



# Saigon sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price

## Chapter two

**The story so far: It is 1959 and widower, James KcKinnon, with his three children Michelle sixteen, Samantha thirteen, and Jules eleven, have recently settled in Saigon having arrived from Kuala Lumpur in Malaya. James is with Asia Barr, a company that excels in buying up rubber plantations and other likely mining investments throughout South-East Asia. James has employed a French governess, Charmaine Curtaine, to attend to his children, but is encouraged to send Michelle to a prestige school in Saigon named the Nguyen Académie. Michelle is excited by the prospect and not quite by accident the family is introduced to the English teacher — the elegant Vietnamese-French Phuong Duval at the market place in Cholon. Also entering the scene at Cholon and being introduced to the family is an inspector of the secret French Sûreté, Claude Bastein. James is at first suspicious of the inspector's intentions, but then comes to accept the big man as a friend. Arrangements are made for a dinner at James' French colonial home in Saigon, with invitations to both the inspector and Phuong Duval.**

**T**he young Vietnamese man with the tick in his left eye watched as the French policeman bid his farewells to Charmaine Curtaine and the Mckinnons. Pham Van Kim rose from a table in the back of the bar-restaurant opposite the Cholon market and followed the big man out of the building. The Sûreté inspector of police stepped into a faded green 203 Peugeot and drove away, while Pham Van Kim scrambled onto his blue Mobylette moped and followed the Peugeot out of Cholon, heading for Saigon. He kept it in sight, deliberately hanging back in the dense traffic so as not to be observed. He knew what the French secret police were like — they were always looking about them for some signs of trouble. Even now, thought Kim, that man would be watching the rear vision mirror, though there would be no perceived threat. It was simply habit, obtained from years of investigations in France, then in Hanoi and Saigon, and within the towns and villages of the many provinces of Vietnam. Kim knew that the man ahead in that Peugeot could smell a rat some kilometres away. They would have to be one of the most cunning police forces in the world, he thought, and most of them had nerves of steel and a strength of interrogation that made the American CIA people look like tame mice.

Pham Van Kim was not a nationalist, nor Viet Minh — he was one of the newly formed guerrilla groups, the Viet Cong — allied of course with Ho Chi Minh's nationalists, but able and willing to carry out massacres and torture that the Minh would balk at. His leaders were not interested in negotiations at the Paris peace conferences between the North and the South, but were only determined to rid the country of all foreign powers and to destroy the reign of the capitalists and blood sucking leeches of the South.

His cousin, Pham Van Dong, had already paid a glorious price for his dedication. It was said he was held in an underground prison at the Saigon Sûreté headquarters, where perhaps inspector Bastein was now headed. Slowly, a plan began to form in the mind of Pham Van Kim. They would hold this inspector for ransom in exchange for their cousin. It would not be too difficult. . . the shadows were lengthening and soon it would be dark. And he felt the coolness of the sharp-bladed knife under his shirt, tucked into the waistband of his trousers, and if necessary the disguised hand grenade hanging from his belt within a camera case. He would force the inspector back into the Peugeot and take him by knife-point to his brother's flat in Cholon. Hoang was also a sympathiser with the Viet Cong and would be pleased to help. We will keep the inspector hidden for days, even weeks, until Dong is released by a secret exchange of persons.

It was a good plan and it would work. The inspector, even though he was an elite member of the Sûreté, would not be expecting such an attack, especially after enjoying the day at Cholon with liquor still flowing through his veins. Pham Van Kim was certain that the policeman would be turning his mind over and over to the very favourable reunion with that fair French woman — the governess to those British children. Kim smiled to himself as his plan grew in strength. It would not be long before his cousin was free again.

The temperature was still debilitating. Claude Bastein parked the heat filled Peugeot and made for the shade of the old French Sûreté building, now mostly taken over by President Diem's Vietnamese secret police. He stood in the shadows for a moment, sensing that something was not quite right, and then it came. . . the knife raked up through the



surface of his chest splitting his shirt in two and heading for his throat. Years of combat training and instinctive survival came into play. He slammed his right knee into the testicles of the Vietnamese attacker, who screamed with pain and dropped the blade just as it pricked the inspector's throat. Claude Bastein quickly wrapped his strong arms around the thin boyish figure in front of him, squeezing as tight as he could and locking his hands behind the man's back. There was a quiet pop, followed by a second, and the inspector thought it was one or more of the attacker's ribs snapping. The agony on the face of the Vietnamese was the signal for the inspector and he squeezed tighter and tighter until the boy's head fell limp upon his chest. Two Viet policemen leapt from the entrance of the Sûreté headquarters, kicked Pham Van Kim in the head, and grabbed the limp body of the attacker as it slumped to the pavement. They turned him over and slapped handcuffs on his wrists. Claude Bastein, not even out of breath, looked upon the scene with satisfaction. "Take the *imbécile bêtard* inside," he spat. "We'll be questioning him later, that is, if he survives."

**T** rue to her word, Phuong Duval had sent a message to the McKinnon household, stating that her diary was blank on the Friday evening that James had suggested for a dinner engagement at the McKinnon household. She arrived at 7.15 on the night, driven in her black Citroen Light 15 by her chauffeur, Kam. This time she was dressed in a pale blue *ao dai* with blue medium-heeled shoes. James greeted her with amazement. Not only was she more beautiful than when he had first seen her at the Cholon market, she was even more slender and taller than he had previously imagined, with he considered, curves in all the right places. Put her into any French or even British society, he thought, and she would pass as someone of the utmost regal importance. And to have come alone — apart from being chauffeured — this was someone of a strong independent mind. His respect for this woman rose considerably.

James had arranged other guests, apart from Charmaine the children's governess, to make up a table of nine or ten. He was not without some considerable influence in Saigon, especially in the diplomatic circles — mainly due to his superior in Dalat, Justin Trevallyn, whose wife Nguyet was descended from the old emperors of Annam. One of the emperor's daughters had married a provincial governor of the Red River Delta, and several generations down from there, Nguyet still retained a family connection with royalty. She was a distant cousin to the last emperor, Bao Dai, who had abdicated in 1945 under pressure from the Viet Minh. Because of this connection, James was able to organise certain high profile people almost at a moment's notice.

The first couple to arrive was the assistant consul of the British Embassy, Howson Pendlebury and his wife, Hilda. They were new to Saigon, coming from a previous posting at Rangoon in Burma. James greeted the forty-something-year-olds and couldn't help but notice how devoted they were to each other, as if they were newly-weds. There is sparkle in their eyes, he thought, that many other couples could but wish for. The second to arrive was the middle-aged Vietnamese Major General, Dao Hu Loc, accompanied by his wife Trinh. James looked over the short, but slim General, in his immaculate white uniform decorated with numerous ribbons, and James nodded with approval. Trinh, who was in her early twenties and slightly taller than her husband, held James' hand a little longer than he expected and beamed at him with a slight inclination of her head. He felt himself blushing and quickly squeezed and released the toes within his shoes.

While hors d'oeuvre's and light wines were being consumed, the third couple had not yet arrived. James glanced at his Omega Seamaster watch and wondered why the delay. His other guest, Claude Bastein, had also not arrived, but just as he turned to speak to the General he heard the Peugeot enter the semi-circular drive-way. He looked out and watched as the inspector stepped out of the vehicle. Very smartly dressed, thought James, though his face seemed a little more ruddier and tired than usual. The headlights of a black Cadillac swung up behind the inspector, causing the Frenchman to turn and view the new arrivals, while James's Vietnamese man-servant rushed forward to open the front passenger's door. The long slim legs that issued from the American car belonged to a blonde-haired occupant in her mid twenties. James held his breath. He had certainly and unknowingly invited Saigon's most beautiful women to his humble abode. The wife of the American Legation's first secretary was stunning, dressed in a long satin green gown with what appeared to be a cream orchid in her hair above her right ear. The only blonde among the women present, thought James, and she really knows how striking she is. The elegance with which she eased herself out of the car impressed him greatly. Her husband, Vernon Clement Harris, an ex Lieutenant Colonel of the United States Marines, curled his hand around her forearm, smiled at his wife, Melody, and together they moved toward the entrance. Sure will be some night, mused James as he turned to find Charmaine looking at him with a subtle smile on her face. He winked at her and gave a grin. She nodded back, knowing that this would be a night to remember.

Phuong Duval was leaning back onto a casement window with a glass of white wine in her hand. She was talking to Howson Pendlebury and his wife Hilda. They seemed absolutely fascinated with her. "So, Miss Duval, apart from France, you were a visitor to our noble British land for a time?" queried Howson, holding a glass of red wine.



Phuong had warmed earlier to this couple, though much older than her almost by a generation. Now, she was having second thoughts. There was something defenseless about them. She thought they were like children living out a pantomime while the world around them turned other people to dust. Were they living in a goldfish bowl, while the real world slipped and slithered around them? Embassy people, yes, but old school — no doubt educated within the public school system of England between the world wars, but with staid upper-class parents. So, perhaps somewhat detached from everyday life out in the fields and the factories. And what would they know about Vietnam's impatient urge for nationalism? Perhaps they were not so much different from some of the rather well-off children in her school? Even so, their child-like quality had some attraction to her. She was going to answer Howson's question when Charmaine butted in.

"If everyone is comfortable with it, we might head for the dining room."

James had skipped upstairs to check on the children, when coming down again he saw Phuong moving with the others toward the dining room. See how graceful she walks, he thought, his eyes gilded upon her figure. She was laughing at something Hilda Pendlebury had said. James stood there at the foot of the stairs for a moment, simply drawing in the breathless image before him. She will ask, no doubt, if he has made up his mind to send his daughter Michelle to the Nguyen Académie, and his answer surely had to be 'Yes'. It would cement his wish to see Phuong again and again.

Charmaine had arranged the specially rounded cuisine teak table so that she and James were almost at opposite sides, with Claude Bastein to her right, followed by the General and his wife, and next to James was Phuong Duval. On Phuong's right side were Howson Pendlebury and Hilda, then the Americans close to Charmaine.

During the meal there was much conversation, with James balancing and encouraging comments from all parties, but he was particularly attentive to the young slim English teacher of the Nguyen Académie in Saigon. He noticed that she sipped her wine carefully, unlike the men in the room who left no doubt in James' mind that they were more than moderate drinkers. Perhaps it is the lifestyle, he thought, or perhaps the uncertainty of the political and military scene. After what all the guests agreed was a sumptuous feast, the conversation began in earnest, helped along by some vintage French white and red wines. They had consumed Vietnamese hot pot soup, a number of Chinese fried rice dishes, various courses of fish, deep fried bananas with coconut ice-cream, Vietnamese wine, and Jasmine tea. Up to then, the conversation had been light and at times hilarious as each told of their younger days — most of them had at one time or another, been in Europe through delightful summers and freezing winters. Then somehow the conversation returned to Asia. Howson Pendlebury leant back in his chair, a glass of shiraz in his right hand, and with a wave of his left, said.

"We put on a number of variety shows for the troops in Burma. We were posted there twice. . . once, when we had only just been married during the early stages of the war. We raked in lot of folk from the embassy and some of the military. I got to sing Coward's 'Mad dogs of Englishmen go out in the midday sun'. I think I was a bit croaky but it went down all right."

Hilda laughed. "Oh, don't be so modest, Howson. They loved it."

"Perhaps," interrupted Claude Bastein, "You could sing it for us after dinner. That should be a riot."

"Did you know," said Howson, "that Noel Coward wrote that song here, traveling down from Hanoi to Saigon?"

Claude frowned. "That must have been a long time ago!"

"Oh, early thirties, I believe."

"Quieter days," said Vernon Harris, "Long before any of the troubles the world still finds itself in."

"Ah yes," said Claude, "Such wonderful days in Paris. The country had recovered from the war to end all wars — nightclubs were flourishing, and oh, how I enjoyed the Folies Bergere. The motor industries were booming — great advances in our Renault, Peugeot and Citroen factories."

"Much the same in America," said Vernon Harris. "We were building cars by the millions, solid automobiles that have lasted up to today. We exported them all over the world. There wouldn't be any country today that didn't see vast numbers of American vehicles."

"I think we French got there before you, Harris, oh, and the Italians too. Technically, we would be hard to beat anywhere in the world."

Howson Pendlebury piped up: "You're both forgetting the Germans. To my mind, their automobile technology is vastly superior to any other."

"Wa-al," said Vernon Harris, "Couldn't have been all that marvelous, otherwise they would have won the last war, don't you reckon?"



General Dao brushed some specks off his immaculate white uniform. “During my youthful days in Paris while studying at the military academy, I had the good fortune to obtain one of those Italian Lancia’s — a soft top touring Lambda — and I can tell you it was far superior to anything the French, the Germans or even the British could produce in those days, let alone the Americans. A ripping car that would blow anything off the road. Those large headlights, the flaring mudguards, the swept-back body — the French girls loved it. We cruised around the country roads outside of Paris almost every week-end having picnic after picnic.”

Trinh dug her elbow into his ribs. “Ooh, you never told me about that, you romantic beast! How many girl friends did you have?”

The General laughed and spilt some of his wine on the table. “Oh, we were so young and wild in those days. All good fun. Yes, the thirties were heady days, but it was totally in innocence.”

James looked at Phuong and smiled, then turned his attention to the General. “I can well imagine a good looking young officer at a French military academy would attract a considerable number of young French girls. You must have had your pick of the Parisian ladies, General.”

General Dao chortled. The wine had taken an affect upon him and he was in the mood for talk. “Yes, my fellow officers and I had our pick of the girls. Some of the French officers were jealous of us, so much so that they would sabotage our cars — usually flattening the tyres, so we retaliated on their cars. One of my colleagues painted over a French officer’s windscreen prior to a Saturday evening dance, so the man and his companions couldn’t go anywhere in the car that night. It was all good fun.”

“Really, Loc!” said Trinh, “What else have you not told me?”

“Ha ha, I will tell you later, my darling, when you are putting on your silken night gown. Or taking it off.”

“So,” broke in Melody with a giggle, “The dashing officer is still very romantic. If the whole world was like this, there would be no need for wars.”

“Oh, we still have our little bedroom wars,” said Trinh, taking a sip of her white wine, “But perhaps tonight there will be some overtures of peace.”

The group broke out into laughter. “Here’s to love and romance,” said Claude Bastein, raising his glass and they joined him, each touching glasses with the person next to them.

James’s man-servant was hovering around, topping up drinks. General Dao squinted at him and watched as the young Vietnamese worked his way around the table. Claude Bastein noticed the little interlude just as he was trained to do. He flicked his eyes back and forth from the manservant to the General, pocketing the almost unseen drama into his memory for later recollection. Something odd there, he thought. Earlier, he had noticed the manservant talking energetically to Phuong Duval’s Vietnamese chauffeur. He sighed and looked at the expensive Swiss chronometer on his left wrist. Might be time to get moving. He had to see about that Viet he had captured, but when he looked at Charmaine he thought perhaps it could wait until the morning. He thought she was quite charming, and he noted the way she had arranged the evening, with a sumptuous meal provided and the best French wines. She really was exquisite, and he would have to do something about that. He glanced around the table at the other guests, who seemed to be having a jolly time. His eyes settled upon James and Phuong. They appeared to be engrossed in some serious conversation, then Phuong smiled at James and nodded her head. At that instant Claude knew there was a flame ignited between the young couple that soon would turn into something more tangible. It’s early days, he thought, but passion shall have its way. . . then he thought, *and not only for them.*

The conversation had turned to local incidents. Howson Pendlebury switched his attention to Vernon Harris. “I heard through the embassy that two American soldiers had been killed at Bien Hoa — a Major and a Master Sergeant. What do you know about that, Harris?”

The American bit his lower lip. “All I can tell you is that it is classified at the moment. We shall be releasing a statement to the press in due course.”

“But,” said Howson, it is my understanding that your people here — and several hundred of them at that — are all civilian aid personnel. What are American soldiers doing up country? What are you hiding?”

It was obvious to all around the table — where silence had suddenly fallen — that Vernon Harris was not pleased with the way the conversation had suddenly changed. Claude Bastein thought, here we go. . . he’s stuck between a wall and a charging bull. If he admits that America has troops here, the shit is going to splatter all over, and if he somehow



squirms his way out of it by saying they are soldiers on leave from some other base — perhaps the Philippines — who is going to believe him? But to Claude's amazement, the American came right out with it.

"I have to say, that yes, we do have some army personnel here, but they are simply as advisors to General Dao's people. Naturally, we would prefer that this knowledge would have remained between the AVRN\* military and our own government, but I do not see that with this incident breaking, it makes much difference. The men are only advisors and as our two countries are eager that any insurgency from the north does not escalate, then that's fine by our American public."

Melody Harris opened up: "I don't see the problem. You all know that we are here to help. We are not here to fight someone else's war for them, but communism must be contained otherwise it will spread throughout South-East Asia and down into other Pacific countries. What began in China and North Korea must not be replicated here. In this room we have unity — French, Vietnamese, British, American, all friends together. We stood with each other during the last world war, and we stand with each other now to protect freedom. I propose a toast to freedom. Let us raise our glasses. TO FREEDOM!"

The gathering stood from the table and raised their voices and glasses. "TO FREEDOM! TO FREEDOM!"

The cell was almost bare, and even within the heat of the rising sun outside, a certain chill engulfed him. Pham Van Kim shifted on the tiny bunk where he had lain almost unconscious during the night, to a searing pain in his chest. He hardly noticed the tick in his left eye, manifesting badly. Someone had strapped his upper body up with bands of tight strong cotton and elastic. He dared not move, the pain was excruciating, so he lay there and looked around. There was a bright insect-specked electric light bulb hanging from the white ceiling — cobwebs in the corners where no doubt spiders lurked watching out for prey, not that he considered there would be much in this airless room. Whatever air there was that he could breathe seemed stagnant, and with each breath he did take, the pain in his chest struck him like a whip. There were ghosts in this room, stark reminders of those who had been before him, probably ending up as emaciated beings not knowing who or what they were in the end. He knew that it was a torture chamber, the dried blood in one corner of the room alluded to that. What they might do to him he could not imagine, not that it would make any difference to his quest. They would not break him.

Apart from the steel bunk, the furniture was minimal — a small wooden table in the centre of the room with two steel chairs each side, and a rusted, dented bucket in one corner which was obviously used as a toilet. There was nothing else. The walls were painted a heavy shade of grey with patched cracks on all, snaking from floor to ceiling. In some areas near the corners, there was considerable green and black mould. He could see it, he could smell it. On one side there was a heavy metal door with a small barred glass window. Beyond was a brooding darkness.

He'd heard some metallic crashing noises at times. He didn't know what time it was, whether it was night or day because they had taken his watch. They had also taken the ring his mother had given him for his sixteenth birthday. He rubbed his right hand where the gold ring had been and remembered that day. The family had all been around him, his mother, father, two sisters and his elder brother Hoang. It was a happy occasion and he'd had his first taste of liquor. He fondly remembered his mother's voice — he being the youngest of the family she tended to dote on him more than the others. She was well overdue when she gave birth and the midwives were concerned for her health, but in the end the birth came naturally and surprisingly painless. This was, she had thought, a good omen. The child would grow up to be someone who would make his mark in the world, possibly to be famous. He would be a leader. Out of habit he reached down for the camera case where he often carried the grenade, but it was gone, as also was his trousers. He was lying there with only a pair of urine stained underpants to clothe him. It was then that he noticed the chain and the heavy locked clasp around his right ankle with one end of the chain firmly attached to the wall.

Kim was eighteen. He had a girlfriend, Cuc, which means Chrysanthemum, who he intended to marry as soon as the South was defeated. The couple would have to wait, for the prime purpose of his life now was to bring about the saving of his beloved country from foreign influence, and that meant he was determined to do anything to achieve that purpose. In his mind he knew it was a holy cause, and that murder of enemies was totally justified because it removed them from spheres of corrupt influence. He could never understand why many of his own people were supporters of the South Vietnam government, which to his mind, was evil. They sit there in their marble palaces eating and drinking expensive luxuries and fornicating night and day, while the peasants in the fields have nothing. These capitalists must be destroyed and replaced by the correct Lenin/Marxist regime that is all consuming and spreading like righteous wildfire across the world in the name of freedom. As he thought of this he smiled, knowing that the pain he was going through was insignificant with the good fight for a freedom that would eventually come. The red star of the North would rise and



conquer and it was his destiny —and Cuc's too, for she was with him in body, mind and spirit — to help bring about a new dawn for Vietnam, after having been subjected to colonial powers for so long. The influence of the French — although their troops were now gone, defeated by that hero Comrade General Giap at Dien Bin Phu several years ago — was still strong within Vietnam and with the government of the South. All must be defeated, all must be either thrown out of the country, or be buried. There was no other way. This prison was but a tiny episode in his life. He would survive it and go on to be the destroyer of imperialism.

He saw a light appear on the other side of the small glass window on the door, and heard voices. Shortly, a key snapped into the lock and turned. There was a sharp click and the door opened to reveal a large Chinese male in jungle greens, carrying a small case. Behind him was also a large man, a Caucasian person whom Kim recognised as the inspector of the Sûreté he had tried to kidnap. And now he wondered if his cousin Pham Van Dong had been incarcerated here earlier, and if so, where was he now? In another cell, or had he been eliminated? Kim had a fair idea of what was in the case, but any pain that the big Chinese could extract from him would simply be an addition to the pain he already felt and he was ready for that. Already he could smell the body odour of the Chinese who had no insignias or stripes on his uniform. Kim was at a loss to know who or what he was, except that he knew that the man was very dangerous.

The inspector stepped forward, wiping some perspiration from his forehead. “Well, good morning my little friend. Oh don't worry, we have your moped safe within our compound, no one is going to steal it. Now, as soon as you have answered some fascinating questions of ours you will receive food and drink. It may not be all that tasty, but it will help in your recovery. I won't go so far as to say that you may be released anytime in the near future, but depending upon your answers, you may get a taste of the open air — that is to say, a small re-education camp not all that far from Saigon, where you may, or may not. . . depending upon your rehabilitation. . . entertain visitors from your family. If you co-operate, you may even get to see your girl-friend, Cuc.”

So, thought Kim, they know all about me, my family, my love. What is there that they do not know? If only I could get some warning to my brother Hoang.

**C**hu Lam Long held the Russian AK47 semi-automatic rifle steady. He and his cadre of eleven Viet Cong men and two women, watched the small convoy of American aid trucks move through the mountain pass north-east of Saigon. The Cong were looking for any signs of military intrusion and were anxious to know what was under the tarpaulins covering the trucks. Several of Long's men wanted to attack the whole convoy, but he had issued a stern caution. As a compromise, he considered that they might take the last truck in the convoy when the vehicles entered a sharp bend to the right of where the cadre was hiding. The only snag was the escort of AVRN\* soldiers in front and coming up behind, which was larger than usual, with several armoured troop carriers. Perhaps, thought Long, we might let this one go through. It is too much of a risk and there are other ways of finding out what the cargo is. They would return to the village and discuss a new plan.

His younger brother, Hung, screwed up his face at this decision. “We had them right where we wanted them. What are you doing? We must destroy the imperialists. . . those trucks would be full of guns and ammunition for the provincial regiments.”

Long thumped him on the shoulder. “It is best to be sure, rather than unsure. Our glorious leader, Comrade Ho Chi Minh, would recommend that. You will need more instruction in the Way. Be careful, Hung, lest I send you north for instruction.”

“That's not fair. I was only making an observation.”

“It was more than an observation, little brother. You have much to learn about tactics. I really might just do that. . . send you north.”

“If you could get me under the command of Comrade General Giap of our comrades, the Viet Minh, I would go lovingly, though I would then miss you so much. It was always my wish to be with you in this sojourn for release from the imperialist pigs.”

Long smiled and clapped his brother around the shoulders. “Well, maybe you should learn more by watching and listening to me. It is better that brothers stay together in this cause, do you not think?”

One of the female cadre members — Du Truong Linh — shouldered her rifle as she passed by, smiling at the two brothers.



“Comrade Du, will you guide my brother to the village and make sure that he is instructed in party principles regarding the surveillance of suspect vehicles.”

Linh laughed and took Hung by the hand. Long grinned at her, knowing how she felt about his brother, Hung. They were a couple, but Long had warned them to make sure that Linh did not become pregnant. Follow the rules, he had reiterated time and again. Follow the rules.

The villagers crowded around them when they returned. An old man with a limp simply spat on the ground and waved his stick at them, but women and children were smiling and gaily welcoming the cadre, as if the soldiers were coming back from a successful campaign. The old man, sprouting a wispy grey beard and slightly hunched of back, came up to Hung and poked him in the stomach with his stick.

“You are bad people, take our food and give nothing in return.”

Hung laughed. “Go away stupid old man, or I will put you in your grave.”

“Ignorant peasant boy! Take your people and leave us.”

“If we leave, old man, others will come and burn down your village. Is that what you want?”

The man leant on his stick. “And that will be because of you. We lived in peace before you came, now we are living in fear from soldiers everywhere. When you go, the others come and search, and *they* also take food. We had good supplies from our small farms before, now we are in trouble of feeding our children. You are parasites.”

Hung hit him then, not hard, but a light stinging blow to the face and the old man fell to the ground. Long came rushing up, handed his automatic rifle to Linh, and slowly picked the villager up.

“Here’s your stick venerable aged person. Now, it is best for you to go to your hut and rest. Be assured that we will find other resources and leave the village food for yourselves, but of course it is an honourable act for village people to give to the revolutionary cause, so if your people can do that in some small way, our leader Comrade Ho Chi Minh will look kindly upon you and your people. One day there will be no other soldiers to come and upset you, for we shall be victorious.”

Long turned to Hung. “Don’t forget, little brother, I can always send you back north.”

Hung seemed puzzled, but dropped his head and softly murmured “Commander.”

Later, as the moon began its shining climb into the night sky, the cadre rested away from the village, greatly hidden within the jungle. At a distance from the other cadre members and resting under a makeshift canopy, Linh and Hung lay together on a waterproof sheet. They were fully clothed, both being aware of the movement’s rules. You could have affairs, but pregnancies were out of the question. Linh stroked his face. “You shouldn’t have hit that old man, my love. He could not fight back.”

“He was rude, and rudeness is not accepted under our new jurisdiction. Did you hear what he called us—parasites! If anyone is a parasite, it is him. He has outlived his usefulness. What good are old people like him, even to his village? Soon he will need someone to spoon-feed him and change his underwear. Stinking, filthy old man.”

“Hush. He is someone’s father, and undoubtedly someone’s grandfather. You do not know what his life has been like over the years. For many in those villages it has been a grim struggle, with bad weather, failed crops. And with many children to feed and clothe. They don’t have much. I myself, came from a poor village in the north — I know what it is like to wonder where the next meal is coming from. You and Long came from a better class of village where your father was well off and respected. You didn’t have to worry about anything.”

“Yes, but they were the old feudal days when the tiers of village command were incorrect, imperialistic. Now my father is living a modest life helping to eliminate the capitalist way, being pardoned for his superior ideas, and now even helping with the work of re-writing our history. He is a changed man, wishing to give Comrade Ho Chi Minh his full support. It is not the same as a dirty old man who still clings to feudalism and shits in his pants.”

Linh sighed and pushed her body closer to him. “You see things somewhat differently, my love, but I know where you are coming from. Let us follow in the footsteps of our beloved Comrade Ho Chi Minh and let him guide our thoughts. He has sacrificed so much for us not to lose sight of the honourable things of life. Whatever the old village man’s thoughts and attitudes are, we need to respect him and slowly help to bring about change in his thinking. Any violence towards him and his like can only lead to a separation of ideas.”



Hung kissed her. “I can see now why you wish to be a school teacher when this is all over. We shall settle in Hanoi where I will be a member of the Minh politburo and you will be head teacher of a new school our administration shall build. My clever brother, Long, will not always be a Commander, but will be part of Comrade General Giap’s divisional chiefs. As you know, he was recalled to Hanoi the other month and given a commendation for his work in the field. Soon he will be promoted and we, dear angel, will also find promotion under his leadership.

She returned his kiss, then caressed his face and neck. “Let us sleep, for we have a full day tomorrow. Commander Long has received instructions of the whereabouts of an AVRN\* platoon that he plans to ambush. As second in command, I fully endorse such a tactic.”

Commander Long, however, had other things on his mind. He had received news that his sister’s boyfriend — a dedicated member of the Cong, had been taken prisoner and was held inside the old Saigon Sûreté headquarters. So, how would they get Pham Van Kim out of there before the torture began? •

*To be continued.*

\* Army of South Vietnam

## Oz Child

### Early intervention key to better protect children and young people

A new report released by **Social Ventures Australia Limited (SVA Consulting)** makes a strong economic case for long-term investment in targeted early intervention and intensive family preservation to prevent children entering out-of-home care (OOHC) in Victoria.

“Diverting children from out-of-home care, preserving family relationships and keeping kids with family is not only the right thing to do, it makes sound economic sense,” says Michelle Van Doorn, National Executive Director of Services, **OzChild**.

“The report paints a pretty clear picture, over a 10-year period Victoria can save \$1.6 billion in the child protection and out-of-home care systems alone and divert 1,200 children a year from out-of-home care. It is imperative, through greater investment in early intervention strategies, for the system to evolve to ensure better outcomes for children and families,” adds Ms Van Doorn.



The number of children involved in the child protection and OOHC system in Victoria is increasing – both in terms of numbers of children as well as a percentage of the population. From 2013 to 2018, the number of children in OOHC increased 11% per year (SVA analysis. Compound annual growth rate of all children in OOHC, based on AIHW Child Protection Australia 2017-18).

The total cost of protective intervention and OOHC services in Victoria in 2017-18 was \$943 million (Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2019, 2017-18 costs).

Creating safe and nurturing environments for young Victorians by supporting parents to better prepare them to care for and nurture their kids to prevent child abuse and neglect is imperative in turning the tide on the number of children receiving child protection services.

That is why, for the past five years **OzChild** has been working hard to implement evidence-based programs to address the growing number of children being placed in OOHC.

“**OzChild** has been delivering Multisystemic Therapy – Child Abuse and Neglect and Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare in NSW as part of the Their Futures Matter strategy to overhaul the coordination and delivery of services to vulnerable children, young people and families.

Over the two years to 2017/18 the number of children entering out-of-home care in NSW has fallen by 44.5%. NSW now has the lowest rate of children and young people admitted to out-of-home care.

“There is no doubt in my mind the investment in evidence-based early intervention programs in NSW has contributed to these significant reductions, a greater investment here in Victoria would see similar results,” adds Ms Van Doorn. •