

On the Borders of Tonkin 1885-1887

Chapter 2

Chu. -Dong-song. Thanh-Moi. -Reoccupation of Lang - son

Commander Servièrè is prepared for an immediate march to Lang - son; he will receive us at Lam, and as soon as immediately our horses and our luggage arrived, we go to the position of Chu, to spend the night there.

The whole column is deploying around the position, it consists of a company of the 23rd regiment, two companies of Vietnamese soldiers, a section of artillery and thirty African infantry men, these last forming the special escort of the commission. The sight of the camp of Chu during the night formed a picturesque spectacle; troops, methodically placed on the roads, completely surround the twelve or fifteen hundred coolies carrying baggage and supplies for the entire column. These coolies in each of which the administration circulated a mantle of palm leaves and a red woolen blanket, are gathering around their fires, cooking rice, laughing and chattering overnight instead of rest. They seem to accept willingly the strong chore that is imposed on them. However we shouldn't be too proud, and despite close supervision there, upon departure, 30 of them have deserted.

The village of Chu is located at the boundary of the fertile regions; further, to Dong-song, the country is desolated from the fertile part which the Vietnamese call "the land of hunger and death," despite the troubled state of the surroundings, people start coming supplying market Chu of poultry, eggs and the vegetables. We stayed here for 24 hours to finally organize the column. We abandoned some of our provisions, not carrying that for one month of food so this will make a sizeable and reasonable convoy, because we need to bring everything with us and anticipate that we will often have to deal with our Chinese colleagues.

On the 14th, we were leaving for Pho - cam.

We meet on the road a few burned thatched houses and traces of camps; rice fields are fallow for several years. This is however not an infertile region, it has grown once. This is war and piracy that desolated this part of Tonkin.

After the small post of Pho - cam, we leave on the 15th in the morning, the country becomes woody and very picturesque, the road is cut off from many arroyos, and walking is painful for our coolies: also the desertions continued, and some die while en route the cholera or rather this little described disease which, in our columns in Tonkin, made so many victims among our soldiers and especially among the coolies, and which I do then can give another name "overwork."

A small post lost; called Camp of the Tigers, monitors the road and provides communication with Dong-song, where we arrived at night.

This point is one of the unhealthiest of Tonkin, and how could it be otherwise? Fightings happened here few months ago: many bodies of Chinese killed by the valiant troops of general de Nègrier; and especially the coolies, horses and mules which died of fatigue during this difficult operation, were only

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imperfectly buried; or still breathes every moment the smell of corpses, and it is not surprising that the small garrison of Dong-song was placed in the hardest status.

On the 16th, we leave in daybreak; this step is tough, we get over Deo-quao pass by a trail very rough, then down in the Valley of the Song Thuong, then we entered Thanh-moi. This is more than a torrent flowing at the foot of a high limestone mountain, true impassable wall; current from the southwest to the Northeast; behind this massive that serves as its bulwark, a pirate having many gangs under his command, Cai Kinh, is holding the campaign and made master of the country. The small garrison from Thanh-moi must be strengthened during the demarcation operations. The Deputy Chief of staff of general Warnet, Colonel Cretin, who was in charge of. The delicate organization of the re-enforcement of the column must stay there during all the time that we will spend in this area. An artillery detach and a company of 23' commanded by Captain Gignous also remain to Thanh-Moi, to their great regret, because everyone would like to take part in the reoccupation of Lang - son. We know that the Chinese regular discharged before us the city without any difficulty, but we don't know if any band of Cai Kinh will not try to resist.

Thanh-moi has just been reoccupied in a few weeks, and already the inhabitants, reassured, start grouping around our small fort, to rebuild their houses, out of the depths of the caves in the massif of Dong nai, where they had hidden, and bring to market, pigs, poultry, tobacco and paddy. The huge limestone walls at the foot of them flows the Song Thuong is composed of a rock with a very particular aspect, found here and there in all parts of Tonkin with the words of Halong Bay are the best-known type. This massif is dug caves natural, deep, and many of them have served and are still shelter to the inhabitants, but too often shelters and Citadel to the pirates.

From Thanh-moi we are entering the unknown; we don't know what's going to happen, and now strictly respected the order of March. The cavaliers follow their discipline of the infantry; with our small horses Tonkinese bright and eager, in these mountain trails which are called pompously "the principal road to Beijing," our movement is slow, tedious and painful.

However, no incident has happened. The distance to Lang -Son is too far to be crossed in one step, then we should not get there at night. Commander Servière ordered to camp the column in a roughly dry paddy field at the foot of mountain Cut that formed the watershed line between the Tonkinese side and the Chinese side.

Everyone now deployed their tents, because the nights are fresh; in the morning the thermometer marks Thirteen degrees, and we were not accustomed to this low temperatures. From the day it starts, not without a certain emotion: this is the last step before Lang - son! It is painful, because mountain Cut is not so easy to pass; maybe even we will be attacked; but we have the confidence, tonight Lang - son will be reoccupied, and each one walked joyfully; It was not until the coolies who feeling at the end of their energy, seemed to walk more briskly. Along the road were still reversed poles and the cut telegraph wires that our army corps had established up to Lang - son. At midday we stopped for the great break, we moved away from sunlight in the tall grass for lunch, and during this time Captain

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Gachet, at the head of a platoon of African horsemen, moved up to Lang – son where they found it abandoned and whose rare inhabitants, remained at home; came receive them.

At four o'clock we entered between the forts on the hills that overlooked the city on the side of the Southwest, and we could see the splendid panorama offered, this point plain Lang - son. The first plan is the city, formed, like all Vietnamese cities, a walled enclosure or official city and a market, located outside, where the traders lived. The walled city is more than its great walls of stores of rice and burned pagodas and ruined composed. However, at the shelter, a charming small hill covered with fir trees, a pagoda and numerous tombs surrounding appeared to have escaped the disaster.

Beyond the city winds the Ky-Cung, already navigable here for small canoes, then, beyond the river, the small Chinese city of Kilua, well- built brick, dominated by the two forts between which the victorious Négrier general was so unfortunately hit by a shot on the day of March 28. To the left and right extends a rich plain well cultivated, dotted with huge limestone blocks to the tormented forms, which were formerly Islands; the sea has gnawed the base and many affect the appearance of fungi.

There were many villages and very populous throughout the Ky-cung; the almost complete absence of areca, coconut and banana gives them a character absolutely different from those of the Delta.

At five o'clock we saluted the French flag hoisted on the North Gate of the city, and we settled in one of the houses in the market. We immediately visited the ruined Citadel, and officers led us near the place where was buried the young lieutenant Bossant, an officer of order of the general Brière de l'Isle, who fell hit fatally a ball next to his general when Lang –son was re-occupied. His comrades were preparing to build a mausoleum, which we could saw on our return in this city and we gave further drawings one of our photographs.

At night, a Chinese officer came to informl us that the Chinese Commissioners were in Long-Chéou and they were going to get started for the Porte of China. The next day Commander Servièrè passed the river Kicung with a little recognition, and a small number of the regular Chinese troops, who were in the market of Kilua, withdrew peacefully before the advance of our troops.

End of Chapter 2