

WXPost Diplomat Without

By Ron Shaffer

Washington Post Staff Writer

Phuong Dung, the first woman career diplomat for the Republic of Vietnam and a representative of her country here for a decade, sat in a Northwest Washington park recently and tried to make sense of the past and sort out the future.

"Maybe I should have been a peasant, got married and had children and made the children the goals of my life," she said. "It seems easier that way. You see the goals of your life, the children, grow up."

Instead, 15 years ago Miss Dung (pronounced zung) decided to do what she could to build a better society for South Vietnam.

In the years that followed that decision she received a law degree in Saigon and a Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Virginia. She served four years as an under secretary at the United Nations in New York and had debates with antiwar activists in Central Park and a starry-eyed meeting with Robert Kennedy.

She spent three years with the South Vietnamese embassy here and then watched in horror in March and April as her government, her goals and her ideals disintegrated.

"I felt my destiny was to serve my country, my people, to help them have a just and free society," Miss Dung, now 31 said fingering a blade of grass in a park near her Massachusetts Avenue apartment. "Now I won't reach that goal, not because I didn't try, but because I miscalculated about politics and human nature. So I must find another destiny for my life."

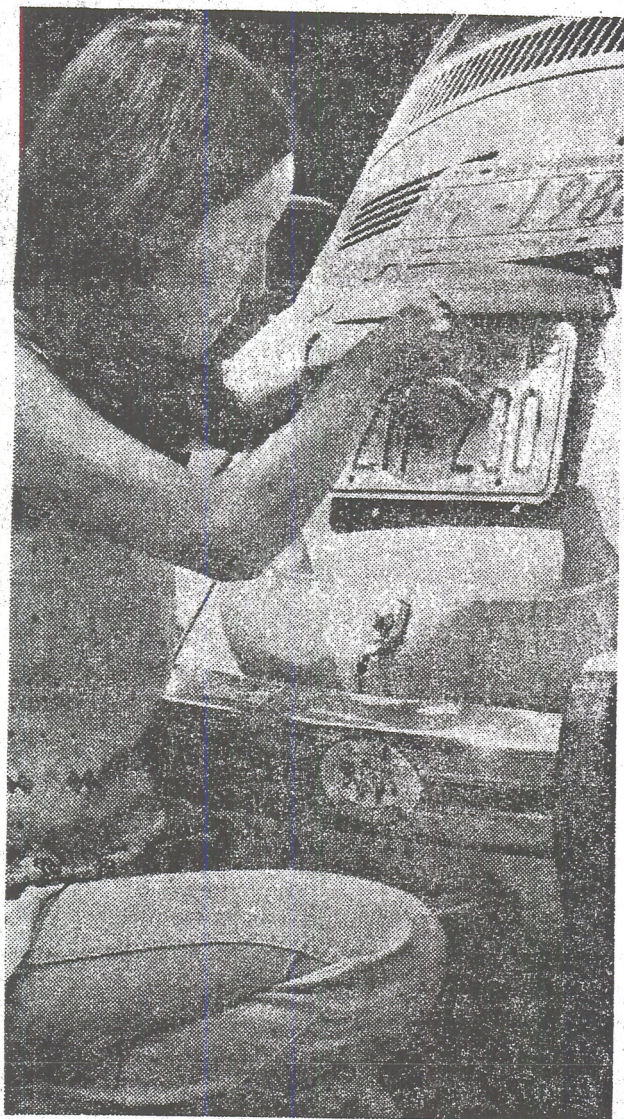
Miss Dung is looking for a job. She doesn't quite know how to go about it, she says, and is not sure what she wants to do.

She talks of making hand-icrafts and trying to sell them; of sewing or embroidering; of writing about "the many heroes of a country that no longer exists"; of entering a monastery.

"I've spent the most productive years of my life working for my country," she said, "and now there's nothing."

Miss Dung speaks with sadness and resignation as she tries to come to terms with her shattered ideals.

"At first the Americans were very friendly, they were looking outward, trying to help others," she said.



By Joe Heiberger—The Washington Post

Phuong Dung replaces her diplomatic license plate.

JUN 9 1975

Country Seeks Future

"Now they just look inward and try to take care of themselves. I don't know why, but Americans have changed."

She came to the United States, Miss Dung said, "because America stood for freedom, justice and equality."

At the University of Virginia, she studied foreign affairs in graduate school, and after a while fell in love with an American. She broke that relationship "because I felt I could not contribute enough to my country if I got married."

Her career plans set, there was a high point in 1964, a time of administration optimism about Vietnam, and promises that all U.S. advisers would be out of the country soon. Miss Dung was selected by her country to represent South Vietnam at a State Department reception for foreign students. Robert F. Kennedy, then attorney general, greeted the students.

"His handshake was so firm, and he paid special attention to me," Miss Dung said. "He asked me about my family and said don't worry, Vietnam will be OK."

"I didn't wash my hands for three days," she said. "I

was so impressed and proud and happy. He had already shaken hands with 300 people, but his hand was so firm."

During her tour at the U.N., Miss Dung found herself frequently defending her ideals and American policy in confrontations with antiwar demonstrators.

"I tried to talk to the people, to tell them that the South Vietnamese fight because they want to be free, that you are helping," she said. "They (the antiwar demonstrators) made noises so I cannot speak."

As political officer for the Embassy of South Vietnam here for the last three years, Miss Dung said she became more and more frightened at the mood of Congress.

"The Americans were getting tired of Vietnam and just wanted to get the burden off," she said. "A lot of congressmen just said forget it."

"I couldn't believe it. I thought when you are friends, you are friends for life—not just a few years."

When she heard on television that Saigon had surrendered to the Communists, "I felt like dying," Miss Dung said, sobbing uncontrollably as she recalled the event.