

Bottom of the Pyramid—Red Viet Prisoner's Story

I was born in Nam Dinh province. My father is now 54 and is a farmer. My mother is 50. I have an elder brother and a younger brother and sister. During the French war (1946-'54) we were lucky; nothing was destroyed and my father did not serve in either army because he had a disease of the leg.

In 1955—before the agrarian reform—my family had five hectares (12½ acres) of land, two houses and five water buffalo. But in 1956 after the reform, the government took away four hectares, one house and three buffaloes. They said we belonged to the class of landowners. So we had only one brick house, two water buffalo and one hectare of land, which produced about 2,500 kilo of padi (unhusked rice) in a good year. Of the five hectares, the government gave us the worst land and took the best to divide up for the poor people for them to work on.

The poor people can keep some of the ration, but give some of it to the government. My father has to pay taxes—about 10 kilo of rice for every 25 kilo he produces. But the ration of what we keep depends on what the peasant needs, on the quality of the land, on the amount of the produce. If a family is large and can work more land, they pay more taxes. Everyone pays their taxes after the padi is harvested and dried. Then they carry it to the government storehouse in sacks slung over their shoulders.

RATIONING

The only thing rationed is clothing. Before 1963, we could buy as much cloth as we wanted. But in 1963, we were rationed, eight meters (8¾ yards) per person per year. It's the same ration for adults and for children.

We can buy as much food as we want. We have government food stores and private shops in the market. The government store is cheaper, but we must have coupons for that, and there's a limit on how much you can buy. But in the private shops we can buy as much as we want. The limit in the government store is 200 grams (7 ounces) of meat a day per person; 400 to 500 grams of seafood; 600 grams of rice. We can buy food for as many days as we want, up to the limit of one month, and we have to buy it showing our identification cards. The people prefer the government stores because the price is lower, but if they want to buy more they go to the market.

(He massaged his leg, rested it on a chair and digressed to hospital care.)

In North Viet Nam, it's very easy to go to the hospital; everyone is admitted. In serious cases, an ambulance carries the people to the hospital. There are no private doctors. Women are taken to the hospital for birthing, and in the villages women go to the maternity center and stay several days before giving birth. There's plenty of medicine in the north.

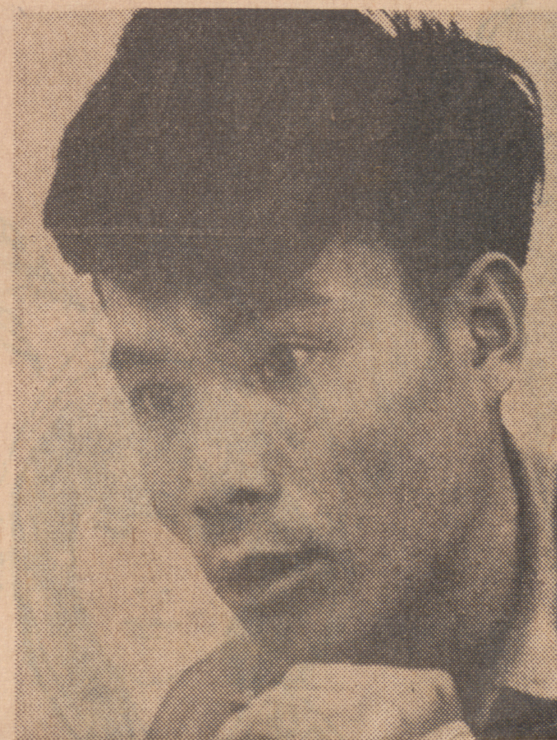
RESORTS

In Sam Son, Thanh Hoa province (120 miles south of Hanoi), there are some nice beaches and a lovely resort area with two-story villas. Red Chinese people and workers of the big factories can go to the seashore there. Some important cadre go for one or two months; those who are sick can go for three months, which is the maximum period.

I had completed my ninth year of schooling. The school system in the north usually ends at the 10th year, with exams at the end of the fourth, seventh and 10th

Infiltrator's route to date, from birth to capture in South Viet Nam.

LE PHAN HUNG, whose name means "The Heroic One," is a 23-year-old North Vietnamese private, one of the first Northerners ever captured in Viet Nam's five-year-old war. He was interviewed at First Vietnamese Army Division headquarters, Hue, 400 miles north of Saigon. He spoke freely, often stopping to massage his wounded knee, tugging at the gray pajama uniform he wore, eagerly accepting an American filtered cigarette or the cup of tea he finished in four gulps. He wore the famous Ho Chi Minh rubber sandals—made of car tires. Beverly Deepe, who filled two books of notes in this interview, was the second American he had ever seen. The first was the helicopter pilot who flew him to Hue. His story is a peephole version of a closed society in which he stood at the bottom and only the few at the top are known to the West. There is no way of checking his accuracy. But this is his story, in his words.



Herald Tribune photo by Beverly Deepe

23-year-old peasant Le Phan Hung answers his South Vietnamese captors.

year. If I'd passed my 10th year exams and had the money, I could go to the university.

My dream was to go to medical school. It's a five-year course in the university. All the university classes are in Hanoi, which has five faculties: one for agriculture and forestry; one for medicine; one polytechnical; one teachers; one all-students school. The last one takes seven years to finish and includes engineering and arts and sciences.

In the university the government gives food and lodging, but the family takes care of clothing and books. Cost to the family is usually 200 dong a year (1 dong equals U. S. 27 cents). If I'd have gone to the university, my family would be in a very difficult financial situation. We have some money after harvest, but it wouldn't have been enough. My father would have to work at a nearby brick factory. And my mother would have to go into her savings to send me money and perhaps we'd have to go without food sometimes. My family is very unhappy. Of course, everyone loves each other, but we're very poor.

I went to school in the city of Nam Dinh. The school used to be run by Catholic priests. It has 20 buildings, 15 in brick and five with straw roofs.

North Vietnamese schools have three cycles. I was in the third, which includes grades (or years) 8, 9 and 10. In this cycle in my school, there were four classes of 8th graders, four of 9th graders and two for 10th graders, each with about 50 people. Girls and boys study together with about 20 girls for every 30 boys in each class.

EDUCATION

My home was 10 kilometers (six miles) from Nam Dinh, and I rode a motorized cycle to school every day and went home at night. Some students had bicycles and a few had motorized bicycles. In a class of 50, 15 students would have bicycles and two or three would have motorized ones. Bicycles cost 400 dong; they're made in Czechoslovakia. Gas costs 1.2 dong per liter. A notebook of 20 sheets costs .6 dong and cigarettes cost 1 dong for one brand and .5 dong for another brand.

Thirty teachers taught in the school. I studied math, chemistry, physical sciences for about 12 hours a week. Also geography for two hours; history for two hours; literature for two hours. We had no military training in school.

In 1961-'62 my school taught Russian for four hours a week. But in 1961-'62 my school taught it only one hour a week. There are no Chinese language classes. I didn't study any foreign languages, but if a student wants

to specialize in any language he can go to a foreign language school in Hanoi.

Also about four hours a week we had political studies and learned about Marxism. The teachers were administrative cadre from the Vietnamese governmental services and were members of the Communist party.

These classes are very boring. It takes too many hours of study to the detriment of other classes—it takes time away from math for example. Political studies are for the third cycle only; in the second cycle—grades 5-6-7—the students are too small.

ADVISERS

The political studies are mainly about what is communism. We studied about Mao, but not about Khrushchev. We didn't study Russian communism, but only Chinese—the biography of Mao, about the Long March and the liberation of China. But nothing about his theory of wars of liberation—as is going on in South Viet Nam.

Some students think Mao is a myth and our studies are not too close to the truth. Some students want to see him, some don't. With the people, it is the same; some like him, some don't. Some older people studied history and know China has dominated Viet Nam in the past and Mao is the leader of China. I wouldn't like to meet Mao.

I didn't see Russians and Chinese in Nam Dinh very often, so I couldn't notice any change in numbers. The Chinese are technicians; they help build roads, bridges, hydroelectric plants and help with urban planning. They helped build a steel plant in Thai Nguyen province (40 miles north of Hanoi). It's been in production two years already. It's a big center with a 40-kilometer (30-mile) perimeter. And big high furnaces produce the steel.

We had no Russian teachers in school, but there were many Russians with the government administrative serv-

ices in Nam Dinh—maybe 20 to 30. I saw a small car with a Vietnamese chauffeur driving three Russians around Nam Dinh once. The Chinese were more numerous than the Russians in Nam Dinh, but I last saw Nam Dinh in April, 1963. I don't know how many are in Hanoi. All foreigners are dressed in civilian clothes. I've never seen a foreigner dressed in military clothes.

The North Vietnamese people have no opinion about the government. We don't see the government very often except Independence Day (Sept. 2, when Ho Chi Minh set up his first government in 1945). I saw Ho Chi Minh at a political celebration in 1962. He was bigger and fatter than before. He was very simply dressed and spoke very simply to the people. Everyone loves Ho Chi Minh.

INVASION

Pham Van Dong (Premier) is well known in the government and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap (army commander-in-chief) is well known in the military. During the battle of Dien Bien Phu (the defeat of the French in 1954) Ho Chi Minh and Giap came to the battlefield and led the battle. I was very young then, but I heard people talk about it.

Since 1961, the government propaganda said the Americans are invading Viet Nam and the South Vietnamese would march toward the north. Before coming to South Viet Nam, I was told we'd liberate it, but we weren't told many details about the south. The army didn't tell us much about the south either.

But the North Vietnamese people don't believe the southerners will march towards the north. Each part of the country would stay separate, but maybe the government people at a higher level think differently.

The government started the propaganda that the southerners would invade North Viet Nam so the people would work twice as hard and give contributions to save the country, but there are no trenches or civil defense in Nam Dinh when I left. Just north of the 17th parallel they're digging many trenches though.