SB: Today is Thursday, February 23, 2012. This is Steven Bui with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project of UC Irvine. I’m interviewing Mr. Ung Bui and we are at his home in Garden Grove California. Could you please state your name?

UCB: Yes, my name is Ung Bui.

SB: Okay, and your date of birth?

UCB: Date of March 15, 1950.

SB: And where were you born?

UCB: Born in North Vietnam.

SB: Okay so what were your parents like?

UCB: My parents names is Loan Canh Bui and my mother’s name Truc Nguyen.

SB: Well can you describe them for me? What were they like?
UCB: He was a teacher you know and a lot of people liked him and loved him. And my mom was a housewife you know, just stay at home all day.

SB: And how many siblings did you have? Brothers/sisters?

UCB: I have 3 sisters and 4 brothers.

SB: Did you always get along with your brothers and sisters?

UCB: Yes, of course we always get along.

SB: Did you ever get into arguments or fights?

UCB: No, never.

SB: Never?

UCB: I was a good boy.

SB: Was it ever hard to have that many brothers? Did your parents ever…

UCB: He’s a very tough person.

SB: Your parents?

UCB: Yes, very, you know he teach me to study you know from a very young age from when I was 4 or 5 years old. He was a teacher.

SB: So where did you grow up?

UCB: I was born in North Vietnam and grew up in Saigon.

SB: Why did you move to Saigon?

UCB: You know when the Ho Chi Minh, he’s a communist, you know when he took over North Vietnam, you know that’s why we had to move to Saigon. We evacuated to Saigon. That’s why.
SB: Can you tell me when you moved to Saigon?

UCB: When? I don’t remember the month but the year was 1954.

SB: How old were you?

UCB: I was about four or five years old.

SB: Did you know what was going on.

UCB: I knew nothing about it, I was too small. I just remembered the French ship take us from North to South.

SB: Okay, so did your brothers and sisters know what was happening or did they know why you were moving?

UCB: We moved together as a whole family.

SB: So how was growing up in Saigon?

UCB: How? Saigon was a big city, nice city, it was easy to live in.

SB: Did you like living in Saigon?

UCB: Yes, that was my you know, my country.

SB: How were your neighbors?

UCB: My neighbors you know were always noisy, the Vietnamese you know, the city in Vietnam is very noisy all the time. In the morning until midnight.

SB: So it was a very busy city?

UCB: Yes it was a very busy busy city.

SB: Even at night?
SB: So what do you remember most about your childhood? What do you remember most about you as a kid?

UCB: Kid? I just remembered as a kid my family was very poor. So I go to school and I had to take a walk from my house to school and it was about 2 or 3 or 1 or 2 miles. I remember I was just about 7 or 8 years old, I had to take a walk everyday. Nobody pick me up like you know American from house to school. We have to take a walk.

SB: Everyday?

UCB: Everyday, from 7am to we study at 2pm.

SB: And then you walked home?

UCB: Yes then I walked home.

SB: How about your brothers and sisters, did they go to school with you?

UCB: Yes, my old sister you know she has a business, small business to take care of us; to feed me and my brother and parents too because my parents or my mom you know were very old. She living in the country side, she doesn’t know how to do anything, just stay at home and cook for sister and brothers.

SB: So the main people that took care of you were your dad and your older sister.

UCB: Yes.

SB: And your older sister had a small business?

UCB: Yes, she sell something in the market you know, very poor. Not rich.
SB: But you were still happy right?

UCB: Yes, I’m very happy with my family you know. My brothers and sisters loved me you know. That’s the tradition of family.

SB: So what was school like in Vietnam?

UCB: School?

SB: Was it ever hard? Did you like it?

UCB: Not so hard you know. It was, I think you know, we don’t have a lot of stuff like in America. We just have a book and you know we were very poor. We don’t have a lot of books to read. Not like you know here. We don’t have a library you know.

SB: So how did the teachers teach if you didn’t have enough books?

UCB: The teacher teaches every subject from reading to writing to math. Everything. The teacher at elementary school.

SB: Did you go to the same school the whole time?

UCB: No, 5 years at elementary school and after that we go to high school.

SB: So you went to high school for 7 years?

UCB: Yes, 7 years in high school and 5 years in elementary school. So a total of 12 years of school

SB: So how did you celebrate the Chinese New year Festival?

UCB: That’s a tradition you know, every asian celebrate it.

SB: What did your family do for Chinese new year?

UCB: We gathered and we cooked food and for everybody from brothers to sisters to parents or nieces and nephews. Everybody, for the whole family together and we remembered Li xi, and the old guy gave money for the young guy. Almost kid like festival for new year.
SB: So how did you celebrate your birthdays?

UCB: We didn’t have tradition, my generation. We didn’t have birthday parties. But now you know my son and my daughter and my wife have birthday parties for me you know.

SB: So did you work while you were in school?

UCB: Work?

SB: Did you go to work or have a job?

UCB: A job in school? No.

SB: You didn’t work? So the only people in your family that went to work were your older sister…?

UCB: Yes so the older people in my family, my dad and older brothers and sisters feed me up. I don’t have to do anything. Just go to school only. We don’t have a job you know.

SB: So it was a nice life?

UCB: Yeah.

SB: So what did you listen to? What kind of music did you listen to?

UCB: The music I just listen to the country music only. We have a traditional dance in Festival New year like hat dance or dragon dance only. That’s it.

SB: So what do you remember most about your parents and your grandparents?

UCB: My grandparents passed away before I was born so I don’t know anything about grandparents. My daddy passed away when I remember I was about 7 years old. I don’t know a lot about my daddy because I was so small.

SB: Why did your dad pass away?

UCB: Why? I think he had a stroke.
SB: Did you miss him?

UCB: Of course, I miss him so much.

SB: How about your mom, what did you remember most about your mom?

UCB: My mom was very kind, she always loved my brothers and sisters. She always cooked everything for us like when I’m hungry. And she just passed away about 8 years ago in 2004. My mom, I miss her so much you know. I remember when she uh, when I left Vietnam or when I escaped to Vietnam, I remember my mom, she cried when I left the house and the last kiss you know.

SB: So who took care of your family after your dad passed away?

UCB: My older brothers and sisters. They take care of my mom and my aunt and the young brother like me.

SB: So do you know how your parents met?

UCB: My parents?

SB: How did they meet each other?

UCB: I don’t know, I think, I don’t remember. I think about 60 or 70 years ago, I think some people like a middle man introduced my mom and my dad. They never tell me about that.

SB: How did you and your wife meet?

UCB: How? I remember, one time I came back to Vietnam, then my brother, you know her cousin is my brother’s friend. Then he see me as an American and said “Hey, Bui, I have a cousin in America and a friend I want to introduce to you.” Then he give me the address to come to your mom’s house now. The first time I meet her, I fall in love and we just make friends about 2 weeks then I have to come back to America. Then I remember I come back to America and I write letters to her. Then I say, do you love me, you want to be my wife? If you agree, you love me you tell your daddy and mommy next year I will come back and we will have a wedding.
SB: And this was after 2 weeks?

UCB: We just make friends 2 weeks and come back to America and I write letter to her and say if you love me maybe you know next year I will come back and we can hold a wedding. And she agreed you know! Then I say I’ll come back next year and marry her and she’s my wife now.

SB: Were you very happy about that?

UCB: I’m very happy, I love her, that’s why you know I have you.

SB: So how many children do you have?

UCB: One son and one daughter.

SB: What do they do?

UCB: Oh they’re very young you know, my daughter is only 17 and she goes to school and my son is only 20 years old.

SB: Do you talk to them about your history?

UCB: Sometimes I talk to them about my past where I was in the military you know and I was very poor and did not enough food and so now I recommend my kid to study and improve life. Not like my life, my life too, nothing to say.

SB: So in Vietnam or America, does your family ever hold a gathering?

UCB: In America you know I have two brothers, one brother in another state, Minnesota, and another in California. I have another brother close to my house, every time I have a chance I see him every week and we have any chance we have a party and invite him to come to my house and hold a family gathering. That’s why sometimes we have a chance to come back to Vietnam and see my sister. I still have three sisters and one old brother and young brother in Vietnam.
SB: So do you keep in touch with all of your brothers and sisters?

UCB: Yes, I always keep in touch with them and I always help them because my brother and my sisters are very old now and they do nothing. They don’t have anything to survive and that’s why I have to help them by sending money for them every month to live. That’s my tradition you know. See when I’m small she take care of me but now she’s old and so I can take care of them. It’s a good tradition?

SB: That’s a great tradition.

UCB: I hope that when I get old you know, while you’re young and you get a good job, you take care of daddy? I think it’s a good Vietnamese tradition.

SB: So does your family keep an altar for your ancestors? Something that your family in Vietnam keeps for a loved one, for an ancestor, like for your grandparents that have passed away? Do you keep an altar for them to respect them?

UCB: Yes. So for example, my grandparents that passed away, we have an anniversary for them every year. We keep a tradition like that.

SB: What do you do?

UCB: The whole family you know, brothers and sisters, nieces, gather together to hold the party to remember them.

SB: That’s only in Vietnam?

UCB: Yes, in America we don’t have enough people to hold a gathering.

SB: So what do you do at the gathering to respect your ancestors? What do you do? Do you pray?

UCB: We pray. Yes we always have you know an altar and a picture of daddy and mommy and pray.

SB: What do you usually pray for?
UCB: I ask for daddy and mommy. I wish for my family and my son and my wife and my daughter for a good life. Whatever we want then we get it. We pray for a good life.

SB: So what do you do after you pray? Do you celebrate with your family? You eat?

UCB: Yes.

SB: So what religion do you and your family practice? Do you go to any temples or churches?

UCB: At the beginning of the New Year, my wife and my daughter and my son, we go to temple.

SB: So how often do you go to temple?

UCB: How often? We go about once a year.

SB: So would you say you’re not very religious?

UCB: We are Buddhists. We practice Buddhism.

SB: But you don’t go to temple very often?

UCB: No, we don’t have time to go often. Just you know once or couple times a year you know.

SB: So do you have any special food that your family loves to eat or cook?

UCB: Yeah, we always have special food, for example, like egg rolls and pickles or eggplant pickles. A lot, like crab soup and chicken soup or even fried chicken. Whatever we want you know my wife can cook for us. But tradition is just pickles.

SB: So what do you usually eat traditionally in Vietnam? What do you usually eat? What did your parents make for you?

UCB: My mom just cooked rice for us and we eat it with pork or chicken or eggs. That’s it. Very simple life you know.
SB: So do you have any old photo albums or scrapbooks?

UCB: Yes I have some old photos, very old, about 50 years ago. I just have one from the cousin when I think I’m about 7 or 8 years old. Very very long time ago.

SB: Was it just a picture for fun?

UCB: Yes, I save it for my life.

SB: Do you have any pictures of you when you were older? Before you left Vietnam or when you were in high school?

UCB: I have some, I left most in Vietnam you know. My sisters keep it. You know that in Vietnam my generation was very poor so we don’t have any cameras and that’s why we don’t have a chance to take photographs. Very seldom you know.

SB: So how come you didn’t take back all of your pictures? You only brought a few pictures over here?

UCB: No, I leave them in Vietnam. I just have some pictures over here. One or two over here only.

Part 2:

SB: So how did the war in Vietnam affect you and your family?

UCB: The war affected my family a lot. In the war, we have to serve in the military. The tradition of Vietnamese is to live together in the house but during the war everybody have to live a different city. Like me, I’m 22 years old and we had to work in the military, the air force, to live far away from my house, about 500-600 miles. So about every six months, I just have vacation about one week to go back to see my family only. My mom and my sister were very sad about that because we live together when we were small.

SB: Was it the law to go work for the military?
UCB: Everybody had to go serve in the military. Every youth from 18 years old and up had to go serve in the military.

SB: So all of your brothers went to serve in the military as well?

UCB: Yes, I had four brothers that served in the military. My oldest brother, he was the chief sergeant. He worked for the prime minister like the body guard for the prime minister of Vietnam and the second brother, he was the captain of the police, Bac Kiem. The old brother, another old brother, he was lieutenant in the navy. As for me, I was a war officer of the air force. And the youngest brother, my younger brother, was in the air force too. So five brothers were in the military. That’s the war in Vietnam. Every youth had to be a soldier.

SB: So how come you and your younger brother didn’t work for the same army. Why didn’t you all work for the air force?

UCB: If you like the air force, you can register.

SB: Oh you got to choose?

UCB: Yes, so you got to apply for the air force. If you liked the police, you would apply for the police.

SB: so some of your brothers applied for the air force, and you applied for air force, and others applied for the navy or the police.

UCB: Yes.

SB: So where did you live during the war?

UCB: During the war, I was told that I would serve in the air force. So I lived far from about 500-600 miles. I live in the air base you know. They called the city Qui Nhon district. Yeah, very poor. It was in central Vietnam. You know central Vietnam? Vietnam has three regions. One south, One central, and one north.
SB: So your air force base was in central Vietnam?

UCB: Yes, it was very hot you know. Every year, over 100 degrees. We don’t have air condition like Americans.

SB: So because your younger brother was in the air force with you did you see him a lot?

UCB: No, we don’t have a chance to see because we served in different air bases. Different cities.

SB: Did you and your brothers come home for vacation at the same time?

UCB: No, different. Sometimes a whole year went by and I didn’t see my brothers. We can’t take a vacation at the same time. With military no.

SB: What do you remember most about that time?

UCB: That time was very terrible. We lived in an air base, at midnight the communist fired cannons. Everywhere and everynight we hear the sound of cannons. So I was very scared a lot. A lot of people died and saw others died when they shoot in the air base. They fired at the air base.

SB: Was it hard for you? Did you see a lot of deaths at the air base?

UCB: Yeah. I remember one morning, in the morning when we hear everybody get together and salute and sing the anthem every Monday. Then the communist shoot the cannons and a lot of people die. I scared. I see it and I scare. Blood you know everywhere and it was terrible. Horrible.

SB: Did all of your brothers, did any of them pass away?

UCB: No. My family was very lucky that nobody passed away during the war. We still have enough memories from me. Lucky. But a lot of families lost brothers and fathers. Oh my god.

SB: So who took care of your sisters when your brothers were out serving in the military?

UCB: My sisters you know, in the war my sister was still young. She was about 30 or 40 and so they went
to sell something in the market you know. They took care of themselves. Sometimes they gave me money
too to feed myself.

SB: So what was life like living at the air base? What did you eat?

UCB: Oh, you know the Vietnamese soldiers were very poor, not like American soldiers. In the air base, I
remember having a lot of American soldiers. They lived in a house, a big house with air condition, with
everything, with coke to drink, you know they had beefsteak, chicken, everything. But you know
Vietnamese soldiers were very poor you know so sometimes we were hungry. Not enough money to you
know buy food. Different a lot.

SB: So sometimes you didn’t eat?

UCB: No sometimes we did eat but not so much. My salary was very little. Not so much, not enough to
spend for one month. I remember when I received my salary, I just good enough to live about 20 days in a
month. Then those ten days...

SB: So did they pay for anything for the military?

UCB: They did but because Vietnam is very poor, we couldn’t afford much.

SB: So where were the Americans? Were they in a base next to you?

UCB: They were same in the air base. They advised Vietnamese soldiers and they supported us and
helped. They also fight communists with Vietnamese soldiers.

SB: How was communication? Because they didn't know how to speak Vietnamese?

UCB: We had an interpreter.

SB: Did the Vietnamese soldiers ever talk with the American soldiers?

UCB: Yeah, sometimes talk you know, we live together and talk talk everyday and maybe we still
understand you know and sometimes we use signal hand language. Hand language.
SB: So the American soldiers, so everyone got along very well?

UCB: Yeah.

SB: How were sleeping conditions? What time did you go to sleep? Where did you sleep?

UCB: Where?

SB: Yes, did you sleep on a bed?

UCB: On a bed, yes.

SB: What time did you have to go to sleep?

UCB: What time? In the military? About 10 or 11 o clock pm.

SB: Did they make you go to sleep? What time did you have to wake up?

UCB: Yes. We had to wake up at 7am.

SB: So what did you usually do at the air base?

UCB: In the air base, I was the administration air force officer. I worked for the general. I was like his staff, the staff of the general.

SB: So did you have to go through military training.

UCB: Yes, of course, in Nha Trang.

SB: Oh do you have a picture of yourself in Nha Trang?

UCB: Yes.

SB: Do you remember the person that took your picture?

UCB: I think it was you know the camera man and he took a picture of me and I paid money for it. It was
over 50 years ago so I don’t remember very much because we don’t have a friend. Because my friend like me we don’t have cameras. Very little or rich persons had cameras. They were very expensive.

SB: Did you remember who you talked with the most at the military base? Who your friends were or did any of your friends die at the military base?

UCB: Yeah. I remember I had a friend that passed away and died you know in the air base. That’s why sometimes, I remember I worked for the general, the pilot, I remember what day the pilot come to my office to receive the papers. Then he went to go fly after half an hour then they called me and said he had just died because his flight had crashed. A lot you know, like some friends they flew jet planes and some friend is a pilot of a helicopter, it’s easy to be shoot down.

SB: Did you know how to fly a jet plane or were you one of the jet fighters?

UCB: No, I worked for underground only you know as one of the technical officers.

SB: So did you ever actually go out to fight?

UCB: No, just in the air base we don’t have to fight.

SB: So were you ever captured by enemy forces? Did you ever or were you ever a prisoner?

UCB: No, I don’t have to be in prison. I was lucky. I don’t have to be captured.

SB: So they never invaded your air base?

UCB: No.

SB: Your air base was safe?

UCB: Yes, the air base was very safe. Not like the jungle where they had to fight. You know what I mean?

SB: So you had friends that fought out in the war and friends with you that stayed back with you at the air base to work with?

UCB: Yeah.
SB: So, do you know anyone that was ever in a reeducation camp.

UCB: Yes, like my brother. I had two brothers that were in a reeducation camp. The communists called reeducation camp but it was actually a prison, not a reeducation camp. They just used that name for that but it was actually a prison. My old brother in prison, I think about almost 10 years. My, another brother about 7 years. I’m lucky I don’t have to. I’m a warrant officer. If I was a second lieutenant I have to go to prison.

SB: Did they ever tell you what it was like at the reeducation camps?

UCB: Yeah. They tell me a lot of very very miserable stories. They didn’t have food, or clothes, it was very cold in North Vietnam. A lot of people died in camp because no food no medicine. They took a shower like once a week.

SB: Were you worried or well when did you find out when your brothers were in a reeducation camp? When did you find out? When did you know they were prisoners?

UCB: When the communists over come South Vietnam, after one week, they put every soldier to go to the camps.

SB: Did you see them in the camps?

UCB: Yes, my brother I took him to the school together and then they take away my brother. Like Bac Kiem and Bac Bang. Bac Kiem ten years in North Vietnam.

SB: Do you know how they escaped or what happened or how they got out?

UCB: After 10 years, communists release them. After 10 years they release Bac Kiem or Bac Bang. But sometimes generals had to serve 15 years. So after they go out of camp, then we make a paper for Americans to allow them to go to America. That’s why we have a big community in South California.

SB: How did your family feel when they found out that Bac Bang and Bac Kiem were taken as Prisoners?
UCB: We were very very sad. Every 3 months we have to support them by sending food for them in the camps because they don’t have enough rice or food. They were very hungry. A lot of people died for hungry. It was cold and hungry because there’s no food and they get sick and they don’t have medicine.

SB: Did you ever see them?

UCB: I don’t see but my brother tell me. My brother tell me about that, a lot of people die like you know when I escaped Vietnam like me, you know how many people died in the sea? Over 100 thousand or couple hundred thousand died in the sea.

SB: When they were escaping?

UCB: Yeah, when they were taking small boats and you know the pirates attacked and storms, people died a lot.

SB: So, did you ever get to visit your brothers at the camp?

UCB: Yeah, I remember I visit my brother in a camp in North Vietnam. Just one time only because it was too far and very expensive. For ten years I only see my brother Bac Kiem one time and Bac Bang I remember one or two times only.

SB: Were they at the same camp?

UCB: No they were at different camps. There are a lot of different camps around North Vietnam. You know how many officers went to the camps? About 200 thousand. A lot. The South, North, everywhere.

SB: Did you go with your brothers and sisters to see your brothers at the camps?

UCB: Yeah, I went with my sister to take a train to go to North Vietnam. It was expensive. We don’t have money on the way. We were very hungry but we saved money for my brother.

SB: So when you went there your brother told you how it was like at the camp?

UCB: Yeah, I just see my brother in the camp about a couple hours then that’s it. Then he come back to camp since everybody see about two to three hours and that’s it.
SB: What was the camp like? What did the camp look like?

UCB: In the jungle.

SB: In the jungle?

UCB: Yes, in the jungle. Every camp in the jungle. They made the houses with leaves and coconuts and leaves. Every jungle has a house. They called it a house but it was just a hatch you know.

SB: Did you or your family members ever suffer any injuries from the war?

UCB: I told you, you know my family was very very lucky, nobody injured and or disability but, relatives like a cousin, I had one cousin died.

SB: Were you close to your cousins? Did you talk to that cousin a lot?

UCB: Not so much. We don’t have time but we just know like that. You know in the war, the time to see together was very little. Yeah so we just know then that he was my cousin. We don’t have time, everybody different city.

SB: So, at the fall of Saigon of April 30th, 1975, where were you?

UCB: The Fall of Saigon, I was living in Saigon. That day, that time, that period, I never forget it in my life. On that day, everybody was out on the street and tried to run away from Vietnam.

SB: How did they try to run away?

UCB: Maybe by ship? Maybe by airplanes. Anyway they could. Small boat. Maybe they run away to Thailand because Thailand and Vietnam were very close. Thailand and Malaysia. We take a boat about a couple days you know. Run away. Anyway or anything to get out of Vietnam, everybody.

SB: Can you tell me what you were doing that day and what it was like?

UCB: I tried to run away but I don’t have the means to get out of Vietnam. That’s why I chose to stay in Vietnam a couple years and so after a couple years my brother was still in the camp. I escape by small boat. A small boat. I start from Vung Tau. It was from Vietnam about 100 miles. A small boat from small
boat and we go to a seven day and seven nights at the sea. The boat was about the length of, I remember, ten meters I think about ten meters. Ten meters was about 30 ft. The width was about 5 ft. You know how many people are in there? 133 people in the boat. Everyone sat in the boat like this. You know, seven days and seven nights, no water and no food. We were lucky when it’s raining we use the something to have water and we drink it. The water was very precious.

SB: So did anyone ever die on that boat?

UCB: My boat was very lucky, no pirates but we don’t have food but a lot of people hungry. They got sick and maybe pass out a lot. When we had storms and big waves, the woman and kids cried. A lot of people cried and just prayed the gods. You know, some people went poo poo and pee pee on the boat and in their pants. It was terrible. I remember that day we were so hungry but we were lucky. Other people tell me other people on other boats eat together. If you passed away on the boat, other people would eat them. You remember if you read the books, some people eat a lot. When we got to the ground, a lot of people were just skeletons and skinny and bones only because it was seven days and like cold. On the boat, no roof, it was very sunside. It was very terrible. We were lucky we can go to the province island of Malaysia. That was seven days, seven nights, we were still lucky but a lot of people died.

SB: A lot of people died on the boat?

UCB: A lot of people died on the boat because of you know storms and pirates.

SB: What do you remember most about the fall of Saigon on that day?

UCB: On what day?

SB: On the fall of Saigon.

UCB: I told you, you know I remember me and my brother, my older brother, he was police, run to a, go to a US American embassy. We hoped we can go in there to climb up a helicopter but no. You know, thousands and thousands of people around ambassador but cannot go and I told my brother or you go to the navy. But every, every ship you know, go out of the harbor so we cannot go. That’s why. I remember.
You know I remember when people tried to run away, the communists shoot a lot of people and died and they run away on the street. After that they were scared and we had to go home and we closed the door in the house.

SB: What was it like when the communists came into South Vietnam? When they took over.

UCB: When they took over? They shoot a lot of people. Like Saudia, if you protest them or talk something about them they don’t like they shoot you easy. They came over Saigon, they looked at the South Vietnam like animals they can kill you. They’re terrible, they were mean.

SB: So what happened after they stopped shooting people?

UCB: They stopped shooting and after one week they scared the former soldiers protest them. That’s why they get them, everybody in a school then bring them to the jungle, the camps. They keep everybody in the camps, in a prison.

SB: So when did you leave Vietnam?


SB: What was the year?

UCB: 1981.

SB: And you left by small boat?

UCB: Yes, a small boat, I told you, 133 people in a small boat about 30 ft and length about 5 ft width.

SB: So when you left the house how did your family feel?

UCB: I remember when I left my house you know, I embraced my mom and kiss my mom. On that time my mom was about over 70 years old. She was very old you know, everybody look at me then I don’t turn around to see them. I was very sad and I cried. I don’t know if I go like this whether I will live or die I don’t know. My brother and my sister sacrificed everything for me and tell me I have to go. I have to go
then she paid money for the owner of the small boat. I think it was about two or three thousand. At that
time, it was very big. A lot of money in that time. Then uh, I’m lucky, I go to America. Then now, I take
care of them.

SB: So where were your brothers when you left Saigon?

UCB: When I left Saigon my brothers were still in the camp.

SB: What about the other brothers?

UCB: They were at home.

SB: They were at home? So they saw you leave?

UCB: Yeah, everybody sad and scared for me because they don’t know maybe communist will catch me
or put me in prison or I will die at sea? But I was lucky, after maybe 7 or 8 days I arrived at Malaysia, I
called my cousin in California, you know my cousin, sponsor me? I asked him to call Vietnam, send mail,
not email you know? Send mail to Vietnam and tell them I came to Malaysia?

SB: So your boat landed at Malaysia and you called your cousin?

UCB: Yeah I contacted my cousin and he sent mail you know. He sent a telegram to Vietnam. Then
informed my family that I was lucky I was in Malaysia.

SB: So how long did that take?

UCB: It took about a month.

SB: So what did you do in Malaysia for one month?

UCB: Oh I lived in Malaysia in a camp you know for how long? I remember I lived in Malaysia camp for
six months. After six months I have to go to Philippines for six months.
SB: So you lived in Malaysia for six months?

UCB: yeah, I lived in Malaysia for six months then I go to Philippines to learn English and six months after that then you know go to America.

SB: So how long did you stay in the Philippines?

UCB: Six months.

SB: So six months in Malaysia and then six months in Philippines?

UCB: Yeah. Then after one year I fly to America.

SB: So they taught you English in the Philippines?

UCB: Yeah I learned to speak English there.

SB: So who picked you up when you came to America?

UCB: My cousin, sponsor.

SB: So where did he pick you up?

UCB: At the airport. John Wayne Airport.

SB: When was this? When did he pick you up?

UCB: When? When I fly from Philippines to San Francisco, from San Francisco, I fly to John Wayne you know then my cousin pick up.

SB: Were you excited to come to America?

UCB: I was very excited. That was my dream you know.

SB: Did you keep in touch with anybody on the boat?

UCB: No, everybody went everywhere. We don’t have the phone number.
SB: Would you like to see any of them again or would you want to see them again?

UCB: Maybe I forget them you know, about over 30 years ago. It was 30 years already so I don’t remember them.

SB: So, when you came to America at John Wayne Airport, what did you think of America.

UCB: Oh the first thing I think of America when I come to John Wayne Airport, I think America is very big you know. John Wayne Airport is a local airport and it was bigger than my air base in Vietnam. You know international airport, Saigon airport, John Wayne was bigger and more nice. My feeling you know I think of America, I know that I read the books before I come to America I know America is a big country and the richest country in the world. I know that.

SB: Who did you live with? Did you live with your cousin when you came to America?

UCB: I lived with my cousin for about one week then my friend from Vietnam, he lived here, he come to pick me up and rent an apartment for me. I lived with my friend you know. I lived with my friend. I like to live an independent life. I don’t like to belong to somebody. I don’t like it.

SB: So he picked you up from John Wayne Airport then did you come down to Southern California? Did you live down here with your friend?

UCB: No, I told you my sponsor pick me up and I lived with him for about one week you know. In California, and after that my friend come rent an apartment then I lived with my friend. Then I go to school. I go to school then the government, when everybody new arrival, the government support money for I think my time, about 18 months. So I just go to school you know.

SB: So the government paid for you to go to school?

UCB: The government paid for the rent, paid for food and school and paid for me for 18 months. That’s why you know I want to say thank you to America. I appreciate America. Then I go to school then after school 18 months I look for job like a part time job and I go to school at the same time.
SB: So then where were you living at the time?

UCB: In the apartment in LA, in Gardena in LA. Then after that I studied I’m lucky that when I finish two years in college, then the company I’m working now, they hire me. The company I apply then they hire me. That’s why I work until now, 27 years already for the same company.

SB: So what did you think of the people of America?

UCB: With me, I think Americans are very nice. But still some people discriminate me a little bit like when I just come to United States. When I speak English and I don’t speak English me I think they discriminate me but not so many. But almost they were nice. When I need something, I ask my neighbor they ready to help me.

SB: The neighbors that you lived next to?

UCB: Yeah.

SB: so when did you come down to Orange County?

UCB: Like I told you, I lived in Gardena in LA, but my company moved to Orange county and so that’s why I live in Orange county now.

SB: So what year was this?

UCB: It was 1987.

SB: Were there a lot of Vietnamese people in the area at that time?

UCB: Not so many, not many like now.

SB: So what did the area look like?

UCB: No. It was still a lot of empty area. But now the Vietnamese come here and so they build a lot of buildings and supermarket. I know that in Orange County, I think there are about over two hundred thousand people living in Orange County. That’s why you see so many Vietnamese markets and
restaurants, a lot of doctors, dentists, lawyers. On the Bolsa street there’re a lot you know. They improve life a lot you know.

SB: So when did you start to see a lot of Vietnamese people come to Orange County?
UCB: You know I see a lot when it was around New year or when they protest and get together and protest the communist. That’s why there’re so many people in Bolsa county. That’s why so many people gather together at Phuoc Loc Tho.

SB: Do you remember when they first started to build Phuoc Loc Tho.

UCB: They build Phuoc Loc Tho about 20 years ago.

SB: Did you know what was going on? Did you know what was happening? What they were building?
UCB: They wanted every Vietnamese shop in there like a mall.

SB: Did you know at the time?
UCB: Yeah I know.

SB: So how do you feel about your decision to come to the US today? Are you happy about coming to the US now?
UCB: I’m very happy. It was my goal you know. That’s why I escaped Vietnam even though I know it was very dangerous if communists shoot me or die at sea but I still go and I’m happy about it.

Part 3

SB: So what were some of the challenges you experienced in starting a new life.

UCB: Oh you talked about challenges in new arrivals? Refugees like me, we have a lot. The first challenge, we had to learn English and look for a job to survive. Then when I come to America, I don’t forget about my responsibilities. That means I have to turn around and look at my sisters because they are very poor. That’s why I have to get a job and take care of my brothers and sisters in Vietnam. You know
daytime I go to school and nighttime I work for a clothe manufacturer. I take a walk at midnight, it’s very cold, I think I have to take a walk about a half hour to manufacture and go home at midnight. It’s very cold. That’s why but I’m very happy because make money to take care of my brother and sister. That was my hope. I start for my new life. I try and try a lot. That was my challenge.

SB: So you only studied English for six months/

UCB: No, I studied English at college and I go to college at El Camino college. I learned English, I learned electronics.

SB: What was your major?

UCB: My major was electronics.

SB: How did you find a job? Who helped you find a job?

UCB: I was lucky you know, when I finished two years in El Camino College, the nI have a notice in the office, they need one company hire an employee. I took their address and I went to their company and applied and they interviewed me and they hired me. I remember it was 1985. 1985, that’s why I work from ’85 to now, almost 27 years. Almost retire now. Lucky, only one place. I don’t get laid off my entire life. I’m a lucky guy huh!

SB: So do you see any similarities and differences between the community you live in now?

UCB: Before you know, about 25 years ago, Vietnamese community was very small.

SB: In Vietnam?

UCB: In America. But now, after 20 years, a lot of people, a lot of Vietnamese people, come to America from Vietnam. That’s why now the Vietnamese community has become a big community now. A very proud community. That’s why they gather in Bolsa and brookhurst street. We have a lot of super markets and a lot of Vietnamese markets. That’s what different now and before.
SB: Is it still the same as the Vietnam community? Is the community here similar to Vietnam’s community?

UCB: I think they’re the same you know in life.

SB: are the Vietnamese people the same or different?

UCB: I think they’re the same you know. Just a little different in the younger generation because they were born here. They live an American life you know, differenta lot and my generation is the same.

SB: Have you ever encountered racism or discrimination in your life?

UCB: I’m lucky I don’t have it. I don’t have discrimination. I think I’m lucky but some people experience it you know.

SB: So how do you identify yourself? Are you Vietnamese or Vietnamese American?

UCB: I think I’m Vietnamese American.

SB: Why don’t you identify yourself as just Vietnamese?

UCB: Because my generation lived here for 30 years you know. At least we have to get along with American life you know.

SB: Did you like the culture in America? Did you like changing?

UCB: Something for example, Americans are very practical. I like that way. For example, I call my friend and we go to take lunch and if I say like that it means I pay for myself and you pay for yourself. Not like Vietnamese. Vietnamese I call you, you have to pay. That’s why even though a lot of people still have to pay. I don’t like that way. I like American way where you eat you pay. You buy you pay. Not like Vietnamese. You know what I mean? That’s it, but something I don’t like, the culture teaches the kid is different from the Vietnamese. We educate them differently. Something good I keep but something not good I put it behind me. Something good I learn it. I know to improve exchange.
SB: Are you proud to have Vietnamese and American culture with you?

UCB: Yeah. I’m very proud.

SB: So do you vote in US elections?

UCB: Of course, I’m a citizen now, it’s a right for American citizens. Everybody has to have responsibilities to go to vote. To pick the right person.

SB: So do you keep in touch with any family or relatives in Vietnam?

UCB: Yes, I call my brother, my sister almost every week and talk to them. They are very happy each time I call them. Like how my wife also calls her daddy and mommy. Her daddy and mommy always wait for her call.

SB: So have you ever gone back to Vietnam?

UCB: If I have the chance and have the money I can you know. I think in a couple more years when I retire I will go back to see my brothers and see my sisters every year.

SB: Would you like to live in Vietnam now?

UCB: No I don’t want to live there. I only want to go back there to see my family only. The weather in Vietnam is very hot. It’s a very hot and humid environment compared to America.

SB: What was it like the first time you went back to Vietnam?

UCB: The first time I went back to Vietnam it was 1990.

SB: Why did you go back?

UCB: After one month.

SB: After one month in America?

UCB: No, one month in Vietnam. I stayed in Vietnam for one month and then I went back to America.
SB: So what was it like when you went back to Vietnam? Was it different than the Vietnam that you knew?

UCB: In that time, Vietnam hasn’t renewed. They have to wait for 1998, they open. It meant that they contacted with every country in the world. They opened to every country.

SB: Did the community look different to you or was everything still the same?

UCB: The first time I come back to Vietnam, everything looked very different. The first thing when the plane land down, then I get out of the airport and I go on the street with taxi I see everything was very small.

SB: Everything was smaller?

UCB: Everything looked smaller because I lived in America. In America everything is bigger but in Vietnam everything is bigger.

SB: So was it different than the Vietnam you grew up in? Did Vietnam change since you left Vietnam?

UCB: No not yet, the first time they didn’t change, after couple years they changed a lot. They improved the country.

SB: Is this before?

UCB: They contacted every country in the world. They had diplomat with Americans. They opened up to England and France. Everybody was allowed in Vietnam. That’s why they improved. They are very stupid before. That’s why the country was very poor but now it’s better.

SB: Was your family excited to see you?

UCB: Of course, after ten years, they see me, they very happy. My brothers, my sisters, my mom was still alive and she hugged me and she cried and said that she loved me and missed me very much.

SB: Do you remember what you did that day?
UCB: I remember. I cannot forget that day. It was a very important day in my life. I get to see my mom again. I don’t think I can see my family. You know why? When I escape Vietnam, American and Vietnam they don’t have diplomat, they don’t have relationship. Everybody cannot go back to Vietnam. After the year they allowed the Vietnamese to come back to Vietnam and that’s why this reason why I go back to see my mom and my sister. But the government is easier than before.

SB: So did you celebrate that day when you came back? Were your brothers still in the camps?

UCB: No. When I came back the first time, my brother, my older brother, he escaped. HE escaped by small boat to Thailand. Another brother, he was lieutenant of the navy, he was still in Vietnam. I saw him the first time, and when I come back to America, then after couple months, he go to America. His mother in law sponsored him to come to America. Do you have any other questions?

SB: What do you think will become of Vietnamese culture in America? How will it change?

UCB: You know my generation is old person. They still keep the culture, the tradition in America. I think the future generation like my son, they don’t know a lot about Vietnam or culture. They will forget and they don’t know how to speak Vietnamese. A lot of kids here they don’t speak Vietnamese. They just speak English only, they get along with American life and so they forget everything about the Vietnamese culture. I think so, but my generation will keep the tradition but you know the next generation they will forget it. They will be real Americans, not Vietnamese Americans like me.

SB: Do you visit Little Saigon Often?

UCB: Almost every week. Me and my wife go to Little Saigon to buy food from the supermarkets and on the weekends we need to eat pho, Vietnamese soup. It’s a famous food of Vietnam, of Vietnamese people. We have a lot of Vietnamese restaurants in Little Saigon and markets and everything in there. It’s the center of Vietnamese.

SB: Do you think Little Saigon than Vietnam’s community?

UCB: It’s bigger and richer.
SB: But are the people still similar to Vietnam?

UCB: I think the people in here are more polite than in Vietnam. I think so. The American way is
different than the Vietnamese way. In Vietnam, they never get in line to buy something like Americans.

SB: So is there anything you would like to say to future generations of Vietnamese Americans? Anything
they should remember?

UCB: I have some words to say to them. The young generation, because I think I’m, I have a lot of
experience from my life in Vietnam. So I just recommend that the young person, young kids, try to learn,
the best way to improve their life. Their life the best way to improve is to learn and study, that’s why the
best way to improve their life is to study. Not like you know old generation like me, we’re very miserable
and poor. We have a lot of chance to improve here. The life here, everything we have is enough. It’s easy
to improve. Do you agree with me?

SB: Yes.

UCB: We have everything you know. You remember when I study university in Vietnam, I just have two
pants, one shirt and one pair of shoes only. The year after when I finish four year in the University, I still
have one motorcycle. I don’t have breakfast. Even though I’m hungry because my family is poor but a lot
of families like me. Not like kids in America they have everything. Whatever they want they just tell
mom and dad and they have it and you study in University you drive a car. You remember that in
Vietnam, if you have a car, you are so rich that you have a car. But you know I remember in Saigon, the
Capital of South Vietnam, about two million in Saigon but you know how many people have a car?
Couple thousand only. Not like here, you know you’re 17 or 18 years old you have a car. You drive a car.
You’re so happy you lucky guy.

SB: Yes.

UCB: So I always teach my son and my daughter the time to learn just a couple year. When you finish
couple year, you have a skill, you have a degree, then in the future when you go to work you know you
have a happy life for family. That’s what I want to tell the next generation, my son and my daughter. I come here with only slippers and pants and a shirt. I rebuild my life and I have everything now. You have to be patient and you know how to save. You have to know how to survive.

SB: Is there anything else you feel is important to add or that I haven’t asked you? Anything I haven’t asked that you want to add to this interview?

UCB: I think I don’t have anything more to say. I think good enough for an interview.

SB: Thank you very much.

UCB: You’re welcome.