

*William Newmiller*

## Voices

FOR MANY THE TERM “VIETNAM” evokes memories of rice paddy and jungle, of warm rain, of being surrounded by an alien culture far from home, but these are not my images. I remember the parched plains of northern Texas and Oklahoma, the cowboy culture of Wichita Falls, Texas, an unlikely locale for an account of the Vietnam War, but a place that, nevertheless, connects many of its untold stories. These are the stories of Vietnamese pilots who lived a sequence that reversed the one American soldiers followed. Instead of spending a year in Vietnam and then returning home as their American counterparts did, the Vietnamese pilots left Vietnam for the United States where they served their country, for a year or so. Then they returned to Vietnam and to combat.

As a T-37 Instructor Pilot (IP), I taught fledgling Vietnamese student pilots at Sheppard AFB starting in June of 1974. My time teaching them was short because less than eleven months later Saigon fell, and the Vietnamese flight training program ended. Still, as I reflect on that brief time, I’m astonished at how great an impact it has had on me. Here the abstractions of the Vietnam War dissolved, replaced by the faces and the hearts of young men, who played a central role in a rapidly unfolding tragedy and played it with exceptional grace. Some days when the sun glints from my sunglasses the way it once glinted from my helmet visor, I remember instructing Vietnamese student pilots...

I hear my voice in the helmet’s headset as it’s transmitted on the T-37’s interphone. “Pull back on the stick. Raise the nose. Back trim. Add power—now!”

I look to my left, at the student, sitting in the pilot’s seat cocooned in a green flight suit and gloves. The green visor on his helmet and the green rubber oxygen mask with its hose dangling to the regulator give the appearance of an enlarged head with a single huge eye and long curled proboscis.

“My aircraft,” I say as I add power and steady the plane. “Look at how much power it takes,” I point to the tachometers. “What happens if you don’t add enough power?” I raise my voice. “What happens if you’re low to the ground and don’t add enough power?” He gives me the right answer: “Crash.”

I shake the stick. “Your aircraft. Look at how high the nose is, keep it there. Crosscheck the altimeter and airspeed. That’s it. Relax. Get the feel of the controls. Just maintain your altitude and airspeed and heading.”

While he practices, I look at the paved roads below us, etched into the plains of Northern Texas and Oklahoma. The pavement radiates north, south, east, and west, stopping at the sea our students will cross when they return home.

In my mind I follow the ribbon of pavement that brought me to Sheppard AFB. The journey from an upper Midwest adolescence to Air Force Instructor Pilot teaching Vietnamese Air Cadets how to fly involved more than geography, and it changed the landscape of my life. But the landscape of our students’ lives changed much more.

The time I spent at Sheppard prior to the Fall of Saigon was long enough to see a single class of Vietnamese pilots through the course of instruction, which included visual and instrument flying, formation, and navigation. Upon completion of T-37 training, these students received their pilot’s wings and proceeded to combat training, typically in A-37 aircraft, the attack version of the T-37. I shepherded two students through the program, Long and Kai. Long had left medical school to become a pilot. He’d been born in Hanoi. After the Viet Minh killed his father, his mother fled to Saigon with him. Kai looked like he was about fourteen years old. One day my wife asked him if he was looking forward to going home to Vietnam. He said no. He said everyone he knew was dead.

But Long and Kai did go home, only a month or two before Saigon fell. By then students no longer received combat training in the A-37 Dragonfly at England AFB, Louisiana, before returning to Vietnam. The money and time for training at England AFB had run out. Long and Kai went directly to Vietnam and to combat training—in combat. I never heard from Kai again. A few years later, I received a

single letter from Long, who was lying low in Saigon. Later I heard from a refugee that Long had been captured trying to escape Vietnam and never seen again.

But I did see many of their fellow student pilots again in 2003 when the 88th Flying Training Squadron, the unit we'd all flown with at Sheppard AFB, held its first and only reunion in San Antonio. I slept little during the weekend of the reunion. We spent most of our time gathered around a keg of beer, and I listened to the stories some 200 former students brought with them. They told me in their still broken English about how they trained, about how they flew combat, about how they escaped from Vietnam, about how they made new lives for themselves in America.

These were stories that told me something I needed to know about the war that defined my generation, about a war that casts a lengthening shadow on us as we age. Since the reunion in Texas, I've interviewed many of these former students, these former Vietnamese pilots. I've endeavored to give a voice to their stories that is faithful to their intent. Some stories relate a painful loss of country and identity, some describe agonizing hardship, yet others go beyond tales of endurance to glimpse a hopeful future for themselves and the next generation. What follows are but a few of the stories I've collected; all of them help us to see the Vietnam War from a perspective that's too often ignored, that of our allies, whose losses were far greater than the considerable losses we've experienced ourselves.

*“One day you are in an aircraft doing loops and spins and flying formation, then next, you’re on the ground washing dishes.”*

—Nga P. Diep, Class 75-07

**M**Y FIRST FLYING LESSON IN THE T-41 I learned how hard it was to taxi the plane. I’d never driven a car before, and here I was trying to keep an aircraft’s nose wheel on the yellow centerline of the taxiway. But I learned and made it to Sheppard and flying T-37s.

Navigation training in the T-37 was a problem for me. When I flew my first VFR navigation flight with Lieutenant Tanner, I had prepared the map I was to use to find my way through the nav route, but shortly after we took off, I realized that I’d left my map at the desk where we’d get our aircraft assignment and sign out of the squadron. Soon after the flight, everyone teased me about forgetting the map—the most important item needed for a navigation flight.

My problems continued on my navigation solo flight on Nav Route 5, which was over Oklahoma. I couldn’t find one of the check points. I should have just flown out my time for that segment of the route and turned to the heading for the next point, but my pride wouldn’t let me miss a check point. I flew back and forth trying to find it on the ground. Finally, I just headed off in the direction that felt right to me. When I called up Sheppard Approach on the radio, the traffic controller told me I was on the wrong side of the field and headed in the wrong direction. The controller told me to turn 180 degrees and asked if I was low on fuel, but I was ashamed to declare minimum fuel. I knew I’d have only enough fuel to make one landing attempt. After I pitched out to downwind, I tried to save fuel by not using the speed brake. It took a long time to slow to the gear lowering airspeed of 150 knots. Finally, I moved my thumb to the speed brake switch just as I heard two words on the radio from Runway Supervisor who was watching me land: “Speed Brake.” I lowered the speed break and kept going while the fuel low light glowed red. I was determined to land even if the Runway Supervisor told me to go around. I landed successfully with maybe fifty pounds of fuel. As soon as I taxied clear of the runway, I shut down one of the engines so I’d have enough gas to taxi to parking.

At our graduation celebrations everyone still remembered my forgetting the map on my first navigation flight. There was considerable laughter at my expense,

but the joy of graduation and receiving our wings was diminished by events in Vietnam. We were scheduled to fly home on the 24th of April, 1975. Exactly one month earlier the ancient imperial city Hue had been lost. On April 21, President Thieu resigned. On April 23rd, the day before we would have gone home, Xuan Loc, just 37 miles northeast of Saigon fell to the enemy, and their path to Saigon was clear. That same day, President Gerald Ford announced in a speech at Tulane University that the war in Vietnam was “finished as far as America is concerned.”

Our flight home was cancelled. I stayed in Wichita Falls. All of us were in shock. We were allowed to stay for three months in billeting at Sheppard AFB, so that we could find a place to live and jobs. None of us had expected our training in the United States to end with our staying in America. Some of us hoped that we might be able to join the US Air Force; others thought that maybe we'd have a chance to go to school and find civilian careers. Still others had no idea of what would happen next.

It was hard to find a job. I was only 21 years old when I came to the United States. I was now on my own, sure that I'd never see my mother or father or siblings again.

When I left Vietnam for pilot training, I thought I would be coming back home with wings. I would bring home proof of my accomplishments, something that I, my family, and my community could be proud of. Instead, something I never would have imagined happened: Saigon was lost. At first I didn't want to believe it was anything but a bad dream. I felt like I had to pinch myself until I woke up, but of course that never happened. Months before the Fall of Saigon, I had been preparing for my homecoming: a new Zippo lighter for my father, silk fabric for my mother, chocolate candies. I even bought Levi jeans for my brothers so they could show off to the neighbors. But all of those items were useless and meaningless now. I would never be able to see my family again. I became a man without a country, without a home. I was an abandoned orphan. When Saigon was lost, my whole existence was lost. My piloting life no longer existed, my childhood dream was destroyed, and half of me died during that time. I spent many nights lying on a tear-soaked pillow trying to imagine the silhouette of each of my family members. A few months after Saigon fell, I was working as a dishwasher at a local restaurant. I would work late nights in a hot and sweaty kitchen. One rainy night my co-worker opened the door, said let's go home, and ran to the car. His statement caught me off guard. Where was my home? I stood there as the rain splattered on my face and mixed with my sweat, maybe even my tears. One day you are in an aircraft doing loops and spins and flying formation, then next, you're on the ground washing dishes.

A Vietnamese lieutenant I knew who had trained in the United States before I came had made friends with a family in San Antonio. When I was in language school in San Antonio, the lieutenant sent a letter to me and the family to introduce us, and I would spend free time with them. While I was working as a dishwasher, they told me of work in a quarry near San Antonio. I moved to San Antonio and worked with machines that sorted rock and sent it to a big kiln to make quick lime. After four or five years a Vietnamese friend of mine opened a gas station and I went to work for him for a couple years, until my friend decided to sell the gas station and buy a shrimp boat. He asked me to go with him, but I didn't want to leave San Antonio. I found work with a steel company as a welder.

In the meantime, I met Nam, who would become my wife. She had escaped from Vietnam on a boat in 1979 and came to San Antonio. She found work at a local computer company. We saved our money so that I could go back to school to learn computer programming. I found a job as a computer programmer, but the company my wife worked for closed down. She heard about a Chinese restaurant whose elderly owner wanted to sell the business. My wife bought it and asked me to quit my job and become the cook. I've been cooking at the restaurant since 1990. Sometimes Lennol Absher, who was a T-37 instructor pilot at Sheppard comes to the restaurant to eat. He tells me I should fly with him someday. I'd like to, but who would cook at the restaurant?

One of my brothers escaped from Vietnam in 1979 and my mother in 1984. In 1993 I took my first of five trips back to Vietnam. I visited my father and other brother. It had been twenty years since I'd left Vietnam, but it was as if the country had gone back two decades while the rest of the world had advanced. Since my more recent trips, though, the country has made a lot of progress. My father even received permission to visit the United States for six months in 2001. But, after three months, he wanted to go home. It's hard for him to be old and leave his home. I can understand his love of Vietnam. If things can continue to improve in Vietnam, if there could be freedom and opportunity there, I'd go home to Vietnam, too.

*“We were rushing towards the ground, on the verge of losing control in a high-speed dive. I saw the lieutenant let go of the stick and reach for the ejection seat handles.”*

—Truong Tai, Class 73-06

**I**N APRIL, 1975, I WAS AN A-37 PILOT with the 532nd Black Bear Squadron. As communist forces advanced, we had evacuated from Phu Cat Air Base to Phan Rang and then south to Can Tho, which was about 80 miles south of Saigon. In these, the closing days of the war, my wife Lai and my six-month-old son Duan lived in Saigon. The Squadron Operations Officer, Major Vo Tong Linh, knew my family and thought I should go to Saigon to get Lai and Duan, but by this time, the highway running between Can Tho and Saigon was closed. I needed to find another way to Saigon. A pilot I knew in the 550th Black Spider Squadron, Second Lieutenant Hiep Nguyen, was scheduled to fly a mission that could get me there.

The mission was to take off at sunset from Can Tho in a two-ship formation, fly to an area about 15 kilometers northeast of Saigon, and drop ordinance near Thu Duc, which was under attack. Hiep Nguyen flew in the left seat of the lead aircraft with First Lieutenant Tuan Nguyen in the right seat. There was room for me to fly along in the right seat of the wingman's airplane, flown by a second lieutenant I didn't know and whose name I've forgotten. Afterwards, we'd land at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon for fuel. I'd stay in Saigon, meet up with my family, and we'd find our way back to Can Tho.

As the sun set, we took off from Can Tho, each plane carrying four bombs, two under each wing. When we approached Thu Duc, we began to receive heavy anti-aircraft fire. Normally, we would each make four passes, dropping one bomb on each pass, but Hiep Nguyen decided that to minimize our exposure to the ground fire, we would each fly but a single pass and drop all four bombs on that single pass.

We split up the formation and lead went in first. He released all four bombs at once and came off the target safely. Now it was our turn. We dived into the ground fire and released all four bombs, but the two bombs under the left wing didn't let go. The extra weight and drag on the left side turned us upside down. It was dark,

hazy from the humidity and smoke. Ground and sky were indistinguishable and the lieutenant didn't realize that we were inverted. He pulled on the stick, which increased our dive angle. We were rushing towards the ground, on the verge of losing control in a high-speed dive.

I saw the lieutenant let go of the stick and reach for the ejection seat handles. Smoke from exploding shells surrounded us. I knew in an instant I didn't want to eject over the enemy's position.

I reached over and punched the lieutenant as hard as I could.

He paused, and I grabbed the stick, turned us upright, and began to pull. I felt the plane stalling as I pulled hard, and had to ease off. We went through a few cycles of pulling hard, feeling the plane shutter, easing off, pulling again. As we came out of the dive and started to climb again, I could see the trees through the smoke.

We called lead on the radio and told him about the two hung bombs. He slowed down so we could catch up. He also declared an emergency for us with Tan Son Nhut. The lieutenant took control of the plane again as we began to rejoin formation on the lead aircraft. But we were rejoining too fast. I took the stick again, pulled back on the throttle, and lowered the speed brake.

Tan Son Nhut cleared us for an emergency straight-in approach and landing. I gave control of the plane back to the lieutenant. We were now getting low on fuel. We'd have only one chance to get the plane on the ground, a landing that should be delicate so that the two hung bombs weren't shaken loose from the left wing. We came in high and fast. We passed the midpoint of the runway and still we hadn't touched down. Land mines had been placed off the end of the runway to protect the field from intruders. We couldn't go off the end of the runway and we didn't have fuel to go around and try another approach. Once again, I took the stick and poked the plane onto the runway. The bombs stayed on the wing, but the end of the runway was approaching quickly. I jumped on the brakes. All three tires blew out and we slid to a stop just before the pavement ended.

Later in the parachute shop where we stored our flying gear, I saw the lieutenant's face in the harsh fluorescent lighting. It was ghostly white.

At least I was in Saigon and near my wife and son. I found someone to give me a ride on a moped to where Lai lived with her family. She didn't know how close I came to not arriving. My wife's sister, Anh, and her husband, Ky Tuan—a good friend of mine who was a Vietnamese Air Force captain—were there. It was evening on the 27th of April, 1975.

The next morning, the 28th, we knew we needed to leave the city. Ky Tuan and I went to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, but the gates were closed. The MPs wouldn't let us pass onto the base. We came back to the house wondering what to do. Later in the day we noticed all the helicopters flying about the American Embassy.

The following day, the 29th, Ky Tuan and I went to the American Embassy, but once again we weren't able to get in. I worried about spending another night at my wife's family's house. It was about three miles from the center of Saigon and guerillas could reach it at night. I worried that since I was a pilot and Ky Tuan was a captain, we'd be attractive targets that would draw their attention to the house. My wife's aunt who lived in the center of the city let us stay with her.

Early in the morning, about five o'clock on the 30th, we returned to my wife's family's house to get our wives and children. Ky Tuan went on to his father's house, about five miles away, to get him. We waited for him to return, but he didn't come back, and we knew we needed to get to the embassy before it was too late. We couldn't wait any longer. My wife and son and my wife's younger brother Thao Tran and I climbed onto a small Honda motor scooter and rode off to the American Embassy.

At the embassy, we found a crush of people trying to get on helicopters that had landed on the roof of the building. I made it inside the building, but the last helicopter left and we were still in the crowd of people. A Vietnamese police officer—a major—lay dead on the second floor, his .38 caliber pistol on his chest. He didn't want to surrender to the enemy and had chosen suicide when he learned that America had completely pulled out of Vietnam. Then came the tear gas.

Eyes stinging, I told my wife that we'd have to find another way out, maybe a ship. We went to the river, to the Bach Dang shipping dock. We still hoped that Ky Tuan and my wife's sister might meet up with us. At the docks, Thao Tran left us to take the Honda back to the house. We told him that if we didn't return that night, it would mean we had left Saigon. On that confused day, when Saigon was lost, I knew only that we must flee the city. Even as we boarded a ship next to the dock and then jumped from that ship to a second ship beyond it, I believed that I would find my way back to Can Tho. Even as we huddled on the deck of that crowded ship, I didn't think we were starting our journey to the United States. Had I known then what I know now, we'd have taken young Thao with us.

There were thousands of people, panicking as North Vietnamese rockets landed on the port. Rockets were exploding around us, on the land and in the river. There was a problem releasing the cable that attached the prow of the ship to the dock. A sailor came with a jackhammer and severed it. The ship, which normally carried maybe 500 people, had maybe 2000 on it. Still, as it drifted away from the first ship, people tried to jump the gap between the two ships. Many didn't make it and fell into the river, which churned between the ships, stirred by their movement and the props. There was blood in the water. Two young women, just girls, sisters, were fortunate because when they fell into the river, others threw them a rope and they were strong enough to hold on to it as they were raised to

the deck and pulled on board. Later, we learned that the owner of the ship was left behind during this time of panic.

With most of the other people on the ship, we were on the exposed deck. A few wealthy people had cabins inside, but we were outside in the sun and rain as the ship pulled away from Saigon and began its journey down the river.

I worried for my infant son; I worried he might pass out from the heat and all we'd been through. I took him and my wife to one of the ship's cabins. A forty-something woman—an old lady to me then—who was part of the family who'd rented it wasn't pleased when we burst in and laid my son in the center of the cabin's floor, but I didn't care. Later, the two sisters who had been pulled from the river were brought into the cabin and laid on the floor to recover from their ordeal. We became good friends with the sisters. The younger one, then only thirteen, grew up to become a dentist.

Conditions on the ship were difficult. There wasn't enough food or water. Some squabbled over what normally would be trifles—a sip of water, a place to sit on the crowded deck. Nights were dangerous. One night the woman whose cabin we'd used was attacked by a small gang of young people. I was only a few feet away. I'd found a spot where I could sit down with my back against a wall. In that position, I'd lower my head and try to sleep. I heard the woman yell when she was hit. I jumped up and decked the guy who'd hit her. I told his friends I had some for them, too, if they wanted it. I was scared they might take me up on it, but they didn't. After that the lady liked me better.

The ship took seven days to reach Singapore. From there we went to Subic Bay in the Philippines, where we transferred to another ship that took us to Guam. We spent 25 days at sea.

Back in Vietnam, Ky Tuan was unable to escape. Like thousands of other South Vietnamese soldiers, he was reported to the new government and placed in a reeducation camp. He tried to escape from the camp in 1977, but they shot him down. Thao Tran survived the motor scooter ride from the docks to his family's house and grew up in Vietnam. On a trip I took to Vietnam in 2001, he told me about the ride home when he was only a young boy, about how it took over three hours to travel the five kilometer distance, about Saigon's streets crowded with people and tanks as clouds and smoke darkened the city.

My wife's sister, Anh, still lives in Vietnam. She never remarried even though she is very beautiful. She raised their three children who were excluded from attending the public university because their father had been an officer with the South. However, they were able to go to a private school where they learned English and did well. As the years passed their knowledge of English became important in the business world, and they all found good jobs in Vietnam.

*“I knew that taking Quynh in an A-37 wasn’t a good idea. Across the ramp, I saw a helicopter—a UH-1 Huey—starting its engine. We dashed to the helicopter and climbed in. About 20 people—all but five of them women and children—sat inside the helicopter on top of their luggage.”*

—Thanh Duong, Class 74-07

**D**URING THE 1968 TET OFFENSIVE, communists invaded our small village about 50 miles southwest of Saigon. They shot up the police station and burned houses a mile or two from ours. The townspeople worried that they might abduct some of the town’s young men and press them into service as guerilla fighters. I was only 17 and the possibility of such an abduction was enough to convince me that, like my older brother, I should join the Air Force. I thought my chances would be better in the Air Force.

The Air Force sent me to helicopter mechanic training at Fort Eustis, Virginia. A few years later, in 1972, I was accepted for pilot training, and another period of training in the United States.

Since I’d trained in the United States before, I had a pretty good idea what to expect at Sheppard AFB. My instructor was Captain Lou Campbell. Like most of my fellow students, I dreaded doing spins in the T-37. On one training flight, I entered the spin, but before I could recover from it, the plane transitioned into an inverted spin. Captain Campbell took control of the plane and recovered it. He said let’s do this again. So I climbed the plane back up to altitude and entered another spin. The same thing happened again. I said I think I’ve had enough spins. But now Captain Campbell was curious. He wanted to know why the plane kept going inverted. So he said let me take the plane and try this. The same thing happened again. And finally we gave up on spins and went home. Over the years, Lou Campbell and I have stayed in touch. We still talk about the day of the inverted spins.

At our T-37 graduation, he took a check from his checkbook, tore off the address, and gave it to me. He said stay in touch. I put the small piece of paper

in my wallet. It was there a year later, when I was in the refugee center at Camp Pendleton. I told him I was there with Quynh, who later became my wife, and we needed sponsorship.

Quynh lived in Saigon, where I had been stationed until the last week of the war, when my squadron relocated to Can Tho. The following Friday, the 25th of April, I took the bus to Saigon to see her. Once in Saigon, I went to my sister's house, and she told me that Quynh had left earlier in the day to visit me in Can Tho. By then, evening was falling and travel was dangerous, but I knew I had to return to Can Tho and to Quynh. I got back on the bus and arrived in Can Tho about nine o'clock that evening.

On Sunday, I took Quynh to the bus station for her return to Saigon, but the busses weren't running to Saigon because the highway had been cut off. We tried again on Monday and again on Tuesday, but still the highway was closed. On Wednesday morning, April 30th, our commander met with our squadron and told us that the new president might take a neutral stance with the communists. Almost as soon as we left the meeting, we learned that the President had surrendered. I was with a friend in the flight planning room. He said that guards had closed the base and wouldn't let us out. The only way out was to fly.

We hopped in a jeep and drove back to the squadron. I got my chute and helmet. Then I went back to my quarters where Quynh was waiting. We threw some clothing into my helmet bag and took off for the flight line. I knew that taking Quynh in an A-37 wasn't a good idea. Across the ramp, I saw a helicopter—a UH-1 Huey—starting its engine. We dashed to the helicopter and climbed in. About 20 people—all but five of them women and children—sat inside the helicopter on top of their luggage. The Huey was meant to carry only seven passengers. I sat behind the pilot, put on my helmet and plugged into the plane's interphone. The pilot told me that he flew for a general from Saigon and that he'd taken off the previous night from Saigon and was unfamiliar with Can Tho. He asked me how to get out of Can Tho's airspace and head for Thailand. Since I'd been a helicopter mechanic, I knew that the Huey wouldn't have the range to make it to Thailand. He said how about the ocean? I told him about an island on the west coast that had been prepared as a last ditch fall back location for the A-37s. We could go there and get more fuel.

We arrived at the island about one o'clock and were relieved to see the South Vietnam Flag flying. But nobody was there: no maintenance personnel, no power. The base had been abandoned with the flag flying. We did find fuel, but we to hand pump it into the helicopter. Even with a full load of fuel, we wouldn't have enough range to make it to Thailand. So we put more fuel into a 55 gallon barrel

and loaded it with all the people and all the bags in the small cabin of the UH-1. We were so heavy we had to do a running takeoff.

We leveled off about 2500 feet and headed for Thailand; we had to fly over Cambodia, which was already under communist control for two weeks. As we flew over the Cambodian jungle, our fuel was rapidly consumed. We needed to find a place to land so that we could refuel from the 55 gallon drum we had. The fuel light came on. Then we found a place where a stream came out of the jungle and met the ocean. Here, a sandy delta had grown, giving us room to land the chopper. When we landed, I told the pilot to take out the guns and guard the plane while we refueled from the 55 gallon drum. We had to use helmets to dip the fuel out of the drum and slosh it into the fuel tank. It was hot work despite the Cambodian clouds, and I was thirsty. I tried the stream but its water was salty. A mist from the clouds coated the windscreen. I put my lips to it for the moisture.

After refueling, the engine wouldn't start. The pilot wanted me to push the blade, a dangerous proposition. I said try one more time. I was relieved when it started. After we took off, we tried to contact Utapao control tower, but maybe we were too far away. The pilot switched to the guard emergency frequency and tried to call everybody. We couldn't tell if we were over Cambodia and Thailand.

Then, to the great relief of our pilot, an American O-2 flew up to us. He rocked his wings and made a right turn. Our pilot's joy disappeared as he said he's leaving us. I said no he wants us to follow. So we followed him, and then another American plane appeared, another Huey helicopter. He asked how much fuel we had and I told him that our low-fuel light had been on for about five minutes. He said see the rice paddy? Land now!

The American helicopter had two barrels of fuel on board. He told us he'd been flying along the border for two days waiting for us. I don't know how he knew we were coming.

We split the remaining gas and the passengers. I went with the American pilots. We landed at a field where many Vietnamese waited. A cargo plane came and took all of us to Utapao. Then we went to Guam and finally to Camp Pendleton.

I still had the piece of paper with Lou Campbell's address in my wallet. He sponsored Quynh and me, and we went to Wichita Falls. His neighbor got me a job. A little more than a year after graduating as pilot at Sheppard AFB, I was working there again: in the mess hall as a busboy. We stayed with the Campbells for two weeks, and then moved to our own apartment. A month later, Quynh, who had never been to America and didn't speak English, got a job, too.

We were able to live comfortably, but I knew we'd do better if we had some skills. We moved to Waco, Texas, where I went to a technical school to learn how to be an instrumentation technician, the career I've had since 1982.

I think it was in 1985 that Quynh and I got our marriage license.

I had to apologize to Lou Campbell for not telling him from the refugee center in 1975 that we weren't married. Now when we laugh about the old days and inverted spins, we also laugh about how he says that had he known Quynh and I weren't married, he'd not have let us stay in the same room.

*“I taxied around the hanger to the taxiway and picked up a major from my squadron and a crew chief. To make room for all three of us in the two-place cockpit, we left our parachutes behind.”*

—Simon Lam, Class 74-03

NEXT TO THE RUNWAY, my T-41 instructor pilot and a friend watched as I added full power and began the takeoff roll on my first solo. At high power settings, propeller-driven planes like the T-41 produce a lot of torque at high-engine speeds, torque that can cause the plane to veer to the left, if the pilot doesn't counteract with enough right rudder. Perhaps it was the excitement of my first solo, or maybe just my inexperience, but as the T-41 gained speed, it drifted to the left. Later, my friend told me that as the T-41 went into the dirt on the left side of runway, the coffee mug my instructor held slipped from his hand. He stood there, fingers still curved around the now-dropped mug, as I continued the takeoff from beside the runway. Tower also noticed my non-standard way of getting airborne and told me over the radio that I had run off the runway. It wouldn't be the first time that I took off or landed off the runway.

When I returned to Vietnam from Pilot Training at Sheppard AFB and A-37 training at England AFB, I was assigned to the 532nd Fighter Squadron at Phu Cat. The Base Commander, who was married to my aunt, already knew me, and when I reported into him, he asked me what I wanted to do. I said I wanted to fly. As soon as I reported to the flying squadron, I began the combat check-out. Two weeks later I showed up at the squadron and there was my name on the scheduling board: I was flying solo as the wingman on a combat mission.

My last combat mission at Phu Cat came just before we evacuated for Nha Trang on the 30th of March, 1975. We attacked a position just a short distance from the runway, maybe only five minutes away. After we dropped our bombs, we popped up onto an extended final approach in formation and prepared for a formation landing. We didn't do many formation landings, and it would be a treat for us to fly one. I maintained position on lead's right wing. The runway was only a couple miles ahead. I focused on staying in position just a few feet separating my left wingtip from lead's right wingtip.

I felt something graze my right leg and then wind began blasting into the cockpit. The canopy was shattered and I broke away from the lead aircraft and announced on the radio that I'd been hit. Lead continued with his landing, and I looked about the crowded traffic pattern—helicopters, a C-130, busy activity preparing for the evacuation of the base. I went around and pulled up onto downwind. I tried to lower the speed brake and the gear, but nothing happened. The gear remained up. The hydraulics had been hit, rendering the gear, flaps, and speed brake inoperative.

I asked tower to foam the runway, but they told me that it would take about 45 minutes to do so, and I didn't have 45 minutes of fuel left. On the ground, lead was listening to the radio transmissions and he broke in to suggest that I use the gear blow-down, an emergency gear-lowering procedure. I pulled the emergency gear lowering handle, and a blast lowered the gear. The three gear position lights glowed green, indicating that all gear were down and locked.

Still, I had no speed brake and no flaps. I crossed the runway threshold, but the plane continued to float. It wouldn't touch down. The end of the runway was protected by a mine field. I pushed forward on the stick, forcing the plane to the runway and stepped on the brakes. But there were no brakes. The plane kept on its way toward the end of the runway and the mine field. The loss of hydraulics also meant that I didn't have nose wheel steering. The plane began to drift to the right of the runway and then dropped off the pavement. The landing gear hooked into the soil, and the plane's path twisted to the right. It slid to a stop in the dirt, not far from the runway's edge. I opened the canopy and jumped out of the airplane. A master sergeant I knew came out and picked me up. He took me straight to a Chinook helicopter that was evacuating personnel to Nha Trang. The disabled A-37 remained where it had come to rest beside the runway at Phu Cat.

Soon after the squadron's evacuation to Nha Trang, we moved again, this time to Can Tho. My last flight in an A-37 would be from Can Tho, on April 30th, 1975, as Saigon was falling. I found an A-37 near the hanger that was fully loaded; it carried six bombs under its wings and wingtip fuel tanks, a good sign that it also had a full load of gas. I'd need a lot of gas to make it Utapao, Thailand. I taxied around the hanger to the taxiway and picked up a major from my squadron and a crew chief. To make room for all three of us in the two-place cockpit, we left our parachutes behind. The airfield was so busy that I took off from the taxiway. As soon as I was airborne—before I'd even raised the gear—I dropped all six bombs. Maybe it was shrapnel from these bombs exploding beneath us that damaged the aircraft's tires and the rudder. We'd not know about the damage until we landed at Utapao.

As we flew across Vietnam, we heard others on the radio. One radio exchange that still haunts me came from a helicopter that was over the sea. It was running out of gas and the voice on the radio was a woman's, and in the background were sounds of children crying. They couldn't find a ship to land on. I also saw another A-37 flying not with three people as we were, but with five. And I heard of a two-place O-1 loaded with seven people.

As we approached Utapao, we were low on fuel, but I couldn't find the runway. On the radio I heard an emergency B-52 inbound to Utapao with an engine fire. I looked up and saw the B-52 trailing smoke, so I followed him. Once I had Utapao in sight, the B-52 allowed me to go ahead of him because by then we were dangerously low on fuel.

When we touched down, I discovered that one of the tires was flat. The flat tire pulled us off the runway and we came to rest beside the runway. We climbed out of the plane.

American personnel met us at the side of the runway. They took the pistol I always flew with, and they painted over the South Vietnamese insignia on the A-37.

*“In Vietnam we didn’t have amusement parks with roller coasters, and I didn’t know what it would be like. After my first ever roller coaster ride, I said I’m not going to do that again.”*

—Sang X Vuong, Class 75-07

I D JUST FINISHED HIGH SCHOOL IN VIETNAM, and could have continued my education, but I wanted to become a pilot. I joined the Vietnamese Air Force in 1972 at the age of 17. After boot camp and survival training, I had to learn English. In high school I’d taken some English, but when I sat in the military English class listening to the audio tapes and to my instructor speaking English, I realized how little I knew the language. I wondered what I’d gotten myself into. I’d have to learn how to fly an airplane speaking this difficult language.

By the time I began training in T-41 aircraft, I’d received a lot of English training, but I still worried about my ability to understand the instruction. And the challenges of learning to fly became even clearer to me one day as I sat with my class at Hondo, the airport where the T-41s flew. It was early in our T-41 training; we’d not flown yet, but were attending ground training classes that would prepare us for our first flights. Outside, the T-41s buzzed in the traffic pattern, one of them being flown by a student in our senior class on his first solo. He touched down on the runway nose wheel first. The plane rocked back onto its main landing gear and then forward onto the nose wheel again. Each cycle of seesawing became more severe until the final rocking onto the nose wheel that caused the propeller to hit the runway. The force of the spinning propeller flipped the plane over and it slid to a stop, upside down on the runway. Fortunately, the student was okay.

The accident, however, didn’t discourage any of us. Many times, though, I’d listen to the instructor, but wouldn’t understand what he said. I had to study hard and ask other students and just watch my instructor flying the plane and try to imitate his actions. We called it “monkey-see, monkey-do.” I was the first person in my class to solo the T-41.

I arrived at Sheppard AFB for T-37 training in July, 1974. My instructor pilot was Captain Greene, who had flown A-37s in combat in Vietnam. One holiday

weekend Captain Greene and his wife and another instructor and his wife took me and five other students to Six Flags over Dallas. Standing in front of a roller coaster, Captain Greene said you think you're so hot flying the T-37, see what you can do on this. In Vietnam we didn't have amusement parks with roller coasters, and I didn't know what it would be like. After my first ever roller coaster ride, I said I'm not going to do that again.

Shortly after I soloed the T-37, we had to take a routine TB tine test. My skin around the test site reacted with swelling. The flight surgeon sent me to the hospital at Scott AFB near St. Louis for further evaluation. The doctors decided that I wasn't infectious, but they worried that the stresses of flight training might activate the tuberculosis. I never flew again.

I stayed as a patient at the Scott AFB hospital. The people there were very kind. They'd let me help with tasks—moving gurneys around, running errands for staff members. My English improved because no one at the hospital knew Vietnamese. They'd let me check out of the hospital and I even took two trips back to Sheppard AFB. I went by bus. It was a long ride from St. Louis to Wichita Falls. My first trip back was at Christmas, 1974; the second trip was for the graduation of my old pilot training class on April 24, 1975. It was an emotional ceremony. There would be no trip back home to Vietnam for this class.

After the graduation, I returned to the hospital at Scott AFB. The sergeant at the hospital told me to go to the Immigration and Naturalization office in St. Louis as one who had received asylum in the United States. They stamped my visa so I could get a job.

The hospital let me stay, telling me to stay as long as I needed to arrange a new life for myself. I stayed for about month.

I learned that my parents and all my siblings except my older brother, who was also in the Vietnamese Air Force, had been able to leave Vietnam. My father had been a driver for the US Ambassadors Lodge, Bunker and Taylor. Because of his long association with the American government, the family received help leaving Vietnam. After I learned that my family was at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, I sought sponsorship for them through various relief agencies. It was difficult to find someone to sponsor such a large group, but I knew it was vital to keep our family together. Finally, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service found sponsorship for all of us. We moved to large old six-bedroom house in St. Louis where we stayed through two winters. I actually liked St. Louis, but my parents, used to tropical Vietnam, suffered through the cold. Friends from Dallas suggested we move there, and we did.

My older brother, who hadn't been able to leave with my parents, managed to hide from Vietnamese authorities for two years. He knew that they would

imprison him a reeducation camp, if they could find him. He tried five times to escape from Vietnam. Each time, something happened to foil the escape, but somehow he always managed to avoid capture. Finally on his sixth attempt, he succeeded in escaping to Hong Kong and found his way to the United States and joined us in Texas.

*“All of us knew what was happening in Cambodia as the Khmer Rouge began to slaughter anyone deemed an enemy of their state. We expected the same treatment from North Vietnamese communists.”*

—Mike Doan, Class 75-03

**J** GRADUATED FROM PILOT TRAINING AT SHEPPARD in October, 1974. Captain Al Viers was the flight commander. He was nearing the end of his tour at Sheppard and had been told that he would be assigned to a non-flying job as missile launch officer in Minot, North Dakota. He wasn't happy about spending his time underground in a missile silo instead of flying through the wild blue. We were astonished that America could afford to give pilots jobs deep under the ground instead of in the air.

Curt Emory, a young captain, was my instructor pilot. He took me up on my first T-37 flight. We were up about 25,000 feet and he was banking and yanking around, trying, I think, to make me sick. I kept my throat closed, and finally he asked me if I wanted to take the stick. Sure, I did. When I took it in hand, the stick was very heavy. Now I know that he had trimmed the plane nose down to teach me about the importance of trimming. On a well-trimmed plane, the pilot can let go of the stick and the plane will continue fly straight and level. I grabbed the heavy stick with both hands and yanked back with full force. The accelerometer registered 5.6 g's and Captain Emory blacked out. He came around and said don't do that again. I said don't do what? When we came back, the plane had to be grounded for a structural check.

After a couple weeks Captain Emory was reassigned to Check Section, and I was assigned to a new IP, Captain David Shetter. Captain Shetter was a new IP, but he was very relaxed and even-tempered, and spread good will. While he and his students knew that our first job was to fly, we could also talk to him about the day-to-day problems students in a strange land are bound to have. I didn't know then how I'd rely upon his good will even after pilot training. I also flew with many other IPs. I think the reason I flew with so many different instructors was because my English was better than that of many other students.

I'd been studying English since sixth grade. I was born in what became North Vietnam. My father was an army captain and our family moved south before the partitioning of Vietnam. He had been French-educated and after his discharge from the army, we settled in Da Nang, where I grew up and studied English in school. So, when I went to English language training at Lackland AFB, I found the studying easy. Since I already knew English, I took advantage of the time to learn about American culture.

None of us really knew much about the details of American life. Our first stop in the United States was Hawaii, where we learned about vending machines. One of the students put some coins into the machine, but without knowing the cost of an item. He began to think that the machine was just taking money without returning anything. A second student took a turn at the machine. He put in just a quarter, and the machine coughed up both product and change. The vending machines seemed more like slot machines to us. You never knew what you would win.

The contrast between what America had and what Vietnam lacked was especially apparent when I returned to Vietnam after pilot training. In February, 1975, I had received my commission as a second lieutenant, but never made it to a flying squadron. By then, there weren't the resources to invest in training new combat pilots. I spent my commissioned time assigned to headquarters in Saigon.

Only one time would I sit at the controls of a Vietnamese Air Force airplane, not an A-37, but a C-130. And it would be on a day I'll always remember.

The base came under attack on the 29th of April. Beginning at two in the morning, the base was pounded for four hours. I saw an AC-119 shot down. An SA-7 hit an engine, the wing came off, and the plane spun downward. A huge fireball punctuated its plunge. Three A-37s captured by the communists at Phan Rang flew over the base and bombed it, damaging many of the aircraft. An F-5 scrambled in pursuit of the A-37s, but by the time it took off, they were gone.

All of us knew what was happening in Cambodia as the Khmer Rouge began to slaughter anyone deemed an enemy of their state. We expected the same treatment from North Vietnamese communists. As Saigon's ability to repulse attack declined, we knew we'd have to face a painful decision: either suffer retribution from a brutal enemy or flee.

A crew chief asked if I could fly a C-130. I told him I couldn't, but I'd help. He'd managed to get family and friends together on a C-130. He found a Vietnamese major who was a C-130 check pilot, who also gathered his family together. We loaded onto the 130, the major in the left seat, I in the right seat. We left the troop doors open to invite anyone else to climb on board. By the time we took off we had about 100 people—military personnel, family members, civilians—sitting on the floor of the cargo cabin.

We headed for Utapao Air Base in Thailand. The flight was short and we landed without incident. A blue pickup truck with a "Follow Me" sign met us as we taxied off the runway and we followed it to parking. A crew chief marshaled us into the parking place and signaled to shut down the engines. We got off the airplane. While we stood on the tarmac next to it, American Air Force personnel arrived in a truck with a cherry picker. Spray cans in hand, they were hoisted up to the plane's Vietnamese insignia and began to paint them over. Tears in our eyes, we raised our voices to sing the South Vietnamese national anthem:

O people! The country nears its freedom day.  
Together we go forward to the open way.  
Remembering our centuries of history,  
Brothers from North to South reunite,  
With hearts young and pure as crystal  
Multiply our efforts and spare not our ardent blood.  
No danger, no obstacle can stop us.  
Our courage waivers not before a thousand dangers.  
On the new way, our look embraces the horizon  
And who can repress the soul of our youth?  
O people! Going until the end is our resolution.  
O people! To give all is our oath.  
Together we go forward for the glory of the Fatherland.  
We fight for the immortality of the Lac Long race.

An American Air Force captain came over and pointed to a roach coach, a van selling food and sundries. He said, I'm very sorry.

I contacted Captain Shetter after I arrived at the Camp Pendleton Refugee Center. He sponsored me, and I went back to Wichita Falls. In my first week, I found my first job working in a foundry. It was hard work, but soon I found another job. I went back to school and today I work as a sales manager for IBM.

I traveled back to Vietnam in 1993 to visit my mother. It didn't feel right to me when we flew into the airfield I'd last seen when I fled the country in the C-130. The flag of my former enemy flew over the airport. Military aircraft bearing my former enemy's markings sat on its military ramp. I felt like I had to be careful with every word I said.

*“I carried a .38 pistol in my waistband.  
My father had a Colt .45. He said if  
worse comes to worst, we’ll use the guns  
on ourselves.”*

—Chau Phong Nguyen, Class 74-06

**I**N 1954 MY FATHER GRADUATED from the National Military Academy with a commission as a second lieutenant. He was assigned as a finance officer in Saigon where I grew up. Growing up I saw many military people, especially pilots in their flight suits. I joined the Vietnamese Air Force and lived in the barracks while we prepared to go to flight training in the United States. Our English book had a story in it about the “quietest town in the US”—Fairfield, California.

My first impression of the USA came on my trip to Travis AFB in October, 1972. We arrived at our quarters and I thought it was like a presidential suite. America was so much more than I had expected. The little I knew about America came from what I’d learned after I joined the Vietnamese Air Force and been selected for flight training in the United States. In Vietnam we lived in barracks far less grand than the quarters at Travis. We learned that Fairfield, “quietest town in the US” was close to Travis, so I and my classmates decided to go see it for ourselves. On the way there in the cab, we came upon a night club with nude dancers. We had to stop and go inside. It was like heaven for us young guys. I’d never seen anything like this in my life. We never made it to Fairfield.

Soon, we left Travis for language school at Lackland AFB in San Antonio. The policy at the language school was to give Vietnamese students roommates from other countries, so that we’d be forced to speak English as a common language. I was given a roommate from Iran. It was a bit vexing because he bragged about how he would be a fighter pilot flying a prestigious F-4 Phantom. I was just happy to become any kind of pilot for my country, and his cockiness got under my skin. His religious practices also bothered me because they interfered with my sleep. I’d stay up until about two a.m. studying and then go to sleep, hoping to sleep until six, an hour before class started for us, but every morning at five my Iranian roommate rose, placed a piece of cloth on the floor and began praying in a loud voice. For me that last hour of sleep, the hour I missed every night would have been the best hour, but I suppose it did help me learn English a little better.

After language school came the T-41 flying phase of our training. My class moved to the Lackland Annex, called Medina, which also housed the Air Force Officer Training School. Here I made friends with the American students who were soon to become Air Force officers. As a Vietnamese Air Cadet, I wasn't allowed to join the Officer Trainee Club at Medina. This club was modeled after US Air Force Officers' clubs, and was a popular place for trainees to let off steam. Even though I couldn't join the club, my American friends took me to it as their guest. We'd drink some beer and play the juke box. We all had the same favorite song and we'd raise our voices and sing along with John Denver: "Take me home, country road. To the place where I belong..."

Before taking the road home, I'd have to finish T-37 training at Sheppard. There, First Lieutenant Brian Spitzer had just come home to America after a tour in Vietnam flying C-7s. He called me Lima Delta, a nickname that sticks to this day when I talk to him.

I was finally able to take the road home to Vietnam after training at England AFB, Louisiana, in the A-37. On June 24, 1974 I finished A-37 training and was on my way back to Vietnam for further training. Eventually, I received an assignment to the 546th Fighter Squadron at Can Tho Air Base, Vietnam. I was able to get only a few training flights in the A-37, but I did get to sit in the right seat as an observer on some combat missions. I was really scared on the first combat flight. The captain who was flying told me not to worry, but it was hard not to worry when people were shooting at you and you were just along for the ride. But after a few times, I got used to it.

About a week before the country collapsed, my father—a 1954 graduate of the Vietnamese National Academy and now a Lieutenant Colonel—asked me to come home to Saigon, where he was assigned as a finance officer. Things had become bad enough that he wanted me to help evacuate the family members.

When April 30th dawned, we still hadn't got the family out. We received a tip that we could get out on a ship docked in Saigon. The extended family—about 50 of us—got on the ship, only to discover that the ship was disabled and couldn't leave the port. Vietnamese sailors went to work fixing it, but it wasn't seaworthy until two hours after the President had surrendered the country. Once it was repaired there was another problem: two other ships had to be moved before we could get out of the port. We had to push those ships out of the way. There was little room and those ships actually ended up being pushed into the houses that lined the opposite bank of the river.

There were about 5000 of us on the ship—standing room only in the cargo hold. Outside, the hull echoed as bullets fired from the shore hit. Everybody was praying. I carried a .38 pistol in my waistband. My father had a Colt .45. He

said if worse comes to worst, we'll use the guns on ourselves. As the ship traveled down river we survived on dry packets of Top Ramen. Once at sea, the ship's engine stopped running. Another ship came to the rescue, taking the women and children. My father and I and the other men had to wait another day for a ship to pick us up and take us to Subic Bay. We finally rejoined the rest of the family on Guam. Along the way I always volunteered to help as an interpreter. I translated the safety instructions on the 747 that flew us from Guam to California. The flight attendant thanked me by giving me a brand new Levi jacket. I was the only one at the refugee center at Camp Pendleton with a brand new Levi jacket.

My immediate family numbered thirteen, and it was very difficult to find a sponsor who could take all of us. Finally, we were told that a Catholic church in Denver was willing to sponsor all of us. They rented a big six-bedroom house for us, where we stayed for a year. The church paid the first month's rent for us. We were able to find jobs and were able to pay the subsequent months' rent ourselves. I knew I needed to get more training so I could find a good job.

I talked on the phone with Brian Spitzer. He suggested that I get an airframe and powerplant certificate (commonly called an A&P certificate) to become an aircraft mechanic. I enrolled in a course of training for the A&P and worked full time at whatever jobs I could find: house cleaning, dishwasher, bus boy, room service, waiter, bartender. After completing my training, I found an aircraft mechanic's job with Frontier Airlines. I was happy working there until August of 1986 when Frontier filed bankruptcy. During the nine years I worked as a mechanic for Frontier, I kept pursuing flight qualifications, gaining a commercial instrument multi-engine rating.

One day after losing the job with Frontier, I was hanging out at the Aurora Air Park, a small airport just east of Denver. A guy asked me what I was doing, and I told him I was looking for work. He was from Evergreen Airlines, and he hired me as a professional flight engineer on Boeing 727s. Most airlines call this position the second officer. A flight engineer or second officer is the crew member who watches over the aircraft systems and manages the cockpit tasks that don't involve using the flight controls—things like transferring fuel from tank to tank, controlling the cabin temperature, monitoring engine performance, and running checklists. Second officer is the first crew position for an aspiring airline pilot who wants to move up to one of the front seats on the flight deck, the ones holding the captain and first officer. Professional flight engineers generally don't have a career path to first officer and captain, even though the duties of flight engineers and second officers are identical. I flew for two years with Evergreen, which subcontracted for United Parcel Service. Then UPS decided to start up their own flight operations and I interviewed with them. They hired me as a

DC-8 professional flight engineer in 1988. After four years they upgraded me to 727 first officer, the pilot who sits in the right seat on airliners. Eighteen years after graduating from pilot training at Sheppard AFB, I was back at the flight controls of an airplane.

In 1994 I was promoted to captain. Since then I've been a captain on the Boeing 747, Air Bus 300, and MD-11. My route is Asia: Shanghai, Manila, Singapore, Seoul, Hong Kong, and Taipei.

When I was a 747 captain, a new second officer came to work for UPS and was on my crew. We introduced ourselves; he asked if I was Vietnamese. He said he used to be an instructor at Sheppard AFB. It was Jim Wolfe, who had been a T-37 standardization-evaluation pilot. I told my first officer, I may be the captain on this plane and Jim may be just the second officer, but he was an evaluator when I learned to be a pilot. He decided if we were good enough to pass. If I do anything wrong, blame him. Him and Brian Spitzer.

*“I stayed in my country after the communists overran South Vietnam. They captured me and kept me in a series of concentration camps for five years and six months.”*

—Dao T. Dinh, Class 74-02

**I**N 1967 I BEGAN MY MILITARY TRAINING at the Vietnamese National Military Academy. Like the American service academies, it had a four-year curriculum leading to a bachelor’s degree and a commission. Unlike its American counterparts, its graduates went to all the branches of the military: Army, Air Force, and Navy. I graduated with a commission in the Air Force and became a fighter pilot, receiving my wings at Sheppard AFB as a member of Pilot Training Class 74-02.

I flew A-37 combat missions in the Delta region from April 1974 until the South fell in April 1975. Seven months before the South fell, in September, 1974, I had married my wife, but most of the next six years, we would be separated while I spent my time in concentration camps. My captors would not tell my wife where I was. When they transferred me to other concentration camps, they would do so under the cover the darkness, I think, so that no one could know where we were.

The first camps were little more than an area of the jungle surrounded by fencing. The only structure was a guard tower. The branch of a tree was my bed. Each group of 20 prisoners was watched by two guards. The guards watched us as we cut down trees and stripped their branches and assembled their trunks into log buildings that would house 60 to 100 prisoners. The camps would come to contain six to ten such buildings. Sanitation was a trench dug by prisoners. There was little food, even though we faced hard physical labor every day. They didn’t even give us rice, just two bowls of corn a day. We were always hungry.

We didn’t have meat. Once, a group of thirty of us was given a palm-sized piece of fish. We tried to figure out how we could fairly divide it. Finally we made gruel of it; we boiled it in water and let everyone have a spoonful. Sometimes when we worked with the soil, we’d find a root we would eat, or even a worm.

The last camp I stayed at was at Pleiku. One night thirty prisoners escaped, but the camp was on a mountain, and the surrounding terrain made it difficult to move quickly. We heard the guns of the guards firing in the jungle. The next

morning we were assembled for a lecture on what would happen to us if we tried to escape. The visual aids for the lecture were the mutilated bodies of our former fellow prisoners.

We were never told how long we would have to remain imprisoned. Sometimes one or two of us would be released with no notice or fanfare. Perhaps they released prisoners whom they thought had become compliant enough to attend the daily meetings with probation officials that were required of all who had served time in the concentration camps. My release came after five and half years. I returned to my wife's home.

Every night after my release I had to report to an official. They wanted to know how I had spent my time each day. Even worse, I found I was an outcast. People looked at me with disgust. Sometimes I'd be kicked. I had no money, no job. My wife and I knew we needed to escape from Vietnam.

I still had some friends from the old days. One, from my time at the Military Academy was Van, who had taken a commission in the Navy. A number of people who wanted to escape pooled what money we had to buy a 12-meter fishing boat and fuel for it. Van arranged for the boat to cruise the water off the southern town of Rach Gia one night in March of 1981, two months after my release from the concentration camp. Each of us had to find a small boat or canoe we could paddle under the cover of darkness to the larger fishing boat. As the boat cruised about two hundred meters offshore, many small vessels carrying two or three people slipped away from the shore to meet the larger boat at sea. Some became lost in the darkness and were unable to reach the larger boat. Still, thirty-two people made it. We spent three days and nights crowded on the 12-meter boat before beaching it on the Thai coast.

After picking up the last group of people, the boat headed for international water. Government agents spotted us and gave chase. Perhaps they would not have respected international water had it not been for the passing of a large European ship.

Our first day at sea dawned, and many of us were still sleeping, when sea pirates attacked. My wife and I had nothing, but others lost everything—the jewelry they hoped would fund a new start for their lives—everything.

When I say I had nothing, I'm not exaggerating. I didn't even have shoes. I don't remember when I lost my shoes, but when we landed on the Thai beach, I remember how the sand burned my feet. I fashioned shoes from cardboard boxes so I could walk on the hot sand.

The Thai government let us stay on a section of the beach, where we built temporary shelter for ourselves from whatever materials we could find, fabric,

cardboard, even palm fronds. I was especially grateful when United Nations relief workers gave me a pair of thongs for my feet.

After a week we were moved to the Songkla Refugee Camp where we stayed for four months. Here, I met officials from the United States Immigration Service. Because I'd trained for two years in the United States to become a pilot and spoke English well, they quickly accepted my application for settlement in the United States. My wife also had relatives in the United States. Her family had escaped when Vietnam fell in 1975 and were in Dallas.

We lived with my wife's family in Dallas for two months, until my wife got a job at a bank. I spent my time studying in the library, sixteen hours a day, to review the subjects I'd taken years before as a cadet at the Vietnamese National Military Academy: electronics, mechanical engineering, and drafting. I prepared my résumé and found a drafting job at a small company. I enrolled in night school to regain the bachelor's degree I'd lost with my country. School was easy for me, and we've been able to live a fine life in America, where we have a good house, plenty to eat, and have been free to follow our dreams. Our two daughters are growing up, the younger one a senior in high school, the older one a senior pre-med student at the University of Texas.