

IV WITH THE APC TANK COMPANY

Having terminated the "Rice Robbery" Operation, A-Company began to leave the hamlet and go back toward the bivouac site of the previous night. Over the heads of the American soldiers walking leisurely in a stream along the road through the hamlet, tin-plate placards were seen, some hung up horizontally across the road, and some nailed on tree trunks.

"Heroes of Vietnam challenge American invaders to a decisive battle manifesting the might of our long tradition. We are convinced of our Victory."

"Nothing is more precious than Freedom and Independence. We will never live as slaves of foreign powers."

"Young men! Join the Liberation Army. Let us point our guns at American Imperialists!"

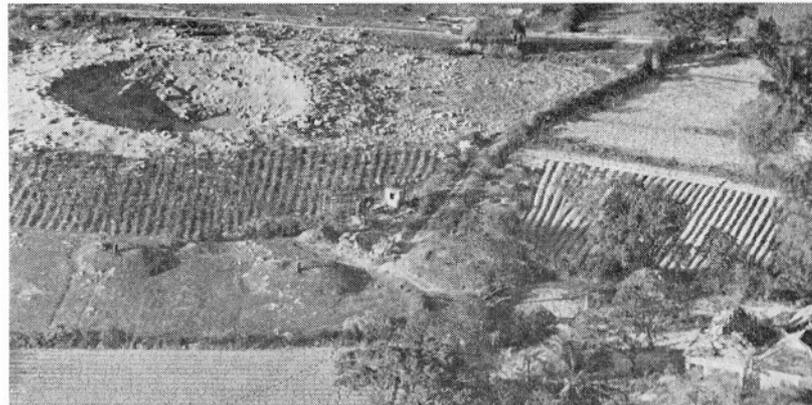
On the same day, A-Company was ordered to return to the front line outpost "Liz", and the soldiers waited for helicopters at the bivouac site. It was a place not far away from the seashore, and commanded a wide view, only with bushes here and there on sandy ground. B-Company appeared to have encountered the NFL in the village they had attacked, and sounds of fierce fighting were heard all through the day to the evening.

Suddenly, a gun was fired at the back of the soldiers of A-Company gathered together waiting for helicopters. An attack of a sniper from behind a tree in the hamlet. Immediately, a shower of bullets was discharged in that direction. The moment the attack ceased, there was another shot. Once again, a counter-attack with a downpour of bullets and hand grenades shook the air. Before long, about a dozen helicopters arrived, and carried us away from the bivouac site with the soldiers of the Company.

On that day, the APC tank company of the same battalion lost one tank, hit by rockets of NFL. Three American soldiers were killed and wounded. We were told that four NFL soldiers were also killed in the fighting. We chose this tank company for our next troop to follow, and returned to Camp Duc-Pho for the night.

The next morning, we were again on a helicopter to fly to "Liz", and around 8:00 a.m. started on the march with the company consisting of five APC tanks. We were given our place in a tank in which Lieutenant-Colonel G., commander of this tank company, was also in charge of a machine-gun. Each tank carried five or six infantrymen, in addition to the regular crew consisting of the driver, gunners etc.

The five APC tanks slowly went down the steep slope of the hill topped with the base. The caterpillars transmitted unreduced the ups and downs of the ground, and the tank rolled and pitched more violently than a ship out on a stormy sea. Containers of drinking water and various other articles in the vehicle rattled down over us. From time to time, we were thrown on or under other co-passengers in the tank. The inside was unbearably hot. They opened the flap on the top, to put their heads out, or to sit on



U. S. bombardment has left huge craters, reminding one of the damage done. (In Quang-ngai)

the edge of the hatch.

At the foot of the hill spread fields of sugar-cane, sesame, tapioca and other crops, with huge craters dug here and there by bombing and bombardment. The tanks made their way as they chose, without paying a particle of attention to the crops in the fields. Needless to say, the ten wide caterpillars left in their wake all the crops miserably torn and crushed.

There was a farmhouse. The tanks passed through the field in front of the house at a distance of about 20 yards. An old man in black clothes, and a boy of ten years or so, stood looking on astounded. Two or three American soldiers sitting on the tank waved at the boy. But the expression on the boy's face was not changed at all. In the case of children in Saigon and in the vicinity of large bases, however, they would at once run up to the American soldiers, shouting "O. K.", or "Number One!", begging things from them as did the poor children in Japanese cities shortly after the surrender. At an American base in Binh-Dinh Province, I saw soldiers throwing canned foods and candies to the crowds of children they had called to come on the other side of the wire-net partition. They were amusing themselves by intentionally throwing the canned foods and candies as far away as possible to see the children run after them like dogs to get them first.

If, in slums of the United States, a Vietnamese should do a similar thing, scattering dimes to children, how would these soldiers feel about it? A Japanese cameraman, who is a personal friend of mine, saw an American soldier open a can of food and show the contents to children. When the children begged for it he emptied the can into the ditch, before the longing eyes of these children. Wherever American soldiers arrive, children are degraded to beggars. In this village, children had not yet been turned into beggars, so they did not run up to the Americans.

The herd of cows being driven by a boy ran away in all directions, frightened by the tanks. In the meantime, the tanks headed toward a paddy field region.



The peasant woman runs away, pleading "Do not enter my field."

V ANGER OF PEASANTS

The tank company left the vegetable fields and marched into a rice paddy region. In this area two crops a year can be raised and it was the busiest season for the peasants, reaping the first crop while planting the second. About 50 yards away from the tanks advancing through rice paddies, which had just been plowed, five women were planting rice. They were working in a row facing this way; but they never lifted their faces, looking as if they had not noticed the tanks that passed right in front of them. They intently bent over their work, pushing young rice plants into mud under the water. It was not that they did not notice the tanks, of course. They knew too well that it was safest to *pretend* not to see anything. Sorrow and anger must have been seething in their hearts.

The tanks broke through a levee and entered a rice-paddy which was being plowed. A man and his wife, aged around 50, were working with a plow drawn by an ox. They, too, *pretended* not to see anything at all. But they were obliged to stop working, as the tanks cut across their way at a distance of only 15-20 feet. The man lighted his pipe while waiting. He took a puff, and then, turned his face to us. The face I saw! I thought: I have never seen eyes burning with rage so furious as this. There are endless varieties in the expressions of men's faces when they laugh or smile; and

these laughs and smiles have all sorts of meanings. But, the expression of anger is the same, and means the same thing, regardless of race and stock. The expression of anger can communicate its meaning directly to all different peoples on the earth. Without a word, he glared at the foreigners' tanks that broke through levees and packed hard the ground they had just finished plowing. His face testified that all U. S. "Pacification Programs" would be utterly futile.

The tank company advanced another three hundred feet, and approached a stream about 16 feet wide. A woman in black clothes, who was also plowing with an ox, rushed up at full speed to the foremost tank. As there was another tank between that tank and ours, I could not catch the words she was shouting, but only saw her shaking her fists at the American soldiers on the tank, her whole frame trembling with rage. She must have been telling them to go away. This tank company had no interpreter. That means that, right from the beginning, they did not care to listen to what the peasants had to say.

Two American soldiers descended from the first tank to examine the wading point with mine detectors. In the meantime, three soldiers went over to the three or four farmhouses on the other side of the stream, for investigation. They came back after a while, bringing two transistor radio sets. They had plundered them. "Booty", they said, and explained to us, "We should take these things away from them. For they listen to broadcasts from Hanoi and the Viet-Cong." Both of the radio sets were "Made in Japan". If this be a plausible reason to plunder radio sets, all Vietnamese homes in Saigon are in danger of being plundered.

"Anyway, American soldiers are still not too bad, one has to say," observed the Vietnamese cameraman by the name of W., who had been with the army six years already. "As for soldiers of the Government troops, they pocket most of the things they plundered in that way. But American soldiers generally hand them over to the Vietnamese Government."

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee as to how the Government officials will deal with them.

The work of detecting mines was over, and the tank company crossed the stream. Three children were standing side by side on a levee, watching the tanks moving away. They were the children who had seen the radio sets plundered from their own houses. Strangely enough, the soldiers who had robbed the family of the radio sets waved their hands to these children. Were they fools, or were they too naive? If not, their attitude showed that in the eyes of these Americans, Vietnamese people did not count as human beings. Naturally, the children stood looking at them coldly, without making the slightest move to respond.

The tank company once again entered an area of vegetable fields. Peanuts, sweet potatoes, red beans, water melons—the tanks crushed all these, and increased their speed. After a while, we came out on a vast plain covered with large sections of rice-paddies. Golden waves of ripe rice rolled over most of the paddies; and here and there, peasants were already reaping their harvest.

VI TANKS AND RIPE EARS OF RICE

The five APC tanks drove right into the golden waves of rice paddies. The ripe ears of rice, now ready to be harvested, were mercilessly trodden and kneaded in the muddy field under the caterpillars as they took their capricious ways all over the paddies. They did not even have the kindness to make each tank follow the wake of the preceding one. The seed beds of rice plants, and the newly planted paddies—all these were nothing in their eyes. The tanks chose their own respective routes, as sports cars driven for fun, each of them leaving new deep ruts in the rice paddies. In the heart of American soldiers, there was a hopeless lack of an element common to rice cultivating peoples. This lack makes it impossible for them to understand the mind of these peasants. The gulf lying between the two makes one despair.

Most of the peasants reaping rice were old people, women and children. As was always the case, they never turned their eyes toward the tanks. They continued their work, without uttering a word.

Near a small town on National Route I, one of the tanks got stuck in the mud which clogged the treads. To pull it out with ropes, another tank went round to one side of the bogged tank. On its way to the position, the tank hit a big fruit tree standing in a corner of a farm yard and broke it near the root. The children came from the town and stood in a wide circle around the tanks to watch what was going on. Infantrymen left the tanks, and holding automatic rifles in one hand, guarded the tanks, walking inside the circle traced by the crowd standing at a cautious distance. The soldiers on guard reminded me of the red and blue demons of a festival in a Japanese village, as they keep off the spectators of the lion dance with their thick *hexangular* staves.

The tank company resumed its march, and having driven through farmhouses situated in the form of the "dispersed settlements", arrived in the area which was designated for operation on that day. It had been reported that the NFL seemed to have CP (Command Post, local headquarters) in the vicinity. Around here, we found no hamlets where many farmhouses stood huddled together, as the one cleared by A-Company the previous day. Farmhouses were standing in threes and fours, scattered in rice fields, looking like a group of isolated islands floating on the sea.

The infantrymen who were taken here in the tanks now left the tanks, and walked towards a group of five or six farmhouses, composing one of these islands. The five tanks, in the mean time, marched on three houses about 600 yards away. We went with the tanks. Coming near to the houses, the tank company encircled the place and halted with machine-guns pointed at them. Soldiers with automatic rifles advanced slowly to the houses.

Two women came out. One of them was an old woman, and another was middle-aged. Each was holding up reverently a slip of paper with both her hands, and joined her palms in prayer facing the gun muzzles of the



The field of ripe rice ready for harvest becomes wide muddy roads.

approaching American soldiers. The old woman had her head completely shaven. The legs of the old woman, who squatted down on the ground, were shaking with terror. The slips of paper they came holding out were their identification cards. All Vietnamese—strictly speaking, "all Vietnamese under the rule of the Government side" are supposed to have such Identification Cards (ID cards). These women were trying to make the soldiers understand that they were just ordinary, innocent peasants, who had nothing to do with the NFL, as the ID cards testified. It is true, however, that ID cards are being sold and bought at the rate of some 2,000 dongs (a little less than 15 U. S. dollars). They are particularly coveted by deserters from the Government troops and by those who are trying to escape from conscription. Therefore, when a robber breaks into a house, and cannot find anything of value, he sometimes robs the family of their ID cards. It often happens in the Government troops that a commander of a platoon does not report to superior officers desertions of his soldiers. For, in this way, he can put into his own pocket the salaries for the soldiers who deserted. So, the deserters are not tracked down. As they know that they will not be tracked down, there are more and more deserters. I heard the story directly from the mouth of one of these deserters.

According to the ID cards, the old woman was 64, and the middle-aged one was 43. They were mother and daughter. In addition to their work in the field, "We keep ducks, and are earning our living by selling the eggs. We are just innocent people," said the daughter in a trembling voice. But the tank company with no interpreter was deaf to all their supplication.

The soldiers started searching these houses.

XI REAPING RICE AMID SHOWERS OF BULLETS

The tank company drove into the hamlet with houses built close together. The tanks passed through the hamlet, knocking down fruit trees, trampling down fences, almost scraping against the walls of houses, crushing the altars of incense sticks dedicated to "Ban Tho-Ong-Thier".*

Leaving the hamlet, the tanks shifted their direction and headed directly eastward toward the coast, once again marching across an area of rice paddies. They came up to a high bank, probably constructed to prevent floods. There the five tanks halted hidden behind the bank, and infantrymen made a reconnaissance of the vicinity. One gun-ship was just above our heads shooting rockets in front of us.

Taking into the tanks the soldiers who had been on the bank for scouting, the tank company suddenly rushed out from behind the bank, and charged at full speed, now all abreast. Peasants were engaged in reaping and threshing rice. The tank of the commander, in which we were riding, was in the middle of the row. Two of the other tanks were driving a little in advance of ours. All of a sudden, these two opened fire with machine-guns. "That's VC (Viet Cong)," said a PIO officer of the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division. I watched carefully to the front, but could not find anything that might be the figures perceived. They must have slipped out of sight.

Instead, I saw an amazing scene before me. Around the charging tanks firing machine-guns, the peasants never ceased working, and resolutely refused to look up at the tanks. They continued moving their reaping hooks or threshing sheaves of reaped rice on the threshing-table, as if they had not noticed at all the bullets of heavy machine-guns flying about them, though it was evident that any of the bullets might kill them at any time. What does all this mean?

It is not that the peasants are ignoring the danger. This is the safest possible attitude for them to take. They know too well that if they should give way to terror and run away, they would very probably expose themselves to the greater danger of being shot at. In order not to get involved in the fighting that has broken out suddenly, there is no better way than to continue to do what they have been doing. Anger must be raging in their hearts; but to endure is the utmost resistance they can make under the circumstances.

Firing was suspended. The tank company advanced a few hundred yards and stopped in the paddies. Behind a levee on the right hand side, lay a body. Coming out of the tank, I found a dead soldier in a greyish-blue uniform, with the trousers rolled up to the knees. This uniform was very similar to that of the North Vietnamese troops I had seen in other battle-fields. There was no gun with him. As he had been killed only a short



The body of a boy soldier shot dead while running away along a levee.

time before, the intestines protruding out of his belly had not yet attracted flies. The pinkish-blue bowels looked like a long toy balloon wet with water, reflecting the brilliant sun of the South. His face was turned upward, tanned and copper-brown. He must be under twenty. The dilated pupils stared vacantly, a little downward, at nothing. Only about 50 yards away, five or six women and old people, all clad in black, were seen still bent on threshing as before.

The tank company, having left the rice paddy area, now entered the thin wood spread over sandy ground, continuously keeping contacts with C-Company and with the helicopter. It seemed that we were very close to the place where the NFL was holding on. The gun-ship above was desperately firing its machine-gun. The wood consisted mainly of trees called *duong lieu* in Vietnamese (*Casuarina equisetifolia*), seemingly a species of needleleaf trees. There were also trees with thick, broad leaves as *Theaceae*, standing conspicuously here and there.

We were already fairly deep in the central arena of combat. But, due to the deafening roar produced by the tanks, sounds of shooting reached us but faintly.

A rapid succession of automatic rifle shots was heard on our right. At the same instant, bullets rebounded on the armor of the tank, and sprang back with a distorted sound. The PIO officer, who was sitting on the tank, jumped inside, his huge body bouncing like a rubber ball. An attack of the NFL. We, too, tumbled into the tank. It seemed that the marksman was hiding in a tree. First-Lieutenant G., the commander of the company, took to firing the machine-gun as if in frenzy. Hot cartridges fell scattering inside the tank.

* In Vietnamese houses, they have altars for Buddha and for their own ancestors; they also erect altars outside the houses dedicated to "The gods of heaven".

XII IN THE FIGHTING

After having been shot at by the NFL sniper hiding in the tree, we had to be more cautious in putting our heads out of the tank. On the other hand, if the tank should be attacked with rocket guns, as the one destroyed on the previous day, the possibility of being killed would be greater when one was inside the tank. From time to time, I peeped out to see what was going on outside.

Each tank of the company drove forward, firing its machine-gun, and came out on an edge of the wood, where there were fewer trees and more fields. Farmhouses dotted the scenery. The one close to our left was a very simple hut, almost a mere shed. A woman, apparently the housewife, stood looking placidly at the tanks passing in front of her house. On the battlefield where fighting had become a melee and a clear line between the two sides existed no longer, her placidity struck me as something strangely alien to the scene around her. The five tanks were now engaged in action separately, keeping contacts by radio. The gun-ship* circled around over the battlefield, and dropped smoke candles that emit colored smoke on the spots where NFL soldiers were discovered.

The tank, in which we were following the operation, was that of the commander of the company. It charged headlong, with the commander himself at the machine-gun, firing furiously. Only the seat of the gunner is constructed outside the body of the tank; but, naturally, it is protected with thick iron plates on all sides. To be inside is like being shut up in an iron box heated by the scorching sun. We were dripping with sweat more than when one is in a steam-bath. For this reason, tanks carry ample provision of water and salt.

"I've got them. Capture their arms," shouted First-Lieutenant G., the commander, and the tank came to a sudden halt. The soldiers jumped out. I climbed out on the tank. About 15 feet ahead, in a ditch between a field and a small lane, two bodies of NFL soldiers were lying one over the other. No, they were still living. They had thrown themselves down in the ditch. When the American soldiers went up, pointing M-16 automatic rifles at them, one of them staggered up to his feet. His head and face were all covered with blood, as if he had a bucket of vermillion paint poured on him. The American soldiers lost no time to grab his arms from both sides, and snatched away his gun. The other was seized by the collar and pulled up on his legs. He was also steeped in blood from the top of his head to the neck. His clothes were all stained with blood. The moment when he was made to stand up, he seemed to heave a long gasp. But the next moment, he fell limp. The American soldiers, perceiving that he was dead, threw him down again in the ditch where he had been lying. No gun was found on him.

The captured gun was an automatic rifle of 56-type made in China (1966). First-Lieutenant G. held it up high with both hands, and shouted



A seriously wounded NFL soldier is dragged out by American servicemen. (In Hoi-An village, Quang-Ngai Province.)

to another tank that was coming nearer, "I've got them!"

The only Negro soldier in our tank brought along the NFL soldier who was still alive, half holding him in his arms. The Negro soldier wiped the blood roughly off the wounded man, and was about to take him into the tank. The PIO officer, however, refused to allow it, and ordered him to be put on the flat edge of the tank. The Negro soldier obeyed the instruction. The edge was about 25 inches wide, but the outer end was bordered with sandbags serving also as the support of rifles while shooting. The NFL soldier was laid beside the sand bags. His lifeless face was turned on one side. Blood kept streaming from the wound in his head. The pale face, vacant eyes. Watching him close at hand, I found that he was just an innocent-looking boy of around 15. It was communicated by radio that another NFL troop of even stronger force had been found in the neighborhood. The tank set out rushing across sugar cane fields, with the seriously wounded boy soldier lying on the edge.

The Negro soldier took one of the arms of the boy and felt the pulse. "Still alive," he said, and took bandages out of the first aid kit. The flowing blood trickled down inside the tank. As I happened to be sitting right below him, my cap was rapidly dyed all red. The blood then streamed down my left arm. The blood of the boy soldier spread over my left arm, mingled with sweat; and my wrist watch turned crimson.

* Gun-ship: A HU-1 helicopter (popularly called "Hui" and most extensively used in Vietnam) equipped with various arms, mostly with rocket guns or a considerable number of machine-guns, but it is also capable of carrying missiles. As it can be loaded with a large quantity of ammunition, it is playing an important role in covering the ground army in an operation within a limited area.

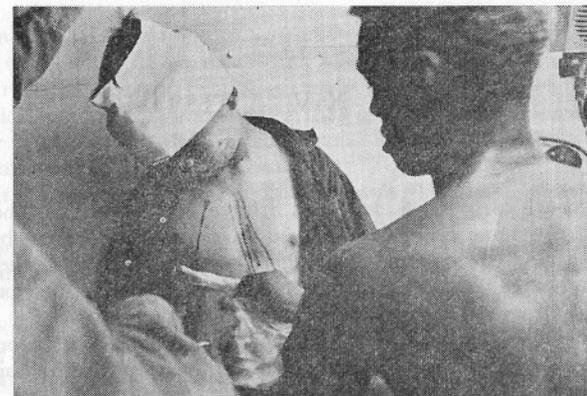
XIII IN THE FIGHTING (CONTINUED)

The infantrymen in the APC tanks also left the tanks to take part in the fighting. It seems that the NFL forces made a grave tactical blunder in this engagement. Probably, for them it was an unexpected encounter. It is possible that they were discovered while moving from one position to another. In principle, hand-to-hand fighting should be advantageous to the NFL. But, in this case, the U. S. forces could gain the lead, in the battlefield where they could make full use of the tank company, while it proved to be fatal for the NFL that they were forced into an engagement in a place where they were unable to resort to the guerilla type fighting with their tunnels.

The tank jolted and jostled violently; and from time to time the captive boy, lying on the edge bleeding all the time, was about to be thrown off. The Negro soldier, who had been taking care of him with evident sympathy, took the boy inside, disregarding the order of the white officer. Having placed the boy propped up against the iron wall, the Negro soldier felt his pulse again. He shook his head, and told us with his eyes, "Little hope." The boy seemed almost unconscious, while the bandage was wound around his head. His eyes were open, but he showed no response to what we said to him. He was wounded not only on the head, but also on the right side of the belly, and at the tip of the left hand. The wound in the head was most serious. Foamy blood came out from his nostrils, as well as from his mouth. His face was deadly pale. There seemed to be almost no chance for this boy soldier to live. The Negro soldier bound bandages all around the head of the boy, and laid him down with a sandbag as a pillow.

The battle turned the sugar cane fields into a hell. The heavy machine-guns of the tanks, automatic rifles of the infantrymen, rockets from helicopters—all were worked up to their utmost to lay down barrages. Now, jet fighter-bombers arrived to take part in the battle with Vulcan guns. The smoke bombs dropped to designate the targets of attack and the dust raised by the tanks screened the view. It was difficult to find out what was taking place where. Though I did not see it myself, we were told that one of the helicopters was shot down by ground fire of the NFL.

Once again, I caught a glimpse of an astonishing scene, through the clouds of dust. Only 50 yards away, in the middle of the confused fighting, six or seven women were walking hurriedly along the path in the fields, carrying things suspended from the poles on their shoulders. These figures, walking in a quick pace swinging their free arms to keep balance, were beyond anything I could imagine concerning the behavior of common people in a battlefield. It must be that, for these peasants, to "evacuate" in the showering shells and bullets, carrying their personal belongings, is far safer — no, "less dangerous" — than to be hiding in their houses, or to run away for their lives. If they run, they will be shot at as Viet Cong. It is a fact that the rate of casualties in the civilian population is lower in the middle of such operations, than under other circumstances. I will explain the reason for



The Negro soldier nurses the NFL boy soldier fatally wounded. (Inside a tank engaged in fighting.)

this peculiar phenomena in one of the following pages.

The fields around here are mostly of sugar cane, with those of red beans, peanuts, sweet-potatoes, etc. in patches. Here and there the fields were partitioned by thin belts of trees standing as wind breaks. There were also many trees planted along dividing lines between two fields. Therefore, the view was not open. Suddenly, a NFL soldier dashed out of a strip of wood, right in front of the tank. He was alone. His face was distorted with surprise and terror at finding the tank there. Probably, he had not heard the approaching tanks, in the great confusion of roaring and explosive sounds that filled the battlefield. He made a desperate effort to escape. The tank chased after him at full speed, shooting the machine-gun at him. He fell tumbling over in a field. One of the soldiers got out of the tank to examine him. His head was smashed. A French light machine-gun, Chinese hand grenades, and an American ammunition belt—these were his equipment. In one of his pockets was found a photograph of the soldier himself standing side by side with a comrade.

Then, the tank company charged on the spot where a helicopter had dropped a "smoke bomb to indicate presence of enemies", the machine-guns furiously spitting fire. After a few minutes of fierce gun fighting, the battle came to an end. Four dead bodies of the NFL soldiers were lying around. First-Lieutenant G., the commander, said, "Our tank company alone has killed twelve." One apparatus of radio communication, and two heavy machine-guns were also captured. A report came from C-Company that they had killed 30, and captured a rocket gun on top of it. The casualties of the U. S. side were said to be "small", though there was no exact number given.

About 4:00 p.m. a helicopter arrived from the headquarters of the brigade, with a major sent for inspection. We left the battlefield taking advantage of the returning helicopter. Looking down from the air, we could see bodies lying scattered over the field. The earth around the bodies was dyed red with blood. At a short distance away, the National Highway was busy with people coming and going as usual.

