

## Vietnamese Conscript

# 'It was like the sky collapsing...'

(continued from page 2)

the bunker you built for us before you left, underneath the wooden bed. We had heard bombs and shells before, but this time it was like the whole sky collapsing, smashing everything. The earth was trembling like an earthquake.

"Many times your sisters and I were working in the rice field when American tanks or choppers came upon us, firing. We stayed where we were, for we knew it to be the safest way. Had we run for shelter, they'd think we were VC and shoot us at once. I didn't tremble then, but this time I was shaking. I had the feeling it was the end of the village. In the midst of all that pounding, we barely heard a loudspeaker saying something about getting out of our bunkers and gathering in the market place. But how could we? What to do? What to do?"



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Your sisters kept asking me. Maybe the VC were hiding somewhere and shooting at the choppers, I said.

"But how could we know? And even if we knew, what could we possibly do about it? Report it? The village authorities never slept in the village and the soldiers at the post would shoot at any shadow approaching at night.

"O God, our house was burning. We smelled the smoke in the bunker. Fortunately your sisters and I had dug an outlet into the garden, so we moved to that end. Then we saw the whole hamlet aflame. One chopper went down at the edge of the village. The sky was filled with flying machines spitting fire and death. My dear son, I've never seen hell, but I got a fair idea of it that day. I prayed the Lord Buddha to help us, but I mixed up all the prayers. My dearest, why weren't you home to help us? I really needed a son that day. Your sisters wanted to get into the house to save your father's incense bowl at least. They wanted to take water from the well and put out the fire. With both hands I held them. We smelled the roasted rice and sweet potatoes we had just harvested and didn't have time to bring down into the bunker.

"Get out of the bunkers, everybody," said the loudspeaker, 'whoever is found in a bunker is a VC. We're going to throw grenades into the bunkers.' At this point, the three of us got out. We lay in the ditch, watching our house crumbling down with all our belongings. Your sisters wrung their hands and began to cry.

"Where are we going to live? What to eat? What to wear? Mother, couldn't they have given us time to get our things out?"

"No, if they warned us, the VC would be warned too," I said.

"But we're not VC, Mother; our brother is in the army."

"There must be some error. We'll make a claim to the authorities."

"Our neighbor's son, Ban, was badly hit when he ran away. He lay screaming in front of our house. Chi Ba was badly burned trying to save her

pigs. Great Aunt Ai and her five grandchildren were in the bunker when a grenade was dropped in. She was deaf from a previous bombing and couldn't hear the order. Is her son, the father of the children, in your unit? Can you get word to him about the disaster?"

"Many people were shot when they ran away. They're not VC; you know, but they ran for their lives, which really meant for their deaths. Anyone who doesn't know the rules of this war pays for it with his life. I always admonished your sisters 'Never, never flee when Americans shoot at random. Just pretend you don't see them. Continue what you're doing. If they're too near, lie down; if they come to you, join your palms in prayer and show them your ID card. That they understand, even if they don't understand what you say.' I was so afraid of their being raped that I sent them to the city of Hue for many months to work as maids in some rich houses. They just came home last month to help me with the crops. Things seemed quieter, but no one could tell. All of the other girls had fled to the mountains which are full of tigers—but no one seems to fear the tigers anymore.

"The soldiers took everything they didn't burn. Watching them, I wondered if I had been right in urging you to join them, or if the VC were all wrong. The Nationals are supposed to defend us, but they're destroying us. As for the true VC, they always know when the Americans were coming, so they never got caught. Even your sister, Mai, said, 'I wonder if the Americans are fighting the VC or us. No wonder so many join the VC. I wish I had something to defend myself with,' I said to her.

"You fool, the VC shot at them first.

"But the VC weren't in our house, mother; why did they burn it?"

"It must be some error. It's some error.

"Error! Error! Look at the whole village."

"The loudspeaker said, in a curious rusty voice, that our village had been

(please turn to page 19)