Vietnamese American Oral History Project, UC Irvine

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Interviewer: Winty Thoumaked
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WT: Hello my name is Winty Thoumaked and today is November 15th, 2012. I am going to interview Mr. Thomas Toan Phan at the City of Westminster, California. This interview is for the Vietnamese-American Oral History Project.

WT: Please provide your name?
TP: My name is Thomas Toan Phan.

WT: Please provide your date of birth.
TP: My date of birth is February 20, 1952.

WT: Where were you born?
TP: I was born in South Central Vietnam, Quang Nam Province.

WT: What's your earliest memory of when you were in Vietnam and approximately how old were you?
TP: I was approximately 4 years old.

WT: You remember so far back, not a lot of people can recall that much from their childhood. Please tell me any key events from when you were living with your family?

TP: When I was very young, I lived with my parents for a short period of time, but then I had to relocate with my paternal grandmother in Central Vietnam. I had witnessed the last days of the war between the Vietnamese and the French.

WT: Why didn’t you live with your parents?
TP: The area where I was living, there were heavy combats between the French and Vietnamese, therefore my grandmother wanted to bring me to Da Nang, a big city in Vietnam in the central coast for my safety in order for me to attend school.

WT: Can you let me know what your parents were doing that they couldn’t live with you?
TP: At the time, my dad was a skilled labor worker; he dyed fabrics. My mom was a mobile saleswoman, and there were constant heavy battles in the area between the two nations of the French and the Vietnamese.
WT: Yes. Therefore, you couldn’t live with them?

TP: In the area, there were many combats. It posed many challenges, such as making attending schools difficult, and often it was dangerous.

WT: Right.

TP: Some people remained in the area, but I had relatives in the big city and they wanted to bring me to safety so that I could attend school. Eventually, my parents would find a way to come to the city.

WT: Okay. How long did the war last for before the French withdrew?

TP: I recall the last year of the war.

WT: After that, did you reunite with your family or did you stay with your grandparents?

TP: After that, my parents left the area, the suburbs of Da Nang to come to the city and move to a different province, to the area of Da Lat, Truyen Duc province. Now it’s called Lam Dong Province. They lived there for awhile before I came back to Da Lat to live with my parents.

WT: Yes. In the aftermath of the war, when the French withdrew from Vietnam, what did you witness from the effects of the war? Do you remember anything? I am looking to understand the effects of the war.

TP: At the time, I was very young. I could see the communists, they withdrew back to the North, and the French withdrew back to France. They left the South in a Free Regime. Therefore, those days were very peaceful. There was no more war. At the time the communists withdrew back to the North, they did not have sufficient force in the South. There were inactive troops serving as espionage at the time. Life was very peaceful then.

WT: Can you please tell me more about your life after the French withdrew? Were you an adult at the time?

TP: At the time, I was 9 or 10 years old living in Da Lac. I moved once again. I had a cousin, who just graduated to become a teacher at Plei Ku Province, a mountainous area of the central coast. My cousin wanted me to live with her; so once again I had to live with her for about two years.

WT: Yes, after that?

TP: After that, after two years, I came back to live with my family in Da Lac. Only for two years, then after that I had to leave again. I wandered quite a few times, and then I lived with my uncle at Khanh Hoa province in Nha Trang city. There was a pastor, he wanted me to attend a technical school at Nha Trang. I attended that school until I reached my college years at Nha Trang.

WT: Yes. You weren’t meant to be near your parents.
TP: No, I was never close with my parents.

WT: What about your siblings?

TP: My family has special circumstances. My parents had nine children, all nine children had to leave our parents to live with all of our relatives at different locations. Before, I was living with my uncle in Nha Trang, I was living with another family. When I was young, I didn’t understand. I didn’t agree to it, so I didn’t go. Therefore, I followed my uncle to Nha Trang until the day that I graduated college. I attended a university in Saigon. Once again, I had to leave. I had an aunt living in Saigon, so I was living with her to go to University. After entering my first year, there was a great attack. I was drafted into service.

WT: At the time, how old were you?

TP: I was 20 years old.

WT: So you were drafted into service? After that, did you decide to join the military? Was that your choice or was that mandatory?

TP: My philosophy at the time, I had a lot of options. I had a scholarship to study in the U.S. but the paperwork process required that I complete my service before I could go. I accepted that. I accepted the draft into service. While I was serving in the military, I was recruited to study in the U.S., and after that I came back to continue my service until the last days of April 30, 1975.

WT: How long did you stay in the U.S.?

TP: At the time, I came to the U.S. for eight months to specialize in electronics.

WT: Yes, you studied for eight months. And then you studied in Vietnam to continue service.

TP: When I came back, I was an officer. I had qualifications in psychology to examine what kind of treasons existed. Also, I was fluent in several languages. I could speak English, Laotian, and French, since I was young. Therefore, they wanted me to travel abroad to study in order to serve in the military. As an officer, I participated in search for surveillance duty during an agreement meeting in Paris. After that, I came back and was responsible for the psychology department.

WT: Yes, so you’re fluent in three or four languages? Laotian, English and French.

TP: Thai as well.

WT: And Thai? When you came back to Vietnam, what was the situation of the war?

TP: There were major battles in the South of Vietnam. I participated in the major battles. I fought for a short time, I fought until the end, April 30, 1975. There was chaos in Saigon at the time.

WT: Where were you and what were you going to do?
TP: My memory always served me right, I’m always accurate. At the time, I was prepared to go to the U.S. again. However, there was an obstacle because the U.S. Congress closed their list and I was doing a surveillance in Vung Tau, a province in the South, that happened at the last days of the war. The communists had invaded Quang Tri and I had witnessed the oppositions invading Vung Tau City. That’s where I was stationed. Until the end, there was nothing left.

WT: Yes, can you say more? Were you one of those people who escaped Vietnam immediately in that month? Or later on?

TP: No, I had no intention to leave Vietnam and that was my philosophy. I did not want to leave, I had to fight until the end, although I witnessed the high ranking officers and commanders abandon the battlefield. I had the option. If I abandoned the battlefield I would have abandoned Vietnam. I had many opportunities to leave Vietnam but I didn’t. And at the last minute, I didn’t leave Vietnam.

WT: What was the reason?

TP: The reason was because I had my family still living in Vietnam. Although I was single, I still had my brothers and sisters. And second, the communists would not surrender if I waited until the end.

WT: So you’re kind of a hero?

TP: I’m a patriot, because of my choosing.

WT: Yes? The communists had invaded Saigon. What was your fate at the time?

TP: Nothing happened in the first few days. But I knew that I had nothing left. Like I was standing in Vietnam and it was no longer my country, because of the new authority. The way they govern the country. We’re like outcasts. The first thing that came into my mind was that I lost everything.

WT: You lost everything?

TP: When you come to the realization like everybody else, we were ordered to report to the new authority.

WT: How long thereafter?

TP: That’s 24 hours after I came back to Saigon because there was an order for everyone to support to authority in order for them to account for the number of people and where they were located. We were then summoned and transported to reeducation camps,

WT: After that, you were sent to a reeducation camp? Where were you sent to, where were you held?

TP: We weren’t arrested, we were just summoned to re-education camps. I was incarcerated in South Central Vietnam in Lang Dong camp malagui.
WT: Yes, if you don’t follow the order do you get arrested?

TP: You don’t get arrested but you pay the price.

WT: How long were you in re-education camp?

TP: Three years.

WT: At least that’s light, some people are incarcerated for 8-10 years.

TP: Yes, some people are locked up for a long time.

WT: Talk to me about your experience in the re-education camp?

TP: The purpose of the re-education camp under the control of the communists, they couldn’t re-educate us but it was a way for them to isolate us from society. So that they could have an orderly society, but they knew that even in 10, 20, 40 years they could never re-educate South Vietnamese soldiers. We were losers. They used a variety of methods to humiliate us and to make us suffer with hard labor to avenge on us so that we would relinquish and deteriorate.

Lots of people aren’t aware, they believe it’s to humiliate us and make us suffer, and then we die. But most of all, they wanted to terrorize us.

WT: Did you befriend anyone in the re-education camps?

TP: Of course, in the re-education camps we are all brothers. We are all in the same circumstances in the same mindset, we are all friends and it lifts your spirits.

WT: So when you were released, you were still in your twenties?

TP: Yes, I was still in my twenties.

WT: Could you elaborate during that period of time?

TP: When I was released from the re-education camp, I did not suffer physically. It was more psychologically because I was being watched and followed. It was very stringent, the authority was under strict control. At night, I wanted to go out and visit my friends but it was very stressful because I was being followed, so the spies could listen to our conversations. They were watching me outside of my home all night.

WT: They followed you?

TP: I encountered a lot of challenges because I come from a generation of Christians, I was very active in my local church but it was very stressful. Very challenging. Like a communist police, I was on the list of the most dangerous people. After that, I decided to escape.

WT: At the time you wanted to escape?

TP: I was finding ways to escape overseas.
WT: What year was this?

TP: It was in 1981.

WT: At the time, you found a way to escape overseas?

TP: I have attempted many times, with many failed attempts until 1986. I tried many methods to escape but they were failed attempts, until 1986, an unexpected incident occurred because I had quite a few espionage friends who had just been released from reeducation camps. They had left hardship and high mountains to Saigon, to be near the sea. We exchanged antidotes, intimate talks and also to come up with different methods to escape. In the end, we decided we would find a method. Several days prior, we were being searched on a daily basis and took photos of us. I foresaw that as the challenges I would find ahead. But we all decided we had to find a way to escape. And I was very fortunate that I was able to. At the end, when I was bankrupt, that’s when my escape attempt was successful.

WT: What was your plan to escape the border?

TP: I was able to escape because I had a lot of experience regarding issues with crossing the border. I had built and traveled on ships and boats. But at the end, I had no money left to build any boat. I had been arrested and imprisoned a few times. At the end, I had to escape on somebody else’s boat, deep down in the South of Vietnam. I left with some friends on a journey when I was already bankrupt. In my final attempt, either I reached my destination or I would never come back.

WT: What year was it when you crossed the border?

TP: In 1986.

WT: Were you single at the time, or did you have a family?

TP: I was already married with children.

WT: That means, at the time, when you were released from the reeducation camp at approximately 1981, you were still single?

TP: No, I was single in 1975. But a few months after the invasion of the South, I got married.

WT: Please continue…

TP: The reason why I got married was very incidental. In the war, my parents knew that I had lots of friends who would concoct risky plans, therefore they wanted me to have a family so that I wouldn’t take such risks. My parents loved me, so they had to do that. After I got married, I was ordered to go to reeducation camp. I already had a girlfriend whom I met at a university in Saigon, therefore the marriage was not prepared or planned. Thereafter, I had to leave.

WT: When you were in the reeducation camp, did you have children?

TP: I didn’t have any children. It was only after I was released did I have children.
WT: So you escaped in 1986? How old were your children?
TP: My children were born in 1979 and 1981.

WT: So you had children, but you left on your own?
TP: I left with faith that my family would join me in the future.

WT: So after you left? After you escaped, what were the anxieties and concerns you had for your family?
TP: Of course I was concerned. I knew from Saigon. I left from Saigon to Tra Vinh. The vehicle had to stop at Bac My Thuan, I decided to leave with my friend, but in my mind I wanted to go back. Which meant that I tried to reach my destination, I arrived in the evening, but I kept missing my children. So I said to my friend, if there was another vehicle passing by, I would turn back.

WT: So, you decided that you would go back and strike your plan?
TP: At the end, there were no other vehicles because it was so late in the day. Therefore, I just went ahead.

WT: It must be fate. So tell me more about your whole escape experience?
TP: My escape incident was not the most horrific, but it leveled to one of the most fearful ones. The story is kind of long but you need to hear the details because they are entertaining. So when I came to Tra Vinh in November, it was a stormy night, there were deadly waves. The headman of the boat made a deal with me. He said, “Let’s just go. The waves are getting high, we have to move along with the waves. It’s best to go during this storm, the guards’ boats would not be able to reach us. When we are out in the ocean, the storm would subside.” But at the end, I knew that he lied, because the storm became very aggressive and it never subsided. The storm was at its peak. I came up to the top, I could not see any light because the waves were so high up to the sky. The journey at sea lasted eight days and eight nights. At times, I had to dock the boat at a deserted island to see the situation. We never stepped down from the boat. We were very fortunate because the boat was very small, but the engine never gave up on us. We reached the south of Thailand in a very stormy night. When we docked at the island, I was not afraid of death at sea but I was more afraid of landing. Even the pirates that we encountered along the way were not as dangerous, the pirates even offered us food and even provided fuel for our boat. We reached Thailand late in the night, after seven or eight days of thirst and hunger, as soon as we stepped down from the boat, there were creature-like people crawling down from the mountain. They were like wolves crawling down, and when they stood up they were very dark. Their teeth were white, their eyes were white, and they all wore machetes on their backs.

WT: Were they pirates?
TP: I don’t know what kind of people they were. I could see a light far away into the village. First, I thought we reached Ca Mau. I wasn’t worried. Far away, I could see the symbol of a cross in the village; I immediately spoke English. I used my English and Thai to communicate
with them. I had to get through to them psychologically, because they took all the women and made them strip so that they could check for gold and valuables. The rain brought scorpions from their caves, they were crawling all over us. They were crawling and biting us, it was a very terrifying scene in the midst of the night. I had an inclination to signal everybody to disperse in different directions. If I hadn’t done that, everybody would have been killed. I would soon realize that. I spoke to a young man who I thought was decent, and I asked him, “why did you have to do this?” All of a sudden, he legibly responded in English, and asked me if my wife was here with me. I answered, “No.” He said, “If your wife is not here, then you don’t need to intervene.” After that, they came with a rope, and they tied everybody up and led us to the top of the mountain. I instantly knew that we were heading to death. Midway up the mountain, I said, “Let’s just stop here. If we are going to die, we are going to die here where there is light.” I don’t know what happened, but they decided to stop everybody there, and led us into an oxen stable, but the animals’ waste was up the knees. They locked everybody in there that night. I coaxed a young boy to crawl out to the boat to check if the engine parts were still intact. The boy was very sharp and quick. Within a short time, the boy was able to remove some of the parts and hid them. That night, I had such a terrible stomach ache. I had to try to crawl out to a bush to release myself. I just sat down, and then I saw the pirates enter the stable. They pulled out the women to rape them. After that, I came close to pirates and I asked them to release the wives because their husbands are here. After awhile, they brought the women back and thankfully didn’t kill them. It was getting brighter outside, that’s when I became very fearful. It was approximately eight o’clock in the morning, I did not see any local policeman, or any signs of authority. And then around ten o’clock in the morning, I saw a Thai police vehicle passing by. They said that their station is located 80 miles from the area, in an autonomous region. Now I knew that if I had signaled for everybody to run into different directions, we would all have been killed. There wouldn’t be any survivors. Because when we were locked up, the local policemen were outside guarding us.

The policemen were foremost suspicious of my fluency in Thai and English. They interrogated me. They examined my hands to see if there was any gunpowder residue. But I said that I was just a boat escapee. They then drove me to the police station to interrogate our situation. After the fact, they agreed to provide us with a location where we could temporarily stay. They knew that the region was heavily pirated. They disclosed that up-to-date, there had been 6,000-7,000 women who had gone missing in that region. I was in disarray. Then I knew we were very lucky. They informed us that they would give us guards to keep us safe. And then they drove me back with the group. They were very glad to see me come back. There was one man, a pirate, who stood up and spoke Vietnamese very fluently, and he said “Whatever we did last night, do not slander our Thai people.” I was in disbelief that he could speak Vietnamese so well. So I had to profess that their people were very kind, that they helped us while we were injured, and provided us food and water. I had to say that. They maltreated us. Every night, they would pull the women out while they were asleep. It was impossible to intervene; every night it was frightful. Every night, the men had to do a surveillance. There was suffering, there was barely any food to eat. We are malnourished.

Incidentally, there was a high commissioner of the United Nations that arrived there by helicopter. The representative said that they were already well aware of what was going on in
that region, they registered everybody so that we were all documented, so that they wouldn’t be
able to kill us off because the locals would be questioned. We stayed there for approximately
two months. At night, we couldn’t sleep. Especially for the husbands who had their wives their,
or the mothers who brought their daughters along. We stayed there for two months, and the
King of Thailand was preoccupied with other issues. In the end, the King gave an order for us to
be released. We had to bow to a picture of the King of Thailand before boarding a bus of the
United Nations and headed toward the North of Thailand to Panatikhom, a refugee camp.

WT: How many people were on your boat?

TP: There were 36 people on the boat of 9x9 meters, approximately 10 yards.

WT: Were there any children?

TP: There were a few, approximately 5-6.

WT: How old were they?

TP: There were some that were on their mother’s arms, about one year old. Very young.

WT: How dangerous.

TP: And the whole journey was exhausting, but we were very lucky. Everybody escaped, no
one died.

WT: So you were on the island for two months?

TP: Two or three months, that’s when we arrived at Panatikhom camp. That camp was very
strict, specifically the Thai did not have any compassion towards the Vietnamese. I don’t know
what your husband is like, but there has been a historical feud between the two countries. They
never liked the Vietnamese. It was even impossible for the Americans to intervene. The guards
were very rigid.

WT: They didn’t release the people?

TP: They did not want the Americans to intervene in their business. There was very strict
control in the camp; there were beatings and torture. But the whole time I was blessed by God. I
was a leader in the camp, they didn’t give me a hard time. I had more freedom than others. I
stayed there the whole time, and I was never punished or taken to the sewage. I was able to
transit outside the market like some people. But I was there for about 5-6 months until we were
transferred to Patang camp in the Philippines. When we were there, we were very close to the
U.S. embassy, they were very kind.

WT: Where about the Phillipines were you?

TP: Patang City.

WT: So, you were in a camp...
TP: At the camp, we were able to transit within the area freely. I was involved in different activities in the camp, and I was an assistant for the orientation. Six months thereafter, we left to go to the United States.

WT: What state did you arrive to?

TP: Texas.

WT: Can you tell me about your life when you first came to the states?

TP: When I studied abroad, it was very different than when I came to live. My life, when I first came to America was a long story. I came to America leaving my wife and children behind in Vietnam. My perspective of Americans is very personal, because when I was still living in Da Nang, I was under the mentorship of many Vietnamese missionaries. For instance, when I was living with my grandma, because we were Christians, they were very friendly to us. They helped us a lot. I had lived and worked closely with the Americans. There was an English-language school. Near home, there were many American teachers whom I would socialize with. As a Christian, I understand the American culture. So I was not a stranger on American soil. I was just missing my children back home, and was hoping that I would reunite with them very soon. I was very concerned that the communist authority would harm my family or cause them difficulties because of my escape. But fortunately, I didn’t have to wait too long. When I first came, there was a burden in Vietnam. I had to work to support my family, and I was trying to cope with the new routine.

I made a mistake by going into computer programming, because I had many relatives living here who were already in the computing profession, and that’s all they knew and spoke about. So they geared me toward that profession. It was not a unique profession. I had to get loans so that I could go to school. I graduated and worked in the field. The first company I worked for was May Company, at their headquarters. They later merged to become Robinsons May. But later, I realized that was not my profession. I liked to work with people, not machines. But I stuck with it because I had a family to support in Vietnam, I was already in the field and was compensate handsomely. So I kept working. And it was a good company, and it wasn’t easy to change the profession. But it was not one of my choice. If I could choose now, it would be totally different. Toward the end, the company was sold. If I wanted to continue working in their headquarters, I would have had to re-locate to San Francisco, because they eventually became Macy’s. But I refused, because now my children had grown and graduated. I wanted to take a break.

WT: So when you came to Texas, how long were you there before you sponsored your family?

TP: No, the time when I was in Texas was when I an overseas student. Otherwise, I came directly to California. Within a year in California, I had started the process of sponsoring.

WT: How long did it take for the whole sponsoring process?

TP: Only two years.

WT: Oh, that was very timely.
TP: Yeah, it’s one of the fastest processes. I didn’t expect it to be that quick. And after my children came here, I made sure that they had a good education.

WT: So you were in California the whole time?

TP: I never left. Because I was always thinking about my children and their education. After they completed their education, I was already old. So I moved to Bolsa to be near doctors, the Vietnamese supermarkets, and foremost, the cemetery. It was just two blocks from my house. If anything were to happen, it was right there.

WT: But you’re still young.

TP: I’m not young.

WT: You have at least twenty more years.

TP: You just never know what age you’ll live until. There’s nothing certain. However, I believe that I could derive many lessons from my life. My life has not been perfect, but no one can ever criticize my imperfection. They would only criticize if I were irresponsible, and that’s very important, especially for the Vietnamese here. We are responsible for the next generation. You must fulfill your responsibility, especially to your children then no one would judge you. That has been my focus, everything I planned has been accurate. I have two girls who have completed their schooling, and they are both married to good men and they have a good life. One daughter has two children, and the other is expecting her fourth.

WT: God has blessed you.

TP: Whatever the Lord has blessed me with, if he were to take me away, I would be happy with what he has given me. My life has not been perfect, but I always knew what my priorities were.

WT: There are no perfect people here. As long as we have morals, we can sleep well at night.

TP: The important thing is you have to know where you are heading. It’s a vehicle of life. We need to know where we came from and where we’re going, specifically I knew where I came from and knew where I was heading.

WT: Yes. Can you tell me about your profession?

TP: After I had left the computing professor…

WT: What year was it?

TP: From 1989-2007. Okay, when I retired I had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, therefore I had to go back to work. I found odd jobs, whatever I could do to regain my health. So I applied at the Garden Grove USD. They hired me to work on the community outreach programs, the adult education programs. At the same time, I was very active in the Vietnamese community. I work at Santiago High School. My main responsibility is the PTA.
WT: Oh, it’s Santiago High School? What’s your title there?

TP: I am an academic liaison.

WT: So you were a programmer for a long time, it was not your profession but you worked for a long time.

TP: At the time, programming was mainly code boards. You could write it with your eyes closed. You would write 250,000 lines and repeat.

WT: It was just familiarity?

TP: I didn’t like it.

WT: Like many people, they just worked because they are familiar with it.

TP: It was not a profession of choice. People need to have a passion for what they do, so you wouldn’t feel burned out. But I felt very burned out, but it helped every time I thought of my children.

WT: That’s right, you have to think of your family. After you took a year off, you didn’t want to be in that profession anymore because you wanted to leave?

TP: There was an obstacle. If I wanted to work, I had to relocate to San Francisco, but my home was here and all my children live here. Although my children were married, they have kids and I felt the need to be near them. So my company agreed for me to resign. I was awarded a big bonus, so I left.

WT: After a year break, you wanted to come back to work in another field?

TP: I changed my profession completely, to work with people completely. Now I get to work with people.

WT: Did you decide what you wanted to do?

TP: At the time I did not, because I was a Christian, I wanted to work with people within the community. I wanted to work in the education industry. I like to mold and shape people because I know that I’m very successful in that arena.

Wt: So you wanted to work within the community?

TP: Yes, to work with people.

WT: To help people, to help the Vietnamese community.

TP: I have been mayor in the American community. I liked them and they liked me. I also enjoy being involved in different aspects including music of that sort. I like to use my skills. Now, I’m very active in church. I help many people, I take care of several events, and I am very
involved in many social events. Since I was young, I have always been involved in social work. I will never part from that until the day I die.

WT: Yes, that’s your passion.

TP: That’s why I have passed that onto my children. Now, they are following my path.

WT: What are their professions?

TP: One of my children is the departmental director at Cal State Fullerton, and the other is a high school teacher at Bolsa Grande High School.

WT: Yes, where were you a mayor at?

TP: A residential community at Royal Garden Estates. I helped to organize events there. Right now, although I am working at a school, I am very involved in outside events.

WT: Do you work full-time?

TP: No, I work part-time. Not only do I work, I have to attend conferences, prepare presentations…I do a lot. I am involved in weekend English classes at church. I never rest.

WT: So you like to be active in the community? Can you tell me more about your family? Does your wife work?

TP: In America?

WT: Yes.

TP: The first few years, she did not work because I covered for her. And then she worked at several companies until she came to Kingston Technology.

WT: What does she do?

TP: She works in the quality control department.

WT: Has she stopped working?

TP: She’s still working.

WT: Still working?

TP: She will work until her last breath.

WT: Does she work full-time or part-time?

TP: Full-time.

WT: That’s a lot of hours.
TP:  Let me give you a few details about this technology company, they design memory parts, and they’re very well known nationally. In prior years, this company previously awarded bonuses to their employees in the amount of $175,000 to buy homes when the value of the homes was around $120,000. Nowadays, they don’t do as well. However, they still would give out bonus checks quarterly in the amount that’s equally to a two-month’s check. The company also provides health benefits for all their employees and their families.

WT:  Wow.

TP:  Therefore, as children of God, the Lord provides for and has plans for us (Mr. Toan and his family).

WT:  Definitely, we must live a morale life so our children can deserve the blessings from the Lord. How long has she been working there?

TP:  Probably for 15 years.

WT:  Wow, it has been a long time, she would work until retirement.

TP:  She will work until retirement.

WT:  Is there anything you want to add with respect to your life? Do you want to express your perspective about your life to summarize it up?

TP:  I have not lived a satisfying life, but I have peace. My life has been relatively peaceful because I’m a child of God, a Christian. If I knew Presidents Obama or Bush, or one of their relatives, my life wouldn’t have been so peaceful. I have completely given my life to the Lord, therefore I have utter peace. My perspective is that I have never deserted anybody, including my male friends. They have abandoned me, but I have never abandoned anyone. When I was young prior to settling down, I had a girlfriend for a few years, we were very in love, but we couldn’t get marry. I had met up with her again after 30 or 40 years to say goodbye.

WT:  Why meet up to say goodbye?

TP:  So we both can move on with our lives.

WT:  So there would be no unfinished business?

TP:  Because there were many times I had to leave abruptly and I never had a chance to say goodbye or to end the relationship. As a soldier serving for our country, I had to sacrifice my life, although we’ve lost the war, I wanted to fight to the end to fulfill my duty. I was a soldier who refused to abandon our country. Therefore, I feel content, well… not contentment, but peace with myself because of my patriotic. Many men left the country, and abandoned their posts; they didn’t have to pay the price, the consequences. I did, I paid my dues, and faced the consequences. No one could accuse me of fulfilling my duty, nobody from the North or the South. I came to America to reclaim my life, to start over after enduring all the sufferings and hardships, so that my children could have a better life and a right to education and opportunities. Most of all, I have lived my life based on good morals, and as a decent person. I have fulfilled
my duty and don’t owe anybody. Although I’m poor, I don’t rely on any governmental assistance, I don’t want to be a burden to society. I believe I have fulfilled my personal duties to my family, my civic duty to my country and my community. Wherever I have been to, I have contributed my service to that community; I have provided my assistance wherever that was required. I’m an active member of a church. At times, I had encountered challenges, but I never faltered. I cannot say I have a family, without mentioning my friends, I cannot pay tribute to my parents, without mentioning my siblings, I cannot not mention my neighbors and relatives. Therefore, no one can criticize me for not being a dutiful person.

WT: You mentioned that you’re not content?

TP: I’m not content because I cannot change the past, if I could, I would do more, provide more service to my community. I still would serve my country knowing that we had lost the war.

WT: So if you could change the past, I would do more?

TP: People have told me why join the military, it’s a huge sacrifice, you risk your life, you risk losing many years of your life. But I don’t think that way, I still would serve, I still take the same path.

WT: You would do more?

TP: I’m still very active. If you smile with life and life will smile back at you.

WT: Do you believe that we’ve lost our country? Do you hope that our country would be free of such communist regime?

TP: Our country is still there and our people still remain, but our people have lost their rights, it’s not the government of our choosing. I do not resent the Northerners, just the regime. I have no hatred, just disappointed that they have imposed our people with such austerity.

WT: What are your hopes for the future of Vietnam?

TP: At the age of 60, I will not participate in any opposition tactics. I just hope that our country would be a united one, free from the oppression of communism because it does not satisfy the lives of our people. I believe that the Vietnamese communist will be overthrown, any oppressive governmental will not persist.

WT: They have persisted for the last few decades.

TP: Although they have persisted, we will have peace and it will reclaim our country.

WT: We have concluded our interview. I want to thank you for your time and what you have shared with us. Thank you.