

* Nguyen van Thoi

Garage mechanic,

May 23, 1983, 313 Geo. Mason Dr., Arlington Va.

(in 1975)

At the time of the communist takeover in Vietnam I was civil administrator of a district of Cantho, major town in the Delta southwest of Saigon ^{a haven of} on the Mekong River. There were about 25,000 people in this district. On April 30 at about 10 p.m. the communists occupied Cantho in force. They were both NVA and local VC forces. They broadcast on loudspeakers that everyone should go to work the next day as before. We learned later that this was so they could sort us out more easily. We talked about whether to go to work or to hide, but on the next days I decided to go to my office ^{in Trau Hiep District} and see what would happen. When I got there I noticed some people, such as cyclo drivers, who were now revealed to ^{be} communist officials all along. After recording our names and positions, we were all sent home about noon, and told to come back the next morning.

Next day ^{about 2 PM} we were put in a truck and taken to the former police detention center, being told we would have to attend lessons. There we were locked in a bare room without ^{only some} light of day. It was covered by a tin roof which made it very hot inside. Over the next few days they put 300 people in this room which was only big enough to handle 50. There were about 5 latrine buckets at the end of the room. We had no mosquito nets, no bedding. At 10 a.m. the door would open and prisoners would be detailed to ^{hand out} ~~carry around~~ containers of rice. We would get one small bowl each, with a small piece of fish or vegetable added. This happened again at ^{about 6 PM} at night. Twice each week we would be let out in the open air for washing. Three men would have three ^{litres} quarts of water. The first ^{litres} quart would be divided among the three men to wet the skin, after which we would put on soap. The ^{litres} other two quarts were for rinsing. This was all done very ^{FAST, in about 5 minutes.} fast. Inside, at night, it was so hot and there was so little air for 300 people that I was afraid I would suffocate.

After about two weeks, at 10 a.m. my name was called out for

interrogation. I was taken to a room and sat down on a stool in front of a desk. Behind the desk was a communist officer, and behind me was a ^{police} guard with an AK 47 pointed at my back. I remember the first question the officer asked me. He said: "Do you know why the Communist Party has done you a favor already?" I said nothing. He continued, "Because we have not killed you outright. All you people who worked for the puppet government owe us a blood debt," ^{subsequent to the capture} I said nothing. He asked me how many people I killed. I said no ~~man~~ one. I had been a civilian administrator, and before that, in the army, I said I had been in G-4, the supply section. I did not tell him I had been in G-2 (intelligence), in the 33rd Regiment of the 21st Infantry Division, ^{in 1972-73} or I would not be here today. ^{or would probably have been with the North Vietnamese and still be a prisoner}

^{a difficult time} Higher ranking combat officers of the South Vietnam army had little chance. I knew that the Corps Commander Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khoa Nam and his deputy Brig. Gen. Le Van Hung had killed themselves on April 30 to avoid capture. ^{He had been 5th Division commander in the battle of An Loc in 1972} They were not willing to flee abroad and leave their men behind. And while most of ^{us} played along with anything the communists said or did so as to stay alive, some did not. I remember Col. Ho Ngoc Can, Province Chief of Chuong Thien Province and ^a former Ranger commander, He defied the communists from the outset and just laughed at them. So one night in August or September 1975 ^{in Cai Rang} we were made to watch a ^{LIVE} TV showing of the trial of Col. Ho Ngoc Can before the so-called Peoples Court. ^{in Can Tho in the zone and helicopter pulled in front of the prison of the ARVN compound} They made a mistake showing us that because he laughed at them. He asked that his body be buried wrapped in the flag of South Vietnam. They refused. So he shouted "Viet Nam Cong Hoa Muon Nam !" which means ^{by the 1st 1st Army Group} "long live the Republic of Vietnam," and then they shot him two or three times in the head. He was 38 years old, the best Colonel in the Mekong Delta region. He was a great hero to all of us.

After about three months in Cantho I was moved to a former Catholic seminary in Cai Rang, about ten kilometers away. Here conditions were much better for us, as we had only 30 men to each room. We were awakened

5 prisoners needed staff from

This was based on ad
Cassidy's memoir
cut by TV and radio

3.

went

at 5:30 a.m. for exercise. Then without any food, we ~~went~~ to class from 7:30 till noon. I remember our first lesson which was entitled: "American Imperialists - Enemy of the Vietnamese People." First they told us how bad the Americans were, and of course we just went along with anything they said, and then they told us how they had kicked the Americans out of Vietnam. Of course I knew it was a political thing, and I remembered how Kissinger had sold us out at Paris. I knew that the Americans had left because they wanted to, and the communists had never kicked them out. But we ²went along with whatever bullshit they said because we wanted to live. I think some of the peasant people may have believed the communists because they knew nothing, but I had worked closely with the Americans as interpreter with our 21st ARVN Division. ^{in the Radical Operations Center, 63} If we ²objected to disagreed with anything the communists said, we would never get out of the camps, ^{that is what} ~~alive~~, we thought. Also, they always kept telling us "we will send you home soon," but then we would be kept on for months or years, so in the end we never believed anything they said anymore. I remember one of our group who was a tough Hoa Hao from Long Xuyen. One night he took blood from his arm and painted "Da Dao Ho Chi Minh" on the wall of our room. That means "^{down with} ~~death~~ to Ho Chi Minh." The communists just took him ^{away} ~~out~~ and killed him. They did not enforce discipline by beatings or torture. ^{in my camp} They just killed offenders, either ~~with a gun or with hammer blows to the back of the head.~~ *

South

Anyway, the second lesson was called "The/Vietnamese Puppet Government" and the third was "The South Vietnam Army - enemy of the People."

After lunch which was better at the seminary center because we had a chance to cook our own fish and rice and because we could grow some vegetables, we were sent out to do manual labor in the fields for the rest of the day. This went on for six months, with Sundays off so the communists would not have to come to work. During all this time

In our camp, a friend says that about 9 months later, we were sent to a new camp. The communists put him in a new camp.

our families[✓] were never told where we were. Even the people who were taken away, like the Hoa Hao man, the communists never told the family where they had buried his body. ^{They} He just disappeared.

After six months we were moved again, this time to the former Chieu Hoi center on the outskirts of Cantho. This was a camp built for Viet Cong who came in to the Government of South Vietnam under its so-called "open Arms" amnesty program. These people, known as the Hoi Chanh, had come in because they were fed up with the war or had come to hate the communists for some reason. Anyway, if they had been Communist Party members or had fought for the South Vietnam government after their return, they were taken away and killed by the communists after 1975. Some could escape by hiding in the big cities, but if they went back to their village they would be caught and killed.

This camp was again better than the seminary. For the first time our families were allowed to come visit us. We were allowed to see them for 15 minutes every month, and my wife brought me some food and, above all, a mosquito net. This net was a lifesaver when we were moved to our next destination, which was the famous Cu Lao Dung forest. This place was down near the seacoast at the border of Soc Trang and ^{Vinh Binh} ~~Canau~~. It was a tidal area so that a place where you were standing would be chest deep in water a few hours later. We first had to clear the jungle, then build a dike to keep the tide out, and then make rice fields. This was all done by hand with only simple tools. The area had been communist-controlled during the war, and we were like on an island surrounded by water and by people who would report us if we tried to escape. It was really a ^{big} great labor camp with ¹¹⁰⁰ 100 of us there. We worked hard all day, then had to attend a 30-minute self-criticism session before going to sleep. The camp administrator was a southern Vietnamese communist and was easier on us than a north Vietnamese would

5 to 10 minutes - Corleone
7:30 work - took food with you
could take back as long as both hands
4 PM - 5 PM - leave - 5 minutes - free - 10 minutes - 10 minutes

6 days a week

have been. For example, we had large latrine pits which we used. When these were full, we would simply fill them over with earth and build a new one. But in another camp run by a north Vietnamese, he made the men empty out the old latrine with their bare hands and use the same pit over again. We were also lucky because our camp was for civilian administrators and police. The camps for the former South Vietnam soldiers were much worse. I heard that the camp at Tay Ninh, north of Saigon, was really terrible.

From time to time we would all be assembled and names would be called out, and if it was your name you had to stand over on the other side. Usually this was to select out the higher officials so they could be sent to camps in north Vietnam. We always feared that, because many of these people would never be released.. Early in 1977 a good friend of mine obtained his release and was returned to Cantho. Before he left he promised to get me out, too. So his wife and my wife got some money and bribed a communist official. There was a lot of corruption of this kind, which was lucky for me. So one day ^{in April 1977} my name was called out and I was told to get ready to leave in the morning. ~~So~~ I was put on a boat which went up the river to Cantho. ~~at night~~ We spent the night on the boat and then were taken to another camp. Families were let in and we all milled around looking for each other until suddenly my little son saw me and came running over. Then they had a ceremony with speeches and we received certificates of release from the re-education camps.

I was allowed to go home to my family in Cantho but was kept under close watch and had to report to the police every few days. I got a job pedalling a cyclo and dressed in poor clothes, barefoot. The communists approved of this and the surveillance eased off after about three months. Meanwhile I was planning to escape.

One day, without any permission, I simply got on the bus for Saigon. There I ~~met~~ ^{had} a good Vietnamese friend who agreed to collect money to pay for the building of a boat. ^{He wanted to escape to} So he would collect gold in Saigon and ^{from other escapees.} I would take it back to Cantho in small amounts. I would never stay overnight in Saigon, lest my absence from Cantho be noted. When ~~my~~ ^{we} friend had ^{accumulated} collected 50 ounces of gold I was able to have a ~~new~~ fishing boat constructed which was registered under the name of a local fisherman. I purchased a compass and even a U.S. Navy chart of the Gulf of Thailand, on the black market in Saigon.

In December, 1978 our escape party made its move. There were 32 men and women and 17 children. We all left at 1 a.m. and travelled ^{by sampans for three days to the sea, Bae Boi} overland through the U Minh forest of Camau to the sea. Meanwhile the boat had gone down the river and was waiting for us 500 yards offshore near the ~~How Da Bae~~ ^{How Da Bae} rocks. We were awaiting an experienced pilot who would guide us to Thailand but he never showed up. So just before dawn we had to leave anyway. I told them that I could find the way. We sailed for three days and two nights. The seas were so rough that we had no trouble from the Thai pirates who prey on refugee boats. Finally I saw bright lights on the Thai coast so I steered for that. We arrived there at about 1 a.m. and it turned out to be a Thai naval base. We motored right in and dropped anchor. They took no notice of us until 7 a.m. After we surrendered to them, I told them they would have trouble if the communists decided to attack Thailand. I was sent to ^{Songkhla} a refugee camp, and after three months we received permission to come to America, because I had worked closely with the Americans during the war. We now live in Virginia.

1966-68 USAID / Canada - Vietnam Deal - interpreter in Saigon & in Ely
 1968 - after that, joined army, armed forces language school Saigon
 1968-73 U.S. Admin team to 21st Division
 1972 - replacement - 12 months hospital - any discharge
 1973 - 75 civil administration