Những Ngừơi Con Cũa Rồng Nhỏ

Sons and Daughters of the Smaller Dragon

Peter Tranvannhon – 2007

Sons and Daughters of The Smaller Dragon

by

Peter Tranvannhon

2007

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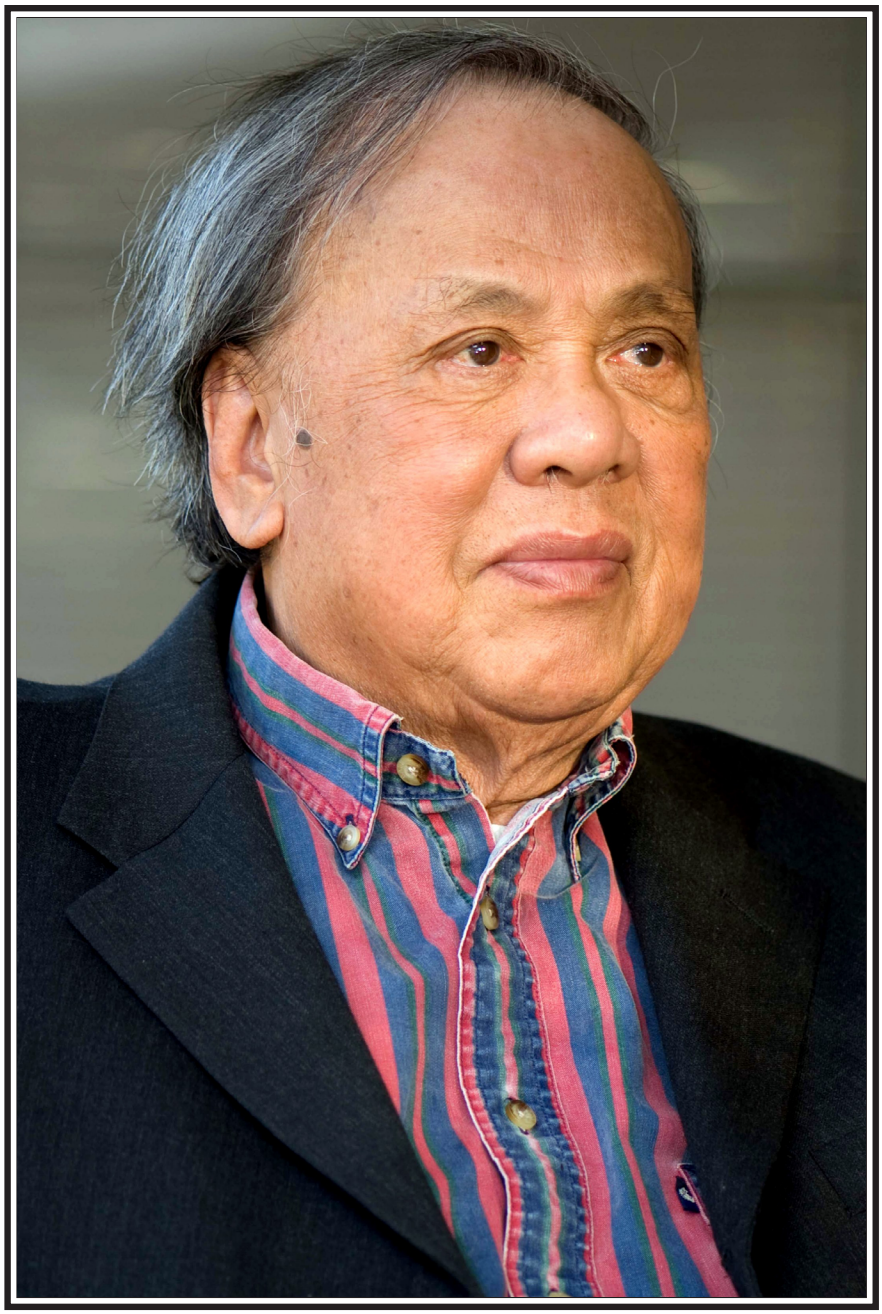
Abbreviations used in this Manuscript

ACNS = American Council for Nationalities Services
Agent Orange = A toxic herbicide sprayed by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to defoliate jungle areas and expose enemy forces)
ARVN = Army of the Republic of Viet Nam
ASOC = Air Support Operations Center
BOQ = Bachelor Officer Quarters
CCP = Chinese Communist Party
CDEC = Combined Document Exploitation Center
CIA = Central Intelligence Agency
CORDS = Civil Operations For Rural Development Services
CPO = Civilian Personnel Office/Officer
DAO = Defense Attaché Office
DMV = Department of Motor Vehicles
ESL = English as a Second Language
GVN = Government of South Vietnam
HO = Humanitarian Operations
ICU = Intensive Care Unit
IRCC = Indochinese Resettlement & Cultural Center
IRS = Internal Revenue Service
LDS = Latter-day Saints
MAAG- Military Advisory Assistants Group
MACV = Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
NFLSVN = National Liberation Front of South Vietnam
NVA = North Vietnamese Army
PHOENIX = A United States' Organization in Vietnam
POW = Prisoner of War
SAM = A type of missile used by the Viet Cong
TET = Vietnamese New Year
USAID = United States Aid
USARV = United States Army Vietnam
USMACV = United States Military Assistant Command Vietnam
VC = Viet Cong/Vietcong
Viet Minh (abbreviation of *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi* or National Alliance for Viet Nam Independence)
VN = Viet Nam/Vietnam
VNAF = Vietnam Air Force
VOLAG = Voluntary Agency



Peter Tranvannhon

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LETTER TO MY CHILDREN

Front Row: Natalie Tran, Audrey Tran , Katie Sternberg, Katherine Tran and Jett (JT) Kendrick
Second Row: Elliot Tran, Jennifer Sternberg, Tina Nguyen, Nicole Nguyen, Oliver Tran, Rebecca Wong
Third Row: Christopher Nguyen, Hoa Sternberg, Ann Tranlong, Ha Wong, Nga Tran, Hai Nguyen
Fourth Row: David (Phuong) Tran, Anh Tran, Michael Wong, Ming Wong, Nhon (Peter) Tran, Tom Sternberg, Elizabeth (Bich) Chau-Tran, Vanessa (Van) Tran, Jakob Holm, Kevin Kendrick, Stefanie (Thuy) Kendrick, Lap Wong, Ngoc Anh Tran, Pang Nguyet Wong (hidden), Abby Hung, Trung Tran (Picture taken August 9, 1998)

My Dear Children,

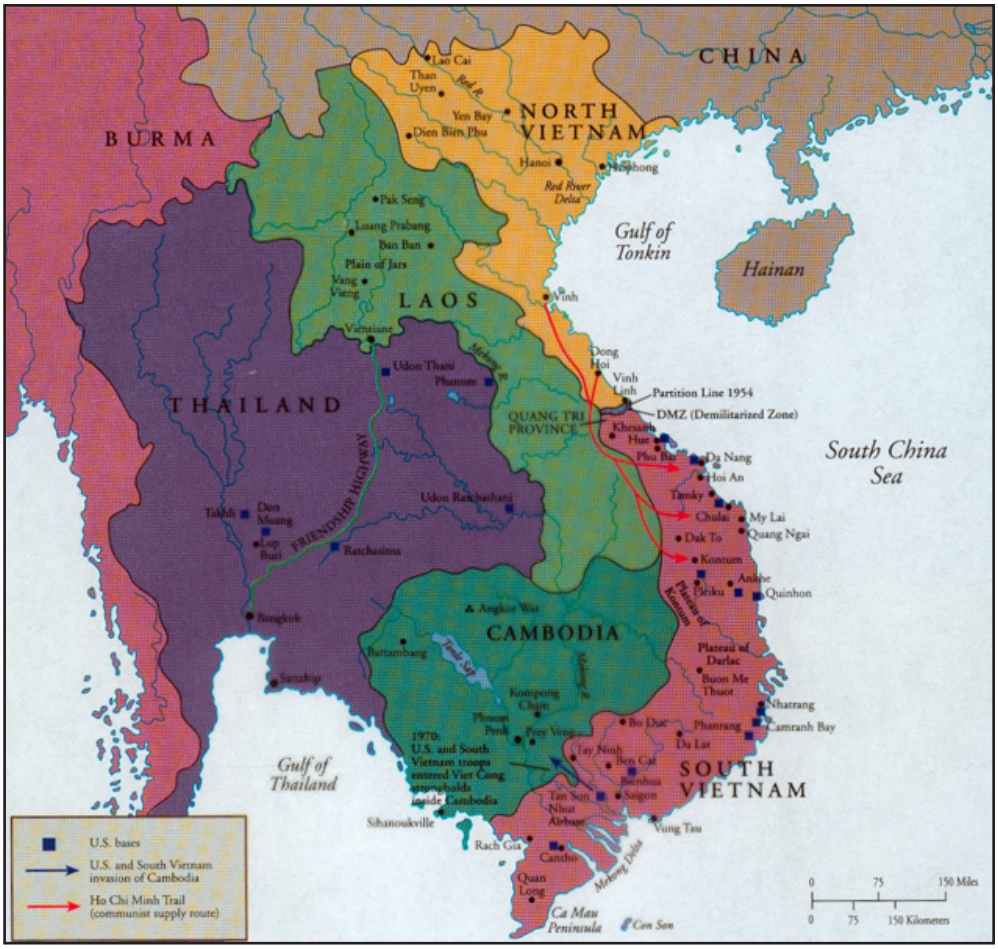
At seventy-five and plagued with medical problems, I know I do not have much time left with you in this world. I feel I am going to die soon. It is all right. People have to die at one time or another. I have lived a long life. In my old age, I still have your caring mother; I still have a large family of many children, in-laws, and grandchildren who still love me in spite of my shortcomings. But before leaving this world, I want to write this letter telling you a little bit about the time and life of your forefathers, the circumstances under which I grew up, how you were brought up in this world, and most importantly, how you were taken to this promised land of God, Freedom and Democracy.

Because of the long war, which spanned my entire life, and the misfortunes that followed me long after our family came to the United States, I was unable to do a lot of good things for you, and I apologize to you for that. To some of you, I was even considered not a good father. In hindsight, the only one good thing I was able to do for you was to take you out of Vietnam in the final days of the war and bring you to this God-promised land so that you could enjoy the freedom that would surely be denied to you in Vietnam and become the men and women you are today in this free and democratic society. When the communists were about to conquer South Vietnam, I gambled the biggest gamble of my life—giving up your three youngest siblings to an orphanage so they could be baby-lifted out of Vietnam. Thanks to God, our Heavenly Father, we were able to get together again as an intact family.

Recently, I've had the chance to talk with my brother Tri who came to San Jose from Los Angles to see me for the last time in March 2006. We talked a lot about you, your children and about his children and his grandchildren. We worried that there might be very difficult times ahead of you because sociologists predicted that by the year of 2030, there will be at least 300 million Americans living in the United States. When we have that many people living in our nation, life eventually will become very difficult economically. We felt we should let you know what to expect, why you are here, where you come from and who your ancestors are. Following his advice, I started writing this letter to talk to you a little bit about Vietnam and the circumstances under which you emigrated to the United States. Some of you might not find time to read the entire book, which took me fifteen years to finish, so I will summarize it in this letter.

OUR FATHERLAND

Our fatherland is located in Southeast Asia on a peninsula jutting out of the large land mass that contains the following countries: China in the North and Ceylon (now Sri-Lanka) in the Northwest, India, Laos and Thailand in the West and Cambodia in the Southwest. Because of its strategic location, Vietnam has been the target of many foreign invasions by surrounding countries and finally by France in the Nineteenth Century and Japan in the Twentieth Century. In brief, our fatherland was subjected to one thousand years of Chinese domination, one hundred years of France colonialism and thirty-five years of genocidal war brought to bear upon it by the Super Powers of the Twentieth Century. During the reign of these foreign powers, your ancestors many a times had courageously stood up and broken the yoke of slavery to regain freedom and independence for our country.



In need of new land to feed the growing Vietnamese population, your forefathers also conquered the Cham Kingdom and, in the process, annihilated its entire population. But your forefathers' ambition did not end there. They continued to move southward and occupied the lower portion of Cambodia, the Mekong Delta, assimilated its people and renamed it Nam Viet (Southern Vietnam). As recently as 1979, Vietnam also waged a war against Cambodia and occupied it for fifteen years. Glorious as they were, these aggressions and occupations have resulted in the *Nghiep Chuong* (bad consequences), which all of us have to bear. As my posterity, you cannot avoid this *Nghiep Chuong.*

ANCIENT HISTORY

Your children's children probably will know more about the history of America than the history of Vietnam because it is a required subject they have to learn and know by heart in order to graduate from high school. Again in the university, they will have to learn about the founding of America, its constitutions, its system of government, etc. They probably will learn more about the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492, the immigration of the Puritans to America to avoid religious persecutions in their countries, the coming to America of Africans to serve as slaves for American slave owners, the coming to America of Irish, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, Hispanics and other immigrant groups during the past 200 years. Four hundred years after the discovery of America, the first wave of Vietnamese refugees came to America after the *fall* of South Vietnam in April 1975. Since that date, wave after wave of Vietnamese refugees set foot in America making this country the largest Vietnamese immigrant community in the world (1,300,000 plus according to the 2000 Census).

The past 200 years of the founding of America were indeed a history full of events—some glorious, like the American Revolution against Great Britain, and some tragic, like the Civil War between the North and the South of the United States. These events are indeed worthy to be studied by our posterity. But it saddens me a great deal to see that my great-great-grandchildren, while rightfully concentrating their efforts at studying the American history, will likely tend to forget the Vietnamese history that began in 2,879 B.C. If we add 2007 years of the present era to that, the history of Vietnam will be 4,976 years old.

Four thousand nine hundred and seventy-six years ago, there were a group of people who called themselves the Lac Viet, part of the Bach Viet Tribes, living under the reign of King An Duong Vuong on a piece of land called Xich Quy. The Lac Viet people lived in the Yantse River Valley with many other tribes. At that time, China, under the Qing Emperor, tried to assimilate all of the tribes living in China, but was not able to assimilate the Lac Viet Tribe because the Lac Viet people were very stubborn and independent. They had traditions, customs and a spoken language entirely different from other tribes. The language they spoke was the language we speak in Vietnam today. Part of their custom was to tattoo body parts in order to avoid sea mammal attacks. They also painted their teeth black and kept them strong by chewing areca nuts and betels.

In 2,179 B.C., refusing to be assimilated by the Chinese people, the Lac Viet went south and settled in the Red River Valley, establishing their first kingdom called Van Lang under the reign of King Hung. The Van Lang Kingdom enjoyed 1,290 years of peace and prosperity, but peace ended because the Chinese Empire never let go of the Lac Viet people whom they considered a part of China. They decided to colonize Van Lang by sheer force. They succeeded in subjecting the Van Lang people under their domination for one thousand years. The Chinese occupation began in 111 B.C. and ended in 939 A.D., but during the one thousand years of Chinese occupation, the people of Van Lang had many a time rebelled against the Chinese. The most notorious of these rebellions were the ones led by the two sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, King Ly Nam De, King Trieu Viet, King Mai Hac De and the Phung Hung Movement. Even though their rebellions succeeded in

regaining Vietnam independence for only short periods of time, their indomitable spirit remained seething in the heart of the Vietnamese people.

In the year 939 there was a Vietnamese hero by the name of Nguyen who succeeded in surrounding the Vietnamese people around him, and he finally kicked the Chinese out of Vietnam, setting up a period of independence for Vietnam from 939 until 1855. For over 900 years, our forefathers turned their backs against the South China Seas in the east to fight the enemy coming from the north. Turning their backs to the South China Seas was not a good strategy, for in 1887, France came from the sea with an armada of several ships and thousands of soldiers to attack Vietnam. France colonized Vietnam for over eighty years, but in 1945, the Vietnamese revolted against France and defeated it in 1954.

For your benefit, I will repeat one more time the names of our forefathers who valiantly fought the foreigners to keep our nation independent, less you forget them. *Dinh* was Dinh bo Linh, a member of the peasantry who used cane breaks as flags to train his armies to pacify the country controlled by the twelve Vietnamese war lords. *Le* was the family of Le Dai Hanh. *Ly* was the name of Ly Cong Uan who introduced Buddhism to Vietnam. *Tran* was Tran Hung Dao, the well-known general who twice defeated the powerful Mongolian Army that attempted to conquer Vietnam. *Ho* was the name of Ho Quy Ly, the famous Vietnamese revolutionary. The posterior *Le* were the Le Kings—one of whom was *Le Loi* who for ten years fought the Chinese with nothing on his back but the cotton cloth worn by peasants. There were two kingdoms of Nguyen. The anterior Nguyen consisted of the Nguyen Anh, or King Gia Long, whose kingdom ended in 1945 as Bao Dai, the last Nguyen King, abdicated for the benefit of a new independent Vietnam.

MOST RECENT HISTORY

Vietnam was colonized by France in 1887 along with Cambodia and Laos six years later. The Second World War began in 1940. Because Vietnam lay in their path of aggression, the Japanese occupied Vietnam from 1940 to 1945, and subjected our people to a great deal of brutality. In March 1945, the Japanese ousted the French, declared Vietnam independent from French colonialism and handed the administration of Vietnam to Emperor Bao Dai. In August 1945, the Americans dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending World War ÌI. Taking advantage of the downfall of the Japanese Empire, the *Viet Minh* (Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi - National Alliance for Vietnam Independence) took over the country led by the Japanese-supported government of Bao Dai and declared Vietnam independent of Japanese rule. France, forever greedy, tried to re-impose its colonial rule on Vietnam again with the help of the British troops in Cochinchina (South Vietnam), there at that time to disarm the Japanese troops. French soldiers were released from Japanese concentration camps and started fighting the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese people, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, fought back. This Franco-Viet Minh War was to last for nine years. It ended in 1954 after the signing of the Geneva Agreement, which stipulated that Vietnam was to be divided in two parts—the territory north of the 17th Parallel was to be under the control of the Communist Government and the territory south of it, under the control of the French (and later the American-supported Nationalist Government). It was also stipulated that a general election was to be held in 1956 to determine which regime, nationalist or communist, the Vietnamese people wanted to have.

American-supported South Vietnam Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem refused to hold the general election, claiming the people north of the 17th Parallel did not have the freedom of choice. As a result, communist North Vietnam began plotting invasions of South Vietnam to reunify the country under its rule. During a period of nine long years of waging war against South Vietnam, the communists finally succeeded in conquering it on April 30, 1975. Not wanting to live under communism, I took you to the United States of America on April 26, 1975, so you could all live in freedom.

RAISING A FAMILY FROM 1954 TO 1975

You were all born between 1954 and 1975. Nga and Trung were born in Danang, but the rest of you were born in Saigon where I lived from 1960 to 1968 and again from 1972 to 1975. From 1954 to 1975, we lived through the most difficult times of the war and destruction in Vietnam—the most ravaging of which was the carnages of the 1968 Tet Offensive. During the Tet Offensive, Viet Cong troops attacked Phu Tho where our family lived, so I had to move you to the Second Administrative Precinct in the center of Saigon to avoid death in the war-ravaged Phu Tho area. In 1972, I was sent to the United States for professional training. Many of my friends in the United States tried to persuade me not to return to Vietnam, fearing that I might be caught and killed by the North Vietnamese Army who, at that time, was pouring its troops across the 17th Parallel and who occupied one-third of our country. In spite of my friend's persuasion, I decided to go back to Vietnam to be with you during this time of crisis. In April 1975, nine days before the NVA conquered Saigon, the last line of defense for South Vietnam, with your mother's consent, I gave up your youngest siblings (Phuong, Thuy and Van) to an orphanage so they could be baby-lifted out of the country. Six days later, through the grace of God, our Heavenly Father arranged for an American, Mr. McBride, at the US Embassy, to help the rest of the family emigrate to the United States via one of those black flights operated by the US Air Force. Two months later we were reunited with the *orphan* children. Our family was whole again and resettled first in Santa Rosa, sponsored by the Santa Rosa First Ward, Santa Rosa Stake, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. During the next thirty years, we were scattered all over the United States. As you can see, our life was not easy for us during the period of fiercest fighting in Vietnam and the first fifteen years in the U.S.; however, there is no death in our family—only multiplication—and we should be grateful to God for that.

WHY ARE WE HERE?

As the first generation of Vietnamese Americans in this country, you need to explain to your posterity why our family is here among millions of other Vietnamese refugees. The reason is simple: having lived through World War II (1939-1945), the French-Viet-Minh War (1945-1954) and the American War of Intervention in Vietnam (1955-1975), and having seen what the Vietnamese communists had done to your forefathers, and knowing you could not have a decent life if you remained in Vietnam under the rule of communism, I decided to take you to the United States so at least you could live in freedom.

Therefore, no matter how busy you are, try to find time to ponder about the history of Vietnam, to discover your roots and to love Vietnam as I have loved it. Throughout its history, Vietnam has enjoyed great moments of glory but also sad moments of defeat. But worst of all, Vietnam is currently under the dictatorial communist regime. The communists in Vietnam today have an ideological and political philosophy that is different as day and night from the world in which you are living now. Why does Vietnam have to suffer so much? I think it is because of the many mistakes our forefathers have made—the most serious of which is their penchant for divisiveness and their past acts of wickedness. Individually, the Vietnamese people are great competitors, but as a nation they are sorely divided. Someone once said, "*If a Vietnamese is to compete with a Japanese (supposedly the most intelligent people in the world), the Vietnamese always comes out a winner, but if ten Vietnamese are to compete as a group with ten Japanese, the Japanese always come out winners.*" The reason is simple: as a group, the Vietnamese always try to compete with one another first before competing with the other group. This divisiveness has been seen throughout the history of Vietnam from the day it achieved national independence in 939 A.D. till this date. This divisiveness has existed not only in our society but also in many Vietnamese families. For this reason I warn you not to be divisive.

With regards to the wickedness of our forefathers, there are ample examples. During the southward movement in the Sixteenth Century to enlarge our country, our forefathers conquered Champa, annihilated all of its people, and most recently they invaded Cambodia, creating a lot of *Nghiep Chuong* (bad consequences) for their posterity.

LOVE YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS

I know that living in America, you cannot help from being influenced by its culture—one of which is, by responsibility, you are required to take care of your immediate family first and your extended family next. I totally agree with that concept. Having said that, however, I cannot disagree with the teachings of my own father and mother with regards to the issue of family relationships. They said, "*A drop of pink blood is better than a whole pond of water.*" (Mot giot mau dao con hon ao nuoc la*). "Brothers and sisters are like arms and legs of a human body.*" (Anh em nhu the tay chan). "*If your sisters are falling, try to break that fall by coming to their rescue.*" (Chi nga em nang*).* Speaking of family, I want to remind you that you also have many relatives who are still living in Vietnam, France and Taiwan. Try to communicate with them as often as you can, making sure everybody is all right. If you do this, your mom and I will ever be happy in the spirit world.

HARMONY IN THE FAMILY

Harmony in the family is the key to happiness. In the family, disagreements often occur, but try to solve them in an amicable way. Husbands and wives should respect each other. So should siblings. Daughters, including daughters-in-law, should encourage your husbands to be good husbands and good fathers. Sons, including sons-in-law, should treat your wives with tenderness and absolutely should never use violence against your wives.

BE FRUGAL

As I said earlier, I expect life will be difficult for your children and your grandchildren in not so long a future. Teach them to be frugal. Houses, cars and furniture are necessities for you. But only acquire what you need. Do not try to compete with the Joneses and acquire things that you do not need. Show your children the dark side of the world—the unfortunate people in Africa and those in Asia who do not have enough to eat because of the ravages of war in their countries. Try to do good to other people and they will do good to you. Having lived a long life and having seen a lot, I, for one, strongly believe in the law of *Nhân Quã* (cause & effect). Always sow a good seed and you will be sure to have a good harvest.

Audrey Tran (2005-2006)

BE GRATEFUL TO YOUR ADOPTIVE COUNTRY

In December 2005, I got the chance to visit Phuong, Ngoc, Natalie, Audrey and Katherine. When checking about the status of his children's education, Phuong produced a copy of the essay written by Audrey Tran about life in America and the true meaning of the American flag. At the time Audrey wrote this essay she was only eleven-years-old. Basically she said that we should all be grateful to America. Since her writing pretty much covers what I want to say, I'm including it here verbatim for your benefit:

The American Flag – The symbol of Liberty and Goodness
By Audrey Tran (2005)

When I look at the flag, it fills me with pride. I am proud to be a Vietnamese American and live under the American flag because it is like the glue that holds all of us Americans together, that confirms our beliefs of Freedom and Justice. To me, the flag means much, much more than a piece of inexpensive fabric on a stick – it stands for our proud history and our envied freedom.

The American flag is full of strong symbols though it has simple patterns. On the top left hand corner, there are 50 stars on a blue background and 13 red and white stripes. The stars stand for 50 states of today, including Hawaii and Alaska. The 13 red and white stripes stand for the 13 original colonies. Red stands for courage and bloodshed; white stands for freedom and liberty and blue stands for justice. If you put all the symbols together, the flag symbolizes 50 strong states and red and white stripes stand for the original 13 colonies deeply dedicated to the cause of courage, liberty and justice.

I am proud of this nation's history and how far it has come to be the strong nation it is today. America is one of the few nations that have a culture so diverse. There are Asians, Europeans, Africans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Middle Easterners or in short, people from all around the world. You do not see so many different faces in Russia or India or Australia. The United States of America had so many different customs and cultures; it has become who we are: we are a free nation. Other countries usually have only one type of religion that people are forced to believe in, but in the United States of America, we may believe whatever we like, whether it is Catholic Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist or even atheist. When we sit down at dinner and give thanks, I thank the Lord for a free nation. Because we are a "free land" many people want to come to the United States of America and my family was one of the many emigrants that left their home to come to America.

They came here fleeing from the war between North and South Vietnam and were looking for a better life. When both of my parents came to the "new world" life was hard for them because they did not know how to speak English. My parents did not participate in a lot of sports, because they did not have a lot of sports in Vietnam or they were not able to understand English fully. As they have been living in the United States for sometime now and get used to the American language, they start living an average Vietnamese-American dream.

Many people in the United States of America are like my parents. They come from a different country, searching for a better life or fleeing from a violent war. That is what America is all about. It is a new life for those who need it. A second chance for the unfortunate ones. We stand proud today, with our different beliefs, customs, cultures, skin colors and all the things that make us a diverse nation.

The flag is one of our most treasured symbols of the United States, as it will be always and for ever. I am brimming with pride knowing that I am a free American living and growing under the American flag and I may believe whatever I like. The flag not only stands for Liberty and Justice, it also stands for us the people as well.

GOD

Remember you are the children of God and remember how God helped you in the final days of the war in Vietnam. You may not remember this but in the darkest final days of the war in Vietnam, you were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and after accepting the teachings of God in this true Church, you have been helped by God to come to this country and become the men and women you are today. Think about that and come back to the Church as I have. Calamities will come in your life, but if you depend on God, He will give the wisdom and the strength to overcome these calamities. I know it because I have personal experiences about it. Before closing this letter, I wish you the best of luck, and a lot of blessings from God, our Heavenly Father.

Your earthly father

Prologue

Why I choose the title, Sons and Daughters of The Smaller Dragon, for this book:

Throughout the history of Vietnam, the Vietnamese people have always been referred to as *Con Rong, Chau Tien* (sons and daughters of Dragon and a Fairy). China, which is much more large and powerful with billions of people living in the land mass north of Vietnam, is called the *Bigger Dragon,* and Vietnam, much smaller in size in terms of territories and population, is called the *Smaller Dragon.*

So, symbolically, we are all the sons and daughters of the *Smaller Dragon.* For this reason, the title of this book is Sons and Daughters of The Smaller Dragon.

The Dragon

Of the four symbolic animals that are engraved and painted on many objects or otherwise represented in Vietnamese houses and public places, the dragon is the most important (the others are the unicorn, the tortoise, and the phoenix).

The dragon, a fabulous animal of Sino-Vietnamese mythology, is usually shown with the head of a camel, the horns of a buck, the eyes of a demon (protruding from its sockets), the ears of a buffalo, the neck and body of a snake, the scales of a carp, the claws of an eagle and the pawns of a tiger. Hanging from both sides of its mouth is a long barbel, and under the dragon's tongue there is hidden a precious stone. The top of its head shows a decorative protuberance that is the mark of intelligence, and along its backbone a crest of eighty-one extra large scales runs from the neck to the end of its tail.

The dragon can live under the ground, in the water or in the air; it spits a dangerous kind of vapor, which it can turn into fire or water at will.

Dragons are immortal. There are not many, but their number increases because another fabulous animal, a reptile (half-lizard, half-snake), can become a dragon at the age of 1,000 years.

In spite of its frightening appearance, the dragon is not a representation of an evil spirit. On the contrary, both in China and Vietnam, the dragon has always been the symbol of nobility and power. It thus became the principle attribute of the Vietnamese emperor or *Son of Heaven.*

(After Thai van Kiem from *Times of Vietnam.* Saigon, September 21, 1957). (*Picture of dragon taken by Vanessa Tran Holm on visit to Vietnam in 1995*)

Preface

Before I wrote this book, a sort of personal memoirs, I discussed my book project with a couple of close friends and they came outright to discourage me to undertake such a project. One of them, lawyer Thi Nguyen said, and I quote,

> *You are a nobody in Vietnam; no one is going to read your book; so many books have been written by well-known writers about Vietnam and yours, if completed, would be one too many. It is better to use your spare time to think of a way to make money and to survive in the United States*.

Thi was right. I was a nobody in Vietnam. I held no important position in the South Vietnamese Government. The highest rank I was ever able to achieve in the military was that of a junior officer. Whatever high position I was able to achieve in the American system of government was through pure personal efforts. But I did not follow my friend's advice because I was by nature a very stubborn man, always going against the flow. Anyway, Thi Nguyen was wrong on his second suggestion (*that I should concentrate my spare time looking for way to make money and to survive in the United States*). It is true that I am not economically wealthy towards the end of my life, but I have the satisfaction of having done something right—I am always able to answer my grandchildren's questions about their great-grandparents and their ancestors thanks to the notes I kept about them.

It is not my intention to write this book for public consumption, but for my children and my grandchildren to remember their roots and who their ancestors are. It is worth noting that those who gave me the above advice are now dead, and I am sure their children will not know a thing about their lives before and after 1975. In view of their misfortunes, I am glad I did not follow their advice and, against all adversities—particularly economic ones—I always did my best to find time to write this book.

This book is about my family, the TRAN Family.

Again I say, I write this book because I want my children, their children and their children's children to always remember their roots. Since coming to America in 1975, (except for my eldest daughter Nga and, much later after I started writing this book, Anh and Vanessa), none of my other children have visited nor, I am afraid to say, have had the desire to visit Vietnam, the land of their ancestry. To them, Vietnam is just another far-away country on the world map.

It is my fear that 100 years from now, my posterity will not have the slightest idea who their ancestors are. My fear is not without a reason. Today, a mere thirty years in the United States of America, my own children, the direct line of the TRAN Family, have already forgotten the names of their grandparents, their uncles, their aunts and their first cousins—let alone the homes, the villages, and the towns in which they and their relatives once lived. I hope that from this book, they will go back to their family history, rediscover their roots and will love their ancestors and Vietnam as much as I have loved them. But above all, I want them to be proud of their Vietnamese ancestors, without whom Vietnam, *THE SMALLER DRAGON,* could not have survived one thousand years of Chinese domination, one hundred years of French colonialism, thirty-five years of genocidal war brought to bear upon them by superpowers of the Twentieth Century.

Presently, Vietnam is a communist institution, adopting and practicing a foreign political ideology that I and million others like me have rejected. A political institution such as this cannot survive forever. It will collapse in due time. Throughout the history of Vietnam, political regimes, not mandated by Heavens—or simply put , not

of the people, by the people and for the people—rose and fell. Despotic rulers came and went, but Vietnam, the country itself—its people, its land, its river, its mountains, its rice fields, its fruit orchards, its coastal lines, its natural landscapes—never changed. For this reason, I encourage my children and their posterity to have an open mind towards Vietnam, as a country and as a people.

I wanted to write this book a long time ago but never have had the chance to do it. Economic hardships, emotional distress and cultural adjustment problems are the main reasons for the delay. My family and I came to America at a time when it was still recovering from an economic recession due to its long, costly war in Vietnam. Jobs were scarce, and getting a job with a decent pay to raise a large family was very difficult for a Vietnamese refugee whom some Americans still viewed as the cause of their socio-economic problems. Therefore, during my first fifteen years in the United States of America, I was so busy working or looking for work to support my family that I did not have the time to write this book.

Besides the above-mentioned economic difficulties, I also suffered from what the medical world today call *Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome*, a depressive mood that American GIs who fought the war in Vietnam knew so well. Flashbacks of years of living dangerously in war-ravaged Vietnam, nightmares of my family's dangerous escape from Saigon without four of my young children just days before the collapse of Saigon, and the constant guilt feeling of being alive and free while my close relatives were being subjected to political retaliations by the communist regime in Vietnam kept torturing me for a long time after coming to America. The mental torture was such that I became ill.

Monterey - 17-Mile Drive

It was not until 1991, when my economic situation was getting better and my mental health more stable, did I decide to move to Monterey to begin work on this book. I had chosen Monterey because it offered me the environment and the serenity I needed for writing. I felt, in love with Monterey when I visited her for the first time in 1976 to give a talk to a church group about the state of the Vietnamese refugees in the United States. It was love at first sight. I was mesmerized by its beautiful shorelines and its magnificent landscapes. Located on the central coast of California, approximately 125 miles south of San Francisco, Monterey Peninsula was probably one of the remaining few places in the United States where natural charm and beauty had not been desecrated by modern-day commercialized tourism. The water in her bay was still pure and limpid, the sands on her beaches were still white and clean, and the rolling foothills that ornated her landscapes were richly green and primitively beautiful. In bragging to my friends and acquaintances about the splendor of this paradise on earth of which I was fortunate to be a part, I always likened Monterey to a pure country girl whose pretty face had not been smeared by cosmetic powder, rouge and other artificial products. I sincerely hope that for the sake of the blessed people of Monterey, she would remain this way for many years to come.

Ideal as it was environmentally, my Monterey book project wasn't without problems. As I began to write, old

suppressed emotions resurfaced. In the process of recounting my life story, I had to delve into the deep recess of my past and had to relive every minute of it. Memories of war-generated destructions and deaths, of my solitary adolescence, of my family's dangerous escape from Vietnam, and of my separation from my young children during the escape, kept coming back to haunt me—so much so that I was afraid to evoke and write about them. As a result, during the three years of living in Monterey, I was able to complete only five out of ten chapters intended for this book.

A brush with death in 1994 (I had a liver operation and almost died of post-surgery complications) turned me around. It was a wake-up call of sorts for me. Suddenly, I realized that I could not procrastinate any longer. The TRAN legacy would have been lost forever. My children and their children's children would not know the circumstances of their presence in the United States of America. From that day on, I began to write in earnest, determined to finish this book at all cost, and finish it I did fifteen years later.

This book is not about statesmen or VIPs who were principle players during my time and life in Vietnam, or during the Second World War (1940-1945), the French-Vietminh War (1946-1953), and the US War of Intervention in Vietnam (1954-1973). This book is about my family and the grass-roots people of Vietnam like I am. In writing this book it is necessary to invoke the socio-political background of the time and life of my ancestors and of my young adult years. The socio-political background of these times and the names of its principal players are authentic. Some of these principal players are still alive. If the invocation of their names in this book creates some personal embarrassment for them, then I am sorry. For the sake of authenticity, the truth still must be told.

To this date, there are people who still believe that if the United States had come to the rescue of South Vietnam in 1975, it probably could have saved Vietnam from collapse. It is a wishful and naïve thinking indeed. To me South Vietnam in 1975 was like a foul—*Co Tuong*—game (*Chinese Chess*) beyond fixing. A new game had to be reset and new players had to be found. With the loss of South Vietnam in 1975, a new game was reset alright, but unfortunately the old players are still there. The old players I am talking about are the successive Communist regimes in control of Vietnam after the war in 1975 and former generals and politicians of the Nationalist regime of South Vietnam in control of this country from 1954 to 1975. In order for Vietnam to have a truly free and democratic society, we have to have new players. Who are these new players? They are exactly the younger generations of Vietnam, your posterity and mine.

After finishing writing this book, I gave the manuscript to my friends and acquaintances and asked them to review it and comment on it. Most of them disagreed with what I wrote. Those who disagreed with me were the ones who used to hold high positions in the South Vietnamese Government and Armed Forces, who hoped that some day in the near future, they would be able to return to and rule Vietnam as in the old days. They sarcastically asked me,

Have you forgotten why you lost your country and were forced to live in exile?

No, I'll never forget it as long as I live. But I do not want the scene of *Gio tanh, mua mau* (blood rains and ill smelling wind) caused by war to start again in Vietnam just because the greedy generals and the selfish politicians of South Vietnam of old wanted it. The senseless war between North and South Vietnam ended thirty years ago. Many countries that either started or participated in these wars have come home and mulled over the mistakes they have made. They knew that grudge and enmity would not serve any purposes except to deepen their self-inflicted wounds. Therefore they have chosen to reestablish their diplomatic relations with Vietnam, their former arch enemy.

Thirty years is a long time to look back and to ponder. That is exactly what I have done. With time, I have been able to come to terms with myself, remove the feeling of hatred and animosity from my heart. Since the end of the war, I have visited Vietnam, my fatherland, several times and with each visit, I was able to make better peace with myself. I have seen Vietnam under a new light. Of course, it is not a perfect society—freedom of speech and religion is still restricted and war slogans such as *Tan diet ke thu* (annihilate the enemy), *De cao canh giac ke thu* (heighten your awareness against your enemy), still abound.

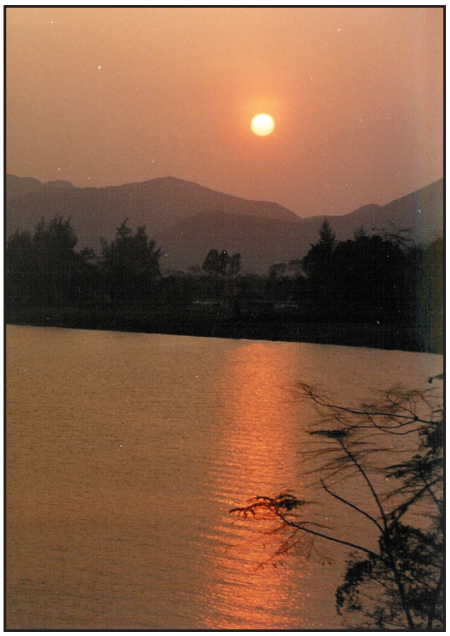
But these are just slogans. Currently, tens of thousands of young men and young women from Vietnam are receiving their education in the United States and other free countries in the West, and as a result, they now have the chance to be exposed to the freedom and democracy enjoyed by the people of these nations. Also, hundreds of Vietnamese delegations in all fields of expertise have visited the United States every year under the US International Visitor Program to learn about the US way of life. I've gotten the opportunity to accompany these delegations and have noticed changes in their perception of the United States. I am sure through these people, changes are on the way.

Going back to the grass roots people of North and South Vietnam, they are the ones who suffered the most during the successive wars in Vietnam. From the deep south of the Mekong Delta to the northern border of Vietnam with China, they died by the millions during the war—all in the false names of freedom promulgated by their leaders. With them nearly one hundred thousand Frenchmen, fifty eight thousand Americans and countless numbers of Koreans and Australians were also killed. In concluding this book, I cannot help thinking about these people, the subaltern officers and cadres of both North and South Vietnam Armed Forces who died in order for us to live. To these unsung heroes, I would like to invoke a line from an ancient Greek philosopher who wrote *The rewards of sufferings are experiences.*

Let the experiences of the grass-roots people of North and South Vietnam be that in wars there are no winners, only losers. Let their experiences be the guiding light of our lives so that through our struggle for peace from now on, there will be no war in our life and in the lifetime of our posterity. So, let us live together in peace.

(written Winter 2005)

Vietnam Coastline



CHAPTER ONE

BURNING THE WORD OF GOD

April 23, 1975, 4 p.m. Saigon time

I had been burning them for nearly ten hours, but the job was far from over. Several hundred copies of the *St. James Bible*, the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the *Word of Wisdom* still remained untouched on the grass by the furnace waiting to be burned. It was already 4 p.m. and I began to wonder if I could burn them all by nightfall. In a couple of hours the military curfew would be enforced, and all outdoor activities must stop.

The burning of the LDS Church Holy Scriptures had been slow and difficult. Without a paper shredder at my disposition, I had built a fire in the church's old outdoor baptismal tank and used it as a furnace. Unfortunately, the burning had not been going well. The fire in the furnace kept dying in spite of my effort to constantly revive it. There was a combination of factors that made the fire in the furnace short-lived. One was that the majority of the Bibles and the Books of Mormon were thick, hard-cover books—not easy to burn. The other reason was, not wanting to arouse suspicion of Vietcong agents and people in the neighborhood that I was burning some sort of classified documents, I had tried to make the fire in the furnace as inconspicuous as possible by burning only a few books at a time. As a result, after ten hours of continuous burning, I was able to destroy only half the number of Bibles and Books of Mormon targeted for destruction.

The burning of the Bibles and the Books of Mormon had been ordered by the General Authorities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormon) from Salt Lake City, Utah. Informed by the United States Government that the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) and the NLFSVN (National Liberation Front of South Vietnam), popularly known as Vietcong or VC, planned to launch a final assault on Saigon, South Vietnam's last line of defense, and to capture it by April 30th so that their troops could celebrate May Day (the international Communist Labor Day) in Saigon on May 1st, the General Authorities of the Mormon Church were concerned that, if not destroyed immediately, these Holy Scriptures might fall into the hands of the communist forces, causing a lot of political troubles for Vietnamese Mormon church members and investigators in South Vietnam.

The reason for the Mormon Church's concern was the Vietcong had long suspected it to be the secret arm of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its missionaries, covert CIA agents. Using dialectical materialism reasoning, they theorized that being an American religious institution, founded in America and led by an all-American hierarchy, the Mormon church must be part of a network of military and civilian organizations the US government had set up in South Vietnam to support its war of aggression against North Vietnam and the NLFSVN, its underlings in the South. As for the American Mormon missionaries, there was every indication that they were in Vietnam to spy. Young, energetic, fluent in Vietnamese language, they conducted missionary work more like spies than evangelists. For example, instead of openly preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their church halls, they chose to venture into Saigon neighborhoods, seeking to meet with people individually. What was being discussed during the meeting between these missionaries and these people, nobody knew for sure. It could be discussions about the Mormon Church or it could be information about VC underground activities. One thing the VC knew for sure was that if history repeated itself—and they believed it would—the role of the Mormon Church and the Mormon missionaries in Vietnam today was not any different from that of the French Catholic Church and the French *Catholic Mission Etrangere* in Vietnam in the late Nineteenth Century. Then, France had used French Catholic missionaries to provide military intelligence on Vietnam—

intelligence which helped France successfully conquest Vietnam in 1876. The VC assumed that today, the United States was doing the same thing. Therefore, they could not afford not to be suspicious.

Burning the Bible and the Book of Mormon, the Word of God! But that is a sacrilege.

I had protested the idea when Elder Nguyen Van The, the Saigon LDS Branch President, called on me to perform this task. Seeing my frustration, he explained to me the reason for the need to destroy vestiges of the Mormon presence in Vietnam.

Our church members and investigators are under suspicion of collaborating with the Americans. They would be in grave danger if we do not destroy the Mormon scriptures before the communists conquest Saigon.

On his insistence, I had accepted the assignment but not without a deep feeling of sadness and disappointment. So, early this morning, as soon as the military curfew was lifted, my son Trung and I had set out for the Mormon mission compound on Thanh Thai Street to carry out this unpleasant task. Trung had volunteered to come help, and I was glad that he had in view of the huge volume of books to be burned. We had started our day by searching and gathering books, magazines, records, etc.—anything that bore the trademark of *Mormonism*. We had particularly looked for records of baptism and notebooks containing names and addresses of Vietnamese LDS church members and investigators. To our dismay, we had found quite a few of them. The American Mormon missionaries had forgotten to destroy these records and notebooks when they left Vietnam in a hurry in early April when the church ordered them to ship out of Vietnam immediately. I was glad I had found these records and notebooks. Innocent people could be held for questioning, put in jail or even killed for suspected fifth-columnist activities.

The search for the LDS Church's Holy Scriptures completed, Trung was entrusted with the task of bringing them to the furnace for me to burn. To my amused surprise, instead of dumping copies of the Bible and Books of Mormon on the grass which was just as easy, Trung had laid them down with care and had stacked them in rows, face-up, library-style as if they were there for people to come by to pick up a copy, if they wished. At first I wondered why he had gone to so much trouble doing what he did, knowing that nobody would come by and these books were there for burning. It did not take me long to figure it out. Apparently, my son had felt guilty that he himself was contributing to the destruction of the Word of God, the *Word* he had learned at Sunday School every week for the past four months, the *Word* that had promised him eternal life, peace and happiness. For him it was indeed a significant promise because during his entire life he had known nothing but war and sorrows.

Looking at my first-born son, full of vitality and energy, at possibly the final hours of his existence, I could not help but feel terribly sad and pained. For I knew at this precise moment 150,000 NVA and NFLSVN troops, supported by tanks and canons, were surrounding Saigon and that, on a signal from Hanoi General Van Tien Dung (pronounced *Zung*) at his field command post in Ben Cat Forest, thirty-five miles northeast of here, this mammoth force would unleash a massive attack on this city of four million defended by a crumpling, disorganized, poorly-equipped ARVN garrison of less than 60,000 men, not all of them combat troops. In my mind's picture, this final battle was going to be ruthless, fierce and bloody. Military and civilian casualties on the South Vietnamese side were expected to be heavy. Would my family and I survive this attack? I doubted it. Even if I did, I would have to face execution or long-term imprisonment for the crime of collaborating with the Americans for nearly two decades. Collaboration with the *enemy* was something the VC would not tolerate. During their TET offensive of Hue City in 1968 and again in the Spring of 1972, they summarily executed three thousand men and women charged with the crimes of collaborating with the Americans, the GVN (Government of South Vietnam) and the police.

With the Communists as rulers of Vietnam, my family and I would not stand a chance. My fate was sealed and members of my family would, if spared of the death penalty, become social outcasts—*ie*, they would be classified as sub-citizens of the Communist Regime. My young children would not be allowed to go to school and live a normal life as children of the revolution. In view of my association with the Americans, I might deserve whatever punishment the communists had in store for me, but for my wife and my young children who had not done the slightest thing to harm the communist cause, save their blood relationship with me, any form of punishment against them would be grossly cruel and inhumane.

Trung must have seen the tears welling up in my eyes for he soon put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed them affectionately.

Dad, everything will be all right.

Trung's thoughtful gesture meant a lot to me. It indicated that he had matured beyond his age. At fourteen, he already behaved like an adult. Instead of going out to play to have fun with friends of his age and doing things teenagers normally do, he chose to stay home to help his family in every way that he could.

We started the burning around mid-morning, expecting to finish the job by noon, but as of this moment, we still had a long way to go. It was my estimation that within the next three hours until nightfall the number of books we could burn was 150. Now I began to worry. As if indifferent to my mounting anxiety, the moisture-laden afternoon breeze occasionally scooped up the carbonized papers and black soot from the furnace and tossed them around playfully in the air.

The burning of the Mormon scriptures was the last in a series of precautionary actions taken by the Mormon Church in the closing days of April 1975. Sensing the risk facing its missionaries if they were captured by the NVA and the VC, the General Authorities of the Church had repatriated all of them to the United States and had issued a warning to American saints in Vietnam to keep a low profile and to avoid being seen at the Saigon LDS mission home.

After the American missionaries and the counselors had gone home, the Saigon LDS Branch now consisted of only two hundred or so active Vietnamese saints led by a Vietnamese presidency of three elders: Branch President Nguyen Van The; First Counselor Nguyen Van Chinh, and Second Counselor Mai Ba Pho. In their secular life, Nguyen Van The was an ARVN first-lieutenant; Nguyen Van Chinh, an army lieutenant-colonel and Mai Ba Pho, a high school teacher. Years later, I learned that Mai Ba Pho was a communist agent infiltrated into the rank of the Saigon LDS Mission to spy on its activities.

The Gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came to Vietnam unofficially around 1966-67 when the American troops began to arrive here to help South Vietnam fight the communist insurgents, known as the Viet Cong. Among these American troops, there were quite a few Mormons. The majority of them came from the state of Utah and the rest from pockets of Mormons scattered around the United States. In those days, Mormon GIs did not have a meeting place of their own in Vietnam. On Sundays, they would hold their priesthood and sacrament meetings in non-denominational church halls or in military barracks of their units or in private quarters. It was not until several years later that an official LDS Mission was founded in Saigon with the sanction of the then Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley of the Council of the Twelve. During one of his visits to Saigon in 1966, Apostle Hinckley stood on the rooftop terrace of the Caravelle Hotel and while gazing over this sprawling city of two million souls spreading out under his feet as far as his eyes could see, he received a revelation from God that the time had come for Vietnam to have access to the Word of God as revealed in the *Book of Mormon*.

After this historical moment, the Saigon LDS District was officially founded in Vietnam and in spite of a fierce war going on in this country, young American missionaries were sent to Vietnam to convert the Vietnamese people to the Mormon Church. For many years, the American LDS missionaries and the American Latter-day Saints in Vietnam, mostly members of the US armed forces, employees of the US Embassy, USAID, USMACV and other U.S. organizations in Vietnam, were the backbone of the Saigon LDS District. The former, on spiritual matters, and the latter, on logistical ones. Generous tithing by the American saints helped pay for the rent of a modern villa on Thanh Thai Street to serve as a meeting place for both American and Vietnamese Latter-day Saints and as living quarters for the American Mormon missionaries.

The Mormon missionaries had done their job well. Over a four-year period, they had converted close to 200 Vietnamese from all walks of life to the LDS Church. On April 6, 1973, the Hong Kong Mission President William Bradshaw brought the first four full-time missionaries to Saigon. On Sundays, large groups of men, women and children, military and civilian, American and Vietnamese, young and old, rich and poor, church members and church investigators would converge on the LDS Church to learn the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to praise the Lord and to give testimonies of their belief in the truthfulness of the *Book of Mormon*. The Saigon LDS Branch was doing so well that it could easily develop into a ward or even a stake (the equivalent of a Catholic diocese), had it not been for the early withdrawal of Americans troops and the premature silencing of Angel Moroni's trumpet.

After the American missionaries and most of the American Latter-day Saints had gone home, there was a deep concern among the Mormon Church leadership about what to do with the remaining Vietnamese Latter-day Saints in Saigon. The political and military situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating rapidly after Military Regions I and II, north and northwest of Saigon, were overrun by the North Vietnamese Army. In an attempt to save the Vietnamese LDS, the President of the Hong Kong LDS Mission, representing the LDS Church in Southeast Asia, had made several trips to Vietnam to discuss with US officials in Saigon about the possibility of including Vietnamese LDS and their families on the list of *high-risk* personnel to be evacuated out of Vietnam. In official U.S. parlance at the time, *high risk* personnel meant individuals who worked in sensitive positions with the various U.S. intelligence agencies such as the C.I.A., the Phoenix Program, the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, the US Document Exploitation Center etc...Being a member of an American religion technically was not *high-risk*, but officials at the U.S. Embassy Defense Attaché Office (DAO) in charge of the evacuation were sympathetic and promised they would do everything they could to help.

Noticing the sounds of footsteps behind me, I turned around to see who was coming. It was President Nguyen Van The. Judging from his look, I knew he was worried. At the rate of only a few pages at a time, he knew that my son and I would not be able to destroy all the church materials before nightfall and, only God knew if we would have the opportunity to do it again tomorrow, given the seriousness of the current military situation. As if to accentuate his anxiety, several loud bursts of machinegun fires were heard in the direction of Tan Son Nhut International Airport, a few miles away. The machine gun fire was soon followed by a series of deafening explosions of artillery shells. Even though these explosions and gunfire were routine affairs in Saigon during the closing days of April 1975, at this moment they carried a particularly frightening message: the NVA and the Vietcong might enter Saigon before we could destroy all of the LDS Holy Scriptures.

Looking at this man who was my church leader and my brother in the spirit world, I could not help but feel sorry for him. Of late, the burden of responsibility on his shoulders had been overwhelming. In meeting after meeting with his congregation of Vietnamese Latter-day Saints, he was bombarded with more questions than he could answer. The Vietnamese Latter-day Saints wanted to know whether the LDS Church Headquarters in Salt Lake City was going to help evacuate them out of South Vietnam before the communists arrived. Through local grapevines, they had learned that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Saigon, also an American religion, had

chartered a flight to evacuate its church members to the United States of America, and they were wondering if the LDS Church would do the same for them. The Vietnamese Latter-day Saints were panicked because they felt they had been abandoned by their American brothers and sisters. All eight American missionaries had quietly left Saigon in early April, without so much as saying *"goodbye"* to them. So had the American Latter-day Saints who made up an important part of the Saigon LDS Branch. They had left Saigon one by one to go back to the sanctuary of the United States. The last Sunday, only one American Latter-day Saint attended the sacramental meeting—Jerry Wheat, President of the Hong Kong Mission, which had supervisory responsibility of the South Vietnam District. Sensing the fear of Vietnamese Latter-day Saints, he told Saigon saints not to lose faith and that Father in Heaven would rescue them in His own due time. At the end of the sacramental meeting, I personally implored with President Wheat to communicate with the General Authorities in Salt Lake City to make sure my three young children be adopted by a good LDS family so they could grow up in the good environment of the Church and that I be notified of the final adoption.

As President The and I were assessing the time needed to complete our burning task there was a big commotion on the street right outside the gate of the LDS Mission compound. Looking out, we saw a group of mean-looking Vietnamese men in camouflaged combat uniforms trying to rob a Vietnamese civilian. The latter was screaming for help but nobody responded. From their uniforms, I could tell they were soldiers who had probably deserted their units at the front lines and had sought refuge in the city to avoid death. After the fall of Military Region I and II, ARVN soldiers had deserted their units *en masse*. In the closing days of April of l975, these deserters were the terror of civilian population in towns and cities they passed through. Still armed to their teeth and operating in groups of five or six, they blatantly robbed people, held up stores and terrorized the civilian population as if they were citizens of an occupied territory. Apparently indignant over their shameful act, President The started towards the gate to have a word with them but I stopped him short. He was only inviting trouble for himself.

As the chaos outside the Mission House subsided, my son and I went back to our burning task in earnest. There was much to be done before sunset. President The then instructed me and my son to burn as many Books of Mormon as we could while it was still daylight and to stop the burning altogether at dusk because a brightly-lit fire at night would attract the attention of underground Viet Cong agents. I appreciated his precaution. To an ordinary Vietnamese, the Saigon LDS church did not look like a chapel at all. Architecturally, it did not have the conventional look or the standard feature of a chapel that Vietnamese were accustomed to. There was no high-rise steeple, no holy cross at its top. The Mormon chapel was just a regular stucco villa with a large living room in front and three bedrooms plus kitchen, bath and storage facilities in the back. The living room was used for Sunday school, sacramental services and other church meetings, and the bedrooms and living quarters for the American Mormon missionaries. To any suspecting underground Viet Cong agent, this villa looked more like an office building or some kind of secret operations center than a church. But the concern of President The was not just about Viet Cong agents; he also worried about the South Vietnamese police. Since the LDS chapel was located only one block from the National Police Headquarters, it had been the focus of police attention during the past few weeks. Knowing that the American LDS Church was planning to evacuate its Vietnamese faithful to the United States, they had set up a twenty-four-hour watch over the LDS Mission. Recently, people who were coming in and out of the church were followed to their homes and questioned about the Mormon Church evacuation plan. The last thing President The wanted was members of his church getting into trouble with the police. For this reason he had constantly reminded Vietnamese Latter-day Saints and investigators to keep a low profile and not to talk about the church evacuation plan to anyone.

After giving me a few more instructions on how to dispose of the charred remains of the burned books, magazines and church records, President The went back to his office to wait by the telephone for words from

the US Embassy as to when his small congregation of Vietnamese LDS could be evacuated. As he walked away, my eyes followed his frail and stooped figure for a long time until it completely disappeared behind the church back door. It was this image of him that I remembered most vividly when I learned of his incarceration in a communist reeducation camp deep in the rain forest of South Vietnam.

Nguyen Van The was a truly great man. Physically small and otherwise unimpressive, he was nonetheless a tower of strength, a man of integrity and spirit. His handling of the LDS Church affairs in the final days of South Vietnam was a reflection of his noble character. In the final days before the collapse of South Vietnam, while most government officials and army officers were looking after their own interests, Nguyen Van The had shown great care for other people, particularly those for whom he was responsible. During the last days of South Vietnam, he had chosen to stay in Saigon until the last minute to help members of his congregation get out of Vietnam. That last minute had proven too costly for him—Saigon was overrun by the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong before he could catch the last flight out of Vietnam. One year after the fall of South Vietnam, in the security of my home in Santa Rosa, California, I learned that the Communist Government of Vietnam had arrested him and put him in prison. At this sad news, I was stunned, but not surprised. As a matter of fact, I had expected it. What I later learned about the circumstances of his arrest confirmed my expectation. What had happened was when the U.S. Embassy Defense Attaché Office finally reserved some seats for him and his family in one of the evacuation flights, he put his wife and two children on the plane but had refused to go—not until <u>all</u> members of his congregation were evacuated. He never made it. Like a captain of a sinking ship, he sank with the ship—South Vietnam and the rest of the Mormon congregation.

I came to know the Mormon Church through an American professor from Cornell University. His name was Clift Barton from Salt Lake City, Utah. He had been in Vietnam several times to conduct social and economic studies for USAID. I had worked for him as a research assistant, on and off for six years, from 1965 to 1968 and again from 1973 to 1974. Clift Barton was very fluent in Cantonese and Vietnamese languages. He had learned to speak Cantonese while serving his LDS mission years in the British Colony of Hong Kong and Vietnamese while working for USAID in Vietnam. But it wasn't his fluency in Cantonese and Vietnamese that impressed me. It was his *un-American* way that did. Clift Barton was the opposite of everything I had experienced about the Americans in Vietnam during my nineteen years of social and professional association with them. His life style was frugal and conservative. For all those years I knew him, I never saw him smoke or drink alcoholic beverage. I never heard him use bad language even when he was upset. Unlike other Americans, he treated the Vietnamese people with courtesy and respect, regardless of their social status. Clift Barton's behavior was so intriguing that one day I decided to ask him what made him so different from other Americans. His answer and our ensuing conversations were quite a discovery for me. Of course, I had never heard of the Mormon Church before, and the stories of the *Book of Mormon* were quite intriguing. After my first exposure to this American religion, Clift Barton and I spent considerable time discussing the various aspects of the Mormon Church whenever we were on field trips together. The more we discussed his religion, the more I became intrigued. Curious about the Mormon Church, I had spent many hours reading books about Joseph Smith and Mormonism. I had studied the *Book of Mormon*, gone over the LDS church's 130-year history and analyzed dissertations for and against it with an open mind—at first neither believing nor disbelieving, only curious.

I had never been a man of strong religious inclination. As a matter of fact, I had always had a skeptical view of religion and religious leaders. There was a reason for this. Throughout the history of Viet Nam, religion had always been used as a political arm for those who governed this country. It was the French Catholic missionaries that had helped France conquer Vietnam in the Nineteenth Century. Subsequently, it was the French Catholic priesthood that was instrumental in helping France impose its ruthless colonial rule upon the Vietnamese people. To help the French effectively rule Vietnam, the Catholic Church created a class of faithful, loyal followers

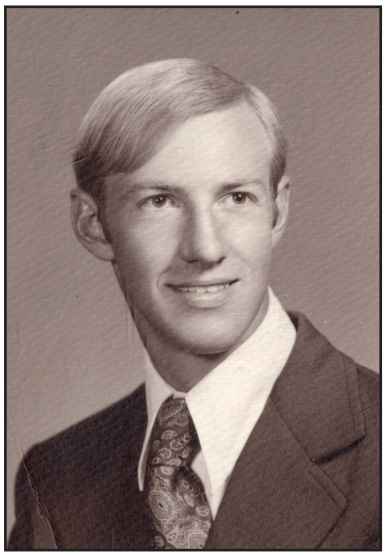
among members of French-educated Vietnamese aristocracies who, for the most part, have converted themselves to the Catholic Church, not necessarily for soul salvation but for personal gain. It is this class of Vietnamese mandarinates and functionaries that helped France rule Vietnam from 1887 to 1945. During the Franco-Vietminh War from 1945 to 1953, being Catholic meant being non-communist and people sometimes requested baptism in order to avoid the suspicion of French *2me Bureau's*. Later, under the administration of President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was Catholic, affiliation with the Catholic Church was a gateway to high positions in his administration. During his reign of South Vietnam from 1954 to 1963, Diem had filled positions of leadership in his government and in his army with Catholics who were selected not necessarily because of their talents or professional qualifications but because of their religious affiliations. And this personnel selection process was done through a network of Catholic priests who, acting as power brokers, would recommend their protégés to Ngo Dinh Diem's brothers, namely Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc of Vinh Long Diocese, Ngo Dinh Can, unofficial advisor to the governor of Central Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's senior advisor. After Ngo Dinh Diem was killed in the Buddhist-led *coup d'etat* in 1963, Buddhism in turn became a sort of *national religion* and Buddhist monks, in turn, had the upper hand in all government affairs. Because of this mixing of church and state affairs, religion in Vietnam had lost its true meaning long ago.

Notwithstanding its theology and doctrine, I was attracted to the Mormon Church for two reasons. One, the Mormons I knew were, by and large, righteous, honest, clean and God-loving people. Their love for God was genuine and their righteousness was manifested in their strict observance of God's law and their maintenance of a high standard of morality in their everyday lives. The other reason, as far as I knew, there was a similarity between the Mormon and the Vietnamese societal and family structures. At the founding of their religion, the Mormons always needed a large number of bodies in their families to do God's work on earth and to expand the economic base of their community, which become depleted and attrited due to their constant movement to avoid harassment and plunder by rival religious groups. Throughout the history of their nation, the Vietnamese people also faced many adversities. Always on the move in search of new land, always struggling for survival against nature and man-made disasters, they, too, needed a large family and a closely-knit community to support and to protect one another. On the spiritual plan, the Mormons looked up to their patriarch as the chosen priesthood leader through whom God's blessings flowed into their families. Likewise, the Vietnamese elected their patriarch to be the spoke person for their family in dealing with the various gods who controlled their lives and their well-being.

The first pair of Mormon missionaries who visited my home on January 10, 1975, were two young Americans named *Anh Ca Le* and *Anh Ca Bang*. In Vietnamese Language *Anh Ca* meant Elder; *Le* and *Bang* were Vietnamese names these elders had chosen for themselves. Vietnamese names usually carried a meaning. In this case, *Le* meant *respectful* and *Bang* meant *peaceful*. The names that these two missionaries had chosen were good names, pleasant to the ear and easy to pronounce. Thus, equipped each with a popular name and a working fluency in Vietnamese language, Elder *Le* and Elder *Bang* became an instant hit among my young children. They were delighted to see these missionaries. It was their first close encounter with the Americans. It was ironic that I, their father, had associated with the Americans for nearly two decades and yet they had had no contact with the Americans. There was a reason for this. The Americans in Vietnam, particularly the junior civilian *advisors* in provincial and district townships were, by and large, an arrogant bunch. In the United States, their occupational skills might limit them to operating bulldozers, building roads or working as sales clerks in department stores, but in Vietnam they were all *advisors*, and because of this bigger-than-life title, they usually took on a high-and-mighty attitude, looking down upon the Vietnamese people and on their way of life. Of course, I did not want my children to have anything to do with these Americans. Elder *Le* and Elder *Bang* were a different kind of Americans. They were polite and respectful to us and to our neighbors. We learned that Elder *Le* was from Farmington, New Mexico, and Elder *Bang* from Salt Lake City, Utah. Besides their proper countenance and behavior, what impressed me the most about them was their sense of duty and purpose. They

were willing to sacrifice two prime years of their lives to do missionary work for their Church and then go home to pursue their personal life goals after finishing their missions. Barely nineteen and twenty, they might not know all the answers concerning the theologies and doctrines of their Church, but their youthful energy and their passion for missionary work compensated for the lack of knowledge and experiences.

During their visits to my home, Elder *Le* and Elder *Bang* taught my children the Gospel of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as revealed in the *Book of Mormon*. They taught my children to sing songs glorifying God, love for family and humankind—a far cry from the hate-filled propaganda songs which my children heard every day on state-run radios and televisions. They taught my children to love God, to respect their parents and to keep their body clean by abstaining from certain foods and drinks. Three months after they came to our home, all in my family were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Milton O. Harris - the Mormon Missionary who brought the Gospel to our family (Back of Picture: *"I Love you like my own family" Anh Ca Le*

I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I had not noticed the reappearance of President The by my side. When I looked up at him, I detected a touch of sadness on his face. Neither he nor I were happy about having to burn *God's Word*. In spite of ourselves, we felt it was a cowardly act, tantamount to betraying God. We both felt very sad that the contemporary messages from God, through Joseph Smith, had to be destroyed so prematurely. In silence and sadness we looked at the red hot flames in the burning pit as they devoured pages after pages of God's written Word.

Then, in a very calm voice he told me he had just received word from the US Embassy Defense Attaché Office that there were three spaces available on one of its evacuation aircrafts and that he had sent an LDS family of three to the military airport to catch the plane. He explained, "*I had thought about sending part of your family on that airplane but since there were seven people in your family I thought it would be wise to wait.*"

I told him I understood. Then, changing the subject of our conversation, he asked me if I had heard anything from my *orphan* children. It was a question I wished he had not asked. A week before, my wife and I had negotiated with an orphanage whose *war orphans* had been chosen for evacuation to the United States via the so-called *Baby Lift* Operation. We had begged the orphanage to include my son Phuong (ten), and my two daughters Thuy and Van (age nine and six), on the list of children to be evacuated. Obviously, my children were not orphans, but using fake birth certificates, we had been able to convince the people in charge of the orphanage to accept them as war orphans. We had asked the orphanage to allow us to keep our *orphan* children for a few more days to mentally prepare them for the separation. On April 21st, 1975, on the day of their departure, we had taken them to the orphanage, keeping our fingers-crossed that they would have a safe journey to America and a good caring family to adopt them. In sending my children away, it was my hope that they would have a better life than the rest of us in the days ahead when the communists became rulers of South Vietnam.

The decision to send them away had not been easy for me and for my family, particularly for Ai Chau, their mother. We all knew that once we let them go, we would never see them again. Apparently my *orphan* children knew that too, for at the moment we said "good-bye" to them, we detected excruciating pain on their faces. Yet, they dared not cry for crying would have betrayed their true identity. They were supposed to act happy because they were going to have adoptive parents waiting for them in the United States. My children

did not cry, but they were sad, very sad. I have never forgotten the painful expressions on their faces as they looked at me and their mother and their siblings tearfully, their blurred eyes telling us they did not want to go. In my tempestuous life, I had many a time experienced pains and sufferings, but what I felt on that day was far more painful and far more agonizing than anything I ever had experienced before. For weeks prior to their departure, I had explained to them that the communists were going to take over South Vietnam and that there would be no future for them growing up in a communist state, particularly when their father, was a confirmed enemy of the revolution. I hoped that my children understood what I had said to them, but now, in retrospect, I wondered if they really did.

No, I haven't heard anything about my children, since the day I said "good-bye" to them... I don't even know if they have left Vietnam as yet.

As I uttered these words, I felt a chill running up and down my spine. Since the day my children left, I had been worrying and fearful that something unfortunate might happen to them. They could be arbitrarily bumped from the list of evacuees and dumped somewhere in this city of four million without my knowledge. In the chaotic final days of the South Vietnam, the hurriedly-organized Baby-lift Operation was fraught with mismanagement and mishaps. Because only orphans from orphanages with the right connections were selected to participate in the Baby-lift Operation, there existed a fierce rivalry between children organizations and there were those who would not hesitate to use tricks to *dump* orphans from a rival orphanage from the list of evacuees and to replace them with their own. My other fear concerned my children's physical safety. In late March, 1975, a US Air Force CA-5 with hundreds of children on board crashed on a rice field immediately after take-off, killing close to 200 orphans. Even though US and GVN authorities categorically denied it, rumor persisted that the huge aircraft was shot down by enraged ARVN soldiers who felt they were betrayed by their American ally. In the final days of South Vietnam, being children carried no guarantee of life protection. Thousands of children were found dead on evacuation barges and ships fleeing Danang when this city fell into the hands of the NVA and the NFLSVN in March 1975. They had died because they could not withstand the shoving and stampeding of retreating ARVN soldiers who wouldn't hesitate to fight and to kill even women and children in order to secure a space for themselves on these evacuation sea craft.

As if reading my mind, President Nguyen Van The gently cupped his hands on my head and gave me his blessing,

. . .By the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood which is bestowed on me, I command you to go forward, to find your lost children and to be with them again.

His prayer had the power of a watershed, for suddenly I felt an incredible sense of relief in myself, a feeling heretofore unbeknownst to me. For the first time since being separated from my *orphan* children, I no longer felt confused and despaired, and even though I did not know precisely what I was going to do, I felt I was being urged to act, to go forward, to do something, anything, to find my children. For me, it was a strange phenomenon indeed, for normally I would not do anything without careful analysis and planning. But now all this logic was far, far away from my mind. Maybe now was the time I must seek God's help and I was ready to do it through fervent prayers.

As I turned around to say *"good-bye"* to president Nguyen Van The and thank him for his blessing, he was all smiles. Apparently, he had seen the change in me, the change from an independent, stubborn, strong-willed individual who believed only in his own strength when dealing with life problems, to a humble, resigned person, willing to seek God's help.

"*Brother Nhon, go find your children!"* He said these words looking straight into my eyes as if giving me an order. *"But. . .the burning. . .the church documents. . .*?" He would not let me finish. *"Don't worry, I'll take care of it somehow. . . Go find your children. Your children are more important!*"

On these words, he firmly offered his hand for me to shake, but instead of shaking his hand, I chose to embrace him, for I wanted to borrow a little fire and strength from this Godly man who was full of the Holy Spirit. I knew I would need that fire and that strength to sustain myself in the difficult tasks ahead—to help my family escape from death and to be reunited with my lost children again.

As I made my way to the gate leading onto Thanh Thai street to go home, I turned to look at the LDS chapel for one last time, for I had the feeling I would never see it again. There had been many good and tender moments in that chapel. Every Sunday in the past four months I had taken my family to this place to pray and to worship our new-found God. It was in this House of God that I had found peace and security for the first time in my turbulent life. *"Good-bye,"* I found myself murmuring and waving at this chapel as if it were a living person. At that moment, to me, it was.

It was 7:00 p.m. when my son Trung and I left the LDS Mission compound. We rode our bikes in silence along side each other for the short distance home. A light rain had started falling and the streets were deserted. Because of rumors of an impending *coup d'etat*, the curfew in Saigon had been lowered to 8:00 pm and not too many people dared venture onto the streets for fear of being arrested or shot at. While riding home, the words of President Nguyen Van The kept ringing in my ear, *". . .Your children are more important. . .Your children are more important. . ."*

Did my children know that the only reason I had sent them away was to secure a better life for them? Did my children know that I loved them more than anything else in the world, in spite of my seemingly cold and detached attitude towards them?

As I rode my bike home alongside my son Trung, these questions kept churning in my head. The rain fell harder now and my face was all wet. Because of the rain water, my son did not realize that I was crying—crying for the missed opportunities to show love and affection to my children, particularly to those who had gone and might never come back. When I got home that night, I assembled the rest of my family in the living room and told them I was going to find a way to take them all out of Vietnam and to be reunited with the lost children. I told them that I did not know exactly what to do but with God's help I would find a way. Didn't Lehi take his family out of Jerusalem to embark on a journey in the wilderness six hundred years B.C. not knowing exactly what was in store for him in the wilderness, except for his total faith in the Lord God. Equipped with this total faith Lehi once had, I knew that the Lord God would help me and my family to leave South Vietnam sound and safe.

Nga, Phuong, Trung, Hoa, Lap Van, Thuy, Anh

CHAPTER TWO

ESCAPE

April 24th, 6 a.m. Saigon time

Cringed inside the doorway of the World Airways Boeing 727, Phuong, Thuy, Van and Hoa, my little children, were frantically crying for help as the head elements of a huge mob charged up the tail ramp of the aircraft and started pushing women and children off the airplane. I had made several attempts to surge forward to reach them and take them off the airplane, but, like tidal waves, the huge mob had kept sweeping me backward farther and farther away from my children.

The unruly mob, mostly soldiers, was extremely ferocious. They fiercely fought their way to the aircraft, shooting anyone who dared stand in their path. Not even women, children and their comrades-in-arms were spared of their demonic wraths. The badges on their uniforms indicated they belonged to the most elite battle groups of the South Vietnamese Army: Trau Dien (Crazy Buffalo), Hac Bao (Black Panthers), and Cop Bien (Sea Tigers). Friends and foes alike considered them the toughest of the tough and the bravest of the brave. But, at this moment, they were just cowards trying to run away from the North Vietnamese Army and, in the process, had fought helpless civilians to secure a means of escape for themselves on the rescue aircraft on the ground to evacuate women and children out of the war zone.

I had pleaded with these soldiers to let me come close to my children and take them off the airplane, but they had ignored my plea and had beaten me savagely. In the end, to silence my seemingly annoying plea to them, one of the soldiers had struck me in the head with the butt of his M-16 rifle, sending me sinking to the ground. Bleeding profusely, but still conscious, I had called out to my children to quickly get off the aircraft and run for their dear lives, but buried under the thousands of stampeding feet, I did not know if they were able to safely get off the rescue aircraft.

I must have let out a very loud scream, for Ai Chau, my wife, had run to my bed and tried to wake me up from my dream. Judging from my tear-wet, haggard and frightened face, she knew that I had had a bad dream. She even had an inkling as to the type of nightmare I had had, for the very first question she asked was, *"It is about our orphan children, isn't it?"*

On April 21, 1975, the day on which South Vietnam's embattled President Nguyen Van Thieu resigned from his office, the orphan children were supposed to have left Vietnam on one of the rescue aircraft, but we did not know that for sure. *Operation Baby Lift* was a secret operation and we were not supposed to know the exact date, time and place of departure of our children. Because of this shroud of secrecy surrounding Operation Baby Lift, we were completely in the dark as to their whereabouts at all times.

Have our children left Vietnam as yet? If they have, where are they now? Are they being placed in good foster homes? Are they being well treated by their adoptive parents? Are they being adopted together or separately? Are they healthy? Are they able to push the images of their parents and siblings out of their mind and to go on living normally with their adoptive parents?

These were the questions that had haunted us day and night since the day our *orphan* children left. We felt they were too small and too fragile to face life by themselves. Our son Phuong was only ten, and our daughters Thuy and Van were barely nine and six. We did find some solace in the fact that Hoa, their teenage sister, was with them in this adventure to the unknown. But Hoa was just eighteen, and how much could she help them? Hoa's being with them was not by design, but by accident. On the day the children departed from the orphanage for an undisclosed airfield, Hoa had been there with the rest of the family to say *"good-bye"* to them. As the orphans were being loaded on the bus, a large group of people had gathered around it--probably more as curious on-lookers than anything else. But the American bus driver, out of fear that they might hijack the bus, had tried to get all the orphans on it as quickly as possible. In so doing, he had pushed Hoa onto the bus, mistaking her for an orphanage worker. That Hoa was with the young children somewhat alleviated our worries but could not totally erase our fear, particularly the ever-present fear that our children had never left Vietnam, that they were being held hostage somewhere in this chaotic city of four million by hoodlums in exchange for an American promise to provide them safe passage to the United States of America or to other countries of their choice. If this happened, even Hoa could not defend them.

Picture taken in mid April 1975 right before we parted with our youngest children -
Back: Nga, Anh, Hoa, Phuong
Front: Thuy, Nhon, Van, Ai Chau

There was a reason for our fear. During the infamous retreat of the South Vietnamese troops from Military Region I in March 1975, soldiers of the *Hac Bao* (Black Panthers) Battle Group had shot their way onto a commercial aircraft, which Ed Daly the philanthropist CEO of World Airways had sent to Danang to evacuate women and children out of the war zone. For all his good intentions, Ed Daly had failed in his mission of mercy. When his plane was airborne, there were only two women and one baby on the plane; the rest were fully armed soldiers of the Hac Bao Battle Group.

No, it isn't about them; it is about something else.

I answered Ai Chau without looking at her. I had lied because I did not want to cause her any more fear and anxiety than she already had. Ai Chau knew I had lied to her, but she did not pressure me for a truthful answer, knowing that I, too, was already laden with grief. We sat in numbed silence for what seemed to be an eternity, each of us deeply absorbed in our own desperate thoughts. Then in a shaking voice, punctuated by sobs, Ai Chau said: *"I cannot go on living like this. I'd rather die than live without my little children. I regret having agreed with you to send the children away. We should have kept them here with us. If we are to die, it is better for us to die together as a family."*

My heart sank to a new low when I heard these words. I knew that they were words of despair, putting feeling over reason, and expressed at a time of utmost despondence, but her feeling wasn't entirely beyond rationality if the code of relationship and honor in the Vietnamese culture was taken into account.

In the final days of South Vietnam, the thought of death by suicide, individually or collectively, had crossed the minds of many people, us included, when faced with the question of what to do when the communists took

over South Vietnam—slavery or death? And for many, death had been the choice. A non-commissioned officer of the South Vietnamese Army, on learning of Saigon's capitulation to the communist forces, rounded up his wife and children in front of South Vietnam's national flag and had gunned them down before killing himself. On the day General Duong Van Minh, the last president of South Vietnam, ordered his troops to lay down arms and surrender themselves to the North Vietnamese Army, an ARVN lieutenant-colonel had laid down at the foot of the Fighting Marines Monument in front of Saigon Hotel De Ville, put the muzzle of his pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger to kill himself. I wouldn't say their actions were right or wrong; simply, that they had chosen death over the shame of surrendering to the communists.

A stretch of uneasy silence fell between us, for we felt a wrong word, an unsubstantiated assumption, an ambiguous guess, or a discussion as to what was happening to our children only served to deepen our fear and anxiety. Then, suddenly Ai Chau turned to me, looked straight into my eyes and said in an imploring but firm voice,

> *"You have worked for the US Government for nearly two decades; you have sided with Americans, doing your best to help them fight their war against the communists. Should not it be their turn to help you now? Don't be ashamed to ask for the American help. You have been loyal to them; they should be loyal to you. Go to the US Embassy to seek help from them now before it is too late! Please do it for my sake and for the sake of our children. . ."*

For a woman of few words, Ai Chau's long, assertive statement was indeed phenomenal. Normally, she was calm and submissive and never argumentative. She must have felt that this was her last chance to say it and to say it all. Instead of answering her with words, I nodded. Satisfied that I had understood her feelings, she stood up and went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast and pack school lunches for the children who still remained with us because they were a notch or two over the maximum age of ten allowed to participate in Operation Baby Lift.

After Ai Chau was gone, I thought long and hard about what she had said. The emotional distress she had suffered since the orphan children's departure had reached a breaking point. She missed her children so much that she stayed awake all night for several nights in a row. At meal time, she would not touch any food. When she heard voices of small children playing and laughing in front of our home, she would run to the balcony and look out to see if those were her children's.

The idea of sending the children away was my idea. Now it was my responsibility to act and to end her suffering. In the past, I had been too proud to directly beg Americans for help. But, for the sake of Ai Chau and my other children, I would beg them today. Besides, as Ai Chau had hinted, America did owe me something.

April 25th, 0800 hours, Saigon time.
When I left my residence (No. 244B, Nguyen Huynh Duc Street) to see Ambassador Graham Anderson Martin at the US Embassy to plead with him to help me and my family get out of Vietnam, I was armed with a thick dossier. This dossier was vouchering for my nineteen years of dedicated service to the United States Government and my absolute faith in God.

The dossier I brought with me contained personnel action papers indicating the various functions I had held while in employment with MAAG, MACV, USARV, CDEC, PHOENIX and other US organizations in Vietnam from 1956 to 1973. Some of these functions were innocent but others were quite sensitive depending on the

type of organizations for whom I had worked at the time. For example, my job as civilian personnel director for USARV in Pleiku, Nhatrang and Saigon in 1970-72, was purely technical, but my involvement with MACV-J2, CDEC (Combined Document Exploitation Center) and the Phoenix Program from1963 to 1968 was politically and militarily sensitive. Also included in my personnel dossier were letters of commendations by my former US employers about my loyal and dedicated service to America. One such letter of commendation came from General William C. Westmoreland, Commander- in-Chief of the US forces in Vietnam. This dossier wasn't much leverage for asking the US Ambassador to grant me and my family safe passage to the United States of America, but that was the only leverage I had. Besides, I had run out of options and also felt it was what God told me to do.

Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara and General William C. Westmoreland

For the past six weeks, since the fall of Military Regions I and II, north and northwest of Saigon, I had traveled the length and width of what was left of South Vietnam in search of an escape route for my family, but the search had been futile. Escaping Vietnam by land was impossible. To reach Thailand to the west, one must go through Cambodia and Laos. Unfortunately these two countries were about to be, if not already, lost to communist *Khmer Rouge* and *Pathet Lao* forces. To reach Malaysia and Indonesia by boat was not only dangerous but inherently suicidal. The waters between Vietnam and these two countries were infested with sharks and marauding sea pirates. Besides, my attempt to buy a boat for escape had failed.

With regards to my former employers and colleagues, I had lost contact with all of them for over two years. I had left MACV in 1973, when it was dissolved to comply with the terms and conditions of the Paris Peace Agreement between Hanoi and the United States. After MACV was officially deactivated, I had gone to work for a group of American economists serving as consultants for South Vietnam's Economics Ministry, but they too had gone home.

The only contact I now had with America was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah and a few American members of this church who, as essential staff of Saigon US Embassy, had to remain in South Vietnam until the last minute. I had known these Americans at church meetings, but our mutual acquaintance was superficial at best. Therefore, I had never thought of seeking their help to evacuate my family out of Vietnam. I was too proud to do that.

With regards to the official position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints *vis-à-vis* the issue of evacuation, it had no formal, independent plan to directly involve itself in the evacuation of its Vietnamese church members to the United States of America as the Seventh Day Adventist Church did. However it did have an informal arrangement with the US Embassy's Defense Attaché Office (DAO) whereby the latter would reserve a few seats on its evacuation aircrafts for Vietnamese LDS church members, whenever possible. These evacuation aircrafts were primarily reserved for Americans and their families. To me, this arrangement wasn't good enough. Under this arrangement, to evacuate all 200 or so Vietnamese LDS church members, church investigators excluded, DAO ought to have at least one hundred flights at its disposal. DAO simply didn't have that many flights. In retrospect, I was right in my calculation. When Saigon collapsed on April 30, 1975, only ten percent of Vietnamese LDS church members had been evacuated. Among those left behind was Nguyen Van The (no relation to Nguyen Van Thieu), president of the Saigon LDS Mission.

Around mid-April 1975, Cliff Barton, the American professor who had initiated my family to the LDS Church

and for whom I had worked as a research assistant for several years, suddenly re-appeared in Saigon. His sudden apparition gave me hope that somehow he could help me and my family out of Vietnam, but that hope was soon dissipated. During my meeting with him at the Majestic Hotel the day after he arrived in Saigon, in response to my request for help, he bluntly told me that he had committed himself to his Chinese business partner and the reason for his coming to Saigon this time was to take his business partner's family and their antique collections out of Vietnam. Again, I was too proud to insist. In the face of death, a person either acted his best or his worst. On that day, I acted my best. Without a hint of reproach, I calmly bid him farewell and left, conducting myself with pride and dignity. His last advice to me when we shook hands was:

> *"The transition between life and death occurs within the twinkling of an eye. If the Vietcong decide to execute you by shooting, death will happen so fast you will not even feel it … Besides, death will not separate you from your family; it will reunite you and your family forever in heaven*!"

It was grim and brutish advice, but it made good sense. If worse came to worse, death might be a good way of escaping pain, suffering and slavery. That night, after all the children had gone to sleep, Ai Chau and I stayed up late to discuss a plan of *death*.

The scene that I saw on Truong Minh Giang Street at 0800 hours on April 25th of 1975 was one of total pandemonium. Traffic snarled to a halt in both directions. Horns blaring, cars, trucks, military jeeps, motorized cycles, and motorbikes tried to cut in front of each other while the men behind their wheels angrily hurled curses and obscenities at one another. An ARVN officer in a combat-equipped military Jeep, evidently enraged by the traffic jam, pulled out his gun from its holster and shot in the air three times, ordering the driver of the car ahead of him to get out of his way or be shot at. But the officer's threat did not seem to work. Not that the driver did not want to oblige. He simply could not move his vehicle.

Since the day American troops arrived in Vietnam, Saigon had always been a city of serious vehicular traffic problems. Taking advantage of the foreign exchange surplus created by the unlimited amount of dollars the US Government had poured into Vietnam to support its war expenses, Saigon import-export companies with the sanction of corrupted South Vietnamese government officials, greedy for kickbacks, had imported all kinds of vehicles to Vietnam—sedans, cars, trucks, motorbikes—even though they were not needed items for a country at war. With the Viet Cong controlling most of the countryside, there were no places for these cars, trucks and motorbikes to go except within the city itself like ants trapped inside a jar turned upside down. Recently Saigon traffic was rendered worse by the sudden influx of military and civilian vehicles from dozens of fallen cities in Military Regions I and II.

Knowing that I would never be able to reach the US Embassy located on Thong Nhat Boulevard, two blocks from the Notre Dame Cathedral in uptown Saigon, in a traffic jam such as this, I accosted a middle-aged, honest-looking man, sitting idly on a propped up Honda motorbike on the curb of Truong Minh Giang Street and asked him if he could give me a ride to the US Embassy on the back seat of his motorbike for 500 dong (the equivalent of one US dollar at that time). He nodded in agreement.

This man and his motorbike was part of a public transportation system, unique in the world, called *xe om* or *hug-a-ride*. It was so-called because the passenger in the back seat of the bike had to wrap his arms around the waist of the driver in the front seat to steady himself while the driver weaved his way around Saigon's narrow and crowded streets at the speed of forty to forty-five miles per hour. This mode of transportation was very popular in Saigon in the days after the American troops, the false source of South Vietnam's wealth, had

withdrawn from Vietnam. For the unpretentious Saigonese, it was a cheap and fast way to get around town. For operators of this kind of transportation, mostly low-level functionaries, school teachers, soldiers, students etc., it was an honest way to earn a few extra *dongs* to make ends meet. When I visited Vietnam in 1989, *xe om* was still a very popular mode of transportation besides the *cyclo* (pedicab). Through this mode of transportation, I had had the opportunity to converse with its operators—this time mostly former ARVN soldiers or NVA soldiers out of favor with the communist regime, workers without work, peasants without land, farmers without farms. It was through these people that I had obtained first-hand information as to life under communism after its victorious conquest of South Vietnam in 1975. Without excuses to make for the fall of South Vietnam, no Marxist ideology to defend for the failure of the communist regime to better their life as it had claimed, these individuals had confided in me the sad truth of the victorious conquest of South Vietnam in 1975. Promises of a life of independence, liberty and happiness under communism had not materialized. Disappointed, many Vietnamese had opted to leave Vietnam by boats, rafts or anything that could float.

During the *xe om* trip to the US Embassy I had struck a conversation with the driver. He told me that he was a male nurse at Cho Ray Municipal Hospital, that he did not use to do the *xe om*, but after the Americans withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, his wife had lost her job as a nurse aid at the Long Binh US Army field hospital and he had to do the *xe om* to make ends meet.

> "*Are you originally from North Vietnam?*" I asked, noticing he spoke Vietnamese with a northern accent.
>
> "*Yes I am,*" he replied, "*my folks were originally from My Trach Village. . .*"
>
> "*Did you say My Trach?*" I interjected.
>
> "*Yes, My Trach, near the district town of Ke Sat in Hai Duong Province*."
>
> "*What a coincidence!*" I exclaimed. "*In my younger day as a sub-lieutenant, I used to station there with the 20th Vietnamese Infantry*."

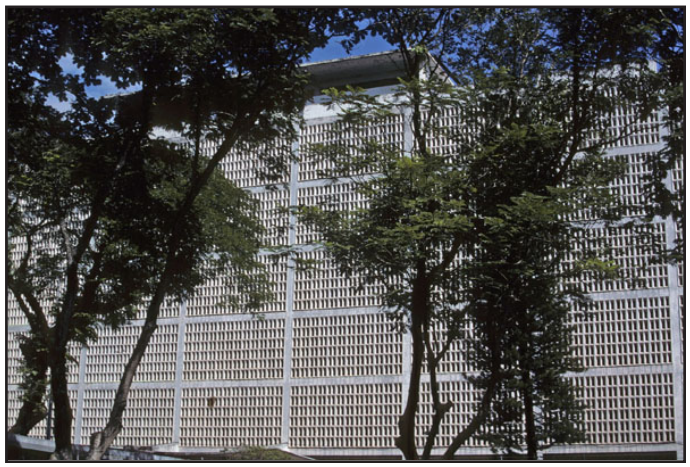
Encouraged by this unexpected coincidence, he went on with his life story. His parents, like their grandparents and great-grandparents before them, had been cultivating the rice fields of My Trach Village all their life but when the Franco-Viet Minh War came (that began in 1946 and lasted till 1953), My Trach Village had become a target of indiscriminate mortar shelling by both the French and the Viet Minh. It was so targeted because it had been classified as a *vung xoi dau* or *rice/beans area*, a term suggesting that the village was sometimes controlled by the French and sometimes by the Viet Minh. Faced with these constant rains of death, his folks had left their ancestral village and had sought refuge in Hanoi, a territory under French control. While in Hanoi, they had done odd jobs to survive. The junior Nguyen, the man who gave the bike ride, had gone to school and had finished junior high. He had joined the Bao Dai's Army at the age of seventeen and had been trained as a medical corpsman fighting alongside the French Expeditionary Corps. When the French lost the battle of Dien Bien Phu, it signed a peace treaty with the Viet Minh. Under the provisions of this treaty, known as the Geneva Accord, Vietnam was divided into two halves, with the territory north of the 17th Parallel under the control of the Viet Minh and the territory south of it, under the French-supported nationalist government of Bao Dai. Being Catholic, Mr. Nguyen and his extended family had moved south in 1954 and had settled in Ho Nai with other Catholic refugees from North Vietnam.

"*But now. . .*" Mr. Nguyen never finished his sentence, but I already knew what he meant. . . .b*ut now . . . where can I run*?

For the remainder of the trip, he did not utter another word, apparently feeling desperate and hopeless. For the past three weeks I had felt the same way. When Mr. Nguyen dropped me off at the US Embassy, I paid him 1,000 dongs.

April 25th 1975, 0900 hours, Saigon time.

In spite of the early morning hours, the crowd outside the gate of the US Embassy compound on Thong Nhat Boulevard had already swollen to several hundred people. They all tried to get into the US Embassy and show the US Embassy staff papers and documents indicating they were former employees of the United States Government. But the US Marines who guarded the gate had refused to let them in. The Marines were under strict orders not to let anyone through the gate unless the visitor was accompanied by an American official from the Embassy. Each time such a visitor and the American escort were permitted through the gate, the crowd would surge forward, frantically waving their papers to the Marine guards, but the latter remained unperturbed. Gently but firmly the Marines would push them back out of the gates with their M-16 rifles, and the crowd would obediently recoil, upset but resigned. There was something about these US Marines that commanded respect from the crowd. They were tough, but not mean.



Former US Embassy in Saigon

Standing on the curb on the far side of Thong Nhat Boulevard, I surveyed the chaotic scene in front of the US Embassy with despair. It was obvious that I would never be able to get into the US Embassy without a proper escort. Where could I find one? I did know some Americans on the embassy staff, but there was no way I could contact them. While I was unable to make any move, I saw an ARVN general in civilian clothes and his wife, being escorted through the gate by an American official. One did not need to have the great mind of a mathematician to know that this ARVN general had gone to the US Embassy for one reason and one reason only—to beg the US ambassador to grant him and his family safe passage to the United States.

I was suddenly seized with anger. A general of the army, on active duty, deserting his troops while the fighting was going on? As unbelievable as it seemed, this was exactly the very thing a number of senior officers of the South Vietnamese Army were trying to do in the last days of the Vietnam War. On the night he resigned from the presidency of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, a career army general himself, had come on national television and had solemnly sworn to the Vietnamese troops and people that, even though he was no longer President of South Vietnam, he would continue to fight the communists to his last drop of blood. Yet only four days after he had made this solemn declaration, he had deserted his army and his people by secretly fleeing to Taiwan. A few days later, Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, South Vietnam's former prime minister, piloted his own helicopter and fled to a US vessel anchored off the coast of South Vietnam. What made Ky's desertion all the more ironic was the fact that a few days before his flight, he had gathered a group of former Catholic refugees from North Vietnam before the *Ba Chuong* (Three Bells) Church in Saigon and had noisily blasted those who had fled the country to save themselves as "cowards," apparently insinuating that Nguyen Van Thieu was one of these. Had these generals decided to retreat into the marquis to wage guerilla warfare against the communist invaders from the North, could they succeed in reversing the military and political situation in South Vietnam? Maybe they could or maybe they could not. But that was what duty and honor obliged them to do instead of *running like mice from a house on fire*.

The sight of a ranking ARVN officer seeking refuge in a foreign embassy made me feel sick in my stomach. Disgusted, I started to walk away but a still but unmistakable voice inside me told me to stay put. *"Be patient,"* said the voice. *"Swallow your pride*." At that precise moment, an official limousine bearing an American flag pulled up at the curbside near the spot where I was standing. That the driver of the limousine chose to drop off his VIP passengers at the curbside instead of driving them through the gate was beyond my comprehension. Maybe the driver did not want to upset the angry crowd, or maybe it was God's will. At any rate, a group of American VIPs disgorged from the limousine and started walking towards the front gate of the embassy. As if being pushed by an invisible force, I found myself falling in step with this group of American VIPs through the gate and into the embassy compound. Neither the Marines at the gate nor the one at the security front desk stopped me and checked my I.D. Because I had a darker complexion and was bigger than most Vietnamese, the US Marine guards must have taken me for a Latino-American and a member of the US delegation. Dressed in suit and tie with a thick manila envelop under my arm, I sure looked like one. Once inside the embassy compound, the US delegation went up the staircase and walked straight to the office of the ambassador with me trailing behind them. Suddenly, I realized that I had a big problem. If I kept following the delegation to the Ambassador office, my true identity would be revealed, and I could be arrested and turned over to the police for questioning. The US Embassy in Vietnam was very security sensitive, particularly after the VC attack on its compound during the TET offensive of 1968. Therefore, any unauthorized entry into it would raise serious questions about the intent of the perpetrator. The police could keep me in jail for months for questioning. *What now?* I had to think quickly. As I was trying to solve this problem, the American delegates walked by an office with a sign on the door saying, *Deputy Chief of Mission.* I quickly fell out of line, walked to the door and knocked. *"Come in,"* ordered the voice from within.

The office of the No. 2 American in Vietnam as I saw it on April 25th, 1975, looked more like an armory than an office. The floor was littered with boxes of ammunitions and grenades, combat helmets, walky-talkies, bullet proof vests, assorted handguns, M-16 rifles, and even Chinese-made AK-47s. Two men were in the room, busy checking items on the floor against their check-lists. One of the men whom I later learned to be *Charge d'Affaires* Wolf Lehman raised his eyes from his check-list and looked at me suspiciously. From his inquiring look, I could tell he was trying to remember when and where we had met. Unable to come to any conclusion, he suddenly asked me in a harsh almost rude voice, apparently annoyed for being disturbed. *"What do you want?"* In response to his question I was equally direct. *"I came here to-day to let you know that it would not be in the best interest of the United States if the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong should capture me."* I paused briefly for these words to sink in and then explained to him that I had been working for the US Government for nearly twenty years and during those years, I had held some very sensitive positions with the US intelligence community. *"I knew too much about CDEC operations and the torture of VC prisoners captured by handlers of the PHOENIX Program, and it would be embarrassment to the United States if my captors forcibly made me talk."* Having said these words, I handed my dossier to Wolf Lehman. While I spoke, the other man in the room listened intensely. The *Charge d'Affaires* perused through my dossier, occasionally lingered on pages containing information of interest to him and then matter-of-factly, almost coldly, he returned the dossier to me. *"You sure have had some very sensitive jobs with us,"* he commented. *"I will put you on the evacuation list. Please leave your name and phone number, and we will contact you when the evacuation starts rolling."* I left my name and phone number with him, thanked him for his time, and left.

As I left the room and walked toward the staircase, I heard quick footsteps right behind me. I turned to look. It was the man I had seen earlier in the Charge d'Affaires Office. He introduced himself as *"McBride"* and said he was trying to catch me to tell me not to go past the Marines Guard at the front desk on my way out of the chancery. *"Mr. Wolf Lehman has called the security guard at the front desk and scolded him for*

having sent you to his office without checking with him first," said McBride, "*and the guard is very upset. He will arrest you and turn you over to the police if he catches you on the way out."* McBride then told me he had heard my conversation with Mr. Wolf Lehman, had appreciated my dilemma and was willing to help me if I would accept his help. *"Of course I would,"* I hurriedly answered him.

> *"Then, wait for me at train crossing gate # 6 on Cong Ly Street at exactly 3 p.m. today. I will take you directly to the people in charge of the evacuation. But, in the meantime, follow me."*

He then led me out the embassy through the back gate.

April 25th 1975, 1215 hours, Saigon time.
Leaving the US Embassy, I took a taxi to go home. The traffic had lightened up some. People had either been in a restaurant to eat lunch or at home to catch a short noon siesta, leaving most thoroughfares in Saigon half empty. With so many things happening to me so quickly and so unexpectedly within the past few hours, my reactions to them had been like those of a robot. I had had neither the time nor the mind-set to analyze them and comprehend them. But now, relaxed and comfortable in the back seat of a taxi, I had the chance to review the series of events that had led me into the US Embassy, my encounter with McBride, my trespassing of a foreign territory that could put me in jail without trial for months. These events were indeed strange to say the least. That the delegation of American VIPs had gotten off their official limousine at the curbside near the spot where I was standing, giving me the once-in-a-life-time opportunity to mingle with them and to follow them into the embassy without being challenged by the Marines might be interpreted as luck, but how could I define the unconditional help that Mc Bride had offered me—a total stranger to him. Were these incidents pre-arranged by God? Indeed they were. I could not explain them otherwise. Taking into consideration the fact that South Vietnam, in the Spring of 1975, was a country in the process of being liquidated, a *hell-hole* so to speak, where selfishness, deception, betrayal, treason were the prevailing practices of the day, it was strange and indeed heart-warming to find people who still had in their hearts uncalculated kindness and genuine compassion for others.

When I broke the good news to my wife and children, they were overwhelmed with joy. "Does *it mean that we are going to see the orphan children?"* they excitedly asked. "*God willing, you will,*" I assured them. My wife and my children were very close to one another. In my line of work, I sometimes was separated from them for months on end, but they were never separated from one another. Therefore, the conspicuous absence of the *orphan* children in our home had been a great pain for them. Since their departure, our home had been like a funeral home.

I arrived at train-crossing Gate # 6 an hour earlier than scheduled. I wanted to make sure that I would not miss Mr. McBride if he were there a bit early. But when three o'clock came and went and Mr. McBride was nowhere to be seen, I began to wonder. Was Mr. McBride going to come or was it another hollow American promise? Hadn't the Americans in Pleiku, Kontum, Hue, Danang, and Nhatrang promised their employees they would never abandon them, but abandoned them they had when the communists marched into these cities? How could I break this sad news to my wife and children? How could I tell them that their hope to be saved from death and to be reunited with the missing children was just a false hope?

As I was juggling with these thoughts, a black Citroen sedan pulled up at the curb side not far from me. My immediate reaction to the sight of the black Citroen was fear. Since French Colonial Time, black Citroens had been used by secret police to arrest people. Why? I wasn't sure. Probably because being a non-marked police car, the Citroen had an innocent look. Could this be one of them? There had been too many arrests

lately due to rumors of another impending *coup d'etat*. It took me a full minute to realize that the man behind the wheel of the black Citroen was McBride. He was thirty minutes late. But thanks to God, he did keep his promise. When I approached him he told me to quickly get into the rear section of the Citroen and to lie low on the car floor. He then threw a blanket over me. "*I don't want the Vietnamese guard at the check point of the Phi Long Air Force base to know that you are in the car*," he said. "*Keep still until after I get inside the DAO Compound*." After making sure that everything was in order, he drove the black Citroen in the direction of Tan son Nhut Airport which also housed the VNAF Phi Long Air Force base and the US Defense Attaché Office.

The US Defense Attaché Office (DAO) was the offshoot of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), which for many years had been the nerve center of the US war machinery in Indochina. In 1973, MACV was deactivated to comply with the terms and conditions of the Paris Peace Treaty, and DAO took its place to continue providing military assistance to South Vietnam in its war against the Viet Cong without the direct involvement of US troops. Between 1973 and 1975, the US Embassy's Defense Attaché Office in Vietnam probably was the largest of its kind in the world at any time, war or peace. For the first eighteen months after the 1973 cease-fire, it had a staff of nearly 100 military officers and men, employed over 2,500 American civilians—mostly weaponry and communications technicians—and 5,000 third-country and Vietnamese nationals to support its mission. The Nixon Administration—and the first few months of the Ford Administration after that—wanted to make sure that, through DAO personnel's logistical expertise, the South Vietnamese Armed Forces were amply supplied with the necessary military hardware to withstand a military take-over by Communist North Vietnam.

However, due to factors beyond its control, DAO had not been able to fulfill its mission as originally intended. For one thing, "*Nixon proposed but US Congress disposed.*" Facing mounting opposition to US involvement with Vietnam by the majority of the American people, the US Congress had decided to write off South Vietnam as a bad investment and reduced its military aids to South Vietnam to a trickle. At the very end of the war, after North Vietnam had conquered three-quarters of South Vietnam's territory, the US did provide some emergency military aids to South Vietnam to help it withstand North Vietnam's invasion. But this token military aid was too little, too late, and served no other purpose except to prove to the world that the US would stand by its ally to the very end.

Toward the end of 1974, without adequate US aid, each South Vietnamese soldier had been forced to go to the battlefield with a few grenades and a few hundred rounds of ammunition on his belt. If he ran out of grenades and ammunition, he must use his bayonet and his own *xuong mau* (bones and blood) to defend his country.

No gas for its aircraft, no shells for its artillery, no ammunition for its troops, South Vietnam was doomed militarily. In 1974, General Bill Murray, DAO Chief, had seen this equation clearly and had suggested to South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu to truncate South Vietnam to a defensible size, but Thieu would have none of it. Since the cease-fire in 1973, he had noisily promoted a policy called *Four NOs*—NO territorial concession to the communists, NO political negotiation with the communists, NO trade with North Vietnam and NO recognition of the Communist Party. To depart from this policy (an article of faith for him) was to lose face, and Thieu could ill afford to lose face, particularly at a time when his own integrity, honesty and competence as President of South Vietnam was being challenged by a Redemptorist priest named Nguyen Huu Thanh. Unfortunately for South Vietnam, when Thieu finally decided to adopt the strategy suggested by Bill Murray two years earlier—a strategy he now code-named *Light Top, Heavy Bottom*—26,000 ARVN soldiers, the equivalent of three army divisions, had been put out of action. Worse, in hastily implementing this *Light Top*

Heavy Bottom strategy, he had too hastily abandoned Pleiku, Kontum, Phu Bon, Darlac, Quinhon provinces in Military Region II and Quang Tri, Hue, Danang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu yen in Military Region I. Without proper tactical planning as a result, he had turned his strategy into a disaster and had rushed South Vietnam to its death in less than fifty-five days.

The US Defense Attaché Office was housed in a military complex located within the VNAF Phi Long Air Force Base adjacent to the Headquarters of the ARVN Joint General Staff. From 1968 to 1973, this military complex had been the home of US MACV and US Army Field Command and had been nicknamed *Pentagon East* by the American press to emphasize its important role in the Vietnam War. Now this *Pentagon East* was being used as an office building of some sort, devoid of all outward symbols of US military glory and power.

McBride drove me directly to *Dodge City* where the evacuation processing center was located. Either by tradition or vanity, all US military installations in Vietnam had to have an American name and Dodge City was no exception even though it was just a recreation center with a bowling alley, a swimming pool, and a cafeteria for bowlers and bathers. McBride led me up a rickety wooden staircase to the evacuation processing desk on the top floor. As I climbed the staircase leading to the upper floor, I saw thousands of people camping on the ground surrounding the building waiting for their turn to be processed. Judging from their exhausted look, I guessed they must have been there for days.

The evacuation of American, third-country, and Vietnamese nationals with political and industrial ties with the United States of America was getting started late, much too late. There were two reasons for this. One was US Ambassador Graham Martin believed the US Congress' approval of his requested military and economic aids to South Vietnam to withstand North Vietnam invasion was forthcoming. His belief was wrong—dead wrong. The military and economic aids never came. The other reason was he and his French counterpart had been negotiating with Hanoi for a political settlement in South Vietnam, calling for an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of a tri-partite government which would include representatives from three major political factions south of the 17th Parallel—the GVN (government of South Vietnam), the PRG (provisional revolutionary government) or Viet Cong, and the neutralists. But Hanoi would have none of it. Since the opening of its Spring Offensive Campaign in March 1975, its armies had successfully conquered Ban Me Thuot Province and had won on all battlefields in South Vietnam. Hanoi had no intention to agree to the political solution proposed by the American and French ambassadors. However, adopting a strategy of *vua danh vua dam* (fighting while negotiating), it had kept the talk open to camouflage its real intention to complete its conquest of South Vietnam by military force by May 1, 1975.

It was not until the second week of April 1975, after the NVA had already swallowed three-fifths of South Vietnam territories, did Ambassador Graham Martin formally adopt the plan of evacuation submitted to him by DAO. Under this plan the evacuation was to be carried out in three phases:

> *<u>Phase I</u>: Immediate evacuation of non-essential American workers, contractors, business people and their legitimate families by charter and commercial aircraft;*
>
> *<u>Phase II</u>: Evacuation of less essential Americans, third-country nationals and high-risk Vietnamese by US military aircraft on their return flight to the United States after having delivered military hardware to South Vietnam;*
>
> *<u>Phase III</u>: Emergency evacuation by helicopters of those who could not get to the airport in time to catch their flights out of Vietnam.*

A bottle-neck soon developed after Phase I began. Not all Americans targeted for evacuation in this phase wanted to leave Vietnam as scheduled. Many of them deliberately delayed their departure, trying to figure out a way to bring their common-law wives, girl friends, and illegitimate children with them to the United States. As a result, when Phase II began, there was a glut of would-be evacuees at Tan Son Nhut Military Airport. To further compound this problem, on learning that the US Government had established an airlift to evacuate US citizens from Vietnam, illegal American residents and military deserters in South Vietnam suddenly appeared from their hiding places to catch a free ride home. If third-country nationals and high-risk Vietnamese and their families were included, the number of evacuees under Phase II was now well in excess of 10,000 people.

April 25th, 1975, 1700 hours, Saigon time

Once inside the evacuation processing center, McBride led me directly to the man responsible for issuing travel orders for would-be Vietnamese evacuees. McBride told him about my extraordinary circumstances, took a blank manifest from the man's desk, put my name on it, signed it, stamped it, and gave it to me, saying, "*You are all set to go.*" Then McBride offered, "*If you want to leave now, I can personally take you to the military airbase and put you aboard one of those evacuation flights immediately*." I told him I appreciated the offer but I could not leave without my family. "*Then fill out the names of your wife and children next to yours on the manifest and try to get them to DAO as soon as possible*," he urged. He hesitated for a moment and then said to me with an unmistakable sense of worry in his voice, "*If I were you, I would take that flight right now*." Did McBride know something that I did not? Was the NVA going to launch a final assault on Saigon tonight? Was the US airlift going to be discontinued?

Years later, in studying the various accounts of individuals with privy knowledge of the handling of DAO airlifts in the final hours of South Vietnam, I understood why McBride had urged me to leave quickly. Suspecting that the increased number of US military and charter flights in and out of Saigon on pretext of evacuating American personnel from Vietnam were in fact tactical airlifts designed to bring military supplies to South Vietnam to strengthen its fighting capabilities, Hanoi had decided enough was enough and had urged US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, co-architect of the 1973 Paris Peace Accord, to immediately put an end to the airlift or bear the consequences of massive military assault on Saigon now, with or without American nationals in it.

Kissinger had taken Hanoi's threat seriously and had pressured Graham Martin to speed up the pace of the evacuation. But the problem now facing Graham Martin was by the third week of April, there were still about 2,000 Americans stranded in Saigon. These were the ones with Vietnamese common-law wives and children who had refused to leave earlier unless their loved ones were granted visas for immigration to the United States. To clear up this last bottle-neck, Graham Martin had requested Washington to grant *parolee* status to alien wives and children of American citizens and his request was immediately approved.

For its beneficial effects, the granting of parolee status to alien relatives of US citizens in Vietnam had created a new problem. As soon as news of *parolee* hit the streets of Hong Kong, Manila, Bangkok, Taipei, Singapore, etc., Americans with no family obligation or occupational commitment began swarming into Saigon like flies. Some came to rescue their friends. Others came to make money off wealthy Vietnamese families who were desperate to get out of Vietnam. For certain prices, they would declare that *Nguyen thi Ha* or *Dao thi Tuyet* as their common-law wives, and they came to take them out of Vietnam. Some Vietnamese women had to pay tens of thousands US dollars to these Americans just to be officially declared their wives, and, if these women had relatives (parents, uncle, aunts, brothers, sisters or children), the price would be higher. Because of this unexpected bonanza, the number of parolees had multiplied, causing an overflow of people at DAO and might very well be the very reason for which so many Vietnamese employees of the US Government—the ones who deserved to be rescued the most—were left behind when South Vietnam fell on April 30, 1975.

As I was about to take leave from McBride to go home and bring my family to DAO, a young American in civilian attire, a CIA man, I supposed, stormed into the evacuation processing center and grandly announced to McBride that a *coup d'etat* had just taken place in Hanoi and Le Duan—its pro-Chinese Communist Party secretary, had just been replaced by a more moderate, pro-Soviet faction. According to him, Duan was replaced because his handling of the Spring Offensive Campaign was too bold and too venturous. Instead of just occupying the highland of central Vietnam and stopping there to set up a provisional government seat for the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, Duan had pushed his troops all the way to Saigon and the Mekong Delta in an attempt to seize the whole of South Vietnam in one sweep. Hanoi Politburo was afraid that such a bold move could cause the US to come to the rescue of South Vietnam by reintroducing US troops to the South and dropping bombs in the North as it had done in 1972. The CIA man went on to explain that what it all meant was the NVA troops currently participating in South Vietnam's theater of operations would have to pull back across the 17th Parallel to North Vietnam.

Apparently elated over this unexpected piece of information, McBride turned to me and said, "*This certainly is good news for you; maybe you don't have to leave South Vietnam after all*." I did not respond to his remark. Politely, I bid farewell to him and his colleagues and left, bewildered all the while about the naiveté of these young, good-hearted Americans when it came to understanding politics in Vietnam. Little did they know that in North Vietnam, political control was so tight that no *coup d'état* was possible and that under the communist system of government, leadership was monolithic and based upon the concept of *collective decision, individual execution.* The decision to invade South Vietnam in the Spring of 1975 was a collective decision by the politburo, and Le Duan was simply the executor of this decision. It was obvious that the reported *coup d'état* in the North was just another false rumor—yet, it had stirred false hopes among American officialdom in Saigon.

April 25th, 1730 hours, Saigon time.

It was getting dark when I took leave from McBride and his colleague. Coming down the staircase, I noticed the number of people gathered on the lawns around the evacuation processing center building had swollen to bursting capacity as busloads upon busloads of Americans and their extended families descended on Dodge City to join the contingent of people already there waiting for their flight out of Vietnam. Although this was only Saigon's Dodge City, it could have been a scene lifted directly from a Western movie featuring Dodge City of America in its pioneering days of westward expeditions. In family groups, people camped out on every piece of real estate they could find—men and women, children and adults, soldiers and civilians. Like pioneers of the America's Old West, they gathered here to embark on an adventure that would take them to some distant land totally foreign to them. Limited in English and without the skills necessary to compete in a highly industrial and technological country, these Vietnamese would-be expatriates were probably taking the riskiest adventure of their lives, but, like me and my family, they were willing to take that risk. As far as my family and I were concerned, the risks of the unknown was still far better than the known risks of facing reprisals from the communists.

As I was threading my way through the crowd to get out of DAO compound, I heard some one calling my name. I turned to look in the direction of the call. It was Tran Trung Tho, a classmate of mine at the Quan Thanh Military Officer School in Hue, Central Vietnam. Upon graduation from that school in 195l, we were scattered all over Vietnam to fight the war against the Viet Minh. I had not seen Tho since then. Of course I was glad to see him. Many of my classmates had lost their lives in the war against the Viet Minh and later in the war against the Viet Cong.

I learned that Tho had risen to the rank of Lt. Colonel and was currently on temporary duty at Tan Son Nhut Airport Customs Services and that he too was trying to get his family out of Vietnam, but he had not yet been

able to obtain a travel order from DAO. His mentioning of the magic word *travel order* brought me back to reality. As if by instinct, my right hand moved to the inside pocket of my jacket where I kept this precious piece of paper. It was still there. Knowing that I was in possession of the very thing that Tran Trung Tho was desperately longing for, I could not help but flash a smile at him. Perhaps, a mutual assistance could be arranged. I told Tho that I was willing to include members of his family on my travel order if he could use his official position and his clout as a custom service officer at Tan Son Nhut Airport to guarantee safe passage for me and my family through VNAF Phi Long Air Force base check-point to DAO compound. He was more than happy to accept the deal.

I needed Tho's help because in order to get to DAO, which was nested inside the Phi Long VNAF Air Force Base, one must go through a checkpoint controlled by the VNAF military police. Even in normal times, this checkpoint was a nightmare for anyone who wished to enter the base to take a flight out of the military terminal. In the name of security, all passengers, military or civilian, were required to submit their names, flight numbers and final destinations to the base security officer for security check a full forty-eight hours before their flights. As the evacuation of Vietnamese relatives of American citizens and high-risk Vietnamese nationals got under way, this security check became much more difficult, even impossible, unless the would-be expatriates were willing to pay exorbitant sums of *tea monies* to the guards at the Phi Long Air Force Base's checkpoint. The deal with Tran Trung Tho was that he would use his official vehicle to pick up my family and me at Train Crossing Station #6 at exactly 1830 p.m. for a supposedly unhindered trip to DAO via Phi Long Air Force Base checkpoint.

April 25th, 1975, 1800 hours, Saigon time

My wife and kids were glad to see me home. I had been out all afternoon, and, not seeing me home at this time of day, they became very worried. They had plenty of reasons to worry. In the chaotic final days of South Vietnam, anything could happen to anybody any time: political arrest, kidnap, accidental death by cross-fire, armed robbery, traffic accident, etc. Briefly, I told my family about the long wait for McBride at Train Crossing Gate #6, the quick acquisition of DAO flight travel order and permission for the entire family to be flown to the United States on one of the DAO evacuation flights, and the encounter with Tran Trung Tho. Then I instructed them to hurriedly sneak out of the house one by one with nothing but the clothes they had on them that evening and to reassemble at Train Crossing Gate #6 to be picked up by Tran Trung Tho's official vehicle. As a precaution, I told them they must act as naturally as possible, pretending to take an evening walk down the street.

My children did as they were told. My wife and I were the last ones to leave. To avoid suspicion from our neighbors and from undercover local police, we left the lights of our home on. When we were halfway to Train Crossing Gate #6, my wife suddenly stopped and told me she had forgotten an important item at home, and she needed to go back to get it. Even though I didn't like the idea, I reluctantly let her go. In times of crises, it was my experience that things might change from one minute to the next, and family members should always be close to one another. When Ai Chau finally joined us at Train Crossing Gate #6, I asked her if she had gotten what she had gone home for. Instead of saying *"yes,"* she proudly showed me the family albums of the TRAN and the CHAU families. The albums contained the pictures of our parents, our uncles and aunts, our brothers and sisters, our children at their various stages of growing up. Years later, she told me she would never have left those family pictures behind for anything in the world. I was glad she had not. The pictures in these albums were to become the permanent features of the Tran's and the Chau's genealogical documents.

With Tho's official vehicle, we went though the Phi Long Air Force Base checkpoint without incident, but as we proceeded towards DAO compound, a police vehicle that was on our tail since leaving the entrance gate,

signaled us to pull over. I immediately understood. The police did not want to accept *tea money* from us in plain view of other people. Two policemen approached our vehicle and checked everyone's identity. They singled out Lap, my twenty-year-old adopted son, and ordered him to get out of the vehicle. They were going to detain him because he was trying to leave the country while within the draft age. Technically Lap could not be detained for any reason. He was in possession of a valid draft deferment, but no amount of reasoning could persuade these two policemen to change their minds, particularly when they were determined to exact *tea money* from us. I whispered to Tran Trung Tho, asking him to check their price. Two million dong was the asking price. After some haggling, they agreed to accept one and a half million dong (at that time one US dollar = 700 dong, so the asking price was roughly the equivalent of 2,100 US dollars). After monies changed hand, we were allowed to proceed to DAO.

I had no problem at the gate of DAO compound. I showed my travel order to the Marine guard, and he let me, my family and Tho's family inside the compound without incident. Once safely inside DAO compound, I began counting and identifying members of my family, making sure that nobody was missing. This might sound a little absurd to people who had never lived in a country at war that such a roll call was necessary, but it was something that I always did after a Viet Cong artillery attack, a run for bomb shelters, and a police raid. Life in war-torn Vietnam was so full of the unexpected that no one knew for sure who was present and who was missing from one moment to the next. As I made the roll call this evening, something snapped. It was poignantly obvious that four of my children weren't with us. They supposedly had been flown out of Vietnam four days ago via Operation Baby Lift. Four days ago, even in my wildest dream, I could never have thought that the rest of us would make it to DAO, the first step in our journey to freedom.

As communist troops shelled Saigon, U.S. helicopters evacuated thousands of loyalists, some from a downtown rooftop.

Where were my young children when the rest of us were here? What if my children were being held up by mobs or were killed or trampled upon like those helpless children found dead on barges and cargo ships when refugees from Danang were unloaded at debarkation points in Cam Ranh Bay, Vung Tau Seaport and Phu Quoc Island? What if they never left Vietnam? I started asking myself these questions. I turned to look at my wife. From her sad look, I knew she was asking herself the same questions.

By the time we arrived at Dodge City that evening, the place overflowed with people. They were everywhere—on the courtyard, around the evacuation processing center, in the cafeteria, on pool sides, and in the bowling alleys, which had been closed to accommodate people waiting to be evacuated. I went straight to the flight booking desk, showed my travel order to the US air force sergeant and registered the names of people in my group—twelve names altogether. Because Tran Trung Tho had the same last name as mine, I listed him as my brother and his family members as my cousins. The air force sergeant looked up at me and casually remarked, "*You have quite a sizeable family, haven't you?*" But he stopped his remark at that, apparently fully aware that the size of my family was relatively small compared to the thirty and even fifty-member families he had seen before. I nodded. "*What would be the time of our flight?*" I asked him. "*It*

would be a little while," the air force sergeant said noncommittally. Then spreading out a map of DAO compound on his desk, he pointed to me the spot where my family and I should be present when called to board the shuttle bus for the trip to the airport.

I immediately went to the spot indicated on the map. It was a cordoned off area with a steel fence a good thirty meters off the side of the main building that housed the evacuation processing center. There was an opening in the steel fence, a sort of gate opening onto an unpaved road. The gate was heavily guarded by US Marines. On the far side of the gate, several empty US military buses were lined up ready to pick up passengers and deliver them to waiting aircraft. Not wanting to miss the roll call for boarding, I took my family to a small area near the cordoned-off walkway and camped there for the night. Exhausted, I laid down on the grass, trying to recuperate from an event-filled, emotion-draining day. The firmament over me was exceptionally beautiful at dusk. It was filled with bright scintillating stars. Occasionally one of them would shoot across the sky leaving behind it a blazing trail like sparks from fireworks. To me, the shooting stars were resplendent, but they had a sad connotation. When I was a kid, my mother used to tell me that when a star dropped off from the sky, it meant that a human being had just left this world prematurely. If this were true, then the shooting stars I saw tonight might very well be the souls of some young soldiers of the North and South Vietnamese armies who had just been killed in the battle of Xuan Loc or Tay Ninh at the war's 25th hour when their lives flash by them.

When the air force sergeant at the booking desk told me it would be a little while before our next flight, that "little while" turned out to be a whole night wait, which was all the more agonizing in view of the fact that an all out assault on Saigon by the NVA and the NFLSVN was increasingly imminent. By dawn of April 26th, the number of Americans and their families had gone down considerably. The names of American personnel announced on the public address system for boarding had become fewer and fewer, at the rate of one American per fifty non-American names. Looking around Dodge City, I noticed the remaining evacuees were mostly Vietnamese and third-country nationals. The change in the evacuees' make-up caused me a great deal of concern, bordering on fear. I knew that Hanoi would care less about the evacuation of non-American nationals. It patiently waited for the complete evacuation of all Americans from Vietnam before launching a final assault on Saigon to victoriously conclude its Spring Offensive Campaign once and for all. In hindsight, I was fully justified in my fear. On 27th of April 1975, Phi Long VNAF Air Base and DAO came under heavy NVA air and artillery bombardment, putting an end to all evacuations by fixed wings aircraft from its runways.

Saigon 1975

During the long wait for boarding, my wife kept urging me to go back to Saigon to fetch my father and bring him to DAO so he could be evacuated with us. "*You will forever feel guilty if you do not try to rescue your father now*," she had told me, but I had decided against her suggestion. Firstly, I did not want to leave my wife and children unattended in time of crisis. The painful experiences of my earlier separation from my young children still weighed heavily on my conscience. Secondly, if I went back to Saigon, there was no guarantee that I would be able to return to DAO compound in time for my flight. I was sure that my father would readily forgive me if he knew of the difficult situation I was in. It was a decision that would haunt me the rest of my life. My father died a sorrowful death on March 9, 1978--less than three years after I had left him. Upon learning

of his death, my first reaction was that if I had taken the risk of going back to Saigon to fetch my father, bringing him to DAO to be evacuated with me to the United States, he could have lived a little longer. I never forgave myself for not having taken that risk.

Finally the time came, and thanks to God, none too soon. At 0600 hours, April 26, 1975, the names of people in my group were called for boarding. Along with other passengers we were made to form a single line along the cordoned-off walkway leading to waiting buses parked on the far side of the fence. "*No firearms, no opium, no oversized luggage; only small carry-on bags were allowed,*" belched the air force sergeant handling the bus boarding. Upon this announcement, I saw a flurry of activities on the boarding line. People hurriedly opened their suitcases, kept their essential belongings and discarded the rest. I also saw Tran Trung Tho's sixty-five-year-old father-in-law and his care-taker daughter getting off the boarding line. Tho later explained to me that the old man was opium-addicted and was afraid that he could not procure opium in the United States to satisfy his addiction. The passengers were then told to move along and board their designated bus one by one. The passengers did as they were told--slowly, silently, resignedly. In their robotic movement, they looked more like zombies than human beings. Undoubtedly, they were saddened by overwhelming feelings of guilt and anxieties. At least I was. How I could I not feel guilty when my immediate family and I were able to escape to freedom while my father and my relatives were condemned to a life of slavery under communism? How could I not feel sad when I knew that on the *Thanh Minh*, the annual *Tomb-Sweeping* Day, I would not be home to tidy up the resting place of my beloved mother? How could I not feel anxious when I did not know what was in store for me in that distant land called the United States of America?

As the bus caravan took us on a final run to the waiting aircraft, I looked out the bus window, trying to register in my mind for the last time the familiar morning scenes of Saigon: street vendors hurrying along crowded streets, their merchandises hung from both sides of their shoulder poles, open-air restaurants full of people enjoying their *Pho* or morning beef noodle soups and dripped coffees at tables placed along street sidewalks, hondas and motorized cyclos zigzagging along crowded thoroughfares at dizzy speeds. There was nothing extraordinary about these scenes, but they were the scenes I had known all my life, and I knew I was going to miss them very much once leaving Vietnam.

From DAO, the bus caravan took us directly to the tailgate of a US Air Force C-141. Surrounding the tailgate of the aircraft was a squad of armed Vietnamese military security personnel. For a split-second moment, I thought the sky was going to collapse on us. Were these soldiers going to deny Lap's boarding? If they were, I wouldn't have enough money left to buy his freedom. It was a hopeless situation. I quickly shoved into Lap's shirt pocket all the monies I had on me, whispering into his ear that if he could not make it this time, I would personally figure a way to get him out of Vietnam later. As the male passengers stepped off the bus and filed up the tail ramp of the aircraft, the soldiers checked their identities one by one. A couple of men were denied boarding. Lap was not one of them. Luckily for Lap, the soldiers were only after military deserters and not after civilians.

After all the passengers had boarded the aircraft, the flight crew quickly closed the aircraft tail ramp, not wanting the Vietnamese soldiers to lay hands on their human cargo. On the aircraft, it was combat loading all the way. Women and children were allowed to sit on two rows of flip-down canvas benches along the side walls of the aircraft while male passengers were made to sit cross-legged on the floor in rows of fifteen or more across the aircraft aisle. Passengers on each row were then tied down across their laps by a long canvas strap. It was the way cargo was secured on this type of aircraft. Ten minutes after the boarding, the aircraft lifted off from the runway with a big roar. Then, and only then, did I know for sure that my family, or rather half of my family, were safely out of the war zone. I closed my eyes and thanked God for His providence. For the past

fifty-five days, I had done everything humanly possible to save my family from a lifetime of slavery, if not death, and I had failed miserably. In just one day, with God's help, I was able to achieve what I could not in fifty-five days.

Suddenly, I heard a staccato of machine gun fire awfully close to my ears. I opened my eyes and saw the air force sergeant gunner training and shooting his machine gun wildly at some targets on the ground. I later learned that he was shooting at the ground below because somebody had opened fire on the aircraft. I wondered who it was. A Viet Cong sniper or a disgruntled ARVN soldier who felt he had been betrayed by America?

After two hours of flight, we arrived at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. The Philippines authority refused to let us deplane even for food, water and the necessary relief of body wastes on the grounds that we were illegal immigrants. After refueling, our plane continued on to Guam where we arrived at 0700 hours, 26th April 1975. As we were assembled in the refugee reception area, I made a quick head count of my family. There were six of us: Ai Chau, Lap, Nga, Trung, Anh and myself. We were all there except for Hoa, Phuong, Thuy and Van. Of course, I was happy that, in Guam, at least half of my family was free of communist domination but the orphan children's absence was a stern reminder that happiness was not complete until I found them and brought them back into our fold. Trying to locate them among the US population of over two hundred million would not be an easy thing to do, but I sure was going to try.

My family and I were assigned temporary *quarters* in an athletic gym at the Guam Navy Base. About three hundred field beds had been laid out in the gym to accommodate arriving Vietnamese refugees. Since we were among the first groups of refugees to arrive at the navy base, we were free to choose our *living quarters* in the gym to our liking. We selected a corner section of the gym where there was at least some sense of privacy. There was one common latrine and shower facility for men and one for women. There was no comfort at the gym. But this was an item of least concern to me. My immediate concern was to locate my *orphan* children.

Since all refugees at Guam Navy Base must pick up their food at a central field kitchen set up at one end of its football field, I planted Lap, Trung and Anh all day long at a prominent spot near the entrance to the field kitchen from where they could easily see the orphan children if they appeared on the chow line. On the other hand, Ai Chau and Nga made the round of the refugees' tent city every day asking people if they had seen any group of orphans any time and place during their exodus from Vietnam. I myself went to the refugee reception area daily to broadcast messages on its PA system to let our orphan children know that we had arrived on the island and desperately needed to hear from them. In spite of our search efforts, our missing children were nowhere to be seen or heard of. As days passed, anxiety and fear deepened. Ai Chau was so worried about the missing children that she became hopelessly depressed. She was beginning to lose sleep and appetite. At night when every one was asleep, I would often see her kneel down at the foot of her bed praying to God and probably to her ancestors to help her find the missing children. During the day, when not making the round of the refugees' tent city to search for her missing children, she would stand outside the gym for hours, her unseeing eyes transfixed on the distant horizon as if waiting for her missing children to come to her. Ai Chau's pitiful mental state pained me a great deal. The decision to send the younger children away as orphans was basically my decision. But now, I began to wonder if it was a right decision at all.

As a pillar of my family in time of crises, I had tried to remain calm and optimistic, hoping that my optimism would somehow placate Ai Chau's sorrows. But I was not always successful. To my optimistic guess that the orphan children must be somewhere in the United States with their adoptive American parents, she would remark, "*What if they never left Vietnam*?" Of course, I had no logical answer to that remark except to

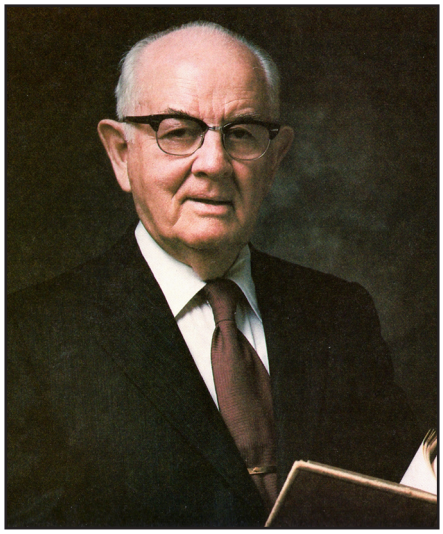
assure her that I would do everything in my power to locate the missing children and to bring them back to her. But do what? Stranded on a remote island in the middle of nowhere, out of touch with the outside world, what could I possibly do?

Four days after arriving in Guam, I wrote my father in Vietnam a letter telling him where my family and I had been during the last few days. In the letter I begged him to forgive me for not having taken him with me when I fled Vietnam. I also explained to him my concern about our missing children and asked him to go by our house on Nguyen Huynh Duc Street to see if Hoa, Phuong, Thuy and Van were there. There was a remote possibility that, unable to catch a flight out of Vietnam with the other orphans—and I prayed to God that that was not the case—they might return to our home on Nguyen Huynh Duc Street waiting for us there.

My letter never left Guam. When I went to the base post-office to mail the letter, I was told there was no mail service to Saigon. "*Saigon is no more,*" said the postal clerk.

> *The North Vietnamese Army tanks and troops had stormed the Doc Lap (Independence) Palace and forced the South Vietnamese Government to surrender unconditionally.*

News of the fall of Saigon struck me like lightning. Ever since the loss of Military Regions I and II in South Vietnam to the NVA troops in March 1975, I knew that the rest of the country would fall any day, but news of the loss of Saigon on April 30, 1975 was nevertheless shocking and painful beyond description. To me, this fateful day should not have happened as it had. Too many people had needlessly died for this day. At the end of World War II, if France had not attempted to use military force to re-impose its colonial rule on Vietnam; if the United States of America had not been so obsessed with the communist containment policy and the so-called *domino theory* meaning that if South Vietnam fell to the Communist Bloc, the rest of South East Asia would also fall; if leaders of the free world in 1945 had not been so myopic in their view that Vietnam was nothing less than a communist state instead of a nation struggling for independence, two major wars in Indochina—the Franco-Viet Minh War and the US War of Intervention—could have been avoided, the lives of millions of French, Vietnamese, Americans, Koreans, Australians, and Cambodians could have been saved, and arch-enmity between North and South Vietnam could have been spared.



President Spencer W. Kimball

With no possibility of getting information about my missing children from my father in Vietnam, I turned to other organizations for help. The first organization that came to my mind was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I remembered that during our meetings with American LDS in Saigon to discuss alternative plans of escape for Vietnamese Mormons from Vietnam, we were advised that no matter where we ended up in the world, we should try to contact members of the Mormon Church for help. Since the only member of the Mormon Church I knew for sure to exist in the United States at that time was Spencer W. Kimball, President of the LDS Church, I immediately called him for help. Having no American money on me, I called him *collect*. I believed I heard the Salt Lake City telephone operator asking me if I meant to talk to Spencer W. Kimball, President of the LDS Church, or someone else by that name. "*Yes—the president,*" I said. The telephone rang, went silent for a moment then a voice came on the line: "*I am President Kimball's personal secretary. The president instructed me to ask you if there is anything we can help you with.*" Thereupon I briefed him about the

general situation of the Mormon Mission in Saigon, the arrival at Guam of twenty or so Vietnamese Mormons, and finally I told him about my orphan children, asking the Church to help locate them. President Kimball's personal secretary assured me that help for the Vietnamese Mormons was on the way and that on behalf of President Kimball, he would ask the LDS Social Services to look into the case of my missing children and to start the search for them right away.

The next day, the bishop of a Guam LDS ward, accompanied by a US Navy commander, came to visit the exiled Vietnamese Mormons. He was loaded with gifts from local church members: clothes, towels, soap, tooth brushes, toothpaste, and snacks. Some of the gifts were carefully wrapped with labels on them saying, "*A small present but a lot of love*" or "*We love you*" or "*Welcome to Guam Island*." The Vietnamese Mormons were grateful. The gifts could not have come at a better time. Most of the Vietnamese Mormons did not have any change of clothes. My family did not. Fleeing Vietnam in a hurry, we did not take anything with us except for the family photo album.

After my telephone conversation with President Kimball's personal secretary, I felt much better about our missing children. Although I could not explain it, I had the feeling that our missing children were alive and well. I couldn't wait to tell Ai Chau about this presentiment. *"Remember how God has helped us escape Saigon when we thought we would never be able to make it?"* Then with a firm voice I added, *"We have to trust the Mormon God; the Mormon God will help us find the children, I am sure of it."* She nodded in agreement.

Guam, May 2nd, 1975

On this day, my family was ordered to be shipped to one of the refugee centers in the continental US for resettlement. There were three of them on the main land—Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Indian Town Gap in Missouri. My family and I were sent to Camp Pendleton, a US Marine training center in Southern California. The Vietnamese refugees had no choice as to where they might go. If they were put on an airplane destined for Fort Chaffee, it was Fort Chaffee they would go. But I was glad we were sent to Camp Pendleton, and, from there, most likely to a county or township in California for resettlement. During my professional training in the United States in 1972, I had had the chance to visit California and had liked its pleasant weather and its beautiful scenery, but above all I liked its great *Feng Shui*. California was bordered on the west by the Pacific Ocean, on the east by the Sierra/Nevada Mountain Range, and between the ocean and the mountain range was an open valley—the San Joaquin Valley—that ran from Sacramento to Fresno where the wind moved freely all year round. These elements of nature converged in California creating a most propitious *Feng Shui* for the inhabitants of this great state. No wonder it was called the Golden State.

The twelve-hour transpacific flight was long and tiring, particularly for me and for my wife, but the children seemed to enjoy it a great deal. When the plane glided into the sunlight, they would excitedly point out to each other clusters of soft, white, cotton-like clouds afloat below them. They had never seen clouds below them before. In war-torn Vietnam when they looked up at the sky to study the clouds above them, it was not to enjoy their beauty, but rather to look for signs and sounds of incoming Viet Cong SAM missiles and artillery shells. Perhaps another reason for their excitement was they fully expected to be reunited with their younger siblings upon arriving in the U.S. I knew I would have a hard time explaining to them why the orphans weren't there to meet them. Looking at my children aged twelve to twenty, I could not help but feel how lucky they were. Definitely, they were luckier than their parents and their grandparents who, in their entire life, had known nothing but war and hostilities. In the United States of America, my children would have the opportunity to live in peace, to pursue a higher education, and to achieve their life goals they could not possibly have in war-torn Vietnam. If they worked hard—and I was sure they would—they would become successful and would

achieve what I, their father, had not been able to achieve in a lifetime. Carried away by this optimistic dream, I even entertained the idea that, perhaps, they could also provide for me and for my wife in our old age when we became too old and too weak to work. For the past twenty years, because of war, I had not been able to do any long-term planning for my children. Sometimes, I did have dreams for them, but those dreams were quickly shattered by the harsh, ever-present realities of war—hospitals full of civilians maimed by mortar and artillery shells, dead soldiers brought home daily in ponchos, etc. There was no war in America, and the future should indeed be good for my children.

We arrived at the El Toro Airport in Southern California at 0800 hrs. May 2, 1975. The fifty degrees Fahrenheit at El Toro Airport might be nice and comfortable for Californians, but for us refugees from Southern Vietnam where the temperature never went below sixty degrees Fahrenheit, it was cold, very cold. People were quivering and shaking like wind-stirred tree leaves. Luckily, we did not have to wait very long on the tarmac. As soon as all the refugees deplaned, they were put aboard half a dozen military buses for the short ride to Camp Pendleton. The bus ride from El Toro Airport to Camp Pendleton on the Golden State Freeway was a delightful, thrilling experience for us as the landscapes we saw along side the freeway were so contrasting to our own war-ravaged country. There were no barbed wired fences alongside the freeway, no military checkpoints, no concrete-block houses bedecked with machine guns, no charred remains of buildings destroyed by bombs and artillery fire. There was an aura of peace and security, the like of which we had never experienced in the world we just left behind.

"*America is really a paradise on earth,"* Ai Chau suddenly commented. *"It really is,"* I said. *But for how long?* I kept the second thought to myself, not wanting to shatter her vision of a paradise-like existence in America. Deep down in my heart, I had a presentiment that America was going to have some troubled times ahead. The reason for my presentiment was, in my view, the way the US had conducted the war in Vietnam was too brutal, and sometimes this brutality was uncalled for. The My Lai massacre by members of the American division was but a small example of such brutality. Too many innocent people had been killed. Infamous statements such as, "*We will bomb them* (the Vietnamese people) *back to the Stone Age!*" by General Curtis Lemay, US Air Force Chief, at the beginning of the Vietnam War, and "*It is necessary to destroy a city in order to save it,*" by an unidentified US Army Major whose troops were trying to recapture Ben Tre City after it had fallen into the hands of the Vietcong, reflected a war strategy that did not take into account the differentiation between enemy combatants and innocent civilians. For these indecent and genocidal ways of conducting the war by the American military establishment in Vietnam in the Sixties, I was afraid that the American people, myself and my family included, would suffer some kind of wrath from God in the years to come. This presentiment might be nothing more than a personal pessimistic feeling of a man who was born under an unlucky star and whose entire life had had so many broken hopes and dreams.

When we arrived at Camp Pendleton, it was obvious that the camp wasn't ready yet to receive the tens of thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees coming from Guam, Wake Islands and the Philippines at the rate of a couple of thousand a day. Marines Corps engineers were working feverishly from dawn to dust to clear undergrowth and scrubs to set up tents for refugees. Eventually eight tent cities were set up. My family was assigned to Tent City #1. Again we shared the tent, latrine and showers with several other families. My family shared the tent with two other Vietnamese families who we loved dearly. Years after we moved out of Camp Pendleton and settled in different geographical areas throughout the United States, we still corresponded and frequently talked with one another on the phone. A young son of one of the families we met in the camp later became a Mormon missionary and was assigned to San Leandro in the San Francisco Bay area near our home, and we had the chance to visit with him quite often.

For the refugees, Camp Pendleton, Fort Chaffee and Indian Town Gap meant a step closer to being with

mainstream America. From these camps that served as processing centers, they would be matched up with their *sponsors*—American families, and church and charitable organizations who were kind enough to take them into their fold, care for them and gradually nurture them into social and economic independence. These sponsors were recruited by the so-called *Volags* or voluntary agencies. There were eight such Volags with satellite offices in Camp Pendleton to recruit sponsors for Indochinese refugees. They were the US Catholic Conference, the Church World Services, the American Councils for Nationalities Services, the HIAS, the LDS Church, etc. It was worth-noting that LDS involvement in Volag activities was the result of my telephone call to President Spencer W. Kimball of the LDS Church in Salt Lake City, Utah. Upon learning of the exodus of refugees from South Vietnam, the LDS Church immediately took on the responsibility of sponsoring and providing social service support for the Indochinese refugees. Except for the LDS Church, all other Volags received funding from the US Government for handling the resettlement of refugees under their care. Federal government agencies also set up offices in Camp Pendleton to handle all administrative aspects of the resettlement process. FBI screened refugees for past criminal activities. Immigration and Naturalization Services issued I.94s to refugees, proving they were immigrants legally admitted to the United States, and Social Security Administration issued social security numbers for each and every refugee for taxation purposes before they left the camps. Speaking of taxes, contrary to vicious speculations in those days by anti-immigrant groups who spread false rumors that refugees from Indochina were exempt from taxes, the true fact was refugees from Indochina did have to pay taxes for every dime they earned just like any working Americans.

My family and I requested sponsorship by the LDS Volag, and our request was accepted. Due to the huge number of refugees to be processed in Camp Pendleton, there was a serious bottle neck on the government side of the process to release refugees from the camp. Prospective American sponsors, angered by the slow pace with which the families they sponsored were released from the camp, had written to or called their representatives in the US Congress complaining about the inefficiency of US Government services in Camp Pendleton, causing great tension between these good-hearted Americans and US Government representatives in the camp.

My family and I stayed in Camp Pendleton for over a month waiting for our turn to be processed. During this period of time, I volunteered to work for the LDS Volag, helping LDS social workers with administrative work in matching up refugees with their sponsors. My basic duties consisted of documenting written and phone requests by would-be sponsors, answering their questions regarding Vietnamese traditions and customs, pronunciation of Vietnamese names, typical Vietnamese foods and what were considered taboos to a Vietnamese. It was heartening to see these well meaning Americans go out of their way to rescue the Vietnamese refugees, to treat them with kindness and to try to make their life in America a pleasant one. The attitude of these LDS sponsors was in such contrast with the attitude of the Americans in Vietnam that I could not help wondering if these Americans had come from the same country and the same culture.

LDS sponsorships were mostly collective, either by a ward or a stake. Normally an LDS ward bishop or an LDS stake president would call and request sponsorship on behalf of the entire ward or stake. Because they took care for the refugees they sponsored collectively, using collective resources, they had better quality sponsorship. Refugees sponsored by the LDS normally found work right away. I did.

One day while manning the phone at Pendleton LDS Volag office, I received a call from a person who introduced himself as Bishop Douglas M. Scribner of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward, Santa Rosa Stake. After some inquiries of the refugee sponsorship program, Bishop Scribner indicated that his ward would like to sponsor a Vietnamese family. "*Do you prefer a smaller or larger family?*" I asked the good-hearted bishop, explaining to him that a Vietnamese family normally ranged in size from six to ten members and sometimes twelve if grand-parents were included. Bishop Scribner said the size of the family did not matter and that if the LDS Volag

could send him a family whose head of household spoke some English, he could a have a job waiting for him. I then asked Bishop Scribner general information about Santa Rosa, its geographical location and climate. The last piece of information was very important to us Vietnamese refugees because, coming from a tropical climate, few of us could physically bear the extreme cold of some regions in the United States.

Bishop Douglas M. Scribner

I learned that Santa Rosa was located approximately fifty miles north of San Francisco, had a population of about 50,000 people and a climate not too hot in summer and not too cold in winter. For educational facilities, Santa Rosa had a city college and a state university nearby. Employment wise, Santa Rosa had three major employers: Hewlett Packard Company, State Farm Insurance Company and Government of Sonoma County. It was an ideal resettlement area for any Vietnamese refugee family, and I must admit that I was very much tempted to accept Bishop Scribner's resettlement offer right then and there. However ethical consideration prevented me from doing so. I thought to myself that it would be improper for me, who worked at the LDS Volag office, to use this inside information to benefit myself and my family. So I started asking other refugee families if they were interested in resettling in Santa Rosa with a job prospect for the head of household. To my surprise none of them were interested. My next step was to discuss the matter with the lead LDS social worker at Camp Pendleton, and he told me to go ahead and accept Bishop Scribner's offer for resettling my family in Santa Rosa if I felt good about it. Of course, after a lengthy talk to my God, I felt good about it. The other reason I had chosen Santa Rosa over other resettlement offers was a job. Since leaving South Vietnam, I had spent many sleepless nights trying to figure out how I was going to feed my family and provide a good education for my children. My family and I had left Vietnam empty-handed with nothing more in our possession than the clothes on our backs. We had to rebuild our lives, and the only way to do it was through hard work. Before Santa Rosa, I was offered resettlement in beautiful San Clemente, but I had turned it down because there was no job prospect there.

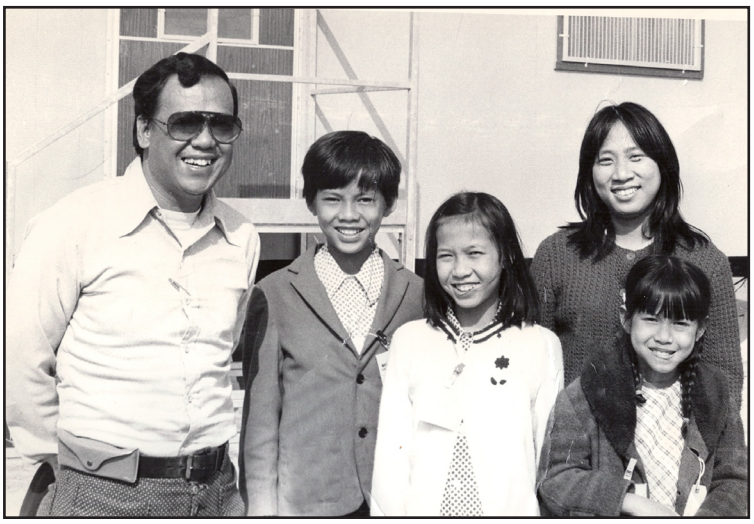
While waiting to be resettled in Santa Rosa, I continued the search for my missing children, but we did not have to watch for them on the chow line day in day out any more. The search had taken on a more sophisticated method. At my request, the American Red Cross at Camp Pendleton had entered the names of my children on a national search network for missing persons. So all I could do was patiently wait. My wife still worried about the missing children very much, and she kept talking about them all the time; but instead of despair, she was more confident that God would reunite the children with her. While waiting for news of my missing children, my family and I witnessed a major event that occurred to the small Vietnamese LDS congregation in Camp Pendleton.

Around mid May 1975, we received a personal visit from President Spencer W. Kimball of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints! He had flown down from Salt Lake City "*. . . to be with you in this most difficult time of your life.*" For the Vietnamese LDS refugees—the tired, the poor, the tempest-tossed, the wretched refuge from a war-ravaged shore, the huddled masses yearning to be free—the visit from a Prophet of God was truly a blessing. Through an interpreter (I was chosen for this choice job), President Kimball gave the Vietnamese LDS a talk full of love and empathy. Without actually comparing them with the fate of the early Mormons, he told them that during the early days of the Church, members of his family had been chased from place to place, and at one time had to seek refuge in Mexico. He counseled the Vietnamese LDS to have faith in Father in Heaven, and he promised that if they lived a righteous life according to the will of God, they would have happiness and success in their newly-found home here in America. He encouraged them to study English

LDS Refugees met by President of LDS Church. Nga, Nhon, Ai Chau and Anh shaking hands with President and Sister Kimball (*Picture in Church News)*

as the first step in becoming independent. In the mean time, he would instruct LDS Church Authorities across the United States to provide them support and help them achieve these goals. Our meeting with this holy man only lasted for one hour, but it had a lasting effect on us. I cried the day President Spencer W. Kimball died. I felt like I just lost my own father.

The Vietnamese adage, *Phuc bat trung lai* (Blessings never come in pairs), proved to be wrong in my family's case. After many days of heart-felt talk with God, I finally received news of my orphan children. Not long after the visit of President Spencer W. Kimball, I was informed by the American Red Cross that my missing children had been found safe and sound in a Catholic convent at Mount Angel, Oregon. Needless to say, we were overwhelmed with joy. My wife and kids immediately asked if they could drop by Mount Angel and see the children right away, having no idea how big the United States of America was. Patiently I explained to them that Mount Angel, Oregon, was about 1,500 kilometers from Camp Pendleton, and getting there by car would take approximately twenty hours. Overcome with joy, I told my children that their little brother and sisters were living happily on a hill surrounded by angels (Mount Angel) and that they were in good hands. Judging by their smiling faces, I knew they were all excited about my fairy tale. It is worth mentioning that my children had been found at the right time, for if they had been found a few weeks later, they would have been placed for adoption by an American family. What it all meant to us was once they were legally adopted, we would not be able to know where they were, who their adoptive parents were—at least not until they reached the age of eighteen. So when the children were found and parentage was established, the adoption process stopped.



Reunion with our lost children Nhon, Phuong, Thuy, Hoa, and Van

Within a week of their finding, my *orphans* were flown to San Clemente and brought to Camp Pendleton for the reunion with us. Needless to say, the reunion was very emotional. My eldest daughter Nga and my wife cried uncontrollably. Now that my family was reunited, my happiness was complete. All we had to do now was to wait for our turn to be processed and be sent to our home sweet home in Santa Rosa. The wait had been long but not boring. I myself had plenty to do. On weekdays, I would go to the LDS Volag office to help LDS social workers to recruit sponsors

and match them with Vietnamese refugees who wished to be sponsored by the LDS Church. On Sundays, there were Sunday school and sacramental meetings to attend. We conducted our meetings in our own tents. Latter-day Saints from nearby wards and stakes came and joined us at these meetings. For lack of furniture, we sat on our own sleeping canvas cots to receive the living bread and water and listen to the teachings of church authorities from nearby wards and stakes. The place in which we met and praised the Lord God was humble, but it was, nonetheless, full of the Holy Spirit. I could feel it. Besides, I did not think our Father in Heaven would mind our humble place of worship.

Speaking of family reunions, not everyone was as fortunate as I was. Many refugees had been separated from their loved ones during their last-minute escape from Vietnam—wives from husbands, children from parents, brothers and sisters from their siblings. Many of them had no idea if their loved ones had left Vietnam or had fallen during their escapes. It was a very sad situation. Unable to withstand the pain of separation, some of these refugees had requested the US Government to send them back to Vietnam. Many people thought these refugees were *out of their minds*, but having been in their shoes before, I understood what they were feeling, and I truly empathized with them. Especially tragic was the case of Captain Tien of the South Vietnamese Army Cavalry Corps with whom I had become acquainted during my first two weeks at Camp Pendleton. In 1974, Captain Tien was sent to Fort Knox, United States for training. Before his training was completed, South Vietnam collapsed and his country, his armor corps and his unit were no more. All of a sudden, he became of man without a country and without a family. His instructors and counselors at Fort Knox advised him to seek political asylum in the United States and start a new life in this country as a civilian, and they promised to help him get a job. But he had decided against their advice and had requested to go back to Vietnam instead. In tears, he told me that the Vietnamese tradition of *tin* (loyalty) to his family forbade him to remain in the United States. He went on to say that he knew as soon as he set foot in Vietnam, he would be imprisoned by the communists, but he would rather face this sad prospect than to live the rest of his life with a guilty conscience.

The sixty or so South Vietnamese refugees who had requested repatriation were later sent to Guam where they boarded the *Vietnam Thuong Tin* and set sail for Vietnam. I later learned that upon reaching Vietnam, all of these volunteer repatriates were immediately incarcerated by the Vietnamese Communist Government on the grounds that they were sent back to Vietnam to spy on the Vietnamese Communist Regime.

My family was released from Camp Pendleton on June 2, 1975, exactly one month after we arrived in the United States mainland, but for some technical reason, my name was not on the list of those released from the camp that day. *Let go of my wife and kids who did not speak a word of English in this huge country? No way! I must find a way to escort them to Santa Rosa with or without permission of the camp commander.* Have you ever heard of a refugee on AWOL (absence without leave)? This was exactly what I decided to do. So I carefully worked out a plan of AWOL. The plan went something like this:

<u>Day One:</u> I would slip out of Camp Pendleton with my family
<u>Day Two:</u> I would stay with them for one day in Santa Rosa to make sure that everything was OK in their new home.
<u>Day Three:</u> I would return to Camp Pendleton and wait for my turn to be released from the camp.

I proceeded with the plan without incident. On the day my family left Camp Pendleton to be resettled in Santa Rosa, I accompanied them to Los Angeles Airport, purchased a round trip airline ticket for myself (tickets for my wife and kids were prepaid by the LDS Volag) and flew with my family to San Francisco where we were met by the welcoming committee of Santa Rosa LDS First Ward. Since we and our our hosts had never met before, we were to recognize them by the red roses they were to wear on the lapels of their coats. The red

roses were unnecessary. We recognized them right away even without the red roses. A natural chemistry between spiritual brothers and sisters prompted us to recognize them immediately.

During the drive from San Francisco Airport to Santa Rosa we passed through San Francisco and crossed the Golden Gate Bridge onto Highway 101. My wife and kids used hand signals to communicate with our sponsors. The *"wows"* my wife and kids exclaimed when seeing the grandeur of the Golden Gate Bridge and the beautiful scenery on both sides of Highway 101 seemed to have worked well in terms of communication. When they were not talking, using hand signals, they sang songs which were popular both in the United States and Vietnam—songs such as "*Frere Jacques*." After one and one-half hours of a joyful ride, we arrived at our new home in Rincon Valley, Santa Rosa, California. Bishop Scribner gave me the key to open the door of our new home, which turned out to be the door to one pleasant surprise after another. Displayed across the wall of our living room was a large banner with the following words written on it: *Chao Mung Gia Dinh Ho Tran* ("Welcome to the Tran Family"). I later learned that the banner was the work of Tuyet and Jim Ebright, my former colleague at MACV Translation Division in Saigon in 1962 and 1963. During our first few days in Santa Rosa, Tuyet Ebright came to visit my family regularly, showing my wife which market to go to in order to buy food, how to shop in a super market, how to read the prices on food items, etc. Since supermarkets did not exist in Vietnam and the way the Americans purchased groceries in the United States was quite different from the way we did in Vietnam, Tuyet Ebright's coaching was a big help. For instance, my wife learned that we did not bargain the price in an American grocery store. We were very grateful to Tuyet Ebright and her family and remained their friends ever since.

Lake Sonoma just outside of Santa Rosa, CA

The living room of our apartment had a sofa, a low coffee table, two arm chairs, a black and white television set. The dining room had a long dining table with ten mismatched chairs. There were three bedrooms in our apartment: One master bedroom for me and my wife, one bedroom for our boys and one bedroom for our girls. The bedrooms were fully equipped with beds for everyone. With a family as large as mine, the furniture industry in Santa Rosa must have had a good business in June 1975. Until I started working and earned money to pay rent, rent for our apartment for the first two months was paid for by donations from our brothers and sisters of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward. They also donated clothing, towels, cooking utensils and Chinaware. But of all the commodities that were made available to our family, what pleased Ai Chau the most was the rice cooker. Apparently our brothers and sisters of the Santa Rosa First Ward were keenly aware of the fact that rice was stable food for Vietnamese, and that they could be in rags, walk barefoot, eat off the floor, but they could not operate without a rice cooker! We would forever remain grateful to our brothers and sisters of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward for their thoughtfulness and their love for our family.

I was wrong in assuming that Camp Pendleton Military Authority was not aware of my AWOL. When I returned to Camp Pendleton on *day three*, I was immediately summoned to the G2 Section of the camp for interrogation.

Did you sneak out of Camp Pendleton to establish contact with Vietnamese communist agents located in the United States? *Were you part of a spy network for the communists? What were your missions*?

These questions were asked for formality's sake, for the good old Sergeant who interrogated me knew full well that I was no *Victor Charlie* (acronym used by American GIs to call the Viet Cong), and that the reason I had accompanied my wife and kids to Santa Rosa was to provide a safety net for them. The good old Marine sergeant accepted my explanation at face value, closed the *espionage* case and let me go—but not without first giving me a stern lesson regarding the need to observe discipline, law and order in the United States.

I finally left Camp Pendleton on July 2, 1975, just in time to celebrate the United States Independence Day with my family and with our brothers and sisters of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward. Bishop Scribner, my sponsor, had written to his congressman, Honorable Don Clausen, to complain about my delayed release from Camp Pendleton. I did not know if my delayed departure from Camp Pendleton Refugee Camp was the result of an administrative backlog or something I had done politically. I knew this much: during the height of the Vietnam War, I had written a series of controversial articles for the Vietnamese *Dong Phuong* (Eastern) *Daily* in Saigon, criticizing US policies and war doctrines in Vietnam—particularly the senseless *body count* system used by the US military establishment to gauge the success of its military operations in Vietnam. Such a system had resulted in increased indiscriminate killings of innocent, non-combatant civilians, women and children. I had decided to write this series of articles after having seen with my own eyes many young children, even babies, with maimed and bloodied bodies in Can Tho General Hospital. Many of these children had lost their limbs and their eyes, others had their faces disfigured by bomb and artillery shrapnel, and still others had their bodies badly burned by incendiary bombs. It was heart-rending to see children so young, so innocent having to suffer so much in a war so senseless.

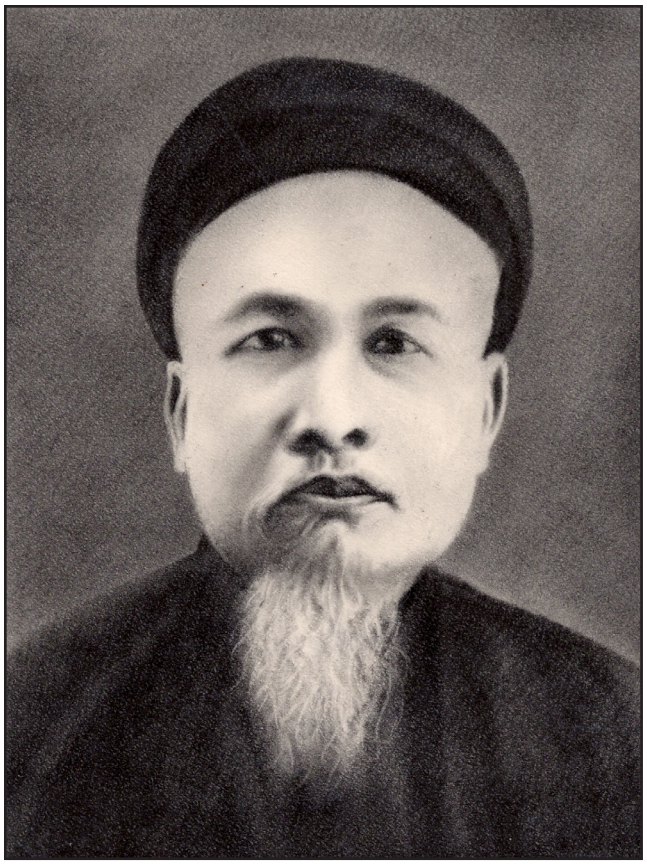
I left Camp Pendleton to join mainstream America, full of dreams and expectations. I was going to have a good job so I could earn a decent income to support my family. My children were going to have a good education and most certainly a better future than their parents and their grand-parents. I had decided that no matter how hard life was for me in the United States, I was going to make it. There was no reason why I couldn't. I spoke fluent English. I had had twenty years of experience working for the US Civil Service in Vietnam, attaining a respectable rank of GS-13. It was true that I was a refugee, an immigrant, an *alien* so to speak. But America was a land of opportunity where a human being was judged not by his nationality, skin color or religious belief, but by his knowledge, skill, talent and hard work. I believed my family and I would be OK.

In my dream, I did not envision the unexpected.

Northern California Coastline

CHAPTER THREE

THE ANTERIOR TRANS



Tran Van Minh (Grandfather)

My grandfather, Tran Van Minh, was born in 1875 in Quang Binh, Central Vietnam during the reign of Emperor Tu Duc. His father and grandfather were originally from Hue, the capitol of the Nguyen Dynasty. To escape persecution by the anti-Christian Emperor Tu Duc and his courtesans, my great-grandfather, who was a devout Catholic, had to move his family to Quang Binh, an obscure city about three hundred kilometers north of Hue. Partly to protest Emperor Tu Duc's religious persecution and partly to protect himself and his family from the wrath of the Nguyen kings, my great-grandfather changed his family name from NGUYEN to TRAN. As a result, by the time my grandfather was born in Quang Binh in 1875, he bore the family name of TRAN instead of NGUYEN.

Emperor Tu Duc, following the footsteps of his forefathers, Emperors Minh Mang and Thieu Tri, adopted a strict policy of anti-Christianity, using harsh measures to punish foreign missionaries and Vietnamese Christians. Tu Duc viewed Christianity as a perverse religion, corrupting the hearts and minds of his subjects, and Christian missionaries a menace to his kingdom. He believed that foreign missionaries were agents of western nations sent to Vietnam to spy on his kingdom and to prepare for European nations to descend upon and occupy Vietnam as they had done in India, the Philippines, Indonesia, China, and Malaysia. In 1851, he issued an edict banning all Christian missionaries from Vietnam under penalty of death and required that Vietnamese Christians be branded on their left cheeks with the characters *Ta Dao* (infidels).

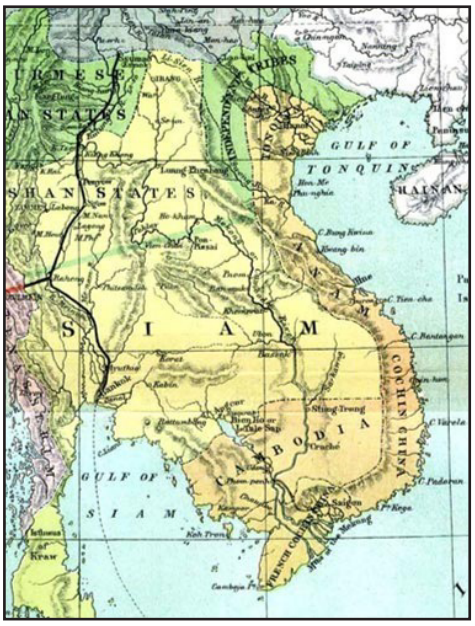
During his reign, of the forty or so French Catholic missionaries in Vietnam, two were executed, and hundreds of Vietnamese priests and tens of thousands of Vietnamese Catholics were put to death in the most barbaric manner. Foreign missionaries who desisted his edict and continued to proselyte Vietnamese in the Christian faith were beheaded or drowned; Vietnamese priests were cut in half in length and *stupid* Vietnamese Christians suffered harsh punishments including death and confiscation of family property up to three generations.

Tu Duc could not have chosen a worse time to carry out his anti-Christianity policy. Upon learning of the persecution of French missionaries, French Government Prime Minister, Jules Ferry, under pressure from the French Catholic Mission *Etrangere* (Foreign mission) and French industrialists immediately sent an armada of navy vessels and several thousand troops to Southeast Asia to attack Vietnam on the pretext of protecting French missionaries. Of course, one can argue that their motives for such an attack was also to exploit Vietnam's mineral and agricultural riches and to expand foreign markets for French manufactured goods. France's

determination to colonize Vietnam was best illustrated in a speech addressed to the French Congress by French Prime Minister Jules Ferry:

Colonial policy is the daughter of industrial policy.

After decades of fighting the Vietnamese people, in 1887, French expeditionary forces finally completed their occupation of *Tonkin* (North Vietnam), *Annam* (Central Vietnam) and *Cochinchina* (South Vietnam) along with Cambodia and Laos six years later. After having been firmly in control of these regions, the French consolidated them into a French union called Indochina. Since most of the old-school Mandarins of the Nguyen Dynasty resigned or were forced to resign from their positions for being unfit for the more sophisticated and more dynamic French administration, the French Colonial Government of Indochina proceeded to create a new class of Vietnamese civil servants to help them govern Indochina at the lower levels of their administration. The recruiting of this new class of civil servants was done through French and Vietnamese Catholic priests and trained by French administrators.



1886 Map
Indochina under French Colonial Rule

Young sons and daughters of loyal Vietnamese Catholics who had survived the Nguyen Dynasty's religious persecution were the favorite ones in this recruitment process. My grandfather, being the grandson of a devout Catholic who had been executed for hiding a French missionary while the latter was being pursued by Emperor Minh Mang's henchmen, was thus chosen to be trained and to serve in the new French Colonial Administration. My grandfather's grandfather had suffered the most cruel and barbaric form of punishment for violating Emperor Minh Mang's anti-Christian policy. On the day of his execution, the executioners threw him in a vat of boiling oil that killed him instantly. My grandfather studied French and became a court officer of Quang Binh Province.

The special treatment bestowed upon my grandfather by the French Mission Etrangere was a quick economic fix for my great-great-grandfather, for by the time he arrived in Quang Binh from Hue, he became so financially destitute that he could not afford to send his sons and daughters to school, let alone a French school, because all of his properties in his native village in Hue had been confiscated by the Nguyen Kings. But for this special treatment by the French Colonial Administration, my grandfather had to pay a dear price. During the so-called class struggle movement launched by the Viet Minh in 1950-1953, the Viet Minh accused him and his ancestors as lackeys of the French colonialists and, even though my grandfather had been dead for years, The Viet Minh People Court convicted him posthumously, calling names and addressing him as *thang Minh*, a derogatory mode of address reserved for people of low social status. They also urged the village people to urinate on his grave.

My grandfather had four children: Tran Van Binh (1897), Tran Van Kinh (1900), Tran Thi Kim Yen (1905), and Tran Thi Kim Oanh (1910). My uncle Tran Van Binh was sent to a French school and attended The University of Hanoi where he graduated with a degree in pharmacy. My father also attended a French school and graduated with a degree in accountancy. My aunts, Tran Thi Kim Yen and Tran Thi Kim Oanh, received their education at a French school reserved for daughters of French colons in Indochina.

Tran Van Binh (Uncle)

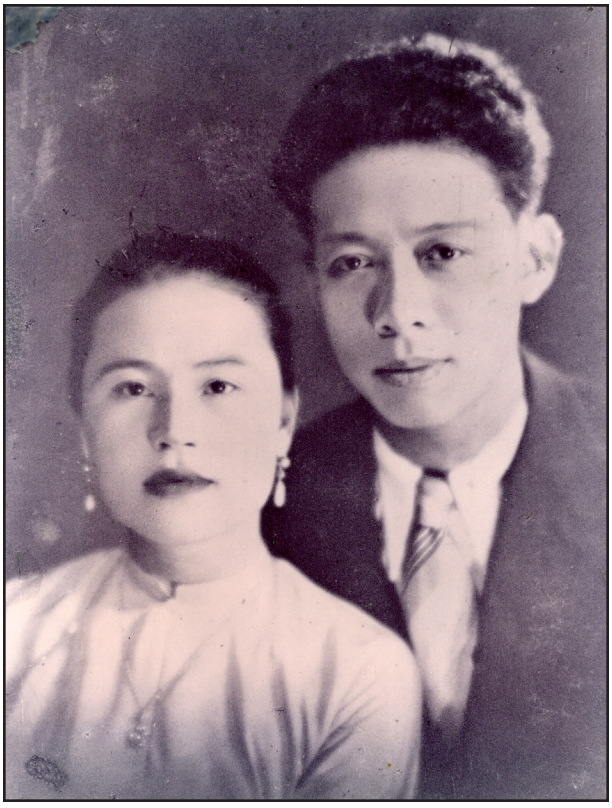
My uncle Tran Van Binh, the pharmacist, upon graduation from Hanoi University, operated a pharmacy in Quang Yen where he prospered. As one of the few French-educated Vietnamese in the medical field in Vietnam at that time, my uncle Binh was well respected by the French authorities and the Vietnamese people of Quang Yen. However, he did not live long to enjoy the fruit of his achievements. He died before reaching the age of forty. He and his wife had no children of their own, so they adopted my eldest sister Tran Thi Khiem as their daughter. After my uncle's death, his wife went to Hue to join her family, and my sister Khiem went back to live with her biological father and mother - our parents.

Tran Thi Kim Oanh and Tran Thi Kim Yen (Aunts)

My aunt, Tran Thi Kim Oanh, renounced all appeals of the world and entered a convent to become a nun and a teacher. With regards to aunt Tran Thi Kim Yen, after graduating from high school, she married Mr. Vo Van Que, a politician and a public work engineer from a well-to-do family in Quang Ngai Province. When she and her husband, Mr. Vo Van Que, visited their children in the United States in 1974, South Vietnam fell and she and her husband never got the chance to come back to Vietnam to live out their old ages there.

Tran Van Kinh (Father)

My father married Vo Thi Chau, a famous *Hat Boi* (classical theatre) actress. My mother was a very beautiful and talented actress; therefore, she had many followers, but my father, being a handsome and generous *cong tu* (prince-like personality), had gained my mother's favor. My mother dropped all of her followers on the wayside and married my father. They eventually had eight children: Trong, Khiem, Thao, Thuan, Nhon, Nghia, Le, and Tri. My brother number six, Nghia, died in his infancy. My father, worked for the French Indochina Treasury Department as an accountant in Quinhon until 1945. All of us were born in Quinhon, the city where my father worked until he was fired in 1945 by the Communist Viet Minh. In Quinhon, life for us, the Tran family, was better than good. My father was a functionary for the French Provincial Administration, and as such made good money and provided well for his wife and children. His children all went to private schools. For those of us who finished high school—and if continuing education was not available in Quinhon—he sent to out-of-town schools in the imperial city of Hue for further education, regardless of costs.



Vo Thi Chau and Tran Van Kinh
My Mother and Father

My father valued learning and intellectuality; therefore, he always chose the best schools for his children's education. We all went to expensive private schools. He sent my elder brother Tran van Trong to a French Christian Brother School in Hue and, after graduation from that school, he sent him to a French technical school to study engineering. In 1944, my brother Trong graduated with an engineering degree. After a short stint with Viet Minh Southern Resistance Movement (*Nam Bo Khang Chien*), my brother Trong went back to Quinhon to help my father move our family to Yen Dai Village, Nghi Loc District, Nghe An Province where he contracted typhoid and died at the age of twenty-three. Since Yen Dai Village was a rural area where educational opportunities for

his children were very limited, my father became very obsessed with the question of how to provide his other children with a higher education after my brother Trong's death. While waiting for these opportunities, he always reminded and encouraged us, his male children, to work hard at learning. At meals he would tell us that

> *. . . wealth and riches can be taken away from you by natural or man-made disasters, but education and knowledge cannot be taken away from you.*

But my father had a problem with implementing his dream. The country was at war (Franco-Vietminh War 1945-1954), and his immediate concern was to protect his family from the dangers of war.

During the early stage of the Franco-Vietminh War, my sister Khiem volunteered to serve in one of the Viet Minh propaganda teams sent to the countryside to urge people to join the various patriotic organizations in order to fight the French colonialists trying to re-impose their colonial rule on Vietnam again after World War II. In the beginning of the Viet Minh Revolution, the people in Vietnam regarded Ho Chi Minh as a patriotic leader and the true champion of the cause of national independence. Little did they know that this man had his own agenda aimed at turning Vietnam into a satellite of the Communist Empire led by the Soviet Union. "*Give me an ideology and a group of zealous cadres, and I will rule the world,"* his teacher, Lenin, once told him, and he followed it to the letter. The ideology that Ho Chi Minh used was national independence, and cadres were young energetic people like my brother Trong and my sister Khiem and thousands of other youth their age. Thus equipped with an appealing ideology, zealous cadres, Ho Chi Minh succeeded in rallying the people in all of Vietnam to his cause.

The people of Quinhon would do anything that Ho Chi Minh told them to do. My family was no exception. Although my father was fired by the Viet Minh from his job as an accountant at Quinhon Treasury Department for having served in the French Colonial Administration, he never complained about it. On the contrary, with patriotic zeal, he urged his wife and children to actively participate in the various patriotic movements initiated by the Viet Minh. At his urging, my mother donated all of her gold jewelry—her gold wedding ring included—to the *Gold Week Fund* set up by Ho Chi Minh to collect gold donated by the people of Vietnam, allegedly to help buy weapons for Viet Minh troops to fight the *French pirates*. Students of Vietnam history later confirmed that the gold Ho Chi Minh collected during the Gold Week was in fact used to bribe commanders of the Chinese Kuomingtang Army in North Vietnam at the time to disarm Japanese troops, so that they might not interfere with Ho Chi Minh's efforts to annihilate Vietnamese *Quoc Dan Dang* (Kuomingtang) leaders whom he considered a threat to his power.

Trong (brother)

When the war broke out between the French and Viet Minh in 1946, my elder brother Trong volunteered to join the Viet Minh forces to fight the French in Nam Viet, the former Cochinchina. In my mind's eyes, I still could see him standing on the roof top of a southbound train departing from Quinhon Railway Station heading for Cochinchina waiving a big red flag and shouting slogans, "*Chong giac Phap*" ("Fighting against French Pirates"), and "*Gianh Doc Lap*" ("Regain Independence"). To me, this image was that of a hero, and I was very proud of my brother.

Khiem (sister)

With no less patriotic zeal, my elder sister Tran Thi Khiem volunteered to serve in Viet Minh propaganda teams. As a propaganda cadre, she would go from village to village in Binh Dinh Province to promote the cause of National Independence and to encourage people in the countryside to join the various patriotic organizations set up by the Viet Minh to fight the *French invaders*. In 1975, Khiem emigrated to the United States,

resettled in Salem, Oregon, where she attended the Willamette University and later the University of Oregon and graduated with a master's degree in special education. This was quite an achievement, considering the fact that at the time she went back to school, she was fifty-five years old and had thirteen children to care for. She became heavily involved in helping disabled and deformed Vietnamese children of post-war Vietnam. To do her work, she had to fly back and forth between the United States and Vietnam, escorting deformed children from Vietnam to the United States, nursing them and caring for them until they had received the necessary physical therapy and gotten well. When this was done, she would escort them back to Vietnam and start the process all over again with a new batch of deformed children to be treated in children's hospitals in Oregon, USA. Although I disagreed with my sister on some family issues, I really admired her for what she did for humanity.

Thao (brother)

My older brother Thao and his children still live in Vietnam. I recently learned that Chuong, one of his sons, had received a scholarship from one of the universities in Australia. This news came to me as a surprise because the Vietnamese Communist Government seldom accorded children of former servants of the *Nguy Regime* (puppet regime of South Vietnam) this privilege. However, not all of his children were that lucky. His first son, Tran van Tin, died of asthma in 1978, and his daughter Tam, a doctor, committed suicide in 1986 because she could not withstand the verbal abuses heaped upon her by communist cadres. This was like guilt by association because her father, Tran van Thao, had one time worked for the American Imperialists during the Vietnam War. Of all my brothers and sisters, Thao was a little eccentric in his perception and outlook on life. His line of thinking was sometimes irrational and strange, to say the least. As an example, while working for the Americans, he considered them imperialists. So when the American and Vietnamese CORDS (Civil Operations for Rural Development Services) staff of Region IV and Phong Dinh Province embarked on a barge leaving Can Tho on April 29, 1975, before this city fell to the communists, he would not make any move to join them even though he was in a position to do so for having worked at the Can Tho Police Department Advisory Team for ten years. I guessed that his wife, Loi, had advised him against throwing his lot with the Americans. His wife used to be a traveling nurse and, as such, often went to areas controlled by the Viet Cong. In retrospect, I believe she was a *sleepcell* Viet Cong agent.

Thuan (sister)

My sister Thuan, seventy-five years old and widowed, now lives in Houston, Texas. It was Thuan and her husband Hoang Van Lieu who took care of my father and my mother in their old age when they lived in Bao Loc and, in later years, in Saigon before North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam. For their services to my father and my mother, I remained grateful all my life. When Lieu was still alive, I often visited him in Houston, Texas, whenever I could. His health was getting worse with each visit. First he lost his balance and was confined to a wheelchair; then he lost his speech and communicated only by written words. The last time I visited him in 2000, he lost his mind. It was painful to say "good-bye" to him after each visit. As if feeling that each of my visits might be the last one, he cried, looking at me with unseeing eyes. It was heart-rending to see tears come down his wrinkled face when I last said "good-bye" to him. Lieu died on October 13, 2001.

Le (brother)

My younger brother, Le, died of cancer on June 4, 2001. When communist North Vietnam conquered South Vietnam in 1975, Le was arrested and sent from one *reeducation* (sanitized term for *prison*) camp to another in North Vietnam where he described, "*life was worse than hell.*" While being incarcerated, he had to do hard labor from dawn to dust, cutting trees, clearing forests and planting crops for the Viet Cong. In the evening, instead of allowing prisoners to rest, the communists forced them to attend communist doctrine and self-critique sessions during which prisoners had to publicly confess to their fellow prisoners and communist

cadres about the crimes they had committed while in the service of the *Nguy* South Vietnamese Government. If they ran out of crimes committed by themselves, they had to confess imagined crimes to satisfy the demand of communist cadres.

For ten years, day after day, month after month, year after year, Le had to conform to this schedule. Malnutrition and hard labor had exacted a heavy toll on my brother. When he was finally released in 1985, he was a decrepit old man to the point where I could not recognize him during my visit with him in Vietnam in 1989. Le used to be a ram-rod straight, intelligent and skillful artillery officer of the South Vietnamese Army. For his military skills in defending Kontum against the NVA assault on this city in the Spring of 1972, he was promoted to the rank of Major on the battlefield. He had his golden *oakleaf* (the rank of Major) pinned on the lapel of his combat uniform in the fighting field by none other than South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu. As an officer, Le excelled in the knowledge and application of military tactics, but he lacked the skill necessary to discharge the function of an administrator. Because South Vietnam was at war, all province chiefs and district chiefs were reserved for military officers appointed by Divisional Tactical Area Commanders who were in turn appointed by Regional Corps Commanders. There were certain prices attached to these appointments. Le's appointment to the position of District Chief of Kontum was no exception. Therefore he had to find money to pay back to the people who had appointed him to this position. It was an unofficial system deep-rooted in Thieu's administration and armed forces. A few years later, I learned that Le was being accused of corruption by a national assembly representative from Kontum Province. He was subsequently removed as the Kontum District Chief, but in early 1975, he was re-appointed to the position of District Chief of Tuy Hoa, Phu Yen Province. When Tuy Hoa and the rest of Military Region II collapsed a few months later, he fled Tuy Hoa. When I met Le in Saigon afterwards, he complained to me that he had never had the chance to recoup the money he had paid to the person who had appointed him to this position.

When South Vietnam fell in 1975, he was imprisoned and suffered the consequences of his previous life with the South Vietnamese Government. When I met him in 1989, after his release from the Viet Cong prisons, he was a shadow of his former past. His teeth were all gone, his hair was all white, and his speech was slurred. He told me the Vietnamese communists had tooled to perfection their forms of punishment of South Vietnamese political prisoners. Using a combination of physical hardships and undernourishment, they had turned South Vietnamese political prisoners almost into zombies, unable to control their own minds. Some prisoners did not even know when to urinate; therefore, they had to always wear a pair of pants with a permanent opening where their reproductive organs were located so that they might not wet their pants.

Tri (brother)

My younger brother Tri lives in the Los Angeles area. All of his children are doing okay except for Chuong who died at a young age. Tri is a talented, educated man with deep rational thinking. He had a bachelor's degree in philosophy and was a certified secondary education teacher in Vietnam. As a former captain of the South Vietnamese Army, he was sent to a Viet Cong prison for a few years. After his release from prison, he and his family escaped to Malaysia by boat and were admitted to the United Stated in 1980. Now at the age of sixty-nine, he's retired but lives comfortably with his retirement pension.

Aunt Tran Thi Kim Yen

Aunt Tran Thi Kim Yen died in 1978, and her husband, Mr. Vo Van Que died in 1983. It was Aunt Yen who had come to my rescue when I was without a family and without support in Hanoi in 1949. She supported me and cared for me for three years while I was going to Pellerin School in Hue. Aunt Yen and her husband were deeply involved in local politics. At the time I lived with them, Mr. Vo Van Que refused to cooperate with Mr. Phan Van Giao, the Governor of Central Vietnam. He viewed Phan Van Giao as a puppet of the French. He

belonged to a group of intellectuals called *trum chan* (covered in blanket), meaning people who chose not to cooperate with the government. He went back to work only after Ngo Dinh Diem became prime minister and South Vietnam was truly independent. Aunt Yen and Mr. Vo Van Que had five children: Lien, Phan, Hiep, Hao, Dai.

Lien (cousin)

Lien was sent to Paris, France in 1948 to study music at the famous French Conservatory of Music in Paris and became a well-known pianist there. She was married to Vinh Noan, a member of the Royal Family. Vinh Noan studied cinematography and in 1952, directed the filming of the movie, *Chung Toi Muon Song* ("We Want To Live"), a movie depicting scenes of Viet Minh people's courts during their class struggle movement in Vietnam in the early Fifties.

Phan and Hiep (cousins)

Phan and Hiep were sent to the United States in 1953 to study engineering. Hiep and I had a lot of memories together. We rode to Pellerin School together. Although he was my first cousin, he was like my own brother. When I went to the United States for professional training in 1972, I went to Chicago to visit with him. By then, he was married and had two children.

Early Years with My Grandfather in Yen Dai Village

At the beginning of the French Viet Minh War in 1946-47, to fight the French who had the superiority in military equipment and tactical mobility, the Viet Minh had resorted to guerilla warfare tactics. One of the early tactics the Viet Minh applied was the so-called *Tieu Tho Khang Chien* (Scorched Earth Resistance). The Viet Minh required people living in the urban areas to leave their homes, burn their houses and poison their wells so as to deny French expeditionary troops all sources of life support when they arrived in the city. As a result, my father had to move his family to Dap Da, a small little town, thirty kilometers north of Quinhon, and finally to Yen Dai Village, Nghi Loc District, Nghe An Province, a good 1000 kilometers from Dap Da, to join my grandfather there. I still remember that trip very well as if it happened yesterday. We put our necessary belongings on one ox-driven cart and walked over 1000 kilometers from Dap Da to Yen Dai because all of the bridges linking these two places had been blown up either by the French or the Viet Minh. After more than two months of hard travel, we finally reached Yen Dai Village, exhausted but intact. My grandfather received us with open arms. He let us use the larger part of his home, retaining only a small room and a reception area for his small family.

During the years I lived in Yen Dai Village, I grew to love my grandfather a great deal. My grandfather was a tall and large man. His stature was that of a *quan vo* (military officer) rather than a *quan van* (civilian Mandarin), which he was. During the time my grandfather retired and lived in Yen Dai Village, the villagers conferred an honorific Mandarin title to him and called him Cu Huong Minh. His brother-in-law also was bestowed this title. Both he and his brother-in-law, Cu Huong Trao, were very well respected by the villagers. My grandmother had died a few years back, leaving my grandfather a very lonely man. So he thoroughly enjoyed us, his little grandchildren. In the late afternoon before sunset, he would gather all of us around him in the courtyard in front of his house and tell us stories—some fairy tales and some real. One story he told us that still sticks in my mind even today was that of a poor, old Vietnamese woman who had been arrested by French police for selling goods on the street of a French upscale downtown without an appropriate permit. In her younger age, this poor, old woman was the common-law wife of a French non-commissioned officer and had two children with him. When the French soldier went home to France, he took the two children with him and the poor old woman lost track of her children. In her old age, having no support, she had to sell goods on the street to support herself. Selling goods on the streets in upscale French quarters was against the law; therefore, she had

to appear in court for plea and sentencing. Before sentencing, the French judge who presided over her case wanted to hear the reason why she did not obey the law. In tears, she told him her life story. Thereupon, the French judge recessed the court, took her into his chamber and embraced her, telling her that he was one of her sons and promised he would take care of her from then on. Apparently, the French non-commissioned officer had told his sons that they did have a biological mother in Vietnam and they should try to locate her and do justice to her. The lesson I learned from this story is that human beings, no matter in what corner of the globe they are born, are basically good. It was this story that inculcates in me the belief that human beings are the same everywhere.

Whenever, my grand father went to Nghi Loc District Administration Office to receive his monthly retirement pay check, he always took me with him and gave me treats of *banh chung* (rice cake), *che xanh* (green tea), and *Xa Doai* oranges, so named because these kind of sweet and fragrant oranges could only be grown in Xa Doai Village, about ten kilometers north of Yen Dai Village. Some farmers from other regions had tried to graft these orange trees and plant them on their soil, but the oranges they produced were not as sweet and as fragrant as those grown in Xa Doai.

After my grandmother's death, my grandfather remarried and sired a son named Phuc, seven years my junior. Because he was my grandfather's son, I had to call him "*Chu*" (uncle). I didn't like this mode of address as Chu Phuc was several years my junior. However, because of his rank in the family, I had no choice but to address him as "Chu." My father and my mother disliked the idea of my grandfather taking a second wife; therefore, there was a lot of tension between my grandfather's second wife and my parents. Eventually, to have peace, my grandfather, his second wife and Chu Phuc moved out to another house, giving my father full control of his own home. I was saddened by the fact that my grandfather no longer lived with us, and whenever I could, I would visit with him at his new home. I did not mind these visitations except that to go to my grandfather's new home, I had to go through a wooded area with a dense growth of very tall eucalyptus trees. That wooded area was so deserted that the villagers of Yen Dai rumored that it was the favorite route of the *Am Binh* (ghost armies) and warned me that anytime I heard strong winds rustling the top of the eucalyptus trees in that wooded area, I should run for my dear life or risk being carried away by the *Am Binh*. I did not know how true this story was, but every time I went to see my grandfather and was in that wooded area, I just ran with or without the strong wind rustling the eucalyptus tree tops. My grandfather died in 1950. I did not have the opportunity to attend his funeral because in 1949, I already was in Hanoi, the French controlled area, on the opposite side of the Franco-Viet Minh conflict.

The home village of my grandfather was poor, very poor—probably the poorest village in all of Nghe An Province, which itself was considered the most destitute province in all of Vietnam. Because Nghe An Province was so poor, for generations it became the breeding ground of protests, riots, rebellions and revolutions. Nghe An was the birthplace of Ho Chi Minh and quite a few other communist revolutionaries who later on became leaders of the Viet Minh and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Yen Dai Village did not have many cultivable rice fields. Two-thirds of the village was covered with dry, sandy land, good only for growing yams, tapioca and *ca phao* (Chinese eggplants). Except for a short time during the rice harvest season, the villagers had to eat rice mixed with yams or tapioca for staple foods. As for condiments, they used pickled china tomatoes or boiled yam leaves dipped in *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) or *mam ruoc* (preserved shrimp pastes). During the rainy season, to supplement their diet, the villagers would go to their rice fields to tackle fish with their bamboo reels or to collect *con ruoi* (snails), which floated in abundance on their rice fields after a heavy rain storm. The *con ruoi* mixed with battered eggs would make a good omelet.

After a year living in Yen Dai Village, my father's cash savings were diminishing to a point where he had to find

a way to make money to keep his family afloat. At first, with the consent of my grandfather, he tried to exploit my grandfather's uncultivated land, but that didn't work so he started to operate a pig farm. In those days in Vietnam, pigs were fed with wine dregs mixed with mashes and slices of banana trees. The dregs were derived from our home-made distilled rice wine, and mashes were collected from rice husking, and banana trees were cut from my grandfather's orchards. My father sold the distilled wine to wine merchants and kept the dregs for pig feeds.

My father, being a city dweller and a well-paid civil servant all his life, never thought about investing in land. Even if he had, it would not have been any good because in Yen Dai, his father's home village, the land was of poor quality. As mentioned, its rice fields produced only one harvest a year. Because of the poor quality of their land, the people of Yen Dai never had had enough rice to eat. Therefore, they ate their steamed rice mixed with yams almost all year round. Not wanting to be above the villagers, we sometimes ate steamed rice mixed with yams, although we did not have to do it. As a matter of fact, I liked this type of rice. I was glad I found it in Chu Tung, Taiwan. On my frequent trips to Vietnam from 1989 to 2002, I always stopped by Chu Tung area for a few days to eat this specialty rice mixture. This type of rice is considered to be a delicacy by the rich people of Metropolitan Taipei City.

The people of Yen Dai Village were so poor that they were often referred to as *Dan Ca Go* (wooden fish) people. According to an old folklore, once upon a time there was a man in Yen Dai Village who was so poor, but so hospitable, that whenever he invited his guests to stay for dinner, he served them real fish while contenting himself with a make-believe fish made of carved wood. With each shove of rice to his mouth, he would pick up the carved wood-fish dipped in *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) with his chopsticks and suck on the fish sauce for taste, leaving the wooden fish intact.

My father and mother finally acquired a concession to provide food services for a Viet Minh Cadre's Training School in Vinh City. Business was good, but it was hard work for my mother. Because she had to feed over 200 cadres at any meal—lunch or dinner, she had to cook rice and other foods in large quantity, using gigantic cauldrons and vats—a job repeated by my wife when our family ran a "Mom and Pop" restaurant in Salem, Oregon, to survive the hard times within our first ten years as refugees in the United States.

Vietnam Countryside in 1995
Picture taken when Vanessa (Tran) Holm was there on a work assignment.

Mau (third cousin)

After the first summer in Yen Dai Province, we had to go back to school. Since Yen Dai had only elementary school education facilities, my brother Thao and I had to go to Vinh City Junior High to study. It was quite a distance from Yen Dai Village to Vinh City, probably no less than ten kilometers round trip, and we walked all the way every day. Joining us in our daily walk was my third cousin, Mau. Since Mau lived on the north side of the village and I lived on the south side, early in the morning before sunrise we would meet at a place called *Quan Banh*, a point west

of Yen Dai Village, right at the intersection of Route National (RN) #1 and the provincial road leading to Cua Lo, a small fishing village and a bathing resort on the east coast of Nghe An Province. From there, we would walk together to our school in Vinh City. The walk was long, but I enjoyed every minute of it. The rice fields west of RN #1 on the opposite side of my village stretched out as far as our eyes could see. Field hands were already on the rice fields working and, depending on the season of the year, they were either plowing or seeding their rice fields or harvesting rice. For me, a city boy, the scene of men working on the fields behind oxen-drawn ploughs, of farmers planting or harvesting rice, or little boys riding on water buffaloes' backs was captivatingly exotic.

When I was in eighth grade, my father decided to send me to a private Catholic boarding school in Duc Tho, Ha Tinh Province. I had to leave Yen Dai and my cousin and friend Mau for the new school. When I went back to Yen Dai for my summer vacations after graduating from Dau Quang Linh School, I learned that Mau had escaped the Viet Minh zone to join his parents in Hanoi. In 1956, I accidentally ran into him one day when I boarded a VNAF Dakota C-123 for a flight from Saigon to Danang. The plane piloted by him was a loan to MACV to use as a *milk run*, transporting American personnel and food supplies for its various advisory detachments throughout South Vietnam. I was then working for the US Advisory Group at the Second Infantry Division in Danang. In 1960, I learned that he volunteered to join the South Vietnamese commandoes/spies and was parachuted into North Vietnam. He has never been heard of ever since—presumably dead. Why Mau volunteered for such a dangerous mission was beyond my comprehension. It could be patriotism or it could be his love for adventure. But I thought it was more because of his passion for vengeance. His father was abducted and killed by the communist Viet Minh in 1952, and Mau's intrusion of North Vietnam was probably caused by his burning desire to avenge the death of his father.

At this point, I would like to comment a little bit about the passion for vengeance of the Vietnamese people when someone in one of their families was unjustly killed or when the honor of their family was unduly blemished. Students of Vietnam wars—the Franco-Vietminh War (1945-54) and the US-Vietnam War (1955-73)—often wondered why the Vietnamese communist guerillas and troops were so determined to fight the French and the Americans against all odds. When ordered to go to a battle, particularly one they must win, some Viet Minh and Viet Cong soldiers tied their ankles to a piece of mortar or artillery, determined to fight to their death. During the Vietnam War, American military commanders sometimes captured youthful Viet Cong prisoners, fourteen to sixteen-years-old, often assuming out loud that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were running out of fighting men. Little did they know that these young lads were fighting to avenge the deaths of their fathers, uncles, older brothers and sisters who before them had died defending their countries against foreign troops invading their Fatherland. Mau's voluntary mission in North Vietnam might have been motivated by this feeling of revenge for the death of his father.

After conquering South Vietnam, the communists, out of hatred and vengeance, incarcerated hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese military officers and civilian cadres in gulag-type prisons, subjecting them to harshest physical and mental punishments. So, when these South Vietnamese prisoners were released and then emigrated to the United States, they in turn took revenge for their prison mistreatment by fomenting aggressive anti-communist actions against the current communist regime in Vietnam. I cannot help wondering when this vicious circle of hatred and vengeance is going to end.

Maternal Grandfather in Saigon

Going back to 1954, when I came to Saigon to join my parents who had just arrived from Inter Zone IV controlled by the Viet Minh, we lived in the home of my maternal grandfather and his son whom we called Cau Tu (maternal uncle No. 4). My maternal grandfather used to be a very rich land owner, but when my maternal grandmother died, he was very depressed so he took up gambling and lost all of his properties. In his old age,

he had to rely on his son and daughters for a living. By the time we came to live with him, he fell into such a state of depression that he took to drinking and talked to himself all day. That made my mother very sad, but there wasn't much we could do about it except to care for him and let him know that we loved him dearly.

Two years after my father and my mother immigrated to the South, my number two sister, Tran Thi Khiem, her husband, Duong Dinh Cuong, and her two young children also joined us in the South as did my sister number three, Tran Thi Thuan, her husband Hoang van Lieu, and her two young children. Because of these new arrivals, my father had to move to a house on Nancy Street in Saigon to accommodate everyone in the family. When my siblings first joined us in Saigon, none of them were able to find work to support themselves, so my father had to work doubly hard to keep our family alive. We lived frugally, but we were happy.

Political History: Its effect on our family

It's worth mentioning that at that time, Saigon was very chaotic. Ngo Dinh Diem, a Vietnamese patriot had just been appointed Prime Minister of South Vietnam with the backing of the United States, which took over the responsibility of protecting South Vietnam where France left off. As Prime Minister, Diem had to face of lot of opposition from different religious/political groups. First, there was the *Binh Xuyen* group led by Bay Vien, a French protégé. Binh Xuyen was a group of armed river pirates who ran opium dens and gambling houses in Cho Lon, a sister city of Saigon, and practically controlled the area on the west side of Saigon-Cholon River. They were protected by the French Administration and, under the regime of Bao Dai, were given two most important cabinet posts in Bao Dai's administration: The Ministry of Interior and the Police. Then there was the *Hoa Hao* religious sect led by General Nguyen Van Soai. The Hoa Hao Sect was a religious/political group with its own army and a large number of adherents. They controlled the entire *Hau Giang* (Mekong Delta) Region. The third important religious sect was the *Cao Dai*, which also had it own army and controlled the entire region northwest of Saigon with headquarters in Tayninh City. All these three religious groups were anti-communist and anti-Viet Minh. Therefore, during the First Indochina War, the French had relied on them to get rid of the Viet Minh and provide security for the regions under their control.

Ngo Dinh Diem was a reformer and he wanted none of this. To Binh Xuyen, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai he offered to integrate their armies into the Vietnamese National Army, which was being set up with funds supported by the United States. The Binh Xuyen turned down the offer. They saw Diem's offer as a ploy to undercut their authority. They openly challenged Ngo Dinh Diem and started fighting the Vietnamese National Army, creating a lot of insecurity for the people of Saigon and Cholon. Ngo Dinh Diem's Army, led by Colonel Duong Van Minh, fought back, and it did not take long for the better-organized and better-trained Vietnamese National Army to rout them out of Saigon and Cholon and push them back into the marquis of Rung Sat where they later joined the Viet Minh to fight the US/Vietnamese troops until the war ended in 1975.

General Trinh Minh The of the Cao Dai Army joined the Vietnamese Nationalist Army and helped Diem fight the Binh Xuyen. Unfortunately, he was killed in the battle at Tan Thuan Bridge. Rumors persisted even to this date that Trinh Minh The's killing was prearranged by Ngo Dinh Diem for fear that he might be a threat to the Prime Minister's authority. Likewise, General Nguyen Van Soai of the Hoa Hao Sect also revolted against Ngo Dinh Diem, but he was captured and condemned to death by the Vietnamese Government. Leaders of the Cao Dai Sect were more cooperative and let their army gradually integrate into the Vietnamese National Army.

One last challenge to Ngo Dinh Diem was from Vietnam's Chief of State, Bao Dai, who was a French protégé. He was educated in France and appointed by the French to the post of Chief of State of Vietnam in 1949. Although Chief of State of a country at war, he resided not in Vietnam, but rather in France. His prime ministers, mostly French protégés, ran the country for him. So when Ngo Dinh Diem was appointed Prime

Minister of Vietnam at the insistence of President Eisenhower, he faced a lot of opposition from Bao Dai's followers. One such follower was none other than the Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese National Army, General Nguyen Van Hinh. The latter was a French citizen and a graduate from France's St. Cyr Officer Academy. Ngo Dinh Diem removed him from the position of Vietnamese Army Chief of Staff and ordered him to leave South Vietnam for France because of his political ties with France, Binh Xuyen, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai. But, instead of relinquishing his power, Nguyen Van Hinh openly defied Ngo Dinh Diem's order. Roaming around Saigon with his Harley Davidson, he belligerently demonstrated to Diem that he would not obey Diem's order. However, under mounting pressure from the United States of America, France finally persuaded General Nguyen Van Hinh to leave Vietnam. It was in this chaotic political situation that my father and his family lived in Saigon City from 1954 to 1956.

With South Vietnam pacified and Bao Dai, Nguyen Van Hinh, Binh Xuyen and Hoa Hao out of the way, President Ngo Dinh Diem of the First Republic of Vietnam took drastic steps to reorganize his government and to deal with two most important issues facing his Republic. The first issue was to not hold a general election as called for by the Geneva Accord of 1953, which Diem claimed South Vietnam did not sign. The second issue was to rid the Viet Minh elements that chose to stay behind in South Vietnam, supposedly to sabotage the general election if one were held and to promote insurgency against the South Vietnamese Government if a general election was not to be held. This, Diem dealt with a rather heavy-hand. He started a national campaign called *To Cong* (denouncing the communist). On the first issue, Diem made clear to the North Vietnamese delegation, which arrived in Saigon in December 1956 to hold talks with the government of South Vietnam, that there would be no general election because people in the North, under the control of the communists, would not have the freedom of choice. A large group of demonstrators orchestrated by Diem gathered in front of the Majestic Hotel on Tu Do Street (now called Dong Khoi) where the North Vietnamese were staying and threatened to do physical harm to them. The South Vietnamese police had to escort the delegation to the airport for a flight home.

With regards to the second issue *To Cong*, it was fair game for anyone who wished to take advantage of this campaign to settle old personal scores. More often than not, people denounced their neighbors and their former personal enemies as communist agents. Many innocent people were unjustly put in jail. I thought it was very much like the anti-landlord, anti-bourgeois movement the Viet Minh had used in the early Fifties. The problem with Ngo Dinh Diem's *To Cong* movement was he relied too much on his chosen leaders at the hamlet, village, district and province levels who were appointed to these positions at the recommendations of his brothers—namely, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc of Vinh Long, Ngo Dinh Can, the unofficial governor of Central Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Nhu, his senior advisor. The more communist agents these henchmen denounced in their areas of control, the more rewards, either monetary or promotional, they received from Ngo Dinh Diem. Cases of denouncement abuses abounded. So much so that students and members of South Vietnam's elite society began to oppose Diem. True elements of the Viet Minh sleepcells began to promote insurgency and, in retaliation, planned a campaign of assassination of Diem's men at the hamlet, village and district levels. As the insurgency became more and more violent and widespread, President Kennedy started to increase the size of MACV advisory groups to train Vietnamese troops in the fight against insurgents. The insurgency started out in the foothill and mountainous regions and gradually spread out to the lowlands.

During this period of time, I accidentally met with Mr. Chau, a friend of my deceased brother Tran Van Trong. Mr. Chau was leader of a chapter of the *Dai Viet* Political Party (Great Viet), led by Nguyen Ton Hoan, who later became Prime Minister of South Vietnam under the Military Revolutionary Council. Mr. Chau convinced me to join the Dai Viet Party and put me in charge of an organizational cell. He sent me to Tuy Hoa in the wake of the Atlante Operation with the mission to contact members of the Dai Viet party in that area. One of the reasons I accepted Mr. Chau's assignment was that I started seeing Ngo Dinh Diem as a despotic and

authoritarian leader who ran the country with a tight-fisted hand. Mr. Chau's was a case in point. Although Mr. Chau was instrumental in helping Ngo Dinh Diem's access to the presidency of the First Republic of Vietnam by organizing popular support for him against pro-Bao Dai and pro-French elements, Ngo Dinh Diem ordered his secret police to kill Mr. Chau around 1957. After my mission was accomplished in Tuy Hoa, I returned to Saigon and went into hiding in the province of Chau Doc for a while with a group of Dai Viet members under the protection of General Lam Thanh Nguyen, leader of a reorganized Hoa Hao Sect in the Chau Doc area.

In 1955, my father was reinstated to his old job with the Treasury Department and was transferred to Dalat City as Deputy Chief, Treasury Department there. At his request, I accompanied him and my mother to Dalat to set up a household there for them. Dalat was a beautiful city and the weather was nice and cool. It was called the land of Hoang *Trieu Cuong Tho* (Land of the Royal Family). As a matter of fact, Emperor Bao Dao had a vacation home there where he spent most of his time when not in Paris, France. People could access Dalat City either by air, by road or by train. My father chose to travel by train when he joined his post in Dalat. During this train trip, I met with a young American who worked for the US Embassy in Saigon. We conversed in the English language and the American encouraged me to apply for work with the American Embassy or other American agencies because of my fluency in the English language.

After having successfully dealt with the problems created by Nguyen Van Hinh, Binh Xuyen, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, Ngo Dinh Diem began to reorganize his government. He used a national referendum to let the people of South Vietnam decide to choose either him or Emperor Bao Dai as Chief of State of Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem won the referendum by a landslide. That was when the First Republic of Vietnam was officially born.

South Vietnam enjoyed a short period of relative peace after the First Republic of South Vietnam was born, but not for long. In 1961, a group of parachutist troops led by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi revolted against the Diem Government. The revolution failed and Nguyen Chanh Thi and his associated revolutionaries fled to Cambodia. Because of his tight-fisted reign, a couple of years later, two South Vietnamese pilots bombarded the Independence Palace where Diem and his brother Nhu's family lived. Diem survived the attack but seemed to ignore the South Vietnamese discontent with his administration. He continued to oppress the South Vietnamese people, but the biggest mistake he made was to oppress the Vietnamese Buddhists by refusing them the rights to fly their Buddhist flags at the *Vien Hoa Dao* (Buddhist Religion Mission Center) and to have an equal status with the Catholic religion of which Diem and his ruling party were fervent members. Diem's refusal to oblige Buddhists' demands led to open protests by Buddhist monks. Their form of protest was self-immolation. In those days a Buddhist monk would proceed to a busy intersection in downtown Saigon, pour gasoline upon himself and strike a match to set himself afire. I myself was witness to such an incident. It was frightening, but Buddhist monks continued to protest the Diem Administration using this form of self-immolation.

At that time, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, sister-in-law of President Ngo Dinh Diem, was traveling in the United States and, instead of showing any concern about the self-immolation by Buddhist monks and without trying to appease them with kinder words, she ridiculed them and called them to commit acts of self-barbecue. The anger of the South Vietnamese population grew, and the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, led by General Duong Van Minh and other military leaders supporting the Buddhists, revolted against Diem and killed him while he was being transported in an armored personnel carrier to the headquarters of the Revolutionary Movement. Three months later, a group of young general officers led by General Nguyen Khanh staged another military *coup d'état,* putting the older generals under house arrest in Dalat, and set up a new government. Several successive *coups d'état* were to follow, the most daring of which was led by Air Force General Nguyen Cao Ky and Army General Nguyen Van Thieu who set up the Second Republic in South Vietnam. Because of repetitive *coups d'état*, division commanders of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces were more

concerned about being ousted by other military commanders than about the deteriorating military situation of the country. As a result, the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) increased their activities of insurgency. Attacks against South Vietnamese and US troops were more often and bolder. One example of such an attack was The Tet Offensive of 1968 when the Viet Cong simultaneously attacked all major cities in South Vietnam—the United States' Embassy in Saigon included. During this general offensive, the Vietnamese Communists occupied one-third of South Vietnam, overrunning Dong Ha, Hue, and Quang Tri. The fact that the US Embassy at the center of Saigon was attacked marked a turning point in the US Congress support for South Vietnam.

Due to constant attacks by the Viet Cong, my family lived in a very chaotic and dangerous time. Viet Cong SAM missiles landed in Saigon, Can Tho, and other major cities daily. After the 1968 Viet Cong attack against the US Embassy, the US Congress saw the equation clearly—South Vietnam was untenable. Therefore, it began to take action—writing off South Vietnam as a bad investment. It started to negotiate with Hanoi to end the war in Vietnam and completely withdrew its troops from South Vietnam. The US *exit policy* was formalized by the 1973 Paris Accord initialed by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. The Paris Accord of 1973 called for complete withdrawal of all US and North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam, followed by the establishment of a tri-partite government composed of elements of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Viet Cong), elements of the nationalist government, and elements of the so-called neutralist groups in South Vietnam. Nguyen Van Thieu protested the framework of the drafted Paris Accord and ordered his delegation in Paris not to sign the accord. And as detailed in the previous chapter, President Nguyen Van Thieu, by not having an appropriate tactical plan and by hastily abandoning the entire Military Region I and a large part of Military Region II, and above all, by abandoning his subjects, the grass root people of these regions, violated his oath as Head of State and plunged South Vietnam to its death in less than fifty-five days.

My father died in Saigon on March 9, 1978, nine years after my mother's death and three years after the North Vietnamese conquest of South Vietnam. When my father died, my brother Tran van Tri was at his death bed, and he heard my father calling my name repeatedly as if wanting to say something to me. After my father's death, Tri wrote me a letter and said that he did not understand why my father had called my name repeatedly before he died. Tri did not understand *why*, but I did. He probably wanted to explain to me that the reason he sent me away in 1949 was so I could have a better life than living in the communist regime. That I could not achieve a better life due to the premature death of Nguyen Vinh Lan was a matter of fate, and he was sorry for that. He did not have to explain. I did the same thing twenty-six years later when I sent away my three youngest children to an orphanage so they could be baby-lifted to the United States and have a better life. It was good luck and good fate that I did not lose them forever and was able to be re-united with them. When my father died, I was ten thousand miles away from his death bed, living the life of a refugee in Santa Rosa, California, with my family. My father's death marked the end of the last member of the Anterior TRANS and the beginning of the Posterior TRANS, starting with me and my children as the first TRAN generation in the United States of America.

[1]

CHAPTER FOUR

THE POSTERIOR TRANS

THE FATHER: NHON (The Benevolent)

Boyhood: 1932-1945

I was born on February 22, 1932, in a small coastal town in Central Viet Nam called Quinhon. I was the fifth child of a family of seven siblings. My parents named me *Nhon,* possibly because I was born in Quinhon, but more likely because it was part of a series of names my parents had already reserved for their children—names that were supposed to carry a meaning in Vietnamese traditional virtues: *Trong* (Respect), *Khiem* (Humble), *Thao* (Generosity), *Thuan* (Harmony), *Nhon* (Benevolence), *Nghia* (Just), *Le* (Right), *Tri* (Knowledge).

According to the Vietnamese horoscope, I was born under the sign of a Rooster (*Dau*). With this birth sign, and particularly my birth hour, my destiny had been set for better or for worse. It could not be changed—so I was told. I was never to become too rich or too poor. No matter how hard I worked and no matter how much money I made, the fortune I created would find its ways down the drain either through natural or man-made disasters. On the other hand, I never was to become too destitute. I was to reach the pinnacle of glory and the shame of defeat many times during the course of my life. Many a time I was down, but never was I out. My horoscope also told me that like a rooster scratching soil for food, I had to work hard all my life for a living, and, most unfortunately, I was not to have a happy life, but was to remain lonesome all my life although I was a charming and attractive person. That was my destiny and, to my sorrow, I found it to be true from the day I was born until this day.

I was born a sickly child—so sickly that my parents had to hire a nanny just to take care of me. Although my nanny had her own name, everybody in my family called her *Vu Nhon* (Nanny Nhon). Vu Nhon was about fifty-years-old when she came to my family to care for me. I was too young to know anything about Vu Nhon's family. All I knew was she loved me dearly and was very protective of me—like a guardian angel. She always wanted nothing but the best for me, whether it was a toy, food or clothing. At meal times, against the protest of my brothers and sisters, she would pick out the best food for me because, after all, I was sickly and needed to be well fed. When evenings came, she would personally put me to bed, tell me a bedtime story and lullabye me to sleep in her bed. The stories she told me at bedtime were normally parable and moralistic in nature. One such story that I remember till this day was about the consequences of *disloyalty*. The story went like this:

> *A farmer had for neighbors a pair of venomous "ran luc" (green serpents). They lived in the hedge near his home. The pair of ran luc seemed to be very attached to each other and were always seen together. But one day the farmer saw that the female serpent was with another male serpent. Angry over the conspicuous infidelity of the female serpent for having an affair with another male serpent, he killed her instantly with the shovel he had in his hand. Later that night as he was in bed about to go to sleep, he saw the husband serpent approaching his bed, ready to bite him and ready to inject venomous poison into him. Thereupon, the farmer told the husband serpent that the reason he killed his wife was because she was unfaithful to him. After hearing the farmer's*

explanation, the husband serpent, instead of attacking the farmer, spit a piece of precious jade onto the farmer's bed as a token of gratitude to him. Thanks to this piece of jade, the farmer became rich and wealthy for the rest of his life.

The meaning of this story was to never be disloyal to your better half—"*If you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind,*" was the message of the many bedtime stories Vu Nhon told me every night.

Vu Nhon never left me alone—not even in my own home, as if fearing that my brothers and sisters would bully me in her absence. On her day off, she would go to Quinhon market place and join a group of women her age to listen to the tales of *Kim van Kieu* or *Luc van Tien* or other Vietnamese classical poems recited by a public story teller for a small fee. On these trips, she would always take me with her to make sure that nobody would harm me during her absence. When I was seven-years-old, to the delight of my brothers and sisters who had grown jealous of the attention I received from Vu Nhon, my parents terminated her services—apparently deciding that I no longer needed a personal nanny. I was so attached to Vu Nhon that when she left me, I cried for weeks. To me, Vu Nhon was more than a nanny. She was like my second mother. At the time, I loved her more that I loved my own mother. When she left, half of my soul was dead, and the other half was numb. That was the first pain of separation I suffered in my life—one which forebode many others to come later during the course of my life. In a way, these separations played an important role in the formation of my character, one of which was the fear of having any close attachment to anyone. That explains my seemingly coldness towards friends, associates and even my own family during the course of my life.

When I was born, my family enjoyed a period of great happiness and relative prosperity. As stated earlier, my father worked as a middle-level functionary for the treasury department of the French Administration of Quinhon Province. As such, he made a good salary and provided well for his wife and his seven children. He owned a roomy house near the beach of Quinhon, an automobile that he used to transport his family for long weekend excursions out of town, and a man-pulled rickshaw that he used every day to go to work. He was well off enough to send all of his children to French private schools. If higher education was required for his children, he would send them to the Imperial City of Hue, which was considered Vietnam's best educational center. My father wanted his children to receive the best possible education regardless of costs. It was in Hue that my eldest brother Tran van Trong obtained his engineering degree in 1944, which, for a Vietnamese under the French colonial regime at that time, was quite an achievement.

Even though World War II was raging in the Pacific Region, life was relatively peaceful for us in Quinhon, except for the presence of Japanese troops in town, which attracted American bombings and strafings nearly every day. Thanks to the collaboration of the French Petain Administration with Japan, Vietnam enjoyed a period of peaceful occupation by the Japanese Army—at least in my little town. Under an agreement between the Petain Administration and Japan, the Japanese allowed France to continue its colonial rule of Vietnam. Although heavy pressure was exerted at the high level of French administration, this pressure was not felt in our little town of Quinhon. My father continued to work under the supervision of a French official. During this period of time, I attended primary school, grades one through six, at Gagelin, a private Christian Brother's School. At the end of the school day, I would go to the beach to swim and play with my friends. On weekends and holidays, with the allowance I got from my parents, I would go to see a cowboy movie at the local movie theater or leave on weekends to a camping trip with the grown-ups—usually with my older brothers and their friends.

Life in the little town of Quinhon was generally calm and uneventful. The biggest event that ever happened in our little town was when a big whale washed ashore, which occurred once every couple of years. When this

happened, the fishermen of Quinhon would organize a big funeral for the dead whale—a funeral which was more solemn and more ostentatious than that of the richest man or woman in town. Several monks were then invited to the temple (that was built near the spot where the whale had been washed ashore) to pray, expecting that the soul of the dead whale would protect them from the dangers of the seas. The other big event was that, starting in l941, Decoux, the French Resident General of Indochina, in order to take the mind of the Vietnamese people off the shame of France's defeat and occupation by Nazi Germany, organized many sport events—the most popular of which was bicycle racing. Once a year, participants in this sport would race on designated routes throughout the town of Quinhon. Such an event was very exciting for us residents of Quinhon.

But life suddenly changed for the worse for me and for my family when the Japanese troops invaded Vietnam and Quinhon in 1941. Today, in my mind's eyes, I still see me as a little boy standing by the roadside watching with awe, mixed with fear, as columns of grim-faced, mean-looking, fully-armed Japanese soldiers marched past Gagelin School on the day they descended upon Quinhon. When the Japanese troops occupied Quinhon, they established a navy base on a promontory called Cau Da on the east side of Quinhon, bordering the South China Sea. Cau Da was the favorite fishing spot for residents of Quinhon. My family used to go to there to fish because of the abundance of fish. No sooner did we drop the bait in the ocean than a fish would be found dangling at the end of it; that was almost certain, based on our experience. But when the Japanese established their navy base there, they denied all access to Cau Da, and that was the end of our family's favorite pastime.

Because of their presence at Cau Da, American war planes came to attack this Japanese navy base almost daily. The Gagelin School was located not far from the Japanese Cau Da Navy Base; therefore, during these air attacks, students of Gagelin School had to run for bomb shelters nearly every day. From these shelters, we could see American planes making their bombing and strafing runs on the Japanese Navy Base and Japanese anti-aircraft guns shooting back, forming clusters of black flaks around the American planes. During these American air attacks and Japanese counter-attacks, I fervently prayed to God that the American planes might not be hit because deep down in my heart I hated the Japanese with a passion. They were mean to the Vietnamese people. They were worse than the French colonialists in terms of ferocity and abuses.

On March 9, 1945, in a coordinated military campaign nationwide, the Japanese attacked the French all over Vietnam and subsequently placed Vietnam under their military control. I still remember the night of the Japanese attack on the Quinhon French military garrison very well. At the time of this attack, my father wasn't home. He was having a card game at his friend's house, but he was so concerned about his family's safety that he ran all the way home, which was a good twenty blocks away. It was a risky run. My father was very tall, and the Japanese patrolling the streets could have taken him for a French man trying to escape and could have shot him. But thanks to God, he got home all right that night.

After the March 9th attack, to appease the Vietnamese people, the Japanese declared Vietnam independent and handed the administration of Vietnam to Emperor Bao Dai, who then appointed Tran Trong Kim to form a government cabinet in order to run the country's affairs. There were a lot of debates, privately at least, among my father's circle of friends about the true meaning of the government change after March 9, 1945, between French and Japanese authorities. There were those who thought that the change was good because, after all, the Japanese were Asians. Supporters of Japanese rule were the ones who felt proud of the fact that an Asian country had soundly defeated the Imperial Russian Baltic Fleet in 1905 at the historic Battle of Tsushima and had succeeded in overthrowing a western colonialist power from Vietnam in 1945. But there were those who viewed the so called *Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere* with mixed feelings. They were the ones who felt that the independence granted to Vietnam by the Japanese was just a cover-up because the masters of Vietnam were still the Japanese. My father was among this group. Referring to the Japanese rule, he often told his family that it was *old wine in a new bottle*. His misgivings were right.

Soon after the Japanese handed independence to Vietnam, they demanded that Vietnam furnish them with rice, coal and other commodities to support their war efforts against the Allied Forces. Even before the take-over, the Japanese pressured the French administrators of Vietnam to confiscate the rice produced by the Vietnamese for Japanese soldiers in their war against the Allied Forces in the Pacific. Because the amount of rice produced in Tonkin and Northern Annam was not enough to feed the local population, they normally relied on the supplies of rice produced in Cochinchina (southern part of Vietnam); but because of French confiscation of the rice produced in the South before it reached Tonkin and the northern part of Annam, many of the people in these areas died of starvation. Conditions were appalling. Peasants from the countryside flocked into the cities begging for food, which the city people could ill afford to share because food, particularly rice, was so scarce and so expensive. As a result, whole families of peasants just died. City streets were littered with dead corpses. Every morning carts went round and round to pick up dead bodies that had been reduced to skin and bones for burial in mass graves. It was estimated that between the end of 1944 and the autumn of 1945, at least two million Vietnamese people in the northern part of Vietnam died of famine.

But the Japanese reign of terror did not last long. On August 10, 1945, after two atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered to the Allied Forces, putting an end to World War II. The Viet Minh (also known as National Alliance for Vietnam) led by Ho Chi Minh, took advantage of the Japanese Empire's downfall. His ranks seized power from the Japanese-supported government of Bao Dai and declared Vietnam independent. Emperor Bao Dai, a French protégé, a playboy, but a patriot at heart, abdicated his throne stating, *"I'd rather be the citizen of an independent country than the king of an enslaved nation,"* and at the invitation of Ho Chi Minh, he became the supreme advisor of the new Vietnamese Government led by the Viet Minh. Little did Emperor Bao Dai know that the Viet Minh had its own agenda, which was to turn Vietnam into a communist state within the satellite of the Soviet Union Communist Bloc.

After World War II, the world entered a period of peace, but peace was not to be for Vietnam. France, forever greedy, would not let Vietnam go free and independent. With the help of the British troops who were assigned (by the Allied Forces Far East Command) the task of disarming the Japanese troops in the southern part of Indochina, the French tried to reclaim its colonial rule on Cochinchina first, and from there they would spread the colonial rule all over Vietnam. Using the motto "divide to conquer," France declared Cochinchina, a colony of France, and set up Nguyen van Thinh as its segregationist governor. With the sanction of the British Government, French prisoners were released from Japanese concentration camps and, armed by British troops, waged a war against the Vietnamese people to reestablish their colonial rule on Vietnam. The Viet Minh fought back and started the First Indochina War against the French in December 1946, a war which was to last for nine years.

The Franco-Viet Minh War was genocidal and costly. In terms of human fatalities, French forces suffered 98,000 deaths and hundreds of thousands wounded. In terms of financial losses, it cost France's tax payers eleven billion dollars and four billion in American aid towards the end of the war. At the beginning of the war, the Viet Minh Army, much inferior in armament, retreated to its bases in the mountainous regions of North and Central Vietnam and in the marquis of the Dong Thap Muoi and Rung Sat Regions in the South. It fought the French practically with bamboo spears and assorted weapons of World War II vintage. However, starting in 1949, with the communists in full control of China, the Viet Minh received a lot of military aid from China and Russia via the Chinese routes and began open conventional warfare against the French. Better-equipped and organized, Vo Nguyen Giap's Army began to conduct military operations on a large scale against the French from the deltas in the North, Central and South Vietnam. Vo Nguyen Giap's Army became so powerful that the French were forced to retreat to defensive positions protected by a series of bunkers and frontier posts to control the movement of Giap's Army. By 1953, the French Armed Forces were losing ground and started negotiating with the Viet Minh for peace in Indochina.

Because my father was a functionary with the French Colonial Regime, he was forced to resign from his job by the Viet Minh after it took over the administration of Quinhon City, and our family had to rely on my father's savings to subsist. But, instead of feeling bitter about it, my father, like everybody else, was so enthused about Vietnam's independence under Ho Chi Minh, that he encouraged members of his family to do everything they could to support the independence movement led by the Viet Minh.

He allowed my eldest brother Tran van Trong to join the *Nam Bo Khang Chien* (Southern Viet Nam Resistance Movement) against the French at the start of the First Indochina War. With his permission, my eldest sister Khiem also joined a mobile propaganda team, traveling from village to village in Binh Dinh Province to encourage people in the country side to actively participate in the various revolutionary organizations set up to implement the revolutionary programs initiated by the Viet Minh. My mother was local chairwoman of the *Gold Week* movement organized by Ho Chi Minh to collect gold and gold jewelry allegedly to help the Viet Minh's fledgling army to buy arms to fight the French colonialists.

Patriotism ran high among the people of Vietnam in 1945. For the cause of national independence, they were ready to sacrifice everything they had, even their very basic amenities. Our family continued to live in the area surrounding Quinhon for a while, but when the Viet Minh started to implement the so-called *Tieu Tho Khang Chien* (scorched-earth resistance) movement in the war against the French (as described earlier), our family as well as others in Quinhon vacated the area. We moved from place to place to avoid being caught in the war. Finally my father decided to move his family to Dap Da, a little town about thirty kilometers north of Quinhon City. Although my father and mother were worried about the safety of our family, I thoroughly enjoyed the time we were in Dap Da. There was a lot of open space near our refugee home, so I could fly kites without being restricted by the narrow space in Quinhon City. On top of this, while living in Dap Da, I could live the fantasy of a cowboy galloping on horseback just as I saw him in the movies. There were many horses grazing the grass that grew in abundance there. The owner of these horses was willing to allow me to ride one of his horses as long as I kept my eyes on them and informed him if the horses ran away. During the day, I would jump on one of the horses and gallop him around the open space as a real cowboy. The fact that there was no saddle on the horse to steady my ride caused me to fall down from the back of the horse quite a few times. Nevertheless, this did not dampen my enthusiasm for horse riding. In the long run, I learned the trick of steadying myself on horseback even without a saddle, and I thoroughly enjoyed my horse riding from then on.

Teen Age Years: 1945-1949

For the safety of his family, and probably tired of moving around, my father finally decided that it was time for his wife and small children to go north to his father's home in Yen Dai Village, Nghi Loc District, Nghe An Province in the so-called *Lien Khu IV* (Inter-zone IV), the second most important Viet Minh base after the *Viet Bac Chien Khu* (northernmost Viet zone) bordering China. My grandfather was glad to see us safe and sound after a long and difficult journey. He was willing to share his home with us. He owned a large house built of *Go Lim* (iron wood), so called because it was so sturdy and so strong that no termites could destroy it.

The Yen Dai villagers were poor, but they lived a happy life—probably because they were not aware of any other life beyond the boundary of their village. During the summer months when the steady Lao wind (*gio lao*)—so called because the wind originated from Laos—blew in an easterly direction from the Chaine Anamitique to the South China Sea, the villagers would make kites as large as water buffaloes and fly them high into the blue summer skies where they would remain the entire summer months. Attached to their kites were large bamboo flutes into which the Lao wind would steadily blow, creating a beautiful symphony all day and all night and all summer long. There was a man in the village named Tao who was very good at making kites. He made

kites for me and helped me fly them high in the skies. Kite flying and making rice wine with Tao's help was the happiest time of my life. War was still far away and I enjoyed the worry-free life, not realizing that it was not so for my parents.

After a few years, my father's financial situation was getting better, and he could start sending his children to private schools again. My brother Thao and I were thus sent to a boarding junior high school located in Duc Tho District, Ha Tinh Province. The school's name was Dau Quang Linh. It was famous for its best educational system in the tri-province area of Nghe-Tinh-Binh (Abbreviation of Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh Provinces) at that time. There, my brother Thao and I were placed under the special supervision of a Catholic priest named Father Vuong Dinh Ai, who later became the people's representative at Vietnam's National Assembly until he was ninety-three. Father Vuong Dinh Ai allowed us to live in the so-called *Nha Chung*, a sort of Catholic seminary under his supervision. My brother Thao and I boarded in this *Nha Chung* while receiving our education at Dau Quang Linh School. I enjoyed my time here very much. Besides schoolwork, I had a lot of things to do. I was a choir member of the church at a local parish. I also participated in Dau Quang Linh School theater program where, right before summer vacation, we performed a medley of musical shows and theatrical plays for the population in the surrounding area. Because I was not a seminarian, I enjoyed less restrictions than other *nha chung* boarders. I did not have to study catechism and do bible studies as other boarding seminarians did, and in the evening I was free to do whatever I wanted.

On weekends, I would accompany other students, mostly in their senior or junior years, on boating trips on nearby Han River. These boating trips were usually conducted in the evening on moon-lit nights. Students in the senior and junior years were older than I, and they used these boating trips to court girls living on both sides of the Han River. Courting girls was not my objective because I was too young. I accompanied these senior students at their insistence because they said they needed my help. As a choir member, I had a beautiful singing voice, and they needed my singing to attract the attention of their girls. I didn't know how much my singing was helping them, but I enjoyed these boat trips very much. On moon-lit nights, rowing softly up and down the Han River, I had the feeling that I was gliding into the skies for, at the farthest point where your eyes could see, the river seemed to blend with the skies. This feeling was all the more real thanks to the lyrics of the song I sang during these boat trips. The lyrics said, *"The bright moon light touches the water of the river and makes the sky and the earth become one…"*

Because Dau Quang Linh School only provided junior high education, I only stayed there for a couple of years. Upon finishing junior high, I returned to Yen Dai Village in 1949, but not for long. At that point in time, my parents had a big education plan for me. There was then a young man named Nguyen vinh Lan from a wealthy family in Quynh Luu, a village about fifty kilometers from Yen Dai Village. Nguyen vinh Lan had proposed to my eldest sister Tran thi Khiem. He told my parents that he was going to Hanoi, a city in North Vietnam controlled by the French, and from there he would go to France to study. And when he finished his study in France, he would come back to Vietnam to officially marry my sister. As a token of the seriousness of his proposal, he was willing to take one of my parent's sons to accompany him to Hanoi and then to France for study. For years my parents had been waiting for an opportunity like this. Of course my parents were willing to oblige. Since father thought I was the brightest of their sons, I was selected to accompany Nguyen vinh Lan on this trip.

On July 14, 1949, two weeks after leaving Dau Quang Linh Junior High, Nguyen vinh Lan and I set out from Yen Dai Village for Hanoi and France—a journey that turned out to be the most tragic of Nguyen vinh Lan's life and mine. How tragic was it? Well, it ended in the death of Lan in Hanoi before we could even go to France. We traveled by bicycle from my home in Yen Dai Village, stopped by Quynh Luu for Nguyen vinh Lan to say

"goodbye" to his family and to pick up Buu Luong and his newly-wed wife for the trip. Buu Luong was a member of the Vietnamese royal family who was recently released from prison for counter revolutionary activities. Buu Luong came from a wealthy family in Hue City, Central Vietnam, and his family was supposed to finance Nguyen vinh Lan's and my education in France. From Quynh Luu we proceeded to Thanh Hoa City, using all kinds of tricks and disguises to avoid Viet Minh control checkpoints along the way. At my request, the group stopped by the Franciscan monastery for me to visit my younger brothers, Le and Tri, who were seminarians there.

Needless to say, the goodbye visit was very emotional because Le and Tri were the last members of my family who I was about to leave behind in my quest for further education. We stayed in Thanh Hoa City for one day and then proceeded to Phat Diem, Bui Chu Province, where a group of freedom fighters would help us escape to Hai Phong, a seaport under French control. Because Phat Diem was a *freedom fighters' zone*, access to it by road or waterways was closely checked by the Viet Minh security forces. We chose the waterway, partly because we were tired of traveling by bicycle and also because people traveling by waterway were mostly merchants and traders, and Nguyen vinh Lan and Buu Luong could easily disguise themselves as one of those. To make the disguise look real, they purchased some merchandise in Thanh Hoa and carried it with them to Phat Diem. But of all the people in the group who had the most problems with the Viet Minh security cadre was me. I did not have a laisser-passer or passport. At check-points and on the boat, the Viet Minh public security people wanted to know why I did not have a valid passport. In Vietnam, under the Viet Minh control, people who traveled out of their places of residence must possess a passport. Nguyen vinh Lan had to tell the police that it was summer vacation, and he wanted me to accompany him to see a little bit of the world. For reasons which were hard for me to understand, the Viet Minh police accepted his excuses and let me go. Nguyen vinh Lan had probably paid them some *tea money*. We finally reached Phat Diem. As prearranged, we entered the free zone of Phat Diem by getting into a certain store front, exiting its back door and getting ourselves into the diocese of Phat Diem and out of the control of the Viet Minh authorities.

Inside the Phat Diem free zone, we boarded at a transit house waiting for the chance to catch a boat in order to flee to Hai Phong. One night, about four weeks after we had arrived in Phat Diem, we were ushered out of the free zone and into the hold of a deep-sea fishing boat that set sail to the sea the very same night. There were quite a few passengers on the fishing boat. They too were in search of freedom. Once at sea, we felt free at last, but our troubles did not end there. The second day at sea, we encountered a big typhoon. All we could do was to pray to God Almighty to protect our boat from being sunk and us from being drowned in the deep ocean. After the storm, we encountered sea pirates who infested the seas between Phat Diem and Hai Phong. Because our boat was better equipped, we were able to escape the sea pirates. We survived the storm and the sea pirates only to be intercepted near Hai Phong by a French patrol boat. We had no trouble with the French because Nguyen vinh Lan and Buu Luong both spoke fluent French. They explained to the French boat captain that we were refugees from Phat Diem and we needed French protection. In 1949, the French were encouraging the people who fled the Viet Minh Zone to return to the French-controlled area; so the French patrol boat captain was helping us as much as he could. The French boat towed our boat to the port of Hai Phong for questioning. Convinced that we were truly refugees from the communist regime, French authorities released us, and we boarded at a transit house owned and operated by the organization of freedom fighters of Phat Diem.

After staying at this transit house for a week, Nguyen vinh Lan, the Buu Luong and I moved to Hanoi, ready for the trip to Paris, France. Buu Luong and his wife joined his family in Hue with promises that he would speed up the process of getting passports for Nguyen vinh Lan and me to go to France. We waited for a month in Hanoi and finally got the necessary papers. Unfortunately, two weeks before we were to board a plane for Paris,

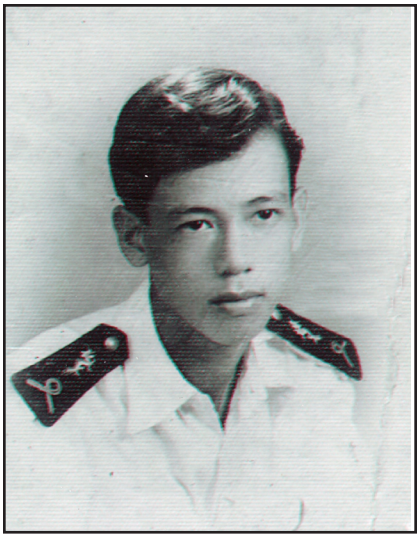
France, something terrible happened to Nguyen vinh Lan. Because of the cold weather in Hanoi, I was having cold symptoms all the time. Nguyen vinh Lan was very concerned about my health, so he always made sure that there were enough cold medicines at home for me. One day we were out of medication, so he decided to go to a neighborhood pharmacy to buy some for me. He rode his bike for a short distance to the pharmacy. It was late afternoon and was raining very hard. After getting the flu medication from the pharmacy, Nguyen vinh Lan rode his bike back home, but he never made it. On the way home, he was hit by a French military truck. He was immediately transported to Phu Doan hospital in Hanoi where he was diagnosed and treated by the hospital medical interns. What the medical interns failed to diagnose was Nguyen vinh Lan sustained a serious spleen rupture that, without immediate surgery, would cause him to bleed to death internally. This was exactly what happened. He died ten hours after being brought to the hospital.

At five o'clock in the morning the next day, as if knowing that he was going to die, Nguyen vinh Lan suddenly woke up from his sleep. Calling the name of his fiancé and then turning over to me, he said, "*Nhon, if I die, who is going to take care of you?"* Having said that, he convulsed violently and gave out his last breath. I accompanied Nguyen vinh Lan to the hospital morgue to say *"good-bye"* to him for the last time and walked back to our rented apartment—the loneliest kid in the world.

After Nguyen vinh Lan's death I lost contact with Buu Luong, our financier, and became homeless. A friend of Nguyen vinh Lan, a gentleman named Mr. Nhan, took me under his care and taught me how to make a living by repairing bicycles. Though poor, Mr. Nhan had a big heart. He could not afford to provide me with an education, but he could give me food, shelter and a trade. I lived with Mr. Nhan for a while, then, by a stroke of luck, my father's sister Aunt Yen, known as *Co Tham*, in Hue somehow learned of my sore situation in Hanoi. She immediately arranged for me to go to Hue to be under her care. After arriving in Hue, Aunt Yen sent me to Pellerin High School, where I studied until I graduated in 1951.

Adulthood: 195l-1953

I went directly from a teen to an adult. Because of the circumstances of war, I never lived and enjoyed the tender years of adolescence. In 1950, there was a fierce war going on between the communist Viet Minh and the French Union of Indochina, which included Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Military officers were badly needed by the Vietnamese Government's fledgling army to command troops in the war against the Viet Minh; therefore, it started an active campaign to recruit high school graduates to join the regional officer training schools in Hue. I disliked war and soldiering, but not wanting to be a financial burden to my aunt, I immediately applied to be a cadet at the Quan Thanh Regional Military Academy. Upon graduation from Pellerin School and after passing the Quan Thanh Military Academy admission exam, I was accepted to be a cadet at the academy. After a year of crash training, I became a career military officer with the rank of *aspirant*.



Nhon van Tran

Something important occurred to me while I was at the military academy. There was a beautiful young half-French/half-Vietnamese girl living not far from the academy. Her name was Hoai Nam. When I first met her, I was immediately attracted to her. At first she ignored me. After all, she belonged to a wealthy aristocratic family, and I was just a military cadet with an uncertain future. However, I did everything I could to attract her attention. Because her home was located near the military academy, on

weekends or whenever my platoon was training in the area near her home, I always lingered around her house, trying to strike up a conversation with her and to express my love for her. My patience and efforts to court her paid off. She confessed to me one day that she loved me too and promised to marry me after I graduated as an officer from the academy. The most difficult obstacle in the relationship between Hoai Nam and me was her mother. She disapproved of our relationship, considering I was unworthy of her daughter, but Hoai Nam persisted.

After graduating, I was assigned to the Reserve Officer Academy in Thu Duc, Cochinchina, as a military instructor. Hoai Nam and I wrote to each other for some time; then, the love letters stopped. What ought to happen, happened. Back home in Hue, Hoai Nam's mother forced her to marry a high-ranking military officer whose family was much more compatible to hers. I found this out when on leave during TET from Thu Duc. Although I understood that she had to obey her mother, I could not help feeling depressed and heart-broken. Her love for me, in a way, filled the emptiness of my life because I was then a young man without a family.

Heart-broken from my first love loss, I returned to Thu Duc Reserve Officer Academy and requested a transfer to a fighting unit. My request for a transfer was immediately approved. The combat unit I was transferred to was the 60th Infantry Battalion located at Quang Trung Training Center. The 60th Infantry Battalion was a unit recently integrated into the Vietnamese Army from the Cao Dai Sect. I had to receive basic training before being sent to the battlefield in South Vietnam. Due to some command disagreement with the battalion commander, who rose up in rank in the Cao Dai Army and therefore had little knowledge of military tactics, I requested transfer to the 20th ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) Battalion in Central Vietnam where I participated in a lot of military operations north of Hue.

Even though I was busy every day fighting the war with the Viet Minh, I was happy with my assignment to the 20th Battalion because its headquarters were located near my relatives' home. It was also through the military operations conducted by the 20th Battalion that I began to see the true nature of the Franco-Viet Minh War. It was a war full of indiscriminating destruction with no regard to the civilian population. I still remember a day when we returned from a military operation and two French non-commissioned officers challenged each other as to who was the best sharpshooter. For targets, they chose two field hands working in the field about two kilometers away from them. They shot but missed the targets. However, this incident instilled in me an indelible feeling. Still commanded by French officers at the battalion command level, the French seemed to be interested in only one thing—destruction of all Vietnamese villages they suspected of collaborating with the Viet Minh, whether their suspicion was well founded or not. At one of those operations conducted in the vicinity of Hue, the French G-2 Officer found rice stocked in a granary. From the amount of rice stored in the granary I knew that it belonged to a family, but the French G-2 insisted that the rice must be destroyed, and he ordered me to do just that. Of course, I refused the order and that cost me. A black mark was entered in my personal file. Disgusted, I requested transfer out of the unit. Around that time, the ARVN was forming some new air-borne units and it asked for volunteers to join the parachutist troops. Looking for adventure or more precisely, looking for a way to continue punishing myself for the death of Nguyen vinh Lan and the separation with Hoai Nam, which had become a constant mental torture for me, I volunteered.

In 1952, I went to Hanoi to join the parachutist troops. I received parachutist training at Chem, an airborne training school about fifty kilometers from Hanoi. Because of my poor health, I was found unfit to be a parachutist. I was then transferred to an ARVN Battalion in the sub sector of My Trach, sector of Ke Sat, Hai Duong Province. Because My Trach Sub Sector was located in the middle of an area under the control of the Viet Minh, the fighting there was the fiercest between my battalion and the Viet Minh. As platoon leader, I had to lead my platoon outside My Trach post at night to lay ambush against the Viet Minh troops. Clashes with the

Viet Minh troops often occurred. Sometimes we killed the Viet Minh troops and sometimes they killed our soldiers. But, as if protected by some super natural being, I was wounded, but not killed. If not on ambush, I had to lead my platoon to escort battalion supplies from Ke Sat to My Trach. This supply route was infested with mines. These mines had to be defused before we could use the supply route. Defusing mines was the most difficult task. These tasks were usually performed by combat engineer troops on loan from Ke Sat Military Sector. When combat engineer troops were not available, we used the most primitive methods of mine defusing to get our supplies through. We would walk a herd of water buffaloes ahead of our supplies. If there were mines on the road, they would detonate and kill the buffaloes first.

Life in a combat zone was no fun. I had to face death constantly. I had seen many of my fellow soldiers get killed by enemy mortar and artillery attacks. To detect the Viet Minh mortar and artillery emplacements, the battalion commander set up watchtowers around the post, and on the Viet Minh first artillery attack, soldiers manning the watchtowers would alert the duty officer of the post, who then reported the locations of the enemy artillery emplacements, and then requested fire support from Ke Sat Military Sector. The role of the duty officer was on a rotation basis. When performing this task, I had to make the round of watchtowers, making sure the soldiers manning these watchtowers were vigilant and wide awake. It was sometimes interesting to talk to these soldiers. From these talks, I learned that human beings, regardless of their social and racial status, had the same basic needs: family, love and peace. In a conversation with a soldier in a watchtower one night, he told me that he missed his family very much—that if it had not been for the war we were in, he could have had a couple of children, but now he remained childless and under the Vietnamese customs, being childless was very bad. He closed his thought with a long sigh as if wishing that the war would end right then and there so he could go back to his home and fulfill the dream of his family.

Conversations like this always brought my mind back to my personal situation. Deep down in my heart, I hated the army, because there was too much atrocity and killing generated by it. I remembered my father had always told me that the army was the "*last thing you consider doing in your life.*" But contrary to his advice, I had volunteered to join the army because I felt guilty over the death of Nguyen vinh Lan and because I needed to support myself. Now that I had joined the army and participated in many combats and had seen many deaths, I regretted having done it. I remembered even to this date how a friend of mine was killed when the mortar from which he was firing exploded in the mortar tube and killed him instantly. In a rush to counter attack one of the Viet Minh assaults on our post, he dropped the mortar shell in the mortar tube head first instead of tail first, resulting in the mortar tube explosion killing all the men around him. War was not romantic and glorious as we saw it on TV. In a real war, you had to kill or be killed. I had killed many of the enemy soldiers in order not to be killed by them. However, when you kill people, even legally, you cannot help but feel part of yourself being killed. That was how I felt about war. So I couldn't wait until my time in the army was up and to get out of it. Thanks to God, that time came in 1954, when, after their military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French signed a peace agreement with the Viet Minh. The peace agreement between the Viet Minh and France called for the partition of Vietnam into two halves with the demarcation line set at the 17th Parallel. The territory north of the 17th Parallel was controlled by the Viet Minh and the territory south of it was under the control of the Nationalist Government supported by France and later by the Americans.

Under one of the provisions from the Geneva Agreement, people above the 17th Parallel could move south, and people from the south could move north if they wanted. My father and mother had already moved south in 1952 and chose to live in Saigon where my father was reinstated in his job with the treasury department there. I was happy to rejoin them in Saigon after my discharge from the army. As a civilian, I worked at odd jobs and went back to school. I loved foreign languages and concentrated all my time off work on learning English. My evening work on foreign languages paid off handsomely. In 1956, I landed a job as an English/

Vietnamese language translator for the office of Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem (actually, it was an office run by the CIA in support of the Diem Government). Later that same year, the US Military Assistance Advisory Group offered me a job as an interpreter for its advisory detachment in Danang. The pay was higher, so I accepted the offer and moved to my new assignment in Danang City, Central Vietnam.

It was worth mentioning here the reason I was so successful in getting my proficiency in English language was thanks to the support of Nguyen thi Mai, my first wife. She not only provided me with her emotional support, but also her financial support. She owned a taxi company, and we lived comfortably with income from her taxi operation business. She moved to Danang and lived with me for a while, but she had to go back to Saigon to take care of her taxi business. Nguyen thi Mai and I were married for three years, but we had no children. I had both good and bad memories with Nguyen thi Mai. The good memories were that she loved me dearly, and we had a lot of unforgettable souvenirs together. The bad memories with Nguyen thi Mai were that she did not want me to move to Danang, and she kept pressuring me to leave my job in Danang to rejoin her in Saigon where we could live off the proceeds of her taxi business. Very much career-oriented, I did not want to do that so what ought to happen, happened. We agreed to a divorce, for we could not continue to live in two separate households.

In Danang, I was very busy with my new job for the US Advisory Detachment to the Regional Directorate of Building and Construction of the First Vietnamese Military Region. My job consisted of translating documents, mostly construction specifications, from Vietnamese into English for the US Advisory Engineer Detachment. This division wanted to make sure that construction specifications were technically correct and pricing was appropriate because all new construction work for the Vietnamese Army was funded by the US. Besides translation work, I also accompanied US engineers to actual construction sites to inspect construction work being done by Vietnamese contractors.

Construction sites were spread out the length and width of Central Vietnam from Dong Ha up North to Quinhon down South. I also served as an interpreter for the Director of Building and Construction and the US Engineer Advisory Group attached to it. Cultural misunderstanding often occurred between these two entities. US officers often took an easy-going attitude approaching these meetings with an informal way but contrary to their counterparts, the Vietnamese officers were always strict and formal. For example, when an American officer wanted to summon his counterpart to approach him, he normally wagged him with a finger, palm facing up. In the Vietnamese custom, you only do this when summoning a dog. The Vietnamese officers felt very offended and angry. Then I had to jump in and explain to the Vietnamese officers that that was the way American people summoned someone, even their superiors. The dog-wagging sign was only one aspect of the cultural differences. Another was in their proposed plan for constructing new barracks for an ARVN unit. The Vietnamese engineers always included the construction of a flagpole or an imposing entrance gate to the unit of a new barrack. The American engineers saw this construction as wasteful and unnecessary—not understanding that in an ideological war between communist North Vietnam and nationalist South Vietnam, the flagpole was more than just a concrete block of cement with a flag fluttering on top of it—it was the symbol of the nationalist spirit for which they fought communist North Vietnam. Discussions of the value of the flag pole normally ended up in an impasse, and the Vietnamese Army normally had to foot the bill for constructing the flag pole. While in Danang, I was so busy with my work that I had no time for anything else, let alone feeling lonesome with my newly-found bachelorship. However, as time went by and work became routine, the feeling of loneliness began creeping up on me. It was during this time that I met Ai Chau, my wife.

Ai Chau (My Wife) and Life in Danang

Ai Chau was a beautiful woman at age twenty-five. At the time I met her she was working as a sales person for a textile store in downtown Danang. To court her, I often pretended to buy some textiles at the store where she was working and talked to her whenever she was not attending to other customers. Because of my frequent visits with her at the textile store, the store owner was not happy and thought I interfered with her work. As a result of my unwelcome visits, the store owner subsequently fired her. I knew it was my fault that she lost her job, so I told her I would take care of her.

Ai Chau, my wife

I was attracted to Ai Chau because she was a beautiful woman with the features of a Euro-Asian, much like Hoai Nam, my first love. But as we came to know each other more, I found in Ai Chau many qualities that Hoai Nam did not have—qualities such as simple-mindedness, unpretentiousness, loyalty and an immense capacity for love and caring. Six months into our relationship, we got married. Around that time, she got word that her mother in Saigon was dying, so she had to leave me and go to Saigon to take care of her mother. But her mother had died before she arrived in Saigon. She felt very sad about it. Added to her sorrows was the fact that her brothers and sisters forbade her to go back to Danang. Somehow they learned of Ai Chau's relationship with me, who was of Vietnamese descent. The Chinese in Vietnam at that time were very racist when it came to relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese nationals, much in the same way that whites in the Deep South of the United States viewed Blacks in the Fifties and Sixties—though not to such an extreme extent. When Ai Chau went to Saigon to visit her dying mother, she was in the early stage of pregnancy with my child, and her family wanted her to abort the fetus. She did not want to do that, so she found a way to get back to Danang.

My first child, the one who was supposed to be aborted, was born August 28, 1958. We named her Tran thi Bich Nga. She was a child of love. When Bich Nga was born, I was participating in a war game exercise as an interpreter with the US Advisory Team of the Vietnamese 2nd Infantry Division, north of Hai Van Pass near Phu Bai Hue, a good seventy-five miles north of Danang. Upon news of Bich Nga's birth, I drove from Hue to Danang to be with them. I was very excited about being a father for the first time, so at the end of each workday in the war game exercise, I drove home just to be with my new-born child.

Life for us in Danang was better than good. My salary as a MACV employee was high by Vietnamese standards, and because I worked for the 2nd Infantry Division, the military garrison authority in Danang allowed me to live in a military housing compound reserved for officers of the 2nd Division and their families. The housing compound where we lived was located across the Danang River from the 2nd Infantry Division Headquarters. So it was very convenient for me

to just walk to the Danang riverbank, take a sampan and get ferried across the river to go to work at the division headquarters. At the end of each day, Ai Chau and I would walk along the riverbank and enjoy the sight of small wooden boats gliding up and down the river driven by boatmen and women who tactfully twisted their oars to push their boat forward, creating small waves of white foam in the wake of their boats. It was simply beautiful and I missed that scenery very much when I moved to Saigon City in 1960.

Vietnamese Coastline (picture taken in 1995)

Danang in the late Fifties was a small town where everybody knew everybody else. I had quite a few acquaintances and friends there. On weekends, I either visited with them or took my family to Son Cha (China) Beach for a swim. Unlike the beaches in the United States, the water at Son Cha Beach was never too cold for a swim. On weekends, we would go to a Chinese restaurant or to a Vietnamese restaurant that specialized in Bun Bo Hue (Hue beef noodle soup) to enjoy the foods.

While working in Danang, I witnessed the first US casualties in Vietnam. In 1958, a US *milk run* DC3 on loan to US MACV by the Vietnamese Air Force crashed into the mountain on the east end of the Chaine Anamitique. There were no survivors in the crash. A US colonel and a US sergeant were killed in the crash. Other interpreters and I of the 2nd Infantry Division were called upon to man the radio station at the US Advisory Group BOQ in order to monitor the progress of the search. The search went on for two days. On the second day, the search team found the crashed plane.

While working for the US Advisory Group in Danang, I also witnessed the rise of the Viet Cong insurgency program. Reports of South Vietnamese Government cadres killed at the hamlet and district levels started streaming in steadily to the 2nd Infantry Division Headquarters. The senior advisor of the US Advisory Group to the 2nd Infantry Division was very concerned about this so he advised his counterpart who was the division commander to start taking more aggressive action against the Viet Cong by conducting more reconnaissance patrols and more penetration into the jungles to intercept NVA troops coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the North. As Viet Cong insurgent activities increased, Vietnamese National Army pacification activities also increased. Troops of the 2nd Infantry Division began a more aggressive offensive, laying more ambushes and conducting more patrols to intercept Viet Cong troops.

I had some first-hand experience participating in these types of operations while working as an interpreter. In 1959, I was ordered to accompany the American advisor to the 5th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division on a reconnaissance mission to Post #6—an ARVN outpost located in the deep forest near the Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos border triangle. The reconnaissance mission was conducted by the 2nd Battalion. It took us a whole day to get from Danang to Post #6. We arrived at the last lowland outpost of Thuong Duc by noon and from there we walked along mountain trails the rest of the day. The mountain trail to Post #6 was covered with thick canopies of forest vegetation that grew into three strata. The first stratum consisted of saw grass, bushes, vines and small trees. Adolescent trees formed the second stratum. The third stratum consisted of old big trees over 100 feet high. When walking on the trail in the forest we never saw the sunlight. We only saw it when breaking out on a clearing. It was an endless obstacle course walking on trails in the thick forest of the Chaine Anamitique.

We descended a mountain side only to climb up another, fording streams and creeks, but the most difficult obstacles were insects—namely, blood-sucking leeches. Somehow they managed to find their way inside my clothing, onto my chest, into my pants, biting my flesh, and bloating themselves on my blood. The American advisor and I had to stop several times during this trip to get rid of them, which was a difficult task to say the least. If I tried to pull the leeches off my body, they would break. The only way to get them off was to spray them with insect repellent or burn them with the lit end of a cigarette. In spite of frequent checks and actions against these insects, when I arrived at Post #6 in the evening, there still were some leeches on my body, and soldiers of the Post #6 helped me to finally get rid of them. After staying at Post #6 for two nights, our reconnaissance unit returned to Danang using the same trails we had come up the previous day, but this time, on advice from soldiers of Post #6, I wrapped up my body with clothes tighter—even wore hand gloves—so that my body would not be exposed to these blood-thirsty insects.

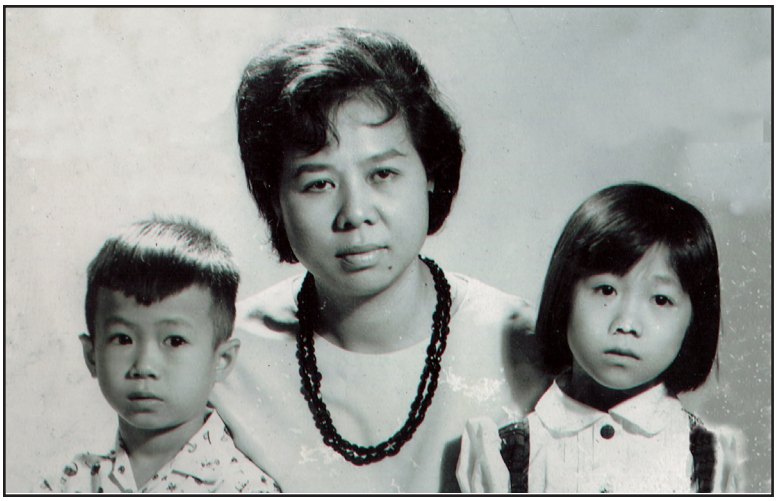
After Post #6, I thought long and hard about staying in Danang. With my second child, Tran Quoc Trung, coming in December 1959, I could ill afford to risk my life in combat operations, which were part of my assignment, so I requested a transfer to Saigon. The request for transfer was approved, and MACV assigned me to work first with the US Advisory Group of the Central Directorate of Building and Construction (engineers), then at the main translation division located in downtown Saigon. I worked there for three years, and due to my excellent work at the MACV translation division, I was chosen to be the personal interpreter for Mrs. Westmoreland, wife of the commander of the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. At that time, Mrs. Westmoreland was organizing a group of Vietnamese *Grey Ladies* to visit and do social work for Vietnamese soldiers' families, and I was required to accompany and translate for her and wives of high-ranking officers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

Mrs. Westmoreland and I
(picture taken in New Orleans in 1997)

Move to Saigon in 1960

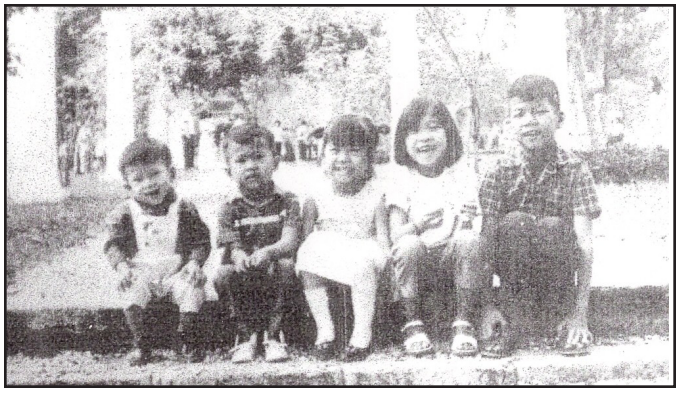
When I moved from Danang to Saigon in 1960 to work for the Directorate of Building and Construction, there were a lot of changes in my extended family. My father was reinstated in his job with the treasury department and was transferred to Dalat to work for the local treasury department there. My sister Khiem, through family connection, landed a job as personal secretary for Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Le, chief of National Police. Lieu, the husband of my sister Thuan, also joined my father as a clerk for the Dalat Treasury Department. So when I arrived in Saigon with my family, I was very much by myself. We lived in a rented apartment in Cholon and then in Phu Tho on the outskirts of Saigon near my work place. While working at this new job, I witnessed two important events in South Vietnam. The first one was the coup d'etat by the paratroopers led by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi. The coup d'etat failed and Nguyen Chanh Thi and his associates fled to Cambodia where they remained until the 1963 Revolution which deposed Diem by the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam. The second big event was the bombing of the Independence Palace where Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu lived. Diem and his brother survived the bombing attack but, in retaliation, resumed his policy of oppression with a new level of intensity, particularly against those who opposed him. As a result of the two attempts against his life, he trusted no one except his own brothers, namely Ngo Dinh Nhu, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc of Vinh Long, Ngo Dinh Can of Hue and their cronies.

Chu Ai Chau, my wife

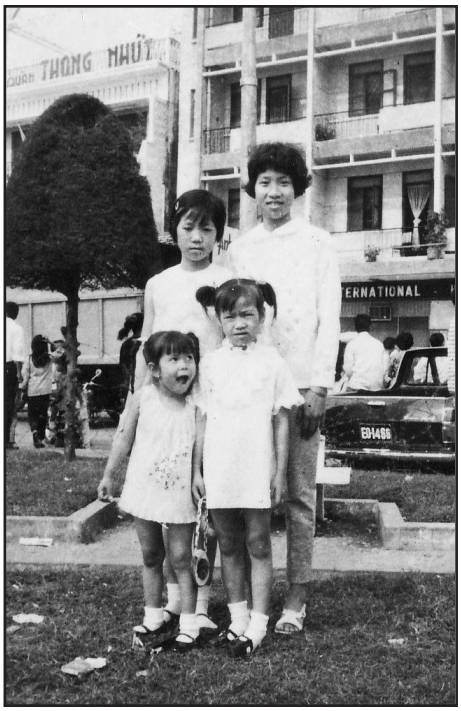


Tran Quoc Trung, Chu Ai Chau, Tran thi Bich Nga

I worked at the Directorate of Building and Construction for two years, then was transferred to the main MACV Translation Department located in downtown Saigon. Because of my work as a translator, I was promoted to the rank of GS-12 and put in charge of the MACV G2 Document Exploitation Center at the beginning of 1963.

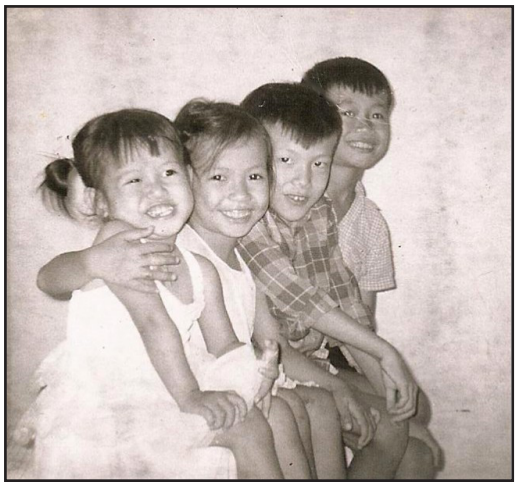


Anh, Trung, Nga, Hoa, Lap



Back: Nga, Hoa Front: Van, Thuy

Anh, Trung, Van, Ai Chau, Phuong, Nga, Thuy

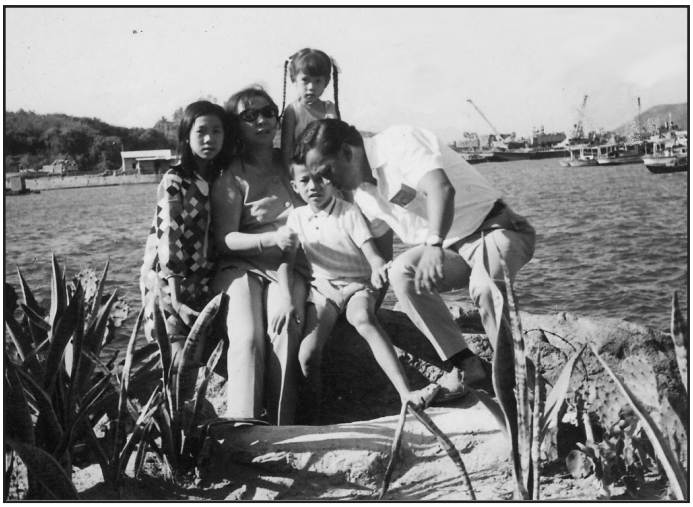


Van, Thuy, Anh, Trung - 1971 in Vietnam

Anh, Phuong, Thuy, Van

Ai Chau and Van

Ai Chau and Nhon



Nga, Ai Chau, Van, Phuong, Nhon - 1973

Nga, Phuong, Ai Chau and Van in Danang

Toward the end of 1963, with no opposition from President Ngo Dinh Diem who was killed in a coup d'etat led by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and with the tacit approval of the US Government, the US Army took a larger role in the war against the Viet Cong insurgency in the South and the Communist Regime in the North. Documents captured by units of the US Army were then delivered to the Combined Document Exploitation Center for analysis. As the person in charge of the center, I developed my organizational skills to the fullest. The center was organized into two groups. One group was responsible for analyzing the captured documents, making a gist translation of their contents, listing items captured and forwarding them to G2-USARV (US Army Vietnam) for consideration. If interested in the gist summary of the captured document, the G2 -USARV would send them back to the center with request for full translation by the translation group of the Center.

Ngo Dinh Diem
President of South Vietnam

While at the Document Exploitation Center, I had the chance to read and analyze the captured Viet Cong documents. Slowly but subconsciously, I began to realize that even with the support of over 500,000 US troops, the military regime of the nationalist government in the South could not win the war against the communist regime in the North. Why? Studying the history of Vietnam from 300 years B.C. to the year of 939 of the first millennium, I noticed that many a time Vietnam had revolted against the Chinese occupiers, kicked them out of the country, gained its independence but only for short periods of time. The reason for this was Vietnam's ruling parties failed to include and protect the interests of the *grass-roots* people who constituted the base of Vietnam's society. One such example was Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, who were often compared to Joan of Arc of France, and are so revered to this date by women both in Vietnam and overseas. But if one is to study the circumstances of Trung Trac and Trung Nhi's rebellion against the Chinese, one would see that their rebellion against the Chinese was basically to avenge the death of Thi Sach, Trung Trac's husband and a member of the local chieftains and feudal lords. Thi Sach had been killed by the Chinese to frighten the Vietnamese feudal lords and local chieftains into submission to their rule. The Trung Trac and Trung Nhi sisters ruled Vietnam for only less than three years before the Chinese Army came back and forced them to commit suicide. Vietnam was once again dominated by the Chinese for roughly a thousand years until 939 D.C. when it finally regained its independence as a nation. During these thousand years, many rebellions against the Chinese yoke were conducted militarily and politically, but only when it was conducted with the help of the grass-roots people, was it successful. Among these rebellions for independence, one must mention the victories of the Tay Son brothers from Binh Dinh Province, One of the Tay Son brothers, Emperor Quang Trung, was able to defeat the Chinese invaders and push them back out of Vietnam.

With regards to the current South Vietnamese Government, it existed basically to protect its interests and the interests of its allied friends. The pronounced objectives of the South Vietnamese Government were freedom and democracy for the South Vietnamese people, but little was done to insure that freedom and democracy for the people at the bottom of Vietnamese society. Oppressions abounded, and many programs were implemented against the interests of the grass-roots people. One such program was the *Strategic Hamlet*, which forced the people to leave their homes and lands and live in the so-called strategic hamlets. Although strongly supported by the US, the Strategic Hamlet Program failed miserably. Aided by Viet Cong propaganda, people living in strategic hamlets protested against the program and sought to come back to their lands and their homes. This program might have succeeded if it had not been for the deceit and corruption of its enforcers.

Deceit and corruption could be exemplified by Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, Chief of Ben Tre Province and a protégé of Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc of Vinh Long Province. Pham Ngoc Thao was a Viet Cong infiltrated in the rank of high government officials of South Vietnam. As chief of Ben Tre Province and one of their own, the Viet Cong left his province alone. At the time, in the eyes of the South Vietnamese Government, it was considered the most pacified province in South Vietnam. The reason the Viet Cong left Ben Tre Province untouched and pacified to the liking of South Vietnam's authorities was so they could use it as an intelligence collection point as long as Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao, one of their own, remained chief of that Province. After Pham Ngoc Thao was discovered as a Viet Cong agent and removed as chief of Ben Tre Province, the Viet Cong began to attack it without mercy. It was brutally attacked by the North Vietnamese Army during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Politics is perception. People both in North and South Vietnam (with the exception of a few US hand-picked leaders in the South), perceived the presence of large numbers of American troops in the South and constant indiscriminate bombardment of North Vietnam and also in the countryside of South Vietnam by US War planes, as an attempt to subject Vietnam under their occupation, just like the French had done to them in the Nineteenth Century. It was around that time that the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was born. Its leadership consisted of the cream of the crop in South Vietnam—doctors, lawyers, and students. They rallied behind the Front with the secret support of North Vietnam, and finally succeeded in overthrowing the government of South Vietnam on April 30, 1975.

I worked at the Document Exploitation Center for three years. Disheartened by what I perceived as wrong politics and wrong war management, I resigned from it in 1965 and joined the Rand Corporation as a free lance research assistant for Professor Clift Barton of Cornell University. At that time, the Rand Corporation conducted a project for USAID to find out why Viet Cong (VC) cadres and troops had such a steel spirit and determination to fight the Americans at all cost, even when the odds were not in their favor. I spent a year interviewing captured VC cadres and troops. What I learned from these interviews confirmed my belief that the United States and South Vietnam could not win the war.

Captured VC documents and interviews of VC prisoners of war revealed that North Vietnamese troops and Viet Cong sent to the South via the Ho Chi Minh Trail had high morale and great determination to fight the Americans, whom they considered as occupiers of South Vietnam as the French had been in the Nineteenth Century. There was only one objective on the mind of the VC cadres and troops: complete independence for Vietnam. Recorded in their notebooks were stories of how they constantly faced death while traveling on the Ho Chi Minh Trail or roaming the marquis in South Vietnam and were forced to live and fight under extremely difficult conditions and hardships. They were subjected to constant bombardment by American B52s and incendiary bombs; yet, their morale and spirit were never dimmed or shaken. How could one win an opponent with an unwavering and indomitable spirit like that? In the history of human warfare, morale of the foot soldiers was the basic strength of any army. It was thanks to the strength of the foot soldiers who pulled artillery pieces to hillocks and mountains surrounding the valley of Dien Bien Phu that helped Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the Viet Minh forces, to defeat the French at the historic battle at Dien Bien Phu in l953. It was this indomitable spirit of the oppressed Vietnamese people that helped Emperor Quang Trung to win the war against the Chinese at Dong Da Battle in the Eighteenth Century. The Americans and the South Vietnamese generals seemed to have forgotten the lessons of history.

In their frustration for not being able to bring North Vietnam to its knees, the Americans often complained that they were forced to fight a war *"with their hands tied behind their backs"* and that the Viet Cong and Vo Nguyen Giap's Army were like gooks—they never stood in one place to fight. The Americans did not have to wait long for the Viet Cong to stand up and fight. In 1967 Giap's Army concentrated a sizable force to attack

the American installation at Khe Sanh. The battle raged for months, and the fighting at Khe Sanh was so intense that the American press nicknamed it *the second Dien Bien Phu*. Little did they know that the Khe Sanh Battle was just a diversionary of Giap's real intention, which was the TET Offensive of 1968.

TET OFFENSIVE 1968

It was supposed to be the most sacred and celebrated day of the year in Vietnam, but it was not the case in 1968. Even though they had agreed to silence their guns during TET, on January 30, 1968, the second day of TET, the Viet Cong launched a coordinated attack on more than one hundred towns and cities in South Vietnam. In Saigon, they focused their attacks on the US Embassy, the Independence Palace located on Thong Nhat Street, the headquarters of the Joint General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam near Tan Son Nhut International Airport, the Saigon Navy Base, and the Saigon Radio Station. These attacks took Saigon Government and the US MACV military command by surprise, for unknown to them, despite the promised *cease fire* by the Viet Cong for the three days of the Lunar New Year, the Viet Cong had amassed men and weapons of all kinds into Saigon and other cities in South Vietnam and had prepared a radio broadcast inciting the population in South Vietnam to rise up and to help them topple the South Vietnamese Government and to force the Americans to withdraw from South Vietnam. It was an ambitious undertaking and Giap had used 120,000 of his troops to achieve this mission. Giap had underestimated the power of the US and South Vietnamese Forces. When the battle was cleared, 50,000 North Vietnamese troops were killed, compared to 4,000 South Vietnamese and 250 Americans. Their military assault across South Vietnam in 1968 was nothing more than a pinprick, but their psychological impact was enormous.

The Viet Cong attack of the US Embassy and Independence Palace right in the heart of Saigon City was the *straw that broke the camel's back*. The searing images of US marines decimated at the US Embassy battle in Saigon were flashed live in every American home. The American people had had enough. For years prior to the Tet Offensive Campaign, the US military command in Saigon had continuously bragged to the American people that the war against the insurgency was being won, but the fact that the Viet Cong could strike at the very heart of Saigon, powerfully belied that claim. Even though Vo Nguyen Giap and Hanoi politburo knew that the Spring Offensive of TET could not liberate South Vietnam in one sweep because of the military presence of the United States, they knew that time was on their side and the that Tet Spring Offensive in itself would create a psychological shock to the American people and to the world. They were right in their assessment.

After the TET Offensive, the American people's opposition to the Vietnam War intensified and reached an all-time high. Faced with such opposition, the United States President, Lyndon B. Johnson, was forced to think seriously about negotiating with Hanoi to end the war in Vietnam. As the first step, he announced that American bombings would be limited to the areas just north of Quang Tri, a small town bordering the 17th Parallel, hoping that Hanoi would interpret his gesture as an offer of the American intention to engage in peace talks. But Hanoi, forever determined to conquer South Vietnam, continued to send more troops to help its military arm, led by the Front for Liberation of South Vietnam. But Hanoi had made one big mistake. During the TET Spring Offensive, they occupied Hue for twenty-five days. During that time, they searched house-to-house, looking for South Vietnamese police officers, civil servants, their relatives, and the so-called collaborators of the American imperialists. When the North Vietnamese troops withdrew from Hue, no less than 3,000 bodies were found in mass graves, shot, beaten to death or, in some instances, buried alive. The searing images of civilians killed during the North Vietnamese occupation of Hue hardened the attitude of the South Vietnamese middle class and those who by necessity had to work for the South Vietnamese Government for a living. After Hue, to them, a prolonged war seemed more attractive than the prospect of peace that could get them slaughtered

by the Viet Cong at a *twinkling of an eye*. It was this attitude, sustained by fear of retaliation by the communists, that prompted them to throw their lot with the Americans and the South Vietnamese Government for the next seven years until South Vietnam collapsed in 1975.

When the Viet Cong attacked Saigon on January 30, 1968, my family and I were living in Phu Tho on the outskirts of Saigon where the fighting was the fiercest. Due to insecurity reasons, I had to move my family closer to the center of Saigon. I had a friend who owned a large home located in the center of Saigon City in the 2nd District, so I had to contact him to see if he agreed to let my family take refuge in his house while the fighting was going on in Phu Tho. On the second day after the Viet Cong attack, despite the fighting that was still going on, I went to his house by foot, a good five kilometers from Phu Tho, to explore this possibility. As I walked from Phu Tho to Nga Sau Circle, the streets were filled with dead bodies—hundreds of them. I was lucky that soldiers of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces or the Viet Cong did not shoot me. I finally reached my friend's house, and he agreed to let my family occupy half of his house. On that same day, I moved my family as refugees in my own city. After moving to my friend's house, I was contacted by Professor Clift Barton to do an interview with Viet Cong prisoners captured during the Tet Offensive of Saigon. He had a contract with USAID to find out why and how they were able to enter and attack Saigon. What I found out through these interviews stunned me. With regards to shipment of arms and military hardware to Saigon prior to their offensive campaign, "It was a *piece of cake*," said one of the Viet Cong cadres. All the Viet Cong needed to do was to hide weapons in trucks or barges transporting agricultural produce to Saigon and bribe Saigon police who were manning the various highways and waterways leading to Saigon City.

Trung, Anh, Phuong - about 1971

Returning to my personal situation, 1968 was a year that I had to make a choice. I now had a family of ten people to feed and the cost of my children's education was at an all time high. All of my school age children attended private schools. Now I must make the decision of whether to throw in my lot with the South Vietnamese Government and its American allies or to stay outside the ring. I decided I would continue to do what I had been doing for the last sixteen years—to work for the Americans in a strictly technical and non-political field. Through some acquaintance, I was introduced to the USARV Civilian Personnel Office and was hired as a personnel management-employee relations specialist for the Can Tho Civilian Personnel Office. Its function was to serve all Vietnamese civilian personnel employed by USARV units and Cords in the entire Military Region IV—stretching from My Tho to Ca Mau.

While in Can Tho, my family and I were pretty much shielded from the ravages and destruction of the war except for the scares caused by daily SAM missiles landing in the city. But the horrors of war did not spare the rural areas surrounding Can Tho. It was during the time my family and I lived in Can Tho that my daughter, Thuy, got involved in a minor bicycle accident. She had only minor injuries but still had to be treated at the Can Tho General Hospital. It was here that I saw with my own eyes the full extent of the horrors of the war in South Vietnam. Artillery bombings by both the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, notably the ASOC (Air Support Operations Center), located at the IV Military Region Headquarters, caused a lot of havoc in the countryside surrounding Can Tho. Artillery and bombing victims brought to the hospital where my

daughter was treated were mostly women, children, and babies because they could not run fast enough to escape the rain of fire dropped on them. It was true that during the first Indochina War between the Viet Minh and the French, I had seen many deaths and many victims of war, but most of them I had seen were soldiers. The victims I saw at the Can Tho General Hospital were nearly all civilians—mostly children—even babies. The most horrific sights were their maimed bodies, their limbs cut off, or their faces disfigured by incendiary fires.

But the war deaths were not limited to what I witnessed at the hospital. While employed with the Civilian Personnel Office of Can Tho, I had to deal with cases of death of many *Kit Carlson Scouts*—Vietnam's Navy Seals. The Kit Carlson Scouts were ralliers from the Viet Cong ranks. They were now employed by the US Navy base at Ca Mau. Because they were former Viet Cong, they were familiar with the places where Viet Cong cadre and troops likely used for hiding places. So, the US Navy Seal Command would employ these Kit Carlson Scouts to help find Viet Cong hiding locations and destroy them. The job of these Kit Carlson Scouts was very dangerous, and often deaths occurred. When deaths occurred, it was my duty to process their death benefits. Previously, this duty fell upon Anthony C. Hall and Kent Ditmer, the CPO and his assistant respectively. Because I had been well trained in my job as chief of the management-employee relations section at Can Tho CPO, I had to personally process these cases. When I took over this responsibility, there was a backlog of fifty death cases to be processed. I flew twice a month to Ca Mau to get my job done. It was a heart-rending job. I had to interview families of the dead and have them look at the pictures to make sure they were the authentic ones. The pictures of the dead Kit Carlson Scouts were horrendously gruesome. Besides the fatal wounds that caused their deaths, their bodies were severely maimed as the Viet Cong wanted to exact revenge on their disloyal former comrades. Although it was tough work, I thoroughly enjoyed the beauty of the scenery at the southernmost tip of my country.

Because I performed my job well as chief of the Can Tho CPO Management-Employee Relations, I was promoted to GS 12, the second highest rank bestowed upon a Vietnamese. Around that time, the Vietnamization program was afoot, not only on the military side but also on the civilian side. I was then promoted to GS 13 and was transferred to Pleiku to become the first Vietnamese CPO for the 2nd Military Region in the highland in 1970. Pleiku was the frontier of South Vietnam territory. It was where the headquarters of South Vietnam's 2nd Military Tactical Area (2nd Corps) was located. It was also an important military depot area of the 2nd Corps. It was also the Headquarters of the First US Cavalry. Because of its strategic significance, the Viet Cong used SAM missiles and artillery to attack it daily. Before I could procure my own housing in Pleiku, I had to live on an American base BOQ and was therefore under constant bombardment from Viet Cong artillery shellings. My personal safety was getting a little better when I found my own housing in the civilian quarter of the town.

After just one year working in Pleiku, I was transferred to Nha Trang to a larger civilian personnel office. In Nha Trang, my career took off sky-high. In a way, I was the showcase of the success of the Vietnamization program on the civilian side of the US war efforts in Vietnam. Although many American civilian co-workers envied my position and felt jealous of my rise, little could they do to change the mind of the civilian personnel director who was on the staff of the USARV Commander in Saigon and the Senior MACV Advisor to the 2nd Military Region. As the area civilian personnel officer, I supervised two Americans and about thirty Vietnamese employees. I must have done a good job because right after the Saigon Area CPO, the largest and most important CPO in South Vietnam, was vacated, the USARV Command appointed me to that position. Now I had the responsibility of providing personnel services to more than 10,000 people serving the various American agencies in Saigon, including all non-military US organizations such as USAID and CORDS (Civil Operations For Rural Development Services). My recommended CPO training in the United States of America was approved after I was transferred to Saigon CPO.

With the help of the American advisor to the Ministry of Interior, it took me just a few days to get my passport, and on April 6, 1972, I was prepared and ready to make the trip. I was very excited about the chance of being trained in the United States among the top-notch civilian personnel officers world-wide. My plane landed at Travis Air Force Base, and I was met by Mr. Thorn, a former American employee at the Saigon CPO. He drove me to his home in Folsom, California, for the night. Because I had plenty of time to spare, he took me the next day to San Francisco to enjoy a day of sight-seeing. Needless to say, I was all excited about the richness and the sense of peace I encountered on my first day in the United States. It was a stark contrast to what I was used to seeing in South Vietnam. There were no charred buildings on both sides of the freeway, no watch tower, no barbed wires, or no security check points. The freeway from Folsom to San Francisco was simply too wide—four lanes of traffic on each side of the freeway on the stretch near San Francisco. The highlight of my visit to San Francisco was the Golden Gate Bridge and Chinatown. In Vietnam, I had heard a lot about the Golden Gate Bridge, but there was nothing compared to actually riding on it and standing at the end of the north side of the bridge looking back towards San Francisco—the city shining brightly in the beautiful spring morning sun.

We had lunch in Chinatown and the question that stuck in my mind was, *How come these Chinese could stay here and prosper while I am stuck in my war-torn country?* A fleeting idea of immigrating to the United States, even illegally, started crossing my mind! But it was just a fleeting idea that never dwelt in me very long.

Unfortunately for me, the day was too short because I had to report to my training center that was located at Warrenton, Virginia, about thirty miles from Washington, D.C. Here again, I was continually amazed at the materialistic comfort enjoyed by the American people. Even the lowest paid workers in the United States enjoyed more possessions than the upper class in Vietnam. During my stay at Warrenton, I often conversed with a young American who served as a bus boy within the cafeteria at Warrenton Army Post. Even with the salary of a bus boy, he was able to purchase the latest model automobile, which I knew I would not be able to purchase with the savings of my entire life work. This could happen only in America. In the first week at Camp Warrenton, I was contacted by my former boss Anthony C. Hall and was invited to his house in Alexandria, Virginia, for the week-end. On the occasion of my arrival at his house, his daughter drove down from New York to visit with us. I was very honored. Upon learning that she had driven from New York City to Washington D.C. by herself at night, I was amazed at how safe people could be in the United States. From then on, my only dream and objective was,

> *One day my family and I would come to America and live in freedom, peace and abundance.*

I was able to achieve my dream but it was under an entirely different set of circumstances. Three years later, my family and I were refugees to this country. . .

As part of the CPO training program, I was sent to Atlanta, Georgia, to observe how a CPO operated in the United States. I was very well treated by my colleagues at the Atlanta army post. Here again, I was totally surprised at the way a CPO in the US operated. In a way, the operation was much simpler than that of a CPO in Vietnam. At least, it did not have to deal with the complicated process of compensating a Vietnamese employee if he or she was killed while in employment with an American army unit. While in the Washington D.C. area, I was visited by Mr. Nguyen, a former Vietnamese translator at MACV translation division. Mr. Nguyen emigrated to the United States legally as an immigrant after working for so many years for the US Government. When visiting with me, he tried to persuade me to stay in the United States and legalize my immigration status later. It was a very tempting persuasion.

In the Spring of 1972, during my training in the United States, North Vietnamese troops poured across the 17th Parallel into South Vietnam and occupied Dong Ha, Quang Tri and Hue. In view of this, all my friends and acquaintances tried to convince me not to return to Vietnam for fear I would be caught in the war, but I resisted because my family and children were still in Vietnam. Even though I am often viewed by others as an egoistic and self-centered person, when the chips were down, my family always took precedence over all other things. It was the same thought process that took place three years later when I was tempted by Mr. McBride who took me to Saigon Airport and urged to get on a waiting C30 to escape South Vietnam on April 25, 1975. Then, I had chosen to stay behind to rescue my family instead of saving my own skin.

When my CPO training was completed, I went to Chicago to visit with Hiep Vo and his family. Hiep Vo was my first cousin, son of Aunt Yen (who came to my rescue when I was by myself in Hanoi) and with whom I went to Pellerin School. He had gone to the United States to study engineering. By the time I met him in 1972, he already had graduated from college and worked for an engineering firm and was well established in Chicago. Needless to say, my visit with his family was very exciting. I had not seen him for over two decades and there was a lot of catch-up to do. I took his family to a Chinese restaurant owned by Bob Smith, my colleague, who used to manage the CPO in Quinhon. We had a lavish meal, but when I was ready to leave and pay for the meal, Bob Smith refused to accept my money, stating that it was an honor to treat me and my cousin during my stay in the United States. When I visited Hiep Vo in Chicago, the North Vietnamese Army had occupied Hue and the territories north of it. Concerned about my safety, Hiep Vo advised me to stay on in the United States and assured me that he would personally see to it that my immigration status was cleared, and he also promised to get a job for me. He said,

> *"What good is it for you if you go home and are arrested by the Viet Cong. In prison or possibly death, you would not be able to help your family! If you stay in the United States, you will have the chance to make money and send home to help your family!"*

There was a lot of sense in what he said, so I delayed my departure for Vietnam as long as I could, waiting for better news from South Vietnam. After about two months, I learned that the US and South Vietnamese Forces had repulsed the North Vietnamese Army out of South Vietnam. That was when I decided to go home. Before going home, I received an invitation from Bob Smith to spend some time in Hawaii. He owned a home in Oahu and worked for the CPO there and said he would arrange for me to return to Vietnam from Hawaii. To back up his invitation, Bob Smith sent me a one-way airline ticket to Hawaii. I had read a book about Hawaii by James A. Michener and had been fascinated by this island and the people that populated it. So off to Hawaii I went.

On the plane ride to Hawaii, I sat near an American lady who started the conversation by asking me where I came from. When she learned that I came from South Vietnam, she started giving me a lecture on the immorality of the Vietnam War, telling me that the majority of the American people were opposed to this war and that the

US Government could not ignore their oppositions any longer. She even predicted that the United States would have to withdraw its troops from Vietnam as early as Spring 1973. Apparently, she was a very well-informed person. She did not encourage me to defect but she did give a clear and comprehensive picture I could not otherwise obtain in South Vietnam where information regarding national security was often controlled by the government, and even in the American milieu where I worked, information was always exaggeratingly upbeat.

I was very confused about the information she gave me. So, while in Hawaii, I was not in the mood for enjoying the beautiful landscape of Hawaii. I spent most of my time on its beach wondering what to do.

> *Shall I stay or shall I go? Shall I abandon my job in Vietnam or remain in the United States and be a nobody here?*

As Hiep Vo said, I could get a job here to support myself and send the money home to support my family. The job I was going to get until my immigration status was clear was probably a manual job, but it was no doubt worth a thousand times the pay I got in South Vietnam. During my soul searching on the beaches of Hawaii, foremost in my mind was not the issue of financial survival, for I knew I could make it. I had done it in my younger years in Hanoi, but it was the issue of family togetherness that weighed heavily on me. As I said earlier, when the choice had to be made between my personal safety and my family welfare, my family took precedence.

In my desperate analysis, I remembered the difficulties facing me as a young man twenty years ago. Then, I had enlisted in the army to support myself. *Why not now?* I could enlist in the US Army and become a language specialist. The fact that my primary language was Vietnamese and I spoke English fluently could be of great service to the US Army in Vietnam. While in Vietnam, I had met many Latin Americans who were sent to Vietnam to fight in the war. Many of them had told me they were not US citizens but by enlisting in the US Army as volunteers, they could become US citizens after the end of their time in the army. Maybe I could do the same. If the US Army sent me to Vietnam as a US soldier, the Vietnamese Government could not do anything about it, and when my tour of duty in Vietnam was completed, I could claim my family as dependents and they could go to the United States with me. I had known a couple of language specialists while working at the translation department for MACV. So one day I decided to show up at an army recruitment office in Hawaii and volunteer to enlist in the US Army as a language specialist. The recruiter looked at my passport and my visa and told me that I must change my visa status from a visitor to the United States to that of an immigrant before he could consider my request for enlistment. So the enlistment in the US Army was out as a way to stay legally in the United States and to bring my family to the United States. Out of options, I finally decided to go home to my family no matter what!

I went home to Vietnam toward the end of 1972 to find everybody in my country in a subdued mood. Life was getting more and more difficult. American presence started to dwindle and American enterprises started packing up and going home. The local economy was in a shamble. The Saigon CPO was no more. So I went to work for Reuters News Agency, listening to Hanoi radio broadcasts to detect its intention with regards to the on-going peace talks in Paris. From listening to Radio Hanoi, I learned that the communists in the North were much weakened by constant American B52s bombing and the heavy casualties inflicted upon their troops during the 1972 Spring Offensive, and it required some time to replenish their forces. Their army was not only smaller, about one-fourth the size of the Thieu's Army, but also less effective and exhausted. The territories they controlled in the South were a patchwork of unpopulated areas, rendered desolate by Agent Orange. North Vietnam economy was depleted as Chinese and Soviet military aid was drastically reduced. The communists in South Vietnam had to deal with the US invasion of Cambodia where nearly all of their ammo and supply depots were captured by US and South Vietnamese armies.

While the Paris Peace Talks were going on, the North Vietnamese delegation, led by Le Duc Tho, in protest of US and South Vietnam occupation of Cambodia, walked out of the negotiating table. The United States President, Richard Nixon, determined to bring them back to the conference table, used B52s to bomb Hanoi City, something that the United States had not done before. Internationally, the Chinese and the United States relations were getting better. Sure enough, the North Vietnamese delegation resumed peace talks. Finally the two sides, North Vietnam and the United States agreed to end the war. According to the provisions of the peace accord, the United States must withdraw all of its troops from Vietnam and the North Vietnamese troops must be withdrawn from South Vietnam. They also agreed on the formation of a coalition government in South Vietnam. The Paris Peace Accord encountered fierce opposition from South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu. He worried that once the Americans departed from South Vietnam, his country was doomed militarily and would be vulnerable to North Vietnamese military take-over.

After a lot of arm-twisting from Washington, President Nixon personally guaranteed to Thieu that the United States would come to the rescue of South Vietnam if Hanoi attempted to conquer it. This was accomplished by demonstrating to Thieu that recent heavy bombings of Hanoi had badly ravaged North Vietnam physically and psychologically, and that under these circumstances, Hanoi was in no position to invade South Vietnam for a long time to come. Assured of Nixon's promise, Thieu agreed to sign the Paris Peace Accord. The United States had achieved its goals—bring home all of its POWs and troops. Nixon declared he had achieved peace with honor. Hanoi also claimed that it had achieved peace—at least in the skies over North Vietnam. After bringing home all of its troops and POWs, the US Congress passed a law prohibiting the President of the United States to unilaterally use air strikes over Indochina. So while North Vietnam was licking its wounds resulting from the 1972 Spring Offensive and rebuilding its military forces and its economy, the situation in the South remained relatively quiet for a couple of years.

But as US troops began to draw down in South Vietnam, Thieu's army became overextended defending positions once held by the US troops. With Russian military aid picking up after the US forces withdrew from South Vietnam, the communists prepared for a final offensive of South Vietnam. In the North, civilian laborers were conscripted to build a highway linking North Vietnam with the Mekong Delta in the South, slicing through deep jungles and high mountains. Hanoi relentlessly prepared for a final offensive of the south to reunify the country. Using the highway it had built, the communists in the North rolled down trucks—day and night—to channel troops and weapons to the South without fear of air attacks. The Vietnamese Armed Forces did not have B52s. They built a pipe line running from the North to the town of Loc Ninh, about seventy-five miles north of Saigon. They even set up a radio network to allow its commanders in the South to communicate directly with their superiors in Hanoi. It took the communists in the North only two years to complete their preparations. And by the end of 1974, the stage was set for them to launch the Spring General Offensive of 1975.

By this time, the economic and political situation in the South began to unravel. When the Americans left South Vietnam, they took all of their dollars with them. Jobs disappeared. Those most affected were the poor people whose economic survival depended largely on the American GIs—workers at US bases, people who catered to the GI's needs such as restaurant owners, bar girls, launderers, tailors, barbers. Toward the end of 1973, there were no less than two million people out of work. Because of insecurity in their villages, these people could not go back to their homes to do their traditional farm work for a living. They hung around towns and cities in which they had taken refuge. Inflation rose drastically, eroding income even more. The vast majority of people found it harder and harder to make ends meet. In this economic crisis, the people who suffered the hardest were the foot soldiers who had to bear the brunt of the fighting. Rich and well-placed people could buy draft deferment for their sons, but not the poor people. In the preceding years, the soldiers' morale and fighting spirit had been surprisingly high, considering the corruption and indifference of their leaders. But now,

while they had a hard time surviving, their leaders indulged themselves in a lifestyle full of luxuries and extravagances. Their leaders blatantly engaged in illegal activities, knowing that they would not be punished by Thieu, whose position was precarious, as he needed to have their support.

The malfeasance reached the highest levels of government. Four-Star General Nguyen Vinh Nghi, commander of the 4th Military Region (Mekong Delta) was a case in point. He pilfered tens of thousands of small arms and sold most of them to the Viet Cong. Though General Nguyen Vinh Nghi was a protégé of Nguyen van Thieu, the president was unable to protect him any longer and had to fire him; but instead of indicting him for the crime he had committed, Thieu gave him another assignment to command troops on the front line in Xuan Loc. National Security Advisor General Dang van Quang, Prime Minister General Tran Thien Khiem and even Thieu' s wife were accused of involvement in heroin traffic, but remained untouched because of their close ties with Thieu.

The situation in Saigon went from bad to worse, but the hardest blow to Thieu was the fall of Richard Nixon. Thieu had relied on Nixon's promise to come to his rescue with renewed military aid and renewed bombings should the communists start to gain the upper hand. But with Nixon's fall, the mood in America shifted. Weary of the expensive war in Vietnam, The United States was determined to leave behind its obsession with Vietnam and move on to other priorities. Responding to the American mood, the United States was no longer willing to give the hard-earned American tax payers' money to the corrupted generals in Saigon. Even before Nixon was out of office, Congress voted to ban all American bombings in Indochina to make sure that America would not be drawn back into the conflict. To prove that it really meant business, Washington started to scale back the annual military aid to Saigon. The new US President, Gerald Ford, not wanting to be involved in what he perceived as "Nixon's War," was not prepared to bail out Thieu and his entourage of cronies.

With the American military aids drastically cut, soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army now had to fight a poor man's war. They now went to the battle with just a few grenades and a couple of hundred rounds of ammunition. South Vietnamese Air Force helicopters were not flying because of shortage of spare parts and fuel. The same was true with military vehicles. Artillery barrages preceding military assaults were silenced because of shortage of artillery shells. This was demoralizing because the Vietnamese Army had been trained to fight the war the *rich man's way*—the American way—relying heavily on friendly air and fire support and the unlimited use of ammunition.

It was against this economic and military background in the South that the Hanoi politburo put together its plan for the Spring General Offensive of 1975. According to this plan, its immediate objective was not to take over South Vietnam in 1975 in one sweep, but to take advantage of its military success and then take over South Vietnam in 1976. However Hanoi politburo left open the option of total conquest of South Vietnam if the success of its 1975 Spring Offense campaign permitted. First, toward the end of 1974, the communists attacked Phuoc Long. This was an unimportant province headquartered forty-five miles northwest of Saigon. The purpose of this attack was to test whether the United States would reenter the war and support the South Vietnamese Government with massive B52s bombings as it had done so many times in the past to save the Saigon regime. When Washington did not respond, Hanoi knew that from then on, all it needed to worry about was the Saigon regime. Saigon Air Force did not have B52s. The communists took Phuoc Long in January of 1975.

Based on the military success in Phuoc Long, Hanoi began massive troop build-ups to attack Ban me Thuot with the intention to establish a government seat for its political and military arm in South Vietnam—the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. In February 1975, General Van Tien Dung was appointed new commander of the communist forces in the South. He arrived in his field command post west of Ban me Thuot, the first

target of his campaign. Ban me Thuot was located about 150 miles northwest of Saigon. His troops attacked Ban me Thuot on March 10, 1975, and overran the town in less than a week.

After the fall of Ban me Thuot, Thieu assembled his trusted advisors to discuss his new strategy called *Light Top Heavy Bottom* (see Chapter Two—Escape) and asked for their advice. But as usual, his advisors, General Cao van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Tran thien Khiem, Prime Minister, and General Dang van Quang, National Security Advisor, had no questions and deferred to Thieu to make the decision. Thieu explained to them his plan to abandon the northern most regions in Military Regions I and II, reasoning that these regions were densely forested and sparsely populated and of little value to South Vietnam. The troops that were now deployed in these regions would be redeployed to Saigon and the Mekong Delta in order to protect them and to rout out the communist forces hidden there. At the end of the meeting, he instructed his advisors not to leak out the information to anyone, particularly the Americans. Why not the Americans? Nobody knew. Thieu probably wanted to avenge America for abandoning him. The generals did as they were told.

Thieu's *Light Top, Heavy Bottom* strategy began with the abandonment of the towns of Pleiku and Kontum in Military Region II (once a huge American logistical base in the Central Highlands) in March 1975. Because there was no advance planning when the retreat began, chaos immediately set in. When the regular troops pulled out of the towns of Pleiku and Kontum, members of the militia and the civil defense forces also left their posts to save themselves and their families. Frightened civilians and families of soldiers also fled. In their flights, they hopelessly mixed with columns of the retreating armies, rendering them incapable to defend themselves against communist ambushes and artillery shelling. Casualties in the retreating column were so high that the Saigon press described it as the "Convoy of Tears."

But the problems did not end there. Following the abandonment of Pleiku and Kontum, other towns of Hue, Danang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Tuy Hoa, Nhatrang, Quinhon, Phan Rang, Phan Thiet were also abandoned. There was nothing that Thieu and his generals could do to stop the receding tides. Thieu's strategy had failed miserably in execution because it wasn't carefully planned in advance and was executed in total secrecy with the intent not to involve the civilian population. As the history of Vietnam had it, whenever a national strategy failed to involve its grass-roots people, it was always doomed for failure.

With the collapse of Military Regions I and II, my thoughts now focused entirely on finding a way to get my family out of Vietnam. Thanks to my years of working with Reuters, I was well connected with the foreign press, and through it I had access to information about the security condition in Vietnam better than the news printed in the government-censured local press. With the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong fast approaching Saigon, it was no longer a matter of *If*, but *How soon* they took Saigon. I knew that once they arrived in Saigon, there would be a *blood bath*, and because of my association with the Americans, I would be the first one to be soaked in this blood bath. I didn't mind dying—but what about my family? So I decided to try to get a way out of Vietnam for my family.

My brother Le, who was in the military, could not move around very much, so he urged me to go to the Mekong Delta and try to find out if we could buy a boat that could accommodate my family and his. So to the Mekong Delta I went. For the first two weeks of April 1975, I shuttled between Saigon and the seaports near Can Tho and Rach Gia to check on the price of a sea-going fishing boat and reconnoitered the possibility of escaping South Vietnam from these seaports. But, to my consternation, other people in Saigon also had the same idea as we had, and the price of a boat for sale soared sky-high. To ensure that a boat could be made available to us, we must put down a deposit of several thousand dollars in order to keep the deal going. When

I informed my brother Le of the sale condition, he hesitated. What if the boat owner took the deposit, sold the boat to somebody else, and disappeared? We would lose not only our deposits, but also our means of escape!

In those days in South Vietnam, deals like the one offered me were often broken because of human greed. Besides, my brother Le, like most other middle-class South Vietnamese, thought that South Vietnam was not going to succumb right away. They believed that United States had invested too much money and too many lives in South Vietnam to simply abandon it, and that it would come back to help the Saigon regime one more time! They reasoned that the current situation was like the one that happened in the Spring Offensive of 1968 and 1972 against South Vietnam—the United States would simply wait for the communists to concentrate their forces in the South and then use B52s to annihilate them! But, better informed by reliable sources, I refused to believe in this scenario.

By the end of the second week in April, 1975, Thieu and his nephew, Hoang Duc Nha, Minister of Information, were so preoccupied with their own survival, that they paid little attention to what was being printed in the local press. So the local press was getting bolder and printed stories of women and children being slaughtered while trying to escape Hue and Danang, the two important northern most cities in Military Region I. Of course, the news of *blood bath* in these cities only deepened my concerns. What if the North Vietnamese came and our children were separated from us? How could we protect them?

The talk among the middle-class people in Saigon now was, *"Are you going and how?"* By the third week of April, I was very much resigned to accept my fate and left it to God, my Heavenly Father, to decide. Ordinarily, I had not been a very religious man but in the last few months, having nobody else to talk to and trust, I put my life in God's hands. Through the grace of God, my family were put on a US Air Force C-41 on April 26, 1975, and were evacuated to Guam and then to the United States mainland (see Chapter Two—Escape). We went to Marine Camp Pendleton for processing and resettled in Santa Rosa, California, sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Santa Rosa First Ward, Santa Rosa Stake, to begin a new life.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEW LIFE

My First Fifteen Years in the United States (1975-1991)

I was released from Camp Pendleton and arrived in Santa Rosa on July 2, 1975, just in time to celebrate Independence Day with my family and our new brothers and sisters in the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward. I was full of hope and determination to make my dreams in the United States come true—the dreams that I had nourished for most of my adult life. My dreams were very simple—a decent paying job and a good education for my children. On the 5th of July, right after the holiday, I presented myself at the local Hewlett-Packard Company to be processed for employment. The only job that was available to me at that time was that of a stock clerk. The pay was not much, only $2.75 an hour, but I was lucky to have that job. The United States was undergoing a minor economic depression after the long drawn-out war in Vietnam. Counting overtime, I made about $550 a month after tax. The rent of the apartment in which my family lived cost $275.00 a month, but we still had $225.00 for tithing, food and other expenses. It was a very tight budget, but I thought we could survive.

The Trans in Santa Rosa in 1975:
Back Row: Hoa, Nga, Christy Scribner, Ai Chau, Lap
Front: Thuy, Van, Phuong, Anh, Trung

At first, thanks to the generosity of our brothers and sisters of the Santa LDS First Ward, we received free rent for an apartment in Rincon Valley for the first two months and we also received some food from the LDS Bishops' warehouse in Oakland. But after a while we had to procure our own food because the food we obtained from the Bishops' warehouse was American food, mostly canned foods and not suitable for our traditional diet. Because of this, we were short of money all the time, but everyone in the family started chipping in. On Saturdays, my wife and children were looking for work by picking up walnuts and strawberries for a commission. I remember the first few dollars they made picking up walnuts and strawberries. It was only $35.00, but they were very proud of it because it came from their own labor. To celebrate the extra income, my wife bought a big turkey for the family, and that was the best turkey I have ever tasted in my thirty years living in the United States.

We were poor, but we felt protected living within the community of our LDS Santa Rosa First Ward. All of our medical needs were provided pro bono by Dr. Sullivan (our primary physician) and Dr Bingham (our dentist). Dr Sullivan was not yet a member of the Church, but his wife and children were active members. However, Dr Sullivan was very inclined towards the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When away from Santa Rosa, I learned that Dr. Sullivan was in the bishopric of the Santa Rosa Sixth Ward. Dr Bingham, our dentist, was a very active member of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward. Later he became Santa Rosa Stake President.

Dr. Bingham was very attentive, not only to our medical needs but also our emotional needs. Knowing that my wife was Chinese by birth and had no acquaintance with any Chinese nationals in Santa Rosa, he introduced one of his clients who was Chinese to my wife so they could converse in their native tongue. Even though Dr. Bingham thought nothing of this gesture, we remained grateful to him for doing that. The Stams and the Taylor families and other brothers and sisters in the Santa Rosa First Ward, true to the spirit of the brotherhood and sisterhood prevalent in the LDS Church, also provided us a lot of care and help. They donated clothes and other commodities for our comfort. I was particularly grateful to Brother and Sister Combs, our visiting teachers. Even though they lived in Glenn Ellen, a small town about twenty miles away from our home, they never failed to visit with us at least once a week. Another family who loved us and cared for us a great deal was the Scribners—Cecile Scribner in particular. Douglas Scribner was the Bishop of our ward, and later became Santa Rosa Stake President. There were many other members of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward who helped us a great deal spiritually and temporally, and I wish I could remember all their names and mention them here to express our gratitude to each and every one of them. I want all of them to know that it was their love and their care that sustained us during the hard times we encountered during our first couple of years in this country.

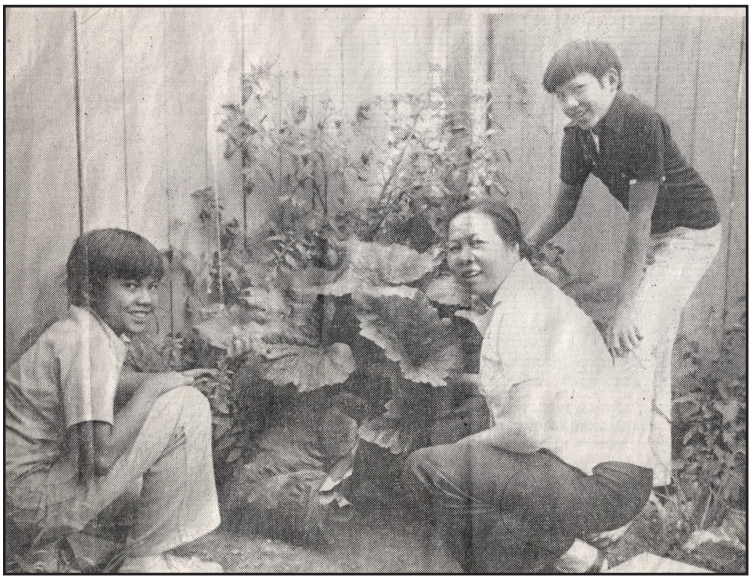
1975, Santa Rosa, California -- Lap Wong and Hoa Wong were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Back: Nga, Nhon, Lap, Hoa, Ai Chau, Anh, Trung
Front: Thuy, Van and Phuong

But outside the protective environment of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward, life was not without problems for us. We had to face constant discrimination from the ultra-conservative people of Santa Rosa. For some reason, the Americans here viewed the Vietnamese refugees as the cause of their sore situation. In 1975, there were a lot of unemployed people in Santa Rosa, and the local economy was way down. As a result, they turned their blame upon the Vietnamese refugees, who they viewed as the root cause of their economic problems. This blame could be direct or indirect. For example, before I got my own car, I had to use the public transportation system to get around. At the transit station in downtown Santa Rosa I often heard remarks thrown into my face—remarks such as,

"Why don't they go back to their own country?" or *"Those damn Vietnamese refugees !"*

First, I ignored these remarks knowing they were the views of just a small group of discontent people rendered bitter because of the economic depression they were facing as a result of the long and costly war in Vietnam. But when the discrimination started touching my children, we reacted. One day, my son Anh was waiting at the bus stop near our home in Rincon Valley. He wanted to use the city bus to get around, but the city bus on that route simply ignored him and did not stop to pick him up. The bus driver probably thought he was just an Asian kid and simply bypassed him. We immediately filed a complaint to the management of the city bus company.

The management apologized, and from then on, no more incidents like that occurred. My son Lap also received quite a few discriminatory remarks—sometimes physical threats—when waiting for the bus ride in downtown Santa Rosa. It was so unfair that while the Americans were in Vietnam, they upset our social order, killed our people, caused destruction and havoc all over our country, yet we had treated them well as guests. Yet when we were in their country, they mistreated us and explicitly made us feel unwelcome!



These pictures appeared in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat in 1975. The first picture is Nhon Tran and the second is Phuong (11), Ai Chau and Anh (12) showing their first garden triumph. In the article Nhon speaks of his first several months in Santa Rosa: Nhon speaks with pride of the refugee families in Sonoma County. *"We are responsible people. To accept government assistance to us, is begging. We don't like to do that. . ."* He has taken on the role of organizing the refugee families here. He counts 12 families, averaging five to six people each, that have settled here. *"It is very expensive to live here,"* he says. The small three-bedroom duplex in Rincon Valley squeezes in Tran's family of 10. Yet the head of the house is respectfully left alone in the living room with a visitor. Two children come home from school and knock on the front door before entering. . ."*We still cook Vietnamese style,"* says Tran. *"Several families go together and shop in Chinatown once a month. . ."*

After the first year in Santa Rosa, the problem facing me now was closer to home. The small salary I made was far too short to support a family of ten. More often than not, I always volunteered to work overtime in order to earn extra money to support my family. Working overtime required that I had to get up at 3:30 in the morning to start work at 4:30 a.m. Without transportation, I had to ask one of my American co-workers to give me a ride to work. I was particularly grateful to a co-worker named Tony who always helped me with the early morning ride. Later, Bishop Scribner gave me his family car, a big Pontiac station wagon, and the car helped solve the problem of transportation. I had been driving a car since I was seventeen-years-old; therefore, I had no problem passing the DMV driving test. But I did have a problem knowing my way around. When I first drove my own car, not knowing the way, I simply followed the municipal bus, which stopped at a bus stop near my home in Rincon Valley, till I reached my workplace that was located on the other side of town. In this way, when the bus stopped, I stopped. When it moved, I moved. Unfortunately, the bus route to my work place had many stops and definitely was not the shortest way from my home to my workplace. Therefore it took me a lot of time, and the car used more gasoline than it should have taking me to my work place. When I confided my driving problem to my co-workers, they laughed their heads off, and one of them volunteered to guide me while I drove my car to work. After that, I did not have to follow the bus anymore.

Unfortunately, transportation was not the only problem that I had to face during my first year in Santa Rosa. When my children started school, they had a lot of problems understanding their lessons for lack of English. Therefore, I had to tutor them every night, and I did not usually go to bed until after midnight. So getting up at 3:30 in the morning to be ready for the day's overtime work, I had roughly three-and-a-half hours of sleep every night. A long stretch of insufficient sleep began to exact a heavy toll on my health. After a year in Santa Rosa, I fell sick and was diagnosed as having symptoms of a nervous breakdown. The doctor recommended that I should be off work and rest, but I refused to take his advice because I needed to work to support my family. Eventually, I became medically incapacitated and was grounded for disability.

Luckily, around that time, my wife got a part time job at the Sonoma County Kitchen to prepare food for school children. The job did not pay much, but it helped. After a year in Santa Rosa, my grown-up children had to give up school and start working to help the family. Lap worked for Jetronics, a small company doing contracting work for Hewlett-Packard, as an assembler, and Hoa also worked for Hewlett-Packard as an assembler. A year later, Nga got a job as a night janitor for a local JC Penney Store, and Trung was hired to work first as an assembler and then after graduating from Santa Rosa Junior College with an AS Degree, he was employed as a technician at Hewlett-Packard Company, where he still is today on the payroll of Agilent Technologies, Inc., a spin-off company from Hewlett-Packard.

A Pageant, *There is Liberty,* was performed by members of the LDS Santa Rosa, California Stake. Our family performed, representing some of those who had come to America seeking liberty. Pictured: (Back) Gary Parkin, Ai Chau, Nhon, (Second Row) Nga, Trung, Anh, (Front) Phuong, Van, Thuy, Craig Scribner

But like American children, when my children got their jobs, they wanted to be independent of their parents. Except for Nga, who did not graduate from high school as yet and chose to stay with us, Lap and Hoa moved and started living on their own. So in spite of the extra income that supposedly was there to help us, the family got very little help, and we had a hard time making ends meet, for, in addition to food and rent, my smaller children needed clothes. For the first year in Santa Rosa, all they got for clothing were used clothes donated by members of the Santa Rosa LDS First Ward. There was nothing wrong with the used clothes, except they did not fit the small sizes of my children. Besides, like kids their ages, they wanted to have trendy clothes like their friends at school. I first recognized their needs when Phuong, my son, kept begging me to buy him a pair of sport shoes because the pair of shoes he was wearing to school was worn out and out of date. He also wanted a skateboard like his classmates. It pained me a great deal feeling unable to satisfy his simple needs. It was around that time that Phuong had to undergo a medical procedure that was very physically painful to say the least, and I promised him that if he could undergo the procedure without too much complaint, then I would buy him new shoes and a skateboard and a hamburger on top of it. It worked—Phuong underwent the medical procedure without any complaint.

Nhon, Trung and Lap

Ai Chau and Nhon

Gina Scribner, Nhon, Anh, Trung, Van, Nga (holding Jimmy Scribner, Thuy, Hoa, Christy Scribner, Phuong (sitting in front) - 1977

Nhon Tran Family in Santa Rosa, California, and Utah 1975-1977

Trans in Utah visiting Cecil and Lucie James (Cecile Scribner's parents) - abt. 1977

Phuong, Ai Chau, Thuy, Trung, Cecil, Nhon, Lucie, Jerilynn Jensen and Joyce Ridge

In 1977, to earn extra money for our family, my wife decided to go to Salisbury, Baltimore, on the East Coast of the United States to work in a soup kitchen owned by the relative of Tran Trung Tho, whose family I had helped evacuate to the United States back in 1975. After she was gone, my family was in a mess. Not that my children did anything wrong like getting into drugs or anything of that nature, but they lacked the tender care of their mother. Also, there were the little things like cooking, cleaning, and preparing lunches for the children, etc., which I was not skilled enough to provide. Finally, in 1978, I had to call her to come back to Santa Rosa to take care of the children. This was when I got a promise for a better paying job in San Jose, California. The reason I took the job in San Jose was I wanted to break through the wall of poverty surrounding me and my family in Santa Rosa.

It was around that time that I received news of my father's death. My brother Tri wrote me a letter describing in detail how my father had died, and he implored me to help the family I had left behind. How could I help them at a time when my own family had financial problems? That was when I decided to take Yklong Adrong's job offer. Yklong was then Deputy Director of the Indochinese Resettlement & Cultural Center (IRCC). He encouraged me to come to work for him and said he was willing to pay me $1,000 a month to start. It was not much, but it was at least $350 more than what I was making at the Hewlett-Packard Company. The only problem working in San Jose and living in Santa Rosa was I had to commute once a week over a distance of over l00 miles between these two cities. In spite of this problem, I enjoyed my work at IRCC, Inc. because my job dealt with people's lives, and the work I performed at IRCC was more in tune with my training and what I had been doing in Vietnam—serving people.

While in San Jose, I witnessed an unprecedented influx of Indochinese refugees into the United States. After three years of oppressive communist rule in South Vietnam, the Vietnamese people started to look for freedom and a better life on the shores of other countries. Among these freedom seekers, the large majority were Vietnamese Chinese. They were blatantly kicked out of Vietnam by the new Vietnamese Government. The United States, along with other countries in the world, out of compassion, was willing to open its borders to the *boat people*. There were no less than 3000 *boat people* streaming into San Jose for resettlement every month. Since I had experience in resettling refugees while working at Camp Pendleton with LDS Volag, I was assigned to match up sponsors and the newly-arrived *boat people*. I took my job seriously. The desire to help refugees now became an obsession. In 1978-79, World Vision operated a big boat on the South China Sea between the coast of South Vietnam and the islands off the coast of Malaysia to help rescue boat people with problems such as shortage of food, lack of fuel or trouble reaching the shores of Malaysia. So, on behalf of IRCC, I teamed up with a World Vision representative in Pittsburg, California, to raise funds to help sustain its rescue operations in the South China Seas.

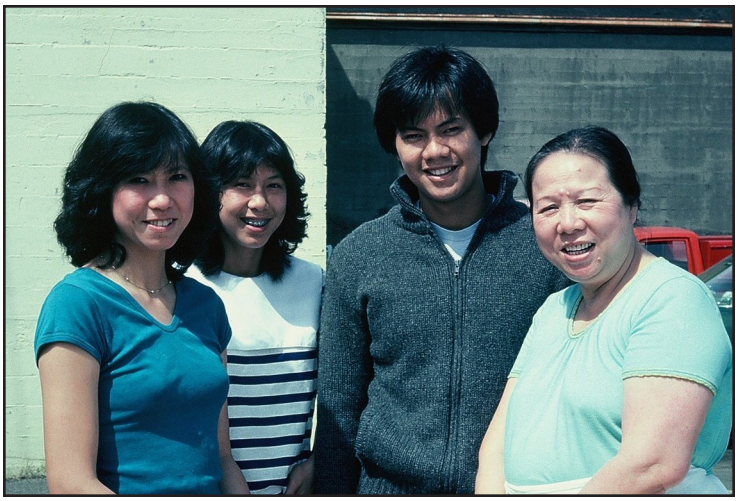
Because of large numbers of boat people coming to the United States, not only to San Jose but also to Santa Rosa, and faced with this new problem, the Catholic Charity of Santa Rosa sent word to me that it needed my help. In 1979, I came back to Santa Rosa and worked in the refugee resettlement program for the Catholic Charity of Santa Rosa. But being a very conservative community, the Santa Rosa Catholic Charity only accepted a small number of boat people for resettlement. While I understood the reason why Santa Rosa Catholic Charity was conservative in its efforts to help the refugees, I disagreed with its philosophy because of my burning desire to help my compatriots. So I quit working for the Santa Rosa Catholic Charity and set up my own agency as an auxiliary of the American Council for Nationalities Services(ACNS) headquartered in New York. ACNS was one of the original national voluntary agencies (Volag) sponsoring refugees of all nationalities coming to the shores of the United States. The ACNS initially provided me funds to set up an ACNS branch office in Santa Rosa. After a month, it started sending me the first batch of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees. Now I threw my full support to the cause of the refugees. My organization immediately

applied for grants from the State of California to conduct ESL and vocational training for the newly arrived refugees. My application was approved for over $100,000 for the calendar year of 1980.

I hired two Americans to help assist me to run the program, and I also hired teachers to teach ESL and vocational ESL for the newly arrived refugees. I did not wisely investigate the backgrounds of the two Americans and their sincere willingness to help the refugees. So they took advantage of their positions to sow discord among the refugee community under my care. Seeing the State grants coming in large sums they furtively conspired to edge me out of ACNS and take over the organization. To do this, they enlisted the support of the Laotian and Cambodian refugees to make all kinds of unfounded accusations against me and my organization, basically complaining that by the very nature of my ethnicity (Vietnamese), it would be too controversial for me to run a refugee organization like the Santa Rosa ACNS, stressing that the organization needed a "uniter" instead of a "divider." But before they could accomplish their goal, I contacted the Chairman of the Board of my organization and exposed their plans to him. With his consent, I fired the two Americans who conspired to topple me. There were no specific charges—just the fact that I was Vietnamese and there were a lot of Laotians and Cambodians that formed the refugee community in Santa Rosa.

The reason I was the cause of such controversy was that, traditionally, the Cambodians and the Laotians do not like the Vietnamese. Their animosity toward the Vietnamese dates back centuries ago when Vietnam conquered their land in the Mekong Delta, and during the first Indochina War, the Vietnamese many a time crossed over the Viet Nam/Laotian border to fight the Viet Minh who took refuge in Laos. The conflict with me in Santa Rosa dragged on until 1981, when I decided enough was enough, and it was time for me to move on with my own life. Although I had the support of my staff and of the Vietnamese refugees, I resigned from ACNS and decided move on and do something else.

At that time, there was a Chinese Restaurant for sale in Salem, Oregon. The asking price was $20,000. I did not have that kind of money, so my wife had to sell her jewelry, and we borrowed money from friends to purchase the restaurant. It took us several weeks of hard work to prepare for the restaurant opening day. With the help of my children from Santa Rosa, we renovated the whole building, replacing the carpets with tiles and repainting the façade of the building with a brighter color. A Salem newspaper reporter noticed our hard work before the opening day and ran an article about our soon-to-be-opened Vietnamese family restaurant in Salem, Oregon. In a way, it was free advertising. We made preparations for the restaurant all too well, but I must admit that we lacked experience in business management. The opening day of the restaurant was a disaster. Having never been in the restaurant business, we bought and prepared too much food for the opening day, making sure that all orders by our clientele were fully met.



Thuy, Van, Phuong, Ai Chau in Salem, Oregon

It rained hard on the opening day of our restaurant, and we were able to sell only ten percent of the food we had purchased. Ninety percent of the food that was purchased and prepared had to he thrown away. Besides, we had not made a complete feasibility survey of the people of Salem. To our sorrow, we found they were mostly *meat and potato* people—not really interested in exotic foods. So we barely survived for the first

three months. But gradually, our business started picking up because our restaurant featured foods not found anywhere else in Salem. Our restaurant was operated strictly by our family. My wife was the chief cook, menu planner, chop boy and practically every job in the kitchen. My two youngest daughters, Thuy and Van, served as *chay ban* (table runners), taking orders from the customers and teaching them how to use chopsticks and how to roll rice paper done by themselves over the dining table when they ordered a special dish called "barbecue beef." I acted as cashier for the restaurant. On Mondays, the day our restaurant was closed, I drove my wife to Portland, Oregon, to purchase vegetables and other oriental foods we needed for the week. We were doing quite well for the first two years because our restaurant was clean and our food was cheap and exotic. Repeat customers received special invitations from us to come back once a month to our restaurant for a special meal so gorgeous they could not refuse.

In 1983, the restaurant was really successful beyond our expectation, but we had to close it because our daughter, Thuy, had to go to college. We sold the restaurant and moved on. My wife returned to Santa Rosa and worked as chief cook for the Toan Restaurant. With her help and her cooking expertise, the Toan Restaurant succeeded beyond its owner's expectations. Even though her pay was minimal, Ai Chau was able to help the children financially when help was needed.

Phuong (David) graduated from Portland State University of Oregon with a degree in accounting. Upon graduation from the Portland State University, he worked for the Internal Revenue Service in San Jose. After four years, he was promoted and transferred to Portland, Oregon, where he is still working as an auditor for the IRS. Phuong married Ngoc, the eldest daughter of Mr. Tranlong, the former dean of the business school and political science school at the University of Dalat, Vietnam. His sister Thuy, also one of the *orphan* children, graduated from the same university as her brother with a bachelor degree in Art Design. After graduation, she worked for Freemont Bank until 2005, when she was laid off due to reduction in workforce at the bank. Van, our youngest child, went to San Jose State first, and, after getting her bachelor degree, went to Osaka, Japan, to work as an English school teacher. When she got back from Japan, she continued her higher education at Thunderbird, The American Graduate School of International Management in Glendale, Arizona. Because nothing else was available for me, I went to work for Cal Neva, a small casino in Reno Nevada, as a vault clerk. I did not want to work for a casino but that was the only job available to me at the time. Besides, I needed to earn some money to support myself and to pay mortgages.

Senator Bob Dole with Peter Tranvannhon. Between 1985 and 1988 during one of Peter's delegation trips to Washington D. C. as part of IRCC's work for the refugees.

In 1985, while working in Reno, Nevada, I was contacted by Mr. Vu van Loc, Director of the reactivated Indochinese Resettlement and Cultural Center (IRCC) in San Jose. Mr. Vu van Loc put me in charge of the ESL program for newly-arrived refugees. He also designated me to write grant applications for other programs run by IRCC. It was a rewarding job in terms of intellectual development. During the years between 1985 and 1988, I was able to obtain grants for IRCC in excess of $1,000,000. To survive financially, IRCC had to renew its application for grants every year. Sometimes the grants were approved and

sometimes they were not, depending on the availability of funds for human services. When a grant was approved, I rejoiced exceedingly, but when an application for a grant was rejected, I was very depressed. Somehow I felt personally responsible for the well being of the IRCC staff. Mr. Vu van Loc, also known under the pen name of *Giao Chi*, was a former Colonel in the South Vietnamese Army. He was more interested in the cultural aspect of IRCC than other aspects of the program.

He was deeply involved in the organization of the TET festival every year in San Jose. He tried to set up a museum, collecting documents and artifacts of former ARVN veterans and pictured histories of the tragic exoduses of Vietnamese boat people from Vietnam between 1978-1982. While I admired his endeavor in this field, I thought it was more important to think of the present state of the Vietnamese refugees in San Jose, particularly with new waves of former members of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces and their families coming to San Jose under the H.O. (Humanitarian Operations) Program. As late comers to the United States, these H.O. refugees faced all kinds of problems. But the biggest problem was that they felt the United States and those refugees who had come to the United States before them owed them something. They were the ones who spent years in reeducation camps (prisons), and they felt, rightly or wrongly, that they should receive special treatment. As a court interpreter, I often had to interpret for the youth of these newly arrived Vietnamese who had to appear in court charged with drug trafficking. To me, the current generation of Vietnamese youth was more important than the museum, and I often suggested to Mr. Vu van Loc to apply for grants and to start services for the Vietnamese youth in the San Jose area, but he did not want to do that. I even volunteered my grant-writing services for these programs if he needed me, but, like former officials and officers of the old South Vietnamese Government, he did not feel comfortable engaging in new ventures.

So towards the end of 1988, I quit IRCC and joined a fishing company in Houston, Texas. The fishing company I worked for owned a long-line fishing boat that it intended to send to Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean Sea for fishing operations. Upon joining the fishing company in Texas, I was put in charge of its marketing department. The boat was operated by a Trinidadian captain and assisted by a crew of Vietnamese fishermen from Beaumont, Texas. Bad luck befell the boat named *San Martin De Pore* at the beginning of the operation. Starting out from the Gulf of Texas, heading for the Trinidad and Tobago, it immediately ran into a hurricane that almost sank the boat. Running out of food and fuel, it limped its way to the port of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Since I was the only one in the company with a valid US passport and willingness to go, the company sent me to Santo Domingo to rescue the fishing crew. There I purchased food and other necessities for them and sent them on to Trinidad and Tobago. But en route they ran into another hurricane and had to stop at the island of Lucia in the Caribbean Sea. After the hurricane was over, the *San Martin De Pore* went onto Trinidad and Tobago, but the misfortunes of the Vietnamese crew did not end there. Because none of the crew had a valid US passport, the authorities of Trinidad and Tobago kept them under house arrest at the Port of Spain. Again I was sent to their rescue. With the help of a local agent who had connections with high level authorities in the Port of Spain, we were able to obtain the release of the fishing crew from house arrest and finally started to do long-line fishing in the Caribbean Sea.

In the gulf port of Texas, the Vietnamese fishermen had the benefit of radar warnings about coming hurricanes, but they did not have such warnings in the open waters of the Caribbean Sea. As a result, the Vietnamese crew of the fishing boat did not dare to venture too far from the Port of Spain. Because of that, their long-line fishing was unsuccessful. No significant amount of fish was caught. At that time, the company I worked for ran into all kinds of financial difficulties because of the operating cost of the boat. Fuel and payment for the fishing crew ran well over the projected budget of the company. Worse, not enough fish were caught. On the first night out fishing, all the bait was eaten by sharks. As a result, no fish were caught. So we decided to send the boat to Barbados to try the waters there. We stayed there for a couple of months, then moved the boat back to San

Juan, Puerto Rico, hoping to have better luck there. But because the *San Martin De Pore* moved around so much in the Caribbean Sea, the US DEA stopped it while it was traveling from San Barbados to San Juan. The DEA practically tore apart the boat for signs of drug trafficking but it found none. So the *San Martin De Pore* continued its trip to San Juan. Due to the failure of the company to pay for the mortgage of the boat, the boat was finally repossessed by the bank in San Juan. That was the end of my career with the fishing business. I eventually went back to San Jose and went to work for the Vietnamese American Council, my own agency.

Setting up the Vietnamese American Council, I applied for a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington D.C. in order to relieve the Vietnamese people without job prospects in San Jose and send them to Reno, Nevada, where they could work in low paying jobs while retaining their health care benefits. Due to my proposal, I was granted $160,000 for the program. The government released $40,000 for my organization to start the program. But due to the lack of interest of these jobless people in San Jose, who preferred to remain on welfare rather than work, the program folded before further release of government funds.

To support myself, I began to work for the municipal court as an interpreter. The work for the municipal court was part-time because I was not a certified court interpreter as required by the Santa Clara County judicial system. I immediately applied for certification, which required me to take a test by the State of California. This test was required to determine whether I was capable of doing interpretation for the courts. After months of learning the specific language of the courts and the various court proceedings, I took the test in 1991 in Los Angeles and passed. Equipped with the certification, I officially began to work for the Superior Courts of Santa Clara County. But there was not enough work there, so I only worked whenever they needed me. I found work by closely following caseloads from beginning to end.

Court proceedings worked like this: A defendant first had to appear in court for arraignment. Then he or she would reappear again before the court a couple of weeks later for plea bargaining. At the plea bargaining session the defendant could either plead guilty to the charges against him or her or choose to be tried by jury or by a judge. After the trial, which was normally set four weeks after the plea bargaining, came the phase of *sentencing*. Following this procedure, I could have interpretation work at least four times per each defendant. If a case was a bit complicated and required further study by the defending attorney, it could be continued for several times and my work thus multiplied. That I had work for the courts during my beginning years was thanks to my good friend Thi Nguyen, a former lawyer from South Vietnam and an interpreter for the court. He was always kind enough to share his workload with me. Thi Nguyen died in 2000, but I want his children to know that I will always be grateful to him for his friendliness and generosity.

Basically, those were the events that occurred in my first fifteen years in the United States. They were difficult to say the least. Except for the time I worked for Mr. Vu van Loc, I never made enough money to support my family and was always in search for a better paying job, which didn't come around until the beginning of 1991.

My Second Fifteen Years In The United States (1991-2005)

At the beginning of 1991, the AT&T Language Line Services in Monterey needed a full time telephone-based Vietnamese interpreter so I applied for it and got hired immediately. Since their interpreters were mostly recent immigrants with questionable language skills, my being a court interpreter certified by the state certainly was a plus for them. After being hired by the AT&T Language Line Services, I moved to Monterey with my wife in 1991. One reason for taking the job in Monterey was so I could use my free time (when not interpreting) to write this book. Monterey was an ideal place for writing. It was for John Steinbeck. My wife and I lived in an apartment on the second floor of a building about one block from the seashore. I was hypnotized by its

Scenery in Monterey caused me to be inspired to write
of my homeland, Vietnam.
These two pictures of Vietnam taken in 1995 by Van (Vanessa) Tran.

beautiful shorelines and magnificent foothills. The water in her bay was still pure and limpid; the sand on her beaches was still white and clean; and her rolling foothills were richly green and primitively beautiful. When out of inspiration, I simply walked on the sandy beaches, and inspiration would come back to me as if by magic. It had other benefits as well. I could stand on the balcony of my apartment and gaze over the year-round ornate green grass on the foothills surrounding the Monterey Community College, and memories of South Vietnam, my homeland, would come back and inspire me in my writing. The inspiration was instantaneous because the scenery of this lustrous green grass always reminded me of home where green rice fields spread out as far as the eye could see and where storks could fly to their destination without having to stop en route (*Co bay thang canh*).

Unfortunately, I was so busy working and writing the book that I did not have the time to thoroughly enjoy the beautiful scenery like I wanted to. Besides my work with AT&T Language Line and my writing this book, I also kept working for the courts in Santa Clara County just to keep my *foot inside the door* because I wanted the court administrators to know that I was always available for them when they needed me. In order to make myself available for the courts, I had to arrange my time so that after finishing work with AT&T, I could be ready to come to San Jose. Under this arrangement, the time to work for AT&T had to be the graveyard shift so when I got home from AT&T at 6:00 a.m., I could set out for San Jose to be there before nine o'clock in the morning. This overloaded work schedule finally took a toll on me.

In 1994, I was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown syndrome. But when the hospital staff subjected me to other tests, they found out that I had more problems to worry about than just a nervous breakdown—they found out that I had a serious liver abscess that required immediate surgery. The surgery was a very complicated one. The abscess was located deep inside my liver, and the surgical instruments could not reach it without the surgeon having to dissect my liver—a procedure the surgeon felt too dangerous for me. So instead, he reached in and plucked it out with his finger. After he removed the abscess, the surgeon closed my stomach and told my son Phuong that he had two choices. The first was to operate the second time to make sure other organs were not affected, and the second was to give more medications, hoping that this would save me from further infections. Due to my weak physical condition, the surgeon told Phuong point blank that if I had to undergo another operation, given my present physical condition, there was no guarantee that I could survive it. So he

left Phuong to decide which one was the next step for me. After consulting with his mother and siblings, Phuong decided that application of medications was to be the solution.

After the operation, I was kept in the ICU for three days where I was placed under tight observation by several physicians. My fever was dangerously high in the ICU and continued to be high after I was transferred out of the ICU to my hospital bed. My life was then *hanging by a thread*. Each morning, the surgeon and several other doctors would be at my bedside checking the progress of my illness. The high fever stayed with me for two weeks, and there was talk among the doctors at the Monterey Community Hospital to transfer me to Stanford University Hospital. In their professional opinions, the facilities there were better suited to treat my illness. Then, as if by a miracle, the fever started going down, and my personal physician came to see me one day to congratulate me for being out of danger. From then on, he always referred to me as "the man with nine lives."

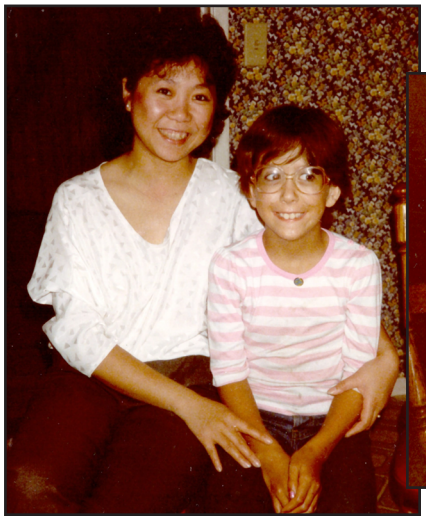
After staying at the Monterey Hospital for a month, I went home, having lost approximately 100 pounds. Gradually, my health was getting better, and that was when my children suggested that I should live in San Jose where there was a better selection of health facilities. It is worth mentioning that when I was in the hospital and it seemed that my illness was terminal, all my children came to Monterey from places as far north as Boise, Idaho and Portland, Oregon, to say "farewell" to me. It was strange that during this brush with death, I did not feel fear of death.

After two months of convalescence, I went back to work full-time for the Santa Clara County Superior Courts. In 1997, the US Department of State called me and asked me to accompany and interpret for Mr. Nguyen Huy Thiep, a well known writer from Vietnam, during his visit to the United States. Interpreting for Mr. Nguyen Huy Thiep was not easy. As a writer he often used abstract concepts in his speeches. For example, when mentioning a man's journey in life, he often compared it to a boat adrift in the middle of a river. The man on the boat had to make a decision to get ashore, but the difficulty he had to face was to know the *Ben Thuc* (the right port of call) from the *Ben Me* (the wrong port of call). Because of my good services for the State Department, they gave me several interpreting assignments from 1997 through 2002 for the *new* Vietnam. As a result, whenever I could, I would make a trip to Vietnam to learn their new vocabulary and phrases.

I had approximately five jobs with the US State Department every year. When not working for the US State Department, I worked full-time for the Superior Courts of Santa Clara County. The work for superior courts was exactly the opposite of the work performed for the State Department. As a professionally-trained interpreter, I was required to interpret the specific judicial terms the judges and attorneys were saying in the court proceedings, but these specific judicial terms presented a problem for Vietnamese defendants who were not used to court terminologies and court proceedings. Therefore, I had to paraphrase what was being said by the judges and the attorneys in simple Vietnamese language that uneducated Vietnamese defendants could understand. I worked full time for the Superior Courts of Santa Clara County for ten years, but towards the end of 2004, I suffered a stroke and had to resign from the courts and live solely on my social security and retirement pensions.

There are several characteristics of life in retirement: You have a lot of time and not enough activity. You do not have friends to interact with you anymore because you have the time, and they don't. From a fat income generated by your work, you suddenly find yourself having to make do with the limited income from your retirement. The first few months after retirement, I felt very depressed. But gradually, I got used to it and learned to accept what was available to me and be happy with it. Another plus in retirement was I could read

1989
Back Row: Hong Bich Hoa, Phuong Tran, Lap Wong, Nhon Tran, Jacques Wong (Be), Hong Duc Hop, Hong Duc Hung, Anh Tran
Middle Row: Pang Nguyet Wong, Hong Bich Thu, Van Tran, Thuy Kendrick, Ai Chau, Hong Duc Nguyen, Tung Bui, Tuong Van Bui, Trung Tran
Front Row: Tom Sternberg, Jennifer Sternberg (baby), Nga Tran, Ann Tranlong, Jimmy Hong, Hong Bich Lien, Hoa Sternberg, Ngoc Anh Tran



Nga Tran and Christy Scribner 1984

Thuy and Van Tran - 1984

Hoa (Wong) and Tom Sternberg - 1984

Family Pictures Between 1984 and 1994

Trung,, Thuy, Nhon, Van, Ai Chau, Phuong, Anh, Hoa, Nga
Phuong's wedding - June 11, 1988

Ai Chau, Christy Scribner, Nhon
1994 - Santa Rosa, California

a lot and became more involved with church activities; so what I lost in the friendship with my fellow workers, I found in fellowshipping with members of my church. Would the retirement income be enough to sustain my wife and me in our old age? To tell the truth, it isn't great, but my wife and I survive our old ages. The highlight of our retirement was being able to occasionally visit our grandchildren, which we tried to do whenever we could.

My wife got involved in an automobile accident that broke her feet in several places, so she definitely could not go to Vietnam as we had planned in 2006. As for me, the question was whether I should leave her by herself and go to Vietnam where I still had a son Dung and three grandchildren. It was true that my other children could possibly help take care of their mother while I was away, but my children here are very busy with their work and their families, so I was not sure how much help they could give. To complicate the matter further, my wife was also diagnosed with an advanced stage of liver dysfunction (her liver functions at twenty percent capacity), which would require her to have dialysis. With dialysis she could not go anywhere. So my advice to my children is that if they can do things together with their wives and children, do it now, before it is too late.

Coming Back To The Church

What happened to me after Santa Rosa? Financially, I was doing a little better, but spiritually I was a mess. Remember the Bible story about the prodigal son! After my drift away from God, my Eternal Father, life was hell for me. I never found a moment of peace and happiness in my spiritual life. Still stubborn and hard-hearted, I did not turn to my Heavenly Father for help, but fortunately for me, my Father in Heaven never abandoned me. In a mysterious way, He always reminded me that I was always one of His precious sons, however prodigal my life was, and that He had saved me and my children in 1975 so that we could live the rest of our lives to glorify His name. On many occasions, he indicated to me that if I decided to have His help, I must knock at the door of His house and ask for it. How do I know that I am one of His precious sons? I know because, when I was away from Him, I never lost faith in Him, and He always created occasions for me to be close to His house. On my business trips, He always created opportunities for me to pass by His house as if to remind me that He was always there for me. Nevertheless, burdened with guilt feelings, I dared not enter His house for fear He would reject me. Now, in retrospect, I see how wrong I was. I realize now that that fear of being rejected was simply a feeling created by the enemies of God to lure me away from Him. But fortunately for me, my Heavenly Father never rejected me. Out of love for me, He waited for me to make the first move so He could embrace me again in his arms. And He ultimately prevailed.

Towards the end of 2001, two missionaries, in their search for investigators, *accidentally* knocked at the door of my home. Their sudden visit poignantly reminded me of the two missionaries who had come to my home in Saigon twenty-eight years earlier and had taught me and my family the true gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and converted us to His true church. From this visit, I immediately recognized that God had finally shown me signs that He had not abandoned me and that it was time for me to return to His church again. Through the missionaries' encouragement, I came back to church and humbly begged of my Father in Heaven to pardon me and to allow me to be His son again, no matter how undeserving I was.

The Bayshore Branch (Vietnamese) of which I was a member, was a wonderful branch. Its leadership, President Woft, First Counselor Loi Le and Second Counselor Toi Bui, were very loving and understanding when I attended the branch. They gradually led me back to the LDS Church. The other members of the branch also demonstrated a high spirit of fellowshipping. What amazed me the most was the spirit of the faithfulness and dedication of new members of the Bayshore Branch. It is worth noting that they were very young in terms of

December 14, 2002 - Nhon and Ai Chau sealed in the Oakland Temple (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

age and membership, but their faithfulness and dedication to the church were very mature. This was particularly true of the former presidents of the Bayshore Branch Relief Society: Sister Lan Quach who died in 2004, Sister Kim and the present relief society president, Sister Lan Pham. Their spirit of service to other members of the Bayshore Branch was manifested in their sincere desire to help not only us but also other members of the church. I was particularly touched by the spirit of sacrifice and service of Elder Toi Bui, the second counselor of the Bayshore Branch and later president of the branch. By their enduring faith, these brothers and sisters have set a good example for me to emulate.

Shortly after I came back to the Church, I was blessed to be called to the position of second counselor of the Bayshore Branch and afterwards I was called to be president, where I served faithfully for some time before being struck down by a serious stroke towards the end of 2004. In my calling to the position of Branch President, I was fortunate to have the dedicated support of Brother Brian Hartley, who died of a heart attack in 2005, and brother Dung Tiet, first and second counselors of the Bayshore Branch, respectively. After the stroke, I was released from the branch presidency and Brother Dung Tiet became president of the Bayshore Branch. Under Brother Woft's presidency, I was blessed to be sealed for eternity with my wife in the Oakland Temple. After being released from the Bayshore presidency, I had the chance to read a lot about the history of LDS Church—an opportunity I did not have when joining the church in March 1975.

I've had the chance to read the Restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter–day Saints, a gift from Brother Toì Bui. The gift could not have come at a better time. From this book, I learned a lot about the early days of the Church—from the time the Prophet Joseph Smith received instruction from our Father in Heaven to find the hidden location of the brass and golden plates, which contained the history of the Nephite and the Lamanite people from 600 B.C. and to translate them into the current English language. This history is called the Book of Mormon.

The immediate effect of reading this book was my strengthened faith in our Heavenly Father and in His true church. It showed me that He had a clear plan of salvation for me; whereas other churches did not. From this book I also learned how the early saints had been driven from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City, and with the many sacrifices they had made during this exodus, how they still remained faithful to the teachings of the leaders of the Church. In reading this book, I got the chance to compare their many trials with the many trials my family suffered during the escape from South Vietnam. In my mind, the early saints of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day definitely had suffered perhaps even more traumas than we had. Another miracle also happened during my retirement. A book entitled When Faith Endures, written by none other than The van Nguyen, the former Saigon Branch President and the man who had cupped his hands on my head and blessed me to go and find my lost children, fell into my hands in 2005. This book told the story of his incarceration in a communist prison after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and of his enduring faith in Heavenly Father, who in due time had rescued him and reunited him with his family in Salt Lake City. This book had a very positive impact on me. Whenever

I feel a weakening and wavering in my faith in Heavenly Father, all I need to do is to read that book. I have read it five times from cover to cover. There are many examples in this book that tell of the blessings you will receive from Father in Heaven if you have enduring faith in Him. I was particularly touched by the examples set by members of the former Saigon Branch during their life under communism—such as the faithful saint, Brother Le van Kha. He had hidden in the closet of his home to bless and receive the sacrament of the holy bread and water without fail for years after the communists banned meetings of church members of the Saigon Branch. This experience was just too much for me. When I read this passage, tears were brought to my eyes—I was unbelievably touched by the enduring faith of our brothers and sisters of the former Saigon Branch.

Most of my brothers and sisters of the former Saigon LDS Branch have died, including Sister Cong Tang Ton Nu Tuong Vi, Saigon Branch Relief Society President, but some are still alive and have resettled in various parts of the United States. I was fortunate to meet some of them in Salt Lake City in 1976, and in the San Jose Bayshore Branch—namely, Sisters Que, Hong Hanh Dao and Chan Dao. I am very touched by the spirit of endurance in their faith to the Church. I am now trying to get in touch with Brother The van Nguyen, but so far I have not been successful. Recently, I sent a letter to David Lynn Hughes who co-authors When Faith Endures with Brother The van Nguyen. I hope I will be able to talk to Brother The again and thank him for the blessing he gave me in the final days of South Vietnam—a blessing that set in motion events that lead my family out of Vietnam and caused us to find our lost children that we all might be reunited.

I am grateful to God who has given me so many blessings, even in my old age when I still have a large family of *clean* children and grandchildren. By *clean* I mean they have all the *ingredients* necessary for a *ready-made* member of the Mormon Church. As far as I know, they do not smoke or drink, and they live clean lives taking care of their small (and not-so-small) children. What a blessing!

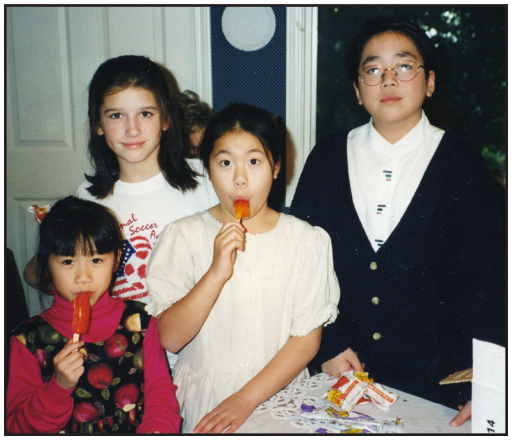
My wish now is that my children will become active again in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as their mother and I did. I hope they will remember that it was Father in Heaven who brought them here to the United States in 1975 and helped them become the men and women they are today—men and women full of blessings and happiness. They must remember that without Father in Heavens' help, they would still be in Vietnam, living a life of destitution.

Although nothing has happened yet, deep down in my heart I know that Heavenly Father will bring them back to his Church in due time, like He has done for his other children. In my old age I keep praying this will happen.

About 1997 - Elliot Tran, Ai Chau and Nhon

December 1995 - Ai Chau, Nga and Nhon with Bella Scribner (baby)

Nicole, Justina and Christopher Nguyen with Lora Scribner



December 1995 - Trans and Scribners - Santa Rosa Christopher, Nhon, Ai Chau, Bella Scribner (baby), Justina, Nga, Nicole on Gina Scribner's lap, JT on Thuy's lap, Lora on Van's lap, Doug Scribner

In 1997, the Santa Rosa California Stake presented a pageant featuring the Tran van Nhon family and their miraculous escape from Vietnam and their reuniting with their orphan children.

Van and Thuy

Trung potrayed the role of The van Nguyen, Branch President of Saigon in 1975

Lap Wong - 1997

Left to Right:
Rebecca Wong,
Katie Sternberg,
Michael Wong,
Jennifer Sternberg,
JT Kendrick,
Elliot Tran,
Benjamin Scribner

Anh Tran and Hoa Sternberg 1997

Thuy Kendrick - 1997

The Trans and Scribners Celebrating the Vietnamese Tet New Year in San Jose, CA with the Bayshore Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints -- 1 February 2003

JT Kendrick and Hunter, Benjamin and Danny Scribner

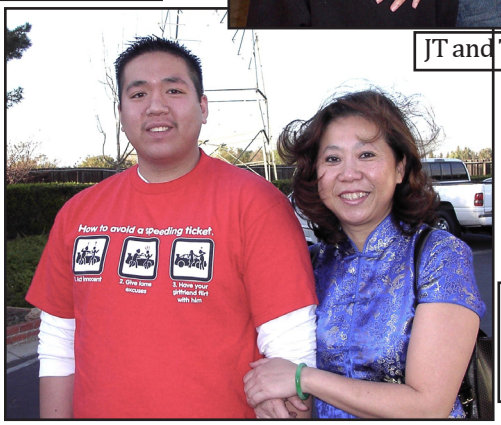
Ai Chau (Bich)

(Peter) Tranvannhon

Thuy Kendrick, Nga Tran, and Gina Scribner

JT and Thuy Kendrick

Below: Nga, Justina, Nicole and Hai Nguyen



Christopher (17) and his mother, Nga Tran

Popping plastic packaging in order to make firecracker noise!

Justina and Nicole (Nga's), Bella, Danny, Benjamin Scribner, JT (Jett-Thuy's), Hunter Scribner

CHAPTER SIX

THE TEARS OF A MOTHER

As we age, the old ways become more vivid in our minds—more important. Old customs never leave us; however, our children develop a love for the customs that surround them. This was the case for us and our own children. They left the land of their birth at very young and impressionable ages and were forced to accept a new land and culture. Nevertheless, the possibility that her children might not love the old ways of Vietnam like she did, on many occasions, caused tears to come to Ai Chau. I believe every parent who reaches old age sheds these kinds of tears over their children. Cultural differences are not the only cause of these tears. It's a part of life as one grows old—as mother and father let go of their children so the children can have the same freedom that they had to make their own choices.

Ai Chau

While we lived in Monterey , we were isolated from family and friends. Our family no longer lived in close proximity to us. It was TET Qui Dau, the first day of the first month of the Year of the Rooster. It was a day on which all of her children were supposed to come home, but none were able to come. She was very disappointed. Since growing up and having their separate households in America, fewer of her children came home to visit her to pay homage to the Tran ancestors on this Vietnamese New Year Day (as Vietnamese social custom and tradition required). On previous TETs, they had used different excuses for not coming home every time. Her younger children, who were greatly influenced by American ways, had flatly told her that they were not interested in Vietnamese holidays. They had said, "*America already has its own New Year holiday. Why do we have to observe the Vietnamese New Year holiday in America ?"* Her older children who were more familiar with the traditions and rituals of TET had not been so blunt. They had cited jobs, business or conflicting social plans as excuses for not always coming home. Their conflicts were real. They had sent her a season greeting card and some *lucky monies* in a red envelop, assuming that this symbolic gesture was more than enough to please their mother. Of course, Ai Chau had not been pleased. As far as she was concerned, her children could be busy with their lives—family, work, social functions—all year round, but they must set aside one day during TET to come home—to kowtow before the ancestral altar and to pledge their allegiance to the Tran ancestors. In Vietnam , the traditional TET visit to the ancestral home had always been observed by the Tran and the Chau men and women, generation after generation. To Ai Chau, there were no excuses for not observing this age-old family tradition. In her mind, the Tran children could not cease being Vietnamese simply because they were living in America.

It had now been eighteen years since Ai Chau and her children had escaped South Vietnam via a *black flight* operated by the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) of the Saigon U.S. Embassy—only five days before the North Vietnamese Army and the Nation Liberation Front of South Vietnam had made their final assault on Saigon. It was one of those flights where human cargo was shipped out of Vietnam clandestinely. This human cargo consisted of individuals who had had close collaboration with the Americans in Vietnam and whose lives would be greatly endangered if captured by the NVA and the NLFSVN. Like the Jews, the Hungarians and the Cubans before them, they were allowed to enter the U.S. as parolees of the United States Government. In the rush of their escape, Ai Chau and her children had not been able to take anything with them except for the family album and the clothes on their back. Less than a week earlier, Ai Chau had disguised her three youngest children as war orphans and had placed them in a Catholic orphanage for evacuation to the U.S. She had paid a large sum of money to a corrupted Vietnamese official at Saigon City Hall and had him issue false war orphan

certificates to her children and then, using these false certificates, she had bribed their way into the orphanage. On the day of their evacuation, Hoa, her eighteen-year-old daughter who had been visiting her *orphaned* siblings, was evacuated with them by accident. Hoa had been mistaken as an orphanage worker.

The decision to send her young children away with practically no chance of seeing them again was indeed a difficult and painful decision.

"*It was like flesh being torn off from my own body,*" she had later confided to me.

But she knew of no other way to save her children from hate and reprisal from the new Vietnamese communist regime. Her fear wasn't without reason. The communists had long had a history of abusing and persecuting enemies and potential enemies of their ideology. After its conquest of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), under the leadership of Mao Tze Dong, had launched one bloody campaign after another to rid China of elements it considered undesirable: Kuomintangs, rightists, landlords, bourgeoises, and fence-sitters (individuals non-committed to their causes), etc. To ensure the purge was complete, the CCP had included the wives, children and relatives of its victims in the list of undesirable elements. Between its anti-Kuomintang, anti-rightist, anti-bourgeois, anti-fence-sitter campaigns which began in 1949, and its bloody Cultural Revolution which ended in 1977, Mao and his CCP had put to death over twenty million Chinese. The Vietnamese Communists had done likewise in Vietnam from 1950 to 1952. During the height of the First Indochina War, to find scapegoats for their economic setbacks caused by a long drawn-out war against the French, the Vietnamese communist leaders had imitated their Chinese masters and had launched a bloody anti-bourgeois, anti-landlord campaign which, in less than three years' time, had put to death over 50,000 Vietnamese--many of whom were innocent victims. The number of deaths would have been higher had not Truong Chinh, Vietnam Communist Party Secretary at the time, admitted his own mistake and discontinued the campaign.

For Ai Chau (who was of Chinese descent but born in Vietnam) and her family, escaping South Vietnam in 1975 was a matter of life-and-death. For the past eighteen years, while exiled in the U.S., Ai Chau had studied the American language and had learned enough of the American ways to function properly in America, but she had never wanted to become totally American the way her children had. She had continued to live the old Vietnamese traditions and to faithfully observe the old Vietnamese codes of ethics her father had taught her when she was a young girl. A fundamentalist Confucian, her father had raised her in the traditions of *Tu Duc, Tam Tong* and *Nhan, Nghia, Le, Tri, Tin*—the Four Virtues, Three Duties and Five Standards of Conduct—expected of a Vietnamese woman. The Four Virtues were *Hard Work, Pleasant Appearance, Proper Speech,* and *Good Character*. The Three Duties were *Duties to Father, to Husband and to Sons*. The Five Standards of Conduct were *Kindness, Dutifulness, Righteousness, Learnedness* and *Trustworthiness*. Her father had also taught her to always observe social customs and traditions, emphasizing that these were required to govern the conduct of people in the same way the cosmic system was needed to regulate the movement of Earth, Sun, Moon and Stars. Deviations from this system, she had been told, would upset the natural order of things and would bring chaos and even catastrophe to people's lives. Ai Chau had faithfully followed her father's teachings all her life, and she had tried to pass them on to her children by education as well as by example. In her mind, she had failed. Towards the end of her life, she had lost her children to the American civilization. In America, her children had considered her Confucian ethical codes outdated and the Vietnamese customs and traditions unsuitable to their American lifestyle. They had cherished and revered a new set of values, which the various American institutions had inculcated in them—values such as personal freedom, economic success, career opportunity and financial security. But in reality, they also lived the "Four Virtues" and the "Five Standards of Conduct." They were very good children who had been raised by example.

Actually, Ai Chau did not oppose her children's adopted value system. She even supported much of it. But she was afraid that in embracing the new American values, they would grow indifferent to the old Vietnamese traditions.

> *"Couldn't they set aside just one day in their busy life to be home and to show allegiance and loyalty to their ancestors*?" had been her usual complaint.

Ai Chau felt very strongly about her ancestors. She believed that after their death, her ancestors had gone to the spirit world and from there they had continued to watch over the well-being of their offspring on earth. For this reason, she had been very reverential in her relationship with her ancestors. She always consulted with them on matters concerning the security and welfare of her family. Once a year, on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, when all good souls from the spirit world were allowed to roam the earth for food and other necessities, she would have a Vietnamese craft store fabricate life-like miniature figurines of things her ancestors would need in the spirit world—furniture, clothing, monies, foods, sometimes a rickshaw, etc., and she would burn them as offerings to her ancestors. As a result of her loyalty, her ancestors had given her and her family good protection. She had had a relatively secure life, and for the past fifty years, there had been no fatalities in her immediate family in spite of a fierce war going on around her—a war that had claimed millions of Vietnamese lives.

Thus, in America, her views and those of her children regarding matters of social behaviors, family obligations, filial duties and ancestral worship were as alienated and irreconcilable as two strong river currents running their course alongside each other, but never really joining each other because of the strength of each of their character. This clash of cultural values had affected Ai Chau a great deal and had given her a deep sense of isolation and loss. In the winter days of her life, she felt her children were no longer hers. In her mind, at least on this day, they had become America 's children.

Because Ai Chau was very emotional, I had kept a watchful eye on her throughout the first day of TET. Her children had told her that they could not come home this time, but she still had hope. To get ready for TET, Ai Chau had cleaned her home inside out, shampooing the entire carpet of her two-bedroom apartment to a garden fresh smell, and rearranging bedroom furniture to provide additional sleeping spaces for children and grandchildren should they possibly surprise her and come. She had wiped the dust and mopped the dining room floor so spotlessly clean I would not hesitate to eat off it. I personally did not see any need for such thoroughness because Ai Chau had always taken good care of her household. But such was the way she had been—a lifetime of caring for father, husband and children. I supposed there was another reason as well. Lately, Ai Chau had complained to me about her deteriorating health and had remarked on more than one occasion that she might not live to see another TET. On account of that, I guessed she had wanted to make this year's TET a special one. *"A TET like in the Good Old Days!"* she had said. But, of course, her children were not aware of all this preparation and why it was so particularly done this year.

The Good Old Days Ai Chau was referring to were the days when she and her children had lived together under the same roof and TET had been the biggest event in her family. Of course, TET was always a big event for all Vietnamese too. The only American holiday that could compare with TET was one that would combine the sacredness, the solemnity, the fanfare, the fun and the joy of Christmas, New Years, the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving all together in one.

Traditionally, TET was the day on which the Vietnamese welcomed the New Year, celebrated the rebirth of spring and enjoyed the blessings of heaven and earth. In peace time, this holiday was always celebrated with

great joy in Vietnam. The air on TET days would be filled with the sounds of music, the noise of fire-crackers and sweet-smelling aromas known only during the TET Holidays. Shop windows would be displayed with multi-colored merchandise. Homes and office buildings would be decorated with bright red banners embroidered with golden Chinese characters expressing wishes of happiness and prosperity to everyone in the New Year. Ancestral altars in every home would be lit up with bright candle lights and decked with multi-colored flowers, fruits and food offerings: red roses, yellow chrysanthemums, saffron tangerines, pink watermelons, ivory grapefruit, burgundy-red roasted pork and deep-green *Banh Chung* and snow-white *Banh Day*. The last two food items were not only special treats for the Vietnamese during the New Year Day, they were also symbolic of their philosophy about life on earth. The *Banh Chung*, a square-shaped rice cake made of sweet rice, bacon, sausage, green beans, and black mushrooms wrapped in green banana leaves, was considered the *DUONG* (Yang) symbol, and the *Banh Day*, a soft round bun made of the finest and purest rice flour was the *AM* (Yin) symbol. These two food items always went as a pair in gifts and offerings to denote the Vietnamese belief in the harmony between heaven and earth, mountain and river, sun and moon, fire and water, male and female, etc.—as a prerequisite for peace and happiness in the universe.

Thus, on this special holiday, in her Monterey home on the central coast of California, half-way around the world from Vietnam, Ai Chau was trying to observe the Vietnamese traditions of TET as close to home as she possibly could. On the eve of TET, Ai Chau had prepared a special meal for her ancestors. She had displayed their foods and drinks on a makeshift altar on the rear balcony of her apartment and when the clock struck midnight signaling the coming of the Year of the Rooster, she had placed three burning incense sticks on their altar and had reverentially kowtowed before it three times. Then facing the horizon above the Pacific Ocean, in the direction of her home country, she had invited the spirits of her ancestors to come, partake of the foods and share the blessings of TET with her family. After the incense sticks were burned to ashes, she had felt peace and tranquility in her soul, which to her was an indication that her ancestors had approved of her proper filial behavior. The next morning, she had arisen early to prepare a special meal for any family who might come—cooking the foods she knew they would enjoy: swallow nest soup, eggrolls, duck *a la Pekinoise*, lacquered suckling pig, steamed chicken, fan-tail shrimps, sweet and sour crabs, baked fish in black bean sauce and dozens of other dishes so fancily prepared, I had no names for them.

To see Ai Chau's culinary products was a visual feast; to eat them was a tongue's delight. Ai Chau had always been a good cook. She had learned the art of cooking from my mother. But the real test of her cooking skills had come when she worked as a cook to help our family survive the economic hardships facing us during our first few years in the U.S. She had worked with a Vietnamese restaurant in Salisbury, Maryland, from 1977 to 1978, and later as the chief cook of our own restaurant in Salem, Oregon, from 1981 to 1983, and again as Chef of Toan's Restaurant in Santa Rosa, California, from 1984 to 1988. During her years as chief cook of our family's restaurant, The Saigon Restaurant, she single-handedly did all the kitchen work: menu-planning, food purchase, chief cook, *chop-boy*, dishwasher, janitor etc. Rain or shine, she had toiled fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, cooking to perfection all kinds of oriental gourmet foods ordered by our patrons. She must have been a very good cook, for our patrons had kept coming back and our restaurant had flourished. In a way, cooking gourmet foods today was an emotionally happy trip down memory lane for her, and it showed. While preparing food, she had talked incessantly about the *good old days* with our family restaurant in Salem. "*It had been a hard time,*" she had said, "*but it had been a good time*." When the first day of TET had gone and it was obvious that her children were not going to be able to come to Monterey, Ai Chau became unusually saddened.

When Ai Chau was in her prime, she had raised all my children literally with her own sweat and blood. She had nourished them with her own milk when they were babies. She had cared for them with love when they were

growing up. She had protected them from harm and danger when the going was rough in war-torn Vietnam. After emigrating to the United States, she had worked long hours in chop suey kitchens to help her children financially if they ever needed her assistance. If my children had become the successful men and women they were today, it was thanks to Ai Chau and not to me.

Our children were successful. They were accomplishing very much in their careers and in their lives and were providing well for their children. But parents growing old get lonely. They don't care about the money or the rush to keep up with the Joneses anymore—they crave to be around their children and grandchildren. They want to be included. But sometimes a mother can feel abandoned by her own children. In the Vietnamese culture, being abandoned by one's children was the worst thing that could happen to a mother. As a senior citizen, Ai Chau had some social security income and, even though this income was meager, it was enough for her humble and frugal lifestyle. Her needs were no different than any other old person in any culture. She craved the attention of her children.

I had always sympathized with Ai Chau's situation, but I thought her view vis-à-vis her children was a bit too severe. Hadn't Rudyard Kipling once said that children were not their parents' luggage, but were simply individuals who began their life journey with them? This philosophy notwithstanding, it was my perception that the gap between Ai Chau's way of life and that of her children was the gap between two generations and two cultures. One lived for the past, and the other for the future. One emphasized family loyalty, and the other, personal happiness. Growing up in America, my children could not help being influenced by the American ways. Everything—well, nearly everything—about them was American. They spoke English like Americans. They thought like Americans. They acted like Americans. Their dreams were an average American's dream. They saw themselves not only as members of an extended family to whom they were expected to owe their absolute loyalty, but also as independent individuals—responsible, first and foremost, to themselves and their own families. This is how I saw my children. On the other hand, born and raised in a Vietnamese traditionalist family, Ai Chau was so culturally engrained in the Confucian traditions that she could not see her children as being anything else but an extension of the Tran and the Chau families, and she felt that they should never disassociate themselves from their Vietnamese ancestry. She was afraid that without showing due allegiance to their ancestors, her children might lose their protection and their blessings and, as a result, might not be able to adequately withstand the many dangers of life on earth. "*A limb cut off from a living tree will sooner or later become a dead limb*," had been her usual remark when I tried to explain to her the meaning of Rudyard Kipling's viewpoint on the relationship between parents and children. Obviously, the answer for my children lies somewhere in between. As they get older, they will hopefully learn to take the best from each way of life.

Seeing Ai Chau's sadness the first day of TET made me feel terribly guilty, and I was wondering if I had not made a grave mistake by moving to Monterey on the central coast of California, where she and I had lived a nearly secluded life for the past three years—without relatives, friends and the Vietnamese community to fall back on when we needed them. Before moving to Monterey, we had lived for several years in San Jose, a metropolitan area approximately fifty miles south of San Francisco and known to the world as the capital of US high-tech industries. We had enjoyed our days in this rainbow city where a wide variety of people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds lived and worked together in perfect harmony. Due to the nature of my job, I had had frequent professional and social contacts with many Vietnamese there, and I had become well-known among the various ethnic groups in that city, particularly the Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Laotians, Cambodians, etc. Ai Chau also had many acquaintances and friends among members of the Chinese and Vietnamese community there. But most gratifying of all, in San Jose, she was close to her children and grandchildren. Their proximity had given her a semblance of family togetherness and a great deal of comfort and consolation. Why, then, did I decide to move to Monterey?

I had moved to Monterey to write this book because it offered me the environment and the serenity I needed for writing. Lying on the central coast of California, approximately 125 miles south of San Francisco, the Monterey Peninsula was probably one of the remaining few places in the United States whose natural charm and beauty had not yet been desecrated by modern-day commercialized tourism. I always likened Monterey to a pure, innocent country girl whose pretty face had not been smeared by cosmetic powder, rouge and other artificial products.

If the decision to come and live in Monterey had been easy for me, it had not been so for Ai Chau. Because writing this book was my primary objective, everything else took a back seat, even my professional and personal life. In moving to Monterey, I had to give up a professionally and academically rewarding job in the field of human services where I had the privilege of working with a very special breed of people whose views and philosophies about humanity I readily shared, particularly when it came to promoting or defending the causes of the refugees, the immigrants, the poor and the underprivileged. In Monterey, I would not have such professional opportunities.

But Ai Chau was the one who suffered more from this separation. She missed not only her children and her grandchildren, but also her Chinese and Vietnamese friends. Not fluent in English, she always enjoyed making acquaintances and talking with people who spoke her native language. The mere sight of a Chinese or a Vietnamese somehow made her feel at home. I remembered when we first came to live in Santa Rosa, California, in 1975, she always asked me to take her to different Safeway stores throughout this city whenever she wanted to buy some groceries. She did it, not because she preferred one store to another, but because she wanted to have the opportunity to meet with other Chinese or Vietnamese refugees who lived in the various parts of that city. In Monterey, she would not have that opportunity. There were very few Chinese and Vietnamese there.

Ai Chau was the one who constantly urged me to finish this book. She did it for an entirely different reason than mine. In her uncomplicated mind, she figured that if my book could be sold—and she trusted it would be—then she would have a little extra money to help bring Chau Trinh Bau, her younger brother, and his family still in Vietnam to the United States of America. For the past eighteen years since emigrating to America, even though we had worked very hard and lived a very frugal life, we were not able to help her brother financially. With eight children of our own to feed, clothe and educate, we simply could not do it. Unlike other Vietnamese, we had never really *made it* in America. Even now, we still lived from hand to mouth. All we had ever accomplished in this country was to provide our children with good educations. It was painful to see this woman who had sacrificed all her life for father, husband and children to now have to worry about her brother. To make her feel at ease, I had promised to her that I would finish my memoirs at all cost and that, if she died before my memoirs were published, I would still send money to her brother and help bring him and his family to America. What I had not told Ai Chau was, in working on my memoirs, I can honestly say that I was not thinking about the money.

Nga Tran and Ai Chau -- San Jose, CA - 23 June 2007

23 June 2007
Nhon and Ai Chau
Doug and Cecile Scribner
in San Jose, California

Some Personal Regrets

After living two-thirds of my life in a country where the outcome of everything I planned and did was dictated by the caprices of war, I had learned not to be optimistic. Besides, as I had said earlier, because the primary objective of my memoirs was to record the history of the Tran and the Chau families and to tell the tragic stories of the Vietnamese people for my posterity to use as references, it would be immaterial to put any dollar figure on my works. I was sure in writing her diary in the darkness of her hiding place in Gestapo-infested Germany, the young Jewish fugitive Ann Frank had never dreamed that her diaries would be translated and published in scores of languages after her death. Of course, it would be nice if my book could sell. If it were published, I sincerely hoped that the American readers would read it with an open mind, for some of the stories in my book might hurt their feelings. To those who had participated, in one capacity or another, in the destruction of my once beautiful country and in the vilification of my once proud people, I would say now that I am sorry if the stories in my book revived the old wounds or some forgotten guilt feelings. The stories still must be told whether or not Ai Chau's brother would get anything out of this book.

Actually, at first, I did not want my memoirs to be published while Ai Chau was still alive. There were certain secrets in my life that I did not want Ai Chau to know for fear I would hurt her feelings, and hurting Ai Chau's feeling at this late stage of her life was the last thing I wanted to do. During the last five decades, I had committed many mistakes, the most serious of which was my infidelity to her. I had started my life on a wrong foot. When I was eighteen years old, I had fallen in love with a young girl named Hoai Nam. It was my first love. And as my horoscope had predicted, my first love was broken. The breakage of my first love had obsessed me in a negative way for five decades. The most serious of which was my low self esteem with regards to women. I had carried the image of Hoai Nam for over fifty years until I met her in the year of 2000 in Paris, France. Then, and only then, did I know that it was all an illusion and the only true love in my life is my wife Ai Chau. If only I had realized this sooner.

During the past fifty years, I lived recklessly, without regard to the harm I was doing to Ai Chau and to my children. During this time, I was obsessed with mainly two things: fame and money. Why? Because the loss

of my first love, at least in my naïve and erroneous judgment, was due to my being poor and to my *unshining* life. This obsession took precedence over everything else. In my relentless pursuit for fame and money, I did not realize that I already had the best companion--Ai Chau, who was the mother of my six children and who was the most kind, the most loving, the most noble and the most generous character I have ever known. Given my split personality, my recklessness, my indifference to her emotional needs and my imperfection as a husband, I knew I did not deserve her. In my often-recurring remorse, I often wished I could have changed all the bad things I had done to her—things that had caused her great pain and sorrow—but how could I change something that was unchangeable?

If I had the magical power to turn back the clock and to make everything in the past disappear, I would. My most serious mistake was my affair with Nguyen Kim Phuong, who had two illegitimate children with me—Tran Q. Dung, thirty-eight, and Tran Q. Khanh, thirty-six. I lost track of them and their mother when I fled Vietnam in 1975. I had not heard from them for almost three decades and had no information whatsoever about them. I did not even know if they were dead or alive. For twenty-some years, I had searched for them by writing letters of inquiry to their mother's relatives and friends, but I still had no news from them, until recently. I learned that they were living a *dog's life* in Neak Luong, Kampuchia, the land of the *killing fields*.

There was something else Ai Chau wanted me to explain to her children and mine--why she had married me and how she had loved them all in spite of her absence in their young lives. At age seventeen, Ai Chau married Wong Yuen in an arranged marriage that was decided by both families. Together, they had six children: Wong Nguyet Pang, Wong Lap (Ti), Wong Nguyet Ming, Wong Nhan Lap (Be), Wong Van Lap, and Wong Nguyet Hoa. What happened was towards the end of the First Indochina War, after suffering several major military defeats in Vietnam, the most infamous of which was the total annihilation of the Dien Bien Phu fortress by the Viet Minh forces, France finally agreed to sign the Geneva Accord with the Viet Minh on July 20, 1953, to end the war in Vietnam. Among the provisions of this agreement, all French troops would be withdrawn from Vietnam. The country would be divided into two halves at the 17th Parallel, and the communists would control all territory north of the 17th Parallel and the nationalists south of it.

In the rush to run away from the communists, Ai Chau and her two youngest children, Lap and Hoa, had gone south to Danang with the French Forces while her four other children and their father, Wong Yuen, had gone west across the Chaine Annamitique to Laos. Her children had remained in Laos during the entire second Indochina War and had become Laotian citizens. In 1975, after the Pathet Lao Forces took over Laos, her two sons, Wong Lap (Ti) and Wong Nhan Lap (Be) had fled to France and set up their households in a Paris suburb called Mauir. Her two daughters, Nguyet Pang and Nguyet Ming, had fled to Taiwan and set up their households in Taipei with their father.

Ai Chau visiting her son, Wong Nhan Lap (Be) , in Paris, France - 1986

This painful period in Ai Chau's life, and the decision she made to part ways with her first four children, was something that she kept from her remaining eight children for years--well into their adulthood. Perhaps her silence was a way to conceal the shame of what she perceived as

Anh Hong (Nguyet Pang's husband), Nguyet Pang, Anh Hong's mother, Ai Chau, Nhon Tran, Nguyet Ming - Visit in Taipai, Taiwan 1985

a personal failure. Parents are considered venerable in the Asian culture, so to recognize our personal shortcomings is to be confronted with the truth that we, like our children, make earthly mistakes in life's journey. For most of her life Ai Chau has carried this feeling of guilt and regret for not keeping all of her children together, even though the turbulent times in Vietnam did not present her with any other option.

In 1985, I had taken Ai Chau to Taipei, Taiwan, to meet with her two daughters, and in 1986, we went to Paris France, for Ai Chau to finally reunite with her two sons. In 1989, we went to Vietnam for the first time to meet her brother Chau Trinh Bau and my brother Tran van Le just released from reeducation camp. I also met Nguyen Kim Phuong and her two sons after they left Cambodia and came back to Vietnam. After this meeting we went back to Vietnam several times, and I am grateful that Ai Chau treated Phuong, Dung and Khanh with utmost kindness. She gave them a large sum of money so they could invest this money to start their business. Thanks to her donations, Dung was able to open a vehicle-wash shop in Can Tho that sustained him and his family all these years. Khanh bought a motor cycle that he used to deliver coffees to the various stores in Chau Doc Province. Nguyen Kim Phuong died in 1998 and Khanh died in 2001.

Ai Chau is still alive in 2007, but she is ridden with medical problems. She has diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart murmur, anemia and, recently, kidney disease. She does not have many years left, and I try to take care of her the best way I can, but I don't know how much longer I can be with her. Not long ago, I had a stroke, and at the age of seventy-three, I hope that I will live long enough to take care of her until the day she dies. But that is up to God. In writing these lines, I want her to know that I love her very much and that I am sorry for the mistakes I have made. I am glad that we have been sealed for eternity in the Oakland Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. If God, my Heavenly Father had been kind enough to help me in the dark days of April 1975, I am sure He will help me now so I can accomplish my duty as husband in the days that are remaining to me on earth.

Ai Chau in Vietnam

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CHU FAMILY

I do not know much about Ai Chau's ancestry except for what she told me based on her remembrances. Unfortunately, her remembrances become faded as she grows older. Following is the story of her ancestors.

She was the daughter of a very rich man in Phu Trung District, Lang Son Province, North Vietnam. Phu Trung was located near the China-Vietnam border. Her father came to Vietnam from Quang Dong Province. Like the ancestry of the Vietnamese from the Viet Tribe in China, he moved South, crossed the mountains bordering Vietnam to avoid lawlessness and oppression of the war lords and feudal chieftains who reigned in China in the late Nineteenth Century. His name was *CHU yet Ky*. Not a farmer by trade, he did not push further south into the Red River Valley but was content to settle in Phu Trung to do commerce. He successfully built up an economic empire by the age of fifty. His economic empire was so large that he needed people to oversee it. Who better to do it than members of his own family! True to the Chinese customs of the day, he had two wives. The first one was the financier of the family and the second one oversaw the operations of his economic empire.

In his adult years, Mr. Chu yet Ky was so wrapped up in his commerce that he had no opportunity to enjoy a true love-life. He kept searching for it and found it in the person of Wong Shea, Ai Chau's mother. Wong Shea was a textile merchant in Lang Son Province, and as such, she was not dependent on Mr. Chu yet Ky for a living. Eventually, Wong Shea became the third wife of Mr. Chu and gave birth to two sons and two daughters. Mr. Chu had a special love for these special children, particularly Ai Chau. He pampered her with the best in education and upbringing. Ai Chau also inherited a great deal of Confucian teachings from her father. She related to me that at meal times, her father always taught her to be honest with, truthful to, and have love for other human beings in the traditions of Confucianism. In a nutshell, *Tu Duc and Tam Tong* were the basic teachings of Confucianism. Ai Chau practiced those virtues all her life towards me and her children. She never thought about herself and always was satisfied with what she had. Even today, towards the end of her life, she never complains to me about being sick nor about being as wealthy as we should have been. She always says, "If *you look up, you may not find you are worth much, but if you look down, you will see you are more blessed than other people."* She always told me that.

Ai Chau has two brothers and one sister and nine other step-brothers and step-sisters. They all have died so now she is the only living daughter of Mr Chu yet Ky. Recently, I took Ai Chau to Los Angeles to bury her last step-brother on March 9, 2006. It was a very emotional time for her, but she did not cry. I asked her *why*, and she told me that all her life she had cried so much for other misfortunes, she had no tears left for this one. After the funeral, we went back to San Jose in a bus, and during the trip, she talked about being the last of the Chu Family on this planet, and because of that, it may not be long before she joins other members of her family.

Of all her brothers and sisters, I knew Chau van Bang very well. I remembered he always brought food to our home and always tried to help us as much as he could during the economic hard times I happened to encounter in the days of fierce war in South Vietnam. Chau van Bang, known to my children as *Cau Beo,* died in 1982. Another brother of Ai Chau, Chau Trinh Bang, nicknamed *Cau Heo,* died in 2003. While Cau *Heo* was alive, Ai Chau and I were able to help him and his family by giving him whatever spare money we could afford. His ashes are being kept in a pagoda in Vietnam along with Ai Chau's mother's. The pagoda in Vietnam does not

Chau van Bang (far left), Chau Tri Bau (third from left), Chau Trinh Bang (far right)

usually keep the ashes of dead people for long. If they have not been paid for a period of time, they often just throw away the ashes. For this reason Ai Chau wants to go to Vietnam one last time to take care of the ashes of her mother and her brother. One of her nieces, Pai Pai, suggested to her that the ashes could officially be thrown on the Saigon River by her to appease the souls of the dead, or they could be buried underground. Those are Ai Chau's options if she goes to Vietnam, but how can she do it when she is presently ridden with medical problems? In Ai Chau's mind, if she does not take care of the ashes of her mother and particularly the grave of her father in Lang Son, the children of the Chu Family can never be well off financially and poverty and misfortunes will happen to them throughout their lifetime. So to calm her, I told her that if she died before I did, I would take care of this matter on her behalf.

Ai Chau and I now live alone in a mobile home-park. Because I had a stroke and have been involved in many automobile accidents, the California DMV took away my driver's license, and so I am able to stay home and take care of her every day. Because of her poor health, I have to check several times on her every night to make sure she does not die; although, I know death will be a relief for her in her old age.

I am glad that she has one simple past time--she really likes to watch TV and video tapes about stories of the people in Southeast Asia where she came from. She really likes those tapes, but she cannot watch them very long. Because of her illness (probably her liver disease), she lapses into sleep after two or three minutes of watching the TV screen. Because she sleeps so much during the day, she has problems sleeping at night. She normally has only three or four hours sleep every night. That causes me a lot of concern, but there is nothing I can do about it. The only happiness she has now is the visit from her children. When my daughter Thuy comes and visits along with her newly-born baby Chloe, Ai Chau is very happy.

Because my children do not live close to her, they may not be fully aware as I am, that their mother does not have much time left on earth. Thus, I always encourage Ai Chau <u>not</u> to be penny-wise, but to spend whatever amount of money she can afford to make her life more comfortable. But this is the very thing that she is not used to doing. All her life she has always been very conservative in her spending. We own a mobile home worth about $70,000 and I always encourage her to sell the mobile home and live a comfortable life in Vietnam or anywhere south of the United States where the cost of living is cheaper, but she does not want to do that because she has close friends in the San Jose area. I do not push the matter too much because I want her to be happy with herself—at least in the later years of her life. So we will continue to live in that mobile home until we die. Like me, she now turns to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for companionship and comfort. There is plenty of love in the church, and she is also happy about that. She finds the love she misses from daily contact with her children in the members of the Bayshore Branch of the Church. I don't know how long either of us will live. Death will probably be a great relief for both of us. We do not fear death. Since we are *sealed* for eternity in the Temple of God, we will be together again in the presence of our Heavenly Father. That is my belief and my testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

EPILOGUE

This chapter is dedicated to you, Mother and Father.

As I am writing these lines to close the last chapter of my book, I keep thinking about you and about the long and difficult road you have traveled in your effort to keep us, your children, alive and well through the tumultuous years of World War II, the Franco-Viet Minh War, and the US-Vietnam War. As a matter of fact, as I am writing these lines, I keep looking at the pictures of you and some of us, your children. These are old pictures I took with me when I escaped Vietnam with my family before the fall of South Vietnam in April 1975. Since that day, wherever I have lived, I've always hung these pictures at a conspicuous place on the wall above my writing desk so they would remind me of you and the Tran Family at a happier time. Of these pictures, one has always caught my attention. It is the picture featuring you, Mom and Dad, me, my ex-wife Mai, my brother Le, my brother Thao, his wife Loi, my brother Tri, my sister Thuan and her husband, Lieu. This picture was taken in 1954 in front of your home in Di Linh (now Lam Dong) Province when you were director of the treasury department there. What has always drawn my particular attention to this picture is that of the ten adult people in it, five have gone to the other world. Only five are still alive: Thao, his wife Loi, Thuan, Tri and me.

Front Row: Loi (Thao's wife), Mother (Vo Thi Chau), Thuan (sister), Mai (Nhon's first wife), Nhon Tran
Back Row: Le (brother), Tri (brother), Thao (brother), Father (Tran van Kinh), Lieu (Thuan's husband)
Picture taken in Di-Linh in 1954

When I last visited Thao and Loi in Can Tho, Vietnam, they were very old. With regards to Thuan, who is a few years older than I, and Tri who is a few years younger, I don't know how much longer they are going to live, but I myself may die soon. I can feel it. I am getting old, tired and plagued with medical problems. I recently had a stroke, which creates two injuries in my head. Thanks to the medication and health care available to me in the United States, I am able to hang on. You know! I am seventy-three-years-old now, a few years younger than you, father, when you died in 1978 and, a few years older than you, mother, when you died in 1969.

Before I am gone from this world though, I would like to report to you as to what happened to me since your deaths. I will explain to you the reasons I never told you about the misfortunes and tragedies I encountered after I had left you for the first time in 1949 and, of course, the hard life my family and I encountered after we left you for the second time in 1975—just before the fall of South Vietnam. In 1949, you sent me away, a kid of sixteen-years-old, from Yen Dai Village to Hanoi, supposedly the first stop on my way to Paris, France, with Nguyen Vinh Lan, your future son-in-law, so that I could further my education abroad. Unfortunately, that bright and glorious future you intended to invest in me did not materialize. *Man proposes but God disposes*. Contrary to your plan, a lot of misfortunes and tragedies happened to me after I left you. I have told this story in detail in this book, including the circumstances of Nguyen vinh Lan's death and the guilt I carried because of it.

As I then was homeless, Aunt Yen (Dad's sister) took me in and sent me to school to be educated. After four years of hard work, I finished high school. Aunt Yen had been very kind to me but she could not replace you, Mother, in terms of motherly love and affection. For what Aunt Yen did for me, I would remain grateful to her all my life. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to express my gratitude to her in person or to repay her. She died of a heart attack in 1983 in Maryland, USA. During my frequent business trips to Washington D.C. area in the nineties, I always visited her resting place in a Maryland Cemetery to posthumously thank her for what she had done for me.

After leaving Aunt Yen, I applied to be a cadet at the Military Warrant Officer Academy in Quan Thanh, Hue and was there for three years. During this time, like other young men, I experienced heart break over my first love lost, and felt that I would be better off dead than alive, so I returned to Thu Duc Reserved Officer School and requested transfer to a fighting unit. I continued to carry guilt because of Nguyen Vinh Lan's death. That was the beginning of a suicidal path that sent me to the most dangerous theaters of military operations in Vietnam. As a combat soldier, I fought in the jungles of Central Vietnam, and in the mountainous regions of North Vietnam, but my death wish did not materialize. After three years of combat duties, I was discharged from the army at the end of the Franco-Viet Minh War.

In 1951, when I was with the 2nd Regiment, 20th Infantry Battalion, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which was stationed near Hue City, I visited with you quite often, but I never told you about the personal misfortunes and hardships I had encountered in my early life. I remember you were very aggravated, Mother, when you found out that I had volunteered to join the parachutist troops for combat missions in North Vietnam towards the end of 1952 where the war was fiercest. Today, in my mind's eye, I can still see your distressed face when you took me to Hue Airport to send me off to Hanoi to become a paratrooper. Of course, you never understood why a favored son of yours had chosen such a dangerous and suicidal path. I feel sorry now that I caused you so many worries and disappointments then. I should have confided in you the sufferings and pains I had encountered in my early life and you probably could have given me some good advice—but I had not. So when you died in 1969, you went to the grave not knowing why your son had been so reckless and so unhappy about life.

The fact of the matter was because of the emotional crises in my youth, I had shut out myself completely and never talked to you, to Dad, or to anyone else—not even to my wife and children—about the misfortunes and pains I had sustained in my youth. These misfortunes and pains had changed my personality completely. A profound change was that I behaved and acted as if there were two personalities in me. I could be very kind and very rude, or loving and hateful at the same time. I could be very loyal to my friends and colleagues, but I could destroy them in a flash if I felt I was being crossed by them. There was no residual feeling in me. Because of the pains of separation in my youth, I was very wary of any form of sentimental attachment, not even to the

people dearest to me. My wife and children are the case in point. I loved and cared for them more than anything else in the world, but I refused to show any sign of attachment to them. Now that I have reached the last segment of my journey on earth, I am trying to change my character from a cold and rigid person to a more open, kinder and gentler one, but this may be a bit too little, too late, considering the harm I have done to them.

Now I would like to report to you as to what has happened to your sons, daughters, your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren after 1975. As you knew, in the hectic days before the fall of Saigon when all attempts to escape the communist troops closing in on Saigon failed, I sent Phuong, Thuy and Van, my youngest children, to an orphanage so they could be baby-lifted out of Vietnam via the so-called *baby-lift* operation. My *orphan* children made it, and, through the grace of God, we were reunited with them in the United States three months later.

Left to right: Anh Tran, Ming Nguyet Wong, Pang Nguyet Wong, Hoa Sternberg, Vanessa (Van) Tran, Jakob Holm, Stefanie (Thuy) Kendrick, Nga Tran, Trung Tran, Lap Wong, David (Phuong) Tran -- Picture taken in 1998

Now my *orphan* children all have their own families. Phuong, whom you nicknamed *Do* because of his large forehead, is married to Ngoc. Phuong has achieved a higher education and now works for the US Government as a tax auditor. Phuong and Ngoc have three children : Natalie, Katherine and Audrey. The latter two are twins. I enjoy Natalie and the twins very much. When the twins were about one-year-old and learned to speak, they sounded like little birds chirping and singing. You would have enjoyed them too, Mother and Father, if you had lived long enough to know them. When I visited with them in December 2005, they have now become teenagers—very bright and very talented.

Another *orphan* child is Thuy. She was married to Kevin Kendrick, but due to their incompatibility, they divorced in 2000. Thuy has a boy named Jett, but he prefers to be called J.T. They live in Tracy, California, about one-hour drive from where we live. Whenever J.T. comes to San Jose to visit me, he always *challenges* me to a game of indoor football, an American contact sport. It is always fun to play with him, but he is too strong and I am too old and too weak to tackle him. It is always a pleasure when Thuy and J.T. come to visit us. Thuy has found love again with her partner Patrick Lemons, a very nice man. She currently works as a manager of a bank, juggling work and motherhood. Despite that, she still finds time to come and visit us every weekend.

The third *orphan* child, Van (Vannessa), my youngest daughter, is married to Jakob Holm, a Dane. They met in college and have a very happy family life. Vannessa also has achieved a good education. She graduated from the Thunderbird, The American Graduate School of International Management in Phoenix, Arizona, with a Masters Degree in International Management. Upon graduation from Thunderbird, IBM offered her a job immediately as a Global Consultant. Vannessa and Jakob have a boy named Tobias. Tobias, your beautiful, healthy great-grandchild, number 10 on my direct line, was born on June 20, 2002, at 01:26 a.m. He speaks Vietnamese, Danish and English. He is a gentle boy and very caring. Their family now lives in Denver, Colorado.

With regards to my other children--Nga, Trung and Anh, the latter known to you as Liet, because he always looked at you sideways, they are doing very well. Nga, my eldest daughter and your favorite granddaughter, is happily married to Hai Nguyen and has three children—Christopher, Justina and Nicole. I attended Christopher's graduation from high school on June 13, 2002. Christopher went to San Jose State University in the fall. I hope to live long enough to attend his graduation from college in 2006. Justina wants to become a doctor and she will go either to Berkley or UC Davis for that particular field of study. Nicole is still in middle school. She is very intelligent and studious. I just checked her report card and noticed that she got all "A+'s" in her school work. Nga and her children come and visit with me and her mom very often. They have a good sense of filial duty—always doing their best to take care of us. You remember Nga, don't you? She used to live with you in Bao Loc for some time. Nga is a good daughter and her children are good grandchildren. I am very proud of them. You would have been too if you had known them. They live close to us in San Jose, California.

Trung, my eldest son, an engineer, also has a happy family. He is married to Ngoc Anh and has two sons, Elliot and Oliver. Trung is very focused on his career and his family. That is good, and I am very proud of him. We had a scare with Trung the summer of 2007 when doctors found a tumor in his spine. He was bed ridden and in pain for two months. Because the tumor was pressing against his spinal cord, doctors were unsure if the operation would actually damage it or whether the "pressing" tumor had resulted in irreversible damage to the nerves. Thanks to God for answering our many prayers, Trung's operation was a success and the tumor was benign. Doctors said he would have a long recovery period to fully gain back his motor skills, but he has surprised everyone with almost full range of movements. His son Elliot is attending Art school in San Francisco and has a penchant for languages. He can read, speak and write Vietnamese, Chinese, and Spanish. He is currently working on French and Korean to add to his list of language mastery. Oliver is now a sophomore in high school. He is a sweet quiet boy, much like his father. They are now living in Rhonert Park, California.

Liet (Anh) is still a bachelor at forty-one. He is working and doing well. He does not live with us, but does eat with us occasionally. Without a doubt, he is all the children's favorite uncle. He adores and dotes on every one of them, even the big kids. He enjoys participating in an American sport called basketball, in particular, Hoop It Up 3-3 tournament. He sometimes has an appearance of someone tough, but deep inside, you would find that he is gentle and has a caring heart. He lives in San Jose, California.

Mother and Father, generally speaking, my children are good children. They do not drink and do not smoke and do not have vices that I know of. They are law-abiding citizens of the United States. My children are good, thanks to their mom, Ai Chau, who during our first fifteen difficult years of exile in the United States, toiled to keep our home a good home.

With regards to Lap and Hoa, my adopted son and daughter, they also live in the United States. Lap is married to Ha and they have two children named Duc (Michael) and Thao (Rebecca). Lap and Ha are good parents.

Lap is a quiet man, but has strong character. He works hard to provide for his family and will always place them first. Ha has done a tremendously good job at homeschooling her children. Michael will graduate from college in 2008 in a computer related field while Rebecca is in Tennessee studying Art. She has won many art contests in high school and has followed her heart in this field.

My adopted daughter Hoa is married to Tom Sternberg and they have two children named Jennifer and Katie. I am very proud of Jennifer and Katie. In the academic year of 2000, Jennifer received a presidential award for academic excellence. Jennifer is currently a sophomore at UC Berkley where she is exploring the field of business. Katie also received a presidential award for academic excellence. In 2002, she earned three gold medals in a national rope-jumping tournament. Her team placed first in the world tournament in 2006. She continues to participate and win many awards in this sport. Hoa has also turned out to be a most filial and thoughtful and caring daughter *vis-à-vis* us, her aging parents. She and her family live in Boise, Idaho. Distance never seems to stop her from visiting and helping us or any of her siblings living in other states.

Your eldest daughter Khiem is now seventy-eight, old and decrepit, but not allowed to rest, for according to the law of *Nhan Qua* (cause and effect), she must mortify her later life for not having treated her husband and children kindly in her younger age. She currently lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, and is involved in various charitble works.

Your son Le died of cancer in 2001. After the Vietnamese communists took over South Vietnam, they sent him to prison for eight years of hard labor to be reeducated because he was a high-ranking military officer in the South Vietnamese Army. After he was released from prison, he was admitted to the United States under the U.S. Humanitarian Program, but he did not live long after that due to poor health. He came to the United States with his second wife who had two children of her own. Although infirm, he had to work to support his family until the day he died.

Your son Thao still lives in Vietnam, poor and destitute. Tin, his first son who had asthma, died at the age of eighteen for lack of medical care. One of his daughters, Tam, a doctor, committed suicide because she could not withstand the verbal abuses heaped upon her by communist cadres for the alleged crime of her father. Her father had worked for the Americans during the Vietnam War. Whenever I went to Vietnam, I always visited him and gave him money.

Your son Tri now lives in the Los Angeles area. He does not do too well financially. One of his sons, Chuong, died a couple of years ago after an all night party with his friends. Tri's other children are doing very well. Dai, his eldest daughter has worked for the postal office for the last fifteen years. She has three children. They all went to college. His second daughter, nicknamed Bu, is married to Dinh, a veteran in printed newpaper business. They are doing extremely well financially. His third daughter Tram is married to a chemist. He works for the government. Both of them are doing very well. His third daughter Thuy is now a medical intern. She will be a full fledged medical doctor shortly. His youngest son, Phong is a contractor. He seems to be doing very well. Tri and I frequently communicate with each other. Tri is a very talented and happy man. His philosophy on life is very simple—*Be happy with what you have. Don't be unhappy with what you don't and cannot have*.

Your daughter Thuan is now a widow. Her husband died in 2000. Her son Vu died of kidney disease and her son Hao, a conscript, was killed in combat during communist Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978-79. Her daughter Dao never made it to the United States. Although her husband, Quynh, had emigrated to the United States in 1980, he died before he could reunite with his wife in the United States under the Orderly

Departure Program. Dao has since remarried, but her second husband also has died. But all of Thuan's other children, Anh Van, Hai, Liet, Thu, Linh, and Quoc, were able to gradually immigrate to the United States during the past ten years. The sad story about her family is your granddaughter, Hanh. She lost her life during her escape by boat from Vietnam in 1986. Sea pirates had intercepted her boat in the high seas between Vietnam and Malaysia, had killed all male occupants on the boat, attempted to abduct Hanh and two other girls and take them to their den as sex slaves. Seeing what was coming to her, Hanh committed suicide. She was only eighteen-years-old. The other two girls were later rescued by Malaysian authorities at the demand of the United Nations Commission for Refugees. After their release from the pirate den, one of the girls wrote a letter to Hanh's mother explaining in detail what had happened to Hanh. I have read and reread that letter many times, feeling grateful that none of my children had gone through such an ordeal. Perhaps it was thanks to your *Phuc Duc* (blessing and virtue).

Now I would like to talk to you a little bit about our winter days in America. Ai Chau and I are now living in a mobile home park reserved for old-age people. Having worked for almost thirty years in the United States, the government now gives me a pension called *social security*, and AT&T, where I worked part-time for five years, also gives me a small pension. Both add up to about $2,000.00 a month, hardly enough to make ends meet. Therefore, at the age of seventy-three, I still had to work some to earn extra money to pay for rent, food and other necessities. After I had a stroke in December 2004, I was forced to retire and rest.

Unlike in Vietnam, living out old age in America is not a blessing. I have thought long and hard about going back to Vietnam to live out my old age there. With the pension I am now entitled, I would live a very comfortable life in Vietnam, but because of Ai Chau's poor health, I have to shelve this plan for the time being. I am indebted to Ai Chau for what she has done for my children and we simply cannot just get up and leave.

In spite of the hardships I encountered in my early life and my solitude in my old age, I think I still am the most blessed of all your children. My immediate family has not suffered tragic deaths and misfortunes as those suffered by my brothers and sisters. In the Spring, Summer and Autumn seasons of my life, because of war and hostilities and circumstances beyond my control, I did not have the chance to do justice to you, Mom and Dad, for the great love and services you had given us. For this failure, I beg for your forgiveness. Before I leave this world, I thought I might repay you in some way by telling your grandchildren and great-grandchildren about your life and your achievements. Your greatest achievement, in my opinion, lies in the fact that your posterity, your grandchildren and great-grandchildren, at least on my direct line, are doing so well. Because we all come from your flesh and blood and your *Phuc Duc*, my children and I have inherited great faculties from you—the most important of which are intelligence, courage, tenacity and strength of character. These faculties have helped us not only to survive the fiercest and longest war in Vietnam but also difficult exile years in the United States and yet come out as winners!

You see, the big dream you once invested in me fifty-five years ago was broken by *dinh menh* (destiny), but it was not dead. Fifty-five years later, at seventy-something, I finally achieved your dream. Through distance learning, I was able to graduate from college and obtain a Masters Degree in Linguistics. My children all achieved higher education and gained professional prominence. So you can rest in peace knowing that the pride of the Tran family you once wanted me to achieve has now been achieved many times over by my children and grandchildren.

Now with love and respect I am bidding farewell to you, looking forward to being with you again. Why am I expecting this? I belong to a Christian faith whereby I believe death does not part us; instead it will reunite us forever. For you, Father and Mother, who died before having the opportunity to hear the Gospel of the true

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you will hear it in the Spirit World where you are right now. If you accept this true Gospel, we will be together again in the presence of God in Heaven.

One more thing, Father and Mother. Our family tree would not be complete if I do not tell you that you also have two other grandchildren on my direct line. Their names are Dung and Khanh. They also bear your family name, Tran. Dung and Khanh are illegitimate sons who I sired with a young woman named Nguyen Kim Phuong. Forty years ago during the war years in Vietnam, I spent a great deal of time away from home. Nguyen Kim Phuong died in 1998 and our son Khanh died in 2001. Only Dung is still alive. He now lives in Can Tho in the Mekong Delta. I fully expected that Dung would hate me for having abandoned him and his mother, but, lo and behold, he didn't. He is a forgiving man. In November 2002, I went to Vietnam to visit the graves of Nguyen Kim Phuong in Tan Chau and Khanh in Hong Ngu, telling them how sorry I was for having abandoned them for the past twenty-nine years.

While in Vietnam in November 2002, I also made a trip to Yen Dai Village, Nghe An Province, to visit the graves of your father and my grandfather, Tran Van Minh and your eldest son and my eldest brother, Tran Van Trong. I am pleased to report that their graves have been well kept by Chu Phuc, your step-brother and his children. I also visited the places where your ashes are kept. I don't think it is proper to have your ashes kept in one place, and the graves of your father and your son in another. So I am planning to buy some land in Yen Dai village and set up a Tran family graveyard there. If the situation permits, I will do it in the next few years. I will then move your ashes from Chi Hoa for burial in Yen Dai Village where the Tran family had once lived happily together.

P.S. As I closed this chapter on the first days of Spring 2006, a new member was added to the Tran family. Thuy just gave birth to a beautiful and healthy daughter, Chloe, your great-granddaughter number eleven. She has a smile that would light up any room she walks into. I thought you would like to know that! In June this year, you will have another great-granddaughter (Angelina) born to Vanessa and Jakob Holm. I hope to live long enough to witness many more births into our family.

Written in the Spring of 2006 in San Jose, California. *(Updates on Nhon's children done by Vanessa Tran in January 2009)*

This picture of Ai Chau and Nhon was taken the 30th of October 2008, just four weeks before Nhon died in San Jose, California.

Peter Tranvannhon's Funeral
7 December 2008
Death: 28 November 2008
San Jose, California

Van and Ai Chau

Nhon's Children and Grandchildren

Elliot holding photo of Grandfather

Nhon's Grandchildren

The Pallbearers

Thuy, Van and Ai Chau

Jennifer and Katie

Kaite, Audrey and Oliver

Hope

The afternoon sun shines its golden light,
a soft breeze brushed against the long lush grass,
a young boy sits on his horse, bareback, staring into the horizon...

A father stares out the window watching his son…
hoping that the future will be more kind than what the present has shown to the child.

An old man sits on his bed,
watching his son staring out the window…
hoping that his upstanding son will be able to keep his family together in these times.

Soothed by the rhythmic swaying of the grass,
the young boy sits in silence and hopes that his grandfather does not have to suffer another war in his lifetime.

by Vanessa Tran (January 2009)

(a dedication to my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather)

My Journey Back to Vietnam, April 1995

by Vanessa Tran (youngest daughter of Nhon Tran)

DUALITY

Exhaust pipes from motorized vehicles bellow clouds of gray puffs into the dense hot air. One can almost see the polluted clouds slowly disperse and intertwine with the invisible but yet distinct culinary aroma escaping from street side food vendors. The united odor slowly waltzes through the air, ever hanging low, reminding every pedestrian, shopper, and loitering soul on the street to continue on with their everyday existence. Riding in the back seat of a 1929 Citroen, I winced slightly as I become conscious to the familiar smell of Saigon that begins my day. As I stared out the window and watched a maelstrom of cars whirling around me, I reflected on how I arrived at this moment in my life.

I was born in Saigon, Vietnam. I left my birthplace at the age of six through an orphanage program that my father had arranged with the Catholic Church. I was not an orphan, nor were my two sisters and brother who also partook in this journey. During the frantic period of imminent takeover by the Viet Cong in 1975, a pandemic fear of inevitability had many Vietnamese making devastating choices. My parents were among those who had to make such a choice. My mother and father had to choose which three out of their eight children would be the "lucky" ones to venture to America for a better life. I was too young at the time to really understand the impact of that sacrifice. When I tell friends of my story, I am often greeted with astonished reaction. "Wow, what was it like?" or "What can you remember?" were common inquiries that required my digging deeply for a forgotten memory.

When I first arrived in America, I had no idea where I was or why I was there. I suppose to a child, traveling from her home to a foreign land thousands of miles away would invoke a feeling similar to that of a dream. Without my parents and familiar surroundings to find comfort in, it seemed as though I was not conscious at all during the long journey to America. Yet, thanks to inquisitive friends and a Danish husband who continually asked various questions about my childhood, this dreamlike experience began to surface to the conscious level.

I was sitting in the back of an unlit bus. I could see a group of people standing outside of the bus reaching in, to touch those sitting inside. I did not have any idea as to why I was sitting on the bus, nor did I dare to ask. My sister Hoa was inside the bus, and so were my sister Thuy and brother Phuong. Although I had no concept of what was about to happen and where I was going, I knew the seriousness of the moment. I did not look at my siblings. I did not talk to them. I sat there holding my mother's extended hand, reaching in from the outside. I don't remember how long the moment lasted, but I do remember that instant when the bus pulled away. That moment, my eyes locked with my mother's eyes and instantly I felt lost. She looked as though she wanted to say something to me, but words could not formulate and she became mute. Quickly she managed to tell my sister Hoa to take care of us, the three little ones. Then it happened, chants of goodbyes from the crowd dulled my hearing and I could no longer hear what my mother was saying. The crowd managed to sever my concentration of looking at my mother, my wanting to send her a message begging her to answer my silent question: *Why are you crying?*

As the bus laboriously rolled, I began to cry even though my parents had told me be happy. I don't know how long I cried for. Even now as I try to recall the chain of events after the bus left curbside, I can only faintly retrieve bits and pieces of the journey to America. It seems as though the lights are permanently dimmed on that part of my life.

For most of my adolescent years, I was terrified at the mere mention of Vietnam. I was gripped by fear whenever history teachers uttered the words, "Vietnam War." I can honestly say that my heart jumped whenever someone mentioned my birthplace. I felt embarrassed, and ashamed. As a child immigrant, I felt as though I was living in a "borrowed" country. The US, I felt, was not my country. It had adopted me. I never told anyone of my fears and shame. As I grew up, I tried desperately to immerse myself in the American culture. I lived in a small town called Santa Rosa in California which, at the time, did not have a large Asian population. As the years progressed, I convinced myself that I was just like any other American kid. I had many Caucasian friends from whom I expertly copied their lingo, demeanor and behavior. In truth, I *was* American. Unfortunately, I got so good at being an American that I had selective amnesia of my past. I just did not want to remember Vietnam or my years there. I hated my link to Vietnam, it made me different from other American kids, and I resented it. I would tell friends and people during my teen age years that I was really Chinese. This hatred of self identity went on for years. My internal conflict with my birthplace did not subside until I turned twenty-two years of age.

It is most peculiar and ironic that I ended up in Vietnam during the twenty-year anniversary of the fall of Saigon. I recall very clearly the anxiety that my parents felt when I announced that I was going to Vietnam to do a business internship. What exactly motivated me to go back to this land, a country which I had fervently tried to disassociate myself from for most of my years growing up?

During my three years of living in Japan, I realized that I possessed something special in my personal history. I remember having numerous discussions with other foreigners living in Japan about the up and coming countries to do business in. Vietnam and China were the two contenders. People in their twenties have the tendency to "do" the not-yet-done things. I was not an exception to the rule. I wanted to ride the wave, to be a leader and not a follower. Vietnam, as my friends and I concurred, was the place to explore. Its pure, untouched by tourism, characteristics appealed to us and we wanted to be the first to witness its genuine beauty before the despoilment of modernity.

So I did an about turn. Friends asked me questions about Vietnam and its culture and to my amazement, I did not feel like I was going through a heart attack when answering their questions. It was therapeutic to talk about my birth country. I became comfortable with myself and of my background. Maybe it was maturity, maybe it was enlightenment. Whatever the reason, I accepted fully that I am a Vietnamese-American. I desperately wanted to go back to Vietnam. I planned and strategized for about a year in graduate school on how I might be able to set foot in Vietnam to do business. I sent out countless numbers of resumes to Multinational Companies offering to work for free if they would allow me to work in Vietnam under their management at their local offices. I finally got a response from a Hong Kong based company called Peregrine Capital Vietnam. They accepted my offer and, in turn, offered me a six month internship in Saigon.

Vanessa second from right (in red)

I saw a great future ahead of me. I envisioned myself working for a big company, running its operations in Vietnam. That was all that mattered to me. I am ashamed to admit it, but during that time, I did not once think about going back to Vietnam as an opportunity to retrace my roots. I had only business ambitions, and therefore, did not concern myself with any kind of sentimental issues. My parents and older siblings, of course, still bare scars from the anxiety of war in 1975. They were extremely concerned with my decision to go back. I, on the other hand, remembered nothing about the war or how life used to be prior to it. I thought, *the war is over, business opportunity is abundant, and the Vietnamese have moved on*. My assumption was callous and lacked true depth.

J&J sales colleague, Hung Nguyen and Vanessa

Working in Vietnam was one of the best occurrences that I have ever had the privilege of experiencing. I met many wonderful people, and some who were not so wonderful. Regardless, the country and its people left an indelible impression. The business side of working in Vietnam was an eye opener and interesting. However, I will undoubtedly treasure for life the knowledge that I have acquired from the local Vietnamese in our day to day living interaction and chance encounters.

GUILT

It was an extremely hot day in July, as I rode in the back seat of a Honda motorcycle with one of Johnson & Johnson's sales representatives. My job for the month, was to ride with the sales team to numerous retail "shops" in Saigon in hopes of finding answers as to why Johnson & Johnson's sales volume had plummeted in recent months. I sat on my parked motorbike, sipping a much deserved bottle of water from a shop that I had just surveyed. One of my favorite pastimes in Saigon was observing the daily activities of the local people to soak in the true atmosphere of this city. As I sat there watching people zoom by on their noisy air-polluting motorbikes, my eyes wandered aimlessly from one scene of the market place to another. People were haggling for deals, some were gossiping, and some sat down for an afternoon meal at one of the restaurants next door.

A woman sat down on a miniature plastic chair by a small table situated in front of the restaurant. She heartily slurped her noodles and, sucked the juice from a piece of duck meat. An unknowing subject in my silent film, she continued eating with vigor whilst I watched her in complete fascination. Soon, she came upon a piece of duck that wasn't worth her effort.

After three attempts at working on the piece and gnawing on the bone, she tossed it a good two feet from where I was sitting. I glanced at the piece. Although it was covered with dirt from the ground, I can see why she did not want to continue. The piece was part of a duck's neck that is usually only good for the broth but really isn't much for eating.

I can remember this next moment as if it were a film, played over and over again. A group of scrappy looking children were headed toward my way; they could not have been more than seven years of age. Despite their squalid and malnourished appearances, they projected a kind of energy only children can exude—chattering and laughing like children do when there is not a worry in the world. One of the young boys looked at me, and then looked down at the discarded piece of duck. He looked up at me, and then, swooped down and grabbed it. He eagerly shoved the piece in his mouth and busily worked on getting something out of it. I can truly say that vision of the little boy had put me in shock. I froze. I wanted to call out to him, to give him money and say, *please go get something to eat*. But I just sat there, unblinking and dumbfounded. The boy gave me a disdainful look, as if to say, *this is how I live*.

Poverty of any kind is unjust and agonizing to take in. To witness children living in squalor is simply heartbreaking. Children, as perceived by Western ideals, should live a carefree life full of pure joy and unbiased discoveries. In this city I watched a young child carry out the task of making deliveries, barely able to handle the overpowering motorbike and the heavy load on its back. On his face, only the weight of survival showed as he wobbled onward to multiple destinations. I watched another child stand outside a busy tourist area, with a dangling cigarette in mouth, aggressively trying to sell souvenirs. On his face, destitution had already taken its toll and I could not help but feel sadden by his loss of innocence. To these children, the necessity of providing for their families financially had matured them well beyond their years.

During my six month stint in Vietnam, there were numerous incidents that really dealt a blow to the core of my consciousness. The first two weeks in Vietnam were very emotionally draining for me. The abject poverty in which people lived their daily lives was, at times, painful. Vietnam is not the first country that I have witnessed firsthand such poverty. However, it is my birthplace and by default, it represents me. In the same vein, I represent it and all the millions of Vietnamese who were subjected to the aftermath of multiple wars which had lead them on the path of substandard existence.

I remember feeling an incredible sense of guilt. It was as if I had gone away on a fantastic voyage whereupon my return, I find out that my mother is dying. Even though I left at such a young age, I somehow felt as if I had

neglected my duty. But a duty of what, exactly? A duty to witness and endure the worse kind of suffering? Instead, I left Vietnam and did not care nor looked back for twenty years. Therefore, this guilt of neglect was twice as heavy in my mind. Try as I may, I could not shake this feeling whenever I saw a child on the street begging for money or persistently trying to sell trinkets on the street from morning to night. I knew I was among the fortunate ones.

One day, while I stood waiting for sales team member outside a local store, an elderly man in his seventies came out of his house shouting hostile words. At first I thought he was yelling at someone else on the street. After tossing my head left to right and seeing no one near me, I realized that the old man's hostility was directed at me. The old man, in his fit of anger, has identified me as a *Viet Kieu*—a term used in Vietnam to label overseas Vietnamese who have come back to their fatherland. The term itself has a straight forward meaning which is: overseas Vietnamese. However, the connotative meaning carries a judgmental tone and is not considered endearing. Most *Viet Kieu* whom I worked with in Saigon can, undoubtedly, sense resentment in the tone of the local people when the term is uttered. The old man not only said the word *Viet Kieu* in total contempt, but also railed at my betrayal of his beloved country. I found myself holding back anger and resorting to a calm façade. I asked him, *"why are you yelling at me?"*

The old man stared intensely into my eyes and said, *"You don't know what it was like. You did not see it, you did not live it. You come back here in your fancy clothes and with your big education to do what with it here? You will never know what we went through during those years."* He abruptly stopped and in an instant, guilt came over me. In his nebulous outburst about "those years" I knew exactly what he was alluding to in his rant. I looked at him and confessed of my ignorance. *"You're right. I don't know what it was like. But please tell me so that I can retell your story to others like myself so that they would know as well."*

Soon, thereafter, my colleague joined us, and the old man began his tale. I listened intently as he told me of the years that were tainted with starvation, fear, and desperation. He described how in the early 1980s, the country was in absolute despair and his countrymen were close to mass starvation. The Vietcong had come down to South Vietnam and pilfered all that the southerners had possessed: livestock, vegetation, and personal treasures. The southerners were left with nothing to start up again for years. The old man went on to describe how families fed themselves with fermented rice and rotten potato roots, which, at one time, were fed to livestock. I later asked my staff at work about this period, and they too, confirmed of these events.

The most memorable aspect about my encounter with this stranger was not so much his heart wrenching story but more for his strong spirit. Despite his scars of those horrible years of pain and suffering, he managed to end his story in an upbeat note. He stated that the Vietnamese people have been tested time and time again, and will never give up on living the life granted to them—blessed or otherwise. My colleague apologetically informed the old man that I was not an indifferent *Viet Kieu*, but one who was too young to realize the extent and damages of the war. The old man then apologized for his harsh words and gave me a fatherly smile. I remember from that day on I felt more inspired to learn about those horrible years. I sat there sharing some LU biscuits with the old man until it was time for me to go.

While working in Vietnam, I often wondered what my life would have been like if I had not been granted life's fantastic voyage. Every encounter I had with a Vietnamese served as a reminder of how privileged and fortunate my life has been. My reflection on life and its destiny made me humble and undeserving of the local people's admiration. Their hardship, adversities, and hunger to have a better life were a constant reminder that etched in my mind an unspoken reality. The truth is I could have been any one of them.

For the remaining two months of my stay in Vietnam, I made it a point to be even more inquisitive and more observant of the people and my surroundings. Although I made the best of my time in Vietnam, guilt would shadow all new discoveries. It was a bittersweet sensation which reminded me daily that I was not just a tourist in town but rather a daughter who has returned home to see all the things that make up her life history—both good and bad.

FLASHBACKS

The moment I stepped out from the airport exit door, I was greeted by a wall of humid air and shouts of *"need taxi?"* Before I had a chance to let my eyes wander among the mob crowd, someone grabbed my arm and blurted *"Van. Wow! You are so big now."* It was my cousin. She and her daughters were there to greet me and to take me back to their home. They were so paranoid that I would be snatched, along with my baggage, that they circled me like secret service men. They hurriedly escorted me into a tour van, and told me that the car was a very special rental just for me. After customary greetings and constant "thank yous," my mind went into hibernation mode.

When we arrived at our final destination, I found myself staring at a shack that my cousin called home. The house looked as though it survived the war with only the four walls still intact. The scant thin layer of paint hardly can disguise the drab coloring of the cold cement foundation that holds these walls erect. The straw roof and dirt floor gave the place a drastic contrast, a non-distinct look where one is unable to say whether it is a house or a hut. After chatting with my relatives for a brief while about life in America, I resigned for the night.

A Vietnamese Home

I woke up to complete silence and darkness. In my state of haziness, I could not recollect where I had fallen asleep. The eerie darkness frightened me for it made me wonder whether I was truly awake or still in a dream state. I moved my hand in front of my face, but saw nothing. Suddenly, above me, a loud belch came from the sky and within seconds, a long thunderous noise followed. The section of the house that I slept under must have had tin sheets for

roofing. The rain pounded the roof top like fallen marbles, drop by drop, to produce the most deafening sound. My heart began to pound quickly as the noise level continued to rise. I got scared. *What if this isn't rain falling but gun shots firing in the night?* My imagination ran wild and for a brief instant, I relived a traumatic moment from my childhood.

I do not remember when it occurred, but one night, my mother shook me up during my sleep. I could not have been more than four years of age. She had directed me to sit inside a cabinet of some sort. The only recollection I have of that night is looking up at the night sky through one of the large cracks of the cabinet. I saw faint stars, and then flashes of bright light. Loud booms followed and sounds of *rack tack tack* echoed. Then, silence. *Where was my mother? Where were my siblings?* I felt terrified and alone. I have always remembered that night especially during storms. To this day, the sight and sound of thunder and lightning still puts me in a state of apprehension.

My recollection of childhood in Saigon came to me in doses during my stay there. Short distinct memory would come now and then, leaving me eager for more installments. During my first week in this noisy city, jet lag would have me lying awake at night forcing myself to remember something about the short time spent in my birth country. Nothing came to mind. I had no memories of childhood friends, teachers, relatives or anything positive to satisfy my longing for self knowledge. Sadly, the only memories that I could conjure up were the ones filled with anxiety and melancholy.

On one Sunday afternoon, a knock on my door woke me up from an afternoon nap. I was told by my landlord that I had a visitor. *Who can it be?* I had just arrived in Vietnam for only a week. As I approached the front door, a weathered looking man in his late sixties smiled at me. He greeted me by my Vietnamese name and asked, *"Do you remember me?"* I was rather unsure how to answer his question because I had no idea who he was but knew I should say, *"yes."* He could sense my uncertainty and embarrassment. He told me he was my uncle Heo, my mother's brother. He had spoken to my parents and was asked to take care of me while in Saigon. I felt incredibly ashamed. I hear so often from my mother about her siblings and how they had helped her through some bad years. I just could not remember who this man was and did not really know what to say to him. It was not as though I could start up a conversation by asking, *"how has it been?"* Any serious discussion at that moment would have spoiled his genuine happiness of seeing his niece.

Three on a bike built for one!

We stepped into the busy, noisy street, and I was greeted by his wife. Again, I could not remember any encounter I have had with her. I began to get a little upset at myself for my lack of conscious memories. It was bad enough that I could not evoke any childhood memory of Vietnam, but to not remember my relatives really brought my mood down. Suddenly, I looked at the old Honda motorbike parked in front of me and realized that the three of us were going to ride this thing! Their excitement of having their American relative ride with them on this bike, built for one rider, had me grinning inside. Squeezed between the both of them, I glanced back to see my aunt clinging for dear life with only half of her tush on the

motorbike. If my family could have seen me at that moment, they would have laughed for days. The humor of the situation soon stripped away the self pity that I was feeling earlier. Once we arrived at their house thirty miles away, I felt better about the situation. I told myself that it did not matter that I could not remember my aunt and uncle. What mattered was that I was there in their home telling them about Mom and our lives in America. We shared some stories and laughter. Then their son, Ca Thau, walked into the room. A flash from my childhood came to me. That face. It was the same face I saw when skipping outside of their home as a little girl. The face belongs to a young boy whom I played countless hours with daily. Finally, I remembered something positive!

On the drive back to my apartment, my uncle made a detour and showed me where my family and I used to live in Saigon. As I stood there in front of the tattered building, tears streamed down my face, and I began to cry in silent. At that moment, I dredged up from the subconscious all the details within our home. All the good, bad and scary memories came back, and I was happy.

My head felt heavy on the way back to my place, and I was slightly dazed from my earlier emotional outpour. The noise, the crowds, everything seemed blurred and distant. Unexpectedly, the thought of peanut butter came to mind. That was what uncle Heo had given me one day while I was playing hopscotch. I shared a tiny military rationed can of peanut butter with my cousin and remember thinking that I had never tasted anything quite like it. I asked uncle Heo, who, was now maneuvering our motorbike through a glut of cyclo (pedibike) stuck in traffic, *"didn't you give me a can of peanut butter once?"* He answered, *"yes,"* and laughed a deep laugh. So, indeed, I did have one recollection of uncle Heo after all. Take away the sun-dried aged face, and he was the same man who I thought was the best uncle to have given me such a wonderful gift of peanut butter.

So I end my story on this positive note. I believe that out of adversity, there are stories to be told and retold. I have been given a wonderful gift of knowledge and compassion for Vietnam and its people and culture. I came back to America with a different attitude on life and about myself. I no longer felt guilty about the path I have been given and have traveled on. My rebirth in Vietnam as an adult has allowed me to view my family's lives, in both Vietnam and America, as if understanding for the first time what it means to be grateful. I wrote down my experience upon my return to America to share with my future children; not wanting to lose any precious memory of my six months in Vietnam. I hope one day they will learn of their mother's wondrous duality.

Countryside and Market Place in Vietnam - 1995