

Sharing The Rations

by Dennis Smith

Speech, Junior

TRAN RELAXED for a minute on the dike and looked skyward at the two rows of helicopters high above and watched their long swinging circle until his dark brown eyes lost them in the brightness of the morning sun. He turned his gaze down to the adjacent field where Gris was grazing and remembered how frightened the animal had been when the helicopters came near. Even the smell of the Americans bothered the water buffalo and now that Gris had calved, Tran realized he would have even more difficulty holding two animals if the Americans came again.

"Lan-dee," his mother called, and he jumped off the dike and back into the field to continue planting the rice. Soon the monsoon rains would start and Tran's mother would let him go to school every day then. Now it was more important to get all the rice planted before the first rain, and Tran knew he was expected to help since, at ten, he was the oldest of his two sisters and one brother. Tran resumed his work as he thought about his mother's promise that he could go back to school the day after the planting was finished. Today they were working the last field and Tran was excited about returning to school after a week's absence.

Tran liked school. It was there he learned about the war and why the Americans were in his country. He also learned about North Viet Nam and Ho Chi Minh, but could never understand why his father was fighting as a Viet Cong.

The last time Tran had seen his father was during Tet, the traditional holiday, when the old looking, bow-legged man came home with a big bag of rice tied to his bicycle. Tran listened to his father tell how his squad had taken the

rice from a woman in Tre Binh and knew his mother was disappointed even though she never said anything about it.

Tran had found it difficult to sleep that night with the excitement of the holiday and Gris about to calve, and once he heard someone rustling about and looked up to see his father removing something from the bag of rice. Since he was awake, his father invited him outside, and in the moonlight Tran noticed his father was carrying a weapon. Tran often wondered later why his father had taken him along that night and then told him to forget everything they did.

When Tet was over, his father left again, and Tran helped his mother carry the bag of rice to the cattle shed, and it had remained there ever since.

Tran worked absent-mindedly in the field, his long naked legs tucked neatly beside his body, his knees up next to his shoulders and the cuff of his black shorts down next to the heels of his brown bare feet. His fingers worked swiftly at the soil between his legs, and his toes left a foreign trail in the dry earth as his feet worked his haunched body sideways down the rows. Yesterday, he had worked this same field with Gris pulling the plow and the calf following along behind. While he worked he decided to name the calf Charlie, a nickname he had heard the American G.I.'s use. He had long ago decided to raise Charlie to be the biggest and best water buffalo in the whole province.

The sounds of artillery drifted to their rice field and an occasional burst of machine gun fire could be heard when it wasn't muffled by the wind. Tran's thoughts drifted from the water buffalo and the rice planting to the artillery and machine guns, and those helicopters. He wondered if his father was out there, or if the firing was just another precaution taken by the Americans. He had seen the Americans working several times with all their equipment and ammunition, and knew that some day his father would be caught, or killed.

"Aye," his mother shouted and pointed to where he was working and told him to keep his rows straight. Tran looked at where he had been, and back to where he was, near the end of a row. His mind wandered again quickly and he was thinking of tomorrow and school.

By mid-afternoon they had finished the planting and Tran took Gris and Charlie to the well for a water bath. The animals loved the cooling water and Tran spent the rest of the afternoon drawing water from the well with the old wooden bucket and then dumping the water first on Gris and then on Charlie.

The next morning, Tran donned his clean white shirt and rubber thongs and rode his bicycle to school. At recess, a convoy of Americans rolled down the dirt road past the schoolhouse and all the students ran to the edge of the road in hopes of getting some candy or C-rations. The young ones just held out their hands, but Tran and his older friends gave the G.I.'s the peace sign. Most of the soldiers returned the gesture and threw some olive-drab cans of white bread or date pudding over the heads of the school children. Tran's long legs made him the fastest runner at school, but today he stayed by the edge of the road and watched the other kids chase the cans of food. He saw a sundry pack come flying out of a jeep and he jumped high into the air to grab it and bring it down. After school, he and three other boys shared the old, brown-stained Chesterfields that had been in the foil packet. He would take the small package of salt home to his mother, the sugar to his young brother, and let his sisters share the two pieces of Chiclets.

On his way home that afternoon, the helicopters came and flew low over his head. Tran stopped his bike and stood watching them till they banked sharply and started to drop out of sight behind the bamboo thickets. As soon as they turned, he knew where they were going to land and he dropped his bicycle and broke through the hedgerow as fast as his legs would go. He was out of his thongs in the first two steps and the elephant grass sliced at his bare legs. He cut across the rice paddies and hurdled the dikes and then caught his white shirt on a bamboo branch as he tried to jump through the hedgerow bordering their property. The helicopters were just touching down and the G.I.'s leaping out. In the clearing behind the house, Tran saw his father running for the cover of the trees and he watched as a gunship came over the hedgerow, found the moving target, and

stopped it. Through the swirling dust from the helicopters blades, Tran saw Gris running and snorting in mad circles around the stake that was holding her in place. Around the outside of this circle of fury was Charlie, who would run first one way and then the other. Tran started into the open paddy in an effort to reach the animals and hold them. The helicopters lifted and the soldiers began their advance when Gris broke loose and charged to protect her young.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tran saw his mother come from the house waving her arms frantically, but it was too late. He heard the shots and saw Gris drop quickly to her neck in a cloud of dust. Charlie hadn't known what to do, and he was now running wildly to catch up to his mother. Another two shots sounded and the calf dropped at his mother's heels.

Tran tugged his shirt loose from the branch and went back through the hedgerow to the spot where he had gone with his father that night during Tet. He brushed away the dirt on the top of the hiding place and pulled open the lid. He reached down inside the hole and pulled out the AK-50 and a magazine of ammunition. He loaded the weapon and then pulled the hinged bayonet down perpendicular to the barrel just as his father had shown him. Now, by simply sticking the bayonet in the ground and pivoting the barrel on the bayonet, a wide area could be covered quickly. Tran remembered his father's words and squeezed the trigger back gently and held it there until he saw two of the soldiers fall from the force of the gun. Then he left the weapon, jumped up, and began running, faster than anybody at school, faster than anybody in the whole province. His father's squad was out there somewhere and he had to find them.

Tran's run was slowed momentarily by the piercing movement of a shell catching up to him, but then he ran some more, and some more, until two more of the shells outran him. His body tumbled onto the freshly planted rice field and his heart stopped with the impact of his chest against the shirt pocket that held the salt, sugar, and chiclets.