

TONY THANG NGUYEN

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*In Desperation*

**T**HE WINTER OF 1975 WAS THE BLEAKEST SEASON of my existence in my unfortunate country. Vietnam had just undergone a brutal change and I was in chains. I was held captive in a low-ceilinged steel-roofed structure called Camp A-9, in Longthanh City, not far from where the Cobra King Division from Thailand was once stationed. These nights were excruciatingly cold and seemingly endless. Without the slightest cover, I dozed off during daytime so I could massage my body the entire night long to keep myself warm. And I was nursing an open, bleeding wound that I had no way to keep it clean other than to douse it with some salty water, lick it and chew out the rotting flesh.

Neither before nor after the Fall of Saigon in April of 1975 did it enter my mind to leave Vietnam. Instead, I made my way to join the Resistant Force founded by Ledinh Thach, a former Captain of RVNAF 5th Infantry Division. We were a fighting force composed of people from Special Forces, Paratroops, Rangers, Infantry, Police and Paramilitia. My rank was Captain.

We occupied the abandoned former Viet Cong secret strongholds as they swept into the cities. These areas, called River Buong and River May, were still strewn with necessities for a campsite, such as tents, cottages, look-out posts on tree-tops, cooking utensils as well as a tended root and vegetable patch. Left behind was also a great quantity of local-made hand grenades, mostly damaged by moisture; we used these solely for catching fish. We often ransacked rice warehouses nearby, in such places as Tanbinh, Tanbac and Traco. Before withdrawing back to our campsite, we never forgot to liquidate the warehouse and leave a full sack of rice at the front door of every nearby civilian dwelling. They in turn supplied us with other necessary staples. For weapons, we had some M16s or M79s, but with less

and less ammunition as the time went by. So we attacked VC outposts to get their AK47s and B40s.

We all agreed to make our way to the border of Thailand, by a jungle trail across Cambodian territory. We would then make further decisions after some rest. We knew that there was an 81st Airborne Ranger unit under the leadership of Wong A Cau stationed somewhere nearby and we tried to join forces with them, as well with a contingent led by Commandant Nguyen Phuoc Truong, also known as Major Tam. We also had a priest with us, Catholic Father Hieu (full name Tranhoc Hieu. Father Hieu was later killed by the communists during his imprisonment).

One day in October 1975, the Viet Cong started attacking our unit as well as Major Tam's. They had two regiments of more than one thousand infantrymen and four T54 tanks encircling us. We were eighty men strong. We spanned a wide area, and met them in tactical three man units. We positioned ourselves at every strategic spot, even on the tree-top lookouts. We used our ammunition sparingly, making our shots count. And thus we fought them for four days and nights and lost about half of our comrades. When Captain Thach was killed, we decided to dissolve the unit. Three men came with me, making our way toward the Cambodian border through PhuocLong Province. At ten a.m. the next day a Viet Cong platoon, spread behind and along a range of bamboo trees, barely forty to sixty feet away, ambushed us near Vinhcuu hamlet. We were crossing an open field and thus were sitting ducks to them. The bullets were flying, tearing my jacket with holes. Then I was hit in my right knee as I was crouching to return the fire. I fell backwards, still firing. I ordered the three men of my unit to escape. But W.O. Nguyenthach Diep was hell-bent on dragging me along with him. Ignoring my protest, he would not release his grip on me. Pointing my gun at him, I ordered sternly: "Release me at once and go or this bullet is for you." Tears brimming in his eyes, he answered, "Yes, sir" and disappeared. The enemy was soon swarming over me in a hand-to-hand combat. One tried to hit me on the head with his B40 launcher, but I swerved my head, and it hit the back of my neck. I fell down unconscious. In a blur, I seemed to see another Viet Cong pointing his AK to my head about to pull the trigger. Another voice warned, "Don't kill him. This fellow is an officer. We can get more info from him. Let's bring him back." When I next regained consciousness, I found myself on a nylon hammock, my back soaked through with my fresh blood. The VC soldiers were carrying me through the rice field where some villagers were tending to their crops. I overheard faint voices saying "Jesu Ma" (Oh my God).

I was detained in Thonghat district, Dongnai province. My cell was in a bombarded house whose roof was missing. Its wooden windows were nailed shut with crisscross boards. My head rested on a big brick. My body lay on a jute sack and was totally bare except for my bloodstained underwear. I found my army shirt wrapped around my broken knee. I endured the excruciating pain in the endless

cold rain for several hours and then I raised my voice and asked my jailers to move me to a drier spot. No one answered. I dragged myself to a corner to seek shelter. Were the door to open at that moment, I would not be able to go anywhere, as the bullet that felled me had gone through my right knee, shattering my kneecap. Evaluating the situation, I was quite certain that I could no way escape a death sentence—I was caught red-handed with a deadly weapon in my hands, fighting my way. Were I to escape death through any unexplainable occurrence, I still would surely become an invalid. Committing suicide was the only best way. I tried to hit my head against the wall but I had no strength left. Biting my tongue was too painful and my stamina failed me. Only one solution was left and that was to let the Viet Cong do the killing for me. I began to call Ho Chi Minh by name and yelled out invectives against him until I was hoarse. No result. Then I called the Viet Cong top leaders names that I could remember, such as Le Duan, Truong Chinh, Phamvan Dong, Pham Hung, Leduc Tho... I kept insulting them until I passed out.

When I came to, I found myself the same as I was before, stiff and numb and cold. My head still rested on a brick, my body was still lying on the jute sack, almost naked but now covered by a damaged rusty metal sheet. The wind went on howling, the rain unfeelingly pouring, raindrops pounding rhythmically on the damned metal.

The following morning, the Viet Cong called a general meeting of all the population of the Thonghat District. They displayed about forty corpses of our men killed in the attack that they labeled 40 “cruel rebels” who had been “punished.” Eleven of us were captured, all of us wounded. The rest, about thirty men, had escaped. The Viet Cong brought me to the back of an army Jeep for the populace to view. Some shouted slogans like, “Death to the traitor,” while some others tried to stifle their cries. I sat back in my bloodshot, flimsy underwear, slightly smiling. Death was what I wished and waited for. A death sentence was therefore no longer ominous to me. It was just a normal consequence of my actions.

A young woman about my age shoved the guards aside so that she could have a closer look. She said, “this traitor, this invader, doesn’t bow to peace but goes on killing innocent victims.” She went on, her rage feeding on itself: “I want to spit on his face, to crush the skull of this creature that bears a human face but fosters inside a bloodthirsty animal.” I sat, unmoved, thinking she was just a female “Victor Charlie” performing her play. I just wanted to see this comical tragedy end. I was ready to die in whatever form, or by whatever means. I met her gaze steadily while she raised her fist against me. Instead of swinging at my face, or spitting on me, her hand touched my belly. I looked down in haste and saw a small tangerine there. I quickly covered it with my hand and met her eyes in wonder. With a glimpse of recognition for my gratitude she went on with her performance. At present time, I still wish for an opportunity to somehow meet this wonderful actress again, and

thank her, for the tangerine, yes, but most importantly for the moral uplift she provided me.

Then began the days of interrogations. Interrogators from the regular PAVN from the North were somewhat bearable. Some seemed reluctant to be tough. One of them even stealthily brought me a cup of hot milk, after I had passed out. But at night, groups of VC's came to torture me. They punched and kicked and hit me with wooden clubs. Sometimes, they stood on my broken knee, and jumped up and down on it. This went on for six or seven days. It seems they had selected me for special treatment because I was the only high ranking officer there at that time.

The interrogators from the Liberation Army of the South were the cruelest. The intense pain of their torture occasionally caused me to pass out, sometimes for several hours. During these periods, I saw myself floating above fields covered with colorful, giant flowers. I was clothed in the richest material made from the gossamer of a rainbow. The air was pure and fresh like after a light rain. And the atmosphere was crystal clear and bright even with no sunlight. I could recall every detail of my entire life as far back as the day I was born. I was happy when recalling my good deeds and then remorseful or ashamed of my bad actions. Was this the "Judgment Day" according to the Christian doctrine, or the "Nirvana and Hell Stage" of Buddhism? I don't know, but suddenly I understood the twitter of birds and the chatter of fish, quarreling over a morsel of food. I therefore was no longer afraid of death. On the contrary, I yearned for the earliest moment when I could leave this earth behind. I wanted to exit this body of mine, which only housed my real being while it evolved through endless stages of transmigration of my soul. It was simply one among trillions of temporary addresses. When I awoke from each of these comatose bouts, I thought that all I had seen were simply dreams. But as the same experiences kept reoccurring, I then firmly believed in my afterlife. I told my torturers, sincerely and in earnest, "Please help me get through death's portal. I have seen beauty and serenity on the other side of death. I will be forever grateful to you if you put a bullet in my brain and end it all. I don't want to continue this terrible life. I promise I will not bear any grudge against any of you, ever and ever." Mysteriously, my tormentors left me alone after that.

One day, a high-ranking member of the VC cadre showed me some black-and-white pictures of my slain comrade-at-arms for identification. I first of all recognized Captain Thach lying dead next to his empty M60, one eye closed, the other opened, a seeming smile on his lips. My heart sank. Tears sprang to my eyes. The VC turned his head away as if he saw nothing. I also tried to find the body of my cousin, Warrant Officer Vuthe Cuong. His was not among the pictures. (His father, Vuthe Nghiep, was my uncle, my mother's full brother. Nghiep was a journalist writing under the pseudonym of Than Phong. He was executed two years later in

Thu Duc, a borough of Saigon city). I said a silent prayer: “Good bye for now, my dear brothers, until we meet again.”

At Camp A9, most of the inmates were former governmental officials of the Republic of Vietnam. The camp consisted of rows of bunkhouses, steel-roofed, and walled with thin wooden boards. Perpendicular to the last row house was a bunkhouse surrounded by layers of barbed wire. About fifty of us occupied it. At night only one of our arms was unfettered; but on the contrary, during daytime, one hand and both legs were free. Here were some of my cellmates: a gentleman named Phanxuan Ha, who was suspected to be a high-ranking officer of the RVN Armed Forces using a fake ID card. He bore himself with poise and dignity. I asked him whether he had any relationship to a classmate of mine in the National Polwar College by the name of Phanxuan Mai. He smiled and said, “Oh, he might be a younger relative.” There was also a woman named Mrs. Minh Dang, the only female to be incarcerated with us. Her crime was that she supplied us “rebels” with a whole truckload of rice. Her iron chain became her rosary, and she fingered it while praying until it shone like polished stainless steel. Nguyenvan Chi was the one who was mistreated and tortured the most, as they mistook him for 2nd Lt. Tranvan Chi. (The real Lt. Chi bore a bullet through his right shoulder, but later made it to California USA). And there was Ngodinh Chien with his left arm paralyzed as the result of a bullet through his left shoulder, and Nguyenvan Can who had sores all over his body, except for his eyes. Another man from Binhdin province looked like former Emperor QuangTrung. Trinhvan Thuong had a bullet wound through his calf; Phamvan Than wore a jacket peppered with dozens of bullet holes.

Also in this cell house I met a former soldier of mine named Daovan Lanh. I had no idea when and why he was incarcerated. But by then he was assigned kitchen duty for the camp. One day, while bringing rice rations to us prisoners, he recognized me, and just nodded as a sign of acquaintance. As for myself, a real infantryman of our RVNAF, I held my cheerful countenance. I joked with everyone, as I was expecting my certain death to come as a welcome friend. Every day we were fed twice, a single bowl of rice with “tiger” meat. A play on the onomatopoeic sound kop, kop, translated into “cop,” a tiger. The “tiger meat” was really rock salt, which when chewed gave out that sound. I used only half of my ration of salt to eat; the other half I used in a solution to wash my wounded knee before licking it with my own tongue. Once in a great while, we were fed with some cabbage soup or pumpkin seasoned with salt. Then one day, Lanh, the cook, surreptitiously gave me half of a small can of something dark and viscous, which he said was reduced fish sauce. Oh my, it was divine. I used only one spoonful each time on my bowl of stale rice, and it brought back to me flavors of high-end restaurant fare I used to enjoy. A dozen days later, when no one was around, Lanh whispered to me, “Did you find the “sauce” o.k.?” “Many, many thanks to you, my friend,” I said. “In the dire

straits I am in now, what you gave me has no comparison.” Lanh said, “They (the VC cadres) asked me to wash about two pounds of dried fish. I washed that whole thing with only one bowl of water. Then I reduced the water by half and that was the sauce you got. Please use it—try to endure and survive, OK?”

The winter passed by, a winter of grief and sorrow befalling all Vietnam that had suddenly turned into a huge prison. Four months later the VC transferred me to Ngaigiao hamlet, Ducthanh district. Though my cell was warmer than the previous one, it was far more difficult to rest. Swarms of bedbugs devoured us all night long.

At night, both my feet were shackled. In the daytime, when we went to our labor duty, only one foot was fettered. And thus we went through the Binhgia village narrow paths, with clanging chains marking our steps. I muttered a song entitled “Vietnam, Vietnam, our indomitable country,” and bitterly felt the meaning of the words, “I shake my shackles noisily in the face of everyone.” My smile was not a natural one. It was a far-fetched one. It was an enraged one. I will step up and smash this chain on the face of those people. 1st Lt. Nguyenvan Tai would sing over and over one line from a romantic opera called “The saga of Lan and Diep”: “My name is Nguyenthi Lang, my body lies here, but my soul has gone elsewhere a long time ago.”

It was in this camp that I witnessed the horrible death of two of my soldiers, named Dongquang Nhuong and Nguyenvan Hien. They had tried to escape from the camp but were recaptured. The VC bound their hands and feet and hung them upside down from the roof-trestle as one would hang two pigs. The head of the camp came out and picked up a wooden hammer used to straighten sheets of corrugated tin plates. It was about five to six inches in diameter, over a foot in length. A handle around four feet long bore into the middle. With one single strong blow, the man swung the hammer right onto Dongquang Nhuong’s head as if it were a coconut. With a thud-like noise it hit its aim. Nguyenvan Hien turned his head to see his friend and received a blow right in his jaw. The jaw fell apart while blood shot out jet-like. I closed my eyes and stifled a scream. The two bodies squirmed a few times and then hung lifeless. They lowered the bodies. I and three other men volunteered to bury them. The bodies, still warm, were laid upon a plank about six foot long and nine inch wide. We walked forward, the dead men’s arms swinging with the uneven steps of our gait. Hien’s head was still oozing blood. Nhuong’s head looked like a gigantic overripe tomato, with its eyes bulging and its face discolored and swollen.

The rocky soil was extremely hard to dig, particularly so when we only had some old, broken shovels. Lt. Tai, the smallest man but also the strongest and most dedicated, encouraged us, saying, “Let’s try to dig a deep grave for them, men.” We tried and huffed and puffed. At dusk, we had reached less than three feet. So we buried our two comrades as they were, with nothing to wrap their bodies, neither poncho nor mat. I gathered some old newspapers and covered their faces. Then I

picked up a few pebbles and lined them around their heads, and ever so lightly, I covered their faces.

That night, it was impossible for me to fall asleep. Around midnight, under the feeble light of our cell I clearly saw Nguyenvan Hien standing by the window, looking out with sorrowful eyes in an immense empty silence. I muttered quietly words of consolation: "Hien, dear, be gone in peace. Leave this cruel world behind. You have paid your dues. Be free from anger and hate. Let your mind soar to immortal bliss." And thus I kept repeating my pleas and prayers until Hien's ghost blurred into nothingness. I then felt something, perhaps a body moving next to me. I turned around and found Dongquang Nhuong lying with me on something liked the floor of a moving train, our backs damp as we were lying on cattle dung. I whispered to him, "Where do you think they are moving us to?" He replied, "Do not fret, big brother, they're taking you to the North, but everything will be all right with you. You'll be then successful overseas." He laughed. Nhuong was always optimistic. I laughed with him and asked, "What? The North has never been our country. It's our enemy's land. And talk about success? How do you expect an inmate, an invalid to boot, to succeed at anything on that forsaken land of those cruel communists? OK, big success considering anyway." We both roared with laughter. I awoke. I was lonely by myself. It was just a dream, and I was awake in a nightmare.

A few months later, an order came concerning my condition: "This inmate is relieved from punishment and is allowed to enlist in a re-education camp." I was moved to Le Loi Camp. Here, though no longer under shackles, inmates were kept away from the population. I recognized quite a few of my friends over the barbed wire, such as Ngoba Lai and Nguyenhuu Tao. We just acknowledged each other by a glint of the eye, feeling ashamed, confused and bitter. Ngoba Lai winked at me and walked to the direction of the outhouse. There crouching next to each other, we exchanged information. Lai asked if I really needed anything but I gratefully refused his help, his condition was not much better than mine. A month later, I was sent to camp Long Giao. My arms were again tied behind me with telephone wires. My feet were bare, and I had nothing on me other than a pair of flimsy shorts and a little bag hanging in front of my chest. My two classmates, Phamvan Bong and Tranngoc Hoan, voluntarily received me into their group. I shared the same camp with other friends Nguyenquyet Thang, Nguyen Nhu, Chunggia Phong, Buiduc Hung, Nguyenthanh An, Dangkim Cuong, Truong Hoi, and Phamduc Thinh. In a camp next to ours there was Nguyenduc Phuong. These Polwar classmates shared foodstuff and clothing with me. I finally got a pair of army pants, a gift from Pham Tue.

On May 23, 1977, I was sent to North Vietnam aboard the ship Songhuong. We debarked at Haiphong harbor. The trip from Haiphong to the ferry on the Red River was by train. On the floor of the train, as I laid my body down amid the

water buffalo dung, my mind went back to my fellow combatants in the jungle, to the horrifying death of my two young soldiers, to my own fate, to my own people, and to the national tragedy that befell Vietnam. With much sadness, bitter tears pricked my eyes.



TONY THANG NGUYEN

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Captain Nguyen endured over eight years of hard labor in concentration camps throughout North Vietnam. He says that he dropped in weight from one hundred and fifty pounds to ninety pounds. In all the time of his incarceration, he was allowed to see his mother and his younger sister twice, for less than an hour each time. He was released in 1983, and emigrated to the United States in 1992.

Captain Nguyen of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces is now a Major, the Executive Officer of the Interpreters Team, Oregon State Defense Force. He owns and operates Tigard Transmissions Center. He is married and has two daughters. He married his wife three months after his release from the prison camps. His wife is a niece of an RVNAF Chaplain incarcerated along with him a long time. This Chaplain introduced Nguyen to his relative's family with strong recommendations. Nguyen graduated from the RVNAF Political Warfare College.