

Interview Number: **24**

Participant: **Truong Vinh Thang**

DOB: 1932

Role at DBP: Driver, Coy 806, Bn 954, Regt 45, Div 351

Date/Time: 4th October 2017, 1415hrs.

Location: [REDACTED] Hanoi

Interviewer/Interpreter: Dr Hoang Hai Ha

Summary of Contents

Like father, like son. Preparing Regiment 45 for war. The road to the Front. The battle and after.

Like Father, Like Son

Thang was born in Mao Khe into a working class family. His father was an engineer repairing the trains for the Mao Khe Coal Company. They later moved to Hai Phong and Quang Ninh. Thang received a good education in Vietnamese and French up to Grade Five. He started working at the age of 13 at the same factory in Quang Ninh where his father worked. In the factory they used French so Thang built on his education and became fluent in the language. In 1946 Thang joined the PAVN. He received a little bit of military training and was then posted to a munitions factory where he became a specialist in repairing artillery. When the French returned in 1947 the factory was moved to the ATK and his father went with it. Thang again followed his father. When the French attacked the Viet Bac in late 1947, [Comment: Operation "Lea",] Thang and his father took up arms and fought the French. At one point Thang entered a T'ai village. The villagers took him for French and ran away. When they realized he was alone they surrounded him, and might have killed him if he had not had the presence of mind to sing the Vietnamese national anthem so they knew he was Viet Minh. In 1948 he parted from his father as their factory was split. His father remained in the Viet Bac whilst Thang went to Bac Giang with the satellite factory. This also gave him the chance to study at a French technical school in Phu Tho.

In 1949 Thang was transferred to the newly formed artillery regiment 675, so called because it consisted of six groups of 75mm artillery in two battalions. Each

platoon had one gun and four platoons made up a company. Initially the regiment consisted of companies using American 75mm guns captured from the French, companies of Japanese 75mm guns provided by the Chinese, and one company of assorted guns of various types that had been captured in Vietnam. Because of Thang's previous experience in manufacturing he was posted to a mobile repair unit at regiment HQ. In addition to repairing and maintaining the guns, it was the unit's responsibility to check the guns that had been broken down into pack loads when they were re-assembled to ensure that they were safe to fire. Thus Thang became known as a "Doctor of Artillery." Thang fought with the Regiment during the Border Campaign and the 1951 campaigns.

Thang was not a Party member. He was admitted to the Party in 1955.

Preparing Regiment 45 for War

In July 1953 Thang was transferred to the 34th "Tat Thang" Regiment which had been selected for training as an artillery unit in China and was re-numbered as the 45th Regiment. Because he had a good education he was initially trained to be a range plotter however, because he was tall and strong the regiment commander selected him to be a driver. When he objected the commander told him that being a driver was more important than being a plotter so he accepted the post. [Comment: The height requirement came from the use of American and Soviet vehicles, built for an average western physique with seats, pedals and steering wheels that were not adjustable. The strength requirement was necessary because in the days before power steering and synchromesh gear boxes when double declutching was necessary to change gear, driving a large truck was quite hard physical work.]

Thang was trained in Company 28 at Mong Tu [Comment: Perhaps a Vietnamese transliteration of the Chinese name,] near Kunming in Yunnan Province. There were 100 trainee drivers in the company and the course lasted six months. Thang graduated in the top five so was designated as a First Driver. Each truck had a crew of three: First and Second Drivers, who normally shared the driving, and an Assistant Driver who was responsible for physical tasks such as placing and removing chocks under the wheels to prevent the vehicle sliding.

Thang was trained on the different types of trucks that the PAVN was being equipped with, the two main types being the American GMC and the Soviet Gaz 63. From his point of view both had their strengths and weaknesses:

- The GMC had an electric starter motor whilst the Gaz had to be hand cranked and was very difficult to start.
- The GMC was larger and could carry a two ton load and tow a two ton M2 Howitzer at the same time, so they were the artillery prime movers. The Gaz had a smaller capacity.
- The Gaz was heavy, but structurally stronger than the GMC, so more robust in rough conditions.
- The Gaz was more manoeuvrable than the GMC and the GMC was not so good in wet and muddy conditions.
- The Gaz was designed for use in a cold climate so it was prone to overheating in the tropic summer.

Thang returned to Vietnam in October 1953. The newly-minted drivers were not married up with their new vehicles in China. They travelled by train to Lang Son and then had to march on foot across the Viet Bac to Tuyen Quang Province where the regiment was being concentrated. This march took almost a month with two days marching followed by a day resting. Until the trucks arrived they focused on political training including the history of the Revolution After training, and the spirit of the Party. In Tuyen Quang Thang met the girl that he would marry seven years later.

Thang was posted to company 806 and when the trucks arrived, (they had been delivered by drivers from the Department of Transport who were not trained in China,) he was allocated a truck that had been captured at Dong Khe in 1950 which was a bit of a surprise as he had worked on the same truck when it had been captured. Thang thinks that he got one of the oldest vehicles because he was the youngest driver in the company. The GMCs were well camouflaged and kept in dugouts about one and a half hour's walk outside of town. It was his responsibility to maintain the truck and to turn over the engine to keep it serviceable in the cold weather.

Each of the four prime-mover trucks in the company carried the driving crew of three and the gun crew of seven. The drivers made up the "No 8" crewman of the gun who would serve as a replacement if necessary, so they were trained as gunners too. They were loaded with two tons of ammunition and food, and each towed a 105mm howitzer. There were two other GMCs in the company and two smaller Soviet trucks that were used for bringing up food and ammunition supplies.

For food the trucks carried rice, dried food, fish sauce and vegetables. [Comment: The supply of vegetables meant that they did not have to forage in the forest as the rest of the army did.] Thang was aware that the gunners were favoured with treats that the rest of the army did not get, for example with cigarettes or they would receive three finger sized pieces of pork for their ration instead of the normal two.

The Road to the Front

At 8PM on 22nd December 1953 Coy 806 set off. Thang remembers the date exactly because he composed a poem “The Elephants Go To Battle” about it. They drove without headlights and he passed his girlfriend’s house but did not see her. Because of the need for security they had not been briefed on their destination and Thang thought that they were going to attack the Delta. When they drove through Tuyen Quang City they reached a crossroads and the military police at the main junction directed them towards Yen Bai. It was only then that Thang realized that they were heading for the Tay Bac.

Driving to the Front was fraught with difficulties. French Morane observation planes patrolled the road by day so all movement was made at night. Just staying awake was very difficult so the drivers had little tricks to stave off sleep. Some would suck quinine because it was so bitter. Some would smoke a lot. And some would rub their eyes with the paper that had been used to wrap chilies in. [Comment: Ouch!] Usually they would drive for two days and then stop for one day. Each morning they had to camouflage the trucks and guns by digging a hole for them. This took a considerable effort by the gun crew, (there were no engineers to help them as they were too busy building the roads,) hence the need for rest days.

On the Lung Lo and Pha Din Passes the engineers had widened the road and used trees to camouflage it, these were pulled apart at night for vehicles to move and then replaced in the morning. Even with the improvement works the Pha Din Pass was very treacherous. Although the GMCs had five gears it was all first gear going up. There was the mountain to one side and a sheer drop to the other. So all the gunners and assistant drivers alighted and just the First Driver took the truck up. Going down was just as dangerous. They could not always use engine breaking to slow the truck as the high revs in low gear would overheat it, so they had to go faster. They normally used four chocks, two for the gun and two for the truck to stop it sliding back on the ascents, or running out of control on the descents. French bombing blocked the road whilst Thang’s convoy was

on the Pha Din Pass and they had to stop until it was repaired. They were stuck on the road and had to camouflage the trucks by removing the wheels and covering the tops of the trucks and the guns with earth.

The regiment concentrated at Tuan Giao where they rested for two days before moving on to DBP. Here they received political education on the need to succeed to give support to the diplomatic struggle that would come. [Comment: This is interesting because it Thang's company stopped at Tuan Giao in early January. The Berlin Conference was scheduled for late January but no-one could have known that this would lead to the Geneva Conference. It indicates that Thang's political officers had a "big picture."] They also used the political lessons at Tuan Giao to decide on who would be the leaders of the "groups of three" soldiers that were the most basic building blocks of the PAVN's military and political organization. Since the gunners operated as a gun team with their own roles and leaders depending upon their positions in the crew the normal tactical role of the group of three did not apply, but the administrative and political significance of the groups were still important.

The drive from Tuan Giao to DBP was very slow because of the mud, the poor condition of the road, and French bombing. On some nights they only made a few KM. The French delayed action bombs were a particular problem and the engineers marked these with white flags if there was a safe route around them.

There were lots of Dan Cong building the road and moving up supplies and if one of the trucks got stuck in the mud they could count on hundreds of Dan Cong, TNXP, soldiers or villages to get them out. Even so they often had to unlimber and pull the truck through first and the gun after. Mere muscle power was often not enough to move the bogged down trucks so they had to fell trees to build a corrugated road under the wheels so that they could get some purchase and be pulled out. After they had passed they used other trees to camouflage the ruts that they had made to hide them from the French bombers. In all it took about a week to drive the 75km from Tuan Giao to the point where they dropped off the guns at Na Tau.

The Battle and After

From Na Tau the guns were pulled and winched into position at the front. Thang did not participate in this as it was the drivers' job to disperse, dig in and camouflage the trucks. The "Hardest Decision," cancelling the offensive and the order to withdraw the guns came as a surprise and everyone complained after

the hard effort of pulling them in. The French knew that there was only one road to use and they bombed it heavily. When the guns were brought out and limbered up they were driven a few kilometers back from Na Tau and the guns and trucks were dispersed again.

In the month that followed Thang concentrated on maintaining his truck and he had word of his father again who was now a group leader at a maintenance depot for Division 351 at Co Noi. They did not meet during the campaign, although they cannot have been far apart when Thang's unit passed through Co Noi on the way to DBP and on the way back, but his father sent him some tools to help his work.

When the order came to move in the guns the second time it was much easier as the roads had been improved. Thang stockpiled his gun's ammunition and from then on the smaller Soviet trucks at company HQ were used to bring up further ammunition supplies to the gun positions, not the GMCs.

Thang visited the company guns before the Him Lam attack but during the battle his post was with the trucks further back to be ready as a contingency in case the guns needed moving, which they never did. Also Thang's company's trucks were not used to bring up supplies as some other Division 351 trucks were.

Thang was kept informed of the progress of the battle and on the last day he went forward on foot in the hope of finding some French loot or uncollected air-dropped supplies. He saw de Castries being led away into captivity and then took the chance to enter de Castries bunker which was still strewn with maps and paperwork.

In the days that followed Thang's crew was tasked with helping to salvage the French equipment from the battlefield as war booty. The gunners collected the guns and the drivers the vehicles. Thang was surprised that the French motor pool was so easy to find because it was not well camouflaged. Although many of the French vehicles had been damaged in the battle or sabotaged before the surrender the French had not had enough time to do a good job of destroying all of them. Thang and his team repaired the more serviceable vehicles and they were collected on the Muong Thanh airstrip. At the same time the French were still dropping supplies of food and medicine for the prisoners and the injured on the strip. Thang then drove a booty GMC from DBP to Tuan Giao before rejoining his unit.

Thang's father was transferred out of Division 351 to the newly forming Division 675 so they did not meet again until 1955 when they both attended a parade at Bac Mai Airport.

In the following years Thang specialized in logistics, vehicle and artillery maintenance, and driver training. He fought in the American War in Quang Tri. After his retirement in 1994 Thang took up traditional medicine, table-tennis and watercolour painting.

With a little glint in his eye Thang modestly attributes the victory at DBP to 40% being the responsibility of the gunners who overwhelmed the French and 60% being the responsibility of the drivers who got them there! He keeps his medals in an American ammunition box, and still prizes the commemorative enamel mug that was given by the Chinese to soldiers at DBP. He is a noted poet and wrote a well-known poem about the French surrender at DBP... and he has also written an ode to his GMC.