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Excerpts from the Memoir of Trần Văn Thủy

In 2013, a memoir by the well-known documentary filmmaker Trần Văn Thủy was published in Vietnam, with the title *Chuyện Nghệ của Thủy*: rendered in English as *The Life and Adventures of Trần Văn Thủy: the Story of a Filmmaker*. The memoir, co-written by Thủy and his friend Lê Thanh Dũng was snatched off the book store shelves by Vietnamese readers (both book store shelves and readers still being widespread and extant in Vietnam) and became a run-away best seller. Trần Văn Thủy is known for making films which are startlingly original and unblinkingly honest in their portrayal of both the strengths and problems of Vietnamese society, and his memoir was equally honest in recounting his own life and struggles.

A good part of that life and the filmmaker's vision was formed by the experience of war. Born in 1940, in the Northern city of Nam Dinh, Thủy and his family had to flee to a small farming village when French soldiers destroyed their house. That village only proved to be a temporary refuge: it was also attacked by the French, who shot and killed Thủy's 14 year old brother in the process. The family finally ended up in Hanoi, where Thủy grew up. In 1965, after some perfunctory training, young Thủy was handed a Bolex camera and assigned as a People's Army cameraman, tasked to film whatever he could of the war with the Americans. He was sent to the battlefields of South Vietnam, infiltrating down the Ho Chi Minh Trails to Quang Nam Province. He spent the next three years capturing some of the heaviest fighting in his lens, before falling deathly ill after the Tet Offensive and being exfiltrated back to the North. Most of the other cameramen in his unit did not survive the war.

The following three chapters are the excerpts from his memoir that cover some of his time in the war. They offer a rare glimpse of the attitudes, conditions, and events that were common to the “other side” of the Vietnam-American War. Thuy’s entire memoir will, hopefully, be published in the United States next year.

CHAPTER FIVE

REBIRTH

After crawling a few meters from the underground shelter, I turned over on my back and gasped. This was a field of leafy grass that people used to thatch their homes. Never before in my life had I felt that air was so precious, so sweet!

The three of us lay on our backs gazing at the sky, and filling our lungs with delicious air. A woodpecker was hopping about on a chinaberry branch: Cheep, cheep... cheep, cheep. It was so happy, so free—not miserable like us.

No sooner did we step into the “battlefront” than we had to throw ourselves at once into... hill farming!

In the 5th Zone battlefront area, we had to put up not only with “pháo bầy” (coordinated artillery barrages from warships and firebases, all falling on one location), pellet bombs, B57 and B52 bombers, and mopping up operations, but also with many other things no less terrible, such as hunger, malaria, disease, and scarcity. We lacked everything: food, clothing, medicine, and even light, because we were active at night, working in the deep jungle, hiding in underground shelters that were wet, humid, and moldy; we even lacked air to breathe...

Whether you were a journalist or an agitprop artist, nobody cared. You had to produce your own food for self-reliance for six months, cultivating land to grow corn or rice for the rest of the year, while the army would supply food for six months only. In the 5th Zone, food rationing was reduced further to five months, and in film units, it was reduced by another ten days. This meant that every year, we had to grow “self-reliance” crops that would last for seven months and twenty days.

Our most terrible experience during the war was hill farming! There were people who did nothing but this work throughout the year. I would get into a rage whenever I thought about this. If they wanted us to grow crops, then why the hell didn't they just let us stay in the North and do it in Hòa Bình, instead of coming all the way down here to suffer? Many people died of hunger. The people in our film unit had to forage for food all year long, clearing a number of hills which were so large and far apart that we couldn't hear each other even by hailing; then, after the clearing was done, we had to wait for the grass to dry out, so we could set fire to it. In burning grass, we were inadvertently telling the enemy where we were. That was

how the enemy knew where to find the VC. Yet, we kept on doing this diligently, enduring hunger to clear the hills for farming, and burning whatever we could. Then we used sharpened sticks to punch holes in the ground to put corn seeds in, then waited for the harvest to allay our hunger. We worked in pairs, one person punching the holes, and the other putting the seeds in. This primitive punching and planting routine would make anyone dizzy. With the war raging on, and with equipment and manpower invested at great hardship and sacrifice, we had to throw everything aside to be preoccupied with food. We had to wait for the corn to sprout and bear ears, so as to have something to put in our mouths! Some people did nothing but hill farming. Even on fine days when there were events worth filming, we were unable even to touch our cameras.

Compared with my companions on the same journey to the South, such as Dân, Hiếu, and Sứ, I was lucky, in that I was able to go down to the lowlands early, while Trường and Tâm had to continue further to the South.

Going down to the lowlands was dangerous, but our stomachs were pretty full, for local people could feed us there. We also had to sneak around furtively, but we had something to eat and recovered a bit; and it was also a place with military activity, so there were some stories to put on film. Of course it was more dangerous and closer to death. By wheedling with my superiors, I was given a very good 16 millimeter camera, a Paya Porex, with thirty canisters of film.

As I didn't know much about film stock, I was quite reassured when my superiors told me, "The film stock you received consists entirely AgFA color negatives produced in West Germany; it's really good. The film and camera were all left behind by a Chinese film crew—there's no way we could have imported such equipment."

Who could have known that this excellent AgFA color film would later on plunge me into misery!

I have many recollections of the days when I shot the film *People of My Homeland*. There was an old man who did paintings there, Teacher Niên, an educated man. He had translated pamphlets into Mandarin to explain the war to the South Korean troops. Later on, a spy reported his activities, and the Korean troops killed him.

I stayed at the old man's house many times. He had a son who had gone to the North, and who later became a ranking official. After 1975 another son, Mr. Toàn, older than me, became the head of the education department in Duy Xuyên District. From time to time, he wrote me letters couched in very affectionate terms.

The Thu Bồn River has a vast sandy islet in the middle where the Chiêm Sơn Bridge crosses over it. South of the bridge lay the village of Xuyên Trường. The old man's hamlet lay right next to the Thu Bồn River.

During the war we had to be careful—wherever we were, everything had to be within arm's reach; we couldn't leave our pants in one place and our shirts in another. There would be no time to gather them—we had to scoop everything up in a few seconds and run at top speed—whether down to the river or down to an underground shelter depended on circumstances. The problem was not about our possessions, but rather that things left behind were evidence that someone in the area was protecting the Viet Cong, so houses would be burned and people killed.

When I first came down to the lowlands, I was a good-looking young man. With a movie camera on my back, walking down to the marketplace in the liberated zone, people would call me “thằng tây con” (junior expat), since I looked so bewildered... Once we were sleeping next to Bàn Thạch market when an artillery barrage started. At such times you have to roll to the ground at once or crawl into a shelter, but I kept lying in my hammock. Mr. Tý said,

“You must be crazy!”

“How so?” said I.

“Get down from the hammock and crawl into the shelter now!”

Later Mr. Tý said, “Why were you so careless?”

When artillery barrages came, I felt no urge to lie down—I was merely bewildered like a bull in a china shop, because I thought that my body would be the same size, whether standing or lying. I hadn't the slightest idea what to do, because nobody had trained me for this.

The whole area was devastated, houses blown apart, with pigs and chickens on the loose... It was because of this that Mr. Tý took pity on me and followed me around. Speaking with some superiors, Mr. Tý said, “If you don't let me go with him he'll sooner or later end up dead! He doesn't know a single thing!”

It was tense and ferocious, with never a moment to relax. We lived in perpetual fear. Among the people in our group, there were Sơn, a teacher from Hải Phòng, and Ba, a local guerilla who had a Lambretta (pedicab). Another person who was very important to my moviemaking in the 5th Zone was the above mentioned Mr. Tý—he was born in the year of the rat (Mậu Tý), and his pen name was Triều Phương. He was a poet and educator who for a period of time was the head of the education department of a district, and at another time was the head of the performing arts troupe of Quảng Đà Province.

His wife, chị Hai Hoàng and her family lived in a disputed area near Núi Bà market, where she ran a good business. The local authorities knew that her husband

was a VC and her family used to house VC soldiers sneaking in and out, but as a smart business woman, she managed to survive and got away without arrest for quite sometime. But, that did not last very long, and she was eventually arrested and put into prison for aiding and abetting the VC.

This man Tý took pity on me, and followed me everywhere, of course with the approval of our superiors. Later on, Tý wrote me many letters, even after I had returned to the North. His letters were immensely touching, and his children still preserve them.

Wherever we went in those days, we first had to check out the locations of the entrances to the shelters—hidden tunnels and spider-holes— before washing, seeking food, or discussing work. We couldn't do anything before knowing where the shelters were. Once in Xuyên Trường, near the house of Teacher Niên, we had gathered together to pass the night exchanging jokes, when at about 4:30 in the morning of the next day, a swarm of choppers flew right over our heads, so one could guess that American troops would soon be pouring out from them. And this in fact was what immediately happened; there were so many troops that they could have encircled the whole area holding hands. They started a mopping up operation. Having no time to flee, we all threw ourselves into the underground shelters. The shelters all had ventilation holes leading to clumps of bamboo or reed brush. But it had rained the previous night, and the ventilation holes were plugged up. I had jumped into a one-man spider-hole, then Mr. Ba, and a moment later Mr. Tý jumped in as well. So the three of us crouched in a small shelter made for one person with the ventilation hole blocked. With the entrance cover closed, we could hardly breathe; I was unaccustomed to this.

Anh Sơn, the teacher from Hải Phòng, who had lain chatting with us during the night, was shot dead the moment he ran out. Running after him, we could see him lying face down, his upper body submerged in water. When I recalled this later on, I was always obsessed with the thought of his parents—what would they have felt if they had seen that tragic sight?

Down in the spider-hole, there was only a brief interval before I began to suffocate. Unable to bear it any longer, I said, “Anh (brother) Tý! Let me get out!”

I thought that if I remained inside, I would surely die—die like Lê Anh Xuân (a war hero). If I crawled out, they might not see me; if they saw me, they might not fire; and if they fired, they wouldn't necessarily kill me.

The sound of helicopters. The sound of people shouting. The sound of gunfire and exploding grenades... I don't know when I lost consciousness. When you can't get oxygen, death comes in a strange manner; you have to experience it to know what

it's like. It felt like a steel band around my head growing tighter, ever tighter, ever tighter. My brain was about to break apart. When I started to lose consciousness, I had only one thought: "This is too shameful, too illogical." I could imagine all other types of privation in life: food, clothes, medicine, love, sunlight—but I could not imagine the lack of oxygen.

When I pleaded to get out, Mr. Tý said, "Impossible! If they find out, they'll burn the house and kill everyone up there, not just you."

But then Mr. Tý couldn't bear it in the shelter either; he knew that remaining in it would end up in an awful death. As a local man, Mr Tý was familiar with these games and, as the last to enter the shelter, he was still clear-headed. He gently pushed the cover up a bit. When I came to, I saw that he was propping up my chin and pressing my nose to the slight opening. Awakening thus in Mr. Tý's arms, I was very moved.

It was then about 10:00 a.m. I said, "Enough, anh Tý—let's just get out!" "Impossible!"

"Let's do this, anh Tý. We can't bring up all our gear. If we're still alive, then we can come back to find it. I'll leave everything here; just let me get out. Whether you two get out or not is up to you."

I raised the cover and crawled up, leaving my hat, sandals, film and camera, and everything else, because I had to crawl. After crawling a few meters from the underground shelter I turned over on my back and gasped. This was a field of leafy grass that people used to thatch their homes. Never before in my life had I felt that air was so precious, so sweet!

A moment later I felt someone bump my foot. Mr. Tý had come up. A few minutes later, Mr. Ba came up as well. The three of us lay stretched out next to each other. The grass field was a few hundred meters wide.

The sound of gunfire had died down. A group of American soldiers was carrying a big mirror out of a house. They slapped soap on their faces and shaved, then opened some cans and had a meal. One thing at a time, just the style of Americans! We'd all go to perdition if they saw a few Viet Cong fellows reflected in the mirror!

The three of us lay on our backs gazing at the sky, filling our lungs with delicious air. A woodpecker was hopping about on a chinaberry branch: *Cheep, cheep... cheep, cheep.*

It was so happy, so free—not miserable like us.

Tý thrust an M26 hand grenade into my hand. Quietly, I asked, "How do you throw it?"

“You remove this wire pin and then throw it. Don’t let this lever spring off in your hand, or we’re all goners.”

After crawling some distance with the grenade, I found that it greatly impeded my progress, so I gave it back to Mr. Tỳ, to get some relief. I had never received any training in weaponry.

I had only a pair of shorts and a short-sleeved shirt. I followed the other two, crawling like a centipede, without hat or sandals, through orchards, through ditches, through water buffalo stalls and latrines, my hands and feet all scratched.

“Where are we crawling to?”

“Up to Dựng Mountain.”

“When will we get there?”

“It’s not far at all, a few kilometers only.”

Though we were moving through an area under the surveillance of American and ARVN troops,¹ there were times when we could stand up and walk. By the time we reached the mountain slope, afternoon was shading into dusk. The three of us were all wearing the same “uniform”: shorts and short-sleeved shirts, dirty and ragged, and with nothing in our stomachs.

By nighttime, we had crawled to Mount Dựng. This was a mountain formation that jutted out to the ocean, very near the infamous place known as the “Vinh Trinh Dam,” where a massacre occurred in the time of Ngô Đình Diệm, the former prime minister of Vietnam.

We came to a cave—it was a sort of crevice where the rock had split horizontally. Inside there were spots where water had collected, and spots that were dry. It was high enough only to sit or lie in. When we first entered it, it seemed utterly silent, but after that we heard whispering in which were mixed the dialects of north, south, and central Vietnam, the voices of other fighters hiding in the cave.

Around 4:00 a.m. I said, “Anh Tỳ, let’s just go on. One way or another, they’ll discover this place. If they spray us with flame throwers, we’ll all be burned up.”

In the silvery moonlight and chilly mist, the surroundings were silent, though from time to time there would be some strange, ominous echo. We started to crawl from the cave. But where to? Wherever we went, we would end up being in the same area. All day we wandered about in abandoned gardens and homes, great numbers of them, all utterly desolate. There were even some *bonsai* and some stately old trees around the houses, but they had become gaunt, empty shells. And there was nothing whatsoever to eat. When night came again, we didn’t return to

1 ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam: soldiers of the Vietnamese Southern Republic.

the cave, but sat at the edge of a rice field. The mosquitoes swarmed; the only way of dealing with them was to break off a leafy branch and keep waving it back and forth until the branch lost all its leaves, and then break off another branch and do the same; otherwise the mosquitoes would turn us into dead meat.

How many days passed like that? Six days! On the other side, they might call it “*hành quân*” (a military maneuver), but on our side we called it “*trận càn*” (a mopping up operation).

On the sixth day we came to a large stream. This was a semi-mountainous region; the banks were steep on both sides. The three of us stripped and went down to the stream naked, so as to bathe and wash our clothing to relieve our itching. Suddenly, thunderous artillery fire began raining down on the area where we were bathing, and we ran for our lives, still naked.

We thought it would be simple—just keep running along the sloped river banks—we’d be safe. But we had no inkling that the stream was on the enemy’s maps. The spotters would peer down at us through their binoculars and call in artillery to fire on us at the coordinates. Artillery fire followed us wherever we ran—I don’t understand why we all survived intact. Later—perhaps when we ran beyond the range of their observation, or of their coordinates—they ceased firing. If the three of us hadn’t run along the stream, but had instead spread out, we wouldn’t necessarily have been spotted and pursued by gunfire.

We ran on to the Vinh Trinh Dam. Right next to it was a railroad. People had removed the railroad ties to build an A-shaped shelter. The three of us crawled into it.

Only a few minutes later, they started bombarding again. Helicopter gunships came and strafed mercilessly. The bombardment would hurl dirt from the hillside over the roof of the shelter and then would blow the dirt away to expose the roof again.

The bombs and shells were so abundant that they were wasting them. Smoke from the bombs obscured everything, turning the sky black. It was around eleven or twelve o’clock at night. We were hungry, tired, despairing, and desperate.

For six or seven days we had eaten nothing. What was there to eat anyway? So we sneaked back to the village of Xuyên Trường again, where we met some guerrillas, who said, “*Get out now!* The enemy is all over the place here!”

They turned on their flashlights, and we saw each other’s faces for the first time. We all looked like black zombies, eyes white, teeth white, and faces full of mud and dirt, blackened by smoke from the bombs. In later years, Mr. Tý would write about all these things in his letters.

I was consumed with anxiety, fearing that my film and camera would be ruined.

“Is there anything to eat?” I asked the guerillas.

“Not a thing.”

“Then where are we to go?”

“You must turn around and climb past this mountain. Then go back until you reach Xuyên Thanh Village.”

It was in the middle of the night. Our stomachs had been empty for six or seven days, our feet were waterlogged and bleeding, and our clothes were ragged and drenched. Where could we find strength to go on?

“We’re horribly cold. Do you have any pieces of dry clothing?”

“Yes, right away, right away,” said one guerilla.

With this, he withdrew a dagger and sliced off a few broad banana leaves, made holes in the middle and put them over our heads. Then he folded over the front and rear halves and used banana tendrils to tie them around our waists. Thus we all had leafy “overcoats.” This done, he shouted, “Move!”

The three of us then groped our way back through the gloomy shadows of the night across Mount Dựng, and at last reached Xuyên Thanh Village. Tý said “Let me lead the way.” There were again culverts and ditches, stalls for water buffalo, and latrines... Then Tý led us into the home of his elderly paternal aunt. She looked at us as if we were three ghosts.

“Come on in then, get washed up first, then come into the kitchen to get warm by the fire.

She went off to cook rice. And then we ate it with “mắm” (a sauce made from fermented bonito). We had never had anything so delicious in our lives!

On the afternoon of the next day, we returned to Xuyên Trường Village, this time taking with us a few packs of steamed rice. All around, there were burned houses, dead bodies, sounds of people calling to each other, sounds of weeping and mourning. The place was devastated, destroyed, in pain... I made my way back to the grassy field, opened the cover of the underground shelter, and found the film and camera, and the rucksack with clothes intact.

It was a cruel and terrible war; people suffered, and the film and camera also suffered. Bombs and shells plowed up the earth, everything got buried or flooded, and people wandered about in all directions...

CHAPTER SIX

THE BEAUTY AND THE BULLET

The girl gazed straight into my face. Our eyes met for a second. Then she shifted the Garand rifle on her shoulder to her back, turning sideways and kicking the water with her long legs with a swirling motion like a ballet dancer, sending sprays of water in the air. Countless pearl-like drops of water flew up and then followed each other, making gleaming arcs in the air as they fell under the early sun. And a clear, spontaneous peal of laughter resounded on the wavy surface of the river... Hý, our photojournalist leading the way, said, "That's Xoa, Vãn Thị Xoa, chief of Xuyên Châu village militia."

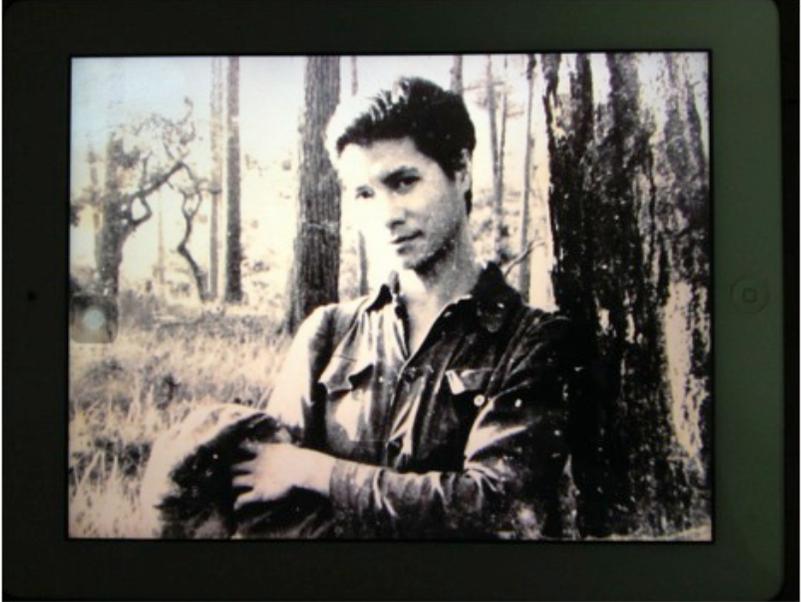
The Chiêm Sơn Bridge across the Thu Bồn River was a railway bridge, second only to the Long Biên Bridge up in Hanoi. The guerillas planned to blow it up, and I had to submerge myself in the water to film the explosion. When it came, great waves swelled up and rolled toward me, one after another, and I had to hold the camera high up to keep it clear of the waves. Once the filming was complete, I had to move immediately, because fighter bombers would come right away and artillery would rain down. Just as I started to move, my foot struck against something hard down in the mud. I had just enough time to dive and pluck it up. It was a steel box. On opening it, I found it was filled with gleaming bullets. I asked a guerilla how long the ammo box might have been there, and he told me that two years earlier the enemy had conducted a sweeping operation through the area. It occurred to me at once that I could use this steel box to carry film in. Pouring out the bullets, I saw that they were bandoliers to be wrapped around a person's torso.

So the American ammo box became my film box. It was a fine box; after I put the film in, there was some leftover space on both ends, large enough to stuff in some roasted rice as a safeguard against humidity.

There was no way I could carry such a great quantity of film on my back to all the places I went to during my time in the lowlands. It would be like having an entire studio on my back! So it occurred to me that I must go in search of more ammo boxes of the same sort. Once the film was shot, I could throw it in a box and bury it wherever I happened to be. Identification signs for the burial spots would be big trees, river bends, and boulders... But then the surface of the earth could be turned upside down by bombing. Burying film in that manner would be extremely

risky, as it could be lost any time, and then what could I say to my superiors! But miraculously, even though the amount of film I shot was huge during all those months of wandering here and there, I was able to dig up all of it, wrap it up, and, at the conclusion of my mission, carry it back intact to the mountains.

I recall that during my years of filming in the battlefield, I often found it strange and “illogical” that I had not yet died! Surely, it would only “make sense” to die hundreds of times!



I often found it strange and “illogical” that I had not yet died!

Another day, we were coming down from upstream, moving along in the Thu Bôn River when we saw a band of guerillas that just then coming up from the opposite direction, talking and laughing noisily. As I gazed into the shallow water, intent on my wading, a pair of white long legs suddenly appeared. I looked up and saw a girl, the only girl in the group of male youths. She was wearing a tight pair of shorts, revealing smooth, off-white long legs, supporting a tall, slender figure. Her face was refined, with an aquiline nose, and a pair of bright eyes...

But only one side of that face beautiful as an angel's was intact! The other half was horrifically deformed (I learned later that she had been injured by a bullet hitting her squarely in that side of her face).

The girl gazed straight into my face. Our eyes met for a second. Then she shifted the Garand rifle on her shoulder to her back, turning sideways and kicking the water with her long legs with a swirling motion like a ballet dancer, sending sprays of water in the air. Countless pearl-like drops of water flew up and then followed each other, making gleaming arcs in the air as they fell under the early sun. And a clear, spontaneous peal of laughter resounded on the wavy surface of the river ...

Hỷ, our photojournalist leading the way, said, "That's Xoa, Văn Thị Xoa, chief of Xuyên Châu village militia."

I was terribly obsessed by her beautiful, yet half-destroyed face. Now, forty-five years later, I still, at this very moment, remember the exact sound of her laughter. It was a laugh unlike any other I have heard in my life; it seemed tinged with some kind of thirst for revenge...

Half of her beautiful face had been shattered and deformed by the bullet wound, so the girl would have to live with that for the rest of her life. The pride of her beauty had been snatched away. Her hope for love and happy marriage had been ruined. Her burst of haunting laughter reflected the hidden pain of a deeply wounded human being, with a sense of loss, bitterness, carelessness, and desire for revenge. I learned later that she had trained herself to be a sniper. I thought that without the war, without the wound, she could have enjoyed a happy, normal life, like anyone else. But the war had robbed her of all that, and left her with lonely, impoverished prospects.

A few days later, I suggested to my colleagues that we organize a shooting sequence about Xoa and other guerilla girls of Xuyên Châu. Dozens of people gathered to do this, but before we could begin, artillery began to rain down on us, forcing us to run in all directions. The whole area was devastated. Only after another three months was I able to communicate with them again. I suggested to Mr. Lai, the Duy Xuyên District party secretary, that he let Ms. Xoa go down to my place near Bàn Thạch Market so we could film her there. Mr. Lai was so conscientious that in spite of the intense and desperate fighting all around us, he sent the village militia chief all the way to our location, so we could make a film.

But, split off from her own unit and her familiar surroundings, with no Thu Bồn River and green fields of mulberry, she was no longer the dynamic, natural, enterprising, self-confident Văn Thị Xoa that she had been before! We tried one

approach after another, but she was still stiff and dry, devoid of life. Finally I had to give up after three days and return her to her unit.

Only long afterward, when we went to Xuyên Châu where Xoa and her unit were active, to make a film on the spot, did we succeed. Only then did the image of Văn Thị Xoa become vivid, as was seen in the film we made of her.

One night, anh Tý and I left the sandy seaside area in Thăng Bình District to go up the hills in the opposite direction. We were accustomed to traveling at night to avoid encounters with troops of the other side. We came to a very broad river. This was the Châu Giang, a name that Tý used to name his first son.

To this very day, after the passage of nearly half a century, I still remember the mysterious sensations of that night by the sea, listening to the breezes chasing each other over the tips of the *phi lao* (seaside pines), and smelling the warm salty aroma of the ocean. Peaceful, reflective moments such as those were very rare. Suddenly Tý asked, “Do you see those lights on the other side of the river?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“That’s Bà Market. My wife and family are all over there. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone back to visit my wife.”

“So could we take this opportunity to make a quick visit then?”

“Let me see. If I went alone, it would be all right, but with you along, I’m afraid something would happen, and then we’d be in big trouble.”

“So are the enemy stationed there?”

“No. By day, the enemy’s there, but at night we’re usually in control.”

“Then let’s go. I too would like to visit your family and meet your wife.”

We decided to swim across the river. To call a ferry would be dangerous. If someone should inform on us, things would be insecure. So we stripped off all our clothing, wrapped our gear and cameras in many layers of nylon, and then, arrayed like the legendary Chử Đồng Tử (i.e. a stark naked fisherman who turned into an immortal saint), gently put our wrapped bags into the black water, pushing them ahead as we swam. There wasn’t a sound.

By the time we reached the middle of the river, a swarm of small fish, imagining that we were some kind of exotic morsel, began nibbling enthusiastically on the area of our bodies that should not be touched. The tickling sensation was hard to bear, but we continued to swim as if nothing were happening.

On reaching the other side of the river, about a kilometer away from the lights, we put on our clothes again and arranged our gear. Taking my hand, Tý pushed me

into a clump of shrubbery and told me to lie low, so he could go in first to test the situation, after which he would come back and get me.

I sat without moving in the shrubbery while the mosquitoes bit me to death. About half an hour later, Tý returned and said, “Things are very quiet. Let’s just go in.”

The family of anh Tý’s wife was moderately prosperous; they did business in Bà Market. It was a two-story house; on the lower level they sold herbal medicines and miscellaneous goods. There were many bedrooms on the upper level. We bathed and brewed some tea. Moments later, a little boy came up. With respectfully folded arms, he said, “Mrs Hai Hoàng wishes to invite you two gentlemen to come down to the lower level and have dinner.”

We went down and saw a tray of hot “*trứng vịt lộn*” (half-hatched boiled duck eggs) and glasses of cold beer to start with, and lots of other dishes arranged in the middle of the room. And so the two “ravenous ghosts” got to eat their fill, making up for their endless days of hunger and misery.

Next morning the local militia posted guards in the area to keep a lookout for the enemy, so we were able to film the activity going on in the marketplace. Such crowded, merry scenes were very seldom seen in the so-called “liberated” areas. Chị Hai Hoàng went out to the market, where she stood out as an elegant beauty arrayed in off-white silk. I don’t understand why the enemy didn’t come that day to search through Bà Market. We later departed peacefully amid the fond goodbyes of Chị Hai Hoàng and her family. Those memories remained deeply implanted in my mind and subsequently turned to sorrow when I learned Chị Hai Hoàng was arrested and imprisoned. Anh Tý sent me a poem he had written to his wife in prison, as follows:

WAITING

(written for Hoàng)

*I wait for you as dusk awaits the wind
To disperse the clouds, reveal the starry sky.
Sails spread before the wind, returning to the pier,
As lines of windswept pines confide in whispers to each other.*

After the war, Mrs. Hoàng and her children became close friends of my family and have remained so till the present day. She and her children have been to Hanoi a couple of times to stay at my home, and I have also gone back to see them...

Underground tunnels and shelters were closely bound up with our lives in that region. Some shelters were dry and others were wet, with toads, snakes, and centipedes. Sometimes we remained in shelters for days—we had to use these places for purposes of elimination too, and then breathe in the aroma of what had been “eliminated.” Yet, that was not the worst. In some areas, the surface of the earth was barren, so the shelters couldn’t be dug in the usual manner. The entrance had to be dug underwater at the edge of a stream or pond. To enter them you had to plunge beneath the water and then go up vertically, as in the lairs of otters. Every time you wanted to enter one, you had to feel around with your hand to find a cave, like a cave for crabs. The “tunnel rats” on the other side also regularly submerged themselves in the water and felt around with their hands to identify the entrances...

Sometimes at night we got word that enemy scouts had crept into the area. It would be silent, with not even the sound of a dog barking. Within five or seven minutes we had to wrap up our gear and crawl noiselessly out to the river. The things that filmmakers like us brought along were not weapons, but cameras and film, both exposed and yet-to-be-exposed, and clothes as well, including the clothes we were wearing! We would wrap up all these things securely in a few layers of nylon, until they were like rubber floats, so we could submerge them in the water and conceal them for later use. Then arrayed like *Chữ Đổng Tử*, we slid easily into the water and lightly pushed the buoyant nylon sacks ahead of us. On reaching the entrance to a tunnel, we would pause and take in a great breath of air, so we would have enough oxygen in our lungs to push our gear downward, move it five or seven meters forward, and crawl into the tunnel! I was quietly grateful for all those days in my childhood when I had run away from home to practice swimming at the Children’s Palace in Hanoi in 1954.

My film passed through countless jungle rainstorms, watery submersions, underground burials, storage in tunnels and shelters, and traversals through streams and rivers... Yet, when I went up to the North, before any processing of the negatives, Mr. Đoàn would at once exclaim, “This film isn’t mildewed at all!”

“How could this be! Given the intense hostilities of the war, with everything being turned upside down by bombing and shelling, that you could preserve your lives, and bring back intact all the films you shot is almost unthinkable! Just the fact that you were able to keep the film from suffering damage or getting moldy is a miracle!”

When we heard Mr. Đoàn say that the film wasn't moldy at all, I also was indescribably astonished and overjoyed!

As for the story concerning Mr. Đoàn and the film I brought back from the war zone, I'll recount that later.

It must be added that a photojournalist filming scenes in a war zone must necessarily put his life in danger, going to places where the fighting is most intense, choosing locations that command the widest view from different angles; standing in high places, so as to capture the best pictures, yet he must not... die! The film must not be damaged. His duty is not to gain victories in battle, nor to use his body to support a machine gun or to block the gunfire from a bunker. His foremost duty is to... live, in order to shoot scenes and bring the film back to the studio for processing—only then does he *fulfill his duty*! Death would be totally useless: all the hard training, all the expensive equipment, all our important stories and unfinished work would be as if cast into the ocean!



My foremost duty was to... live, in order to shoot scenes and bring the film back... (the documentary films didn't get moldy, but this photo did!)

As a rule, people who survive aren't honored to the same extent as people who die, but no one is so stupid as to choose death. Naturally death carries the possibility that you may gain a heroic name, be praised to the skies, and be remembered for generations... Putting it this way may sound very rude and naked, but it is the truth, a very cold, hard truth. In a war zone with bombs falling and bullets flying everywhere, life and death are not up to individual will or wisdom alone, but are also up to fate, to God's will. A great many of my colleagues didn't come home after the war, but departed this life forever, leaving gaps that cannot be filled among their families, relations and colleagues, from the North to the South. There are a great many such cases, but here I will only recount the story of one colleague who was closely associated with me, immersed in the affairs of the same war zone, at the same period of time.²

Compared with my other colleagues, I made Nguyễn Giá's acquaintance late, and perhaps knew him less well.

It was in 1967, at the headquarters of the 5th Zone party committee, when we heard that Nguyễn Giá, who had just completed a course of training in Russia, had come to Quảng Đà. I had never met the fellow before. What sort of person might he be? What would he do, all alone, to cope with these terrible war zone conditions? We didn't say anything to each other, but we all understood that Nguyễn Giá had decided to throw himself into an uneven fight. It was also in mid-1967 that I was lucky enough to get a camera and film, bid farewell to hillside farming, and come down to Quảng Đà. For many months on end, bombs rained and bullets flew, and the enemy came through on sweeping operations. I had met thousands of familiar and unfamiliar faces, but I had not been able to meet Giá. Such was the harshness of the war in Quảng Đà. Sometimes we would be only one rice field, one small canal, one secret tunnel apart, and then, in a flash, an artillery barrage would start, enemy troops would pour out of helicopters, and bullets would fly all about—and then we would disperse in all directions.

When we had filmed the final scenes for the film *The People of My Native Land* in Duy Xuyên, we were subjected to a ferocious sweeping operation the like of which I had never previously experienced in my life. I could never have predicted that it was just in that moment of supreme peril that I saw... yes, without doubt, it was Giá that I saw! Helicopters swarmed like flies over our heads, and shouts of Americans resounded in all directions leading into the village. From Mt. Dựng outpost, the

² The account that follows is excerpted from a newspaper article that Thủy published in September, 1985.

ARVN troops descended, kicking over the fences. Bullets kept whizzing by at belt-level and above. I had just then been suffocating in a secret tunnel and had been dragged out by the armpits to an open place so I could breathe, when someone cried out:

Look, there's Giá!

I tried to raise my sagging body and looked up. The real flesh-and-blood Giá was rushing by in a bent-over posture, about ten meters from us. He was about my age. He was a bit dark, well-built, attired in rural green "pajamas," and had a sack on his back, probably for a camera. What underground shelter had he just darted out from? How did he intend to escape from the enemy encirclement? It was all like a hurriedly taken snapshot.

My films were shot, so, after bidding farewell to my friends, and to anh Tý, I followed some liaison guides up to the base camp. There was no more hope of meeting Giá. I had gotten only a glimpse at him! He seemed like a tough guy.

Perhaps nowadays the living and working conditions have changed, and people can travel around by automobile or aircraft to make film, so the need to meet others is not so strong. But back in those days at the frontline, meeting with colleagues and hometown compatriots was a big comfort.

The road through the piedmont area up to the base-camp was remote and endlessly long. On the afternoon of the fourth day, at a liaison station, I received an order from a leader in the regional party headquarters: "You are to return at once to the Quảng Đà front."

"To do what? My films are all shot."

"This is an order from the regional headquarters. Your mission will be given to you later."

"I don't have a single scrap of film left."

"Just return. We'll talk about film later."

So I had no choice but to turn around. To tell the truth I had no particular reluctance to return—at least I was familiar with the roads and underground shelters there. Furthermore, that fellow Giá had just returned from Russia, but had chosen to stay there. The only annoying thing was that the bosses hadn't told me what to film or where to get film.

On the eve of Tết Mậu Thân (New year of 1968, the year of the monkey), war journalists of every sort (newspapermen, broadcasters, news agency reporters, photographers, and film-makers), as well as musicians and writers regrouped

or, more correctly, were herded into a large underground bomb shelter. This was perhaps the largest and most unexpected gathering in the war. A commander read out an order for a general offensive and uprising throughout the South Vietnam!

I had not yet understood anything when suddenly I saw Giá. He looked exactly the same as he did when I had seen him running at full tilt during the sweeping operation in Xuyên Trường. He was sitting in a corner of the shelter, still with a bundled sack on his back. His facial expression was natural and relaxed, as if he had never run from a sweeping operation.. I approached him.

“Giá, right? I’m Thủy.”

“Yeah, yeah... Triệu Phương [anh Tý] told me you’d gone back up to the base camp, right?”

Giá’s voice sounded like that of someone from Lai Xá.³ But this was not a time and place for us to chat socially. So I said briefly, “The order that was just read isn’t for me— I can’t film with an empty camera.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you some film,” he offered. “I have a little black and white film, but I’ve left it all this time in Điện Hồng.”

Giá was without a doubt someone from Lai Xá, very kind, with no nonsense, and reliable. He pulled me out of the shelter and the two of us suddenly craned our necks to look up at the sky. The night before Tết and the sky so full of stars? Or was the sky in the Central Region like that? There were surely no stars in the Hanoi sky at this time. Giá rushed ahead, and I followed him almost running. High over our heads, some highflying B57 bombers glistened like stars.

Seconds later, a long, horror-filled wail filled the air, and the earth was lit up, shaken violently, and consumed in flames...

“Where are we going, Giá?”

“Up to... Điện Hồng!”

If we’d been up in Hanoi, I would have concluded that this fellow was a psychopath. Điện Hồng village was way up in Điện Bàn District. We had to swim across the Thu Bồn River, stumbling up and down steep paths, rolling and crawling in the pitch-black night for twenty kilometers!

After having crawled in and out of several partially burned out shelters, we found the one where Giá had his film stored.

As Giá crawled out of the shelter, I touched the bundle of film that he was holding in his arms.

“Is this all you have?”

“Yeah... they said they’d send some more later. Go ahead and take half of this.”

3 Lai Xá is a place in the Hanoi area known as a “photography village.” (translators)

The “half” that Giá referred to was half of a canister containing 300 meters of 16 millimeter film. I’ve always been a cunning fellow, but Giá was so sincere and generous! How could someone up in Hanoi have made such a promise to him? In a few more hours, Tết would arrive, and gunfire would erupt throughout the South, instead of the usual Tết cease-fire (as our superiors had announced).

The two of us hugged the 300 meters of film with no cassette and no bobbin (to divide the film into smaller sections) in our arms. How could we film? Giá was a newcomer, but he already had many local friends and acquaintances. He took me along as he groped around for a while and then crept into the house of a blacksmith.

This gentleman woke up at once, as alert as if he had never closed his eyes (only later did I learn that people living in areas subject to bombs and artillery were accustomed to waking up without any yawning or stretching). In accordance with Giá’s requests, he pulled out a set of tools: flare canisters, pincers, punches...

Giá placed a bobbin before him to use as a model: a Paya Porex movie camera bobbin! This blacksmith was utterly zealous—he went to his work with a habitual disdain for the modern manufacturing techniques used in civilized countries. As for us, we were hungry and tired, and could think of nothing better to do than to sit stupidly and wait.

In the end, the hand-made bobbin was finished. Aside from their differing colors, it was hard to distinguish what this blacksmith had made from the product made in Switzerland. I noticed that Giá was sweating profusely, though the night was now advanced, and was beginning to get cold. He opened his back sack, pulled out his camera and put the hand-made bobbin inside.

We were all nervous about the outcome. We wound up the spring on the camera and pressed the start button to see what would happen. The machine ran and whirred for a spell, making our eyes brighten, and then... it got stuck and stopped. He tried fixing it this way and that way, taking it out and reinstalling it, but the machine still would not run satisfactorily; it would run for a number of seconds and then get stuck again. We had to say good bye to the blacksmith.

When we thanked him and shook his hand, we could see that he had never previously accepted defeat in the face of modern technology, not even that of the machines all around him, making such a clamor in the sky and earth for so many years. Giá was sad and deeply worried, more than I was. We miserably searched for expedients until the hour of Tết arrived. Then from here and there, the roar of gunfire began to encircle us.

The Cấm Nam river is south of the old town of Hôi An (now a popular tourist destination). The place is right next to the sea, so by about 4:00 a.m. the light

was clear enough to distinguish people's faces. Hundreds of big and small boats from the south were filled with people advancing toward the town with drums and gongs. Our superiors had told us to go and "capture those in power." Giá rode in one boat, and I in another. When the boats had departed from the pier for a few boat-lengths, I saw him waving his hands toward the sky as signal. I didn't understand what he meant. I saw only that gunfire from the city was coming at us thick and fast. Someone shouted: "That's our fire, we're in control of the town. We're firing to mislead the enemy!" (only later did I learn that the man was lying.) And so, after the shouting, the boats kept crossing the river en masse. Gunfire from the town rained down on the river, with high-speed automatic gunfire like red water drops sprayed from a hose. A number of boats took hits, foundered, and sank.

Sounds of people shouting and cursing... Some boats turned around, but the gunfire was fiercer than ever. I have never afterwards been able to remember how we returned to the southern bank. So Giá and I were separated again and wound up in different places.

After the second wave of the general offensive, the other side counterattacked fiercely. Then came the third wave. The liberated zones gradually shrank, until nothing of our territory was left in Quảng Đà. It was perhaps for this reason that when I left the base-camp and was on my way to the North, I unexpectedly ran into Giá again at the edge of a jungle. We were overjoyed. When Giá learned that I was going to the North, he couldn't restrain his tears, and he embraced me—embraced the scrawny, stinking bundle of bones that I had become. As for Giá, he looked older, thinner, and shrunken. "With such bombing and gunfire, his mere survival must be due to the blessings of his ancestors," I thought to myself. The two of us spent the night together. When morning came, Giá found two tins of rice somewhere and pushed them into a tubular bag for me, but I declined: "When I reach the way stations, there will be something to eat."

Giá gave me an enclosed letter and a small pack of gifts for his wife and children. We walked together for a long stretch before parting. His eyes swimming with tears, Giá said, "I'll return later—please remember to tell my wife. The thing is, I can't go back empty-handed. I must film something or other, you understand?"

That was my third and last meeting with Nguyễn Giá. My film-making friends and colleagues, like Xá Hội, Đức Hóa, Phạm Thự, Ma Cường, Nghiêm Phú Mỹ, Lô Cường, Hoàng Thành, Mai Lê Yên, and especially Trần Đống, who stood in the forefront of cinema in the 5th zone during the war, are able to relate many stories concerning Nguyễn Giá. He had an unshakeable determination not to return to the North empty-handed.

His life was full of setbacks; no sooner did he make his way to some location, then that area would be subject to ferocious sweeping operations. The first load of film he sent back to the North for processing went “foul”—the film flicked by with no images. When he went with Lê Bá Huyền, Huyền was captured. When his first child was born, he never got to see the infant’s face.

And after all this, most tragically of all, he died while shooting his last lengths of film, that he had devoted heart and soul to, in Quang Ngãi.⁴

⁴ Published by *Cinema magazine* (*Tạp chí Điện ảnh Việt Nam*) in 1985

CHAPTER SEVEN

CARRYING THE WAR HOME

I took the crab apart and ate its upper shell, and finally its body, throwing away nothing! It was half an hour or so before I had eaten the whole crab...

Having finished, I quietly sneaked back to my hut and crept without a sound into my own hammock...

The following morning, the little boy burst into tears because he had lost his crab. I felt utterly ashamed.

After the Tết Offensive in 1968, came the second and third wave of counterattacks by the other side. We were dispersed, devastated, broken up. We kept running and kept suffering repeated blows.

My mission was to protect the film I had shot and carry it back to the North, where I was supposed to deliver it to the Cinema Department, without allowing any part of it to be lost or damaged. At that time, I was thin as a rail and sick with malaria, and my hair fell out, leaving only stray wisps. Someone said to me, “When I sit near you, I smell the odor of death.” That was chị Tú, the younger sister of chị Thúy Bằng, the wife of the musician Văn Cao (the author of many famous songs, including the Vietnamese national anthem). She was at the time working there with her husband in the News Agency of 5th Zone.

Let me tell the story of Trần Thế Dân. Much earlier, Dân had studied cinema and photography at a film school in Beijing, and spoke excellent Chinese. After graduation, he came back to work at the Feature Film Studio in Hanoi and later became vice director of the Cinema Department, and then Deputy General Secretary of the Cinema Association. Everything Dân thought and did was in complete conformity with the rules, with all he had been taught at school and in his family.

As for his relations with me, he was extremely kind, and I have many fond memories of our times together in the war zone. Dân cared for me wholeheartedly, especially after I fell ill. Once Dân had me lean against a pillar while he gave me an injection. When he withdrew the needle I fainted and fell down to the ground. Dân hastily picked up the tube of medicine to see if he had administered the wrong substance—but it was only vitamin B1...

Once Dân cut some slices from his last piece of ginseng for me. It had been given to him by Mrs. Hào, the wife of the musician Nguyễn Văn Thương (author of the famous melancholy song “Đêm Đông” or “Winter Night”) and the sworn elder sister of Dân.⁵ At another time when a mission took him to a neighboring area where crops were grown, he carried back a bunch of water spinach to give to me. Since he was on the road for three or four days, almost all the water spinach dried up and withered, so we had to sort them out bit by bit to see which stems were still edible. Later when I set out for the North, Dân shared some rice with me.

Dân was completely deaf in one ear, yet he was given the “special favor” of being allowed to go to the war zone. When there was an explosion, he had to turn around in a circle in order to determine in what direction it came from. For the same reason, Dân could not go down to the lowlands where bombs fell everywhere and where one could meet with enemy troops at any time. He remained in the highlands and made the film *The Wild Game Hunters of Mount Đak Sao*, which won a gold award at a film festival held in Moscow. Very few people, if any, could have done that, given such bombing, starvation and illness... Dân was so thoughtful in his behavior and so kind by nature that he was liked by everybody...

The counterattacks of the other side after the Tết Offensive in 1968 pushed us into Laotian territory. Every time we changed location, our unit had to carry along some sick or disabled men. My presence had become a burden for my colleagues—nobody would be able to carry me around on their backs or on a stretcher. And besides, the quantity of film was so great that it appeared necessary to see if it could be turned into movies or if the negatives had images or not.

They therefore decided that I must go back to the North via the Hồ Chí Minh trails through the Trường Sơn Mountains. If I had been healthy, it wouldn't have been necessary for me to return to the North— someone else could have carried the film back there for processing, post-production and “montage”; and my role would simply have been writing explanatory notes and names of locations concerning each section of the film.

Such was the background at the time of my return. But later, when I got back to Hanoi, I would be regarded with suspicion by some, because there were quite a few cases of “B quay” (meaning a ‘U-turn’ made by people who were scared of the war and turned around to go back to the North) before completing their duties. They made up excuses that they were too sick or handicapped to go on.

⁵ This means that the two women had carried out a formal, but personal, ceremony acknowledging each other as sisters; an expression of close friendship.

When I set out, I left everything I had behind for my colleagues, including my best rucksack. I took along only a cloth bag, which, filled with rice and tied with a string, became a sort of makeshift rucksack. I left my *hung go* (cooking pot) behind as well, taking only an empty can with a steel wire wrapped around it for cooking on the way, and two sets of uniforms. It was hard to say when I would reach the way stations, so my colleagues gave me a *ruột tượng* (a long tubular bag) with rice contributions from the others, a can from some, or half a can, or a handful, from others. At that time I was so weak that whenever I urinated, I had to hold on to a tree for support. So how could I carry all these things? My colleagues let me try by loading them up on my body, that now looked like a chopstick. When I stood up, the rice bag slipped down to my feet, for I had no hips or any protrusions for it to hold on to. And when I put the rice bag on my shoulders, I couldn't bear the load and fell down, though the rice wasn't that much, just a few kilograms... Yet, I had to carry a few dozens of canisters full of negatives up hill and down dale...

So I went.

...my colleagues walked with me for some distance to see me off and encourage me: "Go, and do your best, okay?" And at last, I had arrived at the destination. Now I know how powerful spiritual motivation is.

I wasn't dragging my corpse-like body back North just to rest, eat good food and get medical treatment. The yards and yards of film on my shoulders were filled with so many images of so many people, so many stories, so many battles. I was carrying all of their lives with me...

On the way up to the way stations network, I had to cook food for myself. I was so sick that whenever I ate, I would vomit and have diarrhea. It was miserable. But when I mixed the American orange juice packets with spring water, I could drink it right away and this helped the diarrhea as well. When I started running a high fever from malaria, I put on all my clothes, and carefully wrote the following note that I placed in the film pack: *These are all film negatives shot in the war zone, not yet developed. If they should fall into your hands, please take the utmost care to preserve them and deliver them on my behalf to the office responsible for Cinema. They must not be opened.*

When seized with high fever on the way, I spread out the nylon tent, and lay on it, half exposed and half covered, with my arms protectively wrapped around the sack of film, lying right on the trail which was no more than a meter wide, so that if I died, anyone passing by would see me.

I had seen dead people by the wayside many, many times. Once when I went to get cassava tubers on the hillsides, I saw someone on a hammock groaning miserably, still with hat, canteen, and a backpack... and on the way back, I saw only a twisted corpse, with no possessions left. I had seen such deaths, many of them, time and time again.

I thought that if I died, anyone who happened to run into my corpse would know what I was carrying. I lay there burning up with fever and groaning, as drops of rain fell here and there on the top of the tent. Many people died from malaria like that, not just from bombs and bullets...

And then I heard some voices of people conversing in the distance... and sound of heavy footsteps as if from young and healthy people, probably from paramilitary volunteer youths or frontline workers.

As the footsteps came closer, I was overjoyed. Their voices were enthusiastic as if they were young and strong. One person came up to me: "Oh, there's a fellow lying here, perhaps he is dead already." Another person lifted the flap of the tent. Our four eyes met. "Hey guys, he's still alive." They closed the tent flap and went on their way.

On one occasion when I was too weak to keep up with the others, I said, "You all go on ahead, just make marks along the way for me to see—I'll get to the way station without getting lost." The night was black as ink, another fellow and I went along groping our way forward in the dark and I had no idea how we could finally make it to our destination.

This fellow was a disabled soldier. Of those going back to the north, nearly all of us were disabled, missing a foot or a hand, sick with malaria, some carrying children with them... we were in fact a band of disabled troops.

The soldier I was with had broken a foot and a hand. He said he was good at swimming. I too was good at swimming; I could cross any river no matter how fast the current. As I have previously observed, I owed my life to that critical skill. The soldier could wade across a stream if it was shallow, but whenever it became so deep that he had to swim, he would look pitiful as the current swept him away with only one hopelessly working hand. How can you swim with just one arm and one leg? The dividing line between life and death is indeed fragile!

Once our way was blocked for fifteen days by a large band of special forces that had been dropped into the area. The first day, we each ate one can of rice; the second day, less than one can; the third and fourth days, half a can; after that, not a grain was left. We had to gather wild roots and leaves in the forest, such as taro, to cook and eat. Later on, I would shudder whenever I smelled it. Taro is similar to the

elephant-ear plant. We would cook the leaves until they turned into a horrible sort of soup, and add a pinch of salt and glutamate powder. And this was the food that everyone ate, both the sick and the healthy.

I shall recount here another thing that happened on the way. Our group included all sorts of people—men and women, old people and children. One woman had brought along a four or five year old child—I still remember that his name was Vinh, little Vinh. Everyone in our group loved both the mother and the child. We gave them the best spots to sit and, whenever there was anything to eat, shared it with them. A liaison soldier caught a stone crab when crossing a forest stream and brought it back for the child, for the boy had nothing to play with. He used a long cotton thread to tie one of the crab's claws at one end, and tied the other end to the stake to which my own hammock and that of the mother and son were tethered. I lay on my hammock and gazed down at the child playing with the crab.

When night came, my hunger and thirst became unbearable; I was overpowered by a desire to eat something. There was some roasted rice in the sack with film, but I wouldn't have dared to eat a grain of it, even if I had to die of hunger. The roasted rice was there to protect the film from moisture. I remembered that a crab was tied to one end of my hammock. An "ideological struggle" (a much-used term at the time) took place in my mind—should I steal the crab, so as to roast and devour it?

After thinking this over and over, I decided to eat the crab. When the mother and child had fallen asleep, I crept out of my hammock without a sound, opened my backpack, and took out a water-filled canteen. The water had been obtained for me by the liaison soldier, as I had no strength myself to go down to a deep stream. I scooped up a little salt and put it into a Chinese metal bowl.

Then I carefully disengaged the crab from its string and stealthily brought it down to the kitchen hut. The cooking hearth still had some red embers. I took a little water and washed the crab clean. Then I stirred up the embers and placed the crab on top, turning it over again and again until the crab was roasted brown. I was consumed with hunger, so I no doubt did this hurriedly. I broke off the crab's smallest leg, dipped it in salt and put it in my mouth. I chewed and chewed it, then washed it down with a mouthful of spring water. I went on in that manner until I had eaten the biggest claw, eating each part and then washing it down with a mouthful of water. I took the crab apart and ate its upper shell, and finally its body, throwing away nothing! It was half an hour or so before I had eaten the whole crab.

Having finished, I quietly sneaked back to my hut and crept without a sound into my own hammock. The following morning, the little boy burst into tears because he had lost his crab. I felt utterly ashamed.

All of us in the group kept together as we traveled. We exchanged items of clothing for cassava and honey. A pair of long pants for a few cassava tubers, and a shirt for half a liter of honey. I gave the boy some cassava and honey. If God has allowed little Vinh to live on, then by now he would be close to fifty—no longer young at all.

Actually, in situations of absolute want and hunger, such as this one, human beings sometimes start behaving like beasts. At night, for example, someone might steal some honey in my backpack, spilling it on the ground.

I must add that the ethnic peoples living in the remote areas of the Trường Sơn mountains led a poor and miserable existence in no way different from that of the Khù Xung and Toong Lương peoples with whom I had lived in the Northwest in former days. They lacked everything, including the simplest scraps of clothing, and needles and thread to sew with... Normally, bringing gifts for our highland brethren and sharing a few things with them would be a source of happiness, but we were too hungry, too sick and weak, for this—so we had no choice but to seek anything available to exchange, so that we might have something to fill our mouths with. The tribesmen didn't know how to measure, count, and make calculations like us Kinh ("terrible") Vietnamese. A spool of thread could be exchanged for two cassava tubers, but if you unwound a spool and divided the thread into lengths of two outstretched arms apiece, the tribesmen would still give you two tubers for each length. And so our "beastly" natures turned imperceptibly into blood and flesh—our own.

No matter how unfortunate my life became, I managed to live on, and even got to travel to many far-flung places...

About thirty years later when, as an invited guest, I sat in lavish banquet rooms in Paris, Tokyo, Sydney, London, Boston, New York with important dignitaries such as officials from the French Foreign Ministry, the mayor of Yamagata, Australian and Japanese cinema directors, a British House of Commons member (Mr. Chris Moulin), famous American movie directors, and even the presidential candidate John Kerry (on the 20th anniversary of the William Joiner Center in Massachusetts, Thursday, Jan. 10, 2002)... I would still occasionally remember my feelings of shame in those days—especially the dark night when I had stolen a crab from little Vinh to roast and eat it, or the days when I had lived like a hungry ghost in the Trường Sơn mountains and broke rolls of thread into arm-length spans, to exchange for two small cassava tubers given me by the impoverished, swarthy tribesmen. I wish I could turn all these things into a feature film...

But then people would say it was all made up.

When we reached the headquarters of “Đoàn 559” (the name of the army formation in charge of the extensive system of Ho Chi Minh trails from North to South), my strength was utterly exhausted, so I had to remain there, unable to go any further.

Everyone had left their huts to work. There were so many huts that I had no idea which was which. I lay down in the corner of a deserted hut and covered myself with a reed mat.

I was awakened by a shout: “Who’s this guy? Why’s he still lying here at this hour?”

A polite voice gave a reply: “Sorry sir, this is not someone from our station. He’s a journalist from the front. He’s ill with fever, so he’s staying here.”

“Then something must be done—why do you let him lie here? Move him to the infirmary!”

“Yes sir, but he keeps stubbornly hugging this bag, saying it’s the film he shot at the front, that he has to bring back to the North.”

“That’s all the more reason why he can’t stay here. You must find a way to take him back to the North.”

After the man had left, I stuck my head out and asked the soldier, “Who is that man?”

“He’s the Chief!”

“What’s the Chief’s name?”

“Mr. *Đổng Sĩ Nguyên!*” (Commander of *Đoàn 559*)

The commander had left, but he still left an order that I must be taken away.

I was treated with some concern, not because of my personal condition, but because of the stack of film I was holding on to.

(LTD:) “So before, you carried the film in; now it was time for the film to carry you out!”

(TVT:) “Exactly. But In any case, I’m very grateful to that commander, because he helped me to carry out my duty and fulfill my hopes. Whether he regarded a human being as film, or the film as a human being is all the same to me. Such is my work and my fate. I’ve been associated with film all my life.”

The next morning, someone said to me, “There’s an automobile.” I thought he meant some small vehicle. It turned out to be a truck. The back of the vehicle had no roof, as was the case with all vehicles that went to the front. A huge diesel generator filled almost all the space in the back; it was tightly secured with steel wire to guard against shock and to keep the machine from shifting position and causing the truck to turn over. Someone found a canvas mat, to cover the spot on the floor of the truck near the cabin, making a sort of nest, and said, “Here you are, your place is up here.”

The canvas was dirty and torn, and it stank.

“How about the cabin?”

“There’s no more room in there.”

Later, I realized that there were two others in the cabin aside from the driver. I hugged the sack of film and lay on the filthy nest, raising a corner of the canvass to shield myself from the sun and rain. When there was anything to eat, they would throw me some of it.

As the truck crossed the Bến Hải River⁶ to the northern bank, I lay on my back gazing at the canopies of trees speeding over my head. Using my depleted strength to crane my neck to look out the side of the truck, I saw a distant church spire... a village... I was overjoyed, thinking that if the truck would stop, and if my legs were strong enough, I would be able to walk there. I recalled how in the war zone I would hide behind grave stones in a cemetery and gaze at cars and lambrettas zooming past only a few hundred meters away, and having no way at all to go up to the highway and set foot in one of those vehicles. That was why gazing at the scenes around me now made me feel strange...

And so after several more days and nights, we reached Unification Park in Hanoi. Someone banged the side of the truck with a heavy thud, and shouted, “We’ve arrived, get down!”

The truck had come to a stop by an entrance into the park along Nguyễn Đình Chiểu Street near what is now a club where *chèo* opera is performed. Back then the park was very simple; it had no walls or fences... Later on, people were unable to imagine how I could have gone straight from “Đoàn 559” headquarters to Unification Park. I myself also found it unbelievable.

As a rule, people coming back from the South were supposed to be issued some money and clothing on crossing the 17th parallel, but I never got the slightest glimpse of any station there, and never received any rations, any clothing, or any

6 The Bến Hải was the river along the 17th parallel, which marked the demarcation between North and South Vietnam.

cent. The three people in the cabin, too, were not mistreating me in the least when they threw me down from the truck. The war was like that.

As I was getting down from the truck, hugging my sack of film, one fellow said, “My house is on Bông Nhuộm (a downtown street). When you’re feeling better, let’s get together.” And so we parted ways.

I sat on the sidewalk, thinking. They should have taken me back via the waystation network. That way I would have arrived at the “Ban Thống Nhất” (Department for Unification in charge of receiving returnees from the South) or “Ban Tổ chức Trung ương” (Central Department for Organization) or the K25 Rehabilitation Camp, or any other comparable organization, where I would have been welcomed and given food and clothing, with all appropriate paperwork and formalities...

But now they had thrown me into Unification Park! What could I do in a situation like this?

TRẦN VĂN THỦY FILMOGRAPHY AND AWARDS

The People of My Homeland (Những Người Dân Quê Tôi). Thủy’s first film, shot in the southern war zone; Silver Dove Award in the Leipzig International Film Festival, 1970.

Betrayal (Phản Bội), concerning the border war between Vietnam and China; Golden Award for Best Director at the Vietnam Film Festival, 1979

Hanoi in Whose Eyes (Hà Nội Trong Mắt Ai; banned from 1982-1987); Golden Award for Best Filmscript, Best Directing, and Best Camerawork at the 1988 Vietnam Film Festival.

The Story of Kindness (Chuyện Từ Tế); completed 1985; Silver Dove Award at the Leipzig International Film Festival, 1989. Described in the foreign press as “a bomb from Vietnam”; viewing rights purchased by ten large broadcasting stations throughout the world, and shown widely in Europe, Japan, Australia, and the United States.

A Story From the Corner of a Park (Chuyện Từ Góc Công Viên); Golden Award at the Festival of the Cinema Association, 1996.

The Sound of a Violin at Mỹ Lai (Tiếng Vi Cầm Ở Mỹ Lai); Golden Award at the 43rd Meeting of the Asia Pacific Film Festival, 1999

Witness to the World (Chứng Nhân Của Thế Giới) at the International Cinema Conference in New York, 2003.

TRẦN VĂN THỦY, a People's Army veteran of the American war, is a well-known independent film maker in Vietnam. He is the two-time winner of the Silver Dove Award in the Leipzig International Film Festival, and has won the Golden Award for Best Director, Best Filmscript, and Best Camerawork at several Vietnam Film Festivals, as well the Golden Award at the Asia Pacific Film Festival, and the "Witness to the World" Award at the International Cinema Conference in New York.

WAYNE KARLIN, a USMC veteran of the Vietnam war, is the author of seven novels and three non-fiction books. He is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, the Paterson Prize in Fiction, and the Vietnam Veterans of American Excellence in the Arts Award. Karlin edited and adapted the English version of *The Story of a Filmmaker: the Life and Adventures of Trần Văn Thủy (Chuyện Nghệ của Thủy)*, which is co-authored by Lê Thanh Dũng and Trần Văn Thủy and translated by Eric Henry and Nguyễn Quang Dy.