

Interviewer: Vien Nguyen
Method: Digital Audio Recorder
Interviewee: Phien Nguyen
Location of Interview: Groves, TX
Language of Interview: Vietnamese
Translation by: Vien Nguyen
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Relationship to the interviewee: Father

Name **Transcript**

00:01

Vien What was your life like as a child growing up in Vietnam?

Phien [Translated] When I was a child [pause], about six years old, I understood that our family was poor. I had to miss two years of school to help my parents. Therefore, I was twenty years old when I finished high school. When I was about twenty-two years old, I was drafted into the war through the South Vietnamese military, and went into a military training camp.

Vien What occupations did you have in Vietnam?

Phien [Translated] After serving in active duty for a while, I worked for the Republic of South Vietnam government. At the time my military rank was lieutenant. My responsibility was to be a military training instructor at a military base for South Vietnamese soldiers.

Vien Where did you and our family live during the war?

Phien [Translated] During the war, our family lived in Bien Hoa.

Vien Did you move anywhere during the war or stayed there?

Phien [Translated] Our family stayed in Bien Hoa during the war, but I lived and worked as a military trainer at the military base located outside of the city Phu Cat, in the providence of Qui Nhon, which was located in Central Vietnam.

Vien What rank were you in the military during the war?

Phien [Translated] My highest rank in the military up to 1975 was Lieutenant and military instructor for the base at Phu Cat for the Republic of South Vietnam.

Vien Were any of your family members also involved in the war?

Phien [Translated] Yes, Tuyen Nguyen, my old brother was also a Lieutenant and was in charge of payroll and finances for the military.

Vien Did you come into contact with any American soldiers during the war?

Phien [Translated] I did not work with any American soldiers, but I did work with American military consultants that were at my base. Even then, I did not interactive with them that much.

Vien How did the war affect our family?

Phien [Translated] The war affected everyone in Vietnam especially those that lived in South Vietnam. The war made everyone constantly worry about their lives and safety. Our family pretty much felt the same way.

4:09

Vien Is there any certain instances that you remember most about during the war time period?

Phien [Translated] During the time that I worked as a military trainer, the instance that I remember the most was [pause] when the Vietnamese Communists attacked our base, which happened twice. They killed and injured several of our soldiers and civilians at the base. It caused me a lot of grief and emotional distress after both attacks.

Vien Were you ever captured by enemy forces?

Phien [Translated] After the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, I was captured by the Vietnamese Communists and taken to a reeducation camp. During that time, I felt very worried about my family and a lot of sorrow because the Republic of South Vietnam had fallen into the hands of Communism.

Vien Do you remember what it was like being in the reeducation camp?

Phien [Translated] When the Vietnamese Communists forced me to go to a reeducation camp, it was like being in prison. I was in the reeducation camp for five years and four months before they released me. During that time my morale was very low, and I felt very distraught because I no longer had freedom or free will. I felt helpless because I could not do anything to help my country and protect my family. I felt very sad.

Vien Did you or a family member suffer any serious injuries as a result of the war?

Phien [Translated] No, no one in the family suffered any serious injuries or disabilities during the war, which was comforting for me.

Vien What was life like for you and our family after the war?

Phien [Translated] Well, right after the war was over; I was in prison reeducation camp for five years and four months. During that time, our family suffered a lot of hardships economically. There was not enough food for our family. As for me, in

the reeducation camp, I was always fatigued and malnourished. The Vietnamese Communists forced us to work in the jungles. We had to chop down the trees to plant corn and other vegetables. After I was released from the reeducation camp, our family sold various items to make a living, but we still faced economic hardships. I went to work as a manual laborer. I was not able to work in the occupation that I wanted to because the Vietnamese Communists said that I did not have a good background and all I deserve to do was manual labor. So I did a lot of arduous work and physical labor, which was not even enough to feed my family.

9:00

Vien When did you come over to America?

Phien [Translated] We came over to the United States on November 13, 1992.

Vien What reason did you have to leave?

Phien [Translated] Well, I think that after the United States government decided to pull out of Vietnam and let the Communists take over, they felt guilty for abandoning us and decided to help the soldiers of the former Republic of South Vietnam. So the United States government allowed the officers of the former Republic of South Vietnam and their families to immigrate to the United States.

Vien Was it a difficult decision for you to leave Vietnam and come over to America?

Phien [Translated] It was not a very difficult decision to make because I felt that anyone who appreciates freedom and hates Communism would be happy to have the opportunity to leave Communist Vietnam and go to a free country. Of course, we were all very sad to have to leave our homeland.

Vien When you came over to the United States, who came with you?

Phien [Translated] I came over to the United States with my wife and kids.

Vien Did you have to leave anyone behind in Vietnam?

Phien [Translated] My father, mother, siblings, nieces and nephews are still in Vietnam.

Vien Did you bring anything with you from Vietnam when you came over to the United States?

Phien [Translated] We really did not have anything to bring with us, just our bodies and clothes.

Vien Where did you go after you got into the United States?

Phien [Translated] Over in the United States, we went to the city of Port Arthur. Right now, we live in Groves.

Vien What transportation did you use to come over to the United States?

Phien [Translated] We came over in an airplane.

Vien Why did you choose to come to the United States, instead of other countries?

Phien [Translated] Because the United States government sponsored us to come over here.

Vien How were you allowed to come to the United States?

Phien [Translated] The United States government sponsored all officers in the Republic of South Vietnam military who spent more than three years in the reeducation camps to come over to the United States. I had spent more than three years in the reeducation camp so I was able to go.

13:27

Vien What kinds of questions were you asked when you applied to immigrate to the United States?

[pause]

Phien [Translated] When I turned in the application, I had all of the files and information that they needed, even photos. So when the interviewed me, they just asked me about my previous occupations, my rank in the military, and the time I spent in the reeducation camp. Afterwards they looked at my files and asked about my wife and kids. Those are the questions I remember. There may have been more.

Vien Did they give you a health inspection?

Phien [Translated] Yes, of course they inspected my health. Before I could come over to the United States, they gave me a very thorough health inspection.

Vien How do you feel about your decision to move to the United States?

Phien [Translated] After I was able to escape the harsh life under Communism and come over here, I felt very happy about my free life here. I was happy.

Vien Did you face any hardships starting a new life in the United States?

Phien [Translated] It was very difficult. At the beginning, it was very difficult, but we were able to rely on the United States government, which gave us six months of food stamps so it was not impossible. It was hard not knowing the language. So going to work was difficult at first, but then I got use to it.

Vien Did anyone help you find a home in the United States?

Phien [Translated] Yes, there was an organization that helped immigrants find low-income housing, which we lived in for three to four years.

17:52

Vien How did you find a job?

Phien [Translated] It was hard finding a job, but I eventually got a license as a manicurist.

Vien What occupations have you held in the United States?

Phien [Translated] At first, I made fishing nets for fisherman for about six months. Then I got a license in cosmetology, and I have been a manicurist ever since for about 13 years now.

Vien What are some similarities and differences between your old life in Vietnam and your new one in the United States?

Phien [Translated] The difference between my old life and my new life. [pause] My old life in Vietnam was filled with a lot of difficulties and hardships, especially after 1975 up until 1992. It was very difficult, poor, depressing, and painful not having any freedoms. I did not like the Communists. Compared with my new life now, now I have freedom. My morale is better, and my everyday life feels better.

Vien Are you a citizen?

Phien [Translated] I have my American citizenship.

Vien When did you get your citizenship?

Phien [Translated] 1998

21:34

Vien How did you attain your citizenship?

Phien [Translated] I took the citizenship test.

Vien Do you consider yourself an American or a Texan?

Phien [Translated] American, of course.

Vien Do you still keep in touch with family and relatives over in Vietnam?

Phien [Translated] Yes, I keep in touch with my siblings, nieces and nephews in Vietnam.

Vien How often?

Phien [Translated] Usually during Tet and holidays. About two to three times a year.

Vien Have you gone back to visit Vietnam?

Phien [Translated] Yes, I went back to visit my father. He was eighty-one years old then. He passed away a year later.

Vien What was the experience like when you visited Vietnam?

Phien [Translated] When I went back to visit Vietnam, it was great seeing family members again. However, I still did not like the Communist government structure in place in Vietnam. I would not want to live there.

Vien How does our family celebrate Tet?

Phien [Translated] We would take some days off of work and come together to eat and have fun.

Vien Does our family keep an altar for our ancestors?

Phien [Translated] Yes.

25:26

Vien Do you have any annual tradition or celebration for the ancestors?

Phien [Translated] Yes, we have a day out of the year for each ancestor in which we honor them. The day is the same day that they passed away.

Vien Do you have any songs or music that reminds you of Vietnam?

[pause]

Phien [Translated] Songs...I cannot remember their names. Any songs that sing about home.

Vien Do you think that the next generation will maintain their Vietnamese heritage and background here in the United States?

Phien [Translated] In my opinion, the next generation, even though you are born in America, you should never forget your heritage as a Vietnamese. You should always remember your homeland in Vietnam.

28:35

Vien Do you remember any other stories you want to tell?

[pause]

Phien [Translated] Stories about what?

Vien Stories about anything you want to say.

[pause]

Phien [Translated] Well, I pretty much said it all. Stories about my childhood and military experiences, that's all.

Vien Thank you, Dad