

**Name of Interviewer:** Jacob Wang

**Method of Recording Interview:** Digital Audio

**Language of Interview:** English

**Location of the Interview:** Katy, TX

**Date:** February 27, 2008

**Search Key Words:** Vietnam; America; War

**Name of Person Interviewed:** (Vivi) Tung Tran

<b>Name</b>	<b>Transcript</b>
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00:01

**Jacob** What was it like where you grew up in Vietnam?

**Vivi** Well, we live in an isolation [stutter] town called Plây Cu and it was a very hard life. Simple life, but hard. There's always wars around. Bomb will be dropping next door to us any day, and I remember my childhood was [external noise]... Because my dad was in the army, so we moved from city to city, from town to town, so sometime we stayed in one town two years and sometimes we stayed in another town for four years. But, I don't remember much. When I was like six or eight; those were good times because there's no war. But, between the age of nine and eleven: my last year in Vietnam was when I was eleven years old. It was very hard. We lived day by day. We don't know what's going to happen the next day.

**Jacob** What did you do during the day when you were a child?

**Vivi** Well, if I'm not in school then I'll be at home babysitting [stutters] the brothers and sisters or washing clothes or help mom cooking. Sometimes I hang out and play with my friends. We play with stick and ball and chopstick and ball [laughs]. And we pretty much try to stay around the house, not wandering too far away because we never know what's going to happen next. So, yeah, pretty much most of the time – I mean, if I go to school, we go to school, but even if we go to school it was difficult because [pause] we never feel safe.

**Jacob** And you said that your dad was in the army?

**Vivi** Yes, my dad was a [stutters] like a CIA undercover for the South Vietnamese government. I remember when we lost the, I mean, right before we left Plây Cu, which is the last town that I remember we lived in Vietnam, right before we left, he, in the middle of the night, he burned everything in the office because if the communist come in and if they read anything, then the family can get in a lot of trouble. So, my childhood was [pause] tough. I mean, it always, either we're poor, we're dirt broke, we're always in war [external noise], always looking, there's no tomorrow, you just live day by day.

**Jacob** Did you ever come into contact with any American soldiers or what did you think about the Americans being there?

**Vivi** Yes, as a matter of fact, what I do nowadays was because I remember one year, it was during Christmas, one of the GI gave me a little box of mixed candies and maybe a bag of M&M's. As a matter of fact, [stutter] what that GI did at the time for me... I thought "Oh my god, this man". I thought they were in Santa Claus uniform and I was eleven at the time. I thought "Oh my god, this must be someone from Heaven, this is an angel or somebody. This must be somebody really nice. He came down and he gave me these candies and these M&M's. As a matter of fact, that was what drives me to do charity work nowadays. I go back to Vietnam every year, bringing M&M's and medicine and cookies and candies for the kids because of that GI. I don't remember how he look, but all I remember was in my mind at the time was I look up at him and I thought, this must be someone from heaven that come down to give me this thing, which was to me at the time very precious. That's what I remember about GI. I do not see American GI as hurting people when I was a young kid. All I remember was whenever the GI are around, they would always give us candy or something. I mean, candy or little pack of gum and stuff like that. And that's all I remember the GI. It's like angel from Heaven that somebody sent down to help to give us something at that time.

05:08

**Jacob** What do you remember most about that time period?

**Vivi** [Pause] Red dirt. Raggedy clothes. [Heavy sigh] [Cries] Very unsafe.

**Jacob** When did you leave Vietnam?

**Vivi** April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1975.

**Jacob** Who left with you when you left?

**Vivi** I was sleeping and it was in the middle of the night. My dad came home and he wake all of us up. I think it was two or three o'clock in the morning. Actually, before that we moved from Plây Cu to Saigon. I remember my dad burned everything in the CIA office in Plây Cu and we came into Saigon. I remember have to travel from Saigon to different cities try to look for my dad. [Cries] I thought I was pretty tough.

**Jacob** Did anybody from your family stay behind in Vietnam?

**Vivi** Yeah. Oh, Yeah. [Pause] I don't know how anyone can go through anything like this and able to keep a straight face talking about it, Jacob. It's hard. It's very emotional. Even if we go back and we go to the same town where we used to grow up, all of us cry, too, because it was bad. [Talking over each other] Mom and I, and I think Tam, we went to different town looking for my dad. His boss finally put us on an airplane and send us back to Saigon. And then we went back to Saigon and then dad finally make it into Saigon. On April 22<sup>nd</sup>, in the middle of

the night, my dad just wake us up and said "Everyone have to go now." Because my dad had a high rank in the Vietnamese government, I remember all the GI covering my family. We were in the middle of American officers because if they catch my dad leaving the airport, he would be prosecuted – he would be killed right away. They surrounded my whole family, and Tam almost got left behind, but somehow they managed to get her through the gate. We were the only Vietnamese family on that airplane leaving Vietnam. We were very, very blessed. All of my brothers, 6 of us, and my mom and dad, we all leave in that airplane. All of my parents, kids, were able to get out of Vietnam without any difficulty unlike all the rest of the Vietnamese people.

09:45

**Jacob** Were you able to bring any personal belongings with you?

**Vivi** No. All I have was one pair of clothes on me. We don't have any toys like kids nowadays or anything. All I wanted was my ball of rubber band. I remember I try to crawl under the bed and get it but my dad said, "No more time we got to go now." That same pair of clothes I wore in Guam, which is one of the islands in the southeast pacific. I wore that same set of clothes for a month. Taking a shower, jump in the ocean, came back and shower and wear the same set of clothes.

**Jacob** After you left Saigon, which cities or places did you go to? You went to Guam for a month...

**Vivi** We were there for a couple months, maybe a month or two. And from there we went to Arkansas. Little...

**Jacob** Little Rock?

**Vivi** Yeah, Little Rock, Arkansas. Or somewhere in Arkansas, I'm not sure... Wish I could go back to that one of these days, but I haven't been back to Arkansas since then. We stayed in these campsites; we stayed with a lot of people, with a lot of refugees. Tried to find other family members, auntie and uncle, and all of them like that. We finally left Arkansas and headed to Houston. My family stayed in Houston since then.

**Jacob** What was the journey like leaving Vietnam?

**Vivi** I remember I really didn't want to go. I hate it. I was rebellious. When I left Vietnam, I did not understand why I had to leave. My grandmothers were there. All my friends were there. Eleven years old, you have friends; you have your bicycle. I just got a bicycle because I came into Saigon. [Stutters] Someone in the army campsite, that's where we lived, someone gave me a bike. I learned to ride my bike and I remember I did not want to go because I had a bike. Going to a different country with a lot much better stuff than Vietnam, I didn't want to go. I hate it. But my dad said, "We'll come back some day."

**Jacob** You stayed in an army camp or a refugee camp?

**Vivi** When we were in Saigon, we lived in an army camp. But when we came to Guam, it was just some campsite set up with a bunch of people. It was very crowded. There's no privacy or anything. You're eleven years old, you're taking a shower, and somebody be sneaking and looking at you. You just have to wear your clothes, take a shower, and then go outside and let it dry. [Sigh] You just go outside and sit until your clothes are dry because you have no clothes and you have no privacy. When we moved from Guam to Arkansas, there was no privacy whatsoever. It was very crowded, I mean, Guam was even worse. It was more crowded than Arkansas. Arkansas at least, they set up these refugee camps where they had cot to sleep in and stuff like that. They told us we have to go learn English. I remember I did not want to learn English. I refused to learn English for a long, long time. Even when I came to Houston I refused to learn English. I refused to take off my clothes from Vietnam because [pause] I don't understand why I have to do it.

14:55

**Jacob** How do you feel about your decision now to come to the US?

**Vivi** It was an opportunity. America opened the door to let us in. It was an opportunity. I don't know, it's hard to say. Well, America is an opportunity for me. I can't ask for anything more. But, I just hope that there's no war. I just don't understand why people have to make guns and sell weapons. People should discuss differences. You cannot win when you use weapons with one another.

**Jacob** Was your family sponsored by another family? Or was it because of your father's rank and status in the government?

**Vivi** We were very blessed. Someone took a look at all of us. One of those GI's. I don't know if it was my father's ranking because he wasn't that high rank. Tam, my sister, she look like she's a mix and maybe that's the reason we get out because they thought she's white. Because we have French blood in our ancestor. My great-grand mother is French. When they look at Tam, they thought she was American. So maybe that's why. I think that's the story. That's the true story that they were French. That's why they let us out.

**Jacob** What was the hardest part about starting a new life in Texas or in the United States?

**Vivi** Oh, yeah. Your question was who sponsored us. It was a Baptist church that sponsored my family. We still talk to them once in a while. They sponsored us from Arkansas into Houston, and I remember the first time we arrive into Houston we live on Woodridge (South Houston). They put us up in this [unintelligible] and my parents, eight people, they put us in a three-bedroom apartment. I remember we opened the fridge; there were rice and fish sauce. There were dresses in the closet for us, clothes and everything. My parents reassured me because I was one of those kids that are very sentimental and stubborn. I really missed Vietnam a lot. I didn't understand why I had to leave. Even with these people being really, really nice to us – I appreciate their niceness – but I still don't understand why I have to leave the country even though there's all this material around me, I still don't understand that. But I remember there were food in the fridge and clothes

in the closet for us and they were very nice to my family. But I remember I used to go to [unintelligible] elementary school. My first day go to school I refused to take the bus home or refused to be pick up because I'd rather walk and I remember getting lost for five or seven hours because I didn't want anything to do with this new world. I just wanted to be back in Vietnam with my family, my grandmother, and all my friends. I don't care much about this new country because this is not my country.

**Jacob** When did you finally accept and start learning English and adopting U.S. customs?

**Vivi** It took me a long time. I remember Mrs. Robertson is my fourth grade teacher. She was a really, really nice white lady. Tried really hard to get me out of my shell. Houston weather can be extremely hot. I was wearing the army jacket that [pause] belonged to my dad and even in ninety-degree of Houston weather, just imagine wearing a pilot jacket, and they could not get that jacket out of me. I refused to take that off until almost the end of fourth grade because it's just something that you hang on to and you don't want to let go. Maybe almost a whole year before I finally opened up and the reason I opened up was because math was so easy to me. I didn't understand why I couldn't speak the English but whenever they give me math...[external noise]. The teacher finally give me puzzle, and finally let me sit by myself and let me do what I want to do. I remember I start playing with the puzzle myself, I just didn't want to talk to anyone. Poor Mrs. Robertson [laughs]. I went back to visit her from time to time when I was younger and apologized for my actions. I just couldn't get over it. The first half of the year all I did was play puzzle and play by myself and then I started to look around and realize that these math and these kids have problems with math. And I look at the math problem, and I don't know, maybe coming from Asian country, you just excel in math or something. I just laugh inside. You're eleven years old and you just don't want to associate and you realize it's so easy, how come they don't get it. Math was what draw me out of my shell. The teacher probably realized that this little girl like math and she started showing me other math problems. From that moment, that's how she pulled me out of my shell.

22:30

**Jacob** Do you still keep in touch with family or relatives from Vietnam?

**Vivi** Yes, as a matter of fact, my grandmother just passed away a couple of years ago, but even when I was in Alaska, I send money home to her, and I go back to Vietnam since 1991. I've been doing medical drives and I send a lot of stuff back to Vietnam. Taking care of a lot of people back there, not just my family. Since 1991, we do the medicine drive into Vietnam every year. I stop in '96 because I got the shingles. When I moved here back to Texas in '99, starting in 2001, my husband and I started a helping hand program. I go back to Vietnam for the past five years, you're talking about thousand of M&M bags, gums, pencils, pens, medicine, we just pack it up and anything we can afford to and we just bring it back and help those people that are behind there now. I still have my uncle back in Vietnam, but he's okay. His family is okay, I don't help him, I help other less fortunate Vietnamese kids. My family members in Vietnam are okay, so they

really don't need my help. Whenever we go there, we do food drives to thousand of families. My happiest moment is when I give those M&M's, and gums, and pencils, and pens to kids [laughs].

**Jacob** How does your family celebrate important holidays like Tet?

**Vivi** Well, it is tradition for Vietnamese people to gather together. I guess its all countries, no matter what nationality you are. Family is the core of our society. So, whenever we have any special holidays, we get together. My mom passed away in 2004 and my dad passed away in 1985, so since dad passed away we had our mom to hang on to, now that our mom is gone, we go to our oldest brother or our oldest sister, which is Vivian's mom. We go to her house to celebrate, just like the [unintelligible] people or the Hispanic people, we gather together, eat a lot of food, just like Americans during Thanksgiving, and we all just eat and play and hang out with family members and watch the kids grow. We share certain things with the kids and our younger siblings to see what we can do to achieve a better life than us. That's what we do, basically.

26:23

**Jacob** With the generation of Vietnamese born in the United States, do you feel that they've lost their cultural identity of being Vietnamese?

**Vivi** I don't think anyone ever lost their culture. I think culture-wise around the world, during World War II and World War I, Ethiopia, Cambodia, there's genocide. I think, as a human being, we only have each other. Before the Internet there was culture because we don't cross each other a lot and because of the wars. With the Internet and with each other open up, it's fun to have cultural things, I think its better when people mix different cultures like during Thanksgiving, we'll be having turkey and then we have Vietnamese pho. During Vietnamese New Year, we'll be having pork and egg, but then we also have cheesecake. A lot of people worry about losing their culture. I don't think its culture, I think it's more like getting back to our basic human beings with each other. I'm not too worried about Vietnamese losing our culture. It's fun to have a culture. When we have Vietnamese New Year at the Vietnamese temple, we'll be having Vietnamese traditional dress and we also have African traditional dress. We have Hispanic traditional dress. To me, that is culture; that is human culture. I don't think human beings ever lose their culture.

**Jacob** Lastly, are there any memories that you would like to share?

**Vivi** I went to the holocaust museum. In 1945—then thirty years later, 1975, it happened to Vietnam. Same thing. In 2002, it should be 2005, thirty years later, when the genocide happened in Cambodia. I just hope that all these wars and walls break down. The basic necessity of human beings is being happy with family members. No matter where you are in the world, people all they want is to be happy, with their loved ones, with their family and friends. Even if they're in the jungle of Africa or the Saudi Arabia desert, they still want to be friends. They just want to hang out with their friends and family members. Those kids in Iraq right now or in Vietnam, they're all the same way. It's just our leaders of the country need to stop thinking like being the ruler of the world. Let it be a free

world. I hope that no kids, none of the kids ever go through what I went through. For an eleven-year-old to go through [unintelligible] and I'm so blessed. I'm so blessed to be here in this country and to have Mrs. Robertson pull me out of my isolation or else I can go bananas, I'd go nuts. I'm not going to be very productive for society. But I'm so blessed, I'm one of the blessed person that I'm here. I don't have to go through what other people go through. My aunt, she went through where all the women on her boat were dead. They rape them and throw them off board. She came into the island by herself. I cannot imagine that people have to go through things like that. My friend who live here with me for a while, she said they were out on the beach, and there would be dead bodies all over, all over, no matter where you walk there would be dead bodies. It shouldn't be like that. It should never be like that. I wish that no one ever go through what we have gone through. Kids in the war country are very, very lonely and sad. They don't live for tomorrow, they live day-by-day.

32:52

**Vivi**

Every Vietnamese family that has been in a war country, there house will be stocked up with food, and you don't understand why they have food [laughs]. Because we don't know when is the next hit that's going to hit our house, that's why we have to have a lot of food [laughs]. It took me thirty-something years to realize I don't need to buy a lot of food in my house. I don't need to store six months of food supply in my house. Living with that kind of mind is horrible. You keep thinking something is going to happen next. And you don't know when it's going to happen, so you just have to stock up like you're always 7-eleven or something [laughs]. I just wish that no one ever have to go through what any war country citizen goes through. It take not just one generation, it affect our younger kids, it affect my kids because my kids doesn't understand why mom has to go buy so much food, why mom always has to worry about tomorrow. But because we always live in fear, that's why. So I wish that no one ever go through what we go through. It take a lifetime to recover from that kind of pain. I'm a Buddhist, I've been practicing a lot how to control my emotion, Jacob. I thought I'm okay, but when you talk to me, something deep inside just come out and I choke. People who go through wars, where other human beings come in and wipe you out; literally, shoot you for no reason. It's hard. It takes a lifetime to heal even with all the love, the freedom of America. I can go down to HEB and just walk with my cart and I can get the food I want, any food I want, but still, as soon as I get in my car and drive home, I just don't know. With September 11<sup>th</sup>, we don't know what's going to happen to us next. I just wish that those kind of feelings, the next generation never have to go through it because it's not fair. We have enough natural disaster already, we don't need human being disaster to cause each other harm.