Vietnamese-Americans 2000: Getting Beyond the War and Its Aftermath

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(The event honors 11 Vietnamese-American high school graduates who were either valedictorians or salutatorians of their respective '99 classes. More to be posted at www.vhkhvn.org)

Greetings to the parents, families, friends and the 11 young scholars honored here today and to members of the Vietnamese Culture & Science Association. It is a privilege for me to be with all of you and thank you for your kind hospitality. Please bear with me as I will be speaking mostly in English to the young scholars. Otherwise we would have to be here twice as long. Plus Mr. Jeff Watkins, who will treat us to a special talk later on Vietnamese culture, can translate for me.

Before I begin, I'd like to introduce two special guests of mine today: my father, Pham Van Hoa, my inspiration and my favorite pilot. He is a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Vietnamese Air Force and a survivor of Communist re-education and hard labor camps. Also here with us is Brad Larkin, a college classmate of mine from UCLA and a former U.S. Marine Corps infantry officer who also served in Desert Storm and Bangladesh. Brad left active duty in 1993 and currently lives in Houston after graduating from Rice with an MBA. Thank you to you both for being here.

My hometown is Saigon. I grew up in California, but Texas will always be a part of my family. The first time I visited Houston was July 1989. I was a young, inexperienced Marine Corps student aviator flying in a T-34 trainer from Naval Air Station Corpus Christi. I was always proud to proclaim that I was from the South -- South Vietnam! It was as hot and humid then, maybe just a little hotter in the cockpit, as I landed at nearby Ellington Field on my way to a baseball game at

the Astrodome. Thirty years earlier, in 1959, my father had also flown over this great state as he learned to fly at Reese Air Force Base in Lubbock. He would return to fly in a war back home in Southeast Asia. Little did I know in 1989 I would venture to a war in the Arabian Gulf just a short year later.

That cross-country flight, along with dozens of others over this great state, was the beginning of a journey for me-- one that I had dreamed about as a child growing up in Vietnam watching my father and his colleagues at Tan Son Nhut air base in Saigon. It was a childhood dream and a life-long passion with airplanes soaring above the earth and about putting on the uniform to serve one's country. I thought that dream had vanished on April 24, 1975, when my family boarded a crammed aircraft under the cover of darkness and fled our homeland. I never realized I could achieve that dream in America, only a mere decade removed the end of our longest and most controversial conflict.

However, that dream was not fulfilled without paying a price-- a toll on the soul, a journey within. The road on becoming an officer and a pilot in the U.S. Marines was treacherous, for any young American, let alone a Vietnamese 11 years after the war had ended. The odds were high, the obstacles were tough to hurdle physically, but more so emotionally. The feeling of insecurity was the greatest, one of not belonging, probably stemming from the loss of our homeland and a lack of English fluency, especially when faced with extreme combat simulations. From the time I stepped off that airplane in America, just like your parents and mine, or like others who got off the boat, our identity forever changed. Or was it our loss of identity or self-esteem? Or was it a shame how we lost our country?

I was not unique or alone. Despite the achievements of Vietnamese-Americans, there remain many problems. According to the Vietnamese Community of Orange County Inc., a private, non-profit social and cultural services agency, many of the problems--in older refugees and in young people born or raised in America--and the events in our community, could be traced to a lack of self-esteem and a feeling of insecurity. Some people still don't know where they are or who they are. I still deal with that. As we approach the new millennium, one of our greatest challenges is how we will face our past and deal with our identity crisis. Will we forever label ourselves as refugees and not immigrants, as Viet-kieus, as a community living in exile waiting for the day of revenge to take back our homeland? Do we expect or want our younger generation to carry on the torch of freedom. Or will we face our past, share with the younger generation about our journey and look forward, with hope and confidence, to the future- all of you - right here in America.

Remember we are not alone. Millions of others around the world at this age of uncertainty, the post-Cold War era, face the same identity crisis-most recently the people of Kosovo. We can all identify with the story of Rip Van Winkle and its universal theme of exile, journey and return.

How do you deal with this identity crisis when you face it? I did it and you can too. You do it by looking to your parents as your role models and by going after your dreams and passions. That's who you are. You are made of Vietnamese family values and passions and dreams. Often, we look at stars, celbrities and big-name people. We strive to be like them without realizing our best role models, those who showed us how to love, to care, to sacrifice, to focus, to give back. They are closest to our hearts and our minds, our parents. They have suffered yet they have been strong, for you and me. They gave up their dreams and hopes, left their native land, abandoned their possessions, to reach freedom, for you and me. Their lives were turned upside down, their societal roles reversed. They are still being asked and judged about their lives in the old country. Yet they have survived and thrived, for you and me. And they are here today, to celebrate and cherish this moment, for you and me. Let's give a round of applause for all the parents.

Take the journey. It can only be done in America. Where all passions can be pursued and realized. Where duty, honor, and service to community reflect great qualities also found in our Vietnamese heritage. However, there is no free lunch. You may be shown the path or the door to the food line. No one will open the door for you or move you to the front of the line. You have to earn it yourself like you have done already, by graduating as salutatorians and valedictorians. Remember the tougher the road, the greater the internal reward.

William Faulkner once said "The end of wisdom is to dream high enough not to lose the dream in the seeking of it."

Before I tell you a little about my journey, I'd like to talk about three young Vietnamese-Americans, two whom I know well and one I am huge fan of. Any of them could be here speaking to you instead of me. For they have traveled the tough roads and have broken barriers in their own right, before anyone else from our heritage. They are also in non-traditional career paths and they have done well. None of them became doctors, engineers, or lawyers. But they have contributed much to our culture and have placed us on the mainstream radarscope. Across America, there are many successful Vietnamese. But we hardly hear of them because the legacy of Vietnam and our own insecurities prevent us from looking beyond the war and its aftermath, in the Vietnamese-American community and in mainstream society.

Andrew Lam was a schoolmate of mine from Le Qui Don back in Saigon. An editor and a writer for Pacific News in San Francisco, Andrew has written extensively on the Vietnamese people in the U.S. and in Vietnam. His writing is truthful, painful and scholarly.

Quynh-Trang Nguyen is the general manager of Vietnamese Broadcasting Network in New Jersey and founder and anchor of Little Saigon Radio & Television in Orange County. She was named in top 25 Americans in Orange County and among the most influential Asian women in America. She brought daily news to the Vietnamese community with integrity and deep passion unseen before.

Dat Nguyen, whom I have never met, played college football at Texas A & M and became the all-time leading tackler in the Big 12 Conference. Drafted by the Dallas Cowboys last April, he is also the biggest Vietnamese I've ever seen on television!

Thirty years ago, as a young five-year old Vietnamese boy living in Saigon, I distinctively recall watching with my father the Apollo 11 moon landing broadcast on Armed Forces Television. I was amazed at the sight of humans actually stepping onto the scarred lunar surface. Years later, I would learn about the space program and astronauts and their training. I discovered many of the test-pilots and astronauts came from the military where they learned how to fly fighter aircraft: Neil Armstrong, John Glenn and even our greatest test-pilot who never orbited the Earth, Chuck Yeager. They had the right stuff. They were my heroes. I wanted to have the right stuff and I knew I had go through the military for training. I loved the uniform, the airplanes and the camaraderie like I had dreamed about as a child in Vietnam.

But I didn't have to look far or at the American pilots. In the back of mind was my number one inspiration, my favorite pilot -- my father, who was still in Communist re-education and hard labor camps while I was in high school in the early 80s. For a long time, I wondered why he did not leave Vietnam when his colleagues did. Some of them were on the same airplane we were, dressed in civilian gear. For a long time, I missed his presence, his humor, his support, and the fishing trips we took together in Vietnam. For a long time, growing up in a house full of women, my three sisters and my mother, I missed having a man around. For a long time, I felt like an outsider to the Vietnamese community because our old friends had both parents and were moving on with their lives. For a long time, I stayed away from our community.

When you are a 5' 6", 125-pound high school junior, struggling to fit in, to speak proper English and survive the basketball team tryout, the right stuff seemed so farfetched. Even after I made

the basketball team, earned the scholar athlete award and team captain for one season, I never was offered a chance to pursue my dream. My high school counselor approached one of my best friends, Jimmy, to offer him a congressional recommendation for the Naval Academy. Jimmy was an All-American boy, 6' 2", blond and athletic. And he had absolutely no interest in the military at that time. We ended up in college together but I never forgot the incident. No one opened the door for me then.

A few years later, I discovered another entry into military flight training. It was the old-fashion way …Officer Candidates School (OCS). It was a ticket to Pensacola, the cradle of naval aviation, but the first stop was Quantico, Virginia. I am going to summarize my military experience by revisiting my first summer in Quantico.

Flight school was a lot easier. Desert Storm and Somalia were much more rewarding and fulfilling. But OCS was definitely the ultimate test of my mettle. You will face your own defining moment. Be ready when it comes and give it your all! No one asked me but I carried the burden of our loss in Vietnam on my shoulders throughout that summer at OCS. The lingering belief of South Vietnamese as inept soldiers and the way we lost our country were in the minds of the OCS staff.

"Hey Candidate Chong, Fang, Fong, whatever your bleeping name is, get down and give me 20 bends and thrusts!"

Another drill sergeant shouted "What are you doing here in my Marine Corps? Are you a Viet Cong spy?"

There were numerous times when my arms and legs could no longer carry the 80-pound pack and M-16 rifle and my skinny neck could no longer don the Kevlar helmet in the 90 degree heat and 90% humidity. It was during those moments when I was to ready to forgo the honor of an officer's commission and suffer the ridicule of the DI’s. Ask for a Drop on Request (DOR) or risk getting kicked out after a long summer.

I thought about the next Vietnamese to go through OCS. The staff would dismiss him too. I thought about all the Vietnamese soldiers who died for our freedom. I thought about their long years of fighting and their families who suffered their losses. I only had to survive 10-weeks of

simulated combat, nothing compared to the years and agony suffered by our South Vietnamese soldiers. I thought about my father, who by 1986, had been locked up for 11 years.

During those lonely and humid nights in the Quantico barracks, I lay awake thinking about my dream, my passion and my life. I got angry and became eager to wake up the next day of training to prove the staff wrong. I wanted to scream back but I could not. You have to choose your battle wisely and cannot cry wolf every time about discrimination or we will never catch up let alone get ahead. I bit my tongue and swallowed my pride. I took the respectful, silent and subdued Asian approach.

I wanted to shout back at the DIs "You lost 58,000 Americans in Vietnam. We lost over two million people. You served one tour of duty in combat. My father and his colleagues fought the Commies for nearly 20 years! And you think we (I) cannot make your military?"

The Vietnamese people and my parents, inspired me without even being there, to march that extra mile in the woods, to swim that extra 15 feet, to grin my teeth and bear the harassment, to prove Vietnamese can belong in America and in the U.S. Marines.

When I entered in the Marines, I was merely after my passion of flying and becoming a military officer. I was fascinated by the uniform and the glory. I made a lot of friends, traveled the world, and was very fortunate to come home alive. I learned about the suffering and losses from the American perspectives, from Vietnam Veterans I befriended and served alongside and their families. What I never expected to learn in the Marines was a lesson of life--about duty, honor and commitment to country and community, like my father had demonstrated. But I already knew those characteristics-- from my father early on.

While my father served as my inspiration, my mother was my day-to-day role model. She taught me about personal sacrifice and love. After the day my father drove us to the airport to leave Vietnam, my mother took charge and raise four young children in a strange land without any money to start and without any English. She too had wanted me to be an doctor, an engineer or a lawyer. But she knew my obsession with flying. It was very difficult for her when I told her my desire to serve in the Marines. Her first words were "Why the Marines? Go to the Air Force or the Navy. They're much easier". She never discouraged me from joining yet it was extremely difficult for her to send me off to war like she had seen my father leave so many times before. Even though my mother is not here today, she is always supportive in spirit.

The legacy of Vietnam still lingers on. I refer to it as the American conflict in Vietnam, not the Vietnam War, because Vietnam has been in a war of some sort during its entire history. Against the Chinese, the French, among ourselves, the Americans, and now against change and the new millennium. But Americans prefer to call the "Vietnam War" as its own sort of war, a lingering sore, an open wound that would not heal, even 24 years later.

For the Vietnamese who left the country in a mass exodus, the legacy, pain and anger continue onto life in America and the next generation. Coming to terms with our past, your past, have not been easy. In some ways for me, it was as hard at OCS in 1986 as it has been this year in Orange County, California.

We've come a long way but we're still mourning an irretrievable past. Next year, 25 years after the war ended, will be silver the anniversary our arrival in America. But so far in 1999, our community in Orange County has faced in its past with much disparity. First there was the video store demonstration for 60 days. Then the April 30th celebration conflicts. Last month, the Bowers Museum started hosting a controversial art exhibit from Vietnam, the same one that was on display at Plano last summer. I wonder how the community will react when the popular Broadway play "Miss Saigon" will come in September. Our community is going through a maturation process and growing pains just like other immigrant groups previously had done. We must resist the temptation to forever label ourselves as refugees and war victims of the Communists. Letting go of our haunting past can only help the next generation achieve their full potential without the hinder of the ghosts of Vietnam.

Young Vietnamese-Americans today face far greater expectations than those of my generation--those born in Vietnam and grew up America. The bar has been raised. The expectations for you are enormous because we, the Vietnamese, have been here longer now. You are expected to study and excel and pay back the sacrifices your parents made. You are expected to maintain your cultural heritage and Vietnamese fluency. You are expected to play the violin or piano well. You are expected to be well-rounded yet focused on getting into a top-notch university. You are expected to take care of your family and … the people of Vietnam.

Soon, you will move to your respective college dormitories and live among students from different cultures and regions. Take advantage of this period of learning in your life. Seek to understand those around you and yourself. Show compassion and tolerance. Go after your dreams, whatever they may be. Don't let anyone tell you no. Put your face and your body in the

uniform, suit, lab coat or in the executive chair. Don't rely on anyone to open the door for you. Charge it at full speed and knock it down! Dream, pursue and realize your passions and don't stop until you do. They may change but you will enjoy the journey wherever your destination may be in life.

Whether this year or next or when you are ready, do come back to contribute to our community, in your own way. Don't wait as long as I did. Vietnamese-Americans can have a voice in mainstream as we do have an elected official in Orange County, a councilman in Westminster, one of our own. Protesting in the streets with 15,000 people is another way to make the headline news. But hosting a celebration luncheon like this one is much more effective and meaningful. Congratulations to the members of the Vietnamese Culture and Science Association for a job well-done, and best wishes to Houston's cream of the crop-- the 11 young scholars honored here today.

Thank you and god bless all of you.

(Quang X. Pham, 34, is a top sales specialist for a world-leading biotech firm. Prior to joining the private sector, Mr. Pham served as a United States Marine Corps Officer and helicopter pilot. A frequent speaker and writer, he is completing a book about his experiences in Vietnam and in America.)