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Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Tran Thanh Chieu
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
August 18, 1999
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Tran Thanh Chieu on August 18, 1999 at 8:45 a.m. at Texas Tech University. Mr. Chieu would
3 you please tell us your name, date of birth, where you were born, and a brief description of
4 growing up in Vietnam.

5 Tran Thanh Chieu: My name is Tran Thanh Chieu. I was born on April 24, 1927 in Tam
6 Ky¹, a city south of Da Nang, about 64 kilometers south of Da Nang. My parents. . . , I am the
7 oldest² boy in a family of thirteen (13) people, of thirteen. My parents were Confucian, not
8 Buddhists, and were revolutionary, anti-French. My grandfather was a member of Can Uon(?) in
9 1885 against the French. And my father was a member of the Phan Boi Chau and the Cung Day
10 (?) party against the French and he participated in many movements in Quang Nam at the time
11 from 1905 to 1916. At this time we were Confucian, we were not Catholic, be for me when I
12 was ten years old my father sent me to a Catholic school and I became Christian. But after that
13 in 1940, all my family, my father, my brothers, we were all converted to Christianity. My
14 father, in 1933, he knew the communists very well. He did not like communism, he did not like
15 the ideology of communism. And he was a member of the Ngo Dinh Hoi and Ngo Dinh Diem
16 political organization because Ngo Dinh Hoi, at this time, the brother of Ngo Dinh Diem, he was
17 province chief (Vietnamese name) of my province. And my brother too was a member of the
18 Ngo Dinh Hoi and Ngo Dinh Diem political organization. By this way we are, my family and I

¹ Tam Ky is a coastal city located between Da Nang and Quang Ngai, just north of Chu Lai.

² Chieu meant to say that he is the youngest son in his family.

1 we were familiar with Ngo Dinh Hoi and Ngo Dinh Diem when I was a child. And I remember,
2 when I was a child, in my home, my father met many people, like his friends, and they talked
3 about politics, and I have some idea about that. I was very interested in politics. And I was very
4 interested about the French and about the political stories but I did not understand very well. But
5 in school I was very interested in history. I read very much. And I began to understand what
6 was the French, the history of my country, and stuff like that. And when I became maybe
7 fourteen, fifteen, I became a little politician. But we do not like communism. Then in 1945 the
8 Viet Minh, were communists, I do not know very well that they are communists, but the Viet
9 Minh do not like my father and my brother. Because my brother was a member of Ngo Dinh Hoi
10 and Ngo Dinh Diem and he was executed. He was shot, maybe assassinated. This was during
11 the August revolution in 1945. At the same time with Ngo Dinh Hoi and Ngo Dinh Diem. From
12 this date, I became truly very anticommunist. I hated the Viet Minh and the communists and my
13 father said Ho Chi Minh was not a good leader. Ho Chi Minh, he lead the country to a
14 catastrophe. This was the beginning of my childhood up to 1945.

15 SM: What did your family think of the Japanese occupation during WWII and was there
16 maybe temporary support for the Viet Minh since they were so staunchly anti-Japanese?

17 TTC: My family? Yes. Good Question. My family is revolutionary, patriot. The
18 Japanese, for us, was a good lesson for restoration, for modernization. My father, my brother
19 and I were very interested about the Meiji era, the modernization of Japan. And we like to do the
20 same way as the Japanese did in 1866. We, I, my father, my bothers, my oldest brothers, and I
21 am the youngest, are very interested about the Japanese. And we, sincerely, when I was young, I
22 hoped that the Japanese would help us to kick away the French. And we like to take Japan as an
23 example for modernization. By this way, on one side we respect the Japanese for modernization
24 but we hate communism, but we hate the Russians. It is my idea at this time.

25 SM: So there was not a lot of anti-Japanese sentiment in your family? You thought the
26 Japanese occupation during WWII was okay?

27 TTC: Yes. I think of my brother, my father. My father spent three years in France in
28 1916, he know. . .

29 SM: During WWI?

30 TTC: WWI. Because he feared to be a zealot, to be impressed by the French because of
31 the Ngu Than (?) insurrection, he became a worker soldier to France for three years. But he

1 knows the communists over there. And he knew Ho Chi Minh over there. You know that? And
2 with the French and the Japanese, he expect the Japanese to help us to kick away the French. By
3 this way, the coup d' etat in 1945, 9 March 1945, my father and my brothers were very very
4 happy to do something for the country. And with Ngo Dinh Diem as leader. You understand?
5 Ngo Dinh Diem was very popular too. And we hoped with Ngo Dinh Diem as leader, we can
6 talk with Americans because his brother, Ngo Dinh Diem's brother was Ngo Dinh Tho bishop,
7 he was a catholic bishop and he can talk to Americans and make Americans understand our
8 feelings, our aspirations, and . . . But after March 1945, we tried to convince Ngo Dinh Diem to
9 become prime minister but he refused to be prime minister and by this way an opportunity to be
10 free of communists was lost.

11 SM: After the Second World War and the French were reintroduced and took over
12 Vietnam again, what was life in Vietnam like from 1946 to 1954 during the French-Indochina
13 War? What do you remember from that period? From 1946 to 1954 when the French came back
14 into the country?

15 TTC: There was a big change. After 1945, after the coup d' etat, when the French were
16 out, a nationalist movement grew up and everybody think and act for independence. Movement
17 and the Viet Minh exploit this feeling, we are the communist, Ho Chi Minh I am not communist,
18 I am a nationalist and everybody, you know, maybe I am too sometime, you know because my
19 father say, "Now for was by the Viet Minh" against the French. You, you, you must go with
20 them. But in the future we have change with America and now and you know you can you know
21 choose the right way but this way I became a cadet of Viet Minh, you know, Army. And but you
22 know, I don't believe in the future with the Viet Minh because my father, my brother, I am
23 Catholic you know and after a year, I quit the Viet Minh movement the Viet Minh side and I
24 come, I come back to my family and on two years after, you know, I go to the city to the you
25 know, you know, the city was captured by the French but you know I don't contact the French. I
26 was waiting, you know, for the future and in 1950 when the Americans, you know, begin to help
27 the Vietnam inside against the communists with the Bao Dai solution in 1951 you know I choose
28 the side of the nationalists and become a cadet of you know, the Da Lat Military Academy
29 become officers in 1951. When, you know when, after 1950 when the Americans proven you
30 know, and help Bao Dai regime to the communists and I become officer of the new Army in
31 1952 I become officer.

1 SM: So what did you think of the French occupation in leading up to 1954? Since it was
2 anti communist, did your family support the French in 1952, 1953 during the French-Indochina
3 War? What did you think of the French in the 1950s?

4 TTC: The 19...

5 SM: In the 1950s.

6 TTC: 50s?

7 SM: When you became a cadet, what did you think of the French?

8 TTC: Oh yeah, I just used you know idea with the American help, American, you
9 know, don't like the communism and American, you know, forces was the French to give us
10 independence the motto. I used the I become officer, you know? It's French they communists to
11 have a Vietnam independent with the help of the Americans. This way you know I am very,
12 very, how you say? I believe, you know, in the Americans. Maybe I tell you stories. In 1947 I
13 began to learn English, English, and you know I am very impressionable of the speech of do you
14 remember, the speech of Churchill at Missouri University.

15 SM: Okay, yes.

16 TTC: And I, you know, I believed the future, you know, the cold war between America
17 and Russia, and the Viet Minh are communist and we believe in the future to fire against the
18 communists. But then in 1945, 49 the communists China in 1950 the communists, you know,
19 attack Korea you know, for me I had conviction, conviction that we can, we should be
20 independent with the help of the Americans.

21 SM: Now you talking about the Iron Curtain speech given by Churchill?

22 TTC: Huh?

23 SM: The Iron Curtain speech given by Churchill.

24 TTC: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, a speech.

25 SM: Yes.

26 TTC: A speech, you know, because this time I could not read very well the English. I
27 told to my father, "Here, you see?"

28 SM: Okay, so after the French were defeated by the Viet Minh and the Geneva Accords
29 were signed in 1954 and the country was divided North and South, what was life like in Vietnam
30 during that period, that tumultuous period of the vision and then what did you think of the
31 prospects of an election in 1956 and what did your family think of the election, potential election

1 where Ngo Dinh Diem would have been, basically, fighting against Ho Chi Minh for national
2 control and reunification?

3 TTC: In 1954 in April I was in Korea in you know, like officer, like officer? I went
4 over there to observe the Korean training centers over there how they planned, you know, and
5 their Army, the Army advisors. And at this time you know and after Geneva, Geneva you know,
6 Accords, I was very and you know, I was very nervous and I don't believe in the future. I was
7 very pessimistic and we must do something and for me the best way for me now is to have Ngo
8 Dinh Diem come back. I believe the man who can save the country against the communists. I
9 don't like the, you know, I don't like the communists. I never work for them, I fight against the
10 communism, you know. My father, my family, you know, all my brothers, you know, don't like.
11 We are the victims of the communism and we are happy to be, I very happy to become. Come
12 back from Paris, from France, to become Prime Minister and I become very close to him. I went
13 with him everywhere.

14 SM: So you knew him well?

15 TTC: Yeah. Well, I live at the Presidential Palace. Yeah. I never work for the
16 communists, you know? Never, you know, never, never. And we, you know, if 1956 and now
17 '55 Ngo Dinh Diem have consolidated the regime, do you remember? And we Ngo Dinh Diem
18 who was very popular, you know, for me, "Surely I am communist. I am anti communist." And
19 you know, all the people maybe you know, like Nixon it's a long time said if the election
20 happen, the people you know, the people maybe don't vote for Ho Chi Minh in the South but the
21 North under a communist regime, they are not free to vote. Like here to now, the people aren't
22 afraid to vote, it is the problem and for what election you must be free for the two parts of the
23 countries and to be under a good supervision, supervision of a nation of organization, you know,
24 because under communist regime, totalitarian regime. They controlling the mind, controlling the
25 body by organization. Now too, now in Vietnam now. Not easy to vote against the communists,
26 but easy now because, you know, we could regime if it is the reason, you know, it is the reason
27 we don't have a election for me, I mean not for the communists and other people in the south
28 too. I believe that they don't vote for the communist, but in the North it's different.

29 SM: What Ngo Dinh Diem in that period, that very difficult period between 1954 and
30 1957-'58 when he consolidated his regime, what did you think about his treatment of some of the
31 groups, the competing groups, in Vietnam like the Buddhists and the, the, the ?

1 TTC: Yeah in 1954 the situation of the is very critical. The French force 2,000, 3,000
2 people, different sects. Other side we have catholic in the south. The force, we got one Army,
3 they like the queen, the king in the area. They don't obey, they don't accept the leadership of
4 Saigon like sector, you know, he controls Saigon, he controls everything. Police, you know,
5 casino, prostitution and by the and the Vietnam they all forces. And the French they are the
6 leader, they use all the to confusion, to be, you know, to the country. And the Army, the
7 Vietnamese forces were under the French because a French citizen like control the Army and in
8 one year from 1954 to May 1955 we you know so on these programs, French, everything and he
9 controls the country in 1955. One year, not easy. Remember John Collins who was the
10 ambassador over there in May of 1955 he come back to Washington and he advise to President
11 Eisenhower, but you know, and you know resettle the, big change. Then you know, the Buddhist
12 come 1954 to 1953 you don't have the Buddhist problems, we don't have. And we, you know,
13 we are anti communist. We are Catholic, you know, I am Catholic before. It is stupid to
14 persecute the Buddhism. It is stupid, no never. And me, you know, I am Catholic, my family's
15 respect we are Confucian, but respect Buddhism. I myself am commander. I been in Pagoda
16 because the Pagoda is very, very important for us. But you know, maybe the Buddhism, they are
17 jealous about the Christian, about the Catholic, maybe like that, but you know. President Diem
18 had the same policy with Catholic or Buddhism. In the Army you say maybe Catholic, general,
19 but in reality in the Army you know. We had many generals for Christian like that and we don't
20 pay attention of religion but you never pay attention for religion in the government. He also the
21 President of country, not the president of Catholic church. But this way, you know, the Catholic
22 Bishop don't like him. You know, sincerely I can say you a lot like that. Many, many North
23 Vietnamese refugee Catholic, you know, don't like him because you know, he don't pay
24 attention to the religion. Never happen like that.

25 SM: Well what, why did the Buddhists start protesting them?

26 TTC: Why?

27 SM: And why did some of the Buddhist monks engage in self immolation?

28 TTC: Yeah in 1963 in Vietnam, you know, we have you know, the two religions of
29 Vietnamese is Ancestor Cult we have the Catholic, we have Buddhism but Buddhism the name,
30 not the Pagoda, you know. In 1963 you know. The question is the flag, I don't know why you
31 know and become a big problem. But the problem is I think for me is theology. We become

1 between Buddhism and Catholicism. At this the reason he's part of the was a very good friend
2 over there. But in they had in '51 to be you know, and to over there you know?

3 SM: What about some of the controversy about Ngo Dinh Diem's land reform program
4 and the land redistribution and in particular the distribution of land to the Catholic population
5 that fled from North Vietnam when Ho Chi Minh took over in 1954 and a lot of Catholic people
6 from the North came South and there's of course a lot of controversy because land was taken
7 away from some people and given to Catholics and then conflict emerged. What do you think
8 about that issue?

9 TTC: You know I remember I was in Vietnam in 1954 to North Vietnam and you know
10 because with Ngo Dinh Diem was the Prime Minister many Catholic from North believe to Ngo
11 Dinh Diem to the South I don't like the communist regime and there are millions of refugees, the
12 Buddhists, you know, let them have authorization you know and they the anti communists, like
13 the Catholic. Strongly anti communist and Catholic refugees and millions over there, maybe.
14 The most refugees are Catholic and biggest problem for us, set up resettlement with the help of
15 Americans. We can you know resettle the refugees one million people and we use the land
16 everywhere you know in the high plateau, the Plain of Jars and Plain of Reeds, and you know
17 Saigon to the refugees. Then, you know, I don't know the side of the you know of the refugees
18 again. It depends you know on economic, economic, on economic. We don't pay attention to
19 give land to the Catholic or to the Buddhists. This time one thing that the Catholic, the Catholic
20 you know, they are, they go and they are well organized, the Priests, go to the South with les and
21 they are well organized. The land reform in 1955 '56 was land reform in the South and I don't
22 have any, exactly any idea about this one, you know, to tell you, you know, the true story but you
23 know, I have, I tell you, you know, we don't have enough money to pay back for the owner, the
24 owner, because, you know, we're not like communists. We buy the land from the landlord to
25 and we pay them you know for the land but you know we don't have enough money for the
26 owner and maybe you know I but this way you know we have not good land reform program in
27 1956-'57. But I do not know exactly very well about this story because I am not pay attention
28 about this one.

29 SM: One of the other policies under the Diem government was to cancel certain election
30 processes like village elections. What did you think about those policies and do you think that
31 they contributed to some of the people in South Vietnam becoming upset with Ngo Dinh Diem?

1 TTC: No because you see here we have two periods. The first period, the country side,
2 the French are controlled by the communists. They are very strong. In 1954 their forces, forces
3 you know were back to but in the south they have maybe you know about 50,000 members but
4 they are not communists, we are nationalists, we are nationalists, but they have good propaganda
5 and good organization and maybe good tactics of terror of terrorism. But this way if we use
6 election in the village maybe the communists can use it you know, the election to subvert the
7 village people. But in 1961 we have the Hamlet program, you know the hamlet program, you
8 know, we have the you know and we have elections at the hamlet program, you know. Do you
9 know that, at the hamlet? The key of the strategic hamlet political side is election, to choose a
10 hamlet chief, a hamlet committee, by election, freely election.

11 SM: So the cancellation of elections in villages...

12 TTC: In 1956 but after that, after the strategic hamlet program the election you know of
13 the leaders of the hamlet you know was very well organized and very freely, very freely, yeah.

14 SM: Okay, some Americans have, American historians and scholars, have argued that
15 the strategic hamlet program had some fundamental problems and being first of all that this was
16 a very foreign type of environment for the average Vietnamese villager being put in concrete
17 instead, the cinderblock houses, this was a very strange way for Vietnamese people to live
18 compared to a village like prior to the strategic hamlets, and that this created some problems.
19 What do you think?

20 TTC: You know in Vietnam we have the village operation long times ago. We are
21 stronger this way, civilization and the communist side had the few, forti..

22 SM: Fortified village?

23 TTC: Fortified village. It was organized and armored and on the communist side and
24 they resist the French very effectively. We you know, with the help of Thompson, we had to
25 organize a hamlet program, you know. The hamlet program is not to make you many side
26 politics, it is a revolution. The concept of Vietnamese government is that revolution at the
27 bottom you have military politics, economy, education, control, like that. All things, but this
28 way a revolution from the bottom but now the communists now they fear the Americans now
29 like the coup d'etat you know, as before and they trying now to consolidate. Now in the
30 countries control a hamlet and the communists fear very much about the hamlet program. You
31 see many problems on the communist side, they fear the strategic hamlet program, they fear, you

1 see? I, documents, and remember Ngo Dinh Diem told me in 1962 he say if I realize to organize,
2 you know, you know, maybe you know, three maybe a lot the most of the hamlet are organized.
3 We don't fear the communists.. It can win the war this way, with the village chief, understand,
4 understand? You no understand?

5 SM: Oh Halberstom!

6 TTC: Halberstom...

7 SM: I understand.

8 TTC: The Halberstom was a concentration camp but it. I was, you know, I was you
9 know commander of popular forces during this period.

10 SM: You were commander of...

11 TTC: I was commander of Self Defense Corps.

12 SM: Okay, this was in 19...

13 TTC: I was commander of the Self Defense Corps from 1961 to 1963. And we...I know
14 the effect of the strategic hamlet program and Colby, Mr. Colby, told me you know. I met him
15 you know before he died. He say you know the hamlet you know and the Self Defense Corps are
16 very good formula for anti-communists. Maybe I send you some documents about the hamlet
17 you know, you know for your explanation for clearly, the idea, the concept in this time. Now the
18 communists now

19 SM: Right now, today?

20 TTC: Today the communists fear the American's government and use coup d'etat
21 organize the hamlet, they say they try to control the hamlet, cultural hamlet.

22 SM: Cultural.

23 TTC: Cultural, but you know it's

24 SM: Okay, so as commander of the self defense corps, was this just in the Saigon region
25 or was this the country?

26 TTC: All the south.

27 SM: South Vietnam.

28 TTC: All the south from the 17th parallel.

29 SM: What was your primary philosophy in setting up this self defense corps from 1961
30 to 1963 and was it to, was this a way of controlling the population or was this a way of

1 preventing Northern infiltration or was there...what was the situation of North Vietnam during
2 that period? Was there a lot of northern infiltration?

3 TTC: No you know. The duties of the self defense corps is to protect the people at the
4 village level.

5 SM: From whom?

6 TTC: From communist subversion and infiltration, communist infiltration of the special
7 forces and of the rangers. For me, for us for the self defense corps is to help the people at the
8 hamlet and the village level and we are waiting for any act or any terrorism, act of terror of
9 communists at village and hamlet. That's because you know, from 1957 to 1960 the
10 ambassador.

11 SM: Devereaux.

12 TTC: And your civilian official don't like you know to organize, you know, the forces,
13 the self defense corps. And Michigan State, Michigan State you see you know, they tried to
14 organize the police forces not like here. In America it different, in America you know the police
15 and the FBI you have you know a different society. And in 1957 he went to Washington and he
16 talked to against the communists from the inside you know and I would request the Americans to
17 have him to organize the self defense corps and forces but that is if tried to organize their own
18 Army. I don't know that. On the throne in Vietnam and on the economic organization I don't
19 like to have the self defense corps. They try to disband them and we are very, I talk over the self
20 defense corps. Ammunition, you know, no training, no organization, no command, no logistics,
21 no, but the communists from 1956 to 1961. You know them very well you know the
22 organization of the communists they realize, the of the they come from every means they can use
23 to sabotage the hamlet and only the self defense corps who can protect the people and deal with
24 the terrorism of the communists. But you know we the Americans and this time don't pay
25 attention. And the Army, the Army division you know we you know I am commander for the
26 21st I command the staff college but I don't like it but I don't believe in these tactics in this
27 regime, you know. The communists the people don't use the. Like you know in Korea the same
28 problems here.

29 SM: So in 1957 to 1961 the communists; when you say communists in the village level
30 you're talking about South Vietnamese communists and these are people who live in South
31 Vietnam, are from those areas, but they are communists?

1 TTC: They are communists, yeah.

2 SM: How much is, in 1957, how much are they controlled by Ho Chi Minh?

3 TTC: How much?

4 SM: How much control by Ho Chi Minh and the North in your estimation?

5 TTC: You know, how much, you know the communists are strong by propaganda, and

6 by terror by the terrorism, by propaganda, by organization, and by terrorism. In 1957 we

7 destroyed almost all of their infrastructure by using the and you know all the are destroyed. And

8 now the communists changed the policy. Week before I use, you know, I believed in the

9 political structure. But by 1957 they changed their tactics. They used the to terror, you know, to

10 terrorism. Shooting, you know like that and everybody you know because we don't have the

11 forces to and from day to day you know the communists control in the south. But cannot do

12 because you know we know that the communists are in the and we know that the communists

13 cannot rise up like in the south like in the Delta of south Vietnam.

14 SM: In the Mekong Delta?

15 TTC: In Mekong Delta, yeah.

16 SM: Now the communists in the South, were they controlled by Ho Chi Minh?

17 TTC: Yeah, sure.

18 SM: In 1957?

19 TTC: Sure, sure. We have they are communists we have a distinction between

20 communists and the Viet Cong, they are the same, in the south. Like you know, what the [Lee

21 Jung].

22 SM: [Lee Jung].

23 TTC: [Lee Jung], see, and why here, I don't know why your scholars we have they are

24 the same. I don't understand why you know we have distinction. The Viet Cong not under the

25 communists, the Viet Cong and the North, they are the same under the communist regime with

26 control with tight control. If somebody you know, in their party don't agree with them, but they

27 are ready to kill them. You know now? You know now? You know, when you...many generals

28 assassinate them

29 SM: Today?

30 TTC: Oh in this time. You know, oh lots, like communists are communists, North and

31 South they are communists.

1 SM: How much support with military material was there between northern communists
2 and southern communists though in say 1957 to 1963? I understand the philosophical link but
3 what about actual military and support for this southern revolt, this southern communist
4 revolution? Was there a lot of stuff coming from north to south?

5 TTC: From where?

6 SM: From north to south, to south Vietnam? I said 1957 to 1963.

7 TTC: Okay from 1966 to 1959 the policy for north Vietnam is you know to consolidate
8 the North first. The South, they strategy is the political struggle.

9 SM: So 1957...

10 TTC: 1956 to 9 over there, their policy is to consolidate the north first and the south,
11 the south regime is a political struggle. But from the 1959 you know, with the 14 resolution in
12 1959 come back from south Vietnam to unite the south to use the terror, the terror, you know,
13 you know, the in '59 and the Ho Chi Minh trail, the Ho Chi Minh highway begin to organize in
14 two ways, from in the sea and in the land.

15 SM: What year was that?

16 TTC: In 1959, '59. And first they tried to capture Laos and the if we like to control the
17 south Vietnam we must hand them the Laos and we open the Laos and you know and the
18 communist north Vietnam you know had wide access to the south. The main highway, you
19 know the wide highway to the south.

20 SM: The Herriman Highway?

21 TTC: Yeah, Herriman highway is when in 1962 we were very nervous about the Laos
22 agreement. We fear, you know, why would your policy like that? Laos and then the Viet Minh
23 in South Vietnam and Cambodia and in 1962 you know we have a of. Never, never. The
24 communists they are never, never.

25 SM: Now when you say the policy towards Laos and neutrality, you said the policy
26 toward Laos and the Laotian neutrality you mean you're talking about the establishment of Laos
27 as a neutral country that's not supposed to be violated by either side, is that correct?

28 TTC: You know, this is friendship in theory, but the communists never accept. They
29 use the propaganda for practice only. And you see Harriman and Cooper, you know?

30 SM: Chester Cooper?

31 TTC: Cooper, you know, now the communists never, you know, how we say...

1 SM: Honor?

2 TTC: Honor the other men. Never. Harriman he very intelligent you know? If you
3 control Laos by cutting the Laos in two from the Mekong over there, and the China Sea and the
4 big highway like that, the highway you know. North Vietnam or the Chinese cannot go to the
5 south. How, you see? By land, impossible.

6 SM: Would you tell us about your division command experiences, the conventional
7 force?

8 TTC: When we come back from America Command to Staff College my dream is to
9 become you know, director?

10 SM: Uh huh.

11 TTC: These regional forces. Before I was chief of operations of civil guard but I come
12 back from college.

13 SM: Is the Command and Staff College in Leavenworth, Kansas?

14 TTC: Kansas, 1957.

15 SM: Okay.

16 TTC: to become the chief of staff and assistant for the division commander at the. I was
17 very upset I wasn't very happy because I don't like this job because the job to fight in the
18 Communist subversion. They don't know anything about that self defense corps. I must obey
19 the order. I was promoted be Colonel Division commander the light division, you know, you
20 know, Qui Nhon, of Pleiku in 1958. I don't like this job too because this time you know the
21 communist forces you know in the village in the nighttime you know the chief of the village.
22 Anti communism over there is self defense corps. And in 1959 you know, or '58 we had you
23 know, the big maneuvers.

24

25 Tape two

26 TTC: And in 1959, 1958, we had a maneuver, a big unit maneuver in Pleiku area with
27 the 14th Light Division, 13th, 12th Light Division, and 16th Light Division. But a new maneuver,
28 like the communists attack in 1975. I was commander of the 14th Light Division from Qui Nhon
29 up to Pleiku with General. . . (indiscernible), an American, a General, he was advisor for
30 training.

31 SM: What was his name again?

1 TTC: General. . . I forget this one . . . Myers (phonetic spelling)! General Myers. And
2 they say if you are communist, you are Mao Zedong. Do you agree, do you accept this strategy
3 (und) like that? But for me, I do not believe the communists, in the future, use this strategy to
4 take over the country, they use the Mao Zedong strategy. Like Thu Three quick and one
5 slow. Four quick and one slow. It is a guerrilla concept. For quick action, quick attack, and
6 quick withdrawal, but the planning is slow. And at Kontum, I activated the 22nd Division, I was
7 the first division commander of 22nd Division. But I do not agree with the Corps commander. I
8 was Division commander but I do not agree with the Corps commander General Co Thach Dinh,
9 in the future he made the coup d'etat in 1963., Co Thach Dinh. I don't agree with him but I, I
10 don't respect him.

11 SM: What did you not agree with him on, the tactics?

12 TTC: The tactics, on leadership, on command, and on behavior; on the dignity of an
13 officer. . .

14 SM: Dignity?

15 TTC: Yes, dignity. And he tried to kick me away from 22nd Division and President
16 Diem now changed me, now I go back to the Delta to Tay Ninh to take over the 21st Division to
17 replace Colonel Vien Bao Tri. Now he became a three star, after that he became a three star, and
18 he came to Kontum to take command of the 22nd Division. Bu I am not lucky. In February
19 1960, I was Commander of 21st Division, and I, the communists were beginning to attack, to
20 change their policy and use armed struggle with big unit battalions and they hit the base of one of
21 my regiments, the 32nd Regiment at Tay Ninh, at Tam Chuc (?), in the books you have, at Tam
22 Chuc. But many stories about that. I had some information about activities of the communists
23 and I tried to organize an area operation, preventive. Everything was ready for a counter attack.
24 But my regimental commander, Nguyen Manh Lam, he don't pay attention for the problem, for
25 the situation. An operation like that, it is peace time, no big operations, Mr. Thieu, Colonel
26 Thieu, he make the soldier tired. The Tet, 28 February, two days before Tet and when he sent
27 back, he sent one battalion to go in operation outside of the base and one battalion in alert in
28 ready for operation, and one battalion reserve. But he, and his Battalion commander, 2nd
29 Battalion, they went outside (the base) to play with the girls. Two, the regimental commander
30 and the battalion commander, Nguyen Manh is regimental commander and Hoang Anh Xam (?)
31 is battalion commander, they went outside to sleep with the girls over there, maybe, I believe,

1 communists. And when the communists attacked the base, I cannot communicate with him. He
2 was outside, my artillery was ready but cannot open fire. And my two battalion, three battalion,
3 one in operation, one in reserve, one in alert were used for the counterattack of the camp. And at
4 this time, I go to the rescue for the regiment but this time I have three reg but it is ridiculous.
5 One regiment was at Ca Mau (Peninsula) it is (ind) in the south, and one in the Plain de Jars.
6 Doc Tap Moui La (?), near My Tho. And one regiment near Tay Ninh. But I had nothing in my
7 hands, I use only 30 trucks, thirty trucks in all . . . from the headquarters to go the rescue of the
8 regiment. On the road to the regiment base, the communists organized an attack for the rescue
9 forces. But I am so happy because far from the base camp about three kilometers, I fear maybe
10 they ambush all of the companies. I stopped my convoy of 32 trucks and with one Recon
11 platoon with me and we walked along the road in the darkness. And the communists believe my
12 rescue is so big and they withdraw. No ambush. When I came to the camp, I see the major
13 commander of the regiment and the battalion commander from outside, they go to see me. Oh, I
14 am so nervous. I hit them with my stick and asked them “Why did you do that like that? And
15 where is your Battalion commander?” He was wounded over there. Now for the rescue. We
16 sent a message to the platoon outside, far away from the base out 15 kilometers and we captured
17 all three trucks full of weapons, heavy weapons. We recaptured three trucks full of heavy
18 weapons.

19 SM: Where were those weapons from?

20 TTC: From my camp.

21 SM: From your camp at Tay Ninh?

22 TCC: Yeah, at Tay Ninh the communists captured these weapons and the trucks to the jungle
23 but happily my battalion in operation. . .

24 SM: Your rescue force recaptured them.

25 TTC: Yeah recaptured. And after that we capture also about 20 mines in the road in the
26 ambush but the communists fly away. But in Saigon, all the newspapers wrote that I was in
27 Saigon, not at Tay Ninh, I did not command the rescue and I went to Saigon for dancing, for
28 playing over there. All newspapers from Saigon like that. And Dubrow (Ambassador) when I
29 came here and I read in the Foreign relations History of State (FRUS) Dubrow sent to State
30 (Department) a very bad report about me. Dubrow. But Williams, John Williams, he was
31 shocked but he gave a report objectively. Then, I lose my command, I lose my future. My

1 future because division commander to be colonel to be general very easily. but I lose my battle
2 with the bad conduct of the regiment commander and I accepted the responsibility. This is the
3 story of Tam Suc. Maybe I will write this story in my memoirs in the future. Here many
4 books, American books about this battle, the attack are not true. They do not know the real
5 problems. But I don't like to write now. But now, after my trip here, after I talk to you, I will
6 try to write the true things about the Tam Suc or the Tay Ninh, or Thu Hai attack of 1960. We
7 lost about 20 people wounded and we had about 200 weapons lost because they are in the store,
8 small weapons. But the heavy weapons we recapture. But now in the communist history they
9 say "he destroyed all of the regiment and captured all of the weapons. When I was in Saigon, I
10 stayed in Saigon after 1975 for 15 years, the officer who command the communist ambush, to
11 ambush my column, my rescue, he now commander of the seven Regt. Of Saigon. I said "If
12 you, your (und) you don't withdraw, you can destroy all of my. . . you destroy me, the rescue
13 column, and you destroy all 32 trucks very easily and you can destroy all of the reg. Base very
14 easily. But in Saigon, all the newspapers, told I was not in command, I went to Saigon for
15 dancing, for playing. But Ngo Dinh Diem, he don't believe. He was very nervous, nervous to
16 me. He did not receive me. Three months after, I call to see him. But I accept my
17 responsibility. I don't accept the responsibility of the regiment commander. But I criticized him,
18 because it was the wrong strategy. I said he is responsible for the strategy. He was quiet, very
19 quiet and he accepted my criticisms. Why don't you use the regional forces? Why don't you use
20 the popular forces? And why do you organize the division command. I said to him, "I am
21 division commander I have troops but I have no command in the region. My soldiers they are
22 mostly from the reserves, bad soldiers but good weapons. And for the training, the training for
23 conventional war. Like in the daytime, training was to play like in American movies but in the
24 nighttime, we play Chinese movies, it is different. (und) Like Conventional is different, no
25 training. And at the top we are big but at the bottom we are small. At the top we had big
26 HEADQUARTERS, big Division, but at the village, Hamlet, we have nothing. We have
27 vacuum. It is easy for the communists to maneuver. I talked with him for about one hour.

28 SM: With Ngo Dinh Diem?

29 TTC: Ngo Dinh Diem. I criticized him because he was responsible for the strategy.
30 But I don't know that. Now, in America, when I read the books of Specter, (Ronald) and some
31 books about the Vietnam Conflict, and he knows these problems. But Dubrow, he beat him

1 (Diem) he did not like to organize the self-defense corps, to make roads in the high plateau, a
2 strategic road. He beat him. Like the 14 Highway, Dubrow did not like to do that. Dubrow and
3 Diem like that until 1961. And Dubrow had a strong responsibility in the coup d'etat on 11 Nov
4 1960. Now I respect Ngo Dinh Diem because I criticized him. In the beginning he was very
5 angry and he said: "Why? You are young, I gave you a big job, you do your job and you play. .
6 . it is miserable, miserable." And he smoked many cigarettes; he was nervous. And I tried to
7 talk to him. I said, maybe you can give me a chance to talk to you. He said "Okay, go ahead."
8 But you see, I criticized him. I was division commander. Then he said, "If I hear all the people
9 talk about you, you are now in jail. You must go through the Marshal Court (Court Marshal).
10 But I called many people from Tay Ninh to see me, the father, the priest, the monk over there to
11 ask about you. And I like now to hear your explication." I tried to explain and after that he said,
12 "Okay, no problem. No Problem. I hear that you have pneumonia. . .

13 SM: Pneumonia?

14 TTC: Pneumonia. Okay, go to the hospital and take care of your pneumonia and when
15 you feel well, I will give you a job. And he gave me Inspector General for Training in ARVN
16 after that.

17 SM: How long did you do that?

18 TTC: What?

19 SM: How long were you Inspector General of ARVN for Training?

20 TTC: For four-five months. five months. But I got a punishment. 40 days of arrest, of
21 jail. No promotion for five years, and no command of big division, of big units, for all life. No
22 command of big unit for all life.

23 SM: That was your punishment?

24 TTC: Yes. From the Diem Staff. And so you see my future was stopped from this
25 time. No command of big units for all life. No command of big units.

26 SM: So after you recovered from your pneumonia, you became Inspector General of
27 Training for ARVN and then after that. . .

28 TTC: After November 60, after the coup d'etat 60, President Diem gave me a job as
29 Assistant for the commander of the self-defense corps. And six months after he promoted me to
30 commander of self-defense corps. And I was very happy with this job and he, President Diem
31 was happy with me too.

1 SM: You served as the commander of the SDC from 1961 to. . .

2 TCC: From 1961 to July 1963. Because on 23 July '63, I organized a demonstration of the
3 veterans of the SDC and the wives of the families of the SDC to Xa La (?) pagoda, to Buddhist
4 pagoda in Saigon. And to the house of your Ambassador Nolting.

5 SM: Ambassador Nolting?

6 TTC: Nolting. A demonstration. My objective is that the communists were in a
7 quagmire in Vietnam. Don't try to help them and try to help us to win the war. And I brought
8 the pictures of many of the self-defense corps killed in the war to the pagoda (und). And Ngo
9 Dinh Nhu didn't know this story because this story, this demonstration, I organized this
10 demonstration under the command of General Dinh who was my corps commander before. And
11 now he was corps commander of III Corps in Saigon. And he ordered me to organize a
12 demonstration.

13 SM: General Dinh?

14 TTC: Dinh. And when Ngo Dinh Nhu asked him he denied it. But when Do Mao
15 made a request,. . . no, Do Mao, chief of security, military security, make a study (investigation)
16 about this cause, and he told Mr. Nhu that I am not the man responsible. Dinh is responsible.
17 And Mr. Nhu said, "you are good, I don't know the problem so I will give you a medal." A
18 medal?

19 SM: A medal?

20 TTC: A medal. In French we say "medai." How is it pronounced?

21 SM: Medal. Like an award.

22 TTC On 10 October 1963. This is my story. And I quit the army, I quit my job as SDC
23 Commander since 23 July 1963. In the books, the history books of State?

24 SM: State Department?

25 TTC: State Department. We have a report from Nolting about this story. Do you have
26 this one here? Yes? The History books of State.

27 SM: Yes.

28 TTC: In 1963, July 1963. The Foreign. . .

29 SM: The Foreign Relations of the United States Series.

30 TTC: Yes, from 1954-1963. For 1963 there are two books. This story is also, we have
31 writing in history books. . .

1 SM: Which story?

2 TTC: In 1960. . .

3 SM: And which story is this?

4 TTC: Tang Sup. Tang Sup attack near Tay Ninh.

5 SM: North of Saigon.

6 TTC: Yes, north of Saigon. Tang Sup attack or Tang Sup battle. It was in this battle
7 that the communists, Ma Khi Tho, who was commander of this attack. FRUS.

8 SM: You mentioned Ngo Dinh Nhu. From the American standpoint, Ngo Dinh Nhu and
9 Madam Nhu have been very controversial figures. Especially since Ngo Dinh Nhu was in charge
10 of the secret police or the police forces in South Vietnam under his brother Diem. And Madam
11 Nhu for some of her public comments. She was a very. . . well the nickname given her was “the
12 dragon lady.” What did you think of Ngo Dinh Nhu and Madam Nhu while you served in the
13 SDC from 1961-1963? How important were they in fueling some of the discontent in Saigon, to
14 outside of Saigon?

15 TTC: For me, as Douglas Pike said to me yesterday, my own perception. NGO DINH
16 DIEM for me, NGO DINH DIEM is the best man in the regime. The best. Without Ngo Dinh
17 Nhu, Ngo Dinh Diem could not have stayed in power for nine years. NGO DINH NHU is the
18 best, the doctrinaire. Ngo Dinh Diem is leader, but Ngo Dinh Nhu is theoretician of the regime.
19 For me, he was very honest to me, he never lied to me. Never lied. When I met him, he was
20 very sincere to me. He was sincere. If he did not like me, he said, “I don’t like you.” But after I
21 explained to him, it was okay. In 1962, I did not know the policy of Harriman in Vietnam and
22 Laos. I don’t know. And in this way I did not know the reaction of Ngo Dinh Nhu about the
23 Harriman policy in Laos and Men Phu in Vietnam at the end of December. And Ngo Dinh Nhu
24 told me that he liked to be self-sufficient. And he used the Strategic Hamlet as the basis for his
25 strategy. His new military strategy was to organize with the Strategic Hamlet as the base and
26 700,000 militia. Militia in the Hamlet to secure the countryside. And he liked to request the
27 American withdrawal. And on four April 1963 he requested America to withdraw from Vietnam
28 step by step. But I did not agree with this. I was counter to this policy. I said, “Why do you
29 request the American withdrawal?” I did not agree with this policy. But now I understand. You
30 see in April 1963, he requested, Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, they requested the
31 withdrawal of advisory forces, step by step. Did you know that?

1 SM: No.

2 TTC: Now in this one (pointing to FRUS) in 1963. And at this time I did not agree
3 with him. But now I know why?

4 SM: Why?

5 TTC: Because Harriman, Bowles, Forrestal, Hilsman, they got the Laos agreement
6 about neutrality. And he liked to back Vietnam neutral is Laos. But if Vietnamese neutral, is
7 Laos? The communists, it is a way to give South Vietnam to the communists. By this way, it
8 felt dangerous for us. And Ngoan Xai (?) he organized the Strategic Hamlet, organized the
9 militia, the Republican Youth. . . And also the Chieu Hoi Open Arms program. And To Anh
10 asked the American advisors to withdraw and get some deal, make some secret deal with Pham
11 Van Dong over there, (und) do you know? The police. And in May 1963, Hanoi, and Pham Van
12 Dong, agreed with this policy, because they feared the American intervention. In May. The
13 Chinese over there, they did not agree. And with the coup d'etat in November, everything is
14 gone.

15 SM: So, Ngo Dinh Nhu was, he wanted US advisors out of Vietnam in April 1963. And
16 he wanted Ngo Dinh Diem to coordinate some kind of peace with the North?

17 TTC: With the North. Because he feared that Harriman, Forrestal, and Hilsman policy
18 (neutrality). He said, "This policy is adventurous. Adventure. To talk like that." Because
19 Harriman . . . Because I have the Lederon (?) papers, writing in 1961 that they like to make
20 Indochina neutral. But not a good way, for Ngo Dinh Nhu, it was a way to hand over SVN to the
21 communists.

22 SM: What about madam Nhu?

23 TTC: Oh, Madam Nhu. She was like your Clinton, like first lady Clinton; intelligent,
24 beautiful, but arrogant. I did not like her.

25 SM: You did not like Madam Nhu?

26 TTC: Sure. I liked to talk to Ngo Dinh Nhu but never talked to her. She was beautiful,
27 intelligent, but arrogant. And she made many speeches, anti-American speeches. But this was
28 not suitable at the time. In this way the Ngo family did not like her. And me too, I did not like
29 her.

30 SM: What about her comments about Buddhists?

1 TTC: Oh yeah. She was intelligent but she did not speak English as well as I do (now).
2 She spoke French well but she liked to show off and she used the word “barbecue” like that. . .
3 (laughs) But this was not the best way to explain. But when the media are against her, oh, it was
4 difficult for her to explain in English. When I read the newspapers with Madam Nhu in the
5 rickshaw with a fan and Kennedy (unknown). But Kennedy was in a bad position. Kennedy, he
6 did not like to make the coup d’etat. You know that?

7 SM: Yes, he was very reluctant.

8 TTC: Yes. In this way, in the Vietnam problem, there are many, many stories. And
9 Madam Ngo Dinh Nhu was intelligent but arrogant and her English is not well.

10 SM: Okay, she did not speak English well so she had a hard time explaining what she
11 meant.

12 TTC: Not easy with the media.

13 SM: You mentioned that the American advisory presence during, I guess, the late 1950s
14 and early 1960s, did you interact a lot with American advisors? Did you work with American
15 advisors?

16 TTC: Oh yeah.

17 SM: What did you think of them? Were they helpful?

18 TTC: Oh yeah. I’ll tell you a story. My advisor. At the division level, you have many
19 advisors, colonels, majors, lieutenants, and now I told you first division, advisor division. When
20 they were division commander at Kontum. I think my first job is how to take care of the families
21 to get them house, you know, what school, what house for the families because if they don’t have
22 good house you know don’t pay attention for the communists to give them a house for the
23 families. Because to live there, fly there and die then, no withdrawal you know. In this way we
24 must be up you know for the families. They can use the land, you know, sufficient with the land.

25 SM: Would you spell that for me, [?]

26 TTC: Kontum, it’s a high plateau.

27 SM: How do you spell that?

28 TTC: you look at the map, at the map I show you the map

29 SM: Okay, so we’ve got Kontum

30 TTC: you know, and my advisor you know who was you know, was Colonel, I must
31 take care of the training first. The training is the first job of the division commander but I say no

1 not yet. I must take care for my family and the family of the soldiers. I must for them some
2 house and I your and mine and we are very in good no problem with the advisor, no problem,
3 and the division commander. And now the first one you know he was advisor for me but you
4 know because he officer you know, he very proud in the beginning you know he liked to oppose
5 me about the authorization of the defense corps. The operation, the platoon, weapon it say you
6 know America, the American people pay the dollar, pay taxes, you know for aid in south
7 Vietnam. In this way, you know, you must hear my idea. Yeah, okay, sure, I respect you and I
8 pay I appreciate the dollar but you must hear me because I'm Vietnamese and I know the
9 problem, the self defense corps of the village and I and staff with me we work together very
10 closely, we become good friends.

11 SM: What's his name again?

12 TTC: [?]

13 SM: Bic?

14 TTC: Bigg.

15 SM: Bigg?

16 TTC: Bigg, Bigg, and you know in conclusion I was in very in good you know
17 condition in good, you know, how...friendship with advisor because I talk to him, I talk and he
18 advise me and after that you know we have a good friendship. No problems with the advisor.
19 The advisor must know the problem, for them not enough sometimes you know maybe two year,
20 three year advisor. This way, you know, we have problem but after that we understand each
21 other and become good friends.

22 SM: What about when you were the division commander at Tay Ninh. What was your
23 relationship with your American advisor there?

24 TTC: Oh the same way, the same way. They are very nice too. How I can become
25 Division Commander too easy, you know that? Doesn't like me, okay, but I must hear the idea
26 from him with him and from his advisors. If the advisor report badly about me you know have a
27 bad impression of me his commander. You see that? The role of the advisory in the division, is
28 very important, very important. Their voice is very, very important, very strongly here, very
29 influential.

30 SM: Did you while you were serving in Tay Ninh and in the Saigon area, did you hear of
31 John Paul Van?

1 TTC: When I was at self defense corps.

2 SM: You heard of him when you worked in the self defense corps?

3 TTC: When I was commander of the self defense corps.

4 SM: Did you ever meet him, or...

5 TTC: Oh yeah, I meet him and meet you know, General Colin Clay you know, who
6 precede him over there. You know, he worked at the 7th division. But then I met him also after,
7 after, you know, the coup d'etat. But you know he's arrogant. He like to lead, he like, you know
8 to be respected and he don't know in Vietnam. After that, you know when he become advisor at
9 Pleiku he helicopters.

10 SM: A Bright Shining Lie by Neil Sheehan.

11 TTC: Yeah, and I meet him but I don't know with him. He told me the stories about the
12 war, about the Ap Bac Battle.

13 SM: The Ap Bac Battle?

14 TTC: You know that? Not very important but he the story or maybe the media, the
15 media you know, because the media don't like President Diem and the media don't like, you
16 know, the Vietnam war. Why the Vietnam war? But this way you know, we are a victim of the
17 media. Like Tet you know, the Tet Offensive.

18 SM: Tet 1968?

19 TTC: Yeah, we were the victim of the media. The story of the media to Sheehan and
20 Halberstam you know the New York Times is a big newspaper. You know that liberal
21 establishment?

22 SM: Liberal establishment?

23 TTC: You know that? You had some. Yeah. We are the victim of liberal establishment,
24 you think so? No?

25 SM: I don't know. What do you think?

26 TTC: Oh yeah.

27 SM: You think you're...you think Vietnam was a victim of the liberal media?

28 TTC: Yeah, liberal establishment. To me, you know?

29 SM: Let's turn quickly to your opinions and your views on what happened in November
30 1963 with the Diem Coup and when the coup occurred in November 1963, what did you think of

1 it, what do you think were the important aspects of it, important consequences of the Diem
2 Coup?

3 TTC: Important what?

4 SM: Important consequences of November '63 Diem Coup.

5 TTC: Sure, sure, sure. Because, you know, the problem is Vietnam is leadership. We
6 need from your side, from your side, but the leadership you know, it's not from America, from
7 Washington, but from Saigon and from Saigon we don't have leadership. You know, the party
8 leader, you know the party leader or the Buddhist, you know, they are not good leader. To be a
9 leader not easy. Politics, you know, education, you know, control, you know politics you know,
10 military. Not only military, not only politics, leaderships. And you don't like the officer like
11 you know, how they can become a good leader. And other party politics and other politician
12 don't have you know, the reason of a good leader, leadership after the countries. You know you
13 see Hanoi now? They are now strong of leadership now. They give us many, many problems
14 over there, leadership. But here, we have had a good system now. Good system, good president.
15 That president don't care if your sister can walk now in country but here things you don't care.
16 We have many advisor, good advisor, you know.

17 SM: What happened after the coup, what did you do?

18 TTC: You mean me?

19 SM: You, what happened after November 1963?

20 TTC: In 2nd November I was arrested and put in jail.

21 SM: What for?

22 TTC: Because you know, I go to the I say okay I agree with you the coup d'etat but I
23 can't do that, I can't say that and in the morning after the 2nd of November my friend and after
24 captain he become colonel. He take a half track, you know, to arrest me and drag me and lead
25 me to the and that to put me in jail, in the jail you know at Saigon for three days. But when
26 President Diem was assassinated for me to be free, but you know, under control of the.

27 SM: So you were arrested and imprisoned for three days then released

28 TTC: Released, you know, but under arrest, house arrest.

29 SM: House arrest, so you were watched?

30 TTC: Yeah, but you know I said I can't do that to him you know? You commit the
31 biggest mistake by killing Ngo Dinh Diem. Who will replace him in the future to fight against

1 the communist? The communist, it's not the other communists but the Vietnamese communists,
2 the Viet Cong and the North, they are very clever. They have experience of, you know, 15 years.
3 From '45 to '55 to '65. And you know, you know, Viet Minh.

4 SM: What did you do for employment after...in '64, December 1963 into 1964. You
5 had retired or resigned from the military so what did you do after that?

6 TTC: You know I become a laundry man.

7 SM: A laundry man? But you worked, you said you worked for American 25th Division
8 at Cu Chi.

9 TTC: The 5th division the smallest division.

10 SM: So you opened your own business.

11 TTC: Business, small business.

12 SM: And you did that until 1975?

13 TTC: In 1970 and I go back to Saigon to a house now to make a store but I had many
14 books but I like the books. But now, you know in my house in Saigon I have many, many books
15 you know. Now in Saigon I like, I like the books about the Vietnam war. Yeah.

16 SM: When you...how much...you had a lot of interaction with American soldiers then in
17 1965 when Americans started to come into the country with conventional forces. What did you
18 think of American forces, the American soldiers and the American units.

19 TTC: Very well, a very well the soldiers are but you know I don't agree with them about
20 operation.

21 SM: The tactics?

22 TTC: The tactics, you know.

23 SM: The conventional warfare?

24 TTC: I say, you know, they use a big hammer to kill a fly. But before they kill the fly
25 they destroy everything in the house. Tactics of conventional war.

26 SM: How much do you think that contributed to the problems after 19...say leading up
27 to Tet and after Tet, the fact that you had American soldiers engaging in these conventional
28 tactics, destroying a lot of property and hurting a lot of people. Did that help the communists?

29 TTC: Sure, but you know the communists like to have that. You know, but you know,
30 because you know they use big power, you know, big hammer. Only three or four to hand them
31 some house but use the force, helicopter, artillery like that. Not good tactics, sound tactics. I in

1 the I tell them to use the rifle man, to use small nits, to use you know squad, company and use
2 commando...

3 SM: Commandos, rangers.

4 TTC: Commandos, rangers, it is more efficient. But after Tet, you know, the
5 communists, you know, collapse. Collapse.

6 SM: After Tet 1968?

7 TTC: Oh yeah. If you continue this way, Johnson will be president. This way maybe
8 we can shorten war.

9 SM: ...to resign.

10 TTC: Yeah, to resign.

11 SM: Or to not run for reelection.

12 TTC: If he keep in power he continue like that, you know, the communists will accept
13 your condition in.

14 SM: Did you have interactions with other country's forces, or just Americans.

15 TTC: I don't have any ideas about that, I don't have any experience.

16 SM: Like Australians, New Zealanders, Korea...

17 TTC: I don't got experience, but I hear that the Koreans, you know, not too good, you
18 know. They are too brut....

19 SM: Brutal?

20 TTC: Yeah, brutal.

21 SM: In the years from 1965 to 1968 in the American buildup, what did you think of that,
22 what did you think of how the United States became so involved militarily in Vietnam? Did you
23 think that was good?

24 TTC: No, why to use the big hammer to kill the fly? Why use big hammer to cut Laos
25 in two, the Ho Chi Minh Trail by making a highway division, you know, to make a highway
26 from Dong Ha, they cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it is easier than to use your units you know,
27 dispersing all over the country. It is not economic, not efficient.

28 SM: What did you think about the American bombing in North Vietnam?

29 TTC: Oh yeah. Too many restriction. Like, you know, in Kosovo now, the bombing
30 like in Iraq you know, many restrictions over there. Why you don't bomb, you know, the Hanoi
31 or Haiphong, like Nixon did, come to fear that. Too many restriction and not efficient.

1 SM: Do you think they, well, I think a lot of the concern in bombing, both in Vietnam
2 and in more recent experiences like Kosovo is killing civilians and the potential of killing men,
3 women, and children, and older people so you have to be careful where you bomb and how you
4 bomb.

5 TTC: But you know the question, like in Haiphong, the ocean and the Chinese, you
6 know, view the Haiphong harbor to support Hanoi. Why you don't blow?

7 SM: That raises a good question as far as if there's Russians and Chinese boats and
8 sailors and other people in Haiphong and we bomb them, would that potentially widen the war to
9 include those countries if we start killing Chinese and Russians?

10 TTC: Yeah, sometime, you know, sometime you know, like 1962 you remember
11 Kennedy about the Cuba problems?

12 SM: The Cuban Missile Crisis?

13 TTC: Yeah, yeah. Sometimes we must. You fear too much, you fear...

14 SM: Americans fear too much?

15 TTC: About the China, and the. Fighting with your hands tied, one hand to shoot, there
16 is another way. It is a limited war but victory. I don't understand the morale you know and the,
17 I don't know, maybe Macnamara is a good man, not a good leader. He don't know anything
18 about the military subject.

19 SM: Well you know what he did before he became Secretary of Defense?

20 TTC: No.

21 SM: He was CEO for Ford Motor Company.

22 TTC: Oh yeah, he very, he believe he know everything.

23 SM: He was a business man.

24 TTC: But because in Vietnam we have a man like Macarthur. In Vietnam? He told me
25 you have a Mac...

26 SM: Macarthur?

27 TTC: Macarthur. But in Vietnam we have, you know, we don't have a Macarthur. Or
28 Westmoreland, or Johnson, or you know, they are too...the fear, you know.

29 SM: What about, what about General Abrams?

30 TTC: Oh yeah. The best.

31 SM: Okay.

1 TTC: After this, the best here. Good commander. Yeah, I tell you Abrams is a good
2 general in the Vietnam war.

3 SM: Now one of the big shifts that occurred, and you mentioned the problems with the
4 conventional mind set, the conventional military war. One of the changes that occurred in 1966
5 and 1967 was the creation of CORDS, civil operations and rule development support,
6 revolutionary development support, and Robert Comber and William Colby were put in charge
7 of basically the pacification program. What did you think of that?

8 TTC: Oh yeah, very important, you know. I had camp at, you know, with my family. I
9 have experience, you know. My many fields, you know. My many field. And I spend with my
10 family. And this story lost victory. I offer and my many field from platoon the trail widens in
11 1962 and he became you know two battalions of regular forces of popular forces. And he, his
12 men pacified a wide area of. When the Marine at you know, at Qui Nhon, use their fire power,
13 you know to make the. Good job, good job, but depend on if the know to use this one they
14 become very efficient, very efficient. The Phoenix...

15 SM: Phoenix program [?]

16 TTC: Very important because you know if we destroy communist supplies, the regular
17 forces become blind, blind you know. No, no intelligence, and easily to defeat the of
18 communist.

19 SM: Now did you know anybody who worked in Phoenix, in the Pho Guong program?

20 TTC: No.

21 SM: Did you know anybody anywhere in Vietnam?

22 TTC: The father of you know who got me here, his father was in Phoenix program. He
23 became a communist.

24 SM: Did you know what their operations were like? There's a lot of controversy in the
25 United States about the Phoenix program because people said that it was just assassination and of
26 course William Colby very effectively argues that no, in fact, what Phoenix did was it would try
27 to capture and convert members of the Viet Cong infrastructure and in those attempts at times
28 there would be combat and men would be killed and that wasn't...these people, 22,000 or so
29 Viet Cong Cadre that were killed, they were killed in a combat environment. Is that in keeping
30 with your understanding? What did you know about the killings of Viet Cong infrastructure?

1 TTC: Infrastructure of the communists, you know, we in jail or, sometimes he. No, he
2 was kidnapped because you know, sincerely, sincerely you know, American, you know, you are
3 too human, too human. You are too human.

4 SM: Americans are too human?

5 TTC: Yeah, too human. You like to convert them to you know become a good man,
6 good food, you know, good money but sometimes you know you use some terror, you know?
7 But you in America, I know that you don't like this way but for us...

8 SM: From a Vietnamese perspective?

9 TTC: Vietnamese perspective. Sometimes...because the communists think the same
10 way to us. Before 1945, 1954 you know, it was more atrocious. So you know how many
11 innocent people killed by communist. You never pay attention about that.

12 SM: Well it's good that you mentioned that because of course a lot of the American
13 focus on atrocities in Vietnam tends to be on events like the massacre at My Lai or [?].

14 TTC: My Lai?

15 SM: And what did in 1968...

16 TTC: '68.

17 SM: ...and when you heard about this, what did you hear in Vietnam about it, what did
18 you think of it, and of course how did that compare to say that the massacre of Vietnamese in
19 Hue by the Viet Cong and PAVN?

20 TTC: Yeah.

21 SM: Were these things well known by the Vietnamese people, these events in Hue?
22 were they talked about?

23 TTC: I was in four months ago. But you know, story is by the Americans. But you
24 know, Hue story is more tragic, more tragic.

25 SM: How so?

26 TTC: Huh?

27 SM: How? How is it more tragic?

28 TTC: In My Lai you know, we because in the atmosphere of war. But in Hue you
29 know, they killed the people in the cold manner. They dig a hole and kill them. Many, many,
30 many. But nobody talk about the Hue story, it's always My Lai. I very, very anger...I don't like

1 this way by your media. It was a war, it was a war, you know, how you control your men. We
2 are the same way in the French when in 1945. You know my father and leave it. My father.

3 SM: Your father was buried alive?

4 TTC: Buried alive! My oldest daughter with six people and

5 SM: This was done by the Viet Minh?

6 TTC: Viet Minh, all communists the same way.

7 SM: This was done by the communists?

8 TTC: All that you know at Tay Ninh were buried alive, 1,000, many people buried
9 alive at Quang Nhon in 1945 by communists? No story, no nothing. And believe me, you know,
10 the story of communists at Tay Ninh, thousand, thousand, you know? They put all them in the
11 well, put down the well, and bury them alive. Oh Vietnam war. Now the communists over there
12 use the story to make propaganda.

13 SM: Now you said that you worked in, if I understand, Cu Chi? So were you aware
14 about the communist activity, the tunnels, the tunnels in Cu Chi, that wasn't well known at the
15 time?

16 TTC: No, the tunnel over there. But now, I go back to Vietnam, I go back to Vietnam.
17 Yeah, like now a tunnel like that. I was there, you know, I hear about that.

18 SM: But it was kept very secret?

19 TTC: Huh?

20 SM: It was kept secret?

21 TTC: Yeah.

22 SM: It was a very well kept secret.

23 TTC: Yeah.

24 SM: What did you think of Tet Mau Tan and what was significant about Tet Mau Tan
25 1968 and after the Tet offensive?

26 TTC: He was shocked.

27 SM: So you were shocked when you heard about the attacks?

28 TTC: Shock for me too.

29 SM: Members of your family were killed in this?

30 TTC: May...

31 SM: Oh there was fear that that might happen?

1 TTC: Maybe this American for us you know to escape from this bad situation. For us
2 American and Vietnamese side, you know, because you know, the hard core communists. If we
3 continue like that collapse but the media in Vietnam, advise President Johnson, and to change the
4 policy and change the situation from good to bad. Remember the in the Bulge world war?

5 SM: The Bulge, The Battle of the Bulge.

6 TTC: Yeah. You know that?

7 SM: Uh huh.

8 TTC: If you know and you general lost temper and don't have change, don't you know
9 that? And maybe change. In the battle in the war, you know. My bad advisor.

10 SM: Who do you think was responsible for that?

11 TTC: The wise men.

12 SM: The wise men?

13 TTC: Yes, the wise men.

14 SM: What did you think of the Nixon administration's Vietnamization program?

15 TTC: Oh yeah. I you know, sincerely, I respect Nixon. China or Vietnam and I say
16 with this policy china with Vietnam can win the war easily. You know why? Because China,
17 after Nixon, Vietnam, China may help America to make peace. And Vietnamization is very
18 efficient with new hamlet. Very easily, Laos, Cambodia and you know we have a new chance
19 optimistic.

20 SM: So that was a good plan?

21 TTC: I think so, for me. Good strategy, good strategy you withdraw all your forces.
22 Communists used units you cut your money, your ammunition, it is ridiculous.

23 SM: So now you're talking about after the successful Easter offensive [?] the Easter
24 offensive in 1972 when Americans kept supporting Vietnamese ARVN forces. Then in '74 and
25 '75 with this second onslaught of North Vietnamese. What did you think of the Easter Offensive
26 in '72?

27 TTC: Very, very...the communists lose the war, lose the battle, we win the war, we win
28 the battles. The first time we use the conventional we win the war. And for the people who are
29 in the countryside we are winning to control all the countryside. But in 1975 when we controlled
30 the countryside the popular forces and the communists use but we don't have enough morale, we

1 don't have enough ammunition and we don't have enough support. Propaganda from
2 Washington make us victims from outside.

3 SM: So you think if the United States had kept up support in 1975 South Vietnam could
4 have defended itself?

5 TTC: I think so, I hope so, I think so. You know because in the country we have
6 popular forces, we have regular forces, we have hamlet and we have good paratroopers. And in
7 the sea we have the silver fleet and many Americans you know. And if know that you are
8 headed they never use the elite units to capture South Vietnam. They fear your reaction, they
9 fear very much. They fear Korea, you know, like Pusan, and you know in 1975 we had a Pusan
10 story too. If you counter attack bombing only. We can destroy like in Iraq you know remember,
11 with air power, like Kosovo with air power.

12 SM: Well why don't you go ahead and tell me what happened in 1975 when North
13 Vietnam successfully attacked into South Vietnam and the ARVN units were either dispersed or
14 destroyed in 1975, what happened to you and your family when Saigon fell in 1975?

15 TTC: Oh yeah. Before the fall of Saigon I tried to use the refugees to make the last
16 reaction to fight the communists around Saigon. Did you know that? But you know and we must
17 accept the situation and I am very, very sad about the situation. It is the betrayal, I'm sorry. I
18 had to go, I have to stay. Many friends fly to America but I don't like to go. My children don't
19 agree with me about that but I am too stupid and too chauvinistic, too stubborn...

20 SM: Too chauvinistic?

21 TTC: Too chauvinistic and I'm nervous at Americans. Why except to stay, after more
22 than half you know? I went to concentration camp and I stayed there for three years. And my
23 family my wife must go to the countryside to get food, we have nothing. Three years in the labor
24 camp. After that because I was retired I was in 1964, '63 and in 1978 they free me and I had two
25 boys and I tried to go by boat from the country but I was arrested and I spent three more years in
26 jail in labor camps. In 1982, '83. A big lesson for me, 15 years, hate communist regime with
27 two boys you know?

28 SM: This is tape two of the interview with Chieu. Why don't you describe for me now
29 the experiences that you had after your second imprisonment, from 1983 to 1990 in Saigon.

30 TTC: Second...

1 SM: After your second imprisonment, you mentioned, well, this was the period after
2 1983 was Doi Moi.

3 TTC: I was in Saigon.

4 SM: You were in Saigon?

5 TTC: Saigon you know, and the atmosphere is better after Doi Moi program. And I can
6 talk with them more freely, I can criticize the regime but restriction. Sometimes I criticize them
7 but with a weak restriction, not easy but I like to criticize, you know that? It is more open from
8 19 I think 85 to 1990 it is more open and the economy changed too. And from 1989 I went to
9 Hanoi but in the beginning you know I like to go to Japan.

10 SM: You wanted to immigrate to Japan?

11 TTC: Japan because we have our boy over there because we have to be that way we
12 change and went to America. Immigration program maybe I wouldn't understand. But I know
13 nothing because no books about Vietnam war.

14 SM: Right. So where did you...when you came to the United States where did
15 you...what was your port of entry. You left Vietnam, that was in 1990? What year did you
16 leave Vietnam?

17 TTC: Huh?

18 SM: What year?

19 TTC: What year leaving 'Nam? June 1990.

20 SM: How did you get to the United States?

21 TTC: By plane.

22 SM: So you landed in Seattle.

23 TTC: In Seattle, and live there with my daughter.

24 SM: So you landed there and you stayed there?

25 TTC: We stayed there.

26 SM: And you've lived there every since?

27 TTC: With my daughter.

28 SM: Okay.

29 TTC: And my boy's over there. We had two boys and one girl at Seattle.

1 SM: Have you worked in the United States at all or did you just come and live? Have
2 you had any jobs here?

3 TTC: No jobs because I'm too old and maybe I'm too lazy.

4 SM: No, well you're 71.

5 TTC: 72.

6 SM: 72 so when you came here you were already 63, 62-63.

7 TTC: But I'm too lazy.

8 SM: That's retirement age.

9 TTC: Yeah, but I'm too lazy. I just go to the library to look books about Vietnam war.

10 SM: Did you know English before you came to the United States, did you know the
11 English language?

12 TTC: Here, sure.

13 SM: So you already spoke English before you came here?

14 TTC: Yeah.

15 SM: Okay. Where did you learn English?

16 TTC: Where?

17 SM: Where.

18 TTC: When I was a senior in high school.

19 SM: When you were young.

20 TTC: Yes, in high school in 1947.

21 SM: And where was this?

22 TTC: In 1947.

23 SM: In where?

24 TTC: In Vietnam in senior high school.

25 SM: This was a Catholic school that you attended?

26 TTC: Yeah.

27 SM: So you learned French and English?

28 TTC: French and English and Latin.

29 SM: And Latin? Wow.

30 TTC: Latin. And at the labor camp I loved Russian, I can speak Russian.

31 SM: Were there Russians in the labor camps with you?

1 TTC: Yeah, I use a dictionary to learn Russian, I use one dictionary.
2 SM: [?]
3 TTC: a dictionary, I can read the Russian in three months.
4 SM: Wow.
5 TTC: Because in labor camp you know I had nothing to do. But the Russian it is
6 different from Latin or French, it's Cyrillic, you know.
7 SM: Yeah, the Cyrillic language, the Cyrillic alphabet.
8 TTC: Yeah alphabet and something different.
9 SM: So how do you like America? Have you enjoyed coming to the United States?
10 TTC: Oh yeah. I like America, I like your system, but I don't understand America,
11 enigma. You know Clinton, president, I don't know why he is president. If he was a dictionary
12 I'd understand.
13 SM: A lot of Americans don't understand. A lot of us.
14 TTC: You too?
15 SM: A lot of Americans don't understand. So you've been treated well since you've
16 been here?
17 TTC: Sure, sure.
18 SM: Americans have been nice to you?
19 TTC: Sure, everywhere, everybody, everybody everywhere. The white, the black, you
20 know, the young or old, rich or poor, they are very nice to me. Is number one in the world. In
21 train in bus, I go around the country by bus, by train. I enjoy my trip with everybody. I drink the
22 beer, I talk with or something like that, talk openly. I am so lucky to talk with you like that the
23 first time, I can talk freely like that. Talk you know from my mind, I don't worry, I have no
24 reserve in the open atmosphere like that.
25 SM: What do you miss about Vietnam?
26 TTC: Oh, Vietnam? I am, I have a boy over there and I have millions over there and
27 my dream from when I was young to have a modern Vietnam free like Japan, to be strong, to be
28 rich, to be free, but now in Vietnam we lose everything over there. No freedom, no nothing, no
29 dignity.
30 SM: No dignity.

1 TTC: Dignity. We lose many things good in the communist regime. We lose many
2 things.

3 SM: Do you think things are changing now?

4 TTC: Changing, but depend on America. Clinton say normalization.

5 SM: Normal trade relations?

6 TTC: We have a peaceful transition, formation, but stuff like that but ambassador over
7 there.

8 SM: Peterson.

9 TTC: Peterson, I think he is ambassador of the communists, not ambassador for
10 America. He defend communist too much. You see that? He protecting them. But now
11 Peterson he fair to me to us but not fair to communists over there. You think so?

12 SM: I don't know.

13 TTC: This is my idea because he is ambassador. It is the policy of your government, he
14 must talk, he know the problems but he's ambassador all the always obeyed orders from
15 Washington

16 SM: He follows the orders of the Secretary of State.

17 TTC: But politics is politics.

18 SM: What do you think are the most important things that we should learn from the
19 Vietnam war and the Vietnam experience?

20 TTC: Oh, know the countries, know the countries, know the countries and the people.

21 SM: By that I assume you mean know the people, know the culture, the society, the
22 politics, before you get involved in something like that.

23 TTC: Maybe like the quiet American and the ugly American. Because you're strong,
24 you're a big power, you can do anything but my country is small country at war.

25 SM: Well speaking of the quiet and the ugly American, a person that we haven't
26 discussed yet is Edward Lansdale. Lansdale. What did you think of him? Did you get to meet
27 him?

28 TTC: Yeah.

29 SM: What...

30 TTC: In Saigon.

31 SM: Because he was so close to...

1 TTC: I try to meet Ngo Dinh Diem with them over there. He good man, he know the
2 problems. But the ugly American we have the ambassador, you know he's ugly American, the
3 ambassador know problems, your ambassador he's good for the communist, he's ugly American.
4 You believe me?

5 SM: Uh huh.

6 TTC: He's ugly American?

7 SM: Uh huh.

8 TTC: The ambassador? He was white, he don't know anything. But now we
9 ambassador now at Hanoi, he goes and become ambassador and he married to a Vietnamese.

10 SM: That's right, he's married to a Vietnamese who fled to Australia.

11 TTC: Yeah, but the politics are politics.

12 SM: So you have traveled back to Vietnam. How often since 1990, how many times
13 have you been back to Vietnam?

14 TTC: I came here in 1990, I come back to Vietnam 1997 for of my father. And then in
15 1999 in April...

16 SM: This past April?

17 TTC: I come back to Vietnam to inaugurate the for my father in law house to in the
18 memory of my father in law. We come back over there with my wife.

19 SM: So you've been there twice?

20 TTC: Twice. And we use this occasion to go to Hanoi, to go to Hanoi to see again...

21 SM: Where you were.

22 TTC: In memory.

23 SM: You went back as a US citizen, you were a United States citizen when you went
24 back.

25 TTC: Sure.

26 SM: When did you become a citizen?

27 TTC: In 1996.

28 SM: In 1996.

29 TTC: I must be a citizen of the United States. If there something over there.

30 SM: How were you treated? When you went back to Vietnam how did they treat you?

1 TTC: Oh not too bad. Not too bad you know. Security Forces who give me many
2 problems when I was there now okay, young, American but no choice. I'm happy to be an
3 American citizen. My dream, my dream, when I was young, to have Vietnam. And now I'm
4 independent I cannot sleep over there, I must fly for my country I love. And it's hard for me too.
5 I like to be here but my wife, its hard for her to leave. Completely different. You can drive a
6 car, but she always. She, I tell you a story. Economy to have the student over there, the people
7 who are in seminary to become priest, you have now six or seven seminaries to become priest.

8 SM: This is your wife?

9 TTC: My wife.

10 SM: She's helped six people to become priests?

11 TTC: To become priests. She don't give me money.

12 SM: You are not a priest.

13 TTC: But she very proud, very proud.

14 SM: That's very nice.

15 TTC: And she like to go back to see the future priests and this year when it was at. The
16 province of Ho Chi Minh but you know he's in 1978 and we left him with and we have now a
17 hospital and four young seminarian. Now, we have some money from somewhere and send over
18 there to help of about 20 kids and for young seminary kid. Oh, my wife. Sometime you go to
19 Seattle and I invite you to my house and you see my wife. She is very religious, but she no like
20 to live here.

21 SM: She'd rather be in Vietnam?

22 TTC: In Vietnam but is very bad, not yet citizenship, he very upset with us because she
23 can speak French but cannot speak English very well. He can pass the tests writing but the
24 talking. Three times, I don't know why so difficult.

25 SM: Does she just keep trying? Is she going to try again?

26 TTC: Not really. We lose patience. I'm happy not to go back to write something for
27 Vietnam, maybe that tell you enough.

28 SM: Thank you, yes, we would like that.

29 TTC: For your research.

30 SM: Thank you, the Vietnam Archive would like that very much.

1 TTC: For your research because you are very Vietnamese programs and I send you
2 some documents to help you with your research.

3 SM: Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss today?

4 TTC: Oh, maybe too much?

5 SM: Oh, no, no, no. I didn't have any specific questions, I didn't know if you had
6 anything that you wanted to discuss yourself or anything that you had thought about?

7 TTC: but here it is maybe

8 SM: Because I think I've covered all the questions I'd like to ask.

9 TTC: Maybe you know you photograph for me?

10 SM: Yes, I'll photocopy those sheets that you gave me.

11 TTC: I keep one and for you and maybe in the future I like to find something here and
12 you too maybe because I arrived last night at two o'clock in the morning and it's not very good.

13 SM: Oh this is fine, I can read this. Okay, well this ends, this concludes the oral history
14 interview with Chieu.