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Military Farm in the Central Highlands (1973-1985)

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Abstract

During the fierce years of the national liberation struggle, Group 773 - a military unit specializing in economic activities in the Central Highlands was established with the mission of both producing and fighting while maintaining the rear, taking over liberated areas, and supporting the front line. After the country was completely liberated, Group 733 initially built the economy in combination with consolidating and maintaining national defense and security in the strategic area of the Central Highlands.

Keywords: Group 773, economic, Highlands

1. Introduction

Facing a very new task, the units both fought and were ready to fight, and produced, but with the mettle of "Uncle Ho's soldiers", the units of Group 733 created "green" farms on the land still bearing the scars of war, becoming the core force of the army participating in economic development in the Central Highlands.

2. Research content and results

2.1. The birth of military farms in the Northern Central Highlands and initial achievements

After the 1972 Spring-Summer offensive campaign, with the victory of Dak To - Tan Canh, Plei Kan (December 10, 1972), the army and people of the Central Highlands liberated a very important strategic area. To protect the newly liberated land, the Central Highlands Front Command and the Military Region 5 Command decided to mobilize a number of units to the Northern Central Highlands, both to protect the corridor of the strategic supply line and to increase production to provide food for local forces and battlefields.

The Paris Agreement was signed (January 1973), the liberated area [Including the areas of Trao, Tra My, Hiep Duc, Kham Duc (Quang Nam); Buon Loi, Hoai An (Binh Dinh); Dac Pet, Dac Klou, Plei Kan, Vo Dinh (Kon Tum); Le Thanh, Thanh Giao, Duc Co, Chu Nghe (Gia Lai); Buon Ho, Duc Lap (Dak Lak)...] continued to be expanded from the Western provinces of the Northern Zone 5 to the Central Highlands provinces with an area of over 20,000 km², connecting to the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Politburo and the Central Military Commission decided to build this liberated area into a direct rear area, developing on-site production to meet the requirements of the resistance war in the final stage. In July 1973, the 773rd Economic Construction Group (equivalent to an Army Corps) under the Military Zone 5 Command was established, with the tasks of: production, economic construction, building a strong Northern Central Highlands base area; ready to supplement forces for the main units of Military Zone 5 when required; coordinating with local authorities of the provinces: Quang Da, Quang Nam, Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak to protect the corridor of the strategic support line Truong Son 559; carry out mass mobilization work among ethnic minorities, maintain security and politics in the military area; gradually expand the area, build up forces to prepare to take over liberated areas later. The South was completely liberated, Group 773 continued to stay in the area, conduct mine clearance, reclaim land to expand the area for growing food crops, and organize on-site logistics livestock.

In October 1976, the Ministry of National Defense decided to reorganize the new Group 773 to promote economic development and enhance national defense capacity in this strategic area. On the basis of Group 773, 4 economic groups (equivalent to division level) were established, directly managed by the Military Region 5 Command, specifically: Group 331 planted rubber in Duc Co, rice, crops in Duc To, tea in Bien Ho (Gia Lai - Kon Tum); Group 332 built and exploited wood in Kong Na Nhung (Gia Lai - Kon Tum); Group 333 built a specialized food crop area in Krong Bach (Dak Lak); Group 334 was tasked with growing cotton in Thuan Hai (now Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan) and was then transferred to other tasks.

In addition, there were also permanent units transferred to perform economic construction tasks such as Regiment 10 reclaiming land and growing food crops in Yang Mang (Gia Lai - Kon Tum); Division 471 building, managing, and exploiting wood in Gia Nghia (Dak Lak); Division 352, Regiment 551 doing irrigation.

The main tasks of these units were to build specialized agricultural and forestry areas, combine animal husbandry, basic construction, and irrigation work, making the Central Highlands a key economic region for food in the country. On the other hand, the units also participated in implementing ethnic policies, solving employment problems for ethnic minorities; closely monitor the situation, maintain security - politics and order in the Central Highlands.

From the late 70s and throughout the 80s of the 20th century, the country's peace and stability faced great challenges, most military units focused on combat missions, the Government Council and the Politburo decided to transfer a number of economic establishments under the military's management to the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Forestry, and the Ministry of Irrigation [According to Decision 42-QD/TW on transferring specialized construction tasks to economic sectors dated July 5, 1979 of the Politburo, Decision 273-CP on transferring specialized military establishments in economic construction to economic sectors on July 23, 1979 of the Government Council.], the General Department of Economic Construction was dissolved. However, the economic force managed by the military was still maintained with about 100,000 troops (out of a total of 1.3 million troops), the Central Highlands also organized a number of units growing industrial crops and food. When the Ministry of National Defense transferred military establishments specializing in economic development to economic sectors for management, most of the units in the Central Highlands were taken over by the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Forestry and localities. This was only a change in management, the units had additional economic names (farms, forestry farms, enterprises) in addition to their military names, the training and combat readiness routines were still maintained, continuing to participate in economic development associated with strengthening national defense in the Central Highlands. From here, the name Military Farm was born.

2.2. Some achievements of military farms in the Northern Central Highlands

Immediately after stabilizing the organization, Group 773 was organized into 4 economic groups (equivalent to regimental level): Group 731 was on duty in Kham Duc (Quang Da), Group 732 was on duty in Play Kan (Kon Tum), Group 733 (until December 1974, changed its name to Group

746) was on duty in Duc Co, Chu Prong (Gia Lai), Group 734 was on duty in Duc To, Tan Canh then moved to Duc Uy (now Duc Ha, Kon Tum). On March 24, 1974, Group 773 received Group 2 stationed in Xoai garden (Duc Vinh plantation). In 1975, the Group received Regiment 745 stationed in Le Thanh (Gia Lai); Group 9 Ha Bac (renamed Regiment 760), stationed in Duc Lap plantation (Dac Min, Dak Lak), Group 773 started to produce and build the economy of the newly liberated areas, especially in the Northern Central Highlands, creating a source of food and provisions on the spot to directly support the Southern battlefield.

Immediately upon receiving the area, the groups mobilized maximum manpower and machinery to organize land reclamation and expand the production area. The 732nd Regiment proceeded to build the Dak Kan dam, creating a reservoir of nearly 1.5 million m³, serving the 200 hectares of rice fields of the Group and the production activities of the people in the liberated areas. The 746th Regiment also participated in building roads to serve the Central Highlands campaign.

With the efforts of the soldiers, in 1975 alone, Group 773 provided more than 4,500 tons of food to the battlefield. The Northern Central Highlands truly became a solid on-site base during the decisive period of the Southern revolution. As soon as the Central Highlands campaign was victorious, Regiment 773 took over the liberated areas of the three provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, and Dak Lak, implemented a military regime, closely coordinated with local authorities to maintain security and politics in the area; conducted surveys and preliminary planning of the military positions of 22 groups and affiliated units to carry out the task of combining economy with national defense in the area; organized the takeover of 32 plantations of the old regime with an area of over 10,000 hectares.

From June 1975, Regiment 732 expanded the hill rice area, and planted sugarcane. In a short time, Regiment 745 reclaimed more than 1,000 hectares of land, researched and propagated food crops and livestock suitable for the Central Highlands. Regiment 760 quickly built facilities, guarded the newly liberated lands, and started producing coffee at Duc Lap plantation. By the end of 1975, Regiment 773 had reclaimed 11.9 thousand hectares (out of a total of 16 thousand hectares of the entire military force specializing in economic development nationwide); it was a key unit in cultivating and raising livestock and participating in planning new economic zones in the Central Highlands.

In addition, Regiment 773 also participated in border protection, closely coordinating with border posts and forces of Military Region 5 to build a strong defense position at the front line, pushing the Khmer Rouge forces out of the Vietnamese border, contributing to stabilizing the situation in the area. When the Duc Co area was attacked by the Khmer Rouge with infantry and artillery, the Command of Regiment 746 quickly mobilized more than 1,000 workers to "fence the village to fight" in the Tung - Ia Nan village area, to protect the area and stabilize the situation. Besides Group 773, in the Central Highlands, there were also a number of units of the Truong Son Corps (Group 559) who, after completing the transportation mission for the campaign to liberate the South, left behind a force of about 40,000 troops to organize the construction of basic works, contributing to the restoration of technical infrastructure for the Central Highlands.

By 1976, on the cultivated area of Group 773, 12 production points were formed, managing 32 rubber, coffee, and tea

plantations with a total area of nearly 11 thousand hectares. The force of the Group at that time was 27 thousand soldiers, accounting for more than 95% of the troops participating in economic development in the Central Highlands. Group 773 was the fulcrum for the army to build and expand the Central Highlands economy.

To achieve the goal of turning the Central Highlands into a large specialized food growing area of the country, the units accelerated land reclamation, expanded the cultivated area, and combined with livestock development. In some areas with favorable conditions, the groups planted and exploited rubber, coffee, and tea trees; exploited wood to create additional revenue, focusing on developing specialized agricultural and forestry areas. By 1978, two large specialized food crop areas managed by the army had been formed in the Central Highlands (later handed over to the Ministry of Agriculture):

Krong Pach - Khanh Duong area (Dak Lak): managed by Group 332 with a natural area of 153 thousand hectares, cultivated land of 49 thousand hectares. The Group built 7/9 planned farms, reclaimed 8,600 hectares, and put 8,500 hectares into cultivation. The output in 1978 reached about 14 thousand tons of food with typical high productivity such as corn over 3 tons/ha, rice 4 tons/ha. The Group's livestock herd had over 3,000 cows, 1,000 pigs, and 400 buffaloes. In particular, the Group's basic construction force was organized relatively synchronously, including 1 mechanized land reclamation regiment, 1 irrigation regiment, 1 bridge and road regiment, and 1 construction and architectural materials production regiment. In a short time, the Group "has accumulated some experience, trained a fairly strong team of workers who can undertake both basic construction and production management tasks in the region" [3; p.8].

Plei Kan - Vo Dinh - Duc Co - La Son region (Gia Lai - Kon Tum): is an important food region in the Northern Central Highlands, Group 331 has built 8 farms with a reclaimed area of 8,500 hectares by 1979, putting 7,500 hectares into cultivation. In 1979 alone, the Group produced 5,941 tons of food, raised 750 buffaloes, 527 cows, 837 pigs, and fish. The area has irrigation works such as Dac Uy reservoir with an irrigation capacity of 2,500 hectares, Dac Kan reservoir with an irrigation capacity of 500 hectares, and Ia Hai dam.

In addition, there is Mang Giang area (Gia Lai - Kon Tum) of Regiment 10 mainly growing pineapple, cassava, rice, corn, and potatoes; 2 forestry areas Kong Na Ngung (Gia Lai - Kon Tum) of Group 332 and Gia Nghia (Dak Lak) of Group 471 specializing in timber exploitation and forest planting.

Some units of Group 331 stationed in Duc Co were assigned to develop rubber gardens to gradually shape the specialized area. From the initial 10 hectares of nursery garden, by 1979, the area of newly planted rubber of Regiment 702 in Duc Co increased to 252 hectares. In 1980, Regiment 702B organized the exploitation and processing of 30 tons of latex rubber sheets, built a rubber processing workshop with an output of over 100 tons/year. In 1984 (at this time, Regiment 331 was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, the regiments in Duc Co merged into Duc Co Rubber Company under the General Department of Rubber), the new farms planted nearly 14.7 thousand hectares of rubber. Many rubber areas of Farms 701 and 702 were exploited, processed, and created products; the Company's rubber latex output increased by 4.1% compared to the previous period.

To increase productivity and create favorable conditions for coffee development, the delegations cooperated with socialist

countries, building specialized coffee growing areas such as the Viet-Bun cooperative coffee area (Gia Lai - Kon Tum) of Group 331, the Viet-Czech cooperative coffee area in Chu Pan (Gia Lai - Kon Tum) of Group 359, and the Viet-Soviet cooperative coffee area in Krong Buc (Dak Lak) of Group 417. By September 1981, the five coffee farms of Ia Grai, Ia Sao, Eah Dinh, 705, 49 of the army were qualified to grow, exploit and process coffee for export.

The army units also participated in building roads and irrigation works throughout the Central Highlands, focusing on building infrastructure in specialized growing areas. In 1979, the units handed over three major projects, namely Krong Buc Lake (Dak Lak), Iazun Ha (Gia Lai - Kon Tum), and Krong Bach Thuong (Dak Lak) to the Ministry of Irrigation.

At the same time as forming joint industrial and agricultural production zones, the units also carried out mass mobilization work with the goal of attracting ethnic minorities in the area to join in labor production.

For local residents, the units were divided into working teams, implementing the basic motto of Four Togethers: sticking with the team and wading in the fields; holding hands and showing them the work; going to every alley, knocking on every door; eating without meals, sleeping without beds, going to every village, living with ethnic minorities, promoting self-sufficient production while guiding local people to participate in developing gardens and building houses. Thanks to that, the units were able to recruit a number of local ethnic minorities to work in farms and factories.

In 1983, at Farm 701, there appeared a form of contracting to take care of and prevent rubber tree fires for 116 families in Bo village and 83 ethnic workers who accepted seasonal labor contracts for the farm. Although the phenomenon was small, it reflected the unit's mass mobilization achievements. Although the number of people becoming workers for the farms was still small, it created a foundation for a close relationship between the farms and the locality, a stepping stone for the task of building the area in the strategy of combining economy with national defense. In the organizational structure of the units, besides farms, forestry farms, and factories, there were also hospitals, schools... Group 333 had C18 hospital, infirmary, cultural supplementary school, and nursing school to serve the lives, meeting the essential needs of local cadres and people. Farm 701 also had a primary school and a kindergarten. From 1982 to 1983, workers' villages appeared. The living conditions of workers are taken care of, which is the first step for them to be attached to the orchards, to their profession, and then to the Central Highlands.

From the mass mobilization activities and initial production results combined with investment in basic construction, some residential areas began to appear along the traffic routes, next to the orchards. Here, units maintain the patrol and guard regime; both ensuring regional security and order, production safety, and preventing the intrusion of reactionary forces.

Although carrying out the task of economic development, the daily working, living, and military training regimes of military farms all follow the orders and plans. Units all organize guard teams and self-defense teams to enforce discipline and organize military training according to the program prescribed by the Ministry of National Defense. On July 26, 1987, the Self-Defense Battalion of Farm 732 was established with the mission of "training to be ready to deploy combat plans when situations arise; protecting internal

security and order; supporting production and crop protection teams" [1; p.35]. This was the basis for the regiments to always be ready to perform combat missions and protect the Fatherland's borders.

From the end of 1977, the border conflict situation was extremely complicated and fierce, units deployed forces to participate in combat service and bring wounded and fallen soldiers back to the country. Group 702 organized 1 information company to serve the main units, 2 companies directly fought with Division 307 and Regiment 95 on the Cambodian battlefield.

The groups always arranged forces to block the border area to prevent illegal border crossings, blocking the infiltration of foreign subjects seeking to connect with reactionary organizations in the country. The units coordinated with the local armed forces to participate in the sweep against Fulro and reactionary forces, contributing to maintaining order and security in the Central Highlands.

Agricultural and forestry production facilities were established, and labor productivity was high. From 1976 to 1981, the units reclaimed 18,000 hectares, cultivated over 14,000 hectares, food output reached 10,000 - 14,000/year; 150 - 200 tons of tea were exported, with 30,000 tons in 1979 alone; 850,000 m² of houses of all kinds were built, 174 km of Truong Son road, 615 km of roads in specialized areas; production was stabilized in 13 farms, 6 forestry farms with 2,100 households.

During the "deputy" period, military farms and enterprises, under the leadership of economic sectors, were invested with capital and adjusted their production directions. Some units such as Farm 732 and Duc Co Rubber Company initially operated effectively. The mass mobilization work of the units had certain achievements, initially attracting a part of the people to participate in production, settle down, develop the economy, culture and education, thereby forming stable villages, and the emergence of concentrated residential areas on the border.

2.3. The 15th Army Corps was established.

The establishment of too many units in one area creates organizational difficulties, unnecessarily "bloats" the apparatus, lacks enough management staff, and causes overlap in the implementation of tasks. Economic efficiency is not enough to ensure jobs for cadres who "lack food, clothing, accommodation and means of transportation... have to use military pots to cook porridge to serve a large number of people with malaria" [13; p.33]; on the other hand, due to the limited ability of units to care for local ethnic minorities, it leads to the slow formation of residential areas.

The policy of mobilizing people to participate in production in some places has not been implemented. "This is a very serious and common shortcoming in Plei Kan as well as in Duc Co, in the Drei-lin project. The unit that built the Drei-lin project was praised and supported by the province a lot, but it has not yet thoroughly understood and fully implemented the relationship with the ethnic people, although there is no violation" [15; p.9]. There is a situation where "we keep the land and forest without doing anything, while the ethnic people have no land or forest, have to reclaim land, destroy the forest to make fields" [15; p.9]. Therefore, "it is necessary to use all forms to help the people in the agricultural and forestry areas have jobs, their daily life is better, and their social organization is more and more beautiful" [15; p.10]. In April 1984, the Conference to discuss

solutions to remove difficulties for economic groups in the Central Highlands organized by the Ministry of National Defense determined that it is necessary to quickly overcome the living problems of the seconded defense cadres and workers, ensure health care, education and culture to stimulate production and encourage defense workers to stay with the locality. The conference proposed a solution to ensure essential goods, supplement the policies and circulars of the Ministry, organize inspection teams to implement directives to solve the difficult life of cadres, detect and promptly handle cases of violations of the policies of the Party, State, and Ministry of National Defense with economic troops.

On the other hand, realizing the need to focus on building a key unit, taking economic efficiency as the main factor to solve the problem of organizing production for local ethnic minorities and migrants, on February 20, 1985, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers signed Decision No. 68/CT to establish the Tay Nguyen Economic Construction Corps, named Corps 15, under the Ministry of National Defense. From here, the process of the army combining economy with national defense in the Tay Nguyen area entered a new stage with a large scale and increasingly effective forms of operation.

In the final stage of the resistance war against the US, as the first unit of the army to act as the key force specializing in economic development based in the strategic area of the Central Highlands, Group 773 completed the task of providing part of the food for the local forces as well as preparing human and material resources, contributing to support the forces liberating the South. At the same time, the unit initially carried out effective mass mobilization work to maintain the liberated areas; together with other forces, it built, protected, and ensured smooth and safe traffic on the strategic transport route 559.

The Central Highlands campaign ended successfully, Group 773 quickly joined other forces to take over urban areas and some old plantations, maintaining jobs for 1,278 workers, not wasting resources. Thanks to that, it contributed to stabilizing the situation in the Central Highlands in general as well as production activities in the area where the unit was stationed in particular, creating a springboard for the main units to launch attacks, contributing to the victory of the General Offensive and Uprising in the Spring of 1975.

After the country's liberation until the 1980s, the military forces specializing in economic development continued to stay in the areas heavily devastated by war, clearing remaining bombs and mines, contributing to the rapid restoration of the Central Highlands. During this period, Groups 331, 332, and 333 built and shaped large specialized food growing areas in the area, ensuring food self-sufficiency, generating revenue for the army, contributing to reducing pressure on the state budget, maintaining a significant number of standing troops in the Central Highlands, to promptly resolve conflicts at the southwestern border, "many military farms and forestry farms were the first units to fight and block the enemy at the border and then, many units went straight from the farms and forestry farms to the front" [154; p.125]. The military farms and forestry farms with their production activities, protecting the area, fighting against the infiltration of reactionary forces, and sweeping away Fulro have contributed to maintaining the revolutionary achievements, creating the image of a new economic region in the Central Highlands with great potential, which is the

basis for the Economic - Defense units to continue to develop in the following period.

3. Conclusion

Although they have achieved some encouraging results, firmly holding on to the area, but due to the unstable border situation, the basic task of the military force specializing in economic development is still mainly focused on ensuring national defense - security, not creating outstanding economic models, and still being complementary. However, the military force in the Central Highlands during this period has formed the organizational foundation for the establishment of the 15th Army Corps, at the same time, creating a number of favorable conditions affecting the implementation of the task of economic development associated with strengthening national defense of the military units stationed in the Northern Central Highlands in the following period.

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