

Hanoi, adieu

A bittersweet memoir of French Indochina

By Mandaley Perkins

One

The Execution

It was the moment I lost my innocence. My senior officer drew deeply on a Gauloise Bleue and looked at me steadily across his desk through a cloud of exhaled smoke, resolute yet relaxed. Perhaps I had turned pale, for he dropped his eyes and seemed to study his notes as if giving me a moment to regain my composure. Outside on the parade ground, I could hear an Annamese drill sergeant putting a platoon of infantry through its paces. I wished I could take his place. ‘You went through the exercise in officer training?’ he said. ‘You know the procedure for a firing squad?’ They were more statements than questions. It was as though he had ordered me to round up my unit for roll call. My voice was surprisingly steady as I replied, ‘Oui, mon capitaine.’

‘It will be an unpleasant task,’ he continued, ‘but an essential one, and I expect you to carry it out with speed and efficiency.’ His voice hardened a little. ‘Remember, Lieutenant, these men are Communist spies — enemies of France.’ He smiled, that brief military smile that said nothing more than ‘good luck’.

I was almost fresh from high school in Hanoi. This was not what I had imagined.

On the outbreak of World War II in Europe the previous year, I had put off my university studies in a moment of patriotism, and raised my age to enlist. My father was a career soldier, France was in crisis and it seemed the right thing to do. But this . . .

It was early September of 1940. This was my first posting since Officer School, at the frontier post of Lang Son in northern Tonkin, Indochina, 20 kilometres from the Chinese border. I’d had twelve months of intensive training in artillery and I had never fired a shot except in practice. Now I was to command an execution of men, sentenced to death for their political beliefs.

Until recently it had been acceptable to be a Communist, not only here in Indochina but in France itself. The war in Europe had brought many changes to French politics, but I had never heard of Communists being executed just for being Communists. Was this to be the first such execution? It was a disturbing idea.

I needed a friend. That night I went to the Mess. Gaston was still not there and I was momentarily annoyed. But then, perhaps it was a good thing. I wasn’t sure I wanted

to tell even Gaston about this, and he was my closest friend in Lang Son. The notion of what I had to do disgusted me. How would he feel about it? Gaston was Annamese. These prisoners tomorrow would be Annamese. How would it look to him?

Gaston's real name was Nguyen Nga, but we French had difficulty with Annamese names and he never seemed to mind being Gaston. I had missed his tranquil, intelligent company since I returned from leave. Where was he?

There was a new man behind the bar where Gaston usually worked. The fellow shrugged when I asked after Gaston, and spread his hands in a Gallic gesture. 'I do not know, mon Lieutenant. I am sorry,' and he turned away to pour me a drink.

I don't know why I got on so well with Gaston. It could have been because he was not much older than myself; because I was a bit of a loner in Lang Son. Most of my fellow officers in the Mess were career soldiers, old-guard French Army or Foreign Legion. They commanded largely Indochinese units, and their interests were the interests of soldiers. These older men had little time for blanc becs — white beaks — like me, not yet nineteen and fresh from officer training.

It had been a habit of mine on the weekends to stay on at the Mess well after closing time. Gaston and I would sit on the verandah until 2 a.m., the moon filtering through the tamarind trees, discussing the topic of the day as the cool damp of night crepitated to the call of cicadas. Sometimes we would wander the frontier town of Lang

Son together, through the bustle of the markets where the white képis and scarlet epaulettes of the Legionnaires and the black képis with the gold anchor ensigns of the colonial troops towered over the neat Annamese figures. I was young, with an open mind, and curious about the way the local people thought, about their beliefs. I had a real interest in their traditions and felt privileged that Gaston had taken me into his circle. There were many times he and I went together to watch Annamese classical theatre, *hat tuong*. These travelling theatre troupes had been roving the country for centuries and we would sit in the makeshift open-air stalls, crosslegged on the grass, mine the only European face among a sea of Annamese, mesmerised by the colourful, exotic costumes of an ancient culture, the shrieks and drums and great jarring clashes of cymbals.

The words meant nothing to me, but it was clear enough who was who — the white-faced traitors and baddies, with their erect painted eyebrows; the red faces of the courageous characters, their eyebrows painted horizontal to portray loyalty and integrity; the giveaway low-drawn eyebrows of the cowards, and the green faces of the lowlanders. In the rare quiet moments Gaston would lean across and tell me something of the plot, mostly historical, about conflicts going back thousands of years. When it was over he and I would join the cast for a glass of tea, maybe a bowl of *pho*, for Gaston always seemed to know the actors.

Until now my life in Lang Son had been easy. Our unit was attached to a long-range field artillery battery

10 kilometres from town, and there hadn't been a great deal of activity. But across the Chinese frontier, trouble was brewing. Japan had invaded China in 1937 and the fighting continued. Japan was convinced that victory in China depended upon stopping supplies being sent to the Chinese government through Tonkin, and she was now threatening our own borders.

But in my youthful naivety I never really believed we would be attacked by the Japanese. In the past three months I had been unhurried, unconcerned, organising ammunition depots and observation points in the hills around Lang Son. By four or five each afternoon I was back from the field. There seemed no rush.

Now, alone at one end of the bar, I wanted to block from my mind the coming morning. It seemed too unreal, a nightmare from which I would wake at any moment. I took another swig of my drink. Refusing or failing to comply could culminate in a court martial and long prison sentence, perhaps even a firing squad for me. The French Army dealt severely with anyone disobeying an order. There was no escape.

The barman handed me another Pernod. I breathed in the aromatic fumes of the liquid, then tossed it down, hoping it would send me quickly to sleep.

The first glow appeared over the hills to the east as I climbed into the truck, a wispy shroud of mist barely visible in the dim light. It was going to be hot for September. There were few people around that morning as we drove in the near darkness through the wide

streets of Lang Son. Just another day for most. Some early starters, men and women in loose brown peasant trousers, were trotting along with baskets on each end of carrying poles, to be first to set up at the marketplace. Here and there, sleepy chickens wandered out into the darkness of the street and then fled, squawking and flapping as our convoy of four trucks shattered the morning routine.

Again and again I thought, 'Why me?' Was it some elaborate scheme to test my reaction under duress? Was it because nobody else wanted to do it, this the worst of jobs, and since I was the most junior, I was chosen? I swore at the unfairness of it all. The post was full of battle-hardened mercenaries, Legionnaires who had seen active service and to whom death was all in a day's work. I had never fired a shot in anger, let alone seen a dead man. Yet today I was to command an execution. In the back of each of the four vehicles was a firing squad, a group of twelve men, one group for each of the four prisoners to be executed. Ten minutes behind us would be the truck carrying the prisoners. Ten minutes behind again another team would be preparing to leave, their task to collect the bodies and return them for burial.

There had been a further briefing. The drill was simple enough. Bumping over the dirt roads, I went through the procedure in my mind. I would line up the troops and issue each man with a bullet. Eleven would be live, the twelfth blank. The blank looked the same, gave a similar recoil upon being fired, but disintegrated

as it left the muzzle. Nobody would know who got the blank. Each soldier could believe, if he wished, that it had been he who received the blank, that he had not killed a man that morning. The prisoners would be brought out and I would offer them blindfolds. With the formalities complete I would give the order to fire. Afterwards the final grim task for me, as the officer in command, was to deliver the coup de grâce to the bodies — a shot to the temple of each, just to make sure. It was a straightforward exercise. I tried to feel detached. These men had been conspiring against the country and had to be eliminated. I was under orders and I had a job to do.

I shifted uneasily in my seat. For the last twelve months I had been concentrating on my studies in the theory of accurate artillery practice. There had been lectures on politics to which I, not being a political animal, had given no more attention than need be. At some time I had heard my father speak of the attempted revolution in 1930, before our time in this country, and of how the dissidents had been put down with severity, but until recently, as far as I was aware, the French authorities had been reasonably tolerant of any shadowy undercurrents of dissent in Indochina. But now things had changed.

The previous day's briefing had covered Hitler's pact with the Russian Communist leader, Joseph Stalin. Since the pact in 1939, French Communists had opposed the war against Hitler. From that moment they had been outlawed. In France the Communists, whether they were

party members or sympathisers, had disappeared from the streets. These people, who had once been a legitimate political force in alliance with the Socialists under the banner of the Front Populaire, became hunted men. The same thing, it seemed, was happening in Indochina. The Communists were being forced underground and had suddenly been labelled as spies, traitors, enemies of the country. These were the men to be executed today.

The drive out to the disused limestone quarry north of town was not long. We turned in as the light of dawn began to bathe the pit, and I recognised the flat rock face, the one to serve as a backdrop for the executions. Things began to happen very quickly. As the Annamese troops tumbled out of the trucks, I placed four markers on the ground, about 10 metres apart in front of the rock face. A quick re-briefing, and the men took their positions.

I stood waiting, feeling very uneasy. It was one thing killing a man in battle, quite another shooting a defenceless person in cold blood. I did not look at the troops, but remained in position, staring straight ahead. There seemed a deathly silence over the place. Not even a bird was singing. We were ready.

The sound of the prisoners' truck jarred me out of my trancelike state. It seemed to take an age for the vehicle to enter the quarry and come to a halt. Guards jumped out and began to open the back door. Suddenly someone shouted, one of the prisoners: 'Down with Imperialism! Independence for Vietnam!' Then all four of them began

to shout. I looked across as the men were marched to the marks I had set. They turned to face us — and my heart missed a beat. The one at the end threw his fist into the air. ‘Vive le Vietminh!’

It couldn’t be. How could it be? I peered at the man, and knew I had been right. It was Gaston.

I was confused, stunned. Gaston! Gaston here, inflamed, indifferent, shouting Communist slogans. Nguyen Nga, a Communist? But he was my friend! I felt physically ill. It was hard, too hard. I needed time to think.

But there was no time. All four of them were yelling Communist slogans now, anti-French slogans, standing at their markers, fired up, angry, unafraid. I stood rooted to the spot, until the tough little Annamese sergeant jolted me out of my stupor. I had to step forward and shout the business about the blindfolds to make myself heard, and it was then that Gaston looked at me for the first time. His face was passionate, not the mild, humorous face I had known. It did not change expression as he saw who I was. There was nothing, no sign of recognition, no word. Mine was no longer the face of a friend, but the face of the executioner, flushed with emotion, then pale, grim, appalled.

The blindfolds were brushed aside and the four stood defiant, still shouting ‘Vietnam doc lap!’ — ‘Independence for Vietnam!’. I stared straight ahead. Through the fog in my mind I heard my voice, loud and clear, yet within me ethereal and remote. ‘Ready . . . Aim . . . Fire!’ And at that moment, God forgive me, I looked away. The sound of

forty-eight shots reverberated against the rocks. Only when the echoes had died did I raise my eyes, to see the four bodies slumped on the ground. It was done. Just one more duty, pour la France, le coup de grâce, the death blow. Hazily I walked up to the nearest in the line, to Gaston. His body had twisted slightly as it fell, bloody and lifeless, and his familiar face lay turned towards me, eyes wide open, already glazing in death. My arm was wooden by my side. I wanted to wipe the sweat from my palm as my fingers curled tight around the handle of the revolver. I felt for the trigger. A wave of nausea swept over me and I choked back a dry retch as I took aim and fired the one shot into his temple. His body kicked a little from the force of the blow, and blood, thick and viscous, welled from his nose and mouth in a slow crimson flow onto the ground. I had forgotten to breathe and now my lungs filled suddenly as my mind mercifully shut down. I had killed my friend. My friend was dead. Stiffly, mechanically, I walked towards the next body in the line.

End of Chapter One

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