

Diary of North Vietnam Doctor Killed in U.S. Attack Makes War Real

By SETH MYDANS New York Times

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HANOI, Vietnam — A lost wartime diary by a doctor in which she tells of love, loneliness and death on the Ho Chi Minh Trail has become a best seller in Vietnam, bringing the war alive for a new generation of readers.

[Skip to next paragraph](#)

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Doan Bao Chau for The International Herald Tribune

Dr. Tram's mother, Doan Ngoc Tram, with a picture of her daughter. Mrs. Tram and another daughter traveled to Texas to recover Dr. Tram's diary.

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A four-hour television series and interactive web site by The Times, The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the ZDF network of Germany.

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Courtesy of Dang Thuy Tram's family

A high school photo of Dr. Dang Thuy Tram from 1960. Her first two wartime notebooks are missing, adding mystery to her life.

The journey of the diary itself has given it a special postwar symbolism for people here. It was returned to the doctor's family just last year by a former American soldier who recovered it after she died on the battlefield in 1970.

The writer, Dang Thuy Tram, was killed at the age of 27 in an American assault after she had served in a war-zone clinic for more than three years. Among the intertwining passions she expressed were her longing for a lost lover and her longing to join the Communist Party.

This combination of revolutionary fervor with the vulnerabilities and self-doubts of a too-sensitive young woman might be called ideology with a human face, reminding readers that it was people like them, trapped in a moment of history, who died on their behalf.

"Later, if you are ever able to live in the beautiful sunshine with the flowers of Socialism," wrote Dr. Tram, addressing herself, "remember the sacrifices of those who gave their blood for the common goal."

Her story stops abruptly with a cascade of blank pages in her little book, putting an inconclusive end to her passions and hopes, a reminder that life can be more pointlessly cruel than fiction.

Two days before she was killed, Dr. Tram wrote of her weariness and her longing for "a mother's hand to care for me."

"Please come to me and hold my hand when I am so lonely," she wrote. "Love me and give me strength to travel all the hard sections of the road ahead."

It is this tenderness of feeling that has drawn readers, breaking with a genre of politically correct diaries that emphasized the heroism but not the pathos of war.

"Just yesterday," she wrote at one point, "a badly wounded soldier 21 years old called out my name, hoping I could help him, but I could not, and my tears fell as I watched him die in my useless hands."

When the diary was serialized in newspapers last year, people cut out and saved the articles, passed them among their friends and read them aloud to one another. When it was published as a book, its print run was a sensational 300,000 or more in a country where books are generally published in small numbers, well under one-tenth that number.

"I really admire her," said Vu Thi Lan, who works in a camera shop and said she was 38, "the same age as her daughter if she had had one."

Ms. Lan said she had read everything she could find about Dr. Tram in newspapers and on Web sites, and wondered whether, in the doctor's place, she could have found the strength to endure.

"In my generation we haven't had a chance to live in that kind of situation," Ms. Lan said. "And it's a diary. It's real. That's what makes it interesting. She didn't mean for people to read it. It was just to release her feelings."

Two-thirds of Vietnam's 83 million people were born after the war ended, in 1975. "So for them, the Vietnam War is ancient history," said Hue-Tam Ho Tai, a professor of Vietnamese history at Harvard. "It's their parents' history and it's rather dry, especially in the way it's taught."

This looser, more nuanced presentation suggests that the Communist government, which bases much of its legitimacy on its wartime victories, "is secure enough to feel that it's O.K. to talk about the hardship of the war as well as the glory of it," Ms. Tai said.

At one point, speaking of lost friends, Dr. Tram wrote bitterly, "War never cares about anyone."

The book's huge press run reflects real demand, said Peter Zinoman, a professor of Vietnamese history at the University of California at Berkeley. But it may also involve an effort by the government to "re-energize these old values."

He said Dr. Tram might now enter an official pantheon of wartime heroes, who include a number of brave young women.

In addition to the book, a hospital is being built and a statue erected in her memory at the remote site of her clinic in Quang Ngai Province in central Vietnam.

Her grave just outside Hanoi has drawn hundreds of visitors, and special "Following Dang Thuy Tram" tours have begun taking visitors to places mentioned in her diary.

The visits to Hanoi of the American soldier who saved her diary, Fred Whitehurst, have drawn wide attention and he has been welcomed almost as a member of the family by Dr. Tram's mother, Doan Ngoc Tram, 81, and three sisters.

In a telephone interview from North Carolina, Mr. Whitehurst, who is now a lawyer, said he had been a military interrogator whose job included sifting through captured documents and destroying those that were of no tactical value.

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He said he had come to feel that his discovery of the diary linked him and Dr. Tram in a shared destiny, and he now calls her "my sister and my teacher."

"We were out there at the 55-gallon drum and burning documents," he said, describing that moment, "when over my left shoulder Nguyen Trung Hieu said, 'Don't burn this one, Fred, it already has fire in it.' "

In the evenings that followed, Mr. Hieu, his translator, read passages to him from the small book with its brown cardboard covers and, Mr. Whitehurst said, "Human to human, I fell in love with her."

According to Dr. Tram's account, two earlier volumes were lost in a raid by American troops, which means the published diary begins as abruptly as it ends, as if in mid-conversation.

Last year, after keeping it for decades at home, Mr. Whitehurst donated the diary to the Vietnam Archives at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Within weeks, Dr. Tram's family was located in Hanoi through informal veterans' networks, and last October her mother and sisters were brought to Texas to be reunited with the diary.

"It seemed that my own daughter was in front of me," her mother said in an interview at her home. "For me the information in the diary is not the important thing. What is

important is that when I have the diary in my hands, I feel I am holding the soul of my daughter."

She said she was only able to read the diary in small sections because of the power of the account. "She wrote us letters, but we never imagined that she was suffering those dangers," the mother said.

"It's my birthday today," Dr. Tram wrote on Nov. 26, 1968, "with enemy guns sounding from all four directions. I am used to this scene already, rucksack on my shoulder, taking the patients to run and hide. After two years on the battlefield, it was nothing."

Her real battlefield, though, seems to have been within herself. The diary is as much a drama of feelings as a drama of war.

From the start, she went to the front with mismatched aims, her mother said: to fight Americans — "bloodthirsty demons," she called them — and to follow a childhood love, a soldier she refers to only by an initial, M.

The story of their failed reunion has disappeared with the first two volumes of her diary. The passages that remain are filled with the pain and recriminations of lost love.

"Where are you, M?" she wrote. "Are we really so far away from each other, my beloved? Why do I feel that my heart is still bleeding?"

Throughout the pages, written in a tiny, neat script, Dr. Tram continued to try to tame her restless thoughts and to force the romantic heart of a young woman into the rigid discipline of a soldier and a Communist.

"Do you understand, Miss Stubborn Girl?" she chided herself, or, using an affectionate family name, "Answer the question, stubborn Miss Thuy."

It is a struggle she never wins. Dr. Tram seems unable to distance herself from her sorrows and hopes, or from the patients she treats and loves.

"Oh! Why was I born a girl so rich with dreams, love, and asking so much from life?" she wrote.

In an entry dated February 1969, as soldiers around her prepared for battle, she tried, once again, to push away her feelings.

"Forget all the thoughts of love burning in your heart and pay attention to your job!" she ordered herself. "Can't you hear the sounds of the guns, signaling the start of the Spring Offensive?"