

## *Escape from Vietnam: An Interview with Nguyen Van The*

*Nguyen Van The, a native of Vietnam, was converted to Mormonism in 1966: "I had no previous religion, although as the son in a Buddhist family, I was expected to worship my ancestors." In 1968 he was drafted into the army, and in 1970, he married Lien My Le, a young woman he met at church and later baptized. In 1972 he was sent to Lackland Air Force Base to study teaching skills, arriving back in Vietnam just before the Paris Peace Talks, and just in time to be set apart as president of the Saigon branch. In a speech at Brigham Young University, in February 1980, he describes the state of the branch just before the fall of Saigon:*

*The Saigon branch was as active as usual—not only as active as usual but even more active than usual. The number of members was growing, thanks to the missionaries' great efforts, and many people were waiting to be baptized. We had printed tracts and other church reading material in Vietnamese, along with part of the hymn book. The Book of Mormon was ready to be printed in Vietnamese. Also, we had succeeded in getting the Saigon radio station to include our branch activities into their broadcasting program. Although they were not willing to broadcast any religious messages, they were interested in our Family Home Evening program. As a result, they broadcast our first Family Home Evening program at the end of March at the very time when they were cancelling many other regular programs in order to give more air time to news about the war situation, which was now growing critical.*

*His moving account of what happened after this, his incarceration and subsequent escape is part of an interview conducted by the mission president who set him apart—William S. Bradshaw—and his wife, Marjorie Bradshaw. Former President Bradshaw is now Associate Professor of Zoology at BYU. Former President The is working in the Church Translation Service, also at BYU.*

*What were your biggest problems as branch president?*

The biggest problem was that some of the members complained that the local leaders of the Church, like me, were the only ones with authority to do things for the Church. They wondered why other people weren't allowed to do things and why the Church didn't adopt Vietnamese customs. Some may have thought I was too young to be branch president. They said that they had been in the Church longer than I, and they were older, or that they were better than I and should have been put in ahead of me. The branch president was Vietnamese, but we had one American counselor, and the clerk was American too. Since we were not familiar with the church records, it was especially helpful to have Brothers Gentry and Eldridge as our branch clerks. Dr. Lester Bush, the First Counselor, helped us in many ways. As a doctor he could help the missionaries when they were sick or the members who were sick. From his other Church experiences he tried to help me as the branch president to lead the Church effectively.

*The war started to intensify in 1974 and 1975, and Saigon was threatened. How did the members feel about that?*

They felt very uncomfortable, and they were afraid that Saigon would collapse. But Saigon was different from other places or cities in South Vietnam. It was noisy and busy, and people were earning their income, so they just worked as usual. It was the capital: There was a sense that it couldn't succumb. If it did fall, we thought it would take months. For example, in Cambodia it took one or two months for Phnom Penh to fall. But Vietnam collapsed very suddenly.

*When did the missionaries leave?*

They left in April 1975 (April 3 and 4).

*Did you think it was a good idea for them to go at the time?*

I thought that it was right for them to leave, but many members felt the missionaries should have stayed to help the members. They felt that the missionaries and the Church had abandoned them. When the missionaries left, I knew that I was the only one in Vietnam who could help the members. A few days after that, on April 18, 1975, President (Jerry D.) Wheat and Elder (Richard T.) Bowman came back to Vietnam to get an official list of branch members from the American embassy, having had the names approved for evacuation.

President Wheat, Elder Bowman and I went to the Embassy. President Wheat had a letter of introduction from Ted Price, (Church member in the United States Immigration Office) in Hong Kong. We could get into the embassy with the letter because at this time thousands of people were rushing the embassy for papers.



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We went room by room, and nobody would say that the branch list was there. Everywhere we went the answer was the same. At last we met the Consul General and he told us that he didn't know anything about the list. President Wheat persisted because David Hoopes, the son-in-law of Elder Theodore Tuttle, was a special assistant to the President in Washington, D.C., where he had teletyped the branch list to the embassy in Saigon. President Wheat said to the Consul General, "If you say you know nothing of a list, please let me contact Mr. Hoopes at the White House." The Consul General said "No, we would be arrested if we called the White House."

President Wheat said that before coming to Saigon, Mr. Hoopes had told him that if there were a problem with the list to call him. So at last the Consul General was convinced, and President Wheat talked to Brother Hoopes at the White House, who also talked to the Consul General. I don't know what was said, but all I heard was, "Yes, sir, yes sir." When the Consul General hung up the telephone, he said that the list was in another office, and we should go there to check.

We found the room and talked to a man who was in charge of the evacuation program. He presented the list to us, and we corrected some of the names. The man told us the evacuation program had not been approved by the United States Congress, so we would have to wait for awhile. From then on, I would have to contact him by phone. He gave me his phone number, and I was supposed to call him twice a day.

President Wheat, Elder Bowman and I went back to the branch and called a special meeting.

We dared not tell the members that the Church had a list from which they would be evacuated. We just told them that in case of emergency, we would try to help them get out. Some of the members accused me of trying to hide the truth from them. They thought I was trying to abandon them and go out alone. None of the members had been evacuated then.

There were about 250 names on the list. The list was made by the mission, and when I saw the list at the embassy, I just made some corrections on the names. This was just a listing of the members, without relatives. When I later called some of the members to go, they said, "What about my family? I can't go without my family." So they blamed me.

### *Was there panic in the city?*

Yes, there was panic. About four or five days before the fall of Saigon, the Communists shelled mortars into the airport, and many refugees from the surrounding provinces rushed into Saigon.

Luckily, President Wheat and Elder Bowman were able to leave after two days even though the airport was full and many people were trying to get out. Thousands of people were camped at the gates of the airport. People who didn't have a passport or an official paper from the embassy were not allowed in. After President Wheat and Elder Bowman left, I was to contact the embassy twice a day. I had been released from the army because of my health

and so was free to stay home all day and night and spend time at the Church. I contacted them twice a day, and every time I called, they said that the evacuation program hadn't been implemented yet. They started evacuating American citizens, their relatives, and other important people, but they kept telling me, "Not yet, not yet."

On April 22nd when I was at the branch office, a man introduced himself to me as Colonel Madison, and said he had just received a call from Mr. Hoopes at the White House. "Mr. Hoopes asked me to help you here. Please contact me twice a day at the Defense Attache Office at the airport." So from that time forth I did that.

On April 24th he asked me if I could act fast. I didn't understand what he meant. He said "I'll give you one hour to gather twenty people who can leave on the flight tonight. Major Cook will meet you inside the airport."

At the time, there was with me Brother Kiem, a colonel in the Republic of South Vietnam's armed forces. I told him, "Because you are with me and you have a car, hurry home and get your family and we will meet at the airport." His family consisted of only ten people, so there were places for ten others, or two more families.

I rushed to the branch building and asked my sister-in-law to inform two other families to be at the airport in one hour. Then I rushed back to the airport where thousands of people were blocked at the gates because they didn't have passports or authorization papers. Because I was in the army, they allowed me to enter, along with my member friend, a police major. We found Major Cook and Colonel Kiem's family (ten people). The other two families were blocked because they didn't have the papers to get in. We waited until the time had gone and Major Cook had to leave with ten people. Bro. Kiem could not go, of course because he was army personnel. We went back to the branch and met with the other two families who had not been able to enter the airport area.

Colonel Madison tried to help us by the "back door" so to speak, by reserving some spaces on the C-30 aircraft.

The next day, (the 25th), I called all the families and asked them to come to the chapel. I informed those who could to go inside the airport gates to wait, and those who could not to be ready if any opportunity happened to materialize. About sixty people (six or seven families), including my own, did go to the airport to live there with friends in the military compound.

On Sunday the 27th, we held sacrament meeting as usual in the morning. After the meeting, I met with all heads of families to explain the situation.

We had to decide who would go first. I didn't want to have to make that decision myself. It was decided that those who had been members of the Church the longest and those who held positions in the branch should go first. It was decided that my own family should go. This would relieve me of worry, and it would allow me to take responsibility for the other members. I also volunteered to be the last person to leave. This was approved and a priority list made up. It included the first and second counselors, branch clerks, older members and so on down to the last.

After the meeting, I went to the airport with those members who were able to pass through the gates and I left my family there. I used the military phone line at the airport to contact Colonel Madison. He explained to me that he had been the leader of a negotiation delegation team which had just returned from meeting with the North Vietnamese. He said that the Communists had promised that there would not be a bloodbath in Saigon. He tried to comfort me and tell me not to worry about anything. I explained my situation and reminded him that I had a lot of responsibility for the Church members. He suggested that my family should go first, and I said that had been the decision of the members too.

I hung up the phone, talked to the members and then went back to the branch to wait for a phone call from President Wheat. Just as I arrived at the chapel I received a call from the airport, informing me that my family had just left. After my conversation with Colonel Madison, he had immediately sent someone to pick them up. I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to them. Even though they were not ready, a jeep came, picked them up, and took them on a plane. There were ten of them, including my wife's mother and her sisters. I was not sad because I thought that I would meet them in a few days. I went on living at the branch with several members who volunteered to stay with me.

The next day when I returned to the airport and contacted Colonel Madison, he said that he would give me ten seats that evening. I prepared the next family to go, but Colonel Madison called me later to say that the flight was already full. The members were sad at this news, of course. I went back to the branch to wait for calls from Hong Kong or from the United States embassy. That night the airport was shelled with mortars.

The next day the airport was blocked off, and I couldn't get in. There was no traffic in or out. (There were no casualties among the members. In fact, no one was killed during the siege or during the evacuation. We were blessed.) I went back to the home of one of the members, a lieutenant colonel, and called Colonel Madison on his military line.

As I was talking to him, the military helicopters flew back and forth over me. Colonel Madison said they had suspended the evacuation by C-30 aircraft and now were evacuating by helicopter, so he wouldn't be able to help us anymore. I said goodbye, went back to the branch office and tried to contact the United States embassy.

I knew that the South Vietnamese had ordered all American military personnel out of Vietnam in twenty-four hours, but I thought that this applied only to military not to embassy personnel. Because the branch office was in the area of police headquarters, it was blocked and we couldn't get out. When I came back to the branch building that night, I found myself stuck inside because of the twenty-four hour curfew. I just waited and tried all night to contact the embassy. The next morning, April 30th, Brother Loi picked me up in his jeep and took me to the embassy. On the way, I saw thousands of people mobbing and ransacking American buildings.

When we reached the embassy, I saw smoke. The fire department people were trying to extinguish the fire. A lot of people were removing things from the building. No one was there; all the American people had left. I felt like a person falling from a high place. I felt like crying. I went back to stay with several young men at the branch office, which by then was surrounded by police.

*Could any American at the end have helped to get members out of Saigon?*

Yes, anyone with authority could have done a lot.

*How many of the members were officially evacuated?*

Officially, those who got to Guam, about 100. These were those who got inside the airport and then got out by some way. Colonel Madison was able to help two families: my family and Col. Kiem's family. Col. Kiem got out later, making the arrangements by himself. The last groups were evacuated by helicopter. Bro. Thinh who now works for the State of Utah, was with one of the last groups. Of the approximately 100 members evacuated, some were evacuated officially and some got out by themselves. Of about 250 members, probably 150 remained. From 1975 until 1980, most of the members have escaped and very few of them are in Vietnam now.

*Please tell us how you felt when all of this happened?*

I felt very, very sad in my heart and hopeless. I thought, "Now the Americans are gone, no one can help us. The Communists will take over Saigon. The members cannot get out." A few hours after that the Communists came.

I want to describe the situation. I went back to the chapel where I met some young men who would stay with me there, including Brother Cao Minh and one brother named Nghia, a doctor. He suggested we go to the International Red Cross on his Honda. As we drove on a one-way street, we saw many people coming in the opposite direction, crying, "The Communists are coming, the Communists are coming!" And then we saw a huge tank, with a gun, coming very, very fast. I couldn't do anything. We fell off the bike and tried to hide in the ditch. The tank was very close to us. Then many other tanks came.

We had never seen such big Russian-57 tanks and guns. We had seen tanks in the war, but they had never been driven fast like that. It was terrible. The guns did not fire at all, but the people were very frightened and so tried to get into the ditch.

There were big guns in the streets. Policemen and others in the military had to give their guns to the Communists. Their guns were lying in the street and the children came and fired them into the sky. They even wounded people. The children were just trying out the guns like a toy. The Com-

munists did not try to kill anyone, but we were still very frightened and so decided to hide ourselves in the chapel. I had to pick up my wallet and the papers from my pocket from the street. We got on the Honda and went back to the branch.

The branch was located in the middle of houses occupied by Americans, and Vietnamese came to loot in the area. They even entered the grounds of the chapel, and Brother Cao Minh and I and the other young men who were there explained that this was not an American home—it was a church—so they left. From the other homes they took everything, including window glass. Most were not criminals; they were just taking the opportunity to get things. This happened the first few days until the Communist government gave the order that anyone found looting would be killed.

*Did the people feel depression and sorrow because the South Vietnamese government had failed or did they blame the Americans?*

I believe they blamed the Americans for abandoning them, but they also blamed Thieu and the government of South Vietnam for the corruption.

*President The, we've come in your story to when the Communists took Saigon. Will you tell us your own personal history during this time?*

After we went to see the International Red Cross, Brother Nghia and I went back to the branch and lived there for two days. There were about five young men with me in the building. We didn't dare go out. We could hear gunfire and were afraid of more fighting. Later, we found that the gun noise was caused by the children firing the guns in the street, and that there was a lot of looting of buildings. The Communists held a big meeting on May 1st. We didn't leave the branch. On May 2nd we left very early and went to the western area (Mekong Delta area) and tried to escape. It was very hard for us to travel because so many people were going back and forth on the road. There were very few buses running. We were trying to get into Thailand. We really didn't care which direction we went, just so we got to the sea. We were told that there were some foreign ships outside the sea territory, a possible way to escape, so we went to the Cape of Vietnam land, Camau. I stood right on the edge of the Cape of Camau and could see no bigger boats at all. There was no way to go further, so after ten days I returned to Camau. I was afraid I would not be allowed to go back to Saigon because the Communists were controlling everything and the people living in the town could not leave without permission. We were lucky, though, because we made contact with Brother Nghia and were able to live with him. Brother Nghia had a brother who was a Communist Captain.

When we went to the sea to look for a boat we found that there were several boats sunk in the sea. We talked to the chief of the town government and said, "If you let these boats sink down like this, it is wasteful. Why don't we try to get the boats out?" They liked the idea, so they allowed Brother Nghia's brother to help us. We got permission to go back to Saigon for tools to

get the boats out. I went first, then Brother Cao Minh and finally the five young men.

When I got back to Saigon, I found out that the Communist local authorities had come and announced that they wanted the building. We decided that we must turn over the building to the Communists. We had to decide what we should do with the property inside the church. One of the sisters said that she had access to the empty house of one of her relatives, and we could store the property there. It was very hard to hire a truck to transport it, though, so we decided to sell some of it to get some money to pay for moving expenses. We sold one piano for 100 thousand piasters and some of the desks for about 50,000. I gave some of the poor members some of the money so they could live temporarily. As we put the things in the sister's house, people stared at us. They suspected us.

We had two meetings at this house and we tried to have a sacrament meeting. The Communists looked at us, and wondered why we were holding a meeting. At that time, if more than three people met, we had to make a report. After that, we were afraid to meet.

I went back to my own home to live where I tried to help Brother Cao Minh stay out of military affairs. I wanted Brother Cao Minh to live at my house, so I said that he used to live in the building, and I asked permission for him to move to my house. When we got to my house, we reported to the local authorities and declared that he was a draft dodger. Actually he was a first lieutenant in the Air Force, but when the Communists took over the South, the draft dodgers were not punished like the others. Because they had reacted against the former government, that meant they were with the Communists.

Brother Cao Minh, Brother Nghia (the doctor) and I tried to gather information on how to escape. After we got the information, we were delayed until the Communists made the announcement that those who had served in the South Vietnamese armed forces had to report to be reeducated. Brother Cao Minh was afraid not to report, but I told him that my former testimony had said that he was a draft dodger and if he reported to the authorities, we would have a problem. I said, "Do not list any relatives, (although he had several sisters living in Saigon). Say you are the only son in the family and that you used to live at the church teaching missionary lessons." He obeyed my words and so was safe from having to report.

But Brother Nghia and I had to report, and the Communist government tricked us. In fact, they knew if they didn't trick us, we would not report. Officers in the army from second lieutenant to general and civil servants from director to president were not told to report in the first announcement, only soldiers and noncommissioned officers. There were millions in this group; the only way they could make people report was to say that those who reported would be reeducated on the spot and that this would take only three days. Those who reported would get a certificate showing that they had graduated from the reeducation course, and they could then rejoin their families.

They announced that those from second lieutenant to general and from director to the president had to report and bring a ten-day food supply. We

imagined that those who were assigned to bring a ten-day food supply would be reeducated in ten days. We knew we would be considered more sinful than the other soldiers, so we decided to stay home and try to escape. But we grew bored because we didn't know when we could possibly escape. We started thinking, "Why don't we report for ten days and then come home and wait for the opportunity to escape." So Brother Nghia and I went to report, and Brother Cao Minh stayed at home and looked for the opportunity. Before we went, we heard that there was an organization at Vung Tau that would help a person escape in fifteen days. We figured that we could report and spend our ten days and be back home in time.

We reported; ten days went by, and then a month, and then two months and still no mention of releasing us. I had reported to The Faculty of Letters School in Saigon. About two days later, they transferred me to Hoc Man, the camp that used to be called Ong Nam (Ong Nam meant lieutenant-colonel in the time of French domination.)

There were about 5,000 prisoners in this camp, a "regimental" camp. The divisions were company, regiment, division. In a regiment there are five battalions. One battalion was one camp, about 1000 people. In one camp of 1000 people, we were divided into smaller groups of fifteen people. We had to live, eat, and do everything else as one unit or group. A slogan said, "Work in group, eat in group." There were three groups in one company, forty-five people living in one barracks.

When we ate, we had to cook for ourselves in three companies. But since there were three companies to use the same kitchen, we had to take turns. We cooked the rice in one big pan. It is very hard to cook rice with a great big pan, so we ate uncooked or burned rice for awhile. They supplied us with a vegetable like spinach called, Rau Muong, which we had to boil with salt. I think you haven't seen salt like we had in Vietnam. They gave us a lump of salt with dirt mixed in. You couldn't see the salt because it looked black. Before we could use it, we had to dissolve the lump in water and then try to skim the dirt away. We cooked the vegetables with the salt water. Sometimes they gave us some fish or meat. When they gave us meat, it was terrible for us because we had to preserve the meat for two or three days and then divide it among 145 people. Each serving was about the size of two fingers. We just looked at the meat longingly but dared not eat all at once. One day they gave us one chicken for 145 people. We didn't know how to divide it equally so decided to grind it like powder and put it in the vegetables. At first we had enough rice to eat, for me anyway, but not for the taller and stronger ones. Later rice became short for people outside the camps, so it also became short for us. They gave us about two bowls of rice a day, including some rotten potatoes and flour. The rice was not good rice. It took us many hours to pick out the rocks and dirt.

Since we had rotten rice and little meat, our health grew worse. Most of us suffered from paralysis or numbness and beriberi because of the lack of Vitamin B<sub>1</sub>. We also had a lot of itching.

The most terrible thing about the camp was the toilet facilities. Our camp was a former military barracks. When the government collapsed, the people ransacked the building and took everything. There were about 1,000 men and two or three toilets. With overuse the toilets became clogged, and human waste ran all over the floors. I had to close my eyes and try to get out of the toilet as soon as possible. For the military latrine we dug a big hole for everyone to use. Because of the lack of equipment, we had to dig the hole by ourselves. The hole was an open one, and in the dry, sunny season it was fine and would last one or two months. But in the rainy season after a few days it would be full. It would also pile up with maggots. When we first came to the camp, we brought some toilet paper, but it was used in only a few days. We asked the Communist cadre to buy some for us. We would give them money and for the first while they would buy it for us. At first they said, "What is this?" They didn't know what toilet paper was and when we told them, they said, "Luxury. You are in the reeducation camp now and you still have the idea to use luxurious things. Your mind is still for the American, capitalist way, and you must stop." Soon they stopped buying toilet paper. They said, "When you go to the toilet now, you must take water in some kind of a container with you." We didn't have any container to use. Some of us had brought milk powder when we first came to the camp. The most common container was a milk powder can made from cardboard that would not rust and also had a lid to cover it. So we ate from that can, we drank from the same can, and also used the same can to carry water when we went to the toilet.

We had to dig a well to get water. Two or three people would dig a well and use it together. We washed clothes, bathed, drank, cooked, all from the same well. Imagine what it was like to have nothing to cover the well to protect the water!

In the camp the labor was very hard. Daily work included going to the forest to cut trees to build houses for us to live in and houses for the Communists cadres to live in. We had to plant vegetables or whatever else they asked us to plant for our food. The Communist cadres were from both North and South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese were kinder than the North Vietnamese, who were very strict.

Each day we had a period of working and a period of study. For example, we had two months of studying; then we'd stop studying for awhile and go to work. They started our reeducation by giving us political lessons. In one period they gave us from eight to ten lessons. It took us one week to discuss each lesson. We went to class and then came back to discuss the lessons. Usually we discussed the lessons for eight hours a day, during which each of us (about fifteen in a group) had to confess our sins aloud on every subject. They called it "our relationship to our sins." If one was in a combat unit and had had to fight against the Communists and kill people, one knew what to confess, but if you were not, it was very hard to know what to say. My last position was as an English teacher, so I didn't know how to confess my sins. All of us had to invent our crimes according to instructions. For example, a

doctor had to confess his crimes by saying that he had saved many people and because he had saved people for the former government, he had sinned.

Brother Nghia and I stayed in the same camp for about six months and then were transferred to different camps. They never let us stay in one camp for long in order to prevent us from organizing against them.

I had to confess that I had taught officials in the Armed Forces Language School, and when these officials understood English, they went to other countries and learned military techniques in English and then when they came back to Vietnam, they bombed and killed. Because our minds were under constant pressure to invent crimes, we really used our minds. When we confessed in general terms, our captors wouldn't accept our confessions. For example, if we said we were responsible for killing many people, they would say, "Name the number." If it was an aerial operation, they said "How can you know for sure?" Really, we did not know, but to satisfy them, we had to figure out how many were killed during an operation. They said that if you tell the truth, you can go home early. That meant that you confessed all the secret things of your heart. Then when we invented sins, we were classified as dangerous and sent to the North. The Communists did not kill us, but they tortured us in this way. There was no bloodbath. The only time they killed was if there was an incident against them. I think those above the rank of colonel were sent to the North and treated as prisoners of war.

The soldiers punished us every time they could. The Communist cadres were somewhat educated and because they were governed by high ranking officials, they tried to hide their hatred in their hearts, trying not to express it openly. But the young soldiers were angry. If by accident we laughed, they would say, "Why do you laugh at me?" And for any little reason they would punish us by making us stand at attention for many hours. There were two groups of Communists responsible for our control in the camp. The instructors who taught us in the daytime were on the instruction board for reeducation and they had a lot of power. Then there were the soldiers who guarded us in the camp. These guards said that we had to report to the other guard when we left the barracks, and say, "Mr. Guard, may we have permission to go to the toilet?" One night when we went out, the guard called us over and said, "How do you address us when you go to the toilet?" For many hours in the cold, he tried to teach us. We felt very tired and the next morning we had to go to work. We discussed it with others in the camp and decided we couldn't say Mr. Guard, so he couldn't blame us. We decided that we would just say, "We go to the toilet." The next night the other guard said, "Come here. To whom do you talk when you go to the toilet?" They were trying to set up another trap.

I was in the reeducation camp for twenty-seven months. Some of my close friends and I tried to escape many times but I can really say that I was blessed. I remained in the same area with the same regiment all the time. Many of my friends were transferred to completely different areas, from Long Khanh to Tay Ninh. Every five or six months they were changed to many different parts of the country.

To try to escape from Hoc Mon camp was not very difficult. To get into the camp or out of the camp, we had to take a bus. Sometimes we had to walk for a distance. The Communists' relatives who lived along the way tried to catch us. We didn't want to risk getting caught there, so we prepared another way. We stored some food to carry with us so if they transferred us we might escape on the way. We were transported from one camp to another by truck. When we got to the other place, we had to walk into the camp, so I thought maybe I could escape on the way. It was very dangerous to try escaping, and many of my friends were caught. About a month after we got to camp, two of my friends escaped, but when they got back to Saigon and had lived there two months, they were caught. The Communists punished them severely by putting them in an iron box, the kind used to hold munitions. They remained in that box in the sun by day and in the cold at night. They were given only a little food to eat and a little water to drink. They were kept there until a holy day came and a clemency policy allowed them to go back to the camp as usual. Others, however, had to wait many months. Months later, several tried to escape and were killed on the spot.

One of our duties was to act as judges of those who were caught. This meant that we had to condemn our own friends. We didn't want to condemn our friends, but if we didn't stand up and condemn them, we would be punished. We had to say that their action was very wrong. We had to sentence them to years in prison. If we tried to cut the sentence to two or three years in prison, they would accuse us: "You still can see only one side, so you must be reeducated some more."

After eighteen months in the camp, we were in bad condition. We didn't have much to eat and we were sick. They didn't have medicine for us. Even aspirin was scarce, and there were no antibiotics. When we got sick, they told us that we must try to overcome the sickness. When we got paralysis, they told us to try to walk—try to overcome, they said, try to overcome. I had flu and a sick stomach, but I didn't have skin problems like itching. I almost got beriberi, and I had a little paralysis. Most of us did get numbness or paralysis because we lacked Vitamin B<sub>1</sub>, but I could still walk. Those who were serious couldn't walk; they would just lie down. We didn't have enough food. Our relatives outside the camp were finally allowed to send three kilograms of food and medicine for each prisoner.

After several months in camp with no talk of release, we were ordered to send letters to our relatives, but we didn't want to because we thought that meant we would be staying in the camp for a long time. "From now on," they said, "you have to write once a month to your family, and your family must write to you once a month too." They gave us only one sheet of paper. We had to make the letter as short as possible, and we had to write the letter according to instructions. We were not allowed to say that we were sick, only: "I am in the camp and am doing well. I am working well, eating well, and my health is good."

They did not immediately send our letters, however; they kept them in the office and released one letter every six months. But if we didn't write, we

were punished. Even though we knew the letters might not go to our families, we had to repeat the same words over and over.

It was prohibited that we talk to one another. Our captors always used the word "relationship," saying we could not relate to other people. We could not talk within the group. They did not have enough cadres to watch over us all the time, but there were some spies to report to them. It was very terrible when we could not talk because we all wanted to hear news. There were a lot of rumors in the camp, and we lived on the rumors. If we had had to face reality, we would have been hopeless, and we would have died. One night a friend whispered to me "Did you know that the Americans came to help us? The Americans asked the Australians to take care of us. They will put us in one big area, and those who want to go to the United States will have an opportunity to go and those who want to stay in the South can just stay."

Another rumor was about fighting outside. The National Restoration Forces were supposedly fighting against the Communists and killing many of them. Next month our case would be taken to the Paris Peace Talks, and we might have the opportunity to go home. We really knew this was impossible, but we prayed and hoped anyway. I think most of this "news" was actually spread by the Communists.

*Tell us about your escape.*

One of the members of the Church, a Sister Luong whose family was baptized by the missionaries, came to visit me soon after my release. She asked me if I was willing to risk my life in order to leave the country by means of a fishing boat. I told her, "Yes, in fact I am willing to make the attempt any way possible, even by walking." She said she would make arrangements to have me meet the boat owner and the others planning the escape. I told her I didn't have any money, and wondered if an arrangement could be made with the organizers of the plan to pay them after we got out of the country. She said she would try to work something out. Several days later, I met these people and talked with them. They knew a little bit about me, including my former position as branch president. It turned out that there were two men who owned the boat together, both wealthy. They had been planning an escape since the fall of Saigon but had not yet been able to make an attempt. They planned to include only their immediate family since they did not need the money, were interested only in their own survival and were afraid it would jeopardize their chances if outsiders were involved. The reason they were willing to include me was that they felt I could be trusted (I was a single man without a wife or children to take along). They also felt that after the escape, I could help them by asking the Church to sponsor us as refugees. Of course while they were in Saigon talking about this, we had no real idea what circumstances we would find outside the country. So I agreed that after we got out, I would try to help them get to the United States. (These people were Vietnamese, not ethnic Chinese).

Three days later, on October 6th, we escaped by boarding the boat in the middle of the day, about 2 P.M., on a river about thirty miles west of Saigon. I disguised myself as a mechanic in my military pants, like many laborers of the time, and a grimy shirt (which I've kept as a souvenir). I memorized addresses and other information and left all my other possessions behind.

We had made very careful plans. There were two boats involved, a small boat which took us to a larger boat waiting at a designated place. It took us about two hours to reach it. At the mouth of the river, on the sea, there was a guard post and watch tower. We had arranged for another boat coming from the opposite direction (from Vung Tau) to pass by the tower at a certain time. We wanted to see if the guards would stop the boat and search it or question the people. If not we would have a better chance of going through. This was timed very carefully. The larger boat was about twenty feet long and ten feet wide. We reached it at about 4 o'clock and hurried to jump aboard. There were twenty-four people in our group. We jumped from the smaller boat to the bigger boat and from there sailed out and passed the watchtower. We disguised ourselves as a fishing boat, with only three of us visible on the stern. The other boat was approaching from the opposite direction. If they could go through, it was possible that we could too. (We reasoned that they would not be too particular on that day.) The other boat was not stopped, so we sailed out and were not stopped either. We didn't know how many guards were in the watch tower, but because the mouth of the tower was pointed towards the sea, they usually watched carefully. We carried no weapons. If we had been stopped, we would simply have surrendered. We left about 4 P.M. and tried to steer our boat to Thailand.

Twenty-one of us rode in the bottom of the boat where the fish were kept. We were like sardines ourselves. The motion of the sea made us sick and we vomited. Because we were also suffocating, we had to come out at midnight. As we passed by Cosar Island, we met a patrol boat that chased us. It was very dark, and we could not see, but we didn't care. After about three hours we lost them. They could not shoot at us because they had to check to see if we were a legitimate fishing boat first. We were very lucky, but because of the chase, we had to change our course. It took us then about three days to get to the Strait of Malaysia where we landed on the east side. I was the only one in the group who didn't know how to swim, but I was the only one who could speak any English. Wearing my temple garments and my green pants and shirt, I held onto a big plastic container as I was pushed to the shore.

We climbed off our boat onto a little raft. It was close to a school. One of the students spoke English. I said, "Please inform the authorities that we are refugees. If they will let us land, I will ask my church to help us go to the United States." They told us to wait there while they informed the police. When the deputy chief of police arrived, I was happy to find that he spoke English. He took me in his beautiful car to the police station. (My clothes were so wet that I got the seat wet.) When we reported everything at the station, the officers told us that they could not let us in because they had a relation-

ship with Vietnam. If they admitted us, we would have problems with Vietnam which we didn't want. They said that they would give us food and supplies, and help us find another refugee camp. The police chief took me to his home where he and his wife fed me. He said, "Now please don't tell anyone I told you, but I will tell you how to get to another camp that will accept you." He said it would take about thirty-six hours.

We spent one night there in our boat in their port. The next morning, we were supplied with fuel, food, rice and cans of water, about three days supply. The police chief reviewed his instructions with me and sent a telegram to France for a relative of one of the people on the boat. He did not ask us to pay him.

It took us three more days to reach the other camp. On our way a patrol boat chased us, calling out to us to confuse our directions, but we just continued on our course. After about thirty-eight hours, we reached Mersing, West Malaysia, a small town about one hour from Pulautengah Refugee Camp in West Malaysia. We stayed the night there, then left for the island the next morning. I sent a telegram to Brother Kan Watanabe in Japan and a letter to Elder Richard T. Bowman in Kaysville, Utah. About a week later, I received a letter from Brother Watanabe saying that the Church would agree to sponsor my companions. I had fulfilled my promise! As it later turned out, only nine of them were sponsored by the Church because they had relatives who sponsored them. I was the first one to get my papers processed and to leave the camp where I had lived for three months.

*Did you contact the Church in Singapore?*

Someone in the Church contacted the Mission President in Singapore, President Soren F. Cox. The church's group leader in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, provided me with clothes and books. President Cox was anxious to see me reunited with my family, so when he was in Kuala Lumpur, he contacted the US embassy and offered to buy airplane tickets for me. But the embassy did not accept his offer. I also wrote to President David Chan of the Hong Kong Mission, and President Chan wrote to Elder Hinckley about me. Elder Hinckley then wrote back to President Chan and told him that the Church was helping to finalize my papers. When I left the camp I had to go to Kuala Lumpur for ten days for a medical examination and paper work; then I flew from Kuala Lumpur to Hong Kong where I stayed overnight. I called Jacob de Jager and he came and stayed in the hotel with me for three hours. He helped me call my wife and I talked to her for the first time in three years. The next morning I flew to Japan, where I called Brother Watanabe. He wasn't allowed in the room where I was and I wasn't allowed out, so we waved to each other across a barrier. From Japan I flew to Honolulu, where I lost my suitcase, and then continued on to Los Angeles. Western Airlines treated me very kindly, and arranged for me to call my wife. I found that because I arrived early and because Brother Hoopes had talked to them, I could take any flight I wanted. My wife said, "You must give us time so that many

friends can meet you." So I waited in Los Angeles and at last flew first class to Salt Lake City.

*Are there some things you miss about your homeland?*

Because my family is with me, I am not homesick. Sometimes my wife and I talk about what we had in Vietnam that we don't have here. In Vietnam we used to see Chinese movies twice a week; we could eat food on the streets, food that we don't have here. We miss the Saigon market places. Here the supermarkets and department stores have everything, but in Vietnam we have the fish mongers and the fruit stands. We miss the beach of Vung Tau and Da Lat in the Central Highlands. It is the most beautiful place in Vietnam. We also miss the night lights. You might call Saigon a city of the night. At night there were lights in the streets and people in the streets. When we go out at night here, the streets are deserted. We used to go dancing in the nightclubs. I used to play guitar at home, but I don't play well anymore. I am good at Chinese chess, and I do very well here because Chinese chess is harder than American chess.

*If the situation changed and another government came, would you like to go back there to live again?*

I would like to go back when there are no more Communists in Vietnam. If they set up a neutral government, I wouldn't want to go back there.

*What is your impression of how Americans feel about the outcome of the war in Vietnam?*

I haven't watched much TV, but I have talked with several Americans, and most of them say that they regret what the American government did to Vietnam. Not the American people, but the high officials in the government for some reason didn't want to win the war in Vietnam. Really, they could have won it very easily if they had wanted to. They wanted to prolong the war and then, in the end, when they couldn't help the situation, they lost Vietnam.

*How do you feel when Americans just want to forget about the war with its painful memories?*

I understand the feelings of the American people when they want to forget the past because there are many painful and sad memories for them. But it is regrettable to me if they forget about the Vietnamese people who are still suffering. The Vietnamese look for help from the United States to change their lives. I think if we forget them, it is the saddest thing.