This is Thuy Vo Dang with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project at UC Irvine. Today is January 24, 2013. I am in Huntington Beach, California. I will be interviewing Mr. Tran Thy Van.

TVD: Would you please introduce yourself, starting with your full name.

TTV: I am Tran Thy Van.

TVD: When were you born?

TTV: I was born on the 31th of December, 1944, in Hoa Vang Town in Quang Nam, Vietnam.

TVD: Do you have any memory of your childhood in Quang Nam?

TTV: I don’t have any childhood memory in that place; my mother left my father after I was born. My father went looking for her and dragged all of us away from our birth place. We ended up in Phan Rang and lived there until I grew up.

TVD: Could you talk some more about your father and mother?

TTV: My father’s name is Tran Nhâm; I don’t remember my mother’s name. I don’t quite understand the relationship between them, but I already had two older sisters when I was born. One of them had passed away in the early years, leaving only the younger sister and me.
in the family. I don’t know the reason for my mother’s running away from home. After my mother had left, my father brought my older sister over to his older brother’s home. She was about 11 or 12 years old at the time, and I was about 4 or 5 years old. My father brought me along in his search for my mother. I remember that period of time even though I can’t recall the name of the city; we had travelled by train all the way to Hanoi⁵, and then circled back to Phan Rang. There must be some sort of hint about that location which caught my father’s attention. I ran into my mother there for the first time since she left home in a small town called Ninh Thuan⁶.

TVD: How old were you at the time?

TTV: Only 4 or 5 years old. My father and mother met each other again, and we spent a night there. My mother left for good in the dead of the night later. My father stopped in Phan Rang until he remarried to a woman whom I called “Auntie” in Phan Rang.

TVD: So there were only two of you living in Phan Rang at the time?

TTV: In Ninh Thuan, Phan Rang. There was an event that I am not sure if I should talk about. When I was Phan Rang, about 4 or 5 years old, I’d go catching crickets from Ninh Thuan to Tan Thanh⁷ near the ocean. I would walk along the road finding crickets; that’s how much I loved catching crickets and birds.

TVD: Yes.

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⁵ Hà Nội
⁶ Ninh Thuan
⁷ Tân Thành
TTV: That afternoon I saw a boat, the type that sailed along the coast of the three regions. This one came from the Central Region to purchase fishes and fish sauce for reselling in Da Nang. It was such beautiful boat that I came down to play. That afternoon while I was in the boat, I overheard them talking about going to Quang Nam, a place often mentioned by my father as our birth place. I thought Quang Nam was nearby so I asked them to let me coming along. I thought the trip would take a few hours until the afternoon or at the latest the next morning before I would return. Who knew it would take 7 days to get to Da Nang, and from then on I would become the adopted son of the boat owners. It was unusual in that sense. I didn’t find the way back to Phan Rang to look for my father until I was about 20 years old. My real father had passed away by then. From then on I stayed and enrolled in school there, and joined the military later.

TVD: What’s about your foster father, the boat owner? Do you remember anything about him?

TTV: Yes, of course.

TTV: What kind of memories do you have about him?

TTV: The man, my foster father, was called Huỳnh Văn Häu; his wife was Le Thị Em, ah Ngô Thị Em. They adopted me. They made a living by fishing, which was a hard life, and they brought me along. I went fishing with them for about 4 or 5 years before I couldn’t take the hardship anymore, I asked to be enrolled in school. My foster father let me go to school and fed me from his family’s table until he went to America. He, my foster father, passed away in

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8 Đà Nẵng
9 Huỳnh Văn Hậu
10 Lê Thị Em
11 Ngô Thị Em
San Jose. Back then I was in the military and got wounded. My foster father escaped by boat after 1975. He died when he was 86 years old; I also escaped by boat in a separate occasion.

TVD: Do you know what kind of a job your real father had back then?

TTV: Back to that long gone time in Phan Rang, he worked as a tailor. He opened a small shop in Phan Rang Market. I was in the elementary and I could only recall that much.

TVD: So after your mother left, did you... after stopping in Phan Rang, did you continue looking for her?

TTV: No, I could not. As I told you previously once my father found my mother, they even shared a bed that night, and yet she’d leave again during the early morning. My father knew she had made up her mind, so he stopped looking for her and settled down in Phan Rang for good. Until this moment I had no clue what my mother’s name was or whether she was dead or alive. Yet as I said previously, there was something in Phan Rang that made her, a resident of Hue, chose to live in Phan Rang. My father knew about it, thus he went looking for her there directly after the fruitless search in Hanoi. When I still went to school in Phan Rang after my mother had left, there was an old woman from Hue who claimed to be my mother’s close friend and being a resident of Hue like her. Her name was Vien. She told me my mother came from My Loi, Hue, and she was a relative—a cousin of the ladies Hoang Thi Cuc and Hoang Thi My who were Emperor Khai Dinh’s wives. That’s all I know. Old Vien told me about my mother, yet she couldn’t recall my mother’s name when I asked her about it. She

12 Huế
13 Viên
14 Mỹ Lợi
15 Hoàng Thị Cúc
16 Hoàng Thị Mỹ
17 Khải Định
explained that when my mother went into delivering me, she was in horrendous pain that she made this sound “chut chut”, thus her friends would call her “mother of the puppy” which then became her common name. Moreover, people didn’t pay attention to the name nor called out a person’s real name in the old time. They called her Mrs. Bay\textsuperscript{18} because my father was number seven in his family. So generally, that’s the reason why I don’t know my own mother’s name. Things were different back then. Or the friends would call “mother of the puppy” because of the “tac tac” sound one made during the painful child birth. That was the period of time when I was born in Phan Rang. My sister was born in Quang Nam. After my birth, my parents moved back to Quang Nam, their ancestral place. I don’t know how the relationship between my father and mother was when she left. I remember that afternoon, my sister and I went out to the front of the house, which was in the countryside, to head toward the road which located about 60 to 70 meters away. There were a lot of jack fruit and mango trees lining the way. We made an excuse to go to the toilets which were in the front. The fence in the back yard went right up to the wall. I saw my mother walking out with a bag in her arms. My sister was in the toilet first, thus my mother said something to her which I couldn’t hear. Then she came over to me to give me 4 coins\textsuperscript{19}. I asked her where she was going, and she replied that she went to do laundry. I wondered why she would gave me so much money, 4 coins was a large sum back then, if she just went out for laundry. After she was gone, I met up with my sister to compare our monies. I asked her how much money she got, she said 6 coins. I got 4 coins. My father came back in the late afternoon and asked about her whereabouts. I told him that she went out to do laundry, but my father suspected something else. Who would do laundry from

\textsuperscript{18} Bây  \\
\textsuperscript{19} Bôn các
afternoon until so late? He went inside the bedroom searching around. Then he walked out to announce that my mother had left us and took all her belonging along with her. In the middle of that same night my father brought us to the National Route 1 in the outer neighborhood called Mieu Van, we lived in the inner neighborhood. I can only remember that much and we would go on a search for her from then on.

TVD: Let’s returning to the time you were still in grade school. You said you went on fishing trips for awhile, do you have any memory about your school days?

TTV: I was in 4th grade in a French school when I left Phan Rang. There was a French school in Phan Rang at the time, but I loved catching crickets thus I ended up all the way in Da Nang, working on fishing boat. One day I was sleeping on the boat mooring on Han River in Da Nang after returning from a fishing trip out to the ocean. There was another boat that moored right in front of my foster father’s boat. I heard these two boys, who would turn to be my friends later on, learning French.....12:00 I wondered how on earth on the fishing boat there would be kids learning French language? The thought brought back my own memory of going school. So the next morning, I went to see my foster parents and told them I wanted to go school. I made a scene so my foster father must allow me to go back to school. He knew if he tried to keep me from going back to school when I was making a scene, it would become worse.

TVD: How old were you at the time?

TTV: About 6 or 7 years old. I returned to 4th grade.

TVD: Ok.

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20 Mieu Van
21 Lớp Nhì (in the old educational system)
22 Han
TTV: Then I got to 5th grade\textsuperscript{23}. I took the exam ...12:42 back then. I studied all the way until I was about 18 years old when I failed the High School Entrance Exam for Phan Minh Giang\textsuperscript{24} High School in Da Nang. I decided to return to Phan Rang to look for my real father. When I got back there, I learned that he had passed away and there was no one left. I left and returned to Da Nang, and to Hue to stay with my foster father later. After I passed the high school exam to get myself enrolled in Quoc Hoc\textsuperscript{25} High School in Hue. I studied there for less than a year when the protesting movement led by the Buddhist monks against President Diem\textsuperscript{26} happened. I pulled my student record and moved to Phan Rang to study, otherwise I would be caught in the middle of this protest against the government. A grenade blew up in the Radio Station in Hue at the end and I was right there. I went out that night and the martial law was imposed in the next morning. Buddhists took to the streets to protest because 8 of their members were killed, thus it turned into a demonstration against Mr. Diem. I realized I could not study in this environment, so I transferred my student record to Phan Rang to enroll in the public school which was called Duy Tan\textsuperscript{27} until I joined the army.

TVD: You mentioned the year 1962 or 1963, the period of time when there were a lot of ....in Danang or Hue.\textsuperscript{7}

TTV: It started in Hue and then moved to Danang. It was called the Buddhist Incident\textsuperscript{28} which happened in 1962 or 1963 and led to the overthrown of Mr. Diem eventually.

\textsuperscript{23} Lớp Nhất (in the old educational system)
\textsuperscript{24} Phan Minh Giang
\textsuperscript{25} Quốc Học
\textsuperscript{26} Diệm
\textsuperscript{27} Duy Tân
\textsuperscript{28} Biến cỗ Phật Giáo
TVD: Do you remember anything about the demonstration and the kind of condition people lived in at the time?

TTV: Those college students who didn’t join in the demonstrations were living pretty calmly even though demonstrations happened daily, especially after the grenade incident. The radio station was hosting a monk whose name I can’t recall now. He preached on the airwave and the Buddhists just circled around the station which located right at the Trang Tien Bridge on the right bank of the river. I went there with my friends just for the fun, and for the prank without paying much attention to the speech. A grenade blew up right in the middle of the radio station all suddenly. We learned in the next morning that it had killed 8 persons. The execution of Mr. Dang Si was also a result from that incident. This man ordered tanks to run into the crowds and chaos followed afterward. I left for Phan Rang because it was impossible to live peacefully in Hue. People brought Buddha’s altars to the streets to protest in that manner.

TVD: You lived quite an independent life even at a youthful age, didn’t you? You didn’t ask for permit from your parents at all. You decided by yourself.

TTV: No, when I pulled out my student record from Quoc Hoc High School, I used it to apply for enrollment at the public high school, Duy Tan, in Phan Rang. I retook 10th grade in Phan Rang.

TVD: So what did you study when you were enrolled in the public school?

TTV: Well, I started at 10th grade, going into Department B-Mathematics. In old Vietnamese high school system, they had Department A, B, C and D. Department A focused on biology for

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29 Tràng Tiền
30 Đặng Sĩ
31 Đệ Tam (in the old educational system)
those who wanted to become medical doctors or pharmacists. It focused on biology. What do they call it in English?

TVD: Biology.

TTV: Yes, it was biology. One must study it in order to enter medical or pharmaceutical fields. Those who were weak in mathematics, especially the girls, would choose that path. Department B focused on math, and thus the math scores were weighted heavily. Department C focused on literature; department D about ancient languages. Back then I was good with both math and literature; nowadays I am a writer.

TVD: Did you have any plan for your future career back then?

TTV: I knew I got good mathematic skill, so I enrolled myself in that department as an assurance. It was not until 11th grade\(^{32}\) that I started thinking about what I wanted to study. I thought Department B was about math, but I was also good at literature; I could make it to the College of Literature\(^{33}\) later. That’s all. Students only thought in general terms about their education back then; they didn’t dwell deep in it, thinking of being a medical doctor or somebody else some day. When we were in 10th or 11th grade, few of us would envision we would become an engineer or a medical doctor. That would only come after we had passed the National High School Exam. It was like that back then. It was war time, so everyone was like that; I can’t think too far off into the future even with my own children.

TVD: You were a young man living in the war time, what do you think about the youth of that generation?

\(^{32}\) Tú Tài 2 (in the old educational system)

\(^{33}\) Đại Học Văn Chương
TTV: The time I was at Duy Tan, I was the leader of all 4 high schools there: Duy Tan – a public school, Nguyen Cong Tru\textsuperscript{34} - a semi public school, Bo De\textsuperscript{35} - a private school, and Petrus Ky\textsuperscript{36} - a Catholic school. I was the ring leader of those 4 schools in the protest and ousting of my own principal at Duy Tan, Mr. Nguyen Quang Tuan\textsuperscript{37}. There were many reasons for that. This man was a Buddhist converted to Catholic so that he could become a principal-a coveted position. Once he beat the school manager right in front of us, and that man told us to what to do. I was young and energetic, so I became the student leader leading the classes. The musician Tu Cong Phung\textsuperscript{38}, a Cham\textsuperscript{39} ethnic, was in the same class with me that year in Phan Rang.

TVD: So what happened afterward?

TTV: The man was ousted. I went all the way to Saigon to protest, bringing along with me 3 more friends. We went to an organization called Nguyen Huu Thai\textsuperscript{40}, a meeting place for students. Back then college students didn’t have a Student Union\textsuperscript{41}, they had an organization called Nghi Luan Hoi Sinh Vien\textsuperscript{42} instead. The Student Union of Saigon didn’t exist at the time. Thus, I went to this Nghi Luan Hoi Sinh Vien headed by a president named Nguyen Huu Thai, who would later show his true color as a communist. When we were students, we had no idea who was a communist and who was not. I went in there seeking his help in the overthrowing of Mr. Nguyen Quang Tuan. As I walked in the office, I saw him coming out with a phone in his arm. I asked him where he was heading as I had already set an appointment with him. He

\textsuperscript{34} Nguyễn Công Trư
\textsuperscript{35} Bồ Đề
\textsuperscript{36} Petrus Ky
\textsuperscript{37} Nguyễn Quang Tuan
\textsuperscript{38} Tù Công Phung
\textsuperscript{39} Người Chăm
\textsuperscript{40} Nguyễn Hữu Thái
\textsuperscript{41} Tổng hội sinh viên
\textsuperscript{42} Nghi hội luận sinh viên
replied the Nghi Luan Hoi had been dissolved, and suggested me to walk with him over to Number 4 on Duy Tan St. That place, Number 4 on Duy Tan St. in Saigon, used to be the headquarters of Mme Ngo Dinh Nhu’s Women’s Solidarity Movement. After she left and Mr. Diem was shot to dead, that location was burnt down slightly inside and looted by the protesters. The college students came to take over that residence. Mr. Thai brought me there, which was actually only a short walk away. There were students who were cleaning up the ashes inside as I walked in. All fours of us gave them a helping hand in cleaning the place. Then I recognized a resident of Phan Rang, a former student of Bo De who transferred over to my school after he passed the High School Exam. He enrolled at my school for the senior year so he could take the High School Exam 2 at Duy Tan. He did pass it. He was even better than me as a student. He went on to enroll at the Law School. Nguyen Dang Trung, his name, is still alive at this moment. Nguyen Dang Trung currently is the seating president of the Legal Organization, but back then he was still a law student. He was so happy to see me! I told him, “Brother Trung, we need help. We want to get rid our school of Nguyen Quang Tuan.” He told us to wait. He cleaned from morning until afternoon, and afterward the students would pull out 2 or 3 tables and sat down to preside over a vote. I asked him how come he didn’t bring us to the General Staff and the Department of Education. I reminded him it was getting late and he promised to take us there. He said he was in a meeting to vote for a Provisional Student Organization. There wasn’t a Student Union at the time. It was preceded by the

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43 Ngô Đình Nhu
44 Phong trào liên đội phụ nữ
45 Tú Tài Môt
46 Nguyễn Đăng Trùng
47 Thủ lãnh luật sư đoàn
48 Đoàn sinh viên làm thời
Provisional Student Organization, and he won the vote. I got so angry and threatened to beat him up, yet he would not give in to my demand. At the end, he was voted in and was busy running things. However, he lost at the Student Union vote, and the winner was someone whose name I forgot. Trung won the president seat in next term though. The secretary was Tran Xuan Chi, professor Tran Xuan Chi who is currently living in U.S.A. After that term, it was Huỳnh Tan Man’s turn. We didn’t know they were all communists. Nguyen Dang Trung and Nguyen Huu Thai were more radical than others.

TVD: What did those students demand for at the time?

TTV: In principle we needed a Student Union, just like the Student Union at UCI over here. Back then it was like that. Afterward, while I joined the South Vietnam military force, many of the students would join the other side. The Student Union went on to organizing student to protest on the streets and clashed with the authority resulting in many deaths from being shot at.

TVD: Why did you join the army?

TTV: After I failed the National High School Exam II, I was depressed and decided to quit school to join the military. I thought I was made for a life in the military anyhow. So after failing the Exam II, I enrolled in Class #12 in Thu Duc Military School using my result from the Exam I. Thu Duc only required a passing grade for Exam I. After the first 3 months, the commanding officer at the time there, General Tran Van Trung, asked if any officer candidate would need transportation to Saigon to take the Exam II. I signed up and took the Exam II in the

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49 Trần Xuân Chi
50 Huỳnh Tân Mẫn
51 Tứ tài 2
52 Thủ Đức
53 Trần Văn Trung
College of Literature in Saigon. I passed my Exam II in that year even thought I didn’t have the need for it because I had already joined the military. I signed up with the Ranger Force, and enrolled in Class 2 which lasted 9 and a half month long. I became a ranger until the day I was wounded. The story was generally like that.

TVD: In the period of time when you were in the army, what are your most memorial moments?

TTV: I will tell this story in the presence of witnesses. I was transferred to the Twenty-First Ranger Battalion of the Group 1 Ranger, which had 3 battalions under it including 21, 37 and 39 operating in the First Tactical Zone- the northern most 5 cities of South Vietnam. I was an officer, and later became the commanding officer of a company under the Twenty-First Ranger Battalion. Each battalion would have 4 companies, and I commanded one of them. In the fight to retake Sa Huynh from the hands of the Vietcong, I led my men to retrieve it successfully and heroically from them. Yet my victory was taken from me by the commanding officer of the two Infantry Divisions in that region. That man was General Tran Van Nhat who is living here currently. His wife, Lan, owned a shop selling cosmetics products to women in this area. He stole my victory away from me, thus my chance to get promoted to captain. When I came to the U.S.A., I wrote a book, actually two books, titled “Anh Hung Bac Menh” and “Tieng Hon Tren May”. In there, I criticized him harshly and called General Nhat, one of a hero on our
side back then, a “robber” and I was proud of it. The culprit is still living in America just like me. Talking about the memories in the military or in the family is like, as you know, talking about a legend. Therer was a legend, I don’t know if you have ever heard about it, from the period of Emperor Tu Duc⁶² telling about a magical skill called “Van Phap Quy Ton”⁶³, which allowed those who mastered it to float across a river on top of a conical hat lying up-side-down. Many people of my village were those masters of that art. There was another skill called “Ram dau thanh binh”⁶⁴ meaning using straw men to fight real battle. Or another example was exchanging temples; for example, the nearby village got a temple built with bricks and painted with lime and got a tile roof while this village had only a poorly built temple with mud walls, covered with leaves, one would use magical skill to switch one temple for another over night. It sounded mystical but it actually happened in reality. My great grandfather, he was my father’s paternal grandfather, of Quan Chau⁶⁵ - my ancestral village, told a tale of how the men of Quan Chau had moved the temple of a nearby village in exchanging for their own ragged one. The people of the other village were so angry by the act, they demanded their temple back. They accused the people of this village of stealing their temple. Yet, how could it be? A temple wasn’t like a shirt, which could be stolen easily. They brought their men over ready for a fight. Thus, the men of Chau Quang would employ the magical art of using straw men to fight back because they didn’t have enough men power. The fight went back and forth until the time of Emperor Tu Duc who heard about it. He worried about a far fetch implication when these straw men could be used against the Emperor himself. So he put a death penalty on my great

⁶² Tư Đức
⁶³ Vạn Pháp Quy Tôn
⁶⁴ Rầm đầu thành bình
⁶⁵ Quan Châu
grandparents; a “tam bien trieu dien”\(^{66}\) death penalty including 3 options: death by cutting one’s throat with a knife, by drinking poison or by strangulation. My great grandfather chose strangulation option and asked for a few yards of silk fabric to carry out the penalty. He also asked for ink pen with red ink and black ink, and people thought he wanted to write some final words to his family. He actually made a knot at one end of the fabric and drew two eyes, called “diem nhan”\(^{67}\) and flew away on it. My great grandmother turned herself into a dragon and also disappeared. All that the villagers knew was that they went south. Later it was found out that they went south to Nha Trang where they temporarily lived in two separated locations: great grandfather lived in Hon Khoi, Nha Trang – Khanh Hoa\(^{68}\) while great grandmother lived in Phan Rang. Back then, if they were caught, three generations of the family would be executed. My great grandmother lived in Phan Rang; her husband in Hon Khoi, Nha Trang. A year or two later, they met again at Phan Thiet\(^{69}\), living a hermit life. They made their living by curing the people of their illness. People’s affection for them grew and rumor about them reached all the way to Hue. On the 18\(^{th}\) year of Emperor Thanh Thai\(^{70}\), meaning Thanh Thai had ruled for 18 years to that point, 1906, and he heard about that rumor. He sent investigators to Phan Thiet to check it out. They reported the same thing back that there was such a couple of wife and husband. Emperor Thanh Thai dismissed the death penalty, and rewarded my great grandparents the august title “Chi Duc Tien Sinh, Chi Duc Nuong Nuong, Than Phong”\(^{71}\) That title is hanging on a very grand temple in Ninh Thuan, Binh Dinh that the communists called

\(^{66}\) Tam bién trieu dien  
\(^{67}\) Điem nhân  
\(^{68}\) Hòn Khói, Nha Trang – Khánh Hòa  
\(^{69}\) Phan Thiet  
\(^{70}\) Thanh Thái  
\(^{71}\) Chí Đức Tiên Sinh, Chí Đức Nương Nương, Thần Phong.
Dinh Thay Thim⁷². “Thay” means master, and “Thim” is his wife. That place is called Dinh Thay Thim by the communists, and they turned it into a national center for tourism. Here is Quan Chau, and I am a descendent of the 3rd generation who has the privilege to keep this seal of my great grandfather. Here it is and it is made of ivory.

TVD: I see.

TTV: The most important thing is this thing. The seal is only a reminder.

TVD: What is this character?

TTV: The character means “Top”⁷³ to avoid confusion when using the seal to stamp on something.

TVD: I see.

TTV: That is up-side-down.

TVD: The story you just told, is it written down and told somewhere else?

TTV: Not yet.

TVD: Have you ever told it to your children and grandchildren?

TTV: Yes, but they need more time to understand. Those who are older already knew, the younger ones need more time.

TVD: Have you ever visited that place?

TTV: Not yet. I heard about it but I dared not coming back there. I can’t return to Vietnam in my condition. I came to America since 1989, almost 30 years, and I wrote books and other writing criticizing the communists. They knew me even though my former military ranking was insignificant being a lieutenant. My friends in Danang and Phan Rang told me not to return

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⁷² Dinh Thay Thím
⁷³ Thượng
ever because they already knew who I am. The Police Newspaper\textsuperscript{74} of the Vietcong had mentioned my name once. Five or six years ago, there was a show about Trinh Cong Son\textsuperscript{75} organized by Nam Loc\textsuperscript{76}, Viet Dzung\textsuperscript{77} or someone I don’t really know. I only heard about it because I didn’t attend that show. People had harsh words for the communists and I had nothing to do with it. Yet, their newspaper mentioned my name, Tran Thy Van, in specific and said this about me, “when mentioned the word “Vietcong”, he bit his lips and widen his eyes.” That was my image on Video #40 done by Asia Center a dozen years ago or so. That video had a title called, “War and Peace” and Viet Dzung was my interviewer. He asked me whether it was a “just” war to defense ourselves when the communists brought the war to the South and the Southern Army had to fight back. If I answered it was a just war than it was too banal. This was what I said, “if this war had happened again, I would do the same thing like I did before, volunteering for the military in my youth even if I knew I would lose both of my legs.” That was the way to way to say this war is for a just cause, wasn’t it?

TVD: Could you tell me a little bit about the experiences you had while serving in the military?

TTV: It was during the Sixties, wasn’t it?

TTV: It was 1966. The war became very intense while I was enrolling in the Training Class 22. I graduated and got transferred to the Ranger Force in Danang after 9½ month of training. I liked with this region, Danang, so I asked to be transferred here to the Eleventh Ranger Battalion to be closer to home. If I had to fight, I might as well fight on my homeland. Little that I knew because of the Buddhist Protest Movement which I had told you about previously, the Eleventh

\textsuperscript{74} Báo Công An
\textsuperscript{75} Trịnh Công Sơn
\textsuperscript{76} Nam Lộc
\textsuperscript{77} Viet Dzung
Ranger Battalion, which took side with the Buddhists and helped them to take on to the streets, had been moved to Pleiku. The one that stationed in Pleiku, the Twenty-First Battalion was sent to Danang in its place. Since it was the requirement that each place needed 3 battalions, thus if the Eleventh Battalion went to mountain region of Pleiku, then the Twenty-First Battalion moved back. When I volunteered, I wrote it down clearly that I wanted to join the Eleventh Battalion, I had no clue it had been moved to Pleiku. I ended up staying there for 2 years living far away from my homeland, and had to put up with the hard tasks of climbing mountains and jungles. After two years, there was a training session for staff officers, basic course for sub-lieutenants and lieutenants. I asked to sign up for the 3 ½ months course and when I finished, I asked to be stationed in Danang to be with the Twenty-First Battalion. Just when I joined Battalion 21, Ha Lao78 Operation came around. Back then the war already escalated and was especially horrible in the First Tactical Zone, but I was well motivated because of my youth. I had spent many nights thinking about the daring things that I did voluntarily in my youth; now I felt scared. At this age, I wonder how I could be so brave back then.

TVD: So could you name something that you did or experience back then?

TTV: Horrible. In the fights, death was always nearby. I was brave because I thought nothing of the dangers. When I wasn’t scared of death, I stepped right on the mines. I actually took pride in stepping on the mines. My friends here knew little of it, but I am really proud of myself. One morning we went on an operation crossing through a small neighborhood chasing the Vietcong. A mine blew up inside that tiny neighborhood which was fenced around with

78 Hạ Lào
thick bamboo groves. There was neither house nor the people who lived in there. In the war, the people lived on the roads, leaving the huts empty. After the mine blew up, I brought back a company in the late afternoon. I knew there were more mines at that location since one mine had blown up in the morning in there. I didn’t allow any soldier to enter but me and a non-commissioned officer79 (NCO). They, the smaller units under me, all waited outside. If I allowed them to tag along, there would be at least 10 deaths if the mine blew up. So I made them waiting outside while two of us came in. Instead of ordering my deputy to come in first with the soldiers, and died first if some thing would happen, as frequently be done by the other companies’ commanders, I volunteered to come in there first. I didn’t allow anyone to follow me in. As I entered near the fences, I told the NCO that we would cover from here over there. Then I stopped and my heel slipped only about this much, enough to step right on the mine being buried there. It blew up and the fragments hit my ankle. This foot was ok, but the other one was bleeding. I used this foot to brush the dirt away from the bleeding foot, and at the end I passed out. My wound got infected. I was move from Mo Duc80, where I was wounded, to Quang Ngai and they removed my foot there two days later.

TVD: Do you remember your feeling when the mine went off?

TTV: When it went off, I didn’t feel the pain right away. The force lifted my body up and I fell down on the crate, which look like a “nia” created by the blast on the ground. I didn’t feel the pain right away. The pain came about ½ hour later; it felt like a searing heat burning my two feet, and I lost my consciousness. My soldiers carried me out to the road and brought my Jeep around.

79 Hạ sĩ quan
80 Мос Đức
TVD: Were you still conscious at that moment?

TTV: I passed out when they brought me out. I was in and out of consciousness from then on. When I cam around, I gave them the order to move out of this area. I passed out by the time they got me to the road. I didn’t know for how long I was unconscious but when I woke up I was surprised to see the group of soldiers in camouflage walking all around me. Then it occurred to me that they were my soldiers, so I called out to them and asked why they had not evacuated me to the back. They said they were waiting for the Jeep, which came about 5 or 10 minutes. I didn’t want to use the Jeep because the vehicle was narrow and the stretcher was too long to fit in. If they laid me sideway then my head and my feet would stick out, and if the driver bumped into another vehicle, it would be the end of me. Luckily I was still conscious at the time, so for my own safety, I told them to get a GMC instead. I passed out again by the time they got me to the hospital.

TVD: Where was this hospital located at?

TTV: In Quang Ngai. It was unfortunate that they brought me to the field hospital where I had to wait 12 hrs before they did the surgery. Normally, the hospital would try to fix the wounded up right away, but in my case I had to wait from the afternoon until midnight. It turned out that commanding colonel of the field hospital had some sort of conflict with the other officers, so he went out to take a nap and didn’t showed up until 1 or 2 am while the wounded men were all around. I asked to be transported to Danang; they hadn’t removed my foot at the time. I asked to move to Duy Tan, Danang, to be near my wife and children because I didn’t have any relative in Quang Ngai. They transported me to Danang where they removed my foot promptly. In the first surgery, they cut it up to the shin. When I came around, I found myself lying on a bed and
was hooked up to blood bag, serum and all kind of things. The wound had not been dressed yet, and the pain was unbearable. The doctor brought me back to the surgery room when the condition got worse. This time he cut it all the way to the knee, about 20 cm\(^{81}\) above the previous cut because the bacteria had gotten into the bone, and the flesh couldn’t reattach back to the bone. If the bacteria got all the way up here, I would be finished. Hence, the doctor needed to separate the infected part as much as possible to save the rest.

TVD: What came to your mind when you first found out about your loss?

TTV: Dear God, I was so depressed. The surgery had been completed for a while by the time I came out of anesthesia. They moved me from the surgical room to the recovery unit. I was there for a few hours, I can’t recall exactly, and when I woke up my foot was gone. My life changed, and I felt regretted that I wouldn’t be back to the military. I didn’t worry about the wound, just like when I stepped on the land mine in Mo Duc. Back then when the soldiers rushed in to stand around me, I had told them to pick up my map, which was blown away by the blast to a distance. I remembered I had used my elbow to clean the dirt off it so I could see the coordination to report back to the battalion’s commander. I cried. I cried and then the battalion’s commander screamed at me telling me to stop crying because the B4 – Vietcongs could overhear our conversations and they would laugh at us. I cried not because of the pain; I only felt sorry for myself that I would never be back in the army again. You know I actually volunteered for the life in the military. It was finished for me, and I was forced back to civilian life. That was the reason why I cried. I felt my life came to the end. You just probably heard a

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\(^{81}\) Mộ gang tay
recent story of a woman named Trương Thị Sen, a wife of a VAF pilot whose name was Dieu. His airplane had exploded over Laos. The remains were brought back to America and placed in a museum somewhere in the DC. The remains included the bones of 4 American journalists and that Vietnamese pilot because their bones were indistinguishable from one another. We, Vietnamese, and the Americans financed a trip to DC for the pilot’s widow to visit her husband’s remain. People talked about it a lot on the internet. In our Ranger Association, Mr. Huy Phuong, an Asia Entertainment’s journalist, had asked the former commander of the Twenty-First Battalion via our group whether he knew or remembered anything about that incident relating to the Ranger officer who died in that ill-fated flight. Mr. Thuong said he didn’t remember anything. When he was a battalion’s deputy commander, I was a company’s deputy commander, and yet I could remember. Back then, when we were in the field, we had a note book called “Operation Journal” where we would note down all victories and defeats. I had the responsibility to write the journal, and that was why I still remembered the incidents after all these years. Mr. Thuong asked me to answer Mr. Huy Phuong’s interview on SBTN about a month ago. I confirmed the information about the operation to Laos where the two helicopters were shot down, two not one, about 100 meters apart from each other. At the time Twenty-First Ranger Battalion had spearheaded into Laos ahead of the airborne troops which followed by other units in turn. My battalion went in Laos first, and stationed on top a hill about 300 meters in height and about 10 km from the border of Vietnam. On the third day, we

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82 Trương Thị Sen
83 Không quân Việt Nam
84 Dieu
85 Huy Phuong
86 Thượng
87 Tiểu đoàn phó
88 Đại đội phó
went in on the 8th of February and by the 10th, we heard helicopters’ sound flying in from the East. Normally such flight would announce their mission to the battalion; for example, to resupply our ammunitions or foods. Yet, we were there only on the second day, and nothing was missing. We had not yet run into any fight with the enemy at that point. What was the reason for them to come in here where enemies were everywhere? We asked each other why these helicopters were flying from the East to the West. Didn’t they worry about anti-aircraft guns? Finally, they flew right on top of us but they didn’t land, and then they left flying westward. I was watching over my soldiers’ ditching into the ground when I told them it would be very easy for those helicopters to be hit by anti-aircraft guns flying in that manner. Back then anti-aircraft guns were 12.8mm or 37mm. Just about when I finished talking those two helicopters came near each other at about 100m apart. One exploded and fell down. The second one came from behind, instead of like us watching a car accident happening in front of us and turning our wheel to avoid a collision; it went right through and also exploded. Those two planes fell down on the side of the mountain. I got a compass and 4 men climbing down that mountain’s side which was about 2 km away from where we were. I took note of their coordination. In that crash there were one colonel, four American journalists, a Japanese journalist and a Japanese colonel. I don’t know their last names. There were also a major named Vy, and a Ranger sub-lieutenant. That’s all that I remember. In the chaotic of the war when there were so many deaths who could remember who died when. All the sudden, I heard the story of Ms. Truong Thi Sen who came to pay a visit to her husband’s remain in a museum somewhere in DC. The Ranger Association pointed out in that flight, there was only one sub-
lieutenant named Tri\textsuperscript{89}. I gave his name out in the interview with Mr. Huy Phuong on SBTN. Who knew there would be a relative of Mr. Tri living in Boston who happened to watch the show that day, and she called me up right away. Then she called back to Vietnam and they were so happy. The family in Vietnam contacted me and I just received the files yesterday. Mr. Tri’s oldest son sent me pictures and other stuffs. I just received them yesterday. Here are his pictures and his death announcement paper. Maybe in the near future, I will go through the SBTN station or the Ranger Association to see if they could help this family in anyway. Perhaps they could sponsor this man’s widow to come here to pay respect to her husband’s remains in the museum. It is all coincidence.

TVD: What was the year when you stepped on the land mine?

TTV: Me?

TVD: Yes.


TVD: You were married at that point?

TTV: I had 6 children by then.

TVD: Could you tell me how you got to know your wife?

TTV: I married twice. I met my first wife during the time I studied in Phan Rang. She was also a student there. We dated each other, got married and had 6 children. After 1975, I lost my foot and she demanded a divorce. She was so miserable so she wanted a divorce; we didn’t have any conflict that could lead us to end our marriage. Of those 6 kids, 4 of them are here already. The divorce was ok to me. After Vietcong seized the South, I went into hiding. I didn’t live in

\textsuperscript{89} Trí
Danang any more, nor dared coming to Phan Rang because they knew me there. I hide at a town called Phu Ho Nguyen Duc Trong⁹⁰. My house was right across the road from the Guga Fall, aka the famous Cam Ly Fall. Despite being a handicapped person, I raised pigs and planted vegetables, corns and yams while living anonymously. I dared not admit that I was a former officer. I just claimed to be a regular lowly soldier of the First Army Division⁹¹, not even mentioning that I was a ranger once. I hide my past away in that manner while my wife went to Phan Rang frequently to visit her family. She was a student before she got married, she knew nothing about farming. She went to Phan Rang and found the excuses to stay there, leaving me and the children working the fields. One day she carried the youngest child, who is married and live here now, to meet me and asked me to give her 700 Dong of the newly exchanged Vietcong’s money and was a large sum at the time. One of their Dong was equivalent to 500 of our old money according to the rate of exchange at the time. She asked me for 700 Dong in the new currency; I didn't even have 70 Dong, let alone 700 Dong! I knew it was only her excuse because she told me if I didn’t give her that amount of money, she would divorce me. I am telling you her exact words. I told her that she would have to wait 45 days for the piglets to grow so I could sell them. They were Yorkshire pigs. I couldn’t sell them before 45 days. They were only 10 days old at the time. So, I proposed to her to wait a month for me to come up with the money from the selling of the piglets. I just tried to prolong to see if time would change her mind. She repeated the demand exactly one month later. I rolled my wheelchair to the table to get a piece of white paper. Back then in our home we had two wooden

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⁹⁰ Phú Hồ Nguyên Đức Trong
⁹¹ Sư đoàn một bộ binh
platforms; I built the legs into one to make it into a table, and the other a long chair. I wrote a document, dividing the children into two groups. The oldest stayed with me; he is living in here now. The next one lived with her, and the third was with me so on and so forth. Each of us would keep three children. We had nothing in term of property to divide except for the house. I wrote them all down. When it was all done, I called the three oldest kids out, two of them live here now and the other in Vietnam, to sit on the table while I sat down below on my wheelchair. She sat on the bed with the youngest kid. I asked her to read and signed it, and if there was anything that needed to be changed. She just skimped through and signed it right away. I wouldn’t sign it in a hurry. Instead, I explained to the three kids the meaning of this paper. If I signed this paper, three out of six would come to live with their mother and the other three would live with me. There was no property to talk about, and their mother was free to take whatever she wanted. Only God could change my mind once I signed this paper; I signed it after I explained everything. My wife and I brought this document to the Vietcong’s People’s Committees in the next morning and they just refused to handle it. They told us to go back to the People’s Committees of the town instead claiming it was their jurisdiction. There was a town meeting two days later, in which our marital issue was discussed. The town folks wanted to mend us, but my wife had made up her mind. Finally, we went back to the court where my wife insisted on a divorce. Vietcong had a term called “ly thân”, they didn’t use term “ly đị”, but instead “ly hôn”. Once it was done, she fled to Phan Rang immediately.

TVD: With 3 kids?

92 Cái phàn
TTD: Yes, with 3 kids. The divorce was finalized about one month later; I lived with 3 other kids. That was my first marriage. After that divorce, which happened around 1979, I met my current wife in 1980. I knew her during the war time when I stationed in Mo Duc, just like I wrote in my book. She moved to Dalat with her older brother because of the war and we met again by chance. After the divorce with my first wife, we got married and have 3 children, 2 boys and 1 girl, all of whom live in America currently. The girl is a pharmacist who is working locally.

TVD: May I ask you where you and what were your memory of April, 1975? Were you out of the military already?

TTV: I was in the hospital in March 3, 1974. It took me more than a few months to heal. I was inactive for 2 years and was fit with prosthesis during this time.

TVD: But in...?

TTV: It was not during the period of learning to use prosthesis. I was still in the hospital when the communists came. When they arrived in Danang in March, 1975, they kicked out all the wounded, regardless the conditions, except those who were bed ridden and couldn’t move by themselves. Those who could stand up or on the wheelchairs would be removed so they could bring their own wounded soldiers in for treatment. That was the situation in Danang. When I got home, I secretly sold my home and left promptly, not daring to stay even one more day. I went to Phan Rang where my wife’s family was. When I arrived in Phan Rang, I planed to report myself to them – the communists had arrived to take control of this region by then. I ran into some of the old school friends who were communist sympathizers. They told me to stay put until they would find a reeducation class to send me to; they threatened me in that manner. By
this time, many of my friends were sent to prisons – reeducation camps. It didn’t feel right, so I discussed with my wife the option of running away to Duc Trong where few would know us. I settled there and used the money to buy a plot of land about 3 “sào” and built a hut for shelter there. I raised pigs for a living and then came the divorce. After getting divorced and remarried to my current wife, my past of being an officer was discovered. The pressure and the threat were my constant companions; every other night they would come behind my home to snoop at us at night. I knew my days were counting until they came to finish me off. Even though I was an invalid, they knew me well. I sold my home. I sold my home in a gamble even though to have a residence permit was very difficult at the time. We all moved to Đinh Quán and lived near the market. My wife would come to the market daily to buy a piece of tofu about this size paying 100 Dong for two, and sold them at the market to earn about 20 Dong. I wrote documents for a fee because I had very good handwriting. People would hire me to write documents, all kinds of document, I didn’t care as long as they paid me to do so. A short document was 3 Dong; longer one for 7 Dong. I worked everyday and made enough money for daily survival. On the other hand, I had a project raising pigs because I learned the know-how from reading the books. I had a meeting where I chaired over a hundred people who wanted to invest into the business of raising pigs. Then a communist official walked in the middle of the meeting. He said, “You, Mr. Van, were a former Ranger captain, what business do you have sitting underneath the picture of Uncle Ho here?” He gnashed through his teeth. There was an altar behind my back. My past had caught up with me finally. Initially, my children were expelled from schools. Do you see how low they were? Then they forced me to leave this

93 Đinh Quán
place to return to Danang. Why would I want to return to Danang to face certain death? I fled to Nha Be\textsuperscript{94} where a relative of my foster parents live. He was the son of my foster father’s older sister. I came to his house asking for shelter. I bought a flour milling machine to grind rice to a rice flour for baby milk making, to make baby food or to make Banh Xeo\textsuperscript{95} cake. I escaped by boat after that. In reality, it was a long road filled with hardships from the day of my divorce leading to being threaten and to be exposed; things were not as simple as at all. I had no money and made my living using whatever little skills I had at the time.

TVD: When did you decide to escape by boat?
TTV: After I went to Nha Be to live with my relative. His wife had an older brother who organized escape trips. I had a motorcycle, a 3-wheels motorcycle redesigned from a 2-wheels model. It was an American model, not like those motorcycles model 67 or 68. While in Danang I added a third wheel for my own usage and to carry 2 more passengers in the back. One day I went out to Tan Binh\textsuperscript{96} Market to look for old stuffs. On the way home after a fruitless search, I saw a man, a fellow roader, giving me the signals to move to the sidewalk. He asked me if I want to escape. He organized the trip and let our entire family of 7 to be in. His name is Thao\textsuperscript{97} who lives in Georgia now. I told him if he took pity on us, I would go with only 2 children. We wouldn’t dare put the entire family on that one trip. Once agreement was reached, we waited and waited in Nha Be until he sent a messenger to let us know of the impending depart.

TVD: How many children were living with you at the time, including 3 children from the previous marriage?

\textsuperscript{94} Nhà Bè
\textsuperscript{95} Bánh Xèo
\textsuperscript{96} Tân Bình
\textsuperscript{97} Thảo
TTV: Totally 9 persons, all born in Vietnam.

TVD: How many lived with you?

TTV: My 2 oldest lived with me, only two of them were with their mother in Phan Rang. My oldest and his younger sister, from the first marriage, lived with me in Nha Be. She kept 3 others who stayed with her. After receiving the message, we prepared for the trip. I planned for my oldest sons to come with me but the oldest one refused to go by running away to Phan Rang.

TVD: What was the reason for it?

TTV: I had no idea myself, so only two of us took that trip.

TVD: How old was that person who came with you?

TTV: He was 7 year old. He became a national champion of Taekwondo in America. Two of us made it by being rescued by an American ship and sent to Thailand. We stayed there for 57 days and left for America on September 21, 1983.

TVD: Was there any trouble on that trip?

TTV: No. The only problem was that boat a river boat, not an ocean farer. That boat was used to transport rice and goods from Saigon to the 6 provinces via the river system. When they bought it to the ocean, seawater would leak in from the sides of the boat weighed down by the one hundred seventy one passengers on it. First the engine then the pump stopped working. We used buckets to pour the water out and the boat floated aimlessly around. We were waiting for death to come to get us all until the American ship appeared. It was a Navy ship on its way from Philippine to Thailand. The crews spotted and rescued us. They moved all of us onto their ship and then proceeded to burn down out boat unceremoniously, with diesel oil or
a shot of M79, and headed toward Thailand. Once I got there, I didn’t have to go to the island to learn English, probably because I was a handicap. Secondly, I had a complete set of documents showing I used to be in a scouting unit for the First US Marine Division. I worked along their side for two years, and I got the papers to prove it. I couldn’t just lie to the American; I had to show my former military ID. They let me in the U.S.A., and I could apply for the SSI program right away. The first month they let me on welfare, giving me $100.00 per month. When I applied for SSI later, they approved it immediately.

TVD: How did you and your wife came to the decision who would go and who would stay back?
TTV: Meaning coming over here?
TVD: What I meant was the decision about who would come along with you on that escape trip. Why didn’t you let the entire family come with you?
TTV: I came home to talk to my wife telling her about the man whom I met on the road in Tan Binh District, where it crossed over Hoa Hung. I told her if our entire family left and were caught, who would support us in jail from outside? If only my son and I went and if we made it, we would sponsor for the entire family. If we must die at sea, it was only two of us. If all 7 or 8 of us were caught, we didn’t have anyone from the outside to count on to feed us. I calculated the way I would in the military. I talked it over with my wife and she agreed with me. All we needed to do was to wait for the departing time. Only the boy and I went on the dangerous trip which turned out to be so successful beyond my expectation. Mr. Thao had organized several trips, and 6 of 10 would end up in failure. Even his own younger sister and her child died when their boat sunk at the estuary. I didn’t put too much faith to it even though he

98 Viên thành
99 Hòa Hưng
would be on the same boat with me. Mr. Thao couldn’t bear it himself but he had no other choice; staying in Vietnam was not an option. So, he gave us some spots on the boat without charging us anything. He knew my situation was as bad as his. It turned out to be a success beyond anyone’s dream.

TVD: Do you remember any of the criteria for resettling in America when they interviewed you in Thailand?

TTV: Yes, the first one was being rescued by American ship. If so, they would take us in and resettled in the U.S.A. without the need of being in the military in the past. If they rescued us they would drag us to the States regardless whether we wanted it or not. They couldn’t pass us to any other nations. Regular folks would be sent of Galang or somewhere else to learn English. In my case, I had no use for English learning, thus I just took it easy. When they brought us to Thailand, the US Embassy there sent a few agents to interview us about the MIAs in Vietnam. I pointed out to them the coordinates including 4-5 points; 3 of them in Vietnam, one in Laos. I talked to them, the interviewers, without even the need for interpreter for they all spoke Vietnamese very well. They were so fluent in Vietnamese, Mr. Stephen Young was an example, and I was smart enough to understand many of those Americans were CIA agents themselves stationing in these parts of the world. This American was no different. I asked for an American who knew Vietnamese well because my English wasn’t strong. I asked him for the maps of the Central Region, Danang, Quang Tri, and those of the Southern Laos. He came back two days later with a bag full of maps. I points to the coordination on the maps, pointing exactly at the point in Laos. Whether they found anything or not, they never let me know. I knew Mr. Ngo
Ky who used to be a Republican. I asked him how come I pointed them to those points on the map, and they never let me know whether they found anything there or not? He said it was a secret so they wouldn’t publicize it even if they find something. Rumor had it that the finding recently was based on that filed and they found the remains in 2008. I gave the accurate coordination in Laos. Do you realize Laos is a country of jungles and mountains? A helicopter would be totally lost in there had I not pinpoint the location for them. However, the bodies were consumed by wild animals, and only bones remained. That was the reason why they couldn’t tell which bones were ones of the Japanese or the American. They collected them all and brought home to place in the museum. Of the 3 points in Vietnam, I saw with my own eyes 2 of the crash sites, and 1 exploding right above my head. Back then I went on an operation in Huong Dien, Thua Thien Region, Hue. We were ready for a two-prong operation attacking the target when helicopters started dropping troops down. There was Crobra, a type of attacking helicopter, flying in from the West and rained rockets down at us mistakenly. Our company suffered a loss of 31 men, wounded and dead included, thus I ordered my men to shoot it down. The second time it turned around and started pointing its nose down in the attacking position, we shot back up with our M72s until it exploded. Its remains were found later too. When I answered the interview on SBTN station, the relative of the deceased reacted in the way I told you about. I don’t know what the Americans thought regarding my help to them.

100 Ngô Ky
101 Hương Điền
102 Thừa Thiên
103 Huế
TVD: Was there any organization or group sponsoring or helping you out when you fled the country in 1983?

TTV: No. I came to America 30-some years ago, the Vietnamese organizations/associations around here were still very incoherent and there were not many of them any way. The most well-known one was the Political Prisoners Association\(^{104}\) which was founded by me by the way. I was the one who organized and formed that group. The second group that I did was the Rangers Association\(^{105}\). I complained to the current leaders of that group just 3 days ago that they should “remember the grower while eating the fruits”\(^{106}\). I reminded them that the present Rangers’ charters around the world were all originated from our Southern California association. Mr. Tran Quoc Trung\(^{107}\), an eye witness to my conversation, reassured me that he would mention me, Tran Thy Van, as the founder of this organization per my request. I didn’t ask for much except the acknowledgement of my role as the founder of the organization.

Afterward, I also formed the War Invalids Association\(^{108}\). I was the first who sent wheelchairs to the war invalids back home. The other organizations and Mrs. Hanh Nhan\(^{109}\) followed my example in the later years. The American religious organization such as the Christian churches did it too, but I wasn’t familiar with them. After being rescued by the American ship, I asked to be resettled in California; they always interviewed refugees before letting them enter the U.S.A. They initially declined my request of going to California. They said there were too many of us here already and that I needed to choose another state. I told them with my leg being

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\(^{104}\) Hộp Tù Nhân Chính Trị
\(^{105}\) Hộ Biệt Động Quân
\(^{106}\) Ăn quả nhỏ kẻ trồng cây
\(^{107}\) Trần Quốc Trung
\(^{108}\) Hội Thương Phế Binh
\(^{109}\) Hạnh Nhân
wounded like this, how would I live at another state with cold weather. I already spent time to learn about the warmth and coldness in different regions of the U.S.A. while I was in Vietnam, and I knew California had a tempered weather. He rejected my request. I got so angry that I actually slammed my fists on the table. I told them to put me wherever they wanted so long that the weather wasn’t cold and I had my freedom. Finally, they let me going to California.

TVD: So, you went to California and your son was still very young at the time? How did you take care of him?

TTV: My younger sister, the daughter of my foster father, lived here at the time. I had her address. After the American ship rescued us, there was an American captain came looking for me. He didn’t dress in naval uniform, but instead in the brown color of the Army. He carried with him a list and asked around for me, Mr. Van. I raised my arm up when I heard my name, but I didn’t understand much of what he said. There was a girl about 25 years old who was sitting right next to me, she urged me to speak and she would be my interpreter. This girl was very fluently in English, and this man was originally a military advisor to the Vietnamese Rangers during the war time. Upon seeing my declaration of being a former Ranger, he came around to see if I would need anything. I asked him to send a telegram to my foster father, Mr. Huynh Van Hau, a Southern Californian residence, to let him know that I was here already. He said it was an easy job. He did it for me right on the ship, and then he gave me a tub of tobacco which I shared with others. When I came to California, I stayed with my foster father in a house rented by his daughter. My son and I shared one room until I came back to school. Back then I took classes in Santa Ana College right here. Suddenly I received public housing assistance which I had applied for previously. One American friend recommended me a place in Irvine,
called Roosevelt. I transferred to Irvine College when I moved there. I studied there no less than 2 years; I only had some dozen units to complete before I transferred to university. Then something happened that still upset me to this day. I told you previously that I was pretty good with math. I was in the same class with Dr. Lien Huong’s father. I got an A in the final exam. Dr. Lien Huong’s father’s math score wasn’t as good as mine which was an A. Yet, the dean of the college suspected that I had copied someone’s work. He didn’t believe my math was so good. Vietnamese math level, even at the 12th grade level, was generally higher than American one. I had no problem solving cubic equations. So, he thought I either copied someone’s work or kept the answer with me during the test time. He gave me a zero which was so unreasonable. I quit school and started joining the protests and formed the organizations as I told you before.

TVD: What year did you sponsor your family to come over?

TTV: I did the paper work right away in 1984. I wrote letters to her asking her to send all the documents including marriage license and birth certificates with the red marks; the American wouldn’t accept photocopies. I received all of them after waiting for about 3-4 months. It was difficult to send mails back then. I went to the Immigration Office in Santa Ana where the Westminster Ave. used to run all the way there. I came in at 5 o’clock in the morning, yet there were already people waiting since 2 a.m. The room was completely packed! I ran into Mr. Tony Lam who was our congressman back then. He knew me. When he saw me sitting on the wheelchair, he came over and asked what I was doing there. I told him I wanted to file the paper work to sponsoring my family to come over here. He walked over to where the workers sat and

110 Liên Hương
asked them to help me because I was a handicap. They accepted my application and I had to wait for about 5 or 6 years to my turn. I didn’t have American citizenship back then, but I was lucky. Giang was the national Taekwondo champion, not merely a Vietnamese competition. This is a competition given by the USTU organization. Every time they had a national level completion, he would go out of state to attend. National level required a lot of travelling. Each time like that, the vice president of the U.S.A. was usually there. Mr. Bush senor came there once; he came as a vice president. {..} He also came. Here are the medals... These are the newspaper articles writing about my son.

TVD: I see.

TTV: He was famous for this, especially because he won the championship that year, the gold medal, which allowed him to move to the next round of competing in England. The goal was to participate in the Union International in South Korea. The organizers told us we would need American passports and citizenship to travel. We almost cried in despair because we weren’t American citizens at that point. An American friend told me to go back to California and took care of the situation there. We came home and brought it up to his master, he couldn’t help us. However, because of the story, the Register Newspaper came to do an interview us in Irvine.

TVD: What year was it?


TVD: There were only two of you that year, weren’t it?

TTV: My family had not come over here at the time. Because of the Register’s interview, the Immigration Office granted us U.S. citizenship without even the need to apply. They sent mails
home to us. Mr. Ngo Ky, who was a Republican at the time, called me up at home to say, “I am holding the invitation for you to come in for the U.S. citizenship. I am coming over to your place right now.” When we came in for the citizenship exam in Los Angeles, Mr. Ngo Ky and another man who was fluently in English came along to help me because my English was really bad. They asked me to come into a small room where the interviewer held a folder waiting for me. He told me, “Mr. Van, you will pass your citizenship exam. You only need to go over there to pay $50.00 and give them 2 pictures.” Before I left the room, he asked me to read out loud from a list. While my listening wasn’t so good, I could read ok. I could answer the first question after reading it, and then the same with the next two questions. I had learned about them. Then, I proceeded to pay $50.00.

TVD: You had your citizenship in 1988, and your family came here in 1989?
TTV: Yes, with the help of this news article. There was a British PhD who was the advisor in charge of some 78 high schools in London. His name was…36:20… I don’t know how he knew Professor Pham Cao Duong111 who was teaching at UCLA at the time. I knew this man, so he contacted me letting me know of a Ph.D. from England who would like to get acquainted with me. He would like to visit me if I let him have my home address. He would like to talk to me about Alan Giang. This man came and stayed with us for an entire month at our home in Irvine. He would eat Vietnamese dishes just like me. Once awhile he would go to the market to buy grocery and cooked the meals his style for all of us. Back then, every time Giang had to go to San Bernardino for his lessons he would come along too. He wanted to write a book about him. Then he gave us some money when he had to go back to England, a thousand some dollars but I

111 Ph ham Cao Đờn
didn’t take. I told him we Vietnamese were like that. Dear friend could come to visit and shared foods from our table; we wouldn’t hear about money. This house belong to the housing service, I couldn’t accept any money. He offered to pay Giang’s tuition for an entire year. He paid it secretly to Giang’s teacher who informed me about it after he had left for England. Giang’s teacher told me not to worry about Giang’s tuition because it had been taken cared of by the English man. He wrote a story and published it on an English newspaper; I remember the BBC actually broadcasted it too. The English man sent me a copy of the newspaper in which he said a geography teacher once told him some 25 years ago how America was a nation of opportunity. Yet it didn’t take Alan Giang 25 years to have the opportunity to participate in that competition even though he didn’t have the U.S. citizenship. He said American laws were derived from English tradition. He wrote such a long article! The Immigration Services let us have the citizenship but not soon enough because the game in Seoul had begun. We were late for that event, and it was how we got our U.S. citizenships. Giang was 15 years old at the time so he received his citizenship along with me.

TVD: Your family came here later so they couldn’t get the U.S. citizenship at the same time right?

TTV: I already got the citizenship when my family came here. My wife came in 1993, almost 10 years. I thought even though it was late but I was still lucky. Back then I still had housing at Irvine, but the place was tiny. The Housing Office told us to come here to look for a bigger place with two bedrooms. I found this place and have lived here some 30 years. My children, those who went to school, were all college graduates. One had a double majors; his younger sister who came along with her mother went to pharmaceutical graduate school. My youngest
is waiting for the pharmaceutical graduate school to call him, and in meanwhile he has moved to Hawaii following his girl friend. That girl is studying in the pharmaceutical program there. He can study to become a school teacher in case the pharmaceutical program doesn’t accept him. It’s ok too.

TVD: So, your entire family had reunited after 1993. Did your life changed at all?

TTV: Life was difficult then. When my wife first came here, she didn’t take lesson in doing nails. I got her a sewing machine instead because she knew how to sew so she could work on orders while staying at home. I bought 2 machines, one for her and another for my daughter. The rest helped in with removing the threads etc. We tried to make a living that way for awhile, but the work was hard so she enrolled in school to learn to do nails. Doing nails were less of a hardship than sewing. My disability allowance plus the allowance for her to take care of me were enough for us. Those kids who have jobs move out to live separately. Doing nail took a toll on her health thus nowadays she only watches our daughter’s grandchildren; the one who works as a pharmacist. She has 2 kids and she asks us to help her out.

TVD: You say that you used to be an active participant in different groups in this area. Are you still doing it?

TTV: Less for now because of my advancing age and illness. I was hospitalized in 2011 a total of 4 times. I got bronchitis because of my smoking habit. That day I went over to my daughter’s home and caught a cold from being wetted by a shower. My cough required hospitalization for about 12 days. I went home for awhile, then came back to the hospital in the next month; another week there. Just like that, it was a total of 4 times that year. I have a habit of lying down on the carpet or on a hard bed; I can’t lay on a soft mattress. When I lay facing down, my
feet stretch out, therefore my blood can circulate to that area. If I face up, the blood circulation is cut off. The mattress on the hospital bed was too soft for me to lay facing down, so I sat up right the majority of time. My foot got infected, and because the blood couldn’t get there, the skin peeled off. They had to remove a portion of my foot, so my feet are uneven in length now. Now I have recovered but I am not as active as I used to be. Nowadays I’d go to the monastery right at the corner of Beach Blvd. and Trask Ave. every afternoon to meditate. I am not an active participant anymore. There are a lot of former political prisoners who live in this area; they can carry on doing this themselves. In the past, I participated in every single protest.

TVD: Can you drive now?

TTV: Yes. I learned to drive right away when I came to the U.S.A. They showed me how to drive with hand control; they allowed me to use that system. I have been driving for 20 some years already. Living here without knowing how to drive is the same as being dead.

TVD: After the life time of up and down, do you have any more wish for yourself or your family now that you all have settled into the life here?

TTV: For us Vietnamese, once the children got married and moved away, the weight has been lifted from our shoulders. I am enjoying my old age and have no more wish. My daughters have a comfortable life working in the nail salons. They have their own families to be with and same with my sons. My children do whatever they want. I can’t make them doing things according to my wish being in this country. They learn whatever they want to learn. In the past, there was only a father and a son, I advised my son to study this or that because I thought if I left him at home alone by himself all the time, while I went off to meet my friends, he may end up joining the gangs. I brought him along to all the meetings with the organizations around
here; people all knew who Alan Giang was. He just sat there wherever I was. One time I went on a trip to Texas which lasted 5 days. When I got back here in the middle of the night there was no one opening the door for me. I knocked and knocked, and finally a neighbor had to jump over the fence to get into the house. He actually forced the slide door to get inside. There was no one at home. I called the police in the next morning, and they let me know he was housed at the juvenile hall in Orange where the children with no one taking care of them stay. I came out to the court to ask for my son back, and the judge was sympathetic when he saw me without my legs. I told him I must travel to Texas. While I was away, the middle school teacher asked him why he would come to school so late everyday. Normally I was the one who woke him up in the morning so he could go to school on time. Without me, he could have stay home like other kids would, but he decided to come school anyhow. When being questioned by the teacher, he answered casually that there was no one woke him up in the morning. The teacher knew he was home alone, so she drove him home that day to verify that there was no adult at home. Then, she called the police to get him to the juvenile hall. I had to go there to get him back.

TVD: How old was he then?

TTV: Only 11 years old. I would rent Ly Tieu Long\textsuperscript{112} movies for him to watch, and he really liked it. Then I signed him up for Taekwondo lessons. I wanted him to become a medical doctor, but when he entered UCLA he took Economy instead. He finally settled in a career in computer working on something unrelated to what he studied at all. He was very good with the computer.

\textsuperscript{112} Lý Tiểu Long
TVD: Yes, that’s the reality.

TTV: His older brothers were in the same way too. They came over here when they were older, so they didn’t return to school. They just finished ESL and went to work. My youngest one just got engaged last month.

TVD: How many grandchildren do you have?

TTV: A dozen of them. I have 5 paternal grandchildren still live in Vietnam. The rest are my daughters’ children; 7 of them totally. One of the girls is a paternal granddaughter. With the 5 currently living in Vietnam, I have 12 grandchildren.

TVD: What do you want your grandchildren to know about Vietnam when they grow up, as well as about you and the reason for your being in America?

TTV: When I left Vietnam, I was a political refugee, not an economic one. I refused to live with the communists and took the first chance that came up to do so. Well known men like me just can’t live with the communists. They would never let me be. When I came over and started writing, they threatened me all kinds of things already.

TVD: You wrote many books, can you tell us what the main reason is why do you so?

TTV: In the past, I was writer even when I was still in the military school. My poems got published on Saigon’s various newspapers. I only wrote poems back then; I wanted to write stories but I wanted to write non-fiction books, not imaginary plots. I wrote, “Anh Hung Bac Menh”\(^\text{113}\) in only 4 months in America. I only published it after my family, and a few characters in that story who were still in prisons at the time, came here otherwise the communists would give them so much trouble in Vietnam. I waited for them to come here under the H.O. Program

\(^{113}\) Anh Hùng Bặc Mềnh
first. That was the reason why I published the story very late even though I had thought about it for a long time. When I actually sat down to write it, it was quite easy. The next book was “Tieng Hon Tren May”\(^{114}\) in which I wrote about Xuan Dieu\(^{115}\), the poet Xuan Dieu who was killed because of me. In 1984 when I came to the U.S.A., I wrote a series of articles talking about Xuan Dieu’s homosexuality with Mr. Ho Dac Cu\(^{116}\) who had married to my foster mother. This man was her second husband. Mr. Ho Dac Cu had a homosexual fling with Xuan Dieu when Dieu was in Quy Nhon\(^{117}\). That series got published by the Tay Phai\(^{118}\) newspaper, the right hand of the poet Du Tu Le\(^{119}\) when he was still married to Mme Hoang Duoc Thao\(^{120}\) who is running the Saigon Nho\(^{121}\) newspaper nowadays. They had not divorced each other back then, so they cooperated to form Tay Phai weekly newspaper. I sent them the series of writing about Xuan Dieu’s homosexuality, and those in Vietnam read them as well. He died in 1985. When my foster father called, I asked him the reason, but he didn’t say anything. I had a hunch about it. That series also included in “Tieng Hon Tren May”. The writers living here were surprised because it was the first time they heard such a thing about Xuan Dieu being a homosexual. Even the song writer Pham Duy\(^{122}\) thought I, Thy Van, made that up. He claimed to live with Xuan Dieu in the North from childhood until adulthood, and had never seen Xuan Dieu showing any sign of homosexuality. I was very upset about it. I when to see him and told him Xuan Dieu never lived in the North in his childhood; how could he claimed being a childhood friend of

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\(^{114}\) Tiếng Hồn Trên Mây
\(^{115}\) Xuân Diệu
\(^{116}\) Hồ Đắc Cử
\(^{117}\) Quy Nhơn
\(^{118}\) Tay Phải
\(^{119}\) Đừ Tử Lệ
\(^{120}\) Hoàng Dư Quốc Thảo
\(^{121}\) Sài Gòn Nhỏ
\(^{122}\) Phạm Duy
Xuan Dieu in that case? Xuan Dieu was born in Quy Nhon, Binh Dinh\textsuperscript{123} and graduated from high school in 1920. After that he went to Thanh Hoa\textsuperscript{124}, his paternal ancestral place, to visit his father and the first wife. Xuan Dieu’s mother was a second wife. He was depressed and that was the reason he enrolled at the National School\textsuperscript{125} in Hue instead of in Buoi \textsuperscript{126} and got his diploma there. I told Duy that Dieu never spent his childhood in the North nor to be his childhood friend. Duy was the one who made it up. Dieu’s father was a traditional medicine practitioner; he also had drawing skill. When he travelled to Quy Nhon, he met Dieu’s mother who lived in Go Bau, Binh Dinh\textsuperscript{127}, a region near the sea. Dieu’s mother met him while selling fish sauce house to house. Xuan Dieu was born of that union, thus he grew up in Binh Dinh and went to school in Quy Nhon. He met my foster’s second husband in Quy Nhon. When this man moved to Laos to work for the French Public Office\textsuperscript{128}, Dieu would travel to the North. They parted since then. Dieu didn’t come to the North until he was 20 years old, and returned to Quoc Hoc, Hue after trying unsuccessfully to get enrolled in Buoi. When I wrote those articles, no one believed me. Later the writer To Hoai\textsuperscript{129} in Tu Luc Van Doan\textsuperscript{130}, a very close friend of Xuan Dieu, would confirm Xuan Dieu had a homosexual relationship with Huy Can\textsuperscript{131} and To Hoai himself. He wrote it in “Cat Bui Dau Chan Ai”\textsuperscript{132}. Now the expat writers here would agree that I was right. Dieu and my foster mother were not blood brother and sister, but

\textsuperscript{123} Binh Dinh  
\textsuperscript{124} Thanh Hoa  
\textsuperscript{125} Trường Quốc Học  
\textsuperscript{126} Trường Bưởi  
\textsuperscript{127} Gò Bau, Bình Định  
\textsuperscript{128} Nha Công Chánh  
\textsuperscript{129} Tô Hoại  
\textsuperscript{130} Tự Luận Văn Đoàn  
\textsuperscript{131} Huy Cận  
\textsuperscript{132} Cát Bửi Dậu Chân Aị
they were close like ones. I would call Dieu “uncle”. He paid an unannounced visit to my foster mother’s husband and stayed at their home in Phu Loc\textsuperscript{133} for a month in 1976..........There were a few poems in there. There was one that had never been published, yet I remembered because my foster mother memorized it and I wrote it down in the presence of Xuan Dieu himself. The poem had no title; Dieu preferred it keep it like that because he wrote it so long ago. The writers here once confirmed, “This is truly Xuan Dieu’s writing; Thy Van can’t come up with something like this.”

TVD: Is there any subject that you would like to talk about?

TTV: Oh, those stories I told you about are public records. You can use them in whatever way you want; I have nothing to hide. I have lived of my SSI allowance while my wife takes care of the children. My children don’t ask us for anything, and we do likewise. We have what we need; they have their own families and live around here. There are only 2 of my children who still live with my ex wife in Vietnam.

TVD: In that case, I say thank you for spending your time for this interview today.

TTV: Don’t mention it!

\textsuperscript{133} Phú Lộc