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THE LEGENDARY HO CHI MINH TRAIL

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DISTRIBUTED BY: Xunhasaba,
32 Hai Ba Trung, Hanoi, SRV
OPENING THE TRAIL

On 19 May, 1959, the date of President Ho Chi Minh's sixty-ninth birthday, I got a telephone call summoning me to the Office of the Central Military Committee. Major-General Nguyen Van Vinh, standing member of the Committee, was waiting for me. After some words of greetings, he got down to business.

"Under instructions from the Political Bureau," he said, "and on behalf of the Central Military Committee, I hereby entrust you with the task of organizing a special military communication line to send supplies to the revolution in the South and create conditions for its development..."

I made the gesture of taking out a notebook, but Comrade Vinh waved his hand, saying:

"Don't take notes. From now on, you'll have to commit to memory all briefings about your work.

This line will be a special trail on which cadres, combatants, arms, and medical supplies will be sent to the South. Select people and form a unit.

The Military Committee will put you in touch with the necessary organizations. Your men must be chosen from among southern comrades regrouped to the North. As for the weapons, they must be taken from those seized from the French. Absolute secrecy and security is the word."

After briefing me about the struggle of our people in the South and about the Resolution of the 15th Plenum of the Central Committee on the prospects for the revolution in the South, Comrade Vinh went on to say:

"This special mission is put under the leadership of the Central Military Committee. To begin with, we'll give you 500 men. In the initial stage, the Trail is to extend not farther than the northern bank of the Ben Hai River, that is, on the northern side of the Provisional Military Demarcation Line.

As for working means, we'll give you a four-wheel-drive car; pick your driver. Give this letter to Comrade Tran Luong who will brief you about the rest."

That very afternoon I called on Tran Luong at his private home. A former leading cadre in the Fifth Interzone (south Central Vietnam) during the anti-French resistance, Comrade Tran Luong was then entrusted with rebuilding the South Vietnam Liberation Armed Forces. As he was my former commander, our conversation was all the warmer.

He said: "You are the first man in the army to be assigned the task of opening a supply route to the revolution in the South. Under instruction from the Political Bureau, in 1959 we must send there 500 cadres up to the rank of lieutenant-colonel and 7,000 weapons up to light machineguns, in order to organize 700 self-defence platoons, and prepare for the subsequent organization of the armed forces.

Within the shortest time possible we must open a supply route leading south. This route must be kept absolutely secret. It must not be allowed to become a beaten path, that is, not a single footprint, cigarette butt, or broken twig, may be left on it after the men's passage."

Never before in my soldier's life so full of special assignments had I felt so moved as I was then. I knew a crucial task was awaiting me. Not until much later did I understand that the opening of the Trail named after President Ho Chi Minh on his birthday was a beautiful symbol. Then our unit was given the code number 559, which means May 1959.

* * *

In late May 1959, a GAZ-69 command car took me successively to see commanders of Military Zones and
Divisions of the South Vietnam forces regrouped in the North. Only the commanders or political commissars of those units were informed of the subject of my visits. Wherever I went, I just had to say these words “For the revolution in the South” for all doors to be flung wide open and wholehearted assistance to be given me by the responsible comrades. The command of our unit was set up, and on 12 September, 1959, the Defence Ministry formally named it the Command of Unit 559. Drivers and other transport workers were selected from among men of Division 305, which had fought in the Fifth Interzone. To keep the secrecy, we put on a different uniform from the VPA’s. The Military Supplies Department issued us pyjama-like costumes, plaited-leaf helmets. Then our people bought rucksacks, canteens and other military equipment formerly used by French troops at the flea markets.

Once everything had been settled, I went to Vinh Linh to study the situation. Vinh Linh district, lying on the northern bank of the Ben Hai River at the 17th parallel, was the welcoming place for cadres coming clandestinely from the South. There I met Comrade Hanh, member of the Party Committee of Quang Tri province, and Comrade Quyet, a cadre of the Party Committee of the Fifth Interzone who had just arrived. They briefed me about the situation along the way down into the South.

Years earlier, the Party Committee of the Fifth Interzone had organized a communication line called “Reunification Trail” which ran up from the Central Highlands to the North along the Western boundaries of the provinces of Quang Nam, Thua Thien and Quang Tri. In those regions, however, there was a fairly dense network of enemy posts and so only a few travels were organized each year along that line, each calling for careful preparations. The enemy also sent police spies to watch the border areas. Moreover, the local populations were widely scattered and one would travel for days without seeing a single village or hamlet. In short, travel along this line was very difficult.

During my conversation with Hanh and Quyet, after a close scrutiny of the map, I began to form in my mind a clear idea of how to proceed. Selecting a staging area, a place for setting up depots, another for the Command Post, establishing liaison stations and camouflaging them — everything would have to be carefully calculated and prepared. At the end of our talk, Hanh said:

“Will you send arms to the South?”

“That’s our main object,” I said.

“Down to where?”

I answered with some hesitation: “Maybe at first weapons will be handed over to you somewhere north of the Ben Hai River.”

Hanh showed signs of disappointment. “If so,” he said, “I can say you’re giving the South nothing.

We have no porters, no scouts, no liaison men, no rice. We only rely on the people. How can we take weapons from here to the South? The most difficult and dangerous part of the trip is the crossing of Highway 9, which is patrolled by the enemy day and night.”

I looked closely at the map, pondered for a moment, then said:

“We will hand over men and materials to you some three stations south of Highway 9. Please give us some comrades to help us blaze the trail and keep watch on enemy activities.”

The comrades were rightly concerned about Highway 9. This strategic road ran westward from the port of Cua Viet through Dong Ha and Khe Sanh to Lower Laos. Since long this had been the only motor road leading from Lower Laos to the sea, and it had become an economic lifeline.

For the enemy, this was a defence line dividing North from South Vietnam, a line which the Americans would later turn into a close-knit defence network complete with up-to-date technical means. For these reasons, to blaze a trail across Highway 9 was to be a difficult task.

Back to Hanoi, I reported to Comrade Vinh on the results of our preparations, and proposed that arms and supplies be sent across Highway 9. He listened impassively, then merely said, “All right.”

We chose a storehouse near Hanoi to stock arms and other supplies to be sent to the South. It was a former military post of the French consisting of a “mother-blockhouse” and some smaller bunkers near Kim Lu village, on the southern outskirts of Hanoi. I began worrying about what might happen to the weapons on the way. If they were not properly protected, they would not be in good working order when distributed to our combatants in the South. We decided to experiment with the packing of weapons but then news came from the Ministry of Public Security that an arms cache left behind by the French for their agents to use later had been discovered. I asked for a bundle of guns and a case of ammunition, and opened the packages to see how they had been wrapped up. Then we took two rifles and a box of ammunition, coated them with grease and wrapped them up the way the French had done. Then we, looking for an out-of-the-way place on the To Lich River and dropped them there. One month later, we fished the packages out, and checked the guns: there was no trace of rust. From then on, we packed the weapons to be sent South in that way.

I went back with other comrades in the Command of our Unit to the Demarcation Line area to choose a site for stationing men and setting up a depot.
HO CHI MINH TRAIL

MAIN ROUTE.
WEST-EAST BRANCH ROAD.
P pipe line.
CIVILIAN CARRIERS' AND LIAISON TRAIL.

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for south-bound supplies. After a three-day trek through jungle and mountains from west Quang Binh to west Vinh Linh, we followed trails used by lumbermen and secret paths used for the troop movements of the brigade guarding the Demarcation Line. This was the home of the Van Kieu ethnic minority, who lived in scattered villages and hamlets, each consisting of some ten to fifteen households, near hillsides planted with rice or cassava.

We ended by choosing Khe Ho in the west of Vinh Linh as starting base for our transport unit. We also chose Bang, an area west of Quang Binh, as an alternative base under cover of a cattle-breeding State farm. The first transport unit was Battalion 301. It had been founded north of Hanoi in late May, 1959, and had been sent straight to Khe Ho.

The battalion comprised 12 platoons. Three of them were put in charge of three stations on the way from Khe Ho to the northern bank of the Ben Hai River, and seven others of seven stations dotting the way from there to Phin, south of Highway 9. The remaining platoons were made up of scouts and reserve personnel.

On 10 June, 1959, our platoons crossed the Ben Hai River and occupied their respective stations south of the Demarcation Line. Reports from both the Party Committee of Quang Tri province and our scouts said there were no indications of the enemy growing aware of our activities.

Then we anxiously followed the transport operations. Every day I read reports sent by the commander of Battaliope 301. On the last day we were on tenterhooks: it was as if we were waiting for news of the outcome of a battle.

The message simply said: “20 August 1959, all goods delivered safely.” A more detailed report came later. It said that the first batch of arms had been received by a standing member of the Party Committee of the Fifth Interzone north of A Shau, in west Thua Thien province. After that, we got ready to send a team of cadres to reinforce our bases in the South. In this way Unit 559 made a breach in the barrier between North and South which the enemy had for more than four years tried very hard to set up.

After spending some time on our organization in the rear areas, I made an inspection tour of the southern portion of the Trail.

We plodded along the ridge of the Truong Son Range for four days before getting close to Highway 9. At one point that night, our guide stopped and whispered into my ear: “Highway 9.”

With my heart throbbing I followed the man, stepping cautiously on a plastic sheet laid across the metalled road. The last man to cross rolled up the sheet and took it with him. Before the crossing, our scouts had had to keep close watch on enemy patrols and make sure there were no ambushes. Afterwards, a less hazardous way to cross Highway 9 was discovered: crawling through a culvert under the roadbed. Precautions had none the less to be taken: scouts would upturn the stone slabs inside the culvert before our passage, and put them back in their original positions after we had crossed.

Shortly before dawn we reached the “station”. It was in fact but a bare corner of the forest which had been agreed upon as the “goods delivery” place. No hut or shack had been built there.

One night, one party having strayed just a dozen yards from the “station”, had to spend hours looking for the other.

In the dry season, we would gather dead leaves into something like the lair of a wild boar, in which to sleep. After a few days we would move our “station” to another corner of the forest, after carefully removing all traces of our stay. The hardest hardships came with the rainy season. Often in order to sleep at night we had to drape plastic sheets over our heads and sit with our backs leaning against a tree.

Only here in the south could we have an idea of the difficulties and hardships our porters had to endure. As no road or even trail existed, we had to work our way across the jungle. Each of the porters carried on his shoulders a bundle of four rifles, or a 20-kilo case of ammunition. Most wore a pair of shorts, a patched-up shirt and a leaf hat, and had with them a ball of rice and some salt. And they walked day after day, month after month, scrupulously observing the instruction: “No footprint, no cooking smoke, no sound of conversation.”

Following my first trip South, I realized that the manpower we had was insufficient, and so we asked our superiors for more. North of the Military Demarcation Line we used trucks, 30 horses and three elephants. We also tried to open a sea route. Battalion 603 was founded, with the codename “Gianh River Fishing Team”. Stationed at the Gianh rivermouth in Quang Binh province, it had the task of building boats which could pass for southern fishing boats. These boats would try to infiltrate into Southern waters and reach resistance bases scattered along the southern coast. However, as it would take time to find a safe sea route and to build boats, so we had to rely on the land route for the time being.

Meanwhile, the enemy apparently had smelled a rat. Apart from setting up more military posts in the mountain areas, they would send out spies and commandos. They also sent Protestant missionaries to out-of-the-way hamlets inhabited by ethnic minorities along Highway 9, with the aim of winning over the local population.

Early in 1960, we began taking a short cut near Khe Sanh by crossing a privately-owned coffee
SOME DATA

The building of the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route started on 19 May 1965, the 60th birthday of President Ho Chi Minh. Hence all units of the Vietnam People's Army taking part in building and defending this route were made part of an organization codenamed Army Corps 599 (i.e. May '65). The route served the revolution in the three Indochinese countries and played a decisive role in the supply of ammunition, food and medicines... to the revolutionary armed forces in South Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos.

At the start, 300 men were divided into small units which went to make a survey of the forest trails used along the centuries by the local populations in the Truong Son Range (called by French geographers la chaîne annamitique). These paths crossing thick forests were gradually elongated by rudimentary means and were well camouflaged. Thanks to the support of the local populations and strict observance of secrecy this system of roads was detected by the enemy only when it had become a thick web of communications lines. Immediately, it became a major target of American attacks. US aircraft dropped on it nearly 4 million tons of bombs. But acting upon the watchword: "Fight the enemy to advance", "Open more roads forward", transport units of the Vietnam People's Army steadily kept the initiative and were able to meet the ever more increasing demands of the battlefield.

Aided by the people, these units scored outstanding exploits and achieved miracles of tenacity, resourcefulness and courage.

The total length of this system of roads was 16,000 km, comprising 5 main roads, 21 branch roads and thousands of kilometres of detours. Camouflaged roads accounted for 3,140 km of the total.

During the spring 1975 general offensive, it came to include both National Highway One running the length of Vietnam and parts of the former trans-Indochinese railway line, now renamed the Reunification railway line. In all, our army engineers repaired within a very short time 83 bridges totalling 4,316 metres in length, using both rudimentary and modern means. During the war our men defused 56,720 unexploded bombs, destroyed 12,600 magnetic bombs and 81,500 anti-personnel mines, and moved 7,303,709 cu.m. of rock and earth to fill both craters and repair collapsed parts of the roads.

Between 1965 and 1974, the A.A. units defending this system of roads fought 111,135 battles and downed 2,450 planes of various types. During that same period, our infantrymen repelled 2,500 enemy attacks, wiped out 16,633 enemy troops, captured 1,196 and took several thousand prisoners. In 1974 alone, the total tonnage of supplies moved along the Ho Chi Minh Trail was 22 times the volume transported in 1966.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail has become a legend — an immortal epic.

Of the armed forces and para-military forces taking part in the building and defence of this strategic supply route, 70 have been awarded the title "Heroic Unit of the People's Armed Forces", among them 4 divisions and 15 regiments; 37 officers and men have received the title "Hero of the People's Armed Forces".

The Truong Son forces were awarded the title "Heroic Unit of the People's Armed Forces" on 3 June 1975.

Lieutenant-Colonel
NGUYEN THUONG DAT

plantation. After many successful trips a hitch happened: one night, the men of Station 5, exhausted after a long trek, inadvertently left behind a bundle of rifles. The next morning, the woman owner of the plantation and an overseer happened to pass by and saw the rifles. The enemy promptly mustered troops and conducted a regiment-sized sweep in this area. Our trips had to be interrupted for some time.

* * *

One day I reported to Party General Secretary Le Duan on our work along the trail. After pondering over the frequent obstacles we were meeting with along Highway 9, he suggested:
"Could you try and find another route which would attract less enemy attention?"

I kept thinking of that matter until I finally found an alternative: a way south down the western side of the Truong Son Range, on Lao territory. This solution would entail diplomatic procedures between the two countries. Pending this, one of our teams sneaked through the jungle into Lao territory to survey the situation, then the matter was discussed by the Command of Unit 599. Afterwards, I reported to the Party Central Military Committee.

In January 1961, I returned to Hanoi and discussed the issue with Comrade Tran Luong. He said:
"I have been instructed to get in touch with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The Lao Party leaders agreed to our proposals. In return, they asked us to transport some of their supplies to southern Laos, and suggested that we build up revolutionary organizations wherever the new trail extends."

Under the Zurich Agreement of April 1968, a Tripartite Coalition Government was to be set up in Laos. It would comprise the royal forces, the revolutionary forces led by Prince Souphanouvong, and the rightist forces headed by Phoumi Nosavan. At the request of the Lao revolutionary forces, the Vietnamese army would, before the Zurich Agreement came into effect, wipe out the Lao rightist positions along Highway 9 and open a 50-kilometre corridor cutting across Highway 9, thus creating conditions for the Lao revolution to develop.

Attacked by surprise, Lao rightist troops fled helter-skelter. The Vietnamese forces took control...
of Lao territory from Chepone down to Mueng Phin. Our corridor grew to be 80 km wide, creating conditions for further consolidating the Lao liberated areas, and turning them into solid rear areas for the oncoming political struggle.

Afterwards, we were instructed to move south an important contingent of army and Party cadres to reinforce our grassroots organizations in Nam Bo (Cochinchina) and the Fifth Interzone. A difficult problem was to feed those thousands of people on such a long journey. In areas close to the North we worked like a looper; each unit would leave its weapons and rucksacks at the starting station and carry rice to the next station; then it would return to the starting station to take its luggage. The rice would be moved in the same way to the third station, and so on. This, however, could be but a temporary measure. It exhausted the men, and besides could not be applied farther south. We therefore had to strive to move our storehouses farther south, using trucks on the roads north of the Military Demarcation Line, and carry porters south of it.

When I came back to the North to report to the General Staff, Major-General Hoang Van Thai, its Deputy Chief, told me:

“This matter has been discussed. We are pressed for time. There is no other way but to use cargo planes. The General Staff will organize coordinated action between the Operations Department, the Air Force Department and the Military Supplies Department....”

According to plan, we returned to the liberated zone of Laos and looked for a site to set up a storage depot in the southern province of Savannakhet. This enabled us to shorten our supply route to the South. The site we picked up was the Lum Bum plain which lay in a valley hemmed in by rocky mountains. On the appointed day, an IL-2 cargo plane came and circled overhead. We lighted a fire as signal.

Rice and ammunition were parachuted down. Within a week, with the help of the Air Force, we finished setting up a storage depot serving our communications lines on the western side of the Truong Son Range. This place was later to become one of our most important storage depots.

The strategic road west of the Truong Son Range was taking shape. We had several of its portions widened to permit the use of pack bikes and trucks. Compared with the eastern trail, the western road was on a much larger scale. After organizing the storage depot at Lum Bum, I followed a column of porters across the Chepone River, heading south. The farther south we went, the fewer steep slopes we had to climb and long stretches of road ran through level forest ground with a sparse vegetation. We would have only to clear them of trees and bushes in order to open motor roads. A unit of our army assigned to widen the road worked so enthusiastically that their work was finished ahead of time.

But the situation in Laos suddenly became a troubled one. The rightist forces, supported by the US, staged a coup d’etat, toppled the Tripartite Government and encircled the Pathet Lao forces. As we followed the development of the situation, we felt anxious both for the revolution in Laos and for our own supply route. I returned North to seek instructions from the General Staff. I met Major-General Tran Van Tra, its Deputy Chief.

“The Party Central Military Committee has discussed this matter,” he said. “The Lao comrades agree to our maintaining this road, but advise us to keep it a complete secret. You should immediately move the supply route deeper into the jungle, far from populated areas. Highway 9 is to be crossed only at night, and your men must try to pass for local inhabitants.”

We again went underground. The reactions of the Lao rightist government were closely watched. On some occasions they did voice protests but these went unheeded, for they themselves were violating the agreements they had signed.

Late in 1982, I travelled down the Trail to the Fifth Interzone. For 26 days I climbed mountain slopes and forded streams, getting into contact with combatants and people along the road. I had occasion to admire their patriotism. One of the soldiers, who weighed only a little over 50 kilos, was carrying on his back a load of 75 kilos. Not a few young men carried each a gun barrel weighing close to a hundred kilos. Not only soldiers, but large numbers of people of minority ethnic groups living along the Truong Son Range also took part in the transport of supplies to the South. Girls of the Pako and Hre minorities who wore skirts made of tree bark for want of fabric volunteered none the less for the work.

Although suffering from constant food shortage, villagers along the Trail kept offering food to the army. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was an outstanding symbol of the affection binding together the army and the people and one of Viet – Lao solidarity.

During a trip back North to report to the General Staff, I had the privilege of being received by President Ho Chi Minh. He listened attentively to my report and closely examined the map. When I talked to him about the precarious life of ethnic minorities along the Trail his eyes grew moist with emotion. After a moment, he said:

“You deserve praise for what you have achieved. For you and your men I have three recommen-
disations: Report to me all meritorious deeds for me to commend their authors. The more people are praised, the better. Second, keep the enemy in the dark about your activities. Third, try to give food to people on your road — our own and the people of the friendly country — maintain security for them, and help them build their localities into strong resistance bases."

President Ho Chi Minh's recommendations were circulated in all sections of our Unit. Acting upon those recommendations, the stations emulated one another in improving their living conditions. Some raised dozens of pigs and planted two or three hectares of cassava, and the like. We set up agitprop teams and sent them into mountain hamlets to teach the people the three R's and rules of hygiene and to help them in their production work. We also distributed dozens of tonnes of salt and fabrics to people living near the Trail, on Lao as well as Vietnamese territory. A number of villages crossed by the Trail became revolutionary bases, whose armed self-defense units helped us to defend it.

Thus, only a narrow track at the origin, the Ho Chi Minh Trail kept developing. Early in 1963, we began using trucks on a number of stretches of road such as those linking Dong village to Noong hamlet (on Lao territory), then Noong hamlet to Bac village, then linking up with the porters' trail leading to the Central Highlands. By this time our Unit numbered 5,000, plus an engineering regiment. The men were stationed along almost 1,000 kilometres of road and trail. Our supply work made no small contribution to the reinforcement of the fighting power of the revolution in the South.

The growth of the revolution in South Vietnam compelled the Americans to send combat troops massively there in 1965 and at the same time to escalate their air war of destruction to include the North. The first target of American air strikes was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The more ruthless the war became, the more difficult our mission. The volume of transport doubled and even trebled. Now we had to cope with the enemy both on the ground and in the air. This situation compelled us to open many more roads.

To meet the new situation, Unit 559 was reorganized into a Military Zone under the authority of the Party Central Military Committee. Brigadier-General Phan Trong Tue, former Minister of Communications and Transport, was named commander of the Zone and I was made his deputy. From then on, not only the army but also organs under the Ministry of Communications and Transport took part in making surveys and building new supply routes. The army engineers were joined by Volunteer Youth brigades in cutting roads across mountains. The race between us and the enemy became daily more intense. As the enemy struck at key portions of roads, mountain passes, and river crossings in an effort to block our routes, we opened new detours. In this way, the supply network developed more and more.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail has gone down in the history of our nation's liberation struggle as a miraculous epic of this century.

Brigadier-General VO TRAN FO

1. The ethnic minorities living on either side of the Truong Son Range are bound by blood ties. So Vietnamese cadres were able to carry out propaganda and agitation work among the Lao population.

SUPPLY TRUCKS MOVING DOWN THE TRAIL IN DAYLIGHT

In the spring of 1971 the US expeditionary corps made a renewed effort to cut our supply line from North to South. On the ground, it launched operation Lam Son 719, deploying troops along Highway 9 running from Vietnam to Laos with intent to block our supply route along the Truong Son Range.

In the air, specially equipped AC-130 surveillance aircraft went after our supply convoys.

But operation Lam Son 719 was not the success the United States had expected. The Saigon puppet army was intercepted right after it left its bases and soon faced complete defeat on Highway 9 and in Southern Laos. However, in the air, the AC-130s were taking a heavy toll of our transport lorries. Not a day passed without the Truong Son Command receiving disturbing reports on the number of men killed and lorries destroyed.

The transport plan was delayed. I was sent to Transport Station 32 where the AC-130s were reported to have been most active. That