

BAO TRAN, SOUTH VIETNAMESE AIR FORCE PILOT '69 –'75

Bao Tran: My name is Bao Tra, B-A-O T-R-A-N. I'm an ex-Vietnamese Air Force pilot. My last was a First Lieutenant of the Squadron 429th based at Tan Sanut Air Base, 6th Air Division.

Interviewer: What years were those? What years were you active in the war?

Bao Tran: I'm acting from 1969 to 1975.

Interviewer: Become involved with the American-Vietnam War, give me some of the background if you would please.

Bao Tran: I was born in a military family. My daddy, his last position was Full Colonel, and his last position also as a military attache of the South Vietnamese Embassy out of Tokyo. I was involved in the war because at 1968 I was in college, and because of the intensity of the war in 1968 after the Tet Offensive, we all had been drafted by the war. I was engaged in the Vietnamese Air Force, and applied my ... Drafted in the Vietnamese Air Force.

When I was in the Air Force, I was sent in the U.S. for pilot training. All the bases I've been through is from Lackland for English training, then to Keesler Air Force Base for the Basic Training on T-28. After my graduation as a pilot, then I was assigned as the C-47 pilot training for air familiarization at England Air Force Base at Louisiana.

I came back in Vietnam 1969, and my first squadron was assigned was Squadron 415th, then Spooky Squadron 817th. I flew for about two years in that Squadron, then because of the Vietnamization Program then we had more cargo planes. We were assigned for new aircraft training, it was the C-7. First my training was at the Phu Cat Air Force Base at Queen Young City. After that, the whole Squadron was moved from Phu Cat to Tan Son Nhut Air Base until the end of the war.

Interviewer: Your father was a Full Colonel. Did he fight in the early years, way before the Americans, against the French?

Bao Tran: Actually, my father was ... His position assigned, we called it imperial guard unit of the last emperor of Bao Dai, and then later he was assigned as the military attache for Emperor Bao Dai. Until Bao Dai was deposed in '54, then he was involved in some operation in South Vietnam in the 4th Court encounter some operation involved in clean up all the Ven Swen forces or Hao Forces which at that time was against [inaudible 00:04:28] regime. After that he was assigned

Commanding Court from Nha Trang, he was assigned as a Chief of Staff for the NCO Academy in Nha Trang. Later he was assigned also as the Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese Military Academy at Da Lat in around 1963.

Interviewer: He wasn't actually at the Battle of Dem Bien Phu, right?

Bao Tran: No. No.

Interviewer: After the French did leave, of course then we had the offenses breaking out between the north and the south, was your family fervently anti-communist?

Bao Tran: We are anti-communist from the beginning of the war because know the position that my father, he already choose his side because at that time at his age, he was involved in upheaval in 1945. Even though, the communists try to get him in their side, but since because my father was see the best things from the Vietcong, that's why he choose to go with the French side which is involved not against the communism.

Interviewer: You're just in high school when the Americans finally arrived in 1965. When they were coming into Da Nang, and they were guarding an airstrip up there. They had certainly been there for seven or eight years in an advisory capacity to the South Vietnamese because then they were starting to ... The Vietcong were starting to attack South Vietnam villages. What was your family's reaction when another nation came into your country to basically fight the communists.

Bao Tran: Actually because my father, when he worked in some ... In his position, he had some advisor along with him, and we see that it's a good point for South Vietnam after we gained back the freedom from the president team. The only way that we bring a better life for the South Vietnamese people and also for all of us.

Interviewer: When the Americans did start arriving in '65, did you and your family, your father, did you sense that they would probably easily overpower the North?

Bao Tran: Actually, we don't have any clue about how ... The opposition at that time, we don't know much about how the communists it's an evil thing. We know that we live in the peaceful air from the South. At that time, we had very few knowledge of the communists, and we're happy what we worth at that time.

Interviewer: Your family was fairly affluent, fairly upper middle-class because of your father's position with the former emperor and in the South Vietnamese government?

Bao Tran: That's correct Sir.

Interviewer: You, indeed, were eventually planning to go to university?

Bao Tran: Right. At that time I had no idea to be in the military, but because of the Tet Offensive, which was the entire South Vietnam was attacked by the communists. We have no choice but to be involved in the war. I was assigned, like volunteered, to be in the Air Force just to fight against the communism.

Interviewer: For your training, you said you were at Lackland, etc. What was that like for a young Vietnamese, you were probably still considered a boy at the age of 18 or so, what was it like to come -

Bao Tran: I was 20 at that time, yes.

Interviewer: What was it like to come to America in 1968?

Bao Tran: I'm very happy because at that time my father was already went in U.S. for some of his training in Fort Bragg. He was in Fort Bragg way back in 1960. He knows about how good is America, and my sister went to America in 1964. She has her education here, and then went back in Vietnam. We knew how good is America, how beautiful is America, and we know that there's a better life for myself. It's the right way to choose and be involved in this war and being in the U.S. for training.

Interviewer: What planes did you train on in the U.S.?

Bao Tran: We called it at that time, we was in the 6th wing train. I was trained in Keesler Air Force Base for T-28 for the training. After I finished my pilot training, and then I was assigned for C-47 training at England Air Force Base in Louisiana.

Interviewer: How many South Vietnamese students were there training in the U.S. at that time?

Bao Tran: My class was, I have about 40-some Vietnamese students in my class. It was under the program, they call it Military Assistance Program. Our class was involved with a lot of foreign students from Iran, Guatemala, Bolivia, Laos, the entire class was almost 100 students. I was trained from October 1969 until the end of 1970.

Interviewer: You returned to Vietnam, I assume you said you were based out of Tan Son Nhut?

Bao Tran: Yes.

Interviewer: What plane were you first assigned to fly?

Bao Tran: I first assigned as a sea-air co-pilot in a C-47 Squadron in Tan Son Nhut. At that time it was a transportation plane. Later, 6-months after that I was for the Spooky Squadron which is an AC-47 for night support for the troops, for the night flight support.

Interviewer: The Spooky carried the AC-47, could you tell us?

Bao Tran: We had some training at, our Squadron, we know that the Spooky is a transformation from the C-47 to the attack cargo plane with the mini guns and with the flare on the plane just to light up at night for the night support for the outpost was being attacked.

Interviewer: Was not that plane feared by the enemy quite a bit?

Bao Tran: Quite a bit.

Interviewer: Why?

Bao Tran: Because when they heard the Spooky come with all the, they called it the Dragon Fly, when the shoe that is just like roaring noise, it's a scary noise. For the VC down there, there's no way to hide because when the mini gun is shooting at them, it's just like you sprayed a hose of water on the water. It's very hard to escape from that.

Interviewer: The Spooky crew, was it all South Vietnamese, or was it co-mingling of Americans and Vietnamese?

Bao Tran: This entirely crew was Vietnamese from the aircraft commander to the co-pilot, to the load master, to the gunner, all this the Vietnamese crew. 7 crew on the AC-47.

Section 1 of 2 [00:00:00 - 00:14:04]

Section 2 of 2 [00:14:00 - 00:37:11] (NOTE: speaker names may be different in each section)

Bao: ... the seven crew on the AC-47.

Speaker 2: How many AC-47s were there in the ARVN Air Force?

Bao: ARVN at that time were only one squadron, which is about twenty planes. Twenty planes AC. First it was based on the Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base.

Speaker 2: This is about 1970. The Americans are beginning to phase out their role and turn it over to the South Vietnamese. Were you confident that you, the South Vietnamese could continue the fight vigorously against the North successfully?

Bao: At that moment, we think with the Vietnamization Program of the armed forces with the help of the US, we think for sure that we're going to win the war, but

because of that down the road, that till then, and after the Paris Treaty, we knew that because of some political situation that US will pull out of South Vietnam.

We never think that it ended like 1975. We were really disappointed, because with the power that we have in our hand, it's not easy to fight against us from the North. I don't know how to describe this, the situation at that time. We all confused at that time. Just, as a soldier, we just fight, but we don't know the political situation that that time was that bad until the collapse of the South.

Speaker 2: Did you ever have the sense that as a country, was kind of a pawn in a big political cold war between the United States, the Russians, and the Chinese? Did you ever get a sense that you guys were just in the middle of this and it was really between those super powers?

Bao: The position of the Vietnam, the geopolitical of the Vietnam is very crucial for that part of the region. The access of the South China Sea, with all the traffic that it's getting, more and more important, with all the traffic, and the position of Vietnam. Who can control Vietnam can control the whole area. That's why the influence of Vietnam, whether they in the US side or the China side, or the Russia side, always to give them plus to control that zone.

Speaker 2: It's almost as if we did stumble into a civil war between the North and the South of your country. Did you consider that really more of a civil war, than a fight for freedom and the oppressiveness of communism?

Bao: To me it's not the civil war, but was an ideological war between the communists and the capitalism at that time.

Speaker 2: Okay. How long were you actively engaged as a pilot? I guess it was, our last troops left in '73. You kept fighting against the North for what period of time?

Bao: At that time, we knew that we just, as a soldier, we just fight. Whoever, any position that you were assigned to, fly, just fly to do your job, and whatever comes after that, let it be like that. We never think about the day that the fall of the Saigon. It's really out of our mind at that time.

Speaker 2: How long were you actively in the ARVN Air Force?

Bao: From 1969 til 1975.

Speaker 2: '75.

Bao: Right.

Speaker 2: So you were actively on duty ...

Bao: On duty.

Speaker 2: ... Until the country fell?

Bao: Fell, right.

Speaker 2: ... ARVN forces fell is that the American's financial support did dry up?

Bao: That's correct. Til the last minute, we ... Our plane, let's say our plane, have a very limited gasoline. Every time we flew, we check a tank to see how it's full, but at the end of the war we have a very limited quantity of those supplies for us. Parts, air craft parts, gasoline, and for those squadron attack, like A-47, I mean A-37, or A-1 squadron, there is very few bombs that left over just to have to fight the war.

Speaker 2: It was very difficult to fight the North. Obviously the North didn't have any shortage of supplies coming in from the Chinese or the Russians. Did you sense that maybe things were not going to end well?

Bao: We have a feeling that sooner or later, probably this war without the support of the US, we're going to lose the war, but how we lose the war, we don't know how we would end up. My experience, we knew that after 1975 I end up in the prison, and I spent ten years in the re-education camp. I called it re-education camp, it's actually just a prison.

It's a gulag where I been like prisoner in my own country. That's really sad that if the communists know how to use all the resources from the South Vietnam to make ... Let's take a shake hands, our country would have been better, but because of the hate and the prejudice of the leadership of the North, then we all being a victim of the communists and be in prison. All the entire South Vietnamese region from the armed forces to the [inaudible 00:21:41] collaborator to the US, we all went to prison.

Speaker 2: Around April 30, 1975 when the North came down in force, and they were advancing on Saigon, what were you doing? What were you feeling when that was happening?

Bao: Really scared is one thing, but after one or two days, everything is calmed down, then we see that we have no choice. We in the hand of the communists, and if you tried to do something bad, you have to think about your family, and with all the people around you, so at that time your head is blank.

Speaker 2: Did you think early on that it might be well possible that they might kill a great number of the armed forces as well as bureaucrats?

Bao: That's what I thought, but you know the cruelty of the communists is they don't kill you right there. With a bullet it seemed very easy, but they kill you

slowly by putting you in prison and let you starving, hungry with all the disease in the prison. Slowly, slowly. We lost a lot of friends, comrades in prison because of that. Starvation, sickness, and all kinds of that.

Speaker 2: There must have been literally thousands of prisoners in these re-education-

Bao: Hundred thousand.

Speaker 2: Hundred.

Bao: Because at that time we was told to report, and then after that they gathered about few hundred, few thousand in old military came, ex-military came, then they detained. First they called it just bring whatever, enough for you to survive for ten days, then after that they changed the policy and then they [inaudible 00:24:14] They sent us to deep inside the remote area where we have to do our own to survive. Build our own prison. That's how it ... It was really sad.

Speaker 2: Did you say your father was there also?

Bao: Yes.

Speaker 2: How old was he at that time?

Bao: That time he was ... It based on their rank. He was a full colonel, so he had to report in a different camp. As I was a First Lieutenant, I'm in different camp, but he was sent to the North next to the Chinese border as far as I know. Later, when the Chinese attack in 1979, then we all moved to the South. Mostly moved to the South. I was released in 1984, and my father was released two months after me.

Speaker 2: ... the time that you stayed in these prison camps based on the rank that you had achieved, or what you had done in the war?

Bao: Let's say that in the paper I have with me, it says I made progress, quote end quote. I believe that because of the political situation of that time, that the pressure from the outside world, they released us slowly, camp by camp, and then eventually they released all of us. It's kind of hardship we endure during that time is unforgettable. It's like a scar in our mind.

Speaker 2: Have you been back since it has become a communist nation?

Bao: No. Since I was escape ... Actually I have to say that after they released me in 1984, under one year of strict surveillance, and then during that period I find a way out from Vietnam and then I escape in 1985.

Speaker 2: Where did you go to?

Bao: Our boat landed in Indonesia after a journey of five days and five nights. Lucky that we landed in [inaudible 00:27:13] Indonesia. [inaudible 00:27:15].

Speaker 2: How did you make your way to the United States?

Bao: The only paper that I carry with me at that time ... It's lucky that I still have. It's just my US Air Force ID when I was in Lackland Air Force Base. It's just a tiny copy of the US Air Force ID in Lackland. I have in my body. Just my wife I made stitch inside my pants, and that's the only document that I have with me.

When I joined the refugee camp, and after the talk to the [inaudible 00:28:03], with the joint volunteers agency from America, I show them my US ID, and that's the only proof that I've been serving with the US. The only piece of paper that lucky me, that I had with me.

Speaker 2: That prison camp, that re-education camp, you didn't have a wife at that time, obviously.

Bao: No. My wife was ... After only the [ex 00:28:34] collaboration with the South Vietnamese government has to be report. The wife outside. They control us by, they try to confiscate housing, and everything, and they try to chase the family out of the house just to push in the new economic zone. Let's say stealing the housing like that.

Speaker 2: When did you immigrate and resettle into America?

Bao: After that I was escape in 1984-1985 to land at Indonesia, I was settled in 1986, because my entire family was here. Half of the family, brother, sister, my mother was here. I settled in Virginia ever since in 1986, and everything I start all over again.

Speaker 2: What was it like when you arrived in America and you saw your mother and brother?

Bao: I couldn't be happier than that. I couldn't be happier that it's a second life. It's a second chance in my second country who will love me. I love this country. If I can say, to me as a Vietnamese, I still love my country, but as long as the communists, it's still in the hand of the communists with regime like that, I can never trust it. I never got a chance. I don't want to go back to Vietnam.

Speaker 2: When you look back on how ... Because we never could have guessed how our lives would have turned out. When you were a boy and living back in Saigon, how do you look at this period of your life? Those early years, the war, all the things that happened to you. What's your reaction when you think back on this?

Bao: I miss a lot. I miss a lot of my childhood in Vietnam, my friends. Some of that is still living in Vietnam, but most over here, but like I say, I miss my country.

Speaker 2: You wouldn't go back if you had the chance?

Bao: I would go back if the regime changed, because right now I know that there's no policy that ... It's very hard to explain it. I don't trust the regime. Let's say like that.

Speaker 2: Bao, I want to thank you for coming all the way up here to Maryland Public Television to participate in our documentary about the Vietnam war. I want to thank you for what you did working as our ally over there, and we hope that ... We welcome you, and we thank you for what you did. Thank you for coming in.

Bao: Thank you for having me on, just sharing with you my experience from Vietnam in here, and I have to say that I couldn't be happier where I am right now. Thank you for having me on, again.

Speaker 2: Let me ask Rich ...

Rich: One question that I wondered about. When Saigon fell, a lot of the military was able to escape. A lot of the guys took helicopters and they flew them out to the ships. Was there any possibility that you were going to be able to use your aircraft to escape out of the country?

Bao: Let me describe to you my last mission on the eve of the collapse of Saigon. My last mission was on the 28th. I was assigned to evacuate the wounded soldier from the airborne division with the attack from [Vietnamese 00:33:21] back to Saigon. It's just a short trip, but when I evacuate the wounded soldier from [inaudible 00:33:37], landed Tan Son Nhut Air Base, at that time it was about 3:00pm.

When I go back to my squadron it's all empty, because everybody is rushed to the [inaudible 00:33:53] Air Force just to apply to go, to flee and get out of Vietnam. I know ... What am I going to do with all the soldiers and everything?

Then I have to call the dispatch and things like that, so there's a ambulance come pick up the soldiers when the soldiers and myself went home, but by the time I take my bike out, then the agency [inaudible 00:34:32] from the [Vietnamese 00:34:36], he bomb Tan Son Nhut. At that time it was create some kind of [cloud 00:34:44] in Tan Son Nhut Air Base. People running just like all over.

I don't know, and the base was closed, because no way to go out, no way to go in. I was stuck in the middle of that, but at the end of the day, I find a way to get out. Just try to get my family. Just try to find a way to flee against the communism, because at that time we still don't know when [inaudible 00:35:24] the regime is going to collapse.

Until [Vietnamese 00:35:31] say that we have to dispose all our arms, then we have no choice. We got stuck with that. I cannot win. No way in. We, on the first of May, we tried to go to the Saigon port to find a way out, but it's all blocked and Saigon is like a mess at that time. We think that we lose our chance to go out.

Rich: Did you have much interaction with any of the American forces during the time you were flying? You had been to the US. You had associated with the Air Force in the United states. Was there any connection once you were back in Vietnam flying?

Bao: You know, in my reunion recently in 2014, at the Ohio, I met some of my ex [IP 00:36:38] instructor pilot. I'm very glad to meet them, and we are happy that they're still there and they recognize me. We all share a moment of happiness. Because I never think one day that I'm going to meet my ex IP. It's really emotional moment.

Speaker 2: Thank you again for coming out ...