Grand Valley State University
Veteran’s History Project
Vietnam War / Post-Vietnam Era
Trinh Nguyen

Interview Length: (01:10:02:00)

Early Life (00:00:19:00)
- Born in 1941 in a rural village in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam (00:00:19:00)
- Nguyen grew up in the rural part of the country with his parents and grandparents, who made their living by planting rice; his family’s lives were not prosperous but they were okay (00:00:32:00)
  - One of Nguyen’s cousins eventually went to Saigon to study and become an engineer while his other cousin went to France to study; Nguyen’s aunt was a landlord, meaning she had money to send both cousins to school (00:00:55:00)
- During the time Nguyen lived in the rural country, the Vietnamese were fighting with the French, meaning the villagers needed security for their homes (00:01:34:00)
  - Nguyen began going to school in 1949, when the French set up an outpost near their village to take care of security (00:01:54:00)
  - Nguyen and most of the other children in the village ended up going to the school at the outpost, which was about two kilometers away from the village; the children walked there everyday and some other children in the school had to walk farther (00:02:14:00)
    - Everyone had to walk to go to places because, at that time, they had no means of communication or transportation (00:02:37:00)
  - Nguyen went to the French school for four years before going to My Tho for high school, where he lived with his uncle-in-law (00:03:07:00)
- Nguyen was too young to remember any of the fighting between the Viet Minh and the French, partly due to there not being any form of communication in Nguyen’s region; they did not have radio or even newspapers (00:03:51:00)
  - He does recall going to his neighbor’s and hearing about the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu; everybody in Vietnam loved that victory because they wanted to drive the French out and gain independence for the country (00:04:11:00)
  - Both Nguyen’s uncle and father-in-law left to fight with the Viet Minh; both men were gone for about two years before returning and Nguyen does not know why they left the Viet Minh (00:04:41:00)
- Nguyen attended high school from 1953 until 1962; after graduating in 1962, he went to Saigon to attend the university for dentistry, but only for a year (00:05:33:00)
  - However, Nguyen could not make any money to live as a student, so his uncle-in-law, a policeman in My Tho, told him to put in an application with the police force, which he did (00:05:51:00)
- When he was attending high school, Nguyen had his first opportunity to vote, which he did for Ngo Dinh Diem (00:06:34:00)
  - After the election of Diem, social life in the country was very good; everyone had easy lives to lead and things were good (00:06:48:00)
Nguyen only knew a little about the communist efforts in South Vietnam, mostly because he was not interested in the political issues; he does remember one group, the South Vietnamese Liberation Front, formed to fight against Diem’s government (00:07:28:00)

- Nguyen remembers being told the group was directed by communists from North Vietnam (00:07:57:00)

Before he joined the police, Nguyen knew very little about the communists, although some of his friends in the village did leave to join them (00:08:24:00)

**Police Service (00:09:02:00)**

- When he applied to join the police, Nguyen’s uncle-in-law wrote a letter which made joining easier for Nguyen and after turning in the application, Nguyen had an interview in the central police headquarters in Saigon before he was hired (00:09:02:00)
  - Nguyen received the first part of his police training, which he received in 1963 at a police center in Vung Tau, consisted of learning about: law enforcement, police administration, fire-marshals techniques, and the communists (00:09:45:00)
  - The training lasted for twelve months and after the first section, the trainees attended special courses at another police center in Saigon; the trainees also practiced at several different police centers all over South Vietnam (00:10:33:00)

- Two weeks after completing his training, Nguyen received a job offer as a police officer; however, the job was working as a secretary (00:11:18:00)

- Nguyen eventually got a job working in the My Tho police department with the special forces before moving to the uniform police then on to police administration and the judicial police (00:11:47:00)
  - He spent four years with the special police force as a secretary and eight years working in the other branches of the department, including time at the police center training others (00:12:12:00)
  - Nguyen spent most of his time working in an office, meaning that he did not have a lot of contact with the communists, although there was a lot of communist activity in the area, namely bombings at different public locations, including: markets, schools, and shopping malls (00:12:49:00)
    - Nguyen finally came to the conclusion that the communists did not care about the lives of people, they cared about defeating the Republic of Vietnam (00:13:42:00)

- In 1967, Nguyen got a job working for the judicial police in Mokwo (00:14:05:00)
  - When he went to Mokwo, Nguyen had to take an American plane because the Viet Cong controlled the road to Mokwo; because of the flight, Nguyen had some contact with Americans and he found them to be very good, kind, and fervent in their duty (00:14:21:00)
    - One day, Nguyen talked with a GI who had come to their office and he describes the American as being kind and honest; the soldier had been in college before joining the military and Nguyen viewed him as not only a man of the United States, but as a man of the world (00:15:06:00)

- Because the Vietnamese have their embassy in the United States, people have forgotten just how bad the Viet Cong were and Nguyen believes teachers must show their students this fact and to not let them be deceived by the Viet Cong (00:16:01:00)
- No one can imagine what the Viet Cong think and do because Americans are kind and honest; Americans know very little about the Viet Cong because the door was almost shut (00:16:43:00)
- The Vietnamese government owns the radio and television stations, as well as the newspapers, so the news they give is not always the truth (00:17:12:00)
- In 1968, during the Tet Offensive, fighting with the Viet Cong spilled over into Nguyen’s province (00:18:39:00)
  - One day, they gathered one hundred people inside the police station to fight against the Viet Cong; during the night, Nguyen slept in a ceiling-less bunker and during Viet Cong shells, he was nervous because he had no ceiling (00:18:52:00)
    - During that night, none of the shells hit anyone (00:19:35:00)
  - The next day, the police officers went out of the police station and Nguyen saw numerous Viet Cong lying in fields; however, other Viet Cong hide with the population and the men had to search for them (00:19:58:00)
  - After the offensive, Viet Cong activity in Nguyen’s region slowed down a little but they still sent mortar rounds into town every day (00:20:51:00)
- Nguyen did not get much information about the conflict in other parts of the country because his duty was to deal with the conventional criminals in the region (00:22:16:00)
  - It is hard to say whether there was more crime in South Vietnam or in the United States because the United States is so large with a large population (00:22:49:00)
  - Not many crimes actually happened in Nguyen’s province (00:23:11:00)
- The communists eventually defeated the South Vietnamese government because the South Vietnamese government did not do good work for the people (00:24:01:00)
  - After the Diem government collapsed, the following government was good in working with the United States, not in managing the country (00:24:26:00)
  - Nguyen figured it would take the communists two or three years to defeat the South; in actuality, it only took a year after the withdrawal of the Americans for the South Vietnamese government to fall (00:25:09:00)
  - The South Vietnamese government could not stop the communist advance partly because the United States cut off aid to the South Vietnamese government, meaning the South Vietnamese did not have enough ammunition or gasoline to continue fighting (00:25:32:00)
- At the end of April 1975, the communists came to Mokwo to seize the police headquarters and when they did so, the police officers did not fight them (00:26:35:00)
  - After they took everything from the police headquarters, including: weapons, ammunition, and money, the communists placed all the police officers in prisons, what they called “re-education camps” (00:27:11:00)

Re-education Camp (00:27:46:00)
- Nguyen was originally kept in one camp in [Veitang] and in 1976, the communists chose to move some of the men; Nguyen was not chosen but those who were ended up going to a camp in the North (00:27:46:00)
  - From Veitang, most of the prisoners moved to another camp in [Kin Nam], where Nguyen stayed until 1982 (00:28:12:00)
  - Nguyen originally went into one small camp while other prisoners built the main camp (00:28:54:00)
While at the camp, the prisoners had to attend discussions with the communist leaders of the camp, who took turns teaching (00:29:09:00)
- One day, the speaker said that their country was very rich in natural resources and that all they only had to dig into the ground to find metal sheets to put on their roofs (00:29:26:00)
- Another day, the speaker told of how a North Vietnamese pilot flew into a cloud, turned off his engine, and waited for an American plane; once he saw an American plane, the pilot turned on the engine and rushed out to attack the American (00:30:05:00)
- The communists also tried to say that the police officers and the government were the enemy of the people and in the classes, they explained their reasoning for the distinction (00:31:04:00)
- Apart from police officers, there were also prisoners from the South Vietnamese Army as well as common criminals; however, the groups were divided into teams: the political team and the criminal team (00:32:24:00)
- Neither team spent time with the other, which including having different rooms for different teams (00:32:57:00)

Nguyen married his wife in 1971 when he worked in Veitang and when he went into prisoner, his oldest son was two years old and his wife was pregnant with their second child (00:33:09:00)
- When he was in prisoner, Nguyen’s house was seized by the communists and his family was ordered to move out without any of their possessions (00:33:46:00)
- His wife eventually went to live with her mother in the city, who shared not only her home, but also her business with (00:34:08:00)
  - Every day, they purchased different products, including rice and meat, and transported to Saigon before returning with different products, such as pest control items and chemical fertilizer (00:34:22:00)
  - The two women had to keep their business deals secret because if the communists found out, they would confiscate all the products the women had purchased (00:34:55:00)
  - At the time, it was difficult to make enough money to survive (00:35:22:00)
- The officials in the area knew Nguyen had served with the former South Vietnamese government and his wife had a hard time with the communists, in particular, their neighbor (00:35:43:00)
  - When the communists came to his house in Veitang, they saw pictures of Nguyen’s father but not a picture of Ho Chi Minh; when they ordered her to take down the pictures of Nguyen’s father, she protested because of her pregnancy but the communists persisted (00:36:02:00)
    - They persisted because Nguyen had the label of being an enemy of the people (00:36:28:00)
- While in the camps, the communists wanted the prisoners to confess that what they had down before imprisonment was wrong (00:37:01:00)
  - One day, they wanted the prisoners to write out what they had done wrong in the past; Nguyen did write it out because what he had done was not as bad as some of the other things (00:37:22:00)
The communists said that if prisoners did not tell the “truth”, their time in the prison would be prolonged (00:38:35:00).

- The communists gave good speeches and on some occasions, Nguyen was moved by a speech; however, the more he lived with them, the more Nguyen realized that the communists deceived him (00:38:51:00).
  - At first, Nguyen and the other prisoners believed what the communists said, but over time, they began to see things differently; what the communists said was different from what they did (00:39:41:00).

- Nguyen did have some contact with his wife while he was in the camps; after about two years, Nguyen was able to contact his family and request supplies (00:40:07:00).
  - Nguyen’s wife would send him food but never rice because if she sent rice, that meant the government was not feeding the prisoners enough (00:40:32:00).
  - The prisoners had to labor every day and they only received one and a half bowls of rice at lunch and dinner with a little bit of meat, usually pork, or fish and vegetables (00:41:10:00).
    - When he first got to the camp, the piece of pork was the size of a finger, but over time, its size slowly decreased (00:41:38:00).
    - The quantity was so little that the men in the team agreed to collect all the meat for one day, usually six pieces for the seven men, and only one person received meat that day; the prisoner who received the team’s meat ration rotated between the men and on their days without meat, the men only ate rice (00:41:59:00).
    - However, because they received supplies from their families, the prisoners felt better (00:42:49:00).
  - The criminal prisoners never received supplies from their families, which meant most of them died because of hunger (00:43:06:00).
    - The political prisoners, like Nguyen, did share some of the supplies they received from their families with the criminal prisoners.

- When in the camp, the communists took anyone who had worked in a hospital and put them into a separate team to take care of the other prisoners (00:43:36:00).
  - The prisoners had to go around the country looking for “medicine” and if anyone got sick, then they went to this team; however, there was no medicine comparable to the medicine available in the United States (00:43:49:00).

- The political prisoners survived in large part due to the supplies they received from their families (00:44:35:00).

- When the prisoners were first arrived at the camp, the communists told the prisoners that in three months, they would be released; however, after the three months, nothing had happened, to which the communists said that after one year, the prisoners would be released (00:45:09:00).
  - The communists later increased the amount to three years and continued to lie to deceive the prisoners (00:45:31:00).

- One time while laboring, the prisoners were ordered to turn a twenty hectare forest into rice fields using tools and equipment made by other prisoners (00:46:01:00).
  - Once they had cut down a tree, the prisoners had to carry it on their shoulders back to the camp, about five kilometers away (00:46:22:00).
After the forest was cut down, the prisoners were ordered to dig up the roots of the trees, which they also had to take back to the camp to use as burning material for the prisoners (00:46:36:00).

When the forest was completely gone, the prisoners had to prepare the soil for the rice and the one machine in the camp that made the process faster kept breaking, so the men had to prepare the field by hand (00:47:04:00).

The labor force in the camp was too large, so some of the men went to other areas to work and earn money for the leaders of the camp (00:47:55:00).

- To get to the other jobs, the prisoners had to walk through areas loyal to the communists; when they asked for the water, the villagers told them to get it from the wells themselves (00:48:12:00).

- About two years later, when the villagers saw the prisoners in the distance, they left food and meat on the road as a gift; the people had realized that the communists were cruel (00:48:45:00).

The men labored and waited until their name was called in a meeting; they heard a little about U.S. government assistance but they could not do anything (00:50:18:00).

- The prisoners were released one right after another, not as one large group; every six months, someone else was released (00:50:51:00).

- Nguyen does not remember anything special happening when his name was called, only being happy to hear it called (00:51:26:00).

- Before he went into the camp, Nguyen had a golden ring that the communists took and when he asked for it back upon release, the communists said they could not find it (00:51:37:00).

- In his release papers, the communists had written that he was born in rural village but Nguyen knew that if he went back to the village, the communist control would be very strict; instead, Nguyen told his wife to bribe the communist officials to change the papers so he and his family could go into the city (00:52:20:00).

Release / Immigration to the United States (00:53:07:00)

- Upon his release, Nguyen lived with his wife and children in My Tho (00:53:07:00).

  - Whenever Nguyen’s wife visited him in the camp, she brought the children with her (00:53:24:00).

- During the first two years after his release, Nguyen was under police control; every month, he had to go to the police station where police officers marked his appearance in a booklet (00:53:40:00).

  - Nguyen was not allowed to travel outside the province and was expected to participate in various public affairs, such as cleaning up the streets or working at a collective farm, but with no pay (00:54:09:00).

  - Every day, Nguyen rode a bicycle six kilometers to work with his sister planting rice and if there were no jobs in the field, he worked with a friend repairing bicycles (00:54:45:00).

  - Nguyen worked in the public jobs every three months and each job lasted for about ten days (00:55:38:00).

    - In one public job, Nguyen worked at a collective farm for ten days; however, when he was supposed to go for the second section, he bribed the leader of the farm to not have to go (00:55:47:00).
- At the local level, the communists chose people from the area to be the officials; at the city level and higher, the official was from the North (00:56:37:00)
- According to Nguyen, the communists did nothing good for the people; the good things they did do were for communist party members and their families (00:57:27:00)
  - When building a bridge or repairing a road, the first thing the communists did was think about how much money they would receive (00:57:40:00)
  - Since the communists controlled the country, they practiced suppression of the people; the communists did not care about the people’s happiness or their lives (00:58:06:00)
- Nguyen made his way to the United States in 1992, meaning he spent ten years under the communist regime (00:58:40:00)
  - In 1988, Nguyen heard word about a departure program organized by the U.S. government and one of Nguyen’s friends gave an application to the U.S. embassy in Thailand, who helped raise the funds necessary to bribe the officials needed get the friend out of the country (00:59:04:00)
  - Nguyen originally could not afford to bribe the officials but in 1990, he borrowed enough money from a friend to get his application to go through, which took another two years to complete (00:59:38:00)
  - Paying officials is a custom in Vietnam; to get anything to go through, a person had to pay an official and if a person did not pay, then their paperwork would not go through (01:00:50:00)
    - The need to pay officials was not as serious under the former South Vietnamese government as it was under the communists because the South Vietnamese had the law; if a bad thing happened, then the law could detect it, whereas, under the communists, the law did not matter (01:01:21:00)
  - The different officials tried to protect one another (01:01:48:00)
  - At the time, Nguyen did not have to hide any of his activities because it had become normal for everyone (01:02:28:00)
- When they first prepared to leave, Nguyen and his family got on a plane for Thailand and from Thailand, they went to the United States, specifically, Michigan (01:03:01:00)
  - The family went to Michigan because in Vietnam, Nguyen had a friend who’s daughter lived in Grand Rapids and she sponsored the family to move to Michigan (01:03:26:00)
  - Nguyen and his family had some challenges when they first arrived in the United States but they were not too big because Nguyen knew how to speak English; moreover, Americans were always patient and willing to help the family (01:04:01:00)
  - Nguyen did manage to find a job, although at the time, there were not many jobs available; he found a job working in a school helping other Vietnamese (01:04:34:00)
  - After working in the schools, Nguyen did some manual labor; Nguyen’s wife also got a job after a year (01:05:26:00)
    - Nguyen and his family tried to lead honest lives because they were thankful to the U.S. government and the American people (01:05:57:00)
  - When the family first arrived in the United States, there was already a Vietnamese community in Grand Rapids, so they helped the family (01:06:22:00)
- Nguyen spent ten difficult years under the communists and those years made him want to leave the country; he and his family were poor and they did not have enough money to live their lives (01:07:04:00)
  - Nguyen’s children were not allowed to go to the university except for the agricultural college; the communists did not want them to leave the town so they could easily Nguyen (01:07:28:00)
  - On the other hand, in the United States, Nguyen’s children could go to any college they wanted to and the family had freedoms (01:08:12:00)
- Nguyen suggests that if anyone wants to visit a communist Asian country, be it China or Vietnam, then that person should not just stay in the city; they should go into the villages and the heartlands because then they can hear what the people have to say (01:09:18:00)