

**Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation
&
Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine**

Narrator: HUỶNH VĂN CHỈNH (aka TRUNG CHỈNH)

Interviewer: Darlena Tran

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DT: What is your name?

HVC: My name is Huynh Van Chinh, I have been performing art from 1966 in Vietnam by the name Trung Chinh.

DT: Where were you born?

HVC: I was born in My Tho, Vietnam.

DT: How is My Tho? Can you describe that place?

HVC: My Tho was a Southern province of SaiGon, about 72 kilometers from Saigon. My province was kind of famous because our First Lady Nguyen Van Thieu's family was living there. When I was young about 7 or 8 years old, whenever I got sick, my Mom used to take me to the First Lady's house because her father was a famous Herb Doctor from the North. I healed every time I drank the Herb from him. There was a wharf Bac Rach Mieu, now it has a bridge going across Phung hillock, where the Dao Dua religion at, pass the Ben Tre province, I think it is our My Tho province.

DT: Now you can think back to your childhood. What did My Tho has to offer and what games you used to play when you were there as a kid?

HVC: Of course in a poor province where I lived, there used to be the soccer game, we had a big soccer ground on Hung Vuong Boulevard, this boulevard seems to lead to the City Hall. When

we were young, we went to play soccer game every late afternoon. There was an Elementary School named Cau Bac, this school was on the other side of the railroad, and the opposite side was the First Lady Thieu's house. I studied there. After elementary school, I transferred to a private school and then going to Nguyen Dinh Chieu to finish high school.

DT: Where is Nguyen Dinh Chieu?

HVC: Nguyen Dinh Chieu was a popular high school in My Tho from the 1940s. They named Le Myre De Villers which was the name of a Southern Senator during that time. After that the school name changed to Nguyen Dinh Chieu. Our school also had popular people, even the Assistant of President of Education named Professor Nguyen Thanh Liem, was teaching there.

DT: Do you have any sisters or brothers that time?

HVC: I have 2 older brothers, unfortunately they passed away early, and my parent too!

DT: When did you lose your parent?

HVC: My father passed away when I was 7 years old, back in 1950. I came to America in 1979 and my Mother died in 1980.

DT: so your 2 brothers died in Vietnam when you were young?

HVC: My two brothers still alive when I escaped from my country, they were taking me to the wharf where I escaped. One brother died in 1979, and my oldest brother died 10 years after that, it was 1989.

DT: What did your family do for living when you were in Vietnam?

HVC: My Mom was having her own business. My family was poor so my older brother had to drop out from school. I did not do well in school as early age, that's why I couldn't pass the test to go to public school. I had to go to a very small private school named Truc Giang, I studied there for four years, during that time I suddenly became an outstanding student as God just open

my mind. I finished school with honor and receive lots of rewards. I passed the test to enter Nguyen Dinh Chieu School. I got accepted to Nguyen Dinh Chieu High School during 1960-63. My first year was fine, the next year I became outstanding and then became the best in my last year. I passed the Second High School test, after that I passed another test to enter Saigon Medical School and studied there until I graduated.

DT: When did you graduate?

HVC: Do you mean what school I graduate?

DT: Yes, what year? What school?

HVC: What school? I graduated from Nguyen Dinh Chieu in 1963, and finished my medical school at the end of 1971, so I graduated from Medical School in the same year. Early 1972, I got accepted from the Navy to be a doctor for Navy Army. We were in the combat of hot summer at Quang Tri from 1972-1975.

DT: Can you tell me what process and how you become a soldier doctor while you just graduate from Medical School to be a doctor?

HVC: Yes, from 1966, I passed the test to enter Army Medical School in Saigon. People seemed to misunderstand that Army Medical School would teach medical for students, but in fact, they were only teaching students about financial management, and training about general army and also English. For learning Medical, students still had to go to Medical University School in Saigon to study. So the benefit of taking Army Medical School for people like me who couldn't afford the school tuition, would help to waive that tuition, it provided so when students graduated, they would serve in the Army. So I joined that program from 1966-1971. I graduated at the end of 1971. After that I was chosen to be in branch A12 of the Navy. I became a doctor for Navy Division.

DT: Can you describe the process of preparing the test, how many years, and how is the test?

HVC: Starting from 1960...I don't remember exactly from what year 1961 or 1962. The Medical School organized a class called Preparation for Medical School. They didn't offer it before. That time they only had a similar class to biochemistry. It was about bio, animal, bio chemistry...ect. All students would do self-study and had to get the completion certificate named HBTN, and they could use that certificate to apply to Medical School. After that around 1962, I didn't recall it for sure the Medical School started having a class called prerequisite for medical school. Students would directly attend to the class and had to pass that class in order to be officially accepted from the Medical School. There were 6 years to complete medical study and there was different level each year. Students had to take the test every year to determine if they qualified for the next level. Students would graduate after finish the 6th level.

DT: So is it 6 years?

HVC: Seven years, include the year study for medical prerequisite. I was taking the test in 1963, and completed in the same year. I turned in the test application, and completed the first 2 days. I remembered around the end of October, during the time I was taking the test, there were lots of students going on hot protests. That year they overthrew President Diem's regime in 1963. At that time students were protesting right at the University of Science. We studied for medical prerequisite, but stayed at the University of Science. When we started our first year in Medical University, the experiment room was closed due to the prevention of taking out acid and other chemical to use for a very dangerous reason. During the year I was taking the test, there was Miss Ngo Dinh Le Thuy who was the daughter of Mrs. And Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu, taking the test too. I still remembered when she arrived to the School Gate from the Jeep with 4 body guards. That was the second day and also the last day we could take the test, on the 3rd day, she was there

too, but they stopped the test so she had to go home. Until the President Diem overthrown, on November 1st 1963, or maybe in the middle of November or beginning of December, we were called to finish the test. I passed that test and started my Medical School on that year.

DT: During the time you were taking the test, the whole country was at war?

HVC: Yes, that included exciting time for political too.

DT: Can you describe the life of college students normally how they live with that environment and how is their social surrounding, so that we can look back and understand what happened?

HVC: Actually that year the political changed on November 1st and President Ngo Dinh Diem overthrew. Off course there were other changes after that, about a month later, Mr. Duong Van Minh, became General after that. He overthrew President Diem to become the prime minister or something like that I don't remember. But, there was another General named Nguyen Khanh, he was readjusted to overthrow General Duong Van Minh, so that he can be the prime minister. The Vietnam's political by that time was very chaotic. The majority overthrown was from all the Generals in the army who tried to become politicians just for the title as the prime minister or the president of the country. After the troubles times, there appeared General Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu at last, those two got the hold of the political problems and settled it until the country became stable. Nguyen Van Thieu became President and Nguyen Cao Ky became Vice President. Both of them were leading the country until it lost in April 1975. That was chaotic political during that time. We studied in 1963, 64, 65. During 1966-67, I remembered very well I started my first year in 1966 for Medical. Many college students were going on protest, formidable protests. Even all other people such as tricyclists, sellers on the streets were going on the protest too. The situation was very chaotic by that time. We studied inside medical school so we didn't know about the protesting outside. But there was the time that the protesting became

troubles times, so president Thieu commanded to close all schools because students took advantage of school open to go on protest. I still remembered one night when I listened to the radio, president Thieu announced on the radio – radio was the popular communication by that time – that “Now I command to close all schools from low to high levels” All were closed from elementary to university. As discipline students by that time, we were so happy to take a break. That night we bought beers and had a little party to celebrate. But the fact was we didn’t have anything to do since the school closed. The political was troublesome by that time.

DT: How was your family by that time?

HVC: My family lived in My Tho, I studied in Saigon, my activities were the same. In a small province, there was not as chaotic as Saigon since all the troubles were in Saigon.

DT: On April 30th 1975 when Vietnam lost, what were you doing and where were you?

HVC: Before we lost our country, I was in the army and that was the thorny time for me. If we had time to go back to that topic, I would share some of my experiences. After April 1975, as any other officers from the South Republic, I had to register to re-educate. In fact, I went to re-educate in Trang Lon, Tay Ninh. The reason I went to Trang Lon was that I registered with my current card as an officer, but in fact, I was promoted to Major, but I did not receive my Major card yet, otherwise, I could have sent to the North for my rank as a Major. All higher rank people often went to the North. I stayed in Trang Lon for sometime then they took me to Thu Duc and released me around middle of 1976. I was re-educated for about 1 year, and went back to work in Phuoc Kien Hospital at Cho Lon, it became Nguyen Trai Hospital later. I worked there for 3 years until the end of May 1979 I escaped. My escaping was a very thorny one. I was one of the boat people to pass through the Pacific Ocean with thousands of miserably hard. We lost 18

people along the way. We had to wrap their bodies in the blanket or sedge mat and dropped them off the sea, because we could not carry their death bodies on the boat.

DT: We will continue your escaping later. Now I want to ask you about your experiences through the war, can you tell me a little bit about the life of a soldier?

HVC: I graduated in 1971, until the middle of February 1972. I was officially in the Navy. The reason I was not officially in because I had to complete a First Class Aid at Cong Hoa Hospital. Two other doctors and I were selected and they sent us directly to the Navy by then. I still remembered, we were there at the end of February, until the end of March we went to the orientation. It was the same as primary training in Navy, but we already did that when we were in Le Huu Sanh Hospital which was the private hospital for Navy in Thu Duc. We stayed there about a month until March 29th 1972, the Northern Communist attacked all the soldier's bases around Ben Hai. They also attacked some sub-divisions around, I didn't know what sub-division, but I know 2 sub-divisions of Division 3 of Marine Corps. from Southern Republican defeated, they had to charge back from those bases at Ben Hai to Quang Tri at the base named "Ai Tu." Excuses me, Miss Darlena, have you heard the singer "Duy Khanh" sang like this "Me thuong con ra cau Ai Tu, vo trong chong len nui Vong Phu." That was the based Ai Tu, a big based that American Soldiers were there long time ago. That also became the based of Division 3 of Marine Corps. Both divisions were defeated and retreated to that based. There was a big attack on March 29th and 30th, we had the order to go to Quang Tri on March 31th right after the 2 days continuously defeated.

DT:Is that in 1972?

HVC: I went to the Navy in 1972 because I graduated the end of 1971. It seemed that we were in the Navy since the beginning of the Quang Tri's combat in 1972. On March 31, two other

doctors and I received the order to be in Quang Tri. But as you know, the North Soldiers not only attacked Quang Tri, but also An Loc which was the popular town. Later on, there were the marine units who would die to protect that province so there was a saying "An Loc, where victories go into history, Marine Units who would die for the country." That time, all soldiers decided to win the combat and ready to scarify their lives. They never left that place in order to protect it till the end. Unlike Quang Tri, most units already defeated, so our Navy got the order to protect Quang Tri. I could not make it on March 31 1972 because all helicopters were busy to help An Loc, so we went back to Hue on the 1st, and received the order to go to based Ai Tu close to Dong Ha. Dong Ha was the province between Quang Tri and Dong Hai. Dong Ha was very rich by that time because this was the place where people having business through Lao. People lived very well there, they had prosperous houses, nice and magnificent town. I had not been there but I heard about it. When I went closer to Dong Ha, I merged into unit 6 of Navy at based Barbara from the mountain. They didn't have any doctor, but they did have a physician assistant, I got the order to replace the physician assistant. I merged into that unit 6 on April 1 1972, and started the fierce battle at Quang Tri. Our Navy units and the Marine Corps Unit are all the additional units from special task force. We went into the combat face to face with the North soldiers - Northern Infantry Regime. We had the very fierce battles that I thought even the North soldiers had to admire our fighters.

DT: Were you married when you went to the Navy?

HVC: I was married by that time.

DT: Did you have children too?

HVC: I had a girl born in 1970. I was married in 1969 and had my daughter in 1970. When I was in operation in Quang Tri on April 1, about 2 weeks on April 12, the Saigon newspaper gave me

a death notice. I saw that newspaper, but before I could do anything there was a big battle in the mountain with the North Soldier called "Viet Cong." We kept fighting every day until April 17 there were two battlefield reporters from Saigon, they came all the way to the battlefield to collect information and interview. They met my battalion leader that time, major Do Huu Tung who was a very famous major. He was one of the two majors leading the battle and took back Quang Tri on September 1972. He was very handsome and closed to Miss Khanh Ly. We had to talk about that a little bit later. I stopped by when they were with major Do Huu Tung, and they told me that Saigon newspaper gave me a death notice, and I told them not to joke, but they were serious. I took out a notebook just like yours and wrote a few words that I was busy with the combat, when you came back to Saigon, please pass this note to my family so they know I still alive, and they kept my note. On April 19, we got the order to retreat for a rest since we fought the fierce battle continuously for the last 12 days (from April 7.) We went back to Ai Tu for resting. I came to Hue on April 23 and met MR Bui The Lan, by that time MR Le Nguyen Khang was not directly leading the Navy; MR Bui The Lan was leading instead even though he was not promoted yet. He gave me permission to go back to Saigon to correct the wrong death notice about me, and he also asked me to find a few singers to come and sing to motivate the Navy. I told him I would try but was not sure, but he said that would be OK whether I can find them or not. I was back to Saigon on the 24th, and arrived before the two battlefield reporters since they were still busy filming and not even give my notes to my family yet. My family was very happy when I came home, they heard of the death notice and went to the Navy based, which was the control center at Le Thanh Ton, that also the control center for based Song Than at Thu Duc, they all said I was fine. There was no cell phone by that time, and it was very difficult to have a contact. Even though they told my family I was fine, they did not believe it because they were

afraid that they tried to cover the fact. So when I appeared in front of them, they were so happy. I was home on the 24th and went to Khanh Ly's Tu Do Club on the 25th. I invited Miss Khanh Ly and Miss Ngoc Minh to go to Quang Tri to sing and motivate the soldiers. I still had the picture that I took with them at my office.

DT: Let me ask you this, Do you know how and what do they based on to post the death of a soldier on Saigon newspaper?

HCV: That's the question I think news reporter in 1972, I don't know if you were born yet?

DT: Not yet.

HVC: I think the people who report on the news only heard it somewhere and post on the newspaper, they didn't have any evidence, just posted it, whatever hot news out there so people would buy it, just like our "breaking news" here now. I got the newspaper and didn't remember which one in Saigon. There were lots of newspapers, and you know we had Thanh Trung newspaper, and many others. I remembered that I read the title, the top one that "Additional talent just laid down at Quang Tri, doctor and also singer Trung Chinh." I still remembered that but didn't remember how was the details. I came to that newspaper office and told them that they were wrong. I still alive and wanted them to correct that; they agreed to do that, but put in a very small notice that doctor Trung Chinh still alive, that was it. But, I think they were mistaken me with a song writer named Dung Chinh, I don't know If you know Dung Chinh? At that time he wrote the famous song named "Nhung Doi Hoa Sim." I think he passed away few years before I went to Quang Tri. People were mistaken Dung Chinh and I. They thought Trung Chinh already died.

DT: As the question about the army? Is there any unit that responsible to check and keep track of soldiers who are currently in operation? Who passed away? Who injured? Is there a list to check all registered soldiers who got injured and who died?

HVC: Yes, right at the control center of the army and they all update by telegram everyday to Saigon for each soldier who died or injured.

DT: So from 72 to 75, while in the war operation at Quang Tri, can you tell me how you feel when you have to use the gun by your own hands to fight? It's not easy to go into war, so can you describe the feeling of a soldier right at the combat?

HVC: I think our Vietnamese people experienced so many years in war, we were born in the war, growing up in the war, lived and died in the war from generations to generations, so living through the war like that, we stand up to fight for the war was very common. The war still continued on. Born, live and die or even discharge from the war was so common that made everybody not to stop worry. I think even our younger generation Vietnamese-American now in the operation of army who get sent to the combat in Iran or Afghanistan also have the same worry. Everybody was the same, but that was your duty for a man. So growing up in the war like us, we finished school then time to gave it back to the country. We all went into the army to fight. That was normal, but did we scare? Yes, we did. We would be liars if we said we were not afraid. Our daily activities as an army, we did as we had to. I was a doctor, so I didn't have to directly fight using the gun to kill "Viet Cong" or our opponents. Even I had the gun, but I used the medical tools right at the operation. On our first (7th) day to the based Phuong Hoang where we protected along with battalion 6th to guard there by that time. Up to the 9th we encountered the first battle and we got chased by Viet Cong's hearse. I was with the control leader group, side by side with the battalion leader, and our unit was the medical unit. We had about ten nurses to help me with

all the injured soldiers. We took care right away whoever getting injured, we cleaned and gave them medicine, or gave their bodies water. Our duty was just for primary care, so we did what need to be done then we send them to the back so they could be transferred to the hospital. We never had any break until the battle ended because there were lot of soldiers died and getting injured.

DT: Do you have any idea for your future and your family while you are in the middle of a battle?

HVC: Yes, I thought about that but the truth was we were in the long battle and no body knows what the future look like. The soldier's life at the war was very slim, a person lived in the morning, but in the afternoon he was already in the death bag. That's why we could not predict our future. On January 27th 1973, we signed the agreement to stop the war, and we all felt that we had a little light in the future, unlike before we were busy going into the battles without thinking of the future.

DT: So what based were you at in 1973?

HVC: Ah, the war stopped in 73, but we were still there, our unit was there too, because they agreed to stop but there were still some battles going on, our Navy was getting less combat, but our Marine was getting more and more.

DT: So did you stay in Quang Tri until 75?

HVC: Until the end of February 1975, I transferred to Long Khanh hospital at battalion Long Khanh. We came on April 9th and got attack from Viet Cong, so we left Long Khanh to Saigon.

DT: When you know you lost your country which you had been fought for to protect what you had in the Southern province. How did you feel when everything you protect was falling apart?

HVC: What year was that?

DT: In 1975

HVC: 1975, we left Long Khanh on April 9th and arrived to Saigon on April 11th, I presented myself to Medical Army and they sent me to Bien Hoa to register to the unit which belongs to the medical control center of Region 3, our leader was General Luong Khanh Tri. He was leading the whole region. It seemed they want to send us back to Long Khanh, where the fierce battle still going on, that was also the last battle of Division 18. However, we didn't have transportation by that time, so we stayed back. During that time, I heard some news that we were going to lose this battle sooner or later, and we all came back to the Medical School. I just read lot of information about medical while I was there, but some people around me were on their way to leave the country officially. I did not know how they find out about that way.

DT: Where are you going?

HVC: Going to America, Americans were taking some Vietnamese doctors by that time. I did not know how they had done that, so I came to ask but nobody knows. Most of them knew that we were going to lose our country just the matter of time.

DT: You already predicted you would lose your country?

HVC: That is right.

DT: Did you prepare anything?

HVC: To be honest, I wanted to find the way out because when Viet Cong came, I would be in lot of troubles. I did not find any way out. I asked my Professors, who taught me in the Medical School, most of them didnot want to go. They said that they went to America already, and did not want to go there any more. I had a God mother in Cho Lon, she was very rich. I asked if she wanted to go, but she did not want to. All people I know, they didn't want to go. I had a closed friend, he was a major of Navy, he guarded the control unit on the river, and he had many boats.

He was having a membrane symptom, and already got better after treatment. I asked him to go, but he did not want to. I was begging him to go, he still did not want to because if he wanted, he could take me into the Navy in time since he knew so many people there. Too bad he did not want to go, so I did not have a choice but to stay back at the end. On April 30th we lost our country. Saigon that day was so painful the wind was violently in vein, the sky was so dark from the bombing by Viet Cong on the way to Saigon, the sound of the bombs were so loud from Go Vap and Tan Son Nhat Airport by that time. I was at my wife's house in Phan Dinh Phung at that time, people was moving in crowds from Go Vap, Tan Son Nhat, they carried a pole with two hangers, children in one shoulder, food in the other. That day was really a painful day! Until noon around 11 or 12PM, Mr. Duong Van Minh announced on the radio, requesting soliers to surrender. That was a deep grief; everybody felt a great arguish. I was deeply sad while I was at my wife's house in the small isle about 3 meters wide, I was sitting at the corner by that time sadly asking myself: "Did we really lose our country?" It was right, we lost our country. Many people asked me to to the whaft to find whatever boat to get out because there were big ships out there to rescue us. I lost all my strength and courage, truthfully if I went to the whaft I could have gone out, but I stayed back with that mood.

DT: What did you do after April 30th?

HVC: Uh after April 30th till June 26th, I remembered something like that I had to go to register. I had to go to the re-education. That night I presented myself at Vo Truong Toan, and I had been told to bring 10 days of food, everybody was thinking 10 days of food was for 10 days stayed. We registered as a big crowd. Nobody seemed to be worry too much since there were only 10 days away. That night they gathered all officers, took them by their army trucks with many officers. When we left, they covered the truck so we did not see any direction, but we guessed

they took us to Tay Ninh. We arrived at Trang Lon when it was almost morning. We were lucky to be there because there were about 14, 15 thousands people there. All people came after that had to go straight to Ca Tum which close to the border of Viet-Mien, people there had harder time than us because Trang Lon was the base of division 5 army. Americans were there by that time, they built an airport, very simple. They used PHD pieces which were the iron pieces to build that temporary airport. That was also a big base which lied behind the rubber plantation and directed to the Ba Den's mountain. Ba Den was very famous mountain in Tay Ninh. We stayed there and transferred to Thu Duc then got released.

DT: How long before you transfer to Thu Duc?

HVC: I remembered around beginning of 76, they took us to Thu Duc few months then released.

DT: What did you do in Trang Lon?

HVC: Ah they gave us assignment such as guarding around the iron pieces, went to split wood into pieces, doing miscellaneous things, went to dig a hole because there were death bodies, some died because of sick, some killed themselves. Sometimes we went to dig a grave. Few months before I released, my group voted for me to be a cook. I did the cooking that time. It was not much to do, but cooking was better than doing miscellaneous things as labor work.

DT: Did you get released in 76 or transfer to Thu Duc?

HVC: No, I transferred to Thu Duc where there was a Navy base, and they kept people there before released them.

DT: Was it more austere in Thu Duc?

HVC: They seemed to be more comfortable, they feed us and let our family came to visit before they released us.

DT: Do you know the process of how family can be visited with their members there?

HVC: Not that hard, it was the same as the time my wife still in Da Lat and my sister-in-law applied to get permission to visit me from the local authority, and that was just a simple process. (They let us send letter to family, and I did so my family knew where I stayed.) They kept many officers at Thu Duc.

DT: So how long did you stay in Thu Duc?

HVC: I don't remember exactly just about three or four months at Thu Duc.

DT: Did you get released after three or four months?

HVC: I got released and registered to the local authority. After that I stayed at my sister-in-law house, then I came to see my mother. My God mother lived at Cho Lon, she did not leave and stayed back. My God father is the president of Phuoc Kien hospital, it also named Quang Trai hospital by that time. I got the job and worked there because of that relationship, until the end of May 1979, I escaped.

DT: What made you decide to escape?

HVC: I think Darlena knows Vietnam by that time everybody wanted to escape, there was a saying that even the electronic pole wanted to escape too! I could not stay and could not live under the communist regime. At my place everyday and all day long I had to hear from the loudspeaker that this town was producing 200 percent which was great productivity, and that town was producing even more 200 and 300 percent of the productivity and ect.. We did not even have enough food to eat or survive by that time, so we all knew that they were lying. Lying was really the best skill of the communist. I knew it for the fact so I was very angry but could not say a word. That's why if I still lived there I would soon die if I could not bear to hear their lying or if I went against them, they would kill me, so my only choice was to escape. Let me tell you about your question why did I escape? During that time everyday, the communication unit under

the communist regime at my town used the loudspeaker to talk all day long. They said at Dong Xuan, there was 200% productivity, and Go Vap was 300% productivity, that what they were saying, but we did not have enough rice to eat at that time. They even had to distribute wheat called “bo bo” to replace rice. Sometimes we had to use sweet potatoes and manioc. And rice was so poor since people cropped it before it was even ripen. They couldn’t even eat that kind of rice. Even though we still received the poor rice, we traded in the market later to get the rice that we could eat. Whatever rice the communist gave us, nobody seemed to eat it. I did not remember how we traded, but I knew that people took that poor rice to sell for people to feed the pigs because we could not cook that rice. I was working as a doctor, and my salary was about 17 or 18.5 dollars per month, but the pork price at the market by that time was 60 dollars/kilogram. How would my family survive when my monthly salary could not even buy one kilogram pork meat. It would add more to my already anguished situation that I could have died with anger. If I wanted to do something against them, they would also kill me, so I must escape as my only choice.

DT: As I know it is not possible for anybody who likes to escape can do it, not everybody has the boat to escape, so how did you have the boat and how was your escaping plan?...

HVC: That was right. There were many people who knew friends that they organized the escaping called “unofficially escape” which was very dangerous because there were many people died on the way not even going on the boat yet. For me, God blessed my plan. I went with the friends organization from Chinese people because I worked in their province at Cho Lon. The communists let them leave the country. I went with them by that way which we had to pay to leave the country, but we still had to go secretly. I had to have Chinese name, and I took it from the Chinese people who already left the country. Most people were using that way to quietly

leave the country. I had my fourth child named Viet who was 3-months old by that time, but we must leave.

DT: So your whole family escaped?

HVC: Yes, my whole family.

DT: Are your parents passed away already at that time?

HVC: That is right.

DT: Where did you start leaving?

HVC: We moved to My Tho because they organized there. We went to the shore at mid night from My Tho, the way to the shore was very arduous. We tried once but did it twice. We were not lucky on our first attempt because we plan to have 200 people, but the boat owner was so greedy to get up to 338 people. For additional more than 100 people and each adult paid 8 pieces of gold and children 4 pieces each. The boat was too heavy to move and it was almost sink sometimes when it was out to the open sea. Luckily the ocean was peaceful during May and June of the year. Even though the ocean was peaceful, the steersman who was a lieutenant in the navy but was not that experience to lead the boat, he was only an officer and specialized in financial. He did not know the direction of the sea or established the position of the boat, so we got lost and got robbed by Thailand's boat twice until the 8th day on the sea we came to Malaysia. We got to the town named Kokubaru, it lied in the North of Malaysia and also North of Thailand about 10 kilometers from Thailand's border. Actually it was not easy to go into the land because they always guarded that area. They knew Vietnamese people came in crowds and it was really true that many Vietnamese tried to land there. When the boat arrived, all the leaders of the boat got beaten up by Malaysia soldiers, they got beaten badly. After that we had to make holes on the boat because they did not have any reason to chase us away.

DT: How do you make boat chisel?

HVC: We made boat chisel to sink the boat.

DT: Oh.

HVC: They did not have any reason to chase us away if the boat sank. Most boats came to Malaysia used to make boat chisel and walked to the shore to take no refusal of the guards. The water level was up to the head. I took my wife and my children in where the water was about the neck level. They put us in a small village within that town later, and guarded us like prisoners because we were illegally trespassed. They kept us about 16 days at the Kotabaru province in Keratang.

DT: Let me ask how big is the boat to carry 338 people?

HVC: The boat was 3 meters wide and 7.5 meters long.

DT: Does one meter equal one yard?

HVC: One meter is a little more than a yard. Most young men and women who were healthy had to stay in the basement, and the elders and children were on the top. It was very pack with no room to walk for 338 people. Darlena, you know the front boat was opened, at the end was the place for all the control machines like a kitchen. The central liked a small office for the steersman and some other leaders to search for the maps and directions, both sides of the boat had a little walk way, but people were packed in that way too. I was a doctor and stayed on the top so whenever I needed to take care someone, I had to walk all the way down.

DT: Did you have medication that time?

HVC: Yes, I brought lots of medications for the whole boat including medical tools for checkup. It was fine to help for people in the front, but people in the back I had to climb over because

people were sitting all over both sides of the boat. I had to climb to the back to help people by the boat pale, and climbed back after I was done.

DT: Did you say your boat encounter pirate twice in the ocean?

HVC That is right.

DT: Thai pirate, I could never imagine how it happened on the boat with 338 people on their way to escape. Can you describe what happened?

HVC: Yes, I remembered they had 2 boats to stop us, they jumped over our boat from one boat, one had a gun before he jumped over. He pointed the gun to the sky just to threaten us, and their group was about 10 people who carried knives and hammers, all jumped over our boat. After that they took all of us to their boat. They emptied all people in our boat so they can search for money. After they were done, they came back to their boat to search us all. They did not search on the head so we were hidden some gold in the hair. They searched our clothes, and we even had to hide things in our underwears. They took all the rings, necklaces and watches, and searched all the pockets and took everything they found.

DT: How about medications that you brought?

HVC: I put medications on the top. After they left even the way they left was not that easy. I came to check and they took my medical tools such as sypringe, high blood pressure machine, the needle pack, they took everything. They made a mess on medications so we could not use it any more. It was so fortunate that they left. I believed they searched us around 2PM until 5PM, three hours, they kept on searching and there was a boat from afar, but it seemed to go toward our direction, so they chased us away to our boat and cut the rope that tied our boats together, and they took off. We got away from them because of that, if they still searching on our boat, we did not know what could happened, they might took all women and rape them like later on they

did to other boats. They might kill all the men. We could not predict what happened next. We all thank God that we got away from the pirate by that time

DT: Were you in the ocean for 8 days when you encountered the pirate?

HVC: Yes, that was the first time.

DT: What day did the first pirate happen?

HVC: I think it was Wednesday or Thursday.

DT: Thursday.

HVC: Uh we stayed inside the first few days, not to see anybody yet until later we met them.

DT: How about the second pirate?

HVC: The second pirate was better. They gave us water and we gave them whatever money left on us. They feed us rice soup, and finally pulled us into a town of Malaysia, then cut the rope and told us to go in that area.

DT: So they were pirate?

HVC: If we did not give them money, I think they would rob us, but they seemed to be nicer than the first one. We came in to that area and stayed for 16 days. The Malaysia authority told us that they took us to Bidong, everybody was happy, we were in a small town and no branch of United Nations Organizations.

DT: Where is Bidong?

HVC: Ah Bidong was a small island for refugees at Malaysia. That was where Malaysia authority put all refugees. And all other countries could officially come to interview. Who applied to go to America will be interviewed by American Delegation, who applied to go to Australia will be interviewed by Australia Delegation. That island was famous because Bidong was a place where all delegations from the world will come to interview refugees. So at this

small town in Malaysia no body knows, and the authority did not want to keep us long too. When we were there, we heard that Malaysia authority let their boat pull refueed boats out to the sea and cut the rope and left them there, but we did not pay much attention to that information. That time they said they took us out, we were very happy. We got food from the United Nations Organizations, and all came in cans including meat, chicken, and rice. They let us cook rice everyday. They put us on the boat and pulled out in order from the previous boats which left from others. They fixed to make sure it was not leak any more and fixed the engine but the engine still did not work. They took us on anyway and pulled our boat by their boat. Our second trip was not on our boat, but on the boat from Rach Gia Kien Giang, they just pile the full boat and pulled out. They took us out to a far and deserted sea about 2 days and 3 nights then cut the rope which connected us to their boat. They planed to let us die on that ocean. It was a miserably hard position. We lost 8 people at first when we were floating in the ocean until the 13th day we lost 10 more people. That day we saw an oil ship pass by, I heard that the captain was from England and his sailors were from Hong Kong, so Chinese people on our boat could commnunicate with them, we asked him to beg the captain to help us. The reason we saw that boat was not that easy because when Malaysia boat left us at the deserted sea, our boat had a big pole about my thigh. We used that to make a sail pole using our canvas we brought in case we had to stay in the sun. We made them into the sail and it went well. Our boat went toward the South direction, it was finally at the place where lots of boats from other countries pass by. We went 10 days by that way and made it on the 13th.

DT: So during that time you can go by without food but how about drink?

HVC: That's a good question. We knew that we were left here so we were looking for survival. We organized a group of 10 young men and went to search on the boat to collect all water because when we left Kotabaro to Bidong, they brought gallon and gallon of water to use even for cleaning and brushing their teeth. We did not suspect that they left us like that, so we went to collect all water and put in 2 big barreds, each barred contain about 200 liters. We made a list of family and distributed water equally to each headcount everyday 3 times a day. I only used a little bit of my share and gave the rest to my family to contend. At first people still wanted to eat but later on nobody wanted to eat because the food was saulty and we did not have enough water to drink.

DT: So where did you end up?

HVC: After that the oil ship pulled us to an island named Bolaoloo in Indonesia, it was a long way. We arrived there at 3:00AM and our way there was very arduous because there was a big storm on our first night and the sailors thought that our boat could not make it. Fortunately, the storm was gone the next night and we still afloat. At midnight the ocean was back to normal and they continued to pull us in the island. They showed us how to check the level of the water and the direction of the wind so we can put up the sail and let the boat automatically went into the island.

DT: Finally how did you come to America?

HVC: We stayed at Bolaoloo island and lost 10 more people. That was a small province and the local authority did not have much to offer, we got hungry and malaria. That was terrible malaria, my whole family got it, and I thought we all died in that island already. Finally they saw so many of us died, they telegraphed to the central. The central sent the Seasweep boat to pick us up, that boat used to rescue people escaped in the ocean. They went to pick up other people. We got

about 2000 people, and they took us to a refugee camp on Galang Island in Indonesia. The Bidong Island was in Malaysia. When I arrived to Galang, there were about 1000 people. We merged with them and stayed until the end of November then left for America.

DT: So how long did you stay in Galang?

HVC: I stayed in Galang from the end of July to November

DT: Where did you go when you came to America?

HVC: First I came to Denver, Colorado. My sponsor was there so we went there. I went back to school for English and Medical then took the test. Fortunately, the school accepted my medical degree from Vietnam because America sent professors to Vietnam to train for medical students since 1968 and our medical school was recognized as same as America Medical Institution. So they let me used that medical degree to retake the medical test to get America Medical Degree. That meant I did not have to start from beginning.

DT: Is there a problem with English since you did not speak English in Vietnam?

HVC: We learned English back home when we were in Army Medical School. Our medical school was using English too, but the way we studied did not like here, we studied medical in English at the Army, there were American professors, but they taught only twice a week, so we did not learn as much. Most students came from Western School, where they taught by foreign language, they learned English very easy, so they were fluent by both languages. For us we studied in Vietnamese school so learning France or English still at the basic level. Even in high school, each English teacher taught us to speak differently, so coming to America, English still made us nervous.

DT: When you came to this country, what did you think of the war and of the American policy about Vietnam War?

HVC: Ah, many people think that American responsible to help Vietnamese. I don't think so, I simply think about applying to Australia, but Australia Delegation did not accept my application because they did not need more doctors unless I changed to other career. But I did not want to give up my profession so I applied to America. The America Delegation accepted my application. I think I had a chance to continue my career there and I tried to study to get license to practice. About the Vietnam War, it belonged to the past. I already in America in the 80s and keep in touch with Vietnam was far away, sending one letter took about 6 months because sometimes sending letter to Vietnam had to go to Canada, from Canada to Vietnam, and the Vietnam authority will check, they read everything before give to the family. That's why it took a long time to receive the letter.

DT: So what wind that blows you from Denver Colorado to California?

HVC: Ah that was a long way. After I took the test it was hard to pass some of the American basis certifications. Then I applied to live in the dorm of the American Medical School. I had to find a small school because I was older that I wanted to get in a school with less competition. I got accepted in a school at a small town named Leuo, Lousiana. I moved there and lived in the dorm, study and be a doctor there. Until 1986 I finished the program there and started to look for work. I sent resume and application to everywhere. While waiting, there was a doctor in Pennsylvania needed a doctor in a very small town named John town. I went there to prepare to work for him. I signed a contract with him but by then there was a call for a doctor position in Oklahoma, they invited me for an interview there. I wanted to come for the interview so I lied that I had to go back home to take care of family matter because they needed me. I actually wanted to go for the interview at Okhlahoma because I thought it was closer to Lousiana. I got accepted after the interview so I went back to Pennsylvania to apologize to the doctor who hired

me there. I told him that nobody took care of my wife and children but he said if I left nobody helped him because there was hard to find a doctor at that area. I came to Oklahoma city to work and stayed from 1986 until 2004. I retired there and moved here. One of my children graduated and moved here Los Angeles in 2000, and others lived somewhere else so we decided to live here.

DT: How did you have money to pay for school during the time you study medical and get all medical certifications here?

HVC: Right, that is a good question. As I said earlier, I actually did not have to study from beginning because I can use my medical degree from Vietnam. I just had to turn-in to substitute for my degree and took an America medical equivalent test, but I wanted to study because I graduated at the end of 1971 and went to the army in 1972. We were continuously in the battles until 1975. When the war was over, I had been in re-educated camp until I got out and started working at Phuoc Kien Hospital from 1976-1979. During that long time, I never had a chance to learn any new things. However, I gained some experiences in the hospital, but it was not much since it did not have any medical book and/or information to update. American Medical used to update every 6 months or a year for all new medical information changes. That why I wanted to study again. It was hard for older people to study all over. Many new things to learn, luckily I passed the test even though I had to be disciplined. After passed 2 certificates, the first one called ECFMG, the second one called National Board which took three day for that hard test. I applied to study at the dorm in the university after completed those two certificates. During that time, I received the Assistant Program until 1981 my wife had a job in the post office, her salary was not bad. For me besides study for all my medical tests, I worked for the Social Office of Denver only few months because I had to study not only for English but also for my medical field to be

ready for the tests. I did not have to study by school year, but went to the class that focuses on the medical tests so I could take the tests after that.

DT: Let me ask you that when you came to this country in 1979, how old were your children?

HVC: The oldest one was 9 year-old, the next one was 6 year-old, then 3 year-old, and the youngest one was only 10 months.

DT: Since your children came when they were young and growing up here, they faced two different cultures, from parents, from Vietnam and from American. How could you keep the Vietnamese traditions as the same time as teaching them how to live in the new environment?

HVC: I think that was the difficulty we had in our generation. Nowsaday I think in a big community like here, they have location where they can teach Vietnamese, tradition and culture activities for our children. Children who grow up here are not forgotten about Vietnamese culture compared to children in small town where there aren't many Vietnamese. Besides, I used to tell my family and friends that when we were young we lived in a poor district, and off course our parents and our sisters and brothers were not received good education, around us there were lot of kids like us who did not have good education. Because we were not well train so we were setting bad examples to pass to our younger generation like smoking and drinking at the age of 9 or 10 were very common. Even when we grew up and had family, we still did not know how to be a good husband and/or good father. We had many difficulties, when we were over here we should realized that if anybody still thinking that your family had to do what you wanted since you were the head of the family, you were really wrong. Most old people in our generation were like that, so there were a lot of broken families.

DT: What did you do to pass to your children the Vietnamese tradition and culture?

HVC: We speak Vietnamese at home. My youngest child was here at 11 months old and still speaking Vietnamese with us now. There were years when we lived in Oklahoma City, when our kids were in Elementary School, we sent them to learn Vietnamese at a Catholic school there for summer. They studied about 2 or 3 years. My oldest daughter can write in Vietnamese and speak Vietnamese very well. My son can speak Vietnamese very well, but not writing well. My third daughter speaks well but only reading some words. My youngest son speaks well but does not know any Vietnamese words.

DT: Let me ask you last question. What experiences you learn from your difficult life before the war, after the war, so if the younger generation wants to look back to Vietnam life through Vietnam history, what experiences and messages you want to pass to them?

HVC: Yes, I think belief is very important. Believe in your destiny and in your religion. When escaping, everybody prays, Buddha is praying to Buddhist, Catholic is praying to God. When we faced the difficulties, I think if Darlena asks whoever escaped, most people will tell Darlena about the miracles on their escapings. We went through that, and first we believed in our destiny, second we believed in our Holy Spirit, when we arrived at the freedom land, we can never doubt our belief after what we had been through. The longer we live, the more we see that if we live up to a good moral, we will sure overcome the difficulties in life. There are always miracles to protect us when we live up to our belief and morals. We see that very clear, we see people who do bad things and their results cause them unlucky things in life. For people who do good things, when they encountered difficulties in life, they get help especially by their prayer. That is vividly clear. Young people do not think about that because they do not go through life experiences like that yet. We are the people who went through slender life and death like that so we see that very clearly. Ah. Finally, we have to strive every time, can not avoid strive in life. We have to strive

for whatever happened in life, fight until the end, and never give up. We have to try and fight with our abilities. Off course you have to know where you are, for example, for an average person to try to be a scientist or doctor without any skills or knowledge is very hard. If you know where you stand and what your ability, and strive for it, grap your chance when it comes. I think that's how we are sure to have our successful just the matter of time.

DT: Before I end this interview, Do you have any question for me?

HVC: I see basicially the people who interviewed present some of their ideas and opinions. I think I maybe one of them that Darlena's organization wants to pass to the next generation the experiences of the previous generation. I want to give them my advice that when they learn what the previous generation went through, do not forget their origin because you are who you are as your look and you can not be an American origin. Don't forget where you are from and your own community. You must try to responsible for your new country and as the same time do not forget your root and your own people. You will live a meaningful life if you can live by that way.

DT: Thank you!

HVC: So we're all done.