

**Oral History Interview of Senior Colonel Tran Trong Trung¹ [Trần Trọng Trung]
DVD 13
12 June 2007, Hanoi
[First Day of Interview]**

T – Tran Trong Trung

I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow

I: [In English] Today is the 12th of June, and this is an interview of Colonel Tran Trong Trung, who is a veteran of the Viet Minh resistance and who worked with the Americans in the mid-1940s. [In Vietnamese] Colonel, first of all, I have an American legal requirement. I would like to ask you for your permission to use this as a documentary film for use by historians in the U.S. and other countries, and by students of Vietnamese history and Vietnamese military history, to help them better understand Vietnam's resistance wars against powerful nations, France and the United States. Do you give your permission?

T: Yes. I am ready. [Ha Van] An² here is recording this interview, and I also have my own tape recorder recording this interview, but I would just like to ask you for a copy of this after it is all finished so that we can all agree on it.

I: Naturally. Back in the U.S. they will make copies and send them over here. The tapes used in this camera are tiny, and I'm afraid that over here you would not be able to make copies of them. So I will take them back with me and they will make copies and sent them back here. Now, first of all I would like to ask you to give us your name, where you are from, and what year you were born.

¹ Former Director of the War History Faculty, Military Science Institute, Ministry of Defense; Author of several books and co-author (ghostwriter) of several volumes of the memoirs of General Hoang Van Thai, including his book on the final two years of the war, “*Những Ngày Tháng Quyết Định*”, published in English translation under the title, “*How South Vietnam Was Liberated.*”

² Ha Van An [Hà Văn An] of the US-Vietnam Friendship Association [Hội Việt Mỹ] arranged all the oral history interviews. He attended each interview and made his own separate videotape of each interview for the Vietnamese side's records.

T: My name is Tran Trong Trung. That is a rather unusual name, because each element begins with “TR” – Tran Trong Trung. I was born in 1923 – in the lunar calendar, I was born in the year of the pig. This year I am 84 years old, but in Vietnamese reckoning, according to the lunar calendar, I am 86 years old. And my native area is Nam Dinh.

I: Nam Dinh.

T: I am from Nam Dinh, Phu Truong [?], near the ocean.

I: Near the ocean, I see. Now, what was your family’s social status? Farmer, or...

T: When speaking about my family, we went through several phases. When I was a boy, my father was a farmer in Nam Dinh. But, as I’m sure you know, conditions at that time were colonial conditions. A family trying to support itself by farming and living in the countryside could not make enough to live on. So my family had to leave our home to move somewhere else to make a living. Vietnam has a saying, ah, I don’t know if you, Mr. An, will have to translate this for him, but the saying is, “tha phương cầu ăn” [to move to another land to make a living]. That means to move to another locality to make a living. So I moved with my parents when I was three years old, meaning it was in 1926. Now, my father had two wives, so he took his two wives and three children – my older sister, my older brother, and me – and traveled from Nam Dinh up to Tuyen Quang. This meant that we had moved from a lowland, delta area up to a highland area to make a living. Now, my father was a boatman, and my mother went to work in the Chan Da Mine. There were two mines in Tuyen Quang: the Chan Da Mine, which was a zinc mine, and there was also a coalmine.

I: So she worked in a zinc mine.

T: Yes, it was a zinc mine, and there was also a coalmine. Now, if you categorized us in the Vietnamese system, my family would be classified as a working-class family. My father was a worker who rowed a boat, and my mother was also a worker, who worked in a mine. In those conditions, under the old regime, it was very difficult for a family to raise children and send them to school properly. So things were very difficult even when I was in elementary school. Many times I had to, ah, if you will allow me to brag about myself for a moment, I was a very good student, but at times I had to drop out of school in order to help my mother sell things in the market, and then I would return to school the next year. So after I finished elementary school, ah, one of my strengths was that I was very good at learning foreign languages. So after I finished elementary school, I had to go to work. I went up to Bac Can to the Ban Thi Mine, in Bac Can – it was the Ban Thi Mine. There I had two jobs. First, I was an interpreter, and second, I was an accounting secretary. [Short interruption, tape turned off momentarily]

I: At that time, when you went up to that other mine to work as an interpreter, how old were you?

T: I was 18.

I: So that was in 19...

T: 1941. So I worked to make money, and at the same time I continued to study through a correspondence course. Do you speak French? In French this is called “correspondence.”

I: “Correspondence,” yes, I know it.

T: So I studied like that until I completed my high school studies. In this course I improved my French language abilities, and also my instructor gave me lessons in English.

I: Your instructor was a French woman?

T: No, she was English. Actually, I don't know if she was English, but she did not have a French name. But it wasn't really English, either. It was "Guisenet" [??]. And then in 1945, ah, by that time I had finished my high school program of study, at that time in 1945 the coup occurred – the coup in which the Japanese ousted the French, on 9 March 1945. Now, before the coup, in addition to working and studying at the same time, I had also begun to take part in secret operations.

I: Who was it that first introduced you to conducting resistance activities?

T: It was a comrade named Tran Ho [Trần Hộ]. He was from Bac Can, and he had come down to direct and command the revolutionary movement in Tuyen Quang – ah, I mean in Ban Thi. Now it's part of Cho Don district. Now, what participating in secret activities meant was to proselytize the workers...

I: Like distributing leaflets?

T: No, I did not have to distribute leaflets, because I was living and working right there with the workers, in the workers' own environment. So we regularly held meetings of our secret cell. Then, on 9 March 1945, Japan carried out a coup that ousted the French, so this provided the opportunity to participate directly in revolutionary activities. So I traveled from Ban Thi to Chiem Hoa. Chiem Hoa was a district in the northern part of Tuyen Quang province. I went there to participate in the effort to seize control of the government there. Then the Viet Minh organization sent me to Tan Trao to study there,

because at that time Vo Nguyen Giap had set up an anti-Japanese political-military school at Tan Trao. Do you know Tan Trao?

I: I have heard of it.

T: OK. Tan Trao was our central [national] base area. After he returned from abroad to Vietnam, to Cao Bang, in May 1945 Uncle Ho traveled from Cao Bang to Tuyen Quang. The district was Son Duong, and the center was at Tan Trao village. That place could be called the Supreme Headquarters of the Viet Minh during the resistance war against the Japanese. Now, one of my special talents became important. It was after I arrived and had begun studying in the anti-Japanese resistance class. Just one week after the class started, the OSS³ team parachuted into the area. This was the team headed by Thomas.⁴

I: Lieutenant Colonel Thomas, right?

T: That's right, Lt. Colonel Thomas. So, since I spoke a little English and some French, Uncle Ho assigned me to work with Thomas. Now one of the members of Thomas's team was a man named Henri Prunier. He spoke Vietnamese, but his Vietnamese was rather limited. So Henri Prunier and I worked together to guide the group to...

I: Was he French?

T: Perhaps, because his name was French – Henri. This was the first time I had ever met an American.

I: Excuse me, could we go back for a minute? When was the first time that you heard the name Nguyen Ai Quoc, and when was the first time that you met Uncle Ho.

T: This was the first time. I had never heard of Nguyen Ai Quoc before.

I: You first heard about him at Tan Trao?

³ OSS – U.S. Office of Strategic Services, a predecessor organization to the Central Intelligence Agency.

⁴ For additional information on this OSS team, see Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, "*The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*," University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 2006.

T: In a number of newspaper articles, my first newspaper articles, ah,...Let's see, I wrote an article in August 1946 to commemorate the first anniversary of the August Revolution. I wrote a short memoir, titled, "*The Old Farmer at Tan Trao*" [Ông già làm ruộng ở Tân Trào]. Why did I call him "The old farmer at Tan Trao"? After the trainees in my class arrived there to study, but before our studies began, Uncle Ho came to visit us. Vo Nguyen Giap introduced him to us as follows: "Comrades, this is an old man, a native of this area, a farmer who loves the revolution. When he heard that you had arrived here, he wanted to come visit all you comrades." Now, a very funny thing about this was that, after talking to him, we all realized that this man was not a local and that he was not a farmer. We knew this because he talked to us about the international situation, and he said he hoped when the revolution was successful that we could come to visit in Hanoi, and he drew us a diagram of Hanoi for us to come visit. I thought that I knew who he was, but I did not dare say what I thought out loud. This was because we were conducting secret operations, and the principle of secrecy was considered to be extremely important. Our discipline in this area was very strict. The next day, I and nine others were sent to the Na Lua Stream [Suối Nà Lừa] to attend an intelligence class, a class on intelligence, on reconnaissance operations. Now, before we departed, we were told to assemble at the Tan Trao banyan tree. Have you visited Tan Trao yet?

I: Not yet.

T: You should visit Tan Trao. For the Vietnamese revolution, this was the capital of the New Vietnam. Now when we assembled, the old man was already there waiting for us. Vo Nguyen Giap gave us instructions, about maintaining a spirit of study, about discipline, about sanitation, etc. Then Uncle Ho, and at that time we still didn't know it

was Uncle Ho, we only knew him as the old farmer from Tan Trao, anyhow, he gave us just one piece of advice. H said, “You comrades must make sure that you follow proper sanitation procedures. When you want to have a bowel movement, take a pick and dig a hole. Deposit your feces in it, and then cover it with dirt. This will accomplish two things. First, it will maintain sanitation and keep things clean, and second, it will enrich the soil.” We thought to ourselves, “Who is this old man? Of all the things he could tell us, he decides to give us advice about how to take a shit!” I had an idea about who he was, but I didn’t dare tell anyone. So anyhow, when we walked from Tan Trao to the Na Lua Stream, we ran into two Americans, Americans who were ethnic Chinese. They were Francis Tan and, ah, [looks through some papers]...I would like to take this opportunity to tell you that when you return home to the U.S. I’d like you to pass along my greetings to this friend of mine. Mac Shin [Hands I a business card].

I: Sin or Shin?

T: Shin. His name is Chinese. No, you keep the card.⁵

I: The address is near where I was born, very near. Seattle. So Mac Shin is still working?

T: He is still alive, but he can’t hear anything. In 1995 when he visited here, and in 1997 when I visited New York with the delegation headed by Hoang Cong Thuy⁶ [Hoàng Công Thủy], there was someone with him who wrote everything down for him, because he couldn’t hear a thing. Now, let’s get back to my story. While we were traveling from the Tan Trao banyan tree to Na Lua Stream, we ran into two Americans who were ethnic Chinese, and one of them was this man Mac Shin. When this happened, the old man

⁵ Mac. C. Shin, Managing Director, Y.Y.Y. International Inc. & Macrose 5018 Co., Ltd, 3412 NE Blakely, Seattle, WA 98105.

⁶ Director of the U.S.-Vietnam Friendship Association [Hội Việt Mỹ].

began talking to the two Americans in English. So that answered our questions. He was not really “an old farmer from Tan Trao.” He was an important person. But who was he? I thought he might be Nguyen Ai Quoc, but I did not dare say this out loud. We discussed this incident among ourselves, but just in a small group and in secret. This was not the kind of thing that could be discussed in public. So I worked with Thomas’s American team until the August Revolution.

I: So you worked with them for about...

T: For over a month.

I: For more than one month.

T: From mid-July to approximately 22 August.

I: While you were taking the reconnaissance course?

T: No. Thomas’s team parachuted in while I was taking the reconnaissance course. I then had to drop out of the course in order to carry out this other job of working with them.

I: So you were the liaison officer for the American team?

T: The interpreter. I was the interpreter, and I worked with local residents to resolve any problems the team had with the locals. For instance, we got information – I don’t know where the information came from – but we got information that two American aircraft would be arriving. Uncle Ho instructed me, Kim Hung [?], and several other people to build an airstrip at Minh Khai, or [Luc Co ?], and that airstrip is still there, to this day. It was a rough military airstrip. Two small aircraft, each able to carry two people, arrived. After we finished the airstrip and the aircraft had landed, for some reason, and only now can I guess at what that reason was – that World War II was almost over – ah, Uncle Ho

was going to fly up to Kunming to meet with the Americans, but in the end he did not go. That's what I think was the reason, but I don't know. Anyhow, in the end the two aircraft left with no passengers. I had gone back to Tan Trao and reported to Uncle Ho. I said, "If you're not going to go, then you should let the two aircraft leave to return to their base." He said, "OK. Let the two aircraft leave, but first ask the local residents to give each aircraft two jackfruits – one for the pilot and one to take back as a gift to our friends in Kunming."

I: Excuse me, Colonel, but I would like to ask you one question. At that point in time, how many people in total did the Viet Minh have at Tan Trao?

T: Who?

I: What was the total size of the Viet Minh force at Tan Trao? Several hundred people?

T: At that location we had a concentration of people. We had the anti-Japanese resistance school, with students who had been sent in by all the various localities to study there.

What was the purpose of this class? We knew that the opportunity to launch our insurrection was approaching, and the class to designed to quickly train cadres to be sent back out to carry out the insurrection. But we had very few armed personnel for our armed forces.

I: You probably had very few weapons, right?

T: Very few. And the number of weapons brought in by Thomas's team was only sufficient for use in training, that's all.

I: Just enough for training purposes, that's all?

T: But they included new weapons that we had never had before, like bazookas, machineguns, and mortars. So this was the first time we got training with the kinds of

weapons brought in by Thomas's team. And there was one forgettable incident. When they parachuted in, we had the Tan Trao banyan tree, which was very big. Of the six men who parachuted in, the team leader, Thomas, got stuck with his parachute up in the tree, and we had to make arrangements to bring him down safely to the ground. So that was one thing. Second, we had to take the parachutes and spread them out lengthwise in the rice field to form a "signal" to show the aircraft where to make its drop.

I: As a signal...

T: As a signal to show the aircraft where to make the parachute drop. In 1991, when the men from Thomas's team came here to visit us, we talked about these stories, and it was a lot of fun. And then there was the time I led Thomas out to investigate the situation of the Japanese garrison at Cho Tru. There was an amusing story connected with it. I told Henri Prunier, ah, because he wanted to climb the mountain. I told him to be careful. I said, "If they look down from Cho Tru with binoculars they might see you. And if they learn you guys are here, there will be trouble." But we were both young guys and friends, and what I said was, "Be careful or they'll catch you and devour you like a pig." We joked and laughed with each other that way. But when we got back, like every day I had to report to Vo Nguyen Giap, who asked, "Where did you guys go? What did you do? Who did you talk to?" I told him the truth, I said, "I told Anthony [sic] Prunier, 'Don't climb up there or you'll get caught and be devoured like a pig.'" I was criticized for that. Do you understand?

I: I understand. You were criticized for not being diplomatic.

T: Right. Vo Nguyen Giap said, "We are revolutionaries, and the people on that team are our allies, so when we deal with them, we must be cultured and civilized. Maybe you

two are young guys and friends, but you can't talk to him that way." That was a lesson I haven't forgotten. Then, after the August Revolution, after 22 August when Uncle Ho returned to Hanoi, I remained behind.

I: You stayed on at Tan Trao.

T: I stayed behind at Tan Trao with a number of our cadres. Our mission was to help the people there to consolidate our victory, to improve their standard of living, etc. Uncle Ho told us, "Who knows – One day we may have to come back here and once again have to rely on the support of the residents of this place." That statement was a prophesy that showed his foresight, because from looking at the situation, both the situation in Vietnam and the international situation, he anticipated that a resistance war might break out, and that if a resistance war broke out, then naturally our Supreme Headquarters would have to return to that place. So we had to stay behind to consolidate our hold on that area. After that, I returned to Hanoi. Now, when I was attending the class and everything I got to know Vo Nguyen Giap and Hoang Van Thai [Hoàng Văn Thái], and Hoang Van Thai held me back and kept me there to work with him in the Supreme Headquarters.

I: Vo Nguyen Giap's Supreme Headquarters?

T: No, it was Hoang Van Thai's headquarters. At that time Hoang Van Thai was the Chief of the General Staff. So you should know that during my 45 years of military service, I spent ninety percent [90%] of that time working in the Supreme Headquarters, at the strategic command staff headquarters, and so I was able to find out many things. And then, after the war ended, I went back to work on reviewing the war, reviewing the history of the war and writing history.

I: I know that you have written a number of books, isn't that right Colonel?

T: Yes.

I: And you helped Vo Nguyen Giap write a book, didn't you?

T: Yes. Last year my most recent book was published. It is titled “*Tổng Tư Lệnh Võ Nguyên Giáp*” [Supreme Commander Vo Nguyen Giap], and it discusses General Giap's career from the first time he met Uncle Ho until just after Dien Bien Phu. And we are preparing to publish volume 2 - Vo Nguyen Giap during the war against the U.S.

I: Oh, that will be very valuable.

T: So to summarize, that is the story of my participation in the revolution. It was a totally natural thing for me to do, because after living under those kinds of conditions, with all the difficult economic and political conditions and pressures, when the opportunity surfaced with the appearance of the Viet Minh, naturally I volunteered to participate. It was the natural thing to do, nothing out of the ordinary.

I: During the period you were at Tan Trao, up to the time when the Japanese surrendered did you ever fight the Japanese?

T: You mean personally?

I: I mean the Viet Minh forces as a whole.

T: Yes, we did. Because it was like this: After the Japanese carried out their coup and the French Army surrendered, the French Army was turned into a force that assisted the Japanese in suppressing the revolution. Therefore, they sent forces down from Bac Can, and forces across from Tuyen Quang, and forces up from Thai Nguyen, and they made a number of attacks into our base area.

I: Were those Japanese troops, or French troops, or both?

T: They were primarily Japanese troops. One time they moved through Son Duong to move into Tan Trao, but we repelled their attack. At that time our cadres who were in charge there asked Uncle Ho to move to another location, but Uncle Ho refused. He said, “If we fight resolutely, relying on and using the terrain here, which is favorable for us, the Japanese are not capable of reaching this place.” Uncle Ho stayed where he was, in his hut at Na Lua. And in the end the enemy was forced to retreat. The man in command during that battle was Tran The Mon [Trần Thế Môn].

I: Tran The Mon?

T: Tran The Mon. Later he became a major general. So there was just that one battle, but I didn’t participate in it, because at that time I was a student, and then I was off working with Thomas’s team.

I: Probably the weapons that were used in that battle were very rudimentary, right? Just a few rifles?

T: Just ordinary weapons, that’s all. The main factor was that we utilized the terrain of the De Pass. We laid an ambush on both sides of the pass, and we let the Japanese move up, and when they were massed in a group in the middle of the pass we opened fire, forcing them to withdraw. So we won primarily because we selected the right terrain and the right tactics, but we really had very few guns – we did not have many weapons.

I: You relied on the rugged terrain...

T: Yes, because to get from Son Duong to Tan Trao, there was only one way you could go, and that was through the De Pass, and that was a very rugged area. We hid in ambush on either side. We had few men and few weapons, but the terrain was favorable for us, so in the end the Japanese were forced to retreat.

I: Did the Viet Minh lose very many men killed during this battle?

T: Just one, a squad leader.

I: Just a squad leader?

T: Yes, that's all. And we drove them back.

I: Was this battle fought before or after the Americans arrived?

T: Before. It was circa late May. And the Thomas team arrived in mid-July.

I: When the Japanese surrendered, you stayed behind in Tan Trao. Did anyone from the American team also stay behind there with you?

T: Yes. One of those who stayed was Mac Shin. And we often practiced shooting our guns; we held target practice together. But it was a sad, lonely place at that time, because Tan Trao was empty since our soldiers were gone. Uncle Ho had left, and all of our leading figures, like Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap, had also left, and all that was left was just a small group of people. Who were these people? Hoang Van Thai said to me, "Here is this group of Americans who are staying behind, so I want you to stay behind here to work with them." Because if I had left, they would have had no one to interpret for them. So I remained behind. Then, on the night of 2 September, I and the others who remained behind sat around a radio listening to the news, and we heard the report that we [the Viet Minh] had taken control of the government and had held a ceremony to declare our independence and that Ho Chi Minh – we now knew that he was Ho Chi Minh – had become the President of our country.

I: When you heard that news you must have been very happy.

T: Very happy. Very happy.

I: Were the Americans who stayed behind happy too?

T: Oh yes. We had a big party. They brought out rations, beer and the supplies that had been dropped in by parachute, and we all celebrated together. And we heard the news that Ho Chi Minh, the old farmer at Tan Trao, had become the President of our country.

I: How long did you stay behind at Tan Trao before you went down too?

T: Until the end of October.

I: The end of October?

T: Yes, and then I returned.

I: You returned to Hanoi?

T: Yes, I returned to Hanoi.

I: You returned to Hanoi then. At that time had the Americans also returned as well?

T: No. Most of the American team accompanied Vo Nguyen Giap. They left Tan Trao on 16 August to attack Thai Nguyen. But because we had so few soldiers, and because the Japanese force at Thai Nguyen was so large, we attacked them for two days but failed to take the town. At that point, someone came up from Hanoi and said that we had taken control of the government in Hanoi, and this person asked that our forces go down to Hanoi right away. So Giap ordered a number of our troops to remain behind to continue to pin down the Japanese troops there [at Thai Nguyen] while the bulk of our forces headed down to Hanoi. We decided not to continue the attack because the most important mission for us was Hanoi. Now, at the time we did not know all the things that had happened during this period, but now, after collecting all the documents and all the facts, we can see that something very important for our country took place on 22 August 1945.

I: 22 August?

T: 22 August. At that time, we had taken over the government of Hanoi three days before. What events happened that day? Here, I would like to give you this first article. Ho Chi Minh and Charles De Gaulle on 19 December 1946. In this article we can see the events that happened on 22 August 1945. One: Uncle Ho left Tan Trao to return to Hanoi. That was on 22 August. Two, three days after we took over the government, [Jean] Sainteny accompanied [Archimedes] Patti⁷ on a flight down from Kunming and landed at the Gia Lam Airport. That is the second thing. Third, the French dropped three teams by parachute in three different places: Phuc Yen in North Vietnam, Thua Thien in Central Vietnam, and Tay Ninh in South Vietnam. And what was their mission? They were carrying papers appointing them as commissioners [ủy viên] of the French Republic in Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China! So you see how early their scheming began.

I: I understand that their team that jumped into Thua Thien was attacked. Is that correct?

T: Yes, they were attacked, and they were taken prisoner. Up here [in North Vietnam – Tonkin], Messmer was also taken prisoner, but he was later released. And who was Messmer? Later on Messmer served as the chief of the French delegation at the negotiations with us in Dalat. Do you know about this matter?

I: When were the negotiations in Dalat held?

T: May 1946. They were negotiations designed to lay the groundwork for the Fontainebleau negotiations. And later on, Messmer became the French Defense Minister. Pierre Messmer! And then there was Cedile.⁸ Messmer jumped into Phuc Yen, and Cedile jumped into Tay Ninh. And who was Cedile? He was the greatest obstacle to the Vietnamese revolution in Cochin China. After Cedile was taken prisoner by the Japanese

⁷ Archimedes Patti, American OSS officer.

⁸ Jean Cédile.

and they brought him to Saigon, he met with Tran Van Giau [Trần Văn Giàu]. Tran Van Giau was the leader of the revolution at that time. The two sides negotiated for several days, but as a result of Cedile's stubborn attitude, the initial discussions went nowhere. And Cedile and the leader of the capitalists in Vietnam at that time, William Baze, a plantation owner, went to the Japanese and persuaded the Japanese to release the French soldiers who were being held as prisoners by the Japanese so that they could use these troops as backing for the lackeys who were preparing to greet Philip Leclerc, who was bringing in French soldiers.

I: The British Army landed first, and the French only arrived later, isn't that right?

T: The truth is that even when the initial contingent of British troops arrived, they had a French Foreign Legion company with them. But the French Foreign Legion company was under a British flag, so they were hiding themselves under the British flag in order to be able to enter Vietnam.

I: And it was during that same period that Chiang Kaishek's army came in...

T: No. Chiang Kaishek's army was a different matter. We can summarize this period in the following words: "Just as the Chinese came down, the French moved in." Just a few short words, meaning that just as the Chinese were moving down, the French arrived.

Now, Philip Leclerc had a very difficult task during this period. Why was that? Because in 1940 the French Army was defeated and Germany occupied the country, and then in August 1944 De Gaulle relied on the Allied armies to liberate France. So they were having a hard time rebuilding the French Army. And Decaux⁹ was given the task of rebuilding this force in order to send them into Indochina. So at the time that the Japanese surrendered the French Army was nothing. On 16 August 1945, at the same

⁹ Admiral Jean Decoux, French Governor General in Indochina.

time as Uncle Ho ordered Vo Nguyen Giap to take his troops down to attack Thai Nguyen, on that very same day Charles De Gaulle ordered Georges d'Argenlieu and Philip Leclerc to take troops into Indochina. That is a very interesting coincidence.

I: And the coincidence was completely accidental, right?

T: Yes, completely accidental. One side was launching an operation to liberate its own nation, and the other side was sending troops back in to resume its aggression. That was the second thing. I want to go back to 22 August. So three people jumped into three separate places with the mission of serving as commissioners of the French Republic responsible for reestablishing French rule. That same day, Patti landed at Gia Lam Airport.¹⁰ And who was with Patti?

I: Sainteny.

T: Sainteny. Jean Sainteny.

I: He was an emissary of the French government, wasn't he?

T: No. He was the chief of French intelligence in Kunming, China. So when they arrived, we asked Patti, "Why did you let a Frenchman come back here?" This meant that Roosevelt's policy had been altered, because Roosevelt opposed colonialism and supported national independence. So we asked, "Why did you let a Frenchman come here?" Patti replied, "It would have been very difficult to refuse the request of an ally to come here on a humanitarian mission, a mission to rescue the French citizens who are being held prisoner by the Japanese." That was the pretext, you see. But during the first meeting between Vo Nguyen Giap and Sainteny on 27 August we already could see the true plan of the French, which was to reestablish their rule here, based on the content of the statement issued on 24 March 1945 by Charles De Gaulle. What was the content of

¹⁰ Gia Lam Airport was Hanoi's main airport, just across the Red River from downtown Hanoi.

this statement? It was to reestablish French rule over the five states of Indochina – Tonkin, Annam, Cochin China, Laos, and Cambodia, under the control of one single Government General. So the mission of the three commissioners who parachuted in, and of Sainteny, when he landed at Gia Lam Airport, was to carry out this task. And in the meantime Leclerc was bringing French troops into Saigon. So Charles De Gaulle’s scheme, a scheme that ran through everything, from the time of his Brazzaville statement in 1944 through his statement in Paris in 1945, was to regain control of the most beautiful flower in the colonial flower garden. You must remember this sentence: to regain control of the most beautiful flower in the colonial flower garden. Because of all of France’s colonial possessions, Indochina was the richest. And that is why Charles De Gaulle, as is stated in this article, was intoxicated by this idea, and that was the content of his proclamation of 24 March 1945. The historian Philip Devillers criticized that statement as being 15 years out of date, meaning that we had taken over the government already, we had declared our independence already, our nation was already a sovereign state, and yet they wanted to come back. And what was their intent in coming back? To re-impose the old system. Now, let’s look at the most recent story about this. Last year the Vietnam Veterans Association sent me to Algeria. What was the purpose of the Algeria conference? In February 2005 the French Parliament passed a law that requested historians to honor the work of the colonial army in the former colonial states.

I: Really?

T: And the law said that they should also honor and venerate the colonial officials who opened up the colonies, and the law said that the program of education in history at the university level must describe the role of the French expeditionary army. Now, that law

caused a tremendous reaction in the French academic community and in the former colonial countries, and most directly, in Algeria. So Algeria stepped forward to organize a conference to discuss the thoughts of the representatives of all the former colonies to the French presence in their countries in the past. Do you understand?

I: Yes.

T: So I participated in this conference, and I read a paper to the conference discussing my thoughts about the past French presence in Indochina. I wanted to refute one point – that France came here for 80 years to open up the area, but in fact it was just to exploit the colonies, because they built more prisons than schools! Now, let's return to the story of 22 August. One more story about 22 August concerns the arrival of Chiang Kaishek's Chinese army. Just picture a country that has endured 80 years of colonial rule and that has just taken over control of its own government. And yet just three days later, representatives of the French have arrived, and in the north, 20,000, I mean 200,000 of Chiang Kaishek's troops have arrived. In such a situation, fate is hanging by a thread. Now, at that time I was just a youth, and my knowledge and understanding was limited, but now, after I have had a chance to study all this, I know about these things. Do you know what my job in the General Staff was? I was the personal secretary to the Chief of the General Staff.

I: Ah, you were the personal secretary of the Chief of the General Staff, meaning of Hoang...

T: ..of Hoang Van Thai. I translated French documents, I served as interpreter for the Chief of the General Staff during talks with the French, I listened to the radio to learn the latest news from Saigon, etc.

I: At that time, what was the Viet Minh attitude toward Chiang Kaishek's army? You knew that even though they were there, at least they weren't the French...

T: That is a long story, a story about the relationship between Vietnam and China, a relationship that goes back thousands of years and covers both feudal times and the modern era. And in the modern era, whether it was the China of the Kuomintang or the China of another group, we know one thing about China: that it is a neighbor who is hard to get along with (I laughs). We had just taken over the government when 200,000 of Chiang Kaishek's troops arrived, and along with them came Vietnamese who were followers of Chiang Kaishek.

I: They belonged to the VNQDD [the Vietnamese Nationalist Party – Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng].

T: Yes, the VNQDD. There were two groups, the VNQDD and the Vietnam Revolutionary League [Việt Nam Cách Mạng Đồng Minh Hội]; both of these groups were forces that were close to Chiang Kaishek. The Chinese Nationalists helped these people to put pressure on us. This was after we had taken over the government. Uncle Ho was not concerned about this. He said this was a matter of the national interest, so he said the communists were willing to cede certain posts in the government to them, and our people withdrew from certain positions and ceded those posts to Mr. A and Mr. B from the VNQDD and the Vietnam Revolutionary League in order to preserve national harmony and to create unity among all Vietnamese so that we could protect our independence. That was Ho Chi Minh's thinking. So going through many negotiation sessions between the Viet Minh and ...

I: And it was also to try to win these people over, right?

T: Yes, to try to win their sympathies, and also to try to create national unity in our country. If we didn't have unity, we had 200,000 of Chiang Kaishek's troops in the north and French troops landing in the south, so if we didn't secure internal unity, we would have been in a lot of trouble. So that was Ho Chi Minh's thinking. So we had to reach agreement with Chiang Kaishek's army in order to have a chance to build up our nation, and especially so that we could focus our efforts on combating the French Army. So the first days of the struggle in Cochin China were really difficult for us, because the French Army was stronger, and the French were able to rely on the backing of the British Army, and General Gracey¹¹ supported the French. He created the conditions that allowed the French to enter and occupy Saigon. And the French were also able to rely on 40,000 Japanese soldiers who had surrendered but who had not yet been sent back home. So it is easy to understand why the French were able to expand their foothold in South Vietnam. Then in October 1945 they moved up to Nha Trang and began to move into southern Annam - southern Central Vietnam.

I: During that time, what kind of communications did you have with them? Did you still have radio communications, or did you have to use couriers?

T: This problem, we must say, was resolved thanks to the very skillful and talented efforts of one of our cadres at that time, Hoang Dao Thuy [Hoàng Đạo Thúy]. At that time Hoang Dao Thuy was the oldest person in the entire Supreme Headquarters. At that time he was 45 years old. He was born in 1900. After the French landed, Vo Nguyen Giap assigned Hoang Dao Thuy the responsibility for establishing a communications link between Hanoi and Saigon, meaning a communications link with the command

¹¹ General Douglas Gracey, Commander of British Forces in Indochina.

headquarters of the revolution in South Vietnam. He had to do this under conditions in which, in his hands...

I: When he had nothing...

T: ...he had nothing at all: no equipment, no supplies, no technology, no knowledge of the tricks of the use of the airwaves. Hoang Dao Thuy was a person who had a great store of knowledge. Previously he had been the chief of the Boy Scouts. I was a Cub Scout! I myself was a scout. Thuy, working with the Hanoi radio staff department, was able to establish a communications link with Saigon, with Tran Van Giau's headquarters. But, even though we had resolved the problem of establishing radio communications, Vietnam faced another daunting problem: that was the problem of "codes," secret codes to use. The first codes, and you were in the intelligence service, so you already know this, were very difficult. They were easy to intercept and easy to break. So this was a very difficult problem for us. However, we had a second person: Quang Dam [Quang Đam].

I: Quang Dam?

T: Yes, Quang Dam. He was a lawyer, but he helped us to resolve the problem of the encoding procedures and rules, to make them increasingly better and more sophisticated. Initially, our codes had many weaknesses. So that is my answer to your question about how we communicated with our people down in the south. Now, on 23 September resistance fighting broke out in Saigon. On 26 September our radio broadcast Uncle Ho's first order, which was an appeal to resolutely resist the enemy. Because at that time, during many meetings held in the South many questions were raised, such as "How should we fight? Should we fight or not? And what is the attitude of the Central

Government toward this?” So Uncle Ho told them to fight resolutely. As for providing direction and guidance, at that time Vo Nguyen Giap was the Minister of Interior.

However, internally he was the Chairman of the Military Commission [Chủ Tịch Quân Sự Ủy Viên Hội]. This was the Party’s military organization.

I: It was the Party Military Committee [Quân ủy].

T: That’s right. He [Giap] sent a radio message to them giving them guidance on how to fight. He said to conduct guerrilla warfare. He said, “Up north, there are rivers, mountains, forests, passes, caves, etc, and we rely on the mountain jungles, the rivers and caves, to fight the enemy. But in the south, there are no mountain jungles, so you must rely on the hearts of the people – use human mountains, human caves.” Meaning that they should rely on the hearts of the people to fight the enemy. So what he was saying was the first outlines of people’s war, which meant that we would rely on the people, the good hearts of the people, in order to hide ourselves among the people and fight as guerrillas. Now, understanding and implementing this concept was not an easy thing. We had to go over it again and again. The question was how to develop guerrilla warfare at a time when the enemy’s forces were so strong and all we had to fight them were bamboo spears. So how could we resolve this problem? So it is easy to understand why the enemy was able to expand his area of occupation and control.

I: It was natural.

T: Until the 40,000 Japanese troops were repatriated back to Japan, and after the British Army finished its occupation and transition duties and went home, then there were only French troops left. Then the situation began to change. Meaning that they were occupying a very large area, and their numbers were limited. They were spread very thin.

Beginning in early March 1946, after we had gained some experience and when the enemy's posture was no longer favorable for his side, then we were able to begin to reverse the situation. Then we were able to begin to retake the areas we had lost, and organize our infrastructure, and build bases, and establish bases in places like the Plain of Reeds and the U Minh Forest – remote and difficult terrain that provided footholds from which we could begin to fight the enemy.

I: During this period, did the Supreme Headquarters issue any orders or take any actions to help the revolution in South Vietnam? Did you send troops down to them, or did you send weapons to them?

T: That was a matter of great concern in the North. The resistance fighting broke out on 23 September, and on the 26th, just three days later, the first armed units left Hanoi to go south. This was called the Southern Advance [Nam Tiến], and these units were called the Southern Advance Units.

I: How did they travel?

T: By train. We chose the best soldiers and the best weapons to be sent down to the front. And cadres of the Liberation Army in the North, men such as Nam Long and Vi Dan, for example, were placed in command of the units being sent to the south. Now, when they went south, initially they only went as far as Region 5, and only sometime later did they gradually make it all the way down to Saigon. This was because the front was so vast. So we must look at the role these troops played in the Central Highlands, in Region 5, and in Cochin China. They had a tremendous impact by providing support to our forces in the south. But we did not have any great combat strength, although we were able to limit the enemy's expansion of his occupation. Even our tactics and fighting

methods – at that time we had nothing! At the time of the August Revolution there were no big battles, and we hadn't been able to collect or buy any large amounts of supplies or equipment. We fought battles at only the squad or platoon level. But the cadres were commanding units that were “chi doi”s [chi đội] – that is, battalion-sized units. And their mission was to limit the enemy's expansion of his zone of occupation.

I: In North Vietnam, were you working on consolidating and building your army?

T: At that time in North Vietnam there were many things that had to be done. Uncle Ho assigned us the following missions: At a time when we were helping our people in the south fight foreign aggression, what did North Vietnam have to do? First, we had to fight starvation. Did you know that, because of the Japanese occupation regime, during the period from the 1944 dry season up to April or May 1945, two million people in North Vietnam died? That was one tenth of the population of our entire country. One tenth of the population of our nation starved to death! So what did we have to do? North Vietnam concentrated its efforts on combating starvation. That was our first task. The second task was to open up the people's minds, meaning to teach them to read and write. We had to teach them the Vietnamese phonetic alphabet [quốc ngữ], the common people's alphabet, so our work was to teach the people to read and write. That was the second task. The third task was to send aid to the South. Those three tasks were our most important missions.

I: But when you taught the people the alphabet, the effect you wanted was to make the people understand their responsibilities to the Vietnamese nation and to get them to join the revolution, right?

T: That was a political lesson. Teaching them the alphabet was so that the people would be able to read and write, because at the time of the August Revolution ninety percent of the population was illiterate. So if we wanted to give the people political awareness, if we wanted to give them knowledge, if we wanted to have them read newspapers, if we wanted them to be able to write so that they could vote in parliamentary elections, we had to teach them to read. And with the Vietnamese national alphabet, just three months of instruction is enough for people to be able to read well. So our people who participated in this work accomplished a tremendous thing – in the space of just a few months after the revolution, three million illiterate people became literate. And from those three million, literacy spread – fathers taught their children, older brothers taught their younger siblings, wives taught their husbands.

I: Excuse me, Colonel, but let's stop here.

**Oral History Interview of Senior Colonel Tran Trong Trung [Trần Trọng Trung]
DVD 14
June 2007, Hanoi
[First Day of Interview]**

T – Tran Trong Trung

I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow

T: How should we continue?

I: At that time, in North Vietnam you were concentrating on collecting weapons from the Japanese army primarily, or wherever else, in order to build up your army in preparation for fighting the French, right?

T: The Japanese army did not turn their weapons over to us. That was one of our big difficulties. That was the situation at Thai Nguyen. At Thai Nguyen we surrounded them and we asked them to turn over their weapons to us, but their policy was to only turn over to us those weapons that they had captured from the French after they overthrew the French government in their coup against the French. However, they refused to give us their own weapons. So what weapons did our troops have at that time? At that time Vietnam was an agricultural country, and our manufacturing capabilities were very limited. At that time one of our most important sources of weapons was purchasing them from Chiang Kaishek's army. Now, I don't know what the Nationalist Chinese army's administrative procedures were, but we found that as long as we could get our hands on a Chinese officer, when we paid him money, weapons began to flow out to us. So purchases from Chiang Kaishek's army were one of our most important sources of weapons. Now, the weapons we purchased from them weren't really modern weapons. The rifles were very long and old-fashioned, but to us they were very precious. And our

troops, our main troops and our militia conducted their training and practice using sticks. But, because we realized in advance that war was inevitable, under the leadership of Vo Nguyen Giap, the Chairman of the Military Commission, we focused our attention on building up our armed forces. At that time, the enthusiasm and zeal of our people, a people who had just gained control of their own government, ah, their political zeal was very high, so massive numbers of youths came to join the Liberation Army [Quân Giải Phóng]. By that time it had become the National Guard [Vệ Quốc Đoàn]. The story of the transformation of the Liberation Army into the National Guard has its own history. It was because the Chinese Nationalist army did not like the [Communist Chinese] Liberation Army in the North, so if Vietnam used the name, “Liberation Army of Vietnam,” they wouldn’t like it. That is why Uncle Ho decided to change the name to the National Guard, which means a military organization that is responsible for defending the country – the National Guard. So that is one thing. Second, we had to make a lot of concessions to the Chinese Nationalist army. In a situation in which our country had just had two million people die of starvation, when we had suffered both drought and floods, to have to support and feed 200,000 soldiers from the north was a very heavy economic burden on us. This was particularly true since we were not able to bring food up from the South. South Vietnam is our nation’s rice-basket, but we were not able to receive supplies from down there. In North Vietnam, Uncle Ho ordered that not one inch of earth should be left fallow. So even here in Hanoi, back at that time, even in flowerbeds or anywhere where there was untilled earth, we planted Vietnamese spinach, yams, and manioc.

I: To resolve the food crisis...

T: To immediately solve the problem of starvation. So in August we moved in and took over the government; in September we declared our independence; but it was not until January or February 1946 before the problem of starvation had essentially been resolved. At that time it was temporarily over, but that just meant that there was some kind of food to eat, but it wasn't rice. It was mostly vegetables, corn, and manioc. Those were the economic conditions we faced at that time. But the enthusiasm of the people, well, there is no need to even discuss that. Their enthusiasm was magnificent – it was perfect. So the people worked to till the soil and farm during the day, and at night they congregated around kerosene lanterns to learn to read. Mothers carried their little children to the classes in order to learn to read.

I: During this period, you were working in Hoang Van Thai's Supreme Command Headquarters, right? When did the French begin returning to Hanoi?

T: The war in South Vietnam broke out on 23 September. By October it had spread to the Central Highlands and Region 5; that is, into the southernmost provinces of Annam [Central Vietnam]. From the time that the fighting first broke out, Uncle Ho instructed a number of cadres to meet with various Frenchmen. What was his intent? To try to resolve the problem by making concessions in order to keep a full-scale war from breaking out. Now, let me go back in time for a moment. In July 1945, before we launched our general insurrection, Uncle Ho sent a message to the French via the OSS in Kunming. He asked the OSS to forward his message to France. The message contained five suggestions. His second suggestion stated clearly that the Viet Minh were prepared to make concessions to France in order secure our national independence in not less than five years and not more than ten years. Before that, Uncle Ho also said that the Viet

Minh were prepared to meet with a French representative in Kunming, in Hanoi, or in any other place they might choose. But the French never replied. That was the second of five points – that we were prepared to wait for our independence for five to ten years. Now that five year figure given by him that year was a truly incredible estimate, because he concluded that if we had to fight for our independence, it would take us ten years to win it. And in the end, it took us just a little under ten years. So what does this demonstrate? It demonstrates Uncle Ho's good faith effort to avoid a war. Even when Uncle Ho went to Paris to supervise the meetings that Pham Van Dong's delegation was having at the Fontainebleau Conference...

I: What year was that?

T: 1946. In 86 press conferences, and meetings with prominent individuals, intellectuals, and businessmen, Uncle Ho made one single point: "We do not want a war. We know that we are weak, that France is supported by powerful allies, that it has an army of elite fighters, and that it has a tremendous amount of equipment. We know that if we fight France we will have great problems. We know that in advance. Therefore, speaking from a humanitarian standpoint, we do not want the young men of our two nations to have to shed their blood. I sincerely request that we sit down and talk to each other to solve this problem peacefully." You must remember that on 18 December, when he received a French correspondent who had flown to Hanoi from Saigon, this is what Uncle Ho said. He said this before the Day of National Resistance. So what did that demonstrate? His humanitarian character. And later on, similar things were said to the Americans. So this means that we did not want to fight. But in those meetings, with Sainteny, with Pignon, with Alessandri, etc., Vietnam ran into a wall of stubbornness and

their determination to commit aggression. What did they do? They asked us to return to the situation as described in De Gaulle's proclamation – to return to French rule. Uncle Ho said, "I love the French flag. I love the French people. Do not think that because I am a communist I am just putting on a show for you. No. We are not yet communist. I tell you, in 50 years Vietnam will still not yet be a communist country. And as for me, I became a communist in Paris, where we are sitting. I did not become one in Moscow." But many times, and when you read the article I have given you, you will see what I mean, ah, Charles De Gaulle at this time had withdrawn and moved backstage, and the French Prime Minister was George Bidault. But the person who became famous for liberating France, and who was also born in 1890, was Charles De Gaulle, and the other person was the leader of our national liberation movement, the Viet Minh – this was Nguyen Ai Quoc [Nguyễn Ái Quốc] [Ho Chi Minh's alias], and he was also born in 1890 and was the leader of a nation. But when he was invited to come to France in May 1946, and he stayed there until September 1946, during the entire three months he was in France Charles De Gaulle did not meet with Ho Chi Minh one single time! What does this tell us? It tells us that their thinking was grandiose, and it tells us about their colonialist nature. You are the representative of a country, and I am the representative of a country, so we are equal. And you invited me to come to your country ...

I: But refused to meet with him.

T: Refused to meet with him! So what does this tell us? I discussed this in my article.

I: During the period in 1946 when you wanted to negotiate with France, the Supreme Command Headquarters probably had at least some understanding that there would

probably be a war. So what preparations did you make for how you would respond when fighting broke out?

T: This involved an entire process of growth and expansion. When we signed the 6 March agreement with the French, many places and many people thought that war was still possible. And the Party Central Committee meeting held on 9 March 1946 said clearly, “Do not think that just because an agreement has been signed that we will have peace. We must accurately assess the nature of the schemes of the French reactionaries. Therefore we must make preparations.” So we worked vigorously to carry out preparations, and as the days went by and the stubbornness of the French attitude became more apparent, our preparations became more and more vigorous.

I: Did you prepare the Viet Bac base area ahead of time, or did you do that only after the French attacked?

T: With regard to the Viet Bac base area, after the collapse of the Fontainebleau Conference and after Uncle Ho returned to Hanoi, Uncle Ho ordered Tran Dang Ninh [Trần Đăng Ninh] and Nguyen Luong Bang [Nguyễn Lương Bằng] to go up there and prepare the area. It was only then that we finally concluded that war was inevitable. But at home, on the one hand we continued to hold talks with them, but on the other we set up schools to train cadres, and we continued to build up our forces. We established a lot of schools – one at Tong, one in Hanoi, one in Dalat, I’m sorry, I mean one in Da Nang, one in Vinh, etc. However, objectively speaking, our training skills were relatively limited, because we had no experience. Therefore we did not know how we should fight so that we could provide proper training for the future. Later on we gained practical experience on the battlefield, and we could take these experiences and use them in our schools, and

then we could provide useful training. So we provided training to our people, but the quality of the training provided was of only limited usefulness on the battlefield.

I: I understand that you used a number of Japanese soldiers who had surrendered to you, and also a number of French Foreign Legion soldiers who had joined your forces, to help with the training.

T: The instructors for our classes were made up of the following elements: First, our cadres who had received training in China, at the Whampoa Academy, men like Le Thiet Hung [Lê Thiét Hùng], Hoang Sam [Hoàng Sâm], Hoang Van Thai [Hoàng Văn Thái], etc. – the cadres who had studied in China. That was one element. Second, we had a number of Japanese, and these Japanese, objectively speaking, were progressives, they were people with a level of political understanding. But we didn't have any Frenchmen at that time.

I: You didn't have any Frenchmen?

T: We did not have any Frenchmen yet. We only had Frenchmen later on, after the war broke out. Then we got French defectors, and some of these were French Communist Party members who came over to our side. These people helped us, but they did little training. What did we use them for? To proselytize the prisoners of war we were holding, to work at our radio broadcasting station, and to carry out enemy proselyting work, meaning to proselytize the enemy's troops. That was primarily what we used them for. During our 16 months in Hanoi, when we were conducting training we used a small number of Japanese, but most of the instructors were our own cadres who had received training in China.

I: At the Whampoa Academy.

T: Yes, those plus a number of our cadres who had formerly been soldiers in the French army. For instance, Le Trong Tan [Lê Trọng Tấn], who later became a four-star general, had been a pilot for the French armed forces.

I: Oh? Le Trong Tan was a French pilot?

T: Yes, he flew airplanes for the French armed forces. And a number of our other cadres had been lieutenants in the French armed forces. Those were the people who stepped forward to conduct our training classes. But I would like to emphasize that while this was training, it was training that did not go very deeply into practical matters. The most important thing for us was that, after our first few battles, we came to some conclusions about how we should fight, and that was the most important thing for us.

I: The Vietnamese army was good at one thing, which was that after every battle you always held a review of the battle and derived lessons learned from your experiences, right?

T: Yes.

I: Even the U.S. Army recognized that the Vietnamese army learned very quickly.

T: Let me tell you this. There were things that we learned, but there were also things that we did not accept. When we drew up the battle plan for Hanoi, a Japanese colonel suggested to us that we form three defense lines – one in Hanoi, one on the outskirts of the city, and one even further out – to block the advance of the French troops. At that time Vuong Thua Vu [Vương Thừa Vũ] was the Commander of the Hanoi Front, under the direction and supervision of Vo Nguyen Giap. Vuong Thua Vu put this plan forward, but General Giap rejected it, because we did not have the weapons that were needed to block the enemy's advance in this way. Therefore General Giap instructed Vu to use the

Old Quarter of Hanoi City, the northern part of the city, as the center of resistance in order to draw in the enemy's troops and then have our forces inside the city attack outward while our forces outside the city attacked inward. This plan was the reason we were able to hold Hanoi for two months. We did not really have anything. We talk about the Lang Fortress, and the Xuan [?] Fortress, and this fortress and that fortress, but they were equipped with just Japanese anti-aircraft guns that we had captured during the [1945] general insurrection. We just lowered their barrels to use them as field artillery guns. The fortresses really didn't have anything. Each fortress was equipped with only one or two anti-aircraft guns, and they didn't have optical sights, they didn't have field telephones, and they didn't have telescopes or binoculars. So when we relate these kinds of stories we can see the difficulties our resistance faced during that initial period.

I: When the French began their attack into Hanoi City, did the Supreme Command Headquarters begin to move up to the Viet Bac base area, or did you fight for a while before moving?

T: That was a process, something that happened over a period of time. At the time the 3 March [1946] agreement was signed, we had not yet considered making such a move. Instead we continued to insist that the French implement the preliminary agreement. Then came the talks in Dalat, and the results of the preliminary talks in Dalat caused us to conclude that as long as the French maintained this attitude, it would be difficult to avoid a war. So we stepped up our training and stepped up our preparations to a higher level. Then Uncle Ho and our delegation went to the Fontainebleau conference, and the Fontainebleau talks broke down. Before Uncle Ho arrived back in Vietnam, Truong Chinh, who was at that time the General Secretary of the Party, convened a meeting on

19 October at 57 Nguyen Du Street. This conference definitively concluded that sooner or later the French would attack us and that we would have to fight the French. And at that time we greatly increased our preparatory activities. Now, while the Current Affairs Committee was meeting in Hanoi, Uncle Ho was on his way back to Vietnam, and he stopped in Cam Ranh Bay. There he met with D'Argenlieu. D'Argenlieu was France's highest-ranking representative [in Indochina]. D'Argenlieu's attitude revealed that the French would not implement the terms of the agreement that had been signed with them on 14 September. Now, our people back in Hanoi did not yet know the results of Uncle Ho's meeting with D'Argenlieu, but based on the results of the talks and on the agreement signed on 14 September, in Hanoi it was realized that war was inevitable. After the meeting on 19 October 1946 we began implementing our preparations – deciding how to divide up areas of tactical responsibility, how and where to assign cadres, how and where to distribute our forces, sending people up to Tan Trao to prepare the base area, etc. Only then did our preparations become truly vigorous. Therefore, in reality, our preparations only were carried out in earnest for two months – from 19 October, after the conference, to 19 December. And when war broke out, Uncle Ho was at Ha Dong City, ah, actually at Van Phuc, a village just outside the Ha Dong province capital. He held a meeting, and the meeting at Van Phuc was the meeting at which it was decided to launch resistance warfare. But because of Ho Chi Minh's concept that we had to try to avoid war, on 15, 16, 17, and 18 December, Uncle Ho repeatedly sent Hoang Minh Giam [Hoàng Minh Giãm] to meet with Sainteny, the French representative in Hanoi. But the first two days Sainteny would not see him. On the 17th, France gave us their first ultimatum. Uncle Ho wrote a letter and gave it to Hoang Minh Giam, who at

that time was the Deputy Foreign Minister, to deliver to Sainteny, but Sainteny refused to see him. In their ultimatum, the French said that if Vietnam refused to, first, disband the self-defense militia, and second, to turn over control of the city to France, if Vietnam refused these conditions, then on the 20th the French Army would take action.

I: At that time were you and the Supreme Command Headquarters still in Hanoi?

T: We had moved to the suburbs, to Tay Ha, three or four kilometers from downtown Hanoi, but we still had a duty officer manning the telephones in the Supreme Command Headquarters, and at the General Staff, at what is now 18 Nguyen Du, where the [General Postal Department?] is now, we still had soldiers standing guard duty to make the French think our headquarters was still there, but in fact we had moved to the suburbs, to Tay Ha Hamlet. Why did we go out to Tay Ha Hamlet? On 3 [or 13] December the Supreme Command Headquarters assembled in that area. This demonstrated that there was no longer any chance for peace. We prepared so that when war broke out we would have cables ready to be sent out from the national level giving orders about how to fight, what the code designations would be, which locations should open fire, etc. This was because, objectively speaking, those who were in charge of our regions, and each region consisted of five, six, or even nine provinces, were cadres who had been soldiers in our Liberation Propaganda Unit. They had just been squad leaders or platoon leaders in our Liberation Army Unit, and that was just a couple of years earlier. The army was formed in December 1944, just two years previous, but in December 1946 these squad leaders and platoon leaders were now in charge of a number of entire provinces! So we had to give them guidance at every step – how they should organize things, how they should control their troops, what designations they should use, etc.

I: There is one subject about which Americans are very interested. That subject is, where did Vo Nguyen Giap learn his military concepts? Where did he study? Because he was a very good combat commander, and yet he had any military schooling.

T: This is a subject that I discuss in my first volume, which talks about Vo Nguyen Giap from the time he first met Ho Chi Minh through the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Vo Nguyen Giap had been a history professor, but he was very interested in military matters. When he taught at the Thang Long School, he taught about Napoleon, and he could describe every battle that Napoleon fought – how he deployed his troops, where he placed his artillery, etc. That was where his first knowledge, his first ideas, came from. And when the war began, what book did he keep on his bedside table? Clausewitz!

I: Who?

T: Clausewitz. And when he was in China he studied the guerrilla warfare concepts of Mao and Zhu De.¹² But the problem was how to apply these ideas to Vietnam, because what was Mao's guerrilla warfare concept? When the enemy is tired, we attack; when the enemy advances, we retreat; etc. But this was not applicable in Vietnam.

I: Because Vietnam is a small and narrow country, right?

T: It is small and narrow, and we do not have base areas – that's one thing. Second, if the enemy advances and we retreat, where do we retreat to? To Burma? Or their concept of the rural countryside surrounding and besieging the cities – is that possible in Vietnam? The good thing about Vietnam was that we could rely on the people everywhere, both in the rural areas and in the cities. As long as we had the hearts of the people, our regime would exist. So when the war broke out, Vo Nguyen Giap really did not have any military knowledge.

¹² Marshal Zhu De was Commander of the Chinese Communist People's Liberation Army.

I: So he relied a great deal on those of your cadres who had studied at Whampoa or other places, like the Whampoa Academy – people like Hoang Van Thai. Is that correct?

T: Yes – Hoang Van Thai, Hoang Sam, Hoang Minh Thao [Hoàng Minh Thảo], etc. But these cadres were just Vo Nguyen Giap's subordinates. Vo Nguyen Giap's first test was on how to defend Hanoi. That was the first thing. As I said, the plan was to select a central area and to use it to draw in the enemy's forces, and then our forces on the inside would attack outward and our forces on the outside would attack inward. The fact that we were able to hold Hanoi for 60 days exceeded our original expectations. When we were preparing for the resistance war to begin, Uncle Ho asked Vo Nguyen Giap, "How long will we be able to hold onto Hanoi?" Giap replied, "For one or two weeks." But after the first three days of fighting, he confidently asserted to Uncle Ho that we might be able to hold the city for over one month, and in the end our soldiers managed to hold the city for two months. We held Hanoi for two months, and we held Nam Dinh for three months.

I: So that meant you were able to buy time to consolidate your position in the Viet Bac base area and in other places, right?

T: No. The most important thing for us was to test our troops in their first battles. Now, the war broke out on 19 December, and on 16 January, almost one month later, Giap held a conference at Chuong My, in Ha Tay, south of Hanoi and within range of the enemy's aircraft. The meeting was held to review and derive lessons from the initial battles. That was Vo Nguyen Giap's strength: after fighting, he would then review the battle and draw lessons from it, to see what lessons could be used in the new situation. At that time our troops had not yet withdrawn from Hanoi. The conference was on 16 January.

I: So at that time the Supreme Command Headquarters was still in the Hanoi area?

T: Yes, it was south of Hanoi.

I: South of Hanoi?

T: Yes, south of Hanoi. It was at Chuong My. Chuong My is a little south of Ha Dong, within 20 kilometers or so of the city [of Hanoi].

I: The French probably never suspected that the Supreme Command Headquarters was located there, right?

T: No. The French thought that we had moved down to Region 4, to Thanh Hoa. And Uncle Ho was at Chong [or Trong?] Pagoda, in the flower gardens of Son Tay. And Giap was at Chuong My, and we had our forces waiting ready to attack the enemy if he tried to push out from the city. And what was the purpose of the meeting at Chuong My? To learn lessons from the fighting in Hanoi, to explain why Hanoi had been able to hold out for that first month, to review how we built our forces, the way we relied on the [civilian] population, how we set up our obstacles and fighting positions, how we coordinated the actions of the forces inside the city attacking out and the forces outside the city attacking in, etc. If we were to talk about our preparations for the fighting in Hanoi, I must tell you, that alone would take me half a day (I laughs). There was something different and strange about Vietnam. In the history of warfare never had a force that was so outnumbered, against which the balance was so heavily tilted in the enemy's favor, when we were face to face with an enemy inside a city, in every house, every street, every alleyway, every objective. And there were objectives, like the Railway Station, like the Long Bien Bridge¹³, that were occupied by both – by our troops and the enemy, virtually

¹³ The Long Bien Bridge, called by the French the Paul Doumer Bridge, is Hanoi's main bridge over the Red River.

side by side. So how do you prepare for a battle like that? In the history of warfare, there have been very few cases where, when the hostilities broke out, enemy forces were right next to our forces, where the enemy was in the same location as friendly troops. That was very unusual. So preparing a plan for a battle like this was no simple task.

I: And then, about when did the Supreme Command Headquarters finally withdraw to Viet Bac?

T: The withdrawal to the Viet Bac base area was not conducted all at once. It took a total of about three months.

I: Three months?

T: As the headquarters moved, it also continued to direct the fighting. We in the Supreme Command Headquarters celebrated the 1946 Tet Lunar New Year at Chuong My. Later we moved up to Son Tay, and then to Phu Tho, and then to Tuyen Quang, and then to Thai Nguyen. So this means we went through, ah, let me see, first Hanoi, then Ha Dong, Phu Tho, Thai Nguyen, oh, I forgot Thai Nguyen, so a total of six different provinces. So we moved one step at a time. And the process of those moves was a process of directing the conduct of the war and of holding general conferences on the spot to provide guidance and direction to our cadres of all levels. Because, as I said before, the level of skills of our cadres was still very low. Therefore, every scenario had to be considered, regarding what the enemy might do. After we withdraw from Hanoi, where would the enemy make his next attack? How should we respond to this attack? What tactics should we use?

I: During that period, you were not fighting just in Hanoi, but you were fighting in many other places as well.

T: The fighting that broke out on the night of 19 December happened everywhere that French troops were located. However, it was impossible for the fighting to break out simultaneously everywhere, all during that first night. There were two reasons for this. The first reason was communications. At that point in time, for us to send radio communications took a lot of work. It was not like now, when you just pick up your cell-phone and say, "Hello." So there were some places that were not able to begin the fighting on time. Hue was one example. Da Nang was another example. So we were able to start fighting that night in Hanoi, but a number of locations were not able to start fighting right away, and so the enemy received advance warning and was able to take precautions, and those locations ran into difficulty. But Hanoi and Nam Dinh were able to start in time. So there was a long process involved in our move up to the Viet Bac. In late April or early May 1946, Uncle Ho finally arrived in Tuyen Quang, or Thai Nguyen.

I: You mean 1947.

T: You're right, 1947. Because the fighting broke out on 19 December 1946, and it was approximately May 1947 when Uncle Ho finally reached our base area. But before that, while our troops were still fighting in Hanoi, because we knew the fighting could spread, Uncle Ho went to Hoa Binh, Chi Ne, Thanh Hoa...he traveled all over to check on the situation, and only after this did he move up to the base area. And the process of the successive moves of the Supreme Command Headquarters was a process that the French kept watch on. There were conferences, ah, for instance, in the morning we held a meeting in the Ha Dong province capital, and that afternoon, just when we reached Ung Hoa in Chuong My district, enemy aircraft bombed the Ha Dong province capital. The French intelligence network was truly impressive.

I: There was also the French paratroop landing in the Viet Bac in 1947, right?

T: No, that was later. That happened later. Let me tell you about that. We moved up to the Viet Bac in 1947. And during that move we spent our time drawing lessons from our experiences, consolidating our forces after we withdrew from Hanoi city, and we began to work to build our main force [regular] army. We worked to build our main force army, to build our base area, to stabilize our rear area up there, to train our cadres, to study and analyze the enemy, and to prepare for the 1947 dry season. During our preparations for the 1947 dry season, we displayed our immaturity, our lack of knowledge and understanding [turns to ask Ha Van An for something]. What did we anticipate they [the French] might do? We predicted that, first, the enemy might attack the Viet Bac, but the possibility for an attack on the Viet Bac was only third on our list of possible French actions. We thought the enemy might attack in the Delta, or that they might attack Region 4. Do you know what Region 4 was?

I: Yes, it was down in Thanh Hoa and Nghe Tinh.

T: Yes, it was northern Annam [northern Central Vietnam]. And the attack on the Viet Bac was considered as only the third possibility. Our second prediction was that the enemy was not capable of mobilizing 10,000 troops for an operation. Third, we thought that if they did attack the Viet Bac, and that this would be a very risky and unlikely move for the French, that they would mount their attack up from the piedmont area. So all three of our predictions were wrong.

I: You never suspected that they might conduct a parachute drop.

T: That's right. So, remember our three wrong predictions: First, about the location of the French attack; Second, the size of the force that they might be able to assemble; and

third, the type of attack that they would make. So all three of our initial predictions were wrong.

I: But I understand that the Viet Minh were able to obtain a report that the French were about to attack but were unable to transmit that report in time. Is that right?

T: A report was sent from Hanoi that a large number of enemy aircraft flew over Hanoi and then headed north, but we had no means of communications. The report was sent out from inside the city, but we had no communications, so the report stopped at Co Nhue, a village near here. So...

I: So they had no radio communications?

T: That's right, no radios. We had many difficulties with that. So before the enemy attacked, because of the predictions we made, that the enemy would attack up from the piedmont area, we massed twelve regiments and deployed them in a line so that if the enemy attacked we would be able to block his advance. During a meeting before the enemy attack, Party General Secretary Truong Chinh said that we should pay attention to the possibility that the enemy might take the risky action of parachuting troops into our rear. But that idea was not incorporated into the military conference that was held in late September 1947. That conference still insisted that the enemy would attack up from the lowlands, so the same deployment of forces, with the twelve regiments, was left in place.

I: Because they believed that dropping troops by parachute would be too risky and dangerous.

T: So risky that they never even considered the possibility. After the late September 1947 conference, the Party General Secretary went up to Bac Can to do some work there. The Chief of the General Staff also went up to Bac Can to visit a unit of new recruits.

Supreme Commander Vo Nguyen Giap went up to Chiem Hoa to inspect the situation up there. The only senior officers left at the Supreme Command Headquarters were one of the deputy commanders of the General Staff and the chief of the Combat Operations Section [G-3] – I’m talking here about people who could command and direct the response to the enemy attack.

I: And what about you, Colonel? Where were you at that time?

T: I was at the Supreme Command Headquarters. I was right there. At that time the Supreme Command Headquarters was located off toward Rose Mountain [Núi Hồng], on the way to Cho Chu. So while the senior officers were gone, on the morning of 7 October enemy troops parachuted into several locations – one, at Bac Can, and two, at Cho Don – and in the meantime a mechanized force moved up from Lang Son to Cao Bang in order to then sweep down from there to Bac Can. And on this side, at Hanoi, they sent a group of naval combat vessels up the Red River past Viet Tri and Phu Tho to Tuyen Quang to link up with the other troops coming down from the other direction, thereby forming a ring around the area that was intended to trap the Supreme Command Headquarters right in the middle. So I want you to image this situation: enemy troops have parachuted in, and the place closest to where they landed was Cho Don, which was only 20 kilometers from where the Supreme Headquarters was located.

I: Twenty kilometers?

T: Twenty kilometers as the crow flies [straight-line distance]. And the Supreme Commander was away, and the Chief of the General Staff was away, and the Party General Secretary was away. My God! The Vietnamese have a saying, “like a headless snake.” The man in charge of Combat Operations was Dao Van Truong [Đào Văn

Trùng]; he's still alive. He's in his 90s. Dao Van Truong. So what should we do? Now we knew that they weren't going to attack overland up from the lowlands, so now we had to order our forces stationed down there to move back up, but if we sent them up, what should they do? They had no equipment for use in attacking fortified positions, and how much time would it take them to march back up. It was going to be very difficult. Now, fortunately, the Supreme Commander [General Giap] returned on the night of 8 October. As soon as he got the news he had come back down on horseback from Chiem Hoa. And he worked to find out what the situation was at the various locations. Now, there was one important thing. It was accidental, just a chance incident, but it was very favorable for Vietnam. This was that up in Cao Bang an infantry unit, purely infantry using just machineguns, had managed to shoot down a French aircraft. Aboard the aircraft was an officer from the French High Command, Colonel Lambert [?], and he was carrying with him the plan for the attack on the Viet Bac. This was extremely important. A private from the 72nd Regiment walked for four days and three nights, straight through, from Cao Bang to the Supreme Command Headquarters to carry this report to us.

I: Because you didn't have radio communications?

T: There were no radio communications, there were no cars or vehicles, there was nothing – just a soldier walking on foot. And today that soldier lives in Thai Nguyen. Once we had that plan in our hands, we sat down together, read it, translated it, and used it to sketch the plan on our map – this column here, that column there, this unit here, the times when units were supposed to link up, etc. Only after we had that plan in hand did we have the information we needed to deal with the situation correctly.

I: At the time the French soldiers parachuted into the Viet Bac, where was Ho Chi Minh?

T: He was at Tan Trao. He was at Tan Trao, and he telephoned the Ministry of Defense and asked, “Do you have any information on Party General Secretary Truong Chinh?” We did not have any word. At the time we knew he was at Bac Can, so we sent a squad up to meet him at Bac Can and bring him back. In those conditions, with the Supreme Commander gone, with the Chief of the General Staff gone, with the Party General Secretary Gone, and suddenly having French paratroopers land 20 kilometers from the Supreme Command Headquarters, the situation was extremely tense for everyone. And we didn’t have the necessary communications equipment to easily contact our units.

I: So it was very lucky that you were able to shoot down that aircraft and ...

T: ..and get that map and that plan.

I: And the commander up there was very smart. He must have realized that this was a very important document. That is why he sent the soldier to bring it to you. If the commander....

T: You’re right. The commander of the 72nd Regiment realized the importance of this plan, and that is why he sent this man to deliver it to us. And what a contribution that this private made by walking four days and three nights to reach us. When he got to the liaison station at Quan Vuong, the station called our headquarters and said, “A private from the 72nd Regiment has just arrived carrying an important document. Send someone up here to pick it up.” At that time we still didn’t know what the document was. At that time I was no longer [Hoang Van] Thai’s secretary. Thai’s secretary at that time was Nguyen Van Ngat [Nguyễn Văn Ngạt]. Ngat went up there, and when he arrived he found that the private was asleep. All he knew was that this private had handed a batch of documents to the chief of the liaison station. And when the private arrived, the cook

there made a special effort to cook him a bowl of rice soup, but the private lay down and went to sleep before the soup was ready. So he went up there and got the documents and the map, and then brought them back. All of us then sat there together, that is, those of us who spoke French, and we “deciphered” it and sketched the details on our map. We had the entire enemy plan, and with it we were able to deal with the situation. Soon, this coming December, we will conduct a review to mark the 60th anniversary of the Viet Bac Campaign.

I: Really? 60 years?

T: Yes, the 60th anniversary of the Viet Bac Campaign. We will draw some lessons from it. Actually, we did this already some time ago, but we will do it now to mark the 60th anniversary.

I: There was another campaign, one that was very important in Vietnam’s military history, and that was the Border Campaign. Isn’t that right? (T nods affirmatively).

That campaign was very important to the development of the Vietnamese army. During that campaign, were you still working in the Supreme Command Headquarters? (T nods affirmatively). At that time, what was your job?

T: With regards to that period, from the Viet Bac Campaign to the Border Campaign, that was a period covering three years. Those three years were spent trying to figure out how we should organize our forces appropriate to our situation. And during those three years France began to encounter difficulties. Because, ah, what was their aim in conducting the Viet Bac Campaign? They had three goals: one was to capture Ho Chi Minh and his entire government; two was to destroy our main force army; and three was to destroy our base area. Why did they have to do that? It was because the first year of the war had

shown that the political and economic conditions in France would not allow them to continue the war indefinitely. They decided that they must try to finish their enemy off decisively, because if they didn't, political conditions would not allow them to continue. On the Vietnamese side, we knew about the French problems, but we were trying to feel our way forward, trying to figure out how to organize ourselves, how to incite guerrilla warfare, how to mobilize the people, how to organize a regular main-force army...

I: And that period was very difficult for Vietnam because you did not have any allies at that time.

T: No one knew about us.

I: You had to fight completely independently, all on your own.

T: We were completely encircled, completely surrounded. To the north was Chiang Kaishek's nationalist army, because the Chinese revolution had not yet achieved victory, and to the west of Indochina was Thailand, and to our east was the ocean. So we were in a very isolated posture. We were isolated geographically and we were isolated politically. Contact with the outside world was very difficult. The best we could do was to set up a post in Burma, in Rangoon. We set up a representative office there, and anyone from the outside world who wanted to contact us had to contact us there. So we were in an extremely difficult position. Now, we must recognize one thing, and that is that the success of the Chinese Revolution in October 1949 created very important conditions that led to the transformation of the war in Vietnam. After the Chinese Revolution won victory, in early 1950 Uncle Ho went there. He traveled to China and on to Moscow to appeal for help, because we had fought in isolation for five years, completely on our own. So he told them that they had a responsibility to help us.

I: Because during that entire time you did not have any source of supply for weapons and ammunition.

T: We didn't have any source of supply. We had only our homemade weapons that we produced, and, our most important source, weapons and equipment we captured from the enemy. As a result of Uncle Ho's visit, it was agreed that China would supply us and that the Soviet Union would provide China with matching aid, replacing in full everything that China provided to us. And China helped us with training, because in the past we had fought only small battles, small unit actions - at the most at the level of two regiments, and usually only battalion-level actions. So China began to train us in a manner that would help us to clear the way and shatter the ring that surrounded and isolated us. And the only place we could shatter that ring was in the north. We held discussions and decided that conditions were not favorable for doing this in Cao Bang, or in Lao Cai. Do you know those places?

I: Yes.

T: I mean that conditions in the Northwest sector were not favorable for this, so we had to open up the northeastern sector.

I: To gain an entry point through which you could establish contact with the outside.

T: To have contact with the outside. Now, at that time the Chinese had just taken over control of the government and they still had problems, but the problems of a country whose war had ended were not as great as those of a small country that was still at war. So we decided to make our attack in the Northeast sector. At that time China sent cadres to us to help us study, analyze, and come to an agreement about how to attack, what tactics to us, what attack targets we should choose, etc. Now, there were things that they

discussed that we agreed to, and there were things that we didn't agree to. We did not accept their suggestions. And on this, it must be said that this area was one of Vo Nguyen Giap's real talents. For example, there was Strategic Route 4, a long road. What target should we select as the target of our first attack? That kind of thing. The success of the Border Campaign was our first victory, and it exceeded our expectations.

I: It also exceeded the French expectations as well.

T: No, they never expected it. This was a great surprise to the French. With that border, the French concluded that they couldn't win out there, but for us it was a tremendous step forward, a great transformation for us. Because it exceeded anything we had even considered possible. After the Border Campaign,¹⁴ the war changed.

I: Did you participate in the Border Campaign, Colonel?

T: I was in the Forward Command Headquarters. I did not personally participate in the fighting, but I was in the Supreme Command Forward Headquarters, the Front Headquarters.

I: Were you working under Vo Nguyen Giap?

T: Under Thai.

I: Hoang Van Thai?

T: Yes, Thai. Now, at the Front Headquarters we had three organizations: an operations staff organization, a political organization, and a rear services [logistics] organization. I was in the operations staff organization. So I participated in the development of the plan, I participated in the actual conduct of the campaign, and then after it was over I participated in the review and assessment of the campaign. Now, shall we talk about the

¹⁴ The Border Campaign (September-October 1950), fought along Route 4 right along the Vietnamese border with China, was the Viet Minh Army's first significant military victory over the French.

period after the Border Campaign? Will we have time, An? Just a little longer. How long should we continue?

I: That depends on you, Colonel. We planned on 11:00, but if we go longer that is all right. I am ready, because this is very good.

T: That means that we will talk only about the war against the French, right?

[Escort Officer Ha Van An asks for a five-minute recess, tape ends]

**Oral History Interview of Senior Colonel Tran Trong Trung [Trần Trọng Trung]
DVD 15
June 2007, Hanoi
[First Day of Interview]**

T – Tran Trong Trung

I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow

[T talks about finishing up by 11:00]

T: After the Border campaign, there was one rather special thing that should be noted, and that was how we assessed the situation. Now, this has never been discussed openly, in public, before. Our victory was so great that we underestimated the enemy. For that reason, we moved our troops down to the lowlands. And I'm sure you know that back then the Vietnamese army's standard practice was night attacks. And what was our preferred terrain? Mountain jungles. But because our assessment of the situation was incorrect, and because of our need to develop and expand the war, we moved our forces down and conducted three campaigns in the lowlands. The first campaign was at Vinh Yen, the second was in the mining region, and the third was in Ha Nam Ninh. In these three campaigns, yes, we won victories, but our losses were heavy.

I: I understand that the Chinese specialists [advisors] opposed the Ha Nam Ninh Campaign¹⁵. Is that correct?

T: What was your question?

I: The Chinese specialists who were assigned to help the Supreme Command Headquarters did not approve of the decision to conduct the Ha Nam Ninh Campaign.

T: No, no! The campaign that the Chinese did not agree with was another campaign. That was the Hoa Binh Campaign.¹⁶

¹⁵ The Ha Nam Ninh Campaign in Ha Nam Ninh Province was fought during May-June 1951.

¹⁶ The Hoa Binh Campaign was fought in Hoa Binh Province December 1951-February 1952.

I: Oh, it was the Hoa Binh Campaign. Yes.

T: So after these three campaigns, in which we won victories but in which we also suffered losses, we came to a conclusion – That we should stick to the mountain jungles. So we returned to the Northwest region. But before we returned to the Northwest, we exploited an error made by De Lattre de Tassigny. After the Border Campaign the French sent De Lattre de Tassigny over here. De Tassigny was France’s “number one” general. After dealing with our three campaigns, as a result of pressure he was receiving from Paris, de Lattre sent his troops up into Hoa Binh. What was his purpose in moving up to Hoa Binh? It was to cut our supply line leading from the lowlands up into the Viet Bac. This was a tremendous opportunity for us. Vo Nguyen Giap said, “de Lattre has given us a golden opportunity!” So we moved our forces into Hoa Binh, and in the end we won victory in Hoa Binh. And then we won victory in the Northwest, and then we helped Laos clear a base area at Sam Neua.

I: That was the Upper [Northern] Laos Campaign.

T: Sam Neua, in Upper Laos. Then de Lattre was replaced by Raoul Salan, and after Salan came Henri Navarre. Navarre came in around May 1953. By that time France had recognized that it could not win this war. But the problem they faced was how to withdraw. Prime Minister Meyer [?] gave Henri Navarre the assignment of creating an opportunity in which France could withdraw from Indochina with honor. Winning was no longer possible, but it was an “issue of honor,” to successfully conduct an honorable withdrawal. The biggest mistake Navarre made, a mistake that decided the future of his career, was his selection of Dien Bien Phu. When he chose to fight at Dien Bien Phu, Navarre believed we would not be able to attack. This was because, he had a complex of

fortified defensive positions occupied by as many as 15 or 16 battalions, tanks and artillery, and with the large sloping plain on which it was located, a plain that was six meters by 12 or 13 meters [sic – should be “kilometers”], and he thought we would not be able to move artillery guns up there to attack.

I: Because there were no roads and it was far from your rear area.

T: It was far from our rear area, and we wouldn't be able to supply our forces. But the important thing was that their aircraft would be able to attack all along one hundred kilometers-long road, so how could we transport anything forward? And how could we move heavy artillery pieces up? And where would we site our guns? Because it was a basin surrounded by high mountains. If we placed our guns behind the mountains, they would not have enough range to hit the enemy's position, and if we placed them in front of the mountains, they'd be easy to spot, and the French counter-battery fire would destroy our guns! Navarre's problem was his failure to accurately estimate Vietnam's capabilities. So with our policy of “everything for the front lines,” we mobilized all of our forces in the rear area to supply the front, thereby solving our logistics problem, even though we still had difficulties. There were some places where we had to continually draw and redraw our maps because the destruction was so great along the transportation and supply route. The second problem was how to move our guns up there, where we should site the guns, where we should set up fake positions so we could avoid the counter-battery fire, etc. That was where Navarre made his mistake. And none of the French artillery specialists believed that we would be able to move our guns into position up there.

I: That is why Colonel Piroth¹⁷ committed suicide.

T: Yes, he committed suicide. The battle there was a campaign lasting for fifty-six days. It was the first battle, and it took a tremendous resolve and force of will to fight that battle.

I: In the Supreme Command Headquarters you also had to be very resolute because your casualties were rather high, right? You had a lot of difficulties, and the battle was very tense, right?

T: Yes, it was very tense. One of the problems with Objective A-1, Hill A-1.¹⁸ Our losses there were rather high, but we had to take A-1 because it was the “eyes” of the entire enemy defensive complex. Therefore, after the first wave of attacks, and then the second wave of attacks, as we were preparing to launch the third wave of attacks, Vo Nguyen Giap convened a special conference for all the highest-ranking leaders at the front. The meeting was to resolve the ideological problem, the problem with our thinking. What did we do? We said that no wavering or hesitancy would be allowed, and that we had to fight to the end. Our rear area was taking care of our supply problem, so we had to take action to resolve the problem that was inside our own heads in order to be able to secure victory. The victory at Dien Bien Phu was a victory won by the strength of our rear area in keeping us supplied, and a victory for the strength of the heroism and courage of our entire army, but the true strength, that was in the brain. How should we fight this battle? Drawing lessons from all of our previous campaigns and applying them here, fighting the enemy on a sloping battlefield like this, using more strength than we had ever used before, ah, we had to figure out this battle should be fought, step by step. Initially,

¹⁷ Colonel Charles Piroth, the commander of French artillery at Dien Bien Phu.

¹⁸ “A-1” is the Vietnamese designation of a hill position that the French Army called “Elaine 2.”

we planned on mounting a massive attack, with two divisions attacking down from the north and one division attacking the enemy position from the west in an attack that would last three days and two nights. But after reconsidering the plan, Vo Nguyen Giap concluded that we would not be able to win. If we attacked in that manner, we had a total of six infantry divisions and if we brought them all up there and fought the battle that way, we would essentially lose everything we had. So the victory at Dien Bien Phu was a victory won by Vo Nguyen Giap when he decided to change our method of attack. If we had attacked according to the initial plan, making a massive assault lasting three days and two nights, we would have failed. That is the biggest lesson from this battle. Considering the staff we had, the forces we had, the terrain in the battle area, our transportation and supply difficulties, the question was how to fight the battle in a way that we could win it. If we did not win this battle, we would have been finished. Therefore, much afterwards our generals, like Vuong Thua Vu [Vương Thừa Vũ] and Le Trong Tan [Lê Trọng Tấn] said, “If we had attacked according to the initial plan, we would not be alive today to attend this memorial ceremony,” because they would have fallen there on the battlefield. So that is the great thing, the outstanding thing, about the victory at Dien Bien Phu.

I: During the Dien Bien Phu Campaign, were you still working in the Supreme Command Headquarters at the front?

T: No, at that time I was no longer in the headquarters, because at that time the work of proselytizing the enemy, work that we call “enemy proselyting,” had become very important. And since I spoke French, I joined the ranks of those who used bullhorns and

who spread leaflets to proselytize enemy troops. So I was engaged in enemy proselyting work.

I: Where were you doing this work?

T: Right there on the battlefield at Dien Bien Phu, because even while we were attacking, we continued to use bullhorns and to spread leaflets, using the bullhorns to talk to the enemy and tell them that they could not win and persuade them to surrender to our forces.

I: So you had to go out to the front lines. That was very dangerous, right?

T: That's right, that's right. I went to the front to proselytize the enemy. But even during the Border Campaign, although I was assigned to the Supreme Command Headquarters I still had to go down to this unit or that unit to deliver orders, to supervise and urge the units forward. I did not just sit there inside the Supreme Command Headquarters. So that was the victory at Dien Bien Phu. The victory at Dien Bien Phu was the result of the strength of our entire population in the rear area, of the fighting strength of our troops, but most important of all was the resolve shown by the Commander, who decided to stop and not attack according to the old plan, but instead developed a new plan of attack that was more suited to the situation, the enemy situation and our own situation.

I: I understand that during the Dien Bien Phu Campaign enemy proselyting efforts had a tremendous impact, right? For instance, many of the T'ai units¹⁹ completely disintegrated.

T: That's right.

I: And many other units, the African units, for example ...

¹⁹ Among the French units at Dien Bien Phu were several battalions of T'ai troops (the T'ai were an ethnic minority tribe in North Vietnam and Laos) commanded by French officers and NCOs.

T: Both African and French units. Especially when the third wave of attacks started. When the enemy saw that he could not resist any longer, and when the efforts to break through our siege, ah, Hanoi ordered that forces be dropped here and there so that they could break our siege and let their troops escape, the morale of their troops deteriorated, and enemy proselyting work was very necessary. Therefore we had projected that we would have to fight until the end of May, but our enemy proselyting efforts persuaded the enemy that they could not fight any longer. So after we captured De Castries,²⁰ all the other units surrendered as well. White flags were raised over every enemy position. That was in part because of the strength of our attacks, but also in part to the strength of our enemy proselyting work.

I: At the time that De Castries surrendered, the men in your unit and in the other units must have been very happy, right? Did you guys have a party or some kind of celebration?

T: No, we had a lot of work that still had to be done. It was a big surprise to us when we suddenly found that we had to take care of 10,000 prisoners of war. We had to feed them, beginning that very first night, 7 May. And they were exhausted after enduring so many days in that tropical climate, living in those bunkers and trenches, fighting all the time. They had malaria, dysentery, and malnutrition, but we had no medicines. So we had to figure out how to support them. Some units, for instance, a company of 30 men had to oversee and care for 200 prisoners, and they had no one who could speak the language of these prisoners! They had to prepare places for the prisoners to eat and sleep that very night. So that was a very difficult task.

I; So you were one of the people who participated in this task?

²⁰ General Christian De Castries, Commander of all French forces at Dien Bien Phu.

T: I participated in the work of escorting them from there [Dien Bien Phu] down to Thanh Hoa, to prepare for the exchange.

I: You also had to move them to avoid a possible French attempt to rescue them, right?

T: Rescue them? They could not have rescued them, because it was all over. They had three plans; Navarre had three plans to rescue them, but they couldn't rescue them because they were tightly surrounded by a network of fighting trenches, so that those inside could not get out and those outside could not get in. So in the end, Cogy²¹ in Hanoi called De Castries and said, "That's it. You remain there." That was in the event an attempt to break out and retreat was made. "You remain there with the prisoners of war. If it fails, you remain there." The situation was one in which it was impossible for them to escape.

I: During the entire period of the war against the French, what was your family status? Had you gotten married yet? Did you have any children yet?

T: I did. I got married in 1948. And my first child was born in 1951. But my wife and child were in the rear.

I: In the rear? You mean in the Viet Bac area?

T: Yes, in the Viet Bac area, in Tuyen Quang.

I: What about your brothers and sisters? Did they join the army as well?

T: By that time I was the only one left. I was an only child, because my older sister had died.

I: Died of disease? Or...

²¹ General Rene Cogy, Commander of all French Army force in North Vietnam.

T: She died of a disease. And my older brother was killed during the first days of the war, in the South. He was in one of the Southern Advance army units [the units the Viet Minh sent from the North down to the south in the fall of 1945].

I: Oh? He was in one of the Southern Advance units?

T: ..that went south. And I was the only one left.

I: What about your parents?

T: My father had died a long time before. My father died in 1929, when I was six years old. The only one left was my mother, who was with her grandchild in the rear area. My wife was a lieutenant colonel, a medical doctor.

I: Oh? She was a doctor?

T: Yes, she was a lieutenant colonel; a doctor in the Military Medical Corps.

I: So after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, your entire family was probably very happy because you were about...

T: I wasn't able to go home yet. I didn't get to go home yet. It wasn't until 1955, after we finished exchanging all the prisoners, that I finally had a chance to go home and visit my family.

I: So you still had to be separated from your family for another year?

T: Yes. That was the case for all our soldiers. The conditions at that time were very difficult. They couldn't go home.

I: So everyone had his own sacrifices to make...

T: No, we were very contented with this. It didn't bother us, because we were young. When you were living with your unit and fighting, there were times that you forgot that had anyone in the rear (laughs).

I: The ladies would be unhappy to hear that, wouldn't they?

T: But there were many times, ah, for instance, my mother knew that both her son and her daughter-in-law were participating in the resistance struggle. So she had to stay at home to raise her grandchild. And to raise the child, ah, I had no money to send home to them, so the peasant farmers in the local area fed her and my child and supported them.

I: That was an example of the slogan, "The entire nation resists," isn't that right?

T: During the struggle against the Americans it was different. During the struggle against the Americans there were six of us: my wife and I and our four children. All six of us participated in the struggle. All four of my children became soldiers, including my one daughter (both laugh). OK, Mr. An, that's all for today.

I: Thank you, Colonel, and we will continue this next time.

**Oral History Interview of Senior Colonel Tran Trong Trung²² [Trần Trọng Trung]
DVD 19
19 June 2007, Hanoi
[Second Day of Interview]**

T – Tran Trong Trung

I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow

I: [In English] This is a continuation of the interview with Colonel Tran Trong Trung.

[Switching to Vietnamese] First, I would like to ask about a few issues from our last session. You said that during the Dien Bien Phu Campaign you were engaged in enemy proselyting work. You said you had been transferred to work in enemy proselyting. But from 1945 or 1946 to 1954 you worked continuously in the General Staff, right?

T: That is correct.

I: You worked as secretary, and then?

T: When the fighting began...

I: When the campaign began...

T: ...the Dien Bien Phu Campaign ...

I: That was 1954, right?

T: It was in 1954, when the Dien Bien Phu Campaign began. At that time I was still working in the General Staff. However, after the first and second wave of attacks of this campaign, the number of prisoners of war we held grew very large, and many of our people at the front did not speak French. So an order was sent back from the Supreme Commander [Vo Nguyen Giap] at the front to mobilize all personnel in the Supreme Command Headquarters who could speak German, French, or English and send them to

²² Former Director of the War History Faculty, Military Science Institute, Ministry of Defense; Author of several books and co-author (ghostwriter) of several volumes of the memoirs of General Hoang Van Thai, including his book on the final two years of the war, “Những Ngày Tháng Quyết Định”, published in English translation under the title, “How South Vietnam Was Liberated.”

the front lines to engage in enemy proselyting operations. So I was sent forward immediately to do that work. Then, after the Dien Bien Phu Campaign ended, I led a group of prisoners of war down to Thanh Hoa. In September or October, after we had turned these prisoners over, I was finally allowed to return to Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: I see. After you returned to...

T: I returned to the Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: And you resumed your work there?

T: Yes, I continued to work in the Supreme Command Headquarters for two more years, that is, until 1956. At that time I was transferred to a unit – to the Artillery Command.

I: Oh? The Artillery Command?

T: Yes. I remained at the Artillery Command until 1964, so for eight or nine years. Then I was transferred back to the Supreme Command Headquarters. After I returned to the Supreme Command Headquarters, I was sent to a military university [đại học quân sự]. After completing my studies at the military university, I returned to resume working at the Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: Where you working in the office of the Supreme Commander?

T: No, in the office of the Chief of the General Staff.

I: The Chief of the General Staff was...

T: Hoang Van Thai.

I: Still Hoang Van Thai?

T: Yes, Hoang Van Thai. At that time we were working on a general review of the war against the French to use to draw lessons from experience, lessons we could apply in this second war.

I: Yes, they write about this in the History of the People's Army [Lịch Sử Quân Đội Nhân Dân]. That book discusses the general review of the war...

T: No, the History of the People's Army was written by the General Political Department. But I was working on a general review of our experiences in the war against the French. This was a review of experience, learning lessons, while over on the other side [the General Political Department] they were writing history.

I: So what you were writing was designed to support combat operations, right?

T: It was about policy guidelines, about the military arts [tactics], about strategic decisions, about building our forces. We would draw lessons so that the High Command could make decisions about how to apply these experiences, these lessons, in this second war - how these lessons should be utilized in the current situation, in combat against the American army and the Saigon army.

I: Did you attend training at the Mid and High Level Military Study Institute [Học Viện Quân Sự Trung Cao Cấp]?

T: No. This was a separate organization, a separate organization that was under the personal direction and guidance of the Chief of the General Staff. The purpose was to conduct a general review of the war, to review the experiences of the war...

I: No, I was talking about when you went to study, after you were transferred from the Artillery back to the General Staff. At that time you were sent to attend a class of some kind, right?

T: Oh, that was to complete the military university program.

I: Oh, the military university program.

T: Yes, meaning the High-Level Military Study Institute [Học Viện Quân Sự Cấp Cao].

I: Ah, the High-Level Military Study Institute. At that time, what was your rank?

T: In 1963 I was promoted to major.

I: So you were a major. I have another question from our previous session. During the time that you were working with the American OSS, ah, a lot of people believe that at that time the U.S. missed a tremendous opportunity to cooperate with Vietnam, so that later on we would not have been enemies, and so that we would not have supported France. If the U.S. had continued to support the Viet Minh, what do you think would have happened?

T: To discuss that, we have to return to the situation during the final days of the Second World War, approximately July 1945. At that time we had not yet conducted the general insurrection [interruption as T asks a girl to turn up the air conditioning]. Before the general insurrection [August 1945], as I said the other day, Uncle Ho was not yet the Chief of State, but he was the leader of the Viet Minh. He wanted very much to cooperate with the United States to counter the French scheme of resuming their aggression [re-occupying Vietnam]. He wanted to take action to oppose this in advance. Because in the Potsdam Conference it was decided that Britain would come in to administer the area and take the surrender of the Japanese army from the 16th Parallel southward, and that Chiang Kaishek's army would come in to take the surrender of Japanese forces north of the 16th Parallel. Ho Chi Minh recognized in advance that when the British Army came in, it was inevitable that they would help the French to return.

Therefore, in July and August, on two successive occasions, Ho Chi Minh sent letters to the U.S. delegation in Kunming asking them to raise with France his request that the French acknowledge that Vietnam would receive its independence in between five and ten years. He also asked the U.S. to recognize Vietnam as an independent nation. But no response was received from the U.S. After we had taken control of the government, and after the British army had arrived, and the French accompanied them, and after the Nationalist Chinese army arrived in North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh sent a number of letters to Harry Truman, to John Foster Dulles, to the head of the United Nations, and to the governments of the Soviet Union, Nationalist China, France, and Britain, asking them to recognize Vietnam's independence. But no response was received to any of his letters.

I: How were the letters sent? By what route? Through OSS channels, or...

T: Some of them went through French channels, and some through our representative offices abroad, and when Uncle Ho went to Paris to attend the negotiations, he met with representatives of many countries and he raised with them our hope to cooperate with those countries, with all countries, but especially with those countries that recognized Vietnam's independence. But the Soviet Union did not respond, either. Why didn't the Soviets respond? This is an internal of the communist movement, but since it is now in the past we can talk about it now. It was because Stalin did not approve of the fact that Ho Chi Minh had dissolved the Communist Party. Do you understand?

I: Yes, I understand.

T: It was because Chiang Kaishek said the communists were supporting Mao [Zedong], and it was the result of pressure from Luong Han²³ and Tieu Van²⁴ who had come down

²³ The commander of Chinese Nationalist Army occupying forces in North Vietnam.

²⁴ Apparently the name of another Chinese Nationalist Army commander in North Vietnam.

from the north. They did not approve of the Communist Party. Therefore Ho Chi Minh announced the dissolution of the Communist Party. Now, Stalin didn't know about all this. He did not understand...

I: He did not understand why...

T: ...why we dissolved the Party. He believed that Ho had betrayed communism. He said, "You are a nationalist," and he had a negative attitude toward Ho Chi Minh. So he had this attitude for the entire period from 1945 until 1950, when Ho Chi Minh traveled to Moscow. Only then did he learn why we had been forced to dissolve the Party. We had dissolved the Communist Party, but in its place we established the "Association for Marxist Research" [Hội Nghiên Cứu Chủ Nghĩa Marx]. This meant that the Party activities continued, but not in public, not overtly. It was just a tactic for us, but Stalin did not understand that. As for Britain and the United States, neither one of them replied to Ho's letters. And this must be said – it is in the past now, but it still must be said. Truman's attitude was very bad, very incompetent. Do you understand the idea behind my words?

I: I understand.

T: I meant that Truman was behind the times. And working with Truman were a number of right-wing people who believed that you had to help France in order to block the spread of communism. They came up with the domino theory.

I: This was the concept of George Kennan in the State Department, and a number of others.

T: Right. They believed that if Vietnam gained its independence and went communist, then the other countries in Asia, like the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, etc., even

India and Burma, would also go communist. This meant that if one domino “pawn,” Vietnam, fell, the other dominos would then fall in quick succession. That was the error, the mistake. And they thought that they had to block the spread of communism, and this is why they decided to help the French. This theory reappeared in 1950, when the U.S. began to assist France directly, and in 1953-1954, as France was being defeated, Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, continued to vigorously assist France while they also prepared a plan for the U.S. to jump into the conflict after the French withdrew. And they had begun to prepare the necessary conditions to jump into this conflict as far back as 1950-1951, when they brought Ngo Dinh Diem over [to the U.S.] to build him up to become the future leader of South Vietnam. Now, before the Geneva Agreement was signed, in June Ngo Dinh Diem returned to Saigon. Do you understand?

I: I understand.

T: In June and July 1954, what was the situation in South Vietnam? The French had not left yet. The French in North Vietnam moved down to South Vietnam to regroup pursuant to the terms of the Geneva Agreement. France had not yet left. Diem had returned, and the U.S. had arrived. So I want to summarize this in those few short words: The French had not yet left, Diem had returned, and the U.S. had arrived. So the things that the U.S. military did at that time, because they had very few forces there then...

I: Very few, just a few hundred men.

T: Just advisors, that’s all. But, with the assistance of Edward Lansdale, what did Diem do? What schemes did he carry out? He instituted a plan for the long-term, protracted division of Vietnam into two parts.

I: After the signing of the Geneva Agreement, during the period from 1954 to 1956, North Vietnam supported the implementation of the Geneva Agreement and did not take military action, right? But inside the General Staff, did you realize that in the future you would have to resume fighting, or didn't you?

T: In reality, after our victory at Dien Bien Phu, we discharged a tremendous number of our troops from our army. We discharged 80,000 men. And we used a rather substantial number of our personnel to build state farms for agricultural production, to build industrial enterprises, etc.

I: But the discharges took place in 1955 or 1956, right?

T: They were in 1954, 1955, and 1956. At that time we still had a certain degree of hope that there would be a conference and general elections in the two parts of the country. But, as French historians later wrote, Ngo Dinh Diem knew that if general elections were held, he would lose. And who was behind Diem? The U.S. And at that time the U.S. meant the Eisenhower Administration.

I: During that time, in the General Staff did you have a long-term plan for the possibility of ...

T: War.

I: Yes, for war, and what you would have to do to unify the country?

T: During those first years, from 1954 to 1959, the General Staff sent a large number of cadres down into South Vietnam. Among them were people like Dinh Thi Van [Đinh Thị Vân], and it also had people already in the south like Pham Xuan An [Phạm Xuân Ân]. These were strategic espionage agents. They were sent down to investigate the situation.

I: You also sent a number of sappers, didn't you?

T: No. We sent intelligence officers, strategic intelligence officers [T turns to Escort Officer Ha Van An to ask a question] Does he know about strategic intelligence?

“Spies?”

I: I understand. But I read the history of the Sapper Forces, and that history states that a number of sappers, a small number, were sent down to Region 5 in 1956 and 1957. It said that they sent a number of these people down to help the various organizations in South Vietnam combat the sweep operations being conducted by Diem, and to combat the, ah...

T: The acts of terror being committed. In general, in 1954 North Vietnam had no thoughts, no plans...

I: Long-term plans.

T: ... about fighting, not at all. However, because of Diem's acts of repression and terrorism, frequently one place would form a sapper unit, or another place would form a military unit. But these were just local responses by the people, so that they could combat the government thugs.

I: This happened both in Cochin China [the southern half of South Vietnam] and Central Vietnam, right?

T: It happened in both southern and central South Vietnam. Finally, in 1959, the Party Central Committee held its 15th Plenary Conference, and only then did we definitively affirm that there would be no general elections, that Diem was massacring our people, and that there were indications that the U.S. would continue to strengthen its presence. Therefore the Central Committee concluded that the path to the liberation of South Vietnam and the unification of our country must be a path of violence, that these goals

could only be achieved by war. Therefore, after that we began to draft plans to build forces [train troops], to open up Strategic Route 559 [the Ho Chi Minh Trail], and to organize forces, and we also directed our people in South Vietnam to begin building forces down there to prepare so that we would be able to respond to American intervention.

I: During that period you were assigned to the Artillery Command, right?

T: Yes, I was in artillery.

I: Were you working right in the Artillery Command Headquarters, or...

T: No, I was assigned to an artillery unit.

I: To a unit?

T: Yes. At that time I was the chief of staff of a brigade. I was the chief of staff of an artillery brigade, "Brigade" [in French]. My unit was later awarded the title of Hero Unit; it became the 364th Brigade.

I: The 364th?

T: It was equipped with 122mm guns. I served there until 1964, at which time I returned to the Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: Those were 122mm guns...

T: Howitzers.

I: Made by...

T: They were Russian.

I: Did you have Russian advisors, or did you have to learn to use them on your own?

T: When we got our 105mm howitzers, a number of our cadres were sent to China for training on the guns. And then they returned and fought at Dien Bien Phu. Using the

knowledge we gained in China and during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, we established our artillery brigade. Then when a number of our 105mm units switched over to using 122mm guns, we also received a number of personnel who had been trained in the Soviet Union.

I: Did you have Russian advisors?

T: We did, we had Russian advisors, but they were only assigned to the Artillery Command headquarters. They were not assigned down to the unit level. [I and T talk at same time] Yes, the guy was named Oshkin [?]. He was assigned to the Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: Then in 1964 you returned to the General Staff.

T: Yes, I returned to the General Staff. At that time I was assigned to work on reviewing and summarizing the first war [the war against the French] in order to prepare for the second war [the war against the Americans].

I: And you returned at the very time that Vietnam was preparing to fight the Americans.

T: Just before the fighting began.

I: So that you could respond to the American "limited war."

T: Yes.

I: Was your transfer from artillery back to the Supreme Command Headquarters related to the beginning of work on your plan to combat the Americans?

T: No. I was not working in combat operations. There was an organization called the agency to review the war [cơ quan tổng kết chiến tranh]. There were just a small number of personnel, all carefully selected, all well educated, and all people who were familiar

with our war experiences. We were assigned to help study, analyze, and draw lessons from the first resistance war.

I: Lessons that might have an impact...

T: That could be applied...

I: ...to your second resistance war.

T: Yes. We are talking about major lessons here. For instance, how to build resistance forces? Why did we have to build three different types of troops [main force (regular), local force, and guerrilla militia]? Why did we have to rely on the people? What fighting methods (tactics) should be used? Why did we have to fight a protracted war? Etc. We are talking about very basic, fundamental issues, issues that are of strategic significance and that we could use in the second war. We concluded that all those issues, the lessons that we derived for application to our second war, were all fundamentally correct, even though our battlefield opponent had changed. This means that in comparison to the French army, the American army had greater striking power, and America's material resources were much greater than France's, but the fundamental issues, those involving people's war, the people's armed forces, were still applicable in these new conditions. When we shifted to the second war, the following conditions were different. The following conditions were different from the first war: One – our country was divided into two separate parts. During the first war, we could go anywhere and fight anywhere we wanted. No one could stop us. But during the second war, under the terms of the Geneva Agreement there was the 17th Parallel. So sending forces down into the South was considered illegal. But we only entered the South once American troops arrived. Only in 1965, after the first U.S. units landed in Da Nang, did Ho Chi Minh give the

order for general mobilization [of North Vietnam]. Prior to that time, we sent forces down only to begin to build forces down there to counter Diem's plots, because the South Vietnamese people could not stand that regime any longer. This has been written about in U.S. books and articles. For instance, the book "*Vietnam Verdict*" stated that the people of South Vietnam could no longer endure this new regime, a regime that terrorized and murdered them. All former resistance fighters, Party members and cadres, but also non-Party members as well, were victims of this terror. Therefore the people themselves had to rise up. We believe that this follows a specific law, a specific pattern: if there is pressure and repression, then there will be struggle. The people could not endure this treatment, so they had to struggle against it. There were people who had been members of the resistance who were victims of this terror campaign, but there were also people who had not participated in the resistance who were also victimized by this terror campaign. Therefore the local people, the residents down there, had to rise up.

I: For how long did you work on the review of the war?

T: From 1965 to 1968, and then I was sent down to the battlefield.

I: Until 1968?

T: Yes, and then I went forward to the battlefield.

I: That was at the time of the Tet Offensive, right? [T nods head affirmatively]. The decision to launch the Tet Offensive was a very big decision, because there was a policy position of fighting a protracted war, and there was another policy position of wanting to end the war as quickly as possible, right? So there must have been a lot of debate about the decision to launch the Tet offensive, the general offensive-general insurrection, right?

T: What is the question that you want to ask about the Tet Offensive?

I: I want to ask about the question of theory. It appears that there was a discussion in the leadership about whether you should fight a protracted war, because China was advising you that you should fight a people's guerrilla war, right? And that you should fight a protracted war. So with regards to concentrating all your forces to fight one really big battle, there must have been a lot of differing opinions expressed about doing something like that, right? [T nods his head affirmatively].

T: There were many differences between the opinions of foreign countries and Vietnam's own ideas. At that time Russia advocated peaceful coexistence. They didn't want Vietnam to fight a war. They were afraid that a conflict with the U.S. could escalate into a Third World War. China felt the same way. China advised us, "Only fight small-unit actions, at the platoon and company level. Don't fight big battles." Vietnam needed the material support of friendly countries, but Vietnam had its own independent policies. This means that, at that time Vietnam had a total population of about 30 million people. If we had tried to fight a guerrilla war along the lines of China's guerrilla war, who knows how long the war would have lasted and when it would finally have ended. But the thing that we learned, something that was as certain as a principle of law, was that if you wanted to end a war and finish the enemy off on the battlefield, if you wanted to win victory, then guerrilla warfare had to be developed up to the level of concentrated, massed, conventional warfare. If you simply fought small-unit battles and nothing else, you could not bring the war to a final conclusion.

I: In his book, Vo Nguyen Giap gave that same explanation. He said that war had three phases, and that the final phase was ...

T: Large-scale conventional warfare. Now, the problem of 1968 was as follows: the plan was drafted in late 1967. What was the policy here? It was to use small forces, meaning sapper forces, to attack all the cities, to make powerful, lightning-fast attacks to create conditions that would permit the people to rise up in a general insurrection. But there is a lesson that we learned from this, and that is that the laws of armed struggle dictate that a general insurrection is impossible in a war. Instead, the military blow is required, and the military blow is the decisive blow. Therefore, in reality, throughout the entire offensive, through all three waves of the offensive – the January wave of attacks, the March wave, and the August wave – the only blows struck were military blows, and the people were never able to rise up. This was especially true in this kind of American neo-colonialist war. That was the immutable law of war, and conditions simply would not permit the people to rise up. If the military attack did not finish the enemy off, then the people would not be able to rise up. That was the lesson that we learned. That is why, initially we called it the general offensive-general insurrection [tổng công kích-tổng khởi nghĩa], but in actuality, to use the correct terminology, it was a strategic raid [tập kích chiến lược]. It was a strategic raid. The success of the first wave was a very great victory, because in a very large number of cities and towns we were able to attack and penetrate primary, important targets. Even in Saigon, we hit some very tough targets that no one ever imagined we could hit, and this came as a tremendous surprise to the U.S. Command. For instance, we attacked and got into the embassy, and we attacked and got into Independence Palace, and we attacked and got into a number of enemy bases right there inside the city. That was a tremendous victory. But if we had been wise enough to stop there and to turn back to consolidate our hold on the rural countryside, that would

have been best. But out of immaturity, of ignorance, we instead launched a second wave, and then a third wave of attacks. By then we no longer had the advantage of strategic surprise. So the U.S. troops now were able to deal with our attacks, and in the meantime we had left the rural areas open and defenseless. Do you understand? The rural countryside was left undefended, so the Saigon army was able to reoccupy the rural countryside and to recapture the areas that previously we had controlled. That is why, after the second wave of attacks and the third wave of attacks, by the end of 1968 we began to have problems.

I: Did the General Staff or the Politburo anticipate in advance the international impact, and the political impact, particularly in the United States, that the Tet offensive would have? Because that appears to have been its most important effect, right?

T: You are right.

I: Did you predict in advance that the Tet offensive would have this impact?

T: Yes. After the first wave of attack we could see the impact clearly. What was the greatest impact?

I: But before you launched the first wave...

T: Yes, we saw the impact, which was that the U.S. was deescalating. The announcement on the 31st of, ah, whatever the month in late 1968, the announcement by President Johnson showed this clearly; it showed us that the effects of the 1968 offensive had forced the U.S. to deescalate the war. This is why, later on, after Nixon took office, even though he tried to employ this doctrine or that doctrine, at the basic level, no more U.S. troops were sent to Vietnam and instead the U.S. began withdrawing troops, which meant that the U.S. was deescalating the war.

I: So the Tet offensive was a military blow, a political blow, and a diplomatic blow – a combination of all three.

T: That is correct. But our victory would have been even greater if we had been wise enough to stop after the first wave of attacks. Because the results we achieved in the second and third waves were limited, and we suffered casualties in these next waves. Do you understand? We should have halted the offensive after the first wave. We should have stopped, regrouped and consolidated our forces, and then moved back to defend and hold the rural countryside. That would have been better. Now, what can we conclude from this? The intent was to have a general offensive-general insurrection, but instead we had only a general offensive. There was no general insurrection. So the word we use to describe it is a “strategic raid.” It is more accurate to describe it as a “strategic raid.”

I: But during that time, ah, the second and third waves of the offensive did have an impact as follow-up blows, additional blows struck against the psychology of the American people. So they did have an impact.

T: That is right.

I: Did the General Staff believe that it was necessary to strike such follow-up blows in order to create a greater impact? Because even though you suffered heavy losses in the second and third waves of attacks, they still had...

T: A certain impact, a limited effect.

I: Right.

T: They did have a certain impact, but that impact was not as great as the impact caused by the first wave. In comparison with the first wave, the impact was not as great. And especially after the third wave, we began to encounter difficulties. These difficulties

were that we had lost control of the rural countryside, our troop strength had been eroded, and many localities experienced great difficulties in obtaining enough food, supplies, weapons, and ammunition. That was the reality, the practical lesson. What was the lesson that we derived from this experience? It was that it would have been best if we had stopped the offensive after the first wave of attacks. We should not have conducted the second wave, and we especially should never have launched the third wave of attacks.

I: While you were working in the General Staff, did you take part in the drafting of the plan for the Tet general offensive-general insurrection?

T: I did not take part in the drafting of the plan, but I was sent down to the battlefield to command artillery forces in the attack. Beginning with Tet 1968, I was down at the Route 9 battlefield [the Route 9 battlefield was Khe Sanh-Northern Quang Tri province].

I: The Route 9 battlefield? Ah, I see. So you went down...

T: With the artillery.

I: ...with the artillery. Were you at Khe Sanh, or...

T: I was in the area of Khe Sanh – Route 9.

I: What regiment or brigade were you with?

T: The 82nd Regiment.

I: The 82nd?

T: Yes. That regiment had three types of artillery. First, we had rocket artillery - Katyusha rockets. We had one battalion of rockets.

I: 122mm rockets?

T: Yes. We also had a mortar battalion, with 120mm mortars. And we had a battalion of B-40s [sic], meaning artillery that is fired from launch positions on bare earth, rockets

with no launchers. The rockets were just placed on earthen launch sites and fired from there.

I: Those were 107mm rockets?

T: 120mm. They were 120mm.²⁵

I: 120mm, or were they...?

T: The regiment had those three types of artillery weapons.

I: Where was the unit stationed? In Quang Tri province?

T: What?

I: Where was your regiment located?

T: We were deployed all along Route 9, in a long line.

I: Ah. From where?

T: All along, down past Sa Muu, etc. Now, the rocket artillery fired from earthen firing positions had the advantage that we did not have to carry any launchers. The rockets were carried by the troops on their backs. They were placed down on an earthen launch site, the firing data was calculated, the range and everything, and then you just pressed the button and the rocket fired. So this kind of weapon allowed us to move our artillery deep into enemy territory – right up to the edge of an enemy base. I was there from the 1968 Lunar New Year season until 1974. Then I was wounded.

I: You were wounded?

²⁵ Colonel Trung is apparently referring to the A-12 rocket, not the B-40 rocket. The A-12 was a 140mm Soviet-made rocket that the North Vietnamese did fire in the manner described. Page 166 of “*Pháo Binh Nhân Dân Việt Nam, Tập II*” [Vietnamese People’s Army Artillery, Volume II], written by the Artillery Command and published by the People’s Army Publishing Company, Hanoi, 1986, states that the 84th Artillery Regiment, fighting in eastern Quang Tri just south of the DMZ in May 1968, used A-12 rockets along with other types of rockets (122mm and 107mm) in an attack on U.S. troops operating in the area.

T: I was wounded in 1974. I was evacuated to North Vietnam, and then sent to China for medical treatment.

I: How were you wounded?

T: I was wounded.

I: But where were you wounded? The leg? Or where?

T: Here, in the leg (leans over to roll up pant leg).

I: Ooh! Was that from enemy artillery or...?

T: Yes, from enemy artillery.

I: Puppet army artillery?

T (after nodding affirmatively): And the worst effects were from the pressure and weight, because the explosion collapsed my bunker, and I was buried underground for three hours before they finally dug me out. So one entire side of my body is still affected by the results of that injury.

I: So you fought in all of the offensives from 1968 to...

T: In 1968, 1970, 1972, 1972, and after 1973...

I: Did you participate in the battle of Southern Laos?

T: Yes, I participated in our defeat of Operation Lam Son 719.²⁶

I: What was your position then? What was your rank?

T: I was a regiment commander, a lieutenant colonel.

I: Lieutenant colonel?

T: The commander of an artillery regiment.

I: Of the 364th [sic]?²⁷

²⁶ Lam Son 719 was a U.S.-Vietnamese operation into Southern Laos in February-March 1971.

T: Yes.

I: So, the fighting was ferocious, especially in 1972, wasn't it?

T: No, it wasn't as bad as 1968.

I: Really?

T: When you compare it with 1968, the fighting wasn't as ferocious. 1972 was ferocious – I'm not talking about 1971. 1971 was Lam Son 719. It was not as ferocious, but 1972 was ferocious. 1972 was the attack in Quang Tri and Thua Thien. The fighting at the Quang Tri Citadel was extremely ferocious, but I was not there.

I: Oh? Where were you?

T: I was over right next to the border with Laos. I was right on the Lao border; I wasn't on the Quang Tri Front.

I: Oh?

T: I wasn't on the Quang Tri Front.

I: But didn't your regiment fight?

T: The regiment did not participate in the fighting in Quang Tri. We did not participate in Quang Tri. What was the Quang Tri attack? The initial plan was not to make a frontal attack like they ended up doing. It was not to make a frontal attack on Quang Tri. The initial plan was to make an enveloping attack around the flank into the enemy's rear, toward Hue, and not to make a frontal attack on Quang Tri. The fact that we ended up making a frontal attack on Quang Tri was a reaction, something we did to respond to the situation. What was the goal of the attack? For diplomatic and political reasons, we had to liberate Quang Tri. We had to liberate a province capital.

²⁷ The interviewer misremembered here – Colonel Trung was assigned to the 364th Artillery Brigade during an earlier period (1956-1964).

I: But the original plan for the entire country was that the largest attack would be made in Cochin China, right? Down in Phuoc Long, I mean An Loc, right?

T: Yes, at An Loc. But the central focus of the entire battlefield's efforts at that time was Tri-Thien, meaning Quang Tri and Thua Thien. And what was the primary objective? The Quang Tri Citadel. The struggle back and forth between the two sides was focused primarily on Quang Tri. But we were finally forced to withdraw from Quang Tri because the balance of forces was weighted against us. Artillery and air strikes, to the point that our troops just could not take it anymore, so we had to withdraw. We suffered many losses.

I: Heavy losses.

T: Losses. So as a result, we had to abandon Quang Tri.

I: During the entire time you were assigned to the battlefield, from 1968 to 1974, were you wounded any other time? Or...

T: I was wounded twice.

I: Two times?

T: Once I was wounded in this leg (pats right leg) and once when my bunker collapsed.

I: That was in 1974.

T: Do you know about our A-shaped bunkers?

I: Yes.

T: That was what I was in. The pressure of the bomb explosion caused the bunker to collapse, and the collapsed bunker crushed down on me for more than two hours before someone finally showed up to rescue me. So now, when the weather changes, my left leg aches.

I: The time in 1974 must have been at the battle of Thuong Duc, right? Or where did it occur?

T: No, it happened on the Lao border. This was not during the preparations for our 1975 offensive.

I: So it was during fighting on the Lao border?

T: Yes, on the Lao border, up toward Route 9. Route 9 and Laos.

I: Oh, OK. Because during that time things were relatively quiet there, and there wasn't much fighting along the front lines in Quang Tri. Most of the fighting was down in Quang Nam, where the battle of Thuong Duc was fought.

T: Yes, Thuong Duc.

I: It was west of Da Nang, and this was the biggest battle, and there was also fighting up near Hue, at Bach Ma Mountain, etc.

T: Yes. But at that time, the time when I was wounded, we were on Route 559 [The Ho Chi Minh Trail]. We were bombed while on Route 559, while my unit was moving. It happened while we were moving down Route 559. We were bombed, and that's when it happened.

I: During this entire period, did you ever return to Hanoi to visit your family?

T: One time.

I: Just one time during that entire six-year period?

T: Yes, just one time during the entire six years. That was in 1970, when my mother died. When my mother died I was allowed to go back to handle, ah, but by the time I arrived the office had already made all the funeral arrangements and buried her. At that time I had four children. One was in school, attending the High-Level Military Study

Institute [Học Viện Quân Sự Cao Cấp]. He had been serving with an anti-aircraft artillery unit, and then he was sent back to study. My second child was 15 years old at that time. My third child was 13, and my fourth child was ten years old. They were living with their grandmother, my mother, when she died. She was 82 years old when she died.

I: What about your wife? At that time...

T: My wife?

I: Yes.

T: At that time my wife was working at an emergency medical aid station in Military Region 4.

I: Down in Region 4?

T: yes, in Region 4.

I: So both parents...

T: Both parents were serving on the front lines. My mother stayed at home with the three children.

I: That was very rough on the children, right? One child was studying at the anti-aircraft school...

T: My oldest son? My oldest son was assigned to the 361st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade. He fought at the Long Bien Bridge,²⁸ right over here. After the fighting at the Long Bien Bridge, he was sent to study at the High-Level Military Study Institute, ah, I mean the Military Technical Studies Institute [Học Viện Quân Sự Kỹ Thuật]. And the other three children were still young.

²⁸ The Long Bien Bridge was called the Paul Doumer Bridge by the French and the Americans, and it was (and is) the main bridge leading into Hanoi City.

I: Did your oldest son participate in the fighting against the Americans?

T: My oldest son?

I: Yes.

T: Yes, he did. He fought against American aircraft at the Long Bien Bridge, when he was assigned to Anti-Aircraft Artillery Unit 361.

I: That was the division that was responsible for defending Hanoi.²⁹

T: Hanoi, right. The 361st belonged to Hanoi. He is my eldest son.

I: Was he ever wounded?

T: No, he was not wounded. After the fighting in 1972, he was sent off to school for training.

I: Fighting like he did during 1972 was dangerous, because the U.S. dropped a tremendous number of bombs, right?

T: There is no way to describe it. Never before had Hanoi been so heavily bombed. I was in the artillery until 1972, and then I was assigned to serve as an emissary [phái viên] of the Front Headquarters. I didn't know anything about the bombing of Hanoi at that time. I didn't know that Hanoi was being bombed.

I: You were an emissary of the Front? That was...

T: The Route 9 Front.

I: Ah, that is the B5 Front, right?

T: Yes, the B5 Front. Now, to return to the issue of our assessment of the war: The negotiations were going on, and we knew about them. We know that those negotiations were the longest, the most protracted negotiations in the entire history of the 20th Century. No other negotiations between two parties in a war lasted for over four years, as

²⁹ The 361st Air Defense Division, also called the Hanoi Air Defense Division.

these negotiations did. But we had experience from the Geneva Conference to draw on. At the Geneva Conference we were pressured by two different sources – we were pressured by the Soviet Union, and we were pressured by China. They forced us to agree to accept the 17th Parallel [as the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam], while our minimum goal was the 13th Parallel. Because in 1954 our liberated zones in Northern, Central, and Southern Vietnam were very large and vast. It was only because of the pressure that the Soviet Union and China put on us that we accepted the 17th Parallel. So we used that experience, those lessons, during the Paris Conference. We refused to accept any kind of unacceptable conditions. For example, the U.S. asked that we withdraw all North Vietnamese troops before they would sign the agreement. We refused, because, ah, they said that North Vietnam was invading South Vietnam, that it was committing aggression against the South. That is not true. For example, during America's war against England [the Revolutionary War], was there a distinction between the states that were participating in the armed rebellion and those that weren't? It was the same with the 17th Parallel. We were North Vietnamese, but we had a responsibility to assist our brothers and sisters in South Vietnam.

I: Your position was that Vietnam was one country, right?

T: Yes, Vietnam was one country. So that was unacceptable. Second, they asked us to leave Thieu in power. We said, "OK." Initially we asked them to abandon Thieu, to get rid of him. However, in the course of both sides making mutual concessions, we said, "OK, Thieu can stay." The U.S. withdrew, but just after the U.S. withdrew, or just before the U.S. withdrew, the U.S. carried out a plan to provide an enormous amount of aid to

Thieu [T turns to Ha Van An to ask a question] What was the name? “Enhance” something?

I: Enhance Plus [in English].

T: Enhance Plus.

I: Meaning to provide additional supplementary aid.

T: To reinforce [strengthen], and then reinforce [strengthen] some more. What was the outcome? During 1973 the material supplies that the U.S. provided to Thieu were so vast that one could not count them. Just in terms of his air force, Western observers concluded that Thieu’s air force was the fourth most powerful air force in the world. Thieu’s air force was only surpassed by the U.S., Russia, and China. Therefore the U.S. withdrew its troops, but it increased its material support to Thieu to enable Thieu to deal with us. Therefore, regarding that aid, there was still one issue: As the U.S. presented the issue to us, it was that the U.S. would withdraw troops and we would exchange your prisoners. We were prepared to do that. It was like this: the more prisoners we returned to you, the larger the amount of war reparations that you would give to us. But we didn’t care. [unclear French word]. How do you say that? [asking Ha Van An] “Fair play” [in English]. We gave you back all of your prisoners, but what did Kissinger promise to Le Duc Tho? He promised to pay a set amount of war reparations – several billion dollars. But then you didn’t do that, you dropped that - you erased that promise. You gave us nothing. But after that, what was our responsibility, our duty? Vietnam was not yet unified. Thieu still had a million troops. He still had all those forces and all that equipment. But what responsibility had Uncle Ho laid out for us to accomplish? To fight to force the U.S. to withdraw, for the Americans to “go home” [in English], and then it

was just between us Vietnamese. We had to get rid of the Saigon government. So it is very easy to understand why we continued to fight the war, and it is even easier to understand when you realize that Thieu was the first one to violate the agreement. Right after the agreement was signed he launched all these land-grabbing operations against us. The Vietnamese side [the communists] made a mistake. A number of our local areas concluded that once the agreement was signed, the war would be over. So our forces were taken by surprise in quite a few locations.

I: I have read a number of newspaper articles about General Le Duc Anh.³⁰ These articles discussed this mistake that was made ...

T: ...made after the agreement was signed.

I: ...that after the agreement was signed, the fighting would be over. But Le Duc Anh...

T: Our side issued orders forbidding our troops to fight, or to commit any provocative acts, etc. This mistake was made in Region 5, in Region 7, and in Region 8. But Region 9 did not make this mistake – only Region 9. So the aid continued to flow in, and the Saigon government continued its land-grabbing operations against us, so it was our duty to keep on fighting.

I: But at the time the Paris Agreement was signed, did North Vietnam think that after the agreement was signed it would in fact be implemented and that there would be no more fighting? Or what did they think?

T: We did not trust it [the agreement].

I: You didn't trust it.

³⁰ In 1973 General Le Duc Anh was the commander of Military Region 9, the communist military region covering the southern half of the Mekong Delta.

T: We did not trust it. Why? Because we knew exactly what kind of a man Thieu was. And alongside Thieu was a long line of his generals. Who were all these generals? They were men for whom the war was their livelihood. And then, the U.S. was still standing behind these two groups. Even though the U.S. was no longer directly intervening in the war with its aircraft and ground troops, it was still providing aid and support. Therefore we had to fight. So right after this, we began preparing a plan to liberate South Vietnam within two years.

I: You established a cell to draft the plan...

T: The central research cell.

I: Under [General] Le Trong Tan, right?

T (nodding): Under the Supreme Command Headquarters. It was called the Central Research Cell [Tổ nghiên cứu Trung Ương]. During the course of the preparation of this plan, what was one of the calculations that we had to make? It was whether or not the U.S. would intervene. Whether the U.S. would intervene, either with ground forces or with airpower. That was it. Now, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, after studying this question from all angles, concluded that the U.S. had withdrawn its troops, that the American political posture in the international community was under attack, and, of special note, there had been the Watergate scandal. So how did Pham Van Dong state the problem? He said that the U.S. would not dare to intervene. How did he put this? He said, "Even if you offered them candy, the Americans still could not come back in." So we knew this. And that is why we began to implement our plan. The plan was discussed and discussed again repeatedly, over and over again. The plan went through eight different drafts. The first place that we attacked was Phuoc Long. Phuoc Long was a

battle aimed at liberating a province capital, but from the political and the diplomatic standpoints, it was a battle intended to test the American attitude, the American response. Would you return? Would you re-intervene in Vietnam? The U.S. still had the 7th Fleet, and you still had all those troops in Thailand, and in Okinawa, and in Hawaii, and you had the 6th Fleet, ah, I mean the 7th Fleet. Therefore we wanted to feel out your response. Thieu screamed for help, but the U.S. did not respond. Even though Kissinger made a tremendous effort, you no longer had the necessary posture to do anything. The Watergate scandal had exploded, Nixon had resigned, and Gerald Ford had learned his lesson from all this. So after Phuoc Long came Ban Me Thuot. We had already decided that the U.S. would not intervene, but at Ban Me Thuot Thieu made a very big mistake. After we made our choice between the northern Highlands and the southern Highlands, ah, initially Thieu thought we would attack Kontum-Pleiku, meaning the northern Highlands, but instead we attacked Ban Me Thuot. This took Thieu by surprise, but that surprise led him to make a strategic error. That error was Thieu's decision to totally withdraw all his forces from the Central Highlands. And he decided that all of his forces in the Central Highlands would withdraw down Route 7. That was a road that had been abandoned and had not been used for a long, long time. Therefore when tens of thousands of vehicles and hundreds of thousands of civilians tried to move down it, they were finished. That killed their plan. So after we liberated Ban Me Thuot, there is one thing that you should remember. That is that right after that [the capture of Ban Me Thuot] four conferences were held, and these were the most important conferences held by the Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: Let's stop here, because my videotape is running out.

T: OK.

**Oral History Interview of Senior Colonel Tran Trong Trung [Trần Trọng Trung]
DVD 20
19 June 2007, Hanoi
[Second Day of Interview]**

T – Tran Trong Trung

I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow

T: Now why did we have to redo our plan over and over again, making eight different drafts? Although we had concluded that the U.S. would not intervene, we still had to figure out how to do it in a way that was suited to the conditions in each different battlefield [each different theater of operations]. And when we launched the military attacks, would the civilian population rise up or not? We had the lesson from our experience during Tet 1968. Some of us said that the population would rise up, but others said that the people were not capable of rising up, that it would be impossible for them to rise up. Therefore the name given to this general offensive was the General Offensive and Uprising [tổng tấn công và nổi dậy], but in reality there were only the military attacks, that's all.

I: But during that period, throughout 1974 and 1975, the situation in Saigon was very chaotic and there were all kinds of anti-Thieu movements and demonstrations. So there were not exactly uprisings, but their influence, their effect....

T: Yes, there was the third force movement, which was made up of university students, intellectuals, Buddhists, etc. However, there were no uprisings along the lines that would be involved in a general insurrection. So our first blow was struck against Ban Me Thuot. After that, but before the enemy withdrew from the Central Highlands, on 13 March 1975 the Politburo met.

I: 13 April, excuse me, I mean 13 March, that's right.

T: The Politburo met on 13 March 1975. Based on our success at Ban Me Thuot, the Politburo concluded that it might be possible for us to complete our plan to liberate South Vietnam earlier than anticipated – the plan had been for it to take two years. At that time all that was said was, “earlier than anticipated,” but how much earlier, no one knew. But after the first battle, this prediction was made. Then, on 18 March, after the enemy withdrew from the Central Highlands, a second meeting was held. This meeting concluded that we might be able to liberate South Vietnam during 1975, meaning one year earlier than originally planned. The third meeting was held on 25 March. By this time we had liberated Hue City and were advancing on Da Nang. During this meeting, the Politburo and the Central Military Party Committee concluded that we might be able to liberate South Vietnam before the rainy season. So first we concluded that South Vietnam could be liberated earlier than planned, and then that it could be liberated during 1975, and then that it could be liberated before the rainy season. Then came the final meeting, which was held after Da Nang was liberated. The last meeting was held on 31 March 1975. That meeting concluded that we were capable of liberating Saigon during the month of April, comma, and that we must not allow any delay later than that. Therefore, the course of the development of our strategic offensive was a process of moving forward based on the realities on the battlefield. The enemy was defeated in the Central Highlands, the enemy was defeated at Hue, the enemy abandoned Quang Tri, and then the enemy was defeated at Da Nang. In the end, what did we conclude? That we must liberate South Vietnam during the month of April, and that no delay could be permitted. So that was where the slogans put forward by our leadership came from: “Time is forces” [thời gian là lực lượng], “Lightning speed” [thần tốc], etc. So we

scraped together everything we had, all of our forces in North Vietnam, and we sent everything south. Headquarters staff emissaries were placed all along Route 9 to supervise and push our forces forward – they were on the western portion of Route 9, on the road on the western side of the Annamite Mountains [the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos], on the road on the eastern side of the Annamite Mountains [the new route inside South Vietnam generally following Route 14 along the western side of South Vietnam], and on our maritime routes, the route by sea. Their job was to push south all of the forces that we possibly could, everything except for one single division. In all of North Vietnam the only force left was one division in Ninh Binh, left there to guard against the possibility that the U.S. might still intervene and attack North Vietnam.

I: To reach such a decision, the Politburo and the General Staff must have concluded that American intervention was impossible, right? Only if you reached that conclusion could you have made such a decision.

T: That conclusion was reached in January 1975, after we attacked Phuoc Long. Pham Van Dong's famous sentence, "The Americans won't come back, not even if we offered them candy," was spoken in January 1975. That assessment was confirmed at Phuoc Long, and it was reconfirmed at Ban Me Thuot, and when after the loss of Ban Me Thuot and the entire Central Highlands the U.S. still had not intervened, that meant that the U.S. was not going to intervene. At that time the U.S. domestic situation was in turmoil, and there was a battle with the Congress, and the Congress tied the hands of the Administration, preventing the Administration from intervening. They decide to ask for 700 million dollars in aid, and then 300 million, but the Congress would not give it to them. There was even a case that was like this: Thieu had 16 tons of gold in his treasury

reserves, and he asked the U.S. or some other country to certify these gold holdings so that he could use them to buy weapons to save himself from disaster, but the U.S. refused. In the end, when Thieu stepped down and left, the 16 tons of gold was left behind, still sitting there. With regard to the Thieu government, I also need to add the following: Why did Thieu resign? Thieu wanted to stay in office forever, but we know about the conflict between Nguyen Van Thieu and Kissinger over the signing of the Paris Agreement. Thieu knew that the signing of the agreement meant that the U.S. was abandoning him. After the loss of the Central Highlands, after the loss of Da Nang, and when we began to advance and attack Xuan Loc, Thieu still wanted to stay in office, but there was pressure on him to step down. Where did this pressure come from? There was pressure from the French, pressure from the third force, and pressure from Ambassador Martin.³¹ They hoped that if Thieu stepped down, Duong Van Minh and the third force could redeem the situation. This means that they hoped for the formation of a coalition front.

I: The formation of a neutral coalition government.

T: Yes, neutral – a government that included elements of the old Thieu regime, the neutralists, and the Viet Cong. That was the kind of coalition they wanted. Why did their effort fail? It was because Thieu stepped down too late, not until the 21st of April. He turned power over to Duong Van Minh, and Duong Van Minh wanted to keep, ah, I'm sorry, I meant Tran Van Huong. Tran Van Huong wanted to keep the Presidency and did not want to turn the office over to Duong Van Minh. He did not turn over the Presidency to Duong Van Minh until the 28th, and by then it was too late, because the battle of Xuan Loc was over by that time, and our Eastern Troop Column had already

³¹ U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam (1973-1975) Graham Martin.

opened fire and had begun to close in on Saigon. All of our other attack sectors and spearheads had also closed in on Saigon. At that time the French were the ones who were working the most actively to seek a solution. French Ambassador Merillon and French General Vanuxem, who was in Saigon at that time, kept running back and forth trying to make the arrangements to put Duong Van Minh into power in the hopes of being able to form a neutral coalition government. But by then it was too late.

I: If a coalition government under Duong Van Minh had been formed earlier, in mid-April, for example, would that have had any effect? Or would the final outcome have been the same?

T: That is a hypothetical question about something that in fact never happened. All we can do is to sit here and make guesses about the answer. If the third force had been strong, and if a coalition government had been formed, that was something that we desired very much, because we knew that it would cost a tremendous amount of money and resources to launch an offensive like we did in the spring of 1975, and it would cost a great many lives on both sides. So this [the formation of a coalition government] is something that should have been done at the beginning of the year, in early 1975.

I: So by April it was already too late?

T: Too late! And even when we had already reached Saigon and entered Independence Palace, Duong Van Minh still raised the issue of turning over the reins of power to us, but there was nothing left for him to turn over by that point. So there was a delay. On 21 April Duong Van Minh [sic – T meant “Nguyen Van Thieu”] stepped down. In accordance with the constitution, he turned the Presidency over to Tran Van Huong. Tran Van Huong took over and what did he do? He appealed to his forces to “defend to the

death"! Did you know that? This was during the last minutes of the regime. So we had to attack. So then as a result of pressure from all sides, and especially pressure from Ambassador Martin and the third force, he was forced to turn the Presidency over to Duong Van Minh. But by that time we were already on the outskirts of Saigon, so what was left to negotiate? What was the point of forming a new government? So there was some kind of stubbornness, of obstinacy on the part of those who had already been defeated but who were still trying to hold onto power. But by that time we were on the outskirts of Saigon. What was left to negotiate? What was the point of forming a new government? So there was some kind of stubbornness on the part of those who had already been defeated but were still trying to hold onto power. The prime example was Thieu, and after Thieu it was Tran Van Huong. If on 21 April, when Thieu stepped down, Duong Van Minh had taken over and declared a cessation of hostilities, a ceasefire, then things would have been different. Our delegation was sitting there at Tan Son Nhat. Why wasn't something done? But they were too late. And what did Tran Van Huong arrogantly order his troops to do? To "defend to the death," to fight to the last man. So we couldn't stop. And momentum was on our side, because we were advancing like a gathering storm, so why should we stop, especially when we were confronted by an enemy who proclaims that he is prepared to fight to the last man? We couldn't stop. So, do you understand the idea I am getting at?

I: I understand, and I believe that probably by the beginning of April, after Hue and Da Nang had been lost, that it was already too late then.

T: It was already too late!

I: Am I correct?

T: Yes, you are correct.

I: So if a government had been established at that time under Duong Van Minh, all it could have done was to turn over power to your side, and that's all.

T: That's all it could have done. But we must correctly assess what Duong Van Minh's role was. Duong Van Minh was a person who had a neutralist spirit, a spirit of neutrality. We must acknowledge that. In the past he had opposed Diem, and as for his relationship with Thieu, there was a period when he was out of favor and was sent into exile abroad to serve as a roving ambassador.

I: In Bangkok.

T: Yes, and he wanted to establish contact with the resistance in order to form a coalition government.

I: I understand that he had a brother who was a soldier in your army. The brother's name was Duong Van Nhat [Đương Văn Nhất] or something like that, as best I can remember...

T: That's true, that's true. Generally speaking, every family in South Vietnam had some family members on one side and some family members on the other. That was true of every family.

I: It was true of my wife's family as well.

T: You see? Every family was in that situation. So if this had happened earlier, the situation might have developed differently. But when Thieu finally stepped down, it was already late, and then when Tran Van Huong took over and appealed to his army to fight to the end, we simply could not halt our advance. Duong Van Minh took over much too late. Thieu's departure was already too late, and Tran Van Huong's proclamation that he

would fight to the end demonstrated his obstinate, stubborn attitude, so we could not achieve a solution in that situation.

I: There is one issue about which I wanted to ask you, Colonel, because you worked with Vo Nguyen Giap a great deal, and you wrote a book with Vo Nguyen Giap. During the period 1971, 1972, 1973, etc., the Americans believed that Vo Nguyen Giap was sick and that he had been forced to give up his position, or at least his power, to Van Tien Dung. You probably are aware that there are a number of books that have been written in the U.S., such as the book by Frank Snepp, and books by other authors, that say that Giap did not participate in commanding the final offensive in 1975. I have read a great many Vietnamese history books, and all of these books say that Vo Nguyen Giap did take part in commanding the offensive and that he was still the Supreme Commander of the North Vietnamese Army. I would like to ask you if you would explain Vo Nguyen Giap's role during the period 1972 to 1975. Was he still...?

T: We should not just talk about the period 1973 to 1975. We must begin talking about this from 1968. We must talk about 1968. In 1968, what was Vo Nguyen Giap's concept? It was that the attack launched during the 1968 new year, the Tet Offensive, was a strategic raid, and that it was not a general offensive-general insurrection. Vo Nguyen Giap understood the law of war that states that in war the military blow must come first and that a general insurrection was not possible. That is one thing. That is why, when the offensive started, Vo Nguyen Giap was not at home. At the time of the first wave of the Tet Offensive [31 January 1968], Vo Nguyen Giap was not at home. But after that he returned home to Vietnam....

I: When you say that he was not at home, do you mean that he had gone abroad to rest and regain his strength, or for medical treatment?

T: He went abroad for medical treatment. He went for medical treatment in Hungary.

I: In Hungary?

T: Yes, in Hungary. So in April, after he returned, he concluded that this was a strategic raid, and he issued the necessary directives to limit our losses. Therefore, when talking about just the 1968 Tet offensive, Vo Nguyen Giap's concept was that this was a strategic raid and that it was not a general offensive-general insurrection.

I: What disease did Vo Nguyen Giap have that required him to go to Hungary for treatment?

T: He had kidney stones.

I: Kidney stones?

T: Yes.

I: Oh, that is very painful.

T: Now, in 1972, when talking about the Tri-Thien attack, what was Vo Nguyen Giap's concept for the Tri Thien attack? It was that we should make an enveloping attack around the enemy's flank into his rear. He thought that we must build roads to enable us to mount simultaneous attacks in three different locations: Cochin China, the Central Highlands, and Tri Thien. But the roads were not built in time. After he left home [went abroad], the idea changed, and it was no longer an enveloping attack on the enemy's rear in Tri Thien. Instead it became a front attack directed against the Quang Tri province capital.

I: Do you mean that Giap was away from home again?

T: That's right. He was not at home [not in Vietnam].

I: Did he go abroad for medical treatment again?

T: Yes, he went for medical treatment. Now, regarding the 1975 spring offensive, things were different. From the end of 1974 until Saigon was finally liberated, the Supreme Commander [Giap] was at home that entire time, and he personally directed the offensive. I guarantee to you that this is the truth. Vo Nguyen Giap was present during the eight discussions of the eight successive drafts of the plan for the 1975 general offensive, during the eight discussions held in our highest leadership headquarters, and from the time that the attack on Phuoc Long began, through the choice of Ban Me Thuot as our first target, and through the actual attack on Ban Me Thuot, and during the four important meetings held during March 1975 that I told you about earlier, Vo Nguyen Giap was present in each of these discussions, and he was the one who first proposed that we should liberate South Vietnam earlier than planned, and then he was the one who proposed that we should liberate the South during 1975, and he was the one who proposed that we should liberate the South by the end of April 1975, and the important slogans of that offensive – “Greater Speed” [thần tốc hơn nữa], “Charge Forward” [xúc tiến], and “Certain Victory” [chắc thắng], were all slogans that were proposed by Vo Nguyen Giap. And after Hue was liberated, he took his bed into the Supreme Headquarters and he lived there constantly, eating and sleeping there, and commanded the offensive from there right up through the day we finally liberated Saigon.

I: So it is unfortunate that Giap was not at home back when ...

T: in 1968.

I: In 1968 and in 1972.

T: Yes, and in 1972.

I: In 1972 was he also receiving medical treatment in...

T [interrupting]: He went abroad for medical treatment because he was in poor health, and he wanted to prepare himself for the long term, for the future, so he was not at home at that time. But when he came back home and saw what the situation was in Quang Tri, he gave the order, "Stop. Don't attack any more."

I: When in 1972 did he return? Was it in the summer?

T: After the Quang Tri campaign had begun – the fighting at the ancient citadel in Quang Tri.

I: The battle for the Citadel was in August and September.

T: That's it. That's right – August-September. But as for the spring 1975 offensive, during the entire time in 1975, when we struck the decisive blow and carried out our two-year plan, Vo Nguyen Giap was at home during that entire period, and he was in charge from the beginning – from Phuoc Long through the time we finalized the plan, through the attack on Ban Me Thuot. From the attack on Phuoc Long, then on Ban Me Thuot, and through the attacks against Hue and Da Nang, and right through the attack against Xuan Loc and finally our entry into Saigon, Vo Nguyen Giap was present for that entire time.

I: I have read Hoang Van Thai's book, the book you helped Thai write, the book titled, "*Những Năm Thắng Quyết Định*" [The Decisive Years]. That book describes how Hoang Van Thai helped to draft the plan for 1975, and it describes how Hoang Van Thai went down to brief Le Duan at...

T: Do Son.

I: ...at Do Son. But Giap did not go with him. Why....

T: He sent the two deputy chiefs of the General Staff to give the briefing. He sent Hoang Van Thai and Le Trong Tan. But before they left, Vo Nguyen Giap gave them detailed instructions. He told them what they were to brief Le Duan on, he told them to receive Le Duan's ideas and instructions, and then to return and use them to continue to work on the plan. This means that, based on the ideas of the central leadership agency, which was five people – the five people who were like a current affairs committee responsible for this subject: Le Duan, Vo Nguyen Giap, Pham Van Dong, Pham Hung, and Le Duc Tho. Those five people were the [unclear French word], the nucleus that directed the activities of our entire national apparatus. At the next, broader level, it was the Politburo and the Central Military Party Committee, and the next level was the Party Central Committee.

I: But the nucleus was those five men?

T: Yes, those five men. These five men were responsible for discussing and making decisions about the most basic, the most fundamental issues. They developed the plan and then brought it forward for discussion by the collective leadership. So it was [Le] Duan, [Vo Nguyen] Giap, [Van Tien] Dung [sic], [Pham] Hung, and [Le Duc] Tho.

I: But Pham Hung was down in South Vietnam, so they must have had to discuss things with him by...

T: Pham Hung was up here in the North. After Nguyen Chi Thanh [sic] left, Pham Hung came up here. But when the Ho Chi Minh Campaign began, Pham Hung went back down south.

I: Now, you were wounded in 1974 and you had to be sent back for medical treatment.

During the time the 1975 offensive was going on, where were you?

T: I was in China.

I: In China?

T: I was in China receiving medical treatment, because my leg had not been treated promptly, so it became infected. So they sent me over there for treatment. And in particular, on this entire side of my body I could not feel anything, so over there they cured me by using Oriental medicine, Chinese herbs and medicines.

I: Oriental medicine is very good for treating the types of illnesses and injuries involving...

T: Internal medicine.

I: ...like the spinal column, etc. So during this period were you able to follow the news about what was happening in South Vietnam?

T: Yes, I was. I followed the news by listening to the radio. We were sent over there for medical treatment – we being me and a number of other wounded cadres – and this was one of the types of assistance that the Chinese people provided to us. We could be treated in our own rear area, but by going over there our minds could be more at ease and we could enjoy better living conditions and receive better treatment.

I: Did any member of your family take part in the 1975 offensive? Your son, or...

T: It was like this: after my mother died in 1970, my wife, who had been working at an emergency medical station on the front lines, got transferred back up here, and she worked at Hospital 354, right over here. So in 1975 my wife was living here with my children, but I was away from home, out of the country.

I: What about your son who was in the army?

T: My son was still studying at the Technical Studies Institute [Học Viện Kỹ Thuật].

I: Oh, at the Technical Studies Institute.

T: Yes. But in the end, later on all four of my children joined the army.

I (laughs): So you have a family tradition of becoming soldiers.

T: My second son fought in South Vietnam. After his grandmother died, he joined the army, and he was sent down to fight in South Vietnam, and he went through Cambodia, and then to Tay Ninh, and he fought along the border, and then after Saigon was liberated his mother went down there and brought him back home with her.

I: After your medical treatment in China was completed, then in 1975 or 1976 did you return home?

T: I returned home in 1976.

I: And then you returned to work in...

T: I returned to work in the Supreme Command Headquarters.

I: You went to work at the Supreme Command, working on reviewing the war?

T: Yes, I worked on reviewing the resistance war against the Americans. So I did not participate in the war on our Southwestern Border [the war against Cambodia] or in the war in the North [the border war against China].

I: After participating in two long, protracted resistance wars already, and with the wounds you had received, naturally you had already contributed enough.

T (laughing): You can say it was enough, but I don't know how much is enough (both laugh). I do not know how much is enough.

I: Since you participated in the review of the war against the Americans, I would like to ask you what were the major lessons that you drew out of this after all those years you spend conducting this review. Could you tell me?

T: The first one has to do with our opponent. I drew the conclusion that, just as [Robert] McNamara wrote in his memoirs, in choosing Vietnam the U.S. picked the wrong opponent, and it picked the wrong objective. This is because, and this is very delicate when talking about my country, but we are partners in a scientific endeavor so even though it is delicate, I will still talk to you about it. This country has a tradition that is the reason it has been able to survive, in spite of being located right next to a gigantic neighbor – China. In spite of repeated invasions over the years, our country has still managed to survive. This country has a culture and a tradition of opposing outside aggression. In the past we developed a saying: “When the enemy reaches one’s home, even the women must fight.” Do you know that saying?

I: Yes, I have heard it.

T: During the war against the Americans, Hero Ut Thi, Nguyen Thi Ut [Út Thị, Nguyễn Thị Út], said, “As long as I have a pair of trousers I will fight.” She was a woman raising five children, but she left her children at home to go out and fight the enemy. That woman spoke those historic words, “As long as I have a pair of pants I will fight.” Therefore the Americans chose the wrong objective. That is one lesson. Second, the U.S. did not remain faithful to the ideals that they expressed when they formed the United Nations, which were the right of self-determination of all nations. First Truman, and then Eisenhower, clung to the containment doctrine to block the spread of communism. They used it as their excuse to intervene in Vietnam. If Truman, or Eisenhower, or even Johnson had been willing to listen to Uncle Ho’s proposals, we would have had excellent relations between our two countries. Because in 1945 Uncle Ho very much wanted American assistance to block the grasping hands of the French.

And that is why people called Ho Chi Minh “the Asian Tito.” He really wanted American assistance. If we go back and read the letters that Ho Chi Minh wrote to the U.S. State Department when Truman was President, we will see that, although he was a communist, first and foremost he was a nationalist. So he was very sincere in his requests. When we were still at Tan Trao [summer of 1945], he sent a proposal to the U.S., but the U.S. did not reply. If his proposal had been implemented, his proposal to give Vietnam its independence in not less than five years and not more than ten years, things would have turned out so much better.

I: In 1964 or 1965, did the U.S. have an opportunity, or...?

T: What?

I: In 1964 and 1965, before the U.S. sent in troops, sent in ground troops...

T: 1964. 1964 or 65.

I: At that time did the U.S. miss an opportunity, or was it too late by then?

T: There was still a great opportunity. If the U.S. had stopped, there was still an opportunity. Because if we re-read the appeal issued by Uncle Ho on the tenth anniversary of the Geneva Agreement, which means he issued it in 1964, ah, by that time still no general elections had been held, and [President John] Kennedy was dead, and [President Lyndon] Johnson had increased the number of troops, but on the tenth anniversary of the Geneva Agreement Uncle Ho still appealed for the Vietnam problem to be resolved through peaceful means. Through peaceful means! And at that time Uncle Ho was still hopeful and was waiting for an indication of good faith. It was only on 8 March 1965, when the first units of a U.S. infantry brigade began landing in Da Nang that Uncle Ho finally concluded that we had to order a general mobilization of our entire

nation. Now, objectively speaking, Uncle Ho was a communist. That is true. That is true. But Uncle Ho was, above all else, a patriot. In June 1946, while he was in Paris, Uncle Ho told the French representative, “We are an agricultural nation. We are very weak in weapons. France has tanks, aircraft, and artillery, and we have nothing. But the thing that we do have is a spirit of nationalism. And if France starts a war, this will be a test of strength between an elephant and a tiger. An elephant is big and heavy, but a tiger is quick and has sharp claws. The tiger will not come out in the daytime. He will hide in the bushes, and then at night he will jump out onto the elephant’s back to claw him. And he will keep doing this, day after day after day. What will be the end result? The elephant will bleed and become exhausted.” That is the picture that Uncle Ho drew of what a war between Vietnam and France would be like. Or, Uncle Ho said that there is the story of Troy. Do you know the story of the Trojan horse? The history of the story of Troy? Anyhow, you guys had cannons and you had tanks, but we had jungles, caves, and swamps. You were down in Cochin China – you know about swamps! The U Minh Forest, for example. We had all those things, plus we had our nationalist spirit. So what can we conclude from this? The first lesson we can draw from this is to dare to fight. And if you dare to fight, you will learn to fight. Do you understand?

I: Yes.

T: So once we dare to fight, once we are not afraid to fight, from that point on we can find ways and learn how to fight.

I: That was the lesson of Nguyen Chi Thanh.³²

T: That’s right! What was the lesson of Nguyen Chi Thanh? Just go ahead and fight, and as you fight you will learn how to fight. The initial battle was not just the battle of Nui

³² Commander of communist forces in South Vietnam 1964-1967.

Thanh³³; the first battle was the battle of Ia Drang.³⁴ That was Chu Huy Man's³⁵ battle. What lesson did we learn from this battle? That U.S. forces were strong and well-equipped, but we still could fight them. The question was how to fight them. So it was something that required both spirit and brains. Then from the realities of combat we could reach some conclusions. From our concrete experiences, we figured out how to fight your M-113 armored personnel carriers, how to fight helicopters, how to defeat your helicopter assault tactics and your armored vehicle assault tactics. And then when your infantry units, arrived, we figured out how to fight them as well, based on our actual experiences. And the thing that Vo Nguyen Giap really liked was sappers. They were a very elite organization, they were very lightly armed, they had only small numbers, but they infiltrated deep behind enemy lines and struck telling blows. So you see, the attacks on the Caravelle Hotel, and on the Brinks Hotel, and all the other places, what was this kind of thing? This was something that was one of our traditions going back to the time of the Tran dynasty. We had stakes, which we swam down and planted underwater to sabotage the boats of the Chinese Nguyen dynasty army.³⁶ So what was the first big lesson we learned? It was to accurately assess your enemy, to dare to fight him, and to know how to fight him. The second big lesson, and this is something that came up when McNamara met Vo Nguyen Giap. McNamara asked Giap, "During the war against the Americans, who was the best general?" Vo Nguyen Giap replied, "The people were the best general. Without the people we could not have accomplished anything. Without the

³³ The communist attack on Nui Thanh, a hill not far from Da Nang, on 28 May 1965 was considered by the communists to be the first successful attack against a U.S. combat unit after U.S. ground forces began landing in Vietnam in March 1965.

³⁴ 14-17 November 1965 in western Pleiku province.

³⁵ Chu Huy Man was the communist commander in the Central Highlands in November 1965.

³⁶ This is a reference to Emperor Tran Hung Dao's victory over a Chinese fleet at the battle of Bach Dang in 1288.

people, no matter how talented we were, we could not have accomplished anything.” But the people of Vietnam were very special. There was a phrase that became a catch-phrase: “We will not rue the loss of our homes if that is what is needed for the trucks to get through” [xe chưa qua, nhà không tiếc]. This meant that for trucks to cross a bog, a muddy place, sometimes we needed to place a door down over the muddy spot to allow the trucks to make it through, and the people were willing to tear down their own homes to put down boards and materials on road to enable our trucks to get through. That is the character of the Vietnamese people. Can you imagine a Vietnamese mother whose sons, daughters, sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law, a total of nine children, were all killed? That is a tremendous thing, something beyond anything we could imagine. The endurance of a mother who lost nine children in the fighting – that is something that is beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. Therefore what was the second factor? That we must rely on the people. And that lesson, the need to rely on the people, must also be applied to our lives today, right now. Anything that goes against the people’s will, the people will oppose. The third point is our leadership. Now, people can talk about communism all they want, but what was the first thing in the minds of our highest leaders, our highest headquarters? It was to mobilize the people to liberate our country. This was because, after living for 80 years under the yoke of French colonialism, we knew what it meant to be a people who had lost their country. Take my own case, as an example. My schooling ended at the elementary school level. If it had not been for the revolution, there is no way I would have ever gotten a high school education, or been able to attend the military university. And if Vietnam had remained a colony, the most I could have received was a little schooling beyond the elementary level so that I could become a

junior official in the puppet government. So we understand this very well. I lived under French rule, I lived under Japanese rule, I lived under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and I lived under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, so people like me know how to choose between the good and the bad. But there is one point I want to make: the commanders of the French Army, I'm sorry, I mean the commanders of the American army, were slow to understand this problem. Very few of them understood this as early as did [Robert] McNamara. After the Tet Offensive, McNamara concluded that the U.S. could not win the war, and that is why he decided to leave the Pentagon. But the others did not learn this lesson. One of the prime examples of this was Henry Kissinger, a very slippery, devious, crafty individual. He was not good. He was supposed to initial the agreement, but then he refused. He refused to initial it and went back to their old games, launching strategic bombing attacks against our capital city using B-52 bombers. Those kinds of games are not good; they're not smart. There are people that I can respect, even though they are on the opposing side. Roosevelt is one example. We have a great deal of respect for Roosevelt, because Roosevelt opposed the old colonial regime and he was prepared to recognize Indochina. We agreed with that very much, and that was also in line with the principles of the United Nations. But from Truman on, they were bad. Truman was [unclear French word]. He was the number one anti-communist warrior, he was the person who came up with the domino theory, and he was the one who gave the nod that allowed Charles De Gaulle to send French troops back in on 22 August [1945], etc. I cannot accept people like that.

I: What about Kennedy?

T: Who?

I: President Kennedy.

T: Kennedy did have a good side. Kennedy did not favor sending in additional American troops, and Kennedy discussed an early withdrawal, but Kennedy was under the control of others. Kennedy's death is something for which I still do not have an answer. Who shot Kennedy? And why did Johnson take the oath of office as soon as Kennedy was dead and then immediately make the decision to send additional troops over here [to Vietnam]? Those things are suspicious.

I: Vietnam has one thing that Americans greatly respect. That is, out of all the communist countries, all the countries in the socialist bloc, the Vietnamese leadership maintained great solidarity and unity for the longest time, and maintained the greatest solidarity, when compared with the other countries, like Russia, China, or Poland, for example. In those other countries one leader would overthrow another, etc., but during your entire wartime period, including the war against the French, the war against the Americans, and after that the Southwest Border War [the war against Cambodia], the Vietnamese leadership was able to maintain solidarity. Even though sometimes they disagreed with one another, they still were able to work together, they still ...

T [interrupting]: That's good! That's very good!

I: So could you explain to me how Vietnam managed to accomplish this, because this is something that is very rare in all history. A great many Americans, Americans who know and understand Vietnam very well, do not understand how the Vietnamese leadership, the Vietnamese Communist Party, was able to do this.

T: That is a very good and a very accurate question. I will not deny that during the course of their leadership of the war – now I am not talking about the war against France,

because during the war against France everyone was in total and complete agreement with one another; I am talking here about the war against the Americans – During the war against the Americans there in fact was conflict in the leadership over theory. That existed. That is why one person said “general offensive-general insurrection” but another said this was just a “strategic raid.” That is why one said that there would be a general insurrection, while another said that the military blow must be struck first. There was conflict over that. However, in Vietnam we had several factors that prevented this conflict from turning into a problem. The first was our understanding of the need to respect the opinions and the will of the collective. If there was one person, or maybe two or three people, on one side, but the majority took a different view, then those people had to go along with the majority. That had become our political practice, our political way of life. That was one thing – that the minority had to go along with the will of the majority. Second, we have a national tradition of maintaining solidarity. Perhaps there is a problem between you and me, but when we are confronting an enemy, if we fight one another, that only benefits our enemy. Therefore we wait. Perhaps today we do not understand one another, but tomorrow we will understand each other. The first wave [of the Tet Offensive] – you say “attack.” I do not approve. You go ahead with the second wave; I still do not approve, but I still carry out your order. And in the end, what conclusion can we draw from this? That this was in our national interest; that it was for the good of our country. A third point is that we had something that no other country possessed: We had Uncle Ho.

I: The example set by Uncle Ho.

T: Our nation had the good fortune, the joy, of having a leader like Uncle Ho. The reason that these conflicts did not explode was that Uncle Ho had a phrase, a statement of counsel and advice, that was taught to every one of our cadres: “đĩ công vi thượng.” Those are Han [Chinese] words. It means to put our work above everything else; to put our work above everything else. The work of the people, the work of the nation, must be placed above everything else.

I: What are those words?

T: “đĩ công” – “đĩ” means to take; “công” means work, task; “vi” means to do, to be; “thượng” means above everything, the top. This means that we must take our work for the common good and place it above everything else. This phrase was inculcated into our people, so it was possible for there to be some conflict about this or that, etc. That was the third factor. And the fourth factor was the role of Vo Nguyen Giap. He was the one who completely understood our policies and understood our military art [strategy and tactics] from the beginning right through to the end. Vo Nguyen Giap fully understood, absorbed, and digested our policies. Perhaps on one occasion he did not agree with Mr. A, or on another he disagreed with Mr. B, but from the moment he accepted the responsibility of commanding our troops, he carried out the four words that Uncle Ho had taught him: “đĩ công vi thượng.” Therefore in one situation or another there may have been some conflicts, but in the interests of the people, for the good of the Fatherland, he was prepared to set his own individual interests aside and obey the decision. Afterwards, however, he would sit down and draw conclusions to determine to what extent his idea had been correct and to what extent the other person’s idea had been correct. In other countries, they would just have butchered one another, like it was a game. You see?

I: It even happens in the U.S.

T: Yes! Even in America. And also in Russia. That's what Stalin did, as you should know if you have read Khrushchev's report. It was also the same in China. But in Vietnam, not only did we have our national tradition, we also had the fourth factor that I mentioned – the leadership, Uncle Ho. And we had to have people like Vo Nguyen Giap who fully understood and who were thoroughly inculcated with the spirit of the words “đi công vi thượng” [put our work above everything else], because he was in charge of the army. Even though he was in charge of the army, he was sometimes in the minority, and he had to obey the majority. But after everything was over, when we looked back to review and come to conclusions, then we saw that he was right. For example, he was right about Quang Tri. He was right about Tet 1968. But he first had to obey the will of the majority, and only after it was over could he go back and make an assessment. He was not going to cause a break-up, to cause our solidarity to break apart, because a break-up would ruin everything for us. Because what was staring us in the face at that time? A million U.S. troops, so if we had become mired in internal conflict, that would only benefit the enemy. So your question was very good, and your question reveals that you have a rather firm grasp of this issue, but at the same time I have told you from my heart that this was the situation, and this was the explanation of the situation.

I: Throughout the war, we in the U.S. always imagined that there were conflicts and disputes within the Politburo and the Central Committee, and that we could exploit these disputes to do one thing or another.

T: Right. Right.

I: But in the end, no splits surfaced, and we were very surprised by that.

T: You are correct. That is what people on the outside wanted. The various different outside forces wanted that so they could obtain one thing or another, but under those wartime conditions, and with people whom Uncle Ho himself had instructed and taught, it would have been very difficult to have had any splits, any divisions, among us. And if there had been splits, they would have been harmful to our people and to our nation.

I: Well, I think that this is probably sufficient for me. I would like to thank you for granting me so much of your valuable time and for giving me such interesting answers. I think that this interview will be very valuable to American historians and students and that it will help them better understand the Vietnam War and the reasons that, in the end, Vietnam won this conflict. Because the U.S. must learn some lessons from the Vietnam War, lessons for the future.

T: Just recently an article by Kissinger was published on the internet, an article about the experiences and lessons of Vietnam and his thoughts about the lessons of Vietnam as they apply to the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq. This was just published – on the 14th of June. It appeared on the internet on the 14th. Now, before concluding and saying our goodbyes, I would like to say something to you. It is a famous statement by Vo Nguyen Giap: “The Vietnamese people are prepared to put the bitterness of the past behind it, but the Vietnamese people will not forget the past.” That means that, while we will not forget the past, the Vietnamese people are prepared to put it behind us, to put the bitterness of the past behind us. After he met with McNamara, when he met with an admiral, I can’t remember his name now, the admiral³⁷ asked General Giap, “What are your thoughts about the war?” Vo Nguyen Giap replied, “Yesterday you came here carrying a Thompson sub-machinegun, and I treated you one way. Today you come here carrying a

³⁷ Interviewer’s Comment: The admiral in question was probably Admiral Elmo Zumwalt.

tourist visa, so I will treat you differently now.” That is a very good statement. That is a very good statement. It incorporates a spirit of defending our Fatherland, but it also includes a spirit of friendship between nations. It is very good. So we will not forget the past, but we are prepared to put the bitterness of the past behind us. I want you to remember one thing: The bitterness in Vietnam today is the result of the seeds that were sown by John Foster Dulles, and the person who reaped the fruits of that bitterness was Henry Kissinger (I laughs). That’s it.

I: I would like to thank you very much, Colonel. [Videotape ends]