley team of professional soldiers: and with Dawai Pham, his Vietnamese friend, the night would be a good one.

The Freedom Fighters...

Cyrno's 'lined the gut' for their soldier's night. Fine dining in the southern region of South Vietnam bore the imprint of a multi-cultural cuisine dominated by Chinese food cooked in Indian spices with typical French dilettantism.

Gary's entrée was the Vietnamese equivalent of South Indian dhsa. This dish would have been introduced when the Indian Empire set up the Khmer town of Prey Nokor, now Saigon, in the 14th century. His *banh xeo* was this large French-style crepe packed with spiced shellfish. The green coriander always freshened his palate.

For his main course, Gary delighted in selecting a Vietnamese dish of a magnificent snake. Pictures of his midnight tussle with a fifteen-foot King Cobra had been flashed back to Australia. He'd caught its mate the next night and relished the idea of eating what had become an arch-enemy to his troops. Filleted in front of him, this King Cobra proved a new gourmet experience.

First, the delicate bones were draped in flour, then crisply deep-fried. The white meat was next dissected carefully and he chose one section to be braised in a sweet white French wine, another braised in the Cobra's blood. The last section he had char-grilled in sliced banana leaves.

Gary had first tasted snake in the Kota Tinngi jungle training area of South Malaya. He'd caught and eaten it then freshly grilled it on an open fire. But nothing compared with these succulent Vietnamese delicacies and the superb snake wine *ruou ran*. Troy had shipped the wine to Cyrno's from the My Tho Snake Farm. It warmed his insides. Troy had initiated Gary in these delights the first time they'd met in My Tho, in 1963.

The Freedom Fighters...

Troy had made a snap decision to dislike Pham. He had a paranoia of 'slopes' he didn't know. Nevertheless, a mellow team ventured out into the badly lit streets after their gourmet meal to find a suitable bar where they could drink, enjoy themselves and not be disturbed by sex vendors.

Jinx was anxious to be off. "When and where sir?"

"How about tomorrow at ten by the flags?"

Everyone agreed. Jinx sped off with a wave and a 'cheesy' grin.

"So where to now, guys?" Gary looked around expectantly.

Troy smiled "I know just the place." They deferred to his insider knowledge.

Situated on the outskirts of the red-light district, set back from the street, Gary hadn't been there before. He listened as Troy spoke to the mamma-san in Vietnamese and then explained to them that for a small fee they would get exclusive grog-only service. Gary noted that Vietnamese soldiers already half-filled it.

"No Americans?" Rudi verbalised Gary's surprise.

The Gypsy absent-mindedly scratched through his jangled head of jet-black hair then finger-combed its untidy ends. A loose-bodied man, he didn't have the taut tension Jaago possessed. Nor did Rudi have the acute sense of self that Troy exuded.

The Freedom Fighters...

Gary warmed, "A good choice, mate. What do you say, Troops?"

Pleased at the absence of the normal fog of cigarette and cigar smoke, Gary's team nodded. None of them smoked.

"Mostly Vietnamese, Troy?" Jaago's voice echoed their surprise.

"Better atmosphere and bugger-all bargirls. Don't like to be with slopes normally, as you know, but this is a Vietnamese Officer's Club. Their officers keep better company. The girls serve drinks only. I've been here with friends before."

"How about Rudi and Jaago? They are non-coms."

"So long as they don't tell, we're not going to blow their cover are we?" Troy enjoyed the advantages his insider knowledge gave him.

"Excellent messieurs." Pham expressed his satisfaction.

Troy turned his back away.

Rudi walked over to an empty table. He quietly tuned his guitar while waiting for the rest to join him, perched on the edge of a chair, head bent close...

"I feel like I'm the Fourth Musketeer with you guys," Troy beamed. He consciously ignored Pham, the fifth man.

The Freedom Fighters...

Drinks arrived. First to pick up a glass, Troy raised it as though in a toast, "I'm proud to be in the ranks of the most professional soldiers I've met in any army." He skulled it, spat it back into the glass with "Fucking-hell..." and slammed the glass back on the tray held by the waitress... "Don't any of you bastards touch a drop of this shit..." He snatched the drinks out of their hands, slamming each glass on the tray with a resounding ... T-h-w-a-c-k... "It's whores' shit".

The waitress looked shamefaced.

"I'm going to have a piece of mammasan and we'll get some decent drinks served instead of this watered down Saigon whiskey crap."

Troy berated mammasan in Vietnamese. Pham winced.

New glasses arrived. "A toast..." Troy waited until each glass had an owner before proposing, "Here's to the end of this fucked-out war."

When they'd done, "One more..." Gary couldn't resist. "Up the old red rooster..."

Jaago ended their regimental toast "...and more piss."

"What about Old Faithful's song sir? I'll pick out the tune as you sing it."

Jaago had picked up on Gary's 'Soldier's night' mood and skulled his glass. Straight whiskey. He murmured "Nostrovia..." and looked around.

The Freedom Fighters...

“Don’t you even fucking-well think about it Jaago, my friend.” Gary knew he was looking for somewhere to smash his glass to smithereens. Gary had seen Jaago in action once before and this was a time-honoured Russian and Polish way to skoll.

Rudi chuckled. “It’ll have to happen somewhere, somehow, tonight sir.”

“I know, but you two bastards had better not fuck up Troy’s reputation in this Club or we’ll all be out on the street. Troy ain’t one to tangle with. Gorrit?” He glared at Jaago, who smiled and placed his glass down with excessively studied care.

“Gorrit sir. No problem.” Jaago’s good-natured compliance didn’t fool Gary. The interchange was a puzzle to Troy and Pham. They looked on, perplexed.

Gary decided on a diversion. He rapped on the table with a spoon. Heads popped up around the room turning to watch. He stood to attention as he sang “We’re a pack of bastards...” It was the first stanza of the 3 RAR Aussie’s Regimental song.

He didn’t have long to wait. In unison, Troy and Jaago joined him. “Bastards are we... We’re from Australia... the arsole of the world and all the universe...” They each sang with rising reverence and gusto. Rudi eventually hit the right chords and joined them in time for the start of the next verse, with his Gypsy baritone, “... We’re a pack of bastards... bastards are we.”

Their chorus rose to crescendo with, “We’d rather fuck than fight...” The group paused as they looked around, then dragged out for effect, “...for ...li...ber...ty.”

The Freedom Fighters...

The grand finale, "Up the old red rooster..." This time it was Troy who added. "...and more piss." Gary, Rudi and Jaago shook hands. It was their Regimental anthem.

Smiles broke out throughout the room. Conversations had trailed away as everyone enjoyed the spectacle. Each, in a personal way, enjoyed the same unity. In the pause after "...for ...li...ber...ty...", each group seemed lost in reveries of their own.

The song had reminded Gary of the many other times he had sung this anthem. His face flushed. Some of the friends he'd sung it with he wanted to believe had gone to Valhalla, home of warriors. They would be drinking Mead. As he thought of them he gulped. To hide his emotion he ordered another glass of whisky. Loudly. His mind was filling with images of his dead friends and he wanted to clear them from his head.

"Beaucoup des officiers sont ici, ils parlent bien l'Anglais et Français, mon ami." Pham spread his hands to indicate around the room, smiling and laughing as he did so.

The smattering of South Vietnamese Rangers, Paras and Marines impressed Gary. He ordered another round for his friends but sensed Troy's ambivalence toward Pham.

On their first trip to the toilet Gary got his first chance, alone with Troy, to establish the bona fides of Pham. "Did you know Pham parachuted as a reinforcement into Dien Bien Phu, Troy? He was one of the last volunteers to make a drop."

"Fuck." Troy frowned. "Pham?... Really? Shit. I'm sorry Gary, I didn't know."

The Freedom Fighters...

Back in the bar the scene had become more animated. Two Rangers had joined their table and Gary was ecstatic. He ordered everyone to charge their glasses.

“I propose another toast. To a soldier’s night and bringing all veterans together.”
Turning to Pham. “Pham, peut-être c’est possible pour informer les autres que ceci est un bon nuit des soldats. Salut. Nostrovia. Prosit. Fur ein nacht soldaten. Zieg Heil.”
Everyone clinked their glasses. When all glasses were raised, “Salut des soldats.”

Fresh glasses appeared as if on cue. A group of Marines on the opposite side of the room raised their glasses in salute and indicated they’d paid for that round. Two of the Marines accepted Gary’s invitation to join his table. He returned their salute.

Gary turned to Rudi and Pham. “You two poor bastards went through hell in the last decade of the ‘50’s. Pham forced to flee to Hoa Long after fighting with the French against Giap in 1954. Rudi forced out of Hungary in 1956. To Rudi and Pham. Salut.”
The rest of the table joined Gary in raising their glasses. “How about you two Marines.” Gary shook their hands. “S’ou venez-vous dans la guerre.”

One Marine spoke English. “We juss arrive from Delta. Special Forces.”

Gary ordered whisky all around. Then, “To the South Vietnamese Special Forces.”

Everyone toasted the two Marines.

Pham’s face suddenly lit up. “Excusez-moi...” He quickly crossed the room.

The Freedom Fighters...

Pham talked excitedly with others in the group he'd joined then he returned with a para that Gary quickly recognised. "Messieurs, Je veux introduire ...". No medals on his uniform, just para wings. Red bars ranked him as a Colonel. Same as Troy.

"My God. Le Duc Dat?" Troy jumped up and introduced the smartly dressed Colonel to Gary. "Remember him from My Tho, Gary? He's now Province Chief at Dat Do. Left a cushy job in Saigon to join the war at the coalface, where it's happening."

Troy placed his arm familiarly around Le Duc Dat's shoulders. "Another veteran for your soldier's night, Mate. He refuses to wear that fruit salad shit." In an aside, "His soldiers worship Dat." The man squirmed as Troy heaped accolades on him. "Probably the most decorated Vietnamese soldier in the room."

Everyone stood for another "Salut."

"How about another soldier's song?" Gary had volume but lacked pitch and tone.

Rudi's huge moustache convulsed. Dark eyes twinkled as he and Jaago burst into the German National anthem. Jaago remembered the times it had been poison to his ears.

But soldiers are soonest to forget enmity in the company of other warriors.

Halfway through 'Deutschland' ... Deutschland ... uber alles...' Pham and Dat joined in. Troy wasn't surprised. In Dien Bien Phu the legionnaires had sung it often. Two Vietnamese had their arms around Troy. It'd been a long time since they'd sung it.

The Freedom Fighters...

Everyone was having the time of their lives. The festive mood caught on. Troy glanced around Gary's table. He stared into his glass, stroked his left ear then covered his feelings by gulping down his drink. He remembered other soldiers' nights with the isolated and beseiged French of troops at Dien Bien Phu. Many of those who had marched to their death singing this and the French anthem were Troy's friends. He snapped himself out of this dark moodiness and ordered another round.

Pham and Dat now started up with "Aux armes citoyens..." All the team joined in, standing to attention. The rest of the Vietnamese in the room soon remembered. Eventually all of the officers stood to attention and joined in. The effects of the Marsellaise rang through the rafters. A swell of camaradie gripped the room.

As the sound of singing subsided, Gary said to the members on their table, "I'm buying drinks for you mob and that couple of Rangers over there." Pham tried to remonstrate but Gary convinced him with, "Cette nuit, c'est pour les soldats."

The 'couple of Rangers over there', were coerced into leading the room by singing their regimental song. A couple of false starts, then re-primed with whisky and they were off. Their theme was picked up by many of the South Vietnamese. Soon everyone wanted to be part of the singing emanating from Gary's table.

Except... Gary had been covertly eyeing off two soldiers in the corner who kept a low profile. This didn't fit Gary's paradigm for the night, which was 'one in, all in'.

The rest of the room had warmed into the warrior spirit.

The Freedom Fighters...

In the silence, as everyone downed their drinks, Gary heard the two singing softly. He couldn't make out the words.

"Dat... How about the two in the corner? What are they singing?"

His Vietnamese table companions went deathly quiet.

Dat's English was excellent. "They are Vietcong officers." He whispered. "They are singing a song we all know, but it is a communist marching song." He frowned.

"So?..."

His face clouded. "They're not afraid to sing but they'd be nervous in front of Troy."

"Stuff it, Dat." Gary replied. "Cette nuit c'est pour les soldats. Allons-y mon ami."

Gary smiled at the two Vietcong officers. "Vous me joindrez, mes amis." He sensed them wince. "Chantez avec nous. C'est un nuit pour toutes les soldats." They were stunned, spoke quickly to Pham, looking at Gary, but he couldn't wait. "Tell them, s'il vous plait, we are all singing our soldier's songs. Il faut qu'il chantent."

Dat started to protest. Gary cut him short and stabbed a finger on his own chest "Moi... Je m'appelle Gary. Je suis Australian... *Uc Dai Loi* ... Venez avec moi a ma table s'il vous plait, messieurs." He placed his arms around their shoulders, "Ce soir vous êtes soldats honorables de moi, Il faut boire, mes amis. Quelle appelez-vous?"

The Freedom Fighters...

The senior of the two pulled away to proffer his hand. "Je suis, Vinh."

Gary's geniality intimidated the other. He said quietly, "Je m'appelle, Vo Van Hai."

Gary led his two reluctant friends to his table, announcing to Le Duc Dat, "Mon cher Colonel. You and Pham must know their marching song. We are all soldiers together tonight." Then to the Marines who'd joined the table. "You tell them, Mateys. Tell them that this is one night when we can all be warriors together and to hell with war."

Le Duc Dat looked first at Gary's flushed face, scanned Troy's, who smiled wanly then shrugged his shoulders. Dat looked around the room. Gary was serious Everyone watched. Breathless. They were unused to such effrontery but a mood had been set.

Gary, elated, spun back to Dat. "Annoncez pour moi, mon cher Colonel. Dit-il mon ami Jaago fought the Germans and sings their songs. Rudi and Jaago fought the Russians. Mais ce soir, ils chantent their songs too." He spoke to the Vietnamese. "Mon père est Anglais. Dans la guerre d'Allemagne il était le para. Maintenant, plusieurs des Allemands sont ses amis. Er sprechen das Heute Deutche ver gut."

Gary's enthusiasm was contagious. The two Marines and the two Rangers added their weight to Le Duc Dat's explanation. It worked. The two Viet Cong officer's relaxed. Their faces broke into wreathes of smiles. Gary, realising he'd got through, grabbed their hands, shook them vigorously then led them back across the room.

Jaago and Rudi pumped the hands of the two VC officers. Troy seemed nonplussed.

The Freedom Fighters...

Gary explained, "They might be Viet Cong officers, Troy, but they're on leave like us, Matey." Gradually understanding dawned. "Meet Vinh." Hands were shaken all around. "And Vo Van...?" Gary broke off, a question hanging in the air.

"Je m'appelle Vo Van Hai. Un ami de Pham. J'étude avec lui en Paris."

The six South Vietnamese officers at Gary's table were more than happy the issue had been happily resolved and their tension lightened. Gary announced to everyone that he would sing his favourite Welsh marching song. When happily drunk he claimed Celtic ancestry and would sing "Men of Harlech..." at the drop of a hat.

Gary, ordered to stand on the table in the middle, waited until everyone had readied themselves for his performance. Rudi announced what was about to happen. His height commanded instant respect, and his presence quieted any possibility of a distraction. Gary sang a ball-tearing version of "Men of Harlech march to Glory."

Alcohol gave his voice added strength: his love for the song improved his pitch: and he sang as though trying to lift the roof off. Everyone clapped. He winked at Troy, made a shaky but courteous bow and, assisted by Rudi, climbed down. Breathless, he flopped into a waiting chair. Jaago thrust a fresh glass of whisky into his hand.

A young para lieutenant hauled his mate out. The man held a Vietnamese three-stringed instrument. A chair appeared and the man sat down in the centre of the room. Introduced as Khai, the officer started slowly, nervously. With encouragement from others who clearly knew the piece he was playing he gradually took control.

The Freedom Fighters...

Gentle waves of mystical music unfolding ever outward, caressed each ear from the inside. Silent music for the soul, it became ripples in a still pool. Khai mesmerised them all. Gary'd never heard Classical Vietnamese before. Everyone was silent.

Khai started another piece.

Troy recognised it and whispered, "My God, a Spanish masterpiece. Recuerdos de la Alhambra, by Terrega. It's one of my favourites. This boy is good."

When Khai ended, there was an enormous round of applause. He waited for everyone to be silent then Le Duc Dat announced his final piece. This time he accompanied it with softly sung words. At first some strained to listen. Then, even heartbeats fell silent. Gary couldn't understand the words but music has its own culture.

Khai sang a lament. Pham and Le Duc Dat fought back tears. The same melancholy creeping across all the listening faces. When Khai finished there was only silence.

Heads, swamped by unfettered feelings, re-created a quiet, moment of remembrance.

Le Duc Dat whispered. "That was a Vietnamese warrior's song. It's about the planting of the rice-fields. Of the water-lilies as they move gently in the stream. Of coming home and the smell of Mother's cooking. Seeing the soft face of his Love in the darkness. Hearing the call of a night-bird to its young. Then he played a funeral dirge, believing he'll die a warrior's death. He wants us all to remember his song and tell his wife: of his love: of her face in the moonlight: and the children he'll not have."

The Freedom Fighters...

Rudi had listened intently and had waited in respectful silence, his musical ears tuned. A stifled cough. Covert shuffling near the bar. The swish of the overhead fan, silenced during the performance. A glass c-l-i-n-k-e-d.

Then Rudi began playing, seemingly to respond to Khai's music with what Gary thought was a Gypsy lament. Rudi's hands cautiously fingered the strings. Then he delicately almost accidentally touched the plywood framework of his beloved guitar and stroked its strings. The sounds gave an added quality of sibilance. A hypnotic Siren's call reached deep into each listener's psyche.

Now, Rudi was singing. Jaago joined in softly. One of the Viet Cong officers sang in refrain. *It must be a Russian lament*, Gary assumed. Many singers joined in and harmonised. The final chords hung.

Without warning, Rudi stood. He broke into a fast, toe-tapping, Gypsy dance music.

The mood changed. Smiles and laughter returned. Gary urged the two VC to stand up.

"Now the VC marching song. Come on Pham and Dat. You must help them." Given explosive permission by everyone, they started melodiously as though far away.

Initially helped by Gary's Vietnamese friends, their response seemed to trigger off some withheld tension. Soon, joined by other voices from all around the room the swell filled the corners and warmed the ceiling. Every Vietnamese knew the song. To Gary it lacked the bravado and undisguised 'macho' of western anthems.

The Freedom Fighters...

It matched what little Gary knew about the Vietnamese dialect with its soft cadences and lilting songlike language. Somehow the VC anthem welded the room into a cohesive wholeness. Each man realised this was a special night when 'anything goes' and for a few moments national and political hatreds were set aside. As they'd ended their last chorus everyone was once again standing. Troy and Rudi towered over the tiny Vietnamese. Tall with features darker than theirs.

The VC officer who had introduced himself to Gary as Vinh spoke poor English but excellent French. Vinh explained he'd lived a short time in Russia when the North Vietnamese had welcomed Russian advisors. As the evening progressed, Gary, Vinh, Pham and Hai formed a small cabal. They swapped photos of their families: shook hands introducing each family to the other: wept a little: and sang lustily, as 'Mates'.

Curfew came and went. It was very late. Mamma san called a halt, concerned the Vietnamese Military Police, or 'White Mice', might call. The MP's often roughed-up the owners of late night revelers and shot curfew-breakers on sight. Everyone sobered and realised they'd have to be very careful.

Khai, who'd sung the ballad that had mesmerised everyone, spoke to Pham.

Le Duc Dat took the lead. "Khai has invited us to a quiet restaurant run by his uncle..." Dat continued, "...where we can drink into the early morning so long as we are reasonably quiet and don't put any lights on to attract attention."

Gary didn't hesitate. "So long as everyone understands Vinh and Hai stay."

The Freedom Fighters...

Only Gary's Team, his Viet cabal and a bunch of the marines wanted to continue. They followed young Khai and his guitar out into the blackness. A faint glow on the horizon heralded an early dawn. Rudi and Khai had become firm friends, neither able to speak the other's language except through music. The group kept to the shadows and avoided sounds that might betray them, sneaking down back alleys.

In the distance an MP siren wailed but it headed away from them. They paused, perspiring in the cold night air. Dogs barked a street away as they sweated from the exhilaration of their soldier's night. Someone pissed into a monsoon drain. His stream seemed never ending. No one in the group dared breathe. Then, as if to some magic signal they started again. Stopped again to listen. Everyone strained to hear the first White Mouse whistle. None came. Still no one relaxed.

After some verbal skirmishing with his uncle, the owner of the small restaurant, Khai filed them into a large room with a huge stone fireplace in the middle of one wall. They surrounded a small but heavy-looking marble centre-table. The street light made it difficult. Evanescent yellow ghouls stared instead of friends.

Opposite the entrance they'd just filed through, Gary felt rather than saw a small corridor running behind him into which the uncle disappeared. A smell permeated the room. Gary sensed something almost akin to fear. The trek had been demanding.

Mamma san's place existed in a dream. A million miles from where each of them now stood, enveloped by the pale smog of their breath. Cold sweat ran in ripples down Gary's back. Then cooled quickly. It chilled him.

The Freedom Fighters...

A breeze flowed up the empty corridor. Gary pressed against the sharp corner of the wall, massaging it into his back to ease the tense knot in his shoulders. Behind his left shoulder a corridor ran away into the darkness. Slowly releasing pent-up tension he wondered how the others felt. Pham, his shadow, stood close-by his right shoulder.

Surreal, their spectres gathered for some forbidden ritual. Streetlights played phantom shadows and heralded strange shapes on the walls. His neck bristled as Gary started from the tension of the hunted. Khai's uncle had quietly stolen up behind him out of the gloom. Balanced on the uncle's hand were glasses on a stainless steel tray. No sound announced arrival. The small liqueur glasses didn't even clink.

A pale liquid appeared in a glass jug. Khai's uncle swished it around then placed it beside the tray gently as though gold. Not one word since they'd entered. Khai's Uncle faded, apparently into the darkness of the corridor.

"Nostrovia" echoed as Jaago and Rudi skulled their glasses into the huge fireplace.

Their glasses loudly disintegrated ...then tinkled into silence.

The Freedom Fighters...

1939: Jaago and the 'Enigma'...

JAAGO'S BROWNING EXTENDED ITSELF BACK INTO HIS BODY.

The weapon and he were one-in-being: taut: and projected into the brain of Khai's uncle. He sucked in a deep breath. Didn't dare take his eyes off the shadowy head. Sweat gathered on his eyebrow. He willed it to freeze. Dared it attempt to distort his vision with salty messengers. Mind swung into a quiet space. Suspended time.

Jaago, in Poland, on 1 September 1939, had been quickly orphaned by Hitler's attack.

The fourteen-year-old watched a stone bridge over the deep tributary.

Fog stretched ten kilometres along the stream feeding the river near Danzig. A wispy, 'cotton-wool' cloud hugged the river. Mists had embraced this hand-built bridge for hundreds of years. Dank and cold, the wetness seeped through Jaago's hand-me-down winter clothing. Survivors born and bred in such mists were of stolid stock with minds that laughed at hardship. No one seemed to know when the bridge had been built. It stood solid and impregnable, like Jaago's people in the surrounding countryside. It allowed access for travelers along the muddy, unmade road. Just wide enough for the vehicle, which could be heard in the distance as it laboured up a steep incline.

Other Polish veterans concealed in the ditch listened to the crashing gears of the approaching German military truck. Their camouflage screened them.

Nothing was left to chance.

The Freedom Fighters...

Two SS men had been handpicked as drivers. Selected for today's mission, their Hauptmann had also left nothing to chance. They had driven this same truck a number of times during the week on re-supply missions to the frontline units to familiarize themselves both with the vehicle and the geography of the road.

One of Hitler's most precious secrets lay in a the heavy wooden box in the back.

Two more handpicked SS guards guarded the strange box. "If capture imminent, You must destroy the box. Use incendiaries." The same Hauptmann had impressed upon them the need to die if need be "...for the Fuehrer".

Early in this winter of 1939 snow had given way to rain then thaw. So confident was Herr Hauptmann that the Polish partisans remained unaware of German deception he allowed the truck to travel unescorted. Struggling up this last hill stretched the driver's Rudills. Now and again the truck's huge wheels would spin, throwing red vomit twenty yards behind. At such times the flagging engine would wheeze and the driver would curse the road, the truck and the weather. The back and sides of the canvas-covered frame hiding the load were saturated with red goo and even the driver's rear-vision mirror had been splattered. Though proud of the silvered zigzagging lightning markers on the collar of his tunic, the driver's pleasure was barred by sweaty itching from heavy woollen underwear and the damp discomfort soaking his starched, new winter uniform. Most of his life having been spent in Berlin he found it difficult to understand border roads. Contemptuous of the primitive Poles they confirmed how right Hitler was in his concept of a 'New World Order'. The need to coax instead of flogging the excellent DKW engine hardly entered his rigid mind.

The Freedom Fighters...

His second driver hung on grimly. The other two in the back felt battered and bruised and wished the trip would end. The drivers alone knew that soon they'd be over the top of this brief but steep hill. Then a short glide ended in the heavy white mist. The stone bridge signalled the halfway mark. The one driving always felt a sense of relief when they entered that brief cloying whiteness. The two in front smiled. Their deeply expelled breath echoed suppressed tension as the stanchions guarding the bridge approach materialised.

The driver yelled his delight to the two in the back but his voice was suddenly cut off.

The truck driver slowed. A youth on horseback emerged out of the mist. The horse reared, panicked by the looming truck. In shock the driver saw the youngster closing. He glimpsed blonde hair and blue eyes. Long enough to think 'Aryan'. He pulled right and braked violently. The passengers in the back were thrown wildly around. They Ruditattered into the heavy wooden box then slammed against steel-ribbed sides. The truck at first refused to straighten. The driver visualised the crushed body of the youth, blood and guts from the horse splattered on the windscreen.

Jaago hadn't anticipated his horse would bolt in panic into the oncoming truck. In his first combat experience Jaago viewed the results as if in slow motion. He heard the driver gun the engine to straighten the truck. Felt the driver hit the horse. Already falling backward he watched the head and shanks of his horse crush against the truck.

The murdered horse masked the fact that young Jaago had been magically resurrected. Free of the horse he threw himself sideways and then felt propelled.

The Freedom Fighters...

The driver heard a soft c-r-u-m-p. Selected for accuracy, the sniper had fragmented his passenger's brain. Spewed it over the cabin's insides. The sniper's silencers only gave off faint puffs of white smoke.

The truck careened and slithered its way to catastrophe. The two in the back slammed headfirst into the steel ribbing. The driver didn't feel the strong wooden box crush them as he struggled with the steering wheel. His panic was short-lived. A shot tore into his throat suffocating his scream. He died instantaneously.

Flying through the air Jaago felt space expand.

The ditch looked a hundred miles away. Then ten feet. The crouched veterans were a blur. In slow motion he watched one sniper nod toward him in satisfaction. He smelled the sharp tang of cordite and the heavy diesel fumes of the truck's exhaust. The vision of the madly swerving truck carried him to the edge of the ditch. His focus shifted then cleared. Jaago heard the self-congratulatory grunt of the sniper.

Jaago completed his dive into the ditch where the veterans waited.

The smell of dankness and wet mud filled nostrils starved of oxygen.

His nausea cleared as his body balled into a natural somersault, unravelled into a kneeling position then took his place beside the sniper.

The sound of tortured metal consumed all other sound. Mind felt magically alive.

The Freedom Fighters...

Jaago watched the left-hand mudguard and entire left side of the cabin tear on the stanchion. Then the truck crashed off the road into the opposite ditch. The stanchion obliterated any sign the passenger had been shot first. In the rear the box disintegrated under the combined shock of two plummeting bodies. Their speed of collision ploughed them through its shattered planks and past them. Once more they collided into reinforced steel ribbing as the truck jammed full-tilt into the bank on the opposite side of the ditch. The two soldiers twitched in their death-throes, unseen.

The sudden stop threw the driver through the windscreen then slammed him into the slowly erupting bonnet to shatter what was left of his neck.

Mesmerised, Jaago watched the driver's body slam into the bank, slide, then slowly crumple into a shapeless bundle of muddied, bloodied rags against a large rock. This was the first of many combat deaths he would witness. Time restored itself.

The contents of the heavy wooden box had broken loose from its moorings. As they clambered over the tailboard the saboteurs saw that German efficacy had ensured the machine was restrained intact inside the demolished packing-crate.

The Germans must gather no evidence of ambush. Quickly removing the typewriter-looking machine and its heavy battery, others doused the truck with litres of petrol.

A box full of appropriately selected coils, springs, rotors and battery simulated a broken duplicate machine. This was thrown close to the two crumpled bodies inside the tattered tarpaulin cover and the exposed frame in the shattered box.

The Freedom Fighters...

“Stand clear.” These were the only words spoken during the ambush. The truck, in its final agony, had hurled the smashed body of the horse across the entrance to the bridge. It lay there unmoving. A trickle of blood oozed quietly, staining the muddy roadway. A flare, fired into the back of the truck, exploded it into flames.

The body on the stanchion and the one crumpled against the rock on the bank were left to give the impression of a road accident with an errant horse. It would deflect suspicion. All signs of an ambush were carefully obliterated. The hessian bags attached to their weapons ensured no trace of ejected rounds.

The SS investigators were fooled. It would take thirty-five years for anyone to reveal the outcome of that day's raid. It would be the war's longest-kept secret.

The veterans, proud of their day's work, escorted the strange device to the old Bristol Hotel in Warsaw, stashed it in a large leather travelling bag held together by straps and secured by heavy brass locks. They knew the device was very, very important to their Secret Service comrades. Plastered with steamship stickers and worn hotel adverts the bag container remained insignificant to the unobservant eye.

The old Bristol Hotel was a tourist's watering hole. Jaago painstakingly stuck each sticker to make the bag look old. There could be no mistake. He'd done it twice - two identical bags looking like the usual well-travelled tourist bag. Each uniquely so.

Waiting for the changeover of the two leather bags, the Polish Secret Service had worked out some of the German cipher codes locked in the odd looking typewriter.

The Freedom Fighters...

Fifteen-year-old Jaago, already a tall and handsome youth, easily lifted Enigma in its battered old leather travelling case. Only with the machine-in-the-bag ensconced among piles of luggage in its locker room did the Polish veterans finally relax as they took up positions of watchfulness. Dressed as a pageboy, young Jaago kept separate watch for the replacement bag to arrive. The prize he guarded so carefully was the most precious gift that Poland, on the brink of war, could have delivered to England.

A veteran, Jaago now watched as an agent shuffled an identical bag into the pile of luggage. He felt history was being made and memorized every detail of the handover.

In its replacement bag, Troy had wrapped some dirty Canadian woodsmen's shirts and some weighty books that no one would ever be bothered to claim.

Everything the Poles learned they passed to the British. Enigma was a warrior's sword, thrown at the moment of their country's death to comrades across the Channel.

Enigma's birth had been in 1924, the year Jaago had been born.

This secret operation was based on data passed to them by William Stephenson.

A Canadian, he'd served during WWI as a fighter pilot with the British Royal Flying Corps in September 1917, more than six months before America entered WWI. He'd adopted England as home and became a busy man after WWI.

The Freedom Fighters...

Winston Churchill, in the political wilderness for forthright views of German postwar militarism, gathered the likes of Stephenson about him. Known as Churchill's 'young Turks', most were scientists. In its December edition of 1922, the Daily Mail had published Stephenson's first 'radio photograph', evolved from ideas stimulated by Einstein's revolutionary theory that gravitation bends light. Churchill's 'secret' British Defence Committee tried to 'split the atom'. They developed a catapult bomb twenty years before Hitler aimed rockets at London.

That same portentous year of Enigma's genesis, a young Californian by the name of Troy was also born. Like Stephenson, he had a Canadian mother.

In that year William Stephenson had originally received a clumsy device from Berlin. Called Enigma, anything typed on its keyboard would emerge as a scrambled cypher. In his haste to become a millionaire before his thirtieth birthday, he'd temporarily forgotten about Enigma. Serving as a WWI fighter pilot Stephenson had recognised the importance of aircraft and rushed to build an airplane factory. He helped create the British Broadcasting Company and ensured it was free of political affiliation.

The BBC venture established an audience of millions and produced a ready market in which to sell his radios. H.G. Wells, the writer and scientist, became a personal friend and advisor. Always in search of business partners, scientific brains and ways to develop opportunities, Stephenson also bought an investment in two electronics firms in England. He wished to pursue his scientific interest in what he called Television, the ability to transmit pictures by radio waves. In the years, 1924-34, Stephenson forged a widespread business empire.

The Freedom Fighters...

In 1933 Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President of the United States. This coincided with the rise of Hitler as Chancellor. In May, five months later, Stephenson was in Berlin to watch Hitler's 'burning of the books'. The new US President, FDR, was concerned with Germany and its "...insane rush to further armaments." He'd written to the British Socialist Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald in the same year expressing a well-informed anxiety about Hitler. FDR relied on 'Wild Bill' Donovan to keep him informed of the real events unfolding in Hitler's Germany. Bill Stephenson bore the same relationship to Winston Churchill as Wild Bill to FDR. Stephenson and Churchill believed that a United Europe, led by British inventiveness, could equal if not outdo the United States. In the intervening years between WWI and WWII, Stephenson modernized coal mining in Rumania: led technical missions to India: his steel and cement companies were the largest outside the United States: and he had control of the largest film and recording studios outside of Hollywood.

One of Stephenson's companies made equipment for the International Telephone and Telegraph Company. The German founder of ITT wanted to initiate a new global monopoly with Stephenson's help. Through ITT, he became aware in 1933 of Enigma, now an electronic coding device that still looked like an oversized typewriting machine and used extensively by the Nazis. London was alerted. Churchill listened to Stephenson's unsettling accounts of the large amount and the type of coded traffic he'd monitored. Churchill believed in the importance of owning Enigma, without the Germans being aware. Washington ignored Stephenson.

In 1935, the man called 'Intrepid' was born. Stephenson ceased as scientist and millionaire businessman and became Churchill's secret man in FDR's ear.

The Freedom Fighters...

When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, many in England were gripped by a pervasive sense of impending doom. Troy had been sent to finish his schooling in Paris. On the way to take his school holidays in London with friends, he agreed to divert to Warsaw, all expenses paid, to pick up an old leather bag. Warned the issue was of “national importance” and ‘Top Secret’ he’d lodged at the old Bristol Hotel.

Back safely in London, Troy and his friends glued themselves to the BBC. In the King’s Christmas message to the nation that fateful year, 1939, King George VI ended his speech with a strangely haunting message: “I said to the man at the gate of the Year, ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he said to me, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand in the hand of God. That shall be better to you than light, and *safer than a known way.*”

Intrepid and Wild Bill were two of an elite league of men from each side of the Atlantic who chose to live their lives in the darkness of international espionage. They wanted to make, ‘safer than a known way’, a better world than Communist or Fascist dictatorships. They became central cogs in a vast web of espionage and secret deals. Forced by war weariness, an economic depression and by the political blindness of the governments of Britain and America, they had initiated the clandestine operation to capture Enigma. Its British operators learned its codes and listened-in to the extensive wireless traffic that the Germans assumed was secret. The Enigma device established the importance of timely intelligence and of wireless intercept traffic. It proved to be the most important device ever captured in war.

The Freedom Fighters...

1940: Troy and the birth of the OSS...

BESSIE'S LONG BARREL SHONE DULLY IN ITS BLUE-METAL JACKET.

In the instant of drawing his weapon it had already been cocked. With the expertise of long years of marksmanship Troy took up the first pressure. His pupils dilated as they soaked up all available light to hone in on the soft target to his front. His aim was impersonal, professional and devoid of feeling. Troy's reflexes had been tempered by a life of continuous, top-secret and undercover warfare. A miniscule narrowing of his pupils indicated he'd focussed just above Kai's uncle's jugular, where it met the ear. Troy's eyes and reflexes remained fixated. Some narrow space of his mind let memory play without distorting or interfering with his deadly marksmanship. Troy, Bessie and his breath, created one indissoluble being.

A question pulsed with the drumming in his ear. "How had all this come about?"

Tens of millions of lives had been wasted on all sides before WWII ended. The allies determined there would be no more war. To prevent it they reverted to the 'politics of peace', taking the fateful path of a policy of appeasement of dictators.

His special aptitude remained his ability to teach others to shoot effectively.

Troy's unblinking eyes extended his vision along both arms to a line that marked the special luminous night-sight at the unwavering end of Bessie.

The Freedom Fighters...

A natural flair for pistols and rifles combined with lots and lots of practice made Troy a marksman. He got angry when people, awed by the accuracy of his shooting, assumed he was some kind of phenomenon, some kind of pistol freak. A combination of natural ability, hard work and lots of practice had made him unique. He'd explain he wasn't an innate mutation grounded in some obscure genetic coding.

His unblinking eyes fixed on a head slowly becoming more distinct as the unseen sun cast eerie shadows. Bessie was the one woman who'd never let him down. Nor died just when he needed her most. Like Shivonne, in that first mission into France... when was that? 1941? His tensed arms were held in place by shoulders more like the abutments of the Golden Gate Bridge in the city where he'd grown up, San Francisco.

His fingers fastened together not in a tight grip but as a caress. Huge hands locked them at the balance point of Bessie's slim form. She melted into his consciousness, an extension of his brain. The only change in his training methodology was linked to his right index finger, now curled around Bessie's finely tuned trigger.

He intoned his mantra, "Until you are ready to shoot, your index finger must be along the trigger guard. Never on the trigger." He'd promised to look after his Aussie mate. This slant-eye who threatened Gary had to be eliminated.

Troy had already taken up the first pressure and his finely attuned reflexes waited for the man to move the pistol from Gary's head. Only twelve feet away it would be an easy shot. Bessie's violent seed would travel at the speed of sound to split the man's head open like a watermelon. Troy had seen it often enough before in this 'hell-hole'.

The Freedom Fighters...

He patiently waited for the right moment when Gary would be 'free of this stupid slope's pistol' ... or ... Troy couldn't think of the alternative.

Troy allowed his breathing in to raise Bessie's luminous sight to the top of the slope's head. As the air exhaled from his lungs, Bessie's .22 calibre hollow exit travelled slowly to where Troy then held it fast. His eyes had followed this breathing pattern down the centre of the man's head to the ear and the spot that marked the ear's entrance. Enough light had arrived to show the black spot clearly. He held sight on it.

His fiend-within smiled its grim-reaper smile at the thought that the rounded, leaded end of his specially made steel-shafted bullet would enter at that point.

Troy thought of that first time.

"How had it all happened?"

Until the invasion of Poland, whilst the Allies dismantled their war machines. Hitler fretted under the 'Peace of Versailles': Stalin committed systematic genocide and waited: Hirohito and Mussolini planned new empires: and Imperial China wilted.

"That's right! ... Back in 1918. My friend Wild Bill..."

Colonel Bill Donovan had marched on foot down Fifth Avenue at the head of his 69th Regiment, "... 'cos it had been good enough to fight on foot through Europe."

The Freedom Fighters...

New York crowds had staged a last patriotic, frenzied, ticker-taped parade for him. One year later, as the most decorated heroic warrior to emerge from WWI in Europe and now a Wall Street-based lawyer, Wild Bill explained quietly to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "If we don't learn from history it has a way of repeating itself."

FDR waited fourteen years to become President. . "I hear that the State Department is sending you to Siberia to assess the beleaguered White Russians." He respected Wild Bill's perceptions, "Let me know too. I'll be very interested."

Donovan reported back, "If the intention was to prevent world war two..." then the United States needed to "... take the initiative to win a subversive war..." The 'Doves' of the Administration didn't want to listen. FDR did.

Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, Donovan reported back from another fact-finding mission in Europe. His remarkable espionage career had started. He concluded, "German leadership believes their soldiers were never beaten in WWI." Also re-armament impelled the German military caste. This conflicted with American public opinion. Branded a 'warmonger' like Churchill, FDR believed that Germany's military power would soon be unleashed. Churchill refused to be silenced.

Hitler initially failed to seize power in Germany with his 1924 Munich Hall Putsch. Sentenced for treason, he was feted in jail and saluted with 'Heil Hitler' and allowed to finish Mein Kampf. Ten years later, on April Fool's Day, Hitler was ready.

This was the day the organised persecution of the Jews began.

The Freedom Fighters...

The Holocaust started in tandem with Germany's rearmament. Two years later Hitler obtained 'lebensraum' for Germany by occupying the Rhineland. Without significant opposition he exponentially sped-up Germany's expansion and invasion plans. Surrounded by the unscrupulous, Hitler's only opposition came from an elite cabal.

FDR's protégé, Donovan magnetized David Bruce. Churchill attracted William Stephenson. In 1937, the year Gary was born, Stephenson obtained Hitler's secret briefing to the German High Command for the conquest of Europe and the destruction of the British Empire. Only Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Churchill believed his reports. The British PM ignored Stephenson's copy of the Reich-Fuehrer's 'Operation Green' obtained five months earlier. It predicted the invasion of Czechoslovakia. On 11th March 1938, the British PM conceded Hitler's march into Austria. Later he waved a sheet of paper to Londoners in front of number 10 Downing Street. His contract with Hitler quoted "peace in our time" and "peace with honour".

Just nine months old, on 30th September 1938, Gary was lifted high on his father's shoulders outside number 10 Downing Street. The crowd that a year later would curse Chamberlain, on this day reacted in tumultuous joy. Young Gary gurgled and chortled. His father, a private soldier in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, had started to learn German. Like many other British soldiers he admired Hitler's re-armament and social programs. Especially the German admiration of heroic warriors.

In March 1939, German forces rolled into what remained of Czechoslovakia. Shivonne, a young female student waited in Paris with a heavy heart for news of her parents. On 1st September 1939, Hitler tested British commitment by invading Poland.

The Freedom Fighters...

FDR appealed for peace. Hitler rejected it. Britain and France declared war. Russia invaded Poland on the 17th September 1939. World War Two (WWII) had started.

In April, Hitler had commenced a full-scale invasion of Norway and Denmark, opposed by initially successful British forces. He then occupied Belgium and Holland. German troops occupied the Hague in May and shortly were within sixty miles of Paris. Hitler's friend, Mussolini, invaded Albania. Two days later Chamberlain appointed Churchill First Lord of the Admiralty. The body of the dishonoured British PM, Chamberlain, was invaded by cancer. Worse was to come. Hitler launched his 'Blitzkrieg' into the Low Countries on the 10th May 1940. That same day, Churchill became Prime Minister of a besieged island.

In a unique initiative for the head of a major world democracy, FDR, coded POTUS, engaged in secret correspondence with Churchill through Intrepid. In June 1940 German troops were issued with English phrase books. British Spitfires duelled to the death with Messerschmitts over the 'White Cliffs of Dover'. In two desperate months the British lost nearly one thousand planes in the 'Battle of Britain'.

Churchill thundered, "Let us brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth lasts a thousand years men will say, 'This was their finest hour'." It was a time for heroes. King George VI practiced shooting his pistol in the grounds of Buckingham Palace saying, "I will not leave my people. I will die fighting, here if necessary". His Queen vowed to remain at his side with her two daughters.

The Freedom Fighters...

The sun's warmth embraced Troy as the 1940 summer closed with early mild rains. Twelve months earlier he'd been surveying Paris from the Arc de Triomphe. Today the cloying aromas of Kent hops further north engorged his nostrils. He was part of the audience of secret agents gazing at the opening rounds of the Battle of Britain. The same height as aristocratic Uncle David Bruce and the wiry Wild Bill, Troy almost dwarfed the short, slight but erect William Stevenson.

A fresh breeze whipped from unquiet waves thrust up the limestone cliff and fanned his face. It cleared his head and rustled his untidy crop of black, bushy hair. Dark eyes and features implied mixed ancestry from his French-Canadian mother and part from his Spanish-Mexican father.

Someone was brewing coffee for the group of dignitaries.

It caused him to remember his student days in Paris.

On one day in the *mélange* of those Paris years, Troy had diverged once, moving north from Rue St-Sulpice to the attractions of Boulevard de St-Germain. He enjoyed eating in one of the many boulangeries.

From his wide reading he recognised, as he walked, the haunts of Picasso, Prevert and others. Hemingway had met Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and James Joyce in these very cafes. Troy visualised himself under the aegis of these literary giants.

Near Boulevard de St-Germain was a publishing house.

The Freedom Fighters...

There in 1923, Hemingway had published 'Three stories and a poem.' Troy devoured Hemingway's books voraciously. He'd heard a new novel 'For whom the Bell Tolls' was on its way. Like most youth, not yet nineteen, Troy was excited by the prospect of war and felt immortal. Invincible.

He hadn't yet learned the lesson his favourite author would draw on time and again. Hemingway only learned it after having been severely wounded in 1918. Troy remembered reading that a young British officer had granted Hemingway a protective talisman with the lines...

"By my troth I care not: a man can die but once and we owe God a death...

let it go which way it will, he that dies this year, is quit for the next."

Hemingway claimed they remained a permanent memory. Troy never forgot them.

Twice weekly he visited the Sorbonne, walking from his billet in Rue D'Assass by cutting through the middle paths of the Jardin du Luxemburg. In his last autumn in Paris, in 1939, they were covered with leaves. They gave off the strong but pleasant aroma of rotting as he slushed through them. Troy glanced to his left at the man-made lake in the middle of the park. He'd stopped there once. While resting beside the concrete surrounds of the lake, Troy had met his 'Czechoslovakian maiden'.

Behind the lake, their eyes had taken in the Palais de Luxembourg, commissioned by the Medici family in 1615. They both imagined Louis XV's aristocracy ignoring the Revolution's clouds. Much as Parisians that day ignored the looming shadow of Hitler's 'Thousand Year Reich'.

The Freedom Fighters...

Troy was ecstatic that first year. On weekend breaks he and Shivonne camped on hilltops, tramped mountain paths or, that ecstasy of ecstasies for Troy, hunting.

The daughter of a French woman and of a tough, patriotic Czech, Shivonne and Troy became inseparable. Her soft, gentle roundness and forever dancing eyes belied her robust character. On walks, she often raced him to the top. The only cloud, which then became a storm, was her passionate hatred of the German. Once Hitler occupied her country her only thought was to return to join her father whom she imagined already with the Czech partisans.

Troy convinced her to wait. Times were too dangerous.

Through her, the significance of jack-booted soldiers hit him. As he left Paris that last time Troy looked out on a bizarre world. Tourists still swarmed the highlight venues of Paris. People partied until late. Children played with toy yachts in the lake of 'les Jardins'. Everyone seemed unaware of the German officers in full uniform and side arms as they swaggered along the boulevards of Paris.

The streets of San Francisco, where he'd lived most of his youth, never conveyed the awe and sense of history he savoured in Paris. Inside the Sorbonne Troy absorbed Sociology, History and the new Mathematics. There he'd met two young and enthusiastic Communists. They'd harassed him as he'd entered huge double-fronted doors facing the Rue Saint Jaques. The Student Communist Party had an office immediately inside. They thrust out a membership application at him. Badgered him to join. Troy brushed past, fuming.

The Freedom Fighters...

That September, the French Communist Party was dissolved.

Troy would have been even angrier had he been in Paris on 14th June 1940. The Nazi swastika flew from the Eiffel Tower and German troops goose-stepped down the Champs Elysees. On the 18th de Gaulle swore, on the BBC, “the flame of the French resistance would not and will not go out.” Sentenced to death, ‘in absentia’, he became a hero. France reeled in a civil war between Marshall Petain and his Vichy government were puppets, whose opposition to General de Gaulle’s resistance grew.

Vichy finally imposed the death sentence on all French servicemen who chose to fight the Germans. A month later and under orders from Churchill, the Hood, the largest battle-cruiser in the world, helped to sink the French fleet at anchor at Mers-el-Kebir in Algeria. A thousand French sailors were killed.

The French had good reason to hate the British.

After young Troy’s top-secret Warsaw trip, David Bruce met him in London.

Troy had convinced Shivonne to go with him to Warsaw. They both reported, “Most of the German officers and soldiers in the boulevards, art galleries and museums of Paris are pretentious, arrogant bullies.” The youngsters vehemently argued, “There’s a great need for intelligence gathering as a predictive device and guerrilla tactics must be used to wage war against a superior military technology.”

They offered to be part of either the French, Czech or Polish Resistance.

The Freedom Fighters...

'Uncle' David, as his boss like to be called, had an insatiable appetite for the smallest detail of Troy's experiences in France. "Your gift, Troy," Bruce told him, "is being able to move inside the enemy's mind". Bruce had been impressed by the concise nature of his nephew's perceptive assessment of German manpower and material: and his fluency in German and French. Troy's 'insider' view held Hitler's 'Blitzkrieg' strategy remarkable. Although separated by a quarter of a century in experience, Troy's arguments for guerrilla war were impressively mature.

Wild Bill Donovan's 'Man in Europe' was Troy's mentor. David, as tall as Troy, dazzled high-ranking American politicians. His social sophistication made him fast friends among the British aristocracy. David chose to separate Shivonne and Troy into different areas of training. Troy was an excellent marksman. He abhorred machine pistols and machine-guns. "A shooter must make every round a killer."

The 'phoney war' slowly churned on. ULTRA was Intrepid's secret war, centred on Enigma, the German cipher machine. Shivonne had a natural flare for cryptography and had identified 'Operation Sealion'. Stevenson warned Churchill about Dunkirk.

On 4th June 1940, 'Operation Dynamo' began. It was a massive evacuation using a huge fleet of destroyers, ferries, fishing vessels and riverboats to enable the rescue of 338,226 of the British Expeditionary Forces and its allies from annihilation by Hitler.

The list of survivors in the 'miracle of Dunkirk' included Gary's father, fighting with the Expeditionary force to save France but encircled instead by Guderian's Panzers.

The Freedom Fighters...

ULTRA also warned Churchill that Norway was the heavy water source for Hitler's 'atomic war' plans. Nuclear science and its mathematics hailed a burgeoning industry. Churchill formed a fighting coalition Cabinet. He promised the British people only "blood, toil, sweat and tears." In halting but spirited defiance he announced that, "We will fight them on the beaches ... We will fight them in the streets... We will never parley... we will never negotiate... We will never surrender".

The Battle for Britain began in earnest on 20th August 1940. Goering sent more than 1,000 enemy planes daily to bomb and strafe London and southern England. In a masterstroke of confidence in victory, Churchill permitted the United States to establish naval and air bases in Newfoundland and the West Indies on a lease that would expire in the year 2040. He continued, "No one can stop us. We will roll on in full flood, inexorable, irresistible, to broader lands and to better days."

Churchill would eventually declare to the embattled nation, "Never in the field of conflict was so much owed, by so many, to so few." But it seemed far away in 1940.

Two weeks after Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister, Donovan would arrive in London with chilling information... I have seen Hitler's *Orders Concerning the Organization and Function of the Military Government of England*. 'All intellectuals and Jews are to be liquidated... All Englishmen between 17 and 45 are to be deported to Germany as slaves. The SS is to select males from among its finest men to impregnate Englishwomen and breed a new race.' He also had seen that, 'Liquidation centres will be set up in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester and Edinburgh.'

The Freedom Fighters...

David spoke first. "June 1940 was a critical time for Great Britain. Now we face an Axis coalition of Fascist Italy and Germany and possibly Stalin's Russia. Churchill is vehemently opposed to any suggestion of negotiation with Hitler."

Intrepid offered distressing news, "In June, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin split the atom. Hitler has produced the world's *first* successful nuclear fission and will use it." Irrefutable sources proved Russia and Germany worked collaboratively on these atomic experiments. Also, earlier in March, Himmler had ordered the construction of a camp at Auschwitz, near Krakow in Poland. Intrepid predicted, sadly, "This is the beginning of the end for the Jews, but few will believe and fewer still will take action". Then he finally added, "Some good news! The fourteen-week Russian 'blitzkrieg' to secure a seaport base on Finnish soil, ended in a Pyrrhic victory for the Russians. The Finns cost them over a million soldiers." He observed. "Hitler doesn't cope well with such a defeat. The Russians may have lost an ally".

Troy unconsciously clasped and unclasped large hands. The Polish agony and the French subservience left a backwash of disbelief. The anchors that had held his life together were disappearing. He longed to do something concrete.

A laconic Intrepid said, "The last twelve months have changed the face of Europe forever." He explained he had expanded his intelligence operations via Stockholm, "to escape 'British intrusions'." Enigma had already been in English hands for a year. He continued, "By anticipating German intentions it confirmed the predictive power of informed comment and analyses based on good intelligence". The Germans never realised Intrepid had ensured their top-secret codes were in the hands of the British.

The Freedom Fighters...

Intrepid continued, "My friend Albert Einstein confirmed with FDR that Hitler has the potential to construct an atomic bomb and is prepared to use it indiscriminately ... We've a great deal to thank tortured intelligence officers. They've suffered agonising deaths at Gestapo hands but have never revealed Enigma." Intrepid turned. "Troy. We have a young Polish veteran, Jaago. He desperately wants to get back to Europe. You must train him in sharpshooting. We've a special job for him."

"Glad to, Sir..." proud his Uncle had broadcast Troy's varied and useful Rudills.

Wild Bill arrived in London as FDR's personal envoy in July to share secrets with Intrepid and to enlist David Bruce. Briefed on "Operation Sealion", Hitler's invasion plan for the United Kingdom, Wild Bill felt validated. "The United Kingdom and the United States need to take the initiative and win a subversive war". He predicted, "Moscow may fall foul of the Germans but there'll be a Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis. We're now watching the Battle for Britain. The fucking Japs will attack England's Eastern empire. The son's-of-bitches whipped Russia in 1901 and invaded China in 1933. They won't stop there. They want a South East Asia empire".

Bruce added, "Goering, Chief of the Luftwaffe and second-in-command of Hitler's Reich, is in trouble. He's lost the Battle of Britain, so he's promised London to Hitler as 'war-booty'. The Reich-Feuhrer was preparing to celebrate victory when Churchill ordered the RAF to bomb Berlin four days ago, on the 26th. Unluckily, Hitler was away from the city at the time, but he's furious. Goering's finally fallen from grace."

They all cheered. Their spirits temporarily lifted.

The Freedom Fighters...

David Bruce then briefed them all. “Joseph Kennedy’s been appointed Ambassador to London.” They had reason to hate Kennedy. In contrast to Churchill’s group, the haughty Democrat politician had transmitted to America “London is finished and the United Kingdom will shortly capitulate”. “The silly bugger...” had made David angry. “He’s even had the damned cheek to broadcast these opinions from London, on our own bloody BBC.”

FDR didn’t trust Joseph Kennedy. To the President, Joseph Kennedy was a cocky self-made millionaire who had made friends with the Ex-King Edward VIII. The new Prince of Wales and his wife, Mrs Simpson, were known Nazi sympathisers. The American President instinctively empathised with the British. He wanted a more accurate report than the one presented by pro-Nazis. Hence his reliance on Wild Bill.

“FDR often says... ‘Donovan’s my secret legs’. That’s why the old warrior has sent me...” FDR’s favoured Republican enlightened them, “to view this fucking battle under English Rudies”. Wild Bill took in the air-battle raging above. The results being handed around from various sources made him gleeful. The Germans, with conventional planes, were losing the air battle. “The Axis’ll proclaim a fucking fanfare about the German-Italy-Japan combo next month”. Wild Bill shared secretly, “But FDR and Churchill have planned a global strategy against them”.

Troy tried to count the aircraft battling with their lives. Twisting and weaving, they left intricate exhaust and smoke trails high in the sky. Spitfires and Messerschmitts fought in a tangle of straining and thundering Rolls Royce versus Volkswagon engines. Few of their sounds reached the watchers on the cliffs.

The Freedom Fighters...

All stood mesmerised by the dark shapes hurtling ahead of the trails. All cheered as a German fighter quit in a vertical black-smoking dive. Even the Kent hopfields would no longer be a safe place. WWII would soon be fought in the Rudies over London with new weapons. 'Drop-shorts' would land in Kent. Hitler had prepared more terrible weapons of destruction than the world could at first believe. That he was again unsuccessful was due in no small measure to FDR: Churchill: the team they had chosen to inform them: and the people they led.

Intrepid advised that Hitler had postponed "Operation Sealion", the sea and air invasion of Great Britain, when he realised Goering couldn't fulfil his promise.

Churchill took no chances. He ordered the evacuation of London children away from major bombing targets so that "We will survive."

Churchill ordered Berlin bombed.

Wild Bill confirmed, "The Brits," he'd tell FDR, "will hold the line. But we'll need massive American aid to help survive".

In late 1940, Donovan, on instructions from FDR had been sent to Pearl Harbour. FDR had appointed Admiral Kimmel as base commander. Although Donovan found Kimmel to be a conscientious and indefatigable worker, the downside involved narrow views and unimaginative defensive strategies. The Secretary of State, Knox, accompanied. He'd opposed Kimmel's appointment. After their visit both told FDR, "Kimmell has no right being there."

The Freedom Fighters...

On 22nd June 1941, without warning, Hitler invaded Russia. 'Operation Barbarossa' ended Stalin's Axis support. Too late. Russians would die by tens of millions.

Donovan bid for the creation of a central agency so that the intelligence effort of both countries could combine. On 11th July 1941, FDR created the office of Coordinator of Information (COI). Donovan, as overall Head, chose Bruce as Chief/US intelligence operations in Europe. Troy stayed with Bruce. A month later Bruce supported a US merger with Churchill when he addressed the Virginia legislature.

Six months later, against the opposition of Hoover and the intelligence staffs of the combined services, FDR reincarnated COI as the Office of Strategic Reserve (OSS). OSS would be the hub of combined strategic intelligence services.

On 7th December 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and thrust a reluctant USA into the war. Donovan's strong reservations about overall competence were tragically accurate. Kimmel went to pieces that 'day of Infamy'. FDR's faith in Wild Bill was validated. For FDR, Pearl Harbour 'proved a blessing'. Congress had to finally emerge from its isolationism.

America declared war on Japan. Four days later Hitler declared war on the USA.

Russia re-enlisted on the side of the Allies.

Necessity made bed-fellows of unlikely nations.

The Freedom Fighters...

1941: 'We'll keep a welcome in the hillsides...'

SMOKE TRAILS CHURNED THE SKIES ALMOST DIRECTLY OVERHEAD.

The Battle of Britain hadn't yet been won. Trails hung, listless in the blue skies north toward the hopfields. Some children, evacuated from London, watched and played.

One of them, now almost a four-year-old, paused in the middle of his play and looked up. Then he and the other children ran in terror for the air-raid shelter. One enemy plane had detached itself from the others and was headed their way. The war he'd escaped from in London yet again threatened young Gary.

In 1941, Hitler's revenge for the Berlin bombing resulted in the terrible saturation bombing of Coventry five days later. This determined Gary's mum, Rene, an ardent Welsh Congregationalist, that the coal-mining valleys were 'safer than a known way' for her kids. She decided to send her two sons to Cwmfelinfach to live with her sister.

Gary was old enough to remember, years later, the same patterns that Troy watched that and subsequent days whilst the fate of the free world hung in skies above the south of England. Gary would especially remember the terror as he watched his pregnant mother trying to hurry for the shelter.

Two clear lines of tracers now burst from the diving Messerschmidt as it approached his mum in slow motion. With his brother, Gary howled. His world reduced itself to the shape of a German fighter-plane. He stared in terror at the fragile figure of his mum with her tortured face.

The Freedom Fighters...

Clumps of earth thrown up each side of her signalled 'Extreme Danger'. Mum screamed at him to stay where he was. Gary stretched out to her from the false safety of the shelter. His mind filled with confusion as cannon rounds pummelled into the staunchions each side of the open doorway.

The sudden concussive explosions deafened him. Splinters rained on them both. As she reached the doorway Mum tripped and fell into his arms. He exulted in a superhuman flow of strength as he held her from falling. Then the moment was gone. No one had realised what he'd done in the panic. For a brief moment he felt the softness of her. Smelt her sweaty smells. Tony, his brother, cried hysterically.

Gary felt cheated when Mum grasped Tony to her. Gary held Mum's skirt ... the three of them wept. Then, just as suddenly, his tears stopped.

A year later a grave five-year-old, Gary stood bravely on the platform of Eustace Station. In March 1942 it was a darkened, fearful place. 'Blackout' provisions were seriously complied with. Gary tried not to be scared. All he knew and was aware of was that he was going and Mum was staying. Mum whispered urgently, "You are the eldest. You are now responsible for Tony."

Dad was a myth in uniform at the war. Before he'd left for 'Fortress Europe' and the final invasion, he'd drummed into Gary, "You are the head of the family. Whilst I am away look after the family." In the feeble glow of a masked torch Mum checked, for the fiftieth time, a label firmly tied to his greatcoat collar. It identified Gary's future:

c/o Mrs Lily Jones, (Auntie) No.4, Syndicate Terrace, Cwmfelinfach, South Wales.

The Freedom Fighters...

Tony gripped Gary's hand. Wouldn't let go, even when Mum turned him around. She checked Tony's collar. It seemed to take an eternity. They were at the front of the train, near a huge, black and monolithic beast. Gary saw Mum clearly as the driver's offsider opened the furnace door.

Fear of the unknown turned it into a mystical and mysterious night. The furnace's flickering flame: furtive whispers by torchlight: and Tony's barely subdued terror.

When that train took them to Wales that first time in 1941, their eighteen-month-old baby brother, snuggled safe in Mum's pram, stayed asleep. The train hissed then let out an almighty belch. Steam poured from between the wheels. Gary refused to show fear. A big, bearded and bossy man checked their labels and put them aboard. Tony sobbed uncontrollably. Gary comforted him. When they got to the seat, Tony immediately fell asleep. Gary cuddled him. The clicketty-clack of the wheels fell into a somnolent rhythm.

Finally, Gary too fell asleep, albeit unwilling. His nightmares featured black dragons belching steam, bombed-out ruins, huge fires and fully-fledged terror.

The two boys spoke little: held on tight to each other: and even ate in silence the snacks their mother had carefully prepared. They ate slowly from oversized lunchboxes. The train stopped many times to hide in long dark tunnels. Then it was 'Lights out', especially during daylight. These times felt interminable.

The Freedom Fighters...

HQ/OSS was based near Caxton Place in London. Gary's father, George, visited the street often. Rene and the three boys then lived nearby. On a sunny day five years before, George married Rene, at the Caxton Place Registry Office.

One day in '42, a 'buzz-bomb' had wiped out the street and George thought he'd lost his family. Now he was on leave again. Six times his family had been bombed out of their home and Rene and he decided the two elder boys should leave London. He'd wanted Rene to leave, too. But he had a tough wife. She'd become a 'Londoner of the Blitz', worked at a bomb-factory and looked after young David. "Dad needs a home to come to when he's on leave."

Dad wondered how his other two sons fared, alone in South Wales.

'Accha vee bacchen' the Welsh kid had called. Gary was told it meant 'dirty bugger'. As close to a swear word as the Congregationalist kids in the valley could get.

Even the teachers yelled it at them. Gary felt alien enough but these strange words isolated him. He took months to pronounce Cwmfelinfach as 'koom-velinf-arcch', until it sounded like he wasn't a stranger from a far land. Mum said "The 'arcch' bit's got to be said in the back of the throat." Being Welsh, it was easy for her. Dad said to learn the Welsh way of speaking "You gotta pretend you want to spit a good gossie."

Gary was always trying to shrug off the sadness that was a permanent part of the valley. He missed Dad. Tony quite often cried, but that was because he missed Mum.

The Freedom Fighters...

Mum said, "David is too young to be looked after by Aunt Lil".

So he'd stayed in London. Tony used to wish he was a baby too so that he could have gone back with Mum. But she was far away in a London factory that made bombs to kill Germans. When she left the last time she promised to put their names on a bomb that the big Lancaster bombers were dropping on Berlin to smash Hitler to pulp. Once when Dad had come home on leave in London he'd told Gary the names of some of the German towns he'd been fighting in. They weren't as strange as Welsh names.

Because the Welsh were coal-miners, they didn't have to go to the war. Gary didn't think it fair. He hardly ever saw Dad. Everyone should've been fighting the Germans.

He never got used to the mine hooter. It went off every shift, four times a day.

When it went off in school, kids used to laugh at him because he'd duck under the desk and come up quivering all over. Couldn't help himself. They said "You're just crazy". They still made fun of him even when Gary told them the mine siren sounded like an air-raid siren and that, when you heard the sirens sound in London you know the bombs are on their way and you had only two minutes to be underground.

Then came the day the village got bombed.

The two brothers were already downstairs when everyone started screaming. They'd heard the familiar rumble of the German bombers though the bombers approached when they were asleep. They'd erupted already awake just like back home.

The Freedom Fighters...

Like in their 'real home' back in London they knew exactly what to do. They were already down the stairs and under the kitchen table, but Aunt Lil gave Gary a belting later because she couldn't understand. When the bombs started whistling down, she was still looking and screaming for them and panicked when she couldn't find them.

They counted three bombs and knew one was in the next street, one close and one far away. One was a dud. When they lived in the London Underground they used to hold competitions. Mum said it stopped them from getting scared and she'd give the winner a farthing. Gary nearly always won.

Aunt Lil, Uncle Ashford and Gran kept saying their prayers. Over and over. They scared Gary more than the bombs because they might know something he didn't and that was why they were praying so hard. Gary couldn't convince them it was okay.

Aunt Lil said "We were just kids". She didn't give Gary even a farthing.

The bombs missed. The dud landed next door to Mrs Jones's shop. She was Pat's mum and Aunt Lil's mother-in-law. The bomb was buried in the lounge room of the empty house yet it was still bigger than Gary was. Tony and he went in for a dare to look at it and told Pat it looked like a church bell. Then Pat came and the three of them played ring'a'ring'a'rosies around it till one of the Welsh kids nobbled on them.

He called out to Mrs Jones. They got out before she caught them.

If she had, that 'wouda been worse than the bombs. Mrs Jones woulda told Aunt Lil.'

The Freedom Fighters...

The other bomb landed on the railway embankment. The house shuddered but none of the best china on Gran's Welsh Dresser got broken. Later Uncle Ashford said some tiles on the roof got shook loose, but the two brothers reckoned they were already loose, 'cos their house never shook so hard as in London'. There the whole house rattled every night.

Mum said she took them to the Underground, "'Cause bombs can't hurt you there."

They listened as they went c-r-u-m-p. Sometimes some dust might shake loose but that's all. It was safe, but you could tell when the bombs were close.

Now the whole of Cwmfelinfach knew what bombs were really about.

Tony and Gary had known all along. Being bombed-out had forced them to go to different schools each time. They had been 'bombed out' six times in London.

Before they'd arrived in Cwmfelinfach the brothers had spent the last two months living in the Underground. Life in London was exciting but scary. So now the Welsh kids were interested. They wanted to know. They kept asking silly questions but Tony and Gary answered seriously. At least the Welsh kids had started talking to them.

Tony said hopefully "Maybe they'll even start to like us?"

Pat pointed to a crater, "We got bombed. See, over there. Up on the old railway."

Only two houses got destroyed but suddenly the whole village had entered the war.

The Freedom Fighters...

Overnight, the brothers had achieved fame. The schoolyard was no longer a war-zone. For the Welsh kids their bomb made such a huge hole that the brothers had to be careful not to make the London ones seem too important.

The 'Wiley kids' couldn't even imagine Doodlebugs, let alone the fact that the brothers had seen them wipe out two or three streets in one go. But the Doodlebugs weren't making any noises any more. That's why Mum got worried.

She'd told them, "They are going too fast..." or something.

When you heard the explosion, it was too late.

Mum had told them, "The whole of London could soon be smashed to smithereens if Dad didn't get to Berlin quick enough."

Before the bombs the brothers were the hated English. Part of 'those people' who had taken their land away. After the bombs they had started to see the brothers as human beings, instead of 'a little crazy', as punching bags, and things to hurl stones at.

In Gary's whole school life in Wales, it was always the underdog, or the disabled like Pat, whom he made friends with. Pat was always sick. The other kids were too fickle. They all wanted to be part of a gang.

The 'Wiley gang' was the worst. Gangs always try to hurt or set apart lonely people. Liked hurting people, especially outsiders. Gary was always an outsider.

The Freedom Fighters...

That's why he got into trouble. Kids picked fights with Gary at school and the teachers would tell Aunt Lil. She never seemed to like him so belted him as well. It was a mutual dislike. Tony always tried to be a joiner. Gary was scared of Aunt Lil, though he didn't actually hate her for the way she made his life hell. Half the time he got into trouble 'cos he couldn't understand what she was saying.

He ran away from number four Syndicate Terrace regularly. He hated the coal dust, the cold and the wet. Both boys were also lonely for their parents.

Everything in the valley, the day after the bombing, was drab and covered with the fine silt of coal dust. All the chimneys smoked the same way, even went up into the sky the same distance. Like at prayers in the morning at school, when all the kids stood to attention. The smoke didn't move. Just hung there. Grey sticks poking up into a grey lifeless sky. All the houses in the village, street after street of them, were built out of the same slate and rock. The church and post office were even gray too.

Only the toffs had bricks in this part of the world.

The constant gray depressed Gary. He missed London's brighter streets and houses.

High mountains ringed the valley. The brothers loved those mountains. Aunt Lil had no idea how far they travelled. Once they saw a stranger following them.

The brothers thought he looked suspiciously like a spy. Posters everywhere told kids "The enemy may be the next stranger." Possible spies had to be reported.

The Freedom Fighters...

Once, after 'spotting a spy' they listened to each other's hearts, thinking they might be having a heart attack. They'd held but didn't need to talk much. After sharing so much and being always together, they felt they had grown older and knew much more than the Welsh kids. But they remained alert, seeing spies everywhere.

Both brothers adored the fresh air. Plus, from up in the mountain they could look down on the village and believe they were Crusaders, or even Vikings. Anything to lend a sense of excitement. Aunt Lil would call them for dinner and her incredible voice echoed all the way from valley to mountaintop. Even the trees bent to listen.

Mum said, "Aunt Lil shoulda been an opera star."

They found a bomb crater. It must have been the third bomb no one had found. It was their secret. They promised each other '...spit, hope to die', lightly nicked their wrists and held the blood together like in the Cowboy and Indian movies.

And the clouds... Clouds hung over the valley for most of the time. Rain clouds, snow clouds and worst of all, coaldust. The older miners coughed-up its blackness. Sometimes, playing with other kids at the end of the valley, they didn't hear Aunt Lil.

The kids would quickly remind them. Her voice was known the whole length of the Risca valleys. Aunt Lil should've been allowed to sing at the Eisteddfod, but the Welsh choirs were all male. She got frustrated having to stay behind to look after Gran and Uncle Ashford. He was Gran's 'friend' but no one talked about that. He'd spent over forty years in the mines as one of the superintendents until 1944.

The Freedom Fighters...

After that, Aunt Lil told them, "Uncle Ashford's coughing-up too much coal dust."

Gary didn't like winter. He longed to escape from the pleurisy and chest congestion that racked his chest. He dreaded the hot poultices. Mustard poultices he could bear but the ones made from hot milk and bread were intolerable. The heat stayed in them and convinced him he'd scald to death. Many times he would have preferred to die.

Gary learned that crying and screaming didn't reduce the pain. It was the same with the pain when he got belted. So he stopped. Six is an early age to learn not to cry.

The new railway track they'd built on the other side of the Black River was Gary's favourite playground and dreaming spot. According to Gran, there used to be trout in the River reserved for the village squire, but the run off from the coal mine and the mountain high slag-heaps dirtied the water to black slurry. No mud on the banks. Just layer upon layer of wet coal dust. He'd got the wrong end of Aunt Lil's boiler-stick when he fell in once and all his clothes were dyed pitch black for weeks.

Pat and he would sit beside the blackened river and dream the old river back and make up poems. Gary wrote secret love-poems to her but he never got the chance to show Pat before the 'coal-cancer' got her too.

Mum had moved to Cwmfelinfach in 1944. David was five years old and Gary and Tony didn't even know their younger brother. At the end of that year, Elaine was born to the valley, a Welsh blonde, just like Pat. She arrived on 22nd December. Gary's Christmas present really came, 'wrapped in swaddling clothes'.

The Freedom Fighters...

A month later he was eight and the 'man of the house', changing nappies, cooking the evening meal and emptying Gran's po' when it got too full.

The day Dad came home to visit them in Wales was a terrible day.

The 'Wiley gang' struck. They chased Gary, Tony and David all the way home, calling them names, throwing stones at them and trying to catch them. Gary held on tight to both brother's hands. They were crying, screaming in fear and he had to drag David along the ground a few times. David twisted and fell around like a rag doll but Gary knew he couldn't stop until he'd reached the safety of home. He'd dragged David upright with a strength he'd later marvel about. Tony, as usual, just held on until the blood drained from Gary's hand.

Gary worried about David but knew that Tony wouldn't let go. No matter what.

Finally they stumbled into the yard. That was 'bar'. Even the Wiley kids knew not to trespass. Aunt Lil would 'kill them'. The gang held back, calling the brothers names in Welsh and throwing the odd piece of coal-ash from the dismantled railway embankment over the blackberry bushes and high above the yard.

Head down, Gary made it to the steps leading onto the landing.

Boots. Army boots stared at him, gleaming. His eyes slowly rose. Army trousers. A black para belt that he'd felt once or twice before. Up and up his eyes slowly took in what his mind refused to accept.

The Freedom Fighters...

Then... he saw the red beret. His heart trembled... One word said it all... Dad.

At first he hadn't seen Dad's face. Just the red beret etched against the blue sky. Dad looked like thunder. His two brothers hadn't noticed. They were nearly hysterical from their flight. But Gary knew he was for it. Dad strode over him like a colossus.

Gary disentangled himself and gritted his teeth. The two brothers gradually became aware something ominous was happening and they too looked up, but by now Gary was in Dad's focus. Dad's face dominated Gary's darkening sky.

Mesmerised, like a rat fixed by a snake's eyes, Gary watched and waited. Dad said not a word. He slowly, painfully slowly, undid his black web-belt. He took the belt from around his waist and bend it in two as in those previous times.

Behind him, Gary sensed the silence of the Wiley gang. Beside him his brothers were dead still. The whole world watched Dad. And Gary too.

The words thundered. "You have a choice. Me or them."

Shame bit into Gary's heart. His eyes filled with tears but he was not crying as ordinary people cry. They were tears of shame that his father had found him running away from Welsh kids. Dad always emphasised their family's warrior tradition.

Their ancestors had been soldiers since Agincourt. Maybe long before. Dad's earliest stories were of the 'Lionheart' and of Charlemagne. Real heroes.

The Freedom Fighters...

Each night Gary used to be lulled to sleep with "Little Drummer Boy" or "The boy from Castlemaine." But that was before the war. Now things were different.

Gary, as the eldest, was supposed to set the example for his younger brothers. Now, he'd been shamed in front of his Dad by Welsh kids.

Gary turned and pointed. "There's over twelve of them, Dad."

Behind him, "No there aren't. There is only ever one. Go back. Seek out the biggest bully. Fight him. Don't worry about the rest. Beat him and you've beaten the others."

Gary could hardly see through the tears that flowed without restraint and without his control. He was angry at his tears, angry at his shame but angrier still at these louts who'd caused all this. He wiped his eyes to see more clearly. Then strode off feeling his Dad's presence like a wall behind him. A wall that wouldn't crumble. The crowd stood still. This was different. They looked nervously for leadership. Gary spotted the one. A redheaded boy, head and shoulders over the rest. Sutton. Peter Sutton.

As he approached Gary called out. "I'm coming for you, Sutton."

Through his tears he watched the gang part to let Gary through. This had suddenly become personal. This foreign kid was coming for Sutton. He looked like an avenging angel and no one wanted to be first. Besides, they wanted to see how their leader would cope. Suddenly Sutton was alone. He looked down the parted ranks of his mates. This mad foreigner intended to fight him. But this kid was smaller than him.

The Freedom Fighters...

Who was that guy in the army outfit? What was this about anyway? They'd just been having fun. His reverie was interrupted by a tornado of threshing fists.

The crazy kid kept repeating, "I'm sorry. My Dad told me to beat you up. I'm sorry."

He seemed to have enormous strength. It didn't matter what Sutton did, this whirlwind battered his face and body. Then, without warning, Sutton copped a haymaker. It laid him out flat. But the bloody kid wouldn't stop. Sitting on top of Sutton's chest Gary beat Sutton's head into the s-c-r-u-n-c-h-i-n-g coke-ash. All Sutton heard was the litany, "I'm sorry. My Dad told me to beat you up. I'm sorry."

Sutton had had enough. None of his friends helped him. He was on his own getting the daylights beaten out of him. He panicked. Managed to choke out ... "This kid's crazy..." then scrambled away as fast as he could. A leaderless Wiley gang followed. It was all over for Gary, well before he realised he'd beaten them.

At 2.41 a.m. on 7th May 1945, peace came to a battered Europe in a small, unpretentious red schoolhouse in Rheims. General Eisenhower, Allied Supreme Commander, had his headquarters there. Three days earlier, in Field Marshall Montgomery's tent on the desolate Luneburg Heath outside Hamburg, a short, stocky red-beret quietly watched the surrender of all German forces. Then he left for Berlin.

George watched Stalin's troops rape Berlin. Across the same street, Jaago watched a woman, spread-eagled then raped by twenty Russians until she lay still ... on the road.

The Freedom Fighters...

1942: Troy's first combat mission...

TROY LIMPED TOWARDS THE JUMPMaster WITH A BAG ON HIS LEG

In England in May 1942 and six months after Troy's eighteenth birthday, he'd been given the all-clear. The operation had been ordered and supervised personally by David Bruce, then European Chief of the Office of Strategic (OSS).

OSS became Troy's *raison d'être* at a time when the Allies were losing on all fronts.

Bruce and his OSS had been planning secret operations ahead of the planned liberation of Europe. He outlined Troy's mission, "You are to provide wireless communications and arms training for Czech partisan groups."

Troy had begged Bruce for this chance. His thoughts were far away from this as his plane banked for the final run to the DZ. Shivonne was in the plane.

Adrenalin fired Troy's twenty-year-old frame, bowed down in the overheated belly of the C-47. The King's words "...safer than a known way" rang in his ears. This mantra protected him from catching the fear that twitched other faces.

The smell of sweat and sick swelled inside his stomach. Troy fixed irises, enlarged by darkness, to where soon a red, then green light, would blink morosely above the jumpmaster's head. Karel, the jumpmaster, hung grimly with both hands to the wet underbelly of the swaying carcass of the plane as it lurched through the night with its living cargo. The umbilical cord connecting him to the pilot up front crackled.

The Freedom Fighters...

It spat nonsense inside his head. He waited for the light above the open door. Soon he'd jettison his sweat-faced cargo into the night sky over a beleaguered France.

Bated breaths waited. Then "Red Light On.... Red On..." echoed in Karel's headset.

Troy thought of last night. Shivonne and he had decided on a secret engagement. They had celebrated with dinner-for-two at Claridges, their favourite restaurant.

He'd trained her team to a pitch of excellence in weaponry and explosives. Her Free Czech partisans had been willing learners. They picked up their instructions quickly and efficiently. The pressure of being first into Czechoslovakia was offset by pride.

Karel moved across the door and faced the men limping toward him. The full blast of the slipstream poured through the hole in the belly of the C-47. It struck him full in the face, tearing his cheeks to lie thinly over his teeth and jaw. Karel held on tight.

The plane strained against its props as the pilot struggled to slow it to the ninety knots required. Struggling with the slowing plane, the pilot forced the tail up to keep it clear for the cargo soon to discharge, and fought to keep his plane on course. Two markers burning five hundred feet below him set the outlines of the Drop Zone.

Troy led the charge to the door, his right leg encumbered by the swag.

This contained an extra weapon, radio and demolition gear. Sixty pounds weighed down each person's leg until the relief of the exit would make it initially weightless.

The Freedom Fighters...

Karel pulled then checked Troy's line. Hooked it to the lifeline of the overhead wire. He patted Troy forward then turned to check number two. Troy felt the crush as the others pressed tight against the back of the one in front. Everyone double-checked the harness and lifeline in front, his own life in the hands of the person behind. Karel his. The last-but-one person in the line turned to check Shivonne.

The only female in the group, she'd drawn the short straw to be last out. Checks over, each person pressed against the bulked body in front as if to dissolve into it. The tighter their formation in the belly of the plane the better chance they had of dropping closer together on the ground. More important, they felt the comfort of other bodies, though each knew that, by night more than by day, this increased the body-heat in the aircraft. It took away fear, though adrenaline dried their mouths and palms.

Thought ceased as training took over. "Red On... (pause) ..." All whispered an individual prayer. Adrenalin fired optimally masking residual fears. Troy sweated. Ever since he'd limped toward the Jumpmaster of the C-47 with the heavy canvas bag, lethal contents strapped in the bag to his right leg.

"Green On" ... "Go" ... "One" ... Troy pushed his right leg as far as he possibly could. Then he stretched towards a star straight ahead of him. He tried to grab it with his hands then clasped them across his chest, quickly snapping his left leg beside his right before he was turned by the slipstream. In the dull glow of moonlight he watched the next person. Each night jump he'd done as an exercise, Troy had marvelled at the fireworks emitted from the engine cowlings. Now they disconcerted him. How could they not be seen below?

The Freedom Fighters...

Troy had no more time to think. No thinking now, only to focus. 'Out into the darkness ... into the hand of God.' They'd exited at four hundred feet and he had no time to reminisce. He could already see a torch blinking its secret message from the ground. Even in the moonlight it was difficult to see where the earth was. Troy hardly felt Karel's slap on his back. All the strength in his large frame focussed. He exploded into the darkness with all the fire his heart and body could detonate. Out... Out into the unknown. A human rocket reaching for the C-47's wings. The fiery dragon's breath of engines churned at maximum against upturned flaps. The freezing cold smacking his face cleared his head. Fireworks ruptured the blackness.

Duval, next, was the wireless signaller. A diminutive but robust Frenchman, keen to be in the final push to Paris. It seemed the engine flames would set the nylon parachute alight except they took four seconds before they inflated. Their exit from the C-47 had been textbook. Spare parachutes were not the drill in those early days. Already in training one of the team had plummeted into the ground. Troy hadn't been far away. Bodies made an unpleasant but distinctive p-l-o-p. The mind never forgot. Soft, yet it made a deep indentation in the ground.

The cool night air whistled past him. Troy felt himself taken over as he spun sideways in the slipstream. Then it happened. The moment he knew he'd be safe. His falling stopped as he cushioned into the hand of God. His whole being rested. It made all that hard training, then the parachuting into the unknown, worthwhile. His unthinking mind had anticipated this feeling. His drills to ensure his canopy opened were completed within four long seconds. His parachute snapped open, closed then opened to breathe. His British instructor's voice sounded.

The Freedom Fighters...

“Look up. Check your rigging.” Troy did as this inner voice commanded. Parachute cords attached to the chute had twisted slightly and he spun his body to unravel them. He breathed a sigh of relief. Then, “Leg rope. Release your leg rope.” That indoctrinating voice again. Troy pulled strongly then felt the jerk as the bag extended its full fifteen feet of length. He stopped. Looked up and could see the shadow against the sky as his ‘chute dipped slightly to take the sudden extra weight.

The release was also text book. He prepared himself for the telltale but momentary pause that heralded the arrival of the bag on the ground fifteen feet below, none too soon. Success depended on milliseconds of awareness and fast reflexes. Troy dropped his sixty-kilo swag on the end of his leg rope and felt the jerk as his rigging lines took up its weight. Twenty feet below it would give him some premature warning of the invisible land below. He braced as he sensed it travel sideways. His internal instructor yelled, “Side Right”. Within seconds Troy was on the ground. He released his leg rope clamp, hit the quick-release button to free his ‘chute, jumped upright then ran around his billowing ‘chute to collapse it. He heard a soft c-r-u-m-p.

Shivonne, covered by her chute, loomed into sight. Proud commander of the team, she stood poised like a Jaguar... waiting.

A Resistance leader, Gerard, appeared with a blinking flashlight.

The Freedom Fighters...

1944: "we owe God a death"...

TWO YEARS LATER, HITLER STRUCK BACK ON THE 13TH JUNE 1944

Troy's clandestine operation in Czechoslovakia had been long completed when, seven days after the Allies launched 'Operation Overlord' on "D" Day 6th June, Hitler inaugurated the first wave of the deadly V-1 rockets. They were designed to bring London finally to its knees.

In the short space of one month from 13th June to 12th July 1944, the English capital was blitzed by over twelve hundred pilotless-aircraft. One killed sixty US soldiers in HQ/OSS quarters in Sloane Square. Troy left just minutes before. Rushed to help.

Later, he thought of... *Shivonne?*... His head resounded with *'Why? ... Why wasn't I killed with her in Europe? ... Why wasn't I killed in Sloane Square? ... What is it that God wants of me?'* Whereas before he had been a 'lapsed Catholic' and had regained a momentum to his faith in Paris, now he felt... not just adrift but angry.

To his internal Self – the one that seemed to sit inside him – always watching and always waiting – he raved, *'Of course I'm angry at a fucked-up God who claims omnipotence but didn't save her.'* Nothing helped.

They had both completed a successful mission. The aim... "Get Heydrich". Obergruppengfeuhrer Reinhard Heydrich, the Hangman of Europe and the man chosen by Hitler to complete his 'Final Solution'. In Hitler's 'Mein Kampf', plans for and detailed reasons "Why a final solution?" had been set out by him.

The Freedom Fighters...

Hitler's aim was to exterminate the plague of Europe, the Jews – with them, the Gypsies. Heydrich believed himself a specimen of the New Order of Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich. Arrogant, he drove around Prague in his big Mercedes sports car without a police motorcycle escort. He believed his own propaganda as Nazi Protector of Bohemia. He believed that the Czech people's 'adoration' of him would prevent interference in his divine task.

In his daily drive to the ancient Hradcany Castle he imagined himself as a Roman Emperor. Heydrich sat erect in the back like some potentate, immaculate in his Nazi uniform with his hat raked slightly to one side. His usual chauffeur was not driving

His bizarre dream-state came to an abrupt end in April following Shivonne and Troy's successful parachute drop near the village of Lidice, well outside Prague. Gerard planned the attack very well as Schellenberg had later reported, direct to Hitler.

Schellenberg told Hitler, "A sharp bend on the edge of the bridge forced the car to slow down. Three men stood at intervals twenty yards apart along the curve. As the driver slowed, the first man jumped into the road, shooting wildly with his revolver. The car almost stopped as the second man rolled a spherical bomb, which exploded directly underneath the car. Heydrich had time to get away several shots as the assassins raced away on bicycles and he managed to wound one in the leg."

Schellenberg found the explosive was of English origin.

But his investigation could not identify who did it.

The Freedom Fighters...

Troy watched the rag doll rise slowly skyward. Propelled from behind, Heydrich arched backward in a beautiful curve with his arms outstretched like Christ. Mesmerised, Troy saw Heydrich's Nazi officer's cap fall away in slow motion. Heydrich looked magnificent. As he reached the apex of his ascent he rolled well clear of the careening remains of the sports car. Heydrich plopped on the hard roadway. Face down. Distorted, his body shuddered. The watchers saw no blood.

Every clue followed up, many suspects were arrested and all known hideouts of the Czech Resistance were raided. Theories were developed but "none led to a solution".

Himmler flew within hours with Hitler's best doctors. They learned that Heydrich had broken his spine and found splinters from the third man's bomb had torn through his body and injured his spleen. But Heydrich's luck had run out. His wounds turned gangrenous. He died in agony and Hitler was beside himself. Himmler plotted revenge. But the assassins were never captured... alive.

The ruthless Gestapo lay siege to a church in Prague where two of the assassins plus a hundred and twenty Czech partisans had holed up. They launched an all-out attack but none of the partisans fell into the Gestapo's hands alive. The broadcast, coded by the BBC that night, confirmed all in London knew and congratulated them. Troy and Shivonne parted, promising to meet at Claridges for dinner in two weeks.

On the 9th June 1942, Hitler struck. Himmler's Gestapo surrounded Lidice. Two hundred villagers were shot in the first wave of reprisals. Shot individually to prolong the agony of those next. Almost the same number of women were forced into trucks.

The Freedom Fighters...

They were sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp. Only six survived the war. The children of Lidice, almost a hundred, were driven to a separate camp. They were also listed to be exterminated like their grandmothers, mothers, sisters and aunties. Lidice itself was then systematically razed as Carthage had once been eliminated from the world map. The Germans neglected to pour salt on the earth to destroy the soil forever, but the message was nevertheless clear. Himmler threatened to kill thousands more innocent Czech people in reprisal.

Back in London, Troy limped in to see Bruce. His shattered shin had mended nicely.

“Bad news I’m afraid, Troy.” Troy knew immediately. His mind turned robotic. Bruce’s voice echoed... far away. “We’ve just heard from Prague ... Shivonne has been captured by the Gestapo... They have a person we know working on her. Name of Schraeger. Kurt Schraeger. All we know is that he has a cutlass slash from ear to chin. One of those Prussian Officer-types. Wears his scar like a medal. We’ve had him in our sights for a long time. You need to know. She won’t survive...” It resonated in his brain. “She won’t survive... She won’t survive... Kurt Schraeger. She won’t survive... She won’t survive... Kurt Schraeger...”

For a long time Troy would be embittered. He could tell no one. Something inside him died. He’d never told anyone of their engagement. No one ever guessed.

The line “we owe God a death”... now stuck in Troy’s craw. “Why hers?”

For the first three months sleep was almost completely out of the question. He learned to sleep like a Leopard, eyes waiting. It became his trademark.

The Freedom Fighters...

'Leopard' became his code-name. Troy requested a new assignment.

He was offered North Vietnam with Patti, Chief of OSS (East).

In the closing stages of the war in Europe Troy would be invited to London.

'Intrepid' gave a welcome dinner for the top personnel of OSS, at Baker Street. Troy missed it and was also absent for the follow-up 'Victory dinner' at Claridge's in September 1945. Claridges was too poignant.

Stevenson and Bruce toasted Troy's memory.

On 12th April 1945, on the eve of Victory ... FDR died.

Truman didn't like General 'Wild Bill' and sacked him.

OSS was re-convened by Truman as the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA.

The Freedom Fighters...

1945: Patti and Ho Chi Minh...

TROY INITIALLY ARRIVED IN SOUTH CHINA, IN 1945.

With the war in Europe over, WWII's political and strategic focus shifted to the dispositions of Japanese troops in the Pacific. Donovan warned "It will be a costly and terrible fucking war. The Japs are fearsome warriors." Donovan estimated it would be 1947 before allied troops could even think of landing on the shores of Japan.

Then, suddenly, it was over. The 'Manhattan Project' involving over 100,000 persons, worked in the strictest security. A unique city, Los Alamos, had been built in the New Mexico desert. The project, costing two billion dollars, was a success. Intrepid had already revealed how close atomic warfare had been. Otto Hahn, in Germany, had discovered uranium-235 before the war. Stevenson's elite band knew the disaster facing Germany's success. Hitler intended the A-bomb as his 'Final Solution'. He would not hesitate to use it on the Allies, starting with London then New York. The A-bomb was hailed at the time as the greatest scientific discovery in history. An ecstatic Churchill announced, "We've done it. By God's mercy British and American science have outpaced all Hitler's efforts." President Truman issued a warning to Japan, "If you do not surrender, atomic bombs will be dropped and you will see a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never before been seen on earth."

The Japanese thought he bluffed. Political strategy did not suggest Tokyo. Dropping one on Hiroshima was justified on the basis of the astronomical cost to Allied troops of any war against the Japanese waged on their mainland. Compared to Tokyo it was a minor but important city.

The Freedom Fighters...

Enola Gay proudly gave her name to the plane flown on 6th August 1945 by her son, Colonel Paul W. Tibbetts. The Japanese were intransigent. Truman authorised the release of the second A-bomb on Nagasaki three days later. The same day, Stalin formally declared war on Japan. The Nagasaki dust-cloud rose five miles high to incandesce its 70,000 citizens. Both cities were considered a 'cheap price to pay'. In Asia, 'Total War' against Japan, would have counted casualties in tens of millions.

China already swung in the balance. FDR's major concern was China, "If China goes under, then what?" Early in 1942, Roosevelt had told his son, Elliott, "How many divisions of Japanese troops will be released – to do what? Take Australia? Take India? Both ripe as a plum for the picking. Then a move into the Middle East?... A giant pincer movement by the Japs and Nazis... that will cut the Russians off... slice through the Mediterranean... All we know is this: the Chinese are killing Japanese and the Russians are killing Germans. We've got to keep them doing just that until our army and navy can help."

In a brief ceremony on board the USS Missouri on 14th August, Japan unconditionally surrendered to General Douglas MacArthur. He'd said, with conviction, "It is my earnest hope and indeed the hope of all mankind that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past."

But in Tokyo, a huge weeping crowd testified to the price that would have otherwise been paid in Allied lives. In front of the Imperial Palace they wailed and prostrated themselves before Emperor Hirohito, whom they still worshipped as God. They cried, "Forgive us, O Emperor." Tokyo radio fell silent.

The Freedom Fighters...

In Indochina the monsoon rains came early. Troy wondered, "Were they God's tears of relief?" Each day the Wet gathered in ferocity and by mid-August had developed into the worst deluge for generations. Canals flooded low-lying roads, buildings were submerged and parts of Southern China and Tonkin became vast lakes.

Patti's OSS team in Kunming felt besieged in a fortified lagoon. Word had filtered through about the amazingly abrupt end to the war in the East. Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh representatives were clamouring for American attention. Their primary concern was that their millennia of subservience to the Chinese warlords was about to be re-instituted. The Viet Minh feared a Chinese presence more than the French. After all the French were finished. They had capitulated of their own free will to the Japanese and this had left only the Viet Minh to protect Vietnamese.

Ho Chi Minh, their leader, didn't want the Chinese to become squatters in Tonkin. Poorly paid and poorly disciplined, a Chinese 'presence' ensured only widespread pillage, rape and looting. He'd already experienced this. The Kuo-Ming-Tang under Generallissimo Chiang Kai Shek had an ignominious history. They could not be trusted to put Vietnamese interests first. On 18th August 1945, Ho Chi Minh sent his first semi-official communication to OSS officials of the United States. He acted quickly from concern, because the French had made it clear that they were only interested in the restoration of 'prior right'.

Aiding and abetting French designs to re-establish colonial sovereignty by any of the European powers was contrary to the Atlantic Charter and to FDR's anti-colonialism. The astute 'Uncle Ho' realised Truman was different.

The Freedom Fighters...

Anglo-French versus American differences on the 'colonial question' were not resolved during the WWII. Indochina was Patti's responsibility. Troy was there to ensure Patti's security. He read Ho Chi Minh's first official communication to an American government representative. Troy then immediately wired Ho Chi Minh's letter to General Donovan's HQ.

"The Central Committee (of Hanoi's Viet Minh) wishes to make it known to the United States government that the Indochinese people are prepared to fight to the bitter end against any intention of the French to govern Indochina, or to act once more as the oppressors. The Indochinese people also want independence from China and we are happy that the United States, as champions of democracy, will assist us in:-

1. Prohibiting French forces from forcefully occupying Indochina.
2. Stopping the Chinese looting and pillaging.
3. Helping the Viet Minh with technical and arms advisors.
4. Giving Indochina the same political status as the Philippines.

The rains worsened. They damaged runways, contaminated fuel and prevented the planned take-off of Patti's Team. Patti's OSS headquarters based itself initially within the walled and ancient Chinese city of Kunming. Troy had been nominated to be with the first American Mercy Team to enter Hanoi. He looked forward to getting away from the politically oriented Chinese. His brief was Indochina. The Team's overt aim was to take charge of Allied POW's and to ensure a peaceful Japanese handover. Patti had covert operational instructions to make sure that "under no circumstances are you to assist the French in any forced takeover of Indochina, nor to give any indication of partisanship to the French."

The Freedom Fighters...

On the morning of 21st August, the rains temporarily cleared. On the way to their aircraft, Troy watched, dismayed, at the extent of flooded paddy-fields. The canals were overflowing with a litter of bloated carcasses, both human and animal. The air reeked. At about 8 a.m., as they approached the airport, the mist lifted.

Troy headed toward the familiar hulk of a C-47 cargo plane, his time completely taken up with checking the alert state of the Team's weapons and parachutes. Finally it was take-off-time and at 11.35 their aircraft climbed steeply into dense, billowing monsoon clouds. The sun, as they rose above the clouds, seemed an omen.

Bach Mai hove into view at 1.30 p.m. but the flood damage was too severe and they switched to Gia Lam airfield. Patti ordered Troy, as part of the reconnaissance party, to parachute with his team of four. Troy radioed back "All clear" and soon the Team descended from their plane in Hanoi. Patti, carrying the Stars and Stripes, had arrived.

Cheering POW's, waving British and American flags, greeted them. Many of the British had been captured in Singapore. A tense moment developed. The British surged out of their camp en masse to greet Patti but the Japanese halted their advance at bayonet point. Patti motioned to Troy to accompany him.

They herded a small group of Japanese officers toward a small building near the runway to confer. As he turned from the POW's Patti called out "I'll be back." His supreme confidence in the situation settled them and mollified their Jap escort.

Mercy Team included a group of politically motivated, uniformed French officers.

The Freedom Fighters...

Patti meant to keep them in control in this delicate situation. Japanese Field commanders were a relatively independent bunch and Troy knew they could barely accept their sudden reversal of fortune. Some might resist, or at least make life difficult. The Japanese commander, a Major, made no immediate hostile move.

Patti explained their mission. "I'm to make arrangements for the peaceful evacuation of Allied prisoners and for the surrender of your troops to Chiang Kai Shek's forces."

The Japanese officers were taken aback.

The Major spoke good English. He courteously offered Patti and Troy iced towels and cold beer. The two Americans relaxed and smiled. The Major explained to Patti that the Japanese Theatre Commander of Tonkin, General Tsuchihashi, was in Hue and therefore he would not be able to confer until late that night. He also gently chided Patti about the French officers in his group. Strong anti-French hostility had surfaced in Hanoi and protest action was becoming violent.

Patti assured the Major that the French were totally under American control. They would remain with the Team. Their only purpose was the evacuation of French POW's. Confidentially, he shared with Troy, "General Tsuchihashi commands 35,000 armed Japanese. They are not convinced they have lost the war yet. Hang loose."

Troy overheard quietly voiced French objections to Patti's statement of US control. It reinforced the problems Patti anticipated would occur once the Viet Minh delegation arrived. "Local members will be easily incensed by the arrogance of the French."

The Freedom Fighters...

The Major explained the Mercy Team would be quartered in the Hotel Metropole in downtown Hanoi. Later that afternoon, he escorted Troy and the team in a convoy led by a Japanese tank. They crossed the Doumier Bridge, travelled west along Boulevard Carnot, past the Citadel and on toward the Governor General's Palace.

The whole route bristled with the Viet Minh five-pointed gold star on a red flag. Troy's hackles rose, not as a warning to himself but out of professional concern for the French officers accompanying their small convoy. Along the Avenue Pugnier and rue Borgnis Desbordes, streamers in English, French and Vietnamese proclaimed 'Vietnamese Independence', 'death to the French' and 'Welcome American friends'. No French flags appeared.

The Team rode in silence. The tension made some finger their weapons nervously. Others, mainly the younger members, sweated profusely. Troy empathised with the volatile French in their depression but had no pity for them. He sympathised more strongly with the gentle Vietnamese.

Closer to the Metropole people seemed more boisterous. Exclamations of pent-up anger rose to an incensed murmur as someone shouted, "Les Français sont arrives."

Along the Petit Lac these overt expressions became increasingly hostile, "Les Français se sont arrives sous la protection des Americans." Troy unhooked Bessie. Japanese soldiers lining the route restrained people with difficulty even though bayonets were fixed. Outside the Metropole there was a more animated surge. Frequently, Troy heard a barely repressed "Aux morts des Français..."

The Freedom Fighters...

Inside the vestibule, a large French group mobbed their officers. Tears and endless embraces. The French officers became belligerent, over-excited and provocative. Things were getting out of control and Patti expressed concern.

Around the edge strode a pleasant but tough-looking Vietnamese. He made straight for Troy and spoke quickly in perfect French. "Je suis Trung Nghia. Je me viens de la Committee de Citié de Hanoi. Delegation des Viet Minh."

Beside him, his escort announced, "Je suis Le Duc Dat. Aussi des Viet Minh."

Trung had been delegated, by Ho Chi Minh himself to welcome the Americans to Hanoi. He was happy to offer the city's hospitality and the overall protection of the Provisional Government of Vietnam. Troy introduced Trung to Patti and they moved to a quiet room.

Over a welcome ritual of cold beer and an iced towel, Trung confirmed that the masses of his people were very hostile to the return of the French. The Americans needed to make it very clear they were not supporting a return to colonialism.

Troy translated Patti's words to Trung, "No... French troops are not anticipated... Yes... This small group is only interested in French POW's in the Citadel... Yes... More American soldiers are coming... Yes... Patti had met Ho Chi Minh... No... The Americans are anti-colonial too." As Patti spoke Trung visibly relaxed.

Le Duc Dat fidgeted nervously.

The Freedom Fighters...

As Trung left, a Japanese Captain appeared, complete with samurai sword. In good but clipped English he advised, "The French create serious problem. I think violence soon. If French remain in Hotel, I cannot guarantee safety."

Patti began his negotiations. The French were to be escorted to the Governor General's Palace. A military escort would protect them. Overwhelmed, the French gladly accepted the offer to 'reside in the Palace', believing it to be "more proper with their lofty station as returning conquerors."

Patti set up in a large corner room overlooking a small park. It looked into the Residence Superiere, which flew a huge Viet Minh flag. He was in total control.

Troy relaxed. Even though it was clear they were at the whim of a superior Japanese force, they were safe under Japanese protective and administrative custody. This was important for the aspect of 'Face', an all-important social courtesy in Asia.

Troy's top priority was the establishment of a radio, on the roof of the Hotel, to make urgent contact with Donovan's HQ/OSS in Kunming. Next he attended to the security of the Team, now housed on their exclusive second floor. Then he allocated security, intelligence and communications into small teams with leaders responsible to him. Troy had direct control for "overall security and weapons control."

Patti was to meet General Tsuchihashi promptly at 8 a.m. the following morning. The Team worked feverishly all night to set up their operations by daylight. The Japanese Captain with the samurai sword was assigned as escort. Troy completed the double.

The Freedom Fighters...

The three were driven down near the riverfront. General Tsuchihashi had ensconced his headquarters in the Musee Louis Finot. As the two Americans entered his office Troy automatically memorised his environment. A large portrait of Emperor Hirohito hung behind the General, the Rising Sun fully extended on a flagstaff to its side. To the right of the General, and along the wall, almost a dozen officers stood at attention. A senior aide flanked him.

General Tsuchihashi rose as they entered. A man in his late fifties, he stood casually erect. A large teak conference-table bisected the room, headed by a chair fit for an Emperor. Three other chairs had been arranged. One each side of the teak table and one, obviously for Patti, backed closest to them.

General Tsuchihashi bowed reservedly and respectfully toward the two Americans. His officers bowed pronouncedly, low from the waist. They betrayed no emotion.

Tsuchihashi invited Patti to sit. Troy and the Captain took up positions directly to Patti's rear. The two aides occupied the other chairs. Patti didn't wait for formal proceedings. He took, then held the initiative.

Patti advised Tsuchihashi, "The Japanese government surrendered unconditionally on 10th August 1945. Chiang Kai Shek has appointed me to identify and locate all Allied POW's in Tonkin. I must attend their repatriation without delay. I have been authorised to arrange the surrender of all Japanese forces in Tonkin to the Allies." The General acknowledged he'd received orders to cease combat in five days. If the assembled officers were surprised their oriental masks remained rigid.

The Freedom Fighters...

Tsuchihashi explained the Americans were free to circulate in Hanoi but that he would have to await further orders from Tokyo. The General agreed in principle with all Patti had said but would advise protocols within forty-eight hours.

Patti was courteous but firm.

He informed the General pointedly that public order and safety issues were the responsibility of the General until he was properly relieved of command by the Allied Powers. Patti emphasised that this was the General's burden.

The officers broke silence to mutter among themselves.

Patti, unconcerned, terminated the meeting by rising. He saluted General Tsuchihashi, then respectfully turned as if to leave. As if acting on an afterthought, Patti then turned to face the General again. He coughed for silence until he held the attention of all, then reminded Tsuchihashi that he, Patti, would call the next meeting and issue further instructions. A stony but respectful silence followed them from the room.

Troy was to learn much from his new mentor.

It stood him in good stead over the next thirty years of CIA assignments.

The Freedom Fighters...

April 1951: warriors all...

DESTINY WEAVES SUBTLE TAPESTRIES OF COINCIDENCES AND QUIRKS.

In August 1940, superb weather shuffled three people into a strange future in 1951.

Flashback to 1940: Gary, then a three-and-a-half-year-old, was evacuated south to the hopfields of Kent to escape London's Blitz. Troy, further south and on the White Cliffs, watched Spitfires protecting the doorway to England. Jaago learned secret codes under Troy's tutelage in Kent, then took the first chance to return to Poland.

In April 1951, Paris lay in the shadow of 'la solution d'Indochine' licking Indochina wounds, France sensed a looming guerrilla war in Algiers. French Police swaggered machine-guns along the Boulevards. Early that year Gary had been billeted, as a Sorbonne student, in the same quarters occupied by Troy on Rue d'Assas.

Flashback to 1940: Jaago fought the Germans then the Russians. Catholic Poles survived only to be forced into communism. After WWII, he left for Australia.

In April 1951, with Third Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, Jaago bunkered down in a tiny village called Kapyong in Korea. The back of his neck tingled a familiar warning. Jaago checked his Light-Machine-Gun (LMG) with meticulous attention. Few in Korea really knew what 'big numbers' really meant. Carefully, he once again went through Immediate Action drills. Nothing would be left to chance.

The Freedom Fighters...

Flashback to 1940: At the end of August 1940, a nucleus of British-American intelligence had gathered on the 'White Cliffs'. Bruce had introduced Troy. On the recommendation of David, this exclusive club had drawn Troy into their closed fraternity. As each expert briefed the group, Troy's crystal-clear blue eyes clouded.

In April 1951, Troy hovered between Saigon and Hanoi as a CIA agent. Troy had been given permission by de Lattre to fly to Lai Chau. This town had been declared capital of the Thai Federation that same year. Troy wanted to see the results at first hand and was to report back to his Embassy in Hanoi. The French were losing the battle for the hill country. They intended using a ploy to ally racial minorities, like the Tay, Thai, Nung and the Mung to fight with them against the Vietminh. Those previously despised peoples constituted the four most populous hill peoples.

Flashback to 1940: George had been trapped with Expeditionary forces in Dunkirk. An ex-British paratrooper, he also knew what big numbers meant. He'd survived Arnhem in 1944. From a long breed of warriors, George asked his Colonel to book his eldest son, Gary, into Sandhurst Officer's College. Then his mentor had been killed.

By April 1951, thirty-two-year-old George succeeded in joining the Australians in Korea. He knew his warrior days were numbered and that 'Time waits for no man'. Ready for change he'd heard the Aussies had joined the Yanks in Korea. George desperately wanted to be part of it and left England to 'give Gary a better chance in a new land'. Now, a few days before Anzac Day and in a strange little Korean village called Kapyong, George felt the old surge of adrenalin. Something was brewing.

The Freedom Fighters...

1945: End of the OSS...

FOR HO CHI MINH THE WAR WITH FRANCE HAD BEGUN.

But for the OSS Mission in Vietnam the war had ended. Late in the afternoon of 29th September 1945, Troy received a Top Secret Order. OSS was to be closed down effective 1 October 1945. Truman terminated the OSS because he felt he couldn't control General Donovan. This was the same President who would sack, in the field in Korea, one of America's greatest military strategists. He felt he couldn't control General Douglas McArthur either.

With the closure of OSS, American intelligence operations in China and in Vietnam died a speedy death, generally unnoticed by the American public preparing for 'Peace in our time'. They would pay a fearsome price for Truman's mistakes.

Patti's last evening in Hanoi would be spent with Ho Chi Minh.

At 1900 hours, Troy and Patti entered the anteroom of the main reception hall at the Bac Bo palace. Vo Nguyen Giap met both and walked them to President Ho Chi Minh and a group of high-ranking Vietnamese politicians of Ho's new government.

"This is a very sad occasion, Mon Ami." Ho Chi Minh's courtesy was matchless.

Alternating between English and French the dinner passed agreeably. No formalities were necessary between the old friends. Later at coffee, Giap asked Troy to step outside. Before leaving he shook Patti's hands, grateful for Patti's friendship.

The Freedom Fighters...

Patti admitted later, "Giap has always been courteous and correct but at the moment of leaving I was overcome with his expressions of real emotion. You know, he considered us 'colleagues in arms' and that he wanted to express how 'tremendous' had been our help in the early days of the revolution when they were in Kunming. I was as touched, Troy, as that first welcome in Hanoi when he'd had all other nations flags dipped except our 'Stars and Stripes'. He told us then that it was the first time in the history of Vietnam that his national flag had been displayed in an international ceremony. I will remember both these days... our 'Welcome' ...and our goodbye."

Patti turned his head away.

Troy agreed. "I will long remember both days too, Sir."

Giap took Troy to a separate study. "You two will be good friends..." he said as he smiled and introduced Troy to Le Duc Dat then settled him with a large "Jim Beam".

He introduced him as a political commissar who had been briefed as a Staff Officer by Ho Chi Minh to talk to Troy. Dat had impeccable French. They spoke with Giap a few minutes then he left Troy and Le Duc Dat alone.

"I am very honoured to meet you." Le Duc Dat got straight to the point. "I have been asked to tell you about Ong Cu. It is a word that has no western equivalent expression. It means, an old man enjoying the affection and respect of the people. An honourable Vietnamese title, it is a measure of our endearment to Ho Chi Minh, our leader. I am told that 'Uncle' Ho is the closest word you have."

The Freedom Fighters...

Troy hadn't heard the epithet used before. It sounded like 'Uncle'. He acknowledged the explanation and asked Le Duc Dat to continue.

"Many of the leaders of our revolution need you to carry back to your leaders that we rely more on the US than on the governments of USSR or of China to help us achieve our independence. Many Americans regard Ong Cu as a 'Moscovite' and he's hurt by that. He owes his early training to Moscow and the Comintern but those days are long gone. Since then we have received a great deal of practical aid in materials from the Americans. You and the Honourable Mr Patti have also given us much needed emotional and spiritual help. Ong Cu has only one aim. That is to the Vietnamese people. He does not regard there is a 'North' and a 'South Vietnam'. Our leader will only accept there is 'One Vietnam'. Ong Cu believes that things are coming to a head with the French and that we will need allies if we are to retain our independence."

Troy impressed upon Le Duc Dat that since the beginning of his tour in Vietnam, he and the rest of the American delegation had tried always to remain neutral. They had strict instructions not to become involved in the strategy and politics of the region.

"I know that, Mr Troy. But your country set a great example of freedom to us in your own struggle for independence from Great Britain." Le Duc Dat quoted parts of Abraham Lincoln's speech and the first paragraphs of 'All men are born equal...'

Even though Troy knew that Le Duc Dat was a history professor, the man's knowledge astounded him. "I heard Ong Cu give his inaugural speech. What kind of man is he really? Away from the glare of politics?"

The Freedom Fighters...

“Well you would know we all started in Cao Bang, in the jungle border region close to China. Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, Hoang Van Hoan and a few others of our revolutionary leadership were working in China at that time. After the French defeat by Japan, Uncle Ho decided we had to return to Tonkin fast to establish a Party Central Committee. He set up short term training courses in a Chinese village near the frontier to escape French suspicions. The people had been influenced by the integrity of the Chinese Red Army and accepted us as revolutionaries with the same values towards the people. The lessons we all drafted for the training courses were published in a book, ‘Path of Liberation’. They had had good results with the Vietminh cadres.”

Troy’s main interest was small arms weapon training. “So where did you set up?”

“Well. After the Tet celebrations in China that year, Ho Chi Minh left for Pac Bo. There he set up our headquarters in a cave. Pac Bo is very hilly and our HQ stretched over two to three kilometres in width and about five kilometres in length. The distance from our cave HQ to the border of China was only one kilometre.”

“That’s the home of the Nung, isn’t it?”

“You are well informed, Mr Troy. Which is why we want to share our training and hardships with you. We have a proposition to make. The Nung people are the permanent people there. They are scattered all through the valley and hillsides in hamlets of two or three families. The biggest group probably ten families. By 1943 they provided us with 5,453 self-defence guards and militia for guarding the region. We ran political, small arms weaponry and military training courses.”

The Freedom Fighters...

Troy sat up to take more notice. This wasn't the 'ramblings after dinner type-talk'.

There was an agenda. "What kind of region did you operate in, Dat?"

"Hidden and almost inaccessible, Troy. Covered with rocks, high vegetation and some scattered reeds and bushes. No one could have seen us. Though chilly in the cave, we covered the entrance and lit fires at night. Uncle Ho liked our deepest cave and worked near the brook outside. This swelled into a small lake not far away, so we had plenty of water but we purified it for drinking with coke, gravel and sand. Uncle Ho was very strict on security." He stopped to light a cigarette, then, "Once, I remember we got news that enemy agents had infiltrated. We moved deeper into the jungle. Now we had to walk along a ravine and climb up steep gullies."

"I suppose your Nung would have helped you build a refuge of woven rattan?"

Dat smiled, good-naturedly. "I'm impressed you know our ways, Troy. Yes, but it was always darker among the trees. Smaller caves held three or four of us but our underground existence was very difficult. Uncle Ho, very strict on our hygiene and health, rose early each morning, woke us all up and made us do gymnastic exercises, which he led. We had no kerosene so we burned a fire and chatted into the night."

"So, what did you eat. Always hungry, Huh? I know I was in the jungle."

"We mainly ate 'Vietminh Meat', which is mashed pork, roasted and heavily salted. A hard and rigorous life, many of us got Malaria, even Uncle Ho. He refused to rest even when fevered, saying "We overcome adversity only by struggling against it."

The Freedom Fighters...

“Then we had to move again, this time to the ‘Red Blockhouse’. Always moving the life took great toll and undermined Ong Cu’s health. He’s never recovered properly, but he has an iron will. He fell badly last year. After the Japanese coup d’etat we’d moved from Cao Bang to a hut on stilts in Tran Tao. Walking from Cao Bang proved too exhausting for him. Persistently he had high temperatures, bouts of coma and fell gravely ill. He couldn’t eat rice but swallowed rice soup instead. He had.”

“You must all have been very worried about Ong Cu.” Troy was gaining respect.

“I called on him daily with Comrade Giap. Ong Cu said ‘Don’t be concerned about me, it’s nothing to worry about.’ But after a week I could see he was getting worse. I used to alternate with Brother Giap, who tried to stay every night. The local Man Trang people knew of a healer. He felt Uncle Ho’s forehead and went into the forest. In traditional medicine the cure must come from the area the sick person was in. The healer burned the root then mixed it with clear rice soup. In two or three days Ong Cu was cured. We were all very happy. I then fell gravely ill for two and a half months.”

As Dat paused, Troy respected him for the same strength of purpose. “Then?”

“We seeped *nu ao* root. Some women comrades took our uniforms to the healer and he chanted spells. Eventually a comrade arrived with Quinine pills. Pham Van Dong and Hoang Van Hoan were there. Once Ong Cu recovered he was back to his old tricks of walking ten kilometres without obvious fatigue, more concerned about our health than his own. Interested in everything we did, he filled us with revolutionary optimism, always emphasising the importance of us and the Vietminh Party.”

The Freedom Fighters...

Both men fell silent. After some time Troy poured each a Jim Beam and they clinked enamel cups. "I heard that Ong Cu has an unshakeable faith in your revolution and is never complacent nor pessimistic. Is that right? I thought it was just part of a legend."

"You are right and wrong, Troy. Uncle Ho is no legend. He's pragmatic and would tell you, 'Faith is everything.' He insisted the revolutionary fight would be a hard road and take a long time and often reminded us 'Revolution is about endurance. It may take many years, so tasks must be carried out with a firm will, thorough thinking and decisions never made in haste.' He also made sure we always read our newspaper, the Vietminh *Doc Lap*, meaning Independence. At first I didn't like the simple style but Ong Cu told us "The content must suit the level of the masses that read it."

"The bugger's correct, Dat. It's got wide circulation. The people I've spoken to really love the poems he writes in it. This special trait of the Vietnamese people is one I wish Western Nations would copy. Poetry exposes the soul. I memorised...

Clouds wrap the mountains, which are then enfolded in the clouds,

And the stream is a stainless mirror.

Walking lonely in Tsi Fong mountains, my heart fills with sadness

As I gaze to the remote south where my old friends are."

Dat stared at Troy for a moment, shook his head then grasped his hand.

It was the handclasp of a good and strong person. The Jim Beam had left Troy with a warm glow that reached into his mind. He felt like a brother to this remarkable man. He wished he could stay longer and learn more about Dat rather than Ho Chi Minh.

The Freedom Fighters...

Dat felt he need to share more. He disengaged, emptied his cup in one swig, adopted a more serious mein and continued. "One time we had been told Ho Chi Minh had died in China. It was a terrible shock and all of us were infinitely sad and suffered a great depression. Later, alone I passed southward among desolate hills overgrown with wild reed. The night was deeply chilled and made me despondent and alienated. I couldn't share my feelings. I looked into the stars through my tears." Le Duc Dat stopped. Troy said nothing whilst Dat composed himself. "We needn't have worried so much. A soothsayer once told us that Uncle Ho still has much work to do. He will not leave us until his job is completed. He also told us that the revolution will take a long time."

Troy empathised with Dat's sadness. Quietly he said, "He obviously hasn't, Dat?"

Dat looked more keenly at Troy and felt their relationship had deepened. "Comrade Cap had received the word about Ong Cu's death from a Chinese mandarin when he visited China. You remember the poem?" He waited for Troy to nod. "It was written in character script on a Chinese newspaper. We found it in his belongings. There was no doubt Ho Chi Minh had written it. We all crowded around and asked Comrade Cap to repeat the exact words then we all laughed with relief. Cap had mistaken the word '*su lo*', which means 'Yes' for the word '*xu lo*', which means 'Dead'." He laughed remembering. "The French had always know the close link between the people and our Vietminh. Once they realised he was alive they intensified their terror campaign, setting up military posts all along the key mountain ranges and conducted 'sweeps' and ambushes. The French aimed to encircle and annihilate us. Sometimes they'd set fire to suspected forests. The local tribesmen tracked us through the paths in the early morning when footprints are left in the dewy grass."

The Freedom Fighters...

“Once a group of us, including Comrade Giap, escaped being burnt alive by finding a small cave in a stream. We felt constantly in a state of entrapment. The Bac Can area became the enemy’s main target. Once we were hunted like animals for three days on a hill top. We cooked rice using lengths of ‘*nua*’, a long-noded bamboo. We cut Liana to get water. Have you ever tasted it, Brother? In the high humidity of the jungle it is so sweet and cool it tastes like nectar.”

Now I’m his Brother? Troy felt charmed and honoured. *I can handle that*, he mused.

“I have been asked to speak to you.” Dat paused, then looked long and hard at Troy. “Life is not easy. But we need specialists who can train our troops in small arms and communications. Will you stay to help our cause?”

Troy held Dat’s gaze and both felt they had exposed the other’s soul. He thought he detected a twinkle in Dat’s eyes. He swallowed, slightly ruffled. He hadn’t thought for one moment that he would be confronted with such a request.

“I must ask Patti.”

“Fine. Please give it deep thought.”

The Freedom Fighters...

1966: legend of the Uc Da Loi bear...

THE COLDNESS OF STEEL REMINDED GARY OF DAD'S BELT BUCKLE.

With the Uncle's Luger threatening oblivion, Gary's body, locked in its eternity of waiting, freed his mind. It traversed experiences filled with family, friends, and comrades in situations rarely visited. Bitter-sweet memories are the substance of the soul. Relived moments of love and grief are the footsteps that can lead us into a better future. A history of belt buckles and shiny boots had led Gary to his conquest of fear.

In the army it evolved into self-discipline and courage.

Gary's mind twanged from past into present in a kaleidoscope of flickering shadows.

He preferred the past. Relinquished it as a puppy reluctantly lets go of a strap. Past pleasures kept him from facing his pain dilemma. Even though relived in more poignant detail, the past was preferable. Even though feelings, experienced in their original context, were at least as profound, the past consumed his mind.

But the present was Vietnam, 1966. Dad's steely eyes denied him more dreams. A Luger threatened to extinguish him. Held unshakingly by a pissed-off Asian. Fear folded time into everlastingness. Feeling escaped once more into dreams.

The tension was palpable. But the atmosphere around him slowly changed. Subtly. At first Gary couldn't understand. Words flowed in and around him in a soft embrace. The weapon at his head didn't move yet words condensed a more gentle mood.

The Freedom Fighters...

Gary recognised the soft cadence of Troy's 'San Fransisco voice'. It had a seductive quality yet a persistent ring to it. The tonal quality of his Vietnamese intensified each word's appeal, which hovered in the room above its prelude of silence. Each breath in the room had stilled. Eyes remained blinkless.

Troy held them all in the thrall of a soothing word-spell like during the incantation of a Shaman. Even the Uncle seemed softly stilled. No longer holding forth the threat of extermination. Troy followed each Vietnamese phrase with its English equivalent. Both languages flowed into one stream of understanding.

One phrase shouldered above the others. "Stay calm. No one is going to get hurt."

His ears fixed on Troy's voice, touch circumscribed by the chilled metallic end of the old man's pistol. Gary's eyes widened at the faces opposite. In his time-frozen fear, taste had dried up all the mucus lining his throat, mouth and tongue. Dread's cold sweat was all he could smell. Tension gradually dissipated but all liquid had dried.

Troy continued softly, "Uncle. Each man, except you and I, will lower their weapon." The steel in his voice brooked no argument. "Everyone. Slowly and calmly... let the pressure off the trigger... straighten the trigger finger. Nothing else. No sudden movement. Just straighten the trigger finger alongside the trigger guard. Let your finger rest along the trigger guard. I repeat... Slowly and calmly." Then in 'solte voce', "Uncle. I will pay you fifty American dollars for the damage."

Gary sensed a change. His mind's eye saw the innkeeper's face soothe its strain.

The Freedom Fighters...

Fine, almost imperceptible movements heralded the general relaxation in the room as eight fingers were removed from triggers. Still motionless, Gary's right eye felt the subtle lessening of the pressure of the metal pressing into his temple.

Gary dared to think, "I can feel the breeze." "There is movement." Starved lungs very slowly inspired clean, fresh, morning air.

He became aware of a fierce pounding in his chest. He feared his strongly palpitating pulse would set off a fatal explosion and consciously slowed his breath so as to breathe more deeply and to still movement in the drumskin of his pulsating temple. His eyes dried from the intensity of willing his body not to move. Forced at last to blink they involuntarily watered. People may have seen them as tears but he cared not. Gary only dared not move.

His ears recorded, "Okay, Uncle. Its our turn. Slowly... I will do it first." To everyone else Troy said, "Do not move a muscle. Stay calm. Trust me." Back to Uncle. "My finger is along the trigger guard. It is done. No one is threatening you. Now, Uncle. You do it." A pregnant pause during which Gary once again almost cursed his pounding heart, then, "Thank you, Uncle. It is nearly all done."

Body motionless, Gary's embattled mind tried to come to terms with what was happening, but his consciousness refused to accommodate all except his beating heart.

Suddenly he could see everyone in the room. "Where is that light coming from?" His eyes widened and he realised the tears had fled. Details etched into his brain.

The Freedom Fighters...

Fear could not exist in this light. Gary's mind filled with the emptiness of a serenity he'd never felt before. His Catholic mind interpreted the experience later as 'Grace', but at the time he lost himself in the ebb and flow of its vast peacefulness.

As he drifted from his corporate frame he felt his body as one large over-tensed muscle, standing perfectly to attention. In awe and wonder he drifted around the room looking into each time-frozen face and wishing the person could share the tranquillity that had become the whole of him.

Gary looked at Uncle. Knew the man's terror. Gary's soul experienced the intimacy of his own sadness as darkness. Then he paused. Suddenly all his negative feelings transmuted into love. Gary loved this man. A sensation of soft light enfolded him: spread to Uncle: then to the others in the room until all were enveloped in it.

Inside this capsule, Troy's voice sounded the gentle sibilance of a loving God. "Uncle. Just remain as you are. Keep your finger along the trigger guard." To the others, "Everyone else. Lower your weapons to your side. It is over. Move slowly and together as one." Muffled movements followed in the wake of his instructions. "Remember. No sudden movements. My pistol will not shift until all is safe. I have spoken to Khai's uncle and everything is under control."

Troy's mesmeric voice was enhanced by the delicate twang of his soft Californian accent. All went quiet. To the whole group, "Good." Troy continued. "No one move until I tell you." This time it was the stillness of a meditation. Bodies relaxed and each felt their pent-up tension. Breathing became slower, deeper.

The Freedom Fighters...

To his Aussie mate. "Jaago, You will supervise unloading yours and Rudi's weapon."

To his Vietnamese friend. "Dawai... you will supervise all Vietnamese weapons are unloaded and made safe. Make sure everyone points their weapon out into the street as they unload. No accidental discharges please. Do it one-by-one if you have to."

To the whole group. "Now. Quietly. Everybody slowly move into the room behind the fireplace. Everyone except Uncle, me and Gary..." A pause, then "Move now."

The hushed sounds of men moving filled the silence that had dominated the room. Soon it was clear the last man had left.

"Okay, Uncle. It is time for you and I." Troy's calmness infected the three men in the room. "We will both lower our weapon and point it to the ground at our side."

Under the hypnotic spell of the soft cadence of Troy's Vietnamese, slowly, almost imperceptibly, Gary felt Khai's uncle relax his grip on the Luger. It no longer pressed so convincingly. But Gary remained a butterfly spiked on a pin. His eyeballs had long since ceased blinking. The inside of his mouth experienced the dryness of a blistered desert. The interior of his head swelled to a hollow, arid hotness.

He remained in some other dimension of 'Being'. All was as it should be. At 'Peace'.

An abyss separated him at first from Troy. His best friend's coaxing gradually restored him to a semblance of normalcy. It seemed interminable.

The Freedom Fighters...

Reality intervened as quickly. He felt his super-taut body shake silently. Unable to control it nor able to return at will to 'that ineffable state', Gary imagined a dog shaking itself dry after being immersed in water. For him, the Mexican standoff had seemed to stretch into eternity.

Later, Troy was adamant. The whole event had taken only three or four minutes.

As he recovered, Gary realised this was not the time to talk to Troy about his experience. Thoughts arrived with exceeding clarity. Almost as if someone or something directed his brain, yet out of good not ill-will. He knew what he had to do but his body responded slowly... almost agonisingly slowly.

He'd 'seen' Uncle leave the room. But this had been during Gary's dreaming-time. Troy was now saying Uncle had left. Gary's brain took a little longer to recognise that event. Slowly he focussed his eyes on Troy's intent form.

Gary hugged Troy. Averse to such outpouring, Troy attempted to pull away, relented, then returned the hug. Both men started laughing, shook each other's hand, then the hands of each of the others as they filed back into the room. The tension eased.

"I'm going back to Cyrno's." Troy explained. "But I only have room for one."

The two senior Vietnamese officers spoke quietly to the Ranger lieutenants, then, "You," they said, pointing to Gary and Rudi, "must go with these officers. They will show you to their quarters and you can sleep there. No problem."

The Freedom Fighters...

Gary spoke to Troy. "Okay. You take Jaago." He'd have preferred to have gone with Troy but capitulated. "I'll look after this Hungarian reprobate."

The four mates smiled acceptance.

Troy placed his arm around Jaago's shoulders. "Come with me, Mate."

Gary looked up at the huge bulk of Rudi, who, in turn, placed his arm around Gary's shoulders and said jokingly, "No worries. I'll look after you, Boss."

The Vietnamese wore inscrutable masks.

Each small group said their quiet farewells then crept off into shadows, lighter now with the promise of dawn. Gary estimated that at best, they'd all probably manage three hours of sleep before they returned to their 'Flags' rendezvous.

The early morning air was brisk and cool. They kept to back alleys to avoid the 'White Mice'. Within twenty minutes Gary and Rudi were in a large room. Their newly acquired Marine and Ranger friends sat around it. In the centre was a large double bed. Around it a white mosquito net. It looked like a palace boudoir. The Vietnamese officers were ready to party on. Gary and Rudi looked at each other.

Both aware they needed to rest they wondered how to convince their hosts?

Rudi said loudly, "I'm for bed, Boss." Without waiting he tore off his shirt.

The Freedom Fighters...

He lost some buttons in the process but exposed an extremely hairy chest. Their hosts were stunned but more was to come. Rudi kicked off his shoes and hurtled them obscenely across the room into a vacant corner.

Then he quickly ripped off his trousers. He wore no underpants or socks.

Before their startled, disbelieving eyes Rudi stood, a huge nude savage with a long hanging dick a stallion would have been proud of. Even Gary found the raw, naked exposure unbelievable as he stared at the huge, circumcised sea-slug attached by a scraggly mop of sprouting jet-black hairs and its longer, sagging sac.

The room cleared as if by magic. None of the Vietnamese elected to stay around. Some fled out through the windows. Three bolted to the French doors and got jammed and the two Aussies howled as the Rangers struggled free. The remainder disappeared through the entrance.

Rudi bellowed, "That fixed 'em, Boss. Now we can sleep."

Without further ado he snorted, pawed the ground simulating a randy bull then threw himself on the bed. He pulled up the sheet and spread his legs wide apart and ruffled the bolster under his thick neck. He was ready.

Gary walked over and gave Rudi a hefty push. "Listen, you bastard." Gary smiled. "If you think I'm going to sleep with you like that, you're mistaken. Move over. I'll sleep, clothed, on top of that sheet, thank you."

The Freedom Fighters...

Down the hallway outside they could hear the Rangers' whispers.

As Rudi shifted position and adjusted the sheet, a deep rumble in his belly exploded like a volcano into a huge guffaw. Whispers stopped as if struck by lightning.

Rudi, still laughing erupted, "Did you see the bastards move boss. None of the little pricks fancied a tango with this." He ripped the sheet off and grabbed his huge dick in his bear-like paws then waved its floppiness.

Gary laughed a good belly laugh with Rudi, remembering the speed everyone had left their room. How they'd squeezed through the windows he could only guess.

Gary didn't undress but walked over to the main door and turned out the light at the wall, after first ensuring before he did that the bedside lamp was still on.

Then he wandered back and lay on his half of the mattress, half of the sheet already draped over Rudi's now recumbent form.

"Goodnight, Rudi."

But Rudi was already fast asleep. A deep rumbling snore Gary's only answer.

TWO

REVOLUTIONARIES...

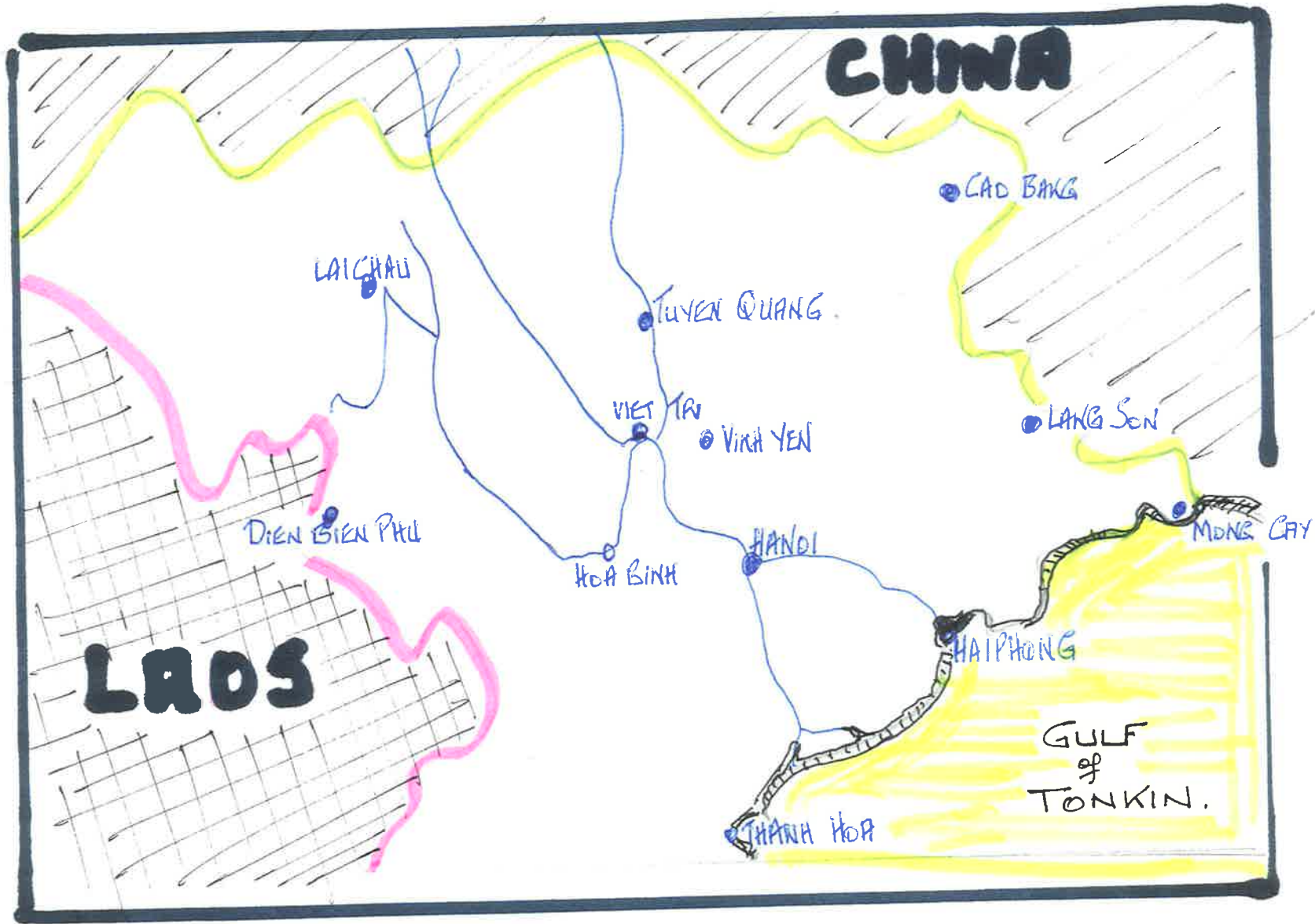
"May friendship bloom between Vietnam, China and the USSR!

With each passing day Imperialism shudders more violently,

faced with the love that unites the workers."

Vietnamese Song of Freedom

TONKIN



The Revolutionaries...

1944: Vinh, son of Tran...

VINH LISTENED AS THE AMERICAN COAXED KHAI'S UNCLE.

The tinkling of those breaking glasses had been the last sound in his small universe until Troy spoke. Like the rest, Vinh had succumbed to Troy's spell. The group worked in perfect harmony under the American's courteous tutelage.

All weapons simultaneously pointed to the floor. Then it was over.

The episode reminded Vinh of the press of cold steel against his own temple the day French legionnaires had invaded his hamlet, Tien Doan. The French mercenaries had attacked in the early morning, just as black turns to grey. He'd just been fourteen.

Ho Chi Minh's jungle hideout in North Vietnam took the form of a triangle. The apex hid itself in the mists bordering China, north-east of the large town of Cao Bang. The triangle's base skirted the River Lo in the south-west.

Tuyen Quang rested at the centre-point of the triangle's base in North Vietnam, in this mountainous region of Tonkin. With its population of five-thousand it was one of four most populous towns. Tuyen Quang's people and its administration supported the 'League for the Independence of Vietnam', or Vietminh. Initially a guerrilla force established by Ho Chi Minh in 1941, the Vietminh fought the Japanese whose occupation had turned his beloved country into a war zone.

The Revolutionaries...

In 1944, Ho Chi Minh's new Vietminh government made powerful appeals for education, unity and national salvation from their 'secret triangle' in the mountainous jungles far to the north of Vinh's village, Tien Doan, or village of the Doan family.

Tien Doan clung to the riverbank ten kilometres north of Tuyen Quang and boasted a hundred thatch-roofed homes, an administrative and health centre plus a marketplace. Vinh's whole family attended its Catholic church, though their prevailing philosophy was Confucian and they welcomed Buddhist monks into their home. The village administrators co-opted Tran to lead their literacy campaign. Ho Chi Minh's ambitious social reform programs and nationwide appeal to "destroy illiteracy as an enemy" had galvanised him. Tran proved an effective, educated political activist.

Tran's son, Vinh, had gone to school at Tuyen Quang and learned to speak Chinese and French. Tran, a history teacher like Vo Nguyen Giap, wanted his son to be well educated and take his rightful place in the new Vietnam. He'd hoped his son would graduate to the Lycee Albert Sarraut in Hanoi. But that was closed in 1943. No one could have predicted at that time that French, the language of an educated Vietnam, would not survive two more decades. WWII changed Vietnam forever.

Ho Chi Minh's rapid organisation of the Vietminh was none too soon. The worst floods for decades hit Tonkin and northern Annam in August 1944.

Tran explained this calamity to his small family: Vinh, sixteen-years-old: Phouc aged eight: and finally Thuyet, born early in 1944. Thuyet quietly suckled at the open breast of Binh, Tran's beloved wife.

The Revolutionaries...

Priest of his ancestral Confucian cult, Tran held complete authority over his children and wife. They listened attentively and with due respect.

“During the war with the Japanese, goods from France ceased, causing food shortages. As you know, large towns like our own Tuyen Quang with its open cut mines and a railway, plus our greatest northern cities, Hanoi and Haiphong, became targets for American bombs. It became difficult to run Tonkin, our northern section.” Tran paused for emphasis... “Now the floods have come.”

With the exception of Thuyet, now sleeping at her mother’s breast, the family “Oooed and Ahhhh’d” appropriately. Tran nodded his approval then continued. “Rivers have burst their dykes all across the south of Tonkin and northern Annam. Our country, always short of rice, finds now the rice fields are flooded and harvests destroyed. We survive on supplies from our beloved brothers in the south, especially in the huge rice-bowl below Saigon. The bombing of railway lines in the south and attacks on our ships means little rice for everyone. It is a national calamity.”

Sadness cloyed the air. Tran mopped his brow. The children hung their heads. “Instead of easing the pressures on us, the French, as lackeys of the Japanese, increased their tax demands on us.” Tran’s voice faltered. “Japanese and French warehouses and granaries are bulging with food but they are stored for Japanese soldiers and French colonists. At the same time our Vietnamese people are dying in their tens of thousands.” Tears formed in Tran’s eyes. “Our starving country cousins have flocked to towns like Tuyen Quang, hoping for enough food for their families.” Tran looked grimly at the bowed heads, took a deep breath, then, spoke stridently.

The Revolutionaries...

“Already our people are dying in the streets and it’s much worse down river.”

“How can it be worse, Honourable Father?” Vinh mirrored his father’s agitation.

“Much worse than we can ever imagine, my son.” Grief wracked his voice. “In bigger towns like Hanoi and Haiphong, friends have told me that every day the carts come.”

Vinh and Phouc gasped in unison. “Carts?”

“Yes, my sons.” Tran’s head fell, downcast.

The whole family kept their heads low. Vinh stared absently at the dirt floor.

“The height of the famine was in the third lunar month of 1945. A friend in Nam Dinh watches carts daily hauling bodies past his home. He told me that ox carts collect the bodies. They are then buried in mass graves.”

Binh wept openly. Thuyet stirred disconsolately. Binh stroked her. Thuyet opened her almond eyes, gurgled softly, looked around then settled.

Tran choked as he continued. “Yes. In Nam Dinh peasants are dying in huge numbers. Those dying of starvation often crowd into the backyards of homes begging for food.” His eyes openly wept bucketfuls. “People have set up soup kitchens like here in Tuyen Quang but Nam Dinh’s problem is too great.” His anger blazed. “Some people are eating the corpses. The French aren’t helping.” Tran paused and looked around.

The Revolutionaries...

No one looked him in the face. Binh made the sign of the cross and her sons followed.

Tran continued. "My friend tells me he has been asked to leave his job by the French colonists because his heart isn't hard enough. As a government official he was entitled to received half of the bourgeoisie allocation. He refused the extra rations."

"French bourgeoisie, Father?" Vinh quickly learned the new communist vocabulary.

"No, my son. Vietnamese, it is high-ranking officials, rich merchants and industrialists who are allowed to buy sugar, salt, milk, coffee, flour and cloth and enough rice per person to feed a whole peasant family..." Defiantly his head raised. "...while others die." He looked directly at each of his family.

Tran's eyes swept the hut like the flash of heat and fire from an open blast furnace.

Vinh stood proud before his father. "I'm glad we voluntarily rationed ourselves and give essential food items to the homes and in the villages around us, Father."

Tran had reduced his family to two meals a day, one only of thin rice gruel.

"So why aren't others doing the same?" Vinh's lion's heart overflowed with distress for his people. "Who's helping our people?"

"The Vietminh." Tran's love for his eldest son flashed in his eyes. "Only the Vietminh can save Vietnam. We're lucky they have already set up in our village."

The Revolutionaries...

Vinh had never seen his father so deeply anguished.

Tran paused as he struggled to maintain composure. His cheeks flushed hot. Blood-speckled webs filled the whites of his eyes. The creases around his mouth deepened into cracks. Veins on Tran's forehead protruded. His jugular writhed and pulsed. Gradually his grief settled. He took a deep breath and composed himself.

He then continued. "East of our river the Lo, and down south, the Vietminh raid warehouses and storage depots to feed our people." His anger exploded again. "The French..." The full shock of betrayal hit Vinh. "deceived our people. They are here to exploit not to help us. They allowed the Japanese to freely enter Vietnam. Now the French join forces with them to exterminate the Vietminh. Only mobilised peasants can protect themselves."

Many of Vinh's classmates had left to join the Vietminh in bases in the peak of the 'Triangle' around Cao Bang.

Tran continued. "The armed resistance of the Vietminh cadres is our only safety. The French administration however, have stockpiled essential food hoping to profit from inflated prices as the disaster deepens. At prices our communities can't afford."

Even Vinh's schoolteacher had spat, disgustedly. "Frenchmen look after Frenchmen."

"Why don't the French help, Father?" Phouc's eight-year-old brain reeled. Suddenly he had a flash. "Where does our extra food come from, Father?"

The Revolutionaries...

Tran spread his hands. "To your first question, my son, the French make huge profits. They even sentenced people to death for stealing their own food." His eyes darkened. "To your second, Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh have mobilised the rich families from Tuyen Quang to donate to the smaller villages like our very own, Tien Doan."

Vinh choked. "With our country starving and in the grip of famine, Father, it feels wrong that we have so much."

Tran shrugged. "Eldest Son, we must survive. We are the base that the Vietminh must depend on. Now the French are hunting the Vietminh down... like vermin." Then he smiled dourly. "The Vietminh punish hoarders. In our major cities down south they raid French granaries. Uncle Ho's Vietminh provisional government cancelled poll, market and ferry taxes this year. They helped me set up the *cuu quoc*, the youth organisation in this region, that makes it possible to send you on your next camp."

Her face deferentially lowered as in the Book of Rites, Binh spoke for the first time, quietly. "The Vietminh have special priority on the youth of Vietnam. You two boys are our hope for the future. You will have to protect dear Thuyet." Then she wept.

Phouc, looking at the floor, added, "Father, I believe without Uncle Ho's direction we would die in this area too. The Vietminh are the people's heroes, aren't they?"

"Yes my son. Uncle Ho is our saviour." His father's eyes regained their lustre. "We have a new Vietnam. One nation under one democratically elected President."

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Later, Tran became the executor for the Vietminh cadres throughout the area with the support of the Tien Doan elders. He used Vietminh pamphlets as a basis to exhort that “it’s patriotic to become educated”. He enthusiastically conducted literacy campaigns “to form youth associations as the spearhead of the new nation”. He fomented social pressure so that “meetings must have expectations all the patriotic will attend”. Finally he implemented negative sanctions by policing the issue that “teachers must conduct public literacy tests at the gate of the village, as villagers come home”.

Tran exceeded the village council’s aims. The village elder, Quang Ngoc Doan, father of Vinh’s best friend, held Tran in high esteem. Seventy percent of his village, under Tran’s tutelage, managed to pass the literacy tests within one year. Previously they’d had a ninety percent failure rate. Quintessentially humble, his sons were proud of him.

His Confucian-based discipline kept them suitably modest.

Vinh recalled a meeting of the whole village, addressed by his father. “I accept your choice to be deputy district chief of the People’s Revolutionary Committee.” The assembled village wholeheartedly applauded Tran’s commitment.

Tran had raised his hand to silence them. “I didn’t desire this position but you, my people, have found me a person of integrity. I thank you. Wherever I go I find you listening to my ideas to invoke Uncle Ho’s precepts. You all respected me as a teacher. I only want to be your servant.” At his side stood Binh, his wife.

The people cheered him. Binh smiled and clapped unreservedly.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Tran continued, "We have averted a disaster but there is much work still to be done. Our French administrators believe they are our masters. Now, with Uncle Ho as President this must change. All must change. Carpe diem... We must seize this day. For the first time since the French colonial oppressors arrived we can once more rule ourselves. Uncle Ho has ordered our women must also seize initiatives. Binh, my beloved, last night accepted the challenge that Ong Bu has thrown to us. She is a true daughter of the Revolution and will henceforth stand beside me."

The people went wild. It took a long time before they were able to listen again. Binh's pride in Tran's accomplishments was only exceeded by Vinh's patriotic fervor.

When the tumult died down, Binh looked around the assembled villagers, meeting the eyes of her new sisters and daring the men to hold her gaze. She reinforced the point that, "For the first time since the Trung Sisters, we women are equal with political voice in our future. Our sisters must be supported, without stinting."

Tran, appointed first chairman of Tuyen Quang Vietminh provisional administration, stayed as often as he could with his family in Tien Doan. He explained to his family that, "It helps me to stay in touch with the revolution. Uncle Ho says we must include the peasants at every step and destroy the mandarin class. It is they who let the French betray us and who now support the Japanese."

Tran became a new man under Ho Chi Minh's leadership. Ho Chi Minh used his peasant villagers as weapons to forge the consciousness of the newly emerging nation.

Tran's effectiveness enthused others of his family.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

His brother Le Duc Dat, in Tuyen Quang, was appointed the head of military supplies for the provisional defence police, the *canh ve*. Ho Chi Minh's communists were in the minority. Le Duc Dat moulded his unit from Catholic, Buddhist and Communist townsfolk and villagers. Within a year, from a small cadre of twenty it grew to one-hundred-and-twenty and its training excellence warranted a visit by Vo Ngyuen Giap.

An Annamite from a small village like Tien Doan, Giap had been chosen by Uncle Ho to guide the formation of the defence units exclusively trained in the north. Le Duc Dat insisted his younger brother Tran and Tran's eldest son, Vinh, be part of Giap's reception committee. Tran had been born during the heady days of the October Revolution. Vinh, an impressionable teenager, found it impossible to be separate from the politically active maelstrom his father created. He joined the Young Pioneers. His mother joined the Association of Vietnamese Mothers. Evenings were spent excitedly planning and reviewing ways to initiate and maintain Uncle Ho's initiatives.

Tran indoctrinated Vinh with Vietnamisation. This inculcated his passion for Uncle Ho's nationalist brand of communism.

Vinh learned the cultural and traditional history of Vietnam from his revered grandfather, Quan, each year when the family holidayed in Hanoi. Born in 1890, Quan comfortably embraced French, Chinese and Vietnamese cultures.

Phouc anticipated and applauded his older brother's fast-growing enthusiasm. He learned not to argue with Vinh. He found personal solace however, in Catholic contemplation. Tran noted the softness. Phouc doted on his mother.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

More especially, Phouc loved Thuyet. She was his 'Little Princess'.

Vinh's thirteenth birthday occurred on the same day Uncle Ho was elected President. The village of Tien Doan feted Vinh as though he too had been elected President of their small but happy community. On that day Vinh also won the heart of little Mai. Both in sixth form, they'd been officially introduced on Vinh's auspicious birthday.

A year after Uncle Ho's election they'd managed to meet again at their school's Youth Union, which had organised a vacation camp at Viet Tri, near where the great rivers Lo (Clear) and Hung (Red) met to form one huge channel to the delta. The terrible floods had receded but devastation remained in their wake. Vinh had never been aware Mai had noticed him. Not until the youth camp where they realised the year-long secret yearnings each held for the other. Mai camped separately with the girls, not far away. The weather proved propitious. The day the students arrived the rainy clouds had parted, the sun shone warmly from a bright blue sky and the damp ground had quickly dried.

Mai's brother, Tran Ngoc Doan, two years older than Vinh, had become his friend at school. A slow learner he'd finished up in Vinh's class. The quicker, brighter Vinh helped Doan in his studies and Doan had become his self-selected 'guardian'. Physically stronger and a ruthless fighter, bullies soon learned to keep away from the two fast friends. Vinh and Doan pitched their tents to be near each other on the sloping banks of the River Lo. Afterward they helped each other collect armloads of wood for the evening campfire. On that first evening a huge one was to be lit. The longest and thickest logs were stacked like a tent.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

After everything had been prepared for the fire, they would eat. Vinh and Mai could tell their favourite camping meal by its fragrant aroma. *Bun Cha* seduced their nostrils. Chosen by the teachers because it was easy to eat and simplest they prepared it by grilling small strips of pork. Before cooking, the pork had been marinated.

They mixed sweet and sour sauce, hot chillis and salt. The Vietnamese way of combining these herbs and spices melded their individual tastes into a unique blend that made the two adolescents salivate. As Vinh and Mai passed the teachers in their disciplined student lines, grilled pork was placed on their cold noodles. On the end of each line a seconded student sprinkled fresh herbs. The herbs gave *Bun Cha* its final characteristic taste and smell. Many students had brought them from home before mixing the appropriate herbs in a communal bowl.

“*Bun Cha* is unforgettable...” Vinh shared with Mai.

She agreed, timorously, until Vinh told her of his Mother’s radical behaviour change.

Vinh waxed poetic about *Bun Cha*. “In the blue smoke it makes as it sizzles on the charcoal burners I see the early morning mists that caress the hilltops in our mountain country. Its aroma makes my belly ache like a lover’s anticipation and in the sound of spluttering fat it whispers promises.” He paused to see how Mai received his poetry. Exhilarated further by her response he became lyrical. “As the teacher’s fans pass over the coals they remind me of the sacred willows hugging the banks of the Lo, near our home. The movement of their hands reminds me of the times when gentle breezes, passing by on their way to their mountain homes, brush their branches lightly.”

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Mai's eyes lit up. Like most traditional Vietnamese females, she judged menfolk not by deeds alone. Poetry, singing and knowledge of legend were important assets too. In their Annamite Code Professional musicians were not considered an honourable calling but poetry and the chanting of ancient refrains accompanied by guitar were.

Her mother had read to Mai the legend of the sacred willow. Today reminded her about that time, long ago, when the king's favourite son had almost died. A holy man from India broke a branch of the willow tree. Dipping it in the waters of the mighty Red River he sprinkled it on the prince. He'd miraculously been cured. From thence the willow was sacred. After they'd eaten, Mai pointed to the nearby bank of the river and smiled. A large willow trailed its branches in the river's flow. They enjoyed the fire together. In the biggest fire either had seen, Vinh watched glowing cinders sparkling and crackling like Tet fireworks into the night sky.

The exploding embers lit up Mai's face. She was exquisite, like the beautiful but simple Madonna captured on canvas in their Tien Doan church, which had always entranced Vinh. Long black hair tumbled around Mai's shoulders. Dark soulful eyes devoured his in the light of the dancing, cavorting flames of the fire. The moon had splashed into the river when Vinh and Mai moved among the willows on the bank.

A light breeze moved the branches. He drew Mai's attention to it. They both settled on a gently sloping bank and for a few moments drank in the scene. Above them the Milky Way shone its myriad stars. The river glistened. Muted voices in the background at first reminded the two listeners of the whirr of a full beehive. Then the students started singing and the two lovers recognised their student songs.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Guitars softly strummed in the background and their crystal-clear notes seemed to make the river shimmer in the moonlight. Vinh protectively hugged Mai.

He whispered, "This is so perfect." He paused, "Isn't the sky clearer here than in Tuyen Quang, little sister? It is much more like the sky above Tien Doan."

Instead of answering, Mai smiled into Vinh's eyes. She had brought her guitar. She lightly fingered a few chords then as she sang a quiet refrain. The two sank into each other's eyes. Some of the students must have heard. Before she'd finished about a dozen surrounded them. Neither Mai nor Vinh felt or saw the students arrive.

Vinh knew then that he and Mai were bound by Karma. And that she also *knew*.

A moment of silence, "Sing another song, little sister."

Slowly Vinh adjusted to external reality. Shadowed his eyes. Looked across at Mai. She plucked nervously at her guitar until she found the correct chord then smiled affirmation at him. She looked across at Doan, her big brother. He nodded.

Taking a deep breath Mai focussed only on Vinh as she raised her head. Moonlight reflected her features. She began a love song, addressed to a soldier on his way to the front. They had no eyes except for each other. Far to the south a silent thunderstorm played in the sky and lit up the far horizon. It silently flashed forked lightning, illuminating ominous clouds. They could not hear its awesome sound as it crackled its urgent, turbulent and sweeping destruction over the delta.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Mai continued her wistful song. They formed a storybook pair. He, strong and virile, sculpted without the maturity of body hairs. She, virginally beautiful and swathed in long black tresses. Both clearly in love.

Some of the young female students sniffed loudly then became embarrassed, unaware of any reason for their mounting depression. The poignancy of her song had swept over them. The distant storm a presentiment. The young men shifted uncomfortably. Drew their girlfriends protectively closer. Then the students left... quietly.

Mai's song ended and she waited. Vinh finally woke from his trance. Simultaneously they embraced. Each whispered urgent words to the other. Both swore undying love.

Cold finally penetrated their passion. They didn't notice the stars were weeping.

Vinh's protective arms tightened around her slim shoulders and he drew Mai into his waning warmth. Reluctantly they left the place that had become a sacred tryst.

The storm moved closer. Stars died. The southern sky lit to the tumult of warring clouds. The wind freshened. No longer gentle, it signalled impending danger.

2nd September 1945: a new era dawns...

TRUMAN ORDERED A SECOND ATOMIC BOMB DROPPED ON NAGASAKI

This act, on 17th August, forced the unconditional surrender of all Japanese troops.

Vinh's birthday celebrations straddled world-shattering events. Uncle Ho operated mainly around and east of Tuyen Quang. Vinh's village helped with supplies.

Vinh assumed Ho Chi Minh's guerrilla units had achieved victory over the Japanese. On 19th August 1945, Ho Chi Minh was elected President of the Republic of Vietnam. Two weeks later General McArthur received the swords of the Japanese Army aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay on 2nd September 1945.

On that same day, Ho Chi Minh announced the Independence of Vietnam in Hanoi.

Tran had been born into a family history deeply committed to liberation from all foreigners. He believed his son's birth date heralded a new era for Vietnam and for the Vietnamese people and he'd taken his family to Hanoi for the Feast of Vietnamese Martyrs on that same 'Victory over Japan' or VJ day, Sunday, 2nd September 1945.

Tran's family set off in the two cargo junks owned by the village. A wet nurse cared for Thuyet. Phuoc wanted to stay with her. Phouc doted on his 'little princess' and both parents were relieved. It had been a holiday to remember. Everyone helped decorate the village junks in streamers and coloured bunting.

The Revolutionaries...

The hundred-kilometre trip down-river had turned into a holiday. Tran's small family enjoyed high Mass at Hanoi cathedral. They celebrated it with millions of Catholics throughout North Vietnam. Vinh's adolescent chest had almost burst with pride as he listened to the homily that supported Ho Chi Minh's communist regime. Almost the whole village of Tien Doan was there, decked out in traditional clothes and led by the village elder. Tran's threesome had almost been crushed in the streets on their way to Ba Dinh square in Hanoi.

Almost half a kilometre long and a hundred metres wide the huge square led directly from the Citadel. In 1894, the French had destroyed most of the ancient buildings constructed in the Citadel, the oldest part of Hanoi. Grandfather Quan had been born four years earlier. Ba Dinh Square faced the Presidential Palace to the right and the One Pillar Pagoda to its left. The original pagoda was built in 1049 of wood on a single stone pillar. It had a beautiful legend associated with the Goddess of Mercy. When the French left Hanoi for good later in 1954, they vindictively destroyed this ancient monument to peace and harmony.

Hundreds of thousands gaily decked in traditional costumes from all parts of Tonkin welcomed each other. Expectation fevered the still air. Tai mixed with Man, Miao, Lolo and Moung; peasants with townspeople and foreigners with Tonkinese: Tonkin women were decked out in brightly coloured regional cloth: and Vinh remembered his mother in her ao dai. Back and front panels flowed yellow-gold over her ankle length black silk trousers. For most of the morning before Mass she swept and brushed her black flowing hair until the sun envied its sparkle. She looked so beautiful with her smiling face sheltered from the sun under her cone-shaped hat.

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Vinh's heart was full. Mai's family struggled through the crowd side by side with Vinh's. Two of the most beautiful women in the world, both of whom loved him, now walked close to him. It was the happiest day of his life. Doan tagged along in the rear.

Although Vietnamese parents normally arranged a union for marriage without consultation with their children, it seemed a mark of the emerging new era that both families were already following the intricate and carefully formulated rules in the Book of Rites for the marriage of the two youngsters. Both parents, though peasants, were unlikely 'to act the son-in-law'. In such cases the poorer parent was 'gilded' to the other set of parents for three years. They had to work off dowry requirements before the marriage was concluded.

But each village held Vinh and Mai's families in equal respect. In their case the dowry could be negotiated to satisfy community and family. A marked feature of their Annamite culture was this strong communal system, binding all its members in a set of financial, religious and political obligations. Each member sustained by the other.

An intricate weave. Vinh was convinced the long-way-into-the-future marriage was Karmic re-enactment. Today however, the silken sheen thrilled his skin each time Mai's tresses touched him. In the growing humidity Vinh hardly noticed his shirt had stuck to his back. Unconsciously he brushed the sweat from his brow.

Tran stared, in escalating excitement. Slogans on placards, streamers, boards and on many other materials were in Vietnamese, Chinese and French. Others were worded in a strange language he assumed, correctly, must be English.

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All bore variations of the same messages. "Vietnam for the Vietnamese". "Death to all oppressors". Tran's family and friends struggled to get as close to the central dais as possible. They left behind anti-French slogans and graphic pictures of French aggression on placards. The crush made breathing difficult but, determined to get a glimpse of Ho Chi Minh, they ignored the difficulties and pressed on.

Vinh passed Buddhist priests in their distinctive orange and yellow, and Cao Dai in white contrasted with their jewelled and brightly embroidered turbans. Vinh glanced at the Catholic dignitaries but his attention became rivetted on Ho Chi Minh's soldiers. As his family squashed closer to the dais, these appeared smartest, in their pith helmets, khaki uniforms and strange new weapons at the ready. They contrasted with Le Duc Dat's unit. Tran's brother had brought them to protect his family. Le Duc Dat's self-defence militia looked splendid in black jackets and trousers sewn by the village women under the direction of the two brothers.

That momentous time when Giap had visited Tuyen Quang. 'Uncle' Le Duc Dat inveigled the Vietminh to give him a supply of captured Japanese weapons for Giap's guard of honour. They presented a more stirring spectacle than ancient muskets, machetes and crossbows. In their assorted clothing Le Duc Dat's indigenous militia carried a miscellany of weapons.

As close as they dared, Vinh stared at Giap's best troops and the honour guard surrounding the saluting dais. He could judge their devotion and discipline to Uncle Ho by their smart uniforms and proud erect carriage. He wanted to be old enough to stand with these soldiers. The banners and flags hardly stirred.

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Midday. Directly overhead the sun glared down. The distinguishing red flag of the Vietminh, with its single gold star in the centre, hung at the rear of the dais. In the sun's oppressive heat this large symbol of freedom hung limply. It was a premonition.

Vinh could not have sensed the warning. Instead a thrill of excitement rippled through him like a summer breeze through the rice paddies just before harvest. Everywhere, faces strained with inner exultation. Whistle blasts were followed by shouted orders. The guard snapped to attention and the crowd ceased buzzing and calling.

Even the massive crowd responded to military discipline.

In the now electric atmosphere Vinh thanked God that no surge attended the change. It would have crushed them without mercy. He'd never believed so many people could fit in one place. The whole of the Vietnamese world must be there, he thought.

He momentarily forgot the heat and the sweat.

As the soldiers executed a smart 'present arms' an expectant hush fell. Among the dignitaries assembled on the rostrum, Vinh knew the small almost frail-looking figure in the centre had to be Uncle Ho. The picture etched itself forever in his brain. The single-handed hero who'd brought about the unification of Vietnam. Vinh never remembered who introduced Uncle Ho to speak. All around him a swell of at least one-hundred thousand voices chanted... "Doc Lap"... Independence. For what seemed an eternity, waves of "Doc Lap" ... "Doc Lap" ... "Doc Lap". It became a mantra that swept the square until to his teenage mind it filled his universe.

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Vinh noticed Mai's hand had stolen into his. His heart swelled.

Vinh wanted to fly across the tops of the soldier's bayonets to throw himself at the feet of Ho Chi Minh. A smile broke across that revered face and the other dignitaries on the dais seemed to shrink. Vinh would swear ever after that Uncle Ho smiled directly at him. He raised his hand not in a salute or royal wave, more as the response of a grandfather to his waiting children.

It took only a few moments for the crowd to cease chanting and to become silent. Ho Chi Minh's first words boomed into Vinh's soul.

"All men are created equal." They hung in the air. Then, "The Creator has given us certain inviolable rights: the right to Life, the right to be free and the right to achieve happiness."

Uncle Ho waited, then called out, "Can you hear me clearly, my fellow countrymen?" Vinh strained to make his voice heard above the tumult that yelled back, "YES."

Like every single person in the gigantic crowd, he hung on every word, memorising every nuance, each stop for breath and each syllable Uncle Ho uttered. Vinh's world suddenly centred around inherited emotions, fostered by his father, his family and the older members of his village. The colossus of the crowd suddenly appeared to Vinh as ONE. Driven to splendid madness by Uncle Ho.

Towering over the crowd Ho infected him with irredeemable and fervent nationalism.

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This virus would never leave Vinh, right up to the moment he died.

Ho Chi Minh reminded the crowd, "These immortal words were first pronounced in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America, in 1776." He stopped and looked around to ensure the crowd followed every word. Then, "In a larger sense this means that... All people on earth are born equal." He paused again. "All people have the right to live, to be happy, to be free."

Vinh's heart gasped. The Venerable leader stopped and smiled. It seemed to Vinh that Ho Chi Minh's eyes never left him, "The Declaration of the French Revolution states the same fundamental Human Rights". In a daze, Vinh heard Ho explain that, "This Declaration also states: Men are born and must remain free and have equal rights."

Ho Chi Minh paused then slowly articulated, "These... are... undeniable... Truths." Cathedral bells pealed as Ho's words burned into Vinh's brain. They would feed and nurture his soul's darkest moments. Then Uncle Ho removed his famous pith helmet and spoke for almost an hour. His bushy head held high, he denounced the French. A slight breeze stirred thin wisps of hair and fluttered in his Confucius-like beard.

Uncle Ho was the only one on the stage in a military uniform.

Vinh memorised key phrases he would repeat often to friends. "For more than eighty years, the French colonialists, abusing their very own standard of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, have violated our Nation and oppressed our people." He had paused. The crowd's silence showed they hung on his every word.

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Vinh heard Ho Chi Minh gasp his prison cough, softly. Vinh wept with his people.

The harangue continued. "The French imposed inhuman laws ... wrecked our national unity... built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots... have drowned each uprising in rivers of blood." His voice rose in indignation. "To weaken our race they have forced us to use opium and alcohol... devastated our lands... robbed us of our rice fields, forests and our raw materials... reduced our peasants to extremes of poverty ... and mercilessly exploited our workers." Ho's tirade continued. "From the end of 1944 to the beginning of 1945... from Quang Tri to Tonkin... more than two million of our fellow countrymen died of starvation..." Vinh's liberated heart seemed to stop, "whilst the French stood by and let it happen." Then it swallowed itself in hatred for the French and all the exploiters and rapists of his beautiful country. He swore unswerving fealty to his national hero.

His brain spun into a vortex. From then on he remembered only the essence of Uncle Ho's words. They etched each detail into his head. What impressed Vinh the most was that, even after describing in eloquent hate the profanities and excesses of the murderous French and their betrayal of the Vietnamese people to the Japanese, not once but twice, Uncle Ho forgave them. Vinh's father had taught Vinh a code of Confucian tolerance all his life. That incredible day Uncle Ho demonstrated it. Vinh's tumult of feelings confused him. Ho's argument now was about the Japanese. The French "abdicated their right to govern by capitulating to the Japanese". Since 1940 therefore, Vietnam had ceased to be a French colony.

"Our people... won their independence, not from the French but from the Japanese."

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Later, Ho Chi Minh often repeated this refrain, as he struggled to gain international acceptance of his country's independence. Especially from the Americans.

Vinh would never forget Uncle Ho's next declaration. "We the Provisional Government... repeal all international obligations France has made on behalf of the Vietnamese people... We abolish any special rights the French have unlawfully obtained in our country... We the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Vietnam has the right to be a free and independent country and is so already." Uncle Ho's next most memorable words he inscribed forever on his heart. "The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their spiritual and material forces, to sacrifice their lives and property, in order to guard their liberty and independence."

Vinh could not know Ho's words on that day would, over the next thirty years, plunge his world into two long wars against separate and powerful Western countries. Even if he had, in his mind Vinh determined to be a heroic warrior for his country. He would shirk neither pain nor discomfort to retain his country's independence. The two words, 'Independence' and 'Freedom', poured balm on all previous hurt and fired his soul. He would show Uncle Ho that he, Vinh, would be worthy of any sacrifice.

Mia winced. Vinh had clasped his fist so tightly he'd almost crushed her tiny hand.

Before he could apologise it was Giap's turn. Vinh immediately recognised the short figure. Giap, with his almost unruly mop of hair, looked relaxed on stage. The only one dressed formally in a dark suit, white shirt and tie.

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Like Vinh's father, Giap looked like the history teacher he had been. The epitome of an important Minister of the Interior with Uncle Ho's first administration, Giap emphasised the importance of America and China as special allies of Vietnam.

Later, Vinh's father told him that Giap had made no mention of the Soviet Union. Tran felt this set the emphasis for the type of communism that would mark Vietnam's rise to "...a new glorious nationhood". Giap stated, "The United States of America has paid the greatest contribution to Vietnamese Independence..." and that America "fought against fascist Japan, and so the Great American Republic is our good ally." On this auspicious day in September 1945, and when all speeches were concluded, each member of the first administration swore allegiance to the "Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam."

The crowd gasped. A breeze proudly flapped the gold-starred flag. A good omen?

A poignant moment many had fought for, all the people around Vinh, especially his father, were weeping. A mystical moment when many Vietnamese heroes, tortured and murdered in the past became present in the charged atmosphere. The First Vietnamese War of Independence had started against the Chinese colonial invasion two thousand centuries before. Vinh felt the presence of ancient heroic warriors.

He hardly remembered how they got back. The short two-kilometre walk took two hours. He vaguely remembered walking the full length of Luang Can Van street after they'd cut past the Citadel. They must have skirted Hoan Kien lake, the largest in the centre of Hanoi. At the junction of Pho Phung Hung street the crowd thinned.

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It made it easy to cross over the railway line, then north to the Doumer bridge. Back in their village Tran's Buddhist friends reported the same support for Ho Chi Minh at all Buddhist temples throughout Tonkin. They also reported the troubles experienced by their comrades during "Black Sunday" in Saigon. A massacre was reported in the Cholon area. The Second Vietnamese War of Independence had started.

This time the war was against the French. A short eleven months after election as president of Vietnam, Uncle Ho fought yet again for the political survival of his Viet Minh. He was forced to retreat to the far point of the triangle east of Tuyen Quang, following his 'call to arms' of the Vietnamese people on 19th December 1946.

It would end in 1954, in the village of Dien Bien Phu, just two hundred kilometres south-west of Tuyen Quang to become a lonely, critical bastion for the French Army in Indochina and a major battle initiation for Vinh.

Tran cursed the "French canards". Le Duc Dat alerted his guerrilla force. The Vietminh and their supporters demanded nothing less than 'Vietnamese freedom from colonialist oppression'. They railed against French oppression, repression and murder. French intransigence would add to another long list of Vietnamese martyrs. Vinh's area became the important strategic resistance centre of Uncle Ho's defensive triangle along the northern sector of River Lo. The war moved closer.

Convinced his sons were too young to join Ho Chi Minh's guerrilla bands, Tran tearfully told them of the French shelling of Haiphong that had precipitated Ho Chi Minh's declaration of war. The French had killed six thousand in Haiphong alone.

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They wounded more than twice that number of civilians. Tran's relatives and those of his river-boat friends were among the injured who swamped Hanoi's hospitals.

Haiphong capitulated but Tran proudly reminded his sons, "The mountains of Tonkin have for centuries been the sanctuary and redoubt of Vietnamese revolutionaries and Uncle Ho's Vietminh base at Tuyen Quang was the resistance centre against the French fifty years ago." He predicted "It will be so again and for good reason."

In the quiet evenings Tran taught his sons the importance of Tuyen Quang's location. "Until the Great War 1914-18, the French did little to develop the mining." Modern industry then developed quickly in the greedy hands of French monopolies. Large coal deposits south of Hanoi were a major contributor to the French economy. "Tuyen Quang became of strategic importance to the colonial French in the late 19th century."

The discovery of coal added to Tuyen Quang's significance, "although our production can't approach the extensive mining in Quang Yen nearer to Hanoi and Haiphong." Quang Yen accounted for ninety-eight percent of mining output for the whole of Tonkin and "coal mining is an important French mining activity". Tran looked thoughtfully into the distance, "The Tonkin coal-mines account for sixty-three percent of total mineral production throughout the whole of Indochina." He knocked his pipe against the grate and re-filled it slowly.

Mother filled their teacups moving gracefully but purposefully around their small home. Binh, comfortable in the roles of wife, mother and housekeeper, also tended the vegetable garden and the family rice plot, helping sometimes with the fishing nets

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As though this was not enough, Binh had taken on the responsibility of raising the consciousness of the village women as revolutionaries. She stood beside Tran on all formal occasions and had earned the respect of her eldest son as well as that of the village for whom, in Tran's absence, she became the 'wise one'. She required diplomacy not to ruffle the feathers of the village Elders.

Tran had sailed with Vinh past Tuyen Quang. "Our combination of fishing, mining and river traffic makes us strategically important to the French". He learned to recognise the power of living at the confluence of the two major river systems the Lo and Song Gam. "This the most northern point in Tonkin to which ships and steamers can navigate in all seasons. Our mighty Lo stretches from China, over one hundred kilometres to the north. It then joins the Song Chay in the south to merge finally into the two mighty river systems of the Fleuve Rouge (Red River) and the Fleuve Noire (Black River). These disgorge into the great delta region of the Gulf of Tonkin."

His teacher role made Father passionate. "In the Wet the two rivers discharge a flow of water equal to the largest in Europe and double that of the Nile or the Indus. Ease of river navigation is the reason for the siting of major towns. In the heavily forested mountains upstream the great rivers are the only means of travel. Our people have used them as such for millennia. The Chinese imperialists used this all-season facility in ancient times". Tran explained how rail was difficult in the mountains with air-transport still a fledgling. The rivers carried heavy traffic, especially in bulky goods such as building materials, pottery and rice as well as a huge flow of people traffic. The ease of access to and from China through some of the most difficult terrain in Tonkin, "is what made Ho Chi Minh select this as his redoubt".

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Tran paused, sucked a long time on his pipe, before continuing, "Each year, over 300,000 passengers embark and disembark in Hanoi." He'd once travelled to the border of China along these river systems and excited Vinh with the vision that, "Starting inside China, and two hundred kilometres away to our south is the mighty Mekong. Gateway to Laos, it meanders through Cambodia down to South Vietnam."

Vinh gasped. He'd sit for hours watching the sampans, cargo junks and steamers plying up and down this mighty river flowing past his doorstep. He meditated, "all that water, flowing in one direction since the beginning of time". The constancy of the river's flow and of its seasons never left Vinh's breast. He learned to love his ancient and proud heritage as he imagined Chinese traders in their huge trading vessels.

Father regaled him with the awe these great ships must have incited in the breasts of an ancient people only used to sampans and barges. Impressed on him the significance of the war against Chinese economic and cultural invasion. "Our people took a millennia, to evict them. The French are only 'short-timers' in our land". He reminded Vinh, "in the late nineteenth century" their region was a major battle zone. "At Lang Son, 35,000 French troops were defeated by Chinese troops in 1885. Tuyen Quang was a major northern base in the first anti-colonial resistance in the 1890's."

Vinh's village, Tien Doan, nestled in the northern foothills of a high-peaked mountain that rose steeply from the River Lo, not far from Tuyen Quang and on the north-east bank of the River Lo. An open-cut Lignite coalmine dominated the southern side. Father's friends netted upstream of the mine, providing fresh fish for it and the town. Others steered the barges that carried ore and other goods downstream.

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When in Hanoi, Grandfather confirmed these resistance stories. "In 1890, the Chinese Black Flag revolutionaries, assisted by our Vietnamese guerrillas, encircled the French forces in Tuyen Quang and laid siege to it for three-and-a-half months." He'd paused and sadness overcame him, briefly. "Then, after a Franco-Chinese agreement was signed it formerly acknowledged Vietnam as a French colony." Grandfather had looked keenly at Vinh. "We lost the battle but we must not lose the war."

The old man had taken an active part in this. He nurtured Vinh on this anti-colonial and revolutionary diet and would often repeat, "Tuyen Quang is your inheritance".

One early morning in 1945, war and its related tragedy of murder, mayhem and massacre set about to destroy the fabric of Vinh's young life and those of his beloved family and social networks. Another thirty years but Peace still would not come.

Like so many other dawns that day started serenely. He listened to them as he wafted between waking and an idyllic awareness: felt the warming of the slowly waking sun: heard the splosh of the river against sampans: the soft sibilance of muffled voices, rising and falling like the tide: and smelt familiar aromas emanating from the kitchen. Behind closed eyes Vinh counted his heartbeats. He played his secret game that helped him relax... 'One heartbeat per second'. Vinh wriggled. Eased his back. The crisp rising mist entered his lungs through the open door of his thatched-roof home.

Thuyet and Phouc were with relatives in a fishing hamlet ten kilometres away.

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As the mist dissipated Vinh could see one large solitary post. The second was out of sight. Between the two, fish nets hung out to dry. Many of these fishermen were family or close friends. Some spent their lives in their boats, creating floating hamlets. Others operated in small teams. Vinh stretched up onto his elbow to watch those closest expertly using the *carrelet*, a large square net of two to four square metres.

He'd seen others used on the banks of the river or on floating rafts but these professional fishermen fished together as family. Two or three boats worked in unison, their nets suspended from bamboo rods attached to a long pole. They'd constructed a bamboo derrick and the pole balanced on its axis. This allowed the nets to be raised or lowered at will. As suffocating fish thrashed around in one of the raised loaded nets he recognised the owners of the small boats.

Some would sell their fresh fish in the town's market: others dried theirs: whilst yet others would be reduced to *nuoc mam*, the popular sauce prepared from fish livers. Everything on and about the river had the touch of the ancient and a feeling of timelessness. Vinh could imagine his people going about this same work three thousand years ago. His culture seeped into the marrow of his being.

In the middle of the wide, slow-moving river a fish pound drifted by. On one end a small compact hut housed the fisherman and often his family. It had a thatched roof with mud-and-straw sides. The twenty-foot long netted pound was constructed of tightly lashed bamboo poles and about five feet across. A bed of leaves protected the fish from the glare of the sun and from feathered predators. A small tug chugged into Vinh's view, echoing across the morning stillness. It steadied the ungainly craft.

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He anticipated the empty pound being towed upstream in a few days time. Other fisherman quietly loaded sampans for the Tuyen Quang Market. Vinh listened as Mother clinked and juggled among the cooking utensils, cleaning and preparing for breakfast. Behind her, he knew the remnants of the dawn mist kissed the ricefields.

In the morning sun's gentle ardour he allowed thoughts of Mai to caress his senses. It was as though the sun warmed him from the inside. Her sweet vision swam into his mindspace and the memory of her sweet passion welled tears unseen by others.

Mother called out to Tran. He sat between the posts helping friends quietly patch and sew their nets ready for their next fishing trip. Vinh's pulse quickened. Salivary glands anticipated their simple breakfast, rice and *banh cuon*. Father boasted that Mother's rice rolls were the best in the whole of the North. She would have a jar of specially prepared *nuoc mam* made from the fish he caught, which she would salt and ferment in her unique way. Vinh had watched her many times mixing in the garlic, chilli, sugar, vinegar and fresh lime. Mother had told him her secret lay in the quantities and in the grinding. His baby sister Thuyet was still too young to learn the culinary secrets, passed on in the ancient way from mother to daughter.

Thuyet would learn vicariously from watching Mother and in a year or two would 'play at house' like the other girls in the village. Thuyet and Phouc quietly replaced the vision of Mai. He saw his brother busy on the edge of a privately owned lake. Thuyet laughed her giggly intimacy as she played close to Phouc. He helped their aunty and uncle collect young fish upstream of River Lo. They had grown children but were not yet grandparents and loved the two boys but were captivated by Thuyet.

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Phouc now helped Uncle collect buckets-full of young fish. He then transferred them to restock the lake. The summer months were best for this. Phouc was old enough then to help his uncle and aunt and loved the process of enriching the nutrients of the lake with human and animal manure. A quiet amiable soul, he loved nature.

Not interested in revolution, his family teased Phouc about being a Catholic priest.

Vinh had started filling buckets the same way but was happy that summer to leave that task to Phouc. He was 'the man of the house' and his main task was learning his culture and focussing on formal education. Since that day in September when he'd witnessed Ho Chi Minh, Vinh's primary interest lay in membership of the Vietminh.

When both the men in her life were ready for breakfast Mother took out the fine rice-paper wrappers and wet them in boiling water. Lifting one out of the flat pan and fanning the rice-paper, she carefully rolled into it a selection of mushrooms, shallots and tiny river shrimps then closed the wrapper carefully so that nothing leaked. Slowly, methodically she repeated the process until there were two each.

Breakfast was ready when the *bahn cuon* cooled.

The ritual was always the same. Vinh loved the care Mother took in the preparation of each meal. As though each were made of most precious materials and with the precision of a religious ritual she'd then lay wrapped *bahn cuon* on three small plates, adding small sprigs of basil and coriander. Beside each plate she'd arrange a little bowl of chilli in vinegar and a small container of the black pepper.

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Vinh couldn't imagine any meal served without this intensely aromatic and sweet black pepper. In the mountainous North it was more characteristic than *nuoc mam*. It already tickled in his nostrils and fired his taste buds. He could hardly wait.

Vinh rolled over and sat upright. Today was a special day. He would be going to the market with Father and his father's friends.

Tran arrived and before the three squatted on the freshly swept earthen floor around a knee-high table, the family paused. Tran extracted two sticks of incense from the large brass pot on a high table in one corner. Behind it stood an exquisitely sculpted and coloured ceramic figure of Quang Yin the Chinese Goddess of Peace. Ceramic industries played a huge part in the culture and economy of Vietnam.

Tran lit incense. The family stood quietly while he muttered quiet prayers to his ancestors, a daily ritual that started each day. It allowed harmony to enter each heart.

Suddenly harsh noise exploded. Vinh started, wide-awake.

Terror overtook him.

The unfamiliar smell of cordite polluted the pristine air. Scorched inside his nostrils.

Fear tore at his entrails in Vinh's first experience of mortar bombs.

The sound of his accelerated heartbeat threatened to engulf him.

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That morning, the relentless cycle of mortar rounds engraved everything on his mind.

First the plopping sounds he would come to know as the bomb going down the tubes. Then the spiralling swish as the projectiles climbed into the sky, followed by an eerie whistle as they plummeted down, every one seemingly intent on his extermination.

Their unique sounds became imprinted long before understanding came. In their burying into the earth, each bomb resulted in a hollow crump that vibrated the earth around. As each erupted they shook brittle bits of earth on him.

The doorway vibrated savagely. As the roof disappeared in disorder he felt the thin rafters of the thatch straining. But a greater fear than a collapsing house transfixed him. The mortar shells fell in such profusion they convinced Vinh there was no escape. His world was about to end. Fear held him in its vice.

It paralyzed his will. Rational thought ceased. The French mortars seemed unending. Behind the pall of the crump and the explosions another lighter but more impelling sound entered the arena of his imprinting mind.

The chattering of machine-guns and the short crack of rifle fire added their sounds.

All senses automatically recorded in the eternity of time it took him to move. The inferno of combat held no intoxication. Feelings fled before this intensity of Fear.

Mother's screams galvanised Vinh.

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Brain recorded everything. Half-light became his medium. The alertness that would come with repetition and experience was not yet a honed survival gift.

Afterward he'd learn to stalk silently. To be a night animal.

This first time, Fear threatened to annihilate. The clamour refused to stop.

French soldiers rushed, hard on the heels of the mortars and machine-guns, before the villagers were fully awake. The sounds and smells of war in the wake of Chinese conquerors belonged to the mists of previous centuries and to genetic memories. The Japanese had never threatened Tien Doan nor Tuyen Quang. These early morning French mercenaries instigated the modern phase of the Second Indochina War. France was intent on total capitulation. The future would pit the North Vietnamese war against a new wave of 'imperialist aggressors'.

But this dreadful morning, he soaked in his fear, trembled on the edge of extinction.

For the next eight years young Vinh's life would be motivated on vengeance trail. From that moment he fervently hated the French and their puppets... and their sounds.

"Vite, vite ... avancez ... allons vite"

"Allah akbar ... yih ... yih ... yiheeeeeeeeeeee"

"Raus ... Raus ... swinehund ... Hier camarade"

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Alien sounds. Foreign smells. Excited yells in strange tongues lusting for the kill.

They heralded his baptism of fire. Vinh tried to rise from his torpor. Suddenly he was grabbed. Strongly but gently, Mother rolled with him into the centre of the room that was their total house space. Hers was the strength of desperation. In one smooth 'survival mode' action she dragged him with her into the small cellar under the floor. A million years ago Vinh had helped his father dig this shallow shelter, wondering.

Mother whispered, "Quiet. No sound. Quiet" Her trembling ate into his body.

Vinh almost smothered. He moved limbs for the first time since the bombs had woken him. Vinh clung tightly to Mother. Terror filled his teenage mind.

Above, Father frantically covered the hole. All about him the sounds of firing and screaming. Vinh remembered lasting images ... beloved Father ... face contorted and a suddenly grimy, sweaty half-naked, dimly seen body. Father desperately trying to hide all traces ... instructions young Vinh would strain to hear in later nightmares.

Trying to control his terror, Vinh strained to listen.

Then ... sound stopped.

A silence, more deafening than the bomb blasts and small-arms fire, froze time.

Vinh shivered uncontrollably. No feeling. No sound. No whimpering. Stillness.

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Eyes wide, the two stared into darkness. Mother's smell enveloped him.

Some of the villagers could not withstand French torture. Tran, identified as a leader, screamed his anguish as his wife, then son, were dragged from their hiding place. Father spewed his hatred as Vinh and his mother, forced to watch Tran's denouement, were held immovable. These laughing hyenas from the mist enjoyed the agonised cries as they tortured. Vinh felt blistered by the torching of their homes.

Smoke blotted out the sun. A pistol was held against Vinh's head. Terrifying images flashed before him. He locked his eyes everlastingly to Father's. Vinh's heart no longer beat. Breath ceased. Sound stopped.

Three sets of eyes stared, fixedly ... Father's unwarrior-like death ... vain struggles ... lashed to the post ... the fishing nets had gone ... Tran's eyes scarcely wavered from his wife and son ... blood oozed from specifically placed bayonet thrusts.

Interminably slowly, Death came upon him. Tran's screams and writhing stilled. Images kept etching themselves on Vinh's brain.

Mother shrieked her torment. Her clothes wrenched off her lower body in a fervour of blood-crazed soldiers' lust. Rough hands of French, Algerian and German soldiers of the vaunted French Foreign Legion stretched her legs wide open. Raped, not once or twice, but a dozen times or more. Like an over-ripe melon she burst red ... writhing in the dirt. As the last one finished, he shot out Mother's crazed eyes with a laugh. Mother's blood mingled with Fathers'.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

The pistol still thrust against his head, a rough barbarian, with a voice like a grunting mountain bear, dragged Vinh towards his parent's ravaged and distorted bodies.

Sodomised Vinh. Over a charred a knee-high table. Rape, on an unfeeling body.

Vinh did not lose consciousness. Mind detached to survive.

The rough barbarian grated his rasping laugh close to Vinh's ear. "Au 'voir le petit garçon. N'oubliez-vous pas la Legion d'etranger. N'oubliez-vous pas..."

A different voice called out, "Ils sont morts, les mort au vaches dans la terre de veau. Ha! ... ha! ... ha!" Another, close by yelled, "Regardez le travail de le bon garçon. Ha! ...ha! ...ha!" Someone else grunted, , "Restez dans les souvenirs." A guttural German, "Ils sont morts, tous les peuples de la Revolution. Ha! ...ha! ...ha!" Always the beasts ended in raucous laughter.

Finally, the last Legionnaire left Vinh's village.

Vinh looked around, dazed, eyes registering what brain could not. The smell of roasting bodies. Ashes falling like rain around him. Village dogs picking through the smoking remains of nearby houses. Fighting over their late owner's remains.

And the silence... broken only by ... crackling of fires ... growling dogs.

In the distance, Legionnaire's sing. It's their 'Blood Sausage' marching song...

1941-1951 *The Revolutionaries...*

Au Tonkin, la legion immortelle (In Tonkin, the immortal Legion)

A Tuyen-Quang illustra notre drapeau (Covered our flag in glory at Tuyen Quang)

Heros des Camerone, aux freres modelles (Heroes of Camerone, model brothers)

Dormes en prix, dans vos tonseaux. (Sleep in peace, in your graves)

Their fast fading refrain...

Tiens, voila du boudin, voila du boudin, (Here's the Blood Sausage...)

Pour les Alsaces, les Suisses, et les Lorrains (For Alsaces, Swiss, Lorrainers)

Pour les Belges, y'en a plus, Pour les Belges-, y'en a plus

(There's none left for the Belgiques)

A plus ce sont des tirers au cul. A plus ce sont des tirers au cul

(Because they're shirkers)

Almost out of hearing, Vinh heard their final verse...

Au cours de nos campagnes (During our far-away campaigns)

Taines a frontant la fievre et le feu (Facing fevers and bullets)

Oublions avec nos peines (Let us not forget, along with our sorrows)

La Mort, qui nous oublis si peu. (Death, which never forgets us.)

Laughter... always the laughter.

The last sound... the name of the next local town, "Tuyen Quang."

Their last line echoed in his brain forever... '*La Mort, qui nous oublis si peu.*'

The Revolutionaries...

1946: "The time has come..." the Walrus said...

GARY'S FAMILY MOVED FROM CWMFELINFACH TO NEWPORT

"No George. You can't have your way all the time. We can't afford to send the boys to a Catholic school. They have to have a uniform, new shoes... We can't afford it."

Gary always remembered it because it was the first 'ding-dong' argument in their new home in No. 2, Station Street. He'd never heard a full-on argument between his parents before. Maybe there'd been too many people always around.

Dad got his way.

The three boys got to go to St Mary's Catholic School. Elaine was just a toddler. Her shiny blonde hair and blue eyes a throw back to the original Saxon genes, according to Dad. The boys were all Celts of Welsh and Irish stock, especially Tony. He was the only boy with black shiny hair and Mum's eyes.

Gary quickly learned that Catholic schools were different. In Cwmfelinfach he always sat at the back. There he could relax. He became the 'milk boy'. Every kid had a bottle of half-a-pint of milk at ten in the morning and three in the afternoon. It was a right. As 'milk boy' Gary got to distribute it and got extra from kids that had permission not to drink it 'cos they were allergic.

In a Catholic school the teacher could take it offuv you for 'misbehaviour'. That word could make you put your hand out for a caning or make you go to the Headmaster.

The Revolutionaries...

Gary had never met Catholic Sisters before. There'd been none in Cwm. They were different to ordinary teachers like Miss Jones. Nearly everyone in Cwm was named 'Jones' 'cos they were all related. 'Specially the Jones'es, the Thomas'es and the Williams'es. So most were related to the kids somehow, except for 'foreigners' kids.

Sister Bernadette, tall and with her black skirt always billowing out with urgency, strode around the class like a 'shadow of the Inquisition'. Then stopped before Gary.

She didn't care who you were. Treated all the kids the same except for her favourites.

"Nine times nine?"

Never as a question, more like a rapier thrust into Gary's head. Her demand threw him into turmoil. He mumbled some answer but Sister was not to be put off.

"I will ask one more time. What is nine times nine?"

Gary had learned his tables in Cwmfelinfach. But he'd learned them in Welsh and he couldn't remember the English words.

He answered in Welsh. The class tittered. Few spoke Welsh. Never in school.

His ears burned. The kids always made him feel like the 'outsider' because he'd lived 'in the valley'. Welsh Nationalism was a product of the miners and factory workers of the Welsh valleys. It hadn't yet penetrated into Newport. *I hate this place ...*

The Revolutionaries...

Sister Bernadette cut across Gary's day-dreaming.

"What did you say?"

All Gary could see was this huge figure in her billowing black outfit. Level with his eyes, Jesus hung on a large black and silver cross on her crucifix belt with its large rosary beads. Jesus hung his head too.

Sister Bernadette had her hands on her hips. If Gary looked up her face was a blur.

"I... I... um-m-m-m..." Her voice made him tremble. *I wish she'd go away...*

She wagged her finger at him. "Speak up, Little Man. What did you say?"

Confused, he mumbled, "Um-m-m-m. I don't know, Miss. What was the question?"

The class couldn't believe the effrontery of this stupid Welsh kid from the mining valley. 'Miss?' Everyone knew you said 'Sister'. These Welsh kids from the mines or from up in the hills with the sheep acted strange and often spoke a 'weirdo lingo'.

Imperiously, the 'Nun in black' with the starched white around her face and covering her starched white neck, said, "My name is S-i-s-t-e-r Bernadette, Little Man."

She'd spelled out her name so's Gary would never forget it. And he never did. The last two words were a pejorative. They stung. Gary felt belittled and more confused.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Sister Bernadette made his face burn with shame, convinced his ears were on fire.

“Look at me, Little Man.”

She leaned over him and demanded he look at her. Gary had to crane his neck.

Sister Bernadette put so much mean emphasis in those two last words each time she addressed him as ‘Little Man’ that he could only stammer. That infuriated her more.

“What is nine times nine?”

He blurted out, “Eighty-one. That’s nine times nine, Sister.” *I hate you...*

Gary blushed furiously. *What if she can read my mind? She is after all married to Jesus.* He glanced at the gold ring on her left finger. *She’s a REAL ‘Bride of Christ’.*

Horrified, he tried to blank out any negative thoughts. Instead he had a clear vision of himself tied to a stake and standing in a platform under which there had been piled bunches of faggots steeped in tar and Sister Bernadette stood in front. In one hand she held a blazing torch. Held high in the other was the crucifix, just inches from his face.

Every detail of the agonized Christ imprinted itself. Sister kept repeating, “*Repent... The Lord will forgive you... Repent.*”

“Good.” Sister Bernadette’s face was inches from his.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

“At last you have shown me you have a brain, Little Man.” She looked deeply into his eyes. “You aren’t trying to hide anything from me, Little Man, are you?”

His eyes were transfixed by hers. *Oh my God. Does she know what is in my head?*

“I... I... um-m-m-m... I mean... “I... I... um-m-m-m...”

But Sister Bernadette had already turned away and fixed on another boy. Gary felt he’d been impaled, then released. His shoulders sagged from the strain.

Finally the school-bell rang for lunch.

He raced to be at the front of the queue. It was Shepherd’s Pie. Hungry ... always hungry, Gary ignored the others pushing and shoving behind him. He drooled at the Shepherd’s Pie with silver beet and heaps of dark brown gravy plonked on his plate.

Gary sat, perched on the end of a bench near the door, so that he could get out before the kids from his class. They’d made fun of him between classes at the ‘Play’ break.

This day had been easily one of the worst days of his life.

But he loved Shepherd’s Pie. Mum made it on special occasions but never ladled as much on his plate as these lovely ladies, who were the servers. They looked older than his mum and two of them had gray hair. Musta been Gary’s boyish face and shorts. They’d put extra on his plate. They were *really* Angels.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Wrapped in thought, suddenly he was on the floor. The boys on the bench had clearly organized some signal. They'd all stood up. The bench, weighed down only by Gary on the end, tilted then collapsed. He managed to save the dinner plate but spilled the contents all over the floor. Gary had to clean it all up whilst the perpetrators laughed.

The next playtime he sought solitary relief. Gary sank down into a corner of the playground where he had cover from view behind a large oak tree, 'out of sight' and hopefully 'out of mind'. Tony and David sat with him. They had no friends either.

Lost in private musing he hadn't noticed the boy at first. He became aware of the smell of urine first. It seeped into his consciousness. Gary looked up.

"Peter Steele. Call me Pete. I'm in your class." Newport kids spoke different to the valley colliery blokes. The boy just stood there with a questioning smile on his face. "I'm from the railway yards." He looked ready for flight. "You know, over near the Newport Docks Housing commission area. No one likes me 'cos I smellz and cumz from the dockyard area. Your name's Gary, ain' it." Pete nervously rubbed the end of his nose and sniffed. "Are these kids your young bruvvers, or somethin'?"

Gary tried to hold his breath. "Where do you sit in class?" Peter offered mateship.

"They makes me siddown near the back door so's they kin't smell me too much."

Tony dug his toes into the dirt. Like Gary he wanted to make friends too, at any cost.

He'd had enough of feeling alienated and 'No way' would he hold his nose.

The Revolutionaries...

David asked, "Why do you smell?"

Pete looked uncomfortable, fumbling with his hands. "Cos I peez the bed every day an' my mum kin't wash every day, see?" He moved closer.

This time Gary wrinkled his nose. "My mum only washes on Mondays."

Pete's face lit up. "So's mine."

He had a 'piggy' face with eyes that lived behind puffed eyelids in a round head that sported swollen cheeks. Everything about him looked 'puffy' and 'piggy'.

Pete grinned. "Will you be my frenn, Gary? I haven't gorreny at school."

Gary stood and held out his hand. "Yep. I'd like to have youz as a frenn."

The two boys shook hands. As the four started to chat, a shadow crept over them. Four boys from their class magically appeared. Gary held his breath. It looked like trouble. Three of the new boys pushed Big Boy forward. They were saying something that Gary couldn't hear.

It was a sing-song that Pete had got used to. "Piggy... smelly Piggy. Wenz yor Mummy gonna wash youz liddle Iddly, Piggy... smelly Piggy."

Gary bristled. He wanted to protect Pete.

The Revolutionaries...

He remembered his Dad's advice, *Always pick on the biggest.*

"Wotz your name, Bachen." Gary stood his ground as he issued his challenge.

"I'm not afraid of you, Little Man." Big Boy held his ground with the Nun's words.

"Always tough with a group but how about one-on-one?" Gary put his fists up.

Without warning, Big Boy lashed out. The three mates he'd brought with him yelled, "Fight." A crowd started to gather. Gary felt them pressing in, like the Wiley kids.

Gary was in his element. He'd seen the punch 'telegraphed' and fended it easily as he leaned away, sized up the distance, stepped closer and let go a massive right hook. It had all the pent-up anger he'd stored away and besides, it was his favourite punch. He'd once caught his Dad off-guard. Nearly knocked him out. Dad bragged about 'my boy's sledgehammer punch' for days after but the home-boxing-ring bouts with his Dad ceased forever. So did the harsh discipline meted out to Gary "cos you are the oldest and you should've known better."

Gary's confidence surged. He balanced himself with one foot forward. Then, whilst Big Boy was still trying to work out what had gone wrong, Gary hit him with a classic one-two-three to the abdomen and finished off with a left to Big Boy's jaw. The big fella didn't stand a chance and went down on his knees. The yelling stopped.

Gary whipped around to face the crowd. "Anywan wan summa the same?"

The Revolutionaries...

The crowd dispersed as quickly as it had started to form and the big fella's mates drifted a 'safe' distance away. There they watched. Gary leant down and held Big Boy under one arm and Peter held the other. Together they lifted the boy upright.

"I didn't know you could fight." Big Boy grumbled as he was dusted off by Gary.

"I'm an amateur boxer at the Police Club on Stow Hill and I try to never pick a fight. Ann' in any case I don' like pugilism. I prefer to box in a ring with gloves on."

"Who torcha?" The Big Boy was genuinely interested as he rubbed his jaw.

"My Dad. He was the boxing champion of his regiment in the Army." Gary looked around. The five of them were on their own. *Dad was right.*

"I'm gonna have a corker of a black eye. But will you be my frenn' too?"

Two friends in one day. Gary was only too happy to make friends. "Whatzyor name?"

"Slater. Geoffrey Slater." Geoffrey winced. "I kin feel my eye swellin' up."

"Okay Geoffrey. This is Pete, my bess' frenn. This is Tony and this one's David."

"Glad to meeher-all. Pete, sorry about the slagging mate. It was a dare."

"S'all right. I'm used to it 'cos I stink."

The Revolutionaries...

“Why do you stink?”

“I pee the bed an’ my mum kin only wash on Mondays. So I stink an’ afta live wiv it till I stops peein’ the bed. Gary’s me mite.”

Geoffrey held his hand out. “Glad ter know yer, Pete. I really am sorry.”

Gary shook hands with Geoffrey too. Suddenly the day looked a bit brighter. They went down to the toilets together, laughing and talking ‘nineteen-to-the-dozen’. They had enough to make a gang. It felt good. Noone would pick on them if they stuck together. Gary’s reputation had gone on ahead and the kids gave them a wide berth.

The five caught the bus together. Sat up top so they could see everything.

Dad said the prayer before the evening meal. No-one could start eating ‘till everyone was quiet and said the meal prayer.

“How was school today?” Dad had told Gary that the Nun’s were Angels.

“Um, good, Dad. Made two new frennz. One’s name’s Pete ’n the other’s Geoffrey”

Tony and David stayed silent. Just nodded or shook their heads.

Next day... and the next... and the next, Gary could hardly look her in the face even when she asked him to repeat answers. She seemed to delight in picking on him.

The Revolutionaries...

A caricature of nightmares to him, always tall, she looked forbidding in black with her fierce face ringed by white starch. Worse was when she stood behind Gary in class.

But worse still was yet to come.

“Sunday,” Sister Bernadette intoned later, “Don’t forget the nine-thirty Mass. I’ll be looking for you on Sunday and I’ll be checking with you on Monday when you get back to school. It’s a Mortal Sin to miss Mass and to miss Confession on Saturday.”

Gary shivered. Sister sounded menacing.

Saturday came and with it the compulsion to go to Confession. Gary peered into the forbidding darkness. He couldn’t see Father behind the grill.

“Father, forgive me. I have sinned most grievously in thought, word and deed. I ask you, through the Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to forgive me all my Sins.”

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Now, tell me, my Son.”

“I don’t like school, Father, because Sister Bernadette picks on me all the time. I have horrible thoughts and I hate her. Please ask God to forgive me, Father.”

“You know that God is Love?” The priest sounded kindly.

“Yes, Father.” But Gary felt as though the priest had hit him. He got the ‘Guilts’.

The Revolutionaries...

All the terrible thoughts he'd had about Sister Bernadette and all the tortures he'd devised for her now lashed him as though he were the victim of his deeds, not her.

The Priest asked gently, "Do you have any other Sins to confess, My Son?"

"Yes, Father. I was tempted to take some money out of Mum's purse, but I didn't."

"That was very brave of you. Faith gives you courage, my Son. Anything else?"

Gary's throat seemed locked up tight. He stumbled over his words, "I had some bad thoughts..." squinted and screwed his face trying to remember. "...about some boys at school." He sighed. Gary decided not to say he'd been in a fight.

With the spectre of 'burning at the stake' for the things he'd thought about Sister Bernadette and for his confession about 'bad thoughts', Gary felt that if he confessed to any more and he'd be the next person crucified. The ruins of a Roman Colliseum stood on the edge of town and Dad had told him it was possible that Christians had been sacrificed there before the Normans came.

The Normans had built the castle on the Usk river bank. Gary loved both places and went as often as he could, to lose himself in the history. He insatiably read. Saint's stories too. Martyrdom images filled his mind. Pride, guilt then fear mingled.

Dad's words echoed in his mind, *You're always the 'Dreamer', Gary.* The priest dragged him back to the present, "Anything else, My Son?" Always so gentle.

The Revolutionaries...

“No Father.” Gary made a mental promise he’d tell the priest next week that he’d...

“Three ‘Hail Mary’s’, one ‘Our Father’ and say the ‘Confetior’, My Son.”

Absolution followed. Gary said his prayers with the intensity of the ‘Lost’. He hoped he’d be clear of Mortal Sin or Venal Sin until next week’s Confession.

Gary’s had to light the fire each morning but on Sunday morning it took longer than usual. The wood was damp and the coal seemed to take forever to catch. Then he had to put the porridge on for the family. He wouldn’t let Tony stir it because, last time he did, Tony burned it and porridge is horrible to taste and the saucepan harder to clean if it’s burned. Breakfast was late.

Dad was still in Germany with the British Army of the Rhine occupation forces.

Gary was the only one going to early Mass. Just as he was about to leave there was a yell from Tony. Two-year-old Elaine was having one of her ‘fits’. That meant getting the bath, filling it with hot then cold water and alternately dunking Elaine in the water until signs of life came back. Then Mum had to settle her down.

As soon as he was let loose he ran all the way to Saint Mary’s on Stow Hill, only half a mile away, propelled by a black veil and steely eyes. He was lucky. Gary only just made 10.30 Mass but it hadn’t yet started. He rushed past Father Jermyn on the way in. He was Gary’s favourite priest and Gary hoped that he’d been the priest who’d heard his confession ‘cos ‘ *Father Jermyn would understand.*

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Sister Bernadette wasn't there. Gary's heart was still racing but relief was profound.

At Mass, Gary confessed to God that he was sorry he was late but glad that he'd missed seeing Sister. A nagging doubt remained. He may have purposely been late.

"Please God. Forgive me for not wanting to meet your daughter, Sister Bernadette."

But the guilt he felt was soon lost as the Mass got underway.

As the priest said the Latin prayers, Gary followed every word in his Sunday Missal. The mystery of it all had him spellbound, as always. *Just to think that the ancient Christians would have said these same words, thousands of years ago.*

He'd bought the Missal with pocket money he earned selling the Argus newspaper. After school he'd race the bus on his bike. Saturday was best, especially from the tips he got when everyone wanted to be first down the pub with the footy results.

Each time he left church he also bought one of the 'Lives of the Saints' books.

The last one he'd read was Saint Theresa. He'd read that she had attended Mass like him as a little girl having not yet taken her First Communion. She'd prayed so hard that, in the middle of distributing Holy Communion, the wafer had left the priest's hands, sailed over the heads of the stunned congregation and hovered above Theresa.

The priest had taken this as a sign from God.

The Revolutionaries...

Gary wanted Communion so desperately. *God IS Love.*

He prayed hard that the same would happen, "Please God, show me you love me too."

Gary couldn't wait for the 'normal' process, studying the Confirmation book and having to take Communion for the first time at the altar rail with all the other kids.

Gary was convinced some were 'Heathens' because they didn't love God like he did.

He willed a miracle to happen, every Mass. Gary loved God with such a mystical longing and so intensely that he believed ... *God will listen.*

God IS everything Life was not. God alone was responsible for all the good in the world and would one day 'rise again in Glory' and put to right all the Sins of the world. *And all the Sinners will go to Hell.*

It didn't happen. *Maybe God's angry at me for not loving Sister Bernadette enough.*

Monday, Gary arrived at school contrite, ready to make amends and forgive Sister Bernadette. He sat between his two new friends and felt good.

"Who didn't go to 9.30 Mass on Sunday?"

Is she looking straight at me?

In trepidation Gary said, "I didn't Sister. I ..." Sister Bernadette looked formidable.

The Revolutionaries...

“Come out here, Little Man. In the front.”

Was that an extra special emphasis on ‘Little man’? Gary shrugged and walked slowly out. The class was in total silence. Each breath held in anticipation.

Sister Bernadette looked imperious, almost self-satisfied.

“Now I’m for it.” Gary braced himself. “She’ll think I did it on purpose to mark her.”

Sister caned him, once on each hand. Then she got a high white pointed hat out. ‘DUNCE’ had been drawn across its front in large black letters. She handed it to Gary with a smug look. Sister made Gary sit facing the corner out in front of the class.

“You’ll stay there for three successive days, Little Man.”

Gary realised he was in a ‘No win’ situation. With as much dignity as he could muster, he ignored the titters of the class and placed the Dunce’s hat on his head carefully. He gritted his teeth as he faced the class, daring anyone to laugh. But ‘inside’ he felt ashamed. He had never felt so demeaned. He fought back the tears and tried hard to remember what Peter and Paul, on their way to their martyrdom, might have done in the same circumstances. *I wish Dad was here. He’d show them all.*

He had a clear image of Saint Sebastian, tied to a stake, his body filled with arrows designed not to hit a vital spot. Saint Sebastian was the Saint of soldiers.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

1946: Pham's student days...

GRANDFATHER MADE SURE PHAM HAD THE BEST EDUCATION

Quan had early given up on Tran and Le Duc Dat, both chose to be 'at one with the Vietnamese people' in a different way to their father. Pham's grandfather was a self-taught man of letters, passing the Mandarin examinations a year before they were terminated by the French in 1915. He rose to become a Confucian scholar. Quan then worked as an official for the French colonial administration, moving to Hanoi in 1937, leaving his two eldest sons, Le Duc Dat and Tran behind in Tuyen Quang.

Before his brutal murder, Tran, a fisherman and a teacher, had devoted himself to use his excellent formal education to 'improve the lot of the people of Tien Dien'. Two years older, Dat proved more radical. In 1940 he was imprisoned in the notorious Hoa Lo prison. This vast prison complex, built by the French in 1896 to house around 450 prisoners, held over 2,000 at the time of Le Duc Dat's arrest without trial. Showing him the guillotine housed there, the French interrogators had laid him on its scaffold twice, as a 'warning'. He despised this symbol of French justice. They had forced him to witness his friends and 'freedom fighters' being guillotined.

Dat shivered. He remembered Hoa Lo's dank corridors and thick walls: the heavy weight of his chains: and the unsophisticated French torturers who took pride in how they scarred him. Dat remembered his young communist wife and unborn child who'd been tortured to death there. He trembled. Dat's only consolation had been that she had never betrayed any of the revolutionaries. He wore his grief very close to his heart. 'No-one need ever know' he'd never had the time or opportunity to weep.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Dat could hardly bear to contemplate the horrors she'd suffered. Now Tran too had been murdered by Frenchmen. Quan grieved silently for both sons who'd hated the French. All three men longed to deed a free Vietnam to their offspring though each thought differently. Each was highly motivated to achieve Vietnamese independence. Quan's other son, Xong, accommodated the French, fearing they'd never leave.

Grandfather accumulated his large family gladly. He absorbed Dat's son, Pham, into his family home, along with Phouc and Thuyet. His magnificent three-story house stood in the 'old quarter' on Rue des Caisses. Higher than most, it nevertheless was constrained by an ancient feudal law. Houses in the Old Quarter could not be built higher than the King's Royal Palace. Many of its houses were built with small frontages and in the shape of a long 'tunnel'. Called tunnel houses, they were a Tax avoidance scheme because houses were taxed on the width of their street frontage.

In the 1940's, French colonial administrators re-named the old quarter's streets.

Originally Hang Hom, the street's French name, Rue des Caisses, would be scrapped thirty years later, after the Second Indochina War with America.

Then, a new breed of Vietnamese would restore the ancient traditional 'guild' names. Each name indicated a specific trade, hence the Vietnamese word Hang meaning 'merchandise'. The Old Quarter was Hanoi's major commercial area and had accumulated a thousand years of history before the French arrived.

At every opportunity, Grandfather explained to his children the area's history.

The Revolutionaries...

On the right bank of the 'Fleuve Rouge', high embankments protected Hanoi from summer flooding. Their river also would not be called its Vietnamese name, Song Hong, for the same thirty years except among the local Vietnamese. About 160 kilometres from the sea, tidal influence was imperceptible in the 'Dry'.

In the 'Wet' it stopped a mere 20 kilometres from the city.

"Our Vietnamese street names date from the 13th Century." Grandfather explained. "Each of Hanoi's thirty-six ancient guilds chose, then named a different street." Quan would extol the virtue of each guild. "Remember, Hanoi was the major city of Tonkin before the Romans had a history. As far back as Tonkin's history could stretch, Hanoi was an important cultural and commercial centre".

Each child would repeat to 'Honourable Grandfather' a portion of the city's history. He'd remind them that the Chinese had ruled for over one-thousand years until the tenth century. Quan wanted them to have a sense of ancient history and of their cultural roots. An old man at fifty-four and born in 1890, he loved telling how the Vietnamese wrested their country from the colonial clutches of the Chinese.

"After defeating the Chinese, Our Illustrious Emperor, Ly Thai To chose Hanoi as his capital in 1010. The Chinese had built their thousand-year empire on our earlier one. Hanoi remained the nation's capital until the seventeenth century, when it was moved to Hue for the next two-hundred years." The French occupied Vietnam in 1873. They shifted the central government back to Hanoi because France "...dreamed of a 'co-prosperity sphere of influence' in southern China. Hanoi put them closer to China."

The Revolutionaries...

Hanoi, Grandfather told them, had a little over 150,000 people when he was little.

“The French tried hard to duplicate a mini-Paris in Hanoi. They loved their shady boulevards and Botanical Gardens, built imposing public buildings and added numerous squares. They made all roads and railways converge on Hanoi to service China in the north continuing south to Saigon. Remember. The name of our northern land, Tonkin, is the foreigner’s corruption of its Vietnamese name. It had many names but was mainly referred to as the ‘Eastern Capital’, or Dong Kinh, so as not to confuse it with Hue. Named by our great Emperor Tu Duc, Hanoi means ‘the city at the bend of the river’.” The French dream of a colonial empire throughout Indochina coincided with development of Tonkin’s rich mineral wealth. “Currently the French military and its Administrative presence have imprisoned themselves in the Citadel”.

The Citadel sprawled less than half a kilometre from Quan’s residence and along the Old Quarter’s western edge. One of three distinctive areas of Hanoi, the French favoured the Citadel because they felt assured of their re-instatement as a colonial power. It contained the military barracks, extensive administration buildings and previously housed the seat of the Annamite government.

The ‘Old Quarter’, where Quan and his extended family lived formed another separate area and the European Quarter made the third.

Quan had once been employed in the Citadel but later worked in the university, the law courts then the palace of the French Governor-General, all in the European Quarter. Now the Old Quarter of Hanoi had become his ‘home’.

The Revolutionaries...

Quan continued. "In la Rue des Caisses, the French have erected lampposts with electrical lighting every twenty or thirty metres along its wide pavements. You are so lucky. It is so much better now than in my Grandfather's time. The French planned the Old Quarter's wide streets to conform with European horse-driven traffic."

In the late 1940's rickshaws were the Old Quarter's most common transport. The motor-vehicle was rare. The planting of trees ensured shade along Hang Hom's French-style 'boulevard'. Most of the shops along the street opened onto it. Pham's taste-buds would be excited buy the varieties of aromas rising from the food shops. Vendor's calls and the bustle around the front of his new home added a rich mixture.

The war orphans lived less than a brisk three-hundred metre walk from the famous Hoan Kiem Lake. This lake dominated the geography of their young minds. A short five-hundred metres from the Red River, the lake was twice the distance from the kilometre long Doumier Bridge over which an ecstatic young Vinh had marched proudly after Ho Chi Minh's 'freedom speech' just a brief year ago.

The Ngoc Son Temple, in the middle of the Hoan Kiem Lake, stood on an island. By Hanoi's standards Hoan Kiem was a small lake. It was among the most important however, among the many that ringed Hanoi. In the later American war, the road and railway bridges would become the centre of a bombing maelstrom that flattened many areas of the 'old section' of Hanoi. Quan's house would remain.

Thuyet, now a precocious two-year-old, integrated into the amah's extended family system. Exposure to Chinese amahs, almost made her forget her prior life.

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Thuyet learned to speak Chinese more fluently than her native tongue. Her memory of her father, Tran, and mother Binh all but severed, Phouc was her only reminder. Wide-eyed, rumbunctious and playful, she captivated the hearts of her amahs. She played most often with their children if Pham was either away at school or on one of the numerous excursions around the precincts of Hanoi and north-east Tonkin.

Quan received academic training at the Hanoi University. It mainly serviced Hanoi's quarter-million population. At the southern end of Bay Mau Lake, the university was one of the many handsome buildings built as a French legacy. Harmoniously mixing European and Asian architecture, new trees had been planted along its wide boulevard frontage. Recognising the importance of education, Quan made sure that each of his six remaining sons, plus Phouc and Pham, would have the best schooling possible. Eventually his sons would study at his alma mater. His comfortable income came from partnership in a rubber plantation in Thau Dau Mot and in a printing house in Hanoi. Quan boasted a 'hill retreat' in Dalat.

Chinese amahs lived in an outhouse on the back of the main residence and took the children to school, escorting them to and from. It was they who looked after the day to day personal lives of the children, chatting to each other on the way to and from school as they gaily admonished the children or asked about school experiences.

Sometimes the three 'northerners' felt more Chinese than Vietnamese. They learned Chinese quickly, absorbing both ideas and elements of Chinese culture and history.

They were made to feel an integral part of this extended family system.

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Pham especially enjoyed their daily excursions to and from school and visits to places of interest and history around Hanoi with his personal amah. She always wore the cone-shaped traditional headdress made of woven straw. In the French tradition school was very early in the morning and sometimes it was difficult to get up in time.

On the way to school he and his amah would often stop for breakfast. Pham loved the Hanoi *bahn cuon*. Produced throughout Vietnam, the Hanoi variety had its own special characteristics. They always met the same woman with her coiled headdress and a large basket sunk into it. Besides *bahn cuon*, in her basket she also had a jar of *nouc mam*, a jar of vinegar, a bowl of chilli and bowls and chopsticks. Thus people could eat her wares. The woman would take out a few wrappers, roll them with shrimps, shallots and mushrooms and he and his amah then sat on the kerb and ate.

Pham never forgot this initial cultural experience with his amah. Reflecting on it he'd remember these as the 'best of times'. He was never confused, living in three cultures.

At school, Pham learned mathematics, science and the history of 'les anciens'. He learned by heart France's history, geography and politics. He studied the valorous feats of French military heroes and the immense influence of her philosophers. Pham responded to the latter and could hardly wait to visit the Pantheon in Paris where he learned the 'greats' lay in state. He devoured France's art, literature and the mixture of peoples that made up the exciting variety of her indigenous landscape.

Pham also learned the French obsession with racism. Although he made French schoolmates, play in the schoolyard was self-discriminatory. During recess he belonged to a derogatory entity called 'naques'. Pham being from a breed of peasants.

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When some French boys were friendly he was referred to pleasantly as 'les Annamis', or 'les 'mites'. As Pham became aware of the racist insult, he alternated between anger and shocked tolerance. In his angry state he joined his outre-mer friends in schoolyard battles that mirrored his radical father's resentment.

Influenced by Grandfather, Pham came to realise the French were latecomers to his four-thousand-year-old Vietnamese history and culture. Grandfather told them "at one time a common language was spoken all over South East Asia from the Irrawaddy River to the Gulf of Tonkin. It was probably Khmer, the language of the Champa."

Resemblances to the Munda languages, spoken across the Indian continent, spread over the whole of South East Asia and Australia. In Indochina the surge and flow of conquering peoples and refugees from ancient times resulted in a composite race. Ho Chi Minh had dated his country's origins to 2879 B.C. Chinese history recorded its first colonial invasion of Vietnam in 181 B.C.

Grandfather would remind them internationally agreed geographic borders admitted a distinctive ethnicity. "They distinguish Vietnam from the rest of Indochina."

Grandfather would add, "But within Vietnam, written documents prove it has been two separate nations for most of its history." Pham learned that Vietnam's evolution had been unique among most Asian nations. "Vietnam is influenced by two of the greatest ancient Oriental civilizations. The extensive maritime nation of India was the primary influence over South Vietnam. Chinese imperialism and colonialism characterised the North.

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Quan's conclusion was one neither Ho Chi Minh nor Le Duc Dat wanted to hear. "The south evolved ethnically and historically different to North Vietnam."

They preferred to support comments, like "Vietnam is older than France or the United States." Then also, "more than twenty centuries of recorded history makes us the toughest people in South East Asia." But Grandfather insisted on total truth.

He taught his children to search for and to recognise historical truth. "For 2,000 years Vietnam's two nations warred against foreigners. In Vietnam's first years China and India were the technological powers in the east. For example, the geographical record of Ptolemy, 150 A.D., gives place names in Sanskrit all along the coast of Indochina."

Three hundred years earlier, China was forging its eastern empire. North Vietnam's earliest dated history is known from Chinese sources. Grandfather had told Pham that "China still feels they have tributary claims upon us that go back to 181 B.C."

Pham was an avid reader and enjoyed history. Interested in China's influence, he found China had at first claimed territorial rights then subjugated many of the peoples of Vietnam. Its kingdom stretched south from China to Vietnam's Central Highlands. Northern Vietnam later fought for and won separation from China and re-named themselves Dai-co-viet in the 10th Cent A.D. It retained its right to independence for the next three centuries. Pham worked hard to understand Vietnam's complex history. Even into modern history the Tonkinese, or Annamites, retained an indelible imprint of Chinese civilisation. Their diplomatic representations with China conformed to the usages of the Chinese court. This assumed all 'presents' from foreigners were tribute.

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To the French then through to 1974, this part of the country was Tonkin. It fascinated Pham that the two portions of Vietnam south of Tonkin were heavily influenced by Indian culture. He felt excited by this.

The Chinese referred to the Cambodian Kingdom as Funan. Pham was amazed that it represented two-thirds of modern Cambodia, it included the greater part of modern Thailand and existed from 300 B.C. reaching its zenith during 800-1200 A.D. It extended from south of Chenla, now central Laos, to the Mekong Delta. The state religion was Shivaism, imported directly from India, although other Hindu deities were also worshipped. Angkor Wat became its capital after completion about 899. From the fourteenth century Siam remained in conflict with Cambodia. Finally worn down by the ravages of constant war, the Cambodian dynastic monarchy became vassal to Siam until rescued by the French when it became a protectorate.

Champa appeared late 2nd Century A.D. surviving to 1470. This Hindu kingdom along Vietnam's thin southern strip of coastline stretched from just south of Saigon to its northern border in the Central Highlands. Often at war with Cambodia and with China, it finally fell to the predations of the Tonkinese/Annamite kingdom. Champa remained on European maps of the 16th and 17th centuries, eventually absorbed into Cochin-China, a southern Annamite state. Finally, in 1673, the Annamite empire itself sub-divided into Tonkin in the north, Annam in the centre and Cochin-China.

Pham's historical studies suggested that in recent history Vietnam had three separate ethnic identities. He also found languages divided among a Sino-Tibetan language group in the north to a South-East Asiatic language, mainly Khmer, in the south.

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This seemed to contradict the drive for a 'unified Vietnam'.

Vinh, his uncle Le Duc Dat and Ho Chi Minh would never accept the reality of these enduring historical and cultural differences between the north and south of Vietnam.

Pham's Annamite identity coalesced its first concrete shape in schoolyard brawling and was later forged in the crucible of his home under the benign influence of Quan. His specially chosen 'home' tutors were steeped in Vietnamese culture. Quan exuded disciplined Confucian philosophy, Tao tradition and Vietnamese history.

Pham wrestled against Grandfather's discipline. Sitting on a kerb one day in Hanoi, he felt that he and his amah challenged the stiff, politically correct behaviour of his Grandfather's family. His amah and her friend were co-conspirators. If his amah said Pham had been really good, the woman would reach into her basket and produce a special aromatic essence extracted from the gland of a Coleopteran beetle.

Quan instilled in his children a powerful thirst for knowledge.

He taught Vietnamese tradition mainly at home, but he educated all his sons and daughters in French culture. Quan ensured the children's teachers were also imbued with his compulsion to teach. Once he deemed Pham's age suitable, Pham learned to speak and to write French exclusively. As a worthy Confucian, Quan aimed for his children to become 'good', to become rich and thereby able to share their financial rewards. They could then give to others less fortunate. This could only be successful through negotiation, compromise and often through reality-based subservience.

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The French held economic monopoly over them as Vietnam's colonial masters. Quan often explained that it was 'right and proper' to defer to them in order to promote one's 'favourable estate'. Sundays were special. Honourable Grandfather would remind Pham and the other children each Sunday of the precepts of Confucian ethics.

"What are the five cardinal ethical principles of Confucius ... Pham?"

"The first is *nhon*, the principle of benevolence. Then *nghia*, the principle of duty."

"Good, Pham." Grandfather beamed. "Remember, the key concept is Dharma."

Many times the children had been briefed on this over-riding concept of Dharma. They would be reminded that this referred to spiritual rather than in-the-world 'duty'. To the deeper 'life' duty owed to one's parents and ancestors. Relieved that he was 'off the hook', Pham waited with relish to see how the other children would react.

Grandfather would sing ... "Le, tri, tin ..." and beat his fingers on the table top for three or more repeats. Then he would point demandingly to one of the other children.

They would chant back to him "Propriety, conscience and faithfulness."

Quan mesmerised them with his allegories. Each of the virtues in turn would be woven around some adventures. Quan would choose one of the ancient Chinese sages or a Vietnamese hero. They would always best exemplify two particular virtues. Family honour came first. Then came loyalty to the Vietnamese traditions and nation.

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For Quan, and his small protégé, martyrdom complemented the highest ideals in both. “From the Trung Sisters to Uncle Le Duc Dat’s wife Vietnamese history is full of accounts of martyrs and of the long, hard struggles of our proud peoples against invaders. We also have patience to wait for the eventual defeat of enemies.”

Martyrs met the two criteria. One as exemplars of national identity and as guardians of a central philosophical core of Vietnamese culture, for example, the concept of an ‘honourable death’. Grandfather explained, “The highest rewards are reserved for the martyred hero. As an ancient people we have a strong sense of the sacred and an even stronger personal experience of magic. Both are found in our epic poetic prose and poetry.” He was proud of Pham’s sensitivity and abilities in the traditional arts.

He told them, “Confucius writes in the Mandate of Heaven that in martyrdom ‘heaven has made its choice.’” Tears would often flow all around as he gave details of Pham’s mother’s martyrdom. He would quote each relevant chapter and verse his favourite being “Confucius, Chapter Xxii, Section 4”, wherein martyrdom was guaranteed immortality in folklore and in mythology.

Quan knew the ‘The Mandate of Heaven’ by heart. He instilled in the children a strong belief that, “Death does not mean separation from family. When we die, we join the larger family of ancestors in death. But, never forget that life itself has intrinsic value and its primary concern is primitive survival.” He implanted in young minds that, “The survival of the family is priority one. Second is property in the form of a farm. Equal to this is one’s position in society, like my mandarin status. In the Confucian tradition... status brings in its wake, property and respect.”

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“...and this is the most important single thing to most Vietnamese.”

Pham dreamt often of his own martyrdom. Inculcated with the veneration of their ancestors, the kids prayed nightly at the ‘altar of their ancestors’ in a special room in the house. The smell of incense permeated the whole house but in that special room it carried significance. For their impressionable minds ancestor veneration was the highest form of respect. Pham was constantly reminded he was born of heroic stock.

“Your mother has gained immortality.”

Quan reserved a special place for Pham’s mother in family worship and on the altar of the ancestors. In the Confucian ideal, his mother’s birth in a ‘lowly estate’ heightened the sense of her veneration more. Her martyrdom was made more significant than a person of high estate who died an ordinary death. Her immortality meant she had access to an undying lineage. Special concessions were often made to Pham.

Grandfather regularly intoned, “Death has no fear. Rather, it is the nature of our dying that is most important for us in the after-life.” He explained, “Our fearlessness in the face of death has often been mistaken as unconcern for death. The French talk often of our ‘impassivity’. Les Galois don’t understand our culture.” He warned, “Vietnamese heroes often choose ‘death before dishonour’. Because of our veneration of the Trung sisters, for example, the French regard our heritage as naques or ‘mites.’”

Pham suddenly showed interest. These were the derogatory terms already encountered at school. The French kids, especially the bullies, had often spat these words at him.

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Quan said, "Names only hurt if you believe them to be true. Learn to feel sorry for a young culture that hasn't lived long enough to understand the deep truths in our Tao nor in our Confucian ethics." He sensed Pham's hurt. "Although we are not naques, or peasants, we are descended from peasants. The French have made that a bad thing. The strength of our culture lies in the fact that many of our people are peasants."

Almost ten, Pham could hardly restrain himself. He timidly raised his hand to speak. Grandfather smiled at his protégé as an encouragement to interaction in dialogue. Timorously at first, "Most of our people live close to nature. They remind us of our beginnings. Their culture is even more ancient than ours." Pham continued gaining confidence from the beaming smile on Honourable Grandfather's face. "I have read Mao Tse Tung's book. His army's strength 'swims in the fishbowl of its people'." His voice took on a strength he did not recognise. Pham's eyes brightened as he flushed in a mixture of pride and embarrassment. "Our Annamite history spans four thousand years. The French were still in animal skins while we traded with the Indian and Chinese empires."

Quan clapped his hands. "You have learned well, young Pham. But what do you do when attacked by these words?"

Pham swallowed, as he thought, "Honourable Grandfather must know?" He decided to admit his shame. "I am embarrassed and want to run away or fight."

"Live your culture." Grandfather became serious. "Control your anger or hurt and never show the enemy how they may have touched you. Be impassive."

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He explained, “The French don’t know how to deal with you then. Neither run nor fight unless a limb or your life, or that of a friend, is in danger. Your mother would have had to do the same.”

That Sunday, life changed for Pham. Previously he’d lived, shadowed in a mystical sense by his mother’s martyrdom. The French would never again better him.

Each Sunday before Mass, the family paid their respects to the Ngoc Son Temple at the top end of the Hoan Kiem Lake. Grandfather loved to tell the Lake’s story.

Even Thuyet ‘googooged’ and ‘arred’ appropriately as Quan told them of the fifteenth century Princess of Heaven. “She gave the Vietnamese hero, Le Loi, a magical sword. Le Loi used the sword, much like in many of the world’s myths and ...?” He paused, looked around at his eager entourage and grinned...

Pham spoke up excitedly, “Like Joan of Arc, to drive the invaders out of her country.”

“Correct my son. Hence the name Hoan Kiem or ‘Lake of the Restored Sword’. After his battles with the Chinese, Le Loi rested by boating on the lake, and ...?”

This time it was one of the older boys. “A giant tortoise reared out of the water, grasped Le Loi’s magic sword then disappeared into the depths of the lake.”

Grandfather looked pleased. He and his family hoped to catch a glimpse of one of the sacred tortoises. Especially the one rumoured to be hundreds of years old.

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This ancient descendant of Le Loi's golden tortoise was reputed to be over two-metres long and weighed over two-hundred kilos. To catch a glimpse of it brought good luck. On this day, in 1946, Pham felt lucky. The Ngoc Son temple was a beautiful place to rest. Surrounded by the lake and in the shade of the many trees.

Grandfather treated the family to tea. "Who is this temple dedicated to?"

Phouc hardly restrained himself. "To General Tran who defeated the Mongols in the 13th Century, Honourable Grandfather. I know because my father..." He trailed off as he remembered the times his father had taught him Vietnamese history and the stories of its legacy of heroes. And how Tran, his father, was martyred...

Pham blurted out. "Also La To, Venerable Grandfather. Patron saint of healers. Ngoc Son was built in the 18th Century and ..." He realised no one listened. All watched Phouc as he struggled not to cry.

Grandfather patted Phouc gently on the shoulder and held him for a moment. "Time to go to Saint Joseph's Cathedral, children." The family rickshaws ferried them around the northern end of Hoan Kiem Lake, staying alongside the lake until they reached Nha Tho street, which led directly west.

Catholicism, as a French import, was an eighteenth century addition to the culture of Hanoi. This magnificent cathedral, in its Gothic style, is still reminiscent of medieval Europe. It was inaugurated in 1886. Its square towers frowned on Pham, giving him a burst of Catholic guilt even if he'd done nothing wrong that week.

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He always felt compelled to give the priest some information of wrongdoing so that he could be absolved of a guilt he knew he hadn't earned. Once cured by confession, absolution and appropriate beating of the chest in "Mea culpa", Pham could then enjoy the beautiful altar and the cathedral's stained-glass windows.

Quan's family was his major passion. As a classical Confucian father, he invested heavily in his male children's health and formal education to assure them, and eventually himself too, of a prosperous future. Everything else Quan deemed subordinate. French influences reduced the severity of the harsh discipline expected under a purely Confucian ideal. Quan, by his own nature, was more Taoist. He cultivated a passion to be in tune with nature: with freedom of the soul: and with a concept of democracy that responded to the ideals of the French revolution and to the American Bill of Rights. They treasured Ho Chi Minh's 'Freedom' speech.

Quan was an 'enlightened' Vietnamese. Ho Chi Minh and he had much in common. Family harmony is mandated by a Confucian belief. Vinh's grandfather was patriarch of the clan in the same way that Tran was the acknowledged benevolent autocrat within his family. At Vinh's grandfather's house in Hanoi the family had gathered for feasts, anniversaries, births, marriages and deaths, to venerate ancestors and to re-establish clan identity. Quan dominated the whole family with his wisdom and dedicated himself to its spiritual and moral welfare. "Your duty is to live a virtuous life." This simple edict governed Pham's maturation as a Vietnamese. His intensity and intuitive understanding prompted Quan to send him to Paris. French schooling would make it possible for Pham to have the best start.

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It seemed that 1946 would bring about rapprochement between Ho Chi Minh and Jean Sainteny, ex-Chief of M.5, the French Intelligence Service in China, and son-in-law of Sarraut, who had twice been Governor-General of Indochina.

Grandfather had finally decided that it was best if Pham was separated from the influence of his more radical father, Le Duc Dat when he shipped him off to Paris in the spring. Unaware of the adult agenda involved, Pham was ecstatic. He left from Haiphong with a group of Vietnamese students in late April 1948, just after the most terrible European winter for fifty years. Privileged like him they had relatively rich family and important connections. He remembered Grandfather's words as he left North Vietnam's major port. "Haiphong is second only to Saigon as a major port of Indochina, its population only about half of the people who live in Hanoi. All made possible by Governor-General Doumer, after whom the magnificent bridge in Hanoi was named. We owe much of our 'modernism' to the French.

They had dredged then opened a deep-water channel in 1902 to give Haiphong its prestige as an international port by allowing sea-going vessels all year access. By the late twentieth century it would rank third, but even in 1946 Haiphong ranked fifth in size among the cities of Indochina. It lay fifteen kilometres from the sea on the south bank of the Cua Cam river near the eastern delta of the Red River.

In the early days of the twentieth century Doumer initiated an ambitious policy of road and rail construction. Haiphong quickly became the Kunming-Hanoi terminus.

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Effectively this made south-west China tributary to Haiphong as well as giving access to the wealth of Tonkin. Hence French and Chinese interest in the region.

Pham had never been to Haiphong and felt overwhelmed by this busy port, with its paraphernalia. He and the other students were timed to leave as soon as the crachin period ended in late April and was noted for its heavy fogs and bad visibility.

As the ship steamed out of its docking, Pham noted the quays, the dry-docks, the warehouses and the gantrys. These facilities owed all to the French who'd started construction in 1885, only five years before the birth of Grandfather.

Pham's wondering eyes took in the complexity and modern marvels of the fast retreating Haiphong dockyards. He passed the confluence of the Song Tam Bach, a physical border to the west of Haiphong, then his passenger ship made for Dinh Vu (Canal Maritime), which headed the liner into the Gulf of Tonkin.

A French informant seemed pleased to recount to the students that the building and construction of Haiphong as an international port occurred after the 'pacification' of Tonkin. Pham remained silent about the cost of the ravages endured by North Vietnam during the six decades of French colonialism since 1883. Vinh's tortured and tramatised family was too painful and too recent a memory. Inwardly Pham seethed.

On 20th November 1946, a short seven months after Pham left Haiphong, the city would be re-occupied by French marines after being heavily shelled by French warships. The carnage left behind 6,000 dead in their wake.

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From there it entered the South China Sea. Pham had never imagined such a vast expanse of water, relentlessly rolling to somewhere, to break on strange magical lands. The ocean's vastness held him in awe and made him feel humbled.

Unlike Vinh, the cousin now with Le Duc Dat, his father, Pham had no opportunity to travel on anyone's river-boat. Told he'd have to "Grow up first..." Pham's 'growing up-ness' had been with Grandfather in Hanoi. Now he was off on his own adventure. The trauma suffered, especially by Vinh, Phouc and Thuyet were lost in a limbo Pham could not directly access. Pham had long ceased to be playmates with the younger two. A teenager, he'd grown to love Grandfather, but thinking of the issues faced by his extended family made him deeply sad. His father left him in conflict between pride and guilt. Details surrounding his father's revolutionary activities were secret. He was proud of what he guessed but guilty, because he knew so little about Father.

Pham spent hours at the aft end of the liner. The pathway the propellers gouged out of the water intrigued him. Its track led to the far horizon, a white foamy trail that in his fertile imagination bound the ship to his land. Life aboard had become a luxury of being awakened for breakfast: idle hours on deck until morning tea: then he kept to the shade whilst some ship's crew sunbathed until lunch.

But Pham's skin didn't tolerate too much sunshine. His was more the sallow skin of the Nesoit-type, but he had features of the southern Mongoloid-type. Grandfather maintained that the Annamites had descended from inter-settlement and interbreeding with Mongoloid invaders from the north and Indonesian migration from the south. He held these "two main physical types could be distinguished among the lowlanders."

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Most 'Lowlander' Vietnamese held indigenous people in contempt. According to Grandfather, "the Negrito-type were the original indigenous stock in Indochina. Dark-skinned, long-headed primitive peoples, they used simple, polished stone tools. They wisely retreated to the vastness of jungles before the rush of invaders." These were akin to the broad-nosed, crisped haired peoples of the mountain ranges of the Malay peninsular and the Philippines.

Grandfather preferred to ignore the Negrito and loved explaining his two races theory. He held that racial idiosyncrasies separated the earlier Nesoit-type from the southern Mongoloid invasion. He "easily distinguished the Nesoit-type race who had some Caucasoid affinity. Short in stature, long-headed, light-skinned with a moderately broad nose, they could be distinguished by their wavy black hair and straight eyes." Akin to modern Indonesians, they'd come from islands to the south 2,000 years ago.

The southern Mongoloid-type from China were also short in stature. This made height a distinctive feature of the Annamites. Their average height lay between 160 cm. (5 ft. 3 in.) with less that ten percent taller than 168 cm. (5 ft. 6 in.)." These Chinese invaders were broad-headed: had yellow to light brown skin: and sported a short flattened nose. Their lank hair distinguished them. They had oblique eyes with its significant 'Mongolian' fold.

In the north, ten centuries of Chinese colonisation made clear distinctions difficult. Pham had evolved from these genetic influences. Annamites seemed mainly to be "a cross between early Nesoit Tonkin stock and later Mongolian invaders", though all were essentially of southern Mongoloid stock.

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Grandfather believed “The Annamites of Indochina were hard and skilled workers.”

Pham, at 162 cm., had a skin shade commonly pale yellow or sallow, “with straight hair, well marked cheek bones and oblique eyes” but without the distinctive Mongolian fold at the inner corner. He characterised the earlier Nesoit-type.

The South Vietnamese peoples on the other hand, were mainly of Cambodian stock. “They had traces of Dravidian as well as Mongoloid elements.” Slightly taller and darker skinned than Annamites they had a distinctly broader head with wavy hair. The Mongolian eye-fold was generally absent. On the whole the Cambodian has a more robust build than the Annamite, but Grandfather considered them “less industrious.”

Pham smiled to himself remembering Grandfather’s complicated lectures about racial characteristics. His French informant was Caucasian, thus “obviously inferior.”

By the second week most students had recovered from seasickness and Pham, who’d been unaffected, started looking forward to lunch followed by siesta. That meant fun in the afternoons with his growing fraternity of friends. They played deck games, breaking for afternoon tea before continuing into the evening until time to break for dinner. The evening meal was followed alternately by reading, gossiping about political rather than personal events, and mah jong or cards.

Pham found himself sometimes in conflict with his busy social demands. It limited his dreamtime. On the almost empty decks, when most students suffered seasickness, as he stared into the lonely vastness of the ocean he’d allowed his imagination to soar.

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He'd fought off the great hulks of ancient Chinese man-'o-war ships with his lighter, speedier Vietnamese craft. The ponderous elephants preferred by the Chinese had been besieged then destroyed by his swarming ants. Naturally Pham had always been the hero, managing to pull off coup after coup, rising fast from ship's lieutenant to Commander of the fleet.

Pham alternated these seaborne fantasies with the terrors of sea-monsters. Whales, giant sharks, octopii and squid gave him opportunities to give his life to save others from disaster. His dreams at night, in full colour, were studded with flying-fish and porpoises that he would wait for hours in daylight to be first on board to see. Many stories about Ho Chi Minh's seagoing travels had passed into legend. Pham felt he empathised with his emerging hero.

He'd enjoyed his earlier on-board isolation. These moments were becoming more rare. He missed the times given him to reflect on Grandfather's 'data overload' and the period he'd been given to help consolidate his own concepts and motivations.

Being one of the few not to succumb to sea-sickness, Pham found himself invited to the bridge. There, crew-members initiated him into the secrets of sea navigation and particularly of the compass. Intrigued by this ability to find one's way across a barren seascape, Pham learned all he could until one day he overheard some French crew talking. He realised that they considered him in the same light as a trained monkey. Once again it reminded him forcibly of the vast gulf between the French and their 'colonial naques'. French arrogance and racism finally blunted his enthusiasm but his appetite for acquiring new knowledge remained keen.

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Pham proved popular. Adroit at deck quoits, he was competent at card games and had long since mastered mah jong, after many games with his Chinese amah. Reflecting on his Hanoi life-style he recognised he'd lived an almost anti-social life. But Grandfather's wide compass of learning and the extent of knowledge gained from avid reading, now rocketed Pham into a whirl of social rounds.

His mentor for this experience proved to be Vo Van Hai.

All too soon his voyage ended. He would remember it with affection.

Approaching Toulon, Pham fell in love with the Calanques, sparkling inlets of uniquely azure blue waters surrounded by high cliffs of jagged rock. Stretching all the way from Marseilles, at Toulon they guarded the western approach to the harbour. The precipices and magical inlets of the Calanques gave Pham stark relief from the weariness of vast oceans and the boredom of the Mediterranean. From Port Said to Toulon the Captain had avoided landfall. Pham, assiduously studying local maps, recognised Porquerolles. The largest island in the Illes d'Hyeres off the entrance to the port of Toulon, Porquerolles had been an asylum for criminals who agreed to defend the mainland against the smugglers and pirates that infested the Calanques.

But Toulon had an air of seediness. The students remained only one night in France's second major port, then caught the train to the 10th Arrondissement of Paris, at the Gard du Nord. The enormous neo-classical umbrella of glass and steel that covered the platforms was awesome. Created by Hittorf in 1863, all six of the railway stations, three south and north of the Seine, conformed to this unique Master's style.

The Revolutionaries...

Pham and the students shook hands all around with their reception committee. A bus took them to their university accommodation in Paris.

On the way Paris students gave them a guided tour. They explained, "Rue Poissoniere is the boundary between two Arrondissement, the 9th and 10th. The Gard du Nord is just east of it and Gard de l'Est to its west. It led into the heart of the city past the Bibliotheque Nationale." Many would visit these in the coming years.

Some of the students would be studying at l'Ecole des Artes et Meteirs so they drove down the rue de Sebastopol. They turned left on the rue de Rivoli so that they could pass the Hotel de Ville, probably the most well known Parisian hotel in the world. Their guides pointed out the Louvre as the bus drove over the Seine River on the Isle de la Cite. There they screamed with pleasure and joy to view the Notre Dame on one side and the Palais de Justice on the other. Finally Boulevard de Saint Michel led them into the grounds of the Sorbonne, their new academic home. They were given on-campus rooms at Maison de l'Indochine, exclusively a foreign student residence.

Within two days the students were assembled to be told by the Maison President that they had received an invitation to a welcoming committee at eleven the following morning. Pham found his group surprised and honoured, but most, like Vo Van Hai his mentor, were ignorant of the host, Ho Chi Minh.

"Who in the hell is Ho Chi Minh, Pham?" he asked. Another retorted, with a puzzled look, "Who is he? Most of us don't know him?" A chorus of... "We don't know him either." made Pham realise half were southerners.

The Revolutionaries...

Pham spent the evening telling them why Ho Chi Minh had left Vietnam in 1911. How he'd worked in many parts of the world as a ship's crewman: as a labourer: and had even been a pastry chef with Escoffier in the prestigious Carlton Hotel in London. Now their President was chief negotiator in Paris for an independent Vietnam. Pham led them step-by-step to anticipate the meeting with Ho Chi Minh in the morning.

"So what are his current Vietnamese and political connections?" asked Vo Van Hai.

"After World War One he settled here in Paris to further Vietnamese independence. As one of the founders of the French Communist Party..."

"So he's a communist?" The buzz went around the room interrupting Pham. Then it settled but now the students listened with heightened interest.

Pham continued, "That was in 1920. His focus has always been on the colonial issue and still is. He is Vietnamese, first, last and always." Grandfather had said so. "He travelled to Moscow and as a Comintern agent he was ordered to South China."

"He must have met Mao Tse Dung, Pham?" Vo Van Hai again.

"Probably."

"So he is a communist?" someone ventured again. It was the tallest in the group.

"No. Bac Ho, as we call him in the north, is an ardent Vietnamese nationalist."

The Revolutionaries...

Pham gave a detailed a summary of the facts and personal anecdotes given him by his father and grandfather, of the terrible things both Le Duc Dat and Vinh had suffered. Many of his listeners were aghast. He earned a new reputation as a raconteur.

Under Pham's tutelage many of the young students realised they had lived cocooned lives. They gained a greater awareness of the 'freedom struggle' and a burgeoning and awed respect for their President, Ho Chi Minh. Pham regaled them with the aliases Ho Chi Minh had been forced to adopt and the students were especially drawn to their leader as Nguyen O Phap (he who hates the French) and Ho Chi Minh's favoured pseudonym, Nuyen Al Quoc (he the patriot).

Pham held his group breathless into the night and found he was a natural orator. He had them laughing at some of the exploits of his father: crying over the tragedy both Le Duc Dat and Vinh had suffered: and angry over the French treatment in the north. He explained Uncle Ho's successful policy of non-violence and passive resistance.

Hai looked at his protégé with new interest. Older than Pham but from the south, he had many friends among the southern students and commanded their respect. He'd heard of Ho Chi Minh and the 'freedom' movement but in the south a different name kept rising up. It was news to him that Ho Chi Minh had fought the Japanese and the Vichy French as a world-renowned guerrilla fighter. September 1945 had been momentous. General Gracey arrived in Saigon and turned against the Vietnamese, imposing censorship in Saigon on 20th and martial law on the 21st.

Then came the murder of Dewey, the American OSS man.

The Revolutionaries...

Hai explained this had resulted in a negative international response on southern efforts to follow the lead of the northern 'Freedom Fighters'. Hai talked about the difficulties caused by internecine squabbles between the various military juntas.

Hai was well briefed. "The main ones are the Hoa Hoa, the Cao Dai and the Binh Xuyen. Essentially these were the truly armed and organised Vietnamese militants. We in the south operated independently of Ho Chi Minh. In August they even set up a separate Southern Provisional Executive Committee without approval from Hanoi."

Stunned, it was Pham's turn. "Why were they so against their elected President?"

Hai answered before anyone else could speak. "Because the affluent southern society of French colons, the Chinese merchants, the Vietnamese mandarins, middle class intellectuals and many religious sects felt threatened by Ho's communism." Prophetically Vo Van Hai told them, "It will be a long time before the south will want to become an integral part of Ho Chi Minh's dream of 'One Vietnam'... if ever."

"But Uncle Ho is founder of the Vietminh and of the Indochinese Communist Party. He wants us all to be part of the One Vietnam using to advantage all our different religious and political persuasions." Pham couldn't understand. He protested, "Surely we can all subordinate our internal differences against the intentions of the French to reassert Vietnam as a colonial outpost of France? The Vietminh is of communists and represents the people of Vietnam. Who organises things in the south?"

"Tran Van Giau. He escaped in 1940 from the penal colony of Poulo Condore..."

The Revolutionaries...

Hai realised it was an incredible feat. He continued, “ Giau formed the Southern Committee but the opposition charged the Vietminh with treason for Ho’s policy of non-violence conflicted with the Trotsky-ite terrorist campaign. Giau stepped aside for Pham Van Bach. I know that Giau is one of Ho Chi Minh’s best friends. Both Giau and Bach are doctorate students educated, as we will be, here in France. Bach got his in Law from the Sorbonne, Giau in Toulouse got his in History. Bach...”

Pham could hardly contain his excitement and interrupted. “Uncle Ho and Giap, his military genius, are also historians. That’s what I’m going for at the Sorbonne.”

Hai laughed.” So am I, Pham.” The two embraced. They would remain good friends.

Hai continued, “Bach couldn’t hold it together last year. Interparty struggles, racism, anti-French potential for violence and fear of the Vietminh led to the Committee breaking apart in two weeks. While they fought among themselves, Gracey organised his Ghurka Regiment for action: the French relieved the Japanese: and with Gracey’s military support the French military leaders, several hundred Legionnaires and many angry French civilians robbed the arsenal and armed themselves. They arrogantly strutted the streets of Saigon and took control of the city, deciding this was the right moment to teach the ‘ungrateful Annamites’ a lesson in humility. The cochons even had the effrontery to hoist the French Tricolor on city buildings.”

Pham and his northerners couldn’t believe their ears. “So. What happened then, Hai?”

“The French went on a rampage, murdering hundreds.”

The Revolutionaries...

“Mon Dieu.”

“They also permanently maimed thousands. Many Saigonese, unaware of Cedile’s coup, were caught by the French gangs who were out for blood. In a fit of bloodlust the French ferreted people from their homes, smashed and totally wrecked their businesses and spared no one. Young women and children and old persons were beaten so badly they would never recover. British and French professional military stood by enjoying the ‘sport’. Many ‘lazy Annamites’ were carted off to prison.”

Pham went silent, horrified. This was new information about the year before in Saigon.

Other students filled in the gaps left by the tall student’s outburst.

One of the older students said, “We retaliated on the 24th September ...”

A quietly spoken student added, “My father, as part of the worker’s assault groups, attacked the Ton Son Nhut airport...”

The one with Cambodian features said, “Two of my uncles assaulted the prison to release several hundred prisoners placed there on the day the French went beserk.”

The tall, unruly-haired student held his hand up. “My friends from the rowing club set light to a French ship in the dockyards. Our Vietminh units cut off the power, the water mains and stopped all public transport.”

The Revolutionaries...

Pham said. "Newspaper headlines proclaimed 'Cochin-China is burning'. Then on the 25th the papers told us the senior OSS American in Saigon had been murdered by the Vietminh." He paused. "We felt that the south hadn't been listening to our elected President. Ho Chi Minh, as first President of a united Vietnam had ordered passive resistance to the French and no vengeance squads. We couldn't understand."

The tall, tousled one interjected forcefully, "That's because you northerners all assumed we in the south couldn't run our own affairs. We had a different..."

Vo Van Hai recovered his voice and interrupted. "Our struggle for independence from the French, that started on the 25th September, suddenly became all-out war. It started in Tan Dinh, a suburb of Saigon in the French-Eurasian district of Cite Herault..."

The student with Cambodian features broke in. "The Vietminh were blamed..."

The tousled one couldn't restrain himself. "It was the Binh Xuyen... they attacked in the middle of the night. I had friends there... " His cries became distressing but he struggled on, "The residents had lapsed into a false sense of security and before they could protect themselves the crazies took hostage over three hundred French and Eurasian civilians." Many of the students wept with him. "Within two hours half had been returned barely alive. I saw it. They'd been horribly mutilated and tortured. The rest were barbarically brutalised before being murdered as dawn of the 25th lifted." He stopped and tried to wipe his eyes but his tears flowed even more strongly. "I heard their screams and could do nothing... I witnessed the most horrible massacres... of my friends... and could do nothing... Nothing..." He trailed off.

The Revolutionaries...

Pham felt helpless. Through the blur of his tears he could see all the other students had sympathised with the tall student. Southerners and northerners all hugged each other. Three students held onto the tall one, who had collapsed.

The Cambodian-type student whispered. "It was terrible all over, Pham ...Cholon... Saigon... south and east to the delta and north to Bien Hoa and Phu Cong... uprisings broke out everywhere... it was chaos..." He paused to collect himself. "Anarchy..."

It was then that Vo Van Hai took charge. "Our attempt failed. We in the South failed. Listen everybody..." He stood on a table and banged a stick on its top for silence. "We are here to learn. We are here to pass exams. Get control of yourselves."

Pham joined Hai. The tall one raised himself onto the table. Each put arms around the other. The tall one looked around, imperiously. The sobbing and crying spluttered to a low ebb of sniffles and coughs then to sharp intakes of breaths.

Everyone s-h-u-s-h-e-d ... soundless, they all listened.

"North, Central and South Vietnam are in this together. In October last year we in the south learned a good lesson." The students held their breath. "The massacre turned the international community against us. It must never happen again. The British, French and Japanese troops combined to win against us. Their air forces bombed and strafed concentrations of our Vietminh wherever they found them. Many good people died." He paused, looking directly at each student. "Others here also lost good friends. Nearly three weeks we held out. We were defeated. Never again."

The Revolutionaries...

Pham intoned, "Never again. We are One Nation. Under one leader."

The solemn mantra echoed around the room, "Never again..."

Everyone turned to his neighbour and hugged. Boys and girls who had arrived as happy-go-lucky students had overnight become responsible young men and women.

Pham, all emotion drained, reminded them. "Tomorrow we all meet Ho Chi Minh, in person. We must rest. We must learn from our mistakes. We cannot risk alerting our Maison President or anyone else to what happened here tonight. It must remain our secret. We must see what our Vietnamese President expects of us."

Hai agreed. "Pham is right." Then he clapped his hands. "Now all leave. Quietly."

As the students dutifully and quietly left them alone, including the tall one, Hai turned. "You realise what has just happened, Pham?"

"We have just been democratically elected to be leaders of this group of students."

"Grandfather would say, discern wisely, discriminate justly and in right action."

"Hai. We must find out who that tall one is. What his name is. Who he represents."

"Amen..."

The Revolutionaries...

Promptly at ten the next morning cars magically appeared to take the students to a country house at Montmorency. Ho Chi Minh's photograph hung already in many homes in the north. It seemed easy for Pham to spot him in the middle of a group of people waiting to greet them on the steps. His heart raced, beat wildly.

He was sure Pham Van Dong waited too. This much-photographed Minister of Finance, and a leader in Ho's revolution, was also a history teacher and another who had suffered six years hard labour at the penal colony of Poulo Condore. This infamous and isolated island lay over a hundred miles east, off the southernmost tip of Vietnam. Released under the general amnesty granted in 1937, he led the Vietnamese Parliamentary Delegation to Paris for the Fontainebleau Conference in 1946.

All but Ho Chi Minh dressed smartly in western-styled suits, ties and leather shoes.

Someone introduced Pham to Ho Chi Minh. Pham tried desperately to maintain his composure. Ho, fifty-six, wore a high-necked Chinese jacket with a frayed collar and rubber sandals. Grandfather had disgustingly pictured Ho this way to Pham in Hanoi. During his revolutionary days in the jungle, Pham's father had proudly described Ho dressed exactly the same way.

Sensitised by his emotions, Pham realized the young men escorting Ho Chi Minh exuded an urban, middle-class air. They wore a sense of permanent anxiety: self-importance: and the feeling they were Caesar's Praetorian Guard.

In contrast, Ho Chi Minh pervaded all with a sense of compassion and inner-peace.

The Revolutionaries...

Pham had known of the old leader's jungle sickness but was unprepared for the pallid complexion and almost frail body that now smiled so serenely at him. His pulse calmed. This man was a 'real' grandfather. Pham knew he stood in the presence of a national leader, yet Ho Chi Minh exuded comfort and a quiet dignity that commanded respect. An intangible calmness entered Pham.

Pham couldn't help comparing Ho Chi Minh with his Grandfather. The Confucian aspect between the two gave him two starkly different Vietnamese characters.

Ho Chi Minh projected a steely purposefulness with courtesy and unfeigned humility. The hospitable formalism of the Mandarin was replaced by Ho Chi Minh's personal charisma. Pham suddenly understood that Grandfather's wisdom, far-sightedness and Confucian tolerance were personified even more strongly in Ho Chi Minh, yet this sense of calm and compassion over-rode all else.

Lost in these reflections, he was startled when the great man touched him on the arm. An electric shock almost felled him and he staggered slightly. Ho steadied him and Pham looked directly into the clearest and most laughing eyes he'd ever seen.

"Come my children." Ho said, encompassing all others in his left hand as he coaxed a dumbstruck Pham to sit down on the steps beside him.

The dark-suited shapes, Pham Van Dong among them, de-materialised. On Ho Chi Minh's right sat another stunned student. Pham would come to know him as Truong Nhu Trang. Twenty years later Trang would be important in Pham's life.

Ho Chi Minh said, "Call me *Bac Ho*." It meant, 'Uncle Ho'.

Ho's words called Pham back to the present reality. Pham felt Uncle Ho's arm resting gently on his shoulder.

"What is your name?" He addressed a student in the centre of the group.

Tremulously at first, then assuming greater confidence, each young student answered name, age and family details then proposed their study details and where their family lived in Vietnam. Conversation felt easy before this compassionate man.

It seemed Uncle Ho recorded each name and their details. Bac Ho asked about feelings, thoughts, philosophies and life motivations. Nothing felt too intimate. Details were received without judgement. Gradually, having won the respect and admiration of all, Ho Chi Minh turned their thoughts to the burning issue of Vietnamese independence. He made it clear to everyone they were their country's representatives and had come from Tonkin, Annam and Cochin-China.

Ho Chi Minh used the familiar language Pham's heart yearned for. "Voila. You are the youth of our great family, Vietnam. You are my family – One Nation – One Vietnam – You must never forget this moment. Vietnam is and always will be..." He paused for effect. "Indivisible... One Nation under God."

Pham heard unfamiliar birds calling in the background. The sun smiled down at the little group, elder statesmen fussed around them but their eyes had room only for Ho.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

Uncle Ho's language resonated with poetry, even his use of cliches was music to the ears of all the students. This was the language used by Vietnam's legendary heroes, from the Trung Sisters to Le Long and now down into the 20th Century. Uncle Ho's message combined the subtle qualities of idealism, nationalism and Taoist simplicity. In Uncle Ho, Pham recognised all Father and Grandfather had instilled into him.

Ho Chi Minh then shared, "It is time to seize the day. It is time to restore Vietnam's ancient cultural heritage." He paused, then continued, "Vietnam's future is up to you."

It sounded like a rallying cry. Pham looked around.

Uncle Ho explained. "You young people have a chance to be free, something your parents and grandparents have never experienced. Something they and many others throughout the history of Vietnam have fought and died for."

"It is up to you...." Uncle Ho's next words rang in his ears. "Your efforts in your studies will contribute directly to our war effort back in Vietnam. We will need you to help rebuild Vietnam. Once we have freed ourselves of the French yoke it will be students like you who have graduated in Law, in Medicine, in all the Arts and Sciences who will help our nation to win honour and respect among the modern nations of the world. We have the fighters in Vietnam. You are our warriors too. The Sorbonne warriors of a 'brave new world'."

"Never underestimate the power of the media. They must always be our friend." He told them. "On our side, they are more powerful than bombs and guns."

The Revolutionaries...

He cautioned however, "But... their words and images must be prepared by an intellectual elite who have learned the power of oratory on the world stage."

Then Bac Ho recited...

"Vietnam must wake from its slumber

Out of love we make concessions.

But the hour of National Liberation is nigh.

Its fire will never go out."

Then continued, "You are involved in a Great Patriotic War. When you believe you have done your best, it is time to strain for the extra mile. Vietnam must remain One Country. You and I have the destiny to free Vietnam from all foreign domination."

Uncle Ho had used well-worn Vietnamese symbols and slogans. He had mesmerised them with his poetry. As the meeting quietly terminated, vehicles arrived as if by magic. Each student quietly filed into the waiting cars, stunned.

Less than seven days later, two representatives from each major region of Vietnam were called for – first the South – followed by Central – then finally the North.

Truong Nhu Trang told Pham that he and a female student would be first. They were from the South. Pham later found he and a young female student had been chosen to represent the North. Once more Pham found himself at Montmorency. This time invited inside and shown into a huge living room with a central large table. Trang told him he believed the table was a historic one.

1941-1951 The Revolutionaries...

The details of the Fontainebleau Conference, held 6th July to 10th September were thrashed out on it. Pham sat down. He wanted to say he'd sat at the delegate's table. Wanted to be part of this significant turning point in his country's history.

Bai, after waiting a few minutes, sat down also. A few moments of reflection passed. Then a hand gently touched Pham, sending the same electric shock.

Ho Chi Minh said "My children." Exactly the same phrase repeated to Trang a day or so earlier. "Let us have tea together and talk."

It wouldn't have mattered what Uncle Ho said.

"Eh bien, mon enfant. Peut-être est-ce possible que tu me parles des parents." But then Uncle Ho confounded Pham. "Your Grandfather wants you to fully absorb the French culture and to be educated in Law at the Sorbonne. Of the old Mandarin class, he is worried about you being the son of Le Duc Dat." Pham could only nod in his perplexity. "This is the best place for you, to be sure."

"Le Duc Dat spoke to me before I left. You know he loves you deeply?"

Pham nodded dumbly. This had taken a twist he could never have imagined. He dropped his head in embarrassment. Uncle Ho touched him softly under the chin.

"Look into my eyes, Pham." Downcast eyes raised to meet his. "Don't be embarrassed. Your Grandfather named you well. Your Father is a good man too."

The Revolutionaries...

The great man continued, “Don’t be afraid or embarrassed ever again. Be proud of your heritage. Follow your intuition, for this guides your destiny, Pham.”

Ho Chi Minh then moved to sit between Bai and Pham, and stretched his skinny legs that straggled from their wide-legged Khaki shorts. He rested his legs under the table then and spoke quietly and confidentially to them, about the heroic traditions of the Vietnamese people and how the whole country was linked in legend and in language.

He addressed Bai by name and had remembered her family and course details. He shared Pham’s knowledge about the Funan culture and the Kingdom of Champa through to the Khmer. Finally Uncle Ho briefed them on their current embattled position with the colonial empire of the French.

It was a revolutionary lesson in sharing.

Neither Grandfather or his teachers ever gave such lessons. The three friends, sought the other’s knowledge, drinking cups of tea with anecdotes and amusing legends

Ho’s emphasis on the new role of the women revolutionaries completely won her over. He spiced this with the legends of the great female warriors and martyrs that studded Vietnamese history.

Bai said afterwards. “Never have I met anyone like Bac Ho. Bac Ho has a dream. His patriotism is a flame that I believe will never go out until Vietnam is ‘One and Indivisible’. I believe he has fanned the same flame within me.”

The Revolutionaries...

When they left the country house they received an autographed photo of their mentor with a personalised inscription. They had arrived as caterpillars lacking direction.

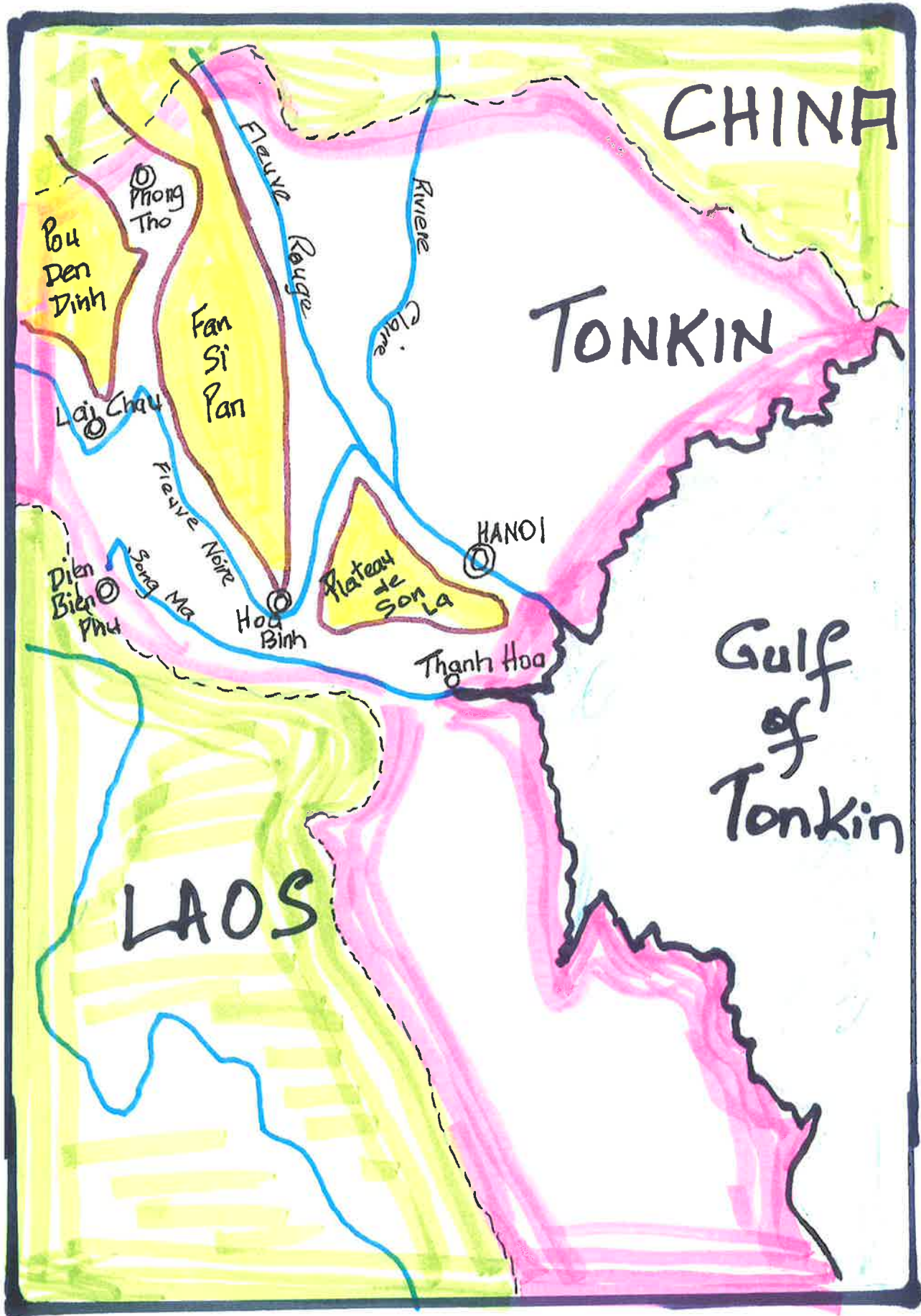
His charisma infiltrated the fibres of their being. For the next few years they would be wrapped in a cocoon of study as chairborne warriors. As zealous acolytes of a 'New Order' their war would be text-books and classrooms from which they would emerge from their chrysalis as his intellectual elite.

They waved to a saddened Ho Chi Minh, some days later, as he left the Gare de Lyon.

The personally disastrous Fontainebleau Conference had his colleagues branded as 'Moscow trained communists' and Ho Chi Minh as a Comintern agent. Returning home empty-handed, Ho faced violent opposition. Charges of 'betrayal' and 'collaboration' hurtled at him.

To emphasise their point, the French bombarded Haiphong on 20th November 1946.

"THE HILLS ARE ALIVE"



The Revolutionaries...

1951: the hills are alive...

WWII GERMAN TROOPS 'REDEEMED' THEMSELVES AS LEGIONNAIRES

Or piloted one of the 'requisitioned' German planes flying sorties for the French in Indochina. Given permission by de Lattre to fly to Lai Chau, Troy avoided the Germans as much as possible. It wasn't easy. Aboard, a German journalist and some German legionnaires trussed parcels of ammunition and food for airdrops. Apart from his earlier hatred of anything German he found their incessant smoking, even on the aircraft, something else he couldn't tolerate.

Lai Chau's declaration as capital of the Thai Federation in 1951 was a successful French ploy to ally the racial minorities to fight with them against the Vietminh. Troy wanted to see the results at first hand and report back to his Embassy in Hanoi.

The Tay, the Thai, the Mung and the Nung are the four most populous hill peoples. All had been fighting against Vietnamese oppression for centuries and this gave the French willing allies against the Vietnamese 'lowlanders'. The Tay lived mainly in north-west Tonkin where Le Duc Dat and Vinh had grown up and centred around Cao Bang. The Mung lived in Western Tonkin along the Chinese and Laotian border country around Hoa Binh with the Thai mainly around Lai Chau and Son La.

These hill-tribe towns in Eastern and Western Tonkin would be the scene of many fierce, unrelenting battles in the coming years. Troy wanted to learn as much about these peoples as possible and about the terrain. The Vietminh quickly made it their servant not their master. As a favoured friend, Troy had access to Vietminh leaders.

The Revolutionaries...

Anti-colonial, Troy developed an intense dislike of the French and the way they used and abused Vietnam and its peoples. Colonial conquest alone dominated their thinking. Aware of growing paranoia in America about communism, he hoped his friend Ho Chi Minh would beat the nationalist rather than the communist drum.

Troy was content to enjoy the ride. He looked down. Leaving Hanoi the pilot had aimed for Hoa Binh. Troy always carried his own maps for the country he would traverse. The ricefields of the Haiphong and Than Hoa deltas soon gave way to the inhospitable interior, though the valleys they'd be following gave some relief.

Hoa Binh soon came beneath their wings. Cotton-wool wisps replaced the heavy cloud experienced at take-off. The easily discerned horseshoe shape of the Riviere Noire cupped the massive southern breast of Fan Si Pan. Its nipple, Hoa Binh, at first glance seemed safe, guarded as it was by the five-thousand feet southern ramparts of Fan Si Pan. The Riviere Noire at its backdoor would also be a major barrier.

Like Lai Chau, Dien Bien Phu and Phong Tho these valley towns served as markets and trading points for other smaller towns and villages in their surrounding areas.

But, as Troy looked down, Hoa Binh looked lonely and isolated. His tactician-mind switched to combat-defensive mode. He looked more closely. Hoa Binh was badly sited for defence. The valley on the opposite side of the river looked over twenty-five miles long and had a defensible space for an airfield and for gun positions. It looked well-drained. Roads intersected north, south, east and west. Troy realised they could be easily defended and if necessary accessed from Hanoi.

The Revolutionaries...

But at Hoa Binh, on the other side of the river, options were severely limited. Any troop or civilian withdrawal over the river would be almost impossible under fire. Quickly past the town, Troy hardly spared another thought for Hoa Binh.

He made his way to the cockpit to get a better look at the rest of the countryside. Troy gave the pilot a polite but cursory nod as he stared over the nose of the Junkers. Three huge massifs originated in China. Each extended over the Vietnam border to the Gulf of Tonkin and stretched three hundred miles behind Troy's aircraft. One loomed to his right, Fan Si Pan, looked awesome. To his left the Plateau de Son La seemed more hospitable though covered mostly by thick jungle and fertile undergrowth.

The Vietminh impressed Troy. The French, with their sophisticated modern weapons and transport capabilities were limited to troop movements where major features south-east to north-west, would force them to follow the easier pattern of the terrain. In contrast the Vietminh marched troops and manhandled supplies across the grain.

Like Fan Si Pan, the first mountain barrier flying west toward Laos from Hanoi. It rose over 10,000 feet and boasted the highest peak in Indochina. Troy nicknamed it 'Fancy Pants'. It dominated the country between the Fleuve Rouge and the Riviere Noire. These two rivers gouged then drained their way through each highland massif.

As the plane rounded the curve of the river to straighten out for the flight north-west to Lai Chau, Troy could barely make out Na San, the next significant and long valley. Directly in front, it lay in the flaky mist that hid the valley floors in the Tonkin region early each morning. Na San valley stretched over twenty-five miles.

The Revolutionaries...

Troy couldn't see the second most dominant mountain barrier, the Pou Tsi Ling. Covered in a huge mass of cumulous cloud, odd and errant peaks jutted into the sky at eight to ten-thousand feet. As Troy flew toward them they slumbered on the distant horizon like a Chinese dragon, waiting. Troy sucked deeply on his water-bottle and studied his map, looking down on Na San. Below him Vietminh scurried east-west.

The Riviere Noire, flowed from China fifty miles west of the Pou Tsi Ling. Twenty-five miles into North Vietnam, Pou Tsi Ling dropped steeply into the river's gorges. The river boiled into rapids. Opposite, the Sin Tiai range rose almost vertically to seven thousand feet. Forced north by both massive ranges, the river's headlong course to the Tonkin Gulf formed a horseshoe around the Sin Tiai mountains before it resumed its headlong rush south to the Haiphong delta

Troy could see nothing of Dien Bien Phu's valley. Lai Chau hid thirty miles away, but on the other side of the Plateau de Son La. Six-thousand feet high peaks identified the high-ridged spine of the fertile plateau. Tracing its course on his maps Troy could see that the plateau's western flank fell into the Song Ma. He traced that river to the curve at its northern end and noted Song Ma's headwaters just north-west of Dien Bien Phu.

Immediately after leaving Na San valley the prudent pilot headed west between two mountains. At six-to-seven thousand feet a flight due north would be too bumpy. Their target, Lai Chau nestled against the Sin Tiai range about seventy miles north.

The new course took them into the northern end of Dien Bien Phu valley. The pilot pointed ahead. Many Vietminh tracks could be seen below, west across the saddle.

The Revolutionaries...

The pilot made a ninety-degree turn to the right, then headed north again, along the Nam Meuk river valley as it dropped away north from Dien Bien Phu. Troy spotted Dien Bien Phu briefly, out the left window, before it disappeared behind him in a trail of wispy clouds. Within three years, that small piece of land would determine the ultimate fate of Vietnam. Troy's memory of that peaceful and pleasant valley, haunted him for two years. Dien Bien Phu seem like a dream.

To his right, huge peaks soared to seven thousand feet. Troy easily followed the course of the Nam Meuk, where it met its confluence at right angles to the Riviere Noire. By ten o'clock they'd emerged from the valley, west from Lai Chau. The sky was so clear Troy could see the almost inaccessible limestone massif of the Sin Thai, and its many isolated peaks. It glistened against the sun, again to his right.

Lia Chau, astride the Riviere Noire, faced all three massifs. The Pou Tsi Ling massif blocked its immediate north. 'Fancy Pants' blocked to its east and Pou Dien Dinh to the west. Lai Chau slumbered against Sin Tiai where the Riviere Noire reversed itself.

A huge field full of multi-coloured, waving people greeted the plane as it descended.

Troy was faintly amused on arrival at the Lai Chau airfield. Thai Federation soldiers dressed in blue pyjamas and had a passion for felt hats. Even the inquisitive peasants bordering the field dressed in bright-coloured clothes, hiding their narrow, slit eyes under a variety of hats. Everyone smiled in anticipation of presents from Hanoi.

These Thai soldiers were the last hill peoples to be assimilated into French forces.

The Revolutionaries...

On the first evening, and at the invitation of the French Administrator in Lai Chau, Troy was entertained to a superb Chinese meal. Assisting the Administrator's Chinese mistress a young and beautiful Dao girl from the border region appeared, in traditional costume. A radiant smile in a huge black turban held on by a folded green scarf, she wore a black oversized blouse, clipped together with a silver clasp. Her sleeves reached halfway down her lower arm. Silver bangles elegantly set-off her arms.

Her blouse surmounted a knee-length, black-and-white chequered, pleated skirt under which black puttees ended above her ankles. Silver bangles also adorned her ankles.

She flashed ivory-white teeth below healthy, protruding gums and passionately friendly lips. Not the least coy and well-aware of exotic female charms she happily posed for photographs in the German's Leica cameras. The evening was marred for Troy when the Administrator showed his private collection of pornographic photos that included posturing girls younger than the young Dao hostess.

Relieved to be on their way the next day, Troy was notified of the plan to 'walk the terrain' to Phong Tho. Their small force would proceed on a tour of inspection of the French garrisons along the Chinese border. They faced difficult climbs and it would take them fourteen days. Steps would be carved in some places from solid rock.

The Colonel briefed Troy, his escort of legionnaires and other educated members of his party. "You can see. Four main roads to Lai Chau shape a Christian cross. A river flows on each arm. Lai Chau is important. It controls the confluence of the Nam Meuk and the Riviere Noire. It also guards the shortest road from China to Laos."

The Revolutionaries...

“What some of you may not know is that a commando war rages behind Vietminh lines. Known as the Groupment de commandos Mixed Aeroportes, or G.C.M.A., they are not designed to return to any French operational bases. Their aim is to remain permanently in Vietminh territory. They are not raiders. They are guerrilla-fighters.”

Troy immediately thought of Merrill’s Marauders but that notion he quickly dispelled.

The Colonel continued. “We have radio-communication with them and have prepared packages to drop to them. In Indochina about 15,000 of them require air-drops of 300 tons of supplies each month. We will be this area’s only contact whilst we are here.”

Before Troy left, the serious French Colonel commanding the small party pointed out a south-westerly trail to the Europeans travelling with him. Then they climbed north for eight hours on small, sturdy mountain ponies. Troy struck up an immediate friendship with a Vietnamese intelligence agent. Troy could never resist ‘lame ducks’. The constantly smiling man shared quite freely with him the torture methods he used to gather intelligence. He received grudging respect from the Thai and the Dao in the party. Dressed in civilian clothes, Le Duc Dat sat astride his Thai pony. Troy felt absurd but comfortable, his feet almost touching the ground. Huge and dark-featured, he looked like Sanchez from Don Quixote. At least he didn’t have to walk.

Troy realised Le Duc Dat’s function at last. A liaison between the G.C.M.A and his group, he’d found ‘call me Dat’ daily huddled over the radio set or clipping away at Morse code. Troy developed an even greater respect for his Vietnamese friend. Troy could help him with their communication set-up.

The Revolutionaries...

Troy dogged Le Duc Dat's side. The man proved a useful alliance. Troy learned much from this encyclopaedia about terrain, the locals, their language and their traditions.

A French Colonel led the group to the other side of the river. He pointed behind. "That is our only road link to the outside world." His nostalgia betrayed him.

"Passable in the dry season, it goes through Dien Bien Phu to Luang Prabang, the Imperial City." He paused as all of them crowded off the edge of the bridge leading them north. He wanted to allow everyone to assimilate this knowledge. Then he pointed again. "Dien Bien Phu, down that way, is the largest and most fertile valley in this part of the world and thankfully we have a small garrison stationed there."

They ate cold balls of rice served with a sticky sweet sauce, washed down with water. Clouds made the trail cool and created a good day for travelling. Winds swept the sky clean again toward evening and they stopped in a clearing on a river-bank. Opposite, a group of Thai huts on bamboo stilts beckoned them. Elders waited on the village side. One was particularly wizened and frail looking. He stood out clearly as the 'boss'. Troy didn't hesitate. Like a Mongol horseman, he led a charge across, holding his feet high in front as his pony splashed its way through the fast-flowing ford.

The village, resting unnamed by the river, had organized an official reception under the guidance of the old shaman. A meal was first order of the day.

Troy squatted on the floor with the others eating minced buffalo-meat served with the thick glutinous rice common to the highlands. He enjoyed the change.

The Revolutionaries...

A young Thai woman squatted behind each guest. Intricately embroidered clothes ended in two straps, one over each shoulder. Troy thought the embroidery motifs were dog's paws. Le Duc Dat spotted his puzzlement. He'd chosen to sit next to Troy.

He leaned forward and whispered, "The Dao believe they are all descended from a mythological Dog. It is a Chinese legend that they have brought with them. They originally came from South China. You know, these people may look primitive but they use a script developed in the 5th Century."

Troy learned to take his time eating. Otherwise, whenever he put his chopsticks down a bowl of muddy-looking liquid, known as *shum*, was almost force-fed into his mouth. Made out of sugar-cane it cauterised his throat better than Johnny Walker Black Label, the preferred drink of urban Vietnamese. Shum tasted like schnapps.

As he swallowed each last drop everyone in the circle shouted "*kempei*". The shaman smiled, nodded and showed his few worn-out teeth. A shum appeared. Then another. Taller even than the Colonel, Troy attracted most attention. It amused Troy. He assumed "*kempei*" was the equivalent of 'down the hatch'. Much later Troy staggered outside and tiredness obliterated thought as he peed on the buttress of a tree. The full moon's grandeur silhouetted him. Its reflection across the surface of the river shimmered a trail to the other side then lost itself in the trees.

Suddenly he realised the full moon's significance. They had arrived at festival time. Like a spotlight, the moon made him feel shamefully exposed but the strain on his bladder suborned any embarrassment. He shook the last drops free.

The Revolutionaries...

As he zipped up he spotted movement. The shaman directed some significant pagan rite. At the river's edge large group of young women had adopted a semi-circle facing the full moon. The sheen on their impassioned faces gleamed with luminescence.

They were dressed in white bodices to distinguish them from Red or Black Thais. Le Duc Dat explained that each group took their identity from one of the major rivers. These maidens were the 'White Thai sisterhood'. Their black skirts merged into the darkness of the mud flats. Troy thought it made them appear to float above the river. Their hair, worn loose inside the hut, now had been twirled into knots on top.

The other Europeans crowded on some steps nearest the dancers.

Troy stood a little way off, Le Duc Dat beside him. From one of the thatched buildings a loud gong sounded. The scene became surreal. Like Sufi dancers they began to move in a graceful, slow-motion weaving. Their eyes never left the bright spectre of the moon. Sexuality hung like a humid wetness as the girls seduced its chaste disc. Troy experienced a hardness and took a sharp intake of breath.

"You are watching a fertility dance." Le Duc Dat voiced Troy's fervid thought. "It is their time to become Woman. These mountain Thai are animists. All life is invested by spirit and spirit exists in all matter. The rocks, the trees, the wind ... the moon and stars in the heavens ... all part of the wonder of life. Life begins in sex." He turned to Troy. "When you were a little boy, did you dream?"

"I was in it. I lived the dreams I had as a young child and still do."

The Revolutionaries...

“Then you resisted the conditioning of your culture, my friend.” Le Duc Dat smiled an enigma-smile. “You must have an interesting inner-life. Are you Christian?”

He looked deeply into Troy’s steely-grey eyes. The direct question rocked Troy.

“Uh... I am Catholic. I ... Uh... sort of believe in the precepts of the Catholic Church.” Then he confessed, “I have to admit some concerns though.”

It felt bizarre to be talking this way. Here, in this place. He looked about. Time ceased to exist. This most ancient of cultures absorbed him. Swallowed him into itself. Troy’s mind spun in an ever-increasing vortex.

Le Duc Dat said. “These wonderful people are of the same ethnicity as the Thais of Bangkok. They can make themselves understood there even though they have never been out of their hills. Attempts have been made over the centuries to convert them to Buddhism but they remain true to their origins, like you do.”

Troy spin-out then recognised some reality, perplexed. “I don’t understand.”

“You are a Christian mystic and don’t know it. You have retained the mystery of your childhood. If you still dream as though you are the dream and the dream is you, then you are very close to the ancient ideas of creation and of life-force for these people.”

Le Duc Dat’s eyes glinted. “The Shaman has already worked you out. He likes you.”

Troy looked more closely at Le Duc Dat. ‘He knows more than he tells’, he thought.

The Revolutionaries...

Dat continued. "All children have the same sense of awe as so-called primitive beings. You believe in God?" It seemed more a statement than question.

"Yes. I believe that a creative being, some central life-force is universal in all mythologies." Troy couldn't believe he'd said that.

As he spoke a loud gong sounded again, within the village. The dancers stopped. Breath itself ceased. Not stir of a breeze. Nothing made any sound. Only the memory of the gong which continually resonated in Troy's head.

One detached herself from the group of young maidens and slowly twirled her way to where Troy stood. Lithe and beautiful, she maintained dignity of form and grace.

His eyes raised to her bejewelled headdress. She exuded the presence of a queenly beauty. Her eyes drowned in Troy's. She moved closer. Their bodies merged. As if by magic a bowl appeared in her hand and she proffered it. Troy took it without question. He smelt a strange aroma rising from the steaming liquid within the bowl. He caught Le Duc Dat's eye. A faint nod confirmed he had to drink it, which he did. It tasted so good he drained it. A glow spread from within his heart to his whole body.

She led him by the hand to the water's edge. The other girls stripped Troy. He felt no affront as he stood facing the river, her hand in his. Troy hardly even noticed as she too was stripped. Everything happened so naturally. So perfect to stand together this way. He wondered briefly, "What have I drunk that makes everything seem so right?" It passed. A solemnity surrounded everything that happened.

The Revolutionaries...

Some deeply religious liturgy took over. The cold of the highlands, which he'd previously felt, no longer chilled him. He glowed with inner, mystical experience.

Working from behind, the girls bathed both in aromatic oils. Moonglow sparkled on the river's surface before them. The gentle touch of the Shaman's hand rested on Troy's shoulder. He even felt the Shaman's hand resting on Her. A slight pressure and the three of them moved into the waters. The Shaman let go. Two bodies entwined. Feelings in the crispness, the coolness. Water baptised them. Made them pure.

The rest of the night passed in a haze of pleasure that Troy had never before experienced. How they both left the river was mystery. Where they went...?

Troy remembered the pleasure of entering his 'White Thai' maiden. So skilled in many ways he wondered how she knew. But his 'White Thai' couldn't fake her reflex of pain. Nor could she fake the show of blood. It gave his ecstasy much deeper meaning. Her very special-ness a particular magic.

He woke. A small, new hut. To themselves. She nestled on his arm. Long tresses cool.

Early next morning they were fed by smiling, twittering sparrows of older women, washed and dressed like babies before being led into the centre of the village. The Colonel and his group had been kept waiting but no one mentioned anything. Ever. Troy felt a pang of regret but the aureole that surrounded Her-whose-name-he-never-knew, and the Shaman, quietened questions before they arose. In silence they left the village. Soon the Colonel's party and Troy were swallowed up by dense undergrowth.

The Revolutionaries...

Once through the lush secondary growth Troy entered primary jungle, notable for its absence of sun. Silence wrapped its blanket around him. The dank smell of rotting flora and dampness was overlaid with the aroma of growth. The slow yearning of greenery trying to reach the sun inspired extreme varieties of flora. Troy normally felt more at home in this environment. Today, the effects of last night had not worn off.

After four hours the party stopped to freshen-up on the bank of the river. Le Duc Dat sat him down on a bund. Still dazed, Troy hadn't noticed the leeches. One jack-knifed its sucker-head to its tail, then stretched to move higher on his legging. Life slowed. Troy became aware all was illusion. The leech paused head-to-tail again. Le Duc Dat placed the lighted end of his cigarette as its tail stretched. The creature shuddered. Dropped to the ground. His friend crushed it on a rock beneath his booted heel.

Le Duc Dat gently removed Troy's leggings. Three had attached their suckers to Troy's ankles. The cigarette-end fascinated Troy. It dulled then glowed repeatedly. Its power of death awed him. Touch to tail. Smell of burning. A leech dropped. Le Duc Dat's heel took forever. Slowly crushed out Troy's blood. It squirted to sludge in six directions. He lifted his heel to check. A green nothingness shrunk to shapelessness. A process Le Duc Dat repeated until all three had been killed, scorched until they dropped then crushed. The other legging revealed two more. Finally the orgy ceased. Troy's blood made star-signs on the hard ground. Le Duc Dat splashed cold water on Troy's face. Troy spluttered. Grabbed the flannel. He wetted it himself from the river. The engorging leeches purple suckers made large weals around his ankle. Then Le Duc Dat saw the scar. As though a sharp knife had lifted the skin from the shinbone.

The Revolutionaries...

Troy wiped his lower legs gently, without dislodging the vomit of the dying creatures. Their juices had already sealed the holes they'd made. When he'd wrung, rinsed and washed his legs, arms and face a few more times he stopped. Purposefully wrung the cloth dry. Rinsed. Dried. Handed it back. Time returned to its normal estate.

"Thank you." His look penetrated Le Duc Dat's sombre, slanted Vietnamese eyes.

"I'm glad you are back with us." A simple statement. No Judgement.

Troy slowly dressed as he smiled back. "Some party, Eh?"

Le Duc Dat's smile was real. Nothing immutable. Genuine relief flooded his face.

The track contoured about the same height all the way and Troy was fascinated by a power-line that edged alongside the track to thirty miles north. There they veered right for the last four miles trek into Phong Tho leaving the power-line behind. It had been an easy walk. Troy hardly noticed it, still locked in the previous night's events.

Seat of a highly respected Thai prince, Phong Tho lay in the shadow of the awesome Fan Si Pan massif to the east. The evening sun glanced off the Pou Den Dinh to the west. Cool evening breezes warned of a cold night to come. Immediately north, Pou Tsi Ling massif breathed colder. In every direction peaks surged to ten thousand feet.

They stayed three days in a real Shangri-La. Not at all a mythical paradise. The aged Thai prince all addressed as "Excellency". He revelled in the attention.

The Revolutionaries...

The prince lavished his beautiful Thai women on them in a luxury of dancing and feasting. Mainly at night. The wonderful Thai. Tall, graceful, frank and hospitable.

Troy avoided the opium. Kept pure the memory of She-who-could-not-be-named. His own 'Ayesha'. In a secret compartment of his mind, that was the name he'd given her. He refreshed himself three times a day in the waterfall.

When Troy returned to his 'room', mounds of flowers were piled on his sleeping mat.

The Colonel moved them on after three days. North and along the Chinese border Troy's map showed 'Relief data incomplete'. They were in the hands of the Meo guides the prince had obtained for them. This was the 'high country' and as they climbed higher the surrounding countryside became bleak and inhospitable. At night Troy's parachute-silk sleeping bag offered little comfort against the biting cold. He and Le Duc Dat slept back-to-back to keep warm.

Troy woke the first night. Cold had penetrated to the centre of his body. He needed to pee badly but was too cold to move. So cold his teeth clenched of their own accord. He held his arms tight across his chest, squeezing his breasts together with his hands, wrists and crossed-over arms held in compression so tightly that he felt each individual muscle. His chin braced itself into the crotch of his neck. It seemed forever. Eventually he was forced to go for a pee as the sun tried vainly to pierce the cold. Standing caused a lightness in his head. Made him stumble. Le Duc Dat groaned.

He breathed into his hands, rubbing them. Troy's knees hurt, walking in the hills.

The Revolutionaries...

A shroud of fine mist seeped into his clothes. Troy only felt the mist as a tenacious, slow-soaking rain. He first felt its wetness. Breakfast passed quickly. They had to move on so that the movement of their bodies would stop the ague-like shuddering. It totally possessed all the Europeans. Even Le Duc Dat shuddered as with a fever.

The Meo were amazing, seemingly impervious to the cold. As the party came across their women, their ability to carry huge loads in baskets on their backs and strapped to their forehead, amazed Troy. Stocky, their mouths heavily stained with betel-nut juice and often puffing heavily on a long clay pipe, they seemed indomitable.

On lower slopes they were half-naked. Knotted, thick muscles in the working areas of their bodies showed no fat. Thick, strong calf muscles betrayed their mountain lives. The men covered their loins in a bulky cloth and wore a red apron in front. Higher up the hills they wore black pyjama-like clothes with black skull-caps.

The women made up for the dullness of the men by wearing red as a primary colour but prolifically garnished with blue and greens. Adorned on every wrist and ankle with bracelets of silver they made a startling change to the drab, often burnt-out hill country, and the droll, always serious menfolk. Throughout the whole of Asia, the Meo were the biggest producers of opium.

Troy never ceased to be amazed as they broke out of the undergrowth, or rounded a bend in the track to be greeted by vast fields of poppies, fracturing drab, dull hillsides with a blaze of red, green and yellow against a verdant blue sky. In the middle of waving masses of rainbow colour women would be bent over harvesting white sap.

The Revolutionaries...

The colour of their clothes competed with the glory of nature. Tinkling voices carried across the cool, clean air of the uplands. Closer, Troy could see the care with which they'd cut the bulbous flower-base with their tiny knives. He'd watch, with a kind of envy, as the slow-moving sap wound its way into the cups the women held. Their lively chatter offered warm relief from the difficulties of their trek. Throughout the hill villages opium was the language of barter and of night.

It became impossible for Troy to continually refuse to smoke. Safer to smoke. Otherwise he risked a breach of mountain-people etiquette. The alternative was to have your liver eaten after being killed for discourtesy. Old tribal customs are timeless, unforgiving and a primal authority among indigenes. Within ten days Troy couldn't imagine his previous life. Life in the hills consisted only of riding his pony, stopping, meeting new people and being faced by the constant challenges of mountain tracks, river-crossings and jungle. The flow of different hill peoples, cultures, traditions and village festivities left him confused and breathless. Life, driven by survival and primitive needs, took over. Everything before became ancient memory. Each day a vague, shadowed thought. Even his last memory, a blur.

On the unmapped frontier between Vietnam and China, the Nam Kum river was their last stop. Its dark-green waves crested as white foam on both sides. Identical scenery existed over the border. Bare mountains, rice paddies and people in bamboo houses on stilts. The same clothes. The women and children ever-smiling escorts, bedecking them in flowers and a permanent stream of chatter.

Their journey done, they travelled back to Lai Chau by boat. The sun shone brightly.

THREE

THE CLOUDS GATHER...

*"God alone
sees the black ant
on the black stone
in the black night."*

Arab proverb

The Clouds Gather ...

1951: the Fleurs de Lys and the Silk Road...

AFTER MEETING HO CHI MINH PHAM BECAME A VIETNAMESE PATRIOT

On reflection, Pham realised that Ho Chi Minh knew, as they shared afternoon tea together, that negotiations with the French at Fontainbleu were doomed. Uncle Ho had placed so much faith on Fontainbleu to achieve some measure of Vietnamese independence, but, instead learned the French could not be trusted. His compromises had ended in a personal disaster for Ho Chi Minh. The French gave him nothing. The Vietnamese delegation left Ho Chi Minh in Paris to salvage what he could.

Ho Chi Minh's failure led to revolution.

Disillusioned and despairing, Uncle Ho had not let Pham see any glimmer of sadness.

Pham settled into his courses at the Sorbonne with his teeth clenched, spending most of his time in the library at the renamed Institute of Political Studies. His focus remained on colonialism. The more he studied it the more his eyes were opened to the hypocrisy and intransigence of French colonialism in Indochina. French Revolution ideals were reduced to pragmatic economics. France was not prepared to concede anything to Ho Chi Minh because he challenged their monopoly in rubber, minerals and other produce. They were 'robber barons' of his history lessons.

Pham's social studies program showed that nothing in history changes without a revolution. Political and economic power had to be wrenched out of the hands of the already rich. He agreed with the Marxist-Leninist interpretations of political theory.

The Clouds Gather ...

For the whole time Pham studied at the Sorbonne, France itself was embroiled itself in attempting a new constitution. Royalists, Socialists, Communists and Republicans stirred a lively, often deadly debate, laying bare the apparatus of French democratic processes. Grandfather's love for French culture, which he'd embedded in Pham's mind, contested with the new challenges Pham faced. He found himself in the middle of change. Government after Government fell. The reasons illuminated him.

Pham felt revitalised by his association with the Algerian Moslems in the Red Belt around Paris. He met Belkacem Krim, who eventually became the Foreign Affairs Minister for the Fronte de Libaration Nationale, or F.L.N. and became inspired by the Algerian Moslem revolutionary movement. At the Sorbonne, he met and talked with Edward Behr, Reuter's correspondent covering developments in North Africa.

The parallels between the 'Algerian experience' and the Vietnamese one made Pham an irrepressible nationalist. It became his 'raison d'etre'. The north-west 'hump' of Africa contains Morrocco: Algeria at its centre: with Tunisia on its eastern border. These had become the focus of confrontation against French colonialism.

Pham learned much from history, student discussions and meetings in the Red Belt. It intrigued him that Algiers in the 16th Century was a noisy, prosperous anthill of Christian slaves, Jewish merchants and Sicilian pirates. Algeria's history was much more intricate and colourful than Vietnam's, being sequentially colonised by the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs, the Spaniards, the Turks and finally the French. But its Berber indigenes had never been conquered. Despite colonisation, mountain and desert tribes lived isolated from the French in a closed national brotherhood.

The Clouds Gather ...

The Berbers retained their ancient laws and customs. Like the Vietnamese, the Berbers superficially adapted to the invader's materialistic ways, but remained free of their moral taint. Forcibly converted to Islam, the Berbers managed to incorporate their traditions, culture and their ancient religious form of animism.

Like ancient and modern Vietnamese, attempts to tame them met with insurrection.

History invents fascinating patterns and twirls in its tapestry of life. Pham smiled as he read that the European powers using the Mediterranean found it cheaper to pay the Port of Algiers for protection. His smile grew wider as he learned that piracy was the Algerian's most lucrative income. Vietnam had its opium pirates. Even more interesting, he found that two Jewish merchants had set up a commercial empire from Marseille to Alexandria. His respect for Jewish influences in history had already matured following his readings of the German Jew, Karl Marx and his philosophical engagement with Maimonides and Spinoza.

The French were deeply in debt to the two Jews with no chance of paying this off. Late in the 1820's France decided to avoid payment and capture Algiers to establish some form of taxation policy upon its European neighbours. In May 1830, in a tradition repeated in Haiphong, the French set sail from Toulon with an expeditionary force of 35,000 men shipped in 600 vessels. Three weeks later Algiers fell.

Moslem leaders, foreshadowing modern history, declared a *jihad* against the infidel invaders. The tricolour flag flew from Algiers but in the rest of Algeria a motley, anarchical group of fiercely independent tribes combined to control the countryside.

The Clouds Gather ...

Systematically they destroyed large contingents of French troops. This captured Pham's imagination. The Berbers fought a successful guerrilla war when the French attempted to move on major towns and villages. Marshal Bugeard changed this. Algeria's history, following the arrival of the Marshall intrigued him.

In a Sorbonne lecture, Behr explained to mesmerised students, "Most of Algeria's problems are associated with Marshal Bugeard and his obsession to make the country *l'Algerie Française*. At the Marshall's instigation, France exported hordes of its citizens, making Algeria a densely populated colony. Bugeard swore to protect his colonists. The presence of one million vocal and determined Frenchmen to stay on Algeria's soil is at the heart of the current 'Algerian problem' here in 1950."

This period, 1841-1848, Pham researched as his compulsory political 'reading'.

Pham delivered his own lecture, stating, "During this time Europe staggered under Metternich. The Prince then completed a successful Treaty of Fontainebleau with Napoleon, leaving his native Austria intact." Pham's explanation of Metternich's first declaration of war on Napoleon then his announcement as 'Prince of the Austro-French empire' appealed to the Royalists in his audience.

He continued, "Metternich then remade Europe's map." Appealing to his communist friends, "Like Metternich," he explained "Ho Chi Minh will prove a brilliant diplomat and remake the map of Indochina." They clapped. The audience he next captured were his beloved Vietnamese compatriots. Pham vilified Metternich. He contrasted the Prince's performance as a man versus the prince as a superb statesman.

The Clouds Gather ...

“He was a magnificent diplomat for his country, Austria. Like Uncle Ho, he had a deep conviction about his role in his historic life-time.” Tears then formed in Pham’s eyes as he remembered, “Uncle Ho is a personally warm and sympathetic leader. Metternich failed as a man. He was cold. Uncle Ho has insight into the lessons of history. The Prince had none” Pham predicted that, “One day Uncle Ho will be leader of a successful evolution of Vietnamese statehood through negotiation, or he will be forced to lead a revolution by force, but only if left with no alternative. It is up to France to adopt him as their choice to lead Vietnam into the future or...”

Pham concluded to an incredible outburst of applause. The rest was lost in loud cheering and more restrained boos. Pham found that he enjoyed the adrenalin-rush.

History’s foibles caused Marshal Bugeard’s name to be a vowel away from Major Bigeard. After capture in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, Bigeard, trained by the Vietminh, became the ‘scourge of Algeria’ in 1958. Pham later learned of his exploits in both.

Much closer to his heart, Pham’s next assignment was ‘historical parallelism’ in the war waged by Bugeard in Algeria and by de Castries in Vietnam, in 1951. It matched his essay on ‘economic imperialism’ in the radical French newspaper *L’Égalité*.

In both, he drew attention to the massacres. Applying his Spanish War experiences to Algeria, Marshal Bugeard ignored the conventions of war. He established the Roman General Scipio’s *razzia*, or scorched earth policy. In another quirk of history Pham learned Scipio had also arrived in Carthage with over 30,000 Roman mercenaries. Successful, he flattened and burned Carthage to the ground, then salted the earth.

The Clouds Gather ...

Saint-Arnaud was a young officer with Marshall Bugeard. Pham never forgot Reuter's Edward Behr, when he quoted Saint-Arnaud as a later Marshal of France saying, "We burned and destroyed everything. The carnage tortured my soul. Houses, tents, streets and courtyards were littered with frightful carnage. Without warning French soldiers struck everywhere without discrimination of sex or of age." The veteran reporter's face changed as tears streamed down his face. "Children, literally whilst sucking, were torn from their mother's tits, dashed against stones and walls and the mothers and their daughters raped." He stopped. He choked, then stated, "The French revolution gave France the moral high ground. The Marshal betrayed our revolution."

Anger and hysteria swept the hall. Finally a cry by one of the students filled the air.

"Why?... Why?... Why?..." bounced off walls and ceilings.

This betrayal inflamed scarlet faces and sweat-covered shirts.

Hysteria subsided as energies became spent. Behr was overwhelmed by the response.

"It is not for the last time that a colonial power, in this case France, has lived in ignorance of what its soldiers and policemen have done in far off places in the name of the people who sent them there. History has a way of repeating itself if we don't learn from it. We French have a notorious record of doing exactly that. We forget easily. If we see or hear what has been done, often we then condemn them and berate our soldiers. We forget the politicians sent the troops in with our majority approval. What they do lines our pockets and brings us exploited economies for us to enjoy."

The Clouds Gather ...

“Why?... Why?... Why?...” The frustration echoed again. Behr raised his hand.

In silence they heard, “Why?... In reprisal against the Marshal’s *razzia*, the Moslem leaders captured then submitted many French POW’s to horrific torture, and even worse, mutilation. One of our colonels in Algiers recaptured the remains of one of his soldiers. Strapped to a steel post cemented deep in the ground, his arm was then tied to a tractor that ripped it out at the socket. He didn’t die. So they repeated this on the other arm. The man still cried for death then they roasted him. What would you do?”

Without waiting for a response he continued, “The colonel’s troops later found a cave full of five-hundred frightened men, women and children taking refuge. He, himself, lit the torch at the open end of the cave. Ten survived. What would you have done?”

To a stunned audience, “When we know the cost of war we’ll blame the soldiers. They have to learn quickly or be hung for atrocities. Saint-Arnaud, two months later, suffocated fifteen-hundred Moslems in a cave but ensured there were no survivors.”

He added, “In a confidential letter to Marshall Bugeard, he stated, ‘No one went into the cave... Not a soul... Only me.’ The French government and Marshal Bugeard, in collusion, excluded the press. They agreed it should not have access to ‘too precise a detail...’ for the good of the country’s conscience.” Behr left the hall in silence.

At the next meeting in the Latin Quarter, Pham heard Hai, his friend, speak. He’d been at Behr’s lecture and continued on the same theme. Except he recounted true stories of the French atrocities that had occurred in Vietnam a hundred years later.

The Clouds Gather ...

“My friends, May I read his letter to you?” he began. “It’s only twenty years ago that terrible things took place in Vietnam. I have my friend’s letter from North Vietnam.”

The only sounds in the room, were fervent whispers, a shuffling of feet and chairs and a few sniffs. It was that traditional way of announcing unanimity.

Hai continued,” My friend was sentenced to death twice without any clear evidence of violence on his part. He was accused of taking a role in the Yen-Bay uprising of 1930 instigated by the Vietnamese Nationalist Party. Death by guillotine ended many lives. Because they could find no direct link between my friend and violence they shipped him to the terrible Poulo Condore prison where many of our revolutionaries were tortured and murdered. As part of his torture in Phu Tho prison in north-west Tonkin he met the ‘lady’ twice. He still remembers the ‘Guillotine Poem’, which the inmates promised to recite on the way to their death. Would you like to hear it?” He read:

“The flame of patriotism burns in my heart To the very end

I now want to shed my blood to beautify my Fatherland

Please don’t feel sorry I must go and you remain

My sacrifice is only a test

To discriminate cowards from warriors

Now I bequeath to you a sacred duty

To liberate our beloved land

Success or failure is in your hands

You Victory is my hope and my dream

I want to share it with you in the golden stream.”

The Clouds Gather ...

To raise their spirits, Pham offered an anecdote told to him by Le Duc Dat, his father, and relayed from Giap, the history teacher, or *Giao*.

“About five o’ clock one afternoon, the French Resident Colas of the northern region visited the Phu-Tho prison, which is on the China-Vietnam border. He ordered a group of inmates to share philosophical and political views. One, a teacher, was my Father’s friend. Earlier that morning thirteen death-row inmates had been executed by guillotine. The teacher, (*Giao*), forced to watch, expected to die with them.”

This news at first disquieted the students but Pham begged for quiet, and continued.

“Colas ordered their chains off. Made to sit on a bench before him, he offered Father’s friend cold water while the Resident sat under an arjun tree sipping lime-juice.” Again he asked for quiet. “Colas asked, ‘Giao, we French have built schools and trained teachers for them. Why do you repay us with revolution and bombings?’”

A murmur spread around the room. Pham had the attention of dry-eyed students.

“Giao said sweetly, ‘Monsieur le President. It is the French who should be grateful to us, the Vietnamese. You have built these edifices for Frenchmen but they would not work without the compliance of my people. Our hard labour and our power to buy French goods makes your economy possible. The railways carry French trains, driven by French drivers to export Vietnamese minerals and other exploited wealth to French-built ports to travel on French ships carrying our goods to make huge French profits. The cars, themselves French-built, transport Vietnamese goods.’

The Clouds Gather ...

“The Resident interrupted, ‘Before we arrived you had no modern railways, roads or comfortable buildings for government and administration. We built you the Dornier Bridge, modernised whole sections of Hanoi, created a modern city to be proud of, and you would have to agree, surely these French gifts have been to your advantage.’

“Giao looked at the Resident with a mixture of pity and hatred, before replying.

‘Everything you speak of, Sir, is to French advantage. It is not a shared advantage. It is for your military and administrative needs and to continue your exploitation of a proud people. We are your slaves. You have made French compulsory, reorganised our administration to destroy our Mandarin class and ignored our history, which is longer than yours. You failed to resist the Japanese partly because you felt you could not trust us, yet Uncle Ho Chi Minh fought and succeeded in his war against them without your help. They raped, burned then exploited us as savagely as you have.’

“Colas smiled but remained silent. My Father’s friend had his sentence commuted.”

Pham had stretched some of the issues and distorted time-frames to suit the points he wanted to make, but he knew the rhetorical style as a classic from his studies. The students clapped and praised Pham and Hai, their eloquence made more praiseworthy because one came from South Vietnam and the other from North Vietnam. It showed the students the solidarity of the ‘One Country’ revolutionary movement.

In Paris, Pham and Hai became further involved in agitation. With the Indochina War gaining momentum his small group of intellectuals studied war classics.

The Clouds Gather ...

Pham's studies included Lenin's 'On Marxism': Stalin's 'Book of Contradictions': Mao's 'Marxism-Leninism': Talleyrand's 'Memoires': and the final treatise 'On War and Peace' by von Clausewitz. He studied the contradictions between France's democratic idealism and its historical record. In Hanoi, Grandfather, blissfully unaware of the new path Pham strode, continued to finance him. But the French war ate into his reserves and he begged Pham to curtail his spending.

Towards the Notre Dame, where Pham still attended his Catholic observances, he found a small shop run by a Vietnamese woman on the Rue Saint Jaques. He soon ingratiated himself with her and she provided him with baguettes during the day. At night she shared steaming rice meals, exotic Vietnamese flavours and home-made *nuoc mam*. His food-bill significantly reduced itself.

The anti-war movement gathered momentum as it entered the Parisian streets. Pham and his small group became raconteurs and 'agents provocateurs' among the students, very careful to remember Uncle Ho's 'command' to graduate. They found allies especially in the French Communist Party, or FCP. Pham left when the FCP Secretary-General stated "If it is impossible to negotiate with the Viets, we'll talk to them by following Mao's political axiom, 'the power of the gun'.

By the end of that watershed year, 1951, Pham had completed his studies. Granted his Master of Political Science degree, he returned to Hanoi and his family.

The Clouds Gather ...

1951: 'fucking Chinese bastards' ...

JAAGO SHIVERED HALF A WORLD AWAY IN A FOXHOLE IN KOREA

Unbeknown to Jaago, the Chinese Third Field Army in had opened a major offensive along Kansas Line as darkness fell at 1930 hours on 22nd April 1951. The huge numbers filtering back to the Aussies staggered the imagination. The 149,000 strong US 24th Division and 6th Republic of Korea (ROK) Division faced over half-a-million Chinese troops.

Twenty miles to their rear, spring had arrived with its plum-blossoms. The Third Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), of the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade made the most of a total rest in their reserve position.

Jaago looked forward to celebrating Anzac Day on the 25th April. Camaradie in all units at an all time high, they'd organised a huge celebration. A parade was planned with the Kiwis and the Turks on operations together for the first time in ages.

He also looked forward to meeting the Turks. He'd always considered them 'rough but ready soldiers' in a warrior tradition he admired. As he and his Number Two dug a fire trench into the softening ground, Jaago repeated what Aussies stated all along the line. "Just a pity the Turks were on the wrong side at Gallipoli, Mate."

About ten in the morning, two 3RAR officers and a security squad casually drove north to reconnoitre a proposed blocking position for the battalion. One was the Commanding Officer (CO) Bruce 'Fergie' Ferguson.

The Clouds Gather ...

The other officer, Lieutenant Alf Argent, was his intelligence officer. No sense of urgency prevailed, even when the Brigade ordered 3RAR to move into the selected positions by the same afternoon.

At 1030 hours on the morning of 23rd April, nothing in the orders given by Fergie indicated a major battle. Instead, clear skies heralded a beautiful spring.

Jaago went in the jeep with them. He already had a reputation as a veteran who had fought the Russians and the Germans and another one as sniper and marksman. The sun warmed. A faint breeze stirred. Blew Jaago's unruly blond hair. Kids called out. Birds sang. Dogs barked. Friendly people smiled and waved.

Before they'd left, Jaago overheard his company commander remonstrating, "There's a bloody Korean and a Yank division between us and the commies, Sir. If an infantryman is behind Divisional Headquarters then we are as good as on leave."

Fourteen hours before the party moved north on its reconnaissance mission, the Kiwis had already sounded a grave warning, 'The ROKs will not hold the line'.

Forward units of the Kiwi 16th Field Regiment were with 6th ROK Division.

The Kiwis had lost contact with their Korean counterparts and stragglers from those units streamed around their gun positions. Stragglers swelled to refugees, and this development was reported seven hours before Fergie issued his orders at 1030 hours for 3RAR to move forward. This important information never reached the Aussies.

The Clouds Gather ...

Unaware, 3RAR moved forward. Jaago had a premonition. He felt it in his bones. He reported what he could see to his platoon commander, 'Korean soldiers are among the refugees. There's been some sort of breakthrough. I've seen this before.'

The CO had no indication that the ROK's infantry regiments had been smashed. Overwhelming Chinese infantry supported by massive bombardment and by heavy assault weapons meant that the trickle soon surged to a flood. His battalion dug-in on their new forward positions wherever they could. In some places the rocky ground forced the diggers to build sangars. The rocks to build these ramparts were plentiful.

3RAR had spread itself over an area of almost two square miles. More appropriate for a brigade, except that Fergie had no idea they'd soon be the front line.

3 Platoon, B Company's position was on the left front of the 3RAR line and on a long ridge running north-east and parallel to the main south road. Jaago nurtured the light machine-gun. His LMG dominated the road and the ford from the western side of the ridge. Jaago felt pleased. A US tank team harboured on the high ground directly in front, overlooking the ford and they might be able to give good support.

Gary's Dad, George, was a Corporal in Delta Company. Fergie had appointed them as his counter-attack force. They were on a much higher ridge but almost two miles away. A kilometre separated the two men from each other. Isolated near the village of Kapyong, within twenty-four hours the Aussie battalion would earn a name and would receive honours synonymous with outstanding bravery. Kapyong would evoke memories of Gallipoli and of the ANZACS.

The Clouds Gather ...

One company of the US 72nd Tank battalion, armed with five Sherman tanks, hulled-down in front of Jaago. The other guarded the ford east of Chuktun-Ni village in the middle of Kapyong valley. They broke a primary tactical maxim.

The tanks were there without infantry support.

Jaago sighted along a road that skirted below him and to his right. He had a clear view to the two fords across the river and 'smelled' trouble. His light machine-gun, could easily cover them. Jaago loved his LMG, historically a legendary weapon in Australian hands against the Japanese in that earlier war. Its cyclic rate of 600 rounds per minute and extraordinary accuracy up to a six-hundred yards made it a perfect weapon for stopping the Chinese tactic of mass attacks.

George double-checked that his weapon was cleaned, that his machine-gunner's ammunition splayed ready for action and freed from its ammo carrier, plus a spare firing-pin, just in case. He'd refined changing the firing mechanism to within ten seconds. His back-up he'd armed with an Owen machine-gun so that he could be supported from the flank by other LMG's in case of need. He 'smelled' trouble too.

Just on last light, George listened as, to his rear, the Mortar Platoon bedded in the mortars and fired ranging shots to his front on pre-registered targets.

His new officer-in-charge made George feel secure. He exuded a quiet confidence. Exactly the type of officer George wanted his son Gary to be when Gary was old enough to join the Army.

The Clouds Gather ...

George wanted his eldest son to follow the family tradition of 'soldiers. He wished he'd be able to go to Sandhurst and his colonel of the Middlesex Regiment had promised to recommend Gary, but he'd been killed in Europe just before the war had ended. With it went Gary's chances to be an officer in the British Army. George would never be able to pay for him to attend Sandhurst.

George would talk to his platoon commander at the first opportunity to find out what the Australian conditions for entry were. Dunttrron was like Sandhurst. The parents had to have money to help support their son. Gary wanted to join the Army but George wanted him to join as an officer. He didn't want his son to slog it out as he had. George wanted something better for his eldest.

In this first part of the dusk before darkness George made out the uniforms of fleeing ROK soldiers and wondered. In the darkness that followed he listened tensely as civilian refugees and ROK's clogged the road. About midnight he was startled.

Tanks rattled and squeaked down the road. They were from the 72nd US Tank Battalion. Jaago smiled grimly to himself. With infantry support tanks are lethal. Without it they rely on their mates in other tanks to hose off infantry that manage to climb on them. Experience told Jaago that tanks without infantry are waddling ducks.

The Germans and the Russians had made Jaago fearless. Among Polish guerrillas anti-tank weapons were scarce. If tanks moved without close-support infantry he'd climb on the back of one as it passed. He'd pick one without another tank close behind, which meant the tank he was on was blind, like a lumbering armadillo.

The Clouds Gather ...

Jaago would wrench open the hatch and drop an incendiary inside. The ammunition would explode and the tank would become a fiery funeral pyre, incinerating those inside. At other times he'd use a Molotov cocktail to set fire to the engine.

Jaago warned his LMG but held his fire. The strict fire-control exercised by Aussies made him realize once again he fought with professionals. Chinese reconnaissance units probed right across their front. His platoon commander passed back grid references. Almost immediately mortar rounds engaged. Their overhead whistling and heavy crump gratified him. In their exploding light he could see bodies thrown in different directions. The smell of burned flesh followed screams of agony.

George, over to his right and in a frontline position, listened to the Fire Controller's measured confirmation of targets to his front. He too felt assured. He preferred to engage the enemy rather than the 'hurry up and wait' boredom of army life in reserve.

Following the first explosions he checked his weapon and ordered his section to do the same. Then he unhooked the button on his commando knife. As Section Commander, he had an Owen Machine Carbine. He wished it was a Thompson.

There was never any doubt about the Thompson's 45mm round. They killed.

Battalion Headquarters and Support Company snuggled into a feature to the right of the ford below George's position. He'd seen their layout, and its dispersion worried him. Battalion Headquarters had too many units and too many troops in its immediate area to be an effective command. The Colonel never realised the imminence of action.

The Clouds Gather ...

Lieutenant Phil Bennett, a later battalion commander, at that time commanded the Mortar Platoon. Just after action commenced, to his amazement he saw the US Tank unit withdrawing. He convinced a couple of tanks to stay within his perimeter.

Shortly after the midnight attacks the mortars couldn't engage more enemy targets because they were under immediate threat themselves. Enemy probes found the Mortar Platoon and, about 2 a.m. penetrated their position. Unable to fire their mortars, the crews fired into the mass of bodies. The Chinese short, sharp staccato echoed all around. Their 'Burp' guns had a distinctive c-r-a-c-k.

"Bluey." Phil yelled. "Get that bastard behind you."

Bluey's OMC let off a burst that almost deafened Phil. "Fuck, Sir. They're all around us." As he yelled, Bluey fired burst after burst having to reload another magazine.

To his left front and across the road, the Anti-Tank Platoon Commander faced a dilemma. He'd wandered across to some soldiers mustering before the attack. When he tried to speak to their leader the man turned out to be Chinese.

They beat a hasty withdrawal. Too close, they'd been as surprised. He realized his platoon would be on their own in the coming affray. 3RAR boasted a pair of 17 pounders in its Anti-tank platoon. This unit was the largest autonomous unit in the battalion with sixty officers and men. From the first contact on he used a Korean interpreter to challenge every uniformed soldier among any refugees near his perimeter. If they proved Korean, they were 'persuaded' to dig-in beside the Aussies.

The Clouds Gather ...

Those who didn't were killed.

All infantry companies except Bravo had lost field-telephone contact with battalion headquarters. Radio communications also proved impossible. Each unit had to fight within its own perimeter. Because Fergie had also lost radio-touch with Brigade Headquarters he decided to move further back. His sub-units were on their own.

He sent Alf Argent back to recce a HQ's with the Middlesex Regiment. Without waiting, Fergie decided to move anyway. In the process he lost command and control, ending up, half-deaf from a close-by mortar round, at the George's old Regiment.

The battle for Kapyong fell on infantry companies Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta.

Clem Kealy, George's best friend, was in the Bravo Company outpost section. They took the brunt of the first wave of Chinese attacks to the rear of the lead US Tank position. The Chinese, in enormous numbers, had swarmed over the tanks like a nest of enraged ants just as Jaago had in that other far-away war.

But Clem could do nothing for the tanks. The tank unit lost four crew commanders and their Platoon Commander before deciding to withdraw. They offered to take Clem and his boys with them but, true to form, he was determined to stay put and fight it out. Besides, "There's too many fucking Chinese between us and the fucking tanks." Clem didn't want to expose his troops unnecessarily. He stayed and fought.

The full moon cast a bright sheen, which embraced the battlefield in front of Jaago.

The Clouds Gather ...

He had a clear view of the enemy. First came the probing patrols but he was defending a long, steep ridge and the Chinese were able to get up very close before he could see what they were doing. His main concern was Delta Company.

George and his section defended the forward position of Delta. Across the road from Jaago he held the highest feature on his immediate battlefield. Hill 504, where George waited, was the lynch pin of the whole defensive area. The Chinese would have to attack up steep slopes to gain a foothold. George's position would cost them dearly.

This was his warrior element. George waited.

A series of whistle and bugle calls warned of the imminent attack. The Chinese assembled as close as they could and soon learned of the communication problems 3RAR experienced that night. Normally the assembly areas would be a slaughterhouse as the guns and mortars ranged onto them. But the Yank's mortars would be silenced by simultaneous attacks. The assembled Chinese were safe.

Silence followed the Chinese bugle blasts. Jaago braced himself. A coldness entered his nerves as he made a final check of his gun, the ammo and his mates readiness. He felt rather than heard the soft, rubber-soled shoes as the assault wave moved forward. A palpable pressure built-up in front of him as they closed.

George touched his 2i/c and nodded forward. A shadowy head had slowly emerged from the grey-blackness and the moon reflected its ghostly light off the Chinaman's distinctive headdress. Slowly he raised his OMC to point at the Chinaman.

The Clouds Gather ...

P-l-o-p ... then the c-l-i-n-k of metal striking stone followed a dull thud.

Both knew. "Stick grenades." The warning sounded in both heads at once. As the man rose to follow the explosion of the grenades George fired the heart shot. At thirty feet he couldn't miss. He ducked his head as the man fell and the explosions went off. Yells came from behind the smoke and he let off a stream of lethal aimed shots.

Battle had been joined. Georges world became mayhem. Explosions erupted. Ricochets pierced enemy and friend alike. Bullets whizzed. Smoke choked. The sharp intake of the acrid rifle fire temporarily blinded him. He blinked it clear, unable to take his hands off the LMG. The barrel sizzled. Shapes became shapeless, disappearing into agony. Blood spurted. Time warped then slowed

On the other ridge Jaago thrust the LMG's hot barrel into a surprised belly before pressing the trigger and disintegrating it in a blood-bath of organs. Time slowed almost to a stop. He thought he could catch a round in flight before it hit his mate. Then he watched as blood spurted. He thrust his finger into the wound. Plugged its seeping. Ripped his mate's bandage off his arm. Shredded it with his teeth before strapping it on. Looked up in time to shatter a face. Watched a rain of brain and blood.

Both men changed magazines in split seconds. In their hands weapons became living things. Both cleared stoppages before the next Chinese could squeeze his trigger.

Heat, smoke and dust choked his body dry. Jaago's ears rang. Gradually the noise of war muzzled itself. His body strained to do his will.

The Clouds Gather ...

Jaago drew on body-fat reserves in the absence of food. Endangered, dared not ache. Imperilled, he dared not tire. Evaporated, he desperately needed water. Then he extended his capacity for endurance. Burned himself into hollowed eyes.

George watched the bastards as they still came on. Wave after wave.

“It was a digger’s war.” Major Ben O’Dowd, Jaago’s Company Commander, stated.

Low on ammunition, with no food and water for twenty-four hours, no artillery and no mortars, still the diggers fought on.

The Chinese found it extremely hard to dislodge them. The diggers poured relentless LMG, rifle and OMC fire at point-blank range. Stopped them. They came again.

Ghouls rose from the ground like the dragon’s teeth warriors of classical mythology.

Burp guns vomited their deadly stream of death. Angry wasps churned destruction about Jaago’s ears. Death selected. Indiscriminatedly.

George’s mind recorded any subtle change in the sounds that splayed around him.

Especially in the silence. A friend replaced his mate. Then they too became mates.

Half an hour later the grey phantom shapes came on again. Then they wilted once more under the weight of the digger’s fire. Finally stopped.

The Clouds Gather ...

Across on his exposed ridge, Jaago wiped free clots of blood and shattered body bits between each break in the action. He then checked his LMG, his warrior's shield. He filled magazines with Vickers machine-gun rounds. Brought forward by mistake, they were the only ammunition resupply the whole night. Unable to smoke, his mouth too dry, he sucked a pebble, a trick he'd learned in Europe.

He introduced himself to his new offsider then they both checked each other's clothes for attached human bits and pieces. Survival was all that mattered. And Mateship.

His platoon sergeant assured him his first mate was in a safe position behind their hill. Still alive. But Jaago didn't know. No morphine. No way to deal with shock except with blankets. Piercing and freezing night conditions. His mate hung on, suppurating beneath his bandage. His consciousness rose and fell with each retreating breath.

George readied. At 0200 hours the Chinese came again. Not as infantry. This time with impersonal mortars and high-explosive artillery rounds. And incendiaries. Smoke, fires and heat to suffocate waterless pores. The shrub caught fire around them and caused ammunition to explode. Burned his mate to death.

In the carnage he fingered the crucifix around his neck. In the silences, prayed.

Casualties had been heavy, especially in 1 Platoon on the other side of the ridge, and O'Dowd had attached himself to 3 Platoon. He ordered 1 Platoon's survivors to join him in his headquarters. As dawn approached a Chinese machine-gunner opened up with withering fire in the gap between 2 and 3 Platoon.

The Clouds Gather ...

Lieutenant Lou Brumfield, who would excel as the first Infantry battalion commander into Vietnam in 1965, was ordered to send a fighting patrol to silence the Chinese machine-gun crew before it caused more casualties. The Chinese gunner had already 'blown the whistle' and called up reinforcements to its piercing tune.

It was wiped out in a swift, clean attack as dawn announced another cloudless day.

O'Dowd also wanted his position cleared of enemy. Jaago joined in a charge down the hill. Their aggressiveness proved too much for the Chinese defenders.

Jaago told Gary much later in Vietnam. "It was like an extermination squad, Skipper. We were too tired to take prisoners. They ran away and we just picked them off like flies. They hid in folds in the ground. They hid under thickets. The bastards slithered into creek beds and lay in the dirty water. They hoped it would make them somehow invisible. Wherever we found them we killed them. Cleanly, but with a sense of rage, relief and revenge. These three feelings gave us enormous energy at the time."

Finally his company recaptured the ground they'd lost during that terrible night of the 24th April, still celebrated as 'Kapyong Day'.

O'Dowd was running out of men to secure his position. Chinese started up Hill 504.

This time George would take the brunt. He'd fought off attempts to dislodge Delta Company. Watched his battalion regroup with a feeling of horror. Those on 504 now faced a concentrated attack. The Chinese realised 504 held the key to resistance.

The Clouds Gather ...

In the middle of reorganising, Fergie, without consultation and three miles to the rear, ordered Bravo Company off their position. He had no knowledge of the situation on the ground. This seriously exposed O'Dowd's left wing.

The Chinese followed up any perceived weakness by applying the Mao Dzi Dung tactic of 'hugging the enemy'. O'Dowd protested but Fergy's response that O'Dowd was tactical commander of the battalion came too late.

Ordered back, Bravo Company's Commander made no assessment of the enemy and made no battle plan. The company straggled back to their previous position having just arrived in Charlie Company's sanctuary.

Jaago, on the left flank and overlooking the road, felt a cold shiver up his spine.

George could see much more from his higher vantage-point. He could do nothing. Bravo Company, strolled in broad daylight, slap into a large Chinese contingent holding Bravo Company's old night-time position, without artillery or mortar support.

The tanks were already escorting the wounded back to battalion headquarters. The Chinese resisted in strength and drove the Aussies back frustrated because 3RAR were the only troops still blocking the Chinese advance on their prize of Seoul.

So important had Kapyong become that the Chinese prepared to attack in daylight. The Americans had air-superiority, but the Chinese needed a victory. O'Dowd walked Fergie around his position.

The Clouds Gather ...

Jaago heard Fergie ask O'Dowd to 'hold the ground one more night'.

Still lacking water, ammunition resupply and food, the Aussies had little choice.

At first light on the 24th April, the Chinese attacked Hill 504.

George finally had his Rorke's Drift. He recalled Rorke's Drift in the Transvaal where a Welsh unit of one-hundred soldiers held off ten-thousand Zulus who had already defeated a British force of fifteen hundred. The unit won eleven Victoria Crosses.

In the middle of the Chinese attack George and the rest of his Company watched as an American spotter plane dropped coloured smoke. Following close behind came American Corsairs, ground-support naval aircraft.

Someone yelled "Fucking hell. The bastards are coming for us." But it was already too late when identifying panels were raced out.

George and Jaago watched as the planes unloaded their eggs.

Closest to the abomination, George ducked as the silver egg bounced just in front.

Mesmerised and glued to its horror he stared as it rose high above his hootchie.

It bounced again and exploded about fifty feet behind him. Heat hit him first, driving any water in his pores to the surface where it immediately evaporated.

The Clouds Gather ...

George's hair singed. He'd turned his back on it but the moisture lubricating his eyes dried. He felt seared behind his ears and his neck partially blistered. He smelled the scorched flesh of his mates then heard their screams. He vomited into the corner.

Watched as it splashed then wormed its way down the dirt wall. He gagged again. Then dry-retched. He realised, as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve that there was really no alternative. He stood up to go and help. Then stopped.

The Chinese, eager to take advantage, charged up the hill toward him.

He vented his hatred in well-directed shots. 'Waste not, want not', echoed in his thumping head. 'Focus' became his mantra of survival. From somewhere behind he heard the rolling, familiar swish of 25 pounders as they sliced through the air.

They fell just behind the first wave, but above the din of battle he heard a voice calling, 'Drop fifty, repeat.' He had the satisfaction of watching rounds fall on target. It was his platoon commander, Don. Cool and precise.

Hill 504 became untenable. The decision made to withdraw, O'Dowd planned and executed an exemplary withdrawal in good spirits. O'Dowd had moved Jaago's company to cover Delta's withdrawal through Charlie. The battalion leap-frogged back through each other. The Chinese were desperate to stop their orderly withdrawal. Bravo Company's job was to safeguard the ford.

The Battle of Kapyong had lasted over twenty-four hours.

The Clouds Gather ...

In it, rifle companies armed with .303 rifles, LMG's and OMC's fought off a vastly superior enemy determined to annihilate their resistance to open up a road to Seoul for the Chinese Army. They were stopped by the 'steadfastness and extreme bravery' of an Aussie battalion wearing the adage 'Old Faithful'.

Their successful withdrawal under fire was a testimony to Aussie discipline.

Kapyong has been celebrated the day before Anzac Day, 25th April, each year since.

The Third Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment wears a 'swimming pool' on their right shoulder. Recognizing their extreme heroism in battle, the President of the United States awarded the Aussies a Presidential Unit Citation. It is bordered in gold and its centre is blue, hence its nickname. Soldiers who took part in the battle can wear their citation even after they've left the battalion.

A Military Cross recipient and an Aboriginal, Captain Reg Saunders, OC Charlie Company, with tears of pride in his eyes, recalled a young Aussie saying...

"I feel bloody awful, Skipper. It's bloody Anzac Day tomorrow and here we are running away from those fucking Chinese bastards."

The Clouds Gather ...

1958: Mind is all I have...

GARY COULDN'T BELIEVE THE SLIDES HAD BEEN GREASED

He'd completed one round on dry ones. Keith Payne had been one of his National Service instructors. One of the best instructors in the platoon Gary had commanded in 1957-1958. Trainee lines were held up until all the slides had been greased.

This was the first para course that either had been on and the competition was fierce between officers and NCO's. First off the slide, Keith braced himself. He stepped gingerly up to the start. Sat down at the top of the slide. Grabbed the sides and steadied himself. Breath held.

They were all on the platform... ready. Everyone poised as if they were taking the slide with Keith. Whatever happened to Keith might also be their fate. The stress mounted. Gary felt it, managed it, "Nervous but controlled".

Keith went down so fast no one had time to let their breath go. An almighty crack echoed in the hanger. His leg crumpled beneath him and he went white. Sweated cold drops. Then almost fainted with the pain. "Fuck you." His expletive hung in the air.

Everyone ran from the platforms to check. Gary got there almost as quick as Clem Kealy, the Sergeant instructor. It was a clean break of the tibia and fibula. The RAAF Warrants crowded around, then ushered the students away. Someone rang for an ambulance. The senior Warrant ordered everyone back to the slides.

The Clouds Gather ...

“So what are you pussies worried about? You, Sir.” Pointing to Gary. “You were quickest down here. Now you’ll go first off the slide.”

Visions of Dad. Gary as a younster. Dad as a Regimental bantam-weight champion. Gary’s boxing matches where the opponent had been heavier and more experienced. Dad in his corner, yelling in his ear. Competition swimming meets. Gary so tired... Dad bellowing ‘Never give up.’ Cycling up steep Welsh hills. Dad urging him on... Always that frenetic urgency. That adrenalin rush. For Gary to perform his best.

He didn’t hesitate. Couldn’t hesitate. Dad’s voice boomed as Gary strode to the slide. Settled himself on the mat. Gritted his teeth and sweated.

A fluttering sound on the other side of the hanger caught Gary’s attention. A dove had returned from its foraging and nestled under the inside eave to feed its young. The dove’s body, virginal white, held him. He could see the youngster’s mouth open... waiting for the food mother had brought. The edges of its wings wore an orange stripe. Momentarily its eyes darted back to Gary. They looked at each other.

A gravelly voice broke the spell. “Stay cool. Feet in the correct position. Side Right.” His Dad’s voice in his inner ear *‘This is it’*. Then, *‘Let go.’* Gary did as he was told. “Go, Geronimo.” The famous para mantra issued loudly from Gary’s open mouth. All he heard was the wind rushing by. Saw the ground coming up. Awfully fast. He lay there for a minute or two. It felt like the correct roll position. He waited for the pain.

But none came. A loud voice snatched Gary back to reality.

The Clouds Gather ...

“What are you waiting for, Sir? No naked Easter bunny lying on my floor. Only knackered paras.” To the waiting paras. “Next.” As a loud aside to Gary. “Off the bloody deck, Sir. The next man’s coming down.” Quieter. “It’s Okay, Sir. Nothing is broken. You can get up now.”

The Warrant’s words took some time to sink in. He’d done it. Gary had no doubt someone, probably Clem, would write to his Dad and tell him all. He leapt up just as the next officer hurtled down the chute. It was Bruce, grinning all over his face. Hoping Gary would break his fall. Gary moved like lightning. Only just made it. Bruce and he were in the same battalion.

Branded the ‘Old Faithful’, they loved serving in 3rd Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment. Gary had graduated in 1956 after a year at Portsea. He’d been the first ‘Junior Class’ ever, at Portsea. Bruce had preceded him. He’d been a ‘six-month-er’. Same as Don. All three were ‘Portsea-ites’.

Don had fought Chinese Communist regulars in Korea same year as Dad. Bruce had fought Chinese Communist Terrorists, or CT’s in Malaya two years ago. Each shared the same hatred of Communism. Gary hoped to get to Malaya before the terrorist war ended. He and Bruce predicted 3 RAR’d be in Vietnam by 1965.

The next morning Gary couldn’t get out of bed. His stomach muscles felt like lead. The reveille bugle-call had sounded and he had an hour to get to breakfast. Still he couldn’t move. His muscles wouldn’t respond. Gary grabbed the bedhead and pulled himself onto his side using only his arms. He rested. Caught his breath.

The Clouds Gather ...

What the fuck's happening?

He swung his legs over the side of his regulation cot and used their weight to wrestle his body so that he hung from the waist on the side of his bed. He pushed until his feet and knees contacted the decking then pushed himself away from the bed. He crashed onto the floor in a heap, gasping. Gary twisted back so that he could reach the bed again and hauled himself up onto his knees. Gradually, feeling slowly returned inside his upper body. He grasped for the bed-head and slowly, agonisingly, he pulled himself up onto feet that had feeling but no stomach-muscle power. For the first time, Gary realised each part of his body was interdependent on other parts.

In the past, he'd taken his body for granted. Clearly the two weeks of "Side Left... Side Right... Reverse landing position..." and all the other tortures a body is put through in order to get it to eject itself from the door of a perfectly good plane, had resulted in the stomach muscles refusing to play any more stupid games.

Somehow the rigidity eased. He shit, shaved, showered and shampoo'd. Had a good breakfast. His stomach muscles did as they were told. Enough to contemplate more para exercises. On his last jump onto the Tea Tree landscape, Gary sprained his ankle. He limped off the Drop Zone, or DZ, under his own steam. But couldn't march around for the final Graduation Parade. He stood beside 'Blue' Hodgkinson, the receiving officer. Blue had been Dad's Platoon Commander in Woodside when Dad was a corporal in National Service. Each smiling face strode by. Proud, at last, to be paras. Gary looked up at the fine, chiselled features of Blue, his model as an officer.

The Clouds Gather ...

Mid-break, Blue leaned over. Whispered, "Wait till you're on the podium, Mate."

He'd helped Gary into the army with a personal recommendation. Blue admired Dad. Repeatedly told Gary what a fine soldier Dad had been. Both men Gary sought to emulate as models were barrel-chested. Wore their uniform proudly. Like peacocks.

Dad had retired from the Australian SAS in 1958. He'd been the first soldier posted to the SAS and wore his sandy beret as proudly as he'd worn his red one. Dad had been especially proud of the fact that his eldest son, Gary, had graduated as an officer. He'd made a special effort to be at Gary's Graduation from Portsea in 1956.

Dad had driven the whole family, two brothers, his sister and Mum, all the way from Williamstown airforce base to Portsea. At midnight Dad appeared in his dress uniform as a parachute digger. Gave his son his first salute at midnight.

Gary was just nineteen. When Gary went to Wagga Wagga to serve in his first unit as an officer, his girl friend, Rosemary stayed with Dick Jordan, his Sergeant, so that she could be near him. She stayed for three months and found separate boarding. They intended to get married in June 1957. Then all broke loose. Gary rang Dad to give him prior notice but Dad hadn't realised Rosemary was Anglican.

"No son of mine is going to break the Faith." He made it plain that, "Officer's don't get married until they are a Captain." Angrily, he stormed over the telephone, "I got married too young. Don't you make the same mistake." Before 'these troubles', Dad and Gary had been more 'best mates', rather than father and son.

The Clouds Gather ...

Mum had rarely seen Dad so shitty. She was a Welsh Congregational. With a heavy heart and dismally dark clouds of apprehension, Gary hitch-hiked home during Easter 1957 to work things out with Dad. Don dropped him on the main highway to Sydney and gave him some 'fatherly advice'. It took Gary two days. Don, and another Portsea mate who'd graduated with Gary, went through a 'battle-plan'.

They tried to work out all contingencies. Both of them intended to 'pop the question' to their respective girlfriends so they had a vested interest in how everything would go for their younger charge. They advised Gary that he would have to get the permission of their Commanding Officer because Gary was under twenty-one. Another hurdle?

Rosemary went home to talk things over with her Dad and Mum and to have time to 'prepare for the upcoming marriage'. Whatever that meant? Before he left, Gary received a letter from Rosemary. On her birthday.

"Dear Gary Darling,

A Catholic priest called on me at home the other day, Darling.

He told me that I should consider seriously how to become a Catholic. He told me that 'regardless the children must be brought up in the Faith' and that I must not be 'an impediment to you in your Faith'. He made it clear that 'a Catholic priest would have to perform the ceremony, in order to make it a Legal marriage in the eyes of God' ... I can't make these promises... Please let me know your intentions.

I love you,

Rosemary.

The Clouds Gather ...

Gary agonised. Decided to talk about it with Padre Duck, the military padre on base.

He'd already made up his mind that he couldn't, 'in conscience', force Rosemary to become a Catholic. As a Sunday-school teacher in Brisbane and in Wagga Wagga, Faith was as meaningful to her as Gary's was to him.

Rosemary made it clear "I can have no truck with such a bigotted Faith." She disliked the audacity and the hypocrisy of the Catholic faith. 'It showed no Love'.

Father Duck was equally adamant. Gary had no choice.

Gary had to make every effort to convert Rosemary 'to the Faith...'

Rosemary had to accept that she may not convert. But she had to also accede that the children had to be brought up 'in the Faith...'

Gary had to make sure that the marriage was 'blessed and sanctified' by a Catholic priest. That meant a priest had to be present for the whole service and that it would not be considered 'legal' by the Church unless this was complied with, 'to the letter'.

Rosemary would be given no choice.

Dad had done it. Gary had to do it.

If he refused the Father Duck would speak to the Bishop of Wagga Wagga.

The Clouds Gather ...

“You will be excommunicated.”

The word was a sentence of damnation. In 1956, being excommunicated meant that Gary would never be allowed entry into Heaven. Excommunication was the worst thing a Catholic of that time could experience.

Gary attended a Novena that went on for a week, hoping some miracle would release him from his soul's torment. He couldn't think straight. 'Soldiers never cry.' But he shed many tears with his best friend, the pillow on his bed.

Dick Jordan, also a good Catholic, couldn't help this time.

No one could. This was his 'Dark Night of the Soul.' Gary was on his own.

On the first day he'd been home all hell broke loose. Gary was thrown across the lounge-room and stopped fast against the wall where Dad pinned him. He refused to raise a finger to physically defend himself. Mum cried and hung onto Dad's arms. Dad pulled a bayonet from its sheath on the wall above Gary's head. Dad's eyes stood out from his head. His face mottled.

“I'll kill you rather than see a son of mine break the Faith, Mum, so help me God.”

Gary's thirteen-year-old sister, Elaine, screamed and went hysterical. Tony and David were no match for Dad's brutish strength, intensified by a mad Irishman's Faith. Gary ripped open shirt to expose his chest. The two women screamed.

The Clouds Gather ...

Gary stood firm. "You gave me birth, Dad. You have the right to my life."

Dad gritted his teeth. "I'm not fooling, Son. I'll kill you first."

Gary blanched but held firm.

Dad shrugged off the two brothers fighting for Gary's life. Mayhem rained. Dad thrust the point of it into Gary's chest, drawing a trickle of blood as he did so.

Mesmerised by the trickle of blood, the whole room went silent. Including Dad.

Gary heard the family alarm clock ticking on the mantelpiece. In the distance the kitchen tap dripped. His pulse slowed to match the ticking clock and the dripping tap. He felt a calmness. Gary made a decision. He'd die rather than strike or retaliate.

Dad looked at the blood again. Snarled into his face. Gary caught a glimpse of a veteran's murderous madness. The bayonet, fixed in a vice of Dad's boxer's hands, didn't move. Gary felt its pressing urgency. Dad looked back at the blood.

Looked at his other sons and daughter. Mum had stepped back and released her hold. Somehow reason prevailed. Dad slipped from madness. The fire in his eyes died.

Contrite but firm, he said, "If you marry that heathen slut you are not my son." Dad released his grip. Shrugged. As he replaced the bayonet firmly back in its sheath, he said, "Mum. Remove that bloody thing and hide it away from me." No apology.

The Clouds Gather ...

Gary left the home without saying another word to Dad. Voiced a staunch “farewell” to each of his brothers. Hugged Mum and Elaine. Both cried quietly, resignedly.

Mum whispered into his neck, “Keep in touch, Son. I love you.”

“Gary is banished from this family. No one will be in touch. That’s my final word.”

Weeks after Gary returned to Wagga Wagga, he found himself summoned to the office of his Commanding Officer (CO), also a Catholic. Dad had hitch-hiked from his para unit base at Williamstown. The Padre was in the office with Dad.

Colonel Hosking told him, “I agree with your father. You are too young to marry. I intend to act on the advice of your father and the Padre. Both have tried to reason with you but you will not listen. I will not give you permission to marry.”

Don, a Korean veteran, wanted to call a meeting of all subalterns. Over-ruled by the Senior Subaltern, he was pissed off. Night after night he’d play ‘Pal Joey’ until late. Gary would wander down to the Officer’s Mess at or after midnight, when he needed to get away from the Spartan environment of his ‘Bachelor’s Quarters’. Don would be asleep with the ‘Pal Joey’ record scratching itself round and round on the turntable. It seemed to be a soldier’s way. Dad played ‘Claire de Lune’ to drag him out of his depression. Gary listened to Smetana’s ‘Moldau’ at two in the morning. In the silence.

John Mitchell was pissed off. He’d graduated with top honours in Gary’s class of ‘55.

“This is medieval. You’re in deep shit, Mate. We must help you as best we can.”

The Clouds Gather ...

Hoskins ordered Gary to see Frank Ardnt, the unit psychologist. Half-pissed at the Officer's fancy-dress party the night before, Frank's wife had draped her Hoola skirt over the lights in the centre of the Officer's Mess. Now Frank sat behind his desk, oozing 'mateship'. Many years later Gary got a copy of his report. The Colonel could have written it and Frank's report dogged Gary's career for the next fifteen years.

Gary's alcoholic Company Commander, Major Vince Passlow, also a social Catholic, made Gary's life a misery for three months. For the slightest 'misdemeanor' he'd place him on the Company Duty Roster, which meant no sleep and work next day 'as normal'. Any subsequent breach he rewarded with duty as Battalion Duty Officer.

Don and another officer called in to see Gary after the psych 'interview'. "Took Vince home last night, Mate. He was pissed as a newt. Stevo here humped him from the car onto his shoulder and we carried the drunken bastard to the front door. His missus met us in her nightie. Told us to dump the bastard on the lawn. As we drove away we saw she'd turned the garden hose on him. Felt you needed to know, Mate."

Gary laughed until he nearly wet himself. The Colonel ensured 'special duties' kept him awake all night. Don considered it illegal but could do nothing to prevent the punishment meted out. Colonel Hosking had Gary 'interviewed' by the Psychologist, Captain Ardnt, a Eurasian. His 'mission'... To prove Gary "unsuitable as an officer."

Company Paying Officer became a regular part of the punishment protocols. He'd first have to check the amount of money received from the paymaster and issue a receipt, thus making Gary responsible 'for every single pound, shilling and pence'.

The Clouds Gather ...

Each paybook would have been alphabetically stacked in order by the Company Clerk, prior to Gary receiving them. Then Gary was on his own. The hut chosen for paying the soldiers stood alone and isolated. Gary had to lock himself in. Outside, a soldier stood guarding each door holding a loaded Owen Machine-gun (OMC). Inside Gary unlocked the chamber of his Smith and Wesson .38 pistol, released the safety catch and checked that the weapon contained six rounds.

Gary placed it carefully on the table immediately in front of him.

Major Passlow had left him in no doubt of his responsibility as an officer. "Any unders'll come out of your pay. Overs, and you will do it again next fortnight." Impressed upon him Gary's duty as an officer... and as a Catholic.

Inside the hut, Gary would have to lock the door. Then he'd open each paybook. He'd have to check the amount each soldier would be paid and put the correct cash amount in the paybook. From stacked bundles of notes and coin, about three hundred books would be filled in this way. He started checking and loading the money.

His loaded pistol caught his attention. *It will be so easy.*

He picked it up. Automatically broke the chamber. *Six rounds. One will do the job.*

Gary slumped. Held his head in his hands, totally disconsolate. Heaved a deep sigh. It started in his boots. Ejected itself from a tightly clamped, unwilling mouth. Finally, he folded his arms and lay his head on them. A profound Depression settled on him.

The Clouds Gather ...

An extraordinary and bottomless sadness weighed heavily on his overburdened heart. Gary further bowed his head and hunched his shoulders. Darkness clouded Mind. Shafts of reason pierced the cloud as lightning strikes. They failed to ignite Reason and Rationality. An ocean of grief threatened to break the dam walls restraining his tears to drown him in sorrow. He had no time for tears.

Dad had always told him, "Soldiers never, ever cry."

To prove it, whenever Gary was punished Dad would give him a match to hold between his teeth. If it broke during a belting then Dad doubled the number of strokes. Gary knew that if he started crying he'd never stop. He felt betrayed by life, by his Church and by Dad. The burden of his young life seemed too great.

How could he survive such a life of continual torment. WWII and its bombs and strafing: Wales and the school bully-system there: then back in an England fevered by racism: Portsea and its demands and pressures: now his love for Rosemary and the burdens both were made to suffer.

Something snapped. Made a loud retort like a gun going off. Inside his head. Deep inside his brain. Calmly he snapped the chamber to the locked position. Checked the safety was still 'OFF'. Pulled back the cocking lever. Held the cold circular end to a point just beneath his ear. It pressed in behind the jugular pointing slightly upward. His eyes glazed over. His heart pumped its life-giving blood and pulsed against the hollow gun-blue tube. His trigger finger, straight and braced against the stock, he now shifted. The trigger guard felt sensually cool. Its edge caressed the pad of his finger.

The Clouds Gather ...

Fuck Vince Passlow... Fuck Padre Duck... Fuck you Ardnt... Fuck the Colonel

A long pause. Silence. His wristwatch ticked his life away.

Mind is all I have. So... Fuck you all...

Gary had a clear image of himself, dead. His head a mass of blood and brains scattered all over the soldier's paybooks. And the blooded money. Judas' money? Passlow will call the dickhead Colonel.

"Tut-Tut. The poor bastard didn't have the guts to take his punishment like a man."

Fuck you all... I will survive. I won't give you the pleasure of saying that.

Gary, very, very carefully released the cocking handle. Opened the breech for one more look to make sure there could be no accidental discharge. Replaced the safety catch and placed the weapon carefully, almost lovingly, on the table just in front.

The punishments continued but Gary felt different. He held a secret. *I will survive.*

Army Headquarters was located in Melbourne. Gary was ordered there one morning with John Mark, another Portsea officer who'd also crossed swords with the mad Colonel. Gary was ushered into the office of Lieutenant-Colonel O. D. Jackson.

"How would you like a posting just outside Brisbane, The best I can offer is Wacol."

The Clouds Gather ...

“Wacol, Sir?”

“Yes. With the 10th National Service Training battalion. The Colonel there is a friend. I’ll tell him to look after you and he can let me know how you are going in twelve months time. Can you get your mates to pack up your personal effects?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then you’ll not have to go back. I’ll get you officer’s quarters here at the barracks and arrange for you to leave for Brisbane as soon as possible. Take a few days off.”

He’d never see Colonel Hoskings or Vince Passlow again. Gary would find out in 1996 that John Mitchell had died of a heart attack and Greg Warland, his best mate at Portsea, had fallen on his head from a balcony in a Gold Coast apartment.

Frank Ardnt? ... Gary’d meet him again as a Colonel in 1972 under similar circumstances, but with a different outcome. Gary had obtained Frank’s earlier report. The Army caste system demanded junior officers said “Sir...” to senior officers. Still the junior but now the returned veteran and much more in control, Gary relished saying, “Hello, Frank.” They exchanged pleasantries. The ‘interview’ ended abruptly when Gary reminded Frank of the Officer’s Mess incident involving Frank’s wife.

John Mark would stand Gary behind huge spotlights and beat his balls with a cane.

Don, Bruce and Colonel Jackson he’d meet again in Vietnam.

The Clouds Gather ...

1952: a Hanoi Flower...

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD THUYET GREW UP IN A DIFFERENT WORLD IN HANOI

Before he left home, Phouc had said, "When you were a baby, you were my special Princess. You remember the aunt we lived with near the lake?" They never spoke of that terrible day. He explained. "Village social systems can't cope with 'loose' females. One of her husband's siblings had to marry her. She married Thai, favourite brother of her dead husband." Phouc spoke warmly of the love the two had shared.

Thuyet was quick to recognize that most of the dogma that governed her life came from Confucian texts. Grandfather's heirarchy of affection, enlightened in many ways, became clearer as his fortune slipped away during the First Indochina War. She watched as Grandfather focussed his attention on his sons and grandsons. They were sent to the Lycee Albert Sarraut. Thuyet had to be content to do 'home-schooling'. Quan marshalled his finances to maintain Pham in Paris and at the Sorbonne. From time to time Grandfather shared Pham's letters home with his family. But his love could not extend Thuyet the same consideration. Until she learned to read, this left her feeling inadequate. The early loss of Father and Mother bit deeply.

Gradually, the older girls and the women of the house dominated her life. The Chinese amahs didn't have the same control that they exercised with the boys as they took them too and from school. The women tried to superimpose on her consciousness, the Confucian traditional mores of Vietnamese culture. These included the restrictions and the moral codes that they hoped would determine her behaviour into adolescence. In this they were mistaken.

The Clouds Gather ...

She also had a furtive friend, Duyen. They'd meet to play in the field behind her home. Slightly older, the girl came from a poor background. She helped Thuyet to fight for independence, which was assured so long as no one found out her secret.

Duyen told Thuyet about her school, "The girl's classrooms are dank and bleak. They don't have proper ventilation. My teachers always look like they need a good meal and there are no textbooks." It sounded less exciting than the boy's Lycee. "Even the toilets are filthy." Duyen complained, "I hold on until I get home. The toilets make me feel so sick. I hope I never have to be forced to use them. One day I had drunk so much water that I was busting. After school I ran all the way home but mother took so long to open the door that I peed on the verandah."

Thuyet gasped and closed her hand over her mouth as she had been taught, when shocked or ashamed. But she felt secretly pleased that her friend could speak so frankly. Finally her laughter burst forth and they both became almost hysterical as they spluttered... "peed on the verandah" ... "couldn't hold on any more".

Thuyet now belonged to an extended family. Inside the house, Grandmother adjudicated. It was She who meted out punishment. Foremost in her own home education was the absolute primacy of the notion of *trinh*, or chastity. The old woman of the house would often admonish Thuyet's older sisters. "Young women who don't keep their virginity should be ashamed of being a female." Thuyet learned that *trinh* referred not simply to the defence of her virginity, about which she had only the vaguest idea, but a more concrete 'absolute faithfulness'. "The most important is that, as a woman your life is divided into *tam tong*, or the 'three submissions'."

The Clouds Gather ...

Father would have been her primary 'submission'. Thuyet then owed allegiance to the dominant males in her life. In the future Thuyet would be subject to a husband chosen by her family. "You will be expected to be totally subservient to him, alive or dead."

'The Widow's Wharf', a story that she cried through constantly as she read it, was about a village up north somewhere near where Thuyet had been born. Only a few men lived in the village, which had sent most to the war. Some were killed. Eldest brother always ensured the wife stayed faithful to the memory of her husband. Thuyet remembered one particularly poignant part where one soldier came back grossly disfigured from his war injuries. All the women in the Wharf were married to a soldier. Most husbands were at war, disfigured or dead. Women were watch-dogs for each other's 'virginity'. Forced to maintain respect for their husband's memory, they used shame, name-calling and spying to make each other's lives a living hell. When it seemed that one of the unmarried veterans in the village had turned his attention to one of the widows, the women banged drums any time they were found together, even accidentally. The message would then be repeated from household to household until the village came alive with the beating of kitchen utensils and gongs. Both were shamed. The wife with the disfigured husband finally took her own life rather than be forced to live and to be constantly beaten by her traumatised husband.

This maintained the concept of *trinh*, the essential of feminine loyalty and service. The story's message was clear. As a dutiful Vietnamese female, Thuyet could expect three masters to dominate her life from birth to her death. Sequentially these would be her Grandfather, then her husband and always the eldest brother. Her extended family would ensure *trinh* would always be observed. Its inhumane-ness depressed her.

The Clouds Gather ...

Reading, normally 'men's only' virtue, was a passion that released her from drudgery. In Grandfather's books, Thuyet found a translation of 'Ivanhoe', her favourite. She also read of French medieval heroes. Thuyet read them, tucked under a blanket with a torch, pretending that what she read was a story in which she was the heroine.

What she didn't realise was the insidious character of stories that maintained her culture. In Vietnam, as in medieval Europe, Vietnamese women were placed on an idealistic pedestal. The concepts were on a par with the masculine virtues of honour and loyalty. In her readings the oppressive culture of chastity was glorified.

Thuyet was made to read Luc Van Thien, a mystical story that re-enforced *trinh*. In it the young girl loved a young scholar but from a distance. Tears of sadness, piqued with anger, filled Thuyet's eyes. Although the heroine had only looked at her hero, she'd fallen in love. The heroine then shared a poem with her lover. When her chastity became threatened the heroine decided to commit suicide. Kuan-Yin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy intervened and saved her. The Goddess reunited the lovers and they 'lived happily ever after'. Thuyet's tears were of relieved joy. Another author, Nguyen Dinh Chieu, idealised his story as a way of life to be embraced by the precept of *trinh*. He wrote at the time of the initial French invasion of Indochina. His story was an uncompromisingly traditional understanding of *trinh* for all respectable Vietnamese maidens to emulate. Chien also used his story as an allegory for the brutality of the French and the Mandarin response to this. In the story, the Mandarin, forced to cooperate with the French, compromised himself with them. Once he returned home he apologised to his family and friends for having 'lost his virginity'. Then committed suicide. A 'double entendre' example of 'political correctness'.

The Clouds Gather ...

Thuyet learned that suicide was the socially prescribed alternative to 'dishonour'. Compulsory readings were based on the familiar axiom, 'Once a girl is spoiled, she can no longer regard herself as a virgin'. Culture, embedded in subtle ways.

One day Grandmother told her she would have to memorise a stanza.

*"Behold virtuous women of true chastity
Whose iron will shields them from lustful fires
A pious, virgin daughter gives her parents peace of mind
Brings praise to her family and a thousand years of blessings"*

It took her a week. Her mouth felt dry as she stood before the family. Grandfather in the huge chair in the centre. Her palms itched with dryness. Before she'd opened her mouth she had rehearsed it ten times. Her stomach was sick with worry. She couldn't eat dinner afterwards and later told Duyen how much she hated the public recitation. The stanza only reinforced her resistance, but she had no choice.

Thuyet envied Duyen's freedom from *tu duc*, or the 'four virtues' that governed a young girl's life. Grandmother expected her to internalize these submissive laws to the point of believing them as law. Her poorer friend seemed to Thuyet to have much more freedom. Duyen wandered where she chose and became Thuyet's major source of fun and friendship. Thuyet's older sisters extolled the long list of feminine do's and don'ts of *tu duc*. They seemed to take pleasure in making Thuyet's life as miserable as possible. Learning from her married sisters that, "the hardest cross a woman had to bear was not the husband's temper but the intolerance and harsh expectations of the mother-in-law". Thuyet learned that men and women preyed on young girls.

The Clouds Gather ...

Thuyet had to study the natural sciences, hygiene, geography and history, “so that she could sound intelligent as an adult on social occasions”. The first *tu duc*, was the ‘virtue’ of labour. Grandfather’s ‘enlightenment’ allowed her to learn to read and write. Often she heard the axiom “A hundred daughters are not worth one testicle.”

At TeT, especially as she grew older, she noted the hours of preparation of special foods by the women of the household. A precocious child, Thuyet realised it was her brothers, presided over by Grandfather, who made the offerings to ancestors. Only they received the blessings for prosperity from family, invited friends and outsiders. Women were meant to ‘stay in the kitchen’. Or to make ‘sensible conversation’.

The second virtue was her physical appearance, where a balance had to be drawn between attracting others and being attractive to her husband. The maxim “Men and women should remain distant”, served as justification for the social isolation of young women. It was a warning that ‘young, especially attractive girls should resist the lustful designs of men’ and reinforced the taboos of the ‘unguarded flower violated by the wayward bee’ that she read as the smug refrain in the novel ‘The King of Siam’.

Correct speech was the third virtue. Thuyet learned the safety net of rigid politeness. Her nature was assertive but she lived, like many of her adolescent non-Vietnamese peers, in an imaginative state fed by poems and books. Thuyet found it difficult to be self-demeaning. She viewed the speech-dynamics imposed on her as constraints.

One of her older sisters once hugged Thuyet, a rare phenomenon, then secretly told her, “My husband is often angry.” She knew Thuyet wouldn’t dare repeat it.

The Clouds Gather ...

Sister continued, "I cannot answer back, but he seems to regard me as an enemy because we haven't yet had a child." She cried and cried, gradually subsiding. "He beats me but my mother-in-law says that I deserve to be beaten until I can produce a son. She tells me not to talk or argue back. Reminds me that 'Boiling rice doesn't burn when you lower the flame.'"

She and Duyen learned as many folk songs and risque poems as they could. It helped them understand that there had been, in the past, and could be, in the future, other, more human virtues. The folk songs and risque poetry turned Confucian platitudes on their head. Some of the angriest folk songs mimicked the mother-in-law relationship.

Like ...

"Out of affection for my husband I must wail

At my mother-in-law's death

But I and the old woman are definitely not relatives."

Thuyet's life changed dramatically after the Vietminh victory at Dien Bien Phu.

In October 1954, the French flag was lowered for the last time in Hanoi. In the Citadel, as the band played the Marseillaise, to the tears of the watching French Officers, soldiers and civilians were splattered with huge drops of cold rain. For the French the sight was a depressing reminder of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu that marked the seventy-five years since French troops had forced their way into Hanoi. On this October afternoon in 1954, blustery conditions added to French despair. A new arrangement had been agreed between the French and the Vietminh.

The Clouds Gather ...

The Vietminh and the CIA had been busy prior to this significant day. They engineered the 'spontaneous' reactions of Hanoi's citizens.

An advance party of Vietminh cadres had mobilized Hanoi's residents to appear in force to support the Vietminh takeover. Huge red flags with a gold star in the centre represented Ho Chi Minh's forces and Vietminh banners and flags hung from many buildings and major administrative establishments. Streets echoed with drums and firecrackers exploded in parks and gardens. Huge portraits of Ho Chi Minh 'suddenly' appeared on street corners, covering buildings where they'd be seen, by the victorious Vietminh columns and on bill boards 'spontaneously' erected to represent the love of the people for their national hero.

Five columns of Vietminh regulars converged on the Citadel for their victory parade. Uncle Le Duc Dat's unit had been formed from the Capital Regiment, one of the oldest. It had taken part in the street fighting that resulted in a French victory in 1946. Victorious following Dien Bien Phu, on this day it led the other columns in trucks and on foot, with bayonets fixed, his soldiers sat proudly in their trucks or stepped out smartly in marching rhythm. They smiled shyly at the adulation of the crowds carrying festoons of flowers and little Vietminh flags.

People lined both sides of the streets. Grandfather's family waved their flags.

Le Duc Dat refused to use a vehicle. He marched at the head of his column. "I've walked with my troops all over North Vietnam and Laos. I'll walk today." Le Duc Dat knew Party cadres had moved among the residents in the days and weeks prior.

The Clouds Gather ...

They promised that the new government would respect their rights and minimize disruption to their way of life. Le Duc Dat became sickened by the hypocrisy of the government's hollow promises. As a Party member and Political Commissar, Le Duc Dat had been required to provide cadre members and to instruct them in their duties.

Nine years ago, when Ho Chi Minh had declared himself the President of a new and 'One' Vietnam, Le Duc Dat had been naïve. Now, mature and battle-hardened, he found it difficult to raise the same enthusiasm. Then he'd been giddy with excitement. Today he was apprehensive. Unspoken issues nagged.

One of his cadre climbed the facade of one of Hanoi's largest department stores to splurge in huge letters across it, "Long Live an Independent and Peaceful Vietnam". He wondered at the word "Peace". Le Duc Dat knew that regular units were already being dispatched South to 'raise awareness' of the victory in the North.

He agonised about the possible use of the military during the Land Reform program.

Dat's unit emblem was distinct as he passed below Troy. Troy owed Dat much. He'd been lucky the day Dat found him after Dien Bien Phu. Troy had seen the state of French prisoners returned by the Vietminh. Many hadn't survived the forced marches and sparse conditions. Yet Troy found it difficult to condone the CIA response in Hanoi. Monitoring the Vietminh special communications, Troy enjoyed his extra-curricula job with the Hanoi police in small arms weapon-training.

Troy warned drastic changes would follow the Vietminh victory. No one listened.

The Clouds Gather ...

The CIA intensified their propaganda and sabotage programs. They did what they could to sabotage Ho Chi Minh's efforts. The CIA had anticipated this 'victorious entry'. Wherever they could CIA operators warned Hanoi residents, especially the middle class. They intensified their fears and premonitions. CIA agents broadcast the results of the 'Land Reforms' still under-way in the countryside and proclaimed similar communist purges and re-education programs could be expected in the industrial areas of Ho Chi Minh's new, expanded proletarian bases.

On 1st November 1954, Ho Chi Minh, with his government and members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, entered Hanoi to a tumultuous welcome. Tens of thousands streamed toward the square where Ho Chi Minh had issued his first Proclamation of Independence in September 1945.

Grandfather's whole entourage, including Thuyet, were there to listen. He had no illusions about where the new regime would lead. Thuyet couldn't have guessed.

She felt a surge of excitement. Proclamations of 'Peace' and 'Independence' mesmerised the young ten-year-old. Joy rose spontaneously, reminding her what Vinh told her after that first heady time in Hanoi in 1945.

Sad yet proud, Father would have wanted to have lived for this day. Thuyet felt sure that Father would be there, in the presence of his brothers and sons, to experience this victory. She believed the friendly ghost of Mother whispered to her. Soon Thuyet knew she would be re-united with Vinh her eldest brother and with Uncle Le Duc Dat.

The Clouds Gather ...

Both already legends, they were the veteran heroes who had made this day possible. Thuyet felt saddened that Phouc could not be in Hanoi with them. She had met Pham, Uncle Le Duc Dat's son. He and Grandfather had been closetted together ever since Phouc had been imprisoned. Grandfather and Pham wore sad faces even on this day of days. But Thuyet was too young and too self-absorbed to know what distressed them. She felt sad too for Phouc but didn't fully understand what had happened.

She missed her brother, Phouc. He was the only one she'd been able to confide in for years and now he too was gone to Tuyen Quang. He wanted to be close to Father, to re-claim his land and work it once again. He didn't like the city. Phouc was such a gentle soul and Thuyet loved him more than any one else in the world.

Xong waved his flag in front of her in the crowd, out of spite. This oldest of Grandfather's sons was still at home. Thuyet hated him and everything he stood for. Thuyet held Xong responsible for Phouc's decision to leave her. Phouc's soft nature no longer tolerated Xong's bullying Thuyet. Even now, Xong blocked her view but Thuyet would say nothing. As the eldest son still at home, Xong imposed his will and behaved like a tyrant. He loved the power and exploited every opportunity. NO matter how badly he behaved Grandfather would do nothing and Grandmother would only insist in compliance anyway. Xong always left Thuyet feeling tense and fearful.

Xong learned Thuyet had started her periods. Secretly he made many lewd remarks.

No one had prepared her for that first day. She woke up and her sheets were stained.

The Clouds Gather ...

The blood puzzled Thuyet. She felt no wound. Yet her stomach pained her so much she felt like fainting. Thuyet at first assumed she had some dreadful disease and wondered who she could trust with the fact she was dying. Bleeding to death.

That part of her body no one ever referred to, now bled. She wondered how she was to wash the sheets without the Amahs knowing? Without anyone finding out? *Surely the whole world would soon know.* Thuyet would die from the shame. Thuyet thought of her friend Duyen. *If only she were here. She's older than me. And knows things I don't. Maybe she can tell me. But how to get to her in this mess?*

For the first time in her life Thuyet didn't know what to do. She felt like crying but couldn't. She lay in bed. Absolutely still. Trying to feel inside her body with her mind to find out what she might be dying of. *I wish Mother were alive. She'd know what to do. Mother would know how to take care of me. She'd clean up the mess.*

Eventually Thuyet got up and crept to the door. The house was quiet. The boys had already left for school and no one seemed to bother about her. She crept back to the bed and scrunched up the sheets. Thuyet snuck across to the bathroom. Closed the door behind her and slipped the safety catch on. Filled the bath. Pushed the sheets under the water and watched the blood seep into the bath water. The swirls made interesting patterns. Hypnotised her. She felt light-headed.

Thuyet felt no disgust at seeing her blood. It was the inconvenience that mattered. *How do I clean then dispose of all this? After all... If I am dying then nothing matters.* It will all pass into history. *I will pass into history.*

The Clouds Gather ...

The thought comforted her as she soaked the sheets and scrubbed them. Then she used the taps to twist the sheets and squeeze all the water out of them. Thuyet repeated this procedure three times until she felt sure all the blood had been rinsed out of them. Then she hung them over a wooden chair in the corner, feeling proud of herself. It took her a long time because she kept feeling faint.

She took her nightdress off and her undergarments. Soaked them in some fresh water. The water had become cold. She looked at her naked body for a long time. Watched the slow seepage. Wondered how long before she bled to death. Cold seeped into her bones. Made her shiver. She wanted to finish washing her spotted garments so that she could shower. But she had little energy left. Her mind numbed as Thuyet pushed the sheets against the back of the chair and sat down. Even the seat felt cold.

She didn't hear the pounding on the door. Her married older sister decided to visit. Thuyet could hardly make out who she was. She thought it was Mother.

Much later she felt warm, in her own bed. It had all been some kind of nightmare. She lifted the sheets. Everything felt clean and fresh. She had on different garments. She drifted off to sleep again. Mother stroked her forehead. Sang a lullaby. "Mother, I am so hungry." She gave Thuyet hot broth. It took a long time for her to realise what had happened. Older sister helped Thuyet to understand she had grown up to be a woman. That for the rest of her life she would bleed. That nothing would be the same again. It was her first 'life-initiation'. Her initiation into the world of Woman.

Duyen, Thuyet's only friend after Phouc left, could not abide Xong

The Clouds Gather ...

Other lessons awaited Thuyet. As she grew toward womanhood, she realised that many of her sisters and her sister's friends complained about the inequities of being female versus the life of a male. She realised it was women who enforced the socialisation of children. They re-enforced the very problems they held men responsible for.

She noted grimly that Grandfather received the credit for Pham's accomplishments in Paris as with other members of his family in Vietnam. On the other hand, "daughters who satisfied their mother-in-laws were held as a special blessing".

Her sister told Thuyet her main fear. "If I do not produce a child then my husband will be allowed to take a concubine." She twisted her mouth, tears fell in streams at this final indignation then her sister threw herself on the bed to smother her distress. Later, Thuyet found that this sister had grown to be the traditional Vietnamese wife. Her husband never shared the excitement of his life with her sister and never took her anywhere. Sister did not complain. That way her life was comfortable.

In an innate way, Thuyet determined that she would never succumb to this system of female oppression. She loved Grandfather, despite the fact that, albeit unwittingly, he subscribed to the Confucian Mandarin's and Scholar's way of life, which was male oriented and decidedly male-dominant.

Duyen taught Thuyet that it didn't have to be that way. Although poor, always hungry and subject to the whims of sickness, overwork and the economics of drought or flood, Duyen's parents relied on the sharing of tasks. Treated Duyen as an adult.

The Clouds Gather ...

Older sister started bearing children one after another almost immediately after her outburst with Thuyet, as though that experience had been a 'break-point'. By the time Thuyet was sixteen, her sister had suffered four childbirths and a miscarriage.

Bearing her first son, her sister once passed out. The doctor told her to abort or she would die. She'd told him, "I will die rather than deny my husband his first son." She added, as though they were her own words, "It is essential to have a son. After all 'In Heaven above and Earth below, men are honoured and women reviled'".

She complained. "My husband will not condone contraceptives". A healthy son was finally produced and her devotion was rewarded for some months. "So long as I continued to give him regular births he was happy." But she suffered shame from sporadic miscarriages. She tried abstention "but this forced my husband to have an affair". To her only confidante, Thuyet, she said sadly, "Affairs are common".

For the husband and wife, 'concubinage and affairs are essential to our culture'. Her older sister explained to Thuyet her husband needed to have no soul-searching nor to feel any guilt. "It is a natural birthright" she'd tell Thuyet. "We made no sacred vows of fidelity in our marriage ceremony." Confucianism laid no injunctions against adultery. Further, "Under Heaven, it is the lot of men to service many women."

Elder Sister finally told Thuyet's older sister of the affair and suggested *danh ghen*. She took older sister to her husband's assignation hoping she would catch the husband in 'flagrante delicto'. Elder Sister wanted to end the shame the rest of the family felt. A traditionally timid but dignified woman, older sister couldn't carry it through.

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She told Thuyet that she had stopped short of the house. Elder Sister gave her a tirade about 'shame'. Thuyet's older sister, whom Thuyet had grown to respect, left before confronting her husband. She preferred to resign herself to the situation. "It means no more babies. So long as he continues to support me," she explained to Thuyet, "and doesn't neglect his children then he is a good husband and I must be thankful."

Hundreds of oral prescriptions like the one on the importance of a son, plagued Thuyet's day-to-day life. Some proved too subtle an influence. Many she rejected. Most attempted to indoctrinate her, unsuccessfully, into submissiveness. For her, the worst had to do with behaviour, the fourth *tu duc* or virtue.

Confucian contexts of 'right' behaviour conditioned society and enforced compliance especially to superiors. Thuyet's readings gave her escape. Her models of behaviour came from the Vietnamese cultural and historical traditions. Grandfather often recommended readings that she gave different interpretations to. Thuyet's solace came from reading of female heroes and attending traditional plays and operas about them. Grandfather was pleased to support her assumed interest in 'patriotic issues'.

She only shared her innermost thoughts with Duyen, whose rare beauty had started to attract unwanted attention. "In early Vietnamese history," she read, "The female gods of fertility ranked the same as the male gods." Thuyet enjoyed reading her nation's ancient history to Duyen. Especially stories of heroines. The Trung Sisters, favourites to both excited Thuyet's fervent mind. A cult had developed around them and there were many different renditions. Their short-lived rebellion in the first century A.D. created an atmosphere of change in modern times. Ho Chi Minh promoted this.

The Clouds Gather ...

Thuyet often sang herself to sleep quoting her favourite hero, Trieu Thi Thrinh, “I want to ride the wind and talk to the waves. I want to slay the big whale of the Eastern Sea. To clean up our frontiers. Save the people from drowning.”

If she realised the big whale was China or that drowning meant adopting Chinese ways, Thuyet preferred her own interpretation. Like ‘Great Mother’ Princess Ao Co who was purported to have given birth to Vietnam’s first rulers, and the later Trung Sisters, Trieu Thi Thrinh challenged the all-male Chinese overlords of the third century, B.C. Thuyet took her, and others like her, as personal models.

In the sixth, twelfth and fourteenth centuries Trieu Thi Thrinh re-appeared as an incentive to finally rid Vietnam of the Chinese ‘Thousand Years Rule’ they’d instituted. Her spirit of resistance was honoured by different dynasties in the thousand years after her ‘honourable suicide’ to escape capture by the Chinese. Chinese scholars attempts to manipulate Trieu Thi Thrinh into a Confucian framework didn’t succeed. According to legend, she possessed a beauty that ‘shook the soul of men’.

Thuyet told Duyen that she reflected Trieu Thi Thrinh’s beauty but “You don’t have three-foot long breasts, which she strapped over her shoulders when she went to battle and you aren’t nine-feet tall.” They laughed until tears rolled. “Also you can’t eat two kilos of rice at a sitting, nor can you walk five hundred leagues in a single day.”

This last, ‘walking five-hundred leagues in a day’ excersised Duyen’s thoughts. She dreamt of joining the women’s support group for the Vietminh. She walked around the Hoan Kiem lake every day and timed her walks to the striking of the city clock.

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Thuyet matured. She modelled her life around Trieu Thi Thrinh's final exhortations, "Why should I imitate others, bow my head, stoop over to be a slave? Why resign myself to menial housework?" Thuyet refused to see herself as a kitchen maid. But Thuyet was careful to be a compliant rebel until she could win final independence.

With Duyen as example, Thuyet was also determined not to succumb to the weakness that finally forced Trieu Thi Thrinh's suicide. The only thing Trieu Thi Thrinh feared? Anything smelly, dirty or impure.

She read the final humiliation to Duyen. "The Chinese commander, hearing about her weakness, charged from the fort. His troops went naked and spread all kinds of filth on their bodies. They yelled and kicked-up dust like wild animals. They threw animal and human excrement at their enemy. Trieu Thi Thrinh's response was one of horror and disgust. She rode off. But this caused panic among her troops and eventually they were surrounded." Trieu Thi Thrinh committed suicide rather than be taken.

The two girls, aware of growing interest after puberty, laughed hysterically when Thuyet read that, even after Trieu Thi Thrinh's suicide, the Chinese General was plagued by dreams and nightmares of her. "He ordered his wood carvers to make hundreds of images of an erect penis and huge swollen testicles."

The two girls mimicked this with gourds. They tried to keep their screams of mirth quietened but tears and rolling fits dominated. Thuyet read, "The constructions were hung over entrances to his palaces and the doors of his soldier's tents." The two friends left the best gourd just inside their hideaway as a reminder.

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They broke into gales of laughter each time as they crept into their secret hideaway. There, each would plaster the other's hair with filth. Then they'd sit and wait for it to dry, in a kind of meditation. Thuyet managed to steal a phial of perfume, and after a suitable interval they'd wash in their bowl, using scented soap and splash perfume.

Unaware that she too was beautiful, Thuyet's white-complexioned face contrasted with the honey skin tone most Vietnamese women had. Duyen would hold a mirror to her and demand that Thuyet look at herself.

"See those dark irises in classical almond eyes?" she said. "A fire dances in your eyes, flashes in your beautiful tresses and affects everyone around you." She made Thuyet slip off her blouse and forced her to look at her budding breasts. "They are impatient to become woman. Not like you. You seem to be holding back."

Duyen's boldness stunned Thuyet. She reversed the process and made Duyen show off her beauty. The sight of their bodies, stripped, together, made them hot.

Their bodies quivered with excitement. They hastily dressed again, but never forgot.

One day, Duyen went missing.

The Clouds Gather ...

1954: the Land Reform...

PHOUC TOLD NO ONE THAT IT WAS XONG WHO'D TORTURED HIM

Prior to 1951, the Vietnamese Communist Party was secret. During the war against the French few knew who the members were. Once it became declared the Party became very active and in 1953, the Communists instituted the Trade Tax, modelled on the one inaugurated by Mao Tse Tung in China. Chinese had been welcomed as advisors and counselors by Ho Chi Minh. They infiltrated every sphere of Vietnamese government. A flood of supplies flowed into North Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh aimed at crushing all private enterprise. The Party became the monopoly on all trade matters.

Pham had worries. In Hanoi a friend of his owned a shop and had put up a sign, "Welcome the Trade Tax!" to show his support for the Party. Uneducated, he'd included an exclamation mark. He hadn't read Orwell's '1984' about 'mindspeak'. In the Maoist Communist vocabulary an exclamation mark was seen as a complaint. At a meeting to denounce 'reactionaries' the man was tried, convicted and beaten to death.

Next began the Land Reform movement. It heralded the collectivity of land and labour and was hailed by the peasants deprived of land as the annihilation of the landlords but Uncle Ho's covert aim was the total destruction "of the landlord mentality." He targeted the mind of the people. Anyone not a Communist was suspect, particularly if they held 'power', meaning influence among the people.

Tuyen Quang Province had endured and survived the ravages of the French Indochina War. The Land Reform movement changed the rest of Vietnamese society forever.

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It was classical Communism as practiced by Stalin in Russia and just as bloody as Mao Tse Tung's takeover in China. The Land Reform program redistributed rice fields from rich landlords and rich peasant households to members of the villages. It had the more sinister aim of consolidating raw power in Ho Chi Minh's hands.

Phouc arrived at a critical point in the establishment of the Land Reform. He'd rebuilt Father's home and worked the fields owned by his family. Through industriousness and fair dealings he'd even expanded his rice-producing area and had taken a prominent place on the council of Tien Doan, their home village. Few Elders remained after the French assault that had robbed Phouc of his parents in 1945.

But Phouc's world had changed. There had been only twelve Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) members in the village in those far off days. Since Vinh and Father had listened when Uncle Ho had announced himself as President the Vietminh had grown exponentially. It was now the only viable political power in North Vietnam.

Uncle Le Duc Dat had been granted membership as had Father, but none of the Elders knew, nor had seen fit to join a fledgling Party where membership remained secret. Uncle Dat had also been the first from Tien Doan to join the Vietminh. The first Indochinese Communist Party cell had not been formed in Tuyen Quang until after Father's murder. Tien Doan's destruction by the Legionnaires was the stimulant. The village ICP operated under the guidance of the provincial ICP membership and these associations, assisted by Uncle Le Duc Dat in the early stages, quickly transformed into associations for national salvation, or the *cuu quoc*. One of these *cuu quoc* had been formed in Tien Doan at the end of 1942, Father had been instrumental in this.

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This organisation, part of the mass organisation strategy that laid the foundations for the Vietminh and for future government, organised protests against price fixing: the drafting of village youth into the French colonial forces: and the *corvee*, or compulsory citizen labour recruited for major construction projects and military facilities. These things propped up the French colonial rape of Vietnam.

Protest campaigns focussed on the Vietminh as a rallying point for disaffected Tien Doan villagers. Poor peasants, angry youth, and the family members of tortured, imprisoned and murdered revolutionaries were the initial focus of the recruitment of 'true believers'. French repression strengthened individual resolve. The Vietminh theme of national unity and Uncle Ho's Declaration of Independence bound people.

By the time Phouc arrived, the land movement had been gaining momentum for some years. The 'Unity' theme struck at communal networks. Young *cuu quoc* activists pushed the limits of reform. They undermined class-oriented social divisions and challenged Confucian frameworks. The *cuu quoc* coerced well-off villagers to donate money to the various Vietminh funding drives: the village self-defence force.

They argued that the village teachers 'destroying ignorance' should be paid. They also obtained donations of rice to needy villagers and focussed on the eradication of problems such as gambling and theft, plus repairs to the village dike system.

Despite his success at supporting these initiatives, Phouc refused to join the Party. He remembered Grandfather's words about the insubstantial nature of political movements and his advice about slogans.

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Phouc chose not to continue a leadership role. He had always been the 'gentle soul'. The amount of conflict within the Party membership appalled him. Despite Ho Chi Minh's directives about women, Phouc had trouble trying to encourage women onto his village committees. Even when he was successful getting the men to agree, women hung back. He quickly found that, as a non-Party member, he was regarded as a junior in terms of revolutionary knowledge.

It annoyed Phouc to be told that he lacked revolutionary fervour and experience.

He retained his position on the village administrative council and worked hard to improve his landholdings and their yield. Vinh visited him, on leave from the army. Phouc hardly recognised his brother. He'd grown hard. The war had made him intolerant. Vinh, in a rare moment of intimacy, had shared with Phouc his hatred of the French, and any other oppressor of their country... within or without.

"I once arrived in a village that had been bombed by the French. I had lived in the village for a few weeks, came back to it for three weeks leave then returned just after a Vietminh operation. My unit was stationed near the village. It was harvest time. Because it had rained, the trenches they used when the French planes came were full of water. When the bombing started they were virtually caught in the open. The whole of my leave I spent burying friends and villagers." Vinh had stopped. He looked directly at Phouc with steely eyes that seemed to penetrate. "Unrecognisable from each other their parts hung in trees. The napalm was horrible and the stench of the burned bits of people remains in my nostrils to this day. I couldn't eat for days. Often I found only intestines. On another time I found the head of a friend. No Body."

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Vinh had not shed one tear. Phouc understood but could not share his brother's hatred. Shortly after his brother's departure Phoung's world fell in. A Land Reform team arrived in late 1954. Ho Chi Minh had earlier decreed an 'egalitarian socio-economic policy'. The Team, headed by Grandfather's son, Xong, enforced the 'destruction of feudal exploitation'. Warning bells didn't go off even when Xong insisted that his Team should base themselves with 'the landless and poor peasants', a policy change involving *ba chung*. This meant eating, living and working together with the poor.

Phouc told Pham much later. "They came to me because others had been forewarned. The Team wanted me to tell them who the exploitive landlords were. I sensed this was a dangerous assignment for me." Phouc avoided any mention of Xong. "At first I joked with them that in my village each of us were the same. We shared what we had with the poorer people. The Team weren't happy with me." Distressed at the memory of Xong, Phouc paused to collect himself. "The Team aimed to destroy the 'exploiting class' by redistributing, yet again, land holdings to poorer peasants. Duyens to poor peasants were cancelled. Then the denunciations started." The pain on Phouc's face was real. "The most terrible part was when Vinh arrived. My brother had changed."

Pham gasped. "Vinh?... your own brother?"

"Vinh sat me down and told me, 'You and Father are landlords. You are the mortal enemy of the peasants. I have been placed in charge of the Land Reform campaign in my province and the Team has classified you and Father as exploiters.' Then came the worse part. He told me that 'Landlords and other forms of exploiters must be punished. I cannot save you even though you are family.' Vinh held no pity for me."

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Pham couldn't believe his ears. Especially when Phouc told him that the exchange had not been a private one. It had been held in front of the few remaining relatives and many of the friends Phouc had made since his return.

"None of them fully understood how I had suddenly become a member of 'the reactionary class of exploiters' let alone an 'enemy of the people' just because I'd inherited and claimed back my father's land." Phouc wiped his runny nose on his sleeve. "They had seen me at sowing time and up to my knees in the water with them planting rice seedlings. I worked harder than they did during the harvest because, as Father before me, I cooked meals for the migrant workers who came from outlying hamlets." He plunged the heels of his hands into his eyes to wipe them.

Pham's face contorted as he tried to control his feelings.

Phouc had the same tenderness for his land as he had for its people. That's why everyone thought he'd be a Buddhist monk. Phouc sensed the cooling and heating of the earth and knew its seasons. He only had to listen to the wind as the ready-for-harvest rice waved its golden sheaves, or the songs of the birds in the fruit and banana trees, to be able to tell whether heaven would bless or threaten their harvest.

Catholics who really knew and loved Phouc believed him to be a reincarnation of Saint Francis of Assisi. He knew when to rush out and warn the villagers at the first thunderclap or first indication of the rains. Phouc would lead the charge.

With spare pickaxes and shovels he'd sweat to refill the levees before the river rose.

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Known also as the 'Sun-and-Moon-gazer, he'd watch carefully for the 'red halo' at night or in the early morning. He could predict the weather from the shape and colour of the clouds. Devotion like Phouc's the villagers rewarded with respect.

Until Vinh came, bringing Xong with him. But Phouc didn't mention Xong's name.

"Vinh left as quickly as he came, moving on from village to village spreading his lies and his hate. He never said 'Goodbye', just left instructions behind for the Team. They dragged me out of bed one night and forced me to kneel with my head cowed, both arms behind my back and in the centre of the very courtyard where Vinh himself had told us once that Father and Mother had been martyred. Now their martyrdom had been changed to simply 'killed'. I was suddenly 'an enemy of the people', one of the many 'reactionary class of exploiters'. I'd inherited a few acres of rice paddy."

Xong and his Team had forced the whole village to attend. Peasants were coerced into accusing parents and neighbours of the most heinous crimes, which everyone knew were fabrications. Luckily Phouc had no children otherwise they would have been forced to formulate crimes he'd supposedly committed. Phouc remembered how...

Xong preferred to call daughters or sisters, telling them, "If you don't denounce your father then you will be classified as a landlord with him. If you tell the people that he raped you then you can go home free to look after your brothers and sisters."

To save the remains of her family the young woman or girl would be coerced into telling her story in front of the whole assembled village.

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This added to her distress at losing her parents. Xong took great pleasure in his role.

These 'rallies' Xong held at night fearing the enemy planes. Hundreds of people would be marched into an open area, sometimes the village marketplace. Xong insisted on bamboo torches circling the people. It emphasised the drama and the macabre and he revelled in it. It reminded Phouc of Buddhist Tankas depicting Hell.

Phouc described the horror to Pham, who said, "I attended one once and you are right. I remember the 'court', nominated by Party members, organised with two stages. One for the tribunal, more like a jury, and one for the accused. In the one I attended they had people behind the tribune's stage pedaling bicycles to light up their stage with bicycle-powered generators. The Party members hid behind the one appointed as Judge so that they could direct and coach the Judge in low voices."

Pham paused. "I am ashamed to say, that as a trained person in Law it was my job. I hid. I gave instructions secretly. I had been convinced this was for the good of the nation by Ho Chi Minh's chief minister." He paused again. His voice went very soft so that Phouc had to strain to hear. "Often I was accompanied by Chinese counsellors dressed in Vietnamese clothing so that I didn't deviate from Mao's model." He hung his head. "I am ashamed..."

Pham described how the accused, often a crowd of 'reactionaries' would be on one stage and the 'witnesses' on another. Guards, again appointed by Party members, would order the 'reactionaries' to stand, to kneel. Then...

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Xong forced them to hold weights, with their arms held high. This would happen every five or less minutes. Behind them the stage would be adorned with “Give the people freedom in their struggle against ‘reactionaries’”, or “All land to the peasants and death to all Landowners.”

Phouc admitted, “I was ordered, ‘Confess your crimes to the people’. The whole village watched my degradation. My friends had to shout ‘Down with ‘reactionaries’, landowners and exploiters of the people’.”

Pham added, “And if they refused they were denounced and made to join you too.”

“That’s right. This immediately effected people who had been my friends. Those who shouted were told to scream louder. The louder they screamed the firmer ‘the proof of your revolutionary ardour can be seen and heard’. They were told ‘not to suppress their hatred for exploiters and landowners.’”

Phouc didn’t say that the loudest voice at his trial was Xong.

“Surely they knew that if it could be done to you then they also weren’t safe?”

“I understood and forgave them, Pham. They were terrified. Vinh had left behind three ‘pillars of the revolution’ as the Section for Land Reform. They were to continue the work Vinh had started and were ‘the Law’.”

“I remember that well Phouc.” Pham stopped. He sipped some water from a glass.

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After a another shorter pause, he continued, “They preferred a demobilised soldier. Better, one known throughout the village for laziness.”

“We had one, Pham. He’d been demobilised after falling over dead drunk off duty and breaking his arm. A drunkard but a good looking and plausible one, his greatest asset had been his dick, which he waved at all the widows the rich landowners’s wives and the pretty, young and imported rice pickers from Tuyen Quang.”

“It was ‘immoral’” retorted Pham indignantly. “The people they chose trampled on everything held sacred by the villagers.” His head in his hands, he shook it, violently.

“Vinh had already told the people ‘not to be influenced by the old ways’. He’d taught the children, the Young Pioneers, their revolutionary song...

‘Without weakness and without hesitation

We will conquer all

And the landowners and exploiting class

Will never rule again’

Any time the Section held a meeting the young ones would be there, beating their drums, shouting their slogans and inciting the people with their revolutionary songs.”

Pham shook his head in disbelief. He’d heard much about the Land Reforms and seen much and this anecdotal evidence from Phouc, his own kin, Pham had to believe.

“This is hellish, Phouc. But if you fell, surely everyone knew their turn...? A gossipy comment was all it would take in the fever of ‘Confessions’.”

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“It was a Hell on Earth, my Brother. Before they could be stopped, a member of the appointed ‘Section of Three’ would denounce that person. An innocent would find himself or herself hurled from bystander to victim. Sex, age or heritage mattered not. The Land Reform hinged on removing the cultural and social habits of a lifetime. It took just three years to destroy our society, from the way it was to a people whose fear erupted into denunciations of family and friends. The young were given special privileges if they denounced their parents. Everyone knew that the shadow of the revolution hung over them and they spoke in whispers and became afraid and furtive.”

Almost afraid to ask, Pham said, “What were the punishments meted out to you?”

“The favourite one was humiliation.” In his imagination he saw Xong. “Many suffered torture and death at the hands of a whipped up and crazed mob. Some died from a broken heart or from starvation and would waste away before my eyes. Some couldn’t cope and went mad. As ‘exploiters’ they couldn’t get work to survive. No villager would dare feed them or show mercy for fear of being identified as ‘friend of the enemies of the revolution.’” Xong was the only one he hated.

Pham lit a cigarette for him. Phouc drew on it deeply then went on.

“This ‘Section of Three’ had been parasites all their lives to their family. Now they held the power of life and death over the whole village. Often long lines of people knelt like I had, heads bowed and waiting for the cries of their own people, ‘Down with the exploiting classes’ ... ‘No mercy.’ ... ‘No mercy for the enemies of the revolution’. No one felt safe. No one was spared. Every family was affected.”

The Clouds Gather ...

“But what was the case against your Father? He’d been tortured to death by the French. Surely that must have been some mitigation? Surely your two heroic brothers in the Vietminh counted for something? Both sacrificed much for the revolution?”

Phouc wiped his nose, roughly.

“Not at all. It was as though all happenings prior to 1954 had been wiped away. Father had never owned property, enough to donate land or to rent. But they described me as a ‘brutal landlord’ because I had successfully enlarged Father’s holdings. I never was a fisherman like Father and Vinh. I loved the land I inherited from Father. The Team told me I had to reimburse excess rent I was supposed to have charged.”

Pham was shocked. “Excess rent?”

“Yes. I had to sell everything to meet their quota demands. I cried inside.” Phouc paced around the room and around the light he still burned on the altar for his ancestors. His voice had become muffled then angered in turn, as he’d spoken.

Pham knew that by 1956, nearly 100,000 ‘landlords’ like Phouc had been sentenced to forced labour camps by courts often composed of illiterate peasants. Significant numbers of the Communist cadres involved had used the chaos to line their own pockets, to extort and to engage in factional struggles. He’d heard many of these tales but this was closer. This was Father’s land.

Pham felt for the social shame his brother had suffered.

The Clouds Gather ...

Finally, Phouc said, "I had to stand trial. I couldn't believe it. Pressured by the Section of Three, close relatives and friends denounced me. I was beaten, tortured by being placed in a pit then imprisoned with many like me who could not understand the turn of events. Only when Le Duc Dat intervened could I be released. It was not the loss of land, title or money that scared me. It was the speed with which ordinary people can turn, and the trauma of social alienation. Alone, I could not face the world. I wanted to die. Seeing the ghosts of Father and Mother, I cried to sleep each night. I felt afraid my ancestors would not understand and would spurn me."

Phouc's torrent demanded expiation.

"They appropriated all Father's property, including his fishing vessels. Father was listed also, as a 'bullying landlord' by the same people who had recommended a long time before that he should receive a martyr's medal."

Phouc's shrunken body shook with shame. He sniffed a few times then, "To survive I collected manure in exchange for food. Normally women's work but I was desperate."

Pham realised this was a cleansing time for both. "What happened then, Phouc?" He had recovered his composure,

"The money they later removed, Pham, saying that the 'Manure belongs to the poor landless peasants.' I could not travel. They forced me to stay and to 'face my shame'."

Pham asked. "How did you survive?"

The Clouds Gather ...

“Some of Father’s old friends who had survived the French atrocities, took pity on me. I had been given back a tiny shed. You remember the old netting shed?”

Pham nodded glumly. “It had only three sides?”

Phouc shook in a conflict of shame and anger. “I had no shoes and shivered in the cold. These old friends would surround my tiny home and throw stones on the rotten roof. “Where is that bully landlord?” They’d throw small ones that rattled while they yelled insults at me. “Show yourself you bastard.’ From time to time a small bag of cooked rice would follow a stone. They pitched it more accurately because the food would fall at my feet. Or some banana leaf wrapped in a cloth. Inside was needle and thread and I sewed a rough blanket.”

“So, Phouc. Despite all they did there are still good people in the world.”

“Yes. After three months the Section reclassified me. In 1959 I was allowed to leave the village and given a permit. The basis of the new land distribution to landless and poor peasants worked on the basis of one third of a *mau* (0.9 acres) per adult. Our 2.6 *mau* classified me as a middle-class peasant family.”

“So how could they classify you as a landlord?”

“The extra three *mau* I worked for then bought classified me as a ‘bully landlord’.”

“What happened to that land?”

The Clouds Gather ...

“It was all redistributed.”

As a Party member, Pham had been drafted as a ‘lawyer’ with the Land Reform and Tax Teams to give credibility to their demands. The results appalled him. He shared with Phouc the terrible details he’d found out.

“Did you know that, in 1953, just before Tet, the government launched a well-organised wave of terror throughout the whole of communist-controlled North Vietnam. You were caught up in this, my Brother.”

“Mon Dieu. Non. How did the horror start?”

Pham laughed hollowly. “It was initiated by the authorities. But it got out of hand. Now it is referred to as ‘the Political Struggle’ and is viewed as ‘historical determinism’. At many of the meetings I went to, the cadres would arrive with sticks and ropes. Tax evasion or landlord bullies were not the main issue.”

A haunting sadness filled Phouc’s words. “It was the issue for me, Older Brother. I lost everything of value. Land, money, position and personal merit, these things were removed and cannot be replaced. What morality can there be in such suffering?” The last words tore a sob deep in Phouc’s entrails.

“I understand, Little Brother.” Pham’s face underwent substantial change. “I’m facing a similar dilemma inside myself. What I am about to share with you must go no further. My experiences have left me totally disillusioned with the Party.”

The Clouds Gather ...

Pham paused. A profound sigh escaped him.

Phouc, initially caught in his own depression, now looked at his brother. Pham's whole demeanour had changed. His shoulders slumped. He looked down at his feet and his hands shook with restrained passion. When Pham looked at him again, Phouc saw a dejected, beaten man at war within himself. Pham's eyes had a far-away stare. Phouc started. It was as if his brother's soul had been torn from its moorings. Phouc reached out to him. They embraced silently.

Quietly, Phouc said, "Tell me everything, my dear Older Brother."

Pham dropped his eyes. Phouc strained to hear as Pham continued, almost in reverie. "I met Uncle Ho in Paris, believed him and worked hard to promote and to sustain the revolution. But the things I saw... The things I participated in..." He stopped.

Phouc quietly prompted, "Go on."

Phouc needed to understand what had happened to Pham and why. Here, in his brother's words he'd find an answer. He listened.

"Torture was used widely." Pham said. "The whole country was torn apart as part of an organised terror instituted on our people by its Communist government and sanctioned by the Party of which I was a member." His words came slowly. As if being torn from his throat. "It took me a while to realise that cadre members arrived at the meetings with black lists."

The Clouds Gather ...

“Excuse me, Elder Brother.” Phouc stirred the fire and placed a pot on the metal.

Pham sighed deeply and looked up as Phouc returned. “The lists had been drawn up in private and well before each meeting. The timing was even precise. Just before TET. Everyone had prepared themselves for the New Year public holiday and had gathered extra food and niceties to welcome family members. It should have been a time to remember our ancestors that we believe are present on our family altars on that day. The ‘Terror’ was designed to break the mould. To frighten and to disarm.”

Pham automatically took the cup of tea offered by Phouc. Drank a little.

“It took everyone unawares. The denunciations and tortures were inhuman and unbearable. They were designed specifically to get more names. It had little to do with you, my dear Brother. Nothing to do with the actual person tortured. That was the means to spread the terror so that everyone in the country would realise the power of the Party.” Pham paused as if the pain of remembering was too much. “Some victims were made to kneel. On their head the cadre placed a heavy basket of stones. Some were forced to hang by their thumbs from a rope thrown over a rafter. The poor person would be jerked violently up and down.”

The cup rattled as Pham tried to lift it off the table to take a sip.

Phouc let his brother take his own time. Didn't move to help. This terrible tale disturbed Phouc. His own tortures had been enough. To now find that this had been a deliberate campaign that his cousin had participated in...

The Clouds Gather ...

“Everything went according to plan the first two weeks, Phouc. But I don’t think the government foresaw the reaction. Many people were maimed. Many died...”

Phouc said quietly and poignantly, “Were murdered.”

Pham looked at his brother. “Yes, Little Brother. Many good people were murdered.”
Tears fell unattended. “As terribly as Father was murdered by the French. It is more terrible to watch our own people murder in such a public way then justify it.”

Phouc’s insight was unremitting. “And you were a voluntary part of it.”

“Yes.” The admission sundered an already fragile soul. Gradually the deep and tearing sobs subsided. His face looked drawn. “I want you to know everything I have lived with in these past years, Little Brother. The campaign went beserk. Totally out of control. The Party cadres seemed to be intoxicated by what they had achieved. I felt the pain. I also felt the terror. I knew I could not stop it. I was in a madhouse from which there could be no escape. If I tried, I would become a victim myself. I at last understood the Terror of the guillotine during the French Revolution. We had turned in on ourselves...”

“And lost the true aims of the revolution.”

“... and lost the noble concept of Ho Chi Minh’s revolution. The cadres tasted blood. So did the people. Ordinary people denounced others and they themselves submitted previous friends to the torture.” Pham stopped as if he’d just heard Phouc’s words.

The Clouds Gather ...

He looked into the distance, past the fire. "Under fiendish torture people will say anything if they think it will save them. And do anything if they think it will grant them amnesty. The people turned inward on themselves. They destroyed each other."

Pham's hands twisted as he wrenched words from his innards he'd never been able to say before. His legs crossed and uncrossed. He picked up the empty cup, looked into it then placed it down only to pick it up again moments later. Almost too much to bear, Phouc heard Pham's confession in silence.

"It was horrible and it was barbarous." Pham continued. "Terror, violence and death were everywhere. 'Hard core' members, those who support the Party but are not Party members, had taken over. When the terror ended the Party was then able to blame the excesses on these people and escape blame themselves. As the terror went on, the people were able to settle old scores by denunciation. The original purpose was lost."

Phouc's voice trembled as he asked, "What was the original aim?"

The answer came quickly and automatically. "To eradicate the landlord class and to redistribute the land quickly." Pham sighed as he realised the extent of his own brainwashing. "Every village throughout North Vietnam lost three or four dead. The larger the village the more they killed."

Again Phouc couldn't resist adding, "Were murdered. By murder most foul."

Pham disconsolately nodded agreement.

The Clouds Gather ...

“Denounced people were arrested, tortured and brutally beaten. Some included Party members. It didn’t matter. The denunciations seemed carried along by their own momentum. The campaign slogan was ‘All power to the people’ and ‘All reactionaries must be exterminated’. The power of slogans destroyed rational thought. People needed to protect themselves.”

Pham rubbed his forehead vigorously as if to get rid of visions. But more came.

“The Terror swallowed all reason. So people took this opportunity to enhance their own prestige by the ferocity of their torture on others. The government realised too late that it had unleashed a force over which it had no control. Telegrams were sent throughout the North ordering all Terror activities to stop. The implied threat was that the army would move in and take charge.”

“And the victims?” Phouc asked quietly, “What about the victims?”

“All reactionaries who had been denounced were to remain in jail. No apologies were sent to the victims or to the family members.” Pham struggled to hold onto some remnant of dignity. “No. The slogan issued was that ‘The judgement of the people is inviolate’. All atrocities forgiven. You were lucky that Uncle Dat was able to intervene in your case. None were released until the ‘Rectification of Errors campaign’ after 1956. The most terrible acts happened in the countryside. The towns and cities seemed to prove more impervious to this kind of state-sponsored Terror.”

“Was a reason given for this inhumanity?”

The Clouds Gather ...

“No. Many towns away from the capital had been razed anyway in the ‘scorched earth campaign’ to deny the French access. Now, I believe this was part of a specific policy. The aim was not to deny the French but to eliminate the town and city bourgeoisie. For a long time hard-core elements acted as policemen ordering citizens to remove anything they believed was ‘bourgeois.’”

Phouc could take no more. “So where, dear Elder Brother, does this leave you now.”

Pham dropped his head. Pain brushed his face. He shook his head.

Then he looked directly at his brother. “I considered suicide time and again but it is not the way of our family. Father showed us real martyrdom. The communism rampant here is not what I believed the revolution is about.’

“I agree. Freedom under Communism is to forget morality and the virtues: to ignore the dignity of a person; and to generate fear in people. This Terror taught me, true freedom is the freedom to believe as a Christian, a Buddhist or any other religion. Communism is a curse and an excuse for an elite to wield unlimited power.’

Pham added, “Worse. Communism devours its own. In Paris I believed in the essential goodness and the love of my neighbour. I wanted to harbour justice and the dignity of the person.” Pham’s tears were unchecked. “The revolution failed me.”

Phouc sat up. “So what are you going to do? There is an amnesty in process. The government wants to get rid of ‘reactionaries’ in a less costly way.”

The Clouds Gather ...

Pham answered, "How better to keep the North 'Pure'. I am going South."

"And Uncle Dat? He will now be a marked man for helping me."

"Father knows that. We intend to meet in Saigon. What are you going to do?"

"I can't stay in the North either. I must rebuild myself." Then he added, wistfully.

"Have you heard where Thuyet might be or what has become of her?"

"Nothing since she left home, little Brother. I fear for her."

For the first time since their reunion, Phouc looked like his old self. His eyes held an excitement he hadn't felt since the Terror. "I'll know, Older Brother, if something dreadful had happened to Thuyet. She is well. Where I don't know, but the decision to go South enlivens me." His eyes danced. His face restored some of its glow. "If it be God's will I will find her again. I love Little Sister so much."

Pham hugged Phouc. "We must travel separately and not know the details of each other, Little Brother." They both knew it would be a long time before they met again. Faith had been restored. They were family. He said, "There is a hotel on the riverfront in Saigon called the Majestic. See you there. Top of Tu Do street."

Phouc echoed, "See you at the Majestic Hotel."

They hugged for a long time. Neither dared look back.

The Clouds Gather ...

1959: the 'Tiger Cages'...

GARY STOOD ON A ROCKY PROMONTORY AT MIDDLE HEAD

Gary took a deep breath. Sydney's Harbour Bridge reared on huge concrete abutments to dominate the skyline. The top touched the clouds, the rest hung there, poised, waiting. Gary was in the grounds of the Army Intelligence Centre and squinted into the glare of the morning sun. To his left, ocean swells rolled, swelled then burst against the North and South Heads. To his right, Pinchgut. No Opera House. Not then.

He glanced at his watch. *Shit. A lecture due to start. I'd better get my arse into gear.*

Turning his back on the most beautiful harbour in the world he felt the breeze freshen, then embrace him. The coolness relaxed him and its memory lingered. A few minutes later, as the warm August sun seeped through the classroom window, Gary shrugged off the image of the bridge and settled down to write copious notes. He had much to learn in this three-week course on 'The Strategy and Politics of South East Asia'.

So far that day had started like any other in a peacetime army.

"G'day Gary, where the hell have you been?" Harry had a craggy frame that matched the bulk of the Bridge. At six foot plus, solid and dependable.

"Daydreaming over the Harbour Bridge, Harry."

"Don't daydream tonight. I'm looking forward to table-tennis again, Gary?"

The Clouds Gather ...

“Course we could also give him a hustle at snooker, unless there’s a firing range they’ll let us use while we are here. What do you say, Harry?” Don had been the senior subaltern at Kapooka when Bruce and Gary had served there. A stringy bugger, built like a greyhound but all guts and already a father of three he’d been married ‘under duress’ just like Gary.

“I’ll take you two bastards on any time.” Gary didn’t let Harry intimidate him. His ham fists didn’t quiver holding a forty-five, with shoulders set in concrete abutments.

“Knowing Gary, I’ll bet he’s planning his next campaign against Ho Chi Minh.”

Bruce was another best friend and always the gentleman. As young subalterns at Kapooka, Bruce and he had sworn eternal friendship. Gary and Bruce predicted Australia would be drawn into the conflict in Vietnam and were on this course to find out the official Army view. Bruce’d set up a Vietnam operations room in his Bachelor Officer’s Quarters back in Third Battalion’s base at Enoggera, and his BOQ had become a Mecca for like minds.

The lecturer started. “The systematic disruption of any nation’s administrative and organisational infrastructure is the hallmark of communist subversion.” He confirmed the warnings sounded by the communist takeover in China and the war in Korea. Then discussed how Chinese communism had infiltrated Malaya and how the Brits had waged a successful textbook operation against them. He continued, “Terror, extortion, intimidation and torture are the tools used by communist so-called “freedom” movements all over the world...”

The Clouds Gather ...

“What the fucking hell?” Gary heard a burst of small arms fire and yelling in the courtyard outside. It wasn’t an Australian weapon.

The classroom door exploded in shattering glass. As Gary dived, he watched in slow motion how the others reacted. Some were too slow. Don, Harry and Bruce were as fast. Others stood as if transfixed. Almost like in a dream, Chinese soldiers burst in.

Still diving, he could see the room still filling with soldiers with red stars in their headbands. This was no practice run. Before he hit the floor, Gary heard orders that were incomprehensible. He was surprised he didn’t feel fear. He could see four sets of Chinese puttee leggings under the desks as soldiers surged into the classroom. He finally hit the floor still not panicking. He even felt a surge of pride though he couldn’t see any escape. There was nowhere to go.

Jerked upright by the shoulder, an officer waved a Diaghilev pistol at him. All was confusion. People yelling and milling around. Though Gary’s mind remained clear, he was rough-handled upright and thrust against the nearest wall. His legs were kicked apart and a hessian bag jammed over his head. It smelled musty.

“Against the wall.” *Don’t argue with a gun.* “Evellybody against wall. Hands muss lest against the wall. Splead feet.” The Chinese officer with the pistol could speak passable English but it was heavily accented.

Gary’s breathing became difficult. They’d soaked the hessian. Immediately he started to sweat, not from fear or claustrophobia but from the heat generated inside the bag.

The Clouds Gather ...

It was almost impossible to see. Gary hadn't been able to fix the sound before in the courtyard, but knew he should have known immediately. The sound of a burp gun was heavier than any Ozzie weapons. There was confusion all around and the Chinese sounded annoyed. More yelling, then heavy blows.

A voice yelled out "Fuck you." He realised Harry was beside him.

Gary felt Harry being jerked and shunted past him. Glass shattered as Harry was pushed through the broken door out into the courtyard.

Harry called out loudly "Up the old red rooster..." Bruce's muffled voice followed, "... and more piss."

C-r-a-c-c-k ... A single pistol shot rang out.

The yelling stopped as if someone had turned off a tap. Silence. The brief silence was broken by Chinese commands. Everything was happening very quickly. Gary's hands were efficiently but roughly manacled behind his back. He tried them for strength and heard the ratchet discharge its portentous 'c-l-i-c-k'.

Fuck... That single shot electrified Gary. His heart burst into one explosive ectopic beat. Then it seemed to stop. *Not Harry ... big strong, indomitable Harry ... So this is it ... Harry's dead. This is the real thing.*

Gary decided: *Fuck them ... No surrender ...I will survive.*

The Clouds Gather ...

He'd done some terrorist training and knew that self-tightening handcuffs were most effective. Gary would have to think through every movement.

His brain became hyper-observant. *This is an effective way to shut people up. Surprise, isolate and sudden dramatic violence ... then shoot one ringleader.*

He was grabbed on each side and frog-marched backwards. Gary stumbled a few times and was kicked. He couldn't hear or sense others and wondered how they were coping. No training could prepare anyone for this. Bundled into a truck and driven some distance, he tried to remember direction, but the truck turned and twisted.

Gary lost the thread. The wet hessian was humid, choking him, and he sweated like a pig. After some time the truck stopped. More commands in Chinese. Then, half-ejected, half-dragged off the back of the truck, Gary hit the deck in a crumpled heap. He had to be in the gun-emplacement tunnels under Middle Head, walking downhill. He tried to count his paces to keep a record of the number of turns. It didn't work.

Gary was propelled into a room minutes later, the hessian bag wrenched off his head and handcuffs removed. No time to adjust his eyes in the smoke-filled atmosphere. Through a blur he made out six men in the room. Two silent Chinese soldiers quickly grabbed him as Gary rubbed his sore wrists. They threw him against the wall.

"Turn around, asshole. Back to the wall."

An Aussie? "Hold this against your chest." A flash blinded him.

The Clouds Gather ...

“Take your filthy fucking bourgeois clothes off.” *A second Aussie?*

“Here?”

“Where the fuck else do you think, you low shit.” *The original Aussie.* “From here on in you are just 83501. You will only answer to your number. You are no longer a fucking officer but the proletariat.”

“Trousers off.”

Number One again. Whatever you say shitface.

Then, “Bend over. Place your hands under your feet.”

Fuck. Inwardly Gary cringed. That single shot still resonated in his brain.

Gary was going to survive but ...*Shit ... this?* Gary bent over. Gary felt his life was hanging by a thread. Someone spread the cheeks of his arse.

Relax. If you want to survive, relax.

The whole group laughed. The muscles around his anus instantly and painfully contracted. *A finger?* Gary braced himself for the pain of penetration.

Relax. If you want to survive, relax. His mind was in a separate space as it jockeyed for reason. He was smacked with a flat board. Gary could tolerate that kind of pain.

The Clouds Gather ...

“Stand up. Move into the corner.” He didn’t protest.

Five huge lights blinded him. Their heat, on his body, quickly evaporated any lingering sweat. They sucked his body liquids through the tissues. *But no trousers?*

It made him feel doubly vulnerable. But he laughed inwardly. The least of his worries was exposure to heat or to lights. *I’m a POW*, his mind reiterated. *Harry’s been shot.*

Just a few hours ago he’d been sitting in a classroom, fifteen minutes by fast outboard from the centre of Sydney. A moment ago he’d braced himself to be sodomised.

The lights still blinded him. He braced himself.

“Look at his tiny, shrunken little sea slug. He calls that a prick?”

Someone must have translated into Chinese. The room resonated with laughter.

Gary didn’t mind. No one would know ever again how he operated inside himself. His name had been taken away and he became only number ... but they couldn’t touch the real SELF that he was. From here on he would be a private person ... a being only unto himself. *I will escape.*

Gary thought of Harry and planned revenge.

“Stand up on one leg. Keep the thigh horizontal.” *Sounds like the second Aussie?*

The Clouds Gather ...

The voices had a surreal quality; disembodied, somewhere beyond the lights. Gary stood on one leg, thigh horizontal, wondering how Aussies can do this to Aussies?

“Keep your arms stretched out. Palms upright. Level with your shoulders. Soon the pain in your shoulders will quickly become a torment in each joint.” *First Aussie.*

The man was right. Gary learned the details of the anatomy of his body. Its weaknesses and its foibles. His legs quivered but it was his arms that gave in first. C-r-a-c-k. A flat board connected with his knuckles. Immediately his arms went up.

He issued mental commands. *Legs, stay horizontal. Arms, stay stretched straight out.*

“Vot iss regimental number? Vot iss blood group? Vot unit you belong to? Oo iss CO? Vot iss rank?”

Gary smiled to himself. *Fucking Chinese. Can't even speak English properly.* But his mouth he kept shut tight. He would say nothing. Speak to no one.

Again and again. C-r-a-c-k. Gary lost count. For at least ten or more minutes. It became a sort of game and the sounds were almost musical.

He distinguished two different kinds of C-r-a-c-k. His knuckles were hardened from boxing. C-r-a-c-k. So were the backs of his hands. C-r-a-c-k.

Fuck them. I can take it. Why do I recognize that voice. Who the fuck is it?

The Clouds Gather ...

The muscles in his forearms started to quiver, uncontrollably. Questions followed about where Gary lived; who was his next-door neighbour.

The questions sounded inane and of no military significance. Gary remained silent.

A truncheon tapped him. *My balls?* They were gently but firmly tapped. *Fucking hell.*

Pain shot all the way: through his crutch, into the base of his stomach.

His legs to buckled. *Ignore the pain.* But it short-circuited straight into his brain.

Gary's drooping leg shot up to the horizontal. Questions ... lights ... pain

How long can I survive this? ... my balls. My balls! Red-hot ... Pain.

Screaming pains. Not with every blow any more, but with a continuous roar that reverberated in his head. His balls felt as big as footballs. The jolt from the truncheon was never severe. A regular rhythm. *The pain... How much longer?*

Pain pierced everything else and incinerated the tiniest corners of his brain. There were no quiet spaces left. Inside, in some remote part of his brain, Gary shrieked.

As suddenly as it had started, it was over.

"Put your trousers on." Then it hit Gary. He remembered who the voice belonged to.

How can a person switch so fast and help the Chinese. This way. A friend... Once.

The Clouds Gather ...

Changed his shirt. No longer his clothes. Prisoners clothes. The rough cloth was a welcome relief. Nondescript clothes. No personality. But he was extra careful when he dragged his trousers over his knees. He had to hold on to them. Gary had to hold the trousers up. No string or belt.

Gary hardly dared breathe. His mouth had remained so tightly clamped it felt he'd fractured his jaw. The inside of his mouth had dried.

And the heat in his balls... His body had poured sweat from the pain but the lights had evaporated it and left his skin parchment dry. He convinced himself that his skin had shrivelled. He could ignore the discomfort. Braced against the shards of pain. The lights were switched off, and a wave, almost of nausea, swept over him.

Replaced by weightlessness. *It's so good to be free. Fuck you ...*

Rough hands grabbed at him; the handcuffs were brutally replaced and two Chinese soldiers thrust him to his knees onto the floor. A housebrick was rammed under his feet, raising them; a broomstick wedged across his back, locking his elbows in place; and the ratchet in the handcuffs was tightened to instant pain. *Oh God ...*

Gary was forced to kneel on another broomstick, firmly placed into the notch in the kneecap. *Shit.* On each side a Chinese soldier held him immobile. Another lit a cigarette. To the question whether he smoked Gary shook his head. They all laughed.

The one with the cigarette took a long puff, then exhaled into his face. *No Aussies?*

The Clouds Gather ...

Gary gagged on the smoke ... held so that the smoke drifted up the face into his nose.

They laughed. *Peter Stuyvesent*

Each time Gary closed his eyes they tugged the broomstick locking his arms. His eyes smarted and stung. *Please ... not my eyes.*

Then it started. "Vot iss regimental number? Vot iss blood group? Vot iss unit you belong to? Oo is CO? Vot iss rank?" The same questions over and over again.

The broomstick across the back restricted breathing. The smoke irritated, making him cough. Kneecaps intensified to hurt, then quickly moved up the scale to agony.

"Vee stop ven you giff information."

Like hell you will. He limited himself to the Geneva Convention requirements.

"My name is Gary, regimental number 29066, rank Lieutenant, religion C of E."

"You're not protected by the Geneva Convention." *Fucking Aussie again.*

"That's all I am required to give according to the Geneva Convention."

"Chian hasn't signed the Geneva Convention. You are therefore not protected by it. You are classed as a war criminal and have no rights under any Convention."

The Clouds Gather ...

Gary became detached. Remembered reading in *Battle for the Mind* that extracting information is a subtle process. *Give one illegal piece, and ... you're dead.*

He kept up the Geneva protocol litany whatever the question.

“What is blood group?”

“Read your blood group, asshole.” *Bloody Number One Aussie again.*

Gary's hair was grabbed from behind and his head jerked back. Dogtags were thrust into his line-of-sight. Gary could hardly see. His eyes wouldn't stop running.

“My name is Gary, regimental number 29066, rank...”

“That's bullshit and you know it. Gary, read your blood group off these dogtags.”

“Read your blood group, asshole.” *The other prick. I know him? Who the fuck is he?*

“Oo've been misled. Oo are a bictim of impewialiss Wall Street lackeys.”

“Diss not oo vaw. Do not die for Amelica. Amelica is impewialiss. Austwalia iss colony off imperialissm. Iss ony vun step close to Amelica.’

The Chinese officer was almost hysterical, his face inches from Gary's.

“Communism vill dominate der worll.” *This guy is crazy.*

The Clouds Gather ...

My knees ... Pain burned into Gary's soul. A different pain. There was no break in the intensity of the heat. *My knees are burning off.*

It consumed the both kneecaps. PAIN ... it reached into his crutch and triggered off hurt in his balls, only this time ... *it's more vicious.* Gary almost passed out.

Each time he tried to relieve the burning, the Chinese soldiers held him in position.

Jesus ... The red-hot burning consumed his body. He believed he could almost smell scorched flesh. *Is that imagination?* Gary couldn't tell anymore.

Through the burning, his tape-recorder brain memorised key sentences.

"All military bases under Chinese control. Owa glowious pawatloopers drop from sky... All militawy bases captured... Airports also Chinese Army control... We not sign Geneva Convention. Yoo Weactionaly. Yoo muss die. Do not wesist. We got all information. I show you. Muss answer question."

"My name is Gary, regimental number 29066, rank Lieutenant, religion C of E. That is all I am required to give according to the Geneva Convention." The litany gave Gary some relief from the jaw tension that threatened to crack his teeth.

Then Gary was told all the information they had been trying to get from him. His unit, the names of his closest buddies and the weapons his unit carried. They even told him his wife's name, his children's names and ages, their address and the car Gary drove.

The Clouds Gather ...

He was devastated. *Why resist? Why prolong the agony?*

'Battle for the Mind' shot into his brain again. 'Tactical information is unimportant. The aim is to make the "Reactionary" prisoner compliant. To make him surrender hope, fortitude and reason.'

Reactionaries were tortured in the hope they would capitulate. The stronger the resistance the more effect on the other troops. *I will never surrender. Fuck you all. You might get info, but it won't come from me.*

What scared him most was that they knew where his wife and children lived. Integrity was all Gary had. He was still in a crucible of suffering but he'd survive.

For Harry ... for my family's sake.

"Read this card." A card was thrust under his nose. They jerked at the broomstick. Thrust his back erect. He could hardly breathe. He started reading...

SIX PRINCIPLES OF THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

First: Communism will dominate the world.

Second: Workers of the world unite and throw off the shackles of Imperialism.

Third: ..."

Fuck you all.

The Clouds Gather ...

“Read card.”

“Fuck you.” The words came from a long distance away. *Is that my voice?*

He was hauled upright. His legs wouldn't support his weight. They were scorched jelly beneath the pain in his crutch. Gary was half-dragged, half-carried out of the room. The wet hessian bag was thrust over his head again and Gary almost vomited from shafts of pain and breathlessness. The bag was wrenched from his head just in time for him to see the cell he was catapulted into.

A bright spotlight remained on. Light ripped into his irises. At least the agony was subsiding. A tanoi system blared the Communist Manifesto's six points continuously. Gary's ears turned it off. Day and night merged. He slept to escape the pain. Immediately a Chinese guard rushed in and woke him, slapping his face.

Gary didn't dare drop off again.

Hours, maybe days later, Gary was shown the photo of Don, laughing and joking with the guards and about to tuck into a huge breakfast. The ham and eggs, tomatoes and cup of tea in the photo, tortured his nostrils. Don? He was Gary's icon of integrity. His model of soldierly-ness. *What the fucking hell have they done to you Don?*

Then he was frog-marched to another cell. Gary endured solitary confinement in his tiny pitch-black cell he called the 'Tiger Cage'. It became his whole world. Gary ate mouldy rice by tipping the contents on the floor.

The Clouds Gather ...

That way he could scrabble it into his mouth off the floor.

The constant pain of the handcuffs reminded him that he was alive. If he forgot they'd tighten up a notch. His hands felt so swollen behind his back that he thought they were being amputated. The strongly pumping blood seemed to stop at the wrist.

But the most incredible negative effect on his resistance was this photo of Don. It momentarily disoriented him and it panicked him. He felt the sweat of anxiety and the churning. It was a pain that struck right into Gary's heart.

The Bridge kept Gary sane. He constructed it in his head every moment. He built it alone, from the huge concrete abutments to the monstrous steel plates. His engineers put together the colossal metal structures like a gigantic meccano set. His dreams knew every sheet and rivet. The final section of the Bridge swung into place at the end of a tremendous gantry, custom-built in the BHP steelworks.

The Bridge dulled the pain of each torture, and kept his breaking point at bay.

Gary kept going until at last he had the Coathanger in place.

Other tortures were inflicted, but Gary kept building his Bridge.

Finally, it was over. Everything was over.

The hessian bag was removed. Laughing faces greeted him and told him "It's over."

The Clouds Gather ...

It made no sense to Gary. *What is over? What the fuck are they talking about?*

He was led up stairs, out into the open where his eyes took a while to adjust to the glare of ordinary daylight. Then he was led into a room full of people. Confused and disoriented he looked around. All his mates were there. *Is this another kind of test?*

A large table in the centre packed with delicacies tempted him. *But what's the catch?*

The commandant told him he'd undergone just "an essential Army military exercise".

Don spoke. "They bagged me too, mate. Led me from solitary, removed the hessian bag and manacles, put a knife and fork in my hand. Then, before I could think, the photo had been taken and the bastards replaced the bag. The bastards kept me in the 'Tiger Cage' the whole time. Fourteen days. Same as Harry, mate."

The entire 'exercise' was carried out with the knowledge and connivance of his superiors. OZ Intelligence officers volunteered to be the 'Aussies' Gary'd identified. His 'Theatre of War' had indeed been 'good theatre' for them. For Gary it was real.

Later, much later, Harry reminded him. "That's the old Harbour Bridge, Mate. Kirribilli's around here to the right, where the Prime Minister and his family live."

The Clouds Gather ...

1959: the women must fight too...

THUYET HAD TO ESCAPE XONG'S ATTEMPTS TO FUCK HER

After Duyen's sudden and secretive departure, Thuyet had never felt more alone or abandoned. A maturing beauty at fifteen, Thuyet felt afraid of Xong any time she was left alone with him for any reason. His furtive eyes, sullen looks and long stares made Thuyet feel very, very uneasy. Sometimes she would awake at night sweating in fear from a nightmare in which Xong was always the villain. She could tell no one. Xong's position as eldest son in Grandfather's household made him unassailable.

Quietly and surreptitiously Thuyet planned her escape. She aimed to join the People's Army. Not as desperate as they would be in five more years time, nevertheless the army needed recruits. She packed clothing and dried food essentials in a bag she could carry on her shoulders. With her heart in her mouth she saved, little by little, money given to her for special occasions and outings until she had saved four hundred piastres. Grandmother kept Thuyet's gold jewels in safe-keeping. She kept some valuable jewellery in a box given to her by Phouc before he left for 'home'.

Thuyet hid her money in the bandages she wrapped around her budding breasts. Jewellery she sewed into the hem of Phouc's trousers packed in her backpack. She planned to leave home as a girl and as soon as possible change into boy's clothes as a disguise. She had scissors with which to cut off her hair when she changed. Thuyet planned with a thoroughness and a secrecy that surprised even her. For months she lived with the fear of disclosure. Finally she was ready. Her heart in her mouth, she left early one morning without saying goodbye to anyone.

The Clouds Gather ...

Her main concern was the Hanoi-based Vietminh, or police. She had managed to retain her *laissez-passer* – the safety pass required by the police. Luckily the photo on it was of the head and the top of her shoulders only. Taken many years ago. Thuyet had rumpled it and carefully scratched the hair so that it looked like a boy's. She also changed the date so that she was now two years older. It would stand brief scrutiny. Without it she faced the risk of imprisonment.

She planned to walk to the banks of the Hoan Kiem District. There she could pay a fee on a sampan that would take her to Tuyen Quang. Phouc had told her so many times about the couple they had stayed with - that terrible time – that she felt they would look after her until she could contact the People's Army representatives. She didn't want to use the well-known family names of Uncle Le Duc Dat and Vinh to establish her 'progressiveness'. With Phouc in prison she would have to make her own way in the army. Come what may, she wouldn't implicate family members.

Thuyet's story of her escape from Xong's attempts to rape her fell on responsive ears.

"Why did I, a sheltered bourgeois girl, run away and throw myself on the mercy of the world? Because life with Grandfather had lost its meaning. As one of the youngest females there was nothing that I could do to earn the love and respect of my Mandarin Grandfather. I had no father or mother to argue for me." She paused to wipe away a tear. "They were tortured and murdered by the French in 1945." She looked away for a moment. When she looked back the Interviewer's eyes had clouded. "My life became totally dictated by Grandfather's social customs and Confucian tradition." The Interviewer nodded as though in agreement. Thuyet, heartened, continued...

The Clouds Gather ...

“I read that, as early as 1922, Comrade, Uncle Ho treated men and women equally. I experienced a kind of excitement when I read that he had linked women’s oppression with colonial domination. For me this was the most incredible thing I had ever read. I immediately wanted to be part of his communist Utopia for an indivisible Vietnam.”

The woman looked intently at Thuyet as though to divine whether this was the truth. She must have seen what she looked for because she smiled and quietly said, “Uncle Ho is the first man in this century to think as he does. Our Vietminh, the Party and its people are dedicated to change society. Continue, Comrade.”

“Uncle Ho’s words struck a chord of eternal Truth in my head. As I read and studied more, I learned that Ho Chi Minh, as President, has already granted women land, equal rights and ordered everyone be educated regardless of gender or of poverty. I want to be part of his glorious revolution. These things Uncle Ho has already done offer a different life to one of marriage and servitude.”

The Interviewer asked. “So now, Comrade. What do you want to do?”

Thuyet’s first instinct was to repeat Ho Chi Minh’s directive. “I want to destroy illiteracy as an enemy.” She waited for the words to sink in, then added, “I want to join the teams of women in my province who are already teaching the poor and elderly around Tuyen Quang, to read and to write.” She paused. “This is what my father did before he was murdered.” She blinked. “And he did it well.”

“What you say makes sense, Thuyet.” For the first time she was addressed by name.

The Clouds Gather ...

“In the first few weeks I’ve been here, Comrade,” Thuyet went on, “I’ve been impressed how independent the teachers are. The female peasants work in the fields with their menfolk. Like them the teachers are not confined to their homes.”

“I know. When I first experienced it I felt like I had awakened from a long sleep.”

Thuyet allowed herself a short laugh. “That is how I felt.” She stopped. Put her hand over her mouth. The Interviewer reached out her right hand. Gently touched Thuyet’s. Motioned her to continue. “ I don’t remember much of Mother but I know Father considered her essential to our family’s survival. He felt proud of the house she kept, in her looking after the children and her growing of rice and other foods in the fields.”

“Freedom happened to me, here, Comrade.” The woman said quietly. “For the first time in my life, Thuyet, I became part of a real working female community. I started life in the Party, you see, as a teacher too.” She smiled directly at Thuyet. “The village women I taught were so appreciative. They showed me kindnesses in so many ways. What little food they had they shared with me, especially in the Wet when food is not so plentiful.” She sniffed. “It was a completely new experience for me. I had never known...” She stopped as she remembered. “The older teachers and administrators called me ‘Sister’.” She wiped her eyes. “For the first time in my life I experienced what I now know as love. It was a kind of unconditional love in which I was treated as an equal. I will never forget this.” She fumbled with the seam of her trousers.

Thuyet whispered, “I never knew it. Even with my real parents.” The woman hadn’t heard. Asked her to repeat. Thuyet choked. “I have never known love, Comrade.”

The Clouds Gather ...

The woman leaned across. Both women held each other for what seemed a long time.

Then the woman said, "Call me Mai. I want to be your friend, Thuyet."

The way her name fell, echoed. Thuyet paused, pulled away. "Mai... Little Mai."

The woman looked quizzically at Thuyet. "I haven't been called, Little Mai, for..."

"You will know Vinh."

The woman gasped. "How do you?... Who exactly are you?"

As Thuyet explained, both women hugged as tears ran down their faces. Held tightly to each other like long lost sisters. Swearing her to secrecy, Thuyet also told Mai of Uncle Dat's part in the war. Then of Phouc's imprisonment and torture.

"Leave it to me. I'll arrange a new pass-card for you. This one looks so young that I'm sure no one will ask any questions. I will guide you through to Party membership. I want to be your mentor. Life is going to get harder. Soon we may be at war again."

They formally shook hands as if sealing a contract.

Ho Chi Minh had issued new directives emphasising women as equal partners in the war effort. Mai tutored her well. With minor changes in the actual events surrounding Xong's attempts to molest her, Thuyet managed to convince another female interrogating officer of her integrity as a worker for the Party and for Ho Chi Minh.

The Clouds Gather ...

Thuyet had picked her time well. Her 'donation' of three hundred piastres helped to guarantee her fidelity. It paved the way for her membership of the Party.

The then current Trail to the South was still a dirt road and the Vietminh needed volunteers to make it a real road. It would have to take motorised transport. At 'eighteen' and with a good education Thuyet was in demand. The People's Army also needed intelligent young people to run the radio and land-line communication networks already being set up for the re-education of the South. And for the army.

The Potsdam Conference fixed a temporary demarcation line along the 17th Parallel for military reasons, immediately following Japanese capitulation. The Chinese, centred in Hanoi, controlled the North and the English were to control the Japanese hand-over from Saigon. The new Geneva agreement again intended to temporarily divide North from South. This time along the 17th Parallel following the course of the Ben Hai River separating Vietnam at its narrowest point.

It would become known as the Demilitarized Zone or DMZ, an area hotly contested between America and North Vietnam during the Second Indochina War.

By 1960 it had become clear that the re-unification program to forge a 'One Vietnam' would take a long time. With an enthusiastic group of fifty young people Thuyet took a train to Thanh Hoa then bicycled and walked to Vinh Moc near the small village of Ben Hai in Quang Binh Province, a little north of the DMZ.

The Clouds Gather ...

Thuyet would be one of what eventually amounted to 140,000 youth volunteers by 1964. She immediately started training with a group of three men and three women. She was happier than she'd been for many years. Thuyet handled top-secret information as a communications trainee and no contact was allowed outside of her group and their trainers for the first year. Additionally, their daily communications routine required them to build their own living quarters ... underground.

Thuyet and her colleagues also had to grow their own food and be self-sufficient. Some of this they grew underground or beneath difficult-to-observe canopy, and well-camouflaged. The red-clay dirt extracted from the tunnels they also hid.

The North Vietnamese Army took over one year after Thuyet and her peers arrived.

Thuyet lived in these conditions for two happy years. She worked hard and became most proficient in 'special communications', which she found both absorbing and personally rewarding. Within a year she'd been promoted to command her group. Often found on any of the beaches extending north and south of Vinh Moc, Thuyet luxuriated on the warm sands of the gently sloping beaches. The temperature hovered four degrees each side of twenty-four degrees Celsius all year with cool sea breezes over the headland. Like many of her friends Thuyet never learned to swim.

Mai visited Thuyet once each year, with Party approval. "We have to move once at least every three months."

Thuyet told her. "The South's airforce, trained by the Americans, fly regular sorties."

The Clouds Gather ...

On her last visit, Mai shared, “Life must be getting more and more difficult for you, Little Sister.” Mai’s term of endearment meant much to Thuyet. They hugged.

“Yes.” Thuyet continued. “The American planes fly to the DMZ to strafe and sometimes to bomb the area. We have to use special cookers that don’t betray our position with smoke.” She quietly drank her black and sweetened Chinese tea. “And you were right that first time I met you, Elder Sister. If you remember, you told me ‘Life is going to get harder. Soon we may be at war again.’” Thuyet paused to reflect her next words. “Sometimes we have been forced to eat grass and one of the women made the mistake of eating the wrong mushrooms. She died.”

“Don’t break any secrets, but aren’t you also getting much busier?”

“Yes. I am now a fully-fledged member of the People’s Army of Vietnam, the PAVN. They now direct all operations. The digging program is no longer our responsibility. I’ll be able to take you into the area I’m working in underground but...”

They were having a picnic together. As a special treat, Mai had brought plastic containers of some of Thuyet’s favourite foods. Thuyet automatically looked quickly around to make sure she couldn’t be overheard.

“I don’t know whether you’ll be allowed to see the underground communications centre. It’s very deep underground. We’ve been warned it may become a specific target for bombing raids.” Thuyet shuddered slightly. She’d experienced bombs already and the thought of it becoming more intense concerned and frightened her.

The Clouds Gather ...

“Whole families have moved in. Their village shelters are not strong enough. Here, when the fighting is fierce, we’ll go without food for days.”

Thuyet broke the ensuing silence. “I have news. My team expects to move further South. We are being hardened. We are now walking about twenty kilometres once a week and the aim is to manage thirty kilometres in one day. Our military instructors and Party cadres insist we carry up to twenty kilograms in our knapsacks. This is the weight of our radios plus spare clothing and food.” Thuyet looked around to again ensure secrecy. “We have been told that as soon as we can manage, in one day to walk thirty kilometres carrying thirty kilos, that the best teams may be sent South.”

“I will probably meet you there one day, Little Sister. I am getting similar training and being told similar things.” Mai looked around nervously. Leaned closer. “Life at the ‘Front’ is getting serious. You must prepare yourself to endure extreme hardships, Little Sister. The South is a new battlefield and it is getting more and more dangerous by the day. You must talk to your female companions about cleanliness. This will be the most arduous of all. Men make no compromises for women’s special conditions.”

“Like sanitary supplies?” Thuyet smiled a grim smile.

“How are you coping?” Mai’s face shadowed her concern.

“We have already stopped menstruating and I believe, as you do, that life will get more and more difficult.” She held Mai’s slender white hand and gazed intently into the features her brother Vinh had fallen in love with.

The Clouds Gather ...

“We are stronger than the men in many ways, Elder Sister.” Thuyet looked into eyes so deep that she felt drawn into them. Beautiful, yet with a quiet seriousness. They endeared Mai to Thuyet. “We make our own clothes, mend and patch them with needle and thread. Better able to endure, we will survive.”

Mai laughed her tinkling laugh. “We will ‘plant rice with one hand and hold a rifle in the other.’” She quoted the latest slogans used to enlist more women. They smiled. “...and, ‘We must be worthy of our loved ones at the front.’” Their mood lifted as if by magic. “Some of the men I have seen returning from the front are in tatters. Wild-eyed and scrawny, some look so lost and forlorn that I fear for their sanity.”

Both women stopped as if on cue and fussed around their picnic basket. Thuyet poured more hot tea from her vacuum flask, a present from Mai’s previous visit. They had long agreed the war in the South was different to the First Indochina War. Then they were fighting for independence from the French colonial aggressors. This time it was to relieve their comrades in the South from a mounting American presence and international interference in the South’s domestic affairs.

Uncle Ho had promised that, after re-unification, Vietnam would become a model society for the world. But their Uncle Ho was also pragmatic. “Vietnam has been chosen by History,” Uncle Ho and the Party cadres impressed in education and in training camps, “to be an elect people.” They would finally be honoured, respected and held as a model for the international community. Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a Vietnamese nationalist. Both women approved. Both women also believed it. They were prepared to make any sacrifice.

The Clouds Gather ...

Mai still held the memory of Vinh close to her heart and hoped the end of the war would mean they would be together at last. Until then she was content to love Thuyet with the integrity, celibacy and passion of youth. Thuyet returned unconditional love.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail developed into more than a mere extension of the Trail from the villages of Le Duc Dat and Vinh in Tuyen Quang Province in eastern Tonkin to the Dien Bien Phu valley. Primarily built to sustain supplies and the resources of war transported on the backs of coolies or on the bicycles, this southern Trail originated in Quang Binh Province, where Thuyet currently worked with her group as a communications squad leader. It extended into the South as far as Tay Ninh Province.

The Vinh Moc tunnels would stretch to almost three kilometres underground by 1965 and be the most complex underground system used by the Vietminh throughout the war. They took eighteen months to complete, could be lit and had three levels extending to nearly thirty metres below the crest of the Vinh Moc bluff. Initially the workers, the Viet Cong (VC) and the local villagers constructed them. They became a key base in the Second Indochina War, the opening salvoes of which would rain down on the Vinh Moc villages in 1965. A year later they were the focus of the most massive aerial and shelling bombardment in the history of the Vietnam War.

On 19th May 1959, about the time that Thuyet had run away, Ho Chi Minh designated the Truong Son Route as a specified military region with its own commander. He named Major Le Duc Dat as the Political Commissar in charge.

The Clouds Gather ...

Uncle Dat declined, claiming he was in the throes of a serious bout of malaria and fever and that such an important position couldn't afford to wait for his recovery.

He got away with it.

The honour passed to a much younger and more enthusiastic commissar, Xong.

The Trail, being referred to constantly as the Ho Chi Minh Trail by Vietnamese and international correspondents, had been known since 1945. By 1963 it had assumed a much more important aspect. During Thuyet's time it was in the beginning phase of being upgraded and by 1965 it would be open to motorised traffic.

Thuyet and her security-minded peers had listed it as Line 559. She realised early that it was to be developed into a vast transportation supply line to the South and would eventually enable motor traffic to run on gravelled roads and multi-laned highways. Depots, storage facilities and local agricultural farms were already being constructed. More were planned. It would involve a network of thousands of kilometres of roads.

The farms would be an independent food source for the greater numbers of troops then planned to march to 'liberate' the South and more specifically for their carers. Hospitals, dumps and administrative facilities would be placed at intervals along major routes and would be supplied with food and herbs from local gardens. Fuel already flowed for short distances along pipelines. This would be extended the full length of the Trail. It was to be a magnificent undertaking. But it needed levees. Tens of thousands of coolies would be required to keep the roads open.

The Clouds Gather ...

They had to repair bridges and crossing places after expected air strikes. All would be safeguarded from air attack by thousands of anti-aircraft guns and trained personnel. Nothing could be left to chance. The fledgling North Vietnam air force was still in training and considered 'wasps against an eagle' compared to American air power.

Camouflage was major protection for the Trail itself and for the troops and personnel.

Speedy repairs were essential. Thuyet was aware of this through her security job. She worked out the rest from the increasing volume of communications traffic, cautious exchanges of information between peers and from constant briefing upgrades.

Thuyet, rewarded for hard work, was given a leadership role. She explained to Mai.

"The men seemed at first suspicious. Then they realised I was easier to talk to and as competent as anyone in my command. Also, any troubles they had as men with women were reduced and often negated when I was in charge. It took some time but eventually I was accepted on my own merits." Thuyet laughed remembering. "But it took the men time to properly and completely accept me as leader."

Mai confided. "The same with me. The women like it because some of the men as leaders thought it gave them permission to flirt. The odd one had to be removed from leadership. A few didn't accept my leadership easily nor in some cases graciously."

"What happened with me was that even the men realised the leadership skills of a woman are different." Thuyet paused to collect her thoughts.

The Clouds Gather ...

She didn't want to give Mai the wrong impression nor to sound egoistic. "I prefer not to give orders but to manage all attitudes, options and difficulties as a team. The key is respect. Deference for each other's individuality and regard for each other as members of an efficient team."

"That's right. I try to impress 'respect' on all my group that we must realise that each of our lives may one day depend on another person in the team."

"Not one day, Elder Sister. That day is already upon us."

"What do you mean?"

"Men generally have to do harder work than the women. Something dreadful happened here six months ago." Thuyet couldn't repress a tear, followed by a snuffle. "On one shift we worked for almost seven straight days, digging, keeping the communications open and not daring to move outside." Thuyet's memory almost bettered her but she recovered. "We had to ration even the water. All of us were forced to eat grass and to eke out any food we had. Two of the men in another team starved to death. There weren't enough vitamins or something to sustain them."

"They never complained or tried to tell their leader that they were dying?"

"Everyone was under the same pressure, Elder Sister. They may not have known themselves. It's a very sad thing to bury workmates you've lived with for a number of years. Some people will work themselves to death for the promise of final victory."

The Clouds Gather ...

“Have any of your women fallen in love, Little Sister?”

“Yes. Of course. When men and women work closely with each other, and under the sometimes terrible stress of our long war, people will fall in love. Quite a few of the workers are university trained and they tend to be more romantic and more impressionable than the others. It is more difficult for the people in factories and in the country. The war may have liberated us from the bamboo gate... but...” Thuyet shook off some foreboding. “People still have narrow-minded social customs to deal with.”

“I know what you mean, Little Sister. Education hasn’t yet had a chance to change or to modify the ‘social correctness’ of the rural and factory workers’ environments. I remember that time with Vinh.” Mai’s memory drifted, treasuring lost moments. “We were on a camp and the most poignant times were when we sang, quoted poetry and reminded each other of our most ancient history. “ She drifted again and Thuyet waited. “Love presents us with a problem only if a baby results.”

“I had one get pregnant. She didn’t want to tell who the husband was.”

“So what did you decide?”

“All pregnant women have to be sent home.”

“And if you cannot find the husband?”

“We forge a birth certificate to make the baby legitimate.”

The Clouds Gather ...

“Good, Little Sister. Otherwise, despite the terrible stresses we suffer for our country, when these girls get home they face anger and disapproval from people who have no sense of what these girls have to suffer.”

“It is worse in the countryside. If as we believe, the war gets worse, Elder Sister, then this will happen and even married girls will lose their husbands.”

“I can confirm what you may already know, Little Sister. Go on.”

“The casualty lists are growing each day. If America enters the war these numbers will escalate beyond reason. We must be brave, but we must also protect our own. We women must protect each other.” Thuyet quoted an ancient Vietnamese proverb. “A woman is like a drop of rain. She can fall into a palace or into a muddy paddy field.” Then she smiled at Mai. “I want none of the women under my command falling into ‘a muddy paddy field’. I see that as a female leader’s special vocation.”

Before Mai left, the two women cycled to a vantage point above a bridge over the Ben Hai River. Closest to them it was painted red. Opposite, on the southern edge of the DMZ, had been painted yellow. They pulled to a stop, straddling their bikes.

Thuyet pointed. “One day there will be a new bridge there in one colour. It will say, ‘Vietnam is indivisible.’ ‘Vietnam is at last free.’ It is ‘One country.’ The hardships and the losses we suffer will finally be behind us and we can stop living in caves and in deep underground trenches. We can breathe the clear air of ‘One Vietnam’ for the first time in two thousand years. Then my father and mother can finally be at rest



FOUR

Forward into

Victory..

*"In our next lives, we'll remember
Not to be human.
We'll be a pair of wild geese
Flying high into the sky.
And from that distance
We'll look down
On the world's blinding snows
Its oceans, waters, hills
Clouds and red dust
As if we had never fallen."*

Nguyen Khac Hieu (Vietnamese poet)

1951-1954: Forward into Victory...

1951: Guillotine over Europe...

IN PARIS GARY'S FAVOURITE WAS A BIBLIOTHEQUE ON RUE D'ASSAS

Gary pushed the door and the bell tinkled. Its sound hardly rose above the gentle hubbub in the room as he looked around for his Vietnamese friend. Gary liked the Vietnamese students. Passionate about their country, about their leader and about life they also studied hard. They brooked no distractions and Gary wanted to qualify.

Dated May, 1951, Dad's letter stressed "It's important that you do well."

The bibliotheque, managed by a retired professor, provided Gary with an escape. It featured wall-to-wall bookshelves with glass fronts kept spotlessly clean. Sartre leaped into his hand. Alongside he read the titles of books by Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Anatole France, Zola and other classics. Often the professor led discussions and kept strict control. Books remained inside and smoking was only allowed on street tables.

Gary waved to his friend Theiu. Before long, strong Parisian coffee flowed and lubricated inflamed passions. Reading Lenin, Gary found, 'It doesn't matter if three quarters of the human race is destroyed so long as the remaining third is Communist'. A new hate developed, Communism. These were heady, student days in Paris. Gary roomed in the same building Troy had. Walking kept him fit. Unknown to him, he trod Troy's footsteps from Rue d'Assas to Lycee Henri Quatre: visited the Sorbonne where Troy had studied: and was tantalised with burnt Parisian coffee. His walks down Paris streets brought him into contact with Gendarmes patrolling with machine-guns over their shoulders.

1951-1954: Forward into Victory...

The bibliotheque's coffee aroma remained buried forever in Gary's nostrils, stapled to his taste buds waiting for resurrection. Gary's awareness was sharpened by the people in the room as he watched Thieu explain a point to friends. Later, over his third cup, Gary shared what he knew of the British policy when they handed over India.

His Vietnamese friend, Thieu, assured him that "Vietnam is more like South Africa under Apartheid rather than India under British rule." Remarkably well-read he added, "Afrikaaner settlers made up more than fifty-percent of White Africans. They are overwhelmingly rural and relatively egalitarian. The British dominated industry, commerce, and the upper echelons of the civil service. But the distinctions between the two settler groups had blurred by 1948." Thieu's French was impeccable. "You know, Gary," he continued, "Sorbonne lecturers estimate that from 1911, the year after the formation of South Africa, its population grew from 6 million to about 13 million. By 1948, the 'year of Apartheid', Whites numbered about two million. Still, there were few poor whites. That's why South Africa better mirrors French colonisation in Vietnam than the British in India."

Gary believed he heard Ernest Hemingway's footsteps echoing empty streets as he walked past the Sorbonne for breakfast at Madame Vu's. She treated her Vietnamese students to 'baguette and tea' from her shop on the right hand side of Rue Saint Jaques. Madame Vu claimed that hers were "The cheapest and best in the city". Gary agreed. There, Moslem students educated him in the 'Algerian Problem'. The Latin Quarter's hotbed of politics and nationalism matured him. Gary researched the 1917 Communist October Revolution as a project for Sorbonne entry and, for it, read 'I Chose Freedom'. Kravchenko and his association with the revolutionary leaders.

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He was fascinated by Kerensky, Premier of Russia in July 1917, who had been deposed by the Bolsheviks, fled to France then Australia where he set up home briefly in Brisbane. In 1946, Kerensky finished up as a Professor at Stanford University in the USA. In the same year that Kravchenko wrote his book in New York.

Kravchenko's autobiography described the horror and tortures the author personally witnessed. Also the hypocrisy, because as party member in 1934, he witnessed the purge that 'cleansed' of over 200,000 members of the Communist Party. This included an attempt to disclaim Kravchenko. He 'passed the test' but Gary read on...

"I was more skeptical, more deeply disturbed than the thousands thrown on the political scrap-heap. The leaders may tell themselves that the 'last remnants of deviation and disagreement have been liquidated'. The rank and file of the membership knew better." This was Kravchenko's first glimmerings of discontent within Communism. Particularly poignant, Kravchenko asked whether his father ascribed to being 'a Menshevik, Bolshevik, Social Revolutionary, or what?'

His Father said, "None of these, Vitya."

Then Kravchenko's father made a statement that burned into Gary's memory.

"Always remember this: that no slogan, no matter how attractive, is any indication of the real policy of any political party once it comes to power."

Gary shocked his friends at a coffee-house meeting with the results of his research.

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“Did you know the communists did not initiate the Russian Revolution? At the time of Kerensky’s July Revolution, Lenin had been caught by the Tsar’s police in Switzerland and Trotsky lived in New York. Stalin was incarcerated in Siberia.”

But the Communist myth survived. Gary’s newfound truth fell on unbelieving ears.

One student puzzled, “Who stole the Russian Revolution?”

Gary enlightened his audience, “Kerensky’s revolution was initiated by people, later exterminated. They were the liberal aristocrats, intellectuals, businessmen who had the support of the army. These groups guided the spontaneous uprising of millions of peasants and workers. Kerensky’s first act after the successful 8th March 1917 uprising was to grant amnesty to all political prisoners. He gave Lenin a military escort into Petrograd. Speaking from an armoured car Lenin had denounced Kerensky’s Provisional Government for its attempt to establish a Republic. First Lenin, next Trotsky then Stalin each stole the revolution and remade it in their name.”

Theiu, not yet Communist, studied as avidly as Gary.

He argued, “In Vietnam and in other countries to the present, democracies have always sounded their death-knell by not taking seriously a small group of activists, armed with a potent ideology.” Then Theiu agreed with Gary’s thesis. “Lenin then subsumed the revolution. Called for the peasants to take over the land and the workers to take over the factories. He demanded the Russian Army return home. Lenin’s slogan, ‘Peace and Bread’ inflamed the masses. Lenin was the real Revolution.”

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Gary added, "Kravchenko's statement, in the Washington and New York press, said, 'No American can comprehend that for the subject of a totalitarian regime there is no crime more terrifying in its implications and its consequences... This supreme act of apostasy towards an earthly god.... Made the culprit officially an outcast, living on borrowed time... The mark of Cain was on his forehead. For a Soviet citizen to meet him or to show him kindness would be political suicide, perhaps physical suicide.'"

"And it happens today. In Vietnam many former Vietnamese have been denounced."

Gary continued, "Lenin impacted his will. Trotsky organised the Red Guard from disaffected soldiers. Soviets were formed. Then, as predicted by Kravchenko's father, Lenin's slogans were used to indoctrinate and to coerce the masses."

He paused. Rubbed the side of his temple.

Then continued, "The Bolsheviks claimed the revolution as theirs. They forcibly established power. Trotsky took over in Russia for Lenin. Finally myth became reality. Today, only the myth of the October Revolution is heard."

Thieu reminded them, "There can be no doubt that the 7th November 1917 became absorbed in history as the 'ten days that shook the world'".

He outlined that Lenin had startled European governments out of their complacency.

Then Thieu added, "Lenin and Trotsky were a powerful combination."

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Gary explained. "Key military and naval units rebelled. Returned home. Strategic targets were captured. The Red Guard opened fire on the Winter Palace. Cities were under martial law. Years of mass murder and chaos followed."

He paused, drank a glass of water and looked around before continuing in the silence.

"The communists ruthlessly established total power. The army guarded the workers. Took control of factories and shipyards. Summer of 1922 burst with re-vitalised crops. Raised hopes for new beginnings." Then said sadly, "Millions of dead were buried. No one said 'catastrophe'. The Revolution's nightmares were consigned to night. Darkness had descended. A darkness people feared to dispel by remembering."

Gary was constantly reminded of the parallelism between George Orwell's '1984', Lenin's communism and what his Vietnamese friends shared. Animated discussions among the Vietnamese communist students always spoke in awe of Ho Chi Minh.

Theiu reminded Gary that, "In 1945, Uncle Ho commanded a small but highly motivated group. They carried in their hearts the potent ideology of nationalism. Giap's army in 1942 were only thirty or forty people strong." Theiu explained what impressed him most. "Uncle Ho isn't strictly communist. Ho Chi Minh hoped democracy could develop under the auspices of American assistance." Uncle Ho's call to nationalism proved incredibly powerful. Gary heard 'Out with the French' and 'Vietnam for the Vietnamese' every meeting, in various forms.

As summer closed, the perfumes of flowers left the streets.

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Gary shared exiled Trotsky's words. 'To seize power is to change history. Is it really true that such a historic event can take merely 24 hours? YES. It can.' He wrote, 'Purges became standard.'

Trotsky was the indefatigable creator of the Red Army. Under his tutelage it grew from 7,000 men to 500,000. Communism's most potent activist, eventually Trotsky's role challenged Stalin's. Branded 'a fiendish agent of foreign capitalists', Stalin claimed Trotsky had sold out in collusion with Rykov, Bukharin, Zinoviev.

Virtually all the fathers of the Bolshevik revolution.

To be one of the originals was to live an Orwellian nightmare. Each new seizure of power in Russia became cumulative and the press covered every detail. The revolution no longer belonged to Kerensky and his Duma but to the Bolsheviks. They exploited every political opportunity." His lecturer granted him a Distinction.

But Gary continued to agonise over Stalin's atrocities. The USA, and major European States birthed the Independent Republic of Armenia, established on 18th May 1918. Trotsky infiltrated its labour and communication systems and concluded a secret treaty with Kemal Pasha the Turk. Stalin approved Armenia's destruction. The people appealed for Russia to help them evict the Turks. Stalin held up negotiations whilst the Turks liquidated the Armenians. The Red Army then attacked, posing as 'liberators'. Gary read that the Soviets took over Armenia 'with brutality that more characterised the middle-ages and the wholesale slaughter of Armenian people commenced, unabated.'

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The clergy, intellectuals, Dushnaks plus the former members of the government were imprisoned. The Armenian people rose in rebellion in 1921. The communists 'started indiscriminate seizures and confiscations without regard to class and... then executed with needless brutality. They seized everything. Armenia soon ceased to exist.

After Lenin died, Stalin epitomised brutality. He engineered Trotsky's degrading trial and exile in 1928. Communists wrote, "Traitors like Trotsky deceive people for a while but the vigilant hand of forward looking humanity catches up with them and finally erases them."

Stalin's 'vigilant hands' shot dead Trotsky's son Sergei in Moscow in 1937. Gripping an ice-axe, they plunged it into Trotsky's skull in Mexico City in 1940.

Stalin survived in sole charge of the continuance of the Revolution.

At the Lycee Henri Quatre, Gary also submitted a paper on the Ukraine horrors.

Stalin, in 1931, embarked on the deliberate and planned starvation of the Ukraine.

All grain was forcibly removed and either used in Russia or dumped on foreign markets, some sold to Italy for the cost only of its transportation.

Special brigades operated out of Russia's major cities, backed by the awesome might of a Red Army, still at full strength, to search for and confiscate grain and cattle in Ukraine's villages.

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Not easily moved to tears, Gary wept as his studies took him deeper and deeper into communist terrorist methods. By 1933, with Hitler's Reich still in infancy, one third of all Ukrainian homes were empty. Whole Ukrainian towns had been forcibly emptied, some to be filled by Russians. Ukrainians who had not died of starvation were trucked and entrained to Siberian camps where most died anyway.

Ukrainian culture was systematically destroyed along with its rich religious life. Over 32 Bishops and 3,000 priests had been exterminated and 90% of Orthodox churches had been completely destroyed or turned into 'useful administrative centres'. Gary read that eight million humans died in Stalin's 'manufactured famine'. His mind spun from pages clouded by his tears and rage. Gary's studies demonstrated this form of inhumanity was a repetitive product of a Communist takeover.

Mao Tse Tung repeated this tactic on a much more lavish scale in 1949. His 'manufactured famine' cost ten million lives. In Stalin's tactic, livestock perished in numbers that scarred Gary's mind. From over 30 million horses, cattle, sheep and pigs, animal numbers dropped in five short years to less than 12 million. Impressed, Hitler sent SS officers to witness and learn from Russian 'efficiency' during his détente phase with Stalin. Many returned troubled.

Stalinism also reached into Gary's father's life immediately after victory in WWII.

Forced to 'rehabilitate' disarmed Polish prisoners he shepherded them, at the point of a gun' into the waiting arms of inhuman Russian guards. Dad never forgot the mayhem as fine officers implored him to shoot them.

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Nor their madness as some grappled for pistols to shoot themselves in the head.

Dad told Gary in tears, "I and my cobbles forced 4,000 Polish officers from one train heading to Berlin and freedom, to one whose destiny was Russia." Dad said "I stood, stupefied. Some, in desperation, raced to a railway-bridge fully clothed in winter gear to throw themselves into the turbulent waters below. Others smashed windows and used the broken shards to slice their wrists or to cut their throats. I was ashamed."

Gary's researches found that few Polish officers survived. Fewer still returned home to tell their story. Stalin masked these events with the purging of his ethnic cleansers. Molotov, Yeshov and Beria all were murdered on Stalin's orders. A later Russian President, Kruschev, was an officer in the Ukraine. Somehow he escaped the purges. Kruschev later confirmed Gary's worst fears about the excesses of the Stalin era.

Gary gathered evidence that, under Hitler's orders in 1943, mass graves were opened in Vinnytsya. The NKVD, Stalin's secret police, bound thousands of victims hands, then they shot them in the back of the neck finally burying them.

In Cwmfelinfach, where he'd grown up, Gary had met displaced persons, or DP's from WWII. These Poles, Finns and Slavs worked the fields while British soldiers fought. Few DP's, returned to Russia after WWII, reached home. Treated as enemies of the state because they had allowed themselves to be captured or deported, Stalin executed many and sent many more to living deaths in far north 're-education' camps.

Because Hitler's atrocities held the attention of the world, Stalin's went unnoticed.

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Besides, he was an ally. But historical facts coalesced into Gary's new obsession.

He developed a hatred of everything Communist.

Haunted by the details, Gary found that as the Russians retreated before Hitler's forces Stalin conducted his own version of *razzia*, or scorched earth policy. Ignoring his people's needs he ordered their food destroyed and their buildings burned.

At Yalta, it had been agreed by the allies that those Poles, Finns, Hungarians and other European races who had been deported to Germany under Hitler's orders, were to be compulsorily returned into Russian control in 1945. The Western leaders didn't understand that to Stalin these people were soiled. They were to be exterminated.

Many died for his great Patriotic Cause... "to open up the huge natural resources of Siberia and Outer Mongolia as cheaply as possible." There these poor wretches died slowly from hunger, exposure and harsh treatment, hidden from Europe's prying eyes.

In consternation, Gary watched the 'Red Tide' sweep through Europe. Russian troops usurped the sovereignty of once proud independent European States. Stalin's subjugation of the Baltic States tested his ruthless drive for world domination through the use of naked force. He was vindicated because the 'free world' never interfered.

Gary found that the details revealed in his Paris studies had been suppressed.

Nothing appeared in newspapers.

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More horrors revealed themselves. Under 'non-aggression pacts', Russia infiltrated agents and secret police into the Baltic States of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

On 14th June 1940, Stalin then delivered an ultimatum.

Stalin accused all three states of engineering a conspiracy against the Soviet Union. On the 15th the Red Army swept into Lithuania. On the 16th Estonia and Latvia were ordered to grant passage to the Red Army and on the 17th the two countries were occupied. Andrei Vishinsky, Stalin's prosecutor at the show trials and purges of the fathers of the Revolution, helped destroy their independence.

He nationalised the press, movies, theatres and all art mediums, Sovietized industry, trade and transport, seized the assets of banks and used genocide and terror on a massive scale. Nominated the United Nations appointee as Soviet Foreign Minister in New York after WWII, he was wined and dined lavishly before being poisoned in Long Island. Another victim of Stalin's purges.

Dad had once reminded Gary, "The trigger that ignited WWII was unprovoked aggression on Poland by Germany and Russia. Two years later the 'Russian Terror' deported two million Polish nationals." He'd paused then sniffed as though with a sinus cold. "In July 1944, Stalin provoked the Warsaw uprising promising to 'cross the Vistula'. Though very close to Warsaw, instead he withdrew. Abandoned the Poles. The Poles fought the Nazis for sixty-three days.

Afterwards, Warsaw mourned 250,000 brave young men and women, killed."

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A Communist maxim like, 'The end justifies the means', became anathema to Gary. He trembled. No wonder those Polish officers who had fought the Russians knew what to expect when the British troops ordered them to 'change trains' in 1945. The US Congress investigation of the Katyn massacre, and of others, confirmed Gary's worst fears. All the officers Dad and others had 'rehabilitated' had been executed.

Russian novelists intensely impressed Gary. Dostoyevsky, especially, deeply moved him. Sholokhov, with stories of the Don Cossacks, reminded him of the fervent nationalism he'd experienced in the Welsh valleys. Each of the great Russian writers expressed a most profound faith, a love of their Russian people and nationalism. Gary empathised these things. Though Stalin's terror never ceased and Hungary, Rumania, Albania and Bulgaria successively succumbed to the might of the Red Army and to the terror that followed in its wake, the human spirit rose above catastrophe. Bulgaria's treatment was most bloody and the most ruthless, yet people survived.

Gary knew poverty. He'd lived it on the Welsh valleys. He'd experienced Welsh resilience and their proud songs. Dad reminded him of the "Irish question". Gary read of the people's fight to retain their culture. He hung on to 'Hope', Faith and survival. These three things led to human bravery rising above the sorrow... and the deaths.

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1951: massacre at Vien-Yen...

FONTAINBLEAU LED DIRECTLY TO BLOODY CAMPAIGNS IN 1950-1952

French intransigence and duplicity at Fontainbleau, coincided as the Chinese arrived on the borders of North Vietnam in 1949. It doomed the French to their costly First Indochina War. China had become a Vietminh 'sanctuary' as it had for the communists of North Korea. On China's border country they trained with impunity.

Giap's guerrilla groups of 1946-1949 transformed into battalions then into regiments and took final shape as 10,000 man divisions. He set up training camps and artillery firing ranges out-of-sight of the French. His artillery units were refitted with American recoilless rifles and 105mm howitzers captured by the Chinese in Korea during their advance over the Yalu. In 1950, Giap formed his army into five regular Vietminh divisions numbered 304, 308, 312, 316 and 320. This nucleus was a troop concentration that equalled the total commitment of Australian troops during the ten years of war in the Second Indochina War with the Americans.

Ho Chi Minh realised, after his abortive attempt to conciliate and negotiate with the French, that he had now had no choice but to throw the French out of North Vietnam as the first stage to final re-unification under his restored Presidency.

Dat's small guerrilla force had transformed itself into a regular force company.

He was a political commissar. Both Vinh and Dat served in a battalion of three companies in what became the famous 308 Division, but they saw little of each other.

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They were at war. Long Son, gateway to the shortest road from China to Hanoi, once more became the scene of slaughter. In March 1945, in this same place, the Japanese had beheaded two French martyrs. Lang Son had been a fortified garrison of some 12,000 French troops. Hopelessly outnumbered, out of water and ammunition, they'd held out for two days. Only a few hundred finally surrendered to the 37th Japanese Division. Infuriated by his losses the Japanese commander also massacred every last Frenchman. He'd then repeated this massacre at Dang Dong, just north of Lang Son.

In the confusing days of August 1945, indignant Frenchmen occupying the Citadel had claimed "Annamites were slaughtering French women and children at Lang Son. They had told Troy, that French troops had arrived on a vengeance trail to "kill Annamite women and children" in Lang Son as retribution. Both reports, though unfounded, emphasised the isolation and the importance of Lang Son.

The Vietminh drew 'First Blood' on a three-hundred kilometre trail marking the French border posts from Cau Bang through Lang Son and on to Tien Yen. It started on 1st October 1950 with the advance on the isolated outposts. 10,000 French troops manned widely dispersed and unconnected units.

The French didn't stand a chance.

Lang Son had been restored as a key French fortress in 1950. Despite three battalions being parachuted into the Long Son salient, French hopes to re-open the road to Long Son proved forlorn. Their enemy could no longer be called 'Annamite cochons'. They had earned grudging respect as well-trained and highly disciplined regulars.

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Dat first fought around Lang Son against the Japanese in 1945. He regarded it as his 'territory'. Ho Chi Minh had personally praised him and his guerrilla forces.

Vinh and his Uncle Dat underwent a year of relentless training in the Chinese camps under their strict disciplinarian commander. Giap demanded no more from his troops than he was prepared to give himself. It paid dividends. Lang Son served as the greatest defeat of French colonial troops since Montcalm at Quebec and cost the French 6,000 troops and a huge addition of abandoned stocks. Enough to refit an additional Vietnamese division, comprising three regiments each of three battalions.

French field commanders were slow to learn. By 1st January 1951, they'd lost control of all of North Vietnam to the north of the Red River. The next set-piece battles would take place in the Red River delta. By 10th January Giap was ready for Hanoi.

Holding Mia's hand in that long, long ago Elysian time, Vinh had watched with some trepidation that storm. It seemed now but a prelude to this greater man-made one.

Russia now helped Vietnam as a member of the communist 'brotherhood'. They equipped and trained the 351st 'Heavy Division' with Soviet artillery pieces and engineer components and provided essential backup for Giap's strategy. Proving no man's fool, a quick learner and exemplary military strategist, Giap had by now been an Indochinese Communist Party member for over twenty years.

The French and the Americans could have learned much from his missive, "People's War, People's Army". It detailed his strategy for war and of French responses.

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Giap's generalship featured two principles. The first: the preparation of staff studies reflecting meticulous attention to friendly forces and enemy details. It was most rigorous. The second: centralised control, in which his commanders came to consensus under his direction and then passed the orders verbatim down to their battalion commanders. Senior Lieutenant Le Duc Dat was appointed as an 'observer' commissar attached to 318 Infantry Division, which had been selected to prepare the staff study that determined the strategy directing the First Indochina War.

It consisted of the three stages now outlined as 'bible' by his battalion commander. They were embarked on Stage Three, in which Giap predicted, "The enemy will pass slowly from offensive to defensive operations... In the first and second stages we have gnawed at the enemy... Our strategy in this third phase is of a general counter-offensive... We will attack without ceasing until final victory... Now we must destroy them... Our military activities have but one simple aim, that is the total destruction of all French troops in Indochina" It was a simple language all could understand.

During their rigorous communications exercises in China, Le Duc Dat's battalion commander, a Captain (or *Dawai* - 'Diewee'), quoted Giap as he briefed his Lieutenant company commanders. Seated with them in a sheltered jungle clearing, each superintended by a political commissar, Le Duc Dat felt tears swallow his eyes in pride as his battalion commander spoke. Everyone revered Giap's words.

Ho Chi Minh's domain was the realm of political conduct. Defeatist newspapers in Paris played up the 'uselessness of the war'. Propaganda leaflets had been posted in Hanoi and the whole delta area stating, "Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi for Tet".

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More than a New Year celebration, the Tet Nguyen Dan (Festival of the First Day) announces the Lunar New Year. This is the most important date in the Vietnamese festival calendar. The Chinese calendar is a Lunar one, the Gregorian one a Solar. Tet is a time when families re-unite for the coming year and it is everybody's birthday. In Vietnam, on this day everyone becomes one year older. It falls somewhere between 19th January and 20th February but in the Chinese calendar these dates vary from year to year. Prayers are offered to welcome ancestral spirits back into the family home and the ancestors are asked to provide for good fortune. Fireworks welcome Tet in and parties, lots of food and happy times characterise the holiday. The first three days are public holidays but most Vietnamese took a whole week off.

The rites would begin seven days earlier. A time when the Tao Quan – the three Spirits of the Hearth, ascended into heaven to report to the Jade Emperor on the details of last years events. It was both a joyous and reflective time. Altars were laden with food, flowers and fresh water to ensure good luck in the following year.

On the French side, Marshal de Lattre de Tassigny arrived as the new Commander-in-Chief. He had armed and mobilised French civilians for guard duties, thereby releasing badly needed reserves and giving a shot in the arm to the combat military forces. French ships sent to evacuate French women and children were sent back empty, "As long as the women and children are here, the men won't dare to let go".

Vinh-Yen, twenty-five kilometres to the north of Hanoi would star as the first great battle for the city. Marshal de Lattre personally flew into Vinh Yen, taking personal charge of 'this decisive battle'. The French were lulled into a false sense of security.

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It seemed that Giap's forces had decided to retreat in the face of de Lattre's massive airlift of troops from South Vietnam into the Vinh Yen area. At 1700 hours, as the sun set behind the mountains, Giap unleashed the whole of his 308 Division.

Le Duc Dat's men emerged from the forest-covered hills of the Tam Dao rhyolite massive. This dominant landscape feature extended in the middle between their Clear River... flowing down from Dat's village of Tuyen Quang, a hundred miles upstream... and the Song Cau valleys.

Backed by heavy mortars and heavy machine-guns, Le Duc Dat's company stealthily moved forward until they could hear the French. They waited for the other formations to catch up. Bugles rallied them for the charge and Dat raced with his troops across the paddy fields separating him from the French. Merciless hand-to-hand combat ensued. His company commander and two of the platoon officers were killed in the first onslaught but Le Duc Dat took charge and continued the attack.

A major battle for Hanoi had begun.

For the first time, French regular troops experienced what was already a characteristic of the Chinese conduct of war in Korea and what would become routine in Vietnam. Human sea attacks in which wave upon relentless wave of Vietminh infantry threw themselves against the hastily dug defences of de Lattre's troops. He had arrived back in time to personally conduct the defence of Vinh-Yen.

Dat was proud. His men didn't hesitate to 'close with and kill the enemy'.

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This much vaunted tactic was specific to infantry. Only infantry could exclusively kill and destroy enemy troops. Other military arms and services fought from a distance.

On all fronts the French units were stressed and some disintegrated after exhausting all their ammunition and falling back to reserve positions with the survivors. De Lattre understood the situation was very grave. At daybreak, The Marshal initiated the most massive aerial bombardment so far seen in the Indochina War.

Dat, after battling all night and losing many of his bravest soldiers, withdrew in as orderly way as he could to a position clear but still relatively close to the action. There in the cover of trees and a protective fold in the ground he gathered remnants of other units, reorganised them and waited for the dawn to show him the best target.

Now it was the Frenchman's turn to swamp the enemy. All available fighter-bombers and transport planes in Indochina were seconded to this battle. De Lattre's special request was for transport aircraft capable of dropping napalm. The pilots were directed to release them at a low angle, wave upon unyielding wave, so as to throw up a curtain of roaring flames to incinerate all concentrations of Vietminh attacking the exhausted French defenders.

Dat could see, from a rise among the trees about four hundred yards away, a looming disaster for the Vietminh. To the south the guns boomed and accurate French shelling added to the chaos. Then the horror he would never forget rumbled behind him. Strange birds littered the sky, getting larger and larger until their roaring engines quietened the boom of the guns. They dived without firing their guns?

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Dat watched the belly of one plane closeby, open as in a dream. A large silver egg fell slowly. Fascinated, he watched it roll over and over as the pregnant bird, delivered of its load, climbed steeply and banked away. Then, his eyes rivetted on the egg and he stared, nonplussed. He would have been a little more than two hundred yards away when the first canister struck the ground, exploded, and as it tumbled and spun out of control it spread a lethal stream of flames over a large concentration of Vietminh massed for one of their human wave attacks.

He saw the explosion seconds before its shockwave hit him. It rocked him on his feet. Then he hung onto a tree as it struck and passed him. He felt scorched. The skin of his body, facing the shockwave, instantly dried. All the moisture had evaporated. He snatched a hand to his hair. He feared it aflame. His eyeballs dried. Forced to close them Dat gently rubbed his hands over them to stimulate wetting.

Then the smell hit him. He involuntarily vomited as screaming and Hell-driven cries rent the air. A Buddhist Hell erupted in tortured eyes. Many Vietminh had been reduced to char. Others ran, their clothes incinerated but their bodies a ball of flame. What had been chaos moments before disintegrated into bedlam. The smell emptied his stomach of its contents. Other planes performed the same shocking manoeuvre. They released their eggs on unsuspecting and disoriented soldiers beneath. In the air it was like a ballet. Silver plane after silver plane ejected silver egg after silver egg. A mesmeric rhythm designed by the devil. Immense sheets of flame now extended over hundreds of metres. A hundred troops immolated in each raid. Dat, emptied in mind and body, felt blast after blast. Immune, he was snared by nightmares of screaming soldiers. Tormented men left the inferno fleeing in all directions.

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Dat couldn't turn any troops back. It was madness to stay. This horror seemed never-ending. Flames were all around. His face scorched a numbing dryness, denying him reason. Only his iron will stopped him from panicking like the others. He knew he had to get out, go back. Somewhere behind this mayhem where he could drink and live again. Those two thoughts dominated his whole being... to drink... and to live.

Dat stumbled. It was no good grasping a tree or branch for support. "The whole world must be on fire... Will there be no end?... Is this Armageddon?"

French artillery, heavy and light mortars and heavy machine-guns ranged onto the conflagration. In some part of his mind Dat could still tell the difference between them. The whole area became saturated with tormented deaths. He twisted and turned seeking a passage. Any path out of this living, dying, dead Hell. He sensed others were rushing around him from that fiery tomb. Eventually he passed through an untouched bamboo hedge. Crashing sounds alerted him that many others had made it.

Dat yelled out "Over here." He heard grunts and curses. "Assemble in the woods behind the hill." He grabbed someone as they staggered past. "Follow me". The man's far-away look told him the man could not be reached. Dat yelled this out but only froglike croaks had come out of his puffed up and parched throat. No one had heard. No one wanted to hear. He stopped as he felt the safety of the darkness of the forest envelop him. Dat lent over gasping, trying to recover his breath. He could hear martial French screams and yells as though from another planet.

Someone screamed, "It's the Frenchies. They are attacking."

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Another soldier stumbled past. "Is this the atomic bomb?"

"No. This is napalm." Dat found half his voice. The man understood.

As Dat reached a line of trees marking some kind of boundary, he watched as a commissar took aim with his pistol. Time had ceased to be relevant. It seemed the man took an eternity as he lined up a fear-drunken survivor. The commissar waited until the insensible scarecrow came almost alongside, then he deliberately shot him in the neck. The man kept going for a few more steps, staggered to a crazy halt then folded like a collapsed ballon. No sound had come from either murderer or victim.

Dat remained hidden behind dense shrubbery. The man hardly spared a look at the dead soldier as he carefully lined up another emerging to his front. To the man's rear, Dat, without thinking, silently and resolutely pulled his pistol from its holster. As purposefully as the other commissar he aimed at the man's belly. In his mind he heard an old instructor saying "Aim at the bulk, then add a coup de grâce". He fired a fraction before the other and saw the man's arm jerk up and away from his next victim. The commissar fell away from Dat. He twisted to look as he fell. He collapsed awkwardly. Dat casually walked over as the man bled on the ground and deliberately aimed between the man's eyes. A moment of eternity as they looked at each other. Recognised each other. The wounded man clutched feebly at his stomach, a confused look on his face as he looked down at blood-stained hands.

In a far away voice he said. "Brother Le Duc Dat. You have shot me by mistake."

Then he choked. Blood oozed from his mouth. He tried to say something else.

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The Commissar didn't see the pistol aimed at him. Then the man was lost in the explosion of Dat's pistol. A head disintegrated.

A minute before, the commissar had been a man, shooting others. Forced by habit, Dat leaned forward and checked the carotid pulse. No heartbeat. He unconsciously yanked out a hair to hold it to check under the nostril but breath had disappeared.

His mind underwent a subtle change. Casting off the madness of the battlefield, Dat's brain gradually emerged from the fog and he looked around as if waking from a dream. He had survived the land of the dead and dying and reality took shape.

Dat turned. Found Vinh staring at him. Vinh's once young face had aged with the sight of too much death. His body lacerated from the bamboo. But it was Vinh. His eyes remained fixed on Dat's. Indifferent, emptied of humanity, they looked at a faraway world that had ceased to have reason. Dat wondered for a moment how he appeared to Vinh. Dat had seen that look before. A chill in his dry body shook him.

He bent over the commissar. Rifled his pockets. Dat took out the man's wallet.

Name: *Tiem Van Duong*

Age: *20* Height: *5 feet* Relatives: *Father, hero of the Fatherland. Dead.*

Native Village: *Son-Duong, midland district of Lam-Thau, Province of Phong-Chau.*

Traits: *Pockmarked face*

Character: *Pleasant person, patient, kind and gentle.*

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The photo of a young country girl looked back at Dat, smiling. Girlfriend or sister?

“So what are you going to do?” Vinh too had come back to reality.

Dat looked at his young nephew.

He saw Vinh’s face more clearly. The flickering of far off fires caused wrinkles to criss-cross over his nephew’s face, the face of a prematurely old man. ‘How could Vinh have aged so quickly?’ Dat thought. ‘My face feels like that of an Ancient One.’ Then he shook himself. Roused his mind whispered, ‘No use brooding.’

“Vinh, Only the two of us know about this. This is war. You are alive. I am alive. He is dead. That is all there is. Say something to anyone and we will both be shot. That would serve no purpose at all. Why throw away our lives? Do you understand me?”

The corpse stared at the sky.

The younger head nodded.

Unspoken words passed. They would keep their secret to the end of time.

Dat replaced the wallet. Settled it deeply into the commissar’s pocket. Patted it.

Two old-young men walked away in different directions without looking behind.

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1952: Hoa Binh the meat-grinder...

TO LE DUC DAT AT VINH-YEN GIAP ADMITTED HIS FIRST DEFEAT

It was a remarkable confession. It showed he still shared Ho Chi Minh's confidence to stay in power to defeat the French. Giap paid homage to the warriors, mainly women, who supplied over 5,000 tonnes of rice, ammunition and weapons into the war zone. His second attempt at 0400, 27th March: to clear the French from the delta; also failed.

Four hundred men of a Composite Battalion of Senegalese mercenaries and Thai partisans were the total strength of a garrison at Mao Khe, which consisted of three defensive positions. One was a mineshaft defended by ninety-five Thai guerrillas from Lang Son. A thousand metres south a small group defended the road approaches to the village. The rest of the composite group had dug trenches in the village. The Mao Khe force was only there to protect a commercial mine area.

Jaago, with the Australians in Korea in 1951, had already seen war as an isolated unit suddenly thrust into a critical combat. Mao Khe and later Tu-Le are similar examples.

Giap launched three divisions at Mao Khe, expecting it to be quickly annihilated. His mass attacks broke under the precision fire of the defenders. Vietminh 'Death Squads' blew a breach in the outer wall and the Vietminh poured through. French B-26's and Hellcats helped keep the Vietminh at bay. Dusk of the second day, survivors of the 'mine battle' surprised the Vietminh by withdrawing in good order to Mao Khe village with the wounded, wives and children. The village became the next target. It soon became a blazing inferno from communist barrages and French retaliatory fire.

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Giap claimed victory but knew it as a Pyrrhic one. He'd failed. But he and his officers learned from their mistakes. In their first major and each formal tactical battle, the Vietminh were unafraid to assess each battle: measure any limitations: and to probe weaknesses in French tactics or strategy. Each attack benefited from surprise.

Then came the rains. They swamped the delta making war impossible.

But Giap and his Vietminh wouldn't give up... his slogan... 'victory or death'.

Luck and greater mobility favoured the French. After all, the Vietnamese were 'an inferior race'. The French couldn't shake their racism. At this time, international circumstances favoured the French. Pressure had eased in Korea. The Americans would finally sign an Armistice on 27th July 1953, at Panmunjon. De Lattre, already dying of cancer, received massive increases of American supplies.

He chose Hoa-Binh to seize the initiative. Giap and his Vietminh would finally be drawn into a 'set-piece battle' and the French could once more show superiority in the conduct of war against Asians. Tactically it was a major road link west of Hanoi. Strategically, it split Giap's forces. It separated Giap from his western strongholds and his supply base at Thanh-Hoa. Known as 'the meat grinder', it could have served as a warning to prevent the French tragedy at Dien Bien Phu. The French high command ignored the alarm. They saw Hoa-Binh as an important battleground.

Hoa-Binh also stood as capital of the Muong tribe whose commitment of fiercely loyal guerrilla troops included two battalions, already fighting for the French.

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Finally de Lattre needed a decisive victory. Indochina's budget was to be debated.

Vinh had recovered from the battle of Vinh-Yen and his close encounter with death, more determined than ever to 'fight to the death' for Ho Chi Minh. Vinh had only two aims in life. That was total support for Uncle Ho's 'One Vietnam' program and to oust the French from Vietnam, forever, at 'Whatever the cost'. Proud of Uncle Dat's accomplishments, Vinh set a resolute course. He would become a good officer of the revolution like his uncle. He'd witnessed French strengths and weaknesses. This made him even more determined to better the first and to take advantage of the latter.

Vinh epitomised the 'true son of the revolution' that his father had squired.

Vinh and his Uncle Dat had grown very close, especially after his uncle had saved his life, that time... Vinh's memory faded. He recalled no images to sustain memory. As though his mind had to close down just so that he could carry out his mission to kill as many Frenchmen as possible. Feelings of hate reminded him more than any images.

Immediately around Hoa-Binh, precipitous cliffs dominated the area. This western part of Tonkin was almost uninhabited except for three towns. Hoa-Binh was a major one and served as a market centre for its neighbouring countryside. Hoa Binh was also the name of the capital of the province and home to the Muong and Thai mountain people. They numbered a million each and most were anti-French.

Ten-percent of all the hill people of Tonkin lived in this north-west region along the Laos-China border. Muong were found predominantly in the Hoa-Binh province.

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Dat and Vinh lived in one of the Muong's small stilt-house hamlets, called *quel*, for months prior to the French build-up in the region. Vinh learned each *quel* was grouped into a '*mong*' meaning family or kinship group. Dat had become on familiar terms with the '*lang*' or hereditary elders of the Muong the two men were attached to.

The group Vinh lived with were ethnically closer to the Vietnamese rather than the Thai, although many of the cultural things he learned with them were more suited to the Thai. He loved Muong poetry, literature and songs. They reminded him of that magical time with the students, and with Mai...

The war had torn them apart but he hoped she thought of him as much as he thought of her. He had no idea where she might be. His missions were always clouded in secrecy and he could only share his whereabouts, needs and longings with Uncle Dat.

Mai stood for the only softness Vinh felt capable of. His had become a harsh life.

At least ten distinct tribes made up this interesting and mainly nomadic group of almost five-million people. Dubbed '*montagnards*' by the French, they used this derogatory term for all the hill tribes in North and South Vietnam. The Vietnamese also referred to all indigenes as *moi*, also a derogatory term meaning '*savages*'.

Vinh grew to dislike his people's ignorance of this fine race. Their darker skin and coarser features, easily distinguished them from the '*lowlanders*' whom they held in equal contempt. Nomadic, they'd establish then leave a village every three months. In their high almost inaccessible hill regions they became formidable fighters.

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De Lattre finally recognised the advantages that terrain gave to Giap's troops.

He ordered strengthening of the string of forts and strong points covering road and river approaches. He assembled a massive force of infantry, artillery and armour.

On the 14th November 1951, as the river mists dribbled over the area at dawn, three French paratroop battalions drifted lazily down through sunlight filtered by the low-lying 'crachin – the morning spittle'. This 'meat-grinder' war would last, for both sides, until 24th February 1952.

De Lattre would not see the end of the campaign he started.

French white, semi-spherical chutes silhouetted grey against the reddening sky. Now and again light danced on the silk of a parachute.

On the meat-grinder's first day, Vinh, who had been promoted to corporal, was a commando observer on the ground. He passed the news back to his base. With a circlet of woven leaves around his neck and camouflaged headdress, he was invisible on the edge of the cornfield. Only French planes dominated the Tonkin skies.

To protect themselves the Vietminh had made a fetish of camouflage. Vinh had dug a hole that just fitted his body. His camouflage was excellent.

A half-mile landline, camouflaged behind Vinh, was his only communications link back to his commander. Three men of his signals squad protected his escape route.

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Less than a hundred yards in front of him and standing on a rise, a French paratroop officer waited whilst his descending paras landed away from Vinh. The man wore the soft peaked cap favoured by airborne troops and his sleeves were rolled halfway. Something about the man intrigued Vinh. The officer watched all directions at once and commanded his soldier's respect. He'd bark orders in short, precise sentences and soldiers quickened their task. Most officers had radio orderlies. This one passed his own radio messages with the wireless-set beside him, its handpiece glued to his ear.

Vinh, feeling close enough to hear the man breathe, watched, as the man focussed on the drop-zone. A tall thick-built man, the officer gazed with a far-distant look that seemed to see through men and equipment. Almost as if he had taken into account all contingencies on the battlefield and already fought upcoming actions in his head.

Vinh wouldn't have known that he'd met this officer and his troops almost exactly a year ago. The ghost of Lang Son and the disaster of the border forts weighed heavily on the French command. In the initial battle for the highlands and on the far side of the Riviere Noire, the same officer and his battalion had been offered as a sacrificial lambs to delay a sudden onslaught of 312 Division. The man was Major Bigeard of the 6th Colonial Parachute Battalion. As now, he'd always arrived with the first plane.

In that other place, Tu-Le, and in that other time, October 1952, in another isolated French fort in another valley ringed with hills, the Vietminh set their repeatable trap. Seven hundred French troops already protected it. Within twenty-four hours of arrival, Bigeard's men had contacted the forward elements of Le Duc Dat's 308 Division, which had advanced across the Fleuve Rouge on a 40-mile front.

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Dat's troops destroyed French resistance in their path. Making full use of their ability to travel fast across inhospitable country, they would rapidly concentrate maximum force at a critical point then use hit-and-run guerrilla tactics to advantage using ambush as their favourite weapon. They'd wait for the French to extricate themselves from their fort: lull them into a false sense of safety; then massacre them on the move carrying their wounded, women and baggage. Striking them when most vulnerable.

Bigeard had called over the radio to a French recon pilot, "The colon are out there. I can feel the little bastards crawling all over me. Find them."

It proved too difficult. In Dien Bien Phu, aircover proved impossible for different reasons. Here, the mountainous region around Tu-Le attracted compacted cumulus clouds. In their fear of planes and fetish for secrecy Le Duc Dat's troops changed their camouflage whenever they moved from green jungle, into paddy or to open savannah. Not wishing to repeat the horror of Hoa-Binh, Le Duc Dat had taught them well. Throughout the division, each soldier carried a wire-mesh netting over his back and head and each companion was responsible to constantly change his mate's covering.

It was one of Le Duc Dat's constant concerns that he couldn't protect para POW's from grisly torture before death. The Vietminh had learned to hate the paras. This elite force consistently accounted itself well and inflicted maximum casualties. For Bigeard it was therefore an axiom that 'paras left no wounded'.

At 0300 hours on the fourth morning the Vietminh 10,000 man division attacked with their predictable heavy mortar barrage and backed with recoilless cannon.

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Extremely ferocious and accurate, within minutes Bigeard had severely wounded paras. He realised any attempts to hold out at Tu-Le were doomed. Predictably loaded with gear and stretchers they broke out of the encirclement. Another fatal error.

Bigeard's whole para battalion walked blithely into a well-concealed, long ambush. Automatic weapons blazed at point-blank range and wiped out two rear companies. He took two days to extricate his battalion over forty miles, through hostile ambushes and terrible terrain. By the time he emerged he'd lost three-fifths of his men. Exhausted, begrimed and suffering from malaria and leech-bites ...but safe, and still a para fighting unit carrying what wounded they could save.

To escape the brilliant and effective Vietminh ambush Bigeard had to leave on the battlefield a hundred-and-ten lightly wounded paras and unwounded POW's. He had no choice. After liberation following Dien Bien Phu only four still remained alive. The badly wounded had fared much worse than anyone could imagine. Mortar fragments cause terrible mutilations. Slivers of red-hot metal had torn into soft flesh gouging out huge chunks and amputating limbs.

Le Duc Dat could do nothing. His orders were 'pursue the paras and exterminate those still on the run'. The Vietminh merely stacked the French side by side in the torn-up dirt, mud and slush. Dead and wounded were left regardless in a hot tropical sun. Soon they'd stink of suppurating wounds and rotting gangrenous flesh. Those left behind, eaten alive by vultures and rats, moaned and begged for death. Dat passed the area a few days later. The smells and groans of the living dead tortured his waking mind in visions and tormented him in nightmares for many years.

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Bigearde would not escape next time. Le Duc Dat would meet him at Dien Bien Phu.

Vinh now watched Bigearde carefully on this first day of the para-drop at Hoa-Binh. He admired his professionalism. Heard paras yelling to each other in the sky then glanced back to Bigearde and his characteristically long nose and heavy eyebrows.

Vinh was fascinated that they carried very little equipment. He remained mystified until a cargo cannister landed with a large and frightening thump fifty yards from him. Vinh had gone to ground. The paras were unpacking heavier packs and equipment and he stored this information for a more detailed briefing later.

Bigearde's only mark as an officer was his commanding presence and the holstered pistol on his waist-belt. Otherwise a patchy camouflaged suit and para boots merged him with his men. Elite troops, once they'd landed and folded their chutes they seemed almost slovenly yet were quickly in defence positions in the areas indicated.

Vinh fingered his own pistol as he memorised the detail he'd carry back to base that night. He'd picked his Mauser up from the dead commissar during that time he'd met Uncle Le Duc Dat. He realised he was close. If captured he'd use it on himself.

Fifty or more parachutes still drifted down from the sky. More were to come. Vinh had never seen so many. It was a perfect day. Enough breeze to lightly brush the tree-tops and to remove the oppressive stillness. It gave the paras the drift they needed in difficult-to-manoeuvre, semi-circular parachutes so that they could perform a 'side-right', the easiest and preferred landing direction. Vinh never saw a landing casualty.

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Hated French words echoed across now empty fields to Vinh. The professional in him kept his mind dominated by one thing. Reports that would spell the death of these hated colonial invaders. With the river behind him and signaller brothers to protect him, Vinh felt secure. Steep rugged hills across paddy fields staggered into the mountains. The French, Vinh felt sure, would be trapped between. Deputised for a while to Le Duc Dat, he had learned much about this area prior to the paras landing.

A meticulous professional, he'd walked the Hoa-Binh terrain with Vinh, allocating squads to collect specific details. Nothing was left to chance. Le Duc Dat had convinced Vinh the paras would make towards the hills and away from his hideout. He proved correct. Le Duc Dat also made a special study of the Hoa-Binh salient repeating similar work he'd conducted in the Cao Bang base area. Drawn to Giap's attention his uncle had been promoted. Now far to the south Le Duc Dat watched de Lattre's massive ground-force churn its way into the narrow Black River valley.

Assiduously studying French tactics Vinh, had learned a lot since that early morning seven years ago when... He dismissed the thoughts as he waited for the night, for now happy to remain unrecognised as part of the undergrowth. Bigeard's radio aerial waved now-and-again as if in a breeze. Cautiously Vinh took out his compass, sighted and wrote down the compass-bearing and distance.

Bigeard moved into the middle of a tree-covered copse on the other side of the drop zone about five-hundred yards to Vinh's front, set up his radio and glued the receiver back to his ear. Sitting on a box, he'd taken off one of his boots to massage his foot. Talking to an unseen listener, Bigeard's eyes never left his troops, even for a moment.

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Le Duc Dat's report on Hoa-Binh, for the High Command before going south, read:-

"The Black River, heading north to join the massive Red River, offers good fields of fire. Recoilless canon and bazookas would have a devastating effect on the French Dinassault water-craft. Hoa-Binh is caught between the mountains and the river and can be easily isolated. Across the river, hills and mountains to 4,000 feet dominate all the low ground that I predict will be held by the French colonial and mercenary troops. From prior experience they will make for the lower wooded hill country in the belief this will cover them from view and protection. It won't.

The slopes and tops of the mountains are covered by mixed oak and pine forests, which would provide excellent cover for our infiltration. Especially, it provides access for our heavy guns. Our supply lines can easily be hidden from French aircraft. Once in position our heavy guns and mortars can devastate French counter-fire. They can be defiladed and therefore impervious to artillery and out of range of French mortars.

French supplies will try to use Route 6. It leads to Dien Bien Phu and is a little over 75 kilometres from Hanoi. The closer to Hoa-Binh the more dense the scrub. This is superb for the ambush. In terrible condition the French will try to repair it. This must be denied. The French protect the road and river access with a series of forts but cannot truly control these approaches. They are costly in manpower and equipment and communications between groups is poor. We must deny them an airfield.

The battle for Hoa-Binh will centre around who controls the road and the river.

Comrade Le Duc Dat"

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Dawai Le Duc Dat, was re-assigned to regimental headquarters, as political commissar. His recon groups assessed French forces heading north. They comprised fifteen infantry battalions, seven artillery battalions and two armoured groups.

This was indeed a large French force. But each time the French were attacked by the Vietminh, a short, sharp engagement followed a Vietminh retirement in good order. It frustrated the French troops who lost with heavy casualties, caused each time by the Vietminh, but they found no enemy on whom to revenge themselves.

He shared with his Captain, "It's obvious de Lattre wants a set-piece battle. He is aiming for something that might decide the war's outcome once and for all."

His Dawai agreed. "Comrade Giap won't let him. We don't have numerical superiority. His 'People's War, People's Army' states that 'when the enemy is strong we will retire, when the enemy is weak we will strike boldly into his heart.'"

"I have read all his works and seen the way our Comrade thinks. He also says that we must 'Let the elephant stamp his foot on nothing.' I believe that for a while Comrade Giap will move as fish among the people and avoid combat."

The main force of 308 Division had been placed immediately south of Hoa-Binh and about twenty-five miles away. They would have to cross the Black River to get into Hoa-Binh but the French Hoa-Binh hedgehog extended to that side of the river and would be their Division's first major assignment. Le Duc Dat's regiment had been attached to two regiments of 312 Division.

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Faithful to his 'credo', spelled out in 'People's War, People's Army', Giap avoided decisive combat. He would choose a time and place to suit. The French, frustrated, seemed to strike into empty space. The Vietminh were 'gnats' in their flesh.

Le Duc Dat rapidly rejoin his 308 Division with his commander. Giap acknowledged that the general terrain around Hoa-Binh offered good protection and cover for his infantry. He ordered 304 and 312 to join 308 and 316 and 320 Divisions to harass and to interdict the French lines of communication linking de Lattre to his re-supply lifeline, hoping this would disorganise de Lattre's rear.

Giap could hardly believe his luck. The French had secured the wooded hill areas.

Ironically, Hoa-Binh, means 'Peace'. It lies 75 miles west of Hanoi, almost exactly half-way between Hanoi and its western border with Laos. Three rivers form a north-south horseshoe, with its open end, due south, closed by Route 6. This is the Hanoi – Dien Bien Phu road. The western edge of the horseshoe is the Black River and the huge Red River forms the top. The horseshoe's eastern leg is the Day River.

Into this natural salient the French formed de Lattre's famous hedgehog system. Isolated defensive fortifications were built like a string of pearls on Route 6 at Hoa-Binh, Xom Pheo and Xuan Mai. Along the Black River, on the western side of the salient, the hedgehogs were Tu Vu, Ap Da Chong and Notre-Dame, names consonant with 'Hell' for both sides. Soon these extensions of the de Lattre line of forts would write their bloody histories in charnel houses of French and Vietnamese battles. For the French, resupplying the hedgehogs, mainly by air, became and a nightmare.

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Route 6, totally sabotaged by the Vietminh in 1946 and ploughed under by the French later, then lay dormant until 1951. Barely little more than an unimproved path, French engineers with bulldozers frantically attempted some repairs under the watchful eyes of Vinh and others of his reconnaissance unit.

In the first days, French propaganda hailed the Hoa-Binh operation as 'a pistol aimed at the head of the enemy.' Vinh shuddered each time this reference was made. But in coming months each fort would be systematically attacked by Giap's Vietminh. He turned the salient into the 'Hell of Route 6' or alternately turned Hoa-Binh itself into a 'living Hades' for French troops trapped within each of their 'hedgehogs'.

Finally they were in position to attack Tu-Vu. Regarded by Giap as the anchor-point for the Black River side of the horseshoe this French position suffered two fatal flaws. These were fully taken advantage of, starting at dusk on 9th December 1951.

Le Duc Dat, moving up with his 308 Division, reconnoitred the isolated Moroccan rifle company on the west bank of the Black River. Ngoi Lat was a tributary of the Black River. It effectively separated the mercenaries from another two-hundred strong, Moroccan rifle company across the Ngoi Lat. The only link between them was a flimsy footbridge. The latter unit also contained a tank platoon.

This French group defended another key post named Notre-Dame Rock. The problem was that Tu-Vu guarded it against any Vietminh assault across the river. Their own position backed against the west bank of the river. Any support from Notre-Dame Rock would have to approach them, across the other side of the river.

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And probably at night. If threatened to extinction Tu-Vu's retreat was effectively cut off by the Black River, a major waterway. A small island offered some small relief close to their bank but theirs was a poorly-planned defence, as soon became obvious.

Vietminh heavy mortars preceded the attack by two regiments of the 312 Division on the northern fort of Tu-Vu. A problem emerged for the French that they would pay a much heavier price for at Dien Bien Phu. In their arrogance they seemed not to learn.

The French continually underestimated the Vietminh. Vietminh guns and mortars fired from defilade positions could not be responded to by French counter-battery fire. Plus they were out of range to the French mortars in the Notre-Dame Rock position. The Vietminh mortars then shifted to the southern strongpoint to support the attack by Le Duc Dat's Vietminh. Forty minutes after commencement by 312 Division, Le Duc Dat's 308 Division followed closely behind its own heavy mortar bombardment.

The Vietminh attacked to familiar cries of '*Tien-lien*', their motivating charge-yell meaning 'Forward'. At one point Le Duc Dat threw himself across the barbed wire as assault troops had done in many places along the front where the sapper's bangalores had not exploded well enough to blow through the wire. He waited whilst his troops ran over his prone body and the last man over grabbed him, pulled him up then exploded in front of his eyes from a well-directed shell.

Le Duc Dat had no time to hesitate but rushed through after his troops. He charged with them through established minefields without regard to casualties. Two Vietminh in separate incidents were blown high into the air in front of Le Duc Dat.

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He smiled a soldier's grim smile. The smell of explosions hung in the air. The brave Vietminh had cleared him a safe way. Le Duc Dat led a charmed life. Combat always exhilarated him and he transformed into a ruthless, but clear-minded killing machine. Men rallied around the safety of his professional combat leadership.

Coming under murderous and concentrated machine-gun fire as he closed with the enemy, Le Duc Dat heard the second, then the third 'human-wave' attacks following behind. He was hoarse from yelling: from the dryness of unacknowledged fear: and from the acrid smoke that choked him. Also blinded by the crashes of mortar rounds that seemed to explode all around him. 'Tien Lien' screams behind stirred him ever onward. The only way to 'close with and kill the enemy' was forward.

French defensive fire from the hedgehog survivors, supplemented by accurate artillery fire from Notre-Dame Rock, fired directly onto the barbed-wire ringing the French position. Le Duc Dat and his troops climbed over their own dead and the still-moving wounded. He cleared one stack of Vietminh bodies. His foot slipped. He'd stepped into half a torso. The body's blood was too much to soak into the parched ground. It still poured from the shuddering torso as its arms tried to grab at Le Duc Dat.

In the act of his falling a burst of machine-gun tracer rounds whipped over his head. Simultaneously fired as he fell. They ripped into three Vietminh hard on his tracks. He knew them, had sipped tea with them just hours before. Their bodies writhed and shook. They screamed. Fought to stay alive. Their death throes tangled around him.

Everything slowed. He threshed to release himself from their panic.

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A lone Vietminh had sprung from the enemy's lines. Maddened and in panic he ran across Dat's front. Dat watched. He marvelled as the man sought safety across the piles of his own soldiers. A mountain deer, the man sailed high in the air, arching in slow bounding leaps. Dat predicted each twist and turn as the man zig-zagged this way and that away from the enemy. No-man's land stood between the man and his sanctuary. Dat saddened. Silence fell heavily, as a blanket upon him. Dat prayed. He'd seen other crazed charges like this and hoped his Vietminh hero would survive.

Small white clouds of smoke puffed from the ground each side of the bounding body. Tracers disappeared into the man's back. Some emerged. They issued slowly from in front as though he himself had fired them, their laser fingers searched for the refuge he craved. He wavered. Dat felt the man's heart shredding. The body crumpled. Sank toward the ground. Rolled for an eternity. A limp rag doll, it shuddered slowly into a pile of its mate's bodies its hands waving 'Goodbye'. It stopped. A life snuffed out.

As if heralding a 'call to arms', a crescendo of 'Tien lien' rose from a hundred throats and the next human wave screamed across the distance just covered by the lone Vietminh. Within an hour-and-a-half, the French could no longer hold Tu-Vu.

Amazingly the fragile footbridge still stood. The Morrocans in the southern fort were almost out of ammunition. At 0115 hours its commander ordered the survivors across the bridge to join their comrades bravely making a 'Last Stand' against five battalions of the larger Vietminh Regiment 312 to their north. French tanks in the fort depressed their guns to minimum elevation. Dat followed the retreating French across the footbridge. Fleeing French had no more ammunition to spare to stop the Vietminh.

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The tanks in the new position reminded him of chained, maddened elephants. They crushed heads, chests and limbs as they moved in ever restricted circles, firing point-blank into the screaming hordes of Vietminh clambering over them like ants intent on being first to destroy these creatures of crushing tracks and smoking death.

Soldiers screamed as they passed Dat for the rear. Wide-eyed, their nostrils flared and, their mouths permanently open, their clamour receded as they were decimated. In flashes between the bizzare-ness of combat, Le Duc Dat registered soldiers clawing at turret hatches, falling off like limp dolls as they were hosed to a bloody mess by another tank. Eventually some brave, crazed Vietminh would succeed where many others had failed. A turret hatch would be prized open and an incendiary grenade would find a final resting place. Others would fire into the driver's slits and the tank's erratic course would be stopped with a point-blank bazooka shot.

White-hot metal sizzled living flesh. His mind registered the bravery of the tank-crews' at the same time, roasted alive in their vehicles. Their sweetish smell drifted over the area. Slowly, sounds of battle retreated to sanity. Mayhem passed into memory. War's madness has no end point. It is subsumed by silence.

Some of the French survivors of Tu-Vu were seen to escape, falling down the steep river bank and swimming or wading to the small island. The Vietminh let them go. Next morning, Moroccan patrols from the island entered, subdued. The Vietminh stripped five-hundred Vietminh and French bodies of weapons, then had disappeared.

The prior reconnaissance with their recce troops had paid dividends.

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The freedoms allowed by the terrain meant the Vietminh could appear and disappear at will. In contrast, French concreted themselves in 'hedgehog' defensive positions. The battle for the Black River line lasted through December into January. It reduced itself to a strategy of 'pourrissement', or the slow, methodical attrition of the forts controlling the salient. The French brought more and more Indochina-seasoned troops into the salient but the Vietminh never let up. Pursued, they merely disappeared into the caves in the limestone hills and the thick forests of the rhyolite mountains. Main actions now focussed on what was now merely the 'Hoa-Binh pocket'.

De Lattre died on 11th January 1952. Hoa-Binh's evacuation would prove difficult. Next day a complete convoy was destroyed near Notre-dame Rock. Battle joined for control of Route 6. But French troops were badly needed for "Operation Amaranth", to start six weeks later in the highlands. The French fired 30,000 shells in two days. The 'meat-grinder' proved as expensive to the French as the Lang Son forts in 1950.

Close to Giap's command and leadership group, Major Le Duc Dat helped him to examine minutely every aspect of operations, good or bad. Determined to win, every battle was a dress rehearsal for the final showdown at Dien Bien Phu. Giap's troop losses had also been massive due to their 'human wave' tactics. But they had learned.

The French made the worst mistake. They never learned.

Vinh and his Uncle Dat received their medals from Giap, personally.

Both avoided each other's gaze, remembering.

DIEN BIAN PHU

13th MARCH 1954

Ban Keo

Gabrielle

Revie Track

Nam Yum River

Route 41

Beatrice

Hugette

Airfield

Dominique

Claudine

Elaine

Bald Hill

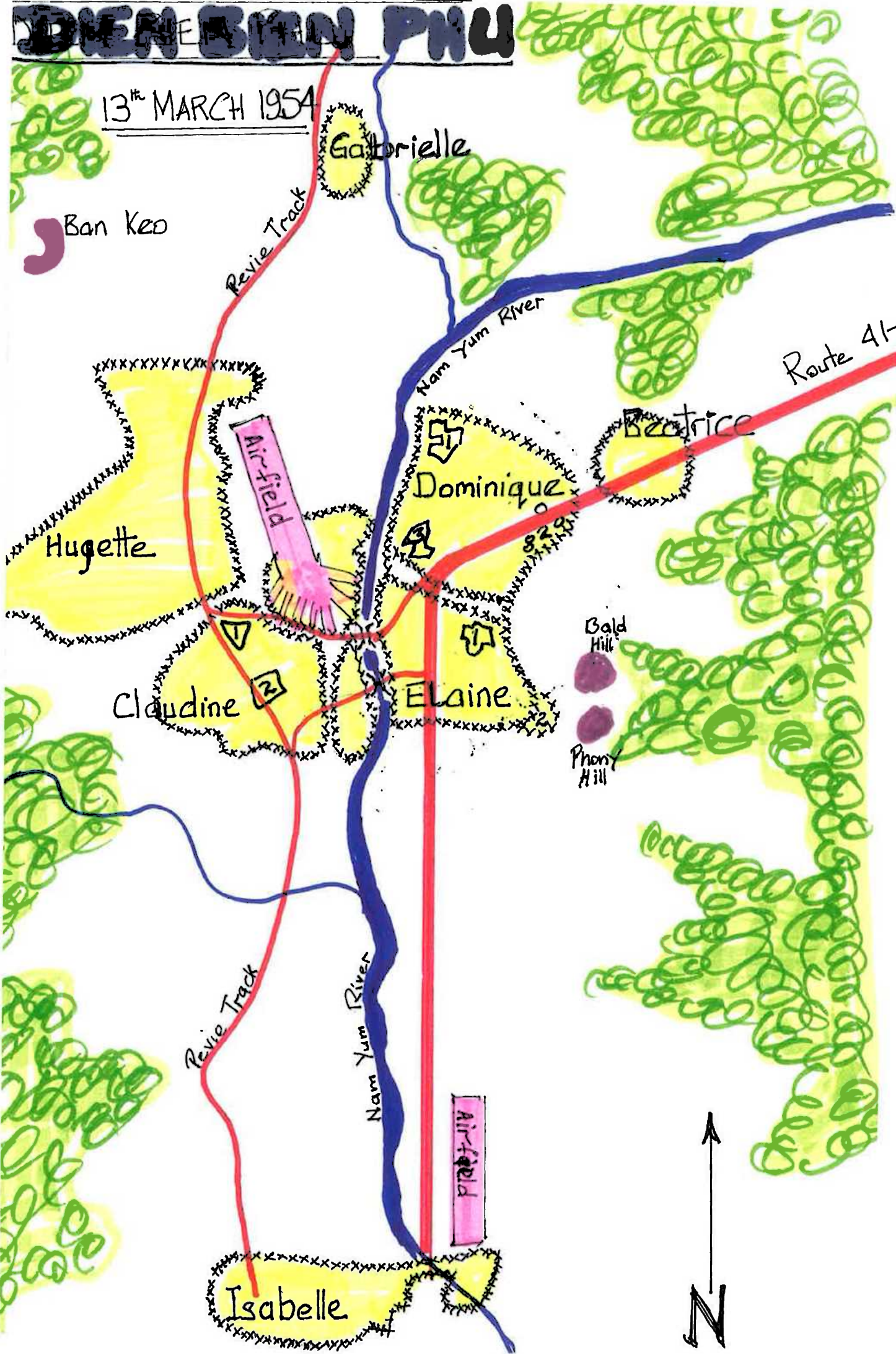
Phony Hill

Nam Yum River

Revie Track

Airfield

Isabelle



1951-1954: Forward into Victory...

"Death, which never forgets us"...

VINH CROUCHED LOW WAITING FOR THE BUGLE TO SOUND "ATTACK"

So close to the trenches that he could hear hated French and German voices. He leant further into the earth embankment. The Wet was on its way. Rain made the freshened Earth smell of dankness, a cloying, heavy smell almost of rottenness. Its odour seeped into his pores. For a brief moment he wished he could dissolve into the earth.

A stone in the bank shimmered. Already becoming indistinct, it seemed to shake a little. The dirt held it firm, enfolded it like the yolk of an egg. Embraced and swathed it. Vinh felt warmed and nurtured by the thought. Only soldiers can know the secrets of the earth in this way. 'Earth is my security, my fervent hope in darkness'. In past battles he'd thrown himself down. The warm Earth gave him sustenance when under fire, and when he pressed closer to it than to his Mother's milky breast. Enveloped, as this stone was. Protected from annihilation. Earth belonged to the infantry soldier.

This is the zone where man becomes one with the animal in him. An erogenous zone where instinct preserves. A holy zone, where Man and God merge. A hymn escaped him. "I will raise my eyes to the hills, from where comes my strength" He was halfway through, before he realized what the verse was and where it had come from. Around him others were pressed into the side of the trench.

Shapeless bundles, soon killed or maybe heroes. Soon, ghosts of a long-forgotten war.

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The moment before battle is joined is magic. Everything waits. NOW is eternal. Sound ceases. The wind drops. Suspended between Heaven and Hell, Death grimaces its skeleton smile. Earth is mother, sister, lover and friend when all about is chaos and fear. She stifles terror. Soaks up the life-force of blood released in torrents and embraces you into her. Chooses its next victim. Vinh waits. Sees Death pass by some.

Energy pours from the earth in front of Vinh. A primitive energy reaching back into the mists of time. It possesses him. Shafts through his veins. Gives him strength. The sky holds its breath in its prelude to dusk. An orange glow turns the colour of blood, reflecting downward. Humidity hangs oppressively in the air. Murder is about to enter this quiet valley on a scale in which the old Gods would revel. The blood and sweat of men is shortly to transform this place into a quagmire of agony. But for this silent moment, everything waits for "Victory at the Front".

Lights go out in some of the souls around him. An officer now, he wonders how he will perform. Official officer ranks won't be bestowed until 1958. Until then, everyone is 'Comrade'. The troops recognize who their officers are.

He is responsible for these men but cannot save them from Death. Vinh crouches further into the bottom of a trench. He remembers Hoa-Binh and the troop massacres of Vinh-Yen. His pulse pumps memories. He breaks into a sweat. This is to be the 'mother of all battles'. Giap promises victory but Vinh knows that each victory depends on officers like him and brave soldiers. Ordinary people sometimes granted extraordinary valour in extreme situations. Vinh remembers an old Latin textbook. As a ten-year-old he'd mastered the cry of the Gladiators to Caesar in the Colosseum.

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His heart pounds, as though to rip itself from his chest. In those far-off days, he'd clench his fist and mould it to his chest. He proclaims to an absent audience, 'Moituri es, te salutant'. French voices in the distance. Vinh whispers to his troops. Repeats the Gladiator's verse to himself, 'We who are about to die, salute you'. He motions to his sergeant, Tran Ngoc Doan, veteran, like Vinh, of all 308 Division's most glorious battles. Doan slithers away. He checks the troops then returns.

A series of black thunderous tornadoes dissolve all thought. The world disappears in a whirling vortex close to the brow of Vinh's trench. Acrid with the smoke of guns and explosives, it chokes even the attackers. Fills his nose. Remains bitter on the tongue. Silent just moments before, Earth rudely awakens. Handfuls of dirt fall from the side of the trench. The stone shakes loose, tumbles, alone from its perch. Is buried. Smothered by the dirt that once succored it. A man pees himself close-by and the smell of urine is strong. Again the rains come.

The bellowing death of huge explosions rends the morning sky. Dusk flushes its urgent blood-red. Stuns a once sleeping sky. Congealed blood shrouds the battlefield. Stains to the ends of the earth. Guns pour mayhem. Shards of red-hot steel whine through Sky. Earth, once a quiet virgin, is raped again and again. Sound ceases. Fountains of darkness. Huge chunks spew skyward.

He shivers. Hears the final verse of the Legionnaires 'Here's the Blood Sausage'. Their last words on that fateful day so long ago... "*La Mort, qui nous oublis si peu.*"

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Nine years later, in 1954, it would soon strike a new discordant note... because *'Death, would forget them.'* The French High command had miscalculated. Underestimated the determination of the black-pyjama'd 'coolies'. Along impassable tracks they'd dragged and pulled their charges over five-hundred miles of the terrain Troy had once flown over. Transported the masses of heavy weapons Giap needed. From Eastern Tonkin, the 'coolies' hacked their way across or through the grain of the mountains, making possible the two major supply roads to win at Dien Bien Phu.

Dat was proud. One had come from Tuyen Quang, his birthplace.

Also where Vinh had gone to school.

The set-piece battle that the French so badly wanted would be fought in a little-known valley and it would last fifty-five days. The French political and military presence in Indochina would be destroyed, forever. The Nam Yum river gurgled gently into the north end of the Dien Bien Phu valley from the east but, in the Wet, surged the valley's full length effectively bisecting then flooding it. Each side and parallel ran two roads. The one on the east, known as Route 41, had been there a long time. The other had been revived and constructed by the engineers to link Gabrielle with Isabelle, both similar to the other French forts, surrounded by barbed wire and mines.

Gabrielle, an isolated fort, guarded the northern approaches. Ten thousand yards to its south lay the most isolated, Isabelle. At its widest the valley was five thousand yards. Between the two and central, Sparrow-Hawk straddled the main airfield, guarded by Huguette, Françoise and Claudine to its west and Dominique and Elaine to its east.

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The Main Command Centre nestled between Elaine and Claudine. Route 41 entered the Dien Bien Phu valley from the north-east, parallel to the Nam Yum. Beatrice, three thousand yards away from the MCC, blocked the road and backed onto the river. It would take the brunt of the first assault by Giap's Vietminh.

On the 'ides of March', Dat looked down on chaos. The 13th was the payoff for five months of backbreaking labour and the gamble of General Giap to destroy the French.

Tumultuous trumpets heralded forty-eight 105 field howitzers, almost fifty 75mm pack-howitzers, the same number of heavy 120mm mortars and 75mm recoilless rifles.

Below Dat, debris rained down. Clattered into the trenches. Sullen ghosts stirred close to Vinh. Soldiers were buried. Smothered like the stone. They shook. Resurrected. Were buried again only to emerge as moles, blinking wildly. Huge shells shrieked their passage through the air, thunderously, deafening ears. Men's curses were lost in flashes of man-made lightning. Vinh hugged his AK-47.

Giap had stacked, in and around Dien Bien Phu, all the ammunition he needed to maintain cataclysmic fire on a mind-numbing and massive scale, forever. Over 200 heavy calibre weapons outnumbered the French by five-to-one.

He'd massed his troops, improving on Sun Tzu's, 'three-to-one ensures victory'.

Colonel Piroth *knew* he'd made a fatal error. Arrogant and convinced of firepower 'superiority', he'd placed only six days of ammunition on hand.

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Giap let loose his 'Hell in a small place'.

The French had almost run out of artillery ammunition by Day Two. Commander of the artillery at Dien Bien Phu, Piroth committed suicide within hours of Day One.

Troy, in the valley, *knew*. He'd once walked these same mountains north to Phong Tho. His friend Le Duc Dat had later shown him how the Vietminh constructed their trails and hid them from air-spotters. No one understood that massive air strikes wouldn't interdict 'coolie' supply routes. The French were unconvinced by Troy.

They believed bridges, tunnels, roadways and railway lines lent themselves to destruction from the air. Other American proponents of extensive heavy-bomber warfare convinced the French High Command that aerial bombardment would destroy Vietminh supply methods. But the most recent attempt to interdict this way had been in Korea, 1953. Codenamed 'Strangle', US round-the-clock bombing had been a dismal failure. Unfortunately the same Americans didn't pass on the fact that, when faced with devastation from the air, the Chinese in Korea had not been defeated.

The Koreans had shifted to using hundreds of thousands of 'coolies'. Human carriers were not restricted to sophisticated road and railway systems. Mao Tse Dung's Chinese coolie system had successfully supplied troop requirements, again.

Seventy-five percent of all combat aircraft in Indochina continued unabated bombing and strafing against Giap's supply lines from February to April 1954. The Americans poured aircraft into North Vietnam to help the French maintain firepower superiority.

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To counter this, the Vietminh boosted their very accurate, Czech-made anti-aircraft guns from about 200 weapons two years earlier to almost 800 flak positions in 1953.

Troy sent back reports explaining how the Vietminh made a fetish of camouflage, of hacking alternate routes and of speedily rebuilding damaged ones. Route 41, all the way from Tuyen Quang, crawled into the Dien Bien Phu valley then wandered straight down and parallel to the river Nam Yum. This road had taken 20,000 coolies to build. Impressed from local villages they had slaved for three months to rebuild it. They kept it impervious to air assault and hidden as much as possible from view.

On 'Day One' the 13th March, the Vietminh outgunned French artillery and made local air support redundant by destroying all aircraft on the ground at Dien Bien Phu.

This 'mother of all battles' would be an infantry war using ancient siege tactics. The French field commanders knew this and took what precautions they could. The best of them scrounged whatever made bunker material. They denuded the valley of trees. Scavenged wood, bricks and concrete. Anything to protect their troops. But the French High Command had also not bargained on adverse weather conditions.

February through to April, the crachin period produced maximum precipitation. Visibility is very poor over Tonkin during its drizzly crachin. This had been factored into Giap's equation for the total destruction of French forces in eastern Tonkin, but not by the French. With winter monsoons on their way, humidity stayed at a high level. Abundant rainfall from the winter monsoons assured Dien Bien Phu of very heavy clouds and humidity frequently peaking at one-hundred percent.

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Nor had the French read their maps. Dien Bien Phu was the only valley in the western Tonkin mountains shown on maps as a perennial swamp. Its French defenders sweated. The last shreds of vegetation had disappeared with the construction of forts.

Le Duc Dat also sweated in the crachin. Now political commissar to the 308th Regimental commander, he watched on a hill immediately north of Gabrielle. From the tree-line. He looked at a valley that had lost its innocence, transformed from an isolated group of quiet villages nestled among waving platforms of yellow rice into a vast defended underground city.

Gabrielle bristled with wire, guns and mortars. It earned its nickname 'Torpedo Boat' by winning a strongpoint competition organised by Colonel de Castries, base commander, because it had the best defensive works. Encircled by barbed wire, its defenders felt impregnable. Their super-heavy 120mm mortars had been well dug-in and registered on 'most-likely targets' along with the regiment's own 81mm mortars.

It stood inviting initial assault. Dat's troops stood ready and waiting.

The Fifth Vietnamese Parachute Battalion dropped from six-hundred feet.

The Vietnamese paras and Algerians combined to defend Gabrielle. Many paras died from Vietminh artillery airbursts before they touched the ground. Survivors fought ten miles to the French lines, dodging artillery fire. Quickly re-assembled, the Algerians and Vietnamese of Gabrielle were ready. They knew they didn't have long.

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The 'Fifth' was a proud unit and an inaugural part of the small 'l'Armie de Vietnam'. Dien Bien Phu saw the last Vietnamese units fighting alongside French regular troops.

Beatrice bristled to Dat's left as he looked south down the valley.

The Vietminh's opening salvo fell on Beatrice at precisely 1700 hours. Within an hour, Dat's sister division, the 312th, pressed hard against its perimeter wire. Their tactics, to win at all costs their "Victory at the Front".

At 1830 hours the command post filled with its senior officers. As Colonel Gaucher started to speak, a Vietminh artillery round landed directly in front of him.

Only one officer was unscathed. Gaucher had both arms torn off and his legs smashed. A sliver shredded his chest and he died, bubbling his last words, in the arms of his chaplain. At 2130 hours a message was received, "The Viets are all over the place." Three hours later, immediately before the radio went dead, its operator called down his own artillery on himself. He'd been cut in two by it. The end had begun.

One fourth of Dien Bien Phu's ammunition had been expended in one night.

Rain clouds prevented ammunition resupply and the evacuation of wounded. Early next morning the skies cleared. All were dismayed by a humid, sun-drenched stink. Only 194 officers and men had survived out of over 750 in Beatrice's garrison.

The stench of their five-hundred and fifty-six broiling corpses was overpowering.

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Dat allowed a burial party to Beatrice. It would be the last time. The French made political capital out of it. It boosted French morale, flagging after the loss of Beatrice. At lunchtime, Dat's burial party reported that Beatrice's defences had been shattered.

Gabrielle silhouetted the evening sky as Giap's artillery pounded it to numbness.

The Vietminh artillery ranged accurately onto the heavy mortars protecting Gabrielle. But the 308th Divisional Commander, Major General Vuong Than Vu, was unwilling to pay the price in troop losses made by the 312th on Beatrice. This 'Iron Division', Giap's most seasoned, was manned mostly by Hanoi volunteers. They'd battled Navarre's troops in December at Luang Prabang, tying down extra French. By the end of January they'd marched one-hundred-and-twenty miles back to Dien Bien Phu.

They followed direct orders from Giap, who ordered, "No more human wave attacks" ignoring the advice of Chinese generals attached to his headquarters. In Korea two of its 'experts' had used human wave attacks to finally overwhelm the Americans' devastating masses of automatic weapons, airpower and artillery.

Giap counted on his preponderance of eight-to-one in infantry troops: strict compliance by all troops of anti-malarial precautions: bicycles for transporting supplies: and strong 'Ho Chi Minh' sandals made from car tyres.

These were not issues on which European or Chinese generals based success in war. This was one battle Giap determined he'd get right. He changed tactics. Convinced this time the French had dug themselves a grave.

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Giap decided not to overreach himself in a quick battle but to assure victory by 'Advance cautiously and strike surely'. He planned to fight "a series of siege battles having the character of positional warfare that will be fought over a long time. We will achieve absolute superiority, sector by sector, until the whole garrison is crushed." His 'Phase One' envisaged the total destruction of Him Lam (Beatrice): Doc Lap (Gabrielle): and Ban Keo (Anne-Marie), the three northern outposts.

"Hell" opened its gates for Gabrielle at 1800 hours. Then the rain burst in torrents.

Vinh, crouching against the ramparts of Doc Lap, (meaning 'Independence') knew little of all this, following simple instructions, "To close with and kill the enemy." Bugles blew as a holocaust descended and Gabrielle disappeared like a candle blown out. The earth shook, writhed and contorted. Darkness descended.

A hurricane of machine-gun fire roared like a dragon's breath, killed off anyone who ventured from the trench's safety. Behind him men were torn to shreds in scores. Vinh clambered his way up the north-west ridge and the steeper face of Gabrielle. The crest above him covered most of his waiting troops from direct fire. Once they cleared it however, they faced withering machine-gun fire. Vinh led a charge into the shadows. He felt rather than saw the sixty or more troops behind him emerge like rats from their holes. Rain made the almost vertical mud face slippery. He reached behind to assist his sergeant and best friend, Doan. They would lead the way through the wire.

"Tien Lien" or "Forward", the Vietminh battle-cry urged him on. The bombardment had torn huge holes on the top that quickly filled with water.

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He yelled "Tien Lien" to encourage those closest then staggered and scrambled his way in and out of the shell holes. The engineers got in front to blast the barbed wire entanglements then fell behind as Vinh, Doan and a handful of his soldiers scampered through. Large bodies appeared crouched in their trenches. They had to be enemy.

Vinh fired, called behind to get someone to blast the machine-gun that was decimating his troops. He fell into a huge hole, scattered with the debris of concrete, wood and destroyed radio sets. Dismembered bodies lay sundered. It was too large to be a post. God smiled. One of Vinh's company radio operators, lost and disoriented, staggered against him. Vinh's company commander had been killed.

Between flares, lightning strikes and bomb blasts Vinh gauged that he crouched in a company command post and relayed that information back through the operator. Out of the chaos, he found himself surrounded by about twenty of his original company. He placed three machine-guns and their support infantry in captured emplacements and reorganised for the counter-attack he expected.

Time to pause. Soaking wet, he looked around, dry-mouthed. Miracle of miracles, he'd survived. Adrenalin fired his veins. He'd finished up in this hole with four of his men. Doan smiled at him grimly. The ground around them smoked. Earth lit up periodically from enemy flares and the explosions of his own artillery fire. Screams of wounded filled the space between explosions.

In the intermittent flashes, Earth looked ripped, raped and bleeding. Momentarily he felt the loneliest man on the planet. These ghosts around him depended on him.

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Then one thing remained. To hold the ground so bravely won by others.

Vinh grasped Doan's hand. Shared Doan's physical strength. Vinh wormed to the next position. Asked the leader's name. He reassured others. Moved on into the night.

"I am a snake", he thought, "slithering and sliding from hole to hole." At the next he appointed a leader. Troops there seemed too fazed to care. Returning, he remembered what happened next as a later nightmare.

Looking six feet tall, black men of the Algerian battalion emerged from the smoke. Vague and gigantic in the gloom, they became real as a betraying flare lit up Vinh's position. Their faces set, bayonets already fixed, the only warning he had was a hail of hand-grenades followed by the withering fire of tommy-guns. Behind Vinh and his handful of men he heard the crump of French mortars. Vinh sweated cold. Tensed as a cobra. Then hissed, white-hot at the hateful French words he'd heard so many times

"Vite, vite ...avancez ...allons vite". His nightmare riveted him.

Fighting mad, night became a whorl of rattling machine-guns, isolated bravery and mayhem. He parried a bayonet thrust. Fired once. The Frenchman's head disappeared in a torrent of blood and brains. He fired and fired until his gun ran red-hot.

The Algerians took cover. Vinh heard, in some space in the brain reserved by leaders, the groups he'd set in place also fighting for their lives. His machine-gunner stopped firing. Yelled, "Stoppage". The word ran like an incendiary through Vinh's brain.

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All weapons swung to protect the gunner who stripped his machine-gun. By sense of touch alone and in the darkness he first found, then exchanged, a damaged firing-pin. Hands moved faster than thought. He re-assembled the machine-gun: pushed home the piston-rod: slapped on the cover: then raised it to his shoulder.

The Algerians rushed. Vinh caught them by surprise in the open. Mowed then down.

One of them, torn to shreds, still reached their hole and killed Vinh's machine-gunner.

Vinh yelled. "Fall Back. Doan, take the lead." More Algerians rose.

Vinh gathered the dead man's weapon. Fired into bodies emerging like phantoms from a bloodied earth. When bullets whistled over his head from the rear he knew it was safe to move. He pulled apart the machine-gun and scattered the bits before collecting another weapon from a dead Vietminh, checked for spare magazines then he retreated to the hole where Doan waited. Vinh repeated the process. Each time the Algerians were kept at bay by his machine-gun, then Vinh waited for Doan's welcome overhead shots and before his scrambled retreat, he left the machine-gun in many parts, buried in the mud. They slithered back over the crest. Then silence.

A long silence. The Vietminh guns stopped. The Algerians seemed happy to remain in recaptured ground. The cost had been great. Vinh checked his watch. He couldn't believe what it read. His watch showed 0230 hours. The chaos and murder had lasted eight hours. The respite seemed an eternity. Vinh collected new troops and added them to his survivors. Word had spread. Many wanted to be near the two heroes.

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At 0330 hours precisely the second bombardment rained down. Added to it were two more batteries and their ranging fell accurately on the battered command-post Vinh had recently vacated and its remnant of hardy Algerians.

“Tien Lien..” A cry as old as warfare screamed from Vinh’s throat. “Over the top.”

The line stalled. An Algerian machine-gunner enfiladed the Vietminh and wreaked havoc. Unhurt, Vinh yelled at Pham Van Tuy, newly attached to his group, who dragged a hand-built, wheeled 75mm bazooka. His bazooka fired three accurate shots within 150 yards of the machine-gun post. Destroyed it. Became a ‘hero’.

By 0400 hours, Vinh was back on top. Pulverized, and the trench system all but destroyed in the second, more lethal bombardment, soon Vinh and his men clambered around the same headquarters he’d fought so vainly for an hour-and-a-half previously.

The enemy mortars on Gabrielle had been silenced.

As a maxim of the battle for Dien Bien Phu, Giap had maintained “after the opening of the first breach one must immediately penetrate into the interior of the enemy-fortified position and hold that penetration to the bitter end.”

As with all strategic and tactical directives this had been handed in written form to all senior officers. Then it was passed, unchanged, by word of mouth to the lowliest soldier. Vinh laid this directive in his heart. Pressed forward and secured Gabrielle. Feeling invincible, all shared some symbiotic exaltation, despite their casualties.

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Ho Chi Minh signalled his brave troops, "You will overcome all difficulties and hardships to fulfil your glorious task." It was a badly needed morale lifter.

His indomitable sergeant, Doan, still following him, Vinh fought his way to the central command post by 0430 hours. There he found one battalion commander had a leg torn off and the other officers riddled with artillery splinters. Vinh organized another group to relay the French officers and their Algerians back as prisoners.

Beatrice was destroyed and Gabrielle all but lost.

At 0530 hours, Langlais' counter-attack attempted Gabrielle's recapture. In that special part of his war-related brain Vinh heard the deep-throated rumble of tanks an hour-and-a-half later. Grimed and soaking-wet he fought on.

By 0600 hours, Vinh had "penetrated into the interior of the enemy-fortified position." He stood determined to "hold that penetration to the bitter end."

Simultaneously Giap launched diversionary attacks from the east on Elaine and Dominique, south of Beatrice and part of the main French defence system. A strategic mistake caused the failure of the French assault.

The Nam Yum river bisected the central and main position. Rain had swelled the river. This Vietminh second full-scale attack threatened to split the main force in two. Its intensification stopped the counter-attack force at the flooded ford. Extremely accurate artillery fire focussed on the French at the ford.

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The French-commanded Vietnamese troops balked. Indigenous Vietnamese and Thai troops made up nearly sixty percent of the French force of 13,000 holding Dien Bien Phu. Momentum was lost and the counter-attack fizzled.

Withdrawal was ordered at 0700.

Tran Ngoc Doan, Vinh's sergeant, planted the Vietminh blue flag with its red star on top of the command-post they had twice attacked. Victorious, this time they'd stay.

At 0700 hours, as a new dawn broke over the valley, Vinh had a moment of extreme pride as he watched his friend plant their flag. Vietminh pith helmets covered Gabrielle. Both French battalion commanders had been taken prisoner. All prisoners were ordered to walk toward the Vietminh lines. Sensing their hesitation, Vinh told them to step on the bodies of the Vietminh that carpeted the wire and the minefields. This would prevent expected casualties from unexploded mines.

The soaking wet and combat-dazed Algerians followed orders. Suddenly, the snaky line stopped. Vinh strode to the front. The Algerian silently pointed. A Vietminh rifleman hung in the wire. Sliced open, his intestines stretched over the barbed wire. Still alive, he looked into Vinh's eyes, his mouth silently opening and closing.

Vinh shrugged. "Step on him. He has done his duty for the glorious People's Army."

French survivors of Gabrielle who'd joined the counter-attack force were pinned below Gabrielle. As the morning mist rose, Vinh directed murderous fire on their retreat. Hampered it all the way.

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Finally they staggered to the central encampment, now the northernmost strongpoints of Anne-Marie and Hugette. Vinh listened to single shots where lone French survivors were determined to fight to the death. One final shot, then silence. He smiled, grimly.

The cost of Gabrielle had been heavy on both sides but Vinh was victorious. The *Bo-Doi*, (Vietminh infantry) had lost over a thousand dead and up to three-thousand wounded from their best units.

308th Division rejoiced. The French had lost the battle. Next they'd lose the war.

At 0900 hours the next morning, Le Duc Dat had also heard the isolated shots ringing their toll over the last intrepid defenders of a dead Gabrielle.

The French people were misled. Dubbed 'the fortress' back in France, Dien Bien Phu's forts and central command had no connecting trench system: no common belt of barbed wire entanglements: and no extensive minefields. The central 'hedgehog', four independent strongpoints, was exposed from Dat's high vantage point.

The pre-existing road system connecting the hamlets to the village had long gone, replaced by the deep-rutted tracks of tanks and heavy vehicles that connected the various strongpoints.

Conventional mines had been sown among selected barbed-wire entanglements. French engineers had also secreted ten-gallon drums of gel, or napalm, which they hoped, when detonated, would incinerate the enemy.

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Little evidence of rice fields remained. The stark ruins of the pre-war French Resident's villa stood mute testimony to the inventiveness of the Moroccans commanding Elaine. They had used its stone to help shore up their bunkers.

Within five-hundred yards from each position, two peaks dominated Dominique and Elaine, both in enemy hands and both covered by jungle. The French defenders couldn't see the enemy. The Vietminh could see every detail of the French defence.

The *raison d'être* for Dien Bien Phu had ceased to exist in February 1954.

The justification offered for its positioning and establishment identified the valley as a major staging area for Vietminh incursions into Laos. Denial of Laos to the Vietminh seemed therefore essential. Dien Bien Phu, as a significant factor in Laos' defence, had been rendered useless. The Iron Division moved freely in and out of Laos.

The reality of a successful prolonged defence of Dien Bien Phu, or of the defensibility of the area immediately around it, had also disappeared. The first two battles for the control of the valley had thrown the balance to Giap. Vietminh commanded the heights, were well-concealed and gripped the valley in a vice with four communist divisions. Giap needed reinforcements and they came in tens of thousands. Small numbers of French reos dribbled in by parachute.

1105 hours on the Tuesday, 16th March and for the second time, Major Bigeard's 6th Parachute Battalion landed at Dien Bien Phu. Over half of the 613 paras were Vietnamese and excellent fighters.

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Bigearde landed badly near Isabelle, hobbled to a waiting jeep and raced a zig-zag course to meet Castries in the main bunker. His battalion reached Dien Bien Phu by 1630. The Vietminh exploded a hidden napalm cache meant for Bigearde. An atomic-bomb type mushroom cloud welcomed him. It would prove an ominous warning.

Bigearde boasted, "If it's possible, it's done: if it's impossible, it will still be done."

This induced a sense of false optimism. But the truth was that, since leaving Dien Bien Phu in November, his unit had fought stubborn Vietminh forces in southern Laos before being brought back to Hanoi. Just nine days earlier Bigearde had fought a vicious night battle against a veteran and highly skilled Vietminh commando unit.

His battalion had lost casualties in the intervening four months and was battle-weary.

De Castries nevertheless issued an operation order. "The whole fate of the Indochina War will be decided here. Everything rides on us. A few more days and we shall have won and the sacrifices made by our comrades shall not have been made in vain."

In the Hanoi headquarters of the French High Command, General Cogy's high optimism had been replaced by deep depression. He was not fooled by de Castries morale-booster. He convinced himself that he'd known for months that Dien Bien Phu was a 'mousetrap waiting to be sprung'. But by Giap, not the French.

On the same day he sent a top-secret telegram to his commander-in-chief General Navarre, "A disaster at Dien Bien Phu must be considered a real possibility."

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Navarre disagreed. Many years after, the two generals still argued their differences.

Giap decided to 'hold the line'. He ordered selective probes and aggressive patrols for the next two weeks whilst he refitted and re-organised the next phase, which was to be "The total destruction of French forces in Dien Bien Phu."

On a visit to 308th Division during the lull, General Giap recognised Le Duc Dat.

He presented Dat his latest medal then re-assigned him to Giap's own headquarters, with the mission to gather as much information as possible before the next phase. Le Duc Dat was alerted that Giap had determined a change in strategy. All infantry and artillery, other than those directly engaged with de Castries troops, were to withdraw.

The battle for Dien Bien Phu would now be fought, "using soldier's brains, not their bodies." They were to stay in the jungle hideouts, practice camouflage and rest and refit. Even in the initial phase, Giap insisted on warm food every day for his troops.

This was a luxury the French couldn't afford. Malaria became a constant, Le Duc Dat had suffered his first bout about twelve months before, but around Dien Bien Phu quinine anti-malaria tablets were in very short supply. Every soldier learned to live with malaria. Dat went down with the 'sweats' about once every three weeks. Many others battled with the worse features of malaria two and three times a month. Dat normally continued working. Sometimes he'd 'go down' for seven days. More rare, he felt with intense relief that he'd become immunised against the debilitating aspects that made many bedridden and feverish.

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He slept on the ground wrapped in a parachute silk the French had been good enough to supply him with during one of their many airdrops that landed in Vietminh territory. Many officers and their soldiers slept on a banana tree leaf laid on a plastic sheet taken often from the wrappings around the French supply drops. Few had mosquito nets and this was the one luxury Giap afforded himself.

Dat had asked that Vinh be seconded to him with Vinh's specially trained reconnaissance squad. This time together felt special. Together the two men enjoyed rare forays for pig and monkey to supplement their rice-ball diet.

Their main concern was the tigers. They instilled primitive dread. One night he and Vinh had been scouting. The moon was high and everything bathed in its unwordly light. They were in the jungle on one of the two Vietminh-held hills to the east of the redoubt. The smell of the tiger was as overpowering as was the fear. Elephants still roamed wild in this area but they thrashed about, made loud trumpeting noises and instinctively avoided close contact with humans. The rutting of the wild pigs was noisy but again, the whiff of man and they were off.

A tiger was different. Older ones were more dangerous. Especially if they'd already tasted human meat. This deep-throated snuffle Dat had heard once before. Two weeks prior, one of his men had been dragged, head first, off his sleeping mat. The man's screams had been smothered in the tiger's throat. The crack of the man's neck as the tiger thrashed him about was louder than a rifle-shot. The trail next morning led finally to the bloody half-eaten remains stashed in deep undergrowth.

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The Vietnamese imbued a tiger with magical powers. Spirits of long-dead villains. Malign spirits intent on death and destruction. The Chinese invested them with aphrodisiacal and special healing powers. This one had already tasted human flesh. Now, hungry again, the old tiger was slowing down. Jungle food was harder to catch. Humans had proven easier. The tiger's smell grew strong and its growls more throaty.

Dat forcibly restrained a timorous soldier. Quickly and silently he spread each squad out in a wide circle. Dat and Vinh had already organised their men into four-man squads, each with a corporal commanding. Sergeants commanded two squads each. Dat stayed on the perimeter and put Vinh with his sharpshooter squad.

Troy, asked to do so by Dat, had trained Vinh's sharpshooters a year or two earlier. Dat placed them in the centre. One squad pointed in each direction. They tied the white-faced one to a tree close to Vinh. Gagged his mouth. They daren't light a fire. Good way to scare Tiger but the French would see it and shoot.

"The tiger won't break through the cordon." Le Duc Dat said in a hoarse whisper. "Comrade Vinh and his three sharpshooters will be the only ones to fire. Our best defence is to hold firm and to look after each other. Weapon in the shoulder. Wait until it is so close you cannot miss. Squad commanders only will give the command."

Each man pressed two feet away from the next on the perimeter, certain the men each side of him could sense his fear, his sweating body, Le Duc Dat sensed theirs. Then, immediately to his front he saw, reflected in the full light of the moon, two beady eyes looking directly at him. As his mind registered, "ten feet away" Le Duc Dat froze.

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Memories of childhood stories and the panic they instilled gripped him. His eyes locked on the tiger's. Green-slitted eyes hypnotised by dark-brown slanted ones.

Inside the creature's mind Le Duc Dat swished its tail. Tensed rippling muscles. Tiger judged the distance separating him from his meal. A deeper and more fear-wrenching growl tore across the space. Tiger rose slightly. Then sprang. Slanted eyes shut.

A single shot rang out. A hard, thudding sound as it penetrated Tiger's bony skull. All sound silenced in the jungle. Slitted-green lights extinguished in a nano-second. The creature's head drooped in mid-flight. Tiger hit the earth with a heavy, floppy plop. Its extended claws close enough to Le Duc Dat to knock his cold AK-47 aside.

But, Le Duc Dat's grip was that of a dead man. Claws slashed the back of his hand, deeply. Tiger gave one long deep sigh. Shuddered then went still. Silence reigned.

Then a babble of loosened fear until Vinh growled "Silence. Hold your positions." He joined Le Duc Dat. Rested his hand on Le Duc Dat's shoulder. "Good shot, Uncle."

They both stood up together and Vinh moved forward. "May I, Comrade." Not waiting, Vinh grasped a limp paw and removed two claws with his sharp bayonet. He gave one to a silent Le Duc Dat. Retained one. Both silently placed the claw in their pocket. Jungle sounds restored, Le Duc Dat gave permission for each soldier to take some souvenir. There was plenty for all. Even for the gagged one.

They remained close until just before dawn. No other tiger would ever worry them.

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By the 24th March, Giap was ready to, 'apply piecemeal occupation tactics.' He decided to use classic trench warfare. "From the west, east and north, our lines of attack advance ... At that time, to kill more of them (the French), to occupy one more inch of ground, is of great significance."

Giap opened the second phase of the battle. It involved slow strangulation by digging extensive trench systems, reminiscent of WWI, nearer and nearer the forward French positions. Engineer moles linked their encirclement and dug from their perimeter trenches to within ten to fifteen feet. Then shovelled to within five and ten feet. Sometimes tunnelling into and underneath the fortified hill positions themselves. A steady trickle of deserters ensured that Le Duc Dat's information gathering assured a constant flow of accurate information.

A German ex-legionnaire actively assisted 308 Division in the control of artillery.

His forward observers spotted every move by the French whereas the French couldn't see their enemy. Communist dispositions were either in the jungle, too well camouflaged, behind the hills or, like moles, burrowed toward and underneath. The French could hear but, frustrated, could do nothing.

Each day, Bigeard sent a strong fighting group to force the road open between its southern extreme position, Isabelle with main headquarters. Supported by tanks this routine could normally be successfully completed by noon.

On the 24th a bazooka attack on the tanks effectively stopped this.

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Also on the 24th, despite a fierce battle by the French to control their airfield, Giap's troops "advanced toward the airfield, met there then tunnelled their way across, cutting it. The central airfield was occupied."

Despite desperate attacks to reverse this situation the Vietminh continued to hold it. With fatal results for the French.

Communist shock units continued to penetrate deep into French lines. Their massacre of transport planes continued unabated and the last hospital aircraft to leave Dien Bien Phu airfield barely escaped in a rain of mortar fire on the 25th March. Attempts to break through the circle of trenches proved costly, often reverting to hand-to-hand fighting and grenades. By 27th March, even this became too costly.

Tet, but no time for a Vietnamese feast. Even so many of Giap's troops were treated with rice cakes, rice wine, cold meat and vegetables. Prepared by the local people.

The French, often forced to go hungry, watched in dismay as vital food, equipment and ammunition fell from their aircraft onto Communist positions, or in no-man's land where its extrication cost too many lives.

The Vietminh merely tunnelled their way and retrieved the French intended supplies.

Dat was sent to explain in detail a particular French target to an artillery battalion commander. The man's name was Kurt Schraeger. A German legionnaire, he'd surrendered, joined the communists and was placed in charge of a battalion of guns.

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Dat could not know the man had been a Gestapo torturer.

French command of the battle for Dien Bien Phu had now passed from de Castries to a fraternity of senior officers who conducted the battle without regard to rank. Known as the para 'Mafia' it consisted of Langlais, nominally 'Chief', Giraud, Botella, Bigeard, Tourret the Tank Commander and de Castries Chief of Staff, Seguin-Pazzis.

Hugette, on the opposite side of the main position to Beatrice, was being battered.

A fortified position overlooking the airfield, it was essential to the protection of the airfield and the central or main position of Dien Bien Phu.

At 0200 hours Sunday 28th March, Major Bigard, given *carte blanche* to destroy the dangerously effective communist artillery position to the west of Hugette, tasted his last real victory. In his briefing, Bigeard's scorn about the 'turncoat Nazi' commanding the artillery position had a different effect on Troy, dressed now as a French officer and seconded with Bigeard.

Barrel-chested 'Bruno' had earned his nom de plume as a resistance leader before commanding one of the most battle-hardened of the French Indochina paras.

He orchestrated an intricate operation that included him commanding five battalions and the firepower of two artillery battalions. All scrounged from the meagre resources of the Dien Bien Phu base. His simple plan had been an attack starting at 0600 hours.

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It was Troy's first experience of an infantry action led by rolling, thunderous barrages from French mortars and artillery followed by massive air strikes. "How can human beings survive?" But Germans did at El Alemein and on 'D' Day 6th of June 1944.

Troy realised that he still carried a hate for one of them in particular. He wondered? Was this turncoat Kurt Schraeger? ... Who'd tortured Yvonne to death in Prague?

Then the smoke and noise of battle and the need to survive thrust all other thoughts from Troy's mind. The attack slowed, pinned down by mortars and artillery until Bigeard silenced them with a massive air strike, mainly napalm. Then French tanks arrived, reminding Troy of Custer's last stand, except in this case the cavalry arrived on cue. A cheer torn from his dry throat joined about a thousand others.

Re-invigorated, Troy got caught up with 6th Battalion Para Commando (BPC) in their frenzied bayonet charge and the hand-to-hand fighting that ensued. Troy smelt blood. It engorged his nostrils. His head remained cold and clear. He saw as in a slow-motion film, Vietminh mingled everywhere, caught in a survival frenzy.

The balance had reversed. Until that moment all had been a Vietminh victory. Bigeard had turned the tables on them and they were in shock. The French should have been demoralized, already half beaten. But these were avengers from Hell. Bigeard!... The very name struck a fear chord in the bravest of the Vietminh. Indomitable, his reputation was fearsome. He had NEVER lost a battle.

Troy exulted in the bloodbath. Every fibre of his being had no thought but survival.

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Impregnable as a Samurai he had no time to change magazines. His Garand's long bayonet parried then pointed. Troy thrust it firmly in the enemy's soft gut. Fired. One round meant one dead. He extricated the sharpened and pointed blade, turned and parried again. Eye contact. A Vietminh attempted to thrust into Troy's side. Troy killed him. A grenade burst deadly fragments nearby. Troy heard its 'z-i-n-g'.

Combat is outside any frame of reference. It is personal and Gladiatorial.

A piece of shrapnel thuds into another body close-by. Eyes remains locked into eyes. Steel thrashes against steel. Animal heat glares. The smell of Death hovers. One will die. He shudders as his rifle stock takes the full force.

The enemy makes a mistake. Troy balances on his feet like the leopard he takes his name from. Nerves fire from his navel-centre. Electrify him. Short hairs all over his body respond. Every muscle, finely honed, makes him a perfect killing machine.

A cool feeling radiates from his forehead. Troy knows the man's already dead. Troy points then feints: holds then, with the full focus of energy on the tip of his bayonet he thrusts. The wide eyed man senses his moment of death. Troy fires.

The man's life-energy explodes out his back with his intestines. "G-e-r-o-n-i-m-o." Troy's para yell explodes. The man falls.

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At 1500 hours, the sweating, bloodstained para survivors looked around in surprise. For vital minutes Bigeard commanded the battlefield. Three-hundred and fifty enemy corpses littered the area but he didn't have enough men to hold the ground. Its cost neutralised its effect. Bigeard couldn't sustain one-for-one losses. Every French soldier killed meant no replacement but Giap outnumbered him ten-to-one and had unlimited reinforcements. Bigeard was forced to withdraw to the main position.

Once inside Dien Bien Phu's main centre, things got worse. Night fell. Gave Colonel Langlais new concerns. Thousands of coolies lit their hurricane lamps east of the valley. For once the Vietminh 'glow worms' exercised no caution. It augered an ominous sign of confidence among the Vietminh and "Victory at the Front."

Then the monsoon rains really set in. Sogginess affected the bodies and minds of the slowly strangling garrison. Langlais covered Elaine, cornerstone of the whole main position, with a thin veneer of his best troops. Old Baldy, a 535 foot-high feature dominated the southern portion of Elaine but the French could do nothing about it. East of the keystone, Elaine now faced the full force of Vinh's 308th Division.

Worse, Dominique's defence rested on five key hill features, but Claudine and Françoise were separated from Dominique by the Nam Yum River. Small battles, gunfire and mortars made the garrison's daily life an unabated inferno.

The final days of March gave no respite. Langlais attempted to feed his garrison with a hot meal. Ordered for 1800 hours, his men trudged to the meal points, collecting extra ammunition. Some even shifted location.

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On Claudine, Troy slowly recovered from the attack on the German's artillery post. He'd showered, changed clothes and ate, but still felt drained. Reserves of energy, so freely available during his rampage, took time to restore. Troy was desperate to check whether anyone had heard of the German. Still Sunday, he decided to visit wounded survivors. It was the last time Troy would visit the underground hell.

It stank of congealed blood, suppurating sores and the excretions of newly dead men.

He caught a glimpse of Genevieve, already a legend among the troops and dubbed "The angel of Dien Bien Phu" by French reporters who'd never see what Troy had just seen. Paul Grauwin the doctor, hard at work, merely glanced in Troy's direction

Genevieve, a nurse in French Air Force coveralls, had flown in to save survivors but Vietminh shells had grounded her. Now she dressed in more practical, tailored para outfit. In three weeks time, the Lieutenant would be ordered to the Main Command Post, not far from the Hospital. Lifting the blackout curtain she'd be surprised by de Castries, Langlais and Bigeard.

"Genevieve, c'était pour toi."

Langlais had been able to find a battered *croix de guerre*. One of the officers had been granted the white enamel cross and the blood-red ribbon of *La Legion d'Honneur avec la crois du Roi*. No one, in the whole of Dien Bien Phu, could argue that this demure lady hadn't earned her honours in the hell-hole of the hospital. Somehow, her softening presence changed the way a man suffered or died.

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“Par l’*autorité* qui m’est *conférée*, je te donne...” Bigeard had been deeply affected.

War has moments of mystique as well as horror. The memory of what Bigeard said and what had been conferred on Genevieve, momentarily blocked out reality for Troy.

Then the hospital’s full gruesome-ness returned, with its smells, humidity and noise. Grauwin raised sweat-filled eyes. Nodded glumly. Operating lights glared. Atrocious smells invaded Troy’s nose. His gullet retched. Vomit remained just a cough away.

Grawin’s primary problem seemed to Troy to be lack of space. Rooms had to be continually added to make space for the wounded and suffering. Maggots from the putrefying corpses nearby sluggishly crawled their way into the festering wounds of the waiting or recovering wounded. The airdrops couldn’t extend to disinfectant when it was all they could do to keep up the blood plasma and other essentials.

Troy stopped gagging enough to ask. Somehow the German had escaped. Ten prisoners had been captured. They told Troy the man was definitely German, tall and with a sabre scar slashed from under his right eye to his mouth.

Tuesday was relatively quiet and started with routine dawn patrols. Two hills, Phony Hill to the north-east of Elaine and Baldy Hill to its south worried Langlais. In his perimeter inspection tour, both were within heavy machine-gun and light mortar range. Vietminh activity was secreted behind them and dominated Elaine’s garrison. Industrious Vietminh engineers had turned Phony Hill’s guts into a labrynth. The rains never let up. Giap’s eyes fell next on Dominique.

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Precisely at 1800 the massive firepower of 312 and 316 Divisions fell on Dominique's hills. Initial assault waves of the Vietminh infantry hugged close to their own barrage. Le Duc Dat and Vinh's troops waited, holding Gabrielle to the north.

The French always expected the Vietminh would occupy Phony Hill with troops. Ignoring expectations, Vietminh sappers bored through to the centre of the hill. They placed huge stores of weapons and equipment in it and created a passage for Vietminh attacking waves. The enemy's infantry emerged very close to the French from these approaches into the French trenches and quickly blasted their way through French minefields and wire entanglements before effective fire could be ranged on them.

Troy listened. The two northernmost hills, D1 and D2 of Dominique took the fiercest pounding. Even from Bigeard's headquarters the earth shook and dirt fell onto the floor. Troy couldn't imagine the ferocity facing the Algerians and T'ais under such a huge bombardment. The scream of incoming shells and mortar bombs deafened him. The smell of cordite and white-hot metal seeped into the bunker.

Disaster hit. Troy heard Bigeard tell Langlais that the Algerians had broken. They'd deserted and run for the shelter offered by the banks of the Nam Yum. The 'second-day' stampede of Algerian and T'ai deserters already honey-combed them. Troy later learned the commander had died a hero in the debris like a sinking ship's Captain. He listened in horror as each of the radios on D1 fell silent, witness to the last stand of valiant soldiers. The paras arrived on D2 in the nick of time to prevent the total disintegration of the Algerians and T'ais. But D2 collapsed: was overrun: and there were no survivors. In the next five days the French would lose two thousand men.

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Some of their best units fought to the last man.

Sporadic voices emerged from radios in Bigeard's headquarters. "Cochons..."

Then, "The Algerian's are bolting ... all I can see are green uniformed Vietminh ... they are everywhere." No sound came from the operators. There was nothing Bigeard could do. Troy listened to the annihilation of one position after another. "Vietminh are pouring in everywhere ... We can't stop them." Men in the dugouts wilted.

Troy fingered his crucifix. More Algerians on D3 looked like following their comrades. Then a miracle occurred. The gunners depressed their guns to minimum. Fired salvo after salvo of high explosive and fragmentation into the hordes of Vietminh clearly visible against the background fires of Hell.

The Vietminh infantry of 312 Division were torn to ribbons. Their assault staggered.

The .50 cal's, grouped as one gun containing four and known as 'quad-fifties', fired enfilade across the front and into the massed bodies of the infantry then ranged onto the hills swarming with Vietminh. The night sky lit up with tracers and forced the Vietminh to take cover. Couldn't escape the murderous red talons tearing them apart. Parts of the 312th 'People's Army' Division's attack ground to a halt.

Elaine came next.

"The fucking Morroccans are bugging out." The strangled yell came from E4.

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Elaine bore the brunt of savage artillery pounding that rattled Troy's dugout. Earth slipped and dust fell as Troy coughed, listened and waited. The Vietminh's recoilless rifles now blasted holes in E2's 500 foot high body. The steady but deadly rhythm of heavy Chinese machine-guns added to the cacophony of war.

At 2300 hours, all radios on E2 went dead. No Frenchman had been left alive.

In terrible conditions, French, Moroccan and a company of Bigeard's indefatigable Legionnaires, staged a counter-attack on Elaine. Joined by tanks, they won command of it again. At break of dawn next day, a carpet of Vietminh bodies lay thickly every inch of the five hundred yards on the bomb-blasted slopes separating E2 and the Vietminh position inside Old Baldy. Key positions affording effective defence of the central position remained in French hands. Once more, disaster had been averted.

But French artillery reaction had been severely reduced.

On Wednesday, the last day of March, only eighteen of twenty-four 105mm Howitzers were firing. Of the heavy 155's, two were left. By Thursday, only fourteen out of thirty-two heavy mortars. The battle still had five weeks to go.

In that time, Vietminh would pound Dien Bien Phu with 30,000 shells of 105mm artillery. Over 100,000 shells of 75mm and 57mm calibre weapons and their deadly mortars would be fired without let-up. French-built bunkers, only constructed to withstand 'normal' artillery fire, wouldn't survive. Continuous, murderous and accurate, the Vietminh gunners buried many French troops in their dugouts.

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Dawn on the 31st March unveiled another looming disaster.

The legionnaires on Isabelle attempted to breakthrough to the main fort. They failed. Fighting for their life they battled through a Vietminh blocking position within one mile of home. Then were forced to go back.

Henceforth Isabelle was on its own. Isolated almost three miles to the south.

For the first four days of April, the beleaguered garrison felt heartened by the drip-feeding of the 2nd Battalion. Each night, a company dropped from the sky. Brechignac, its commander, vied with Bigeard as 'bravest of the brave'. He was one of the most accomplished and oldest paras in the French Army. He was on just hand in time to save Hugette, the north-west position securing the main one.

Hugette held the key sector, the airfield and the western entry to the main fort. It nestled against Claudine, where Troy fought out the last days of Dien Bien Phu. Hugette withstood massive bombardments whilst Giap's human wave attacks dug, stormed and clawed their way into the living entrails of the main position.

Volunteers from all over Indochina begged to be dropped, into this final showdown.

Pham was among them. Ho Chi Minh's Land Reforms appalled him. He needed a clean break or to die opposing the Communists, guilty because of the part he'd played. He joined the Vietnamese Fifth Parachute Regiment.

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Mid-April Bigeard moved-in to Langlais' command post. Troy moved with him. Bigeard's 'pride' of paras had rapidly dwindled in the last few weeks. Troy had heard, "If we hold out until 15th April, Giap will give up." Apparently this information had come from a Vietminh *chieu hoi*. There were still some Vietminh who believed the French could win. Bigeard predicted, "It'll be all over before 10th May".

On 4/5th April 1954, whilst Dien Bien Phu's garrison fought for its life, political and strategic issues determined French/Anglo-American relations for decades. Plevin, the French Prime Minister, realized that the bulk of the French people had focussed on Dien Bien Phu was a critical point in French history. The only hope in retaining French pride lay in "Operation Vulture". The Americans had to save them.

Navarre repeatedly refused American help. Now he demanded full American retaliatory power within the next eight days. He'd finally recognised that the only hope of saving Dien Bien Phu, lay in the bomb bays of B-29s based at Clarke Airbase in the Philippines. His telegram read, intervention had to be "Prompt and massive."

John Foster Dulles received the coded requests. Navarre had an American friend. Admiral Radford had fought the Chinese in Korea and he wanted to exterminate the communists wherever they might appear. His plans included an atomic crusade against China. The fears of Congress had alerted a worried President Eisenhower.

The US Seventh Fleet, equipped with 'A' bombs, cruised the Gulf of Tonkin. "Operation Vulture" almost became the 'Tonkin Incident' of the First Indochina War.

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Dulles' response was conditioned by an earlier rebuff of "Operation Vulture" by important leaders of Congress. Dulles needed to bury "Operation Vulture" under the weight of international opinion. To escape Eisenhower's dilemma Dulles determined any response would have to be by consensus of the three great western powers, France, England and Russia. Also, that former American comrades in Korea, namely Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines should to be consulted.

A Geneva Conference, scheduled for 8th May, would also delay critical decisions. A laconic Dulles parried. "It is inconceivable, that the United States should take the initiative in such a warlike act. It would need the prior permission of Congress."

The French Ambassador's disappointment was not checked. "I must express regret to Your Excellency," replied Monsieur Bonnet ironically, "that the possibility was even considered. That the false hopes dashed today were ever raised."

The French request was effectively stymied. The French felt betrayed by America.

The Vietminh destruction of Dien Bien Phu's garrison thus assured, politicians and ambassadors went back to the comfort of their beds.

The French-American concept of once again using a weapon 'brighter than a thousand suns' to this time to exterminate hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese or Chinese and to reduce them to ashes on the soil of their ancestors, was dismissed.

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Le Duc Dat had earlier escorted a fellow student friend of Giap's, Professor Ton That Tung to the Vietminh hospital seven miles north-east of Grauwins operating tables. Tung had been recalled by Uncle Ho from a hospital in the jungles north of Tuyen Quang to be Commander-in-Chief for the duration of the Dien Bien Phu campaign. It sometimes seemed to Le Duc Dat that Tuyen Quang had provided more than its equitable share of personalities as well as soldiers in the fight against the French.

For the first time Dat visited the hospital and he witnessed the plight of the wounded. Legions of yellow flies had laid maggots in his soldier's festering wounds. Most soldiers, buried beneath bloodied bandages and sheets were stoic. Agony streamed from once young eyes. Normally lack-lustre, a flicker of recognition told Dat he was known. Their eyes followed him on that day and haunted him a long time after.

Prior to the approach of the latest storm, Dat's throat had been dried to hoarseness by the crachin. It and concern for his men left his chest constricted around his heart. The hospital was a fevered and sick environment. Beset there by angry biting gnats, blood-sucking leeches and annoying ticks Le Duc Dat realised he, at least, could leave.

The wounded had no choice but to suffer further distress with no foreseeable relief.

Dat's forehead streamed in the humidity brought on by the advancing storm. Other wounded, sitting upright, proudly said, "My wound has been sown together after being scalded with an iron to heal it."

Each told him they would see him shortly, ensured of "Victory at the front."

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For the first time these words sounded hollow to Major Le Duc Dat. He had nothing to offer but wounds, further sickness and more infestations of maggots.

The next major and most costly battles would be around the Hugettes. See-sawing of ownership would last three weeks, exhausting both attackers and defenders.

Dat's exhaustion reached deep into his soul.

His new friend, the professor, specialised in head injuries. Le Duc Dat's soldiers wore only lightweight pith helmets, which were no match for shards or for bullets. A nurse wiped the professor's brow. He opened a skull to lay bare its intruder: applied a suction tube to remove the foreign bodies: then closed the skull again. Young surgeons strained to watch each part of the professor's famous operation procedure.

In the French perimeter, Troy helped Bigeard with communications deception. He trained a number of operators to deploy imaginary battalions: to respond to calls from phantom artillery: and to bring masses of imaginary air strikes against Vietminh units.

The fetor and the sounds of war dominated every moment. Each counter-attack was worse than the last. Mounting casualties, the 'natural attrition' in losses of vital equipment such as radios, guns and mortars, added to the burden of suffering. French guns and mortars before the attack and Vietminh munitions during and after each attack resurrected enemy and friendly corpses. Previously buried to avoid further shredding, they were again dismembered then buried deep, as an incorporate mess.

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To the bitter end, the last 3,000 men holding out - French Legionnaires, Vietnamese paratroopers and North African troops – believed “they can’t let us lose the war”. They remained active combatants out of an original 13,000, despite four full-strength battalions having reinforced the garrison since the start of the battle. The trickle of reinforcements no longer kept pace with the wounded, the dying and the dead.

Their motivation and bravery may also have been influenced by a number of factors.

One was a realistic fear that the garrison would be massacred to the last man.

Another, two days before the end, news flashed the length and breadth of the shrinking perimeter. ‘Condor Force’ was only fifty kilometres away. Belief in a break-through by massive French relief force was an illusion but it sustained faith.

Another rumour ... a relief force from Laos code-named ‘Atlante’ was on its way.

This was Navarre’s impossible dream but it remained an expensive drain on desperately-needed resources. Planned massive airlifts grounded planes and supplies.

The French High Command and people in Europe and America clung to these straws.

They believed the garrison would survive. The men on the ground knew different.

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White mushrooms continued to cascade from the sky with men hanging from them. Men who only days before had hunted the brothels of Saigon. Men who'd hugged a wife or Vietnamese mistress the night before. None had illusions they would survive.

Often the only remark they'd give. "I want to be there with my friends."

In some mystique known only to a warrior brotherhood, they came in singles and in batches. No regular units were available, sucked up in Navarre's ridiculous dreams to relieve the garrison or to protect Laos. Most put on a parachute for the first time.

Others were veterans. They dropped from rain-filled and Death-garnished skies, neither for glory nor for career gain. Most knew they'd die. Dien Bien Phu was doomed. The French Indochina Army knew it. No 'call to arms' had gone out. Yet on they came, these effete officers, white mushrooms for a shroud. Soldiers whose 'tour of duty' had ended and were about to return to France sought to exchange their certain retirement for the dubious glory of a "Last Stand". Race bore no distinction. Vietnamese, North Africans and French Colonial troops, often from dull, boring orderly rooms, joined the desperate men of Dien Bien Phu.

Langlais met each after they had launched themselves through from darkness into the probing fingers of bright searchlights straining to kill them in the air. He hugged each and pinned a para badge on their chest. Then they joined hollow-eyed men who were too tired to wonder why they'd come. The arm-chair pundits were wrong. Langlais had proved he was right. Brave men didn't need to pass the exhaustive criteria of a parachute school to launch themselves from a Dakota, onto a 'hot DZ' and at night.

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All brothers in a community of warriors whose task was to 'hold the ground' or die.

Troy met them as the new men joined severely battered units. Wonderingly they'd look around at the shambles. He'd smile inwardly as they instinctively ducked their heads at their first experience of the murderous sounds of war. Within twenty-four hours they'd sink into the anonymity of self-sacrifice.

No longer able to gingerly respect the piling bodies of the dead that clogged the trenches. Blood merged with mud they'd no longer notice, nor the reek of gangrene.

They'd no longer recognize the shattered remnants of mates who a second before had laughed with them or grumbled their way through a cold, sloppy meal. They'd succumb to the agony humidity inflamed in constantly itching skin rashes. Ignored water constantly flowing around. Suffered silently as feet shredded from foot rot.

Within forty-eight hours they'd be integral to the Dien Bien Phu garrison. Dead.

Or worse, horribly wounded. Grauwin could not contain his pain. With each batch of sorely wounded he'd select ten men he could save and mercifully terminate the others with morphine. The unconscious ones he'd let die. There were limits to what even he could do in the terrible conditions of his underground 'hospital'.

Professor Tung, in his underground 'hospital', fared no better with his Vietminh.

Neither man could be God.

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Unluckily, each night, if exhaustion didn't immediately give reprieve, Troy and Dat would be plagued by fetid processions of maggots eating into their flaying corpses.

Their's and other's nightmare screams would be lost among the louder sounds of war.

Doctor Grauwin reported a startling phenomenon. Starting in the last weeks of April, able-bodied men suddenly died. Went into a permanent sleep at their post. They showed no signs of combat-induced wounds. Concerned but unable to prevent the sudden, inexplicable deaths, he believed they were the outcome of fifty-five days of lack of sleep: poor eating or not eating at all: and being unable to rest.

There seemed no end to the mayhem men wreak on men's bodies, minds and souls.

The final battle for the Hugettes would be fought in the last weeks of April.

Bigearde's men once again led the charge for its relief.

On Sunday, 18th April, the fog was lifting as Bigearde's men ran, singing and yelling as they raced toward the total nakedness of the airfield runway. Half-mile away and south of the Hugettes on Claudine, carried south by the breeze, Lieutenant Bergot heard Bigearde's soldiers singing the Spanish Anarchist's rallying cry...

Si tu madre

If your mother

Quiere un rey

Seeks a king

La barago

The deck of cards

Tienne Cuatro

Has four of them

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The sharp rat-a-tat-tat of machine-guns broke the tension in Vinh's bunker as the French fought their way across the 3,500 foot length of PSP (prefabricated steel plates) that made up the runway. With a month of lethal experiences behind him, Vinh couldn't believe how humans could survive the howling, wasted expanse of the exposed runway. There was no cover. Dispassionately, Vinh stared from the slit of his bunker as he watched the Frenchmen attack.

French helmets appeared. Vinh was shocked. *They're on the lower slopes?* He'd been convinced... *They won't get any further.* But the crazy Frenchmen did.

The French bombardment tore his wire entanglements to shreds. Vinh's troops threw hand grenades as fast as they could, to slow the suicidal attack. Vinh threw one seventy yards. Most of his men tried harder because they knew once the French infantry were within forty yards it would be vicious hand-to-hand combat.

Vinh watched the French casualties mount. He wondered ... *Where are their tanks?*

Tanks would have made it impossible for Vinh and his decimated men to hold on. The French infantry were closing too fast. He distinguished hated white faces.

They've suffered heavy losses getting this far. How can they keep coming?

Between the shelling he heard the squeak and roar as tanks came, trundling noisily. *But this attack seems to be slowing?* A whole line of French attackers paused, sagged like marionettes on a string, then collapsed before him, their life-breath expired.

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The sun's rays now blinded the Frenchmen then addled their brains under their hot steel helmets. Vinh's machine-gunners directed intense fire on them.

Vinh's attention honed only on survival.

Bigearde exploded, "Fuck, There goes another fucking machine-gun and its spares. Probably ammo and grenades too. Hanoi is going to bitch like hell."

His assessment raised a snigger among the 'almost dead'.

No longer human, Bigearde's troops were wolves. He went to see his men on the eastern side of the main position only to meet shadows, tortured by hunger, wounds and battle-fatigue. They looked on with one eye, shook one leg or saluted with their only arm. His men were threatened with destruction on Hugette 2. He rushed to its command post, floundered into only to find a silent, hunched-up commander.

The officer pointed to silent radio sets. "Ca doit coller."

Bigearde found they were off net. Exhausted beyond reason, the man hadn't checked.

At Bigearde's command Troy ordered B-26 strikes with delayed fuzes. French artillery laid down another barrage on the Vietminh positions. Two, now ragged companies were left of the brave ones who had crossed the steel tarmac. The French were within fifty yards of H1. They had attacked the swarms of machine-gun nests. Taken a battering from grenades and well-directed fire.

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At 1530 hours he heard Bigeard give the order to withdraw. Men who earlier had been heard singing their way across the hell of the airfield, now ran in small groups. Each covered the next whilst the other extricated itself from death.

Through the slit of Hugette's command post Troy watched as the officer-in-charge went down with both legs mangled by a sliver of an artillery shell. Two soldiers turned. Tried to recover him. Lieutenant Guerin, deputy commander of the Indochinese company, waved them on.

Then shot himself in the head rather than expose his men and cause more casualties.

The battle for the Hugettes ended on 23rd April. Giap's troops had taken a month.

The assault and holding of the airfield and the dominating Hugette features cost the Vietminh at least three regiments in dead and wounded. The French lost 500 men.

By the beginning of May the Wet had set in, blanketing the battlefield. It caused the dugouts to collapse and trenches to flood. Effective hygiene ceased.

The debris of guns, equipment and bodies often formed sedimentary strands one on top of the other in the squelchy red clay. With each new explosion, guts, brains and putrefaction fell back on top of a bloodied earth like a nightmare deluge. Humidity increased the stench. The rains washed it temporarily clean until the next attack.

Then the cycle of horror started again.

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The stink of burnt flesh, from frequent napalm or the detonated petroleum gel serving as booby-traps, hung constantly in the air. Fresh corpses quickly filled with maggots as multitudes of exotic tropical insects swarmed over them and spawned new types.

Gradually, on the surface, bodies were reduced to unrecognisable pulp by constant bombardment in the steadily shrinking two square miles of space occupied by the main position. Death was always possible in the next bomb or bullet.

Death's constant signature was the heavy crash and boom of gunfire, the whistling then signature crump of mortar-fire, the sharp scream of rockets, the slow crack of heavy and the more dangerous 'humming-bees' of small arms fire.

All served to bludgeon brains into torpor.

Dien Bien Phu's garrison was reduced to the size of a large football field.

Elaine was a chaos of mud, debris and fetid corpses. Each time Troy ventured into the Metro, the local slang for underground trenches, the ricochets and the tiny clouds of dust followed him like an avenging angel. The odd glimpse he had of the battlefield around Dien Bien Phu showed a battleground sown with 90,000 discarded parachutes.

Large splotches of white, jettisoned. Circular poppies to be picked later. By others.

Combat reduces survival to a moment. Time exists as NOW ... No future ... No past.

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Vinh is no longer human. He and Doan protect themselves against annihilation. They do not face men but wild beasts. The French fight like trapped wild animals.

Bigeard is convinced the counter-attack will fail, chooses to leave command of the counter-attack to the commander of the main force It's a fateful decision.

Fighter bombers and B-26s drop their payloads on Hugette to destroy its Vietminh trench networks. Then they strike 'targets of opportunity'.

The garrison's artillery and mortars fire salvos of 1200 rounds.

The Vietminh company, from Vinh's old Iron Division, is hacked to pieces.

The French attackers rise from their trenches at 1400 hours. Storm across the PSP as the metal boils in the afternoon sun. Yelling and screaming 'Sur le plafond', they meet withering fire from well-emplaced Vietminh machine guns.

Vinh, back with his old unit, commands from Hugette's heights. Somehow he and half his men survive the bombardment. They find it difficult to realize how embattled and desperate enemy troops can mount such an inferno after what they'd suffered.

He smiles in pride of accomplishment with the batch of prisoners they'd wrenched from Hugette earlier. Wasted and haggard shadows of their former glory, he'd pushed and prodded them during their shambling, disconsolate walk to the rear unit. He'd used similar French expressions that had once been used on him.

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Vinh immediately set to, restoring revetments for his trenches and strong-points.

He is their victor now and he revels in it. His commander's praise rings in his ears.

And the counter-attack ... from Bigeard. War is a personal combat.

Bigeard's fury causes the hardened Vietminh veterans before him to tremble.

Bombs drop from on high with a bursting roar then the more intimate hell of artillery and mortar shells. Vinh feels the 'deadly tension that scrapes along the spine': the survival-caused deadening of nerve endings and feeling. When the bombs cease there is the excruciating mandible pain, from teeth clamped together to stop the screaming within. His skin is taut as a drum, 'painfully stretched over repressed madness'.

He looks around in his bunker. Meets eyes stared vacantly into some abyss from which sometimes madness emerges. A new recruit has a fit. Vinh's sergeant, Doan, has already drawn Vinh's attention to the young man.

He grinds his teeth. Clenches and unclenches his fists. Suddenly he stands up.

Doan obstructs, "Where are you going?" He meets a mad dog's glowering eyes.

"I need to go home." He tries to push past. "I'm the last son my mother has."

Eyes protrude, are distant. "I must g-o-o-o." The last ends in a shriek.

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Doan hits him. He collapses like a felled tree, conscious, but still.

A direct hit and the concrete splits with a loud crack, like lightning. The bunker won't withstand another. It's a grave, waiting for the next shell. The dust-cover at the entrance is blown away. Sulphurous fumes choke the men. Three others stand up.

The first, with superhuman strength, bulldozes past Doan and rushes outside, wailing and screaming his torment. Another beats his head against a steel pole. Vinh shoots. The man falls, dead. Vinh swings his pistol on the others. Doan covers him doing the same. Another close round shakes their bunker.

Acrid smoke and grey dirt settle on them.

The vomit of anger rises in Vinh's dry mouth. ... *Hate!*

Mother's writhing fevers his mind ... Such a gentle woman ... *Murder!*

Father's screaming and slowly seeping death obsesses Mind with blood-lust ... *Kill.*

Lunchtime, Thursday, 6th May, de Castries, senior officer in Dien Bien Phu, extracted Eisenhower's telegram, in a moment of quiet. The American President thanked him for tenacity 'in defending the cause of human freedom'. He congratulated de Castries for portraying the 'truest qualities on which the survival of the Free World depends'.

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Korea determined American strategy in Indochina.

China and Russia vied for power in Asia. Mao Tse Tung agreed to a Korean armistice, partly to pro-actively influence Ho Chi Minh. Information from Troy pointed out that the French assumed the Korean 'cease-fire' guaranteed American intervention. The Americans wanted to prevent a similar national division in Vietnam to that in Korea. They and the Chinese had a different agenda to the French.

Eisenhower galled the French commander. Determined to end French power in the region, he had rejected massive American military intervention. Appalled at American rapaciousness, De Castries also knew a 'Top Secret' later denied. Authoritative French and American sources agreed that 'Operation Vulture' had considered dropping 'A' bombs on Giap's massed troops at Dien Bien Phu. That would have solved de Castries problems. Now he knew it wouldn't happen. He frowned.

De Castries ordered black coffee and a baguette. As he sipped he penned his response.

'I am deeply moved by the expression of admiration and confidence from ...the American people... The Free World may rest assured that, whatever the origin of my troops here in Dien Bien Phu, they are conscious of the war they are fighting and are determined to do everything in their power to deserve your confidence and to fulfil the mission entrusted to them, *no matter what the cost.*'

He called his signaller.

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A shrieking, howling cacophany rent the air over the whole of Dien Bien Phu.

For the first time since the days of Stalingrad and the battle for Moscow, the 'Stalin organs' or *Katyusha* rockets screamed through Dien Bien Phu's afternoon sky. Fired from mobile launching pads they'd put fear into seasoned German soldiers as now they released havoc on the French. Normally used against troops in the open because they had little effect on the solid German fortifications, the Dien Bien Phu bunkers and underground defensive systems were fragile and vulnerable.

It confirmed Russian vested interest. What Vietminh bombardment hadn't weakened, the monsoon had. As one salvo died another took its place and the effect was terrifying. French soldiers had never been exposed to *Katyusha*'s horrors before.

Even the deepest dugouts were rocked. Most caved in. Wounded soldiers desperately tried to dig comrades from their sudden graves of beams, planks and oozing mud. Men had their clothes blasted off their bodies as they fell wounded, bleeding or dead.

Electricity failed throughout the fortified camp, the hospital temporarily blacked out and resistance wavered all over the encampment. All the major medical supplies were destroyed in one afternoon. The rockets triggered off minor explosions that added to the chaos. But worst of all it was the psychological effect that was most damaging. The noise deafened. The w-h-o-o-s-h and w-h-i-r-r of the flying missiles quickly became banshees, wailing as their tailfins whirred their screaming litany.

Then, as if this wasn't enough, conventional artillery let loose a massive barrage.

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Dien Bien Phu had one more day to live.

The cost of the battle to both sides had been horrific, but where the French counted their dead and wounded in thousands, Giap counted his in hundreds of thousands.

Giap reported that “Our forces have not been able to avoid decimation. This requires rapid re-organisation and reinforcement... among our cadres and combatants there appear rightist tendencies, whose manifestations are the fear of having so many killed, the fear of suffering casualties and of facing up to fatigue, difficulties and privations.”

Dat had developed ‘rightist tendencies’ but kept silent. He deplored the loss of so many seasoned Vietminh veterans. Vinh was probably dead. A deep sadness built up in his internal pressure-cooker. But he had a job to do, part of which was to help win this war. He looked down now on the desolation and chaos and his soul wept.

Troy convinced himself, “The Vietminh are just as exhausted as we are.”

Bigearde knew his troops had just two days of food and ammunition left.

The afternoon of Thursday, 6th May, Bigearde looked through his glasses and motioned Troy to do the same. Giap’s troops, assembled beyond artillery fire, could be seen being harangued by their commissars. The troops must have been in fine fettle.

They danced and through their glasses the two men could see pith helmets thrown into the air. The two looked at each other silently. Lowered their binoculars.

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Bigeard reached for his hip flask. "Lets have a cognac." He always carried one.

Toward the end of the afternoon Vietminh Harassing Fire intensified.

Shelters and blockhouses still relatively intact caved in. One 105mm How remained.

Bigeard added, "We must hang on. We must force a draw."

At 2200 hours the Vietminh started a massive assault. Three battalions of the battle-hardened 308th Regiment of the 316th Division attacked Elaine. Vinh's went for E4, part of the headquarters that included Dat headed for E10, 102nd Battalion charged for E2, but held back awhile and 36th Battalion rammed into Elaine's back door at E5.

Vinh, now promoted to Captain and commanding the 88th Battalion, spearheaded the charge that broke on E4 garrisoned by the fierce fighters of 2nd Company of the Fifth Vietnamese Parachute Battalion.

There, Pham braced for the onslaught with barely thirty other survivors.

Dat's headquarters had chosen the Fifth, believing resistance would crack easily. They were wrong. The ferocity of brother against brother is sometimes difficult to fathom. It stamps all civil wars. Pham had no idea Vinh's troops faced him.

Nor could Vinh have known Pham waited in the enemy trenches. But Vietnamese faced Vietnamese in these closing stages of a barbaric battle.

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Successful in holding off the first attack, the remnants of 2nd Company were reinforced from another Fifth company at 2230. Langlais also sent two platoons of Foreign Legionnaires to help Pham's threatened post.

They trekked in the darkness and the slime, not knowing what to encounter or where. Hoping there'd be no obstruction, they silently and fearfully explored their way across Elaine's fully half-mile width. They worked their way through the Metro, the trenches and tunnels of Elaine, past the rear of Dien Bien Phu's Main Command Centre and were silently waved on past some 'pack rats' who'd emerged from the watery banks of the Nam Yum. Honour and integrity sometimes make for strange bedfellows.

On the ridge immediately north of Pham, on E10, Bigeard's men, the survivors of his 6th Para Battalion, now faced their end. Bigeard, or 'Bruno' was commander of counter-attack operations. The officer who'd taken the brunt of the Vietminh attack on E10 needed parachute flares to light up the enemy on the battlefield around him.

"Bruno a le Page. Nos ami sont au dessous. Je me fais interdit les 'feu'. C'est Bien?"

The choice for the young lieutenant was 'Occam's Razor'. The Vietminh were within grenade throwing distance of his position. Bigeard had alerted him to the para reos circling in the night sky. The choice rested with the man on the ground. If he said 'Oui' then paras wouldn't drop because the battlefield would be lit up. That would be suicide. But to say 'No' meant that he and his men would have to fight 'blind'.

Reinforcements might save another day. His post was already compromised.

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A young-old and brave, firm voice responded. "Oui. Arretez."

The noise of battle sounded in Bigeard's earphones as he put them down to transmit to the paras on another radio. He was his own radio-man. It was the end for Elaine.

Instead, at 2300 hours precisely a mountainous wave of destruction erupted. Vietminh tunnellers had burrowed underneath and into the centre of Elaine's main strongpoint and there laid thousands of pounds of explosives. Then lit the fuse. Debris from the shattered position poured down on the tin of the shelters and into trenches filled with dead and dying. This was the signal for Vinh's shock troops to attack.

In the white light of Vietminh flares, Vinh felt the shudder of the earth as the explosion lifted the top of the hill and left a massive crater. A huge geyser of blackness shut out the night sky. Shattered earth, disintegrated men and weapons, and huge chunks of revetments and blasted fragments of concrete bunkers settled back to earth. Then a plume of dark-grey blocked out the horizon and lingered against black clouds. The smoke from the tremendous explosion would remain longer.

Vinh and Doan stormed the steep slopes of a familiar Elaine 2. Vinh's lead troops met a hail of bullets. As his headquarters reached pinned down Vietminh, the French defender's over-heated guns jammed or their ammunition run out. Vietminh swarmed.

Bigeard's radios jammed with "Help" calls. A rising sun tinged the French blood-red.

Dat, bathed in the same light, heard shouts of "Tien Lien" and "Victory at the Front."

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Standing watching the explosion, next to his Divisional commander, Dat had felt the earth-shattering tremor under his feet, like an earthquake. Dat reminded his boss that the Geneva Conference was to begin in two days time, on 8th May.

He added, "It is imperative that Dien Bien Phu be in our hands by then."

The commander announced, "Tonight, we negotiate with bayonets, explosives and guns. You hear, "Tien Lien" and "Victory at the Front." They are the best way to the negotiation table. Tomorrow, Ho Chi Minh can have his political victory."

Dat smiled ruefully. "Uncle Ho has told me that our soldiers are the best diplomats."

He worried. Vinh had come so far and achieved so much but tended to take too many chances, as though Demons chased him. *He'll be close to that explosion.*

But Vinh hadn't been killed. He'd remained buried under a heap of Vietnamese and French bodies until the French had withdrawn, then joined Doan who'd miraculously also survived. They alternately crawled, skirmished and slithered their way back.

Both nominated as heroes, they re-joined for the final attack on Dien Bien Phu.

Vinh still had old scores to settle.

Of Bigeard's 6th Para Battalion, twenty men remained alive. Troy, a survivor, thought grimly, "The men by whose fault battles are lost were not the ones the enemy killed."

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Elaine 4 called. "Bruno, It's all over. They're at my command post. Goodbye."

Swarms of little men in green cloth battle-fatigues, Ho Chi Minh sandals and helmets with a red star, finally reached Elaine. On its peaks, dawn broke in a golden halo of promise. Shouts of victory echoed. A hive of human bees claimed their nest.

Indescribable though E4 was, Pham held on with a brace of the Fifth. Almost all the heroes of the survivors of Dien Bien Phu were gathered around, including Botella, one of the 'Mafia', and le Page. Almost all were wounded. How they could survive the final mayhem is a secret only God can tell. They had withstood the last Vietminh attack at 0530 hours but as they watched, in the half-light, they could clearly see them massing on E1 across the re-entrant. They prepared for another attack on E4.

The French and Vietnamese defenders thought. "We'll never survive."

Hanoi had been informed but didn't consider the situation desperate.

The final attack on the Elaine feature started at 0805 and at 0900, screaming hordes of Vietminh submerged E4. Botella called Bigeard for the last time.

"Bruno. C'est finis. Il y a ici. Parle a Langlais, je l'aime. Au revoir."

Moments later, Pham escaped with le Page. Rolling through the mud of Nam Yum, the two of them staggered into Bigeard's dugout. Le Page and Pham were the only members of 6th Para to make it. Bigeard reacted with a deep sense of betrayal.

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Pham heard him mutter, "Le Page... Quelle domage. Mon pauvre ... le Page." His Battalion's loss pained him. The 6th had followed their hero from Tu-Le, through the hell of the Tonkin blood baths and now it had ended in defeat in Dien Bien Phu.

Despite the last two months, the survivors still held to the illusion they'd be saved.

This and a desperate tenacity had enabled them to initially throw off the Vietminh attempt to take Elaine. The fighting had stopped. A silence engulfed Dien Bien Phu.

They prayed, "Perhaps they've had enough." Others hoped, "Perhaps they are going to leave us in peace."

But at 1600 hours de Castries told Langlais, "It's all over."

Two weary, reticent veterans hugged silently.

Langlais gave the instructions to destroy all weapons. The news spread like wildfire.

"Surrender will be soon".

A phosphorous grenade was tossed into the breach of the single remaining 105mm gun to solder it. Machine-guns and infantry weapons were fired with the barrels thrust into the earth so they'd explode. Ammunition was blown or thrown into the river.

They emptied the tank engines of oil then ran the engines full out so that they'd seize.

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Defeat had been complete. A white flag flew from de Castries bunker.

There was a sound of running feet on the Main Command Centre bunker.

The last words Hanoi heard from the Main Command Centre were “The Viets are a few yards away. We’re going to blow up the transmitter. Goodbye, friend.”

In daylight, Bigeard and Troy strode sullenly.

A Viet called out, “Bigeard... Where is Bigeard?”

Neither man looked up but Troy was recognised by Le Duc Dat.

Pham entered the long anonymous line of French, African and Vietnamese prisoners.

At 0150 hours on 8th May 1954, after the isolated and southern Isabelle garrison had failed in their mission to break out of the Vietminh encirclement, a command aircraft picked up the last message that would be sent from the Dien Bien Phu garrison.

“Sortie manquer – Point – Communication est impossible – Point – FINIS.”

This staccato message marked the end of the French Indochina War.

And the beginning of the end of French dreams of a post-WWII, colonial empire.

FIVE

CHILDREN OF CHAOS ...

*"Go tell the Spartans, thou who passes by
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie."*

Simonides: The Battle of Thermopylae

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

1963: beyond the borderland...

GARY STRUGGLED TO STAY SANE LYING IN THE BOTTOM OF A TRENCH

Canungra in Queensland was the best Jungle Warfare Centre in the world and lay about ninety kilometres south-west of Brisbane. Kota Tinggi was a British replication. But, on the 20th June 1963, Kota Tinggi was hotter ... and steamier.

The tropical jungle environment appealed from his first initiation to Canungra after Portsea in 1955. He'd been there four or five times since. Kota Tinggi was initially enjoyable and very instructive. Sakai trackers, whose world began and ended in the jungle, taught him many things he'd not known before. Including a new appreciation of foods available in the jungle. Then things changed, traumatically.

It was pitch dark. The trench was deep in the Malay jungle. Dug like a weapon pit and six-foot long, it was shoulder width and about three-feet deep. Gary was handcuffed, behind his back. Not the self-tightening type but firm. Huge speakers, placed directly over the top of the hole, continually assaulted Gary's consciousness. He attempted to sit up but the matting supporting the speakers didn't allow. *Fuck*. He felt betrayed.

Classed as a 'Jungle Survival Course' it had taken a now all too familiar twist. It was replay of the Sydney 'Tiger Cages' but in Malaya. This time the interrogation was run by the British Secret Service. Twenty-five had been specially flown in. His intuition had proven correct. *Fuck again*. 'Preparation for capture by a Communist enemy'. The student group attending was multi-racial, which reflected growing concerns by South East Asian military forces about the possibility of war against Communism.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Gary's greatest fear was scorpions, a deadly fixture in the Malaysian jungles. Leeches he could nearly cope with. They dropped off when they were gorged. But scorpions bit and the poison of the green ones could be lethal. Most made a man sick for days but the initial bite was very, very painful. Snakes could be lethal too. But Gary had made a pact with snakes. Normally, when one appeared, he'd capture it and put it in a box. Other snakes seemed to steer clear then. Problem? He had no control.

No chance to do anything in the bottom of a hole. Handcuffed. Cooped up in a foetal position. The damp smell of freshly-dug jungle dirt cloyed the air. Gary normally enjoyed the unique odour of rotting leaves and the smells of growth. Endemic to the jungle environment, he preferred it to open savannah or clear forest. He felt more at home in the jungle. Savoured what others experienced as claustrophobia. The civilized world had no place here. Once isolated under the high jungle canopy, within days nothing existed except the jungle and its life forms. Under normal conditions that is. But these were far from normal. Gary preferred to be the stalker on the surface.

Selected for the advance party of his battalion, the Third Battalion RAR or 'Old Faithful' to learn as much as possible from 2 RAR officers already in country and from training courses. That way there'd be a continuation of Malayan experience and expertise when 3 RAR finally arrived. Gary's wife and three daughters remained in Australia for that three months. He lived a bachelor's life at Tanglin Barracks in Singapore: attended a couple of Kota Tinggi courses across the causeway from Singapore: and in-between he spent a week or so at Terendak Army Camp. There he'd exchanged notes and experience with 2RAR officers. Eventually 3RAR would be located in 2RAR's quarters in Terendak. But he disliked barrack life.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Gary lived with his Chinese 'Singapore wife', a sane link in the insane army world. Suzie, Catholic and Chinese Confucianist, lived close to the British Army Barracks at Nee Soon. He'd met her in the 'Downtown' Chinese section of Singapore and they'd come to an 'arrangement'. Suzie would remain 'true' to him whilst he was in Malaya.

Gary chose the survival course at Kota Tinggi and the Para Refresher course at Changgi to be near her. Sumptuous six and seven tiered meals provided by the Royal Air Force at Changgi were an added benefit. The Tiger Cages were a league apart.

For three weeks prior to incarceration as a 'reactionary', he'd been taught how to exist in the Malay Jungle. Gary learned to drink from liana vines, set traps and eat monkeys, small furry creatures including rats, bears if he could catch them ... even snakes. They proved delicious, the white-meat so tender. Birds were hardest to catch.

Only three Aussies attended the Survival course. Roger, a second lieutenant that Gary mentored, a Catholic padre and Sergeant Jaago, whom he'd never met before. Gary hit it off with Jaago. He learned, first hand, what the Communists had done to Poland.

There were about thirty on the Survival course.

Most of the non-Caucasian officers were Thai, Philippino and Korean.

The Koreans, as normal, stuck to themselves. A tough breed, they didn't mix.

The Padre kept aloof. Gary, Jaago and Roger made friends with the Americans.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Aussies were 'flavour of the month' with the three Yank officers. A small group of Aussie Advisers had arrived in Vietnam in 1963. Within a year, The Australian Army Training Team, Vietnam (AATTV) would become legendary. Aussies, Philipinos, Brits and Koreans all backed an American view of communism in South East Asia ... That Communism was a cancer to be 'Eradicated by all means.' It suited Gary.

For him, Communism had become anathema. It had almost taken over in Malaya in 1947 and in Korea in 1952. It infiltrated the Philippines and held its south to ransom. The Indonesian Army had bit the bullet and murdered almost a million communists in a few weeks of mayhem in 1959. Gary believed the new front was Vietnam. He hoped to join the ranks of the Advisers at some time in the future. Two of the Yanks on the Kota Tinggi course were American Advisers.

At Kota Tinggi, there were British Commandos in sandy berets, Paras in red ones and Royal Marines in green ones. Excellent soldiers and good to stick with but a pain in the arse with their 'terribly British accents' and cool behaviours. Having read Burchett's 'The Wingate Adventure' and Chapman's 'The Jungle is Neutral', Gary respected their jungle expertise but was proud to be Australian, not British anymore.

Gary's hackles rose when told one afternoon that at 4 a.m. on the following morning all course members would parade ready for a three-day solo jungle stint. This change warned him. Suspicious, he took precautions. Whilst most adjourned for drinks, Gary drove to the local village market in his new 1500 cc. Fiat. There he bought *ikan bili*.

Suzie had introduced Gary to Chinese and Malay foods and showed him how to cook.

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Half a kilo of *ikan bili*, or Malay dried anchovies, would be enough for four days. Gary spent the evening cooking then cooling balls of rice before stashing them in his water bottle. He topped it up with water next morning. No one would know. He also hid ten rupees in his other water bottle, wrapped in singles in an aluminium waterproof container. Gary added a tiny compass in plastic, and water-proof matches.

Convinced this 'trek' was going to be different, Gary took no chances. He didn't want to be burdened with the tinned rations provided. The British field rations were as cumbersome as the Yank's tucker. The pre-cooked tinned foods were far too heavy to carry. He swapped them with the British and American officers for their tubes of condensed milk and Mars bars and picked up the Barley sugar lollies the 'foreigners' threw out. They were perfect to suck on the march.

If his intuition turned out wrong the rice meals would still be good. If the enemy were to be bettered, then Aussies had to learn to move through the jungle with 'local' food. But something told him there was 'mischief' afoot. Gary shared his doubts. Jaago thought the same as he. Roger thought Gary was hypersensitive.

Next morning, having spent the night packing long-stay gear in his backpack, the Brits removed it. Each person was left with two water-bottles and a machete. No food. Gary had stuffed *ikan bili* in his pockets. He smiled. He and Jaago carried British rather than Yank water-bottles. The British canvas covers were loose and allowed a 'parachute black-silk pyjama gear' to be packed underneath the water bottle.

Gary learned that, in the jungle, changing to dry at night was an essential health habit.

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He'd got out of wet clothes a few times already. That cut down the skin rashes, or jungle rot. Also, when being stalked, black is a good colour at night.

The officer-in-charge told them, "You'll be living on your wits for three days. Find your own food. We've taught you how, now practice survival." He paused for effect. "You'll be dropped off in the jungle. Keep heading south until you hit the rubber plantation. All the waterways lead south, so you can't get lost. We'll be waiting."

It sounded ominous, no maps and no compass.

Gary realized he'd have to use sun and stars for navigation, watch the flow of streams and the moss-growth on the larger trees. Smug about his hidden compass, nevertheless Gary felt cheated. He hadn't signed on to be tortured again.

The 'Tiger Cage' experience had been only a couple of months before.

Gary and Jaago climbed aboard a high-off-the-ground British 'Blitz' truck. It took them to a jungle drop-off. They made sure they were at the tailboard. Four Ghurka guards watched every movement closely, incommunicative and watchful.

Gary and Jaago were even more certain their assumption was correct. Ordered not to talk, the two Aussies decided they wouldn't stay aboard longer than was essential.

They used sign language. They'd 'jump ship' at the first opportunity. One would go right, the other left to confuse the guards and make them split their forces.

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The chance came as they slowed down negotiating a bend.

Thick tree-roots spread over the jungle track and slowed the truck some more. Gary yelled 'Geronimo'. They both jumped. Rolled simultaneously over the tailboard. Hit the track running and headed into the jungle each side of the track. Gary got clean away. Heard shots, whistles and yelling behind him, but it was 'each to his own'.

Fuck them. He headed straight back to Kota Tinggi barracks. Gary would turn it into a part-holiday. After a hot shower and breakfast he'd drive into Singapore for three days with Suzie before heading back to rendezvous at the rubber plantation.

Gary got back to barracks without being spotted, changed into civvies then headed for his pride and joy, a Fiat 1500 cc. The Aussie Adjutant, alert to his eccentricities, had plastered over the windscreen, ... "Gary... Report to my office in the Orderly room."

Fuck the clever little bastard. Gary smiled then went straight back to his room and changed back into jungle fatigues. He picked up some more money then beat a track to the nearest Malay village. *Better than avoiding Ghurkas.*

Gary's 'friends in town' hid then fed him for three days. Later, as he headed to the RV, Ghurkas were everywhere. Clearly they aimed to intercept course members before they got to headquarters. Gary watched a capture then changed into his black pyjams. He'd hidden his lightweight poncho down the leg of his trousers and now packaged his jungle-greens in it. Around the outside he then wrapped his poncho in his camouflage neck-cloth and hung the bag over his shoulder.

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His right hand held a walking stick cut from the jungle and he wore on his head a Moslem headpiece that he'd bought before he'd left the village. Convinced he looked the part, he nearly got away with it, managing to get within a hundred yards of headquarters. Pulled up finally by Ghurkas, he resisted when they tried to remove his water bottles and 'bush tucker'. A 'terribly British' Captain came racing up.

"I say, old Man." He'd been shocked, when he finally worked out that Gary was a Captain, and said, "Officers don't fight with troops you know. It's just not kosher."

"Then tell the bastards not to take my water bottle."

The officer did, adding, "You Aussies are a strange breed of colonials, you know. You made a good attempt. Bravo, old Man. But locals carry sticks in the left hand."

Shitty, Gary said. "It's Gary. And we're no longer 'fucking Colonials', *old Man*."

"Oh well. Come this way, old... I mean, Gary."

The initial selection procedures separated the 'progressives' from the 'reactionaries'. They'd made Gary stand for eight hours spreadeagled against a bamboo wall, his legs spaced well apart and hands spread to take the full weight of his upper body. For most of that time he'd amused himself pushing a sliver of bamboo through the slats to an 'unknown prisoner' on the other side. Non English-speaking Gurkha soldiers carried thin bamboo wands that had already drawn grunts from 'malcontents'. And blood. The professional interrogators proved more sophisticated than the OZ.

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They'd practiced 'mind games' learned by interrogating European spies and the German Gestapo. Also, they would have read Sargent's 'Battle for the Mind'. This book took on special significance to Gary after the 'Tiger Cage experience in Sydney.

Gary had recognised his Achilles heel in the Tiger Cages. Sound. More specifically noise. The Tiger Cages had taught him an irrevocable fact. That Mind is all we have.

His mind charted a vivid course. Less than three feet away the noises were the worst ... like chalk scratched across a blackboard: a washing machine with a cog missing: a car with a screeching brake drum: and other weird syncopated noises designed to make a body shudder and squirm. His only escape from the ghastly noises put out by the loudspeakers on full volume was to flee into Mind. Gary knew he couldn't cope. He had to escape ...devise Mind games to beat theirs... and he did... in visions.

He started with vivid memories of Canungra. On his first free weekend he'd been approached by staff who intended to walk the Canungra Creek from O'Rielly's to Canungra village. Gary stumbled and laughed his way down the creek. He felt the softness of jungle moss. Recalled favourite sounds. Heard bird-song. Calls of the bush parakeets and parrots vivified him. A kookaburra, calling its mate, extinguished all other sound. A waterfall swished its way in freedom down the side of the mountain. Gary drank from a fresh mountain stream.

The smell of food infiltrated consciousness. The evening meal denied him, Gary tried to imagine what it was, then converted it into his favourite. A very, very hot chilli laksa, crammed with seafood. Its odour tantalised. His mouth watered.

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He imagined Suzie cooking it in her kitchen. Just for him. Then they adjourned to make love. Erotic visions stimulated by Sex.

He'd learned that sex became an easy way to escape torture. Erotica released Mind. Enabled a powerful and fast exit from most tortures. Especially alien noises. If he relaxed vigilance or allowed the alien sounds to enter Mind ... inexorable Pain.

In the Tiger cages he'd realized that sound created a pressure in his brain. Oppressive, it pressed down on him like a concrete block. Pressed him into the dirt. If he lost, then Pain became uncompromising and tore the vulnerable fabric of his pain control.

Eventually the matting of his prison roof lifted. Strong hands raised him up from his confinement. Blinking in the exquisite early dawn sky-show, Gary was led into a tent where the interrogator waited. Questions assailed his distracted mind. Made to stand on the opposite side of the table, Gary's silence irritated the interrogator.

In 'Battle for the Mind' he'd read 'It's possible to turn the tables on any inquisitor. Always be polite but avoid answering their questions'. Gary finally spoke. "You've only recently arrived here." He'd made it a statement, not a question. The interrogator looked at him, quizzically. "I can tell." Gary continued. "You have a short-sleeved summer shirt. Not appropriate you know. I'll bet you haven't even taken your mosquito tablets yet." The interrogator looked stunned. "Anywhere in Malaya, I'd make sure I wore a long-sleeved shirt and right now use mosquito repellent."

"I'm supposed to be asking the questions."

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“Please yourself. I just wanted to help. I’ve lived in jungles like this in many parts of the world most of my adult life and have a certain immunity to mosquitoes.” Gary squatted on the floor so that the interrogator could only see his face. “This jungle is the worst I’ve ever been in. I love the jungle. But... You know, malaria is the least worry you have, don’t you? There are much worse things in this part of the world.”

The interrogator moved closer. “Like what?” The table between wasn’t a barrier any more. The man had taken the bait. Gary enjoyed the reversal.

He assumed his lost ‘English’ accent. “Encephalitis is the worst scourge. We’ve lost three soldiers already. One died just north of here last week.”

Encephalitis was a water-borne disease from rat’s urine. “Died.” Sudden anxiety lit the man’s face. It looked like this man mightn’t know much about jungle creatures.

Bingo. Gary pressed on.

“Yes. It’s a meningococci disease that attacks the dura mater then other liquids housing the brain.” Gary had some medical knowledge. Hoped it would confuse.

“Mosquito-borne and deadly. First indications: sudden sweating and headaches. Like meningitis, it kills. Or takes years to recover. This area’s infested with mosquitoes.”

That much was true. “But that and this are the least of my worries.”

“Really. What can...?”

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“Leeches, Old Man. That’s been my main problem in the hole. Not the sound...” *Liar, liar, Gary*, he thought. At the same time Gary enjoyed the newly found power. He paused and pretended confidentiality. “The leeches here are the biggest I’ve seen. They leave a mark the size of a sixpenny bit. Look.” Gary lifted his foot onto the table almost overbalancing it and himself. Manacles made life awkward. “Check my ankle and tell me you’ve seen leech bites that big before. I haven’t. Not in all the years...”

The man lifted Gary’s trouser-leg gingerly and pulled down his sock. “Shit.”

A huge bite, just as Gary had described. He’d been bitten on the way in. “I’m lucky. This has been on my leg for two days...” *Liar, Liar ...again*. “If there’d been any trouble I’d be in hospital now.” The man’s face went ashen. “They can have syphalautus conninus in their saliva.” Gary was enjoying this Aussie furphy. The man had been reeled in. Showed fear. “That’s a poison, which effects the nervous system”

“That’s enough.” Another man in an officer’s uniform strode in. He whispered to the interrogator and they changed places. The first left the tent. Gary chortled silently. Clearly, everything he said was being listened to and probably being recorded.

“No more bullshit. You’ve had your fun. See how you cope now.” He called out. Three Ghurkas stomped in and saluted. The officer exchanged words in Ghurkali.

Bastard, Gary thought. Led outside, he was marched into the edge of the camp. Unshackled, his arms were stretched loosely around a tree trunk then re-shackled so that, ‘You can think about your future until dawn’.

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He shivered. The morning-dew sun rose slowly. Exquisite patterns filtered through the canopy. Gary remembered Lobsang Rampa. Naked on a snow-capped mountain the Llama melted the snow. He used Mind. Conjured a fire. Generated heat in his own body with the image of the fire. Then he'd meditated, manipulating his Breath.

Gary tried. Invoked Fire. Allowed Heat to percolate through his body. His shivers stopped. Elated, he'd succeeded. Found the secret in his breathing. Focussed on Breath as a release. Gary had found a doorway into Mind Control through his Breath.

At noon the interrogation continued. Wary of the fact he was being listened to, Gary kept silent. This personal choice had come to him as a direct result of the Tiger Cage experience. 'Take whatever physical punishment is meted out but don't answer questions. Ask them. To answer is to enter into dialogue'. Once that happened there was no telling where the questions will lead and no guarantee they will ever end.

Meant to emulate being a prisoner of the communists, 'Reactionaries' had to accept Death as a possibility. Gary used this Kota Tinggi experience to test his theory. At least this mob wouldn't kill him. Gary hadn't been so sure in the Tiger Cage.

More real than this one, the Tiger Cage had prepared him. No interrogation involved 'hands-on' physical torture. That was a relief. New persuasive techniques to force Gary to talk failed. He remained silent. Soon they tired. A circular shaft was dug, deep enough to stand in but not to sit. Still handcuffed, Ghurkas lowered Gary into the standing 'grave'. Left him "to rot". Another night then more interrogation. He continued his silence. Release finally arrived with the banging of gongs and laughter.

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Gary didn't feel like laughing. They held a debrief back at Kota Tinggi. At least that was an improvement on the Aussie one. No debrief there.

Introduced to an extraordinary Catholic priest, he learned that Chinese Communists had incarcerated him in 1949. They had tortured him continuously for two years, in a 'Tiger Cage' just like the Aussie ones. Solitary confinement. Twelve months in darkness, not just seven days. Imprisoned ten more years, then recently released.

He'd lived in a Catholic village that the Communist commissars compelled to become communist. The priest explained how they did it. Set up at one end of the village, they flanked the priest in the middle of a long table. Each member of the village then was brought to the table, one by one. The remainder had been forced to watch.

"Anything, just confess." The first person, the village chief, said "NO."

Chopsticks were thrust up his nostrils into his brain. The priest had to be restrained.

The next person brought forward suffered the same. "Anything, just confess." This continued until a mother broke down and confessed. She was led off to a re-education camp. Half of the village, male, female and children all perished before the priest.

The short, white-haired man broke down and cried a few times during the telling of his story. He ended the account of his own torture with, "Eventually we all break."

Appalled, Gary asked. "What then, Father?"

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“I prayed for God to give me strength. When they came to get me next time I resisted as much as I could. Faith never left me. They wanted me to renounce Jesus. Sometimes it worked. I would pray for strength to resist. I had been told that God never tests us beyond our ability to withstand.” Then the priest said something Gary would never forget. “That’s wrong. I passed beyond boundaries I couldn’t resist.”

“What sustained you?”

“I realised that Faith cannot be argued with. By definition it is irrational. Torture tested me. Far beyond my ability to withstand. How I survived is a mystery. I would recant. I would surrender to them under horrible torture. One time, I remember, I was strapped to a slatted bed with a winch up one end. My ankles secured with rope and my hands strapped to the winch, they stretched me face down. Then they beat me continuously with heavy bamboo canes. I remember somewhere, a long way from me, someone screaming. I prayed for the man. It took me a long time to recognise that it was my own voice I was praying for.”

He paused. Sweat stood out on his forehead as he drank a long draft from the beaker placed on the rostrum. He wiped his forehead, unconsciously. Combed his frail, straggly hair with his hand. Smiled a benign smile that illuminated Gary’s heart.

“Eventually I agreed with everything they demanded. When my faculties returned I felt betrayed by God. The burden had been too great. I went into a deep depression. I too had betrayed Him. Maybe my Faith was all sham.” Tears poured down the old man’s face. Rivulets followed its deep creases.

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He held tightly to the rostrum. Muscles corded. Gary and most of the course were deeply affected. Unheralded, hot tears sprang into warrior's eyes. The priest slowly recovered composure, then released his tormented grip. Someone coughed.

Without wiping his eyes, the priest continued. "The Communists had won the first round. They left me for a while after my confession. They'd had it typed. Wanted me to sign. I realised that the only thing I had that they couldn't touch was my Faith. They could beat me, tear off my arms and legs, tear out my tongue. All these things I saw them do. But so long as Mind recovered they could not touch my soul. It was impregnable.. As I realised this my whole being flooded with love. An indescribable love for all people. I recalled the Compassionate Buddha's words, 'Compassion for all sentient Beings' and I experienced what I believe he experienced. What I firmly believed Jesus experienced for most of his life. I envied both, as the feeling dissipated over time. But I could remember... I didn't seem to be able to recall the experience in its exquisite first-ness. But for a day or two it flowed as living waters from a well deep inside my soul. From this feeling of security I also found the strength to pray. I prayed for them, for my parishioners and for myself."

Gary wept. His heart ached for all those who suffered as this man had.

"I resiled my confession. Recaptured my Faith. I would laugh at their lack of any belief system. I'd pray for them. They couldn't understand. I survived but only because I believed. I spent one year in total solitude and darkness. Each time they forced me to surrender, my belief grew stronger. I finally realised they couldn't shift me. Rationality has little substance. Faith is beyond reason."

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This wizened little old man with sparkling blue eyes had a profound effect. Gary made two personal vows. He would combat Communism at every opportunity. Also, no matter what happened in the future, he would fight to maintain the integrity of his mind. Gary had survived only a small example of what the priest had suffered but the lesson had been driven home. 'Mind is all we have.' Drugs, grog, sex and all the other ways people abdicated their mind would never satisfy Gary the same way, ever again. He would never voluntarily allow his mind to be taken over by anyone or anything. He'd also fight to ensure others had the same freedom of Mind.

On the last day, the course performed what for the Aussies were elementary field tactics in the jungle. Made Platoon Commander in the second assault, Gary chose as his Orderly Serle, an American second lieutenant. Roger he made a Section Commander and Jaago another. A British Commando headed the third section.

The section led by Roger, extended in-line to his right, Jaago to his left and also in extended line, with the Brit in arrowhead ...in reserve. Half-way across the space separating them from the Ghurka position, a swarm of angry jungle wasps attacked the back of Gary's neck. He fell to his feet. No words passed. Serle poured the contents of Gary's water-bottle over his neck until the swarm dispersed. They attacked the American. As though this had been rehearsed many times, Gary stood. Serle knelt, covering his eyes as Gary had. Gary worked loose the man's water-bottle and poured the contents over the officer's head. It worked for the second time and they caught up with the attack. Scarce minutes had passed and in the interim Roger and Jaago kept the momentum of the attack going forward. Gary's confidential course report documented the wasp assault and Gary's 'bravery in continuing the attack'.

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They left for Malacca early next morning. Gary should have seen a doctor. He'd been stung about thirty times. He had no time to call Suzie because he had to be at the Malacca airport that night and it was a hundred and fifty-mile drive. Roger and Jaago chose to go back to camp with him. Roger drove. Gary slept some of the way.

By late afternoon, Gary arrived home in Bukhit Bahru on the outskirts of Malacca. Even though Army quarters were unavailable in Terendak Camp, Gary actually preferred to live within the Malay and Chinese community.

Malacca had an extraordinary Portuguese history. Eventually they arrived at Bukhit Bahru, which would be Gary's home for the next two years.

Lunch-time in Kontum, on the East coast of Malaya, and Gary paused for a drink.

His wireless-operator often played with the UHF WF210 dials. He alerted Gary.

They'd stopped for a short rest and the wireless-operator had ran up, breathless. "Kennedy's dead, Sir." The anguish on the corporal's face was contagious.

Gary would forever remember 23rd November 1963, 'jungle-bashing' with 3RAR.

A cataclysmic event had happened. It was the day John F Kennedy was assassinated.

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Gary's mind whirled into its own tornado. "What?"

"Murdered, Sir. Assassinated. It has to be some form of Communist plot, surely."

Stupified, Gary had made him check again. Troops gathered and listened. Whitefaced.

Once it was confirmed, "Hold here. I'm going to speak to the Colonel. Roger. Take charge. No move unless I say so. This event will change the course of history."

Gary sped to brief the Colonel. The man seemed unperturbed.

"Will this change anything, Sir?"

"Why should it?"

"It seems pointless to play soldiers when the rest of the world could be gearing up for an all out war, Sir. Surely...?"

"Don't worry. I'm sure we'll hear. Let's get back on the track, shall we?"

The Colonel turned away to issue some mundane order.

Gary couldn't believe his ears. He'd already played out ten or more 'worst case' scenarios. The Colonel didn't seem to be anywhere near as anxious or concerned about the awesome implications of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

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A dull ache in the pit of his stomach and a leaden heart told Gary that he'd lost someone who seemed personal and close. JFK had been more than a hero to Gary. He'd been the promise of a New Era of 'Peace in our time': a time that promised limitless opportunities, expectations and an often naïve world-view. JFK and his wife Jackie had played hosts to a new Camelot.

JFK had been murdered in the United States, 'home of freedom and democracy'. It made Gary aware, for the first time, that if a popular President could be assassinated in America, with all the secret service and security people available to the most powerful man in the world, then anyone could be killed.

Murder or assassination by any terrorist could happen anywhere and at any time.

The 'Death of a President', at least, this particular President, consumed Gary.

But there was more to his anxiety than this. On both 'Torture Courses', Gary had had impressed upon him, by his interrogators at the conclusion of the Tiger Cage 'experiment', the vulnerability of his family if ever captured by the Communists. He'd been told that the members of Communist Front Societies would gladly give out names and addresses of family to their organizations, on the assumption this would help the anti-war movement.

Gary spent three months patrolling the Thai jungle-border for Communist Terrorists.

Then he left for Vietnam.

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1963: borderlands of the mind...

MAI WAS FINALLY TO MEET VINH AFTER FIVE YEARS OF WAR

Just after 9.30 a.m. on her birthday, 11th June 1963, Mai wandered down Rue Le Van Duong as if in a dream. She hardly noticed the warm humidity. For the first time in five years Mai finally believed that perhaps she would actually meet Vinh.

This had been enough to set her mind awirl.

In a small pagoda off Pham Dinh Phung Street incense swirled in wispy vapours sending its aromatic messages to the Buddhist Heaven from ceremonial braziers. The throats of hundreds of gathered monks intoned their ancient meditation chant in deep resonating voices, “Namo a di da phat... Namo a di da phat... Namo a di da phat...”

At precisely 9 a.m. the chanting had stopped.

With military precision the monks uncrossed legs in ‘Lotus posture’ and stood, easing out the threat of cramps and tingling from hours of chanting in that position. Serried ranks moved in unison out of the pagoda, swelling with nuns as a procession formed. Banners in English and Vietnamese were unfurled and the long snake of Buddhist religious began to move. A long grey sedan formed the pious Cobra’s head, as it slithered slowly into the heart of downtown Saigon. Half to one block in front, White Mice cleared the way ahead. The Cobra, the White Mice and the people of the major city in Vietnam knew what was about to occur. Those supposedly in charge of the country either knew or didn’t recognise its significance.

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Escorts of polite but firm White Mice stopped her on the kerb and about to cross the major boulevard. Slowly and immutably, a silent phalanx of monks surrounded Mai. Her mind already awirl with thoughts of love, this sea of saffron made her feel disassociated, unaware that she would have a grandstand view of a major event.

The head of the Cobra poised at the intersection on Le Van Duong Street, then coiled back to strike its fatal blow to the Diem regime, directly in front of Mai. Buddhist religious included her in their coil around their head. From the opened trunk of the grey limousine on the other side of the boulevard in front of Mai, a monk took out a five-gallon can of petrol. Another came forward with a small brown cushion edged with yellow silk tassles and placed it reverently on the pavement opposite her.

The Venerable Thich Quang Duc, a seventy-three-year-old monk appeared fingering his string of holy beads as he repeated his mantra, “Namo amita Buddha... “Namo amita Buddha... “Namo amita Buddha...(I return to the Eternal Buddha)”. In deep meditation and in total control of his ‘Being-at-one-with-the-Eternal-Buddha’ he regally settled himself on his cushion.

The monks and nuns quietly intoned, “Om mani padme hum... Om mani padme hum... Om mani padme hum...” the great Buddhist mantra.

Mai watched, as though in a dream. Other monks helped the first carry the petrol can to the venerable old man. At some silent signal they poured most of its flammable contents over Thich Quang Duc’s head and shoulders. They returned to an anonymous place among the saffron inscrutables.

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Seeming immovable until this moment, the old man unfolded heavily veined hands resting interlocked on his lap. Studiously aware of the drama of the moment, he deliberately held them up and the only sound was the low swell of the great mantra.

Knowing what was about to make world news, many of the monks and nuns prostrated themselves towards this holiest and most revered of Vietnamese Buddhist monks. Their holy sound snapped off as he struck the match and exploded into a raging inferno. Consuming flames hit him as they erupted five times as high as the Lotus-postured monk, their pointed ends disgorging the sparkling ashes of his clothing and thin epidermis then allowing its fine ash to settle on his saffron guard.

This old man's prayer for 'Peace and Compassion' was a different prayer to Heaven and would be repeated three times in the ensuing months. Some White Mice, in a natural human response, tried to rush to the disintegrating old man's aid as the pungent but sweet aroma of burning flesh and ruptured internal organs woke them from their trance. Thich Quang Duc's praetorians with tears of sadness and joy streaming down their illumined faces, then drying in the scorching heat, held the White Mice back from the gradually dying inferno and the motionless priest.

The flames, now only twice as high, crackled their destructive eulogy as the body, severed from its essence, fell backward slowly, like a once-proud, felled forest giant. The old man's finger stumps seemed to hold his palms upturned in supplication each side of its bursting torso. As his head hit the ground with a thump the body sent heavenward another shower of sparks from its peeling dermis. His legs kicked convulsively its spasmodic jerks in the shrunken brain's last attempt to understand.

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The flames took a further ten minutes to complete their purification. The sickly sweet aroma of his torched body filled all the surrounding boulevards, whilst a monk intoned over a loudspeaker, “A Buddhist priest burns himself to death...” in English and in Vietnamese. Aware only of the horror, watching westerners could only repeat hoarsely their shocked mantra, “Oh My God... Oh My God... Oh My God...”

Diem’s repression of Buddhist resistance and his own bloody and ignominious end was near. Whilst this fiery priest’s drama was being played out Mai’s friends gathered at the Majestic Hotel as they had promised each other before they left the North.

Each had arrived via a different route, careful to check they were not being followed. The mid-morning breeze had lifted the wisps of fog from the river and a clear, fresh breeze greeted them from the roof of the Majestic. Around the outside of the pavilion cumquats grew in pots, their dark green leaves and bright golden fruit contrasting with the bright blue sky. The breeze blew directly off the South China Sea coursing up the Saigon River to stir the slender, overladen branches of the cumquat bushes.

Mai told the group what she had witnessed. In telling them she hadn’t realised the full significance of its impact on her. Her face and ears hotted up and her voice choked three times before she’d finished.

The group remained silent for a while after.

“I...” Phouc could not believe his ears. “I...” He tried to articulate but words failed. He leaned on the table and put his head in his hands.

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They were stunned, both by what Mai told them and by the grievousness of Phouc's response. Gradually his grief subsided. He remained silent.

Pham waited until he had their attention. "We all started out holding to a Catholic faith within a Confucian and Buddhist tradition. Let's have a minute's silence. In that moment let each of us in our own way remember what Thich Quang Duc did this morning." He called the waiter over. "Light some incense and place it on the table."

When the waiter had completed the small task, Pham said, "As the incense spirals upward, let the old priest's soul find the peace we also all wish for and may we find the Buddha-compassion to understand and to listen to each other."

Phouc broke their long silence. "I make a vow that I will follow the Buddha Path."

Pham, the family Elder, ordered highlands jasmine tea from the patient waiter framed against the door behind. Tea was more than a 'Welcome' in Vietnam. Northerners, as they were, turned it into a ritual. The charcoal brazier arrived with its accompanying boiling pot then the earthenware pot of cold rainwater. Next the teapot with its small teacups in a range of tea boxes. He then brought an armful of Aquilaria, the aromatic wood to be added at the right time to the brazier. Finally the waiter returned carrying a clear glass jar with a lotus flower in it. He assured Pham, as he'd asked, that the tea had been steeped within the lotus flower overnight. Pham's face lit up.

He imagined the perfume surrounding the cultivated lotus-plot, pungent with the aroma of lotus blossoms in the night air and the flowers picked at that prime time.

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A pinch of tea placed inside the blossom in the jar would then be sprinkled with the heavy night-time dew to increase the potency of the lotus' perfume. When all was ready, Pham boiled the rainwater for a few minutes, took it off the brazier and let it cool slightly. He opened the lid of the lotus-blossom jar and allowed the aroma of the lotus that permeated the tea to delicately caress his nostrils. It filled his mind momentarily with memories of previous special family occasions.

Pham gently poured tea into the teapot and let it steep.

Polite ritual conversation focussed on the tea ceremony for five minutes. Comments included the aromas issuing from the Aquilaria and the lotus blossom: the lacquered designs on the tea boxes, which were famous: and various favourite teas.

Pham took pleasure in pouring a little tea into the 'commander' cup. Condiments stacked in front he carefully poured from it into each small 'soldier' cup. This, equally distributed the delicate flavours and colour that made the tea ritual such a pleasure. In the western tradition the last cup is often strongest. Then he passed each small cup, in silence and in a strict order of precedence. The last person served, he then raised his cup. All raised theirs and drank their first polite sip. They followed a Hue tradition.

Pham had chosen a reading of poetry to accompany the drinking. Mai's memory drifted to Vinh, and that special campfire on the banks of the Song Lo.

She remembered the huge fire they'd lit that night, but then her joy turned to grief. The fire reminded her of the still-fresh memory of the self-immolation of the Abbot.

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The tea ritual finished and its meditative aspect ended as Pham watched the cloud shadow Mai's face. He chose to move their conversation to present reality. They caught up on the location and updates of family members and a discussion of the various philosophical biases now held by each member of the family. Pham's shift in perspective worked and the shadow left her face.

Largely unseen, the waiter removed the tea party implements. Then he hovered.

The war in the South had taken a different course to the political changes in the North. Mai had realized, months earlier, that this group who once thought as she did, now acted quite differently from her and her northern friends. Vinh would have difficulty with the views of these family members. The three men were diametrically opposed in revolutionary thought. Vinh wouldn't tolerate their changes in attitude and behaviour

He'd have each of them 're-educated'.

Meeting Duyen provided Mai with a chance to breathe the fresh air of 'revolutionary determination'. Both abhorred the stark contrast they found between the motivation of the North and the lack of conviction in the South. They dared not express their true thoughts to their friends. Instead the two women chose to listen, then to pass their reports to their independent Northern contacts. Their task was intelligence gathering.

Mai's conclusion, sent North in her report, was that without massive effort from the North the southern revolution would wither. South Vietnam had chosen a different path. As a culture, they rejected Communism. Their talk was of Democracy.

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Mai politely offered, “Don’t you think that the danger you face is that you will stagger from political crisis to political crisis because you cater for too many factions and each of you has a different view on the ultimate outcome.”

Duyen was more candid. “Factionalisation will cause you future problems. It will blunt your judgement. It will not achieve unification among South Vietnamese.”

To bring the group back on track, Pham said “Factionalism, as you call it, Little Sisters, is our strength.” Now a Captain in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), he explained. “The South seeks a different ‘Unity’, one that keeps the South independent from the North. I and my friends believe that we can achieve democracy through political and economic negotiations with the French and with the Americans.”

Hai, a Captain with the National Liberation Front (NLF), welcomed the change. He explained his different view. “I disagree with Pham’s strategical thinking. For me and for my companions, the only way for the South to achieve independence from Diem and the Americans is through terrorism and guerrilla warfare. First and foremost we have to rid ourselves of the Saigon government, which is essentially a dictatorship. You have to recognise that we are at war with Diem and his policies. But we don’t want commissars, troops and revolutionaries from the North and we certainly don’t want the North forcing on us a Communist government. We need material help in weapons and military training cadres but not at the cost of the North’s agenda. The NLF has few communists. Like Pham I am a devout Nationalist, not a Communist.”

Phouc showed Mai his wounds. “I take no active interest in politics.” He went silent.

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Mai stroked Phouc's wounds so tenderly and so lovingly that she touched each of the group's heartstrings too. Some transmission took place between her and this gentle, caring brother of the man she loved. Her heart went out for all those who suffered. Mai suddenly understood the meaning of the Buddha vow 'of unconditional love to all sentient beings'. Compassion overwhelmed her.

Pham explained, "It was the people in Father's own village, Tien Doan, who betrayed Phouc. They were interested only in Father's land."

Phouc added, "Here I provide both sides of 'family' with food. I'm happier here."

Pham, in a gentle voice, added. "Little Sister. I think we owe it to you to explain some of the issues that place us apart from the revolution that is going on in the North. The revolution that we were all once a part of no longer satisfies me. The difference between the strict curtailment of individual independence placed by the Northern government on its people, compared to the freedoms we enjoy in the South, have changed my perspective. When I arrived in the South in the mid-fifties, Diem had been dubbed the 'Winston Churchill of Asia'. He had managed two 'miracles'. In the first he'd achieved political stability and the second was an economic 'miracle' in rebuilding an economy previously dominated in every sector by the French."

"I..." Hai wanted to vehemently protest but chose instead to listen. "Don't mind me."

Pham smiled at him, "This reminds me of our Paris days, Hai." Then to the group, "Diem was hailed a hero arriving in the Presidential plane in America in 1957."

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Hai broke in, “To be fair to Diem he had high ideals and is essentially a good man.” Then, unable to restrain himself, “But Diem is a descendant of families of Mandarins. Ninety-percent of the South are Buddhist. A self-righteous Catholic, as a result of this morning he is going to find himself on a head-on collision with them. All will understand Thich Quang Duc’s statement. His martyrdom highlights the people’s oppression. He has set a purely Vietnamese example for a revolution against Diem.”

Pham remained silent, gathering his thoughts. Then, “Diem is not an ogre. I repeat what I said a moment ago that Diem had high ideals. He’s essentially a good man. Above all, like us he is a Nationalist. He refused a French scholarship to the Sorbonne ‘to remain pure Vietnamese’. Diem wanted to be a Catholic priest and spent three years in a seminary in America. Our President took a vow of chastity ‘to better serve my people’. In 1950, the Vietminh sentenced Diem to death ‘in absentia’. He once asked Ho Chi Minh why had the communists killed his older brother. Ho merely said, ‘Let’s forget the past’. But his brother’s murder made Diem oppose Communism. Diem believes that, as President, he represents a moral example to us.”

Mai asked, “How did Diem succeed to power?”

“With the help of the Americans. They saw in him a strong man. His strength of character allowed the people to choose between Bao Dai and Diem in democratic elections in late 1955. He swept to power with over ninety-eight percent of the total vote. We’d never experienced democracy like that in over two thousand years of our history. It was Diem who formed a popularly elected legislature and it was he who drafted our first Constitution. This was the first miracle I referred to earlier.”

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“What you have left out, Elder Brother, is that Diem used dirty tricks to win that election.” Hai was relentless. “He could have won the election without playing a dirty game but the strife with the religious sects made him feel unsure of popular support.” His voice, as much as his words, showed his anger with Diem. “His margin would most probably have been much less but he would still have won.”

Duyen added, “The information I had was that he may not have been successful without the help of the CIA.”

Hai’s smile thanked her for her support. “Colonel Lansdale, a CIA ‘honcho’ was Diem’s mentor during the 1955 threatened military coup crisis. He also helped Magsaysay to power in the Philippines about the same time. Life would be more difficult without CIA money, that’s for sure.”

Pham agreed with Hai. “Lansdale convinced the generals plotting a coup against Diem to go study the Philippine insurgency problem. The ‘coup-in-the-making’ fizzled. Then the Hao Hao and the Cao Dai religious sects united in a coalition and made a bid to wrest power from Diem. He used divide and conquer tactics. Diem had access to CIA funds through Lansdale and he bribed key sect leaders. A million dollars richer, the Cao Dai strongman marched five-thousand of his troops into Saigon to back Diem. The religious sects, smarting that Diem had outwitted them, decided that their allies, the Binh Xuyen, could do the final job on Diem on their behalf.”

Hai interrupted. “That’s right. I remember. Then the Saigon mafia controlled most of Saigon. They attacked Diem in the presidential palace. I remember...”

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Puzzled, Duyen asked, “So many different groups against him? How did he survive?”

Pham said, “Before we get into that, who’d like a *bia hoi*?”

Hai laughed. “Its a dry argument. I’m happy with a *bia hoi*. Phouc?”

Phouc nodded, and grinned. The waiter appeared, without being summoned, carrying three glasses with the ice already in them, a jug of fresh ice and a jug of light-bodied Pilsener beer on a tray. He placed it on the table and politely took the women’s orders.

The three men clapped as Pham said “Three cheers for the Czech industrialists.”

Czech workers first introduced Pilsener decades before. Brewed without preservatives it had to be drunk as soon as the bottle was opened. Pham poured his beer from the jug into the glass and over the ice. The French wines the women ordered appeared quickly with the ubiquitous ice floating on top.

Pham waited for the other four to be ready with their drinks. Then he raised his glass. “To Tram Van Tram.” The Vietnamese equivalent of ‘proziet’ or ‘scholl’ echoed.

After a few sips, Hai sounded bitter. “Diem had his back to the wall. I’ve been here in the South all the time, remember.” “The French hated Diem as much as he them. They wouldn’t give him the transport he needed to bring reliable troops into Saigon.”

Pham imagined debating with Hai back in the Sorbonne. He grinned as he spoke.

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“Diem prevented a French takeover. They intended to use the South as a platform to retake the North. Diem’s cabinet knew this. They either resigned their posts or sat on the fence. Then Diem took on the Binh Xuyen, the Mafia ruling Saigon. Even Lansdale cautioned Diem against taking them on. They were supposed to be formidable fighters. I admire Diem for the way he took those gangsters head-on.”

Pham grinned at Hai. It had been a long time since he’d been able to debate so freely. “The Binh Xuyen controlled the illicit trade going on in prostitutes, drug traffickers and terror. Diem was a brave man. He convinced four battalions of Paras to attack key Binh Xuyen positions. The once invincible Binh Xuyen were driven into the Ruing Sat swamps and, in Saigon, he broke their backbone.”

Hai, not to be outdone added, “It cost five hundred dead on both sides including a large number of civilian dead and about two thousand injured...”

“But Hai, Diem achieved the impossible. He finally took on the Hoa Hoa and the Buddhist army of the Cao Dai sect. The ‘Pope’ of the Cao Dai escaped into Cambodia and Ba Cut, the leader of the Hoa Hoa sect was caught and guillotined. By the end of 1956, Diem had succeeded. He took charge as President of South Vietnam.”

“I agree. It made Diem an instant hero and all the ‘fence-sitters’ flocked to him.” Hai then argued, “But Diem allowed America to replace France as a new colonial power. The Americans hailed Diem as ‘saviour of South Vietnam’.” Distaste for Diem and his American supporters showed in Hai’s wilting face and in his slumped shoulders. “They said ‘Diem is our best hope in Vietnam;’ and Bao Dai must not return.”

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Mai entered the fray, genially. “I seem to recall that Dulles, who wanted to get rid of Diem just months earlier told a joint meeting of American, French Vietnamese and British representatives in Paris that ‘America will support Diem wholeheartedly’.”

“We are no match for their enormous resources.” Hai looked directly at Mai, sadness creeping into his voice. “Even Ho Chi Minh will be no match for them.”

Mai looked into Hai’s suddenly lustreless eyes. “That remains for the future, Brother. We Vietnamese have a fifteen-hundred-year record of successfully dealing with foreigners who want to colonise us. At the Paris meeting the French tabled that ‘Diem is a bad choice’. More importantly, the French asked that if they retired from Indochina unreservedly and recalled their Expeditionary Corps would America ‘help protect French refugees and French civilians?’ to which the Americans replied ‘Yes’. So the French bowed out and the Americans have moved in.”

Pham conceded, “I met Bernard Fall and attended one of his talks. For a Frenchman he showed remarkable insight. By late spring of 1956, the Americans had replaced the French and their choice, Bao Dai, with Diem. They totally reorganised their Military Assistance Advisory Group, or MAAG, with the aim of streamlining the 250,000 strong South Vietnamese Army, the ARVN that I am now honoured to be a Captain of, into a more conventional force reduced to 150,000. The Americans equipped and payrolled the new army through Diem, thus ensuring he kept their loyalty.”

“They cause three problems, Elder Brother. One, your ARVN became a conventional army trained to respond to American tactics, weaponry and organisation.”

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A chorus of voices agreed with his assessment.

“Two, their aim no longer focussed on internal events. It aimed to attack Vietminh forces in the North: and Third, ‘All power corrupts absolutely’ is the maxim in Diem’s case. But I’m interested in what Fall had to say Pham?”

“You’ve already predicated Hai, my friend. An Army untrained in guerrilla warfare.”

“There is another problem.” This time Phouc interjected.

“And that is, Little Brother?” Mai listened with mounting dismay.

“The Americans have assumed that internal military action can be contained using Militia Forces to control the countryside. They created a fifty-thousand man Civil Guard and their training is not anti-guerrilla but as a rural police force. Dat’s best friend... I forget his name...”

“I’ve met him.” Hai offered. “His name is Troy but he prefers to be called Leopard.”

“That’s him. After Dien Bien Phu, Leopard ‘retired’ to be a San Francisco cop.” Phouc recovered a smile. “Your father, Elder Brother, told me Troy tells his students he trained the police to shoot straight. Civil Guard groups are trained by people like Leopard who have been retired Sheriffs and Captains of police Precincts in the States. This doesn’t address the need to fight the Viet Cong or the NLF. Vietminh cadres coming from the North have trained your troops, Hai, in guerrilla warfare.”

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Duyen added. “The French gave your people the problem they gave us in the North.” Her intelligence-gathering had to do with economics. “When the French left, they purposefully bankrupted the South. In the five years between 1955 and 1960 the Americans have pumped almost two billion dollars into the southern economy. They pay all Diem’s administrative and operational expenses, all government salaries and provide nearly a hundred million dollars a year for the purchase of American military equipment. If the war escalates they’ll meet all expenses.”

“How do you know that?”

“Don’t ask her, Pham.” Mai said, darting him a withering look. “Just believe it.”

“I’m hungry.” It was Phouc’s way of halting the talk. “Take medicine when you are sick and eat meat and vegetables when you are hungry.”

The group laughed at this Phouc parody on the ancient Vietnamese proverb ‘Take medicine when you are sick and eat vegetables with every meal.’

The invisible waiter suddenly materialised. Pham said, ““We’ll have *banh xeo*.”

Pham explained. “It’s a favourite here. Saigon began its life as an Indianised Khmer town called Prey Nokor in the 14th Century. Indian merchants left their imprint on the food choices of the South and that’s because the South grows most of Vietnam’s spices. This Indian influence means that, rather than hot chilli meals and curries, the South Vietnamese prefer aromatic foods. Isn’t that so, Hai?”

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“Absolument. *Banh xeo*, is like a stuffed crepe but contains a special rice flour ingredient with tumeric spice or *bot ban xeo*.” Hai agreed. “I love the way it’s done at the Majestic. They add heaps of freshly-caught large prawns to lean pork then garnish it with fresh coriander leaves. Mint *nuoc mam*, is the pungent fish sauce that accompanies most meals. You’ll see that *banh xeo* will be served with fresh herbs and lettuce. It’s actually easy and quick to prepare.’ He smiled approval back at Pham.

The two girls hadn’t tasted it before. *Banh xeo* delighted them.

Between mouthfuls, Mai thanked Pham “After the food on the Trail this is divine.”

Everyone smiled as Phouc quoted another proverb. “Heaven punishes. Heaven reprimands. Heaven does none of these things when people enjoy eating.”

The ever silent, unobtrusive waiter brought to the table two huge jars of a smoothie Pham ordered. Made of crushed ice, a dash of sweet condensed milk and a squeeze of lime-juice, the fresh perfumed mango with a touch of mint had been blended perfectly into a uniquely Vietnamese smoothie.

Cool and luscious, it tingled as it refreshed the palate. The girls asked for another jug. Then, replete, they adjourned to a covered area on the verandah. There they watched river traffic, slowly sailing or put-putting its way north and south on the Saigon river.

The two women sat side-by-side in a double lounge chair, leaning on the upholstered back and holding hands. An awning blocked out the sun directly overhead.

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A magical breeze stirred in the women's hair as they stretched and relaxed. Phouc, contemplative as ever, leaned on the low parapet, his introspective and solemn hooded eyes reaching far into the rice-fields of home, north in Tonkin. The meal made him feel dreamy and he enjoyed the quiet. Pham lounged in a single upholstered chair covered in rich, red velvet, pleased with his choices. Hai relaxed in a deck chair half-in and half-out of the sun. Each rested. Some with eyes closed but not sleeping.

The waiter, stood, within earshot but behind the drapes inside the lounge, immaculate in black trousers and white shirt. Slowly, each stirred from their brief rest,

Pham ordered uniquely Vietnamese coffee, but not the steaming pungent American, nor a French *gastronome* production. Two glasses to each customer set on the table so that each could meditate the slow ritual. One, a six-ounce glass with ice and a stirring spoon. The other, topped by a stainless steel capped cylinder with a wide-rimmed bottom. This sat on top of the other shorter glass. The cylinder contained the hot water percolating its way through finely ground coffee beans more like dark brown flour.

A large teaspoon of rich sweetened condensed milk lay on the bottom of the cylinder. Onto this, slowly dripping hot percolated coffee infused its essence into the milk.

Phouc's hot gastronomic beverage became 'ready' first.

He carefully poured the coffee into the ice-glass, swirled it to cool then slowly sipped a small mouthful. The aroma rose, like a crisp morning fog, in the back of his throat and spread in the spaces behind his nostrils. He felt its restorative powers.

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Each of the others followed suit as theirs became 'ready'.

The gathering cool of the afternoon sun swirled around them. The awning protected them from its direct rays.

Phouc explained. "In the North the Land Reforms were ruthlessly carried out. I, like tens of thousands of others, was tortured until I agreed to give up Father's land. Some landholders were summarily executed as an example to others not to resist. They made me confess to 'sins' I hadn't committed. Many refused. They were simply beaten or tortured to death by the people. The communist cadres set the system up but it was Father's people who tortured me. They beat me with bamboo waddies and hung me up by my thumbs as they beat me. Many of the scars on my back are from the beatings." He paused as he recollected. "The worst on my chest and back are from the barbed wire they later wrapped around me as they beat me."

Duyen gasped. She'd heard none of this before.

Phouc continued in a low voice, eyes downcast. "Some of my friends had cotton bound around their thumbs, soaked in metholated spirits then set alight until they denounced me." His voice stumbled a few times and he had to pause. "I don't blame my friends or Father's people."

He struggled to compose himself. "I blame only the communist commissars who forced ordinary people in the villages to become torturers and murderers. They had no choice. It was me or them."

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Mai also knew nothing of this. Bile rose in her throat but she held her peace. Phouc's wounds were real, both the physical and the psychic ones. She couldn't understand how anyone would want to torture such a loving and beautiful person.

Pham continued, "I arrived in the South in time for the Saigon government's Order for the re-distribution of the land in 1956. In the South they attempted this by Decree not by promoting social violence. Labourers already working land were given priority alongside those who had fought against Communist influence."

Phouc added, "They granted me land because I'd been tortured by the Vietminh and fled South. They classified me as a refugee from Communist persecution."

Pham continued, "This group included the relatives of those killed or wounded in the war against the French and the Vietminh. The government granted land not just to the landless but also to those with less than three hectares. Priority in this group fell to those with more than five children. The South achieved a more humane process."

Phouc added. "Uncle Dat's organisational abilities were immediately recognised in Saigon and he was appointed as an administrator of land titles in Long An Province."

The three men failed to see the glance the women exchanged at the name, Long An.

Pham's eyes glistened. "Father told me that it took two years to see the first results of the land redistribution Order, and admitted to me that the cadres were corrupt. He tried to balance the land reform movement but found it difficult."

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“Corruption seems endemic in the Saigon government.” Hai added irritably.

Phouc ignored Hai’s comment. “Uncle Dat told me, though ten bags of cement might be granted for the local *ap*, or hamlet, being built on Diem’s orders, only one or two arrived. Often, Uncle Dat told me, some grants were symbolic rather than real. Worse, if rice was ordered to be sent, barley appeared instead.”

Hai added ruefully, “And Diem’s regime must have had vested interest in farm machinery. Tractors appeared in droves but became useless in the muddy rice fields.”

Phouc laughed. “Yes. A good buffalo would have been a tenth of the price and more effective. But what can you expect from a Central government that hardly ever moved out of the city. Uncle Dat quoted Confucius to the government officials, ‘If people do not have peace and prosperity, they will rise up in revolt’...”

“And we have,” laughed Hai with a twinkle in his eye. Then he added seriously, “What makes trouble for the people must be eliminated, whether it be communism or corruption. As you know, your father, Pham, has been removed to My Tho. He had a habit of bypassing local officials and going direct to fix the problem at the source.”

Mai’s focus drifted. None of the three men in front of her knew the harshness of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. She dismissed Hai as ‘one of those Southerners, a perjorative term in the North. Hai’s NLF experiences were different again from Phouc and Pham.

Mai momentarily day-dreamed of that time on the banks of the Song Lo with Vinh.

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She dreamt of her rendezvous with Vinh, her first love. She'd been ordered by the Party to join the revolutionary movement in the South and revelled in the idea. It would take her closer to her love. Called to the 'Parrott's Beak' on the Cambodian border, just east of Saigon for a briefing, Vinh would have to pass through Saigon on his way back. The possibility of meeting him again thrilled her.

A Captain like his brothers, Vinh now commanded a North Vietnamese Battalion in the 275 Regiment in Phouc Tuy Province. Mai hoped to eventually join him there.

At first, Mai had been appalled at the lack of political motivation in Southerners. For their part the three men had been slightly amused at her intensity. Not for them the privations of a Ho Chi Minh Trail nor the regular political indoctrination on Marxist subjects mandatory for the Vietminh. She had learned that Southerners did focus on *ton ton's* (Uncle Ho) nationalistic slogans such as 'Unity ... Unity ... Greater Unity' and '*Doc Lap*' (Independence).

Hai explained. "NLF training involves sessions on current affairs and the history of the revolution, but 'in our Southern style'. If we tried your Northern-style of Marxist indoctrination on our peasants and workers in the South then we would lose them. They consider it a worse torture than training."

Hai told Mai. "Most NLF live for the opportunity to return home to their village or town. Or for the concerts that we hold to relieve the harshness of the training."

Mai didn't tell them that she hadn't been home for ten years. She questioned Hai.

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“Yes. The NLF are always ready to move. I am the battalion commander of D445, an infantry unit in Phouc Tuy. We carry weapons and ammunition and ‘elephant’s intestines’.” The others laughed as Hai explained, “They are the long tubes of rolled cotton that we keep filled with rice and sling around our back with our bedroll. We guerrillas, NLF or Viet Cong, are proud of the fact that we can move quickly and lightly over any terrain. ‘Prepare sternly, practice often and victory is certain.’ ”

“So you are the ‘men in black pyjamas’ Americans are so afraid of?” Pham laughed.

Behind him the waiter, unobtrusive, stood ready to take their orders.

“Not like your ARVN friends.” Hai spat back. “We are all Vietnamese but we Viet Cong have a greater appetite for war than your fellows have, my good friend Pham.”

Mai interceded. “We are all of us Vietnamese. Let’s remember we are also family.”

Hai’s anger quickly settled.. “Okay. We are the ‘boys in black pyjamas’.” Mai gained his respect. “Unlike our ARVN friends who like to advertise their presence with bright red neckties and carrying heaps of noisy American weapons and gear, we keep only two pair of black pyjamas and a mosquito net and some nylon for rainproofing.”

Her interest in logistics prompted Mai to ask, “Food must be a big problem?”

“It is our primary pre-occupation. We move among the people like fish in the paddy field...” added Pham.

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“Yes. Chairman Mao is right, Elder Brother.” Hai beamed, the twinkling in his eyes restored. “We are the fish and the people are the waters in which we move.”

Phouc added, “I provide the Viet Cong with twenty kilos of rice per man and that lasts almost a month. My landholding of one hundred hectares dries paddy fish and some buffalo meat to add protein.”

“Lack of protein in the soldier’s diet is a problem.” Hai told her, “We eat Phouc’s rice twice a day in combat conditions. We get up at dawn, march for three hours then stop for breakfast about nine. Then either we march or dig until four in the afternoon when we stop to eat dinner. If we are on a march we then move again until dark. We never eat where we bivouac like the ARVN do.”

“That is the way of our Northern troops.” Mai approved. “And the domestic details?”

“We have units that farm specifically for us, like the one Phouc runs.” Hai paused.

“We put a rice-tax on many villages we pass through. But meat is the main problem.”

Phouc wanted to expand on Mai’s point. “In the past you must have got used to all sorts of meat, I guess?” He turned to Hai. “What different types have you tasted?”

“On the borderlands, where we did most of our training, wild meat was plentiful. I’ve eaten elephant, tiger, the odd bear or Orang Utang, wild dogs, monkeys and snakes.”

Pham cautioned. “Those native creatures are rare, now large groups hunt and trap.”

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Phouc pressed Hai for more details. "What's the worst meat you've tasted, Hai?"

Mai jumped in, "Elephant. Tasteless and rubbery as the sandals I wear." She changed her mind about Hai. She acknowledged his intensity came from a very deep source.

Hai laughingly agreed, then, "Dog I still find unpalatable but it is good protien."

Phouc remonstrated. "In the North, dog is a delicacy."

Hai smiled. "I know, I know. But in the South we have sophisticated palates..."

"You mean, French trained palates that regard dog as ..."

Mai interjected. "Come on you two. Vietnam is united. 'U-N-I-T-Y', remember."

The conversation reminded them they hadn't eaten and they paused. Pham called over the waiter and ordered *thit kho to*, a very Southern claypot pork dish heavily sugared. It came in a casserole dish with a lid, accompanied by a pot of cooked white rice.

Hai continued, "One of the delicacies I learned to eat is the jungle moth."

"On the Trail it is a delicacy too." Mai added. "Remove the wings then barbeque it"

Steaming plates of food arrived as they spoke. All but Mai bowed their heads whilst Pham offered a Catholic 'Grace before meals'. Silence reigned a minute or two.

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Hai surreptitiously looked across the table at her and caught her coyly smiling at him. After some mouthfuls, Hai cleared his mouth then continued, “In addition to weapons, clothes and food, we also receive about eighty piastres a month to buy extras like tobacco, sugar and of course the women need to buy their female items.”

Mai, desperate for more details asked, “And transport, Big Brother?”

“We are lucky. The ARVN make us presents of their bicycles, don’t they, Pham?”

“So that’s where they all go?” Pham good-naturedly added.

Hai smiled. “ARVN regularly make donations of equipment, weapons, ammunition and of course their bicycles, for which I wish to tender a personal vote of thanks.”

The South still maintained Confucian ‘politeness’ as a dominant social feature. Mai’s earlier upbringing returned. ‘Correct social behaviour’ was easy among ‘family’. No overt expressions of hostility towards parents, elders, peers or siblings were allowed. Conflict with established codes of interpersonal and social behaviour were also taboo.

As they ate she watched, wryly. Meals were a small family or communal affair. Bowls of food were passed around. Pham, as the family Elder present, dropped food into everyone else’s bowl before placing some in his. They even had an empty bowl to represent missing members of the family and small scraps would be dropped into it from time to time. Despite her communist re-education, Mai found togetherness in sharing a meal was an intimate and bonding experience.

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Mai looked forward to a permanent relationship with these men, as Vinh's wife. She realised that, although opposed to each other in the field, 'family' remained 'family'. Later, when she met with Duyen, they shared misgivings about the lack of war determination of the southerners but recognized strong family bonds.

Duyen agreed, "Most of the Northerners wouldn't consider going home, for example, as an option. 'Going home' can't be considered by us until we achieve Final Victory."

This woman who loved his brother so dearly, impressed Phouc. "You say you made your way, still on foot and along the Trail, south through Tay Ninh Province and on to the Cu Chi Tunnels? Then from there to the Parrott's Beak and finally into Saigon?"

"Yes, but I only walked in the illustrious steps of my Vietminh predecessors."

Mai couldn't tell him that she had walked most of the Trail from Thanh Hoa to the Fish Hook. She would never know that Hai had walked the same Trail but much earlier, when it had been more difficult. Nor that she'd met Thuyet at Central Office South Vietnam (COSVN). This secret headquarters, then being located on the Mimot Plantation astride the border of Cambodia and Vietnam had been on her way to the NLF headquarters near Ta Not. She managed a post with the Saigon intelligence unit.

No longer naïve, Mai had suffered a great deal. Duyen noticed her leg injury, which left her with a slight limp. Later, Mai told her the details and showed her the scars. Mai had been on the Trail one day when it had been bombed and she'd been badly injured. They also shared the trials and tribulations of the Trail.

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Mai's reports on it and on its progress were eagerly scanned back in North Vietnam. She'd explained to Duyen, "They like my reports because they are independent of influence by the commissars who always wish to show themselves in the best light."

Duyen left early. Vo Van Hai and Mai left Pham and Phouc on the roof of the Majestic. The brothers had been in contact. Pham had a flat in the Cholon area and would give Mai details of Vinh's visit when he received word. They could meet there

"It was so good talking of our days together as students in Paris and the fervour Ho Chi Minh had inspired in both of us." Hai said to her. "But Pham has lost his spontaneity." Hai couldn't understand why Pham now fought with the ARVN.

"It will never effect our friendship, Mai. Both of us know that our primary concern for South Vietnam is and remains the same. I picked the revolutionary movement to bring about 'Peace in our time'. Pham joined the South to fight against the North Vietnamese takeover of his beloved country. In fighting for freedom we are allies."

Mai, dedicated to Ho Chi Minh, felt Hai's words were seditious, but kept her silence. Pham gave Hai his reasons and Hai found it hard to believe the Land Reforms had proceeded so drastically in the North. Even harder to believe that Pham's own brother Phouc, a Northern hero, had been tortured by people in his own village of Tien Doan. The totalitarian excess forced on the Northern people so blatantly, worried him.

"In the South," Hai explained to Mai as they walked, "we want liberation and will fight to achieve Vietnamese autonomy. We don't like the 'Diem clique'."

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Mai said quietly, “But you all view with suspicion the developments in the North under Ho Chi Minh. I heard that you sent Nguyen Van Hieu to alert Ho Chi Minh that you don’t want a totalitarian Communist regime.”

Walking with Mai, Hai used this chance of one-on-one to focus ‘on fundamentals’. “Pham was right, Mai, we have the support of students, Buddhist monks, Cao Dai, businessmen and newspapers, all of whom resent Diem. The President has thrown Vietnamese supporters of democracy in jail: muzzled the press: and alienated the elite. His secret police chief, Nguyen Ngoc Duyen, has draconian powers of arrest. Ho Chi Minh is our spiritual father but the South has developed its own philosophy and means of action. The North must understand. We’ve a different history.”

Outside a jewellery store they idly gazed through the window at the bourgeois rings, bracelets and other gaudies neither would consider buying. Then they moved on. Mai seemed hardly to listen but she took it all in. She already had known that Pham and Hai had started out in Paris as students together. Thuyet had briefed her that the two of them had been inflamed and ardent revolutionaries and that both had been mesmerised by their meeting with Ho Chi Minh. Neither had strayed too far from their early premises. Issues he couldn’t tolerate had driven Pham South.

“You know, Hai,” Mai managed to smile, “I can see from the composition of the members of your revolutionary cadres that few belong to the Lao Dong or worker’s Party. Sure, you have Party members but the majority, as you say, are patriotic allies. The National Liberation Front needs a dynamic leader to be able to keep together all the disparate members who make up your revolution. It won’t be easy to reconcile.”

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Surprised Mai knew so much, Hai said, “How do you know about my organisation?”

Mai answered him with, “Trinh Dinh Thao, the high official of the Cao Dai sect and a non-communist, was probably your best prospect for a leader but he refused. Then Ngyuen Huu Tho, the lawyer imprisoned by Diem, was your best man.”

Hai realised how astute Mai was. Her summary stunned him. Only in Saigon four months this time, Mai had an excellent understanding of the key issues for the South. For her part, Mai had met and talked to most of the leaders of the various NLF factions opposed to the Diem regime. Hai had spoken to many. They had also been impressed by Mai’s ability to offer political insight, wisdom and tact.

Hai acknowledged to Mai that she was right, “Communists are not a dominant force in the NLF. Businessmen, religious factions, lycee teachers and political activists for a democratic and free Vietnam make for a better balance.”

Mai liked his frankness. Couldn’t fault his rationale. When the NLF mobilization committee finalised its nine objectives in 1961, Mai found herself agreeing with them. Their dominant theme, ‘The overthrow of the Diem regime’, was unarguable. Behind each article the second most important had been ‘Unification’. Mai had lobbied hard for its inclusion. Ultimately the committee accepted unification on the basis of ‘mutual interest’ but opposed the North’s focus. The NLF leadership made it clear democratisation of the South could be compromised by the ‘warlike’ activities of the North. The committee had asked Mai to pass on their concerns about the infiltration of Northerners into the South. Mai tactfully explained the time for talk had ended.

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The NLF had been inaugurated a year earlier on 19th December 1960. Mai issued a blunt warning. “The NLF must coordinate a military dimension to give ‘teeth’ to its program. Otherwise our Northern compatriots will lose patience and force the issue.”

This warning she’d received direct from Ho Chi Minh’s chief military spokesman only days before. It had come through Thuyet’s top-secret radio network in the Cu Chi area. Watered down by Mai, the implied threat nevertheless remained clear.

Hai’s priority on the agenda was “the withdrawal of American Advisers and an end to American influence in domestic and economic affairs.” On this he was most adamant.

The two friends had stopped on the opposite corner to the façade of the Notre Dame Cathedral. A group of young girls dressed in flowing Ao Dais crossed the road. The bright blue of the sky starkly contrasted against the brick red of the Cathedral vaulting upward with its two slate spires above the carillon sounding for Mass. Mai looked at Hai’s profile with renewed interest. Found herself admiring this studious, dedicated man. Suddenly two black vehicles squealed to a halt in front of the two friends. Two men sprang out of each vehicle. One couple grabbed Hai, the other Mai.

Hai remonstrated, “What do you think you’re doing?” His struggle was of no avail.

Manhandled roughly, both friends were manacled, pushed into a vehicle each then the cars hurtled toward the Cholon area. A burly security man clamped Hai’s mouth.

The car stopped. His stomach fell as he recognised the old Binh Xyuyen headquarters.

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No time to think, once inside the building Hai's belt was removed and the laces from his shoes ripped out, then he was frog-marched at a rapid rate to a room. His heart accelerated. This slit-eyed, pock-marked torturer he secretly called 'Face'.

The Face sneered, "You are Viet Cong. We formally arrest you." He hissed, "Do you want to see your accuser? "

Into the room shuffled the waiter from the Majestic. Hai's blood drained from his face. He wondered, *Does that mean they have Pham, Phouc and Duyen?*

The Face drooled, "Do you want me to read you your rights?" The men each side of Hai laughed. "I have the right to beat you to death if it pleases me. And that goes for the slut with you and any other Viet Cong or Vietminh Communist bastards brought to me in here. What do you have to say for yourself now, you Bastard."

Hai's legs felt they'd turned to jelly. He was tongue-tied. Communists had been excluded from South Vietnamese citizenship under a new law added to their constitution by the Diem regime. He realised that if the Face could make him confess that he was a Communist then Hai had no protection under South Vietnam law.

He hardly recognised his strangled voice, "I am not a Communist."

"Bullshit." The Face pointed to the downcast waiter. "Tell him what you overheard."

The man muttered quietly. "He said he was a member of the NLF."

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“Speak up louse, or I’ll have you in here too.”

The waiter looked directly at Hai, muscles working in strictures across his face. “He said he was a member of the NLF.”

In the man’s eyes Hai read fear. The waiter’s irises had shrunk.

“Take the louse out of here before he piddles on my floor. And this crap for now.”

The two each side grabbed Hai and marched him backwards out through another door, down a corridor filled its whole length with people shackled to the wall by their ankles. Hunched into different postures, in the dim light Hai could see all of them had sustained terrible beatings. The smell of fresh and drying blood made him want to retch. Faces turned toward him. They showed deep cuts and bruises and some had smashed-in noses. He could only distinguish male from female by their clothing.

He felt nauseous and agonised about his possible future. Phouc and the others had told him of various types of tortures that were a regular thing in the North. Each side he saw limbs skewed, broken to lie at strange angles. Their owners whimpered or groaned. His guards enjoyed beating these misshapen hulks until howls degenerated into submissive grunts. Hai’s benumbed brain recorded two rooms to the left behind the doors of which came screams, sounds of terrible beating and bleats of pain.

Moments ago he’d been in glorious sunshine watching people going to Mass. The sound of the carillon was already a far-away memory from another planet.

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Led into a different interrogation room, Hai sat opposite a prison officer who pushed papers across the table. “Complete these with all the details of times, organisations you are in and people you are associated with. Leave nothing out. Make a full confession and you may be spared torture.”

Hai gulped. His senses had almost deserted him and he found it hard to make sense of anything. He’d just passed through a horror chamber and now was expected to write logically about ... what? The punishment for revealing anything connected with the NLF would be a death penalty executed by his own unit in the NLF.

The officer sat there toying with his pen, a disinterested look on his face. Hai started writing. Anything. He kept out of it the university and his meeting with Ho Chi Minh. He gave his family history and avoided any mention of his contact with communists. Hai outlined what he could remember of his Catholic faith and gave explicit details of his fervour for ‘Unification’ under the Diem regime. It took him hours. During this time he was fed some fish and rice and coffee. He refused the coffee even though he desperately wanted to drink it and to feel the caffeine rush that followed but used it to express how much he hated the French and their exploitation of his country.

He rambled about the history of colonialism, how he appreciated American help but hoped that Diem didn’t trust them and then hand Vietnam over to a new colonialism. It was the truth. These were the things he’d spoken about at the Majestic. Hai wrote how much family meant and that, despite differences in political philosophy, all his family were adamantly opposed to any form of American colonialism. As he warmed to the topic his disabling fear left him.

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His writing looked like a treatise on anti-colonialism. Guards led him away to a cell. It must have been about two in the morning when his torture started.

The Face screamed through Hai's fogginess, "You filthy Communist." A huge paw struck him an angry blow across his cheek. "You're a Communist. Admit it."

Through his bleeding mouth, Hai answered. "I am and have never been Communist. That waiter lied. Had he told the truth he would have told you that he heard me emphasise the withdrawal of American Advisers and an end to American influence in domestic and economic affairs. The other issues I discussed with friends dealt with the internal running of changes in the re-distribution of wealth and power. I have a dream... to realise a true democracy in the South."

Face snorted like a pig, "Take him into the other room."

The 'other' room stank of sweat, blood and in the background Hai heard the moans of some living creature. Its body hung slumped from chains reaching all the way to the ceiling. The body was almost totally stripped, its clothes in tatters.

Blood streamed from the face, the arms and the torso. It stank of urine and excrement

A bench resting against the wall was dragged into the centre of the room in front of the body. Hai was pushed onto his back on it and his ankles shackled to a metal rod nailed to the legs of the bench. His head they caught by the hair and stretched him until it flopped over the end. Hai's arms were handcuffed under the bench.

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Face appeared upside down. He held a large bucket.

Face gloated. "I have all the truth I need from that filth hanging there from the ceiling. The one you came in with. Mai... Mai... Mai..." He laughed at his own joke. "Twenty-four hours was all it took. She told me everything. I hope you'll last longer."

Guards pressed down over Hai's nose and forced his mouth open. Face then poured warm, soapy water down Hai's throat. Hai tried unsuccessfully to twist his head away but the water poured relentlessly until he choked, gagged and vomited.

Face did it again... and again... and again as Hai gradually suffocated in a mixture of his own vomit, soapy water and bile. Hai realised in a fog that Face was drowning him but Hai could do nothing. Until, mercifully, he lost consciousness.

He awoke to find a soldier jumping up and down on his bloated stomach. Hai had little recollection of what was ejected but it hurtled out in long gushes. He tasted all the juices his body contained, including blood. His head thrashed from side to side in a vain attempt to stop the putrid juices and soapy water falling back into his mouth.

Conscious once again, his glazed eyes sought out Mai. She still hung there. Dead or alive he couldn't say, before the guards dragged him back to his cell and threw him on the floor. Darkness descended as a blessing. He had no idea of time. In the background of his heavy, seemingly drugged mind he heard screams and curses.

His stomach burned in the fires of hell and there was no relief. He urinated.

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But his intestines refused to give up solids, only their seeping, weeping. He wanted to die but death wouldn't come. He wanted to weep for Mai but the fluids of his body would only weep from his lower self. He felt paralysed, unable to move but movement happened spontaneously. When it did it wrapped him in a network of pain. Vaguely he watched the passing from grey gloom into darkness, a pitch black darkness he assumed was night. He counted three passings.

A guard appeared in the next grey zone of mind. Hosed him clean, kicking him like a bunch of rags onto his stomach to hose his back. Left him to shiver himself dry.

Led again to the Face, "You are a Communist. Confess and this will end. I tell you in all sincerity that no one can resist forever." Face breathed one-inch from Hai's face. "Confess. Don't you know you cannot resist me. Admit."

Some distant part of Hai's brain heard the last remark, chuckled and said, "I'll see you in hell first." He felt the Face's hot breath and smelled its putrefaction.

Hai found himself once more in his cell. A bowl of rice with scraps of vegetable and unknown meat slithered into his cell and lay there. A long time later the door opened.

"He hasn't touched it."

"Then let the bastard starve."

A long time later, rats had eaten it. Another similar meal arrived. Slid under the door.

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This time, Hai ate what he could. The rats ate the rest then gnawed at his clothes. He huddled in a corner so that he could face them with his back to the wall. When he woke he shooed them away. As consciousness slowly returned his horror of their visits increased. The pain in his stomach was gradually replaced with hunger pains. The ache in his body never left. The cries of agony mingled with cries torn from the depths of his depression. After what seemed like forever, the door opened.

Hai, forced once more to his feet, stoically endured the suffering of his body. The 'Nothing' that was never spoken of scared him more than anything so far.

He shrank within himself. Strapped to the handcuffs that draped from the ceiling, Hai sagged. His shirt remnants were torn from his torso. Electrodes fixed to his nipples. Then the Face thrust himself into Hai's hazy, greying vision.

"Confess. You will confess."

Hai's eyes started from their sockets as unbelievable shocks rippled through his body threatening to tear his chest apart. His teeth clamped on his tongue but the pain of electric shock impaled him. No other pain could be felt nor this one endured.

Hai shrieked his torment then tasted blood. It filled his mouth.

In the background to his own screaming Hai heard "Confess. You will confess."

Foam gathered on his lips and mixed with blood.

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Hai woke up in the corridor. Shackled to the wall by his ankle. The pain in his eyes felt as if they'd been torn out. Low shuddering moans filled his ears. He gradually realised they emanated from him. Words wouldn't come, masked as they were by foam and lots of blood. His tongue flamed and his stomach shrivelled in its own heat.

The grief of his agony overwhelmed him into a sobbing whose beginnings retched from below the manacles on his ankles, travelled through the bones of his body and ached their way into his mind's agony. His temples throbbed to his anguish.

Like waves on the seashore, moans, wails and screams filled the space around him.

A passing guard noticed Hai struggling into consciousness. Unlocking the manacles, he dragged Hai along the floor by his feet and left him on the floor of his own cell.

Time, regulated by the appearance of his bowl of rice in the dark-grey fog of isolation and the scuffling of the rats in the blackout darkness of night, left him night after night huddled in the security blanket of the corner of the cell.

He eked out his existence by forcing his body to eat. His electric burns festered and smelled. Early in his incarceration after the electric shock treatment Hai had a shirt draped over him. It took him a day to drag it over his tortured frame.

Something in his head kept repeating what the Face had said, *Confess. Don't you know you cannot resist me.* Some part of Mind responded, *Fuck you. I will survive.* In a face that had forgotten how to smile, Hai grimaced. *I will survive.*

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He found a bucket to pee and shit in. Crawled to a tap to wash. They must have been there all the time but initially his agony would not let him see anything. Hai realised 'recovery was in progress' one grey-black day when he felt clean again.

He lost his fear and need of death. *I will survive ...* became his mantra.

Face called Hai into his presence one more time.

In the room stood a tall Vietnamese. "My name is Dat," the man said. "I have come to take you away from here." Face left the room.

Hai merely nodded. Dat took him in his arms, lifting him as a baby. Hai didn't see tears forming in Dat's eyes. Only felt the comfort of the man's arms around him as he dropped off to sleep. A sleep of relief only his mind could know about for days.

Much, much later Hai learned that Dat and his friends had organised ten-thousand dollars to ensure his release. Hai would remember Face. Dat would also remember Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan as the man who gave Face his orders.

Le Duc Dat later told Vinh of Mai's death. How she died and by whose hand.

Within four years the world would know General Loan. Television audiences would see him during TeT 1968. He'd accused, tried then shot Face in the head on the street. Millions would see his victim slump, fresh blood spurting in heartbeats over a curb.

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1964: 'meeting on a rooftop'

GARY STEPPED FROM AIR FRANCE FLIGHT SINGAPORE TO SAIGON

On the 9th June 1963, he'd been ordered to fly by a British Wessex helicopter from Alor Star to Kuala Kangsa then on to Ipoh. He caught a small plane to Kuala Lumpur. Overnight in the Tanglin Officer's Mess for the best meal in three months then direct to Vietnam by an Air France Boeing 747. 'All-aboard' with free drinks in first class.

The heavy-laden atmosphere almost stopped his breath after the air-conditioned flight. Quite different from Singapore, Saigon's sweet herb-i-ness hid a humid atmosphere. The thermometer only moved between a maximum of 29.7 degrees Celcius (85 Farenheit) and 26 degrees (78.8) all-year-round. But its tropical humidity made him sweat immediately. Arriving at Tan Son Nhut airport Gary watched, stunned.

All kinds of military and civilian aircraft jostled for position. Gary had never seen so many banked up, with thirty or forty planes in one shuttle service. Inwardly discomfited, during the walk across the tarmac he anticipated he'd be shot at. Gary felt exposed as an Aussie in his smartly pressed jungle greens,. The leather band of his officer's peaked hat sparkled with 'spit polish': silvered captain's badges burned into his shoulders: and even his spit-polished boots reflected his face. The Regimental Infantryman's badge in the centre front of the hat made sure that if he became a sniper target he'd die quickly. Shot straight through his 'Third Eye'. He tried to shrink.

Australian servicemen exiting Singapore had to leave in civvies. Singapore was a British base. The British weren't committed to the Vietnam War.

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Australia's initiation into the Vietnam War had began at midday, 3rd August 1962. The original members of the Australian Army Training Team (AATTV) had, at that time, stepped down a Qantas gangplank from Singapore having been farewelled in Australia by a small group of family and friends at Mascot.

Thirty-four officers, Warrants and Sergeants and those who followed (a total of 990 OZ and 10 Kiwis), would make history as the highest decorated group of soldiers in any Australian conflict. In civilian clothes they were barely noticed in Australia by the press or the public. After their arrival in Vietnam, public attitudes changed quickly ...and remorselessly, proving how fickle the 'public' really is.

Gary had hoped to strut down the gangplank as an adviser. He'd served with almost every Officer and many of the Warrants in that first AATTV group.

Ray Simpson had served with Dad in Korea and was Dad's best friend. 'Simmo', Doug Clively, Clem Kealy and Danny Neville, all Dad's mates, trained Gary on his first para course at Williamstown and his later 'refresher courses'. AATTV's chief, Colonel Sarong, had trained Gary at Canungra. Sarong would see out the whole Vietnam War. Tributes to him and the Team were sparse in those early days.

The Viet Cong had started shooting from the mangroves bordering the airport. A persona non grata 'Englishman', before his arrival in Tan Son Nhut, Gary became a naturalised Aussie at 35,000 feet. He arrived dressed as a bona fide Aussie soldier.

His aircraft approached Tan Son Nhut and went into a spiral to avoid VC weapons.

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Arriving in Vietnam on 11 June 1964, Gary recognised that day as the anniversary of the 'Day of the Bonze'. It was twelve months ago to the day when The Venerable Thich Quang Duc, had immolated himself to 'admonish' President Diem.

On the tarmac, Gary stopped and moved to the side to let the others pass. Bent over, he loosened the zip on his overnight bag. Took out his Colt .45 pistol then attached the holster onto his right hip. He loaded a full magazine. Cocked the firing mechanism. Applied the safety-catch and placed the Colt in his unclipped holster. Ready to take on all-comers, he felt safer. Shot at, he could now at least respond.

No-one else seemed the slightest bit concerned. The bustle of people arriving and leaving overwhelmed him, two days away from the Thailand border... and silence. Since leaving the closeness, quiet and isolation of the Thai-Malay jungle, Gary's sensory deprivation had been replaced by noise, movement over large distances and sensory overload. He was disappointed no baptism of fire greeted him

'In-Country', Gary didn't feel a veteran... yet. Maybe he'd be tested later. He scoured the tarmac for people in black pyjamas but found none. Inside the 'Welcome' hanger, and proud to be hosting Aussies, a jovial Green Beret greeted Gary and his two colleagues. 'Call me Jack' identified then collected their luggage from the teeming hordes of people and bags. Gary didn't have time to catch his breath

A jeep appeared as if by magic as they were whisked away through jostling crowds. The next thing, Gary and his companions had been given a conducted tour of Saigon, arriving at the Majestic Hotel. It had become a transit Hotel, mainly for Americans.

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The streets swarmed. Cars, buses and trucks swerved and thrust trying not to knock anyone over. All executed with Confucian restraint or Buddhist compassion.

As though intent on some Grand Prix motorcycle race, white-shirted males preferred motorised pedi-bikes and Hondas. Attractive and beautifully poised girls, with the front-piece of their swirling Ao Dai clutched in their laps, chugged leisurely through the maelstrom on their Lambrettas. Rickshaw drivers sweated either their many overweight American burdens or suffered lithe Vietnamese customers who insistently crammed the whole family in the rickshaw with all their travelling cases.

Dubbed 'Paris of the Orient', Saigon boasted wide French-designed boulevards bordered by beautiful French Villas surrounded by high brick, yellow plastered walls. Surmounted by spikes or broken glass the walls were breached by huge iron gates.

With old-fashioned rifles casually draped across their lap, Guards languished on wicker chairs at each iron-wrought entrance. Slumped over and looking half asleep, all wore permanently bored looks. Many smoked. Most sat motionless however, like 'Mother', in Whistler's painting, either stared at the floor or with glazed eyes ignored the city's bustle. Bored men marking-time. Prisoners guarding someone else's prison.

The French 'presence' had not been eliminated by the disaster at Dien Bien Phu or by the Geneva Agreements. French still ran many of the rubber plantations, mines and factories. Major streets still bore French names and the traffic swarms lacked the freneticism of the Malayan, and especially Singaporean, roads. French blue and yellow Renaults were the only taxis. The restaurants and cafes exuded French charm.

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Gary changed back into civvies, his .45 hidden. Loaded American weapons lay casually leaning against walls and against chairs, begging for their owners. This was a sight Australian soldiers could never tolerate. Weapons safety was embedded in them.

He walked the length of Tu Do Street with the free time they'd been granted that afternoon. The others took off for the Continental Hotel where an officer's Club promised drinks. Gary preferred his own company and the chance to form a relationship with the 'locals'. He looked forward to non-prostituting female company. He never enjoyed prostitutes nor the experience of drinking, solely among men, for its own sake. Beer-besozzled soldier's experiences varied little whether soldier or officer.

Sober civvies he found more interesting.

Gary walked the five blocks to the French-owned Caravelle Hotel. He stopped for his favourite drink, a Pernod and lemonade. As he approached the next block 'Bar girls' brazenly accosted anyone in uniform or whites in civvies. Adverts multiplied for them to experience 'Massage-for-the-lonely girls'. Anti-Fraternisation Laws didn't stop business. Gary stopped across from the Continental Hotel where the other two officers would by now have a skin-full and be swapping a legion of stories and furrphies.

Tu Do had parking each side for the myriad of French and the smattering of huge American limos. Its two free lanes constantly choked by bikes, taxis, baseball-capped cyclo owners, white-helmeted rickshaw peddlers and Fedora-hatted pedi-bike drivers, they were a swarm of urban ants feeding the city. Squashed between the parked cars, the inevitable Lambretta motor scooters preferred by ladies in Ao Dais, shrunk to fit.

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The four-story Continental Hotel, its awning shading the pavement, seemed a mile away. In the middle of the four-way intersection a 'White Mouse' kept a space open. Pedestrians interrupted the seeming unstoppable flow of the river of motorised traffic. The Army presence, in 1963 and 1964, remained muted. American jeeps and huge GMCs were notable but rarely seen. Civilian traffic and blaring horns dominated.

Saigon reflected the French colonial style of gracious living and its ready adoption of French culture. Gary felt at home. The Cathedral, a Notre Dame replica, marked the end of Tu Do Street, furthest from the river where the Majestic waited. The South was in conflict with its names. Saigon and its advertising awnings proclaimed French products. The century of French colonialism seemed to be still intact, the French language preferred to English. But Tu Do Street had been Rue Catinat before 1954. Cap St. Jaques had been renamed Vung Tau. Shop staff fawned on the Americans but in private talk declared them crass. Because he spoke French Gary was assumed a 'local'. He cringed as Americans badgered and bullied the diminutive Vietnamese.

Back in the Majestic Hotel, with its French-trained and effusively correct stewards he left for a French cuisine, Dinner-on-the-Roof. He and a group in the opposite corner were the only customers. Gary couldn't fail to notice the beautiful woman facing him, in a gold Ao Dai. It clung to her slender frame like a filigree undergarment.

Pham, Phouc and Thuyet celebrated their anniversary of their reunion by ordering their evening meal "on the rooftop of the Majestic Hotel in Saigon", as they'd promised each other a year ago. They sat at a table in the corner facing the river.

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Across the river French and Texas oil firms competed with glaring multi-coloured lights. They reflected on the smooth surface of the quiet river-front. The ferry boats could be seen plying their trade across the river on the other side of the Ben Nghe Channel. On their side the Bach Dang jetty saw the exit of boats, for hire and for rent, that travelled the river to Vung Tau. Until 1966, Vung Tau was the 'Gold Coast' equivalent, a holiday resort for most of South Vietnam.

A fresh evening breeze had sprung up but humid air still drenched the street below. The impeccable French-speaking waiter took Gary's order and asked him his drink preference. Gary rejoined by asking what the Vietnamese group drank.

"Whisky for the men and a Pernod and ice for the lady"

"Would it breach politeness if I bought them their next round of drinks?"

"Not at all, Sir. It's a family. They are celebrating. I'll ask them, of course."

Gary hardly dared look as the Waiter strolled across but moments later the group looked his way, nodded and smiled. The older one spoke to the Waiter.

The waiter smiled his message. "They would like to accept your drinks but only on condition you will accept their invitation to join them, Monsieur de *Uc Da Loi*."

Flattered by acceptance from the group, Gary smiled at the *Uc Da Loi* bit. It meant Australian. Also that these Vietnamese could differentiate between Caucasian types.

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In contrast Gary couldn't tell whether Vietnamese he met were from North or South. The table in the corner waited until he joined, then each introduced themselves.

Thuyet, more beautiful close up than distant, laughed and clapped her hands joyously as he introduced himself. Gary sank, momentarily, into her almond-lusted eyes. The Ao Dai's gold blouse shone its reflected glory in the dying sun. The high neck of Thuyet's blouse had Thai-silk covered buttons all the way down her front, straining to contain their secret. Thuyet's hair reflected the dusk's blood-redness.

Her slender fingers tapped an unknown tune on the crisp white tablecloth.

Pham on his left and Phouc to Gary's right, made a space between them and opposite Thuyet. As evening shadows lengthened the darkness gave her added radiance.

Behind her, Standard Vacuum, Texaco and the Compagnie Franco-Asiatique des Petroles (Shell) reflected the oil company's bright lights on the opposite bank. They danced and shimmered across the water.

Gary couldn't remember what he ate or drank. The four swapped stories: where they'd been: what they'd suffered: and what had brought each to the Majestic. Nothing seemed too personal and each enjoyed the other's company. They spoke late into the night. Two slightly drunken Aussies returned from the Continental boasting what a fabulous night Gary had missed, until their eyes focussed on Thuyet. They sobered quickly and became well-mannered and respectful. One left Gary, laughing and joking with his friends and reminding him of the long day to come.

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The younger one stayed. Invited 'home' for a nightcap and coffee, both accepted.

Gary and he had a hilarious and scary ride along deserted streets on the back of a Honda made for two. Thuyet sat side-saddle in front of Phouc, Gary on a luggage rack padded with newspaper and a rolled shirt. His legs rested across Phouc's thighs and Thuyet held his left foot on her lap. Gary did what he could to keep his right leg straight so that it wouldn't tangle. He focussed on Thuyet's long, black tresses flying in the breeze of the fast moving Honda motor-scooter.

The other officer called his concern as they left the 'safe' environs of the city. He hadn't heard their stories but knew the White Mice shot curfew-breakers on sight.

Humidity had given way to a crisp, clear pre-dawn.

It must have rained while they ate and talked at the Majestic. The dampness on the Saigon streets had disappeared by the time they hurtled into Cholon. An euphoric Gary leant sensitively with each pitch and roll of the Honda. Thuyet's hands, holding firmly to his left foot, seemed to be in communion with him. When their eyes met, both seemed exhilarated. Through the delicate silk he could feel the heat of her body.

Supper developed into an orgy of laughter, smiles through tears and playful scenes. Their home was simplicity with a double bed in the lounge room-cum-kitchen "for the two boys" and a private but tiny room with its double bed, for Thuyet.

The two Australians were pleased they'd already habituated to the 'asian-style' toilet.

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A hole in the ground between porcelain pedestals. Toileting frequency had become exponential after the beers and the cool but racy night ride.

The brothers wanted the two Aussies to stay but Gary insisted they return. They would need a cab. Phouc wrote his address.

Unable to sleep, next morning, at six a.m., Gary strolled Tu Do Street east toward the Saigon River. Images of Thuyet swam in his mind. Report time at 9 a.m. in the Majestic lounge-room. Breakfast could wait.

Squatted on a two-gallon drum just outside his shop, an old man puffed contentedly on a long clay pipe. A herbal yet pungent aroma swirled into the clean air and spread along the street. Gary rested against the side of the shop. The old man pushed another two-gallon drum in his direction. Beside the old man was a Chinese wicker tea-basket. Without asking, the old man removed his pipe carefully: pulled the tea-container to him and took out a small handle-less mug that cushioned like a fragile egg in the container. Slowly and deliberately he poured. He held the lip of the mug and graciously proffered it to Gary.

With all the decorum he could muster, Gary took mug gingerly and sipped it. The two men enjoyed each other's company as Saigon slowly came to life before them.

Gary remained absolutely silent.

Cholon was a city of Pagodas. Cholon's Chinese community had a long history.

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While he and the old man contemplated the hustle and bustle, monks in their pagodas prayed in deep resonance among the incense and joss sticks.

Gary wondered, *What contemplative religion would 'barbecue its priests' as Madame Nhu had cynically retorted?*

He returned in time to meet the mini-bus that took the Aussies from the Majestic to the headquarters of the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (USMAAG). They were introduced briefly to General Harkins then a long session began. Gary and the other two stopped in a new Centre. Explanations, followed by countless statistics.

That evening he walked to the Quai le Myre le Vilers at the junction of the Arroyo Chinois, the waterway connecting Cholon with Saigon. Hundreds of sampans and junks transferred goods and people to all parts of South Vietnam. Waterways and canals starting in and around Saigon and Cholon criss-crossed in all directions feeding and supplying with no White Mice to contend with. It was a huge sub-culture that no army seemed interested in. Gary would have said "except the VC". He heard nothing in all his briefings that first day nor did he hear at subsequent briefings any attention drawn to the 'roads in the water'.

Early next morning Gary headed south for My Tho. The Mekong Delta's morning mist floated its cotton-wool along the river and canal lines. The open Huey's morning coolness fingered through Gary's hair and massaged him into a feeling of freedom as he glided 3,000 metres high in the sky. A Wedge-tailed eagle, looking for prey.

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into Leopard's domain...

GARY HEADED SOUTH IN A CIA CHOPPER THREE DAYS LATER

My Tho, the centre of the 'rice-bowl of Asia', was a Provincial Capital connected to Saigon by railway, road and river traffic. In all directions the canals interlaced with broad river highways, chock-a-block full of sampans and junks. He photographed the roads from 3,000 feet, supposedly safe from rifle fire. At intervals, what to him looked like VC roadblocks gummed the roads. The American pilot agreed. But nowhere could Gary see the waterways controlled in the same way. Rivers and canals exuded the peace and the quiet passage of a millennia of water traffic plying its uninterrupted way across the vast, flat landscape.

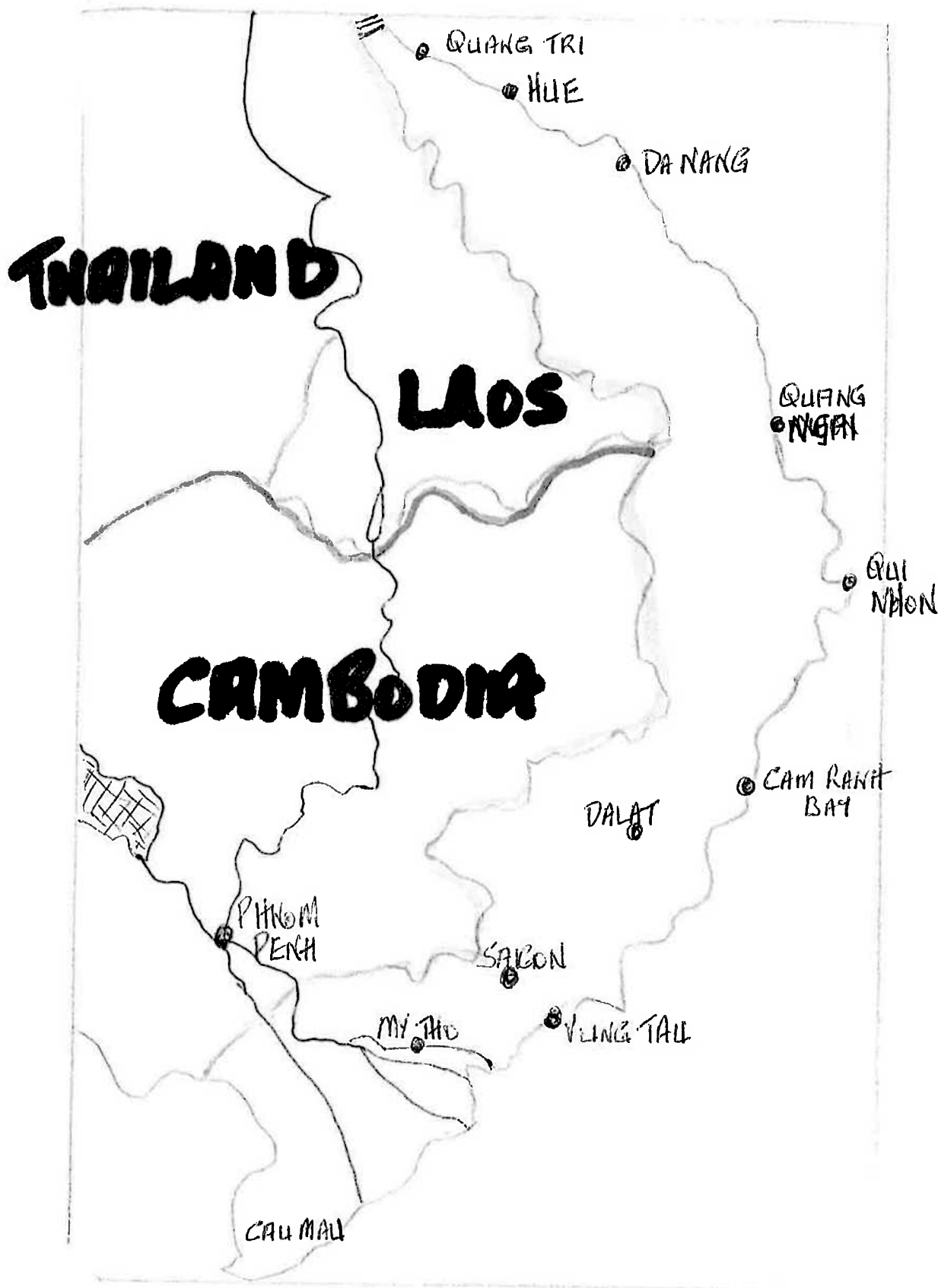
As they entered the room, an American CIA legend, Ed Lansdale, greeted them.

"Gentlemen, I won't waste your time. We'll get straight on with the formal briefing then I'll hand over to my colleagues here, some of who've been, like Troy here ..."

He pointed, "He's been in Vietnam for over twenty years. Others like Dat..." Ed acknowledged with a polite nod, "...he started out on the other side of the fence."

Lansdale then continued, "I'll quickly bring you'all up to speed. During the 1950s the CIA underwent exponential growth. There was plenty of action in them-there days, more especially for covert paramilitary and political-action missions. Secrecy dominated intelligence. Fierce anti-Communist and anti-Soviet sentiment in America was on a collision course with Communism everywhere in the world. On 8th July 1959, a small MAAG billet near Bien Hoa was attacked and two Americans killed."

SOUTH VIETNAM



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Lansdale wiped his face with his camouflaged necktie. “We’d had no forewarning that Americans were targets. Diem violently opposed Communism and they would not be allowed to ‘go political’ in the South. The Viet Cong’s political opportunity had passed them by in August that same year when they failed to determine the composition of the National Assembly in the elections. They decided to move the war from a political to a paramilitary one, rather than patiently wait for the South to collapse under Diem. The Viet Cong learned an important lesson and acted on it. Low-level violence in the countryside has now taken on a more ominous tone.”

In the My Tho briefing room of the CIA station, the sun streamed through the open windows to Gary’s left. Overhead the electric fans oscillated on their axis to drag in the morning cool but Gary already sweated. A huge area of man-made canals caused the oppressiveness and God-made river systems that would shortly start to evaporate to create humid conditions, more pronounced in the Delta than in Saigon.

Against the quiet chugging of the electric fan and vague street sounds, Lansdale explained that the Communists had attacked an army regimental headquarters near the Cambodian border on 27th January 1960. From that date the 100,000 southern Communists who had gone north began re-infiltrating down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam. They carried with them arms and supplies provided by the North. They also moved with two-million North Vietnamese refugees, Catholics and other minority faiths as they poured south after 1954, to escape ‘the Land Reforms.’

“A different, more subversive Terror now follows in the wake of the population move from North to South Vietnam. The Commo bastards are turning up the heat.”

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Skipping the statistics they'd been fed in Saigon, Lansdale impressed them as he exposed, in simple language, the Communist programs of assassination, murder and kidnappings. These had escalated in the three years prior to the Aussies arrival.

His eyes flashed. "In May 1960, Hanoi's Central Committee formally decided 'the time has come to smash' Diem's government and 'to eradicate it' from the countryside." Lansdale stormed back and forth. "Terrorist and guerrilla strikes attacked the programs Diem initiated to increase health and well-being in the rural areas." His voice rose and he struck the rostrum. "Anti-malarial and other Health Teams were killed, village authorities assassinated and attacks on the Strategic Hamlets became commonplace. Nothing was sacred. No one left untouched."

Lansdale moved quickly to international events. "In April 1961, President Kennedy inherited from Eisenhower the CIA-organized 'invasion of the Bay of Pigs' to unseat Castro. It was a total disaster for the President and the CIA. The Bay of Pigs had a profoundly devastating effect on the morale of the CIA and on its Vietnam role. For a start it forced a clandestine force, the CIA, go public and to protect its arse. Luckily for us, the CIA hand-picked good men for its eastern operations. Taiwan geared as a Third Force alternative to Chiang and Mao. The Communist Hukbahalap of the Philippines threatened the country's integrity and I provided Magsayay with political counsel and Agency assistance to ensure he became President. His assassination was a fatal blow." Lansdale then, as promised, ended the discussion urging everyone to 'mix and mingle'. "I want you Aussies to get a taste of how we as individuals feel about what the fuck's goin' on. Let's move into my air-conditioned sanctuary. It's smaller than this briefing room but cooler. Grab some coffee and cake and talk to each other."

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Gary found out that, following the Geneva Accords in 1954, the CIA ran two stations in Vietnam. Troy, it developed, had worked in both. He'd worked closely with the French against the Vietminh in the North. After the French forces left, Troy became involved in the CIA's flights to the North. Colonel Ngyuen Cao Ky, the last President of South Vietnam, flew one of the first of these. He helped to train and equip Vietnamese Agents to land in isolated areas, establish contacts with friends and to build subversive networks to operate leaflet drops, radio programs and other clandestine activities designed to undermine Communism in North Vietnam.

Ed Lansdale, later 'torpedoed as the Ambassador' in Graham Greene's *Ugly American*, worked the northern program. His CIA operatives were compromised by bad intelligence then murdered by the Vietminh. This left an indelible mark on him.

The Staff assured Gary that Bill Colby's southern Station was more successful. Lansdale helped Ngo Dinh Diem become President of the nationalist South Vietnam government and believed the triumvirate of Diem, Nhu and his wife, the 'Dragon Lady' was the best combination. Colby doubled MAAG. South Vietnam's Army escalated and adopted American organizations. By the time John Richardson replaced Colby, the Intelligence component of the South Vietnam station had been reorganized so well that the renegade Australian journalist, Burchett, reported that 1962 was 'Saigon's year'. Colby had recognised that the tactics Vo Nguyen Giap had used so successfully in North Vietnam to defeat the French were being mirrored in the South.

But in Saigon, U.S. State Department officials couldn't reach agreement. They interfered to 're-arrange' power structures in South Vietnam's government.

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As they left his air-conditioned sanctuary, Lansdale announced, “Gentlemen, forget all the hype you have been given in Saigon. The people up there have fuck-all knowledge of what is going on where it matters. Our focus is the Delta. Here a different kind of war is going on, mainly focussed on ‘Winning the Hearts and Minds of the people.’ That is what the Saigon flunkies’ claim we are doing in this stink-hole. The Viet Cong have beaten us to it and are wiping our arses in it.”

He looked around to see if his words were having any effect. “I have an excellent staff here, doing the best they can in shithouse circumstances.” The rapt attention on the Aussie faces convinced him. He continued. “Listen to what these guys tell you. I won’t tolerate bullshit. You won’t hear any down this end of the cesspit... Leopard”

Lansdale moved aside as a six-foot tall, distinguished-looking person took over. Casually but smartly dressed in civvies, Troy looked like a senior businessman giving an audit of the bank’s financial situation. ‘Leopard’ commanded attention.

Dwarfed by his side, but by no means able to be ignored, stood a Vietnamese in a smart safari suit. They gave the appearance of being inseparable.

“My name is Troy Leopard, spelt L-E-O-P-P-A-R-D. Two P’s. Same creature.”

His height gave him an advantage but it was the way he walked and talked that impressed Gary most. He strolled on the balls of his feet as if every step were a meditation. He exuded strength and dignity and awakened immediate respect in his increasingly large audience. Military members of the My Tho Team gathered around.

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He stared into unfathomable distance and each uttered word seemed weighted by long experience and insight. His black had started to thin. It revealed a smooth brow and the sharp, stalking features of the prowling beast he apparently was glad he took his name from. He held up a card.

Know your enemy, know yourself,

One hundred battles, one hundred victories.

Sun Tzu, sixth century B.C. Chinese Military Strategist.

Quoted in military documents by Ho Chi Minh

Troy said, “This, gentlemen, is what this briefing is all about. Statistics do not tell the truth. They can be and are manipulated. Few do it better than we Americans. Ho Chi Minh has written that ‘If you want to know the mind of the enemy, then you must search the inner recesses of his mind’. Facts without soul are mindless.”

Gary listened intently.

“Two main factors gives My Tho its significance. One is the local economy. The second is the way the Mekong affects every Vietnamese life in the region.” He turned to a blackboard. In copper-plate English writing he wrote... ECONOMY ... then, after looking over his shoulder and smiling... he chalked the word...MEKONG.

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“ECONOMY: Most of you would know that the main product in this Delta region is rice. The economy succeeds or fails on this staple. The Mekong Delta dictates timeless customs and traditions. These determine the life and very existence of the people around these parts. The Viet Cong, dubbed VC, know this and take advantage of it. We ‘scurry under their huge legs and stride over us like a colossus’.”

A smile creased Gary’s face. He recognised Troy’s quotation from Mark Antony’s speech to Brutus in *Julius Caesar*. Troy grinned back. A connection was made.

“The VC scare the fucking life out of the people and out of us. We are the ‘fat ones’. Under-resourced and overfed. We will never win until we come to grips with the reality of the Mekong, its Delta and the life force that flows with the river.”

Neither could have been aware that the connection would last for over forty years.

Troy continued, “We must study the place we live in. Geography is the seed of demography. Two delta areas drain THE MEKONG, the Saigon and the My Tho. This mighty Mekong is one of the world’s great rivers and a major artery sustaining the heart of Indochina. It rises in the Tibetan Highlands.” Troy unfurled a huge map down from the ceiling. “It flows 4,500 kilometres through China and Laos, along the Laos-Thailand border then through Cambodia and Vietnam.” He traced its course with a pointer. “Here at Phnom Penh it divides. The southern branch flows past Can Tho, fifty kilometres south of here. All major towns in this part of the Delta are on the bank of the river. The northern branch splits into several branches at Vinh Long.” Troy paused. “I’ll get Dat to continue in a moment. He can talk about the people.”

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Satisfied he held everyone's attention Troy continued, "The Mekong empties into the South China Sea at five main points. My Tho is strategically important because it's one. The Mekong's rush to the South China Sea is slowed down by..." Troy stabbed the map, "Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake." then again. "...and the immense Delta plain." He paused. "Both reduce the danger of flooding. In the Delta, thousands of interlacing canals drain the Mekong. But the south can't avoid dangerous flooding."

Troy then introduced Dat. "If it had not been for Dat, I wouldn't be talking to you now. We have been friends since 1945." Troy looked briefly at Dat with a special kind of intimacy before continuing, "In those early days I helped train Dat's North Vietnamese troops. America's relationship with North Vietnam was a good one then. Between North Vietnam and America the situation deteriorated after Truman dismantled the OSS and inaugurated the CIA in its place. He gave the CIA a new leadership and different strategic aims and policies."

Troy's voice had dropped then flattened. He stared at his huge hands for a moment as though he needed inspiration. Others, watching more carefully, may have seen a clouding of his eyes. Then he mentally shook himself and shrugged.

"As a member of Truman's revamped CIA organization and captured following the debacle at Dien Bien Phu. I'd supported the French forces. Dat undoubtedly saved my life by pulling me out of the long line of French and colonial prisoners. He'd recognised me and went to Ho Chi Minh himself to get my release."

Troy smiled broadly at his mate.

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Through the open windows the sounds of the street echoed a far-away world. Buffalo complained of the heat with long rasping bellows, snorting, stamping, then shaking their heads and making their trails creak and groan in unison. Cyclos, twisting and turning between buffalo carts, buses and heavy vehicles loudly contested road space with small motor-cars. All the metal monsters fought for room on the roads with screeching brakes and loud blaring horns. The buffaloes kept a slow pace regardless.

As lunch approached the heat and humidity intensified. Relief and a degree of silence would shortly reign as the busy street world gave way to siesta-time. The scents and smells of Vietnamese herbal dishes and rice preparations titillated nostrils.

Dat pointed out Saigon's portion of the Mekong Delta on Troy's map. "The Mekong drains into Vung Tau and is responsible for the mangroves separating the town of Vung Tau from Dat Do and Baria. These will eventually become strategically important areas. "Extensive areas all along the east coast of the Delta are mangroves." He moved on. "Ca Mau is a 'no-Go' zone, meaning we don't dare operate in that region at the moment. The VC use this and the Rung Sat for major training and supply. Neither Ca Mau nor the Rung Sat are tributaries of the Mekong. They are both sanctuaries and refitting zones for the Viet Cong. Eventually," He further predicted, "they will form staging areas for reinforcements from North Vietnam."

Dat spoke slowly. "Devastating flood experiences dictate the profile of traditions and culture here in the Delta. The Viet Cong are integrated with the people of this region. They have lived the joys and disasters of their environment. They swim among their own people like fish in the sea. We live in a goldfish tank."

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Gary knew the 'fish in the sea of the people' quote out of Mao's guerrilla war treatise.

"North Vietnamese regular troops are already being infiltrated South." He explained that Rung Sat lay in the Province of Long An, bordering Bien Hoa and Phuc Tuy. Then Dat shocked Gary out of his complacency, with, "Both of these Provinces will become home soon for future operations involving Australian troops. To its north Rung Sat stretches to the 'Parrot's Beak' where Cambodia extends almost to Saigon." Again Dat accurately predicted "This will become a major infiltration point for North Vietnamese regulars. Part of Ho Chi Minh's trail ends in the 'Parrot's Beak'."

Gary took copious notes.

"Ca Mau makes up five of the southernmost Provinces of South Vietnam. It's a vast low-lying plain covered by dense forest and mangroves. Ideal for guerrilla operating bases. My Tho, the town that surrounds our 'fish bowl' compound, lies on the Fleuve Anterior. Its twin town, Ben Tre, rests on the southern bank. Ben Tre was the site of the annihilation of a small force of local pro-government forces a week prior to the arrival of you AUC Da Loi. The VC blasted it. Made it an example. My Tho is a town still smarting. Ben Tre proved our weakness to effectively predict and to intervene"

Dat emphasized that, "This Delta region is the complete opposite to the Tonkin highlands in the extreme north, which was my ancestral home less than nine years ago. The Mekong Delta as one of the world's largest delta systems, is also one of the most densely populated Vietnam regions. Economy and demography are interlocked."

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Troy signalled Dat, who nodded, “When no state of war exists the Delta produces enough rice to feed the whole of Vietnam with a healthy surplus. The French Indochina War resulted in Thailand becoming the rice-rich exporter. A super rich, abundant agricultural area, the Delta’s additional products are coconut, sugar-cane. We feed well here, as you’ll see.”

‘Leopard’ and Dat confirmed much of what Gary believed as he’d choppered to My Tho, clutching a map in one hand and briefing papers in the other. With one leg resting on the skids, Gary took photo after photo, hoping to create a rich source library of instructional slide evenings back in Malaya and eventually Australia. The whole Delta area overwhelmed him in its beauty and in its images. It stretched to each compass point on the horizon. Gary had no prior idea of its magnitude until he flew over it. There seemed no end. His interest was in the interlaced canals that were like a spider’s web, splaying out in all directions. All carried heavy traffic. He believed they were the main supply and provision ‘roads’ of the south.

Troy’s soft but commanding voice had raised ten decibels. “It seems strange now but in those early days we all shared Ho Chi Minh’s vision.” Gary looked up. Troy’s eyes sparkled. “We all believed that we could work toward common solutions for Vietnam in the 1950s. I and my boss Patti, formed a good friendship with that incredible old man.” Troy’s face recalled his youthful passion. “Though our political and strategic directives have taken an irremediable turn, I still like to think that friendship still remains. Ho Chi Minh always hoped the American government would work with him to create a new and united Vietnam. Ho had a great respect for American democracy.” He looked at Dat. “You, more than anyone, my Friend, would know this.”

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Dat quietly agreed. “He based his inaugural Presidential speech in 1945, on the American Constitution. Troy and I were there. We heard him...”

The room suddenly rocked with a huge explosion. The sound echoed and most seemed stunned, except ‘Leopard’ and his Vietnamese shadow.

“The stupid, fucking bastard. The Captain’s jeep must’ve been on his way back. That bomb’s three hundred yards away.” Leopard issued orders in rapid, staccato bursts.

At the same time he moved like the striking beast he took his name from, quickly but in control, muscles working in tandem with each other and not a motion wasted. Military personnel followed his orders without question.

“Gary, follow me.” An order not to be argued with.

Gary found himself caught in a maelstrom of action as he followed in Troy’s wake. The jeep had no doors. Troy leapt into the driver seat in a bound and had started the vehicle and gunned it as Gary threw himself in the other seat.

Dat, with remarkable agility, frog-leaped into the back from the rear.

As Troy screamed through the gears and tortured the tyres, spinning them on the gravel, his jeep thundered out the opening gate, hardly clearing the gap, to the shock of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldier, supposedly guarding the gate. Other vehicles hadn’t yet started up.

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Troy hurtled the vehicle into a ninety-degree turn to get it onto the road, dodging local traffic and shocked buffalo drivers. Most of the local traffic had stopped. Some slowly moved to the edge of the road. They'd heard and felt the explosion.

As Troy's jeep charged them, vehicles and bodies scrambled out of his way. Behind him Dat cocked a 50 cal. Machine-gun and checked it through. Troy, without taking his hands off the wheel motioned Gary to his 'under-over', an M-16 Armalite with an M-79 grenade launcher underneath the rifle's barrel.

"Grenades in the glove-box." He yelled into the slipstream. "Load shotgun rounds."

Gary did as he was told, grateful for the quick review he'd made of this weapon that morning. He loaded a magazine into the M-16, a shotgun cartridge into the M-79 then cradled the weapon and looked around. It didn't take long.

"There the poor fucker is." Within 50 metres Troy slammed the breaks, slewed around to face back the way he'd been coming then reversed it to within ten yards of the wreck. The 'poor fucker's' jeep lay upside down. Its wheels still spinning and the engine gutted and the chassis in shambles Gary found it hard to believe a person could survive.

"Over here. Somebody... over here."

The yells deteriorated into a sobbing then a moaning. Two lifeless bundles showed the explosion had been effective. Everything stank of cordite. Wisps of smoke wafted.

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“Cover me, Gary.” Troy leapt out of the jeep, its engine still running, almost before it had stopped and ran to a shapeless bundle fifteen feet away.

A long burst of .50 cal zoomed over Gary’s head and he watched the tracer follow a very fast-moving person in black pyjamas. The man threw himself into a low patch of ground and the tracers fell short, then over, pinning the man between. Without thinking, Gary eased the range of the M-79 to one hundred yards, quickly reloaded a phosphorous grenade then fired. It dropped short then exploded forward, totally engulfing the man in white, all-consuming smoke. The screams were their own reward. The smell carried back to Troy’s jeep just as Troy appeared with the body of the American Captain slung over his shoulder. Unceremoniously throwing his burden into the back seat as Dat made room, Troy once more gunned the jeep. He forced it to zigzag its way through the American jeeps coming at him, all intent on rescue.

Troy swore at them, “Get the fuck outta my way, Cowboys.” waving his hands from side to side. “Shit. Nearly got that mother-fucker.”

Gary hung on. The whole frenetic drive took but moments from start to finish. He had no time to worry how Dat might be, with the .50 cal. in the back. Let alone the poor bastard of a Captain. Gary saw the bloodied bundle out of his left eye.

The compound gate wide open, Troy screeched on two wheels negotiating the right-hand turn. “Medic...” The Captain tumbled about like a rag doll in the back, grunting and swearing. “If you can yell at me then you’re still alive, you lucky son-of-a-gun.” As he spoke Troy slammed the jeep sideways. Male nurses came running.

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Troy ignored them as they fussed. "Let's go have that drink. Good work, Gary."

Dat called to an ARVN, gave curt instructions, presumably about cleaning and safety of weapons, because the man called two other ARVN over as he took charge, checked the safety catches and unloaded the weapons.

In his 'detached MIND' Gary admired the weapon-handling proficiency of the ARVN soldier. *He's been trained well*, Gary thought, *that's not their normal style*.

Troy led the way to the Officer's Club, deserted except for the barman. Troy ordered "Beer for me, Gary. What do you want, Mate?" Then, to Dat, "Whiskey for my Best Mate here, Chug-a-lug."

'Chug-a-lug' turned out to be the barman. Drinks distributed, Troy raised his glass. "We made a good team out there, didn't we ever, by Christ." He turned to Gary. "Here's to our new Mate from the Country-Down-Under."

The Officer's Club had started to fill, slowly. Most kept their distance from the three.

Ed Lansdale came over and patted Troy on the back. "Fucking good work, Troy. And shit-fast. What the fuck do you gas your tank up with? You were out the fucking gate before these mother-fuckers got their fingers outta theyz bums let alone the keys in the throttle." He called, "Chug-a-lug'. Get your arse over here boy and give these heroes another round." To Troy, "I owe you a Beer." He paused for a breath. Acknowledged the drinks brought by Chug-a-lug, he added, "Shit, you were fast."

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Some time later, much later, they ate then drank a lot more. During this saga Gary found himself hoisted up by two Green Berets to sign his autograph on a sampan bolted into the roof of the Officer's Clubroom.

Gary had no idea where the other Aussies were or what they were doing. He did remember the interest shown by Ed Lansdale in his theory. Troy backed it effusively. He and Dat held Gary up while they made it into the Colonel's sanctuary. Gary found he could speak articulately but couldn't stand up straight. His legs didn't seem to want to support him, but his tongue made sense. At some stage in the uproarious proceedings, everyone was laughing, shouting, and making pet theory statements.

The Colonel shushed everyone. Then, "Everybody out but Troy, Dat and Gary. I mean, O-U-T... OUT." At the last an explicit order, he closed then locked the door.

Troy whispered, "Shit. I've only seen the inside of this fucker once before."

After jiggling with a code, Lansdale pulled a map out of the roof. The map had 'SECRET' in huge red letters on each side. Hardly able to see clearly, Gary gradually made out the water networks. He pored over them with Dat, Troy and Lansdale for what seemed hours, marking junction points, staging and loading areas and collection points. As the three sobered, it became a 'dry argument'.

This was serious business and Gary felt proud that his theory received such attention.

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Springtime in Saigon...

GARY COULDN'T WAIT TO GET BACK TO SAIGON AND THUYET

At 8.00 a.m. he called. She had answered and was alone.

His heart jumped. "Can we meet somewhere?" Gary cursed his presumption but she agreed. He effected a less urgent tone. "Would you like to name a place and a time?"

Thuyet demurred, asking Gary, "Peut-être vous avez un rendezvous."

"La Banque du Rivière du Saigon c'est bon? Au front de l' Hôtel Majestic? Perhaps you would like me to pack a picnic with some food and drink."

"Oui, C'est tres bien mon cher. There's is a little park on the river bank at the end of Tu Do street." Thuyet's voice brightened as she answered. "Je tu vois la-bas dans une heure si vous voulez? Okay-la? Je m' arriverai a neuf heures ce matin. C'est bon?"

"Bien sûr, Thuyet." Gary's heart thumped in his breast. Thuyet had started with 'Monsieur Gary' but had just said 'Oui' and 'mon cher' in the same sentence. He couldn't believe it. She'd also capped it with 'tu'. Agreed to meet him. Alone. In a little park on the riverbank. He wished they were in Paris. But then, Saigon was the 'Paris of the east'.

He hurried to speak to the concierge. "Yes. It could be done in an hour, no problem."

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

The concierge called one of the waiters. The two men seemed to enter into a conspiracy with Gary, once he explained he wanted to make a good impression on a very 'pure' Vietnamese woman. He wanted to make friends, not to bring her back to a room at the Majestic. The two Vietnamese explained that there was a Vietnamese proverb that said 'Take medicine if you are sick but eat vegetables with every meal.'

They illustrated this by recommending, "If you give a Vietnamese person the choice between meat or fruit, they will always choose fruit and vegetables. We love small snacks and good fruit and fresh vegetables are safest if you want to make a favourable impression. For a drink, we would like to prepare a special Vietnamese tea for you two. You can never go wrong with properly prepared tea."

"And can all this be prepared in time? In a picnic basket for two?"

The two men smiled, "No problem."

Gary smiled to himself at the unaffected way Americanisms became an accepted form of language. "No problem." Gary had adopted that idiomatic turn of phrase himself.

He sat on a park bench less than an hour later under a shady tree looking across the Saigon River with his picnic-basket at his feet. The river had a timeless feel about it. In the early morning breeze off the river it seemed the placid waterway could keep the humidity and heat of midday away forever. It was a perfect day and the 'right' spot.

The angle of the bench allowed him to watch the street entrance to the park.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

The honking of horns, the fumes of the buses and trucks and the frantic busy-ness of Saigon streets made him feel as though he were in a fishbowl, separate yet an integral part of a teeming, bustling and urgent city.

The park, though small, had a peaceful vibration about it. The people in it must have sensed this. They strolled along tailored pathways, paused randomly to be in quiet harmony with the twittering birds, stopped at flowering gardens shaded by tropical trees, with the ever-flowing river as backdrop.

Thuyet, dressed in her golden *ao dai*, entered the park. Gary couldn't miss her. Balancing a white parasol decorated with delicate gold orchids, Thuyet smiled as Gary slowly recognised her. He immediately jumped up to greet her.

Gary couldn't help himself. "Thuyet, tu es tres charmante, très merveilleuse."

"C'est magnifique ici, n'est pas? Ici est une place d'excellence en Saigon."

"So you don't live here?"

Meant to be an innocent question, it caused Thuyet to pause mid-stride. A momentary shadow passed but not before Gary had taken note, puzzled but still smiling.

She looked quizzically at him, seemed to try to penetrate the reason behind the question, finally relaxed suddenly, smiled then closed up to accept his proffered hand. He took Thuyet's in both of his, one under, one over.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Thuyet let him hold her for a moment then replied, “No. I come from further north.”

Gary daredn't question further. He would not allow this day to be spoiled, for anything. He offered her the bench and Thuyet sat, coyly adjusting the silken cloth of her ao dai. A faint but tantalizing aroma embraced him. He sat beside her but not too close and turned slightly toward her. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

Thuyet dropped her eyes demurely; “C'est merveilleux to see you here.”

Gary felt the first hint of a blush seeping into his cheeks. He hadn't experienced that since he'd been an adolescent. He'd known furious or frustrated surges of colour during his army service but not the blushing of a teenager in love.

His heart pounded its message ‘I like Thuyet ... very much’.

He struggled for an appropriate response.

Gary stammered, “W-w-what a ...b-b-beautiful d-day.” Annoyed at his nervousness.

Thuyet seemed more in control. “I see you have a picnic basket. How sweet.”

Gary looked away. “I love this view of the river. It looks so placid and peaceful.”

Then he remembered. “I had the Hotel make a picnic-basket up, Thuyet. They told me you'd like the things they have prepared.”

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Again that swift but passing shadow. “Did you tell them who you were meeting?”

Perturbed, Gary paused before answering, “No. Of course not.”

Thuyet seemed taken aback by the involuntary sharpness in his voice. Gary secretly chided himself. He continued in a gentler tone.

“There is no way I would want to share you with anyone today.”

The softness worked. “That is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me.”

She’d seen his blush but Thuyet said nothing.

Once again Gary felt like a schoolboy on his first date. He tried to relax but all he really felt like doing was sweeping Thuyet into his arms just to hold her close and breathe in her subtle perfumes. Her Ao Dai was...

“Charmante.” The unconsciously thought word fell from his lips.

Thuyet actually blushed at his ‘spoken aloud’ comment then quickly turned away but not before Gary had seen her sudden colouring. He stood up and moved slightly away from her to give her space and commented on a Vietnamese boat on the river.

Thuyet had time and space to recover. “They are carrelets. They are fishing boats like my father had on the Song Lo ...” She faltered. “...my father used to have...”

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

She stopped. Thuyet coloured heavily and in consternation turned her head from him. Her hand automatically came to her face as if she'd said something she didn't want to say. She recovered. Thuyet quickly added, "...when I was a young girl."

Gary assumed there was some secret about her father. He chose to focus on the fishing boats as a welcome distraction.

"I've never seen the *carrelets* before, Thuyet. How do they work?"

Glad of the reprieve, Thuyet answered, "Almost all the people of Vietnam fish. The coastal peoples all have boats or access to boats for fishing. What you see over there Gary is one of the most common. It has a square net about two to four metres across. Can you see two sets of poles?"

"Just a minute. Oh yes. One on the end is like a derrick or hoist device?"

"Exactement. The other two are crossed over to hold the net out like a square. Just watch. The fishermen on the front are pulling the net up now, *mon cher*."

There it is again... 'Mon cher.' Gary felt overjoyed. As the net raised out of the water he saw a simple pulley system linking the 'derrick' on the end of the shallow-draft bamboo boat with two very long, curved bamboo poles that crossed over each other and supported the net from each of their four ends.

Ingenious and lightweight fish squirmed and flopped in the belly of the net.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Gary laughed. “What would this country do without bamboo, Thuyet?”

Fully recovered, Thuyet laughed with him and the tension eased; though where it came from Gary couldn't tell. His questions had been so innocent.

Thuyet continued smiling. “In our country we have a liquor called *ruou can* and it's named so because it is sipped through a long, slender bamboo straw. The bamboo is called *quan tir* and that means ‘a noble man’. That is because the bamboo the straw is cut from is in our mind elegant, straight, strong and helpful just as a noble man should be. In Confucian culture it is important for a man to be ‘noble’. I have read some of your history and your definition of noble used to be the same as ours but then later it seemed to change into some kind of...?” Thuyet searched for words.

Gary supplied them. “A knight, like King Arthur and the Round Table.”

‘Exactement, mon cher. But restricted to princes of royal blood. Our Confucian concept of the ‘noble man’ has the same virtues as yours but nobility of spirit is the aim of every Vietnamese male of value. I like you because you have a noble aspect, Gary. Except you are a noble warrior.’ She covered her mouth as she laughed.

Embarrassed yet joyful, Gary mumbled, “Merci, ma chérie.”

Both stared at the fisherman in the two boats plying the river.

Emboldened, Gary's hand traced along one of the slats on the bench.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

His fingers stopped. So close that he felt the cool of hers.

Thuyet must have felt the heat pouring from his hand. Slowly, timorously, she moved her hand until it settled on his. Neither moved but the coolness of her alabaster hand gradually replaced his heat as her touch surged through him.

Lamely, to fill the silence, Gary said. “What a beautiful day.”

Thuyet watched the two fishing bamboo boats. A flashback to earlier times jolted her.

Gary, unused to such a peaceful scene so far in his tour of Vietnam, watched the fishermen quietly working in the sunlight whilst he held hands with this beautiful woman. He imagined the same vignette playing itself out over thousands of years.

Maybe Lancelot and Guinevere watched a similar scene in Wales?

Large rivers always engendered these feelings of eternity in him. The fisherman’s net had been partially raised. The sun played on the water, glistening the river’s fertility, as fish, caught in the net, thrashed about. The two fishermen on the prow of the vessel emptied it. He wondered how many ‘landlubbers’ like he had stopped to watch. His Christian mind remembered passages of the New Testament and images of Jesus and his fishermen friends on Lake Galilee. The plopping of the net back into the water broke into his musing and he turned to look at Thuyet.

Oblivious of him, her face had puckered, then, very slowly her features relaxed.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

It gave Gary the opportunity to look even more closely at Thuyet's fine features.

She looked cast from Nefertiti, whose finely sculptured head had the same Asian look and queenly charisma that Thuyet duplicated. Dappled in the soft sunlight, her face could 'launch a thousand ships'. Her long neck invited a kiss he found hard to resist.

He watched Thuyet's life-flow pulsing her carotid then down to her gentle swellings.

If Thuyet felt his gaze she indicated nothing. The breeze dropped. The humidity rose.

Gary's thirst intruded. "Thuyet. Would you like something to drink?"

"Perfect, Gary. What do you have?"

Gary looked at his watch. No wonder he felt thirsty. It was ten o'clock, time for a picnic and morning tea. Gary bent down and raised the basket sitting it between them.

"Would you like to look, Thuyet? I know what's in there but you don't. It'll be like a Christmas hamper."

Thuyet squealed her delight. "It's been a long time since I celebrated Christmas."

Bingo. His whole body sent wave after wave of relief sounding through him.

Thuyet lifted out a small laptop table. "Gary?" The tabletop fitted snugly on the lid.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Thuyet lifted the top of the basket and sniffed the wickerwork Chinese tea-basket.

“Lotus blossom? Oh, Mon cher. How did you know?”

Thuyet’s eyes opened. Her puckered eyebrow confirmed her puzzlement.

“I have to confess that I didn’t. Have I done something wrong?” His forehead had furrowed and his mouth went dry.

“Tea sends special messages, Gary.” Her tone suggested he done something good.

“And the message I have sent you, Thuyet?”

“In my culture, poets and scholars prefer Jasmine. The rich use their money to use rare perfumed flowers. But the ‘pure of heart’ drink Lotus blossom tea.” Thuyet held his hand and said “Thank you, Gary. Whatever you told the concierge suggested you regarded me as pure and chaste as I regard you as noble, mon cher.”

“With all my heart, I do, Thuyet. In case you hadn’t noticed... in your presence I feel like a schoolboy on my first date.”

She laughed then quickly covered her face. “And I love you for your consideration.”

Gary, overwhelmed, asked, “May I hold you for a moment Thuyet?” Then he added as a joke, “I have been told that a hug a day keeps the doctor away.”

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Thuyet laughed, leant forward and hugged him gently. Disengaged, then she asked, “May I have a hug, please, without having to lean over the picnic basket?”

She stood.

Gary stood carefully and waited. He hugged Thuyet as she came to him. As he held her gently, a peace came over him like he’d not experienced before. He felt Thuyet’s heart pounding beneath her silk blouse. It sent him a thrilling message.

Gary felt her small breasts soft against his abdomen. Her head rested on his chest and he felt protective. Simultaneously both disengaged, held hands for a moment, smiled into each other’s eyes then sat down each side of the basket again.

The air smelled of her perfume.

Gary hardly noticed the increase in the day’s humidity. From some lost memory his head sang an old hymn ‘There are flowers in the hills and flowers in the fields’... he’d loved it as a youth. He added aloud... “and joy in my heart all day-ay-ay-ay.”

Thuyet asked him, “*Sin loi*, Gary. What did you say?”

Gary sang the hymn to her and watched her face light up.

They rested for a moment then Thuyet put the two handle-less small cups on the table, lifted out the teapot from its posy and very carefully poured a cup each.

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

“The, a mes peuples, Gary is more than a drink. To share a cup of tea is a sacred ritual.” She smiled knowingly. “It normally goes before romance.” She held the steaming teacup carefully by the rim. “A l’amour, mon cher. To us. On this occasion I would like to be the hostess. It is my privilege therefore to serve the tea to you. ”

As they drank Gary’s eyes never left hers nor Thuyet’s his. Almost as if they drank each other in. Softly, so that only Thuyet could hear, Gary sang...

Drink to me only

With thine eyes

And I...I will drink with mine....

He explained that the great love of Henry the Eighth of England was Anne Boleyn. “That was the song he sang to her, Thuyet. It was a pledge of eternal love.” Then in jest he said, “But I have no intention of chopping your head off.” He laughed.

A solemn look clouded her visage, then fled.

Gary gently clinked their glasses together. Recognizing the importance of this occasion to Thuyet, he solemnly sipped, taking his time.

Gary looked at his watch. “Mon Dieu. It’s twelve noon already.”

Inside the basket Thuyet reached and squealed her delight. “*Cha Gio*, Vietnamese spring rolls. This must be the national dish of Vietnam, Gary.” She held it up for him to see. “They are cellophane noodles, minced pork.. o-o-o-h! No... they are shrimps.”

1963 – 1964: Children of Chaos...

Gary said, “Yum ... Yum ... Bubble gum.” Noticing her puzzlement he explained how this ‘kid’s expression’ had become his favourite.

“Look, Gary. They have even given us little plates avec beaucoup les condiments... *nuoc cham*, thinly sliced cucumber, mint leaves, and my favourite, *ngo* or coriander.”

“I eat my favourite herb coriander by the handful, Thuyet. And I adore your *nuoc tong* and *ot*, fresh chilli. I especially ordered it for myself. I eat any rice, vegetable or meat dish so long as there’s *nuoc tong* and fresh chilli, how do you say? *Tuong ot tuoi*.”

Thuyet clapped her hands. “C’était merveilleuse, Gary. You said our words for chilli paste and soya sauce very well. You’ll not go hungry in Vietnam, mais certainment.” She rummaged and let out a joyful cry, “And *dau xanh* too, or mung bean sprouts. Magnifique. Nous les faisons toujours les recettes, Gary. The Thais and Laos copied les culinaires d’Indochine depuis nous.”

They ate slowly, relishing each prepared morsel. The way Thuyet moved so facilely from French to English and back again held Gary fascinated. Her French sounded to his Parisian ear like that of ‘les paysans’ but lacked their guttural sound and the running-together-ness that made people outside Paris sound almost indecipherable. It had a lilt and singsong to it, probably because of the of Vietnamese phonemes.

Thuyet marvelled at the amount of *ot*, fresh chilli and *tuong ot tuoi* that Gary plastered on his *cha gio*. In their ‘Christmas basket’ she found *mia*, a pressed sugar cane drink especially favoured in summer. They sipped it with the ice thoughtfully provided.

1963 – 1964: *Children of Chaos...*

Gary explained that the 'hawkers' squeezed the cane as you watched in Malaya. Deeper down, hidden among the ice cubes in the plastic tray, Thuyet found "*Du du*".

She clapped her hands excitedly. "And it's my favourite papaya too, Gary. Many of my friends like *du du* green because it's high in iron. But I like the way the concierge has prepared it, with limes to bring out the essence of the taste." She squeezed the fresh lime, sprinkling its juice liberally over her pawpaw.

Together they munched happily through the basket and sipped their sugar-cane juice.

Time flew on this perfect of perfect days, both oblivious to the passing time. In the background, a persistent tooting of a motorcycle horn broke into their idyll. Thuyet was first to recognize it. She turned and at the entrance to the park stood a woman in jeans frantically waving a white neckerchief. She started as though bitten.

"I must go, Gary, mon cher. Quelle heure est-il, merci?"

For a moment Gary hated his watch. "It's one-thirty, Thuyet. What's up?"

"C'est mon ami', Duyen, my best friend." Thuyet waved back to her friend. "I must go. Now, mon cher. Merci pour le meilleur. This has been the best day of my life."

The basket packed, they hurried to the curbside and the waiting Honda moped. Suddenly, watching the two women wending their way through the congested Saigon traffic then Thuyet's *ao dai* disappearing from view, Gary felt more alone than ever.

SIX

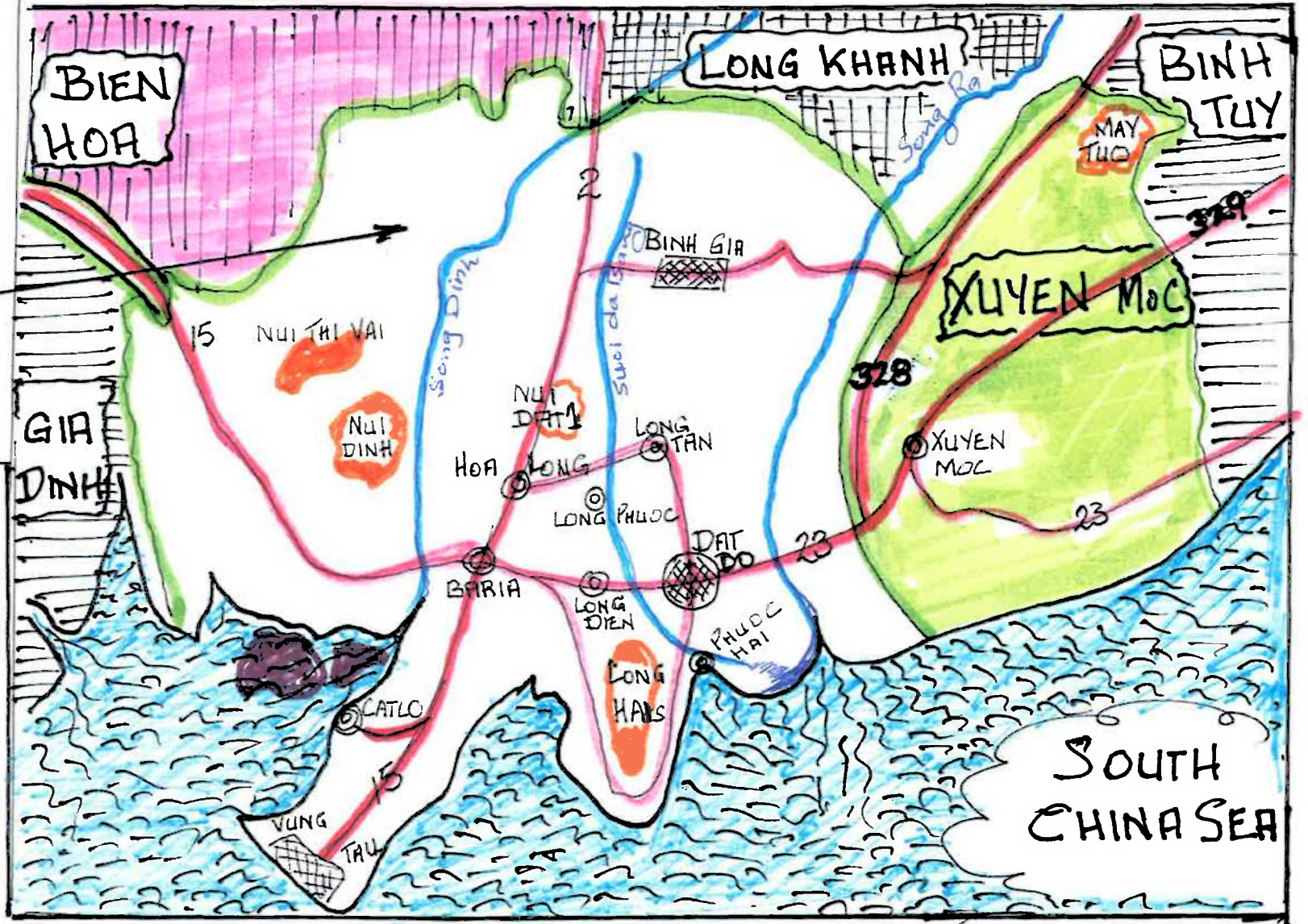
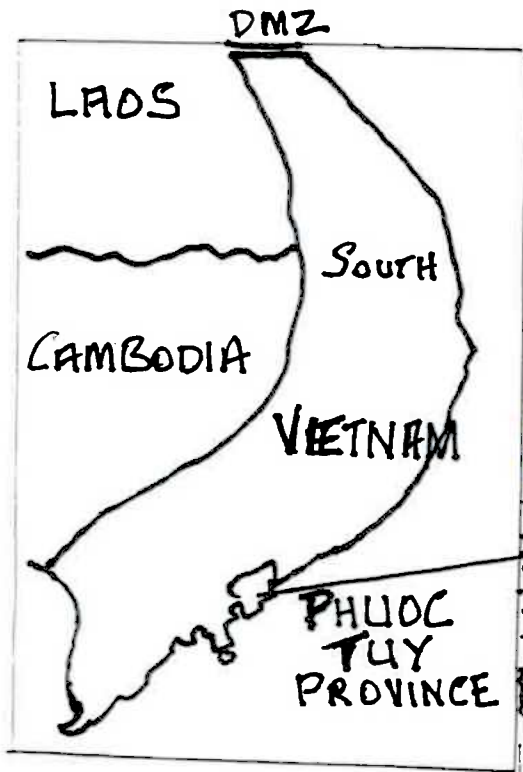
SEEDS OF BETRAYAL...

Beware of Man for he has been,

And look what he has done.

Greg Brooks, "Over there"

PHUOC TUY PROVINCE



1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

JULY: Rudjinczky on 'the Art of War'...

THE MORNING AFTER THE MEXICAN STANDOFF GARY HAD ASKED

“So where is home, Rudi?” Gary was interested to share life experiences.

Rudi grinned mischievously over the top of his fresh, warm baguette. Half raised to his mouth, he contemplated taking a bite but chose not to, deciding to answer first.

“Budapest, Boss. I was born under the shadow of Hitler, in 1938.”

He added seriously, “One Friday evening in March, the once the great Hungarian-Austrian Empire, surrendered. The ‘Third Reich’ arrived at the gates of Budapest.”

Rudi then took a huge bite of his baguette, showing a cavern of white teeth. The previous night, when Rudi had ripped off all his clothes and shown the Rangers his masterpiece, must have been the top news item among the Vietnamese officers. Many heads periodically turned their way. The Lieutenants laughed as half his baguette disappeared into Rudi’s gigantic maw.

In excellent English one asked, “I have a riddle. Five boys use two long white poles. They chase a herd of white buffalo into a dark cave. What does this saying mean?”

Rudi, still chomping on his half baguette, was unable to answer straightaway.

Gary shrugged his shoulders. “I give up. I wouldn’t have a clue.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Playfully, one of the senior Dawai's verbally chastised the Lieutenant.

Then he turned to Gary, "Sin loi, Trung Thieu. Sorry about that, Trung Thu. It's an old Vietnamese proverb and it was unfair to ask you. For most schoolchildren it is the first riddle they learn."

"That's fine." Gary inwardly smirked at the man's use of 'Mate'. "But what is the answer so that I know next time?"

Another Dawai offered, "It's a hand, eating rice with chopsticks."

Rudi spluttered and almost choked. Gary chortled. Relieved and 'honour restored' the assembled officers also chuckled, as much at Rudi almost choking as at their riddle.

Gary chose to follow up his primary interest. "From memory, Rudi, Hungary lost two thirds of its country and people after WWI. Then of course came the Revolution."

Gary knew Hungary had been swallowed up in the Iron Curtain in 1956. One of his Sydney mates had fought in the Revolution. Gary had graduated that year.

But he didn't know much about it. It had been the year of the Melbourne Olympics.

The Vietnamese politely listened as Rudi spoke.

"Not many Aussies know much about our Budapest Uprising, or the Hungarian Revolution, Boss. The eyes and ears of the world were focussed on Australia."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

From their chattering Gary assumed some would be translating Rudi's words. "Unfortunately, Rudi, 1956 was also the year that the British and French decided to take Nasser on over the Suez Canal. The Communists picked a good time to strike."

"That's right, Boss." Rudi took a long swig of his coffee. "In Hungary, the rise of Germany after WWI, meant a better alternative to Communism. Two years after I was born, new elections resulted in a quarter of Budapest votes being given to the National Socialists. Their crossed arrow was the Hungarian version of the swastika."

"So, even before WWII the Hungarians hated Communism?"

A buzz of interest went around the room. It was clear that the Ranger officers were interested in what these two Australians had to say about Communism. A heightened interest focussed on Rudi. His last night's exploits would have 'done the rounds'.

"Yes. That's the clearest political position I heard. I grew up in Budapest. As I grew up, WWII was distant. Hardly a single bomb fell on Budapest during almost all of the war. Plus, in Budapest at least, the Germans were tolerated rather than loved. For example the Jews of Budapest were relatively safe compared to the rest of Europe. sadly things in Budapest took a turn for the worse in 1944,"

Gary said, "That is amazing. I grew up in London from 1937."

"You'd have had a totally different experience, Skipper."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

"I'll say, Rudi, by 1944 my Mum had had enough. I know all about buzz bombs and the V-2 rockets wiping out whole streets, being bombed out six times."

"Well, just as you left for Wales, German tanks arrived and behind them the Gestapo. In one year Budapest caught up with the terrible things happening in Europe."

Gary sipped his noodle soup and looked around. The Ranger officers followed closely what was being said. A Ranger replenished their coffee. Another offered an extra baguette to Rudi and seemed ecstatic when Rudi took it. They were in awe. Rudi had devoured the first in three bites and his coffee in two draughts.

"And the Russians? They followed hard on the heels of the Germans, didn't they?"

"Yes. You'd know my city was formed out of two, Buda and Pest, straddling the Danube?" The question was rhetorical. "The Communists began the siege of my city in the Winter of 1944. It was Warsaw all over again. After Stalingrad, mine was the next city to fight house-by-house. Only Berlin suffered the same fate as Budapest and Warsaw. It took the might of the Communists three weeks to crush resistance in Pest. That was 18th January. Then another month to end it in Buda on 12 February 1945."

Gary shook his head sadly. "That must have been a terrible time?"

The Officers Club slowly emptied but a small core remained, less fascinated by Rudi's story than by the man himself. Rudi stood up and strode to the latrine. He'd announced, "I need a shit and a pee."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

When Gary and he had showered earlier, next door to the latrine, the shower block had become crowded. Six Rangers now followed Rudi, probably hoping to catch a glimpse of the 'monster' the others had spoken about. They returned downcast, lifting their hands in the air and shrugging. Gary assumed Rudi had chosen a private cubicle.

Rudi returned and his broad grin confirmed it.

He continued, "Stalin deported thousands of 'bourgeois' elements of Budapest society. He died in 1953. They returned as I turned sixteen. By then, the more the Communists let go, the greater our resentment grew."

Gary shared, "De Tocqueville once remarked that a revolution is most likely to occur, not when oppression is at its worst but when restrictions start to weaken."

At the mention of this famous 19th Century French historian and military tactician's name a polite murmur echoed around the room.

Many had received French military academy training.

The mid-morning sun streamed through the closed glass windows and the room had heated up. Three officers opened the windows to let a humid breeze circulate.

One of the waiters brought in three or four huge jugs of limewater with glasses all around, each filled with ice. Gary and Rudi hadn't realised until then how thirsty they were. Nor how hot. Both were grateful and nodded their thanks.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

The senior Dawai asked, "The anti-communist revolution? When did it first begin?"

Rudi answered, "The Hungarian Revolution began in Budapest on 23rd October 1956, Sir." He hesitated, remembering, "At nineteen years of age I learned very quickly how to make 'Molotov cocktails' and where best to smash them on a tank." His eyes brooded. "For almost two weeks we fought the communists with anything and everything we had... pistols, rifles, Molotov cocktails and sometimes our bare hands."

The officers clapped politely. Rudi had become their unwilling heroic warrior. Big, strong, friendly and with an astronomical 'donk' they'd never met anyone like him.

In a respectful voice, the senior Dawai asked, "And the end came ... in how long?"

A subdued Rudi replied slowly, "The night of 3rd and 4th November 1956 was freezing cold." He shivered, remembering. "The Communist forces invaded my beloved city without warning with tanks and armed forces."

Rudi paused. He felt he was choking. "The Communists were pitiless." He stretched then stroked his neck before continuing. "Most Hungarians, like me, fought house to house and street by street. But the bastards bombarded us with tank cannon and incinerated people in their own houses."

Rudi paused, remembering behind hooded eyebrows. Their mass of hair twitched.

The senior Dawai interrupted quietly, "Just like at Binh Gia."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Rudi didn't appear to notice. The Dawai saw that Rudi's brows had furrowed.

"It was a holocaust, Dawai. The bastards burned and demolished street after street as we retreated." His eyes burned feverishly as they looked far into the distance. "They used artillery and machine-gun fire." Rudi stopped. Breathed heavily. Then a deep sigh groaned from his belly but again he didn't notice. "When it was over they installed a communist puppet government while the people of Budapest struggled to survive. I became part of a massive refugee stream." He wiped his forehead and eyes with the back of one massive paw. "Eventually I finished up in Australia."

"Did the Communists commit any atrocities?" It was the quiet, young Lieutenant.

"We both did."

Gary started. "Both sides? You mean that you did, personally?"

"Yes, Boss."

"But?..."

"War is war, Skipper. Some hold chivalrous notions about how a soldier should react but war is cruel, sordid and immoral and modern war is scientific butchery. We can't escape becoming butchers. I predict this war will deteriorate into similar tactics on both sides and that future wars will do the same. The Vietminh already know how they must fight. It's the only answer to massive technical force."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“I prefer not to see war in such stark light, Rudi.”

“So what do you call what happened in Binh Gia just before we arrived, Boss?”

The Ranger officers suddenly silenced their quiet chatter. Took note again.

The talk, for most, was far away and long ago. But this massive bear-of-a-man had grabbed their waning attention again with the name of the Catholic village.

“Binh Gia?”

“Fucking right, Boss. Binh Gia was a terrible slaughter just north of 1ATF. The communists launched a massive strike against the eighty percent Catholic community. Dawai, you’d know. Wouldn’t you. Did you take a part in it?”

“Yes, I did. The communists sent two regiments against Binh Gia and almost wiped us out. The butchery was terrible. The Vietminh wanted Binh Gia to be an example.”

The Dawai added quietly, “And they did.”

“Fucking Oath they did, Boss.” Suddenly the heretofore ‘gentle giant’ now transformed into an avenging Bear. “The fucking VC systematically murdered and tortured over one hundred of the Binh Gia people. They made an example alright.” His dark eyes flashed. “They captured the Village Chief and before chopping his head off they skinned him alive.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

A horrified, "My God?" Sprang unbidden from Gary's mouth.

He paused a moment. Thought, before continuing, "I don't see that as 'WAR' in its professional aspect, Rudi." He spanned the assembled group for some support.

Dawai spoke respectfully. "Are you saying it's not the conduct of a professional soldier?" He appeared genuinely puzzled.

Rudi burst in. "So what about Long Tan and Long Phouc, Boss?"

He felt his bile rising and looked directly at Gary, his eyes not wavering. "The people were systematically exorcised from their lifeline, their rice paddies, vegetable gardens and fruit trees. Economically we cut their throats. I was there, so I have nothing to be proud of." He heard his voice rising but couldn't stop. "Then we burned their houses to the ground, Boss – houses their grandparents had built for them."

Chagrined, Gary said quietly, "I didn't know, Rudi."

"It was just before you came, Boss. The poor bastards had probably lived for decades if not centuries in the houses we destroyed. Is that more honourable? What is worse? What the Germans did? What the Communists do? What we are doing?"

Rudi had never spoken to anyone like this ever before but couldn't stop himself. He stood up and pounded the table to emphasise each question. The china and glasses rattled and clinked without breaking but he was too angry to notice.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Gary had no immediate answer. In the face of Rudi's distress he didn't want to say anything. His face had reddened and he tried to cover his discomfiture by drinking his coffee. It was cold but he hardly noticed.

The eight Ranger officers remaining were stunned and embarrassed. The Dawai rose and held his hand out to Rudi. The act made Rudi stop as he realised he'd caused embarrassment all around. The Dawai's hand disappeared into his paw as he pumped it gently. Then Rudi almost lifted Dawai off his feet as he then hugged the man. Rudi's passion, in the light of what he himself had suffered during the Hungarian Uprising. It made them comrades. The Dawai hugged Rudi back.

“We are soldiers, Rudi.” He'd realised Rudi's distress was for him and his Vietnamese people, not for himself. Still discomfited, Gary finally found his voice. “Long Tan and Long Phouc were tactical essentials. We learned in Malaya we must separate the people from the terrorists.”

Rudi's passion remained but it was more under control. “But they aren't terrorists, Boss. They see themselves as Nationalists, like me. We have a long history of Revolution just like Jaago and his Polacks. We also fought against the Germans and the Russians in the last war. My 'Budapest Uprising' was part of a much longer war for independence, very much like the Viet Cong in this country. Others may call us Hungarians terrorists but we believed we were 'Freedom Fighters', like the Vietminh, the VC and the ARVN. They just have different philosophies and that makes for a civil war. We know from history that civil wars are always the bloodiest, pitting brother against brother and friend against friend.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“Those who resort to skinning human beings alive can’t be considered soldiers.”

Rudi spoke quietly. “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

“I agree, Rudi, but...” Gary trailed off.

The old Dawai interjected. “If the Viet Cong didn’t resort to terror tactics they would soon be annihilated. Your scientifically superior air power, your artillery and your use of the helicopter don’t give them equal power. Terror is a legitimate weapon, and in Vietnam all sides finally resort to it. The French military were masters.”

“I agree, Rudi, but there is a world of difference between guerrilla warfare and terrorism isn’t there? Inequality of weapons still doesn’t justify brutality or torture.”

“It won China for Mao Tse Dung. It worked there and will work here too.”

“Bloody hell, Rudi.” Gary sounded exasperated. “Where do you get all your facts from?” Rudi was full of surprises. “You are as bad as the Directing Staff at officer’s school. Where did you learn all this stuff? It’s not covered in promotion to Sergeant.”

The sweat from the oppressive humidity poured off Rudi and added to his dishevelled appearance as he stood up then strode in a tight circle beside the table. His habit of running his hands through his hair made it an unruly mop. He used his camouflaged neckerchief to wipe his forehead and the nape of his neck. Without thinking he grabbed his steaming hot mug of coffee and downed it in one swig.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

The mug broke as he slammed it down on the table. Left holding only the handle it took him a full minute to realise he'd broken it. He mumbled apologies. Rangers gasped. Their 'Legend of the Uc Da Loi bear' grew.

"I was a Lieutenant during the 'Uprising', Boss. But they were honorary ranks."

"So why haven't you gone for Officer promotion in the Aussie Army?"

He grinned, mischievously. "I prefer the life in the ranks, Boss."

Gary braced himself. "But why? We need your experience as a leader."

"I'll let the Officers do all the thinking, Skipper. I believe that when we apply a scorched earth policy, as we did in Long Tan and Phouc Tuy, we haven't moved much beyond our caveman ancestors. You remember Scipio?"

Gary found it difficult to compare this well-versed person with Rudi, his sergeant.

"You mean the one who levelled Carthage then salted the earth to make it barren?"

"We did exactly the same to Long Tan and to Long Phouc, Boss."

Rudi stood up and looked like he was about to repeat his previous burst of anger, then he remembered. "We sow what we will one day reap." He sat down heavily. "What the Yanks are doing with Agent Orange and all their other defoliants is worse."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“What do you mean, Rudi?”

“The Yank bastards are too lazy to learn the ways of the jungle as we Aussies and the Brits have. They bulldoze it, burn it or chemically destroy it.”

Gary felt as though the argument was getting out of hand.

“Who knows what the effects of powerful chemicals will have on the fauna and flora, Skipper? Do you know what effect their poisons have on human beings,”

“No, Rudi. I assume the Yank scientists have checked all that out.”

“With all due respect, Skipper. Bullshit, Sir...”

Gary and Rudi faced each other and their intensity showed in their flashing eyes and mobile hand movements. Unannounced, Dawai Pham had been listening.

Pham spoke quietly, “‘Methinks you assume too much,’ to quote your beloved Shakespeare, Gary. Mao Tse Tung had a better quotation. He told his soldiers they must ‘swim among the goldfish in the fishbowl of the people.’”

He paused and waited for Gary and Rudi to acknowledge him.

“My God, Pham. You’ve come in the nick of time to rescue us from ourselves.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“What you both have said has many truths, Gary my friend.” Gary hugged Pham.

He shook hands all around. Gary realised Pham and the Dawai must have been old buddies by the way each greeted the other. He felt relieved when one of the young officers was sent off by the senior Dawai to replenish everyone’s cup of coffee.

Pham tapped Rudi on the arm politely and asked, “Rudi, you have a point?”

He turned to Gary and plopped himself down again. “Can I be up front, Boss?”

Gary smiled as his chair creaked. He raised his hands in sublimation.

Laughingly, “Go for it Rudi, but let’s keep the decibel level down. Among our friends it’s impolite to carry on like we Aussies normally do.”

“I’ll try, but don’t go all humanitarian on me for Chris’s sake, Boss. War is war.”

“But I don’t think...” Then caught himself and shrugged his shoulders.

Rudi pressed on, “Regardless of what the folks back home fucking-well think, we are at war in this beautiful country, aren’t we? Scruples costs lives. During the Revolution I took three Russian prisoners. I had to shoot them. They jeopardised my survival.”

“But soldiers are entitled to life, according to the Geneva Convention, which states that ‘from the moment a soldier surrenders he is entitled to life’, Rudi. Did you tell them you were going to kill them before you shot the poor bastards?”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“There you go again, Boss.” His voice started to rise so he paused, looked around, then beamed at everyone. “Sin Loi, Mates. It happens to me all the time. I get too fucking emotional. It’s my culture and I really can’t help myself.”

The young Ranger arrived with a tray full of fresh mugs, steaming coffee. The aroma reminded Gary of happier days on the Left Bank in Paris.

Pham put his arm around Rudi’s shoulders. “Sin Loi, Mate. ‘No worries’”. He smiled. Then turned to Gary. “Sometimes when you are in the thick of battle, men do things out of the need to survive, Gary. We all understand.” Then to Rudi, “Drink of this hot black coffee and let me take over for a moment, Okay?”

“Go for it, Dawai.” Rudi looked thankful for the interruption.

Dawai spoke in his quiet, but firm voice. “Gary, my friend. I have killed prisoners too. That’s my job as a soldier. To kill the enemy.”

“I accept that but...”

Dawai ignored Gary’s interruption. “Sometimes you cannot take them with you or you need to escape yourself. I couldn’t let them escape to shoot at my soldiers, again – that is an inescapable fact of war. What do you see as an alternative, mon ami?”

“But how do you live with shooting unarmed soldiers who have been forced to surrender? Were you able to look them in the eyes as you shot them? I...”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Rudi interrupted "I did, Boss." More in control now that he realised he had 'friends in King Arthur's Court'. "I felt I owed it to them not to be afraid to tell them and to give them a chance to make amends with their maker. In my mind I had no choice."

"In the same circumstances, they'd have no choice." It was the senior Dawai. "One thing you can be sure of. The Communists I have met don't think twice about executing their prisoners, especially if it becomes expedient to do so."

Rudi added. "Expediency is the key to life or death in war. Nor do they cringe at torture, Boss. They don't give a shit about the Geneva Convention. Why should we?"

"Because soldiering is an honourable profession, we do have choice. We are honourable men, all of us in this room." The Rangers looked nonplussed. "To shoot an enemy soldier in the heat of battle is one thing. To shoot a deserter is also part of the warrior's code. But if the other soldier is unarmed, it's murder and..."

"That's a harsh judgement, Gary." Said Pham. "My father told me that once he came upon a Communist Party Officer shooting his own men because they were deserting."

In a quiet voice, Gary said, "My Dad shot one of his own officers for deserting. In all armies at some point some soldiers have had enough and try to desert. Cowardice in the face of the enemy has to be dealt with. Shooting is sometimes the only way but..."

"My father shot the Political Commissar. He had no remorse. Only later did he find out that he'd saved Vinh's life. Vinh is his brother's son... my extended family."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Gary, startled by this revelation, involuntarily exclaimed, "Vinh?"

"If my father had lived by your rules, Vinh would be dead at the hand of one of his own officers. War is strange, Gary. It weaves strange destinies for us all."

"But doesn't it worry you that you've killed outside a normal parameter of warfare?"

Rudi laughed sarcastically.

"I don't mean to offend you, Sir. But honest to God... What are the normal parameters of warfare? For Chris's sake, Boss, can't you get real?"

Pham agreed. "There are none, except in the writings of philosophers and in the minds of civilians who have had no part in the reality of war, Rudi."

"And you sit comfortably with it, Rudi?"

"No soldier sits comfortably with what war demands us to do, Boss." Then he laughed a full-gutted roar. As his bellow subsided, "I don't know how it is for officers, Boss. But for soldiers, we have four elementary instincts. That's why I'm happy to remain a non-com. We soldiers eat, get drunk, make love and sleep, in any order. It allows us relief from the extreme fatigue of thinking. That's left to people like you, Skipper."

"I don't know that you soldiers have a fix on that, Rudi."

Gary had relaxed. His face creased into a grin at remembering.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“At officer’s school I learned to get up in the morning and before I was properly awake I’d shit, shave, shower and shampoo and dream of the ‘Fifth sensory experience’. The five S’s, mate became my waking life.”

“What was the fifth ‘S’, Boss?”

Rudi in feigned innocence.

“Shag, you bastard. Shag.”

Gary had to explain the word to Pham, who then relayed it.

Rudi guffawed again.

He quietened down. “This has made my poor head ache, Skipper. I got drunk last night. I’ve slept. You ruled out sex. That leaves eating. What about it, Dawai? Can you rustle up some more tucker for a hungry Hungarian?”

The group broke up laughingly to organise ‘some more tucker’.

Whisky bottles and iced glasses appeared as if by magic.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

the sound of still waters...

NO ONE NOTICED THUYET RATIONING HER DAYS WITH HER UNIT.

She could only think of her stolen hours with Gary. She wondered if he'd return to Vietnam and reddened as she thought of him.

The touch of fear that flitted across her mind she soon subsumed in the memories of him. Of his boyishness in her arms: his tenderness toward her innocence: and the smell of his newly washed body.

She tightened her inner thighs at this memory. *There is so much for me to learn.*

Thuyet felt alive, as if for the first time. She smiled. *It had been.*

She'd never been loved before and had never known the wonders Gary had awoken in her. That first night they'd made love... continuously. She'd felt insatiable.

Gary had been so caring in his role as her teacher. The more she experienced with him the more she wanted, as though her body had been asleep all those years before. Thuyet's eyes danced at her memories. The two lovers said so little yet shared so much. She looked around quickly then hid her face so that the others wouldn't notice.

Thuyet, initially ignorant about her body's responses, shared more with Gary than with any person she'd ever known before. More, even than with Duyen, her best friend. Thuyet learned so much more about her needs, wants and hidden desires.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Since joining the Vietminh, her zealousness, patriotism and thirst for knowledge had made her the perfect leader: fair, firm and friendly. Comfortable earning the respect of her peers, she instantly learned new codes and machines. Quickly became expert. Through it all Thuyet exemplified the female warrior. But this was like nothing else.

Later that night and after work, Thuyet lay in bed remembering. She'd never before experienced the incredible intensity that followed being wanted. Gary had shifted her paradigm of needs, wants and hidden desires to a new planetary confluence where each of them melded, became an essential part of the other.

That first night, sleep had deserted her. Gary had slept, briefly. But the touch of her hand stirred him. She traced the midline of his stomach muscles then down until her fingers walked in his forest and touched IT.

Her heart somersaulted. She breathed short, panting gasps.

Gary had stirred. His hand drifted across the sheet then he became instantly alert.

He heard her ragged breathing. Placed his hand on her breast.

Thuyet's heart, almost bursting out of her chest, thrilled his too.

He took her wandering hand in his and let her feel the pounding of his heart, almost in desperate synchrony with hers.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Thuyet's memory intensified. Her whole body arched to receive Gary's hard pride. She remembered he was on top... but only for the moment of slowed-down entry. Somehow he moved her, his knees then thrust under her buttocks and his arms held her to him. Gracefully, like a breaching whale, Gary held her upright on his lap. Next moment, still conjoined, Gary lay underneath her. As his legs straightened, Thuyet found herself on top. He raised her buttocks away from him.

"Sit down on me... very, very slowly. You are in charge, My Love."

These had been the only understandable words spoken so far.

Thuyet sat, very slowly on his hardness. As she eased down, her eyes widened. She felt a steamier, more swollen inside-ness than ever before. Took pleasure in Gary all the way from the outside to his gradual stopping deep inside.

She knew Gary was as deep inside her as he could be.

Thuyet sat, filled with his swollen pride and smiled into his already grinning face.

"Move up and down, slowly. Learn to tighten and relax your muscles."

Thuyet had never known these muscles that now tightened and relaxed on his 'object within'. She felt his whole shaft expand and contract as Gary moved with her muscular motion. She looked down in wonder. A feeling, different to the movements his fingers and tongue had stirred within her, now filled her whole 'on-heat' body.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Gary raised his knees. Thuyet varied and prolonged each shudder of delight as they coursed through her. She stretched back over his knees and threw her head back in wild abandonment to savour the experience alone. Then, rhythmically, Thuyet moved her whole body on him with her eyes shut so that no exterior thing distracted her from her bliss. She entered into a trance and wanted the experience to have no ending.

Thuyet's needs, wants and hidden desires finally distilled into love.

Merged from 'freedom from hunger' into sustained eroticism.

She learned anticipation as the shared promise of fulfillment. Experienced love as the warm summer rain caressing every shard of her shared secret.

Her hunger transposed into a voluptuous dream ... fired then freed by reality.

Eroticism became a warmth... a comforting, furry towel wrapped around her wetness.

They made love for breakfast and drank in each other's eyes, increasing their appetite until they consumed each other's bodies with the gentle language of tongues.

Stilled at last. Replete. Thuyet was first to break the silence of their loving.

"Gary, My Love, Duyen will be picking me up in two hours."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“Am I right in saying that you and Duyen seem to go back a long way?”

Thuyet went quiet. Her thoughts tumbled, made no sense. “I love you, Gary. But...”

“I love you, Thuyet. I have never experienced a love so deep, so real. But you carry some secret with you. I sensed it that first day in the park. What is it, darling?”

“I... I... You must trust me, Gary. I don't know where to start.”

“How about in the North?” Her unease convinced him. “Song Lo is a river in North Vietnam.” Thuyet's startled look told him to press on. “You are a Communist.”

Thuyet buried her head in her hands.

Gary protected her nakedness with his body. He held her close to him and whispering in her ear, “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Gradually small tremors that followed her tears subsided. She lay quiet in his arms.

“How did you know about the Song Lo?”

“You told me, accidentally, that first day in the park. I was curious and looked it up.”

“I was there as a child. Father fished the river and sometimes took his produce down to Hanoi. How much more do you know or have guessed?”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“There has been a shadow hanging over you and it was only a few moments ago that I put my fears to the test and your look confirmed it. You’re a Communist, aren’t you?”

Thuyet moved her body slightly so that she could look Gary full in the face.

“I love you, My Darling. I want you to believe that with all your heart.” She took his face into her hands, holding him gently by the cheeks. “It’s not so easy just to say, ‘Yes’.” Tears formed again in her eyes but she continued to hold him reverentially. “I want to tell you my story, Gary. I don’t want to hold any secrets from you. But you must realize that I am putting my life into your hands, probably not so much with your people but with mine. They don’t suffer traitors easily.”

She let go Gary’s face.

She lay back for a moment as if to gather her thoughts.

Gary went to hold her again.

Thuyet gently warded him off, pulled the sheet up to cover her nakedness, dragged a pillow so that it supported her body then turned to face Gary. She reached over him and fluffed the sheet so that it covered him too as he settled back onto his back to listen. Thuyet brushed his lips with a kiss, whispered, “I love you darling.”

She leant her cheek on her hand. She looked at him intently, as though to concentrate took an effort, put her hand out to touch him, rested it on him ...then spoke.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Consternation was already clear on Gary's face.

"Darling. I don't want to put you in any risk."

"Shush, Gary. You already know some of the main people in my life." She smiled through fresh tears. "The men you met on the rooftop of the Majestic were relatives. The two people with me? Pham was on your left and Phouc to your right?"

"I gathered they had to be related."

"Phouc is my brother. We lost Father and Mother when I was a little girl. Pham is my cousin. I have another brother. Vinh is a dedicated Communist, as I believe I am."

Gary rose up to remonstrate.

Thuyet "Shushed" him again. "Let me tell you my story first, then we'll talk." She waited for Gary to settle down again. "Our parents were tortured to death by the French. My older brother, Vinh, has never forgotten. Not that I have, but he was there. They made Vinh watch then raped him. Left him with his parent's bodies."

Gary couldn't help himself. "My God, Thuyet." He sat up and they hugged whilst she wept silently. He kept repeating, "I love you, Thuyet. I love you, Thuyet. I love you, Thuyet." Gary slowly, reluctantly let her go and lay back for her to continue her story.

Thuyet lay back, holding Gary's hand and speaking to the ceiling, softly.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“In 1964, Uncle Ho called for the whole population to support the Army. Hundreds of thousands of young people joined. I’d already been a volunteer for two years.” Thuyet waited for the impact of this to settle on Gary. “I had donated three hundred piastres and it paved the way for me to become a member of the Party. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was still a dirt road and the Vietminh needed volunteers to make it a real road. At eighteen and with a good education I was in demand. The Army desperately needed intelligent young people to run the radio and land-line communication networks. That became and still is my job.”

Gary lay with his eyes closed absorbing her information. He listened to the low hum of the overhead fan and somewhere in the distance heard a radio playing Vietnamese music. A car-horn hooted its frustration and a hawker bellowed his wares. The room itself, apart from the fan, seemed a quiet haven from outside noise and its distractions. Gary breathed slowly and deeply to put the brakes on his racing mind.

Thuyet quietly got up, went to the small table and poured out two glasses of water. Then she went to the fridge and collected some ice.

Gary heard the pouring of the water and the clinking of the ice.

These sounds seemed so domiciled and so far away from the brief story of murder and decision-making he’d been listening to. Eyes still closed, he heard her place a glass on the small table beside him then the bed creaked.

Thuyet eased herself in beside him and drank her iced water.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Gary lifted himself up on one elbow, looked at her, smiled his love and reached for her glass, gently removed it from her hand, drank from it himself in a symbolic gesture then gave it back.

He watched the curve of her back as she set the glass on her table.

They hugged and kissed.

Gary was first to disengage. "So you have been in the Army for four years?"

"Yes."

"In a top secret communications job for most of that time?"

"Yes."

And you must have seen much and hated much about the Americans?"

"Yes."

She leaned on her elbow to look at him. Gary raised himself, pulled a pillow under his head and lay on it not letting his eyes leave hers. She joined him on the same pillow. Their eyes were just in focus. They held hands.

"Tell me about the Trail. That must have been a hard life, Cheri."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“Our lives were very, very hard but we never blamed the government. We blamed the Americans. I knew that Uncle Ho would never ask us to suffer as we did if there was no other way. Pham met him in Paris. I met him but from a distance. Pham actually went to an audience with Uncle Ho. He loved him. Uncle Ho explained to him how the country needed us and I gladly accepted the hardships when it became my turn.”

Gary agreed, quietly. “I can understand how affected you must have been. I would have done the same but I would also have left as Pham and Phouc did after the Land Reform atrocities. I couldn’t sit back and be part of it by compliance or complicity.”

“They were the work of ignorant Party members who saw a opportunity for personal power and a chance to be involved in corruption. I did not see what my brothers, my Uncle and what my cousins saw and experienced. The Land Reforms happened far from Hanoi. When I left home, a seclusion of secrecy surrounded me. What I saw and experienced was the American bombing along the Trail.”

“I heard that was terrible, Thuyet. It is hard to imagine you in that environment.”

Thuyet’s brushed tears impatiently with the free hand she’d draped over his hips. “Duyen often carried the bones of her friends in a knapsack so that she could give them proper respect and burial when she got to some resting place. Otherwise her friends would wander in the shades forever, not being able to find home. Sometimes on the Trail at night we heard the cries of friends buried or blown apart that we never found. We promised, whatever happened, we’d track down the other if one was killed. We swore we’d never rest until we had properly and respectfully buried the other.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“That is a powerful friendship, Thuyet.”

“Until you came along Duyen was my truest friend. She now worries for my love for you. But she would never question it or get in the way. We have been through too much together. We are true comrades.”

“I understand. I have a friend like that. His name is Bruce. I am lucky that I have other friends like that too. One is an American and I hope you may meet Troy some day. Not all Americans are terrible people. In fact most are like you and me.”

“I can believe that, Gary. But I am in conflict. Why are you here so far from home and in a foreign country? You do not understand our culture, cannot speak our language yet you may have to die here someday. Or your friends. Why? What for?”

“Like you, Thuyet, I have a belief that what I am doing is for the good of the people of South Vietnam. Neither the Americans nor the Australians are here to take your country from you but right now there are millions of South Vietnamese who don't want to be Communist. They want their country to be free of foreigners but they don't want to be dominated by the North nor to be forced to be Communist.”

“Our country must be freed of foreigners. The strength of our country is in National Unity, not in division nor at some parallel that Foreigners have dictated. Vietnam's fate has been dominated for almost two millennia. I want that to end in my lifetime.”

“If I were Vietnamese I would feel the same.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

"I don't want my children to be born in a country divided by some arbitrary decision made by people who are not part of my culture nor of my traditions."

"I can understand that, Cheri. But Southerners don't want life under Communism. They also prefer the Americans to the Chinese or the Russians, both of whom have given the North massive aid and large contingents of 'advisors'. If that's not foreign interference, what is? After America bombed the North, Russia and China were the ones who proposed that four point plan for the withdrawal of 'foreigners'. That's foreign domination too, isn't it?"

Gary found he almost had a pleading in his voice. His brow furrowed as he looked at the beautiful face less than six inches away from his. Thuyet's brow had furrowed too.

Their voices remained loving to each other but Thuyet suddenly realised, with a pang, that they had entered a field of discussion that could have no end.

"Gary, My Love. We have to stop. Some things in this war are too personal to forget." Memories pained her, wrenched her stomach. "We have found a love. It is still young and fresh. We cannot resolve the differences between us. For both there are hurts that talking will never resolve." She paused to brush away tears then attempted to smile at Gary. "When my Grandfather was dying last year in Hanoi, I wanted so much to be with him. I had to ride a bicycle the length of the Trail to get back as far as possible. Trains and buses weren't running because of American bombs. It took me a month to reach Hanoi. Grandfather had been buried. I had missed the chance to be near him. By then I had outgrown my fear of Xong but he was away anyway. No one knew where."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Gary felt her pain. "Thuyet. I want you to understand that I know something of the pain you have." His own erupted as he spoke. "A few years before you were born, the Germans bombed London." He swallowed. "I have been the victim of war for as long as I can remember too. Father came home one day and our street had been bombed. It no longer existed. I was five years old but can remember the fear of the bombs but most of all the fear I would never see my father or mother ever again." Gary paused, as he struggled on with memories long buried. "I can remember being sent away and not seeing my parents for almost two years. As the eldest I had to look after my brother, Tony, my only contact with family." His voice almost inaudible, he continued. "I lived in a foreign land called Wales where they spoke a different language too. There's much more. I could go on but I don't want to, My Love."

They both went very quiet. Thuyet reached out. Touched him. They hugged. Both were too full of memories and conflicting emotions to speak. As they held each other, thoughts and memories tumbled, merged, swirled and got lost in others more hurtful, more poignant. All jostled in competition to be felt, heard and seen.

"Thuyet." In a distant part of her mind Thuyet heard someone calling. "Thuyet."

It was Duyen and she held Thuyet's shoulders firmly. "The Supervisor will be here shortly. You must focus on what is real. What is now, Thuyet. Do you hear me?"

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

AUGUST: savouring the monkey...

GARY HAD ONLY BEEN IN THE 1st AUSTRALIA TASK FORCE ONE WEEK

Roger handed the landline to Gary in the Command Centre. "Boss, I think it's your CIA mate, Troy, on the line for you." In the sandbagged silence of his CP, Gary heard, "Say is that you, K-u-r-l." Unmistakably Troy's with its soft, California accent.

Gary grabbed the phone and exploded, "Where the fuck are you, Yank bastard?"

"I'm here in Vung Tau you stoopid son-of-a-bitch. When are you coming in?"

Stunned, Gary said, "Bloody hell. You mean Vung Tau ... in Phouc Tuy Province?"

"Where the fuck else?" Troy had a distinctive rollicking laugh. "That's where you said you'd be, K-u-r-l. You called. I'm calling. I'm in Cyrno's, the French Hotel."

"I'm on my way." Gary could hardly believe it. "How long jya have, Troy?" Aside to Roger. "You're in charge of the ship, Mate. And I'll be back in two days, Roger." Then to Troy, "It'll take me about twenty minutes, Troy, providing some arsehole of a VC doesn't take a pot-shot at me."

"You'll be right, Mate. I'll be waiting at Cyrno's bar." Again Troy's purring laugh. "I'll wait as long as it takes for you to get here, you son-of-an-Aussie bitch. I gorra get drunk with you. Gorra plane waitin' to get me back to My Tho in the afternoon."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

An hour, and a bottle of whisky, later their conversation had moved to Dien Bien Phu.

“The French took a long time to realize they had been defeated. They believe that they hold pre-eminence as soldiers.” Troy raised his middle finger. “Their belief is that no nation in the world has a greater military tradition. Retz, Vauvenargues, Vigny, de Toqueville and Gobineau are the grand theoreticians and exponents of the tactics, philosophy and psychology of war.” He laughed bitterly. “Until Dien Bien Phu I would probably have agreed with them. Never again.”

Gary picked up a fresh whisky and slowly sipped it. “I’m intrigued, Troy. The French military seem to have nothing but one strategic trauma after another since Napoleon. What went wrong? I’ve read Bernard Fall, Larteguy and other Frenchmen’s versions on the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. All seem bitter. If anything they castigate their strategic leadership. What’s been their problem? They seem ashamed, not for their defeat but of the circumstances and outcomes of that defeat.”

Troy took a long draught of his whisky. “That couldn’t be more succinctly presented, Gary.” He hiccupped, apologized then continued. “Dien Bien Phu began and ended absurdly, Mate. The troops were magnificent. But their French High Command in Hanoi betrayed us. Make sure your senior guys don’t betray you. Gary. The French artillery commander, Piroth, committed suicide even before the battle had started.”

Gary interrupted, “Which I thought was not the hero’s way but the way of a coward.”

Troy snapped, “Honour and pride strike to the core of the French military, Gary.”

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His reaction surprised Gary. "The honourable course is often the most painful, Mate. To bite the bullet then be prepared to die alongside your men, is to me the mark of a greater hero. To fight for survival is often the most difficult and hazardous option."

"Colonel Piroth didn't think so, obviously. He was a fine artillery commander... and a friend." For a moment Troy went silent. Then he raised his glass in a quiet 'Salut'. "Few of us have the chance to choose our death. He chose his way."

His eyes had darkened, became morose. Troy looked directly at Gary and waited.

Gary understood. Raised his glass, "Salut."

After a long pause, Gary admitted quietly, "I have to take that back anyway, Troy. I've been too flippant and too hasty. I read somewhere that at Stalingrad, Troy, there were three senior German officers. About to be taken prisoner they walked to a mound in direct line with a menacing machine-gun and fired their pistols until the last officer had been killed. Also, my hero, Rommel, chose to take poison rather than be disgraced by Hitler. Among soldiers, suicide is an honourable option."

"Apology accepted, Mate. That's what the Samurai are all about, Gary." Then Troy paused, filled both glasses then said more clearly, "To old friends and dead warriors."

"That doesn't excuse the French High Command, however, Gary." Troy smiled grimly, then, "The French leadership, totally convinced Dien Bien Phu was impregnable, considered that air power would deliver on cue."

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“Bernard Fall wrote an excellent book. He explained how the French failed to do their sums correctly and were wrong on all counts.” Gary’s excitement made him lean forward. “So how did you get out? You were there to the end weren’t you, Troy?”

“Sure was. A bloke called Le Duc Dat saved me.”

“You mean Colonel Le Duc Dat?”

Troy’s eyes lit up. “How do you know him, Gary? He’s my best mate but I lost track of him in the last month or so. You say he’s a Colonel?”

“He’s the Province Chief of Phouc Tuy.”

Troy almost choked. “Province Chief? Here in Phouc Tuy?”

Gary hadn’t seen Troy caught for words. “Yep. He’s the new Province Chief and...”

“I’ll bet he’s already smartening the boys in the province.” Troy added, completing Gary’s sentence. Then added, mysteriously, “His son is somewhere in the province?”

It was Gary’s turn to be intrigued. “His son?”

“I believe he is a Dawai, somewhere in the province, Mate. His name’s Pham. According to my sources he was first a lawyer, trained in Law at the Sorbonne.”

“Good God. I introduced him to Brigadier Graham the other day.”

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“You’re joking, Mate. He and his dad, Le Duc Dat, are from North Vietnam.”

Gary frowned then bit his lip. “You mean they are Communists?”

“This war is confusing, Gary. Some of my best friends were labelled Communists, once. In the early days I was with Ho Chi Minh. I guess that makes me one too?”

Taken aback, Gary remonstrated. “Of course not, Troy.”

“All Ho Chi Minh wanted was to be left alone and to be the leader of a united nation.”

Gary was aghast. “You knew Ho Chi Minh?” He gasped.

‘Better than that. Dat was one of his personal aides. I helped train Dat’s troops in sharpshooting. We did many things together until the era of the Land Reforms in the early fifties changed it all. That ghastly error alienated Dat and his son.” Troy ordered another bottle of “Black Label-Johnny Walker”. He poured a fresh glass then continued. “Dat’s family were all good Catholics by all accounts.”

“You knew him pretty well, Mate?”

“Bloody oath.” He laughed at his adoption of Australian idioms. “Dat’s proven to be a person of the highest integrity, time and again. My life would be different without him. If his son, Pham, is anything like his dad then he’ll make you a very loyal friend, Mate. Ho Chi Minh’s Land Reform movement estranged him too. And me.”

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Gary savoured his Johnny Walker, let it run around his mouth. "So what was so terrible about the Land Reform movement, Troy?" The scotch tingled his taste buds before it slithered slowly down his throat. Gary followed its warmth into his stomach.

Troy lifted his glass into the light, staring at his friend through its amber texture. "The best people to talk to are those caught up in it." His words were slightly slurred.

"You're the closest I've got to it, Troy. I'd really like to know."

"The Land Reform movement was a straight copy of what happened in Russia then China and finally translated into a Vietnamese social experiment by Ho Chi Minh." Troy straightened up, shook his head and smiled. "This Johnny Walker's fucking good, Mate." He continued. "Ho believed in the 'power of the people' focussed on dispossessed peasants. For millennia they'd slaved under different colonial regimes. Worst of all, in his view, they had been enslaved under a Vietnamese meritocracy."

Gary slurred, "A Vietnamese meri-bloody-tocracy? That's a big fucking word for this time of the day." He re-filled his glass before the waiter had a chance.

Troy's face lit up. "Cheeky bastard. Do you want to know or not?"

"Of course I do, you big bastard."

Troy cleared his throat. "The Mandarin and merchant classes kept the peasants under a feudal system. Plantation workers and paddy farmers worked from dawn to dusk."

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“Like the feudal peasants back home in England?”

“Yes. But peasant production of food was stolen from them then sold to other countries or stored in silos for the consumption of the rich in North Vietnam. In 1945, people from the rice producing areas died of starvation by the hundreds of thousands.”

“But I thought Vietnam was called the ‘Rice-Bowl’ of the east?”

“It was. See Vietnam on the wall over there? Use your fuckin’ imagination, Mate. What do you see? It should be easy to visualize a long pole stretching from Qui Nhon in the south to Thanh Hoa in the north. At each end it swells into a basket shape.”

The blur materialized into a map. “I see it, Troy. It’s almost like a dog’s bone.”

Troy was enjoying himself. “You’ve got it, Mate. You gorrit. Them knuckles at each end are what is referred to as the rice bowls. Before the French and Japanese stockpiled all Vietnamese rice production during the early forties, Vietnam produced beaucoup rice for home consumption and for export overseas.”

The waiter appeared and, as their glasses emptied, almost unobtrusively filled them

Gary’s head swam. He shook it to clear the fuzz but only half-succeeded.

He focussed elsewhere. Gary looked around the leather-furnished room with its huge and heavy brocaded, ceiling to floor curtains.

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An exclusive club, it catered specially for the holidaying rich and the military officer class. Within Cyrno's walls Gary felt safe, protected from the demands of leadership and isolated from the brutality of war. A large fan swished overhead, one of three in the room. Gary realized the two men had been oblivious to the sound but thankful for the movement of air and its coolness. He took a deep breath. Some street noises penetrated. It made it difficult for Gary to realize that less than twenty kilometres away death was being dealt out randomly.

In some corner of Vietnam people lived and died knowing nothing else but war. Soldiers crawled on their guts into ambush positions, walked blindly to their death or suffered horrifying injuries. Prisoners were tortured, some to death. He wondered what Vietnam would be like without this reality of war tearing at its entrails. Gary thought of Thuyet. *What has been her life? What experiences could she share?*

Troy's words echoed from afar, gradually dragging Gary from reverie.

"I'm going to have to leave soon, Mate. I can't afford to miss my plane back to My Tho. The next one's not due for two days and I've got essential things to do."

Gary's driver had waited. Gary felt relieved. As the cool air whistled past his head he realized he was 'slightly pissed' and Troy served no better. Neither could have driven safely in the melee of Vietnamese transport. As it was, his driver almost collided with a Lambretta cyclo weighed down by three enormous black American soldiers. The back running board scraped the road every time it went over a bump. Sounds, smells and honking horns befuddled Gary after Cyrno's silent seclusion.

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They drove without incident to the guard-post at the entrance to the Vung Tau airport.

The ARVN guards stopped them for their ID's and Gary conversed and entertained them at his most garrulous best. Rather than sober them up, the cool breeze had heightened their 'slight pissed-ness' and everyone became Gary's instant friend.

A small Marmoset jumped onto Gary's shoulder. In his 'pissed state' he believed it was 'Tiki' reincarnated, his pet monkey when about fourteen. He told everyone how much Tiki meant to him and how depressed he'd been when Tiki caught encephalitis from the family cat. Gary described in detail the Viking funeral he'd given his mate.

"That's why I hate cats. One of them killed Tiki." Real tears rolled down his cheeks.

The Marmoset claimed Gary's shoulder. Laughing ARVN guards donated Tiki.

Before they parted with the monkey they each stroked it muttering "Tiki... Be good friend to Dawai. Good Tiki... You go now with Dawai... Have good home."

Suddenly Troy remembered. "Shit, Mate. I'm gonna be late." It was the first time Gary'd heard a suggestion of panic and urgency in Troy's voice.

Gary's driver caught Troy's mood. Responding immediately he spun the wheels as the guards lifted the boom gate. Still laughing the ARVN guards waved the three men, and Tiki, through. The Land Rover rocked side-to-side as it gathered speed. Unsure in his present state exactly where his plane would be parked, Troy got them lost.

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Gary and Troy laughed and egged the driver on to new feats of 'proximate risk' as they hurtled up cleared runways faster than the vehicle had ever experienced before. The Land Rover pitched and rolled ninety degrees around to a different runway. Gary and Troy chortled like young pranksters on a stolen-vehicle speedway ride.

In the distance a police siren whooped, whooshed and clanged its urgent message.

The driver saw the police first in the rear vision mirror.

"Christ, Sir. The bastards are chasing us."

Troy yelled to the driver, above the slipstream, "Lose the fuckers, Mate."

His plaintiff "But, Sir..." fell on deaf ears.

Gary hung on tight as he called out. "You heard him. Lose the fuckers."

Pursued by armed and angry US Military Policemen across the Vung Tau airstrip, the driver did his best. He reached speeds the Land Rover hadn't been designed for. Gary unsuccessfully tried to find the aircraft Troy had booked to return him to My Tho. The MP's finally managed to catch up when Gary's driver miscued trying to perform a one-hundred-and eighty degree turn then crashed into the high, arc-mesh perimeter fence. They jumped out of their jeep, angry... fucking angry.

Especially when Gary had to stop the cowering monkey from peeing on them.

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One huge, black MP brandishing a .45, pointed at Troy. "I want your fucking ID."

When the two officers pretended they didn't know who the MP was speaking to, the man lost his cool and pointed his pistol, pointing it aggressively at Troy.

"Not you, Aussie. The son-of-a-bitch beside you, Man."

Troy pulled out a string of top security ID's. The big blackfella, impressed, backed off. The alacrity with which he backed off impressed Gary.

The MP's escorted Gary's Land Rover to Troy's aircraft and made Troy promise 'No repeats'... and ... 'Don't come back too soon.' Then remembered to be polite "Sir."

Whatever they'd seen in the security ID's Troy had flashed made them respect him.

The two Aussies finally reached Nui Dat and the relative 'safety' of 1ATF 'stone-cold sober'. Gary daren't think of the outcome had their 'misdemeanour' been reported. It had cost his driver a slouch hat, which Gary duly replaced.

Some time later Gary was accosted by the 'tucker-fucka' Sergeant. "You'll have to do something about your fucking monkey, Skipper."

Clearly the sergeant was frustrated over Tiki's behaviour.

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Non-plussed, Gary asked. "What's the problem with Tiki, Sergeant Morris?"

"After the diggers have set the tables for each of the diggers meals, the little bastard... sorry, Sir, young Tiki appears. He arrives from nowhere and runs down the centre of the table purposefully knocking over all the sugar bowls, the sauce bottles and the milk jugs. The little b... extends one arm as he runs and flails everything making a goddam awful mess, Skipper. That's what the little fucker does, and no bullshit. The diggers and the cooking staff are pissed off. It wouldn't be so bad if the bludger didn't tease the shit out of us, Sir."

"Tease the shit? Out of grown up humans, Sergeant? Come on. Pull the other fucking leg. A tiny monkey teasing grown soldiers?" Gary laughed.

"Tiki sits at the end of the table, Sir. Hogs into the sugar. If we get close he runs off."

A long time later in the SAS Sergeant's Bar in Australia, Gary met Sergeant Morris.

He told Gary that the staff'd had had enough one day and rebelled.

He then confessed he'd cooked a 'Tiki' soup ...made specially for Gary.

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AUGUST: "to pay any price"

SEVENTEEN HUNDRED ARVN AND ALLIED FORCES DIED AT BINH GIA.

Hai first met Vinh in the bloody but successful battle for Binh Gia on 28th December 1964. For bravery in the Binh Gia action both men had recently been promoted. Le Duan, Hai's friend and communist leader of the South's war, personally commended Vinh's bravery and leadership and awarded a Medal of Valour to Vinh and Hai.

Major Vinh was promoted a battalion commander in 275 Vietminh Regiment and Hai a Captain as Second-in-Command of D445, the Provincial Mobile Battalion. D445 bivouacked in Hai's home village of Long Tan until American forces and their allies, the Australians, destroyed it.

In the middle of Phouc Tuy Province, Binh Gai's 6,000 strong Catholic village hated the communists, having lived through the Land Reforms in North Vietnam. In the 1954 Geneva 'partition' they'd headed South and settled in Binh Gia. Two Vietminh regiments, one of them Vinh's, ambushed then destroyed 52nd Ranger Battalion, an elite ARVN unit. There the Americans lost more casualties than in any other single action up to 1964. Binh Gia's people put up a fierce resistance for six days.

Binh Gia signalled the Viet Cong had moved to a new strategy in South Vietnam.

Le Duan confirmed Binh Gia meant that Viet Cong units had moved to Mao's offensive Stage Two. 'Now we will smash the large puppet main force units'.

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Vinh asked Hai to visit him. He needed to know about Mai. In the massive tunnel system in the ramparts of Nui May Tao, a mountain sanctuary in the north west corner of Phouc Tuy Province, the two men sat with their backs to a waterfall. It tumbled into a lagoon. Stoic during Hai's story of his meeting at the Majestic, his capture with Mai followed by her death, the only sign from Vinh was a deep, deep sigh and a slowly drooping, downcast head.

Hai spoke first. "Mai's murder makes me realize why we are at war in South Vietnam. I just wish I could understand why Dat and Pham are opposed to us. It is sad when family and friends have to be treated as the enemy." A long silence followed.

Vinh explained. "For a commander, war cannot be a personal issue. If you want promotion, Hai, study historical determinism." His eyes flashed. "Focus on the mind of your enemy. In this province the enemy are the Australians. Before he established IATF, the enemy commander, Brigadier Jackson, toured major ARVN and American establishments. He reported 'the war was lost from a military point of view'."

"If he believes the war is already lost then what does he hope to gain? The Australians are already proving more effective than the Americans. If Jackson believes..."

"America is desperate for power in South East Asia to fill the vacuum left by other colonialist regimes. Johnson and his military will pay any price for victory."

"But what if you thought the war was already lost? Our motivation for war comes from the top. No one is more convinced about our victory than, Ho Chi Minh."

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“That’s what makes the difference. We fight a people’s war and our generals and political leaders fight only for our victory too.”

“But why...?”

“They don’t realize that one day communism will dominate the world. Australia must have its own political or economic agenda in Asia.”

“But why does Australia fight us, Vinh? Their country has so much materially and yet is so far away. They are no better than the French. What do they want of us? What have we ever done to them to make them hate us so much?”

“I don’t either, Hai. But I also don’t think they understand we will fight a long war and that victory will ultimately be ours. You joined the VC at sixteen. All your life you have been at war. Your children may have to fight too, and there’s but ‘Victory will be ours.’ France, and now America, cannot sustain a long war. They want quick victories and we will deny that to them. America will one day tire of war. Then we will have won. You must believe this, Hai.”

“I do believe it, with all my heart. But I still don’t understand what they have to gain.”

“America links their South Vietnam puppets to the survival of Laos and Cambodia, yet the whole of South East Asia is aflame. The Americans have committed themselves to stop what they call our aggression on the South. The stakes are high. President Johnson is determined to destroy communism. So was Kennedy.”

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“He’s dead. Assassinated, like Diem, by his own people. What has he to do with us?”

“In his inaugural speech on 20th January 1961 he promised that the US would ‘pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.’ President Johnson supports this doctrine unreservedly. He believes Americans are ‘equal to the task’. Australia supports him.”

Hai shook his head in disbelief. His biographical details were similar to Jaago’s. Born five years later than Jaago, in 1930, Hai had grown up in Long Tan and fought as a ‘runner’ in the First French Indochina War. Intelligent and wise beyond his years, Hai had been financed by the South’s communists to further his education in Paris.

“You met Ho Chi Minh in Paris, didn’t you?”

Pham’s friend in Paris, Hai’s love for communism equalled Pham’s nationalism.

“Yes. I returned from Paris to Phouc Tuy in the early 1950’s and fought in the Second French Indochina War. Then the 1954 Geneva partition protocols shipped me north to Thanh Hoa province. That’s where I was commissioned and I eventually returned with my unit commander and a group of southern officers. In 1960 that took me twelve months on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We stopped some time at Tay Ninh.”

In the secret communications zone, where Thuyet worked. But they hadn’t met.

“From 1965, through to April 1966, we fortified Long Tan and later, Long Phouc.

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“You worked hard, Hai and we will never forget. You also ordered the construction of an extensive network of tunnels and enlarged existing tunnels plus you established arms and food caches before the Americans and Australians destroyed them.”

Hai dropped his head in a sign of humility. “My soldiers worked hard.”

“Better than that, they aggressively controlled most of northern Phouc Tuy and managed to reduce ARVN effectiveness there. Your D445 Battalion was trained to a peak of perfection under your inspired leadership. Reports from the Special Unit tell me that your highly motivated D445 unit and your Viet Cong ancillaries now deny the area to the ARVN. Your hold over a large area of Phouc Tuy even includes infiltration into the Province Chief’s own town of Dat Do.”

Humidity made Hai sweat as he poured tea for the two of them. Vinh’s words had pleased him. He’d had no idea that D445 had made such an impact on the Communist Vietminh leadership. A vaporous trail, from the teapot contrasted milky white against the shadows of an overhanging rock. A bright red Dragonfly followed its mist upward. Desperate to understand and to follow Vinh’s argument, Hai hadn’t noticed.

Vinh didn’t notice either. He remained silent. Then he stirred and his whole body shook as if to rid himself of memory. He looked at Hai intently. Something clicked.

Overwhelmed by a feeling of incredible intensity, Hai wanted to pull his eyes away but Vinh’s held him riveted. Some part of Hai’s mind knew Vinh’s staring, focussed-eyed look. He’d seen it in some market, somewhere. Then he remembered.

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A cold chill shivered up his spine. Hai had watched the killing in the Dat Do market. The eyes of the mongoose never left the cobra's. The snake, mesmerized, seemed to know it was about to die. Hai had stood behind the cobra's distended neck, similarly riveted, watching as the mongoose struck. Vinh's were the eyes of a mongoose.

As though to confirm Hai's fears, Vinh's voice trembled. "I will avenge Mai's death."

Hai felt relieved he was not the Face.

"But first I have a mission." Vinh's face had set hard. "It is yours too." It was not what Vinh said but the way he looked and the determination in his voice. "My battalion has orders. The Australians must be exterminated." He paused, frowned then continued, "They are too sharp a thorn in the side of the Liberation Army."

Hai replied, "My wife, young son and daughter were forcibly evicted from Long Tan by the Australians. I too want vengeance, Vinh. They destroyed my village."

Vinh agreed. "The Australians have now set up their fortress on and around Nui Dat." He banged his cup on the table. "The Australians killed nearly fifty soldiers in one of my Recce units." Festering eyes seethed from deep, darkened sockets and Vinh's thin, narrow face showed the ravages of malaria. "Malaria is an epidemic among us." He looked back at the waterfall. Stopped. Listened to its sounds then laughed grimly. "But remember, Hai," he added ominously, "it was the Australians who destroyed Long Tan. They must be eliminated before they establish themselves in Phouc Tuy. They are our primary enemy."

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As quickly as they'd flamed, his eyes dulled, then glazed.

"You are right." Hai spat his words. "Australian puppets. They are a ferocious enemy. Australians devastated Long Tan's farms. Market goods are our main income. My people are destitute. Australian patrols look for us all the time. They have established their Task Force Base. Now they won't even let Long Tan villagers return to their village to harvest crops. They act like conquerors, Vinh."

Almost wistfully Vinh added, "They are more effective than either the Americans or the ARVN." He turned in his chair and fixed his gaze on the waterfall. It seemed to bring him a little peace. His frown receded and the grim lines of his mouth relaxed.

Hai added, to Vinh's back, "Our bases, food caches and our bunkers were found and destroyed. Their April operation destroyed a great deal of my hard work and effort."

The constant splash and tinkling seemed to wake Vinh and he smiled wanly back at Hai. Vinh stood then picked up a pebble and threw it across the surface of the pond. He watched the stone bounce four times. As he turned, a pallid smile appeared.

"Mai could have made it bounce six times and made it reach the other side, Hai."

Hai felt the grief-driven sadness in Vinh's voice. Tousled black hair topped a sparse, lithe frame. Fire smoldered again in the black coals of his sunken eyes.

They sprang back into flame. "Hai. Brigadier, Jackson, is alone responsible."

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Hai, mystified at the sudden outburst, quietly said, "For...?"

"For the devastation of Long Tan, my friend, Hai. It was his decision. We will make the Australians pay for it, and soon. I'll make sure you are specifically asked to attend the briefing." He added, "A dog was killed and hung from a tree by some villagers. It's a bad omen. The Australian 5th Battalion arrived in May. Another will follow."

Hai whispered, "All villagers in our province are especially angry at the Australians. They have been forced to leave behind many of their household goods, their gardens and farms, and some had to watch their homes destroyed behind them. The Australians took a week to force us out of Long Phouc."

"Your operational area, Hai, is very important. Fifty-per-cent of the total population in Phouc Tuy lives along a twenty-five-kilometre ring road from Baria. Evenly spaced along it, each population centre is like a string of pearls. Each is very valuable to us."

Hai brightened. "Thank you, Vinh. I also believe Hoa Long is tactically important. Resettled VC supporters from Long Phouc and Long Tan made up the bulk of Hoa Long's village population. They are only 2,000 metres from the 1st Australian Task Force Base and just north of it. 1ATF is vulnerable on and around Nui Dat Hill."

Vinh stood up. He paced to and fro agitatedly, whilst Hai waited. Then, "We'll take advantage of their vulnerability, Hai, but Baria remains a most strategically important town. It controls the centre of Phouc Tuy Province. We must hold it at all costs." Vinh brought out a map whilst Hai pulled over a table.

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He looked into his empty cup, absent-mindedly. Hai filled it as he spoke.

“Don’t be sad, Hai. Many people suffered during Diem’s terrible regime. Your unit drew its main logistic support from Long Tan and Long Phouc. Now they have been destroyed you must focus wider to ensure we are victorious.” In an undertone, Vinh said. “I can tell you that a tactical decision, made and agreed between the Australian and American commanders in Saigon, is that Australians need a four-thousand metres ‘safety-zone’ around its 1ATF base. Its central locus will be located around Nui Dat Hill, that dominant position overlooking Route Coloniale 2.”

Vinh’s last words as they parted were, “Hai, two things. First, when you get back to your unit tell them that their revenge will not be too long. The Americans and their Australian and ARVN lackeys will be destroyed before they celebrate next Christmas. Second, I want you to have this.” He drew a small book out of his pocket. “I got this from Dien Bien Phu, it’s a French Military Field Book. I’ve kept it as a memento and I believe it’s been a lucky omen for me. I want you to have it.”

Hai was taken aback. Vinh had never been known to have a ‘soft side’.

He received a call in July. D445’s battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Van Kiem, was temporarily incapacitated with malaria when the message came. Regiment 275’s Commander, Colonel Ut Thoi, specifically requested Kiem send Hai, its 2i/c, so that he could brief him. Hai and his troops had sworn vengeance on the Australians. Many of D445 Battalion’s troops, nearly three hundred seasoned Viet Cong, were local. The majority came from Long Phouc. Kiem and Hai left together.

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Kiem also had tactical command of about four hundred locally based guerrillas who operated in strengths varying from small groups of three to five village-based soldiers to units up to company size, about sixty strong. Hai virtually commanded D445.

It and its ancillaries could be concentrated anywhere in Phouc Tuy within twenty-four hours. Also, within each village throughout Phouc Tuy, the Viet Cong command located an infrastructure that could be used on a variety of essential tasks. The villagers dug tunnels and built fortifications to facilitate administrative tasks. They were located in the Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh mountains north-west of Baria.

Phouc Tuy was one of the prettiest in the Delta region. Just north of Nui Dat 1 was the large Binh Ba rubber plantation. Its village of the same name straddled Highway 2.

The Courtenay rubber plantation, fifteen kilometres north, was on the junction between Phouc Tuy and Bien Hoa. Most plantations were still staffed by their French owners. They continued to pay VC 'taxes' to the communist forces in the province.

A briefing officer told how 1RAR had conducted operations in Bien Hoa during 1965. They had built a respected reputation. Experiences against 1RAR in 1965 also alerted them that Australian troops were different to American or ARVN. Thoroughly trained in counter-guerrilla warfare the Australians had proved a match for North Vietnam regulars and constantly harassed the local Viet Cong forces.

Intelligence from Thuyet's secret sanctuary in Tay Ninh Province to 275 Regiment warned Vinh and Hai that 1RAR was about to be replaced by 5RAR and 6RAR.

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Ut Thoi, Commander of Regiment 275, had no illusions. "Once fresh Australian troops arrive we must strike quickly before they have had time to settle-in. The presence of a strong Australian Task Force in Phouc Tuy will interfere with our aim."

When Vinh asked for clarification of the aim, he was told, "To dominate Phouc Tuy and to make it a safe base for operations against Saigon." His sister regiment, the 274th, had been activated in War Zone 'D' north-west of Saigon, three months earlier. Both had been reconstituted from two combat-experienced battalions.

The briefing officer continued. "Regiment 274 is ready for action. Currently they are alongside the Song Ca, a key waterway from Phouc Tuy and Long Khanh."

He used the map pinned against the cave wall. "The Song Ca is our major waterway. Guarding it is a major function of 274 Regiment. The main road highways, Baria to Bien Hoa and from Vung Tau, north past Nui Dat 1 are also 274's responsibilities. Major actions against the Australians will be supported by them."

He then briefed all assembled officers. "Gia Dinh and the Rung Sat marshlands and mangroves form a natural barrier to the west of Nui Dat 1. They are a strategic barrier. The Plain of Reeds to the north is still a revolutionary-controlled base area. In 1965, the Viet Cong all but extinguished a government presence in Gia Dinh Province. It can destroy any remaining government forces at will. We must achieve the same in Phouc Tuy. Hai, the Second-in-Command of D445, fought in that campaign."

The assembled officers clapped politely. Hai's pride lit up his eyes.

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The officer pointed out other important features. "Note that the eastern side of the Phouc Tuy rectangle edges Binh Tuy province. These two mountainous areas dominate our northern corner." He indicated, "Where we are living at the moment is in the Nui May Tao mountain base." Again, "Immediately east is this one...(pause) the huge Nui Be. The Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh mountains are to be the new home of 274 Regiment. They will dominate Phouc Tuy's western boundary ..."

"... and can be seen easily from Long Tan." Hai added. The officer asked Hai to illustrate. "Thank you, Comrade." Hai said, indicating the southern and central region where the Long Hai Hills reached into the South China Sea. "Here there are large cave systems that were honeycombed with tunnels during the two French wars. Recently they've been fortified and mined by Hai's troops. It's now a major base for Viet Cong units in the province. I can promise you those mountains will become well known to Australian troops in the coming years and they'll regret ever seeing them."

Hai returned convinced the Australians would be destroyed. Early in July the Viet Cong encountered extra Australian patrols. These patrols had been aggressive and successful. VC units, under command of D445, countered by building a battalion-sized base camp that concealed caches of rice and explosives. By the end of July, the Australian's combined to conduct two major operations in the Long Tan area. They destroyed a number of D445's main caches and tunnel systems.

Following the total destruction of Long Tan, Kiem had riefed his officers, "I am not disappointed. We are fighting a just war and possess the 'Mandate of Heaven'. South Vietnam will be independent one day. Giap said that 'our war of Liberation will be a long and vast war.' I tell you truly, we will sometimes win and sometimes lose."

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He scanned each of their faces before continuing, "Ho Chi Minh told us 'not to be too optimistic when we win nor too disappointed when we lose.' When the enemy gains any advantage we must find out what caused us to lose momentum so that we gain from the experience each time. We must all believe in victory".

Kiem listened intently as his officers submitted reports and confessed any errors.

He admitted, "The Australians aren't easily discouraged. More extensive and aggressive patrolling of Long Tan followed the discovery of our preparations. Worse, Uc Da Loi mounted a full battalion operation east of Long Tan on 24th July. In the headwaters of the Suoi Da Bang river, accurate artillery fire and constant Harassment and Interdiction tasks troubled us. In July alone they fired four hundred H&I tasks."

The Medical officer reported, "This random but constant H&I bombardment means many of our troops refuse to use mosquito nets at night. Some get entangled as they tried to flee the artillery fire. The predictive result is even more losses from malaria."

H&I tasks were demoralizing Kiem's troops. Fire missions in Australian operations were also specifically mounted against D445 and any reported units of 275 Regiment.

Dawai Nguyen Duc Thu, a company commander, spoke next. "On the July 24th operation the Australian reaction was quick." Many men, killed and wounded in his first major action, were in an area he'd assumed safe. Kiem waited for Thu to regain his composure. The company commander continued, "An enemy company assaulted on 25th July. We followed the Suoi Da Bang because there was plenty of cover from bamboo and rainforest along its banks." He paused to collect his thoughts.

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“About an hour later two forward scouts leading our two withdrawing units were shot and wounded. We’d run into a large enemy force. They must have been placed in a blocking ambush position. At midday they spread across our front. Then they also engaged all forty troops in Nhai’s unit.” Dawai Nguyen Duc Thu stepped to one side.

Nhai took over, “My forward troops used their light-machine guns to good effect wounding some and slowing the Australian attack. We engaged them with our 60mm mortars and they responded with artillery fire. Realizing they outnumbered us, two sections amounting to eighteen of my men remained to cover our escape. I used bugle calls to rally my men and to signal our breaking into two predetermined groups about ten each. We split east and south. The enemy used helicopters to extricate their wounded. Then we ran into big trouble.” He stopped, too distressed to continue.

Kiem spoke. “Really big trouble. We had no warning and took many casualties. One was a company commander I had trained with in Than Hoa and later fought with in Gia Dinh.” With tears in his eyes, Kiem stopped for a moment to recover. Then, “I was proud of the way your troops dealt with the ambush, Nhai and Thu.”

Hai added, “Your accurate and heavy return fire when you used your light-machine guns again achieved a good effect. They caused heavy casualties among the Australian troops. The lesson is, they will retaliate with accurate artillery fire. How do we combat their heavy artillery response?”

Nhai responded, “We must hug the enemy so close they cannot use air strikes or artillery bombardments to destroy our forces.”

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Kiem said, "Excellent. To recapitulate where we left off, Trung... you said 'We'd run into a large enemy force. They must have been placed in a blocking ambush position.' What did you do then?"

Thu continued. "We went to ground and waited for a lull."

Hai thought he caught a sparkle in Kiem's eyes.

Thu, pleased with Kiem's response, concluded, "We caught the enemy this time by surprise. They must have thought we'd left instead of which we silently prepared to counter-ambush them. As they stood up to flush any remaining troops from the long grass my men fired at close range. I got orders to my mortars and shelled them too. My men showed excellent discipline and remained out of sight of the enemy."

Kiem interrupted, "Your troops responded immediately to my bugle signals. You conducted your withdrawal very professionally, Thu. By the time it was all over we'd killed or wounded over forty of the enemy. But we sustained thirty-two ourselves."

Hai, asked to conclude, added, "By 28th July the Australians had discovered a great deal about our preparations to attack their base. Many of the camps, cooking and feeding areas and hospital facilities we were preparing for 275 Regiment's attack on the Australian's base were destroyed. Our battalion managed to stay out of sight. But by the end of July the Australian's were worried about our possible attack and 6RAR returned to the base area to defend it. They knew that 275 Regiment were to their east but had no idea where. Our aim is to keep it that way. We will destroy the enemy."

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Kiem unrolled a sheaf of paper. "Brother Hai received this important information from a secret source. It is a transmission from one of the Australian generals. 'We know the Viet Cong will react against the insertion of the Australian task force into Phouc Tuy Province. A major attack is not expected to develop because the Viet Cong would not expose themselves to heavy casualties unless they could be successful.'"

Hai added, "And this part is best... 'This type of attack has no place in the enemy's tactical doctrine.' This shows that the Australian senior officers do not know us, our capabilities or our determination to rid them from our beloved country.'"

The assembled officers cheered and clapped. The commissars looked glum. These southern troops were different to northern troops. There, orders issued from the top. These were more like brothers. The commissars, sidelined, had already decided that there were too many non-communists for South Vietnam to win their war.

Kiem had been promised the Vietminh would use all their resources to convince the Australians there would be no attack on the First Australian Task Force base area. It seemed to be working. At the end of July Brigadier Jackson had nervously withdrawn the majority of his task force into its central position around Nui Dat. His staff developed plans for the 'Cordon and Search' of key areas outside the 4,000 metre perimeter known as the Tactical Area of Operational Responsibility, or TAOR. Saturation patrols and ambushes by the two Australian battalions aimed to restore local government control and to open the key roads in the province. Jackson was determined to break the VC stranglehold on Binh Bah to the north of Nui Dat and to secure Highway 2, which passed within a hundred yards of Nui Dat Hill.

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The destruction of Long Tan and Long Phouc hurt the Viet Cong. But despite their best efforts to locate and destroy the VC unit D445, the two battalions had failed in the operations outside the TAOR, which took place between 5th and 17th August 1966.

In their 'Liberation' campaign the VC had hacked a village chief's head off with a machete and placed it on a pointed stake at the village entrance. It was a warning. Terrorism followed, plus: 're-education' of village chief officials: forced conscription of young men into a guerrilla unit: and many coerced to join 275 Regiment or D445.

For twelve months, combat see-sawed across the Long Tan plantation then Hai's long-awaited order finally came. 275 Regiment's operational order was clear. The final destruction of 1ATF was to start and D445 would have a major part. Ut Thoi had been given a directive 'to raise the fighting spirit of the local people and to stop the destruction being wrought by the Australians'. The annihilation of the Australian forces would alert the American's allies that American might could not protect them. Absolute secrecy and a fanatical emphasis on camouflage and stealth dictated the form of the advance by 275 Regiment and the conduct of D445's battle plan.

Between 29th July and 14th August, Vinh's battalion of 275 Regiment moved south to Xuyen Moc from their base in the Nui May Tao mountains. Then they secretly moved from their base area immediately north of Xuyen Moc to a hill named Nui Dat 2 in the region of Long Tan, five miles west of Nui Dat 1 and the 1ATF TAOR.

Ahead of him, Hai's D445 rehearsed their plans. The 'Battle of Long Tan' would open with 'a bang not a whimper'.

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D445 had worked hard, excited by the honour of opening the first phase of the annihilation of the Australians. The Australians could only muster two battalions and their commander, Brigadier Jackson, had them dispersed all over Phouc Tuy Province searching their elusive quarry D445. It sustained casualties but guerrilla units from Dat Do and Baria quickly replaced them.

Vinh's Recce Platoon from his 605 Battalion had been with him a long time. They'd observed and recorded the locations of the various dispersed elements of 1ATF from a large hill, Nui Dat 2, exactly due west of Nui Dat 1. Four miles away, it provided an excellent view of the Nui Dat 1 Task Force defensive system. Nui Dat 2 stood just beyond the limit of the patrolling 'Line Alpha' established by Brigadier Jackson at 4,000metre from the 1ATF area. Vinh's sister unit, 274 Regiment, also operated an excellent observation point on the Nui Dinh hills from where they could also see the whole layout of 1ATF. Vinh built sand models of 1ATF's area.

On the ground, Hai's recce units had confirmed precise measurements of distances between them and the enemy. Vinh couldn't emphasize enough to Hai the importance of knowing precise distances so that their combined mortars, heavy machine-guns and recoilless weapons would inflict maximum and accurate destructive fire on 1ATF.

Vinh's 605 Battalion also had some recoilless rifles they'd managed to conceal from marauding Australian patrols. Vinh didn't want his troops to be on the receiving end of the withering artillery fire, so much a feature of the Australian defensive strategy. The Australian artillery had to be neutralized. Vinh impressed upon Hai the need for urgency and for precision in measuring distances. There could be no room for error.

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One sunny morning buffalo boys from Hoa Long met one of Gary's patrols 'near the wire'. Unaware the 'boys' were trained in measuring the foot distance almost to the edge of the barbed-wire entanglement surrounding 1ATF's position at Nui Dat 1, the Uc Da Loi thought the youngsters were cute and innocent and never shot at them.

The urgency Vinh and his Regimental commander keenly felt came from two factors. The monsoon weather had arrived in force in May. The second was that the two Australian battalions, 5RAR and 6RAR, had recently arrived in Vietnam.

The monsoon season would slow operations down for Vinh and for the enemy. Hai and Vinh both knew that the whole of the First and Second Indochina Wars had been dictated by the weather. The entire war rhythm, its timing and concentration of forces was a cycle consistently determined by monsoons.

July being the month heavily affected by monsoons, normally meant a lull.

May elicited the highest fighting intensity, measured by the number of casualties. Combat intensity rose again August to September. October to January was normally taken up by re-supply, troop reinforcements and their training.

Initially Vinh knew that the monsoon period would work in his favour Rain hinders observation but mainly interfered with the enemy's deadliest weapon... air-strikes.

Australian artillery had already been highly accurate and destructive but American air-support often proved decisive in preventing victory on the battlefield.

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The second urgency was that the Australians were tired and overworked. Hai knew that was the best time to strike. For two months, the Australians been settling-in, their time taken up by constant and vigorous patrolling. The heavy rains increased their burden, many soldiers complaining to their relatives and friends back home that “there were no decent defences such as minefields, barbed wire or anything else. Anyone attempting to attack our base could walk right through.”

Despite two Australian battalions arriving at Nui Dat, the IATF defensive framework hadn't had time to be constructed in depth. The constant threat to the task force base by the illusive D445 and the constantly moving two Vietminh regiments kept the commander, Brigadier Jackson, continually worried.

Young men flocked to Hai's standard, desperate for 'Liberation' from a new colonial power. Often asked, “Why are the Australians killing us and destroying our homes?” Hai had no answer. He'd never heard of Australia before their arrival the year before in Bien Hoa, outside Saigon. They already had won a respected reputation as warriors.

Vinh felt complacent. Told of wireless intercept, this highly developed and secret eavesdropping system kept Ut Thoi, his Regimental commander, informed about enemy troop movements and gave early warning of Australian operations against his regiment and against D445. Thuyet's unit also blocked Australian transmissions.

This was important because the Australian wireless communication system had radios right down to individual platoons. Vinh's radios only went down to company level. He wished he had the Australian's degree of sophistication.

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It could determine the outcome of battles. Vinh's company commanders relied on complicated bugle calls and whistle-coded instructions, or the human 'runner'. So sophisticated had radio interception become that it was a new tactic. Vinh was assured the extensive enemy wireless systems could be jammed once battle joined.

Hai's Heavy Weapons Platoon, with its six 82mm mortars and its three recoilless rifles, left the comparative safety of Nui Dat 2 at dusk on the 16th August 1966. Prior to this time his Recce platoon had informed him that the Australian patrols had intensified as though they knew some danger was imminent. The patrols had caught fleeting glances of Hai's soldiers but had been too far away to shoot.

Hai respected the Australian's fire-control. It was so unlike the Americans. They'd shoot at anything and at any distance. Or bring in helicopters and air-strikes for a few of Hai's soldiers. Two of Vinh's Recce Platoon had been killed earlier that same day.

Their documents, dress and equipment gave them away as Main Force rather than Viet Cong. They wore greens, carried their M1 rifles with extra bandoleers and wore packs. But Vietminh intelligence had not picked up any increase in 1ATF's response

In the middle of the Long Tan rubber plantation stood a large shed standing over a well-concealed tunnel. Six soldiers guarded the hut and were there to give others early-warning of the enemy. Carrying an 82mm mortar, with its tube and heavy base-plate, each weighing over forty kilos, had not been easy. Extra troops had been assigned to protect the weapons carrying party: to carry extra rounds of ammunition, each weighing about ten kilos: and to keep the mortar teams on the track in the dark.

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The weather continued to be stifling and they could feel heavy rains in the air. Those underground suffered most. Vinh's troops arrived without mishap.

Using the perimeter of Nui Dat 2 then moving into the rubber plantation meant they didn't have to slug and slosh their way through the long grass and muddy tracks. Recent heavy rains had turned into bogs some parts of the track from their last platoon rest point north east of Nui Dat 2.

Tired, sweating profusely and breathing heavily the carrying party and ammunition carriers finally gave up their loads and silently left. Only sufficient troops remained to help the mortar crews move quickly back to Nui Dat 2 as soon as their mission was over. They knew that Australian artillery reprisals would be swift and deadly.

Vinh had told them, "The whole mission may hinge on you not getting caught to warn the Australians of their imminent destruction." He communicated his anxiety not to compromise the operation very strongly. "Also, remember, Hai, this is not the attack. We just want to be sure of our ranging so that on the actual attack we already have rehearsed as best we can. Enough rounds to alert them and to draw the Australians into an ambush. That is what this is about. Silence their artillery. Six mortars will share about fifteen rounds each mortar. Get your rounds away fast and accurate then get out of the area quickly. No loitering. No casualties left behind."

The battle's initial barrage of sixty-two heavy 82mm mortar rounds and recoilless ranging rounds fell on 1ATF at 0243 hours on the morning of 17th August 1966. It lasted for twenty-two minutes. In that time 1ATF, at first in shock, recovered quickly.

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Within seven minutes of the first rounds landing, 1st Field Regiment fired on the VC mortar base-plate positions and suspected withdrawal routes until 0410 hours. 1ATF had been attacked for the first time. They sustained twenty-four wounded as well as material and installation damage. Many of the rounds fell on Gary's unit. Nicknamed 'King of Nui Dat', as he looked down from his lofty perch at 1ATF in the rubber plantation below him he suddenly realised that being on top of Nui Dat Hill made him vulnerable. Jaago checked everyone had 'Stood To', then waited.

The 'ambush' ruse worked. Hai and Vinh understood the slow infantry patrol response they most feared. Vinh's unit positioned itself behind Nui Dat 2 where they could move in any direction. D445 spread a screen into the rubber plantation in front of Vinh. Some of his forces deployed in front of the feature and in positions already prepared by friendly villagers units co-opted by Hai.

At 1030 hours, and in the hot and stifling weather, three women posing as fruit pickers with valid identity cards, had been captured by B Company, 6RAR. These brave women, a section of Hai's Recce platoon, had tagged the Australians since early morning. Luckily, the Chieu Hoi 'interpreter' with the Australians was one of Hai's best men. On release the women had immediately reported to Hai that a lightly armed Australian patrol had found the mortar base-plate and protection force positions after crossing the Suoi Da Bang. Hai contacted Vinh. They decided to let B Company pass. Hai's Recce Platoon reported three patrols searching for him at midday. His units purposefully left trails, to draw the Australians into a set-piece ambush.

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Captain Charlie Mollison, commanding A Company, reported the enemy jamming his radios. Major Noel Ford, B Company commander, felt frustrated. All trails went cold. One of C Company's Platoons returned to base with 'nothing to report'. At 0630 hours the next day, 18th August, 6RAR commander, Lieutenant Colonel Townsend ordered all companies to return to base, unless there were significant finds.

All returned by early afternoon, except for two units. Noel Ford, his company reduced to thirty-two men because the rest had been promised their long awaited leave, had found an abandoned recoilless rifle site at 1200 hours. It had been blasted to pulp by Australian artillery counter-bombardment fire with plenty of signs indicating enemy dead or wounded taken away. D Company, having left the 1ATF perimeter at 1100 hours, reached the edge of the small Long Tan rubber plantation at 1300 hours.

B Company then left Harry Smith's company behind. Noel Ford left the rubber and disappeared into the long grass in the direction of Nui Dat Hill, the 1ATF base area.

At 1515 hours, silent and eerie, the rubber plantation seemed bereft of birds and any other life forms. The excessive heat of the earlier overhead sun left behind its canopy of sweltering humidity as sweating, tired but alert Australian soldiers followed fresh tracks, blood trails and discarded pieces of clothing and footwear. At 1540 hours, the six men of Vinh's early warning unit sat around a fire having lunch. Without their AK47's, which they'd stacked, their khaki shorts and shirts gave the impression they were "a bunch of kids on a scout jamboree". They had managed to avoid 6RAR's patrols on the 17th and now on the 18th they convinced themselves that the Australians had 'gone home'. Their relaxation cost them lives.

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Lieutenant Gordon Sharp's Eleven Platoon forward scouts fired a volley into them.

"We wounded two and they all took off into the rubber."

They headed for the hut, five-hundred metres into the rubber, with its underground tunnel system. All they left behind were bloodstains and well-concealed trapdoors.

At 1610 hours, Vinh, angry his ambush had been sprung too early, whispered to his men to hold their fire until the initial contact unit had walked across their front, the line of Uc Da Loi soldiers fanning away from him. He heard a grasshopper clicking its love message. Felt a breeze strained by the trees. Smiled at its poetry.

Caught in classical enfilade the Aussies didn't stand a chance. Vinh had his heavy machine-guns trained on the closest and almost wiped that line of soldiers out in the first burst. His snipers, hidden in the trees picked off the machine-gunners in the flat, relatively open ground of the young rubber plantation. Then they focussed on any soldier that seemed to have command authority. Vinh heard their desperate calls. Without understanding the detail he judged their distress and confusion.

"Wherethefuggarethey?" ... "Up in the trees." ... "NO. They're fucking left of us". A machine-gun suddenly went silent. Any attempted replacement was immediately killed. Then the rain began to fall as though God cried for their lonely deaths, in a country they didn't understand. Heroes for a war the survivors would be punished for.

D445 and Regiment 275's surprise turned to unforgiving hatred. They unleashed an awesome retribution. Vinh had been caught inspecting his front line.

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Snipers in the trees afterward complained their fields of fire soon became masked by acrid smoke. Massive volumes of small-arms fire stripped the leaves then the bark off young rubber trees. Soon they were shredded to their stumps.

Vinh kept his head low as the Australians returned accurate and selective fire. Admired their professionalism and effectiveness. An awesome picture of tracers caused later nightmares on both sides as they hit live targets. Tracer rounds continued to burn inside chests being clawed at: bellies exploded phosphorescent contents: and mouths lit up heads like Halloween lanterns.

Some of Hai's troops, tired of constant harassment by Australian artillery, patrols and unit losses over the last twelve years, snapped without warning. They could be seen rushing aimlessly from tree to tree in the open, their mouths opening and shutting like hungry, feeding goldfish. The only noise, the mayhem of battle, made their panicked yells and screams soundless. Wildly flaying, these live scarecrows, in a plantation of stripped rubber trees, quickly and silently died mouthing horrors.

The Australians on the ground kept firing long after they should have been dead. Vinh had never seen such a volume of relentless fire. Hidden demons of the 'Lost Long Tan and Long Phouc souls' screamed death and destruction, yet the Australians wouldn't die. Vinh's men bellied toward the Australians. He admired their similar tenacity.

Vinh watched an enemy soldier lifted from the ground by the sheer volume of machine-gun fire aimed at him. Minced as though in a massive grinder, his hollowed out shroud haunted Vinh for a long time. It slowly settled like an Autumn leaf falling.

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Over-ripe, bloodied plums fell limply in slow motion from trees. But today he felt nothing. He heard their soft 'P-L-O-P'. It took him some moments to realize they were his snipers. He gave his bugler orders.

In the heat of battle the only saviour is discipline and constant rehearsal. The two paid off. He felt rather than saw his troops deploy to encircle the enemy. Then the hated artillery landed. Vinh saw a platoon totally annihilated. The incoming whistling suddenly stopped. Silence. Huge blue flashes filled the air. Then Earth erupted.

Dust and grime exploded above the ground as phantom shadows taloned outward from it. Darkness blotted out the sky. Earth's bloodstained guts settled slowly. Rag doll bodies hung for long moments then dissolved into the blackness of newly upflung earth. A thousand hurricanes bore down. Harpies screamed into Vinh's blasted eardrums then crunched and clawed for new victims. Closer and closer to him.

Hai's soldiers drove a path through bloody carnage to 'close with and kill the enemy'.

From the relative safety of Vinh's hole in the ground, blast upon blast of artillery shells poured from the sky, blotting out the rain. Their heat fried his forehead. Dirt and shredded body excrements, the remains of his men, fell around. His bugle-calls had no effect and he watched his soldiers torn apart. Many blown to smithereens by artillery. Others mercifully shot by survivors among the Australians. Vinh's Heavy Weapons Platoon's mortars, recoilless rifles and heavy machine-guns had almost exhausted their ammunition. Porters brought more. Bugle calls and whistles to his officers gathered his men for a last desperate charge.

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Before his radio-man had been killed, Hai heard Vinh's voice calling his officers to encircle other pockets of enemy. Hai assumed this was a much larger Australian force than had been anticipated. All D445's troops were now engaged and Vinh sounded as though he had been calling in his reserves too.

Back in 1ATF lines artillery pieces ran hot. Gary mustered every soldier to help the artillery lines, carrying shells, carting away discarded empties. 'Delta' Company's desperate plight infected everyone. Major Harry Smith, commander of the besieged Company, had no immediate reserves. D Company defiantly withstood the full onslaught, for over two hours. Two Vietminh battalions, an attached VC company with heavy weapons, plus D445, all tried to annihilate him and his brave men.

D Company hung on, the Australian's artillery shredding battle formation after battle formation. Some soldiers were still able shoot their deadly and accurate small arms.

Vinh's troops staggered him with their bravery, surrounding the enemy on three sides, hugging close. Often Australian artillery whistled aimlessly over their heads. Vietminh mortars often fell among his own troops because they 'hugged' as close as possible. Vinh knew the enemy had suffered with half at least wiped out.

But still the Uc Da Loi fought on. He'd seen their tactical withdrawal and had been unable to interfere. These were excellent troops, superbly led and determined.

Hai questioned, "Why? Why are the enemy brave so far from home. How much more impressive would they be if fighting for their own land and families like us?"

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1ATF expended nearly 3,000 rounds. Rain and artillery shells fell in buckets. "The sights were drenched with water as the gunners fumbled in the rain." Darkness fell. "The gunners had to handle the ammunition, load and fire the guns in pitch darkness".

At 1800 hours, the Vietminh and D445 inexplicably broke contact. Three hours after his initial contact Hai needed to reform the shattered remnants of D445 to lead them in another assault. Exhausted, soaking wet and bleary-eyed from straining through the rain and gathering gloom, he managed to assemble and reform.

At 1815 Hai's troops intended to assault into the rear of the enemy. His face blackened by blast and dirt, his gut wrenched by what he'd seen and experienced, an apathetic Hai assumed this would be his last day on earth. His soldiers had been exemplary but had not succeeded. He gave his orders in the quiet of the false interval.

"My brothers. This is it. We have come this far. Now I ask for final commitment." With faith he did not believe himself, he said, "We will be victorious."

Hai's section of markers, white cloth bound around the packs on their backs, guided D445 across a well-established track that cut the plantation in two, almost north to south. Those of his Heavy Weapons Platoon, who had not been destroyed by artillery fire, gave him essential support. At 1835 hours, bugle calls rallied his men. They were more for morale effect than as signals. The attack into the rubber, east to west from his village, used its main road as his axis.

Vinh led the frontal assault to destroy the enemy main force.

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Vietminh in the decimated assault lines waited until a new line formed then joined as it too forged toward the Australians. Each human wave moved closer to an exhausted D Company. Vinh's troops were blasted, fell by the hundreds and reincarnated again, seemingly invincible, avalanching over the dead. Vinh lay on a pile of his own dead waiting for the next wave to attack. Instead a well-orchestrated artillery barrage sliced through his troops, once again annihilating them.

Half his unit across the road, a commotion to his rear slowed Hai. The message got to him quickly. Australian tanks and infantry had cut across the body of D445, effectively bulldozing a swathe through its heart.

A Company, in Armoured Personnel Carriers, had been carried into the fray. The heavy rain had proved a Godsend. It masked the noise of the approaching armoured vehicles. At the same time Major Ford marched back into battle with his thirty-two men. Both units had launched their surprise assault on Hai's exposed flank.

"They were a fucking pack of cards falling down. Once the APC's arrived it seemed to me it was the crucial moment in the battle. The bastards had had enough. Hundreds rose from the ground all around. Many had been lying there, just waiting for the next assault. They just got up and trotted away off to the north-east towards Nui Dat 2."

The communist troops fled the battlefield.

Recalled to Hanoi, Vinh explained to Giap's replacement what had happened. Then helped to plan a new major offensive.

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SEPTEMBER: aroma of roses...

GARY'S HEART SKIPPED A BEAT AND HE LOOKED AGAIN, THUYET

Thuyet, seated alone at a table on the other side of the room, appeared in the gaps between the couples on the floor. Then she'd disappear. Light dawned in his eyes and his heart trembled. He'd called. Eventually Thuyet agreed to meet in Vung Tau, but they had to be careful. Now he knew the reason. Each re-appearance he'd find her looking at him. Gary got up and manipulated his way across the crowded dance floor.

As he bowed to kiss her hand he noticed hers trembled too.

"Hello, Gary." The softness in her voice embraced him. Demure, her eyes dropped.

Words tumbled from a dry throat. "May I join you, Thuyet?"

"For a moment, Yes."

What did she mean? He sat in the chair she offered. *Don't make too much of this.*

Her glass was empty.

"Would you like a drink?" *Come on Gary. Wake up mate.* Thuyet nodded. "That's a Lemon, Lime and Bitters?"

She smiled her affirmation. He signalled a passing waiter.

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Before he knew it they were on the dance-floor. They moved slowly to the lullaby of the Vietnamese female singer. Gary felt at ease on the floor among the many dancers.

She swayed like a reed in a gentle breeze. Willowy and slightly taller than the average Vietnamese women he'd met, Thuyet rested her head comfortably on his shoulder.

Their hands hardly touched. Speech felt profane.

But the dance ended and Gary walked Thuyet back to her table.

"Leave me at my table for two dances." She said, "Then come back again."

Gary didn't question her. In the intervening dances he did his best not to look across. She accepted a dance with another Vietnamese but held her distance from the man. Once, she smiled at Gary over the man's shoulder.

A lump constricted in Gary's throat as he tapped a relentless unknown melody on the table waiting for that dance to end. Reunited with her he danced as in a dream. Gary didn't dare to hold her too tightly.

"Please escort me back to the table and don't wait for another dance to pass."

Next dance, Thuyet slipped a note into his pocket, making sure he knew she'd done it.

He left her at her table, alone. Gary went to the toilet.

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“One more dance. Leave half an hour before curfew.”

The note had an address and Gary knew the area.

Curfew would be at ten-thirty. Then White Mice reigned in the streets.

As Gary walked toward Thuyet a man selling roses passed. He bought a single rose and lay it on the table. Thuyet touched it, tenderly, but made no attempt to pick it up.

Gary touched her arm. “Last dance?” His voice trembled.

Thuyet took his hand and looked directly into his eyes. “Yes. Then wait outside. Leave after me.” Her eyes dropped and she stood up.

They moved onto the dance-floor. Gary felt her hot breath on his collar.

The open-air dance-floor, protected by the high walls of Cyrno’s, kept out the crisp night air. Outside, it stimulated him. “Overhead the moon is beaming...” Mario Lanza sang the love song in Gary’s head. Plumes from his breath dissipated. He rubbed his hands. Unconsciously he stuck them in his pocket, crushing her note as he did.

He took the note out and folded it carefully. Minutes passed. A Lambretta scooter cruised up. “Montez monsieur. Venez avec moi.”

Gary didn’t hesitate. Climbed on the back of the scooter and they putt-putted away.

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The wind in his face enlivened him. Whirling through the dying night-time traffic Gary noted that Khai's Uncle lived in this area, the Vietnamese part of Vung Tau. He vaguely recognized some of the streets from that previous time. He shuddered.

He remembered with clarity the 'Mexican Standoff', when Khai's Uncle had held his mind to ransom over two small glasses. That time of the pistol pointed at his head.

A nagging sensation stuck in his gut about warnings in taboo areas. Vietnamese quarters were 'out-of-bounds' unless you were accompanied by a 'friendly'.

The scooter stopped a street short. The darkness heightened Gary's sense of danger.

Duyen lifted her visor and looked directly at Gary. "Attendez ici pendant un moment." She pointed. "Chez moi cela." She moved closer to whisper, "Il y a une lumière devant mon appartement. Okay?" Then she closed her visor with, "A bientôt."

The Lambretta's rear lights dissolved into the distance. Gary turned around to check he wasn't being followed. He hunched to reduce his size. Small pebbles that scrunched under his feet with each step seemed to make a mockery out of his stealth.

He moved into the concrete guttering on the side of the road.

He took no chances, fingering his .45 and checking the safety was on. It fitted snugly in his hand and in a pocket, custom-made especially. Troy had warned Gary to "go nowhere in Vietnam" without the safety of a weapon, "cocked and on safe".

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Outside her house Gary knocked softly. Thuyet had been behind the door, waiting. It opened and he moved quickly inside. She made sure that no light shone on him. Thuyet held his hand as he entered the kitchen. Vietnamese spices perfumed the air.

“Il y a une lumiere devant.” Duyen also waited. A smile creased her face.

Thuyet appeared. “Duyen, my best friend, will protect us.”

Gary didn't question. He met Duyen's appraisal firmly. Unlike Thuyet there was no sense of the 'demure'. Duyen had clear eyes, and a once beautiful, now pock-marked face. Slightly older than Thuyet, she retained a sense of hardness. But, from the way she touched Thuyet, he could see Duyen was protective and cared very much for her.

Concern showed in Duyen's flushed face and the brief but staccato way that she spoke. Thuyet's voice, in contrast, remained soft. A lullaby of words flowed and Duyen shrugged her shoulders then hugged Thuyet as a loving sister. Duyen whispered and looked over Thuyet's shoulder at Gary. Duyen's tinkling laughter was almost smothered in the nape of Thuyet's neck.

Thuyet turned to Gary. “Come.” She held out her hand.

They picked their way through to a bedroom that led directly off the lounge cum-dining, cum-kitchen space. Kitchen smells followed Gary as a sweet ambience.

Thuyet placed her finger to her lips, “Les murs ont les oreilles.”

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Then she motioned Gary toward her bed. Unsure but grateful he sat on the edge.

Thuyet drifted into the adjoining bathroom and her quiet splashing recalled memories as Thuyet's mosquito net enclosed him in its cocoon of safety.

Naked, Gary stretched himself thankfully into the luxury of a clean, perfumed sheet.

The quiet allowed him to hear the beat of his heart settle to a comforting throb. The sound of his breath lulled into gentle waves on the seashore of his mind.

Eyes closed, his mind slowly numbed.

Suddenly startled, he woke.

Troy's warnings sounded. He got up. Placed his .45 under the pillow between the thin mattress and the slatted wood. 'Available'. Able to be reached but not under his head.

Reassured, he relaxed. A subdued lamp on the table beside Thuyet's bed revealed feminine mystique through the lace of the mosquito-net. Small 'things' caught his attention: the Virgin Mary in blue-and-white with her hands folded in prayer: then incense sticks in an ancestor shrine on top of the cupboard: clothes randomly placed on a chair and over an octagonal table.

The delicate 'aroma of roses,' scent of Thuyet, permeated the whole room. No doubt this was her sanctuary. Languorously, he stretched full length again then let go.

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Not knowing what to anticipate, he let the ambience of Thuyet's room embrace him.

The bathroom light went out and the door opened. In the bedroom-lamp's golden hue a vision appeared, misty on the other side of lace. Thuyet became his whole world.

The curved uplift of small breasts, the flat stomach and the sheen of her, stilled him.

The mosquito net lifted and Thuyet slid in beside him. Gary turned to receive her. Their eyes closed simultaneously. Both quietly savoured the moment. Bemused but unquestioning, Gary couldn't believe his 'un-need' of Thuyet. He'd anticipated lust but had lost the 'brute' of self-indulgence. Her breasts nestled his head. Her arms entwined him to her. Gary felt safe. Her sanctuary enfolded him.

As he kissed her skin he savoured her sea-salt taste on his tongue. No need to hurry.

His sensitive hands followed every curve of Thuyet's back and buttocks. Thuyet shuddered slightly and moaned. She became cool to his touch and satin-smooth under his sensuousness. Gary traced her, locking secret memories into his hands. He found no blemish. Her body scent mingled with his.

Thuyet's hands performed a parallel symphony. Exploring, remembering, she tracked down the centre of his back to the cleft and outside to the buttocks.

As her hands slid up the side of his waist Gary's skin tingled.

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They smiled into each other's faces, nose-to-nose and naked, sharing the same pillow. Before he could move down on her she held his head, looked into his eyes as if to discern then hungrily kissed Gary. Tongues wormed and twisted, exploring the inside of each mouth. Lips embraced tongue and tongues licked mouths. Heat entered their lovemaking then consumed them in vibrant flame. Panting, they parted, momentarily.

Lovingly he slowly tasted her nakedness.

She smiled then abandoned herself. A pulse beat strongly in the nape of her neck.

Gary lay on his back.

Thuyet raised herself questioningly onto her elbow to look into his face.

Gary twisted a little, held her with both hands by the waist and guided her until she sat on top of his thighs, her eyes fixed on his and with complete trust.

She sat upright, allowing him to show her. Gary offered his manhood into her hands.

Thuyet held his erection wonderingly, a smile then a question on her face.

"Stop". Gary lifted her tenderly and slowly stroked her apart to receive him.

He massaged, without urgency, until her fluids responded.

Thuyet moved in synchronicity with Gary, allowing the pads of his fingers to probe.

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She sighed as he touched her dark forest with his other hand, holding her off him.

With sensual fingers he delicately caressed the silky-softness of her inner thighs.

“Gently, very gently just lower yourself onto me. Take your time.”

Thuyet settled. Moved slowly in a rhythm as old as mankind.

Duyen knocked, discreetly. Breakfast arrived with a pot of steaming tea. Duyen had gone to some extra trouble. Normally the two girls would eat ‘sticky rice cake’ wrapped in a banana leaf. Simple and able to be eaten anywhere, Thuyet told him they’d often gone to work with the banana leaf in one hand and a cardboard cup of water. ‘Cardboard is easier to dispose of when in the Vietminh tunnel environment’.

Duyen had prepared a light meal of *pho* with bits of raw red meat in it. A special treat, she’d cooked this for Gary, with all his favourite, coriander sprigs.

“Duyen is spoiling you Gary.” Thuyet said with her tinkling laugh. “She has been preparing it for twenty-four hours. Duyen, you are a marvel. Look Gary, she has decorated the tray with scented petals. You are really getting the treatment.”

Gary gasped. “Twenty-four hours” That’s a meal fit for a king, Duyen.” Both girls chuckled. Gary and Thuyet were sitting up propped on pillows and the bolster. Duyen took a small space on the corner of the bed and served them.

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“Let me see if I can pick the spices.” Gary laughed. “Ginger and cinnamon, but ...? Like five spices but ...? No. I should know it but I can’t pick it, Duyen. What is it?”

Duyen looked flattered by Gary’s response. “It’s star anise, Gary. They are hiding under the lean meat, the onion rings and the noodles. And shallots, just for you.”

From garnish on the tray, Gary took some bean sprouts and a slice of lime, which he squeezed over the sprouts, nibbled testing their freshness then sprinkled into the bowl. Gary wanted to show his appreciation. He picked up the chopsticks, squared the ends then plunged them into the bottom of the steaming bowl. Lifting the noodles out of the soup he allowed the sauce, coriander and bean sprouts to slide into the liquid, laying the noodles over the top. Then he leaned forward to sniff the aromas.

The two girls clapped hands and their bell-like laughter gave Gary his reward. With the chopsticks in his right hand and the china soup spoon in his left he alternated between slurping the spicy noodles into his mouth and spooning the aromatic liquid after. He experienced a gourmet delight eating and watching the two girls enjoy also.

As the liquid disappeared, Duyen would pause in her own eating and pour more hot liquid over the noodles and meat adding fresh mint and coriander as she did.

Duyen seemed to know when to be with them and when not. Their day passed in simple pleasures and more lovemaking.

Gary and Thuyet felt safe.

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NOVEMBER: phantoms in the paddies...

THE MONSOONS WOULDN'T BE BACK UNTIL JUNE

The sun shone from a clear sky, cool and refreshing after the cloistered and cloying feeling of the 'Wet'. The ground quickly dried before Gary's eyes. His Land Rover thrilled him as it hurtled along, sides stripped, no doors and the windscreen down. The crisp morning air ruffled his hair: whistled past his ears: and made his eyes water. Like a chopper with the doors off. He breathed in deeply. It felt like air-conditioning. He'd lost his anxiety of ambush on the Vung Tau road and stopped at Hoa Long.

Pham's Regional Force Company manned the roadblock at the north end of Hoa Long hamlet. His compound featured the last habitation before Nui Dat 1. Regional Force Companies were being 'stiffened' by experienced commanders like Pham under the control of the newly appointed province chief, Lieutenant Colonel Le Duc Dat. Gary reminded Pham of their first meeting on the roof of the Majestic in Saigon.

Pleased to see him, Pham spoke mainly in French, "Until you settled around Nui Dat , Gary, VC controlled every village throughout Phouc Tuy. Baria's their headquarters. Things are changing, thanks to Uc Da Loi, but Hoa Long hamlet is still harassed by VC cadres though mainly at night. My soldiers live in the same villages and hamlets as the VC and are often related, as I am, to either the VC or the Vietminh."

Gary instantly thought of Thuyet but chose not to mention her name until Pham did.

"So what rewards do your troops get protecting the people from the VC, Dawai?"

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“Very little, mon ami. They are generally poorly paid and I hardly ever have the finances or the equipment they need. My men ask for little, hardly move outside posts like this.” Pham waved his hands. “Come I’ll show you around then you can see for yourself, Gary. They’d really appreciate any equipment and help you can spare”

Constructed as a hollow square, on each corner of the large compound a guard post had been made from four upright poles with a scraggly tin cover. Two straddled Highway 2 and had a fifty cal machine-gun pointing up the road toward IATF. In the shade of each guard post a soldier relaxed. One smoked alone quietly, another read a local paper while languishing in a slowly swinging hammock, the third played cards with his mates and the fourth one played happily with a bunch of kids.

The rest of the compound had the air of a poor man’s holiday camp. Soldiers lounged or slept in shade provided by threadbare cotton, plastic or rusting corrugated iron. The overall impression, of disintegration and general malaise, appalled Gary that these ‘frontline soldiers’ should be expected to exist in such a destitute environment. They lived with young families in squalid little mud huts with their six-foot-square ‘homes’ leaning dejectedly against the wall of the compound. The elite had canvas roofs.

The walls surrounding the compound were made of packed earth, which had turned to a concrete hardness by constant baking in the tropical sun. In the middle drooped a tired villa, once the pride of the French owner of the Nui Dat 1 rubber plantation.

The headquarters and office of Pham’s company-sized outfit and from it, Gary heard the tap-tap of random strokes from a worn-out mechanical typewriter that rattled.

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“Until the Uc Da Loi arrived to threaten the VC, we all lived in fear of attack by them. We were as badly off here as where I served last. The next province west is Rung Sat. That’s communist controlled. I worked in next Province over, Long An.”

“Pham? Are you saying Phouc Tuy has the same problems as Long An?”

“Not quite, Gary. Even though the American and Vietnamese forces outnumber the Viet Cong by five to one, the government hold on Long An is tenuous at best.” Pham pointed out the mountains to the west. “On the other side of those hills is Phouc Tuy’s western boundary, the swamps of Rung Sat. The communists have a free reign there. The VC also control Long An even with though their forces are smaller and despite financial support not experienced elsewhere in South Vietnam. Before you arrived, only a small strip between Baria and Vung Tau was considered secure. Phouc Tuy was on the brink. You Australians have already dramatically changed the balance.”

“And Long An?”

“ARVN and Regional Forces have started to gain a modicum of control during the day but the night and the countryside still belong to the VC. It’s almost impossible to get my soldiers to go outside their compound for any reason at all at night. The result is that Long An is currently one of the three least secure provinces in South Vietnam.”

“The other two being?”

“Rung Sat and a province on the southernmost tip of South Vietnam.”

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“How bad are they, Pham?”

“They’ve been strongholds for the Viet Cong for over two decades. Like here, the VC are indigenous to the province. But, the arrival of 1ATF’s base is a two-edged sword.”

Perplexed, Gary said, “Sorry, Pham. What do you mean?”

“Your forces and the Americans have totally destroyed the villages of Long Tan and Long Phouc. You’ve also significantly altered the ratios of people in the province through your resettlement program. Both cause resentment and hardship.”

Gary reddened. “These things are unavoidable. Pham. We have to break the hold the VC have on the people. To do that we have to separate the people from the VC. Until we arrived, your people had no choice but to provide the VC with food, supplies and often to become the unwilling source of recruitment. You must realize, Australians operate differently to the Americans. General Westmoreland’s credo is, ‘People, not terrain, are the objectives in this war’. That’s why the Americans emphasize their ‘body count’. They sit in their huge base areas and rely on intelligence and massive resources before they attack their targets. They like to get in, get the maximum ‘body count’ then get out quickly. We are here to stay and to finish the job we’ve started.”

“But your tactics split up families, Gary. They remove my people from traditional lands and cause much heartbreak. In a long war and you may be the losers, mon ami.”

“Surely, unless we end VC coercion and intimidation we lose anyway?”

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“It would be better not talk ‘winners or losers’, mon ami. Ho Chi Minh has warned us that this will be a long war. Americans think in the short term. We Vietnamese think in decades and centuries. It took a millennium to rid us of the Chinese.”

“Reading Ho Chi Minh is like reading Mao Tse Dung, Dawai.”

“Because Ho Chi Minh is Communist, through and through. We made a mistake in the North that I hope the South don’t make. He claimed to be a nationalist first but his Land Reform movement showed him in his true lights. Ho Chi Minh betrayed us.”

“Is that why you came South?”

“Yes. And many like me will make the South our last stand, with your helping hand.”

Pham offered Gary a chair and signalled to one of his soldiers to make a cup of tea.

They relaxed in the shade of the villa as Pham continued, “Ho Chi Minh also exhorts his troops about what a long war means. If the VC feel glad at small victories then they’ll feel sad at their losses. He says, ‘accept both with equanimity. The important thing is to be finally victorious.’ Only *Giai Phong*, or Liberation, can be the ultimate aim. He tells his people, ‘We can only be truly joyful when victory is ours’. Victory, he believes, means ‘One Vietnam’. That is the VC and Vietminh credo, Gary.”

“Our credo is, ‘separate the enemy from the people’. That was what was behind the destruction of Long Tan and Long Phouc. That’s behind Hoa Long’s creation.”

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“But aren’t you also interested in ‘body count’?”

“No. The difference is we seek the VC out wherever they are but deny our bases and your people to them. On American bases Vietnamese do the laundry and even things like cooking and feeding. For us that’s a serious breach of security. We also believe in constant patrolling around our bases. That’s how we triggered the Long Tan battle.”

“You may be right, Gary but you’ve initiated large population shifts and your constant H&I and air attacks cause heavy destruction of fields and property. This upsets the people. Then your vigorous patrols and well executed offensives make the VC angry.”

“But our aim, Pham, is eventually to destroy the VC. What’s the problem?”

“It’s happening too fast, mon ami. If you want the people’s support then you must deal with the impact you’re having. Currently, you’ve made a negative impact on the people. It’s early days. Either you win the people or in the long run you lose the war.”

“The Task Force realizes that. It’s addressing it with a ‘Hearts and Minds’ program. Major Donohue is the boss of that effort. Have you met him yet, Dawai?”

“I’ve seen him from a distance but he’s never called in here to speak to me or my soldiers. I can tell you, my friend, his ‘Hearts and Minds’ program is not working yet. The other problem, Gary, is that you’ve caused the VC to ‘lose face’ throughout this province.” Pham took the tea tray off the soldier. “That’s stirred up a hornet’s nest.”

He poured the steaming tea into small cups. “The VC were gradually winning.”

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Gary offered Pham a cigarette then carefully lit both. "Were or are, Pham?"

"Another year and all of Phouc Tuy would have been like Long An Province, heading fast toward communism like in the south of my country and in Tay Ninh up north."

Gary looked up as his cigarette smoke swirled. "And your second problem?"

"The propaganda war, my friend. You are losing it. For example, what were the VC and Vietminh casualties for the Long Tan Battle? Particularly, what were yours?"

"Well, it's no secret, Pham. At Long Tan on the 19th August, 6RAR found 245 communist dead 'by actual body count' and three prisoners. We believe that there were 500 wounded Viet Cong. But VC dead and wounded are rarely left behind."

Pham sipped his tea and said quietly, "According to the VC, Long Tan was a communist victory. Many heard or relayed to their friends the Radio Hanoi report. That said the Australian mercenaries 'proved as good as fresh targets for the South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces'. So, how many did you actually lose? Truly... because most of the people in Phouc Tuy don't believe your figures. The VC claim, pour example, that on 18th August they wiped out 700 mercenaries in Long Tan."

Gary almost choked on his cigarette and spilled his tea. "That's bloody ridiculous, Pham. Harry Smith's D Company only lost seventeen dead and twenty-one wounded. Shit, we'd be crucified back home if we sustained anything near the VC claim of casualties." He paused. "Christ, they claim half our Task Force has been killed."

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“Well, you need to know what you are up against. The VC claim to have killed 700 Australian soldiers, shot one jet plane down and destroyed thirty-two tanks.”

“Impossible.”

“For these victories at Long Tan, my friend Hai’s D445 unit and my brother Vinh’s 605 Battalion were awarded the Liberation Military Exploit Order, Third Class. The communists claim that theirs is the victory. Their propaganda’s better than yours”.

“That’s crazy, Pham. President Johnson awarded a Presidential Citation for Long Tan. That’s a rare event even among the Americans. Besides, we have too many newsmen around to conceal the truth. Australian medals are always on the mean side. Trung Thieu Harry Smith, the D Company commander, only received a Military Cross...”

Pham interrupted, “Are you saying only a Company battle was fought at Long Tan?”

Gary looked sharply at Pham. “That’s right, Dawai. Only a small company at that.”

Pham was appalled. “Only one company?” He shook his head, disbelievingly.

He stubbed out the butt of his cigarette, sipped his tea pensively and took his hat off. His jet-black hair thinned at the rear top of his head like on a Christian monk.

Gary hadn’t noticed before the half ear on the right side. It had been bitten off. Gary could almost make out the teeth marks.

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“Yes, Pham. The initial contact was Harry Smith’s D Company. They fought for over two hours before reinforcements arrived to relieve them. What’s in your question?”

“Again, the VC and Vietminh claim they ambushed at least one battalion and forced one other to come out with tanks. The result was that the communists caused heavy losses, shooting down a plane and destroying thirty-two tanks. Those figures were apparently released as fact by the BBC in England and by the French...”

Gary stirred in his chair, instantly alert. “The BBC...?”

“Most VC units have a transistor radio, Gary. They prefer to listen to BBC broadcasts because they believe that the BBC is the most neutral of all news broadcasts. The BBC said you’d lost 500 men and the French claimed the same.”

“Bloody French. What would they know, Pham? They are still shitty with the Yanks over Dien Bien Phu. It was probably the Commie newspaper, La Monde, anyway.”

“You aren’t getting the point, mon ami. The truth is what the people believe.”

“Well, their facts are just not true. The one thing that makes me shitty is their repetitious misrepresenting of the truth. The communists create lies and deceptions that people find easy to believe. I believe communism is an evil. They purposefully distort the truth and constantly re-write history to suit their political agenda.”

Pham had ordered a cup of tea. He poured as he spoke.

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“Gary, what you and I believe is irrelevant.” Pham smiled ruefully. “If what they claim remains unchallenged then the village people only have the communist version. What are you doing to counter-act the communist claims? That’s the key point.” He dropped his voice almost to a whisper. “As we speak, right now a group of two hundred VC are gathering down at Long Hai.”

Gary was aghast. “Say that again, Pham? What’s that about Long Hai?”

Pham changed the topic. “Let’s take a walk, Gary, mon ami.”

Gary smiled, “I’d love to, Dawai.” But persisted, “But what’s that about Long Hai?”

Pham guided Gary past soldiers playing with small bamboo sticks with coloured markings. He came upon a low barbed-wire entanglement about a foot off the ground. Underneath and in the centre lay a Vietnamese soldier, calling out. Pham motioned to another resting in the shade. The guard rose, picked up a bucket and threw its contents over the prone soldier. Gary had seen this form of harsh discipline before and knew not to interfere. The watching soldiers laughed, even though he was one of their own.

Pham led at a fast clip until safely back within the walls of the villa. “Two hundred VC are gathering in Long Hai. They are there once more intimidate the villagers and to spread false propaganda. But, mon ami, if I give you this information you must realise one of my best friends may be killed.”

“I promise we Aussies are staying until the job’s done. Can you give me a location?”

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“What are you saying? You want something in return for important intelligence?”

“My friend, Hai, is the Deputy Commander of D445, the unit you want to destroy and almost succeeded in destroying at Long Tan. Hai has been a friend for over a decade. I will be putting his life in jeopardy.”

Gary'd been leaning against the wall. He straightened up. “He's the enemy, Dawai.”

“Hai is also a friend. I want something for my troops in return for information. And I want guarantees of continued support from you. My family's safety is also at stake.”

Gary had never been able to get the relationships entirely clear among his South Vietnamese friends but somehow they all seemed to be related. Either that, or like the Red Beret *Dawai* commanding the ARVN soldiers at the southern end of Hoa Long, they shared similar histories and these formed a complex fabric of interconnectedness. The Red Beret, *Dawai Chuong*, had fought as a para with the French at Dien Bien Phu. He still wore his wings proudly. Now he commanded the Company-sized group responsible for the defence of the southern end of Hoa Long. He'd chosen to move to South Vietnam from the North at the same time as Pham and for the same reasons.

They both hated communism and what it had done to the North. But Gary could not deny the threat to his friend's family. Nor accept responsibility for the risks. He could however, minimize them. Gary was learning that Vietnamese life devolved around complex reciprocal relationships and mutual obligations. It confused those unaware of Vietnam's culture but it was the essence of social survival among the Vietnamese.

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In Vietnam, personal loyalties were given much more emphasis than institutional ones and were much more greatly valued. Gary felt comfortable in that environment. His friendships with those he called his 'mates' always placed much greater emphasis on personal loyalty anyway, sometimes at the expense of skills and abilities. The privileged Vietnamese could always be assured of a job commensurate with their social value. Vietnamese were imbued with a consciousness of prestige.

Pham and Choung were members of an elite group among whom a web of secrecy existed in which each had a vested interest in the other's survival. Gary had made friends with both and found a lot in common with them. Both men were sophisticates of the French tradition. Pham and Gary often reminisced about 'life at the Sorbonne'.

Troy once said, "Personal loyalty cannot be taught, Gary, it's an inbred trait. My best Vietnamese friend has it. He's demonstrated loyalty to me and to his family, often at great personal risk. One day I'd like you to meet him, Mate. Loyalty like his is worth more than gold. Expertness and capabilities are skills that can be trained into a person. Like shooting for example. I can train a person to be a sharpshooter but not to watch my back. For that, I prefer someone I can trust, thank you very much." Troy had shared his Sorbonne experience and aspects of his French culture with Gary. He too became frustrated with American anger at what they interpreted as 'duplicity', often charging Vietnamese with being traitors and liars. "Nothing is further from the truth."

Gary reassured Pham, "I can tell you, Mate, we Aussies will be here for a long time. I'll take you to see my new boss of the Task Force. Brigadier Jackson has gone home. His replacement is Brigadier Graham. He's a much different kettle of fish."

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Pham puzzled at 'kettle of fish' but got the sense of what Gary tried to say. "I once met Brigadier Jackson when he toured Hoa Long. I'm sad he's gone because he was a good man, Gary. He had been in Vietnam a long time, hadn't he?"

"Yes. But sometimes 'a new broom sweeps clean'. Graham is a new broom. He needs to be given a chance to sweep clean. No one knows what his response may be. Let's share with him what you have to say and see if we can make a trade-off."

"We too have a saying, Gary. 'Why barter for a buffalo that will one day die, when you can buy a block of land for your family for the next century'. I believe you're sincere when you say you'll stay for a long time. I also believe you're a loyal friend."

"We have another saying, Dawai. 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained.' Would you like to speak to my boss? You and he will get on well. He's a good man too."

"If that's what you recommend, Gary?"

"I am your Mate, Pham. We Australians take that word, Mate, very seriously."

"I trust you, Mate. "Pham paused. "Mate." He solemnly whispered. "I know you will help protect my family. But foreigners have ruled my country for a thousand years." He thanked Gary. "You will take me in your vehicle to Dat Do? I don't have one."

As they walked to the Land Rover, Pham put his arm around Gary's shoulders in a public show of friendship. Gary's heart warmed. He linked around Pham's waist.

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Gary then disengaged. He took the wheel from his driver, showed Pham into the front seat then sang, "We're off to see the Wizard..."

Pham called out... "Khai?" then spoke rapidly in Vietnamese to his sergeant.

The sun, climbing now almost overhead, warmed Gary's head and shoulders. As he drove away from Pham's compound the sparsity of their equipment and the paucity of the compound environment again struck him forcibly. He realised their vulnerability.

These people are very special, he thought. I can walk away. But this is their life.

As he drove to the Task Force, Gary reflected that Pham's men were prepared to give their lives, opposing communism. Gary, then and there, made a mental commitment, part of which was to upgrade their material well-being. He had a deep, burning admiration for Pham. Gary visualized his own future. He would try to return to Vietnam every two years. One year in Vietnam and two back in OZ then return. National Servicemen were committed to serve two years in total, one in Vietnam.

He had a little trouble at the Task Force checkpoint but the mention of Brigadier Graham's name seemed to satisfy the sentry. Gary drove direct to 1ATF Headquarters leaving Pham in the Land Rover with Gary's driver. He sought out his friend Don, now senior administrative officer in at 1ATF. As DAAG, he arranged an introduction.

He'd been Gary's Senior Subaltern at Kapooka in 1957. Tall and lanky he'd been called 'Chips Rafferty'. He'd also been on the 'Tiger Cages' course at Middle Head.

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Luckily, Brigadier Graham was alone in his office and Don took Gary straight in. Once Gary had explained his longstanding friendship with Dawai Pham, his mission and the intelligence Pham had to offer, the Brigadier welcomed Pham, receiving him into a briefing room. The two commanders shook hands. Don remained.

“I can’t promise you any equipment but I’m sure that between the two officers here they will be able to help you, I’m sure.” He winked at Don. “But I’m also told that you have some important information. Can you share this with me?”

Pham didn’t hesitate. “Mes excuses, mon Commandant.” He turned to Gary and started to speak in French, only to be interrupted by Brigadier Graham.

“Je parle bien le français. Si vous préférez parler en français, c’est bien, Pham.”

After a few exchanges, Brigadier Graham asked Pham if he preferred coffee or tea. Don exited briefly. French flowed easily between the three speakers. Gary left the two commanders together and joined Don to help with the coffee, feeling pleased with himself. Gary’d no idea the meeting would turn out so good. This meeting augured well for the future of Australian operations in Phouc Tuy.

Brigadier Graham created a favourable impression on Pham that could only reflect an increased confidentiality in 1ATF’s role in the province. Glad he’d followed his intuition Gary re-joined the conversation, which devolved into social chit-chat. Afterward, Gary took Pham to meet Roger, Gary’s new second-in-command. Tents were a priority. Roger had a source with the Americans.

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In his storeroom he held three Yank tents that had been 'written-off'.

They were loaded onto a trailer with an ecstatic Pham. Roger spoke to Pham and got from him a list of priorities.

Gary and Pham retired to Gary's Staff Club, where they enjoyed a whisky, then lunch. Bruce appeared, surprising Gary, who immediately stood, shook hands and introduced Bruce to Pham. The two men immediately warmed to each other. Bruce had lost his boyish zeal and sparkling youthful eyes. His hair still an unruly mop, he'd replaced his youthful exuberance with the seriousness of a seasoned combat Commander.

Bruce chortled. "Not still drinking rum I notice, Gary?"

He enjoyed telling the story of when Gary had got so drunk on rum he'd spewed everywhere and had sworn never to drink rum again. "I notice the bastard sticks to whisky now." Bruce quickly filled his glass, grabbed a chair and joined them.

They'd hardly met since Kapooka and Bruce laughingly reminded Gary of their vow.

"That was sure one hell of a night-turned-day, Bruce." Gary turned to Pham. "We made a 'blood-brother' vow that we would never forget each other, no matter what. The American Indians seal their vow by slashing their wrists and joining their blood."

"Boy, have we downed a few of those together, *Dawai*." Referring to his whisky. "It was a long time ago, mind you. I remember the day you left to go to Wacol, Gary.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

There we were on Wagga Wagga railway station saying goodbye and the blood on our wrists hardly dry." He reached forward and they joined wrists in their private ritual.

Bruce proceeded to entertain Dawai Pham with excerpts of their subaltern life at Kapooka. His first posting out of Duntroon, he and Gary formed an intense friendship with Don. The 'Tall One' appeared later that same afternoon to share a drink with his friends, correctly assuming they'd still be celebrating. Congratulations meant drinks all around, which they then skulled. The lowering sun shone directly through the marquee flaps, throwing merged shadows across the duckboard flooring.

Don confided, "I'm jealous of you three bastards. I've already asked the Brigadier for a Company. But Jackson left without granting me one. Now I have to wait to get Brigadier Graham in a good mood."

"How come?" Gary frowned. "What's the deal, Don?"

"I don't want to tell my sons..." He stopped and his eyes brightened. "By the way you know I've got four kids now?"

Gary nodded. Jaago appeared, stopped when he realised the 'Boss' was entertaining and that he was the only non-com in the room. Gary introduced him around.

Don said, "I've just received a letter that another one will arrive in a few weeks time."

"Congratulations, Mate. Let's baptize the poor little bastard in Whisky."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Gary ordered drinks all around. "Bottoms up. I suppose you'll be wanting another son, Don? After all you're nearly half-way to a rugby team. My Dad always said, 'Watch out for the tall skinny bastards, Dawai. They have the biggest dicks and are the horniest.'"

Gary ducked as Don pretended to clout him over the head.

They skulled another glass each.

"When my sons ask, 'What did you do in the War Daddy?' ...I don't want to tell them, Gary, that I was a paper-pusher in an office. Vietnam is the last chance I'll have to command a Company in battle because of my seniority. I've commanded a platoon in Korea. Now I want to finish my combat career as a Company Commander."

Gary, touched by Don's confession, added, "You know, Mate. You are a very good example of the military mind. We warriors have an innate, almost mystical sense of righteousness hard to replicate among civilians. It's called 'Honour'."

Bruce said, laughing, "here we go folks. Our armchair philosopher is at it again."

Gary, not to be put off, continued, "I mean it. Most folks would be happy they could see the war out in a safe environment and wouldn't understand what you've just said, Don. Our wives for one, think we're crazy when we talk as you just have."

Pham looked bemused.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

He could understand most of what they spoke in English but didn't have the vocabulary or the confidence to speak it.

'L'honneur des soldats cette mystique est merveilleuse. Aussi le camaradie.'

"That's because what we do has no comparable civilian job." Bruce became serious as Gary knew he would. "Death is the centrepoint, la raison d'être pour existence."

Don laughed, "Shit, Bruce. I never had any idea you were multilingual."

"Je parle français un peu, you illiterate slob of stringy bark."

Don stood up, towered over the sitting Bruce and from his great height, said, "Take that back you piece of rusting galvanised shit, and oil me with some whisky for your impudence." He picked up a newsheet and pretended to beat Bruce over the head.

His serious mien had Pham confused as did the idioms they used.

Gary saw his consternation. "Sin lôî, Dawai. This is how we Aussies have fun."

Pham relaxed. "C'est un bon idée, Gary. C'est bien pour voir l'esprit de corps."

"Also, Pham, dignité, fraternité, et la recognition de la rule de la caste d'officiers."

Pham agreed with Gary. Ca concept du role, n'est pas l'expérience du civile."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“Agreed.” Said Bruce. “L’arrogance des officiers et la servitude des soldats... c’est l’expérience du civile mais jamais entre l’Armie.”

“That’s enough you guys. I had to put up with all that French mumbo jumbo down at the headquarters. Someone will have to translate for me unless you want me to start up in Japanese.” Don grinned.

Gary stood up. “Arragato, Kanto.” He bowed deeply from the waist and as he straightened up he drew the corners of his eyes until they squinted and smiled. Withdrawing his upper lip so that it pushed his upper teeth into prominence and his lower lip disappeared into his mouth stretched over his lower teeth. Ach, so!”

Everyone, including Pham, burst into hysteria at his mimicking of the Japanese stereotype seen so often in the war magazines. The Australians all stood up, similarly pretending to be Japanese officers until the whole marquee was filled with staff, bowing fully at the waist to each other and repeating, “Ach, so! Ach, so! Ach, so!”

Gradually all slumped into their chairs exhausted.

“Beers all round, Garçon.” Gary could hardly contain his mirth.

“C’est merveilleux pour voir les officiers. C’était charmant, Mon Ami.”

“Actuellement, ici nous avons les deux, Pham. Les officiers sont soldats. Ici, mais pas la-bas, nous sommes soldats. La plupart des hommes est soldats, pas les officiers.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

“Come on you mob. Let me in on what you’re saying. I’m a guest here too, dammit.”

Don made his point jocularly but Gary got his message. “I was just explaining to Pham that we have a mixture of officers and soldiers here. He assumed that this was only an Officer’s Mess. I was just putting him right.”

“Okay. That’s all right then. Back to what we were saying. Bruce is right but left an important ingredient out. Death is a two-pronged sword. We are ‘Death-dealers’ as well as in servitude to the high probability of our own Death. Policemen for example, often walk the line of service, which may result in their death. But their purpose is to avoid death. They are not ‘Death-dealers. That is our primary function not theirs.”

Jaago arrived. Gary called him over. He introduced himself to Pham in fluent French.

Don exploded, “Oh! Fuck. Not another one, for Christ’s sake.”

“Jaago can be interpreter for Pham.” Gary looked at both. “Okay mes amis?” Jaago and Pham nodded. Don finally looked relieved.

Bruce said, impishly. “This talk’s lightweight after a hard day as a ‘Death-dealer.”

Don said, somberly, “The cult of Death to which we all subscribe is our ‘rites d’initiation’. I picked that expression up from Israel Regardie, the sociologist and anthropologist cum mystic. In his book he spoke about the soldier as both sacrificial priest and victim. I like his concepts and the idea we belong to a closed order.”

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Stunned, Gary had never heard Don so eloquent on the mysterious. The barman quickly appeared and refreshed their glasses and cans. Gary had switched to Bourbon and coke. Don stuck to his rum and coke whilst Pham drank straight Johnny Walker in an iced glass. Bruce settled for a can of Budweiser beer.

“The one saving grace among all this Death-talk, Don, is that any society can be moved by the eloquence of priest, prophet or king... and bloody politicians if you insist... but the courage of a warrior can move people much more.”

“Like the stories of Horatio at the bridge.” Don agreed. “It’s the stuff of myth that nations hold dearly to their heart and tell their children about. It’s the kind of Death, that if I was told I had to die, then a warrior’s Death is the one I’d prefer. Of course only if there were no other choice, but I think you’d agree, wouldn’t you?”

Hours later, Pham’s booty left only enough room in the vehicle for himself and the driver. Gary and his friends pumped Pham’s hands vigorously, their insides warmed.

As Dawai left, Gary said, “I’ll bring the rest to you tomorrow... about noon, *Dawai*.”

Bruce and Don stayed for dinner.

Next day at ‘siesta-time’, Pham’s soldiers slept as Gary and Jaago towed a trailer full of ‘goodies’ into Pham’s compound. He tried to ply Gary with whisky but Gary preferred a cup of green tea, explaining that last night’s re-union had lasted until morning. Pham grinned, led him to a chair in the shade in a silenced compound.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Jaago's pride and joy was the Garand rifle given to him by Troy. From the ground it reached only eight inches below Jaago's barely five-foot, wiry frame. Its sniper-scope, clamped along the stock, gave a times-ten magnification and added nearly one pound in extra weight to the nine pounds of his already heavy M1D rifle.

He'd dispensed with the full-length bayonet. He'd gladly exchanged it with a Yank in preference for a 'real' Bowie knife.

Pham, normally phlegmatic, looked askance as Jaago took up a squatting position immediately behind his Boss, Gary. He looked at Gary, puzzled.

"He's my 'Guardian spirit-man' and his only function is to guard me, especially to watch my back." Gary explained. "Anyone who asks, Dawai, do me a favour and just tell them that he is 'not of this world' and goes everywhere with me."

Pham smiled nervously. Jaago in return stared back. Pham's sergeant, Khai, sat up in a hammock strung between two almost dead trees and in the sun, his guitar across his lap. Pham exchanged some words and moved back beside his Aussie friend. Khai strung his guitar, tuned then played it. The effect was soporific.

Khai's haunting melody gently stroked Gary's body then seduced his mind. He closed his eyes. The music drifted him across dry paddy fields of waving, ripened rice, glinting yellow-gold in the sun. Smoke rose from the hearth in a hut fringed by banana trees. Children quietly played in the ochre dust whilst dogs scratched or lay on the ground watching. A buffalo snorted, corralled somewhere behind the banana trees.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

In the background Pham said something about 'home' and the burden of being a soldier then dying without the solace of a loved one. In Gary's imagination, a woman in a bright sarong appeared at the open doorway of a lean-to and smiled across the space to dividing them. The rich aroma of her spiced cooking caressed his nostrils.

Khai finished then reached out, holding his guitar extended toward Gary.

Pham spoke quietly, "He wants you to play something."

Gary couldn't play. He tried to make this understood. He wished he could. It almost depressed him having to refuse Khai.

Dappled by the sun, Khai looked downcast.

A soldier suddenly appeared, behind and to Gary's left. Jaago moved so fast that neither officer had time to remonstrate. Jaago had buried the muzzle of his huge rifle into the soldier's gut, finger curled around the trigger ready to blow him to eternity. The soldier's forward momentum curled him over the long wooden stock of Jaago's rifle as he stopped in mid-flight.

His eyes almost popped and his face blanched. He'd been casually carrying his rifle and it dropped to the earth with a clang causing other soldiers in the immediate vicinity to wake abruptly. They leapt to their feet.

Gary broke the impasse in a loud voice. "Let him go."

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Jaago's face broke into a snarl, not taking his eyes off the man.

Gary spoke more imperiously, "Let him go."

Reluctantly, Jaago pulled his rifle back and the man collapsed on the ground more frightened than hurt. Jaago kept his rifle trained on the soldier and quickly looked back at Gary as if for confirmation the man was not to be killed.

Gary turned to Pham. "This is a good indication, Dawai, of what I was saying before about Jaago and his role. He is my 'Spirit-Guardian'. Tell your soldiers it is okay now but that they should be careful when they approach me. Jaago normally shoots first."

A relieved Pham spoke quickly to his men and they relaxed but the wariness in their faces and the way they continued to look nervously at Jaago ensured they understood. Pham went to his soldier, picked up the man's dropped rifle and consoled him. When he joined his mates they, typically, broke into laughter at his and their unease.

As Pham joined him, Gary said, "*Sin loi, Dawai*. Sorry about that."

"No matter." Pham smiled, shrugged then added. "You must go to a meeting with the Province Chief, my father, next week, mon ami. Pick me up here in my compound at 1000 hours next Wednesday and we'll go to Dat Do where the celebration will be."

"I'd be delighted, Pham." Inwardly Gary smiled at Pham's Asian mannerism that 'assumed' compliance. Many Australian and American peers objected.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Driving out of the compound, he said. "I'll bring Sergeant Jaago along, Okay, Pham?"

Pham paused, frowned for a moment, grinned then nodded and waved as Gary left.

Out of earshot. "Christ, Boss. Did you see the look on that slope's face."

"He nearly fucking shit himself, Jaago." Tears rolled down both faces.

"The whole community'll get the message not to fuck with you, Sir. That's for sure."

They'd just passed the 1ATF check-point when they heard a machine-gun burst.

They drove to the Command Post where Roger hurried to meet them. "There's a big stink at Task Force, Skipper." He wore a huge smile. "John Donohue, in charge of the Hoa Long 'Hearts and Minds' thing, almost got himself killed a few minutes ago. You didn't see? Donohue was in the village when you left?"

Hoa Long had been inaugurated in 1962 as part of Diem's strategic hamlet program.

This involved the forced resettlement of villagers into defensible communities.

Based on British experience in Malaya the program faltered then failed because, often isolated from government, military and administrative control, they were easily made targets for a purposive communist terror campaign. Initially surrounded by a moat filled with sharpened bamboo panjis, isolated hamlets like Hoa Long became a focus for VC attacks and served only for the VC to make them shocking examples of terror.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Two miles south of the 1ATF Base, Hoa Long divided into four separate strategic hamlets over its long oval shape. One of them, Ap Tay, had been a pro-government village until burned to the ground by the VC in 1964.

Conscious of the importance of civil action in the pacification process, Brigadier Jackson, on meagre funding resources, early established a civil affairs team, commanded by Major Donohue and supported by project officers. The aim involved discussion of needs with village officials then individual units undertook these commitments when not on operations.

Major Donohue long argued, "If 1ATF removed the fear of communist reprisals then the villagers will support us." His civic action had made inroads by the end of 1966.

In early 1967, Gary's unit focussed on the construction of administrative facilities.

Donohue refused to accept Hoa Long's VC infrastructure supported VC hard core. 1ATF intelligence summaries confirmed that recruits for D445, for the locally recruited Chau Duc District Company and for the local VC guerrilla units were drawn largely from Hoa Long. Also, many VC supporters, 'resettled' from Long Tan and Long Phouc now lived in the abandoned Ap Tay hamlet.

Donohue distributed goodies to a group of children. When he'd finished, he then climbed into his vehicle putting his foot onto the dashboard to tighten his shoelaces. At that moment a machine-gun opened up from a hut on the schoolyard perimeter and the bullets passed between his legs. But Donohue remained anxious ...

The meeting room on the ground floor was full of Vietnamese by the time Gary, Jaago and Pham arrived in Dat Do. The Three Musketeers were the only 'white fellas'. Jaago had left his long blond hair in disarray. Gary had given him permission to grow a Ho Chi Minh-type beard and called him his 'wild man from Borneo'.

The two purposefully cultivated his feral look. Even Troy looked furtively at his mate. Everyone wore a weapon of some kind. The Vietnamese cast strange looks at Jaago. Gary explained to Troy the 'Spirit-Guardian' concept ... in a low voice.

Troy stifled a smirk. "Good security." Then ignored Jaago during the proceedings. To Gary he indicated, "Looks like my mate, Dat, is about to make some announcements. You know he's Pham's uncle, don't you, Gary?"

Gary almost choked.

Colonel Le Duc Dat made a welcome speech then the crowd moved upstairs. Fifty feet long and twenty foot wide, the room had trestle tables loaded with half-litre glasses half-filled with ice. Coloured flowers in large glass vases had been set.

Jaago stood, feral-style with one leg resting on the opposite thigh, behind Gary's chair and with his back to the wall. Everyone could see his Garand with its extra-large scope. He wore a faraway look that scanned then stripped people it rested on, constantly roving over the whole group. The sun streamed through a wall of glass.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

Jaago remained motionless, leaning with his back against a brick column in the middle. The room had floor-to-ceiling windows. He refused to be exposed to them.

The half-litre glasses were filled with Johnny Walker. Individual waiters treated each guest to a chicken, with roasted vegetables. Gary realised he and Troy were treated as VIP's. It was the height of respect to serve 'correctly cultural' meals to a visiting personage. From the animated conversation in the room and the glances cast openly at them, all were aware this was a special occasion to mark the deep friendship between Dat and Troy. Gary gathered the aim of the meeting had been kept a secret from Troy.

Dat then stood and asked Troy to remain seated whilst Gary and the others rose.

The Province Chief, and those present, proffered their glasses. Troy's response followed Dat's short speech and the assemblage greeted his shorter 'Thank You' speech, in Vietnamese, with unanimous clapping. Smiles and handshakes followed. Troy moved up and down the table. Then guests were plied with more whisky. An hour later Dat asked Troy to accompany him on an 'inspection' walk.

It was to be the immediate area of Dat Do. Jaago had eyes everywhere. As Jaago passed, people muttered, covertly looking at him. Troy walked in the centre with Dat as the escort, preceded by Rangers acting as security. The rest of the entourage flayed out either side and drifted like a ship's wake behind. The sun warmly greeted them.

Gary unclipped his .45 cal, checked it was loose then relaxed. Jaago was primed and ready. He took a strategic position immediately behind Troy and the Province Chief.

1966 - Seeds of Betrayal...

They'd proceeded fifty yards when a Lambretta cyclo roared toward the VIP party.

No one realised what was happening as it screeched to a stop and before the driver reached the first Ranger he'd spun the cyclo 180 degrees, rammed it into first gear and tried to roar away. A person in the back rolled out what looked like a potato sack.

As the cyclo gathered speed two shots rang out.

The man in the rear fell back, dead before he hit the road. The driver valiantly attempted to steer away from stalls ranging each side of the road but his head had been half removed by Jaago's bullet.

From a seeping sack they extricated Khai's chopped-off limbs.

The machete had done heinous work. Naked and bloody, Khai quivered, almost unrecognizable. Barely alive and still moaning, tourniquets had stopped his blood spurting from severed arteries.

Pham shot his sergeant. Then he wept.

SEVEN

REAPING

THE WHIRLWIND...

*Be sure
The thing you are living for
Is worth dying for...*

Charles Mayes

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

JANUARY: Nemesis ...

LUONG SCOWLED. A PRISONER SHIVERED FACE DOWN, VULNERABLE.

On the sixth month of his 1966-67 tour, Troy urged Gary to spend his five days R&R in My Tho, to return briefly to Troy and Gary's old stamping ground.

"Gary, you could be 'in at the kill'." His arrival would coincide with a victory. "A North Vietnamese *chieu hoi*..." Former VC fighter, "...now wants to lead my team to one of the major Vietminh cadre operators in My Tho Province. Come to the interrogation Centre with me, Gary.."

The Interrogation room was depressing. A heavy wooden prison door, sunk into the deep recess of shadow, cast a morbid single eye. From an arc-mesh frame its spotlight, in the centre of the roof, spewed a spider's-web of shadows that scarred the inside walls. Two security guards protected its dark history. Vietnamese Ranger veterans, they'd say nothing. They held loaded and cocked weapons 'at the ready'.

The room had last housed French interrogators. Nothing else had changed, only the racial features of the torturers altered, and their objectives from the torture. A two-foot high concrete block dominated inside. Screwed into the roof, the hook hung directly over its centre, strong enough to winch up an outstretched body.

The block, wide enough to cramp it into a foetal form, had small splashes of blood congealed on it. In one corner a tap dripped relentlessly over a stainless steel bucket.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary looked around. *Fuck. No other amenities.*

The door opened, complaining on rusty hinges. Laughing and joking, three ARVN exploded into the room. "Five thousand piastres we get this mongrel to talk."

Number four arrived a few minutes later. Dat was the hungry fox. Calm and poised, his frame intimidated. Knotted cords for muscles hung on a lean chassis. Deep set eyes glared from a forehead that could never forget. He'd slicked his hair back.

Luong spoke first. "Today we'll squeeze the fucking bastard's balls dry."

"So?... What do you have for us today?" Troy's frame dominated.

His clothes gave Gary the impression Troy had just stepped off a fashion-walk. He ruffled Luong like a father his son. Luong feigned discomfort. Shook free.

"When do you relax ... huh, Dat?" Concern etched Troy's voice.

"When I catch my hare... le batard." Dat vomited the word ... "Nguyen."

"Nuygen?" Troy's face screwed up. "You mean, King of the shit-heap."

"Some Vietminh are shit." Dat's hate sluiced anger. "Nguyen is a nom de plume."

An armed soldier knocked loudly on the slightly open door. The sound echoed until all were silent. Dat quickly disappeared then re-appeared to whisper in Troy's ear.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Telepathic eyes faxed a secret. Dat ordered, "Thieu, take over."

Gary followed his mate. Across the square, in the administration centre, an office phone disappeared into Troy's huge paw. He leaned over a desk. "Troy..." un-words tumbled. "Uh huh! ... Uh huh!... Yup!"... Silence... "Where?... When?" Then sentences jerked out. "Good... delay everything until I get there... I don't give a cocks arse if the shithead bleeds to death. Hold him ... Here's Dat." Dat also gave staccato answers. Troy again. "Give me priority on this one ... Just hold the bastard"

Back in the interrogation chamber, Luong and Thieu went into an arcane huddle. They exchanged experiences in sentences mixed with strange lilted words that were a melisma. The room hushed, stilled, then went silent. Duc, the other member, focussed on the light overhead. Pretended to ignore the two. Neither Luong nor Thieu noticed.

"Troy is master." Luong loved the man. "He always gets results. We are here to preserve the integrity of Troy's team. To get information for him that is accurate."

This was a seriously committed Luong. "We must not fail him again."

Both nodded their agreement.

"We will stay here until the task is completed, Luong. The politicians have betrayed our people in South Vietnam. We must win the ground war." Thieu was bitter. "They will not listen to President Diem. He's our best bet. He's opposed to a direct takeover of our affairs by the Americans."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Luong's eyeballs silted over. "Yesterday I saw the trademarks of Nuygen, the prick we are chasing. A missing right hand means the man's alive. Dead, it's a sliced-off dick in the mouth. Balls too. He uses Laos and Cambodge for his arms and drugs. Saigon and other major cities he considers his personal pad for prostitution and gambling. But My Tho is once again Troy's turf. We must not fail Troy."

The two confirmed their cabal with a special handshake. In the office across the square, Troy galvanised. Threw the phone to its cradle. It missed. C-r-a-c-k-e-d. Then s-n-a-p-p-e-d. Louder. Voices froze. The phone swung a violent pendulum until it slowed. Its back broke. Joined by its inner spinal cord, it screeched a final dirge. Then the phone clicked off... went silent.

Administrative office staff sucked-in their breath. Transfixed by oscillating plastic. Ancient ghosts in the room trembled. Troy's fast footfalls echoed down the passage. Finally the broken phone stopped swinging and office puppets jerked back into life.

"Dat... My men?" Troy's commands were the rat-at-tat of a machine-gun. "Get all my men. We'll all meet at Madam Nhu's." Huge fingers stubbed the air. "and Dat... Fuck the White Mice off our turf... No screw-ups this time."

"Come..." Troy flew down the passage. Gary barely made it out the door. Jeep doors flew open. Gary's heart lurched. He hung on as Troy gunned the accelerator.

Minutes later, they screeched to a shuddering halt. Troy sprung out. Gary smelt burning rubber as he raced to keep up. Two of Dat's ex-Paras were waiting.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

One acted as security. The other acted as a shock-trooper. Troy initially ignored the injured man. Troy's size dwarfed everyone. No one dared intrude whilst Troy devoured information. The shock-trooper pointed... nodded toward the doors. Kept a dutiful distance. A badly wounded man lay on an ambulance stretcher.

Troy patted the injured man's belly. "So, you fucking bastard," Troy's words ticked away the seconds of the man's life. Troy *knew* him. "We've finally got you again."

The Vietnamese prisoner coughed an expletive at Troy. Blood oozed everywhere.

"Good, those gut-wounds will protect you" Troy had already turned his back He spoke to the paramedic. "Will the bastard survive?"

"Only if we get to hospital quickly. He's haemorrhaging." The paramedic hardly glanced at his patient. "Don't know the internal damage. Won't know until he's in emergency. Limited facilities to keep him alive until we know the damage."

Troy's voice was authoritative. To the paramedic, "Take this piece of shit away". To the security ex-Para, "Go with the bastard. One of my men will relieve you."

To the injured man he spoke in fluent Vietnamese, "*Sin Loi...* as for you...you bleeding piece of excrement... see you later, if you survive ... If not, see you in Hell." More forcefully, "Get this bastard out of my sight... Now."

Gary waited, puzzled. "No questions?"

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Troy just shrugged. "When we're ready, he'll tell us. We each have our own style. Nuygen personally raped a friend of Dat's. She fought in the Northern Resistance. That bastard thinks he is the new mafioso. Come..." Troy was again unquestionable.

Gary covered, a pace behind. Knowing Dat was backup made both feel secure.

Dat fitted a silencer and hissed. "My widow-maker." A well-tuned, well-oiled and efficient killing-machine, poised for the scent of danger.

His nostrils flared. Tonight he was a Ninja in a safari suit. Troy and Gary smiled.

Three of them stormed through the double bar door into Nhu's restaurant-bar, two in front, one behind. It smacked shut. Troy made straight for the far end bar.

Gary felt adrenaline rush into his empty headspace. His irises shrunk. Ice formed inside his hollowed out skull. He touched his forehead and confirmed its coolness. Cigarette smoke assaulted his eyes. Gary took a long, slow, d-e-e-p breath.

It activated his para-sympathetic nervous system, and made his vague nerve dominant. Everything slowed. Chi-energy? Balance?...both confirmed. Body... Brain... All OK. ...Electricity zapped along neuronal circuits.

Pissed off that their personal sanctuary had been invaded, the patrons recognised Dat.

"Whisky" Troy made it a pejorative.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Patrons started to leave, furtively. Troy sensed two men near Gary. Guards, posted each side of a curtained doorway. Closed. Dat sidled closer, made himself almost invisible. He offered an inconspicuous target. Dat was five-foot of short-fused nitroglycerine... ready ... primed.

Troy tensed, and the nape of his neck went cold. His eyes became hooded. The guards, mesmerized by them, made their fatal error. They shifted their gaze and watched as the whisky glass rose. On cue, an explosion rattled the building. Yells and angry expletives erupted on both sides of the door.

Chaos burst in echoed pulses from the other side. Discharged from Troy's snakelike eyes, the two guards both reached for hidden guns. Dat's pistol sputtered twice. Both men bowed at the waist, slid forward then pitched to the floor. Troy wrenched the curtain from the door then kicked the door in.

For Gary, time played it forward in slow motion. No emotional crap clogged his arteries. A special type of remembering suborned itself in survival mechanisms and honed reflex. Half a step behind Troy, he felt rather than saw Dat behind them protecting their backs. Gary watched past Troy's huge shoulders.

The man behind the door was stunned as the door's panels disintegrated. Troy bulldozed past him. Caught unawares the man was putty in Gary's hands. The next man inside reached for his knife. *They never learn*, Gary thought as his solar plexus exploded its Chi. His man was a in slow motion ballet. Gary was the 'ballet de main'. Inside, Dat, in a black suit, was some man's Nemesis.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary's man lunged, then shrieked as his arm broke. The sharp c-r-a-c-k ricocheted. Shards tore through taut skin, stark white. At first the blood didn't flow. The idiot's knife arm hung limp. His mouth locked in rictus. Then blood jetted in regular spurts across the room. Gary attempted to attach his handcuffs on the good arm.

Another man lunged at Troy. Gary hurled his man between them. The broken-armed one screamed a curse. A sharp c-l-i-n-k as knife struck bone. Troy whirled. The knife was reversed, thudded into his attacker. Gary dragged his man up. Smacked his hysteria into silence. The knife had glanced off the man's bony buttock. Gary quickly and efficiently checked. Lots of blood. No permanent damage.

The Team threw the screen of their bodies around as Gary applied a tourniquet.

Troy's men had caused a minor earthquake, when their jeep purposefully smashed through the back door. Troy, Dat and Gary blocked any escape.

Two Vietnamese drew knives. Stupid. Two soft, sharp c-r-a-c-k-s were followed by two softer c-r-u-m-p-s. The two men cradled bloodied knees as they writhed in agony. Permanent limps would remind them. The Team methodically handcuffed the rest.

The agonized ones they left still screaming. The para-medics could fix them.

Dat held a bulky Vietnamese. He spat, "Nguyen." The man's arm threatened to break.

Troy, Gary and Dat grinned the victor's smirk.

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Troy spewed orders. "I'll take my car ... Gary, prenez votre homme ... drag him with you. We need him. Dat ... take Nguyen ... no stopping ... straight to the interrogation room ... I'll see you there." This cohort had already been dubbed 'The Three Musketeers'. "Mes amis ... clean up this mess ... bring the jeep back to the station too. When you've finished, Luong, go relieve security at the hospital 'till I get there ... Thieu, remain with Son ... Lam ... Take Bui to sniff around with you ... Thieu, you are at the helm here... Attend les rites finales des imbéciles ... Va-t'en, vite."

Troy lurched into his car and sped into the night.

Minutes later Dat followed with typical Asian disregard for cars or pedestrians.

Gary held on. His man's good arm handcuffed to the handle over the rear door, the man whimpered around each corner. Gary found out his name was Thiem. Nguyen had each hand handcuffed around the each opposite staunchion.

He thought, 'Thank God the traffic is not thick like peak hour over the Harbour Bridge.' Gary only relaxed when finally they reached the parking lot.

Dat bounded out before the vehicle stopped. Unbolted the rear door. He unclasped the manacled Nguyen with "Out, cochons." twisting him into a painful headlock. Gary followed suit, an arm-lock on the tournique'd broken arm and his fingers clutched under the ridge of the man's eye sockets. It forced the man to squint.

Gary had complete control. His man whimpered, ashen-faced.

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Dat darted a laudatory grimace. "From here on, everything that happens in the Maiden remains a secret, Gary. Got it?"

Gary nodded and wondered.

"Dat ... how much time do you need in the Maiden?" Troy caught up with them.

"Thirty minutes, at the most forty with this batard." Troy's man didn't flinch.

"I'll take your man, Gary." The man heard, anticipated, and sobbed louder. "I want you to watch how Dat deals with this creep." He pointed to Nguyen. "And for God's sake make sure Dat keeps this bastard alive this time." Gary was sure the rest was for the benefit of the prisoners. "Dat was tortured by the French when he was a kid. The French practiced their fiendish monkey tricks on him long before Dien Bien Phu. They tortured his wife to death. The rest he learned during the Land Reforms. Dat's record for keeping people alive isn't good. I want Nguyen alive. See to it, Mate."

Gary sensed his man wilt. Then the man jerked, stiffened as though electrocuted and grunted in intense pain. Troy had seized him. Gary completely let go. Troy then marched the man off to the cubicle that faced the Maiden.

Dat's ramrod back gave no hint.

Gary steeled himself. *This is going to be no picnic*, he thought. His mouth tightened.

His palms dried up and the taste buds in his mouth turned sour.

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Gary knew these signs well. Triggered off by memories of his own interrogations. He'd also seen South Vietnamese interrogators in action. They were sadists even to their own troops. Gary could hardly believe the things they did for minor breaches.

What would happen when they got to their real enemy?

Inwardly Gary shuddered and the hairs on the back of his scalp tingled. He shook his head to dismiss the images of twisted and broken bodies that littered his mind. Images that persistently intruded: the smells of urine, defecation and scorched flesh: and the shrieks that burst into nightmares, which he told no-one about. Gary pressed his index fingers into the side of each temple. He entered the Maiden first.

The Maiden's incumbent but invisible ghosts seemed to take shape in the cigarette smoke that vaporously trailed in. Gary's hackles rose. Silent shadows flitted across walls used to man's devilry to man.

At the sight of Dat they leapt back, scalded. He whispered to his prisoner.

Eventually, he pulled a sock from his pocket.

"Gary. Fill this with sand from the urn in the office and heat it in the electric oven."

Gary returned fifteen minutes later. He hadn't seen the buckles before. Nguyen, face down on his knees on top of the block, had his own underpants shoved in his mouth. Straps secured his hands to 'O' rings at the top and each side of the block.

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Nguyen's jumper cushioned his head. No chance would his head bang. Suspended by a wide strap around his midriff the now naked man dangled from a chain that swung from a hook in the roof. Shoes off, his feet spread-eagled. Strapped into place in the 'O' rings they dangled over the bottom edge of the slab.

The man's shirt and trousers cushioned his insteps so that they wouldn't bruise.

Gary had seen and used 'the hot sock' only once before. Simple but effective.

But the way the man's body was suspended? He hoped Dat wasn't an arse bandit. As he watched, hot air rose further to sear the wetness from his mouth. His jaw twitched.

Dat was methodical. First he beat the centre of the soles of the man's foot. Ten rhythmic smacks, one foot at a time. After each ten t-h-w-a-c-k-s...which sounded more like a t-h-r-u-m-p, a question. Quiet... almost inaudible. The man obviously heard each question because he would shake his head vigorously.

It took five minutes before a significant change occurred in the man's response.

The man was tough, but change he did. It had taken just ten minutes. His whole body started to shudder from each foot to the top of his balding head.

Gary knew the break point had been reached when Nguyen anticipated each regular and methodical thrump... thrump....thrump. The secret was in Dat's remorseless rhythm. A dramatic change occurred when Dat switched his focus to the man's balls.

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At that point Gary blanched. He remembered... the French were bastards but they had trained their enemy well.

Pain shot into his groin on remembering. The jolt from the smack on each ball left the mind quivering in the same way. His balls remembered. Gary broke into a sweat as the whole of his crutch started to ache.

Some experiences never leave you.

Dat didn't have to use any force.

Just kept up the rhythmic pendulum of the heated, weighted sock.

At least here in the Maiden there was reason and cause to it. Inhuman as this was, Gary felt it was justified. Vietminh were holding hundreds of innocent people to ransom. People like this arsehole, Ngyuen, affected thousands in their tangled web...infected millions with their incipient poisons of drugs ...'high crime' and weapons. Such people showed no mercy in their own dealings nor in the prostitution of young bodies, male and female.

Gary still found it hard to shake his personal pain. He focussed on the body-liquids that Nguyen had sweated onto the concrete platform. *But ...No blood?*

Nguyen's underdaks prevented the man from biting his tongue. *Probably some internal bruising but bugger-all external.*

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It took just twenty minutes. Just a marked reddening, hidden when he dressed.

But Nguyen's mind had been raped forever.

First released from the harness attached to the hook in the roof, Nguyen's body collapsed then convulsed in quavered, staccato movements. A symphonic pain that started with variations on a theme then reached a crescendo that wracked his body.

Gary removed Nguyen's underdaks before the man could choke on the slimy mucus that congealed in the mouth following intense pain. Gary knew that from experience. The Maiden reeked of fear, pain and body waste 'in extremis'. He wanted to retch.

Nguyen answered Dat's questions in a whisper, shamed, covered in his own urine and shit. His head remained bowed and shoulders stooped. Once its victim, Dat was unmerciful ... knew the man's pain... and its limits.

Hosed clean with icy cold water, Nguyen's clothes were used roughly to dry him. Gary and Dat helped dress the rag doll. It shivered uncontrollably, stumbled, sagged, cowered and fumbled, but eventually dressed. The wet clothes clung, sharpening each contour. Led, mostly carried out into the hall, the soggy bundle was handed over to the waiting Team. It would take him several weeks before he'd stand on his own feet.

Inside the Maiden, Dat had been blunt as usual. "Gary, remember this. Most torture is crass. They try to break the body to reach the mind. They don't know ... Mind is all."

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He paused, "The Viets taught me it's the person's mind they're after. The aim is to expose the substance of Self. Then they can remould it. Deflowering some takes longer, but everyone has a break point. Xong, knows he'll never be the same again."

"Xong? I thought his name was Nguyen?"

Dat's face changed. He snarled, "I knew that piece of shit in North Vietnam."

"Well I'll be fucked. So this was personal, Dat?"

"Yes. He gave my brother's daughter hell until she fled home. He raped her best friend." Then, turning aside, "Troy... Here's your man... ask... he'll tell you all."

Outside, only a thin line of dribble issued from Xong's mouth to remind Gary. As the 'broken one' emerged the 'broken-armed one' went hysterical. Dat helped Gary peel his man off the reinforced-glass front where he had glued himself to its inside wall. Pressure on a broken arm, a few quiet words, "You and your garbage will be sent to meet my Saigon friends." Again, a quickly broken mind and no further time wasted.

Troy felt good, "So, your name is Xong?". He checked Xong's handcuffs were tight. "I take great pleasure in informing you that the Saigon crew will probably arrange to send you back to North Vietnam when they've finished. You and Thiem will travel together. Don't fuck around with the Saigon Team. They love to toy with bastards like you. They say we're too soft. See you in Hell." Troy turned away, joined his remaining Team then left immediately Xong was handed over.

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They made a quick sortie to the hospital where Troy again took over the questions. Dat only had to press down on Thiem's injuries once. Troy's great claw stifled any outcry. Gary held Thiem's legs down in a vice. The Team covered the door.

Outside, Dat grabbed Xong, alias Nguyen. "You remember Doan, Arsole?" He smiled as Xong blanched. "Yes, I see you do. He's in Saigon's Special Police. I've phoned him. He's looking forward to seeing you. I'm sure he'll know what to do." Dat grinned a 'Grim Reaper' smile then turned to Gary. Confidentially took him aside. "You remember meeting Mai, a friend of Thuyet?"

Dat waited for Gary to nod. "Doan is Mai's big brother. You see that horrible bastard, Thiem?" Dat waited for Gary to nod again. "He's known as Face. He is Xoan's best mate and tortured Mai to death. He'll rue the day he ever hurt any of my family."

It was all over.

Troy announced, "Dat... Gary... alors... today's been a success mes amis... allons-y... let's go fuck le Diable... Xong is as good as dead. Long live the Queen."

Troy's victory continued to dance somberly in his eyes for some time.

Gary felt confused... even a little sick.

Dat looked as though a dread weight had been lifted.

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FEBRUARY: 'moturi es te salutant'...

“DRINKS ALL AROUND.” DON’S FACE WREATHED INTO A SMILE.

“It’s my birthday in a couple of days time: my wife loves me and is pregnant: today Brigadier Graham has let me join 5RAR for the last part of my tour of Vietnam: and there’s a 5RAR operation planned, the briefing for which is the day after tomorrow.”

Don hardly paused for a breath as his words tumbled out. His face said it all, with his flushed cheeks, the twitching nostrils of his large nose and soft, grey eyes sparkling with new life. Gary hadn’t seen him like this since their Kapooka days together. Although a good staff officer, Don literally glowed as a combat-troop commander. Office work, essential though it was, had ‘felt like drudgery’ to him.

Don grabbed the first drink off the tray then settled his tall, gangly frame into one of the small, folding, metal-framed chairs. It made him look as though his knees just fitted under his ears. His enthusiasm caught on and buoyed-up everyone in the room. He waited until everyone else had their drink then raised his can of Budweiser.

“To my first combat role in Vietnam, my wife and kids and my first mission.”

“To Don...” resonated through the marquee. Everyone took a large swig.

Gary added, “To your new kid, Mate.” Already popular, Don’s spontaneity and newfound excitement made everyone automatically warm toward him.

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Rudjinczky needed no second call. He grabbed his guitar and immediately struck up the 'Happy Birthday' refrain. Then started, 'For he's a jolly good fellow...'

The revelry died down as people got down to some serious drinking.

"What are you doing tonight, Don? You don't have to go straight back to your lines?"

Gary, Don and Roger had closeted themselves in the corner closest to the bar.

"What've you got in mind?"

"It's still daylight, Don. This is your last chance to celebrate your birthday before you get locked into being an Infantry Company Commander. Once you get into John Warr's paws you'll get bugger-all rest, that's for sure. What's stopping me taking you to Vunggas tonight and bringing you back in the morning, ASAP?"

"But I..."

"Your diggers don't want you to tuck them in. They too are counting the days, Mate. They've been here twelve months almost. Quite long enough to know what the score is. They sure as fuck don't need you to mother-coddle them. Just tell your 2i/c to take over and I'll have you back first thing in the morning before anyone misses you."

"But I..." Gary and Roger saw Don weaken and pressed home their advantage. Gary had briefed Roger about staying at Cyrno's the following night.

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“The skipper’s right, Boss.” Roger put in. “You’ll have tucker with the men, then what? Wait to tuck your diggers into bed then kiss the fuckers ‘Bye... Byes?’.” He laughed at the thought. “Not on your Ned Kelly, Boss. Have a fucking birthday. You’ll have plenty of time to get serious when you come back in the morning.” Roger stood up. “Jinx...” As the driver acknowledged him, “Get your arse over here, Mate. The Skipper’s off to Vunggas, tonight and staying tomorrow night.”

Don lifted his arms in submission. “Morituri es te salutant.”

“Which, translated means, ‘We who are about to die salute you’. That’s the chant of the gladiators to Caesar when they entered the Coliseum” Gary said

“You’re right, Gary.” Don laughed. “I use it when all other options have run out.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘Yes’ then, Don. Roger. You’re Boss again for two nights. Give our Birthday Boy a new toothbrush, razor, toothpaste and a cake-a-soap. Add a towel and throw it all in the back of Jinx’s Land Rover.” To Don. “Have a piss, Mate. It’ll be the last one you’ll have before Cat Lo. We’ll stop there for a Birthday Call, on the way to Vunggas. Don’t forget to ‘Test-Fire’ your weapon as soon as you’ve had your pee.”

Jinx had already left, glad for another stopover in Vunggas to see his ‘Vietnam wife’. Jaago, his sixth sense working fine, grabbed his Garand and walked to the ‘Test-Fire’ zone just outside. Then Jinx’s vehicle arrived in a rush of dust and Jaago took his self-appointed position on the rear seat. As each person fired their rounds into the firing trench he watched closely and satisfied himself that all safety-catches were ‘ON’.

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Jaago then checked the .50 cal, cocking it finally and setting its safety mechanism.

Gary's final words before they left were, "All aboard those who are getting aboard."

Cat Lo welcomed them with open arms. They'd formed a good relationship together with Gary's group. Don was impressed when he found out that 'Captain' Gary had more respect and courtesy than a Major or even a Colonel. The assumption that all Captains were ships' Captains worked to Gary's advantage. It gave him the equivalent of an Honour-Guard salute each time he entered or left the Cat Lo US Coastguard Base. The officers primed them both with fine whisky once it became known it was Don's birthday and he had a 'kid on the way' etcetera... etcetera. The Cat Lo officers didn't want them to leave ...but, based on prior experience, Gary knew they'd never get Don back in time and that Don and he would be in danger of being drunk for a week. Roger had phoned Troy to say Gary'd chosen to meet at Cyrno's. Troy treated the four 'renegades' to a sumptuous meal. By the end of it they were practically sober.

Gary had wrongly anticipated Don might like some 'companionship' for the night. A regular customer for drinks with Mamasan, Gary set Don up with a beautiful woman.

Don explained, "No way, Mate. I'll be home in six weeks and the last thing I want to do is bugger-up my celibate record. I love my wife and kids and there's no way. Thanks for the thought and don't let me spoil your fun. I'll get a taxi to 1ALSG ..."

"No you fuckin' well won't." It was Troy. "I'll take you back to my place and get you back to Nui Dat in the morning. I won't take 'No' for an answer either, Don."

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Gary tried to protest but Don was adamant. Impressed with Don's integrity Troy offered to drive Don back to 1ATF early next morning then to meet Gary for a day at Back Beach. Jinx was happy. It gave him two days in Vunggas with his girl friend.

Don explained the 'Operation' his battalion was doing was a 'Cordon and Search'. "The village name is a deep secret until the briefing tomorrow, but I'd appreciate some extra troops. I checked today and I've barely got fifty men for the cordon."

"How's about a platoon of my diggers, Don? I'll send along one of the new Platoon Commanders. It'll be good training for them."

"That'd be fantastic, Gary. A platoon'll be fine."

"Just remember, Mate. My platoons have many more soldiers than yours."

Troy and Don left for Cat Lo an hour later. Don was contented he'd at least celebrated his birthday, even though celebrated two nights before. Gary had even been able to organise a birthday cake covered with small candles.

The very last thing Gary said to Don, was... "Up the Old Red Rooster." The two had smacked their hands together, gripped in a handshake of friendship, then Don left.

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“Mamasan, can I stay here for the night, please?”

On the night of 12th February, the curfew had already started.

Mamasan grinned through her betel nut stained teeth. “You want girl, Dawai?”

“No, Mamasan.” Gary shrugged. “No girl tonight. Just a bed.”

“Okay, but you *Uc Da Loi* crazy, you no want girl. I have plenny good girl for you. Clean girl ...speshul for you, Dawai. Gorrin clean sheet, juss for you.”

Gary followed her into the brothel. It was a long corridor lined with curtained alcoves and just enough light to see. Six beds each side. As he passed each alcove he could smell the sex. The flimsy bright coloured curtains hid the occupants but he could hear the sounds of lovemaking and screwing and the soft sibilant voices of the ‘girls’ encouraging their clients. Gary had hardly noticed the humidity before in the air-conditioned bars with their overhead fans but in the brothel he sweated before he made it to the bed Mamasan had selected for him.

Gary pulled apart the drape, pulled off his shoes, shirt and trousers and lay on top of the sheet in his underpants. He put his .45 Browning under his pillow. Mamasan had been kind. She’d selected a bed underneath a fan and the downdraft worked its wonders. Mamasan reappeared with a glass of iced tea and a cloth that had been scented then placed in the fridge. She wiped him down as a mother would her baby. No words passed between. She left satisfied he was cool and relaxed.

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“Juss gimme the youngest whore you have, Mamasan. I’ll pay whatever price.”

He listened as Mamasan remonstrated with the speaker. Gary had just started to drop off to sleep when the ruckus started in the cubicle on the other side of the corridor.

“Relax you fucking slant-eyed whore and let daddy in.”

The struggle seemed to go on for a long time. The deep, loud, gravelly voice grated. A struggle ensued in the cubicle directly across on the other side of the corridor. Gary was left in no illusion. The bed creaked.

A voice, unmistakably that of some big black buck, yelled, “Whoopeee, I’m finally gonna get me some fuckin’ slope-bellied ass.”

The Vietnamese ‘girl’ whimpered. She sounded so afraid ... so vulnerable.

“Give me your little white ass you mother-fucker. Let me grease you up and make it easier for daddy to fuck you. Come to daddy, baby.”

Gary was reminded of the sluicing noise when cleaning a drain with a rubber sucker.

The girl let out a loud shriek. Mamasan came running.

“You fuck off, Mamasan. I paid good fuckin’ money for this fuckin’ broad and she’s gonna get her ass fucked by little ol’ fucking me.”

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Her whimpers suddenly stopped after a slap that resounded all along the corridor.

Gary reached for his trousers but Mamasan appeared and shook her head solemnly.

“No trouble. I wanna no trouble, Dawai.” She whispered.

The screwing stopped in the other beds.

Someone at the far end shouted, “Cool it, Man. We’re all here for a good time.”

Another voiced chimed in. “Fuck her ass, but don’ cause no trouble, Man.”

The gruff black shouted, “I’ll get what I cummed ‘ere for. Now you boys shut the fuck up an let liddle ol’ Johnny here fuck his slant-eyed asses cunt. Now you, Girlie, juss fit yoursell on the end of Johnny’s big fuckin’ black prick.”

Gary felt sickened as the big buck ground away. This was rape. Gary wished he had Troy’s ‘Bess’. He wanted to kill the man. He took out his .45 and held it ‘Ready’.

The big buck’s grunts got louder and louder and submerged the girl’s whimpers. They echoed starkly in Gary’s brain even when he pulled a pillow over his head. The man’s sex sounds seemed to go on and on for an eternity. The big buck finally let out a bestial roar. Gary felt sure even the curtains quivered. The lion’s roar of a successful mating left Gary nauseated. The victory bellow ended in a series of self-satisfied grunts and groans that culminated in a long drawn out gasp. Every listener knew the brute’s orgasm had happened. He’d reached the apogee of his contemptible odyssey.

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Shocked silence reigned, other sounds drowned by this young girl's worst nightmare. He'd scandalised even the most hardened. Now the orgy was over. For everyone.

Gary had dressed, unlatched the safety on his Colt but did nothing. In the sudden quietude, he breathed a sigh of relief and wondered how the girl had survived such an ordeal. Gary convinced himself that had the girl's terrible violation gone on any longer, he would have been forced to take drastic action. He wanted an excuse to kill the big buck and lay for minutes cursing himself for his pusillanimity.

The beast in him 'done', the big buck slept like a baby... in ignorance of the effect on the rest of the people in the corridor. They soon became immersed in the noise of his snoring. Their pregnant silence continued. Gary sensed no one wanted to have sex any more. Ardour had curdled. Lover's milk had turned sour. The young girl's trauma had touched them all. She'd been publicly raped and no one had moved to save her.

His curtain moved. Gary tensed, aiming his pistol at the gap in the curtains. Mamasan opened Gary's curtain. In her arms she held a drooping young girl upright.

She whispered, "Dawai, you take this girl. You must look after her."

The girl slumped onto Gary's bed and he moved closer to the wall to make a space for her. She shivered uncontrollably and her soft whimpering cleaved through his heart. For a moment she started as she felt Gary's clothed body against hers. Gave a moan.

She shuddered violently. Then stopped as Mamasan said something in Vietnamese.

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Gary understood even though he didn't know the words. Mamasan reassured and consoled her. The girl slumped, turned onto her side with her back to Gary and to face Mamasan then continued unabated involuntary shaking and shuddering. Her mewling sounds lacerated Gary. Mamasan held the limp hand as she whispered to the girl.

Gary murmured soft words of tenderness. Smoothed her brow.

Unable to dismiss the thought, *I'll kill the bastard*. But aware he'd done nothing.

Between them the girl slowly, agonisingly slowly, stopped shivering.

Gradually she fell into a fretful sleep. Random shudders ran right through her body.

Mamasan touched Gary and murmured, "Thank you."

Shocking images kept Gary from sleeping. He felt protective towards his charge. The young girl seemed so fragile. Gary resolved to remain alert. All went quiet.

Later, much later he heard men's whispered voices.

The sound electrified him. Gary's curtain moved. He poised and raised his Browning. White MP helmets framed white eyeballs in black faces. Gary had cocked his pistol. The three men stopped. Another standoff. Luckily Mamasan suddenly appeared.

Gary heard her saying "Him, good boy".

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Her smile relaxed everyone. The MP's grinned sheepishly and dropped the curtain. They had looked huge and black to Gary in the early dawn light. Eeriness pervaded all the cubicles. A pregnant silence descended.

Three weapons cocked in rapid succession. Gary held his breath, instinctively drawing the girl closer, protectively. The big buck stirred. He took a few moments to realise three pistols were all aimed at him. Following some scuffling and a muted, protesting "Fuck", he was escorted out.

Gary heard their jeep drive away. He sighed with relief.

The girl lay silent and unmoving. Light filtered through some window or skylight above him. Vague sounds in the street informed Gary that Vunggas struggled into life. For the first time since he'd lain on the bed, surrounded by its flimsy curtains, Gary felt that he could relax.

Mamasan came back and gently shook the girl. She woke mumbling incoherently. Still muttering sleepily, she got up and left without a backward glance. Mamasan led the girl away. Gary realised he was the only person left in the corridor.

He ate the hearty breakfast Mamasan prepared for him. He'd asked for 'poached eggs on toast' assuming the impossible but before his glazed eyes, three 'sunnyside-up' eggs miraculously floated into his vision.

He'd thought the aroma of bacon an illusion but they appeared along with the eggs.

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It was Mamasan's way of saying "Thank you". She'd apparently had a French boyfriend at some stage and he'd taught her to prepare a sumptuous breakfast.

She told him, "I quiet move everrybuddy out before Police come. They my good frenn. I wanna no big trouble. No want animal. Not wanted in my house. I tellim 'You good boy'. They know me for sure, good person. Wanna no trouble wiv nobody."

Gary stared into a far horizon. Mamasan's words echoed somewhere in the distance beyond the room. He hadn't heard Mamasan's customers leave, nor her girls.

"Them fella polissman, them my frennz. They know I wanna makim nobody no trouble. That fella. He bad fella for me. They fix him... and good. He no come back."

Gary heard her words but couldn't find his own to respond. Mamasan shrugged. After breakfast Gary sought out Troy, who'd been up at 'sparrow's fart' to drive Don back to Nui Dat in time for breakfast. He'd even gone for an early morning run.

Excitedly, Troy explained the two had stayed up most of the night swapping stories.

He couldn't stop repeating, "What a top bloke he is, Mate."

Troy's energy was misplaced and he soon recognised it. He decided to drive Gary to Back Beach. He worried about Gary's vacant look but knew better than to interfere or try to do something about it. Some trauma beset his mate's mind. Troy had seen the same signs in veterans before.

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The sun rose higher behind the two men. Gary looked out across the sea. The breakers rolled gently onto the shore. Gary sighed deeply. A breeze played games with his hair.

The soothing rumble of the surf left him musing deeply about his life. 'Where did all life come from anyway? What am I doing in Vietnam? Where is this life leading me? Gary couldn't remember the last time he'd thought about 'this life'... and 'the last'.

Are the Hindus right?

For the first time he felt he was experiencing the reality of Karma.

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

Gary couldn't remember the author's name nor the name of the poem. Mind retreated into meditation. "What is my future?" His answer was suggested by the same poem.

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

Gary agreed with its author. His head hurt. He felt the strong beating of his heart.

Not in entire forgetfulness

And not in entire nakedness

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Never had Gary's thoughts had such clarity. A fathomless change was going on inside him. It numbed his mind ... What's happening to me?

But trailing clouds of glory do we come...

And the last line, *From God, who is our home*

The rhetoric of self-sacrifice and the reality of life, especially of war, were thrust into sharp relief during these musings. Gary wanted affirmation from his Vietnamese friends that the Aussies were making a difference. Wanted them to know and to feel that, Australia in general and he in particular, would never let them down.

"Who is right?"... and ... "Who is wrong?" These questions made no sense to Gary any more. Last night's rape? Was Vietnam a victim like her? Was her rape the result of the demand of a ham-fisted American colonial soldier, imposing his right by deed of money, into an innocent child? Gary needed confirmation that this war and all its anger, hatred and despair... had meaning... was ultimately worthwhile. The terrible thing thrust into that young woman last night had to find some consolation in him. He needed to resolve the rubbish in his head about liberty, religion and righteousness.

As the poet's words echoed around his skull, Gary realised that he'd never be able to tell what had happened the previous night with the Vietnamese girl and the big buck.

It was his secret. Telling such secrets, somehow reduced their potency.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Saint Valentine's Day: 1967...

AN NHUT HAD BEEN CHOSEN FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS

John Warr initially wanted to 'throw a cordon around Dat Do' but somehow the VC got wind of the planned operation. It had been called off.

In November of the previous year a squad of VC had entered An Nhut and strung the village chief out with his legs and arms tied to poles each side of him in the centre of the village. There they'd gutted him, gouged out his eyes then cut-off his nose and ears. They'd choked his screams with his own dick and balls then cut him down. When he'd finally stopped twitching they removed his head with a machete. Their final trick was to place his severed head on a pike and leave it in front of his administration block as a warning.

An Nhut was a pro-government village, sitting astride Highway 23 and stretched out like the handle of a dumbbell. The two heavy ends were the much larger towns of Dat Do to its east and Long Dien to its west, both two miles away each side. 5RAR could easily cordon off this isolated village of about a thousand people but An Nhut was a bulwark outpost on a flat sea of paddy fields. Colonel Warr opposed the idea of an 'airborne op' because they were too predictive. The battalion couldn't guarantee the security of the operation plans before the cordon was in place. Combined ARVN operations were too hard to police, being outside IATF control.

Colonel Warr decided on a deception plan for his 'Operation Beaumaris'.

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A huge mountain complex, known as the Long Hai Hills, dominated An Nhut and the terrain to the south. Five miles long and three miles wide the Long Hais stretched to the coast just one-and-a-half miles south. These were a favourite hideout for VC and regular North Vietnamese troops and an obvious justification for a battalion 'Search and Destroy' mission. Going for the Long Hais made for a good deception plan.

The Long Hai foothills were jungle-clad and offered excellent cover and its nearest edge housed the village of Tam Phuoc, a VC controlled village. The jungle near the village provided an obvious stepping-off point for operations planned for the Long Hais. Colonel Warr's deception plan included simulating an APC only operation. He hid two companies, one of which was Don's, inside APC's that drove to the northern edge of Tam Phouc, ostensibly to move then into the Long Hais. The troops remained hidden until night fell. An artillery cover plan bombarded the northern hills to provide additional deception. In reality, 5RAR would actually cordon An Nhut.

'Beaumaris' would start the night before Don's birthday, on the 13th February. Colonel Warr's staff worked out the timings for 'Beaumaris' in explicit detail.

Early on the morning of 13th February, Colonel Warr dispatched a 'routine road patrol'. This cover-plan used armoured escorts along the circular route from Long Dien, through An Nhut to Dat Do then south to Tam Phouc, finally returning northwest back to Long Dien. Its real function was a detailed recce of Tam Phouc and its approaches. Coordination was essential. Popular and Regional Forces manned a compound in each village. Five bridges connected the three villages on Highway 23 and Popular Force troops had mounted a sentry post on each.

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Small 5RAR groups secured each bridge. Company 2 i/c's went to each manned compound in each village the day before to act as a liaison officer. Each had a radio. The night of 13/14 February had no moon. Night movement had to be well planned.

Don climbed out of his APC at about seven, relieved to finally be free of the sweating soldiers locked in the confines of their tin hulks and all the accumulated smells. His 'Charlie' Company dismounted. They too stretched and inhaled. The cool night air acted as a balm to anxious, pent-up diggers.

The evening breeze seduced their nostrils with blossoms, tropical fruit trees and subtle cooking smells and spicy aromas. They drifted through the trees then wafted below the canopy. Teased suddenly hungry soldiers. Silently, sentries were posted.

As his troops waited, two companies trekked across the paddy fields from a secured site on the outer edge of Dat Do. Don's company fanned-out along An Nhut's southern boundary at 0400 hours on Valentine's Day. Four hours later, the cordon in place, a company of ARVN 772 Regional Forces conducted the search of An Nhut.

The village had been surrounded by a moat but this had now become a dried out ditch. Two vertical fences had been erected surrounding the village, using metal piquets strung between with single-strand, barbed wire. The space between had once held an array of Vietnamese mines and booby traps.

Long Dien's American Advisor told Colonel Warr they'd been lifted prior to the Wet.

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In the late afternoon, Thuyet's cool and naked body stirred. Gary turned his head on the pillow. She opened sleepy eyes then widened them to expose the dark brown of her pupils. Instinctively he turned his whole body to hers as they embraced gently. Both snuggled closer. Gary's arms slid under her nakedness as he held her to him.

She tightened her hold as he moved as close as possible into the security of her love.

Gary needed her 'Peacefulness' to surround him, to embrace him and enfold him. He could not think of sex, except as that 'terrible thing' Gary had experienced last night. The smells and images left him nauseated. He desperately tried to slough off thoughts and images of that night, but peace wouldn't come. No matter how hard he tried.

Thuyet sensed some change in Gary but held her silence.

Thuyet needed this time of 'togetherness-aloneness' to sort out the confusion in her own head. She was in love with the 'enemy'. Her upper leg moved over Gary's thigh.

Both let out a contented groan as their two bodies merged to become one.

She nibbled Gary's ear gently and lovingly and whispered, "I love you." Soft finger pads explored his back. She preferred to let Gary rest in her arms.

Gary murmured, "Saint Valentine's Day feels better already."

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At first light on Saint Valentine's Day, Corporal 'Doc' Urquart, of 8 Platoon 'Charlie' Company, led his section to Tam Phouc.

Captain Bob Milligan, Urquart's Company's Second-in-Command had spent the last twenty-four hours ensuring the safety of 5RAR troops by remaining in Tam Phouc. A stocky young man, Bob was one of the most popular officers with his troops.

Don felt pleased. The cordon had gone without mishap. Even John Warr had expressed his thanks over the radio to Don, personally. The day promised to go without a hitch. The sun rose slowly above the horizon from the direction of Dat Do.

The spicy cooking smells of the awakening village, reminded Don of its proximity.

Faint wisps of morning dew rose from the paddy fields behind him.

The Charlie Company troops assigned to assist the Vietnamese had already moved into position. The Vietnamese would arrive just after 8 a.m. Don could hardly believe that his first combat mission in Vietnam had gone like clockwork.

Loudspeakers broke the silence.

They announced the presence of the Australians: the need not to panic; and for the villagers to eat their breakfast in situ. Then they told the villagers to carry lunch with them to the marked space in the middle of the village. Pre-positioned white tape identified this area.

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There, the local District Chief and the newly appointed Village Chief addressed the people of An Nhut, explaining the reasons for the cordon and interrogation of villagers. This was re-inforced by some *chieu hoi*. Viet These were VC soldiers who had surrendered to government troops. They gave reasons for their surrender and confirmed the hopelessness of trying to outwit and escape the Aussie cordon.

Colonel Warr had planned a Gala Day.

It involved a band, distribution of soft drinks, ice creams and colourful brochures supporting the government. The interrogation centre housed thirty interrogators to screen the people. The villagers could visit the medical and dental facilities once their interrogation was over. They'd then be directed to a Civil Affairs aid point where clothing and food waited.

Don stood inside the piquet fence closest to An Nhut. He'd put on new socks. He'd learned the benefits of this in Korea. His ritual seldom varied. Gary had noticed it from their days next door to each other at Kapooka in the fifties. Don then combed his 'short back-and-sides', dark-brown hair with his plastic hand-comb. His dated but distinctive 'Brylcream' brush-back style with its parting on the left, pleased him. Then he'd had breakfast, consisting of strong, hot coffee laced with three sugars.

Company Headquarters people stood around or fumbled with packs and cleaning weapons. Everyone slowly and carefully prepared for the busy schedule the day's search and interrogations would bring. No one yet wore their combat gear. This had been a textbook cordon. Now they rested.

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“Captain Bob Milligan reporting, Sir.”

Don grinned at this formality. It had become a private joke between them.

The rising sun warmed his right side as Don told Bob of the upcoming “O” Group.

Bob stood on the other side of the fence facing Don, with his left foot resting on the lower strand of the fence as he relaxed into a characteristic pose. The 2i/c’s upper body leaned forward and the weight rested on his left elbow as it balanced him on his left thigh. Their longer-than-normal shadows lay on the grass parallel to the fence.

The mental details of his ‘O’ Group were already being organized, as Don’s right hand reached behind his neck and rested there. It was a sign, to those close to him, that Don had things on his mind.

Satisfied that checks by the Assault Pioneer Platoon and some engineers had found no mines or booby traps in the vicinity, he gave instructions to his radioman.

“Call all Sunrays. All to attend Oscar Group... Now.” He turned to his batman. “Tell WOII Goldspink, the CSM, to attend and to bring the interpreter with him.”

To his left and about ten feet away, and on the same side as Don facing the barbed wire fence, stood Captain Peter Williams the Kiwi artillery officer.

Don called to him. “O Group in ten minutes, Peter.”

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All the Aussies had their sleeves rolled down and buttoned. A lesson dinned into them at Canungra and later in Malaya. In contrast, Peter's sleeves, and those of his small group, were rolled up. Don intended to speak about that. It wasn't just the mosquito and malaria. Exposed white skin was a dead giveaway in the jungle or even paddy.

Peter sidled up to Don. "Christ, Sir! Don't you think your marines oughta getta fuckin' haircut?" In a short time they'd already developed a friendly familiarity.

Don laughed. "Cheeky bastard. What would you Kiwi's know about haircuts? You Kiwi bastards only know how to use sheep clippers."

He felt relaxed as he thought about the good time he'd had with Gary. The warming sun promised a hot day but he imagined that by midday he'd be wishing for this early morning coolness. Don sweated too easily, after nearly nine months in an air-conditioned office. The diggers grapevine knew Don had been in Korea.

As his batman re-assembled his boss's kit, he listened to the banter. He enjoyed his Skipper's relaxed air. Resting Don's pack near the piquet holding the wire, he thought. *It won't get in the way there.*

The "O" Group had been and gone. The two Captains and WOII Goldspink remained, plus the officer's batmen and the radiomen. Don walked over near the fence.

He called out, "Bob? Could your batman organise a cuppa for us all?"

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In the quiet of their room and after lovemaking, Gary had asked Thuyet about her early life. "My mother was killed by the French when I was a little baby. My paternal Grandfather died of a broken heart in 1956, after I left home to join the Vietminh." She nestled closer into his armpit and spoke in a quiet, sad voice. "Grandmother was a distant person. She lived all her life according to proverbs and duties. She desperately tried to keep Grandfather's house clean and tidy. She lived off the sale of snacks and goods that she carried in a large, circular rice tray. Grandmother used the money to tend the graves of our ancestors and to help the upkeep of Grandfather's house."

"Where was Grandfather's house?" Gary asked gently.

"In Hanoi. In the Old Quarter."

Gary remained silent whilst Thuyet continued her story.

Outside their room at Cyrno's, a barley-sugar vendor called out tirelessly. Now and again the low murmur of street traffic would be shattered by the honking and blaring of a horn or the piercing, distracting sound of a policeman's whistle.

"I was almost ten years old when the Land Reforms started in the North. Peace had been declared following Dien Bien Phu. My Uncle, my young brother Phouc and my older brother Vinh returned briefly from the Cao Bang hideouts near the China border. Everywhere the streets rang with the songs of liberation, of peace and the traditional ones beloved of our people. Grandfather, alive then, tried to warn them of the coming changes but they laughed and, though respectful, chided he was wrong."

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Gary stroked her hair away from her eyes, kissed her on the nose and settled back.

“Grandfather used to say to us, ‘Miscreants. Unhappiness will follow those who flout ancestral laws. Your happiness can’t last.’ He was right but for different reasons from those he believed. Poor Phouc suffered the brutalities of the Land Reform but it never broke his spirit. He remained true to the beauty within him even though he had to go South like my Uncle and my cousin. I don’t blame them. My people, bled white by the French, then their Indochina War, teetered on the edge of starvation. Then they were pitted against the leaders who had led them from the stone-age to the present.”

“So how did you survive? Did it change anything for you, Thuyet?”

Thuyet didn’t miss the genuine concern in his voice. “The Vietminh soon realised their mistakes and corrected them. They publicly apologised for the Land Reform, acknowledged that they had made an error and led a campaign they called the ‘Rectification of Errors’. It didn’t help my brother.”

“‘Rectification of Errors’?” Gary eased his arm from around her and turned so that he could look her full in the face. “Sounds strange. What was that about?”

Thuyet loved Gary the more for his genuine interest. “They reclassified the way they had named the peasants.” She had only one friend she could share her story with.

Thuyet paused, staring into his eyes. “Phouc wasn’t given his land back. He was forgiven and told to ‘forget’.”

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Gary touched her ear gently then traced the line down her neck. "Did he?"

She lay on her back with a deep sigh. "No. But by then the Party had recognised its errors, which is more than most governments ever do, Gary. The changes the Party made in the restructuring of our society were good. We, the women of Vietnam, can now create our own future. Under previous regimes we were crushed. Under the Confucian model male authority dominated every aspect of our culture. Women were chattel, to be disposed of as men saw fit."

For Gary, the realisation suddenly dawned that Thuyet may be a Party member as well as being Vietminh. He remembered Troy's best mate, Dat. Troy's friend had been in North Vietnam too but hated everything Communist. Gary leaned over Thuyet and kissed her. She responded. Slowly they moved apart holding hands.

Gary waited for her to continue.

"So many changes have taken place, Gary. In my short life I have already seen so much. Vinh, my eldest brother visited me in camp one day. His visit made me feel radiant, I'm sure the rest of my comrades could see the pride in my face."

So there it was. Not only a soldier but communist. "What rank are you then, Thuyet?"

Gary remarked as nonchalantly as possible. "And Vinh? What rank was he?"

"I'm a Second Lieutenant." There was no hint of holding anything back. "Vinh is a Major like you. He'd just been promoted."

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Thuyet made no effort to hide the pride she felt in her elder brother.

“He wanted to praise me and show off at the same time. I wanted to show him off and prepared plates of delicacies and arranged cups and glasses as if it were a wedding banquet. I hadn’t seen Vinh for ten years.”

Gary stretched back on the bed and took a deep breath. This was much more than he’d bargained for but as he looked at her he felt nothing but an overwhelming sense of love for his beautiful Vietminh woman-soldier. He reached out and held her left hand.

“How did everything go, Darling?”

“Neither are children any more. A seasoned warrior, he is marked by his profession. Aloof and in command, yet I sensed a poignancy in him. He loved me and relaxed in my company but it was as though it frightened him. I don’t think he’s ever shown anyone his soft side. He feels betrayed by Uncle Dat and by his younger brother.”

“That’s Phouc, isn’t it? I think I met him in Saigon once.”

“Yes. You did. Vinh cannot understand why they don’t feel the same about the revolution as he does. He’s a Colonel now and even back then he told me that his Uncle Dat would have been a General in the Vietminh had he stayed in the North.”

Gary could hardly believe what he was being told. “Thuyet?” He almost feared asking the next question. “Is that the same Dat who’s Province Chief here in Phouc Tuy?”

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She nodded.

“I’ve met Colonel Dat too. He’s my best friend’s best friend.” He struggled to keep his voice subdued, not revealing the turmoil her information had set up in him.

Thuyet turned to face him again. “Yes.”

As she spoke she searched his face even more intently than last time. She sought something but he couldn’t fathom what.

“You mean, Troy? Your CIA friend?” Her question was rhetorical. “My Uncle told me I’d met Troy a long time ago. America was the best friend of our country then.”

Gary remarked, limply, “So you know? What else about my friends and I do you know, Thuyet? I am struggling to make the connections you’ve just told me about.”

Thuyet looked pained. She struggled as she said quietly, “I know a lot, Gary.”

At An Nhut, at 0900 hours on Valentine’s Day, 14th February 1967, Don had given his ‘O’ Group. All but his two most senior officers had dispersed back to their units. Captain Bob Milligan and the Kiwi Captain, Peter Williams, wanted to clarify administrative matters. Peter Williams needed some decisions on artillery support.

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Don looked around then waved to his Warrant. "Serg'n Major?"

He took a deep breath as a light breeze caressed his face.

"Yes, Sir? By the way, Happy Birthday, Sir."

"Thanks, Serg'n Major. How's the cuppa? We've three thirsty officers."

Don fondled the back of his neck so that he could think more clearly, pulled out his comb and tidied his hair. Minutes later, the three officers sat around in a close circle.

Bob Bilston, Bob Milligan's batman, called, "Does anyone have some extra coffee?"

Don declared, "I've got heaps." He lifted his knapsack to scrummage for some.

The huge explosion threw him ten feet across scorched and flattened grass. Dead.

Captains' Bob Milligan and Peter Williams, the Kiwi, were likewise instantly killed.

Later, when he heard, a severe pain shot across Gary's chest, from left to right. An iron band arrested his breath. Sweat formed on his brow, but tears wouldn't come.

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MARCH: the rabbit shooters...

THE GROUND AROUND GARY SHOOK AS THOUGH ABOUT TO ERUPT

Gary confided with Roger that in 1953 he'd witnessed an earthquake in Adelaide and the trauma he'd experienced then, reasserted itself fourteen years later. Helplessness, followed by a silent sort of terror.

“Australia's such a vast continent and such an old land that before the earthquake I felt secure in it. But the pliability of that huge landmass shook me up, I can tell you, Mate. It swayed and vibrated all the time during the earthquake. Made me aware for the first time of the massive forces constantly at work tens of miles beneath my feet.”

Roger queried, “Yet didn't the earthquake only last just four seconds?”

“That's the difference, Roger. This B52 horror just goes on and on.”

The two men sat in folding chairs, away from the marquee. Both needed to escape the hilarity, smoke and drink inside the marquee. Above them the stars had a brilliance never seen in a city. The Milky Way, arching over them protectively, startled the mind with its magnificence. They discussed its effect on the first thinking humans.

“You know, Roger, the Milky Way would have shaped God into their souls.”

From the top of Nui Dat, Gary watched a stick of bombs fall almost in a straight line.

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Witnessing this 'close-up' nighttime B52 strike, Gary only felt pity for those directly underneath the hail of bombs now falling on the Long Hai hills seven miles away. He hoped neither his friend Hai nor Thuyet's brother, Vinh, were beneath.

"Look at that, Roger." He spoke in a lull. "The first thing you see is a halo of light with a black impact point in its centre."

The halo moved fast, travelling like a living thing and hugging the ground. Then the black hole suddenly filled with a massive semi-circular dome of light, exploding into brilliance then fast extinguished. Sound waves detonated into the sky. Finally reached Gary. To the two watchers on the hill the explosions rumbled into a thunderous, roaring sound echoing destruction and death.

He and Roger held their 'gin and tonic' at arm's length to prevent spillage.

Nui Dat shook violently as though to shake itself free. The rumbling thunder, the wildly shaking hill and the detonated earth coalesced beneath Gary's feet. Behind him in the marquee, glasses clinked their fear: duckboards groaned their distress: and the canvas tents flapped angrily. The still air trembled, then spilt its fear in shock waves.

Flying south to visit Troy in My Tho a month earlier, Gary had seen the monstrous holes and incredible destruction sewn by B52's. Huge ulcers lacerated the land then quickly filled with the pus of putrid water. He could only vaguely imagine how it felt to be blithely walking through an open paddy field, assuming the mantle of darkness protected. Now B52's had bombed the Long Hai's for about six minutes.

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It felt like forever. Gary couldn't imagine being rained on from silent, silvery sleuths with cigar-shaped bodies and huge outstretched wings. He could feel however, the intense fear the VC must suffer once they experienced or saw the carnage caused from these aluminium and titanium bodies prowling the night skies at thirty thousand feet.

Immediately south were the mountains that had once glared down from their great height on Gary. He'd taken his company, by Vietnamese military motor boats, to Xa Long Hai, a small village on the Vung Tau side. The village had given the mountains their name, the Long Hais. Sullen and intimidating, they crouched like a hungry grey wolf, as though always watching, waiting to spring.

They were the third group of Phouc Tuy mountains in a long line from west to south and ended last in line on the edge of the South China Sea. The Long Hai's created a stunted peninsular immediately the west of Vung Tau. The river Rach Cua Lap's swamps and mangroves made a formidable barrier between the two.

Bruce's Bravo Company, part of a combined Fifth and Sixth Battalion operation, was assigned to conduct a sweep of the Long Hais from north to south, intended to start a short four days after Don's death on Saint Valentine's Day. 'The hills were alive' with the sound of digging. VC bunkers and tunnels were extended. Four miles long and three wide the Long Hais were surrounded on all four sides by roads but most had been rendered impassable. The VC dug them up then mined them. This form of ambush caused heavy casualties but minimalized VC dead and wounded

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Base camps identified on the eastern side had been the focus of the B52 strikes that had rocked Nui Dat two nights earlier. It and H&I artillery fire drove the VC from the lower slopes into the more dense foliage covering the mountains.

Bruce had told Gary that, "Before they'd moved higher into the Long Hais, the VC had chopped off the Long Hai village chief's head, sticking it on a pole at the entrance to the village." He paused, took a deep breath then continued. "Before he died the bastards tortured him. From their sanctuaries in the Long Hais the VC then conducted similar atrocities on Dat Do. I get really angry at that kind of wanton brutality."

The image of Khai's dismembered body swam into Gary's mind.

Bruce spluttered. "I don't understand what motivates a person to use terror like that on men, women and children. I'm a soldier. War is bad enough but I don't believe the end ever justifies the means. Terror is the weapon of terrorists, not soldiers but there seems no end to the horrors the VC perpetrate on innocents." He'd added, "They're arrogant bastards, too, you know. During Tet earlier in February this year, the VC flew two huge blue and red flags with their yellow star in the middle. The one on the Long Hai's highest and most southern rampart they illuminated by spotlight."

Hai's VC D445 Battalion decided they wouldn't be intimidated by B52 raids nor by the H&I artillery fire. He announced to the people of Dat Do that his units were taking up permanent residence and passed on to the Aussies. "You won't throw us out. We will remain and be victorious." He'd thrown down the gauntlet.

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On the 17th February, Hai's units attacked the Phouc Hai government post, in the 'dead shift' at 2 a.m., intending to conclude their attack by dawn. Besides asserting a 'presence' in the province, Hai's aim was to draw a relieving force into an ambush.

Gary was later told, "It didn't work. The Regional Force commander from Hoi Moy, immediately north of Phouc Hai, set off to intercept at first light. The clever bastard moved east of Highway 44 and struck the flank of the VC-prepared ambush."

6RAR, in response to D445, initiated a 'quick reaction' Operation Bribie. They ran full-tilt into a re-invigorated D445. The Aussies landed on a 'hot DZ' or drop zone. At ranges between thirty and sixty yards a four-hour battle ensued. APC's brought forward to engage with their 50 cal's were greeted with anti-tank rocket fire.

Even though well dug-in and using sniper and machine-gun fire, D445 were caught between continuous 1ATF artillery shelling from a fire-base north of them in Dat Do and constantly harassed by close-support aircraft fire. Hai had enough. His company suffered eight killed and sixty-five wounded and broke contact just before nightfall.

They'd been soundly and publicly thrashed. D445 eventually escaped northeast.

Two companies of 6RAR blocked their exit to the east and a company in APC's blocked any exit to their west. A taste of what was to come, 6RAR suffered seven killed and twenty-six wounded. The APC troop had one killed and one wounded. When Charlie and Delta companies attacked next morning, the VC had 'flown'.

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These events postponed 5RAR's blitz into the Long Hais.

Colonel Warr finally launched 'Operation Renmark on 18th February. Two companies plus Battalion Headquarters choppered in. They desperately needed a win.

At 1145 hours 19th February, Bruce's Bravo Company, mounted in APC's, and established first contact with the VC, halfway up the eastern side of the northernmost hill feature of the Long Hais. Bruce deployed his platoons to track the VC down.

One of his more aggressive, heavily mustachioed platoon commanders, Jack Carruthers, his face grimy with dust and sweat, stumbled on a manned VC campsite. He swept speedily into assault formation and exchanged fierce but sporadic gunfire. As APCs sloughed up the red dirt it was hard to differentiate between the blazing red hair of Carruthers large, bushy moustache and the road dust covering him.

By the morning of the 21st February, Bruce felt elated. He would move south, in the heavy humidity of the midday sun, to complete Phase Two of Operation Renmark. This entailed the hunting down of any VC and the destruction of bunker and tunnel complexes in the southern ramparts of the Long Hai's Things were going very well.

Ever the cavalier, Bruce called the Colonel at 1340 hours, "Sunray heading south."

His APC's moved southeast, keeping clear of all tracks due to the probability of both anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. Deep ravines, fast flowing creeks and dense foliage made the going slow and tedious.

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The lead APC crossed a creek in low gear, covered by others within the APC troop.

Its way was partially blocked by heavy jungle growth. To its right a clearing crossed the track they thought had been mined.

The driver stopped to reconnoitre. It was thirty minutes after Bruce's last radio call.

Back in Battalion Headquarters the tremendous explosion was heard by all.

Most of the leading section of Carruther's platoon were either killed or wounded. He escaped unscathed. Luckily for some of his soldiers, the blast-wave that had blown a two-foot hole in the front part of the APC, also blasted the rear door off its hinges. Soldiers not killed in the initial blast were blown out the hole. Otherwise they'd have been smashed against the thick metal door. They escaped with bruises and shock.

Two others were not so fortunate.

One had been behind the blasted APC. Thrown to the ground he'd been pulverized under the skyward-blown rear door. One had been riding on top of the APC.

The huge blast of the five-hundred-pound bomb had lifted the twelve-ton vehicle and thrown it about fifteen feet to the side as if were a dead turtle. Carruthers watched it.

It turned slowly in the air spewing out soldiers like limp rag dolls. The doomed APC ploughed into the dirt on its side to land and crush the roof-riding soldier underneath.

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Those not injured, in Carruther's Four Platoon, speedily 'debussed'. As they hit the deck, the soldiers immediately went to ground: took up firing positions in front of their respective APC's: and executed their deployment in perfect standard drills.

Carruthers felt proud of his men. They'd 'kept their cool' and were clearly highly disciplined. He and his platoon sergeant dismounted to the rear of the second APC. The still smoking crater, blocking the junction of the track, measured six feet across by four feet wide and about three deep.

The time was now 1410 hours.

The APCs instantly swung into counter-ambush drill. Bruce travelled immediately behind Carruther's platoon. He brought his senior medic, his two radiomen and the rear platoon's stretcher-bearers with him to assess the damage.

Another huge explosion erupted. Everyone in the area cringed then blanched.

Just short of the second APC, where Carruthers stood waiting, someone in the middle of Bruce's group had stood on a 'Jumping-Jack' mine. It hurtles four feet into the air before exploding and had become the infantryman's horror-weapon, filled with hundreds of steel ball bearings and copious chunks of twisted and torn metal.

A huge s-w-o-o-s-h: a searing, a flesh-shredding t-h-r-u-m-p: followed the c-l-u-n-k and clatter of large pieces of metal as the dreadful weapon's shrapnel instantaneously tore off limbs and at the same time peppered bodies.

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As they hurtled into an abyss of mind-searing pain, the two officers shared parts of each other's body. A moment of dreaded quiet hung, between the shrieking of the fiendish metallic harpies tearing men apart then the cries of suddenly shredded men.

But only the dead remained completely silent.

The pall of destruction completed, the living knew they couldn't move. Mayhem surrounded them. Screams from their friends begged for relief but no one dared move. The horribly mutilated and shockingly wounded only knew their pain. The survivors knew they were victims of a massive minefield ambush. They couldn't tell where next to place their feet. It could trigger more mutilation and dismemberment.

The convoy of APCs had been halted. Sitting targets for VC anti-tank rockets. Inside the APCs claustrophobic, hollow bodies, sweating troops could not deploy from their APCs until the extent of the minefield ambush could be verified.

Heroic warriors saved the day. Men on the ground reeled in shock at the scene of carnage but had to shake off their fear. Ordinary soldiers volunteered to prod and probe to uncover more mines. Trained sappers were'nt instantly available and something had to be done, immediately. Other abominations *HAD* been seeded. Troops cleared a site for 'Dust Offs'. The life-saving choppers arrived within minutes.

Casualties littered the blasted terrain exactly seven days after the Saint Valentine's Day slaughter. Colonel Warr and his team of officers worked miracles. The worst cases were on the operating tables of the 36th US Evacuation Hospital in Vung Tau.

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In less than twenty minutes. All thirty-one casualties were there within the hour.

Gary listened in shock. Five had been killed immediately. The final tally? Seven dead.

The two officers hung on. Carruthers took four days to die.

An officer arrived at Bruce's side. "Barely conscious, Bruce waved me away to treat the many Four Platoon casualties then lost consciousness from terrible wounds."

Shrapnel had sliced almost half Bruce's head away.

Gary remained at the hospital as his brave friend's life ebbed away.

Bruce took until the 5th March to die.

"Fucking VC mines." For the second time Gary found he couldn't weep.

"I've got me a jeep with a good cover story, Gary. So let's hit the road." Troy drove a jeep he'd 'acquired', with a Red Cross on its side and on its canvas roof.

Gary's grief for his two murdered friends had turned to anger. He needed retribution of a personal kind. Jaago and Troy decided they needed a 'holiday'. The three planned their 'rabbit-shoot' to the nth degree. Dat decided he had to 'look out for them'.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

The 'four musketeers' dressed in civvies. Hid their combat gear and clothes.

Troy obtained aerial photos of the Xuyen Moc area and Special Forces reconnaissance reports. Dat managed to find even more recent air photos. The four had planned their targets from these, armed with the latest operational and detailed information.

Nui Dat Hill 3, north of Xuyen Moc was their target. Three hills were each named Nui Dat . One was home to 1ATF, the other had masked 275th Regiment's march on 1ATF to Long Tan and was three miles away. Nui Dat Hill 3 crouched immediately north of Xuyen Moc on Phouc Tuy's western border, twelve miles from the Task Force base.

Troy explained, "I know the province chief of Xuyen Moc, Gary. He'll look after our vehicle and ask no questions." He added, "We'll leave the vehicle in the chief's compound and walk in under cover of darkness." Then, "What do you say, Dat?"

Dat grinned, "I agree, Mate. The province chief's a personal friend of mine and won't mind what we are doing in his area. What's more, as you say he won't ask questions nor will he tell anyone what we may be doing."

Gary agreed. "The less that know the better, Troy. At least our arse is covered."

Jaago wanted to know, "What did you tell them at Task Force, Boss?"

"Just that I needed a break and that I might go to Saigon for a few days. The Brigadier knew that Don and Bruce were special friends of mine and that I was hit hard."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Devoid of ordinary feeling, Gary felt emptied. Looked forward to the 'rabbit-shoot'. As they walked carefully through the bush, keeping off tracks and following pre-determined compass bearings, Gary focussed on the birdcalls, any tiny rustlings and especially any foreign smells. The four had showered without soap.

They ate a meal laced with nuoc mam. Rinsed their clothes twice to remove any trace of detergent smells. Only Dat smoked. He preferred Vietnamese tobacco but took no cigarettes. They'd taken care not to have foreign odours betray them.

Gary felt totally integrated with his environment but had never been this far west.

The area from Phouc Tuy province's northeastern border to the South China Sea was drained by the Song Rai river and practically empty except for small pockets of rice and fruit farmers. Isolated small towns and villages were ideal exploitation areas for the VC and for harbouring the Vietminh. Phouc Hai, controlled by D445, was used regularly for R&R, or rest and recuperation. Vinh's 275th Regiment controlled this section of the province.

Twelve miles east of Dat Do, Xuyen Moc was the largest town on the eastern edge of Phouc Tuy with a population of barely two-and-a-half thousand. The only sizable town in the whole eastern third of the province, its rubber plantations were not as extensive, either, as on the Australian side of the province.

Gary couldn't help himself. "Goddam, Troy, that's a fucking wide river."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Eight miles from Dat Do, their vehicle crossed a steel bridge. A mass of tributaries parallel to the Song Rai watered the open paddies for almost a mile each side of the bridge and threatened to turn it into swampland, seeming to stretch forever

Dat responded. "The Song Rai is a much more formidable river in the wet, Mate."

Leaving their vehicle in the Province Chief's compound in the late afternoon, they walked west towards the rubber plantation less than three miles away. There were many tracks and most of them showed a lot of recent heavy traffic, some motorized.

The four kept clear of the tracks and the well-made road skirting the plantation.

Jaago, the lead scout, stopped a number of times.

On one particular track he knelt down. "Plenty of rabbits to shoot here, Boss." He pointed out the well-known Ho Chi Minh sandal prints that betrayed the presence of northern troops and local VC.

To the best of Gary's knowledge they were alone except for the VC.

Before leaving 1ATF, he'd surreptitiously checked all intelligence reports, artillery H&I fire tasks for the next few nights and possible SAS or Recce patrols.

"I wouldn't expect any 'friendlies' will be this far out near Xuyen Moc, as Brigadier Graham is more focussed on the immediate area around the Task Force base."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Task Force had been alerted on the movements of 274 and 275 Regiments, reported to be 'possibly' closing in on the Task Force for a possible showdown. Perhaps a Long Tan re-run? Brigadier Graham had therefore, much to the chagrin of 5RAR, recalled both battalions from the Long Hais to defend the 1ATF base area. 5RAR would have preferred to finish their sweep of the Long Hais and hopefully revenge their losses on the 14th and 21st February. They too wanted 'blood'. Gary heard the dull t-h-r-u-m-p of artillery to the southwest. *The Long Hais again*, then the much heavier c-r-u-m-p of the American eight-inch guns and their sluicing sound.

It was almost dark when Gary felt a gentle tap on his arm. Jaago had seen movement. Instantly, the other two were alert. The four had set the ambush site a mile-and-a-half west from Nui Dat3 on the edge of heavy foliage. Through his binoculars Gary looked across clear space, about a mile long and four hundred yards wide, on a slightly rising slope toward the western side of Nui Dat3 hill. The visibility was excellent because the glow of the setting sun behind them threw an even illumination across the open space to their front, whereas they were well shadowed in the treeline. Gary lowered his binoculars, cupped his hands around each ear and listened.

In the distance behind them they heard choppers and the ever-present hollow sounds of firing guns. Now and again the staccato burst of machine-gun fire added to the sounds of distant war but never close enough to be of concern. Gary needed to remember the 'normal' environmental sounds. That way he'd more clearly discriminate any foreign footfalls or the slight, swishing sounds soldiers make as they carefully move through foliage. Better still, any metallic clinking or scratching as the foliage is pushed aside or scraped by packs or weapons.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary listened to the gathering, nighttime symphony. Closeby, crickets rubbed their legs in sexual frenzy. Frogs dominated the night sounds in far-away rice paddies.

Here in the bush with the sounds of frogs absent, Gary clearly heard the unfamiliar calls of Vietnamese birds. He identified warbles, clicks and pretty tunes. In the timber a softer harmony prevailed. Gary closed his eyes momentarily to focus.

He felt the warmth exiting the ground beneath his feet. The air noticeably cooled as it entered his nostrils and his body felt the first signs of evening chill.

Jaago let out a sharp almost inaudible hiss.

He pointed with his Garand.

Gary turned his head slightly so that he looked out of the corner of his eye to detect what had grabbed Jaago's attention. Peripheral vision was one of the earliest tricks a soldier learned as he developed the skills to detect movement. It worked. Too far away to be certain but it looked like an enemy forward scout... or maybe two?

Troy already had his starscope pointing in the same direction. He passed it to Dat without a word, turning his thumb down to identify... *enemy*.

Four men, in two sets of two, readied their weapons, quietly slipped off their safety catches then steadied themselves and their weapons on the slight rise to their front. Not a word had passed but each professional knew what might lie ahead.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary's mind fired off questions. *How many enemy soldiers? Was it a small party or part of a larger group? What ambush tactics will we need to employ? What action or counter-ambush action will the enemy take? What will my response be?*

There was no way of telling. The four had rehearsed many options.

The fortune of war determined each combat outcome but each of the four flickered through their options as they waited for the enemy to reveal themselves. The four of them were aware they were on their own. None of the normal backup could be theirs.

As the shadowy shapes drew closer, two figures emerged.

The four held their collective breath, remaining motionless and soundless. The environment drifted into silence with the intensity of each man's focus. Gary wished he could see more clearly. Jaago and Troy could. Troy had a starscope fitted to his captured AK-47. He preferred to use the weapon of the enemy. "That way the bastards won't be able to tell who's who."

Jaago's starscope fitted his Garand. He whispered, "It's only two, Boss."

Gary preferred his M-16 'under-over'. Underneath it had an M-79 grenade launcher with a short, standard M-16 on top. Gary had earlier slipped in a shotgun cartridge. He'd packed M-79 grenades as emergencies but an M-79 shotgun cartridge made a deadly close-up weapon. Its bore four times the diameter of a normal shotgun.

Troy's AK-47 lay on the mound. Then Gary remembered. Troy had Bessie.

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With his deadly target pistol with its silencer he'd shoot the first two. No one would hear the shot. Troy sighted on one. Dat covered the other with his silencer pistol, a present from Troy. In addition he carried an SAS-type SLR. As a double indemnity Jaago had placed two Claymores, one at each end of their chosen killing ground.

A terrible anti-personnel weapon, Gary had been cautious ever since 3RAR, Enoggera. Outside Battalion Headquarters, the Intelligence Section sergeant prepared a 'demonstration model' for senior officers to view just ten minutes later. The explosion had blown both the sergeant's legs off above the knees. Thousands of ball bearings had shredded his legs and buried themselves in the wooden building.

Troy said, "We'll use maximum stealth." Tonight they'd rely on Jaago's Claymores only as a last resort. Troy and Dat could fire first with their silencers. Two enemy presented no problem. More than that "We'll hafta use whatever we've got." Then "Get the hell outta here... and fast."

Both enemy soldiers carried weapons. They were moving quietly, carefully.

Gary worried. God? Have they been warned we might be in the vicinity? Is the Province Chief really trustworthy? Are the ambushers about to be ambushed? They'd have us cold if they already had been warned. I wonder how many behind these two?

Gary knew this form of paranoia. He'd faced it in Vietnam before. Vietnam was a civil war, brother against brother. Gary cleared his mind. He focussed on breath. Slow, silent and deep ones to the limit of each in and out breath.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Warnings echoed "If you put your fuckin' head up, you'll get it blown off. Keep it down and you'll survive." Ray Simpson, Dad's best mate, had taught Gary well. He'd been Gary's para instructor at Williamstown.

The two enemy approached cautiously heading along the track across the front of the four musketeers. They were Vietminh, regular troops not VC. They wore bush hats, webbing and carried their AK-47's ready.

The first enemy soldier stopped eight feet from the first Claymore.

Gary daren't move or breathe.

The soldier moved past into the killing ground.

The second soldier hovered directly in front of Jaago's first Claymore. Then moved.

Both were centred in the killing ground but Troy hadn't fired. Gary sweated more.

Troy had placed the starscope to the side of his body, out of the way.

Troy held Bessie pointed at the second enemy soldier and out of the corner of his eye he could see Dat. He covered the first. Troy's pulse quickened. Adrenaline pumped him up. He squinted then turned ever so slightly to Dat, slowly turning his thumb down so as not to alert the enemy just ten paces in front of him. Troy indicated, "Number two is mine."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

He willed all of them to hold. Instinct commanded Troy's reflexes. The two passed out of sight along the track, out of the killing area, then on, out of range of Jaago's last Claymore. When they'd gone he cautioned with his hand, "Wait. Hold your fire."

He had no other way of communicating the instinct dictating his response.

Five minutes of agonizing wait. Five minutes in which each wondered, including Troy, whether a tragic mistake had been made. A five-minute eternity in which each sweated their own fears. *Had the two enemy spotted them? Would they holler for reinforcements and return with enough weapons to obliterate the four of them?*

Jaago picked up the first Claymore's detonator and held it for Gary to see.

"Voices?" Strained ears almost instantaneously sensed the chattering then someone in the approaching group laughed. The four hadn't been seen. The first two enemy were the forward scouts. Troy's instinct had paid off. Soon they saw six, walking in twos with rifles across their shoulders. Oblivious and relaxed they laughed and joked to each other like schoolboys on a picnic walk. They assumed 'darkness is my friend'.

Jaago picked up the other detonator. Gary nodded. Troy gave 'thumbs down'.

In what seemed like hours, all five entered the killing ground. The four tensed and waited for Troy and Dat's first mark to fall dead. Gary and Jaago had no doubt.

They'd seen the marksmanship of the two sharpshooters many times before.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Troy checked quickly left and right out of the corners of his eyes to make sure no other enemy were approaching then focussed, aimed at the head of the nearest man, squeezed Bessie's hair trigger as he controlled his breath then squeezed some more. Dat, alongside him did the same with the soldier at the rear. Troy sensed that the others were ready. He was ready. In synchro with each other or more likely in symbiosis. He made sure all six enemy soldiers were 'In'... then...

P-h-u-t-t ... P-h-u-t-t ... such soft sounds to denote death.

As the two slowly crumpled from accurate headshots the enemy group paused in mid-stride. Just long enough for... P-h-u-t-t ... P-h-u-t-t ... Two more slid into oblivion. Jaago called out, "Claymore." Troy's team momentarily closed their eyes in anticipation of the blinding flash that could destroy their night vision.

Then followed a deep, resounding almost deafening ... B-O-O-M.

The explosion shattered the silence. Adrenaline pumped into the veins of the four ambushers. This was the moment when all the drills, rehearsals and practices brought MIND into sharp relief. A 'tabula rosa' mind until war's reality events are driven in like marlinspikes, memory retaining each successive miniscule-moment.

Gary had shared with Jaago and Troy, 'War experiences get indelibly imprinted on Mind. Vignettes forever etched in every small detail.' They agreed life-threatening contact definitely honed a special part of the mind not available to many others. War incidents such as this one were also permanently stamped 'good' or 'bad'.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

The explosion shook the trees around them and raised a smoke pall immediately to the front. The team immediately opened their eyes to check the damage and to make sure no one in the killing zone lived. Almost always one VC would survive and make a run for it. Their vision, completely obscured by shattered leaves, disintegrated twigs and dust, they couldn't discern any human movement. It seemed all were dead.

Without warning, Gary fired. His shot coincided with Dat's fired from his shortened automatic SLR with its flash eliminator removed. This made travelling through the bush easier and less fraught with 'hang ups' on foliage. They'd spotted movement, an arm or a leg. Gary couldn't be sure but he'd fired at it anyway. As the dust quickly settled, all six bodies could be seen. Dat and Troy chose to double-check. Two VC attempted to struggle, using what was left of their arms for leverage. Another moaned.

P-h-u-t-t ...P-h-u-t-t ...P-h-u-t-t ...P-h-u-t-t ... Movement and sound ceased.

They returned to the cover of the ambush site, silently collected their weapons and equipment whilst Jaago and Gary kept watch then they vice-versa'd. There were two VC further down the trail who could double back and there was also no guarantee that these now six dead VC were alone, so the team wanted to quit as soon as possible.

For the first time since Jaago whispered, 'It's only two, Boss.' It broke silence.

The four debated for a moment, which route was best to take. Gary was 'Boss' but each man had a significant survival stake in important decisions. Each agreed the best way was the shortest at night especially the one with the easiest markers to follow.

Finally Gary said, "Okay. Let's scoot to the next rendezvous."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

With a nod, they checked and double-checked they had everything. Their destination lay across the track where very still bodies now clogged it, to another base position they had chosen. Half a mile due north from Nui Dat³, the small settlement of Bau Lac was the only habitation between Xuyen Moc and the Soui Soc. This tributary fed like all the others into the Song Rai. They had driven on the bridge over this large waterway three miles from Xuyen Moc.

North of Bau Lac, they'd ascertained, would most probably provide the next 'kill'.

As he stepped over the mangled remains of the VC, Gary's thoughts made a paradigm shift. Moments before these dismembered corpses had been laughing, joking, possibly thinking of loved ones... parents, wives, sweethearts and in their case, of ancestors.

They followed the more foliated edge of the cleared areas surrounding Xuyen Moc.

The team naturally kept tracks in sight but didn't use them. The moon had risen and cast its eerie but lucent glow, making travelling that night relatively easy and they had just over a mile to walk. More poignantly, Gary and his friends could have been the dead, his thoughts the same as theirs. Wishing as he frequently did, of home and of an end to war. Gary couldn't work out whether this was a 'good' contact or not.

From a soldier's point of view it would be considered a good one. They had after all survived and killed six of the enemy. They waited.

Gary checked his luminous, plastic 'Mickey Mouse' watch. "Okay. Let's move."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary led with his M-79 loaded with cannister. A clearing halted them. Jaago brought up the rear with his Garand. Dat with his SLR halted immediately behind Gary to check distance and compass bearing. Behind Dat, Troy double-checked each compass bearing. Nighttime reflexes had to be sharper than daytime so they kept weapons at the ready. Safety-catch off, because they'd have no time to do this if they struck a patrol. At night, ears 'listen' with more difficulty, easily distracted by the whipping of vines or branches across the head or face... or the sound of your own footfalls.

More familiar with the Vietnamese countryside and marching through his country at night, Dat proved their greatest asset. Gary regarded him an excellent soldier. With Dat's SLR on automatic firing thirty-round magazines, his weapon sounded more like a machine-gun and would confuse the enemy into thinking they had more than merely four men. One specially marked magazine he'd loaded one-on-one with tracer.

They'd been travelling carefully but at a reasonable clip, estimating they were halfway to their next point when mortars c-r-u-m-p-e-d behind them. It confirmed the two VC scouts they'd spotted and that the six dead were part of a much larger VC group. Mortar fire heralded at least a platoon-sized group if not a company, deciding on the size of the mortars. Luckily forward of the ambush site they'd left an hour ago.

Gary estimated they were fired at fifty-yard intervals. "About sixty millimetres. Probing for us, I'd say, judging by their dispersion. They are hoping to hit us unawares." No one disputed his assessment. It hastened their feet at the same time that it increased their 'security-consciousness'. At their destination they set up a new ambush site and slept with their ears open, straining for human footfalls.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Dawn, and the filtered blood-red rays of the sun augured a warm day but perhaps a bloody one. Whose blood the future would tell. As daylight arrived they saw fresh tracks everywhere. Hidden in dense foliage and off the side of another well-worn track, the four men decided not to eat. Gary had to go for a shit. Jaago protected him.

Gary dug a hole as unobtrusively as he could. The ground was soft and he could stand on the shovel's edge and work it in until he had a shovel-full of dirt, which he carefully placed to one side. He dug as far down as he dared, stopping to listen and to smell the air with Jaago. Eventually he'd dug far enough, squatted on his haunches.

Feeling vulnerable, he rested his weapon across his knees. Finished, he wiped his bum then pulled his pants up, relieved not to have been caught in that position. Gary quickly but carefully covered his shit with the clods of dirt he'd so carefully laid to one side then tamped it down. He carefully erased any signs of his presence and as he did he noticed a trip device similar to the ones he'd been taught to make at Kota Tinggi, the British Jungle Warfare Centre.

It was a snare for trapping small forest creatures.

Clearly they were close to the enemy. These snares the VC placed on their perimeter of a 'permanent' camp. The two increased their caution returning and told their mates.

They neither slept nor ate. Water they rationed. VC patrols moved around them. It had been a 'hair-raising day but dusk gave them some relief. The blazing sun and the constant 'freezing' of all movement, dried them out.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary could hardly find enough spittle to slake the dryness in his mouth. The inside of his nose felt parched. His skin had gone brittle and stretched from dehydration. He hadn't sweated for hours, even though the circumstances of their forced disclosure would normally have had Gary breaking into a watery, salty sweat-ness.

Again the moonlight gave them enough light to travel. Not a word had passed all day, just hand signals. These were used yet again to indicate they had to quit this place.

A large enemy group had to be close.

They'd deduced this from all the patrols they'd seen up close and further away, as well as the fresh tracks. They'd gone about three hundred yards when Jaago heard a returning patrol. He'd switched to the lead and Gary pulled up the rear. This patrol wasn't laughing and talking. Only the swishing of branches and sandalled footfalls gave them away when the four had instinctively paused to listen.

"Four of them." Gary whispered. "Take one each. Silencers and knives only."

The four moved to the edge of the brush keeping a tree between them and the enemy. Spaced about three feet apart they'd each be able to select one. Troy would take the first with Bessie after the whole patrol had all got into the killing ground.

The VC patrol came carefully but didn't look too far into the scrub, mainly to the front and rear. They must have assumed they were in reasonable proximity to their own base not to be too inquisitive. Gary and his team would never know.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Dat triggered the ambush, dropping 'rear-end Charlie' with a quiet ... s-s-s-p-h-u-t-t.

Simultaneously Gary leapt at the nearest VC from behind. His over-under he'd strapped ready-for-action on his shoulder but behind his back. Gary grasped the man around the throat with the fingers of his left hand, feeling for the soft space under the soldier's chin and wrenching it back in the same movement. His knife he struck immediately into the man's neck behind the windpipe and at the same instant

Gary sank his knife hard and deep back towards his own shoulder Then yanked hard. He felt the ripping, tearing then final slicing of the windpipe. His knife came free.

Gary realised he'd sliced into part of the jugular. Warm blood gushed across into his elbow. In a fluid movement he then completed his silent kill, striking into the man's back, up and under the ribcage, further into the VC's kidney then deeper into the lungs. It was over in ten seconds.

The man didn't have a chance to scream with his windpipe shredded. Gary slumped the VC onto his blade, heaved it firmly upward to make doubly sure then deliberately pushed the man sideways so that the weight of his body would fall off the blade. The man collapsed, twitched violently then sagged.

Troy, assured his man was dead, gave Gary's a coup de grace. Dat did the same for Jaago. Quickly and efficiently they completed their work, dragged the dead off the track, covered them with what branches lay on the ground. Whilst Troy and Dat kept watch. Gary and Jaago would have to clean themselves later.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Half an hour later, they reached the brushwood, low scrub that would lead them to the Soui Dong where they could clean up and have a rest. They kept to their favoured heavy-forested bush keeping the low scrub top their left. Tracks had petered out in this area and their intuition told them the area 'felt' clear of VC. The moon hid itself.

The running water revived Gary. He and Jaago first filled their two water bottles and plonked in the quinine tablets they carried whilst Troy and Dat stood guard. Placing his weapon on the ground beside him, ready for instant action, Gary, carefully so as not to make unnecessary noise, washed his head and face and rinsed his neckcloth. Then sponged his neck and the top of his head. Placed the wet cloth under his soft hat.

His face was clear but droplets dribbled down his neck. It felt luxurious. He and Jaago swapped places, refreshed, with Troy and Dat. No words were necessary. They went about their self-appointed tasks efficiently. Then the four rested, close, about a yard apart but feeling the presence of each in the intimate way of soldiers whose lives depended on each other's professionalism.

Next morning, they had an uneventful walk to the road junction on the edge of the rubber plantation, where the province Chief met them with their vehicle. Once clear of Xuyen Moc and the Song Rai, Gary relaxed for the first time.

He still didn't feel right. It hadn't been a 'good' patrol for him.

Something gnawed at his entrails. Something Bruce had said.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

APRIL: karma...

THE MICROPHONE ENHANCED THE GENTLENESS IN HER VOICE.

Pham translated as Thuyet sang couplets from a medieval Vietnamese love epic. But Gary knew Thuyet sang '*Kim van Kieu*' only for him. He felt sure they had shared similar love refrains in some previous life together.

Only the five, Troy, Dat, Pham, Jaago and Gary knew how deeply the he was in love with Thuyet. Both lovers knew even that could be four too many. Vietnam taught everyone to display characteristics of paranoia. So many VC had turned *chieu hoi* only to take what they had learned back to their original VC units. No Frenchman could be trusted, yet a Frenchman still ran Cyrno's, the friend's 'place for magic'. Those Frenchman who remained after 1965 were in league with the VC for their very survival, like the ones still managing the rubber plantations.

The substance of trust between the five comrades had been formed over many years. Each owed their life to the other. Two were father and son.

Gary dismissed the thoughts that plagued him and the constant fear of Thuyet's risk.

He concentrated on her voice and the mood she created in her words, none of which Gary understood without translation. Pham had been assigned their 'watchdog' for the night. It had been Troy's idea in the first place that the friends would roster themselves once Dat had told Troy the terrible dangers both lovers faced.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Troy and Jaago took turns in booking the room next door to Thuyet's with Gary. The two Vietnamese bunked on the other side. Dat explained to Thuyet, and Troy to Gary, that Thuyet's communist rank made it imperative she be protected. It had to seem that the two Vietnamese looked after 'family'. That could be better understood within Hotel Cyrno's 'upper class' Vietnamese environment. Once a month but sometimes only every two was the best the group could manage.

The full moon swung high in the sky and illuminated Thuyet's face. Lights on the open-air dance floor had been all but extinguished and only a few customers remained. In a back corner, Dat and Troy scrutinized any person close to Pham and Gary. In a further corner sat Jaago. He preferred to be alone and nursed Ski's Birretta.

The big Hungarian had finally completed his tour, as had Roger.

Gary's thoughts were entirely focussed on Thuyet, her voice and her meaning.

Yet images whistled past. He remembered. Ski's final party. What a 'whingding'. Ski had smashed his guitar as an ultimate gesture. Gave his Birretta to Jaago. Images of Roger and Ski leaving from Luscombe Field flitted past the TV screen of mind.

Ski had said sadly, "No regrets, Boss. Meet youz in OZ."

Roger added, "Don't forget, Skipper." He mimicked Simmo's voice. "If you put your fuckin' head up, you'll get it blown off. Keep it down and you'll survive." He smiled. They shook hands. Nostalgically, he added, " See you."

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Images of Michael, the postmaster at 1ATF, held Mind. Normally a teetotaler, he'd got 'paralytically' drunk after staying up for the whole night. They'd all watched the dawn. Then they'd sung 'Michael rowed the boat ashore, Alleluia'. Michael cried buckets of real tears, sat on the ground and pretended to 'row his boat home'.

Gary once again found full-on focus listening to Thuyet.

He stopped the flow of translation with a respectful wave. Gary then drank in her presence, pretending to watch the band, the tables and drifting his eyes over his friends without engaging in anything or anyone except... The One...

Without conscious awareness, Mind flicked another dimension. Suddenly Gary *knew*.

His Christian upbringing didn't allow him to think in Karmic terms. That would have been anathema. But he *knew* Thuyet and he had shared previous lives. Many times.

He had a clear vision. A mystical 're-living'.

Of being transported into another, previous world where they had been Priest and Priestess. In a culture he couldn't recognize ...but understood.

It wasn't a dream.

Genetic memories are stored in the deepest recesses of Mind.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Gary stood in a huge cathedral of a cave. Silence fell like an invisible mist. A bright shaft of light entered in the centre of a roof that arched into infinity. The only light, it enveloped them. Danced in scintillating colours shaping the crown on his head.

A high collar ringed his neck but opened in the V-shaped front, his robe held in place by an interlaced woven-silver thong. His ankle length robe shone in lightweight but clinging silk, burnished in gold on the inside and a deep shimmering purple on the outside. Underneath he wore a sapphire-blue, two-piece tunic. Around his neck, on the outside of his high collar, hung a tightly linked gold chain at the end of which a gold-encircled talisman blinked in the white spotlight. The Observer-Gary knew immediately that it was a 'fire-opal'. Larger than any he'd ever seen. Its ruby-redness flashed and squirmed like a live thing as the Actor-Gary moved.

A blood red that burned into Soul. She'd exposed her soul to his. Him to hers.

Now she knelt before him in meditation. They were in the middle of some mystical ceremony. His Beloved Priestess wore a dark head-shroud topping a purple, silken gown that sheltered an emerald-coloured dress. Her Madonna-like face peeked shyly, framed within the cowl. The exposed inside of her gown shimmered silver. Her neck shone with illuminating jewels. Sparkled as they coalesced into light. Diamonds.

Gary could vaguely see the cave was packed with worshippers. Bonded by shared mystery, he contained Thuyet's form within his heart.

They were spiritual lovers.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Dimly he perceived the congregation knew this and respected the celibacy they had both committed themselves to. A sense of the sacrosanct pervaded all. Gary's heart beat rhythmically. He outstretched both arms over her, protectively and in blessing. Thuyet's heart drummed in the same rhythm.. A halo of silver light enfolded her and its luminescence turned her into a shadow-shape within it.

Gary felt the crown on his head open like a funnel in total surrender. Divine love replaced all earthly forms. Thuyet rose, stood beside him and they became the centre of a spiritual mandala. Golden light absorbed in silver. Light moving gently through the rainbow to its Alpha and Omega of white opaqueness.

An awed murmur swelled, as a calm ocean breaks softly on a sand-filled beach. Quickly as it had risen it retreated to the whisper of a thousand breaths as one. Gary felt a healing heat in the centre of both palms and directed it outward to the waiting acolytes. They glowed in a golden aura as they turned to heal the silent faith-filled.

The sick of Gary's world had waited patiently. 'Love-light' glowed. The healthy were filled with a sense of well being. The sick were embalmed in love. Some experienced miracle. Other injured and sick bore their illness or injury as a mark of 'Grace'.

Some turned to embrace their neighbour. Others wept, silently. All experienced 'presence'. Some interpreted it as God. Others as compassion. The vision dissolved.

Experience over, it returned to the deepness of genetic memory.

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Yet a vague memory remained. Gary and Thuyet had shared something depthless.

The others already knew they were in love and worried for the lovers. When Thuyet returned they desperately tried not to hold hands. Furtive, they looked across the table.

Pham talked to Thuyet hoping to relieve the burden of their secret love. All failed.

“It’s time to move.” A sense of the covert reigned. On cue, Troy and Dat arrived at Gary’s table and exchanged polite banter. Pham left with Thuyet as prearranged.

Jaago joined the group for a final nightcap. Troy escorted Gary to his room. After a discreet interval Pham knocked on Gary’s door. Gary glanced down the corridor. Troy kept watch. Jaago guarded the other end.

A warmth flooded from him to his friends in the corridor as Gary mentally thanked the steps his friends were prepared to take. They wanted to protect his Love, Thuyet.

Thuyet, still dressed, rose to meet him with a smile as he entered.

He turned to thank Pham but he’d already disappeared.

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Gary closed the door softly and carefully turned the lock as though not to wake any sleepers. Thuyet's hands were first to touch him then suddenly, breathlessly they were in each other's arms. They held tightly, not wanting to let go. Wanting to merge one with the other so that the deception could end.

Gary whispered into her neck, "I want to dance in the light, kiss you on the street and show the world how much I love you, Thuyet."

Thuyet's tears wet his neck but neither budged.

"I'm only on leave for these two days and only for this night. I must leave in the morning, Gary my love. Pham will get me to the airport so that I can get back to Base Area 702. I must be there by nightfall the next night after tomorrow. The last part is a difficult and dangerous track, my Love."

Thuyet said this matter-of-factly yet it sent cold shivers down the nape of his neck.

Danger clung so close to her each time they met that parting made him fearful. Apart from her, his mind played terrible scenarios. Gary knew her base was on the South Vietnam side of the Cambodian border and somewhere west of Pleiku.

Gary knew Thuyet lived in 'Tiger Country'. It literally swarmed with ARVN troops. Gary tried, with difficulty, to dismiss negative thoughts.

Thuyet confessed again that she was a Vietminh officer, in the III corps area.

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As though reading his mind, Thuyet said, "Live only for moments we're together."

They kissed, gently and longingly. Remaining standing and without disengaging their lips, they slowly undressed each other until clothes littered the floor around. Reluctantly, they parted, held hands and gazed into each other's eyes in the half-light of the bedroom lamp. A smile lit both their faces. They hardly dared breathe.

"Hello, my Love." Gary was first to speak.

"Hello, my Love." Thuyet returned.

The morning was dark when they awoke, still linked.

Thuyet wanted to share her history. Gary wasn't sure.

She continued, "I love you. I have never said that to anyone before. I want you to know me. What I do, where and who I am. I don't want to hold any secrets from you, Gary. I am afraid. For me that I may be killed. I am afraid for you, too. I don't want to lose you. I feel I have waited my whole life for you. Every time we meet may be our last. I want to know who you are. Not just as a lover but as a real person."

Gary replied, "I love you too, Thuyet, with all my heart and soul. I trust you with my life. I love you too much to keep secrets from you. I am a Company Commander and stationed with 1ATF in Phouc Tuy province, which you know."

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“And I know you are Uc Da Loi.” Thuyet laughed. “You are not American. I have read about Australia since I first met you and it seems to be a huge country.”

Gary grinned at her. “You’ve done your homework well, My Love. My country has just over ten million people and yours has over fifteen in the South and a bit more in the North. Much bigger than OZ.” Then he laughed. “And you are right. We are not American. Most, like me, have come from Europe. Many have come from the United Kingdom. I was born in London before the war with Germany and I lived there until I was seven, went to Wales until I turned fifteen then went back to London for a year.”

“You moved a lot.” Thuyet said, whimsically. “So you were originally English?”

Gary moved his arm to let Thuyet snuggle onto his chest. “That’s right, Thuyet. I went to school in Paris in 1951. I left to live in London a year later.” She lifted her head to look at him and his heart skipped a beat. “You are so beautiful, Thuyet. I don’t know whether you know it but each time I look at you I feel I’m falling in love again.” He kissed her on her forehead. “I arrived in Australia in 1953 and joined the Army two years later. As you know, I first came to Vietnam two years ago.”

She snuggled closer and her tresses tickled Gary’s nose with her hair. “Imagine.” Thuyet grinned mischievously, “I was seven years old when you went to live in Paris.” She played with the hairs on his chest, twisting and turning them with her finger. “I lived in Hanoi until I left home at fifteen then joined the Army the next year in 1960, putting my age up to join. All went well until President Johnson escalated the war in 1965. Life became very hard after that.”

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“We have something in common. I left home at sixteen. As the eldest I had to bring money home so that we could survive. We’d only just arrived in Australia and life was difficult. I have always been glad I left home when I did. It gave me an independence I’ve always loved. It’s a hard life and the sooner you get into it the better.” Gary laughed, humourlessly. “It sure made me appreciate home more.”

Thuyet had gone silent. Gary sensed the change.

“Am I correct in thinking that your reasons for leaving were driven by sadness?”

“Yes. Compelled to leave home...” sadness percolated her silence. “I met Mai...”

Thuyet paused. “... my friend for a long time. Mai loved my Elder Brother, Vinh.”

Thuyet’s silence lasted nearly a full minute. Gary waited, patiently.

Eventually, Thuyet spoke with a heavy heart. “It’s a crazy war, Mon chérie. The Northern Communists tortured my favourite brother, Phouc. But they are my people.”

She shook her head sadly. “We talk of One Country?” Then cried quietly. “The South Vietnamese tortured Mai to death. Southern Nationalists murdered her, for what?”

Gary pulled away enough to look into her face. “Compelled to leave home...?” He had caught her earlier words and they’d stuck in his brain, unexplained. Gary watched Thuyet’s tears well up. “What compelled you to leave home, My Love?”

“Grandfather’s son, the eldest left at home.” She spat, “Elder Brother.” She paused.

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“Grandfather’s son?”

Thuyet shook her head as if to rid the thoughts “My Elder Brother, Xong wanted me.”

Gary frowned. *Where have I heard that name before?* He heard Thuyet still speaking.

“Xong is the reason I left home. I had to leave to escape him. He had already raped my best friend, Duyen. I never knew until she told me one time when Duyen and I met on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Xong intended to rape me too. He’s a horrible brute.”

Gary’s frown intensified. *I know that fucking name. Where have I heard it before?*

Suddenly it hit him. He remembered... *Thuyet is talking about the guy in My Tho that Dat had ...* Dat’s words sprung into his mind as though it had been yesterday... “The bastard knows. His virginity is gone forever. Xong will never be the same again.”

Gary recalled being puzzled. “Xong? I thought his name was Nguyen?”

Dat had snarled, “I knew that piece of shit in North Vietnam... He gave my brother’s daughter hell until she fled home. He raped her best friend.”

So Dat is Thuyet’s Uncle, who in turn is Pham’s Father. Bloody Hell. Xong the Eldest Son of Dat’s Father raped Duyen, now Thuyet’s best friend. In fact Dat is probably Xong’s stepbrother and Dat. He had tortured Xong, then handed him over to the White Mice in Saigon and Xong would be lucky to be alive today? “Wow.”

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Thuyet started. "Que dit-tu? What did you say, Gary?"

"I said... 'Wow!' That means I have just made some amazing connections."

"What connections, mon cher?"

"C'il est seulement le fils du Grandpère est Xong. Suis-je correctement, ma chérie?"

"Oui." Then softly, "Bien sûr."

"Xong raped your friend best Duyen. I've already met Duyen a few times, n'est pas? Pham's father is Colonel Dat. I met him in Dat Do in Phouc Tuy province?"

Thuyet frowned. "Bien sur, mais?..." then looked away.

"Your Grandfather is Colonel Dat's Father. That makes Dat and Xong ...?"

"Brothers." Thuyet's word tumbled out.

"Has Dat told you the latest about Xong?"

Thuyet sat up. Looked Gary straight in the eye. "What do you mean?" She'd tensed.

Carefully, Gary re-phrased the words. "Has Dat spoken to you lately ... about Xong?"

He realised he'd have to be careful. "Has your Uncle spoken at all about Xong?"

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“Why would he?” Thuyet spoke very quietly. “Non. Que lui a dire a moi?”

“Connai-tu le Colonel Dat knew about Xong?... Xong’s rape and attempted rape?”

Thuyet’s hands flew to her face. “Mon Dieu.” She coloured crimson. “Non.”

Gary held her shoulders gently, noting her distress. “Well, Darling. Il connais.”

Thuyet collapsed onto Gary’s shoulder and wept. She brushed her tears away.

“Thuyet, darling, it’s okay. Xong is out of your life... pour tous les jours.”

She looked intently at him. “Xong. Out of my life... for good? What does that mean?”

Gary decided to prevaricate a little, hiding Dat’s complicity. “Mon ami Troy travaille pour le CIA. He captured Xong. Le batard is mixed up with black-marketeering and serious crimes. Xong etait interrogee par les Police Speciale en My Tho then handed to the internal security people in Saigon. Troy believed Xong would be lucky to be still alive because if he survived Saigon, they’d send him back to North Vietnam. Their internal security people want him too. That’s all I know.”

The relief on Thuyet’s face made the fib worthwhile. “So, the reason Xong wasn’t in Hanoi for Grandfather’s funeral was that he must have been sent to the South and got caught up here. I decided to go to Grandfather’s funeral to prove to myself that Xong no longer had any control over me and that I had outgrown my fear for him.”

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Gary decided, "Time to stop for a pot of tea and breakfast."

Afterwards they shared the shower. Thuyet had never experienced showering with another person before and coyness overtook her. Gary's tenderness won the day. He soaped her all over and before long she giggled and tittered like a young girl, having, in the excitement of this new experience, forgotten about Xong.

After both had soaped and sloshed and had fun showering, Gary got some 'Baby oil' and, under the hot water, slowly, sensuously oiled Thuyet's body. He took special care and time massaging her breasts and abdomen, spent a long time oiling her buttocks and back then turned so that Thuyet could repeat the same for him.

Drying each other tenderly with a soft towel and patting each other's wetness gently, they fondled and loved each other back into bed. Thuyet squirmed in delight as Gary continued massaging her well-oiled body. Thuyet learned quickly. Loved much. Sensitively stroked and massaged Gary until they lay quiet in each other's arms.

Xong's name never occurred again. As though their shower cleansed her of him.

Pham knocked discreetly and brought them breakfast. He'd ordered French baguette and coffee. The two lovers sat facing each other across the corner of a small table with a beaker of water and two filled glasses in the middle. A lime had been squeezed into the water and lots of ice added to it. Gary and Thuyet held hands.

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Thuyet wanted to talk about the happy times with her friend. "Once Mai and I went on a picnic, Gary. The sun shone and shimmered over a bridge that divided North and South Vietnam. I remember saying to Mai, 'One day there will be a new bridge there. It will be one colour. It will say that 'Vietnam is indivisible.' 'Vietnam is at last free.' It is 'One country.' The hardships and the losses we suffer will finally be behind us and we can stop living in caves and in deep underground trenches. We wanted to be alive when, at last, we could breathe the clear air of 'One Vietnam' for the first time in two thousand years. Then my father and mother can finally be at rest."

"So, did you get military training or were you exempted, Thuyet?"

"We did military and nurses training. In 1962, I was told I'd be moving South to the 702 Special Zone. Given a knapsack, two sets of uniforms, a pot and some tin cans we went by train to Thanh Hoa. We crossed the river by ferryboat. Then I walked the Trail with my unit to the area east of Qui Nhon. My unit commander then, Nguyen Anh Bao who was killed last year in 1965, walked with us and earned great respect."

Thuyet paused to remember him and her tortured and murdered friends. In the corner of the room was a small Chinese Buddhist altar with incense sticks in a bowl. She got up, walked slowly over, lit three joss sticks and muttered prayers over each. She held her hands together in prayer then returned to the table, composed.

"We rested by day and walked by night to avoid the bombers. Many trucks also moved at nighttime. One time some trucks were strafed by rockets killing, maiming and setting trucks alight. Destruction on the Trail was terrible. The bombs missed us."

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Gary emptied his coffee cup. "I'm glad the bombs missed you, Thuyet." He grinned.

Thuyet smiled for the first time. "Good things happened. We made hardship into fun. Some nights we played the children's game, Dragons and Snakes."

"What children's game is that, Thuyet, Dragons and Snakes?"

"It was so dark that we had to hang onto the clothes of the person in front. Like in the game I played as a child. It took two months to get to our destination east of Darlat."

"You walked all the way? How many of you were there?"

"In my group there were more than a hundred but they dropped off at different locations on the way. Mine was the furthest South."

Gary's fascination had him asking more questions. "Women only, Thuyet or were there men with you? It must have been a hard walk?"

"Our feet suffered badly. Especially the young girls like me. The Trail had only been started. Construction, mainly by hand, left the track full of rocks and stones that wrecked our shoes. Often our feet would become badly infected. The men made us sandals out of car tyres because ordinary shoes didn't last."

"You mean, what we called Ho Chi Minh sandals? I thought only the Vietminh wore them, only the regular soldiers."

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“That’s right. I am Vietminh.”

She looked Gary straight in the eyes as though to challenge him.

“I am a member of the Signals Branch of the Vietminh. I work with B18 Signals Unit. But that was afterwards. As a raw recruit I learned to shoot early in the military courses but women attended to the setting of broken bones and dealing with pressure waves of bombing. That’s the most demanding work we had to do.”

“Pressure waves?”

“They are terrible, Gary. I had taken time off and sat in a café near my special communications unit. Without warning a strong wind picked me up and threw me against the front bar. The first time I’d experienced pressure waves. You never hear the big bombs until too late. They drop from high in the sky. The earth shook me like a dog shaking a rat and plaster fell of the wall around me covering me in white dust. It took me a few minutes to realize what it was. A huge bomb had dropped closeby.”

“Mon Dieu. What did you do, Darling.”

Thuyet absently nibbled on her baguette. Then she sipped her black coffee after first sniffing its aroma. Gary could see her mind was elsewhere, but remained silent. Unaware she had eaten, Thuyet continued, “I raced to the nearest underground shelter fearing another bomb might be dropped, lifted the cover and found a whole family cringing below inside the shelter.” She grabbed a glass of water from the table.

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Thuyet drank slowly. "They looked alive, in good health and looked like they'd been sunbathing." She rubbed her forehead. "Quand j'ai regarde attentivement, the heat that preceded the blast had coloured their skin a chocolate brown. It had even singed and curled their hair." She paused at the horror she'd seen. Then, "pressure waves had sucked the air out of everyone's lungs." The terrible images filled her mind.

Thuyet put her head in her hands for a minute. She struggled to continue. "J'ai eu de la chance. I'd been caught in the cafe and struck by the blast. It had given me protection from the pressure wave and the heat. Si je m'etais cachée en refuge I'd have died of suffocation and burns with them."

Gary's face turned ashen. "What did you do then, Thuyet?" That this beautiful woman should be subjected to such horrors made him hate the war. "How did you react, Darling? It must have been terrible for you?"

"Je me suis debriller mieuse que les autres. Many of the rescuers cried when they came upon the people. The screaming of the victims made me want to shut my ears."

"Were there many survivors?"

Thuyet spoke as if from a great distance. "Many had been caught like that family and frozen, in their moment of death, in whatever pose or action they were doing when the pressure wave, heat and blast hit them. J'ai fait ce que j'ai pius mais impuisante. Some, whose breath had been sucked out, were suffocating." She'd paused. Nibbled absently again on her baguette not noticing that Gary had long ago eaten his.

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Gary acknowledged that Thuyet needed to talk. "Quest-que tu a fait, chérie?"

"I pumped air into their lungs by blowing into their mouth. Some of them had seared lungs and what I did only made things worse." Her head dropped. "Pas faire rien."

"I can only imagine what you went through, Thuyet. Comme débrouillé toi?"

"I went back to my barracks and je pleurais tant. For a whole week I could only vomit, cry and finally finished up in hospital with a high fever."

Gary's chair squeaked as he moved it alongside Thuyet's. Protectively, he placed his arm around her shoulder and held her whole body as it trembled. After some minutes she recovered then leaned her head on Gary's shoulder.

"Did you take long to recover?"

"Je restée a l'hôpital pour trois semaines. I couldn't sleep at nights. Je vois toujours le carnage, le destruction terrible. All the bodies and the survivors with their clothes and skin burned off." Tears formed. "L'images n'allais jamais de moi. Never left me."

Gary kissed her forehead. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yes. I need to get them out of my head, Darling. Talking really helps."

"Va t'en, ma Chérie. I want to hear."

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“I’ve told no one before except Mai. She’d arrived just after but we didn’t talk much. We had too much reconstruction to do and I’d been just promoted. She came to congratulate me and to help but couldn’t stay long.”

Thuyet paused and sipped her coffee. Sniffed. Wiped her nose unconsciously.

Gary spoke quietly. “Go on, My Love.”

Thuyet leaned against Gary’s shoulder. “Heads rested sur la terre. I thought qu’il etait les peuples, buried up to the neck. I tried to dig them out only to find that they were only heads. Resting where they’d fallen from people’s bodies. The rest of their bodies I’d find somewhere else, charred beyond recognition.” She put her hand to her face. “And the smell. I’ll never forget the smell. Burned bodies have a sickly aroma that cloys, hangs in the air then clings to you. You can’t shake it off nor can you scrub it off.” She shook her head to clear it. “Quand je dit, I smell it. Pour le longtemps”

“I know the smell, Thuyet. It’s the most terrible of smells. It sticks to you.”

“Bien sûr, mon Cher. Mai visited me once she’d heard je suis en l’hôpital. She told me later I looked like a... what you say... like a zombie?”

Gary nodded dully, caught up in images stimulated by Thuyet’s experience. He pulled himself out of his meanderings and gently said, “How terrible for you.”

“Mai had laughed then. Said I looked like a ghost from the dead.”

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Gary gently pinched her, "You feel real to me, my Love."

"Apparently, I just stared into the distance, pas dit, not even responding to Mai at first." Thuyet smelled the aroma of her coffee. "But Baby Bombs were as bad."

"Baby bombs?"

She shuddered. "The ones that pierced the body with hundreds of fragments."

Gary hugged her close. "You must have been terrified."

"On the Trail I realised how protected I had been by Grandfather in Hanoi. The constant walking, the countless interruptions pas'que les bombes. J'ai desolé. I felt totally powerless. C'est impossible pour l'influence. I thought I'd would die. I hoped for survival and if I died I just hoped it would be quick."

"Had you anticipated anything like what you suffered?"

"Non. Before we left we were told that we'd be hailed as 'liberators'. Told over three quarters of the South loved us and that all the people were happy to help us eject the colonialists and happy to be freed by the Front. We found out this was a lie."

"Really? Mon Dieu. Even in 1963 I met many Battalion commanders who wanted to take the war to the North. The villagers I met were not happy with the infiltration of regular North Vietnamese. They saw it as a takeover by terror and intimidation."

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“We found out that the situation is getting worse, not better, each day. Our troops slink around in the jungles, hide underground to escape detection and the bombs. Instead of ‘Freedom Fighters’ welcomed by the South we had to train in deception and camouflage. Our troops fight, not alongside the ARVN against the Americans but against both. As these get stronger our forces grow weaker. Instead of ‘victory in our day’ we have to be prepared for a long drawn-out war against larger forces. But we are committed. We are a long way from home and we have no options. We must continue what we have started. I believed that our cause was a just one.”

“And now?” Gary felt overwhelmed by the sadness in her voice, by Thuyet’s resignation to continue a long war that she sounded ‘helpless and powerless’ against. “It must make you feel sad, my Love. The words you use make me very depressed.”

Her face looked forlorn. “My word, Gary, is ‘Betrayed’.” She wept. Tears gushed.

Thuyet and Gary lived only for their stolen moments. Both knew the risks.

Perhaps they’d meet again in Saigon, in another three weeks?

They’d keep in touch through Pham... somehow.

Troy had said he might be able get her out of the country. Within a week... Perhaps?

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Gary called to see Pham. A message had been left at 1ATF. Instantly, Gary knew Pham's face told him something serious had happened. Pham took Gary aside. They walked to an open space under a tree and near some bushes.

"Did you know that my friend Hai had been killed?"

Taken aback, Gary said softly, "Yes. I meant to..."

Pham interrupted. "Thuyet's favourite brother, Phouc, is dead. The VC killed him in retaliation for Hai's death. Uncle Dat warned me I'm now on the VC 'hit list'. Hai was the Deputy Commander of D445 and worked closely with my Elder Brother Vinh. He's a very senior Vietminh officer and is in Hanoi making preparations for top secret coordinated attacks on the South by the VC and the Vietminh."

Gary didn't know what to say or how to respond to this important information. "I'm so ... so very sorry, Pham." His voice faltered. "I... When? ... What are you going to do, Pham? ... What can you do? ... Can I do anything to help?"

"I told you when we first met that my family will be at risk if I help you, Gary. The VC know you and I have a good relationship and they questioned me once before."

Gary felt trapped. "Pham... I... What can I...?"

Pham continued relentlessly. "Your relationship with Thuyet has put her life in jeopardy, too. The VC don't care. They are terrorists. You can't protect me, Gary."

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“Pham, I understand your position. No matter how hard I want the facts to change, your family is at risk. The Communists command the night in Hoa Long and Baria.”

His friend’s face agonized. “Don’t forget Dat Do, Binh Gia and Xuyen Moc, Gary. It’s a price we Vietnamese pay for our friendship with you and with the Americans. You need to know that as soldiers we risk death and know that risk. Remember Khai?”

“I understand what you are saying, Dawai. We couldn’t stop his torture and death. I just hope that Phouc’s death came quickly. He was a good man.”

“They staked Phouc out and lit their campfire on his chest, then cooked their meal.”

Gary blanched. “Oh God. Does Thuyet know this?” His guts wrenched.

“No. And she must never know it, Gary. We can save her that agony at least. I must leave for Saigon. This is probably the last time you will see me, Gary. I cannot afford to be seen with you or with anyone opposing the Vietminh. In Saigon I have friends who will look after me. The big city is safer to hide in for my family.”

The two friends embraced and shook hands. It was a soldier’s farewell.

Gary waited for Thuyet.

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In the far distance of his mind he idly listened to the hum of the ceiling fan.

He must have drifted off. *Thuyet is late.*

Suddenly awake, a sense of panic hit him and he grasped at his chest. Pain seared through him as it had done once before then left him, exhausted and sweaty. He felt disorientated and couldn't work out where he was. Gary turned his wrist to check the time. *Thuyet is late. Very late.*

Memory returned. Gary leapt up out of bed... quickly recalled he was at Cyrno's in Vunggas. He relaxed. He glanced out the window and saw it was already dark. He had been asleep for six hours. *Dinnertime... Mon Dieu... No Thuyet ...yet.*

Gary looked around idly as he drank his liqueur. *Thuyet?*

Gary longed for her... waited... and wondered?

Troy called. Gary sensed some seriousness in his voice but Troy wanted to wait so that he could tell Gary face-to-face. Gary decided to leave for Vunggas early and explained he'd 'get there within the hour' but Troy couldn't make it until six.

Troy booked an early dinner at Cyrno's.

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Gary alerted his new 2i/c at Headquarters. "There's been a stoush at Binh Bah, Boss."

The 2i/c's friendly face broke Gary's reverie. "Squizzy rang. He's got seven dead down at the market-place in Hoa Long."

"And?" Gary couldn't see the connection at first.

"He thought it a good time. They are closeby and you might like our diggers to view, first-hand, some VC dead. Part of the 'familiarization process' he called it."

"Actually that's not a bad idea, Mate. How many reos can we scramble?"

"Probably about forty, Boss."

"It's good timing. Troy called minutes ago. I'll take the boys to Hoa Long then keep going, Be back first thing in the morning, Mate. What've we got as transport?"

"I can give you two GMC's and a Land Rover in addition to your own. I wouldn't mind taking charge and bringing them back myself. Squizzy always has such interesting stories. Seven's not a bad haul, Skipper, for a two-man band."

"Okay, Mate. Please yourself. I'll get in the front, You pull up the rear, Okay?"

Gary chose to drive himself with Jaago as 'shotgun'. In Hoa Long he waived the GMCs to a stop. Pham's compound looked quiet. Pham had left already to be with his family. At the market place Gary stopped, dismounted, and with his 'Spirit-Guard'.

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He made his way to the front of the crowd. Clear of the crowd a grotesque scene assaulted his eyes. Seven bodies, each torn and blasted, covered in stagnant blood and powdered with red dust, lay in contorted shapes. They had been unceremoniously dumped on the concrete slab in front of the Market.

Flies swarmed and buzzed, women wailed and children cried. Old men looked blank.

Two men with weapons at the ready, stood fronting the crowd. A translator informed the crowd what one of the Aussies was saying.

Gary spotted 'Squizzy' berating the crowd. "Tell your young men that if they want to shoot at Uc Da Loi they will be killed. Any VC we kill will be brought here to your Market where you will see that we mean what we say." He stood, feet apart like some ancient warrior. "We want to free you from terror. We are here to save you from VC. Uc Da Loi can be trusted to free you from VC taxes and selective murder. We are not here to torture, maim or to kill you. Our role is to protect those who want freedom."

When he'd finished his harangue Squizzy sauntered over to Gary. "Good dye, Boss. Good ta see youz to this neck 'o' the fuckin' woods on such a fine summer's day."

"I wuz on my way to Vungga's, Squizzy." Gary wrinkled his nose as the other soldier turned one of the VC over with his foot. "Thanks for the call."

"I reckoned it'd be good fer your rookies ta see this, Boss. Let your guys step forward and see the mess our gear makes of human beings."

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Squizzy stood square, balanced on both feet with a 'marine-style' haircut. His weapon always moved where his eyes looked and he squinted yet didn't miss anything. Skinny, like Jaago, blond and blue-eyed, Gary likened him to his 'Spirit-Guardian'.

Gary waved to his 2i/c. They had a quick 'O' Group.

His soldiers came forward in groups of ten. The Vietnamese crowd continued their mourning and keening cries. Squizzy took the first group over and showed each corpse, explaining the damage. One he showed to Gary had been half blown away.

"This one triggered the ambush. He came over for an early pee and picked the bush I hid behind. Luckily for me he wasn't looking. He'd been talking to a mate when he decided he needed a pee and walked with his head turned. I waited for him to open his fly then let him have it with the M-79 on 'shotgun.'" He laughed. "I blew his crutch all over his mates. The Claymores killed them before they could complain."

Looking at the corpses, Gary could only think... *this is butchery.*

He'd seen worse but there seemed something sadistic and callous in publicly parading these bodies in front of their parents and family. Whilst the soldiers filed past each body the villagers kept clear, probably not wanting to make too public their ownership of a VC. Gary felt sure the villagers knew anyway. He sensed tragedy.

Above all, it offended a dignity toward the dead. Yet Gary knew it would be no use to articulate his feelings. They had to remain in silence unless shared with his friends.

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One can only develop a meaningful philosophy of Death once repeatedly exposed to it. Gary believed its intellectualization made for arrogance and insensitivity. The young men in his unit needed to see Death up close. As real, not as some vague idea.

They had to come to terms with Death as individuals. For almost all of them this would be the first time they'd seen, let alone been close to, a dead person. It seemed right that they should be alerted to the effect of the weapons they carried.

Gary thought, War is cruel and iniquitous. The sooner they witness Death 'as it is' the better. Training, no matter how good, rarely prepares the soldier for his first look.

In death the VC soldiers weren't serene, as so often happens in later depictions in art. Their features half-swallowed screams they could never have uttered. Their limbs jutted in grotesque angles, twisted and broken. The whiteness of shattered bone stood stark against the blood-soaked clothing. One had grasped his spilled, stinking guts in a paroxysm of instant agony. Another gaped smashed teeth in his rictus. One had only half a head. A small ooze of brain marked where the rest had once nestled.

"The one at back's a female." Squizzy's epitaph. "You can see here..." He pointed. That's what an M-16 round makes. A small hole in the front..." He turned her over with his boot and pointed with the end of his M-16. "Look here, where it exited."

She didn't look womanly. Congealed in gore, its exploded shoulder-blade gaped.

"She would have died instantly."

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One of the soldiers broke free, found the corner of a hut and spewed. Dogs raced to be first to clean up his mess, barking and struggling with each other. White-faced he wiped his mouth with his neckerchief then removed it, throwing it among the dogs.

This war disgusts me. The VC are so young. Same age as my soldiers, now so brave.

Jaago held back in an aura of silence. He looked bemused but distant. So close, Gary saw his contracted pupils. And his stillness, as if he listened for his breath.

The last soldiers didn't dawdle. One didn't even want to look and had to be ordered forward to see. The parade done, Gary was glad to see everyone aboard their trucks and for his 2i/c to return to 1ATF. He felt a suffocation. Something not right?

An acid worked within him, ate away at reason. We are here to defend these people. Against what? We are killing their best and fairest with our best and fairest. We are eroding the very values we promote. Can there be too much of Death?

He remembered the difficulty with the young girl his unit had accidentally shot. The soldiers had wanted to do something in reconciliation and had collected almost a thousand dollars. Gary hadn't consulted 1ATF Staff. This was a cleansing of a terrible crime. The soldiers had to do this themselves. They'd appointed Gary to pay the money direct to the old lady, which he'd done.

Major Frank Crowe had found out. As the DAAG and QMG responsible for deaths, burials and compensation Frank felt an unwise precedent had been set. A thousand dollars made a fortune. 'Some of these people are lucky to make ten dollars a month.'

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Was Frank right? But how is conscience appeased? Money cannot redeem us. How much is a beautiful young girl worth? The soldier's felt good. The parents better.

Troy said, that night, "We are on the heavy hammer on top, the VC are the anvil underneath and the people? They are the heated blade in between. We hope they are reformed then beaten into shape by the great blows of our hammer. It's up to us how well we mould them into the healthiness of freedom and liberty. The Communists want them to be tropistic: to turn this way and that to the most recent flutter of the communist flame. They don't want them cast to stand alone like a well-honed blade."

But that was not why Troy had asked Gary to come to Cyrno's.

"My time here has been cut short. I can tell you that Dat thinks plans are being made in Hanoi to bring this war to a quick close. They have abandoned Giap. Chinese generals lead Northerners and Russian advisors and they believe the Vietminh are strong enough to take us on in pitched battles with regular forces. We both think they are crazy. The Vietminh cannot compete with the massive resources that American generals can bring to bear on static forces. We are not the French."

Gary thought for a moment. "Giap's guerrilla way is best against massive airstrike and the incredible weight of your artillery and gunships, Troy. He needs to learn that his Dien Bien Phu tactics won't work against American troops. Giap's losses would be horrendous. The Khe Sanh operation that started on Kapyong Day this year is an example. President Johnson is terrified it'll turn into a mini-Dien Bien Phu. The anti-Vietnam moratoriums are starting to worry him."

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Dinner arrived as they spoke. Gary's experiences earlier in the day lived in images in his mind as he spoke and ate. But the smells and aromas of the meal titillated his taste buds and the juices flowed until his jaw ached. His appetite had never been jaded.

Gary thought it a response to always being hungry during WWII after London's evacuation. Especially Wales, where mining valleys taught him the aridity of poverty.

"Shit, Troy. This is dining in luxury, Mate." Gary's eyes lit up as crab appeared.

"I've organized *Thit Kho To* to follow, Gary. Hope you like it, Mate? It's clay pot meal and Cyrno's specialize in crab and love to produce exquisite clay pot dinners."

Gary's attempts to work out what the meal consisted of also amused Troy. "I don't think the Viets can cook without *nouc mam* and sugar any more than the Chinese without MSG or the Indonesians without peanut paste."

Troy ordered a French red wine. Cyrno's had an excellent cellar, a rarity in Vietnam. Gary had got used ice in his wine. After the main course. Troy returned to their topic.

"The spectre of Dien Bien Phu haunts the US Administration. Lyndon B. ordered the Khe Sanh 'bridgehead' was not to be overrun. Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs reassured Johnson that the base can be defended indefinitely. Operation Niagara unleashed massive B-52's and tactical aircraft assaults. Vietminh casualties have been enormous. The worst day for the US Marines at Khe Sanh was ten days after Don died. It cost forty-eight Marines. God knows how many enemy died."

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“Which means of course at least three times that number of bodies dragged away.”

Gary’s real anxiety showed. “But what about you, Troy? Where are you off next?”

“I’m being shipped to the Embassy in Saigon. What I’ve seen of Embassy security, a Boy Scout could assassinate the Ambassador and no one would know what to do.”

“With all the expertise the CIA they should’ve taken care of that by now, surely.”

“People become complacent, Gary. I had a looksee. It’s so slack you wouldn’t believe it, Mate. Security there needs a good kick up the ass and the Ambassador knows I’m just the boy for the job. He got that from my background in the early days.”

“God! It’ll be a complete turnaround for you, Troy. From the bush to the jungle.”

“I agree with you on one point, Gary. It’ll be a complete change from teaching Slopes to shoot straight. But if I kick enough arse, I’ll make more enemies than friends.”

“I’ll miss you, you old bastard. When are you off?”

“Next Week.”

“Shit a brick. Lat’s have a final sortie then, Troy.”

“You’re on, Matey.”

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MAY: dead men don't dance ...

HOT AND DRY DAYS MOVED RELENTLESSLY TO THE MONSOON WET

The long line of soldiers snaked along a path through the Hoa Long huts, slowly. Gary felt relaxed. He and Jaago had planned this operation for days.

Four platoons, each of forty infantry soldiers, moved in different directions outward from the centre of the village to create the anchors of a spider's web. A fifth platoon, the 'spider', surrounded the market place as a reserve. Determined to establish a large 'presence' in Hoa Long, each platoon moved to the outskirts of the village along the spokes of the 'web'. They consciously projected an overt signal that the soldiers would return to 1ATF. Covertly, two selected groups set up ambush positions

This deception plan allowed a platoon to be dropped off along the perimeter.

Gary and Jaago in the past had tramped these paths with other troops on many occasions. They planned the routes taken by each platoon and knew the terrain of Hoa Long intimately. They'd noticed pathways through the barbed-wire entanglements surrounding the perimeter of the village and guessed their use.

Villagers needed access to their rice paddy. Over time, as the ARVN relaxed their vigilance, the villagers would naturally take the shortest route. These had congealed into established tracks, making VC access easy, in and out of the village.

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Dropped off on the eastern side of Hoa Long one of the platoons set up a strong ambush position. Gary, Jaago and Troy decided they'd form a second ambush site. Just the three friends, with Jaago doubling as radio-operator. They'd take the western side so that the platoon commander on the opposite side could operate independently.

Previous patrols had located a suspicious convergence of tracks. The Platoon would take that posy. Gary wanted their small ambush party to act independently.

Troy came aboard at Hoa Long with his starscope. Officially an 'Observer', they intended a replay of their 'rabbit-shooting' expedition without the angst that had preceded it. This time they'd be part of a regular 1ATF patrol. Task Force had been alerted and everything approved to 'GO'.

The village echoed of clanging pots, dogs barking at the soldiers, the odd radio blaring Vietnamese music and the slow, measured tramp of army boots. Only the muffled clink of metal betrayed weapons, Aussie training back home had drummed in the need to have covered dogtags with black tape, hidden shiny bits with camouflage or black felt pens. Gary knew that the odd metallic 'c-l-i-n-k or c-l-u-n-k was impossible to prevent, rarely accidental. They'd checked everything before leaving.

Kids came to stare and call out 'Uc Da Loi, Number One'. Old people wondered.

Under the eaves of thatched roofs ancient, goatee-bearded men sat outside as they'd done for thousands of years. They smoked their pipes and looked into the far distance trying to be invisible. Old women hid inside hugging young girls, protectively.

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Woodsmoke simpered heavenward. The clanging of pots withdrew. No one smiled. Except the kids. Innocent children played with knucklebones. Their excited voices contrasted with the silent army as it slunk past, anonymous lumps in green fatigues.

Gary soaked-up a timeless atmosphere. His intimate thoughts cocooned him safe inside a bubble. The outside reality existed as a faraway dream. Mind denied entry to heat, dust and the itching rash that came with the humidity. He detached himself from the task ahead, beguiled by thoughts of other armies who'd trod similar paths past mud buildings with thatched roofs. The people remained a constant. Absorbed armies that wouldn't be sloughed off. Ignored others. Raised rice and children.

A single rifle shot blistered the calm.

Burst Gary's bubble. As the dull thud of bullet ... punctured flesh ... t-h-r-u-m-p ... a little girl screamed a long tortured cry then simpered to a mewling. The air stilled. The silence cloyed. Echoed agony hung in suddenly still air. It froze the tramping boots.

Gary ran back and Jaago forward. Soldiers remember the fine detail of each trauma. Civilians prefer not to contemplate what soldiers see in their nightmares. A child had broken free of Mother's security. Stood in an open doorway. Watched, unaware of the virus... 'Death' ... that soldiers carry. The bullet entered her left thigh, out her right.

It traversed the entire pubic area and the whole of her lower abdomen shattered. As it exited out the opposite thigh it carried with it splintered bony shrapnel. The bullet deflowered her ... horizontally. Whale-spouts identified her many ruptured arteries.

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Mother nursed her accidentally raped daughter in her lap and across her knees. The innocent's once agile left arm sagged loosely to the ground and there the hand slowly curled its dying fingers into a fast whitening palm. Her right elbow nestled into Mother's abdomen as the girl tried to raise her head onto Mother's long-lonely breast.

Mother rocked in silent grief as daughter hemorrhaged. Tired heaven witnessed both.

But daughter's muscles had lost the tenseness that graces youthful agility. The girl's eyes glazed over as she strained through blurring eyesight at Mother's anguished face. She tried desperately to speak the words one thinks of the moment before death.

Gary knew she didn't have time. Daughter's head slowly turned. Blood, soaked onto Mother's lap. For a millisecond Gary looked into her daughter's questing eyes. Enlarged pupils swallowed him into her wretchedness. Her un-fulfillment begged him to explain. Caught, her agony became his.

As Brother blinked through tears the flower shriveled, gasped, coughed twice and sagged. The splurging stain dyed Sister's sprawled legs scarlet. Black pyjama trousers contrasted with her squirting redness. Daughter's head flung itself loose of Mother's frantic hold then twisted from side to side as if to complain her death.

She chose another target. Jaago wept. Made no attempt to hide his misery.

The spouting slowly simmered to a stop. Deluge to gently bubbling pool. Watchers stood-by, helpless, stunned to silence in the shadow of a death that hung like a pall.

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Troy yelled in Vietnamese to clear a space for the medic but he'd arrived too late. There was nothing he could do. Nothing anyone could have done.

Daughter's head shuddered to a halt. Draped its loss of life down the outside of Mother's thigh, just three inches short of where, fourteen years ago, she'd been born.

'Death-dealers' echoed in Gary's head. The seeping stopped. The blue-grayness that precedes stiffness percolated from her dead heart. Someone interrupted.

"It was an accident, Sir."

Jaago stood up. Looked the grieving soldier in the face. Recognised this was a death the soldier would never forget. He'd be forever accursed, a punishment enough.

As though to answer the un-posed question, "I switched my rifle from right side to left and the safety-catch must have come off. I'm sorry, Sir... I..."

Jaago called two soldiers. Spoke gently to the devastated man, "There's nothing you can do, Son." Then to the other two, "Take him away. Be gentle. Look after him."

Called four others. "Get a stretcher." He found it hard to raise his voice above the wailing. "Make it quick and cover it with a groundsheet before you put her on it."

Troy spoke quietly to Gary. "The best thing you can do is to get the fuck outta here, NOW. They won't want your help. They won't want you to be around."

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Gary remonstrated, unsuccessfully.

“The whole village will lament with Mother. You won’t be able to do or say a thing.”

“But we want to help somehow. I want to...” Gary’s voice trailed off.

“Quit now, while you’re in front. Do what you’ve come here to do.”

Reluctantly, Gary told Jaago, “Move them on but make sure the tail-enders don’t come past this spot. Take them around behind. All safety-catches double-checked.” He looked at Troy who nodded approval. Jaago gave Gary the ‘Thumbs up’.

Behind Gary, the clamour of grieving slowly escalated. He knew Troy and Jaago were right but he felt helpless and disconnected. The persistent tramp of depressed boots pierced his gloom. As the din of women and children in mourning receded the ‘soldier-in-him’ took over. Some corner of his mind whispered *‘Thuyet’*.

The word had gone down the line, faster than electricity. Each soldier carried the burden of ‘Death by Misadventure’. It weighed like lead, pressing on their hearts.

Gary passed the message on the 1ATF. Frank Crowe came on the line. He’d been a subaltern in Korea. One of his jobs, before Long Tan, had been to ensure the gun ammo had been adequate. He’d fussed, cajoled and strained all systems to make sure the guns would have enough ammo if the VC tried a Korean-type mass attack. His premonition and foresight had paid off at Long Tan. He supervised burials at 1ATF.

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“Nothing you could do, Gary.” Cool and detached, Frank checked the procedures Gary had followed and praised him for ‘leaving the scene of an accident’. “When you come back to base we’ll talk and sort out the necessary recompense for the family.”

“Necessary recompense... necessary recompense... necessary recompense.”

Frank’s words hewed a sadness with each footfall. Gary couldn’t shrug off the details of the girl’s death. Her scream kept echoing its tragic reality in his mind.

Nightfall brought in its wake the fever of ambush. The friends gradually wormed their way further out from Hoa Long’s perimeter than the platoon on the eastern side.

Gary strained through Troy’s night scope. An eerie greenness lit by yellow, filled the space in his head. About a hundred yards to his right a long hut silhouetted against the night sky. As he swung the scope to traverse to the left he noted the bushes bordering the track to the hut then panned further right. Inside the hut no lights showed. Deserted ... but every hut had an underground access that hid the truth.

Immediately to the front an open space beckoned. *A perfect space to make a camp.*

Large enough to accommodate six to ten VC, fresh tracks betrayed its constant and recent use. They led to and from the hut and criss-crossed the open space.

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Jaago agreed. They had a good ambush site, behind a disused paddy bund, hidden from the hut and its approaches by low bushes. A 'fine prospect of springing ambush'. Where the three watched from must have been an H&I 'drop-short' that had gouged a depression, giving them protection as well as cover. They'd all agreed, 'Perfect'.

The three had crept upon the hut but had no time, nor inclination, to check it out. In good repair and quite large they'd estimated it could contain enough bunks to house a section of VC, eight to ten at least. As though to prove their point, Gary's scope picked up two VC. *They had to be VC. Who else would travel at this time of night?*

All three strained through the gloom. Heard voices, loud enough for Troy to translate.

Gary turned his head. Troy turned his thumb down... Enemy. *At last ...retribution.*

The VC moved with surety to the hut, knocked and a man let them inside. The starscope showed they carried weapons. Within an hour two more groups of two knocked and were allowed inside. By midnight this process had been repeated three times. The last group of four VC to arrive had to remain outside and camped on the ground fifty feet from the three 'musketeers'. They lay down and slept. *No guards?*

The three musketeers stayed awake. Two left, two right. Troy would shoot the two on the left with Bessie's silencer but the other two 'have to be dispatched by knife'.

Claws grabbed at Gary's throat and he wondered if the other two had any reaction.

He'd proved he could execute a silent death-by-hand. Could he do it again?

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Anger welled within him for Phouc's death. And the way of his death. *Thuyet?*

They waited to make sure no other groups arrived and none came. This was it! They squirmed close to the sleeping VC wriggling on their bellies like snakes. Pistols strapped inside their shirts, 'just in case' otherwise most gear they left behind as they elbowed their way very, very slowly. Thirty yards took forever. Then ten.

No responses from the sleeping VC. They lay on a groundsheet, a blanket over each.

The three friends stopped again to listen. The last ten feet they'd crouch forward, ready to spring. It wasn't necessary. The sleepers obviously assumed the numbers inside the hut guaranteed their safety. *The four sleeping bastards must be the guards?*

P-h-u-t-t... P-h-u-t-t...

Deadly and accurate head shots lifted their bodies slightly then they sagged for the last time. Gary and Jaago had an easy time. Over before Gary realised his tension had been replaced by dispassion, the VC sleepers disposed of professionally.

Troy gave each VC a 'coup de grace'. P-h-u-t-t... P-h-u-t-t... P-h-u-t-t... P-h-u-t-t...

From close-up. Then they shrouded each one over in the VC's own blankets.

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Sweat poured off Gary as he rested and controlled his rapid breathing in the safety of their trench behind the paddy bund. It soaked his camouflaged neckerchief, dripped from his chest and cooled inside his shirt. He wanted to scratch his soaked crotch but knew from experience that would produce a rash. He suffered in silence.

The silent night air pressed down. Something about what he'd just done felt 'unclean'. Gary couldn't put a finger on it but he felt dirty. He believed the difference between any other member of society, faced like the policemen with the chance he may die in the line of duty, rested on Gary's premise that 'the warrior's adversary is equally noble'. He and the enemy were in a deadly competition, circumscribed by respect. They both trained hard and stalked each other on a 'level playing field'.

What he'd just done was murder. The VC had not had a chance. They'd been killed in their sleep, cleanly. Blissfully unaware the 'enemy' was even close. *Not like Phouc.*

Gary lay on the earthen embankment. Smelled the freshness of the awakening earth. It had a special fragrance, dank and musty yet pleasant too. The VC would never again experience it. He breathed in the pre-dawn chill now, for them? How many times had they slept and been safe, waking to the odours of an embracing Mother earth?

Questions pained him in a strange new way. *Who were they? Where did they come from? Who will mourn them?* Gary's stomach retched. *As a human I have risen above the animal. Yet they stalk the slumberous as I just have. But only to eat.*

They kill for survival's sake. What I've done wasn't for survival. It was extermination.

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“P-s-s-s-t...”

In the pre-dawn mist the door of the hut opened and someone stepped out. Gary balked. A young woman? She struggled with the old man to balance a huge open basket of rice on her head. Gary glanced along his mates out of the corner of his eyes.

They had nestled their weapons in the warmth and dust-free environment under their armpits but with the woman's appearance had slowly brought them to the ready. Not one had aimed. Gary glanced at the silent struggle between the old and the young..

As if out of respect for the four bodies vague in the mist fifty yards from them, the young woman said something in a low voice and turned toward the dead VC.

Slowly, so as not to draw attention, the three men raised their weapons to the aim. But no one fired or even took their finger off the trigger guard. Gary smelled his own sweaty body and hoped the two, the old man and the young woman, were too far away. No sound came from inside the hut. Sweat trickled from the corners of his eyebrows onto his cheeks and challenged him to brush it away. He hardly dared breathe. The beating of his heart settled to a slow rhythmic t-h-u-m-p.

The woman whispered to the old man. Gary worried... *What could they possibly be saying? Had they any idea? Did they suspect anything untoward?*

The mist wavered. Birds trilled morning songs alerting everyone to the coming dawn but the sun was still half-an-hour away. The birdsongs were from time immemorial.

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They weren't intended to alert the couple to the patient threesome. The Sun's promise had awoken the birds but would no longer stir the VC, now dreaming the sleep of the Dead. The woman turned toward the friends, seeming to sniff the air. Satisfied, she waved goodbye and followed a track leading away from the three sweating men.

He too sniffed the air then turned inside and closed the door softly behind him.

Some moments later each man let his baited breath surge, freed it, to inhale and exhale again. They looked at each other. Each met a grim stare. They looked back at the hut as if to sense movement, should it happen, then slowly shook their heads.

Gary whispered, "I couldn't have shot her."

The other two nodded. Gary had expressed their thoughts too. Jaago remained on watch whilst the other two checked their weapon safety, quietly and professionally.

"Sunray. This is Sunray two. Over." The call-sign of the other platoon.

"Roger, Sitrep. Over."

"All quiet on the Western Front. Over."

"Roger. Wait till daylight then move back to base. Over."

"Wilko. Out."

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The hut door opened just minutes after the last transmission. The old man got out his bicycle. He fumbled at the door. Climbed aboard his bike and, with a puzzled look over his shoulder, whisked away into the gathering mist. The sunlight was just touching the hill line of Nui Dat2, on the other side of the Long Tan rubber plantation.

The three men waited a full fifteen minutes but heard no one.

They walked carefully, using fire and movement, one covering the other two, until they were close to the hut. Troy whispered, "The door has a brass lock."

Jaago checked around the back. Indicated, "So has the back door." Then, speaking softly, "Whoever went in, stays in? The four outside were supposed to be guards."

Gary whispered, "Or the bastards have gone underground?"

"They're too many for us anyway. Let's check our VC bastards..." indicating the corpses, "... then get the hell outta here, Waddya say?" Troy was impatient to leave.

Jaago walked carefully over covered by the two others. He stopped, motioned them forward and then took up a sentry position. Quietly and carefully they searched the bodies for documents. Jaago found one mangled body with a maps and photos.

Jaago kept his voice low. "This one must be an important commander, Skipper. You'd better come over and take a look." Jaago rummaged around in all the man's pockets then offered the heap of stuff to Gary.

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Most of the documentation was in Vietnamese. Gary thought, *I wish Dat was here.*

One was a French Military Field Manual. It looked like it had been captured at Dien Bien Phu. Gary bundled it into his pocket. He found a plastic bag and in it were some photographs. The wallets and canvas bags contained important maps and documents.

And then he found... He found it easy to translate but his eyes kept misting over...

Name: *Vo Van Hai*

Age: 35

Height: *almost two metres*

Relatives: *Wife, son and daughter*

Native village: *Long Phouc, District of Dat Do, Province of Phouc Tuy.*

Dumfounded, he looked once, twice then three times before he could trust his senses.

“Oh God! I think know your man, Jaago.” Gary said sadly.

Gary crawled back to be sure, covered by his two friends. The headshots made it difficult to recognize the man. Photos in the wallet gave it away. Gary felt sick.

Blood rushed to his head. *Fuck.* Then Gary choked. “It’s Pham’s best mate. Hai.”

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Jaago coughed into his hand. Cleared his throat. "I'm really sorry, Boss."

Gary then found photos of a beautiful young woman, the two children ...and a recent photo of Thuyet. Gary kept the personal stuff.

Jaago took the official stuff from him whilst Gary searched the other. He went over to Troy and whispered what had happened.

Troy, covered by Jaago, stepped over a body and placed his hand on Gary's shoulder.

Finishing his task, Gary turned, "I want to bury them. How about it?"

Jaago remonstrated, "No fuckin' way, Skipper. We're best out of here. Now. Dead men don't dance, an' I've gorra lorra dancing I wanna do yet, Boss. Let's get the fuck outta here while we fucking-well can."

"You'll be here by yourself, Mate." Troy added. "We've overstayed our welcome already. I agree with Jaago. No time for sentimentality, Gary. Outta here, Mate." He started walking away to emphasise his next point. "Fuckin' toute suite. Like, NOW."

Heavy hearted, Gary left the corpses to the flies and to the old man. Hot tears formed.

Troy patted him gently. Jaago led them back home to 1ATF. And to safety.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

'what dreams may come'...?

STANDING IN THE SUN SHE DRANK DRAUGHTS OF COOL MORNING AIR.

The sun sucked at the pores of her skin as though to evaporate her body warmth. Separated from the quiet of her calm, sounds whispered false promises to Thuyet.

In the one pledge 'of new life' her hearing became acute. Birds, unheard until then, trilled their sweet post-dawn chorus. Crickets rubbed their legs together in solemn cadence to the drumbeat of her heart.

A dream-like haze surrounded Thuyet. Whispers from the shade reminded her of a slowly unveiling truth. *Death comes but once*. Silhouettes drifted in a twilight zone. Lullabies, like the delicate strumming of harp strings, filled the background of her mind. Shadowy shapes moved in slow motion to complete their work.

Thuyet felt rough cloth rasping her face, seeming to claw the soft cotton cloth on her shoulders. She smelt the damp smothering odour of a wet hessian bag. But her blinding chimera of light remained as surety. It rigidified the purpose of her mind.

A strong woman, Thuyet had been born in Tuyen Quang in the North. She had her mother's mountain blood in her veins and a great river's certainty, that had been her father's strength, flowing in her arteries. Thuyet never countenanced the softer ways of the lowlander, except in the business of love and loving. Given her freedom by Ho Chi Minh's northerners carrying a new philosophy of brotherhood and sisterhood.

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Thuyet had been forged in the furnace of Colonial oppression. Unafraid, strong in faith, in love and acknowledged in her courage she knew the risks ... and the cost.

The man assigned to the task was a friend. He would do the job, quickly and efficiently. She could rely on him. Her old sense of religion did not desert her now, despite the indoctrination of the last ten years.

Her foreigner had gently re-introduced it to her.

Thuyet felt her friends' hand on her shoulders. His grunt spoke a thousand shames.

She whispered her forgiveness.

The priest intoned 'The Lord's prayer'. Thuyet slowed him purposefully, to feel and experience every word of the prayer. The last sounds in her universe.

Then her feet were dangling in space.

She heard a loud snap that she knew belonged to her, a warm flash saturated her.

No pain, just light, a different brilliant light, then total darkness, a kind of oblivion but ...no pain. Then light...the experience of a pure light engulfed her and she knew she was free... the war was finally over. Thuyet shuddered.

The two men saw her legs kick and twist as though to climb back up the rope.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

On of the men was her Vinh. He looked away.

Thuyet had insisted on wearing the leather shoes given to her by her foreigner.

The men respected her wishes, after all she was a brave and true warrior. The image of a dainty little yellow bow on the front of each shoe would stay with them.

They'd never understand the irony of a yellow ribbon. She knew. Gary had told her.

This was her special message to him on that last day of her life. Small almost indistinct tremors made the little bows shake as if to speak, then stillness again, the final stillness. Then the sign they were waiting for.

Men ejaculate. Their sign of death is a white stain.

Women rupture in an explosion of colour ... as seen in a freshly plucked red rose.

Gary felt himself twitching and shuddering. The heat of the sun strained the sweat from his body as he choked his last cries for her.

His heart pummelled him as though having desperately run its last race. Gary's chest heaved with the exertion of stifled yells and he felt the cage of his ribs being swelled against until they ached too much.

1967 - Reaping the Whirlwind...

Fingers traced a body in the dark. Naked. Cool. Soft. His fingers jerked back, red-hot.

Electrified... *Holy shit? A fucking naked body?* Slowly vague realisations returned. Gary panicked... *Is this a woman or a man's body in my hootchie?* Reality set in with a growing horror. *A woman?* An officer, in bed at the 1ATF base camp. *How did this happen? How did I get her past the guards and past my own men?* His fast-beating heart flew faster. *Oh, my God? A Court-Martial for sure.*

His breath came in gasps. Then his lungs clogged. He choked.

“Gary. Wake up. Gary, what’s happening to you?” Someone tried to wake him by shaking and suddenly, before they could recover, he’d leapt out of ... was it his bunk?

He whispered loudly, “Never touch a soldier when he’s sleeping.”

A face swam before him, strange yet familiar. A vague outline coalesced. Shape and form. *O Shit! A woman. Who's this?*

Startled, shaking and quivering, he heard, “Gary. Wake up. What’s happening?”

The light came on and Gary woke as though still dreaming.

Fuck... I'm back in Australia.

novel			
34	13	Rudittered	skittered
41	7	message	dispatch
55	7	Rudills	skills
55	9	“Operation Sealion”	‘Operation Sealion’
56	20	Meschersmitts	Messerschmidts
57	8	“Operation Sealion”	‘Operation Sealion’
62	3		<i>after</i> George insert had
115	7	He’d just been fourteen.	He’d just turned fourteen.
127	3	Professional	professional
139	19	rail was	building a railway would have been
192	19	its	a
198	1	gave a	
213	1	Or piloted	Troy was a passenger in
215		comma line 12 (<i>after</i> north-west)	comma line 11 (<i>after</i> capabilities)
232	14	Morrocco	Morocco
300	15	Phopuc	Phouc
309	3	TET	TeT
349	8	are	were
353	7	Then said	Gary added
758		(printed twice in one copy only)	

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