

What the Viet War

By Eugene Robinson

As the Saigon government fell and the Americans left, attention shifted to the differences among the South Vietnamese themselves over their country's fate.

Long Nguyen and Pham Thanh are both Vietnamese students living in the Bay Area. They experienced the war differently—one in a small front-line village, one in an Americanized Saigon—and they both have bitter memories of the war that devastated their country.

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Pham Thanh is an 18-year-old junior at Berkeley High School. His neck bears a deep, ugly scar he received the day his family became victims of the war.

He says the grenade that nearly took his life was lobbed by a South Vietnamese soldier—an ally, not an enemy. He welcomes the fall of Saigon as the end to "foreign domination" of his homeland.

He grew up near Da Nang in the hamlet of Ha Lam, a collection of thatched shacks at the edge of the rain forest.

"Everyone in the village was very happy in life," Thanh said—until the soldiers came from Saigon.

"They started taking our belongings—our buffaloes and our cows. They shot them, ate what they wanted, destroyed everything the people had."

Thanh says that in 1967 the Saigon government had all the villagers moved to a nearby relocation camp to permit unhindered bombing of the area. They were kept there, away from their lifeblood—the land—against their will.

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"Every day they would line us up at the fence and make us look back at the village, at the planes strafing the village and dropping napalm." Thanh says they were seldom given enough food.

The villagers, he says, were kept in the camp for six months, and released when the Viet Cong overran the area in the 1968 Tet offensive.

Thanh claims his father was killed by an American soldier early in 1968 when the villagers of Ha Lam organized a march to a nearby American base to protest the American bombing of their village.

Thanh's life was almost ended that year, when he was all of 11 years old.

"A helicopter came around. My mother, grandmother, a neighbor woman and I went under our bomb shelter. We heard tanks outside, so we stayed in the shelter for a long time.

"The women were the first to go up. I was standing right behind them. All of a sudden I saw a lightning flash, then I smelled gunpowder.

"My neck felt like it was burning. There was blood all over my chest; it didn't hurt at all." Doctors later told Thanh that a grenade had nearly killed him. His mother, grandmother and the neighbor lay dead a few steps away. Thanh scurried

back into the shelter, a frightened youngster hiding from the awful sounds of war.

"Finally at the end of the day I was thirsty. I came out and saw two American soldiers and one South Vietnamese soldier. They patched me up a little, threw me on a tank, and

gave me peanut butter and cigarettes."

Thanh was taken around to several field hospitals, and finally a representative from the Committee of Responsibility, an aid organization, offered to bring him to the United States. Thanh was told he would die without proper care in Vietnam.

Thanh now lives with the James Jones family in Berkeley. But he said, "My country is Vietnam and I'm planning to return to it."

"I'm so happy," he said of the fall of Saigon. "No more bloodshed after so many years.

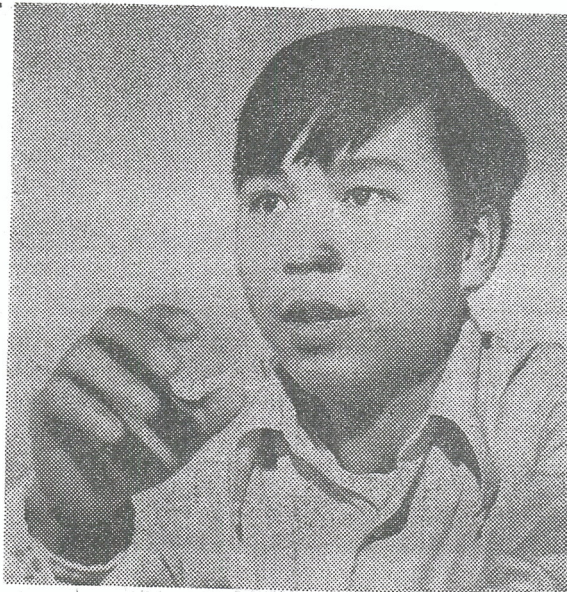
"There is only one Vietnam. Unification should have come long ago, but the Saigon government and the United States made that impossible.

"This is the end of our struggle against foreign oppression. The future looks very good."

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For Long Nguyen, 23, the future is dim and foreboding. Her anti-Communist family, at last report, was still in Saigon. She fears for

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Pham Thanh

Long came to the United States more than three years ago. She has been working as a domestic to put herself through San Francisco State University as an accounting major.

She says the friends she was able to reach earlier this month in Saigon were afraid. "They were told that anyone who defected from the north in 1954 would be killed when the Communists take over," she said.

She asked that her real name not be used and no photographs taken, fearing that publicity would mark her family for Communist revenge.

Since Saigon's defenses first began to crumble, Long Nguyen has made a frantic effort to get her family out of the country. She does not know if they made it.

"The last time I spoke to them they said the situation was fine, but they didn't mean it. They asked me if there was any way I could get them and their money out of Saigon.

"Soon — in two years, maybe — the Communists

their lives.

She was born in Hanoi, but remembers little of the city. Her family fled south from the Communists after the French pulled out in 1954.

Most of her knowledge of the north comes from conversations with her family. "My father was very poor in Hanoi," she said. "Every

day the Communists took a quota of his rice. Often the family was hungry, but we still had to turn in our rice.

"Every week they made my father go to a meeting. He was taught to suspect his neighbors."

She was only 2 years old when her parents brought her south, along with her

4-year-old sister, her 6-year-old brother, and an aunt and uncle. They stopped in Haiphong and several other cities before ending up in Saigon.

The family stayed in Saigon and prospered during the boom years of American involvement. Her father, a lawyer, worked briefly for the Saigon government.

will get rid of them. Maybe they will do it quietly."

With the help of several American friends, Long Nguyen was able to secure permission from the U.S. Immigration Department for her family to enter the United States. But she has been unable to locate them, despite repeated cables and telephone calls.

"The Communists cannot be trusted," she said. "They will turn the children against their own parents."

She described her feelings in an interview last week.

Tuesday night after Saigon's surrender she declined to be re-interviewed.

Pat Bentzen, an American who has been trying to help several Vietnamese students get their families to the United States, said that Long Nguyen is "very desperate."

In a cruel twist of irony, Mrs. Bentzen said, an overseas operator called her house several days ago while Long Nguyen was out, presumably with a call from her parents. The operator promised to call again. She never did.