

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Duc Dinh

Interviewer: Cindy Dinh (daughter)

Date/Time of Interview: March 3, 2011

Transcribed by: Cindy Dinh

Edited by: Amber Lu, Xingyi Li (05/06/2017)

Audio Track Time: 01:18:02

Interview Transcript:

Keys: CD—Cindy Dinh

DD—Duc Dinh

[00:00:00]

CD: This is an oral history interview of Mr. Duc Cong Dinh at his home in Houston, Texas on March 3rd, 2011. This interview was conducted by Cindy Dinh for the Houston Asian American Archives at Rice University's Woodson Research Center.

CD: So thank you for sitting down and talking about your life. Can you describe what your life was like in Saigon, before you immigrated here to the U.S.?

DD: Yes, um, I was a college, uh, I mean, uh, before I go to college, um, I was during that time in 1975, I just graduated from high school. And, um, the Communists attacked Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. And I had, um, to stop my education and look for freedom. I had to leave the country and before that time I had um, many years in, um... of good times with my family in South Vietnam. And during my high school time I go to school during the daytime and I had a chance to work at night to help my family out.

CD: Where did you work?

DD: I worked for a tobacco factory in Saigon.

CD: What did you do there?

DD: I worked in an assembly line to make the cigarette.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Oh, okay. Did you smoke?

DD: No. I don't smoke. But I worked in that factory.

CD: Oh, that's good. You're around that area but you weren't influenced by it. So I guess you were a student and you were working during the war time. Like when—so for you, when did the war really start for you? I know '75 was when it ended but when did it start, when did you realize the war started?

DD: Yes. I was born in 1956 so I, during that time that I was, the war already happened, because Vietnam had been split in half. North Vietnam is Communist in 1974 and in South Vietnam is the Republic of South Vietnam. And the Communist in North Vietnam is Soviet Union and China helped North Vietnam and South Vietnam had been helped by the Americans.

CD: Okay. So when did you first arrive to the U.S? How old were you?

DD: I was, um... I came to the um United States in 1975 when Communists took over my homeland and I had to leave the country. Luckily I was, my boat... my small boat had been picked up by American merchant ships and they took me to the Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines. That's a, uh, that's the, uh... a navy base of, American navy base in the Philippines. And after that, I had a chance for me... to transfer me to Clark Air Force Base...so they can took me to the Guam Island. That's a refugee camp in Guam Island.

CD: Do you know how to spell that, or...?

DD: It's G-U-A-M.

CD: Oh, Guam. Okay.

DD: Guam, yeah. Guam Island.

CD: So we'll talk about that later, but can we just get some basic family information? Can you describe your immediate family in Vietnam? How many siblings do you have?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: I have a big family in Vietnam. I have seven brothers and three sisters and I was in the middle. I was the, uh...

CD: The middle?

DD: In the middle, yeah.

CD: Okay. So how were your interactions with your siblings?

DD: I can communicate from now... After I left Vietnam, I can communicate with them by correspondence. I can send mail or e-mail to them. Because every time that I send mail to them, the Communists, they... they—they monitor all the mail from overseas sent home. So we have to very careful when we write something because they—Communists, they can open up and read whatever.

CD: Okay, well can you talk about your immediate family right now? Like...

DD: Yes, right now I'm married. I have three children. I have one boy and two girls. And um... and um...

CD: How old are they?

DD: Oh, so my first son, he's 26 years old. His name is David. And uh, my second, um, the second one, my second kid is my daughter. She's 23 years old and her name is Amy. And then the youngest one, my daughter, her name is Cindy Dinh.

CD: (*Chuckles*) Okay, well, can you describe how you've maintained your family and...First of all, how would you describe culture?

DD: To me, the Vietnamese culture is to keep the value of education, and of the family, and to try to sustain the native language.

CD: Okay. Can you describe how you've maintained your culture and teach it to your children?

DD: Oh yes, I'd like to share with that, with you that. My wife and I we talk to our children in Vietnamese at home, and we send them to Vietnamese school on the weekends. And we teach them to

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

love within the family and the society. And uh... and um... keep trying to achieve the highest grades in school.

CD: Okay. Let's talk about school. So, uh... what... I guess, back in Vietnam, what did you want to be when you grew up, as a kid? What were some of your dreams?

DD: Yes, when I was a kid in Vietnam I just wanted to be a doctor, a medical doctor.

CD: Did you pursue that in high school?

DD: In high school in Vietnam, everybody had dreams. Most of them, most of the family they want their kid to grow up to be a doctor or to be an engineer.

CD: So what kind of work does your family members do? Mainly your family members in Vietnam.

DD: Oh, in Vietnam? Oh... so, um, my father, he was a professor of health, uh... health education in Vietnam and he trained for all the students to work in government office.

CD: This is the South Republic of Vietnam?

DD: Yes, the South of Vietnam, yeah. The Republic of South Vietnam. And my older brother he was a banker. He worked in a bank in Vietnam. And my older sister, she worked at a hospital. And uh... and uh... I had one older brother... he's um...

CD: What was his name?

DD: The oldest one? his name was *Tuấn*. And, uh... He the only one who escaped with me when I left Vietnam.

CD: So did *Bác Tuấn* work in the bank? Just say the names.

DD: Um... The bank was called *Viet Nam Thuong Tin*. That's the name of the Bank of South Vietnam. And uh... My older sister, her name is *Hà*. She worked at the Hospital of Saigon – right in the capitol of South Vietnam.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: So is this where you developed your dream of being a doctor because your family members were in health or something?

DD: Yes, uh... because my father used to be um... work in a hospital before he had a chance to work in the Vietnamese Embassy in Laos in Vientiane. Vientiane, in Laos, in 1965.

CD: What did he do there?

DD: He worked for the Vietnamese Embassy in Laos. He have owned the Vietnamese... um... and he worked for the health clinic over there and take care of the Vietnamese... um...

CD: Was he a doctor too? A professor, you said.

DD: He teaches.

CD: Oh, he teaches, okay. All right, let's talk about the time before the Vietnam War, like, before the end of it. So during the war, did life go on as normal? Did you continue to go to school?

DD: I'm luckily to live right in the south capital of Vietnam. So I can have a chance to go to school... and um... without the, with the minimal um... disturbance of the Communist. Most of the other people who live in um... suburban or country, they had a lot of problem with Communist attacked and how to keep their education continued.

CD: So did you experience any... um, so how did you know the war was going on?

DD: Oh, the war had been going on for...um, had been going on for a long time since I grew up in Vietnam, but it escalating some more and more, and uh, and uh... a few years later the Communists from North Vietnam, just, tried to invade South Vietnam. So they tried to make own attack, uh...

CD: So how did you hear about all this? Did you listen to the radio? Did people tell you about it?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: Oh yeah. In Vietnam we had uh... media like television and radio, like good radio stations. Most of the people prefer to listen to VOA. That means Voice of America and BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation. They're from England. And newspapers, also.

CD: So you said that since you lived in the city, life was minimal... you had minimal disturbances. When did it start to feel like, 'Oh my gosh. There's a lot of... the pressure's coming on. This war is coming to us.' When did you start to feel like that?

[00:12:00]

DD: I started to feel that, uh... right around the first of the year in 1975 when the Communists start to attack, uh, um... the central of Vietnam first, in *Huế* and then *Quảng Trị*. They started to take over one city at a time. They started to invade toward South Vietnam and uh, uh... later on they, uh... keep attacking and took over the South and later it came closer to the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon.

CD: Did you do anything differently? Did you prepare or how did you prepare?

DD: When we heard that we just knew what was going on. And uh... We just hoped that during the time we were going to school, we would keep going to school. But we hoped that one day our troops from South Vietnam would try to fight back. So we just keep hoping and uh... every day we still had normal lives, but we just keep hoping that good news is coming.

CD: Did anybody in your family... Was anyone in the army?

DD: With my immediate family in Vietnam, no. I had relatives – I had relatives in the military, my cousins and my uncles. I had two uncles in the military, one in the air force, and one in the army. And I had two of my cousins were injured during the war time. And I had one uncle passed away during the war.

CD: During the war?

DD: During the war, yeah.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: So how old do you have to be to be in the army? Were you able to be in the army – were you and your brothers?

DD: No. During that time, during the Vietnam War we had to keep up our education every year because we had to pass at a high rate and go up with higher education. If you failed high school, you could be, would be in the military draft and go into the killing fields. You had no choice: go get higher education, or go to the killing fields.

CD: Good thing you continued in high school. [laughs] The, you had – I guess you had time to learn and avoid the draft that way. What are some reasons why most Vietnamese people decided to leave Vietnam?

DD: Um... When the Communists took over the South Vietnam, and... they controlled, first they controlled North Vietnam first. That way, uh... a lot of people did not want to live with them, that's the reason why in 1954 a lot of people from North Vietnam had to... uh, left and go to the South to live with the Republic of South Vietnam. So, the with the Communists, uh it..uh... with the Communist regime there are no human rights and no democracy. So when the Communists took over and invaded the South Vietnam the majority of people in South Vietnam we had to try to escape, leave the country to look for freedom.

[phone rings]

CD: So can you tell me, what are some of your reasons for leaving Vietnam?

DD: Yes, when the Communists from the north invaded my homeland, there are a lot – the majority of South Vietnam decided to leave Vietnam in order to look for democracy and freedom. And, uh... My family is um... also tried to get out of the country. But it's very hard, it's very hard to get out of the country during that time. Because the only transportation to get out is by airplane or by boat. But all the airplanes, the Communists had been attacking the airports, so a lot of airplanes cannot take off. And um... and uh a lot of... During that time there was a curfew. You had to pass through the check-point before you get out to the boat.

CD: Is this curfew, um...was this curfew supervised by the South Vietnamese people or by the Communists?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: By the South Vietnamese. So that way, they can uh... that way, um... they can control people and make sure the security of the people of South Vietnam. So the, during that time, that's why they can't control— because when the Communists tried to take over the south capital of Vietnam, so whoever came out was part of the military, to go against the Communist only.

[pause]

CD: So, was it illegal to leave? Or what are the legal ways of leaving Vietnam?

DD: Yes, it's legal to leave the country because.... If you don't want to live with the Communists, then you had a chance to get out of the country.

CD: So they imposed a curfew for everyone, but did they allow you to leave the country?

DD: Yes, they do.

CD: Or did you have to hide to leave?

DD: With um... with the South Vietnam...um... troops, they allowed us to uh... leave the country. But the Communists don't want us to leave. They want to control the whole country and with everybody inside. They want to take over, yeah.

CD: So was the biggest fear being caught by the Communists, then? Like if you wanted to leave by boat, can you just get on your boat and leave freely, or did you have to hide, and get *chốn đi*?

DD: Yes, um... when the Communists, um... they tried to invade South Vietnam.... Um... because I live in the capital, so that's the last city they tried to, um they took over. So um the...when the Communists tried to take over South Vietnam, I had to leave by boat. That's – during that time, during the war zone, sometimes it was very dangerous from the boat on the river to get out to go to the ocean. There were some areas that were still fighting. So we had to prepare.

CD: Why did you choose to come to the U.S.? Why didn't you choose any other country?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: It really... when we left Vietnam, we had no choice. We just... hopefully, we would survive in the ocean and we'd come to the international water. And, uh... Whoever lucky can be picked up by any country... uh, by any boat belonging to any country because that's international waters. But I am lucky. I was picked up by American merchant ships. So that's the reason why they took me to America.

CD: Oh, okay. So when you left, you didn't know which country you would land in?

DD: Yeah, that's right. Just like a lot of friends of mine, some people, they go... they uh... were picked up and some go to Australia, and some go to France, and some go to the um... Hong Kong. It all depends on what kind of boats can help you to pick you up.

CD: Was there a particular event that made you start to think about leaving?

DD: Yes. Um... First we tried to hang on and stay with... um, our troops in Vietnam to defend our country. But until the last city to defend is the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon. The Communists took over the Saigon, and we had to leave the country at the same time.

CD: Can you walk me through your thought process? How did you decide to leave? Because right now, I can't imagine leaving the U.S. and going to a different country or somewhere I don't know. Can you tell me what led up to that decision?

DD: You mean in Vietnam, or in...?

CD: In Vietnam. Before you decided, you and your brother, *Bác Tuấn* decided to leave, how did you decide you would come to that decision?

DD: First, we think that we just had to evacuate from the war zone. And uh... After we evacuate from the war zone, hopefully one day we would come back after the war is over. But when we left the capital of South Vietnam by a small boat, and when we go to the ocean, and we kept on turning the radio and we listened to the radio station. And, uh... the president of South Vietnam had uh... come up and said they surrendered. So a lot of people cried. A lot of people on the boat, we cried, because we had lost the capital of South Vietnam, and we knew we cannot come back.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: So can you describe your thought process before that? When you decided, originally, you just wanted to leave the war zone area, but how did you come up with that decision? What made you say, 'I want to leave?'

DD: Oh, yes, because when we heard it on the news the Communists were trying to come closer and closer to the capital of South Vietnam, and when... at that time we tried to find whatever transportation means to get out of the country, either by airplane or by boat. So the... at that time we knew the Communists were coming close. If we don't leave the country, we have no chance to get out. Because the Communists controlled all the coast—controlled the Coast Guard, and controlled the—you cannot get out.

CD: It was a timely issue. But how come only you and *Bác Tuấn* left? How come none of your siblings left?

DD: Yeah. First the whole family we tried to go together to get out, but the only thing is my older brother, *Bác Tai*, he was um.. in um...the police academy, and he... and we were just waiting for one person, my older brother. He had to stay.... with the police academy.

CD: He had to stay? So he had to work.

DD: They don't let him go home, because during the war time, everyone had to defend the country. So that's why we couldn't wait no more. When the Communists took over South Vietnam, it was only I and my older brother can escape by the motorcycle and tried to pass through the checkpoints. Just the two of us escaped. The rest of the family members were stuck at home.

CD: Can you tell me what preparations you did before you left Vietnam? Did you give away any of your possessions? Did you talk to people? When you left, did you know you would see them again?

DD: No, uh... when we left the country, um... we had to be in a hurry. We had no time to say good-bye to your relatives or friends. So you had to try to get out as soon as possible, with the safety, because during that time there was still fighting.

CD: Right. Did you only have one day to prepare and leave? What was the time frame?

[00:25:20]

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: Yeah, just about... I think just about two days. That's when we decided whether to stay or leave.

CD: So what did you bring with you?

DD: When I left Vietnam I just carried with me one backpack with three days' supply of food and water and clothes and some money. That's all I can—to survive a few days.

CD: Do you know how much money you brought?

DD: During that time I brought with me just 500 pesos, I mean Vietnamese...

CD: *Đồng. Năm chăm đồng (dollars, 500 dollars).*

DD: Yeah, 500 *đồng*—Vietnamese money.

CD: So can you tell me the story of how you escaped by boat?

DD: Yeah, but um... it's lucky um... before um... we leave...we decided to leave Saigon, I had one friend of my brother's, he was in the commandos. They called *Lôi Hố*. And he stopped by at my home and visited my older brother. And he told us they had a small boat um... at Pier 18. It's about four miles from our home. So that um... they can... they are going to embark at night.

That's only one way to get out of the country, by boat. We luckily, we had my older brother's friend who was a commando and told us where to go and we'd come with them and join with them to basically get out of the country. And it's very dangerous to get out because all the checkpoints were controlled by the police. We had to wear, to put on the military clothes, the uniforms, so they can allow us to get past the checkpoint. My older brother and I could get that pier—number eighteen—so we can join um...the commando troops to try to get out of the country at night.

CD: Was that his boat, the commander's boat?

DD: That boat belonged to the Navy, but they used the small boats for transportation.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: How big was the boat?

DD: About 50 feet. That's a metal boat, about 50 feet.

CD: How many people were with you?

DD: I think there were about uh... 300 people.

CD: On one boat?

DD: Yeah. And it was very dangerous to get out. And... After we passed all the check-points and had a chance to join with the commando, [pause] and uh... you know, [pause]...we departed at night. I can remember it was April 29, 1975, after passing through the war zone, en route to the open sea of *Vũng Tàu*—that's the bay—and I was furnished with the M-16 rifle, and a box of ammunition, and six grenades to prepare to combat and to protect the boat of our troops, just in case the Communists attacked and we had to fight back.

CD: Did you have any training or experience using weapons before?

DD: Yes. During Vietnam's war time, in high school, the government um... required all the high school students to know how to use weapons. So I had been trained how to use weapons – how to shoot rifles.

CD: In high school? Wow.

DD: Because during high school, during war time, everybody had to be trained just in case you passed all the test in high school, or if you didn't pass, you still go to the killing fields. You have to prepare to help the country.

CD: That's true. That makes sense.

DD: And uh... During the war time, I had to accept only one choice, you know: just kill or be killed. And I had to remember that freedom is not free. That's why we had to try to get out of our country. You know, after I spent four days on the fifty feet boat, my brother and I ran out of food. And the last food

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

we had was a small box of raisins. And then when we ran out of drinking water, so the—we were so tired. So when it rained, we just wait for the thunderstorm to come, and when it rains, we... I had to take off my t-shirt to spread it out like a funnel, in order to catch some rain water and I had to squeeze the t-shirt to get some water out of it to drink. You know, when you're on the ocean, when it rains, the temperature drops down and it's so cold. And I was so hungry and my body was shaking and I thought we, I thought I and my brother were going to starve to death in the ocean, without help. And I remember before our boat ran out of fuel, we had a chance to rejoin with other Vietnamese refugees on a barge, because the barge is the one that had been towed by another tow boat. Before we ran out of fuel... we had to join with them so that way we can... I mean...

CD: Oh, so you joined another boat?

DD: No, it's not a boat. It's a barge. It's like a floating...uh... What you call the uh... *Sa-Lan*. It's just like a ferry. Just like a flat float with a fence all around it.

CD: Ok. [pause] So when you were on the boat, did everyone—what did you do to pass the time?

DD: Oh, when we was, you mean, on the boat on the day we left Vietnam?

CD: Or during the four days...

DD: We had to... during the daytime, it's very, very hot. Because the sun comes up and the heat... because... uh... everybody stayed on a metal boat and we had no food, no water, and no room to move around, because it was so packed. It's so packed we don't have room to spread your legs and we... You can sit down but you cannot lie down.

CD: What did you fear the most?

DD: I can remember that uh... when we came to join the other refugees on the barge, and uh... a lot of people ran out of food and water. We got so frustrated and desperate and hungry. And uh... I can see some people cannot control themselves and they had to jump down in the ocean.

CD: *Tự tử?* Suicide?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: Yeah. They killed themselves. Because they had no food, no water, so they cannot control themselves. And uh... I remember when we kept waiting for some boat to come by and help us, but some boats passed by but they don't stop. And luckily... I kept on counting, and uh... until the twelfth boat came to help. The first eleven boats they were just passing by. They didn't help out refugees. Luckily, the twelfth boat and they came and that's the American merchant ship. And I remembered that ship is named the Green Forest.

CD: Oh, okay. The Green Forest.

DD: When the Green Forest came over and... close to the barge and and tried to... and dropped the folding ladder down, to try to let people come up, a lot of people were so hungry and desperate... They tried to get on to the American boat, so it was overloaded. And... the barge had a rail, uh... along the outside with sandbags to protect, just in case the Communists attacked. A lot of people tried to climb up on the rail and trying get on the boat, so it was overweight, I mean... overloaded. So it collapsed [claps] just like the rat trap...the rat trap. A lot of people got caught down there and died. And I can hear a lot of people screaming and asking for help. And uh... that's the first time in my life I could see people dying in front of me. And later I see a lot of people's blood spreading out on the floorboard, and a lot of people screaming for help. It's very hard for me to stay in that kind of situation. That was a tough time for everyone. I could see a lot of my people get killed before they can get help.

CD: Right. They can see it, but just...wow. How long were you waiting for a boat? How long were you at sea? How many days?

DD: That was the fourth day. That was the reason why our boat ran out of food... out of, we ran out of fuel and food.

CD: On the fourth day?

DD: Yeah, On the fourth day.

CD: And then the boat came?

DD: Luckily, the fourth day.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Okay, that's good.

DD: And the first boat came, the Green Forest. They said they could just take 500 people only. They don't take all. Because our barge, they had about 2,000 people. That's overloaded. That's a lot of people.

CD: So do you know what happened to the people who stayed behind?

DD: I was lucky to have been picked up by the first boat. And after 500 people, they cut off. They don't take no more people. They helped the people on the barge – just water and some food for them to survive. They said the next day another boat would come to help them. So the people who got left on the barge, they just kept waiting and hoping that some of the other boat would come over.

CD: So where did the boat take you?

DD: Yeah, that boat took me to uh... Philippines. That's what they called Subic Bay in Philippines.

CD: Subic?

DD: S-U-B-I-C. Subic. Subic Bay in Philippines.

CD: So what is that? Is that a refugee camp? Or is this...

DD: No, Subic Bay is just an American Navy base.

CD: Okay, a Navy Base.

DD: American Navy Base. They had a...

CD: So how long were you there at the naval base?

DD: Oh, after came out the first day and after we get through the processing of the paper work, they transferred me to an American air force base. They called it Clark – C-L-A-R-K – Air Base.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Where is that?

DD: In the Philippines, also. Clark Air Base was nearby. So they can load us on a cargo plane, they called C-130, the cargo plane. There were a lot of people had been loaded on that airplane and they took us to Guam Island.

CD: And what is at Guam Island?

DD: Guam Island is just a small island, but they used that for temporarily, to hold all the Vietnamese refugees. We camped—we lived in a tent over there. They set up a lot of tents for refugees to stay, for temporarily.

CD: So when you were at the refugee camp, did you have any interactions with family back in Vietnam or with Uncle Tuấn?

DD: Oh, no, no when I came to Guam Island by myself, I tried to look for my brother. And I – for the whole month, I couldn't find him. Luckily, finally, I had to look for, to ask for help from the American Red Cross. And they had a list of all the refugees so they can check out my brother's name. He was picked up by another boat and... they took him to Wake Island. W-A-K-E. Wake Island.

CD: Oh, okay. So when did you split?

DD: When the first boat came and picked up, and then... because my brother could not get on the boat, because he was older. They said all the men had to stay on the boat. They just had the children and the kids only, but the other lady, she had five kids and she asked me to carry the young kid, the two-year-old for her. So I had a chance to help her and carry the kid up, so they allowed me to come up. But my brother got stuck on the barge. So he, later on, he got picked up by another boat and they took him to Wake Island.

CD: So how did you feel at this point? Do you remember? Because you were by yourself now. How did you feel?

DD: I feel that was the first time in my life I've ever... left the country. I left all—I left my family behind. And uh... this was the first time I felt like an orphan. I had to face uh... the world all by myself, and

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

uh... without help from any family member. And this was the first time I had to leave the country and I kept looking for my older brother and luckily I found him in another island. So I asked the American government—they had military airplanes—to take me to Wake Island to reunite with my older brother. Reunion.

CD: So how long did you stay in Wake Island?

DD: I lived in Wake Island for one month. And uh... later on they took us, they transferred us inland, to California. They called it Camp Pendleton. That's a uh... Marine Corps camp, military camp they used for training the Marine Corps, and now they used it to hold refugee camp, a Vietnamese refugee camp.

CD: Was it difficult to apply to live... to go to Camp Pendleton? Or did they just send everyone there?

DD: Everybody had to go through a process to go inland. They said Guam Island and Wake Island it's just for temporary holding only, uh... because tropical thunderstorms would come every year. So that temporary camp, we lived on the tents. The wind would blow it away. (*Chuckles*) So that was very dangerous for us, so they took us to the mainland.

CD: Okay. How long – so can you describe the conditions at Camp Pendleton and how long you were there for?

DD: I lived in the Camp Pendleton... uh... uh... Camp Pendleton is located in a valley, surrounded by hills. And the curfew in Camp Pendleton was 10 p.m. No one can, no one was allowed to come outside the camp at night, you could hear wolves howling outside, and the military vehicles had been patrolling around to protect all the refugees.

CD: Oh, okay. Protect from what? From animals?

DD: Uh... Protect from all the animals, and the wolves. And they don't want people to go outside at night.

CD: Okay. How long were you there for?

DD: I lived there for about three months.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Three months?

DD: Yes.

[pause]

CD: So how did you leave Camp Pendleton? Did you have to apply for sponsorship to help you get settled in the U.S.?

DD: Yes, and uh... I had to live in the refugee camp and um... learn English inside the refugee camp. And uh... later on, uh... I had to learn, because all the refugees had to be before you can get out of the camp, you have to have a sponsor. It's a requirement. That way the refugee can have a chance to adapt to American life outside. So I learned...we asked for help from the IRC, which stands for International Rescue Committee. The IRC helped us to look for the sponsors so they can, uh... we can have a chance to get out of the camp.

[00:45:38]

CD: Do you remember who your sponsors were?

DD: My sponsor, he was a businessman. Uh... And he sponsored sixty-two Vietnamese who came out at the same time.

CD: Oh, wow. Did you all live in the same area?

DD: Yes. He, my sponsor, he was a businessman, so he owned the apartment unit, a lot of apartment units. And then he let all sixty-two Vietnamese live in his apartment units.

CD: Where did you live?

DD: I lived in a small town called Pomona in uh... California—near Los Angeles.

CD: Oh, Pomona. Yeah. Did Uncle Tuấn live with you?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: Yes, when...we got out of the uh... After we had a reunion, we decided we better stay together. *(Laughs)* We don't want to get lost no more. Yes, and afterwards we got out of the refugee camp together with the same sponsor so we could try to help each other.

CD: So at this point in your life, what were your thoughts so far?

DD: I feel very lucky to be survive in the Pacific Ocean and um I start a new life in America. And because I had to start all over. I had to learn English and I had to work a full-time job with the minimal pay. And uh, at the same time I still had to support my big family in Vietnam, financially.

CD: You sent remittances? You sent money back?

DD: Yeah, I had to try to work hard and try to save money. Every month I sent money to help my parents in Vietnam because I still had a lot of big brothers and sisters over there. So I tried to help my parents out to support them.

CD: So what factors helped you get adjusted to the American life? Like, what kind of programs or things helped you?

DD: Yeah. When I came to America I think that worked hard, with a willing to learn, in a new environment. And I went to—I did go to vocational school to learn skills to try to support myself.

CD: Was this in California still, or... when did you go to school?

DD: In California, I just studied English and worked uh... in the nursery. And um...I also worked for, as a dishwasher in a hospital before I moved to Houston.

CD: Can you describe some of the jobs you held when you first got out of the refugee camp?

DD: Yeah, the first job...I worked as a dishwasher in the hospital. They called it Olive Vista Hospital. And uh later on... because that job paid me below the minimum wage. So that's, at that time, in 1975, the minimum wage was \$2.15 but they paid me just \$2. So that's why later on I tried to find another job that can pay \$2.15, like at the nursery. So we—I—decided to move on and work for the nursery.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: A nursery? Like, is that taking care of...

DD: Like a gardener.

CD: Okay... Is that it?

DD: And my brother worked as a, uh...dishwasher for a restaurant, with minimum wage also.

CD: How did you find these jobs?

DD: First, when we just got out of the refugee camps and lived in that apartment, and we, there were a lot of churchgoers. They came over to help us. Uh... the churchgoers, they volunteered to help us find a job.

CD: Churchgoers. Okay. What hardships do you remember facing upon arrival to the U.S.?

DD: When I first came to the United States, that, the first thing I think is a problem was the language, and the different culture. During that time, during that, I had no skills to find a job and had no money to support myself. That was the rough time in my life.

CD: Did the U.S. government give you any aid?

DD: Later on, when I decide to move down to Houston, I can have a chance to go to school and study in a program they called Manpower Program. So like, in the daytime, we would go to school and learn. They also paid \$2.30 to have per hour, just like the co-op program. Just like work and study. They called it the Manpower Program.

CD: So where did you work? You went to school and you worked?

DD: I go to school to learn and they paid, uh... like, I go to school and learned vocational skills.

CD: They paid you to go to school? Oh.

DD: That program, you can learn English or learn uh... how to be a repairman.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Oh, vocational school. Okay. That's pretty neat. What are some benefits from living in the U.S. that you don't get from living in Vietnam?

DD: The difference is when I live in America, um... in Vietnam, there are no democracy, no freedom, and no human rights. So when I come here to the freedom country, to America, I feel very grateful and very happy to live in America.

CD: That's good. You mentioned earlier that one of the difficulties was learning English. What are some of the things you did to learn and practice English?

DD: During that time when I tried to learn English, I went to Houston Community College in Houston and I signed up for ESL, English as a Second Language class, and I practiced English with my co-workers and neighbors and churchgoers.

[pause]

CD: Just out of curiosity, do most people continue their friendships with the churchgoers that helped them resettle? Did you keep in contact with some of the people who helped you find a job in the early years?

DD: In the early years, during the time I lived in California? They came over every week and had volunteers, people, sometimes like college students. They had volunteers who came during their free time and they keep changing, different person, people. We had a chance to practice English and learn about the American life outside.

CD: So what motivated you to move to Texas?

DD: Yeah, I decided to move to Texas because I found out through American Red Cross that my uncle and my aunt lived in Houston. So I decided to move out to Houston to get closer to my relatives. When you leave the country without family, you feel lonely and have no help. [pause] Just in case you get sick, and no one takes care of you. (*Chuckles*)

[00:54:39]

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: (*Chuckles*) That's probably why you stay close to home! What are their names? Your relatives?

DD: I have my uncle is *Tích* and uh... my aunt *Yến*. Y-E-N.

CD: So when you moved to Texas, or to Houston, what did you do? Did you continue school or did you start to work?

DD: When I first moved down to Houston in 1976, and uh... I first tried to start to find um... a program to train me in vocational school and learn English at the same time.

CD: The Manpower Program?

DD: Learn English as a second language, and learn in vocational school. And when I come down to Houston, I started to go to school and study to be an auto mechanic. They called it the co-op program, NADA. That stands for the National Automobile Dealers Association. After I graduated from the San Jacinto College with an Associate's Degree of Applied Science degree, I became a Certified Master Auto Technician. And I worked for the City of Houston. Um... Every day my job I had..um...was to verify customers' complaints and I make a diagnostic test. And then after that I repaired or replaced the necessary part to fix the problem. Because that was a full-time job and I had to work from 7 o'clock in the morning until 3:30 PM in the afternoon.

CD: You worked there for how many years?

DD: I worked there for twenty-six years until I retired.

CD: And when was that?

DD: I started work in 1979 until 2005.

CD: Oh, okay. Twenty-six years. Wow. Okay well, did you like these jobs? Or how did you decide to become a mechanic?

DD: Yes, when I moved down... when I first come to America, my dream in Vietnam is still I want to be the doctor. But when I came to America, I realized that I had no support from family and I had to support

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

myself in America. Every month I had to give money to help support my family in Vietnam. So, that, um... and it's so expensive to go to the medical school in UCLA. During that time it cost \$4000 per year and I don't have that much money to go to school, so I decided to move down to Houston and I go to vocational school and decide to study to be an auto mechanic.

CD: Did someone tell you about being an auto mechanic thing, or was it because of the Manpower Program that made you decide, 'Okay, I'll be an auto mechanic?'

DD: That was one of the programs offered by the Manpower Program; they offered the auto mechanic...so I took the class.

CD: Are there other programs, other vocational jobs you could have chosen?

DD: Yes, there have some other vocational jobs. But I think that... They just had limited fields you can go to. Just some classes offered by the government.

CD: So what were the other—did you decided not to do the other types of occupations, you just chose mechanic?

DD: I just picked the class because it was offered by the government program. After I signed up for the class and go through it, I think that it was a shortcut to support myself and support my family.

CD: Do you like working with cars? Or, did you like... If you were in Vietnam, did you like cars and motorcycles before? Or did you develop this after you started working?

DD: I had a background with um...it. In Vietnam uh... I still going to school and liked vocational school also, and I've been to vocational school how to repair auto mechanics, and also I learned how to repair radios, TVs, electronics also. But that was just for fun. But later on when I came to America, it became uh... a major. That's why I went to school with the program that offered it.

CD: So think about your aspirations back in Vietnam, it doesn't have to be about your goal of being a doctor, but your overall goals in life. How have these goals changed over the years?

[1:00:49]

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: Yes, in Vietnam I wanted to be a medical doctor, so we can help the society. And then... when I came to the United States, um... I decided to take a quick career in auto technology so I can support myself and my big family in Vietnam. So then... that's, my life had been changing.

CD: Do you have any other goals aside from career?

DD: Yes, um... when I lived in Vietnam...I just like a lot of people, they want their kids to grow up to be doctors or engineers.

CD: *(Chuckles)* Sorry! *(Chuckles)* Go ahead.

DD: But when I came to America, I found out it's very hard to fulfill that dream.

CD: Yeah, because none of your kids are doctors or engineers right now, but they're somewhat similar to that. Okay. Think about your early years in the U.S., has race or immigrant status influenced your life here?

DD: Yes, as I came to the United States as a Vietnamese refugee, I always tried to do the best I could. However, as a minority in the United States, it was very hard for me to find a decent job. Even when they hired me, they always offered a job that paid lower than the minimum wage at that time.

CD: Oh, is that legal?

DD: Yeah, that's illegal. But just because the population is high and there are very limited job offers, you had to take it and... or someone else would take it. So just like they put you in a lower position.

CD: Hmm. So has that improved over the years, do you think?

DD: Yes. Since I live in America, I have tried to learn English and tried to get a career to get better pay, and my life...I feels much better, to adapt to American life, to fulfill my dreams.

CD: So what are some things that you liked about America when you first came here, something that made you go, 'wow, that's so cool!' something you saw, something maybe you heard on TV, on radio.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: When I was in Vietnam, um... sometimes I saw American soldiers come to Vietnam. And we had a chance practice our English and to talk to them. And, I just know about America through the magazines or some of the advertisements...um...

CD: Like a book, a magazine, a brochure... a catalogue?

DD: Yes, catalogues. Catalogue had the best pictures. A lot of pictures. We knew about America through Sears catalogues. I see a lot of beautiful uh... pictures in there and when I went to school, a lot of books talk about America is beautiful and there is a lot of land, and then the country is rich, and it was dream for everybody to come to America. When I first came to America, and I realized, the first thing I liked was the freedom. That's what I liked when I come to America. When I came here, I saw a lot of beautiful buildings, cars, and beautiful ladies. *(laughs)* We don't have blonde hair and blue eyes in Vietnam. *(laughs)*

CD: Well, let's talk about how you met your wife then. *(Chuckles)* She's a beautiful lady, too.

DD: Luckily, I had a chance to come to the wedding of my cousin, that's in 1979.

CD: Who?

DD: That's my cousin.

CD: Oh, what's her name?

DD: Uh... that's uh, [???]'s wife.

CD: Oh, *Diep*.

DD: Yeah, that was my cousin in Tennessee, in Nashville, Tennessee in 1979. I had a chance to attend that wedding. My wife, she was a bridesmaid in that party. In that the reception, I had a chance to meet her.

CD: So it was in Tennessee, but how did you continue talking to her?

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

DD: Yeah, so I live in Houston, and later on when I came back to Houston, I found out she lived in Houston also. So that's... after them getting married in Tennessee, my cousin, she decided to move down to Houston to live with her husband. Later on, I had a chance to come and see my cousin and I had a chance to meet my wife over there. *(laughs)*

[1:07:00]

CD: Oh, good! That's nice. Okay. What about your family in Vietnam right now? Have you ever gone back to visit them?

DD: No. I don't want to go back to Vietnam during... during the Communist control in Vietnam unless there are no more Communist living in Vietnam. I don't want to go back, because under their control, there is no freedom, no human rights, and no democracy in Vietnam. So that's the reason why I don't want to come back.

CD: So even after the U.S. and Vietnam had diplomatic relations in the 1990s, I mean, a lot of people visited, but I guess you didn't want to visit because of those issues, right?

DD: Yeah.

CD: Okay. All right, well, let's just recap real quickly. We talked a lot about family and your immigration story here. Throughout your entire immigration experience, what has been your scariest moment?

DD: What do you mean?

CD: During the...you know...from Vietnam, to the boat ride, to the refugee camps, and in the U.S., do you remember a time or moment when you were the most scared? Like, 'oh my gosh, this is the scariest moment in my life'?

DD: Yes. When I escaped the country to get out from the Communists, I remembered that is the worst time and the scariest was when our barge was overloaded with hungry and desperate people, who tried to get on the American rescue ship. At the same time, the barge rail collapsed and trapped a lot of people

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

under, just like a rat trap. They trapped people under. I saw a lot of people screaming for help and a lot of people's blood was spreading all over the floorboards.

CD: Okay. So that was the most scariest moment. Well, let's change it up and say, what was your proudest moment?

DD: When I came to America, the proudest moment was when I celebrated the very first Fourth of July in the United States. It was the Fourth of July in 1976 and it was the twenty years of independence in America.

CD: Two hundred years?

DD: Yeah, two hundred years. That's in 1976. That's the anniversary of 200 years of independence in America.

CD: What did you do?

DD: We celebrated. And... It was the first time we tried to play with firecrackers. (*Laughs*) And, uh... We looked on the TV and there was the Statue of Liberty. And, we just really appreciated the freedom we had. That was the first year we celebrated freedom in America, with the Statue of Liberty and fireworks. And it was also the commemoration for the 200 years—they called it bicentennial.

CD: Bicentennial. That's great. How has your view of the U.S. and of Americans changed since your arrival?

[1:10:53]

DD: Here in the United States, everyone had a chance to go to school and go to work. And... we had freedom of speech to express ourselves. So that, I like.

CD: Is there something about your experience that you wish you could've changed?

DD: Yes. If I had a chance, I would go to... go back to medical school.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Well...do you have any concerns about raising your family in America? Because I know...

DD: Yes. I lived in America all by myself, and after I married, I had a family of five – my wife and three children. I was the only breadwinner, I mean, just one income in the family. So I was so worried that I could not be able to support them financially and in addition to that, I wanted to raise them as American and still keep our Vietnam culture.

CD: How have you kept your Vietnamese culture and identity alive in the U.S. even when there is so much pressure to assimilate to the American culture?

DD: It's very hard for my—us, my wife and I, who try to keep the Vietnamese culture along with the American culture. We wanted to adjust our family to American life without forgetting the roots of Vietnam.

CD: I guess to back to when you first started your family. What kind of aspirations did you have for your children?

DD: When I started to have my family, I wished my kids good success in education and to have a better life in America. I did not want them to struggle for life like myself, thirty-six years ago.

CD: Has those aspirations and expectations changed over the years as they've gotten older?

DD: [pause] My three kids have been successful and fulfilled my expectations.

CD: (*Laughs*) Aw, well that's good to hear. If you had to pick three or four events about your life that you want your grandchildren to know about our family history, what would it be?

DD: Yes, I want my grandchildren to know that I was a Vietnamese refugee, who was looking for freedom in the United States of America in 1975 and they called me 'boat people.' I want them, my children and grandchildren, to know that I was a lucky survivor in the Pacific Ocean and I came to the United States to start my new life in America without any help from the family, just like an orphan. So I can survive. And, I want them to know that I could compromise the differences of the East and the West culture so that I could raise my family in America without them forgetting their roots of Vietnam.

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

CD: Well, let's see...how long have you lived in Houston?

DD: I have been living in Houston since 1976 until now.

CD: So would you consider yourself a Houstonian?

DD: Oh, yes! Um... I have been living here for a long time and I consider myself to be a Houstonian and I can identify myself as Vietnamese American.

CD: Vietnamese American. So what are you doing now? I know you said you are retired. What kind of activities do you enjoy, and what groups—I guess what groups are you doing now?

DD: Yes. Right now I am a retiree from the City of Houston and I enjoy to be a member of the photography club. I am also a member of a Vietnamese music choir, so I sing for the community. The choir's name is *Sóng Việt*. And I also enjoy traveling to different places in America every year.

CD: What are your hopes for the next generation of Vietnamese Americans?

DD: Um... I hope that the next generation of Vietnamese Americans will have a voice in the United States mainstream. At the same time, they can carry along with them the traditional culture of Vietnam. And I also hope that one day they can help change the world, like bringing democracy to Vietnam.

CD: Wow. That's great. (*chuckles*) Do you have anything else that I have not asked you that you want to include or mention? Like, there was something you wanted to say before but you forgot to say it?

[01:16:55]

DD: One thing is that... because I am a Vietnamese refugee. I left Vietnam to look for freedom. And I started my new life in America. I want to say thank you very much to the American people who have helped me during the past. And without their help, I cannot be successful today. I am so appreciative and thank God for America for helping other countries and open their arms to help a lot of refugees like me, so I can have a chance to start my new life. I really appreciate the freedom and liberty in America. [*Tears*]

CD: Thank you. That was beautiful. Thank you.

DD: Thank you for your time.

[End 01:18:00]

Oral History Interview: Duc Dinh

INDEX

American Red Cross 18, 25

Aspirations 1, 26-28, 32

Camp Pendleton refugee camp 19, 20

Clark Air Base 2, 18

Culture maintenance 3, 32-34

Freedom/Liberty 1, 8, 14, 24, 29-31, 33, 34

Guam Island 2, 18, 20

International Rescue Committee 21

Life in Vietnam

Education 1, 4, 7, 8, 14

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Work 1, 2

Family Members 1, 2, 4, 10-12

Media 6

Life in the United States

California 19, 21

Difficulties 22-25, 28, 32

Education/Learning English 22, 24-26, 29

Family 3, 4, 28-30, 32

Manpower Program 24, 26-27

Texas 23-26

Work 22, 23 28, 29

Subic Bay Naval Base 2, 17

Vietnam War

Situation pre-migration 1-8

Reasons for migrating 9, 10, 14

Barriers to leaving 8-12

Escape by boat 9, 10, 13-17

Houston Asian American Archive
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Green Forrest 16, 17

Wake Island 18-20