

Dang T. Le

Story of my Family

My grandmother was born in 1917. In 1917, the Bolsheviks staged a successful revolution and overthrew the Czarist Regime in Russia to adopt a new government founded on the ideals of Communism. 1917 was also the year America entered the Great War and helped Europe to decisively end it two years later. In 1919, an optimistic Ho Chi Minh was present at the Palace of Versailles, asking for US intervention in Indochina as Woodrow Wilson preached his vision of a bright new world guided by the principles of self-determination. Among his Fourteen Points, Wilson expressed the need for the world to recognize the sovereignty of individual states. Based on Wilson's Fourteen Points, Ho proposed his own eight points calling for the independence of Vietnam from French colonialism. Though Wilson's vision of the future was optimistically aimed at preventing another global conflict, only one of the Fourteen Points was fully implemented and Wilson himself ignored Ho's proposal because the colonization of Vietnam was dismissed as an insignificant item on the agenda of US foreign policy. The country would be referred to as French Indochina for another 35 years as Ho waited patiently for the conclusion of another world war to again state his pleas.

It was arranged that my grandmother marry my grandfather during the summer of 1933. He was seventeen then and a member of the French Army. During their colonization of Vietnam, the French required that one male from each family perform selective service when they came of age. In 1945, my grandmother gave birth to my uncle who would later be a part of the South Vietnamese Navy in the war against the Vietcong. But this was two decades earlier and France was still fighting the Viet Minh as she was reluctant to let go of her colonial empire. At the close of WWII, Ho Chi Minh repeated the words, "We hold truths that all men are

created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Once again, he was ignored. Without any other options, Ho turned to the Soviets and modeled a government which had been the consequence of the revolution staged on that Sunday morning in 1917.

My mother was born in January of 1951. She briefly saw her father for the first time late November of that year. My grandfather came home on leave to deliver rice and give my grandmother his wages. He helped out with the farm and fed the water buffalo. He ate breakfast and attended Sunday mass with the family. Finally, he bid them farewell and told them confidently he'd be home for Tet, the celebration of the Lunar New Year. Nine days later, my grandfather was caught in a crossfire at the Battle of Hoa Binh and never returned.

The Hoa Binh plan called for French forces under the command of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to lure Viet Minh forces under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap out of the jungle to the town of Hoa Binh. There, the French army with its superior firepower would hope to crush the Viet Minh and prove its ability to project power beyond their current location on the Red River delta. Giap outsmarted the French by deploying two divisions to hold French forces on the delta, one division around Hoa Binh, one along its landline of supply, and one along the Black River, its water supply line. Knowing that their chances of winning a battle on any open field were slim, the Viet Minh would attack the outposts at Tu Vu and then fade back into the jungle when the French counterattacked. After numerous ambushes, French supplies were eventually cut off and my grandfather died in a crossfire as he was fighting his way back to the Red River delta. He still lies between the Red River and Tu Vu, not knowing even in death what it was he fought for. It certainly wasn't for the independence of his country because France had every intention to hold on to Vietnam. Somewhere between the friendly lines forward of the Red River delta and enemy lines forward of Tu Vu, where Giap's 312th initiated their attacks, he is like the thousands of soldiers from a distant Western country that would perish fighting similar battles years later.

After my grandfather's death, our family slowly migrated towards the South as Communism rapidly replaced French influence in North Vietnam. By 1954, my grandmother, uncle, and mother had reached the province of Tay Ninh. French colonialism ended that same year in Vietnam after the famous battle at Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Minh became the Vietcong and the country was divided in two. Above the 17th parallel was North Vietnam and below it was democratic South Vietnam. Life in the province of Tay Ninh proved hard for a widow and her children, so my grandmother moved to Loc Ninh in 1958. Loc Ninh was a lot

closer to Saigon so my grandmother was able to find a steady job carrying scrap rubber to a local rubber factory left behind by the French.

Migration from North to South Vietnam did not mean living in the absence of the Vietcong. After the division of the country, Ngo Dinh Diem became the president of the Republic of South Vietnam. Diem's administration encouraged and supported the role of hamlet protectors to suppress VC activities in the South. My mother said, "I was twelve when they dragged two bodies back one morning and proceeded to hang them on a large branch of a tree. They assembled us and warned us not to support the Vietcong. The VCs were dead from bullet wounds, but everyone guessed that their bodies were then bayoneted to make a stronger point. The first corpse had a concaved face because it had taken a bullet near the right cheekbone. The second had a preserved face, but had been disemboweled. Accusatory fingers pointed here and there and a young lady publicly denied that one of the dead bodies was her lover." But, behind every dead Vietcong, what seemed to be a victory was actually a well accomplished mission for the VC cause. Behind the dead body at the preparation for the battle of Dien Bien Phu was a saved cannon that snapped from its chains and sped down a steep incline that gave the Viet Minh strategic advantage over French forces. A Viet Minh soldier sacrificed himself and jumped into its path bringing it to a stop with his body. Behind the dead VCs in my mother's hamlet was an accomplished mission of assuring villagers of their ubiquity. The dead bodies carried on them standard issue rifles, a pouch of rice, and a fixed belief that they would win. Eventually, Vietcong activities escalated to the level of assassinating influential figures in hamlets and recruiting at gun point the young men and women living there. Then, my grandmother was required to dig trenches around the village and plant sharpened bamboo sticks (6 feet long) in an attempt to keep the VCs from entering the hamlet. At night, the family slept on the ground to avoid bullet trajectories whenever the VCs skirmished with friendly forces.

When it became apparent that the Vietcong were growing in strength in Loc Ninh, my family decided to move to Saigon. By this time, the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, or MACV, had been in Saigon for two years advising government and military officials. Within a two-year period, the strength of the MACV grew from 900 to 16,300. More regularly, the VC fought elusive battles that increased their control in South Vietnam. On the morning of November 1, 1963, one of President Diem's generals murdered him in Saigon. Twenty-one days later, President Kennedy was assassinated in Texas. After the shootings, massive and complete Americanization of the war began. My grandmother made the decision to send my mother to a convent to be raised by nuns and also be removed from the effects of war. My grandmother then got a new job as a maid

for an upper-class family. When he was seventeen, my uncle obtained fake documents that falsely reported his age. He lied that he was thirteen and hoped that the war would end by 1968. He didn't care who would win the war; he just wanted it over. As he told me this story, he looked down at the floor and uttered, "I was a coward. I didn't want any part in it. I didn't want to die. I spent my days fixing scooters in a shop and nights listening to the faint gunshots of distant battles and praying it would be over soon. I wanted so much to live." Talking to him in his dimly lit house in Fontana, California twenty-five years later, I could find no trace of cowardice in the man. He joined the South Vietnamese Navy in 1968 and fought bravely for the next seven years. His time in the Navy was seven times longer than the average U.S. military tour. He was shot at escorting foreign ships into the country and was fired upon escorting special forces into the jungle. He remembers the battle of Rung Xet where a friend was hit by a mortar round and body parts were scattered all over the bow of the boat. My uncle was able to gather the remains under fire and brought them home for proper burial. He came out of that battle with a medal for bravery.

When she was twenty, my mother decided to leave her convent to attend the University of Saigon. She met my father in English class, and he offered to walk her home every night. The year was 1971 and my father had been in the South Vietnamese Air Force for two years. The war first came to him in 1968 when the Viet Cong launched their Tet Offensive. He lived in the town of Ninh Hoa and fled to the protection of South Vietnamese soldiers when VCs swept through. Allied forces successfully counter-attacked several days later, and my father returned to his town. As he neared the town market he sensed a foul odor. The heat and humidity of noon multiplied the smell, and with each step closer, the more powerful the stench. He came upon hundreds of dead VC displayed by allied forces to assure the South Vietnamese people of their on-going success in the war. My father stepped close enough to make out the dead soldiers' wounds. One that stood out belonged to a Viet Cong who must have died from a grenade that was lobbed to his head. In biology class, my father had been taught that below the human brain lay the intricate ocular muscles that together work to control the eyes, the windows of the human soul. Studying the VC with the front half of his head missing and flies swarming to feed and lay eggs on the exposed flesh, my father couldn't make out anything intricate and doubted if humans had souls.

After basic training my father was stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base. He passed a proficiency exam that provided him with the opportunity to earn a B.S. degree at the University of Saigon. From 1973 until the fall of Saigon in 1975, my mother worked as a logistics secretary for the South Vietnamese Army. Since all of the men were on the battlefields, the women were encouraged to take up secretarial

jobs in military offices. Daily, my mother kept track of bullets and counted food supplies and my father kept track of the number of helicopters that never returned on their daily mission and counted the body bags that were flown to Bien Hoa Air Base instead. When Saigon fell on the 30th of April 1975, my parents found themselves at the harbor of Ben Tau among some twenty thousand other people hoping to be picked up by the United States Navy. In their arms was my newly born older brother. They were separated from my grandmother that morning when she decided to walk to my uncle's post to find his body. My grandmother had lost contact with him for two months. She had lost my grandfather's body twenty years ago and on the day of the fall of Saigon, finding her son's body was more important to her than leaving her besieged country. She did not find my uncle and my parents were not picked up that day.

I came into this world shortly after the fall of Saigon. The year was 1976 and the capital now known as Ho Chi Minh City. I attended Nguyen Thai Hoc elementary school, saluted the communist flag every morning, and received academic awards that stated I was the "Good Nephew of Uncle Ho." The Vietnam I knew was completely different from the Vietnam my family had experienced. One day, I asked my mother about an assigned homework problem. She said that when she was in elementary school, the typical addition problem stated if there are five birds on a tree and two more landed, how many are now perching on the tree? The math problem I had asked her about stated that if the citizen soldier captured five tanks and his comrade captured two more, how many total tanks do we have? I just wanted the numerical answer, I didn't understand what the big deal was and why she took the time to explain it to me. She smiled at a secret thought and hoped that someday I would understand.

I returned to Vietnam for the first time in 16 years in June of 2000. The hai quan, or customs guard, once so determined to expel our family and our democratic ideals now eagerly welcomes us back to stimulate his economy. The signs indicating the distance left until we reach the city of Saigon had the word Saigon crossed out and Ho Chi Minh City handwritten in. Tall, green grass covers the blood and the craters that once marked the site of my grandfather's last battle. Standing in the open field between the Red River and Tu Vu and in the midst of the intense monsoon heat that itself had been the central and faceless character of so many novels about the Vietnam war, I could not help but wonder how my grandfather lived, and most of all I wondered how he died. If he were alive, my grandfather would have been sponsored by my uncle and emigrated from Vietnam with the rest of our family to the United States in 1985. Then, he would have returned with me on our trip and to this sight pointing out strategic locations, lines of defenses, and areas of raids. I knew that my grandfather died from a mortar

round but I don't know if his death was instant or not, painful or easy. Just beyond the enemy lines forward of Tu Vu, I can see Giap's 312th division attacking and my grandfather fighting his way back to the Red River delta when he felt several stings in his stomach. For a split second, he looked down and realized that fragments had punctured his body. And that was the last thing he would remember, several stings and then total darkness. I imagined a different death every time, and in my reverie, my grandfather said, "Yes, I still lie here having lost my life. But, you are wrong. I knew what I was fighting for. It was you. You are here now, you are alive, and you have a bright future you mustn't squander."



Dang T. Le emigrated to the United States as a refugee from Vietnam in September 1985 and settled in Orange County California. He graduated from the United States Air Force Academy as a member of the class of 2000. He currently works as a research physicist at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico and wants to pursue a career in medicine.