Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

Narrated: TU ANH VU
Interviewer: Richard Anh Vu
Date: February 24, 2010
Location: Huntington Beach, California
Sub-Collection: Vietnamese American Experience Winter 2012
Length of Interview: 01:10:50

Richard Vu (RV): So I am doing this interview for the Vietnamese American Oral History Project, and so would you please state your name.

Tu Vu (TV): My name is Tu Vu.

RV: Yes, and when and where were you born.

TV: I was born in 1949 in Bui Chu province about 80 miles from Hanoi.

RV: That was in North Vietnam?

TV: Yes, this was in North Vietnam.

RV: So, when did you move to the South.

TV: And when the country [was] divide in two by the Geneva Agreement on July 20, 1954, my parents took me to the South as immigrant. And I think that was in July, 1954.

RV: Where did you move to when you emigrated from the North to the South.

TV: We immigrate to the South and living in Gia Dinh province. That the suburb of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam.

RV: Do you have any memories growing up.

TV: When I was in the North, I am a little child anyways, but I do remember I had to face with the war many times, like I have to go to another village in the daytime to avoid French bombing or any military action of the Vietnamese communists.
RV: So, can you describe a little more about your family, like how many siblings you had and things you did as a child around the house.

TV: When I immigrate from the North to the South my parents took three of us, my sister, me, and my young brother, a family of five, living in the North, leaving behind all of my grandparents, and everybody else, only five of us go to the South.

RV: So you’ve only had three siblings?

TV: At that time, we have, I have one brother and one sister.

RV: So can you describe more about your family growing up in South Vietnam.

TV: And when we settle in South Vietnam, Gia Dinh province in the suburb of Saigon, I grow up from there, and attending school, as children in school, in elementary school, and then high school. The first nine years we were there, that is a good time with the first president, and the peaceful time of the South before the North begin to attack us, so this is a good time.

RV: Did you have any jobs or had any particular traditions growing up.

TV: Yes, in the, this is in the country, this is not in the North, but this in the South. The North and the South, the local tradition is not exactly the same so North tradition and South tradition are different, but we live in the area with all of the North immigrant to the South in a Catholic village. So the tradition is the same as in the North.

RV: Can you describe what tradition did you did, have?

TV: What [do] you really want to know?

RV: Just some events like, you grew up in a Catholic community, could you describe some of, I guess, events you observed and if they were any different than the traditions you see here in America.

TV: That tradition at the time, in the Catholic village, I can say 100 percent of the people in that village was Catholic so we had a very good Catholic parish.

RV: Can you tell me more about your schooling.

TV: Yeah, I grow up at that time, and I attend elementary school, and grow up to high school until I am about…about 1969, the war is already very hot and I had to join the military.

RV: So part of the military did you join

RV: Can you tell me more about your experience in the South Vietnam Air Force.

TV: When I join the air force, I attend, first the 8 weeks of basic military training. And I do not go to the officer training school immediately after that because they need to train for the pilot before that So, I had to attend English class, and then me to the US for helicopter training near Dallas, Texas. First I attend English school in Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas for two months, and then go to Mineral Well, Texas to study the helicopter, the first helicopter training.

RV: Did you find anything unusual when you first came to America, like did you find the Americans to be unusual.

TV: I come to America a couple of days before July 4, 1970 in San Antonio, Texas. Yes, American culture is completely different from the Vietnamese culture, where I came from. But I am very happy and I like the American civilization where I can see different from my country.

RV: So were you the only one that came to America, or did you come with other recruits.

TV: Oh, we come with a lot more. I don’t remember how many exactly, but at that time it could be 30 of us come at one time, and in school that have two or three hundred of us at that time.

RV: Since you grew up in a Catholic family, did you continue going to church while in America.

TV: Yes, I was in…I am Catholic, so when I am in this country, I am still going to church every week, at least every Sunday. I am Catholic.

RV: Were the masses in English?

TV: Yes, the mass, the local mass is in English, no Vietnamese.

RV: Did you find it difficult to understand, or did you manage to learn quickly since you learned English.

TV: I learned English, I get used to it quickly.

RV: So how was your experience after you…when did you return from America?

TV: After I study the first helicopter course in Mineral Well, Texas, we move to the East coast at Hunter Army Airfield for bigger helicopter training. That is the second course and totally that last one year. And I graduate on May, 1971 and return to the country.

RV: So how was your experience coming back to Vietnam in the military.

TV: That is my duty at that time as a helicopter pilot, but I told you previously I wasn’t trained for the officer, military officer yet, so I has to fulfill that and they send me to the local school to catch up with military officer training before they can send me to the battle. That is a few months
class and after I graduate from that, I become a second lieutenant and begin the military and helicopter pilot operation.

RV: What were your duties in military?

TV: My duty as a helicopter pilot? I do everything a helicopter can do: medivac, sweep, and gunship too. And after that, most of the time, I fly a helicopter pilot gunship.

RV: Did you get married before or after you came to America.

TV: I was married in May 5, 1973, two years after I come back from America to become a helicopter pilot.

RV: Can you tell me a little more about Vietnamese traditions about marriage. So what types of traditions about marriage can you tell us compared to American, such as, did you move to your wife’s home or did your wife move in with your family.

TV: I was married in a normal way, that is the same as the tradition of the local people at that time.

RV: Can you describe what those traditions are.

TV: What you want to know?

RV: Did your wife move in with you family or do you move out with your wife.

TV: After marriage, same as tradition, the wife would move in to live with my family because I don’t have my own house so usually we live the parents for a while.

RV: Can you relate any stories of the conflict, because I know you were in the military. Did you find it difficult to manage your military life with your family life?

TV: Because I am military, the main I have to do is the military life. I have to be in my unit and only the time allowed, I can go home. I am lucky because I am living close to the base, but really on my duty hour, yes, it is military life and during the hot time, usually we have to stay in the base, rather than going home.

RV: Since this is close to the end, the fall of South Vietnam, so you only spent about less than four years in the military before South Vietnam fell, so can you relate any stories of how it was close to the end.

TV: I have been in the Vietnamese Air Force for total six year, but after training time, I only have four years in the battle. And during the battle-time, I have to carry all of the military duty and I have many operations, that was a hot time. The hottest time I ever been in is Anlog Meadow during the hottest season, the hottest summer of 1972. And I had been shot down and my…in a mission of escorting the medivac to take wounded, but they shot me down before we
get to landing zone. And I am the number one ship to escort the medivac and they shot me down. The engine is quit in the air and I am lucky, I make am autorotation landing in the forest and my helicopter exploding and couple hours later, I had been rescued by my unit rescue helicopter and we are lucky. Only my, another pilot had injury in his head, and the other three are okay.

RV: Can you tell me more about your experiences about the fall of South Vietnam.

TV: Six months before the South Vietnam fell, in October, 1974, I had been changed the unit from Bien Hoa to Pleiku. I was there just a few months when the last battle begin and we have to move from one place to another place. We move from Pleiku on March, 75’ to Nha Trang about one or two weeks, then to Phan Rang and then when Phan Rang, when we lose Phan Rang, we go to Saigon for about one week. And then, the last week, we went to Can Tho. And from Saigon, our unit moving to Can Tho, I took my wife and eleven months daughter to Can Tho with me. And two days after, two days before the government failed, my commander has a mission with only one big helicopter Chinook, to take the family members from the base to Con Son Island to avoid bombing, shelling in the base. And I sent my wife and eleven months daughter to Con Son Island. That is only one hour to prepare to do that. Because we are in the base so we make it. My wife and my daughter go to Con Son Island with this helicopter at the midnight of two days before the government failed.

RV: You were at the base while your family was in Con Son Island? So how did you manage to get them out during the fall?

TV: When the government announced the surrender, the failure in about 10am, April 30, 1975, I am in the base and we have to look for the way to go and everybody want to go and when I go from my unit to the terminal to look for the helicopter to fly, a lot of G.I., they go in front of us. And when we look for, we heading for the helicopter, they already get there and when we get to the helicopter, there is no more people, no more seat will be available, only the pilot seat is empty and cannot put one more person in it. So I and my friend get to the helicopter and we looking for how good is that to fly or not, how much fuel we had, but we had no choice. I had to untie the plane and let my friend start the engine as quick as possible and we try to get out. When we just see we have enough fuel to get to Con Son Island from Can Tho and we have to go because we cannot get any more fuel at that time, we cannot do anything at that time. We only have the aircraft as is. If we can fly or not, we try. And we don’t know who to talk to, we don’t know where to go, we don’t know anything so, but we have to take off. And after the takeoff, we had use the S.O.S. frequency, this is the Guard frequency, to talk to people and from it, we know where the American fleet is and we go from it. We go to Con Son Island to pick up my wife and my daughter, that is the first priority so we go to, we fly to Con Son Island in the rainy day and this is very hard to go, to fly over the sea during the rainy time. And when we get there, I see an ocean liner on the shore ready to pick up the refugee from Con Son Island, but I had to look for my wife and my daughter and after we get them, we have to fly to American Seventh Fleet, who I already talked to and we don’t have enough fuel to fly to the Seventh Fleet. Because in Con
Son terminal at that time, we do have a lot of fuel, but the fuel pump is not running. The people [who] control that already go away and nobody can get the fuel from the pump. We cannot get it wither. And what I have to do, I [was] looking for the automobile fuel in fifty gallon, fifty-five gallon tanks and fill up my helicopter. That’s enough to fly to the Seventh Fleet and I go to land on the midway carrier. And we had successfully landing on the midway carrier. And American Marines took me from there.

RV: When did you arrive in America.

TV: That is April 30, 1975, and from the midway carrier, they transferred me to another boat, another ship named Trimo Kimbo and the Trimo Kimbo and Seventh Fleet go to Subic Bay in the Philippines and couple of days after that. And when they put me in Subic Bay for about one day, and then we immediately I try to get some way to get out of Subic Bay and they took me to Honolulu by plane. I believe this was a C-130 airplane to the Hawaii base. And when we get to Hawaii, they put me in the hotel for a few hours. No, no that’s wrong. When we get to Hawaii, they put us in the refugee camp. But my daughter, eleven month-old daughter they feel is not very well on the skin and they it is the measles so they isolate us and put us in a dispensary. Dispensary is the corner of the barrack with the nurse and somebody to take care, not really, in the refugee camp, but still in the military base. And after few days, they think it is okay and they put me into a refugee camp, the tent camp. So we were there for one day and I planned to do the paperwork quickly so I can get out of the tent city. And we planned to go to California, but because there is too many wanting to go the California so finally they put me on a plane to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and we fly to Florida on May 10, 1975. We get there in the morning, about 7 o’clock May 10, 1975 we get to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

RV: During that time, I guess the only possessions you had are what your wife and daughter brought with them. So you didn’t have anything besides the things your wife and daughter brought to the base.

TV: We escape from the country without anything. Yes, that was only a couple of things personally, but that don’t mean anything, looks like we get nothing. Even when we get to Subic Bay, the Filipino government already declare the new government in Vietnam communist in South Vietnam, so we had to take off all of my uniform and they give us some clothes to change and we had to use them, it was our property, that’s all we had.

RV: When you arrive to America, did you know where your brothers and sisters were?

TV: When we get to America, we don’t know anybody else get out of the country because we don’t know anything. And I do know my mother-in-law is in United States already and we have American Red Cross help us to contact my mother-in-law and that night, they did it and the next morning, my mother-in-law come from Atlanta, Georgia, driving about 6 hour drive to Eglin Air Force Base and ready to wait for us at American Red Cross tent and we see each other for first time.
RV: I guess when you initially came to America, you stayed with your mother-in-law.

TV: Yes, when they come to pick us up, I cannot go, but in the refugee camp they let my wife and my daughter go with my mother-in-law and I had to be there for the security clearance. And about three weeks later, when I have the clearance, she come to pick me up also, in about three weeks.

RV: How long did you end up staying in Georgia.

TV: We get out of the refugee camp and we stay with my mother-in-law at the beginning and because she had to move to another base, another city, so we stayed in Atlanta, Georgia about three months and then we move to Savannah, Georgia in a city named Hinesville near Savannah, Georgia, and stayed there for a few months. And then I come back to Atlanta, Georgia and stay there for totally three years in Georgia. And then we moved the Louisiana. I, during those three years, I try to get my commercial helicopter license so I can fly as American commercial helicopter pilot and when I get it, we move from Atlanta, Georgia to Louisiana, near New Orleans. I am looking for a job with PSI, that is a company who have helicopter to take care of passengers to the oil well in the sea. I am not lucky and I cannot get a job at that time and I working for Sweetman supermarket as refrigeration maintenance for about one year. At that time, I am still looking for the helicopter pilot job, but so far, I cannot get it. And at the end of the year, we plan to move to California and very next year, in early January, move to California in January, 1979.

RV: Where did you live initially when you moved to California.

TV: When I move to California, I live in Los Angeles area in the city of Hawthorne and around that area, looking for a job. I am lucky to get into training, job training, and I take the program named CETA for a few months to learn electronics and after that, I get a job with the company named Teledyne Controls and I begin avionic career for many years from it.

RV: Going back to the CETA acronym so you know what it stands for?

TV: I don’t remember what CETA stands for, but that is a program for job training.

RV: Did you move anywhere after you came to Hawthorne.

TV: Yes, I stayed in Hawthorne and the nearby city, but moving in the area, still in the area. I lived in Huntington Park for a year, go to Lawndale city for a few years. Then I bought a house in 1985 in Lawndale, and I stayed there for long time, about 20 years from the time I bought the house.

RV: Was it difficult for your family, moving around.
TV: I had to move around because, I am working in the area, so I am not moving too far from it, but because the renting, so that’s why I had to move from one place to another, but that is a easy moving, until I buy a house in Lawndale and stay there for 20 years.

RV: Did you have any problems with neighbors or adjust to the community, because I know the area doesn’t have many Vietnamese around.

TV: During the first few years, not many Vietnamese there. But after five years, ten years, there’s a lot of them coming, and we have a couple of Vietnamese community there belonging to some church. I am belonging to one of the Vietnamese Catholic group in the area of Gardena, city next to the city of Lawndale where I am living.

RV: Can you describe more about your experiences in that Catholic community.

TV: Catholic community is a religious group, mostly for the Catholic service and also gathering the Vietnamese in the area for different services like Vietnamese class and a lot of help for the people to get into the area, get used to life in America, help the newcomers a lot.

RV: Did most of the Vietnamese in the community, were they the first wave and did they come as refugees, or were most of them immigrants?

TV: Most of us are refugee. We don’t have immigrants at all at that time, but later, ten, fifteen years later, when they have some sponsorship, the government let some immigrant coming, but that’s a lot later.

RV: Did you have any difficulties with the Vietnamese community from other people in the city?

TV: Because the Vietnamese group, we have, and really that’s just the Catholics, we have a service in Vietnamese rather than English and most of us don’t understand English well enough to attend the service so we have the Vietnamese service that help us a lot with the language.

RV: I know that the Gardena, Lawndale area is a little far from what is now Little Saigon so did you know about Little Saigon before you came to California or did you find out later while you were living in Lawndale.

TV: I live in Lawndale, and the community in Gardena is 30, 35 miles from Little Saigon and at the beginning, Little Saigon is not like Little Saigon now. It is very small at that time, so we, it looked like we built it up with our community at about the same time. And Little Saigon become bigger and bigger and later, I move from Lawndale to nearby Little Saigon in 2003, that is about 8 years from now.

RV: Where did you move to?

TV: We move to Huntington Beach city, near Saigon, near Little Saigon.
RV: So that is right next to Westminster.

TV: Yes.

RV: Did you want to move to the Little Saigon area before, while you were living in Lawndale or... did you Huntington Beach because you wanted to be closer to the Vietnamese community or was there something, another factor in there.

TV: We like the house we are living in right now. We like the city we living in now, the neighbor of Little Saigon. And we are happy, we don’t think of moving to any place at that time. That only about six miles from Little Saigon.

RV: I guess I am asking because I’ve heard you were involved in the Vietnamese community in Gardena so were able transition into another community when you moved to Huntington Beach.

TV: When we moved from Lawndale to Huntington Beach, of course we left the Vietnamese community in Gardena, and when we get to the new place, we join the Vietnam group in the local area. So Huntington Beach now is my local group of the Vietnamese.

RV: So you just continued where you left off?

TV: Yes.

RV: Did you find it difficult to transition culturally to America culture.

TV: Yes, it is very difficult to move from one tradition to another, from the Vietnamese to the American culture, but up to now, it has almost been 38 years, so we get used to the new culture a lot. It is my second country so we had to adopt a lot of the new culture, but we get used to it now.

RV: Coming back to Vietnam, when they opened their doors to travelers and tourists back in 1994, did you find it difficult to go back to Vietnam, of did you see that as an opportunity.

TV: When the Vietnamese communists begin to let people come back to the country, yes, a lot of people come back to visit family because anyways, this is still our country, where we came from. So it don’t matter what, our people still our people, our family persons is still there, so we need to go back to our country and visit them, visit my parent, visit my relatives. Yes, we do that, but we come back to this country, not because of the government, but because our family, our people. And when we go back there, we still worry about our safety. I go back the first time after 24 years, after 24 years I come back the first time and I still, I want to go, but when I go there, I still worry about my security and anything, any safety. Yes, we do.

RV: Did you, how was your experience when you returned to Vietnam for the first time. Were you surprise or...
TV: When I come back to that country, come back to the country after 24 years, I still worry about our safety to be back and yes, everything is different, everything change, a lot of things changed. The culture changed, the way people treat me changed, the people are talking changed, and everything, everything changed, the house, the city, everything changed so it is not like the Vietnam before 1975 at all.

RV: Were you able to return to you old home in Vietnam.

TV: Yes, the first I come back there, a lot of surprises like that, and anyways I can go back to see my family in the area where I left 24 years before that. And at that time, I was lucky to be in the country and get out safely.

RV: Besides your relatives in Vietnam, were there any other relatives that left Vietnam? Were there any other relatives like siblings outside of Vietnam, that left Vietnam after the war.

TV: When the government fail, the country fell in April 30, 1975, I left with only my family, including me, my wife, and my daughter, I don’t know anybody else. When I get to America, a few years later, I found out I have a couple of cousin, also left the country. They are living in California, somewhere else in the country. And in the first ten years, yes we can contact them and also in seven, ten years later, my brother can get out of the country, can escape from the country as boat people and they go to Canada. So a couple of years left, I have another one, also the boat people and they both get to Canada, as refugee in Canada. When they get out of the country by boat, and they get to the refugee camp in Thailand, I tried to sponsor them to America, but I cannot do that because the U.S. government don’t let the married brother come to this country because they can go anywhere, they don’t need to be with me, so they not approve for them to come to America, and they go to Canada.

RV: Are there any traditions you still keep with you when you came to America. So is your lifestyle more or less the same as it was in Vietnam and what ways have you seen it change when you came here?

TV: When we stayed in America, and when we live with Vietnamese group, when we, the activity in the group is still a lot of Vietnamese tradition. But we are working, we are living with the local people, yes we have to adopt, we had to be the same as American culture a lot.

RV: Can you describe any specific things change, like have you noticed how, any difference between working in Vietnam and working in America.

TV: Yes, about the working, it is very difference. In our country, in Vietnam before, I am a military man so, it could look the same, military and military, but civilian life, working in the company, to carry a job is a lot different for me because we don’t have many manufacturers or big company like America. Most of the people are working in the farm or working in the small
business, that is completely different from America. But when we come here, we work for some big company, we work for government, that is the way of working is different.

RV: Were there any events when you came to America that stuck out to you, that really affected you? Is there any events that gave you difficulty or did you have any point where you felt you were struggling to make it in America.

TV: You are talking about jobs?

RV: Just in general, in life.

TV: The life or job, everything if different, but we had to deal with that, when we are in the system, we have to work, we have to do like the others.

RV: Can you give any specific examples like, maybe if you were laid off at some point or if you were unemployed and had difficulty finding a job because...

TV: Yes, I do have some hard times when I have a couple of layoffs, during the last 38 years, I had a couple of layoffs, yes it is a difficult time, not only for me, but for the while country. So during that time, it is difficult to look for jobs, it is difficult to handle with the hardship of the economic system. It is difficult, but not only for me, but for a lot of Americans so...

RV: So can you tell me about you personal experience of being laid off.

TV: In 1983, I had been laid off the first time, the company I am working for is Ampex, and laid off a lot of people including me and for a while, I cannot get a new job. And when I do get a new job, a lot of things is different. I had to...

RV: Can you describe to me your experiences after being laid off, like did you have difficulties making ends meet or did you have to cut back a little...

TV: Because at that time, from the time I come to America, I always try to work full-time and study at night. In college, I tried to get my degree and that take so long for me, very hard and time-consuming for me to finish four-year degree. It took me fourteen years, it took me fourteen years to complete only four year college because I have to work full-time to support my family and study only part-time at night to earn my degree. And finally, I get it, after fourteen years.

RV: What degree was it?

TV: It was electrical engineering. I graduate from Cal State Long Beach in 1990.

RV: Did you find getting that degree make it easier to find a job or did you feel...

TV: When I get the degree in 1990, that was not good for graduation candidate. It is difficult to look for a job. A lot of graduates cannot find a job, including me, but at that time, I was already
working engineering for a company. However, in 1990, that company laid me off too, so that is another hard time for me, when I just graduate, I get degree, and get laid off too.

RV: Looking back on it now, do you have any regrets or anything concerning the decisions you made when you came to America.

TV: I am very happy and appreciate the Americans, my second country that give me a chance to live, to work, and give me the second country to live, to be a citizen. I appreciate it very much and some hard times during the economic times, that is normal for everybody, not for me only, so that is not affecting what I appreciate, the circumstances I have now, the condition I have now with American people, American country help me in my refugee time.

RV: Now, looking at the Vietnamese community, do you feel that they are keeping with their traditions, preserving the Vietnamese culture, or do you feel there is more the Vietnamese community can do right now to preserve our culture.

TV: The Vietnamese community, we talk about not the local one, but nation-wide, the Vietnamese culture becomes bigger and bigger in the last 38 years, and yes we offer a lot I think to American life now. A lot of business, a lot of things now, a lot of successful things in many ways. So I am proud of our Vietnamese community can do for the American where we are living now, but in the Vietnamese community, we still have a lot of problems with things, with politics from the government. A lot of things can make us to become, could be some trouble, some rich people, most of them are from communists, they’re immigrants with the chance to coming to America later. And most of them are rich people and they can make the people, the anti-communist, the refugee people to be affected by them. And it looks like the communist government try to make our anti-communist refugee be worse with the American life now.

RV: So you are finding that the communists coming after the war to be agitating the refugee community in America?

TV: Yes, many of them are coming after that they may relate to the government or really they are trying to go away from the country and they join the Vietnamese community and make the Vietnamese refugee community, the Vietnamese anti-communist community, with many troubles with them.

RV: Now that we are entering the second-, third-generation of Vietnamese-Americans, do you have anything you would like to say as a first-generation, your feelings towards them or any advice for them?

TV: We always tell the young Vietnamese in our group why we are here. We are here because we are refugees, we escape from the communist government. We don’t escape from the Vietnamese country, the Vietnamese people, but we escape from the communist government and no matter what, we should keep our culture, we should love our country, we should not let it go
with the communist. We have to remember, we are the refugee and we are anti-communist people. And we cannot live with the communists. That is why we are here and we appreciate the Americans help us to live in a free country, to escape from the communists.

RV: Are there any memories or stories you would like to share before we end this? Would you like to share any other stories, any last thoughts on your mind?

TV: We have a lot of things to talk about, but…

RV: Would you like to mention any of it?

TV: …but mainly, I just say we are anti-communist people, we are the refugee, we escape from the communist government, we lost our country, we lost our people, but we have to get out of the country to escape the communists. That is the main thing and our people, our young should not forget that.

RV: Thank you for your time.