

Vietnam Exodus 1975

A Story of
the Vu Family

By Tri Vu, Lori Vu, and Nick Vu

Vietnam Exodus 1975

A Story of the Vu Family

Interviews conducted by Tri and Lori Vu

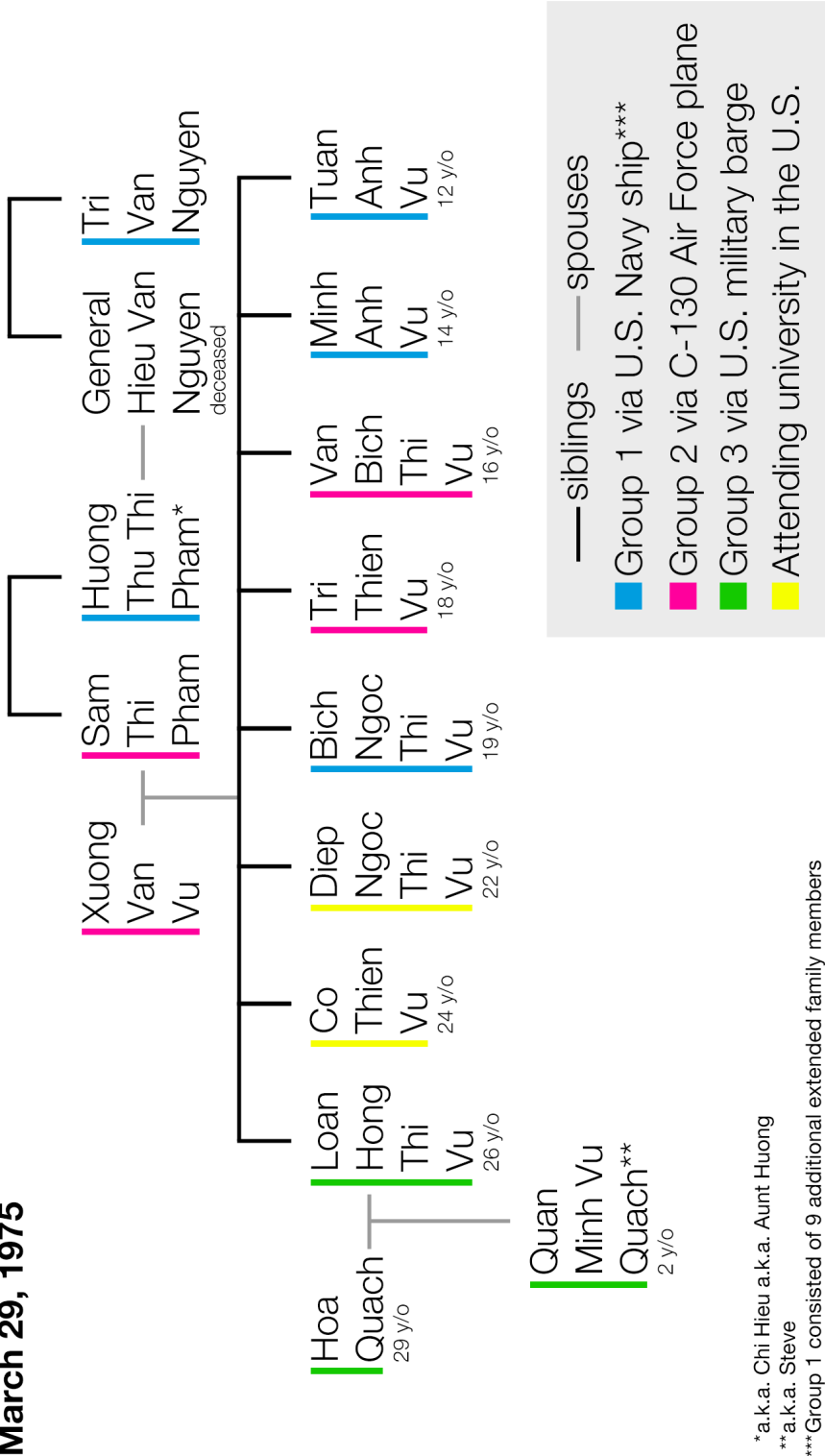
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Evacuation from Vietnam

March 29, 1975



*a.k.a. Chi Hieu a.k.a. Aunt Huong

**a.k.a. Steve

***Group 1 consisted of 9 additional extended family members

Note: Countless family members, friends, and strangers participated in the Vu family's escape. Only the immediate family is listed here.

Evacuation from Vietnam 1975

South Pacific Leg

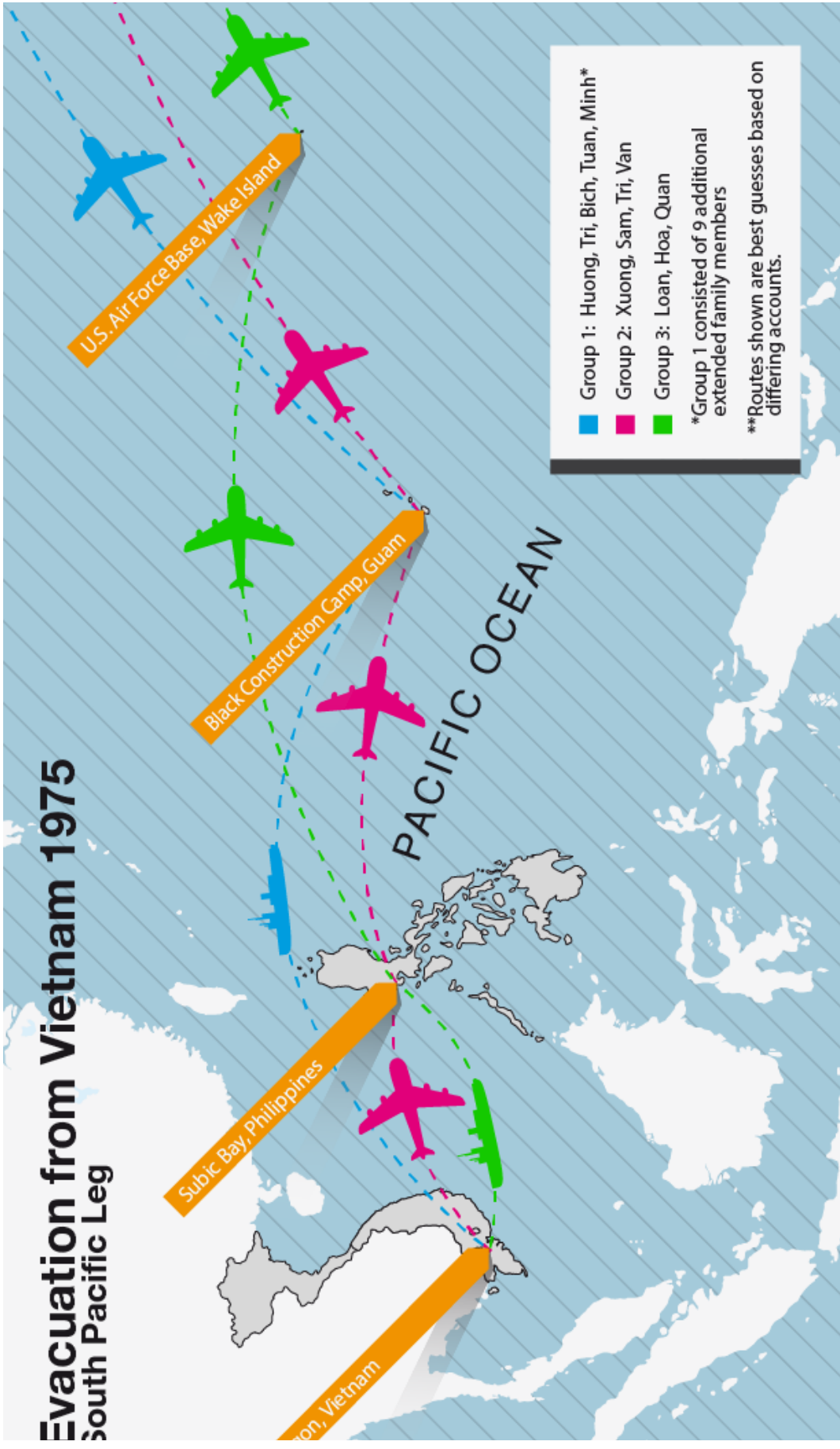


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Forward

Nick Vu

First child of Tri and Lori Vu

As I was wrapping up my studies at the University of Florida, my dad, Tri Vu, had just passed the 25th anniversary of moving to the States. My memory was speckled with time-muddled tales of Vietnam, nearly forgotten snippets of guerrilla soldiers pouncing from trees, gaunt tigers hungry for stray children, and warnings of kidnappers who would gouge out your eyes and force you to beg on their behalf. Surely not every story was so morbid, but these are the scenes that calcify themselves in a boy's mind. Not that such atrocities did not occur, but few were the accounts of my family's firsthand experiences. Vietnam existed as a vague, disjointed, elusive mythology.

From as early as I can remember, there was understanding that my dad and his family left everything to escape war. A big deal was not made of it, and the details (that were not part of apocryphal scary stories) could be jotted down in a few sentences. His past life was considered a mundane personal feature. "Tell me about your dad," someone would ask. I might mention his age, height, his job, and include in passing that he was a refugee from Vietnam. In retrospect, this turbulent origin must have shaped, and would continue to inform, every aspect of his daily life and the infrastructure of his internal landscape. Yet living in Florida, removed from my relatives, the primary characters and allies in a shared experience, Vietnam as a culture, as an event, and as a critical point of reference, was all but nonexistent. I childishly assumed it was as influential on his life as the color of his hair.

This understanding was challenged in 2002, the summer before my last year of college. Hearing that over 25 years had passed since the Vu family's escape, and that my dad was planning his first return to his home country, the sparse details I had access to managed to realign in an important way. Maybe enough context came to light or the dramatic nature of this return struck a chord. Regardless, the long past story of Vietnam suddenly became relatable. Its significance for my dad's life, and indirectly my own, was becoming apparent.

The journey back was to include our immediate family. As the departure loomed closer, the long ago exodus did as well. Anticipation for the future was connecting me to the past. Not that it was deeply profound, just a curious

realization. Once in Vietnam, my father revealed the motivation for bringing my sister and me along: to expose us to our Vietnamese roots. In his words, “we could embrace or reject them;” either seemed to be an acceptable option. I was warmed by the gesture, of space being made for me to take part in a long running tribal narrative, as well as the lack of expectation over how I would integrate the story to which I was being exposed. The seeming spontaneity of my father’s invitation was rather surprising, if not disorienting. Further, given the dearth of Vietnamese culture in the first 20 years of my life and the unlikelihood of that becoming a moving force upon returning home, I doubted “embrace” was probable. I was intrigued nevertheless. The proposal piqued my curiosity of the country in which I found myself, resulting in extra attention paid to every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, reaction and emotion.

Surprisingly, the cuisine that I had tolerated back home became mouthwatering. Chả cá with it’s dill and turmeric and the pungent, caramelly cá kho tộ are fish dishes I still long for. The whole fried eel was a delicious, exotic experience that I still brag about. The bustling urban centers, spotted with street food vendors and surging with cyclo peddle taxis and humming scooters. It was an urbanity wholly different from any US city. The island pillars of Ha Long bay still rival the most awe inspiring landscapes I’ve seen.

The most significant historical monuments were not castles, temples, or statues, though there were those, but landmarks depicting my father’s youth. His old house, his school, the places where he hung out. These were anchors around which a story was materializing. Yet although I was a character in this story, I was newly introduced. I could claim this history as I was born out of it, however, I was still a foreigner very much out of place. My height, my dress, even the way I moved and carried myself were all commented on by the locals. Further, the language barrier prevented me from engaging in any fluid or natural way. Understandably, I was received as other. The identity I was trying on was an unnatural fit, with time needed to settle into newly acquired understanding of place and family and origins.

As predicted, the return to western culture was welcoming and comfortable. The things I had seen were impactful, sure enough, but not much changed in my daily life. It is not clear what there was to be changed. And so I carried on.

Twelve years later, a new door opened. I was asked to compile and edit the book you are about to read. To my surprise, the stories I read in the interviews were completely unfamiliar to me. It was a huge piece of the puzzle that I had

not realized was missing. References to people, places, and events lead to research in politics, geography, military strategy, and the popular culture of the day. 1970s southern Vietnam came alive, an atmosphere thick with uncertainty. I sat in a bedroom as my teenage father listening to music just before his sister delivered whispers of a possible route out of the country. I peered into the eyes of trench-bound soldiers in the midst of mortar fire. I hid in the back of a car as brave teenagers were smuggled past armed officials. I listened to the fears and hopes of my extended family as they underwent their individual journeys toward an unknown land. The story materialized. The locations I visited during my college years, filled out by firsthand accounts, photographs, and historic research, added the weight required to move my understanding of who I was. I remain utterly struck by how decisions made by political and military leaders, the personalities of my family members, and then-seemingly trivial circumstances in Saigon have nudged my family to where they are today. A thousand moments could have easily gone differently and my parents would never have met. Not only do I owe my existence to the events of 1975, but its marks are still visible and essential to who I am. Though I and dozens of cousins, spouses, and extended relations were not present for the Vu exodus, it serves as a vessel that unites this vast family. It shapes who we each are and at the very least has brought us all to this very moment, reading these words.

My hope is that by reading these accounts, you will have a better understanding of who your family is and as a result who you yourself are.

Now when people ask of my father, with importance, honor, and gratitude I reply,

“He is a refugee from Vietnam.”

Saigon, Before the Fall 1960-1975

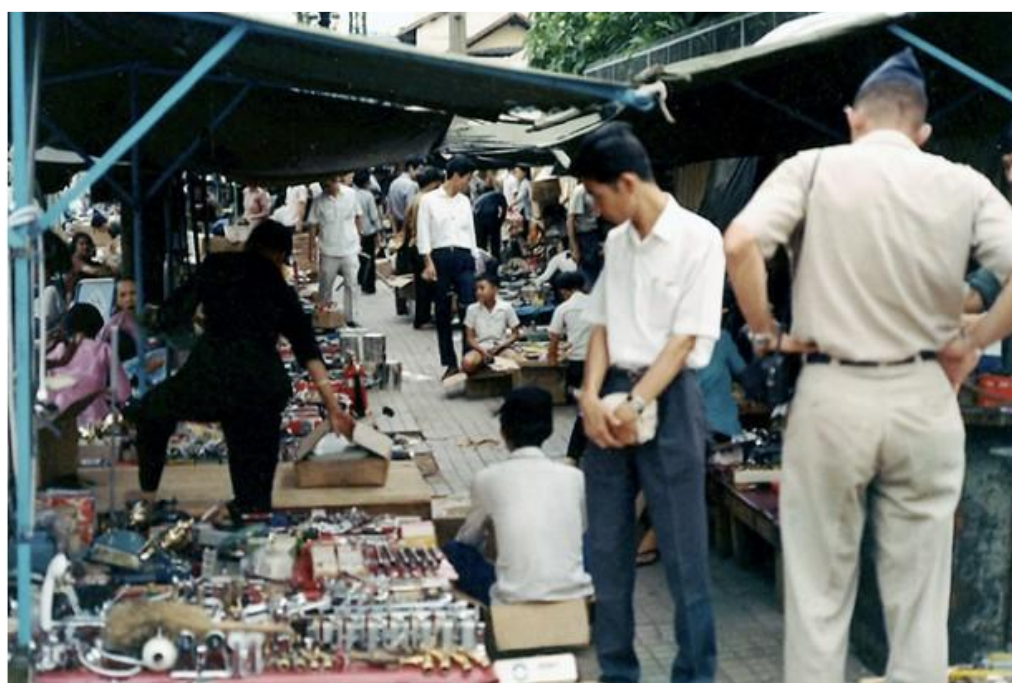


























Family Photos



Vu's with cousins in Saigon: Front row - Tuan; Middle row - Minh, Van, Dung Hoang (cousin); Back row - Tuyet Bach T Vu (cousin), Bich, Diep Hoang (cousin), Tri



The Vu children in Saigon: Loan, Bich, Van, Tuan, Quan.



Mother Sam (front row, 2nd from the left) with Co on her lap. Loan stands to the right of them. Aunt Huong is in the back row, middle. Hanoi, 1952.



Sam Pham holds Tri while in front stand Co, Bich, Diep and Loan.



Many of the family and friends who were interviewed for this book: Front row - Tuan, Van; Middle Row - Kim Mediate, Tri, Minh, Dinh Van Pham; Back row - Loan, Diep, Sam, Betty Mediate, Dr. Earl M. Caspers, Quan, Art Mediate, Xuong, Hoa



*Terre Haute, Indiana 1977: Front row – Loan, Xuong, Sam, Bich, Quan (child),
Van; Back row – Minh, Tuan, Diep*

Introduction

Tri Thien Vu

Fifth child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

For years and years I concentrated on myself. As a child in Vietnam, I learned to think only of the present because the future was perhaps non-existent. My only worry was to do well in school so as to avoid the only alternative—becoming a soldier. So, as a teenager, I went from regular school to a tutoring school to home tutors with little time in between to play. Then there was the sudden and traumatic experience in April 1975 of leaving home and my homeland forever, carrying only a small tote bag and the hope of survival. After that, there was the adjustment to a new country and culture and language, and on top of that, going to college to study even more. There was meeting new people, falling in love, getting married, having children, and starting a business. Well, you get the idea. It was my own self and my own survival and my own fight for success in a new land.

So, after altogether too many years had passed by, I realized that I was missing something. I was missing the world and the people that had surrounded me throughout the first half of my life. And I was especially missing the part of my life that was so far away...the Vietnamese part of my life. As a goal-oriented person, I have resolved to rediscover my past and to try to reconnect with a part of me that had been pushed aside for so long. I decided to begin with my immediate family and that sudden traumatic experience in April 1975 when we left Vietnam.



Youth of 17-years-old were drafted into civil defense duty and men of 18-38 into military service with the South Vietnamese Army.

Historical Background

In order to appreciate the decisions facing the Vu family and their journey out of Vietnam, some understanding of Saigon's political and military climate is necessary. What follows is a historical account of the days surrounding the evacuation under Operation Frequent Wind (April 29, 1975) and the subsequent fall of Saigon (April 30, 1975). [Source: Wikipedia]

The Fall of Saigon

The Fall of Saigon was the capture of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front of the North on April 30, 1975. The event marked the end of the Vietnam War and the start of a transition period leading to the formal reunification of Vietnam into a communist state.

North Vietnamese forces under the command of the General Dũng Tiến Văn began their final attack on Saigon, which was commanded by General Toan Van Nguyen on April 29, with a heavy artillery bombardment. This bombardment at the Tân Sơn Nhứt Airport killed the last two American servicemen. By the afternoon of the next day, North Vietnamese troops had occupied the important points within the city and raised their flag over the South Vietnamese presidential palace. South Vietnam capitulated shortly after. The city was renamed Ho Chi Minh City, after communist leader Ho Chi Minh. The fall of the city was preceded by the evacuation of almost all the American civilian and military personnel in Saigon, along with tens of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians associated with the southern regime. The evacuation culminated in Operation Frequent Wind, which was the largest helicopter evacuation in history.



North Vietnamese tanks break through the gates of the presidential palace.

Operation Frequent Wind

Operation Frequent Wind was the evacuation by helicopter of American civilians and "at-risk" Vietnamese from Saigon, South Vietnam, on April 29–30, 1975 during the last days of the Vietnam War. More than 7,000 people were



A famous image of the evacuation of 15 South Vietnamese by Air America from the rooftop of 22 Gia Long Street

evacuated from various points in Saigon, and the airlift left a number of enduring images.

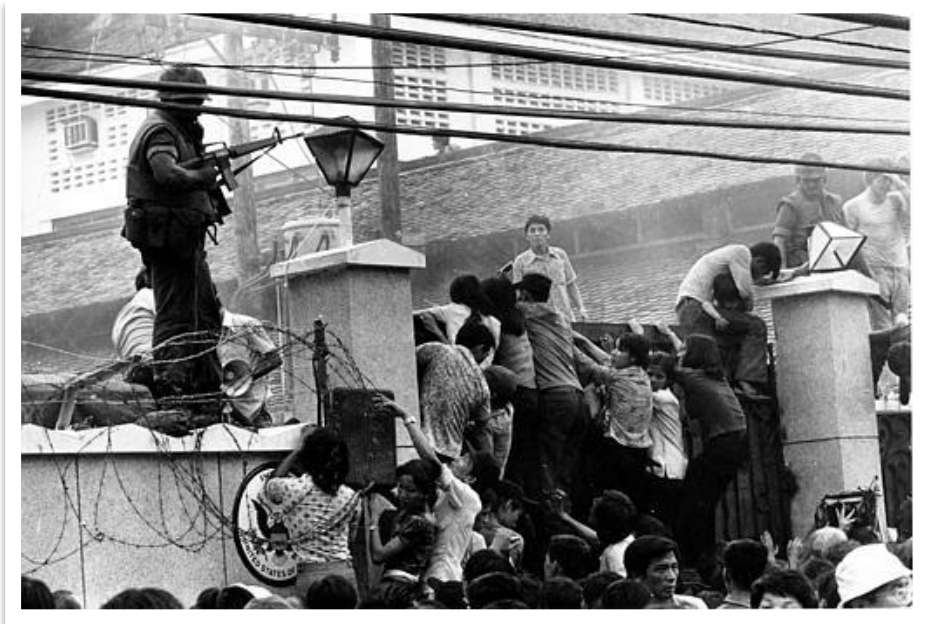
Preparations for the airlift already existed as a standard procedure for American embassies. In the beginning of March, fixed-wing aircraft began evacuating civilians through neighboring countries. By mid-April, contingency plans were in place and preparations

were underway for a possible helicopter evacuation. As the imminent collapse of Saigon became evident, Task Force 76 (a fleet of US Naval ships) was assembled off the coast near Vung Tau to support a helicopter evacuation and provide air support if required. Unknown at the time, air support was not needed as the North Vietnamese recognized that interfering with the evacuation could provoke a strong reaction from US forces.

On April 28, Tan Son Nhut Air Base came under artillery fire and attack from Vietnamese People's Air Force aircraft. The fixed-wing evacuation was terminated and Operation Frequent Wind commenced.

The evacuation was to take place primarily from Defense Attaché Office compound (located across the street from Tan Son Nhut Air Base) and began around two in the afternoon on April 29 and was completed that night with only limited small arms damage to the helicopters. The US Embassy in Saigon was intended to only be a secondary evacuation point for Embassy staff, but it was soon overwhelmed with evacuees and desperate South Vietnamese. The

evacuation of the Embassy was completed at 07:53 on April 30, but some 400 third country nationals were left behind.

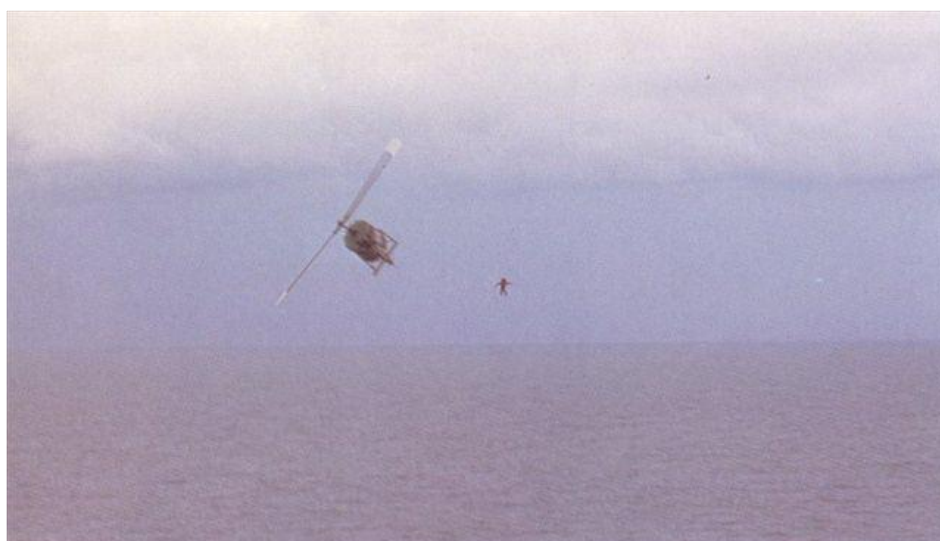


Panicked citizens attempt to scale US Embassy walls in hopes of reaching an evacuation point.

With the collapse of South Vietnam, an unknown number of South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) helicopters and some fixed-wing aircraft flew out to the evacuation fleet. Helicopters began to clog ship decks and throughout the day, around 50 were pushed overboard to make room for more helicopters to land. Other helicopters dropped off their passengers and were then ditched into the sea, close to the ships. The pilots jumped from the helicopter at the last moment to be picked up by rescue boats.



A South Vietnamese helicopter is pushed over the side of the USS Okinawa to clear deck space for more incoming helicopters



After unloading passengers, pilot ditches his helicopter in the sea for lack of room on the carrier

During the fixed-wing evacuation 50,493 people (including 2,678 Vietnamese orphans) were evacuated from Tan Son Nhut. In Operation Frequent Wind a total of 1,373 Americans and 5,595 Vietnamese or third country nationals were evacuated by helicopter.

Option 4 – White Christmas in April

In preparation for the evacuation, the American embassy had distributed a 15-page booklet called SAFE, short for "Standard Instruction and Advice to Civilians in an Emergency." The booklet included a map of Saigon pinpointing "assembly areas where a helicopter will pick you up." There was an insert page that read: "Note evacuational signal. Do not disclose to other personnel. When the evacuation is ordered, the code will be read out on Armed Forces Radio. The code is: The temperature in Saigon is 112 degrees and rising. This will be followed by the playing of *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*." Frank Snapp later recalled the arrival of helicopters at the embassy while the song was playing over the radio as a "bizarre Kafkaesque time". Japanese journalists, concerned that they would not recognize the tune, had to get someone to sing it to them.

In the run up to the evacuation, thousands of South Vietnamese supporters wanted to leave the city. With so many desperate people and so many civilians in knowledge of security codes, it is likely that security was broken almost as soon as the code song was given out. In any event the sudden movement of hundreds of Westerners and thousand of high-ranking Vietnamese would not have gone unnoticed for long.

After the evacuation signal was given, the buses began to pick up passengers and head to the DAO compound. The system worked so efficiently that the buses were able to make three return journeys rather than the expected one. The biggest problem occurred when the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN) guarding the main gate at Tan Son Nhut refused to allow the last convoy of buses into the DAO compound at about 17:45. As this was happening, a firefight between two ARVN units broke out and caught the rearmost buses in the crossfire, disabling two of the vehicles. Eventually the ARVN commander controlling the gates agreed to permit the remaining buses to enter the compound. General Carey's threat to use the AH-1J SeaCobras flying overhead may have played a role in the ARVN commander's decision.

Security and Air Support

It was not known whether the PAVN (North) and/or the ARVN (South) would try to disrupt the evacuation and so the planners had to take all possible contingencies into account to ensure the safety and success of the evacuation. The staff of the US Marines 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade prescribed altitudes, routes, and checkpoints for flight safety for the operation. To avert mid-air collisions, the planners chose altitudes which would not only provide separation of traffic but also a capability to see and avoid the enemy's AAA, SA-2 and SA-7 missile threat (6,500 feet for flights inbound to Saigon and 5,500 feet for those outbound from Saigon to the Navy ships). In addition, these altitudes were high enough to avoid small arms and artillery fire.

In the event that the PAVN or ARVN shot down a helicopter or a mechanical malfunction forced one to make an emergency landing in hostile territory, two orbiting CH-46s of MAG-39 each carried 15-man, quick-reaction "Sparrow Hawk" teams of Marines from 1st Platoon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, helo lifted from USS Blue Ridge LCC-19, were ready to land and provide security enabling a search and rescue (SAR) helicopter to pick up the crew. In addition, two CH-46s would provide medical evacuation capabilities while AH-1J Sea-cobras would fly cover for the transport helicopters and for any ground units who requested support. The Sea-cobras could also serve as Tactical Air Coordinators (Airborne) or Forward Air Controllers (Airborne).

The air wings of the USS *Enterprise* and USS *Coral Sea*, were ready to provide close air support and anti-aircraft suppression if required with their A-6 and A-7 attack aircraft, and would provide continuous fighter cover the evacuation route including by VF-1 and VF-2, flying from the *Enterprise* with the first combat deployment of the new F-14 Tomcat. US Air Force (USAF) aircraft operating out of Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Korat Air Base and U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand were also overhead for the duration of the helicopter evacuation. A C-130 Airborne Command and Control controlled all US air operations over land. USAF F-4s, F-111s and A-7s provided air cover during daylight, being replaced by AC-130s from the 16th Special Operations Squadron at night. Strategic Air Command KC-135 tankers provided air-to-air refueling.

In fact the evacuation was allowed to proceed without molestation from the PAVN. Aircraft flying air cover for the evacuation reported being tracked with surface to air radar in the vicinity of Bien Hoa Air Base (which had fallen to the North on April 25), but no missile launches took place. The Hanoi leadership, reckoning that



South Vietnamese refugees arrive on a US Navy vessel during Operation Frequent Wind.

completion of the evacuation would lessen the risk of American intervention, had apparently instructed General D  ng not to target the airlift itself. Members of the police in Saigon had been promised evacuation in exchange for protecting the American evacuation buses and control of the crowds in the city during the evacuation. American helicopters were repeatedly hit by small arms fire from disgruntled ARVN troops throughout the evacuation without causing serious damage. Despite receiving anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) fire, no attacks were made by USAF or USN aircraft on AAA or surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites during the evacuation.

Despite all the concern over these military threats, the weather presented the gravest danger. At the beginning of the operation, pilots in the first wave reported the weather as 2,000 feet (610 m) scattered, 20,000 feet (6,100 m) overcast with 15 miles (24 km) visibility, except in haze over Saigon, where visibility decreased to one mile. This meant that scattered clouds existed below their flight path while a solid layer of clouds more than two miles above their heads obscured the sun, additionally, the curtain of haze, suspended over Saigon, so altered the diminished daylight that line of sight visibility was only a mile. The weather conditions would deteriorate as the operation continued.

The DAO Compound

The two major evacuation points chosen for Operation Frequent Wind were the DAO Compound for American civilian and Vietnamese evacuees and the United States Embassy, Saigon for Embassy staff.

At 14:06 on April 29, 1975, two UH-1E Huey helicopters carrying General Carey and Colonel Gray landed at the DAO compound. During their approach to the compound, they experienced a firsthand view of the PAVN's firepower as they shelled nearby Tan Son Nhut Airport (across the street) with ground, rocket, and artillery fire. They quickly established an austere command post in preparation for the arrival of the Marine CH-53s and the ground security force.



DAO compound before its destruction. Across the street is Tan Son Nhut Airport

At 19:30 General Carey directed that the remaining elements guarding the annex be withdrawn to DAO headquarters (the Alamo) where the last of the evacuees would await their flight. Once completed, the new defensive perimeter encompassed only LZ 36 and the Alamo. By 20:30 the last evacuees had been loaded onto helicopters. With the evacuation of the landing control teams from the

annex and Alamo completed, General Carey ordered the withdrawal of the ground security forces from the DAO compound around 22:50. At 23:40 Marines destroyed the satellite terminal, the DAO compound's last means of direct communication with the outside world. At 00:30 on April 30, thermite grenades, having been previously placed in selected buildings, ignited as two CH-53s left the DAO parking lot carrying the last elements of 2nd Battalion 4th Marines.



Aerial reconnaissance photo of the destroyed DAO Headquarters

Results of the evacuation

During the fixed-wing evacuation 50,493 people (including 2,678 Vietnamese orphans) were evacuated from Tan Son Nhut. Marine pilots accumulated 1,054 flight hours and flew 682 sorties (i.e. one flight by a single aircraft) throughout Operation Frequent Wind. The evacuation of personnel from the DAO compound had lasted nine hours and involved over 50 Marine Corps and Air Force helicopters. In the helicopter evacuation, a total of 395 Americans and 4,475 Vietnamese and third-country nationals were evacuated from the DAO compound and a further 978 US and 1,120 Vietnamese and third-country nationals from the Embassy, giving a total of 1,373 Americans and 5,595

Vietnamese and third country nationals. In addition, Air America helicopters and Republic of (South) Vietnam Air Force aircraft brought additional evacuees to the TF76 ships. Many of the Vietnamese evacuees were allowed to enter the United States under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act.

Group 1: Evacuation with General Hieu's Family

Aunt Huong was authorized to assemble a group of 14 people for passage to the USA. She gave the three last spots to her sister, who selected her children Bich, Minh, and Tuan to join the group. Below are accounts from Uncle Tri (Aunt Huong's brother-in-law) and the three siblings.

Excerpt from the Biography of General Hieu

Tri Van Nguyen

Brother of General Hieu, uncle of Tri Thien Vu

October 1991

The following is an excerpt from Uncle Tri Van Nguyen book, General Hieu ARVN: A Military Genius, about his brother General Hieu. (See family tree for relation.) Several of the photographs are from his book, as well. The names in red refer to the members of the Xuong Van Vu family.



General Hieu Van Nguyen



*Huong Thu Thi Pham
a.k.a. Chi Hieu a.k.a. Aunt Huong*

General Hieu's funeral happened on April 12, 1975. Mr. Richard Peters, the US Consul in Bien Hoa, invited General Hieu's family to a simple reception at his residence after the funeral. I remembered that our father, Tin, and myself accompanied Chi Hieu and her children to the Consul's residence. During the reception, the Consul asked Chi Hieu whether he could help the family in any way. (I acted as the interpreter between Chi Hieu and the Consul on that

occasion). Chi Hieu had one favor to request: would the Consul be kind enough to help her two oldest boys Dung and Cam obtain a visa to the United States to pursue higher education. The Consul replied that it was too late; that is, there was not enough time to take care of this matter. I immediately understood the meaning of the message he tried to convey to us. So, after translating the Consul's reply to Chi Hieu, I immediately told her to ask the Consul if he would help General Hieu's whole family to resettle in the US. Chi Hieu was puzzled at first by my suggestion (Chi Hieu wondered why would the Consul help the whole family resettle in the US when he just said that it was too late to obtain a visa for Dung and Cam). But upon my insistence, she repeated my suggested request. I then "translated" her request to the Consul. We were both happy to hear the Consul say that he would certainly respond positively to our request. He then turned to his Vietnamese assistant and told him to get the Deputy Consul to take care of this matter. After having given his instructions to his Vietnamese assistant, he turned to me and said that he would do his best to evacuate everyone. However, he would have some difficulties evacuating Dung, Cam, and Liem, who were of army draft age. He gave me his deputy's name and phone number and told me to contact his deputy for further details.

After many unsuccessful attempts to contact the Deputy Consul by phone, the American Consul gave me his deputy's home address in Saigon and encouraged me to go and see him at his residence. So, a few days later, Chi Hieu and I went to the Deputy Consul's home in Saigon. Luckily, we were able to see him as he returned home from work. He asked us to give him the list of names of persons to be evacuated, but limited the number to fourteen. We went back home and worked out the list of names. Besides General Hieu's immediate family members, we were able to squeeze in three members of Chi Hieu's sister's children: Bich, Minh and Tuan. The next day we went back to submit our list to the Deputy Consul.

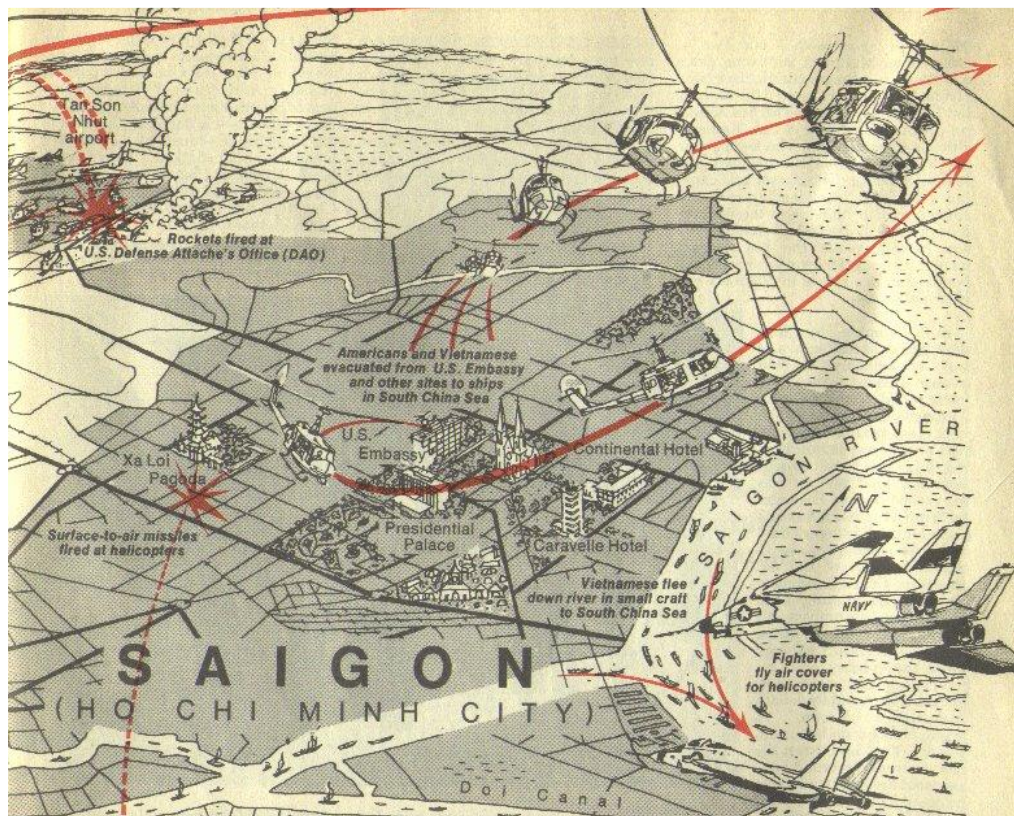
A few days later, I received a phone call from him saying that we should be ready to go to a Defense Attaché Office (DAO) bus waiting on a certain street on April 29. This bus would take us into Tan Son Nhut Airport. On April 25, I moved my things and took up residence at General Hieu's home.

However, on April 28, 1975, the airstrip at Tan Son Nhut airport was bombed. In the morning, I received a call from the DAO Operations Center, which notified us that all flights had been canceled. In the afternoon, I received another call from the DAO Operations Center advising us that US Marine helicopters would be coming in the next day to evacuate those who had not been evacuated



Tan Son Nhut Air Base was a Republic of Vietnam Air Force facility, and used as a base by the US

by plane and that we should be ready to be evacuated by these Marine helicopters. Early in the morning of April 29, another call advised us that the DAO bus would not be available, and that we would have to get to the DAO compound in the early afternoon on our own. At noon, I called the DAO Operations Center and asked to speak to Colonel N. (I don't recall his name), the American chief of the DAO Operations Center. A Vietnamese officer (he did not identify himself during the whole telephone conversation) answered the phone saying that Colonel N. was at lunch and asked whether he could be of assistance. I identified myself as the spokesperson for Lieutenant General Hieu's family and asked him to notify the Marine guards to let us in when we reached the DAO gate. He said not to worry and just come. Once at the gate, I should ask the Marine guard on duty to call the Operations Center.



North Vietnam's Saigon attack plan with Tan Son Nhut Air Base on top left



Bombing of Tan Son Nhut Air Base

So we left Cu Xa Chi Hoa in two of General Hieu's sedans. I was in the lead car with Chi Hieu. Tin was in the second car. However, when we arrived at Tan Son Nhut we could not come close to the DAO gate. We had to park about two hundred meters away. I had my black (priest) robe on that day. I walked to the gate, but the Marine guard pointed his M-16 rifle at me and would not let me come closer than fifty meters. So we stood outside the DAO compound waiting by the fence. Meanwhile, the Marines had landed by helicopter and they took position on the other side of the fence pointing their rifles toward us. [Photo 9] I handed a piece of paper with the name of the Colonel Chief of the Operations Center to one of the Marines on the other side of the fence. I asked him to please contact this Colonel for us. But he came back with a negative response. I realized later that I had misspelled the Colonel's name. We waited there for about an hour. Quite a few rockets exploded around us while we were standing there. Because we had no way to contact the American Colonel we decided to go back to Cu Xa Chi Hoa.



Helicopters land within the DAO compound on April 29, 1975

Unfortunately, the Vietnamese guards at the entrance gate of Cu Xa Chi Hoa would not let us in, saying that we had left to go to the United States and thus had no confidence in them. So why come back. Chi Hieu had the presence of mind to say that we only went to visit General Hieu's tomb. At that moment, Dong, one of General Hieu's chauffeurs, drove by in General Hieu's civilian jeep on his way home. He stopped and told the guards to open the trunk and they would find the evidence that we were leaving for the United States. Luckily, the trunk of the lead car could not be opened when we left at noon, so we put all our bags in the second car. The guards and General Hieu's (betraying) chauffeur were surprised to find an empty trunk. The (betraying) chauffeur said that he just wanted to show to the guards the General's two stars plate that was in the trunk. Having found no evidence, the guards finally let us in.

Back at the house, we discovered that people had already tapped into General Hieu's home phone line and were using it as if it were theirs.

I resigned myself to the situation and told everyone that we would have to leave this home and find another place to live. Tin prodded me to call the DAO Operations Center again. So I dialed the DAO Operations Center phone number once more. How glad I was to hear the American Colonel himself answer the

phone! I told him what had happened earlier that afternoon. Apparently he knew General Hieu well because he told me to have General Hieu's family brought back to the DAO compound. He would give the orders to the Marine guards right then. In addition, I gave him the license plate numbers and the descriptions of our two cars in order to prevent anymore confusion. He took note of these numbers and descriptions.

Upon arrival at the Tan Son Nhut entrance gate, we ran into a small group of Vietnamese paratroopers who stopped every car. One of them approached me and wanted to collect money for his colonel. I said that being a Brother, I had no money to give him. Chi Hieu said she had only a couple thousand piasters. So he left us alone and went to talk to his Colonel. They would not let us through. I told the chauffeur to remain where we were and just to wait. Luckily, when the paratroopers collected two large bags full of money, they started driving their two military jeeps toward the DAO entrance gate. So we just followed them in.

About ten United Nations cars with a blue sky flag preceded us. As we approached the DAO entrance gate, we noticed that the two Vietnamese paratrooper military jeeps had been turned away by the American Marine guards. This caused some apprehension among us. As the United Nations cars entered one by one, we were all quietly worried. After the last U.N. car went in, the Marine guard looked at our cars' license plates then at a small piece of paper in his hand. Then he waved us in. At that signal, we all breathed a sigh of relief. Once inside, we took our small bags from the trunks of the cars and let our chauffeurs drive the cars back home.

By 8:00 p.m. we boarded one of the Marine helicopters which flew us through the night and toward the high sea, landing us on one of the US Navy ships. Half an hour later, we were transferred to a cargo ship. We sailed for about five days and landed in Guam. During our stay in Guam, General Tho



Boarding the Marine helicopter

came to Chi Hieu and only then identified himself as the officer who spoke to me from the DAO Operations Center. An American Air Force captain put us on an earlier departure flight after hearing my petition for an early resettlement on the continental United States. So in the second week of June, we were flown to Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, near Harrisburg. Once there, Bich, Minh and Tuan found a sponsor named Mr. Caspers, who settled them in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where they were able to soon rejoin the rest of their family. By mid-June, we were in Philadelphia, under the sponsorship of the Christian Brothers.



Transferring from Marine helicopter onto the US Navy ship



Loaded onto the cargo ship

Interviews from the Siblings

The stories that follow are the words of each of the Vu children who left Vietnam with their aunt's family, that is, General Hieu's family. Bich was 19 years old in April 1975, Minh was 14 years old, and Tuan was 12 years old. Bich, the fourth child (third daughter) was given the responsibility of the two youngest children.

Tri and Lori Vu interviewed each of the family members. Some words may have been changed for clarification purposes only. All of Tri's brothers and sisters were asked the same questions. Each person had their own unique experience, due to differing ages, personality, individual history, etc. For this reason, there has been no effort to correct any inconsistencies in the accounts.



Bich Ngoc Thi Vu

Fourth child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

Interviewed on May 4, 1987, at Bich Nga's Beauty Shop on Milam Street, Houston, Texas

Tri: Please tell us your birth date.

Bich: I was born on September 21, 1955, in Saigon.

Tri: When was the first time you heard about our decision to leave Saigon?

Bich: I did not know then when we would have to go, but probably I heard about it around the third week of April, 1975.

Tri: Who told you?

Bich: Mom told us to pack a bag, to be ready to leave at any time. At that time, I learned from the radio and newspapers that the South Vietnamese government had lost control of many cities around Saigon.

Lori: How was Saigon at that time?

Bich: It was scary, the streets were deserted, and you could feel the panic in the air.

Lori: How old were you then?

Bich: I was almost 20.

Tri: Why were you and our brothers Minh and Tuan chosen to go with our Aunt Huong's family?

Bich: At first, she promised our mother to take two of us but then one person, I believe it was her stepbrother, decided not to go so she took the three of us with her. The high-ranking US officer who helped her family get out of Vietnam allowed a total of 15 persons.

Tri: Mom chose you to go with Minh and Tuan so you could take care of them?

Bich: I don't know if it was Mom's choice or Uncles Tri and Tin's that I go and look after Minh and Tuan as they were still young. They behaved well though.

Lori: What did you pack in your bag?

Bich: I had a couple pairs of pants, a few shirts, pajamas, and some papers (IDs, diploma).

Tri: Did you pack your high heels?

Bich: Oh no! Just a pair of sandals I was wearing.

Tri: When did you leave Saigon?

Bich: Mom wanted us to go and stay at Aunt Huong's on April 27 and we left Vietnam on the 29th.

Tri: Who drove you there?

Bich: I think our chauffeur.

Tri: What did you do during those two days at Aunt Huong's house?

Bich: Nothing, we just sat there and waited for the order to go. Can I tell you about Aunt Huong?

Tri: Yes.

Bich: It was so sad seeing her sitting on a chair next to her husband's picture and crying all the time. It must have been very hard on her. Her husband was killed just a few weeks earlier; he left her with six young children. And then the big move.

Tri: Besides the three of you, who else was at her house at that time?

Bich: Aunt Huong's six children, her two brothers-in-law Tri and Tin, her two stepsisters, and her stepmother-in-law.

Lori: Did you have to pay for your way out of Saigon?

Bich: No, none of us had to pay. The high-ranking US military officer wanted to help his friend's family. (He was close to General Hieu, Aunt Huong's husband, before he died in a suspected assassination.)

Tri: Explain the situation when you had to say goodbye.

Bich: On the 29th of April, 1975, it was not easy to call anyone. Each member of our family had to find a way to get out, and the phone lines were busy or did not work right the whole time.

Tri: Tell us about April 29, the day you left Saigon, and the activities after that.

Bich: Uncle Tri called that US officer several times but was unable to reach him. He left messages, and then later received a call back telling us to get ready to go to the military airbase.

We left in the jeep and the black family car. Along the way, we were stopped many times by Vietnamese soldiers who stood guard with barbed wire at every street corner. They did not let us go through, so we had to bribe them with cash we brought along in order to proceed.



It was common for barbed wire to be pulled across the road and require bribes from approaching cars for passage.

At the gate of the airbase, US soldiers formed a barrier with guns drawn. Uncle Tri asked to see the officer he had talked to on the phone earlier. Their response was, "Back off or we will shoot you." Uncle Tri begged them not to shoot and to please let him see that officer. When they kept pointing the guns at him, he backed off and lay flat on the ground next to the car to dodge any bullets that might have come his way. We were terrified.

He decided that we should go home so he could call that officer again. Luckily, he was able to speak to him. He told uncle Tri that the family should go back to the airbase. He would be there to wait for us at the gate.

When we arrived the second time, after checking that we were indeed General Hieu's family, he personally let us in. We were told to wait in a room, to throw away most of our belongings and to keep for each only a small bag so that the helicopter could carry more people. It was a crowded airport; many people stood in long lines, waiting for their names to be called.



Escapees crowd into helicopters

We were relieved to hear our group called and after a head count, we were allowed to board a helicopter that took us to a US carrier (I don't remember its name).

Aunt Huong had been worried the whole time that her sons Dung and Cam, who were at the ages of registration for military service, would not be allowed to join the family, but she was

wrong. No one asked about our ages or to see any papers.

Although Saigon and the airbase were still in American and South Vietnamese control, we were so scared by the thunderous sound of rockets the enemies were firing into the airbase and by the planes that hovered above our heads.

The helicopter flight took only around 15 minutes to get to the carrier. We stayed in the carrier overnight; no one was able to sleep. We were taken the next day to a barge, and we stayed there for a day or so, then we were transferred to a big ship.

The ship was much taller than the barge. It was hard to climb up to the ship. Once aboard, we had to find a spot to sit down. It was dirty; it was crowded.

We had some rice (cooked in a huge metal trash can) the first day. We ate rice with tuna and fish sauce (brought onto the ship by some nuns) the next day. Children were given boxes of cereal.

People in the ship started to develop red eye problems. It spread fast, but uncle Tin and I were spared.

Lori: Did the conditions in the ship improve with time?

Bich: We could not shower, so we were dirty and we smelled bad. People usually waited until it was dark to go to

the toilets because those toilets were built with a few pieces of wood on the sides of the ship. There was no privacy because we could see people sitting inside and they could see the outside. I had my period the first day on the ship - the napkins I brought with me were wet from the rain, but I used them anyway.

One sick boy died and was thrown overboard; we learned about it a day later.

Lori: Were you aware of the destination of the ship?

Bich: No, not at all. I cried a few times and that made my Aunt Huong worry. She told me that everyone was suffering, not only me.

Lori: While on the ship, did you know about the situation back in Saigon and of your family?

Bich: I knew nothing about our family, but someone had a radio and I knew a little bit about what was happening in Saigon.

Lori: So where was the next stop?

Bich: We went to Subic Bay of the Philippines. I was so happy. I had my first shower in many days (eight days I think). I had fresh food to eat and a bed to sleep in.

Lori: How many days did you stay in Subic Bay and where did you go after that?



Voyage on crowded ship lasted almost a week

Bich: After about a week there, we flew to Guam. It was hot and sunny; we all got a tan.

Lori: How was life in Guam?

Bich: All of us stayed in one tent, the long military type. One tent was next to the other. There were folding beds inside. Refugees received toiletries and three meals a day. Some volunteered to work in the kitchens. Long lines were seen at every meal time.

Lori: Was the food good?

Bich: The food was fine, and we had fresh fruits every day.

Lori: How long did you live in Guam? Where did you go after that?

Bich: We lived there for about a week. After that we went to Pennsylvania, to a camp called Indiantown Gap, I believe.

Lori: Were you able to communicate with other members of your family?

Bich: While in the Philippines, I called my brother Co in Virginia. He advised us to apply to go to Arkansas, to a camp in Fort Smith, to be reunited with our parents who would eventually settle in Fayetteville through the help of Dr. Caspers.

Lori: Then why did you go to Pennsylvania?

Bich: Maybe the camp in Arkansas was full, because our request was denied.

Tri: Which kind of plane did you fly in from Subic Bay to Guam and from Guam to Pennsylvania?

Bich: From Subic Bay to Guam, we flew in a small plane but from Guam to Pennsylvania, it was a big Pan Am jet.

Lori: Ok, now tell us about Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Bich: Dr. Caspers filled out paperwork to bring us to Fayetteville. He picked us up at the airport. We were reunited with our parents, and we stayed there for two months.

Lori: What did you do during those two months?

Bich: Not much. I helped my mother cook, clean, and do the dishes.

Tri: How did you compare the house our parents rented in Fayetteville and our house in Saigon?

Bich: It was a nice house with a big yard. Our house in Saigon was huge, 10 times bigger I think, but it had no yard.

Lori: How many people lived with Dr. Caspers at that time?

Bich: My mom and dad, my sister Van, you (pointing to Tri), brothers Minh and Tuan, and myself. I believe Loan's family came shortly after I left for Terre Haute, Indiana.

Lori: Why did you decide to move to Indiana? Where did you stay?

Bich: My sister Van and I joined my sister Diep, a.k.a. Ngoc, who went to college there since 1972. Van lived with Mr. and Mrs. Mediate and their daughter Kim, who was close in age to Van.

Diep and I rented a room in Mrs. Volcker's house. Mrs. Volcker was single with no children.

Lori: How did you know the Mediates and Mrs. Volcker?

Bich: Mrs. Volcker worked at Indiana State University and my sister Diep knew her. The Mediates were friends of Mrs. Volcker.

Lori: You lived with Mrs. Volcker for how long?

Bich: For a couple months. We then moved to an apartment.

Lori: Did you go back to Fayetteville to visit after moving to Terre Haute?

Bich: The Mediates drove me and Van back to Fayetteville to visit our parents for a few days in the Fall of 1975.

Lori: You went to ISU?

Bich: Yes, I chose nursing as a major but after working in a nursing home and seeing the hard work of nurses, I did not think that this career was right for me so I changed to home economics.

Lori: Why did you decide to move to Houston, Texas?

Bich: After graduating with a B.S. degree in home economics in 1979, the only job offer I had was in Chicago, a food service supervisor at the airport. I did not like the idea of moving to Chicago to live by myself. I was unable to find anything in Terre Haute. Moreover, my parents told me that they would eventually move to Houston to be with my older brother Co who just moved there.

Lori: Was it easier for you to find jobs in Houston?

Bich: Yes, right after moving to Houston, I got a job in a hospital, working in food service. Two months later, I quit after finding a machinist job at Texas Instruments. I got laid off after a year. A friend told me about job openings at Southwestern Bell so I applied there, passed a test, and was offered a desk job. I have been working there from 1981 until now.

Tri: How did you meet Hien, your husband?

Bich: I knew him from law school in Vietnam. I was a first year student there. Our mutual friend in Montreal, Canada, tried to hook us up after hearing that I lived in Terre Haute. Hien and I began exchanging letters and phone calls in 1976. He went to Terre Haute to see me twice and I went to Montreal to see him twice. We were married in July 1980.

Tri: What is his full name, birth date?

Bich: Nguyen Huu Hien, born July 17, 1953 in Ha Noi.

Tri: You guys want to start a family soon?

Bich: We have been working on it, hopefully one day...

Tri: Any bad memories?

Bich: Let me think...there was an incident in the camp in Pennsylvania: Aunt Huang's stepmother-in-law accused me of stealing her bath towel that she left on the edge of her bed. No matter how hard I tried to convince her that I did not

take it and even when her daughter later admitted to taking it, she still kept on believing that I did. She said that although the barracks were dark, she said she saw me taking it. I was so sad.

Tri: What was the worst time?

Bich: The days on that big ship.

Tri: What do you think about the Mediates?

Bich: They are nice; they like to help people.

Tri: How about Dr. Caspers?

Bich: He has no family of his own. He has a good heart. He sacrificed a lot to help Vietnamese refugees, one family after another. He always made sure that we had plenty of food; he filled up his freezer all the time for us.

Tri: What is your wish, short and long term?

Bich: Hien and I wish to have a baby soon. And in a couple years, Hien will graduate with a degree in management information systems. That degree, in addition to the accounting degree that he received from college in Canada, hopefully will bring him a better job, a job that he likes.

Long term: I wish to go back to Vietnam to visit one day. I would want to see the areas in Vietnam that I did not have a chance to see like areas in the Central and the North.

Tri: You don't want to see our old neighborhood?

Bich: Yes, I do.

Tri: What is Hien doing right now?

Bich: He works at the post office, a night shift from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. and takes classes at University of Houston two days per week from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Tri: Has Hien been working at the post office since coming to the US?

Bich: He had a bookkeeping job before, but the pay was too low so he quit.

Tri: So he works the night shift, you work the day shift. Do you guys see each other that much?

Bich: We see each other from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. and on weekends.

Tri: Are you happy with life now?

Bich: Yes, we have a nice house, and we travel. Life could be better after Hien graduates.

Updates – July 2007

Bich and Hien now have two daughters, Christina 12 and Viviane 10. Hien graduated from University of Houston with a degree in management information systems. He still works for the post office. Bich retired after working for more than two decades at Southwestern Bell. They reside in Sugar Land, Texas.



Bich with daughters Viviane on the left and Christina on the right (2012)



Minh Anh Vu

**Seventh child of Xuong Van Vu and
Sam Thi Pham**

**Interviewed on May 2, 1987 in Houston,
Texas**

Tri: What is your birth date?

Minh: December 2, 1960

Tri: When did you find out that we were going to leave Vietnam?

Minh: A week before we left.

Tri: Who told you?

Minh: Mom told me to go to Aunt Huong's house.

Tri: You knew who would go with you?

Minh: Yes, her children and some relatives on her husband's side of the family.

Tri: Anyone in our family?

Minh: Bich and Tuan.

Tri: How did you feel that week before?

Minh: I don't know. I just spent most of the money I had on eating out.

Tri: How old were you?

Minh: 15.

Tri: How much money did you spend?

Minh: I had 1500 Vietnamese Dong, I spent about 1200 Dong.

Tri: What did you pack to go?

Minh: Mom made bags for us, one for each. I packed a couple pairs of pants, some shirts, pajamas.

Tri: Who took you to Aunt Huong's?

Minh: The chauffeur. Mom told us to tell him we were going there just for a few days.

Tri: But you knew you were leaving the country?

Minh: Yes. I heard that Uncle Hieu's American friend promised to take us with him, so I guessed the destination must be the USA.

Tri: Do you remember what day you went to Aunt Huong's?

Minh: The 22nd or 23rd of April, 1975, five or six days before we left Vietnam.

Tri: What day did you actually leave?

Minh: The 29th.

Tri: What did you do at Aunt Huong's?

Minh: We sat around, ate, and waited to hear from that guy.

Lori: The trip to the airport on the 29th, was it scary?

Minh: Yes, very. We departed at around 11 a.m., were stopped by Vietnamese patrols, and had to bribe them with 80,000 Vietnamese Dong. But we were unable to get into the gate of the airport. We had to go back home to contact the American guy, give him our license plate number, then return to the airport at around 5 or 6 p.m. the same day. During the drive, we saw a lot of people running around in the streets trying to stop us from leaving.

Lori: You eventually got into the airport? What did you have to do next?

Minh: Yes, we got into the airport. We were told to keep one bag for each person and throw away the rest. We boarded a helicopter at night around 10 p.m. to go to an aircraft carrier, and landed there about 45 minutes later. We then moved to a small boat that took us to a two-story big boat.

Tri: How big was the boat?

Minh: I guess it was 80 feet long.

Tri: What time did you get to the big boat? Were you tired?

Minh: I was very tired. We got to the big boat around 2 a.m. We tried to find a place to sleep but the good spots were taken.

Tri: How many days were you in the boat?

Minh: Five or six days.

Tri: What kind of food did they serve you on the boat?

Minh: First day: canned meat. Second day: rice with tomato, beet, and fish sauce. The food tasted bad. Rice was cooked in a big metal trashcan.



finding space on the boat to sleep was difficult

Tri: How did you go to the bathroom?

Minh: I only urinated. Toilets were dirty, in the outdoors, made of two planks of wood attached to the edge of the boat. The weather was hot, it rained a lot but there was no place for shower or bath.

Tri: Your next stop was Guam?

Minh: A place with trailers. It is not Guam, some place before Guam, close to Guam. Or maybe it is Guam, I am all mixed up.

Tri: How did you feel to be on land?

Minh: I was exhausted but happy.

Tri: What do you wear there?

Minh: Pajamas.

Tri: Tell me about that place.

Minh: There was good food...fruits, meat. I got to shower, play volleyball.

Tri: How long did you stay there?

Minh: About a week.

Tri: Where did you go next?

Minh: Two camps before getting to Indiantown Gap Camp in Philadelphia.



Entrance to Fort Indiantown Gap, one of four Vietnamese refugee camps in the US

Tri: How do you compare Indiantown Gap to the other places?

Minh: This was the best place. We lived in barracks. Food was good but the lines to go eat were long.

Tri: You went to Fayetteville Arkansas after Indiantown Gap?

Minh: We flew a big commercial airplane to Fayetteville to join our parents. I was happy.

Tri: Who picked you up at the airport in Fayetteville?

Minh: Dad and Dinh.

Tri: How was life in Fayetteville?

Minh: I did not know Dr. Caspers before, but I felt at home. But once in a while there were problems. I wanted to do things my way instead of his way. I was bad at times.

Lori: You acted bad or you felt bad?

Minh: Sometimes I acted like I did not care about anything, anyone.

Tri: What grade were you in?

Minh: I was in 8th grade when I left Vietnam but Dr. Caspers made me repeat the same grade to learn English.

Tri: What school was it?

Minh: Fayetteville High School.

Tri: How did you do at school?

Minh: Math was okay but other subjects, like English, I just got by with Cs.

Tri: How did people treat you at school?

Minh: I was teased by some big guys. I got into a fight once and the teasing stopped.

Tri: Anything else?

Minh: No, that's it.

Tri: Thank you.

Updates – July 2007

Minh graduated from University of Houston with a degree in Electrical Engineering. After working for a few years at General Dynamics in Fort Worth, Texas, Minh moved back home and now lives with our parents in Houston.



Minh (2012)



Tuan Anh Vu

Eighth child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

Interviewed May 3, 1987, at parents' house on 15706 Longvale Dr.- Houston, TX 77059

Tri: Tuan, can you tell me your date of birth?

Tuan: February 11, 1963.

Tri: You have other names?

Tuan: During my college undergraduate years, I chose the nickname Tom to make it easier for my friends to say, and when I start medical school, I was called Patrick but now, I am going back to my name Tuan. It is the name on papers.

Tri: How old were you when you left Vietnam?

Tuan: I was 12.

Tri: How did you know that you were going to leave Vietnam?

Tuan: Mother told me. We had a family meeting and our parents told us who would go with whom, so I knew.

Tri: You remember what day was it?

Tuan: It was April 23 or 24, I think.

Tri: Tell me about your feelings; were you concerned?

Tuan: Yes. I was kind of scared because only Bich, Minh, and I would go with Aunt Huong. We were separated from the rest of the family.

Tri: Did you plan anything in your head?

Tuan: No, I just went.

Tri: What did you bring with you on the trip?

Tuan: A small bag, some dress clothes, some regular shorts, T-shirts and stuff, and a pair of shoes.

Tri: How long did you stay at Aunt Huong's house?

Tuan: Five to seven days. It seemed like a long time.

Tri: What did you do there?

Tuan: Eat, sleep, and play with my cousin Hoang.

Tri: Did you talk to Mom during that time?

Tuan: She called a couple times. The last time she called was on April 28. She said that she and Dad, Tri, and Van were leaving Vietnam the same day.

Tri: Were you worried?

Tuan: No because we were supposed to leave on April 29, which was the day after that. We were waiting for Uncle Hieu's friend, the American guy, to call us.

Tri: Did you have any money?

Tuan: Mom stuffed some money, 20 dollars, in the seams of my pants waistline. She told me to wear that pair of pants all the time so as not to lose the money.

Tri: You left Vietnam on the 29th?

Tuan: The airport was attacked with rockets the night of April 28, so Uncle Tri had to talk to the American guy. He told us to go to a US compound about a mile or two from the airport. We left at around 11 a.m. the morning of the 29th in two cars. One was a black limousine with two stars on the front plate and another car I don't remember what it was. We were unable to get near the gate of the compound because the US soldiers, who stood guard with guns drawn, ordered us to stop. Uncle Tri, dressed in his black priest robe, approached them cautiously to ask for the American guy, was told he was not there, and that he had gone to lunch.

We were standing outside the cars and could hear the loud noises of gunshots. We were real scared; we hid in a ditch. I wanted to go home.

Tri: What time was it?

Tuan: I guess it was around 1 p.m.

Tri: And what else?

Tuan: After some discussion, the adults decided to go back home so Uncle Tri could call the American guy. He was able to get in touch with that guy, gave him the cars' license plates. We left again the second time but were stopped even before getting out of the subdivision. The chauffeur got out to talk to them but to no avail. Aunt Huong gave them some money, so they let us go.

Tri: What are the names of people who went on that trip with you?

Tuan: In addition to Bich, Minh, and me, there was Aunt Huong's family consisting of Aunt Huong herself, her brothers-in-law Tri and Tin, her step mother-in-law, her sister-in-law, her sons Dung, Cam, Hoang, her daughters Thu, Ha, and Hang. A total of 14 people.

Tri: So you got inside the US compound this time?

Tuan: No, before getting there, we got stopped again. Vietnamese soldiers with guns drawn closed off the road with barbed wire. Aunt Huong had to bribe them with 20,000 Vietnamese Dong. When we finally arrived at the compound, the soldiers checked the license plates and let us in.

Tri: What was your



Barbed wire could quickly be pulled across road to form an impromptu blockade

feeling at this point?

Tuan: Relieved that we got in.

Tri: What did you see inside the compound?

Tuan: Thousands of people were lining up along the hallway.

Tri: So you had to stay in line?

Tuan: Yes. It seemed like forever. Uncle Tri had to take care of things. We waited for our group to be called.

Tri: What was next?

Tuan: We were called, and we got into the helicopter that took us to a US aircraft carrier. The helicopter ride from the compound to the carrier took about 15 minutes.

Tri: What happened after that?

Tuan: After waiting for 30 minutes, we were taken up the stairs to the back of the loading dock to be taken to a ship. We got to the ship at around 2 a.m. It was a big merchant ship, about 100 yards long. We climbed onto the ship. People were packed like sardines; we found some free space on the deck. It was dark; we did not realize that we were situated right next to the toilet. We slept sitting up.

Tri: Next to the toilet? The smell was bad?

Tuan: Not really. Toilets were made of planks of wood with canvas covered around like a cubicle. Waste went into the ocean, there was also a water hose that could be used to keep the area clean.

Tri: How long did you stay on the ship?

Tuan: Six days I think.

Tri: What clothes did you wear on the ship?

Tuan: I wore the same pair of pants with money and a shirt. I was afraid of losing the money if I changed.

Tri: Did you shower?

Tuan: No, just washed my hair and brushed my teeth.

Tri: What kind of food did you eat on the ship?

Tuan: We ate twice a day, at 11 a.m and 6 p.m. Each person was given a can of rice mixed with tomato. Heads of family went to get food for everyone in the family.

Lori: Did people get sick?

Tuan: Yes, there was an eye infection epidemic brought onto the ship by a person that came from a small boat. I got it, too.

Tri: How was the weather?

Tuan: Not that bad, it rained once or twice.

Tri: Where did you go when it rained?

Tuan: We went down to the lower level, where someone let us in. There was a metal door that opened to the lower level.

Tri: Did you have any friends?

Tuan: No.

Tri: What kinds of activities did you have?

Tuan: Eat and sleep. I slept most of the time so as not to waste energy.

Tri: When and where did you go next?

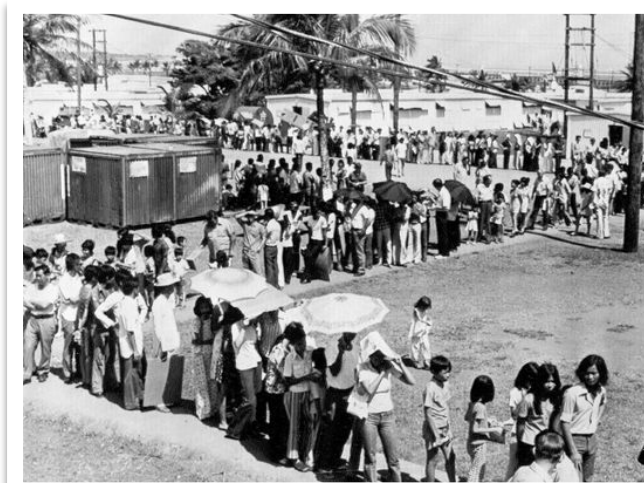
Tuan: We went to Guam in the morning of the 7th day. We stayed in a tent. Tent areas were identified by A, B or C. We were in one of the tents in 4C.

Lori: Just your group was in that tent?

Tuan: Yes.

Tri: What was the daily routine?

Tuan: We had to line up for food. Lines were usually a half-mile long. You should be in line before 3 p.m. for dinner or have to wait for the next meal.



Food lines in Guam, 1975

Tri: How was the food?

Tuan: Foods were different at each location. People sometimes went to eat at a location other than their own.

Tri: You had friends in Guam?

Tuan: I did not see any of my friends from Vietnam. I had brother Minh and cousin Hoang with me; we just walked around.

Tri: What was your impression of Guam?

Tuan: It was better than the ship, okay for short-term but not for long-term.

Tri: Tell me about the tent.

Tuan: We slept on a sheet on a wood floor. There were not enough cots for everyone.

Tri: You still wore the same pants in Guam?

Tuan: Yes, but I washed them. Let me tell you this funny story. I got lost after getting food. I was walking with two plates of food but unable to find our tent. Then I had a bad stomachache. I had diarrhea, and I was unable to hold it. I did not care about food anymore, so I left the plates on the ground when I found a place to do the job. My pants were soiled; I had to use toilet paper to wipe the spots. Finally I came to my tent. I took out money from the pocket, asked our cousin to keep it and went to wash my pants.

Tri: Did you have enough water?

Tuan: Yes, there was a water truck where we could get water.

Tri: How long did you stay in Guam?

Tuan: Four days.

Tri: What was the next place after Guam?

Tuan: It was Black Construction, a part of Guam.

Tri: You did not go to Subic Bay in the Philippines?

Tuan: No, I have never been in Philippines.

Tri: How was Black Construction?

Tuan: Nice, clean. We lived in barracks, 40-50 persons in each.

Tri: How about bathrooms?

Tuan: Regular bathrooms.

Tri: Did you see any old friends from Vietnam or make new friends there?

Tuan: Yes, I had four or five new friends to hang out with. They were Dat, Vinh, Mick and ... I don't remember his name. One is in California and one in Canada now.

The boy named Dat, we got into a fight after he cut in to my line to get food. I hit him, so he punched me back in the eye and gave me a black eye. Later on, I saw him and told him to just forget about everything and be friends. He agreed and we became friends since then.

Tri: How long did you stay there?

Tuan: A month.

Tri: What was the next move?

Tuan: We moved next to Camp Andersen.

Tri: How did you get to Andersen?

Tuan: By bus.

Tri: How was Camp Andersen and how long did you stay there?

Tuan: Peaceful. Pretty much the same like the previous place. It was an army camp with beds. We stayed there for two, three weeks waiting for processing to go to the US.

Tri: When and where in the US did you go to?

Tuan: We flew to Indiantown Gap Camp in Pennsylvania in late May 1975. The plane made a stop in San Francisco before flying to Pennsylvania.

Tri: Tell me about Indiantown Gap.

Tuan: We lived in barracks. It was cool in the morning and at night. Food was pretty good. We had plenty of fresh food.

Tri: You still wore those same pants?

Tuan: Maybe yes.

Tri: Did you see any friends?

Tuan: I saw some friends from Guam. I saw our sister Van's friend Tung Vien working in a food service place and asked her about Van. She told me that Van just left a few days ago. I was happy to have good news about family.

Tri: How long did you stay in Pennsylvania?

Tuan: A month or less, probably three weeks.

Tri: What were your activities there?

Tuan: I played soccer. We were able to ride the bus to other areas of the camp to meet with friends and hang out.

Tri: Anything else?

Tuan: Bich took the money Mom gave and bought new clothes at a PX store. She got for me new pants and new belt. I was happy. She also bought a handbag.

Tri: Where did you go next?

Tuan: We flew a commercial airplane to Fayetteville, Arkansas, to be reunited with our parents.

Tri: Did you say bye to your friends? Were you happy to leave Indiantown Gap?

Tuan: I was happy to go but sad to have to say bye to friends and relatives.

Tri: How was the flight to Arkansas?

Tuan: It was not a direct flight. The plane stopped in St. Louis and we tried to get off, but there was a Red Cross person there who told us to stay in the plane. We were hungry, had only peanuts and Coke so far. There was a Vietnamese stewardess in the plane; she asked Minh something in English but he did not understand. She said in Vietnamese: “em muon uong gi?” meaning “what do you like to drink?” When Bich heard her speaking Vietnamese, she told her that we have not had anything to eat since last night. The stewardess took us to the back of the plane where there were some empty seats, she gave us her sandwich, half of a chocolate bar and bags of peanuts.

Tri: What airline? What kind of plane?

Tuan: I don't remember.

Tri: You must have appreciated the food she gave very much?

Tuan: Yes, we thanked her.

Tri: Who picked you up at Fayetteville airport?

Tuan: Dinh and who else I don't remember. It was 5 or 6 p.m.

Tri: What time did you depart from Pennsylvania?

Tuan: 8 or 9 a.m.

Tri: Did Dr. Caspers feed you right away?

Tuan: You were there; you should know that.

Tri: Tell me.

Tuan: A big dinner.

Tri: A single word to describe life in Fayetteville?

Tuan: Scared. Hectic.

Tri: Did you help around the house?

Tuan: I was assigned to set up the dinner table. It was the easiest job, but I did not feel like doing it.

Tri: Any trouble with Dr. Caspers?

Tuan: Yes, he asked me to clean up the porch and the garage, and I was too lazy to do it.

Lori: Was it tough living there?

Tuan: Maybe then but now, thinking back, it was worth it all.

Lori: What grade were you in? What was your impression of school?

Tuan: 7th grade. At least the first half of the year, I did not know what was going on. They talked too fast.

Lori: Did you pass?

Tuan: I got Cs and luckily did not have to repeat 7th grade.

Lori: You and your parents all stayed in the same house?

Tuan: Yes, in the beginning until they moved to a rented house with a weeping willow in the front.

Tri: Did you have a girlfriend?

Tuan: No.

Tri: Any memories?

Tuan: Mom and Dad moved to Indiana. We visited them twice a year.

Tri: You want to say something to Dr. Caspers?

Tuan: Many thanks. It was great living with him. He taught me a lot of things and I learned a lot from him.

Tri: When did you move to Houston?

Tuan: In August 1981 to attend University of Houston. That same year, Mom and Dad also moved to Houston from Indiana.

Tri: Where did you stay in Houston?

Tuan: I stayed with our brother Co for three years, and then I moved to our sister Van's house the last year of my undergraduates.

Tri: Why did you move?

Tuan: Too many people, too noisy at brother Co's house.

Tri: What was your major at University of Houston?

Tuan: Biology first, then chemical engineering, then biochemistry.

Tri: How did you like U of H?

Tuan: The school was okay but there were too many Vietnamese who caused troubles. In my freshman year, there were about 150 to 200 of them; the number became 600 or 700 in my third and fourth years. I tried to stay away from them.

Tri: Did you stay close to Co and receive his advice or you were pretty much independent?

Tuan: Independent.

Tri: Were you rebellious?

Tuan: Maybe a little.

Tri: Reason? Was it your age?

Tuan: No, I just wanted to do my own things.

Tri: Did anyone pressure you to go into that major of biochemistry?

Tuan: No.

Tri: How long did you stay with Van? Where did you go after that?

Tuan: One year. I moved out to Galveston to study Medicine. I would come back to visit Van every two or three weeks. Her house was closest to Galveston.

Tri: When did you start medical school at Galveston?

Tuan: August 1985. This is the end of my second year. I have two more years to go.

Tri: When you finish, what are you going to do?

Tuan: I will do my residency in either emergency medicine or surgery.

Tri: Can you choose the specialty or the location you want?

Tuan: You can indicate your preference by ranking the program after the interviews but you will get matched and you have to accept the matching. In the worst case, you might not get matched at all.

Tri: What are your first three choices?

Tuan: I don't know yet. It is too early now.

Tri: How long is the duration of the residency?

Tuan: It depends on the program; it can be three to six years.

Tri: Do you plan to practice medicine in Houston?

Tuan: I have no idea.

Tri: A goal?

Tuan: Get a car, a Porsche 911.

Tri: A wish?

Tuan: No wish. I just do whatever is needed to be done.

Tri: You have a girlfriend now?

Tuan: No.

Tri: Searching or waiting?

Tuan: No.

Tri: Do you want to get married soon?

Tuan: At least after my residency.

Tri: Do you want a Vietnamese or a Caucasian girl?

Tuan: Probably Vietnamese, but who knows.

Tri: Any comment?

Tuan: I wish everyone happiness. Life is short, so enjoy it.

Updates – July 2007

After years of residency in general surgery and plastic surgery at the University of Kentucky Medical Center and fellowship at Louisville Jewish Hospital, Tuan opened his *Southwest Cosmetic Surgery Center* in Sugar Land, Texas. Tuan and his wife Melissa have two boys, Ryan and Eli.



Ryan, Melissa, Eli, and Tuan, 2014

Group 2: Tri, Van, and Their Parents

The second family group to leave Vietnam consisted of four people: Xuong Van Vu (Dad), Sam Thi Pham (Mom), Tri (fifth child), and Van (sixth child). Tri was 18 years old and Van was 16. The children's stories follow. The parents spoke mostly on topics other than the trip to the United States so will be included in a later section.

Tri's College English Essays

Several of Tri's college English essays were written during his first six months in the United States. These writings reveal a good amount of Tri's thoughts and feelings during this time of life. We are very thankful for this English professor who was able to draw out these essays from the quiet 19-year-old.



Tri Thien Vu

Fifth child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

Essays assigned at the University of Arkansas

First Impressions of a New Home, 1975

So many things happened unexpectedly to my family that I never would have imagined in my life. When we left our country we accepted with our fate either we would be happy or miserable. My family consists of 10 persons. My father was a businessman in Saigon, and my mother helped him in business. They were active people so they worked all day long. Our house was a high building in Saigon. We had more than enough to live, and we were helped by many servants so we felt very happy and very agreeable. We invested all of our money in my father's business. We thought that we would live there for all our lives, and we never believed that there were the last days like those in Saigon. We discussed every day about whether we should escape or not. But Saigon was unceasingly shelled; it forced us to escape as soon as possible. We didn't have time to arrange the baggage. We gave up all the things, and eventually we left our house so we couldn't get much money for our trip.

Anyone in my family left the country whenever we could so we separated into three groups. The first group got to Arkansas, the second to Pennsylvania, and the third to California. My parents missed both their country and their children and they sorrowed over the loss of their money. They cried all day long and felt disappointed; I didn't know how to console them. About two months later, owing to the generosity of the Red Cross, the first two groups got together. We wished one day the whole family would be together again. We have just gathered in a group; and we are going to separate once more because our sponsor can't feed all the persons at one time. Everyone is looking for jobs, even my younger sister. My parents are going to rent another house to live in, and some have to go to Indiana. Now, my parents are willing to work absolutely like the servants that we once had in Saigon.

We are consoled by the kind people surrounding us. We are very grateful for the help from the Americans. I wish someday the whole family can be together



the Vu home in Saigon

and everyone can go to school; that would be the happiest day in the rest of my life.

Untitled Essay I – March 11, 1975

It was a week or two before we left. As I lay in bed, Loan came in. As the eldest child, she was the most understanding and mature. She seemed to always try to bring the family together. She gave me a whole stack of her school law papers. “Ask me questions and I will try to answer.” She had a big test coming up. I spent most of my time in my room studying. I was listening to a Vietnamese songwriter Trinh Cong Son when Loan interrupted me. “You know Tri, these songs are so good.” I’d never actually REALLY listened to the words before. “See how nicely he put the words together?” “Listen...Tri, if you have the chance to leave Vietnam, would you do it?” I could tell she was speaking seriously. “Suppose there was a ship out there to take you to another country.”

“What country?” I asked.

“It could be the United States.” She was giving me a choice—to stay or to go.

“What’s happening?” I asked her.

She continued, “Don’t tell any servants or workers. It must be kept very secret.” Loan always seemed to know everything that was going on. I did not know who else knew about this.

Girlfriend O.

Problem #1. My parents had been wealthy for a long time. Her family was different. I never noticed or compared this. She was always trying to compare. She would tell me how her friends would comment about her beautiful house. I just said, “Uh huh.” I did not feel that our relationship should be based on jealousy, family status, or whatever.

Problem #2. My (girl) cousins knew that I was dating O. I wanted my sister Bich to get to know her. Bich was a quiet person and therefore not particularly popular and outgoing. My girlfriend was very popular and outgoing; she had many friends and dated a lot. When Bich made efforts (for me) to get to know her, Bich would come home telling me things O had said that upset Bich.

Problems #3. My parents didn't want me to date O. I took this quite personally. Now as I look back on the situation, I think that my parents feared that I might not finish school if the relationship became too serious.

Untitled 2

My girlfriend's father worked for some Americans, so he had top priority to get out of the country. She wanted me to leave with her. I went to her house at least twice a day. At that time, my father wanted me out of the country at any cost. Her father offered to help me, but I knew that my father would refuse the offer because of ego (pride). But it turned out that her father helped my father exchange some Vietnamese money into US dollars. My father and I went to her house, up the narrow stairs to the second floor where the living room was located. We sat down and waited for a man to show up. My father met her father for the first time and met her formally for the first time too. In my mind, our business there was strictly business—the money exchange. Her father was very understanding and wanted to get closer to our family (our relationship, etc.) We exchanged VN\$600 for US\$1. We had carried a big brown bag of money to her house. After the transaction, I felt that my dad was beginning to panic—had he done the right thing making this money exchange? We left hurriedly. In the car, my dad drove. I soon noticed that we were not going directly home, but to his friend's house. I sat in the car waiting while he went in alone.

As I sat there, I noticed the surroundings. We were at a dead-end street. Blocking the street was a gate or fence. It was the American Embassy grounds. All the way at the other side of the compound was the main gate to the embassy. Hundreds of people were at that gate trying to get in. I was afraid. In 15-20 minutes, my father returned. "Is the money real?" I asked.



The US Embassy in Saigon

He replied, "It could be fake." He typically didn't relate his true feelings to me; this made me angry and worried. I had helped make the deal; and now I was feeling guilty for my part in it. We went home. I continued to feel badly.

My girlfriend's father proposed putting my name on his list to leave—listing me as Oanh's fiancé. I packed my blue Adidas bag (12" x 12" x 6"), which was all I would take with me...one half dozen underwear, one shirt, one pair of pants. On the side of the bag I put all my school papers previously translated into English (in hopes of my entering a US university.) My father did all he could to ease my trip by writing down all the names, addresses, and phone numbers of relatives in France and the US.

I was in my room deciding what else to pack. On my built-in bedside table was my Longine watch, a gift from my brother. It was running slow so I thought that it wouldn't do me any good. I left it laying flat there. Looking around, I rested my eyes on each item in my room knowing that it would have to remain

there. To my left were my large stereo and reel-to-reel recorder and speakers. Further to the left was my study desk. There were so many things to leave behind. To the right was my wardrobe closet with all the new clothes. I picked another shirt and pants to pack. My bag was quite full by now.

I expected to leave for my girlfriend's house that afternoon, as soon as they received the proper papers. I went to her house. My family was so strong. We said goodbye and my parents wished me luck. It seems that it should have been more traumatic – I may never see them again. I rode over there on my brand new scooter. I rang the bell. Her grandmother answered the door as always. "Hello, Tri. Your father (that meant my girlfriend's father) has gone somewhere. He will be back soon. Come on in and I will get Oanh." I pushed my scooter inside ahead of me and sat on it as we talked.

About 2 p.m., her father returned. "I love you," he said to me, "you are like part of my family. I want to take you with us but I can't." There were tears in his eyes. Oanh began crying. I was disappointed but not surprised.

She said, "I guess I must go. If anything changes between us, it will be me." I stayed a short while, we kissed each other goodbye and I went home. (I took her to the airport at some point.)

I told my family what had happened. I lost an opportunity to leave and a relationship that had lasted six years. My parents, underneath it all, were relieved. Going with her would have meant a lifetime commitment to her at an age when I should begin my studies for a career. I went to my room and turned on the music. I'd unpack later.

I never did unpack that bag. (Lost time here.) It seemed as if it were only a few hours later that someone entered my room to say, "Let's go." I picked up my bag and left.

Untitled 3

My friend Thanh spent the night with me. We were good friends and went to the same school. Around 2 a.m., we went down to the kitchen and found some rice and chà bông to snack on. We took it up to my room to eat. "Are you leaving?" he asked me.

"Yes, are you?"

"No, I don't know how," he replied. When he went home the next morning, he said, "Let me know when you leave. Call me."

“I will, I promise.”

The Family Meeting

Father called everyone to his room around 8:00 p.m.. How quiet things were. You could hear a fly. I knew this was serious. The nine of us sat on the floor in a circle.

He began: “I’ve been building up my business for the last 20 years starting from nothing. I just can’t leave it behind. I want to stay.”

Mother said: “Anyone who wants to go may go with me.” This was the first time I saw Mother’s strong will. She was clear and decisive about her choice.

Father said: “Whoever wants to stay, stay with me.”

I am sure I said I’d go, but I knew my chances were slim. I was at the age to join the army.

A few days before we left, Mother took me to a sweater store two houses to the left of ours. There were all girls in that family except for a boy my age also named Tri who had paralyzed legs and used leg braces. Mother asked for a heavy-duty sweater for me. Tri’s mother was curious, as were all the girls. Why does this boy need such a sweater in April? My mother didn’t answer the question. Tri’s mother, as we left, asked: “Do you know a way to get out? If you do, please let me know so I can get my Tri out.” We left silently.

Around Noon or Later on April 27, 1975

I will always remembered the time when we were all packing up. Both our house doors were closed—the solid one and the metal storefront. All the stores on the street were that way these days. The workers in our factory were long gone. The previous day we had told the servants to return to their homes. Only the cook stayed. She stood on the stair landing packing her own things. Our own bags were lined up below.

My 26-year-old cousin was going to take care of our house because he was staying behind. Father gave him all the keys. Someone was putting our bags in the car. We all waited inside. The girls from the sweater factory walked by to see what was going on, though they already knew.

Minh, Bich and Tuan had already gone to our aunt's house. She was the widow of a general, General Hieu. She had good connections for leaving.

That afternoon, we knew that we'd leave. The streets were deadly silent. They had been this way for three days. People knew that something was about to happen, but not exactly when, where, or how.

In the car, we drove a long way to someone's house. We called it a villa because it had a wall in front, then a courtyard. We went inside. I saw many other people there. I knew I was to stay there while my father took care of things. I was hungry so I walked down the street to a corner shop and ate my last Vietnamese sandwich.

Looking around, I sensed I was in the middle of something big, yet I could not share my feelings with anyone. Back at the villa, we waited as it grew dark.

Black G.I.s came inside with papers and then left with a group of people. Very quickly and business-like they moved; I watched this happen time after time.

Looking into the brightly lit room from my spot in the courtyard, I learned more of what was happening. A large safe would open and I watched what was being put in. We had to buy our way to freedom in one of three ways: gold, diamonds, or US dollars. We paid \$2000 per person.

The G.I.s returned in a US military jeep with a canvas cover. It was our turn to go. Father went into the office; I followed him. He was talking on the telephone saying goodbye to one of his best friends, Vinh Thanh. He had kept the secret from him, too. After he hung up, I asked, "May I use the phone?"

"No."

"I just want to say goodbye."

"No, it's not good to do that."

What guilt I felt towards Thanh and my other friends! I had promised that I would phone them before I left Vietnam.

At that point, a Vietnamese colonel walked in cussing. "Those guys wrote on the papers that I am 10 years old; I'd better go shave!" He had a bushy mustache yet I watched him shave a dry face. He, too, was desperate to leave the country. Another man in our group was a bodyguard of a top airport official; his papers said he was one year old. We got our papers with our pictures stamped with a US embassy stamp.

We found out then that my sister Loan, her husband Hoa, and their son Steve's names were not on the list. And now they wanted \$2500 per person.

We had to leave them behind. We said our goodbyes to them. Would we ever see them again?

We left the group home for the airport around 8:00 p.m. on April 28, even though the curfew was 6:00 p.m.

We all got into the jeep. The black G.I. driver and my father sat in the front. In the back were the two men I just mentioned, along with my mother, my sister Van and me. Suitcases were piled all over us. It was 8:00 p.m. and dark. I was lying in the center back with those two men trying to hide under the suitcases. After all, we three were the “guilty” ones—two top Vietnamese officials and an able-bodied 18-year-old. I could only hear what was happening. From my vantage point under the suitcases, I couldn’t see a thing. We were stopped only once at a barricade, and there were barricades everywhere.

At the airport, I remember the open-air waiting area filled with artificial light (high pressure sodium) so that it felt like day. I felt strange meeting neighbors there, yet nobody spoke to one another. The night seemed so long, yet we didn’t realize that we had stayed up all night.

We left early in the morning on the 29th after staying up all night waiting at the airport. We squatted inside a C-130 Air Force plane. Each person had about 6 square feet of floor space. We were really scared of the unknown ahead, but felt relieved at finally leaving Vietnam. The assistant pilot stood at the airplane door with a flare gun in case of emergency.

Philippines

Our first stop was Subic Bay, Philippines. The trip took four hours. From the airplane, we were taken in a beautiful white



The Lockheed C-130 Hercules was the only model of fixed-wing aircraft used in Operation Frequent Wind. The cargo transport could carry in excess of 240 evacuees

boat across the water to get paperwork done. Jet fighters flew overhead doing their exercises; the Clark Air Base was nearby. *[Note: Clark Air Base is a former United States Air Force base on Luzon Island in the Philippines, about 40 miles northwest of Manila.]*

We stayed here for three days. After the instability and fear in Vietnam, Subic Bay was a treat. Food was served 24 hours a day and we could have Coca-Cola and apples free. Never before had I experienced this...something for nothing! And I had never felt like this...free to walk and wander around everywhere at night. I felt so free, it was wonderful. If I was thirsty or hungry I could just go to the mess hall.



Subic Bay Naval Base, basketball court and mess hall

It was interesting to see how roles were reversed in our new environment. Adults seemed to be intimidated by everything while young people were bold enough to step forward to take control. What a dramatic change in only 24 hours!

When I got there, our “neighbor” was so aggressive to speak English. He told me that he would page my girlfriend over the loudspeaker for me. (I had

guessed that she might be there.) She must not have heard. I was there only three or four days.

On day two, I decided that I'd do some volunteer work like many others were doing. I was particularly interested in one job because I would be able to ride on a truck around the camp and look for my girlfriend as I worked.

Very early in the morning, they gave each of us an overall-type jumpsuit with long sleeves. We jumped in and out of the truck at the toilets. They were plywood boxes with raised platforms. To go to the bathroom, one had to climb up to the platform and "go" into a hole. Under the hole was a giant metal drum. Our job was to carry the drums from under the platform to the truck. They were extremely heavy. At the truck, several of us had to carefully lift the drums onto the bed of the truck without spilling anything. Like I said, the joy of this task was looking for my girlfriend.

All was quiet; the weather was nice and cool. When the truck went uphill, the liquid in the open tanks would tip precariously toward the rim. At a specified area, the drums were set on the ground and contents were burned; the remaining refuse was dumped onto the ground. My feelings were good; I was doing something for the community (not just for myself) for the first time. People were helping one another. I was beginning to see life differently than I had just a few days before.

We ate a lot, although the food was bland. We played, and we had snacks at midnight. I met an old friend of mine from Taberd School, and he gave me a cigarette. This impressed me because we didn't have much to give away. This guy probably had family and money and belongings waiting for him in the US or somewhere; for this reason he could be free with what he had with him now. One noontime as I was resting on my cot like most everyone at the camp (but so unlike Vietnam at noontime), my friend walked by for the last time--it was time for him to leave the camp. He walked by me, said bye, and tossed me a half pack of cigarettes. I thought I must be in heaven.

The camp and its environment were absolutely gorgeous. It was green everywhere, the nearby beach was beautiful. Our cots were under canopies in open air...one canopy for each family. You could see hundreds of (green?) plastic canopies rising out of the beautiful green landscape.



A bridge leads to US Naval Base Subic Bay on the tropical island of Luzon, Philippines

In the camp, I made several friends, one of whom was Hai. Hai's sister was a beautiful girl. While we were here, she kept flirting with a Philippino fire department head. She managed to get four or five of us invited to his place for dinner one night...and what a feast it was! The food was nice, spicy and oriental. Mmmm!

Guam

We flew to Guam on Pan Am. How fancy this trip was compared to the C-130 in which we left Vietnam! We were served food and drink. The hostesses were really nice except one. By the look in her eyes, she thought we were pigs.

We landed at night in a big open space, got out, and walked into a hangar. There were sandwiches and all kinds of food...and so much of it! And anything that was free tasted even more delicious.

They then herded us into another hangar. It was a huge place with bright lights. We sat in one area; our baggage was lined up along the walls. We were to walk along and find our bags then wait to be processed, fingerprinted, etc. We were there all night waiting for our turn. By the time we finished, we picked up blankets and our bags and were taken to our tent. It was noon. Time to eat lunch. Looking around, there was dirt and dust everywhere. There were no trees for acres around.

This camp was on an Air Force base. It was extremely hot and so very crowded. I was walking around at 2 p.m. On each corner of this particular intersection were ice cream stands. I was walking with my father for the first time in a long time. We saw a cousin with an ice cream cone walking by. "Do you want some, Tri?" my father asked.

"No," I replied, knowing we did not have money to splurge. But my father bought one for himself. It was so hot; he gave me a lick.

My cousin asked, "Did you know that O. is here?" My heart leaped. My cousin had arrived in Guam a day earlier than I, in the same group as O. I visited my cousin's tent. They seemed to be having a great time, not like my father and us.

Along the way somewhere, I found her. We gave each other a hug. Holding hands and walking along we talked, though we felt hot and dirty. O. and I had so much to talk about.

I met her later. She said, "I am leaving in a few hours!" We spent as much of that time as we could together. That night we walked through a very dark area and into an area with tall grass to watch a movie on a giant screen outside.

We said goodbye and I lost her once again. I remained in Guam a few more days then moved on to another camp at another military base.

Guam [essay for English class, 1975]

I began my new life as a refugee at Guam island. A large area was isolated just for the refugees to reside for a time. Thousands of tents rose close to one another. The camp was divided into several parts, each part having several tents labeled by different numbers. About thirteen people lived in one tent. At the center were some particular tents such as the mess hall, the PX, the clinic, and the information desk. It was always full of people over there.

The loudspeaker at the information desk yelled all the time and all day long. A little farther away from there was a nice beach. But not too many people were there because it was not the right time for any pleasure.

That was summer time. The sweltering heat almost burned me up. Guam was like a desert. My skin turned really dark because of the sun and the dust. Dust flew in the air like fog whenever it was windy. It stuck on my body even though I had just taken a shower. I didn't know how much dust I breathed in a day, surely a lot. I was thirsty all the time.

When I was in the tent, the smell of plastic melting in the heat and the smell from the toilets around my tent really made me sick. But at night, the weather was cooler. I wandered along the beach to admire the stars and to think of my life. I felt so lonely when I sat down in the dark to listen to the sounds of the waves beating against the rocks. I missed my country, I missed my family, and I missed my relatives. I was nearly crying. I had never imagined that I could have those miserable days. The misery made me imagine my new vague life. But I always consoled myself by thinking that what I had at that time was better than nothing at all.

Everyday was the same. I got bored with my schedule. I went to bed late because I didn't feel like sleeping at all. But I always woke up early. About six thirty, I woke up to go get water from a truck to wash myself as usual. At seven, I began to get in line to wait for my breakfast. The line was long as a train. I thought probably those people must sleep there from the night before to make such a long line like that. After two hours waiting, it was my turn. After finishing this meal, I began to wait for another one. I used to start waiting when I was full, so I could have food by the time I got hungry again. The food was not excellent. I had an artificial egg every breakfast. I had chicken, taken from a can, every lunch. And I had fish every supper. Once in a while they served beef, still taken from a can, for the meals. I never had any fresh food, everything was taken from cans. I had rice every meal, but the rice was never well-cooked. Sometimes, it was hard like sand, and sometimes it was soft like soup. The fish smelled terrible; I was scared of it the most. Sometimes I fasted because of their fish. Vegetables never appeared in any meal. That fact made my body dryer and dryer. Moreover, the heat of the sun seemed to want to kill me when I was waiting. I got thirsty all the time; then I was still happy to have water mixed with dust. I remembered in the army of Vietnam, the leaders used to punish the soldiers by making them stand under the sun. In Guam, I was punished in the

same manner. But I didn't know who punished me or why. After the meals for the day, the sky began to turn dark. Another day was getting ready to come. Day after day changed and changed like a machine.

I only lived there for seven days, but it seemed to me that I lived there seven years. Although Guam had a very nice beach, I hoped never to go back there again. To me, it looked like a battlefield. I didn't know whether those days were the most miserable days of mine or not. Or I would have to face another one in the rest of my life. I was ready for that, and I was always ready to face it.

Another Camp

There were many bases, so many bases where we stayed that it was impossible to keep up with them. We arrived at one base very late at night. I saw a color TV for the first time; it was outside for everyone to watch. Nobody was watching it, though, except perhaps the G.I. who gave out toilet supplies. It just so happened that the reception was bad that night or maybe the channel was not adjusted right. I remember thinking, "This is terrible. I don't believe that color TV will ever be as good as black and white!"

At every place we went, we were given free things, so I took advantage of it. One place was giving free Bic razors to men over 18 and I made sure that I got one of those. We got a new toothbrush at each base and I always took one even though I didn't need it.

Fort Chaffee

I had stayed at Fort Chaffee one month. I got to know this place that became my home out of necessity. The barracks was a two-story structure in the shape of a long rectangle. There was a door at each end and a hallway down the center. There were steps out the front. Flimsy dividers about six feet tall divided the barracks into 10'x10' rooms, one room per family. We slept on bunk beds and cots, and we could hear everything going on in the immediate vicinity.



Fort Chaffee barracks

Each barracks had an elected leader who would attend camp meetings and return to tell us about them. Usually it was about bathroom problems. Each barracks had two bathrooms (one upstairs and one downstairs) serving 60 to 75 people. I remember when they made certain hours for men and certain hours for women to use the toilets and showers. That happened after Hai's beautiful sister was walked in on as she was showering one day. It created quite a scandal. Other problems had to do with what was thrown down the toilet, other papers besides toilet paper and sanitary napkins.

One evening, a jeep drove around the camp with a loudspeaker announcing that there was a tornado watch in effect. We were to stay inside and be alert. It seemed rather funny at the time. The weather outside seemed fine; besides, what could a tornado do that we hadn't already seen? Living one day at a time and from moment to moment was a way of life for all of us.

My brother Co had been in the US going to college for several years before we reached this country. He was living in Washington, D.C. Two weeks after we arrived at Fort Chaffee, Co came bearing gifts of food and morale raisers. He

carried in an ice chest filled with bags of noodles, beer, a watermelon, and a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. This was to me heaven on earth...normal food, not canned fish, canned chicken or hard rice. We ate at the mess hall first, thinking to relish our fresh food slowly in order to make it last longer. But we hadn't thought things through quite well enough; we had no refrigerator! There was no way to save most of the food. So we had a feast.



Low plywood dividers allowed some privacy for each family

Co tried his best to raise our morale. There was nothing to worry about anymore, the war was far, far away from us and we were safe in this new country. My father began to cry. Yes, danger was far away, but so was the life he had spent years to build for us all. He could no longer run his textile business, send his children abroad to college, visit with his friends and relatives, or relax in the comfort of his own home with his own possessions. He and my mother had left behind so much more than we children had.

The next morning Co took all of us to the PX for lunch. It was dark like a nightclub and it was full of Vietnamese...those who had brought money with them. The food was so good. All of this lovely environment was located only about 20 yards from where we normally ate. This spot was so special, air-conditioned too.

One day I strolled down the street with a purpose in mind. Rumor had it that some Vietnamese were working in the camp earning money. How exciting! This was a chance for independence and was not a pleasant idea to my parents. I wandered into a store and asked about a job. The lady there told me that all the workers were volunteers. I wasn't so sure this was true—there were politics involved, no doubt.

One evening, there was a social with singing and entertainment. Phi Thoan was the star; he was a famous comedian in Vietnam. He joked about the entire situation of leaving Vietnam. We all needed this lift to our spirits.

Looking back, it was funny that when the temperature became 20-22 degrees C (68-72 F) in the early mornings, folks quickly donned their sweaters and kept them religiously on throughout the entire day.

My dad would wake up early and go outside the barracks to exercise. Out in back, on a hill, there was always a man doing yoga in the afternoon. So Hai, his friend, and I decided to wake up early the next morning at 4 a.m. to jog. After all, as young people, we should exercise too. So...we woke up and began running in the dark. Suddenly we saw an MP standing there. Oh no! Was there a curfew here as there was in Vietnam? We continued jogging closer, said hi to him, and kept on going. This is great! This was clearly a free country where one can do anything you want. So what if I was running in my nice dress shoes with a stepped-on heel and a wooden lift? This was freedom!



Phi Thoan was a visiting entertainer at Fort Chaffee.

Return to Fort Chaffee

One month after leaving Fort Chaffee, I had an opportunity to return with Roy Anderson who was teaching English as a volunteer down there. Several of us drove the 45 miles from Fayetteville with him. My heart began to pound as we approached the fort. We were returning to the past...not only a place, but a heart and mind full of memories, vivid ones. It was like returning to prison. I felt proud to be free now. I felt curious to see my barracks and those refugees still waiting there to be sponsored. I felt anxious at what memories may be stirred up. As we drove up to the gate, I was seeing Fort Chaffee from the outside in for the first time. I had left on a night two months earlier.



The old main gate at Fort Chaffee

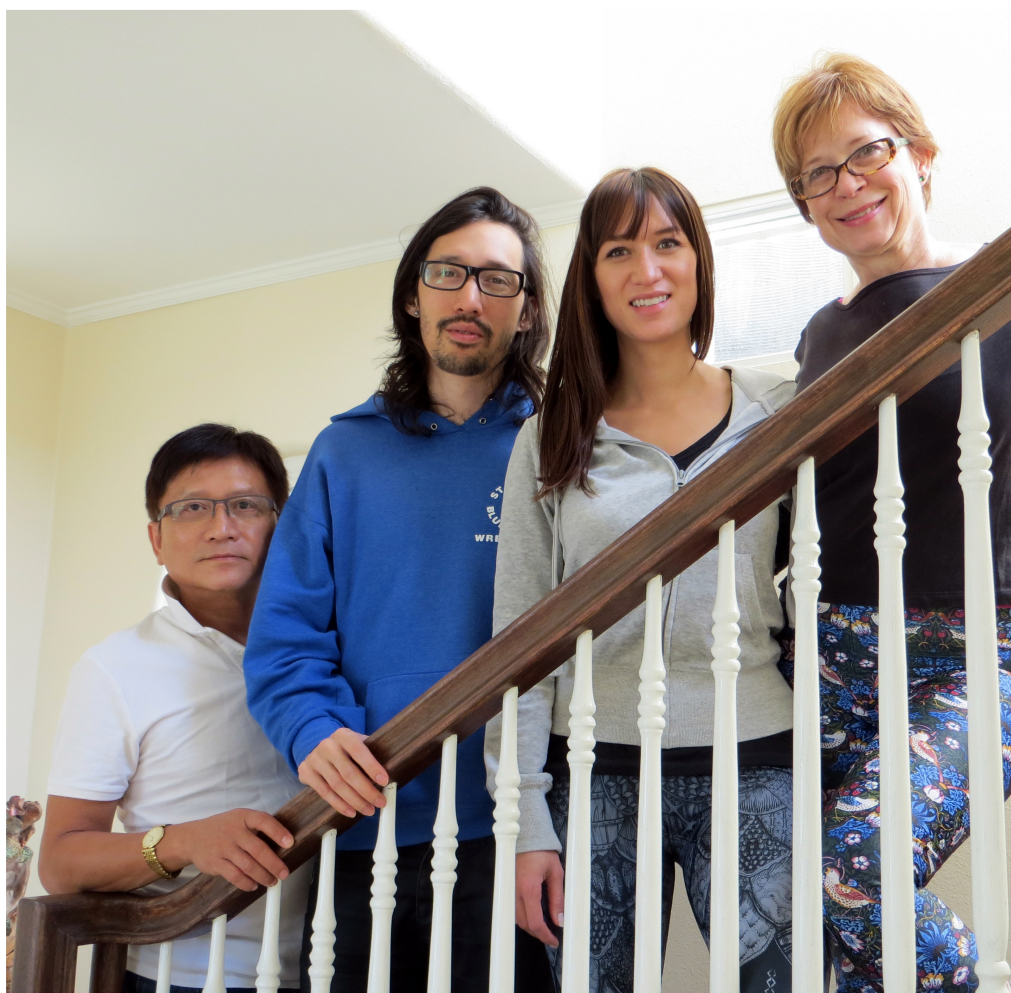
As we entered the camp, MPs (military police) checked our papers...a familiar process. In Vietnam, papers were checked all the time. We didn't go straight in because no cars were allowed there, so we drove around to the parking area. All alone I walked straight from the main gate, all the way down the street to the end to my old barrack. Where are the

others? I wasn't aware of anything but the memories that were flooding within me...recent memories, yet they were from my other life, my life of imprisonment.

The Mess Hall A was right next to my barracks on the right-hand side. And there it stood, "my" barracks. I wanted to go in but it wasn't my home anymore, so I turned around and walked back. There were folks waiting to eat at another mess hall and they were staring at me. I wore jeans so I was casual, but I was cleaner...obviously an outsider. As I left the area, I noticed trash everywhere and the filth of it all. It made me feel bad. The Vietnamese in the camp now were fishermen who didn't seem to cooperate with one another. What a different group of people than when I was there.

Updates – June 2008

Tri and Lori share their time between Jacksonville, Florida, where Tri is President of his architectural firm TTV Architects, Inc., and Huntington Beach, California, where they recently renovated a home one block from the beach. Their 33-year-old son Nicholas is a teacher and a business owner in Seattle, Washington, and their 31-year-old daughter Jessica teaches children with autism in Los Angeles, California. During their free time, Tri and Lori enjoy ballroom dancing and travelling.



Tri, Nicholas, Jessica, and Lori, 2014

The Second Exodus: Interviews



Van Bich Thi Vu

Sixth child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

May 1, 1987 - Houston, Texas

Tri: Hi Van. I would like to ask you about your feelings, the facts, what happened during the trip from Vietnam to the US, also any information you had even before you left Vietnam. This interview will help us understand you, clarify the story, fill in the missing parts because there could be things that you knew but I did not.

Ok, first of all, what is your birth date?

Van: September 25, 1958

Tri: Did anyone tell you that we would get out of Vietnam?

Van: I sort of knew because Mom was so nervous. I heard her begging Dad to go out and find a way to get out. But I overheard Dad telling Uncle Doan, "I absolutely do not want to go anywhere."

I was 16 and confused. One day, I closed the curtains of my room, turned the air conditioner on, and tried to take a nap when at around 1 p.m., a maid knocked on the door and told me, "Your mom wants you to pack now."

Tri: What did you pack?

Van: Mom made cloth bags for us. I packed some sweaters, clothes for cold weather, high heels. In my mind, I was going to America.

Tri: Were you scared, nervous?

Van: No, I felt numb and just followed Mom and Dad's orders. In my mind, someone was going to take care of me.

Tri: Tell me about the trip.

Van: We gathered downstairs. The cook kept looking and listening in to our conversations.

Dad drove us to a house. It looked familiar and suddenly I recognized it was my best friend Chau's house. We went to school together at Fraternité.

It was crowded and noisy there. I did not know what was going on. The lady of the house, my friend's mother, told us to go upstairs and stay in a room. I tried to look for my friend but a maid said she had already left.

I looked around and saw a blackboard with English writings on it. I asked the maid and was told that children were taught English, so I thought my friend must have been in America by then.

Our sister Loan went with us during the car trip. She wanted to say bye, and she cried, "You left me behind!" Mom tried to calm her down. "No, no. You just go on the next flight. I give you money for the trip."

Tri: You knew there was money involved. You knew how much was the cost for each person?

Van: I think it was US\$1200 or \$1400 for each person. But they did not accept Vietnamese money or gold. I remember that you and Loan had to go exchange gold for dollars.

Tri: I don't remember anything like that.

Van: Dad did not have enough gold, so Dad had to borrow some from Uncle Doan. Dad told him that our brother Co in the US would repay him later.

Tri: Ok. When did you actually leave Vietnam?

Van: Around midnight that same day. A black G.I. drove us to the airport. He was stopped by patrols in the street. His Vietnamese wife told the patrol that her husband was taking the family to the airport. The patrol wanted to check all IDs, and searched the van. Our mom was terrified, she prayed constantly. Two men were hiding under the bags; they were not on the passenger list. They claimed

that they just wanted to accompany their uncle to the airport and say bye. We were cleared to go.

Tri: Were you scared?

Van: Of course.

Tri: Tell me about the time at the airport.

Van: We arrived into a big room with a lot of lights. It was like a warehouse. I saw our neighbors, the Vinh Phat family.

Tri: It must be a hanger?

Van: Maybe.

Tri: Then when did you fly out?

Van: We boarded a cargo plane with no seats the next day. I had motion sickness, sat on the floor next to Mom. A Caucasian guy gave me some gum to chew; he said it would help with the nausea.

Tri: How did you understand him? You knew English?

Van: No, maybe sign language.

Tri: Chewing gum helped you?

Van: Not really. A lady in the plane gave me a cookie. I ate it and fell asleep.

Tri: Where did you land?

Van: We got to the Philippines. We went by boat to Subic Bay. I vomited.

You (Tri) went to get a drink. There was plenty of food and drink there.

Tri: How many people were there in our group?

Van: Four. You, me, Dad and Mom.

Tri: Tell me about your feelings after getting to the Philippines.

Van: I accepted the new situation and tried to survive.

Tri: How long did we stay there?

Van: I don't remember. Five or six days I guess.

Tri: What do you think about Subic Bay?

Van: Nice, grassy green. Pleasant weather. There were even concerts.

Tri: You were confident then that we would not go hungry?

Van: I did not think much about food. I worried more about the days ahead in the USA...language barrier, education.

Tri: Were you surprised to be in Philippines?

Van: Yes, I wondered why we landed there.

Tri: What was next?

Van: Moving from camp to camp made me real tired.

Lori: Do you remember how many camps were you in before getting to Ft. Chaffee?

Van: Three or four I think.

Tri: Do you remember their names?

Van: Subic Bay, Guam, and another one, a military base of some sort.

Tri: You had to get in line to get food, right? The first time we had to be in line for anything.

Van: It did not bother me. But Dad was not too happy. I told him that he had to get used to that.

Tri: You met any old friends?

Van: I met my friend Tung Vien at Guam. She told me that my best friend Chau was also there and took me to see her. I also saw our cousin Diep there.

Tri: What do you think about Guam?

Van: Horrible. It was like a desert with red sand, very dusty. It was so sunny, so hot in the tents. I was not an outdoor person so it bothered me. I stayed in the tent most of the time.



Tri: You packed high heels, so did you wear them there?

Refugee camps in Guam were hot and dusty.

Van: I wore a skirt and high heels in Subic Bay and wrinkled cotton pajamas with high heels in Guam, the only pair of shoes that I had. I was jealous of cousin Diep, she brought with her a lot of nice clothes so she dressed up everyday. She had money to go to the PX to buy gum or ice cream. I wanted so bad to buy a pair of flip-flops but Mom said to save money.

Tri: What did you do in your leisure time?

Van: In the Philippines, I just sat tight with family except times to go eat or see concerts. At Guam, other than visiting with friends, I stayed most of the time in the tent. Oh, were there concerts in the Philippines?

Tri: No, I don't think so.

Van: Maybe concerts in Guam then.

Tri: You slept on beds?

Van: No, on cots.

Tri: Were you surprised about the number of people at the camps and the living conditions there?

Van: No, I guess the trip out of Vietnam...scary times, chaos at the airport...already prepared me for all that.

Tri: You said that you knew someone would take care of you. Who? The people whom we paid to take us out of Vietnam or the government of the country we set foot on?

Van: No, mainly our parents. I just went with the crowd. I thought maybe because our sister Diep and brother Co were already in the US, they would find ways to take care of us. I was a little surprised to be sleeping in the camps, but I did not worry.

Tri: How long did you stay at Guam?

Van: A month. I am not sure.

Tri: That is interesting. That is not what I remember. Any other memories?

Van: I noticed that people who worked in the kitchen could get juices or food they liked, so I went with my friend Tung Vien to one of the kitchens at Guam and we were brave enough to ask for some juice. We were given pear juice in the can. They took out the pears and gave us the juice. I was so happy. I added water and ice to the juice and brought some back to the tent for Mom. She liked it a lot.

Tri: You did not have any money to spend but did your friends have any?

Van: Tung Vien did not have money but Chau had a lot.

Tri: You hung out with Chau frequently?

Van: Yes. I mentioned to her that we were at her house and we got out of Vietnam through her mother. She told me that she did not know that her mother did such a thing. From her reaction, I could tell that she was not proud of it, she did not want to hear further about it.

Anyway, I was not upset at her mother. That was the opportunity for her to make money and an opportunity for us to get out of Vietnam. That was the deal we made with her mother.

Tri: Tell me about your daily routine in Guam.

Van: I got up early like the rest of the family, listened to news about Vietnam, went in line to eat. Constipation was a problem, I did not do a big job for all the duration we were there. I had to shower in open space with other females.

Tri: Where was the next stop?

Van: I cannot recall the name but a place with big jets. We stayed in a building with bunk beds.

Tri: We went to Fort Chaffee next, right?

Van: Yes. We lived in Fort Chaffee for about a month. Dr. Caspers came with Co to visit us, they brought Kentucky Fried Chicken and beer. Fried chicken was delicious. I was happy to see Co, so proud of him. Then Diep and her boyfriend also came. We left Fort Chaffee with Dr. Caspers and Co one day in the middle of the night.

Tri: What do you remember about Fort Chaffee?

Van: A camp with two-story buildings. Each room was occupied by two families. Our family stayed with Bac Lam's family of three.

Tri: Did you have friends there?

Van: Yes, I saw Chau, Tung, Vien, and Diep again at Fort Chaffee. We took walks, talked about old days, and made plans for the future. Bac Dam's family was there too. He is a military guy that Dad knew from Vietnam.

Tri: Tell me about food at Fort Chaffee.

Van: It was okay. Scrambled eggs for breakfast, then rice with meat and vegetable for lunch and dinner.

Tri: Did you meet anyone else at Fort Chaffee?

Van: Your friend Thang who left before us and also your girlfriend.

Tri: You knew my girlfriend?

Van: I saw you walking with her but I did not talk to her.

Tri: How did you feel about leaving Fort Chaffee?

Van: I was not worried, not scared. I felt empty.

Tri: We then stayed with Dr. Caspers. Tell me about your time at his place.

Van: I spoke some English words but not sentences. Dr. Caspers taught us English with a big picture board. It did not feel like home because I was not able to speak Vietnamese all the time. I had to speak English when Dr. Caspers was around.

I helped Mom around the house with whatever she needed. Dad tried to get jobs for Bich and me at a hosiery factory. We had interviews but did not work there because Co called and advised Dad to send us to college instead of working for minimum wages.

I stayed with Dr. Caspers for a couple months then moved with Bich to Terre Haute, Indiana, by bus after Diep found someone at a church there who would take me in.

I remember during the bus trip, Bich asked me, "Are you scared?" I said no. Then she told me, "You are going to live with an American family." Since I did know about the arrangement, I replied to Bich, "No, you are."

Tri: Now, I want to know about life in Terre Haute.

Van: Diep and the Mediates picked Bich and me up at the bus stop. I was sent to live with the Mediates (husband Art, wife Betty, and daughter Kim) while Diep and Bich rented a room at Mrs. Volcker's, a person that Diep befriended at Indiana State University.

I enjoyed living with the Mediates. They were nice, bought new clothes and a suitcase for me, and took me shopping every weekend.

In the summer, I went on vacation in Michigan with them. One day, I overheard Betty Mediate discussing with her husband, "Should Van call us Mom and Dad?" I was in the bathroom then and did not get out for a long time after hearing that. I told Diep about it and she kept teasing me, "They want to adopt you."

I felt at ease at their house. I loved them but I already had my mom and my dad. They then asked me to call them Aunt and Uncle.

Betty did all the cooking. Kim and I did the dishes. Kim was so quiet, it was hard for me to understand her. She was probably jealous of me because of all the attention and the new clothes her parents gave me.

Betty taught me English. I read books every day, picked out 25 words, and made sentences with them. Betty or Kim corrected my work.

Art Mediate was out most of the time. He was on the road selling papers and came home at dinnertime. He watched TV with us after dinner.

Betty was a housewife; she drove Kim and me to school and picked us up every day.

I went to Laboratory High School for my 11th and 12th grades. Kim went to the same school; she had a learning disability.

I took five English courses in one semester and did well at school. I had speech therapy.

From the Mediates, I learned to freely express love and care. We hugged, and kissed each other goodnight.

At home, we love each other a lot but we are not used to showing affection, privately or in public. I guess all Vietnamese are like that.

Tri: Interesting! You then moved back to stay with Mom and Dad?

Van: Yes, I moved in with our parents a year after they bought their first house at 73 South 17th Street, Terre Haute, Indiana 47807. It was four blocks away from the Mediates who lived on 21st street.



Central Christian Church, Terre Haute, IN

I remember that the Central Christian Church helped us furnish the house by donating used furniture. The house was old and was located in a bad neighborhood.

Mom wanted me to move back home because she thought I did not respect her and Dad. She thought that I was becoming Americanized and rebellious. I did not like that very well, but I did as our parents wanted me to.

I used money earned from summer jobs to buy new furniture and carpet for my room at the new house. That made Dad upset. He thought that I was spoiled, too demanding.

Besides school, I found a job at CBS Records earning \$4 an hour. I stayed in Terre Haute for a total of four years. After two years of high school, I enrolled at Indiana State University. I was given a four-year scholarship, but I had to transfer to another school after my sophomore year because ISU did not offer the major of computer science.

Purdue, a university which is located a couple hours away had that major, but Mom wanted me to apply to a school in Houston so I could stay with our brother Co who already bought a house there.

I moved in with Co at 11626 Borderwood Drive, Houston Texas 77013 the summer of 1979. I started school at University of Houston the fall of that year. Dad gave me his Datsun B210. I was happy that he finally gave some attention to daughters.

Life was good. Co and I got along fine. We ate roast beef almost everyday because I guess that was the only thing he knew how to cook. I was jealous when he got married.

Van: Can I tell you about school in Vietnam?

Tri: Go ahead.

Van: I did not do well in school in Vietnam. Mom and Dad had to hire for me a tutor, a one eyed woman, who was very mean. She hit my knuckles when I did not speak French all the time as she wanted me to or when I did not answer her questions correctly. Mom found out about it and fired her.



*Le Collège Fraternité a.k.a. Truong Bac Ai,
Saigon*

I hated school. I had problems with the Catholic school St. Paul and then transferred to Fraternité. I was rebellious and I cut classes. I was surprised that I did well here in the US.

Tri: You got a job at IBM right after graduation?

Van: When I was in my Junior year, I saw friends who were Seniors go for

interviews. I prepared for myself a resume, bought a suit to wear, and signed up for interviews, too. I still remember the name of the guy who interviewed me. He was Joe Walkins; he had beautiful eyes. I was the last student he interviewed.

He asked me, "What will you do in 10 years?" I told him that I would have a consulting firm. He said, "That's nice."

I got a call afterwards from a lady at IBM, Linda Miller, inviting me to come to the company for an interview. When she learned that I was not graduating that year, that I was only a Junior, she told me to come later in January. I was ecstatic.

I told Co. He is like Dad, very calm. He just said, "That's good!" and then spread the good news to Mom and Dad.

Tri: Did you maintain good grades during your Senior year?

Van: I flunked one class. My grades were not very good. I partied a lot, collecting \$1000 for the class dance.

Tri: Now tell me, how did you meet Hiep?

Van: I went with Bich to Montreal and stayed with Aunt Lan. I met Hiep in Montreal. Actually I knew him in Vietnam. Our cousin Diep invited me to ice cream and I later found out she invited him too, a set up you know. Another time, I danced with him at a welcome home party for our cousin Khoa.

In Montreal, I went to a New Year celebration with cousin Viet, Aunt Lan's son. Bich and her boyfriend Hien were there. I saw Hiep there; he was very well dressed. Viet took me to his table. He asked me for my phone number and called me two days later. The romance started from there.

Tri: What is his full name, his birth date?

Van: Hiep Hoang, November 19, 1958.

Tri: You are happy with your life here in the US?

Van: Yes. I can achieve more, be more independent here.

Tri: What are your short and long-term goals?

Van: To be promoted to a manager at IBM and then one day, own my own business.

Tri: Thank you, Van.

Updates – July 2007

After several successful years in management positions at IBM, Van went back to school and became an optometrist. Her husband Hiep is still working for IBM. Their son William will be a freshman at University of Houston majoring in Architecture in the Fall of 2007 and daughter Elizabeth, is a 10th grader in high school.



Hiep, Van, William, and Liz, 2014

Group 3: A Young Family's Journey

Loan, her husband Hoa, and two-year-old son Steve made up the third and final family group to leave Vietnam. Loan was the oldest child in the family and had married Hoa in 1971.



Loan Hong Thi Vu

First child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

Erie, Pennsylvania, May 1988

In late March 1975 when the war intensified around the cities in central Vietnam and people started to run for refuge, our parents were very worried and sad. The atmosphere in the family was extremely tense. Dad called for family meetings several times a day to discuss what to do.

Unlike our aunts and uncles who had money in banks abroad, our family was in a difficult situation since all capital was invested in various business ventures; assets were tied up in buildings, machinery, and raw materials.

Our father was in distress. He knew that, for safety, we had to get out of Vietnam as soon as possible, but he just could not think about leaving behind the huge fortune he had worked all his life to build up. He did not feel like he could start over with empty hands late in life in an unfamiliar territory.

Dad was a proud man; the status change was probably to him too sudden; and the life change was too much for him to accept. He reasoned out loud that there would be no means for us to survive away from home except to work as prostitutes or slaves to rich foreign people. He talked a lot about staying. He hoped that the country would become politically neutral or become a form of coalition government and not communism; he prayed for miracles. It was sad to see him cry.

Our mother was calmer. She was good at hiding her fears. She was adamant about leaving even if we had no money, because living under communism was, to her, a life sentence. She reminded us about the sufferings of our relatives in North Vietnam after the Communists took over in 1954. They confiscated all personal possessions; they imprisoned the business people who, according to their Marxist doctrine, were capitalists who profited from the labor of their poor employees.

Our parents had emigrated from the North of Vietnam to the South to escape Communism in 1954. Now it was the second time that they had to make the same decision. The first time was easier since they were younger and did not have much in terms of assets. This time, twenty years later, it was much, much harder.

Unable to convince our mother to stay put, Father had long talks with my husband Hoa and me. I could see his points and wanted to stay. Hoa's side of the family, his parents, brothers and sisters did not express their desire to go so it was okay with Hoa either way. We told him that we would stay with him and let our mother go with my younger siblings.

My sisters Bich and Van went about their regular business. They did not look worried. I asked them about their thoughts after the family meetings, they always answered, "I don't know." I just hoped that at least one of them would think about staying back with Dad and me. I was in a state of panic most of the time; I prayed that whatever was our decision, we would all be safe.

My brother Tri was 18 years old. He would surely be drafted into military service if he stayed. I knew that our parents were anxious to find a way for him to go. But he looked so relaxed, he still went out to see his girlfriend. I did not know if he realized the seriousness of the situation. The stereo in his room was always on. I went into his room wanting to talk to him but he kept looking up at the ceiling so I left him alone.

Around the 24th of April, the Viet Cong moved closer to the capital of Saigon. Guns and bombs could be heard at anytime of day and night. The streets were deserted, shops were closed, and a curfew was imposed. From newspapers, we saw pictures of a refugee center in Guam. We knew that families of high-ranking South Vietnamese army officers were allowed to be evacuated out of the country. Father contacted some of his friends and relatives; they assured him that they had no intention to go anywhere, and that made him feel better.

Mother instructed the cook to go buy two big bags (50 lbs each) of rice, a few cans of cooking oil, and some sugar...to store just in case. It was not easy to buy the basic kinds of food at that time even at ballooned prices.



Many Vietnamese experienced terror and panic during their flight to freedom. They were leaving their homes, businesses, and relatives behind, fleeing toward an uncertain future in America.

My brother-in-law who was the commander of a small navy division in My Tho, a town 70 km from Saigon, called to inform us that there was a ship (with enough food and drink to feed all passengers for some time) preparing to leave within days. If we wanted to join him and his family, we should come to his place as soon as possible and wait for orders to depart.

We heard the horror stories about pirates and the risks at sea, so we

declined his invitation. Besides, we had already agreed to stay with our father.

April 26: Uncle Le Tien called our dad to say goodbye. He had obviously changed his mind about staying and had persuaded his cousin to do the same. He said that, although he had closed his business and told the employees to stay home until further notice, he was really nervous seeing many of them wandering in front of his house. Were they waiting for the time to come to storm into his house to harm him and his family and then divide his possessions like what happened to businesses in the North Vietnam twenty years back? He told our dad that it was very possible. I stood next to my dad at that moment and by looking at his pale face, I could tell that he was really shaken by this phone call.

As the situation was going from bad to worse, we received a telegram from my brother Co in the US telling the family to go straight to the airport for an opportunity to leave Vietnam. I thought to myself that he must have known something from news in the US. My father was more inclined to go after reading this telegram. He wanted to talk to the neighbors Vinh Phat to see what their plan was, but their door was locked and no one answered the door. They must have left.

Now, the right thing to do was to leave. Father asked Mother if she had saved any gold because by now, only the US dollar and gold were of value. Mother had some gold but rumor was that it would be impossible to exchange gold for dollars if we landed in the US so she was anxious to find a place to exchange her gold for dollars. Unfortunately, she was ripped off really badly, for 16 ounces of gold, she received only \$1000 from a person who lived on Le Thanh Ton street, in front of Ben Thanh market, a few blocks from our house.



Saigon's Ben Thanh market, 1975

Father asked his cousin Doan about leads, ways to go by air, and was introduced to a lady named Ly. She was able to take a group of about 10 people out of the country and she had a few seats available. My parents decided to sign up for that trip taking my brother Tri and sister Van with them. I cried uncontrollably when they told me about this decision. I was so disappointed because Hoa and I had agreed to stay back with our father, we were a team, but now he wanted to leave without us. My parents comforted me, gave me money to pay for our ways out on the next trip. They assured me that there would be another trip tomorrow.

Father arranged with the manager (a close friend of his) of a bank near our house for me to close their savings and withdraw all the money to pay the maids,

the cook and the chauffeur their salaries. The total amount I got from the bank was four million Vietnamese Dong. Carrying the heavy stacks of money in a big bag, I was extremely scared.

When I paid the cook, she cried and told me, "Please tell your parents to come back, I know they will be fine. This big house, the cars...it is a lot to leave behind." I lied to her by saying that my parents were visiting friends. I told her not to worry since I was still here; I would not go anywhere. She knew she was free to leave but for some reason she kept hanging around. I gave her my red Suzuki motor scooter.

April 28: The phone rang non-stop from late afternoon until past midnight. Relatives called to check on me. I talked on the phone and packed my bags at the same time. I paced in a daze around my room, unable to decide what to take. Finally I stuffed full three small bags without really knowing what was in there.

My family of three went to Madame Ly's house to wait for the next trip out of the country. I could hear the loud gunshots and rockets; we waited until the afternoon of April 29 but were still unable to leave. Hoa decided to go home by taxi and take the family car to bring us home. My cousin Thuy and her family of four who were also at Madame Ly's waiting for their turn to go also wanted a ride back to their home; they lived in the same block as us.

Hoa came back with the white Peugeot 404. Thuy talked us into waiting for a little longer to see if there was news about going from Madame Ly's while her husband Do was calling around for other leads. We did not know until later that, during the time we were at Mme Ly's, my uncle Long's brother-in-law came to our house (uncle Long and family came to stay at our house since the situation was getting serious, they thought the five story house would be safer in case of bombing) to invite Long's family and our family to join him on a trip out of Saigon in his military ship; he was an officer of the Vietnamese Marine and he was allowed to take his relatives along. Uncle Long decided not go with him, he felt that it was a risky trip.

Later that evening (April 29), a black US serviceman came knocking on Madame Ly's door. After a private negotiation with Ly, she announced to everyone who was waiting in her living room that if we came up with a sum of US\$20,000, the US soldier would take all of us (about 20 adults and children) to the airport to go. We all pitched in, each gave \$1000 and we had the money ready for her.

The guy came back in a green army van. We all boarded the van and were happy to finally get out. Outside Madame Ly's house, there were people standing at the corners of her block. They pushed the van's door open and jumped in when the van stopped at the stop sign. They were loud, aggressive, and said that if this was a way for us to escape death then we should let them have the same opportunity. They did not pay but we were too scared to react.

We thought that we were taken to the airport but were surprised to be dropped off at the docks in Khanh Hoi. It was sad to know that the trip my parents took with my brother and sister was the last trip by air before the Viet Cong bombed Tan Son Nhut airport.

There was an enormous barge in the water. A huge crowd of thousands of people were trying to get on. As I was waiting to jump up onto the barge, the small bag that I was carrying on my left shoulder was soon emptied by kids who took advantage of the chaos to steal whatever they could. Even my little leather-covered notebook containing phone numbers of my relatives abroad was taken.

It was not easy jumping up onto the barge that was several feet above the ground. People fell on each other, children cried in fear and pain. Our two-year-old son Steve screamed when an elderly man fell on his leg. We were worried that his leg was broken.

The barge did not depart until late at night when there was a tugboat that came and pull it to sea. We were hungry, we did not bring food with us because we thought we would be going by air. The darkness of the night, a sudden rain caused children to cry non-stop. We got all wet; it was miserable. We were terrified when shots were fired from land in the direction of the barge. I



Khanh Hoi port, 1975

prayed hard for our lives.

We were then transferred to a big US ship. I carried my son Steve in my arms and climbed the flexible ladder up to the ship while Hoa carried the three cloth bags that became much heavier after the rain. When I heard that only women and children were given priority to move to the ship, I worried that the men would be sent back home.

The ship was packed like sardines. People sat one next to another. I waited for several hours and still did not see Hoa. Holding our son, I was in tears, I asked an American soldier on guard to let me go to the other end of the ship to look for Hoa but my English was so poor, he was unable to understand what I wanted to say so he kept shaking his head, pointing me to back off.

I looked at Steve, he was hungry, he had not had any food since the morning. His hair was still wet, the skin of his fingers white and wrinkled after staying too long in the rain waiting for our turn to move to the ship. He kept asking me about milk, about his usual bowl of rice and pork. I held him tight, telling him that we would find Dad to get him milk. His dad carried the bags, one of them had a can of dry milk but he did not have a chance to give it to me before the men were separated from women and children. I did not want my baby to see me cry all the time but I was emotional. I could not hold my tears. He must have been scared, confused about everything that was going on.

We were given cooked rice and canned chicken at around 11 p.m. The rice was so bad and the chicken was cold but we were happy to have some food. Steve was so happy when he received a piece of Tootsie roll from a lady who sat next to us. After we ate, we found Hoa.

It was so hot and crowded in the lower level of the ship so we went up to stay on the deck. It was easier to breathe up there but it was a bit windy and cool at night, and all we had were two bath towels. In the three bags that I packed, there were two beach towels, several bars of soap, a bottle of perfume, a camera, my father's electric razor that he forgot to bring, our diplomas and important identification papers, wedding pictures, pajamas, my traditional Vietnamese dresses, Hoa's suit, a few pairs of pants and shirts, small toys for Steve.

Hoa thought that I was crazy to bring perfume and that many bars of soap.

Sanitation was at a minimum, there was no place to shower, and the toilet was built with two planks of wood in a semi covered small area outside the side of the ship. The lines to go to the restroom or to get drinking water were always long. It was hard for children to wait for their turn to go to the restroom so when Steve

needed to poop and could not wait, we let him do the job on a piece of cardboard, and this did not go well with our neighbors on the ship deck.

We wore the same clothes for days; we did not shower for days. We lost track of time and place. We were not sure where we were heading and when we would be on land.

Meals were provided twice a day: a handful of raisins in the morning and rice with canned meat at any time between 8 p.m. and midnight. We got used to hunger. I am not sure how many days we were at sea. From a comfortable life at home, things changed drastically so fast.

We came to Subic Bay in the Philippines. We were happy to have sandwiches and fruits right after setting foot on land. It was heaven here compared to life on the ship.



Subic Bay, Philippines

We were given a meal card to get food. The line to the dining area was always long. Tents were assigned with about a dozen people in a tent.

I had so much free time to wonder about the future: where will we go next, what life is going to be, where are my parents, brothers and sisters?

We then boarded a cargo plane to Guam. We landed on Guam Island, but after waiting for some time on the runway, we were sent to Wake Island because Guam was too crowded, we were told. On Wake Island, the barracks were divided into partitions with bed sheets. Each family occupied a so-called room. Life was comfortable with three meals a day. Food was okay.

We lived on Wake Island for about three weeks. During this time, we filled out applications and were interviewed. We were asked about our background and our preference of a settlement location. We were given the choices of Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and California in the United States or other countries like Canada.

We did not really know much about the good and bad of each area to make a decision. I do not remember if we did indicate a choice but we were sent to Camp Pendleton in California.

I saw my cousin Ngoc Anh, my aunts Nga and Thu, and my uncle Phuc at Camp Pendleton. It was the end of May; the weather was cool and nice at the camp. Before getting off the bus each of us was given a jacket because coming from Vietnam, it was a little too cold for us. Steve vomited during the bus trip; he looked really tired.

We were assigned to a tent with cots to sleep on. About a dozen people stayed in a tent.

There was a place in the camp that we could get used clothes. I was happy to have clothes to wear since I did not bring much with me. There was a clinic with volunteer doctors. We were required to take chest X-rays and have immunization shots.

My cousin Ngoc Anh who arrived to the camp before us lived in a barrack. She invited us to stay in her barrack. There were bunk beds in her barrack, much more comfortable to sleep on than the cots.

Our daily routine consisted of going to English class, staying in line to go eat and trying to get information from the Red Cross about the whereabouts of our family members.



*The temporary housing facility for Vietnamese refugees at Camp Pendleton, CA,
May 1975*

I was relieved to finally be able to contact my brother Co and had good news about other members of my family. After two months in Camp Pendleton, in July 1975, we received the sponsorship from Dr. Earl M. Caspers to settle in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

We were supposed to fly to Fayetteville Arkansas, but for some mistake, we were sent to Fayetteville, North Carolina. The mistake was caught early so when our plane landed in Atlanta, Georgia, we were taken onto another flight to go to Little Rock, Arkansas.

It was a very long and exhausting trip. Dr. Caspers waited for us at the Little Rock airport. It was nighttime so we spent the night at a hotel in Little Rock. "Doc" was teaching at a university in Little Rock at the time.

Dr. Caspers told us to eat breakfast at the hotel when we woke up but because of the language barrier, we were too scared to go down to the hotel breakfast area to eat. Dr. Caspers knew when he picked us up the next morning for a flight to Fayetteville that we did not eat anything so he bought sandwiches for us at the airport.

My parents waited for us at the Fayetteville airport. It looked like they had lost some weight. I was so happy to see them. Fayetteville was so beautiful and peaceful. We settled quickly in our new place.

I still remember a funny story. One day, Hoa and I borrowed a bicycle to go buy groceries at Lawson's. It was tiring to pedal uphill. We carefully locked the bicycle for fear that it would be stolen. It was an old bike but we were so poor, anything was valuable then.

I immediately got a manual job working at Bear Brand Hosiery. A white guy (Roy Anderson?) from church helped find this job for my sister Bich, but since she decided to move to Indiana to be with our sister Diep, the job was for me.

It was my first job ever. It was hard work for a princess like me, but I was happy to earn money to pay rent and buy food. I cried quietly a few times thinking about the education I had in Vietnam and the job I was now doing.

A couple of months later, I found a better job working in food service on the University of Arkansas campus in Fayetteville. Hoa and my parents had jobs at Mexican Foods making taco shells. Steve turned three on August 31, 1975; he started nursery school, and Dr. Caspers gave him a ride to and from school.

After six months in Fayetteville, my parents talked us into moving to Terre Haute, Indiana, to join my sisters Diep, Bich and Van.

The change was disappointing in many aspects. I missed my brothers. I worried about Tuan and Minh who were only 12 and 14 at that time. I missed the beautiful Fayetteville, the old routine, and the friends we had made there. After days at sea, moving from camp to camp, and the adjustments that we had to make, the latest move was a very bad idea after only less than six months in Fayetteville. Hoa and I lived in the same house with my parents so when they wanted to move, we thought that we had no choice but to follow them, especially since all my sisters now lived in Terre Haute.

In Terre Haute, Hoa enrolled in Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology majoring in chemical engineering. He had been a pharmacist in Vietnam, and wanted to continue this career but was told that he had to take test and go back to school for a few years in order to be a pharmacist in the US. He thought that, instead of going to a pharmacy school that was far from home and being away from his family, he would opt to learn English and at the same time, pursue a new field.



Xuong Vu and Hoa Quach

I had graduated in December 1974 with a law degree. I wanted to go back to school, too, but did not know what would be the right major for me since law seemed not to be the right field for a person who did not speak much English. I chose to go to the nearby Indiana State University and major in nursing. I was told that nurses were in demand and I would be able to easily find a job after graduation.

Nursing was hard because I was required to do presentations. Besides, a science lab that made me work on a cold cat was horrible. I changed my major to accounting.

Hoa and I found part time jobs working a few hours during the day at school. At night and on weekends, we worked at a local restaurant. I was a waitress and he washed dishes. We also cleaned the medical office of Dr. Paul Siebenmorgen. It was a very hectic life. Steve was doing well in 1st grade. He was young, so it was easy for him to adjust and to learn the new language.

Hoa and I both graduated from college in May 1979. Hoa received a B.S. degree in chemical engineering and I received a B.S. in accounting. When Hoa found a job working as a chemical engineer for Lord Corporation in Erie, Pennsylvania, he moved to Erie in June 1979. I was pregnant with our second child so Steve and I stayed back in Terre Haute waiting for the birth of Steve's brother Brian.

We have been in Erie for nine years. Hoa and I now have four children: Steve, Brian, Julie and Justin. We are a happy family.

Hoa and I are grateful to Dr. Earl M. Caspers for bringing us to Fayetteville, Arkansas, and for his generosity in providing us with financial and emotional support during our first difficult months in a new place. We are also grateful to Art and Betty Mediate for helping us settle in Terre Haute, for their advice and kindness, and for the lasting friendship.

We miss Vietnam but we would never want to go back and live under communism. We hope that one day we can go back and visit our homeland, visit our old house, old school, and all the places we did not have a chance to see like the North and Central Vietnam.

Updates – July 2007

Hoa still works for Lord Corporation; he is now a Senior Staff Engineer. He will retire in a few years and the family is thinking about moving to Texas to be closer to relatives. Steve graduated from Rice University with a B.S. and an M.S. in biology, from University of Texas Medical Branch – Galveston with a Doctor of Medicine. He married Pam Havlen in 1997. He and his wife have two children. Brian graduated from Case Western Reserve University with a B.S./M.S. in electrical engineering. He works for Texas Instrument in Dallas. Justin graduated from Case Western Reserve University in 2006 with a B.S. in chemical engineering.



Loan and Hoa



Quan Minh Vu Quach (Steve)

First child of Loan Hong Thi Vu and Hoa Quach

Interviewed May 1987 in Houston, Texas

Tri: Do you remember anything about your trip out of Vietnam with your mom and dad?

Steve: I have only a very vague memory of seeing my parents depressed and not in control.

Tri: But did you feel safe with them?

Steve: Yes.

Tri: Do you remember how many days were you on the ship?

Steve: It is not clear, maybe three or four days.

Tri: Do you remember about the food served on the ship?

Steve: No.

Tri: Do you remember about the stops before coming to the camps?

Steve: Not sure.

Tri: Do you remember anything about the camps you were in and how long did you spend in each?

Steve: All I remember is being cold, and the rooms being small. I must have stayed longer in the camps than on the ship but I am not sure how long.

Tri: Then what is the beginning of your memory?

Steve: Arkansas, at Dr. Caspers. The whole family was there, sitting around the dining room table. The light was dim in the house. I played by myself.

Tri: Do you remember about the flight to Arkansas?

Steve: No.

Tri: How long did you stay at Dr. Caspers?

Steve: I don't remember.

Tri: What is your next memory?

Steve: Indiana. The big white house. I was maybe four or five years old.

Tri: Ok, tell me about Indiana

Steve: I had a closet full of toys. My bedroom was big. It had an air conditioner in the window; it was on the second floor with two beds in it.

I liked chasing lightning bugs, catching and putting them in a jar.

Our neighbors in the back had a big dog, I was scared of it. I went to their house to play with a boy my age. They had a swing set. The dog chased us.

I was in kindergarten, I had a few friends, two boys and a girl.

Tri: What else do you remember about that house?

Steve: It was not in a good neighborhood. Houses were close to each other, old, not in the best shape. Our yard had fences on the sides, I played in the backyard with Uncle Minh and Uncle Tuan.

There was an old neighbor who gave me some marbles. His garage and our back yard were separated by a dirt road.

One day, I played with matches. Then there was a guy who ran really fast through the dirt road, I saw a police car and was scared that he came to get me because he knew I played with matches. But it turned out that the guy was a robber who just grabbed a lady's purse. I showed the police which way he ran.

Tri: What is the name of your school?

Steve: Laboratory School. I went there from the morning to 2 p.m.. My mom picked me up at school.

Tri: Your mom worked?

Steve: Must have been.

Tri: Your dad worked?

Steve: Yes, I think so.

Tri: How was life then?

Steve: I was happy. I had a lot of things I wanted.

Tri: Anything else about Indiana?

Steve: Aunt Van had a boyfriend. He was Vietnamese. He took her and me visiting a college where my dad went to school. There was a pond there with a dock where we sat to catch sunfish. I saw a turtle that ate fish. I almost fell over in the water.

He had a car, a Pinto. There was a little horse in the front of his car.

He then took us to his room to get drink.

Tri: What is your next school?

Steve: Chesnut Hill Elementary in Erie.

Tri: Were you happy moving to Erie?

Steve: I was sad at first because I missed my friends in Terre Haute, Indiana. But after a while, I made a lot of friends.

Tri: Why did your family decide to move to Erie?



Chestnut Hill Elementary School, Erie, PA

Steve: My dad got a job in Erie. He moved before us. My mother and I and my brother who was not born yet stayed back in Terre Haute. After my brother was born, a few months later, we all moved to Erie.

Tri: Tell me about Erie.

Steve: We lived in a two-story townhouse. It was in an apartment complex called Carriage Hill. We stayed there for three or four years then moved to a rented house on Mineo Drive, which was a block away from the townhouse. The house had a big backyard with an apple tree.

Tri: How long did you live there?

Steve: A short time, less than a year.

Tri: How old were you then?

Steve: I was nine.

Tri: Were you curious about what your mom and dad went through to get here?

Steve: When I was 10 and in fifth grade, my parents told me about the story. It was interesting.

Tri: What else can you tell me about Erie?

Steve: We then moved to a large white house. It was an apartment house, run down and infested with mice.

My mom went to Houston with Brian and Julie for a few months over the winter. I stayed home with my dad.

Tri: Why did your mom go to Houston?

Steve: She wanted to move to Houston. She went there to look for a job.

Tri: When your sister Julie was born, did you know that she had Down's syndrome?

Steve: I was told that she had some kind of disorder but did not know that she was retarded until later on.

Tri: Were you sad? Did you help her? Did you feel the responsibility of an older brother?

Steve: No, I was not sad. I thought she could learn so I taught her to do things herself.

Tri: Did your friends make fun of her?

Steve: No. They just felt sorry for her.

Tri: What else do you remember?

Steve: My parents bought a house. The house we are living in right now. I was so excited. I was eager to have a house so friends could come over. I finished my fifth grade at Asbury Elementary School.

Tri: Tell me about the new house.

Steve: It is a nice house. Half brick, half aluminum. I helped my dad finish the basement, the easy jobs like carrying things and nailing. I was in seventh or eighth grade.

Tri: Do you have your own room?

Steve: I share a room with my brother Brian.

Tri: How many brothers do you have?

Steve: Two. Brian and Justin. Justin was born a year after we moved into the house.

Tri: What is your fondest memory?

Steve: The Olympics of the Mind Competition.

Tri: At which point did you feel you did well in school?

Steve: The second half of my fifth grade at Asbury. I got all A's.

Tri: How about middle school?

Steve: I went to Westlake Middle School, the transition from fifth grade to sixth was a little hard. Seventh and eighth were much easier.

Tri: Are you in high school now?

Steve: Yes, I am in tenth grade now at McDowell Intermediate High School.

Tri: Do you enjoy school?

Steve: Yes, certain subjects. I have a lot of friends.

Tri: Do you think about the future?

Steve: Yes, I think a lot about the future, about college.

Tri: Any career plan?

Steve: I am not really sure. I think I want to be a doctor but I am not quite sure. I also think about a major in business, taking some economics courses...something like that. But it might be easier to achieve success in medicine than in business.

Tri: Your mom and dad told you to plan ahead?

Steve: They always told me to work hard, to do my homework. My mom helps me during the summer. About planning ahead, I am growing up. I want to plan everything ahead.

Tri: Do you worry about the future?

Steve: I am sure I am going to succeed.

Tri: Can you speak Vietnamese?

Steve: Names and places I can't but normal conversation I can.

Tri: Let me ask you something in Vietnamese: Quan bao nhieu tuoi? (How old are you?)

Steve: Con 15 tuoi. (I am 15 years old.)

Tri: Con hoc lop may? (What grade are you in?)

Steve: Con hoc lop 10. (I am in tenth grade.)

Tri: Con co bo chua? (Do you have a girlfriend?)

Steve: Chua. (Not yet.)

Tri: Tai sao? (Why?)

Steve: Me con khong cho phep. (My mother does not allow me.) It is easier to speak English.

Tri: What language you speak in your home?

Steve: Both. I think I should know my native language. If I live in Houston near my relatives, I can speak better. I am taking French at school.

Tri: Quelle heure est-il?

Steve: I don't see a clock around here.

Tri: Do you want to live in Houston?

Steve: My parents will move to Houston eventually. I plan to apply to Rice University in Houston.

Tri: Your parents don't like Erie, Pennsylvania?

Steve: My mom is sick of the cold weather.

Tri: Are there relatives in Pennsylvania?

Steve: Relatives are in Philadelphia. It is an eight-hour drive from Erie.

Tri: Are you closer to your mom's side of the family?

Steve: Yes. I lived with them in Vietnam and for a few years after we moved to the US. My dad's family also lives in Houston, I have a chance to see them during visits to Houston.

Tri: Anything else?

Steve: I wish we could stay closer. I want to know more about Vietnam and about the trip to the US.

Tri: Have you watched movies about Vietnam? How do you feel?

Steve: Yes. I feel it is unfair. A lot of people got caught in the crossfire.

Tri: Were you surprised about anything you have seen about Vietnam in the movies?

Steve: It was more modern than the picture of all country and forest I had in mind. It is a world that is new to me and I am curious to know more.

Tri: Do you want to go back and visit some day?

Steve: Yes, if it safe. I want to meet relatives. I am curious about the place where I was born.

Tri: Do your friends treat you differently?

Steve: Most don't but some do. I am friend with 85% of people in my class of more than 500.

Tri: Do you feel that you have the responsibility to set example for your younger brothers?

Steve: Not really.

Tri: Will you take care of your parents, brothers, and sister?

Steve: If I am successful, I will help any relative in need.

Tri: Do you think about getting married one day?

Steve: No, not at all. I like to be independent and to make my own decisions. I don't like to have to ask anyone.

Tri: What is your typical day?

Steve: It is hard to drag myself out of bed in the morning. At a quarter to seven, the alarm rings. I push the snooze button at least five times before getting up. I get dressed, and sometimes eat breakfast depending on how late it is. I get a ride from my dad to school. I stay in my homeroom for about 20 minutes before school starts. I am in the audio and video crew.

Tri: What do you do in the summer?

Steve: I will get a job as a caddy. Working for four hours a day, I get \$25. If I carry two golf bags, I get \$40. You have to take class and pass a test to be a caddy, but it is easy.

Tri: Your parents let you do that?

Steve: My mom is all for it. My dad is okay with it if it does not interfere with anything else, like with school.

Tri: It is 1:45 am. It is late. Good night!

Updates – July 2007

Steve is now a medical doctor. He married Pamela R. Havlen, also a medical doctor, in December 1997. They have two children, Ethan three years old and Charlotte four months old. They reside in League City, Texas.



Steve, Pamela, Ethan, and Charlotte

Waiting in the US: Co and Diep

Two of the Vu family children were already in the United States. Co and Diep were attending college at the time.

Insert 1975 photo of Co

Co Thien Vu

Second child of Xuong Van Vu and Sam Thi Pham

In April 1975, a week or two before Saigon fell into the hands of communists, I sent two telegrams, one directly to our parents' address in Saigon and another through the US Embassy to tell Mom and Dad to go to the airport and to leave Vietnam as soon as possible.

I knew the situation was serious and our family could be in danger. I was in distress thinking about the likelihood of them deciding to stay because of the buildings, materials, machinery, businesses they owned, and the huge fortune they had worked all their lives to build.

Then came the end of April, the US withdrew all their troupes, and things precipitated so quickly since the day I sent the telegram. I was worried about our family, was not sure where they were, and if they were able to get out in time. I waited impatiently for three weeks or a month then got a call telling me that Mom, Dad, Tri, and Van were in the Philippines. I was also told that Bich, Minh, and Tuan left Saigon with Aunt Huong's family.

When Mom, Dad, Tri, and Van went to Camp Ft. Chaffee in Arkansas, I asked Dr. Caspers for help in getting them out. Dr. Caspers was very helpful. He likes me, he knew that I was always fair and square, and I have never taken advantage of him.

It was my very first time in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The last time I saw Dr. Caspers was in 1973 in Carbondale, Illinois. Dr. Caspers and I went to Ft. Chaffee late in the evening. I brought Kentucky Fried Chicken, cole slaw, mashed potatoes, and beer. I remember sleeping in the camp a night or two. I thought that everyone would love my fried chicken but to my surprise, no one jumped up and down, no one was excited about the food. Dad shared it with his friends living in the same barrack.

(Tri interjected: Everyone loved the food, they thought it was fantastic but they wanted to save it. We did not want to finish it all so fast. I remember that you also brought watermelon and packages of dry noodles.)

When I saw Dad in Ft. Chaffee, he told me that he really did not want to leave Vietnam. Upon receiving the telegram I sent, Mom pressured him into leaving; it was hard for him to make that decision.

Looking at Dad, I could see a long and difficult road ahead with a lot of problems, a lot of worries. I could tell he was depressed, but I did not know how to comfort him. I was always confident that I would be successful someday. I dreamed big dreams in my head that I would rebuild what was lost and be rich by the time I turned 30.

Dad asked me about the money he had sent me. I told him I had a total of \$5,000. He looked puzzled; he thought I still had 20 to 30 thousand dollars in the bank.

When the family moved to Terre Haute, Indiana, things seemed to go smoothly. Everyone either had jobs or went to college. Mom and Dad bought their first house. Even though it was an inexpensive one, I felt relieved. I was happy. Tri, Minh, and Tuan were taken care of by Dr. Caspers; they were in good hands.

I was still studying for my MBA in Washington, DC. It was December 1976. I took any job I could get and was barely getting by. I sent money to Tri but he declined so I told him to send it to Minh and Tuan.

From DC, I moved to Houston. I don't want to talk about the reasons why I decided to move. The first months in Houston were difficult. I was unable to find a job in my area of International Business. I was down and out.

All the good jobs like working for the World Bank or the IMF were in Washington, DC. I saw a help-wanted sign and applied to work for a company making insulated glass. I was paid \$3.50/hour. I had to carry big pieces of insulated glass and cut them into small pieces. I cut my hands all the time. No one at work knew that I was college educated.

About three months later, I switched to a job selling insurance for Prudential. I was doing pretty well but to get rich fast, I thought I had to go into business.

I bought three vending machines. I had to go around servicing those machines. It was a bad move. I thought to myself that this was not a way to make money.

I was always doing two or three things at the same time. I also took a job delivering newspapers early in the morning. I delivered newspapers in the morning, worked for Prudential during the day, serviced the machines in the evening. I wanted to buy a new car but with the little savings that I got, I was afraid of failing and would have no one to depend on.

When finding leads to sell insurance was no longer easy, I looked for another job and found one at Exxon. I bought a house. Our sisters Bich and Van moved in with me. Life was good.

Then I met my wife Nga. I knew her sister Trinh whom I met at my friend Loc's wedding where she was a bridesmaid. Later, Loc took me to Trinh's house and I met a girl named Linh. I liked her a lot but she was too young for me. I then dated her older sister Nga. We got married in 1980. At first, I did not seriously think about getting married. I had many girlfriends before, but making money and rebuilding the family were always top priorities.

While we were dating, I helped Nga's mother with business ideas for her grocery store and restaurant. I was good at finding merchandise that was in demand to buy at the cheapest prices.

I was still working at Exxon and my wife, after staying home for about three months, started working for a hair salon. During this time, I drove around trying to find a place for our own beauty shop. I also had an idea of opening a fabric store.

I found a place on Main Street but the rent was too high, I later rented a place for \$300 a month. I did all the remodeling myself, painting, installing floor, and plumbing...to save money.

Nga made \$600 to \$1000 a week the first weeks of opening her beauty shop. I earned good money working at Exxon but after taxes, it never seemed that we got enough money.

I started selling fabric. A guy I knew told me about a new type of fabric and I went to Cloth World, looked for information and called the seller. I was told that there were only 5000 yards left in stock and I bought them all. I learned to buy direct and easily made \$5000 to \$10,000 a month on selling fabric alone.

In addition to selling fabric, I was working at Exxon, I was selling insurance, and I was doing income tax returns on the side. I was doing too many things at the same time.

I needed someone to help me so Dad moved to Houston to help me. We did pretty well, but looking back, my mistake was that while trying to save as much

as possible by doing everything myself, I did not spend enough money to expand the business.

[Note: In the section that follows, Lori recounted what Co told her without the recorder:]

While driving by the fancy surgery office building owned by his parents-in-law, Co pointed it out to me and told me that he did not get along with his in-laws. They are millionaires in cash. His mother-in-law was first married to a plastic surgeon. He was assassinated right inside his clinic in Saigon. The suspect was someone who was upset with the result of a surgery job but the case was not solved. The mother-in-law was later remarried to another plastic surgeon.

Co is the kind of person who always wants to make more money, he wants to be rich and felt that he could be. He went from job to job because he was not getting rich fast enough and the only way to do it is to have your own business.

About his dad who was once a successful, wealthy businessman in Vietnam, Co thought that dad was good at directory work, repetitive work, day to day things that need to be done but he is different, he felt that he himself has the creativity that it takes to be successful.

Co is confident in himself about getting rich one day but at the moment, he is a little discouraged about his business ventures. He has hit quite a few failures. He has lost a lot of money in the stock market, he has tried hard to buy a business building and felt frustrated because it did not work out, then he tried to buy a parking lot in order to build on downtown but the owner wanted an exorbitant price for it.

He still looks for a big break.

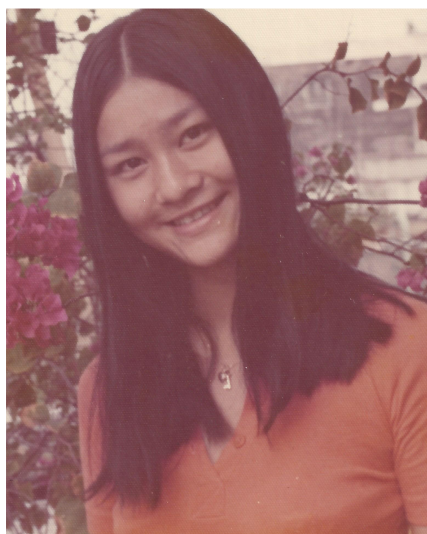
Updates – July 2007

After working for several years as an attorney, Co closed his office and now works for the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). His wife Nga still owns the successful beauty shop in downtown Houston. They reside in Spring, Texas.

Their son Anthony graduated from University of Texas and worked for IBM for a few years, he now goes back to school to pursue other areas of interest. Their daughter Stephanie also graduated from UT and is applying to Graduate School.



Co, Stephanie Tjia (Anthony's wife), Anthony, Nga, and Stephanie, 2014



Diep Ngoc Thi Vu

**Third child of Xuong Van Vu and
Sam Thi Pham Interviewed July 2007**

In the spring of 1975, I was in my Junior year at Indiana State University (ISU) while my brother Co was in D.C. attending Graduate School. Since I had to maintain good grades at ISU, I only focused on my studies. I hardly watched TV or listened to the news. Therefore, I did not know much about the

war situation in Vietnam.

One day, brother Co called me to let me know about the fall of Saigon. I remembered that the call was very short since he did not want me to worry. He just wanted to assure me that he would take care of me in case our family could not get out of Vietnam. I was a little worried and shed some tears but went right back to my studies. I probably was in shock, but I was not scared. My only goal then was to finish school and find a job to support myself.

I flew from Vietnam to Evansville, Indiana, in December 1973. The weather was bitter cold with snow up to my knees because of a snowstorm. Brother Co took me shopping for a winter coat. I did not know how to drive yet and had to rely on my brother Co. I felt homesick at first but I adjusted well to my new life in the US.

I studied very hard with the goal of going back to Vietnam after graduation to help with my dad's business. I remembered taking business courses and math the first semester at ISU (Evansville campus). Although I was more fluent in French than English, I managed to get straight A's, which made me very proud and confident. In the spring of 1974, I transferred to ISU main campus in Terre Haute, IN. I took a full load of classes and worked part-time. I found a job at the ISU cafeteria and a year later at the library. I used the money for books and put the rest in my savings. Since I attended ISU under a student visa, I had to pay out of state tuition, which was very costly. My parents had to support me financially during those years. It was a big sacrifice! After the fall of Saigon in

1975, I received a scholarship from ISU. Somehow, I was never worried about money since I did not mind working hard after school.

While anxiously waiting for the news from my family, my brother Co informed me that some of the family members had arrived in the Ft. Chaffee, Arkansas, refugee camp. I was so happy and relieved! Immediately, we drove there to visit them and stayed at the camp for a few days. I slept in the barrack and lined up to get three meals a day like any other refugee. Not long after, I found out that Dr. Caspers, a family friend, sponsored my family and helped them get settled in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

In my thoughts, Dr. Caspers could only take care of so many members of my family. While back at ISU, I thought hard about Loan's family and our parents since they had to do labor work and had no future. I went to the Foreign Student Affairs at ISU to find out more about foreign students' sponsorships. The advisor gave me a couple of names to contact. One day, I made a call to the Mediates and went to meet them at their home. They were very warm and willing to help my family to settle in Terre Haute, Indiana. Their wish was to have my sister Van live with them and help their daughter Kim with her studies. Kim had some type of learning disability and was in need of a friend her age. Van was a perfect fit. I contacted my family and asked them to move to Indiana.

Aunt Betty took me out to look for a house to rent. She furnished the place with donations from her church and with some of her own furniture. She promised to find jobs for my sister and her husband while helping them applying for college. She said she knew someone who could help Hoa, Loan's husband, to apply to Rose Hulman, a well-known private school. This was very encouraging news for me.

Everyone seemed to cope well after moving to



The ISU campus at Terre Haute, 1975

Terre Haute, Indiana. With Betty's help, my mother got a job at a florist shop, and Dad worked as a clerk at the ISU library. Loan and Bich attended ISU and Hoa got admitted to the Engineering school at Rose Hulman. They all worked part-time while attending school. Van lived at the Mediates and attended High School with Kim.

Betty treated Van very well, like her own daughter. I thought of my brothers Tri, Minh, and Tuan often but was assured that they were well taken care of by Dr. Caspers. I could tell that Mom missed them a lot but tried to hide her emotions. Mom was quite sensitive and did not talk much then. Although I understood some, I could not imagine how hard it was for them to cope with the new life in the United States. I tried to avoid talking about the past, afraid of bringing back bad memories. From the outside, it seemed like my parents were content with whatever the future would bring them since they already lost all their fortune. A year later, they bought a small three-bedroom bungalow close to ISU for all of us to stay under one roof. We all lived happily there although the house was small. After Van graduated from high school, brother Co decided to move the entire family to Houston because of the cold weather in Indiana. By then, Hoa already graduated as a chemical engineer and landed a job in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Without Dr. Caspers and the Mediates' help, we would not have what we have today. They sacrificed a lot for us and did not hesitate to help our family. We are all very grateful for their help and support.

I graduated from ISU in 1976 with a B.S. degree in business finance. It took me less than three years of schooling because I attended summer school and took over 18 credit hours each semester. In my career, I always worked very hard in achieving my goals. I started out as a staff accountant and was later promoted to accounting manager, and lastly, comptroller for an IBM distributor.

My wish is to go back to Vietnam someday. I especially want to visit Hanoi and many cities that I did not get to see when I lived there. I want my daughter to understand her roots and the Vietnamese culture. I have always missed our big house on Gia Long Street where I spent most of my youth. All the good memories of my high school years at Marie-Curie and my childhood friends still remain at that house. When I retire, I want to work as a volunteer for a non-profit organization and help the poor kids in Vietnam.



Marie Curie High School, Saigon

Insert "Update" section about Debbie

Insert current photo of Debbie with family

The Parents' Perspective

Accounts from the parents follow. Tri interviewed each of his parents individually in Vietnamese. Loan translated the stories into English. In the following interviews with Xuong (Dad) and Sam (Mom), we learn more about the family's background.



Xuong Van Vu

Father of the Vu family

Interviewed on April 5, 1987

Tri: When and where were you born?

Dad: February 12, 1926.

Tri: Do you remember what you brought with you when you left Vietnam?

Dad: A few pieces of clothes and a casual pair of shoes.

Tri: Please tell me your story, the move out of Vietnam, the days following that.

Dad: I do not have a good memory. What I still remember is that we went from one place to another, stayed a week or so at each place, then finally arrived at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

Tri: How did you get to Fayetteville, Arkansas?

Dad: Late one evening, unannounced, your brother Co and Dr. Caspers went to look for us at Ft. Chaffee. Co brought with him fried chicken and some beer. Money was a worry so I thought that he should not have spent it on buying food for us. Anyway, I shared the chicken and beer with our friends living in the same barrack.

Tri: Did you have any close friends in Ft. Chaffee?

Dad: Mr. Lam, your friend Hai's dad. I knew him from Vietnam. He was a businessman there.

Tri: Was he in the same business as you?

Dad: No, I am not sure now what kind of business he was in. He did not speak English so he depended on me for translation.

Tri: Were you happy to see Co? What did you and he talk about when he came to Ft. Chaffee that day?

Dad: Of course, I was very happy to see him. I asked him about the money that I had sent to him, how much was still there.

Tri: What time did they leave Ft. Chaffee?

Dad: We all left together. At around 1 a.m., after satisfying all the required paperwork, Dr. Caspers drove Co, your mother and me, you, and Van to his house in Fayetteville.

Tri: What did you talk about during the car drive?

Dad: Not much, it was late, I was tired. Only Co and Dr. Caspers talked with each other.

Tri: What did you think about during that trip?

Dad: I just thought that Dr. Caspers drove too fast. It was pitch dark and I was worried that he would get into an accident.

Tri: When you arrived to his house, what did you do?

Dad: Dr. Caspers showed us around his house. Mom and I went right to bed. It was at least 3:00 a.m.

Tri: How long did you stay with Dr. Caspers?

Dad: We stayed with him for about a month. Then he helped us rent a house on Sang Avenue.

Tri: During the month at Dr. Caspers', how did you feel?

Dad: I was sad. I stayed in my room most of the time. But I was glad to hear the news that all our children got out of Vietnam safely. Your siblings Bich, Minh and Tuan arrived to a camp in Pennsylvania, and your sister Loan's family was in Camp Pendleton in California.

Tri: You said you were sad. You missed your country, your own home?

Dad: Yes, all that.

Tri: Loan and her family later joined you in Fayetteville?

Dad: I thought that it was better for them to settle in California. I heard that California was a very nice place, but she said she missed us and she wanted to be near us.

Tri: Please tell me about life at Sang Avenue.

Dad: A missionary at a church in Fayetteville, Mr. Roy Anderson, helped me, your mom and your brother-in-law Hoa get jobs at a Mexican food company, making taco shells. He also helped your sister Loan find a job in a hosiery company. We earned money to pay rent and to buy food. We did not have to depend on Dr. Caspers for help.

Tri: Anything else?

Dad: I had hemorrhoids. It was not easy working with that condition. Mr Anderson arranged for me to have surgery at a hospital. I think the surgery was done on a Thursday, and I was told by my doctor that I could go back to work on Monday. Monday came and I was still in pain so I stayed home for a week.

Tri: How long have you stayed at that house?

Dad: I don't remember.

Tri: Why did you decide to move?

Dad: The Mediates drove your sisters Diep, Bich, and Van to Fayetteville to visit with us. They advised us to move to Terre Haute, Indiana so we could be with the girls who wanted to go to college.

Tri: Why did you leave us, your sons, in Fayetteville with Dr. Caspers?

Dad: Your mom and I thought that you boys would be well taken care of by Dr. Caspers. He seemed not to care much about higher education for girls.

Tri: Where did you live in Terre Haute?

Dad: The Mediates helped us rent a house on 12½ Street. It was an old, dirty house.

Tri: Did you find a job?

Dad: I got a job at a furniture store sanding wood.

Tri: What else can you tell me?

Dad: We bought a house. On what street I forget now. We paid \$9000 then spent another \$5000 on fixing it. Your brother Co sent \$2000 for a down payment and the Central Christian Church in Terre Haute gave \$1000.

Tri: How long did you stay there?

Dad: We stayed there for 5 years.

Tri: Did Mom work?

Dad: Mom found a job at a flower shop. I changed jobs to work at Indiana State University's library.

Tri: When did you move to Houston and why?

Dad: We moved to Houston in 1982 because Van left for college in Houston. Hoa and Loan had moved to Pennsylvania to work after graduation. We thought that it was best to move there. Houston is a big city, easy for children to find jobs and be close to parents.



Houston, TX, late 1970s

Tri: What did you do in Houston?

Dad: Your brother Co had a store selling fabric. I helped him with the store for a year. He had the store but still kept his full time job. Then after moving the store to a new location, he gave ownership of the store to me.

Tri: I remembered that while working at the library, you got a job interview at a knitting company?

Dad: Yes, I sent my resume to a knitting company (in North Carolina?) and was invited for an interview.

I flew there, had dinner at a Chinese restaurant with two men from the company; then at night, went to see the factory. They came to the hotel the next morning to take me back to the factory for interview. I was shown the machinery, fabrics...

The interview did not go well, the machines they used were not the same as the ones I was familiar with in my factory in Vietnam. I did not get the job.

Tri: Did they pay for your expenses?

Dad: Yes, they paid for everything: hotel, airfare.

Tri: How is business at the store?

Dad: In addition to fabrics, I sold sewing machines and a variety of things that the Vietnamese in Houston wanted to buy to send back to Vietnam. I made some money but I had to work long hours, from buying and selling to bookkeeping. I was older, and I got tired easily. And the Vietnamese customers were hard to please.

Tri: How does it compare with your business in Vietnam?

Dad: My business in Saigon was big with a lot of employees and capital. I was the owner and director.

At home, we had servants. We were wealthy, we had everything, we could afford anything we liked, but here, when we spend, we have to think. It was totally different.

Tri: What was your best memory?

Dad: Our house in Saigon. It took two years to build that five-story house; it was a huge project. I was very proud of owning it. I thought it was the most beautiful house on the block.

Tri: About your children, are you proud of us?

Dad: Of course. I am very happy about your success. I am thankful for that.

Tri: How about your life now?

Dad: I can get by with the money I have. Minh got a job right after college. We are blessed.

Tri: Any wishes for the future?

Dad: I hope to have enough money to live and some day to travel to China, to Europe, to go on a cruise...our children will help us financially if we need help.

Tri: Anything else you want to say?

Dad: Right at the beginning, Dr. Caspers told me that our children (meaning boys) should go to college instead of finding a job. It was a good idea. I am glad I followed his advice. I want to thank him and also thank the Mediates for their kindness.





Sam Thi Pham

Mother of the Vu family

April 5, 1987

Tri: When and where were you born?

Mom: September 10, 1929 in Hanoi

Tri: When did you start thinking about leaving Saigon?

Mom: When I heard that the cities in Central Vietnam were lost to the communists, I told Dad to find a way to go. I also contacted your brother Co and sister Diep to ask them to talk to Dr. Caspers on how to arrange for our boys Tri, Minh, and Tuan to come to the US.

Tri: How was your business at that time?

Mom: We still had our store open for retail sales but we told the factory workers to temporarily stay home. Only the chauffeur, the cook and a servant stayed. We did not want to give out the impression that we were preparing to leave for fear that they would do something to disrupt the plan like kidnapping one of you, for example. But I noticed a few of the workers, two or three of them, around the vicinity of our house trying to monitor the situation or coming to ask for loans.

Tri: You were scared of the communists?

Mom: Dad and I have relatives who have been living under communism for over 30 years. We knew how bad it was, and we were very afraid that the workers would revolt against us.

Tri: How many workers have you had?

Mom: Depending on market condition, we had between 30 and 50 workers at one time or another.

Tri: Did Dad really want to leave Saigon?

Mom: I think Dad wanted to be reunited with his relatives from the north; he wanted to stay to help the country with his talents. I had to reason with your dad, to tell him that we would have no chance whatsoever under communism, and I reminded him about how bad his brother Bong and my sister Nhung's lives had been. Their children did not have a good education or jobs. I was adamant about leaving.

Tri: You said you still had the store open for retail sales?

Mom: Yes, we wanted to show that it was business as usual. Sales were good those last months maybe because people bought stuff to pack for a big move.

Tri: Dad went to find a way out for the family?

Mom: That was what he said he did, but I doubted that he put all his effort into that.

Tri: But finally he did find something?

Mom: Yes, a cousin of Dad's told him about a way out. The cost was US\$1500 for Tri, since he was at the age of service, and US\$1000 each for your dad, me, and Van.

Tri: You had US dollars to pay?

Mom: I had gold bars so I had to find a jeweler who agreed to exchange gold into dollars. I was ripped off; they exchanged \$1000 for 16 ounces of gold. I exchanged all my gold to have enough dollars to pay our ways out.

Tri: You were told that they accepted only US dollars?

Mom: That cousin told me. I did not have time to personally contact and ask Madame Ly, the lady who arranged those trips.

Tri: Please tell me in detail about the minute you learned of the path available and what followed after that.

Mom: Dad was at that lady's place with his cousin, Doan. He sent his nephew, Do, home to tell me to get ready to go immediately. After sitting your sister Loan down and telling her that she would go on the next trip and asking her to do a few things for us the next day, our chauffeur drove us, the three of us, to Mme Ly's

house at around 2 p.m. on April 28, 1975. We pretended that we were going on a business trip to Cholon so no one suspected that we were leaving. We had gone to Cholon for business many times before. Your sister Loan was still at home anyway.

Tri: What did you tell Loan to do?

Mom: I told her to go to the Bank Franco-Chinoise near our house the next morning to cash some checks for us and take the money with her.

Tri: And then what?

Mom: We left by air that evening but I heard that the airport was bombed the next day so that was why your sister and her family had to go by sea.

Tri: Did you have time to talk to my aunts and uncles, your sisters and brothers, to say goodbye before you went?

Mom: I called uncle Duong, your dad's cousin, to ask him to come over to watch the house and the store. I also called my sisters and brothers to discreetly tell them that I was going to visit Co and Diep (meaning leaving Saigon), and that they should do their best to get out.

My cousin Tu Anh had asked me to go with her family by boat but I thought it was too risky. Robberies, the boat, the water...were all scary to me. I prefer to fly.

Tri: You knew about the destination?

Mom: No. I just wanted to get away from the situation in Saigon. From Mme Ly, we traveled by van in the evening to the airport. Our van was stopped several times by Vietnamese patrols. I was terrified.



The Bank Franco-Chinoise was a commercial bank in Saigon that dissolved in 1975

Tri: You are happy with your life in Houston now?

Mom: I am happy to be reunited with our children. We have a store, and our children have good education. I don't think much about the past. We lose some, we win some.

Tri: You have any wishes?

Mom: I wish that you guys will all have good jobs, will help each other, and will keep the Vietnamese traditions.

Tri: Any regrets?

Mom: I felt sad that my sister Huong is no longer with us. She had done a lot for our family, bringing Bich, Minh, and Tuan to the US.

Tri: How were the days with Dr. Caspers?

Mom: Because of the language barrier, I did not feel at ease. I did not know how to cook American food but Dr. Caspers let me do all the cooking. He said he could eat anything but chicken neck. Your dad and I cried a lot in our room. We missed home, missed Vietnam.

Tri: You wish to be able to go back and visit Vietnam?

Mom: Yes, I wonder what our old house looks like now. I want to go back and see it, see all the changes.

Tri: Anything else you want to say?

Mom: My thanks to Dr. Caspers for guiding and supporting Tri, Minh, and Tuan. We decided to move to Terre Haute to look after the girls. I knew Dr. Caspers must have been disappointed about our leaving Fayetteville.

I also want to thank Mr. and Mrs. Mediate for letting Van stay at their place and the nice people at Central Christian Church in Terre Haute, who helped us a lot when we first moved there.

Tri: Anything else before we close?

Mom: I have adjusted to life here but I still miss Saigon and the good life that we had. Your brother Co has helped us tremendously. We cannot have what we have without him. He also took good care of his younger brothers and sisters by letting them stay at his house and supporting them.

I am proud of our children who are all successful. I am happy that you (Tri) are very successful. I hope that you will teach your wife and kids about Vietnamese customs and traditions.



A Letter from Sam to Tri and Lori, 1980

In the early days of being in the United States, Sam, Tri's mother, wrote this letter. It may be the only account that clearly described the living condition of the family. Additionally, Sam's correspondences typically consisted of recipes or instructions of some kind, making this letter something of an anomaly.

October 29, 1980

Dear Tri and Lori,

I received news that Lori is pregnant; your father and I are very happy. That means next year we will have another grandchild, three of Loan's and two more from Co and Tri. The more grandchildren we have, the more we feel we can live longer.

I am very anxious about still not being able to sell the house so we can move. The bank interest rate remains high. The slower we move, the more difficult it is to find jobs because of our ages and lack of education. With me being laid off, if we don't have your father's income, I am sure that we will be hungry. The factory where I worked was not doing well; it laid off workers constantly. From the beginning of this year, I have been laid off this way three times already. We are at disadvantage because the company does not have a union; they don't care about seniority. Any equipment, any people not needed are gotten rid of right away. I submitted employment applications at other places already, but there is not much hope because of the decline in the economy. People are losing their jobs everywhere. This is another reason that we want to move.

Lori is pregnant, gagging is normal. In the old days, when I was pregnant with Loan, I gagged and threw up about 10 times a day. I threw up so much that my face turned green and yellow. I threw up whether I was full or hungry; my throat was sore and miserably dry. However, it depends on the pregnancy, each is different. When I was pregnant with Co, I felt the opposite. I felt nothing; I did not gag or throw up at all.

We want you to teach your wife to speak Vietnamese fluently so that we and the relatives can communicate with her. That's a very necessary matter. The following is an example that I want to bring up so that you can draw some experience. Your father's friend knows a couple (Vietnamese husband and

American wife). In order to preserve the culture, the state where they live has a huge celebrations to welcome the Tet New Year away from home. Every year the couple would make Bnah' Chung themselves to share with other Vietnamese families. Everyone was surprised and complimented the couple....

Since here, I am sending you recipes of a few Vietnamese dishes that are very easy to make, convenient, and fast.



Xuong and Sam at the wedding of Justin Quach & Elizabeth Petrie, 2010

Supporting Characters

Others have provided invaluable help to the Vu family. Below, sponsors and loved ones describe their involvement.



Dr. Earl M. Caspers

Professor who helped reunite the Vu family

April 22, 1987

Tri: Please tell me about what and when you knew about our situations, the day we left Vietnam.

Dr. Caspers: I do not know the exact date, but I was well aware that Vietnam was overrun by the Communists. I was in Bolivia in February and watching what was happening there in Bolivia.

There was a peace treaty signed granting enclaves to the North Vietnamese. I knew they were staging areas to move in tanks and heavy guns to build up for another Tet offensive. Nixon wanted to bomb the enclaves but he was having a lot of trouble with Watergate.

I came in contact with a CIA man in Bolivia. He told me that once North Vietnam started something, there was no stopping them and they would take over the country.

I came back in March, early April. Your brother Co and I were in contact; he worried about the family, especially the male members, so I wrote to your father through the American Embassy telling him that I would take the three boys. In May 1975, the State Department wrote back saying that it was too late; Vietnam had already fallen into communism.

Tri: You only wanted to help the males and not the females?

Dr. C: I knew that the communists always wanted to keep the males. Females would get out easier. I later got word that you, your parents, and a sister got out.

Tri: How did you know that?

Dr. C: I don't remember whether I contacted the Red Cross or a hotline or your brother Co told me, but I learned that you guys were at Fort Chaffee.

Tri: We stayed at several camps and one month at Fort Chaffee.

Dr. C: But in this country, you only stayed at Fort Chaffee.

Tri: No, we stayed in several camps.

Dr. C: I did not know that, I thought you came to Fort Chaffee directly from overseas.

Tri: At least four or five camps.

Dr. C: I drove down to Fort Chaffee. I knew Co when he came here and stayed with me for three or four months before moving to the dorm. Viet was here first, I knew his parents through a mutual friend. After Viet then Co. After moving to the dorm, they came back on weekends, holidays. I had a game room. I had 60 kids at one time.

Tri: Did you get support from the government?

Dr. C: No. You don't plan anything ahead. I lived in Vietnam and worked there for four and a half years from 1966 to 1970. I had contacts with the Vietnamese, I knew some from the time I was there and some through mutual friends.

Tri: Co was worried, so he contacted you?

Dr. C: There were kids I knew from Carbondale, Illinois. I had a strong relationship with Co; he was more mature than other kids; and he kept in touch. I don't remember all the details.

I was at Fort Chaffee many, many times, almost every week to meet other people. Kids from Carbondale asked me to check on their families at Fort Chaffee. One night, 20 kids slept here.

I drove with Co to Fort Chaffee; he brought with him Kentucky Fried Chicken and beer.

I remember that your mother was sick trying to find Minh, Tuan, and your sister. I contacted a Congressman and was able to locate your brothers on an island north of Guam.



*Aerial view of Andersen Air Force Base, Guam,
where Minh, Tuan, and Bich were staying*

Then I had to find your sister, brother-in-law, and the baby. They were found at Camp Pendleton, California. They were supposed to fly to Fayetteville, Arkansas, but were sent by mistake to Fayetteville, North Carolina. I had to call the refugee office and the airline to reroute them to Little Rock, Arkansas, where I was staying during the week to teach. They arrived in Little Rock at night and stayed in the hotel overnight before flying to Fayetteville.

Tri: Did you think about the cost of letting so many people, strangers, stay in your home?

Dr. C: No, I have never considered them strangers. The subject of money never crossed my mind. I am a poor man today. I am not a detailed person. I never got hung up on money.

Tri: You filled out sponsorship papers, registered me for University before I got out of Fort Chaffee?

Dr. C: Yes, your father gave me the necessary papers that he kept in a blue folder.

I was teaching at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock for six weeks. I asked President Bishop to have the Vietnamese students registered as in-state students. Bishop refused but said I could write him about it. The letter was circulated around the Registrar's Office. All of his staff agreed with me that Vietnamese students should be allowed to register as in-state students.

Tri: What are your impressions, comments, what do you feel about each of us after you got us out of Fort Chaffee?

Dr. C: I don't worry about things you questioned nor was I concerned about things you thought I should be concerned about. I tried not to upset people or be too pushy.

Tri: You were pushy. I remember when you asked about a certain English word I did not know, you got upset. You told me to go get a dictionary. I did not understand a word and I wanted a Vietnamese dictionary. On top of that, you wanted me to write an essay about it. I was so pissed off. You did that with my brothers too?

Dr. C: No, they were younger. I felt I had more time with them. You were an adult; you were very sharp. I remember one time, I had classes at night, came home late, and instead of working and doing homework, they ran off to play. When they saw me, they said we had to do homework.

You were always docile. You did things without complaining. You did very well at school; architecture is not easy.

Tri: Maybe that is Vietnamese nature.

Dr. C: But Tuan always let his feelings be known. He observed and watched everything closely. He learned English very fast.

Tri: Who decided the college major for me?

Dr. C: I talked about it with you and your father. Your English was not that bad, your father's English was not that bad either. It was you who decided to pursue chemical engineering. I remember that part of the story.

Tri: I remember taking the English requirement. I got all A's but did not get credits. I was not officially a student at the university. But later on, the credits were applied toward my degree after I officially became a student.

Do you remember taking me to art class and told the art teacher that Tri started to draw?

Dr. C: I tried to get everybody into art, into something you would enjoy, math and art. I knew you were good at art, as well as your brother Minh.

Co did not consider himself a scholastic genius but he did consider you to be. When the school had some leftover money to give out as a scholarship for students to pay room and board, I recommended you.

Tri: Hai was furious and we don't talk anymore because he thought that I gave misleading information to the Exchange Student Organization and he did not get that money.

Why did you put Minh in a grade lower?

Dr. C: With my experience in teaching school, I thought that making Minh repeat eighth grade would help him learn English and get decent grades for English in ninth grade. To apply for college, he needed good Math and English credits from ninth to twelfth grades of high school.

Tri: Minh felt bad about that.

Dr. C: Maybe temporarily in the beginning. It was the same reason I put you in Art. Minh was always worried. Your brother Co had to go through a year of intensive English before enrolling in college.

Tri: I remember drawing your portrait from a picture you had at your house to surprise you as a birthday present. Later on when Roy Anderson saw it, he took me to an art store trying to sell this service. All they wanted to pay me was \$5 a picture that I spent several days to work on. What they paid was only 5% of what it should cost. I was so disappointed.

Did you feel discouraged we did not know a word of English?

Dr. C: No, I saw it coming.

Tri: My mother worked hard and tried to make the stay at your home more comfortable, more acceptable.

Dr. C: I told her that everyone had to take turns washing dishes and now it was my turn. She said no.

Tri: My mother woke up early to vacuum the house. Dinh was upset because of all the noise.

Dr. C: I remember that. Then a fellow came around; he talked to your dad about jobs.

Tri: Yes, Roy Anderson. My parents then moved to a rented house on Sang Avenue. They showed you a letter from their Vietnamese friend about getting welfare. They tried to help you, you spent so much money on so many people but you did not agree with my dad about getting welfare.

Dr. C: They did not rely on me that much. They all got jobs, they bought their own groceries.

Tri: I remember you always checked the newspapers' ads to save on groceries? How did you know how much to buy, what to buy?

Dr. C: I did not. I was more concerned about the right types of food.

Tri: You must feel extremely fulfilled to see the Vu family successful after 12 years?

Dr. C: The success of the Vu family is not because of me.

Tri: But you are the vehicle.

Dr. C: No, I don't think about it.

Tri: Anything you want to say in closing?

Dr. C: I am a man of very few words. You all are strong, very capable people. You know what to do, what not to do. You don't need any advice. The Vu family is successful because they are stronger than themselves, they are good people within themselves. I am happy to know them because of the type of people they are, not because they are successful or are refugees.



Art & Betty Mediate 1979

Betty Mediate

Host to Van, helped the Vu family transition

Terre Haute, Indiana, March 12, 2007

As I remember it was July 1975, we were getting ready to go to Michigan for our yearly summer vacation, when the phone rang.

When I answered, Irene Volkers who worked in the Indiana State University financial assistance office, asked if Art and I would be willing to have a Vietnamese girl come to live with us. She explained that the girl's sister, Diep, was presently attending ISU (Indiana State University), and that she

would arrange a visit with Diep so we could talk about her sister Van, and why there was a need for her to come and live in Terre Haute.

So we met Diep and liked her and her story. That night Art and I discussed the possibility of having a live-in person. We were concerned about the language barrier, but decided that we could do this since Van was about the same age as Kim and they could become friends.

So Van came, wearing only shorts, a t-shirt and sandals. She seemed shy at first. We showed her to the room which would be hers, and she decided to take a nap before dinner. Apparently not knowing about bedspreads, she laid on top of it and took a nap. Since we were leaving for Michigan in a few days, we had to shop for warmer clothes right away, for Michigan gets very cool at night, so off to the mall. But it took Van a long time to decide what to buy, she was very small and looked close at all the ticket prices, until I finally said, Van its only money, and we need to get you stuff, so please ignore the price and get what you need. I am sure she still remembers that day!

Now off to Michigan; we took books and each morning on the deck overlooking Lake Michigan, we learned some English!

Then the beach, we were surprised to learn that she really did not like to sunbathe, for in her country, too dark skin was frowned upon. So when we were tanning, she would cover up as much as she could. (We have pictures to prove this)

By the time the two week vacation was over, we had become pretty well acquainted and seemed to get along great! Then there was the thing about what to call Art and me, and we decided that Uncle Art and Aunt Betty would satisfy all of us. Van & Kim became fast friends and Kim was delighted with her foster sister.

After a few weeks, Diep and Van would get letters from the rest of their family who were still residing with a university professor, Dr. Casper in Arkansas. Stories went that all of them plus many others were living in a very small house and were not too happy, it was decided that we would find out what it would take to sponsor a family of that size.

Through contact with the Lutheran church, which was familiar with sponsorship, we found out that we could bring the whole family from Arkansas if we could provide them with living quarters and find them jobs. So at a board meeting of Central Christian Church, where our family attended, we proposed that the church and our family would take on that responsibility.

It was decided by the Vu family, that the three boys would remain in Arkansas and the rest of the family would move to Terre Haute to be with the girls.

This included Mr. & Mrs. Vu, Loan & husband Hoa with three-year-old Quan, and Bich. A rented house on North 12th Street soon became their new home.

Residency in their new house was short-lived, as the house did not provide the necessary things for comfortable living. Art & I decided to find a new place, and we purchased the house on South 17th Street for the family. People of Central Christian helped furnish, clean and make the house as livable as possible, but Mr. Vu, who was used to being an executive, would walk around with a cup of coffee while the others did the work. One night Art said that something has to be done about this and asked Van to talk with her father and explain the complaint. But Van declined to do this, stating that this would be considered disrespectful. So I had to have that talk with Mr. Vu after which all went smoothly.

Job-hunting was a real experience. Mr. Vu and I would go around town and put in applications. Being that in Vietnam women are not valued as in America, when Mr. Vu opened a door, instead of letting me go before him, he would enter

first and let the door fly shut behind him. By now we learned that cultures are definitely different, alright! Mr. Vu landed a job at the ISU library, Mrs. Vu worked for a local record company, and the rest of the family either had part or full-time jobs or went to school. Hoa (son in law) attended Rose Hulman, worked a 48-hour week, and graduated cum laude. I was told that he, not being fluent in English, had to spend a lot of time looking up words in the dictionary and had to stay up late at night studying after work.

Diep had to move from ISU. She and Bich were offered a room in Mrs. Volkers' home on Washington Avenue. But that proved to be a disaster as we found out that Mrs. Volkers tried to use them as her maids, cleaning, etc. This was not intended to be, so we moved Diep and Bich into our home for a short while until an apartment was found.

The rest of the family, except Van who stayed at our house, lived on South 17th Street. While there, Quan, Loan & Hoa's son, would call our house and asked if he could come over to play, and I would go and pick him up and bring him to our house. But while there, he would always like to visit the dime store in Meadows Center near us, and of course found small toys to buy. He asked to leave them at our house to play with because his mother had told him not to ask for things like that. We had a large chest in our garage, which soon filled with his games and toys.

Sometimes we would ride our bikes. I purchased a basket for him to sit behind me on the bike. One day I asked him what all he saw while we were riding, and the answer was: "Aunt Betty, you are too big back here for me to see!"

At one point Mr. Vu was able to purchase the house on 17th Street, and carry his own mortgage which would help him acquire principal for a later sale.

When we moved to the house on Ohio Blvd, Van shared a room with Kim. They attended the University Lab School and both graduated from there in 1977, then attended Indiana State University for a year after that.

Since I was born in Holland, we often talked about a trip to Europe, which would include Vansy! But in 1980 Uncle Art died, and I decided to take that trip with the girls anyway. It was a big hassle to get the necessary papers for Van to travel abroad. When we left the States, we thought all was in order until we arrived at London Heathrow airport, where Van was not allowed to enter. Our tour guide and we had a consultation with the consulate, who informed us that she would be allowed to stay in England, but when our tour crossed the Channel over to France, they would not let her enter the country due to past relations with

Vietnam. We cried all night, and to my dismay I had to buy her a return ticket to Canada, and she was not allowed to continue the tour with us.

Now Mr. Vu's eldest son, Co, and family lived in Houston and were instrumental in the Vu family making the move to Texas. Mr. Vu sold his 17th Street home and moved the family to Texas. Van discontinued ISU and enrolled in University of Houston because they had the Computer Science major she needed, and she could once again live at home with her own family. Hoa and Loan moved to Erie, Pennsylvania, where Hoa got an engineering job with Lord Corporation, and they added two boys and a girl to their family. Over the years we visited them often and enjoyed their wonderful hospitality and Oriental food.

It has been over 30 years since we first met the Vu family, and we feel that through the many years we kept in touch, they have become our extended family. Thinking back on how they came here without much of anything and seeing today how much they all have accomplished, they are a remarkable family, overcoming language barriers, cultural differences and establishing themselves into our American way of life. We will always be grateful to God, who through one phone call in 1975 brought our families together. We love them all and pray that God will keep them in the palm of his hand for many years to come!



Lori Orton

Wife of Tri Thien Vu

Born August 11, 1952

I was about a year too young to have High School classmates going to fight in the Vietnam War, as I graduated from Fayetteville High School in 1970. By that time, boys were sometimes signing up for military service rather than being drafted. However, as a college student at the University of Arkansas in the early 1970s, I had met two guys who had been to Vietnam as soldiers. They didn't talk much about their Vietnam experiences, but they were both emotionally messed up from the experience and had become "druggies". Because of this fact, I was against the Vietnam War. However, it was *because* of the Vietnam War that I met my future husband and my life was changed forever. I truly believe that all things work together for good, and meeting Tri Vu was a perfect example and a confirmation of this belief.

I met Tri at a New Year's Eve party. It was December 31, 1975. Normally, I don't remember such things. I remember this exact date because this particular New Year's Eve was the day before 1976, America's bicentennial anniversary. My girlfriend, Mona, had met Tri in an art class at the University of Arkansas and she had talked to me about him. Mona would walk around during her breaks as the class model and would look at the students' paintings. She often would talk to the students, and this is how Mona had made friends with Tri.

Tri was a refugee, recently arriving in the United States from Vietnam. He was a good artist, Mona believed. I was curious to meet him and I was home from graduate school in St. Louis, Missouri, for the holidays. I had been invited to a New Year's Eve party by an Israeli student I had met a year earlier at the University of Arkansas' International Club. I knew that Mona would be at the party, too, and would bring several foreign students who didn't have cars. She told me that Tri would be one of her guests.

I was fascinated by Tri from the moment he walked into the party with Mona and a few other foreign students. He was so handsome, exotic-looking, and mysterious. Tri had grown up in Saigon, Vietnam, in a life that had only known

war. I had grown up mostly in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and had known only peace. Tri's dad was a businessman; my dad was a University professor. Tri's family had been wealthy and had lost everything in order to escape Communism; my family was middle class and lived a stable life in a stable democracy. This young man's life was so different from mine and yet our paths crossed in Fayetteville, Arkansas. How could I know that, almost four years later, I would become Mrs. Tri Vu?

I was so mesmerized by Tri that I talked to him the entire evening, completely ignoring my date. I asked Tri many questions, wanting to find out as much as I could from this cute 19-year old Vietnamese boy. Tri's English was okay; he had been in this country almost seven months. When he didn't know a particular word in English, he would automatically say the word in French because French was the first foreign language he had learned in Vietnam. He had even attended a French school in Saigon where they only spoke French. The fact that Tri spoke words or phrases in French didn't faze me at all because I was working on my Master's degree in French. I had lived in France with a French family for a year and was fluent in French. I tried to draw him out, asking him questions and wanting him to tell me about himself. My attempts didn't work especially well, but I blamed that on his limited English. Later I learned that it was not only his command of English that kept him from speaking candidly, but also his culture and recent life-changing experiences that kept him from expressing himself openly. He was not going to "spill his guts" to a girl he had just met!

Tri was so interesting to me and I wanted to get to know him better. We met several times during the Christmas vacation, and then I returned to school in St. Louis, which was a six and a half hour drive from Fayetteville. We continued to correspond by letter. Tri wrote well and his letters were always expressive. Tri invited me to the Vietnamese New Year (Tet) party in March 1976. He asked if I would buy some banana leaves for him because St. Louis was a larger city and had several Oriental food stores. I agreed. I had never been to an Oriental food store in St. Louis, but I was able to find one and buy the requested banana leaves. He must have really wanted them because he asked me, whom he didn't know very well, to buy them for him. This request gave me that extra excuse to return to Fayetteville for the weekend, something that was rare for me to do because of the distance.

I drove home to Fayetteville to give Tri the promised banana leaves and to go to the Tet party. Tri actually did not expect me to be there because of the long

drive involved. Unknown to me, Tri had invited another girl to the party, too! I never found out about his two dates until several years later. Tri and his friends did an amazing job of keeping me and the other girl on opposite sides of the room the entire evening, each of us dancing with so many Vietnamese guys that we didn't notice anything odd. Certainly that girl felt just as popular as I did with our newfound Vietnamese boy friends!

As Tri and I became friends over the next months and years, I came to know more about Tri, his family, and his friends. It was a very slow process. In our hurried American lifestyle, I had to just relax and wait for bits of his story to emerge in a conversation or for a reaction to be explained. Many times this was frustrating for me; I wanted to know everything all at once.

Tri's Vietnamese friends at the University of Arkansas were a close-knit group. They didn't know each other in Vietnam but they had a common bond: they had all been up-rooted from their homeland and "dropped" into Fayetteville, Arkansas. I'm not sure if they talked to each other about their experiences, but they certainly did not talk to me about them. One fellow had been a helicopter pilot and had left behind his young wife and child. Others had dramatic stories but I never found out what they were. These guys would go out together and would drink a lot. It was obvious to me that they had been through some traumatic experiences and were trying to deal with them in the best ways they could. Probably their drinking helped dull the emotional pain, at least for a short while.

For several months, Tri's parents lived in Fayetteville with him and two of his brothers. They all lived with their sponsor, Dr. Earl Caspers. Dr. Caspers was a confirmed bachelor and had met the Vu family in Saigon when he was teaching there. Dr. Caspers sponsored many Vietnamese refugees. By the time I met Tri, his parents had moved to Terre Haute, Indiana, where two of Tri's four sisters lived with their sponsor. The parents felt that they should be near the daughters, believing that Dr. Caspers would take good care of their sons in Fayetteville. They felt sad to leave their boys and somewhat guilty that they were now unable to pay for their college education. By living near their two daughters, they would be able to keep a small part of the family together. Loan, the eldest child, moved with her husband and toddler to live with her parents until Hoa found a job in Erie, Pennsylvania. Terre Haute, Indiana became the Vu family's new home base.

At the Caspers' household in Fayetteville, each person would take turns cooking. Everyone had chores to do, from cooking to cleaning to picking vegetables in the garden. They had to speak English at all times and carry a small spiral notepad with them to write down any words they didn't know so that they could look them up in the dictionary later. Dr. Caspers was a strict taskmaster, but this was necessary when there were up to 15 people living there at times. I could definitely sympathize with the work that needed to be shared by that household. My mother was also a strict taskmaster. I learned cooking, cleaning, and picking vegetables from the family garden, as well. However, there was a difference. I had been raised to do these tasks. Tri and his brothers came from a family who had servants to do those tasks for them. Who knows if they ever even *thought* about dusting or making a bed or doing laundry before coming to the United States!

When the time came, I helped Tri move from Dr. Caspers' house into the college dormitory. I'm guessing that Dr. Caspers felt that this move would be good for Tri. His two younger brothers, Minh and Tuan, were still in Elementary or Junior High School and needed a father figure for guidance. Tri was 19 years old and would be able to fend for himself like so many other college freshmen. Tri was able to get scholarship money, a loan, and work-study spending money while attending the University of Arkansas. Tri wanted to become an architect and the U of A had a good five-year Architecture program.

I received my master's degree in French in May 1976, hoping to get a job teaching French at the college level. This didn't happen, so my mother suggested that I go back to the University of Arkansas to get my education degree so I would be able to teach at the high school level. This is what I did. During this year and the years following, I got to know Tri better. We now lived in the same town.

Tri had great trouble with his architecture history classes, which he had to take each semester for three years, or was it four? Vietnamese history concentrated on eastern civilization, whereas this architecture history was based on western civilization. I noticed that Tri was highlighting almost every word in the textbook and he was looking up every other word in the dictionary. For me, raised in the Western civilization, I knew, for example, that Zeus was a god of some kind. Tri had no idea who or what Zeus could be so he had to look up Zeus in the dictionary. To help him make these classes easier, we came up with a plan. Tri took his cassette tape recorder to class and recorded the lecture. I read the

textbook and highlighted the important points. I also listened to the recorded lecture and took notes. Tri read the highlighted points in the textbook and read my written notes. He was then able to look up fewer words in the dictionary and ask me some questions. Tri passed all of his architecture history classes, and I felt as though I should have received credit on my transcript, too! I was happy to be able to help Tri, and was glad that I didn't have to take his exams for him! I actually never cared for history. Ah...the things you do for love!

Every once in a while, something would happen to remind us of the differences between Vietnam and the US. Dr. Caspers and my family lived within two miles of each other near the edge of town. Driving (or walking) between the two houses, there was on a small road with only a few homes and lots of woods on either side. This made Tri nervous to pass through this area, especially at night. In Vietnam, this area would have been dangerous. Soldiers would no doubt have been in the woods and come out to stop or shoot at the car. Airplanes flying low made him nervous, as well. He knew the sounds of different types of airplanes. His experiences made me very thankful that I lived in the US and had not experienced that fear.

In the late 1970's there were no personal computers or cell phones. Our long distance communication took place mostly through writing letters and, on rare occasions, through long distance telephone calls. I wrote to Tri's two sisters in Terre Haute and got to know them a little bit. I got to know Minh and Tuan who lived with Dr. Caspers. And of course, I got to know Tri. He was still quiet. He had a sense of humor. He would tell a story with a straight face and it was often impossible to tell if he was telling the truth. If the story sounded outrageous, then he was joking. If it sounded believable, then I would have to get him to confess that it was a joke.

When we decided to get married, family members were concerned about the marriage because of our racial, religious, and cultural differences. We were aware that these existed, but we believed that our similarities greatly outweighed our differences. My main personal concern was that I was four years older than Tri. I knew that I wanted to marry Tri, but I never wanted to put pressure on Tri to marry me. I knew that he was perhaps a little young to get married and I wanted him to be certain about his decision, and not be pressured into it. This age issue bothered me for many years following our marriage until, after a certain point, age didn't matter at all.



Tri and Lori's wedding, 1979. Tri's parents are to the left, Lori's to the right.

Insert photo of Uncle Phat 1975

Uncle Tran Gia Phat

Married to eldest sister of Sam Thi Pham, lived with Vu parents in US
for a short time

Houston, Jan 3, 1988

Tri: You are the husband of whom?

Phat: I am married to your mother's eldest sister Nhung Thi Pham.

Tri: Can you tell me your birth date?

Phat: I was born in November 20, 1921 in Bac Ninh, North Vietnam.

Tri: And your wife's birth date?

Phat: April 20, 1928. She was born in Ha Noi, North Vietnam.

Tri: You recently moved to the US?

Phat: We came to Terre Haute, Indiana, in June 1980 and stayed with your parents, Mr. and Mrs. Xuong Van Vu for two months, June and July. We moved to Philadelphia in August 1980 to be near other relatives on my wife's side: Uncle Phuc, and Aunts Nga and Thu.

Tri: When many members of our extended family moved from North Vietnam to the south, your family decided to stay back. How many years are there from that date to the day that you were reunited with them in the US?

Phat: It was from 1954 to 1980, a total of 26 years.

Tri: Where in North Vietnam did you live?

Phat: Before 1946, we lived in Bac Ninh but since the war with the French in 1946, we moved to the capital of Ha Noi to be safe. In Ha Noi, while your parents lived at Gia Long street in a house owned by your father's older brother,

Bong Vu, my wife and I and our daughter lived at Hang Buom street, in a house owned by my parents-in-law (your maternal grandparents.)

Tri: What did you do for a living then?

Phat: We had a business selling ready-made clothes at Thuoc Bac street.

Tri: I wonder why Ha Noi streets were given such names?

Phat: The streets of Ha Noi are named according to the types of products sold mainly at stores in the street. For example, Hang Buom street is where you can find many stores selling sailing boats. Thuoc Bac Street has stores selling Chinese medicinal herbs.

Tri: Was your business different from our parents' business?

Phat: Yes, completely different. Your parents were in a wool-weaving business with Mr. Bong Vu, your father's older brother.

Tri: How did you learn about the exodus to the South in 1954? Was it a free and legal move announced to all citizens or was it a secret that only a few were aware of?

Phat: It was free and legal; anyone who wanted to go could go. When the French army withdrew from the north of Vietnam in 1954, a lot of North Vietnamese left their homes for the south to escape Communism.

Tri: Why did you decide to stay back?

Phat: I had made many business trips to Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, by myself or with my sisters. We would buy stuff to ship back to our store in Ha Noi for selling because we could find very good prices in Saigon. I had a close relative, Mr. Quang Dai, whom I could stay with while in Saigon.

My household at that time consisted of my old parents, my sisters, and my own family (myself, wife, and daughter). I was the oldest of the children and the only son who, according to Vietnamese traditions, had the duty to take care of the whole household and make all kinds of decisions. At first, we had thought about moving to the south, and planned to buy a house near An Dong market, in Cho Lon, near Saigon for 20 thousand Dong Duong piastres, the currency at the time.

The agreement was signed and all we needed to do was to pay in full and take possession of the house. Then my wife heard that her parents did not intend to move so she expressed to me her desire to stay. I, myself, was not so sure about the benefits of moving. I had second thoughts. I had so much to lose, our business, our house. I was not involved in politics; I was just a small businessman. I am Chinese born. I thought we would do okay with the change in government.

I told my sisters about my change of heart and they suspected that I wanted to stay to take over all of my parents' possessions, which included many pieces of property and the clothing business that we had in partnership with all the members of my extended family. So finally, everyone decided against the move.

Tri: What were you thinking when you found out that my parents and other relatives were moving?

Phat: Your parents had Mr. Hy Van Vu (a.k.a. Hai Cu) and Mr. Bong Vu (a.k.a. Thinh Cu), your father's older brothers to help with their decision. They owned a big business and their situations were different than mine. Since we arrived at our decision to stay, I was fine with it. I did not dwell much on whether it was a right or a wrong decision.

But then, my parents-in-law decided to move, we said a long goodbye by following them on a three-hour train trip to Nha Trang, a beach resort in central Vietnam. My wife and I stayed in Nha Trang for a night at a house of a relative named Toan Ca. My parents-in-law stayed with my mother-in-law's brother Thin Van Nguyen for a few months before flying to Saigon.

Tri: You mentioned you have made several trips to Saigon. In your opinion at that time, how was Saigon compared to Ha Noi?

Phat: While Ha Noi was a cultural and political center, Saigon was a big business and trade center. The population of Chinese was large in Saigon.

Tri: Did your wife feel sad about her parents leaving Ha Noi?

Phat: That, you will have to ask her. She did not show her sadness in front of me. She understood that being a Vietnamese woman, she had to respect her husband's decision.

Tri: How was life in Ha Noi after the change?

Phat: A month after the Communist regime took over, we could feel the tight grip of the government on the administration of food distribution and on the formation of districts under police control. Any change in family situation, in residency must be reported.

Then a few months later, there was a change in currency. Business owners, big or small, the so-called capitalists, were ordered to file their tax returns to pay income tax. Committees consisting of neighbors, district supervisors...met regularly to audit and review the fairness and accuracy of the amounts of income reported by business owners. Any amount deemed too low had to be adjusted to the satisfaction of members of the committee involved. We had to pay a huge amount of tax, approximately a third of our total net worth.

Tri: Were you forced to declare more income than you actually made?

Phat: The tax rate was so high. The income reported was about right but we had to pay a lot at that time. Everyone gave a lower figure at first, trying to lower the burden.

Tri: Did you have enough to spend?

Phat: We still had some savings, and we were able to rent out some of the rooms in our large house.

Tri: Were you able to get in touch with relatives who moved to Saigon?

Phat: Yes, we exchanged letters via a relative in France.

Tri: So you knew about the better life in Saigon?

Phat: Yes, we did.

Tri: Did you feel sad for your destiny?

Phat: I was happy for our relatives in Saigon but I was not sad since everyone was the same in Ha Noi after the change.

Tri: Had you thought about finding a way out of Ha Noi?

Phat: Yes, we applied and received passports to go to China, then Hong Kong. From there, we hoped we could go to Saigon.

Tri: Then why didn't you go?

Phat: It was all destiny. I was unable to find a trusted person to look after the business. And then shortly after that, the government took away the passports issued and forbade citizens to travel abroad.

Tri: Any other hardships that you had to endure after that?

Phat: Oh yes. In 1959, the government did a major reform. They confiscated all lands and properties and divided them equally among all citizens. Each person was given four square meters of space in a house. Since our house in Hang Buom was big (1248 square meters), instead of sectioning our large living room, I begged them to give us more space and luckily, we got a total of 60 square meters for our whole family.

Tri: At that time you still owned your business?

Phat: No, everything belonged to the government. We all worked for them, received 60 piastres of the new currency per family per month. It was not enough because we had more children then.

Tri: It sounded bad to me. Anything else?

Phat: All "capitalists" were sent to a labor camp to be re-educated. All your uncles were in the same camp with me. It was terrible.

Tri: By that time, you still maintained communication with relatives in the South?

Phat: We had to be careful about the letters we sent or we would get into trouble with the government. Therefore, we did not write much. But some of us listened (against the law) to the BBC and spread the news. We knew about the situation in Saigon, the politics, the military, the economy...

Tri: What was the worst?

Phat: The bombing of Ha Noi by the Americans. It was scary, in addition to worrying about feeding ourselves, we now had to fear for our lives.

Tri: Did you know in advance about the eventual defeat of Saigon?

Phat: Yes, we followed news about the war in the newspapers and the BBC, so we knew it would happen very soon.

Tri: Did you know that we left Saigon after April 1975?

Phat: Yes, your Uncle Bong told us that your family left everything behind to go to the USA.

Tri: Were you allowed to visit Saigon after April 1975?

Phat: We applied to go to Saigon with the purpose of visiting my in-laws. A year and a half later, I received approval to go. My wife and I had to apply separately, so we traveled at different times despite our request to be allowed to travel together.

Tri: Please tell me about the trip and who did you see in Saigon?

Phat: It was a long three-day trip from Ha Noi to Saigon. I had to sleep outdoors during the stopovers.

I first visited with your Aunt Hoan's family who lived in Thi Nghe, then I saw your Uncle Long, your Great Aunt Quang who lived not too far from Thi Nghe.

Upon seeing me, Aunt Hoan teased, "You look very country" because of my wearing a straw hat. I was still scared of bombs and rockets; I just wanted to protect my head.

Tri: How did you think about life in Saigon after April 1975?

Phat: In my eyes, Saigon was still prosperous. I bought a TV and a small refrigerator to take back to Ha Noi.

Tri: Please tell me more about Ha Noi after 1975.

Phat: In 1979, there was a border dispute between China and Vietnam and a war ensued. The Vietnamese government subsequently discriminated against Vietnamese of Chinese descent living in Ha Noi. They were urged to go back to China or they would be sent to a concentration camp in Lam Dong, a rocky

mountain region in central Vietnam. Chinese people started to buy or build boats and apply for visas to enter China and Hong Kong.

We planned for over two months and left Ha Noi when we received visas from Hong Kong. The boat trip took two weeks. The overcrowded conditions (around 300 passengers) and some mechanical problems of the boat that happened a few times during the trip made everyone sick. But we were glad to get to Hong Kong. It was like heaven on earth.

We had to stay in the boat for a month while the Hong Kong officials did a thorough investigation of each individual. We were then allowed to come on shore and stay in a camp while waiting for processing to go to a third country.

It was comfortable in the camp. We had food, water, and electricity. We were even allowed to go out to work and earn money.

Tri: How long did you stay in Hong Kong?

Phat: We stayed there a total of 13 months. Then your father did the paperwork to sponsor us to come to Terre Haute, Indiana.

Tri: What was your impression of life in the US?

Phat: We all felt blessed with the opportunity to leave Vietnam. Our main focus was that the boys would have a good education and good future. For me and my wife, we were older, we just hoped for good health to be able to see the success of our children and grandchildren.

Tri: What are your children's names and how are they doing now?

Phat: Our only girl, Phuong Bich Tran born in 1953, is married to Son Cao Duong who was a college professor teaching chemistry in Ha Noi.

Our sons: Chi Huu Tran (32 years old) just graduated from college with a B.S. degree in electrical engineering. It took him longer to graduate because he is the oldest, and he had to work to help the family. Minh Khai Tran (30) and Ngoc Bao Tran (27) graduated with degrees in electrical engineering and electronics technology respectively. The youngest one, Anh Bao Tran (25) is graduating this month, also with a B.S. in electrical engineering. Three already got good jobs.

Tri: I am Tri Thien Vu coming from Florida to Houston on the occasion of my sister Ngoc's wedding to Mr Duc Anh Do. I am glad to meet you here and have the opportunity to hear your story. If you have more to tell, please record it on a tape and send to me.

Phat: I am happy to see you here. Your parents have a nice house. I like it very much. In the next few days, I will visit the Buddhist temple Phat Quang to pay respects to my deceased parents-in-law (your maternal grandparents) whose ashes are stored there. Then I will visit my Uncle Hien. I have five more days in Houston before returning to Philadelphia.

Tri: Thank you very much.

Dr. Caspers' Death

Written by Tri Thien Vu

May 15, 2006

I was not surprised to receive a phone call from my father yesterday morning. The news: Dr. Caspers passed away the day before.

In working on this book, I ran into a problem. The cassette-taped interview of Dr. Caspers 25 years ago was not audible to transcribe onto paper. I spoke to Dr. Caspers by phone to request if I could re-interview him or if he would rewrite his story. He declined. It appeared that he might not have recognized me. He did NOT seem to respond to what I was saying to him. I found out yesterday that he had Alzheimer's disease.

With all the things he had done for this family, I felt that I had to see him and to attend his funeral. I found out, however, that the latter was not possible for me since his body would be transported to Iowa for burial where his family is located. Tuan and my dad would represent the Vu family at the funeral in Iowa.

My trip to Fayetteville, Arkansas, turned out to be very rewarding. Prior to my arrival, I was not sure whether I could even view Dr. Caspers for the last time due to my flight arrival time. Apparently, Dinh had requested extended time from the funeral home to allow out of town visitors to be able to visit.

I met old friends from 30 years ago. Dinh looked so much older (I probably look the same to everyone else); Nghia was so handsome; Phat was about to retire and was with his Vietnamese wife; Huong and her brother, Hoang, were so pleasant and helpful. We all felt like a family again. It is a special bond that is hard to describe. Dr. Caspers lay peacefully in the coffin. He looked good; the make-up artist certainly did an incredible job. He lost some weight from when I saw him last. I later saw his most recent picture and was extremely surprised how the make-up artist could make him lose weight, have tight skin, and be healthy looking. I photographed him for the last time, for memory's sake and for the book. I touched him and felt the coldness of his body. I held his hand and said goodbye to him.

Dinh is certainly the main figure behind Dr. Caspers' name. Equally important are Huong and her brother, Hoang. These two people went to Fayetteville to be sponsored by Dr. Caspers a few months before I left for Florida (1981). They

remained close to Dr. Caspers ever since. Huong is now divorced from her husband who was never there during her pregnancies. She is so much happier than the image of her that I remember. Hoang is a businessman. He recently sold a bar for a hefty profit. During the last 26 years, Huong and Hoang have been by Dr. Caspers' side. Even though they hadn't lived with Dr. Caspers, they had been checking on him every day. Huong even went to the doctor with Dr. Caspers and planned nutritious meals for him.

Dinh, Nghia, Tu, and I spent the night at Dr. Caspers' house. We all said that it was the last time we would be together in the Living Room and in this house. We used to spend months and years together here. Lots of memories came from this house. We each had a sleeping bag to sleep in the Family Room. We wanted to be with each other, since we hadn't seen each other for at least 25 years. I was sure that none of us would have felt comfortable sleeping by ourselves in the bedrooms. We did not want Dr. Caspers to come back and say hi to us in the middle of the night.

The next morning, we all departed in different directions. Nghia and Tu drove back to their homes in Dallas. Dinh drove to Iowa with Hoang and an American friend for the funeral. And me, I stayed in Fayetteville for another night. I decided to take a final walk from Dr. Caspers' house on Lawson Street to my in-law's house on Halsell Road. I enjoyed that early morning walk. I took a picture of my brother's old elementary school and my parents' old home on Sang Street. Seeing this old home for the first time in 25 years was emotional.

Dr. Caspers was a big chapter in my family's life and in the lives of many Vietnamese people that he had sponsored and helped. Dinh explained to me (perhaps again) the connection of Dr. Caspers to everybody else.

Dr. Caspers: Taught at Quy Nhon University, Education Department. Taught at Illinois State University. Was a professor at the University of Arkansas until retiring. Despite not having much, he spent unselfishly for his cause- to help Vietnamese people.

Dinh: Studied at Quy Nhon University, Technical Department. Studied at Illinois State University. Later University of Arkansas. Now resides in Orlando, Florida. He was the connection between Dr. Caspers and many Vietnamese families who needed sponsorship.

Ha: Worked as facility maintenance person at Quy Nhon University. Went to University of Arkansas. Now lives in Sugar Land, Texas.

Nghia: Went to University of Arkansas. Now owns a daycare center in Dallas, Texas.

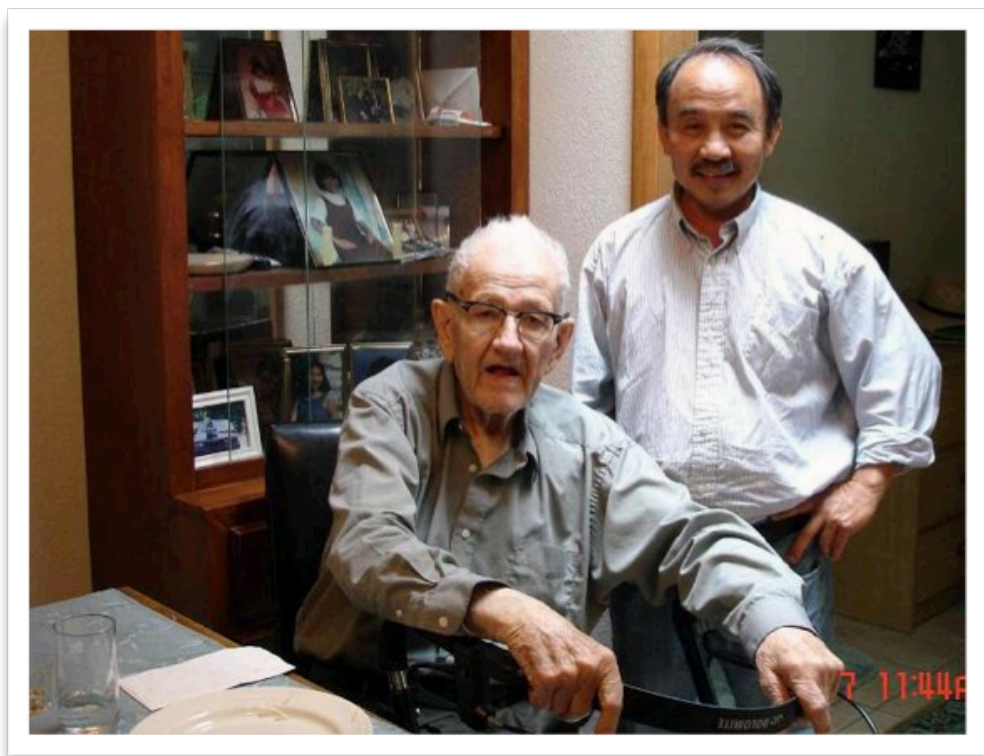
Phat: Went to University of Arkansas. Was not sponsored by Dr. Caspers but hung around with us since we are all Vietnamese. His wife and children came from Vietnam to the US to be united with him. Now lives in Kansas.

Huong: I don't think she went to school in Fayetteville at all. I remember she was pregnant again and again. She always looked miserable then. She is so much happier now that she divorced her husband. Has been checking on Dr. Caspers during the last 25 years. Has lived in Fayetteville ever since.

Hoang: Huong's brother. Has been hustling, I guess. He bought, ran a bar, and now just sold the bar for a hefty profit. Has been taking care of Dr. Caspers. Has lived in Fayetteville ever since.

Khach & his wife: I met them briefly at the viewing. I found out that they were the couple who lost two of their young children on a fishing trip. (The car holding the children rolled into the lake while they were out of the car.) They still live in Fayetteville.

The chapter about Dr. Earl Caspers is now closed. Several of us (Vietnamese and American) plan to establish a memorial in his honor at Quy Nhon University in Vietnam. We will all chip in to turn a room at Quy Nhon University into a nice space, all furnished, complete with computers and internet for the University students to enjoy free of charge. This will be a fitting memorial for the man so many people admired, and will certainly help the students at Quy Nhon University in a way consistent with the help that Dr. Caspers has given to so many Vietnamese now living in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and around the entire United States. Hopefully, this memorial will continue his legacy of working together (East & West) and helping one another.



Last photo of Dr. Caspers, 2006

Final Thoughts

These brief essays were written by Tri in the summer of 1975, right after arriving in Camp Chaffee.

English Theme [1975]

Summer has scorching sun. Summer has sweltering weather. Summer is a good break time for everyone to enjoy, especially for students. And summer is a season with lots of memories. Yes, I have lots of memories of summertime. To me, summer is something very special. It's a little different from others, because some events usually happened to my life right at that time. I can say approximately that in every summer of mine there is something coming to change my love story, my schooling, my family's story, and then my country's story.

The summer that made me remember the most was the summer of seventy-five. In other words, that was the last summer. My mind had two quite opposite opinions, and I had to choose one. I could stay and live with my people in Communism, or I could have a new life in Freedom. I didn't know which one I should choose and which one I should refuse. Any decision still got me a new vague life anyway. It seemed to me that I stood at one intersection and that I had never been there before. Then, at last, I did reach a decision to leave everything behind me—property, friends, relatives, and my lovely country. I started my new life in another country. Because I did decide by myself, I never felt sorry. I felt happy and hopeful with my new situation.

What would happen next summer and other ones remaining in my life? I don't know. Anyway, no one is able to change his fate. As the weather of the summer is always sweltering and sweltering forever.

English Theme [1975]

I loved freedom, that's why I decided to get away from my country. On the way I went to find a new free land by ship, my heart was going to be broken. The sky was overwhelmingly tremendous in front of my eyes; waves kept dashing against the ship's sides. Strange thoughts came unceasingly to my mind. My future

seemed risky like the floating of the ship. I was born in a war country, and the war made me become a ponderer. Cigarettes with smoke flying in the wind; coffee with the bitter taste were my closest friends. Sometimes my mind was empty; my body was so light that it was almost sucked by the winter wind. I felt lonely. I felt cold with the weather. I felt myself that no one in this earth paid attention to me at all. Many times, loneliness came to my mind; I walked alone under the light rain. The drops of water made me feel missing. I missed my country, I missed my family, I missed my girlfriend, and I missed all my friends. My head kept writing my pieces of thoughts. I let my thoughts flow by themselves, flowing like a peaceful stream that runs through deserted places that no one had ever been to.

Conclusion

Life is an on-going journey. In my “middle age”, perhaps nostalgia has kicked in. As I reread the stories by my family members, and as I take another look at the English themes I wrote in 1975, I feel that a piece or two of my life’s puzzle is missing. What would my life have been like if I had stayed in Vietnam? Would I have even remained alive there? Would I have met my extended family members in Ha Noi? Would I have studied architecture, the passion of my life? Would I have been fulfilled as a human being? Would I have appreciated the beauty of my country and been able to travel through it in peace times?

Those questions are questions without an answer. My life went a completely different direction than “normal”. My roots were dramatically jerked out of Vietnamese soil and transplanted into American soil. I became an American citizen and a “Viet Kieu” to the Vietnamese people. I am now free to visit Vietnam. I *have* met many of my relatives in Ha Noi. I *have* pursued my love of architecture and become a successful architect. I do have a family and children whom I love dearly. I appreciate, not only my adopted country, but my native country so very much. I continue to learn more about the country I left so suddenly in 1975 and I continue the search into myself as I relate to the beautiful tapestry of my life that covers continents and cultures and multitudes of human beings that have played a part in its creation.



*Top row: Xuong Vu, Sam Pham, Co, Tri, Tuan, Minh
Bottom row: Diep, Bich, Loan, Van
Christmas 2012*



Many of the Vu children: (left to right) Stephanie Vu, Lizz Quach, Justin Quach, Anthony Vu, Liz Hoang, William Hoang, Brian Quach, Christina Nguyen, Julie Quach (in front), Connie Do, Viviane Nguyen, Steve Quach, Ethan Quach (in front), Pam Quach, Christmas 2012

Epilogue: Tri Returns to Vietnam

Letters from 2009/2010

January 1, 2009

I just got back from VN over a week ago. I am still adjusting to the time change. When it's time to eat dinner here, I need to sleep instead. When it's time to sleep here, I am wide-awake. Traveling to VN is long, uncomfortable, and can take weeks to get over. I am sitting here reflecting about my life, my travel. I still love to travel. It's the excitement, the anticipation, the adventure, the unknown that I enjoy.

This was the 4th time that I visit VN since I left the country. Each trip was different. Each trip gave me a different experience. This time I wanted to accomplish a few things in VN besides just sight seeing.

For some reason, I always felt like a stranger when I visited VN. Even when I speak to the people in Vietnamese, I still get the same reaction. In one of the trip, a young girl asked me to buy something from her. She spoke to me in broken English "Mister, Mister buy this...". I responded to her in Vietnamese that I was a Vietnamese; why was speaking to me in English. She replied in English anyway, because you are fat!. So it was the body size that gave it away. I was sure that the way we dressed, the hair that we wore, the white teeth that we have are the things that made Viet Kieu look different. One of the time that I went, my wife Lori also went. That time I felt even more like of a stranger.

The trip this year, I wanted to try something different. I went to VN alone. I wanted to see and photograph some of the places that were part of my book "Vietnam-The exodus". I wanted to blend in as much as possible with the locals. I wanted to eat like them along via he (sidewalk cafe). I wanted to walk the streets that I used to walk as a child and as a teenager. I also wanted to set foot on Japanese ground, so I could say that I had been in Japan. I understood that a lot of things changed over time, especially after 33 years. Saigon would not be the same as what I remembered. I wanted to find "something". What that "something" was not quite clear in my mind. Maybe the way I felt was part of the mid-life crisis. This was exciting to me anyway. I practiced my Vietnamese almost every weekend by watching the Vietnamese movies. I would write down some

words that I did not know. That was the way that I learned English; so I did the same for Vietnamese.

I accomplished all of my goals and more during this latest trip. As a goal oriented person, I always do things with a set of goals. 99% of the time, I get them done. It's easy to me to get things done. My mother-in-law told me one day that it's amazing how much I have accomplished and achieved. I never looked at it as my achievements; I just looked at it as the things I had to do.

I decided to stay at the Thang Long Hotel near the Saigon River. This is the part of Saigon that I was not familiar with even though it is still in District 1. I remembered that this was more of an area for foreigner to hang out. So I wanted to be there. It's ironic that I wanted to be part of the foreigner and at the same time, I wanted to fit in. Oh well, I don't know the answer to that. I remembered as a child, I used to walk along the Saigon River with my family in the evening. I had fond memories of those walks. So I walk along the river in the evening. This time, the view was not the same as what I remembered; there were restaurants all over the banks of the river. It was even hard to look at the water view as what I used to do. I could not really enjoy the scenery that I was looking for. I did not want to walk far for fear of being robbed. I tried to stay close to where the people were. There were so many changes that I saw. The river was not a peaceful scene as what I remembered. They have dinner cruises, restaurants, lots of colored lights everywhere. Across the river used to be a swamp. It is now developed into expensive housing development. I have seen the master plan of the city so I knew that there were plans for much much more in this area. In Vietnam, it is not uncommon to wish a lot and hoping for foreign investments to turn it into reality. This is no different. Even though there is a master plan, but the reality is that nothing may ever happen. Despite of that, I still saw a lot of buildings built there. I had planned to go on the ferry to the other side and walked around. It would be nice to rent a scooter but it was more complicated to rent than I thought. Well after 2 weeks of being there, with all the fun I had, I never had a chance to go over the other side of the river. For now, the view of this area from my 5th floor hotel room nearby would suffice.

I always wanted to sit along the via he (sidewalk) to eat. As I was growing up, I never had a chance to even try this food. I remembered near the Taberd school, I got off school around noon. I always dreams of being able to sit and tried the food that others seemed to enjoy so much. My parents never allowed me to do this for fear of getting a stomachache due to unsanitary conditions. Well, I finally

had the nerve to do this. The same food shop on the sidewalk was no longer there. But there was a similar place inside an narrow alley. I saw a sign from out the front for Com Binh Dan (food for common people). Common sense told me that food away from the busy dusty streets should be cleaner. I had all kinds of shots, pills before going to VN. I brought plenty of any kind of medicine with me so I felt somewhat safe. After all, if I got sick, I had the medicine with me. I was prepared to take a chance. The difference between the “via he” food (street food) and restaurant food is that all the available food is displayed on the stand. I asked the Owner to tell me what each item was. The only thing that was not displayed was the soup (canh). Every Vietnamese meal has to have canh. The Owner would tell you what was available. The earlier I went to eat, the more choices of food I had. By after 12:30PM, the food should be almost gone, or much less choices. Most Vietnamese would order 1 to 2 items on their plate. I ordered everything that looked good to me. The problem was everything looked good. I ordered my food, drank a couple beer at each meal. Each seat in the place was meant to be a place for someone to sit. So after the time, I was used to have somebody sitting next or in front of me. Sometime, people decided to move to another spot just because all my foods took all the room on the table in front of me. The tables were lined up against each other for maximum seating capacity. If you need something else...just yell. Depending on the place, the napkins are different. Napkins varied from small Kleenex pull out of a box, to homemade precut paper of 2"x2", to a white small wash cloth (8"x8") sitting together with the chopstick holder. The 2"x2" napkin was the hardest to use, especially when the paper was not absorptive. As for the cloth napkin, I must clarify that each chopstick holder only has 1 cloth. When finished, the food is cleared off the table for the next customer. The cloth napkin was nicely folded and put in its place for the next person to use. Like warm or cold tea were sometime free if you asked. The tea pot usually had several little cups for the customer to use. To find a clean cup, I just needed to pour some tea from the pot to rinse the cup. After my use, someone else would do the same. Even though there were some questionable sanitary conditions, I must say that the food on via he tasted a lot better than food in the fancy restaurants. The food was more tasty (dam da). At the nicer restaurants, they tend to use less spices in the food; the nuoc mam cham were also less tasty to be more palatable to foreign people. I enjoy the via he food very much. I never got sick. I enjoyed sharing table with strangers. I enjoyed different people each meal. And best of all, I ate all these

foods for a fraction of what I would pay at the nice restaurant. Usually, each of my meal from via he would cost me about \$50,000VND or about \$3USD. The price was good and the experience and the food were even better.

I chose to visit Phu Quoc because I wanted to visit the Southern most point of Vietnam. In previous years, I had visited the northernmost parts of VN. I wanted to have the feeling that I visited the entire country. All through my life in VN, because of the war, I never had an opportunity to go to places. So now, I was doing it. To get to Phu Quoc, I had to fly from Saigon. One could also get there by boat if you had a lot of time. There were 2 flights a day to and from Phu Quoc, I believe. I stayed at the cheap ocean front hotel Ngan Sao (Thousand Stars). Actually the hotel was quite nice despite the ugly sleazy sculptures throughout the compound. It had several buildings and bungalows along with a nice large swimming pool. I enjoyed seeing the ocean from the balcony of my room. I enjoyed walking the ocean in the evening. All of this was for a price of \$35USD/night. Phu Quoc was more primitive than I had thought. Most of the roads were unpaved, dusty, full of rocks and "o ga" (holes on the street). There were hotels lined the ocean shore. From what I saw, I could not tell much difference between the 2 star hotel and the 5 star hotel except the price. The Saigon Phu Quoc Hotel was a well-known 5 star hotel that most foreigners stay at. From the video on the internet, this 5 star hotel was completely over rated. I felt like I made the right choice. I decide to rent a scooter. All of the scooters were owned by employees. They washed it clean everyday, so that I felt like you rented a nice and good scooter. I could choose the automatic or standard shift for \$150,000/day (about \$8USD). I was told by another hotel guest that a standard scooter was a better choice to be able to go uphill. I rented the scooter for 2 days. I enjoyed it so much since at home Lori never wanted me to ride one. Here I was alone so I could do anything I wanted. I rode everywhere on my own instead of going on a tour. I wanted a different kind of experience. I was suntanned. I probably ate a lot bugs but it was fun. I had a map with me; there were not that many roads; some roads didn't even have names. I stopped and asked for directions often. Somehow I managed to get to where I wanted to go. At the end of day 2, I had an accident. It was pitched black outside around 7 o'clock. I had the high beam light on to be able to see far out. I saw an "o ga" on the street too late. I fell with the scooter on me. The scooter was not heavy at all; I was able to push it up. People nearby came out to help. This was the only night in Phu Quoc so far that I wore long jeans. My jeans were wet and red as the

color of the dirt. I walked with little difficulty while someone pushed the scooter to a nearby street shop. After hosing down the scooter and my pants, I proceeded to continue to ride the scooter to a Night Market for dinner. In Phu Quoc, I ate at the same place almost every night. The food was so good and cheap. No wonder why it was always full as compared to other shops with hardly anybody. My knee hurt some but still bearable. I felt some bump through my pants. It was probably swollen. I was confident that the next day I would feel normal again. When I came home, when I took my pants off, I saw a big deep slash on my knee. It was so deep that I saw other things inside. If it were a slight cut, I would have just wrap it to heal. But in this case, I had no choice, I must call the Hotel Receptionist to get me to the hospital. I remembered my health insurance person had told me that in case of emergency, I would have to fly to Hong Kong for treatment. I did not like the idea of leaving VN for this. After all, I only had spent half of my vacation so far. The taxi was waiting for me downstairs to go to the hospital. I certainly felt a native as I had wished. I was in the same hospital that others were at. I walked in asking for directions. I entered this one room with doors open for open air. I was asked to lay down on a stainless steel table. I was told that nurses would take care of me. In fact, nurses would do better sewing than doctors. I lay down next to a pool of dry blood. I was told that my condition was not serious since it did not cut any tendons or muscles. The cut was actually on my kneecap. The kneecap was the one that took the blunt. After several shots of local anesthesia, I was sewn back together. Because it was so deep, I had about 5 stitches inside (with resolvable thread, that's what I was told) and 15 stitches on the outside. I screamed so loud because it hurt so badly; the nurses should have waited until the anesthesia took effect before cleaning and sewing. Strangers from nearby came in the room to watch. This would never be allowed in the US. But this was VN, anything was possible. Even though it was a painful experience, I felt relief that the problem was taken care of. I was confirmed that my condition was not serious after taken 2 x-rays. The nurses told me that the jeans helped kept my wound clean. They said that there were not a day without seeing a foreigner come in from scooter accident, some with broken nose, broken bones...I was asked several questions for the paper work. I decided to act like a true Vietnamese. I answered questions decisively. Where were you from? Saigon. What part? District 1. They knew that I had an accent but that accent could be from Saigon since it had a little bit of Northern, Southern, and everything else. I paid for the service at the accounting office. By now, there were

other staffs coming around me including real doctor and nurses. They could tell that I was not from there, perhaps I would give them "tips". I could sense that because they said that nurses did not make very much money. I listened but not acted pretending I was tired. My bill was \$240,000 VND (\$14USD) for the sewing, \$95,600VND (\$5.50 USD) for the 2 x-rays services. Since I did not offer any "tips" I was given some medicine prescription instead of some free medicine. Because I had to buy medicine, it cost 3 times more than the cost of the actual care in the hospital. The total cost for the medicine was about \$400,000 VND (\$23 USD). The taxi was still waiting for me for hours. By now it was about 11:00PM. I was quite experienced with using the taxi. There was absolutely no problem asking for the taxi to wait for you. I limped to the taxi. It was an experience. Now I could say that I had experienced the services provided by a Communist country. I saved the hospital paperwork as a souvenir.

The next day, I was immobile. My knee was all wrapped. I could not move much. The good thing was that I already spent 2 days on my own riding around Phu Quoc. I saw everything that I needed to see. I decided to lay on the cushioned lounge chaise under the shade of the large umbrella. I did not mind staying lazy all day on the beach. The reality was that I did not have many choices. I enjoyed the relaxation. I even had a massage solicited by a local lady who did not have permission to enter the hotel beach ground. I had to walk (very carefully) to her beach spot next door for a massage. She asked for \$60,000VND. I bargained down to \$30,000VND for a one-hour massage. The massage was not as good as what I usually had in the US, but it was OK, definitely worth almost \$2USD. I had a good chat with an Australian man. He drank like a sieve. He probably consumed one beer every 45 minutes. The water in the ocean was so calm on this part of the island with no wave and cool. I was dying to watch people swimming and playing in the water. I shared my thought with this man. I told him that I would die for a swim. He disappeared for while and came back with plastic bags, packaging tape, and scissors. He wrapped my leg and taped my knee. He held on to me to help me get in the water. After staying all day on the beach, I was hot even in the shade. The cool water was so refreshing. I did not care what would happen to my wound. It was worth floating in the water. This man stood my side the whole time in case I needed help. He asked his wife to continually bring him beer to him and me. We drank. We laughed so hard. It was one of the most fun moments I had. People on the beach kept watching us to see what was going on. We could not stop laughing. This

man's idea of wrapping my leg gave me lots of hope for more good times in the rest of my trip (another week).

I used the same idea of wrapping my leg to have a mud bath in Nha Trang. Mud bath is a specialty of only Nha Trang; and there was only 1 single location. To go to Nha Trang, I must have to have it. I had been looking forward to try it out. I hired a cyclo to drive me around for sight seeing. We had gone for over an hour; we agreed on \$30,000VND (\$2USD) per hour. I saw a sign pointing toward the direction of the mud bath place. I immediately wanted to go there. The cyclo driver kept trying to talk me out of it because he could not take me there because of the road condition. I did not care. I called for a taxi to go there. The cost was \$200,000 VND (\$12USD) for a private tub. It was a lot cheaper if I wanted to mud bath with a 10 others at the same time. They even sent out a nurse to consult with me how dangerous it was for the wound to have contact with mud. Since I had prior experience in Phu Quoc of wrapping my knee; I was determined to move ahead. This time I tried to improve my method of wrapping. The nurse was so nice and helped me wrap it. After all, I bought the ticket with a condition that someone would help me wrap my knee. Because I was in a private wooden tub (look like an old fashion high side tub), I was able to rest my leg on the side of the tub to keep my knee clean. It was comfortable. I was able to keep my wrapped knee clean the whole time. I stayed in it for about 1.5 hrs, 45 min. longer than what the time they said they would allow each person. It was not completely crowded so I guessed that they did not care. After the mud bath, I soaked myself in a hot mineral bathtub and shower. I did not know how good it was for my body to have this experience. It probably was the biggest conspiracy ever. The company had good story for people to believe in; the mineral should help your body. I did not care. I wanted the experience. As for me, it was worth it. I left after spending 3 hrs there. I was not surprised, my taxi waited for me this whole time.

The visits to various places in Saigon helped give me some closure. I said "some". So much had changed after 33 years. I was not allowed to go in some places. I truly enjoyed strolling the streets, the paths that I used to go on when I was a teenager. But I constantly had to force myself to imagine the way it used to be. I wished that I had some old pictures with me. I definitely would find more closure when comparing the way it used to be and the way it is today. It helped me but somehow I was not satisfied. The fact that I was able to meet with my aunt in Thi Nghe and was able to bring the lacquered painting home was

definitely the highlight of the trip. It's the single thing that I could hold on to when thinking about my past.

Each time I went to VN, I found something new or learn something new. I enjoyed meeting people there; in fact I met some really nice people there. I tried to improve my Vietnamese everyday hoping to find some of the missing experience in the last 33 years. What I found was that I was 33 years behind time. The train already left the station 33 years ago. There were so many changes; of course the country could not wait for me all this time. I just had to settle for bits and pieces of the past. It's my job to put these pieces together into something meaningful to me. Each person dealt with this experience differently. As for me, sometime I felt that Vietnam was not fair to me. It only left the small pieces for me to pick up, sometime too small to recognize. Of course there were some large pieces also. But all in all, it was quite difficult, if not impossible, for me to ever think that I could one day was able to glue back all the pieces into something recognizable. I still wanted to visit VN, perhaps if I could find and accept within myself, the replacement pieces that are almost equal to the missing pieces that I remembered. I also realize that some pieces may never be found and that something else would have to be used in its place to patch the holes. I guess that I wouldn't have much choices regarding this. My life sure looks like a swiss cheese.

Tri

December 28, 2009

Hi Nicholas,

Yesterday after a day of going to get my glasses done, a massage, and ate some strange stuff, I came home tired. I did not sleep well the night before on my first night despite taking some sleeping pills. So I was writing to you last night after taking some sleeping pills again (Vietnamese natural sleeping), I was writing and almost finished and then fell asleep while writing. I don't know what happened to that email and I cannot find it. So I am writing again.

I just had my first day in VN. Usually, I tend to pack too many things to do in a day, and I would feel bad if I did not get all the things done. So this time, I just have pretty much an objective with a few specific things to do, that's all. I find more relaxing this way.

I find VN more and more friendly as I get more accustomed to it. I learn that I should not tell people that I am from the US because they will take advantage of me. Instead, I just use my awesome Vietnamese to get around. For example, when I go on a taxi, not only that I tell them where I want to go, but also tell them how many km away. That way they know that I know how much money I will pay (\$1USD=1km). From the airport to the hotel, the taxi (I only use 2 companies - Mai Linh or VietnamSun since they are reputable cos.), the driver asked for an extra dollar to the hotel since its location is closed to the airport and since it was midnight to make it worth it, I agreed. It turned out that he asked for 1000 VND which is about a nickel more. I decided to splurge by giving me another nickel. Hi hi (that's the Vietnamese laughing word = haha)!!

This time, I stay in an area that I had never stayed before (Phu Nhuan) Instead of staying around the SGN market every time, I want to just feel like staying in Queens rather NY city all the time. Well, so is it? It is the same feeling as anywhere in SGN except the street names seem to be unfamiliar.

I had a massage yesterday. I was reluctant to go to this massage (part of the hotel) before of an unsatisfying experience years before. This time one of my old classmate recommended a place that is supposed to be decent and furthermore, you only pay for the massage and get a free foot massage, and free steam, jacuzzi, sauna. That sounds like a good deal, isn't it? I also learned to give them a 100,000VND (6USD) tip for the body massage if they do an exceptional job, 50k tip for a foot massage, no tip for the 3 guys getting your towels and locker unless you want to.

I have to go to another paragraph because my story will get a little complicated. I had a great locker, great sauna, steam bath, and whirlpool totally naked for men only, I was given some cold ice tea with ginseng. Next, I went upstairs to lie down on a heavy chair for the foot massage. This time I was given a plate of fruit and a glass of the same ice tea while watching the latest Batman movie (illegal version I am sure. The foot massage was done by a young man 28-year-old called me " anh" (brother). I told him I have a son the same age, but he said they are supposed to call it this way to be closer and friendlier. An hour and 15 min later his foot massage turned into food and all the way up to my thighs. Wow, it was so worth it that I gave the guy 70k tip and he was happy. He did so well without complaint; he squeezed really hard as I wanted. The foot massage is usually extra because it requires working a lot on punctured points.

So he worked on points for my head, my brain, all my innards, my digestive system, etc. So I am all set now.

Tri

December 30, 2009

I just had my fourth night here in VN. Last night I had the most hours of sleep, about 4-5 hours despite taking the Vn natural sleeping pills. I guess it is caused by the time difference.

Yesterday I went on Phạm Ngũ Lão street, a popular street for foreigners. The travel agency is located in an area known for "Tây bao lô", or poor westerners who travel with backpacks. They label anybody who has light skin as a Westerner. Any Westerner who is in this area is labeled Tay Bao Lo regardless whether he wears a backpack or not. Anything cheap (or anything looks cheap) is popular here, even though it is not any cheaper than anywhere else; in fact it is the opposite. I think it is more about feeling more comfortable being around their own people than saving bucks. This reminds me of everyday spring break in Daytona Beach. It is also interesting to know what the locals think of backpackers. They think that these people are poor westerners who cannot afford the luxury. Every Vietnamese here seems to be able to speak English ...including the drivers of the "xe ôm". There seem to be lots of travel agencies, bars, coffee shops, and hotels here. I could not find any outdoor food kiosks. The locals probably realize that they cannot sell food this way to this kind of buyers.

The streets are the same as anywhere else in SGN, crowded, dusty, and noisy of horns. The park in center of the area seems to be perfect for it where the city plans various events there for the tourists. Especially during the Holidays, there are many kiosks set up here already for food, traveling, and activities. German or American cold beer is available at all time sitting in ice. US Dollars are accepted and preferred here, and so are the prices. The park has new amenities like muscle beach in LA where people can exercise in various machines, but in this case they are cheap primitive machines made locally or China. So this morning, I did some bar push ups for my biceps, twisting on a circular plate for a tighter abs.

I saw a group of young men playing "đá cầu", it's the game that you kick a feathery object passing around each other. I asked if I could join them; these people were in their 20's but they did not seem to mind. I hadn't played this game in 40 years probably and still could play it well. These guys probably thought it was strange for me to want to join but they went along with it. Someone took a picture for me. I had some fun and exercise.

December 31, 2009

I booked a tour to the Mekong River (My Tho town) yesterday through Mai Linh company (I recognized the name of a reputable taxi company with the green tie or green áo dài). That shows about the name recognition! The tour bus had to pick up people from different hotels in Phạm Ngũ Lão area. Since my hotel is in a different district, I had to go by taxi to this touring co. It took probably about 2 hrs for the bus to finish picking up everyone because the traffic was so bad everywhere. Talk about the traffic, it is always crowded whether it is during working hours or not. I was told that some of these people out the street are rich who have businesses run by other people so they are out having fun or do errands, or some might be "thất nghiệp" (7 jobs or unemployed). Some of the people in the bus were upset for having to wait so long. As for me, I did not care since I had plenty of time. I could enjoy myself just by observing everyone.

I always wanted to visit the countryside My Tho probably because that's where Hoa (Loan's husband) is from. I was always curious when people say "về quê" which means going home to the village. So I wanted to see how people live and their simplicity.

My Tho is due South of SGN so I tend to say that I wanted to visit the South. But I was corrected by the locals for saying that; locals say to visit the West. If you look at the map, there is nothing West about it. Apparently, there are 2 highways from SGN - one turns Westward to My Tho and one turns Eastward to Vung Tau. Therefore visiting My Tho is visiting the West. No wonder why most Vietnamese are bad with geography!!

The town is small but I could tell that it had been commercialized to attract tourists. The Mekong river is supposed to carry "phủ sa"- good minerals carried by rain from the mountains down to the river. That's why the plants grow very well here and the fruits are best here. I looked around me as far as the eyes can see, I could not see any mountains. I thought that the mountains were in the

Central area only. And as far as the plants growing well, it's true; it's green everywhere. The fruits were not very sweet because i was told that all the best and sweetest fruits were shipped to SGN for consumption. I took a bicycle ride around town. It was lots of fun. The bike was a lot slower than motor scooter so i could see more; I had more time to observe what was around me. The streets were a lot quieter than SGN for sure. The houses were scarce nestled in the green lush landscape. I rode around some very narrowed meandering paths and could not find my way back. It felt like the more I went, the deeper I went into the village wit no way out. I imagined during the war, there was no way for the soldiers to find VC if they were hiding in these paths. I was not panicked, I did not bring much money so they could not steal much from me. All of a sudden, I heard a voice from 50' away saying this way. That was the voice from my tour guide. How did he know where I was? How did he know I was lost? I followed him. We passed some local villagers along the way; they looked at me unthreateningly and said "I knew you were lost when you turned that way". Wait a minute! I never rode by this path, how could she know I turned the wrong way. This just showed how small the community really was. I was glad someone found me though.

January 2, 2010

As everyone knows that I want to submerge myself into the VN society. I want to know what, how they think.

I talk to various types of people everyday from rich to poor. Every night, I would sit in front of the hotel talking to the security guard. It is fun. I give tips to the hotel employees (including the guard), so i get very good treatment here. Instead of waiting to give tips at the end of my stay, I decided to give tips periodically. That way I get to enjoy the result of my tips rather than waiting (and hoping) for good service. An example of a good treatment is that, I would be in the hotel Lobby before going to dinner. The employee named Minh, 22 year old, would comment on my shirt- about how wrinkled it was. He asked to let him iron it. So that's my hard life!

I heard that to get a good job, I needed to know English well and had certain piece of paper to apply for a good job here. Well, so I went to take an English test this morning. The test consisted of 2 parts, written and oral. The cost was 100k

(5 USD) for the test, evaluation, and recommendation. So I took the tests. I planned so that I would not be surprised with anything asked. So here is the background. I worked for a foreign company before; I now wanted to test my English level. I now reside in Saigon.

I filled out some application. Well, for planning as well as I did, I was still trumped by some questions: my mailing address and my tel. number. The Manager asked me those questions face to face. Holy cow! I was not prepared for that. What street, and what tel. number should I put down. I thought quickly of my hotel street name without the street number. As for the telephone number, I told her I did not have one. She was surprised with my answer.

I took the written test first. It started with simple and more elementary questions and ended with super high level questions. So it was easy at first, then it was hard at the end. I missed 1 question for each level (2), and missed 4 in super high level. There were a total of 100 questions; I missed a total of 6. The Manager came to me with the result and said: Your test score was very good. You are living overseas, aren't you? What are you doing here? Men! I was a little worry about my concocted story. I told her that I used to live in Saigon, left VN to go to the US for a few years (8 years). I could tell she did not really believe me but did not press on. She said that an oral interviewer would be with me shortly.

Then the oral interviewer came. She was nice and less curious than the Manager. She talked to me in pretty good English. She asked me to introduce myself. I told her my name. With each question, I provided an answer, no more no less. So here was by background information. I had been in construction business until I was unemployed. I did work for a foreign company before and now wanted to apply for a good leadership position in a foreign company here in VN. The interviewer's English accent was quite good. She said mine was so good that there was no class for me there. If I wanted to, I could take some tests to get some certificates for my quests to find a job.

Before I said goodbye, the Manager asked how i was going home because my "house" was not far away in this direction (she pointed). By this time I did not trust her. I felt like she was tricking me to see if I would fall for it. I told her that I would need to do some errands that direction anyway. After walking a little bit, I waived for a taxi to get back to the hotel. My hotel was in fact in the direction of her pointing.

Wheee!! I know Lori would not like to do what I did. I sure learned a lot from this experience though.

January 4, 2010

I looked forward to see Vung Tau, a beach resort that I used to go with my family on vacation. The town is about 80 km (?) East of Saigon.

It took about 1.5 hrs drive to get there from Saigon. I rented a limousine taxi to go there. A limousine taxi is a black Toyota 6 seaters that you cannot tell that it is a taxi. I think somewhere on the exterior of the taxi that might have the vinyl word "Limousine Taxi". The driver has to be in uniform to make it...limousine like. It cost a little more than a standard taxi but it is much worth it. I used to think that the size of the taxi effects the cost to ride it, but it is not true. That's why at my hotel, if you ask the Receptionist for a taxi, she would call and request a 6 seaters...just so that guests would feel more comfortable as opposed to sit in a cramped taxi.

I wanted the image of Vung Tau that long have kept in my memory. The family was always so busy that when we could all go together on vacation then I would really enjoy it. It probably has been about 40 years since I last saw it last. I wanted to see again that primitive image fishing village with hotels that were really people's vacant homes for rent. I pictured lots of sand with little vegetation due to the harsh environment as the Florida beaches. I remembered the coconut trees lined the small dirt roads.

The actual scenes that I saw were completely different from my memory. It reminded me more of the mountainous Dalat than the beach environment. There was beautiful landscape with colorful flowers everywhere. There was more grass here than what I saw anywhere else. Far, far away there were mountains also. I did not remember the mountains; I thought that these things would only exist in the Central area of VN. Well, my memory was wrong. I did not recognize the scenery in front of me. There was a front beach and the rear beach. I felt like I was in a different area from where I wanted to be. I walked on the beach. I swam in the beach water. I carried a small bottle of red wine to drink along the way. I had to swim in its water to get the real feel of Vung Tau that I remembered. At the Front Beach, there was sandy beach. The water was nice and comfortable to swim in. There was wider beach than any beaches that I have seen. Perhaps the At the rear beach, The ocean floor was all black mud. From the black rocky beach, I would never guess that It would be slippery under the water. The water

was not blue as normal ocean water but it was not black either. Instead the water was kind of brownish.

(to be continued)

January 5, 2010

This morning I had some "pho". This was the original Pho Hoa that I saw several branches in the US but never tried. At home, I had some pho cubes of this company.

I remember the last time I had pho in Hanoi with Nicholas. They gave exactly 3 small pieces of meat that was stretched twice the size with a cleaver. That was in Hanoi but In Saigon they gave plenty of meat just like in the US. It was so good! people seem to always know who the tourists were because they tend to order ...everything. I felt comfortable with SGN. I sat right at the same table with someone else. Hey, if there was a seat, the seat was for you no matter what. You can just yelled for you order. You could ask any server at anytime even when he was busy with someone else. It did not mean to be impolite; I was just letting him know what I wanted ...when he was done with what he was doing. Ha ha !!! Sometime I would get some real character waiter. For example, I asked him what was sold here. He answered "everything". I felt like some fried wonton that I saw in the cart, so I asked how he sold it. He answered "don't know". How many wontons were in an order? 4-5-6 , he answered. With this kind of waiter, you might as well just tell him what you wanted. Since I already knew what everything costed, he could not take me for a ride. Put kidding aside, I love this kind of interaction; I just laughed so hard. So far the smaller the restaurant place, the better the taste. I tried to choose the cleaner places though.

I saw some interesting things around here. I was wondering how cars, scooters cell phones stayed so new even though the harshest dusty environment. They plastic wrapped everything. If anything gets scratched, the plastic could be pulled off and re-wrapped. After seeing stuff wrapped. I had my cell phone and my watch wrapped. I took some pictures to prove it too. The plastic seemed to be the same as the protective plastic that I paid for \$10USD at ATT to protect. They cut the plastic in about the size but larger than the object to be wrapped. The put the plastic over the surface the used the lighter flame to heat up the plastic and seal it. Holy cow! This plastic could bend around the

corners too. I am talking about wrapping the whole cell phone and not just the clear plastic only. To trim it they used the razor blade. To keep the blade sharp they used their teeth to break the blade. I wanted to clarify that the blade was not the type that was pre-scored to break off. These blades were a full piece of blade that was broken off by their teeth. My cell phone looked as good as new, and it was hard to see if any wrapping was done. My watch glass was wrapped for free. I wished that I brought all my watches here. The cost for wrapping my cell and watch was \$1USD. I saw them wrapped literally the whole motor scooter for \$10USD. Once a year, you could re-wrap your scooter and always look new.

In a poor country, I guess that they had to find ways to keep things last as long as possible.

January 8, 2010

Hi Lori,

I am preparing to bring stuff home. When it's time to do this, it's close to time to come home. Of course I miss you too.

I have tried foods that I never heard of before. I think that these were new foods since 1975. I seem to enjoy my days here more and more as I feel more and more comfortable. Few days ago, Hiep (Van's husband) sent me an article about the new diamond island in the Saigon River where the Developer is building new condo projects. It sounded interesting to me so I called the company to set up an appointment to go see the development. I wanted to visit the place to surprise Hiep. I wonder if he knew I went to VN.

I went to their office to hear their explanation of the development and then, went on a boat to the island. Oh my gosh, it was the afternoon during the heavy traffic. It took about half an hour to get to the Saigon river dock which was about 1 mile away. The traffic is always like that here. The boat ride was nice; they called it canoe (French) ride. It certainly cost them money to show me around because they had to rent that boat. Oh well! The salesman was about 35 years old. He had a professional image. However, the boat was dirty and could be cleaner. The boat driver was not so hot looking with red face and full of whiskers. The image of the company certainly did not match with the image of the boat or the driver. I went to the island as he explained to me the development. I acted seriously like a serious buyer like when you and I went to look for a condo in Jacksonville. I felt like I was knowledgeable because you and I had been through

it already. So I asked a lot of good questions. They did not have condo fees here; instead they had management fees which cost \$1USD/1m sq. each month. I was looking at the 800-850 Sf. The costs was around \$230k + fees. There were no maintenance fees like in the US.

I also went to the real estate office to look at the cost of houses/ condo. Do you remember the condo pre-sale in the US? Here it is the same, When you sign a buying contract for a condo, there are 4-8 payments with 100% payment at the end of construction (or move-in date). The best time to invest is to buy during pre-sale then try to sell the condo when the building is completed. The return is approximately 45% which is quite good.

I also took a taxi ride to the Phu My Hung neighborhood in district 7. The neighborhood replicated a Singapore neighborhood. It was clean, not dusty, and had mostly cars, in contrast to the typical area of Saigon where there were mostly scooters. I did not know this area existed in VN. It was quite developed for rich Vietnamese and Viet Kieu. You could walk down the street for coffee or enjoy the scenery. In contrast, the Diamond Island was so isolated that it appeared to be so boring. There was nothing nearby to do or to play. The resident must depended on the amenities on the island, You could go by boat or by car (they called it by foot = by land). I also thought that it could be dangerous to ride a boat at night due to the water robbery ??

I enjoyed learning about different things here. I want to thank you for allowing me to learn more and be adventurous in my homeland. These experiences are hard to find.

I love you.

Tri

January 11, 2010

Hi Lori, Nicholas, Jessica,

I am sorry to say that I am stuck in Vietnam. The airline could not find the flight crew; they need a min. 8hrs sleep. I found out that the flight was completely cancelled. I went back to the airport at 10:30Am this morning as requested. I checked in, went through immigration, got the ticket, waited at the gate...to find out hours later that the flight was cancelled.

They took my passport, took the boarding pass, returned my checked-in luggage then took over 300 people to the hotel. They are so unorganized. I hope they will know how I could get back on the plane. Upon arrival to the hotel, I ignored my luggage under the bus to get to the reception desk first. I did not want to wait for 300+ people to check in before me.

With my language skill, I got a room fast. Some American ladies tried to be too nice to end up having to wait to their turn. hey, this is my territory now, I knew what to do.

There was not much information about the returned flight. They said they would contact the rooms tomorrow for the info. For your information, I overheard this morning that there would not be a flight tomorrow either. In the bus, There were a few people who could not catch their flights yesterday and today. So I don't know what to tell you. Everyone seemed very upset (they are Viet Kieus, or Americans).

Remember that this is still a 3rd world country. I will let you all know as soon as I find out something. As for me, I am waiting for my luggage so I can change, take a shower and sleep. I got up at 2:00 a.m. this morning without a good sleep before that.

It is an interesting experience though. Lori, please look at my calendar, to change or cancel any appointment that I have for the days you know for sure I would not be there.

I miss you all.

Tri

September 30, 2012

I have been here almost 4 days. It's raining again in Saigon. It's the hardest rain since I have been here so far. The rain was sometime heavy but quick to end. It's the monsoon season in Vietnam. From what I have read, it's probably raining every day in this season. The temperature is 73d F- 84d F average. I am writing this story sitting in the Living Room of the hotel. There are a few signs in my computer that seems to be strange. Is my computer bugged using the hotel's wifi? Is it possible? I noticed that my company's webmail address suddenly

appeared on what I was writing. It's interesting that Lori raised this question earlier, but I absolutely felt that she was wrong on this. Now, I am not sure.

I am in Vietnam as an invitee of the VN Government External Affairs (Bộ Ngoại Giao) under the program of trying to get successful Overseas Vietnamese to come back to help build a stronger Vietnam. This is a 2nd conference that was organized by the VN government. The 1st one was in Hanoi 3 years ago. I was excited and honored to be invited, but at the same time I did not know what to expect. I tried to read on the internet and YouTube about the last event to gain some knowledge for preparation ahead. The government paid for the hotel as well as all meals during the four-day conference.

My experience started from the time I arrived at the Tan Son Nhat airport on Sept. 26, 2012. Before going through the Customs, I saw a table with a banner welcoming the Delegation. I stopped and signed in at the table. The man was very nice and polite. I was told that most delegations had arrived. I figured so

because I arrived in VN at 21:30 the night before the Conference. He directed me to the 3 no-waiting custom windows reserved specifically for the delegation. The other Custom windows had people waiting in long lines to be processed. Oh my Gosh, for the first time, I noticed that the Custom Officers were so nice, helpful, and polite. They must have been slow just waiting for the delegation to go through. Even the Officers from the other 2 windows turned to talk and socialize with me. Then, there was a van waiting



Tân Mỹ Đình hotel

outside greeted me to take me to the 3-star hotel Tân Mỹ Đình near the Bến Thành market. Apparently, the delegations were placed at the hotel by country, i.e. all the US delegations stay together in 1 or more hotels. I had my own room but was told that if someone showed up, I would have to share the room with that person. I was prepared but constantly hoping that I would not have to share the room with anybody.

In Vietnam, I knew that all important companies or industries are owned wholly or partly by the VN Government. Well the government owns a bunch of the hotels too, but not all. Every time, there are delegations, or officers traveling, they stay at these hotels. Obviously, for this Conference, the entire hotel was reserved for the delegations. Other times, these hotels also serve the public. This way, the government does not have to spend much for the delegation's stay. This year, there were about 980 people attending from 110 countries, of which 78 people are from the US. Originally, the venue was supposed to be at the People Unification Palace (Đình Độc Lập), but the venue changed to Hội Trường Thành Ủy HCM at 111 đường Bà Huyện Thanh Quan. The People Unification Palace used to be the Presidential Palace of the last regime. It was a place that forbid people from coming close...like the White House. As a kid, I always dreamed to setting my foot in this place. It would have been nice to have it at the PUP but it did not work out that way.

This is my first experience at this kind of conference. Not knowing what to expect, I looked on and listened a lot. I can see the sincerity in the Government wanting to get all the help possible to make the country stronger economically. I can see what the Government is doing is right. How else can they do it to get all the resources and talents from overseas? Who else with closer ties to Vietnam than the Viet Kieus? I agree with the way VN is taking, it's the only way. I, as with lots of other attendees, had lots of reservations about this, but we were equally curious to find out what it's all about.

The conference consists of general sessions and specific topics very similar to the way it is organized in the US. One observation I would like to make is that the Vietnamese presenters like to be wordy. Each has a prepared speech, long and too long. Those who had questions or comments, spoke very eloquently without prepared speeches. Prior to the event, we were all invited to write about 1 of the 4 subjects. I even got a personal phone call asking me to write by a staff of the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington DC. I wrote an outline, but I guessed that it was not what they were looking for. I was not asked to present. At one point, I

also got the nerve to stand up in a sub-group to offer my comments...in Vietnamese. My Vietnamese has improved a great deal in the last few years. I was interviewed by the newspaper reporters as well as TV reporters.

One highlight that I would never forget. The bus that took our group to visit a factory in a nearby town was escorted by police motorcade. Even the crazy traffic of Vietnam had to stop to allow our bus to go by. The police car with siren leading the way; police motorcycles follow along the sides of the bus; and even an ambulance following also. I think they use this ambulance because it has siren, and not necessarily to serve us. All pedestrian and vehicular traffic on the streets had to stop when we went by. You could see on the people's faces the curiosity. I felt so important and privileged. You must be in Vietnam to understand the traffic. It is the most confusing, unorganized, and dangerous. It would take forever to go anywhere. In this case, our bus never had to stop, or slow down. It went straight to another town and back without any trouble.

There are those VK who believe that anyone who helps Vietnam are traitors or are communists. I don't worry about what these people think. I think that they are either jealous or ignorant. Those who criticize still want to come back to VN and visit. What they don't realize is that they are supporting the Vietnamese tourism industry. They come back to relive the past, to see relatives and friends, and to spend money. They are actually contributing to the VN economy, but not want to acknowledge that they are. They don't want to directly participate or contribute to the country's well-being. After all, VN is till the birthplace of the Vietnamese; like it or not, soon or later, we all come back to our mother land. Some questions need to be raised to those Vietnamese who still question. They want VN to be strong but disagree with the existing policies, so therefore they refuse to participate? For as long as this politics still remain, they don't want to help, or see VN grow, ever? In business corporation environment, to make a company strong, it needs to retain the talents to support the company while eliminating any resistance. That's natural! So I guess, if anyone wants to help, then please come in. If not, then stay out to allow room for those who want to help. One is welcome to stay on the sideline and watch, but not try to destroy what somebody else is trying to build.

From many of my visits and constant associations with Vietnam and its people, I feel that I have some understanding of Vietnam. The more understanding one has about VN, the easier one can decide about VN within oneself. Although I am not interested in politics but I try to understand it. The political system is not quite Communist, not quite Socialist, not quite Capitalist.

The country is ruled by a party government; therefore it's the government that makes up policies. The policies often change to adapt or to take advantage of certain situations. These policy changes often cause confusion and unhappiness to the people of VN, but no one dares to complain. Also these policy changes can cause contradictions to the law. For these reasons, we often see that the VN laws are not consistent, not being followed, not being enforced.

Now, one can find anything in VN. There is a clear separation between the rich and the poor. The rich tends to like foreign designer's stuff (called hàng hiệu). Any import are subject close to 100% import tax. What that means is that any import stuff in VN will cost twice what one would pay elsewhere in other countries. For this reason, the person driving a car in VN are considered rich. They often pay by cash also. The VN banks are more and more like in the US; I guess because they want to do business with the World. So nowadays, people can pay things by credit also. In my opinion, the Vietnamese who can afford luxury are much richer than the VN overseas. The business atmosphere in VN seem to be improving. Business people try hard to become international. Some are quite successful, some are still trying. In general, they are being very professional.

This is my 8th trip back to VN. I learned a lot from this trip. I met some very interesting and famous Vietnamese people from various parts of the World. I have a deeper understanding of the state of the country VN economically. It's my choice if I want to help the country. The country is in line to be successful economically like China, though not as big. China is getting more and more expensive for manufacturers around the World. VN still has cheap labor. We can see more and more things made in VN nowadays. VN does not need me. Without me, the country will still can succeed. It's my choice to be part of the country's success. I signed up to be member of the group "Business and Investment" because I think that this is where my strength was. However, upon further thinking, I wished that I had chosen the group "Education" instead. My wish presently is to share my knowledge with the future generations of VN. That's where I think I can most contribute to this country.