

Interview Number 14 Trần Vát

Location: ██████████ Ngo Quyen, Hai Phong

Time: 14.00 – 16.30, 29 July 2017

Place of birth: Vĩnh Bảo, Hải Phòng

Date of birth: 6/1/1934

Enlisting day: 10/1950

Role at DBP: Ammunition Number, Coy 816, Bn 383, Regt 367, Div 351

I volunteered to join the army. I brought only one set of clothes and set off. My mother was prissy and told me not to join the army. I fought in Kien An, Left bank Military Region. At that time, the French troops raided my village for many times. Therefore, young people had to join the army. I joined the local guerrilla at 16 years old.

Recruitment was done in communes. Many people of the same age with me also joined the army at that time.

My family was of poor peasant class. My family had many children but many were killed by the enemy. Just my mother, my younger brother and I still survived at that time. My younger brother also joined the public security later.

Before joining the army, I studied in my village school early. Thanks to my study, I was able to join the force of anti-aircraft artillery. I could not speak French. I nearly finished my study at primary school. Later, when I was demobilized, I went on with my study at the University of Planned Economy.

I joined the local army first. I was a member of provincial army section of Vinh Bao, Kien An, then Left bank Military Region. I joined the Division 351 by late 1952. At that time, soldiers in units were recruited according to the level of education so that they could learn about new artillery. I was recruited and after that, we marched from Hai Phong to Hoa Binh and Phu Tho, crossing the enemy rear, walking at nighttime and resting at daytime to approach Dinh Hoa in Thai Nguyen. Regiment 367 was established with three battalions of recruits. No designation for battalions at that time. After that, these three battalions marched via Quan Vuong to Lang Son. Here, fully-covered vehicles transported us to the border gate of Dong Dang. After crossing the border gate, we took a train to Tan Duong, China for training in how to use artillery and political education in six

months. From March to August 1953, I learnt about new artillery in China. I had not been trained in artillery in Vietnam before.

After that, these three battalions with nearly 2,000 persons were divided into smaller units. They were sent to many locations to learn about each part such as: carriage, artillery... or information, observation, reconnaissance...

We used 33mm gun with one barrel. This type of artillery was transported from Soviet Union via China and China helped us with training. During these six months, we learnt with the support of an interpreter. The interpreter was a Vietnamese. From now, battalions had their designation: 381, 383, 385, 392, 394 and 396. These were six battalions of anti-aircraft guns. However, of which, there were only two battalions with the most excellent performance, including 383 and 394 who were allowed to return to join the campaign of Dien Bien Phu. These two battalions took charge of pulling artillery in and out.

- Which campaign did you participate before the campaign of Dien Bien Phu?

Before Dien Bien Phu, I joined many campaigns such as Hoang Hoa Tham, Ha Nam Ninh...

- Can you remember the names of your regiment and battalion commanders and political officers?

Vũ Thanh Giang: Commander of Battalion 383

Trịnh Đình Hậu: Commander of Battalion 394

- The name of commander of Regiment 367: I remember just the name Ty. The commissar was Mau.

- Battalions of artillery in the campaign of Dien Bien Phu

In the third phase, the force of Regiment 376 together with Battalion 381 pulled guns straight from Tan Duong to Dien Bien Phu. In fact, during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, there were just 24 anti-aircraft guns. Not many. I was in Company 816, Battalion 383.

Battalion 383 ought to have four companies: 815, 816, 817 and 818 of 12.7mm machine guns. At the battle of Dien Bien Phu, besides two battalions 383 and 394, there was Company 828 of Battalion 392. After returning, this force was divided into three battalions, including one battalion of anti-aircraft gun. In fact, Battalion 383 and 394 had their own company of 12.7mm machine guns. When

pulling artillery to Dien Bien Phu, these two companies of machine gun together with Company 828 of 12.7mm machine gun formed a separate battalion of anti-aircraft machine gun. They were organized in tertiary formation, or three companies per battalion.

Only Battalion 394 and two companies of Battalion 383 including 815 and 816 were able to join the opening attack on Him Lam. Meanwhile, guns of Company 817 were still on the way.

After the attack on Him Lam was over, I was on the hilltop at the dawn and saw prisoners of war queued to go out. After taking over Him Lam, Company 816's battlefield of artillery was moved to near Him Lam, next to Him Lam Hill to protect and create conditions for Company 817 to get to their action station. Company 815 shot down a Morale at 8am of March 14. It was the first aircraft shot down in Dien Bien Phu. Company 816 shot down a Handcarf at 2pm on the same day.

- In August 1953, how did your unit return to Vietnam?

By vehicles pulling artillery for several days. The march formation included an one-axle vehicle which transported a nurse and those in charge of observation and information. It was called the commanding vehicle. We traveled from China to Vietnam by vehicle. When arriving at Tuyen Quang, we went into the jungle of *nira* (a kind of bamboo) in the west of Tuyen Quang and waited there. We did not stay there for a long time. Just more than a week. After that, in December 12, Company 816 marched in the formation with Battalion 383, crossing the river by Hien ferry (a ferry pulled with a string near Yen Bai Town in the north of Tuyen Quang), O Lau ferry, then following Lung Lo and Ta Khoa Pass to the Road No 6 to Son La (via Co Noi), Pha Din and Tuan Giao and taking a rest at Km62 (62km from Dien Bien Phu).

- What was your main role at Dien Bien Phu?

I took the position No 5, in charge of supplying ammunitions. Six gunners controlled one gun, including the captain. The role of No 1 to No 6: No 1 in charge of range, No 2 in charge of direction, No 5 in charge of supplying ammunitions... Jobs or fighting positions of one group of gunner include: adjusting the gun and its range (raising the gun up or down), its direction, supplying and loading shells (the last number).

- How many ammunitions were there for each gun?

Each ammunition box for an anti-aircraft gun had five ammunitions. When there was no ammunition left, new ammunitions would be supplied. The number of ammunitions for each gun was not fixed. Dancongs would provide ammunitions in case of shortage. There was a machine to cut fuse (ngòi). We had explosive ammunition and kinetic energy penetrator (đạn xuyên). When the captain ordered, the one in charge of supplying ammunitions had to cut the fuse. There were often five persons on the gun platform.

One platoon had two guns. One company had two companies with four guns. One commanding platoon included ones in charge of observation, information and reconnaissance and one nurse. Cooks worked at the company level. On the way of marching, each company had five vehicles, including one commanding vehicle with one nurse, those in charge of information and reconnaissance and one cook. Four vehicles pulled four guns. Ammunitions and personal belongings were transported by vehicle. However, only light belongings were carried to the battlefield, while personal heavy things were left in a separate storage guarded by one person. Each one brought only two sets of clothes. There were no boots, just canvas shoes and light personal belongings.

- Pulling artillery

Engineers would go first to clear the way. Battalion commanders had to march one month before to check the route. When dancongs were opening the road, they had to widen a dangerous bend if it was difficult for guns. If it was a too sharp bend, the gun would be disassembled.

Dancongs did not help with transporting guns on the way. Soldiers themselves had to disassemble guns. It was not very difficult. When pulling guns, after the gun was disassembled, the captain would have to hold the handle (cần) to control the gun which was pushed from behind. There would be one person in charge of holding chokes to choke the gun. Infantrymen mostly took charge of pulling guns. Soldiers of Division 308 and 312 had to pull guns. On the way of pulling guns, infantrymen were sent to locations to pull guns.

Guns were pulled at nighttime, while ropes were made from river-leaf creeper at daytime. Due to French bomb, my unit's deputy commissar died on the way of pulling guns together with many dancongs transporting ammunitions. On the way

of marching, almost nothing was destroyed by bombs. Battalion 363 was not bombed. However, Battalion 394 was bombed after the attack on Doc Lap. On the way, I heard that there was one 105mm gun falling into the abyss and killing one battery.

After the attack on Him Lam, knowing that the battlefield would be detected, our unit withdrew from that battlefield. At that time, we had to build simulated battlefield.

My unit arrived at Dien Bien Phu before General Vo Nguyen Giap made a decision to change the motto. It was about January 1954. At that time, anti-aircraft guns and 105mm guns were ready for the battlefield. However, fortifications were very shallow. The battlefield was not stable after guns were pulled in. Then the order to pull guns out was announced. When my battalion pulled guns to the gathering area, it was the second day of New Year already. At that time, each one had one glutinous rice ball and one piece of dried buffalo meat. When the motto was changed, fortifications for 105mm guns were dug on the hill side and anti-aircraft guns would protect 105mm guns. During the time of pulling guns out, the battlefield was strengthened and fortifications were rebuilt. When my unit arrived for two days, the first attack on Him Lam began.

When the battlefield was controlled, guns were not pulled by hand in the second phase. Engineers built one road for vehicles to pull guns straight to the battlefield. My unit just mobilized a small part of force for building the battlefield and fortifications. Most of these works were done by engineers. After the attack on Him Lam, my company was stationed at the foot of Him Lam. After April 26, my company moved from the foot of Him Lam to Doi Chay. Because Hong Cum and Him Lam were located on the field of Muong Thanh, we moved to Doi Chay to cut the flight path between Hong Cum and Muong Thanh. The battlefield was moved there on April 26. We moved and pulled guns at nighttime. The scout party moved first. At that time, my unit shot two C19s which were confirmed later to be piloted by Americans. These two aircrafts were damaged. One landed on Gia Lam Airport, while the other crashed at Dien Bien Phu.

- Could you please describe the battlefield of artillery?

It was very narrow, about 100m long with four fortifications for four guns and one commanding fortification in the middle. Each battlefield of artillery had four

guns. The fortification for one gun was just two meters wide with one entrance. It was an open fortification. Gunners would carry ammunitions. A nearby tunnel with vaulted entrance was the place for resting.

I don't remember the number of ammunitions for each gun. However, we had about four boxes of ammunitions at that time. I don't know where ammunitions were made. However, the box was printed with Russian.

When opening the box, I took the belt with 5 ammunitions and supplied them to the gun.

We did not lack ammunitions for anti-aircraft guns. However, we saved ammunitions.

- Were there Chinese advisors in your unit?

There were Chinese advisors at the level of company during the first period of the battle. They mostly stayed in the headquarters tunnel. There were several ways to fire down aircrafts. We would fire when the aircraft was diving, rising up or flying. Chinese advisors often showed us two ways to fire: when the aircraft was approaching and when it was rising up (in Vietnamese: bắn đón (bắn để nó đến), bắn khi nó ngóc lên). Therefore, during the first phase of attacking Him Lam, it was very ammunition-consuming and the result was not very good. Therefore, we had to learn from experience after the attack on Him Lam. We had to fire when the aircraft was diving near us. At that time, we could see it directly to fire. We would not wait for the aircraft to rise up to fire. Thanks to that, we shot down more aircrafts.

At that time, these anti-aircraft guns had no radar but one machine used for observation which was called measuring device. When the peace was restored in 1954, I went to China to receive guns and these guns had radar. 33mm guns aided by Soviet Union also had the machine of observation. We often waited until the enemy aircraft was in the range of 1,000-1,500m to fire. Meanwhile, Chinese advisors often told us to fire when the aircraft was in the range of 3,000m.

The guns had no guided-ammunition. When firing, we loaded five ammunitions and the gunner No 2 stamped on the trigger, then fired and halted. It meant he would fire and lift his foot, not keeping his feet on the trigger for a long time like with the bike brake. He would not fire continuously.

On 24 September 1954, Division 367 was formed. In December, I went to China to transport guns including 88mm, 40mm, 20mm, 37mm and 12.7mm. Soviet Union 88mm guns had radar. We only had 85mm, 75mm and 100mm guns in the anti-American Resistance War.

- What was your rank in the campaign of Dien Bien Phu?

A soldier. I was not a Party member at that time. I was admitted to the Party in 1960.

It was very difficult to be admitted to the Party at that time.

Before the campaign of Dien Bien Phu, I was trained in China. I also joined classes of political re-education in six months in China. I had three months for artillery and three months for politics. I learnt about land reform in these classes. Everything changed a lot after land reform. I did not come back to my hometown during this time. I did not visit my mother until 1956. Therefore, I did not know clearly about the situation after the land form in my hometown. I got married in 1964.

- Were you informed of the Geneva Conference while fighting?

We heard no news about the Geneva Conference during the campaign of Dien Bien Phu. Commissars and political officers came to encourage us in fighting. They mentioned the land reform and Uncle Ho's words, not the Geneva Conference.

-The fighting morale on the front:

In general, soldiers were very determined to liberate the nation. They said they would be determined to fight till the end in the campaign of Dien Bien Phu. Just victory would bring us glory. Our hometown and family were having a new life thanks to land reform.

- Food

Soldiers in charge of anti-aircraft guns were not hungry, for we had glutinous rice when marching to Dien Bien. In China, we had green beans mixed with rice. When coming home, each company carried several bags of green beans. At that time, we gave all to cooks. Soldiers in charge of anti-aircraft guns did not have to carry heavy load. We were provided with rice prepared by cooks everyday. Sometimes there was no drinking water. We had to drink rain water. One time,

the engine of the vehicle became hot. We drank water from the vehicle and our personal water was used for the vehicle.

When we came home from China, we brought a lot of cigarette. However, we ran out of cigarette on the front and we had to use pipe tobacco. Soldiers in charge of anti-aircraft guns were not so hungry. We also collected many French parachutes and cut them for camouflage. Parachutes of flares were spread in the tunnels for sleeping. We were not allowed to go out of the battlefield of artillery. We always had to sit on the gun platform. Therefore, we could not collect many French parachutes. We did not have parachutes of food like infantrymen.

- Health

In general, health was not very good but we still had to fight. When there was no alert, we took a rest in the tunnel. In case of alert, we returned to our guns.

It was not difficult to transport guns to the battlefield. Guns were put on fixed positions. When a gun was broken, it would be disassembled to be repaired. We did not have to move guns to avoid the enemy. Our anti-aircraft guns were protected by 12.7mm machine gun of low range. The anti-aircraft gun was of the high range. 105mm guns were located halfway up the mountain. We often joked and called soldiers in charge of anti-aircraft guns and 105mm guns “chocolate soldiers” (in Vietnamese: lính cầu), because our force did not suffered heavy losses as infantrymen. Engineers dug tunnels for us to move guns in.

- Was the battlefield of artillery detected by the French?

The French seldom detected our battlefield of artillery. Just one time. When Battalion 394 marched to control the battlefield, they still marched on the highway in the morning and they were discovered. The position of infantrymen was at least three kilometers from our position. And the French fire power focused on this force and it was hard for them to detect us. Anti-aircraft guns were protected and supported. When we marched at daytime urgently and had to come close to the French, 105mm guns would fire at French positions continuously so that we could move anti-aircraft guns safely. For example, before we started, 105mm guns were ordered to fire continuously at A1 Hill so that anti-aircraft guns could be moved without being detected. 105mm guns belonged to Regiment 45.

- Life on the front line

It was normal with no special problems. However, in fact, we just felt comfortable when our shift was over after three to five days. When one battery was allowed to take a rest, the other battery would take the shift. There were four guns on the battlefield.

- The last day on Him Lam

I was very happy to see French troops surrendering. We saw long lines of French troops on the way. When we pulled guns out to protect new positions, we saw them.

- When standing on the top of Him Lam, did you think that the battle was over?

At that time, we did not know if the campaign was over or not. Even when the campaign of Dien Bien Phu ended, we still thought that we would advance to the lowland to continue fighting. At that time, we heard about a cease-fire. We even wondered why we needed a cease-fire and we wanted to overpower them.

- Did you know in advance that Dien Bien Phu was a decisive battle?

As soldiers, we could not know that was a decisive battle.

- What is the one thing that you most remember about Dien Bien Phu?

At that time, we just wanted to fight and finish the battle as soon as possible. We had not other wish, for it was just a valley there.

- What did you do after the campaign of Dien Bien Phu?

After Dien Bien Phu, I was demobilized. In 1954, I came to China to receive guns and came back to train on how to use artillery. At that time, my rank was sublieutenant and then company commander. After that, I was demobilized. I studied at the National Economics University and worked in the coal industry in Quang Ninh. I retired in 1993. I was also deployed to many places such as Bac Kan, Thai Binh... And in 1978, I came back to Hai Phong to work as a chief accountant and deputy director of a Hai Phong-based coal factory.