

Rockville MD.

2. PHAM TIEN - 5514 Bisley Ct., # 211 Tel: 468-1546 Social Services Mont. Co.
Former 2nd Lieut. ARVN, Gen. Staff Trng Officer, former
student Faculty of Law, ~~in~~ Saigon.

On April 27 (1975) my family members all left Saigon except for me. I was employed as a training officer at the ARVN General Staff near Tan Son Nhut airport. My rank was 2nd. Lieut. I had been drafted in 1970 from my civilian status as a law student. April 29 was my last day of work, after which we were told to go home. President Duong van Minh surrendered at 10 a.m. on April 30, and the Special Forces Unit at the General Staff was the last unit to lay down its arms. Starting about noon on April 30, the first North Vietnamese tanks and infantry came down Cong Ly Street from Tan Son Nhut, past the apartment where I lived. No one paid much attention. Many South Vietnamese civilians surfaced as having been VC agents all along. They could be anybody - a laborer, a school teacher, anyone. For two months I had no problem, just lived at home, went shopping as before, using South Vietnam piastres. During this time the communists were organizing the population, for example, dividing the city up into units of 10 households, registering its members etc. For this they used North Vietnamese civilian cadre and also Viet Cong who had surfaced.

Then in June came the first orders to report addressed to former ARVN personnel. The first call was for non-coms, who were detained for only three days, then sent home. This was very reassuring to the rest. After two weeks the next call was for officers of field grade and up to Generals, who were told to bring food and clothing for one month. One week later, company grade officers - Lieutenants and Captains - were called up, bringing 10 days food and clothes. I accordingly reported to a high school in the Tan Son Nhut area one morning and waited there all day. Then at midnight we were loaded in groups of 40 each into canvas covered Molotova trucks. They were not big trucks and we were packed in standing up and stayed that way as the trucks proceeded to unknown destination, arriving at about 8 a.m. We then could see we were in the former US and ARVN 25th Division compound at Tay Ninh, north of Saigon near the Cambodian border.

The overall camp came under Division 3, and was broken down into units corresponding to Brigades designated by the letter L, and into Regiments ~~corresponding to~~ designated by the letter T. Each T consisted of about 800 prisoners. Division 3 had four Ls, and each L had five Ts, which means that the Division camp overall contained about 16,000 men, including former GVN civil servants* as well as military officers. I was assigned to L4, T5. My T was commanded by a North Vietnamese Major, with staff of a Captain who was also Political Officer, 5 junior officers plus NCOs and soldiers, for a total force of 20 men. Our T of 800 prisoners was surrounded by a wire fence about 200 metres on a side, with guards at the corners, and a minefield outside. This minefield had been part of the defense perimeter of the old base. Inside our compound there were four shelters with tin roofs but no walls. The floors were concrete or wood. One hundred men were assigned to each shelter, which was originally designed for 30, and there ~~were~~ were no beds, bedding, mosquito nets etc. At night you could not turn over to either side without hitting your neighbor. In the whole enclosure, there was one latrine for three men, to serve 800.

For the first month our only task was to fix up the shelters and the compound. We took apart old oil drums, flattened the sides and made walls. We also dug wells about ten metres deep for our water supply. We used helmets or old empty ammo boxes as buckets to bring up the water.

* Such as Le Quang Nguyen, former Governor of the National Bank.

At first there was no routine at all and we were free to work on our quarters or visit other shelters within our wire enclosure. After two weeks they started to organize us into KHOI (200 people), broken down into DOI (40), again subdivided into TO (10). Each group would have a leader assigned by the North Vietnamese cadre. By the end of the first month our barracks and compound were completed, we were organized into groups, and were now assigned to labor tasks. As yet there was no political indoctrination.

During this period of labor our day began at 5 a.m. when a drum summoned us to 15 minutes of calisthenics, then a half-hour for washing up and reporting to the work site. Our task was to dismantle a great earth mound around the camp, including guard towers with thousands of old sandbags which were very hard and heavy. We would then flatten the ground and prepare it for agriculture. At 10:30 work would stop and we would return to our compound for the first meal of the day. The ration at first was 700 grams of rice per day with a little dried fish, and pumpkin as a vegetable, and some salt. At 12:30 lunch was over and we went back to work until 5 p.m. Dinner was then at 5:30 (the same food as lunch) and then from 7-9 we had to attend auto-critique sessions to go over the results of our 10 hours of labor in the hot sun. While working we had a ten minute break each hour but had to remain in the blazing heat. One prisoner, Ngo Nghia, tried to escape by seizing a guard's gun but he was quickly caught, and each Khoi had to send one man to witness the execution at which he was shot.

After one month at labor, political instruction was held. We had class from 7 - 11 and 1 - 5. There were 13 lessons which lasted for three months and were taught by North Vietnamese military instructors. Each lesson would be presented in part for one day and then discussed in the TO for two more days before going on to the next part. Essentially the instruction was on how bad imperialism is in general and American imperialism in particular. They reviewed each stage of American policy, such subjects as the rapid reaction forces, Westmoreland's search and destroy tactics, pacification, and Nixon's "Vietnamization" tactics, and then they explained how each one had been defeated by them. The North Vietnamese instructors were basically very ignorant people. They convinced ~~know~~ one and they knew it, but at the same time everyone went along with anything they said, to avoid trouble. They also taught ~~us~~ how good socialism is. One instructor thought American and English were two separate languages. We ~~were taught~~ could study one but not the other!

I spent 1½ years in this camp. The rice ration was reduced to 600 grams after 6 months, but we were allowed to grow some vegetables. Also, after this first 6 months food packages from our families were permitted once every 2 three months, and we had one family visit lasting two hours during this 1½ years. Labor just went on every day again, 6½ days a week. Two more men tried to escape in the first year. Both were captured, one shot in the leg. They were not executed but were put in a Conex container in the sun for more than two months on a rice and salt diet only. We were also made to clear the minefields. Three men lost legs. We had to carry them on stretchers to a hospital 5 miles away. Another time when we were cutting rushes to make thatched roof, a mine went off and killed 7 men at one time. We had no doctors and no medicine, except aspirin and Vitamin B6, plus any medicine from our family gift packages.

* * * * *

After 18 months at Tay Ninh our whole camp was transferred to Bu Sia near the Cambodian border between Phuoc Long and Banmethuot. Here we met with malaria, and more than 90% of us were infected with it. This was a place of total, dense jungle, and our task was to clear it with machetes and axes we made from the springs of junked military vehicles, after first having built bamboo shelters for ourselves and for the North Vietnamese cadre.

Our job was to convert this jungle into agricultural land for a "New Economic Zone.

This time our quarters, being made by us from virgin jungle, were less crowded, and we also were able to work among the trees without being bothered by guards. There was only one road out of this area, nowhere to go, so security was considerably relaxed. The communist system of discipline is quite different from the open violence and brutality which you would expect to find in a Latin American dictatorship or in Iran, but it is very effective. It has three basic parts. First, they deprive the prisoner of any contact with his family for long periods. Then they work him hard on an inadequate diet which is periodically reduced. (In this new camp the rice ration again went down, to 500 grams per day.) Finally, they turn the men against themselves. For example, if a TO does not work hard enough and does not fulfill its quota, the men are simply kept in the auto-critique session until they solve the problem themselves, missing food hours or sleep, as long as necessary. Thus anyone who has a spirit of resistance will find the others turning against him. In these ways a mental state of depression is induced. I believe that after three years of such treatment, the will is broken.

Over the next 1½ years we were transferred to four places in Phuoc Long province, always with the same mission of clearing the jungle. By this time I had been a guest of the North Vietnamese communists for three years. Then in June 1978, without any advance warning, I was given a discharge paper and released.

The release policy is this: Medical doctors are freed first, after 18 months, because of the critical need for them in the society. College graduates are usually let go after three years. I had majored in economics at the University before taking legal training. Again, the state is desperate for trained people. Conversely a simple combat officer ~~minim~~ could have little hope of release. The communists will keep him confined indefinitely as a security precaution, while profiting from his unpaid labor. Many of those with whom I toiled under those miserable conditions are, I am sure, still there, eight years after the communist victory.

You may be surprised but I was not so happy to be returning to Saigon, because I knew that is just another camp. The people are divided into 10-household units, or TO. Every 10 TO have their uniformed Public Security officer from the North Vietnamese Army. He knows everything about you and your household, even what you are eating. He can come in to your house at any time of day or night, and you must stay on his good side. You can only travel to another city, ^{for example} if he issues you an internal pass. When I arrived in Saigon I was ordered to go to the police every week to tell them where I was, whom I had met or talked with during the week. At night we were obliged to attend the self-criticism sessions, just like in camp.

My family's house had been confiscated so I stayed first with a friend from student days and decided immediately to go underground. I bought a forged pass on the black market and kept moving my place of residence for 8 months without being caught, until I escaped from Vietnam. It happened this way: One evening my nephew called me and said he had money and had arranged to join a boat which would try to get away. I ~~minim~~ went with him a little later to a small boat on the Saigon River, at 4 a.m. We went down this river until 11 a.m. when we reached Vung Tau, formerly Cap Saint Jacques. Then we waited until 11 that night, when a fishing boat came in from the sea. It

was 13 metres long and 4½ metres wide, and 136 people who, like us, had made their way to Vung Tau went on board. Then, at midnight, the boat sailed out to sea again in stormy weather to avoid the patrol boats and sailed for six days, during which we had no food at all, until it arrived at an uninhabited island in Indonesia. Local fishermen then took us to a refugee camp, from which I was processed rapidly for the United States as Category I since I already had parents here, had been an officer in the ARVN and had been in a concentration camp.

Looking back now at the situation in Vietnam, I can only say it is bleak. The policies of the communist regime will not change until the present leadership is dead, and the policies are not working. The quality of the administration is poor, and the educational system is backward. Only 30% of high school graduates are accepted for higher training, the rest going directly to production. And the training provided at the ~~universities~~ universities is poor. The farmers have lost their land to the state and have no incentive to produce. Food must be diverted to the army in Cambodia and Laos, and the small businessmen are being squeezed out. The population in former South Vietnam is hostile, depressed and waiting for any change.