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DEFENDERS OF HAM RUNG

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The life of Vietnamese anti-aircraft gunners is difficult and dangerous. It is easier to calculate the exact hours than the number of times a day when, clinging to their weapons, they have to follow approaching American aircraft and engage them. The alarm signal resounds 10 times a day - and sometimes even 12 times - at their positions. Right now, for example, as battery commander Ma Hyen Luong has just begun telling about the latest skirmishes, word was received from the observation post that a group of American fighters is approaching Thanh Hoa....

* Translator's note: Transliterations of Vietnamese surnames and place names are at best only approximations.

We met the men of this battery in May. At that time they gave us miniature photos of an American "F-105" fighter, taken by soldiers on the remains of an aircraft they shot down in the first engagement at the Ham Rung Bridge. At that time the position of the battery was not far from an electric power station. Now their weapons are enclamped in the rice fields, from which the bridge is clearly visible.

In all of Vietnam you will not find another target on which American aircraft have dumped as many bombs as on the Ham Rung Bridge. It was thrown up between two mountains above the deep Ma River at the city of Thanh Hoa. I was not able to see it in the form in which it was created by man. Only the footage of a documentary film and a photograph revealed its austere beauty.

I visited these places for the first time several months ago. At that time we had heard about the large U.S. air raids on the Ham Rung Bridge, but could not imagine all of the consequences of the barbaric bombings. At the Ma River we were informed that we would cross to the other bank by ferry - the bridge was damaged. The night sky was bristling with stars and the moon. At Ham Rung, all we could see were twisted girders and bridge spans collapsed in the water....

Bridges have become one of the primary targets of American air strikes. From the first flight over the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, photographs of destroyed bridges have been flashing on the pages of American newspapers. Defense Secretary McNamara proudly revealed such photographs to journalists, praising the destructive power and accuracy of the bombing strikes by his aircraft. U.S. propagandists are making a considerable effort to give people the impression that Vietnamese bridges are purely military targets.

No, U. S. aircraft are not bombing bridges in North Vietnam because they might carry soldiers. The United States has embarked on a course of destroying the entire economic viability of the country and creating difficulties for the industry and agriculture of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Han Rung Bridge is one of the largest in the Republic. It was put into operation in May 1964. How happy the Vietnamese builders were then! They knew the bridge was needed in order to accelerate the development of the domestic economy of the Republic. This bridge is the target of the most frequent and powerful strikes by U. S. aircraft.

The raids are planned carefully. One day U.S. reconnaissance aircraft made several passes at high altitude near the bridge. Then they overflew the bridge itself at high speed. Suddenly scores of bombers attacked Do-Len Bridge, not far from Thanh Hoa. Antiaircraft gunners shot down three enemy aircraft, but they were unable to protect the bridge. One U.S. jet aircraft attempted to make a surprise attack on Han Rung, but was shot down and crashed into the river bank. Other aircraft appeared after the fighters. They flew in groups of 12-15 planes. Echelon after echelon approached for the attack. They were met with antiaircraft fire. One aircraft burst into flames, then a second, a third... But the attack did not stop. It continued for five long hours.

The people's militia from the small hamlet of Nam-Han fought bravely alongside the soldiers. They fired at the diving aircraft with rifles and machine guns, bandaged the wounded, carried ammunition. Among the valiant bridge defenders was a girl by the name of Nguyen Tuy Hang, about whom we have already reported in the pages of Pravda. (Recently Nguyen Tuy Hang was a member of the Vietnamese delegation in Moscow).

The attack was repeated the next day. Enemy aircraft made continuous approaches. Attempting to silence the antiaircraft gunners, they shifted the thrust of their attack to the artillery positions. For two days, over 800 bombs - varying in weight from 250 kg to a ton each - were dropped on Ham Rung. Hundreds of rockets of varying size were fired at the bridge from the aircraft.

I saw the bridge after these raids. I passed that way twice again afterward. The people were still fighting for the bridge, despite continuous raids. And, like the staunch, badly-wounded soldier, they remained in the ranks, serving their Republic.

The antiaircraft gunners had to constantly beat back the attack. If you have ever been in the tropics, you know how oppressive the heat is during the day. It is incredibly difficult for a man to work under these conditions. The antiaircraft gunners had to beat back the attack for several hours on end. In the area where Junior Lt. Ng Hyuen Kuang's battery was fighting, over 200 bombs alone were dropped.

At one point the raids on the bridge almost stopped. There were only a few attempts by small groups to attack it. Then the reconnaissance aircraft made frequent forays over it. A new massive attack was launched against the damaged bridge. Once again bombs fell and rockets exploded.

U. S. Defense Secretary McNamara himself - arriving on a special visit to South Vietnam - personally commanded one of the major raids on Ham Rung Bridge. American newspapers published photographs of a smiling McNamara, wearing an interphone headset aboard the aircraft carrier INDEPENDENCE: he had just pressed a catapult button and launched bombers on a routine raid against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Seventeen U.S. aircraft laid a course for Ham Rung. In order to assure success, an "RB-57" reconnaissance bomber was dispatched to this area, followed by a pilotless reconnaissance plane.

The American pilots did not have easy sailing. They had to pay dearly for this raid. Vietnamese antiaircraft gunners shot down four aircraft, including the pilotless reconnaissance plane. One of the first to be shot down was that of the American lieutenant-colonel commanding the raid. He bailed out and was fished out of the Ma

River, where he had fallen. The lieutenant colonel's aircraft crashed a kilometer from the bridge. Another American pilot was taken prisoner in this battle. He also bailed out. He was suspended in a coconut palm.

The attacks on Nam Rung continued in August and September. All told, U.S. aircraft bombed and strafed it over 40 times, dropping about 1500 bombs and firing over 1000 rockets. Within a radius of several dozen kilometers from the bridge lie the remains of 13 U.S. aircraft shot down here. Many air pirates crashed into the sea.

My Vietnamese comrades showed me some interesting papers taken from American pilots. In sending pilots on raids against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the U.S. command generously supplies them with all sorts of reference material and other items, ranging from a miniature, automatic radio receiver to chewing gum and sleeping tablets.

Take, for example, Lt. David M. Christian's paper, with full details concerning the color of his hair and eyes, his height and weight, blood type and even prints of the fingers of his left and right hand. His effects also contained several dollars, West German marks and a photograph of a Thai girl (Cora), with a Bangkok address on the reverse side. It was dated: 21 April 1965.

To be on the safe side, the lieutenant carried with him a phrase book, in Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian, Chinese and French (such geography!). In addition to questions about hot water, it also contains political dialogues. I shall read from one of the pages:

"How far are friendly partisans from here? Where are they? Tell them that they should send for me."

Or here is another example of the dialogue which, in the opinion of the U.S. Defense Department, a downed pilot should carry on with some of the local inhabitants:

"I am an American and do not speak your language. My misfortune compels me to ask you to give me food, shelter and protection from the Communists."

Don't you see, American pilots who are bringing death and destruction to the Vietnamese people nevertheless want to be "protected." In this connection I am reminded of another encounter.

One night, when we were at Thanh Hoa, near the city hospital we saw a vehicle and some Vietnamese standing near it. A tall, tow-headed lad sat on a bench with his back leaning against the vehicle. It was an American pilot taken prisoner - Capt. James V. Stockwell. He was captured by peasants of a small fishing village 30 km from Thanh Hoa. Militiamen Le Dan and Tuylong (obscure spelling) and the head of the household where we stayed - Le Viet - were among them. They told us in detail how they spotted the parachute, how the American attempted to reach the sea, but then fell into a tree at the very edge of the water. Three aircraft circled him, attempting to clear an approach for a helicopter. The American pilot cut the parachute cords and fell to the ground, breaking his leg. The militiamen picked him up here. The doctors assisted the American, but the aircraft, circling the village went away empty-handed.

We told the fishermen what had been written in the phrase book for American pilots, how they wish to ask the Vietnamese for protection against the Communists. The people had a good, long laugh. Then Le said:

"Let not the American aggressor search for Communists among us. We have all become defenders of our homeland."

Side by side with Vietnamese soldiers in the defense of Ham Rung, at their posts at the Ban That Dam and in the factories at Vinh stand the entire Vietnamese people, who cannot be intimidated or subdued by any bombs.