



Thao Cao  
Utah Vietnam War Stories/KUED

**Interviewer 1**

Okay, give us your full name.

**Thao Cao**

My name is Thao, and my last name Cao, and my middle name is Phu.

**Interviewer 1**

And when were you born?

**Interviewer 2**

Spell it, please.

**Interviewer 2**

Okay, spell that. Can you spell that for us?

**Thao Cao**

T-h-a-o, and my last name is Cao, C-a-o, and my middle name is P, yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

When were you born?

**Thao Cao**

I was born in May 7, 1950 in Saigon.

**Interviewer 1**

In Saigon?

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

What did your parents do? Tell us about your family.

**Thao Cao**

My family have a small business, like a barbershop, and then a furniture shop.

**Interviewer 1**

Tell us about your life and tell us what -- when you were born in 1950, tell us about Vietnam. Tell us about your family life. Tell us about Saigon. It was under French, the French were there in --

**Thao Cao**

When I was born Vietnam still in French and when I still have memory about, you know, President Diem. At the very first day he came in, and we had a war around the city. At that time I was so young, but I saw, you know, like the city weaken and surrounding with smoke around because they have war around with the French. I can remember that is for (inaudible @ 0:02:04), that's the name of this when President Diem tried to unite the country from 17 parallel to the south. Yes, he just came in and that is after the (Xinara @ 0:02:24) Treaty. And some of the -- a million people from the North rush to the South.

**Interviewer 1**

So they went to the South?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, at that time, about a million people in the North, yeah, they tried to escape the Communists and go to the South at that time. That's when I have a memory.

**Interviewer 1**

How big was your family, brothers, sisters?

**Thao Cao**

Oh, my family, about -- we have 12 siblings.

**Interviewer 1**

Were you religious? What religion --

**Thao Cao**

We're Buddhists, but even -- we don't have any looking about the religious, because I go to the school, for the Catholic school. You know, the brother we call frère in French, you know, at the (Jorn La Sand @ 0:03:37) school.

**Interviewer 1**

They're the priests, the friars?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, the priests, but we call them like a brother.

**Interviewer 1**

Brother?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

Are you the oldest son? Where are you in your family?

**Thao Cao**

I have one sister and I am the second in the family.

**Interviewer 1**

Were you a happy family?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, we have a happy family. My parents open -- as well they open a barbershop and we make it grow up and up, yeah. And under the Vietnamese Republic we do very good business. And people, you know, get -- you know, at that time, when -- we don't have any problem to do our business because the government helps us, that in peace.

**Interviewer 1**

So, it was fairly peaceful growing up when you did. But when did the fighting start getting serious, the war come back? Because you've got the French, they leave, and then when does the war really start for you?

**Thao Cao**

I don't know about the war until in 1968. The war, it happened, but it in newspaper or some in the news, mostly in newspaper, because at that time, you know, the television is real early. I think it was about '68 or '67 or something it starts to have TV in Vietnam. But before that we only have radio or newspaper and the war goes to us really by the newspaper, the radio, but not affect a lot into our life, because we live in the city, in capital.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you go to Catholic school. So in 1967, when you start getting aware of the war, you told me --

**Thao Cao**

No, we aware about the war, but -- we know we are in the war by reading in the newspaper, but not realize where the war really, because we never, you know, have anything with it until 1968.

**Interviewer 1**

And you're 18 years old then?

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

So, what happens to you? You end up at the naval academy. Tell us about how that all happened. You ended up in -- right? You were in a navy academy? Is that right?

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

Tell us how that happened, how you got there.

**Thao Cao**

Oh, we have to apply, make application and exam. And when we pass it and the limit for us is we have to graduate high school. You have some college. It's good to have some college. And we have to pass the exam for the naval and then pass the physical exam and then they will accept us and we become in naval academy.

**Interviewer 1**

Were all your friends, everyone -- were all the young men going to go into the military? Was everyone expected to go into the military, South Vietnamese?

**Thao Cao**

At that time, you know, if you have graduate in high school you can go to some of the academy to become officer and depend on your health and your knowledge. You can go to (inaudible @ 0:08:25) Academy for the military or you join to the political welfare academy, the naval academy or you can join to the air cadet, you know, if you graduate high school.

## Interviewer 1

Why did you want to go to the Navy?

### Thao Cao

I went to go to naval academy for my people, you know, after the war. Yeah, I believe that sometime we will end the war and I have a carrier -- you know, naval and can work in all the ships or somewhere else (inaudible @ 0:09:15).

## Interviewer 1

Somewhere in the ships or in something like that after the war?

### Thao Cao

Yes, I believe that, you know.

## Interviewer 1

So, tell us your story. Tell us about your family, your family and what happens from 1968 on. Tell us about that. Tell us your story.

### Thao Cao

You know, we in the city sometimes we know about the war, sometimes we have some rocket get into our city. But, you know, we know we are in the war, but not really taste it until 1968, yeah.

## Interviewer 1

What happens in 1968?

### Thao Cao

In the new year, 1968, when the Communists invade to all the cities in Vietnam. So this is the first time we saw them.

## Interviewer 1

This is the Tet offensive?

### Thao Cao

Yes.

## Interviewer 1

And so tell us about all this. Tell us how you saw -- because we need to see, you know, what you saw.

### Thao Cao

Oh, at first we saw some helicopter flyover the city and they shoot the rocket and then, you know, people run from this corner to the other corner and we heard a rumor about the Vietcong invade to the city and we don't know where, everywhere! We don't know, because this time we see the people run from this side to the other side and the other time they go from the other side to this side. So they go, you know, back and forth and we decide not to go anywhere because my house is big enough and strong enough to stay when -- because our siblings are so small. I have some siblings at that time about two, three, four or five years old. So my family decided not to go anywhere and stay in my home. And we go to, you know, in the terrace to look at the very first day when they came in and they tried to burn the (Tai @ 0:12:07), everything. They have meeting and they call our people, but not so many people involved. A lot of people they scare and they get inside the house and close all the doors.

## Interviewer 1

So how long did the (Tet @ 0:12:27) battle last?

### Thao Cao

It lasted about a couple of weeks and then, you know, they -- at first they have some of the Marines came too. Like they start on nine o'clock in the morning and they come in and they (shot @ 0:12:50) something and then after about 2 or 3 PM, they retreat somewhere, we don't know. And then at that time, at nighttime, we heard some people run on the street and we close all the doors and never want to see anything except we hear the step of them go on the street, back and forth. And after a couple of days, the ranger come and that time they fighting, for almost two days. No, they start on this morning and they go through that night and they push all the Vietcong out of the area in the other morning.

## Interviewer 1

So, the Vietcong, did they terrify you? Did they scare your -- what did you think of communism?

### Thao Cao

For us, we think we don't have experience about Communists. We're just taught that they are the enemy and they have different beliefs to us. But at first I think we are Vietnamese, we still want to make our country better and better, like the king. This king and all the kings is the same. They should go round the country and make the country will be better and picks and (inaudible @ 0:15:05), you know, of everything. And this the (inaudible @ 0:15:11) president, two presidents, Ho Chi Minh, they will make the country to be better or what. So we don't have any idea about Communists and freedom, what the difference between them, when I was young.

**Interviewer 1**

So, moving with your story, keep telling us. After Tet, when do you go into the naval academy? When do you go?

**Thao Cao**

In 1970.

**Interviewer 1**

Okay, so --

**Thao Cao**

The end of 1970.

**Interviewer 1**

All right, so tell us about how -- everything else that's happening around you. Take us year by year, if you would.

**Thao Cao**

You know, when I graduate from high school I still continue my education in the faculty of science in Saigon. And after, I try to get into the engineering school, but I failed. And then I decided to choose for me a career in the future. That's why had I choose naval, because if the war ends, I have my career as navigator and I can work on -- for any ship, you know, commercial ship or whatever. Yeah, that's why I choose naval academy to join.

**Interviewer 1**

So, at this time you believe the war would end in a good way?

**Thao Cao**

I don't know, but whatever, it will be end because we cannot have war all the time. And we believe in sometime it will be end. I don't know what the end will be, but if it ends by all two sides are too tired or whatever, they will stop like in Korea or whatever. We will stop and we will be rebuilding our country better and better. That's why I think that I will be joined to the navy. I have my career as navigator and when the war stops, I can have my country, you know, do whatever, as a navigator.

**Interviewer 1**

So, the war is changing as you get into the academy. Things are changing in Vietnam, are they not, as you're getting older here?

**Thao Cao**

I don't know what you mean, but when I join to the navy, you know, the war still worse and worse.

**Interviewer 1**

That's what I mean.

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm. At first I realize that the American retreat, you know, and will help us to fight the war. But I realize that one thing, Americans just help us to protect us, but don't help us to win the war. Because after 1974 the Chinese invade our Paracel Island. Some of the American come into our ship to look at the (DUB @ 0:19:14) sonar because we worry about the Chinese have submarine. So they're looking at the DUB sonar in our ship, but it only take out, we don't have sonar (dome @ 0:19:34). And they look at that and I showed I am -- I was a (inaudible @ 0:19:42) officer to looking for the hull of the ship and I show him where the sonar on the boat of the ship. Yeah, they're going to look at this. I think that they want to put the sonar to our ship, but they didn't until I left the ship.

**Interviewer 1**

So you graduate from the naval academy, did you have time to graduate?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, I graduate in 1973 after two years in academy.

**Interviewer 1**

Okay. And where are you assigned? What is your duty after you graduate?

**Thao Cao**

I was assigned in the (inaudible @ 0:20:31) in Vietnamese fleet, the (Turk @ 0:20:26) fleet is a patrol around the country, (inaudible @ 0:20:45) for patrolling in --

**Interviewer 1**

All right, where are you based? Where you stationed?

**Thao Cao**

In Saigon.

**Interviewer 1**

In Saigon.

**Thao Cao**

But we used go to the 17th parallel. You know, we have 17 and we have to have 10 miles away from 17th parallel.

We have allowed to go, you know, because 10 miles for DMZ. So we patrol to prevent for the intruder from the North.

**Interviewer 1**

Are you seeing combat? Are you encountering -- are you running into North Vietnamese in --

**Thao Cao**

Mostly we patrol and sometimes we have to (support @ 0:21:42) the firepower in some coastal area.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you're seeing combat?

**Thao Cao**

No, not seeing combat, but like we have some area in around near the coastal and have troops, enemy troops around and we get close to the shore and (support @ 0:22:15) fire power.

**Interviewer 1**

At this time do you have a wife or a girlfriend or anything?

**Thao Cao**

No.

**Interviewer 1**

So, tell us what happens, tell us how everything keeps going. Now we're to '74 and things are really getting worse. So tell us about it.

**Thao Cao**

In 1974 I realize that we have not so many ammunition. Before you can (support @ 0:22:52) about 100 rounds a night or something, a time, but later on we have limited to 50 rounds or 30 rounds only.

**Interviewer 1**

So your ammunition is being limited?

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

Because you can't get resupplied, correct?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, they told us to limit that. So we can before it we support the (inaudible @ 0:23:25) for the -- shoot to the enemy, we can shoot unlimited until they -- you know, for (inaudible @ 0:23:37). But later on we limit that to 30 rounds at a time or what.

**Interviewer 1**

Thirty rounds, yeah.

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

So, this as America is pulling out.

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

America is withdrawing at this time. Are you feeling frightened? Are you feeling -- with America leaving like this, are you feeling -- how are you feeling about all that?

**Thao Cao**

I am not feeling about, you know, whatever, because we believe our country and we believe our troops, yeah, because even in '72 -- they invade to us '68 or '72, you know, they invaded, but they failed. After a while, we won. And we already pushed them away. So I believe that we have strong enough and have a spirit, high spirit. When we in danger we can, you know, can survive.

**Interviewer 1**

So, 1975 is the year when the Communists takeover. Tell us about your story. Tell us what happens to you.

**Thao Cao**

In 1975 I have decided to go to political welfare school to learn about the political welfare in (Dak Lak @ 0:25:25) and --

**Interviewer 1**

You're still a naval officer?

## Thao Cao

Yes. And, you know, I was assigned to go to school to learn about political welfare in (Dak Lak @ 0:25:41). And then in the end of March we have the order to withdraw, you know, without see the enemy. I will withdraw without see any enemy around and the order to withdraw, you know, it is not consistent. At nine o'clock they call us to have meeting in the auditorium in the school and tell us have to be stay in (Dak Lak @ 0:26:25) to, again, the enemy, if it came in. We have to keep (Dak Lak @ 0:26:41).

## Interviewer 1

So you have to hold (Dak Lak @ 0:26:44) against the enemy?

## Thao Cao

Yes, at nine o'clock. And then about 11 o'clock they told us we cannot do stray out, we have to go in, back to the main school to make a fortress more solid, by --

## Interviewer 1

So, not spread out, go back and make a fortress in your school?

## Thao Cao

Yeah, in the main school.

## Interviewer 1

In the main school.

## Interviewer 2

Main school.

## Thao Cao

Yeah.

## Interviewer 1

Main school, okay.

## Thao Cao

And then, you know, when we go back to main school, we find out that they already gone from the evening, about 6:00 PM. They already go, you know, evacuate at 6 PM. So, we have to go back to go to (inaudible @ 0:27:44), yeah. We have the order, you know, not consistent. Sometimes they say have to keep it and then they give it up without telling us about withdraw or what.

## Interviewer 1

So everything is confused?

## Thao Cao

Yes, it's confused.

## Interviewer 1

And people are panicking at this point?

## Thao Cao

No, we not panic. We go back where they go, because we know, you know, some rumor or something. You know, we know about we have to withdraw, where we withdraw, when we withdraw to the south.

## Thao Cao

So, keep going. Tell us what happens.

## Interviewer 1

And then we were brought to (Fran Wrang @ 0:28:37) and then go to frontier. And we saw the many other troop withdraw with us and they came because the withdraw without any, you know, order. So they make a trial between -- you know, a lot of people, they have gun or whatever, we don't know, maybe, and they try to steal whatever for survive or for money, you know. Even in the troop they don't have the leader and they do whatever they can do, you know, on the --

## Interviewer 1

So, everything's falling apart.

## Thao Cao

Um-hmm.

## Interviewer 1

At this point. Are the civilians panicking too? Are they confused, the civilians?

## Thao Cao

The civilian and the troop, you know, the troop without leader, so I think that we cannot to condemn them about what wrong, what they do wrong, because they have to survive. And some people, they want to make a fortune from this either, because some people, they have -- collect everything they have, whatever, motorcycle, radio or

whatever. And maybe, you know, some people they don't have it, they can steal it, whatever they can -- that make in a group of people like you see at Katrina or something, when there are no government, no people leader and get the (picks @ 0:30:38) in order, they will make everything they can.

**Interviewer 1**

Yes. So keep going with your story.

**Thao Cao**

So, I withdraw like that and I saw some -- a lot of people die on the way because of some of the, you know, the city -- the (province @ 0:31:07), they don't want to that people come into their (province @ 0:31:12). So they have to protect and even we are the same side, but they shoot to us because where that people come into what city they will make that city to become, you know, very disturb everything, no peace at all.

**Interviewer 2**

Excuse me.

**Thao Cao**

You know when I --

**Interviewer 2**

What city are you talking about where they wouldn't let you in?

**Interviewer 1**

The location, yes.

**Thao Cao**

Yes, in the -- you know, from (Dak Lak @ 0:31:50) --

**Interviewer 1**

(Dak Lak @ 0:31:51).

**Thao Cao**

We go to Phanrang.

**Interviewer 2**

How do you spell that?

**Interviewer 1**

Phanrang.

**Thao Cao**

Phanrang, you know, P-h-a-n-r-a-n-g.

**Interviewer 2**

And then you went where? From there to where?

**Thao Cao**

To Phanthiet, P-h-a-n-t-h-i-e-t.

**Interviewer 2**

And then after that?

**Thao Cao**

And I go to Xamtan.

**Interviewer 2**

How do you spell that please?

**Thao Cao**

X-a-m-t-a-n.

**Interviewer 2**

Thanks.

**Interviewer 1**

Okay, so they're keeping people out because of they have to keep some -- you're seeing terrible things happen.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, they will make trouble when they come in, because, you know, they don't have -- when they run they don't have any -- you know, they need like food, like whatever for the basic need and they need it and they become a bandit or whatever.

**Interviewer 1**

So, there is no law. There is no --

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, there are no law and that people, you know, that group, our group, when they came in any city they will make that city become no peace at all. They have gun, they have all weapons, they can do whatever because they have

no leader.

**Interviewer 1**

So keep going with your story.

**Thao Cao**

And that's why no people and no government, you know, leader on the city want to accept them.

**Interviewer 2**

And were you a part of this group? Were you part of the same group?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, we pack up (inaudible @ 0:33:43), because when we withdraw from (Dak Lak @ 0:33:46) --

**Interviewer 2**

So, look at Jeff.

**Thao Cao**

So, when we withdraw from (Dak Lak @ 0:33:49) we -- you know, on that (route @ 0:33:52) we run and we heard that we have to run to the south. And when we go to any city, we go to frontier and this one become, you know, no peace at all. And then we run to (Xamtan @ 0:34:17), where, you know, they make a barrier to prevent us to come into the province.

**Interviewer 1**

So, what happens next?

**Thao Cao**

Then after that they ask about the (regime @ 0:34:35) 45 of the, you know, the division of 22nd, because that group have a whole group from (inaudible @ 0:34:52) that withdraw and they have (M113 @ 0:34:58).

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah? For sale? Carriers?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, ammo carrier, the whole, you know, regiment. So they asked them, they contact with them because they still have -- they communicate together. And that group, that regiment are ready to keep order and this time everybody on our group. So they let us get into the province without any weapon and where we can have the helicopter or the C-130 to bring us to (Long Bin @ 0:35:51) in (Binh Thuan @ 0:35:53) and where I go back to my naval headquarter in Saigon.

**Interviewer 1**

Are you worried about...

**Thao Cao**

My family is still in Saigon.

**Interviewer 1**

So you know...

**Thao Cao**

No, I am not worried about my family.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you're just worried about you at that point?

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm. At that point, only about me only.

**Interviewer 1**

So you get into (Long Binh @ 0:36:21) --

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

And you make it to naval headquarters?

**Thao Cao**

No, in (Long Binh @ 0:36:25) and there I go to Saigon and go to my navy headquarter to present at them because nobody knows, you know, about this. You have to go and tell them, you know, where you're at now. And at that time they can count how many you are.

**Interviewer 1**

Yes. So, your naval headquarters, describe what's going on there in Saigon. What's going on? Tell us what you see.

**Thao Cao**

In Saigon we heard about a lot of people running from Da Nang or whatever, now they go to for work, Iceland. And



because I am in the group to go to school and study, so they already separate me from my ship. I work on the ship, but when they send me to the school, political school, they already separate us, you know temporarily separate us. And now I stay -- I belong to naval headquarter. And I heard that they're going to send us to (inaudible @ 0:38:03) Island to looking for the people, you know, escaped from the south -- the middle of Vietnam, Da Nang, (Ninh Thuan @ 0:38:17) or whatever, they rush to Saigon, but by ship or whatever at that time.

**Interviewer 1**

So you're to go to this island --

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

And help people or --

**Thao Cao**

No, because they don't let the people go into the -- because they had lock up (chow @ 0:38:42) in this, so old people on the ship, they pick up from the shore up, you know, lost area. They brought us to (inaudible @ 0:38:59) Island, all the refugees.

**Interviewer 1**

Refugees?

**Thao Cao**

Yes. Because they need some people take care for these people, so they're going to send us to that island, but before that, you know, and it happened in the end of April.

**Interviewer 1**

So, what happens then?

**Thao Cao**

The 29 April, 1975, I heard, you know, some of my friends in the ship said to me that they're going to evacuate all the ship to (Con Son @ 0:39:46) Island, because they worry about the Communists come into the city, you know, because our base inside the city and have to go to the very narrow river. So if the Communists take some spot along the river, so our (plate @ 0:40:20) will be trapped into the (bay @ 0:40:22). That's why they have to evacuate. That's what I heard, ship evacuate from Saigon base to will be on (Con Son @ 0:40:35) Island for -- you know, we don't know about, you know, (river @ 0:40:42) now or what, but evacuate. At that time I heard in radio about American, you know, will take off and I saw the people run out to American Embassy or some spot in the city and pick up a (inaudible @ 0:41:09), you know, the (jets @ 0:41:11) then fly over the city and the helicopter went over the city to pick up the people.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you're watching the Americans withdraw from the embassy?

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

So, tell us more.

**Thao Cao**

But because I choose not to go, I will stay and, you know, my family with the sibling, you know, so small, we worry about when we run out of the country, you know, we have difficult -- very difficult. And I believe and my family believe if the war ends, whatever, we stay and we will -- you know, when the war ends, we don't kill each other, why we have to run out of the country, for what it for. You know, they are the (north @ 0:42:18) or whatever, the Communists, even the Communists, they are still the enemy.

**Interviewer 1**

So you believe when the war stops the killing will?

**Thao Cao**

That's what I believe.

**Interviewer 1**

Could you hear the battle in the city? Could you hear everything going on?

**Thao Cao**

No, not --

**Interviewer 1**

So, you were not -- yeah.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. And I stayed there in the morning and (noting @ 0:42:46), I heard some battle around the city. In my house I

can hear the fly up -- you know, the gun, because they still have some troops still fighting, fighting until, you know, I think until 12 or 2 PM. Even at around 10 PM they already have, you know, the order of surrender. You know, before the order of surrender, people running around and around, but after the order have on radio about surrender, I saw the street, you know, evacuating, not any people run around.

**Interviewer 1**

So, the streets are empty?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, empty. And then, you know, some of the gunfight, a little bit more than before. And then stop and until 2 or 3 PM I saw the North troop get into this -- you know, the street and go through it. And that night they have people looting some of the area. We stayed inside the house and close all the doors and waiting.

**Interviewer 1**

So, what happens?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, waiting for, you know, (inaudible @ 0:44:44) order, because people go to looting some of the -- around my area have some of the, you know, (start @ 0:44:58), of the enemy (start @ 0:45:00) or something and they go to looting everything.

**Interviewer 1**

So, the Communists come in, tell us what happens to you. Tell us what happens.

**Thao Cao**

Nothing. After a week they call us to go to register, you know, register in any police headquarter before and we have to go to register our unit or whatever.

**Interviewer 1**

You have to go register, yeah.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

So then what happens?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, we register and we think that they will treat us something like and then they (inaudible @ 0:46:00) almost, no, not (inaudible @ 0:46:06) and they call the ship officer, show them the rank, not the soldier, they call (back @ 0:45:16) the ship officer, go to have a class to know about the government or the regime for a week in any school around the city, for one week. And then they call, you know, that the way they trick -- they make a trick for us. They educate the ship officer for one week and then they call the ranks from general to major or something, you know, major to general to have one month of -- you know, bring enough food for one month.

**Interviewer 1**

So you're going somewhere to be re-educated, those officers?

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

Okay.

**Thao Cao**

But they told us about -- you know, the way they trick, at first they show us they only have one week for a ship officer to go to all the school around the city to learn about, you know, whatever, you know, like they make people know about the Communists, about the way the government will treat you or something. It's very peaceful.

**Interviewer 1**

That this is a trick you say?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. And then after that, they call the rank between the major to general and bring for one month food. And the people believe that, yeah, for the ship officer we have one week and maybe for the general we can go, you know, like the ship officer to learn about the government or something, about a month or something. And then after a week later on they call the rank from major to, you know --

**Interviewer 1**

Lower.

**Thao Cao**

Lower, to have one week or something and the people two weeks or something. And the people think that, yeah, we maybe go for that time.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you're prepared to go away for two weeks maybe?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, that's what we believe.

**Interviewer 1**

What happened?

**Thao Cao**

And then they -- after they collect us, every people, you know, have to go some time. You know, they let us for three days to come into some area in the city to register for go to education and bring for two weeks our food, money enough for two weeks.

**Interviewer 1**

So, what happens?

**Thao Cao**

And then after we came into that area, they bring us to some of the base, old base and let them inside the base surrounding by the North troop, you know.

**Interviewer 1**

The northern.

**Thao Cao**

The northern troop.

**Interviewer 1**

And what happened?

**Thao Cao**

And we have to write all the information about us, the family, the unit, a (ranger @ 0:50:11) or whatever, even our property, how many cars, how many bicycles, or how many motorcycles you have. It was so amazing why you need it and at that time, even -- you know, they say even the bicycle you have to tell us. And we don't know about why. A bicycle at that time, you know, a bicycle it's not property because the people in the South, they think that if they have property maybe the house or the car, but the motorcycle or the bicycle, it means nothing to us. But they ask us to register all the things we have, even the bicycle. You know, I thought when I have -- you know, some time they don't want to steal the bicycle either, because the people think about they have a motorbike or a car. But, you know, so for a week we have to write out everything, put dry on the paper to tell them what we have, what unit you are, what you work, in the government, in the army and what you did, you know, where you go, what you learn.

**Interviewer 1**

So, what happens?

**Thao Cao**

So --

**Interviewer 2**

We have to keep track of the time, because Thao needs to move along with the prisoner of war experience and then I'd like to ask him questions about his culture.

**Interviewer 1**

We can have him come back too, if we have to.

**Interviewer 2**

We could have you come back.

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah.

**Thao Cao**

Okay.

**Interviewer 1**

We may run out of time and we may have you come back to --

**Interviewer 2**

But I'd like to do Tony -- I'd like to interview Tony while he's here, so --

**Interviewer 1**

Okay, you tell -- how much longer do I have?

**Interviewer 2**

What time is it now?

**Interviewer 1**

So shall we go another 20 minutes with him?

**Interviewer 2**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

Okay. Alright, but I don't want you to hurry up. I don't want you to hurry the story, because we'll have you back, okay?

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

All right. So, you're registering everything.

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

Every belonging you have.

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

And you're in a -- so, what happens to you? What happens then?

**Thao Cao**

And at that time we realized that it's not two weeks as they said and we don't know how long it will be for us. And then they left us to learn three lessons about, you know, the government, our government and American, American, you know, invade the -- a century of the war or something. All the lesson, it mean that insult us and we have to learn it and we have to discuss about it and find out the reason to insult ourselves.

**Interviewer 2**

To insult yourselves?

**Thao Cao**

Yes. It means that they -- we have to talk about, you know, we have condemn the people -- treat the people or sometimes they say something not really, but -- and they look and we have to discuss that and have to talk the way they want.

**Interviewer 2**

So it's psychological.

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

So they're turning everything you did into a crime?

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

And everything America did into a crime?

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 2**

Can you have him say that?

**Interviewer 1**

Can you say that? Like can you say it that way to us, I'm not trying to put words in your mouth.

**Thao Cao**

Like they have three lessons. At first they say American is the police to the world and make a lot of -- make the war for every country or something like that.

**Interviewer 1**

So, they're making American evil?

**Thao Cao**

Yes. And you have to find a reason why, make it to be evil and you have to talk because they say -- and they stay beside you to listen to you and hear about, you know, what you discuss. And everybody, a group of people, about 10 or 20 people, even on that we have to talk and by turn and talk and talk and talk for a whole day. You cannot

stop and you have to find out the reason.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you have to confess? They make you confess to something?

**Thao Cao**

In their way. They lead you in the way you have to talk about you, wrong or whatever, in their way. And you have to talk and talk and talk a whole day, a whole week in the same topic.

**Interviewer 1**

What happens if you don't?

**Thao Cao**

They already -- you know, when they go to the class, people go to class and they talk and they lead to that way and you have to follow that way to discuss in that way. And you have to, you know, you have to go that way because if you believe it, you follow them, you have time to go back. They will, you know -- they told us if you study good, you make good, you will have freedom. They will give you freedom and people believe it and they have to talk in their way.

**Interviewer 1**

But what happened instead?

**Thao Cao**

And after that and they say, okay, now you have to realize your study by practical. You have to work and make everything, before you only go to kill people, to make a war or whatever. Now you have to make economic by -- you don't know how to farming or whatever. Now we teach you how to farming, how to do everything by hand, make economy by producing, to make a producing. Before you only using and you have a help of the American and you only use, you don't do anything. You don't do any production. Now we have to take you to learn how to make product.

**Interviewer 1**

Reeducate you.

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 2**

Production?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, to become a --

**Interviewer 2**

Physical labor.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

So what happens to you? Tell us what happens to you.

**Thao Cao**

And they every six months they will give us the new area, go to anywhere else, so, you know, like a separate go to -- like servicing the car, you know? So you have to train the whole time.

**Interviewer 2**

What were the things, the specific things you had to do?

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah, where they making you dig and farm?

**Interviewer 2**

Did you work on farms?

**Thao Cao**

Um-hmm.

**Interviewer 2**

So talk about -- in the labor camp and then if you wouldn't mind talking about how you escaped from some of these camps, but we don't need as much detail. If you could just talk about --

**Interviewer 1**

First of all, tell us what they made you do and then tell us how you start getting away from it.

**Thao Cao**

Some of us have to go to where, you know, we got around the base. They have some -- put some mines or

whatever.

**Interviewer 1**

Mines?

**Thao Cao**

Yes, so some of us have to go to pick up the mine, yeah, without anything, by your hand or whatever.

**Interviewer 1**

Digging them up?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, you have to dig them up or whatever or you have to throw it, until you hit the mine and you die, you're wound, it doesn't care. Just say you make it, now you have to -- you are a victim of what you did.

**Interviewer 1**

So it's your own fault they're saying?

**Thao Cao**

Yes. If you have, you know, Some mine blowing, blow up or whatever, some people die or what, they say, "Yeah, you make it and now you have it."

**Interviewer 1**

Did you see people die from the mines?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, because I -- you know, when you -- some mine put under the (row @ 1:00:24), you don't know where it is, so you have to dig it. But not all the troop know how to find out the mine. You know, you have to have -- even you know it, but you have to have trainer. And to digging the mine, you have to have a very good trainer to do it. But right now they look at us and say, "Your people put the mine there, now you have to dig it."

**Interviewer 1**

So how long did that last? How long were you doing the mines?

**Thao Cao**

Until they want to make the area become farmer.

**Interviewer 1**

Was it weeks, was it months?

**Thao Cao**

No, not a week or a month. They say now clear it, so you have to dig it and you have to blow it. If you drop the mine, you die. It's okay, because you make it.

**Interviewer 1**

So what happens to you next?

**Thao Cao**

Oh, I have many areas, they bring us to (Fuark @ 1:01:42) Island and then go back to (Long Gao @ 1:01:46) and then my last real go to (inaudible @ 1:01:53) deep into the jungle.

**Interviewer 1**

How long? How long has this gone on for? Are we talking a year? Are we talking -- how long have you been in this reeducation?

**Thao Cao**

I'd been in there until 1978, because I don't know when.

**Interviewer 1**

So how many years? Three years?

**Thao Cao**

Three years, almost 3 years.

**Interviewer 1**

How do you get out?

**Thao Cao**

I escape.

**Interviewer 2**

How?

**Thao Cao**

You know, when they put us into that area and by -- hungry, we have to go find out something to eat like a bamboo shoot or something. And when I wandering around, I saw the trail and I saw next to the trail they have some, you know, about 15 or 20 feet away from the trail, have some -- a hole they dig in and that, and I saw some leaves or

some... I have my people stay in there. And I looked at now the people who take care of us, only a few, they call up the teacher to looking for us. But the troops not go with us about one platoon or something, they only sleep at day. And I know, I believe in the nighttime they go to that hole to, you know, looking for someone escape. And that's why I heard some people tried to escape and after a week or something wandering around, they had took back and some people have killed or they put them into the (rao @ 1:04:18) and tie them in the way they -- you know, in a very hard way to (inaudible @ 1:04:32). But I want to try to escape. I want to try to go out.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you do this, you go to this hole?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

You go...

**Thao Cao**

I think if I try to sneak out by night or what, you know, I will be taken back again. So I tried to plan in the people, when I have time I plan in to the people who go to visit us or something and then at that time in Saturday I think, Saturday or Sunday in the weekend, I change my clothes and look like normal people.

**Interviewer 1**

So, you had kind of a prison uniform or you had some kind of uniform you had to wear?

**Thao Cao**

No, I change, you know --

**Interviewer 1**

You changed from what you are wearing?

**Thao Cao**

Clothes, yeah, because the people in there, they wear some worn clothes or something. I try to have my family give me some good clothes, clean, clean ones. And then I try to wear it and blend in the people, you know.

**Interviewer 1**

So tell us about that, getting out. Tell us about that day you actually left, you actually escaped.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, I plan it and try to take the bus, come out to that area and lucky for me when I go to the sentry where they put that and the people they -- the police, they focus on the people who bring the food or something to go from this area to the other area. Then, you know, they order and they say do you have something to carry with you, food or rice or whatever? I say no, I don't have anything. So they look around and then they let us go and I go out and then I tried to go to (Ninh Thuan @ 1:07:08) where I have a friend over there and try to escape by boat.

**Interviewer 1**

Did it work? Did you make it?

**Thao Cao**

No, my boat have a broken propeller and I have to go to -- you know, after 10 days around, I was a navigator, I know where to go. I tried to go into lane of the ship, you know merchant ship, go from Hong Kong to Singapore. And I stay on that lane for more than a week, but no ship stay and help us. They go back and forth and go through it. And then my propeller broken and we get into (Con Dau @ 1:08:03) Island in very south. And then where I have for about four years over there.

**Interviewer 2**

So, Thao, can you quickly... maybe five.

**Interviewer 1**

We're going to come -- we're going to have you back and we can go through these details again.

**Interviewer 2**

We'll go through the details of the other escapes, but in '85 you escaped by boat with a friend because you had navigational experience to escape. And you went to Saigon and then you were rescued by a ship and then you went to Singapore. Can you briefly go through that in '85? So, you were in prison camps for another -- how long?

**Thao Cao**

I think from April 1978 until September '92 -- or '82.

**Interviewer 1**

'82.

**Interviewer 2**

'82, to December 82. So can you say from 1978 to '82 I was in prison camps with -- to Jeff?

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah, we need you to say it that way to us, so that people hear you tell that. You're going to say what she --

**Interviewer 2**

Say how long you were in prison camps.

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah, just tell us, again, how long you were in prison camps.

**Thao Cao**

I was in the prison camp from April 1978 to September 1982 and I was released from there.

**Interviewer 2**

And you were -- in '85 you went on a boat with your friend, right?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 2**

And you ended up -- can you just explain that --

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 2**

You went on a boat and ended up in Singapore?

**Thao Cao**

I escaped in May 1985 from Saigon and we planned -- I planned to have my two other -- my sister go with me, but we failed. And then only, you know, me and my four brother can escape that night and have about 19 people on that boat. It should be about more than 50 people, but it failed and only about 19 people on that boat. And we go out from (inaudible @ 1:10:54) to -- and I try to go to the light of the merchant ship and after, you know, 70 hours -- 72 hours from the (inaudible @ 1:11:13), from Vietnam to there, I have a rescue by a tanker, a British tanker named (Evelina @ 1:11:26). And they rescued us and put us on the ship and sailing to Singapore, where I get into Singapore camp, refugee camp at Saturday night. And then in the morning, Sunday morning, they prepare all the paper for us, because they told that Monday American will come to interview us. And in the morning American come in and interview all of us and they interview me from 8 AM to 2 PM and then they left. The next day, Tuesday, and the people in the camp told me that officially you have American accept you.

**Interviewer 1**

How did you feel?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, I feel happy, very, very happy, because -- you know, when the time -- you know, the ship return to rescue us I know my time have turning. I already paid 10 years, all of my life I never forget my experience with the Communists. That enough.

**Interviewer 1**

Should we continue this?

**Interviewer 2**

How do you feel about -- overall about the war and about what you've learned since you come back to America as a refugee and about the war in the North and the South and the Americans and everybody playing a part in the war? Can you answer Jeff about --

**Interviewer 1**

Do you have something you can teach us from what happened to you?

**Thao Cao**

You know, right now I tell you about my experience, before I heard many stories the people from the North escape to the South and they told us and the government teach us many things, many story. But I didn't believe it. When I realize about the Communists, I think that they not tell us enough, you know, because the experience I have, more, more than what they told. When the people told you about the stories, you not believe it because it out of your mind, you don't believe anything because of what? Because you live in the lie, it not like that. And your mind never thinks about how it's worked like that and you heard that story you say, hey, you lie. But when you realize -- you know it, they not tell you enough, not enough. That piece very little of the experience they have, that what I know.

**Interviewer 1**

So it was -- they didn't --

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, because whatever they told you, if you don't have the experience to it, you don't believe it, because, you know, you're a lie, never think about. You know, like most of the people, you think about -- I make you an exam.



When they tried to evacuate all the orphans in Vietnam in April 1975, and one of the C-5 had blown up when they left the consulate air base with the many orphans and American die on that plane and --

**Interviewer 1**

A C-5 with orphans on it?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

A C-5 transport?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, they try to evacuate some of the orphans in 1975, April 1975, you know, go to United States for the foster, they have adopted by the Americans. And in the newspaper they say that the victory of one of their (agent, Kim Ku @ 1:17:26), you know, they put on the newspaper and they say that it is their victory and we don't know why. Why, you know, the orphan, when they are adopted by Americans, it is good for them. But how they say that they are victory because they make it like they help the people. We don't know why until, you know --

**Interviewer 1**

So they shot down this plane?

**Thao Cao**

No, that member of the (inaudible @ 1:18:10) in the South and she tried to visit, like visit the kid, and she carried, you know, a suitcase with the dynamite on it and then it blow up and blow the ramp. She tried to let it into the ramp by, you know, whatever, so it blow up the ramp and then that C-5 blows up and drop down.

**Interviewer 2**

So, all the orphans on the C-5 --

**Thao Cao**

When they take off.

**Interviewer 2**

Were killed?

**Interviewer 1**

I think they disabled the plane before.

**Interviewer 2**

Oh, disabled the plane.

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah, so it couldn't happen.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 2**

So, you're saying that's one of the stories of how you were deceived or lied -- how you --

**Interviewer 1**

Were lied to.

**Interviewer 2**

Weren't told how fierce --

**Thao Cao**

No, they write in the newspaper and they say that is their victory, because they already help the people, help the orphans and in my -- I look at this and I say, what? If, you know, the orphan goes to American, they have a very good life. Why they say they haven't? Because I'm not in their view until, you know, when I know about their view. In the South we don't have it, but in the North -- when the people who adopt -- when you are so poor, the family is so poor, they cannot afford to have their children, feed their children or what, they will give up their children to someone who can adopt them to get some money or some they need. And these kids will be a slave. They will work for this family who adopts them and very to do, you know, like a slave.

**Interviewer 1**

So, like a slave.

**Thao Cao**

And that's why the people in the North, in their mind, they think that American adopt them to work like a slave. The kid will be the slave. That's why they say they help the orphan. You know, you see in their side -- in their mind and in our mind have different, you know?

## **Interviewer 2**

Thao, I have one last question before we move on to Tony --

## **Interviewer 1**

And then we're going to have --

## **Interviewer 2**

We've interviewed almost 40 American Vietnam veterans and I don't know how to -- this was a complicated war and there's a lot of sadness and a lot of confusion in this war and they didn't really have the homecoming that they maybe deserved. And you know about that, with the protesters and such. I mean when they came back here things were not on their side either, so is there -- could you talk to -- look at Jeff and talk to Jeff, but maybe as though he's a -- he is a veteran, but could you maybe talk to these veterans and tell them how you feel about what they did?

## **Interviewer 1**

How do you feel about the American soldier, the American G.I. who fought in Vietnam?

## **Thao Cao**

You know, like I told you about, you know, in your mind and in our mind we have different thinking about. You know, the President (Diem @ 1:22:24), he know about outside. American troop, with your mind, you go to that country to help that country, again, to the Communists, like you did in World War II or in Korean War. You go to help, to protect it, not go to colony them. That is your mind. In our mind the important troop in our country like the French troop, it a colony. That's why the President (Diem @ 1:23:16) never want American troop get into our country. Because when Americans go to help us, they stay with us, he lose the right, he lose his principle because of the Communists. They told that, you know, the American go to be a colony and the troops will dominate us and make our country to be one of the colony, American colony.

## **Interviewer 2**

So, what did you believe when you were in the Navy and you saw the Americans actually going into villages and helping? I mean did you -- what was your feeling about the Americans when you were serving?

## **Interviewer 2**

Is it mixed? Do you have mixed feelings about Americans or -- yeah.

## **Thao Cao**

You know, Americans go to help us. I don't have any bad idea about American, about -- I don't, you know, have any other thing about Americans help us, because we have freedom, we have read the paper, we have order, documents, everything. We know about Americans involved in World War II or Korean War or whatever. They don't, like the French, colony us or something, but for the -- every people who know it. But most of the people in Vietnam, they don't have the time to read it. They don't have knowledge because half of the people uneducated, mostly are the country, countryside where the Communists come in and tell them what they want to tell. They talk with them and they scare them. You know, you believe and they scare them either. So, you know, most of people in Vietnam, they have a different think or different mind about American presence in Vietnam. And besides, the story of the newspaper, you know, the news, they have write the American people in American are different looking about the war.

## **Interviewer 1**

Different view?

## **Thao Cao**

Yeah, different view. And I don't know what the -- they make the American go to fight for freedom become you know, like do a colony, you know. That's why maybe that makes the American soldier when they came home they have no good reason to proud. But if you see, when you go to Kuwait, you help them, liberate them, you win the war, you proud. But when you go to Vietnam, you lost the war and in their mind Communists told you, you want to be -- make Vietnam to be a colony or something. So, you know, American soldier, when they return, failed the war, they -- that's why they depressed. But if you won and you have the right reason, you be proud for that, never depressed.

## **Interviewer 2**

So, the question is -- the big question seems to be what is the right reason?

## **Interviewer 1**

Your view of war, is there a right reason to go to war? Is there -- is it times -- is it necessary?

## **Thao Cao**

You know, right now --

## **Interviewer 2**

Let's talk about Vietnam.

## **Interviewer 1**

It would be about Vietnam.

## **Interviewer 2**

Specifically Vietnam and then we need to move on right after that.

## **Interviewer 1**

Yeah, so in Vietnam, so yeah, yeah, as she said.

## **Thao Cao**

You know, right now if Vietnam -- American go and help Vietnam, they have -- will have a different look, because they already experienced about the Communists, they know it. And maybe, you know, they have a different look with American. They happy to have American present in Vietnam. They will, I hope, I think.

## **Interviewer 1**

Okay, we're going to have --

## **Interviewer 2**

All right, thank you, yeah, we've got --

## **Interviewer 1**

We're going to have you back.

## PART 2

## **Interviewer 1**

I want to pick up to where you were sent away. Vietnam falls, 1975. You're made to reeducation camp. You're pulling out mines with your bare hands. People are dying. Tell us more about those times before and why you had to escape -- all the things that have happened. Tell us what it was really like.

## **Thao Cao**

You know, I think I don't do anything wrong. I lived in the South under the government, and I liked the way we lived. So when they say we have to go to the fort to, you know, keep whatever we have now by going to the fort, to again to any other fort, you know, to again to us. At first, we think that it is civil war. But when we know it's not a civil war because the North under the influence of the Communists, they want to dominate a whole war. They want to -- all the war will become to Communism. And they do whatever, like right now the Muslim, you know. I don't know. It doesn't mean the whole Muslim, but some of the Muslim terrorists, they want to be, you know, the war with Muslim the same way as the Communists want the war with Communism.

## **Interviewer 1**

So they put you in a camp after Vietnam falls, the Communists in 1975. You were telling me that they said, "You have to dig up mines." Tell us about how long you were in that camp.

## **Interviewer 2**

And what you did and how you lived and slept and what you ate. And what was it like being in that camp?

## **Thao Cao**

Oh, the life in the camp?

## **Interviewer 2**

And look at Jeff. Life in the camp. And so you need to answer him as though he asked the question.

## **Interviewer 1**

Yes. Tell us about life in the camp and what was horrible about it.

## **Thao Cao**

In June 1975, the newspaper tell us have to go to have a reeducation camp, you know, to learning about the way of the new government. And the first day we left, the (sub @0:03:37) officers have seven days. And after seven days, in some of the school around the city, they give them some certificate, and then they go home. The next week, they tell all the people who had ranked from general to major, go to take about one month, you know, financial enough for one month food. And the generals to the majors go to, you know, some other spot in the city. And they think that the generals will have a one month study. And the week later, they call everybody from majors to captains in the Army could go to two weeks financial or whatever, you know, food for two weeks. And then for us, the last ones, they say carry about one week food or financial enough for one week. Everybody think about, you know, yeah, the (sub @0:05:22) officers, one week. The generals have one month. And the majors to the captains have about two weeks. And we have one week. And maybe after that, we will have a certificate and return to the normal life and work like they already did with the (sub @0:05:50) officers.

But when they already took us into some of the -- around the country where the old camps are, old army station, and put us into there. And they don't say anything about that. And one week, two weeks, one month, and we don't know what happened to us. And at least we know it's not one month or two months. Then after, I think, about one month or three months, they let us to study (inaudible @0:06:52) lesson. The first lesson was talking about, you know, American and American new colony and the police (after @0:07:07) war. The second lesson is talking about the Republic Vietnam government. And the third lesson talking about Republic Vietnam Army. Everything in order to

make into our, you know, mistake or condemn us to again to Vietnamese in order to (ensure @0:07:46). And everybody have to go and talk and try to find a reason for fail (unintelligible @0:08:01).

They say, "The more you talking about you, the better for you to become a good citizen, and you have chance to go home." That's why, you know, we have to talk, we have to try to find reason to insult us. And after a month to learn everything, and they talked with us, now you already study it. Now you have to do whatever you were already taught. It mean that you have to learn how to labor. Before you only consume; you not do any production. Now you have to do production. The way they tell us to do production by you have to cultivate and, you know, in – like a (base @0:09:25). They put a stone, everything in it. Now we have to pick it up to make it to become a soil can be growing something.

**Interviewer 1**

So this is becoming very, very difficult (glitch in recording @0:09:51) pick up mines?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. We have to clear the mine all around the base. Before the people put that mine on to protect the base. Now we have to go and try to clear it up and to make it become the good soil to can be, you know, grow something: vegetable or whatever they want. So, you know, we are not trained to do so, but they say, "Your people put it on. Now you have to take it off." And a lot of people have die or (wound @0:10:47) from the mine.

**Interviewer 1**

Because you had no equipment?

**Thao Cao**

No, no equipment, except they give us some tool. We have to make it by ourselves.

**Interviewer 1**

So how long were you in the camp, this reeducation camp?

**Thao Cao**

They change almost every six months. They switch us, you know, and swap us around and around and move from this place to the other place. And like me, in December '75 or January '76, we have transport to (inaudible @0:11:47) Island. And I live there about six months, and then they transfer us to Lang Gao in Lang Son. And after all the six months more, they moved us to Phu Lang.

**Interviewer 1**

So that's a year there, a year and a half.

**Thao Cao**

Mm-hmm. Yeah, and I stay in Phu Lang until January 1978. And I escaped from there.

**Interviewer 1**

What would have happened to you if you hadn't escaped? Were you all dying?

**Thao Cao**

If I fail – you know, some people try to escape and fail, they will catch back. And some, they will try – they kill them right away. Or they take back them, but they put them under the hole under the soil and tie them in a very hard way.

**Interviewer 1**

Did you escape alone, or did you have friends?

**Thao Cao**

You know, after I figure out that, if we try to escape at night or through the trail because every night they already put some guards around the trail to check it, and some of the high tree in the (route @0:14:01) to look at the people traveling at night. And they will catch up if they see anything, you know, any group of people or any people. If not, then go through it. So every people try to escape, they have a few lucky to go through it. And I think that, if we can plan in with the people who come to visit us, if the family come to visit us, we can get out of there if we're lucky. And we have more chance than we try to escape at night. That's the way I escaped.

**Interviewer 1**

So did you go alone? Or you had some friends with you?

**Thao Cao**

No.

**Interviewer 1**

You were alone when you escaped?

**Thao Cao**

I am alone because I don't want to – you know, if my friend who tried to escape with me, he act, you know, something strange, when they see – you know, the people who guard us or whatever – they act something strangely, and then they will (inaudible @0:15:52) up, and we will fail. So I don't want to have a fail like that. That's why I decide, if I fail, it's my mistake, (inaudible @0:16:09) mistake.

**Interviewer 1**

So tell us about your (inaudible @0:16:15) so long ago. Tell us the journey.

**Thao Cao**

My sister come in to visit me, and she told me about my friend, who already released from the camp. And when we was in the camp, we have plan because he told us his family have a boat in Nha Trang. And I am in the Navy and a navigator, and he wanted me to join him to navigate escape with his family. And my sister come in and tell me the news that he already get out of the camp, and he already tried to escape. And he have boat, and he wait for me to return. If I come in, I get out there on (this time @0:17:38), we will try to get out by boat. But if I am late, he may go by himself or with others.

**Interviewer 1**

So you're going to go by boat. You're going to meet this one guy.

**Thao Cao**

Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

Is it a small boat? How big is the boat?

**Thao Cao**

It's like a, you know, other people, we have the boats for those fishing boats.

**Interviewer 1**

So will there be other people onboard?

**Thao Cao**

Mm-hmm. And then I try to escape from my camp to go to – to travel like that. You know, I don't want to miss that chance. So that's why the reason for me to try to escape.

**Interviewer 1**

So tell me about escaping. Did it work that time? Did you make it out that time?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. I make that out that time because I am lucky to get up above who were lay on (this @0:18:48). And I plan in and get out. And when I get into the suburb of Saigon City, where my parents live, I send a message to my parents. And they know that, and they support me, you know, everything. And I went to Nha Trang and stayed in Nha Trang to wait for the trip.

**Interviewer 1**

Tell us about when you did escape, how that worked. And what happened to your sister? Did she get out of jail?

**Thao Cao**

No. She was in the jail for three years. And I try to get an order, a contact, and try to form an order, you know, because at that time a lot of people want to get out the country. And they try to make a contact with all the people who know how navigate the boat. And I am the one they want to looking for. That's why I miss this one, I have another one.

**Interviewer 1**

So you were valuable.

**Thao Cao**

Yep, at that time.

**Interviewer 1**

You had knowledge.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah.

**Interviewer 1**

So when did you escape – when you finally did escape? Tell us about that, how that happened.

**Thao Cao**

In April 1978, I have a plan to go. And that time I went from Nha Trang. And we planned to get out to the route of the merchant ships from Hong Kong to Singapore. And from this I planned to go to Natuna Island off Indonesia on the way and hope that, if we get into Natuna Island, we can have a refugee camp over there to (get us @0:21:28). And I planned everything. And even I know about, you know, the (inaudible @0:21:40) material. And I tell them have to buy one other propeller for just in case it broken. And I say, without it, I don't want to try. And the one who make that trip, he asked the boat owner how much it is. And he said it is about 500 (inaudible @0:22:36) at that time.

It about – I don't know about how many (inaudible @0:22:44) for, you know. And they give money to that guy right away. And then we travel for – at first, the people, when I try to get the (inaudible @0:23:01) way to that route, you

know, merchant route, it mean that I go almost along to the coastal. The people – the fishermen, they jump on with us. They again to me, they say, "I want to get back to the shore." I say, "This way is the short way route to see the merchant ships." Because at that time, the people try to escape, and they heard in somebody, you know, already get out say about, when you get into contact with merchant ship, and they will rescue you. And --

**Interviewer 1**

I'm sorry. How many people on your boat?

**Thao Cao**

That time about 50 people on the boat. About 30 – no, about 45 – I don't know, about 15 meter – 15 meter, about 45 feet or something.

**Interviewer 1**

Yes. So you're packed into this boat.

**Thao Cao**

Yes, about 50 people.

**Interviewer 1**

And you're going to try and find a merchant ship that can pick you up in the shipping lanes.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. And I told them, "How long you can get into that merchant ship?" They say two days. And I say, "With my way, I will get it tonight or tomorrow."

**Interviewer 1**

So what happened?

**Thao Cao**

Because I want to convince them to go my way – because if go with their way, I am not truly believe that the merchant ships will pick up us, and I already have enough fuel to go to Natuna Island. It's my goal. And if I go by their way, I waste a lot of time and a lot of fuel. So I have to convince them to go my way and that it have more chance to go to Natuna Island if the merchant ships not pick up us. And then I have to convince them. I say, "If tonight or tomorrow you don't see any merchant ships, you can throw me to the sea. I guarantee with you about that." And then, you know, we travel by that way. And about 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. in this morning, we already see the line of the merchant ships go back and forth.

**Interviewer 1**

You saw them.

**Thao Cao**

Mm-hmm. And in the morning, we try to go and go through that way. And we see many, many ships go pass by. But no one stopped to pick up us because I know about the Navy tactical to intercept with (inaudible @0:27:04). So with only the compass, I look at the angle. And with my bearing and them, I know I can cross their way, or I could not cross their way. Only with my compass, I look at the bearing, and I know how I can cross their way.

**Interviewer 1**

So what happened?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, I crossed their way. But, you know, nobody stopped to rescue us. Even the people yell or everything, and we have some kids, you know. And we try, but nothing stopped.

**Interviewer 1**

So what happened?

**Thao Cao**

And we had my plan. I traveling along that way until, you know – you know, I try to estimate my speed, and then I do a calculation. And after three days travel, I stopped by to try to measure the deep by use a rock and the (wire @0:28:40) to go to see how deep it is and go and check it on about two, three times. And I know where I am, yeah, estimate where I am. And I try to go direct to the south to Natuna Island because I know that the – you know, we – at that over there in the deep about 20 to 25 fathoms. And I turned away, and I left the merchant ship route to go to Natuna Island. And I told with them, you know, maybe that time when I changed it around 2:00 p.m. – no, about 12:00 p.m. And then I change it, and I told that maybe 8:00 a.m. tomorrow we will see the Natuna Island on the horizontal if I do right calculation.

**Interviewer 1**

Were you correct?

**Thao Cao**

But, you know, when I traveled two more hours, at 2:00 p.m. that day, the propeller (rock @0:30:18) is broken.

**Interviewer 1**

So what do you do?

**Thao Cao**

And then I asked the owner where the spare propeller was. And he said, "No. I don't have it." The reason: he scared about bringing his family with him. So he left that morning to his wife to stay home.

**Interviewer 1**

So you're stuck. You have no propeller.

**Thao Cao**

Yes.

**Interviewer 1**

So that settles the question. But what happens to you?

**Interviewer 2**

Can I interrupt for a second? Con Son Island is – this was not your first escape. This was not the final escape' til you were free. Is that right?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. That is my first escape.

**Interviewer 2**

Okay. So we have two more escapes and not a lot of time.

**Interviewer 1**

Okay. Shall we get to the --

**Thao Cao**

No. First escape with my family, it failed, and my sister locked into jail. And I try attempt to another one, and this second one, it failed, and I locked into Con Son Island.

**Interviewer 2**

And you did reeducation camp in Con Son Island, you told me.

**Thao Cao**

No. I stay in Con Son Island for four and half years.

**Interviewer 2**

Oh, that's right. Tell us, what did you do there for four and half years?

**Thao Cao**

Half year I was in --

**Interviewer 2**

Or can you tell us briefly what you did because we need to ask you more questions.

**Interviewer 1**

We want to get to your final escape, too.

**Thao Cao**

Half year, they put me in the cell in solitude, you know, only me in the cell for a half year.

**Interviewer 1**

Solitary confinement.

**Thao Cao**

Mm-hmm, solitary confinement for a half year. And then they let us go to do labor by pick up the sand or the stones to view the road and do whatever they want around (inaudible @0:32:59) some food or fruits or some vegetables. And then they asked me, "Do you know how to fix the typewriter?" And I say, "I can do it because I have a mechanic mind." So I can figure out how to fix. For these years, you know, they have a American typewriter like a Remington or something. And because this is in the island with the salt air, they make it rust because a long time they're not using it, and it's rusty.

**Interviewer 1**

So you fix it?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. I fix it. I take it piece by piece. It's a thousand pieces, you know? I take it off, clean it and put it together.

**Interviewer 1**

So you're there for four and half years.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah and do everything.

**Interviewer 1**

So how do you escape? What happens to you at the end of the four and half years?

**Thao Cao**

No. After four and half years, they release me.

**Interviewer 1**

They release you.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, in September 1982.

**Interviewer 1**

And what happened then?

**Thao Cao**

And then I go home.

**Interviewer 1**

To Vietnam?

**Thao Cao**

To Saigon City.

**Interviewer 1**

Saigon City. Okay. So you're there for how long?

**Thao Cao**

I try to contact to someone want to escape again and again. And I did maybe another three times. Another three times, but one time we only get into the boat in (Vinh Chau @0:35:21), and they wandering around, but we don't have enough food. We have only a mile up (inaudible @0:35:36). And after checking everything, I told with the people who (inaudible @0:35:48) in this boat, I say, "You know, you get out of this one with 50% because you maybe catch up the coastal. You have 50% to victory, to get you won the game. You only have 50% to won the game."

**Interviewer 1**

So a 50% chance to make it.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, 50% chance. And when you get out to the ocean, you don't have any instruments I can navigate. So you get only 10% to win the – to get the chance, to get to --

**Interviewer 1**

And then there are pirates.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. I know, if we go from Saigon, we go out to merchant ships, not in the Thailand area, we never get the pirates because the Thailand pirates only on the Thailand Gulf.

**Interviewer 1**

Got it. So you're going to make sure that doesn't happen.

**Thao Cao**

But we go out to the east to the merchant line. So in this area, it has less chance to see the pirates.

**Interviewer 1**

Got it.

**Interviewer 2**

So you're let out of, after four and a half years, of Con Son Island. And then you helped another family to escape? Is that how you got back into the sea?

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. I am a navigator.

**Interviewer 2**

Okay. So we have to be brief. So we have to keep going here.

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah, yeah. So tell us how you finally made it out. Tell us about that escape, the final one.

**Thao Cao**

The final one I escaped from Saigon City. I planned to have my other two sisters, but they will be kept me on a small village around the coastal because when I take the boat from Saigon City, go out through it, I go with my brother. I went with my brother at that time with the group of the people over there. And we looked like the fishermen go to sell the fish in the fish market in Saigon City. And now we go back to the coastal, where they do



fishing.

**Interviewer 1**

So you're disguised as fishermen.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. I do like a fisherman.

**Interviewer 1**

And you go to the coastal city.

**Thao Cao**

Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer 1**

Is there a boat there?

**Thao Cao**

No. I ride a boat from the fish market in Saigon City.

**Interviewer 1**

From the fish market, okay, to the coast.

**Thao Cao**

To the coast with my brother.

**Interviewer 1**

With your brother.

**Thao Cao**

And when in that area, I will catch other small one with my sister, and the other people in this area and (catch @0:39:46) up to our boat, and we will row out to the sea. That's our plan.

**Interviewer 1**

So what happened?

**Thao Cao**

But in this afternoon – no. That night I go from fish market in Saigon City. And at the afternoon I will be there on the point where we can go and have people can get into the boat by a very small boat from the shore, come out to get us together. But at that afternoon, somebody run out from that shore and say everybody already catch by police already. So the fisherman owner of that boat, he worry about, and he want to go back. And I try to convince him, "Now, if you go back, 100% you will be catch by police, and they will put you into jail. Now you try to get out, escape, you have another 50% chance to win the freedom as we planned." And then, after an hour, I try to tell with him everything, and he agree to get out. And that night, I try to get out through the shore, and we try to run out about to the route up the merchant ships again. And after about 32 hours, I mean that one night, one day and the other night, yeah, and then in the next afternoon, we already get into that route, and we go back. In the morning, we already see the sea, and once again I try to catch up the line. And about three ships already pass by. And I heard about some of the people, they want to go contact with the ship, and they got the ship from the company's country, and they get them back to Vietnam again. And that's why I say, if any ship, you have red, you know, the, the, the smoke, you know --

**Interviewer 1**

Yes, the red star.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah, red or black or something, you know, have to be very careful to look at this. If it be Communist, run away.

**Interviewer 1**

So what happened?

**Thao Cao**

And then I tried to ask for rescue. Three or four ships pass by. And then last time I see that ship, we go to very close and we wave them to rescue, but they pass by. And I see another ship come by, and I try to go to get that other ship, but the people on the boat told me that, "Hold, hold. They return. They return." So I saw that ship return to us.

**Interviewer 1**

It turned around.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. They turned around to us, and then I run to them. And then they stop by, and they ask, "Somebody can speak English?" and I volunteered to get in there. So they asked me to go to see the captain of the ship. And the captain, he told me that, "I will give you whatever you want: food, fuel, everything." And he showed me where I am. "Yeah, I know," I say. "I look at this, and I know where. I already estimate, you know, almost very accurate." And he

told me that, "I give you what you want, what you need." I say, "Look at my boat. It is for the river boat, not for the sea." And I lie with him that night, already travel a week, even we only have about two days, more than two days. But I should lie with him because I don't want he give me everything, and I travel that way again. That's my lucky. I don't want to give up my lucky. I have to stick with him.

**Interviewer 1**

So did he take you aboard?

**Thao Cao**

And he have to (inaudible @0:46:10) a British tank.

**Interviewer 1**

British tanker.

**Thao Cao**

Yes. And he say, "Okay. I have to talk with the British government." And after an hour he say, "Okay. We take you, but you have to sink the boat." I say, "Of course." And I return to the boat, and I say, "Everybody, we have chance. But let the kids and the women go first. And I am the last one who will leave the boat. But where the hold, we can open it for the boat can sink it." And they show me. And I am with one sailor on that tank, stay and open everything out, and I get out the boat. And after two days leave that ship, we get into Singapore.

**Interviewer 2**

Is that where you meet with the Americans?

**Thao Cao**

When I got in Singapore that Saturday morning about 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, I talk with the Singapore Police, and they have to do a report, and they put I have some weapon. I say, "What weapon?" They say, "Kife." I say, "It's not a weapon. It's a utensil because the fishermen use it to do the fish or cooking, and you cannot put it as a weapon. You have to correct it, utensil. If you don't correct it, I don't want to sign it." Because I don't know what happen. But we don't have any weapon with us. And I don't want to stick with the weapon on that boat. So I say, "It is utensil."

**Interviewer 1**

So when do we finally meet up with coming to Utah and what you think and why you're here and what you like?

**Thao Cao**

I live in Monterey Park and study electronics. But when I could got a job over there. And my other sister in San Jose, California, lied to me and say, "If you want to be a gardener or take care of our garden, go with us and we have job, like a gardener."

**Interviewer 1**

Gardener, yeah.

**Thao Cao**

Yes. And I fly to San Jose and work as gardener for a couple of months. And when I have one year in California as resident, I go to college and study in college while I'm working as a gardener and study in college for two years from '87 to '89 and transfer to San Jose State University. And when I transferred to San Jose State University, I got a job in IBM as operator. And then I work as operator and stop studying until '89. And I asked the company to return to study in mechanical because it relate to the job I'm working now. I work as a (inaudible @0:51:19) in IBM company to take care of other machines. And then I asked them to return to study in mechanical engineer. I study while I'm working, and they give me very flexible hours. It mean that, if I get the class in morning, they give me work in the evening. And if I get a class in the evening, they will give me work in the morning. And then 19 –

**Interviewer 1**

Yeah. I'm sorry. I was asking you how you got to Utah.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. 1999, IBM lie off. I was in the lie off.

**Interviewer 1**

Lay-offs, yeah.

**Thao Cao**

Yeah. And then I work as a contractor in a engineering company in Berkeley. And I have to drive 60 miles from my home to Berkeley to work. And it is very dense traffic. I have to wake up early in the morning and return late in the evening to, you know --

**Interviewer 1**

So how did you get to Utah?

**Interviewer 2**

Yes. We've got to – and then you come here.

## **Thao Cao**

That's why I decided to go to Utah because she doesn't want me to drive so far and so long. And year 2000, I go to Utah. I went to Utah.

### **Interviewer 1**

I've got a big question.

### **Interviewer 2**

Okay, big question, but wrap it up.

### **Interviewer 1**

Tell me what you think about America, being an American. Tell me about it. You said your life changed.

## **Thao Cao**

Yeah. I still have my memory to Vietnam, my life in Vietnam. I love Vietnam, but I can't live with the government always hanging, you know, because I released – it is the temporary release. So I worry about I return to reeducation camp again. And even now, sometimes at night, I dream about I return to that camp, so it make me worry.

### **Interviewer 1**

But to be an American, to you, what does it mean for you to be an American now?

## **Thao Cao**

I'm proud to be American because in America, in the United States, I have real freedom. I can work like everybody, and I know we have a chance. If we work hard, we will have good living. And I build my life in America in that way, working hard. And my kids have very good education. And I think that my next generation will be better than my generation. And my kids will have a good education, and they will find the good future in America.

### **Interviewer 2**

That's good. I think we got it. That was good.