

# Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap Remembers

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## INTRODUCTION

I made my first trip to Viet Nam in 1988 and was fortunate enough to secure an interview with Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap. I had been teaching Viet Nam for some ten years before I received permission to go to that land. General Giap kindly let me interview him and later we corresponded. I told him on my second visit to Viet Nam a few months later that I planned to write his biography and he replied that he remembered me from our earlier meeting and expressed his pleasure that I planned to write about him for, he said, he wanted any book written in the West on his life to be done "with the honesty and seriousness of a good historian." I hope I fulfilled his desire.

It quickly became apparent that almost everything written in the West about Giap was riddled with errors. No one knew the name of his mother or father or the year of his birth or when he went off to school in Hue or why he was expelled or why he was sent to Lao Bao prison or how long he was an inmate there or how important journalism was to him or the name of his wife or who her family was or how many children Giap had or what happened to his eldest child or what happened to him after he fled north into China at the outbreak of World War II or how he organized the hill people into an anti-French cadre or what was the name of his first armed group or the name and occupation of his second wife-on and on and on.

There was little written on Giap in the West in any case. If one consults the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, one finds very little about Giap. *Dissertations in Progress* is no more rewarding. *University Microfilms* lists 520 studies on Vietnamese topics from 1940 to the present but only one focused to any extent on Giap. The Frenchman who fought with the Viet Minh, George Boudarel, has published a book entitled *Giap!*, but it has little text and is primarily a picture book. Robert J. O'Neill, an Australian, has given us two books: *General Giap: Politician and Strategist* and *The Strategy of General Giap Since 1964*, but their content is similar and they leave many questions unanswered. French speakers can peruse Gerard Le Quang, *Giap: ou, la guerre du peuple* and readers of Vietnamese can work through the pages of Huy Phong and Yen Anh, *Nhan then huyen thoai Vo Nguyen Giap: hoa quang vay muon cho cuoc chien tuong tan*. Yet most of us read neither French nor Vietnamese and the works of all these authors are now generally unavailable.

A retired British army brigadier general Peter MacDonald, published *Giap: the Victor in Vietnam* in 1993. It may well be the sorriest book I have ever read and I reviewed it as a work without redeeming historical, literary or biographical merit, riddled with errors, lacking understanding, and misleading in its text.

The late Douglas Pike, long a fixture at the University of California, Berkeley, and later at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, maintained an immense collection of documentary materials relating to Indochina, and in his writings, he occasionally focused on Giap. Time after time he supplied incorrect information about the man, which was then picked up by others and perpetuated in their writings.

That was the state of publications on Giap when my own *Victory at any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam's Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap* was published by Brassey's in 1997. It would have been published several years earlier save for the wrath of the estimable Douglas Pike. I had submitted the manuscript to the University of Kansas Press and the acquisitions editor was impressed, but, as is normal, sent it out for review. One of those to whom he sent it was Douglas Pike who did not like the fact that I had repeatedly corrected his writings. His reaction was to write that "this manuscript should not be published. If boiled down to article length it might have some small utility for high school students." So, of course, the University of Kansas refused to consider publishing my Giap manuscript.

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Several years later it was picked up by Frank Margiotta, editor and publisher at Brassey's. It was published in hardback and paper. It was an AUSA book, and chosen by History Book Club. Published simultaneously in England, the London Times called it one of the two best books to appear there that year. It was nominated for a Pulitzer and won the President's Prize of the estimable Association of Third World Studies. It was widely and favorably reviewed. It was translated into Chinese, French, and Portuguese. I wonder if Doug Pike's reaction might possibly have been unprofessional?

My questions to Giap covered two legal sized sheets, and his answers filled twenty-three single-spaced legal sized pages. He answered my questions about his early life up to about the time of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. His wife, Dang Bich Ha, sent photographs of the general, of the both of them posing, of his children, of Giap with Ho Chi Minh. She also wrote me valuable information. Then there came a day when, in response to additional questions I posed to him, Giap refused to respond, despite his earlier willingness to do so. He inevitably had an excuse. He was "traveling," or attending "numerous ceremonies," or "celebrating historic anniversaries," or in mourning after the death of a brother. Giap finally gave only the terse explanation that he had already given me enough material and, in any case, the new questions had been "inspired by nonserious, even false and reactionary documents." The honeymoon was over. He never again responded to my efforts to contact him. Yet what he did tell me was enough to correct all previous efforts of authors who produced flawed books. His answers to my questions follow:

**Question: What is your name?**

Answer: My name is Giap. Vo Nguyen Giap.

**Question: Tell me when and where you were born.**

Answer: I was born August 25 of 1911 at An Xa, a small village of Quang-Binh province, situated alongside the pretty Kien-Giang River. The village was based on agriculture, the culture of rice. There were only three or four landed proprietors in the village.

**Question: Tell me about your father.**

Answer: My father was named Vo quang Nghiem. He was literate and was a teacher of Sino-Vietnamese [writing] and of Quoc Nhu [the Romanized Vietnamese language developed by Alexandre de Rhodes, the Jesuit missionary priest]. He also treated diseases with traditional medicines, but when his daughter died from dysentery, he gave up this profession.

**Question: Tell me about your mother.**

Answer: My mother's name was Nguyen thi Kien. She was the daughter of a member of the Can Vuong [Save the King] Resistance movement, a patriotic effort at the end of the nineteenth century to support the emperor against French colonialism. Although illiterate, she was able to recite poems by heart such as Kim van Kieu, Nhi Do Mai, Tong Chan Cue Hoa, and others. Passionately fond of Vietnamese history, she was delighted to tell the stories of the Can Vuong Resistance movement with all the vicissitudes it brought upon our people. She told these stories first to her children, and then to her grandchildren.

She was a housekeeper, and in charge of the familial farm. (His father was often away.) She stayed active until her death at age 84. She was passionately fond of plants, most happy when she could cultivate [something green] on her small piece of ground. Later, when I was away, she raised my daughter Hong Anh, after my wife Quang Thai died in Hoa Lo [literally "the oven", many years later called by US POWs, the Ha Noi Hilton] prison.

**Question: Did you have any brothers and sisters?**

Answer: Yes. the first child was a boy dead at tender years (precocious intelligence).

The second was a boy dead at tender years.

The third was a girl, also dead at tender years.

The fourth was Vo thi Diem, a sister who is now dead but who married and who had children.

The fifth was Vo thi Lien, a sister who is now dead but who married and who had children.

The sixth? I was the sixth. And [obviously] I am alive, am married, and have five children.

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The seventh was Vo Thuan Nho, still alive, married, the father of children, and who has served as Vice Minister of National Education.

The eighth child is Vo Thi Lai, a sister who is alive, who got married, and who is the mother of children. She retired from public service.

### **Question: What was life like when you were a child?**

Answer: At that time most children had no shoes to wear and so went barefoot. For everyday events they dressed in a short shirt and light cotton pantaloons. For more important events at age of about 12, children of rich families dressed by wearing a black tunic, white long pantaloons, black skinned slippers and a black turban.

### **Question: What was life like as a young boy in An Xa?**

Answer: Young boys were fond of many games but a favorite was battling, of playing warfare. The most popular game in this time was called "da kieu" and sometimes called "da cau." It was a game of skill and endurance played by keeping a flying coin (a kind of shuttlecock made of a holed coin balanced with a piece of paper used as a rudder) in the air as long as possible, by hitting it with the knee or the ankle. In this time coins had a small square hole in the center. When the coin fell onto the ground, the player must leave the game and turn the coin over to another boy.

### **Question: Tell about your early education.**

Answer: Children of An-Xa village learned to write the sinoVietnamese [characters] and the romanized Vietnamese called Quoc Ngu. They studied with a school master (Thay do). After school duty, they participated, like Giap, in daily family jobs. Some served as watchboys of the family water buffalo. Also in certain evenings they replaced their parents for pounding the rice (gin gao). In Quang Binh county, people used to give the rythmn [of harvesting rice by] by singing alternating songs and bumping up and down to the words and music of the song called "Ho gia gao", a typical regional song in Quang Binh province.

### **Question: What was your childhood like, General?**

Answer: My father, a school teacher, taught me to write Sino Vietnamese very early at age of four or five. My first reading book was Au hoc tan thu (New Manual for Beginners). It was written with a patriotic spirit and was published under the ephemeral reign of the progressionist emperor Duy-Tan. I also learned how to write the romanized alphabet of quoc ngu. Even as a little child I was very fond of studying. So every day my father kept a glass jar in which were my favorite sweets and delicacies to use to reward me when I did things right.

Then, when I was eight, I attended Tong classes of the canton, corresponding to fourth or fifth grade primary classes in the schools today. At age nine, I went to the Huyen classes of my district. And when I was eleven I went to Tinh provincial classes.

Children in An Xa learned how to take part in their family tasks, as I did, such as looking after buffaloes, or pounding rice, and so forth.

### **Question: Now tell me about your adolescent years, General.**

Answer: In 1923, aged twelve, I obtained my certificat d'etudes elementaires, called in Vietnamese so hoc yeu luoc, which was not easy to get by this time. I got the first place in the graduate list. In 1924, as a candidate taking the entrance examination to the Quoc Hoc school in Hue, I failed. In 1925 I tried the same examination again and achieved second place in the rankings. I was fourteen.

I left An Xa for Hue, got a room at a private house and attended classes at the Quoc Hoc school. Professors there included both French and Vietnamese people. In this lycee were taught all matters concerning the general knowledge of culture, such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, literature, history, and so forth. During my two years at the Quoc Hoc, I

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constantly kept first place at monthly grade results, except for one month when I placed second.

The Quoc Hoc school in Hue was indeed the cradle of the student patriotic movement of central Viet Nam. Students there used to share with one another texts and poems written patriotically. To this day, I remember one Vietnamese professor at the Quoc Hoc. He was a teacher of the quoc ngu and he liked to communicate progressive, patriotic opinions to his students.

Serious and hard-working, students at Quoc Hoc were very interested in politics. This main stream of feeling blew up at the least incident-on the occasion of the request for Phan boi Chau's liberation [Chau was a famous national patriot and leader of an independence movement] or the funeral of Phan chu Trinh {1872-1926. a leading anti-French reformer}.

One of my school mates, Hai Trieu, gave me a copy of the article Proces del a colonisation francaise written by Nguyen Ai Quoc [an early pseudonym of ho Chi Minh]. Later I discovered [patriotic] newspapers such as Le Paria and Viet Nam hon.

Since arriving at the Quoc Hoc school my awareness of politics strengthened. Very often, with some of my friends, we visited Phan boi Chau, who was sentenced to house arrest in Hue after he returned from exile. Phan boi Chau spoke about problems of Viet Nam to us, of colonialist malpractice, of democracy, and so forth. I also liked to organize meetings in my student room with my friends. Together we used to discuss about youth, about the school program, about colonialism and the world problems. I fluently read {in French} texts by Marx, by Lenin, by Nguyen Ai Quoc written in French.

The French headmaster chief and the supervisors were hard, even inquisitorial with the students. On one occasion I protested against an injustice committed by the headmaster chief concerning a student, Nguyen chi Dieu, a close friend of mine. During an examination, Dieu, well known for his anti-colonialist opinions, was charged arbitrarily with cheating. Another friend and I organized a student strike. This movement succeeded to an unthought-of extent and spread widely throughout central Viet Nam, from Quoc Hoc school to Dong Khanh, the associated school for girls. Then it spread even to Catholic high schools. Of course, because of my role in these events, I was expelled from the Quoc Hoc. I was not surprised by this decision. I acted in full consciousness of the consequences.

Despite the fact that I expected to be expelled, I still raged with anger and decided to write an article, in French, entitled "Down with the tyrant of Quoc Hoc." This article was published by L'Annam, a French language newspaper, published in Saigon, run by Phan van Truong. It was the only newspaper at that time which ventured to criticize French colonialism. The paper was successful not only in Hue, but in other towns of the country.

**Question: Those were exciting times for you, General. But tell me, since you had now been expelled from school, what did you do then?**

Answer: My friend Nguyen Chi Dieu [who had been accused of cheating] joined the Tan Viet party. His function within that party was to foment and spread ideological propaganda. I continued to live in Hue and organized an underground library. A great part of the documents were supplied by the French communist organizations.

Dieu persuaded me to join the Tan Viet party also [but we found it to be too conservative for our tastes and so] we laid the foundation of the first communist cell within that party.

**Question: It sounds as if you were interested in journalism. Was that the case?**

Answer: Yes. I soon found a job at the Tieng Dan newspaper. The editor in chief was Huynh Thuc Khang. Tieng Dan was the first important progressist newspaper in central Viet Nam.

When I wrote articles, I signed them with different names, such as Van Dinh and Hai Thanh. It was self protection because I was constantly spied upon by the French Deuxieme Bureau

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(equivalent to your F.B.I.) Still, at Tieng Dan I had opportunity to learn all aspects and problems of journalism, from world situations to commentaries to social analyses by way of investigations and reports. I wrote my articles with great care in choosing the best words as in the veracity of the facts. Most of my articles were published. Meanwhile, it happened that some of them were carefully censored, such as my article on "Trading firms with capital over one million dong." This article unveiled the French capitalist exploitation of Viet Nam.

### **Question: What was the next important phase of your life, General?**

Answer: It began after the failure of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets. French administrators increased their terrorist policies. By the end of 1930 I and a certain number of other militants were arrested. The sort of person included employees, peasants, workers, brain workers, and so forth. Among them was Professor Dang Thai Mai, my brother Vo thuan Nho, a young girl named Nguyen thi Quang Thai, and Lai, one of Quang Thai's friends. Quang Thai was 15 years old, a school girl from the Lycee DongKhanh. When sent to Hoa Lo, she did not yet know me.

Punishments were severe. Even teachers at the Quop Hoc were arrested and many of them received sentences of six or seven years. At first, I got a suspended sentence of two years because there were as yet no proofs against me, but at last I did get two years. Quang Thai and Lai got three years, Professor Dang Thai Mai received four years. We were all sent to the penitentiary of Lao Bao, in the mountains, next to the Laotian border. Many prisoners died there in the prison because the climate was so insalubrious.

Thirteen months later, a governmental order decided to reduce all sentences under four years. Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen thi Quang Thai, Lai, and other people were released from Lao Bao, one after the other. The court determined that I would have to go back to a forced residence in An Xa. Shortly afterwards, however, I came back to Hue, in the hope of reengaging myself with the Tieng Dan newspaper. But on the second day of my arrival, the French resident in Hue forbade me to stay there. So I returned to An Xa.

But life in a small village was not for me. I decided to go to Vinh to look for a job. I met again Professor Dang Thai Mai. I had known him formerly as a member of the Tan Viet. I lived in his house, close to the residence of the sisters Nguyen thi Minh Khai and Nguyen thi Quang Thai. In Vinh, I got a job as an accountant on Marechal Foch street and also gave private lessons in mathematics and French. Quang Thai was among my students. Then Professor Dang Thai Mai and his family decided to move to Ha Noi, and I chose to go with them.

### **Question: What happened after your arrival in Ha Noi?**

Answer: Once settled in the city, I continued to read, to study by myself and to do different small jobs in order to survive. I obtained the first part of the French baccalaureat. When I knew classes for free lance candidates were open in the Lycee Albert Sarraut, I applied. I was a bright student, and gained a first in philosophy. I rapidly obtained the second part of the baccalaureat.

### **Question: What happened then?**

Answer: I found a job at the private Lycee Thang Long where I taught history and literature. At the same time I applied to take courses at the Faculte de Droit at the University of Ha Noi. I was very interested in political economy and sought to learn that subject. Every day, in order to get to the Lycee Thang Long I had to walk down Trang Tien Street and at one of the intersections pass by a news bulletin board.

One afternoon in May 1936, while on my way to school, I saw on the news bulletin board a notice concerning French politics. In France, the "Front Populaire" composed of ten political organizations or so, among them the communist and socialist parties, forming the nucleus of the Front, had won at general elections. Immediately I decided to take advantage of these propitious circumstances for our anticolonialist movement, by publishing a newspaper. It would be a political tool for me and my group.

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On 6th of June 1936, two days after Leon Blum, the new French prime minister, took his oath of office, I began the newspaper *Hon tre tap moi* (Soul of Youth, new edition). This was only possible with the help of friends. Some teachers at Thang Long put their savings together to purchase the publishing rights of *Hon Tre* (Soul of Youth) and nearly went bankrupt doing so. This transaction saved us from a great deal of time, preventing us from the colonial administrative fuss connected with seeking a license for a newspaper to be published in the Vietnamese language.

*Hon tre tap moi* was practically the first newspaper in Viet Nam to promote democracy, to claim amnesty for political prisoners and to approve of the French Front Populaire. The newspaper was a success. There were not even enough copies printed to satisfy the number of readers. But, on the fifth issue, French authorities insisted on closing down our newspaper.

To get around these colonial administrative difficulties, I and my group decided to publish a newspaper in the French language. Thus on 16th of September 1936, *Le Travail* was born. I was its editor in chief. In late 1936, just released from jail, Truong Chinh joined me [Chinh was a longtime member of the Politburo and a communist functionary]. Soon thereafter Pham van Dong also came to work at *Le Travail* [Dong was also a Politburo member and long time communist functionary].

### **Question: General Giap, it sounds as if you were making real progress in your efforts to undermine French colonial government. Am I correct?**

Answer: Yes and no. On 16th April 1937 I received orders from the French Resident stopping all publication of *Le Travail*. I had published thirty issues of the paper. That was its whole life over its seven months of existence. They were exciting and productive for me. On one occasion, for example, I made a three hundred kilometer rough trip ride on my bicycle from Ha Noi to Cam Pha in order to write a report on some striking miners.

Closing down *Le Travail* didn't stop us. Under the leadership of Truong Chinh, I and the party committee published successively many newspapers both in French and in Vietnamese, such as *Rassemblement*, *En avant*, *Notre voix*, *Thoi the*, *Ha thanh thai bao*, *The gioi*, *Doi nay*, *Tin tuc*, *Ngay moi*, *Ban dan*, and lastly *Giai Phong*, another underground paper that was stopped after three issues when the authorities discovered the whereabouts of its press and seized it. Sometimes, in *Notre Voix*, a column appeared under the title *Lettre de Chine* (Letter from China), articles that were signed P. C. Lin, a pseudonym of Ho chi Minh. For all these papers I wrote mainly all my articles in French although I also took part in writing articles in Vietnamese for almost all the newspapers mentioned a moment ago. On 23 March 1937, as a delegate from the newspaper *Rassemblement*, I participated in the Congress of Newspapers of central Viet Nam.

Then on 24th of April 1937, I was chairman of the first Congress of newspapers of North Viet Nam, organized by the committee of the communist party. Tran Huy Lieu was vice chairman.

I was busy. During this period, I taught at Thang Long, attended courses at the University's *Faculte de Droit*, and still succeeded in passing the examination obtaining for me the license *en droit*. But the greater part of my time was indeed for writing in the papers. I knew all the process by now: writing a leading article, current events, news in brief, varied subjects, making investigations, reports, making up and composing, being a sub-editor, looking after the brush proof and very often being a newspaper man.

Sometimes the party would order Pham van Dong, Truong Chinh and Ho huu Nam to go on some special mission. I had to stay alone in front of a desk from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. the next morning, to write, to make up an entire issue of *Notre Voix*. After that, I had just enough time to run bringing to the press forty-eight typewritten pages, then to swallow down my breakfast, before rushing headlong to Lycee Thang Long. I still take pride in my journalism. In 1991 the Vietnamese journalists association awarded a medal to me reserved to journalists having been more than twenty-five years in this activity. I was very pleased.

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**Question: It seems you have always had a passion for creating and for orchestrating events through your journalistic efforts.**

Answer: Yes. Later, when I served with the military, I used comparing the preparation of a battle with combined operations to the production of a newspaper. For me, the least detail has its importance: the choice of type, the appropriate use of a word, the page make-up in composition, the balance of articles, their place on the pages, how to take advantage from a newsworthy event, and so forth. I spared no pains in writing in my papers and was very happy when readers took an interest in my publications.

My activities as a journalist will never leave me. In even the worst of times [as we struggled against the French], when I was with the Maquis, I kept up my work. In 1941 I contributed to the newspaper Viet Nam doc lap, an underground publication intended for the population of Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Lang Son. This paper had a circulation of only a few hundred and was printed on bad paper using bad ink. But it was successful because its articles were written in a style anyone could comprehend and, more especially, they were printed in easily legible large type. Then in 1944, I brought out Tieng sung reo (The Guns Rumble) a manuscript paper, for internal use only by members of the Army of liberation. Later, with Ho Chi Minh's agreement, I prepared Nuoc Nam moi (Nam, the new country). After publishing only seven issues, the August Revolution came. In the heat of the movement in those days, I continued writing articles for Co giai phong (The flag of the liberation), Cuu quoc (National welfare), and Sao yang (Golden Star).

**Question: Tell me about your marriage.**

Answer: I was married in 1939 to Nguyen Thi Quang Thai. Both of us were animated by the same [communist] faith and were dedicated to the same cause. Our elder friend, Professor Dang Thai Mai, totally approved of this union. Then on 4 January 1940 our child was born, a girl, whom I named Hong Anh (Red Queen of Flowers).

Only a few months later, in mid-June, I had to leave my young wife and our baby to go to China with Pham van Dong. The reason? In November 1939 the Indochinese Communist Party had decided to form a united anti-imperialist front and to make national liberation the order of the day. Direct contact had been renewed with Nguyen Ai Quoc who was living in the province of Kouang Si in China. In April 1940 the [communist] Central Committee decided to send me and Pham van Dong to China. The secretary general of the Tonkin Committee, Hoang van Thu, personally met with me before my departure to talk about launching a guerrilla movement.

Quang Thai also wanted to go [to China] with me but first had to find a safe place for the baby. Quang Thai and I said goodbye on the bank of West Lake, better known as Large Lake, one Friday evening in June after my classes at Thang Long school. With the baby in our arms, we walked along among the strollers at the lake like any young, contented, loving couple. We never saw one another again.

Quang Thai never had the time to find a safe place for Hong Anh. She was arrested and died in 1941 in Hoa Lo prison in Ha Noi. [Other evidence indicates that she was tortured to the point of insanity and then hung herself with her cloth belt.] Luckily, Quang Thai's younger sister was able to take the baby to the home of its paternal grandfather, Vo Quang Nghiem, and grandmother, Nguyen thi Kien, [at An Xa] in Quang Binh province. [Most writers claim the baby died at about the same time as her mother. They have been wrong. Hong Anh grew to adulthood and became one of Viet Nam's leading physicists!]

It was only while I served in the Maquis, in April 1945, a little before the meeting of the military commission of the Central Committee at Bac Giang that I accidentally learned of the death of Quang Thai. Truong Chinh told me. He had no idea at all that I had had no news of my family since my departure for China [in 1940]. The brutal shock [of this news] left me speechless, deathly pale, for long minutes. Then I left the gathering to be alone.

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Before that terrible news, at Cao Bang in 1942, I had other shocks. I learned of the execution of my sister-in-law, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Quang Thai's older sister. Minh Khai was shot, April 25, 1941 at Hoo Mon, near Saigon. [Some believe Minh Khai was the wife of Ho Chi Minh.]

At this point in the interview Giap's daughter, Hong Anh, volunteered helpful information.

### **Question: What are your memories of those terrible days?**

Hong Anh: During the period of resistance to the French, in 1947, during the debarkation of French troops in Quang Binh, my grandfather did not want to leave his home in An Xa and flee with us. He said he risked nothing at all for he was an old man without special or compromising activities. He also said he had so many things to do. Thus we children, transported like luggage in cai thung, those baskets like half spheres made of thin woven bamboo slats, hooked to each end of a pole, resting on the shoulders [of those who carried us], which never ceased to swing to the rhythm of their steps.

I never saw my grandfather again. People later told us that he was captured and taken off to Hue to suffer questioning and to be put to the torture. One torture consisted of fastening Grandfather to the bumper of a car with a long rope and then dragging him. We do not know the precise date of his death, perhaps in 1947 or 1948. Thanks to the goodwill of nice people along while later we were able to find his remains. At present he reposes in the cemetery for those who died in service to our country located at our home village.

About the same time, the French also arrested my Aunt Vo thi Diem and her two children, my cousins. She was not imprisoned at the same time as my grandfather and she was put in charge of cooking food for the prison. She was not tortured to death [as were so many others]. During the time of these events, my father was with the Maquis in the Viet Bac. So our family paid with their blood for their aspiration that Viet Nam might be independent. My father, the old fighter soldier, is still very erect and alert. He carries in his soul wounds that even time cannot heal.

### **Question: Tell me about your trip into China in 1940, General.**

Answer: After leaving Quang Thai and Hong Anh on the road to Co Ngu (present day Thanh Nien), I rejoined Pham van Dong and a comrade who served as our liaison and made arrangements for us. So we wouldn't attract attention, we traveled separately and without luggage. We bought a train ticket for Cao Cai, a border town, but left the train one station before it reached Lao Cai and we made the rest of the trip on foot. Then we crossed the border in a rowboat in a deserted area. We then took the train again, this time to Kunming. Someone met us outside the train station there and drove us to the house of Phung chi Kien, a militant who had gone to China in 1924 where he attended the training course at Whampo Military Academy.

Later Dong and I found Nguyen Ai Quoc who had been criss-crossing the south of China since the end of 1939. After sending Dong and me to attend classes in Yen-an-recommending me to learn quickly so I would have time later for an internship in military training-Nguyen Ai Quoc left to visit the Vietnamese communities located along the railroad tracks of Hunnan.

So Dong and I left for Kouei Yang, capital of Kwei Chow, aboard a Kuomintang Red Cross truck driven by a Chinese communist. We made this difficult trip in the back of the truck, jammed in among the cargo which was covered with a tarpaulin, in sweltering heat on a horrible road marked by potholes and ruts, around switchbacks and hairpin curves above sheer drop-offs.

Finally we were left at the headquarters of the 8th Army (a former unit of the Red Chinese Army) now integrated into the Kuomintang Army forces. We were forced to wait for another vehicle to go on to Yen-an. But the capitulation [of the French government to the Germans] in Paris changed everything. Phung chi Kien arrived from Kunming. We thought about going back to Viet Nam to begin fighting [the French]. But instead, our group stopped at Douang Si

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and settled in the suburb to work at the party hall of the local [communist] committee with the name of Viet Nam giai phong long minh, or League for the Liberation of Viet Nam. Then our group started its propaganda work with the permission of the Kuomintang, discreetly supported by the Chinese communists.

We were content with the idea that soon we would return to Viet Nam to begin the revolution. Thai co da den! (The good prospect is here) we said to one another.

### **Question: Before long, Ho Chi Minh sent you and others down into Viet Nam and you lived in the mountains along the Chinese border. What was life in those crude base camps like from 1941 to 1944?**

Answer: During that whole time we of the Viet Minh lived clandestinely. Our activities and our movements were done in the most secretive way possible. Around population centers and in certain other situations, we had to observe the four following rules: (1) forbidden to move during daylight, (2) forbidden to wear shoes because they leave prints (3) forbidden to use walking sticks or canes to climb mountain paths for they left marks on stones and moss, (4) forbidden to sleep in villages. As I recall them, these are the chronological order of important events that marked those years.

In December 1940 the first group of Viet Minh cadre was formed six months before the official Congress which founded the Viet Minh party. It was done in a little Nung village close to the Chinese border at the bottom of a quiet valley.

Composed of ethnic minorities, this first group of forty young men full of enthusiasm and courage, spent ten days in accelerated training. Eating corn, sleeping under the stars, each morning they picked up firewood in order to help people of that Nung village. This task of helping people was a fundamental aspect of their political training. The end of their training was celebrated in front of a red flag emblazoned with a five-pointed yellow star.

In this way we began to strengthen and enlarge the existing clandestine area, by organizing communities all along the frontier. We called them Hoan toan or "total villages" because they were totally converted to the Viet Minh cause. Total villages became total cantons and then total districts. By 1942, out of nine districts in Cao Bang province, three were totally converted to the Viet Minh. Although we were still operating clandestinely, the Movement grew. The result was that the Viet Minh came to exercise administrative power first in villages, then in districts.

One of the important elements which allowed this growth was the psychological impact brought by the propaganda of my newspaper, Viet Lap, an abbreviation for Viet Nam doc lap. Published clandestinely for the exclusive use of the Cao-Bac-Lang population, it had a restricted circulation. Nevertheless, it worked well thanks to its appearance and style and the way it was written, clearly and concisely, enabling us to bring our message to all levels of the population.

### **Question: Is it true General that you and other Viet Minh cadre lived in caves in the northern mountains?**

Answer: Yes. On 8 February 1941, Ho Chi Minh moved into the grotto of a cave we called Pac Bo. He later became a legend in the history of Viet Nam's revolution. [Others of us also lived in nearby caves.]

### **Question: How was the Viet Minh organized?**

Answer: In May 1941, the full assembly of the [communist] Central Committee met at Pac Bo. The agenda was (1) preparation for insurrection, (2) to reinforce the maquis of Bac Son in order to make it the second base of resistance, (3) the election of a general secretary of the [communist] party to replace Nguyen van Cu, who had been arrested in June 1940. (The poor man was shot on May 25, 1941 in Saigon.) Truong Chinh was elected.

## Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap Remembers

During these early years, other than Phung chi Kien, trained at Whampoa, no Vietnamese communist had practical battle/combat experience. But starting in May 1941, the campaign to prepare for an army of liberation took shape. This "insurrection army" began to take form because of people's changing consciousness-to feel themselves as a people, as a nation-accomplished by our organization of the masses. As I wrote in Nguon suoi, "Men first, and then rifles."

I had to face an enormous problem. The population of the region's mountains and high places was composed of many non-Vietnamese ethnic minorities. Their number approached a million. They had never been in contact with revolutionary propaganda. They had always lived within the orbit of colonial domination. Their dialects were different from one group to another and even sometimes within the same ethnic group. I learned to speak fluently the ethnic languages of Tay and Zao and H'mong. I also had much success with a [propaganda] saga poem which I wrote, with a meter of five feet, which I called Viet Minh ngu tu kinh. It was easy to memorize and remember it.

The strategy of the Viet Minh therefore was (1) to reorganize the political base at Cao Bang, Bac Son, and Dinh Ca, (2) to organize a tight liaison between the two centers, and (3) to spread the movement starting from this revolutionary hub.

**Question: Tell me about the Viet Minh's "March toward the South." I believe you called it by the French words, "Marche vers le sud."**

Answer: Yes. I could see that there was an urgency to establish other ways of communication between Cao Bang and the [Red River] Delta in addition to the usual methods. This would enable me to extend the ties between different groups in case of danger or of [French] repression which would facilitate the movement of [our] armed guerrillas. Ho decided that we would call this movement the March to the South and he assigned me that responsibility.

I organized the masses to open three paths: to Cao Bang, to Lang Son toward Thai Nguyen, and to the Delta. Some "specialists" of both sexes were used for this operation. One hundred volunteers were divided into nineteen groups. In concert with local party members they went forth in many itineraries. That begun by the first contingent was consolidated by later groups. Together these people traveled through innumerable passes, mountains and fields to put together a complete grouping of Tho, Man, and Kinh ethnic tribes. It was August 1943 before much progress was made. One would have to march twenty days to cross the lands we now controlled.

With this operation successful, I was finally able to return north to Cao Bang to celebrate the eve of Bac Kan (Tet) with my volunteer teams. The year of the goat made way for the year of the monkey. For this occasion I offered in the name of everyone aq flag embroidered with the words Xung Phong Thang Loi (Victory to the Volunteers).

Both the French and the Japanese were our enemies and since 1941 they had bloodied our ranks, and we had to mourn those who had died, yet our Viet Minh movement progressed in spite of them. Simultaneously with our political preparation, the armed preparation was forging its own path. As early as 1941 a certain number of instructors already had criss-crossed the areas where the revolutionary cause had been well implanted. They organized and prepared self defense teams. This was well advanced by the end of 1942. The next step was to form a military cadre and we taught such people one month to prepare them.

The hub of these formations were located deep within the forest, pole houses with roofs of leaves. Those temporary buildings could hold some hundreds of people. They had a conference room, a dormitory, a dining room, and an armory. There was even a stadium next to the building for exercises. Houses had to be built on several levels, sometimes fifty to sixty steps separated the lower from the upper. They had to be solidly anchored on the sides of those steep mountains. For this clandestine building, the shanties were very well conceived.

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By the end of 1943 we became strong enough to organize military inspections and exercises even in the daytime, in the middle of fields, with simulated combat, which mobilized up to four to five hundred men at a time. To do this we used cadre from several districts. Such activities could not possibly stay secret [from the French] indefinitely. Their repression against us fell right after the September harvest that year. It was bloody.

**Question: General, tell me more about those early problems with the French colonial administration and its troops.**

Answer: [They reacted too late.] The infrastructure for an effective war and a resistance zone was already in place in this region of Cao-Bac-Lang. During the terror sewn by the colonial administration, one had at all costs to maintain organization, maintain the sympathy and confidence of the population. The Viet Minh applied the solution of clandestine cells. A clandestine cell was composed of secret members belonging to one or two communes who left their families to live hidden in the forest.

Each one of those cells had to establish one point of contact. That could even be a little hut covered with tree leaves, built on a mountain or deep in the forest. They also had to gather enough provisions to last six months-the time necessary between the rice and maize harvests. On top of this, each cell had to obey the rules, very strict orders, adhere to a draconian schedule, divide their frantic activities teaching the population from those times reserved for study.

At dusk, according to agreed upon signals, members of those secret cells left their refuges, went on foot across three or four kilometers of mountains and forest to arrive at twilight for a rendezvous meeting at an agreed upon gathering spot. In this way they could communicate with "faithful" members living in the "village below" who, ignoring the police menace, brought them provisions and information.

Their mission accomplished, those fighters of the shadows/ghosts/phantom fighters, in all senses of the word (guerrilla fighters and fighters in the shadows), slept precariously alongside a river, or at the edge of a rice paddy. Before the morning fog disappeared they had gone back to their mountain refuges. Because of these clandestine cells, the popular movement was able to resist the savage persecution and activities of the "white terror" inflicted on the population by the colonial administration.

**Question: I have been told that the winter of 1943-1944 was a hard one for you, General.**

Answer: Yes, it was harsh for me and my men. The [French] repression often forced us to be satisfied with only a bag of dry cereal grain and a tube of toasted salt. One time I and two of my men were entrapped during three days on a mountain near The Rue. We had to use tubes of bamboo and water extracted from forest vines to cook our rice. Other times we had to feed ourselves with the lack of food, we faced danger from artillery and from forest fires lit [by the French military] during days of long sunlight to force us out of hiding.

**Question: When did you begin to believe you actually had a chance to rid your land of the French colonial masters?**

Answer: It was perhaps in July 1944. At that time the inter-provincial committee of Cao-Bac-Lang organized a great meeting of cadre to discuss the problems of insurrection. It took place in a huge cave in the heart of a dense forest. We erected a triumphal arch, flew our national flag, set out tables of food for all participants, and had for them dormitories and a dining room. Three security groups were posted all around at each sensitive point. They were composed of local Man plus some armed detachments from the three districts.

At that meeting we changed the term "insurrection" to "declenchement de la guerrilla" [an untranslatable phrase that means something like "launching the guerrilla war (against the French)]. The date for this war to begin was set for two months later. But in the month of September following the harvest, after some serious analysis, Ho Chi Minh chose not to continue this project. Regrouping all our military potentials would give us a stronger and more effective weapon.

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The primary application of this strength/force/weapon would be political rather than military. Its goal was to lean upon military action as a way to organize the masses, produce a military effect beneficial toward revolution thus developing and reinforcing the political stand of the Viet Minh. In this way the Armed Propaganda and Liberation Brigade was created.

That happened on December 22, 1944 in a forest which spread over parts of two districts, Tran Hung Dao and Hoang Hoa Tham, near Cao Bang. Thirty-four men in mixed uniforms of clothing were sworn in. I wore a soft hat. It was 5 p.m. and very cold. The ceremony closed with a very frugal meal. The food was given by the [local] people for the event. Lifted up by the spirit of sacrifice, the participants in that moment were filled with inexpressible and unforgettable sentiments.

Forty-eight hours later, my new army won two successive victories. The first was against the [French] post Phai Khat, the second was at Na Ngan, thirty-five kilometers from Phai Khat. The elements forming this [small] brigade were all expert people, hardened and extremely devoted to the cause. The Brigade relied upon its surveillance system of spies who gave us intelligence data. Hoang, the first intelligence agent of the brigade was a very young adolescent of thirteen years. One could not separate the victory at Phai Khat from this young boy's activity. Nor the one at Ha Ngan from the work of Duc Long, a man of the region.

Then on March 9th 1945 the Japanese [occupation] forces triumphed over the French forces in Indochina [arresting many, including most officers, and disarming the troops]. [That was the Viet Minh's signal to organize themselves even more fully.] At the end of May Ho Chi Minh arrived from Pac Bo to Tran Thao. On June 4th 1945 a very large meeting took place between different heads at Tan Trao. They decided to declare the region of Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Lang Son, Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang, Phu Tho, Vinh Yen, Phuc Yen and Yen Bai a zone of liberation.

Tran Thao was to be the capital of this zone. The administration of this liberated zone was placed under the responsibility of a provisional executive committee formed of five persons. The five nominees supervised the sections of politics, population and administration, economy and finance, transport and culture and society. This newly freed area would serve as a rallying point for the whole country of Viet Nam during the period of resistance against the Japanese [and the French]. A chapter of Viet Nam's history was on the point of achievement.

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