

Interview of Nguyen Van Thai

A: Interviewer: Allison McIllece

B: Interviewee: Nguyen Van Thai

Summary of the Interview

Nguyen Van Thai is a Vietnamese man residing in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Born in Saigon, he recounts his involvement as a soldier fighting against the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1977. In this interview, Nguyen Van Thai reflects on his tumultuous life story from political upheaval to imprisonment other personal trials. Now happily living in Phnom Penh, Nguyen Van Thai spends his time learning English and pursuing other personal goals.

A: Hello. Nice to meet you today!

B: Hello. Nice to meet you.

A: Yeah. Nice to meet you. What is your name?

B: My name is Thai.

A: Thai.

B: The family name is Nguyen. Nguyen Van Thai.

A: Nguyen Van Thai?

B: Yes.

A: Is it Nguyen Van Thai?

B: Yes.

A: Is it a Vietnamese name?

B: Yes.

A: Are you from Vietnam?

B: Yeah, I'm from the South of Vietnam.

A: South of Vietnam.

B: Yeah, I'm born in Saigon.

A: Saigon. Okay, very cool. And so today I wanted to ask your permission, is it okay if I take your video today?

B: Yes, that's okay.

A: Okay. And is it okay if we post it on Facebook?

B: Okay.

A: Okay, so I will ask you again—what city are you from in Vietnam?

B: Say again.

A: What city are you from in Vietnam?

B: I'm from Saigon.

A: And how long have you lived in Cambodia?

B: I have twice.

A: Twice.

B: Yes, the first in 1977.

A: Oh, in 1977.

B: Yes.

A: So, you were here around the time of the Khmer Rouge?

B: Yes. No, I fighting to Pol Pot.

A: Oh.

B: In that time, I was soldier.

A: Oh really. So, can you tell me more about that experience?

B: Yeah—I am—in that time, I came to Cambodia for fighting to Pol Pot. And I stay here for more than three years. Yeah, in that time I can speak Khmer because I have [inaudible] training for three months, Cambodian. But now for a long time, past of 40 years—I'm trying to remember and I'm trying to speak with Khmer people.

A: Hmm, very good. How old were you when you came as a soldier?

B: In that time, I'm 20 years old.

A: 20 years old.

B: And do you know what rank you were—what your name was as a soldier? You can say it in Vietnamese if that's what you know.

A: Yeah, the name of me in the soldier is the same as now.

A: Oh, it's the same as now? Did you have a title?

B: Yeah.

A: What was your title in Vietnamese? What did they call you in the Army?

B: Major.

A: Major. And how long did you fight in the war?

B: In—I can talk about my life.

A: Yeah. You want to talk about your life, so—

B: I live and I—in the South of Vietnam is Saigon city.

A: Saigon city.

B: Yes. And in that time, I—in the war time, Vietnam war time, I'm still a student.

A: A student?

B: Yeah.

A: What were you studying?

B: For the [inaudible] of the University for society.

A: Oh, very good.

B: Yes, and I have two certificates of proficiency. I'm finished for overseas by the American government in when I'm 16 years old.

A: Wow, 16. That's very young.

B: Yeah, yeah, I'm—I'm not finished for the high school, yes. And but in that time, the government, they have to change the law for the military service and every—the young boy must to be the soldier when 17 years old.

A: 17.

B: Yeah, and I'm against with that law. And don't—we, all the students think—we don't agree that law.

B: Yeah. You don't want to fight at 17.

B: Yes, we have the many, many meeting against with that law and they get me in jail.

A: Oh!

B: Yes. [Laughs]

A: You were in jail?

B: Yeah.

A: How long were you in jail for?

B: Oh, for about seven months, because my father—my parents live in Canada now.

A: Oh, in Canada.

B: Yes, and my father in the old government before '75, my father, he's the bodyguard of President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

A: Wow!

B: The old government, yes.

A: Wow.

B: And me and him have the wrong way.

A: Yes, you're not very—

B: Yes.

A: You don't get along very well?

B: Yes. When the policeman get me in jail and I help my father and my father get me out, and when I come back to the school, everybody know.

A: They all talk about you.

B: Yes, and I—but I like against with that law. And I don't, I don't know that the community recognize. Yeah. And they say no, no, no, no—very care—very danger! Because the policeman, they'll caught you and they will—you will show the people who work for the Communists. No, no, no, no, no. I can keep the quiet. And they get me in the jungle with the Communists. Yes, you hear the Củ Chi tunnel in Vietnam?

A: No. What is that?

B: Oh, very amazing!

A: Very amazing?

B: Yeah, the tunnel—the city underground.

A: Underground, under the tunnels! Wow.

B: Yes, yes. Have you been in Vietnam?

A: Never. Not once.

B: Yeah. Okay, on the way from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh. Yeah, that is between—after the border about 30 kilometers. Yeah, that reason—the reason on the highway on the Asian highway. And that the place very, very famous. Oh, excuse me. Where were you from?

A: I'm from America.

B: Oh! I think that if you read on the history book—

A: I'll probably learn about them! Yeah, the famous tunnels.

B: Yes. And I live in the tunnels with the Communists for nearly a year.

A: Wow in the tunnels for a year?

B: Yes. And after the war—Vietnam—I'm very happy because I think that the war is stopped and the peace is coming with the Vietnamese. We are very, very happy because the people in the North and people in the South decide to meet together and many, many they are very happy. The family is [on] two sides.

A: Yeah, but now they're together!

B: Yeah. But that time, we stopped for that. And because it—now—and in that time, in my mind, I like to study all the time. And until now I'm 62 years old.

A: 62!

B: But I like study and learning and studying. Yeah. But the one I am very happy because with my children—I have two children, one boy and one girl. My son is 36 years old. And my daughter is 30. My daughter, she get married with a foreign boy. They are living in Singapore now. My son, still in Vietnam.

A: Do you ever talk about your war experiences with your kids?

B: Yeah. The special for my life now, I escaped from Vietnam. Because I lucky—I retired from the military service. And the political of the Vietnam now, they have a lot of terrible—and they are fighting together inside. Yes, and the people who live in the north, and people

who live in the South, even the Communism. I'm so tired, I'm so sad. And my parents, my family, my father, my brother. And my brother, he's a police, Canadian policeman. Yeah, and two up in America, in California.

A: California.

B: Yes, and they are angry and they worry for me because I lost my wife—I lost my life. Yeah, but I never sad. I hope that—I'm still alive and I can do, and I can change, yeah. Five years ago, when I still in Vietnam, I worked, I worked with many, many foreign companies. And I know many, many foreign people in Saigon. And I have the one, the best friend. He's the CEO of CFI of [inaudible], and he helped my daughter for the high school in Singapore.

A: Oh good!

B: And, my daughter study and finished the high school and university in Singapore. And she back from Vietnam, work for [inaudible] of a year. And last year, two years ago, she worked in Thailand and she lived and I come to Thailand. But when I returned, the government, they get back all of my documents. And they warning me, "Don't go out of Vietnam for three months"—from last April. Yeah, and they get for me a letter—a memo [inaudible]. After two years when I retired, five country I have, I can't come in: American, French, England, Australian and one of Asia is Japan. Five countries I couldn't come, after two years. And I'm very worried that's uh—the best for my life. I sheltered for a long time with the government, but I am nothing. Yeah, even for my life and my family.

A: It sounds like your family is very important to you.

B: Yes, and last year—in my mind, I want to take an escape. And I come to here, by some helping from my old friend, they work in the military. They helped me to come here. And last time I very, very remember Vietnam. But, [chuckles] and my daughter, she said, "No, no, no. You stay in Phnom Penh. It's good and I think that now you come to the church, and you can do something." But now I'm happy with here. [Chuckles]

A: And you are learning a lot of English in English class. It's very happy.

B: Yeah! Yeah, very very amazing, because I stopped for the high school in 19—the end of '74. A few months before the Vietnam war is stopped. And from there, from that time, I never, never come to school. I never, never read the book. Because, you know the Communists, they don't agree with it. And but I'm trying to learn and to remember in my mind, in my head. In 1993, in that day, in the Vietnam law, they have changed something. The soldier, you can make the business by the private, private business by yourself. And I opened a company to work with foreign people.

A: I have one more question for you today about your grandparents. Because you love to learn. Did your grandparents love to learn too?

B: Yeah, sure. Because it matters, because my grandparents, they are dying in Paris.

A: Oh, in France.

B: In France, yes. And because he—uh, in my the big family, my family is grandparent—my grandparent is French.

A: French.

B: Yeah, and my grandmom is Vietnamese.

A: So, your grandfather was born in France.

B: No, born in Vietnam.

A: Born in Vietnam, but lived in France.

B: Yeah, no. My father born in Vietnam but work in that time the French Government still in Vietnam and Cambodia—Indochina.

A: Right, Indochina. And so he spoke French.

B: Yeah, yeah.

A: OK. And your grandmother was also Vietnamese.

B: Yeah.

A: Did she know French?

B: Yeah.

A: Very smart!

B: And I hear my parents say that she's very famous in 19—the second war in Vietnam. Yeah. And but after the Japanese? Remember as Japanese and Germany, Germany in the war.

A: In World War 2.

B: Yeah, World War 2. They, they change from the French by the Japanese. And in that time, Vietnam very, very they angry Japanese, because the Japanese, when they come to Asia. They use the rice instead for the coal. They burn for the train.

A: They burned rice?

B: Yes.

A: That's so wasteful.

B: Yeah. And in that time in 1945, 2 million Vietnamese people were dying by no have food. A lot of in the North, they die.

A: That's very hard!

B: Yeah.

A: But your grandparents survived that time.

B: Yeah.

A: They did not die because of hunger.

B: Yeah, and my grandmom, she goes back to the province, to the countryside for to—must obey. Because they—if the Japanese, they will cut the head.

A: It's very hard.

B: Yeah.

A: What were your grandparents' names? Do you know?

B: Nguyen Van Vung. Yeah, I remember—and in the family book and yeah—

A: You have it. And Nguyen Van Vung, was that your grandmother or grandfather?

B: Grandfather. Because the Vietnamese, if you see the family, the long name, the between—Van—is for the boy. And [inaudible] is for the woman or for the girl.

A: Oh okay! Very good. Do you have anything else you would like to share before we close our interview today?

B: No, I like—

A: You like the time.

B: Because, my big family in all over the world. Friends. Japan. My sister too, in Japan. And Canada. America. And in French, in Paris. Many!

A: Many?

B: Yes.

A: Okay.

B: But I don't know they still alive or they died.

A: Right. You don't keep in touch with them?

B: Because when the time I work in the military, and when I became an officer, you never, never connect to the country.

A: Oh, you don't connect with other countries.

B: Yes.

A: That's very hard.

B: They know. And my life is very, very hard. My wife is Chinese. Yeah, and in the time I get married with her—the time we fighting with China!

A: Wow! That's very difficult.

B: And then my leader, but because in in the Communist government, if you get married, you must to report for the leader. The boys and the girls you will get married, and they will check about the application. And the Catholic, the people who overseas, and the Chinese.

A: They did not like them?

B: Yeah.

A: Was it hard to give them the application?

B: Yeah.

A: Did you say that she was Chinese on there?

B: Yeah.

A: And what did they say?

B: They no agree, yeah. And they said, "No, sorry." [And I said,] "I love my wife, and I love this girl and I want to get married with her. I can leave from my job and stop, I want to stop for the military." But, the one time everything is very well over is because—sorry, some people, some something in the military is very confidential.

A: That's okay.

B: I couldn't—I don't say.

A: That's okay.

B: We never say about that, yes.

A: Yeah. You never say it, that's okay. I respect that. So today, that is all we have. And we would love to continue with another interview for you, because I know you are busy at 6 o'clock.

B: Yes, okay!

A: So thank you so much for your interview today.

B: Okay.

This interview was transcribed in English by Noah Moffat, a volunteer and friend to the project.