



JOINT TASK FORCE - FULL ACCOUNTING  
DETACHMENT TWO/US MIA OFFICE  
DOC NGU STREET, HANOI, VIETNAM

Oral History  
Dong Van Thinh  
Gp 559

JUNE 26, 1993

SUBJ: INTERVIEW OF REQUESTED SOURCE, DONG VAN THINH

REF: ENTRY NUMBER 27, LIST OF 83 INTERVIEW REQUESTS, PRESENTED BY U.S. SENATOR JOHN KERRY TO ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER TRAN QUANG CO, MAY 93

1. BACKGROUND. ON 19 JUNE 1993, A JOINT U.S./VIETNAM ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW TEAM INTERVIEWED RETIRED SENIOR COLONEL (SRCOL) DONG VAN THINH, A 67 YEAR OLD HANOI RESIDENT. MR. THINH WAS A REGIMENTAL STAFF OFFICER SUBORDINATE TO TRANSPORTATION GROUP 559 AND SUBSEQUENTLY DIRECTOR OF MILITARY AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE 1A UNTIL HIS RETIREMENT IN 1991. HE IS ALSO A CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR TO THE PAVN'S OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL. THE TEAM MET AT THE CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL NEWS AGENCY COOPERATION, VIETNAM NEWS AGENCY, NUMBER 8 TRAN HUNG DAO STREET, HANOI, TO INTERVIEW MR. THINH, LISTED IN REFERENCE AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF INFORMATION CONCERNING U.S. PERSONNEL MISSING IN ACTION IN VIETNAM. THE U.S. CONTINGENT CONSISTED OF MR. [REDACTED], DET 2, JOINT TASK FORCE-FULL ACCOUNTING (JTF-FA) CASUALTY RESOLUTION SPECIALIST; TSGT [REDACTED], JTF-FA ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM COORDINATOR; AND PO2 [REDACTED], JTF-FA ANALYST/LINGUIST. THE VIETNAMESE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT CONTINGENT CONSISTED OF LTC LE KY, MINISTRY OF DEFENSE; AND MR. TRINH QUOC KHANH, MINISTRY OF INTERIOR.

2. SUMMARY. THE SOURCE, DONG VAN THINH, PROVIDED INFORMATION CONCERNING HIS WARTIME EXPERIENCES WORKING WITH TRANSPORTATION GROUP 559, THE UNIT RESPONSIBLE FOR STRATEGIC TRANSPORT OPERATIONS ON AND DEFENSE OF THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL (AKA 559 STRATEGIC ROUTE, AKA TRUONG SON ROUTE). THOUGH A MEMBER OF THE GROUP FOR OVER TEN YEARS, HE PROFESSED NOT TO KNOW THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE UNIT'S WARTIME RECORDS. HE ALSO SUMMARIZED HIS PURPOSE AND METHODS IN CO-WRITING THE OFFICIAL PAVN HISTORY OF THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL. HE RELATED NO PERTINENT INFORMATION ON U.S. PERSONNEL MISSING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

3. DETAILS.

A. AFTER FORMAL INTRODUCTIONS, LTC LE KY EXPLAINED TO THE INTERVIEW SUBJECT THE JOINT TEAM'S MISSION. MR. [REDACTED] THANKED DONG VAN THINH (DOONGF VAWN THINHJ) FOR HIS PARTICIPATION AND BEGAN THE INTERVIEW, POSING THE FOLLOWING TWO KEY QUESTIONS FIRST:

(1) SINCE 1973, HAVE YOU EVER SEEN OR HAD KNOWLEDGE OF U.S. PRISONERS OF WAR (PW) LIVING IN VIETNAM? MR. THINH REPLIED THAT HE HAD NOT.

(2) SINCE 1973, HAVE YOU EVER SEEN OR HAD KNOWLEDGE OF U.S. "STAY BEHINDS" IN VIETNAM? MR. THINH REPLIED THAT IN 1988, AN AMERICAN REQUESTED HIS HELP IN PROVIDING INFORMATION CONCERNING MISSING U.S. PILOTS, PURPORTEDLY TO SUPPORT AN EXCAVATION OPERATION (NFI). AGAIN, IN JULY OR AUGUST 1989, TWO AMERICAN JOURNALISTS INTERVIEWED THINH ABOUT THE WAR. THINH SAID HE REALIZED THESE AMERICANS WERE NOT ACTUALLY LIVING IN VIETNAM, BUT WERE JUST THERE TEMPORARILY. OTHER THAN THESE TWO INSTANCES, HE CLAIMED NO KNOWLEDGE OF AMERICANS LIVING FREELY IN VIETNAM.

B. HAVING ANSWERED THESE TWO QUESTIONS, MR. THINH BRIEFLY SUMMARIZED HIS CAREER. HE FOUGHT IN THE ANTI-FRENCH WAR DURING THE 1950'S. IN 1965, HE WENT TO SOUTH VIETNAM TO FIGHT IN THE REVOLUTION AND WAS STATIONED THERE WITH TRANSPORTATION GROUP 559 UNTIL 1977. IN 1977, HE BECAME THE DIRECTOR OF MILITARY AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE 1A, FROM WHICH HE RETIRED IN 1991 AS A PAVN SRCOL.

C. AS A REGIMENTAL STAFF OFFICER SUBORDINATE TO GROUP 559, MR. THINH SAID HE DEALT MOSTLY WITH POLICY MATTERS, ONE OF HIS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES BEING POLICY RESOLUTION WRITING. THOUGH AWARE WHEN GROUP 559 FORCES CAPTURED OR

SUBJ: INTERVIEW OF REQUESTED SOURCE, DONG VAN THINH

REF: ENTRY NUMBER 27, LIST OF 83 INTERVIEW REQUESTS, PRESENTED BY U.S. SENATOR JOHN KERRY TO ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER TRAN QUANG CO, MAY 93

TOOK CHARGE OF A U.S. PRISONER, HE KNEW ONLY GENERALLY WHAT HAPPENED TO THESE PW'S. GROUP 559 STANDING POLICY GUIDANCE IN THESE INSTANCES WAS TO ASSIGN PERSONNEL AND A VEHICLE TO MOVE THE PW'S NORTH AND TURN THEM OVER TO CENTRAL AUTHORITIES. THINH SAID HE WAS PERSONALLY MORE CONCERNED WITH VEHICLE STATUS, SERIAL NUMBERS AND THE LIKE THAN WHO RODE IN THE VEHICLES. AS FOR U.S. SOLDIERS KILLED IN GROUP 559'S AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY, THINH CLAIMED LOCAL AUTHORITIES BURIED THEM ON THE SPOT. HE BELIEVED THE U.S. BOMBING HAD OBLITERATED MOST OF THESE AMERICANS' GRAVES, JUST AS IT HAD MANY PAVN GRAVES.

D. GROUP 559 RECORDS, ACCORDING TO MR. THINH, DISPERSED WHEN THE UNIT CHANGED MISSIONS IN 1973, AFTER THE U.S. PRISONER RELEASE. AT THAT TIME, THE STRATEGIC ROUTE'S COMMO-LIAISON STATIONS, FORMERLY A MEANS OF MOVING PRISONERS NORTH, DISBANDED AND THINH DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE STATIONS' RECORDS. THIS ALSO HELD TRUE FOR OTHER GROUP 559 SUBORDINATE UNITS. THINH WAS STILL A GROUP 559 MEMBER IN 1977 WHEN THE UNIT ASSUMED A TOTALLY ECONOMIC ROLE. HE COULD ONLY SPECULATE THAT THE GROUP'S WARTIME RECORDS POSSIBLY RESIDED IN THE CENTRAL ARMED FORCES MUSEUM IN HANOI.

E. MR. [REDACTED] POINTED OUT THAT THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN U.S. MIA SEARCH OPERATIONS, PARTLY DUE TO ITS POTENTIAL LINK TO THE 591 U.S. PERSONNEL MISSING IN LAOS. THOUGH MR. THINH CLAIMED NO KNOWLEDGE OF U.S. PERSONNEL MISSING IN LAOS, HE OPINED THE HIGH RATIO OF PERSONNEL MISSING THERE, MOSTLY PILOTS, HE ASSUMED, WAS DUE TO THE LIVING CONDITIONS INCLUDING U.S. BOMBING, ROUGH TERRAIN, AND WILD ANIMALS. HE BELIEVED FINDING GRAVES ON THE STRATEGIC ROUTE WOULD BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT, PARTLY BECAUSE THE ROUTE RAN THROUGH THREE COUNTRIES (VIETNAM, CAMBODIA, LAOS). IN ADDITION TO A GEOGRAPHIC LOCALE NOT CONDUCIVE TO PW ACCOUNTING OPERATIONS, THE ROUTE ROUTINELY FLOODED DURING THE RAINY SEASON AND ENGINEERING PERSONNEL OFTEN HAD TO BULLDOZE THE ROAD TO MAKE IT PASSABLE. MR. THINH SAID THAT THE LOCAL LANDMARKS AND SPECIFIC TERRAIN FEATURES IN THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL REGION CHANGED DRASTICALLY FROM ONE RAINY SEASON TO THE NEXT. AFTER 20 YEARS, HE SAID, IT WOULD BE NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY PORTIONS OF THE OLD HO CHI MINH TRAIL.

F. CONCERNING THE OFFICIAL PAVN HISTORY OF THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL, MR. THINH SAID HE AND THE OTHER AUTHORS HAD INTENDED THE BOOK AS A MEMENTO TO THE LEADERSHIP AND MEN WHO SERVED ON THE TRAIL. A MAIN SOURCE DOCUMENT FOR THE BOOK WAS A LIST OF PERSONNEL INVOLVED IN GROUP 559'S WARTIME EFFORTS. MANY OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, THE AUTHORS DISCOVERED, HAD FORGOTTEN DETAILS CONCERNING THE WAR. THINH EXPLAINED THAT HIS OWN CONTRIBUTION TO THE BOOK WAS BASED ON HIS GENERAL STAFF KNOWLEDGE.

G. WITH NO FURTHER QUESTIONS FOR MR. THINH, THE JOINT TEAM AGREED TO CONCLUDE THE INTERVIEW.

4. CORRELATIONS TO EXISTING POW/MIA CASES. NONE.

5. POTENTIAL LEADS. MR. THINH IDENTIFIED OTHER AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS TO THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL AS FOLLOWS:

A. NGUYEN VIET PHUONG (NGUYEENX VIEETJ PHWONG), A 75 YOA RETIRED SRCOL AND HANOI RESIDENT, WHO THINH CLAIMED PROVIDED ONLY FOUR SMALL PIECES OF PERTINENT POLITICAL INFORMATION TO THE BOOK. (JTF-FA, DET 2 RESEARCHER/ HISTORIAN BEGAN AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. PHUONG ON 1 JUN 93. THIS INTERVIEW, IN SUPPORT OF CODEL KERRY, WAS CUT SHORT DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS AND WILL BE RESCHEDULED IN THE NEAR FUTURE.)

B. NGUYEN THANH BINH (NGUYEENX THANH BINHF), A RETIRED HANOI RESIDENT AND

SUBJ: INTERVIEW OF REQUESTED SOURCE, DONG VAN THINH

REF: ENTRY NUMBER 27, LIST OF 83 INTERVIEW REQUESTS, PRESENTED BY U.S. SENATOR JOHN KERRY TO ACTING FOREIGN MINISTER TRAN QUANG CO, MAY 93

A MILITARY TRANSPORTATION EXPERT.

C. CAN HOANG DU (CAANS HOANGF ZUJ), A HANOI RESIDENT AND MILITARY ENGINEER. (THIS JOINT ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW TEAM INTERVIEWED MR. DU ON 19 JUN 93, JUST AFTER INTERVIEWING MR. THINH.)

D. TRAN HAU TUE (TRAANF HAAUF TUEEJ), AN ANTI-AIRCRAFT ARTILLERY SPECIALIST CURRENTLY RESIDING IN HO CHI MINH CITY. MR. THINH SAID THAT THOUGH TUE WAS THE YOUNGEST AMONG THE AUTHORS, HE WAS NOW AILING AND UNABLE TO WORK.

E. PHAM HANG HAI (PHAMJ HAWNGF HAIR), CURRENT WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN, NOW APPROXIMATELY 45 YOA. HAI PROVIDED ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT FOR THE PROJECT, BUT WAS NOT AN AUTHOR.

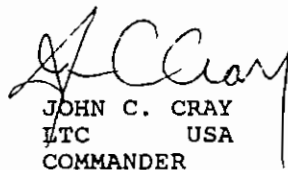
6. MATERIAL EVIDENCE: NONE. THIS SOURCE BROUGHT NO RECORDS, NOTEBOOKS, DIARIES, OR ANY MATERIAL EVIDENCE ASSOCIATED WITH ANY UNACCOUNTED FOR U.S. PERSONNEL.

7. COMMENTS.

A. THOUGH APPARENTLY SINCERE IN HIS STATEMENTS, DONG VAN THINH WAS A RAMBLING SPEAKER, COVERING THE SAME POINTS SEVERAL TIMES DURING DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE INTERVIEW. DESPITE THIS FACT, BELIEVE THIS SUBJECT KNEW NOTHING THAT COULD ILLUMINATE THE FATE OF ANY U.S. SERVICE MEMBER MISSING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.

B. THE MEMBERS OF THE JOINT TEAM CONFERRED ON THE QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED DURING THIS INTERVIEW. TEAM MEMBERS AGREED THAT THE NEED TO RE-INTERVIEW THIS SUBJECT WOULD DEPEND ON WHETHER FURTHER QUESTIONS FOR MR. THINH ARISE DURING THE COURSE OF THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW TEAM'S FUTURE WORK.

C. REQUEST THE VNOSMP MAKE DONG VAN THINH AVAILABLE FOR RE-INTERVIEW IF NECESSARY.

  
JOHN C. CRAY  
LTC USA  
COMMANDER