

THIS IS LE PHAN HUNG, a 23-year-old North Vietnamese draftee who left the Communist orbit involuntarily, but is happy about it. Infiltrated into South Viet Nam as a guerrilla, he was captured in his first engagement. The first part of a Herald Tribune interview with him was published Sunday. Here, Le Phan Hung tells what it is to be a private in a Communist army and a captive of anti-Communist forces.



Herald Tribune photo by BEVERLY DEEPE
Prisoner Le Phan Hung

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Coming of Age in Viet Nam's Jungles

I never finished my schooling because I was drafted into the army in April, 1963. Young men can be drafted at any time between ages 18 and 27, depending on the decision of the government. They used to be drafted for three years but in 1960, changed it to two years.

I could not apply to be trained as an officer because that depends on the cultural standards of the student and mostly the origins of the person. Even university students cannot apply to be officers if they come from landowner or reactionary classes. Officers have to be from the poor peasant class and recommended by the Communist party.

When I went to the army, my family was sad and even cried, but it's impossible to avoid it since I'd be arrested and jailed and driven out of school. Before my leaving, my family gave me a farewell dinner and my mother cried and complained: "I've raised my son up to twenty years of age; I've sent him up to the 9th class; now the government takes him from me. It's impossible for me to keep him."

I was first taken to a training center in Thanh Hoa. There were 2,000 draftees there, and for three months we went through basic training—like marching in the ranks and shooting at targets. We always had enough to eat there and stayed in the training-school barracks. At the end of three months, we were given green fatigue uniforms and were then sent to different units. I was sent to Division 324, along with 200 other privates. I went with 90 other privates into one company—Company 6, Battalion 7, of Division 324. This division was stationed in Nghe An (250 miles south of Hanoi—American intelligence experts are aware of a North Vietnamese 325th Division but not the 324th).

GUNS AND POLITICS

We worked with the division eight hours a day, and two nights a week we had night training and we went out on maneuvers at the end of the year. I specialized in 81 millimeter mortars.

But when it rained, we took political studies—on the military tradition of the army; sometimes we'd have the studies eight or nine days in a row when it rained, and then sometimes we wouldn't have them for 2 or 3 months. We could send letters to our family whenever we wanted; a stamp cost .12 dong.

Each company had one company commander, one deputy, one political cadre, but no staff officers because they're only with battalions. Most of the officers in my company and battalion were about 30; officers at division-level were about 35-40, but we didn't see those very often. Most of the time all officers wore rubber tire sandals like mine, but occasionally they wore boots.

I knew about 10 or 15 of the other privates pretty well. All were North Vietnamese. All 200 in our group spoke in North Vietnamese dialect.

After nine months of this training with the division, I went with one battalion for 20 days in April, 1964, to work

on roads and build dikes on the River Lam. We were then sent back to the division. I'd been in the army a year by then (April, 1964) but I was not allowed to see my parents. We're supposed to have seven days leave a year.

Then in May, I went with two companies—180 men—by nine trucks to the south—to Dong Hoi (350 miles south-east of Hanoi; 100 miles north of Hue). Each truck carried 20 men. The trucks were new, Chinese-made *Molotovs*, some with four wheels, some with six.

We stayed overnight at Dong Hoi.

At 6 a. m. the next day, we were taken to the airport in Dong Hoi to board a helicopter for Laos. I'd never seen a helicopter before, but I felt normal. Others in the company were surprised at it, and just stared at it. No one protested when we were given orders to go south.

There were only two helicopters at the airport, but 20-30 airplanes with two propellers. There were no foreigners there and the pilots for the helicopters were Vietnamese. The two helicopters could carry 20 men each. They were Russian-made—they had Russian characters on them—and were painted black. Each trip to Laos took 40 minutes and each helicopter made five trips.

Of the 180 men I went to Laos with, about 100 had been in basic training with me. About 80 came from other provinces. But all 180 spoke North Vietnamese. I never heard any one speaking another dialect.

We landed somewhere in the jungles of Laos and got out the helicopter and had to march all day for 10 days. One cadre from the south met us in Laos and took the whole group to the western border of Thua Thien province (in South Viet Nam). He didn't have a uniform and we called him chief of the group. There were other local cadre too, without uniforms, and we called them simply chief.

When we arrived at the western border of Thua Thien, we stayed there two months, clearing the jungle and planting manioc (similar to sweet potato). During these two months we ate more manioc than rice and we had six southern officers for the two companies. These officers had a different accent and were more difficult for us to understand.

NO LETTERS HOME

In this jungle area, we had no classes; no camps or barracks. We worked in the jungle and slept in hammocks. When I got on the helicopter I carried with me my rifle, hammock, bag of clothes, 80 bullets. I was in uniform on the helicopter and also in the jungle; I had three uniforms of good fatigues of thick cloth and one wool coat. Nobody was allowed to have a diary or to write letters to their families. I couldn't even write my mother I was going south and she doesn't know where I am.

In the jungle we saw planes and helicopters and the southern cadre said they were American. We were all homesick, and we talked about our places at home. I had headaches and caught malaria—all the nurses were men and they didn't have enough medicine—only anti-malaria drugs and some penicillin for injections.

Then one day we were told to march. We were given no explanations except it was secret and could not be revealed. A southern officer gave me black shorts and shirt to wear. I left two uniforms in the jungle and put another uniform and khaki hat in bag along with a piece of nylon one meter by two meters to serve as a raincoat. I also had my rifle, which fired five shots, one at a time, and 80 bullets.

We left the jungle and marched four nights to the lowlands. In the daytime we went into the bushes. We followed one trail, man behind man, in single file. We were organized in platoons of 22 persons each, and we traveled through the trail one platoon at a time. Each platoon had a southern leader and one deputy—making nine platoon leaders and nine deputies, all southerners.

After four days we came to one village and made an attack about 7 p. m. But I and three others got lost before the attack about one kilometer from the village. I saw many people but I dare not ask them for food because it would reveal I was a northerner and I had no money.

On the second day two of the four were killed, one escaped but I was wounded and later captured. I was caught by regular forces of more than 40 men. I got wounded in the knee.

South Viet Nam is different from the north. Here the villages have trenches and spikes around them (strategic hamlets), but in the north, they have no defenses. In the south you can have anything you want if you have the money—you could buy radios and bicycles. But in the north, even if one had the money, he could not buy a radio. Only the cadre can—and radios cost 700 dong.

I don't know what will happen to me now. I hope the government will be lenient to me and let me go free. I'd stay in the south and work. But I wouldn't join the South Vietnamese Army. I've had enough of army life.