

Name of Interviewer: Nathan Batoon

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Name (of Person Interviewed or pseudonym): Dr. Duc Van Tran

Name Transcript

First recording

Nathan What was it like were you grew up in Vietnam?

DR I grew up in Hanoi in the capital now in Vietnam.

Nathan What was it like growing up there?

DR I was born in Hanoi and I did not stay for long time in Hanoi because '41 was the year I was born and 1954 I followed my parents to move south to Saigon. So, it is a period of about 10 to 14 years.

Nathan What kind of family values did you grow up with?

DR When I was young my parents... my dad was a public servant, my mom was just a house wife and we did have a quite large family. My parents have 12 children and I'm the oldest of the family. Especially at that time according to the culture, to tradition of our country, the first son of the family has to take a huge responsibility and also the leadership in helping the parents and especially in my particular case a high number of brother and sister, so we have a very close family and with a very high sense of responsibility and service and helping out parents.

2:05

Nathan How many brothers and sisters did you have?

DR I have seven brothers and five sisters together and that is not usually to be nice but quite frequent at that time in our country.

2:35

Nathan Do they still live in Vietnam or did they come to the United States?

DR We lose two...One brother and one sister by the communists. I have a younger sister who tried to escape from Vietnam but was killed by the Communists in her own boat. And the other is my third brother who was also a physician, a surgeon in Vietnam. He disappeared in a camp so called for education, but I think it is a camp of concentration, and we completely lose track of him.

First Recording

3:22

Nathan Were you ever able to visit him in the camp?

DR By the time he was in the camp I was already in the United States. But his wife did have two or three times to see him in the camp.

3:49

Nathan When you were growing up before the war what was your basic daily routine?

DR During the war I came to South at the age of 14. I complete my high school in a French private school, Beaguene, and I decide to attend the University of Saigon School of Medicine, and I graduate M.D. by 1969, and from that I was involved in the Republic Army of Vietnam. By the age of 28 I joined the Republic Army as a physician serving in the army as such.

Second Recording

Nathan What prompted you to become a physician?

DR My family, we have a lot of brothers and sisters and my father he advised me that it much better to be a professor because it just take me 3 years to graduate and to have money right away. At first I did have intention to go into that career, but at the last minute I changed my mind. I got this scholarship from the Republican Army and they send me to a military school and attending the medical school in Saigon, so I explained to my dad that I prefer to be a physician because for some reason I like that career much better than teaching and that's the reason why I become physician.

1:08

Nathan What age did you start practicing medicine after graduating?

DR After I graduate in 1969 it's mandatory for all the freshly graduate physicians to join the army. 100% of all the young physicians have to join the army because at that time we don't have many physicians and there is a great need for physicians in the army. So, I served the Vietnamese Republic army since 1969 until '75.

Nathan Were you in involved in any cultural organizations at this time?

DR In Vietnam at this time we were in the army and you don't have... even time to come back to Saigon to visit your family, so my entire life during that period of time was completely in the army.

2:20

Nathan During the War were you in South Vietnam, and did they transport you all over Vietnam?

DR Yes, in Saigon and 100% military physician so I follow my unit most the times in the 3rd regional military part in Vietnam and I served in the field at least 3 years. Then after that they send me back to the one of the largest military hospital Gua Wa Military hospital.....and I served there until I left Vietnam.

3:11

Nathan That was in 1975.

DR Yes.

Nathan How would you compare the Vietnam medical facilities in Vietnam at that time to

the American facilities?

DR I follow the French education and the MD degree from French was recognized all over the world including in the United States. I think that I did have chance to follow a very good training, and after 33 years staying in the United States which is now my second country and have the chance to follow all the training program and especially I went into the residency training program for five years in San Antonio in the specialty of atomic and clinical pathology. I realized that we did have comparing... considering our condition at that time I think that we did have pretty good education and training in the military in the medical field.

4:35

Nathan How big was the medical school in Vietnam?

DR At that time it took me 7 years to complete my medical career in Vietnam and at that time there was only two medical school. One in Hanoi and one in Saigon and it was the selection of future medical students was very, very rigid. And there are not many...if I recall well, every year they select about 40 to 50 young students in the first year.

5:20

Nathan That's to go to medical school?

DR Yes, because they don't have more room for that.

Nathan How would you say the war affected your family?

DR To answer your question, actually I still have kind of mixed feelings related to this Vietnam War, but for my family I think they are pretty good. They was lucky because when I get married in 1969 and all of the time from 69 until 75 my wife, my kids, they are in Saigon, so they are quite safe. I'm the only one who went into the field so about the safety of my family I think that it was pretty good.

6:25

Nathan What is your family currently doing right now?

DR I think that among all my brother and sister we still have 10, and little by little during a period of almost 15 years they escape Vietnam. I was among the one who came here first in April of 1975, but we managed to have them little by little and they are now 10 of them are now in the United State. Three in San Jose, three in Phoenix, the rest in L.A. I'm the only one who stayed Texan here in Austin.

7:31

Nathan What do you remember most about that time period between 69 and 75, during the time you served?

DR The thing that still in my memory was the war...We was not lucky. Not like Laos or the Thailand people. Unfortunately for our Vietnamese people we was under two or three too many super power. The Russians, the Chinese, the American and we was involved in a very terrible war, very destructive war and the consequents is as you said, we lost our freedom, we lost our country. So, that's history, I can't do anything about that, but because you asked me this question. Before I came to this country, I was very angry because I personally did participate in this war and I realized that the whole army...we was fighting very

forcefully too preserve our freedom, to protect our country. Especially the south Vietnam, but with the whole 100% support from the Russian, 100% support from the Chinese, we did not receive such support from our friend, our ally. Now when it come to this country when I came in 1975 this idea is still in my head, but after 30 years, 33 years actually, I'm here, I realized there is a big difference between the American government and the American people. And the influence of the media, the news, that this distort everything and the politic even now in this period many, many times American people cannot do exactly what they like to do. So, I completely understand. I do have a lot of many very good American friends. One of them is Dr. David R. Peter who work with me in Vietnam and who continues, who was my sponsor when I came over here. And now that he is more than 80 years old we still have a wonderful relationship, so I think that the war... happened and I strongly believe that it was not the result of the agreement 100% of all American people and even now considering Iraq it is about the same. I'm so afraid that the Iraqi people may end up to have similar suffering that the Vietnamese people we did have in the past.

11:46

Nathan

The doctor who sponsored you, was a he an American soldier?

Dr

When I complete my residency in 1981, I told to my sponsor and all my American friends that we did benefit from the friendship from the very charitable spirit from the American people. You did widely open your arm and give us the opportunity to live to enjoy to freedom and also to rebuild our life, and after a tremendous period of very hard working stress I thought that it was never that I may have the chance to be back in my position as physician. Thank God, I realized that and one of the main things I got is according to the openness to the friendship of the American people and I like to do things in return, expressing my gratitude to people of this country giving us the chance to be back again in our profession.

13:32

Nathan

Was it an American program which helped to bring you over?

DR

By the time I came over here they didn't know especially according to the float of the Vietnamese refugee and the first float leaving Saigon was among the Vietnamese people they did have a lot of experience with the Communist and they were scared to death. They preferred to die rather than live with the communist. You can see all the pictures now from the top of the building with the helicopter landing area showing how disastrous people trying to leave Vietnam. I was among those people. So, after many years practicing in Vietnam our life was pretty comfortable. My wife was a pharmacist in Vietnam. I had my own medical clinic but in 15 minutes we did decide to leave everything behind to leave in April.

15:08

Nathan

How did that opportunity present itself?

DR

The opportunity is also almost miraculous. One of my sisters worked with the DAO Defense Attaché Office in the American office and she introduced me to one of her boss that he is my brother he already have a family he is a physician he tries desperately to leave the country so I was lucky that I came into the refugee camp taking care of the refugees staying there for days waiting for the airlifts. And the few that they do need me and finally they say okay...you go.

16:10

Nathan

You were actually a doctor in the Refugee camps?

DR Officially not, yet there was no real organization but I offer myself to take care of the refugees.

Nathan Did you ever come face to face with the enemy?

DR Personally I was lucky. I was not facing anytime any real enemy so I took care of military men. Taking care of the prisoners of war. But, fighting face to face, I was really lucky. I did not have that situation.

Nathan How long were you in the refugee camp?

DR The refugee camp. When I left Vietnam it was in huge cargo plane. I think it was the C-141. We was darkly landing on Guam and I stay in Guam for almost 3 weeks. During that time we were was living in a military marine barrack and I did have the chance to serve the Vietnamese refugee helping them to take care of themselves about their medical care with American doctor over there.

Nathan Is that when the recognized your talent as a doctor allowing you to enter the medical field in America?

19:30

DR No, there is no anything. I was working there as a Vietnamese physician and also as an interpreter so to help the American Red Cross, to take good care of the refugee at that time. Going through the training or go back to school or from my own accord.

Nathan On your way over how long did take for you to get to Guam?

DR I do not remember because you know that I left Vietnam with a lot of emotion. I thought that this is the end of my life leaving my country I lose everything and I don't have any idea about my future. And my wife and I we discuss and we look back to our three kids three years old 2 years old and 18month old at that time and we think even if we have to work in the jungle that having freedom we preferred that this is what this kind of feeling and emotion that I had in the Airplane. There was no any plan. We just put everything our future in the hand of our God and that's it.

21:24

Nathan Leaving Vietnam were you emotionally torn or was there any part of you that wanted to stay in Vietnam?

DR As I said, that I know for sure 100% that it would be impossible especially for my family to live with the communist. So that idea helped us to make a very strong and decisive decision right from the very beginning. I prefer to go to any other country with freedom regardless of the occupation that I may have and we still decide to go and... hoping at that time it was just hope to have our freedom.

22:30

Nathan When you came over to the United States did they ask you questions in order to enter the United States?

DR Yes, they asked me a lot of question especially dealing with security clearance. But main thing as I said we left Vietnam not because the economy closed

because as I said my condition in Vietnam was very comfortable but we left because we are so scared of the communist and wees requesting to have the chance to enjoy to benefit of the freedom that the American people are enjoying.

23:15

Nathan Were the communists hunting you because you part of the South Vietnamese Army?

DR I think that they did not hunt me personally but I know that if I were left behind I stay behind I would have the same consequence as my brother who is dead.

23:40

Nathan How many of your family members fought with the South Vietnamese?

DR At that time since 1954 I have 5 brother in the navy in the special force in the U.S. Army serving the Vietnamese Army at that time.

Nathan Were there any conflicts with your family joining the communists?

DR No, we was 100% sure that we have to escape from them.

Nathan Can you elaborate on the early comments of how you harbored all those feelings of hatred Americans when you first got here. How would you perceive your feelings now?

DR First personally, I feel that I'm lucky because there are not many people that did have a chance to be here in the United States and enjoy all the freedom especially for the future of my children. One of the main reason was because of the future of my 3 kids. And right now because of the hospitality of the American people we realize that we did get a lot of good things and thank god all my children are now very productive U.S. citizens of this country.

25:40

Nathan What are their occupations?

DR The first one is my daughter she is now 37. She have a master degree in business administration and she is working with a financial firm in Austin. My son who is now 37 and he is a physician practicing in Dallas in the specialty in kidney disease neutralists. And my baby, the one who was 18 months when she left. She is now a dentist working as an orthodontic dentist right here in Austin.

26:45

Nathan If you would have stayed in Vietnam you don't think that these same opportunities would have been afforded your children?

DR Personally, I don't think so because if I still stay in Vietnam I will be classified in a very special category of people that you can not even have a shop and all my kids if they still there I don't know what they would be at this time. So again that is also the very special gift from god that we are now in the United States.

27:25

Nathan Do you still have any relations with anyone in Vietnam?

DR I still have my uncle. He is still in Vietnam. He is 84 years old and in good health. And we continue to take care of him off and on financially.

Nathan What would be the difference between your experience and his experience? What did he have to go through by staying in Vietnam?

DR My uncle doesn't have any idea of America. All his life is in Vietnam in the countryside. He is a very simple guy...he is 84.

28:24

Nathan I noticed that you formed a healthcare organization. What prompted you to start this organization?

DR Actually, especially since the day that I retired in 2001 so for about 6-7 years ago. I did have some free time and I was lucky that my wife still worked as a pharmacist and all of my children they are on their own so I we organize a little bit my very heavy hectic life as a practice in family practice and I told myself that the remaining years that I try to do that the rest of my life is some what meaningful. I'm Catholic so my by meaningful by serving really our people. So that is the main reason I participate in two main organization. The first one is a Catholic organization. It is a movement helping the Catholic to lead a witnessed life following Jesus Christ with love and charity. And the second organization of that I'm actually a president of AVAMS. AVAMS stands for Austin Vietnamese American Professional Society. So in that organization every specialist of people working in the medical care in the health care will get together and try to do something to help our people especially Vietnamese American in taking care of their health condition and organization is aiming to provide a preventive medicine. So vaccination, lectures and counseling so all our Vietnamese American will benefit of all the progress and the facility medical facility that we are now having in the United State.

Nathan Is this your own Vietnamese medical facility or is it run by the hospital?

DR No this is a very private society. We hope that in the future we will have more and more members and we may extend our facility. But until now we have health fair organized every year in Austin and this is the 8th. The normal participants is increasing and the last time we had 5 to 6 hundred people attending that. So our specialist had the chance to sit down and explain to our people how to take care of their health conditions. We kicked out unnecessary costs for our medical care and also we keep them healthy in mind and healthy in body to be a good American citizen.

32:50

Nathan Is this all volunteer work?

DR We have our physician, nurses, and especially a lot of young people and especially students from U.T. in different religions. Catholic and Buddhist we form together in a 100% non-profit spirit. Our spirit is just serving. We were lucky all our people serving us are volunteers.

33:30

Nathan Were you Catholic in Vietnam?

DR I was converted Catholic. After I got married my parents and my entire family we were not Catholic, we were not Buddhist but we followed the Ancestral code. We honor, we have deep gratitude to our ancestor and we try to follow the common sense to be good people. But, having a great influence from the Christian brother

that I have a chance to receive my education since young age. The elementary school as well as the high school in Hanoi and stop in Saigon so I just receive a very deep information about Catholicism so that lead me to be a Catholic.

34:55

Nathan You attended Catholic schools in Vietnam?

DR Yes.

Nathan What were parents occupations in Vietnam?

DR My dad was a public servant and my mom was a house wife with all the children. She sacrificed all her life for her kids.

35:25

Nathan Would you think of yourself as American or as more of a Texan?

DR The reason I correlate with U.S. citizen and the reason that I told you that I'm Texan because from the very beginning for one I was closer to San Antonio, I complete my residency and I was in the Army since 1981-1987.

Nathan The U.S Army.

DR Yes, in the U.S. army. I was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army under my request because at that time my own clinic was so busy and I could not afford to go into military training at many bases. So, the military life in Vietnam and in the United State I'm personally so proud to serve Vietnam and also I do have the chance to serve my second country which is the United States.

36:45

Nathan What would be the biggest difference between serving in Vietnam and in the United States?

DR The big difference is that serving the Vietnamese Army I was serving my own country and I'm serving with the idea with my single purpose to protect my country to preserve the freedom in my country and although the condition the military was nothing compared with the American army but I'm really proud of what we did. Not only me but thousand of thousand of others Republican Vietnamese military men and women serving the South Vietnam. Now talking about the U.S. Army why I decide the U.S. army is expression of my gratitude to this country and also I think it is also my own character. When you receive gift from someone you have an obligation to do something in return and it is not my own feeling but I strongly believe that is the it not all the mentality of all the Vietnamese refugee benefiting having all the benefit that living in this country is.

38:32

Nathan What was your sentiment about us pulling out of Vietnam, and what was the sentiment in the Refugee camps towards Americans? What was the sentiment in the Vietnamese communities?

DR I'm not in a position to say for all the Vietnamese refugee, I'm just talking from myself. From myself, my general feeling there is a big difference of feeling when I was in my country in Saigon and especially after 30 years of living in this country while I was in Vietnam serving in the army as a military man I like that our huge army should have the chance the opportunity to at least protect the South

Vietnam. That's my feeling. I strongly believe that way. Unfortunately as you see it is not that way and I have a very ironic feeling about our ally. But when I came to this country considering the politic, considering the power of the president of the power of the Senate and all of that and also the media news and I understand every country and every people have to serve their own interest first. Then I understand the reason why we lose. That according to our culture we still feel a good friend should stay with his own friend no matter what happens. And that why I said I still have mixed feelings about war. All our officers...how many committed suicide in 1975. To reflect to you that how hard we were determined to fight all we need is real help a good weapon that we could not. And many of my friends say how come in one week the whole Vietnam army just collapse, but I did have the chance to explain to him not all of them agree with me that today you don't have any rocket, you don't have any airplane, your hands were tied 100%. How can you fight against a huge army, the red army like this? And saying that not to try to justify our failure. More or less it was also our fault. We were not pointing our finger to our friends say hey, if I lose my country it is your fault. That is not my feeling. The feeling is that the main things we were not lucky. We were in the position to do things is impossible. And unfortunately our allies, our number one friend did not see that way. And things happen. We lose almost 60 thousand of our American friend. From the Vietnamese more than one million and we did fight in vain. So that's my feeling.

Nathan How long do you think the war would have lasted if America would did not pull out?

DR I have no idea. It all depends upon which way the American go. What was the main goal? Especially now because we are almost in the same situation with Iraq. All dependent on how strong is your determination really help the Iraqi people.

43:45
Nathan With the anti-war revolution going on in America and the anti sentiment against the war, what do you think about this?

DR I did not want to generalize all the fact that we are observing now but that the one thing that I strongly believe especially from the part of the Vietnamese student they still have this communist scare, fear in their heads and whatever they feel that this trap is coming then they will react. And I, 100% stay behind that. The way they fight it all depends the individual organizations, the person him or herself, but the main thing is when was under the communist then you realize what mean communist and that is and I realize that most of my American friend did not stay one single day under the communist then they just see the reaction from the Vietnamese people, from the Vietnamese American people living now in this country under the aid of a very peaceful American. They enjoy peace all their life. They enjoy all the good things in this society and it is totally different.

45:47
Nathan Different from Vietnam?

DR Yeah, I think that many of the American friends told me "why were the Americans react for single thing. They are very quote un-quote very allergic to communist, and I share their feeling. When you stay 10 years, 13 years in a camp of

concentration you are very fearful. Not only for yourself but for your generation to come.

Nathan Have you gone back to Vietnam to visit?

DR Yes I went back a couple of time to take care of my uncle and to help him to build a little house to spend the rest of his days. So, I did visit Vietnam a couple of times.

46:42

Nathan What was that experience like?

DR My experience is that my country is one of the most beautiful country in the world, and I still pray that in the very near future Vietnam will enjoy their freedom.

47:11

Nathan How does your family enjoy important holidays such as Tet?

DR I always explain and guide my children living in the United States. They came here at the age of 3 years old, so practically they are American even in their thinking. But, I really did explain to him to my children's according to our example telling them that we really enjoyed the freedom in this country, the prosperity of this country, the friendship of this country, but don't forget that our Vietnamese culture we do have also something that we should preserve. For example, the respect of the elderly, the respect of the teacher, the obligation of the parents to taking care of the future and the education of their kids. I still celebrate with my kids during the Tet festival and during that day it is the second day all of them are in Dallas we'll get together in my home and we celebrate together by talking about the past and remembering that our parents our grand parents, going to cemetery and saying a prayer for them. Trying to have a very close relationship try very cohesion in our family which is very characteristic in most of the Vietnamese family. Especially in my own family we decide that every two years we have a get-together. And now we so large that there is no any single family that accommodate 10 brother and sisters and spouse and also about more than 20 niece and nephews. So in June, we have our family reunion in Cancun. So during that time we will close together, especially the second generation. I have the chance to talk all to my niece and my nephew and my children that we continue maintain the good heritage the good Vietnamese heritage. And I strongly believe that the respect the elderly the respect of the teachers, the gratitude, the willingness to work hard, to go up on the latter and to be productive citizen, and I'm very happy that we are doing pretty good. We are in a good direction.

50:45

Nathan In trying to pass on these ideals to your children, what do you think will become of the Vietnamese culture in the U.S. as time goes on and as more generations become more Americanized.

DR We are very realistic. Now our children are living in this country, they started in this country, they are U.S. citizens. For sure they will have a full pronged influence from the American culture which is very good. I realized that there are so many type of celebration and tradition here. The father day, the mother day, something great that we don't have in Vietnam. And also, the sweet heart day, that's also great. So, I think that there are so many good things that we learn and

we definitely will adopt to enrich our culture, but there are also many thing that I hope that all my future generation should not leave...our language. 'Cause when you lose your language, you lose your identity. So a lot of good tradition as I mentioned then they should have a kind of combination of all the best things from both culture and that make the richest in our American society in our American lifestyle.

52:46

Nathan

Are there any other memories or experiences that you would like to share today?

DR

As I told you for almost one hour, the final impression that I would like to express is again our sincere gratitude to the American people. We are lucky, and with all the gift we are receiving from the generosity, the hospitality of the American people. We will try to do in our part to deserve all of this special treatment beginning from our own family. And I did do my part and I told to my kids they should do their part. This country is now ours. We are American. Not only the Vietnamese American, but you see that there are a lot of ethnic minority in this country. And the Indian people, the Chinese people, the Vietnamese people, the Spanish people, all we are American and we contributing to preserve the prosperity and the strength of this country. And especially for our American freedom and our Vietnamese American people...the freedom. And that is my passion; that is what I like to say.