

PHOU LOUANG

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THE MEN of Company 97

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NEO LAO HAKSAT PUBLICATIONS

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Editor's note

To the victories won by the Lao resistance over the last two decades the people's armed forces have brought an important, sometimes decisive, contribution.

How does the Lao liberation fighter live and struggle ? What are the objects of his love and his hatred ? How strong are his ties with his people and his country ? Such are some of the questions that our foreign friends must have asked themselves. The following story, about the men of Company 97, may bring them, we hope, a tentative answer which, although incomplete, will give them a hint about what is not found in the laconic war communiqués.

NEO LAO HAKSAT

1971

THE MEN OF
COMPANY 97





Latter-day Kasats

In Kang hamlet, the rice was ripening. The gold of the fields was set off by the green frame of the forest, and the picture was reminiscent of a sunflower in full bloom. The day Company 97 left for the front the harvest was being brought in. A gentle wind rippled the golden fields. It seemed as though numberless hands were waving a cordial farewell to the combatants.

Old Mrs Thiep, her hands holding a sheaf of rice, was the first to see the soldiers going out of the hamlet. She was so surprised she called out to the Nai Ban* who was working nearby;

* Village chief.

«Hey Nai Ban, the men of the 97 are going away. Look, they are leaving the hamlet.»

The Nai Ban couldn't believe his eyes. Before he could move, however, the old woman had clambered on the road and rushed to meet the soldiers. Grasping the hands of their political commissar, she said breathlessly :

«Kham Kang, tell me, is it true that you're leaving us ? »

«Yes, Mother, we're going away,» said Kham Kang.

«How sad », said the old woman, «you've brought us joy and now you're leaving».

They remained silent for a while, their eyes wandering over the fields, which had taken on a bright yellow colour, like that of a bonze's robe. Finally the young officer said in a voice quivering with contained anger, «Mother, the heaviest is being brought in. The Yankee bandits will come for plunder, and we'll be no longer here to defend you.».

«Don't worry, son», said the woman. «Go and fulfil your mission. We'll take care of the pirates. Where is Chan Thanom ? »

«Here he comes ! » said the political commissar. A soldier came up to Mrs Thiep with an affectionate smile.

«Have you fully recovered ? » asked the old woman.

«Sure, mother,» said the soldier. «Look ! » And untrapping the machinegun he was carrying on his shoulder, he brandished it with one hand and broke into joyful laughter.

«Stop that romp,» said Mrs Thiep, who was also laughing. «You're like a child. Beware, you might have a relapse.»

She was better acquainted than anybody else with the ups and downs of Chan Thanom's health. One day he would be in perfectly good health; but the following day he would have a nasty fit of fever, which sometimes turned out to be quite serious. On one such day, the young man's comrades were about to carry him to the army health station when Mrs Thiep turned up and said, "If you have confidence in me, entrust him to my care. I have good traditional recipes and I'll cure him".

The soldiers brought Chan Thanom to Mrs Thiep's house. For a month she gave him the most devoted care and he slowly recovered. Now he was strong and healthy again.

As they stood there talking, the people of the hamlet were streaming out to say farewell to the soldiers. All had nice words to tell them. The girls, however, formed a separate group and were whispering into each other's ears things that they were the only ones to understand. Indeed, in the hearts of most of them tender feelings were nesting. One of them, Boua Pheng, was especially the prey of conflicting urges. How much she would like to rush to her sweetheart, a soldier named Boun Kham, yet she could not make a step. Her hair fell on her face and hid her blushing cheeks but she could not move a finger to lift it.

Boun Kham too felt his heart go pit-a-pat. He bit his lips and put his hand to his pocket, from which he

drew a red handkerchief. Coming up to the girl, he gave it to her in silence, then rejoined his column.

Like a bevy of birds the young girls dashed on the road and gave the soldiers the finest sunflowers they could pick. Boua Pheng took a budding one and blushinglly put it in her friend's left breast pocket.

The soldiers slowly filed along the paddy dykes. After a while they disappeared into the forest at the foot of the mountain. Old Mrs Thiep followed them with her eyes. Wistfully she murmured, "Poor kids! They are so gentle. They came and helped us till our fields. When American aircraft raided our village and two of our people were buried under heaps of debris, they rescued them and restored them to life. Now that they're leaving us these girls find nothing better to give them than... flowers! Flowers, pshaw! The forest is full of flowers. The only thing you have to do is stretch out your hands and pick them!"

Boua Pheng overheard her mother but said nothing, for she did not want to contradict the old woman. However in her heart of hearts here is the answer she would like to make to her: «Mother, you should know that flower means happiness. In legendary times, when the moon goddess Nang Fa Seng Chan clasped a white lotus flower against her bosom, she became pregnant and later gave birth to twins. Then one night when the moon was spraying silvery dust on trees and meadows, she again met her love, the knight Kasat. Their eyes met and exchanged a message of ardent love and nostalgic melancholy. Surely, mother, flower means happiness.»

She became suddenly perplexed.

"Will my destiny", she asked herself, "be similar to that of Nang Fa? What about his? In legendary times, the knight Kasat stormed the heavens in quest of happiness for his people. Now, the Lao liberation fighters are also struggling for the sake of their people. They are waging a just combat against the American aggressors and their lackeys, the traitors, so that each Lao may live in peace and happiness. The liberation fighters are thus latter-day Kasats. But who are going to be the Nang Fa Seng Chan of our times?"

She smiled to herself and her eyelashes quivered. Again she bent over the golden rice and, cleverly wielding the sickle, soon was ahead of her companions. In her heart, how eagerly she wished she could move even faster, so as to catch up with the soldiers whose figures were fading into the distance,



Indomitable Chich Nou

The battle came to an end last night, after the 3rd Platoon had destroyed the enemy post at Pong Tom and provided support for the 5th to capture the last enemy base at Chich Nou. The enemy stronghold was still burning when Company 97 received orders from the battalion headquarters to dig in and repel all enemy counter-attacks.

The ground was still littered with enemy corpses when our men started consolidating trenches and fox-holes. At daybreak everything was ready. As the morning mist was still lingering over the landscape, the liberation soldiers availed themselves of the pause to take some rest. The cook had prepared the meal and brought each soldier his ration. In the command

post, company leader Kham Tan stood gazing at a map spread over a table made of bamboo sections split lengthwise and bound together with lianas.

The tip of his red pencil followed a stream and stopped at a place called Den Din. There Thao choum's unit was giving hot pursuit to fleeing enemy troops and, as a matter of fact, the clatter of gunfire was heard coming from that direction. At another place, called Phou Houei Leuk, an ambush was being laid by another unit led by political commissar Kham Kang in anticipation of a sneak attack by the enemy on Chich Nou. But that corner now was quiet.

It was two in the afternoon when Kham Tan stepped out of his command post. The pale yellow light of the waning sun glowed on the peak of Chich Nou, still wrapped in mist. Kham Tan made an inspection tour of the whole place.

"These air-raid shelters need reinforcement", he murmured to himself. "And Kham Lay should pay a lot of attention to the southern slope of the mountain. It is not very steep and the enemy might be tempted to launch a counter-attack there."

He made his way along a trench to Boun Kong's squad. The soldiers were still sleeping, except the squad leader, who was doing sentry duty.

"Have you got some slepp?" asked the company commander.

"Not yet, chief," said Boun Kong.

"What?" growled his superior, frowning.

Boun Kong had an apologetic smile. Kham Tan knew him well, having had Boun Kong in his company the last five years. He loved his squad and always wanted to do the work of his men. Anyway now was not the time to rebuke him and Kham Tan contented himself with saying in a severe voice, "Try to make up for it to-morrow, all right?"

"Yes, chief", said Boun Kong, coming to attention.

Kham Tan walked back to his dugout, and ordered a runner to wake up the men. The whole place soon came alive. The rest had proved a refreshing one and the soldiers looked fit and ready for action. At three, the sky cleared up and wisps of milky clouds drifted against a background of resplendent azure.

Very soon the thunder of plane engines was heard coming from the distance and Kham Tan quickly snapped out his orders:

"Take up your combat positions! Hit back hard at them!"

The bombing began. Strings of bombs fell and geysers of flames erupted. Masses of earth, stones and other debris were projected into the air and fell back on the ground with a deafening sound. Boun Kong, Kham Lay, Kham Mani, together with their comrades fired burst after burst at the air corsairs. Their intense riposte prevented the latter from diving on their targets and forced them to circle over at a relatively high altitude and to fire their rockets at random.

Kham Tan stood up. The slopes were now pock-marked with craters, and several trenches were cut up.

Availing himself of a lull, he shouted, "Anybody hurt?"

From the debris-strewn ground, heads emerged here and there, and the answers came: "Nobody, chief."

"Good," said Kham Tan. "Cling to your positions. Take advantage of every lull to consolidate them."

A spotter plane still lingered in the air. Suddenly, a look-out screamed: "Four Thunderchiefs!"

Hardly had Kham Tan taken shelter when the earth again shook. Bomb after bomb fell, and the explosions were so deafening his head itself seemed to explode. But his sense of responsibility was uppermost in his mind. He called the nurse. "Follow me," he said, and the two left the dugout.

"Kham Lay", the company commander called out. "Where are you?"

Kham Lay emerged from a shelter, his face blackened by gunpowder. Kham Tan rushed up to him and quickly forced him back into the dugout. A burst of cannon fire was heard and 20-mm shells whizzed past overhead. Kham Lay pushed his chief to the bottom of the shelter and blocked the entrance with his body. A new burst sent up spurts of dirt. Kham Lay wiped his face with one hand and touched Kham Tan's body with the other. "You're not wounded, are you?" he asked.

Kham Tan spat. "No, I'm not," he answered. "Let me go. They've turned tail." He shoved Kham Lay aside, stood up and wiped the dust from his clothes. The planes were going away. The company commander

clambered out of the trench, stretched himself and called out: "Boun Nhoum, go tell the squad leaders to be at the meeting this evening at 7 sharp."

That evening, at the command post where the meeting was held, political commissar Kham Kang was the last to speak.

"The fight has only begun," he said. "It will be a bitter fight. Each squad leader will be responsible for consolidating the positions in his sector. To-morrow only a small group will be left on the hill to stand guard. The rest of us will be assigned various tasks defined in the company's operational plan."

He glanced at Kham Tan, who just nodded his approval. As the men were preparing to leave, Kham Kang said in a loud and merry voice, "I forgot to remind you that each squad will publish its own wall paper. This will be taken into account when the emulation drive ends and the merits of each unit are weighed by the company command."

"My goodness," someone exclaimed, "he even talks of a wall paper!"

"Why not?" protested Kham Kang, "We shall have to fight the Yanks for a long time yet. We should settle down to a normal life, shouldn't we?"

"But how could we find the time to write articles for the paper?" a man asked.

"Time?" said Kham Kang, unperturbed. "You'll have plenty of time. This afternoon for instance, had the Yanks stayed on for two more hours, I would have had time to finish my article!"

Everybody burst out laughing, Kham Kang included.

Now, in the command post, only the two leading cadres of the company were left. Kham Tan lighted a cigarette and reclined. "Tell me, Kham Kang, "he said, "who will be responsible for the defence of the hill in case the enemy counter-attacks?"

Kham Kang remained pensive. In his mind's eye, faces appeared in succession. Who should be entrusted with that dangerous mission? Towards the close of the political course held early this year, the men had sent individual requests to the command: all had volunteered to stand in the van of the struggle against Yankee aggression. And this afternoon, when bombs and shells were rained from the sky on our positions, all had stood firm, full of resolve and optimism. At the meeting which had just ended, every squad had volunteered to defend the hill, a dangerous mission indeed, but how glorious!

Kham Kang thought of the days to come when tons and tons of steel would fall on the hill, and felt a heavy weight on his chest! So long as the enemy managed to cling to Den Din, he would continue to launch heavy air raids on Chich Nou. Resting his hands on the table, he slowly stood up.

Kham Tan deeply sympathized with him. The two men had been friends for a long time and had shared weal and woe. Together they went out. A comforting spectacle offered itself to their eyes: in perfect order and discipline, full of zeal and enthusiasm, the men were working hard to consolidate their fieldworks.

The two commanders joined heartily in their labour. On top of the mountain, a full moon was shining.

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Day after day, the fighting became ever fiercer. But Kham Lay, Boun Kong and Kham Mani were like age-old trees solidly planted on the hill, their roots running deep into the soil. They stood firm under the most savage attacks.

The Yankee pirates were sly foxes. They often changed their tactics. Sometimes they would follow up their air raids with artillery barrages from their base at Den Din. It happened that the pounding lasted seven days and seven nights in succession. It was a truly harrowing ordeal.

On one occasion, as Kham Lay was about to go out to replenish his stocks of munitions, a string of bombs fell near the entrance to his dugout and the blast propelled him onto the parapet of the trench. His friend Kham Mani, who was a few yards away, was knocked against the wall of the trench and fainted. When he came to, the place was shrouded in smoke and flames.

"Kham Lay", he called in an anguished voice. No answer came. Kham Mani's heart missed a beat. He cast a look at the crater just created by a bomb a few yards away, and, clambering down the slope, came to Kham Lay's shelter which had been buried under a heap of earth. With his bare hands, feverishly, he started digging. A plane passed overhead with a screaming sound. Kham Mani grabbed a rifle and, clenching

his teeth, fired at it. It was then that he saw a leg sticking out of the earth. "It was him!" he said to himself, his heart jumping for joy. Before long Kham Lay's body was freed. His friend stroked his face and felt his pulse: he was alive. Tears trickled down Kham Mani's cheeks... A few moments later, Kham Lay's eyes slowly opened and blood again rushed to his cheeks. "Kham Mani" he said in a barely audible whisper, "sound the drum to warn our friends below."

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Since morning, Kham Tan had been on tenterhooks. He could not sit still and paced the floor of his dugout, his face suddenly looking old and tired. Around him, the whole team had finished their preparations and were waiting for his orders. But Kham Tan remained silent as bombs and shells kept raining hard on the hill.

"How strange" he said, "that the comrades up there have not yet sounded the drum? What happened?"

Then the order was given: "Forward, comrades!"

Boun Kiem, the team leader, was about to rush out at the head of his men when from the top of the hill came the sound of an exhilarating music: the music of life, of victory! At first Kham Tan could not believe his ears, but the marvellous music grew ever more distinct. He cried: "No doubt is possible! It's the tune of Lam Vong, the age-old Lao folk tune,

handed down to us by generation after generation of our forefathers. It's now rising above the din of the enemy's bombing and shelling!"

Then overwhelmed by emotion, he shouted: "Boun Kiem, our friends on the hill are all alive!"

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On the hill, Kham Lay leaned against the wall of the trench. He was exhausted, but the sound of Kham Mani's drum was like the cool water of a jungle stream and had a reinvigorating effect on his battered body. He made a great effort to rise, and, resting his rifle on the parapet, looked in the direction of Den Din with a flash of hatred in his eyes.

Bombs and shells continued to fall, but Kham Mani's drum resounded even more vigorously and carried a long way. Kham Lay and Boun Kong encouraged him:

"Sound the drum, Kham Mani, sound it more loudly even!"

Kham Mani's arms made a flourish before coming down on the face of the drum and his legs moved rhythmically as if they were about to dance the Lam Vong. As the shells kept falling, he made as though he was being invited to a festival and shouted, "Long live Prince Souphanouvong!" His shout was echoed by his friends, who also cried: "Long live Prince Souphanouvong!"

With one foot on the parapet, Kham Lay brandished his rifle and said, "Comrades, let us shout even louder so that the enemy cower with fear!"

Suddenly it seemed as though the ground was giving way under their feet, and their eyes were blinded by flashes...

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At the foot of the hill, Company 97 sprang into action, with Kham Tan and Boun Kiem at the head of their men. About a hundred yards away, enemy soldiers were coming for an assault: some were walking in a stooping position, others were crawling on their bellies. Their commanders were shouting and urging them to advance.

The men of Company 97 waited in long-pent-up anger and hatred. The assailants were drawing nearer and nearer. At twenty yards, an order resounded. "Fire!"

The liberation fighters' guns crashed furiously and a hail of grenades swooped on the attackers. Many collapsed. Their ranks were shattered and one after another, they turned and fled.

Hardly had they disappeared down the slope when the artillery at Den Din started firing again. But little damage was done to the liberation fighters' fieldworks: and whatever damage was done was immediately repaired. Meanwhile at the foot of the hill, enemy troops were cursing each other. From time to time, as if to give vent to their impotent anger, they fired a few bursts up the slopes.

Kham Tan slowly walked along the trench and to each he gave a few words of encouragement and advice:

"Keep your grenades ready! You did a fine job, comrades. Keep it up!"

Some proposed that a counter-attack be made. The enemy would surely be put to flight, they said, and we would chase them down to Den Din and capture the place in our stride. Thao Tang heartily approved the idea. "They are right, chief", he said. "Enemy morale is at a low ebb."

But Kham Tan smiled knowingly. "Don't be in such a hurry, comrades," he said. "We shall have plenty of opportunities to thrash them soundly. But now the enemy would like nothing better than to see us leave our fieldworks and expose ourselves. We must fight with our heads as well as with our arms."

Half an hour later, the enemy had regrouped. Three signal flares went up into the sky, and the artillery barrages from Den Din stopped.

This time, the assault line stretched out longer. Those in the van walked half-bent and tried to make themselves as small as possible. Those who followed were yellow with fear and never stopped looking right and left for fear of a surprise flank attack. It was obvious that not one of these soldiers worried the least bit about the fate of the others and was ready to show a clean pair of heels at the first occasion. If they continued to advance, it was because of the bursts of automatic weapons that their commanders, who were marching behind, were firing over their heads.

The attackers were progressing at a snail's pace, which slowed down even further when they approached our lines. The men of Company 97 were burning with

impatience. Some took off their caps, so as to take aim more easily. But then, having nothing to do, they put them on again.

"What a funny kind of fighting," someone grunted. "One neither advances nor steps back. Wouldn't it be simpler for us to pitch into them and knock the hell out of them?"

"Don't lose patience," said Kham Tan. "Look at them. They're crawling like crabs. Isn't it a sight? Now, in answer to this new tactic of theirs, we'll play at the cat catching mice. We'll cut at least a company to pieces."

The first enemy platoon was now coming within range of our rifles. The enemy soldiers immediately hit the ground and fired at random in the direction of our trenches. Thao Tang unbuttoned his coat because of the heat and said in a sullen voice:

"These rogues are so yellow they don't dare to come up, lest we should offer them a few slugs. So they keep tickling our ears with their crackers."

But Kham Tan knew what the enemy was up to. "They're waiting for artillery support," he said with a scornful smile. "But death is waiting for them."

He winked at Boun Kiem, who at once clambered out of the trench at the head of his squad. In a quick manoeuvre, they outflanked the enemy and opened an intense fire at them. Availing himself of the enemy's disarray, Kham Tan jumped on the parapet and shouted, "Follow me!"

Like a hurricane, Company 97 charged. It was like an avalanche sweeping away a whole forest. At the same

moment, Thao Choum rushed up from the foot of the hill with his unit and Kham Kang started attacking from Phou Houei. In face of this three-pronged onslaught, the enemy panicked and went into a headlong flight.

"Let us give them hot pursuit!" shouted Thao Choum, rushing forward at the head of his platoon. Like a tornado, they followed close on the heels of the enemy and chased them down to Den Din.

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That day, the artillery pounding was the fiercest ever for all the ten months that Company 97 had occupied the hill. Defeated on two occasions, the enemy had drawn a lesson: artillery pounding alone would never get the better of the iron-hearted men who were defending it. And so he had adopted a new tactic: air bombing would be followed by artillery pounding, after which a ground assault would be launched to occupy the area devastated by bombs and shells.

The shells were falling thicker and thicker, and behind the barrage enemy infantry was advancing. Boun Kiem singlehandedly defended a whole sector. Every time he stood up and pressed the trigger of his machinegun, the enemy ranks were thrown into disarray...

Suddenly a thought flashed through his mind. At first he had believed that enemy shells were falling rather at random and were missing their targets, but now he realized what the enemy command was up to.

"They're trying to stop our reinforcements," he murmured. Anger surged within him and he shouted: "If we're compelled to withdraw, then we'll leave behind trenches filled with your corpses."

Again he stood up and pressed the trigger, but it was too late. A long section of the trench had been occupied by enemy soldiers, who were pressing on. Bound Kiem's blood boiled. His eyes flashing fire, he slowly advanced and fired burst after burst. Enemy soldiers collapsed in clusters.

However, the fight was too unequal. Section after section, the trenches of Company 97 fell into the enemy's hands.

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The rain, which had started falling in the afternoon, had not stopped. Flashes of lightning streaked the sky. Enemy artillery was firing at random, aimlessly.

On the bank of stream, under the thick foliage of the trees, huts covered with plastic sheets stood scattered. Company 97 was engaged in preparations for a campaign.

After nightfall, the men set out on the trail. The path was slippery, as though smeared with grease. With their rifles slung over the shoulder, the men walked, climbed, slipped, but none uttered a bitter or angry word. For their company commander, Kham Tan, had told them: "Whatever hardships we have to endure, the enemy will have to pay for them. This long march in the rain is aimed at annihilating him. Death is

lying in wait for enemy troops at every step they make. That is why they quiver with fear and can neither eat nor sleep."

The column was approaching the foot of the hill. There it was divided in two. One group, headed by Thao Choum, took a turn to the left. The other, led by Kham Tan himself, turned to the right and took up combat positions.

Against the background of the night sky, Chich Nou stood as high as the venerated peak of That Louang. The men of Company 97 felt a strange emotion surge in their hearts, made up of love of, and pride in, their native land. It seemed to them as though there was floating in the air the sweet fragrance of the oranges of Nam Bac and the coffee of Boloven. The wind was whispering in the foliage of the trees. How beautiful their land was, with the fragrant blossoms of its trees, the precious wood of its forests, its evergreen plants! Cursed be those traitors who have brought in the Yankee pirates, who have devastated the country and perpetrated so many crimes against the people! These cruel bandits have even sought to destroy all traces of vegetation, all possibilities of life in whole areas! The only punishment they deserve is death.

Anger and hatred flashed in the eyes of the men of Company 97. All were waiting for Kham Tan to issue the order for the attack. On his watch, the luminous hands marked three o'clock.

But a sudden order arrived from the superior echelon: The assault was not to be launched yet. The men were bewildered and bits of conversation were

heard: "Why?" — "Because the artillery was not yet ready." — "Why can't infantry attack alone?" — "Who knows?" — "When shall we start fighting?" — "Perhaps after the mist has dissipated." — "Are we withdrawing?" — "No, we're staying". — "Oh, what a frustrating situation".

The same thing was happening with Thao Choum's unit. He went from one man to another to give the necessary explanations: The enemy is now a sitting duck. We could attack him at any moment. Why should we give up artillery support? Patience is a factor of victory as well as secrecy and bravery. So the best thing is to do as we're told by our superiors.

Dawn broke. The birds of the forest began hopping and twittering. But the men of Company 97 continued to hug the ground, motionless and silent.

Afternoon came. The sun emerged and dissipated the mist which had lingered on top of Chich Nou. Under their camouflage branches, the liberation fighters waited. They were now within sight of enemy positions. Someone grunted. "Where are our big guns? Look, the enemy is getting out of his trenches. It's high time we sent him a few shells!"

Others also cried out: "Where are our guns? Let them fire at the enemy!"

Suddenly the earth shook and the boom of artillery was heard. The shells started raining on the enemy positions. Fieldworks were shattered, bodies were projected in the air. The enemy soldiers were struck with panic. They ran about frantically, like ants on the lid of a pot put on the fire.

After such a long wait, now the liberation fighters were able to give vent to their feelings. Kham Man said pleadingly, "Stop firing, comrades artillerymen. Don't kill them all. We want to do our jobs, too. Save part of your shells for the attack on Den Din".

Soon, the pounding ceased. The order for the onslaught was given: "Forward!"

The men of Company 97, their guns at the ready, rushed forward, their eyes flashing fire. The clamour of the troops and the detonations of their weapons made up a frightening noise". Death to the enemy!" shouted the fighters. The enemy troops were paralyzed by fear. Some collapsed on the spot. Others were killed as they tried to flee.

Boun Kiem thrust his bayonet into the body of a burly enemy soldier, who gave a gasp and died. Kham Lay, Boun Kong and Kham Mani were now again together. They fought bravely, shoulder to shoulder.

The enemy troops were like rats in a trap. Even if they had wings, it would be impossible for them to escape. They were cornered and destroyed.

Once again, victory came to Chich Nou. Again, it was restored to the liberation zone of Sam Neua. A powerful bastion, it stood guard on the west and barred the road to the enemy.



The meaning of an attack

The songs of the birds had announced the coming of the rice season, but the last heat waves of the dry season still continued to sear the vegetation. Company 97, which had gone away, had so far sent back no news. No runner had come back to the hamlet, and the old people, especially the women, were gnawed by anguish.

One day, old Mrs Thiep went to town to visit some relatives and there she ran into an army nurse who was a native of her hamlet. They had a friendly chat.

"Have you got many patients at your hospital?" asked Mrs Thiep.

"Only a few," said the nurse.

"Are they serious cases?"

"No, some have received slight wounds. Others are sick, but none seriously. There is one exception, though. Last night, a man was brought to us in a comatose state, with serious burns. They told me he had behaved like a hero. He was a scout who had been sent out to reconnoitre an enemy position. As he was lying hidden in the tall grass at the foot of the hill on which the latter was set up, the enemy set fire to the grass in anticipation of a surprise attack. He couldn't get up and run because this would give away the plan for the attack. So he decided to stay, and suffered the most serious burns".

Tears trickled down the nurse's cheeks as she said these words. Mrs Thiep, too, felt her eyes grow moist.

"May Buddha protect us!" she murmured "Those Yankees are real savages. What's the name of the scout?"

"Boua Say".

Back to the hamlet, the old woman decided to keep the matter secret. She told nobody about her meeting with the nurse, except her husband. But not long after, the news spread all over the hamlet, God knows how. The name of the wounded combatant, whispered from ear to ear, underwent various changes in the process. From Boua Say, it became Boun Kong, and finally Kham Kang.

Boua Phan was greatly saddened by what she heard. She wept a great deal and her face grew gaunt and pale. How much she would like to visit Kham Kang at the hospital, to tell him about her feelings

for him. But she remembered that they had exchanged no pledge as yet, and that perhaps that young man had given his heart to somebody else. Her dreams might turn out to be completely empty ones! Her parents, too, were greatly afflicted by the news about Kham Kang. They had indeed thought of giving their daughter to him in marriage once the campaign was over and he was back at the village. Kham Kang was native of the south and had been a long time away from his parents and family. It was only natural that the warmth of family and home would be offered to him. Isn't each combatant of the liberation a son of the people?

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Thao Choum was greatly afflicted by what happened to Boun Say. The reconnaissance mission was not fulfilled and a man had been grievously wounded. Besides, he was concerned about the future of the company. After being entrusted with the task of ensuring the protection of the Central Committee, Company 97 had remained a reserve unit and as such could not participate in every campaign, whereas all its members, cadres and men alike, were eager to go into action and perform brilliant deeds. So Thao Choum insisted that the unfulfilled mission of Boun Say be handed over to him.

When he had accomplished this task, he made a detailed report on the situation of the enemy and put forward his own suggestions. They were approved by the battalion command, which ordered Company 97

to make the appropriate preparations. The following day, political commissar Kham Kang and Thao Choum reconnaissance team set out on the trail.

Thao Choum took Kham Kang along the path he had taken and easily disposed of the mines and booby-traps. They soon came near to the enemy defences and Kham Kang was able to realize how good Thao Choum's observations were. But the problem proved to be more complicated than he had anticipated. Could important forces be mustered without the enemy being alerted? In case the onslaught was launched by several convergent units, how to cope with the mines and booby-traps? And once the external defences of the enemy had been pierced, how best to cope with the inner ring? And so on and so forth.

He was carefully studying the enemy position when a sentry came out and headed straight for where he was. Thao Choum cocked his gun but Kham Kang stopped him. However, the sentry took another direction and went round the mess and down the slope to fetch water at the stream. An idea flashed through Kham Kang's mind. He looked at his watch and nodded. Thao Choum was burning with impatience.

"Do you think the attack possible?" he asked.

Without answering, Kham Kang said, "Let's go."

They walked in silence for a while. Suddenly Kham Kang gave Thao Choum a tap on the shoulder and asked, "Tell me, how many troops would we need in order to launch the attack?"

Thao Choum was not caught by surprise. He had pondered over the question.

"Perhaps two squads would be enough?" he said tentatively.

"No," said Kham Kang. "There are at least fifty of them in that fort. We need at least forty comrades for the attacking force."

"Good", said Thao Choum in an enthusiastic voice. He grasped Kham Kang's hand and asked: "Has the company command decided who will be entrusted with the mission?"

"Yes," said Kham Kang, "Boun Toun's detachment."

Thao Choum was disappointed. "All right", he said, "but..."

"Do you think Boun Toun may not be equal to the task?" asked Kham Kang.

"I would not say that", said Thao Choum. "However, I would like to tell you how eager my men are to participate in the attack planned. We have a good knowledge of the terrain and the enemy's disposition. We'll be in a better position than Boun Toun's detachment to resolve the difficulties likely to be met with."

Kham Kang was impressed. Thao Choum was a good and trustworthy commander. So he said, "All right. The company command has taken its decision, but I'll persuade it to give you the job".

Grasping Thao Choum's hand, he said warmly, "We're fighting for the people, comrade. You must fulfil your task."

"We surely will," said Thao Choum, overwhelmed with gratitude.

"Good, it only remains for you to give adequate training to your men. You must get everything prepared down to the most minute details. We'll help you."

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For three days already, Thao Choum's detachment had been training hard. Even when a pause was ordered, no one thought of taking a rest.

Thao Tang, a member of the detachment, rushed forward with his rifle. Shouting "Death to the enemy!" he thrust his bayonet into the chest of a dummy, and dashed on. Coming back to his starting position, he wiped the sweat on his forehead. Thao Choum came up to him and said, "Take some rest."

Thao Tang availed himself of the occasion and asked, "Comrade Thao Choum, are enemy trenches as deep as ours? I don't want to slip and fall, like a ripe grapefruit."

His superior burst out laughing. "Never mind. If you fall, your comrades will pick you up and bring you home on their backs."

Thao Tang also laughed and earnestly asked, "May I join the first wave of assault?"

"Being in a reserve unit is just as good."

"Yes, but reserve units don't go to the frontline."

"All units go to the frontline."

"Then, it's all right."

"Good."

Thao Tang sprang to attention and saluted. His eyes, which are as gentle as a rabbit's, looked steadily at Thao Choum as if to call on him not to forget his promise: Thao Tang would go to the frontline with the others.

Then the young combatant ran away to join his friends. He was obviously greatly excited and, as he gambolled away, his superior wistfully thought of the days when he, too, was eighteen.

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While for the enemy the fog means darkness and hostility, to our combatants it promises friendship and support every time they get ready for action.

That day, at nightfall, Thao Choum's detachment, under cover of a thick fog, was able to come very close to the enemy post without being detected. Thao Choum personally took his men to the very foot of the stockade then crawled back to his B.40 rocket-launcher team. To the team-leader he said, "Take careful aim so that your rockets will cause the maximum devastation."

Boun Kiem's squad, following the path that led up from the stream, took up position near the mess and waited for the assault signal.

Everyone was ready. Thao Choum stood up and snapped an order: "Fire".

A B.40 rocket made a fiery streak and hit a building at the centre of the post. A geyser of flames erupted

accompanied by a deafening explosion. The liberation fighters rushed forward for the onslaught.

Right at the beginning, Boun Kong's team silenced a gun nest, thus making it possible for the other assault teams to occupy the ground, block all exits, and drive enemy soldiers into their barracks, like trapped fish.

Boun Kong was about to order a final assault when a volley of grenades was lobbed out. "Hit the ground!" he shouted. When the grenades had exploded without causing any harm, he dashed into the building...

From another building, a machine gun was firing burst after burst at our comrades. Thao Choum dodged behind a piece of wall, unpinned a grenade, made a dash for the gunnest, and at fifteen yards threw his grenade at it, following up with a burst of his tommy gun. The enemy gunners were killed and the gun silenced.

Thao Tang ran into an enemy soldier who hastily fled along a trench. As he chased him, he slipped and fell. Immediately the enemy soldier sprang on him, but he managed to push him back with his feet. It was then that a shot resounded and the soldier fell dead. Thao Tang looked up: Thao Choum was standing there, his clothes smeared with gunpowder and blood.

The battle unfolded at a fast tempo. The enemy was paralysed right at the beginning and could oppose no resistance. He had not even recovered from his surprise

when the fight ended. All told, the assault had lasted five minutes. But it was the result of long and careful training and preparations. It confirmed the maturity of Company 97, whose progress stemmed from the resolve shown by its men to act up to their motto: "To dare to fight and be resolved to win!"

When the detachment came back after that victorious thrust into the enemy's rear area the whole of Company 97 greeted it with the song of the Lao liberation armed forces.



The revolution is in our hearts

After two months in hospital, Boun Say was now coming back to his unit. The first comrade he met as he was crossing the fields was Boun Kong. "Good to see you back, Boua Say", said the latter.

"Yes, it took me two days' walking".

"Our comrades will be especially glad to see you".

"Are we starting a new campaign?"

"Not yet. But I have the pleasure to inform you that the Central Committee has just awarded our unit an Itsala medal, second class, and that the High Command has sent us a telegram of praise".

"About what?"

"About our success at Na Ao. But you'd better hurry. The ceremony is for this evening".

Boua Say was walking on air. He felt so happy to be back among his comrades, those men who for years had shared cold rice and wild vegetables with him and shed their blood and sweat for the people. As he crossed the forest, he saw flowers everywhere.

Near the stream he ran into Thao Tang, who was wearing a brand-new uniform and was carrying a bunch of forest flowers. The young man gave a shout and threw his arms round Boun Say's neck. He noticed the scars on the latter's face and asked with concern in his voice, "Do your wounds still hurt?"

"No," said Boun Say reassuringly and they began talking about recent events.

"What a pity", said Thao Tang, "you were not with us at the Na Ao battle. It was even better than at Nasala. That day, Thao Choum's unit got as close as two yards from the enemy sentry. But we could not attack yet. We had to wait for the assault to be given on the artillery base at Dot Pip. It was a very tense wait. Specially when the sentry began flashing his electric torch in our direction. You know what happened? Well, Thao Choum winked at Kham Kang, who was lying next to him, and as the latter nodded his approval, he opened fire and shot the sentry dead. The assault began. We hurled grenades and satchel charges at the enemy who were killed in great numbers. Some died right on their cots. Others had hardly time to put on their shoes. One was found lying dead with a telephone in his hands; he was probably about to call for help. In two minutes the post was liquidated. We lighted electric torches and collected an abundant

booty. As I was walking towards the entrance with a captured machinegun, Thao Choum said to me, "Here are two clips. Go and fire them in the air." I was surprised and asked, "Why should I waste ammunition in this way?" But he smiled and explained his scheme to me: This would make the enemy garrison at Dot Pip believe that the fighting was still going on; they would not leave the post and would be liquidated by our comrades."

"What a splendid fight", said Boun Say. "You surely fought well that day, Thao Tang".

"Oh, I only did my best", said Thao Tang modestly.

"He fought magnificently," said Thao Choum, who had come up to them. Thao Tang was embarrassed by his praise and ran away. Boua Say followed him with his eyes. "Not so long ago", he said, "he was still only a little boy, and the Pathet Lao cap went down to his ears. But now he is a full-fledged fighter".

"He is a member of the Youth Union and a shock combatant, said Thao Choum.

Don, the deputy political commissar, was writing slogans. He put down his brushes and warmly greeted Boua Say.

"We were afraid the nurses at the hospital would insist on keeping you there," he said teasingly, "but we're mistaken. Here you're back. And in good shape, too".

Kham Kang shook hands with Boun Say and invited him to sit on a bamboo bench. He stroked Boun Say's shoulder and asked, "You can still fight, can't you?".

«Of course,» said Boun Say.

«Did you pass through Ban Sang on your way here?»

«Yes. The people there had received our gifts: a bag of glutinous rice for each family. They were deeply moved that we should have found time, between battles, to make the bags and send gifts to every family in the hamlet. We should have used the time to take some rest, they said. And of course, they insisted that I should take with me some gifts for you: meat and red pepper. It was impossible for me to refuse; the old ladies just thrust it into my rucksack. Then, there are also letters. One is for Kham Kang».

«For Kham Kang?» Kham Tan said winked knowingly.

«A confidential letter,» said Boun Say, smiling. «But don't tease him, please, otherwise he may fly into a temper and read it aloud for all to hear».

Kham Kang burst out laughing and raised his fist.

«You'd better take care», he said, «or I'll give you the punishment you deserve».

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That night, Company 97 stood in impeccable rows, as if it was about to set out on a new campaign. Political commissar Kham Kang was wearing a well-pressed uniform and showed a clean-shaven face. His voice took on a solemn tone as he talked about the attention and care given Company 97 by the Central Committee and the High Command, which had made it possible for it to grow and mature. He concluded: «We have

the duty to strengthen even more the feelings of respect and confidence we have always shown the Central Committee and the High Command. Let us pledge to follow for ever the banner of the Central Committee in its march forward and to make Company 97 a unit that is politically reliable and militarily strong, whose every campaign ends in victory. Will yon swear to do so, comrades ? »

An unanimous answer rose ; « We swear ! » The voices of the men were enthusiastic and their eyes shining. Their words echoed among the forests and the mountains, and every leaf of the trees seemed to repeat them.

The pride of the cadres and fighters of Company 97 stemmed from their feeling that they were advancing at the same tempo as their fatherland toward a brilliant future. They were proud to tread the same path as their elders, for the present anti-Yankee resistance is the continuation of the former resistance to French colonialist aggression.

A Lam Vong dance was organized that very night in the heart of the forest. Of course it could not be attended by beautiful young girls clad in multicoloured skirts, but it was none the less full of animation and joy.

Kham Kang and Kham Lay formed a pair. Dancing, they would come close together, then again separate. They were like two trees swinging in the wind. Simulating a girl, Kham Lay put his hand on his chest and said simperingly : « Do you think I'm a good enough dancing partner ? »

Kham Kang, whose arms were stretched like the wings of a bird, wanted to slap his friend's back, but the latter quickly dodged and burst out laughing.

"Tell me," said Kham Kang, "is the old woman at Nhot Sim back at the hamlet?"

"Yes," said Kham Lay. "She is a bit angry with us. She told me the other day: 'I had wanted to give you some vegetables from my kitchen-garden, but you refused to take them. Now enemy soldiers have come and they have destroyed everything'."

"Poor old mother!" said Kham Kang. "She lives in enemy-occupied territory and the soldiers can come any time to plunder her property".

"One day," said Kham Lay, "I paid her a visit. She brought a big pot of hot water with odoriferous leaves in it and said: 'You Lao Soung people like to wash with warm water before going to bed. Go and wash while I stand watch lest enemy troops might come'. Then she told me about the day when our unit left the hamlet. The enemy had come and set fire to many houses and plundered the people's rice. The soldiers had said threateningly: 'This Meo hamlet has gone over to the Itsala. You have guided the attack made by the resisters recently on our post. We'll kill you all'. The son of the old woman, who had been impressed into the puppet army, was also there that day. He was but a bag of bones. His mother would like very much to talk to him about the good the revolution had been doing to the people, but his commander kept a tight watch on him. The young

boy was quivering with fear. Finally the enemy went away after causing the death of two people ”.

“ How ? ”

“ They had laid mines in the fields and failed to inform the village population. The old mother told me: “ When you resisters were here, the pigs could wander freely, the hens could remain on their perch, and the dogs wagged their tails to you. But when these pirates came, they sowed fear and desolation. The children did not even dare to cry at night, the girls fled to the heart of the forest, and old folk felt even older ”. Then the old woman talked to me about her son. She said: “ I’ve failed to bring my son back to the right path. I feel truly guilty toward you. The revolution, I carry it in my heart ”.

“ The revolution, I carry it in my heart ”. These words deeply moved Kham Kang. In his mind’s eye he saw Chan Tha, the dauntless hero who was one of the 15 members of the first partisan group set up during the resistance against French colonialist aggression. He fell in the defence of his native land, Champassak. His body was cut to pieces by the colonialist troops and salted, but to his last breath he had said to the face of the enemy: “ The revolution, I carry it in my heart. How can you know it ? ”

Twenty years had elapsed, but every time the memory of Chan Tha, Sithong, was evoked, the men of Company 97 felt their strength renewed. They were members of the great family of the Revolution and were imbued with this ideal formulated by the Central Committee :

"To struggle for the independence and freedom of the Fatherland".

The fraternal friendship which bound them together was strengthened day by day. Once Kham Lay was seriously wounded in a battle at Nhot Sim and was carried to the rear. For two days, he was unable to swallow the least bit of food. The stretcher-bearers were moved to tears and could hardly eat themselves. But Kham Lay clenched his teeth and said, "I can go hungry. But you who are carrying a heavy burden and have to travel a long distance, you must not go without food".

No tie is stronger and nobler than those uniting men who are comrades-in-arms and class brothers. In the battle at Nhot Sim, the company was detected as it approached the enemy. In order to avoid losses, Thao Choum unhesitatingly attracted the enemy's attention and fire to himself, making it possible for Don's unit to outflank and wipe out the enemy. Thao Choum was nicknamed "King of Raids" by his comrades. Whenever he undertook a reconnaissance mission, he used not only his eyes but even his hands: before the battle at Na Ao, he penetrated at night into the enemy's camp and counted the cots and weapons by touch. Anh when after such a mission he declared success to be certain, the only thing that remained to be done was to launch the attack and win.

Yes, this is so! The native soil is soaked with the blood of the people of Champassak, and their descendants are resolved to keep this blood pure and free from all stains, so as to remain worthy of the heroes Ong Keo and Kommadan, whose memories will live on for ever.

At Phou Ngoua, Phou Phao, Phou Ken, Houei Lou, Company 97 ran into great difficulties and dangers, just as when it was defending Chich Nou, but it always came off with flying colours, for it had matured and been tempered in the struggle. Every combatant and cadre was full of self-confidence and none was willing to stay at the base whenever a campaign was about to be started. Even those laid up with fever asked to go and political commissar Kham Kang was often forced to revise his decisions.

Today, Company 97 was getting ready for a campaign. On orders from the company command, two men in Thao Choum's detachment were to stay at the base to take care, among other things, of the unit's poultry. For each detachment kept about 100 hens. Thao Tang was one of the men appointed. He felt so bad about it he could not eat for a whole day. His rifle, which he used to take such good care of and to keep always by his side, even when he was ill and had to stay in bed, now lay in one corner. He could not stand the sight of his comrades cleaning their guns and getting their ammunition ready. More than once, he was about to burst into tears but then he remembered that he was a member of the Youth Union and that in this capacity he could not give way to his emotion and had to obey orders. Thao Choum had told him, «To stay at the base is also to fulfil one's duty. You're not going to take part in this operation but you'll participate in the next.»

Thao Tang was thus forced to listen to his superior's advice, but in his heart of hearts he was not pleased

and said to himself: "When the Yankees come to perpetrate such atrocious crimes against my compatriots my duty is to go and fight them on the battlefield. I've always borne this truth in mind and have never failed to volunteer for combat duty even when the battle promised to be a hard one."

Now, aware that he could not expect a favour from Thao Choum, Thao Tang went to see the company command and pleaded with Kham Kang to let him go. He insisted so much the latter finally had to agree.

Thao Choum was not at all angry. He smiled, winked and shook his head, saying: "All right, go and get your things ready. You're late, my boy."



Three days in pursuit of the enemy

For three days, the American pirates had been bombing the areas surrounding Houei Leui in the hope of dislodging our troops from key points and making it possible for the puppet troops to launch a sally. From battalion headquarters an order had been sent out for our forward units to brace themselves for an imminent offensive of the enemy. Thao Choum's detachment and Kham Lay's squad were to keep watch on the besieged garrison and probe the direction of the impending offensive.

The following day, at noon, an enemy reconnaissance party was sent in the direction of the Phou Ouat forest. It ran into Thao Choum's men, who gave it a hard

blow and sent it reeling back to Phia Kham. However informed about our strength, the commander of the puppet BV.28 battalion declared presumptuously: "After breakfast, we'll fight and capture Phou Ouat in no time."

But hardly had he said this when our mortars from Phou Ouat rained shells on his positions. His men did not have time even to swallow their rice and hurriedly ducked for cover. On top of a hill near the airstrip, 800 yards from Phia Kham, one of our heavy machine-guns was positioned. Kham Kang ordered that a few bursts be fired to keep the enemy cowed and allow Boun Thang's mortars to continue their pounding. And so the enemy's barracks and command post were hit and shattered.

The puppet soldiers, regrouped at Pa Cha hamlet, clamoured for reinforcements.

Under the command of Kham Kang, our troops encircled Pa Cha while Kham Lay's unit stormed Phia Kham and captured it. During the night, preparations were made to meet an eventual counter-attack.

The following day, at dawn, enemy aircraft began bombing Phia Kham, then an infantry company launched an attack, which was immediately repulsed. The enemy then called in artillery and the pounding lasted the whole day.

Meanwhile an enemy company attacked Pa Kha to try to break the encirclement of Pa Cha. Our mortars

at Phou Ouat gave our troops effective support. While Thao Choum's men stopped the enemy at Pa Cha, Kham Kang led a unit for a flank attack on the column advancing towards Pa Kha. As the enemy fell into disarray, our troops rushed down the slope of the hill to finish him off. It was a pitiful stampede: enemy soldiers trampled on their wounded comrades in a frantic effort to escape. They were given hot pursuit by Kham Kang's men.

That night, Kham Kang's group was bivouacking at Phia Kham when orders came from battalion headquarters to take advantage of the enemy's panic and try to dislodge him from Houei Leng.

Kham Lay was entrusted with the task of reconnoitring the area occupied by the enemy. Said Kham Kang: "If you run into isolated soldiers, kill them. If there are too many of them, pin them down until we can give you a hard".

Together with Boun Kiem, Thao Tang, and Thao Choum, he set out for a gruelling walk across thick jungle. At dawn the following day, they ran into an enemy patrol, opened fire and killed two soldiers, putting the rest to flight. Kham Lay and his men followed hotfoot on their heels.

Thanks to the thick screen of forming mist, the enemy company positioned on top of the hill was unable to assess Kham Lay's strength. When enemy soldiers

heard gunshots and loud shouts and saw their comrades fleeing in disorder, they too were seized by panic and fled in the direction of a stream. Kham Lay resorted to a stratagem. He shouted at the top of his voice: "First company, turn left. Second company, turn right. Third company, cut off the trail leading to the stream".

This bluff threw the enemy into even greater confusion. Boun Kiem, Thao Tang and Thao Choum took three different directions and drove wedges into the ranks of the enemy by new in full disarray. Kham Lay shot down a soldier and rushed forward. It was then that he was hit. His head swam and he fell.

At about the same time, automatic weapons began firing from the direction of the stream. The enemy had recovered his legs and was hitting back. The surprise element no longer prevailed. Boun Kiem was carrying Kham Lay on his back. The latter was very pale and weak. His comrades wanted to evacuate him to the rear but he refused. "We must quickly organize our defences," he said, "The enemy will soon attack".

On top of the hill, Kham Lay rested his gun on the parapet of his trench. Boun Kiem was by his side. Three successive assaults were repulsed, but Kham Lay felt that there was a hitch somewhere on Thao Tang's side.

"Thao Tang!" he called. And when the latter had come to him, he asked: "Are you wounded?"

"No," said the young man, "but we're running out of ammunition".

Kham Lay frowned and turned to Boun Kiem: "How much ammunition do you have left?"

"Two clips"

"Give one to Thao Tang and take some from my own reserves. If we share among ourselves all we have, we are still capable of inflicting grievous losses on the enemy should he dare to come up close".

The sound of gunfire coming to Kham Kang warned him that Kham Lay's group was engaged in fierce fighting. He wanted to send Boun Say's unit as reinforcement but then thought better of it. His reasoning was like this: "Around Phia Kham, the enemy is occupying four hilltops. Kham Lay is in action around Hill One. How if I attack Hill Two where the enemy has his headquarters, the troops on the other hills will surely send relief columns. It will be a good occasion to wipe them out".

After pondering over his idea, he thought it quite feasible. He discussed the matter with Boua Say and Boua Son and worked out his combat plan. Boua Say's group was divided into three squads. The first, commanded by Boua Say, was equipped with rifles and was to mount a frontal assault. The second, commanded by Boun Son, was equipped with tommyguns and was assigned a support role. The third was to man the mortars.

At two hundred yards, they opened fire with all their weapons, then Kham Kang ordered an all-out assault on Hill Two. Within five minutes, enemy defences were overrun.

On Hill One, the enemy locked in combat with Kham Lay and his men, realizing the fate of Hill Two, beat a hasty retreat.

From Hill Three, an enemy column advanced towards Hill Two for a counter-attack. At the foot of the hill, it was ambushed and cut to pieces by Thao Choum.

All told, two enemy companies were shattered and put to flight.

On Hill Four, the garrison knew their days were numbered. They tried to stop our advance by a mortar barrage, but in vain. The commander of Company 97 knew that they were about to cut and run. He ordered a violent mortar pounding then an infantry assault.

By three in the afternoon, the enemy was completely swept from Phia Kham. While a abundant booty was being collected with the help of the local population, Kham Kang ordered Boun Kong and Boun Tom to encircle the enemy at Houei Chon.

On the third day, the enemy mustered a company in a corner of a forest near Houei Chon and prepared for a counter-attack to recapture Phou Ouat. Boun Toum's group infiltrated into a village and was warmly welcomed by the population, who gave them not only protection but also precious information. An enemy

unit was marching on the village to plunder it. Boun Toum laid an ambush but his forces were discovered. Heavily out-numbered his men were in a difficult position. Fortunately a detachment from the battalion was sent from Houa Xieng under the command of the deputy commander of the battalion himself and the enemy was immediately put to flight towards Phou Pouk, pursued by company 97. At that very moment Platoon 5 turned up and the enemy's rout took the proportions of a disaster. All his forces in Ban O and Ban Pan were wiped out.

The noise of battle died down gradually. The joy of victory was enhanced by the prospects of a good harvest and the mutual love between people and liberation army. There was a festive atmosphere in all villages. Even families with members who had become pirates or mercenaries heartily joined in the merry-making and took liberation soldiers to jungle hideouts where their unworthy sons or brothers were taking refuge, so that the latter might be persuaded to come back to the right path.

Company 97 was assembled in full. All the men were beaming with joy and laden with arms and ammunition taken from the enemy. When the roll-call was made, three men were missing from the Second Platoon, among them Boun Kong. A detachment was ordered to make a search for them, but in vain. Meanwhile, Boun Kong and his two comrades were on the track of fleeing enemy troops. On the third day, they

caught up with an enemy column, which was apparently exhausted, and immediately engaged it. Two soldiers were killed but then the intervention of aircraft made it possible for the rest to escape.

The return of Boun Kong and his comrades to the camp was a triumphal one. In spite of the late hour, people talked, laughed, recounted feats of arms... Everyone felt intoxicated as though with a heady wine.

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The road leading to the front was bathed in sunshine. Maize fields girdled the hillslopes with tender-green sashes like those worn by Lao girls on festive days. Company 97 was going to the front, confident and proud. At a turn, they stopped and waved their hands to the population. Before the men had reached the forest, a song rose, like a bird taking wing, sung by a girl's voice :

O you who are going to far-away battlefields

Listen to my tender farewell!

When the day comes for you to be back home,

The fruit will be waiting for you on the branch.

The song was listened to with enthusiasm. The soldiers shouted a long hurrah in response to the cordial feelings expressed in it.

"Boun Kong", someone suggested, "please answer You have a good voice."

Boun Kong was a good singer. He smiled and, looking into the distance with dreamy eyes, began singing:

*O my lass, please let the fruit stay on the branch,
For I cannot yet sing the wedding song,
So long as the Yanks are invading our land
I'll go and fight them.
More and more exploits I wish to achieve
On far-away battlefields.
Let your heart give me its support,
O lass with rosy cheeks!*

The song was still echoing among the hills when the men of Company 97 reached the top of the slope and began walking down the other side. Kham Kang steadied his rucksack. Before his eyes, lining the path, sunflowers were blooming.

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