Vietnamese American Oral History Project

Narrator: DUC TRI PHAM

Interviewer: Michelle Le Pham

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TRANSCRIPTION

Track 01

MLP: My name is Michelle Pham, I am from UC Irvine and I am part of the Vietnamese American Oral history project. For the record can you state your name and date of birth?

DTP: My name is Duc Tri Pham, I was born on the 7th of August 1961. I was born in Saigon Vietnam

MLP: What are your parents’ names?

DTP: My father’s name is Pham Van Hau, my mother’s Nguyen Thi Bo.

MLP: Do you have any siblings, a brother or sister?

DTP: Yeah, I have a younger sister, her name is Pham Thi My-Hanh

MLP: How old is she?

DTP: She was born in 1969, she’s 43 years old now

MLP: When you were younger, where did you live?

DTP: I lived in Saigon, Vietnam

MLP: What was your address?

DTP: 23 Tran Van Thach, District 1, Saigon. Now it’s 23 Nguyen Huu Cau, Phuong Tan Dinh, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
MLP: When you were young did you go to school?

DTP: Yeah, I went to La San Taperd, after ’75 I studied at Van Minh which was Les Lauriers before. Afterwards I studied Bui Thi Xuan, after that I studied at a governmental sponsored electronics school, Diesel.

MLP: When you were younger did you like going to school?

DTP: Yeah, I liked going to school

MLP: What does your neighborhood look like? What do you remember?

DTP: Well, it was normal. In front of our house is also a tailor shop, next to our house was a basic shop selling knick knacks. Our house was on the side walk facing the street. There were lots of people.

MLP: When you were younger what did you sell?

DTP: We were a tailoring shop. We made Ao Dai (Vietnamese traditional women’s dresses)

MLP: Who did the tailoring, was it Grandpa or Grandma?

DTP: It was only Grandpa, he hired people to take care of the house. We took care of about 10 people in the house. We also hired people to work the tailoring shop.

MLP: When you were younger do you remember playing with your friends?

DTP: Yea

MLP: Who did you play with?

DTP: We played out in the street, on the sidewalk. Game like tat long, dich hinh, nhay day, OOO. We played all different kinds of things.

MLP: Did you have a best friend?

DTP: Yes, I have one best friend named Tan

MLP: What is your religion?

DTP: I am a Roman Catholic

MLP: Which church did you go to?

DTP: I went to Tan Dinh, close to our house
MLP: I remember when you were younger you went to a religious school?

DTP: That was La San Taperd. That was a school run by brothers of the church and supported by Dong Chua Cuu The

MLP: How old were you when you went to these schools?

DTP: I went to La San Taperd until 9th grade, after the communist came. I studied 2 years at Bui Thi Xuan, after that I studied 2 years at vocational school, Diesel sponsored by the governmental electric company

MLP: What did you do in the religious school? You told me a long time ago that you went around preaching?

DTP: Oh no, I just studied there. The only thing I did was go to a vocational school to become a laborer.

MLP: After the fall of Vietnam in 1975, where were you on April 30th?

DTP: I was still in Vietnam

MLP: What do you remember on the day of April 30th?

DTP: Terrible on the morning of April 30th, 1975. The night before, April 29th me, my mom, and your aunt was at Bach Dang to find a way to leave Vietnam the night of April 29th, 1975. At that time all the boats left so that morning April 30th we had to return home. At that time Saigon was in turmoil. Some people stole, other burglarized. Some people rioted. On April 30th communist supporters wore a red scarf, claiming that they were the revolutionary army. They ruined everything. It was very chaotic. We didn’t know what to do; we didn’t know what was going to happen

MLP: What did you think you had to do?

DTP: I’m shocked. I don’t know nothing. I cannot do anything. I just regret that we weren’t able to escape on April 29th. At that time I didn’t know where to go. I just wanted to leave Vietnam, but I was too young to know what to do.

MLP: At that time how old were you? How old was Co Ut (younger aunt)?

DTP: I was 14, Co Ut was 5 years old

MLP: When we went back to Vietnam that one time you told me a story about how Co Ut snuck around and did something illegal and she was really scared doing it

DTP: A that time Co Ut was still young, Co Ut was smuggling because after ’75 life was very difficult. Luckily our home was close to the swap meet. The Viet Cong (Vietnamese
Communist) prohibited selling, however we supplied western medicine. Co Ut would take the medicine and put them in her backpack and pretend to go to school to outwit the communists.

MLP: Did you do anything similar to that?

DTP: I did everything to find a living and to make some money, so I did everything.

MLP: How many times did you try to escape Vietnam?

DTP: I tried so many times, too many times to remember

MLP: What was your first time like?

DTP: The first time was in 1976 in March. I was caught at Ha Tien (city), I was 14 so I was only imprisoned for 1 month. I tried escaping from Sa Quynh (city) to Ca Mau (city). I was caught one time in October at Nha Be (city). Total I was imprisoned twice. I did everything to try to escape even pretend I was Cambodian to be extradited.

MLP: When you went to prison, what did you remember?

DTP: In prison I remember I just wanted to shower and breathe. I wasn’t hungry, but it was just hot and humid. The prison cell was 10m long by 5m wide, but it held 30 to 40 people. It was terrible.

MLP: Did you go to a re-education camp?

DTP: No, because I wasn’t associated with the military or anything like that

MLP: Tell me about the day that led up to your successful escape

DTP: For that time I was working at the governmental sponsored electronics company. I was just ready to go. I went to many times already and I wasn’t really excited. I just wanted to leave.

MLP: Tell me about the time you did something with voodoo to try to escape. A long time ago while I was in high school you mentioned using voodoo to try to escape, something involving a chicken?

DTP: We Vietnamese at the time wanted to have a successful escape. We had an acquaintance that told us to make an appointment. After we made offerings the guy took out a chicken and opened its mouth and skewered it with a chopstick with a talisman until it came out the butt. He said that if the chicken lived after he pulled out the chopstick I would be successful in escaping, but if it died I would be captured. When he pulled it out the chicken was alive. He gave me the talisman and told me once I made it I have to throw the talisman away and it would come back to him. As I was going home I realized that I was a Catholic and I was dabbling in the devil and demons. I threw the talisman on the street and went to church to pray every day.
MLP: At that time did you make it?

DTP: Yea I made it

MLP: Can you explain to me that why the second and third time you didn’t make it?

DTP: The primary reason is that we were scammed by people. It was because were from Saigon, if we wanted to escape we had to go into a designated area. It was because we didn’t know anything. We would go over there and people would say they had the boat when they didn’t or they didn’t know the way. The second time I was caught was at Hai Phan Quoc The (city). For seven days and seven nights we were at sea. The boat was big but the navigator didn’t know the way. It was going towards Malaysia, but others wanted to go to Hong Kong. A larger tanker ship came by and refused to rescue us so we had to go back to Vietnam. Everyone was caught except for me. There was another boat leaving but I was 20 minutes late, it turns out everyone was caught except for me.

MLP: We are going to stop right now for a restroom break.

Track 02

MLP: Before we went on our break, you were talking about escaping the country. You only came here by yourself why not your mom or dad or sister?

DTP: We would never go as a whole family, earlier it would just be me, my mom, and Co Ut. Grandpa would never go because he had to stay behind. We were afraid that if we were unsuccessful the Viet Cong would confiscate everything, and then we wouldn’t have a home to return to, that’s why we had to split up. On the last attempt there was Co Ut and my mom, but as I said before we were scammed. Luckily they let a few people go but scammed the rest. I went with an oil tanker, a water tanker that’s why I made it. But Co Ut and my mom stayed behind. I heard that, that night they had to hide in the brush because at that time the police came and arrested people. They actually caught your grandma and Co Ut, but she bribed them and they let them go back to Saigon. It was thanks to leaving on the supply boat tanker that I was able to leave.

MLP: Why is it that it’s Grandma, Co Ut, and you why not, Grandpa, you and Co Ut? Why did your dad choose to stay behind and not your mom?

DTP: For safety, because we had to split up. Vuot Bien (escaping the country) is always like that. We would never go as one group; you had to split it up, half and half. If you all went as one and were caught they would confiscate everything. At least that if you were caught and put into prison there was someone on the outside that would visit and care for you. If you went as a whole family who would come and care for you?

MLP: But why did Grandma go and no Grandpa?
DTP: Because Grandpa was the head of the family and wanted to stay behind for safety.

MLP: This is not the first time your parents moved from one place to another. Your parents were from North Vietnam and moved to South Vietnam, why did they do that? Where did they live in North Vietnam?

DTP: They lived in Hanoi.

MLP: Why did they move?

DTP: Because they were scared of the Communist

MLP: What year was this?

DTP: 1954

MLP: Where you born then?

DTP: No, I was born seven years later in 1961

MLP: Do you miss you sister?

DTP: Yeah, I a lot

MLP: Do you wish she would have gone with you instead?

DTP: Yeah, because if she were to go her future would have been better because she was still young. If she were to come here she would be able to have chance

MLP: When you were actually successful leaving, what do you remember? What do you remember about the boat?

DTP: The boat was 11m long the width was only about 2.5m, on the vessel there was only one motor, one cylinder only, but the boat took 43 people the displacement of the boat in the water was only about as long as your hand, because the boat was so small

MLP: How long were you afloat?

DTP: It was only for a day, but after that day the motor broke. We were just floating there for 3 days. We were very lucky, very lucky that the US Navy rescued. The ship was called the USS Pelileu. We were really lucky, if not we would have all died because the boat wouldn’t have moved, the motor died we would have just floated there. Another lucky instance was earlier in May, in May people say that “an old woman goes the sea” means that the sea is very calm, the waters look like that of a pool, there are not waves. If there were waves or a storm then we would be dead, because the boat was too small. Earlier when we went to Hai Phan Quoc The, the weather was really bad, but we had a large boat. But if it was this boat and it was stormy
then we would have all died, because the engine wouldn’t work and the storm would rage, there was no way to avoid it. The two instances of luck was that the sea was calm and the US Navy rescued us.

MLP: How old were you at that time?

DTP: 20 years old

MLP: Oh my age! Did the boat have any supplies food or water?

DTP: No, it didn’t have anything, only a few potatoes, that’s it

MLP: Do you remember what the people looked like, men, women, children?

DTP: There was about 43 people, about 10 women, everyone else were teenagers

MLP: No children?

DTP: Just one very young child

MLP: While you were on the boat did you notice anything strange in a sense that were people crying, upset, everyone worrying, people praying?

DTP: Yeah, everyone was praying, no one was crying yet, everyone was praying, at that time people were only worried about making

MLP: When the motor stopped working, did you feel scared?

DTP: No I wasn’t scared

MLP: What were you thinking?

DTP: For that time I think only escape, this voyage was successful. All the other times were all scams and didn’t even get into the ocean. I was just worried about leaving Hai Phan only. I was just hoping that a ship would just save us or the waves would push us into an island or a country. I weren’t afraid, I don’t know about the other people, but I wasn’t afraid. I was afraid of being scammed the most. What was being scammed, people would take our money and they wouldn’t have a boat. The second was that people would trick us so the police would arrest us. Being scammed would be like people telling us that they have a boat to leave but when we got there, there’s nothing, then we would have to run home. The second is being caught. Leaving from Hai Phan and being in the sea, I wasn’t scared I just prayed.

MLP: How much money did you lose from being scammed?

DTP: From 1975 to ’82 and being successful we lost 100 gold bars. 1 gold bar today is worth about $1080. Then totally we lost about $100800.
MLP: When you were rescued by the naval ship, how did they rescue you? What was the procedure?

DTP: At that time the US Pelileu was having war games in Thailand near the harbor. We floated close to them and then they found us and saved us. Because at that time there was a lot of Vuot Bien, so they saved us.

MLP: Were you their first refugee ship saved?

DTP: I don’t know

MLP: What do you remember once on the ship?

DTP: Upon the ship they put us in the cabin, took our name and age and gave us a place to shower, before that they gave us chicken broth to eat because they were afraid that we were hungry. They took us to the hospital in the ship to stay and sleep. We were on the ship for 3 days and took us into a refugee camp, Panat Nikhom.

MLP: When you took a shower for the first time and ate their food did you feel happy or excited?

DTP: Yea at by then I knew I was going to live.

MLP: Did you talk to anyone did you thank them?

DTP: Yea everybody. When the boat engine broke I was happy that Grandma and Co Ut wasn’t on there because we might have died. But when the US ship rescued us I was sad because if Grandma and Co Ut was on there they would have been free.

MLP: After that where did they take you?

DTP: Panat Nikom, Thailand. I lived there for one month afterwards I was transferred to Bataan, Philippines. I lived there for 3 and a half months for citizenship and finding a sponsor to go to the United States.

MLP: When you were in Thailand do you remember what it was like?

DTP: It was very hard

MLP: Really, didn’t they have unlimited food?

DTP: They were two meals a day, only rice. Chicken was small as your finger you can count them we had to split amongst so many people. I only had once piece. In the Philippines I didn’t have any help so living was difficult

MLP: Did you make any friends while in the camps in Thailand or the Philippines?
DTP: No, we lived in the camp. People in Thailand and the Philippines didn’t come visit us.

MLP: Did you get along with any of the other refugees?

DTP: Yeah.

MLP: Do you still keep in contact with them?

DTP: Yeah, there is one person living in San Jose.

MLP: Have you kept in contact

DTP: No, but in my wedding he came by

MLP: Living in the Philippines for three and half months what do you remember about the days leading up to it?

DTP: I left the Philippines on October 19, 1982. It was because an American vessel saved us. By law the country from which the ship served is where the refugees were supposed to go. If I wasn’t saved by a ship and I washed up on Thailand, because the family didn’t have any priority in the refugee camps I would have stayed 2-3 years before I could go to the United States. Luckily thanks to being rescued by the American vessel I got to go sooner.

MLP: Do you think you could have stayed at the refugee camp for three years?

DTP: No, it was terrible

MLP: When you came to the United States do you know who sponsored you?

DTP: There was no one that sponsored me, there was a group called the IRC that sponsored me.

MLP: Did you go by plane?

DTP: Yes, I have to from the Philippines to the United States I went by plane.

MLP: Were you excited, were you nervous?

DTP: I’m not nervous, but I was excited. Because I knew I would have a new life. I was still worried about how I’m going to live a new life.

MLP: We are going to pause for a second.
MLP: Before the break we were talking about how the IRC sponsored you to the United States, where did you end up in the United States?

DTP: Marrieta, Georgia

MLP: Did you have anything with you when you came off the plane?

DTP: Nothing, I didn’t have anything just the clothes on my body.

MLP: Where did they take you, who took you?

DTP: The representative of IRC said that he was the caretaker. He could speak Vietnamese; he took us to his apartment with two rooms. In the two room apartment he lived with a Vietnamese teenager about my age in one room. Another room had three other Vietnamese teenagers. At that time, I came to the IRC with a friend who I lived with in the Philippine refugee camps. The IRC sponsored us both, when we came to the sponsor’s apartment we stayed in the living room. At that time the sponsor walked around the house in his underwear, I didn’t know what was going on. When he picked me up at the airport he hugged me and I thought it was an American thing and he was being nice. That night I couldn’t sleep. The next day he took me to apply for social security, food stamps, and then went home. I stayed there for another night; I applied for a job at an electronic company. I was lucky because I had a background in electronics in Vietnam. I worked on a recording board. The next day he threw me into another home 2 bedroom. There were 8 other teenagers living there. The governmental rule for refugees was that we were to receive $250 in cash, but when he kicked me out he only gave me $20. The $250 he deducted into living spaces. The food stamps that came home he took them too. The most important thing is that he was gay. The person living in his room was his boyfriend, because the refugees didn’t know English they came from the country, he forced them to live with him. They told me that every night he would pick them off one by one and sexually abuse them. He worked in a group and abused the refugees who didn’t know better.

MLP: Did anything happen to you?

DTP: No, I studied in the Philippines for three and half months I knew a little English and I lived in the city. He knew that I was not naive. The representative knew that the others were from fishing villages and didn’t know better, that’s why he abused them. He wouldn’t dare do it to me because my face was that of a person from the city.

MLP: Is that why you left? Where did you go?

DTP: No, he kicked me out, that’s why I stayed at that house with 8 other people.

MLP: When did you go to California and why?
DTP: Because in Georgia all I did was work. I didn’t know what my future was going to be like and there weren’t a lot of Vietnamese. I worked on the assembly line, but I wanted to go back to school. I didn’t know anyone there that would help me. I had someone I knew, a couple in California. Chi Hai, my mom’s godmother, we contacted each other and I headed to California.

MLP: How long did you stay in Georgia?

DTP: Only two months

MLP: How did you get to California?

DTP: I went by bus, Greyhound. It took me 3 days.

MLP: Was it a good three days or a bad three days?

DTP: I don’t care. I’ve already went through Vuot Bien nothing scared me.

MLP: Where did you get the money to buy a ticket?

DTP: I saved up money from work to go

MLP: Where did you work to save up all the money?

DTP: I don’t remember, the factory was in Marietta, Georgia. The bus ride from Georgia to California was three days and three nights. I didn’t know English, but I wrote on a piece of paper telling the driver that I am from Georgia and the address to where I wanted to go and the person I’m supposed to contact. I sat down and told him that if I had to transfer please let me know. I remember one time I got on and on the speaker they said something that sounded like “AAA”. I thought it was California and Santa Ana, I walked up there and asked if we were here, but he told me to sit down. An hour later I heard “AAA” I ran up there again and asked, he told me to sit down. It happened a third time, he told me to sit down. I sat down and slept a day later I arrived.

MLP: You ended up on Santa Ana, California, who did you end up living with?

DTP: I lived with Bac Hai in La Habra

MLP: Did you start going to school then?

DTP: First I went to ESL, to learn English and then after a few months I went to a vocational school, CETA program. I learned machine shop and after that I went to Fullerton College to learn machine shop. Later on I went to Santa Ana College to learn machine shop too.

MLP: Back to ESL, what was it like to learn English? In Vietnam you didn’t learn English what did you learn?
DTP: I studied French. It was hard because I was older and capabilities were a lot lower. I just had to find a way to open my mind and fill it with English.

MLP: What was the hardest thing, reading, writing, or speaking?

DTP: The hardest thing was speaking, because in French the pronunciation is what you expect the written word is supposed to be.

MLP: Do you remember a word that was funny or difficult to learn?

DTP: No, I don’t remember

MLP: So after you learned English, who helped you find a job, or did you find it on your own?

DTP: I found it in a newspaper, they paid me $3.85, the minimum wage at that time was $3.50. I went there and deburred parts, 4 years.

MLP: What made you quit?

DTP: The company close-up

MLP: At the company were you the only Vietnamese person?

DTP: There was only 3 Vietnamese, after they hired me they thought it was good so they hired a lot of Vietnamese people.

MLP: How did you get to work, did you have a car at that time?

DTP: Yea I had a car, it was a Pinto. I only had $500 I borrowed another $150 to buy it a 1973. I bought it for $650.

MLP: The money you borrowed was it from Bac Hai and were you still living with her at that time?

DTP: Yeah, but after I got a job and a car I moved out.

MLP: Where did you live then?

DTP: I lived with my friend in Anaheim

MLP: You used to tell me how you saved up money and you treated yourself to McDonald’s once a month
DTP: Yeah, when I came to California I received welfare, $258 in cash and $60 in food stamps so I gave $60 to Bae Hai for food $50 for rent. So I have $158 left. I spent for myself $30 a month and saved the rest of the money and sent it back home about $50. I like to eat hamburgers and French fries, but I didn’t have money so I only ate it once a month.

MLP: You said you studied at Fullerton College is that where you met Mom? Was it the best day of your life?

DTP: Uhh…

MLP: What year did you meet mom?

DTP: 1984

MLP: When did you purchase this house we are living in?

DTP: August 1988

MLP: And when did you marry Mom?

DTP: 1990

MLP: Now that you are established in the United States how do you feel living here compared to Vietnam?

DTP: A lot better

MLP: Would go back to Vietnam?

DTP: Yea, but just to visit not to live.

Track 04

MLP: Earlier I asked you if you would like to go back to Vietnam

DTP: Yea I want to go back to Vietnam, absolutely, but I cannot live over there

MLP: Why?

DTP: Because Vietnam has a different lifestyle. The time I live in American is longer than in Vietnam. I am still Vietnamese, I speak Vietnamese, I eat Vietnamese food, and my family is in Vietnam. Que Huong (homeland) is where you are born and raised. I was born in Vietnam, I grew up in Vietnam, but the timespan is 20 years. Right now I’m 51 years old; I lived in the United States for 31 years. I’m lost because I don’t know I’m Vietnamese or American. I’ve been back to Vietnam multiple times. I remember that one time I came back from Vietnam to
L.A. I met an officer of immigration he said, “Welcome home, sir”. For that moment I said “Wow” this is my home. I realized it, that I am home, my sweet home. Here, I have mom and you, this house I bought. This is my house, this is my home. However, here I feel lonely because I only hang out with Vietnamese people. I don’t socialize with our American neighbors only “Hi here and hi there”. The home is only in our house, but outside it’s not my home. This isn’t my country, even right now I’m an American this isn’t my real country. But when I go back to Vietnam my feelings is it isn’t my country either. I’m like a tourist, I speak Vietnamese, the color of my skin is like that, I eat like it, I speak it, but my mentality compared to the Vietnamese people now is completely different. I’m not entirely Vietnamese either, in America I’m a citizen, but I’m not American. But in Vietnam I’m not Vietnamese. I don’t know who I am. When I go back I’m like a tourist. I’m planning when I retire I will live in American and Vietnam, a few months in Vietnam a few months in America. I’m middle I don’t know. I’m American? Nope. I’m Vietnamese? I’m not sure. The mentality of a Vietnamese person is different.

MLP: How so, what’s different? In what ways is it different, is it government or the way you raise your children?

DTP: Yeah, people want to raise their children like Co Ut, they raise children different way with me. They are different from you. The work ethic is different, over there everything corrupt. Here everything comes out as is, one is one, two is two, but over there everything different. If you want to work there everything is under the table. You have to lie, cheat, and smuggle. Right now, over here a worker works. Now its $8.50 minimum they can still live, a month is a couple hundred dollars, they can still live within their means. A Vietnamese works makes about 3 million dong (Vietnamese currency), that is $150 a month. But the lifestyle is very odd; I don’t understand how you can live off of that. For example a Honda is about $3000-$5000. When people make $150 they still have to use some of it, for food. Suppose that if you’re stingy you save $50 one car is $3000, I don’t know how long they have to save to buy it. Take the price of a house in Vietnam today. If our house was in Vietnam it would be $500000, but a worker can only spare $20 or $50 how can they buy it to live. At least here you can go to work and buy a home. The life in Vietnam doesn’t make sense, because everything is made under the table. For example Co Ut’s house right now they money, but everything is under the table. Her husband is customs officer, everything’s under the table.

MLP: When you go to Vietnam do you plan to work there?

DTP: No! No way! You can’t work there, even if you wanted to make a living you couldn’t. Everybody’s cheating.

MLP: Do you feel like you can cheat to make money?

DTP: No, the Communist government you can go vacation there, but making a living is not possible.

MLP: Some people say that “I swear I’ll never go back to Vietnam, unless there is no Communism”, do you feel that way?
DTP: No

MLP: Why?

DTP: After 1975 there is so much resentment, they just say it. I won’t go back to Vietnam unless there is no Communism. It’s been 37 years, it’s the past. Right now how many people go to Vietnam in a year? Hundreds of thousands of people. In our family, Bac Thuy and Bac Thanh, the left in 1975, how many times have they been back? Bac Thanh is the greatest protestor, but he’s been back more than us. I’ve only been back six times. Now this is very important, from ’75 to 2005 is 30 years. Bac Thanh despises the Communist government, he’s been adamant about not returning to Vietnam, anyone who goes back he scolds. But from 2005 to 2012, that’s 7 years. After Bac Thanh went back once he goes back every year. Why? Because in Vietnam they change now, they change a lot. Vietnam change a lot.

MLP: So you don’t hold any grudges, you’re not angry? Because some people are still angry, do you actually forgive them?

DTP: I understand; I understand that somebody is angry. They have the right to be angry. During the war people experience loss, people lost brother, sisters, parents. They’ve died because of war, Viet Cong murdered them. After ’75, families were separated; homes were confiscated by the Viet Cong. Children and spouses could have been taken by the Viet Cong. I understand their feeling, they have to be angry. With me I’m angry too. I understand. However in our family we were lucky we didn’t go through that. My dad’s dad leg was lame he wasn’t drafted. Our family was not really involved with the Republic of Vietnam, which is why we weren’t targets of retaliation from the Viet Cong. Also on the side of the Viet Cong we didn’t have anyone in the family who followed them. So our feelings towards them are different of those who were prosecuted and abused by the Viet Cong. People like that have obvious reasons why they hate them. However time goes on, resentment is there but now the life is different. The Viet Cong now aren’t really Viet Cong. All they care about now is money, their ideals aren’t the same. On paper they are, but realistically they aren’t like China. China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam are all Communist governments. I don’t know about North Korea or Cuba, but China and Vietnam are not Communist anymore they’ve changed.

MLP: Living in the United States for 35 some odd years, did you ever encounter any racism because you were Vietnamese. Can you explain it?

DTP: Right now, in my work place there is an old white guy asked “Are you Vietnamese, does the government give you money, do you pay your taxes, does the government give you money to pay the down payment for the house?” Man I work my butt off to have it, how do you get that idea! Because American people think that we are refugees we get governmental money, we don’t have to pay our taxes, and they pay for our house. That is racism right? That’s racism.

MLP: Were you angry or you just didn’t care?

DTP: I’m not upset, people like that are dumb, their brain is dumb, they don’t know anything
MLP: When you hear people say that “I’m Vietnamese American” or “I’m Vietnamese” or “I’m Asian American” what do you identify yourself as?

DTP: I don’t know who I am, before I told you. I speak Vietnamese, I eat Vietnamese, I look Vietnamese, but when I live in United States I feel I’m Vietnamese, but when I go to Vietnam I feel I’m American, you understand me? When I live in United States I feel Vietnamese, but when I go to Vietnam I’m American, not Vietnamese.

MLP: You still keep in touch with Co Ut and your parents when they were alive. How often do you keep in touch with her?

DTP: Usually every 2-3 years I go back to Vietnam, sometimes I call my sister ask her what’s going on.

MLP: How many times have you gone back to Vietnam in total?

DTP: I believe six times, I’m planning to go back in a few more months.

MLP: When was the first time you’ve been back to Vietnam since you left?

DTP: During that time you were 1, 1992.

MLP: How did it feel, were you excited, were you worried?

DTP: No at that time my dad was still alive, I wanted to go visit. When I went back I feel strange. Everything changed, when I left that was real Communist, I thought I can never come back. But when I come back I thought, “Wow, I come back”. Not a lot of people come back to Vietnam.

MLP: Because they were still upset?

DTP: No they’re scared, not upset. Yeah some people still upset, most reason is because they’re scared. They don’t know what going on they scared. Vietnamese people in America at the time called people who go back a traitor. They call me a traitor, but hey I’m not a traitor, I go back to see my mom, see my family. If you wanted to buy an airplane ticket they protest, if they knew they would protest against you.

MLP: Did you see any of these protests yourself? Where?

DTP: Bolsa Mini Mall

MLP: Is that where you bought your ticket?

DTP: No I bought it at another office.

MLP: was it a big protest?
DTP: no small one, just a few days then it’s gone

MLP: Did you feel like you were a traitor

DTP: No, okay if they call me a traitor for that time, for that time only a small amount of people go to Vietnam if they call me a traitor, right now every year 400000 people come back to Vietnam. So 400000-500000 people are traitors who go back to Vietnam. See? See what I mean? Even the people who called me a traitor they’ve already gone back to Vietnam. The people who called me a traitor has also been back

MLP: Now that there are Vietnamese establishments in Little Saigon do you go there often?

DTP: Everyday, almost every day?

MLP: Why?

DTP: To buy the food

MLP: What is it about Vietnamese food compared to American food that makes you want to go and buy it? Say Pho instead of a hot dog or hamburger?

DTP: The food I got used to and cheap too, cheaper than American food

MLP: When you were in Georgia did you eat Vietnamese food?

DTP: Yea I cooked it myself

MLP: Do you remember the first time you came to Little Saigon, do you remember what I looked like?

DTP: It was only the Bolsa Mini Mall area, a small plaza at Magnolia and Bolsa, no Phouc Loc Tho yet. Small business plaza at Brookhurst and Hazard and that’s it, nothing

MLP: What kind of shops did they have and what kind of shops did you go to?

DTP: A small shop, the largest store was Hoa Binh a supermarket, now its Hanoi Restaurant. It was the biggest supermarket.

MLP: What do you think of it? Some people are saying that Vietnamese are taking over, they are turning the once all American town to a little China town.

DTP: I don’t care about people who say that. It’s a business, if they’re successful they have to grow up, explode, if not they close. I don’t about the people who say that.

MLP: Do you think the Vietnamese community changed since the first time?
DTP: They changed a lot; I think they will change more. Because the community around 1975 like Bac Thanh and Bac Nga (Thuy) they hate Communist, so they always protest. The second half was me, boat people, we still hate communist. Another wave HO they hate communist but they changed a lot, their children grew up in Vietnam so they learned in Vietnam. So when they went through immigration they change again. The older people who protest they are all old, in about 5-10 years they will all die. They will all be gone.

Track 05

MLP: We’re going back to your parents, what do you remember about you dad, do you remember anything?

DTP: No, my Dad doesn’t talk too much with me. My father was a tailor and he owned a tailor shop. In the house there is always 10 other tailors, they came every day and went home every night. My father doesn’t walk with me much; we don’t get along because the older Vietnamese generation doesn’t like to share. Even right now, you see Chu My and Ngoc the same! They don’t talk to each other, just like I said the Vietnamese people and I don’t have the same mentality, the feeling is different. My father doesn’t speak much.

MLP: What did you dad look like? What do you remember or do you remember?

DTP: Yeah, I remember how he acting, I got a good memory.

MLP: Can you describe him?

DTP: My father is normal, somewhat short with a lame leg. He probably never said anything to me. Anything he wanted was an “okay” or needed was an “okay”. There was no good in touch.

MLP: What about your mom were you closer with your mom?

DTP: Not close either. Because their generation just thinks that their responsibility is to feed the child, dress the child, and make sure the child goes to school. There is no sharing of feelings, even today in Vietnam it’s the same thing just like Co Ut and Ngoc. Co Ut thinks that I feed you and put you through school are enough everything else you have to worry about. There is no sense of in touch with each other.

MLP: When you look at your mom what did you see? Was she tall, skinny? Was she pretty?

DTP: She not really pretty, but she’s a little cubby she has some meat

MLP: Did she laugh a lot or was she always serious?

DTP: Normal, not serious. Not look like my Dad. I don’t have much in touch with them

MLP: What about your sister, when you were young what do you remember about her?
DTP: At that time she was too young, she didn’t know anything it was just it. I was a boy she was a girl I wasn’t in touch with her and she was too young. When I left she was too young she was in her pre-teens.

MLP: Did you take care of her? Did you take her to school?

DTP: No, in Vietnam I was a boy, similar with their mentality. I had my own thing and she had her own thing. I was the same with them. If right now if I don’t go to United States I’m the same with them. If I got the children in Vietnam, I’m sure I would treat the same with them.

MLP: In Vietnam did you like anyone in particular? Did you have a girlfriend?

DTP: I had a girlfriend before, yeah.

MLP: Did you like her a lot?

DTP: Yes of course, she was my first love.

MLP: Where does she live?

DTP: She left Vietnam 1979 she go to Germany, after that she married and she move to California. I saw her sometime, right now she live, I think in Florida.

MLP: Usually when people come to the United States they change their name you know people who’ve changed their name, did you want to change your name?

DTP: No.

MLP: Why not?

DTP: It’s me I don’t care. It’s my name they have to call me by my name I don’t care.

MLP: Did you meet any other family members? We talk about your mom, dad, and sister? Did you have any other relationship with other family members?

DTP: Nope my grandparents died. My mom is co nhi (orphan), even she doesn’t know her parents so she living like a servant for one family. That family said this is my daughter, but it’s not really, she’s a servant. The family was only a little bit successful they open the store, they were successful and then became poor and they said, “This is my daughter”, but they really didn’t love her.

MLP: What about your Dad, do you know anything about his family history?

DTP: Yeah, my dad have one big sister, one young sister. The big sister died, the younger sister every time I go to Vietnam I see her and giver her money.
MLP: Is there anything that your mom cooked for you that you love and still wish she made?

DTP: Yeah, cha gio (egg roll).

MLP: Do you remember how she made it?

DTP: Yea, right now I can do it, but different cha gio from United States

MLP: Last but not least what are your hopes from now till however long you live? What do you from want America or what do you want from Vietnam? What is your goal?

DTP: In America I don’t hope for anything, because the politics you see right now? Right now Obama and the Republican Party they just argue, argue. They just want their people to be president.

MLP: So you don’t agree with politics of any kind?

DTP: They’re all shit. They are all liars, lying, and liars and Vietnam the politic in Vietnam will change. They cannot live like that they have to change.

MLP: You provided me some old ephemera, old documents can you walk me through some of the documents?

DTP: This is birth certificate, the original one, I don’t think anyone has one like this now. They have a stamp, the stamp means that you go the notary public you have to pay a fee. This stamp means you paid the fee.

MLP: I found something that was very interesting can you read this aloud please?

DTP: Get me the glasses

Track 06

DTP: This is my real birth certificate; it contains my country: the Republic of Vietnam, city: Saigon, county: Quan 1, name: Pham Tri Duc, gender: Male, birthdate: 7 August 1961, time: 2 AM, and place of birth: Grall Hospital.

MLP: I see that Grall isn’t a Vietnamese word…

DTP: Grall is French, this is a French Hospital. Here is Pham Van Hou, my dad he was 37, his profession tailor, and his address: Saigon 23 Tran Van Thach. This is my mom Nguyen Thi Bo, her occupation was homemaker, same address. This is very funny, it says here main wife or secondary wife, they filled in the legal primary wife as certified in Saigon, Quan 1 6/7/64. That means the marriage certificate was made in 1964. Wait, I was born in 1961, that doesn’t make sense.
MLP: Why is that?

DTP: You know Vietnamese. Below here is a stamp stating that it’s a copy made on 22 August 1967 in Saigon. So this right here is a copy, the original is in the city, this is signed by the representative of Quan 1. Primary wife and secondary wife, why do they have it; because a lot of men have a second wife, third wife, even fourth wife. For example if my mom wasn’t Nguyen Thi Bo and my mom would be second wife. Why does it matter? If my parents died then the children of the primary wife would get more property.

MLP: Did grandpa have more than one wife?

DTP: No, he only had one wife

MLP: What about this picture?

DTP: This picture is that of my family. That’s me on the left, my mom, my sister, and my dad. Going to this one, I don’t think anybody have it. Before I told you I went to school in Diesel, after two years I graduated and became a government worker. This paper has the name of the company, the number of this document is 45. The document states that I Pham Tri Duc who lives at 23 Nguyen Huu Cau is a worker for the company, sort of like my identification. The second document is similar. This paper my company gave to me, it states the company name and the company location and my home; wait, they wrote that wrong, whatever. It goes on to say that, “We acknowledge that Duc earned 19 kg of rice, we have already paid him 10kg and he is able to buy 9kg more”. This was a time of “bao cap”, or a system of budgets, meaning that stuff like sugar and rice was controlled by the government. Following the parameters of the government at the time a legal person, not a worker was able to buy 9kg of rice per month. But because I was a government worker, I make production, the people don’t make production so I have 19kg of rice. The place I work at sell to me, not give, sell to me 10kg of rice so when I got the market they can sell me 9kg of rice.

MLP: So you can’t even buy more rice if you had the money

DTP: Yeah, unless you buy in the black market

MLP: Really, did you buy anything in the black market?

DTP: Everything was in the black market. The black market was more expensive, for example 1 kg of rice is $1, if you go the black market 1 kg cost you $3. You understand what I mean? So for that time 1981 same time as the other paper, the Communist took over, we were very hungry not enough food to eat so they controlled the food they eat. Even if you’re a legal person, you can buy what they sell, but if you are not legal you cannot buy anything. That is only rice, the meat they sell only get a fist size amount of meat, all bones. You remember 1 month! If you wanted a box of matches it was this small per month for 1 entire family. 1 month not for 1 week or 1 day; my situation a lot of people would dream to have.

MLP: Was 19kg enough rice for you, for your family?
DTP: No it wasn’t enough. Sometimes they didn’t even have rice, they say 19 kg of rice, but if they don’t have rice they sell you the yam. They say 1 kg is equivalent to 3kg of yams, but those 3 kg are all rotten, I don’t even want to buy it. Its whatever, you eat or exchange, they don’t care.

MLP: Were you always hungry at that time?

DTP: No, it’s because our family have savings at that time, but I know a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of people hungry because my family have a lot of money before ‘75 we save. But I know a lot of people hungry it’s like we were high class at the time. A lot of people went months without food, but when I went to the refugee camp, I don’t have a meat to eat.

MLP: Where there any times that you regret going Vuot Bien?

DTP: No, I will always go. Do you see this picture RC00297 this picture I just came from the boat to Thailand, they gave me the number when I went to the camp. This picture was when I got off the USS Pelileu a week from Vietnam. This is what I look like in Vietnam. And this one is my identification in Thailand too, after a week in the camp they gave me identification. And this picture I live in Baatan, Philippines for I learn English and US life. Learn how to go to supermarket, how to go to the bus, how to find the job.

MLP: Was US life difficult to learn, was it different from Vietnam

DTP: No it was because I lived in the city and I learned the Western education from the French. I know what going on, but a lot of people don’t know. It was a shock for some people but not me.

MLP: Okay I think we’re done here, thanks Dad

Track 07

DTP: This is my final statement. This year I am 51 years old, I lived with the Republic of Vietnam until I was 14, 1975. I lived with the Communist Vietnam for seven years until I was 21. I left Vietnam when I was 21. I lived in the United States for 31 years. In ’92 I went back to Vietnam. You can split my life in four periods, the first period is living with the Republic of Vietnam before ’75, I felt even when I was young I felt that everything was peaceful, everyone worked, but the war was weight on everyone shoulders. The war was present in everyone’s life, everyone was afraid of the war, everyone was afraid of losing their family. The economy was fruitful, but an issue was that I believe that the economy and lifestyle was supported by the Americans. From the wages of soldiers to our home appliances were supplied by the Americans, the economy of Vietnam at the time was in its infancy there was nothing. That is my opinion. Life was quiet and tranquil in the city, only because I didn’t experience life outside, but I’m sure it was just terrible because of the war. After 1975 the Communist took over, the everyone’s life was miserable, because the Communist were oppressive and the worst was they forced military men of the old Republic into re-education camps. That is why many families were completely
destroyed because fathers, son, brothers, children were imprisoned. The Communist ruined and completely destroyed families. Referring to the economy, the Vietnamese people were living under Communist rule, there was no economy to support them, which is why the life of a Vietnamese was so difficult. As I said before my wages were paid in rice not in money, I was a government worker, a star in their eyes; I still had a difficult time surviving, compare that to a common citizen of the state, imagine how they lived. Secondly, my family was about to be sent away, because they claim we weren’t producing enough. They were going to send us into the country, but the countryside wasn’t ready for us, they were just going to throw us on some uncultured land, how are going to survive? Issues at that time were that families were destroyed, the economy was ruined, and thirdly they didn’t allow us to transfer funds or supply. For example, there is a younger sibling in the country that has excess rice and wants to bring it to their family in the city, they wouldn’t let you. On the route, there would be many stations that wouldn’t let you go. If you wanted to go you would have to get written permission, there was no freedom. Another example, I want to visit my younger sibling in Thu Duc when I live here, I can go visit sure, but if I want to spend the night or sleep there I couldn’t because I have to sleep at my house. If I wanted to I would have to have written permission, say I wanted to go to vacation in Vung Tao, or even go to a different district, I have to get written permission. Life from ’75 to ’82 was living under Communism is the second period. The third period is living in the United States in ’82, I came here with absolutely nothing, no mother, no father, no siblings, there was no one to support me. I received welfare, I understand gratitude, I am very thankful for the American system of welfare. I received it for 10 months, during that time I went to school, I understood that welfare would support me for 12 months, I had to find a way to support myself after 12 months, either finding a job or learn how to speak English. During that time I understood struggle, I had to struggle, I came to America without skills, without education, without anything, I struggled. Everyone knows struggle, you all know what it is like. Now moving on to ’92, upon returning to Vietnam I see that it has changed. The strict Communist Government is completely bankrupt. They have to change, if they don’t change now they will perish, however people here want them to change faster. I don’t think they can go any faster because they have to change slowly, if they change too fast, it would be utter chaos because those in power want to stay in power. If they are in a place of power and we tell them to step down, how are they going to step down? For example, the politicians in California right now, this politician here this politician there, they haven’t even been elected into a position yet and they are already muckraking and sabotaging each other to gain the upper hand. What makes you think someone in power is going to give up their position so easily? Everyone wants to make money and survive, the Communist in Vietnam are exactly the same. They will change, they have to change. This change comes from this younger generation, like my daughter or my daughter’s children. My daughter’s generation and those after will not know what war is or even resentment steaming from war. My generation will pass, their generation will rise, not to say that they will join hands, but will understand and do better work. These are my statements, thank you.