

Interview of Truong Vinh Thang

Location: [REDACTED] Hanoi

Date and time: 14.00, 4 October 2017

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

- My native hometown is Hai Phong, but I was born in Mao Khe, Quang Ninh, where my father worked as a worker in a coal mine. Before joining the army, I also worked as a turner at Mao Khe coal mine.

- **Date of birth:** 12 May 1932

- **Education:**

I finished the 5th grade at Dong Trieu School. I studied in both Vietnamese and French. However, I just used French when I worked. I started to work at 13 years old. At that time, my father's working card was No. 22, mine was No. 52.

My father and I both worked in a train repairing workshop of Mao Khe coal company in Hon Gai. I worked here for one year and joined the army.

- **When did you join the army?**

I joined the army on 1st June 1946.

- **Which unit were you in when joining the army?**

I worked in a small arm factory in Mao Khe. It was a small arm factory located in Chi Linh, Hai Duong. I followed my father who also worked at this factory. My task was repair artillery. This factory was located in Mao Khe until 1947, when it was moved to Bac Kan.

On 7 October 1947, French troops landed into Bac Kan by parachute and I joined the attack in Deo Giang. My father also joined this attack, but he followed other direction.

In 1948, I parted from my father when one part of the small arm factory was moved to Nha Nam in Bac Giang. I followed the factory to Bac Giang.

In 1948, I studied in a vocational training school in more than one year. This school was located in Phu Tho. At that time, I was selected among many soldiers to study there. I studied in French.

- **Were you militarily trained when working at the small arm factory?**

Not much. Just some basic things.

When moving to Bac Giang, I continued working in the small arm factory for more than one year.

By 1949, I joined a new regiment: Mountain Artillery Regiment 675. I worked with a mobile team to repair artillery. I also could use artillery. When we competed each other in disassembling and installing a gun, I did faster than gunners. I had a right to test-fire the gun to check its technical status before gunners used it. When I agreed, gunners could use it. This mobile team was directly under the command of the regiment's military weapon section.

Then I joined the Border campaign on the front of Road No. 4 from Lang Son to Cao Bang in 1950. I still worked in the mobile team and followed artillerymen and worked directly with guns. Before a gun was fired, it had to be checked whether it worked or not. We were called doctors for guns.

In the Border campaign, our side had Artillery Regiment 675, or six 75mm artillery companies. Each platoon was one battery. China also provided some guns taken from Chinese Kuomintang. These guns were made in USA. Eight or nine guns were provided by China to form this artillery regiment in China. After that, we collected guns from the enemy in many areas to form six companies under the regiment, including one company with all made-in-USA guns, one company with French guns, one company with Japanese guns and one company with guns collected from various areas.

- How did you join Company 802?

In July 1952, Uncle Ho ordered to form a unit of motorized artillery named Tat Thang Artillery Regiment (*Tat Thang = sure of victory*). Therefore, the whole Tat Thang Regiment travelled to China for learning about artillery. All of guns in this regiment were 105mm.

I stayed with Regiment 675 until July 1952, when the order to form Tat Thang Regiment was given.

I went to China by early 1953. By late 1953, the whole unit was ordered to return to prepare for the campaign of Dien Bien Phu. However, there were no vehicles. At that time, there was a medical examination. Thanks to my tall and big figure, I was allowed to stay at the Army officer school. At that time, guns were available, but trucks were not. This was our army officer school, but it was located in China. Thanks to my education, I moved to a unit in charge of measuring interval, co-ordinate... However, the platoon commander Nguyen Huu My said that driving was important at that time. And I learnt how to drive. I learnt how to drive in Mong Tu (Kunming, China) in six months (1953). Company 28 with more than 100 persons learnt how to drive. We were first soldier drivers of Vietnamese artillery force.

China provided us twenty 105mm-guns taken from Chinese Kuomintang. Four more guns were taken from the French in the battle of Dong Khe.

When we learnt how to drive, anyone who drove better would be the main driver, while the others would be assistants. I was considered one of five best drivers.

Each artillery truck had three drivers including one main driver, one supporting driver who could replace the main driver and one assistant. There were always three persons on one truck. The assistant would sit next to the door and use chocks to prevent the truck from going down if necessary, because the brake could be broken. When the main driver felt tired, the second driver would drive.

It was very stressful to drive the artillery truck. We were so sleepy that we had to chew some bitter quinine to stay awake. We were also forced to smoke to stay awake. Sometimes we had to rub chili pepper around eyes to stay awake.

- Did you drive GMC at that time?

I drove GMC.

- Were you trained to drive Soviet Union trucks?

At that time, there were about four trucks made in Soviet Union which were managed by one company. Soviet Union trucks had one disadvantage: It would become too hot when running. It was because of hot weather in Vietnam but cold weather in Soviet Union. Therefore, it was very hard to start the engine. When starting the engine, we had to do manually, not using the automatic motor. Soviet Union trucks were strong but heavy. However, some kinds of Soviet Union trucks were suitable in Vietnam, such as GAZ 60 which could run flexibly. US trucks were not suitable due to slipperiness.

Among artillery trucks, there was one taken from the battle of Dong Khe and I drove this one. It was interesting that I knew this truck since the battle of Dong Khe.

- Did you learn how to drive GMC in China?

GMCs were made in USA and taken by China from Chinese Kuomintang. When I learnt in China, I mostly learnt how to drive GMC.

- Did you return to the country by late 1953?

By late 1953, all of artillery units had to return and garrison in Tuyen Quang.

I returned in October 1953. In this trip, I met my wife when she was just 13 years old. We got married in 1960, seven years after the first time seeing each other.

- When returning from China, did you gather in Yen Bai first?

No.

On the way home, soldiers were transported by trucks on some road sections. On some other sections, trucks were transported by raft to the country and soldiers had to walk. We gathered in Trai Cay in Tuyen Quang. Guns were transported by raft or trucks, while we walked to the gathering location. This trip took about 15 days. For every two marching days, we would stop for a rest.

- What did you do when coming to Tuyen Quang?

All soldiers gathered in Trai Cay for training. There was one company of drivers having no trucks at that time. They would study politics and they would be provided with trucks later. There were three persons in charge of one truck.

- What did you learn in political classes?

About Vietnamese revolution, like how successful the August Revolution was, how the morale of fighting French was...

At that time, the Department of Transport specialized in driving cargo vehicles, not driving artillery trucks. Drivers of transport vehicles also drove GMCs and they did not learn how to drive it in China.

Meanwhile, drivers trained in China learnt how to drive artillery trucks. In training, we drove in Kunming. The gun was 2.1ton heavy.

After trucks were handed over, every morning, we would walk from the gathering area to the parking tunnel for one and a half hour. Trucks were kept in the tunnel to keep secret. Every day, we would come there to maintain and get familiar with trucks. We disassembled spark-plugs to clean. We started the engine once a week. It was quite cold at that time and we had to start the engine once a week.

- Did the truck transport gunners?

When a gun was transported, there was always one team of seven gunners on the truck. They were the ones who would use that gun. Because the driver knew how to use the gun, he was considered the eighth gunner.

- Why did the driver have to know how to fire the gun?

The driver needed to know how to fire the gun so that he could replace one gunner.

- What did the artillery truck transport?

Each truck transported two tons of ammunitions, while the gun had to be pulled. The logistic team cooked for each company. Drivers were given priority. They also got priority with cigarette. If pork was available, the driver would have up to three pieces of pork.

Each company had four artillery trucks and two vehicles transporting rice and food. Food included dry provisions, dried fish sauce and wild vegetable. These two

vehicles were smaller with the load of two tons. They had big wheels and were made in Russia.

- When did you receive the order to serve the campaign of Dien Bien Phu?

We marched from China to Go Gai in Phu Tho to wait for the order for months. This was not near Trai Cay. On 22 December, when gathering in Trai Cay (Tuyen Quang), we began marching. However, we did not know that we would serve the campaign of Dien Bien Phu. I had a poem about this event, which was titled “The first day elephants going to war”. At that time, we were ordered not to turn on lights to keep secret. We just used a very small light. From Trai Cay, we moved to Tuyen Quang Town at 11pm and we still did not know where we were going. We just thought that we would head to the lowland. When we just arrived at the crossroads of Tuyen Quang, one man holding a flag signaled the direction for vehicles to turn to the road to Yen Bai. At that time, we knew that we would head to the Northwest.

After that, we marched for two days and rested for one day. On this second trip, we would go to Tuan Giao. French aircrafts dropped bombs all the day. We always moved at nighttime. It was so secret. For the distance of 8km to Lung Lo and Pha Din Passs, a new road had to be built and trees were planted along so that it would be open for artillery trucks at nighttime and covered in the daytime. Trees for camouflage were planted in baskets.

- When you did not march in the daytime, how did you cover your trucks?

Gunners and drivers had to dig tunnels for artillery trucks and cover them carefully.

- Were there any criteria to choose a place for rest?

Yes, the place must be near a stream so that we could rest, bathe and boil water.

Our distance from Lung Lo to Pha Din and from Pha Din to Dien Bien Phu was 82km. The first gathering location was in Tuan Giao where political re-education classes were held in two days. At that time, we did not call the campaign of Dien Bien Phu. We used the code name Tran Dinh to keep secret. In these classes, we were briefed on the morale and target of this battle and we were told to win at any cost to create favorable conditions for the diplomatic front.

After that, we continued our march. We stopped at the second gathering location, but for a short time, just one day. There was no more political re-education here.

On the way to Tuan Giao, we also had an examination to see who met enough criteria for the campaign. For commanders, some would not be delivered with a short gun if they lacked some criteria. After the political re-education was over, guns were delivered for all.

- How long did it take from Tuan Giao to Dien Bien Phu?

It depended on each unit. One night, I drove just one kilometer due to slippery and muddy road.

Pha Din Pass was high but it was drivable. The hardest thing was when we could not drive due to French bombardment. We had to disassemble wheels and battery, then put soil on the truck's body for camouflage so that it would not be detected by enemy aircrafts.

- Driving on a high pass: The fourth and fifth gear were used to drive on a flat road, while the third gear was used for running up a slope with supporting gear (số phụ) so that the truck could run slowly. Therefore, we had to change to supporting gear. When we ran up and ran down, we had to use supporting gear to run slowly. However, it was very dangerous to use this gear when going down. If the truck was too heavy, the supporting gear would fail to work and the truck would run down freely.

It was very difficult for the truck to run up and down a pass and it had to run slowly. On a dangerous road section, the driver would be the only one on the truck, while gunners had to get off. Because on such a road section, one side was the abyss and the other side was the mountain and if the truck turned over, all on the truck would die. Each artillery truck needed four chocks, including two chocks used for the truck and two ones for the artillery. When the truck ran on a slope, gunners had to get off, holding chocks and walking next to the truck to chock it.

- How many kilometers per day did the truck run on the distance from Tuan Giao to Dien Bien Phu?

Very slow due to French interdiction. Sometimes it took four or five hours to run a short distance. Due to time-bombs dropped by the French, engineers had to use white parachute fabric to signal so that trucks could avoid them. There were many dancongs. They also helped us on the way. There were both dancongs in charge of building roads and pushing pack-bikes along the way. We had to ask dancongs and youth volunteers to pull the artillery truck when it got stuck. At that time, the truck needed to be pulled by up to about 100 persons. My truck got stuck in the mud for many times. At that time, we had to disconnect the truck and the gun. After the truck passed the muddy road section, the gun would be pulled after. This gun alone was 2.1ton heavy. The truck was two tons heavy, not mention tens of ammunitions on the truck. Therefore, it was too heavy to be pulled through the mud. The truck and the gun must be parted. When facing with this muddy road section, we cut down trees to pave the road for the truck.

- When arriving at Dien Bien Phu, where did you stop?

I stopped outside Dien Bien. I don't remember the name of that place. When arriving at Km75, the artillery truck had to stop and the gun must be pulled manually to the

battlefield. It was 7km from this place to Dien Bien. It took us about one week from Tuan Giao to this place. At that time, the hardest thing was pull the gun manually to the battlefield. When arriving here, we had to hide the truck.

- In January 1954, when the decision of changing the motto was made and guns were ordered to be pulled out, what were you doing?

At that time, when the French dropped tanks, heavy mortars and 155mm artillery by parachute, General Giap telephoned Uncle Ho to ask for his direction. General Giap decided to change the motto to “Steady attack, steady advance” and order to pull guns out. It was difficult to pull guns in. However, it was even more difficult to pull guns out. At that time, there was a 7km-long slope and guns could not be pulled manually. We had to set up a winch to pull guns. Sometimes we had to hang guns on the tree.

I did not have to pull guns. I was tasked to keep trucks safe and secret. Infantrymen took charge of pulling guns out. At that time, I was 7km from Dien Bien Phu.

There was one problem. The route used to pull guns in was detected and subjected to French continuous interdiction. When guns were pulled out, tunnels were dug to hide guns.

- When guns were being pulled out, what did drivers do?

Drivers had to prepare trucks. The duration for pulling guns in for the second time just lasted about half a month. However, when guns were pulled out, many wondered: Was it due to fear of the French that guns were pulled out? Therefore, education and awareness raising had to be done. When guns were pulled in, the action station was prepared again.

For the second time of pulling guns in, the starting point was at Km64, the gathering location. From Km64 to Dien Bien Phu, guns were pulled by vehicles. However, from Km75, guns still had to be pulled manually to tunnels on the battlefield. We still had to follow the previous route to pull guns in, for there was no other way. Drivers were given priority to visit artillery tunnels before opening fire to attack Him Lam. It was because that fact that 60% of the victory of artillery in Dien Bien Phu was credited to drivers. In the second time of pulling guns in, tunnels were rebuilt to make them stronger. All of soldiers moved in tunnels.

During the remaining 55 days and nights, gunners stayed on the battlefield along the hill side, while drivers stayed at the foot of the battlefield. We had to get ready in case artillery tunnels were hit and the order to withdraw was given, we had to drive trucks to transport guns. In general, artillery tunnels were safe and we never had to transport guns out of the battlefield. In this campaign, the number of gunners killed was not high.

- Ammunition supply

When guns were pulled in, ammunitions were already brought together. About 2,000 ammunitions. Ammunitions were placed in tunnels, not on trucks. Ammunitions in the campaign were supplied by transport vehicles, while our artillery trucks were just used to pull guns.

Artillery trucks were not used to transport food in the campaign, either.

- How did you know about the news of Dien Bien Phu Victory?

When the attack on Him Lam was going on, we stayed in tunnels with gunners. During the first 40 minutes, there were continuous explosions. Then each shot was heard.

When enemy troops surrendered, I saw a lot of white flags. At that time, I approached the airport closely. I followed the trench here to collect war booty.

At the end of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French dropped many food parachutes. At that time, our soldiers cut off the airport already and collected many of these parachutes. Right after De Castries was arrested and taken out of his tunnel, I also entered his tunnel to see all of documents on the table. I was the first one entering De Castries' tunnel to see what he had. At that time, I saw that he had a lot of documents on the army of Viet Minh.

After the victory, I stayed there for one month to clear the battlefield. We took and used French trucks to pull French guns, while our trucks still pulled our guns. We also drove the French's GMCs to transport French guns and war booty. Several 155mm-guns were destroyed by the French. However, they could not destroy all of their guns and trucks in time. At that time, I saw that French trucks were not fully covered. Only truck heads were covered.

After the campaign of Dien Bien Phu, I drove a French truck back and I also used a French truck when I was in China to transport our remaining 105mm guns which were kept for reserve there.

I did not transport guns from the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu out. At that time, some persons with experience of pulling guns were selected to pull French guns to the gathering location. And from this location, guns would be transported gradually out of Dien Bien Phu. More than ten French guns were collected. I just collected French trucks and drove them to the gathering location in the battlefield of Dien Bien Phu. Drivers would collect trucks, while gunners would take charge of guns. I don't remember the exact number of collected trucks. After that, guns and trucks were gathered at the airport to be transported out of Dien Bien Phu.

At that time, the French still dropped food supplies to French prisoners of war. The airport was under our control and we could collect these parachutes. The French dropped many parachutes.

- Did you meet your father on the marching way or in the campaign?

On the marching way (1954), my father sent me a very nice spanner, for he knew that I was driving and I needed these tools. At that time, my father was working at the repairing station of Division 351 in Co Noi. I was the station leader. I did not meet my father on the marching way.

After 1954, my father managed the repairing station of Regiment 675. In 1955, I met my father when I was preparing for the parade at Bach Mai Airport on the occasion of the National Day.

- How did you feel?

We told each other many funny things. My mother died when I was seven. Then my father lived in Vinh Yen and he died at 70 years old.

- What did you do after Dien Bien Phu?

I joined the Anti-America Resistance War. I also joined the battle in Quang Tri. I studied a lot, at the Army officer of logistics and Army officer of politics. I still worked at Division 351. After that, I worked as the commissar of the Department of Artillery Logistics, then the director of the artillery truck repairing factory and the principal of a driving school of the General Department of Engineering (1987). In 1990, I traveled to Soviet Union for vocational training for one year.

I was admitted to the Party in February 1955. I retired in 1994. After retiring, I learnt about acupuncture, oriental medicine...