FOURTH'S A FIRST FOR NEW CITIZEN

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At an age when many men are aching for retirement, Ma Do is starting a new life.

Maybe he feels compelled to make up for the 13 years he spent in a North Vietnamese labor camp after Saigon fell into communist hands in 1975. Do, 65, is the general custodian and jack-of-all-cleanup trades at Vancouver Goodwill Industries. Today, he is celebrating his first Fourth of July as an American citizen.

Do is mildly embarrassed at what he calls "my broken English." He has an impish smile and sparkling eyes when he describes his feelings about his new citizenship. Do took his oath in March in Portland, along with about 60 others.

Do's life in Vietnam is a microcosm of the decades of wars that have plagued his homeland. In the 1940s, when he was 17, his farming family helped feed Ho Chi Minh's soldiers, who then were battling the French.

His mother's land, in the family for generations, eventually was confiscated by the North Vietnamese. Years later, his own house in Saigon was seized.

Do is a humble man. In 1967, when he was a captain in the South Vietnamese Army, he was offered a medal by U.S. military officials for helping rescue a U.S. pilot who bailed out of his jet because of engine trouble.

"I didn't want a medal," Do said. "I say no."

Finally, when U.S. officials insisted on rewarding him, Do asked for sheet metal and bags of cement for repairs to housing for his soldiers and in the community market.

When Do sets down his broom and homemade dustpan to talk about his U.S. citizenship, he stands soldier straight. That's what he was for 22 years, a soldier.

He was a lieutenant colonel when he was handcuffed by North Vietnamese soldiers in June 1975. He was imprisoned with thousands of other soldiers, community leaders and other political prisoners in what were called "re-education camps."
"They were called labor camps, not prisoners," Do said.

In the camps, the prisoners were forced to raise vegetables to help feed themselves.

In 1988, after 13 years of imprisonment, Do was released. Three years later, with the help of a friend, he was on his way to the United States. He stepped off a plane at Portland International Airport, bound for Vancouver.

Do said he enjoys freedoms in this country that were forbidden while he was captive in the new Vietnam.

"Here, the freedom to study, the freedom to work, the freedom to happiness, yeah," he said.

"When I become American citizen, I have so many things," Do continued. "We can travel, we can buy anything, we can talk (about) anything."

Since his arrival here in 1991, Do has learned English, found a job, and helped put two of his three children through college.

All on a custodian's income. Do, and his wife, Lan Pham, live in Vancouver, near the Washington State School for the Deaf.

Dale Emanuel, spokeswoman for Goodwill Industries, said Do brings out the best in people.

"There are some people who glow from the inside, and that's Do," Emanuel said. "He makes people smile. He's kind.

"And you know why he likes to work at Goodwill? So he can help people who are where he was years ago. He's pretty cool."

Next semester, Do plans to work half time so he can put himself through college. He wants a degree in English literature.

"Now it's my turn," Do said.

Cutline: Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian * New citizen: Ma Do, originally from Vietnam, is celebrating his first Fourth of July as a U.S. citizen. As a janitor at Goodwill Industries, Do comes in contact with many shoppers. "There are some people who glow from the inside, and that's Do," said Goodwill spokeswoman Dale Emanuel. * Perseverance: Through hard work as a janitor at Goodwill Industries, Do has helped put two of his three children through college. "Now it's my turn," said Do, who's planning to go to college next semester.

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