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Vietnam Report

(FOUO 1/82)

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VIETNAM

'VOLUNTARY' REHABILITATION IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS DESCRIBED

Paris PARIS MATCH in French 20 Nov 81 pp 3-10

[Report on interview with Rene Le van Duc by Jean Larteguy; date and place not given]

[Text] In the concentration camps of North and South Vietnam, 250,000 "voluntary" prisoners are discovering "rehabilitation": Psychological torture is just as effective as physical torture. Rene Le van Duc, 61 years old, a former French attorney and a colonel in the "puppet army," who admitted to his jailers that he had been involved in anticommunist activities, has experienced the hell of these camps. He was released because he was "old and sick" and too weak to take part in any active resistance. The fact that he was in contact with Ho Chi Minh via the French at the time of the Paris negotiations no doubt facilitated his release. He talks about his stay in camps in the communist North and describes the methods used to break down bodies and souls.

I, Rene Le van Duc, a former colonel in the puppet army, know my biography by heart. I can recite it. I was forced to write it at least 30 times in the various camps where I was a prisoner. But I never changed its details. For a very simple reason: I had written it in French, a friend had translated it into Vietnamese for me and I was forced to always use the same phrases, which had been transcribed in a notebook that I always kept with me.

In the world of the Vietcong, there are two reasons for such perpetual self-criticism. One is rational and obvious. The Vietnamese do not have photocopies and every agency must have a complete file on every individual, whether or not he is suspect.

The other reason is Machiavellian. The can-bo, the cadres, always hope that a prisoner, who is therefore guilty, will change a date, a sentence or a single word from one confession to the next. Then he will be caught and forced to confess whatever, that he broke the vase of Soissons or raped one of the Trung sisters (Vietnamese national heroines, 44 a.d.). I would have gladly embellished those biographies with racy stories, but the can-bo wouldn't have appreciated it.

Their tragedy was that they were so limited and molded by the system that you could not even resent them for it. Can you blame insects for stinging you because that's

the way they are made? Can you blame a robot that has been programmed to relentlessly try to destroy you?

During the month and a half following the fall of Saigon and the rebirth of Ho Chi Minh City, the communists did not ask me anything. I managed the Hotel Continental for my first cousin, Philippe Franchini.

On 16 June, after all journalists had been sent back to their various countries of origin and those annoying witnesses were gone, the hotel was turned over to the people, i.e., to the new government. In any case, the last customers had fled.

While returning home one evening, I learned that the first decrees on rehabilitation had just been published. For privates in the army, such rehabilitation would be limited to 3 days locally; for junior officers, to 10 days; for higher and general officers, to 1 month, but in the camps. I considered myself to be just a civilian who had been discharged long ago. A can-bo from the chairman's office authorized me to go through the 3-day course, along with my secretaries, stenographers and orderlies. The course was uninteresting gibberish. For 2 days the can-bo told us why they won the war: thanks to the spontaneous uprising of the people of Saigon. I was in Saigon and I had never heard of this uprising. It was absurd. They didn't ask us to believe it but to pretend to admit what is now the new truth.

They said the same thing about the 1968 Tet, when the entire population of the southern capital had risen up and had been crushed by the American imperialists. Totally false! There was no uprising: the Vietcong fought alone.

I had thus just entered the disconcerting world of lies, where trying to stick to historical truth can cost you 10 years in a concentration camp.

On the third day, a can-bo told us that all former officers had to report to Office No. 7. I had high hopes. The number seven was always my lucky number when I bet at the races.

Actually, I had bet on one hell of a nag that day. At Office No. 7, I was given a slip of paper telling me that the revolution was granting me "the favor of prolonging my rehabilitation by 1 month."

This still wasn't a disaster, I thought, if only 1 month of chatter was all that was required to put me right with our new masters. Like all my comrades, I let myself be fooled. Without formally assuring us that this rehabilitation would last exactly 1 month, we were asked to provide, in addition to a mosquito net and a few personal effects, the sum of 6,750 piastres (which had not yet been changed to the new dongs) to pay for our food; that would be our share of the expenses, which were 250 piastres a day. It was only necessary to divide the amount: our stay had been planned for only 30 days.

Reassured of this, I voluntarily went to the camp to which I had been assigned.

It was ironic that it was the former camp for Vietcong prisoners at Tam Niep near Bien Hoa, where there were only soldiers or former soldiers (nearly 6,000), from second lieutenants to lieutenant colonels. Colonels and generals were sent to Quang Trung, near Saigon.

The Vietcong said that having worn the uniform of the puppet army, if only for a single day, was enough to be guilty of a crime against the masses. And there I was, a criminal, lost in that crowd, guarded by bodoi. We were counted and assigned numbers. We were fed more or less properly: 600 grams of rice, boiled vegetables and dried fish.

On the ninth day, we were awakened in the middle of the night. We were being moved. Naively, I thought that we were being sent back to Saigon, or rather, to Ho Chi Minh City.

We were transferred on foot to another camp at Song Mau (River of Blood), dominating the Bien Hoa airstrip.

At the end of 3 weeks, after reading my first confession, they learned that I was the only high-ranking officer there. I was transferred by truck to the Long-Giao camp, the quarters of the 18th division, the one which performed gloriously at Xuan Loc under the orders of General Le Minh Dao, who is still rotting in prison in a camp. If all the other divisions had done as much!

I must confess, with much sadness, that besides the officers who had fought courageously and never talked about the war, as though they had been knocked senseless, others had become sad cases, embezzlers, cowards, informers who stole from each other. Myself, an incurable civilian sickened by their attitude, I stated during a public session of self-criticism that it wasn't necessary to look very far for the reasons for our defeat. I said that it was us, the officers, who were to blame as much as the Americans or our leaders.

One month and then two passed, when we were supposed to be released at the end of 30 days. But we understood very quickly that there was no longer any question of that.

At Long-Giao, I finally experienced the benefits of rehabilitation.

There were 100 of us in each hut, divided into groups of 10. We slept on mats laid on a low ledge running along the side of the hut.

We rose at 5 am. Exercises, work details (such as chopping wood); most of the time we didn't do a damn thing. Rations diminished. At 10 am, the first meal: 200 grams of rice, cups of water and the same thing in the evening at 5 pm. From time to time, a little dried or fresh fish: about a mouthful.

Everyone was dying of hunger. Having the appetite of a bird, I suffered less than my comrades.

Things got worse later. On the pretext of saving wood, the two meals were taken closer together: the first at 10 am, the second 4 hours later. The result: our stomachs stayed empty for 20 hours at a time. Unbearable!

This was a tactical measure, of course, but let's get back to the rehabilitation.

The complete course included 10 lessons, with each lesson lasting 1 week. The same teacher conducted each lesson; he was a kind of itinerant parrot monk, carrying the gospel from camp to camp. He always came from North Vietnam. Everything was programmed; nothing was left to improvisation or to imagination.

These were the topics of the 10 lessons: the puppet government's leaders and their crimes; military leaders, other criminals; the American imperialists; the Vietnamese people's victorious struggle; their ancient, heroic traditions; their war against the imperialists; the stages in the victory of the masses (even if they weren't there); redemption through work, which is "glorious"; Vietnam is a beautiful, rich, powerful, prosperous country (even if people are dying of hunger there) .... There were two 3-hour courses daily, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. There were 500 of us, assembled in a large hall, writing nearly 20 pages on our knees in each session. For me, these 20 pages constituted a dual labor because of my poor knowledge of the language.

Those were my first lessons in Vietnamese. I had forgotten everything; at least I managed to learn my native language.

But I paid dearly for those lessons; when I was released, I weighed 34 kg and had lost some of my teeth from malnutrition. My comrades, who were often strong, athletic young officers, suffered from hunger to such an extent that they were no longer able to sleep.

We drifted in a world that was as unreal as the description which we were given of our country's history.

Thus there were 6 hours of indoctrination for 3 days. Then discussion sessions for 3 more days. The can-bo asked four questions about the lesson given--not a single one more--and every lesson had to be discussed for a half-day, with each one of us obliged to give our opinion. For example: the crimes of Vietnamese officers against the revolution, the people and the Vietnamese homeland.

Without being concerned about the truth, we had to paraphrase indefinitely, but in writing. That was called the harvest, which of course followed the planting of the seed of truth.

Then there was another discussion among ourselves, in groups of 10, which was attended by a can-bo, who was impassive and silent, always a northerner who constantly took notes with a stiff face devoid of all expression.

We were supposed to help each other make progress by asking each other questions. In exceptional cases, the can-bo redirected the course of the discussion when it began to digress. Unfortunately, such assistance sometimes seemed like a denunciation.

The can-bo very cleverly let us know that they knew everything about us.

Concerning the "crimes," my comrades often admitted more than was necessary. But I tried hard to dampen their zeal.

Such as the commander of the third military region, who admitted that he had asked to head a secret mission in which six important leaders of the Front had been killed and others taken prisoner.

The poor guy, stricken with panic, thought that the Vietcong were omniscient. But they undoubtedly did not know about that. The result: He underwent a severe interrogation and gave them the names of all his comrades. When he regained his wits, he burst into tears. He had just closed the door to freedom on himself and on other officers forever.

No torture, neither physical nor mental, was needed to obtain such a result; nothing except hunger and fear and a can-bo staring at you with empty eyes.

The worst torture was still the uncertainty of our fate. Officially, and this is true, we had gone to these rehabilitation camps voluntarily, but for 1 month, as we had been led to understand. And the months went by. When someone asked a can-bo how long our detention would last, he invariably recited the text of a law which had just been issued: "The legal duration of rehabilitation is 3 years. But the indulgent and humane revolution may permit those who, despite their past crimes, are old or weak and those who have made progress to be released before that time." Implying that others (in good health) lacking enthusiasm would remain confined for at least 3 years. And if they didn't reform, for an indefinite period.

Progress was evaluated according to two criteria: enthusiasm in learning your lessons and repenting for your faults. Everyone learned his lessons and repented in order to get good marks from the can-bo.

For nights on end, I thought about how to get out. To maintain this uncertainty and the prisoners' zeal, the communists were necessarily obliged to release some of them. As an example. I had to be one of those men. My file had to be examined and noticed; I had to be a special case.

So I mentioned, in one of my "biographies," my interview with Ho Chi Minh in 1946. I was called in twice. I had not lied in my biographies; I had just added to them.

For example: To the question, "Why did you enter the army?", my comrades replied: "We were mobilized" or "We enlisted in order to feed our families." But I wrote, despite the opposition of my translator friend, who maintained that I was putting a rope around my neck: "I was French, reared in France from infancy in a religious institution, the son of rich middle-class parents. In the Vietnamese Army, I earned 10 times less than if I had remained an attorney in France. I enlisted to fight communism, which was logical, in view of my upbringing and social environment. I wanted to contribute to building an independent, but not communist, Vietnam."

To such candor, I no doubt owe the fact of having been considered special among the mass of prisoners. My plan turned out to be right, but in the meantime I almost died.

My chronic bronchitis became worse. Weaker and weaker, I had come to think that under those conditions life was no longer worth living. I stopped fighting. My strength diminished very quickly. I could no longer even stand up and had to crawl on all fours to my mat when my comrades didn't carry me.

It was then, after 4 months of detention, that the "masses" permitted us to write to our families.

Thinking that I was going to die and not wishing to give false hopes to those who loved me, I refused to take part in that evil comedy.

The can-bo collected the letters, counted them, and counted them again: 97, 98, 99 ... one was missing. They found the culprit; I was it. They tried to lecture me. I didn't want to listen. I demanded that they leave me the hell alone and leave me to die in my corner, among my comrades.

The can-bo were totally bewildered because such a case was unexpected. They referred it to their superiors. I was taken against my will to the infirmary, where there were no drugs. I persisted, still refusing to write the letter, jamming the entire complex mechanism of the camp system. I disturbed them. I became a special case: the one who had met Ho Chi Minh, who had died and become a god. I was that colonel who had never gone to war, that former French lawyer, one of the few who dared to admit that he had engaged in anticommunist activities.

Nevertheless, they managed to find a rare and precious drug with which to treat me: 20 cc's of streptomycin, which they injected into me immediately in that infirmary, where it was impossible to find even a single aspirin tablet.

That's how I regained my strength and, at the same time, the desire to go on with that experience.

Almost well, I was sent back to the Tam Niep camp in the company of hundreds of lieutenant colonels.

I was unaware that there had been so many in the southern army. There were also two catholic chaplains among us. About a hundred of us would meet secretly on Sundays in a hut during rest period to attend a mass that lasted barely 20 minutes. There were 2 candles and a mustard jar which served as a chalice. We were even able to take communion with a tiny piece of host. We had returned to the age of the catacombs. As for myself, who had been a very lukewarm catholic until then, I learned again how to pray to God in such circumstances. And I continued to do so after I was released.

While celebrating the holy sacrifice on Holy Thursday, we were surprised with shouts and cocked rifles. The bodoi surrounded, threatened and insulted us and arrested the two priests.

The priests returned several hours later, looking crestfallen and avoiding conversation with their comrades. And there were no more masses.

Many prisoners thought of escaping. But they figured out how to make us forget about that. Loudspeakers were installed throughout the camp one day. Until then, we had been living in an atmosphere of silence, I should say of reclusion, without any contact with the outside world: no music or slogans.

The loudspeakers started to crackle the next day at 7 am. They broadcast the trial, within the camp, of two comrades who had escaped 5 months earlier and had been caught immediately. They had resumed their usual lives among us and then suddenly, they were confined in what served as a jail--a conex, a container which had been used by the Americans.

It was a trial without any defense counsel, of course. The men were accused of belonging to the CIA and of trying to escape in order to join underground saboteur forces.

The verdict for the first man was handed down at 11 am: death. There was a burst of gunfire 5 minutes later. He had just been executed.

The second man's trial began at 1330; he had heard his friend's whole trial. He tried to defend himself. He said he had wanted only to rejoin his family. The verdict was handed down at 1600: death. He was executed immediately.

At 7 am on that same morning, a work detail had dug the two graves.

I questioned one of their friends. He confirmed to me that they had only wanted to rejoin their families. Volunteers for 1 month, they were not at all willing to stay indefinitely.

But in North Vietnam I later heard about escapees who, having been caught after 2 weeks, received sentences of only 1 month in prison.

Were the Tam Niep executions meant to be an example? Or were they a result, which is also possible, of the immense confusion, the absence of laws and precise regulations governing reunified Vietnam, with each camp commander acting according to his own will or whims? Both theories are possible or perhaps applicable.

As for me, sufficiently rehabilitated, instead of being released I was transferred on 5 July 1976 to Yen-Bay in North Vietnam, on the Chinese border.

Three thousand of us were moved to Haiphong in the hold of a large Soviet freighter. Then we took the train, in terrible conditions. One of my friends, who had tuberculosis, died from heat in one of the cattle cars in which we had been piled.

We went down the Red River in rowboats at Yen-Bay to our camp, where we numbered 400. It was in the middle of the jungle. We moved about only at night and excursions were always at impossible times: midnight, 1 am--all so we would not be seen by the people.

Our entire baggage consisted of 2 satchels containing our personal effects. We received military uniforms, Ho Chi Minh sandals made of a piece of tire rubber and cone-shaped peasant hats, plus 2 red Chinese Army blankets of fairly good quality, dating back to the period of brotherhood. I remained at Yen-Bay for 11 months.

There I encountered a new breed of can-bo, astonishing individuals from another universe, both admirable and frightening, hardened by war and hardship and totally unaware of the outside world. Carefully selected, those lieutenants and captains had been in combat since the age of 15 and they were then 40. They all wore the same expressionless mask. But it wasn't stuck over their faces, it was incrusted in their flesh. Sometimes there was a flash of anger in their eyes, but you still had to catch them unawares to detect it ....

There were 90 of us in each hut and this time we had two of these extraterrestrial beings who, from 0600 to 2100, were simultaneously our instructors, our spiritual fathers, the directors of our consciences, our commanders. We called them quan-giao: educators.

As the days went by, the food got worse and worse and its amount diminished. The rice improved, mixed with manioc and corn which I spent my time husking, alone, all day long--a light job.

We had fish once a week: 7 kg, including the head, bones and guts, for 400 men. I would give my mouthful of fish away; there were too many bones and it was rotten. Fortunately, my appetite was small! Several comrades, who formerly ate 2 Chinese soups just for breakfast, became ghosts, floating in uniforms too big for them. Many others got sick: dysentery, malaria and beri-beri. No drugs. No tobacco, 10 g of thuoe-lao for water pipes for 1 month.

A pack of cigarettes for the Tet. For me, who was used to gray tobacco, it was like smoking straw. Plus 1 biscuit and 3 bad candies!

The can-bo had the same food and tobacco ration as ourselves. They would refuse when one of us would offer them a cigarette to soften them. They were incorruptible. I couldn't get over it. As the blasted keeper of the camp's oxen, and then its fowl, I was able to go into their quarters: apparently they were tightening their belts as much as we were.

And during this whole time rehabilitation through work went on, which did not exclude indoctrination. The work was interrupted twice in 1 year for review sessions which lasted 1 week each and during which we recited, or rather we stumbled through, our lessons learned at the Long-Giao camp.

But to get back to the work, when we arrived the camp did not exist. We had to build large straw huts, one for each group of 90. Everything was made of wood, bamboo and thatch in contrast to the south, where they used what the Americans had left behind: sheet metal and barbed wire, without its barbs. Here, there wasn't even a nail. We had to tie together the various parts with vines. The frame of the hut was composed of large tree trunks buried in the ground and walls of bamboo that was crushed and then braided.

The camp was enclosed by a fence, which was purely symbolic, as was the watchtower with a guard armed with an AK47, the Chinese combat rifle. There was no problem escaping. It would have been easy! But where was there to go?

The night was total. There were no searchlights because there was no electricity, only three oil lamps per hut. Since the monthly fuel ration was used up in a week, we had no light for 20 days and lighted our lamps only for the 20-minute reading of NHAN-DAN, the party newspaper; the hut leader had saved a few drops of "strategic" oil solely for that purpose.

We rose at 5 am. It was not yet daylight; it was winter and it was cold: 2° to 3°. We were given a bowl of rice or corn: 50 g. Cleaning, exercise. At 6:30 am: work. The old and the sick stayed in camp. Everyone else left for the mountains to clear them. First we brought back the wood and bamboo. Then we planted.

Everyone was provided with a kind of large knife which had the peculiarity of not cutting at all. It was a piece of iron that was impossible to sharpen. Thus it did not really have any cutting edge. It was more like a hammer than a knife.

With a normal knife, one-fourth of an hour would have been enough to cut down a small tree: instead, it took 3 to 4 hours. And then there was only one of those pieces of iron for every 3 or 4 workers. But this did not prevent our can-bo from bending our ears with talk of production, yields and work scheduling.

At first I thought that it was deliberate, that there was a purpose: to force us, to train us, to work with improper tools. No, it was only negligence and disorder. Behind the rigid appearance of organization, that was the whole tragedy of Vietnamese communism: systematized absurdity. The wood was crushed rather than cut.

When the camp was finally finished, the Chinese came in 1979 and destroyed it. But I had already left.

We returned to camp at 11 am for the second meal: 200 g of rice and herbs, actual strings that were impossible to chew, and a little fish brine diluted with a great deal of water. There was another meal at 5 pm. After I left the camp, there was finally no more rice, only some Soviet sorghum and manioc.

It was forbidden to fish in the river. The local Thai population was in a deplorable state of poverty, even worse than ourselves. In rags, they walked barefoot even though it was cold. They were not mistreated, but totally ignored by the government, which waited for them to disappear. None of them spoke Vietnamese. Of course, all contact with that "inferior race" was strictly forbidden, even though they sometimes crossed through the camp.

The winter clothes which we had been authorized to request from our families did not arrive until summer.

Always absurdity! I also worked in the kitchen. There were 16 of us and only 6 knives for peeling the vegetables. Those knives were also the same pieces of dull iron which had been sharpened a thousand times and which immediately became dull.

I maintain that there was really no Machiavellian purpose in this, but only incredible disorder prevailing over enormous destitution. The 400 of us, including many strong young men, represented a considerable productive force. But nothing came of it, for lack of a few sharp tools and the semblance of reason.

Six pickaxes for a 30-man clearing team! We changed shifts every half-hour! We planted vegetables. But they rotted in the field. For a time, there was too much. During the period of abundance, the rations, although very inadequate, nevertheless remained the same.

We didn't work to produce; we didn't work to eat, but to reform. Actually, under such conditions of organized disorganization, we didn't have to strain ourselves. We weren't dying of fatigue, but of hunger and of seeing such "voluntary" rehabilitation continue indefinitely.

When one of us got sick, he had to tell the group's nurse, who had no training; he simply noted the sick man's name for a medical visit. The patient was then taken to the camp's nurse, a can-bo this time, but he didn't know anything either. But he did wear a stethoscope proudly and listened carefully to the chests of those suffering from dysentery or stomach ailments, deciding at random that this one was sick and that one was not. Anyone considered sick was given ... a slip of paper granting him 24 hours of rest, but no drugs; there were never any. The most serious cases were sent to the infirmary ... where there weren't any drugs either.

Sometimes a patient was sent to Yen-Bay by boat and truck. What happened in Yen-Bay? No one returned to tell us. As a rule, they died in the camp. In my camp there were 5 deaths in 10 months.

There were informers among us, of course, but if some were quickly discovered and ostracized, others continued their dirty work--to be favored, to get out quicker. The idiots! When they were no longer useful, they kept them anyway.

It was impossible to steal a bowl of rice without being denounced. We were all very careful in our conversations. But what could we say to each other? We were cut off from the world. Our only source of information was the party newspaper, NHAN-DAN (The People), which they read to us in the evening after returning from work. The newspaper reported only victories and triumphs in every sector. We couldn't have cared less.

Our sole obsession was our stomachs and saving a little food to eat at midnight, in order to cheat hunger and sleep. Hunger drove us wild. Afraid of being robbed, everyone carried his pitiful wealth around with him: a pinch of tobacco, three aspirin tablets brought from the south and a piece of soap.

One of us escaped in an effort to reach Laos, which wasn't very far away. For 2 weeks he ate bamboo shoots and drank the water from vines. Exhausted, he sought refuge among the mountaineers, who turned him over to the militia, who brought him back to the camp, where he died from dysentery 2 weeks later.

There was no internal clandestine organization, at least not in my camp. Egotism was pushed to an extreme. In order to survive.

The can-bo kept to themselves and did not mix with us. I struggled to understand what they wanted from us and what made them tick. I was aware that their sole mission was to destroy us morally, mentally, psychologically and spiritually, but not physically.

All of North Vietnam was hungry. Still no news from our families. Nothing to read, no music; no light at night. It was impossible to measure the time. Our watches had been taken away in the beginning. Nothing but a gong punctuating our ectoplasmic existence and fear preventing us from speaking. And our release postponed indefinitely! Uncertainty!

There was never any punishment. Four comrades came back from a 15-km rice detail with a 20-kg sack on their backs. They passed by a corn field and each one picked two ears. They were denounced the next day. A conference was held. The camp's entire staff was present, lined up like onions on a platform.

One after the other, every one of our comrades confessed. The camp commander gave us a long speech. Their crime was very serious. They had stolen from the people; the worst kind of offense. It glaringly demonstrated their despicable nature. They were not cured of "the pernicious influence of French colonists and American imperialists," who had taught them to exploit the people. They were rotten to the core.

Finally, the sanction: this would be put on their records.

Those four men were shattered, infinitely more than if they had been slapped in jail for 6 months. They didn't dare to speak to us. They thought of themselves as pariahs. For two ears of corn! They imagined the worst. They would never be able to get out. All that was left was for them to die. I tried to reassure them, in vain! For two ears of corn, the merits acquired during 2 years of detention were wiped out. They had not improved!

I never saw anyone punished a single time in my camp in the North. But for each peccadillo, the accusation was terrifying: having tried to sabotage the revolution; the sanction was merciless: that would be put on the record.

The communists had no intention of releasing their prisoners. But they let some go as an example, to encourage others and, this may seem surprising, the ones released were the highest ranking officers, regardless of the charges against them.

The ones that they did not want to release, under any circumstances, were the young lieutenants and captains, especially paratroopers, marines and rangers, who could join the underground, reestablish a resistance and create networks: all real soldiers who had fought and were ready to start over. Whereas old men like myself, physically weak or no longer aggressive in any way and, it must be said, who had also lost all prestige, presented no danger any longer.

The can-bo never intervened in our quarrels. Two prisoners would argue. The can-bo preferred not to know why. Who was guilty, innocent? Both were considered guilty.

I later learned that my particular case was the subject of a lesson in a neighboring camp! During a study session, the can-bo giving the instruction referred to that lieutenant colonel of the puppet army, the one who didn't even speak Vietnamese, only French, and to whom the Revolution, in its indulgence, had assigned the task of watching over two oxen--the easiest work--because he was old and sick. An ox had escaped ... no doubt that colonel had spoken to the ox in French and it had not understood!

My release was nevertheless provided for by article 7 of the rehabilitation ordinance, which permitted the release of the sick and elderly.

Initially, there were 20 of us to be examined by a medical committee. There were 10 of us remaining before a second committee. Then there were five. Finally, only four of us were released.

On the second day of the 1977 Tet, 18 or 19 February, one of the two can-bo in charge of my group, finding me alone, crouched down beside me and pointed at the ground, which meant that I was to do the same. Without looking at me, he said: "Brother

Duc, you are an example for the camp! You are old, weak and sick, but you have made an effort at rehabilitation. We have put this in your record. Keep it up." He rose and walked away.

I was definitely very surprised. I had not made so much of an effort and that was the first time that I had seen a can-bo behave that way. Lying on my mat that night, after thinking about it a long time, I thought I understood: that meant that they were in the process of studying my case and the can-bo was urging me not to do anything wrong concerning camp discipline or indoctrination.

Two weeks later while, having become a breeder of rachitic pigs, I was walking through the camp, the same can-bo sternly ordered me to follow him.

He told me to sit down, offered me a cigarette, poured me some cold tea in a regulation can-bo cup, a soldier's cup with green enamel on the outside. I drank and smoked, more and more intrigued.

He looked at me, waited until I had finished and then told me to keep the cup but to hide it under my clothes.

He had seriously violated the rules by that token of friendship. Why did he make me that present? I learned the next day that he himself had left to be rehabilitated.

Thus that being who had been trained to have no feelings, to display no anger or feelings of sympathy, that machine, was still a man. There was still hope for everything. The terrible old men of Hanoi, the engineers who created these robots, had they lost if man survived?

I then struggled to interpret his gesture from a practical and bureaucratic standpoint. I concluded that that can-bo, knowing that he would not see me again, that I was going to be released, had risked showing me a sign of friendship. One month later, I left the camp.

There was another gesture which would have been sternly condemned: on the day that I was released, at 11 in the evening, a second can-bo secretly gave me a little delicacy, some soybean curd. But still with an impassive expression on his face.

There were still five of us up for release and suddenly, the fifth man was scratched from the list.

A can-bo gave us a speech using the usual terms, as was the rule: "You are being released because you have made some progress; this is only a beginning; once you have returned to your homes, you must continue in order to again become an honest citizen and also help to rehabilitate your families and those around you in order to achieve perfection on the glorious path of Marxism-Leninism."

He continued: "One of your comrades (the fifth) should have been among you, but unfortunately he demonstrated that his progress was inadequate."

He was the man who slept next to me. His attitude was exemplary for 2 years. That was his crime.

One day, he caught cold and came down with a bad flu; he had to be confined to bed. He was excused from work. He malingered a little, prolonging his convalescence. It was 3° outside! No one told him anything.

At the last minute, without being aware of the reasons himself, for he had to discover them himself in order to reform ... he learned that he was not going to be released.

With the can-bo, it was useless and even dangerous to display too much enthusiasm. That appeared suspicious, just as not displaying enough also appeared suspicious. To avoid all the traps which were set for us, so that the can-bo did not record them in his notebook, we were like tightrope walkers in perpetual balance on a string, risking a fall to the right or to the left.

Someone might volunteer for a work detail to which he had not been assigned. He said that he was volunteering, completed his work and thought he was entitled to the same rest as his comrades. But he had made a mistake and had toppled from his string. As a volunteer, he should not ask to rest. And the can-bo opened his notebook. The man had just taken a step backward on the road to redemption.

Other traps set: our perpetual biographies. One word too much, one new fact reported, another one forgotten, and you had to start all over. In this regard, my lack of knowledge of Vietnamese saved me.

Such treatment, which was both subtle and simple, could not be withstood indefinitely. Half of my comrades would leave the camps, if they managed to get out one day, more or less broken.

I was officially released under Article Seven of the Charter of Concentration Camps of the People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam. "The merciful and humane Revolution releases this officer, regardless of his past crimes, because he is old and sick." Which should be interpreted as follows: "Because he is not dangerous and unable to participate in any resistance."

A few individuals definitely had to be released so that the charter was not a total lie. I was a member of the first contingent to come back from the North and that event was given all the publicity that could be expected. Photographs and recordings of the farewell ceremony were distributed to every camp ... to encourage other prisoners to continue their efforts along the radiant path of repentance and rehabilitation.

It was a real surprise to my whole neighborhood.

The people's clemency was given out very selectively. Cao Giao, the journalist, had also just been released after 6 years of detention. But he was dying.

In May 1977, our group of prisoners released from camps in the North was composed of 65 rehabilitated men who were in rather poor physical condition.

We were reassembled in another camp, officially to get us back on our feet. I never slept as poorly or ate so little. At the end of 2 weeks, we took the train to Hanoi

and then Vinh in a car reserved for us. Ten can-bo and nurses escorted us: can-bo without weapons, nurses without drugs.

At every station, a wild crowd tried to climb into that small local train. The steps were taken by storm.

We had ample room in our car, but when a poor nha-que risked entering, a can-bo calmly told him to leave. And he obeyed without protesting, without the least murmur, and remained sadly on the platform. Buses took us from Vinh to Saigon in 5 days. I didn't have any money. We had just crossed the former southern border, arriving in Hue, the former imperial capital, when a can-bo gave us permission to get off the train and, for those with money, to eat in a restaurant alongside the road.

Suddenly it was a miracle, the miracle of the South. There were women in groups on the sidewalks. A can-bo forbade us to communicate with them. There were about 20 of them, rather young vendors of soup and delicacies. They looked at the can-bo, came closer, understood who we were and where we were coming from. A rice-cake vendor spoke to me. She wanted me to buy one of her cakes. "I'm sorry," I said, "but I don't have any money."

The young woman came closer, took two cakes and offered them to me: "Take them," she said simply. And since I refused, smiling, without caring about the can-bo, she threw the cakes to me through the open window. Three other women came up and each one threw me a piastre. The most beautiful gifts I have ever received in my life!

I tried to give back the piastres! They refused. Then I dared to speak to them, to violate the very law of the can-bo, to tell them not to lose hope and that their husbands would return one day very soon. They smiled at me with tears in their eyes.

I have been told about those widows, those women dressed in black, who indefatigably walk around a square in Buenos Aires, Argentina, because they have no news of a husband or son.

What square in Saigon would be large enough for the 250,000 women who are also waiting for a husband or son?

Finally we reached a camp near Saigon, supposedly to complete the formalities, which actually amounted to a medical visit. Twelve days! Oh, such bureaucratic red tape! Our families were obliged to come get us, to be given a final speech with us.

In order for my wife to survive, in order not to be labeled a parasite or a privileged middle-class woman, she sold cigarettes from a small cart in front of our house. Out of sympathy, the entire neighborhood bought from her.

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END