

TRAN MAI NAM

EDITOR'S NOTE

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(The Story of a Journey)

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

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TRANSLATION BY ROBERT C. FRIEND



## EDITOR'S NOTE

*The Narrow Strip of Land* is the report of a trip taken during a mission in the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien from mid-1966 to the beginning of 1967. Its author, the writer Tran Mai Nam, war correspondent of the People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Viet Nam, has put down his impressions.

Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces are situated in the extreme north of South Viet Nam. The first is crossed by the 17th parallel. The second contains Hue, the ancient imperial city, today almost completely obliterated by American bombing and shelling. The two provinces form a narrow strip of land between the sea on the east and the Truong Son mountain range on the west, the natural frontier with Laos. Here, the year is divided into two seasons: the dry season from March to August and the rainy season from September to February, often marked by catastrophic floods. The population, estimated at nearly 800,000 people, lives



primarily on rice cultivation done by rudimentary means.

In the history of the armed resistance against the French colonialists (1946-1954), the people of the Quang Tri - Thua Thien sector wrote many great and famous pages. That part of National Highway No. 1 which crosses the area was called "The Unhappy Highway" by the French expeditionary forces. Since 1954, Quang Tri and Thua Thien have been confronted with increasingly greater numbers of American and puppet forces. Two G.I. battalions in 1966 became five divisions in 1968. Even so, this gave the American commander General Rosson no satisfaction, for the pressure of the People's Liberation Armed Forces never relaxes in spite of this enormous American pressure-play.

On the contrary, the Americans have been dealt heavy blows of such crippling violence that the 6,000 Marines trapped in Khe Sanh were forced to flee in a precipitous and unforgettable rout in June 1968.

The Narrow Strip of Land will give the reader a better understanding of the extraordinary and victorious struggle of the South Vietnamese people under the banner of the National Front for Liberation against the most formidable invasion in our history.

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# I

We march in the desolate gray of the forest. Around us, giant trees, their foliage stripped by poison chemicals, thrust their stark branches into the sky. Their ghostly silhouettes march across a low and cloudy sky, heavy like a soaked quilt. Our feet tread on many seasons of fallen leaves, the last of which show a startling green over the rust color of the others. Over them all the rains have hastened the rot.

In the distance a space opens up. Uprooted trees lie fallen at every angle. A country of the Apocalypse as though some Furie in an impotent rage had turned his axe without rhyme or reason against these inanimate, harmless forest beings.

Our eyes have become red from watching such devastation. Everywhere in South Viet Nam, only bombs and shells. But here, on these mountains green with heavy growth, such a rage against nature seems

insane. One finds himself thinking: "But what do they want?" Is it possible that the superforts fly all the way from Guam, so far through the air, just to change the color of this forest? Is their objective the fields of manioc and corn, or this impenetrable jungle with its streams and turbulent rivers?

Yesterday afternoon, the chief of the relay station called us into his hut of branches in the deep shadow of the undergrowth to go over the details of the route we are to travel. His explanations, in almost an undertone, took on an unaccountable tone of gravity. The effect of this gripped us, not only because of the tone of his voice, but because the way ahead of us was particularly difficult. A way with little cover, full of sharp climbs, and every prospect of frequent bombing by planes and artillery. Tight surveillance by reconnaissance planes over sections of our route, to say nothing of unpredictable brushes with patrols of the enemy's special forces. Passwords, special signals, recognition signs, both for the day and the night, in case contact is broken. The chief told us everything, not even forgetting to tell us what to do in case we had wounded or dead.

This morning he had introduced us to two Liberation soldiers who would be our guides. Both were very young. One had dry and curly hair, a thin figure and olive skin. He was the leader. The other, slightly pockmarked and with great round eyes, wore black trousers and shirt, revealing the round, white arms and legs of an adolescent. We looked at him with uncertainty.

"Are you already eighteen, comrade?" I asked him to get more acquainted.

The young man stuttered some incomprehensible words. When I repeated my question, he answered in a more understandable voice, as though he wanted to change the subject, "Of course I'm eighteen!"

We begin our journey. U.S. Air Force planes above never stop their annoyance. Like masked gangsters, the B-57s hide behind the clouds, carrying out their bombing by coordinates. The whistle and explosion of bombs sows thunder in every corner of the forest. Formations of Phantoms, the howl of death coming from their jet engines, streak towards the North on the other side of the Ben Hai River. But most annoying of all is the continuous growl of the reconnaissance planes.

Our road becomes tougher and tougher. Road? It is not even a path! Just a simple track opened by our guides in the low brush on the sides of the mountains, sometimes only crude steps cut into the bare rock. Often, having crawled under the trunk of a fallen tree, you straighten up again triumphantly only to find yourself jerked violently to the ground, caught by a branch hooked in your pack. In many places we cannot walk upright, but have to use our hands and feet to jump from branch to branch like monkeys.

Now we are marching at a good pace. Suddenly our young guide stops to take off his sandals, too heavy with mud. He pushes them to one side of the trail with his foot, covering them with hastily-cut palm leaves without even checking to see if the camouflage is good. Amused by this, I am just about to point out a better

hiding place when he quickly returns to his place at the head of our file.

His cotton hat has made him too warm and now hangs behind on his shoulder, leaving a squarish head with hair in a brush cut. The heavy pack he carries on his back and his way of walking bent forward give him the air of a little panther. Completely occupied with studying the trail, he pays no attention to the roar of the planes above, training his eyes on every bush and every crevice in the rocks, automatic rifle in his hand ready to fire. Reassured, we congratulate ourselves on having been given these good guides.

We go north. This is the narrow strip of land of our motherland. When I studied geography in school, I had imagined Viet Nam as a slim young girl with a wasp waist. And here under our very feet is this waist, tightened as if with a corset! From this height the eastern limits of our country do not seem far. There is the ocean before us, almost touching the feet of these mountains. From here to that turquoise mirror with the emerald reflections seems only a few hours' march.

On this narrow battlefield, our positions and the enemy's were bound to become interlocked like the pieces on a chess board. The same hamlet shelters both adversaries, both use the same paths. The same path we are following is also full of the traces of a pell mell retreat of American Marines. Many green bulletproof vests lie abandoned with the words still legible on them: "Don't forget to wear it, it will save your life". Someone has pulled rectangular pieces of white plastic from the stuffing and scattered them on the ground.



He waits for us to approach. "You pet rangers!" he tells us, pointing with his finger at the tree under which he stands.

We see bullet holes. Not long ago, the enemy rangers had come in helicopters and set up an ambush here. One of our couriers was killed in the fight that followed. But we knocked down four of the enemy and





The area looks like the aftermath of a card party broken up by the police from which the players have fled in panic. There, radio batteries. A little farther, empty tin cans, bayonets still in their metallic cases, empty gold-colored rifle cartridges lying everywhere alongside multicolored candy wrappers. Countless empty cigarette packages.

Any move from one place to another in this area is carried out like a military expedition. The men of the Liberation Army move only with a loaded rifle.

A wooded hill rises in front of us. Our young guide advances only with the greatest caution, halting frequently to search the surroundings and listen carefully. There was no morning rain, only a cold wind from time to time. Now it rises to a gale, violently tossing the branches and shaking down on us so many heavy drops of rain from the leaves that it sounds like waves on the seashore.

Reaching the top of the hill, our guide stops again, narrowed eyes searching. He picks up a pebble and throws it into a grove hidden by the white mist. Frightened birds wheel up with terrified cries. The boy turns towards us, smiles and motions for us to approach.

He waits for us, face red dripping with sweat. "Puppet rangers!" he tells us, pointing with his finger to the tree under which he stands.

We see bullet holes. Not long ago, the puppet rangers had come in helicopters and set up an ambush here. One of our couriers was killed in the fight that followed. But we knocked down four of the enemy and



forced the others to flee. Telling us the facts succinctly and in a whisper, our guide beams, as though it had happened far away and had had nothing to do with him. But as he turns to take the lead, he again becomes grave, thoughtful and cautious. A sure sign that we must be on our guard.

After we ford a stream, a wide path opens before us. Our guide waits for us at the bottom of a small slope. It is clear that he wants to tell us something. We catch up with him. In the same whispering voice, he says, "Here, comrades, they bomb and shell often and at random."

"Is this the famous 'saddle path'?" someone asks.

"The same."

And he resumes his march calmly. The day before, the relay station chief had gone into great detail about this section of the route, a special target of the enemy. Many bombs had in fact fallen precisely on this path we are treading. The trees are still covered with red mud thrown up by the blasts. He had told us to cover this stretch in a hurry. Our guide says that the planes bomb at random. But surely only madmen would drop bombs capable of wiping out whole sections of forest and digging craters thirty meters wide? Even so, seeing him increase his pace, we understand that it is necessary.