



# ON THE 17<sup>th</sup> PARALLEL

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE — HANOI 1965

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PRINTED IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM



*ALERT*  
*ON THE 17<sup>th</sup> PARALLEL*



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*A gangster intrudes into the house of a peaceful man, breaks his furniture and visits cruelties upon his wife and children. Out of patience, the master of the house gives him a sound beating. The thug whips out his revolver and shoots at... the man's brother, saying, "Tit for tat, I am only using my right of self-defence."*

*A bandit can thus be a sophist at a pinch. Unfortunately for him, like the master of the house, the brother is a man who knows how to defend himself.*

*Such is in a nutshell the story we will be telling you below.*

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### Quangbinh — Vinhlinh, February 1965

The winter has been mild. The newly-transplanted rice plants grow vigorously and stretch their green carpet as far as the eye can see. In the dry fields, maize and sweet potatoes grow side by side and not an inch of land lies fallow. In 1964, thirteen typhoons wrought havoc in Quangbinh and Vinhlinh; the end-of-year crop suffered heavy losses, many houses were swept away, roads and small dykes were badly damaged. But in February 1965, when we visited the region, there were no more traces of these storms. The Tet festival \* had been observed with dignity, the kids had had their toys and new garments and all households had had their *banh chung* and *banh tet* \*\*.

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\* and\*\*: The Tet is the lunar new year festival on the occasion of which big rice cakes (the *banh chung* and *banh tet*) are made by all families.

"Formerly, we would have died of hunger or would be roving about in search of food," an old man told us. "Never in my life have I seen our province recover so promptly from such a trial. One would say a miraculous rejuvenation."

"It's true, we have rejuvenated," another old man chipped in. "Formerly we would have installed some altar to invoke the genii, then we would do nothing but cry our despair. Today we are not yet rich but we have learnt one thing — never to remain idle, but react and fight."

These old folks' words reminded us of a recent past. Life in Quangbinh-Vinhlinh has never been easy. Here, the land is but a narrow stretch, the mountains virtually touching the sea. The rivers, as smooth as a mirror in normal times, grow furious when swollen by the typhoons. Such is the land of Quangbinh and Vinhlinh. Bent under heavy taxes paid to the feudalists and colonialists, the peasants had furthermore to face a cunning and tough enemy which compelled them to be constantly on the alert. Blown by the wind from the Pacific, the sand creeps day and night into the fields, invades the villages and relentlessly assaults the ricefields and dwelling houses. Some villages have such a revealing word as "Buried" added to their names. For generations, the inhabitants of Quangbinh and Vinhlinh have been waging an unrelenting struggle against the sand; each inch of cultivated land has been conquered from the sand; each bamboo tree, each cassava plant has to be watered, tended and protected like a suckling. The Vietnamese passionately love their Fatherland. The Quangbinh - Vinhlinh

inhabitants are even more than patriotic : they cherish their soil — the soil they have wrested from the sand— and the smallest bush they have grown at the price of untold hardships.

The French expeditionary troops called this region a "street without joy". They had thought that a few posts would be enough to control this narrow strip of land wedged in between mountain and sea. However, despite the mopping-up raids carried out by armoured cars and the bombings and strafings by airplanes during nine years, Quangbinh-Vinhlinh province remained indomitable. The "street without joy" became for the French expeditionary corps an abyss which engulfed pitilessly its most seasoned battalions. To enter a village having apparently no defence work always proved a costly operation in the end. Remnants of blockhouses built along National Highway No. 1 lined with *filao*-trees are proof of the trouble the French troops ran into when they invaded the region.

We often stopped at the roadside to gaze at the green riceplants and the red tiled roofs which looked so pleasant amidst the dark green of the *filaos* or the light green of the bamboo-trees. What a contrast with the greyness of the thatched houses and parched rice-fields of yore ! Along the seacoast stretches a dark strip of *filaos*, a forest of *filaos* still under ten years of age but forming an inviolable fortress. Man has got the better of his centuries-old enemy, the sand, and the wind whistles melodiously day and night in the foliage of the *filaos* as if singing this victory. Millions of *filaos* have been planted in a few years. On dog-days, thousands of men walked on the hot sand to water the

young *filaos* so that they may become this murmuring forest which checks the invasions of the sand.

We stopped on the edge of a ricefield and saw on the surface of the water among the riceplants a thin green sheet of tiny starry spots — azolla, a fertilizing plant which, it was formerly believed, could be grown only in some regions of the Red River delta ; this plant has now come to this locality, 700 km from its habitat. For centuries, it never left the region of Lavan. We remembered that we had set foot in the cradle of the “Strong Wind” ; here in Quangbinh, by dint of hard work and creative innovations, the Daiphong (Strong Wind) co-operative has been able to grow on this barren soil the best crops of the country. Who could fully imagine the tremendous amount of labour spent by the Quangbinh farmers over these ten years to improve this land wrested from sand and gravel ! Canals, dams and dykes criss-cross in all directions ; in the culverts, the water flows from ricefield to ricefield and sneaks even between the rows of sweet potatoes. With a broad gesture, the man in charge of agrarian question pointed to this gentle land of water and ricefields and, with some emotion and pride in his voice, gave us some figures : 342 hydraulic works of all sizes built within a few years to irrigate and drain 53,000 hectares of land, a big project is nearing completion at Camly with a water reservoir of 43 million cubic metres to water 5,000 hectares : 14,000 hectares of newly-cleared land, a food production doubling the 1936 figure, a per capita production of 325 kilogrammes of paddy as against 250 kilogrammes in 1960, despite a yearly demographic increase of 3.7 per cent.

In Vinhlinh district, we went up the hills, a region in which the expression "meal of the day before yesterday" was formerly used to designate the fact that people had a meal only every other day. Farmers who were tending pepper-plants said that by 1970 the plants would give their best crops and yield the co-operative at least ten times more than rice or maize grown on the same area. The following small detail is more informative than figures : here plans have been mapped out for the next five years and this proves that every day the inhabitants eat their fill. On the hill tops near the 17th parallel, we could not refrain from gazing at the other bank of the Benhai river : the South. After a few minutes' silence, a man in our group whispered, "My mother lives there, 30 kilometres from here ; it is ten years since I have not seen her."

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Ten years... If you ever talk to the Quangbinh-Vinhlinh inhabitants on this subject, you will have sleepless nights. That school was built in 1959, that road in 1961 ; the same year our fishermen joined co-operatives... Have you seen those big junks returning every evening ? Pay a visit to Quangphu, and you will know how our fishermen live and work today... Look at that road built along the wharf at the mouth of the Nhatle river, encompassing the site of the old citadel of Donghoi. This small town is quite beautiful with its promenade on the banks of the Nhatle river now nicely lined with coconut-palms, from which one

can gaze at the junks laden with fish with their sails swollen by the sea breeze. The Donghoi people have carefully restored the ruins of the Master's Rampart (Luythay). Don't fail to visit Canhduong, a village which had given a hundred battles to the French and never allowed a single enemy soldier to trample on its soil ; this village is now a big workshop bustling with all kinds of activities. Come and see Hoxa hospital in Vinhlinh ; just imagine a mere district hospital equipped with X-ray apparatus, where important surgical operations can be performed !

Ten years... For the inhabitants of Quangbinh-Vinhlinh, the words also evoke the time of separation with their dear ones, with relatives and friends whom they can see on the other side of the Benhai river, but cannot talk to ; they conjure up all the pain and anger of the South which is so near — hatred so long contained and ready to flare up at any moment.



The American press informed us that President Johnson had had a gloomy Christmas. Like a cancer, the South Vietnam problem has corroded all aspects of American politics. News from South Vietnam is definitely bad ; the mercenary troops are melting away ; the American advisors attract the blows of the Liberation National Front as magnet attracts iron. Westmoreland proved no better than Harkins, nor Taylor than Cabot Lodge ; to try and get a "puppet" who can keep on his feet in this jumble in Saigon

would be tantamount to trying to square the circle! "Ten years already!" Johnson mutters... He is the third president to wear himself out in this task. Helicopters, amphibious cars, napalm, phosphorous bombs, toxic chemicals, supersonic planes, all have been used in South Vietnam. He runs his finger angrily over a map of Vietnam; the Camau Cape, the southernmost tip, seemed to challenge him. Gloomily, he clenches his fists and casts a look beyond the 17th parallel.

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It was fine weather on that day of February 7, the first Sunday after the Tet festival. Everywhere a festive mood still prevailed. In the town of Donghoi, people thronged the stadium where a foot-ball match was to take place; others were playing the "bai choi" \*; in the surrounding villages, others availed themselves of the fine weather to go and plant trees along the roadsides. Suddenly the alert sounded. Hardly had the inhabitants time to get into their shelters when American planes turned up.

The new hospital, the pride of Donghoi, with its red-tiled roofs and snow-white walls amidst the ricefields, was under particular attack. Within two hours, six waves of jet planes dived on it and its buildings were hit by dozens of rockets. The consulting ward had its roof blown off and its walls blasted open, just after

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\* A game of cards in which players sit on an elevated stand (choi).

the last patient had been evacuated to the shelters. The maternity home and infant wards were also hit. But the emergency service was ready. Donghoi had known for months that Washington had evil designs on its schools and hospital. Calmly doctors and nurses comforted the patients and carried them one by one to the shelters. As it was Sunday, some doctors and nurses were away, but they were back beside their patients soon after the alert was heard. The first rockets whizzed around the hospital; Thia, a nurse, had carried twenty little children to the trenches, but remembering that one of them had had a convulsive crisis and another an important haemorrhage, she ran back to the hospital to fetch medicines, hugging the walls to protect herself from bomb splinters and shrapnel: on this hospital the Americans dropped hundreds of shrapnel bombs. Fancy a small orange jam tin with six brass winglets, filled with explosive. On the lid one can read: *bomb fragmentation Blu 3/B*. When the bomb explodes, hundreds of small bullets fly in all directions, wounding and killing people nearby. Many did not explode and remained buried in the sand, or hung on the bushes or clung to other objects, and the slightest shock against the lid would be enough to release a volley of bullets. A real marvel of American technique!

After her operation for glaucoma, Mrs. Thuyet was ordered to remain motionless in her bed. She did so, thinking that "they would not bomb a hospital, the more so since it is standing all by itself and has a plainly visible red cross painted on the roof". But she

received a bullet through her arm and had to be carried immediately to a shelter. Four other patients were also injured.

On the afternoon of February 8, it was the turn of Hoxa school, or rather of the whole of the Hoxa school sector (Vinhlinh). Here, at the foot of a hill flanking the national road, only a few kilometres from the 17th parallel, stood the buildings of an education sector: a nursery school, an elementary school (7 to 11 years of age) a junior secondary school (12 to 15) and a senior secondary school (15 to 18). This was formerly a rubbish dump. After liberation the local population cleared the place and widened it by cutting into the hill, brought their own bricks and bamboo and contributed labour to build school-buildings for more than a thousand children. The teachers, vying with one another in patience and cleverness, made all kinds of tools and apparatuses, and collected plants and animals; friends in the Soviet Union, China and African countries sent in gifts which filled the children with admiration.

At 2 p.m. the children had already filled the classrooms. Their teachers were still busy bidding farewell to a parting colleague. Suddenly the roar of plane engines were heard overhead. The younger pupils rushed into their shelters while the teachers and senior pupils in the school defence unit, took up their weapons and gained their fighting positions. Several successive waves of Skyhawks, Skyraiders, F.8U Crusaders came and dropped bombs on Hoxa. About fifty bombs fell on the school sector. The teachers' room crumbled, tools and apparatuses were blown to pieces,

and many class-rooms damaged. Three children and one teacher were killed. A shelter heavily shaken by an explosion would have collapsed on the children who had taken refuge there had not the self-defence militiamen come to their rescue. A woodworkers' shop in front of the school was completely razed ; one shivers at the thought that some of those bombs might have fallen on the shelters crowded with hundreds of children ! Near the school lived a cripple named Tram who could not go to her shelter in time. Her house was reduced to ashes and the only thing that remained of the poor woman was her mutilated arm which had been flung by the blast scores of metres away.

Among the pupils victims of the bombing there was little Minh Huong who had come from South Vietnam several years ago. Her mother, Mrs. Nguyen, braving all kinds of dangers had taken Minh Huong, her only daughter to Vinhlinh, when she reached school age, for in the South they build airfields and prisons but no schools at all. Mrs. Nguyen had wanted to send her daughter to a school where she could learn the joy of life and the reasons for living. She crossed the 17th parallel, settled in Vinhlinh where for several years now, she has lived sparingly on the fruit of her labour to bring up her child. For years, she lived happy watching her daughter growing up in body and mind. Every night, before going to bed Minh Huong whispered into her mother's ears what she had learned at school and her dreams for her future. And now U.S. bombs and rockets had taken her away from her mother, for ever. On our way to see Mrs. Nguyen we had expected to find a bereaved mother in tears. But