

LITERARY FLOWER GARDEN

Class XI - The First Aquarius Class



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NGUYỄN NGỌC THÔNG AND THE FACELESS GIRL

By Phan Lạc Tiếp

In the 11th Naval Officer Class in Nha Trang, there were a total of 81 people, among whom Nguyen Ngoc Thông was among the youngest. When he first entered the school, he had to stand guard at post number 4, overlooking the wasteland towards Chutt Mountain. Thông shrugged his shoulders and said, "Am I the only one on guard here?" Thông looked around as if seeking help and continued, "I'm very afraid of ghosts." Everyone burst into laughter, and Thông laughed along, revealing his missing tooth. That gap in his teeth was where Thông often stuck a cigarette, and he would grin, the cigarette still in place. Because of this, his friends gave Thông the playful nickname "Thông-Sut" (Thông-Gap-Toothed). After two years of military school, upon graduation, like all new officers, Thông had become a different person: strong and serious.

The new officers of the 11th class were dispersed to various naval units. Some went to the Fleet, serving on ships. Others went to the Six Provinces, serving in riverine assault groups. Before long, these young officers, including Nguyen Ngoc Thông, one by one, held unit command positions. At the end of 1965, after participating in the fierce battle of Ba Rai in My Tho, I was called back to serve as the Head of the Mobile Psychological Warfare Team, under the Psychological Warfare Department of the Navy Headquarters, operating with the Hospital Ship HQ-400. The first mission of the Hospital Ship HQ-400, lasting nearly two months throughout units in the 4th Riverine Region, was warmly received by the naval units in the area and the people. On another mission in the 1st Coastal Region, started at the 1st Coastal Region Headquarters in Da Nang, then along the coast from Cua Viet to the last unit in the southern part of Region I, the 16th Coastal Group in Co Luy, Quang Ngai.

Before arriving at any unit, the Hospital Ship and the Mobile Psychological Warfare Team would hold meetings with local military or administrative officials to understand the needs, especially the security in the operational area. The 16th Coastal Group was noted to be under heavy enemy pressure. In recent days, the enemy had shelled the Group. Security around the unit within a kilometer was considered unsafe. Given this situation, the Hospital Ship could refuse the mission. Upon learning of this intention, Nguyen Ngoc Thông was very upset. He called the Hospital Ship's Captain directly and complained to me, "The brothers here have been eagerly waiting for a long time. The people around the unit have also been informed. Now that you 'elders' are not coming, we will lose face." I asked, "Can you 'elders' guarantee security?" Thông replied, "With coordination from the Sub-Region too, there's nothing to worry about..." However, as soon as the Hospital Ship arrived at the river mouth in front of the unit, Thông was present on the main boat, waiting to welcome us. A meeting was held on the Hospital Ship to assign tasks, especially how to maintain security for the mission. Medical tasks such as examinations, tooth extractions, x-rays, and medication distribution for the people were carried out during the day, with little concern. The evening performances and "open arms" (Chieu Hoi)

activities needed careful planning. Based on that, the Psychological Warfare Team would only perform one show at the unit, and another show would be for the surrounding areas. Thông suggested, "Perform here. One show is enough. Soldiers are also people, and so are their families..." We agreed to only perform at the unit and canceled the evening "open arms" activities. A special order from the Captain was issued: "To keep the Hospital Ship in a constant state of readiness, except for the Psychological Warfare Team personnel with onshore tasks, no Hospital Ship personnel are allowed to remain on the base after their duties are completed..." The Hospital Ship would always be in its operational area, not anchored, sailing along the coast to provide support and respond when needed. A boat from the Coastal Group was on standby at the pier to transport personnel to and from the Hospital Ship. The Hospital Ship's small boats were also launched, ready to go ashore to pick up personnel.

When the Naval Medical Team worked, the Civil Affairs Team and the unit personnel repaired the uneven roads around the area and gave poor families gift packages containing cloth, sewing thread, and cooking oil. The Political Training Team interacted with an elementary school and gave students gift packages containing pens, ink, and notebooks... Thông and I went around, ostensibly to visit the people and to understand the situation, but in reality, we were surveying positions to place guard posts for the night. Looking at the smooth white rocks, like giant eggs rising among the low trees, which were very beautiful, I told Thông, "Like Chinese paintings of pines and bamboos..." Thông replied, "That's the problem. At night, they come back, hiding behind those rocks, and shoot at the unit..." Hearing Thông say that, the vast mountainside in front of me was indeed a disadvantage for us. The enemy was on high ground, with excellent defensive walls made of rocks scattered across the vast mountainside. Low clouds hung over the mountaintop... Wherever we went, we only encountered children and women, and the elderly, rarely young men. I asked Thông about this issue. Thông said, "Most of the young men have to join the army. Especially, many families only have women; some men went to the North in 1954, and others joined the Communists in the mountains later..." I reminded Thông, "We need to be very careful, you know..."

In the evening, at the Coastal Group base, half of the personnel were on operational duty. The other half of the personnel and their families sat and enjoyed the entertainment right in front of their houses. Absolutely there were no large gatherings in front of the stage to avoid casualties in case of enemy shelling. The Psychological Warfare Team, not bringing heavy generators, used the Group's electricity, so they had to limit lighting in the barracks area. Each house had an oil lamp lit, shimmering like a rural night market during the Tet holiday. Women and children walked around happily.

Night had fallen, and everything was in order. Of course, the Hospital Ship's Captain and the doctors did not come ashore to attend. The stage was set up in the middle of the yard, with bright lights. In front of the stage, there were only a few chairs for officers and guests. But in the

barracks area, every house had its doors open, with husbands, wives, and children sitting inside watching the entertainment.

The performance began. After the formalities, Thông and I returned to the office, which was also the operations room, looking out at the yard, enjoying the entertainment and drinking beer. Thông said, "It's been so long since I've seen you 'elder.' I told my younger brother to cook chicken porridge; let's have a drink for fun; it's rare that we get to see each other since graduation..." Faintly, from behind the kitchen, there was the sound of girls laughing and talking, telling the kitchen helper to bring out the snacks. I raised my eyebrows, and Thông replied, "The rear support girls came to watch the entertainment..." Outside on the stage, a contemporary song played loudly:

"Welcoming you into the arms of a soldier"

The song ended, with resounding applause and shouts of "Encore, encore!" The singer said, "By popular demand, I will perform 'Hoa-Bien' (Sea Flower) by Anh-Thi." The applause erupted, mixed with loud voices: "We want Anh-Thi on stage so everyone can see his face." In the kitchen, the girl stopped laughing and ran out to the side of the stage to see the face of the musician Anh-Thi. Corporal Pham Van Khon, a heavy artilleryman, stepped onto the stage, wearing a shirt with the glittering gold letters 'Anh-Thi' on his chest. The female singer introduced the musician Anh-Thi. Anh-Thi smiled shyly, bowed to everyone, and then stepped down. The applause was thunderous. The singer began:

"Your eyes are the color of the ocean,
Your hair is like rolling waves..."

I waited for the girl to return, intending to find an excuse to see her face, but I couldn't. She covered her face almost entirely with a long scarf. She bowed her head and walked, almost running, back into the kitchen, and her giggling laughter returned. Thông and I, along with several other officers, ate and drank while keeping an ear out for any trouble. I expected to hear the sound of a mortar shell leaving its barrel and the loud



explosions within the unit, as we had been warned before arriving. The festivities grew livelier with the comedy skit and magic show. The children couldn't resist and moved to the front of the stage to watch the scene of someone chewing on light bulbs and swallowing them with Coca-Cola. The fear seemed to dissipate with the applause... The entertainment ended a little earlier than usual compared to performances in other places. Everyone rushed out to the yard, surrounding the performers. And in a moment, almost everyone dispersed into the barracks area. An unplanned "after-show" program began. Loud and cheerful toasts were raised: "It's rare for

you all to visit... It was great, wasn't it... When will you visit us again?" Thông and I wandered around the barracks area, even out to the guard posts. Everywhere I went, I saw smiles. The night grew quiet. The Naval Entertainment Troupe boarded their boats and returned to the ship. When I arrived, I still saw the Captain standing on the command bridge. After all the personnel from the Psychological Warfare Team were back on board, the landing ramp was raised, and the ship's operational siren sounded immediately. The warship turned its bow southward. I went to the command bridge to give the Captain a general report on the completed mission. At the same time, Thông's voice came over the loudspeaker system: "Thank you, Captain, thank you everyone. We will always remember this joyful evening. We hope to see you again soon." The Captain replied with a few words, and then Thông said to me, "Thank you very much, 'elder.' When you return to Saigon, I'll find you at the Headquarters." As I walked down from the command bridge, the sea breeze blew strongly. I stopped on the side of the mess hall, looking to the right. The coastline faded. The 16th Coastal Group blurred into the mist, merging with the shadowy, undulating mountains. In that place, my classmate was facing danger day and night. But even in that shadowy night, I could still hear the faint giggling of the faceless girl in her headscarf.

Upon returning to Saigon, while waiting for the next mission, I had to write a report on the previous operation and follow the rehearsals of new entertainment programs, especially to monitor the suggestions and personal letters of request from staff at various levels that the Psychological Warfare Team, while operating in the units, was tasked with encouraging and collecting to present directly to the CNO. During this time, the echoes of the mission in the remote units continued to reverberate. I borrowed some nautical charts from Room 2, studying the locations for the upcoming mission. I looked back at the 16th Coastal Group and thought deeply about this land with many mountains and few fields, a region that, throughout the nine years of resistance against the French, had been under Viet Minh control.

Before regrouping to the North, in accordance with the spirit of the Geneva Accords, the Viet Minh organized mass weddings between their cadres and local girls, aiming to create close ties between those leaving and those staying, to facilitate future operations. It was a long-term and insidious plan. The writer Vo Phien had foreseen this intention of the Viet Minh. And indeed, later, when the North-South war erupted, the Communists secretly returned, bringing with them children who had been taken to the North, trained, and then sent back to operate. This plan was what writer Vo Phien called "Catching the Young Green." Therefore, I was anxious and worried... The more I learned and followed the war, the more worried I became for Thông.

One morning, August 7, 1967, news from the Operations Center reported: "Last night, after a fierce shelling, two Communist battalions launched a massive attack on the 16th Coastal Group in Co Luy. The unit responded fiercely. With the support of the PCFs, and especially the counter-fire from HQ-10, Nhat Tao, the base repelled many fierce enemy attacks, but the Commander of the Coastal Group, Naval Lieutenant Nguyen Ngoc Thông, was killed in action."

I received this news with shock, but it was as if I had vaguely known it somewhere in my subconscious. And it was terrible for me, as I was the one who had to deliver this news to Thông's family. Thông, my classmate, Thông was too young, only 25 years old, posthumously promoted to Captain. Thông's body was taken to the Vietnam Quoc Tu Pagoda for viewing, and my classmates and I went to keep vigil and offer condolences. In addition to Thông's relatives whom I knew, there was a girl whose face was covered with white mourning scarves, with only her swollen, tear-filled eyes visible. This girl sobbed and threw herself onto the coffin lid. I was sure this was the girl with the giggling laughter in the kitchen when I was on mission in Co Luy, 16th Coastal Group. Despite my attention, I still hadn't seen this girl's face until then. When Thông was given his final farewell, I had to go on a mission and couldn't attend. Friends told me that Thông's funeral procession went through Saigon under the scorching sun. The fellow officers, in full dress uniform with swords, escorted Thông in a long line. At the burial, two rows of officers formed a V-shape with their swords, and Thông's coffin passed through the middle. The girl from Quang Ngai, in full mourning, rolled on the edge of the grave, crying out in utter grief. Although there had been no promises and the family didn't know, seeing her deep sorrow, Thông's father took her hand and said, "Enough, child. Thông's life was short. But I consider you as my own daughter..." The girl stepped back as flowers and handfuls of earth from friends and relatives were gradually thrown down. On the new grave, fresh and old earth was piled high, covered with the national flag. Everyone gradually left, but the girl remained, her head bowed on the grave, sobbing uncontrollably. According to news from a relative of Thông's now in the United States: "Thông's father said: 'Thông, our family member, is gone anyway. Dying like this is also glorious. To die and have someone mourn is also a consolation.' Therefore, the family allowed Thông's girlfriend to wear mourning. Still according to this source, during the days stationed at the 16th Coastal Group, enemy pressure was fierce. The enemy offered a reward of one million dong to whoever killed Thông! The battle at the 16th Coastal Group was considered fierce, and there were many indications that the unit had been infiltrated. After the battle, Thông's bodyguard disappeared. He might have been an infiltrator planted by the enemy. Some people also said, 'Who is this girl to Thông that she's crying so much? Maybe she's from the other side...' The tragic war, with so much suffering, grew increasingly fierce, and the question faded into oblivion. Hatred and love intertwined. Bombs fell from distant skies. Vietnamese blood and bones were shattered. So many young men like Thông died, with a loyal heart to protect their homeland. They were the heroes of their time. Now, in 2000, the war has faded. Where is the girl who mourned Thông now? Does she ever return to Saigon to visit Thông's grave and remember with melancholy? A relative of Thông's now in the United States also said: 'On the day we bid farewell to Thông, a whole stretch of Tran Quoc Toan Street was filled with the white of naval uniforms, with flags and the military band. When the CNO arrived, the national anthem was played, and the Captain's epaulets were pinned to his pillow as a posthumous tribute, and then the National Defense Medal was also pinned... My grandfather was very sad, but he also saw Thông's death as very honorable. My grandfather placed Thông's epaulets, medal, and sword on the altar, behind his picture. After 1975, Thông's altar remained

unchanged. Thông was the youngest of my grandfather's 14 children. In 1984, my fifth uncle, who was stuck in the North, visited my grandfather. This uncle looked at Thông's altar, felt melancholy, and said to my grandfather: 'What a tragic and painful fratricidal war...'

Why the 16th Coastal Group was constantly harassed and besieged day and night? Many fierce shellings repeatedly occurred at the Group. Under Thông's command, the Coastal Group stood firm and consistently achieved significant successes in protecting Vietnam's territorial waters. Many enemy ships infiltrating Sa-Ky, which the enemy called the gateway to Region 5, were monitored, intercepted, and sunk by our warships and patrol boats. To provide a concrete view of these feats, we quote some documents from Hanoi (History of the Vietnam People's Navy, draft and summary, Navy Headquarters 1980, pages 110-111) verbatim as follows:

"...In 1967, under the directive of the Central Military Commission, the convoy temporarily stopped transporting goods to the South to transport goods to Inter-Region 5, with the requirement that each locality receive one shipment (...). Ship 43 departed on March 8, 1967, and at 23:00 on July 13, 1967, was detected by enemy aircraft. At 2:00 on March 14, 1967, it was surrounded and intercepted by four enemy ships (...). The battle erupted here, ultimately forcing us to destroy the ship."

"...Ship 198 departed on July 6, 1967, carrying weapons to Quang Ngai. After ten days of skillfully deceiving the enemy, on July 14, 1967, six nautical miles from the pier, it was attacked and intercepted by enemy warships and aircraft. Ship 198 returned fire while maneuvering towards the Ba Lang An coast. In this battle, Political Commissar Senior Lieutenant Huynh Ngoc Thach and Second Lieutenant Pham Chuyen Nghiep fought bravely and sacrificed themselves..."

Let's calmly review the above passage. From March 8 until Thông's death on August 6, 1967, in less than five months, not counting the enemy ships lingering offshore that our warships monitored and pursued, the Ba Lang An sea area, the responsibility of the 16th Coastal Group under Thông's command, witnessed two enemy ship sinkings. The above document from Hanoi did not mention the hundreds of tons of weapons that we destroyed and confiscated, nor did it mention the crew members of the infiltrating ships who were killed and wounded. This was a severe loss for the enemy. The 16th Coastal Group was like a knife in their throat, a plug in their windpipe, and they had to find a way to remove it. They had to remove it at all costs, to avenge the two ships sunk by us, the deaths of Political Commissar Senior Lieutenant Huynh Ngoc Thanh and Second Lieutenant Pham Chuyen Nghiep, and to find breathing room for the entire Inter-Region 5 front which was in turmoil. Unable to win with guns and bravery, they had to find another way. By any means, even the most devious, even the most costly. They offered a reward of one million dong to anyone who killed Naval Lieutenant Nguyen Ngoc Thông, Commander of the 16th Coastal Group. Was that the reason for Thông's sacrifice? Over 30 years have passed, and the details of the bravery of the 16th Coastal Group's soldiers, Thông's intelligence, and courage have faded and been forgotten. But with the concrete evidence in the enemy's document above, it is sufficient to prove that the 16th Coastal Group was a highly excellent and effective

unit of the Navy and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. Thông, like the soldiers under his command, were heroes of the military, of the South, fighting against Hanoi's infiltration by sea. Thông, in the devastated pain of the war's end, we, the living and the dead, share a common sorrow. Before, in my heart, I sometimes thought: "Thông was too young, Thông's death was too pitiful..." But with the enemy's remaining documents, though very simple and deceitful, they clearly reveal that the 16th Coastal Group stationed in Co Luy was indeed a heroic unit, and Thông, you were a hero. Two enemy ships, hundreds of tons of weapons, two enemy officers, and the crew of those two ships were buried in the sea area under Thông's responsibility. Thông can smile knowing that his sacrifice was paid for at a very high price by the enemy. As classmates, we will never forget you. We are proud of you, Rest in peace, Thông. If Thông were alive now, he would be like us, and like so many others, forced to swallow our bitterness and resentment, as the poet Thanh-Nam spoke for us:

"The gamble hasn't even started, yet the capital is gone.
The game still had a move, but I had to accept defeat."

Rest In Peace, Thông. Thông lived like a man of his time. Thông's death was as radiant as a sunrise over his homeland's sea.

Phan Lạc Tiếp

CLASS REUNION ANNOUNCEMENT

Editorial Team



*Đằng ấy nằm yên khép tuổi xanh
Tớ sâu lưu lạc, mộng không thành
Tháng Bảy nhớ về đây họp khóa
Tám một thằng đâu? Giờ điểm danh!*

*Có gặp 'Cà Chua'? Thằng Bích đó!
Nhấn dùm là tớ đã đem hình
Lên chùa gửi gắm, nghe kinh kệ
Cho hồn siêu thoát cõi u-minh.*

*Bốn mươi năm trước mình trôi dạt
Kết bạn trên bờ cát trắng phau
Nha-Trang ngày cũ, đời hoan lạc
Còn nhớ còn thương giấc mộng đầu.*

*Khi về nhớ rủ dăm ba đứa.
Nghe chuyện ngày xưa để khóc cười.
Tóc tớ bây giờ không xanh nữa.
Chỉ còn một chút nhớ thương thôi.*

You lie still, youth gently closed
While I wander, lost, dreams decomposed.
July comes—we gather for our class,
Eighty-one boys—let's take roll at last!

Did you see 'Tomato'? That's Bích, you
know—
Tell him I brought a photo to show.
To the temple I gave it, left it there,
With prayers and chants, and incense air.

Forty years ago, we were adrift,
On white sands where friendship was a gift.
Old Nha Trang, wild and full of cheer—
Do you still recall our first dream, dear?

When you return, bring a friend or two,
To laugh and cry over times we knew.
My hair is no longer young and bright,
Just a trace of love and dreams in sight.

AQUARIUS ZODIAC SIGNS

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The First Bảo Bình (Aquarius) class had many "number one" distinctions perfectly fitting for the "double number one" identity of Naval Officer Class 11 in Nha Trang. Most of these top achievements have already become well known: the largest number of cadets (81) entering in 1961, the highest number of officers who would go on to command ships, and the most "big shots" like Mr. Thiệu (President), two Mr. Khánh (Chiefs of State), Mr. Lộc (Prime Minister), and more...

Bảo Bình was also the only class that had "beginning and end" across the full Vietnamese alphabet, from A (Nguyễn A) to Y (Ngô Xuân Ý). But there's at least one more "number one" distinction that has remained relatively under wraps: it had the *largest Zoo*—also fondly known as the "Animal Pen."

For comparison, even Heaven and Earth only created 12 animals of the zodiac. Including the full "Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches" (Can Chi), the total count reaches only 60—but this double-one Bảo Bình class managed to produce 81 zodiac animals!

In recent official reunions and gatherings, some of the *older Bình*, *chipped Bình*, or *cracked Bình* seem to have forgotten not only the names of the animals in their own pen, but in harsher cases, even their own biographical details! Many of the Bình wives have also complained that they don't know much about the "zoo registry" of their husbands.

So, in response to this interest, we'll briefly review the bios of each *Bảo Bình zodiac animal*, giving everyone a chance to revisit the precious memories of the days when we "put down our brushes and picked up the sword."

And let us state clearly to our fellow pen mates: every zodiac animal has its own traits, good or bad, depending on the viewer. Therefore, while some parts of this writing may go into detail, the goal remains—first to bring joy, second to honor the past—without any malice, attacks, or ridicule. The style may be rambling and the humor a bit rough like a duck stew, so please forgive us and enjoy this over some tea and wine!

**The following is the background of the Aquarius zodiac signs,
in order of ABC.**



Nguyễn A

A! This guy is at the top of the list with the shortest name and is also the first recorded in the dictionary. It could also be that Bình has been "in the military" the longest, as he enlisted at the end of December 1951 at Mang Cá Fortress, Huế. He is very dignified and was one of the few Bình's granted the privilege of receiving a night pass every Wednesday to fulfill his civic duties.

Perhaps because he started practicing "dry swimming" early, he has a well-rounded, attractive seat—so impressive that it is the envy of women. In short, he embodies the refined image of the *Grand Monde*.

He is good and sincere with friends but deeply despises hypocrites like Nhạc Bất Quần. Upon arriving in the United States, to better suit his new environment, he changed his name to Anthony Ditto. He rose to the prestigious position of Chairman of the Force, boldly declaring, "I am the enemy of those who advocate the 'big head, small rear' strategy."

Only Duy was the most lovable and gentle, like a plush dog in the animal pen. He was a resident



Phạm Duy Anh

of the Phú Thọ student camp. His jet-black, naturally curly "fur coat" made him look just like the father of a Poodle. This guy was fair-skinned, handsome, and belonged to the most "noble" class of his cohort—so refined that even his barking was elegant and gentle, never crude or vulgar like some of the other "Western dogs."



Naturally, wherever the plush dog went, he was the darling of the ladies, who showered him with affection and whispered, "Only you, Duy... Duy Anh..."

After moving to the United States, he became a senior expert at IBM. He had no connection to *Eastern Heretic* (Đông Tà), but he was the father of the heroine Hoàng Dung.



Nguyễn Văn Anh

Wherever this Bình went, whether loved or hated, everyone simply called him *Anh* (Brother).

He was upright, disciplined, and meticulous in managing finances, which earned him the trust of his peers as the Treasurer of the Mess Hall Association in the early days of military school.

He has long been out of contact, and perhaps he still lives in Vietnam. However, there are also rumors that *Anh Quản Lý* (Treasurer Anh) now lives a secluded life in the cold lands of Canada.



Nguyễn Phú Bá

This zodiac sign is certainly destined for wealth, as his name itself suggests—both *Phú Ông* (wealthy man) and *Bá Hộ* (landowner). Fair-skinned, handsome, and eloquent, his English was impeccable, earning him a spot in the top group.

He was kind-hearted, cheerful, and always had a bright smile on his face. At one point, he was temporarily assigned to the Merchant Marine. Notably, his... *covert productivity* was remarkably high, as rumors say he was among the very few reeducation camp prisoners whose wife, after a visit, left pregnant.

He is now settled in Australia and once served as the head of the Naval Family Association in the state of Victoria. Unfortunately, he was *too* perfect to be included in the animal pen. And since he has been at the top of the roll call so far, let's call him *The Nameless One #1*.



Trần Hữu Bân

His name is short—Bân—yet his hands and feet are even more skillful than a carpenter’s, which is why close friends affectionately call him *Bác Phó Mộc* (Master Carpenter). A former cadet of the Junior Military Academy, he was gentle, always smiling, and wholeheartedly devoted to his friends.

True to his reputation, his craftsmanship and woodworking skills were top-notch, earning immense satisfaction from his female clientele. Later, after becoming a disabled veteran due to a Viet Cong grenade in 1971, he mastered yet another art—*staking his claim* (a humorous reference to resourcefulness and adaptability).

The *Bình KK* group fondly awarded him the additional title of *Bình Mê* (Chipped Bình). All his children have grown up to become successful engineers.



Trần Ngọc Bảo

Originally, his profession was "riding the clouds and chasing the wind" (a reference to being an aviator), but perhaps because his *gear bag* was a bit too heavy, he switched to the navy for more stability. His name sounded as precious as pearls or treasures.

His nickname, *Son Duong* (Mountain Goat), became legendary. It’s said that on the night the senior class (Course 10) graduated, as revenge for being doused with cold water while sleeping, they kidnapped him and painted his *highly esteemed gear bag* with paint in his dorm room. As a result, he was forced to shave his head, earning him the extra *Son* (paint) in his nickname *Duong*.

True to the traditional belief that life is short, *Son-Duong* met his heroic end at Rạch Ba Rài, Mỹ Tho, on September 29, 1965, while serving with Riverine Assault Group 27.



Hồ Ngọc Báu

He was a stylish player who returned from the West, so even Uncle Ho had to take his surname. He’s as white and plump as a lump of dough. Although he was related to the contemporary CNO, he never relied on his connections; on the contrary, he was very good to his friends. He was cherished and adored by women like a precious gem.



His talent for "plucking flowers to offer to the Buddha" reached a masterful level, as he would take the whole bunch of fragrant flowers. It is said that he often whispered and shared "Tâm Cầm" stories with Fernandel.

He tragically died in a car accident in Rừng Lá (Phan Thiết) in 1973. This was also a rare case because he shared the same name and nickname with another Aquarius. Please continue reading...



Hoàng Đình Báu

This is another treasure of the class, a "big stud, good breed," which was rare in the livestock pen. He was carefully nurtured and cherished by women like a prized breeding pig.



He was a brave and exemplary ship captain who fought until the very last moment in the final days of April 1975. Unfortunately, this "Bát Giới" (a reference to the pig-like character in *Journey to the West*) was left behind and was frequently imprisoned by the Viet

Cong. His wife and four children were tragically shot and killed by the Viet Cong at Chử Y Bridge while trying to escape. He and his youngest child survived, but he was imprisoned a second time.

After coming to the U.S., he changed careers, wrote poetry and literature, and pursued education as a hobby—yet still managed to earn multiple high-level degrees. He was particularly known for his literary works, having published a poetry collection *Mother and Homeland* and authored the novel *Black Night, Red Devil*. His short stories were just as emotionally stirring as *Mường Cháy*.

He lived a peaceful and comfortable life, always well-fed and well-rested, reciting the saying: "A big stud never worries about going hungry."



Võ Văn Bảy

With his charming sun-kissed complexion—not as dark as a *Chà Và* (a colloquial term for South Asians in Vietnam)—he was affectionately called Anh Bảy, perhaps because of his notably abundant and perfectly white teeth, reminiscent of a Hynos toothpaste advertisement.

He had many nicknames, including *Mỏ Cà*, *Mái Tây Hiên*, and Director of the Kiến Hòa Coconut Shredding Factory, but the most common was *Xe Ngựa* (Horse Carriage), which Cá Sơn translated into *Mã Xa*. The reason for this nickname stemmed from his unique running style during exercise sessions led by Sergeant Cóc and Corporal Nhái, which closely resembled that of a carriage-pulling horse.

Beyond his charming artistic personality and witty speech, *Mã Xa* was also a talented writer. He published several books in Vietnam, including *A River for the Warship, Amidst the Sea Storm*, and *The Life of a Sailor*, all deeply evocative works.

When not “pulling the carriage,” *Mã Xa* often indulged in reciting poetry about Thu Nguyệt, passionately composing under the pen name *Cung Hoàng*.



Nguyễn Hoài Bích

The Company Commander of the Officer Cadets—tall, handsome, and kind-hearted—was beloved by the entire class. Whenever he was mentioned, all the *Bình* (a reference to his comrades) would feel nostalgic and deeply miss him.

His name and presence were as beautiful as a jade stone. He had a gentle and lovable personality. One distinct feature was his nose tip, as red as a ripe tomato, earning him the nickname *Tomato* in French.

He was a devoted son to his mother, passionately dedicated to the Navy, and had a fiancée who remained loyal even during his time in reeducation prison.

Tragically, he and his family perished while attempting to escape by boat in 1982, leaving behind deep sorrow among his friends. Alas! We lost one of our most precious "*Bình*" far too soon.



Trần Ngọc Bích

Another jade stone, perhaps best described as a mystic pearl. His frame was slender and delicate, with long, lanky limbs resembling a grasshopper or cricket. With a complexion that wasn't particularly fair, he bore a resemblance to a Fakir or a bony Saint Gandhi. He had a gentle and easygoing personality, yet he was famously tough while serving in the Patrol Forces, operating in the Đồng Tiển and Phước Xuyên canal regions.

He was imprisoned for many years as an act of revenge by the Viet Cong. However, despite enduring countless hardships, Fakir remained unfazed—calmly crossing his legs and tapping his foot, knowing he would always have enough to live on!



San Diego, 1971

His name, Đinh Bình, sounds fierce, but he was actually very gentle and as beautiful as a girl. With a delicate and graceful appearance, soft as a pomelo blossom, he had all the qualities to be an airline stewardess for the Dragon Airlines.

Small, gentle, and charming, everyone adored him. He had many roles, such as being a Ritual Officer in the Ceremonial Unit, later transitioning to a Theater Director at the Military Operations Center. He directed officers in demonstrating military operation diagrams like the Sông Biển (River-Sea). Whatever job he took, he excelled in.

He was one of the rare Navy Officers with a paratrooper certificate. Perhaps because of his feminine qualities, he had a fondness for Bijoux (jewelry).

As a husband, he was a model of virtue, worthy of the title "exemplary in chastity", famously declaring, "Happiness is here; there's nothing left to wish for."

He disliked the San Francisco area because he couldn't bring himself to bend down and tie his shoes.



Trần Đỗ Cẩm

In the course, this guy was quite eccentric, belonging to the "Trần như nhộng" sect (which humorously implies being naked). He wasn't as skilled at swimming as Cá (Fish) but wasn't as hopeless as Heo (Pig) either. Perhaps because he came from Đà Lạt, he was chubby and fair-skinned like a freshly shaved pig when he enrolled. Since he often got penalized for diving, he was classified as a "Cá" (Fish).



But this was quite a fitting name by fate because he actually preferred "dry swimming" (possibly implying non-aquatic sports). He enjoyed playing tennis on the grass courts, whether wet or dry, and his skills were probably only second to Trâu Lăn (Rolling Buffalo). Cá Heo (Dolphin) loved the freshwater and lush landscapes of Hậu Giang, frequently traveling around Long Xuyên, Vàm Nao, and Chợ Mới. His dream was to one day "bring love back home," taking his Southern sweetheart to visit his homeland, "Làng Tôi" (My Village), nestled along the Đáy River in the North.



Lê Thượng Chiêu

He came from a wealthy, well-educated family of distinguished lineage in Nha Trang. With a sturdy, sun-tanned physique, he was as big as an elephant. Despite his size, he was kind-hearted and always good to his friends. His parents' multi-story house on Phương Sài Street served as a headquarters for many classmates.

Though large, "Voi" (Elephant) was quick, resourceful, and skillful. He was a renowned goalkeeper for the cadet soccer team. It was said that during his time in a reeducation camp, he became highly skilled in carpentry, crafting tools and makeshift items of impressive quality

A distant relative of Luu Bi, his name, when written in telegram style, was "Cow." On the



Lưu Lương Cơ

training field, and especially during soccer matches, his head was as formidable as a charging bull, ramming through everything in its path. His specialty, the "Ngầu Pín" (bull tendon) dish, was highly regarded.



He was cheerful and close to his friends, especially with the "Nhà Lá" group. Cơ went missing while attempting to escape by boat. And just like that, the "animal farm" lost a beloved Bull. In the next life, may you be reborn in India, where the world will worship you.



Nguyễn Văn Tấn

His name meant something big, like "Cự Thất," but the American teacher, Mr. Taylor, pronounced it in a way that sounded like a common nickname for a little boy—similar to a term of endearment used by women. A true man lacking in this regard could only end up as a eunuch!

He was from Nha Trang, and during his university years, he boarded at the home of a fermented shrimp paste seller, earning him the nickname "Mắm" (Fermented Shrimp Paste). He once said, *"I don't mind, because mắm is a quintessential dish of Vietnamese cuisine, rich in protein and highly nutritious..."* So, it turned out that not only was this "Cu" (a playful reference to his name) adored by women, but he was also admired by the entire nation!

After moving abroad, he became "David" instead of "Mister Cu," but among his old B.B. friends, "Mister Cu" remained dearly missed. Despite enduring many hardships, his family is now thriving, with his children becoming Ph.D.s, doctors, pharmacists, and engineers—all thanks to his devoted and faithful wife, who dedicated her life to supporting her husband and children.



Hồ Đắc Cung

One of the first three Cadet Platoon Leaders of the class, he was well-loved by his friends for his kind and easygoing nature. His name evoked the dream of *"tang bổng hồ thi"*—the lofty ambition of a man pursuing a career in arms.

His nickname symbolized the ultimate stronghold that a man must conquer when *"leading his beloved into summer"* (a poetic metaphor for love and intimacy).

He sacrificed his life for the nation at Vĩnh Hy Lagoon while serving as the Commanding Officer of Coastal Group 26 in Bình Ba, near Cam Ranh.



Hoàng Dân

He was born in the Year of the Tiger and was the "Golden Tiger" of the class—tall, handsome, and a member of the honor guard for the division commander and regimental colors.

A man with an artistic soul, he had a deep fondness for the song with lyric like "... *Chiều đi lặng lẽ, màn đêm dần trôi ...*" , sung by Thanh Thúy.



After graduation, he served in the Frogman Unit (*Liên Đoàn Người Nhái*). He sacrificed his life for the nation in 1970.



Đặng Diệm

He transferred from the branch known for "*riding the clouds and chasing the wind.*" Tall, calm, and cautious, these were the defining traits of this cadet who served as an aide to the division commander and regimental colors. He shared the same name as the President of the First Republic (*Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa*). Highly successful both in his military career and civilian life, he was renowned for his expertise in strategy, organization, and training.

He was the first in the class to receive the *Bảo Quốc Huân Chương* (National Order of Merit) and also the earliest to achieve the rank of Acting Commander. He found success in all aspects of life in the United States. One wonders—does he ever regret being so proper and disciplined that he never earned an animal nickname like his classmates in the "zoo".



Trần Thế Diệp

He is the "Golden Toad" of the class. His talent lay in spotting money and gold everywhere, though his wealth was cleverly disguised beneath a humble exterior—much like a prince hidden in the form of a toad. But beware, for "*the toad is the uncle of the heavens*" (a Vietnamese saying implying hidden power).



Trần Thế Diệp

A fiercely independent person, he was determined from a young age never to live in poverty. Though he didn't like military life, he joined the Navy as a stepping stone for future opportunities. He had the skills of a Finance Minister more than a Ship Captain.

He was always the wealthiest in the class, living by the philosophy of "*Tái Ông thất mã*" (a Chinese proverb meaning that misfortune can turn into fortune). Now, he is a successful entrepreneur, specializing in investment and construction in the land of the Kangaroo Australia.



Trương Văn Đăng

He's one of the former Air Force members transferred to the Navy. His name symbolizes the guiding light of hope for those at sea, making his switch to the Navy seem destined. However, he would rather be a solitary lighthouse on land than a ship "*rocking on the waves*" in the midst of a stormy ocean.

A former technical student, he was highly skilled and full of ingenuity, having studied at the Rochford Military School in France. During his time in a reeducation camp, he became a renowned blacksmith, crafting hoes, shovels, hammers, pliers, chisels, and saws—all without an anvil or forge.

In 1980, he piloted his own boat to escape, carrying 178 people. He voluntarily took on key leadership roles at the Pulau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia. Quiet and reserved, his personality mirrors the state of Minnesota, where he has long since settled.



Trương Quý Đồ

This guy belonged to the *Nhà Lá* (thatched-roof house) section of the "animal farm." Though not big in stature, he possessed impressive talents. His name sounded like *Tsukido*, evoking images of a heroic submarine navigator crossing the Pacific or a reconnaissance pilot patrolling the U.S. coastline—who wouldn't be intimidated?

He captained several merchant ships and was known for his gentle, easygoing nature and down-to-earth attitude with friends. But don't be mistaken! His name included the character *Quý* (meaning noble or fortunate), suggesting he was blessed with powerful benefactors, always emerging victorious in his endeavors. At one point, he nearly lost his legs in a reeducation camp due to paralysis, but a fellow prisoner who was a doctor performed acupuncture and saved him. He was also one of the most relentless and skillful "flirts" around. "*The end justifies the means*"—*what's so shameless about that?* Fate smiled upon him, as his life was guided by the *Hồng Loan* star (a Chinese astrological symbol of love and marriage), leading him to a capable and devoted wife.



Nguyễn Tấn Đơn

Reading his name, one might think he was a very lonely person in the class—like the "*Tấn cô Đơn*" (Tấn being a name and "*cô Đơn*" meaning loneliness)—but in reality, anyone could be his friend.

Furthermore, don't "*mistake like an elephant*", he was one of the very few in the class granted the privilege of practicing marksmanship every Wednesday evening. Very skilled in strategy, he was well-versed in naval organization. He was the only one in the class to receive the award for academic progress during the graduation ceremony. After his time in the reeducation camp, he now resides in Australia.



Nguyễn Châu Giám

Your name sounds like that of the director of *Châu Ngọc* company, very generous with friends. You were the most charming person in your class, and besides that, you have many "firsts" in life. You are the father of the four sacred animals: "Dragon, Qilin, Turtle, and Phoenix." You transitioned into the Air Force group, always dashing, elegant, and gentle. Affectionate and well-liked by everyone, especially women, you were chosen to represent the entire class to present flowers to Ms. Kim Vui after the 1963 cultural performance. Sometimes, you sported a tiny mustache, making you look as romantic as Clark Gable in *GONE WITH THE WIND*. Embracing the philosophy of impermanence, you have now returned to dust.



Phan Tử Hải

"**Cho Dien**" Bình was very artistic and, fittingly named "Four Seas as Home," naturally joined the Navy. On evenings when he was confined to the barracks, he would roam around playing his guitar like a "Mad Dog" in the military academy, alongside "Golden Tiger," singing "**CHIỀU ĐI LẠNG LỄ...**" making those stuck in confinement feel even more miserable. He had the talent of playing the guitar with his left



hand, but with other instruments, he used both hands—and sometimes even a third foot. His talent knew no age, and he became famous right after graduation. He was a terror to the Viet Cong in the *Cửa Việt, Hội An* region as well as the South. He married the beauty of Long Hồ, enjoying a peaceful and happy family life. No longer dreaming of the seas, "Mad Dog" now settles down, happily singing "**HOA TÍM AI CÀI TRÊN BẮP VÉ!**"!



Trần Trọng Hải

With a name meaning "Ocean," he was naturally suited for the Navy. Handsome, tall, and possessing an excellent memory, he was exceptionally intelligent. Particularly, he had a sharp mind capable of filtering, gathering, or discarding information like a computer. Because of his many innate talents, he was somewhat different from others and was considered a mystical "J." He was an ACTOVRAD Project Manager for USN/VNN, establishing radar stations. He endured a long period in reeducation camps. Later, he became an electrician, carpenter, English professor, and writer under the pen name Tuấn Anh, with many famous works published in Vietnam. His pride and "aggressive" yet confident nature suited American society well, and despite arriving late, he and his family achieved great success. We celebrate that the "mystical J" has had the chance to become the "real J."



Phạm Văn Hàm

Although he studied at the Vietnamese Naval Academy, this man was considered a "Westerner". Hàm is tall, handsome, intelligent, and strong, and he has a particularly high nose, resembling the Frenchman "De Gaulle." During his time in Nha Trang, he had quite a few "younger sisters," but it is said that when he settled down, he had only one wife. This "Western" Hàm was a determined and patient man, willing to redo important tasks two or three times if necessary. He became famous for an incident when his ship passed Cape Cà Mau—he rolled up his pants and boldly declared:

"I'm standing right at the tip of Cà Mau, taking a piss. Even the rich and powerful can't do this!"

Later, tired of picking up seaweed and cooking porridge for fish, he studied law and became a judge, specializing in convicting criminals.



Trần Văn Hoa (Em)

Everyone must remember our friend Trần, a man with an imposing figure. His waistline was already 33-34 inches in his youth. He suffered injuries during his time in a reeducation camp. Yet, after 30-40 years, upon reunion, he hadn't aged much—he even looked stronger and more agile than before. So, fellow Bình's, stop calling him "Em"! His new name is Trần Văn Hoa.



Lê Văn Huệ

He asked us to send his deepest gratitude to all the Bảo-Bình brothers and sisters who visited, comforted, and supported his family during times of hardship and imprisonment, as well as in the early days of their arrival in the United States.

Although his real name sounds delicate like a "flower," his nickname is a very popular fruit, whether eaten fresh or dried. What's the reason? During a harsh initiation ritual at noon, right after lunch, the upperclassmen made him run several laps under the scorching sun. Exhausted and overwhelmed by the heat, he vomited up an entire bunch of bananas right in the mess hall.

Later, while serving in the Rapid Strike River Squadron 31, he gained a reputation for being extremely lucky in battle, always victorious thanks to his ability to read omens. He later worked in the Navy Inspectorate at Headquarters, becoming well-known for his integrity—unlike most people, he was not "as soft as a banana."

He endured 10 years in a reeducation camp and an additional 3 years in prison for attempting to escape Vietnam. Throughout these hardships, his devoted wife took care of him. After resettling in Canada, "Banana" embraced Buddhist philosophy, living peacefully and content with his true self.



Đinh Mạnh Hùng

He was both *Mạnh* (strong) and *Hùng* (heroic) in the class and after graduation. Just hearing his name was enough to make both officers and even the ship captain jump in surprise—similar to hearing the name of the Naval Chief of Staff at the time. Despite this, he was very kind to his comrades in the "animal pen." Even at his angriest, he would only curse with a soft "meows... meow"



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and swipes like a cat. He was highly successful in the navy, serving as the captain of a major warship in the fleet. It was said he also had a talent for "long-distance running." In the final days of April 1975, during a meeting at the Phan Rang Air Base, the Communist forces suddenly attacked. He displayed his "Ling Bo Wei Bu" (a reference to a legendary martial arts technique) to escape to Coastal Defense Unit 27, where he commandeered a boat back to his warship.



Phạm Văn Hùng

"A young man for many years, yet with white hair," he is earning the respectful title of *Cụ* (Elder). A true artist at heart, he had talents in music and painting, later adding writing to his repertoire. He was the designer of the XI First *Bảo Bình* class insignia. His trumpet skills were top-notch, rivaling even President Bill Clinton, and he loved forming jazz bands—especially with female saxophonists. When he found the right partner, he would strike fast and strong, sometimes feigning innocence as "*Cụ Thộn*" to launch an attack at the opponent's weakest spot. Rumor has it that these days, he has switched to playing the *trống bỏi* (a type of drum). He was quite close to Fernandel, frequently visiting his *Love Boat*.



Nguyễn Xuân Huy

He's the most dazzling in the class, as magnificent as a glorious spring. Though originally from Huế, he preferred venturing south to the *Nam Kỳ Lục Tỉnh* (Southern Six Provinces) and practicing "architecture" there. His most impressive achievement was conquering a beauty from Thoại Ngọc Hầu High School, as fresh as the apricot flower (*Mai*), and as pure as the pear blossom (*Lê*). If he had been born in the U.S., he would have thrived in Las Vegas. The "Uncle and the Party" generously sent him on long-term "inspection tours" of numerous resorts from the South to the North. After being released from reeducation camp, he became a brilliant interior decorator, so skilled that even veteran carpenters had to step aside.



Nguyễn Kim Khánh

Just reading his name, one could tell he came from a wealthy family, full of **KHÁNH VÀNG, KHÁNH BẠC** (gold and silver treasures). If he wasn't the owner of a jewelry store, he would at least be the boss of a pizza chain. He aspired to a life of "saving people and helping the world," but "**FATE HAD ALREADY DECIDED**"—he

became a sailor instead. One of the most successful members of the class, both in and out of the military. On paper, his name resembled a type of jewelry beloved by women, but among friends, he was given several special nicknames. He was called K.K., CŨ CẢI (radish), and even C.C. by those who preferred short and snappy names. He was a loyal friend, highly trusted as a treasurer, and also a talented tailor—never concerned about whether he sewed by hand or by machine, because "SEWING IS SEWING, NO MATTER HOW IT'S DONE!"



Trần Hữu Khánh

Sharing a name with a certain mustachioed general, this zodiac sign was truly unique—one of a kind—because his name consisted of only a single letter: *P*. Some speculated it stood for *P Phổ*, but being a true *Nam Kỳ* native, he preferred *hủ tấu*! This remains an unsolved mystery—only *he* holds the answer. He's a rugged man with thick, jet-black hair, cheerful and open-hearted with friends like no other. He was an expert in commanding amphibious assault units and was famously fearless in battles, whether in Vietnam or across the Cambodian border. He knew the intricate waterways of the U Minh region like the back of his hand.



Lý Anh Kiệt

In the class, if anyone deserves the title of a true hero, it has to be this zodiac sign. Loyal to friendship and behaving like a true gentleman of the underworld, as if Don Hung Tin had been reborn. The King of Chess and Lights, who could memorize an entire long telegram without taking notes and not make a single mistake.



Very kind to his brothers. He had a distinctively hoarse voice like musician Louis Armstrong and walked with a relaxed, stately gait like a Muscovy duck. After being imprisoned in a re-education camp and escaping to a refugee island, he gave himself the nickname "the flat duck of Class 11." He had the talent of "beautifying," transforming unattractive models into beauties and making overweight celebrities look slim! He worked in Hollywood. Cheers! Cheers!



Võ Duy Kỳ

The tallest and also the most amiable in the class. Thin and delicate like a "stork gliding in the sky." He lived very quietly, sometimes like a ghost, which is why his friends called him "Ghost Stork." He was the captain of a landing ship that could carry thousands of people but was trapped. He was imprisoned in a re-education camp for many years, and after arriving in the U.S., he became a Zen Master and a master of fortune-telling in the heavenly realm of Tusita. He always longed for friends to visit him to share his thoughts.



Nguyễn Xuân Lang

Another former Air Force officer who loved the vast ocean. His name sounded fierce like a wolf, but he was actually very gentle. His bright eyes and warm smile were always present. Even after many years, his friends still remembered his booming voice counting "1, 2, 3, 4" while leading the company on a march. He had a high forehead and a slightly pointed head—features of a wise man.



Mentioning him immediately reminded other Aquarius classmates of an exceptional fish—Catfish—used for sour soup or grilled over an open flame. He was very enthusiastic about strengthening the bonds within the Aquarius family.



Lê Quang Lập

Tall and elegant like "a hero standing firm despite the winds," charming and handsome, a true "lady killer." He was a student of the mathematics department and a flag bearer in military parades. His calm demeanor meant that even when provoked, his anger only reached the level of "he's slightly upset now." He was an outstanding landing ship captain, rescuing thousands of evacuees at the end of Black April. Upon arriving in the U.S., due to his kind nature and desire to make people beautiful, he took up the profession of enhancing "people's facial features" and later expanded into fashion design. He was deeply attached to the Aquarius brotherhood, to the point of choosing Toan Nai, a classmate, as his in-law. He mastered the "enter the tiger's den" strategy, boldly venturing into the kitchen when hunting for food, earning him the nickname "Uncle Four... Fearless," just like the president from his hometown.



Nguyễn Văn Lộc

During the hazing period, this cadet platoon leader, when bombarded with questions by senior classmates, nervously blurted out that he went "hunting... at a relative's house." How could a gentle young deer ever go hunting! He was an idealistic Navy man, who dreamt from childhood—starting with floating banana raft adventures in small canals—of one day becoming a captain of a landing ship on the high seas. But... Heaven has the power to give and to take away. The events of 1975 struck like a collapse, shattering his maritime dreams along with the fall of South Vietnam. But what about the long dream of a lifetime? This "mahjong sage" once wrote: "...In the end, my soul drifted into the vast universe filled with stars and moon, searching for my roots, from where I once wandered, loved cracking jokes, and obsessed over mahjong, which led me astray into the mortal realm..."



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Lê Kim Lợi

He was the beloved son of a rice shop owner in the Imperial City, as strong as an "elephant." He never thought of personal gain when playing with friends. His house was right by the Gia Hoi Bridge, the base of the Perfume River ferry fleet, so he was well-versed in naval warfare. The most muscular in the class—if there were a bodybuilding contest, he would surely win first place. Along with his charming eloquence, he never lost a "seek and destroy" mission in Nha Trang. He could always sneak off to shore because he had the talent of stuffing money into the waistband of his shorts and sprinting straight down the beach to Bar No. 5. Even in the re-education prison, the cruel guards had to serve him as if he were royalty. In the U.S., he fared just as well—any car that saw him had to stop and greet him before proceeding.



Vinh Lợi

The only one of royal lineage in the class. His name, when spoken, may sound like "Forever Thinking of Profit," but he rarely lets his friends suffer losses. This "Mê" (a respectful term for royalty) is also very noble, composed in demeanor, and speaks in a calm manner—unlike some of the other more mischievous classmates. There was even a Duck who mispronounced his beautiful name as "Pig," yet he never got angry. No news from him for over a year now. It is said that he is still selling Western medicine to help people in Da Nang. Hoping that "Mê" remains safe so we can reunite one day.



Nguyễn Ngọc Long

Born and raised in the region of "Ngũ Phụng Tề Phi" (Five Phoenixes Flying Together), his name is the most beautiful in the class, and he himself is as elegant as a Jade Dragon. He almost never offended anyone throughout the two years of military school. He was among the first in the class to be appointed as a Squadron Leader. Unfortunately, this unlucky Jade Dragon was also the first in the class to sacrifice his life for the country when he took his post in Vĩnh Bình in 1965. He is also the only one in the class to have a warship named after him.



Trần Đình Liệu

He was truly worthy of being called the "people's representative" of the humble neighborhood. He had a special talent for adapting to all situations, always knowing how to "make do with what's available." His skin was a warm tan, "dark but charming," and his bright white teeth made him stand out. He was well-matched among the great heroes like Lumumba (and Mobutu) of Africa. The first in the class to be given the title "Commander of the Stream Operations" while serving in V2DH. Generous, well-connected, and deeply loyal to his friends. He endured a long period of re-education imprisonment and only began to settle down after arriving in the U.S. Although he arrived later and found work later than others, he is probably the one who has traveled across the United States the most. It is rumored that he has a special talent—he can touch the hands and feet of women without paying and even receive tips for it!



Nguyễn Ngọc Luân

This person could be considered the most exemplary in the class, excelling in all virtues: work, speech, manners, and loyalty. Always gentle and never offending anyone. Serious, handsome, and soft-spoken to an almost unbelievable degree, he was loved by all. His name is as beautiful as a "Jade Wheel." Classmates called him "Goat," not because of any wild nature, but because he had great potential and command abilities, much like a distinguished leader rallying his people. Indeed, later on, he was the most prosperous family man in the class, raising seven intelligent and beautiful children, all resembling their parents. Successful in every way



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Đặng Vinh Mai

One of the 81 Aquarius-born individuals in the class, he had a distinct nickname. The wild ducks called him "Hen." Tracing back the etymology, "Mai" and "Mái" (meaning "Hen") indeed share a rhyme. Regardless of being a hen, a small duck, or even a cow or buffalo, Communism spared no one. From 1975 to 1992, he was imprisoned in a Vietnamese Communist re-education camp. Seventeen long years—a record. He moved to the U.S. in 1993 and has been residing in San Jose ever since. Suffering from kidney failure, he received a kidney transplant in 1995, preventing him from working. He survives on health benefits, leading a relatively stable life. He is also a walking Navy archive—no matter how secret the information, he knows it all. Certain impostors fear him greatly! His future wish, like ours, is for Vietnam to be free of Communism so he can live and die in his homeland.



Hứa Hồng Minh

The only one in the class who loved joining the Navy but refused to learn how to swim! His reasoning: "The Navy recruits people to serve on ships, not to swim!" Makes sense, makes sense. His name means "A Glorious Dawn." He must be of Chinese descent, possibly related to the mighty general Xu Chu of Cao Cao's army. Well-loved by his friends—his absence is like a kitchen running out of soy sauce. Very filial, even as a cadet, he sent money home to support his parents. A

talented personnel management officer.



Phạm Văn Minh

A true gentleman, the most stylish and well-groomed in the class, and a master at "Vảm" (smooth talking) while serving in the Coastal Forces. Very charismatic, skilled in all sorts of arts, and always played fair with his comrades. Perhaps due to his naive nature and love for dancing in dimly lit nightclubs, he became famous as "Darkness Lover." But in reality, he was incredibly sharp and calculated. Despite being imprisoned in a re-education camp, he successfully fled to the U.S.

with his child to rebuild his life. No one knows why he chose to "disappear" into obscurity, severing contact with old friends.



Lê Thành Nam

Mr. Nam Đ. shared a name with the famous religious leader "Đạo Dừa" (Coconut Monk) from Côn Phụng, Kiên Hòa. He was the most emblematic figure in the "animal farm" but had a very flamboyant, poetic, and romantic nickname. There was no better friend—he even shared his loincloth with the captain of the Love Boat! Witty and smooth-talking, he had a way of using words to his advantage, with eyes sharp as betel nut-cutting knives. When it came to pursuing love interests,

he was as persistent as a snake charming its prey. Always well-dressed when going ashore, exuding a fragrance—perhaps that's why his mysterious nickname contained just the single letter "Đ." He was a devoted soldier in love, once declaring, "No matter what anyone says, I will always be 'Fragrant,' forever 'Fragrant,' and only 'Fragrant!'" Truly a star performer when singing "Thank You, Life." Bravo! Bravo!



Mai Quang Năm

He had a robust build, strong limbs like a farmhand, but every time he received a TAB - DT injection, he would return to the animal pen and bellow like an "overworked plow buffalo." He was kind-hearted and cheerful. Marine Corps Sergeant Minh, a basic military training instructor, called him "Mẫ." Later, he



became a talented personnel management officer. After spending a long time in a re-education camp, he no longer pulled the plow but instead worked as a cyclo driver. He and his family now reside in Colorado.



Nguyễn Nghĩa

He was very gentle, soft-spoken, and deeply loyal to his friends, earning the affection of both close and distant acquaintances. He was slightly thin, with tan skin, bright eyes, and lips that were slightly pale like an immortal sage. However, among the four indulgences, it seemed he was only "addicted" to number three. Fate was kind to the righteous—after enduring many storms, he now lives peacefully in the Valley of Yellow Flowers.



Nguyễn Nguyễn

Nguyễn was a true Westerner, adept in all four pleasures of life and highly skilled in martial arts. Being tall and strong, he was selected for the elite ceremonial unit serving high-ranking officers and the national flag corps. His personality was open and easygoing, treating everything lightly as if it were just another round of billiards. But "don't be mistaken"—those who thought he was naïve were deceived. This was merely the "Sun Bin feigning madness" strategy, waiting for the right opportunity. In reality, he was highly clever and resourceful, especially during his tenure as Deputy Chief of L Logistics for Coastal Region 2. After April 1975, he was the only one from his class who had the chance to continue a seafaring career on foreign ships.



Nguyễn Văn Ôn

With ambition and perseverance, he transitioned from infantry at Thủ Đức to another branch. He once boldly stated, "I was once a Sergeant Major, so if I ever return to that rank, I won't consider it a loss." He was quiet but highly cautious. His friends deeply admired him because he "helped others without expecting anything in return." Sergeant Minh, the "sharp-witted" Marine Corps instructor, renamed him "Ôn" (Stable). He had many talents: an exceptional sailor, a skilled researcher, and an expert in naval history in the Operations Department. He specialized in patrolling Phước Xuyên, Tuyên Nhơn, and Đồng Tháp, as well as coastal defense units in Năm Căn. After enduring hardships in a re-education camp, he now lives peacefully in the land of kangaroos (Australia).



Ngô Tấn Quanh

Frank and upright, he spoke with clarity, never beating around the bush, earning him the respect of his friends. He was bright, handsome, and charming in speech, making him highly popular. So much so that many from other zodiac signs (women) wanted to accompany him on shore leave in hopes of "second-hand luck." It was said that he was in Australia, but no one could reach him. We sincerely hope that he has overcome all of life's twists and turns and is now on a smooth path to a bright future.



Võ Văn Quột

His name was so unique that even Nguyễn Văn Khôn's dictionary did not contain it. He was from Nha Trang, a close companion of "Nước Mắm" (fish sauce) and "Trâu Lăn" (Buffalo Roll). A sharp and agile winger for the Nha Trang Naval Team, he had a face and smile that made everyone like him. He bravely sacrificed his life for his country in 1967 while serving as the Deputy Commander of the HQ 231 warship near Vàm Mỏ Cà, close to Bắc Hàm Luông in Kiến Hòa Province.



Lê Văn Quý

He belonged to the refined and literary type—graceful and elegant. However, his personality was gentle, honest, humble, and as sincere as a hardworking farmer plowing deep and tilling diligently. His friends in the "animal pen" often thought of him when they saw the slogan "**The Farmer Owns the Land.**" After graduation, he became a talented Commanding Officer of Naval Fleet. Strangely, this "farmer" had a fondness for fish sauce, which led him to settle on a slanted

plot of land on Tamassu Island, Phú Quốc. After moving to the U.S., he settled in the polygamous land of Utah—perhaps to ensure his plow would never rust. Rumor has it that these days, he has taken up meditation and spiritual practice like a true monk at the One-Pillar Pagoda!



He was light and graceful, truly like a **"Jade Nightingale"** that everyone adored. Delicate and charming, with a shy smile revealing perfectly even white teeth, just like “a young maiden in spring.” Soft-spoken, fair-skinned, and handsome, he was admired by many. Notably, he had elegant, tapering fingers that were skilled in “map drawing” as deftly as **Chị Tư the seamstress... with her hands.** However, **Chị Tư** was actually a tough and fearless Riverine Amphibious Group Commander. Upon arriving in the U.S., he initially sold firearms to Jewish traders but later, perhaps due to his slender physique and the difficulty of competing with the locals, he changed careers—becoming a Zen master, a spiritual teacher devoted to brown rice and sesame salt.



Phạm Trọng Quỳnh

Although he lived in a modest neighborhood, he was a true native of Hanoi—tall like a Westerner and educated at Albert Sarraut School. Elegant and noble in demeanor, like a Quỳnh flower. Handsome, with an imposing yet graceful stature, he moved lightly yet powerfully “like an elephant.” His deep and warm



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tenor voice could make even professional singers envious when he performed pre-war songs. An outstanding Fleet Commander, he enjoyed a remarkable naval career. Highly dignified, even after a quarter of a century, he remained a symbol of both talent and heartfelt dedication among the Bảo Bình officers. Respected by both his class and his superiors, he was one of the two Bảo Bình commanders who directly participated in the Battle of the Paracel Islands.



Trương Hữu Quỳnh

Highly strategic and composed, he never panicked even in the most dangerous situations. His eyes had a charming, captivating gaze. He was the only one in his class who dared to **tease the senior officers from Class 10** by bringing up the infamous **Cá Sơn (Painted Sweetlips Fish)** story during a brutal hazing session. As a result,



once the senior officers caught on, the entire class was punished with an exhausting run—some of his classmates **nearly coughed up their bananas!** When asked, it turned out that he had sarcastically said, **"How much can you really force, carrying that much salt?"** He had a highly successful naval career and was the last Captain to lead a warship protecting **Spratly Islands** during the final days of April 1975. Now, he enjoys a happy family life, with his children excelling in their education and careers. Indeed, only **Cá Sơn** could have had the strength to carry so much salt!



Phạm Đức Riển

He had a robust and sturdy build, well-fleshed with tanned skin, and was very **"Reglo"**—just a rank below Admiral—but his nature was kind and approachable. Honest and without pretense, he was a former member of the **Gia Đình Phật Tử** (Buddhist Youth Association), truly resembling a reincarnation of **Maitreya**

Buddha or the jovial **Ông Địa** (Earth God). A filial son, he always set aside money to support his family. While serving in the **Coastal Patrol Force**, he was the last hope for broke gamblers still looking for a chance to turn their luck around! Highly capable, he was an excellent cook, as skilled as a meticulous housewife. Because of his round physique like a large water jar—and his well-known "enthusiasm" in a certain area, he earned the nickname "**Địa Lu**" (**Earthen Jar**). Unfortunately, he was killed in an accidental shooting by an officer from the Army while serving as **Director of Military Training at Cam Ranh Naval Training Center in 1966**.



Nguyễn Thành Sắc

"**Because you called my name Beauty,**" many women adored him. He often operated alongside **Minh Tối**, forming the "**Yin-Yang Assassin Duo,**" feared in the underworld of **Nha Trang**. He didn't play music, but his skill on the **saxophone** was no less impressive than that of U.S. President **Bill Clinton**. Last heard, he had wandered off to **France**.



Nha-Trang, 1962

This **Bình** (his name) became well-known for commanding the **Destroyer Trần Khánh Dư HQ-4**, fighting to defend the sacred land passed down by ancestors. Though he lived among the "animals" (military barracks), he had a leg injury, so he waddled freely behind the formation like a **crippled duck**. After graduation, he became famous for being "**unyielding,**" and his sailors had to



memorize the poem "**Bán Than**" (**Selling Charcoal**) to sympathize with the fate of **General Trần Khánh Dư**. After arriving in the U.S., he initially settled in **Utah**, hoping to live "with incense and fire for a complete life." However, the **Salt Lake water was too salty**, and the duck couldn't adapt, so he moved to the **Valley of Yellow Flowers** (**California**). Now nearing retirement, he plans to write a book arguing that "**A duck is not a chicken; it needs water. Similarly, Vietnam is not China's Central Plains; it must return to its ancestral 'Water Civilization' roots.**" Passionate about the sea, he embraced the **Aquarius spirit** so fervently that his friends jokingly promoted him to **Admiral and Chief of Philosophy**.



Dương Quang Sang

Sang had an illustrious presence, exuding nobility. As a **Naval Cadet**, he was often strict in enforcing discipline, much like the feared **Ly Bá Sơ**, the notorious prison warden. However, he was merely carrying out orders from his superiors. After graduating, he was well-liked for his loyalty to his comrades. Along with **Văn Quọt** and **Trâu Lăn**, he formed the famous "**Rook-Knight-Pawn**" trio in the Naval Academy's soccer team. Ironically, after **April 1975**, the **Lý Bá Sơ** of Class 11 found himself imprisoned by the communists in the actual **Lý Bá Sơ "successor camp."** But fate favored the righteous—after coming to the U.S., he built a successful career in **Los Angeles**, where he found the perfect opportunity to thrive and prosper.



Nguyễn Văn Tánh

He was the senior elder of the Aquarius Class 11, a role model of ambition for younger cadets. He once served as Platoon Commander of Platoon 6, earning the nickname "Each Year, More Strength." Counting by the traditional Vietnamese age system, he is now approaching eighty years old—a grand milestone. "Respect the elderly for longevity", and his juniors still fondly remember him.

We wish him and his wife a long life, forever embodying the image of "a sage with an immortal spirit."



Nguyễn Minh Thành

A former Air Force officer, he was very intelligent, which led to his success in the Navy. His hair was always neatly trimmed, almost bald, earning him the nickname "Su Cù" (Elder Monk). He was quiet, careful, and had a knack for electronics. He often repaired radios and communication equipment. While in the Coastal Patrol Force, he frequently partnered with Địa Lu. After the evacuation, he lost contact with everyone. Some say he was seen in the West.



Trịnh Đình Thiện

He was a descendant of the Trịnh lords, but "human nature is inherently good." He had a sturdy build, an honest and lovable personality, and was very popular with women. He often employed the "love you for a long time" strategy, playing the role of an innocent Đình Thộn to lure his target. At one point, he moved to sunny California to study acupuncture, but has since lost touch. Rumor has it he is now in Texas with Rị Mọ.



Trần Quang Thiện

No introduction is needed; everyone knew he was the "President" of the class. Intelligent and strategic, he knew himself and his opponents well. He was particularly devoted and loyal to his friends, making him a "good" version of Cao Cao. The youngest and the brightest in the class, he was well-deserving of the Valedictorian title. He was righteous and just, resembling Cao Cao only in his admirable traits—he did not flatter his superiors but was known for recognizing and recruiting talent. Back in Vietnam, he enjoyed going to the racetrack to buy grass for horses. In the U.S., he became a distinguished citizen of Las Vegas and Reno, succeeding in every aspect of life. He became a formidable contender on Wall Street.



Trương Văn Thịnh

A highly trustworthy person, he was well-suited for the role of Treasurer, managing the finances and ensuring his comrades were well-fed and taken care of. Any money in his hands was safe. After long weeks of study and exhausting drills, many classmates were still able to enjoy outings, thanks to his excellent financial management. Many thanks to him. Despite his talents in planning and budgeting, he was unfortunate enough to be imprisoned by the Communists. It was once said that he narrowly escaped wearing a "wooden shirt" (a coffin) in the reeducation camp. Quân Thịnh had a smile as bright as a blooming flower, which is why he was said to be under the influence of the "Peach Blossom Star"—a fate of romantic entanglements. Many people clung to him, making it difficult for him to leave in 1975.

Later, after arriving in the U.S., he ended up in Atlantic City—the "sin city" of the East Coast. One might think he should have gone to Utah to preach Mormonism instead. But fate has its own plans, doesn't it, Mr. Quân?



Nguyễn Ngọc Thống

Tall and imposing, his gait during inspections was powerful and upright, like a towering pine tree. The youngest in the class, he was cheerful and the most generous friend anyone could ask for. His warm smile and charming gap tooth made him easily likable. He was the closest friend of Cọp Dàn on outings. A fearless warrior, he sacrificed his life for the nation in 1967 while commanding the 16th Coastal Group in Cỏ Lũy, Quảng Ngãi.



Võ Quang Thủ

Every time friends passed a Michelin tire shop, they were reminded of this round-faced, lovable squad leader. He was honest and friendly with his peers. As a soccer defender, he specialized in using his left foot, charging like a raging buffalo, taking down both the ball and opponents. Sources say his kicking skills were just as fierce and precise on the battlefield as they were on the soccer field. After moving to the U.S., he honed his tennis skills, making his "kicks" even more formidable. On the tennis court, he became the nemesis of Cá Heo, who often joked in frustration: "Why did fate create Cá Heo (Dolphin) only to create Trâu Lăn (Rolling Buffalo) to torment me?" A patriot at heart, he ironically ended up in the business of selling houses and water (purifiers).



Phan Thành Thuận

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Phạm Văn Thủy

He was the first Company Commander and also the earliest cadet to join the course. A tall, lanky man with slightly dark skin and an Omega-shaped chest, he looked exactly like a mystical Fakir. Later, he went to Thu Duc and rose to the rank of Major in the Quartermaster Corps. It is said that he arrived in the United States but has been out of contact for a long time. Despite the distance, Thủy remains a deeply symbolic figure of the 11th Bảo Bình class. Let us return to the old stream and flow together into the vast ocean of life's ups and downs.



Phan Lạc Tiếp

He was a representative of the Văn Khúc Star of the class. Tiếp was an eloquent writer, had beautiful handwriting, and recited the poem **MAÀU TÍM HOA SIM** exceptionally well. He was a talented writer and poet, with many famous works published even back in Vietnam. Within the class, it was unclear which mischievous person jokingly replaced the first letter "T" in his name with an "H." When he held the rank of Lieutenant, he was the first in the class to serve as a Department Head at the Navy Headquarters, holding a Captain-level position. After arriving in the U.S., he remained optimistic, continued his literary journey, and achieved remarkable

success. Additionally, he was highly active and made significant contributions to the "Rescue the Boat People" movement. He was a key pillar in the Hải Sản project and a model family man, with highly successful children.



Nguyễn Văn Tinh

Grew up in the land of Thần Kinh. Considered one of the "tough guys" in the Tough Guy neighborhood, but had a gentle, lovable personality and rarely got into conflicts with friends. Although his face wasn't as long as Mr. Fernandel's, after one communal bath, everyone nodded and stuck out their tongues, respectfully calling him "the



Horse"!

He had a reputation for being an excellent fighter and often snuck around the Phuoc Xuyen and Dong Thap areas. He had the potential to escape early, but because of his deep love for his wife and children, he stayed behind and ended up in re-education camps for many years.

After coming to the United States, the road ahead was wide open. The Horse galloped freely on the open road, quickly settling down and becoming very stable and solid.



Nguyễn Cao Toàn

He was the first Platoon Leader of Platoon 6. Of average height—not as tall as some of his peers—yet he commanded such authority that he earned complete respect. His gentle demeanor, calm voice, and slightly bewildered eyes made people think of a golden deer. But do not be mistaken by his mild appearance! His firm



commands of "Attention!" and "At ease!" still probably send shivers down Bình's spine to this day. On the battlefield—whether in combat or business—he was a fierce tiger hidden beneath a deer's disguise, attacking with such ferocity that his opponents had no chance to react. Though he has now retired his sword, he remains a formidable adversary in the world of casinos.



Nguyễn Chí Toàn

This man is in the "super" category, truly worthy of being the Supreme Leader among all the Aquarius class members. With a long and handsome face resembling the actor Fernandel, he is charming and quick-witted in conversation. Despite having a French nickname, he actually has a strong preference for local traditions. He teamed up with Nam Đ. to form a formidable duo in the field of architecture, known for their sharp tongues and quick wit rather than brute force. With the strong backing of his strategist, Mã Xa, he was highly popular among the people. Talented and versatile, he deserves the rank of Grand Marshal or "Super" General on any battlefield. He is extremely kind and generous with friends. A seasoned "day trader," he remains the last captain of a LOVE BOAT on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C.



Vũ Bá Trạch

Since moving to the U.S., this Bình has become elusive—slick like an eel, as hard to catch as a loach, making it difficult for friends to pin him down. He tells stories with great charm, especially humorous anecdotes. After arriving in the U.S., he switched to a teaching career. Though he has the eloquence of Ba Giai and Túú Xuát, he believes that "one must follow the trajectory of destiny as plotted on the graph of life." Such is the mindset of a math professor! Not fond of Westerners, he ironically created his own "little Westerners" (his children) so he could scold them freely. His children are well-educated and successful, while he enjoys a quiet and reclusive life with his family in Kansas.



Trần Văn Trung

Another figure with the alias P., a relative of Mobutu, joined forces with Saxo and Tỏi Nước to form a mischievous trio. Though his complexion is not the fairest, he has a heart of gold—kind and upright. He once served as an attaché to the Deputy Prime Minister. If anyone wishes to uncover the true identity of P., they should ask this man. He is currently residing in Florida for "medical treatment."



Nguyễn Tường

His skin is dark brown, not as pale as a whitewashed wall. His voice is gentle and sincere, like that of a farmer from the countryside. Even in anger, he only smiles at his friends. As an engineer, he invented a "one-fi" radio to compete with Japan's "hi-fi" technology. His especially dazzling teeth could blind anyone, even with just a subtle smile. During his time with River Assault Group 26, he was deeply involved in guerrilla warfare among the people. Alongside Nông Dân Tamassu, this countryside friend is one of the most honest, simple, and lovable characters in the "barnyard" of life. It is said that he is still stuck in Vietnam.



Bùi Quang Vinh

He shared the same name as General Ba Cụt of the Hòa Hảo sect, but unfortunately, he could not find the glory in his military career that he had dreamed of. A virtuous, kind-hearted man, he was always good to his friends. When fate took a different turn, he had to settle for a career in teaching. At the military academy, he was nicknamed after a fish known for its incredible speed when sensing danger, escaping by propelling itself with a jet of black ink. He lived with great integrity, embracing the philosophy of "contentment in simplicity." He currently serves as the class representative in Vietnam, often sending heartfelt letters to check in on overseas friends.



Ngô Xuân Ý

A former Air Force officer who switched fields, his name was second to last in the class, as short as "Grand Monde," who topped the list. His name evokes the beauty of an Italian spring. An excellent instructor, he was gentle, sincere, and well-loved by his friends, who placed great trust in him. After enduring the bleak, frigid winters of imprisonment, he finally found his refuge in the capital of the refugee community.



Another former Air Force officer turned Navy man, his name was as melodious as a hundred nightingales singing. He excelled in organization and intelligence work. Though he joined the Navy, he rarely went to sea because he preferred to be *Close to Land*, having left the Air Force because he wanted to be *Far from the Sky*. He achieved many victories, becoming the first in his class to be promoted to Acting Lieutenant Commander. He was also the only member of the Republic of Vietnam Navy (HQ/VNCH) to travel to Hanoi as part of the prisoner negotiation delegation under the Paris Peace Accords. Highly talented in politics, culture, and social matters, he remained very active after arriving in the United States—owning a newspaper and presiding over various anti-Communist organizations. Despite his high rank and influence, he always remained humble, even during training, where he often stood at the back of the line, just as his name suggested. He was a man of his word, always keeping his promises to his friends. He was the perfect and most deserving "final punctuation mark" of the class. For the writer of this piece, he is also a sigh of relief—a duty fulfilled.

Dear *Bảo Bình* classmates,

With these "collected rustic words," I sincerely reaffirm that the sole purpose of this lighthearted essay is, first, to bring joy and, second, to honor the cherished memories of our youthful days at the academy. If, by chance, some words here may seem inappropriate, please know it was unintentional. I ask for your understanding, as my writing skills are not enough to fully capture the greatness and beauty of each *Bình*. Or, if you prefer, simply dismiss it as the mistakes of a wayward *Ngụy* child.

As for the wives of our *Bảo Bình* brothers, I must humbly acknowledge: "Behind every successful *Bảo Bình* man, there is a devoted wife"—or at least *one* devoted wife! If we, the men of *Bảo Bình*, have become legends and achieved honor, much of it is thanks to the sacrifices of our beloved *Bình* ladies. I hope that after reading this, our dear wives will be gentle with us—raising their hands high but striking lightly—showering their husbands with just a bit more love, care, and affection, to ease the burdens of our *old Bình* souls!



Editor's Note:

Thu-Huong, the author of 'Nắng Và Em' (Sunlight and You), published by Tân Thư in 1998, was the first fiancée of Bảo-Bình Phan Thành Thuận. Mr. Thuận has passed away, but Ms. Hương's feelings, whether as romantic as in the beginning or sorrowful at parting, remain intact. Furthermore, Ms. Thu-Huong still seems connected to the Aquarius Class, cherishing and deeply attached to the Navy. We invite you to read 'Giáng Pha' (Sunset Light) and 'Như Sao Sáng' (Like a Bright Star) to understand her feelings. The Editorial Board sincerely thanks her for her contribution.

One night, the tide changed, preventing the boat from returning to its old harbor. On the small river of years past, the moon still hangs high, the coconut branches still sway in the wind, the moon still rests on the silently enduring rooftop, the waves crash strongly against the boat's side, stirring anxiety. The boat, the woman, and her child follow the moonlit river into the realm of uncertainty on that historical night. The wife's baggage consists of her young children, the moonlight, and the old evening hues of bygone days.

SUNSET LIGHT

Thu-Huong

A long time ago, in a small town where the early sunlight was as gentle as golden rice stalks lying against each other as if still asleep in the fields. The war still raged on the front lines, so pain was still hidden somewhere close. There were young men who bid farewell to their schoolbooks, hearts full of dreams... heading northward in stillness... going southward in pieces...

In that same small town, there were also girls in their tender teenage years, innocent, stepping with polished shoes to school, gazing at the afternoon light and dreaming in silence. Warriors and their eternal sweethearts—some things never change.

Then came a truly magical day—a sailor arrived, with a graceful and elegant demeanor. His hair floated like clouds in the sky, his eyes sparkled vividly, and his voice was warm and deep. He stood outside the gate, gazing at a house painted the soft green of tropical flowers, shaded and cool, where sparrows occasionally swooped down into the small garden and then flew up to perch on leafy branches, eyes darting, chirping

their lively conversations.

She decided to invite him in, just to avoid giving northern girls a reputation for being sharp-tongued and hard to love.

"Please come in," she said, opening the gate. On the tree, the birds widened their eyes in astonishment.

"I'm sorry. I had to beg for three days just to get this address," he said quietly as he followed her.

...Silence...

The little birds darted their eyes back and forth as if straining to listen, then began whispering among them.

"His shirt is white... like drops of ocean water... like tears... but where is the shimmering glow in the soul of the girl, watching the sunset through the trees?" one murmured.

"You silly thing, he's just visiting her, not

heading to the front lines. That radiant look isn't for war," said another, more mischievous bird.

"She was only joking. No need to make such a fuss," another voice whispered.

The sound of waves gently lapping against the boat's hull—like a bamboo leaf drifting on the moonlit river. A full moon hung high in the night sky.

"If only life could be as peaceful as tonight. The moon is so beautiful, everything so serene and still."

Moonlight shimmered on the swaying palm leaves, lay silent on someone's rooftop, as if sharing a small, quiet happiness.

"You're thinking too much again," he said.

"No, it's more like... I don't dare think about the war. I'm thinking of *our* little oasis. A small house, a tiny pond, a row of soft coconut trees by the stream that circles the house, and a little boat. So we could wake up to the crow of a rooster, watch the dusk fall, and admire the moon like this. And I... I wouldn't count the days I spend beside you."

He opened his arms, pulled her close, kissed her hair—half tenderly, half protectively. He gently placed her head beneath his chin,

looking at the shimmering moonlight on the water, his voice soft and peaceful.

"With you, my life is as calm as the trees, as the rice in the fields. I don't wish for more."

"Come closer to me, and count the stars with me. Look, there's the rainbow bridge and the stars of destiny."

"This little northern girl is too romantic," he teased.

"That's why I love literature. It helps me see the days far from you as something beautiful. I feel sorry for all the women left behind in the past."

In the dream-filled life of that girl long ago, memories of him became long years of longing, joys that never fully bloomed, and innocent children.

One night, the tide changed, and the boat could no longer return to its old harbor. On the small river of the past, the moon still hung high, the same coconut branches swayed in the wind, the moon still rested on the enduring rooftop, the waves now pounded hard against the boat's sides in anxious rhythm. And the boat, the woman, and her child followed the moonlit river into an unknown place on that historical night. The wife's baggage: her young children, the moonlight, and the fading hues of past sunsets.

Thu-Huong

LIKE A STAR

Thu Hương

Memories are like a priceless string of beads—some round, some oddly shaped—shimmering with love, contemplation, and the unique fate of each part of life. My string of memories is filled with anger, resentment, love, hate, and worry. I fear the long days of war. I fear becoming a displaced person. I fear life's changes. I fear loneliness. But most of all, I fear people's hearts. There are times I escape the cruelty of reality—like poisoned arrows—by wearing invisible armor, so my heart won't ache. I look at life with indifference, like Lao Tzu once did: Emptiness is form, form is emptiness. Let the years fade away. My life flows quickly, like the weather. I feel like an alien in the human condition.

One day, I suddenly realized my hair was no longer soft, my eyes had lost their liveliness, my body felt heavy, and my heart had grown poor in humanity. Watching the trees change leaves with the seasons—the fresh leaves clinging to high branches—I woke from my dream of resentment toward life. Like those leaves, I had clung to the past. Now, I throw myself back into being human. My string of beads is still filled with anger, resentment, worries—but also dreams. I listen to music again. I love literature again. I cherish people again. The road ahead is wide open. My only baggage is a heart that still loves life and trusts others.

I remember those days—sitting in class, longing to listen to music, my soul wandering among the treetops—learning what it meant to dream. I remember the tears shed for loved ones who left without saying goodbye, and knowing what separation and loss are. I remember the months and years with a lover who was a sailor on long voyages. To have a partner who sails is to

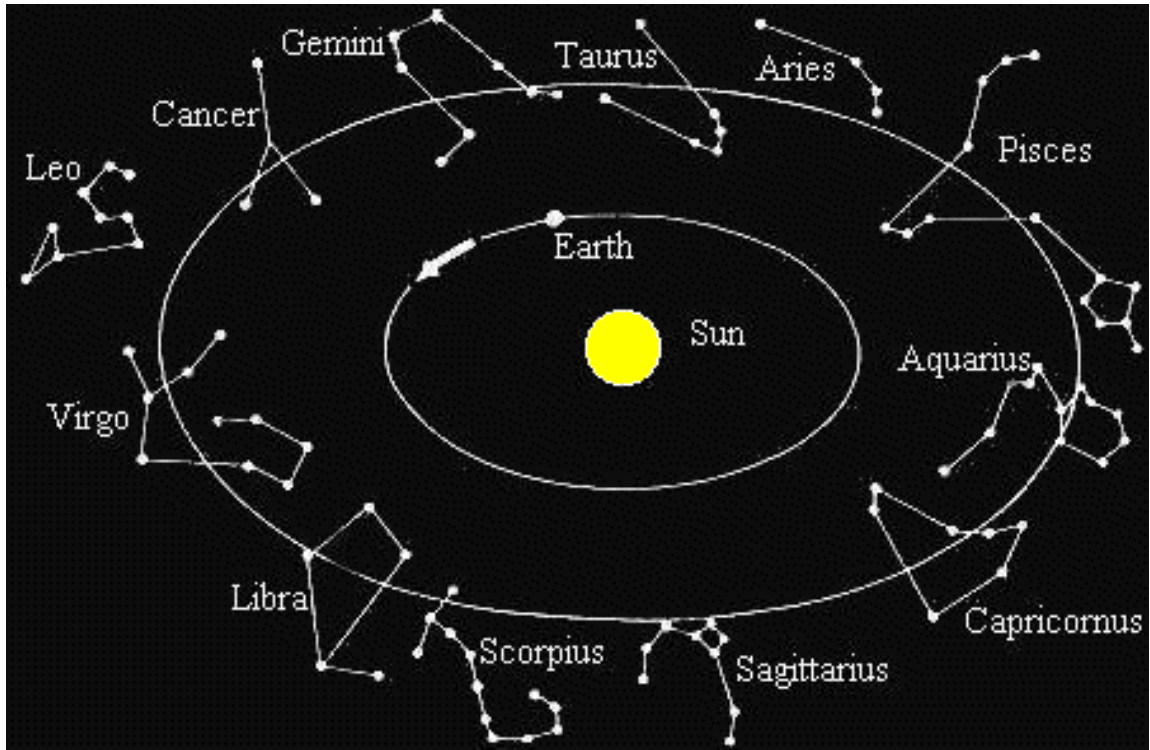
understand the ancient longing of women. To raise young children is to learn patience and forgiveness. To wander foreign lands is to know the kindness of strangers.

Now, sometimes, I sit on the beach among sunbathing seagulls, and I feel lucky to be human. The warrior's belt of my past shines again with affection. I remember, a few years ago, Mr. Trạch and his wife called me. Their voices were as kind as ever, reminding me I was still the same person. Their words left me speechless. Mr. Khánh and Hoàng Minh's friendship has endured over the years. Mr. Hùng and his wife feel like family. At the launch of my first book, *Sunlight and You*, I met the California Navy family. Everyone was kind and attentive. Mr. Trần Trọng An Sơn and Mr. Lê Bá Chư offered rare sincerity.

Seeing the children grow like sails full of ocean wind—how could I forget our sea voyage of the past? Like thousands of other families, mine sought freedom on the ships during the final days of April 1975. Please, thank the captain of Ship 501—also from class 11—and his crew. You were loving angels, like seabirds guiding us. You carried us to safety. You brought back talents to the homeland—those who had not grown up in war, but in peace far from home. You brought my children and me to a peaceful land.

And to the Gatekeeper of Heaven, also from HQ11, who once said, “Thuận was in the same class as me...” Please accept my thanks for your kind heart.

Please, thank you—beloved children of the fatherland.



Thu Huong/ P.T.T/ HQ11

A RIVER LOVE, AN OCEAN KINDNESS

Tình Sông, Nghĩa Biển
(A will written on behalf of a friend)

I write these lines for my friends to share a sorrow, for my child and for H. as a confession, and for myself as a final testament.

Like me, most of you have experienced the hunger and hardship of imprisonment in the highlands or forests of North Vietnam. But the physical suffering could not compare with the anguish I endured. One year after I was forced into re-education, my wife fled the country with our child, who was not yet a year old. A Dutch ship rescued them, and they resettled in a free country. Fourteen years of imprisonment were also fourteen years of hope, because through my younger sister, I learned that my wife and child were living in peace.

The day I returned to the city was the most painful day of my life—more painful than the day I was taken away to the camps. My sister hesitantly told me that my wife had been living with another man. The last letters H. wrote were kept from me, fearing I wouldn't survive the emotional blow in the midst of prison suffering.

“A thousand times I beg you, please forgive and forget the woman who is no longer worthy...”

I crumpled the letter in pain and humiliation, but had no tears left to cry—for myself or for life.

But even the deepest pain eventually fades. I still had a child I hadn't seen in fifteen years. I wrote to my former wife, wished H. happiness, and thanked her for raising our child in my absence.

In 1991, after I had resettled in the U.S., I received another letter from H. She reminisced about our first love—gentle like the river that flowed through her hometown—and asked to see me once more:

“Just once, and then it's up to you. I will always be like the old river.”

My heart sank. I waited eagerly for our reunion, like the days when we first fell in love. That summer, H. called to ask for directions to the room I shared with a friend in the same class at the Naval Academy. Nervously, I combed my graying hair and felt as awkward as a young man of twenty, newly in love.

That night, H. told me of her immense loneliness and suffering—alone with a small child in a foreign land. From the gentle river of her youth, life had swept her into the sea. X., a foreign student and interpreter for a relief agency, had been her lifeline. He supported her and our child while I was still in prison.

“We lived together for a few years, and you often had to travel, and eventually left with no word

of return. I always loved and missed you. But X. gave me and the child a life. For more than ten years, he has been by my side—loving, kind, taking the child to school, picking me up on rainy afternoons, and just yesterday, folding clothes to prepare for my visit to you. When he saw me off at the airport, he said nothing, only held my hand, but his eyes said everything. A thousand times I beg you—whatever you decide, I accept. I know that I cannot have both our love and his kindness.”

I wept—not out of grief, but from deep emotion. In prison, I suffered, but I was never truly alone. I had friends, a bamboo pipe, and drunken stupors to forget life. I was luckier than my wife, though I never realized it. Only then did I begin to love her again—and even to feel affection for X. Our love had been like a river, but X. had come to her with the heart of an ocean.

“You should go back. Our child is grown, and I have made peace with my life. X. needs you more than I do. Please send him my thanks.”

H. cried, but in her sorrow, there was a sense of solace.

That winter, my daughter also came to visit. She could hardly speak Vietnamese, and my English at the time was still very poor. A friend helped us when we stumbled. I spoke little, but it seemed *Âu Cơ* understood much. She called me “*Bố*” clearly, and before returning to Holland, she bought a rose bush and planted it at the front porch:

“So you know that I’m around, and that I love you.”

My soul is now at peace. From time to time, I go to *Từ Sơn Temple* to talk about meditation with *Thầy Đức*. One day, when I pass on, I ask that my friends cremate me and scatter my ashes at sea. The wind will carry me back across the ocean:

“Ashes follow the path of homeland,
The soul rides the waves to the ancient sea.”

As you all know, my homeland lies along the *Tiền Giang River*. In the end, I truly fulfilled both the “*Love of the River, Duty of the Sea*.”

Trần Quang Thiệu
April 2001

Postscript: The main character in this story, Mr. Đ.V.M., passed away in California. He requested to be cremated and for his ashes to be returned to his homeland, to be buried beside his parents, rather than scattered at sea as he had once wished. His friends fulfilled all his final wishes, and his former wife traveled from Europe to attend his funeral.

When we brought his photo to the temple for him to hear the prayers, we added a few lines in his memory:

Dear friend,

Most of us are now in our 60s. Passing on is just a matter of time, yet whenever one of us goes, the pain still feels raw. The last time we visited you while you were still lucid, you smiled and said:

“The doctor says I’ll fall into a coma in about two days...”

You asked your friends to prepare for your final moments. Your tone was calm, like telling a story:

“I am going to meet Đon, Lang, and Lộc. The mahjong table is finally complete—what’s a joy. Just remember to cover me with the flag...”

K.K. stepped into the hallway to wipe away tears. I held your hand in silence. Back when we were still “bright-eyed and youthful,” I visited you in Đà Nẵng after returning from the North Sea. You were drunk and sobbing:

“Thông Sút died in battle last night. Tiêu-Phong just passed away at Nhạn Môn Quan. There is so much sorrow.”

“Since ancient times, how many have returned from war?”

We are already among the fortunate ones. Gradually, we too shall meet again. Here are just a few lines for you, whether you are wandering the heavens or playing mahjong in the clouds. Farewell, dear friend.

Trần Quang Thiệu

Ghi chú của BBT:

Hồng Nhật là phu nhân của anh Chu Bá Yến, chủ trương tờ Florida Việt Báo

Xây Đồi Tự Do

*Còn một chiều nay?
Không, ngày nối tiếp ngày
Bao nhiêu chàng trai thời loạn
Dẹp tình riêng góp sức đấu tranh
Người nói làm chi
Cung đàn lỗi nhịp
Nét-tin-yêu phai tàn
Dư âm vọng mãi bờ quan ải
Niềm tin tràn ngập cả quê hương
Người đã lên đường mài kiếm thép
Thì dâng tất cả cho non sông
Hãy cố làm cho tròn nhiệm vụ
Đừng nhắc làm chi chuyện má hồng
Người thấy chằng
Quê hương mờ cát bụi?
Ôi lao tù! Ôi máu đổ thịt rơi!
Oán hờn réo gọi khắp nơi
Bao hồn tử sĩ muôn đời chưa tan
Hồn tử sĩ chưa tan
Khi phương Bắc còn điêu tàn
Người ơi máu đổ chiều hoang
Người ơi Bến Hải còn mang hận thù
Tôi tiếc không là trang tuấn kiệt
Để lên đường cho thỏa những ước mơ
Để lên đường phá hết những lao tù
Ôi, mộng ước chỉ còn là hư ảo!
Dù không gươm súng trên tay
Như những chàng trai trẻ
Không đam mê trong sóng nhạc duyên tình
Trước bàn thờ Tổ Quốc nguyện hy sinh
Gánh trách nhiệm trên vai về cuộc sống
Người ơi biển trời nổi sóng
Từng đoàn trai mặc áo chiến hoa
Đang đi vào cuộc sống
Trong khúc hùng ca
Hỡi Hồn Thiêng đất nước ơi
Bao người chung sức XÂY ĐÒI TỰ DO.*

Hồng Nhật (1968)

Translator: Writer & Poet Trần Việt Hải

BUILDING A FREE LIFE

Is there still an afternoon?
No, day after day
How many young men in the war time
Putting aside personal feelings to contribute to the fight
What do you say?
The zither is out of tune
The trace of love and trust fades away
The echoes forever echo on the border
Faith fills the entire homeland
You have then set out to sharpen your steel sword
Later you dedicate everything to the country
Try to fulfill your duty
Please don't mention the rosy cheeks
Do you see
The homeland is covered in dust and sand?
Oh prison! Oh blood and flesh are shed!
Resentment calls everywhere
So many souls of the dead have not yet dissipated
Souls of the dead have not yet dissipated
When the North is still devastated
Oh my people, blood is shed in the deserted afternoon
Oh my people, Ben Hai still carries hatred
I regret not being a hero
To set out to fulfill my dreams
To set out to destroy all prisons
Oh, dreams are only illusions!
Even without swords and guns in hand
Like young men
Not passionate in the waves of love music
Before the altar of the Fatherland, willing to sacrifice
Bearing responsibility on their shoulders for life
Oh my people, the sea and sky are in turmoil
Groups of young men are in the camouflage uniforms
Entering life
In the heroic song
Oh my sacred soul of the country
So many people join hands to *BUILD A LIFE OF FREEDOM*

Hồng Nhật (1968)

Chiều Đại Lộ

Cho những người lính áo trắng kiêu hùng

*Chiều!
Giữa lòng đại lộ
Những tà áo xanh đỏ tím vàng
Thướt tha
Những mái tóc quăn quăn
Những dáng đi uyển chuyển
Những tiếng cười vang dội giữa không gian
Giữa những chàng trai thác loạn
Những nàng thiếu nữ đương xuân
Một quân nhân
Đếm bước giữa lòng đại lộ!
-Về đâu anh ơi?
Hỡi người trai biển cả
Hiên ngang!
Anh khoác trên mình bộ quân phục trắng nguyên trinh
Như tâm hồn người em gái nhỏ
Thơ ngây!
Gió hây hây
Đùa mái tóc bồng bênh thơm mùi nắng
Vờn làn da tắm sóng nước đại dương
Anh ơi trên vạn nẻo đường
Những màu áo trắng gợi thương nhớ nhiều
Anh ơi!
Có những chàng trai áo trắng
Đi giữa lòng đại lộ
Một chiều nhạt nắng
Mím cười!
Ai biết đến những chàng trai anh dũng
Đã hy sinh cho Tổ Quốc Quê Hương
Một niềm thương!
Anh ơi trên vạn nẻo đường
Bao tà áo tím còn vương bóng người!*

Hồng Nhật (1965)

Translator: Writer & Poet Trần Việt Hải

EVENING ON THE BOULEVARD

For those who are the proud white-uniformed soldiers

Evening!
In the middle of the boulevard
The green, red, purple, and yellow dresses
Flowing
The curly hair
The graceful gait
The laughter echoes in the air
Amidst the debauched young men
The young girls
A soldier
Counting steps in the middle of the boulevard!
-Where are you going, my dear?
Oh, my dear sea-dweller
Proud!
You wear a pure white uniform
Like the soul of a little sister
Innocent!
The gentle breeze
Plays with your wavy hair, fragrant with the sun
Plays with your skin bathing in the ocean waves
Oh, my dear, on thousands of roads
The white shirts evoke many memories
Oh, my dear!
There are young men in white
Walking in the middle of the boulevard
A pale afternoon
Smiling!
Who knows about the brave young men
Who sacrificed for the Fatherland
A love!
Oh, my dear, on thousands of roads
So many purple dresses still have their shadow!

Hồng Nhật (1965)

THE DAYS IN GUAM WITH NGUYỄN HOÀI-BÍCH

Back when I was at the military training camp in Nha Trang, I stayed in a bamboo hut with a group of elite trainees, including people like dogs and cats, buffaloes and cows, pigs and ducks, frogs and toads, elephants and tigers, and even Nam Đĩ. Most of the people in the bamboo hut were playful and not very studious, so when it came time to graduate, more failed than passed. Whether they passed or failed, everyone went their separate ways. The first ship I served on was the HQ-327, where I had a friend named Hâm. Then, I moved on to HQ-02 with friends Đon and Ôn, and later on HQ-404 with friends Quýnh and Bích. Eventually, I went to the Philippines to take over a ship and did training on the U.S. Coast Guard's WHEC 320, the predecessor to HQ-2 Trần Quang Khải. During that time, I was with a friend named Trạch. All my friends from the same class mentioned here left me with various memories. As for Bích, I worked with him on HQ-404 for nearly two years, including six months on Guam to repair the ship.

Bích's nickname was "Cà Chua" (Tomato) because of his nose. Whenever it turned from light pink to red, we knew what the weather was like. He was tall and thin, with a high-pitched voice, but he spoke little, so when he stood in front of the troops, he appeared somewhat shy. Back then, Bích was the squad leader, and many of the guys in our class still remember him. He had another nickname, "10 o'clock 10," because when he stood at attention, his feet pointed in opposite directions. One time, while we were playing cards in the officer's mess, I asked:

"Is it because of your '10 o'clock 10' that you didn't get the top honor in Class 11?"

"You!"

Then he grabbed a "Times Magazine" and

hit me on the shoulder. See, Bích rarely answered a question directly. In his spare time on the ship, Bích loved reading books, newspapers, especially *Times* and *Newsweek*. I must admit, Bích was intelligent and had a natural talent for languages, especially English.

In 1964, the warship HQ-404 set sail for Guam for major repairs. At that time, the ship's captain was Captain Vũ Duy Ninh, the deputy captain was Lieutenant Junior Grade Lý Thăng, Bích was the third officer, and I was the fourth officer. The ship passed through the San Bernardino Strait in the Philippines. When the ship entered the bay, every 3 minutes, the officer on duty would take a point to determine the ship's position using the small islands along the corridor from west to east. By 8pm, the ship's position was determined by radar. Bích was on night watch from 8 p.m. to midnight. At nearly midnight, I took over for Bích. Before leaving for my shift, Bích carefully handed over all the details about the ship, course, and weather. Then Bích gave me the captain's night orders, and we both signed the ship's log. At that time, it was pitch dark, the sea was calm as if sailing on a river, and the wind was light. The warship, with two engines running at speed 3, was cruising at 12 nautical miles per hour.

By 3 a.m., the ship began to exit the bay. The sea outside was slightly choppy, and the wind was stronger. The sky was still dark with fog. The further we went, the rougher the sea became, with a southerly wind at 20 nautical miles per hour, blowing strongly on the ship's right. Suddenly, the radar room reported an unusual echo at 12 o'clock, about 12 nautical miles away. Five minutes later, they reported it was 7 nautical miles away. The direction remained unchanged. I

ordered a 5-degree turn to starboard. Three minutes later, the radar reported the echo was 5 nautical miles ahead of the ship. I ordered another 5-degree turn to starboard. In total, we had turned 10 degrees, and according to the navigational chart, the ship was heading at 090 degrees, which meant it was heading 100 degrees. Suddenly, the observer and the navigator reported seeing green and red lights from an unidentified ship right ahead of us. I grabbed the binoculars and looked again. Outside, it was raining, and the raindrops, along with the strong wind, blew onto the bridge, scattering the navigational chart and various items on the table. I knew our ship was in danger; if we collided, it would be due to the darkness and fog. Seeing those green and red lights meant we were already too close. I shouted loudly into the intercom:

“Both engines full ahead” – Underneath:

“Both engines full ahead”

“Both engines half ahead” – Underneath:

“Both engines half ahead”

“Both engines stop” – Underneath: “Both engines stop”

“Starboard 30” – Underneath: “30 to starboard”

The Martini engine roared continuously. The warship tilted to the right. The ship vibrated violently. Everyone woke up and rushed up to the deck in a frenzy.

“Rudder midships” – Underneath: “Midships rudder”

The strange ship probably reacted the same way as the warship, with starboard rudder and both engines stopped. As both ships came to a halt, all the floodlights on either side turned on. A massive merchant ship, as huge as a mountain, was right next to the warship. Its lights illuminated the warship from bow to stern. The two ships lay side by side, only about 5 meters apart. It was miraculous—one more second and who knows what might have happened!

I stood frozen on the command bridge. The officers and personnel present all felt the same. The captain and the executive officer had also come up to the bridge and stood beside me. Everyone was silent, waiting for the captain’s order. Before leaving the command bridge, he gave me his order:

“Continue following the designated course.”

On the other side, the merchant ship quietly restarted its engines and headed straight into San Bernadino Bay. Bích, the navigation officer, reviewed the logs and was the last to descend the stairs, still holding the *Times* newspaper as always.

At 4 AM, I handed over the watch to Sub-Lieutenant Cãn, the officer on duty from 4 to 8 AM. As usual, whenever I finished a shift, I’d stop by the fridge for a few sips of water or make a bowl of instant noodles to curb my hunger. But today, I went straight to bed. I slept on the upper bunk, Bích on the lower. The fans were still humming. I turned off the light by my bed and tried to sleep, but kept tossing and turning, making the bed creak. Bích hadn’t fallen asleep yet and spoke:

“Go to sleep, man.”

“I just can’t fall asleep.”

“It’s over. Think about it tomorrow.”

“But it was terrifying, absolutely horrifying!”

“That’s life. Life has mysteries and miracles we can’t explain.”

“I think that was a real miracle.”

“We’ve chosen this profession, so we have to accept its burdens. That burden follows us until our last breath.”

“You’re right; glory and shame go hand in hand—and today was a disgrace in my naval career.”

The two of us talked back and forth, and then drifted off without realizing it. That morning, I woke up late, sluggishly heading to the officers’ mess. The captain, the executive officer, and all the officers were

having breakfast, chatting as if nothing had happened the night before. After a while, the captain entered his room, and the executive officer turned to me and said:

“Take off your cap and go see the captain.”

I felt that more clearly than anyone else, so I quietly left the mess hall to change into my white service uniform, which I had sent out for laundering before the voyage. I went up to the restroom; Bích followed me. The two of us quickly brushed our teeth and washed our faces. I adjusted my collar because the starch from the laundry had made it uncomfortably stiff. I glanced at the mirror. It hadn't even been a week, yet my face already looked so worn out—my eyes were sunken and dark, stubble scattered across my chin, and the lines on my cheeks had deepened. Just five days of rough seas... and there's more to come! I thought to myself.

I went back to the mess hall, ready to report to the captain. The executive officer entered the captain's office first, and I followed. I saluted and addressed him:

“I, Ensign Hoàng Đình Báu, report to the captain.”

“Have a seat”, the captain said.

The executive officer sat next to me. On the captain's desk were the ship's night log and the night orders book. I knew the navigation officer had brought everything the captain needed to review. I reported the sequence of events during the previous night's watch. The captain asked:

“Did you read the night orders before taking over your shift?”

“I read them carefully and signed at the bottom.”

“The night orders clearly state that any unusual event must be reported to the captain immediately.”

“I thought I could handle avoiding the ship, as I've done many times at sea, so I didn't inform you.”

“The open sea is very different from a narrow sea lane like San Bernardino Strait.

When two ships are traveling in opposite directions at high speed, evasive maneuvers must be made hours in advance—the earlier, the better.”

The executive officer added:

“In June, there's a strong current flowing northward here, along with wind also blowing from the south to the north. Our warship is small—an LSM class—with a tall bridge, and since we're not carrying any cargo, the ship is very light. That means the drift is significant, so turning an extra 10 degrees to starboard still wasn't be enough. Everything was too late.”

Finally, the captain said:

“This is an expensive lesson—one that any naval officer must remember by heart before taking a watch. You must understand the status of the ship's machinery, the ship's characteristics, and finally, the weather. Also, you must study the nautical chart carefully; it contains information on ocean currents, coral reefs, and submerged rocks. But there's one thing no one can accurately predict: the weather. The weather limits both your visual range and the radar's detection range.”

The captain's expression suddenly softened: “We were lucky to avoid disaster. But you should write down everything that happened last night as a lesson for yourself and for others in the future.”

I stood up, saluted, and left. The executive officer gathered the logs and brought them back to the bridge to return them to the officer on duty.

Back in my cabin, I changed clothes but still felt unsettled. Although the captain didn't punish me, I still saw it as a punishment—a black mark in my naval career. I'll never forget how close HQ-404 came to disaster, and whenever the opportunity arises, I retell the story to my junior officers. I acknowledge I made two mistakes: one, not alerting the captain when something unusual occurred; two, not taking early evasive

action, placing the ship in a dangerous situation. It all came down to lack of experience. I still remember the words: “In the navy, you can learn everything—except the weather, which you must always be cautious of.” It’s true. Throughout history, most accidents at sea and in the air are caused by unpredictable weather, no matter how skilled the pilots or navigators.

When we arrived in Guam, the warship entered Apra Harbor, located on the western side of the island. Guam’s area is about the same as Vietnam’s Phú Quốc Island. Guam belongs to the Mariana Islands group in the western Pacific, with a current population of nearly 100,000. The warship docked at a pier next to the Navy repair yard to facilitate maintenance.

The captain and officers stayed at the officers’ housing on Nimitz Hill. Nimitz Hill is named after the American admiral who served in World War II and played a key role in the battles against Japan in the Pacific. He was born in 1885 and died in 1966. The crew members were housed in the barracks of the Naval Station.

Bích and I each had our own rooms, but they were connected by a passage, so it felt like we were sharing one room. Two days after arriving in Guam, the captain assigned me to be the liaison officer. In truth, Bích would’ve been better suited for the job since his English was better than mine. But when the captain gives an order, you follow it. He told me to go straight to Guam’s City Hall to inform the Governor that the Vietnamese LSM warship had arrived and to request an appointment for the captain to pay a courtesy visit. I was anxious about this assignment—my English at the time was quite limited, and now I had to go speak with the Governor of the island! I asked Bích for advice, and he just laughed:

“What’s the big deal? Just say whatever—you only need to get your point across. Every day you talk to the superintendent and the repair crew without any issues, don’t you?”

“Help me out, man. The car’s already waiting outside. Here’s what I plan to say...” I practiced my English lines from the phrasebook over and over. After listening, Bích nodded and asked:

“What level of English were you in at school?”

“At first I was in Level 2, but after cramming, I dropped to Level 4—the lowest one”.

“For Level 4, that’s not bad at all.”

As I rehearsed, I changed into my white service uniform. It was the same one I wore when reporting to the captain, so it still had all the insignia and name tag. I jumped into the car that was waiting. The driver was Tài, the navigation officer. He was the only one on the ship with a driver’s license valid in Guam, since he had been here several times before.

The pickup truck took me into Guam’s city center. There was only one road from the Navy Shipyard to the city. The town itself only had one main street facing the sea. In Guam, aside from the two major Naval bases—the Shipyard and the opposing submarine base—there’s also Anderson Air Force Base, a massive facility from which B-52 bombers used to take off for bombing runs over Vietnam at the time.

When we arrived at City Hall, the car stopped in front of a building flying a large American flag fluttering in the breeze. After stepping inside, my first task was to find the Governor’s office. I walked down the hallway, and the cool air inside was a relief compared to the blazing summer heat outside. I saw a sign pointing toward the Governor’s room, and as I followed it, my nerves kicked in—I found myself wishing

the hallway was even longer.

Then I arrived. Standing in front of the big sign that read “Governor,” I took a deep breath, held it, steadied myself, and pushed open the door. There was no one else inside except a beautiful secretary with fair, smooth skin, platinum blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and long black lashes. She reached out her hand to shake mine, eyes locked onto mine, a gentle, friendly smile on her lips:

“Hi! May I help you?”

I was stunned and just stared at her for a moment. I felt enchanted. It was the first time in my life that I had interacted with an American woman—gorgeous, like the models you see in store displays. She was gracious, always smiling, and spoke to me as if we were old friends. She looked at the name tag on my uniform and asked if that was how my name was pronounced. Then she asked how the voyage from Vietnam had gone—whether it had been difficult. I gave general answers.

I regretted how little English I knew back then—I couldn’t explain the nightmare we had endured coming out of San Bernardino Strait. After chatting with me for a while, she told me to wait while she went into the inner office. Sitting alone, I glanced at the nameplate on her desk: her name was Kathy. When I first came in, she had introduced herself, but I had been too dazed to catch it.

Now that I was more composed, I decided not to refer to her as “you” anymore, but to call her “Kathy” to sound more familiar. I was already thinking of asking her out tomorrow for the weekend. I imagined her showing me around Guam, the two of us swimming at the beach, and her taking me to meet her parents. These thoughts had just begun to form when Kathy returned and invited me into the inner office.

I imagined I would meet a large, well-dressed American man wearing a fresh tie, waiting for me. But no. What I saw was not

what I had imagined. In front of me was an elderly, unattractive native man wearing a light green, four-pocket khaki uniform. Perhaps sensing my confusion, instead of waiting for me to introduce myself, he took the initiative to introduce himself.

“I am the Governor.”

I was startled, apologized to him, then stood at attention and said:

“I am the liaison officer of the Vietnamese warship LSM 404. Today I’ve come to request an appointment for my captain to pay a courtesy visit.”

The Governor cheerfully invited me to sit down. He asked about the ship and our journey. He said he would be honored to meet the captain tomorrow at 10 a.m. He stood up, shook my hand, and personally walked me to the door.

I breathed a sigh of relief because the Governor had spoken slowly and clearly, making it easy for me to understand. I was delighted and considered it a small success. But when I passed by Kathy’s office again, I was flustered—perhaps because of her smile and those blue eyes. I thanked her and quickly made my way to the car.

Back in my room, I told Bích everything. He giggled. I said, “Here, all the officers from the Philippines, Thailand, Iran, Iraq—they all have American girlfriends. Why don’t we find a couple of girls to hang out with too?”

Bích laughed:

“They’ve got money. Each one of them gets \$10 a day from their government while in Guam. We only get \$3. How are we supposed to afford anything? Besides, they all have their own cars. On our ship, only the captain has a private sedan. The rest of the officers share one pickup truck. On the weekends, everyone wants to borrow it for shopping. How are we supposed to take a girl out?”

“Then how about we go play bingo tonight?”

“Last week I won \$80. It’s fun when you go

with me. Not only is it exciting when we win; it is fun even when someone else wins.”

“How is it fun when they win?”

“It’s super crowded—mostly kids. When someone hits the jackpot, they scream, “Bingo! Bingo!” and it gives you goosebumps. Then they start jumping and hugging everyone around, no matter if you’re male or female, black or white. One time, a little Black girl behind me hit bingo, and she grabbed my shoulders and danced like crazy. Her hips just kept swaying with the music until the next round started.”

From then on, the two of us played bingo every weekend. During the week, our work schedule was three days on duty at the ship, one day off. The one not on duty was responsible for bringing breakfast to the other. Breakfast usually consisted of two slices of bread with a fried egg or a few pieces of cold cuts or fried pork. In the morning, we’d go down to the ship, and by 4 p.m., we’d return to shower and either go play billiards or just stay in and listen to music.

Sometimes we’d sit and reminisce about our days as students in Nha Trang—friends who were gone or still around—and talk about love, family, and so on. One time, Bích asked me:

“Back in Nha Trang, did you have a girl you loved?”

“I did. Her name was Nhung. She was eight years younger than me. When I met her, she was only 15, and by the time I graduated, she was 17. She used to send me a letter every week. Occasionally, she’d visit me at school and bring me gifts. She told me she saved her lunch money from her parents just to come see me. I had met her by chance, but somehow she sought me out at the school. From then on, every time I had shore leave, I’d go visit her. Her parents knew but

never said anything. We had planned that once she got a bit older, we would get married.

But unexpectedly, when I returned to Saigon, I got married. Still, I kept all of Nhung’s love letters in my suitcase, thinking my wife would never touch something so personal. But while I was away on duty, she went through the suitcase and found the letters. She wrote to Nhung, telling her that she was young and beautiful, that she had plenty of other men to choose from, and that I was now married and about to become a father.

I knew nothing about any of this. My wife had put the letters back exactly where they were, so I had no idea anything had happened. A year later, when the HQ-404 was on a mission to Nha Trang, I eagerly went to look for Nhung. She had grown into a beautiful young woman, blooming with youth. My heart raced, thinking I was stepping back into the garden of love.

She looked at me for a while, her expression unchanged. Then suddenly, she burst into tears without saying a word. She went inside, came back with a letter, handed it to me, and then tearfully told me to leave her house. I tucked the letter into my pocket and walked straight to the beach. That day, the Nha Trang beach was empty. I found a quiet spot that felt familiar—maybe it was the same place Nhung and I had once sat, gazing out at the sea and dreaming of the future.

I opened the letter to see what she had written. But it wasn’t from her—it was from my wife, with the contents just as I described earlier. From that day on, I never dared go near Nhung’s house again. And ever since, whenever the ship docked in Nha Trang, it brought back all those memories of her. That’s why I later wrote the poem “Sad Love in Nha Trang.”

Sad Afternoon in Nha Trang
I wander aimlessly through *Cầu Đá*,
Passing the white sand dunes,
Along rows of green casuarina trees.
I feel like a stranger.
The golden sand whispers your name.
I remember the little sea snails,
Lonely, lying in the sand,
Peeking in and out beneath the crashing waves.
My love!
Will you ever pass by here again?
Do you remember those old days?
The afternoon was just as melancholy as today.
Waves gently lapped the shore.
You walked a long path on the sand,
The wind caught your blouse and made it flutter.
Oh, the day I returned!
I passed by the school I once attended.
I remembered the day you cried.
We leaned on each other as we walked
Down the street with no lights.
The saltwater tasted like your lips.
You cried!
All night I couldn't sleep,
Dreaming the dreams you once dreamed.
The promises we buried,
Like a sand crab trying to fill the sea,
Like waves carrying water hyacinths adrift.
What do I have left to give you?
What do you have left for me?
We drift apart endlessly—
A love that refuses to fade.
Nha Trang, a sorrowful afternoon.”

“You’re such a romantic,” Bích said. “I didn’t have a girlfriend in Nha Trang like you, but I did in Saigon. I haven’t married yet because I’m the eldest in a big family, so everyone depends on me.”

Six months passed quickly. In the final days in Guam, the two of us drove around the island, sightseeing and taking photos for memories. We visited Guamanian villages. The people were similar to the ethnic tribes

from our Central Highlands, but their living conditions were far better, thanks to access to modern civilization and aid from the U.S. We also visited the grave of Magellan, the English explorer and navigator. In 1521, when his fleet stopped by Guam, he was killed by the island’s natives.

The days leading up to departure were hectic. Everyone, from the captain to the crew, had to fulfill their duties. Sometimes

work stretched into the night, as the ship had to be perfectly prepared before departure. When the time came, the warship had been freshly painted and looked like new. The yellow flag with three red stripes and a vibrant array of signal flags stretched from the bow up to the mast and then to the stern. Everyone on deck was dressed in formal uniforms and lined up, except for the mechanics still busy below in the engine room.

On the command deck, the captain, executive officer, and the officer on duty prepared to salute those standing on the dock. A few sailors lingered emotionally with their girlfriends—kissing, crying, waving goodbye. Finally, the gangway was pulled away by a crane. The ship's whistle blew a long, deep sound. The captain ordered:

“Release the spring lines.”

Then followed by:

“Release the bow line.”

The ship slowly pulled away from the dock.

In this silent and sorrowful moment, everyone's hearts grew heavy. I stood at the bow next to the 40mm gun, scanning the waving crowd to see if I could spot Kathy—but she wasn't there. I quietly blamed Bích—if he hadn't discouraged me, perhaps she would've been among those seeing us off.

The warship departed Apra Harbor under the morning sun, making the silver sea shimmer. On every face was the joy of reuniting with family after more than six months apart. After we returned from Guam, I never saw Bích again, as we were transferred to different places. Later, after being released from prison, I heard that Bích and his family had perished at sea off the coast of Phan Thiết while trying to escape the country.

Today, I light three incense sticks in remembrance of my friend—a brilliant, kind, and helpful soul. He was a model son. Though Bích cannot be with us today, he will always remain in our hearts.

Hoàng Đình Báu, Dec. 2000

Six Months with a Newly Established Unit

TÂN CHÂU NAVAL BASE

In September 1970, a dispatch from the Naval General Administration Office was sent to the Command of the River Patrol Forces, requesting a nomination for an officer to assume the position of Base Commander of the newly constructed Tan Chau Naval Base. In the margins of the internal memo, the Force Commander had handwritten a note: "Field grade officers or Lt Commanders, whoever wants to volunteer, come see me."

At that time, I was serving as the Chief of Operations. After reading the memo, I was stunned and momentarily dazed. Tan Chau was the hometown of both sides of my family, and it was only about ten kilometers from the hometown of my fiancée. If I were assigned there, what could possibly be more wonderful? I reread the handwritten note, and eagerly requested to meet with the Commander.

Two weeks later, in early October, I departed from Binh Thủy, Cần Thơ, with a Petty Officer and 15 personnel aboard two PBRs (Patrol Boat Riverine), heading straight for Tan Chau, near the Cambodian border. The base was located at the junction of the Tien Giang River and the Kinh Xáng Canal, constructed on elevated ground and comprised a family housing area, bachelor quarters, administrative buildings, an operations center, an underground ammunition depot, supply warehouse, and power station. Before we arrived, a group of 20 U.S. Navy personnel, led by a Lt Commander, had already occupied two prefab barracks. The most prominent sight at the base was the American Stars and Stripes fluttering high on the flagpole.

A sudden surge of emotion swept over me at the thought of having to "reclaim" our

national sovereignty. I shared this thought with my team, and they enthusiastically supported the idea. For the whole day, they were diving into a thorough cleaning of the entire base.

The following morning, dressed in white full service dress, my entire team and I held a formal flag-raising ceremony. The yellow flag with three red stripes flew proudly under the vast blue sky. With great pride, we immediately began constructing multiple layers of barbed-wire fencing, setting up guard posts, and implementing all necessary measures to place the base in full operational readiness to support and conduct military missions in the shortest time possible.

Everything proceeded smoothly for about two weeks, until one morning I encountered a difficult situation. After roll call, the base's Chief Petty Officer reported that the American Commander had caught a Vietnamese sailor sneaking into their barracks the night before to steal a radio cassette player, and had detained him inside a Connex box. My face flushed with shame at this affront to our honor. I immediately went to the commander to request him to transfer the sailor to our base for disciplinary action. I explained that this was a Vietnamese Naval base, and the sailor was under our jurisdiction. But the US Commander refused.

I ordered the duty officer to sound the battle station's alarm. At that time, the base had been reinforced to a strength of three officers and more than 50 personnel, about

half of the authorized strength. I ordered the armory to issue a Colt pistol to each officer and an M16 to each enlisted man. We deployed to encircle the American area. I issued strict orders: all U.S. personnel were to remain in place, no one in or out. Any noncompliance would be met with warning shots, and I would personally resolve the matter on site.

To be honest, I had no idea how I would resolve it.

Fortunately, just minutes after being surrounded, the commander appeared and asked to meet with me. I invited him into the Base Commander's office and closed the door. My English was rough at the time—I wanted to say more but lacked the words, so I spoke firmly and to the point: “Do you know who commands this base? Is it you or me?”

The commander flushed red and replied: “It’s you.” He then began a long explanation, of which I understood only bits and pieces. Once he finished, I stated plainly: “Return my man to me right away.” The captain stood up grimly and quickly walked back to his area. I followed and stopped at the perimeter. I had no idea what I would do next if the Americans refused. But once again, luck was on my side. Just minutes later, the captain returned, escorting the detained sailor toward me... Strangely enough, from that day on, there were no more thefts.

In December 1970, the base received two permanently stationed units: first, the headquarters of Task Force 212.2, responsible for overseeing escort operations into Cambodia. The Task Force Commander was Lieutenant Commander Lư Trọng Đa, a senior classmate. Second it was River Boat

Patrol Group 58, commanded by Lt Commander Tran Van Hoa Em, who was a classmate of mine. Later on, the base also had the opportunity to host River Boat Patrol Group Commanders from same my Class: Tran Do Cam, Tran Ngoc Bich and Nguyen Hòai Bích. The base also temporarily accommodated an Amphibious Boat River Group and a detachment of PCF Coastal Patrol boats.

All my crew became extremely busy providing support in ammunition, food supplies, fuel, medical evacuation; and maintaining military discipline, security, and order.

In January 1971, I received what one could call a... major milestone. All the base officers pitched in to buy me a pair of new Lt Commander's rank insignia and a cap with embroidered gold pine needles. To share the joy, I asked my fiancée to pin on my new rank insignia.

Perhaps it was thanks to the shiny golden three-striped insignia and the newly embellished cap that I managed to handle two potentially deadly incidents smoothly. One late night, the duty officer woke me urgently, informing me that the District Chief needed to speak to me immediately over the cross-band radio. The District Chief reported that a Navy riverine patrol boat was firing wildly at the District Headquarters and that one M79 grenade had landed in a residential area, causing casualties and damage. He asked for my intervention.

Shocked, I geared up in combat uniform, ordered to wake the deputy commander to take care of the base, and together with the duty officer, we jumped aboard a PBR heading straight for the District HQ. Spotting the riverine patrol boat, I ordered

an approach and jumped aboard. Perhaps thanks to the bright moonlight, the two sailors at the bow recognized my rank instantly.

One of them, holding an M79 grenade launcher, reported with a resentful tone: “Sir, the District Headquarters detained one of our guys. We’re firing to force them to release him.”

Standing close to him, I caught the smell of alcohol. My suspicion was partially correct. Three sailors from the temporary riverine detachment had taken the boat out to drink. After drinking past curfew, they were stopped and questioned by District troops. One was detained; the other two escaped back to the boat and began firing randomly to scare the District into releasing their comrade.

I ordered all weapons confiscated and steered the patrol boat back to the base. The two undisciplined sailors were handed over to their parent unit for disciplinary action.

The second incident was even more... dangerous. It occurred about a week later. It was a Sunday, and our convoy of merchant ships had been safely escorted to Phnom Penh. I drove to the market to take my father out for breakfast. Since I had returned to the base, whenever free, we shared morning meals together. While we were sipping coffee and chatting, a local rushed into the cafe, alarmed, and told us that a sailor was using a grenade to threaten a gold shop in an attempted robbery.

Alarmed and tense, I rushed in the direction the man indicated. A small crowd had gathered at a distance in front of a small shop. Inside were an elderly couple and their daughter, trembling beside a glass counter full of jewelry. I recognized them—they were relatives.

Outside the counter stood a sailor from my base, dressed in civilian clothes, waving a

grenade with the pin already pulled, threatening everyone. When he saw me, he quickly said:

“Commander, please don’t interfere. I have no intention of stealing anything! This is a personal matter...”

I stepped closer and stopped at the doorway, inwardly thinking, “*Am I going to die meaninglessly over something like this?*”

I spoke with the shop owner and learned the backstory: the sailor had fallen in love with the daughter but was rejected. In desperation, he used a grenade to propose—a twisted form of emotional blackmail.

I promised the sailor I would speak on his behalf and would make sure his love succeeded. Gently, I asked him to reinsert the pin and hand me the grenade. He hesitated, but then complied. I handed him over to the Navy’s military police team, who had just arrived.

Back at the base, I advised the sailor never to resolve emotional matters with weapons. Even if he got his way, the girl would never truly love him. To show sympathy, I spared him any punishment. And once again, luck was on my side. While I hadn’t even figured out how to persuade the family to marry their daughter to the sailor—he simply left the base and disappeared...

But by February, my streak of good fortune began to fade. The brand-new rank insignia, once gleaming, now seemed to be losing its shine, perhaps even permanently. What happened came so suddenly.

It was the weekend. After giving instructions to the duty officer, I took a ferry across to visit my fiancée. On the morning of the first day of the new week, as I returned to the base and was shocked to discover that the base was now stocked with illegal goods! The items had been salvaged by river patrol personnel from a merchant vessel that had been severely damaged by VC gunfire and left abandoned near the

Cambodian border.

Faced with this unexpected situation, I took two immediate actions: I asked the owners to remove the goods from the base immediately, and I sent a message to report the incident to the River Patrol Force Headquarters..

The next afternoon, as I sat working at my desk, I heard a helicopter landing in the base's courtyard. I assumed it was a U.S. Navy chopper, which occasionally came by to pick up or drop off personnel. But then the duty officer rushed in and reported that the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) landing for a surprise inspection. I was stunned. I hurried out and saw him on his way to the warehouse near the riverbank.

I stopped, saluted respectfully, and stood at attention. He nodded slightly and stepped into the warehouse. Inside were only the base's standard-issue items: beds, mattresses, boxes of rations...

He continued to inspect the entire base—but found no trace of any illegal goods. I, too, was surprised at how quickly everything had been removed—in just a few hours.

The Admiral returned to the helicopter. Before boarding, he looked at my brand-new insignia and asked:

“You just got promoted?”

“Yes Sir.”

“And when are you getting demoted?”

With that, he gave a slight grin and climbed aboard the helicopter. I stood watching it take off, not even bothering to salute. A sense of bitterness welled up inside me. Whether he meant it as a joke or not, as a leader, he should not have uttered such veiled threats without knowing the full truth. Even more than that, what I had hoped to hear from him was a word of congratulations on my promotion. Instead, he had said the opposite.

A week later, I wasn't surprised when I received a dispatch ordering me to report to the Naval Security Office. The first person

to receive me there was my classmate, Lt Commander Chu Ba Yen, followed by Lieutenant Nguyen Phuróc Chắc (Class K12). I take this opportunity to thank my friend Yen for welcoming me warmly with a delicious breakfast, and also thank Chắc for conducting the interrogation professionally, yet still with the respectful camaraderie of a junior receiving a senior.

By the end of March, my promotion insignia still on my shoulders. It made my wedding more joyful. The ceremony was a true countryside wedding, but quite festive nonetheless. Because so many guests were invited, the celebration lasted two days—one day for relatives, and one day for military comrades and friends. Honestly, my family hadn't intended to invite so many people, but once you invite one person, it's hard to exclude another.

I also want to thank the District Chief, the Subsector Commander, and the good people of Tan Chau for generously contributing food, drinks, and wedding gifts, making the whole event warm and memorable.

The ancients were right when they said: *"Good fortune never comes twice."* Because I had just received two great blessings, a misfortune struck, and it struck hard. When I returned from my honeymoon in Đà Lạt, a dispatch was already lying on my desk. Its content was devastating: an order transferring me to a patrol ship.

I had just gotten married—and was now being ordered to go out to sea? What madness!

Even the Task Force 212 Commander was annoyed and told me:

“Go to the Navy Headquarters' Personnel Office and find out what kind of messed-up nonsense they're pulling. The newly issued directive says officers are to serve two years at a unit before being transferred. You've only been at this base six months!”

So I went to Saigon—but instead of going to the Personnel Department, I went directly to the CNO. The Admiral explained that alongside the transfer directive, he had also signed another regulation stating that officers wishing to promotion rank must have served at least six months as a ship commanding officer. Since I had not held such a position before my promotion, I would now have to do it retroactively.

I argued that there were plenty of Lt Commanders promoted before me, even some commanders, who never had to serve as ship commanding officers.

The Admiral laughed and said:

“You’re not losing anything. You’re still a unit commander—and now you’ll have the honor of wearing the Ship Captain insignia.” I respectfully replied that while the base commander position was at the rank of commander, which meant in two years I could be up for promotion again, but my new position was typically held by a Lieutenant, so the path to promotion would be much longer...

The Admiral cut me off: “That’s an order.”

I returned to Tan Chau Naval Base, handed over my command to my classmate, Lt Commander Nguyễn Nguyễn (followed later by Pham Van Hung, also from our class), and departed the base with deep dissatisfaction. I sensed that there was something off about this abrupt reassignment. Could it be because I didn’t know how to play the game at a lucrative posting, or perhaps because I had dared to confront the Americans to defend our national sovereignty?

But what I had feared soon became a reality: until the final days of April 1975, four years later, even while I was commanding a task force with a commander’s responsibility, I was still wearing the rank of Lt Commander.

All things considered, those six months commanding Tan Chau Naval Base, though short, were the most challenging and trying period of my 14 years of service in the Navy Forces of The Republic of Vietnam. What I have recorded here is meant to serve as a contribution to the book “The 40 Years of Memories of the First Aquarius Class”.

Võ Văn Bảy

An Old Poem

By Trần Giang (TQT)

In 1963, the First Aquarius class planned to publish a special edition to commemorate their graduation. Unfortunately, at the last minute, the special edition could not be released due to technical reasons, even though the articles were ready. On that occasion, I contributed a poem that I have long forgotten the title of. Later, Phạm Văn Hưng (Thụy Lữ, aka Cự Thôn) used the idea of the poem to compose the song 'Hồi Âm' (Replying), and he played it for us at a gathering. Recently, at my daughter's wedding party, the two of them sang this song as a symbol of their 'Đào-Hung' love story. The song awakened in me the peaceful memories of the old days, and I wanted to share them with friends.

In reality, the old poem, written about a non-existent love, was very clumsy, full of clichés and conventions (in popular literary terms, it was unbearably 'cheesy'), but the form was not constrained, and the content was the sincere emotion of young people who had just left their books and stepped into the adventurous life. I also don't remember the entire original, so I rewrote a few lines, and I borrow the name 'Hồi Âm' from Thụy-Lữ, to dedicate to my friends of the First Aquarius class."

Hồi Âm

Thư cho em đêm nay
Rời mai anh theo tàu ra khơi
Giang vòng tay ôm tròn đời thùy thủ
Chuyện chúng mình buồn như sao đêm trên trời.

Câu chuyện tình ở núi
Khắc sâu kỷ niệm trong hồn
Hà ơi, ngày xưa dưới khung trời đại học
Sao chúng mình yêu nhau cho bây giờ anh buồn

Hai mươi tuổi nên mắt buồn vì vương núi
Chợt một chiều nghe sóng gọi từ biển khơi
Giã từ em, giã từ phố nhỏ
Anh lang thang theo gió bốn phương trời

Chiều tiễn đưa, mưa rơi trên mái tóc
Mắt em buồn, đời thông gió cũng buồn
Giã từ em, giã từ ga vắng
Em về giữ lại dấu môi hôn.

Lúc nhớ thương mắt nhìn về hướng núi
Đường biển xa nên ngăn cách muôn trùng
Hà đừng khóc. Anh không về vì trời chưa ngớt sóng
Lá thư này cho chúng mình nguôi nỗi nhớ nhung.



Response

A letter for you tonight,
For tomorrow I follow the ship out to sea,
Embracing the sailor's life entirely
Our story, as sad as the stars in the night sky.

A love story in the mountains,
Etched deep in my soul's memories,
Dear Hà, in those days under the university sky,
Why did we love each other, only for me to be sad now?



At twenty, my eyes are sad, burdened by the mountains,
Then one afternoon, I suddenly heard the waves calling from the open sea,
Farewell to you, farewell to the small town,
I wander with the wind to the four corners of the earth.

The evening of farewell, rain falling on your hair,
Your eyes were sad, the pine hill wind was also sad,
Farewell to you, farewell to the deserted station,
You return, keeping the memory of our kiss.

When longing strikes, I look towards the mountains,
The distant sea route separates us by countless miles,
Hà, don't cry. I won't return because the storms haven't subsided,
This letter is for us to ease our longing.





Thùy-Lữ



lời âm

nhạc : Kỳ Lê
HSC : Trần Quang

blue

Thật đo cơn đên nay, rồi mai anh thao tâm ước? neo ra khi màn h mây
 anh đang thì vông tay, ôm hôn đôi tay K2, còn H. lấu tay viên phượng
 Lỡ một mái Cúc Em gặt đã nằng kẻo anh lại vụng tay hôn, và
 em đi ngay xưa trên bãi sông thàn em xui ấy, sao chậpmình quay lại, cho bây giờ anh
 nhớ! ... anh ra đi muôn phước, ta có fate không hề buồn thây nháy lại với vãng
 em vui trong mùa xuân, gặt vụng anh ngọt ngào, nào ai kết Kưng có anh
 thì linh chiến mắt buồn vì vụng nữa, vẫn nghe tiếng gọi sông hồ, ngay
 xa xưa khi gần đưa xôn những lời âm ai cũ ... sao chậpmình yêu anh cho bây giờ anh



bướm ... Anh vẫn còn luyến luyến theo tàu ra khơi ...
 Em vẫn còn yêu anh, nhớ hai đứa hai cuộc đi ... Lỡ khi vắng bao
 la hẹn bãi bờ xưa ấy ... em như chim trong lồng, em anh bị vướng phải
 thời ... Tại giờ bãi bờ xưa anh vẫn với mẹ con tìm về
 biển đông xưa lời ai, và vẫn còn yêu em đi lạc đến phương
 còn mang với chi ... tiếng kèn thổi mây, giờ trời chuyển xưa đến sao
 với ... ôi trời em mưa mãi, mây ai không bướm ... anh em đi mãi biết ai mừng
 chi ... (đi hết)

Tháng 10 1963

HỒI ÂM

Thụy Lữ phổ nhạc
(theo ý thơ Trần Giang)

*Thư cho em đêm nay
Rồi mai anh theo tàu nhỏ neo ra khơi mênh mông
Anh giang đôi vòng tay
Ôm tròn đời thủy thủ còn đi lênh đênh viễn phương
Lòng nhớ mãi câu chuyện tình Đà Nẵng
Khắc sâu kỷ niệm trong hồn
Và em ơi ngày xưa trên bến sông Hàn êm xuôi ấy
Sao chúng mình quen nhau cho bây giờ anh nhớ...*

*Anh ra đi muôn phương
Dù cô đơn không hề buồn thương những khi vắn vường
Em vui trong mùa xuân
Giữa nhịp cười ngọt ngào nào ai nhớ thương cố nhân
Đời lính chiến mất buồn vì vương núi
Vẫn nghe tiếng gọi sông hồ
Ngày xa xưa thời gian chưa xóa những lời ân ái cũ
Sao chúng mình yêu nhau cho bây giờ anh buồn...*

*Anh vẫn còn lênh đênh theo tàu ra khơi
Em vẫn còn yêu anh nhưng hai đứa hai cuộc đời
Lòng biển xanh bao la hơn bến bờ xưa ấy
Em như chim trong lầu son
Còn anh bơ vơ mường phương trời*

*Tàu ghé bến xưa
Anh vẫn ước mơ
Còn tìm về thăm đường xưa lối cũ
Và vẫn còn yêu em đôi lúc đến nghẹn ngào*

*Còn mong ước chi
Tình theo khói mây
Gửi tròn chuyện xưa đem vào thương nhớ
Ôi trời còn mưa mãi mấy ai không buồn
Người còn đi mãi biết ai mong chờ...*

(1963)

Response

Music by Thụy Lữ
(Based on the poem by Trần Giang)

*A letter to you tonight
Then tomorrow, I'll follow the ship, pulling anchor into the vast open sea
I extend my arms wide
Embracing the life of a sailor, still wandering in distant lands
My heart forever remembers the love story of Da Nang
Engraved deeply in my soul
And oh, my dear, those days on the gentle Han River
Why did we meet, only for me to miss you so now...*

*I journey to distant lands
Though lonely, I never feel sad when longing arises
You rejoice in the spring Amidst sweet laughter, does anyone remember an old friend?
A soldier's eyes are sad, burdened by mountains
Still, I hear the call of rivers and lakes
Those distant days, time hasn't erased the old words of affection
Why did we fall in love, only for me to be sad now...*

*I still wander on the sea, following the ship
You still love me, but we live two separate lives
The vast blue sea is wider than the old shore
You are like a bird in a gilded cage
While I drift aimlessly in all directions*

*The ship docks at the old harbor
I still dream
Of returning to visit the old paths and roads
And I still love you, sometimes to the point of choking*

*What more can I hope for?
Love follows the clouds
Sending the whole old story into longing memories
Oh, the rain keeps falling, who wouldn't be sad?
I keep going, who waits for me...*

(1963)

A FAREWELL MESSAGE

Editorial Team

Like a ship safely reaching its home port after navigating the vast ocean, our Yearbook has finally been published on the occasion of the 40th anniversary reunion, overcoming many challenges thanks to the collective efforts of all Bảo Bình members. This achievement is a source of pride—not only because we have completed a meaningful project together, but also because it reflects our unity, shared commitment, and enduring friendship within the Bảo Bình family.

As of this year, 2001, it has been exactly 40 years since the birth of The First Aquarius Class of the Naval Officers' Academy, "The First Bảo Bình." While this may be a relatively short period in the grand timeline of history, for us Bảo Bình members, these were the most vibrant and formative years of our youth—a journey that feels like a lifetime. Once young students sharing a common dream of the open sea under the roof of the naval academy, most of us have now reached the age of "knowing our destiny." Some remain, while others have departed; countless changes, joys, and sorrows have shaped our lives over these 40 eventful years.

Now, as life's daily rush slows down, we often find ourselves reminiscing about the past, reflecting on the years gone by—especially those of us who are no longer caught up in the busyness of work. The experiences and memories we shared at the naval academy, during our service in the Republic of Vietnam Navy, and in our lives as exiles abroad, have left indelible marks on our hearts. That is why this Yearbook was created—to capture and share these cherished images and emotions, serving as a keepsake for future generations of Bảo Bình.

As you have seen, most of the articles in this Yearbook were written by Bảo Bình members themselves—about their own lives or their friends, both living and departed. Each piece serves as a faithful recording of events, emotions, and experiences, offering a deeper understanding of one another. Through these simple yet heartfelt stories—of youthful dreams, maritime aspirations, and personal journeys—we gain a richer appreciation of our fellow Bảo Bình members. Out of respect for individual preferences, the Editorial Board has preserved each contributor's words, even when their form or content may not fully align with our initial vision.

Reading through these pages, one might be surprised to discover that the same Bảo Bình members who once endured the hardships of war are also dreamers—filled with sentiment, loyalty, and pride. Each of us expresses these emotions in our own unique way, not only in personal and familial love but also in our deep bonds of friendship and our devotion to our homeland and the sea.

When it comes to dreams, nothing is more beautiful than the Dream of the Open Sea:
"My soul still lingers in Nha Trang, where my maritime dream became a reality. In the end, my spirit roams the universe, among the moon and stars, seeking its origin."

And the dream of distant voyages:
"Having grown used to life away from home, constantly on the move, I dreamed of long journeys, of peaceful and unfamiliar lands. That dream led me to the Navy."

At times, dreams were shattered:

"I vaguely felt I had chosen the wrong career—seasick and vomiting for days on end, never once feeling clear-headed."

Or the dreams of youth that shaped us:

"Years have passed, and I have yet to fulfill the dreams of my youth. But I no longer resent people or fate."

Beyond dreams, there were simple yet romantic aspirations:

"I dream of the day I can 'bring love home'—to take my beloved back to visit my village along the Đáy River in the northern countryside."

Interwoven with these dreams is the immense pride we hold for our naval past:

"We became the First Bảo Bình officers, ruling the seas along the length of our homeland with pride: 'Above us, the sky; below us, the earth; in between, we stand.'"

The grueling voyages of the past have now turned into cherished memories:

"Whenever I left Saigon for a mission, I carried the responsibility of Senior Officer at Sea and Tactical Command over the entire East Sea—'my kingdom,' as I liked to call it, stretching from the 17th parallel to the Cambodian border near the port of Sihanoukville."

Yet, beyond dreams and pride, Bảo Bình members are also deeply grounded in reality, showing profound love and appreciation for their families—especially for the wives who have stood by them with unwavering support. We sincerely thank these incredible women, whose patience, endurance, and sacrifices have allowed us to hold on to our pride and dignity. In nearly every article, we find heartfelt expressions of gratitude:

"I take this opportunity to thank my wife, who has given me 28 years of happiness, who shared in the hardships of our early years in America. A woman with three university degrees, yet she humbly worked as a hotel maid, a McDonald's cashier, a waitress at a Chinese restaurant, an assembler, and a technician—before finally becoming a software engineer."

Or:

"And a special thank you to my love and lifelong partner."

The love and loyalty of Bảo Bình wives, who devoted themselves to their husbands' struggles, are truly admirable:

"I am deeply moved and forever grateful to my wife. Though we lived through difficult times, she remained unwavering in her loyalty."

And another deeply emotional reflection:

"My wife hunched over, tirelessly stitching every seam to provide for our daughter's education. Now, she proudly holds two university degrees—one in law and one in pharmacy. This is the most profound and sincere gratitude from the depths of my soul."

Even so, there remains a hint of the commanding officer's humor:

"We never asked for handouts, yet we've managed to build a good life. Looks like I married well!"

Beyond family love, we also find enduring friendships:

"Looking back on 40 years feels like just yesterday. Some of us have passed seventy, while the youngest are nearing sixty. Some still work hard, some have retired, and others battle illness alone. But through it all, one thing remains: the bond of friendship and family, which will stay with us for the rest of our lives."

And treasured memories:

"Forty years have passed, filled with countless memories of military school—what remains for us now? Youth has reached sixty, yet it still feels like the days of our youth. Sometimes, we forget the present and live in the past—a time to remember and cherish."

Some even embrace the humorous nicknames given to them by friends:

"The 'nickname' you gave me is so fitting! My wife and I love it. Even for gold, we wouldn't trade it away!"

It's not surprising that, after all these years, many Bảo Bình members have come to see life as an illusion. Some have embraced Buddhist philosophy:

"As the twilight of life approaches, I suddenly realize: 'All things are impermanent; dust returns to dust.' Yet something remains beyond death."

Others have sought spiritual enlightenment:

"What I was searching for was buried within myself, hidden beneath layers of dust. How can I restore my mind to its natural state so that I can have 'a mind at peace is the way'?"

And some have found true awakening:

"One day, I unexpectedly stumbled upon Zen. In that moment, I encountered truth. How can I describe the instant of enlightenment? Who can perceive in me the silent awareness—the absolute stillness, the clarity, the radiant illumination?"

Ultimately, despite enduring hardships and exile, Bảo Bình members remain steadfast in their love for their homeland:

"My greatest wish is to see the communist regime in Vietnam dismantled, so I may return and lay my bones to rest in my ancestral land."

As we close this Yearbook, we bid farewell, knowing that this reunion is not the end but a preparation for future gatherings—just as a ship returns to port before embarking on new voyages.

With sincere gratitude for your support, we wish you and your loved ones good health, so we may reunite again in the years to come.

Editorial Team

