

Cigarette Pack Helps Start North Vietnam Army

By TRAN VAN DINH

Collegiate Press Service

Editor's Note: This is the fourth in a series of articles on the armies of Vietnam by Tran Van Dinh, Vietnamese journalist who is a regular columnist for the Collegiate Press Service. The first three articles appeared in EFS numbers two,

WASHINGTON (CPS) — The official birthdate of the People's Army of North Vietnam (VPA) is December 22, 1944.

The father is Ho Chi Minh, the legendary revolutionary who since 1941 returned to the mountains of Vietnam after 30 years of activities abroad from Moscow to China. Ho Chi Minh, now President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) was then the leader of the Viet Minh, the political organization which led the Vietnamese fight for independence.

The VPA was born in clandestinely and the conditions of its birth were contained in a yellow piece of paper smuggled in a package of American cigarettes (Camels) by Ho Chi Minh to an ex-professor of history, Vo Nguyen Giap (at the time known as Comrade Van) who since then led the VPA to the victory of Dien Hien Phu against the French and to the present confrontation with the U.S. power. The instructions in the piece of paper read:

"1. Name: Brigade of Propaganda of the Liberation Army of Vietnam. It means that the political aspect is more important than the military aspect. In order to act with success, on the military field, the main principle is that of concentration of forces. Therefore, according to the new directives of the Party, recruits will come from the ranks of guerilla units in Cao Bac Land (the three provinces of North Vietnam, at the border with China) from those cadres and soldiers most loyal and most dedicated. A number of arms will be concentrated to develop the 'chu luc' (the main force). However, our resistance being people's resistance, it is necessary to mobilize the whole population. While concentrating forces to form the first army unit, it is necessary to maintain the regional armed units, to co-ordinate with them and assist them in every way. The main force unit has the mission of guiding the regional forces, instructing them, giving them arms if possible and making them grow continuously.

"2. Regarding the regional armed units: bring the regional cadres back to the main force headquarters for training. Send them back to their regions to exchange experiences, to organize liaison and to co-ordinate fighting.

"On tactics: apply guerilla warfare, the principle of secrecy, of lightning attacks, of absolute devotion. The soldier must be one day in the east, the next day in the west, coming without shadow and leaving without image. The Brigade of the Propaganda Unit of the Vietnam Liberation Army is the elder brother unit, trying to have soon other younger brother units. Although its beginning is small, its perspective is large and glorious. It is the beginning of

the Liberation Army. It can go from North to South, all over our country."

Vo Nguyen Giap added to these instructions 10 points of the Oath of Honor. The first point read:

"The Vietnam People's Army fighter swears to sacrifice himself unreservedly for the fatherland, for the cause of national independence, democracy and socialism, under the leadership of the Vietnam Workers Party and the Democratic Republic, to build a peaceful, reunited, independent, democratic and prosperous Vietnam and contribute to the strengthening of peace in South East Asia and the world."

The ninth point read: "In contact with the people, to follow these three recommendations: to respect the people, to help the people, to defend the people in order to win their confidence and affection and achieve a perfect understanding between the people and the army."

From this rather simple birth certificate, the Brigade of Propaganda of the Liberation Army of Vietnam (actually composed of less than a 100 poorly armed personnel) grew to become a Liberation Army which helped the Viet Minh to take power in August 1945. It is the same army which grew into a formidable force which defeated the French at Dien Bien Ph. in 1954.

At the end of the First Indochinese War, the VPA was a

regular army of 200,000 men strong.

At the present time, according to official sources, the VPA has 450,000 men. According to a study of the VPA by the South Vietnamese Army General Staff, the regular VPA army is backed by over 200,000 of the people's Militia and Self Defense Units.

After the bombing of North Vietnam by the U.S. Air Force, in February 1965, an organization called "Thanh Nien Ba San Sang (The Three Ready Youth Organization: ready to enlist in the armed forces, ready to fight, ready to go anywhere) mobilized 1,500,000 young men to support the army. The minister of defense and deputy prime minister, General Vo Nguyen Giap, is assisted by 7 Deputy Ministers of Defense and a Defense General Staff of 8 departments one of which is the Office for Liaison with the ICC (International Control Commission) headed by Colonel Ha Van Lau. The Armed Forces Staff under the Ministry of Defense is headed by General Van Tien Dung assisted by 5 Vice-Chiefs.

The Political Department of the Armed Forces Staff, the most

important of all departments is headed by General Song Hao, an old comrade in arms of General Vo Nguyen Giap. The VPA being an "instrument of the Party" is basically a political army and the role of the political commissars attached to all units is the decisive one.

In an article in the VPA magazine, General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the VPA in 1959: "The Vietnamese Peoples Army fighting against imperialism and traitors in its service, it has fought for national independence and the unity of the country. "Our Army is a democratic army because it fights for the people's democratic interests and the defense of people's democratic power. Impregnated with the principles of democracy in its internal political life, it submits to a rigorous discipline, but one freely consented to.

"Our army is a people's army, because it defends the fundamental interests of the people, in the first place those of the toiling people, workers, peasants. As regards social composition, it comprises a great majority of picked fighters of peas-

and and worker origin, and intellectuals faithful to the cause of the Revolution. It is the true army of the people, of toilers, the army of workers and peasants."

One may disagree with General Giap about the existence of democracy in North Vietnam, but for those who have been in the VPA it is no doubt that it is an army which reserves a great deal of time to discussing problems and solutions within the ranks of soldiers and commanders.

Unlike the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), the VPA is an army which had met with victory and which had years of experience in fighting both conventional and guerilla warfare. Unlike the ARVN, it is commanded by revolutionaries whose personal life are marked by dedication and austerity. They are the same people who in the 1940's lived in the jungles, the same people who fought side by side with President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap. It is an extremely united army.