

It's 1991 at Government House in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Oh, I do hate these government receptions, especially now that I'm retired, but Sister Binh says I have to be here, to show how important we women were in the war, and still are now. Ha, here's the wife of the new Mexican ambassador heading my way ...

And, as I expected, she thought I was 'Madame Binh', who was our foreign minister for the South, and internationally famous for sitting with the enemy in Paris, negotiating a deal for peace that took two more years, and our final offensive on Saigon, to realise.

Anyway, the little Mexican lady asks me when I'd had time to get all the medals on my silk *ao dai*, our traditional long dress, that I have gladly adopted instead of that itchy green uniform. I helped the young woman get over her confusion by telling her what each one was given to me for. My favourite is the tin affair that my River Unit made for us way back then, after half of us dressed up and larked about on the bank to distract the French sailors, while half the unit attached limpet mines to the other side of their ship ...

No, I wasn't involved in much front-line action, but I did a lot of planning for some of that, but mainly for what Uncle Ho called the 'Long-haired Army'. We were just as important as our army brothers - as communications operatives, as village explainers and organisers, as medical and social workers, as spies ... The women who got closest to death, and most often, were our drivers, mechanics and road- and trail-menders on the land transport network that the Americans called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The women with the most nerve-wracking jobs were the spies who beguiled enemy officers, and, yes, even slept with them if they thought they could get useful information from them.

No, I'm not saying exactly who I organised, what I did or didn't do. But leaders did have to have experience of what we were asking our units to do. How else could we

plan realistic operations with them? We wouldn't have had their respect, or their results, if we hadn't.

You see, resistance was a way of life in my farming village in the Mekong Delta. Against the French. I was only ten when they beat up my brother in front of me. After that, my education consisted of finding ways to trick and block them. Later, my sweetheart Sung and I arranged a big wedding as a distraction to keep the local French lookouts from spotting a flotilla of our fighters being ferried to Ben Tre. We'd been planning to marry anyway, so that was extra fun.

Sung was caught stealing weapons and imprisoned before Minh, our little boy, was born ... I had the baby with me on a reconnaissance trip up river. And I'll never know who tipped off the *securité* who threw me and Minh into a filthy jail. He died there ... That was the worst time, also because I got word that Sung had died in another prison ... But we women eventually tricked the guards and got out and away - and carried on.

After the brothers in the North captured Dien Bien Phu, in 1954, the French just crumbled. But the deals done with the Americans meant that we ended up with a new enemy, who had better radios, bigger guns, *and* they used chemicals ... pheaew! I just threw myself into learning about them, and devising new tricks we needed to get rid of them and that puppet regime in Saigon. That's when the village espionage wing that my sisters and I developed really took off, helping thousands of Saigon's soldiers to desert.

In the Tet Offensive in '68, we patched up our own wounded soldiers and got them to the safe refuges we had set up. After that test of strength, we set up our provisional government for the South in one of our forest complexes.

That's where I met an intellectual sister called Nguyen thi Binh who soon took charge of our foreign ministry and whom we sent to Paris to represent us at those peace talks.

Nguyen thi Binh - what a woman! Here she is now, in a lovely silver-grey *ao dai*, to tell my little group that it was our women who shortened the war, not the Paris talks.

Our brothers all knew that, which is why they elected me Vietnam's first woman vice-president.

But I'm tired now, and I'm handing that baton to Little Sister Binh.

General Nguyen thi Dinh, 1920-92

Judith Appleton