

Vietnamese Fled U.S. For Canada

By Elizabeth Becker
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MONTREAL—Long before their brothers-in-arms fled by the thousands from this year's offensive that ended with the surrender of Saigon, more than 100 South Vietnamese military men quietly deserted from bases across the United States.

Like American deserters before them, most of these Vietnamese took up illegal residence in Canada.

With the aid of an underground network of sympathetic people and with their own ingenuity, these mostly middle-class and privileged Vietnamese bicycled, bused and walked across the border.

Just before the war ended, a group of Vietnamese deserters in Montreal agreed to break their self-imposed silence.

On April 2, the Canadian Minister of Manpower and Immigration had assured all Vietnamese and Cambodian citizens that they would not be deported "as long as the situation in Vietnam is as it is."

In their crowded apartments, at their workplaces, at an antiwar movie presentation, and at a dinner gathering of the "Association of Ex-Militarymen of South Vietnam in Canada," a dozen deserters in Montreal discussed why they abandoned military training programs at American bases.

Despite the fact that some of the Vietnamese deserters provided reporters with their military card numbers and graduation certificates



The Washington Post

Montage of certificates and identification papers of former Vietnamese trainees.

from American training programs, the Pentagon refused to confirm their identities or acknowledge that any Vietnamese deserted from American bases.

The U.S. Department of Immigration provided a "rough number" of 105 Vietnamese deserters, most of whom are presumed to have gone to Canada rather than

face military authorities in the United States.

Tran Minh Chau, a deserter himself who founded the association of ex-military men, talked at a dinner he gave for deserters.

"We say ex-military men because deserter in Vietnamese is not proper," the 32-year-old former army feed plant manager ex-

plained. "It is translated to 'escape' the military. We use a Vietnamese word which means to 'refuse' the military."

Chau was particularly sen-
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CANADA, From H1

sitive to any charge that he was a coward. He left, he said, because he "fundamentally disagreed with the Thieu government of traitors and cooperators with foreigners."

Chau was also quick to emphasize that each of the deserters had a markedly different story to tell.

Seated next to Chau was an ex-marine who had killed Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians in combat and became a pacifist. Another guest was a young navy nurse who said he supported the Vietnamese Communist movement.

In all the interviews with the deserters, two principal motives recurred. Each man said that at some point in his military career he decided he did not want to kill fellow Vietnamese.

And each separately came to believe that the United States had used Vietnamese to carry on an 'American' war.

They also said they would return to Vietnam once they were assured it was "safe."

Older than most of the other deserters, who were between 19 and 26, Chau said he was one of the

Vietnamese who used devious methods to buy his way to the United States.

"In this program 150 applied and only four were chosen," explained Chau, the son of a former bureaucrat in the French colonial government "I was one of them because I gave free chicks from the army feed plant to the officer who selected the people who go overseas."

Chau helped form the underground network. Two deserters who reached Montreal because of Chau's work are Truong Chi Hung and Bui Mong Lan, 1974 graduates of the pilot training program at Shepherd Air Force Base, Tex.

A romance with an American WAF officer, three dormitory break-ins, an off-limits flight to an American city, and a graduation night beer bash were essential elements of their complex plot to escape from Shepherd, according to the 23-year-old men.

In separate interviews Hung and Lan said they were closely guarded from the moment they arrived for training in late 1973 and were forced to devise their complicated scheme.

"They took our passports away from us at the beginning and in September, 1974, Saigon sent a cable saying there were 10 potential deserters in our class of 22. Our names were on the list."

Lan said his family paid a \$300 bribe to enter him in the elite South Vietnam Air Force and another \$300 bribe to send him to the United States for training.

Lan stole Air Force maps of the American-Canadian border to prepare for a secret meeting with the underground in October.

"We had to report to the liaison officer each morning. I feigned an illness, took an airplane, and returned to the base with enough time to report in ...," Lan explained.

After vacillating for months—torn between filial responsibilities to his elderly parents and a revulsion against "doing the bombing job"—Hung finally decided to escape.

"I kept thinking in in-flight training ... how a whole family near my home in Dalat was killed by an American bomb in 1968," Hung explained.

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CANADA, From H5

Lan broke into his liaison officer's apartment and stole four Vietnamese passports when he couldn't find his own, broke into another office to grab his graduation certificate, and collected his pay.

That night the two shunned a beer bash thrown by their squadron leaders to celebrate graduation and the last night on base.

While their Vietnamese friends partied, Hung's girlfriend, a WAF at Shepherd, picked them up and drove them to the Greyhound bus terminal.

Now, four months later, the two are employed in Montreal factories without work permits—as are most of the deserters—and Lan is eager to return to Vietnam.

"I'm not a political person. My family, my cousins are in Hanoi. Before, we wrote to each other through Paris and they were fighting for North Vietnam. If I had fought, someday I might have killed them . . . I could not do this."

Another deserter is ex-marine Nguyen N. Hai. Just three years older than Lan but wearing the expression of a man long past youth, Hai said he had little choice when he fought and killed during four and a half years of campaigns in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

"If I didn't fight, I would go to jail. After all, what do we feel when we fight? We did not think we were fighting for our country, only for our safety. You see, I was

everywhere, I know what the war is."

"I would return to the cities . . . where rich people were taking from the poor . . . and leaders did not listen to the people," Hai continued.

Hai said that as his resentment with the South Vietnamese leadership grew, he had open conflicts with his commander. A final argument in 1972 triggered events that ended with his trip to Montreal.

"I always remember a case and I can never stop to be hurt by it," Hai began. His unit had captured a wounded prisoner whom Hai was instructed to interrogate.

But, Hai said, the soldier had no information and Hai fed and nursed him. Two days later, the commander got drunk, had the prisoner brought before him, and killed him, Hai said.

"He picked up an AK-47," Hai said, "aimed it at the prisoner and said, 'You used this to shoot at me and I'm using it to shoot at you. He used the prisoner as a target.'"

Hai said he told a Saigon journalist about the incident and the story was published. To remove the troublemaker from his battalion, the commander sent Hai to the United States for training, three months after Hai's marriage.

Hai said his American training at Quantico, Va., encouraged his bitterness: "Every time the Americans gave examples of battles, or sacrifice, they used the Viet-

namese. We were used as a game for the Americans to learn how to be better soldiers. By their openness in training I learned my country was just a toy."

Lam Phuoc, one of the first deserters, escaped in 1972 from San Diego Navy Base, where he was trained as a nurse. He said he was helped through his first years in Canada by American deserters.

Now 22, Phuoc had to cross the border in the days before the underground network.

After finding his way to the border between Washington state and British Columbia, Phuoc waited two days until he figured out a plan.

He had watched two Canadian teenagers bicycle back and forth at the Blaine, Wash., border point and he befriended them. Phuoc said they agreed to help and one afternoon in the rush hour, he climbed on the back wheel of a bike "looking like a young boy" and was paddled past unsuspecting guards who did not bother to stop the cyclists.

For the next two years, Phuoc lived with the family of George Strong, an American deserter in Ottawa, who supported Phuoc until he received landed immigrant papers.

Phuoc now works the night shift in an operating room at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, completing training in plastic surgery, a skill he hopes to use to help war victims in Vietnam.