

Interview Number: **9**

Participant: **Colonel Nguyen Xuan Mai**

DOB: 1935 (actually 1932)

Role at DBP: Company Runner, Coy 677, Bn 536, Div 316

Date/Time: 18th June, 2017. 1445hrs.

Location: Hotel De L' Opera, 29 Trang Tien, Hoan Kiem, Hanoi.

Interviewer/Interpreter: Dr Hoang Hai Ha

Summary of Contents

Background and early service. A divisional anti-aircraft battalion. The march to the DBP and life at the front. How the soldiers were paid. The battle. After the battle.

Background and Early Service

Mai was born in Hanoi into a middle class family, his father was a pharmacist. So he received a good education in a French primary school and could speak French well, along with a little English. He escaped to the Liberated Zone and in 1951 joined the PAVN. He was posted to Bn 536, the AA battalion of the 316th Division. He received two weeks very basic training and then was posted to the Coy 677 where he received on the job training in specialist skills such as recognizing aircraft type and function, and estimating speed and altitude. He participated in three campaigns before DBP.

The 316th Division was called the "Sun Cuoc" or "Highlands" Division because it had originally been raised near Cao Bang mainly from T'ai and Nhung ethnic minorities. By the time that Mai joined up this ethnic make-up had been diluted by the recruiting of Kinh from the plains like him, but there were still many ethnic minorities in the division and even a few who could not speak Vietnamese. Many were illiterate or had very basic education. However Mai found that the ethnic minorities set a good example, they worked hard, fought well, and were honest, and thus many were admitted as Party members. That there were so many Party members made it harder for Mai himself to be admitted and he did not become a Party member until after DBP. He was on track to be admitted before then but

the fighting was so bitter that they was no time to convene a Party meeting to go through the formalities for him.

A Divisional Anti-Aircraft Battalion

Until the Upper Laos campaign Mai's battalion was equipped with French 50 calibre machine guns. [Comment: Probably American M2 machine guns.] Before the DBP campaign they were refitted with Russian 12.7mm DShK 1938 machine guns. There were no Chinese advisors or Vietnamese specialists to train them on the new gun. They only had the manuals that had been translated into Vietnamese by the General Staff, but these were very basic and focused on the stripping down and assembly of the gun rather than its tactical use. So the crews had to be creative in working out the best use for the guns. At first they were not very good, but they learnt from experience and improved. The guns were broken down into five parts for transport: barrels, main body, wheels and tripod, armoured shield, and sights. The normal ammunition allocation was 100 rounds per gun, but sometimes more, sometimes less. [Comment: The gun and mounting weighed 157kg, and each 100 rounds of ammunition about 15kg.]

The battalion had three identical companies and each company had eight guns with four platoons of two guns each. Each platoon consisted of two eight man squads to serve the guns, two eight man squads of ammunition carriers, and platoon headquarters. In addition the company headquarters consisted of the company commander and his deputy, the company political officer and his deputy, a medical orderly and his assistant, cooks, and a four man communications squad of runners of which Mai was the squad leader. The company had no radio or telephone communications between company HQ and the platoons and squads, and made no use of physical signals. Everything was transmitted by either written order or word-of-mouth. So in combat the work of the runners was very dangerous as they had to run to pass orders through the fighting. [Comment: I was specific in clarifying the lack of technical communications because you would expect an AA unit to be tied into some sort of early warning system, but apparently not.] When not engaged in combat Mai was responsible for routine administration compiling and transporting daily returns to battalion HQ. These included a daily report on activities, a sick-list and company roll, and details of ammunition expended and remaining. In addition to these duties Mai organized a company singing group to keep morale up and he also wrote the company newsletter and was pleased when his colleagues praised his writing.

The companies were supported by Dan Cong porters who brought ammunition up to a storage post whence it was carried to the guns by the platoon ammunition numbers. Although this was the first campaign using the Soviet guns Mai states that they never ran out of ammunition. The gunners were praised for achieving their objectives with less than their allocated number of rounds. [Comment: cf. Khau's account regarding the similar practices for artillery ammunition at interview No 4.]

The March to the DBP and Life at the Front

The 536th Bn was based at Cam Thuy, Than Hoa province before the march to DBP [Comment: Unlike most of the PAVN units the 316th Div started south of the Red River Delta.]. There was no transport and everything was man-packed so Mai estimates that with the weight of their guns, ammunition, kit and rations each soldier was carrying about 40kg.

On reaching the battlefield their guns always had to be dug in and since they moved frequently this was a major effort as they had to dig fighting positions, rest positions and communications trenches. Everybody dug, including the platoon commanders. Each soldier had a personal spade and they dug in the standard manner at night: separated by three or four meters they would first dig enough to cover themselves lying down, then a hole to cover themselves sitting down, then a hole to stand up in, then connect the holes. Mai recollects that digging on the flat ground south of Hill A1 was very difficult in the rain, and that the rains brought out many insects and leaches. After the French surrender the situation became even worse as the grass regrew very quickly and this spawned even more insects.

The guns were normally dug into circular pits allowing for a 360° traverse and for five men to serve the gun. The pits were deep enough so that the gun on its tripod could point out horizontally. Near each pit would be a crew position, well dug in with overhead cover, and capable of sleeping about four to five men. Normally there were at least two of these sets of positions for each gun, and the platoon HQ had its own position as well. Because the trenches were narrow and their floors were uneven they never used the wheels to move the guns between positions.

Once the positions had been built and ammunition brought up and stockpiled, the manpower of each platoon was divided into two parts. From the nominal 16 men available for each gun they could post lookouts, and also keep the gun

constantly manned and ready for action with five men, with about half the manpower whilst the other half rested.

The platoon positions were normally about 500-1000m behind the front line and the company HQ was usually 500m behind them with the company hoang cam kitchen. Platoons would send back details to collect food and water. In turn the kitchens were supplied from rice stores about 5km in the rear.

Water was not a problem during the battle as there were plenty of springs and streams where they were deployed. As an artillery unit where they were required to do heavy lifting, the men of Mai's company were entitled to 1.2kg of rice a day per man, (although they seldom received so much.) They knew that this was considerably more than that allocated to the infantry, but they still felt hungry! Fresh rice was always in short supply and usually reserved for the sick, and they usually had sticky rice and salt which they found hard to eat all the time. Each soldier also had their own condiments, a special salt spiced with ginger. Sometimes they had a soup made from green beans and salt, flavoured with pig fat. This was carried to the front lines in bamboo halves. Meat and fish were scarce, usually just a slice of fish the size of a finger, and if they were lucky they had some "Nam Kem," a very thick but very salty fish sauce. At Tet they made the traditional Tet rice cakes, "banh chung", but had no meat so they made "vegetarian Tet cakes." Mai wrote about it in the company newsletter and it became an amusing little achievement, with the newsletter being circulated to the battalion and division.

When in the rear they could buy things and the locals often gave them presents but at the front there was little in the way of luxuries. Alcohol was forbidden and tobacco very scarce. At Tet each soldier received two sticks of cigarettes and when the battalion political officer visited the troops he would bring tobacco and a bamboo pipe, but there was usually only enough tobacco for one puff by each soldier!

Mai heard of the "Three Wells" campaign but his unit because never talked about it because, given the nature of their duties, they were able to rotate most of their men. The runners of Mai's communication squad did not have this advantage so when it came to "Sleep Well" Mai never had enough time to sleep! He was always tired and once was so groggy that he walked into a tree!

Because he was posted to company HQ for communications duties and was responsible for producing the company newsletter, Mai was well informed

about the conduct of the battle and the struggle elsewhere in Indochina. He received the company's copy of QDND, (he kept every copy from first to last,) and also information and orders from battalion and higher headquarters

How the Soldiers Were Paid

One of Mai's non-combatant duties in company HQ was to work out the soldiers' pay. This was based on the equivalent kilogram market price of rice in the province in which they were stationed and it increased with responsibility and years of service as follows:

- Private Soldier = 2kg
- Deputy Squad Leader = 3kg
- Squad Leader = 4kg
- Deputy Platoon Commander = 5kg
- Platoon Commander = 6kg
- Deputy Company Commander = 7kg
- Company Commander = 8kg
- Long Service Pay = An additional 3kg for soldiers with three years' service increasing by one additional kg for each year completed after that.

As far as Mai is aware this was a standard rate of pay throughout the army and soldiers with specialist roles or training did not receive more pay than infantrymen of the same rank responsibility and length of service.

[Comment: So, for example, a deputy platoon commander (a sergeant or senior sergeant in other armies,) with five years' service would receive the cash equivalent of the cost of 10kg of rice at the provincial rates: 5kg for his position and 5kg for his completed service. A newly recruited private with less than three years' service would receive the basic cash equivalent of 2kg of rice only. To put this monetary reward in context, over the same month the army would have fed him 22kg of rice if he was an infantryman and between 28kg and 33kg of rice if he was an engineer or artilleryman.]

The soldiers were paid monthly in cash, although Mai recounts that there was nothing to spend the money on at DBP. There was no official way to remit money to families, even if they were in the Liberated Zone. If a soldier was killed the company would collect his money and pass it up to higher headquarters for

eventual transmission to his next of kin, although it was understood that this could be difficult.

The Battle

The battalion's Coy 676 was detached from the division at an early stage. On 5th January 1954 an artillery convoy became stuck on the Pha Din Pass. [Comment: Between Son La and Tuan Giao.] The convoy risked destruction if found by the French air force. To divert the French from the guns, the army chief-of-staff Hoang Van Thai ordered Coy 676 to the pass to fire on all French aircraft and attract their attention. This they did, firing for seven hours and bringing down the wrath of the French air force upon themselves at the cost of five dead and one gun destroyed, but the convoy was unmolested. Later Coy 676 was deployed to protect the Muong Phang HQ.

The other two companies in Bn 536 remained with the division. Coy 675 was deployed to protect Regt 98, and Mai's company 677 was deployed to protect Regt 174. Mai remembers that the men did not understand the order to stand down the Three Days, Two Nights offensive after "The Hardest Decision" but they obeyed it. Over the Lunar New Year they were deployed near the Doi Xanh ("Green Hill") position to the east of Muong Thanh when it was attacked by the French. A two day battle raged and on the second day, 6th Feb 1954, one of the company's guns shot down an F6F Hellcat, the first French aircraft shot down over DBP. This was reported in QDND which made them all happy; Mai passed the paper around the company. They also received a commendation from the divisional commander.

For the second phase of the offensive Mai's company displaced forward to support Regt 174's assault on Hill A1. They were originally deployed to the south-east of Mont Chauve, to give them a good arc of fire coving A1 and the PAVN's jump off area for the assault. When the battle on A1 stalled and the situation was stalemated with the PAVN holding the eastern, lower part of the hill and the French the western, higher part of the hill, the company sapped forward, digging trenches and gun pits to the south of A1 between 500 and 1000 meters from it. From these positions the company supported the battle, sometimes by giving ground support fire, but mainly in the AA role. On 9th April the company achieved its second confirmed kill when it shot down a C119 transport plane. They had put considerable thought into how to target these large aircraft: hits on the huge hull were unlikely to have any critical effect, [Comment: The C119 was not called the "Flying Boxcar" for nothing.] the twin

boom fuselage was small and easily missed, and so the correct aiming point was high on the nose where there was a chance to hit the cockpit or high wing mounted engines. Mai is proud that the F6F and the C119 hit by his company were the only confirmed kills scored by the battalion during the battle, although all three companies were awarded many “possibles” or “probables” where French aircraft were seen to be damaged but were not seen to crash.

His company was told of the mine to be exploded on A1 and was given instructions that the men should turn away from the hill, lie down, cover their ears with their hands, and open their mouths. When it came they only felt a slight tremor and heard a small noise but then they saw a high tower of smoke rising from the hill.

Spirits remained good in Mai’s company throughout the battle. They did not think that the battle would be decisive and their two favourite songs were about returning to the Delta and returning to the capitol. Since DBP was not in the Delta, nor the capitol, they expected more fighting to come. No-one talked about the Geneva Conference and Mai believes this was a deliberate policy by the battalion and company commanders who did not want to raise the men’s expectations.

After the Battle

After DBP the division returned to Thai Nguyen to refit. In October his battalion marched to Cao Bang, the truce was in force and Mai remembers the joy of marching in daylight to the sound of drums! At Cao Bang the battalion became part of the 367th Heavy Division which was formed by upgrading the 367th AA Regiment from the original 351st Heavy Division. The new division was equipped with much more powerful 85mm AA guns. [Comment: Mai says that they also had German 88mm guns and I was fascinated, if skeptical, about this claim. They may have been told that the Soviet 85mm gun was developed from the German gun which it was not. However Mai was there and I was not. Certainly the Russians would have had considerable captured stocks of the weapon and it may have been intended for training rather than front-line combat use. It is also possible that the guns could have come from Yugoslavia, which continued to field the German weapon and produce ammunition for it into the 1990s, but the Yugoslav-Soviet split of 1948, and the fact that Yugoslavia did not formally recognize the DRV until 1957, long after most other Communist countries, would argue against this source.]

Mai considers three main points to be the important lessons of DBP:

- Giap's Strategy: In hindsight "The Hardest Decision" was completely correct. Also, if they had not taken the time to build the additional road infrastructure to enable the heavy 105mm and 37mm AA to be moved around the battlefield, they could not have won.
- The spirit of sacrifice for victory.
- The support of the people in the rear, especially the Dan Cong.

Mai remained in the AA units and when the Air defence Command was created in 1958 he was made responsible for the Command's newsletter because of his experience from DBP. He retired in 1990 as a Colonel. He was instrumental in compiling a 50th Anniversary commemorative magazine about DBP and was one of the compilers of Dau et al, (2009.)