

Interview Number: **12**

Participant: **Nguyen Tien Thu**

DOB: 1934

Role at DBP: Squad Leader, Coy 404, TNXP Group 40.

Date/Time: 28th July, 2017. 1430hrs.

Location: [REDACTED] Hanoi.

Interviewer/Interpreter: Dr Hoang Hai Ha

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Background

Thu was born of peasant stock in Tien Du, Bac Ninh province. He studied in a French primary school but when he was in Grade Three the French re-occupied his district. Nobody in his family was a revolutionary, although his younger brothers joined the PAVN, but his grandfather was a teacher who loved his country and he encouraged Thu to join the revolution. So at the age of 16 Thu joined the district Viet Minh forces as a runner and clerk. A year later in 1951 Tien Du district was required to form a Thanh Nien Xung Phong (TNXP) "assault youth" Company and Thu was encouraged to join. This involved receiving a recommendation from the Youth Committee of his commune to establish that he was of good character and loved his country. This introduction was then passed to district level for further consideration, which was usually a rubber stamp.

The TNXP

Thu's company was called "To Hieu" after a famous revolutionary who had planted a peach tree of peace in Son La prison where he died of tuberculosis. The other companies also had similar names for revolutionary heroes or events. The company consisted of 160 men and 40 women, broken down into 10 squads of 20 men and women together. The women did the same work as the men and were integrated into each squad. Theoretically you had to be 18 years old to join the TNXP and had to leave at 30. But exceptions were made for people like Thu who was allowed to join earlier because of his work with

the guerrillas; and few, if any, reached the mandatory leaving age during the 9YRWAF. The TNXP was used to support the PAVN and was armed only for self-defence, each squad of 20 had about three to seven rifles, but their main “weapons” were the spade and the pick axe.

Theoretically 10 companies formed a “Group” but this echelon had little direct command function. Unlike the PAVN the TNXP companies had no fixed bases, they went where they were sent and rarely returned to their home district. The squad and company commanders were Party members who were also members of the TNXP, but usually a little older than the others. Thu was not a Party member but because of his previous work he was appointed as a vice squad leader. The minimum age to join the Party was 18, (although again, exceptions could be made for younger people with great achievements.) Joining the Party was not easy as you had to demonstrate your willingness to sacrifice yourself for the nation. Thu became a Party member in 1953 at the age of 19.

Early Service

In 1951 Thu’s company supported the Hoang Hoa Tham campaign and other campaigns quite close to their home district and were employed moving supplies and weapons to the front and evacuating injured soldiers to medical posts in the rear. After this they were deployed further afield to the Tay Bac building roads and bridges under the supervision of the Department of Transportation, not the Army engineers. The first bridge that Thu’s company repaired was at Na Gu near Bac Kan. Ho Chi Minh visited the assault youth at this bridge, (although Thu did not see him,) and wrote a poem about them which was later set to music and became a sort of theme song for the assault youth. After Na Gu Thu’s company moved to Yen Bai and Nghia Lo building roads to support the Upper Laos campaign, including the new Route 13, and repairing bridges bombed by the French. Bridge repairs were always urgent and usually had to be completed in the space of one night.

Normally each company would be responsible for building one to two km of road at a time and when completed move on. In the harsh conditions illnesses and diseases were common. Malaria was rife and Thu was smitten with it. He was treated with one or two quinine tablets a day and overcame it. One woman in his company was killed by a tiger. Seriously sick and injured members were sent to the rear. There was no formal replacement system but sometimes replacements were sent up from the rear and sometimes the

company recruited from local youth to make up its numbers. TNXP members were all volunteers and were given an allowance at the same rate as soldiers' pay.

After Nghia Lo the company moved into Upper Laos for six months opening the road to Sam Neua and it was during this time that Thu first started clearing bombs. Finally, the company returned to Vietnam in October 1953, to the Pha Hang Pass and Son La.

Thu had become a squad leader during the Upper Laos Campaign and he was admitted into the Party in December 1953.

Reorganization

After about a month at Son La there was a major reorganization in the TNXP starting in November 1953. Firstly, all women were returned to the Viet Bac. They were happy to go but sad to leave their comrades. Thu admits that there were a few broken hearts too, as men and women who had built up a relationship in the company were now split up and would have to wait until the war's end to be reunited. To replace the women the company was brought up to strength with new male recruits, mostly from LK IV.

Secondly the TNXP was expanded greatly in size. When first formed it had about 3,000 members but by the end of 1953 had been brought up to 30,000 members. Ho Chi Minh took a great personal interest in the TNXP. His Personal Secretary Vu Ky became leader of the TNXP, and Ho's bodyguard Ta Quang Chien, and the Party Secretary of Ha Tay province were both on the leadership committee. To command and administer this increase in membership the TNXP were divided into four group formations of roughly brigade size, (i.e. larger than a regiment, smaller than a division.) Groups 34 and 40 were the main groups responsible for the supplies to DBP in the North West whilst groups 44 and 46 covered the Viet Bac. The companies remained the same although Thu believes that the 200 man strength was not standard and some may have been larger. Because there were now many more companies they were no longer known by titles but were designated by number depending upon their group. Thu's old To Hieu Company was part of Group 40 and was now designated as Company 404.

During March and April of 1953 the Assault Youth were used to provide replacements for the army at DBP and General Giap asked the Party Central Committee to provide more military training for the TNXP. Thu believes that

some 8,000 men were transferred to the PAVN from across all four groups. The criteria for enlistment was that they should be a volunteer, be in good health and as strong as soldiers, and have already had military training and experience at provincial level.

Bombs at Co Noi

Thu's company was deployed at Co Noi between December 1953 and May 1954. Thu regards Co Noi as the most vital part of the PAVN lines of communication heading towards DBP, in his opinion it was even more important than the bottleneck of the Pha Dinh pass. [Comment: Co Noi is the junction of the then RC 41 (now QL 6 (AH 13)); and Route 13 (now QL 37,) and thus it was the junction of the two main supply routes, leading from LKs III and IV; and from LKVB respectively. Because of the geography it was difficult to by-pass.] The junction covered an area of about 500m x 500m and was a prime target for French bombing. The company's task was to repair French bomb damage and keep the roads open. But before they could do their work it was Thu's task, as leader of a small squad of eight men, to disarm any unexploded bombs (UXBs). This job was left to the Assault Youth because the army engineers were deployed nearer to DBP. [Comment: Ung Rang's memoires cites the Cong Binh Battalion 555 of Engineer Regiment 151 as covering Co Noi, but this may have been at different times in the campaign.]

The French used four types of bombs at Co Noi:

1. Blast bombs of 200 or 500kg.
2. Napalm.
3. Delayed action bombs of 200 or 500kg.
4. Butterfly bombs.

The blast bombs and napalm might cause damage that had to be repaired but that was not Thu's problem. The delayed action bombs were blast bombs fitted with a chemical fuse that might activate at any time from half an hour to a day later, thus creating an unpredictable "time bomb" that could not be safely ignored because it could go off at any time. The butterfly bombs were sub-munitions that were scattered from a bomb casing. Covering an area about 100 meters square. [Comment: These are the same weapons that Nguyen Van Sa had to deal with, see interview No 8: They were either US M28 or M29 cluster bombs that contained 75mm 1.8kg fragmentation sub-munitions: 24 in the M28, 90 in the M29. The bomb casing opened as the bomb fell distributing the sub-munitions over a wide area. The sides of the

sub-munitions would then open in flight to form four curved wings that would set the bomb spinning to arm its fuse. Hence the “butterfly bomb” name.] It was the task of Thu and his squad to clear these UXBs.

Thu and his men would watch the air-raids, that usually took place in late morning, after the mist had cleared, or early afternoon, and carefully note the location of any bombs that did not go off. In the case of delayed action bombs the method of removing them was to approach using cover if possible and place a small explosive charge on them to destroy them. On the afternoon of 16th March tragedy struck when a 500kg delayed action bomb that two of Thu’s men were working on detonated. Nineteen-year-old Tac was killed instantly and his colleague Ngoan died of his wounds later. Thu and his men collected the pieces of Tac’s body for burial but they never forgot the day. It brought home the unpredictable danger of delayed action bombs and whenever Thu had to deal with such a bomb later he always thought that he would die.

The butterfly bombs were small, and the same colour as the ground, so they were very hard to see, especially at night when the troops and Dan Cong were marching. They were made of wrought iron which fractured into irregular shaped shrapnel when the bomb exploded causing nasty wounds. Butterfly bombs were usually dealt with by taking cover and prodding the bomb with a long enough bamboo pole, or snaring it with a hook and line, so that it would move, and usually this would release the detonator and explode the bomb. Unfortunately, whilst many of the sub-munitions would explode at the slightest touch, some bombs would not explode but still remained live even when moved. Picking them up was fraught with danger and one of Thu’s men named Thoi, frustrated with a bomb that would not go off, tried to pick it up and throw it down a slope. The bomb went off in his hand and he died two hours later.

In order to find the best way of dealing with the butterfly bombs Thu decided that he would have to dismantle one to determine how they worked. He had his men dig a foxhole for him near a butterfly bomb so that he could reach over the parapet with his head still in cover and dismantle the bomb by touch: he reasoned that if it went off it would only blow his hands off. [Comment:!] After a few minutes of trying to unscrew the detonator he realized that he was turning it the wrong way, and he was then able to disarm it. Having been able to dismantle a bomb Thu’s work was to no avail as they could not come up

with a consistently safe way to disarm the bombs quickly by hand. So they concluded that the best way to deal with bombs that didn't respond to prodding was to push or drag several of them to a small explosive charge and then detonate the lot. This experience was passed on to the rest of the army and it reduced the number of people injured.

Thu's squad was always kept up to strength and in addition to the three men killed every man was injured at some point or other. Thu himself was wounded four times and he was covered by earth from exploding bombs three times, and each time he thought he would die. Thu believes that 100 people, soldiers, Dan Cong and XP were killed at Co Noi.

Motivation

Later journalists asked Thu how he could do what he did. He believes that without the love of his country and the support of his colleagues he could not have done it. His team motivated each other and supported each other to do the job. They lived by the hour and by the minute. They did not receive any special pay or rations for their work.

Thu usually had enough food, and they had clean spring water that he kept in a much prized two mouth water bottle. Occasionally they received canned meat from China and sometimes canned French rations. Thu found the weather at Co Noi much worse than the Delta, hot in the day and cold in the winter nights. He did not have enough warm clothes. There were also lots of mosquitos but no mosquito nets.

As a Party member Thu believed that it was his duty to lead by example and he was willing to sacrifice himself for the others. He was willing to give up his food for others and if necessary give up his life if his death would enable others to win the struggle. The Assault Youth idolized Ho Chi Minh and the sacrifices that he had made for the nation inspired them. They felt that Ho's statements were relevant to what they wanted for the future and the Ho gave them a spiritual foundation.

Each company had one political officer and a party cell but political classes were kept very simple to everyone setting and following a good example. Thu heard about land reform but it did not affect him much because his family was in the Occupied Zone. They were not told much about Geneva or what was happening at the battle and got most of their news from people passing through, to and from DBP.

After DBP Thu studied economics at university. He continued with youth development work and then went into the Foreign Service, becoming 1st Secretary at the Vietnamese Embassy in Moscow in 1982. He retired in 1993. In 2014 he was made a Hero of the Armed Forces for his work at Co Noi.
[Comment: Today there is a large memorial to the work of the Assault Youth at Co Noi.]