

I know an old Vietnamese man who I will call Mr. Tran. He doesn't talk about the Vietnam War to much of anyone. He talks to me, though, because I am genuinely interested in the insights he is capable of providing.

During the war, Mr. Tran used to be a prominent member of the South Vietnamese Army. He eventually rose to the rank of major, and was finally assigned to a secret team that coordinated military operations with the United States. He worked intimately with US Special Forces, MACSOGV (Military Advisory Command Special Operations Group Vietnam) and the US CIA. When the US eventually pulled out of the war, Mr. Tran and his family were transported to the US and granted citizenship. For those like him, those who helped the US, to be left behind would have been a death sentence. To this day he cannot return. He and his family were very lucky. Most Vietnamese who worked for the US were indeed left behind.

Finally, he decided to give me some really serious information. In a somber voice he said, "I'm going to tell you about something that happened over there that will never come out. Americans would never want to know. They don't like the truth." Here is what he said:

Back in the mid 1960s, when Mr. Tran was still leading troops in combat, he told me of several incidents where his units would walk right into well laid enemy ambushes. In one case, on a cross border raid into Cambodia, his entire unit was nearly wiped out by enemy forces that seemed to be waiting for them. This type of ambush had happened before. He began to get suspicious.

He went to his immediate superior and said that he thought there might be some type of leak in the chain of command on the US side. The missions that had come under ambush had been pre-cleared with the Americans before they went off.

Some time later, Mr. Tran received information of the existence of a Viet Cong camp across the border in Cambodia. This time he decided he was going to act on his own. He assembled a group of his best men and set off without telling anyone, except his commander. Mr. Tran said that when they encountered the camp, there was no sign that the enemy knew they were coming. He said that his small fire team of about twenty men managed to neutralize about 60 Viet Cong soldiers without sustaining a single casualty, and that they fled back across the frontier almost before the echo faded.

When the US Advisory Command learned of Mr. Tran's actions, they wanted to have him court-martialed! Luckily, his superior intervened and apologized for not clearing the mission through channels. The Americans said that there was to be no further action without US approval. What else could Mr. Tran do? He was a soldier. Soldiers follow orders.

The Vietnam War happened a long time ago. While some of the horror of combat has faded from his thoughts, Mr. Tran still had nagging questions about the several strategic ambushes he and other commanders, including Americans, have experienced. At this point in the story, he took a deep breath, and looked at the floor. Then he fished out a cigarette and lit it. He put the thing to his mouth and inhaled deeply. He squinted his brave, fiery eyes. His fingers and teeth were stained orange from several decades of smoking. He removed the cigarette from his mouth, pausing for a few moments. Then, in a deliberate and even maneuver, he blew the exhalant into the cool evening air. He watched the ghostly apparition slowly fade away... Like a painful memory.

He continued talking. A few weeks ago, it turned out, he got a call from a friend of his. He never told me the man's name, but Mr. Tran worked with this man back in Vietnam. He was a retired Green Beret Colonel who was, at that time, working for the CIA. He was now dying of cancer. Mr. Tran went to see him in the hospital, and asked him about the ambushes. What the Colonel had to say was altogether shocking. Here's how Mr. Tran told the story:

President Kennedy and Congress needed to be convinced that the Communist forces were becoming increasingly formidable in Vietnam. So, he said, in the early days of the conflict, US intelligence turned over strategic military intelligence about the South Vietnamese army's operations so that vigorous and seemingly skilled attacks could be made against them by the North. Kennedy was then presented with intelligence reports showing strong communist capabilities.

I interrupted, in shock, "But JFK signed an executive order that would have removed all US forces from Vietnam by Christmas, 1962. He must not have believed what he was being shown."

Mr. Tran continued with the Colonel's account. JFK, according to the retired colonel, was removed mostly because of his stance on the Vietnam issue. In the years that followed, US and South Vietnamese military operations continued to be undermined by secret operations designed to perpetuate the fighting, and justify higher levels of funding by the US Congress.

I became enraged. I said that I had to speak with the colonel while he was still alive, I needed operational designators and dates, I needed the numbers of US and South Vietnamese men killed as a result of this treasonous business! I fully intended to make the US Congress aware of this, but I needed some more information.

"No no no no!" said Mr. Tran. "You don't need any of that. Besides, no records exist, and I don't want anyone else to get hurt. You know what *they're* capable of." His chilling reference to the intelligence community in this context terrified me, because he was right. I might even be a fool for writing this down. I don't care anymore. You reach a point where you have to express certain things. "The only reason I told you this information is so that you know what happened when they try to lie to you about Vietnam. No history book will ever tell the truth about what happened there. And when old men like me die, no one else will know. We would have beaten the Communists if they didn't kill Kennedy. Never forget that!" He pointed at me with the cigarette. A hint of a tear showed in his right eye, only a hint. I don't think men like Mr. Tran could cry anymore. I thought all of their tears had been expended long ago.

He went on to say that the agents who had been involved in the actual leaking of the information to the North had been executed under the guise of the Phoenix Program. Ironically, this was an operation that was supposed to, among other things, eliminate those people thought to be spying for the North. The reality was that some of those spies had their genesis with US intelligence in the first place.

"There was a mole, all right. It was Uncle Sam," he said.

[Ed. NOTES: I thought about the quagmire of lies that was the Vietnam conflict. I tried to tell myself that maybe his story was only the ravings of an old man. I thought about Robert McNamara saying, "We were wrong. Dead wrong." Ha! Maybe that's all it was, fools with PhDs running amuck in the halls of power. I mean, it would be parsimonious to think that. But then I considered the *Pentagon Papers*. Were the implications of that document any less shocking than this account? I don't think so. I've always thought the Gulf of Tonkin incident was one of the most egregious lies ever foisted upon the American people. That event opened the door for all that followed. But would the American people have acted any differently if they found out U.S. intelligence was selling out the lives of American soldiers directly? Sadly, I'd have to say that I don't know the answer to that question.]