



VINTAGE

THE SORROW
OF WAR
BAO NINH

VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Author

Bao Ninh was born in Hanoi in 1952. During the Vietnam war he served with the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade. Of the five hundred who went to war with the brigade in 1969, he is one of ten who survived. A huge bestseller in Vietnam, *The Sorrow of War* is his first novel.

'The violent upheavals of war have given painful birth to many outstanding works of literature, ranging from *The Naked and the Dead* to the *Poems* of Wilfred Owen. To these must now be added Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*.'

Economist

'*The Sorrow of War* is a more complete and humanly engaging work of fiction than any written by an American about Vietnam. Its success derives largely from its formal inventiveness. Ninh's multi-faceted approach to his material is a courageous and deliberate attempt to discover ways of overcoming its power to terrify and dehumanise ... This unforced patterning allows him to describe terrible events without hysteria or evasiveness.'

London Review of Books

'*The Sorrow of War* is a profound and tragic account of a survivor. At times lyrical and bleak, frequently intense and gruesome and occasionally blackly humorous, it reminds the reader that the scars of war are universal, and do not disappear with the signing of treaties.'

Eastern Express

'A masterpiece of a novel; a brutal and shocking book of resistance, a mystical journey through the Vietnamese landscape, a tragic love story of lives torn apart by war ... A bestseller in Vietnam; it deserves to be the same here.'

Militant

'A novel of international significance: literate, highly readable, and immensely powerful.'

The List

'As a testament to war in general and the Vietnam war in particular it is without parallel.'

Labour Briefing

'The Vietnam war has been burned in our minds through a plethora of film and fiction but none has succeeded in translating so haunting and tragic a message as Bao Ninh's first novel.'

Yorkshire Post

'There are many Americans who have written along similar lines of memory and recall dreadful war and disappointing peace; but surely none has got so near to the truth as Bao Ninh. Any veteran of any war will identify with his inner struggle, and any woman who has seen her man go off to the front will be able to suffer with Phuong. This book should be required reading for anyone in American politics or policy-making.'

Tim Page, *Guardian*

'A rare corrective to the overwhelming American literature of the war. As an informative contrast *The Sorrow of War* is valuable. It floats in place and time, shifting smoothly between personal memories of pre-war days and detached accounts of combat. Moving between poetic licence and understated description, it has a post-war calm and sadness.'

Times Literary Supplement

Bao Ninh

THE SORROW OF WAR

A Novel

ENGLISH VERSION BY
Frank Palmos

FROM THE ORIGINAL TRANSLATION BY
Phan Thanh Hao


V I N T A G E

ON THE BANKS of the Ya Crong Poco River, on the northern flank of the B3 battlefield in the Central Highlands, the Missing In Action body-collecting team awaits the dry season of 1976.

The mountains and jungles are water-soaked and dull. Wet trees. Quiet jungles. All day and all night the water steams. A sea of greenish vapour over the jungle's carpet of rotting leaves.

September and October drag by, then November passes, but still the weather is unpredictable and the night rains are relentless. Sunny days but rainy nights.

Even into early December, weeks after the end of the normal rainy season, the jungles this year are still as muddy as all hell. They are forgotten by peace, damaged or impassable, all the tracks disappearing, bit by bit, day by day, into the embrace of the coarse undergrowth and wild grasses.

Travelling in such conditions is brutally tough. To get from Crocodile Lake east of the Sa Thay River, across District 67 to the crossroads of Cross Hill on the west bank of the Poco River - a mere fifty kilometres - the powerful Russian truck has to lumber along all day. And still they fall short of their destination.

Not until after dusk does the MIA Zil truck reach the Jungle of Screaming Souls, where they park beside a wide creek clogged with rotting branches.

The driver stays in the cabin and goes straight to sleep. Kien climbs wearily into the rear of the truck to sleep alone in a hammock strung high from cab to tailgate. At midnight the rains start again, this time a smooth drizzle, falling silently.

The old tarpaulin covering the truck is torn, full of holes, letting the water drip, drip, drip through onto the plastic sheets covering the remains of soldiers laid out in rows below Kien's hammock.

The humid atmosphere condenses, its long moist, chilly fingers sliding in and around the hammock where Kien lies shivering, half-awake, half-asleep, as though drifting along on a stream. He is floating, sadly, endlessly, sometimes as if on a lorry driving silently, robot-like, somnambulant through the lonely jungle tracks. The stream moans, a desperate complaint mixing with distant faint jungle sounds, like an echo from another world. The eerie sounds come from somewhere in a remote past, arriving softly like featherweight leaves falling on the grass of times long, long ago.

Kien knows the area well. It was here, at the end of the dry season of 1969, that his Battalion 27 was surrounded and almost totally wiped out. Ten men survived from the Unlucky Battalion, after fierce, horrible, barbarous fighting.

That was the dry season when the sun burned harshly, the wind blew fiercely, and the enemy sent napalm spraying through the jungle and a sea of fire enveloped them, spreading like the fires of hell. Troops in the fragmented companies tried to regroup, only to be blown out of their shelters again as they went mad, became disoriented and threw themselves into nets of bullets, dying in the flaming inferno. Above them the helicopters flew at tree-top height and shot them almost one by one, the blood spreading out, spraying from their backs, flowing like red mud.

The diamond-shaped grass clearing was piled high with bodies killed by helicopter gunships. Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporised.

No jungle grew again in this clearing. No grass. No plants.

‘Better to die than surrender my brothers! Better to die!’ the Battalion Commander yelled insanely; waving his pistol in front of Kien he blew his own brains out through his ear. Kien screamed soundlessly in his throat at the sight, as the Americans attacked with sub-machine-guns, sending bullets buzzing like deadly bees around him. Then Kien lowered his machine-gun, grasped his side and fell, rolling slowly down the bank of a shallow stream, hot blood trailing down the slope after him.

In the days that followed, crows and eagles darkened the sky. After the Americans withdrew, the rainy season came, flooding the jungle floor, turning the battlefield into a marsh whose surface water turned rust-coloured from the blood. Bloated human corpses, floating alongside the bodies of incinerated jungle animals, mixed with branches and trunks cut down by artillery, all drifting in a stinking marsh. When the flood receded everything dried in the heat of the sun into thick mud and stinking rotting meat. And down the bank and along the stream Kien dragged himself, bleeding from the mouth and from his body wound. The blood was cold and sticky, like blood from a corpse. Snakes and centipedes crawled over him, and he felt Death’s hand on him. After that battle no one mentioned Battalion 27 any more, though numerous souls of ghosts and devils were born in that deadly defeat. They were still loose, wandering in every corner and bush in the jungle, drifting along the stream, refusing to depart for the Other World.

From then on it was called the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Just hearing the name whispered was enough to send chills down the spine. Perhaps the screaming souls gathered together on special festival days as members of the Lost Battalion, lining up on the little diamond-shaped grass plot, checking their ranks and numbers. The sobbing whispers were heard deep in the jungle at night, the howls carried on the wind. Perhaps they really were the voices of the wandering souls of dead soldiers.

Kien was told that passing this area at night one could hear birds crying like human beings. They never flew, they only cried among the branches. And nowhere else in these Central Highlands could one find bamboo shoots of such a horrible colour, with infected weals like bleeding pieces of meat. As for the fireflies, they were huge. Some said they'd seen firefly lights rise before them as big as a steel helmet – some said bigger than helmets.

Here, when it is dark, trees and plants moan in awful harmony. When the ghostly music begins it unhinges the soul and the entire wood looks the same no matter where you are standing. Not a place for the timid. Living here one could go mad or be frightened to death. Which was why in the rainy season of 1974, when the regiment was sent back to this area, Kien and his scout squad established an altar and prayed before it in secret, honouring and recalling the wandering souls from Battalion 27 still in the Jungle of Screaming Souls.

Sparkling incense sticks glowed night and day at the altar from that day forward.

There were civilian souls loose in the wood, too. Quite near to where the Zil truck parked on this rainy night there was once a tiny trail leading to Leprosy Village. Long ago, when Regiment 3 arrived, the village had been empty. Disease and successive famines had erased all life.

Still, it seemed the naked, warped and torn souls had continued to gather, emitting a stink that penetrated the imagination. The regiment sprayed petrol and set the village alight to cleanse it, but after the fire the soldiers were still terrified and none of them would go near the place again for fear of ghosts and lepers.

One day 'Lofty' Thinh from Squad 1 courageously went into the village and there, in the ashes, shot a big orang-utan. He called in three others to help him drag it back to

the squad huts. But, oh God, when it was killed and shaved the animal looked like a fat woman with ulcerous skin, the eyes, half-white, half-grey, still rolling. The entire squad was horrified and ran away screaming, leaving all their kit behind. No one in today's regiment ever believed the story, yet it was true. Kien and his colleagues had buried her, making a little headstone for the grave.

But none escaped her vengeful, omnipresent soul. 'Lofty' Thinh was soon killed. Gradually the entire regiment was wiped out. Only Kien remained.

That had happened during the rainy season. Before marching to the South Wing to attack Buon Me Thuot, Kien's regiment had been based on this very spot for nearly two months. The landscape was much the same and the roads over which they passed had not become overgrown.

At that time the scout platoon had built its huts on the bank of this same stream by which they were now parked, but further along, where the stream hits the foot of the mountain, divides, then continues along as two separate streams. Now, perhaps at that branching of the stream, their old grass huts remained. Thatched roofs, side by side, near the rushes by the water.

The area had been used then to house front-line soldiers called back to the rear for political indoctrination. Politics continuously. Politics in the morning, politics in the afternoon, politics again in the evening. 'We won, the enemy lost. The enemy will surely lose. The north had a good harvest, a bumper harvest. The people will rise up and welcome you. Those who don't just lack awareness. The world is divided into three camps.' More politics. Still, the scouts were treated lightly, not being pressured as much as others to attend the indoctrination sessions.

They had plenty of time to relax and enjoy themselves before returning to the battlefields. They hunted, set traps,

caught fish and played cards.

In his entire life Kien had never developed such a passion for cards as he developed here. They played all the time. At dark, straight after dinner, the game started. In the warm air which smelled of sweat and mosquito repellent the gamblers gathered enthusiastically, concentrating on their cards. The kitty was usually stinking 'Compatriot' cigarettes, made from wild leaves. Or, if the stakes were higher, it would be snuff, or pieces of flint, or the roots of *rosa canina* plants, which were smoked like marijuana. Or dried food, or photos; photos of women of all kinds, foreign or Vietnamese, ugly or beautiful, or anyone's sweetheart. Any photo was valid currency. When the kitty was gone they used to get lamp-black and paint moustaches on each other. Some played, others watched, joyfully, noisily, sometimes all through the night. It seemed a period of happiness and calm. An easy, carefree time.

They were really happy days because for most of that rainy season they didn't have to fight. The entire platoon of thirteen was safe. Even 'Lofty' Thinh spent a happy month here before being killed. Can hadn't yet deserted. His mates Vinh, 'Big' Thinh, Cu, Oanh and Tac the Elephant were all still alive. Now, only the torn, dirty set of cards, fingerprinted by the dead ones, remained.

Nine, Ten, Jack.

'Lofty', 'Big' Thinh and Can,

Queen, King, Ace!

Cu, Oanh and Tac!

Sometimes in his dreams these cards still appear. He shouts their names and plays Solitaire. 'Hearts, diamonds, spades ...' They had bastardised the regimental marching song and made it a humorous card-players' song:

'We'll all be jokers, in the pack,
Just go harder, in attack.

Dealing's fun, so hurry back,
Enjoy the game, avoid the flak.'

But one by one the card players at their fateful table were taken away. The cards were last used when the platoon was down to just four soldiers. Cu, Thanh, Van and Kien.

That was in the early dawn, half an hour before the barrage opened the campaign against Saigon. On the other side of an overgrown field was the Cu Chi defence line. The Saigon defence forces then started returning fire with artillery and machine-guns and they registered some lucky hits. In the trenches and in shelters the infantry were trying to enjoy last moments of sleep. But for Kien's scouts, who were going to lead the attack as the advance guard, it was going a bit too fast. They were spooked by their cards, not at all liking how the hands fell as they played the game called 'Advance'.

'Slow down a bit,' Kien suggested. 'If we leave this game unfinished Heaven will grant favours, keeping us alive to return and finish the game. So, slow down and we'll survive this battle and continue the game later.'

'You're cunning,' said Thanh, grinning. 'But Heaven's not stupid. You can't cheat Him. If you play only half the game the Old Chap up there will send for all four of us and we'll torment each other.'

Tu said, 'Why bother to send all four there? Send me with the cards. That'll do it. I'll play poker, or tell fortunes from cards for the Devils in charge of the oil urns. That would be fun.'

The dew evaporated quickly. Signal flares flew into the air. The infantry noisily came to life and began to move out. Armoured cars motored to the front line, their tracks tearing the earth, the roar of their engines reverberating in the morning breeze.

'Stop, then!' Kien threw the cards down, adding petulantly, 'I just wanted to slow down for good luck, but all of you rushed the game to the end.'

'Hey there,' 'Thin' Van slapped his thigh happily, 'I didn't know until now just how much I enjoyed playing cards. I'll have to learn to play better. If I die, remember to throw a deck of cards on my grave.'

'We have only one deck and Van wants it for himself. Selfish bugger!' Thanh shouted back as he moved out. Before an hour was up Van was burned alive in a T54 tank, his body turned to ash. No grave or tomb for them to throw the cards onto.

Thanh died near the Bong bridge, also burned in his tank together with the tank crew. A big, white-hot steel coffin.

Only Tu had fought, together with Kien, to Gate 5 of Saigon's Tan Son Nhat airport. Then Tu was killed. It was the morning of 30 April, with just three hours to go before the eleven-year war ended.

Late in the night of 29 April and into the 30th when the two of them met for the last time at the airport, Tu had taken the deck of cards from his knapsack and given it to Kien. 'I'll go in this fight. You keep them. If you live on, gamble with life. Deuces, treys and fours all carry the sacred spirit of our whole platoon. We'll bring you permanent luck.'

Kien sinks into reminiscence.

Whose soul is calling whom as he swings gently and silently in his hammock over the rows of dead soldiers?

Howls from somewhere in the deep jungle echo along the cold edges of the Jungle of Screaming Souls. Lonely, wandering noises. Whose soul is calling whom this night?

To one who has just returned the mountains still look the same. The forest looks the same. The stream and the river also look the same. One year is not a long time. No, it is the war that is the difference. Then it was war, now it is peace.

Two different ages, two worlds, yet written on the same page of life. That's the difference.

Kien recalled: At the time of our first stay here it was late August. Between the jungle and the forest along this stream, *rosa canina* blossomed in the rain, whitened everywhere, its perfume filling the air, especially at night. The perfume vapour permeated our sleep, fuelling erotic, obsessional dreams and when we awoke the perfume had evaporated but we were left with a feeling of smouldering passion, both painful and ecstatic. It took us months to discover that our nightly passion-frenzied dreams were caused by the *canina* perfume. Those diabolical flowers! Kien had seen them in the jungles along the western ridge of the Ngoc Linh mountains and even deep inside Cambodia around Ta Ret, but nowhere did they grow the way they did here, with such powerful scent.

The *canina* here grows close to creek banks, within reach of the mountain carp, who nibble at their roots, so when caught their taste is exquisite but instantly intoxicating. The local people say *canina* thrives in graveyards or any area carrying the scent of death. A blood-loving flower. It smells so sweetly that this is hard for us to believe.

Later, it was Kien's scout platoon, taking a break in some idle moments, who decided to try drying the *canina*, slicing the flowers and roots, then mixing them with tobacco, as a smoke. After just a few puffs they felt themselves lifted, quietly floating like a wisp of smoke itself floating on the wind. The tasty *canina* had many wondrous attributes. They could decide what they'd like to dream about, or even blend the dreams, like preparing a wonderful cocktail. With *rosa* one smoked to forget the daily hell of the soldier's life, smoked to forget hunger and suffering. Also, to forget death. And totally, but totally, to forget tomorrow.

Smoking *rosa canina* Kien would immerse himself in a world of mythical and wonderful dreams which in ordinary moments his soul could never penetrate. In these luxurious dreams the imagined air was so clean, the sky so high, the clouds and sunshine so beautiful, approaching the perfection of his childhood dreams. And in those dreams the beautiful sky would project pictures of his own lovely Hanoi. The West Lake on a summer afternoon, the scarlet flame trees around the lake. Once in his dream-picture he had felt the waves lapping the side of his tiny sampan and looking up he had seen Phuong, youthful, innocently beautiful, her hair flying in the Hanoi breeze.

The soldiers each had their own way of smoking *canina* and ridding themselves of their shared harsh realities. For Cu, cassava alcohol or *rosa canina* conjured up images of returning home. Cu could relate the scenes vividly, making them sound so joyful that tears fell from everyone's eyes as he unfolded the scene in soft words. Vinh dreamed only of women, describing his imagined and planned love affairs with youthful enthusiasm. As the affairs dragged on the women became more voluptuous and the affairs more complicated, the descriptions more erotic and explicit. As for 'Elephant' Tac, he dreamed mainly of food. He spoke of long tables laden with wonderful and exotic dishes and of sitting down to savour the moments, morsel by morsel, dish by dish.

The lethargy brought on by *rosa canina* spread from Kien's scout platoon huts through the entire regiment. It wasn't long before the Political Commissar ordered the units to stop using *rosa canina*, declaring it a banned substance.

The Commissar then ordered troops to track down all the plants and cut all the blooms then uproot all the trees throughout the Screaming Souls area to ensure they'd grow no more.

Along with the gambling and smoking of *canina* went all sorts of rumours and prophecies. Perhaps because the soldiers in their hallucinations had seen too many hairy monsters with wings and mammals with reptilian tails, or imagined they had smelled the stench of their own blood. They imagined the monstrous animals plunging about bleeding in the dark caves and hollows under the base of Ascension Pass on the other side of the valley from the jungle.

Many said they saw groups of headless black American soldiers carrying lanterns aloft, walking through in Indian file. Others paled in terror as horrible, primitive wild calls echoed inside their skulls in the rainy, dewy mornings, thinking they were the howls of pain from the last group of orang-utans said to have lived in the Central Highlands in former times.

The rumours and the predictions were all seen as warnings of an approaching calamity, horrible and bloody, and those who leaned toward mysticism or believed in horoscopes secretly confided these fears to their friends. Soon there sprang up tiny altars in each squad hut and tent, altars to the comrades-in-arms already fallen. And in the tear-making smoke of the incense soldiers bowed and prayed, whispering in prayer:

‘... suffering in life, pain in death,
the common fate of us soldiers.
We pray the sacred souls will bless us,
that we may overcome enemy fire,
and avenge our lost comrades ...’

The rain had kept pounding, day after day. The fighting seemed blanketed by the immense dull sea of rain; if one stared hard and long into the dark, grey, wet-season sky, or

listened to the rain falling on the canvas canopies, one thought only of war and fighting, fighting and war.

The rain brought sadness, monotony, and starvation. In the whole Central Highlands, the immense, endless landscape was covered with a deadly silence or isolated, sporadic gunfire. The life of the B3 Infantrymen after the Paris Agreement was a series of long, suffering days, followed by months of retreating and months of counter-attacking, withdrawal, then counter-attack. Victory after victory, withdrawal after withdrawal. The path of war seemed endless, desperate, and leading nowhere.

At the end of the wet season the echoes of cannon fire could be heard a hundred kilometres away, a harbinger of a poor dry season over Con Roc, Mang Den and Mang But.

That September the NVA forces attacked Kontum township's defence lines. The firing was so loud that it shook the earth as if every square metre would rise in a groundswell and burst. In the 3rd Regiment, hiding in the Screaming Souls Jungle, the soldiers waited in fear, hoping they would not be ordered in as support forces, to hurl themselves into the arena to almost certain death.

Some of those waiting found they were hearing a musical air in their heads, the sound of guitars rising and falling with the sounds of the Kontum carnage. Soldiers of that year 1974 sang:

‘Oh, this is war without end,
war without end.
Tomorrow or today,
today or tomorrow.
Tell me my fate,
when will I die ...’

Late in the afternoon of Can's escape, that wet, boring autumn afternoon, Kien was sitting by the stream, fishing.

The drizzle was relentless, the day lifeless and gloomy. The stream was swollen, its waters turbulent and loud, as if it wished to wash the banks away. But where Kien sat fishing there was a silent eddy around bare tree roots, exposed where flood waters had bitten deep.

Kien nestled in his jute raincoat, hugging his knees, staring blankly into the rolling stream, thinking of nothing, wanting nothing. Now that the *rosa canina* had all gone there was nothing for his soul to grab hold of. So it wandered, meandering freely. Every day Kien would sit for hours by the stream, motionless, letting its sorrowful whispering carry him along.

That autumn was sad, prolonged by rain. Orders came for food rations to be sharply reduced. Hungry, suffering successive bouts of malaria, the troops became anaemic, and their bodies broke out in ulcers, showing through worn and torn clothing. They looked like lepers, not heroic forward scouts. Their faces looked moss-grown, hatched and sorrowful, without hope. It was a stinking life.

To buoy himself up, Kien sometimes tried to concentrate on uplifting memories. But no matter how hard he tried to revive the scenes they wouldn't stay. It was hopeless. His whole life from the very beginning, from childhood to the army, seemed detached and apart from him, floating in a void.

Since being recruited he'd been nicknamed 'Sorrowful Spirit' and this now suited his image and personality, just as the rain and gloom fitted the character of the Jungle of Screaming Souls.

Kien waited for death, calmly recognising that it would be ugly and inelegant. The thought of his expected end brought a sense of irony.

Just the week before, in a battle with Saigon commandos on the other side of the mountain, Kien had truly made fun

of death. When the Southern ARVN had faced his own Northern NVA troops both sides had quickly scattered, rushing to take cover behind tree trunks and then firing blindly. But Kien had calmly walked forward. The enemy had fired continuously from behind a tree ahead of him but Kien hadn't even bothered to duck. He walked on lazily, seemingly oblivious to the fire. One southern soldier behind a tree fired hastily and the full magazine of thirty rounds from his AK exploded loudly around Kien, but he had walked on unscratched. Kien had not returned fire even when just a few steps from his prey, as though he wanted to give his enemy a chance to survive, to give him more time to change magazines, or time to take sure aim and kill him.

But in the face of Kien's audacity and cool the man had lost courage; trembling, he dropped his machine-gun.

'Shit!' Kien spat out in disgust, then pulled the trigger from close range, snapping the ARVN soldier away from the tree, then shredding him.

'Ma ... aaaaaa!' the dying man screamed. 'Aaaa ...'

Kien shuddered and jumped closer as bullets poured from all sides towards him. He hadn't cared, standing firm and firing down into the man's hot, agonised body in its death throes. Blood gushed out onto Kien's trousers. Walking on, leaving blood-red footprints in the grass, he slowly approached two other commandos hiding and shooting at him, his machine-gun tucked carelessly under his arm, his shirt open. He was unconcerned and coldly indifferent, showing no fear, no anger. Just lethargy and depression.

The enemy backed away and dispersed in retreat.

Despite that imprudent, risky action Kien was invited on return to the military personnel section and told he was on the list of officers selected to attend a long-term training course at the Infantry Institute near Hanoi. The order would soon come down from the Divisional Commander and Kien was to travel back up north.

‘The fighting is endless. No one knows when it will stop,’ the hoarse, gloomy personnel officer told Kien. ‘We must keep our best seeds, otherwise all will be destroyed. After a lost harvest, even when starving, the best seeds must be kept for the next crop. When you finish your course and return to us your present officers will all be gone, and the regiment with them. The war will go on without you.’

Kien remained silent. A few years earlier he would have been proud and happy, but not now. He did not want to go north to do the course, and felt certain he would never join them, or become a seed for successive war harvests. He just wanted to be safe, to die quietly, sharing the fate of an insect or an ant in the war. He would be happy to die with the regular troops, those very soldiers whose special characteristics had created an almost invincible fighting force because of their peasant nature, by volunteering to sacrifice their lives. They had simple, gentle, ethical outlooks on life. It was clearly those same friendly, simple peasant fighters who were the ones ready to bear the catastrophic consequences of this war, yet they never had a say in deciding the course of the war.

Someone was coming up to him from behind, but Kien didn’t turn. The person came closer then silently sat down behind Kien as he fished on the edge of the stream. At that late hour the bamboo forest on the other bank seemed to make the dusk thicken. The brief, rainy day faded away quickly.

‘Fishing?’ the person asked.

‘Obviously,’ Kien replied coldly. It was Can, chief of Two Squad. A small thin boy, nicknamed ‘Rattling’ Can.

‘What’s your bait?’

‘Worms.’ Kien added: ‘I thought you had a fever. What’re you doing here in the wet?’

‘Caught anything?’

‘No. Just killing time.’

Kien mumbled. He hated any confidences, any sharing of personal problems. Hell, if everyone in the regiment came to him with personal problems after those horrendous firefights he'd feel like throwing himself over the waterfall. He knew Can was going to unload some personal problems on him.

'It's raining heavily in the north,' Can droned on in his gloomy, dispirited voice. 'The radio says it's never rained as hard. My home district must be flooded by now.'

Kien just cleared his throat. More rain was falling. The air was getting colder and now it was quite dark.

'You're about to go north, I hear.'

'What if I am?'

'Just asking. Congratulations.'

'Congratulations? Congratulations?'

'Please. I'm not jealous, Kien. I'm sincere. I know you don't like me but can't you understand a little of what I mean. Accept what heaven gives you. You've survived down here and now you'll go north and continue to survive. You've suffered a lot. You were from an intellectual family, so it's not right for you to die anyway. Just go, and let events unfold here. We feel pleasant envy for you. You deserve it.'

'I'm not going anywhere to make others happy. I know you're scared of being killed, but you have to overcome your fear by yourself. You can't place that responsibility on others' shoulders.'

Can seemed to ignore the taunt.

'As for me, I've always longed for the opportunity to get into an officers' training course. Truly, that was my dream. I'm younger than you. I was top of the class at school. I've tried to discipline myself, to fulfil all my duties. No disobedience, no gambling, no alcohol, no dope, no women, no swearing. And for what? All for nothing! I'm not jealous, just depressed.'