




HUU MAI

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STRONGHOLD



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**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE**

**HANOI — 1963**



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**T**HE heroic sacrifice of our martyrs  
has prepared for the blooming of  
independence and fructifying of  
freedom in our country.

HO CHI MINH





## PREFACE

The Hanoi Foreign Languages Publishing House had the kindness to ask me to preface its translation of "CAO DIEM CUOI CUNG" (The Last Stronghold). I am neither a writer nor a literary critic, but I know that the Publishing House wants a military commander, further, a participant in the Dien Bien Phu campaign like myself to tell the reader my opinion about a novel on our fighting — so I am very glad to make this small contribution.

*Dien Bien Phu is a charming valley deep in the North-Western mountains of Vietnam. Had it not been for the Resistance, few Vietnamese would have set foot upon it or known of it. It was in 1954. The resistance of the entire Vietnamese people against the French aggressive colonialists had entered its ninth year and was becoming fierce at this stage of equilibrium. The land reform implementing the slogan "Land to the tiller" was like a fresh wind blowing enthusiasm and ardour into the hearts of the Vietnamese people and armymen. They scored victory after victory on all battlefronts.*

*The French colonialists got bogged down more deeply and asked for help from the U.S. imperialists who had just suffered defeat in Korea (1953). From then on, the U.S. imperialists directly interfered in the war in Indo-China. The following figures are eloquent proofs: in 1950-1951 "American Aid" accounted for 15 per cent of the military budget of the French colonialists; it reached 35 per cent in 1952, 45 per cent in 1953 and 80 per cent*

in 1954. To retrieve the situation, Paris and Washington sanctioned the Navarre Plan which was aimed at annihilating our regular armed forces, occupying the whole of our country within 18 months and turning it into a base from which to unleash war in South-East Asia. On June 20, 1953 U.S. General O'Daniel (nicknamed "father" of the Southern army by the Ngo Dinh Diem clique) headed a military delegation, coming to Saigon to supervise the implementation of the Navarre Plan. In the first stage Navarre concentrated over half of the French mobile forces in North Vietnam to mop up our free zones and drop paratroopers into Dien Bien Phu in an attempt to build up a springboard for his future attacks. The Dien Bien Phu entrenched camp, the backbone of that plan, was a system of 49 strong positions that U.S. advisers often boasted of as "impregnable". After three months of encirclement and 55 days of fighting, on May 7, 1954, the yellow-starred red flag of the Vietnam People's Army fluttered above de Castries' command post, the Dien Bien Phu entrenched camp was razed, the dream of the French colonialists and the intervention of the U.S. imperialists to protract the war in this country were shattered, compelling them to cease fire and sign the 1954 Geneva Agreements restoring peace in Indo-China.

Since then the words Dien Bien Phu have become very dear to every Vietnamese heart and are their source of pride.

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Dien Bien Phu has gone down in the history of the Vietnamese nation and inspired many writers and poets.

A Dien Bien Phu fighter, I was very moved when reading Huu Mai's *The Last Stronghold*. The author has revived in his novel the fighting on hill A-1, dubbed by the enemy as "the vital key to Dien Bien Phu". They mustered all their forces to defend it when we attacked it for they knew well that the loss of Hill A-1 meant the annihilation of the entire Dien Bien Phu entrenched camp. An officer himself, Huu Mai was then present at the front-line. The vivid pages of his book have recalled before my eyes the majestic and harsh setting of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, with

its blood-covered muddy trenches the value of whose every inch of ground we clearly realized through the tense and stirring days and nights in the rain, sun and mist. What is most gratifying for me is that through his book I could meet again my former comrades-in-arms. The characters in *The Last Stronghold*, from the veteran soldiers or new recruits, to the commanders of a platoon, company, battalion or the whole front, whether their name appears in the novel or not, evoked in me dear memories of the actual men, the then Dien Bien Phu fighters. Small wonder that officers and writers when reading and criticizing the novel, have called its characters by their true names. Those are ordinary and simple men, deeply attached to life but also ready to lay down their lives. They fiercely march forward like lions in face of the enemy's fire but willingly share with him a morsel or a cup of water immediately after his surrender. They are mild, unprepared for a modern war but are victorious over an atrocious and perfidious enemy fighting skilfully with up-to-date weapons.

During these days, it must be said, the war brought us most severe trials and raised gigantic obstacles that we had to overcome at any cost. As workers, peasants and other labouring people rising in arms to defend our fatherland, we had many weak points when facing a seasoned army with modern equipment and the technique of the aggressive imperialists. Huu Mai has dealt with the main intricate difficulties of the battle and made a bold and true account of our officers and men's huge sacrifices during the fighting. The enemy had planes, tanks, 155 mm-guns, flame-throwers and machine-guns with infra-red rays. To oppose them we had a few guns, only light arms, packs of explosive and a poor knowledge of military science. Nor does the author conceal the other difficulties facing us. As a generation newly liberated after the August 1945 Revolution we had to rush forward into a struggle with a much more powerful enemy. While fighting him, we had also to fight the individualistic considerations from time to time arising in our minds. The calculations before the adverse and harsh trials of war were either to launch ourselves into the thick of the fight to secure glory for the nation or to step backwards to become a coward and deserter. In this struggle with our own selves not everyone of us has won. Some have fallen back, degraded.

However, the prevailing spirit was always the "resolution to fight and to win" of our Army, the will to overcome every difficulty and hardship to secure victory in the end. We had an invincible strength the enemy could not have, the patriotism of a citizen determined to break the shackles of slavery.

All those facts found their echo and development in each officer and man in a most complex way. Huu Mai has scrutinized these souls, minutely analysed their psychology and feelings and achieved an outstanding success in this respect.

The French aggressive colonialist army dropped on our heads all the iron and steel that they and the U.S. imperialists brought into our country. The war dragged on longer than expected. We had to pay dear every inch of ground wrested from the enemy. But under the leadership of the Vietnam Workers' Party, the Party of the working class, for the sake of the nation's destiny, of freedom for our present and future generations, we kept serried ranks, marched to the fore, grew in the fire, and triumphed at last. This is a victory of patriotism and revolutionary heroism. This also is the message that Huu Mai wants to give through his novel, as he has quoted President Ho Chi Minh's words in the first page of the book:

"The heroic sacrifice of our martyrs has prepared for the blooming of independence and fructifying of freedom in our country."

He has reached his goal.

A Dien Bien Phu fighter, I have met through *The Last Stronghold* a friend after a long absence. The novel stirred me for it fairly well reflects the fighting and the men who wrote a glorious page in the history of our nation. The particularly real historic setting, the unfolding of events and the characters created in the novel have made it attractive while giving *The Last Stronghold* some of the value of a historic document.

Through over three hundred pages of *The Last Stronghold*, apart from a certain number of weaknesses and shortcomings inherent in any work, for example while creating Vinh the author has failed to bring out what grain of beauty his soul may actually

possess, nor has he delved deeply into the characters with roots in the peasantry like Chu and Khoe — Huu Mai has helped the reader better realize that the key factor of success of the Vietnam People's Army at Dien Bien Phu is "men" and "spirit of sacrifice in the struggle for a just cause". After Stalingrad and Chang Kan Ling, the Dien Bien Phu epic has demonstrated more than ever that no seasoned aggressive army can defeat and subdue a nation united and determined to wrest back independence and freedom.

*This is what I want to tell the reader before he reads this novel.*

Hanoi, February 1963

Former Chief-of-Staff  
at the Dien Bien Phu Battlefront

*Hoang Van Thai*

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Lieutenant-Général  
HOANG VAN THAI





**I**n spring that year, when the "ban" trees, after shedding all their tattered horse-hoof-shaped leaves, were blossoming into five-petalled flowers all over their branches, the Dien Bien Phu battle entered its fiercest stage. After having annihilated the Him Lam, Doc Lap and Ban Keo strongholds, thus scraping off the outer crust of the Dien Bien Phu fortified entranced camp, we shifted over to the second stage of the onslaught against the central area.

Thirty-four enemy positions including General de Castries' command post and the airstrip, crowded the middle of the plain. All the huts on piles, cradles of the "xoe" dance and "tinh" musical instruments, all the orchards grown to orange, grape-fruit, apricot and mango-trees, formerly laden with fruit, had been razed to the ground, without a single pile or trunk left. Everything had been turned into ramparts. The Nam Rom river, whose clear, blue waters would normally at this time of year flow quietly through the villages, was now bristling with enemy barbed wire and mines. The five eastern hills, the ornaments of the plain, were now blood-red, filthy and sickening heaps of earth. From a height, the whole central area of the

enemy entrenched camp looked like an enormous lump of meat, sticky with blood and covered with flies.

While the enemy felled all the trees, burned every bush and every tuft of tiger grass round his positions to clear the field of vision, our troops tried their best to hide under the thick green vegetation of the mountain ranges encircling the plain. Our main communication trench which connected our troops' shelters spread over the hills from the mountain top to the plain, hiding its vermilion body under the thick shade of chestnut-trees with split dry bark and the dense, damp bamboo-groves. The enemy had showered the skirts of the wood with napalm bombs, burning the tiger grass-covered hills in order to uncover our communication trenches which linked our troops' mustering points. But the cunning trenches hid themselves under the green camouflage which was replaced as soon as it changed colour. They skirted the hills scantily covered with shaggy "cho de" bushes then branched out and checkered the ricefields. The whole plain looked like a heavy pock-marked face. Day after day, the enemy did not spare his bombs and shells to check the advance of our trenches. But after each night, these indestructible trenches became more widespread and crept nearer to the enemy posts.

That afternoon, the Dien Bien Phu sky was still like bruised flesh after the last few days of heavy rain. Since early morning the rain had stopped but the sun had not appeared above the sea of dark grey clouds. From the soaked earth there rose a stuffy, oppressive and pungent vapour. The graded ranges of mountains surrounding Muong Thanh plain were also enfolded