

The Eagle's Wings

by Toan Phong

Toan Phong is the pen name of Dr. Nguyen Xuan Vinh, Commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force from 1958 until 1962 when he resigned and came to the United States. In 1965 he received his doctorate, the first Ph.D. degree in Aerospace Engineering Sciences conferred by the University of Colorado. In 1972 he was awarded a national doctorate in Mathematics by the University of Paris, France. He joined the University of Michigan in 1968 as an associate professor of Aerospace Engineering and was promoted to the rank of professor in 1972. As a scientist and educator, he has published three books and more than 100 papers in mathematics, astrodynamics and trajectory optimization. He is a member of the International Academy of Astronautics and a foreign member of the French National Academy of Air and Space.

In 1960, to promote a cadet recruitment program for the newly created Air Force Academy in Vietnam, he wrote a novel: Pilot's Life. The novel became a best seller (now in its sixth printing) and the author was awarded Vietnam's National Literature Prize. The novel is in the form of a series of letters written by a pilot to his sweetheart. The Eagle's Wings is a translation of one such letter. It was originally published in Empire Magazine with the illustration by Oliphant, a cartoonist winner of a Pulitzer prize.

Nha Trang Air Base

Dear Phuong: Do you remember that day in August, just before the Autumn Festival, when we went window shopping in Hanoi? You were attracted by a beautiful Japanese doll on display among other colorful toys inside a shop window. I remember you suddenly exclaimed, "What a beautiful doll!"

Yes, the doll was beautiful. I can still see her dressed in her Japanese kimono, with high-combed dark hair holding in her hand a light green umbrella decorated with small, pink cherry blossoms. With her fair complexion, and her dark eyes wide open, she looked like you. She was beautiful!

I can still see you standing there, hypnotized. I knew you wanted to have the doll, and a vague sadness made my heart sink. I knew that you realized I was just a 14-year-old student from a family of modest means, looking at my future as through a layer of morning fog. After a moment of hesitation, you pulled my hand and said, "Let us go home."

We went home silently, deep in meditation, not talking to each other the rest of the day. You were sad, not getting what you wanted, and I was tormented by a multitude of empty thoughts.

It's hard to believe that it has been 10 years since that day. You are now a college student, full of bright promise for the future. And, through several turns of destiny I have become a military pilot spending day after day in my flight cabin, floating along different sky routes, above white cotton clouds.

For the past six months I haven't flown those long-range routes; it's almost like being grounded. Last December, I was appointed as an instructor pilot at this flight training base. It is true that in my profession I am happy with any flight assignment; but

after many years of flying distant routes to new and exciting horizons, I cannot chase away some vague, sad feeling when I sit here looking through the window at the antics of students pilots practicing landings on the runway. They are like young birds flapping their wings when the sun rises, learning to fly by little hops, maybe wandering a little farther each flight into the valley, but they always hurry back and land at this base, which is nestled in the forest near a beautiful resort beach. In spite of this, my life seems empty here.

Yesterday I received a little box sent from Japan by a pilot friend. I opened the box and found a small Japanese doll with a little note: "*A souvenir from Tokyo*". I smiled, thinking of the thoughtfulness of my friend, and instantly there came into my mind the memory of our stroll that day in autumn.

Time passed and we grew up. Our wishes and also things which were dear to us have all changed with time. The Japanese doll may be just a child wish to you, but it is still dear to me. It reminds me of my first flight to Tokyo.

Saigon-Tokyo is just one route among others, but it is the one that impresses me the most because it is the route to the North. A century ago, when Vietnamese foot soldiers were sent to outposts far North along the Chinese border, they carried a spear, and a pack on their backs. They walked north along dirty roads, through the valleys and through the jungles, for several days before reaching their destination. Their wives were left behind. The husbands would come back after three or four years. There were those who never came back. On their way to the frontier they would sing the popular song:

*"My dears, who want to go with me
To these isolated outposts?..."*

Now we share their feelings each time we fly north. High above the ocean, above the cotton clouds, we see nothing. But we know that somewhere to our left, there are the Vietnamese Sierra, and through them there are dirt roads leading from South to North. Farther north, it is dark, and there are 45 million other Vietnamese living painfully behind the bamboo curtain. There is nothing we can do for them except give them our prayers.

I could feel it, flying on a moonless night. Outside the plane there was a multitude of stars in the deep ocean of nocturnal sky. The most beautiful place in the world is our homeland, you used to tell me each time I came to bid you farewell for a new trip to a far horizon. In flight my world was reduced to my flight cabin and also my homeland sank into it. Already I could feel the emptiness outside as the oncoming night spread beneath the wings of my airplane. I certainly had no impression of time, and for a moment as I shut my eyes I could hear the propellers cutting into the wind, lifting the airplane up and away into the golden silence of the night.

In the dark I could see my crew passing around their last cigarette. I could see its luminous point glow in the darkness, move to another place and finally stay in the hand of the mechanic meditating in a corner. He always meditated in flight. In another corner, in the yellow light of a tiny lamp, my navigator was working on his map. He scribbled a note and handed the piece of paper to me-Route 025. I gave him a smile nodding and at the same time banked the airplane to the right, leaving the Vietnamese shoreline. We'd arrive in Hong Kong at four o'clock in the morning, and then on to Tokyo. The radio operator was sending a message in code to Hong Kong control. At that time you were

sound asleep. Did you have a dream, I wondered? I had a dream that night. I had a vision of a day when I could bank to the left and land in the peace of a fresh morning on an airfield somewhere in the North, a North Vietnam free of oppression. But that night we were floating above the clouds in the dark of the night, and we were steering toward the high seas and away from home.

I had supper in a small restaurant in Tokyo the next evening with my crew. Like a group of nomads we had wandered through the crowded streets of the city all that afternoon. It was a routine flight, the night before. It was as if we had flown on a night of full moon with its faint glow over the banks of fog below. Memory of the flight had vanished, and gone too was my dream of last night. Like somnambulists, we walked through the streets of Tokyo and did some shopping. Our mechanic, who was meditating last night, was at the airport supervising the refueling of the airplane for the next flight. He was always alert while on the ground.

Dear Phuong, my friend bought me the Japanese doll on an afternoon such as I just described. She is now standing on my desk, staring at me with her wide-open eyes while I am writing. I hope that your busy life in the city hasn't changed you much, because even though we pilots have flown to many new horizons, we cherish the dream that we will return to the homeland and find it as beautiful as before.

If you still want to have the doll of your dream when you were a little girl, I will send her to you.