

## THE PHYSICIAN ON THE OTHER FRONT LINE

Yesterday, I suddenly had a phone call from Washington.

- Hello! Is this brother Tran Khoi's phone number? A pretty funny female voice rang out.

- Yes, it's me! I replied, got a bit surprised because I didn't know who was on the other end? Moreover, it was a call from the US!

- Hello, Mr. Viet Cong Tran Khoi! I'm Phu who cured you and brother Thanh at Bong Son Junction in 1972! Do you remember?

Before I could reply, the phone on the other end suddenly went silent. I couldn't contact her anymore...

I patted my forehead. Oh, I remember! Nurse Phu is the female physician on the opposite front line, the wife of the doctor - captain of the 22nd Infantry Division of the Republic of Vietnam.

That's true! When liberating northern Binh Dinh in April 1972, the entire Command of the heroic Golden Star Division Number 3 based in the village of Thiet Dinh 2, at the foot of the focal point 174. At that time, I had a high fever, the disease caused by many years in the inhospitable forest. I had insomnia, sallow complexion, hair loss. Although brother Phong, the unit's physician, gave me many medicines, I made no improvement...

That day, Thai Van Thanh and I were sitting at Mrs. Tam's house when we saw a girl about 20 years old, with fair complexion, adorable face, carrying a first aid bag. We inquired about her, Mrs. Tam said:

- She is Phu, the wife of the doctor - captain of the Republic of Vietnam. Her house is at Bong Son Junction...

Thanh whispered in my ear:

- Don't be shy! Must get acquainted with her first to ask for medicine! We're still in difficulty so we are short of medicine. But they have a lot of American medicines...

We chatted her up, gradually became bolder. Soon we cherished each other. This was the cease-fire period, the two different front lines had a temporary boundary. Perhaps Phu saw that the Viet Cong seemed educated, gentle and not scary at all. Besides, the couple only worked as physicians to save lives, not directly shot and killed people, causing blood debt. Later, Phu sincerely and honestly said:

- My house is at Bong Son Junction. There is a signboard that reads: "Co co sinh"...

Seeing that we did not seem to understand, Phu explained:

- A place to help women give birth! Then Phu added - Today, I go back to my mother's hometown, to cure people, and also to take refuge....

Seeing us listen attentively, Phu boldly told us about love and pain, about the happiness of their couple in the chaotic war. Phu's voice was lower and interrupted:

- A few days ago, we just finished our bridal procession when suddenly a big battle happened between the two sides. My husband was taken away by your side. And I had to drift back to my hometown. A few days later, the gunfire stopped, I came back, and oh no, my house was ruined...

Phu grunted and added:

- I most regret the poetry collection written by my husband. Someone took it! It contained bittersweet, unforgettable memories of us, brothers!

I frowned, startled and scratched Thanh's leg under the table with my foot. Both of us looked at each other in shock. What a coincidence!

I pretended to be calm and asked Phu:

- At Bong Son Junction? There's a sign that reads: "Co co sinh" in front of your house, right?

Phu nodded. I said:

- Hey! Do you remember any of his poems? Can you read us a poem? One verse is fine!

Phu hesitated for a second, then said:

- I remember these verses: “We kill each other with bullets/ We heal each other with needles/ Bong Son night of fire and smoke/ How heartbroken I feel...”

Before Phu finished reading, Thanh stood up and shouted:

- That's right! That's right! That's it!..

Phu widened her eyes suspiciously. As if not hearing it clearly, she asked:

- What did you say, brother?

I parried:

- Nothing! Nothing at all!

When we parted, Phu gave me some medicines, and told me how to take them. She did not forget to invite us to her house next Sunday. Although the two front lines were still ready to fight, but now, in the liberated land, we considered it peaceful. We could visit each other...

According to the appointment, that Sunday, the two of us secretly disguised, changed clothes, became commoners, and found Phu's house. Even though I knew it was the house of an officer of the Republic of Vietnam, I still wanted to come and thank her, for I had made remarkable improvement thanks to her medicine. Moreover, I came to buy more medicines. On the other hand, to confirm if it was the house that the trio of Khoi, Thanh and Khai caused disaster that night.

Thanh and I stood in silence, releasing sighs of regret. We tormented ourselves in front of the house with the sign “Co co sinh”. The house was right on the National Highway No. 1. Its door and walls were full of bullet holes caused by Khai Ro...

Phu greeted us warmly. In my eyes, Phu was not only a woman from the newly liberated area but also a physician. Phu's husband had just been released from Doc Dot re-education camp. The officer – physician on the other front line kept glancing at me warily...

I reminisced about that night. It was early May 1972, the three of us: Khai, Thanh and I, from Thiet Dinh, went to Bong Son Junction. At that time, the National Highway 1 crossing north of Binh Dinh was cut off. The night became quiet. In the sky, enemy flares shot up from the Phu My main town. Explosion from enemy

cannons could be heard from afar. Khai Ro pointed to the house in front of him, with the sign “Co Co Sinh” and whispered in our ears:

- Be careful! This is the house of the captain of the Republic of Vietnam!

The three of us scattered, with weapons in hands, we approached the house. Khai called out:

- Is anyone there? Open the door immediately!

Called three times, no answer. Khai continued:

- “If no one answers, we will break the door!”

And then, a volley of AK shots bellowed harshly, resounding in the dense night, breaking the lock. The explosion shook the whole house. We could hear the crash of falling furniture inside. Khai Ro and Thanh quickly sneaked in, turned on flashlights, and rummaged around for a while. I stood guard outside, waiting impatiently. Later, I saw Thanh stick his head out and put a notebook in my hand.

I jerked up my chin as if questioning. Thanh smiled and said:

- “Poem! Love poem of a soldier of the Republic of Vietnam”! I widened my eyes and shouted:

- “Why did you take it from him!? Thanh laughed.”

-“ I didn’t take anything but this notebook! Let’s see the mood of the soldier on the other front line. Isn't that interesting?!”

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Phu split open the coconut and invited us to drink. Seeing a young man, taciturnly sitting on the side bed, writing something, I rushed over to invite him. He shyly refused. I held his hand tightly and said:

- “Don’t be shy! We are all friends!..”

As if seeing my point, Phu quickly introduced to us:

- “This is Dong, my husband! He has just returned from the Doc Dot re-education camp...”

I suddenly remembered and asked:

- “Doctor?”

Dong humbly clasped his hands:

- “Yes! Doctor!”

I quickly started a conversation, and pushed a cup of coconut water to him:

- “Is there a lot of people on the camp?”

- “Yes! There are up to seven or eight hundred people!” Dong replied softly.

- “How are the food and drinks there?”

- “Well, they are okay! “Dong replied more boldly.”

- “What are you supposed to do there? How were you treated?”

- “We learned politics, policy, and background declaration. I also participated in the medical team to examine and cure prisoners. Brothers there treated prisoners very well!”

I offered him a cigarette but he refused. As if suddenly remembering something, I quickly asked:

- “I heard you write poetry very well, right?”

Dong denied:

- “No! Who told you guys?”

Phu laughed. “It's me... tell them!”

Seeing Dong's face getting brighter and brighter, Thanh added:

- “You wrote the poem “Bong Son Night” very well! I really like the verse “We kill each other with bullets/ We heal each other with needles/ Bong Son night of fire and smoke/ How heartbroken I feel!”

Before Thanh finished his sentence, Dong stood up. He folded his hands and bowed to Thanh a few times, smiling.

- “Wow! Why do you know my poem?”

- I asked “In which situation was the poem written?” After thinking for a while, Dong said:

- “Last month, the two sides were still at war. My 40th Regiment Field Hospital was located at Bong Son High School. One night, I heard a loud gunshot. I was ordered to the battlefield, near Thiet Dinh airport, for the first aid. On the battlefield, 4 soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam died. Lying next to them, two Viet Cong were seriously injured. One person had a puncture wound in the abdomen with his guts hanging out. A nurse and I gave them booster shots, bandaged them and called an ambulance to take them to the station. The battlefield scene haunts me forever. We are all Vietnamese, young men, including me, but we are pushed to opposite sides of the war and shoot each other in the head. The following night, unable to sleep, I immediately wrote that poem...”

I commended the profound and fresh meaning of the poem. He thanked me, and was very happy. We talked, like never before on the two front lines.

At the end of the day, Phu and her husband saw us off. Dong did not forget to give me the medicines, and carefully instructed me how to take them. I was about to pay them, but both Phu and her husband resolutely shook their heads and refused it...

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The next day, from Hanoi, Thanh called me and said:

- “Phu and her husband now settle in Washington. She inquired after you on the phone. She said she intended to return to Vietnam, and asked for her husband's poetry collection...”

I said:

- “Well, give them back, please! And apologize to them! We're so wrong! Poetry is a product for human beings, but the copyright belongs to the author! They are also respectable physicians. Sometimes they're sent to the war, but they're still true doctors, caring about saving people, no matter which side the injured are on!...”

Later, I added:

- “They are also our benefactors, Thanh!”

I knew Thanh was listening on the phone. Thanh was very fond of poetry. He kept Phu's husband's poetry collection as a good memory of his youth on the battlefield. My poetry book “Blue cuckoo and orphan stone” had just been printed, I said to Thanh:

- “I have just published a poetry book, I will send a copy to you. And when Phu and her husband return to Vietnam, I will also send a copy to them...”