

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Southeast Asian Immigrants Project

Life Experience

O. H. 589

NGOAN NGUYEN

Interviewed

by

Poncharas Arirachakaran

on

May 15, 1981

NGOAN NGUYEN

Ngoan Nguyen was born on March 16, 1939, in Vung Tau, South Vietnam, the son of Tinh Nguyen and Dao Nguyen. After finishing Catholic high school at Vung Tau in 1963, Ngoan attended Su Pham College but was forced to quit his education due to the war between North and South Vietnam. He was drafted into the Republic Vietnam Marines in 1970 and assigned to Marine Commando. In 1975, he got married with Ho Thi Muoi and they subsequently had two sons, Long and Quoc. When the Communists came and took the country in 1975, Ngoan escaped to Binh Cia. But unfortunately in 1976, he was captured and sent to prison. Realizing that he would die if he stayed with the Communists, he decided to escape. In 1978, Ngoan successfully escaped from the prison and went to stay at Long Khanh and Phu Hoa. In 1979, Ngoan decided to escape from Vietnam with 43 passengers in a small boat. He arrived at Thailand, Chantaburi and stayed in the camp of Lam Sing, Thailand for about two weeks. In December, 1979, he started his new life in the United States. He plans to move to the South to look for a better job. Having left his family behind, Ngoan plans to bring them to the United States.

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INTERVIEWEE: NGOAN NGUYEN

INTERVIEWER: Poncharas Arirachakaran

SUBJECT: Navy Commando, Vietnam, Vung Tau, Su Pham

DATE: May 15, 1981

A: This is an interview with Mr. Ngoan Nguyen for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Southeast Asian Immigrants, by Poncharas Arirachakaran, at 1316 Florencedale, Youngstown, Ohio, on May 15, 1981, at 1:23 p.m.

Good afternoon. Where did you come from?

N: I come from Vietnam.

A: Can you tell us about your family? How many brothers and sisters do you have?

N: In my family I have eight brothers. I am the oldest one in the family.

A: No sisters?

N: No sisters.

A: How about your school, do you remember anything about it? What school did you graduate from?

N: There was no name for my school. It was in Vung Tau, Vietnam. That is where I was born.

A: Is that close to Saigon?

N: It is about ninety miles from Saigon.

A: Did you finish high school? Can you remember anything about it?

N: When we began high school we had to learn another language.

We could learn English, French, or Chinese. We had a choice.

A: What did you pick?

N: I picked the English language.

A: You told me you can speak three languages. How can you speak them?

N: That was a special class. That was an international class in Vietnam, sponsored and taught by Americans.

A: Do you speak Chinese?

N: Yes, very little. No formal training in Chinese. I learned from friends.

A: When did you finish your schooling?

N: 1965.

A: What did you do after that?

N: I was drafted into the Army to defend our country. The war started in 1963 and was spreading throughout South Vietnam.

A: What college did you go to?

N: Su Pham College in Saigon for two years. At the same time, I was studying engineering at Cao Thang Ky Thuat University, also located in Saigon! At Su Pham College, general academic subjects were pursued, while at Cao Thang Ky Thuat, I was specializing in engineering.

A: Was that a free college?

N: Yes.

A: What did you study?

N: Engineering.

A: Diesel?

N: Yes.

A: How many months did the government call everybody?

N: Just for six months. After six months, the government depended upon volunteers to fight in the war.

A: Your studies were interrupted then?

N: Yes.

A: Do you remember anything significant in your life?

N: I have a lot of significant things in my life. Sometimes I don't want to remember because it hurts. I got shot many times. In some families the mother and father would die and the children would run around the city hungry, without help.

A: When you served as a Marine Commando, where did you go?

N: I went to North Vietnam.

A: They sent you to fight?

N: My mission was to mark important targets in North Vietnam to be bombed by the B-52 planes such as factories, Army camps, and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I lived in the trees for six months while doing this!

A: How many years did you serve as a Marine Commander? When did you start, 1965-1975?

N: I started in 1965. The Communists came into my country in 1963. I served with the Army Marines until 1975.

A: If you quit school in 1965 what did you do until then?

N: From 1965 to 1967 I went to Army school. They taught me about fighting in the war for two years.

A: What happened when the Communists took over your country, what happened to you?

N: The Communists wanted all former soldiers to report to them. Former soldiers were put into prison or often killed. I didn't report and moved around from city to city to survive.

A: Did you disguise yourself?

N: Yes, I tried to become a farmer, a laborer. I changed my name too. In 1976 they found me.

A: Where were you at at that time?

N: Binh Zia, South Vietnam. One day one of my friends got drunk and talked a lot about me and that's how the Communists found out about me. I was put into a war camp of former soldiers.

A: How long did you stay there?

N: I went there in the end of 1976. I escaped in 1978.

A: What was your life like in jail, what did you do?

N: I had to make things from wood for them.

A: What did you get, just food and clothes?

N: I got nothing.

A: What about food?

N: We got one small sweet potato a day.

A: What about clothes?

N: We had to take clothing from people who died.

A: How did they treat prisoners?

N: We got underwear to wear only when we would have a family visit us.

A: How many people were in your group?

N: We had about ninety-six people.

A: They did the same kind of work as you?

N: Yes.

A: Did they keep you in this city all the time?

N: We didn't know where we were because we were blindfolded while traveling. I was taken to many different war camps for a period of more than two years.

A: Did they move you anyplace?

N: Yes, they had to move us every three months because if we found out where we were we could escape, they moved us at night.

A: Did you know where they moved you?

N: No.

A: In 1978 how did you escape?

N: I couldn't take the war prisons anymore or I would die. They sent me to make a table or something in a nearby village. It was a holy day for them. Some of the Communist guards were sent elsewhere and that's how I escaped.

A: How?

- N: I was the only one who escaped, not the whole group. They had some people living with us prisoners that worked with the Communists. Therefore, no one could be trusted. I escaped by walking.
- A: What city did you arrive in first?
- N: I kept walking in the jungle for about three days. The first city I reached was Long Khanh.
- A: What did you do in that city? Did they know?
- N: No, they didn't know. Then I went to Saigon. I went to change my name and social security identification card.
- A: Did you stay as a farmer before coming to the United States?
- N: Yes. After that time I lived in Phu Hoa, which is near Saigon.
- A: Why did you decide to come to the United States?
- N: Because I couldn't live under Communism and I had to get out. I didn't care what country I went to.
- A: When did you come to the United States?
- N: December 1979.
- A: Do you recall your journey to the United States, how you escaped from South Vietnam and continued?
- N: I called my friends and told them I needed help because I had to get out. They knew what I needed. My family gave me money to escape from Vietnam. I lived in Phu Hoa for a little while and then I went to Vung Tau. Then I contacted a fisherman who wanted to escape. We all put together to buy a boat.
- A: How big was your boat?
- N: My boat was about nineteen yards.
- A: How many people were in your boat?
- N: In October of 1979 we began to get out of Vung Tau. After three days the engine of my boat broke. We had arrived near Thailand by that time. After about eight days our food was gone. We stayed together in the boat. On the thirteenth day one person died. On the fifteenth day two more died. At that time we understood that we would die on the boat, but we started to catch fish by hand. We lived on the boat for twenty days, then we finally saw a fishing boat off of Thailand. They came and gave us some water and some canned food. After three days we finished the food again and the people continued to die. On

the twenty-seventh day we saw one boat from Thailand. They came on our boat to rob us. We had weapons in our boat and that's why we got their boat. We said we would kill them if they wouldn't let us come into Thailand. They said they would kill us if we went to Thailand.

A: So you arrived at Thailand?

N: Yes. We went to the camp of Lam Sing.

A: How many people left in your boat?

N: Forty-three left with us and twenty-eight survived.

A: Were most of the people men?

N: Yes, they were Army men.

A: How long did you stay at the camp?

N: Fifteen days, and then the U.S. Embassy people came in to interview us because the Thailand people wanted to get rid of us. They allowed me to come here.

A: When did you come here?

N: December of 1979.

A: Did you come to Youngstown?

N: No. I went to California first.

A: How did you make contact to come to Youngstown?

N: I didn't have a sponsor or anything. A group of volunteers helped me.

A: Did you choose to come to the United States or did they just send you?

N: They just sent me. I didn't know where I would go.

A: What about the rest of your friends?

N: I don't know where they are. They had all the freedom in the world to go anywhere.

A: Why did you come to Youngstown from California?

N: A group of volunteers sent me.

A: Did you hear or learn anything about the United States before you came here?

N: Yes, I learned about the United States when I went to high school.

A: What do you think about your life in this country? When did you start to learn English?

N: I started to learn English on April 28, 1980.

A: You learned before you came here?

N: Yes.

A: Do you still study English?

N: Yes.

A: How is your job here? Do you have any difficulties?

N: Do you mean in the United States or in Youngstown?

A: Youngstown.

N: In Youngstown there are no jobs.

A: Are you still looking for a job?

N: Yes, I have to decide on my future. I will move down to the southern states because they have a lot of jobs and the weather is the same as my country. There are a lot of Vietnamese people over there too. We can live together and have some fun.

A: What country?

N: Down south in the United States.

A: What place do you plan to move?

N: I didn't decide yet because I have a lot of friends asking me to move to different places.

A: How about your religion?

N: My family is Catholic.

A: When did you get married?

N: In the end of 1975.

A: Do you have any children?

N: Yes, I have two children, two sons.

A: Do you plan to bring them here?

N: Yes.

A: What about your parents, have you heard anything about them?

N: My parents don't want to move out; they will stay in that country.

A: What about your brothers, do you still have contact with them?

N: Yes.

A: Would they like to come here?

N: Yes, but it is very difficult to escape out.

A: Can you tell us about your own efforts or desire to adjust to life here?

N: I just keep working.

A: Do you like life here?

N: Yes.

A: Looking back, what changes would you like to see in your country?

N: My people want the Communists to leave. But if you studied history where Communists took over countries, they never leave. I hope one day I can go back to my country and be with my family.

A: Do you have anything else to add?

N: I want the people of this country to live together regardless of color of the skin. If I can work and make a life in this country then I would like to study again also.

A: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW