Today is April 23rd, 2012. This is Thuy Vo Dang, with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, interviewing Mr. Luong Van Ty at his home in Garden Grove, California. And I also have with me Miss Thuy Tran [referred to as TT].

TVD: Could you please state your full name, and birth date?

LVT: Hello to both of you, today I am very honored that you ladies have come to my home, I am very pleased and happy to have this interview. But in life nothing is overly important. I’ve never had anyone else interview me before. I’ve always only interviewed others. From the day I began working in TV day and night I’ve interviewed all kinds of personalities, as far as I’m concerned I felt I didn’t have anything (worth mentioning). That’s why today I am most honored.

TVD: Thank you.

LVT: I will clearly state my name and age. My name is Luong Van Ty. My father’s name is Tran Dong, my mother is Luong Thi Nhan. Tran Dong was Chinese, while my mother was Vietnamese. I was born on October 8, 1932, at 9 pm, which according to the lunar calendar was the 9th day of the 9th month in the year of the monkey.

TVD: Can you repeat your father’s name- was it Tran Dong?

LVT: Tran Dong.

TVD: And your mother was?
LVT: Luong Thi Nhan.

TVD: Could you speak briefly about your parents?

LVT: I remember my father worked as a laborer, building boats.

TVD: And your mother?

LVT: My mother stayed at home raising livestock, and doing housework.

TVD: What was your parents’ educational background?

LVT: Actually my father passed away when I was 12- so first of all I couldn’t understand clearly his language, he spoke Chinese, and furthermore he seldom discussed matters that’s why I don’t know for sure, really.

TVD: What was your mother’s education like?

LVT: It seems to me that she lived in the countryside, somewhere near Tan An, then came to live in Saigon and we lived in Cho Lon together with my grandmother on my mother’s side. At that time my grandmother lived with us so that my family consisted of the few of us, with father, mother and grandmother. Regarding the matter of education, likewise, I’m not entirely sure but I know my dad studied in Chinese, or was educated in Chinese, I’m not really clear on that. But my mother only knew how to read Vietnamese.

TVD: Could you describe briefly the place where you grew up?

LVT: The place where my parents where living when I first grew up.

TVD: Was it Cho Lon?

LVT: Yes, it was in Cho Lon. Cho Lon meaning that it was right near Cho Lon market, from my house to the market it was only about 800 meters. To get to the market, my mother went about 800 meters, while Saigon market was 5 kilometers away. And if
talking about the things I remember, about the days when I was little and used to play well there was a gravel road reserved for rickshaw pullers, and carriage drivers. Now and then a window carriage would pass by, and I really liked those windowed carriages. Every time I saw a window carriage it was so much fun. In the front were the horses, while the person pulling (the reins) sat in the front of the carriage but behind the horses’ rears to steer the horses. Inside sat the people, in those days the window carriages were mainly used to transport important people, but also used for weddings, for receiving the bride. Therefore whoever was onboard those carriages were always dressed so fine and elegant, and extremely colorful. It was so much fun for me, I still remember that time. And nearby there was a river called Han Bang River. I seem to remember that in the olden days the name of that gravel road was -- ---------. The boat I mean to say the wharf, right next to the road running alongside the river, people called it ----------- that’s in French. That was a very pretty wharf, with rows of Han Bang trees but especially because when I was born there it was near district 9. Since I remember my mother saying that birthdates were rarely recorded in the past, I wondered why by my time they went to get a birth certificate, on my birth certificate the date is clearly listed as such so that’s how I was able to tell you. My younger brother, on the other hand, doesn’t have a birth certificate so he doesn’t know for sure like I do.

TVD: So do you still have those birth certificates?

LVT: Maybe- I don’t really remember clearly, I don’t know if I still do. But I remember all the papers we had back then, in particular the family register listing
my various children which I’m sure is somewhere in the house. I brought the old family register over with me from Saigon.

TVD: If you happen to find it I would like to see.

LVT: I'll hand you my family register, listing husband and wife and 6 children.

TVD: Going back to the discussion of the time period in which you grew up, could you tell me what your family's social class was like?

LVT: What do you mean by social class?

TVD: Like when one works on a farm, or one’s family does, like here we have middle class, upper class, working class, in Vietnamese that’s called class, correct?

LVT: Ah, naturally it was similar to social class. Those of us, I think that the neighborhood where I used to live with my parents was just a working class neighborhood. Working class but I also sincerely cherished everyone in my neighborhood for their cheerfulness, honesty, and tranquility. I liked it there, even though later on I moved to Saigon and established myself I still missed it and returned every now and then. That was 5 kilometers away.

TVD: So how many siblings are there in your family?

LVT: I sense that possibly there were many of us but in the end we were very unfortunate in that my parents could not care for us all, only 2 of us remain. Therefore I have a history regarding my date of birth, it differs from other people. Now my siblings at that time which could not be taken care of all died, as a result I was given their name which was associated with beauty and all sorts of things, but no one survived. That’s why my father’s name is Tran Dong while mine is Luong Van Ty, obviously I took my mom’s surname. I’m fortunate that I was given my mother’s
surname, while my surviving younger brother, who stayed over there, but has since come to the U.S., well his last name is Nguyen.

TVD: Why is that?

LVT: You want to know why my family has such a story, well I'll tell you just for the heck of it, even though I can't really believe it myself. Meaning that I have one younger brother, whose name is Nguyen Van Khai, born in 1935, I was born in 1932, about 3-4 years apart. You know that the two of us are biological brothers but we each have a different surname. On my birth certificate it still lists the correct name, age and native region of my parents. This is according to what my mother told me, there was an agreement between my father and relatives that I would take my mother's surname, while my younger brother was given the surname Nguyen which was the surname of the husband of my mother's older sister. Because my aunt Tu and her husband didn't have children my mother agreed with my father to give my younger brother to her sister, who thought that if later on she gave birth to any more younger siblings then she would continue to give them my father's surname Tran after that. But people cannot plan out their destiny. In all I know that she gave birth to 3 more children after that and gave them all the surname Tran, but the three with the last name Tran didn't survive. The ones that came before, it seems to me that there were 3-4 more people also given the surname Tran also did not survive. That's why afterwards we were given surnames which were not Tran, I think that history does have some logic to it, right or wrong I don’t dare determine or judge regarding it but that is what was told to me in the past and I’m still quite a bit surprised by it.
While there’s nobody left besides the two of us with surnames that are not my father’s, on the day my father died he didn’t even have any other direct relatives.

TVD: You said that your father was Chinese but his name was Tran Dong. So how many generations does that surname Tran go back, because I’m not sure but isn’t Tran a Vietnamese name?

LVT: Ah, these Tran were Chinese, these Tran lived in China. He was from Phuoc Kien province.

TVD: Where is Phuoc Kien?

LVT: Phuoc Kien is in China just across the sea from Taiwan. I heared that when Tuong Gioi Thach, the president of China after losing to the communists under Mao Trach Dong, retreated to Taiwan he went back to Phuoc Kien, and then relocated. I went there, I even searched, but couldn’t find anything. I don’t even know how his parents were, I’ve been through the museum and also bought products from over there.

TVD: So your father was from China and emigrated to the South (Vietnam)?

LVT: He emigrated to the South (Vietnam), but couldn’t speak Vietnamese.

TVD: So throughout his life in Vietnam he lived in Cho Lon right?

LVT: Yes, my parents lived in Cho Lon. As for me, after starting my career I moved to Saigon.

TVD: Could you go back and talk a little bit about your education when you were little?
LVT: I started school when I was 5 years old, so I remember at age 5 I studied at whatever school young children go to but I didn’t know anything yet, kindergarten or some kind of school like that.

TVD: Yes, usually at age 5 it’s kindergarten.

LVT: (Going to) that school early in the morning I was clueless. My parents fixed my clothes all clean and proper then told a kid to go get the rickshaw driver, who then picked me up and put me in the rickshaw then started pulling away. All I know is that going by rickshaw was a lot of fun. Leaving in the mornings meant I got to ride in a rickshaw. We went through Phu Dinh or somewhere, along a long street. And I remember when I got inside there I might have just laid on the tables and slept, and played games with the other kids, I don’t even know if I learned anything, but I do miss it. I liked (school) a lot. And if I may apologize, at that time I also liked several of my classmates, girl classmates that is, 5-6 years old. We would sit together and talk. There were many things I also once went to court. 5-6 years old but already had to go to court because they forced me to testify. Because a girl sitting by me lost a gold bracelet, 5-6 years old about the same age as me, but wore, girls back then wore bracelets and necklaces and such, after it was lost two people sitting next to me said: “This boy, he sits nearby so he knows who took it.” But to tell the truth I had feelings for that little girl, while the woman at this time tells me: “Child, now be a witness for me. You saw the lady carrying water take it from Kim Trieu right?.

“Then I told her to go tell my mom, and she went and told my mom that: “ I had him come to court because when he was in school and an object was stolen.” So I had to stand witness for the person who I said was a classmate. But this girl also had a
positive phase after she turned 8 years old, when we reached elementary school she was different. There's another story that's quite funny, would you ladies like to hear it?

TVD: Yes, Go ahead and tell us.

LVT: Because in those days, the time period I lived in was still the feudal period, I heard that parents from both sides talked together, promised marriage together while we were still little, so I was told, my mother said: “Now I like miss Hoang Nguyen who lives next to us, do you agree? Both families will become close and someday you both will play together, study together, and then when you are older then you will marry each other.” Then I said: “No no mother, I won’t agree to it. I don’t want to be with Hoang Nguyen at all.” My mother said: “Then who do you want?” So I said: “I want Kim Trieu.”

TVD: You were only 8 at the time?

LVT: Yeah, just 8 years old, I really liked Kim Trieu. But my mom said: “There’s no way, Kim Trieu’s mother lives too far away, I have close friends here, this Hoang Nguyen, she’s a very good girl.” But I didn’t like her. My mother and a few others gathered around laughed, Hoang Nguyen’s mother was there, Kim Trieu’s mother was there. As for the kids that were there to see that, there was one time we went out to play together, and passed by a house on the way to school, but back then people often dug small ponds and around the pond they planted hibiscus flowers. So the two of us were picking hibiscus flowers and chasing butterflies and such, when this girl, Kim Trieu that is, fell into the pond. I was standing on the bridge playing when I saw her fall in, I yelled out loudly in panic, and then the people there started
to run to us, but I stood there yelling for awhile before anyone came, I saw people running over to us but they were too far away, so I jumped in. But we were just little kids, and seeing her struggling to keep her head above water, I couldn't stand to watch so I jumped in after her. Who would have thought I was so wise to do that, thanks to someone seeing that finally somebody pulled the two of us out. That’s the story of when I was young. I was 8 at the time. While at 5, I already had to testify in court.

TVD: I would like to ask some more about your education, could you talk briefly about it?

LVT: Education? Well after kindergarten I went to elementary school, and the elementary school I went to was called Cay Go school which is also in Cho Lon. In front of the school there was a street named Alergian Derot [Avenue Diderot], named after the man who wrote about the history of the Vietnamese language, he was French. That’s the name of the street right in front of the school. And so that’s when I studied at Cay Go school. My memory from going to this school is that I was a kid who spoke with a lisp, I still couldn’t speak clearly, due to my impediment, so when I went to school the other kids teased me terribly. When you see kids with a lisp get together they call out, (numbers) mot as “ot ai a on am au ay am in uoi”, instead of mot hai ba bon nam sau bay tam chin muoi. Eventually, thanks to the headmaster teaching me how, by headmaster I mean the teacher who watched over the entire school, that’s what we called him by.

TVD: Was he called principal?
LVT: Yeah, he was the principal. He’s the one who showed me, taught me, corrected my lisp impediment. He taught me continuously and didn’t let me go out and play, but always called me in to practice. He would say “Now say one”. I would say “n.” Not correct, “one”, “n.” Say “two”, “oo.” But after yelling for a time he was able to get me to say “one.” Once I was able to say “one” alright, then came two three four five six. And I could repeat two three four five six, and then I could speak okay after that. I never expected it, he got me to stop, and now when I see kids that lisp, and refuse to learn this way I wonder how that head teacher could endure like that. Because of that I got over it, and they stopped teasing me after that.

TVD: So he taught you during break time?

LVT: When I got out, during recess. He didn’t let me go out to play because he said that if I went out to play the other kids would tease me, speaking with a lisp really frustrated me, I couldn’t play together with them.

TVD: So later on then, can you talk about your time in high school?

LVT: I wasn’t able to go to high school. High school was just self-study. I studied high school but when I was 12. I think when I was 12 years old I just finished elementary school when my father passed away. My family was devastated, my mother also. They say that as long as you have your father you still have your roots, and losing my father was miserable, I had to learn to be self-reliant in order to rebuild my life. I had to earn a living, go to work, study and work at the same time, and I really enjoyed studying at that time, so that’s why I was able to get into art school, a private school, with high standards even, I don’t know how, but I was able to do it. My younger brother studied at Nguyen Thi Minh Khai school, he was 8 years
younger than me and several years behind me in school. He didn’t even finish elementary school, but he tried to study anyhow, he studied electronics. He wanted to pursue a career in electronics but afterwards he became very rich. At that time radio was still new and TV wasn’t even around yet. Yet he got work in the field of radio, as a technician, and took technology classes, while I chose to study painting.

TVD: So you say that at 12 years old

LVT: 12 was the age when I stopped going to an official school. I myself studied at various private schools, whatever I liked I studied, whatever I needed to learn I studied it. For example if I feel like studying sculpture then I’ll go down to the school in Laguna Beach to learn. And when I first came over I liked to study Silk Screen painting. I wanted to study silk screen so I studied it at San Bernardino. After arriving there I transferred to Los Angeles and studied at East West Coast College in Los Angeles where they teach ceramics.

TVD: But you say that at age 12 you had to go to work, what was your job?

LVT: I worked at many different jobs. Such as carpentry, where kids 12-13 years old could try their hand at working on the crosscut saws or chisels and such, and at that time whenever I was free I would study. While during the day I would work, and I got paid for working. But going to school was also a matter of making a living, to be honest. Because of this I learned about business. But while I was going to school, I was 16-17 years old already. Those were my teenage years, when I was still young. When I got older things were different, it was a different phase in my life. But most important was why my brother and I had to take different surnames, I don’t know
how to change that. I was born before him, naturally I’m not the first-born brother, but in the end I became the older of the two of us.

TVD: So your parents had how many children before you?

LVT: Probably 3 or so I can’t remember clearly, but I think around 3. Then I was born along with my older brothers, I had an older sister too, she had a pretty name.

TVD: What was it?

LVT: It was a pretty name, very beautiful, while her surname was Tran. My mother couldn’t remember the name clearly but I know my parents said that one should never have too pretty a name. She told me not to give a child a really pretty name or they wouldn’t survive.

TVD: So they lived to what age?

LVT: None of them lived past the age of 12. I remember that the day I was born somewhere and what I know is only what my mom told to me, but anyways I know for sure that early one morning at dawn, my mother’s house, in front of which there was a row of ancient Hang Bang trees, really tall tropical almond trees covering the entire river. And the roots of this tree are so big. There was a nun, who lived at the temple who passed by. About 5-6 o’clock in the morning she got up she went and stood in front of the tree calling out: “Hey someone left a basket here with a child inside.” Then people from all around the neighborhood ran over to see. And from my home, my mother and a servant also ran out to watch. Then she exclaimed: “Oh, sister, it's a baby, a little boy, look how cute he is.” The child was clinging to a blanket inside the basket, the kind of basket used for storing unhusked rice, to lie in. That child had an impudent expression, staring back. My mother mentioned this to
me, and then said that’s it, fate has chosen you sister, I think perhaps it would be best if you take him back to the temple with you to be raised there. And then those who were there agreed, it was meant to be, fate had intervened, she should take him back to the temple to become a monk, and follow Buddhism. That little boy was me, perhaps due to the fact that my parents were superstitious and followed the advice of the scholar who said that that boy needed to change and if they did nothing they would not be able to raise me. So I was taken to the temple. She said okay, I’ll go to the temple, it’s very quiet there, I’ll take him back to be raised. So she lived at Giap Duyen temple, the temple was called Giap Duyen, also nearby there, maybe it was called the Binh Thoi area or something like that I don’t really remember, it was also part of Cho Lon. I don’t know how long I lived at the temple but from the time I was an infant she must have done a good job at taking care of me, so probably my mother went to the temple and asked to adopt me back, but there they had already prepared a birth certificate, meaning that when that person got there she requested one and even though when she found the baby at the foot of the tree she didn’t say she was the mother but afterwards when she came to the temple and asked to take me back then she did say she was my mother. That’s how I found out that when I was little I was raised inside a temple and lived there for a few years. I then returned home and remained healthy. I was raised in a temple after all. It’s true then after me I had a younger brother who was given to my aunt, and given the husband’s surname Nguyen which is why my brother’s name is now Nguyen Van Khai.

TVD: You say you were raised in a temple during a period do you or your family happen to believe in any religious faith?
LVT: I think in reality my parents worshiped their ancestors, of course when I was living at the temple I had to follow Buddhism, I don’t really remember how it was since I was still so little when I was then sent to Hoa Thuong. That temple was quite large, an ancient temple, the present temple must predate 1900 or mid-1800’s. I have since gone back and I remember that there they have, its seems like it Vietnam they have what is called, the thing they often perform in Cho Lon, anyways they still have it at the temple. I have visited the temple.

TVD: So your family prayed to your ancestors, so do you also pray to your ancestors?

LVT: Yes I must pray to them. I think I have a Buddhist name but I don’t understand it clearly, I don’t remember. I think when I was little I had a Buddhist name, but now I just pray to my ancestors.

TVD: So do you currently have an altar?

LVT: Yes I have an altar but when I was 70 or seventy-something years old I got it set up, because I was always getting sick, I entrusted my youngest child to maintain the large altar. It will be taken care of.

TVD: Let me quickly ask you about the time when you were growing up in your early teens was that the 1940’s or 50’s?

LVT: That’s right, 1940 plus. I hadn’t even finished my schooling when Japanese and American warplanes started flying overhead, so I had to stop my studies. I was twelve when I fell down while on a bridge. The planes came down so intensely that I fell down while trying to run away, I fell flat on my back on the bridge. I saw a bomb falling down on my head. I was terrified and closed my eyes all I saw was the bomb
dropping. I didn’t expect that the bomb would drop but still fly far away before hitting the ground. I learned then that if a bomb drops it will still travel quite a distance before it explodes.

TVD: So you were a teenager at that time right?

LVT: I was only 12 at that time.

TVD: Wasn’t that during the French period?

LVT: I remember the French were still there. It was still during the French domination, but the planes were American. They were bombing Japan at that time. Japan surrendered. So now when I talk about when I was 12 that was when I had to stop studying because Japan entered around the same time my father died.

TVD: Why did your father die?

LVT: Because of illness. He was already 60, he was 60 years old while I was only 12.

TVD: So your father didn’t die because of the war?

LVT: No, not because of the war. He actually told me or so I think that he was still a Chinese citizen, he did not have Vietnamese citizenship. But I didn’t know a word of Chinese, I only learned Vietnamese.

TVD: So back then did you or anyone in your family fight in the war?

LVT: No! No one in my family. Neither on my mother’s nor father’s side.

TVD: So what do you remember from that time. You mentioned that at that time you saw airplanes flying in the air. But did you see any other effects, in the society during that period?

LVT: At that time I was still too young so I just stayed home during the war likewise we built bomb shelters to stay in. A little kid didn’t have any idea during that period.
Therefore I see that war only causes distress. Meaning my parents suffered losses, then my life went downhill, yet I came from a decent home so I only wanted to do good things, and live honestly.

TVD: So did your daily activities change because of the war?

LVT: They changed because I could no longer go to school. Then the matter of my parents. My father died. While my mother had to scrape by financially to support the family. Yet my mother lived to 90 something before she died.

TVD: If you don’t mind me asking, are you married?

LVT: Of course. I was 25 when I got married.

TVD: Could you discuss how you both met and your marriage?

LVT: My marriage well first of all you already know, it was pre-arranged by our parents. I was simply a person living in a vicious cycle, whatever my parents arranged I didn’t argue with. When it came time to marry I went along with my parents’ plans.

TVD: How did your families meet?

LVT: My parent knew everyone on my wife’s side, as our family lines weren’t too far apart. When that proposal was made I was 25 and had already entered the army.

But my mom wanted me to get married. My wife’s father was also Chinese, same as mine, her mother was Vietnamese and her father Cantonese.

TVD: So did the two of you grow up together?

LVT: No. We were complete strangers. It was Kim Trieu no longer.

TVD: What was your wife’s name?

LVT: Trinh Tran. Surname Trinh, first name Tran.
TVD: Could you talk briefly about what the wedding was like?

LVT: We got married according to Chinese custom. My father-in-law was Chinese. So was my father, I remember it that way even though my father had already passed away. For the wedding, I followed the way of my father-in-law who lived in Saigon on Camet street, so that’s where I left from when meeting the bride. Camet street is right next to Saigon market where uncle Qua’s house was, the home of Hui Van Qua, the house where Saigon market was built.

TVD: The name of the street is French right?

LVT: Yeah, the street has a French name. I don’t remember very clearly but for instance the street I lived on was called Bonna.

TVD: So meeting the bride was part of the wedding festivities right?

LVT: Oh, let me see. I have a wedding photo.

TVD: Yes if you have a photo I would like to see it.

LVT: It’s a photo of both her and my relatives at a wedding reception inside a restaurant. I can still remember it.

TVD: How were you dressed?

LVT: Well it was a white wedding dress with flowered veil, etc. I also wore a white vest.

TVD: Following the French style right?

LVT: Yeah, It seems to me that my parents only wore long tunics. At that time my father had already passed away. My father never wore shirts.

TVD: How did you feel getting married that way?
LVT: My parents picked her so it was right by me. They picked a decent, gentle, and very good natured young lady.

TVD: So when you got married, did the two of you have any feelings for each other?
LVT: No, we didn't have feelings, we didn't know each other, but she turned out to be a good match and it worked out well for me. This miss Tran made an ideal wife. She was a woman who took care of her husband.

TVD: How old was she at that time?
LVT: She was about 3 years younger than me.

TVD: So about 22-23.
LVT: She was born in 1936.

TVD: Did the two of you have children?
LVT: We had 6 children. One girl and five boys.

TVD: Can you say their names by order of birth?
LVT: Ah, First is Luong Nhan Quoc Viet. Second came my daughter, her name is Nha Thanh. Third is Hoan Vu. The fourth child is Vu Hung. The fifth child is Nha Quang. The sixth child is Quoc Long.

TVD: What are your children’s occupations? Did they all grow up in Vietnam?
LVT: They were all born in Vietnam. I recently sponsored them to come over here. I went first, then sponsored all my children to come over.

TVD: So what are their current occupations?
LVT: They all finished high school already, after coming over every one of them took a career. Two of them followed my lead and work in the television field as well. They work in camera technology and television assembly. My daughter is a musician. She
teaches music. The next child is a legal assistant. Lastly, my youngest also choose the same career as me. I handed everything over except for the station, she doesn’t want to take it over so she quit instead of replacing me after 25 years. I have worked in television 25 years.

TVD: I’ll ask some more about that in a little bit. Since you were mentioning your children, I wanted to ask if you had shared with them any of your biography? Either your family or personal history.

LVT: I’m sure they all know, but just some of it, but now that I’m telling it in this manner it will be much clearer, thanks to you they will understand even more.

TVD: Just now you mentioned that you were in the army?

LVT: Oh, not the army, but military service. At 21 years of age every citizen had to serve.

TVD: You mean the reserves?

LVT: As a matter of fact it was the reserves. Reservists were usually discharged after 2 years. If you wanted to become an officer or something like that then you had to enlist, and go on active duty, meaning that you could not be discharged.

TVD: How old were you at that time?

LVT: 21 years old.

TVD: So it was mandatory that you go?

LVT: Yep, had to go. As a citizen, I had to serve 2 years before being discharged. If I remember correctly seems like it was 3 years. It was wartime so it got extended. I was discharged and then after that they called me back to re-enlist. Afterward I went home for a few years.
TVD: So when you were 25 and got married, you were already discharged and allowed to go home?

LVT: Yeah, that's right. I was discharged, got married, then had to leave my family. At that time I already had a family, already had a child when I re-enlisted.

TVD: Could you talk briefly about your experience in the army? What did you do, where did you go?

LVT: Before that I studied painting, so when I entered the army I still pursued art, mainly drawing. Particularly during the period of Ngo Dinh Diem. I also worked as a war correspondent. During that time I went into the combat zone along with Ngo Dinh Diem to Ban Me Thuot. When he was assassinated, I was a lead photographer, I remember the scene at that time when I was in the army, in the war zone. Even though I was just a regular soldier when I entered the army because of my educational background they gave me the rank of sergeant. I kept that rank throughout the 8 years or so I was in the military, I remained a sergeant, but I worked for Song Ly War while in the war zone I worked as a correspondent.

TVD: So in the army you worked as a reporter taking photographs?

LVT: I was a painter, I remember my greatest memory was when Ngo Dinh Diem was about to assume power, there was an enormous ceremony on Notre Dame Street in front of the presidential palace. So in the office I worked in it was suggested that I create what became the largest painting I ever made. Its width was about 6 meters, and about 20 meters in length. It was a portrait of Ngo Dinh Diem, for his movement. But at that time I only had 3 days, They made me complete it within 3 days and 3 nights. Yet that painting was not easy to put up in the least due to the
windy and rainy weather. But not to do so was not an option, since the army ordered it done.

Even the presidential elite suggested I get it done. I tried my best, not knowing how I would get it done but it was ridiculous, really funny, I told them that I couldn't do it, I was a sergeant who couldn't give orders, but he said no, you could use anyone anyway you wanted. But I replied my gosh, I don't dare say anything, how could I give directions to a colonel who is my senior. I needed an engineer, the organization planning the movement must have an engineer corps that could do the job better than I could. So then they agreed, giving me an assistant to follow me during the work, whatever I wanted done I would give orders to that person, suggest that he do it. If it was only me giving the orders then I wouldn't even dare, how could I get it done in three days.

TVD: So did you get it done?

LVT: I had to. In the army you can't refuse, but they gave me everything, they said whatever you need we'll provide. The painters had to be assembled and assigned duties efficiently. Then the tailors, all the tailors were gathered together, and sewed the material to make the canvas, I thought that canvas would be easier to fold, easier to work on, I didn't want it to become too heavy. I painted on the canvas which needed to be stretched out, a location for it needed to be found, it was raining and we could not find a building that fit, eventually we found a church to do it on. Then the engineers set up the scaffolding on which to work.

TVD: What year was that, the year you did that painting?
LVT: Around 1960 or thereabout, I forget, but around that time. I remember that was during the Rododon unification, that was the time the Thi Nghe bridge collapsed or something like that.

TVD: So did you use a photo for the painting of Ngo Dinh Diem?

LVT: I used a picture of him. The worst part was that they gave me the photo and forced me to copy it, it was a picture from a piece of music, I remember it was from the song “Gratitude towards President Ngo”, the image with the president waving. But that picture was as small as my pinky, and I then had to make it 20 meters tall, that was the greatest difficulty. It had to be painted just like the photo. I was only in my early 20’s, but I did it. From the black and white sheet music I redrew it in color, they gave it to me as a CPR image that I had to paint in color.

TVD: At that time when you were working for the military where were you, where was your family?

LVT: My family was still in Cho Lon, but I was living separately, I wasn’t living at my parents’ house anymore.

TVD: Where you still living with your family or with the army?

LVT: I was staying with the army, my wife and children were back home they couldn’t accompany me.

TVD: How did your family earn a living then during that time?

LVT: They were far away. Now then, back when I enlisted, I first worked in Saigon. Then after I was discharged and re-enlisted, they sent me all the way up to the 17th parallel, right in the middle of Viet Cong territory, not really sure what they would send an artist out there for. While I was there I could not return home, over several
years I requested permission to return but was unsuccessful. Up there I continued to just work in painting. First was the La Vang festival, the La Vang churches that catholic people all know about. Every four years they held a huge La Vang festival, I had to work on the floats. In the army I was always doing painting work. I remember how hard it was at that time. Then I was given a furlough, it had been several years before I finally got a permit to go back to Saigon, so then I ran straight to the administrational offices in Saigon, asked some top officials to help me out, order me back, since up there I couldn’t even communicate with anyone. I wanted to be closer to my family so that’s when I got back. After a few years they discharged me. After I was discharged I began displaying my work, I painted and did art exhibitions.

TVD: So after you were discharged you went back to live with your family?

LVT: Yes, I returned to live with my family.

TVD: Then you worked as a professional artist?

LVT: Yep, I worked as an artist. I worked as an artist first of all for the American newspaper Global Freedom, after they attended an exhibition for me there and wrote an article about it.

TVD: What year was that exhibition?

LVT: There were many exhibitions. I even had some solo exhibitions within those 4-5 years. I exhibited my work about 16 times. Many places such as Do Thanh News, Vietnamese American Society, and the Phap danh dong minh Association. Usually it was on of those 3 places, another place was the Gallery office of the Katrina Hotel Caravelle.
TVD: So when you held an exhibition was it by yourself or did you collaborate with anyone else?

LVT: By myself for most of them. One collective exhibition was the Spring Art show. Spring Art was organized by the district cultural society, I won several awards there, I received some bronze medals at Spring Art. In 1962, I exhibited for the first time, I organized an international exhibition with participants from 21 nations in the Tao Dan gardens. I participated and received an honorary diploma there while there were only 12 Vietnamese participants. Meaning that out of 500 they chose 12, I specialized in oil painting, and my work won an honorary award for Vietnam.

TT: Does that painting still exist?

LVT: I believe so, I brought it over with me, let me look around to see if I still have it. It seems to me that I possibly sold it off to someone a long time ago. Afterwards I asked my children to try to locate it and buy it back for me. This sculpture is by Le Thanh Nhan, at the exhibition, he even carved it for me.

TVD: I seem to have forgotten to ask you about your art studies. You said that when you were 12 you studied independently here and there, but did you study at any art institution, do you remember the names of those schools or your instructors?

LVT: I still remember the name of my first teacher who taught me to paint he was Chinese, painted Chinese scenes. His name was... once I remember it again I’ll write it down. And the second person was Quy Van Long. He studied at Dong Duong art institute. Dong Duong art institute in Hanoi.

TVD: So you studied privately with these instructors?
LVT: First I studied privately. Then I started going to Mr. Long’s school when he received something from the government to go overseas, he went abroad for some exhibition, so he worked on those programs. In reality studying meant mostly helping him work. Yet I could both study and work at the same time. Then when I had the time I entered a program, I studied at a private school named The He. The He school was also managed by Mai Linh. My teachers there were professor Do Dinh Hiep, Mr. Nguyen Van Thinh, who went by the name of Thinh del. So then I went to that school. I took part in an exhibition there and then the American news office at the embassy, recruited me to do official painting, working for the American news department. I worked there a few years.

TVD: When was that?

LVT: After I was discharged, after the second time I was discharged.

TVD: Could you talk about what profound memories you have from that time, regarding any special exhibitions or colleagues?

LVT: One special memory happened while I was working there at the American news office, at that time a very interesting love story occurred, quite funny, about an artist friend, who recently happened to pass away. Of the people back then who were around my age there’s probably not many left, they’ve probably all passed away. Most of them are gone, so here I am all alone, they have all left me. His name was Nguyen Khac Vinh, artist Nguyen Khac Vinh. He was very romantic, very artistic.

TVD: A romantic love story?

LVT: Yep, really romantic, at the office where I worked.

TVD: In the American news office?
LVT: Yes, in the drawing room. I started working there after the others did. They came before me. At that time there was a female artist, then Nguyen Khac Vinh, and two or three others.

TT: They were also artists?

LVT: Yes, usually when I went to work I kept a sovale box in my car in order to paint outdoors. I usually got out at 12, took a 1-2 hour lunch break, then I would carry out my equipment to go paint on the riverbank. It was the same river I remember my father used to dock his boat on. I liked to draw by the riverside. So then one day Nguyen Khac Vinh, I mean to talk about his love story, this man who happened to recently pass away. At that time he already had two children but his wife had left him. The truth is that the war came and then when the Americans came she would often work at bars, and so his wife left him, therefore he had to raise the children by himself. And thanks to his job at the office he was able to. Yet he was in love with the female artist working to his side.

TVD: Do you remember her name?

LVT: I think her name was Hoa or something like that, I remember it was something like Hoa or Mai. But she had another lover, she didn’t love that man, she was always turning him away. One day I went to paint by the river when he called me over to a restaurant nearby, where we talked for awhile, then he said: “I love Mai very much.” So I replied, if he loved her then he must do something to show her, if he loved her but only said so in words then how would she believe him. At that time I liked to make jokes, I would often tease. Yet this guy was quite simple, and he thought I was going to show him how to get her to notice him. I just asked him if he was serious, if
he loved her for real then he needed to do something to show her. Then he replied: “I’ll do anything, just tell me, whatever she wants me to do I’ll do it.” So without thinking I said softly: “okay, now that you told me that I suggest you do something now.” I said that there was something very difficult that he could do but only if he dared, I mentioned how wide the Saigon river was, then asked if he was willing to risk jumping in and swimming across. Then that girl spoke out: “You say you love me huh, why don’t you try to swim across it then?” by which he replied: “I can do it.” Heavens, I never expected that something I said could bring about such danger. Then I said no, I held him back, yet even she was opposed. She said okay, but I said hold on, wait for me first. I wanted him to wait because I already had an idea, even though it was my idea I had an obligation, therefore I looked around carefully, and told him to wait up, don’t go swimming just yet, I didn’t agree, I didn’t really mean what I had said. Just as I said that, he jumped in to swim across, thinking that if he could cross it she would love him. While at that time, spent sitting at the restaurant, working for the American news office, we only had an hour before we had to go back to work. But that girl, even after I told him to take off his clothes, she made him go swimming with all his clothes still on, she didn’t want him to take them off. So Nguyen Khac Vinh, at that time I was talking with this other guy, also an artist but I forget his name. That’s when he went into the water, I never expected he would be such a good swimmer, however it was too difficult for him to swim with his shoes still on, layers of clothes, and so he was having trouble. The river was too wide, current too strong. I thought to myself he’ll die, but once he went for it I then thought, there’s a boat over there, floating by, so I figured, he would reach the spot
where the boat would pass, then the man on board would calmly dive in after him.

From the bank I yelled over to the boat, asking them to rescue him, otherwise he would have been a goner. I was frightened to death, but thanks to the fact, I was able to think of that, my awareness led to his getting pulled out of the water, so I warned him not to be so foolish again, I was there this time but he could have been lost for good after listening to her. You see, passion can get you killed.

TVD: So did they get together in the end?

LVT: Yeah, my gosh, this girl not only swooned over him but they invited me to their wedding as well but recently passed away.

TVD: Okay going back to the questions I have here for you, let me ask did the American Vietnamese war affect you or your family?

LVT: That war both sides of the family, on my father’s side there wasn’t anyone, besides I was in the army for most of that time, then there were only a few years left after that when I went back home to work just those few years is all, until the time came for me to come to the U.S.. So I started to work right after being discharged from the army, meaning that I tried not to take things too seriously. I already had paid my debt to my country. I fulfilled my duty. I did my upmost, was on the field of battle, even saw action in the Quang Tri offensive.

TVD: I want to ask about the effects, I want to know about the psychological effects, any loss within the family, that may have influenced the way you saw your art?

LVT: As I said from the start I had to be self-reliant. Any situation that I faced, I had to remain undaunted, I must try whatever way it took to follow my aspirations. When I wanted to paint I knew for sure that I had to become a painter even though
my parents told me that occupation didn’t make money. My brother, he established a career, working in electronics, but I told my parents I knew what I wanted, so I was going to stick with it and see it through. When I left the army I was still able to do it. I accomplished what I had wanted to. Hence my parents agreed, but no one expected, that when I went to work at the embassy I would make quite a decent salary. When without warning Nguyen Khac Vinh told me to quit, I stopped working, and went home. Even though my parents wanted me to go back to work, I still had money. No, let me take care of the children, there were several of them at home, six children already. I had just gotten back, I had just worked a few years when the war came. I spent most of my time in the army during the war. When I returned, I opened a television electronics business, that’s when I became quite a well-known businessman in Saigon, I opened it in Saigon.

TVD: What was the television business called?

LVT: Dang Kim TV, I sold television sets, all kinds of electronics, appliances for import. My shop was located on 124 Gia Long St., behind Saigon market.

TVD: So around the year 1970 something right?

LVT: No, 1960’s, close to 1970, around 60 or 68. At that time I had just gotten out and went to work.

TVD: So after being discharged you worked for the American news office, then after that you went into business?

LVT: Right, ran my business but I was still painting at the time. But not very actively, since I still had my business to worry about, after 75 I left the country.
TVD: I want to ask you about going into business, how did you first open up a business like that?

LVT: Well during the time I was working, I earned money, while I was working in the private sector, in the news office, after a few years I had enough money. I used that money to open my business. In my family I have a younger brother, Nguyen Van Khai, he helped me out at that time to run my business. 

TVD: So you ran the business together?

LVT: My brother also had his own business, we worked together but he had another large business, in Cho Lon, mine was in Saigon, so we were still different, it was my brother’s primary field. Although I also worked in the same business because I set up shop in Saigon, I became better known. 

TVD: So that’s what you did until 1975?

LVT: Yep, up until 1975, thanks to a Christian organization, I was received by them when I was a refugee in Guam.

TVD: Do you remember the date?

LVT: So how did you decide to leave Vietnam?

LVT: The truth of the matter is that at that time my friends were doing so, they showed me, there was still an extra place for me to go along with my friends, so I also got onboard. They told me to go ahead, they would look after things back home, because they thought Vietnam would have a devastating war in Saigon. (They said) If you want keep for your family then go it wouldn’t be long, I had friends who were representatives and such, maybe they could intervene.

TVD: So at that time you didn’t think you would leave for good?
LVT: Yes, I didn’t think I would leave for good, that I couldn’t return.

TVD: So you went by yourself?

LVT: Yes, by myself, they advised me, there’s a spot, how was it then, that when I went there wasn’t one, but I still went, if I decided to go then perhaps I could send a lot of money over to the U.S. .. I still had my business, furthermore I had connections with Mekong Ford, back then Mekong Ford had exclusive rights, they formed a monopoly with the sole right to import from Ford motor company, and I was an agent with Mekong Ford in Saigon, therefore I made a profit from selling cars, they asked me if I wanted to hold my money in the U.S., since I would get commissions, for every car I sold I would get a commission so that if I wanted to keep my money in the U.S. I would have money to spend when I came to the U.S.. But I refused, I wanted the money sent back home to do business, therefore I didn’t keep any money over here. I never expected to go. Even when I left, I was still heard my friends talking about returning, they would take care of matters first then go back.

Everyone in that group were neutralists.

TVD: So when you left you went by boat?

LVT: I went by plane.

TVD: From Saigon?

LVT: From Saigon we went by helicopter. I had by helicopter to Guam, then went by airplane to the U.S. after that. I was in Guam for about 12 hours then continued by plane.

TVD: Who did the helicopter that took you to Guam island belong to?

LVT: It belonged to the U.S..
TVD: So then you flew to the U.S. in April 1975. Where did you arrive to at that time?

LVT: I went to Loma Linda.

TVD: Did you go through Camp Pendleton?

LVT: Yes, I had to pass through Camp Pendleton, then go to the U.S.. So I must have been at Camp Pendleton for those 12 hours or so and not Guam.

TVD: So you were at Camp Pendleton 10+ hours only?

LVT: Yes, then transferred to Loma Linda.

TVD: So do you remember how long you were in Guam?

LVT: I don't remember how long, probably about a week, I don’t remember exactly.

TVD: During that situation of having to go from Vietnam to Guam to the U.S., what was going through your mind at the time?

LVT: I was really sad at that time., I keep thinking about finding a way to return. Once I was settled in Loma Linda, I registered to return. Those were tense times. I was staying near the Loma Linda school, they helped sponsor me, the doctors there at the school sponsored me.

TVD: So how did you meet the people who sponsored you?

LVT: Through acquaintances, they tried to convert me to Christianity.

TVD: So you were introduced to Christianity. Because in Vietnam you still prayed to your ancestors right?

LVT: I only became familiar with it as a refugee, I didn't expect a Christian organization would take care of me. My friends also came the same way, many of my friends also worshiped their ancestors and weren’t Christian, but also were on board, most of them were doctors, that trip had many doctors, we went together. So
I went with them. But when we got there apparently they returned to studying medicine at Loma Linda, while since I was a painter at first I didn’t go to school. Not until later on. I was still planning on returning home at that time.

TVD: Did you know anyone in the group of refugees who came over with you?

LVT: Of course, I had a lot of friends, some of the ones at Loma Linda are still around.

TVD: You say you tried to sign up to return to Vietnam. At that time did anyone organize this?

LVT: At that time the U.S. told me that if I wanted they would send me on the Vietnamese merchant ship Thuong Tin.

TVD: So how long did you stay at Loma Linda?

LVT: I lived somewhere a few years but I don’t remember, the period when the Vietnam Thuong Tin had a boat returning to Vietnam, so I registered and the U.S. let me go. But they had an American come along, next to me, he accompanied me in the car, in other words the government escorted me. They sat next to me talking, they keep telling me that I should never return. There would be no advantage to me returning. So I listened to their advice but I kept thinking, I told them to let me think about it. (He then told me) I’ll tell you now as long as you are sitting with me here then you can think about it, but we are about to reach the harbor already, so he took me to the boat docks, I can’t remember where the boat was docked, yet he kept following me trying to stop me, talking continuously, he was a black man.

TT: Do you remember his name?

LVT: I don’t remember. I forgot. I’ll tell you if I happen to remember. He wore his hair in a bun in the back. I remember thinking that I should wear my hair like that. I
remember seeing him with that hairstyle when I first came to the U. S.. He told me:

“Now sit here, look at the sights before deciding. Once you walk over to that room on the other side and you enter there you cannot come back to the U.S.. Once you squeeze past that fence there you have left the U.S. already. And after you return to Vietnam you will not have the right to come back to the U.S. in this way again. You only have one chance.” So I sat and thought for awhile, over there I could see lots of fighting going on, on board the boat the Southern liberation flag was flying, and there was a lot of noise. Then I asked the American, even if it was fake I had to ask the Americans since it was under American control, it was an American harbor after all. But seeing the communist flag raised, I had just noticed that so I asked him how are things over there now? They say there are two sides. One side wants to return directly to Saigon, while one side wants to escape. That's what I remember. This looked worse than war; these guys were ready to kill each other. When they carried in a dead body off the boat, someone had died so in seeing this the man said: “You see, they’re communists, they were all around. You could go down there and paint Ho Chi Minh.” I was silent and didn’t say a word. They didn’t know I was in the army, how I came, because I wanted to go home, I planned on leaving and not returning, I never expected that I would decide not to go through those gates. The American man was overjoyed, he celebrated when we got back, he took me back. That was when I came back, I hadn't listened to their advice carefully, but after seeing the Southern liberation flag flying overhead I didn’t want to go any further.

TVD: So did you receive any news from your family during that time?
LVT: I contacted my family and they were already preparing to go, so I just worried about sponsoring them to come over. It took about 10 years before I was able to sponsor them to come. Now I've sponsored them all already. They've all come over. I told them to try their best to endure, actually in my family my younger brother stayed behind, Mr. Nguyen Van Khai. I told him that if I wanted to stay I wouldn't be able to live with those guys, whatever activities or work I did back then would be considered capitalistic, some had already committed suicide. Anyways that's fate talking won't change it now, I've decided to try and rebuild my life over here.

TVD: So after you left, how did your family get by?

LVT: It was very difficult for them back there. They were miserable. One child had already graduated high school, one was still in elementary school. When I sponsored that child to come over here he studied at Bolsa Grande. He graduated high school over here. The others are all grown and now have careers.

TVD: Can you tell me about the experience of sponsoring your family to the U.S., what were the procedures in doing so, did anyone help you with the process?

LVT: At that time I had an American sponsor, but when I sponsored my family I did it myself. Sponsoring them at that time was quite easy, the government agreed, I still had my family back there. If you are wondering about the interview process well I still had my younger brother Nguyen Van Khai and family back there. That's everyone I had still over there. My family and six children only. I was asked why I claimed my name was Luong Van Ty while my brother's was Nguyen Van Khai. I then replied that in fact they were right to wonder that, but if they wanted me to tell the truth then I would tell the truth that way, but if I had to lie and say he wasn't my...
brother then that would have been okay also. But I told them I really did have a
brother, all my other siblings had died and his last name was not Luong, just Tran.
But no one in my family even knew about that matter so I told them, about how I
spent my early days at a temple, that my origins were like that. The first few people I
met in the U.S. didn’t believe me, if my children claimed that then how could I
someday sponsor my brother. Even though that wasn’t the way it was I still didn’t
sponsor my brother. I never sponsored him. He has other relatives that sponsored
him. That’s the truth, because they asked about surname Luong and surname
Nguyen. The issue of sponsoring is hard to explain. Enough said I didn’t sponsor him.
The matter of my family is complicated but I have finally solved it.
TVD: So it took 10 years for you to sponsor your family?
LVT: Yes, it took 10 years. I had already built a career over here. 10 hard years. I
learned some English, and studied a trade at the same time. Sometimes people
asked me if I would ever begin a new career. Then I replied I wanted to open a
restaurant. Then they said: “Oh really. Then let me get you a job as a chef, you can
learn in the kitchen.” So then these doctors took me into the kitchen and taught me
how to cook for American officers. After studying I received a cooking certificate.
This was at Loma Linda, right by the San Bernardino airport.
TVD: March Airforce Base?
LVT: Yeah that’s right, that’s where I studied cooking. I learned to become a chef,
cooking all kinds of American foods.
TVD: So you also worked at the base?
LVT: I worked on the base, for American officers. There was an officer base, they ate there every day. Many surprising things happened there, that I didn’t expect.

TVD: What type of things? Anything you can tell us?

LVT: I'll tell you, things that I often think aren't even legal now, but even so nobody got hurt. Because I was working at the base, where I studied and worked, therefore I knew that a lot of American food went to waste. My gosh, even beefsteak, for example if 65 officers ate a meal, I would need to prepare 65 courses of beefsteak each person getting a large portion of steak. I won’t talk about weekdays because it wasn’t much, but on the weekends when most were on leave no one was there. 65 courses for just a handful of people. A huge pile of meat had to be thrown out. What a waste! Whatever was taken out to use could not be put back in, if we left anything out then it had to stay out. So I thought of a way to raise pigs, let them eat up all the leftover meat, since it was no longer fit for human consumption. At that time I didn’t even know how to raise pigs over here. My mind was filled with all kinds of ideas, and so, I studied for quite a long time, I raised pigs for over a year. But now where to buy pigs. Now where do you think I could find a herd of piglets. I know but perhaps you wouldn't guess.

TVD: Yes, I know where.

LVT: You do? Where?

TVD: My family lives in Riverside, my parents also raise pigs.

LVT: Oh, that’s right then. Really? my gosh, no wonder. I decided that I must raise pigs then. I had to find a farm. Then I found the place, where they raise horses. The base was already there, the stalls were already set up for horses, so I would use
them for pigs, makes me laugh. I didn’t even buy any food, salad and such, everyday I would transport an entire carload over, bring back the extra meat, my pigs got really fat.

TVD: So during that time you were near the base or actually on the base?

LVT: No, I was off base. There was one man, an engineer, he helped me later on. I told him that I wanted to find a house. I still wanted to work as a painter and not a chef. I told him I wanted to go back to art school, while my job as a cook was only to get by and didn’t fit my personality. I felt like it was such a waste, working there I still felt at a loss. Selling that way must lose money. So he was an engineer, and I went to living in a house, he had an entire house for me to live in, then I looked for a house with artists living inside, an artist family that I could live with. He found a place on Red Lane, an engineer up there, an artist house. Inside I saw a studio like this, she created very large paintings. Then he asked me now is this alright for you? I said it was great, I would live there. That was upon first sight she had even more.

TVD: So did they rent out to you?

LVT: That’s what so special. Because a sponsor introduced me. The man I was introduced to used to campaign for president Reagan, he was a close friend of Reagan, so he was rarely home. He said he would give me the house, the entire house, a large villa on top of the rose hills. I live there, I painted, so he gave me the house, telling me to watch after it, no money involved, no rent. I just had to watch the house. He provided food even, American food. He let me eat peanut butter sandwiches, he left food so I could make something to eat whenever I got hungry.

TVD: So are you still raising pigs over there?
LVT: I finished raising pigs. That’s over with. I raised pigs when I was still living at the base, after that I finished school and stopped. At the school they told me I couldn’t raise pigs because I didn’t have permission to raise pigs that way. That food wasn’t for pigs to eat, I needed to buy food for pigs, that I shouldn’t feed them meat. That’s why I stopped. I just quit.

TVD: What year was that? Do you remember?

LVT: No I don’t.

TVD: Was it in the 80’s, because you mentioned Reagan.

LVT: Yeah, Reagan. During that time. Reagan was elected the first time, then the second time it was different. I remember at that time he also assisted with matters like making signs, for Reagan and his vice-president who I forget the name of. I made those signs.

TVD: Like posters?

LVT: Yes, posters. I worked on them when he was running for president.