

DINH PHONG

A SURGICAL OPERATION

**To american friends who are struggling
against the dirty war in Viet Nam**

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“ — Those in the puppet army and puppet administration at any level who have committed crimes against the people but are now sincerely repentant will be pardoned. Those who redeem their crimes by meritorious deeds will be rewarded accordingly.

— Captured officers and soldiers of the puppet army will enjoy humane treatment and leniency.

— US and satellite officers and soldiers who cross over to the people's side will be given kind treatment and helped to return to their families when conditions permit.

— Captured US and satellite troops will receive the same treatment as captured puppet troops ”.

(Political Program of the
South Viet Nam NFL)

1 - That in the past and
present administration of the
state committed crimes against the people
and that now a new government will be
formed. Those who have been in the
government will be removed
and replaced.

2 - The new government will be
formed by the people and will be
based on justice and equality.

3 - The new government will be
based on the principles of justice and
equality and will be based on the
principles of justice and equality and
will be based on the principles of justice
and equality.

4 - The new government will be
based on the principles of justice and
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5 - The new government will be
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The day was ending. In the west, the clouds turned red, as if dipped in blood. Artillery shells were still falling along the stoned road, but only sporadically. A blown-up tank lay half submerged in a flooded ricefield, near the road where bits of its tracks were scattered.

In the underground operating-room, a relaxed atmosphere prevailed. The last wounded Liberation soldier had been operated on and had been carried away. The surgeon took off his mask, drew a long breath of air and sat down on a bench at the entrance to the cave. The nurse also took off her white gown and fanned herself. In a corner, the "power-house operator", perched on a bicycle frame with the rear wheel con-

ned to an electric generator, stopped pedalling and lighted a cigarette.

For three days and three nights, they had worked hard to save the lives of a dozen Liberation soldiers who had been wounded while taking part in an ambush which had resulted in the total annihilation of an American armoured convoy. Surgeon, nurse and "power-house operator" had not had a wink of sleep. Only through a miracle of will and resolve had they managed to keep their eyes open. The surgeon's legs seemed to him as heavy as if made of lead.

But now they could relax. The surgeon stood up after a while, stretched himself and said in a voice with the characteristic accent of the central provinces :

" Well, let's put things in order and take some rest. There may be more work to-morrow ".

It was then that someone stepped in. He was the director of the hospital and

his face showed that he had some important news to tell. More wounded comrades to take care of? The surgeon hastily put on his cap and the nurse reached for her gown. "Comrades," said the director, "the leading committee know that you have worked very hard for several days and nights. However we shall ask you to spend one more sleepless night..."

The surgeon glanced at his collaborators, who all looked exhausted but whose eyes shone with determination and eagerness.

"All right, comrade director," he said slowly, "I must say that we are all very tired. But even if we should work several more nights to save the lives of wounded comrades, we would gladly do so."

"For the sake of our dear comrades," added the nurse, "we are always ready."

The hospital director looked embarrassed.

"The wounded man is not one of our comrades," he said hesitatingly. "He is an American."

"An American?" the surgeon exclaimed in surprise.

The director nodded. "Yes, an American soldier, wounded in the head. We have been asked to do everything in our power to save him."

A long silence fell. Each man retired pensively to a corner. The "power-house man" again saddled his bike, puffing away at his cigarette. The surgeon took off his cap and crumpled it in his hand. The nurse tossed her gown on a table and sat down on a bench, her face drawn. The air turned stifling, it seemed, in the underground operating room.

The hospital director bit his lips and looked at three people in turn. This reaction was what he had expected when the matter was discussed at the meeting of the leading committee. But he would have to cope with it. Now he

tried to interest the surgeon and his assistants in how the American had been caught :

" Our comrades told me that during the battle, when a B.40 bazooka shell hit an american tank, they had seen a man projected out of it into a bush. When they rushed up to him, they saw that he was an American Negro soldier, who had recovered to surrender... "

But nobody was interested. A painful silence continued to reign in the underground operating room. Suddenly a voice cried out, " No, I can't do it... I can't save a murderer... " It was the nurse. Her body was shaken by sobs. Everyone felt a pang in his heart, for all knew how much this gentle and devoted nurse had suffered at the hands of the enemy.

Only some time ago she had learnt that her fiancé had lost a leg in a battle against the Americans in Eastern Nam Bo. They were deeply in love with each other and this was quite a hard blow for her. Their common friends asked

themselves whether she would have the courage to marry him, an invalid. But the young girl simply went to the convalescent centre and asked that the marriage be celebrated. She looked quite happy, but there was deep resolve in her voice when she told her sweetheart: "The Americans want to destroy our happiness, but they will not succeed. I'll go to battle in your place. One day the occasion will be given me to make the enemy pay for their crimes!"

And now she was asked to participate in a surgical operation to save the life of an enemy soldier, perhaps the very one who had made a cripple of her husband.

With tears running down her cheeks, she came up to the hospital director and repeated, "You must understand... I can't do it."

The hospital director took her arm and made her sit back on her stool. As he stood there in the middle of the room, about to say something, the electrical operator left his bike, came up to

him in long strides, unbuttoned his dark green shirt and bared his chest covered with deep scars :

“ Look, comrade director, ” he said, “ you yourself operated on me not long ago. You took away an eye which had been injured beyond recovery and stitched deep gashes on my body. Now I no longer have enough strength left to fight at the front and must content myself with pedaling that bike to generate electricity for operations to be performed on wounded comrades. How can I work to save the life of one of those criminals, who have been ravaging our country and made an invalid of me ? ”

“ Yes, I know, ” said the director softly, patting his comrade's shoulder. “ I know that every one of us still carries wounds caused by the american aggressors These wounds still bleed... ”

He stopped. In a flash he remembered his own little girl at home. Taken up by his work in the resistance against the French colonialists, he had married very late. But hardly had a girl been





born to him and his wife when he again had to take up arms to fight against the american aggressors. For years now he had been unable to visit his family. Only on rare occasions had he received news from them. A few days ago, he had received a letter from his daughter. "Dear Dad, how sadly we miss you," the child had written. "Fight the Yanks hard, drive them away and return to live with us." To him, too, the Americans had robbed many days of happiness. But now he could not say it to his friends. This, he realized, would only pour oil on the fire.

Containing his pain, he continued: "Whenever we think of our devastated land, massacred compatriots and divided families, our conscience would prevent us from saving the life of an enemy. However this is not a matter of personal vengeance, but the just cause that our people have been fighting for during more than twenty years. To kill a US aggressor is very easy, but to save his life and help him become an honest man with a just conscience is a

hard task .The US aggressors have been telling their soldiers that we are cruel and barbarous, that we cut off the heads or the noses of those we capture. Here is our reply : in combat we may kill tens of thousands of US aggressors to defend the sacred soil of our fatherland, but we won't waste a single bullet on those who have surrendered. We give them food, and if they are wounded, we take care of their wounds. This is the just policy of the South Viet Nam National Front for Liberation and the humane tradition of the Vietnamese people. We have always acted in this way and we shall continue to do so vis-à-vis of US soldiers who have dissociated themselves from this dirty war of aggression, and especially Black soldiers who have crossed over to our side.

Again there was silence in the underground operating room. The electrical operator slowly buttoned his coat. The young nurse was cleaning shining surgical instruments. The hospital director walked back and forth. After a while, he added :

" This Black GI is named JB and was a Californian docker before he was drafted. He was very poor. In his pocket he always carries a small note-book where he keeps a record of small sums of money, his savings, he sends every month to his wife back home. He carefully saves every dollar he makes, and neither drinks nor smokes. As a soldier in the US army of aggression, he is our enemy. But he lives in a society now under the rule of the American capitalists, and thus finds himself in the same situation as we are. The capitalists exploited him harshly and finally forced him to go to war to bring them even more profits. And so, unlike a White capitalist, he is not our enemy. By saving his life we shall not only soothe the sorrow of his mother, wife and children, but we shall have demonstrated the good will of the Vietnamese working class towards the American working people who, together with American progressives, are struggling for peace in Viet Nam. At the same time we show our esteem and affection

for the American Blacks whom the racists oppress and despise. Thousands of American mothers, millions of American people will understand our just struggle, grow consciousness of their responsibilities, and will not allow the American capitalists to draft their sons and brothers for the war in Viet Nam. They will stand up to oppose this dirty war of aggression. ”

The hospital director looked at the surgeon, hoping for a word or gesture of approval. But the surgeon avoided his gaze and said with great effort :

“ I understand and approve of everything you’ve said, but nevertheless I am afraid I won’t be able to operate on him. Like you, I can never forget that in this same room a month ago, my friend Doctor Nguyen Van Tru and Comrade Le Quang Chau, a skilful anesthetist, were killed by American bombs. Every time I takes the scalpel, I see in my mind’s eye Tru standing in front of me and urging me to do my utmost to save the lives of our wounded fighters so that they may go back

to the front to avenge him and other comrades. If I were to save the life of an American soldier in this very place where friends of mine were killed by American bombs and with assistants roused by this same hatred, I would not be able to perform the operation adequately... ”

The hospital director answered in a moved voice :

“ I could order you to perform the operation, putting my trust in your sense of discipline as a member of the Liberation forces. But so long as your anger against the American aggressors has not abated, I am afraid your task could not be carried through. In our profession, the least mistake or inadvertence — a bubble in a vein, or a few drops of ether too many — may kill the patient. When they took prisoner that American, our soldiers at the front had to overcome a feeling of hatred a hundred times deeper than what we feel here. They saw with their own eyes their comrades killed or wounded.

American bombs and shells were being showered on them and might kill them at any moment. Yet, because they were bent on carrying out the policy of the Front and were thinking of American mothers, wives and children and also of American progressives who were supporting our struggle, they surmounted a thousand obstacles and brought that American prisoner back here. I hope that you will follow their example and overcome your personal feelings to fulfil your task."

He walked towards the exit, but stopped halfway and said in a worried voice, "A few hours' delay and the American will have very little chance left. All the efforts of our fighters at the front will have been lost."

The surgeon started as if he had received an electric shock. In a flash he saw in his mind's eye the repentant look of an American Black soldier, the sorrowful face of an American mother, the stern gaze of a Liberation soldier, the gentle features of Doctor Tru...

Thinking of his responsibilities, of the operation to be performed and of all the subsequent care to the patient, he shook his head as if to drive away all erroneous thoughts.

"No," he said, "we have no right to let that American die."

The nurse glanced at the electrical operator and both came up to the surgeon. Moved by the hospital director's words, they now came to a decision after hearing those of the doctor. Encouraged by the resolve shown on their faces, the latter turned to his chief and said in a firm voice. "All right, comrade Director, your order will be carried out."

Turning to his assistants, he gently added, "Comrades, get ready for an operation on the skull. We'll start in 15 minutes."

The nurse lighted the stove for the sterilization of the instruments. The electrical operator straddled his bike and gave a few turns of the pedals to see if the generator was in order.

The voice of the director was heard, "Comrades, bring the patient in."

Four Liberation soldiers whose sweat-stained uniforms seemed to smell still of gunpowder brought into the cave a wounded American soldier lying on a stretcher. The nurse, with their help, put him on the operating table and covered his face with a white linen. The American was wearing the green uniform of the US army with two badges, one showing a black eagle and the other a flash of lightning, the sign of the US 25th Infantry Division, nicknamed "Tropical Lightning".

Suddenly whistle blows sounded the alert. The light went out. Two big explosions shook the cave. Trees fell in a crash. The wounded man stirred.

A moment later, everything was calm again. The light returned. The patient was anesthetized and the operation began.

The moon had risen in the sky and its silvery beams shone through the foliage of the trees. In the cave, the monotonous hum of a drill was heard,

mingled with reports, now distant, now quite close, of American artillery.

Suddenly, the surgeon gave an exclamation and handed a small metallic object to the hospital director: a tiny shell splinter found in the wound of the GI.

After a long moment, the two doctors went out of the cave and took off their gowns and gloves. The moon had risen quite high and a gentle breeze was blowing.

Four Liberation soldiers carried a stretcher past on which the American soldier was lying.

"J.B. has had a narrow escape," said the surgeon. "I am sure he will never again turn his gun on us."

The hospital director nodded: "And thousands of American soldiers will side with us and demand an end to this dirty war of aggression."

Heath-cocks crowed. Dawn broke.

Written at Military Hospital 77A

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