Today is May 15, 2012. This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project. I am interviewing Mr. Phat Nguyen in his home in Huntington Beach.

TVD: First of all, would you please introduce yourself including your name, date of birth and birth place?

PN: I am Phat; my full name is Nguyen Trong Phat\(^1\) born in 1951, Ha Nam\(^2\) in the north of Vietnam.

TVD: Could you briefly tell us about your family? What did you parents do for a living, and how many brothers and sisters do you have?

PN: I have 6 brothers and sisters in all. My parents brought us to the South to live after the country’s partition in 1954. At that time of going, there were only two of us, my younger sister and me. My father would drive bus for a living in the South. First he drove bus along the routes Saigon-Dalat\(^3\), Saigon - Nha Trang, and also Nha Trang – Ban Me Thuot\(^4\). That was the beginning of our family’s life when we migrated and settled down in the South.

TVD: What did you mother do for a living?

PN: My mother stayed home to watch over the children. Most Vietnamese women of old time depended on their husbands’ works for a living.

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\(^1\) Nguyễn Trọng Phát.
\(^2\) Hà Nam.
\(^3\) Sài Gòn – Đà Lạt.
\(^4\) Nha Trang – Ban Mê Thuột.
TVD: So, do you have any memories of growing up in Ha Nam at all?

PN: I was born in 1950 in reality, not 1951. I don’t know why they had changed the birth year to 1951 after we moved to the South, but I had no choice but to accept it. I can only recall an image of myself standing by the side of a water spinach field\(^5\) just outside the village’s entrance. I was a little bit more than 4 year old and had some intelligent at the time. I stood crying in front of a tiny shoe belong to a four year old child which had been dropped into the field. That is the one image that I can recall of the North. There is the memory of the landing ship\(^6\) that brought us to the South. In order to use the toilet which situated high up there on the upper floor, my father would carry me on his back climbing each step of the stairs to reach it. I still remember those images of the days travel to the South on a landing ship. I remember the time when we were settled in Cu Chi at a refugee camp for northerners who chose to emigrate to the south. I can only remember that much. When my maternal grandma got a piece of land on Bac Hai\(^7\) street, she alerted my parents so they could get the lot of land next to it. Back then land was plentiful in the South. If one found a piece of land, one just settled in and called it home. Over the time, it would grow to become a residential neighborhood with a large population, such as the quite well-known area called Ong Ta\(^8\). Those are the images from birth to that moment of the trip going south; the memories of climbing the stairway on the landing ship. Those images after 1975 followed me too when it was my turn to bring my own family out of the country in 1981. I can never forget them. I had no choice but to get my family out. My father told me once something I have remembered forever. I had put the lobster that I caught in my one of my fishing trips on his altar. I put it there, and asked my father to give me the strength to make and carry through his words. My father said this before his death in 1975, “If the communists came, I would build a raft with my own hands, and floated all of my children out to the sea on it. I would rather die than lived with the communists.” Those were the words of a dying man - my father. When I came home from the prison, I saw too

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\(^5\) Ruồng rau muống.
\(^6\) Tàu hạ mỏm.
\(^7\) Bác Hải.
\(^8\) Ông Tạ.
many people trying to escape being cheated. I served as a ranger in the (South Vietnam) military so all of my worldly knowledge was limited to land-based operations from old time. In these land-based operations, I must be knowledgeable about the ways of the jungles, from how many squares there were on the map to the jungle’s clear areas\(^9\); the red-colored routes or whatever aerial photographed land marks in the middle of the jungles being noted on the tactical maps given to me. Then, I must make judgments base on experiences about these locations. When the helicopter dropped us in a middle of the jungle, the correct coordinates given at the base and the coordinates where we jumped out were not the same. We had to find our way in the jungle going from the drop-site to the target location, sometime 5 squares – about 5 km – away. Even it was only 5km but it would take us an entire day to get there, following the jungle’s clear areas. I have that much experience operating on land. When I worked building my own boat I had offered prayers to my father. I learned a new career going fishing, catching shrimps and fishes; I had made up my mind. I saw enough people being cheated of their monies, or lured to their own deaths and being shot while on their ways to escape. So if I must bring my wife and children out, I would captain the boat myself and did everything with my own hands. Using the experiences from my former military service, I did captain my own boat in our escape. I decided on the coordinates, the stop locations as well as the direction pointing toward Vung Tau\(^10\) to keep track of the distance we had travelled. All of that was my job.

TVD: I would like to turn back a little bit. Could you tell us about your formal education, as well as the memories of those times, starting from elementary school?

PN: When we just arrived to the South, my father was very ignorant of the elementary school system. Let me tell you a little bit about my father. During the French colonial time, my father served in the 10\(^{th}\) Commando Battalion of the French Army. Later on, he joined the anti-communist front of Father Lieu Tu\(^11\).

\(^9\) Cái trận.
\(^10\) Vũng Tàu.
\(^11\) Liễu Tự.
Due to his prior Commando experiences, he was in charge of a unit called the “Nghia Dung Quan”\(^{12}\) under Father Lieu Tu to fight against the communists. Perhaps it was the reason why he could not accept staying under the communist regime; it was in his blood. When I was about 10 year old, living in the South, my older uncle who was a graduate of Thu Duc\(^{13}\) Military School, class # 5, wanted me to join the military as at the young age. He took me to the Cadets Military School\(^{14}\). Both my father and his older brother wanted me join the military at that youthful age. My paternal grandmother and mother had overwhelmingly opposed to the idea; they wanted to send me to a monastery instead. Both sides went back and forth, and finally I was sent to the Dong Cong Monastery\(^{15}\) to be a little monk instead. I did all the study but perhaps the warriors’ blood ran deep in me anyway. That was my childhood going to school. I joined the military right way when I turned 18 year old; I volunteered to join the military. There were many people who would try to avoid being drafted into the military. They did not want to be there. There were others who would find careers that would lead to more sedentary lives. I told my mother that I did not really care for any crocodile tears\(^{16}\). I believe that talks couldn’t end the war; direct participation would. So that the Vietnamese would stop killing each other. Or so I told my mother. My mother is near 90 year old now, and sometimes she would say to me ironically, “There, whatever happened to going to the den of the tiger to catch its cub? How come the tiger chased you all the way over here?” She would say it to this day!

Back then I jumped right into life of a soldier, joining a very demanding branch of the army. I volunteered to be in the Special Force Unit 302, which my father had no problem with. He would say, “let him be”, while my mother insisted that he would stop me saying, “He would not listen to me so you should talk to him. He is joining this incredibly terrible unit! It only does combat reconnaissance.” It was a special unit which many people calling on for help. When I joined the unit it already got a reputation. Those recruiters brought along a speaker to make sure the soldiers would understand what they agreed to sign up for. They brought out

\(^{12}\) Nghĩa Dũng Quân.
\(^{13}\) Thư Đức.
\(^{14}\) Trường Thiếu Sinh Quân.
\(^{15}\) Nhà Gióng Đồng Công.
\(^{16}\) Thường vay khóc muốn.
the pictures of the toads and frogs asking if we were able to eat these alive in order to survive through dangerous conditions; who would want to volunteer to eat one? They wanted to test for bravery. There were those who would step up to swallow those frogs raw. Sometime we think those images were of crazy people, but in truth they were people who were not afraid of anything, and they could show their capabilities in facing the stress in the battles. Eating those frogs would be a survival skill for them. When I brought my family out with other people, perhaps it was those images, challenges, memories, and the ways of thinking and survival skills of my old life as a soldier that saved my family on high sea at the end. It was just like that. You asked me and I gave you such a long winded answer, didn’t I?

TVD: Did you have any experience or memory in the military that is special to you? That you often think about?

PN: I already told you so; I believe to end the war, one must jump right into the war. But participating in the war had it own hardships. If we didn’t shoot at them, they would shoot at us. Even if we sat still and did nothing, they would still attack and tried to kill us. That was the harsh reality of war. There were too many stories to tell. I would tell about my close friends and my comrades. For example, there was Phung\footnote{Phụng.} who died in my arms. He was still holding the brown beret with a few pieces of gold hiding inside taken in the trip to Kampuchea. Then there was Thiên\footnote{Thiện.}, and many others who died sitting on the top of the bunker. Just one shot from the enemy’s artillery\ldots which dropped right in front of a group of soldier eating their meals. The shell felt right nearby, and the blast took off the heads. The entire bags of cooked rice were filled with blood. Those were the most horrific images. And then there was sergeant Nghiem\footnote{Nghiêm.}. When we had military operations in Kampuchea 1972, three enemy divisions\footnote{Công trường.} attacked us at Ton Son Trúc\footnote{Tôn Sơn Trúc.} base. The fighting was so fierce that they jumped out to grab our guns, and we fired away until all our ammunitions ran out. Then we tossed...
our guns and ran. Of course when turning around and ran, the vehicles moved right on top of our own men mowing down those who did not move away fast enough on their feet. One vehicle ran right across sergeant Nghiem’s body. I was limping with a leg wound behind at that moment. I lurched forward trying to lift him up. You know the dirt at Son Truc base was the kind of dirt people used for growing cassava plants which was very soft and sinking. So, when the vehicle ran over Nghiem, his body sunk deep into the ground instead of breaking in half. When I turned him around his body had been folded in half. Blood oozed out of his eyes and ears because of the pressure; one eye actually popped out of its socket. There were so many deaths. Everyday someone would die; every day a body of a friend would turn up. I could not remember the names of all of my dead friends simply because there were so many who died in this war. Their deaths touched me in the deep and emotional way whenever I talked about the war time. Every time we went to a civilian’s home - when we went in Kampuchea to fight the war there, we were told that it would has the same effect as doing PR for our own on foreign land. We tried not harming the civilians even though we knew the bases of support for the three communist divisions were there. There would be no harm done to the Cambodians themselves until I met a Cambodian who broke his left arm climbing the coconut tree and whom we treated. We tried winning their hearts through the psychological warfare so they would understand that we, the ARVN soldiers, came to their land to fight against the VCs to safeguard our borders only. We did not come to bring harm to the people. It was so sad, and some time full of irony. We would take care of them; we treated their wounds and everything else. Meanwhile, there was a soldier of mine named Dung who asked for a cassava root in the field. He went digging up one root and the people would yank his hands away, not allowing even one root of cassava. How they - Cambodians really hated us! And it led to incidents of robbing and killing of so many Vietnamese in Cambodia. It happened regardless the fact that we, the soldiers, put our best efforts to bring the good words of our military to the people, and to show our good will; we only fought against the VCs, trying to

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22 Đem chuông đi đánh xứ người.
23 Army of the Republic of Vietnam.
24 Dũng.
stop them from infiltrating into the South and harming our own people. At the end we could neither know nor understand the depth of their hearts. It was too difficult to predict who was right and who was wrong in the war. Therefore, whatever left in my life – a life of a soldier – was this love toward my brothers-in-arms and the completion of all the duties. Until this moment, whenever people asked me about it, I would get very emotional and tearful from the overwhelming feeling and pain. How could people like us have to lay down our weapons at the end, leaving the entire country in misery until this day?

TVD: So how long had you been in the military?

PN: 7 years.

TVD: During that time you were already 18 year old?

PN: Yeah, already 18 year old.

TVD: During the years you were in the military, which places you had been to in Vietnam? Which cities?

PN: I was stationed at Dong Sau\textsuperscript{25} with 35\textsuperscript{th} ARVN Rangers Battalion\textsuperscript{26}. We operated in many places within the 2\textsuperscript{nd} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Corps\textsuperscript{27}. One time they transferred us to Hue\textsuperscript{28} to provide support for the Hue battlefield for less than a month. However, at the end the government sent the Marines out there because they were stronger at division level to protect and oversaw Hue’s security. We returned to Pleiku, Kontum. We set our feet on the entire region of 3\textsuperscript{rd} Corps. In Cambodia we marched along the front such as Truc Xuan\textsuperscript{29} battlefield for example, a name many of my brothers-in-arms would recognize. From the cross road at Crest instead of keeping left along the National Route 7\textsuperscript{30}, we would keep right, and it would lead us to the front ---, the front ---then we could use the

\textsuperscript{25} Đồng Sáu.
\textsuperscript{26} Tiểu đoàn 35 Biệt động quân.
\textsuperscript{27} Vùng II và Vùng III
\textsuperscript{28} Huế.
\textsuperscript{29} Trúc Xuân.
\textsuperscript{30} Quốc lộ số 7.
routes inside Vietnam’s territory to reach the frontline at Binh Long\textsuperscript{31}, then we moved on to the frontline at ---. At that time the 5\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Division was stationed there.

TVD: Could you tell a little about your private life, family relationship as well as friendship when you still served in the army?

PN: Talking about friendship, I am sure the bond between brothers-in-arms fighting at the frontline is a lot stronger than blood brothers at dead-bed at home. The pain was real because we shared everything. There were times we longed for a cigarette or when we only brought along enough foods for a 4 day operation which actually lasted into the 7\textsuperscript{th} day, so the helicopters had to drop supplies for us in the middle of the jungles. Sometimes unfortunately right on the days we would have our pay checks. We came back to the base without any tobacco being delivered to us. Then, there were times we would have search-and-destroy operations around the outpost. Back then we had the 200 denomination Dong bill with image of a herd of deers on it, and the 500 Dong bill denomination with General Tran Hung Dao’s\textsuperscript{32} image. We would enter Viet Cong’s secret bases to plant our robots. In these places they would often grow corns. We would use our 200 bills to roll the young corn beards into make-shift cigarettes for smoking. It was hilarious because they caused we coughed like a bunch of monkeys; we coughed so much that night. Luckily the VCs were not around or they would attack and killed us all. Those were the memories we had serving in the military together. There were a lot of them actually. In the South we had this saying “Huynh đề chí binh\textsuperscript{33}.” We brothers-in-arms lived and died in the battle field together, so we had to take care of each other at all cost. Such feeling toward each other was expressed in a song, “Thương nhau mà hát chi nhận tình.” We were truly all by ourselves at the outpost. One time my younger sister, Vân\textsuperscript{34}, came to visit my outpost at Van Don\textsuperscript{35}. Every day there were people travelled across the mountain range from Tay Ninh (Tây Ninh) to Van Don. The VCs

\textsuperscript{31} Binh Long.
\textsuperscript{32} Trần Hưng Đạo.
\textsuperscript{33} Huynh đề chí binh.
\textsuperscript{34} Vân.
\textsuperscript{35} Vân Đồn.
habitually planted mines along roads that buses would use frequently to blow them up. That particular road stretch (Tay Ninh – Van Don) was always mined by them. So, we always had search and destroy units checking the road for land mines before opening it daily for the safety of the people. On that day, about 10 of us took a bath at a bomb crate in the middle of the jungle where few people went by. Ten of us were all the same in our manners of taking bath. We would stand by the edge of the bomb crater and jumped in from there. My younger sister from Saigon heard that there was a road to Van Don. I was twenty some, so my sister was only in her teenage age. She hired a man to drive her all the way there. She called out to us from the street, “Hey you, soldiers,” when she saw all the military clothes on the ground, and realized that everyone was taking a bath and was completely naked. She was really freaked out! So, my family travelled all the way to the outpost while knowing full well that they could be killed by a land mine along the way. I can’t express enough gratitude for the kind of love they had shown to me. These are the tender moments in my life as a soldier.

TVD: What did you do with your off-base time?

PN: Rarely. I must say R&R time for us was rare. They may allow it before a major operation, but the VIPs were different from us. They would take helicopter rides back to visit their families or went oversea to France. They had this or that. Many privileges. Those soldiers of lower military ranks, from the Company level\textsuperscript{36} down to battalion level, the longed for R&R time was rarely granted. And that was only going back to the rear, not Saigon. For example, we had military operations in Pleiku. In reality, it was not exactly at Pleiku but in the middle of the jungles. So, we could only go as far as Pleiku itself with 3-4 days of R&R, and felt so very happy about it. Or if we were stationed along the National Route 1\textsuperscript{37}, Bong Son\textsuperscript{38}, Tam Quang, we would mingle with the people who lived along those frontlines, and considered it an operation with permit to leave\textsuperscript{39}. A real permit to get back to Saigon was very difficult to have. Those who could get back to Saigon

\textsuperscript{36} Cấp đại đội.
\textsuperscript{37} Quốc lộ số 1.
\textsuperscript{38} Bồng Sơn.
\textsuperscript{39} Vừa hành quân, vừa phép.
on military planes for R&R were pretty well-off already, not regular enlisted men. We could only have a few days off in an entire year. In truth, I had to stay back with my brothers-in-arms because there was no leading officer. In time of none-stop fighting the casualty was continuous at Company level. In my own group, a platoon had only two squads, 5 persons each. It meant that sent down 5 persons for a field operation, and added another five to make it 10 in total. While a company had only 2 platoons, which in fact a combination of 1st and 3rd Platoons. 2nd and 4th Platoons were completely destroyed. So many had died in the fight that reinforcement could not be sent in time. Yet, regardless such terrible condition, the units still had to do operations. Some times in my own unit, there were only ten persons left in a Company. Seven newly reinforced soldiers plus three old hands, and a brand new graduate from the Officer Academy in Dalat. Poor freshly minted officer – he did not know anything, so we needed to do something about that. We called him, “Khai,” the name of this officer class #23, “Please hold this mine for me. I have four, Mr. Thach Khon – an old sergeant – had three.” Sergeant Thach Khon was a Khmer ethnic, who started from second class soldier and moved up to sergeant level in the Ranger Force in about 17-18 years, without knowing how to read a map or to call out coordinations. I had to show him that too. Khai, the new officer from Dalat, never experienced real combat situation, so he was just like any other new soldier being very ignorant of things. He carried a bag of mines when all 11 of us going on a nightly operation. All of us - new soldiers from Saigon, three old hands and a brand new officer – had to go. Three old hands were Mr. Thach Khon, a young guy and me. “Old hands” like us meant we knew a little bit more than the rest. The soldiers carried ammunition for the machine guns, plus eight grenades on each of them. I too carried a few mines, and a few grenades for extra protection. At dead end what else could I do besides killing myself with a mine or a grenade? We went on operations lacking many things back then; especially in 1975 when we did not even have bullets for our guns to fight on. The entire situation was

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40 Trung đội.
41 Tiểu đội.
42 Khải.
43 Thạch Khon.
depressing. The entire war was painfully depressing. Memories of my military life are so numerous that I can’t even tell all of them.

TVD: Was you married back then?

PN: I got married in 1973. I wanted to tell you in my first month of marriage, I got 2 weeks with my wife, and left for operation in the 3rd week. I was stationed in Hoai Nhan, in the Central Region, so my wife did not have any mean to travel from Saigon to visit me there. She stayed home with the old folks. I came back at any opportunity that I had. I got one Leave Permit and used it to get back there. When the fighting intensified, I could not ask for any more permits to leave. I did apply for it, but could not obtain one.

TVD: How did you know your wife? Was it through the family’s introduction?

PN: Before the time I had to go on operations continuously, I was sent back to Saigon for 6 months of medical emergency training class. My family introduced me to my wife during that time. That was how our romance came about. We got married a year later when I had a Leave Permit. In all truth I still wore my helmet and military uniform the day I came back for my engagement, which was followed by the wedding right away. I walked into my home dressing in my uniform, and helmet on my head amid the guests waiting at the tables. I did not have time to change into civilian clothes or to put on the suit, nor time to prime myself for the occasion. I still had my battle field clothes and my helmet on. Back then the military had a rule that most military men must wore helmets whenever they ventured into the streets even in the cities after the attack in Tet Mau Than. This rule of wearing helmets applied specially to combat units even when we were on leave come home to the cities. It purposefully kept us in ready-to-response combat condition. Any time the Viet Cong attacked us all suddenly, we could counter-attack them.

TVD: In the one year of your courtship, where did you go?

44 Hoài Nhãn.
45 Tété Mậu Thân.
PN: Yes, we went out but there were not many places to go to in Saigon back then. We had to ask the permission of the parents who were very strict anyway. Back then to date each other was really a complicate thing. I must ask permission, and for only a few hours at a time, from her parents. We said we would like to go out to places like the zoo for example. Even so it was very precious to us because we had to return home after a few hours. We kept in contact with each other once I went back to my unit.

TVD: Did you write to each other?

PN: Yes, of course. Since I was at the front, it was more difficult for me to receive mails from home, especially from our own families. I wrote back, sometimes from the outpost. Or when we had some free time we would bring our guitars out to sing sitting on top of a bomb shelter - Songs such as “The Souvenir for You”.

When will you return? May be after the victory here or victory there. The emotion of a young girl walking next to her wounded and calloused lover in that song made me thinking of my own uncertain future whether I would live or die in this war. Deaths. So many deaths that I did not even know how many days I could still have left to live. Those images obsessed me. I did not have Phú, my son, until shortly after April 30, 1975. I was put in Chi Hòa Prison when my wife was pregnant with Thi. It was an entrapment they set up to get us, I knew they got many of us – my brothers-in-arms, which resulted in many of them loosing their lives.

Sau khi người viết công năm vùng ở Trung Quốc của nhà, ông đó là một ông xã, ông ấy năm vung, khi anh em tôi về tới thì lúc đó chúng tôi về, một xe anh cả tôi, vào khoảng 7-8 người lính nuôi hộ, cùng với anh cả tôi nữa. Lúc đó đang phục vụ cho đại tiệc nói tục đồ đồ, những toàn đồ, còn tôi bên biết đồng quân về.

One image hit me when I returned to Bac Hải St. My heart went out to a young Airborne sub-lieutenant, who was much younger than me. At that moment when VC’s tanks were noisily racing down the road from the Bay Hien direction. Mr.

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46 Ký vật cho em.
47 Phú.
48 Khâm Chí Hòa.
49 Bác Hải.
50 Bảy Hiền.
Duong Van Minh\textsuperscript{51} declared our surrender. We took off our uniforms leaving only the pants. Nearby people would pass out civilian shirts to us and we would wear them. There was a young airborne sub-lieutenant with a group of three or four soldiers. The soldiers would take off the uniforms, cursing loudly and sadly, got drunk with a few litters of alcohol and slumped away dispirited. Not the young officer who stood at the beginning of Bac Hai street. He was so young. He cried out resentfully, “Oh God, we already surrendered, oh God!” He cried out like that a few times, and then put the gun to his head. He shot himself in the head and his body crashed down loudly on the ground. I was just walking by at that moment. I had already switched to a civilian shirt at that point, but I was still a soldier. I lifted the body of this young officer up with my arms. I cried, “Why, why more death at this moment, oh God?” My heart went out to him. In reality, after the war ended in 4/30/1975 we did not just have the Tuong\textsuperscript{52} ranks, the Ta\textsuperscript{53} ranks, or Uy\textsuperscript{54} ranks, but there were many of us common soldiers, feeling outraged and resentful about being forced to give up. This entire war was shameful, and nothing could heal this pain in the collective soul of the Vietnamese. There were people died in vain just because they were put into situation fighting a war doomed to be lost. We laid down our weapons in pain.

After so many days in prison, a man talked to me while holding a Colt handgun knocking at my temple – I would forever remember what they said to me that day – “Listen, we are like Gods; there is nothing you can hide from us.” I still remembered that person’s words to this day. I showed up present myself to be reeducated at the common solder level after they started calling out to formers military men to come out and register to be reeducated. A nursing student accused me of something which resulted in me being cuffed and arrested and sent to Chi Hoa Prison. There was so much misery back then.

TVD: What month was it that you reported to them?

\textsuperscript{51}Duong Van Minh.
\textsuperscript{52}The General ranks.
\textsuperscript{53}Major to Colonel ranks.
\textsuperscript{54}Sub-lieutenant to Captain ranks.
PN: Many officers had reported to them in person by the end of May. However, I was arrested right away for trying to pass myself as a regular private. I told them I was not as talented as others, so I was not promoted as fast as them. In truth, I was guilty of nothing for being a soldier. At the end they did not accept my explanation even though I was only a soldier, and the things people accused me of were not true. They kept on pressuring me through interrogations to no avail. Months went by just like that, and then they put me in Chi Hoa Prison.

TVD: What is Chi Hoa?

PN: Chi Hoa is a large prison in Vietnam, until this day.

TVD: Chi Hoa locates in the South?

PN: Yes, Chi Hoa Prison is in the South. The reeducation camps, however, were camps built by the prisoners themselves to isolate and to distance the prisoners from the rest of the population. There were others like me during this time being entrapped by many wild rumors – in Vietnam the propaganda machine worked incredible well back then. They would say Mr. Ky was staying in Phan Rang, or the 6th Army Ranger Force was stationed in Binh Tuy, or this or that. The former soldiers who wanted to carry on the fight against the communists would try to find ways to make contacts with them. They lured many of us into the traps in the jungles where they would wait dressing up in our uniforms and pretending to be friendly forces. I was in the area at the time. They killed all that showed up. Those were the one who would oppose them to the end who needed to be done away. It was a scary time knowing the numerous traps the communists sprang out to catch our people.

TVD: So, how long was you imprisoned?

NTP: Not even one year that time. However, I would be rearrested later on. They didn’t let me walking away that easily.

TVD: Was your family allowed to visit you while you stayed in prison?

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55 Binh đoàn.
56 Binh Tuy.
NTP: Yes. Only twice I think. One time at District\textsuperscript{57} 10 where I was temporarily held while the police did investigation. Later, they’d put me in Chi Hoa Prison once the investigation turned fruitless. They kept me there waiting for a break from other leads. I belong to a special category, the Special Forces, which worked for the CIA. I said so because I was a member of the Special Forces back then. So I was in armed forces that belong to both Vietnam and America. I was in charge of those dropped into the jungles. During home-leave days, my superior and others stopped and stayed at my own home. That did not escape the notice of the informer who stationed himself in front of my house. They mistakenly thought that I must be a person holding important rank; hence I must owe many blood debts, aka killed many of their people. With these blood debts in mind, they forced me to admit to many things, but I only agree to be in the Medical Corp at the end. I was only an army medic taking care of the wounded. I did not mention any other details. Whatever they did, whether banging on the desk or smashing up the chair, my words remained the same – I was only a soldier who learned to treat wounds. From beginning of the investigation till the end, my testimony never changed. Finally, it could be either the neighbors really loved me because I used to give medications to them, or the police could not find anything to substantiate the allegation, they concluded that I was a medic. They let me go. In reality, I had no idea whom my wife had asked for help. I think she must bribe here and there a little bit to beef up my claim of being a medic which was a truth to start with in order for them to free me. Otherwise, it would not be easily so. Later they got some leads from somewhere, they rearrested me. That time also lasted a few months.

TVD: Did that happen in 1975?

NTP: Around 1976, in 1977 I was arrested once again.

TVD: How did you family and you rebuild your family life after the last release?

NTP: After I was released I met an older cousin visiting from the North. I asked him why he didn’t have to be drafted into the fight in the South, or going to “B”\textsuperscript{58}.

\textsuperscript{57} Quán.

\textsuperscript{58} B was the Northern code name for South Vietnam.
He told me he owned a cow used for transporting food for the Commune, thus he was exempted from having to go to the front. He would serve locally. I was impressed that he had accomplished that feat with only a cow. My situation after they released me for the second time was dire. They made me promise to move to the New Economic Zone to live, and no longer permit to stay in Saigon. I did what they forced me to do, and I was very sad because I just came home a short time to see my new born baby whom my wife had carried during that time. Now I signed the paper to go to the New Economic Zone which caused my wife much grief. I thought to myself that I needed to buy a transporting vehicle, a Lam\(^{59}\) for example, which I would use to transport locally at the New Economic Zone making it easier for me to survive there. That was my plan to make a living while waiting for an escape. I already accepted my fate not knowing when they would re-arrest me once they had more facts about me. I would drive this vehicle around for the time being, and wait to see what other punishment they would hand out to me. It was tough in the first few days driving around. It was very difficult for me to persuade them to let me working for that company which was far away from the city and was still able driving around locally. I explained to them that I wanted to serve the people – to be a true working person. It was very difficult, but I did it at the end. They granted me that permit. While I was a driver like that, I changed myself to a complete different man. I told my wife, “Darling, I must be out there like other men nowadays. I must a drunkard from morning till night\(^{60}\), like any other driver, drinking in the morning and drunk at night. I will curse and swear, just like a street driver, to make myself into the image of a common laborer. I must play his role.” Later on, after I started driving, the City’s Transportation Group\(^{61}\) was formed. In a group of the blind, the one-eye was the king. The majority of the drivers were owners of the Lams, the buses, the horses, and others who did not have much of an education. In the mix, there would be some who were educated like my young friends, Vuong\(^{62}\) – pilot in the Air Force, or Thang\(^{63}\) – another Air Force officer. They were all Air Forces pilots. Thang held

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\(^{59}\) Lambro.

\(^{60}\) Sáng xin chiều say.

\(^{61}\) Đoàn xe khách thành phố.

\(^{62}\) Vuông.

\(^{63}\) Thằng.
on to the rank of Chuan Uy until the war ended, thus he escaped being sent to the reeducation camp. He was lucky enough to escape death itself while flying the helicopter as a pilot. Not only one man escaped, but many of them who now living in America and bear witness to this. After working as a driver for awhile, we formed a group of our own from men with enough education. They liked me a lot because I always gave in to them. Every time we arrived at a rest area, whoever wanted to go somewhere he just took off because I didn’t really care about it. I knew about medications so I set out to buy medical drugs from those who looted the Army Hospital during the final days of the war. I purchased them to cure others. My neighbors really loved me because I treated them with these medications. I even went to Cho Lon, and the Chinese there really appreciated it. “Here comes Dr. Phat!” They knew I could treat them with the medications that I had. I guess I was good because they kept calling me “Doctor”. That was the time in the past when I healed people, including the members in my driving group who had tuberculosis one time. I would drive to earn money and gave them their shares without keeping any for myself. Those were the reasons when the Cooperative was formed in the city. Men, who had certain level of understanding and education like me, they all agreed that I should be in the leadership position; they voted for me to be the head of the Cooperative. Other members of the Cooperative did not feel so threatened with potential competition. I generally let people had their own ways. Every day I would drink a “xị” of alcohol upon arriving at the station, and another “xị” when I reached my destination at the other end. By then, I would be slightly drunk, so people would do whatever they wanted. Thus, people trusted me enough to vote me in the position of head of the Cooperative. Being the chairman of the Cooperative required them to report me to the city’s Economic Units 3 and 4 for further background checks. Dear God, how could they accept my past? There was no way a person with my past could even be considered being the chairman of a communist cooperative. Finally, they said let just take a collective vote to see

64 Hợp tác xã.
65 A “xị” is equivalent to ⅓ of a litre.
66 Chủ nhiệm hợp tác xã.
how thing turned out to be. Dear Heaven, I got 100% of the votes to be the
chairman. No one turned in a vote of no confidence against me. 100% of the
votes; how hilarious it was! When I started my new position as a chairman, there
was order from the city denied me both the responsibility and the position. A
nationalist person could not be put in the leadership position within a communist
organization. Finally, because of the overwhelming confidence being shown
toward me by members of the Cooperative, they let me keep the position of vice
chairman of the Cooperative. I was in charge of the finance of the organization.

Dear me, now I got to keep their money! They surely wouldn’t have to worry
about money nor it being lost. Thus, that was how I became the financial vice
chairman, in charge of monetary matters. I prepared all the business plans for
them, and I did such a good job that earned me lot of compliments from them.
Whatever compliments they paid toward me, I still built my own boat. They could
sing all the praises about me as they liked, and that wouldn’t stop me from
building my own boat. I must say I was very brave at the time. I put my wife’s
name on the registration paper as the owner, and myself as the captain of the
boat. Because of my driving experience, I knew people at the Department of
Traffic and Transportation, which oversaw both land routes and waterways.
Therefore, with the introduction paper in hand to assume the responsibility for
land transportation, I became an official in charge of setting up the Fisheries
Cooperative of the city. Now I was known as an “experienced” person. They
gave me the job of setting up this Fisheries Cooperative, right after stopping the
City’s Construction Company. I got my wife and children out right after I had
finished this job; they never saw it coming. It was less than a month after this
project that we left. They must be astonished by this unexpected event. That
was my past. I did whatever to survive and to get my family out of the communist
control. That was my way of doing it.

TVD: How did you come to the decision to leave? What had happened for you to
decide that you must build a boat to bring your family out?

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68 Phó chủ nhiệm tài vụ.
69 Tài công.
70 Giao Thông Vận Tải
71 Hợp Tác Xã Thủy Sản.
PN: I had said it previously. First of all, I couldn’t. I worried that they would find out about my past and rearrested me sooner or later. Secondly, my children clearly had no future whatsoever living under this communist regime, regardless how young they were at the time. Thirdly, it was my old man’s saying, “If the communists came here, I would build a boat to put all my family on and floated them out to the sea. We would never survive under the communist regime.” Thus, an individual like me would find it difficult to live under them. Considering the future of my children, and the hatred between the nationalists and the communists from the days of my father, being denounced and more, I must leave under all costs. I didn’t put my trust in any one else but myself because I had seen so many being cheated. There were numerous incidents of boats going down in Vung Tau, Vam Lang\textsuperscript{72} and others. There were a few communists, now I tell you, who bribed and bought the safe passage warranty from the police. It meant they paid in gold tales to the police to look the other way so they would load people up on boats and departed at a certain location. After everything were arranged and paid in full, for whatever reasons the police would turn around and shot at these boats to sink them. Those survivors who jumped into the water would be pushed under the water to be drowned by the men on the boat using long sticks to hold their heads down. They determined to kill them all. I was frightened by the tactics the communists used to lure our brothers-in-arms into the jungles to kill them; they used these same tactics against those who tried to escape by boats, taking their gold and killing them afterward. I couldn’t trust anyone. I must build the boat with my own hands, and captained it myself to bring my family out. I was on my own and I would ask no favor from anyone. I was very scared because there were many cases people losing their wives and children on high sea, or they all died together. I would rather take the responsibility on myself in building my own boat to prepare for the escape because it was impossible living under the communist regime back then.

TVD: You had told me in a CD about your escaping experience. Could you explain a little bit more? For example, when I listened to it, I didn’t understand the whole process of building a boat or how it happened. How did you get a permit to build

\textsuperscript{72} Vâm Lãng
such a boat? What was your plan? How many people did you plan to transport on that boat?

PN: It was a long, difficult and convoluted road all the way. {laugh} Let me tell you. The first thing I did was to buy a small dingy boat; the boat was small with a small engine, an India 5 engine, which was pretty weak. Not even comparable to a Couberta, a Yanma or a Gray. So, I bought it to go fishing by means of throwing net and hanging fishing hooks, and had obtained a permit to travel along the small rivers. Such a permit was a nothing out of the norm; it was just like what one would need a driving permit to use the roads. So I got that permit which led me to the next step - applying for permission to repair that boat. During the repairing process, I would extend the boat a dozen meters long. Thus, my small fishing boat became a shrimp boat. A shrimp boat had to be about 11 or 12 meters or more. A shrimp boat needed an engine with strong enough horse power strong to pull the entire netting contraption behind it; the contraption once dropped into the water would be very heavy because it churned up all the mud and whatnot when being pulled along by the boat. Therefore, boat needed an engine strong enough to tow that net behind it. An Indian engine didn’t provide enough horse power to pull. One would drop the heavy metal rod to which the net was attached in the water and the boat would pull the net behind it as it sailed ahead. Thus, once the boat was upgraded from a mere fishing boat to a shrimp boat, the India Engine was also needed to be replaced with another engine specifically for shrimp boat. So, I requested for a “specific” replacement and bought a Gray engine. The boat I used to escape had a Gray engine installed. A Gray...... How can I forget it, it must the sign of time. It should be stored in my mind somewhere. That Gray engine was an electric generator, not a boat engine. After I bought it, I modified and connected the line through the “rap” and hooked it up to the boat’s back wheel and turned it into a propeller. Do you understand? I just had to improvise. These were experiences and details

73 Ghe cáo.
74 Cang cáo.
75 Thay đổi đặc trưng.
76 Gray Marine.
77 Cây ráp.
that a lay person would rarely pay attention to. Another one example was to determine the boat’s speed. How did I do that? How many miles per hour would the boat sail? I had nothing in my hands except the most basic tools. So I looked it up in the books. I knew if I pulled too hard on the Gray engine, the force would push the end of the boat down while lifting up the front up. I needed to know at which speed my boat would sail smoothly and the front was only slightly uplifted at about 45 degree. So I tested it out by sailing on the river at various speeds. I would seat at the front end of the boat, and dropped into the water a Styrofoam piece. When the boat sailed ahead, the Styrofoam piece would position itself at the end of the boat. I measured the time in seconds to see how fast that Styrofoam piece would travel the length of the boat. My boat was 12 meters and it took about 5-7 seconds for it to reach the end. Thus, logically I could calculate how long it would take to go 120 meters or 1,200 meters even. By multiplication I had been able determine the speed of my boat. It was that rudimental! That how I know the speed of the boat on river in calm lake-like water condition. Then I started trying it out at the estuary where the waves were strong. I could only guess at the strength of the waves by the way the waves pushing up and down and applied the same method. For example, my engine’s watch indicated 2,500 rpm, a rough measure and not as accurate as those installed on cars. I would drop my piece of Styrofoam and watched it bobbing up and down on the water travelling down the length of the boat. I took note of how fast in seconds it would take and used the result to calculate the speed of the boat per hour. Afterward, I memorized the speeds in my head. Meanwhile, I continued practicing fishing and shrimping for experiences. How would my boat performed in a level 5 or 6 storm with the wind blowing against or pushing it? I planned out all scenarios. What would happen when a south-west wind turned north-east? For example, I wanted to travel from the west to the east, from one point to another, and the south-west wind blew against us. I would need to know how far it would blow my boat off-course in one hour. With that knowledge, I would turn my boat 120 degree instead of 90 degree to counter that effect. All of that was part of the experiences I collected in preparation for my escape. Did you listen to it in the CD? It takes so long to tell!
TVD: It has been about one hour since we started. {laugh}

PN: Would you want to take a break. Let’s take a short break.

TVD: To continue, will you go on with your story of escaping?

PN: Yes. After more than one year of fishing and captaining my enlarged boat for numerous trips, I started sailing to Vung Tau and Da Bach Chao Mountain\textsuperscript{78}, Thi Bai River\textsuperscript{79}...The travel itself was all the same. They guarded us very well. Firstly, they only sold us certain litters of diesel enough for a trip that lasted so many days. I must show them the plan before they provided us with the diesel. Even so, I must turn to the black market to buy more fuel. For every 20 liters they sold to me, I had to buy 100 liters more in the black market. Otherwise, it would not be enough. By the time I reached Nha Be Port\textsuperscript{80}, I needed to show the police my permit for such a fishing trip. Every single time I did so...I apologize for calling my friends’ names in this manner, Vuong – a former pilot, Thang – also a former pilot, brother Number Two\textsuperscript{81} – a former naval security officer, whose real name is Huan. I called myself brother Number Three even though my name is Phat. I needed to tell all these in order for people to understand how absurd it was back then. It was a bit coarse. Brother Number Two was not very articulated given his background as a security officer; he talked in a jeering and funny manner. So, I called him brother Number Two “Cac”\textsuperscript{82}. I was brother Number Three “Cu”\textsuperscript{83}. Vuong – Number Four was named “Buoi”\textsuperscript{84}. Thang was Number Five – “Dai”\textsuperscript{85}. We called each other so according to our ages. So, every time I stopped by the police station to show my permit, those women selling fishes nearby, at the Nha Be Port, would laugh to death listening to us calling each other by these crazy names. Even the police would not understand why we would take these kinds of absurd names referring to the male sexual organs for ourselves while we had our

\textsuperscript{78} Núi Đá Bắc Chao \\
\textsuperscript{79} Sông Thi Bãi. \\
\textsuperscript{80} Cảng Nhà Bè. \\
\textsuperscript{81} Anh Hai. \\
\textsuperscript{82} Cắc, a Vietnamese slang for male sexual organ. \\
\textsuperscript{83} Cu, a slang for male sexual organ. \\
\textsuperscript{84} Buổi, a slang for male sexual organ. \\
\textsuperscript{85} Dái, testicle.
real names on the list of members of the boat. {laugh} They asked why called Five“Dai”; I explained to them that was because his mother had praised (vái)\(^86\) Heaven for many children and lost many until him. That’s all. {laugh} We called each other by our nick names. Thus, in at jovial manner I came by the station with ice, smoking cigarettes Vam Co\(^87\) or Nong Nghiep\(^88\), and other gifts to the polices so they would get used to see us. In that one year, we did many fishing trips, and our net got torn up so many times. None of us knew how to mend the net. Finally, we was able to get a guy, Minh, from Nha Be\(^89\) to come along to mend the net when needed. We made many trips like that and they were all the same. For every trip like that we spent a few “chi” of gold, almost a tael of gold, to buy food and fuel for the boat, not to mention buying the catch of fish and shrimp from others for show. We couldn’t come back with nothing. We didn’t catch anything ourselves because of our inexperience causing the net to get all torn up. Thus, we just bought the fishes from those real fishermen nearby to show to the police when we got back from the trip to pretend it was our own catch. It was such a money loosing enterprise! However, because of those trips we got acquainted to many people, and had been able scouting out and mapping out the entire estuary area of Vung Tau, and crossing through the estuary at Binh Dai\(^90\), Ben Tre. I mapped down all coordinates as well as the times for the monthly tide, when the water was high or low. I also observed the duty schedule of the police stationed in Cat Vang, and their boating schedule at Binh Dai. I would say I was so diligent in getting to know these to the minute details. That’s why it took us more than a year to plan our escape out. I wanted to leave in March when the water was calm. Yet, precisely for that reason of good weather, the police patrolled more often. At Binh Dai, the police’s boat was outfitted with a Gray 4 engine, which was more powerful than our own. It also had the Thai-style front tip, not Vam Lang style like ours. Thus, if they gave chase, they would catch up to us in no time. Therefore, it was difficult for us to leave in March. We waited until the first day of the storm season in June 5, 1981, to decide that we

\(^{86}\) Vái, in Southern pronunciation sounds like “dái”.
\(^{87}\) Vâm Cô.
\(^{88}\) Nông Nghiep.
\(^{89}\) Nhà Bè.
\(^{90}\) Binh Đại.
must leave. In those two months of May and June, we had many false starts and unsuccessful departs. That day, when we all decided we would depart, the weather station announced the coming storm. We said to ourselves that we couldn’t postpone any longer. We already threw the spear, so to speak. We already buried the fuel at the shore, and planned out everything else carefully. In that same day, we obtained a permit to move our boat. With the permit being granted, I came home to leave my vehicle there and caught a ride to my boat and departed for the sea. The plan itself was elaborated. We must plan how many people we would pick up from the land routs including my wife and children who would use land road to travel down from Ong Thin Brigde\(^91\) heading out to Long An to reach Go Cong by bus. That day happened to be the Tet Doan Ngo, so my wife brought along Tro cakes\(^92\), kumquat sweet\(^93\), pickled lemons\(^94\) and everything else all wrapped up carefully. The group using land roads would carried these items. Those using the water way, we’ll pick them up beyond Nha Be Port at Binh Khanh\(^95\). On one side was Binh Khanh and on the other was Phuoc Khanh\(^96\). Our plan was using the waterway through Binh Khanh and picked up some rice once we reached that location. After that, we headed toward Dau Voi Ly Nhon\(^97\) where we would find the fuel hidden among the Duoc trees\(^98\) growing in the salt water. We had hidden the fuel there ahead of time. That day we already refueled our boat more than our allowance would permit at the station. Yet, when we presented our papers to the police, they were pretty relaxed. They didn’t have any suspicion that we would escape that day. They didn’t notice how heavy our boat was, and that it sunk down more than usual because of the heavy load. They let us pass without going down to check our fuel level. How lucky we were! Meanwhile, my wife would arrive at Binh Dai in Go Cong. They would step down the smaller “taxi” boats to reach the rendezvous location. For us, those who were

\(^91\) Cầu Ông Thìn.  
\(^92\) Bánh Tro.  
\(^93\) Mứt quả.  
\(^94\) Chanh muối.  
\(^95\) Bình Khánh.  
\(^96\) Phước Khánh.  
\(^97\) Đậu Voi Lý Nhơn.  
\(^98\) Cây Duốc – Rhizophoraceae.
on the boat, we sailed out from Muoi Bridge\textsuperscript{99}, Saigon around 12:00 pm noon time. I had a few younger brothers and sisters, who took the smaller taxi boats, would wait for us at Cay boat landing \textsuperscript{100} and Muoi Brigde Market. From there one by one they would be picked up and transport to Tam The\textsuperscript{101} boat landing, at Rach Ong Bridge. Our plan was for everyone to meet up at Rach Ong Brigde by 4pm at day so that our shrimp boat would be able to tow all these small taxi boats to Go Cong. Once these taxi boats passed through the cross waterway at Doi Voi Ly Nhon, they would separate and hid themselves among the bushes and water coconuts to wait for the big boat to arrive. At night time, those who took the land roads would take taxi boats from the direction of Binh Dai, Ben Tre, heading back toward Doi Voi Ly Nhon. Once passing through Do Voi Ly Nhon pass, I moored my boat at a distance waiting for the hand paddling smaller boats arriving slowly, moving with the flow of the tide. I waited until almost day break before my wife and other women who took the Go Cong rout appeared. I lighted up a match to signal. The situation was dire because as the water receded our mooring boat now laid on a bed of mud. It was completely immobile. The ebb tide also brought the smaller boats toward our boat. After lighting up the signal, I was so anxious that I ... Every man jumped off the boat and started digging at the mud around the boat with our hands. We pushed and pulled doing everything to move the boat into the water. We stood on the coconut leaves so that we would not sink down into the mud. Then came the tide from the sea which lifted up our boat from the bed of mud. Unfortunately, the tide ran in the opposite direction with the taxi boats coming toward us, thus slowing them down considerably. By the time we was able to push the shrimp boat off the mud into the water, and the smaller boats met up with us, we lost nearly 2 hours even though we all saw each other’s signal. Once we got everyone together, we transported the cans of oil from the smaller boats onto the big one. Next, we moved the women and children on. The sounds of voices asking if we got everyone were so loud in the night. We departed as soon everyone got on the big boat, and this time we sailed against the tide. Our boat was slowed down considerably because we were

\textsuperscript{99} Cầu Muỗi.
\textsuperscript{100} Bến U Cây.
\textsuperscript{101} Ư Tám The
heading out to the sea while the tide was moving inland from the sea. We went on like that until day break and the tide slowed to a stop. We speeded up and passed through many underwater cement blocks. It was about 11 am or 12 pm when the authority realized our boat was heading out to the sea for an escape even though we put the netting contraption on top of our boat in pretending it was business as usual. They must have observed us by monocular from a distance to determine that it was a “vuot bien” boat, instead of a shrimp boat. They started giving chase from Binh Dai direction. As I passed through many underwater cement blocks, I turned around to see that Vung Tau was behind us at quite a long distance. I just followed the southwest wind blowing behind me. This southwest wind blew to the northeast direction, pushing us to the sea. Running at the maximum speed and with the wind and marine current pushing us forward, our boat moved very fast on the water. However, they had a bigger boat with a bigger engine and higher speed. Just then the storm started and our boat bobbed up and down with the toss of the high waves. It was the same with them. The police boat didn’t give up either. They chased after us for almost three hours, and they shot at us from the standing in front of their boat. I saw it very clearly; they aimed their guns at us and we could hear the sound of the bullets buzzing by. I stood in the back of the boat to man the wheel. Ignoring the bullets, I maneuvered the boat in the zigzagging fashion trying to shake them for the life of me. After three hours of chasing like that, they turned around heading toward land. The storm was really strong at that point. They probably thought the storm would take care of us eventually. I stuck to the southwest wind blowing to the direction of northeast. Throughout the night the storm beat down on us. Everyone on the boat had lost the will; people were asking me to turn the boat around toward land and faced prison time. “The storm is too strong; it’ll kill us all.” They begged me. That night, it was already one day, there were underwater currents in addition to the high waves. This type of “hammer” waves that could crush the side of a boat they had warned me about. I only read about them from the books up to that point. My wife told me, “Please go back. We are doomed. We can’t survive this! Let’s just go back and let them put us in prison.”

102 Hạng đáy.
103 Vuốt biên – crossing the border.
That entire night, I still followed the northeast wind to see how thing would turn out. At this point I only had a land measure compass in my possession; I hold it in my fingers and pointed it directly toward Vung Tau direction to calculate the distance we had travelled. Even the two tops of the Big Mountain and Small Mountain in Vung Tau were still visible from where the boat was, but I knew we had gone for a long distance - long enough that I couldn’t even guess how far we had travelled. 100 km at the minimum. The current pushed our boat further out for one more day when the waves calmed down. I decided to point our boat northward because it was too late at this point to turn it southward. Our boat was going northeast following the direction of the wind, and with its low Vam Lang style front tip, it was ill-equipped to cut through the high waves if I turned the boat southward. The waves towered at 5-6 meters over our boat and would bring it down in no time. Thus, I was forced to keep the boat sailing on along the northeast direction using the force of the wind and the waves behind us to speed up. After three days like that, I guessed we were about Cam Ranh area. Ah, before that we saw a big ocean liner with Soviet Union flag. My wife and other members on our boat begged me to use the distress signal SOS to call for help. I use the handheld flash light to send that signal out to them. Despite our dire situation as our tiny boat bobbling up and down in the middle of the storm like a leaf in the middle of a violent current, the Soviet just sailed on ignoring us totally. Had they stopped and rescued us, we were probably still in Vietnam right now. {laugh} After several days of calm water, we decided to continue on northeast direction. Our original destination was Thailand in the south. Now that I thought we were somewhere past Cam Ranh and near Nha Trang because of the northeast wind, we would turn 90 degree heading straight across the water to Philippine. It was my guess looking at the map. On the other hand, if we continued on along the northeast route, we would end up at Hoang Sa - Vietnam. I had no idea Hoang Sa was at the time already in the hands of the Chinese and guarded by the Chinese military. At that point we started having our first mortality from thirst. No, not right away. The inside of the boat was full of foods laying everywhere, mixing in with human wastes. We tried our best to keep the water from seeping inside the boat by taking turn bail the sea water out; it was exhausting. After a dozen days, the rice we brought along started rotting away
because of the sea water splashing on it. With calmer sea, people recovered their health and also their appetite. We ate the Banh Tet and the sugared kumquats to keep ourselves alive. However, after the dozen days we ran out of fresh water to cook our rice; we used salt water instead. The situation was miserable. Even the 50 ice blocks we brought along and kept in the two containers stored on top of the boat were mixed up with salt water. We used that half sea water half fresh water to cook our half rotten rice. We only needed something to sustain our livelihoods at that point. Then, we ran into another boat, carrying the letter “N” “B”, that’s all I remember now. I guessed it was the abbreviation for Nghia Binh, Vietnam. If so, we were around Da Nang sea. The weather changed once more. Ah, before that we decided to attack that Nghia Binh boat. Our people were dying slowly one by one as the days passed. At the beginning, we treated the bodies with care and love. We wrapped a “chi”\(^{104}\) of gold with each of the bodies hoping someone would take the gold and buried the children’s bodies. We actually did that. Phu, my own son ... While we were in that still water during those days, we were so thirsty; we dunk ourselves in the sea to relieve our thirst. Then we used two oil tubing trying to distill fresh water from salted one. We used an iron container to store the water, and the wood from the boat itself as burning fuel. We tried to use the alcohol making method to collect the steam from the salt water and condensed them into liquid through the oil tubing. Thus, as the hot steam coming out through the oil tubing, we cooled the oil tubing down using our clothes drenched with cold sea water; the steam would condense into droplets of water inside the tube, and then went into a baby bottle drop by drop. That’s how we survived using the military lesson we learned previously. We removed all the boat’s spared wood, including the cross in the front of our boat, to use as cooking fuel. All the wooden planks on the top of the boat and below where people used for laying down were removed to use for fuel. We were all miserable; one by one we were dying slowly. That night, I was lying next to the boat’s engine. Phu and Thi were dunk into the ocean, and they sucked on their wet clothes to relieve their thirst. When my wife saw that she told me, “Why was Thi sucking on the cloth being put on her face?” I yanked the cloth away because I knew if she

\(^{104}\) Chí vàng.
sucked on the water she would die. The salt water had a lot of toxic elements, very poisonous indeed. You know people never store the sea salt used in making fish sauce in metallic containers because the salt would eat right through. People only use wooden barrels instead. Thus, if one kept drinking salt water, the stomach and the intestines would be badly damaged; it destroyed all. In case of Phu, the damaging effect showed up on his head in form of the puffiness under the skin. My wife, Hoa, got them on the back. The puss would come out when I punctured them. I knew we were dying – our body was dying. Only the brain was still working. Phu got it on his head; he lost his head and started acting crazily. He kept screaming, “Blood, blood, blood”. I tried to suck out some blood using the syringes that I brought along. Each of the families on the boat did the procedure on themselves. My younger sister was a medical doctor, Vu Minh Hang, she worked at Pediatric Hospital, aka Gral Hospital. Thus, using those syringes to suck out the blood, I took out the blood from a person and used it for the same family’s members. For example, I would take the blood from Tanh and Sin, her son, to inject into Tanh’s daughter, Trang and others. Tanh had another daughter named Thuy, around 13-14 years old, who died eventually. Such a pretty girl; she didn’t survive. Dr. Hang also help taking out the blood from Huan’s family. I got my own blood to inject into Phu and Thi. We took our blood to inject into the children. We knew the blood was toxic, but in our conditions we no longer thought of it as being toxic or not. We only thought there was a tiny part of nutrition in that blood that kept the children alive. Whatever nutrition to fool the stomach! At one point, the syringes didn’t pull out anything because our blood became too thick. How could we thinning the blood out? I was ignorant enough to put ourselves into the ocean to absorb the moisture through our skin. In our conditions our bodies became edema. In healthy person the water absorbed through the skin, and it became fluid which would thinning the blood. We dunk ourselves in the sea all day long, hoping it would help thinning our blood out, and also making us less thirsty. We hoped our skin would be able to filter some of the sea water and used the moisture to sustain our body. Afterward, we would use the syringes to pull out our blood to inject into it into the children. To a point when that method stopped working. We were completely helpless. Little Trang drank urine and blood intermittently. Phu, my son, did the same thing. He
drank my blood and he went insane. His head was covered with sores which looked terrible. He kept screaming, “Blood, blood, blood” on and on. My younger brother couldn’t bear it; he slapped him hard across the face. I boiled over in anger. He couldn’t see dying people was delirious when death was near. Tai was also in the same situation; he is now an aerospace engineer at NASA. Tai also sucked on the salt water; he was a college student at the time. Once he took the salt water in, his stomach could not take it. He would relieve himself and stuff just came out of him like water. Then he would lick them up to catch whatever liquid there was in there. How one knew he would later survive, went to school and made a decent living? {laugh} In this moment of desperation we just had to take care of each other by taking turn to pull out the blood and injected into others to sustain ourselves.

Thus, while floating on that dead sea, I saw the boat with that N.B. letters, we headed straight toward them at full speed with the intention to commander that boat or at least got some foods. Unfortunately, our boat was in no shape for such task dues to its poor, self-built conditions. The propeller broke and sunk away as we rounded the other boat. So now our boat was completely at the mercy of the current, floating about aimlessly. We were desperate. After everything that happened and now without a propeller we were desperate beyond words. Then there came a storm. Oh, there were many ships passing by; I remember seeing a Shell ship, a Dutch ship, and British one.... They would not rescue us despite our SOS sign. I told Sau to use iron rods to build a rudiment propeller for the boat. He called on to me to let me know he had finished the work. As soon as I turned the engine on, dear God, the entire iron thing turned and slammed into Sau’s leg, crushing his leg’s bone. He is an handicapped until this day. I carried Sau with his bloody leg onto the top of the boat so the passing ships could see our pitiful conditions. We must look horribly dirty, blacken by the sun, and covered in oil. Who would want to rescue a bunch like that? They probably feared being infected so they ignored us and sailed on. I remember the Shell ship ignoring us, and the Dutch ship which actually stopped and observed our near death situation through their binoculars. At the end they just departed without even leaving us a can of water. They just left. Then there came a storm which kept pushing us
along the northeast route. I stood up to build a sail using an old US military issued blanket hoping it would catch some wind. Our boat’s engine had stopped working by then. That night my wife told me Phu kept screaming “blood, blood, blood”, and it was the same with other children. They kept hiccupping-like as they passed nearer and nearer to death. Phu’s face was pale, but his nose was purple; people who died of hunger would have this typical purple nose. As the waves started that night, I prayed sincerely to Christ to let us all die at that moment for I couldn’t take it any more seeing people dying one by one. I have no idea how I could be so calm at that point: maneuvering the boat, ordering people around, tying people before letting them lowering them into the water so the waves would not push them away from the boat. After I prayed to Christ to deliver us from this misery, and saw my son hiccupped nearby, I told my wife that I needed to cut my own flesh to feed him; I would cut a piece of flesh from the thigh to feed him. I picked up the bayonet and sat up. My wife turned around seeing it, she cried, “Our son had died already!”, and she yanked the bayonet which cut at my finger instead and left a scar to this day. I was so happy seeing the blood seeping through my wound, and I stuck that finger into Phu’s mouth who was near death at that point. He sucked on it and I left my finger in his mouth all night long. That night we started seeing some lights at the horizon. As day break I prayed again, in full hatred toward God, “I had prayed to You and You wouldn’t save me, would You?” “Today You must save us because we are at the end of our endurance.” Yet even so I resigned, “I prayed so, but still everything is according to Your wish.” I imitated Christ’s words when He prayed to his Father. “It’s Your wish at the end.” Our boat floated nearer to the lights slowly and Phu was still sucking on my finger. Ah, before that episode, he was so hungry as there was nothing left in his body, there was this little worm about the size of the tip end of a chopstick. Its head was big with thinner body crawling in his nose. I never forget that scene. I pulled it out of his nose and this creature was something I read about but never seen with my own eyes. Unlike the worm with two tapered pointy ends, this thing was square at one end and tapered down to the other. I just pulled that thing out of his nose! As our boat floated nearer to the light and my son sucked on my finger, I saw a tip of something like an antenna. I thought it looked like the top of a church. I must be death already for my eyes were seeing
the image of a church? As time passed, I realized it was an antenna pole. I shook my wife, Hoa, from her sleep; she was delirious herself and wouldn’t wake up. She mumbled something about black bean “che”\textsuperscript{105} I asked her what black bean che? She replied, “black bean che at home.” She was having flash back about the pot of che that she made and kept in the freezer at home before we left. I was terrified because I knew that delirious sign meant she was near death herself. I was so terrified that I kept crying and shaking her, “Wake up, Christ has saved us, wake up. We have reached land....” Meanwhile, the waves pushed the boat straight to that island. Around 3-4 pm that afternoon, there was a American style naval ship came out to meet us. It carried China’s red flag. I was disappointed because it was a Chinese ship, yet at the same time I was thankful because we would be saved at the end. I forgot to tell the story how I built a coffin to save ourselves. Let’s just skip it for now. As the Chinese naval ship pulled our ship in, we just kowtowed to them. On our boat there was a young man, Toan, who spoke Chinese. He called out to them to save us in Chinese. All of us on our knees called out to them to save us by repeating what Toan said, “Kiu me, kiu me” It certainly sounded like “kill me, kill me” in English! {laugh} So they came out to save us, and pulled our boat zigzagging through the underwater coral reefs into the island. That night they fed us rice congee with canned meat that we would call pate back home. It was actually USA Spam meat. They chopped up the Spam and put them in the rice to feed us. They pulled us to the safety, but forbad us to tell the UN representative that they saved us. Never let the UN know that we were allowed to step on this land which officially was China territory. If we let the UN folks knew that the Chinese rescued us, we would be resettled in China. “You guys ran way from Communism to end up in our country?” They called me up to act as the spoke person and the leader of the group; they instructed me to carry the food back and divided among the people. Later on I went back to our boat with the news that there would be a fishing boat from Hong Kong arriving in two days to tow us back to Hong Kong so everyone should remain calm. In those two days we ate porridge, and only then they allowed us some steam rice with canned vegetables such a cucumbers and tomatoes. Those canned pickled vegetables

\textsuperscript{105} Chè đậu đen.
gave me a bad diarrhea! At last after two days they told us that they had been able to make contact with the boat from Hong Kong. They would tow us out to meet up with this boat, and it would in turn tow us to Hong Kong. When we parted at the end of the bridge, they were very kind to us. They would throw 3-4 bags of rice down our boat. If we could not finish them all, we would give them to the Hong Kong boat. They also gave us few empty bags of rice to wrap the few dead bodies before entering them into the ocean. The Hong Kong boat would never rescue us if they saw these dead bodies remaining on board of our boat. You know what, for those who died of hunger, their bodies didn’t stink up. There was nothing left in their bodies; they just dried up and flatten down like dried fishes. They weren’t swollen up like those who died of normal death. They dried up and the skin was darkened. There was a slight smell; it was very strange. When we met up with the Hong Kong boat, they told us they could not rescue us because they just arrived at the fishing ground. If they returned to Hong Kong with us with no catch, they would be financially hurt. They asked if we carried any money so that we would use to compensate for their loss. We collected gold from everyone and gave it them, but it wasn’t enough. At the end, they still went on fishing somewhere, and let us waiting around for a few days. I was having a bad diarrhea at the time. Originally, they wanted to bring me up to their boat so they could take care of me medically. However, after transferring all the women, children and others to their boat, I asked them to let me stay back with the other 5 members of our boat. If they didn’t see me back to our boat, they would feel left out. I felt pity for them. Moreover, what if I would survive being rescued while they perished? It would make me an untrustworthy man. Thus, I declined the invitation to remain on the Hong Kong boat to return to our group of men. There were only 6 of us, including me, clinging to that boat and taking turn to dump the water out. We ate the crabs’ legs to sustain ourselves while the diarrhea went on every 5 minutes or so. They went on fishing for 3-4 days, and I don’t know how on earth we survived through those days. All that we had left was tiny bits of rotten banh tet mixed in with human feces and urine. It was dreadful but we got some nourishment from that. After three days, the Hong Kong boat returned. They looked for us and gave us canned foods. They didn’t realize we had nothing left to eat except chewing on the uncooked rice given to
us by the Chinese naval boat. Eating like that gave us a huge thirst; so much hardship had happened to us! We ate whatever on our boat to keep us alive. Once the Hong Kong boat returned, they must take pity of our horrible conditions to announce that they would start towing us back to Hong Kong. Only when they tied our boat to their boat that I would come over to their boat; they didn’t permit the other men to board their boat. They wanted to keep whatever left of that boat. That night when we reached Hong Kong, they forced us off their boat and back to ours. Then they cut the line letting us go; they didn’t want to take the responsibility for our survival. The waves would push us toward Hong Kong instead. Thus, they transferred us back to our boat, waited for the current to push toward Hong Kong, and cut the line between the two boats. Our boat just floated in slowly. When the day broke, there was a helicopter flying out on top of us giving instructions. Then came the police speed boat which pulled us up to a barge. Back then, the Hong Kong authority didn’t allow any refugee entering Hong Kong before spending a few days on a floating barge out in the sea for health safety reasons. They disinfected and washed us first before feeding us; all was done on that barge. After a few days to make sure we were clean, they let us enter a refugee camp in Hong Kong. It was completely isolated from all outside contact, and there we waited for the UN representatives to interview us and completed our personal files before we were allowed to go to a more open camp where we could learn English and got ready to go to America. It was my entire journey.

TVD: Once you arrived at the camp, what were your daily activities like?

PN: I was employed by the **** Organization as a translator. ****** I knew some English from the time I worked with the US military. It was bad. I didn’t return to school one day since I came here. Thus my English isn’t so good because I never had the chance to study English. So, that Organization employed me as a translator. I got paid with one bag of noodle a day. At the beginning, when they rescued us, the helicopter airlifted the children, about 10 of them, to the hospital directly because they were too weak. The 13 year old boy looked like an old man; he was just a child when asked. When one was near death, one aged rapidly and looked like old people. Now he lives happily in Chicago. {laugh} My eldest, Thi,
and Phu were transported to the hospital right away. It took them 1 month to recover from the ordeal before being allowed to return to us. Phu already forgot his parents; he was healthy and fat, and had quite an appetite. Thi, on the other hand, was stick skinny; she probably missed us a lot, and didn’t eat well. She looked dreadfully thin like those of the African famine children with bones poking out. Those pictures were lost during our many home-moving, and I am really regretted losing them. She was only skin and bones, and looked dreadful standing next to the barbed wires. She could throw that picture away herself because it just looked horrible. {laugh} She is beautiful now, and she probably doesn’t want to be reminded of that time. After that, we stayed at Camp Jubilee. Every day they would give us a bowl of rice. Our bodies after a period of starving would demand more nutrition than usual. We would feel hungry a short while after just being fed. Yet they only feed us a bowl of rice a day. Those who came from Da Nang or Hai Phong, they got help from their compatriots who came to the camp ahead of them. We, who came from Saigon, knew no one, thus we were pretty much alone and without any help. We begged for left over rice from others who had other sources of foods that they could spare us some of their left over rice. We were hungry an hour or two after being fed. They had this one huge cookware where they stir-fried cucumbers, liver, lungs – never a piece of meat, and green beans altogether. Then they would give us one spoonful of that combo on top of some rice and called it a meal. It was disgusting, but we were happy because we got something to put in our mouth. {laugh} Thus, being hungry Hoa must go begging for rice from one to another. July in Hong Kong was hot, so rice left from lunch would start spoiling after about 2 hours. God knows how long the food was there before it got to us. Thus before we ate, we rinsed the spoiling sustain off the steam rice to be safe. Then we ate that stuffs to survive. How could we compare ourselves to others who had better circumstances? When we got off our boat, we looked like a bunch of old folks, including the 13 year old child. After 3 months in the camp we started looking ourselves again. Once we were allowed to come outside to buy clothes to wear, we looked better visibly. Those who came from Hai Phong would point and said, “Look, look at that girl who used to beg for foods from our family. See how beautiful she is now!” How could they know about our past which was beyond their means by a long
distance? Now unfortunate circumstances put us in the position of having to beg for food from them. Imagine now miserable it was! We didn’t feel so humiliated by it. We also invite them for meal. That time the Hong Kong Authority gave each family some money; I can’t recall exactly, probably 30 Hong Kong dollars. Hoa would go to the market to buy dead chickens to cook; live ones were worth dozen of dollars each which truly beyond our reach. We’d buy the chicken imported in from China in the cages and died of suffocation during the transportation process. Each of those chicken cost only 2 Hong Kong dollars; we brought them back to the camp and made many dishes such as rotisserie, boiled ...etc... anything that we could think of. We invited the neighbors to share the food with us, but they always declined. Finally, it occurred to me that they knew we bought these dead chicken and they didn’t dare eating them themselves. {laugh} That was the difficult time at the camp, but we were thankful to arrive at freedom at last. Ah, during those three months staying at Jubilee, food was not enough, but I got a translating job at *****. There was no salary; instead, they would pay each of us a bag of noodle. Thus, every morning when I came there for work, translating or whatever, they would give me one bag of noodle, the standard payment for my service. And they made me eat it right there and then. Many times I squirreled away a few bits, while pretending that I cooked and ate everything. I brought them home to the kids, and they loved it. My wife would scorn that those foods needed to be saved, or to make into thin soup to eat with rice. “We had to be thrifty.” She said and didn’t want the kids to eat them. It was a long road that we travelled through in our lives. When we met the UN Representative, it was painful for us to see all those boat people who originated from Hai Phong or Da Nang leaving the camp sooner. They were members of the Communist Party or the Union, like those from Hai Phong, and they got to go the free camp only after two months in preparation for the trip to the USA. It took them 3 months to investigate our boat; it was very unreasonable. Our boat was the only one departing from Saigon, while the rest was from Hai Phong and Da Nang. They questioned why this boat from Saigon was still survived after 30 days on high sea? We told them of our deaths, and they investigated to make sure we didn’t cannibalize on them. We didn’t do any wrong; we even tied pieces of gold to the bodies so that if they landed somewhere people would bury them. They
invested me thoroughly. They asked me about the map of Saigon. They asked about my former military status, specially the part where I told them I worked with the Americans. So I told them my American officer was called Pinault, and my direct Vietnamese superior was Captain Lac. Pinault was an officer in charge of administrative and financial matters. They asked me what my salary was in 1968? I told them it was 6,300 Dong. They checked it against the salary book of the South Vietnam Army, and saw that a South Vietnamese officer didn’t make that much in that year; it was about 2 thousands some. My situation was different. I was sent in Special Operation working with the Americans, so on top of my regular salary I also received a sort of bonus equivalent to serving in the Air Born branch. Thus, my salary was 6,300 Dong. A regular soldier would have 5,700 Dong, still higher than our South Vietnam officers’ salaries. Those men faced death so frequently; therefore their salaries were almost twice as much as an officer’s. My salary, being a leader - a platoon leader, was 6,300 Dong; 600 Dong higher than a regular soldier. After my American interviewer, working side-by-side with an translator to verify all of my answers, quizzed me on details regarding my marching operations, jumping operations and all credentials that connected me to the Americans. Not only that, they interviewed every single one, one after another, from my boat about me. That’s why it took them three months to decide whether I would go to America. They were very surprised about the presence of a boat from Saigon, about how its leader was knowledgeable enough to do First Aid, how he knew the way to prevent people from being knocked off the boat by strong waves by tying everyone down, how to help the thirst with immerging people in the sea water or pulling blood from one person to pump into another. They seemed to be surprised and it took them 3 months to get done with the interview. Then the American stood up and shook my hands saying he already had the confirmation of my story from the USA. He said he knew an administrative Captain with the name Pinault, R312, who stationed there that year, and my salary was as such. He shook my hands and called me a hero, and the entire boat got to settle down in America. I was so happy because they investigated and confirmed my background. Unfortunately, the entire process took us three months while others, the communists - they left
after only 2 months. In any way, we reached the end of our journey to freedom at last and were able to bring our children over here.

TVD: Were you sponsored by a church or an organization?

PN: Yes, we were sponsored by the USCC, a Catholic organization, to come here.

TVD: The entire family?

PN: The entire family. There were people who had relatives already in California; they would go there directly. We didn’t have anyone because we were the first in our family to escape, thus we followed the World Relief to Houston, Texas.

TVD: What did you think when you and your family first arrived in the USA?

PN: Very pitiful. Upon arriving at Houston, I worked as a house painter; just like the Mexicans one see standing on the streets now. I worked on call, following a group of our country men. People would let us stayed in a trailer, gave us some blankets and clothes. They also gave us bags of rice bought from the market in Houston. They gave us those things, but our children craved the milk which we couldn’t afford to buy. A few days after we got there, I worked as house painter and house cleaner. I got paid about $15.00 for a day of work, which increased to $20.00 later. That was good money back then. I depended on my friends’ word of mouth; otherwise I would not know how to make a living. We had a friend, who escaped a bit earlier than us. Her husband was in the USA already, yet she still chose to escape by boat. She got sponsored by him and go to San Jose. Once we were able setting up contact with her, she would send us $20.00; $20.00 at the time when a stamp only cost $0.17. We used that money to buy dozen of stamps to send our mails to all those we knew even back to Vietnam. That’s how we found Oanh’s address. Oanh was a bride maid in our wedding. She married a naval officer so she left the country on his ship in 1975. She didn’t have to pass through miserable conditions like us. By the time we arrived in USA, she was pretty affluent with a business in selling fabric and a market. So, after we mailed a letter to Oanh, she wrote back telling Hoa that she needed a help with her business, and asked Hoa to come to California. We received so much money from the World Relief Organization. They gave us $250.00 totally for our entire family.
Worry about the cost of airplane tickets, we took the bus instead after receiving confirmation from Oanh about the job she offered to Hoa. Oanh would pay Hoa about $20.00 per day, and then would bring her to the Social Security Services to apply for more help. I bought the bus tickets to California, but we dared not buy 4 or 3 tickets because we didn’t have enough money. Finally and painfully, I bought 2 tickets from Houston to California. The two kids, Phu and Ty, were allowed to lie down at our feet. People were being lenient to us back then. They didn’t mind letting them lying on floor at our feet riding on the bus for free. I don’t understand why they let us doing that; nowadays, it would probably be illegal. Back then it was like that. So I bought the two bus tickets, and also some maps. On the maps I would mark and coordinated our routes starting from Houston going through whatever cities to get to where we needed to be. The maps cost me $0.25 each, and I wrote the details on them such as where we would be every day, the time of arrival, how long it took us to get there... I didn’t have to do it because I wasn’t the driver; it was only my old habit left from the time I was in the army. I had $20.00 left after all the purchases for the trip from Houston, and I had money to buy anything along the way. I bought some Bánh Day 106 and bread at Houston for the kids to eat on the road. So that’s how we brought ourselves from there over here. I don’t recall any stop except the one at San Pedro. When I saw the phone area code started with 714, which covered the entire region all the way up there unlike nowadays, I called people but no one picked up the phone to answer. No one picked us up; no one picked the phone. We already agreed on them picking us up at the station, yet there was no one. That night there was a bus going from San Pedro to LA which also was the last station; I tried to call them again, still no one picked up the phone throughout the entire night. Do you know the LA bus station was full of homeless people at night? If you could see them standing along the 4th St., you would understand how horrible it was. They would urinate on the street, they would smell terribly, and it was horribly until this date even with the presence of the police everywhere. Years ago it was even worse. Two of us, with two little kids in tow, pushed bags of clothes around, and bewildered in the middle of a bus station with

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no one to call for help; it was utterly miserable. Around 6 o’clock in the morning, I went out to beg the bus drivers, pointing at the map and showing them where I wanted to go to – Long Beach; “I stay here, can you pick me go to here – Long Beach?” “Long Beach was closer to our destination than LA, and there we could call our relatives to pick us up.” The Americans were very nice; they would let us, husband wife and kids, riding on the bus to Long Beach even though we ran out money. We arrived there around 8 o’clock. More futile phone calls were made. At this point I felt so scared and so miserable. What were we going to do here where we knew no one? Both of us, and two kids around 5-6 year old, barely spoke any English. Who would pick us up? Who would take us in? Finally with my last $20.00, I called a taxi whose driver was an Indian. I asked him how much it would cost to go from here to there in my broken English. My English was not as good back then. To be honest my pronunciation wasn’t good back then or even now. For example, I would say “Give me some salt”, and they would reply in “What? What?” At the end, I had to spell it out in writing S-A-L-T, meaning “salt”. I really had a hard time learning English. My reading was good, but my speaking wasn’t so for lack of practice. So when I met the Indian taxi driver I asked him if $20.00 was enough for the ride to which he replied “Yes”. Thus, it was 8-9 o’clock and we were still on the road; we needed to get to that address at all cost. When he got us there, do you realize how much it was? Exactly $19.60! It was amazing and I got exactly $20.00! {laugh} I was generous enough to tip him the last $.40! {laugh} If he asked me for some more, I wouldn’t have anything to give to him. When we arrived at the address and stood in front of the house, Oanh stepped outside and asked us profusely, “Hoa, you had arrived already? How did you get here?” It turned out the phone back then wasn’t like the kind of phone we have nowadays. The phone upstairs was connected to the ones downstairs going everywhere. Oanh had a brother/sister living in the garage, and when he/she heard that we needed a ride, he/she didn’t want to be bothered so he/she just left the phone off the hook. It was memorial moment. To be honest we were all Vietnamese, but we must tell the truth and they should not be upset about it. That time was a miserable time. I worked as a driver, transporting patients to the medical offices; those who were on welfare and such. Oanh loaned us $800.00 to buy a Ford Pinto, which was big enough to carry 3-7 persons at the time. One of
those patients was the owner of Thanh Son Tofu. She was one of the patients I drove around. The doctor would pay me $5.00 per person for the first time; the second time on they would pay me $3.00. Sometimes it was very unfair. For example, they would pay me $5.00, then once the person became their patient, they would stop paying me. Sometimes, the patient saw the doctor today, but he/she must return an urine test at another day. Thus, in that particular instant, the patient lived all the way in El Toro, and I must drive all the way there to pick up the urine sample or whatever to give it to the medical office. However, they didn’t pay me for that drive. I was almost tearful. {...inaudible sounds} They were Vietnamese patients. Back then Vietnamese patients couldn’t speak any English, and the welfare and medi-care benefits were generous. Each person would have certain number of tickets to check up their health and getting the medical drugs. Back then the government really took pity on our people’s conditions, so many had benefits and survived through that period of time. I drove patients around and also applied for welfare benefits. I had that for about one year, $ 602.00 for all four of us. Then I found a job that paid me $3.25/hr, which later increased to $4.00/hr. I fed my family with that salary, and worked at the Flea Market on Sunday. I believed once I escaped from the communists, I should not be anyone’s slave. I must live. There were many instants of humiliation. There were old friends who now turned away or took advantage on our conditions. After a while, I said to myself that the best revenge was to better one’s life. I wouldn’t be anyone’s slave. I must forward to live; I had done it in the past, I would do the same thing now. That’s the reason you see I named my business Hoa-Phat. I bought the super market, and made it a successful business to show those who had looked down on us before. Thus, those doctors whom I worked for, driving patients around or fixing up their leaky houses, yet when I showed them the Home Depot receipts asking for re-imbursement, $10.00 or $12.00, they would question them and said such papers were worthless because I could obtain them from anywhere. Their plumbing system was leaky, but they wouldn’t fix it when I told them so. When I fixed them, I expected to be paid for my work. The way they treated me made me sad. Yes, they still have their business around here. Therefore, my going into the business Hoa-Phat was a respond to them, and to life. Back then they treated me badly;
look at my business Hoa-Phat now. Hoa-Phat has many meaning. Firstly, the name Hoa-Phat stand together to show the marital love I share with my wife. Secondly, the success of Hoa-Phat was also a success of the Vietnamese in America. Thirdly, for those who looked down on us once, it would teach them a lesson. It was a symbol of the determination to overcome all hardships. We were not the type who would give up. That’s its meaning.

TVD: How did you move from Hoa-Phat, a grocery business, to Hoa-Phat money wiring?

PN: Back to the old time in Vietnam when I was preparing to escape, looking at boxes of gifts from oversea would always make me drool. Everything was so exotic, the soap – simple thing as a piece of soap, would smell so great. When I came to the US, I didn’t start out going into grocery business. I worked odd jobs, and then on the floor of the factory. My job then was to pack things in boxes to send off to places. My only professional job was knowing how to pack. From $3.25 at beginning I got a raise to $4.00. I worked like that, and I would bring home the torn boxes repacking them with stuffs to send back to my family in Vietnam. They would sell those items, and keep the money for me. Then, I would advertise to whoever in America wanted to send money home to Vietnam. Back then there was no such thing as money transferring service between here and Vietnam. My family would sell the items from the merchandises that I sent home to them, and gave cash to the other family. It went both ways. People could give me $500.00 cash here, and I would send home to my family a package of merchandises worth about $500.00. My family would sell the merchandises off to get the cash to give to that person’s family. Sometimes, my family would make a profit if they happened to sell the merchandises for $600.00. We used that profit to send more packages home. I was lucky in my packaging business by meeting a Korean, a supplier of Mervin, who willingly gave me a discount. For example, the shirt sold at Mervin for $19.00, he would give it to me at $3.00. I resold them by packaging and sending them back to Vietnam at the price of $5.00, making a handsome profit. Do you know they gave me hundreds of thousands dollars, and I packed hundreds of packages at that time? Within
a few months, I already made hundreds of thousands dollars. That was just my luck.

TVD: Had you have an office for you business yet?

PN: After I made some money from the business of sending packages back to Vietnam, I saved the money, about $8000.00, and open a store. $8000 was a large amount of money back then. I never expect to have that much money in my hands. After people transferred the title of us, I moved in that large empty space. I did whatever I could. I was so lucky to meet that Korean guy who let me in such a great deal. I was already very successful only after two years. People came to me because they trusted me. The first year was slow, but people put more trust in me in the second and third year on. Then I started receiving orders that people didn’t bother coming to check the package. They didn’t care what was in there. They only need to mail to me asking for packages worth $500.00, $300.00, or $200.00. They sent money; we packed. There were many packaging businesses by now, but they did business in a different way ‘til this date. Those unaware people would send money to them, they would pack only slow-moving merchandises which were difficult to sell, or no one wanted to buy. They just wanted to get rid of them and reported the amount of money. It was very unconscionable in my opinion. Slow-moving merchandises were considered a lost to me already, so I just did close out sale or threw away. I only sent merchandises that I knew being in demand in Vietnam. Thus, a $200.00 package could be resold and brought back $300.00. People made handsome profit, and they loved it; they trusted me because of it. I sold the less expensive items first. They were used to hold the doors or weighted the bottom of the boxes down. I sold them inexpensively, about $1.00 only. Because of their trust and based upon their trust, I bought a market. Just when my business took off, I bought a market. I thought now that people needed me to send packages to Vietnam, plus the fact that there were more Vietnamese in the area, they would also need to do grocery. They would do two things at once, ordering packages to send back to Vietnam and doing grocery shopping at the same time. Thus, I offered them two services. Only when the grocery business worn me out that I closed it down. I stuck to the packaging
business. Around that time, the US government started allowing money remittent operation to Vietnam.

TVD: It must be in the 90s?

PN: Yes. It was in the 90s. I sold the market in 1990, and switched to money transferring service after the diplomatic relationship was officially established. The license was difficult to obtain. There was a company called Nho Thai, a Vietnamese one. We Vietnamese have many strange habits. No one had license to transfer money back to Vietnam back then. They sued us for doing business without a license and brought us out to the district court. There was a company that came in with an offer to buy Hoa-Phat at $300,000, and then at $350,000. Eventually it reached $700,000. They asked me, “What do you have for sale? There was nothing in your store for sale.” I told them, “I have a lot of customers who respected me. When you buy Hoa-Phat, you indeed buy my customers whom I really care about, respect, and build upon.” They wrote to me confidentially so that no one else knew about it, but dozen years have passed since then that I can tell you now. I had that confidential letter in my hands, but I still accepted orders to transfer money back to Vietnam. To offset any potential problem, I asked my customers to write something to the extent that they agreed to let Hoa-Phat transferring money to their families, and that they trusted Hoa-Phat as a money transferring business. Bringing those papers, about dozen boxes in all, along with me, I showed them to […….] because I was applying for a business license. I showed the woman the signatures of my customers, ten thousands in all, to get her approval. She approved that, and asked for the map of Vietnam. I showed it to her and started explaining about the Vietnam’s geography, its waterways, and the difficulties in getting access into remote regions deep in the jungles or high up in the mountains to turn the money to those who really needed it. I was the person doing that job. I explained to her how Dong Nai River\textsuperscript{107} was, as well as the whole network of waterway system of the south west region of Vietnam. That woman signed the approval of license for me after listening to all that explanation. It was the first of its kind, permitting money

\textsuperscript{107} Sông Đồng Nai.
transferring between here and Vietnam. Its approval based entirely upon the signatures of my customers, unlike those licenses granted to others later.

TVD: What years were that?


TVD: So you were in this business for about 20 years now?

PN: I already transferred money back and forth between Vietnam and here since the time of my arrival in the US, from 1982 until now. I brought my wife and children here penniless without welfare or Medicare. Nothing. So, I had to jump head in to restart my life again. I didn’t want to depend on others; it was just my personality. Not only I declined nothing and not minding the hardship of manual labor which required good health, I must have perseverance. I would not bow down. I had arrived to the land of the free; this country has provided me a shelter and an incredible freedom. I think it only reasonable that I give something back in return. I asked myself what I would become or could do had I stayed with the communists. I think like that, so I always feel thankful.

TVD: Do you have any thought about our community throughout the years?

PN: I have mixed feelings talking about our community. While I am happy about our many successes, I am saddened by what I saw as low level of intellectual. How come people just grab and compete with each others? How come they can’t forgive? There are plenty of fishes in the ocean; each person would have a net to catch them. Getting more fishes or not is really depend upon the skill of each one. If one has good techniques, I am talking about skills here such as being a medical doctor, one would catch big fishes, and thus one would enjoy more. Those unskilled persons like us, we build our fortune with sweats and bloods. That is understood without the need to ask out right. The Vietnamese has that kind of habits that saddened me numerous times. I guess it is because people’s intellectual is low, or that they had experienced a long period of time in
hardship. When one is poor, one looks around and only sees other poor folks. When one had overcome the economic hardship, one should extend a hand to those less fortunate to help lift them out of the hole. Try to help the unlucky ones to be like us, not by giving them money, but by giving them their dignity. As a whole, we would move up together. For example, there are situations where former VIPs would like to brag about their former titles by saying this or that person used to be their underlings working on this or that job. They looked down on them and did nothing to raise a person’s dignity. Then, there were people who would like to compare their own hardship to the others, and concluded that their own was worse. Why did they have to be like that? If I had suffered hardship back then, and now my life has turn around, I would like each and everyone to be happy like me. Our community only has individual successes so far, and I haven’t seen a sort of unity that would help the entire community to move up as a whole. That is my own opinion, and I am saddened by what I have seen. There are many youngsters who are very successful. Yet, I still hear people complaining that their own children can’t measure up to this or that. Why are they thinking that way? Wouldn’t it be good enough that these youngsters didn’t turn bad? They live on a land of plenty and free to do whatever they want; it'll be a reward by itself if these kids don’t join the gangs or doing something stupid. We should not think that they must be this or that, but accept them instead. The apple will not fall far from the tree; be a model of goodness and success to them. If we are successful, then our children will follow our steps. Do what we preach; that is by itself a personal success already. Right now just teach our children not to lie, or to steal, tying two bunches of herbs into one in order to pay for the price of only one for example. Cheating on social welfare is rampant; how can that environment is good for a child? Even if he/she would turn out to be this or that successful person, they would live in their own world with their own kind. Instead, if we really achieve success by our own sweat and tears honestly, our children would remember that it is their parents’ work to put them through school, and be thankful to their parents. Then, they would live a happy life knowing from deep down of their souls that they have been spared the misery the previous generation had shoulder ed it for them. That is living life. We Vietnamese are so sad sometime.
TVD: I’d like to have a final question to you. Do you want to say anything to the future generation and to our community in general?

PN: Like I just said previously; I have nothing more to say. We Vietnamese once had a Dien Hong in ancient time which unified all of us to fight against foreign invasion. In another words, Vietnamese can come together to fight off a foreign invasion. It is a part of who we are and what our history is. The future generations of our children should remember where we came from, and that we once had a Dien Hong to unify us all. We Vietnamese should not be selfish, and only think of oneself. We shouldn’t because our titles not to mingle, to share, and to forgive among ourselves; only then, we can talk about a kind of unity that will lift up the entire country. That’s my feeling about what we should instill in the future generations; how to mend the Dien Hong of the Vietnamese people. Thank you.

TVD: Thank you very much.

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