

Memoir of My Life



Nguyen Trung Thu

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Memoir of My Life

PREFACE

My children have often told me that my life has been interesting and that they would like me to put it on paper so they could read and teach their own children about their roots. I promised to do so, but due to the scale of the undertaking, and my limited command of written English, I have been hesitant to start. Now that I am retired, time is no longer a constraint, and the older I grow, the more I feel compelled to leave something to the future generations of my family and to other relatives and friends, and to satisfy my children's genuine interest in my story.

I am writing this memoir not only because I want my descendants to know about my life, but also because I want them to know about the lives and characters of my parents, who did not have much of a chance to communicate with them. I am also proud of my maternal and paternal ancestors and wish to preserve their memory. Finally I want to tell my parents - although both of them have already passed away – how deeply I appreciate what they did to bring me up.

When I first began writing, I was unsure of where to start. However, I soon realized that life does not simply progress in a straight line, because the present often merges with the past to create a certain reality or event. I feel most comfortable telling my story in the order of my work history because my career allowed me to see the world and interact with people, including relatives. (We usually spent most of our lives working, anyway). This memoir therefore covers events from my childhood and working time in Vietnam, and then narrates other experiences I had in many countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, South Korea, Canada, etc. where I have worked since the day I left my homeland Vietnam and settled in Canada.

I try not to address political issues in this memoir. However, when I was growing up, every Vietnamese person was influenced by national and international political policies and doctrines. Therefore, sometimes politics are reflected in my personal views or life experiences. I do not put myself forward as a witness of Vietnamese history, but I believe some of the anecdotes presented in this book may help the younger generation or at least my descendants understand some aspects of the struggles that occurred during my lifetime, most notably the fight against French colonization and the ideological war between the Communist and non-Communist Vietnamese.

A person cannot write about his life without mentioning the relatives and other people who surrounded him. For the sake of brevity, I will discuss only those people whom I remember most vividly and who have affected me to some extent. They are presented based on when I got to know them, not according to their role in my family. I have omitted the names of some close relatives and friends, not because I do not value them, but to avoid misunderstanding or sensibility. I have also decided not to include many details pertaining to my direct relatives since I would need another book to describe them, and since I might be biased in my judgements.

Spiritually, I consider this memoir one of my many projects, because for me, life is an accumulation of things to be completed. As said by the French author Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: “La vie de l’homme avec tous ses projets, s’élève comme une petite tour, dont la mort est le couronnement” (“The life of a man, with all its projects, is like a tower which rises in the air, which has death for its summit”); I will still have further projects as long as I live.

Nguyễn Trung Thu

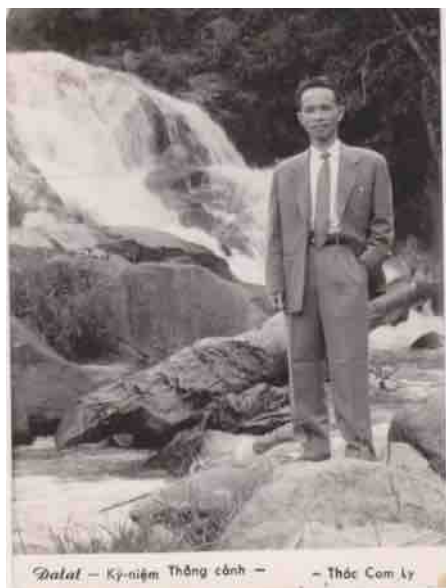
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Part I: ORIGINS, COUNTRY LIVING AND STUDENTHOOD

Section 1: My Parents and My Birth

1.1 My Father



My father was named Nguyễn Đăng Sung. He was born in 1915 in Quảng Trị Province, into a large and unique family that originally came from the province of Nghệ An, in Central Vietnam. He was a solid man of a medium build who was always healthy, optimistic and happy. He was a simple, easy-going, reasonable person. Whatever the circumstances, he remained calm and viewed new conditions with a positive outlook. He was willing to accept the less advantageous alternative to ensure that everyone was satisfied. He loved his close relatives, extended family and the ordinary country people who surrounded him. For him, love, sentiment and care were paramount and everything else came second.

His ancestor Nguyễn Hoàng¹, who established my father's family line in Quang Tri, was awarded a cử nhân (equivalent to a modern bachelor's degree) in the reign of Minh Mạng king of the Nguyễn Dynasty. At that time, the chance to compete for this degree occurred only every several years and just a few titles were granted on each occasion.

Ancestor Hoàng was discriminated against by government officials in public service because his parents had supported Nguyễn Huệ in defeating the Lê Dynasty which had been under the protection of Trịnh & Nguyễn Lords. Nguyễn Huệ then briefly became king, but was defeated by Nguyễn Ánh (who was descendant of Lord Nguyễn and later became Gia Long, the first Emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty). Once Emperor Gia Long gained power, Hoàng's name was put on the government's blacklist. Upon his assignment to the South Vietnam, which was bordered by the Gianh River (Sông Gianh), ancestor Hoàng decided to emigrate from Nghệ An to Quảng Trị Province.

My father's parents flourished well in the new home and founded a rich and illustrious family with 21 children (from two wives). My grandfather's concept of a legacy was "to give letters (education) to his children rather than to give them the money". This was why my father gained a relatively high education for that time, even though he was raised in the countryside. He was good at school, and bravely participated in the rural life of the country. He finished his Diploma degree, spent a few years in senior high school under French system, and was trained in PTT (Poste, Téléphone et Télécommunications). In 1938, he was assigned by the French government to the PTT office in Xiengkhoang (Laos) and later became its director.

However, the blood of his revolutionary forbears flowed in his veins. A few years after the August 1945 Revolution in Vietnam, my father left everything including the security of his family to join the League for Independence of Viet Nam (Việt Minh²), which was fighting the French colonists. This was the beginning of the misery of my mother, my sister and myself.

Near the end of 1952, after the Việt Minh's military advantage was manipulated and turned into the Communists' victory, and the patriotism had become synonymous with Marxism-Leninism; on a trip required for his job as a provincial vice-director of the PTT for the Revolutionary government, my father was arrested by the French. (He may actually have arranged this as a way to escape from

the Communists). Because of his years of co-operation with the colonial French government in Laos, and the intercession of my mother's brother, Uncle Hỷ who was a military officer in the French army posted in Huế, he was jailed for just a few weeks and then released. After his imprisonment, however, he no longer wanted to work for either the colonists, or for the Revolutionaries, and decided to return to his mother in the village of Vinh Quang and farm.

When I started becoming interested in politics and particularly in the war between South and North Vietnam, my father told me that he had left the Revolution because its leaders were or became Communists. As someone who loved not only his family but his country, he felt he had to help liberate it from foreign colonization. But since the Communists sought to erase national boundaries and rejected family values, he no longer thought it was worthwhile to work for them.

In Vinh Quang, our family was reunited. It included my grandmother, my parents, my sister Ngọc Diệp, myself and Auntie Em who was my father's cousin but was adopted by my grandmother as her daughter. My dad tried to work as a real farmer, but because he had been a student and a bureaucrat who had never been trained to do heavy agricultural labour; he found it difficult to perform his daily tasks in the fields. However, since he was positive, enthusiastic and generous, he was loved and helped by every other farmer in the village. He always had an understanding, compassion and respect for people. One day, when he went into the forest with a group of men to cut the bamboo trees for building houses, one man tore his bare foot on the return trip due to the heavy load on his shoulders. My father, who was the only one wearing shoes, gave the man his sandals (dép Bình Trị Thiên), which were made of rubber from used automobile tires, and walked home barefoot.

Vinh Quang was influenced by both the Việt Minh guerrillas and the French army. During the day it was within sight of the French with artillery and navy. I remember, one afternoon in the summer of 1953 or so, when the French army, including the Vietnamese guards (lính Bảo vệ), which were based in the city of Đông Hà, located about 8 kilometers northeast of Vinh Quang, landed on the north shore of the Thạch Hãn River. They proceeded to patrol the village. We were warned of this by some security guards, which gave my father just enough time to hide in a small cave concealed in the bamboo roots and weeds that bordered the water-filled trench on the edge of our farm³. Few minutes later, some French troops went into our garden to inspect the trench. Suddenly we heard several gunshots. Everyone's face turned gray. Fortunately however, these were just warning shots and they had not detected him. The soldiers also searched the house and found a stainless steel Western-style razor clipped to the edge of a thatched sheet of the roof. They asked my grandmother who the razor has belonged to. My grandma, who was prepared for this, solemnly answered, "It belongs to my son Mr. Tân, an employee of the Office of Civil Works in Đồng Hới, of the province of Quảng Bình". They did not retain anyone that time, but they ordered everyone out and burned my family's house, together with most of the houses in the village, as well as our pigs, potatoes, beans, rice, and other crops.

Having learnt their lesson from that day, the villagers concealed their remaining rice in a hole deep in the ground. But they did not have the appropriate containers and nylon sheets to protect it from humidity and rainwater. When they later dug up the rice for the coming winter, it was decomposed, inedible and could not even be used to feed the pigs. These poor villagers were just waiting for starvation.

¹Futher data on our family's roots may be found in the book entitled Gia Phả họ Nguyễn Đăng (Family Tree of the Name Nguyễn Đăng), published in Vietnamese by my father and his relatives in 2008.

²Việt Minh : League for the Independence of Vietnam, included: The Indochinese Communist Party, The New Vietnam Party, The Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, and a part of the Vietnam Nationalist Party. On August 19, 1945, the Viet Minh began a revolution against French colonial rule in Vietnam.

³In the Vietnamese countryside, trenches are typically constructed along the perimeter of a family's property to demarcate territory, store rainwater for animals and irrigation, and raise fish.

During this period, the Revolutionary forces normally launched their campaigns at night which provoked shelling from the French artillery. This caused many injuries and deaths among the villagers. In the day time, the French army patrolled the countryside and shot any men they saw. To avoid the French and make some money, my father joined a company of merchants on trips to buy buffalo and oxen in the northern provinces, where these animals were much cheaper. These trips were very risky. I remember that before he left, my mother would go to Mai Xá, a large village about five kilometers away from Vinh Quang to buy beef. She would then prepare enough muối sả - dry and tasty meat mixed with salt, fish paste, sliced citronella and tomatoes - for him to eat on his long journey. My father would usually return home with his cattle after two or three months, though sometimes he came back sooner.

In 1954, the Treaty of Geneva was signed and the Republic of Vietnam (Việt Nam Cộng Hòa – VNCH) was born my father sent a relative to Nghệ An Province (which was under the Revolutionary governance) to bring back my sister Ngọc Diệp, who was living there with Aunt Minh for her education. My father left the village for the city of Quảng Trị to start a new job with the new South Vietnamese government and we moved to nearby Đông Hà to go to school. This ended our period of country living.

My father served the Republic of Vietnam as a temporary assistant technician at the provincial Office of Public Works in Quảng Trị - a position far beneath his knowledge and capabilities. He accepted this job because he did not wish to convert to Catholicism and leave his mother for another province, where he had been offered a higher position in the PTT. He was happy with his life and successfully guided us through our school years although it meant mediocre living conditions.

Although my father was intelligent, he was not very successful due to his easy-going personality. He took everything in stride, even the tight financial situation of the family. But he loved us. I remember that in the evenings after work, my father would ride his motorcycle downtown to read or buy newspapers, mainly Paris Match; sometime he also bought apples or pears which were imported luxuries. He did not eat them himself, but gave them to us and ordered us to eat them. He would correct our way of cutting the apples in slices, saying “Il vous faut croquer la pomme”.

My father, despite his intellectuality and his good heart also had some flaws and bad habits. For instance, he played poker to a degree that affected his family, and was somewhat old-fashioned and idealistic. Consequently, he did not provide for us as well as he could have.

After 1960, when the American government sent troops to South Vietnam to help the Vietnamese military forces fight the infiltration from the North, many educated people like my father did well and became rich or at least financially comfortable, but he did not pursue his opportunity. Some years later, from 1962 to 1965, he started learning English. He progressed rapidly in his reading, writing and speaking, and gained respect from his friends and colleagues. But he did not use this new skill to make money, untill about 1972, when Quảng Trị was attacked by the Communists, flattened by bombs, and he had to relocate to Đà Nẵng which was 170 kilometers away. To make ends meet, he joined some development projects financed by USAID. But that was near the end of the American involvement in Vietnam.

My father was sometimes impractical and was too attached to the village where his mother lived. From 1958 to 1960, political life and security in rural Central Vietnam were threatened by the activities of the Việt Cộng, namely the Mặt Trận Giải Phóng Miền Nam (National Liberation Front for South Vietnam). Instead of moving his mother to the city, his brother (Uncle Xân) and my father built a large house for her to replace their family home which was destroyed several times during the French colonization and then the conflict between the Republic of Vietnam and the Việt Cộng. The house was beautiful and a symbol of family pride, but was completely destroyed by the American artillery shelling less than a year after it was built. After that, my uncle and my father decided to bring my grandmother to Đà Nẵng.

Also during this period, the two brothers regularly visited Vinh Quang to build a large, brick fenced cemetery where all the graves of their ancestors and relatives were relocated and arranged according to their place in the family tree. Each relocated grave was given a concrete tombstone with some added decoration. Uncle Tân provided the financial backing for the project, while my father oversaw the construction. This was the earliest and largest complex in the village, which gained respect from our neighbours and represented our Nguyễn Đăng family heritage. But my father frequent trips attracted the interest of the Department of Intelligence, which once questioned him about them. We cautioned him about these visits, but he never listened. Of course, this adversely affected his career. However, he did a good thing for his extended family.

My father taught me French from early days of living in Quảng Trị, which gave me a great advantage in high school, in university, and later in adapting to Canadian society. His hobbies were reading newspapers and magazines, discussing politics, and keeping up with advancements in medicine, technology and science. Indeed, his medical knowledge benefited not only his extended family, but the villagers as well. During his stay in the countryside, he advised his neighbors about which medications to buy for treatment of common illnesses. He cared very deeply about our health, and always searched for the best medications for my mother and me. His simple recommendations for keeping healthy were to go to bed at the right time, get adequate sleep and take a nap at noon. When I was going to high school, he gave me a schedule that set my bedtime back half an hour for each grade, so that I went to bed at 8:00 PM in grade 6 (lớp Đệ thất) and at 11:00 PM in grade 12 (lớp Đệ Nhất). This was why my health kept improving and I could focus on my education.

In 1963, after the fall of the first Republic of Vietnam, I was eager to join the politically motivated student group in activities like student demonstrations, walkouts from class, etc. to protest certain government decisions. One day, my father told me, “Thu, sometimes there is no Right or Wrong, particularly in the politics. Something can be judged to be good today, but bad tomorrow. No matter how educated you are, if you participate in politics, you might be appreciated today, but might be in jail tomorrow”. Because of that warning, I became more circumspect about my political activities during my university years in Saigon, and thus avoided failing to obtain my Engineering degree. Daddy, I truly thank you for your rare but precious advice to put me in a right direction.

In the early spring of 1975, after South Vietnam was heavily attacked by the North army and people started evacuating from Central Vietnam, my parents moved from Đà Nẵng to Saigon. I met with my father there to discuss about my evacuation strategy should South Vietnam fall into the hands of the Communists. He protested this idea and asked me several questions. He refused to join my family in this attempt and decided to stay with his siblings who were to come from the North to reunite with him.

My parents stayed in Saigon (which was eventually renamed to Hồ Chí Minh City, but which I still call Saigon), in a tight living condition. Having seen the punishments that the Communist regime imposed on the South Vietnamese officers, intermediate and high-ranking government officials, he sometimes told my parents-in-law who also then lived in Saigon, “Thu was smart to discard my comments and evacuate Vietnam at the right time; otherwise he would have been in a re-education camp (a kind of jail created by the Communists) by now, and how could I have endured that?” Although he was glad to be reunited with his siblings, they were poor during the earliest years of their emigration to the South, despite their high position in the regime; and he had to support and shelter one of his sisters and shared the monthly income I sent him with his extended family.

My father, together with his brothers Tùng Lâm, Hương and Huy who returned from the United States, built a family temple in Vinh Quang and a second cemetery in the district of Cam Lộ (Quảng Trị Province). This cemetery was a sumptuous structure for regrouping several graves of our ancestors and relatives beside the grave of the mother of Sir Hoàng, who had died and was buried in Vinh (Nghệ An Province). It was said that after having established himself in Quảng Trị, Hoàng travelled to Vinh to bring back his mother’s remains and rebury them near the falls of Ô- Ô. That was about 200 years ago. Based on the art of Feng Shui (ancient science about the harmony

between Earth and Human), people believe this place has brought success and prosperity to the Nguyễn Đăng family. For that reason, it needs to be maintained and developed although it is far from where the family now lives.

After 1986, the regime accepted the reform under the motto of “Communism based on a capitalist economy” (Cộng sản dựa trên Kinh tế Tư bản) and approved the Innovation Policy (Chính sách Đổi mới), Vietnam was more open, and my father could travel to Canada and the United States under my sponsorship. I wanted to give him the opportunity to see the world and more specifically, to see his grandchildren. He was happy to discover the North American way of life - free, protected and comfortable. He told us “When I am in a market or in a mall; I can’t tell who is rich and who is poor”. We took him around Toronto and to other Ontario tourist spots like Niagara Falls, the Thousand Islands, Lake Simcoe, etc. We went one day to a park on the shore of Lake Ontario, where he admired the beautiful reflection of Toronto in the clear water; we were surrounded by thousands of Canada geese peacefully pecking at food thrown by children. He said, “You made the right decision by choosing this paradise for your children”.

He stayed with us for three months in accordance with the approved terms of his Visa. My father returned to Vietnam with the enthusiasm of having known a place of richness, peace and freedom. His relatives asked him about what he thought of North America compared to Vietnam. He simply said: “We are capitalists and they are socialists; I can see a lot of difference between people in our country, but I did not see the difference between people in North America”.

My Step Siblings

I struggled to decide where this section should go. My father was responsible for the existence of my step siblings due to various circumstances in my parents’ lives. I do not intend to justify his actions or the damage they did to my mother, but the outcome turned out to be acceptable. He had his first child out of wedlock, Đông, in 1970 with a woman who was working for him on a construction site, and had two daughters. During that period, my sister Ngọc Diệp and I lived apart from my parents. We understood that he was eager to have another son (after me) and my mother was unable to give him one. Besides, my grandmother and his siblings always encouraged him to have a large family.

My mother took Đông in after a few years in the care of his biological mother. She taught, cared for and loved him as her own son, and Đông also loved her. My two stepsisters, Kim Chi and Kim Quế joined the family later on. My mother never had a good life, materially and mentally, because my financial support helped the entire family of more than five members when we intended to provide the support for a family of three. In 2000, during the last few months of my mother’s life, Đông proved to be a good son, caring for her with patience, love and respect.

The house in Saigon where my parents lived was originally bought for my father with the financial help of Uncle Huy, in appreciation of his support of their eldest sister Minh, who passed away in 1986. However, I sent him money for repairs and furniture, and paid other expenses since I began working in Canada. According to logic and to the Vietnamese tradition, this house should have been mine. But upon my mother death, I wanted to give this house (which was then valued at about 85 ounces of gold) to Đông to keep as an inheritance and for my father to reside in while he lived. My father appreciated this offer.

When I began this memoir, my father was 98 years old and still living in Saigon, and was always happy. He was not physically fit due to a stroke that occurred in 2004, but he was mentally sharp. I completed the writing of this sub-section just a few days after his passing on January 28, 2013.



Saigon 1998 – Father and his brothers Hương and Tùng Lâm

1.2 My Mother



My mother was an extraordinary woman in many ways. She was born in 1916. Her father, Dr. (Tiến sỹ) Nguyễn Hàm, a high-ranking Mandarin, served the Nguyễn Dynasty for several dozen of years at the positions as royal adviser than sub-minister (Ngự sử then Tham tri).

My mother married my father sometime in 1940 and accompanied him to Xiengkhoang when he relocated there as a member of the managerial staff of the PTT Office. Having learned the virtues of Confucianism from her Mandarin background, she took very good care of her family. She taught us how to live in harmony with my father large extended family, and to behave politely in society. She said that her father told her that “Cần, Kiệm, Liêm, Chính” are the essential virtues of a responsible person, that is, if you work hard and know how to save, you respect yourself and are honest. She always treated my father’s parents and relatives well, even when some of them were occasionally unfair to her.

My mother considered her husband’s large family as hers, and treated everybody with respect and dignity. She took full responsibility for caring for her parents-in-law. During the critical time of the war between the French and the Vietnamese National Army (Quốc Quân Việt Nam – armed force of Việt Minh), when most of my father’s relatives left Vinh Quang to follow the Revolution or to

escape from the conflict, my mother stayed in the village with her in-laws. My grandfather, who was then 80 years old, had been shocked by the deaths of my three uncles who had sacrificed their lives for the Revolution in the battles with the French, became depressed, weakened and unable to consume regular meals. He told my mother that he felt weak and wanted only a thin soup with porgy fish. The Gia Độ market that had the best fish was across the Thạch Hãn River, which was usually patrolled by the French warship that would fire on small boats. Nonetheless, she braved the crossing. Upon her equally challenging return, she cooked a good fish soup for her father-in-law, which was nearly his last meal. A few days later he passed away. My mother proudly recalled this story as a time she showed her caring and fulfilled her duty and responsibility. It was truly a noble action.

When my father left his PTT position near the end of 1945 to join the Revolution, she took us back to the village of An Cư (district of Triệu Phong, province of Quảng Trị) to live with her parents. My sister Ngọc Diệp and I were later taken to Vinh Quang (district of Gio Linh, province of Quảng Trị), about a dozen of kilometers away to stay with my paternal grandparents. In this place, my mother was once badly beaten by French soldiers on a military operation, but she successfully protected her virtue although her husband was absent. This event was publicized and honoured by the Việt Minh.



Some years later, my mother left us in the care of my maternal grandparents to travel with a group of Revolutionary activists to Nghệ An Province where my father was working as a PTT vice-director. She spent more than a month journeying through mountains, jungles, cataracts, and other dangerous areas to visit him. Raised in a rich Mandarin family, she did not find it easy to march a half thousand kilometers through such terrain, but because of her determination and her love to my father, she made it. Of course, there was a high cost to pay: she was sick for several months after arriving in the new village which lacked most facilities and foods. She told me that one night, the activist group passed through Thủy Ba (Quảng Bình Province), a mountainous area famous for the tigers that roamed the forest and killed many of the inhabitants. They decided to rest in a small village on the edge of the woods, a few kilometers away from the French control point. While they were asleep, a tiger attacked one of their comrades. The group ran for their lives and my mother panted

after them. My poor mother! Whenever I think of that incident, I love and respect her even more.

There was a song (I don't recall the author) that honoured the young men and women who served the Revolution by travelling along that trail:

“Trèo đèo Ba rền, băng qua đèo Ngang
Ai đi qua bên đồi, dừng chân cho tôi nhắn
cùng:
Non xanh cao bao la vòng quanh đến gặp biển xa
Non sông ời ra đi lời thơ đang còn trăm mối

Climbing the Ba Ren Pass, crossing the Ngang Pass
Whoever is passing that hill, please stop for me to say
something:
Blue and high mountains are going to meet the sea;
Oh mountain and river, I leave my country when I have not yet
completed my poem.

Sương rơi mênh mông, đêm đêm mờ tối
Đường còn xa lắc, dừng chân đã nào
Đường dài chập chùng, cô em dừng chân
Cho tôi nhắn đôi lời gửi về chiến khu
Ai đi vô trong Nam, ai đi ra Việt Bắc
Ngàn trùng xa cách...”



Fog is abundantly falling, and nights are obscure!
The road is still long, please stop your steps
The road is still long, oh my young lady, please have a pause:
Allow me to send a message to the war zone
Who is going to the South, who is going to the North
A thousand miles away...

Note: The Ngang Pass (Đèo Ngang), on the left is a mountain pass on the border between the provinces of Quảng Bình and Hà Tĩnh, on the North Central Coast of Vietnam. Previously no roads existed in this area, only trails.

This song describes the topography of the trail on which the young Revolutionists travelled; and one traveler expressed the sentiments towards his family or his lover. My mother was not a Revolutionist, but she took the same trail, and experienced the same challenges to find and rejoin her husband who served the Revolution. She fully deserves appreciation. I reprint the song here to honor my mother's contribution to her family, and perhaps to her country.

My mother also recalled some happy memories from that time. Once, when she was on washing duty at the riverbank, she saw a large fish (probably a tarpon) floating near the surface, not very much far from her spot. She judged that it has been mistakenly shot by a French patrolling airplane and was injured. She jumped down, grabbed the fish and tried to pull it ashore, but the fish was still strong, occasionally dragged her down and then resurfacing. Finally she successfully got it to the shore. The fish was about 30 - 40 kilograms. That evening, my father, his colleagues and his friends had a great supper, especially because my mother was a good cook.

After about a year in Nghệ An, as the fighting intensified between the Việt Minh and the French army, my mother returned to Quảng Trị to live with us. But due to the disastrous effects of the war in the countryside during this period, she decided to move to Chợ Cầu, a small town in the French-controlled part of the Gio Linh District, to stay with her elder sister. My mother used to travel to Huế, a city about 90 kilometers from Gio Linh, to buy wholesale merchandise to supply Aunt Hai's convenience store. She certainly risked her life during these trips because travelers were usually attacked by Việt Minh guerillas or caught in clashes between rival armies.

Some years later, she decided to go back to Vinh Quang to stay with her mother-in-law and frequently went to An Cư to see her mother. Though living with her mother-in-law, naturally created some tensions, they were not serious. My mother always followed the precepts of Vietnamese tradition and Confucian philosophy to establish a good relationship with her in-laws. She had learned from her Mandarin father about “*Công, Dung, Ngôn, Hạnh*” or the four virtues of a good woman: work/ability, personality/beauty, speech, and behavior. She followed the maxim “*Tại gia tòng Phụ, Xuất giá tòng Phu, Phu tử tòng Tử*” (At home, listen to your father; when you are married, listen to your husband; when your husband is dead, follow your son). What a strict generation of women!

As part of *Công*, she used to make copious amounts of food for family ceremonies such as Lunar New Year (Tết), anniversaries of ancestors' deaths, etc. I remember that she was normally in charge of preparing *chả* (a type of ham) immediately after a pig was killed when its meat was still warm and fresh. Two or three strong women would help her tenderize the meat. Then several well marinated and tightly enveloped loaves of ham were loaded in a large pot to be cooked for 4-6 hours. When the *Chả* was ready, my father and I had the honour of being the tasters. It was delicious! Of course, everyone appreciated my mother for her hard work and ability, but she spent the whole night without sleep for such meals.

On the New Years, beyond the duty of providing copious meals for her extended family, my mother usually prepared gifts for her highest-ranking relatives, like my father's uncle, elder sisters, and elder cousins with neatness, solemnity and quality. She always observed the teaching of “Kính trên, Nhường dưới” (The younger should Respect the elder, and the elder should Yield to the younger). When I grew up and started reading books on Confucianism, I realize that her conduct exemplified the five Confucian virtues: “Nhân, Nghĩa, Lễ, Trí, Tín” (Humanity/ Kindness, the appreciation and repayment of the goodwill of others, doing things well and according to Protocol, Intellectuality, Trust). Having these five attitudes distinguishes a person of quality from an ordinary one. My mother learned them from her father and practiced them in her own life. That is Hạnh (behavior).

Around 1953, when living conditions in the countryside were very difficult, I overheard from the adults that some families had run out of food and ate only one meal a day, a mixture of rice and cassava or taro. Some families had to forage for roots in the forest. A talented embroiderer and knitter, my mother devoted her spare time to using these skills to make extra money, which she spent on new clothes and some luxuries for us. Her work was highly appreciated by the youth, who needed warm wool sweaters to go out to the military operations or battle fields.

Due to her frequent overwork, the influence of her torture by the French, her long march across the mountains and jungles, and poor living conditions, my mother grew fragile and eventually became very ill for about a year. Unfortunately, during this time, my father was mostly absent. As she lived in the countryside where there were no doctors or no medical facilities, she was near her death. The only medication she could get was some Chinese herbal medicine.

One day, when I was seven or eight years old, I remember being left alone at home to take care of my mother. My father was on a cattle-trading trip, and Aunt Em was out in the fields, I was required to prepare her medicine, which had to be cooked for 3-5 hours under a dim flame, the more slowly the better. This was a task requiring patience and certain knowledge – not one for your average small child. Because I was unable to control the flame, the herbs in the pot dried up. I was terrified, I added some water to return the pot's contents to their expected volume and kept quiet until Auntie Em came back from the rice field and discovered the problem. My mother did not reprimand me, but she softly wept because she loved me.

A year later, Aunt Thứ, my mother's younger sister who lived in Huế, learned about her illness. My aunt asked my mother to stay with her and took care of her until she recovered. She then returned to the village and prepared for our journey to the city to start our future, particularly our education. She always showed her concern that I should do well academically by reminding me that my paternal grandpa gave his children an education instead of money for an inheritance, and by referring to the advice of her father. These tell me that my mother was determined to do the same for her own children.

Mother, every time I think of you, I realize that you were a perfect person, a woman who devoted her life to her husband, a mother who always taught her children to behave well and denied herself so that they could succeed.

My father resumed his public work in Quảng Trị, believing that it was a temporary job. In the summer of 1955, we accompanied my mother to move to Huế city, where my father expected a better-paying position. But it never happened.

At the end of 1957, we once again moved to Quảng Trị to reside with my father, who had decided to stay there and take a job at the Office of Civil Works. We lived in the housing quarter of the Civil Works Department from then until I left for university. My father's job provided poorly for a family of five, which including a servant. However, my mother knew how to supplement our budget by processing special flours, buying and storing large quantity of fish sauce for resale. We

had a reasonably comfortable life. But my mother was not in good health and frequently took vitamins and medications. This reinforced my father's medical knowledge.

Something that I sometimes regret is that when I had nearly completed the secondary high school, my mother expressed a wish that I attend medical school in Huế, so that I could take care of her when she got older. Huế is close to Quảng Trị, and with my excellent academic record - my graduations with Very Good grades (hạng Bình) from high school and from secondary high school at first level, and with excellent school records through 7 years - I could easily have qualified for admission. But I decided to apply to the technical university because I really liked the engineering, and I always felt faint if I saw blood. How could a doctor complete his training and treat patients with that kind of phobia?

My mother was usually insightful and gentle when talking about our future, including marriage, career and lifestyle. She never insisted that we do what she wanted us to do, but tactfully made suggestions, also indicating that she would be willing to make sacrifices if things became difficult.

After my immigration to Canada, my mother lived in Saigon with my father, my stepbrother and my stepsisters. I believe that she was not usually happy due to my father engaging in some types of gambling and giving money to others without her consent, and due to the disobedience of her stepchildren. In contrast to my father's extravagance, she constantly tried to maintain a balanced family budget. To have extra funds for emergencies, she tried to save some money and used to buy gold rings and wear them on her fingers. But she was willing to give them away when required. Sometime in 1999, Đông needed money to attend an apprenticeship program on a cruise ship to become an onboard steward; my mother gave him a thick gold ring to support his training. Đông appreciated her gift and loved her as his own mother in return.

My mom never had a chance to see my family in Canada like my father did, because her fragile health prevented her from travelling. However, we returned to Vietnam several times and in 1998 both of us, then my two elder daughters went there separately to see her. These visits made her very happy. I trust that she lived with that feeling till her last day.



Vietnam Spring 1998 –
our last reunion with
mother during Tết in
Saigon.

In 2000, I went to Saigon to attend her funeral. She passed away peacefully and without pain. She was prepared for her departure and let the family

know two days in advance. She did not forget to tell my father to call me home. I was back in Saigon just in time to see her coffin. In the ten days during and after the funeral, I could not sleep. I suspected this was caused by my grief and love for her, but I also felt that something unfair might have been done to her. I went to her altar and tomb to pray and requested her to generously forgive anyone who had ever committed wrongdoing against her. After that, my soul was lightened, I slept well and returned safely to Canada.

I would like to express my thanks to a Catholic nun (although she is no longer with us) who spent her time caring for my mother during the several last weeks of her life. She was a very noble person.

1.3 My Birth

I was born on the fifteenth of August, 1944 in the city of Xiengkhoang (Laos), in a troubled period of global and Indochinese (Đông Dương) history. I was named Trung Thu (first name) to commemorate the Mid-Autumn Festival, an important celebration for Oriental children. My parents told me that at that time my father served the French Indochinese government responsible for the colonization and protection of Đông Dương including Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. He was hired as the director of the provincial PTT Office which gave him a comfortable life compared to that of the common Vietnamese and Laotian people. In fact, he was assigned a French built villa with an elevated veranda and a front garden planted with roses.

On the evening of August 14, after my mother had organized a medium-sized party to celebrate the festival of Mid-Autumn (Tết Trung Thu) with my father's friends and colleagues, including some French guests, she came out to water the plants and fell. She was rushed to the hospital where I was born two months prematurely in the early morning, when the sky was lightened by the full moon. My name is a major part of my identity and it has often reminded me to do things with the clarity of the moon that was shining when I was born. However, I was not a physically strong baby.

Section 2: My Childhood in the Country

My life flowed in synchrony with the lives of my mother and father. I was also exposed to many of my relatives since my parents were occasionally absent. I can still vividly remember my childhood with all of its happenings, miseries and joys. These experiences acted like the genetic material of my personality and taught me lessons from which I would benefit later. My childhood can be divided into two periods, one of living in the countryside and another of living in the city.

In 1945, my father left Laos to join the Revolution and my mother went back to An Cu to stay with her parents. Because I was only one year old, I don't remember much of what happened. My memories become clear from around 1950, when I was six. My mother's absence was the thing that most affected me. At the time, my sister Ngọc Diệp and I moved between An Cu and Vinh Quang to stay with our maternal and paternal relatives, respectively, as my mother had requested before she left on her adventure.

2.1 An Cu and My Maternal Relatives

An Cu, my mother's birthplace, is a large village near the estuary of the Thạch Hãn River. Although none of its houses were located along the river, some of its rice fields were; which meant that its farmlands varied in quality. The fields farther from the shore were fertile, but those bordering the river were occasionally immersed in its slightly salty water during high tides and flooding season, and thus produced poor crops. At the southwestern edge of the village was a hill named Cồn Đống (Dune Hill). This was something like a small mountain separating the village from the river. This hill seemed to get steeper as I grew older, and I found it an increasingly arduous endeavour each time I had to climb it on the road to and from An Cu.

The western part of the village was composed of fields for growing rice, divided by lines of thorny trees that were about 2-3 meters tall, which grew along the edge of the road. These trees, called Dưới in Vietnamese, bore small yellow fruits during the summer. Kids liked to climb them and sit on the tops, which were generally flat, and covered with a blanket of tiny dark-green leaves to pick the fruit. This fruit was quite juicy, slightly sweet and good to eat when we were thirsty. I think it might have contained vitamin C, because after eating it, I felt refreshed, particularly when we

walked the 10 kilometers from Bò Bản back to An Cù. Hiền and I were asked to make these trips to transmit messages to Uncle Ý, my grandma's nephew, who lived in the neighbouring village. The northeastern part of An Cù contains several large tombs and memorial buildings, of which the monument of Quận công (the dauphin) Nguyễn Văn Tường was the most impressive. Sir Nguyễn Văn Tường was a prime minister, famous as the first high-ranking representative of Vietnam to be sent to France on a diplomatic mission. He also acted as one of the regents of King Hàm Nghi, a patriot who was against the French domination and whom the colonists exiled to Algeria. Sir Tường himself was exiled to Tahiti and died in 1886 on this island.

An Cù village was mainly occupied by wealthy and famous members of my grandpa's maternal and paternal families, including Sir Nguyễn Văn Tường. It therefore boasted many sumptuously built residential and communal compounds that each included several large beautiful brick houses and impressive entrance gate. My grandparents' living compound was one of these. In contrast, the rest of the village was made up of small houses, covered by thatched roofing. These, of course, belonged to the poor villagers, who generally served the rich by providing labour for farming, gardening and other tasks.

My maternal grandparents lived in a large compound that was approximately 300 m x 300 m, surrounded by a thick fence of bamboos growing along a perimeter trench. It was a typical dwelling for a large rich Vietnamese family. The entrance was secured by a canopy gate of Mandarin design, with two large wooden doors painted red. A brick-paved road about 40 m long led to a huge front yard, also paved with quality bricks, and a big garden surrounded the back and sides of the dwelling. The complex consisted of two magnificent houses. The upper or main house primarily contained ancestor altars, living and sleeping quarters, a reading area, and an area for guests (living room), guest rooms, etc. The lower or secondary house consisted of ladies' suites, an area for meeting with ordinary people, and a kitchen including an annex for raising pigs and other domestic animals like chickens, ducks and geese. In the central area, at about two meters above the floor, a huge, hermetically sealed wood bunker was built to store rice and other crops.

I used to sleep with my cousins Phước (who was a year older than me) and Hiền (who was my age) in a large wooden divan in the back of the main house. At night, when I needed to go to the wash room - which was an open area with a big basin to store rain water for washing, and a corner for urinating - I had to cross the altar area. This made me so fearful that I sometimes decided to hold it and ended up wetting myself! That certainly made my mother upset in the morning. An alternative place to go during the night was near the north side door that opened onto the garden. But I did not dare to go into the garden because it was thick with trees and filled with shadows cast by various structures such as a 2mWx3mLx1.5mH concrete container for storing rain water, and some stand-alone walls decorated with image of dragons and tigers. For me, the spirits could hide themselves anywhere!

At this time my maternal grandmother's family included herself, Auntie Hoan, Hiền, Lành and their mother, Auntie Tâm (my grandmother's niece), Huệ (a helper who was about 15 years old) and Mực, the family's beloved dog. Every two to three months, Auntie Tâm accompanied us to Vinh Quang, a trip that took about 3-5 hours. We spent the first 2-3 hours in a sampan navigating the Thạch Hãn River. The section we had to traverse was close to the river's mouth, which emptied into the Pacific Ocean, which was why its waves were generally high. Sometimes we had to delay the trip until the water became smoother. After this, we had to walk for several more kilometers, take another sampan accross a confluence, and walked an additional four kilometers to get to Vinh Quang. When we reached the village, Auntie Tâm had just enough time to hand us over to our paternal relatives before she had to return to An Cù.

Starting sometime in 1952, the fighting between the Việt Minh and the French raged in this area. Eventually during this time, the Revolutionists came in and out of the village at night, which prompted the local dogs to bark more frequently. Consequently, they launched a campaign of killing dogs. My grandmother, escorted by Auntie Tâm took Mực to her younger brother's (Ông Nghè) house in Bò Bản, her native village. But ten days later, in the early morning, we saw Mực in

front of the entrance door, wagging his tail apologetically. We knew that he missed the family and had decided to come home. My grandma relented and concealed him in the storage area, out of sight of visitors.

To be honest, we led quite a good life in An Cù, because Grandma was wealthy; she got anything she wanted, even French products like butter, Maggie sauce, bread through my aunts and uncle who lived and worked in Huế. As An Cù is located along the river, we had access to fish like seabass (cá kình), kingfish (cá thu), tuna (cá ngừ), perch (cá chép), and porgy (cá hanh). We always ate fresh fish because the local fishermen would bring their catch directly to the rich families. My grandmother usually ordered in advance so she would have a good supply when she wanted it.

My Grandfather (1882 – 1951)

My grandpa's name was Nguyễn Hàm (or Nguyễn Sĩ Hàm). He was a grandchild of Sir Nguyễn Văn Tường on his mother's side; and was a descendant of an intellectual family named Nguyễn Sĩ (or Nguyễn Hữu) on his father's side. He was renowned for overcoming obstacles to obtain his doctorate (bằng Tiến sỹ) in the reign of Duy Tân, and for resisting bribery when he served the Nguyễn Dynasty over several dozen years. He was nominated to the position of royal advisor (quan Ngự sử), then sub-minister (Tham tri). He always taught the family to observe “Cần Kiệm Liêm Chính” and other virtues.

Having risen to a high rank among the Mandarins through his long service to the Nguyễn Dynasty, he and his family lived comfortably in Huế and retired in Quảng Trị. My maternal grandfather was also a patriotic person as I recently discovered while reading about the elites who were rooted in the province of Quảng Trị. He had been member of “Phong Trào Đông Du” and “Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục” (Movement toward East and Tonkin Free School). Those movements aimed to motivate and help young Vietnamese go to Japan for receiving technical training and a modernized education. He resigned when the Vietnamese government under the French protection became weak and was being used as a tool for French colonization.

My grandpa was quiet and contemplative, and read throughout most of the day. He behaved like an intellectual trained in Oriental philosophy and culture. He appeared very strict, even unemotional; but despite that appearance, he discretely took care of the family members, made observations and gave instructions and advice. He gently admonished you when you made a mistake, and rewarded you when you correctly completed a task by offering you a half of a sugar apple, a banana or a guava that had been grown in his garden, which also contained various fruit trees, cotton plants and vegetables.

Every day, each of us had a task to perform. Every morning I had to bring him a brass container filled with rainwater, which was stored in a large vase. The vase was placed on the elevated cement balcony of the main house and the water it contained was usually infested with larvae. When I took the water from the vase, I therefore took the larvae as well. However, I found a way to get rid of them by slowly transferring the water to another container and using a chopstick or a rod to stop the larvae from flowing through; then I retransferred the filtered water to the brass container. I did not forget to clean the spilled water from the bottom of the container before placing it on the table in his room. My grandpa realized that I executed my task with care and observation. That made him happy. He talked to my mother about the way I completed the work and gave her advice on my future. He said: “Thu is fragile but intelligent and thoughtful in doing things. He certainly will be useful in the future if you provide him with an education”. But I did not live with him in An Cù long enough. One day, he decided to move back to Huế for medical treatment. I never saw him again.

I recently came across an article honouring my grandfather's contribution to Vietnamese youth and history. The article also mentioned that he was celebrated by the Nguyễn Dynasty and that his name was engraved on a tombstone together with those of fifteen other elites of the Nguyễn Dynasty. This ignited my curiosity and I promised myself that I would find the site of the tomb. When I returned to Vietnam in 2010, I had a goal for my trip: to visit my beloved living relatives and the

graves of the ones who have passed away. On a visit to the city of Quảng Trị, I met with some of my old time friends for coffee at a stand on the shore of the Thạch Hãn River; one of them gave me a booklet about my grandfather.

After reading it, I committed to doing something for him. First I went back to Huế to convince my Uncle Vọng, who was then about 90 years old and considered as the head of the Nguyễn Hữu family, to accept my proposal to build a memorial in An Cựu. After he agreed, my cousin Đức, who was Vọng's son, took me by motorcycle the next morning to visit my grandpa tomb under Ngự Bình Mountain. On the way back, I spotted a beautiful monument, Văn Thánh National Memorial, on a hill about 3 kilometers from the Thiên Mụ Pagoda. Inside the old, sumptuously built gate were two rows of open houses nicely roofed with red brick shingles. I was told by a tour guide that the house on the right side was for 16 high-ranked Mandarins and that on the left was for military elites of the Nguyễn Dynasty. I had a feeling that I had found the right place. We inspected the right-hand house and saw 16 small memorial structures; each consisted of a cement turtle-shaped base and a tombstone engraved in Chinese characters with the occupant's personal data, academic achievements and Mandarin career. One of these was his memorial tomstone.

Some days later, I returned to Saigon to meet with my cousin Nguyễn hữu Phước, Uncle Vọng's eldest son, to discuss my proposal and to ask him to accept the task of implementing the project since he lives in Vietnam and is a reliable person; and after two and a half years, in March of 2013, I met with Phước again to put the plan into action.

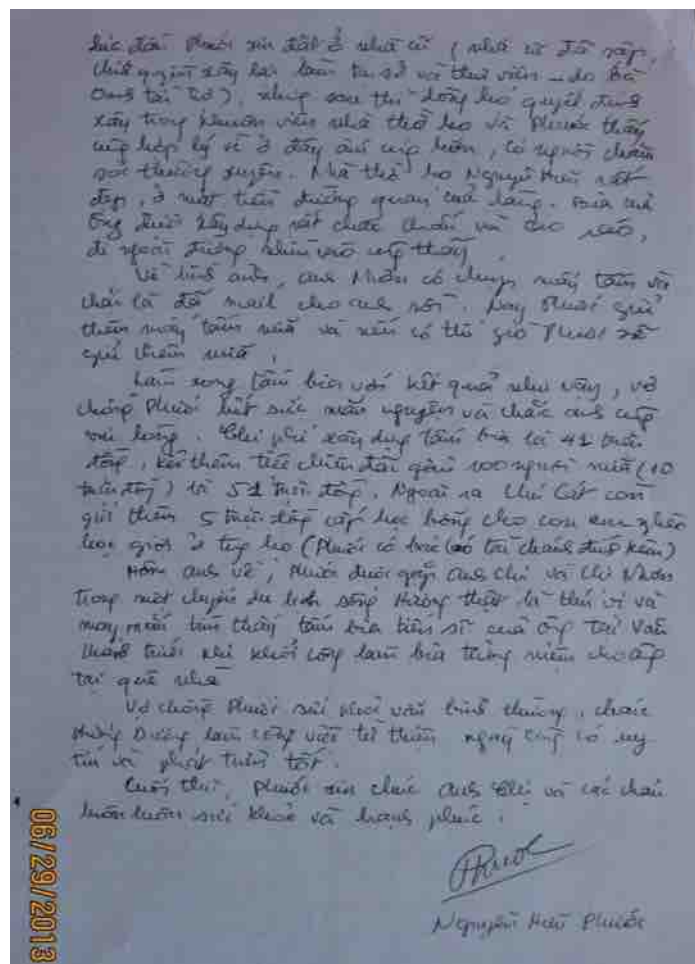
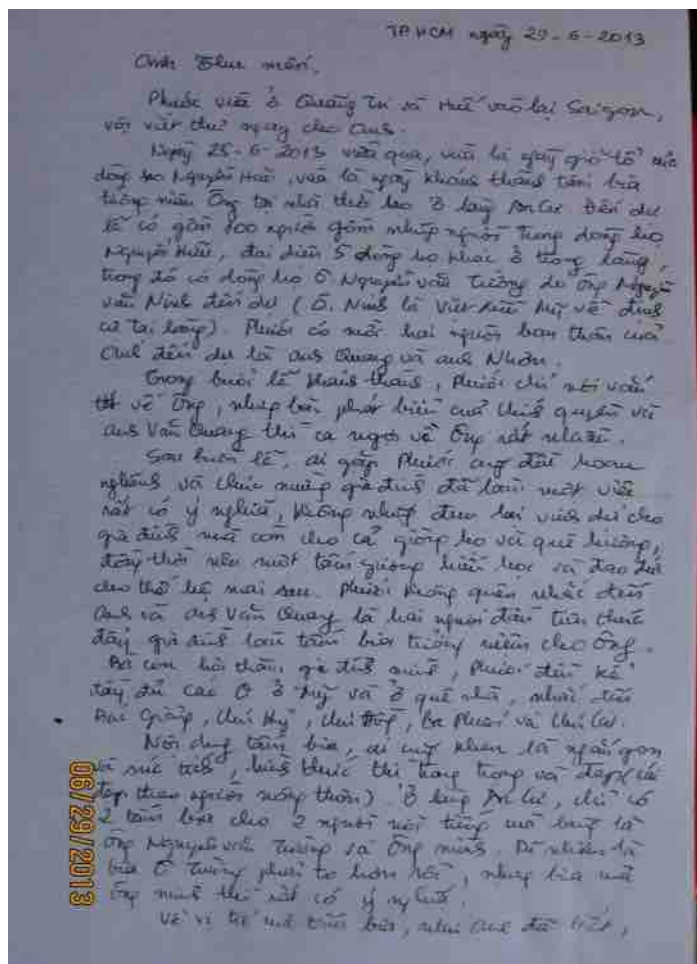
The following is some documentation on our efforts to build the memorial to commemorate our grandpa.



Huế 2010 – Văn Thánh National Monument where the memorial tombstone of Grand-father Nguyễn Hàm was located



Quảng Trị 2013 –
Newly installed
tombstone of
Grandfather
Nguyễn Hàm



My Grandma (Mệ ngoại, 1884 – 1957)

My grandma was a moderately healthy person who acted strict to maintain her authority. I usually sat beside her during lunch or supper. She normally put good things to my bowl, but did not realize that kids don't like to eat exactly what adults do! I unwillingly received bitter melon or watercress soup that I could hardly swallow. I couldn't protest about it even if I had dared, as that old-fashioned household did not allow a child to express disagreement with an adult. But now, those vegetable soups are among my favourites.

My grandma had a kind of irritating cough, I don't know when it began, but she used to have coughing fits that were loud enough to be heard half a kilometer away. Whenever I came back from Vinh Quang or Quảng Trị (later in my life) to see her, I could tell from far away if she was at home.

In the middle of An Cu, there was a man-made lake of about 60 mx500 m to store water for the use of the villagers and for planting lotus and water lilies. On one of its corners at the end of a clay-paved road was the house of my father's sister, Aunt Trợ, who had married a distant uncle of my mother. I occasionally went there to talk to my cousins Nguyễn quang Gia and Nguyễn quang Phục. However, I was not very close to them due to difference in age.

At the far end of the lake, was the house of Aunt Bộ Tư, who usually got along well with my grandma. My grandma usually asked me to go there to carry messages or to return some kitchen utensils. Unfortunately, these trips were usually in the evening or at night, and I had to pass an imposing temple gate beside the lake where people said that ghosts had appeared after dark. I ran by that gate as fast as I could till I got to Auntie Bộ Tư's house! Since my vision was not good and I did not then wear glasses, I eventually stumbled on a block of clay on the street and I fell right in the middle of the entrance. Fortunately, I recovered quickly and continued on my way. On

subsequent missions for my grandma, I had more confidence and could steadily walk by the gate with little fear, in the knowledge that no ghosts would try to get me.

My grandmother sought help from several men and women in the village during the paddy and crop seasons. One named Chú Mượn (Uncle Loaning), was a strongly built man, but very rustic and quasi-ignorant. What he wanted from his wages was to eat a lot to fill his stomach. He never negotiated his pay, and was frequently exploited by rich and selfish people. (This was one of the aspects of the feudalism, which the Marxist – Leninist doctrine denunciates and tries to make use for inventing Communism). He usually wanted to work for my grandma because she gave him plenty of rice and a good salary as well.

I had the chance to reunite with my grandma in 1956, when she left An Cu to stay with us. Since she was lonely and could no longer take care of herself, she needed help from her daughters, my mother, Aunt Thứ and some others living in Huế. Every morning after breakfast, my grandma treated my sister and me two bowls of tofu. She always made the same joke: “You need to win the contest (đâu) to help your poor mother, so you must eat tofu (đâu)”.

She went back to An Cu by the end of the year and died in 1957. I was fortunate to have attended her funeral.

Uncle Vọng (1920 -) and Uncle Phũ

Uncle Vọng is my mother’s younger brother. After his graduation from the French educational system, he, like my father, joined the Revolution. He usually came home to An Cu once or twice a month to rest after his tours of duty. When informed that my uncle would be home for a visit, my grandmother would prepare to welcome him. She had one or two young hens overfed in the pen and some ducks in the garden readied for slaughter. I also impatiently waited for him to come home because I could sometimes follow him to the fields when he hunted for birds with his shotgun using small bullets. I had fun observing his preparations. He used lead and black powder from regular bullets to make smaller ones and ignitions for his hunting rifles. His targets were wild ducks, quails, pigeons, etc. When he shot a bird, I ran and caught it as it fell in the rice fields. Most times we went hunting; we came home with 2-6 birds.

When I was studying in Saigon, I got to see him again when I sublet a room in his rented compound. He did not seem happy with the politics of the existing pro-American government, and made a living teaching the French language in French schools. I have also seen him on recent visits to Vietnam and realized that he was unhappy with the Communist regime as well. I like and respect him due to his straightforward character and his great honesty.

Circumstances also gave my grandma another close relative, a handsome man who appeared well educated and serious. He was assigned by the Revolution to be my grandma’s adopted son, so that when he came to the village for work or recreation, he had some one to take care of him. Apparently the Party generally assigned officers to wealthy families so that they could be well fed and live on good terms with other upper-class people. This was Uncle Phũ. He was a high-ranking officer from Thừa Thiên Province, who probably came from a Mandarin family like my Uncle Vọng. (When I grew up, I learned he was a lieutenant colonel in the Vietnamese National Army). He was polite to my relatives, and friendly to me.

With an escort of 2-5 officers and soldiers, he came to the village periodically to rest and probably to study the suitability of the ground for battle. Once when he was there, we heard the continuous roaring of the French airplanes, followed by machine-gun fire, then gun shots that lasted throughout the entire day. In the evening, they carried several dozen wounded soldiers to my grandma’s house. There was just enough space in the brick-paved yard to temporarily hospitalize them. All the family members rushed to offer the wounded soldiers with whatever was available and permitted by their nurse. It was a horrible experience. After that, I never saw Uncle Phũ again.

Aunt Hoan and Uncle Dzu

Sometime in the early stages of my mother's repatriation from Laos, my mother, sister Diệp and I lived with my grandma's family including Auntie Hoan. Aunt Hoan is my mother's youngest sister, now lived in the state of Oklahoma. She was pretty and young, nice to us and loved us, but always seemed serious and not very communicative. I believe that this was partly due to her quiet nature and partly a way of distinguishing herself from others, as a Mandarin woman. As kids, we were irritated by her reserve and could only stand it for a few months before wanting to go back to our paternal grandmother in Vinh Quang.

She mostly stayed in her large room, which had been occupied by all of the family's daughters when they were growing up and kept the door closed. Sometimes my sister and I would try to explore it. In the room were photographs of my other aunts, who were already married and had left the house, and a trunk containing several dozens pairs of shoes and slippers that were decorated with strings of tiny coloured buttons. We were happy to remove some strings to add to our collection.

In the early '50s, probably after my mother's return from Nghệ An, I usually accompanied her on long visits to An Cu. Auntie Hoan was then married to Uncle Dzu, a handsome man who was involved in politics in South Vietnam, and who had retreated to the village. He was a nice person, who was kind and sympathetic, and everyone who talked to him liked him. This was a source of unhappiness if not misery, to my Auntie Hoan throughout her marriage, because he had so many mistresses. The couple was happy to live under the care and protection of my grandma. Uncle Dzu practiced nursing for a living. In some years, he seemed to be successful, and was able to purchase a motorcycle. He used to give me rides on it to welcome me back to An Cu.

In the '80s and '90s, Aunt Hoan wrote to me from time to time from Saigon to discuss about my mother's welfare. I acknowledged this by sending her some money to establish a special account for her frequent visits home and for her care for my mother. On the several occasions that I visited Vietnam, I never forgot to see her and bring her gifts. She finally immigrated to the United States around 2006, and I have visited her twice in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma 2007 –
Visiting Aunt Hoan's
family



Aunt Hai (1912 – 2001) and Her Family

When my mother left Vinh Quang to search for a safer place to live during wartime, we stayed in Chợ Cầu, a small town in the Gio Linh District (Quảng Trị Province) with my Aunt Hai's family.

This included my aunt Hai, my cousin Bích Nhạn, Bích Nhạn's husband Thi (whom I called Brother Thi) and my cousin Phúc (who was about 2 years younger than me). During this period, my mother often travelled to Huế (about 90 kilometers from Gio Linh) to buy wholesale merchandise for Aunt Hai's convenience store. We had a fairly reasonable life. One thing that I particularly remember is the kindness of my cousin-in-law Thi in taking care of me. Because Gio Linh was newly built in the midst of the jungle and I was not accustomed to that environment, I developed some skin problems. Brother Thi used to clean and apply medication to heal several large sores on my legs. Every time when I look at those scars, I think of him.

In the eyes of the small boy that I was at the time, my aunt seemed severe and difficult. But now that I am an adult, I realized that she was the most responsible of my mother's siblings. She was concerned about her sisters and extended family and was ready to help when required. Unfortunately, I could not visit her during her last years of life in Austin, Texas to tell her that I appreciated her help of my mother during the early years of the war in Vietnam. But in 2011, I went to Austin to see my cousin Bích Nhạn and to light an incense stick at her grave. While there I also met cousin Phúc and his eight family members (not counting the third generation), and stayed with Bích Yến's family.

I saw Cousin Bích Nhạn various times in the '60s when I studied in Saigon, and still get together with her occasionally. On her 80th anniversary, she invited her relatives to Austin for a celebration, during which I had the opportunity to express my love and appreciation, as follows:

Austin (TX) 2011 –
Meeting with maternal
relatives on occasion of
Cousin Bích Nhạn's 80th
birthday



Chị BÍCH-NHẠN dưới mắt nhìn của một người em họ.

Tôi có cái may mắn được gặp và sống với chị Bích Nhạn trong nhiều giai đoạn của cuộc đời. Được các cháu báo ngày làm kỷ niệm tuổi thọ 80 cho Chị ở Austin, Texas; hôm nay (18 tháng 6 năm 2011), tôi tự bảo thế nào cũng phải cố gắng xuống tham dự để mừng chị và tỏ lòng kính mến. Thế nên tôi đã vượt mấy ngàn dặm (miles), trong hơn một ngày hành trình để đến đây. Vợ tôi, Phụng rất cảm mến chị nên cũng có mặt trong dịp này. Với tuổi 80, Chị đã đạt được 80 phần trăm của cái mức cực đại 100 năm của đời người, với một thể chất còn duyên dáng, sinh động và một tinh thần sáng suốt, tự chủ đáng khâm phục. Điều này làm cho tôi phải ngưỡng mộ và cảm chắc rằng Chị sẽ đạt đến hay đạt trên 100 năm tuổi thọ!

Chị sinh ngày 09 tháng 7 năm 1932, tại làng Đầu Kênh, quận Triệu Phong, tỉnh Quảng Trị, dưới tên ĐỖ THỊ BÍCH NHẠN. Chị là con đầu của bà di cả (nếu không kể cậu Cả đã qua đời sớm) trong gia đình họ ngoại NGUYỄN HỮU của tôi. Chị tuổi xấp xỉ với một số cậu di. Nhưng sự kính nể của đàn em họ hàng như tôi

với Chị không phải ở tuổi khá chênh lệch của chị đối với chúng tôi, mà ở lòng chân tình, cởi mở, rộng lượng cũng như sự rộng rãi của chị đối với các em họ hàng.

CÁ TÍNH VÀ THÀNH QUẢ CỦA CHỊ:

- Với gia đình Chị: chị đã là người mẹ rất có trách nhiệm, biết hy sinh, nuôi dạy con cái nên người.
- Với em út và dòng họ: Chị không phân biệt em ruột hay em họ, con của cậu hay dì nào. Chị luôn luôn vui vẻ, chia sẻ và cảm thông. Đối với bà con cậu dì, chị luôn tỏ niềm kính mến và tình cảm. Hai năm trước đây, dù ở tuổi 78, chị đã mạnh dạn đảm nhận trách nhiệm của các cháu ngoại, về tận làng An Cư, tỉnh Quảng Trị trong mùa đông rét mướt để hoàn thành việc dời mồ mả tổ tiên ngoại vào Huế, khi các cháu trai và trẻ tuổi hơn chị không làm được. Chị còn là một cuốn gia phả sống của đàn em khi hỏi đến sự liên hệ bà con giữa người này với người kia. Chị như biết hết cả bà con bên họ ngoại, gần cũng như xa.
- Với cuộc đời và xã hội: Chị là người phụ nữ phi thường, dám đương đầu với cuộc sống, mềm dẻo và cứng rắn khi cần, có óc cầu tiến và thức thời. Xuất thân từ gia đình nội ngoại đều là quan lại, Chị được giáo dục với “Tam Tông Tứ Đức” làm người đàn bà trở nên lệ thuộc, nhu mì dễ bị đóng khung trong khuôn khổ. Thế mà Chị đã dung hòa được cái đẹp cái hay của giáo điều Khổng giáo với thực tế trong cảnh góa bụa ở tuổi 32 với một đàn con dại 8 đứa. Chị không những đã tạo dựng được đời sống khá vững vàng cho gia đình mà Chị đã còn thức thời cho con ra nước ngoài du học... Kết quả là Chị đã đóng góp cho xã hội những đứa con xuất sắc và hữu dụng.

KỶ NIỆM CỦA TÔI ĐỐI VỚI CHỊ BÍCH NHẠN:

Trong quá khứ tôi có nhiều cơ hội gặp gỡ Chị. Nào những năm kháng chiến chống Pháp lúc gia đình di tản và chị ở Chợ Cầu, Gio Linh Quang tri; Ba tôi đi theo kháng chiến, mà tôi phải tần tảo bán buôn nên thường vắng nhà, khi ốm đau tôi thường được Chị và anh Thi (hôn phu chị) chăm sóc tận tình. Rồi những năm lớn lên học đại học ở Sài Gòn, Chị thường khuyến khích tôi cuối tuần xuống Thủ Đức chơi và đôi lúc ở lại nhà chị. Có lắm khi Chị phải làm việc về trễ, nhưng cháu Bích Yến cũng đã biết soạn bữa trưa để các cậu cháu cùng ăn! Hồi chị lập Câu lạc bộ nhà binh ở Vũng Tàu (lối 1966) tôi lại được gọi xuống chơi để đi tắm biển, đôi lúc với bạn bè nữa cũng không sao. Có một lần chị gọi tôi và người bạn đồng khóa của tôi ở nhà một ông cai nhà máy nước (ty Thủy Cục thì phải) Vũng Tàu. Gia đình này có đến 2-3 cô con gái bậc Trung học. Mấy cô này rất tinh nghịch, có đêm lẳng văng đèn cửa sổ thả đá vào phòng chúng tôi ngủ, rồi chạy và cười khúc khích. Tôi và bạn ra khỏi phòng thì họ đã dong mắt...

Thế rồi những năm di tản qua Bắc Mỹ sau 1975, mặc dầu chị ở Austin, Texas, chúng tôi ở Toronto, Canada nhưng cũng có dịp chị đã cùng vợ chồng Yến/Dzịệp lên Toronto chơi với chúng tôi.

Mỗi lần nghĩ đến cái tên BÍCH NHẠN tôi nghĩ đến mùa Xuân. Người Pháp có câu ngạn ngữ “Một con én không làm được mùa xuân” (une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps). Tôi không đồng ý với quan điểm này, nhất là ở trường hợp của con én Màu Xanh Biếc, vì mỗi lần tôi có cơ hội gặp chị hay nói chuyện với chị thì có cảm tưởng rằng tất cả mọi thử thách đều giải quyết được, mọi khó khăn cũng trở thành dễ dàng..., mọi sự đều ở dưới cái nhìn khả thi và năng động của chị. Tất cả đều là đẹp, đều là hoa lá xinh tươi. Đó không phải là mùa Xuân hay sao?

Kỷ niệm vẫn còn nhiều. Tôi tạm ngừng nơi đây để kính chúc Chị thật vui trong ngày MỪNG TUỔI THỌ 80, và tôi muốn nói với chị rằng “chị Bích Nhạn ơi, chúng em rất hạnh diện có một người chị như Chị, mong chị sống vui sống khỏe trong suốt những ngày còn lại của cuộc đời. Lần tới khi kỷ niệm tuổi thọ 100 thì Chị nhớ gọi cho em một xe lăn để xuống chia vui với chị. Chúng em rất mến thương Chị”.

Em của chị (NGUYỄN TRUNG THU).

My Niece Bích Yến:

Although I think I saw Bích Yến in Chợ Cầu when my mother was looking for a safe place to live during the war time, she was more than half a dozen years younger than me, so I did not pay much attention to her. Many years later, when I was a student in Saigon, my cousin Bích Nhạn (her mother) often asked me to visit her family on the weekends, first in Thủ Đức and then in Vũng Tàu,

so her children could get to know me. We talked a bit about everything, including her schooling and her ambition to be educated abroad.

Houston 1989 – Meeting
Niece Bích Yến & Dziệp,
cousins Mỹ Hà and Thái
during Diễm Hạnh's
wedding



BY did well at school, and was always polite and kind to her relatives; she also displayed her responsibility as an elder sister towards her seven siblings. In the spring of 1971, my wife and I went to Vũng Tàu for a vacation on the beach and to introduce Phụng to her family. We met with BY and her boyfriend Dziệp (who is now her husband) in my cousin's beautiful garden, which was planted with guava and grapefruit trees. I didn't know whether I was a good example for her, or vice versa. The uncle was just married, and the niece was already dating (cậu mới có vợ, cháu đã cặp bồ!).

After graduation from Quốc Gia Nghĩa Tử - a high school for children of the military personnel who had sacrificed themselves for their country - BY went to the U.S. to study and afterwards worked for Motorola Corp. She has become well known internationally and in the Vietnamese community for the more than 100 inventions she has patented in the fields of electronics and telecommunications. I am proud of her intelligence, determination and success.

While living in An Cư taught me how to behave politely to my relatives, and made me appreciate an earlier society dominated by Confucian teachings, it did not give me much exposure to other kids of my own age. I always felt that something was missing, and I did not gain as much experience in rural living as I did in Vinh Quang.

2.2 Vinh Quang and My Paternal Relatives.

Vinh Quang is a relatively small and newly established village. During the reign of King Tự Đức (1848-1883, Nguyễn Dynasty), our ancestor Nguyễn Vĩnh of Dương Xuân Village (Triệu Phong District, Quảng Trị Province) moved to this place, where there were only a dozen houses. In the second generation, which included my grandfather and his 3 brothers, my grandparents became very wealthy through raising ducks and growing large quantities of rice. They purchased much land to establish a broad feudal agricultural system. They also built a compound consisting of several brick houses, barns and stables in the family land. Thanks to their dynamic initiatives and development, the village prospered and attracted more people.

When I lived there, the village was located about 1 kilometer west and 2.5 kilometers north of the Thạch Hãn River. The east side or the back bone of the village approached a hamlet via a strip of land that was about 1.5 kilometers wide and several kilometers long. This area was infertile land because it was closed to a sandy hill located along the shore of the Cửa Việt Estuary. In the war time, it served as a convenient place to graze cattle because of its abundant grass and other weeds. The

north side of the village was used for rice fields, but only a small area near the riverbank was fertile, namely Đùng, where my family had most of its land. However, the cultivation of these paddies was interrupted during the war, because the French ships would have shot any moving object in sight.

I first came to Vinh Quang in 1948, some years after my parents' return from Xiengkhoang, Laos. I only remember that my paternal grandfather with his long beard usually lay on a thick wooden divan that was placed in a half-enclosed room in the corner of the main house. This room had a large window facing the front yard of the compound, so he could observe the comings and goings of his family and their guests. This type of room was normally used for reading, but I think he used it as more of a command post, as he was a manager who wanted to oversee the daily operation of the family business.

The property was landmarked by a very large tree of about 18 meters tall, with a trunk of 75 centimeter diameter measured at the level of my height when I was at nine, planted at the end of the road leading to our front yard. We nicknamed it “cây chim-chim” (birds-tree), but probably a silky oak (cây trái bần). The tree gave thick foliage all year-round to provide a good shade for anyone who wanted to take a rest under it after long hours working in the garden, and in certain circumstances it provided also a safe sleeping place for the chickens as well. I remember in certain period, there were many stray cats in the village. Without anyone to feed them, at night the cats preyed on our chickens having slept on the poultry platform, and caused fear to them. Every day at the sunset, these birds tried to fly upward to the tree, and usually the mature ones succeeded, but the youngsters failed. Poor family of a mother-hen and her dozen chicks did not know how to resolve the problem, normally stayed around us for protection. We then put them in a strong pannier, which was reinforced around with brick blocks and was temporarily located in the kitchen area. But still sometimes, in the morning we found one or some of the chicks missing. The tree also occasionally hosted a couple of hawks, or eagles coming for their nest.

It was a sentimental symbol of my family. When I came home from other places, from a distance of several kilometers, I began to see its foliage and realized that I had almost reached home. But during the war time, it became a target for the French army based in Đông Hà to shell us; and then my grandmother decided to cut it down.

I vaguely recall several things happening to my father's family, and was later told that three of my uncles had died on military missions or in the battle against the French army. My grandfather became deeply depressed, fell sick and died after a brief illness. From that day, my father's family dwindled rapidly. Every day, I saw the adults gather around the large table in the middle of the common living area to argue about something, which I later learned was the Revolution, and whether to join the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Việt Minh). I saw them leave the house one after the other. And I never saw some of them again.

My father was also occasionally absent during this period; I would learn that he was making some connections for his new technical role with the Việt Minh. Eventually, the only regular occupants of the main house were Aunt Cữu Thiệp, with her daughter Tam and her little son (my aunt's grandchild). My family had the second brick house, and included my grandma, my mother, my sister Ngọc Diệp, me, and Aunt Em.

About 1952, we returned to Vinh Quang from Chợ Cầu when my father, through his work for the Revolution was arrested and released by the French, and decided to go to the countryside to make a living on agriculture. In the countryside, there were many skills to learn and to practice, and I always found something interesting to explore. Some of the relatives that I met were very kind to me and gave me knowledge and experiences I would draw on when I grew up and had a family of my own. It is because I owe them so much that I want to write a few paragraphs about their

contributions. I also recall some memories of my first school days under the educational system of the Revolutionary government.

The Vietnamese Village and the Concept of Self-Sufficiency

Most Vietnamese are farmers who live in the country. The amount of land each family owns is determined by its wealth. Because of the need for onsite agricultural facilities, people generally build compound housing consisting of a main house, which contains the ancestral altar, guest meeting area, and men's living quarters; and a lower house and corridor that contain the women's living quarters, meeting area for ordinary people, kitchen, and dining area. An extended structure is used as a cattle barn, pigs pen and poultry platform. The remaining land around the compound is for vegetables and various crops (cotton, beans and corn in summer; potatoes and cassava in autumn; white radish in winter). In the back yard, there is generally an area reserved for planting spices and special vegetables like cucumbers, squash, and tomatoes. Fruit trees like papaya, guava and plum, are also planted in the front yard or on the sides of the house.

The family's property is generally surrounded by bamboo. To stop the bamboo from spreading, a perimeter trench about 1.5 meters wide and 1.3 meters deep is dug to store the water used for plants and raising fish, and sometimes for washing clothes as well. Water from a pendant gutter system using carved wood or curved brick sheets and installed along and under the edges of roof, is stored in a brick or cooked earth container. The entire arrangement facilitates self-sufficiency in the day-to-day rural life. A farmer could feed his family with the harvest from his rice field, supplemented by fish from the trench, vegetables and cereal from the garden for a long time without having to go to the market. I believe that system helped the Vietnamese people survive and partially supply the army during wartime. This is also why we defeated the colonial forces from China and France.

In 1988, I worked in Burkina Faso on the Kompienga Hydroelectric Project, a \$300 million dollar project financed by the European community. The detailed engineering and construction were handled by French contractors while the conceptual design and project management, which were financed by CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency), were handled by my Company. The project involved building a high-volume dam primarily to store water for irrigation, only a small portion of the budget was for energy generation and transmission.

After spending several months in Burkina Faso, I learned that in the country, during about two months of the summer, there is a high volume of rain. Sometimes the White Volta River floods the roads and low lying areas with a violent current that kills animals and people. But only a few days after the torrential rain, women would carry water several kilometers in open pails on their heads to bring home a dramatically reduced amount for their families. I also realized that the local people in the affected area did not do much farming, but mainly hunted and foraged in the forest for dry wood or charcoal.

So what were the real benefits of building that large and costly project? I concluded that if the people could learn some simple methods of storing water, such as using gutters and large containers as we did in rural Vietnam, they could collect enough for their domestic use. We might only need a few dozen million dollars to supply the materials and facilities, and few dozen more to teach the mechanics of the system. In meetings, I would occasionally comment on the practicality of the project, but the top-level decision makers were never interested. The government leaders always wanted fancy feats of engineering, like the first 138 kV transmission line, or the highest dam in the country and probably in all of West Africa. On the other hand, the leaders of donor countries always wanted to send their experts and engineers to underdeveloped or developing nations under aid programs. So that what they spent as a donation, returned to their pockets.

My Illness

Because of my premature birth and my move to the country at too early an age, I was not a healthy infant. I was told that I got asthma when I was three or four years old. That was a terrible illness for a child like me. It made me cough incessantly every time the climate changed, prevented me from

playing with other kids, and caused my diet to be even more restricted than it could have been given the scarce resources available. I became underfed if the asthma attacks continued for several days. But the local medical practitioner advised the restrictions and would charge my mother more money or blame her for the failure of the treatment if she did not make me follow them. When I was about eight, my asthma intensified, and the food restrictions became even tighter. My father wanted to lift them by letting me eat eggs, and to everyone's relief, nothing happened.

My mother consulted several famous rural doctors (thầy thuốc) for treatments, which included feeding me the dung of special worms obtained through a process called “thuốc cữ long trùng”. Small bugs that resembled wood bugs were put in a container and continuously fed sweet rice. They produced worms, which were also fed on rice to produce dung. She mixed this with herbal medicines and honey, ground the mixture then steamed it for several hours to make candies for me to eat. That wasn't all. One day, a distant cousin caught and killed a huge water monitor lizard to sell its meat to the villagers. My mother bought a small piece of the meat and a small portion of the liver. She then prepared a steak for me. I ate that only once.

When I was about ten years old, the asthma disappeared. To make sure of this, my father gave me some chicken, which was the most restricted item on my “not to eat” list one rainy day. I did not cough at all. From that day, it was declared that my asthma was gone. Oh, I was so happy. I felt like I had been released from a jail.

About that time, however, I contracted a more serious illness: typhoid. I was in bed for several days, and had no effective medication. My father was absent. For various reasons, my mother could not take me to the medical facility at Đông Hà, but she asked Aunt Em to carry me on her back to a small Catholic church in Mai Xá Thị, a large village about 6 kilometers away from Vinh Quang. The nuns of this church had a good reputation for giving medical advice and some treatment to the villagers. Initially, the sisters refused to admit me on the grounds of their lack of drugs, but my mother insisted that their knowledge was important and that she was willing to go anywhere to find the proper medication. Because of her begging, they let me stay for a few days. During the treatment, my mother fed me only rice broth even though I was hungry and kept asking for a bowl of rice with fish. I do not remember what medication I was given, but I got better and was released after about two weeks.

My Grandma (Mê nội, 1887-1971)

My grandmother name was Bùi thị Điều. She was an amazing woman who was very intelligent, even though she never went to school. She had a good memory and could recall every detail and event related to each member of her extended family. I was lucky to have lived with her for several years in my childhood, when observation and learning are at their peak. It was from her that I learned certain anecdotes about some of my uncles, aunts and other relatives. She took good care of me when my mother was absent. As a fragile kid, I was a little bit spoiled by her. One evening, when I was five or six, I skipped dinner because I felt tired and disliked the food although I did not say so. During the night my grandma touched my head and found out that I was sweating. She woke me up, asked if I was hungry; and made me a bowl of rice with fish. I ate that rice like it was the best thing in the world, and immediately felt better.

Born into a poor family, my grandma was a hardworking, open minded, nice and consistently tried to help people. From 1952 to 1954, the rural economy deteriorated to the point where many previously self-sufficient farmers had to hire themselves out to others to be fed every day and to bring home rice for their families. Most of them wanted to work for my grandma. They were fed pure rice that was not mixed with cassava and/or other rough cereals, supplemented with shrimp paste and fresh vegetables, with no limit to the number of servings. They used to say “We want to work for Mụ Thèm (her nick name) because she let us have a full stomach”.

She always sacrificed herself for others. One day that summer, when the sun had gone down to the west of the Thạch Hãn River but while the sky was still lighted enough for us to save fuel by not using the kerosene lamp, I saw Uncle Trường entering our family property, with a heavy load of

bamboo bundles weighing down his shoulders. My grandma immediately told each of us to stop eating and save a bowl of rice for him (I saved only half), because she knew that his family had run out of food that day.

She was highly responsible in caring for her relatives, no matter how much effort it took. When the Treaty of Geneva was signed, my father decided to stay in the South. On his request and to be near him, my grandma went to Nam Đàn (Nghệ An Province) to contact Uncle Huy (her youngest son) and bring back my sister Ngọc Diệp, who had been sent there for her education around 1952. Uncle Huy later left Việt Minh and moved to Huế to study.

That self-sacrifice and generosity paid off when she was brought to the People's Tribunal (which was then controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party) to be tried for feudalism. My grandma escaped the conviction and potential torture, because none of the villagers who used to work for her agreed with the charge. What a cruel and unjust regime it was that said the Constitution was based on "Independence, Liberty and Happiness", but that promoted animosity towards one class of people and dependency on another! After having given six sons to the Revolution, for which two of them died on the battle, my grandma was still tried by her ignorant countrymen under the direction of the Party. What kind of justice was that?

For several years afterwards, despite the political disturbance in the area, my grandma was still attached to her village, her family home, her relatives, and her neighbours until the fighting grew too intense. She then left Vinh Quang and relocated to Đà Nẵng with my uncle Tân's family. I was fortunate enough to see her occasionally before she passed away in 1971.

Uncle Trường

In Vietnamese, my uncle's first name, Trường means "bare body". I don't know if it was just a nickname or if his parents gave it to him at his birth, but it foreshadowed a difficult life. He was my father's cousin. Uncle Trường lived with his two wives and three young daughters in a separate house on my family's farm. It had been our barn and stable several years previously, before the Revolution forced my grandparents to curtail their agricultural activities.

Uncle Trường used to lead the farm workers, and of course was cared for by his relatives, my grandparents. However, when my father's family business, the massive rice production and duck raising operation gradually collapsed after the August Revolution in 1945, his role diminished. But he still stayed on my father's family farm because he had nowhere else to go.

Starting from 1953 or so, the Việt Minh declared Communism officially and prepared for fighting among the classes. Their partisans nominated him as an independent and gave him the title of labourer hero, with the expectation of using him against my family. But they had given him nothing, except unrealistic promise. At the same time, they classified my grandmother as a feudalist landowner and sent her one night to the local People's Tribunal, which was held in the large front yard of a house. Several partisans tried to turn the people against her, but when my uncle was called to speak, he confirmed that my grandmother was a good person, that she and her relatives always helped him, and that they had not ill-treated him. Although their trial failed, they still punished her for being a "feudalist landowner", by overestimating the tonnage of her rice crop in the ratio of ten to one, which meant a much higher tax rate! Poor my grandma, in several nights, she discretely hired a relative to dig up the backfill of a hole in the kitchen floor to recover her concealed brass coins and some gold rings; but the brass coins had been discarded from the market and just retained the value of its copper content. However, that somewhat helped purchase an additional quantity of rice and pay the transportation cost to fulfill her unjust tax burden.

The lives of my uncle Trường and his family did not get easier after the Revolution. Indeed, he had to work even harder because he could no longer be remunerated by my family. He did own some buffaloes, which were mostly given him by my grandparents. He had to feed them well to prepare them for the ploughing season. There was a good herding area along the river bank where the grass grew abundantly, since for a long time no one had dared to bring animals there. One late morning

in autumn, some blasts of gunfire were heard from the river. By noon, people came to tell us that my uncle and another relative had been ambushed by the French troops during their adventure to the river bank. His body was retrieved soon afterwards when the French had left. Because his two wives were so desperately poor; my family helped pay for the funeral.

Aunt Em and Uncle Thiên

From time to time, I accompanied Auntie Em on her foraging errands, such as catching fish or crabs to supplement our family's meals which were basically vegetables and cereals harvested from our fields. Auntie Em was a very skilled at this work, and would usually bring home a full basket of carp, crab, shrimp, and other fish after spending a few hours in the rice fields. These crabs were very tasty in the early months of the rice growing cycle, and were an extra source of protein. The catching of crabs is also helpful to prevent them from feeding on the young plants.

Aunt Em taught me how to catch a crab without being bitten by its sharp pincers. Rice field crabs appear during the planting season. They develop fast and live in holes dug into the dike or edge of the field, which normally have two or three exits for escape. To catch them, we needed to use both hands, one to block their escape route and the other to attack. You must quickly plunge your attacking hand into the hole and grab the crab immediately. If you hesitate, you will be painfully bitten. Having learned this lesson, I successfully caught some crabs. But one day, I stuck my hand into a hole and grabbed a water snake instead. Needless to say, I screamed.

Our farming activities also included the raising of pigs, chickens and ducks. In the early spring, my grandma would buy several dozen chicks and ducklings. I learnt from Auntie Em how to feed those cute baby animals and realized that the ducks need to be fed earthworms or shrimp shells to grow. But shrimps were very expensive, so once a week I followed her to the village back fields where we could turn the sandy soil and gather large worms. In the beginning I was scared to touch them and tried to pick them up with chopsticks, but after losing several fat worms this way, I decided to use my hands. We gave three or four worms to each bird in the evening, and by the next morning, we could see that they had grown much bigger. This is considered one of the joys of being a farmer.

One day, Mr. Thiên came to help my grandma harvest the rice, and I knew he was attracted to Auntie Em. He was a tall and strong man, very polite, kind and handy. He also had great agricultural skills and did everything well. In the late winter and early spring, when it was cold and rainy, he would go out early in the morning to lay hand-built traps on the dike or in the shallow water. He would return late in the evening with crane, heron, wild duck, and other birds and offered some of them to my grandma. In the summer, he proved himself adept at planting secondary cereal crops like cassava and sweet potato, and then harvested them. In the autumn, when the river rose and sometimes flooded, he netted carp, trout, river crabs, etc. I was glad to accompany him on these missions if he invited me and my parents allowed me to go.

About a year later, my family organized a simple marriage ceremony between Auntie Em and Uncle Thiên, which was full of the Vietnamese tradition and held in the countryside.

Auntie Em, I remember you not only for teaching me much about country living, but for the care and affection you showed me and the tales you sometimes told. In 2010, on a trip back to Vinh Quang to visit the family cemetery, I was fortunate enough to meet with her in her home. She was delighted to see me again after a fifty-year absence. She seemed to have a reasonably good life with her beloved husband. I offered her some money, but I still regretted that I did not see Uncle Thiên.

Cousin Phiên

Phiên is my distant cousin (his maternal grandfather and my paternal grandfather were brothers), who lived with me for a while in Vinh Quang. About two years my senior, he was a natural at performing every daily task that a boy had to do in a farming family, such as taking the cattle (including several cows and buffaloes) to the field for herding and to the river for washing, and

harvesting the sweet potato crop. He was a sympathetic guy who taught me how to ride a buffalo, how to take it from the stable to the field and vice-versa, and other valuable rural skills.

These lessons helped me be useful when my father brought back home a dozen buffaloes from one of his trading trips to the Northern provinces, then Phiên was hired to look after them and I was allowed to accompany him. However, these non-local animals behaved differently and were sometimes stubborn. One day when I ordered a young and robust buffalo to follow the herd, it resisted and chased me. I ran for my life, but the animal continued in its pursuit till I hid myself in the corner of two high dikes in the rice field. From that day, my father did not allow me to join Phiên on his cattle herding trips.

Phiên also had a talent for making toys out of clay, like a set of whistles of different tones and shapes, and for organizing battle games. He used small bamboo rods and tiny wild fruits that looked like black peppers to create a kind of shotgun for us kids to shoot at each other. When you were hit, it would hurt unless you were protected by thick clothes or shielded yourself with banana leaves. These were the only toys I had in my childhood, and though they were simple, I really liked them. Happiness is not measured by what we possess, but by what we successfully do with the things we have.

Phiên was not only a resourceful farmer, but a talented improviser of verbal responses in the folklore poems recited between boys and girls in the rice field during harvesting season.

I left him in 1954 to go to Đông Hà for my first year of schooling, after the Treaty of Geneva had divided North and South Vietnam. In my last years of senior high school in the city of Quảng Trị, I learnt that he had married the most beautiful girl in the village and then enlisted as a soldier in an armored fighting unit of the VNCH regime (binh chủng Thiết giáp). During my first visit to Vietnam after immigrating to Canada, I discovered that Phiên had had both legs amputated during the war, and became a veteran of VNCH. From that date of South-North reunification, he became an abandoned disabled veteran. Poor Phiên! Like other former soldiers of the South Vietnamese army, he was neglected and discriminated against by Communist government officials at all administration levels, from the rural areas to the large cities. He had to sit on a wheeled stool and used both hands to move from his home to the fields or forest to work.

I normally helped him and encouraged others to help him. My brother-in-law Lý Chánh who lived in Australia was an active donor among some others, but I realized that this was not enough. There must be a special budget or fund for these people. The government should co-operate with other generous people both outside and inside Vietnam to establish funds and support programs for the disabled. If a government is truly by and for the people, it should care for anyone with a disability regardless of the circumstances.

2.3 Teacher Kỉnh and His Moveable School

By early 1950, I should have been matured enough to attend an elementary school, but this was not the case for various reasons. We lived in what could be described as “vùng xôi đậu”, which is literally translated as an “area of rice and beans”, meaning an area of mixed influence between two rivals. The day was controlled by the French navy, and the night by the guerillas. There were hence no functioning schools in the rural villages. Moreover, I was often ill because of my asthma. Until late in 1952 - 1953, there was a man - Mr. Kỉnh of the upper village (Vinh Quang Thượng) – who was nominated as a teacher. I don’t exactly know what his qualifications were, but people called him Teacher Kỉnh. No matter what Mr. Kỉnh might offer, my mother, who was always concerned about my education; was determined to send me to his house for study. Some days before school started, my father made me a schoolbag using the lower part of a dried coconut palm leaf.

Every morning I woke up early and ate a light breakfast of sweet potatoes, cassava or boiled peanuts; then I left home with some other kids, without forgetting to hang a bag of rice mixed with

ground sesame seeds on my shoulder for lunch. There were about two dozen kids of different ages in the class, some of whom were about five years older than me, and we walked 3-4 kilometers to school. When we were all seated in the central room of his house, teacher Kỉnh asked the name of every child, and then started the class with a song promoting the Communist party.

In the following days, he talked about the Russian Revolution and Communist countries, and about feudalism and the exploitation of the working classes. He also taught us Russian and Polish dances, in preparation for a recital to be directed by a lady from the local activist group. We learnt only basic spelling, and our education itself probably occupied only 25% of the time we spent at school. But Teacher Kỉnh had a talent for piquing the students' interest and encouraging their participation. Now I know that he was trained for this, but not for teaching writing, mathematics and science to kids.

Our teacher ordered us to ask our parents to buy us each a brown suit, including a shirt and pants that cost a fortune to them. We glued coloured paper strips onto the clothes, using sticky rice to make them look Polish. Rehearsals were held in a thin forest adjacent to a neighbouring village. As kids who had grown up in the countryside, we had never seen a music and dance recital, and we were all fascinated. I still remember some of the songs and poems Mr. Kỉnh taught us to promote the working class of the Communist system, such as:

Đầu năm ba lệnh đưa ra phát động quần chúng,
Đầu năm ba người nông dân tích cực tranh đấu,
Giết cường hào địa chủ ác gian...

(In the beginning of '53, there was an order to motivate the people,
In the beginning of '53, the farmers were in a hard struggle;
They killed the rich and ferocious feudalists....)

Or, it could be even stronger to create the hatred:

Đời bộ ngày xưa sống như cua cáy:
Ngẩng đầu lên chẳng thấy mặt trời.
Kiếp trâu cày chạy bữa đứt hơi,
Thuế thúc bầm lưng, sưu dồn lũng trán,
Ruộng đoạn, trâu cầm, đòn đôn giở bán,
Con mở mắt đã cong lưng đi ở đợ,
Vợ đùm cơm chạy nợ nát bàn chân..."

(Our father of the old time lived the life of a crustacean:
He raised his head but never saw the sun.
He had the life of a working buffalo, breathlessly running for meal.
Taxes burdened his back, surtaxes made a hole in his forehead,
Land taken, buffalo pawned, home rafters removed for sale.
His child, having just opened his eyes, bent his back as a servant.
His wife, with a handful of rice to eat; had to run to beg for a loan till her feet were torn...)

One morning, when we got to our teacher's garden, we heard a blast of gunshots from the direction of the river. Under Kỉnh's guidance, we ran to the forest behind the village for refuge. The French troops came and burned all the houses, including his. After this, the school had to move from this village to another in the Gio Linh District.

My parents realized that it was too dangerous to send me to school and that it was not developing my mind, and decided to keep me at home. Some weeks later, I learnt that the school had ceased to function. However, I did not miss it much because my reading had not noticeably improved during the few months I attended.

I did not hear anything more about Teacher Kỉnh until 1990 when I first returned to Vietnam from Canada, I discovered that he had been a political leader of the guerilla units in the province of

Quảng Trị from 1968 to 1975, when some fierce battles had occurred between the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (VNCH) and the Liberation Army of South Vietnam (MTGP miền Nam, a Communist organization).

Section 3: A City Education

3.1 My Short Stay in Đông Hà for Elementary School

The Treaty of Geneva, signed in 1954, divided Vietnam into two parts: the South was designated for the non-Communist people and the North for the Communist regime. Much has and will continue to be written about the historical and political implications of that event, but I only consider it here as a starting point for my real education. Having always been concerned about our schooling, my mother tried to convince my father to send my sister and me to Đông Hà, a little town historically built by the French to control the flow of products and people between Vietnam and Laos of French Indochina via National route #9 (Quốc lộ #9). She went to Đông Hà and asked Aunt Hai who owned a convenience store, to let us stay temporarily in her house to attend elementary school. Of course, there was no problem since Aunt Hai already knew us and as my mother's eldest sister, always wanted to help her relatives.

She may have acceded to my mother's request to obey the cultural standards and family traditions taught by my maternal grandfather. On the other hand, Ngọc Diệp could also sometimes help out with her busy store. We greatly appreciated her kindness and generosity, although she was quite strict.

We were sent to a private elementary school in this town while we waited for permanent transfer to Huế for our education, according to the plan made by my father. We started in the second term. It was the grade 2 for me and grade 3 for my sister. I was delighted to be going to an appropriate school for the first time in my life, at the age of nine. This meant a lot to me because it was almost three years later than most kids started their education. Both of us successfully completed the school year in the summer of 1955 in Đông Hà and then moved to Huế to seriously begin our studies.

3.2 Living in Huế City.

Trần Cao Vân Elementary School

After we moved to Huế, my mother became concerned about how to enroll us in public schools, since the private schools were both inadequate and too expensive. Finally, Ngọc Diệp was admitted to the Đoàn Thị Điểm School, an all-girls public elementary school, and I was admitted to Trần Cao Vân, which had all boys; both were located in the inner citadel (Thành Nội). Thanks to the kindness and efforts of Aunt Bê, my mother's sister-in-law, whose father was then the director of the elementary education system in Central Vietnam, we both had access to long-term schooling.

A minor controversy arose over the grade at which I would enter school. My mother discussed the subject with my Uncle Huy (my father's youngest brother, who was attending the Quốc Học secondary high school in Huế) who advised her to apply for me to enter the grade 5 (lớp Nhất, as counted in reverse in Vietnam) instead of grade 3. My mother was reluctant, but my uncle convinced her otherwise. He said "Thu is good, patient and attentive; and he is already three years behind. I believe he could learn quickly if I teach him during this summer, and I promise to do so". Fortunately, I had a good relationship with Uncle Huy. He was always gentle and positive, which

helped me make tremendous strides in acquiring basic knowledge. He taught me science, mathematics and some writing skills.

I remember that on my first day of school, I dressed up in a new light red outfit. When I came back home, both my shirt and pants were stained with purple ink because I could not keep up with the teacher's dictation. I kept trembling and hitting the ink pot which caused it to tip and poured purple ink freely onto my clothes. My mother just smiled and told me to change.

In the mornings, I would normally walk about 1.5 kilometers with my sister down the paved roads Yết Kiêu and Nguyễn Trãi to my school, and my sister would continue for another 1.5 kilometers to hers. In the winter, this walk was not easy because of Huế's severe and frequent bouts of cold, rain and wind. However, we were considered lucky because there were several students who came a long way from the countryside to attend the school. In class I felt lonely because I was basically a rural boy. I did not know the games the other kids played, the stories they told, or the bad habits they shared. In the first several months, I ranked between 41st and 49th in a class of 53 students!

One day, I woke up late and was not ready to walk with my sister to school. I insisted that she should wait for me, but she could not stay longer and left. I reacted by crying and refusing to take my schoolbag and leave the house. My mother tried to explain the situation, but failed to make me go, till she had to use a rod and pretend to beat me. I moved one step each time the rod touched me. This continued till we got to the road leading to the school. I decided to walk faster because I didn't want my peers to see the scene. That evening, my mother treated me well. She talked to me gently with tears in her eyes, saying that she put all her hope in me and that I had to study hard to make her proud. I loved her so much, and thought the situation over. From that day, I applied myself seriously. The results clearly showed in my rankings over the next months which rose from 39th to 26th, to even higher numbers. By the year's end, I was placed at 25th or so.

We lived on our grandfather's estate in the inner citadel, near the Hữu Gate (namely Cửa Hữu) with our stepgrandma and Aunt Như. In the rural areas of Vietnam at that time, bathroom facilities were scarce; half-open toilets were generally located far away from houses to avoid the bad smell. One very dark night, I had a terrible stomach ache; I told my mother that I had to go to the toilet and left. There was a trail of about 260 meters running diagonally through the garden from the house to the opposite corner where the facilities were located. But it was somewhat serpentine, winding through all kinds of plants and fruit trees. After the necessary visit, I came back, but lost my way, ending up at the well in the corner opposite to the toilet. I tried to take courage by remembering the night in An Cù when I was asked to go to Aunt Bộ Tư's house via that scary road. But I could not find the path connecting the house and the well, and I hit the huge trunk of the roseapple tree (cây đào) that was about 25 meters from the kitchen. I was walking around the big tree trunk and could not find the way till I heard my sister calling "Thu ơi, sao lâu rứa?" (Thu, why are you taking so much time?).

Hàm Nghi High School

I successfully passed the examination for my primary certificate (Fr: le Primaire) soon after my summer vacation. But this was not important compared to the contest for admission to public high school. There were more private schools than public ones in every province of the South Vietnam because the country could not afford to finance universal education, particularly at that level. Consequently, this contest was tough. For students from ordinary families, it was vital to go to public school. I studied hard for the competition, which was held in mid-summer of 1956, and I passed.

I was assigned to attend Hàm Nghi High School in the inner citadel, about 1.6 kilometers from my mother's rented house on Hàn Thuyên Street near the Đông Ba Gate (cửa Đông Ba). While we were living there, we were happy to have our maternal grandma from An Cù, who stayed with us for several months.

Every morning during the school year, I was proud to pass historic monuments like the abandoned Tòa Khâm sứ (building for French representatives, which was seriously damaged in the 1945 event) and the Viện Bảo Tàng (Museum), and to walk down Lê Thánh Tôn and Tổng duy Tân streets to Hàm Nghi School, which was previously named Quốc tử Giám and was reserved for children of high-ranking Mandarins and royal families. I became one of the best students in my class, with monthly notes for being second or third of over 50 pupils and monthly honor certificates. However, my time in the North American equivalent grade 6 (lớp Đệ thất) in Huế ended soon after I completed my first semester, having achieved the rank of second.

I really enjoyed the time I spent in this royal capital, where the food was fantastic. I tasted famous dishes like beef noodle soup (phở bò) and beef vermicelli soup (bún bò Huế) cooked by the locals. There were several moveable and merchant-operated food stands at night, no matter how hot or cold the weather. In my neighbourhood of Chợ Xếp, I occasionally heard a lady chanting “Cháo lòng thời đây” (here is the pork stomach rice soup, you are invited to taste it), which made me feel sorry for the difficult lives of these vendors. Sometimes, as a treat, my mother would call this lady over and order each of us a bowl. We ate the soup, seasoned with spices when it was still steaming. That was an excellent dish to have on a cold winter night.

Huế boasts several landmarks and historic sites, like the Thiên Mụ Pagoda, the royal citadel, etc. Occasionally, when class was dismissed early, on the way back from school under the hot summer sun, I would go to Thượng Tứ or Ngã gates to lie down on the huge barrel of one of the bronze cannons placed in the open but roofed housing structure. It was exhilarating to be cooled down by the massive bronze equipment that symbolized the military power of the Nguyễn Dynasty. I felt the flow of a fresh current penetrating my body.

Our home on Hàn Thuyên Street was a fine house that my mother rented from a family that had left Huế for Qui Nhơn. It had a garden planted with coconut and other fruit trees like marble sugar, apple grenade and soursop. My Uncle Huy came to stay with us for a while before he left for military service. Sometimes he and his friend Lê hữu Nam (my distant cousin who is now deceased) climbed the tree to harvest the coconuts for their delicious meat and juice. On weekends, I used to see Tuệ, a distant cousin who was a year younger than me and lived nearby. His family’s house had a garden planted with various fruit trees, including a guava tree that we used to climb to pick its ripe fruits. They were good to eat when they were so fresh. Tuệ later became a physician who was trained and worked in Huế. I visited him on my trip to Vietnam in 2006, he seemed happy and healthy.

Below are some recollections of my relatives during this time:

My Sister Ngọc Diệp

Ngọc Diệp was two years older than me. I do not remember much about her before we met again after her return from Nghệ An . My mother told me that when our family lived in Xiengkhoang, my sister had a fever and received an injection; however, the needle broke due to her reaction. In spite of the efforts of the hospital staff, they could not find the part that had broken off, even using X-rays. This event presaged a life of misfortune and mismanagement, although she has been smart in how she has dealt with it.

I remember that when we were in Chợ Cầu, a bad girl several years older than us, tried to convince my sister to exchange a bolt of fabric that she proposed to bring to the market on behalf of my aunt for some broiled potatoes, my sister refused. It was found out later that the girl was a fraudster.

When I lived in the country, my sister was sent to Nghệ An for education under the Revolutionary government. But it appeared that she learned about neither literature nor sciences; I suspect her school in Vinh was similar to the one taught by Mr. Kính. One good thing it instilled, however, was

a distrust of Communism. Fortunately, in 1954, my father wisely decided to bring her back to South Vietnam, considering that her two years or so of living with the Việt Minh had not brought her any benefit. She therefore started her education practically from the beginning, as I did, in the South zone of the 17th parallel after the Treaty of Geneva.

Uncle Huy and cousins Thu, Lạc, Mỹ Hà, Hưng
in Oklahoma 1989 at Lạc's residence



With Sister Ngọc Diệp at La Vang
Holy Cathedral – Quang Tri 1961



I think that my sister had a hard life not because of her ability or character, but because of her destiny: her elementary school Đoàn Thị Điểm was about 3 kilometers from home, her high school Đồng Khánh was also too far away. Even worse, she had to cross the Perfume River (sông Hương or Hương Giang) in a non-motorized boat to get there, risking drowning in the winter and often being late to class. Possibly for these reasons, my sister was a slow learner, finishing high school a year after me and failing to pass the first secondary level (Bac I) exam twice.

However, she was always an affectionate daughter. I recall that my sister loved to collect dried wildflowers. We used to pick them along the dirt road in Thạch Hãn and she compressed them in books to dry them while keeping some of their original color. She also liked to collect romantic poems by many pre-war poets, like TTKH, Xuân Diệu, Thế Lữ, Hồ Duẩn, etc. and had several girlfriends who were younger than her (because my sister was one grade behind me at the secondary level). They were pleasant and polite and our parents treated some of them like daughters. It was an advantage for a boy like me, who was always at the top of the class, to have a sister, wasn't it? I never dated any of them, although some of them were good looking; however, most of them definitely liked me.

In 1964 or so, when I was at Engineering University in Saigon, my sister decided to quit secondary school and got a job with the Civil Works Department. Her salary was fairly low because she did not have any special training. As she was fortunately living with my parents, she could save about half of her meager earnings, which she sent me to supplement the funds my parents provided for basic expenses. How generous and sentimental she was! I deeply appreciated her sacrifice.

Soon afterwards, my sister married Mr. Đặng Hữu Trục, a lieutenant in the VNCH army. I could not come home to celebrate her happy day, but wrote a letter to my parents advising them that they should give my part of the family inheritance to my sister, because she was not well equipped; as her life would depend on others more than on herself, I did not want to receive anything they might

think of saving for me. She stayed a while with my parents in Quảng Trị. As the battles between the South and the North intensified, the salary of a public employee was tapered and became inadequate to live on, but she managed to make extra income by travelling to big cities like Đà Nẵng and Saigon to purchase special merchandise and reselling it to local stores. This proved she was dynamic and managed well under the circumstances to survive. Then she moved with her first child to Bình Dương Province to join her husband, where she again engaged successfully in trading activities to add to his tight salary.

In term of family relationship, she was always open and generous to relatives, including me. I remember that when she was staying in Bình Dương (about 1966-1967), as a student I had time on the weekend to ride my Honda motorcycle to her housing unit on the military compound to spend a few days with her family; she frequently offered me a selection of the best T shirts or pullovers in her merchandise stock. I sometimes had to accept the gifts, like the red Montagu pullover that I liked to wear.

After 1968, the war accelerated dangerously in South Vietnam. Her husband was sent to the battlefield and had a mistress; my sister was enraged. I also started my engineering position in Quảng Ngãi Province, in Central Vietnam. To help her during this difficult time, I let her sell my motorcycle so she could have additional income.

In her relationships with people, she was easy going and optimistic, but my sister always faced her problems squarely. Though she had already endured family difficulties, tragedy struck in 1975 when her husband was put in a re-education camp in Cao Bằng - a northern province, for more than a dozen years. Lonely under the new regime, she had to deal with the retaliatory political policies issued by the winner against her family, when feeding four children. She fell severely ill and ended up a permanent cripple. I believe this was due to the cruelty inflicted by the new regime. From Canada, I sometimes sent her packages of drugs, fabrics, and occasionally money to help her family, but of course, this was not sufficient to support her huge burden.

Finally, when the American HO program was implemented, I convinced her to take the opportunity to leave Vietnam as soon as possible, and sent a significant amount of money to help her relocate her family to the U.S. They finally made it in 1992.

Mississauga Home
2006 – Visit of Sister
Ngọc Diệp & family



Uncle Đồng (1931 -)

Uncle Nguyễn hữu Đồng is my mother's youngest brother from the second line of my grandpa's family (like most of the middle and upper-class Vietnamese men of his generation, my grandpa had a second wife). I came to know my uncle when we were transferred from Đông Hà to Huế, and temporarily relocated to my grandpa's estate situated in the northern part of the inner citadel. He is

about thirteen years older than me. At that time, I was told that he was trained as an officer in the French army, but he resigned after the Treaty of Geneva. When we lived there, he was preoccupied with preparing to study abroad in the U.S. under a scholarship offered by the University of Huế, which was awarded based on his excellent work at the Khải Định secondary high school.

We rarely had occasion to speak to him, but it seemed that he had a good personality and a sense of humour. He sometimes made jokes when I made mistakes in the homework assigned by Uncle Huy. Once, when I went to Trần Cao Vân Elementary School wearing a slightly red shirt, he cut the peel of an orange into a five-pointed star and struck it onto the fabric.

He left Vietnam for the States in 1955, among the first cohort of students. Some time later, he used to write to his sister, Aunt Như, as she was quite close to him. We heard from him through letters describing his efforts to acclimate to the new culture, and the additional works he took on to assist with his living expenses. His experience made me dream of going overseas for my higher education. I was told that he eventually got two PhD's and became a professor at Stanford.

In the later years of the successful coup d'état to eliminate President Ngô đình Diệm, he married the daughter of General Mai hữu Xuân, a member of the Military Council of the Revolution (Hội đồng Quân nhân Cách mạng); but he refused to welcome his parents-in-law on their visit to the U.S. to attend the wedding! I vaguely heard that he was an anti-war sympathizer during the American involvement in Vietnam, but when the country was governed by the Communist Party, he developed some mistrust and disappointment. He never went back to Vietnam for a visit.

In 1975, after immigrating to Canada, I wrote to him for advice. He replied and suggested that I should obtain a North American degree to secure a stable future. I kept this in mind and attempted to act on it. Five years later, during my visit to California, I tried but failed to find him at several addresses. I haven't heard much from him since.

Uncle Xân (1913-1975)



I came to know my uncle Nguyễn Đăng Xân during this period. My grandma had talked about him when I lived in the countryside, where I also met my cousins Ái and Đề, who were his sons from his first marriage. I knew that he worked in Đồng Hới (province of Quảng Bình) and he became a legendary figure for me. In 1954, having been affected by the Treaty of Geneva, he and his family relocated temporarily to Quảng Trị, and then settled permanently in Đà Nẵng (province of Quảng Nam). However, I did not meet him till my father was hired

by the Civil Works Department (ty Công chánh) in Quảng Trị.

My uncle was handsome, well dressed and sympathetic. He was always particularly concerned for the welfare of his extended Nguyễn Đăng family, which was why he came to Quảng Trị several times a year to go with my father to the village, which was about 20 kilometers away. Occasionally, I was permitted to accompany them in a jeep that could go across the country. My uncle was generous with the rural relatives and villagers, sometimes helping them make necessary improvements, such as refurbishing a well or repairing part of the road.

Through his financial assistance, he helped my father build the first cemetery for the Nguyễn Đăng family in Vinh Quang and execute other projects. My uncle was more concerned with the quality of the work, while my easy-going father didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Uncle Xân was nice to

most of our relatives and never argued with my father. He always tried to help his siblings and took an interest in their lives, even supporting Uncle Huy in his studies in Huế.

When I was in high school, I would spend up to a week with his family in Đà Nẵng during my summer vacations. I was very much pampered by him and his daughter (my cousin Thanh Liêm) and also sometimes met my other cousins: Lạc, Hưng and Hải. Uncle was proud of his technical knowledge in his role as the manager of the Đà Nẵng Airport extension project. When I visited him after graduating from the first part of secondary high school (Tú tài Phần I) with a Very Good classification (hạng Bình), he drove me to the construction site in his newly assigned and fully equipped American sedan. He then described the project and his role in it. On the way home, he took me to a seafood restaurant and treated me to a nice dinner.

As a music lover, he had a beautiful set of audio equipment and a wide selection of disks. Late in the evening, he would ask me to sit with him on the balcony with a soft drink for me, and some cognac for himself. He appreciated the performers like singers Thanh Thúy, Hà Thanh and Thanh Tuyền, and would often sing along. He had a taste of savouring the music and I enjoyed sitting with him.

After graduating from secondary high school with a Bac II degree, and passing the contest for admission to the Technical Center of Phú Thọ (TCPT) for my engineering program, I passed by Đà Nẵng to say goodbye to his family on the way to Saigon to attend university. He took me to Đà Nẵng Airport, which he once built, and escorted me right to the steps of the air plane.

In 1975, Uncle Xân had to leave everything behind to evacuate Đà Nẵng. By the time he arrived at the port of Vũng Tàu, he was exhausted and passed away a few days before the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam. I could not go to his funeral because administrative regulations prevented me from leaving the office, although I showed my bereavement by contributing financially.

On my recent visit to Vietnam in 2010, I went to Đà Nẵng to see the members of my uncle's family who still remained in the country. In a reunion at a restaurant at the Thanh Bình Beach where I had spent some time with him, I met almost one and a half dozens of his descendants. I also went to his house to light up an incense stick in front of his altar. My uncle, I love and miss you so much! (Bác ơi, cháu thương nhớ bác lắm).

Uncle Huy (1935 -)

My memoir would be incomplete if I did not mention my uncle Huy. He has been very close to me,



not only because he was my father's youngest brother, but because the circumstances of lives brought us together. I vaguely recall that I knew him in the countryside before he left Vinh Quang to be educated under the Revolutionist government in Nghệ An.

Houston 1989 – At Uncle Huy's house on occasion of Diễm Hạnh's marriage

In 1954, he escaped from the Việt Minh's controlled zone to relocate in South Vietnam (south of the 17th parallel), and we met again when he visited my grandma in Vinh Quang. That summer night, in the front yard, we lay on a thatched plait to observe the sky and he showed me the moon and the stars. I asked him various questions about the moon: What is it made of? How big is it compared to a blinking star in the Milky Way? From where does it come? I also asked him about the stars, the sun, etc, until he could no longer answer my questions. He taught me something about the universe. When I started attending elementary school in Huế, it was thanks to him that I acquired some basic knowledge and that I got into grade 5, which saved me two years, when I was already behind. However, he left me to struggle with my immaturity in the classroom.

In Huế, he lived near the An Hòa Gate and tutored the children of a public employee who was also the senior brother of a Buddhist youth group (Buddhist Scouts). After a few visits to his home, I was pulled into participating in the group's activities, learning the Buddhist teachings, outdoor sports and some survival techniques, which I very much enjoyed. I also practiced riding his bicycle. He talked to me about his role in the music group at the Quốc Học secondary high school, as well as about his girlfriends.

One autumn evening, he took me on his bike to the house where he tutored the family's children. After dinner, he asked me if I dared to ride it home alone. Of course, I jumped at the chance, biking on the rough and sloping Nguyễn Trãi Road on a very dark night. After passing the orange plantation, I speeded up on the Vĩnh Lợi Viaduct overpass. However, because it looked like a large figure was following me, I lost my balance and fell on the downward slope. My legs and arms got hurt and bruised, and I could not stand up for a while, but I think it was a good lesson.

Uncle Huy occasionally received financial support from his brothers, including my father. When he had money in his pockets, he took me on his bike to Phú Văn Lâu Park for beef noodles, without forgetting to order a dish of bones, namely "bóc mỡ". In 1956 or so, he was drafted for compulsory military service; he was then admitted to the Vietnamese National Military Academy of Đà Lạt and became a sub-lieutenant four years later. I remember that early in my time at Nguyễn Hoàng High School in Quảng Trị, he visited the City with his academic cadets under a government-sponsored program. They were handsomely dressed in military uniforms that captivated most of the young people.

In the autumn of 1964, when I went to Saigon for university, I stayed with his family for almost six months in a house on Trương công Định Street, near the Tao Đàn Park; I got to know his wife's distinguished relatives, who had emigrated from Hải Phòng in 1954. I had to admit that he had very good in-laws, including his pretty wife, my aunt. I developed a good relationship with most of them, and called them aunts and uncles.

On weekends, we used to go to noodle soup restaurants, then to the airport to see the American Air Force jets' touching down and taking off. Once, when strolling in the promenade of the civilian terminal, we saw a group of young girls whose way of dressing indicated they might be secondary high school or university students. Two of them were good looking. Suddenly, one of the aunts dared me "Thu, can you start a conversation with them and get an address? We will give you free ice cream on the way home". I said "Why not", and accepted the challenge. I took a deep breath, stood in front of the girls and asked "Could we have a chat?" They smiled. I composed some questions and asked them in my heavy Central Vietnamese accent. Apparently, they did not understand me. I repeated very slowly that I was a student as well and that I was dared to go over and talk to them. They laughed and I asked for their addresses, and eventually got two of them. I realized that I was courageous enough to accept a challenge and that I had managed to overcome it.

My uncle Huy usually treated me as a friend; he never ordered or used strong words with me. Several times, when he was home from his military missions that usually lasted weeks or months, he would put some money in my pocket for miscellaneous expenses. This was very nice of him and indicated his understanding of my situation. (His frequent and long absences from home were also one of the reasons that made him become a Don Juan versus women, and that had broken down his

family later when he immigrated to the U.S.). Then his family moved to Đà Nẵng under the military service order.

I began living by myself during the second semester of my first year at university, after spending some time with my Cousin Thanh Liêm's family. For this reason, he bought me a 65cc Honda motorcycle to go to class each day. Not only was it a beautiful, durable and sport motorbike, but I was the first student in my class to have one. After his family moved away from Saigon, I occasionally met with him when I visited Đà Nẵng or when he came to the city on military service. Later, he was assigned to Washington D.C. for a military-related position with the embassy of the Republic of Vietnam. In the summer of 1967, I received a mail package sent from the U.S. It was a textbook dealing with most aspects of the new technologies in television. I was stunned, not only because of the value of the book, but because it showed how much hope he had for my future.

My uncle's family returned to Vietnam when I was working far from Saigon, but we still kept in touch as we were both sentimental and attached to our relatives. The event of April 1975 took him back to the United States and took me to Canada. I visited him after he settled in Houston (Texas), where his family received me as a member after my long absence; this reunion revealed that they were a close-knit and successful unit at the time. But later on in 1983, when my family went to see them during my annual vacation from the overseas service, we realized that they were in trouble because my uncle's occasional contacts with an old time girlfriend. The family eventually broke down. From that day, he floated between the U.S. and Vietnam, trying unsuccessfully to find a good place to live. He ended up having a stroke that crippled him. In August 2006, after learning about his illness, I went to Los Angeles to see him. I wanted to let him know that I was concerned about him. The point I want to make here is that despite his unfavourable reputation with women, which I heard about quite often, even from my wife (although she might be influenced by his first wife), he has been a good uncle to me.

After 1975, on his multiple trips to Vietnam from the United States, Uncle Huy always visited his relatives, tried to help some who needed it, and took care of the family cemetery. I will always love him no matter what is his personal life. I regret the bad things people said about him, and appreciate the good he did for his extended family. No one is perfect.

Uncle Huy is always positive during times of success or failure. He is talented and has a sense of humour that usually makes him a good companion. He was successful in business due to his dynamism, knowledge and familiarity with the supply and demand of the market. However, the conditions of his life limited his abilities and talents. I teased him sometimes by saying "You are an eagle with a broken wing". And he laughed with tears in his eyes. This just proves that "Mưu sự tại nhân, Thành sự tại Thiên" (Man proposes, God disposes).

3.3 Living in Quảng Trị

This was the most important time in my life, as I lived with my united family, including my parents and my sister Ngọc Diệp. My father decided to stay in Quảng Trị with the Civil Works Department (Ty Công Chánh) after refusing to relocate to the Highlands (Cao nguyên) for his PTT career. At the end of 1957, we moved from Huế to Quảng Trị, where the Nguyễn Hoàng public high school had been newly built and expanded for both boys and girls. On weekends, my father was generally absent on trips to Vinh Quang to supervise or purchase materials for his projects, such as renovating my grandma's house and building the Nguyễn Đăng cemetery.

3.3.1 Attending Nguyễn Hoàng High School

We were enrolled in grade 6 (namely, lớp Đệ Thất, with reverse counting of the seven-year high school program) because we had attended public schools in Huế, Ngọc Diệp having gone to Đồng Khánh and I to Hàm Nghi.



Nguyễn Hoàng High School
- This school was totally
destroyed by war in 1972

Since it was small, Quảng Trị did not have many apartments or houses for rent, so we lived in the personnel compound of the Civil Works Department. This was acceptably supplied with most conveniences, but in

wartime, admission to the compound was restricted. For this reason, we could not often receive guests or friends, and sometimes we felt we were missing something.

Quảng Trị 1962: Lê đình Ân – Phan văn Khuê –
Nguyễn Trung Thu – Đặng xuân Hòa – Lê Thọ Giáo



Quảng Trị 1961 –
As a H.S. student



My cousin Đỗ Văn Phúc stayed with us on weekdays to attend the Nguyễn Hoàng High School as well, so there were three students at the same level in our house. We all chose to take eight hours of French a week for our foreign language study, along with 4-5 hours a week in English. When he was around, my father occasionally taught us French, asking us to read and translate passages, compose sentences, write to dictation, etc. He also helped us in geometry and algebra. We progressed in French very rapidly, and at least Cousin Phúc and I caught up with the class. In the second term and at the year's end at Nguyễn Hoàng, I received an award for being first in my class, with a generous gift of books and school supplies. My parents were very happy about my achievement, and I believed that those books and supplies saved us some money. I was glad to be able to sit beside famous alumni of the school, like Sen, Cai and Hiền on these occasions.

Once I got over the difficult start, my class standing was established, and in the coming years I only had to exert moderate efforts to maintain it. From grade 6 onwards, I routinely ranked first at the end of the year. In the summer of 1960, the examination for the completion of the first level of primary high school (Trung học Đệ nhất cấp) was organized for the first time in Quảng Trị. I took the exam with great confidence and I passed with Very Good standing (hạng Bình) at the upper

level, only a few marks short of Excellent Standing (hạng Ưu). My parents and teachers were very proud of me. At about this time, during a presidential campaign, I represented the school along with two others in an essay-writing contest. The question was: “Is it necessary for a president to be concerned about the virtues when leading the country? What are they?” I thoughtfully answered that to me, the virtues were honesty, keeping the promises made during the presidential campaign, and respect for others’ beliefs. These qualities conform to Oriental culture and tradition. I won second place and got the silver award.

The following year, classes for the North American equivalent of grade 10 (lớp Đệ tam) became available for the first time in Quảng Trị, making Nguyễn Hoàng a secondary high school. I chose to take Option B (for mathematics and science) and French towards my first secondary diploma (Fr: Baccalaureat I). From this point, I had to try harder because there were many new students coming from other schools, some of whom were quite good. I fell to second place at the end of the first semester. This irritated me and I was determined to do better, and I regained my first place position by the end of the school year. Then in the summer of 1962, I went to Huế to take the exams for my first secondary diploma (Bac I or Tú tài phần I), in which I once again attained a Very Good standing (hạng Bình). I also earned the highest marks in Quảng Trị Province.

For grade 12 (lớp Đệ nhất), my last year of secondary school, I stayed in Quảng Trị at Nguyễn Hoàng, which had just started providing level II secondary education. I continued taking Option B and French as major foreign language.

Sometimes on your path, you lose your focus and direction. It happened for Vietnam on November 01, 1963 when Ngô Đình Diệm, the republic’s first president was overthrown by a so-called Revolution. Like many young population, I was somewhat active in student movements, one day being involved in a parade to kick out the newly assigned head of the province, the next in welcoming the new one, because I wanted to show I was a leader. However, I didn’t know that I was being used by the politicians, till one day my father told me: “Thu, politics is like a hand: it can be turned upward and downward. Today, good is good, but tomorrow it can be bad, and vice versa”. My academic performance had been diminishing with my increased absences from class, and by the end of that school year, I ended up in second place. I thought it over and I knew that though I could not be a politician, I could be a scientist or an engineer. I already dreamed of studying abroad (in the U.S., Canada, France or West Germany) for my undergraduate or post-graduate degree. Therefore, I started withdrawing from participating in politics.

As the exams for my Baccalaureate II were that summer, I tried harder to catch up for lost time and felt confident I would pass. But under the Revolutionary government, the candidates got a big surprise: in most subjects, the questions we had to answer were much tougher. The results were satisfactory to neither the professors nor the students, as the passing rate was at 5% before the oral exam and 3% afterwards. The reason was simple: the government knew the failed students would be sent to military institutes to become much-needed officers. I had to go to Huế again for the oral test about two weeks after the results of the written exam were announced. I was in the same boarding house as before with half a dozen students from other provinces.

Due to the stress of the exams and the poor conditions at the boarding house, I could not sleep and caught a cold. The morning of my French exam, I left the boarding house and walked to the Quốc Học Center, taking a little more time than expected. I went to the administration office to get my seating number and room, but several pages of the list had been torn out by bad students who had failed the written exams. Contacting the office for this information and getting to the building where I was seated took even more time, and I showed up at the exam room about 30 minutes late! It took all my courage to go up to the professor handling the French oral exam and say “Veuillez pardonner moi mon professeur, je regrette que j’arrive un peu tard à cause de quelques problèmes incontrôlables; ainsi que ma fièvre, mais j’espère que je serai à votre satisfaction”.

The examiner smiled at me, because he could not believe a student in Option B could speak some phrases in French with a fair accent. He asked me to find my seat. About an hour later, he called my

name and I came forward to sit on the first bench right in front of his desk. He gave me a text in French and asked me to read it. My God, it was “Le Lac” by the famous eighteenth-century poet Alphonse de Lamartine. I had studied this poem extensively at school, and my French professor had reviewed it with me in class, commenting that I should be in Option C - for students of literature - instead of Option B. I read the poem clearly, attempting to use a special voice for recitation. When I had finished about half of the text, he said “Pause. Vous êtes l’élève de mon attente”. I knew that I had won his sympathy and I became more confident. He asked me three questions: “Qui était Alphonse de Lamartine? Dans quelle circonstance Lamartine composait-il ce poème? Qu’entendez vous sur le Stoïcisme?” I knew the answers to all of them and replied in a French accent. When I had finished, he told me: “Très bien, quelle note voudriez vous avoir?” I answered: “Mon professeur, je n’ose pas de vous le demander. Ca depend de votre jugement”. He then said “Je vous donne 18/20. Je n’ai jamais donné cette note a quelqu’un”. I learned later that I got the highest mark in the French oral exam. And I obtained the Bac II degree in the summer of 1964 at the age of nineteen (seventeen on my birth certificate), although this was somewhat late.

In the summer of 1964, I made several visits to Huế, which was then the hub of culture and education for Central Vietnam. I applied for admission to the University of Medicine in accordance with my mother’s wishes, and to the Technical Center of Phú Thọ (TCPT) in accordance with my own. I passed the contests for both civil engineering and electrical engineering, but I chose the latter because I thought I might be better in this field. My father received the notice advising me to report to the TCPT for admission sometime near the beginning of September 1964, when I was floating around in Huế without a clear address. He asked my friend Đỗ Tư Nhon, who used to accompany me on my trips, to find me.

I came back home to prepare for my departure for Saigon, but just three or four days before leaving, I was bitten by the neighbor’s dog. As there was no time to be treated with Western medication, my father decided to go to a remote village to buy two packs of special herbs prescribed by a country doctor to make a kind of liquid for my oral consumption. I had no choice to accept this treatment. Then I left home. In Saigon, I learned that the dog was rabid and died just a few days after I departed. Since I was busy with my studies, I almost forgot about the dog bite and only remembered about it several months later. But there was no sign of any problems. From this experience, I learned that traditional treatments can work as well as Western ones.

3.3.2 Building up My General Knowledge

The rural way of life and habits of hard work had been imprinted on my mind and benefited me later whenever I had to deal with matters related to gardening or animals. In the country, I learned through daily observation how to grow crops, how to treat and care for the domestic animals, etc., so that when faced with the reality, I already knew how to proceed. I believe this gave me an extraordinary advantage in life. This also explained why my garden has grown well, and I often received good comment from my children: “Daddy really had his green thumbs”, when they enjoyed seeing the flowers and fruit trees.

My years in high school also contributed greatly to my general knowledge. In 1956, as a reward for doing well in the contest for public high school admission, I was allowed to travel to Quảng Trị to stay several weeks with my father. To keep me busy while he was at work, my father usually got me to read translated novels like *Lettres de Mon Moulin* by Alphonse Daudet and *Robinson Crusoé*; then he would asked me to write a précis at the end of the day. He also gave me roast chicken for the first time in my life to test my asthma. I started to like both chicken and the reading of foreign novels from that date.

Because I did so well in most subjects and rarely failed on the teacher’s text review, some of my friends thought I was a “rice worm” (sâu gạo) who studied constantly. But this was not true. In my generation, particularly in an under-developed country like Vietnam, few technologies and facilities

were available to help students learn. Generally, we had to memorize a text by heart and then recite it to the teacher, with a minimum of explanation. But while others spent excessive amounts of time memorizing the readings, I had a learning method that cut down on this process. When I first read a passage, I tried to go over each phrase slowly, using my imagination to figure out the imagery and my knowledge to understand its meaning. In the second reading, I tried to recite each sentence, looking at the text only when required. In the final reading, I once again went through the text slowly. This allowed me to understand and remember the assigned text or subject. I used the extra time to go to the movies, trade stamps, visit friends or stroll around with my peers on the weekend.

Living in the small and poor city of Quảng Trị during my vacations enriched my general knowledge tremendously. Other than occasionally going to Đại Chung, which was the only movie theater in the city, I had no other alternative than reading novels and magazines to pass the time or entertain myself. Although the living conditions were mediocre - we had no brick house or air conditioning to shelter us from the heat and the Laotian wind blowing from the west (gió Lào) - I spent the morning of every day reading. I devoured books by the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (TLVD, the literature association of famous Vietnamese writers, formed before the World War II). My father let me subscribe to Nguyễn Vỹ's *Phổ Thông* and *Văn* (Literature) magazines, and would sometimes buy Reader's Digest and Paris Match as well. These publications helped young people understand and familiarize themselves with various topics. I traded or borrowed books from adults and read almost everything published by TLVD. These writings taught me much about Vietnamese culture, history and traditions, and about romanticism and the relations among individuals. Reading *Nhật Linh* via *Dòng Sông Thanh Thủy* and *Chi Bộ Ba Người*, and other books published from overseas like *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak that I read later in Saigon, helped me learn more about patriotism, capitalism and communism.

This knowledge combined with my education in Saigon, helped me make the right decisions. In 1975, when the Northern army were pouring into the South and winning the war, I had a difficult conversation with my father about whether to leave Vietnam. Due to my extensive reading, however, I knew that I could no longer live in the country.

I also collected and traded stamps. Because my family was not rich, I couldn't afford to buy them on my own. I joined an international philatelic club. I started writing letters to French, Belgian, and Swiss members in French, and amazingly, I received responses from collectors who talked about stamp trading and other topics like culture, landscapes, and particularly friendship. These pen pals helped improve my French to a point where no one in my class could beat me.

3.3.3 My Friends in High School

While friends are important in everyone's life; it would take several chapters to mention them all. Hence, in this memoir, I will only record anecdotes about some close high school friends who are still close to me today.

Hồ Doãn Uyên

Hồ Doãn Uyên has been a fantastic and trustworthy friend. Though small in stature, he was a strong-minded kid who patiently endured a lot of teasing from his peers. The youngest boy in grade 6, he looked childish at the time, but ranked among the first ten students in the class. Since he sat in the same row with me, we became friends within a week. He was good-natured, nice and generous with his friends. When we traded stamps, he always gave more than what I asked.



From grades 6 to grade 9, we used to play together during class breaks, but in grade 10, we split up because we were in different foreign language groups. However, we still stayed in contact for stamp trading, and sometimes joined Lê đình Ân to look at the girls. That was Ân's best subject!

After receiving his Baccalaureate I, Uyên left Nguyễn Hoàng for Quốc Học Secondary High School in Huế. In the summer of 1965, I visited his family for several days to go canoeing on the Bến Ngự and Hương Giang rivers. A year later, we met again in Saigon when he was admitted to the University of Agriculture. During the 1967-1968 schoolyear, we both stayed in Quãng Đức Dormitory, a Buddhist institute housing university students who were away from their families. We rekindled our friendship and sometimes went out together for coffee and breakfast, or for a stroll on Saigon's boulevards.

In the event of the Tết offensive in which the Việt Cộng launched an attack on South Vietnam, we shared the misery of poor students losing financial support from our families. One morning, Uyên was very happy to find me in the dormitory cafeteria and said: "Thu, go out with me for breakfast". I took him on my motorcycle to a noodle restaurant for phở, along with a good filtered coffee. He told me that he had just received extra funds from his family. We got together a few more times in Saigon after we both graduated and went into different fields.

After the event of April 1975, I immigrated to Canada but he stayed in Vietnam to temporarily work for the new government. During most of my visits since 1990, I have contacted him to chat or go out for a meal or a coffee. He has a reasonably good lifestyle and a nice family with a young second wife and two children.

Lê Thọ Giáo

Los Angeles
1983 – Meeting
with old-time
friends at
Nguyễn hữu
Hùng's house



Giáo also transferred from Huế after elementary school. He sat right beside me in the first row of the class. Though he was nice to me, he was always teasing someone, such as pulling out of pant the shirt of a friend who sat two spots from him, or pulling a kid's hair from the back during the teacher's lecture. He particularly aimed at my cousin Phúc because of his quick temper, and they would challenge each other to a duel during the recess. We were excited to see them fighting in the schoolyard. They used

all sorts of gestures and tricks to show their aggression and readiness of throwing a blow or a kick, but they never actually hit or kicked each other. Their mock fight ended when the drum announced that the break was over.

As one of the top ten students, he was particularly good in French, and was sometimes my rival. He was also a source of stamps for me. Since he was an occasional collector, he even gave me specimens without asking for any in return. He was an easy-going guy with a fair sense of humour. We also exchanged literature by famous French authors like Alphonse Daudet, Anatole France, etc. Giáo did not stay long at Nguyễn Hoàng, but left for Quốc Học Secondary School to take Option C (literature).

He graduated from University in Huế with a degree that allowed him to teach literature. In 1972 or so, he got a scholarship to go to the U.S. for post-graduate study and earned a PhD in Anglo-American literature. We met again sometime in 1983, when I went to Los Angeles on vacation from my job in Saudi Arabia. In the '90s, as president of the Quangtri Mutual Friendship Association, Giáo has dynamically organized a contest in English writing for students of Vietnamese origin, in which my daughter Nina won the second Academic Excellence Award.

We have continued getting together when I travel to Los Angeles. Giáo's health has become somewhat poor, and he looks more serious and a bit older than his age.

Đỗ Tư Nhơn



Huế April 2013 –
Meeting Đỗ tư Nhơn &
Cẩm Tú and Phước on
Hương Giang River tour
- at King Minh Mạng's
tomb

Nhơn has also been a dear friend since grade 6. He was a handsome kid, with a ready smile on his pink lips. Nhơn was more interested in literature than in other subjects, but kept

well within the top ten, sometimes achieving an unexpectedly high position. His house was in the village of Thạch Hãn, which was bordered by Quảng Trị City and the countryside to the south, through which I used to walk to school with my sister Ngọc Diệp and some of her girlfriends.

Occasionally, when class was dismissed early, we dropped by his house to pick guavas from the tree in the garden. Nhơn was interested in Vietnamese literature and had a collection of various books and magazines on ancient and contemporary authors, particularly novels of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn. Like me, he was neat and polite to everyone and was always liked by the girls in his own and lower grades. In grades 10 and 11, we usually met to discuss ancient Chinese literature and philosophy.

After obtaining our Bac II's, we often went to Huế to spend a few afternoons on Trần hưng Đạo Street, a haunt of other students and intellectuals. Everyone walked along the same couple streets,

seeking new novels by famous writers, or cute stationery items to look at or buy. This was a kind of fad among Huế's student population and it made the local businesses look busy, but their revenue was actually low because most of the shoppers did not have a good income.

Nhon was always attentive and willing to help a friend. It was he who tried to locate me in Huế when I was asked to show up at the Phú Thọ Technical Center for admission to the engineering program. However, we took completely different career paths, as I became an engineer and he became a literature teacher. Thus from the day I left Quảng Trị for Saigon, I saw him only a few times on my vacations from university.

My immigration to Canada separated us further, but I always checked up on him after major political upheavals. I assumed that he would have been okay, because as a socialist-minded person, he would have adapted quickly to the Communist regime. However, I learned from my father that Nhon seemed to have faced financial difficulties in 1975-1986, when the Communist Party imposed extreme austerity on the populace. I sent him some money to help. On my second visit to Quảng Trị in 2010, I asked him to organize a reunion with about sixteen of my Nguyễn Hoàng schoolmates in Đông Hà. We were very happy to see each other after almost 45 years.

I also learned that Nhon was instrumental in coordinating the provision of mutual aid to classmates facing difficulties, and I became an active supporter of the club. I was glad to help my childhood friends when they needed it. Nhon and I are still in contact through the Internet. Moreover, in April 2013, we met in Huế for a one-day boat tour on the Hương Giang River, to reminisce about our hopes and dreams when we lived in that country of dry wind and "buffalo turning pebbles for the crop" (trâu cày lên sỏi đá).

Lê Thị Diệu Minh



Diệu Minh & Luân –
Montreal, Quebec 2013

One spring afternoon in 1958, when we were in grade 7 (lớp Đệ lục) at the Nguyễn Hoàng High School, my sister Ngọc Diệp brought home a pretty girlfriend and introduced her to me: "This is Cousin Diệu Minh, the daughter of Uncle Khởi". While I was vaguely familiar with those names, this was probably the first time I had heard them. Diệu Minh (DM) was very friendly and attracted my attention, not only by her grace but also by her sweet voice and slight smile. She was good at singing romantic songs when someone accompanied her on the guitar. I checked with my mother how closely we were related.

Because we were in different classes, we didn't have much of a chance to talk till grades 10 and 11 when we were both in the class B2 for Option B and French. Diệu Minh was also a good student, ranking in the top ten of the class. We became dear friends and had a close family bond. We even reviewed the Bac I and Bac II exam materials together. Then both of us moved to Saigon in the autumn of 1964, I to attend the Tech Center of Phú Thọ and her to attend the University of Pharmacy.

Since I was the only student from Quảng Trị origin at the TCPT, I felt lonely and used to visit DM on the weekends at the apartment of my cousin Lê đình Kỳ, who was her elder brother. DM, Kỳ and I usually spent the afternoon strolling on famous streets like Nguyễn Huệ and Catinat,

sometimes accompanied by her pretty female cousin. Though this girl's beautiful face sometimes dazzled me, I found that our attitudes and lifestyles differed and I never tried to flirt with her.

My cousin DM and I had the same reason for living away from home; this made us get along quite well. Occasionally, we would see our families on vacations or New Year breaks. In the spring of 1968, when we were back home, the civil transportation was totally disrupted by the Tết offensive. We were saved from this tense situation by my uncle Huy, a captain who worked as an aide to an army general, who got us back to Saigon in a military airplane. We arrived safely in the city, where the battle between the Việt Cộng and the Republic of Vietnam was still raging.

A Saturday evening after she had returned from visiting her parents during the Tết break of her first year at university, DM asked me to take her to the Phú Thọ District to deliver a gift from her sisters to their girlfriend. On her Velo Solex motorbike, we uncomfortably navigated the area's bumpy and muddy roads; we had to walk with the bike on several sections. When we arrived in the late evening, we saw my classmate Phan văn Luân answering the door. Four years later, after graduating and before leaving Saigon for a new job, I met with DM to say good bye; we made an excursion to the Lái Thiêu plantations to pick fresh fruit. She told me that after many years of knowing him, she realized that Luân was the man of her choice.

In this time of war and worsening economic conditions, people were preoccupied with their daily struggles and we rarely contacted each other. But one day in Montreal (Quebec), I received a letter from her. I was glad to know that her family had escaped from Vietnam and was waiting in Tangoung Island (Indonesia) for their visas to be processed; she needed some financial support. I visited them when they arrived in Sherbrook (Quebec) in 1980. From that day, we saw each other quite frequently, even though we lived in two different provinces. In Quebec, to restart her family's life, DM had courageously returned to university to retake her pharmacy degree, at the same time gave birth to another son, and successfully brought up her three sons through university. This made me respect her even more.

At their house in Montreal, we were always welcomed as siblings. During these visits, my cousin DM usually cooked us special dishes from Quảng Trị, with the care of a sister. We savoured her Vietnamese food, reminisced about the past, shared our concerns about family and friends, and particularly enjoyed our karaoke sessions.

Vietnam 2006 -
Meeting with
Nguyen Hoangers
at Phái&Mai's
house in Saigon



Despite living overseas, we always thought of our childhood friends and tried to contact them on our visits to Vietnam. In the autumn of 2006, we made a five-week trip to several cities and provinces from the South to the North; in Saigon we invited about 35 teachers and friends from Nguyễn Hoàng High School to a reunion party. We eagerly embraced each other after forty years of separation. Some of them looked fragile and tired, probably due to their long years under the Communist regime, but happy to be reunited; others were still energetic and able to perform a sing-along together.

In Huế, we organized a similar reunion of teachers and friends at the Không Gian Xưa Restaurant. To mark the occasion, we offered scholarships to six excellent students at Quảng Trị High School, which had replaced the school my sister and I attended.

Now we are overseas, we are proud to have an association that re-established connections between friends and classmates of the former Nguyễn Hoàng HS (called Nguyen Hoangers), which helps those of us still living in Vietnam if they run into difficulties. Every year, we organize a gathering to enjoy each other's company, singing together, and visit new places. We are most proud of having launched two campaigns to buy plane tickets to the U.S. for eight teachers so they could join us at our reunion. To me, this gesture showed the virtue of "Respecting the Teacher, Valuing the Friend" (Kính Thầy, Trọng Bạn) that we learnt at school and from our oriental culture.

Recently in May 2013, we participated in the Reunion of People of Quảng Trị Origin that was organized in Boston by the Association of the Compatriots of Quảng Trị; I was surprised to see more than a dozen of my old classmates from the Nguyễn Hoàng HS. We had a great time recalling memories from the past; sharing jokes about the present, and planning for the future.



Boston (MA) 2013 –
Reunion of old-time
Nguyễn Hoàng HS
friends

The other Nguyen Hoangers living overseas, that we have met from time to time on our trips or by their visits to our home, are:

Nguyễn quang Bá of Paris (France)
Nguyễn quang Tùng of Paris (France)
Phan thi Ngọc Bích of Liège (Belgium)
Nguyễn Tri of Montreal (Québec, Canada)
Nguyễn văn Quý of Montreal (Québec, Canada)
Hoàng thị Xuân Tuyết &
Lê văn Tịnh of Adelaide (South Australia, Australia)

Lê thị Kim Quy of Los Angeles (California, U.S.)
Nguyễn hữu Hùng of Los Angeles (California, U.S.)
Nguyễn thị Quỳnh Hoa of Los Angeles (California, U.S.)
Tống thị Sen of Los Angeles (California, U.S.)
Nguyễn thị Nghĩa of Dallas (Texas, U.S.)
Phan bá Ân of Dallas (Texas, U.S.)
Đỗ văn Phúc of Austin (Texas, U.S.)
Nguyễn Thanh Hiền of San Jose (California, U.S.)
Nguyễn văn Hùng of San Jose (California, U.S.)
Nguyễn thị Đoan of San Jose (California, U.S.)
Nguyễn thị Điều of Oklahoma City (Oklahoma, U.S.)
Phan Thanh Thái of Charlotte (North Carolina, U.S.)
Lê thế Viên of Sterling Heights (Michigan, U.S.)
Trần minh Châu of Denver (Colorado, U.S.)
Trần văn Phi of Orlando (Florida, U.S.)
Trần thị Mỹ Lệ of Denver (Colorado, U.S.)

These occasions usually provided us with opportunities to introduce our family members, share souvenirs of the past and enjoy the reunion parties. I particularly thank some of my dear friends and relatives who have spent time and money to visit us at our home in Mississauga, Canada.

Section 4: Living in Saigon as an Adult

A DC6 airplane from Vietnam Airlines (Hàng Không Việt Nam) took me to Tân Sơn Nhất Airport in a late afternoon of August 1964, and I was welcomed by my cousin Thanh Liêm (my uncle Tân's daughter), while waiting for Uncle Huy to return from his military mission. In the evening, I took a shower in the apartment's tiny bathroom, which we shared with the landlord. The water was clear and cold enough to wake me up, and it gave me the feeling of having arrived in the comfort of what was then the capital city. The next evening, when it was time for a shower, I was surprised to find a container of hot water beside the cold water vase. I was told that this has been arranged by Miss Thủy, the landlord's daughter. She was good looking, but older than me. My cousin smiled and cautioned me that I had to be careful and avoid getting involved. I was anxious and wanted to leave that apartment as soon as possible.

4.1 Student Life

On Monday morning, I woke up early to go to the Technical Center of Phú Thọ by bus. It took me an hour and forty five minutes to arrive, including one transfer and ten minutes of walking. The opening session, held in the central amphitheater, was led by the dean of the TCPT, Dr. Nguyễn Chánh, a "Ponts-et-Chaussées" engineer who had graduated from the École Polytechnique in Paris. To a small-town student like me, the amphitheater was impressive because of its huge size, modern equipment and beautiful fittings, including its large, interchangeable sliding blackboards, audio and video facilities, and comfortable seats. His opening speech was brief, but friendly and motivating. I only remember one thing he told us "You don't need to work very hard to graduate, because when the 110 of you were selected from the 5000 applicants, you already passed".

Every day I biked to the TCPT, which was about one hour and fifteen minutes away from Trương công Định Street (near Tao Đàn Park), where I stayed with my uncle's family. However, having lived in the countryside and in a small town, I was accustomed to this condition of travel without complaint. The only problem was that it took too much of my time, and I got tired after a long day of studying. I got along quite well with everybody in my aunt's family and was treated as a relative. In the early morning, my aunt Thục would put a large cup of milky coffee and a warm piece of

bread on the table for my breakfast. I had lunch in the university cafeteria, though it was too expensive for a student from Central Vietnam like me. After six months, I moved to a privately operated dormitory closer to the TCPT, which helped me get through the four-year program.

In my new residence, I had more time to study and participate in the student life, including strolling down the Saigon streets on weekends. Consequently, I need more money to pay for extras, as my parents could give me only enough financial support for basic expenses. So starting from my second year, I worked as a tutor for one or two high school students. As a student of TCPT, I earned a better hourly wage than those attending other universities. Thus, with about five or six hours of tutoring a week, I was able to earn a reasonable salary to cover my additional needs during my remaining years (my first-year expenses were funded by my sister Ngọc Diệp, and I planned not to work during the last half of my final year so I could concentrate on studying for graduation).

One story comes to mind when thinking of my days as a tutor. In the the first semester of my fourth year, a friend got me a job helping two kids from a wealthy family (that operated a jewelry store) to prepare to write their Bac II exams. They were good students attending French schools. The boy was younger and bright, and the girl was pretty and sweet. Every evening, before starting the session in geometry or calculus, they offered me a sweet iced jelly or some fruit. We had a good student-teacher relationship, and we sometimes made jokes or discussed movies or songs.



Saigon 1967 - Class of Professor Néan and student Nguyễn Trung Thu

One evening, my then girlfriend took me to the students's house because my motorcycle had broken down. I conducted the lesson as usual. Two days later, however, I came to their house as scheduled, but only the boy showed up; he looked serious and did not offer me a snack. He said "My elder sister got a cold and could not join us". I did not comment. The next week, both of them turned up, though the girl looked unhappy. After two and haft hours of work, their mother came in with an envelope and said pleasantly: "Hi Thu, as you know, my children's exams will come soon, I think they need a break. Therefore, no further tutoring is required". (It was more than half a year before the usual date of the examinations). She handed me the envelope and thanked me for my help. At the time, I did not care to understand what had happened, but was unhappy to have lost my supplementary income ahead of schedule.

On weekends, my friends and I also enjoyed going downtown. We would promenade down the well-known streets of Saigon, have an ice cream on Nguyễn Huệ Street, buy a magazine at a news stand on Lê Lợi Boulevard, and take the bus back to our dormitory in the evening. We were usually late for the last dinner service. To appease our hunger, we went to the beef noodle stands installed every evening on Lữ Gia Avenue. Each of us ordered a large bowl of noodles and added a lot of bean sprouts to fill our stomachs. We humourously called our order "the philosophy of bean sprouts".

During an ideological war like the one in Vietnam, there were many students who were interested in politics. But I clearly unnderstood the purpose of my stay in Saigon and limited my activities and

entertainment. Due to the lesson learned in my last year of secondary school, I restrained myself from participating in violent protests and demonstrations. I thought that students, with their ideology and sincerity but lack of deep thinking, might be used by either the Communists or the opposition for their purposes.

While the engineering curriculum was extremely broad, if you did not often miss class, you would pass without any issues. I was able to visit my parents in Quảng Trị once or twice a year. After my first year, I stayed with them for my three months of vacation. I also started tentatively exploring relationships with girls, though I mostly kept them to discussing music or literature. In my second year, I met a girl who attended the College of Commerce that was located on my campus. She was a nice person and we started dating. During my vacation after my third year, I talked to my parents about this relationship, but my mother did not wish it to continue because my girlfriend was from Tonkin. She said that as her only son, I had to pass on the torch of the family, and that my girlfriend's cultural difference could strain my relationships with my relatives. I realized that this would be catastrophic for both my mother and the girl, especially as my mother had already anticipated the situation. What would the relationship between them be like in the future? Therefore, I decided to end the romance before it became more serious.



As an adult, I established some directions for my life, based on the contemporary lifestyle concepts of “Truth, Goodwill and Beauty” (Chân, Thiện, Mỹ) and the Oriental beliefs of “Fame is less important than Appearance, Appearance is less important than Fate, Fate is less important than Virtue” (Tài bất cập Tướng, Tướng bất cập Mệnh, Mệnh bất cập Đức), and the application of achievement in science and technology.

Saigon 2013 – Meeting with TCPT classmates at a restaurant in District 1

I always honour my Conscience as a way to keep my heart happy and my mind at peace, knowing that “Science without conscience is just a destruction of soul” (Science sans conscience n’est que ruine de l’âme). I am proud of the virtues that both my paternal and maternal families and I myself have always adhered to, particularly compassion and fairness. In any circumstance beyond our control, I believe the sum of our compassion will bring us luck and prevent misery.

4.2 My Study at the Technical Center of Phú Thọ

Beyond receiving technical training at the TCPT, we could practice our fluency in French and English. As all of our professors had studied and graduated in either France or U.S., they lectured and provided materials in these languages. In fact, since there was no Vietnamese equivalents to foreign engineering terms at the time, learning in our native language would have been impossible. While this became an advantage for those of us who would later emigrate from Vietnam, it was a misery for the students who had not learned well French and English in high school.

In my third year, I took an electromagnetics course, both the lectures and materials of which were in French. When I wrote the second-term exam, I sat beside a classmate who was weak in French and did not have enough time to review the course. He asked my permission to copy my work.

Because I understood his situation (he spent a lot of time making money to support his family), I said: "Okay, but you have to modify my text when you put it on your paper". He agreed. I forgot that he would have little time to change what I had written, especially because it was in a language in which he was not proficient. When the professor returned our exams, I got 8/20 and he got 4/20; the teacher commented that one of us must have copied the work of the other, and that he must punish us for violating the ethical code by giving us lower marks. Consequently, I nearly failed the year and my classmate had to repeat the whole program of that year, because we needed a mark of at least 12/20 to pass all the exams.

We had quite a few practices on each topic of every course and usually did TP (Travaux Pratiques) in groups of three. My group consisted of Thung, Bão and me. Thung and Bão were very intelligent guys, but each had his peculiarities. Thung rarely did things all the way through. He seemed to become frustrated quickly when repeating the same procedure to complete a set of data for an experimental curve or to explain the behaviour of a machine or a device. He usually came late and/or left the laboratory early. Moreover, Bão was always late, because he was teaching at a high school to finance his education. As a result, most of the time I usually had to stay longer, do the cleanup, and of course prepare the report. It seemed unfair, but they just laughed when I complained.

4.3 My Friends at the TCPT

In university, we were generally preoccupied with our personal lives, particularly because most of us had to work to cover the cost of attending the four-year training program. Therefore, we did not have much time to mingle or find new friends, except at Christmas or during the Lunar New Year. However, some classmates with extraordinary personalities always made us smile, and I had a few good friends like Phan văn Luân, Phạm long Thượng, Tôn thất Thung, Lê quý Khôi, and others.

Phan Văn Luân

At the Tech Center, the guy who sat beside me and who used to be late to class was Phan văn Luân. He seemed to be good at calculus and physics (later, I discovered that he had received some credits in Mathematics and Physics from the University of Sciences of Saigon). Luân did not care much about dressing well and his hair was usually uncombed, but we started to talk after I revealed my heavy Quảng Trị accent. Luân was also born in Quảng Trị and lived there for a while, but did not study at Nguyễn Hoàng School. I realized that he was an open-minded, easy-going guy who had a broad knowledge base, and we became friends.



Mississauga 2010 -
Visit of Luân &
Minh, Kim Qui and
Mỹ Lệ

One Saturday evening, I went with my cousin Diêu Minh to a house in Lữ Gia (Phú Thọ District). I knocked at the door, which was then opened by a man in pajamas. I was stunned to realize that it was Luân. He said “Hi Thu, how did you know where I live?”, but his eyes were fixed on my cousin. He was understandably confused. He immediately found his sister Như, to whom my cousin was delivering a package. After DM and Như had chatted for a while, we left because it was getting dark. On the morning of the next day, when I came to the amphitheater, I saw that Luân was already there waiting for me. Smiling, he said: “Your cousin is so pretty; I want to go with you to see her again”.

That weekend, I rode with him on his motorcycle to Khánh Hội. Both DM and Cousin Kỳ did not exactly welcome us, but they offered us a light lunch. The weekend after that, he asked me to go with him again, but this time I saw that he was carrying several cassettes of songs by famous singers. My cousin Kỳ remarked to me, “Thu, you brought us a hippie guy who never combs his hair”. But after two visits with me, Luân was able to make one visit every following week, maybe more at my cousins’ apartment. In our third and fourth years, we were separated because we were in different programs (he was in civil and I was in electrical engineering), we still met occasionally to watch good movies at the Rex Theater without paying for tickets, because his father was a partner or supporter of the business. We also met at the annual New Year’s dance held by the TCPT as a tradition.

After graduating from university, we used to meet to discuss our careers and how to get jobs as soon as possible, because if we failed to find work before our birthdays, we would be called for military service and there would have been no employer to sponsor us out. We both applied for field engineering jobs at the Quảng Ngãi Sugar Company, a newly formed enterprise that was launching a major construction project. We were hired and became connected again, and moved to the Thu Phố job site in Quảng Ngãi Province.

We were in a group of eight to ten young engineers, with a new house for every two of us along the shore of the Trà Khúc River; however, Luân and I were in different duplexes. We cut the wall separating kitchen units to make an opening for easy passage in case of an attack or artillery shelling by the Việt Cộng, who were present most nights on the other side of the river. We also had a bunker covered with sand bags for protection during shelling or the exchange of gun shots between our troops and the Việt Cộng.

In this period, Luân dreamed of marrying my cousin after her graduation which was one year later than ours. Every night, he wrote her a letter, even when we were in the bunker under a heavy shelling. He even let me read them. I sometimes broke into laughter because instead of describing the flares and thunder of the shelling, he literally wrote: “You know, tonight the stars are illuminating the sky, light-worms are lighting up the compound in the twilight; lying on the grass and listening to the concert of the insects, I think of you. Oh my dear DM, let me express all my dreams and hopes of reuniting with you soon....”

Luân knew a lot about many subjects, from literature to science, from history to reality. He could use words to lighten the situation, which helped release tension between friends. For this reason, I usually enjoyed our conversations.

Phạm long Thượng

I got good contact with Phạm long Thượng early in my first year at TCPT. He was a tall and handsome guy from the near-by town of Long An, who was always easy going, nice and willing to help his friends. Several times during the New Year, I left school early to go home to Quảng Trị for a family reunion. Before leaving I usually asked him to pick up the materials that would be distributed in my absence. On my return, I amazingly received every page, and even got a bonus: some of his handwritten notes. From then on, we became good friends.

He and some other guys like Lê quý Khôi, Võ Cồn and Trương sĩ Thực were good at organizing parties, especially the New Year's Eve dance that became a tradition of our Electrical Engineering School. They also coordinated a class excursion to Gò Vấp for “Bò bảy món” (beef prepared in seven different ways).



Los Angeles 2005 – With
TCPT friends: Thương, Thu &
Phụng, Tiên & girlfriend and
Khôi

During our work at the Vietnam Power Company (VPC), when we were in different departments in the same building, we usually ate together in the Company cafeteria or went out for lunch. After the 1975 event, Thương was stuck in Vietnam for more than fifteen years. When I visited the country, he usually contacted our former classmates and helped me organize a reunion. These occasions allowed us to see each other and to recall our student days.

He finally left Vietnam in the '90s and resettled in Los Angeles. We saw each other quite often because I used to go to LA to visit my in-laws. On these occasions, he would organize a small party to welcome me, and as per Vietnamese custom, I was never allowed to pay. In the summer of 1999, on occasion of a VPC former employees' reunion in North Eastern of the States, Thương accompanied a group of friends and made us a short visit. We were happy to receive them at home for a tea party.

I also learnt that his wife Huyền was Phụng's classmate at the University of Pharmacy; which is yet another reason for strengthening our friendship.

4.4 Meeting a Girl at the Diêu Quang Orphanage

At the start of 1968, which was the last year of my engineering program, the Tết offensive hit Saigon. I was still living in the Buddhist Quảng Đức Dormitory, a cultural centre directed by Honourable Thích thiện Minh, which housed the students from Central Vietnam who were living away from home. I participated in the humanitarian response to the offensive and led a group in collecting food such as rice, beans, fish sauce and in finding transportation to bring it to the temporary relocation centers to help the evacuees. Because there were over fifty thousand people in each of these centers, the task was not easy, due to the quantity of food and the logistics involved. I successfully obtained several dozens of 100 kilogram bags of rice, a dozen containers of fish sauce and transportation trucks. I then got a dozen students to help bring the supplies to the Orphanage of Diêu Quang.

After transporting and unloading the food, we stopped for a break. As I walked around the facility, I was surprised to see Miss Lý thị Phụng sitting at a table with a group of Medico-Pharmacy

students who were volunteering at the camp. I was stunned because I thought she was only in Saigon to study, not to help those in need. This made me interested in getting to know her better.



Saigon 1968 - Student
Lý thị Phụng at Thanh
Quan Dormitory

In fact, we had gone to the same co-educational high school Nguyễn Hoàng in Quảng Trị, and while Phụng was a grade below me, we were both among its good students. We always received awards at the end of the year and sometimes competed to be the best in the school. I remember that she won once, and so did I. We respected each other and would occasionally say hello when meeting, but nothing more.

This time, I was eager to ask her a lot of questions when we took the same microbus back to our dormitories. I realized that she was a person of quality, and our relationship grew from there.



Saigon 1968 -
Student Lý thị
Phụng and Thanh
Quan Group on
Christmas Eve

Part II: WORKING IN VIETNAM

Section 5: The Quảng Ngãi Sugar Plant (1968 – 1969).

As a student, I dreamed of going overseas one day for post-graduate study. I had a reasonable chance to do so after I completed my four-year Bachelor of Engineering program at the TCPT. I even applied for an international scholarship to do a master's degree in Canada. At the same time, however, I applied for a job in Vietnam as it was vital for us to have a supportive employer, preferably a public company, to sponsor us when we completed our mandatory military training. The Ministry of Education did not review my application expeditiously as promised, and in the meantime, I was offered a position as a field engineer at the Thu Phổ construction site of the Quảng Ngãi Sugar Company. I had no other choice but to accept and leave Saigon.

After a few days in Quảng Ngãi, I received a telegram from a friend telling me to return to Saigon for a French test. With help from a senior secretary in the company, I got a round-trip plane ticket after three days (normally it would take at least a month), and arrived in Saigon in the evening. The next morning, I showed up at the French Cultural Centre, but the test had been administered two days before! It was an example of “man proposes, God disposes” (Mưu sự tại nhân, Thành sự tại Thiên).

However, this trip was not a failure because it allowed me to strengthen my relationship with the girl from the University of Pharmacy to the point we could make a commitment two years later. During this visit, I took her around and to high-end restaurants like Thanh Bạch, Thanh Thê and Brossard, but sometimes ran out of money; she occasionally had to pay, although this was not common in Vietnam at the time.

I went back to the Thu Phổ site with a plan: I would try to work there for at least a year to gain experience, particularly in areas of technical practice and leadership. The project was to install a plant that could crush 1500 tons of sugar cane per day in Quảng Ngãi Province, the design for which was made by the Hitachi and Mitsubishi. At the site, Hitachi Shipbuilding Corporation was the main contractor, helped by a Korean specialist team for equipment installation. On the advice of the CEO, Mr. Tôn thất Trình, the QNSP engaged 8 – 10 newly graduated engineers like me to work as trainees for a short time, then nominated us as leaders to handle the construction activities. We worked under the site superintendent, Mr. Lê đình Kỳ and some experienced Vietnamese engineers who had assisted with the construction of the Bình Dương Sugar Plant, the design of which was a copy of the Quảng Ngãi plant. Our team was lucky to have such an opportunity to practice our skills. With guidance from tutors and the Korean specialists, we carried out the installation of the structures and equipment, and performed testing and commissioning at the site.

After one and a half years of construction, we successfully launched the plant with the production of a small amount of sugar for presentation. This caused a sensation in Quảng Ngãi Province, as well as in Vietnam. We got a good reputation as the Vietnamese engineers who had successfully installed and commissioned a sophisticated industrial plant. Most of the young people in the city of Quảng Ngãi, such as high school students, teachers, military officers and visitors respected us and wanted to see the site. We were proud of having accomplished something.

From that project, I learned a lot about electrical systems and equipment, as well as their ratings, operation parameters and functions. This experience gave me in-depth knowledge that would prove highly beneficial in the future. I recall a French proverb often quoted by my father “Qui veut voyager loin, prepare sa monture” (who wants to travel far prepares his setting).

Aside from gaining valuable work experience on the QNSP construction site, Quảng Ngãi was an interesting place to explore, with its unique people (who were either extreme anti-Communists or vehemently against the government), its landscapes like Thiên Ân Mountain and certain parts of the Trà Khúc River, and its special dish like grilled sugar cane sparrows (chim mía).

Then I was called for an undetermined period of military service. Fortunately however, my conscription was postponed for a year because of my unbalanced vision and because I was the only son in the family (this became routine every time I was drafted). Considering that the interesting construction project was over, I decided to quit the QNSP, moved to Saigon at the year-end of 1969, and applied for a job with the Vietnam Power Company (VPC).

Section 6: The Vietnam Power Company (1970 – 1975)

The country's power infrastructure was extensively expanded due to the requirement for power in South Vietnam after the contractual termination of French utility companies like CEE and SIPEA and the region's modernization in the '60s and '70s. Hence, the Vietnam Power Company (VPC) was a potential employer for electrical engineering graduate like me. I applied for a position as a junior engineer in the Division of Provincial Exploitation (Khối Địa Phương) and got an interview with Mr. Hồ Tấn Phát – the acting CEO in the absence of his boss, with a promise of employment. But due to a conflict between these individuals, Mr. Phát was barred from making new hires until the previous CEO returned from his business travels. I therefore had to wait for several months to learn if I had gotten the job.

Getting Married and Raising a Family

The most important turning point in a man's life is his marriage to establish a family, particularly when he is the only son of traditional Vietnamese parents. Since I was not going abroad for a post-graduate degree, my mother disapproved of me dating a Saigon girl, my permanent employment with the VPC was assured, and my military service could be postponed each year, the conditions were ripe for me to do just that. My dear Phụng and I had established a close relationship since the day we reconnected more than two years before, and I knew from her character and education that she was the one with whom I wanted to tie the knot.

In the spring of 1970, I returned to Quảng Trị for Tết (Vietnamese New Year). I talked to my parents and got their unmitigated approval, because they knew her family quite well, and remembered Phụng's academic achievement at the Nguyễn Hoàng High School. Not only were my parents happy about this, but so were most of my friends and teachers. (As I explained in the introduction, I will not go into detail about Phụng's quality and characters or our relationship). Thus we decided to become engaged.



Saigon 1970 – During engagement



Quang Tri 1970 – Thu
& Phụng's marriage

Back in Saigon, I started my new job and she began her third year at the University of Pharmacy. She lived in the Thanh Quan Dormitory, which had become her second home. This was a well organized dorm for female university students whose families were far from Saigon. I picked Phụng up there at least one a week to take her out for a stroll or to the movies. On every visit, we had to sign our names for registration, and we usually sat in a large room with a living-room set, couches, and some extra arm chairs. You could read newspapers and magazines while waiting for your girlfriend. Initially, I was irritated that curious people might be trying to identify me, (in fact, they were), but after a while, I acknowledged that this system was necessary for a respectable girls' dormitory. Unfortunately, more private means of communication like the telephone were not broadly available at the time. Though we did go out on dates, but I had to bring her back before 10:00 PM. This could be extended to 11:00 PM if we pre-arranged it with the custodian, but never later. I was there so often that the dormitory residents nicknamed me "the guy with the red Montagu pullover".

During our engagement period, I found that Phụng was caring and possessed other qualities of a good wife, and we deeply fell in love; by the summer of 1970, we decided to marry. As she was the first daughter and the eldest child of the family, the marriage was sumptuously held by her parents on September 26, 1970, in our hometown of Quảng Trị, with over 400 invited guests from several provinces. After a three-week honeymoon, we returned to Saigon to resume our duties.

Although we had a helper, it was hard for Phụng to perform two roles simultaneously, those of a traditional Vietnamese housewife and a full-time student. With the help of my in-laws, we bought a house in Bàn Cờ (the Chest Table), an area whose name indicates its character. Our house was located in front of and adjacent to irritating people. They were a "Bà Năm Sa Đéc" and "Bà bán muối chợ Đồng Xuân" (nicknames given to mean and cunning people by the South and North Vietnamese, respectively). We tried to be kind and tolerant towards them to keep the peace, but this strategy only worked for a while. In the end, I called for help from the community security agent who was also an employee of the VPC, and this solved the problem.

In July 1971, as per Vietnamese tradition, Phụng went back to her parents' home in Quảng Trị to prepare to deliver our first child. On the 26th, I was delighted to receive a telegram that my daughter Mimi had been born, and I flew back to QT for a few days to see her. She was placed on a large divan and slept with me through the night without crying. In the day, she looked around observantly, so cute and so intelligent. We had already given her the official name Thiên Nga, which we chose when we visited the zoo several months before her birth. We were inspired by the swans swimming in the lake fully planted with lotuses. During this time in Quảng Trị, every night the sounds of artillery shelling rumbled through the city to show that the war was nearby. This was my last visit to the place where I grew up and got my basic education, before it was flattened by war.

When she returned to Saigon after two months with her parents, Phụng had some difficulty handling the pharmacy program and caring for the baby. Our fifteen-year-old nanny could not do the chores while being with Mimi when both of us were away. Thus, the only solution was for Phụng to postpone her studies and resume them at a more convenient time.



Saigon 1974 - Nina at
1 year old and Mimi
at 3 years old

After the entire city of Quảng Trị was razed to the ground by bombing and shelling from both sides in 1972, my parents escaped to the refugee camp of Sơn Chà (Đà Nẵng) for a while, then moved to Thanh Bình Beach (Đà Nẵng), where my father got a job with the USAID-financed development program. During this period, my mother stayed with us in Saigon for a few months. This was the only time she participated in a traditional family reunion that included three generations. I was not sure whether Phụng played her part as well as I could wish, though I knew she had tried.

Life continued uneventfully until June 1972, when my wife spent a few days in a private hospital known for obstetrics and maternity care to deliver our second child. Sadly, our first son was born without a single cry! The doctor and nurse told me they could not save his life. Eventually every thing happened too fast, too unpredictable, we lost our first son. That night, alone in a dark room of the hospital's annexe, I saw his body laid on a table, covered with a white sheet; he was so cute and looked like a healthy boy. I told him: "My dear son, unfortunately we did not have the chance to take care of you and see you alive. You were searching for a train to carry you to a nobler and better world, and you had to go immediately without looking at this one".

My wife only learned about the situation after she recovered and was back with the family. One night, in a dream I saw him as an angel walking on the lotus leaves in a lake, smiling and waving his hands towards me in greeting and then walking away. We still think of him, and offer him an annual remembrance ceremony.

We had our second daughter Nina on December 05, 1973. She was lucky to have been born in a hospital and to be cared for by my parents-in-law, who relocated to Saigon after Quảng Trị was devastated. Nina never opened her eyes during her first two or three days, but was chubby and smiling; we named her Thiên Trang (Grace of Nature). She grew up healthy and happy in the care of both her mommy and nanny.

I started to realize that the cost of living was constantly increasing. Although my salary was high compared to those of my colleagues at other organizations, it was hard to maintain a standard of living. I had to take greater responsibility to earn more for the family, and therefore sought further challenges.

My In-laws, the Lys

I met the Lý family in the spring of 1970, when Phụng and I went home for Lunar New Year. I found that both her father and mother were very sympathetic and sincere, and were particularly interested in the Oriental culture and Confucian virtues that my family also followed. I was glad to have made their acquaintance.

The family was rooted in the Cam Lộ District (Quảng Trị Province) where Phụng's grandparents, who had emigrated from Hainan (China), established a successful farm growing utility plants like black pepper, coffee and tea along with a business importing and exporting tobacco and agricultural products between Vietnam and Laos, with its own fleet of transportation trucks. Grandfather Lý Thi Ngọc was honoured by the community as a pioneer of the region.

My father-in-law Lý thơ Thành was determined both as an adolescent and as a family man. He told me that despite being the heir to his father's large estate, he was determined to get a Western education and to manage his own life. His father Ngọc did not like this idea and always kept an eye on him in Huế, where he was discreetly taking a high school program in French and Chinese studies. So as not to look like a westernized boy, he used to carry a spare Chinese outfit that he changed into under a big tree before he entered the house. With his proficiency in three major languages (Vietnamese, Chinese and French), he was elected president of the Chinese Association of Quảng Trị for several terms. In all circumstances, he was elegant, generous and concerned for everyone's welfare, especially that of his friends, relatives and children.

Phụng's father usually went to Saigon to conduct business and to visit his daughter. When I was already his son-in-law-to-be, I usually accompanied him to some offices, particularly the Citroen Company, where he ordered a Deux Chevaux sedan (I guess he wanted to test my fluency in French). After that, we always ended up in good Chinese restaurants in Chợ Lớn.

I was especially pleased that although the family was doing commercial business, it showed sincerity, honesty and compassion, and was always generous. This generosity was notably on display when they helped purchase a house for us in District 3 of the city.



Quang Tri 1967 - Lý family (Phụng was not included as she was studying in Saigon)

When my parents-in-law's family, along with many others withdrew from Quảng

Trị Province after the Northern army's spring 1972 attack, they stayed with us for a while in Saigon, then bought a new house in the District 1. We were happy to have them nearby. We used to visit and have dinner with them on most weekends and in special family gatherings and rituals. On these occasions, Mimi (who was under three years old) would perform dances inspired by TV shows to an attentive audience of relatives. My parents-in-law were attentive not only to their first grandchild, but to other grandchildren as well. I also got to spend quality time with my siblings-in-law Vinh, Chánh, Minh, Huy, Nhơn, Quang and Anh. Sympathetic and caring, they were concerned

about our children and tended to spoil them. Thus, I love them like my brothers and sister, and I believe that they love me as well.

I know that during the difficult time under the new Communist regime and when we were absent from the country, my parents-in-law did more than was expected for my close relatives. They usually visited my parents and helped my sister's family, both emotionally and materially.



Los Angeles 1990 –
Dad's 80 years old
anniversary celebration

My in-laws finally came to Los Angeles (California) in 1980, when we were on steps of leaving North America for Saudi Arabia. From thenceforward, we usually made Los Angeles the destination for our yearly vacations during our overseas service. Together with Phụng and/or our children, I visited my parents-in-law often until they passed away. Each time we saw them, they never forgot to remind us to send financial support to my parents and relatives in Vietnam. Deep in my heart, I respected and loved them as my own parents.

6.1 Regional Power Exploitation – East

Vietnam visit 1995 –
Meeting with some friends
from RPE-East: Nguyễn Văn
Quận, Myself, Trần thị Như
Hoàn & Đồng sĩ Nam



Finally, I was hired and reported to work at the Regional Power Exploitation - East (Khu Khai thác Điện lực miền Đông), starting from January 1st 1970. This organization directed and supported the technical, administrative and financial monitoring of more than a dozen provincial electricity centers. I began learning about their operating procedures and guidelines, and prepared for a long career with the VPC. I reviewed the operating data, prepared documentation and reports on the power operations of the fourteen utility centers,

familiarized myself with their technical specifications and standards, and drafted the instruction notes and directives for each center.

Furthermore, I visited the provincial cities in the eastern part of South Vietnam, where fruits and famous regional delicacies were abundant. I learned about each province's economic situation, and saw how the country people lived. Above all, I enjoyed the spirit of friendship and cooperation among my colleagues at different levels like Đồng sĩ Nam, Đinh Văn Quý, Nguyễn Văn Quận, Nguyễn Văn Liên, Triệu công Quay, and most utility-center heads. I thought I was doing well at the Region East when I was ranked at 11-05 (that is 11 out of 12 scales, level 05 of 10 or so) by the



new year of 1975, although I had joined the VPC about two years after my classmates. I achieved good work records as head of the Administrations Office of the Regional Power Exploitation – East.

Mississauga 1999 –
Visit of old time
colleague Đinh văn
Quý & his spouse

The infiltration of the Northern army into Quảng Trị Province was becoming increasingly obvious. In the summer of 1970, when I came home to spend time with my family, the nights were roamed by the sound of artillery, and blasts of machine gun fire were sometimes heard. I realized that the war had spread and nowhere in the country was safe any more, especially in the frontier provinces. One day at the noon, I was riding to Huế with my father's colleagues, but when we got to Mỹ Chánh, which was halfway there, we found ourselves in a battle between the VNCH and Việt Cộng armies. We left the Jeep and ran as fast as we could across the sandy field. However, I had to stop several times to pull on the hand of my father's friend or to wait for him. When we escaped from the fighting zone, we found we had lost our car because the driver had gone in the other direction.

We then took a bus and arrived safely in Huế. There, I visited the family of my father's boss, the head of the Civil Works Department, who was also our neighbour having left Quảng Trị on the government's injunction when he supported the Buddhist protest in Central Vietnam on religious grounds. I thought this was an unjust decision that could potentially cause the citizen to rebel. I wanted to show my regard, respect and sympathy to that family. I also started to worry about the safety of my parents.

6.2 The Utility Centre of Đình Tường

Sometime in 1974, the vice-president of the VPC offered me a new position as head of the Class A utility center in the province of Đình Tường. This Center had 132 kV transmission lines, a 15 kV distribution system, several 132 kV/15 kV substations, two interconnected power plants, and many customers. He told me that he had learned about my accomplishments and wanted to offer me a position within his division, at whatever utility center I wished. I preferred to work in Nha Trang, a new center that had been transferred to us by the French company SIPEA. But he said: "I know that

you are competent in both engineering and administrations, but you are quite straightforward and a very nice person. This may not be a good fit in the Nha Trang environment. I think you might want to work at the Định Tường Utility Centre, which is close enough for us to support you”. I realized that he was sharp and knew his employees well, and I accepted his proposal.



Mỹ Tho 1975 - Office premises,
in the early days at The Utility
Centre of Định Tường

I moved alone to the Mỹ Tho, the metropolitan city of Định Tường Province at the beginning of 1975, when the fighting between the Republic of Vietnam and the Việt cộng, mostly led by the North Communist Army, was intensifying. In the midst of the chaos, I calmly worked to take control of the complexities of the Định Tường Utility Centre, while trying to form good relationships with the leaders of other local organizations.

Outside the office, I got advice from my cousin Nguyễn đăng Lạc, a major in the Navy of the Republic and commander of Fluvial Squadron 56, which was based in

Mỹ Tho. At work, I had a technical assistant and an administrative assistant as well. While I could deal the management and technical issues at the utility centre, building relationships with the heads of the other organizations was more difficult, particularly because they liked to drink on weekends, and I was not into the bar scene. However, I had to learn because without joining them, I could not do business locally. I counted on my technical assistant, who had been born in the area and knew many of these people. Of equal importance, he was a drinker who could easily consume half a dozen medium-sized bottles of beer and be able to work the next day. Therefore, I took him on most of my outings with the locals. After an hour at the table and only one beer, I would make some excuse and leave my assistant to enjoy the rest of the evening. This was a protocol in Vietnam at the time, and may always be in the future.

A few weeks into my assignment, the customer service secretary informed me that a gentleman from a remote district wanted to see me about the power supply to his gas station. I anticipated this was an important matter and agreed to talk with him. He was dressed in the complete religious costume of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist sect, which gave him an air of intellectuality, and seemed straightforward. About fifty-five years old, he was handsome and had a ready smile.

I greeted him courteously and invited him to sit down on the couch. What he was asking for was that he wanted us to implement a three-phase 220/380 volt power supply that he had already requested a year previously from the former head of the center. But for us, this was not simple because his station was several kilometers away from our medium-voltage distribution line. The supply would thus cost him more than he could afford. I proposed that he should wait for us to investigate further into developing the system so that the cost could be reasonable. He was happy with this idea and told me: “I think this is fair enough, but now I would like to talk with you a bit about the political events that are happening to us”. Then he quoted the prophetic verses of the Vietnamese aristocrat Trạng Trình Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491 – 1585), explaining them phrase by phrase. According to his interpretation, some verses stated that there would be strong and large waves sweeping through Vietnam and Southeast Asia; this image might not be exactly the ocean waves, but it could be interpreted as chaotic phenomena or pushing forces, that would lead the Vietnamese people astray. Consequently, there would be uncountable deaths, misery, torture, etc., after which, the country might see peace.

This prophecy scared me so much that it reinforced my decision to leave Vietnam. Years later when I was in Canada, the flux of Vietnamese who clandestinely evacuated the country and became “boat people” has justified the above interpretation of the prophetic verses. I just want to express my admiration for this perceptive man.

Section 7: My Determination to Leave Vietnam

In March 1975, my parents left Đà Nẵng during the North Communist Army’s attack and occupation, to stay with my family (my wife, two children and our nanny) in Saigon. I visited them there since I wanted to inform my parents of my political views and potential decision to emigrate in the near future. I told them: “The South Vietnam government appears to be collapsing. If it does, I will evacuate Vietnam with the whole family, including you both”. My father asked me how and why. I answered that we would take a Vietnamese or American ship, or go by land to another country of the Free World that would accept us, because I didn’t like the Communist regime.

However, he ironically said, “The Communists are also Vietnamese. They may not feed you well, but this is not a major concern when the country will be reunited after almost one hundred years of war and separation. You are an engineer; any government would want you to help develop the country. So why do you want to go?”

I replied, “Communists don’t respect the individual; they don’t let you make your own decisions. I don’t want to put my children in a school that teaches them one way of thinking and makes them pray every day to Uncle Lenin, Uncle Mao, Uncle Ho, etc. And when they grow up, they would condemn their parents if they did not follow the instructions of the Communist Party. I may be useful to them, but I know that under their system, I would not be allowed to make decisions because beside me, there would be a political adviser to tell me what to do, even in technical matters. If I disregard his advice, I would be condemned for being against the Party; and that would be deadly. I just want to know your decision so I can make the arrangement for leaving Vietnam”. My father said firmly, “I have dreamed of the day when Vietnam will be reunited, and I want to once again see my siblings who have joined the Việt Minh and stayed in the North Vietnam; moreover, I don’t want to take a clandestine evacuation and want to die at home”.

I had no more questions and let my father make his choice.

My wife and I started planning emigration from Vietnam in case of a takeover by the Communists. I had several ideas for that purpose. My parents-in-law proposed to band together with other business-owning families to buy a ship or motorboat, which our family would be invited to share. But this plan failed due to the decease of a major player. I was asked to arrange another solution in Mỹ Tho via my cousin Lạc. But while I succeeded in doing this, my in-laws bowed out for fear of danger. Finally, I secured an alternative arrangement for us to escape with my cousin from Vietnam if necessary.

In Mỹ Tho, I worked hard to keep up with the directives from my company and the local government. But the daily news on the intensifying attacks from the Việt Cộng made me worry about my wife and two children, who were still in Saigon. I asked NTA, one of my assistants, for help because the company permitted him to travel daily between Saigon and Mỹ Tho, while I was forbidden to leave office, by my employer as well as by the chief of the province. I told NTA that if the North Vietnam took control of the South, I would emigrate, because I was accustomed to the freedom offered by the Republic of Vietnam rather than the “Độc lập, Tự do và Hạnh Phúc” (Independence, Liberty and Happiness) offered by a new Communist government. Since, I could not leave the office; I asked him if I could trust him to help me relocate my family. He replied, “Thu, you treat me well and I think of you as a brother; if you asked me to jump into a fire to help

you, I would be glad to do so, and this is just a minor task”. However, though he twice took my car to the city, he failed to convince my wife to leave with three-year old Mimi and one-year old Nina. I realized that she was waiting to receive payment for goods she had been contracted to deliver to a client, and hesitated to leave Saigon without money. My direct manager, Mr. TMN, and another man, TTT, whom he had introduced to us, were her partners in this supply contract (my wife had 60% of the value, and the two other partners each had 20%). When they bought the goods, Mr. TMN could not contribute financially but still wanted to maintain his position, so we let him borrow money from us.

In this situation, I felt I had no other choice than to try to convince my manager that he should issue a three-day permit for me to go to Saigon. After receiving permission, I took the company car and left Mỹ Tho on the afternoon of Friday April 24, 1975 under the escort of my cousin Nguyễn đăng Hưng, an army lieutenant who was then in the city.

On Saturday morning, I saw my manager in his office to discuss the security of the utility centre and other miscellaneous items, and in the evening, we tried to contact my wife’s partners to disburse the money and goods left over from their contract. To meet with TTT, my wife and I had to travel a short distance from our apartment on the Trương minh Giảng Street to Tân sơn Nhất. This area, which was near the airport, was very chaotic because so many people were departing overseas or arranging for their tickets. It took us two hours to arrive at his house, and he was absent. We left his share of the proceeds and a note to him with his wife. That weekend, we packed the belongings we would need and made family arrangements, including the provision of some financial support to my parents in Saigon. On the morning of Monday, April 27, 1975 we said goodbye to my parents-in-law, and left the city.

We could not take the usual route National Road 4 via Long An, because it was occupied by the VC, and had to take another that was still under the control of the Republican Army via Gò Công. The traffic was jammed due to a bottleneck at the Chợ Gạo River crossing. I tried to bypass several cars and trucks, citing my special permit and my need to return to work. My cousin Hưng supported me, saying: “I am escorting this man, who is the head of the utility centre, back to his Mỹ Tho office, so we must have priority to pass” when we were stopped by some truck drivers.

On thinking back, I feel some shame. I wish I had the chance to apologize to the people I passed that day for my roughness and trickery. I could justify my bad behavior by saying that it was wartime and I was trying to survive. Moreover, there was gunfight on the road to Mỹ Tho that caused a crowd of soldiers to withdraw to Gò Công City. I had no choice than to go to Gò Công Utility Centre for a short respite. Finally, we arrived in Mỹ Tho that evening, after passing several burning military trucks and houses along the road.

On the instruction of my cousin Lạc, we took a hotel suite during these critical days instead of moving to my villa, which had just been finished and was ready for our occupation. He usually updated us on the political situation and told us the evacuation could happen at any time. Our suite was full of our belongings as a result of moving from Saigon.

7.1 Journey from Vietnam to Subic Bay (Philippines).

At about 2:00 AM on the April 30, 1975 I heard several knocks on the metal door of our hotel. I came downstairs and saw my cousin Hưng standing beside an idling military Jeep, driven by a marine. He said: “You have just five minutes to get your family. We are going to the wharf on the river to board a motorboat that will take us to the sea”. I went up to the suite to wake my wife and children. I took one-year old Nina with one hand and in the other I carried a bag containing six pouches of instant noodle soup, several million đồng (Vietnamese money), most of my personal documents, and miscellaneous hygiene items. We took the back seats in the Jeep, while Hưng and the driver took care of the traffic. The early morning was quiet in Mỹ Tho, and the weather was

cool enough for children to wear sweaters. Most of the roads in the city were still barricaded with barbed wires. The military guys had to remove these wires to pass, and then return them to their original positions. We arrived at the wharf at about 3:00 AM, and had to wait for the families of two other officers. Finally, our party of twelve departed at 3:30AM. The motorboat was a type of fast-moving craft (giang đĩnh) used by the Navy of the Republic, which was suitable for navigating rivers and creeks, but not the ocean.

On the route to the port of Vũng Tàu, our boat ran out of gas while we were under fire from unidentified machine guns. We had to negotiate for gasoline with a commercial boat travelling other way. While it was still dark, we reached the estuary of the Đại River, where we would meet with a larger military craft. All of a sudden, the sky became darker, the wind picked up, and the waves grew higher. The motorboat started to be unstable. We only had two small life vests for our two children, and none of the other passengers had the floatation devices. Every one of us, except the soldiers, was tired and seasick. We circulated the estuary for almost an hour and only met with the navy vessel on its final attempt to find us, which the captain made as a favour after three failed tries.

We intended to go to the Vũng Tàu port to board a large naval ship, but were told that the port was in chaos, and that we should go out to the sea. Thus we were about 120 souls crowded on a type of landing craft previously used in the World War II. The Captain announced that the ship might take an undertermined amount of time to find a host country, and that there was no food, each person would receive a daily ration of two small cups of water.

On the afternoon of the first day, I took a caramel noodle pack and broke it in two, then used one of the halves and the rationed water to make the soup for my children. Poor Nina had been drinking Pelargon powdered milk, but we didn't take any with us due to its weight and time constraints. With no other alternative, she was also fed the soup. Our family managed to live on those noodles for two and a half days. The naval officers persistently tried to make contacts with every vessel on the international waters, as well as with the group of 29 ships of the Vietnamese Navy that had left Saigon on April 29, 1975.

On the first night, we saw a big, dimly lighted craft, which looked like a storage ship of the American Seventh Fleet that was then operating in the southeastern region. Everyone hoped that they would take us in, but we were flatly refused and were advised to continue our course to meet the Vietnamese ships. At noon on the third day, the contact was successfully made, and the HQ5, a major Vietnamese navy ship was dispatched in our direction. When we sighted it, we thought God had sent it to salvage us, and were grateful when the sailors assisted us on board.

Some of the passengers on the Landing Craft (LC) however chose to return to Vietnam, perhaps because they did not wish to leave their families or because they were indecisive. Separating from these men was touching; we handed most of our money to them in the hope that it might be useful. No one knew what would happen to them in the hands of the new regime. We also learned that in fact, the water storage of the LC was fully filled and there was a lot of rice in its hold. We laughed understandingly, as this was the military way of operating a ship.

It was very crowded on the HQ5; we shared a space of about 2.5 m x 3.0 m on the deck with another family of three. Fortunately, our co-occupants had brought a poncho, which they nicely put up to make a temporary shelter for all of us. Each person received some canned food, rice and a small bottle of water a day. My Nina could slowly consume the rice, which was good enough in the circumstances. On the first night after boarding, it was windy and rainy. Everyone on the deck was soaked with the water, but ironically we were glad to get the free shower after three days of travelling without one. Moreover, everyone understood the sadness of having lost their country, and being prisoners on the ocean.

The poncho did not provide much shade, and by about 10:00 AM every day, it was very hot. Oh my poor children, you had always lived in comfortable conditions! However, my three-year-old

daughter Mimi found a good place to cool off: the shadow of the ship's radar tower. She would pull her younger sister Nina to that spot and follow the shade as it moved with the sun and swaying of the ship, all while happily singing. That image profoundly touched me; I promised myself that I would bring my children prosperity and stability; even though the future was uncertain! My eye glasses were suddenly clouded up by some vaporizing tears.

Occasionally, a breeze came to cool us, though there was no more rain during the journey. The evenings were better, and we gratefully enjoyed the fresh air and open sky. Gazing at the horizon and the dark blue ocean, we discussed the future with our companions. Sometimes we saw bands of flippers following the ship and watched the dolphins performing their amazing jumps. I realized that everyone was under pressure; the women including my wife were frustrated with the difficult conditions, while men including myself were occupied with the daily news on Vietnam and world politics, particularly the legitimacy of our ship on international waters.

We finally learned that we were heading to the Subic Bay, a U.S. Navy-owned port in the Philippines. Everyone brightened at this news, because it meant that we were in the care of the Free World community. A touching moment came when the ship's commander ordered that all weapons and ammunition should be unloaded into the ocean. I gave a hand in pulling the guns and machine guns (like M1s, M16s...and cannon shells) out from their storage room and dropping them overboard. Though I was initially sad that this marked the end of our struggle to keep our country

part of the free world, I also realized that we were saying Good-bye to a war that had killed millions of Vietnamese citizens, and that we were trying to find a place that respected freedom, democracy and humanity where we and our children could live.



HQ5 Ship of the Navy of the Republic of Vietnam

Rhyme of the famous song Tình Hoài Hương (Love for the Country) from Phạm Duy was suddenly recalled in my memory, and I murmured:

“Quê hương tôi có con sông dài xinh xắn,
Nước tuôn trên đồng vương vấn,
Lúa thơm cho đủ hai mùa,

.....

Tình hoài hương, khói lam vương tâm hồn chìm xuống,
Tình ngàn phương, biết yêu nhau như lòng đại dương.

.....

Người phiêu lãng! Nước mắt có về miền quê lai láng?
Xa quê hương, yêu quê hương....quê hương ấy”.

(My country has a long and beautiful river.
Its water flatters the land-field
Of rice being produced bi-annually,

.....

Love for the country, by its grey evening smoke saddening our soul,
Love for that distant horizon, as deep as the ocean.

.....

Emigrant! Are your tears dropping for your dear country?
When you are away from it, love it....that country).

I took a deep breath to hold back my tears, and said to myself: “This is it. Adieu, Vietnam”.

We arrived in Subic Bay at about 6:30 PM. The concrete pier in front of us made me think of the ports of Vũng Tàu or Đà Nẵng. We were ordered to form a double line between a pair of ropes and to proceed slowly to the shore. We were happy to see land again after seven days and seven nights on the ocean.

7.2 Journey from Subic Bay to Guam

No more than fifteen minutes later, we were directed to a huge ship anchored about 400 meters away from the HQ5 to be transported to Guam Island. We were asked to proceed to the inner hall of one of the ship’s several decks, but I found that there were so many people, that space was very limited. It looked like there was little oxygen for breathing. Instead, I took my family to the upper deck that was open to the sky, and was pleased with the way we had got through our trip thus far.

The ship was loaded with about five thousand passengers and departed in the late evening of May 7, 1975. I woke up at 6:00 AM the day after, and went to the service deck for the personal hygiene and to get a pail of water for my children. I was shocked to encounter three of my siblings-in-law, including Vinh and his wife Dung, and Minh. They had left Saigon by jumping on a Vietnamese naval ship that had departed on April 29, 1975 and that had also proceeded to Subic Bay. Both for companionship and security, we banded together on the upper deck. Three times a day, we received basic canned food or cooked meals, which was more than acceptable under the circumstances. I wanted to thank the U.S. Navy for caring for the refugees – a burden to a nation that fought in Vietnam, then had tried to withdraw from the war. I did not know whether this type of service was purely humanitarian or was part of a program or contingency plan, but already perceived their human kindness and good will. It was sweltering on the open deck with its painted metallic floor, especially as it was summer in this southeastern region. One week later, on the evening of May 14, 1975, we arrived in Guam. We had spent a total of fifteen days at sea without paying a cent.

From the bottle of my heart, I acknowledge the advice and protection my cousin Lạc gave us from the time we came to Mỹ Tho City to the sad day we had to leave. In the spring of 1983, on our visit to Uncle Huy’s family in Houston, we also went to Oklahoma City to thank our cousins Lạc and Hung, and see their relatives.

7.3 Landing on Guam Island and Process of Immigration to Canada.

At the time, there were about 120,000 refugees in Guam. Our camp was constructed by the American Navy on the flat terrain several days before we arrived. A large tent of about 6 meters x 8 meters was allocated to 4 - 6 families, and military folding beds were given to each person. As a family of four, we made two lines of two beds for convenience. Shower and toilet facilities were outside in a common area, and the canteen was in another area with a large yard around for line-ups. At mealtime, we had to queue for about fifteen minutes to receive our ration. The food was not bad, and included canned meat or tuna, minute rice, and some canned or sometimes fresh vegetables. But after several days of eating the same thing, fresh food became very precious. Fortunately, Minh was engaged in the kitchen, and he occasionally brought us fresh vegetables, fish, and other luxuries that made our lives more bearable.

Everything was well organized by the American Navy, probably with some help from the United Nations and other organizations. I sincerely appreciated their efforts to provide a high level of service to the refugees. However, after a few days, I started noticing the bad elements in crowd:

many people would forget to turn off the tap after showering (note that water was brought in from remote Hawaiian islands), grab too much food and throw the leftovers on the ground, take tents to the forest for immoral purposes, and otherwise abuse the host country's hospitality. Several times a day, the camp's operating team called for attention and responsibility. I felt ashamed to be a member of that crowd.

Moreover, I thought we should leave the island as soon as possible for other reasons. The summer days were hot (about 36 – 40°C), but the nights were cold. Nina started to develop stomach congestion, and Phụng was about six months pregnant. Also, since the politics of the United States and Communist Vietnam were diametrically opposed. I had no hope of seeing my parents and relatives if I became an American immigrant. I knew that Canada was a more open country that would allow me to reconnect with them much sooner. Finally, at the time, the process for refugees to immigrate to the U.S. would have taken at least six months, which would have been difficult for Phụng in her condition.

There were then three immigration centers in Guam: France, Switzerland and Canada. For the reasons cited above, I chose the latter one. I was among the first 5000 people to submit an application, and was called for an interview three days later. All the questions were in French, which I had chosen as my official language, and I had no difficulty in answering them. However, not only my linguistic skill counted, but my personal data, profession, age and individual attitudes were judged in the selection process. In the interview, I asked whether it would be possible to secure visas for my siblings-in-law, but was told that because they were all adults and not part of my own family, the matter could be easily resolved when we were in Canada. Outside the Canadian immigration centre after they had announced some potentially selected candidates, I met a gentleman who had studied in France and was a professor at the TCPT and also the president of a large public company, but who had been rejected after his interview!

After three days, I received notice that my application had been accepted, and our entire family had a health check-up. Fortunately, all of us passed the mental and physical screening. We were advised to be ready for the first flight from Guam to Canada.

Thus, after a stay of nine days, we left Guam on a Boeing 737 airplane; we were treated politely and were served delightful food. The Canadian stewardesses were elegant in their Western-style dresses, on which were pinned Canadian flag buttons. We were very impressed with our first glimpse of the civilized and humanitarian country called Canada.

Part III: MY IMMIGRATION AND WORK IN CANADA

Section 8: Sept-Îles and Port Cartier, Quebec (1975 - 1977)

8.1 Acclimation and Job Search

On the afternoon of May 23, 1975 we arrived in Montreal, Quebec, which still had traces of snow on the roadsides, and checked into a hotel on Maisonneuve Street. That evening, it had been arranged for us to pick-up some new clothes for the entire family. We then had slept peacefully through our first night in Canada, after an arduous journey of twenty-four days.

The next morning, the Canadian Immigration Office invited us to an interview. They asked us some basic questions, such as "Where do you want to go in Canada?" I replied: "Canada is still new to me, and I don't exactly know the differences between the cities or provinces. Since we have two children and will soon have one more, my greatest concern is getting a stable job to support my family".

Then they asked: “Do you know someone in Canada? And what does he/she do?” I replied: “My wife has a distant uncle who lives in Sept-Iles, Quebec. He is an engineer with a doctorate in chemistry and works for the Iron Ore Company”. The agent responded that they would send us there. However, I protested: “In Guam, I did not mention him. Now that we are in Canada as landed immigrants, why should we bother him or rely on his support?”

The official responded: “Your family will be fully supported by the government. But we need someone of your culture to help you adapt to your new country. Moreover, Sept-Iles is a fast-growing city and highly suitable for one of your profession”. Based on this information, we accepted the offer.

On the morning of May 25, an immigration agent took us to the Dorval Airport and escorted us to the plane. We were welcomed at Sept-Iles Airport by my wife’s uncle Wey Ly. It was a bit cold, but we already had light jackets. The Lys were nicely inviting us to stay a few days with them before we could find an apartment.

After we were temporarily settled, I started searching for a job. Within the first week of moving, I consulted with Mme Pilchard, an employee of the Man Power Office in Sept-Iles, about the job market and my limitations. An open-minded and understanding agent, she spoke English or French according to my needs and reviewed my career background. She offered me a 30 hour retraining course in human relations in French, and asked me to join a group of about eighteen immigrants of different sexes and races to discuss various aspects of social contact and relationships, including hugging and hand shaking. This helped me feel more confident in meeting people of different cultures, ethnicities and genders in my new milieu.



Sept-Iles, Quebec
1976 – Uncle
Wey Ly’s family

A few days later, I was asked to meet with the personnel officer of the Elevator, a company operating ship loading facilities in Sept-Iles. I was interviewed for the position of station engineer to replace a foreman who was ill and reaching retirement. My technical knowledge from my days at the Thu Phở sugar plan allowed me to answer the questions competently. However, although the work was stable and the salary was high, it needed only the knowledge of an experienced technician. I could get stuck in the company and never return to engineering, while our living expenses would continue to increase.

My wife not only agreed that I should not take the job, but committed to helping me through a post-graduate program at the Ecole Polytechnique of Montreal. She expected to pay half of our family expenses through sewing, with the remainder possibly coming from my summer work and bursary. But when I mentioned this to Uncle Ly, he criticized me for having an academic mentality. He said that the salary was very high and met the expectations of most intermediate engineers at the time. However, he agreed with me after my explanation.

Some days later, I was invited to the Man Power Center and informed that they were willing to offer me the job at \$13.50 per hour, with many benefits. I explained to Mrs. Pilchard that while I

did not under-value the position, I wanted to work as an engineer, which was something that this did not allow. At thirty, I was still young, with plenty of energy and ability to return to the university. I requested that she continue supporting us financially till I attended the program, and she very kindly agreed. I knew well that in other MP centers, people were persuaded to accept any job to be released from the government support. Soon afterwards, I contacted the dean of post-graduate studies in electrical engineering at the Ecole Polytechnique and was accepted to the master's program, with some potential bursaries and earnings from summer work. We were on our way to leaving Sept-Iles.



In September 1975, our third daughter was born in the Sept-Iles Hospital. We consulted with Ly's wife, Auntie Mireille on the selection of a French name for her. We eventually called her Eugénie, together with the Vietnamese name Thiên Hương (Fragrance of the Nature). Mireille also helped review the French version of my curriculum vitae.

Port Cartier Winter 1976 -
Eugénie at 1 year, Nina at 3
years and Mimi at 5 years old

However, we had not adapted to our new country completely. On October 31, we were stunned when half dozen kids wearing scary costumes knocked at our apartment door and asked for "trick or treat". Not knowing how to respond, we shut the door and called the janitor.

In November 1975, the MP Center notified me that they had arranged an interview with Dravo Construction Inc., an American engineering and construction firm based in Pittsburgh that was building a pelletizing plant in Port Cartier, Quebec. I was eager to apply as the position on offer was that of a field electrical engineer (although this seemed to contravene Canadian engineering laws). The job title was important, because it would allow me to apply for membership in the Order of Engineers of Quebec (OEQ) after one year of practice.

In the first interview for technical knowledge screening, I met with Mr. Yvon Girard, the Electrical Department manager; I answered his questions easily as most of them centered on industrial power systems and equipment with which I was already familiar from my work at the Thu Phở Sugar plant. He told me at the end of the interview: "Ca va bien, Thu. Maintenant tu vas parler a monsieur Schneider qui est le directeur du département personnel de la compagnie". In the follow-up interview, I had no difficulty answering Mr. Schneider's questions (in English, of course), except for his last one: "What salary are you looking for?" Afraid of not being hired if I asked for too much, I told him it depended on his judgment.

He offered me the salary of a junior engineer who had one year of practical experience, but I was satisfied with that. (Later, I realized that Mr. Girard, as a French Canadian, was trying to tell me he was happy with the interview and I could have asked for a better salary. I believe the French people are usually generous). So at the end of 1975, our family moved to Port Cartier, a small town of about 7000 people, 70 kilometers south of Sept-Iles.

8.2 Dravo Construction Ltd.

My first job in Canada commenced with Dravo Construction Ltd. on January 1, 1976. The project was to build a plant for processing the iron ore transported from the north of Quebec for Sidbec Normines Inc., the design and construction management of which were carried out by Dravo Construction Ltd. The end result was iron pellets suitable for export. My responsibilities were to prepare weekly and monthly reports on the progress of the construction and to design field changes according to site conditions. The work acquainted me with the construction organization, the applicable standards and codes in North America, modern equipment, and honed my French and English fluency. These skills were integral to my future advancement.

I remember that once, in a meeting between Dravo Construction and a small local contractor, they did not understand each other well due to the language barrier, and I became the interpreter and conducted the discussion. After that, some of my colleagues remarked that I had made it. I learnt quickly and moved up in the new environment.

An opportunity arose when the site office needed a special report on the instrumentation and control systems of the pelletizing plant, to be used as an addendum to a bid on a Quebec construction contract. The Electrical Department consisted of several engineers, including Yvon Girard (French-Canadian born manager, who had graduated from the Ecole Polytechnique), Antoine Batany (a Lebanese electrical engineer with four years' experience, also an Ecole Polytechnique alumnus), Harry Gottlieb (a German-Canadian, electrical engineer from McGill University, with two years of experience), George xxx (a Romanian electrical engineer who had practiced in Canada for several years), Gordon Stevenson (an experienced practitioner from New Brunswick) and I myself.

When asked to prepare the document, the more experienced engineers refused. When they got to me, who was last because I was a new immigrant, I replied that I could do it if I had three weeks to study the available technical specifications and other documents related to the systems. I then asked Mr. Robert Saint Luce, who was a safety engineer for help writing in English. (This African Canadian had graduated in France, worked in Vietnam during the French colonization and in Europe, then immigrated to Canada with his German wife. He had a high regard for me and often visited my family). He congratulated me on my initiative and promised to do so.

Port Cartier 1976 –
Family welcoming
first winter
(Eugénie was with
baby-sitter)

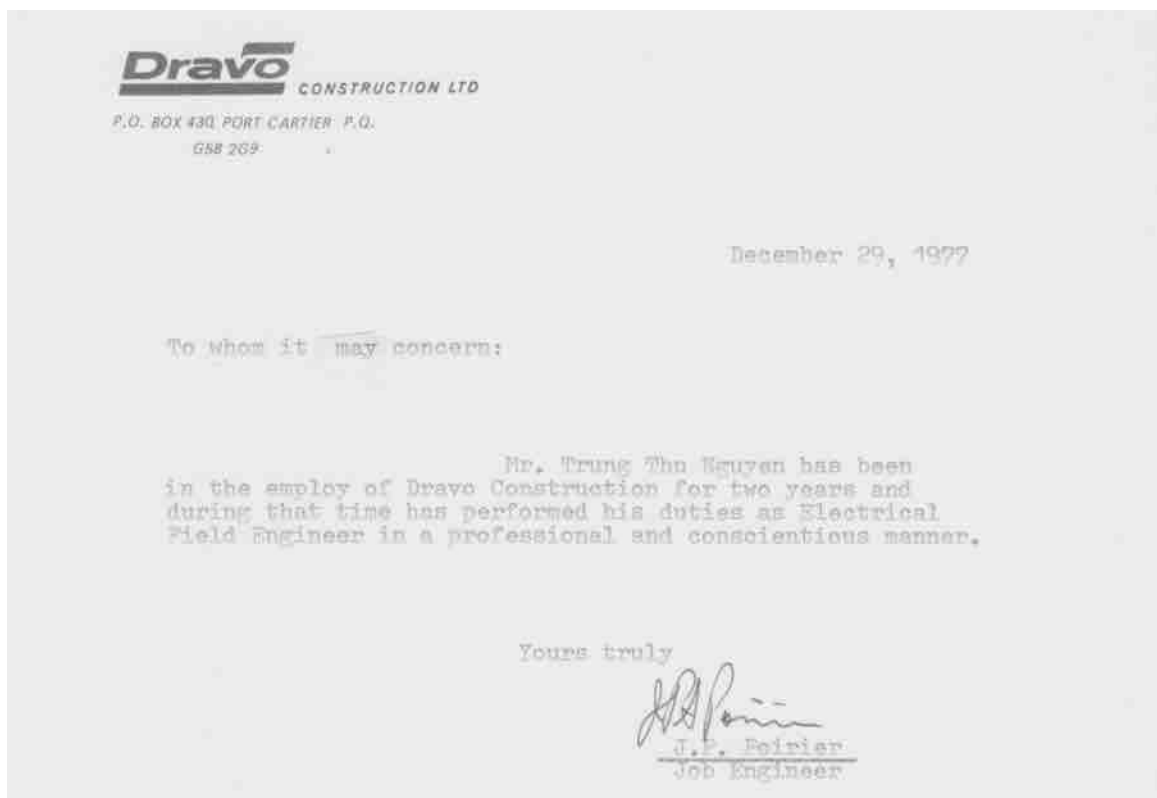


After ten days of reading, I prepared a 40 page document in French, including all the required diagrams and attachments. Robert translated it into English, and I rewrote it in my own handwriting.

I submitted the document first to the engineering manager, Mr. Dave Copland, and also to my Electrical Department manager. Two days later, Dave called me into his office and said: “It was delightful to read your report on the instrumentation and control systems of the pelletizing plant. We are sorry that we underestimated you and offered you with a salary that was below your knowledge and competence. We will try to rectify the situation”. I was stunned and thanked him for his comment. The next day, Mr. Murphy, the construction superintendant made a similar statement and added that he would call the Pittsburg head office to request an upward adjustment. About two months later, I received an increase of 30% just six months after I joined the company. I deeply appreciated how the North American managers awarded hard work and merit.

While I was proud of this event, I still looked forward to becoming a member of the Order of Engineers of Quebec (OEQ).

Côte Nord, Quebec
1977 – Visiting Percé
(Gaspé)



8.3 OEQ Membership and Professional License

I studied materials on the regulations and requirements for admission published by the OEQ and found the subject very complicated. But when I discussed this matter with Robert, he encouraged me to promptly submit an application, which I did by the end of 1976. I had to follow many steps, but as the French proverb says: “Petit à petit, la fourmi fait son nid” (little by little, the ant makes its nest). In three months, I completed the collection and preparation of the required supporting documents, with the exception of the “Certificate of French Language Usage”, and sent them along with a letter explaining why I could not obtain the Certificate. A short time later, the OEQ office registrar telephoned and spoke to me in French for about fifteen minutes. I explained to him that I had a 50-hour-a-week job at a construction site, was supporting a family of five and was also expecting a fourth child.

Two weeks later, I received a letter attesting that I had been exempted from submitting the Certificate. (Because they had read my written request, they knew my French writing skills, and they had confirmed my conversational ability over the phone). Ironically, at the time of my application, I had a friend named Pierre Passebon, a civil engineer who had graduated in France and who was also applying for OEQ membership. He was asked to submit the Certificate, but this irritated him and he refused.

I do not know what happened to him afterwards, but two years later, I met him in Montreal, and he said he worked in the engineering field but was not required to hold a license. He looked happy. I realized there were various roads to go to Rome, or in this case, to practicing engineering, and that Pierre had more leeway than I had. As a French Canadian and a handsome guy in a Francophone environment, he could work in other areas such as marketing; but I who belonged to an Oriental minority group, had to be more flexible and patient to survive.

Next, I went to Montreal to prepare to write the licensing exams. Most of the immigrant engineers had taken pre-exam courses at the university, but my circumstances prohibited me from doing so, a fact that made me nervous. Fortunately, my friend Nguyễn văn Thích gave me some sample tests so I could know what to expect. Back in Port Cartier, I had only about 4 weeks to the exams, and still had to work 50 hours per week and share the childcare and shopping responsibilities on Saturdays. Thus, I had only two hours per day and three Sundays to review a large quantity of books and materials. Fortunately, at 31 years old, my memory was strong enough to retain things after one or two readings, which left me more time to research the technical aspects of engineering practice. I had to write three major exams: general knowledge in electrical engineering sciences, specific knowledge in electro-technologies, and engineering laws and ethics. I completed all of them and obtained the license of practice in 1977.

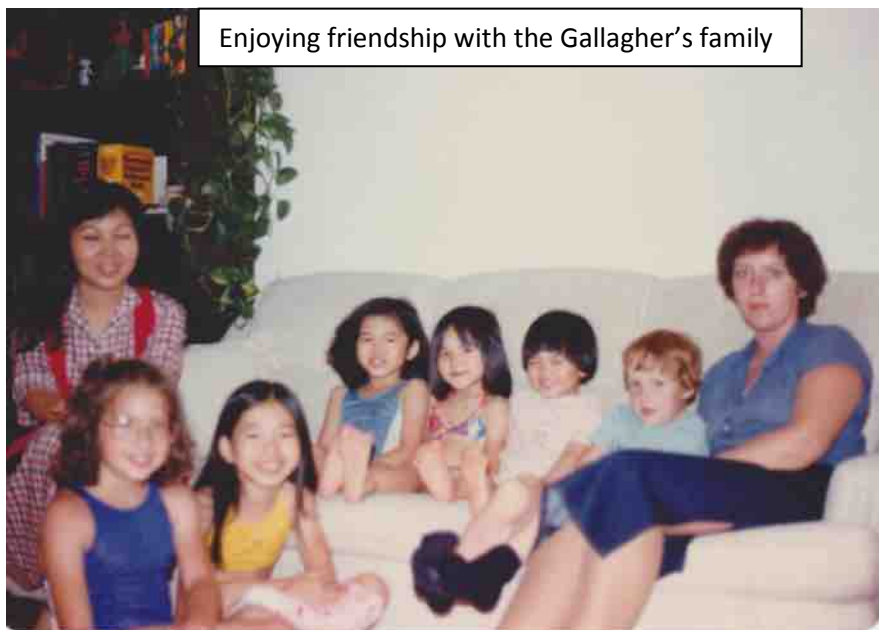
8.4 Family Growth and Concern about Long-Term Job Security

After settling my own projects, I started to help my brother-in-law with his job seeking. Although I advised him to take courses in growing fields like electronics or computer science, he wanted to be an independent business or convenience store owner. But in working towards a long-term career, he still needed to have a job to feed his family. I talked to my site facility supervisor, who offered him employment in the cafeteria serving the construction workers.

With three daughters in a row, we wanted to have a son and decided to take a final chance. David was born beautiful and healthy on November 2, 1977 in Port Cartier Hospital when the harsh winter of the Côte Nord region had just set in. Because his birthday was a gift to us, we named him Hoàng Nam (Royal Son or Son of Glory). However, we did not have much time to celebrate this event before the construction of the plant drew to an end and I became anxious about losing my job. Moreover, our two-bedroom apartment was becoming too small for our needs. It was time for a change. Port Cartier did not have many opportunities for engineers, and it was difficult for me to

look elsewhere when I could not conduct interviews. I was therefore determined to move to Montreal, where the job market was much better.

8.5 Discoveries and New Friends



I was thrilled to be living in a prosperous and peaceful country with a four-season climate and natural resources to discover. Although I was constantly working on a tight schedule, we always found time to see new friends and colleagues with the family, thanks to my wife Phụng's great management abilities.

In Sept-Iles we did not have a car, which made transportation difficult. Except when the Lys occasionally offered us a ride, we had to walk to the

shopping center, which was several kilometers from our apartment. But we were happy to discover new things along the way, such as that everyone seemed to use cars for transportation because the country was so large and the population was so thin. In the summer, we would walk with our children to the harbour to buy fresh-cooked shrimps. These were very tasty since they were cooked immediately after being pulled from the ocean. Because Mimi was so lively and Nina was chubby, people often stopped to greet or hug them and talked to us as well.

I found that the local Quebecers, although they spoke French with a special accent that was difficult to understand, were sincere and friendly. One day, on a short trip to a food market, I met Trí, a Vietnamese student who had come to Sept-Iles for summer work. On weekends, he would visit us, play with the kids and stay for dinner. He often bought plastic toys like race cars and a farm with domestic animals for the children. This was very nice of him. I met Trí again when we moved to Port Cartier; he came to see us, and he and I drove along Côte Nord and Côte Sud on a three-day adventure. We visited Baie Trinité, Baie Comeau, Matane, Rimouski and Mont Joli, and returned via Les Escoumins Ferry.

From the day we arrived in Sept-Iles, we sought to sponsor our siblings still living in Guam. We talked to the Immigration Office, and were advised that this could not happen till I or my wife got a job. Finally, we asked Uncle Wei Ly to act as a sponsor. Every two or three days, we called our relatives long distance in Guam to iron out the situation. For example, Minh wanted to go to the U.S. with his friends, including a newly discovered girlfriend (who later became his wife). In some months, the cost of these calls exceeded the allowance we got from the government. Uncle Ly warned us about this extravagance, but it simply reflected our concern for them. Finally, Vinh and his wife arrived in Canada after an immigration process of a few months.

During our two years in Port Cartier, we made some good friends, including:

Cliff and Kate Thornberry: A long-standing employee of Dravo Construction Corp. in Pittsburg, Cliff transferred to Port Cartier to work as a resident engineer; he and his wife lived in our condominium building. They used to visit us to play with our children and treated them like their own.

Robert Saint Luce (as mentioned above).

Quebec 1977 –
Family's adventure
along Côte Nord and
Côte Sud during
annual vacation



Bernard and Leonor Gallagher: Bernard worked for the Rayonnier pulp mill and used to give us guidance in dealing with governmental services. Leonor usually drove Mimi to kindergarten and took care of the children when we wanted to go out. They occasionally invited us to dinner during the New Year holiday, so we could taste Canadian food. We met them again when we moved to Montreal, where they went on vacation one summer.

Đinh ngọc Bôi: Bôi worked for Dominion Bridge, a sub-contractor to Dravo Construction Ltd. for structural and mechanical works. One morning in a general meeting with the contractors, I was surprised to see a Vietnamese engineer in the conference room. He was dynamic and sociable, and we became friends. On weekends, we explored the natural beauty of the Côte Nord region, often fishing, kayaking or canoeing on the lakes. After his company finished working on the Sidbec-Nordmines pelletizing plant, Bôi returned to Montreal and joined the Atomic Energy Canada Limited (AECL). Although we initially lost contact, our careers occasionally brought us together when we travelled on business, and thus reinforced our friendship. Eventually, we lived in the same district of the Mississauga. We found that we had common interests in professional development, Oriental culture and similar concepts of family and morality, and we treated each other like brothers.

Some other guys I met in Port Cartier, but with whom I did not maintain close relationships, were NHT, Khương (both employees of Rayonnier), and Nguyễn ngọc Danh (Dominion Bridge).

In summer, some Vietnamese residents, including our family, went on excursions to the forests, the shore of the Saint Laurence River, and the nearby lakes for picnicking, boating or fishing. The scenery was beautiful, with its lakes shaded by tall conifers and maples, and the sudden appearance of cataracts and waterfalls. In the summer of 1976, our family took a trip along the Côte Nord via highways 138 and 132, crossing the Saint Laurence River by ferry and ending up in Campbellton, New Brunswick to see a colleague (Trần văn Đạt) who was with the VPC before 1975. He offered us famous Canadian lobsters for dinner. On the return journey, we visited Dalhousie, Persé, Gaspé and Matane. Wherever we could find an interesting site, we explored, rested and sampled the local delicacies. The children had a chance to familiarize themselves with the Canadian environment, running and playing on the grass or in the park. We savoured every moment of the liberty and natural beauty. That is Canada.



Montreal 1978 – David at 9 months and Eugenie at 3 years old



Eugenie at 5 years old

8.6 Concern about Relatives Living in or Having Left Vietnam

After a while in Port Cartier, I learned that some level of communication had been established between Vietnam and Canada. Several times a year, I would send packages of medications, fabrics and other goods to my parents in Đà Nẵng and later in Saigon, for them to sell for cash. My sister Ngọc Diệp was also in a desperate situation as her husband had been sent to a re-education camp (where the Communist regime left her husband in a desert without food supply), and she had collapsed due to overwork on a government irrigation project. She therefore needed my help as well. When the vehicles became very scarce in Vietnam; we sent them Honda motorcycles instead of money.

To start the process of sponsoring my in-laws, we researched the Canadian policy on receiving immigrants from Vietnam. Near the end of 1977, we learned that this was possible if the sponsor had a stable full-time job with a high income. I submitted my application for the sponsorship of all family members at the Immigration Office in Sept-Iles, and the documentation was accepted soon afterwards. Then the process of emigration was to be done by our in-laws in Vietnam. We waited for confirmation until the autumn of 1979, when we discovered that the family had already left the country clandestinely by sea and had ended up in a refugee camp in Kuku Island, Indonesia. However, they still wanted to immigrate to the U.S. under my brother-in-law Minh's sponsorship, and arrived in Los Angeles in April 1980.

Despite my concern about my parents's lives in Vietnam and my proposal to bring them to Canada, my father still wanted to live near his siblings. I knew well that he had no problem adapting to the new regime, as long as he had long-term financial support.

Upon his release after 12 years in the re-education camp located some where in the North Vietnamese province of Cao Bằng, my brother-in-law Đặng hữu Trục prepared to leave for the United States under the HO program, together with his family of seven. But because they could not pay for paperwork and bribes (which were endemic under that government), we helped them by sending a motorcycle and lending money. However, my sister's hesitation to let her stepson join the family could have jeopardized the process. I successfully convinced her to do the right thing; and they arrived in the States in 1992.

I was also concerned about my step-brother Đông and his education. I did not hear much about his serious studies, but only about his black belts in karate and his tennis matches. I knew quite well that my father was not firm enough and usually spoiled him. In my 1990 Vietnam visit, I advised

my father to find for him a practical profession like an electrical or electronics technician, or even a steward in a hotel or on a cruise ship. Finally, my stepbrother chose to be trained in the hospitality business. In the years that followed, I helped him prepare for the course, partially paying for the appropriate clothing during his training and on the job. I was happy to see him doing something for his future.

8.7 Moving to Montreal in the Winter

After receiving my termination notice of a month in advance, I prepared a moving plan that considered the transportation risks and our economic situation. We temporarily rented the basement of a Vietnamese friend in Laval des Rapides for two or three months, vacating our old apartment by the year's end. Phụng and three of our children took a plane from Sept-Îles to Montreal one day before my departure. Nina and I were to go to Montreal in our station-wagon so we could keep most of our personal effects. Although this was somewhat daunting, I always liked a challenge.

However, the move was fraught with disaster. When I drove my family to the airport in Sept-Îles one day in early January, my car slid off the road and hit a snowbank. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and I returned to Port Cartier safely with Nina that evening. When we got home, I heard on the radio that a snowstorm would be moving into the region the next day. I called NHT, who was my companion on the trip, to convince him to postpone it, but he still wanted to go.

We started early in the morning and arrived near Baie Comeau at about 10:00 AM. The snow fell densely and my car was not strong enough to handle it. While driving up a steep hill, it turned to the side of the road, with its front facing a valley. I took Nina out of the car and waited for someone to help us. The Vietnamese guy drove on and never looked back or waited for us! Fortunately, a road-clearing truck came by, and the driver - probably a Quebecer - asked me if he could do anything. I asked him to pull the car out of the snow. He agreed on the condition that I would not complain if his pulling ended up damaging the vehicle.

With the storm violently blowing; I slowly drove into the city on a very thick layer of snow. When my car could not advance any further and the visibility dropped to zero, I stopped in the middle of the road in front of a convenience store. I took my brief-case in one hand and used the other to open the door to pull Nina out of the passenger seat. But when I had just closed the door, the wind threw us down and tore away both Nina and the brief-case. I yelled to Nina to lie down and crawled toward her to hold her hand tight again. When we got to the front door of the store, I made Nina wait so I could recapture my luggage. By the time I returned for my daughter, I was totally exhausted and could not stand up. I had to rest to catch my breath before entering the store.

The owner kindly showed us a hotel just a few houses away and we went there after ten minutes to warm up. When we checked in, we were surprised to see NHT standing there and laughing. From then on, I started to look down on him. I had asked him to guide me on an unfamiliar road under winter conditions, but when I really needed him, he was not there. We spent that night at the hotel. The next morning, I went out to get the car, but it was heavily covered with snow. We had to wait till late in the morning for the roads to be cleared and for me to dig out the car. Then the battery needed recharging and some minor repair.

We got back on the road shortly before noon, hoping to get to arrive in Montreal in the evening. But NHT had left us again and I got lost in Quebec City. Consequently, I made it alone to Montreal. The battery problem persisted since I failed to save its stored energy by driving in bad weather. We needed heat to deice the glass, and energy to turn on the signals; I therefore had to see a mechanic again in Quebec City for another battery boost and to ask for directions. In Montreal, I frequently got lost when attempting to exit the highway, as it was my first time driving on a sophisticated North American road system. I finally got to Laval des Rapides at 3:00 AM on the following day.

Section 9: Montreal, Quebec (1978 - 1980)

9.1 SNC Group Inc.



After two months in Laval des Rapides, we moved to an apartment in Saint Léonard, Montreal and I started to look for a job. I sent resumé to some consulting engineering firms and got a few interviews.

Montreal 1980 – In the apartment at Port de Mer, Longueuil

An ad in the Montreal Gazette caught my attention as the position it described matched the five years of experience I had gained with the VPC. I got an interview with the section head of the distribution group within five days of applying, another two days later with the design engineering manager, and eventually, the job was to start on May 1, 1978 with a reasonably good salary and benefits.

As an intermediate engineer in the distribution group, I was responsible for implementing the design of the medium voltage (MV) systems for the Qaseem Electrification Project, a multi-million-dollar contract that SNC Group Inc. (which later became SNC-Lavalin Inc.) signed with the Electrico Corporation of the Saudi Arabia. I would first complete the design within two years, and then move to the site in Qaseem, Saudi Arabia to do the detailed engineering involved in the construction.

In the Montreal office, along with the design work, we offered on-the-job training to a group of young engineers who had graduated from the Saudi University of Riyadh. In one of my sessions on the MV power distribution system, when I was discussing the features of switching devices (i.e. fuses, circuit breakers, automatic reclosers, etc.), one of the engineers protested, “Thu, you talk too much; we don’t need to learn the details”. I told him: “I assume you guys will be directing the design works when you have completed the training and returned to Saudi Arabia, so you need to learn about these important devices to protect your system”. He replied: “All we need to know about the MV power line are things like the poles, conductors, insulators, etc. The difficult things like what you’ve introduced will be handled by the consultants like you. And we will hire European, Canadian and American engineers to do the design for us anyway”.

I just asked him to hear my excuse. Two years later, on my first day on the Qassem site, my Canadian project manager took me to the Saudi management officers for an introduction. As I was going towards their office, I saw a man coming from the opposite direction and looking right through me. When I met him, he offered me his hand to shake, while still ignoring me, and said: “I am glad to see you here. Welcome to Saudi Arabia”. This attitude was typical of the Saudi Arabian managers, and he was one of them there.



Montreal 1978 - David at 1 year & Eugenie at 3



Montreal has always been the largest city in Quebec, but when I lived there, it was the largest city in Canada as well. Though theoretically, it was in a French-speaking province, in actuality, it was bilingual. I worked for the Grand Project Division, and since the work was primarily in English, my knowledge in both languages proved advantageous. Most of my colleagues in the engineering group were immigrants who normally spoke English, while most of the administrative staff used French. Therefore, while my English allowed me to complete the work, my French endeared the Quebecers, giving me easy access to services like text typing, photocopying, drafting, etc.



Montreal summer 1980 – Olympic Stadium

SNC Inc.'s office was located in the Complexe des Jardins, a modern shopping mall where most of the province's media activities also took place. As we lived in the building complex of Port de Mer, I could go to the office without wearing a heavy coat in the middle of winter by taking the subway. You could do everything underground, even crossing the river.

One day the project engineering group was presented with a challenge, to perform a protection co-ordination study for the MV system. Some members were asked, but the response was negative. My engineering manager finally came to me, promising plenty of time and the necessary technical assistance. For this study, first we needed to obtain the line parameters, short circuit calculations and load flows. Having never worked in this area, this was definitely a challenge, but I had already given my word, I had to follow through. I expressed the need to take some post-graduate courses at the McGill University, which the management kindly agreed to pay for. Thus, I took two 60-hour courses; in both of which I got A's. These results encouraged me to continue pursuing a master's degree in electrical engineering.

Every evening, after leaving work at 4:30 PM, I ran to the McGill campus with some colleagues, who were also attending the program, to catch the evening classes which started at 5:00 PM. I did course by course for almost two years, and earned about 36 credits before the company sent me to the site. I did not have time to complete a project worth 9 credits to receive the degree. After three years of overseas service in Saudi Arabia, I returned to Montreal and expressed my interest in finishing the project (in which I could have described my role in implementing the protection of the site's entire MV and LV systems); but the university refused due to my prolonged absence. However, I was not too disappointed by their decision as the courses I had taken proved useful in my work, and all costs had been paid by the company.

I realized that the electrical protection was a difficult area in which few engineers had thorough knowledge. Although experts could be highly compensated, I admitted that I did not have enough experience; but I accepted the task on condition that I received further training and assistance, and disclosed my lack of expertise to my manager as stipulated by the ethical code. All of my hand calculations were verified by a chief engineer, who appreciated their correctness and accuracy. However, due to the size of the project, the management concluded that these calculations should be performed by a computer, and hired a post-graduate student with a PhD in electrical engineering. Under my direction, Mr. Talef Moussari inputted the data and ran the program for calculating load flows and short circuits. The results of my hand calculations were amazingly similar to the computer's findings, which earned me the nickname "Thu Computer". Based on these results, I successfully carried out the co-ordination studies for setting the protective devices of the MV and LV systems at the site of the Qaseem Electrification Project.

9.2 Living in and Adapting to Montreal

Living in Montreal was an interesting experience. The winters are bitterly cold and it snows most of the time! However, because we wanted to familiarize our children with the Canadian climate so they could enjoy the winter and winter sports, we would take them out to the public skating rink and tobogganing areas, which they loved. The Port de Mer complex had a slopping back yard that was covered with grass in the summer, but had a thick layer of snow in the winter, on which the children enjoyed sliding on panels, even when it was bitterly cold. They only gave up when they started to freeze. In the summer, we visited Olympic Stadium (the venue for the 1976 Olympic Games) and the Botanic Garden, or drove to the outskirts of the city to see the countryside.

Montreal (Quebec)
1979 – Botanic
Garden in the spring



As we grew accustomed to the city, we started to connect with friends and relatives in Canada, the U.S., France and Vietnam. We were happy to receive news from those who had fled Vietnam by any means, even across the ocean by risky motorboat. Arriving thus in a neighbouring country made these immigrants members of a strange category of refugees, the "boat people". I eagerly

welcomed them to a world of freedom, and supported them financially when I could. My brothers-in-law Minh, Huy, and Anh came to the United States, one after the other, and Phụng asked me to visit them in Los Angeles in 1979. On this occasion, Minh, Huy and I took a road trip along the Californian coast from Los Angeles to San Francisco. We enjoyed the beauty of the region, and were impressed with San Francisco and its surroundings, particularly the Golden Gate Bridge.

We often visited friends and relatives who had recently come to Sherbrook, Quebec and Los Angeles from refugee camps in Southeastern Asia. These trips helped my children get to know their relatives and learned some Vietnamese language and traditions. In 1979, we were all proudly granted Canadian citizenship, which was proof that we had successfully adapted to our new country. However, everything did not come naturally or easily. When dealing with others, I always kept in mind the saying: “For integration, a smile is always better than an order”.

The people here, particularly the Quebecers, were very nice, especially when I spoke French with them. I made friends with the Quebecers as easily as with the Vietnamese Canadians, and found them to be open-minded and similar to us. Each of the three times we moved in this city, some Quebecer friends came to help us and worked as hard as we did.

Near the end of 1980, I was asked to proceed to Saudi Arabia for a two-year renewable contract, and was allowed to take my family under Canadian non-resident status.



Montreal 1980 –
With David on the
hill of Mont Royal

Section 10: Saudi Arabia (1981- 1983 and 1986)

10.1 Trip to Qaseem and Al Nour Site

The trip to Qaseem took two international flights and one local one, from Montreal to London, London to Riyadh and Riyadh to Buraydah. The SNC project office handled all the paperwork and procedures to send us there effectively, but flaws were inevitable. Our family of six left Mirabel Airport on January 19, 1981 and arrived at Heathrow Airport in the early morning of the following day. We went to the Saudi Airlines counter to check into the connecting flight to Riyadh and learned that they did not want to admit David because he lacked his own passport, even though his name was in his mother's passport, and he had a ticket as well.

I was advised to go to the Saudi Arabian consulate in London for a special permit, and I did not forget to bring with me all the relevant documents. After explaining the situation, I got the paper and came back to the airport to meet with my family, only to find we were late for the flight. We spent the night on a bench in the waiting room and then took an earlier flight to Riyadh. (Later, I realized that leaving the airport without family members was a serious mistake because if something had happened to me, my family would have had no identification and could not have left the premises).

When we arrived in Riyadh, we had to walk to the local terminal, since the airport was then still underdeveloped to have buses. The heat was quite a shock. Communication was also a problem as few people spoke English and none spoke French. However, we successfully made the connecting flight to Buraydah that afternoon, but we were exhausted when we arrived. The trip was especially rough on the children.

My company, SNC Inc. has a good reputation for managing major overseas projects, including the building and operation of town sites for their expatriate employees.

Qaseem 1981 -
Family house in Al
Nour Town site



We were assigned a villa-style house in a newly built village of one hundred units, fully furnished from A to Z; we had no need to buy anything other than food. The town site had all the facilities required to live independently, including a swimming pool, a restaurant, a clinic with an expatriate doctor and a nurse, a school with expatriate teachers covering grades 1 to 13, a tennis court and a sports club. My children were admitted to the appropriate grades, and we enjoyed participating in multi-cultural social activities. In the spring we occasionally organized picnics to savor the beauty of the desert, particularly of the sand dunes at sunrise or sunset. In the winter, we enjoyed plays performed by the site's social club or by the school, including our children.

Qaseem 1981 –
Taiwanese Agricultural
Research rose garden
in Unayzah



We shared the joy of greeting newly arrived residents and the sorrow of saying farewell to departing members. Our family believed the site allowed for a high level of multi-cultural integration, but I, for once, thought it looked boring without the greenness of plants.

We got to know a group of Taiwanese experts working on a model farm on an agricultural research project in the nearby city of Unayzah. They often invited us to see their efforts to grow Oriental vegetables and flowering plants in the new terrain. I realized that the soil in the area was very fertile, and that if there was water, every plant would have grown beautifully. They gave us some baby sunflowers and pine branches to transplant in front of our villa, and our garden was so successful that most of the residents copied it.

However, since these new gardens eventually created a critical shortage of well water, a ration was implemented and the site management still sometimes had to buy water from outside source in summer.

Qaseem 1982 – Day to day
life: Children activities,
friends' gathering (Visit of
Taiwanese couple Kwangs)



The site technical team provided well-organized and very effective service; if our AC system or TV broke down; we could just call them and get it repaired in a half day or less, depending on the seriousness of the problem. Moreover, all of our R&R (rest and recreation) and vacations were well handled by an expat travel agent. Our business class tickets could be exchanged to pay for economic tickets and accommodation, as well as transportation to and from the airport.



There were also buses to take ladies of the site to the market several times a week. Although they lived in the most strictly Islamic country, the Canadian women were exempt from covering their heads with veils, and simply wore long gowns when going out in the public.

Qaseem 1981 –
Picnic in the desert

Since the site had a gate operated by a guard, we were isolated from the crowd and could enjoy the lifestyle we had in Canada. The school, with its expatriate team, was especially good because it had less than 150 students. In addition to the official curriculum, the pupils usually received more follow-up and socio-cultural activities. In sum, the living conditions at the Qaseem site were incredibly good according to Canadian standards. The company offered some of the most lucrative personal contracts for its overseas projects, with a value of about 250% of the base salary, beyond the benefits of free housing and travels.



10.2 The Challenges of the Qaseem Electrification Project

Due to its rich petroleum reserves, Saudi Arabia was then very wealthy. Although it was governed by an absolute monarchy, thanks to the willingness of the royal family, considerable funds were allocated to modernizing the country and improving the lives of its citizens. The Qaseem Electrification Project was a 1.2-billion-dollar initiative for which SNC Group Inc. did the conceptual design, procurement, implementation and management on behalf of Saudi Arabia's



Electricity Corporation (Electrico), the client. It comprised 680 MW of power generation, 1000 kilometers of 132 kV transmission lines, 16 SF6 gas-insulated substations of 132 kV/33 kV and 18 conventional substations of 33 kV/13.8 kV, over 7000 kilometers of 33 kV and 13.8 kV distribution lines, several thousand kilometers of low voltage distribution lines, and residential power supplies. The project would provide electricity to all residents of the province of Qaseem, with a focus on supplying power to water pumping units for agriculture. This area was about 300 km x 300 km of typical desert, with underground reservoirs at 500 to 1000 meters below the sandy surface.



Qaseem 1983 - A newly
built SF6 insulated-gas
substation under testing

At site, my first position was as an intermediate office engineer handling quantity assessment for all distribution contracts, which involved purchasing bulk materials, and revising the construction standards for site suitability. In my second year of service, I was promoted to lead engineer for the medium-voltage substations package, which covered field engineering and the inspection of the testing and commissioning of the substations. After my two-year term, I was asked to stay one more year as senior substation and protection engineer to handle all of the protection studies and relay settings for the distribution network, as well as to participate in the commissioning of the 132 kV SF6 gas-insulated substations. In this role, I gained the respect and recognition of my colleagues and the client's engineering group. Based on this achievement, I applied for and was granted senior membership in the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) in 1983, which is a mark of high distinction in this international organization.

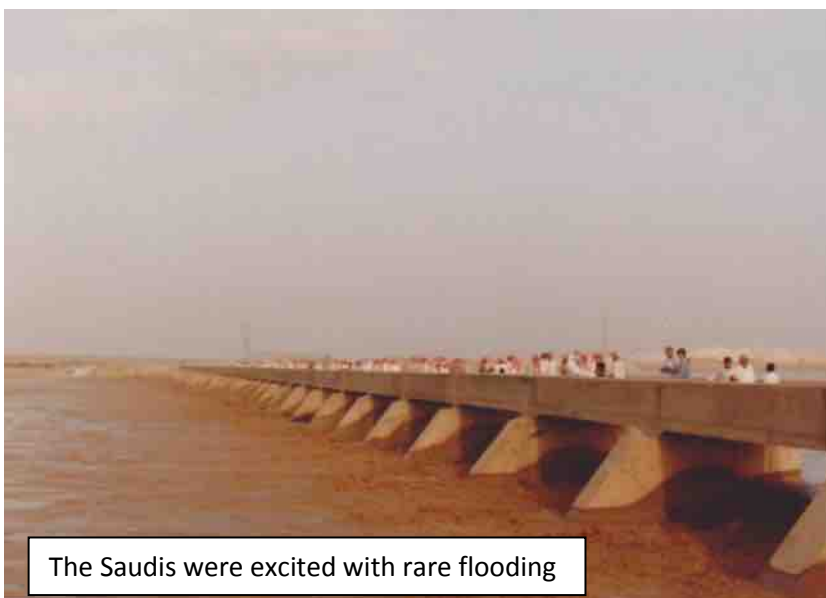
In Qaseem, I had opportunities to work with international engineering groups like Japan's Mitsubishi, Korea's Hyundai, Sweden's ABB, France's Merlin Gérin, Germany's Siemens and many others. I also appreciate the lasting relationship I established with Samir Zakhary and his wife Marcelle. Samir and I worked together in Montreal on conceptual design, and when we were both transferred to Qaseem, we were colleagues in the Site Engineering Department, and neighbours in the Al Nour site. He proved to be helpful in securing my engagement with phase two of the project. We became friends and neighbours again in Mississauga, Ontario, after our overseas service, and have remained so since.

Because of my three years of service in S.A., Electrico Inc. invited me to sign a one-year contract in 1986 as a resident engineer to handle the implementation of the Qaseem Phase II - Substation Extension Project. Since the client engineering group appreciated my performance during this project, near the end of my contract, they introduced me to a Saudi consulting engineering firm that was working on a similar initiative. However, negotiations were unsuccessful and the job never materialized. Nonetheless, these experiences helped me develop the ability to deal with international contractors in both engineering and management.

10.3 Particulars of Saudi Arabia.

Along with the challenges foreigners sometimes face in Saudi Arabia, I encountered some adventures, inspiring moments, and learning experiences throughout our long residence:

Knowing that there was practically no rain in Saudi Arabia (which was why it was a desert); I was surprised to see many new bridges built over low-lying areas, and I wondered what they were for. Then in early March of 1981, a few months after my arrival, it rained torrentially for several days,



The Saudis were excited with rare flooding

creating a large river that followed the predetermined course. Thanks to the kingdom's royal family, which had invested heavily in development and modernization, the risk of flooding was averted.

At the time, the country had a population of eleven million residents, of which five millions were foreigners performing services for the Saudis, i.e. construction workers from Pakistan and India, consultants from Europe and North America, service and

agricultural workers from Philippines and Indonesia, and road crews from South Korea. The Arabians generally occupied middle or upper management positions because they derived exorbitant income from petroleum production, and because they had the knowledge to control their property.

When we first got to Qaseem, we were transported by minibus to the town site down a 15 kilometer road. Outside the window, we saw sand and sand dunes everywhere, with everything shaded a light brown. Compared to the greenness of Vietnam, this environment was totally different! I felt I was living in another world. But in the spring, when we could picnic in the dunes, we could appreciate the waves upon waves of light brown sand surrounding us, as if we were swimming in the ocean. We felt that we were tiny specks in the immensity of nature.

Still, while the view was inspiring, after several months of seeing the same color; we wanted to see something green. This is why we sometimes visited the Taiwanese experimental farm via my connection with Mr. Kwang, or occasionally went to an oasis. (In the '70s, Mr. Kwang had been assigned by the Taiwanese Power Company to be an advisor to the VPC Transmission and Distribution (T&D) department. We met him again when he became an advisor to Electrico, our client in Qaseem).



Unayzah 1982 – Visiting
the Taiwanese
Agriculture Research
Center with Mr. Kwang



Qaseem 1986 – On
second assignment:
With electricity, desert
turns green

Aside from working together, we used to go out to the Taiwanese Agriculture Research Center in Unayzah to see the rose garden and the plots where other familiar

Oriental plants were grown. We remembered Saigon and enjoyed each other's company. Ours was typical of the warm friendships between people working overseas.

On weekends, you could take your family to Buraydah or Unayzah for shopping, which was an amazing experience. Generally the ladies had to cover their faces when going out, but because the local populace held us in high regard, it was acceptable for the Western, or at least the Canadian women to only wear thin veils over their hair. In the cities, we saw farmers carrying their harems of up to four wives in the open decks of their trucks, while their sons sat on the front seats or middle bands with their fathers. You never lost any thing in these Saudi cities; one day my wife bought a bag of tomatoes and other fruits from a merchant in the open market, left it in a corner on the floor to visit some other merchants, and forgot to take it home. Two days later, when she came back to pick it up, the food was still there and fresh. Moreover, it was not surprising to see a middle-aged barefoot man sitting on the concrete floor of the market open area, beside a pile of vegetables like spinach, green onions, etc., which he was selling at a riyal (about \$0.35) per kilo; while a new Mercedes sedan was parked nearby.

Travelling with a family of six, particularly when the children were still young, was a mixture of pleasure and frustration. Visiting other countries was a practical way of teaching the kids about various ancient and contemporary civilizations while showing them their landscapes, historic monuments, and cultures; but sometimes it was a hassle. One evening, on a connection from Bangkok to Tokyo, when boarding was called for the first time, Nina said she needed to go to the washroom. Despite her mother's concern, she convinced us that she would have no problem finding the facilities and would return in about five minutes. We let her go. Over ten minutes later, she had not come back; and Phung went to look for her. I waited with the other children till the last call for departure, when my wife came back without her. Naturally we thought we would have to cancel our flight. Then our daughter showed up, making us the last passengers to board the airplane. We were so happy to have her back.

At the start of 1986, I returned to Saudi Arabia under single status on my second contract with Electrico for the phase of substation extension. The first thing I noticed was the new greenness of the rice fields and the vegetable gardens continuously extending to my view, over which the irrigating sprinklers automatically dispersed water. I was proud that my previous contribution to the development project had helped make this region productive and self-reliant, and that it now produced an abundance of all kinds of fruits and vegetables. I had helped build a Californian landscape in the middle of the Arabian Desert.

Sometimes, we can still find happiness, even when we are alone in an isolated place. This happened to me when the Hyundai workers left the National Guards Substation where I was working, which was built right on top of a rocky mountain about 50 kilometers away from the nearest town. Since I was protected by some guard dogs, I decided to stay alone in the housing facility. Sitting in an armchair on the patio, I contemplated the September twilight and observed the movement of the stars in the absolute quietness of the night. I felt a relief from all disturbances and complications; recalling the past and revisiting my loved ones in my thoughts. I was at peace.

10.4 International Travels

Each year, we had ten days of R&R to go to Greece, but we could rearrange it to go to anywhere in Europe (except for Northern Europe) or the Middle East; we also had a month paid vacation to Canada, but we could instead use it to travel around the world. We took advantage of these offers to visit several places in Europe and the Middle East, including Greece and some of its islands, Istanbul and its vicinities, Paris, Geneva, London, Rome, Lisbon and Madrid.

As a student, I dreamed of one day seeing the Acropolis and other Greek monuments, and of showing my children the splendor of that ancient civilization. Our visit to Athens allowed me to make this dream come true.



R&R in Greece
1981 -Acropolis

We made a second trip to Greece the year after, this time to explore the quietness of a typical Greek island. After a night in Athens, we proceeded to Aegina where we rented a suite on a hill overlooking the ocean. The

view was terrific, with the sea in front of us, the town behind us, and the gentle breeze nicely flattering us. The only problem was the lack of sea food, which we had expected when we decided to take our R&R on an island. We loved to eat lobsters, but after two hours of searching, our results were mediocre: we found only one at an extremely high price.

Istanbul was also a great destination, with a spectacular view of the Bosphorus, the dividing line between Asia and Europe; it had monuments from the ancient Roman and Islamic empires, alongside new growth from a reformed Turkey. I was eager to see the two famous sixteenth-century structures, the Sultanahmet Mosque (also called the Sophia or Blue Mosque, as its name and utilization changed due to historical and religious influences) and the Suleymaniye (or the Magnificent) Mosque, which is considered a wonder of the world.



Turkey 1981 – Blue
Mosque

One morning, we decided to go to the bazaar, but did not have any local currency. The hotel concierge advised us to exchange our money at some large shops on the way to the market. But as my wife, Nina, David and I walked across the Istanbul

University campus – a local landmark - a man ran after us, asking us politely in English whether we wanted to exchange some currency and in what amount. I replied “Yes. Though not much; let’s

start with two hundred U.S. dollars”. He said: “Let me see your money. I want to make sure that it is not counterfeit”. The guy looked clean and wore a nice jacket, and I thought he was being reasonable and business savvy. I pulled out a \$100 U.S. bill and gave it to him. He folded it twice and rubbed it several times against his hand. Puzzled by his actions, I asked him to stop and give me back my money. He replied: “It’s okay. I will exchange it for you, but you have to follow me”. He then returned the bill, which I put in my pocket. I followed him, but he started to go faster, and when I told him to slow down, he broke into a run. Thinking something might be wrong, I shouted: “Forget about the exchange. We’re leaving”. When we got to the exchange counter, I handed out the folded bill to the agent. It turned out to be \$1. Despite the perils of street exchange, we really enjoyed Istanbul, with its landscapes, its historic monuments, its museum with rich treasures and particularly, the delicious seafood offered by its floating restaurants along the shore of the Bosphorus.

In London, we visited London Bridge, Big Ben, the Parliament buildings, Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), and even Stonehenge. Since I started reading novels and magazines in high school, images of these places had been imprinted in my mind, and it was great to actually see them. I also found the British countryside to be extremely beautiful and well managed when I travelled to Salisbury and Bath on sight-seeing tours.

England 1982 -
Visiting
Stonehenge
from London



Paris 1982 - Palais de
Versailles Site



During our second R&R, we flew to Paris and stayed in the suburbs area with Phụng’s sister. From there, we could take the train to the city and explore it via the Metro system. Thanks to the kindness of our in-laws, we feasted our eyes on all the historic and romantic sites of the French capital.

From Paris, we took the night train to Geneva. In the early morning, as the train was entering Lausanne, we woke up and looked out the window: the landscape was so romantic, and we thought it befitted a country of peace and reconciliation.

When the fog slowly lifted to let some fragile sunbeams through, we felt we were going to a haven. Our trip on a ferry (a type of bateau-mouche) along Geneva Lake was also a fantastic way to admire the castles, monuments and estates along the shoreline.

Switzerland 1982
– Lake of Geneva



Italy 1982 – At
Roman Coliseum



Then an Air France flight took us to Rome for five days in a motel near the Republic Square. This location was ideal for most city tours, or for walking to the historic monuments, the famous gardens, the Coliseum, etc. We spent a whole day on a guided tour to Vatican City, which gave us easy access to most of its landmarks, buildings and artworks. After five continuous days of sight-seeing, Phụng and the children (Mimi & David) got tired in the evening, and I went alone to the famous Republic Square to see Rome by night.

On the way back, a guy approached me to ask for directions. I answered that unfortunately, I was not a resident of Rome. He said that he came from Germany and asked me some more questions; then we talked about Montreal, and he offered to take me to a cabaret for a Canadian beer. I thought this was a good idea because I wanted to taste a Molson Blue Moon after more than a year without one.

After a fifteen-minute cab ride, we got to the cabaret. He ordered a Molson for me and a punch for himself, and then from nowhere a girl came to sit between us and asked for a whisky. After a few minutes, he excused himself to go to the rest room. I waited about ten minutes for him to return, but he did not. Suspecting foul play, I called the waiter for the bill, intending to pay half of it. It was US\$250! I protested and the waiter advised me to see the cashier to complain. However, when I went to the counter to express my displeasure, a very heavy man came up and invited me into his office, closing the thick door behind us.

Rome 1982 –
Vittorio Emanuele II
Monument



At that point, I realized that they were gangsters and that any wrong move might jeopardize my life. He asked: “Do you want to pay or not?” Unfortunately, I had only US\$100 in my pocket. They took my passport and the heavy guy accompanied me in a taxi to my hotel for the rest. Once we arrived, he told me to bring the money, threatening to leave with my passport if I was not back in ten minutes. I had no choice but to follow his instructions, because it was late and it was my last night in Rome.

Portugal 1982 – Botanic
Garden in Lisbon



During the first vacation of our contract in 1982, we flew to Lisbon, then took the train to Cascais to spend a week on the beach. This was a wonderful vacation spot at the time because everything was so cheap compared to the rest of Western Europe. It had a nice beach and good seafood, a beautiful hotel with balconies overlooking the ocean and the mountains, and warm weather. Eugenie and I took a trip to the famous shrine of Fatima to pray for her welfare, as she had some lack of attention and weakness in school. We also visited the Castle of the Moors, which was built in the eighth century, and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was situated on top of a mountain looking down on Lisbon, and I understood this is why the Arabs were able to occupy more than half of Europe for several hundred years in the early Middle Ages.

We continued our journey through Western Europe by flying to Madrid. I was very impressed by the huge boulevards whose medians were beautifully decorated with plants and flowers, with large walkways along both sides. They were a luxurious remainder of Spain's imperial past. We went to La Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas, a bullfighting ring in the midst of the city to see a much anticipated program of eleven bullfights, including several performed by the most famous matador at the time. The ring was fully occupied, and we sat in the first-come-first-served area.



Spain 1982 – A typical boulevard in Madrid

The ceremony surrounding the fights was sumptuously organized, and high government officials and possibly some royalty were present. After three fights, we had had enough and left. Several people around us were very surprised and followed us to the gate. They asked why we had left the best bullfight of the year, invited us to the bar, and offered us red wine. The Spanish were amazingly courteous! In the evening, we enjoyed an activity for which Madrid is famous: a dinner with Flamenco dancing.

We then took a thirteen-hour westward flight to Los Angeles to see our relatives who had recently immigrated to California. Everyone was exhausted, but we soon recovered when we got to their house in Monterey Park. We were filled with happiness at reuniting with our family members after long years of separation.



Los Angeles 1982 – Family reunification in Monterey Park

Finally we stopped in Singapore for a few days before returning to Saudi Arabia. After knowing Changi Airport and visiting some tourist attractions like the Jurong Birds Park and orchid garden, and witnessing the citizens' high standard of living, we realized that Singapore was a rich and modern nation. I was struck by the contrast between democratic Singapore (which eventually inclined towards dictatorship to keep the country progressive), and the nearby totalitarian country of Vietnam, whose government was leading it towards misery and bankruptcy.



Singapore 1982 –
Visiting Jurong Bird
Park

On the second vacation of our contract, in the spring of 1983, my whole family once again travelled around the world. We took flights from Riyadh to Bangkok via Dubai, then Hong Kong - Los Angeles - Riyadh to return to Qaseem. We scheduled to stay five to six days at each of the first two destinations, and ten days in Los Angeles to visits our family.

In Bangkok, Phụng was delighted to see relatives she had never met before. They welcomed us and took us to restaurants and tourist sites, including the former capital of Ayutthaya. We also took the children to a famous crocodile farm near Bangkok so they could experience that kind of industrial and entertainment facility.

Bangkok 1983 – Visiting
old capital Ayutthaya
with Phung's relatives



On the flight from Bangkok to Hong Kong, it was announced that the plane was flying over Saigon, I was in an emotional mood; I looked out the window and thought that my parents were down there, but that I could not visit them; some tears fell from my eyes. It had been almost ten years since I had left Vietnam and my parents.



Bangkok 1983 –
Visiting Golden
Buddha Temple

We arrived in Hong Kong and stayed in Kowloon. It was a paradise for shopping: we bought some jewelry and my first Canon A1 (one of the best cameras at that time) with all the accessories. But what we enjoyed the most were our evening excursion to eat fabulous Chinese food from the mobile counters temporarily installed on the walkway along the beach. We were happy to see the children enjoy their meals and refresh themselves after several days of travel. We also crossed the bay of Hong Kong by ferry, and were amazed by the view of the colonial monuments at the entrance to the port. We then paid two rickshaw drivers to carry us around a prearranged route in that part of the city, but just five minutes later, they dropped us off at our starting point after showing us a nearby church. Though the drivers were Chinese, this shorter ride was not the result of a language barrier, but purely a cheating.



Kowloon 1983 –
Waiting for ferry
to Hong Kong

Once again, we travel to Los Angeles instead of Montreal to see our in-laws. To prepare to return for my third year of service, I went downtown to re-confirm our flights to Qaseem. While talking to the American Airlines staff, I put my travel bag on the floor beside my right foot, but when I looked down to check it, it was gone. Some people in the hall told me that a beggar had carried out a brown bag, looked through it, and then threw it in a trash bin outside the building. I recovered the bag but not the contents. Nothing of importance was stolen, except my passport and entry visa (I had the other passports and all the tickets with me). I immediately went to the Canadian Consulate and got a new passport in two days. The issue was how to get entry visas to Saudi Arabia, as there was no Saudi consulate in Los Angeles.

Since the nearest consulate was in Houston, we took a flight there; it was also a good opportunity to see my uncle Huy and his family. The day after our arrival, my uncle took us to the Saudi Consulate to reapply for entry visas; but it was not easy. They asked me a bundle of questions and suggested that I contact my Employer, Electrico Corp. to obtain a letter to be signed by the Governor of Industry and Electricity Ministry confirming their need to rehire me. I showed them all the documents I had on hand – the passports of my family members, our return tickets to Qaseem (which had expired because of our delay), and a letter confirming the extension of my contract up to one year following our date of departure for vacation. But nothing could convince the consul to issue the visas. I also had a hard time contacting my SNC Inc. office in Qaseem due to the time difference. Moreover, it was difficult to obtain a letter personally signed by the governor in question, especially because he was a prince.

After a week of waiting and failing to receive a useful reply from my employer, I came back to the Saudi Consulate and explained my situation again. The answer was still no. While waiting for a note to confirm this, I made conversation with the lady who had so far handled the interaction and translation between me and the consul. Thinking flattery might help my case, I said: “You are quite good looking; are you of Egyptian origin?” She replied: “No. I am Moroccan”. I was happy to hear this and switched into French. The conversation became more friendly and personal. After a while, I asked her to listen carefully to my story and help me out with the consul. She said: “I will do that with all my heart. Please give me the papers again”. She went into his office and returned in five minutes, with all of the visas stamped and signed. My uncle was amazed by the swift resolution; and I learned a real lesson: a common language and some flattery can solve many of life’s problems.

We also took a vacation during my third year of service in the autumn of 1983. The whole family went to Tokyo (via Singapore) and Los Angeles. As the plane entered Japan’s airspace, I looked out the window and saw a green mountain capped with snow, with the bottom decorated with grey clouds; the silhouette of Fujiyama was like an ancient Chinese painting.

We were received at the airport by the owner of the privately operated Chamama Motel, which some colleagues who had previously travelled to the country, had recommended as providing an authentic Japanese experience. We enjoyed homemade meals and were taken to various tourist sites. On our first evening before we went to bed, we were invited to join the owners, a young married couple for a bath in a large bathtub as per their tradition. Of course, we might refuse if we felt uncomfortable. Though we planned to visit Mount Fuji as a family, most of us were too tired. In the end, only Mimi, Nina and I took the bullet train from Tokyo to the foot of the mountain, then a taxi to a nearby hill to see Fujiyama. We were lucky that the day was sunny and our view was clear, since the mountain was usually covered with fog.

The Japanese showed great intelligence and discipline. Although they tried to help the strangers, due to the language barrier, sometimes they did more than was required. When we went to a library to buy a city map, the owner mistakenly thought we were asking for an address; because she could not help us, so she took us to a local police station, as it was only place she could think of where someone spoke English.

I admired the Japanese for their neatness and honesty. Though we did not stay in a high-end neighbourhood, everything was in order: along the street, the garbage cans were painted different colors representing various categories of trash, and they were placed in a straight line and at the same distance from the street. This made the district look clean, very neat and artistic. One evening, we were walking to the shopping area when the sun was still in the sky; on passing a delivery area containing many small and medium-sized packages waiting for truck pick-up, we were very surprised to see that there was no fence. When we came back at midnight, those packages were still there, although the office was closed. There appeared to be no theft or stealing. These observations made me rate Japan as the most civilized society we had seen.



Japan 1983 –
Fujiyama back
ground, as
magically seen



Section 11: Moving to Mississauga, Ontario (1984 - Present)

11.1 Adapting to Our New Environment

After my first three-year contract with Electrico, we returned to Montreal as I waited to be reassigned to a similar project in Algeria, as promised by the SNC Group Inc. However, the deal fell through and I was asked to wait for a few more months. My family seemed to suffer from the cold winters in Montreal and indicated that they would like to move to Toronto or its vicinity for its warmer climate. I was also fed up with the political situation in Quebec. We had left Vietnam to escape an environment of conflict, separatism and dictatorship; we did not want to live in another. I visited Toronto in the winter and found that the weather was indeed milder, the people were more open and tolerant, and the job market was broader and more challenging. We therefore decided to move to Ontario, although we loved the Quebecers and the bilingual environment.

We moved to Mississauga in the early days of 1984. Initially, things were not easy, because the Ontarians had a different way of doing business and a different mentality. When I started looking for a job in engineering, I realized that I had made a mistake by not maintaining my membership in the OEQ, which could have been transferred to the new province. I was required to rewrite the exams on ethical codes and engineering practice to become a member of the PEO (Professional Engineers Ontario). The application, examination and licensing process took the entirety of 1984. I also contributed to my skill set by taking some post-graduate courses in advanced computer and microprocessor technology at the University of Toronto and George Brown College.

11.2 Colombia (1985)

The Cerrejon Coal Exportation Project

At the start of 1985, I entered the Ontario work market at a position as senior field engineer for the installation and commissioning of the material handling systems at the port that would be developed by the Cerrejon Coal Handling Facilities Project in Colombia, South America. I worked for the Canadian engineering company involved in the supply and installation of ship loaders, stacker-reclaimers and conveyors, hence was transferred to the site. We were subcontracted by the giant American company RMK, which was implementing the multi-billion-dollar project. The onsite workforce was immense with 3000 women and 5000 men located in several camps along the coast. The nearest town was Maicao, about 60 kilometers away, but it took several hours to get there, not to mention that the bus convoy had to be escorted by half a dozen militiamen. Two foreign engineers were assigned to a two-bedroom bungalow, which was convenient and well equipped.



The R&R was generous: I could visit my family every six months, in addition to spending two or three days every two months in Miami to renew visa. My employer, Carr Donald Inc. generously paid for Phụng to join me on these Miami stopovers on occasion.



Miami 1985 – Break
for Visa validity when
working on Cerrejon
Project

However, the site had some of the worst weather in the world, with a temperature of 40°C, high humidity, and a strong wind blowing sand mixed with coal dust into our faces. All of these things made me exhausted. Besides, I lost enthusiasm for working with the Colombian professional team that headed the project, which consistently showed a lack of co-operation, I therefore decided to leave the position after ten months to preserve my health.

The Colombian Way of Life

The Colombians were happy people; they thought of entertainment most of the time and took things easy. The work week was usually from Monday to noon time of the Saturday; after 11:00 AM on Saturday, hardly anyone was at the site, because after getting their pay-cheques at about 10:00 AM, they would go home or to the camp for entertainment, particularly for dancing, which they loved. This became a nightmare when I lent my bungalow to the Colombian office staff one Saturday evening. They first stuffed the kitchen with food and drinks. Late in the evening, a group of several dozens men and women gathered to play music and dance till 8:00 AM the next morning. I couldn't even go to sleep as they continually asked me to dance, even though I had at least a half day's worth of work that Sunday to resolve some urgent issues.

As the site was located on the coast at the edge of a desert, far away from the metropolis of Barranquilla, the workers normally shopped in the small town of Maicao. One Sunday morning, I was woken up by my co-resident, a Canadian engineer, for a trip to Maicao in the Jeep assigned to us. I refused to join him because I was tired due to working late the previous day. When the convoy was supposed to have arrived in the town, however, his car did not show up. On returning in the evening, the travelers found him standing on the road, wearing only his shorts. Because his car was at the tail of the convoy, two pirate cars had suddenly appeared and separated his car from the others without anyone noticing. They forced him to drive into the desert and stole everything from him, including his Jeep and clothes. I had fortunately escaped from that peril!

While visiting Barranquilla before returning to Canada, I bought twenty one-pound bags of first-class Colombian coffee. On my way to Toronto, at the security checkpoint in Miami, the agent asked whether I had anything to declare, and I said no. He escorted me to the customs office and searched my luggage. He was surprised to see those bags and asked: "Why did you not make a declaration?" I replied: "I acted in compliance with the American law allowing people to carry up to twenty pounds of coffee from a foreign country without tax or penalty". They took two bags for analysis, and then they let me go.



Toronto 1989 –
Phụng and her
Accounting team
at YWCA

A few months after my return from Colombia, Electrico Corp. approached me to take my second job in Saudi Arabia, as described above. During this time, while the children were growing up, Phụng wanted to complete her

pharmacy program, which had been interrupted in Vietnam. But due to the difficulty of re-admission, she decided to take a three-year accounting program at George Brown College, but condensed the work into two years. She entered the job market right after graduating in 1986 during my service in Saudi Arabia.

I acknowledged my wife's determination to handle a heavy burden. On one hand, she worked hard towards her accounting degree, then served as a payroll and benefits administrator for a large crown corporation, and on the other, she took care of the family during my frequent absences. If I consider myself somewhat successful in my career, I should praise my wife Phụng with the sentence "Behind a successful man, there is a supporting woman".

Section 12: Burkina Faso (1987 – 1988)

12.1 The Kompienga Hydroelectric Project

In March 1987, the SNC Inc. approached me again to offer a position with the Kompienga Hydroelectric Project in Burkina Faso. This was an international initiative to build a reservoir dam primarily for irrigation, along with a small volume of water to run two turbines to generate 15 - 20 MW. I was in charge of administering the contracts for engineering and construction of 300 kilometers of 132 kV transmission line, a 13.8 kV/132 kV step-up substation at the Kompienga site and 132 kV/33 kV step-down substation in Ouagadougou, the capital city.

Burkina Faso 1988 - Kompienga
step-up substation



Burkina Faso 1988 –
With assistant Eloi at
the Ouagadougou
step-down substation



The project's engineering and construction management were handled by SNC Group Inc. on behalf of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), as a contribution of the Canadian government to Burkina Faso. The lion's share of the project, over 300 million dollars was financed by the European Community as foreign aid.

The construction contractors came from France, and brought European equipment such as turbines, overhead cranes, generators, and Italian lattice transmission towers. The residential site was well built by Campton Bernard, the French contractor for the high-volume dam. Each Canadian consultant was assigned a fully equipped concrete bungalow with an attached garden. Every week, my chauffeur would drive me 400 kilometers, from the dam to Ouagadougou, where I stayed in the Simandé Hotel (of the French five-star Sofitel chain).

12.2 The Vietnamese Association in Ouagadougou

When I arrived in Ouagadougou from Paris at noon, I checked into the Simandé Hotel – the city's tallest and most beautiful building, located on the other side of Lake Ouagadougou.

Ouagadougou 1987 - Hotel
Simandé, my second
residence in Burkina Faso



Having travelled more than a day without sleeping because of poor conditions onboard the Air d'Afrique, I napped until 4:30 PM. I woke up relaxed and started thinking about filling my stomach. Although the restaurant was not open till six or so, the front-desk girl - a graceful Burkinabe, with an open smile - told me that I could get something at the bar beside the swimming pool. I went down to swimming area, took a seat at a two-person table beside the pool, and ordered a beer. On the table were a small plate of peanuts and some African-style canapés. It was hot in the open air, but fairly cool under the roofed terrace around the pool. It was perfect for a lonely visitor on a quiet afternoon, and I savoured the beautiful and peaceful surroundings.

Ouagadougou 1987 –
New friends: Dr. Cao
Dũng and other French
citizens



All of a sudden, two Oriental girls wearing long white dresses and conical hats came in from the front-desk area through a large sliding door. Completely surprised, I told myself “It’s not possible that they are Vietnamese”. I thought I was dreaming. I squeezed my thigh to wake myself up, but I knew I was awake because I saw two others coming. They were as beautiful as angels. It was the first time in more than thirteen years that I had seen real Vietnamese girls in their real costume. How elegant they were! More Vietnamese people came in, carrying decorative objects. They set up a stage with a backdrop of Vietnamese landscapes, including Hanoi’s Single Pier Pagoda, Huế’s Tràng Tiền Bridge, and Saigon’s Lê Văn Duyệt Tomb. Then they performed Vietnamese folk dances, sung Vietnamese songs, and recited Vietnamese poetry.

I paid all my attention to follow the performance as I had never seen anything like it in my life. I drank in every sound and every note of the music, believing that it was dedicated to me as a gift for my adventure, for my intended contribution to this sub-Saharan country. After about two hours, the performance ended. I went backstage to talk to the actors in Vietnamese and learned that the presentation was part of a national program for cultural exchange periodically organized in the city. It had been the first performance of the Vietnamese community, which consisted of about 80 members, who mostly lived in Ouagadougou. They were professionals who had graduated from France, had worked in Vietnam before 1975, and who were now employed by the French aid program (*coopérants français*) in education and other fields. They had formed a Vietnamese association in Burkina Faso for cultural exchange and friendship, and of course I was invited to join it.

12.3 My Trip to the Dam Site

Later that day, I was taken to the SNC Group Inc. office to confer with the project manager before leaving for the Komienga site in my chauffeur-driven four-wheel-drive Toyota. We went along a mostly unpaved route with some French-built sections remaining from the country’s colonization, passing through a large area of cleared forest dotted with gigantic baobabs, in which bands of baboons were playing or watching the traffic. I rarely saw water sources, and noticed that the people and animals were frail and skinny. Some women and kids carried water in large pails on their heads, from pools or lakes several kilometers away from their villages to refresh their families after a day working in the bush.

Farther from the inhabited area, the forest grew more thickly and boasted larger trees like ebony, although they had been thinned by the wood poachers. Then I came to one or two towns with colonial-style concrete water towers, with some lakes covered with lotus or euphrasy, or naturally occupied by water lilies. These images were reminiscent of the French influence in Central Vietnam. As we drove, a ring of fire suddenly appeared in front of us, and a few minutes later, we found ourselves surrounded by it. I was dazed by the flames and the smoke, but the chauffeur just laughed and said: “This is common here; the people are turning the forest into agricultural land”.

Water was also scarce, because on the 200-kilometer stretch of road we had travelled, just a few water pools were shared between villagers and animals.

So how could farming take place here? In some areas, I saw traces of riverbed, but they were all dried up. Then a swampy lake appeared, surrounded by all kinds of animals. They came for their evening refreshment, risking becoming dinner for the large crocodiles lurking in the muddy water. I did not see any real agriculture at all. Few Haute Volta sites or other works remained after more than a hundred years of French colonization. I later learned from reading that the French had come here just to exploit the country's resources like ebony, ivory and slaves, but not to stay or to add it to their empire as they did in Vietnam.

We arrived in Kompienga in the afternoon. I was taken to my assigned house to briefly refresh myself, and was then transported to the office. That evening, I dined at the contractor's restaurant, which served French-style three-course dinners with French wine, and ended with a nice coffee. The site was surrounded by a concrete perimeter wall to protect the residents from wild animals. When I returned to my bungalow built in the midst of a garden, I was surprised to see two boys awaiting me: one to do the gardening, the other to do the cooking. I hesitated to fire either of them because they badly needed the job to support their families. After a week, however, I could not retain the cook because he smelled as if he never took a shower, and because I rarely ate at home. Two months later, I let the gardener go as well because I enjoyed doing the gardening after work to relieve my loneliness, and besides, there was not much to do.

12.4 Working with the French in Africa.

The site's office was typically furnished for construction support, although most conveniences were available. The most difficult part of my job was meeting twice a month with two French contractors, one for the substations package, and the other for the transmission line package. At the meetings, were the MOK (Maitrise d'Oeuvre de Kompienga) representing the country's power company, all parties interested in the project, and the contractor. We normally spent the entire morning discussing several aspects of the project and of the contract.

In the French style of recording minutes, every conversation had to be detailed and the document co-signed by the contractor. Thus I had to compose a dozen pages, and get them signed by my French-Canadian project manager, and the contractor. The problem was that the manager of the contract lived in Ouagadougou, so that it took a few days for the Minutes to reach his office, and they rarely returned to me in less than a week. Several times, the returned document was not signed, leaving us no time to monitor the contractual work or implement the suggested solutions. Sometimes after two weeks, the contractor would bring back the document without a signature on the next meeting, because he disagreed with the minutes. This situation delayed the construction schedule, but it was typical of French contractors in Africa. I gradually learned that it was easy to make friends with the French people, but difficult to work with them.

Although Italian constructor completed the construction of the 138 kV transmission line according to schedule in early 1988, the generation side was not ready to power it. Moreover, after a cyclone and torrential rain, more than a dozen of lattice towers collapsed. A multi-party investigation revealed that locals had removed hundreds of the steel braces that composed the towers near populated areas and had used them to build tables and beds. This called for additional funds for repairs. I recall a similar thing having happened on the 230 kV Đa Nhím transmission line near Đồng Nai in the '60s, which caused headaches to the VPC. That was Africa.

12.5 Getting to Know Africa

I had to travel almost every week between Ouagadougou and Kompienga. Once, while returning from Ouagadougou, about 25 kilometers from Kompienga dam site, we passed the town of Pama and arrived in the resort village run by Madame X, which was a meeting point for lion hunters from every corner of the world.



BF 1987 - Kompienga site's
swimming pool and social facility

On seeing me, she embraced me and cried joyfully: “O Thu, Je t’ai manqué trop. Où étais tu depuis lors?” I did not know what to say, but fortunately, my friend André replied:

“This Thu has the same first name as the boy you knew half a dozen years ago. But he is an electrical engineer at SNC Group Inc., not the geologist who had spent some time in this area and occasionally stayed at your compound”. I finally understood the story, as I knew something about the geologist who had worked on the feasibility study and the illness he had contracted. I felt lucky to be working as an electrical engineer, not as a geologist or a civil engineer, who had to live in tents in the jungle when the project began.

Several dozen of years before my visit, Madame X and her husband (then deceased) were a loving couple who had left Italy for the Upper Volta to hunt lions. They grew fond of the country and its people and became citizens. Some years later, on a hunting trip, her husband was attacked by a male lion, and she shot the animal to save him. However, he was fatally injured and died sometime later. She decided to open a resort to stay with his grave and to help the international visitors who came for lions. During my time in the country, she was famous for her contribution to the people: she adopted more than half a dozen Burkinabe children, raised them and gave them an education. Some of them became well known and successful. The government acknowledged her devotion and the president honoured her with the Best Citizen Medal and the title of “Mother of Burkina Faso”.

Living at the Kompienga site was a terrific experience. The village consisted of over a hundred houses for the Canadian team, MOK site representatives, and French contractors, and had all facilities that included a restaurant, clinic, tennis court, and swimming pool. On Bastille Day (July 14), a large gathering was held beside the pool with music, dancing and eating; which started in the afternoon and ended early the next day. The French are the most gastronomic people in the world. To celebrate the event, they flew in the best Bordeaux, oysters from Normandy, lobsters from New Brunswick, barracudas from the Caribbean, beef from Holland, and of course lion from Kompienga. In fact, a contractor’s employee had a hunting permit and shot a lion nearby. He hosted a poolside barbecue for everyone during le Quatorze Juillet. Surprisingly, more people took the lion ribs than the other delicacies, although they tasted only slightly better than the chewing gum or rubber.

On holidays and weekends, the site sometimes hosted interesting activities like folk dancing performed by a professional troupe from Ouagadougou, a trip to a Togolese border town to buy French wine (Togo was influenced by the West while Burkina Faso was in a strictly controlled regime initiated by a democratic socialist government similar to Vietnam’s), visits from a merchant of ivory and ebony art objects... and even going out to the plain to see a herd of vultures devouring the corpses of animals.

Every day, I would encounter something typically African. This included an unpleasant surprise on New Year’s Day 1988. I woke up early to welcome the first sunbeams striking my partly mirrored entrance. As I contemplated the lovely morning, slowly opening the door, I felt something obstructing its movement and heard a strange sound. A huge cobra was right outside, raising its

head high enough to attack my knee. Luckily, I had not opened the door wide enough for it to get in, and I closed it in a hurry.

Togo 1987 – Market
under a baobab tree,
near border with B. Faso



As I previously mentioned, my work required weekly trips between the site and Ouagadougou, where I normally checked into the Simandé Hotel. One evening, at the swimming pool, I met a Vietnamese guest - Dr. Cao Dũng, the son of a former VNCH general, who worked for a U.S. medical research unit. He had a dynamic personality and an interesting life story that drew my attention, and we became friends. Through his introduction, I met Tôn thất Toàn, an engineer working for the Swiss-based Hydrowatt Inc. We became a trio, and used to go around together in Burkina Faso.

Toàn was a very nice guy, In 1989, when I was working in Saguenay, Quebec, Toàn briefly visited my family in Toronto on his way to New York. Although I was not at home to greet him, my wife offered him dinner, so he could see our children.

Hanoi 1998 – Visiting Tôn
thất Toàn & spouse at his
Hồ Tây residence



Toàn and I kept in close contact throughout our overseas adventures. Sometimes he was in Bangkok or Vietnam, while I was in Bolivia or South Korea. In 1998 we met in Hanoi when he was the technical director for the Swiss Development Commission in Vietnam. He invited Phụng and me to his condominium on the shore of Hồ Tây (West Lake) for five days.

My weekly trips brought other surprises, such as hitting a flock of wild chickens (pintades) in the evening on the road to the Kompienga site, since these birds normally return to their nets at twilight when their vision was limited. They were easily disoriented by the noise of the vehicle, and three of

them could not clear the road fast enough! Still, it was an opportunity for me to taste the meat of these wild chickens.

My frequent trips to Ouagadougou helped me maintain contact with my family in Canada. I would call home from the office on a weekly basis. One morning, the phone was picked up by my son David. He said right after the hello: “Daddy, do you know that your new Pontiac 6000 was flattened by an accident caused by Mimi’s driving practice?” Of course, I asked how she was, and fortunately, no one was hurt.

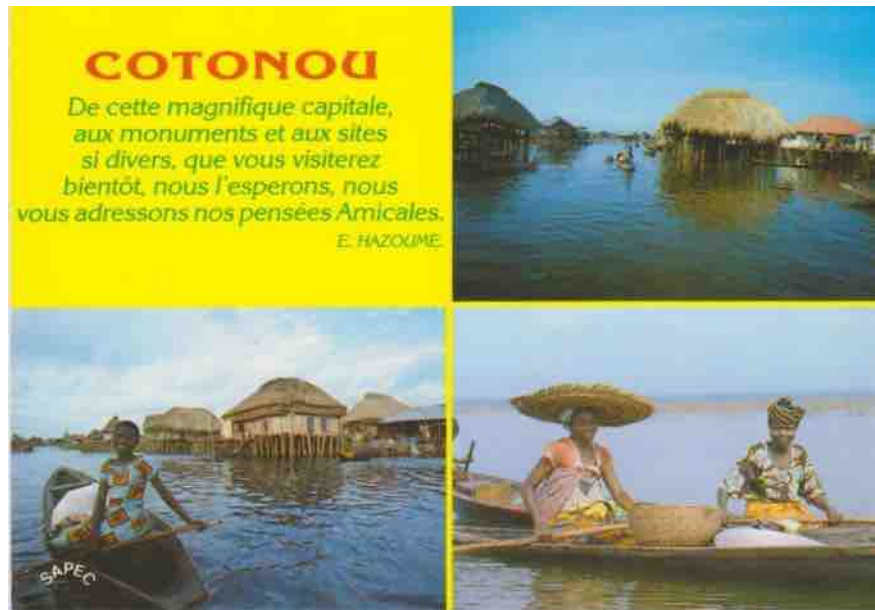
Another time on a Friday afternoon in October 1987, we got to the office from the site at about 4:30 PM. No one was there, but I had a key and opened the door. Suddenly we heard several blasts of gunfire, very close by. We realized something was happening, and through the office window, we saw a group of people running from the presidential palace, shouting: “Coup d’état, coup d’état”. The gunfire became fiercer; we lay down on the floor for a while and then decided to leave the building because it was less than a kilometer from the fighting. I was taken to the Independence Hotel because the Simandé was located on the other side of the lake, and the road was probably blocked because it passed near the presidential palace. Having lived in Vietnam in the period of 1963 -1975, this event did not surprise me much; I slept through the night even though I could still hear gunfire nearby. Early the next morning, I learned via radio and newspaper that a political takeover had occurred, and that the president, together with a dozen of his cabinet members had been killed. The new leader - a comrade captain of the previous president, Mr. Blaise Compaore – had taken power as leader of the Revolution, with the mandate to abolish the Socialist - Communist regime and put the country into the orbit of the Free World. It looked like his declaration appealed to the people.

This occasion gave me time to rest. I sat at the bar near the swimming pool, where I met a man who was short and looked serious, but who had a friendly face. I asked whether he was of Vietnamese origin, and he said he was Mr. Bùi hữ Tuấn, the former minister of the Civil Ministry of the government of the Republic of Vietnam, to which my employer VPC belonged. We got into a good conversation and eventually had dinner together. Several months later in 1988, I met him again in the Independence Hotel, and we had more time to discuss our jobs and futures. He was actually working on a feasibility study for developing an African inter-country highway for the World Bank; and he suggested that I stay in Burkina Faso to join him on the project. I replied: “I miss my family and want to go home first”.

However, travel was a good temporary solution for my homesickness. Before leaving for R&R in the autumn of 1987, I bought a hand-made crocodile purse for Phụng and took it on several flights, including the flight from Europe to Toronto via Vancouver. At customs, they took away the purse because it violated the law on the protection of rare species. I felt this was unjust since although crocodiles were nonexistent in Canada, they were superabundant in Burkina Faso; it was also a sentimental gift. I contacted the Foreign Ministry of Canada (of which the CIDA was an agency) and applied for a special importation permit. After a year, I received a registered package containing the purse from the customs department. I was happy not only with my recovery of the gift, but also with the way Canada’s government serves its citizens.

I also visited neighbouring countries like Togo, Bénin, Niger and the Ivory Coast on long weekends. The roads were mostly safe and paved with asphalt. Four of us took a four-wheel-drive cruiser, loaded with a cooler of food and water, along the Togolese National road R.N. 1, to the capital of Lomé. On the first night of our journey, we took a side trip to a French resort in the north of Togo. Amazingly, it was a five-star hotel in the midst of the forest where people came to experience the wildness. You could rent a safari truck to go into the animal habitat to see herds of various animals, and then gamble at the casino. However, I rarely saw French monuments or buildings in the country. I realized that the French were here strictly for exploitation and colonization.

On the second day of our trip, we went south to Bénin and visited Lake Nokoué to see the village of Ganvie, with its 500 floating houses; we then proceeded to the Sheraton Resort in Cotonou, a beautiful facility on the coast. It had a private beach, and the guests were mostly Russian and French. The morning of the following day, before continuing our journey, we walked down to the shore for a swim. We were surprised to find that we were on a nudist beach. A dozen young French girls swam in the blue water or played volleyball on the white sand. They seemed so calm, happy and sexy in a country whose people were extremely poor.



We got to Lomé late that evening and checked into a French hotel near the beach. We then went out to dinner and to a pop dance club. The Togolese enjoyed a much better life under their monarchy, which had a parliament and a Western influence. We also took a sightseeing tour to the old royal palace built before and during the French colonization. This was a complex of several bark and thatched houses containing gifts exchanged between the European colonists and the ancient Togolese kings, including artifacts like hats, sets of seats, stuffed animals, and some European military equipment like bronze cannons and guns.

As well as the Simandé Hotel, Ouagadougou has a large lake to store fresh water, and is bordered by a line of flamboyant trees (phượng vĩ) entirely covered with red flowers. This landscape reminded me of Huế's Perfume River and Quảng Trị's Thạch Hãn River each time I passed by.

While living in the Sahel region, I did not neglect to explore its scenery, particularly its wildlife. One weekend, my administration officer - a Burkinabe who had graduated from the Sorbonne - proposed a half-day journey to a swamp containing thousands of giant crocodiles, one of which was rumoured to be considered sacred by the local residents.

Burkina Faso 1988 – Sacred crocodile living in a swamp



On the way, we dropped by a small market to buy a chicken. From the pebbly shore of the lake, we could easily see hundreds of crocs floating on the muddy water. The driver made the bird cry "cheep, cheep", and from somewhere in the lake a croc of around 3.0 meters long approached. We

let him come closer, and then the driver fed it the live chicken. The beast looked relaxed and lay quietly on the shore. They told me: “Now we can ride on his back without any problem”. The officer led and I followed. I truly forgot the danger and briefly sat on his back. On the way home, I regretted taking the unnecessary risk.



The province of Kompienga is typical of the Sahel region in its people, landscapes and animal habitats. You could see nomads carrying all their family's possessions, quietly and miserably moving day and night through deserts or dangerous forests in a harsh climate.

Burkina Faso 1988 -
Meeting with nomad
people of the
Kompienga region

They were not of the same race as the African Burkinabe; they looked elegant, being tall and slender with light brown skin, high noses and large eyes. They seemed to be the descendants of North African Arabs who immigrated to West Africa to trade or graze their herds.

You could sometimes see herds of several dozen elephants alongside the road, but you always had to be alert and ready to run if they charged. One summer day, we loaded some drinks in the cooler and drove deep in the forest to look for animals, such as wild hogs, antelopes, zebras, elephants, giraffes, and lions. Because it was so hot, they just stood under a bush or a tree to rest and try to digest their food.

Burkina Faso 1987 -
Wild elephants
herding along the
road in Kompienga
Province



In Africa, we saw how people helped others who had no resources, especially when they fell ill. These non-benefit religious or humanitarian groups included Catholic nuns, Caritas, and

Doctors without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières). Their members, some of whom were medical specialists, voluntarily worked to help their patients, often in remote jungle areas and without remuneration. For instance, when a family member of a Canadian colleague suddenly got sick, we had to transport the patient to a medical research centre near Niamey (Niger), I was astonished to see a huge complex of hospitals equipped with sophisticated technologies, operated by nuns for research and treatment of tropical diseases. These people are doing noble work.

My long residence in Burkina Faso also showed me how privileged we are as North Americans compared to people in other parts of the world. We should, at the very least, pause to appreciate our blessing.

Burkina Faso 1987 -
A typical Burkinabe
village



As a consequence of living in Africa, I look at people with a more open mind. I value leading a simple life in sympathy with those who have nothing and who are at the mercy of the nature. Why do we keep squandering materials, equipment, energy and resources that could be useful to others? I also realized that the so-called international aid programs are sometimes not well designed to help the poor, making them more rather than less dependent.

At the end of my contract, I invited some friends from Ouagadougou to visit the Kompienga site. They helped me prepare a dinner of typically Vietnamese dishes to offer my French and Canadian colleagues who usually invited me to their houses. The guests appreciated the foods so much so that on my return to Canada at the end of July 1988, my project manager asked me to pass by Abidjan (Ivory Coast) to identify a good Vietnamese restaurant, and recommend a three-course menu for him to offer the delegates of the European Development Bank (EDB) on their way to Burkina Faso to evaluate the project's progress. This was the French way of doing business.

When I flew back to Canada near the end of October 1988, at the arrival gate of the Toronto Pearson International airport, I found my entire family welcoming me with flowers and hugs. I thought I had fulfilled my duty and was glad to return home to their love. I was especially happy to see my children growing up healthy and energetic.

Toronto Pearson
International Airport
1988 – Mission
accomplished, return
to family





1, Complexe Desjardins
Case postale 10
Succursale Desjardins
Montréal, Canada H5B 1C8

Avenue KENNEDY
B.P. 3924 - Ouagadougou Burkina Faso
Téléphone : 33-60-79
Télex SNC : 5450 BF

SNC Inc.

Kompienga, le 15 Juillet 1988

A QUI DE DROIT

Monsieur T.Thu NGUYEN a travaillé sur le chantier du Barrage hydroélectrique de la Kompienga (Burkina Faso) du 15 Mars 1987 au 20 Juillet 1988.

Pendant cette période, Monsieur NGUYEN fut responsable de la gestion technique et administrative des travaux objets du lot 5 : Postes de Transformation.

Monsieur NGUYEN s'est acquitté de sa tâche à notre satisfaction jusqu'à la fin des travaux qu'il surveillait, et nous n'hésitons pas à le recommander.

J.L. WILLOCQ,

DIRECTEUR DU PROJET

Section 13: Chicoutimi, Quebec (1988 – 1989)

13.1 The Laterrière Aluminum Smelter Project

After more than a year and a half away from my family, I did not want to accept any more overseas offers. It was time to look for something in Canada. I got my wish when Mr. André Gagnon, who was a dear friend on the Kompienga program, asked me to join him on the Laterrière Aluminum Smelter Project in Chicoutimi, Quebec to work for Bechtel Canada Inc., a subsidiary of Bechtel whose CEO was former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz. I enjoyed being in Quebec again after working in French in Africa, and the senior contracts administrator position suited my experience and was at somewhat higher level.

This project involved the construction of a 235,000 tons/annum smelting plant that used electrolytic technology to produce aluminum from the bauxite. I was responsible for directing all activities

related to the electrical systems and equipment of the plant, i.e., a 161 kV/69 kV/25 kV - 680 MVA substation, a dozen unit substations, electrical plant distribution and control systems, which were separated in ten contracts. I also had to handle related issues, including contractors' complaints or claims. The position allowed me to negotiate with contractors to resolve conflicts over plant design as well as over financial compensation. It was pleasant to work with the French Canadians in the beautiful city of Chicoutimi.

Due to the complexity of the project with a large number of contracts under my administration, I had full support from the project team. However, I found the need of hiring a few more inspectors, and was responded promptly by the construction manager. Once I received an application for the position of inspector/supervisor forwarded to me by the resident engineer for review. It turned out that the applicant was Nguyễn hữu Nhơn, a former VPC's engineer who also graduated from TCPT several years before me. I made a recommendation of hiring him. Nhơn then joined us and became my co-tenant of the apartment in Laterrière. We worked together and supported each other as brothers.

After more than a year in the position, I was judged by the management as the best contracts administrator.

13.2 Exploring Saguenay

Saguenay is a unique region of Quebec, several hundred kilometers away from metropolitan areas like Quebec City. To get there, you have to take Highway 175, which runs through mountainous areas populated by wild animals like bear, moose, and deer. Several times a year, the road would be closed for hours due to cars colliding with wildlife. But the landscape of the region is fantastic, with mountains, farms, lakes, forests, large and narrow rivers, cataracts, waterfalls, and most distinctively, Saguenay Bay and Saguenay Fjords, where whale watching is a seasonal attraction. French immigrants came to this area several centuries ago for fur and wood, and formed strong Francophone communities. There is a whole world to explore.



Saguenay's major towns are Chicoutimi, Jonquière, Laterrière, Palma, and La Baie. Each has its own style and famous properties, many of which can be seen during a stroll or drive along the rural roads of Laterrière. However, to really see the region's magnificence, we should spend several days touring the bay and fjord by ship. In the spring, we rented a mobile home to fish for trout in some of the lakes suspended on ancient volcanoes. The best time for trout fishing is in the early morning (at about 4:30 AM), when the fog still covers the water; we took a boat, rowed to the middle of the lake and cast our lines. The reward for our few hours of effort was not our half dozen rainbow trout, but total peace of mind and the enjoyment of nature. While trout tastes good when steamed or grilled; it is even better when it is smoked by the Saguenay's residents. On special occasions like Christmas, my Quebecer friends offered me this delicacy as a gift.

During my stay in Saguenay, I observed that the people were polite, kind and friendly. Particularly when you communicated with them in their language, you got their respect and friendship. Most

ladies were quite fit and pretty, dressed and applied their makeup in the French style. The Vietnamese community was also quite strong, with Vietnamese being the third most often spoken language in Chicoutimi after French and English.

Once, when I went to a barber shop for a haircut, the owner asked my name and I said “Nguyen”. He replied: “So you are a Vietnamese Canadian, and you are an engineer or a professor”. I was surprised and asked him how he knew. He replied “Because all the Vietnamese I meet here are engineers and professors”. This made me curious; I read some local magazines and realized it was true. I started to make contact with the Vietnamese community, and met several nice people and their families, including Dr. Bùi Tiến Rững, the former dean of the Mechanical Engineering School and director of the TCPT as well, and now a dean at the Université de Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC), and Nguyễn minh Nhứt, a mechanical engineer. It was nice to have people with whom to talk and occasionally gather. Moreover, at the time, other Canadians identified the Vietnamese community in Chicoutimi as having the most highly educated members.

Each winter, the Saguenay receives a lot of snow, so people tend to stay at home. In fact, the locals take winter very seriously, particularly if they live on the outskirts of the city. They stock up on logs and canned or dried foods, sharpen their skates and shovels, and tune up their snowmobiles early in October. As I did not have this mindset, winter nearly got the upper hand in that weekend. I returned to Bagotville Airport at noon after visiting my family in Mississauga, and proceeded to the parking lot to get my car. But during my three-day absence, two feet of snow had fallen and the hundreds of vehicles now looked identical. I found myself as lost as I was in the desert surrounded by sand dunes. I had to wait several hours till a snow plough came and cleared a space between two



lines of the frozen cars before I could identify the approximate location of my own. You must also have a tool to break icy snow - I used a screwdriver that I usually carried in my briefcase during the winter, and my safety shoe as a hammer.

Shipshaw hydroelectric
power station –
Saguenay, Quebec

I will never forget the earthquake that struck in the winter of 1988, which damaged many electrical substations and systems, and blacked-out the city for days in double-digit negative temperatures. The evening it happened, I was driving from Chicoutimi to my apartment in Laterrière, my car seemed to lose its balance at the time of the blackout. I stopped on Talbot Boulevard and got out of the car; under my feet the road was shaking, and outside there was total darkness. Back at my apartment, all my picture frames had fallen to the floor.

As the Saguenay is a mountainous region with a high potential for power generation, I was eager to explore its hydroelectric facilities. I therefore took a trip to the Shipshaw hydroelectric complex that supplied most of the aluminum smelters in the region, including the Laterrière smelter. It was simply built using the abundant water and strong flow of the confluences of the Saguenay River, and generated many megawatts. I was amazed by this technology and wanted to participate in the engineering of such a facility in the future.

13.3 Family concern

At this time, my wife and I realized that our children had become teenagers; we needed to buy a house and I needed to be at home with them. By the end of May 1989, Phụng had identified a home on Golden Orchard Drive that was ideal in terms of location, layout, neighbourhood and price. On a weekend visit, I found that everyone including the children, was happy with it, and we made a firm offer to move in by July 1, 1989.



Buying the house was a fait accompli, but maintaining it has been a continual effort. On my first visit to our new place, I received a note in my mailbox, saying: “Please do not devalue our neighbourhood; mow the grass”. I realized this was good advice, and thought it was time to go home. I told my engineering manager that I wanted to leave the project to return to my family, particularly to my teenage children. He said he could alter my personal contract so I could officially go home for three days every two weeks without changing my salary and benefits. I promised I would talk it over with my wife and respond in two days. After speaking with her, I once again asked him to let me go. He replied that he wanted me to stay till the completion of the project, hopefully about a year from that day, and offered to increase my salary by 20 percent, along with all the previous promises. But Phụng and I agreed that this was not the time to think about money. I told my manager: “Mr. Morneau, I deeply appreciate your understanding of my family circumstances, but I cannot change my decision”. He made a final compromise: “I want you to be on the active list of the Bechtel Canada Inc., so I can let you withdraw on a leave of absence for up to a year”. I accepted the proposal.

On the day of my farewell, the administrative team and my engineering manager presented me with a commemorative plaque with the words “En souvenir de son séjour au Saguenay Nguyen Thu Tremblay, de ses Confrères Administrateurs”. (Tremblay was my nick name, because it is as commonly used in the Saguenay region, as Nguyen is in Vietnam). The ladies of the office kindly hosted a farewell party with blueberry-stuffed chocolate cake for dessert (as blueberries were the specialty of the region), and they even sent a large cake for my wife and children.

I left Saguenay by the end of August 1989. A year later, I was invited to join Bechtel on a power plant project in Sarnia, Ontario; but I declined. By the year's end, I received a cheque of about \$2000 for profit sharing from Bechtel Inc., and understood what Mr. Morneau had done. He was definitely a nice boss!

Mississauga 2005 – At home. Some precious time together as family



Section 14: Monenco Agra Inc. (1989 – 1997)

14.1 Overseas Power Services

After having left Saguenay, I returned to Mississauga and immediately started working for Cambrian Agra Inc. This was thanks to Mr. Louis Nguyễn, a colleague on the Colombian Cerrejon Project, who helped me get the job after the interview. I was the senior design engineer for various small projects on industrial power systems. This did not particularly interest me, and thus caused some frustration. Fortunately, my employer merged with Monenco Inc. to form Monenco Agra Inc., evolving into a more resourceful company that provided power services to the Caribbean and some African countries. I became the lead engineer in studies on various technical issues of small and medium-sized power systems, and often joined the other specialists to go overseas to discuss the potential projects or to collect data for developing the design. They included the protection improvement project on Dominica Island, Suriname's power systems interconnection and improvement, Montserrat's power system planning, and Guinea's power planning for aluminum smelter development. Sharing my knowledge of newly developed devices/equipment, and electrical control and protection systems with the utility companies was much more interesting to me.

Guinea (Africa): In October 1991, Monenco Agra Inc. sent a study team, which included me as an electrical specialist to Guinea for a potential project on long-term power system development to support aluminum mining and smelting. We arrived in the capital of Conakry via Amsterdam and were transported to the mining site, which was about 2.5 hours away. On the drive, we were educated on the customs of the indigenous people, including the practice of cannibalism that still survived in some remote areas. This made me cautious when entering the deep forest where the Kamsar facilities of the CBG Mining Company were located. That evening we dined at the company's restaurant, and then a housing unit was assigned to each two of us for the three-week visit. On the first night, however I couldn't sleep and kept the lights on.



Guinea 1990 – Visiting
Conakry’s Grand
Mosque

Despite our busy work schedule, we visited several famous sites, including Conakry’s Grande Mosque and the modern housing village on the outskirts of the city; we also took a day trip to Mali. On our return, we had a stopover in Paris for our connecting flight to Canada, but persistently bad weather caused it to be cancelled. We decided to go to a hotel near Charles de Gaulle Airport to rest. In the afternoon, the team leader, who was also vice-president of the company, asked me to join him for a promenade, as I spoke French fluently. In the evening, we had a three-course meal at a restaurant on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées overlooking the Arc de Triomphe. The bill came to around \$350 before tip. My boss put it on his expense account. He just said: “We are worth that kind of money, with our contribution to the project”.



Barbados 1991 – A
main street of
Bridgetown

Barbados (West Indies): In Barbados, we performed a similar study on power development and grid expansion. This is one of the largest Caribbean islands, whose capital Bridgetown is bright and modern. Their most famous dishes are flying chicken (or large frog) legs and grilled dolphin, which is served almost everywhere on the island. Barbados has several beautiful beaches, plantations and historic monuments, such as the Garrison (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). I visited this island several more times in my retirement.

Dominican (West Indies): In 1992, I made several trips to Dominica to work on power systems improvement and distribution protection studies. The island's landscape is panoramic, with mountains, valleys, beaches, tropical forests and water falls. I savoured its Créole (old French) cooking and was impressed by its pirate village.



However, during my last visit, when I was scheduled to teach a course on the relay settings and co-ordination of the protective devices on the distribution system, I got into big trouble. Due to strong winds, we had to land at an airport on the east side of the island, and then take a minibus to the city of Roseau. When the bus dropped some passengers at a location near a village, I noticed that it was a while before we started driving again. On my arrival at the hotel, I took my luggage out of the trunk, only to find it was much lighter. My dress suit, shoes and some other items had been stolen.

West Indies Dominica 1992
– Visit to National Park
with a client engineer

I informed the front desk clerk of the situation, and half an hour later, I received a telephone call. At the other end of the line, a person who identified himself as the interior minister asked for the details of what had happened and promised to find my belongings. This incident was immediately reported by the national broadcasting station in the day.

The next morning, I reported to the Dominican Electricity Corp. to begin my series of lectures. I received expressions of sympathy from the manager, even though I was violating the dress code because I had lost my suit and my dressing shoes. After leaving the office that afternoon, while walking to the market, I suddenly saw a beggar carrying my suit over his shoulder, and my shoes in his right hand. I called a nearby policeman and identified the thief. He arrested him and invited me to the police station to file a complaint so the case could go to trial. I told him that I just wanted to recover my belongings, and that the culprit was just a poor man. I did not want the authorities to jail him for this type of crime, but only to give him a notice or a warning according to their judgment. I left the island after teaching the course for two days.

Belize (South America): In July 1995, the Belize Electricity Company invited me to discuss a potential study on improving the control and protection systems for the interconnection of their diesel and gas power plants with their hydroelectric plant. I conferred with a strong technical team of several representatives from their T&D, Generation and Substation departments. During the interview, they brought up several concerns and asked me: “How will you assess the levels of the relay activation and operation when you do not have the appropriate computer system and/or program?” I answered, “I will draw on my knowledge and experience to calculate the line and system parameters and short circuits by hand to evaluate the maximum and minimum fault levels of the system. For greater precision, I would use the computers in my Canadian office to verify the values when I prepare my report”. They immediately gave me the project, which was about 3000 hours of study and some engineering work for my company. That evening, one of the managers

invited me for dinner at his residence, and I asked him why the approval process had been so tough. He replied, “We needed someone with real expertise to tackle the problem, rather than someone who depends on computers and always asks for this or that software. And we were happy with your confidence”.

Belize has several monuments and pyramids built by ancient South American civilizations, though many more were destroyed by the Spanish.

Belize 1995 –
Visiting Mayan
Ruin Altun Ha



Belize 1995 –
Visiting Mayan
Ruin Cerros



Montserrat (Caribbean): Our three-member design team travelled to the island to collect data and discuss a long-term plan for power generation and grid development with the Montserrat Electricity Company, both to encourage tourism and to mitigate the frequent effects of hurricanes. It was very beautiful island, with beaches, farms, tourist resorts, housing properties, and a famous semi-dormant volcano. We had rooms in a beachside resort for the entirety of our stay, and were assigned a chauffeur to take us through Plymouth, smaller towns and other points of interest. We also visited the Souffrière Volcano (1050 meters high), since we were considering it for power development because of the geothermic energy generated by its bubbling lava. Two of us, who were the youngest members of the team, took more than a thousand steps to the top of the volcano for a closer look. After a week-long visit, we returned to our office and completed the study, which contained my input on the proposed power grid, in the allotted three months. The report was

revised to include some comments from utility and other supporting organizations, and was then resubmitted. We did not hear much from the client from that point.

In the late 2000s and thereafter, I learned from newspapers and television that Souffrière had erupted several times, destroying most of the inhabited areas of the island; the entire population had to be evacuated.

West Indies Montserrat
1992 – In the resort on
Black Sand Beach



Suriname (South America): We conducted a system study for the local utility company in this country as well; I was assigned to go to Paramaribo to collect data and discuss the project with the client. The work was quite similar to that we had done in Belize. I stayed at Torarica, an upscale hotel booked by the utility company. Every day after work, I passed by the hotel casino, but I was never tempted to go in. On perhaps the fourth afternoon of my stay, when I walked pass the casino, a formally dressed man greeted me and introduced himself as the manager and invited me to have a coffee with him at the service counter.



Suriname 1992 - Famous
Keizerstraat Mosque is
located adjacent to the
Shalem Synagogue in
Paramaribo

I was surprised to see a well-dressed middle-aged couple sitting beside me and speaking French. Because their conversation somewhat

interested me, I turned to them and politely asked, “Bonjour! Il me semble que vous êtes français?” The gentleman replied, “Oui, nous sommes français, mais ma femme est une française d’origine vietnamienne”. I was amazed to meet a Vietnamese lady in the midst of this strange South American country, where people spoke Dutch or local Mayan dialect. We had a pleasant conversation. After about half an hour, they asked me to dine at their residence that upcoming Saturday. I had no difficulty finding their address because it was the French Embassy.

I was offered a stylish three-course dinner with French wine. We had Vietnamese appetizers (amuse-gueules) like spring rolls (chả giò), Vietnamese ham (chả) and grilled shrimps (tôm rang

muối), followed by French-style steak and dessert. We talked about the Vietnam War, about my evacuation in 1975, etc. I learned that the gentleman had been a diplomat in Vietnam before the event of April 1975, that he had met and married a Vietnamese girl, and that they had returned to France some years later. He had been made ambassador sometime before I visited Suriname. When I was about to leave, the lady asked me if I could help them in temporarily supporting a French sailor and his wife who had been stranded in the country for two months, when their boat broke down on a voyage from Brazil. They had run out of money, and the woman was pregnant. The embassy had been feeding them on humanitarian grounds while they waited for some parts to arrive from France. During my remaining week of service in Suriname, I ate at inexpensive restaurants rather than at the higher-end ones that were covered by my expense account, to have enough money to pay for their meals without overburdening the company.

The Surinamese people lead a peaceful and artistic lifestyle. On weekends, they would gather in front of the presidential palace to compete on the beauty and singing voices of their nightingales. I was told that during these shows, a lot of money changed hands, and that a good bird could sell for several hundred thousands of U.S. dollars. Their capital Paramaribo is also famous for having its Keizerstraat Mosque and Shalem Synagogue built adjacently each to the other.

Martinique 1992 –
Excursion to Fort-de-
France by ferry from
Dominica.



Other Caribbean Islands: While travelling on business, generally on weekend I took sightseeing tours at my own expense to Antigua, Trinidad, Martinique and Guadeloupe. These are beautiful islands with plantations, dormant volcanoes, beaches, and particularly good French restaurants. In Martinique, at the entrance to the city of Fort-de-France, I was stunned by the statue of Joséphine Bonaparte, the wife of Napoléon, who was born on the island. She led a lavish lifestyle and caused much controversy to the private and public life of the great French emperor.

Trinidad 1992 –
Port-of-Spain



14.2 The Valerie Falls Hydroelectric Project

In August 1991, I was assigned to lead the team handling the electrical engineering activities for the Valerie Falls Hydroelectric Project in Ontario. The project was the dream of Davis Boileau, a businessman who wanted to convert his large family property, which had a fast-flowing river that poured into a lake, into a power generation facility with a capacity of 10 Megawatts; he would then



sell the energy to utility companies under the non-utility generation (NUG) program. This dream could only be achieved through the expertise of our professional team at Monenco Agra Inc

Atikokan, Ontario 1994 –
Valerie Falls Hydroelectric
power plant

Over the next three years, we performed all phases of the Project, including the feasibility study, conceptual design, detailed design verification, construction management, and commissioning of the start-up activities. As well as doing the in-office design, I made frequent trips to supplier factories in the U.S. and Canada to assess the manufacturing progress, and to watch the equipment tests. Moreover, during the termination phase, I spent several weeks in Atikokan (a small town 250 kilometers north of Sudbury) to lead and inspect the commissioning and start-up of the plant.

Things always seem to go wrong near the end of a project. For instance, our first attempt to synchronize the plant with the 132 kV grids failed due to a cabling problem. I directed the commissioning team non-stop for 23 hours until the issue was resolved. It took a huge amount of effort to keep the client on schedule with his commitment to the buyer (the Ontario Hydro at the time). A few months after completing the project, David Boileau paid for me to attend the inauguration ceremony and gave me an extra week of vacation. He eventually became a friend.

When I visited the Valerie Falls site to inspect the construction and monitor the performance of the equipment under commissioning tests, Davis would usually take me out on the weekends to see moose, bears and beavers. We would also paddle a canoe on the Valerie Reservoir to fish for white bass and trout. That scenery was amazing. We usually dined at the only Vietnamese restaurant in Atikokan, which had delicious spring rolls. When I left the town after the project completion, the owner offered to us a special meal. I asked them: “Why are you doing this for us, when you have already cooked for us several times?” They answered that they wanted to give us real Vietnamese family food, which was more authentic than what they served in the restaurant. I deeply appreciated their nice gesture.

Davis also came to our home for dinner on one occasion, when he demonstrated his ability to remotely monitor his plant using my computer and software installed on his remote computer. I was pleased that he valued our successful design and execution of the project.

Atikokan, Ontario
1994 – Valerie Falls
6.9 kV/132 kV step-up
substation



Section 15: Bolivia (1996)

15.1 The Zongo Valley Hydroelectric Project

As our children had grown up - Mimi was 24 years old and David was 18 - I felt more confident in letting them lead their lives. In 1996, in response to the economic downturn, the Company downsized their activities by working on small jobs that quickly became boring. The spirit of adventure rekindled in me, and I decided to look for international projects again. The former manager for Valerie Falls Project, Mr. Eric Hanson recommended me for a position as a senior advisor on the Jiangya Dam Project in Hunan, China although I eventually declined due to unsatisfactory terms regarding family relocation and visits.

I once again got to travel when I reviewed the details of the proposed engineering program for the Zongo Valley Hydroelectric Project, which had been awarded to Monenco Agra Inc. For appreciation of my comments and corrections, the project manager, Mr. Dennis Chen offered me a two-year renewable contract as senior resident electrical engineer. I was given non-resident status and Phụng was allowed to join me, while the children stayed in Canada. Everything was going well, until just five days prior to our departure, when Phụng got into a car accident and possibly suffered internal injuries. Thus I left for La Paz alone.

The Zongo Valley Hydroelectric Project involved the construction of new plants and the refurbishment of several existing ones, which were fed by a cascading water system, and generated 80 megawatts, plus an interconnecting high-voltage transmission line at 132 kV.

15.2 My Trip to the Town Site

In May 1996, I checked into the five-star Radisson Hotel in La Paz, and was surprised to be given a pot of coca-leaf tea in my room within fifteen minutes of my arrival. I learned that this was a customary offering to visitors after they landed in the city, which was 12,000 feet above sea level (ASL). I drank it and felt very relaxed.

The following day, I went to the Monenco Agra Inc. office to receive my Toyota pick-up; the chauffeur assigned to me was a young guy and married. Early that afternoon, we were en route to the housing compound in Zongo, where I resumed my life as an expat. After about an hour of navigating city streets and a muddy suburban area, we arrived at the foot of Huayna Potosi Mountain (which is 20,000 feet high). Before embarking on the steep mountain road, my chauffeur paused and made the sign of the cross on his body, and he asked me to do likewise. Instead, I prayed in the Buddhist manner, “Lạy Phật”.



Bolivia 1996- My
project house in the
Zongo Valley

From Lake Milluni in the El Alto area, the road down to Huaji Yungas was a red, earth-paved single lane; extremely narrow, rough and steep; it descended from 13,000 feet to 7,500 feet within 20 kilometers. The turns vary from 30 to 60 degrees, and the route becomes more slippery in rain or fog. If we met another vehicle travelling in the opposite direction, we had to move the car to the surrounding peaks, sometimes we had to back the car. I tried not to look to the narrow and sinusoidal routing, but only looked at the mountains surrounding us. On reaching the valley, however, we were welcomed by the beautifully green water of the Zongo Lake, which was fed by the melting snowcaps of Potosi Mountain.

Nature presented us with various breathtaking landscapes, from the rocky, flat subarctic zone, where animals like llamas and alpacas grazed the road to subtropical highlands like Đà Lạt (Vietnam) with horses, cows, sheep and goats. After more than two hours on the road, we arrived “sain et sauf” on the site campus. The compound consisted of six villas and about twenty apartments, a restaurant and a community center, all newly built for the project.

15.3 Getting to Know Bolivia

Every day, we were given three meals at the restaurant by a cook and a waitress who had a Spanish style of service that the medium-class Bolivians seemed to enjoy. Several times, when I was impatient for a drink, I would go and refill my cup of orange juice and return to the table; but my Bolivian colleagues disapproved of this, saying: “No, Thu. Please let the girl do that”.

The country’s fruits and vegetables are amazingly good. In the market or at street vendors’ stands, we could easily find pineapples weighing up to three kilos and up to 40 centimeters long, and kiwis as big as oranges.

Coca was commonplace, and piles of fresh coca leaves could be seen in the open market. I was told that during the Spanish colonization, miners were sent to underground pits to work for three or four consecutive days due to restrictions in transportation. They were poor and had no nutritious food to bring with them, and relied on chewing coca leaves or some other form of coca to have the energy to finish their shift. I think that the use of coca leaves is a way of life among the South American people. While some products derived from coca may be dangerous, eliminating it as a commodity may not be justified in Bolivia.

Bolivia 1996 – Tiquimani
Plant construction site
at over 12,000 feet ASL,
at lunch time



The project was complicated in that we conducted the construction while maintaining the operation of the power plants. But I did not have experienced engineering staff, except for a few new graduates. Living at that high altitude, shuttling between Zongo and La Paz, and eating unfamiliar food, all made me quickly exhausted. One winter morning, when it was snowing and very windy, I was urgently summoned to the Tiquimani site (the first being developed on the cascading system, and was over 12,000 feet ASL) to direct the contractor on certain engineering details, I got sick.

Bolivia 1996 – Transmission
line interconnecting Zongo
Valley power plants



As I stayed outdoors several hours in these conditions, that night, I could not sleep and in the morning, I found that my eyes had turned red and my mouth was deformed. I had contracted Bell's palsy, a disease that people frequently catch in that area when working at high altitudes in cold and windy weather.

It was decided that I should stay in La Paz, where I could be treated by competent medical professionals. After six weeks of medication and therapy, I was able to return to Zongo Valley and resume my duties.

David's Visit: Two weeks into my stay in La Paz, David came down for a visit. I picked him up at the El Alto Airport with mixed feelings of confusion, happiness and pride. Although one of my eyes was covered and my mount was twisted, I was happy to take him around the city. We went to the marketplace, visited the famous monuments of Simon Bolivar and Christopher Columbus, and ate grilled duck at the penthouse restaurant at the Radisson Hotel. The duck was marinated with spices, rum, honey and pineapple to make it tasty, tender, sweet, and perfect.

Sitting at a table on the top floor of the Radisson Hotel while looking down at all the landmarks of La Paz, was an unforgettable experience.

Bolivia 1996 –
The ancient
Tiahuanaco ruin



Because I wanted David to have the opportunity to see the hydroelectric plants and the spectacular landscapes of the Zongo Valley, I arranged a site visit for him that would last several days. We also went to Lake Titicaca and the citadel of Tiahuanaco, located at 13,300 feet ASL. Western scholars estimate that it was built ten thousand years before the arrival of the Spanish by the Tiahuanaco people, using stones weighing dozens of tons with sharp cuts and interlocking edges to hold them together. Some standalone stones weigh up to 100 tons, and many monuments and statues remain undamaged. Lake Titicaca produces rainbow trout (called truicha), which are a regional specialty.

The Bolivian physicians treated me successfully and got me looking normal again. The day I left La Paz, I presented them a box of French chocolates with a note saying “I really appreciate your contribution. Thanks for giving me back my smile”. I then returned to Zongo Valley and tried to catch up on my work, which had been temporarily handed over to an American female engineer.

Phung’s Residency: As per the contract, Phung came down to join me under non-resident status. We started buying several household items and furniture with the intention of staying for the next twenty months. During the first two weeks, we were happy to explore the region, travelling down the sole road in the valley from La Paz to Vertigo, the last hydro site to be developed by the project. One weekend, we went to Lake Titicaca, suspended on a highland at 13,000 feet, where rainbow

trout was fished and deliciously served in a floating restaurant. Small rocky islands emerged from the clear blue water of the lake, which was bordered by brown reeds. With these plants, the ancient Incas built thatched boats that could navigate on the ocean.



Bolivia 1996 – Visiting
Lake Titicaca @
13,000 feet ASL

We also went downstream on the Zongo River to see the cataracts along the road between Tiquimani and Vertigo, observe the flora and fauna of the various climate zones. Foxgloves and orchids naturally grow along the road near waterfalls or rivers. In some hidden corners, if you drive too fast, you may fall into a cataract or a vigorous flow of water pouring from mountain caves.

After three weeks in the valley, Phụng developed a breathing problem, waking up at night and gasping for air. It was caused by the high altitude of the site. We got an oxygen tank to assist her at critical times, but it was not convenient for her to use it regularly.



The only thing I could do was to take her down to the Vertigo base (at 4,000 feet ASL), where the Bolivian Power Company (COBEE) had an office and recreation center, for her to breathe and rest.

Bolivia 1996 – Chiroraqui
Waterfalls in Zongo Valley

On these trips, we could appreciate the subtropical fauna and flora, as well as the waterfalls and cataracts. It was truly beautiful. But Phụng's breathing issue worsened, and she needed to go to lower altitudes more and more often. The only solution was to return to Canada, which she did after about three months of stay in Bolivia.



Bolivia 1996 – A
cataract on Zongo
River

15.4 Leaving the Project

The pressure started to build as I began to feel guilty about having left my family to live alone in a remote region of a remote country. Moreover, my project manager was controlling every aspect of

Memoir of My Life - Nguyen Trung Thu

my work, with a purpose. I figured out that he was trying to use my experience to help an Oriental American female engineer who was working in his office under his direction, and whom he assigned as my assistant. I thought it was a bad idea to fight because Bolivia was not a country where a truth is a truth, and because the manager was not a straightforward man.

Bolivia 1996 –
Downtown of
Cochabamba City



As I was aware of this person's malicious character, I made careful preparations to resign, obtaining a letter from my physician, contacting the MAI Human Resources department, and bringing the matter to the attention of the site manager. I applied a familiar French proverb to the situation: "Qui veut voyager loin, prépare sa monture". I submitted my resignation letter by the end of November 1996 for reasons of illness and left Zongo Valley for La Paz.

Before returning to Canada, I made a side trip down to Cochabamba, 240 kilometers from La Paz, to see the countryside and the Spanish colonial monuments. This is a famous city located on a plain of the same name, and was called, "the breadbasket of Spanish Bolivia". Its pace of life is typical of a South American city, with Spanish music and dancing at most public places or occasions, and ladies' colorful dresses being seen everywhere. It was a relief to be there after eight months of service in Bolivia.

Bolivia 1996 –
Strolling with
students in a park of
Cochabamba City



Section 16: South Korea (1997 – 1998)

16.1 The Wolsong Nuclear Power Project

Back at the Oakville office, there was little work available, and I was assigned to the marketing group to prepare proposal packages. I was able to branch out into a new area, nuclear power generation when drafting the proposal for a Fusion Technology pilot plant in Ontario. It was thus that in 1997, the Company asked me to take a position as senior resident electrical engineer for the Wolsong Nuclear Power Project, which was being implemented by Atomic Energy Canada Ltd. (AECL) in Kyongju, South Korea.

Our mandate was to build three 680 MWe CANDU (Canadian Deuterium) reactor units on the same site the one AECL had previously constructed in 1967 for KEPCO (Korean Electricity Power Corporation). I would advise on and verify the work performed by the Korean engineering consulting firm that contractually worked for KEPCO. I was also given a married status during this successful project.

Thanks to my friend Đinh ngọc Bôi who provided me with reading materials to enrich my knowledge in CANDU reactor and its electrical systems, in order to win the tough selection process.

16.2 My Trip to the Town Site

After almost a day of waiting at Seoul International Airport, I took a local Korean Air flight to Kyongju and arrived at its airport in the late afternoon. I was taken by a KEPCO chauffeur to the housing complex in Naahri, a small town built during the construction of the first CANDU unit two decades before.



South Korea 1997 – Kyongju City: tombs of ancient kings are seen at the background

The trip was a harrowing experience, as a seasonal typhoon was sweeping through the entire Korean peninsula. Recalling similar weather in Central Vietnam during the 1950s, I was scared to brave the strong winds and torrential rain; but the driver did not hesitate to keep going, though the car sometimes skidded on the narrow road. I perceived that this Korean driver was determined to the point of stubbornness and would not give up easily.

South Korea 1997 –
Project house in
KEPCO Town site



16.3 Getting to Know South Korea

On reporting to work on Monday morning, I was taken to the engineering manager's office by Mr. Kim, the design team leader. He respectfully folded his hands and bent his head to greet the boss. When we left the office, he complained that I did not show sufficient deference to the person to whom I would be reporting. I said: "I am a Vietnamese Canadian. I do not have the same way of showing respect as you do". However, the Koreans are very straightforward, sincere, and honest; which are characteristics I value highly. They are also very athletic. After two hours in the office, everyone would stand up to do about ten minutes of physical exercise before going back to work.

Occasionally, on Friday afternoons, they would gather in groups to go hiking for several hours. I went along with them, but only once. I had to run all the time to keep up with them if I didn't want to get lost in the woods. As a result, I fell down, hurt my knees, got some bruises and ended up using a stick on the way back. It was truly an unforgettable experience.

South Korea 1997 –
Mountain hiking with
engineers of the
KEPCO Design
Department in Naahri



Naahri is located on the seashore, at the foot of the mountains running along the east coast, and is connected to the cities of Ulsan and Kyongju via narrow, steep and serpentine roads. Despite the need for supplies and food, I hesitated to use these roads in the first several weeks. However, since Phụng would be joining me within three months, I needed some driving experience so I could pick her up from either Ulsan or Kyongju airport. Things were made even more dangerous, because most Koreans had cars and enjoyed high-speed driving along the coast and beaches, particularly on weekends. This bad habit might be explained by the fact that they needed breathing room after their long days in factories or offices, although the beaches were muddy and the water was cold. Additionally, because there is not much land along the shoreline, most communities were spread out close to the roads. When driving, we often felt that we would run into someone's house.

On weekends, we went to the Naahri wharf to join the local amateur fishermen, who usually set up a small gas burner and some folding chairs on the concrete dock. I thought the stove was for cooking their catch, but was wrong. They just wanted to warm up their shochu (a kind of strong alcohol fermented from rice, similar to Japanese sake) to drink with their raw fish. On occasion, we were invited to eat with them.



Korea 1997 –
Enjoying
fishing on
Naahri wharf
with Koreans

When we drove through some remote villages, we observed that the people worked very hard, planting vegetables or sweet rice even on pieces of land that were of 1.5 m x 1.5 m squared. To maintain the country's agriculture in parallel with its industrial growth, the government banned the importation of foodstuffs and subsidized its farmers. Thus the cost of living was very high, especially for food. Once, when we wanted to make Vietnamese noodles (phở), we had to pay \$50 for the leg bone of an ox at Hyundai Supermarket.

The people were very nice, and always wanted to help foreigners with directions. However, due to the language barrier, they sometimes led us astray. Because they wish to be of assistance, they always answered yes to questions they did not understand, and used sign language. Several times we just got lost. It was also not easy to work with the Koreans as they were usually reluctant to compromise. I suspected this was why North and South Korea remained divided, when other divided countries had reunited. But the Koreans are disciplined, respectable people who always defer to their leaders. They are also loyal to their employers, sometimes to a ridiculous extent. I was surprised to see many team leaders, and lower and middle managers staying in the office from one to three hours after closing, but doing nothing. I later found that the company generally gave the managers bonuses equal to two or three months' salary on the New Year.

In the autumn of 1997, Mimi and Nina came to Kyongju for four days to see us. We took them to a Korean restaurant that used the traditional seating style (a low table and no chairs). We wanted to order my favorite dish "daeji bulgogi" (Korean-style barbecued pork), but I did not remember its name. We decided to communicate our order with pictures. Mimi drew a pig that looked like a mouse; the waiter shook his head no. Nina drew an unrecognizable animal. Then Phụng drew a picture of a dog. The waiter took us to the back of the house and showed us a big dog tied to a post, waiting to be eaten. We were embarrassed to say no. Finally, I drew a pig. He smiled and gestured yes. We eventually got a very good meal with some shochu to top it off. The following morning, before leaving for work, I suggested that my daughters could use the car to explore the surrounding area. I returned home at 5:15 PM, but found no one at home. I was a bit nervous. They only came back at 7:30 after visiting Naahri and Ulsan; Mimi had been in the driver's seat, although she had no experience on such dangerous roads.



South Korea 1997 – Mimi and Nina in Kvongiu Citv

We also went to Kyongju, the capital of the Shilla Dynasty (57 BC - 935 AD), to visit its historic monuments, ancient Buddhist temples, and royal tombs. Unlike the Chinese emperors, who built complexes of tombs and monuments, the Korean kings were buried under huge dome-shaped mounds of soil that looked like small mountains. These tombs made me think that they were simple and knew how to avoid burdening their citizens. The tourist attractions like the Golgul and Bulguk temples (which are both UNESCO World Heritage Sites) are ancient, large and sumptuously built on mountains or highlands, mostly in remote and quiet areas. They attest that Buddhism was extremely developed and practiced in Korea for several centuries.

For physical exercise, we enjoyed workout and swimming in the Sheraton facility, which was built on a geothermic heat source, since our membership was sponsored by AECL. It was sensational to swim in an open-air pool in winter, when it was snowing and the temperature was freezing.



Kyongju City 1997
– Visiting Imhaejon
pavilion (AD 674)

The project contract also offered R&R and vacations. In the spring of 1998, I took a month off to visit Vietnam. Phụng got to see her mother-in-law again after we parted in April 1975, and I think the reunion helped them understand each other better. On this occasion, we also met most of our relatives who had evacuated from the North.

South Korea 1997 –
Nahri, a traditional
seating style in a
Korean restaurant



From Saigon, we toured the country, stopping in Đà Lạt, Nha Trang, Huế, Quảng Trị, Hà Nội and Hạ Long Bay. I then came back to South

Korea while Phụng returned to Canada. But because the economic situation had been deteriorating in East Asian countries, especially South Korea since the end of 1997, KEPCO decided to take over most of the engineering and commissioning activities of the project, and repatriated its Canadian workers. My contract was consequently terminated by the end of February 1998, when the Wolsong Unit 2 was synchronized with the grid and the other two units were under commissioning.

Section 17: Pool of Monenco Agra Inc., AEC Ltd., Canatom Inc. and SNC-Lavalin Inc. (1998 – 2011)

17.1 The Merck Power Expansion Project (1998 - 1999)

I returned to Monenco Agra Inc. to work on industrial and nuclear power projects, stipulating no involvement in long-term overseas service. It was time to live with my family and watch my children starting off on their own.

New Jersey 1998 –
Visiting Liberty
Statue with a group
of North Bergen HS
students



From April 1998, I was involved in the detailed design for rehabilitating the New Jersey electrical facilities of Merck (an American pharmaceutical company) for more than a year. Fortunately, the lion's share of the project was carried out in Canada, though I welcomed the opportunity to work with American professionals and occasionally explore the eastern states. I enjoyed driving to New

Jersey via New York to study the modification requirements for their existing equipment and systems. I found that this corporation was as strict in adhering to their technical standards as it was in maintaining the quality of their drugs, but that it was quite generous in the treatment of their workers, and their respect for professional ethics.

17.2 The Pickering A Return to Services Project (1999 – 2000)

In the spring of 1999, MAI seconded me to the AECL (Atomic Energy Canada Ltd., a Crown corporation) on my request, as it had been selected to implement the PARS (Pickering A Return to Services) Project, which was for refurbishing four CANDU units that had been shut down upon the recommendation of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Authority) after the Chernobyl disaster. As the senior design engineer, I enjoyed the challenge of engineering for improving the nuclear plants' electrical systems. The work was interesting as we had usually introduced reliable equipment and new technologies to ensure quality and safety. Indeed, the nuclear power plant was a place where the best scientific and technical knowledge was applied. But the project was somehow mismanaged by both AECL and Client (the OPG).

Two years into the design of the modifications to return the CANDU units to service, the project ran out of resources. MAI was bought by the British company AMEC, while I went back to Canatom Inc. (a sister company of Monenco Agra Inc.) to pursue the challenges in the electrical design for nuclear power plant.

17.3 The Pickering B Environment Qualification Project (2001 – 2004)

I was nominated as the project manager of Canatom Inc.'s portfolio with Pickering B's EQ (Environment Qualification) Project, which was implemented by an OPG design unit whose office was in Oshawa, Ontario. The project involved determining appropriate replacement equipment, devices and cables to be used in case of an accident happening at the vital equipment and/or system of the nuclear reactor, and modifying relevant documentation of the plant. The work was interesting but hazardous (nuclear zone 3), as I had to carry out walk-downs in the restricted areas of the reactor and its auxiliary systems.

After a year, I intended to quit, but stayed on to support David through his dentistry program at New York University. I completed my entire three-year service term with OPG to have some extra income to help my son achieve his dream of working in an independent field. In the first two months, I travelled 100 kilometers each way from Mississauga to Oshawa five days a week. On the way back from Oshawa, the traffic was always very slow on HWY 401, and I fell asleep several times while waiting for it to move. I then decided to rent an apartment in Oshawa.

In the nuclear industry, everything is slow and safety is the top priority. However, many things could not always be controlled. One Wednesday afternoon, after having followed exhaustive procedures to enter the reactor to obtain site data and verification, I returned home to find that my eyes were turning extremely red. It took almost a week for them to heal.

The electrical design, which had been divided into several small packages, was progressing well under my multi-specialist team, till I made a presentation to my OPG managers on what had been done and what remained to be completed. They realized that the design would have too much of an impact on the plant's improvement activities and daily operations. To continue the project, the management had to narrow down the scope of the environmental qualification. This meant a serious reduction in the design staff, which took me back to Canatom Inc. in March 2004. From then on, most of our projects were done in our Oakville office.



Oshawa, Ontario
2002 – Halloween
at Pickering B EQ
- With OPG
design team to
rehabilitate four
CANDU reactor
units

17.4 The Darlington Used Fuel Dry Storage Project (2004 – 2005)

I next became the lead electrical engineer in the engineering and procurement phase of the Darlington Used Fuel Dry Storage (DUFDS) Project. It involved building loading and unloading bases, container transfer, and truck loading systems for used uranium bundles which were placed in a pool of heavy water (D₂O) over ten years. While the design was to be carried out in our Oakville office, frequent trips to the Darlington Nuclear Power Station were required to collect data via plant walk-downs, and to discuss the technical issues with the client's engineers and the design authority team.

Knowing the risks involved in highway driving during the winter, I would sometimes pray at night for safety. Once, I dreamed I was driving in a busy section of Saigon, when I lost control of my car due to a problem with the brakes. Amazingly, I did not hit anyone because pedestrians and other cars would move when they saw me coming. As I looked at the side of the road, I saw my mother directing traffic with her hands, like a policewoman. I called out to her, "Mommy, what are you doing here?" Then I woke up.

Later in January 2005, I went to the Darlington station when it was snowing. In the afternoon, it turned warmer then sunny and windy. After meeting with the client engineers, on my way back in late afternoon, it was cold. I knew from experience that the roads might be slippery. Drivers were also going more slowly because of the weather. I carefully observed the road to avoid black ice. At one point, I turned the steering wheel slightly to another lane, but my car started spinning in the middle of the highway, occupying two or three lanes of traffic. I went around several times, totally losing control of the vehicle. Needless to say, I was scared, especially when other cars and trucks started honking at me. I told myself, "Let it happen! Que sera sera". For some reason, my car turned towards the outer lane, hit the metal barrier, and stopped. I found myself facing the traffic, safe in the service lane. I got out of the car so that people could see I was alive, and made an inspection; the trunk was seriously damaged. But I was unharmed, without even a scratch. I don't know how I escaped from injury or death. But I knew that my mother was always beside me, looking out for my safety.

The DUFDS project ended after two years of detailed design and construction assistance. I became the company's contact person for everything related to the electrical systems of the nuclear power station - creating proposals, preparing technical documents, reviewing design packages from other specialists, interviewing new technical staff and training employees. The engineering vice-president

wanted to promote me to electrical department manager, but the job didn't interest me. However, I was asked to take it on an acting basis for six months. I had to spend too much time on things I didn't enjoy, and I felt my efforts were being wasted. After the allotted time, I confirmed that though I wish to stay with the engineering position, someone else should take on the management responsibilities.

17.5 The PBMR Design Scoping Mission in South Africa (2006)

In the spring of 2006, SNC-Lavalin Inc. (the engineering and construction giant that bought Canatom Inc. to expand its Nuclear Division) sent a team of experts to South Africa to conduct a scope definition study on building a 200 MWe demonstration power plant to develop the PBMR (Pebble Bed Modular Reactor) technology, and I was asked to handle the electrical engineering activities.

Recently invented by Germany, this new type of nuclear power plant uses fuel spheres of coated uranium dioxide encased in graphite, with helium as a coolant and energy transfer medium to a closed-cycle gas turbine. We were very well treated during our six-week stay at the Golf Suites Guest Lodge in Centurion, a town between Pretoria and Johannesburg.



South Africa 2006 –
Staying at Golf
Suites Guest Lodge
in Centurion

By the end of our trip, we had successfully drafted an engineering activity list, cost estimate, and budget structure

for the work my company would do in near future for the Electricity Corporation of South Africa.

Since we were impressed with the temperate climate and beauty of South Africa, and expected to be sent there as consultants for the utility company, we ventured outside the city to explore the countryside. Moreover, while in Pretoria, we could not resist visiting the Sterkfontein Caves (a World Heritage Site), where the first hominids lived over three million years ago and where Lucy's skeleton was found. We also toured Kruger National Park, which had many wild animals. We were excited to see some hogs digging for roots, a band of elephants, some rhinos, a dozen gazelles, a couple of giraffes, ... and even a leopard walking alone on the trail.

When we came back to the rest and service area for lunch, we were surprised to see half a dozen wild hogs eating behind a restaurant, as it was easier for them to be fed by the tourists or find food that had been discarded than to dig roots in the reserve! A recreation center named Sun City was near the park, with a modern and crowded casino similar to those in Las Vegas.

The study was successful, as SNC-Lavalin Inc. got a long-term contract for the detailed design soon afterwards. I was asked to join the project under married status, for working in South Africa, but I

refused because I was concerned about the security in the country. Besides, it was time to forego overseas service and live with my family.

South Africa 2006 -
Visiting De Wildt
Cheetah Research
Center and Kruger
National Park



Part IV: FAMILY LIFE AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Section 18: Family Life and Community Participation

18.1 Efforts towards Our Children's Education

Both of my parents' families highly valued and promoted education. So did we. Two major events affected the education of our children: Quebec Bill 101 and the school in Saudi Arabia. The first created obstacles to overcome, while the second gave our kids an educational advantage.

Saudi Arabia
1983 – Al Nour
School: Mimi on
receiving an
award



Saudi Arabia 1983 -
Al Nour School:
pupils were under
good care of Ms.
Hennessy (teacher)



Mimi attended an English-language kindergarten and elementary school in Port Cartier, Quebec. But by the time we moved to Montreal in 1978, Bill 101 had mandated that most immigrant children attend French-language schools. Not wanting our children to be hindered by the political situation, we fought hard to enroll them in Anglophone schools, using Phụng's Lower Cambridge English Certificate to convince the French Language Committee that her mother spoke English. The government then allowed Mimi to attend an English-language school; and the exemption was extended to her siblings afterwards.

Conversely, in Saudi Arabia, the schooling was spectacular. A team of Canadian expat teachers covered grades one to thirteen for less than 150 students. Thus, in their three years in the Al Nour School, my children made great progress in the enriched program offered there. When we relocated to Ontario in early 1984, they were slightly ahead of their peers.

Mississauga 1984 – After having moved from Quebec, children restarted well their living and schooling in Mississauga



In Mississauga, Mimi had no trouble enrolling in Glen Forest High School. She graduated with mark A+'s in 1993. We encouraged her to pursue a career in medicine; and to this end, she took a four-year program in biology at the University of Toronto (UofT). But Mimi was not interested in this field, and therefore got an average GPA in her B.Sc., making it hard for her to get into medical school. She attempted to get accepted to a private medical university in the U.S., but was not successful. However, thanks to her dynamism and intelligence, she decided to switch to banking and has done very well.

In the meantime, Mimi became involved in social activities through youth organizations and was recognized by the mayor of Mississauga for her many contributions, including two months of work for a humanitarian housing project in Costa Rica. In 1995, we were proud to be invited to a lavish ceremony hosted by the mayor at Mississauga City Hall, where she received the First Young Citizen of the Year Award.

Despite her nearsightedness, Nina was very bright. When she enrolled in Glen Haven High School in 1984, her counselor advised us to place her in grade seven instead of grade six as we had proposed. After a short time, she was unhappy with the curriculum offered by this school and asked to be transferred to an immersion program at Lorne Park High School to improve her French.

Toronto 1995 – Nina's graduation from UofT



Still not satisfied with the regular program, Nina was given a curriculum designed for gifted students. In 1988, I was summoned to a meeting where her counselor and the principal proposed to promote her to grade eleven when she was still in grade ten. When they asked my opinion, I responded that I had skipped two grades at once as a child, and was okay at the end of the year. In high school, Nina loved reading and writing. This was confirmed when she received the Academic Excellence Award from the Quảng Trị Mutual Friendship Association in California, in a writing competition. Of course, Nina had no difficulty getting into a pharmacy program at UofT right after her graduation from the immersion school with A mark in 1990. When she earned her degree, she was the youngest accredited pharmacist from that institution. She also received the Champion Award for the 1995 PDW Competition organized during an international seminar for pharmacists in Montreal.

Los Angeles 1997 – Eugenie's excursion to LA to see grand-parents



In school, Eugenie seemed to have the problems; she would draw a snowman or a flowering tree while others were learning. This was why her work was only average. She also attended the Lorne Park immersion program with her sister Nina.

During this period, Eugenie tried hard to keep up, sometimes working until late at night. We often advised her to take it easy and to go to college instead of university, but she was very determined and said: “If Mimi and Nina can make it, so can I”. She completed secondary school with acceptable marks and without interruptions. Eugenie enrolled in the University of Windsor in 1992, but left her four-year nursing program three years later.

Because of her good singing voice, we proposed to enroll her in a music school, but the attempt failed due to her lack of interest.

David mostly did well academically, from the Al Nour School in Saudi Arabia to Glen Forest High School in Mississauga, although sometimes he lost orientation because of his high devotion to sports. In 1993, he was selected to be part of a six-student Canadian cross-country skiing team in an international winter junior competition among 25 countries in Collingwood, Ontario. He also proved to be good at tennis and won trophies in community competitions, and started to like hockey as well.

However, training for and participation in these sports took a lot of time, and David sometimes missed class and received complaints from his teachers. We sadly advised him to abandon his dream of being a competitive athlete. According to our judgment, his Oriental physique would not allow him to advance in the long run, and would make it hard for him to excel as a professional player. Therefore, we thought he should focus on pursuing a career in medicine, dentistry, engineering, or an equally conventional field. He agreed, on the condition that he could play

hockey or tennis after securing a job. David finished secondary school with A's, and easily got into UofT for a bachelor of sciences degree in kinesiology.

He ended up working in a hospital after taking some programs in administration and management. Then one evening, David came home from his downtown apartment and said: "Mommy and Daddy, I want to go back to university for a post-graduate program so I can work independently". We liked his idea, and asked: "Have you applied to UofT?" He answered: "I did, but they have not responded yet. In the meantime, New York University has offered me admission to a four-year dentistry program".

We said that it must be very expensive, to which he replied that it was something like \$80,000 or \$100,000 CAD a year. Naturally we encouraged him to wait for UofT. He answered: "They may or may not accept me this year, and it will delay my graduation. If I graduate one year earlier, I will earn at least the same amount of money." He continued: "Please let me know how much you could put aside to help me yearly, and I will take care of the rest". We thought he was right and that we should partially finance his post-graduate ambitions.

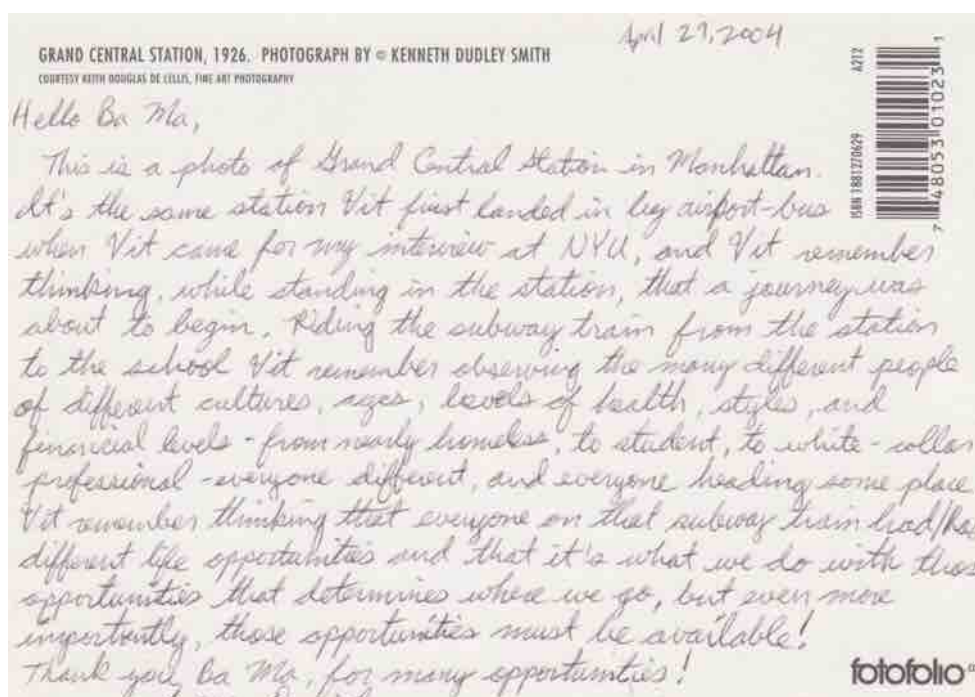


Collingwood 1993 –
David and
teammates at the
international junior
skiing competition

On his return to New York after a visit home, he sent us a postcard thanking us for our support. We believed that David took well the opportunity and confirmed our faith in him by graduating as a dentist in 2006.



Mississauga 2002 –
David got our support
to the post-graduate
program at NYU



Some Thoughts on Education in North America

I believe I should say something about the concept of education in North America. Every day, the media bombards us with complaints about children's behaviour towards their parents. It is claimed that they buy their parents one-way tickets to their original countries to avoid taking care of them. They flatly order their parents out of the house, or worse, ask that the deed be transferred into their name and then find some way to put them out of their home. Some children try to avoid contact with their parents so that they can dodge the caring responsibilities, etc.

I have observed that the more education these children receive, the more selfish they are. I see a parent living with a wealthier son or daughter less often than with a poorer one. In countries affected by Confucianism like Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam (before 1975), when we said that a man was well educated, we meant that he was not only competent in his profession, but in his knowledge of the teachings concerning virtue and good behaviour towards his parents, relatives and society. But in North America, virtue and good behaviour are not given the same weight against study in science and technology, because they are simply not taught in school. I have never seen a curriculum that teaches children how to behave with their parents, relatives, teachers or friends. It is totally up to the perceptions of the child. If we are lucky, we will have a good child who cares about us; if not, we have nothing in return.

Recently, on a cruise on Panama Canal, we sat with a group of teachers, some of whom had/have influential positions in the American education system. When we discussed this issue, they agreed that inculcating virtue is the responsibility of the parents, not the teachers. We were not totally convinced by this premise because not all parents have the time or skill to be good instructors.

As parents, this neglect from our children is unbearable, because the older we grow, the more we need love and care. While we understand that our children want time for themselves, and we might accept living in a nursing home if necessary, we still need our kids to cherish us. So what should we do? My answer is that we must have a plan. We should try to achieve our own financial independence, and expose our children to Oriental values. Why should we lose beautiful concepts about virtues like “Kính trên Nhường dưới” (*), “Nhân, Nghĩa, Lễ, Trí, Tín” (*), “Cần, Kiệm,

Liêm, Chính” (°) and “Tề gia, Trị quốc, Bình thiên hạ” (to be a successful person, you must take good care of your family – of course you must know how to treat your parents, so you can manage your country, and then keep your people in peace).

Last but not least, we should draw the attention of our legislative representatives to the issues of teaching virtue in our schools via our votes.

18.2 Family Life

As our children grew up into teenagers, my permanent presence in their lives became increasingly important. We perceived that the children needed a place they could call home. In the near future, they would be leaving for homes of their own, but on certain occasions, they would remember to drop by for a visit. This was the time for us to buy a house, although prices were near the top of the market. We bought our house in a good, well-organized neighbourhood of Mississauga that was close to most of good schools. I had resigned from my management position with Bechtel to come back home. It was the time for us to focus on caring for the children, gardening, reestablishing relationships with relatives who had currently immigrated to the U.S. and Canada, and becoming involved in community activities.

From the fall of 1989 to the fall of 1995, we had more time to help our children participate in school and extracurricular activities as I was always at home. To expand our knowledge of Canada, we frequently travelled together to cities like Ottawa, Sherbrook, Montreal, and tourist sites. We welcomed friends who wanted to visit Toronto and/or Niagara Falls and took our children to California to see their relatives.

My Father’s Visit

Although my father voluntarily left the protectoral regime and joined the Việt Minh to fight for the country’s independence, he was always interested in French culture and the Western civilization.

Mississauga 1995 –
Reunion during my
father’s visit



As a public employee in South Vietnam, he courageously attended night school to learn English and familiarized himself with the Western science and technology development. I therefore thought he would be happy to visit North America and see his grandchildren. Now that a better relationship had been established between the Vietnamese Communist regime and the free world, I realized that it was time to offer him a trip to Canada and the United States. At the time, applying for a visitor visa in Vietnam was a painful process, particularly because he was among the first citizens to do so.

In the summer of 1995, almost two years after submitting his application, he was allowed to leave the “communist-socialist paradise”. I also got for him a U.S. visa so he could take several trips from Toronto to Buffalo to see my sister Ngọc Diệp’s family. My mother in-law and sister Nhon, as representatives of the Lý family, also kindly joined us in Canada to share the joy of our reunion.

My father enjoyed discovering the Canadian landscapes and its people’s way of life, and exploring the cities in the States as well. I was happy to see that he was happy.

Nina’s and Mimi’s Weddings.

Nina Thiên Trang Nguyễn &
Kenneth Chan.

Mississauga 1998 –
Nina & Ken’s
engagement: Ken
with his parents
(Mr. & Mrs. Chan)
and Nina with us



Mississauga 1999 –
Nina & Ken’s
wedding, traditional
ceremony at home



During this period, we were also preoccupied with preparing Nina’s wedding, which was held in the summer of 1999. It became a family weekend project. We were kept busy compiling the guest list, choosing among various restaurants, visiting tailors for tuxedos and gowns, coordinating with the in-laws, and finally, conducting wedding rehearsal. Though we could have had a simple ceremony, it was a pleasure to do all we could for our daughter, especially now that she was leaving to start her own family. It was also an opportunity for all everyone to work together to make things happen according to our standards. We successfully organized three weddings: a Vietnamese family ceremony at our home, a Chinese family ceremony at our in-laws’ house, and a

traditional Canadian ceremony in public. We ended the day with an amazing party at Dynasty Restaurant.

Mimi Thiên Nga Nguyễn & Albert Frank.

Mississauga 1999 –
Mimi & Albert's
engagement:
Albert with his
parents (Mr. &
Mrs. Frank) and
Mimi with us



One year later in the summer of 2000, Mimi's turn came. We were now experienced wedding planners and the ceremony was simpler, as per Mimi's request. The wedding party was to be held at Casa Loma in Toronto. Because the in-laws were Jewish Canadians and we would have many Canadian guests, we wanted to do things in a Western style. With the help of our children, we successfully negotiated the new customs and organized a great wedding ceremony and reception.

We appreciated the contribution of our friend Đinh ngọc Bôi, who performed some music, and of our SVNCP colleagues, who provided the MC Service along with the DJ team.

Toronto 2000 –
Mimi & Albert's
wedding under
public ceremony



18.3 Contact with Relatives

I am proud that I have been able to keep in touch with people related to both of my parents, before and after the war. I value these relationships because I believe that my parents had very good families who respected, loved and cared for each another.

After the Communist regime started welcoming foreign investment and visits from Vietnamese expatriates, I made my first trip to Saigon in 1990 to see my parents and most of my other remaining relatives, and to acquaint myself with my as yet unseen relatives who had been with the North during the war and who moved to the South after 1975. I realized that although they had been on the other side of the struggle, many of these people were not Communists, in their way of thinking, talking and doing things as I had thought. I wondered whether the regime had really controlled them and converted them into heartless people, or whether Communism had failed. I therefore felt comfortable talking and participating in various activities with my extended family, particularly in the building, restoring and visiting of the cemeteries and tombs of our ancestors.

For me, the country of Vietnam, its people, and particularly both sides of my extended family are important, while its government and politics are only temporary. On my visits, I occasionally organized large family gathering to exchange ideas about sciences, technology, and life and to relive old memories.

We also frequently visited close relatives in various parts of the U.S., going several times to Los Angeles to see my in-law parents, and to Houston, Dallas, Austin and Oklahoma to strengthen ties with other relatives. In 2009, we went to Australia for five weeks to be with Chánh & Hồng, as well as with other relatives and friends. Of course, we took some time out to enjoy the monuments and landmarks in the places to which we travelled.

Visit to Vietnam in 1998: When I was working in South Korea, we took a month-long vacation to Vietnam to see our parents and to enjoy our first Tết (Lunar New Year) in the country since the day we had left. A welcome was organized by Uncle Hương at my Cousin Quang's house.

On this occasion, I particularly got to know my Uncle Nguyễn đăng Trình (Tùng Lâm) who was long-time with the North Army, honestly led a simple life in his retirement. Not like other influential officials usually did, he had refused all types of potential corruption to benefit himself. Having been sympathetic and family-minded, he certainly gained my respect.

Vietnam 1998 –
Meeting with
relatives at
Cousin Quang's
house in Saigon



My visit in 2000: My mother passed away in the autumn of 2000. I came home for her funeral, which most of my extended family attended. The eulogy read by a relative was very touching, and showed respect and appreciation for my mother's lifelong contribution to her husband's family. She was finally laid to rest at Lái Thiêu Cemetery, and a tomb was built for her under my care.



Saigon 2000 –
Mother's funeral,
attended by most of
the relatives at both
family sides

Our visit in 2006: During this trip, we sponsored a gathering of over fifty members of my extended families. Three generations met at a restaurant in Saigon District 1, where we could meet new faces and

recognized old ones after over half a century of separation. During this visit, we had also opportunities to see other cousins who had lived in Central Vietnam and in Hanoi. We were always happy to meet each other on the grounds of culture and tradition of the Nguyễn Đăng family, although we might be different in the politics and norms of life.



Saigon 2006 –
Meeting with the
extended family
members in
District 1 (cousins
Ty & Yến, Us,
Quang and...)



Quảng Trị 2006 –
Visiting the
Nguyễn Đăng's
temple and
relatives living in
Vinh Quang
village (meeting
with Cousin
Nguyễn Đăng
Bữu and others)



Los Angeles 2010
– Gathering of Ly
siblings' after
Dad's funeral



Australia 2009 –
With Chánh & Hồng's
extended family in
Canberra

Our visit in 2013: After my father's demise, we went back to Saigon to celebrate his 49th day after death, as per Oriental custom. On this occasion, we built his tomb at Lái Thiêu Cemetery, where my mother was also buried.

On our return to Canada, we stopped in Paris for a week to see Sister Cúc Anh's family and other relatives like cousins Nguyễn quang Tùng and Nguyễn quang Bá. They took us to several Parisian landmarks and cabarets for dinner, music and dancing. The French people seem to cast their economic worries aside and enjoy a luxurious lifestyle.

Saigon 2013 -
Father's tomb
was built in
March 2013,
side by side
mother's tomb



Paris 2013 – One
week stay with
Sister Cúc Anh's
family in Ville
Logues



18.4 Community Activities

My spared time on weekends was mainly devoted to the Society of Vietnamese Canadian Professionals (SVNCP). Now that we were established, we realized that it was important to help new Vietnamese immigrants adapt to the society and gain the respect of native Canadians.

We organized several socio-cultural activities to introduce Vietnamese professionals, artists, and businesspeople to the Canadian media to promote mutual understanding and respect.

We met almost every weekend to discuss, plan, establish activity programs, and solicit support for the Vietnamese community from various levels of government. These activities included presentation to the Race Relations Management Committee, some proposed changes to the Professional Engineers Act entitled “Admissions into PEO: Proposals For an Appeal Process”, a Vietnamese arts and crafts exhibit, a Vietnamese folk music performance by Bạch Yến and Trần quang Hải, etc. To gain our audience's respect, we always tried to keep our events looking

professional, from the facility, to the organization, to the features of arts and artists. Within this SVNCP, I was a functioning member of the board.

We occasionally brought our children to these events, hoping they would trigger an interest in Vietnamese culture. I recall one of my children saying after the Vietnamese folk music performance: “Daddy, we realize that Vietnam had a culture and a civilization in the past”. This made me proud of my participation and confirmed that my effort had it paid off.

I was honoured to work with a team of well-educated Vietnamese Canadians like Dr. Nguyễn Văn Yên, Dr. Đặng ngọc Danh and Kim Hoa, Dr. Nguyễn hòa Bình and Nguyễn thị Thu Lan, Dr. Nguyễn Văn Phú, Dr Lê Xuân Lộc and Mỹ Hoa, Đàm Trung Phán, Phạm chí Đức, Trần Lưu Diễm Hương, Nguyễn Kim Cúc, Nguyễn mỹ Hiền, Đinh ngọc Bôi and Mai Hường, Quan and Robert Steele, Đỗ Quyên, etc. They always showed a team spirit, worked in a professional manner, devoted themselves to a common purpose, were open-minded, and became good friends. Though our activities ceased after about eight years, our friendship remained. We became a group that gathered to share concerns, points of view, and good and bad news, and still participated in social and cultural events.



Mississauga home – SVNCP friends gathering

18.5 Contact with Friends from the VPC

Once most former VPC employees had left Vietnam for other countries – mainly the U.S., France, Canada and Australia – after 1975, there was a group of friends who devoted to making connections with former colleagues. This non-profit organization was established in early 80s, and still exists.

Every year, a group of former employees would host a reunion, which usually lasted three days, in the city where they lived, and would greet and entertain the participants coming from other states or countries. It was our turn in 1993. Some of my colleagues and I undertook the challenge of organizing a three-day gathering in Mississauga for almost 100 people. We enjoyed recalling old memories with colleagues and friends, and exchanging ideas and perspectives on our new lives. We were also glad to introduce Toronto and its vicinity to our guests.

Mississauga 1993 –
Gathering of former
VPC colleagues &
friends

In keeping with the spirit of our friendship, we occasionally received groups of VPC colleagues at our home. These occasions fostered mutual understanding and empathy, and made our lives more enjoyable.



Mississauga 2000 –
Meeting with VPC
friends/colleagues:
couples of Nguyễn văn
Thích, Hoàng mạnh
Cần, Ngô đức Huấn, Lê
văn Lợi, Nguyễn công
Thuần, Hồ tấn Phát
(former CEO of VPC)
and Nguyễn Trung Thu
in home garden.



Section 19: Conclusion

As I mentioned in the preface, I wrote this memoir mainly to leave something to my descendants, so they can better understand me and my family. Some readers may think that my life has been too easy. I realize I have been enormously lucky and that I have survived many challenges and adventures. I believe that I have earned this reward through the virtues my ancestors and I have cultivated.

Only by remembering the achievements of their forbears can future generations know their roots and the pride of their family. Our ancestors struggled to build their lives over several centuries and decades and passed their values on to us. Our success did not come naturally, but has been achieved with the help of their common heritage of hard work, determination, intelligence and experience. We should celebrate them by leading lives of integrity, conscientiousness, and love, not only for the

parents, siblings, and other family members who share our roots and values, but for our friends and for people who have fewer opportunities as well. Beyond this, we are in the hands of fate. But fate can also be altered by the accumulation of virtues like understanding and compassion. Indeed, showing compassion towards people, both makes us happy when we give it and brings us rewards in the future.

But compassion is not enough without effort and ability. We must build up our knowledge to be ready to deal with any situation, or to adapt to a new environment without depression or failure. We may sometimes have to fight with others, not to win, but to make them accept our co-existence or co-operation. Never try to destroy a rival because he has a different mindset or approach.

Decision making and determination are the keys for success. When facing a new requirement or challenge, we should study the issue, find the best solution, and figure out how it works and the possible consequences if it fails; then we should decide without delay. When the decision has been made, stick to it to achieve our goal. And if the solution isn't good enough, acknowledge it and try to change it.

I would remind my descendants that we can always find something interesting to learn and appreciate in a new location, society or environment. As well as allowing us to finance our lives, work gives us the opportunity to enjoy them. Everywhere I've travelled, I tried to study the local geography, people, history and culture so I could understand them more deeply through lived experience, rather than through books or magazines. Fundamentally, everyone is born with goodwill (Nhân chi sơ tính bản Thiện), and I've found decent people everywhere in the world when I have been able to get to know them.

Writing a memoir is no easy task, as I mistakenly thought when I began this project. Moreover, experience has taught me that people don't like to hear much about oneself, although the genre is by nature autobiographical. Bearing this in mind, I have tried to avoid generating bad feeling among my readers, while changing the facts as little as possible. I hope they will understand my situation and forgive any mistakes I have made.

It is fitting that I should thank Canada for accepting us as landed immigrants, offering us citizenship, and allowing us to work and contribute to the country and to humanity through its program of international aid and co-operation.

Finally, I must express my gratitude to the friends and relatives who have commented on and corrected this manuscript. I would particularly appreciate my friend Phạm chí Đức - a former SVNCP member - who patiently helped me create digital files and trouble-shooted my computer problems; and my dear wife Phụng for supporting me on recalling some details of the past events, and selecting family photos for attachment. You have made this memoir clearer and more precise.

Part V: PRE-RETIREMENT AND RETIREMENT (2007 – Present)

(To be developed later)

APPENDICES

1. Curriculum Vitae – Nguyen Trung Thu

Home address:

4255 Golden Orchard Drive
Mississauga, Ontario
Canada, L4W3G1

Born: August 15 1944 in Xiengkhoang, Laos

Education:

Tran cao Van Elementary School, Hue (1955 – 1956)

- Diploma of Primary Study (1956)

Ham Nghi High School (Hue, 1956) &

Nguyen Hoang High School (Quang Tri, 1957 - 1961)

- Diploma of Primary High School (1961) at Very Good grade

Nguyen Hoang Secondary High School (Quang Tri, 1961 – 1964)

- Baccalaureate I (1963) at Very Good grade
- Baccalaureate II (1964)

Technical Center of Phu Tho (Saigon, 1964 – 1968)

- Bachelor of Sciences in Electrical Engineering (1964)

Mc Gill University (Montreal, Quebec 1978 – 1980) – Evening class

- Post Graduate Studies: Completed course credits for Program of Master of Engineering

Toronto University (Toronto, Ontario 1984)

- Post Graduate Studies: Programmable Controllers, Industrial Instrumentation and Controls.

Career:

Field Engineer at Construction site of Quang Ngai Sugar plant (1968 - 1969)

Officer at Regional Power Exploitation – East, Vietnam Power Co. (1970 - 1974)

Manager at Power Utility Centre of Dinh Tuong, Vietnam Power Co. (1975)

Field Engineer for Port Cartier Pelletizing Project, Draco Construction Ltd., Canada (1976 – 1977)

Senior Engineer for Qaseem Electrification Project (Saudi Arabia), SNC Group Inc. (1978 – 1983)

Resident Engineer for Qaseem Electrification Project - Phase II (Saudi Arabia) SNC Group Inc. (1986)

Senior Engineer for Cerrejon Coal Exportation Project (Colombia, S.A),

Carr-Donald Consulting Engineering Ltd., (1985)

Contracts Administrator for Kompienga Hydroelectric Project (Burkina Faso, Africa),

SNC Group Inc. (1987 – 1988)

Senior Contracts Administrator for Laterriere Aluminum Smelter Project (Quebec, Canada),

Bechtel Canada Inc. (1988 – 1989)

Senior Resident Engineer for Zongo Valley Hydroelectric Project (Bolivia, S.A) then for

Wolsong Nuclear Power Project (South Korea), Monenco Agra Inc. (1995 – 1998)

Senior Design Engineer for Merck Electrical Rehabilitation Project, Monenco Agra Inc. (1998 – 1999)

Project Manager for Pickering B EQ Project (MAI portfolio), Canada, Monenco Agra Inc. (2000 – 2004)

Lead Design Engineer for various Nuclear Power Projects, SNC Lavalin Group Inc. (2005 – 2011)

Other Activities and Affiliations:

Order of Engineers of Quebec (OEQ) – 1977

Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), Senior member – 1983

Professional Engineers – Ontario (PEO) – 1984

Society of Vietnamese Canadian Professionals (SVNCP), Board member -1990

2. Documents of Qualification





THE INSTITUTE OF
ELECTRICAL AND
ELECTRONICS
ENGINEERS, INC.

In recognition of professional standing
the Officers and Board of Directors of
the Institute certify that

THU T. NGUYEN

has been elected to the grade of

Senior Member



September 1, 1983

James B Owens

President

Wasad.. Kodali

Secretary

3. Award of Recognition

Particularly in the Oriental cultures, an employer generally expects an employee's loyalty. Workers can anticipate spending their whole lives with a company, and in exchange the Company will invest in them and fulfill their needs, providing housing, yearly bonuses, healthcare programs, etc. But because of the competitive job market and lack of cultural expectations, North American employers usually do not take this view. Consequently, an employee, beyond his responsibility to comply with the Company's procedures and code of ethics, is not required to be loyal. My concept of career advancement involved performing to the best of my abilities in the preferred field and area of my profession. This caused me to change jobs occasionally to suit my geographic and lifestyle preferences. But after many years of work, I ended up back at the same company where I started, and where I wanted to hold a long-term career: the SNC Group Inc.

I began working for SNC Group Inc. in Quebec in 1978, but left it by the end of 1983 for job endeavour in Ontario, though I rejoined it several times thereafter as a contractor. Only in 2005, when the SNC Lavalin Inc. merger decided to expand its Nuclear Division and acquired Canatom Inc., for which I was working, did I returned to my original employer. In 2007, I was surprised to be invited to join its Quarter Century Club and received an award of recognition during a sumptuous evening ceremony in Montreal. On this occasion, I was offered a customized Longines watch.

In writing these paragraphs, I want to thank SNC Lavalin Inc. for the chance to participate in international mega-projects and to work in various countries to enrich my knowledge and advance my career.



Montreal 2007 – Receiving Award of Recognition from the President of SNC Lavalin Inc.

Award
OF RECOGNITION
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

This certifies that

Thu Nguyen

has actively participated in the success
of the Company for twenty-five years.

To acknowledge your exceptional contribution,
the SNC-LAVALIN Group officially welcomes
you into the prestigious Quarter Century Club
and proudly presents this Award of Recognition.

25
QUARTER
CENTURY
CLUB

In witness whereof, and with our deepest gratitude,
we hereby sign this certificate.

2007


President and Chief Executive Officer


Senior Vice-President
Global Human Resources


SNC-LAVALIN