

Interviewee: Trinh, Vu C.
Interviewer: Michael Roffman
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Roffman: This is an agreement form for the transcript tape recording. This is to say that your story is valuable for people doing research on the topic of Vietnam and that they would like to incorporate it into their collection. If you are in agreement, please complete and sign the form below. And this is just talking about how I'm tape recording our interview. This is actually going to be put into the Oral History —

Trinh: I don't know why I have to sign something, it's not like it's a contract, right?

Roffman: Just to make sure that you're okay with doing it.

Trinh: Okay, I have no problem with that, I'm okay with doing it. That means it's okay to tape it, right?

Roffman: Yes, yes. My class required me to do it.

Trinh: Okay.

Roffman: Okay, why don't we start by introducing yourself and talking about a little bit of your life before Vietnam.

Trinh: Okay, I was in Vietnam — Talk about military time or school time?

Roffman: Both if you'd like.

Trinh: Um —

Roffman: This is Mr. Vu-Trinh, by the way.

Trinh: Well, I was a law student before I joined the army in South Vietnam which fought along with the American forces in Vietnam. In, I believe 1968, I was forced to go into the boot camp to become a military man. At the time I was a law student and we didn't like how the government was dealing with the people at the time. It was considered corrupted and we didn't like the Americans treating the government as a puppet and we said we had to stop and to tell them that the Americans should not support the bad government. That's how I got into the military. After I got out of boot camp, I was an officer in the military for six years and during that six years I got wounded twenty-six times and I got shot twice in my head. And in 19 — I think 1975, since I worked together along with the American sides they allowed me to go to America, which allowed me to set up my life here. That is how I get to America through student life, military life and the

life of America.

Roffman: When did you first begin hearing about Vietnam?

Trinh: Hearing about Vietnam?

Roffman: Yes.

Trinh: I was in Vietnam, Vietnamese, so I don't hear, I sat right there.

Roffman: So it was right in front of you?

Trinh: Yeah, because if it happened in my country, I don't have to hear them, I just — Actually I didn't like military at first because I didn't like the way my government functioned in my country, they are corrupted. So I tried to stay out of the military as much as I can, but uh, I go to college and do well and not have to be in the military for at least a while. But right in the , I think that they start at three years in law school, I was forced to go into the boot camp, so that's how I got into the military. To answer your question, I didn't hear it, I was right there, I was a part of it and as a young man. I had to do what they told me to do.

Roffman: What was the training like for boot camp?

Trinh: Um, it was not much there. I don't think they could time, however, there were three different kind of training for officers. Just like they have Westpoint here, that four years there they have one there as well, and they have a 2 year program, then they have a, which I went to a nine month program. You get out and you become a low ranking officer. In my country they call it an officer, but I heard over here they do not even consider officer. And after two years, eighteen months, you automatically get promotion. If you don't get any discipline travels or some fighting or trained into something like that automatically eighteen months, you become a, second lieutenant.

Roffman: Did you have any men or officers you remembered? Or id you keep in touch with any officers and men during training time?

Trinh: Yeah, I —

Roffman: Like throughout the war —?

Trinh: Yeah, I have a lot of friends, but they — You know, I was lucky that America give me the chance to get out of Vietnam on time. But I have a lot of friends that didn't have that opportunity, so they were captured. I don't know if I would call it captured, but it was reported to them because of the new government — The Communist government — when it took over Vietnam in '75. They lied to them and said, "All you need to do is come here for one day." And after they report to them, they took some of them, up to fifteen years. And I have a lot of them in

America and we talk from time to time. Actually because we are busy with our unusual life and we have a lot of responsibilities so we call each other every week, two or three weeks.

Roffman: And, do you feel your training prepared you for Vietnam?

Trinh: Yeah, because they put you at boot camp, teach you how to use a weapon. Um, actually they tried to tell you what you need to do as a young man to protect your country. However, so often the government is corrupted so everyone understood it clearly so we have to fight to protect our country and what within.

Roffman: So, where were you stationed?

Trinh: Um, my station because I was a regular force. There were three different kind of forces. One was like a marine, airborne, special range like Green Beret that would mobilize you all over the country. But what I did, my mom didn't want me to go far away from the family, so I was in the RF — eh, the Regular Forces — they very much mobilized us around the state, the province, so we wouldn't go too far away. It was in Hoa Vang — just about thirty miles, not miles, thirty kilometers southeast from Danang.

Roffman: And what were the living conditions like there?

Trinh: Now?

Roffman: At the time.

Trinh: Oh well, you can say it's not good because for everybody the war was out there. They bombed every time and then at night the [cannons?] send a lot of mortars — or rockets — into the certain area, the important area, that the government use as offices or airports. So the people don't feel comfortable about that because more than often the rocket would land on right on the schools and the rockets would kill them. IT's ver similar to the situation in Iraq right now. The people don't feel too good, but then again, we had to function and they had to function while we went forward everyday. These people go to work, these people go to the market to sell or buy stuff.

Roffman: Can you describe your first combat experience?

Trinh: Um, it's not too good. I was a young officer. I went to a base that I was sent to a platoon leader and I was young. There was a sergeant, he was an old guy. And he was waiting in line, up a troop away from me. And too much ego, I told the guy, "Get in the line, who asked you to stay out of the line?" I hurt his feelings, but I leaned a quick lesson because the next night we got contact from the enemies. The guy knew everything about area. I'm too new, too young to deal with that area and without his help we would be in big trouble. But I leaned a good lesson, I learned not to be humble and not to underestimate people and he realized that experience is not dependent on your rank. It depends on the time that you've spend and the knowledge of the local

area where the unit is at. So that was my good lesson.

Roffman: And what were your duties at first when you first started? What were some of the things you had to do?

Trinh: You mean in military life?

Roffman: Yeah.

Trinh: Yeah, I told you I was a platoon leader. You always start out as an officer. The minimum you start out as a platoon leader if you do a good job. And if you have a system company commander move away and the company commander like you then they might pick you out as an assistant guy and then depend on how well you do, you become a company commander. In my case, I became a company commander when my company commander got killed. So I was promoted in a very short amount of time as opposed to wait for another year or two, but because nobody was there in charge. So the platoon company decided for me to take on the responsibility and I got promoted right there. That's how I got my promotion.

Roffman: Do you think it was an efficient way of promotion?

Trinh: Of course, it had the right system. Actually, they did a good job because sometimes if you have a small group of enemies being set in a small area, they fought very well. But a whole big troop come in, they cannot penetrate the area. But if you have about three, four, five guys quietly go around, they can destroy the group. And I think they well deserved. In other words, they gambled their life for their promotion. And I think they deserved that.

Roffman: And how did you feel when you were in combat and not in combat? What was the lifestyle like when you were fighting, or when you were at base or home?

Trinh: Well, nobody wanted to be in the front battle or to have to be honorable to your death. In some cases you ought to be in a better position. In my case, when I was a young officer and every morning the high ranking would go around with a pair of scissors and they want to cut your hair short — one inch short. And I don't like that, so when they try to cut my hair, I was like, "Hey, don't touch me." And I just volunteered to go out to the battlefield. My family, my mom didn't like that, but I liked it. You can become — you know, you feel like you're a hero. Personally, that you feel you are actually engaged in the action to protect your country. So, after that, I like it. And I be there at the battle — front battle position area for quite a long time.

Roffman: How did you deal with the fear? Did you find yourself afraid at first or did you conquer the fear or — ?

Trinh: Well, I'll tell you one thing that during the Vietnam War you don't have room for your fears. Because if you ask anybody in fighting the Vietnam War, the smoke when you start engagement with the enemy, the smoke smelled, the smoke came out of the gun and make you

high . You don't — you don't — just like medical feeling that you don't feel fear no more. And most of the time, the battlefield were a lot of racket that blew around you, all the noise, all the thing — the action, you always focus on what you have to do. You don't have the time to concern about your feelings. So, that's my experience. If you die, you die. If you don't, you don't. But you don't have time to say, "Oh, I'm scared." You don't have time for that. — always action going on. You have to duck down, stand up, or fighting. But you never have time to say, "Oh, I'm so scared." You don't have time for that, to worry about that.

Roffman: What were some of the places that you found yourself sleeping during the battle?

Trinh: Sleeping?

Roffman: Yeah.

Trinh: Oh, that's another concept. In the battle, sometimes you not sleep a whole night, or sleep for ten minutes a day. There was a time that I was retreating and I sleep underwater — up to my neck for all night long. But I would choose that solution because I know that as second to going on the road where the traffic, where the enemies waiting for you. So I took my troop. Got more hardship to go that way, but save a lot fo life to go that way.

Roffman: Many Americans found, in some of the things I've read, the conditions of the land were nearly impossible to live under. And being from Vietnam, what you impressions of some fo the conditions you had to find in — had to find yourself in. And what were some fo the conditions that, that you were living in at the time?

Trinh: I don't seem to understand your question. What do you mean by —?

Roffman: Well, did you find — what were some of the conditions of the land that, um, made it hard —

Trinh: What you mean by land?

Roffman: The battleground, the land area, the weather, the land area itself — did you find it hard or complicated during battle?

Trinh: Land, land — the weather did not affect the battles. You know? I was in the South. So the South was very hot. It never be too cold ever; in the North maybe, but not he South. It never e too cold. And you could always tolerate the hot weather with sweat, but it's not going to kill you like the cold weather in the North — North Vietnam. However, I never be in the North to tolerate that condition. The South, you know it's not — not comfortable sometimes because it's too hot, however, you're under fighting situation. You don't have time to concern wit hot or cold at the time, to be honest with you. So, the point is why you asked, is that you open to the enemies to kill you, something like that, but tragic weather you don't have to worry too much about that. If that's what you're talking about land. But one thing about land is that I will tell you that,

especially in the country, it would be eighty percent booby trapped, minefield everywhere. So if you go into battle and don't look for something you think safe. You find something behind a grave yard or behind a door. You go there and think safer, but you step right on the booby trap. If you're hungry and you see some food you think to pick to eat, when you move the food, there's a booby trap underneath. So, everywhere during the battle, during the Vietnam, there was areas that you don't know for sure. There would be areas, with traps everywhere to be concerned for you life.

Roffman: Did you see a lot of these go off?

Trinh: What do you mean?

Roffman: During your time on the battlefield —

Trinh: Yeah, everyday. Yeah, everyday that I had to cross the river and somebody had to do the dirty work. You know — um, if it had been a bad discipline guy, who would goof off all the time, so we disciplined him by — he's the one who come to the water, and, and, got the boat out. Because we have to leave him there — and when he move boat out he better be very careful because maybe little line somewhere He move the line and he activate the booby trap and the bomb. So I would say eight out of ten times there's a booby trap and I would say fifty percent or a little bit more times somebody got killed or hurt because of that booby trap.

Roffman: Can we talk about some of the men you served with?

Trinh: Say again?

Roffman: Could you talk about some of the men you served with?

Trinh: You mean American guys or Vietnamese guys?

Roffman: Both.

Trinh: Well I have, as my rank, two advisors. All I know is his name was Kendall, I forgot his first name. He's an intelligent officer —

Roffman: An American guy?

Trinh: An American guy. He would spend a lot of time with me, day or night. And all I remember was he was a good man, he taught me a lot of stuff and sometime I taught him a lot of stuff as well too. He was so thankful that I give him one of my men to carry his stuff for him because as Vietnamese custom we have more respect for the boss. So his man didn't do it for him so he asked me, and I give him, assigned one man for him. And he very appreciate that. I give him that help, so I can remember. And another thing I remember about him was the drunk very often at night because he missed his young wife. So uh, I wish that I could find him here, but it's not that easy.

Roffman: Did you find that here were any conflicts between, um, the South Vietnamese Army with the Americans?

Trinh: South Vietnamese?

Roffman: Yeah.

Trinh: Uh, always there were some conflict, even husband and wife sometimes conflict. The American, they, they don't talk to the lower rank of the Vietnamese soldier. They always talk to the person that I think is the officer in this case. And they make the decisions sometimes that were not quite reasonable, sometimes because of the custom. For instance, there was a time I was in an operation. One guy just falled down — he got killed, the sniper shot him and he fall from the boat into the water. And we have a special mission, to, to rescue the pilot who shot down. The airplane shot down and we decided to look for the body of the dead man. But th adviser, at the time because hey one man is not going to slow down the operation and while I agree with him, but I still don't agree with the fact that just somebody dies. At least I try and we found the pilot as well. But I mean, we have a big disagreement and we almost go into a verbal problem. You know, we, we talked kind of unfriendly and some troop got so upset that he acted like he had the right to kill someone and I hoped to get into that and try to defuse both sides; but there's always a conflict between an American adviser and a Vietnamese troop. However, its not a bad one as far as I know. And because I was low rank at the time and the conflict is not that bad. Could be bigger if higher rank, I don't know.

Roffman: Did you see a lot of, um, violence as far as unnecessary violence towards maybe, um, peasant life and citizens of the country? Did you see a lot of civil war going around between your own, um, between Americans and the South Vietnamese troops? Were there a lot of violence? Did you —

Trinh: You mean American and Vietnamese — South Vietnamese? No, no, because there's no competition there. Just say if that, um, um, if an American guy come to the bar, he had a lot fo money. So obviously he got the girl before anyone else because, uh, money talk everywhere. But as far as, we, um, military action, we don't have much choice. Like I said, American dictate. The American tell South Vietnam troop what to do — even the government — the adviser tells him what to do. That's why they killed the good president of South Vietnam, that President Diem because he didn't allow the American government to do what they wanted. They got rid of him. They used his own group to overthrow, to overthrew him and kill him. What happened? If you don't listen to America, they find a way to get rid of you. That's the way I look at it. That's what I didn't like at the time. That's the whole story behind — that — that — we don't have our own decision on everything, but listen to American folk at a time. That a problem.

Roffman: Were most of your supervising officers, American?

Trinh: They're all America, yeah. What you talking about — advisors? Yeah, they're all American.

Roffman: Throughout your time in the war of Vietnam, did you get used to the combat environment, pretty well? Or was it just a day to day activity for you that you were just accustomed to? That you woke up and went to sleep just knowing that his is how it was.

Trinh: Eh, at the time I was — I considered my self just like a [war] technician. I don't want to use the term expert, but I was a technician and that's what you do - you're dealing with. You get up, you know, ready for action — you always look around to make sure that you don't trust people. Be prepared for booby trap and bombs that can blow up on you anytime and sniper everywhere. And I definitely don't be the one under pressure, I don't want to be around American guy. I deal with information I got form enemy that the sniper always look for the man with the high antenna to destroy the communication and second target was the tallest man, they don't know who they are but they predict it's American guy. So they kill the man with communication — the radio man — and the tallest man they consider the adviser and they kill the man that's next to American guy, the translator or officer like myself. And they kill the guy that always talk on the radio they consider the guy in charge of group. So I try to avoid all that and it worked very well for me because a lot of guys that took over what I supposed to do — they got killed. So I took all that in consideration and make a very goo preventive plan. I never be around an American when the operation going on because I would worry that a sniper would look me as target. So I always act very busy somewhere else, but not next to American man or the radio man.

Roffman: Did you have, um, nay loved ones at home; a girlfriend that you'd write to?

Trinh: Always. You know, when I was young and I had a girlfriend of course, you know, that you have a very limited vacation there. But I took the opportunity every time I can. So uh — as a young man, we all had a girlfriend. You have to deal with that. It's the responsibility and the pleasure that you have back. If not only girlfriend, boyfriend, I mean girlfriend, but also the love of your parts, your brother and sister as well. So that, you have to deal with that. It's your life during war time.

Roffman: How did you feel at the end of your tour?

Trinh: What you mean, my tour? In Vietnam Wa—

Roffman: Tour in Vietnam —

Trinh: Oh I feel very bitter. I feel very angry because we lost the war. I feel, that personally, if the American government wanted to win the war, they could have easily won it because with all the ability they have, they could probably clear out — wipe out – the whole Vietnam in tow days, or one week. The bomb would destroy everything. But I don't know exactly why, but I was too small a person to even concern with that. But I believe at with all the bomb, with all the air strike, they probably could destroy the whole North Vietnam in two days. They did bomb North Vietnam, but they limit target. They didn't go into town, but if they go into town they could cripple everything. They could destroy everything, I would say one week. Whether they want

the international organization into that or whatever, but all I know is that they didn't want to hurry to win the war and consequently we had to pay the big price. I have to pay for the big price. Two members, the one I love, got killed as a result from the Vietnam War and on their way to escape from Vietnam to see me, to regroup, to reunite with me. Things like that, all that, at this point, I could put behind. As long as they don't treat people bad, if they do, let people take action. I feel concerned with that right now; but there's a lot of things that I need to concern myself with right now and the Vietnamese community here is too small. So we don't do any action to help, to educate people at how dangerous of this and how dangerous of that, and what needs to be doing for younger generation, but in a town where there's big Vietnamese community, a lot organization — they do that. Every week or month, they have a meeting to talk to a younger generation on that consequence of being with the regime that's not good for you, but not here.

Roffman: And how did the war influence your life experiences since then? Would you say there's any influence you've had since then?

Trinh: You mean now?

Roffman: Uh-huh.

Trinh: I think that the Vietnam War trained not only me, but all the folks that come over from Vietnam. I believe we all have a very, very good determination and that in place because nothing can torture you more than dealing with war. For that idea, I come to his country and it's like I'm in heaven. I was not a young man at the time, but I try to go back to school because, uh, working, going to school and doing two or three jobs at the same time, it's not near as bad as dealing with the war situation. And that there's a place for all these Vietnamese folks that come over here and you know they're told that America is the land of opportunity. You work hard, you can make it easily so by providing that concept, I do okay for myself and — I give you example. One of us come over here and do labor work for two or three years, then I go back to school, now I don't have to do that no more. People don't tell me to do something that is not my responsibility and they don't treat me like a second best. You know, that, that kind of thing. But to anything, it has its price. I pay good price for that. I spend, I will say, that it took me nine and a half years to have my B.S. because I work in job and go to school, for example, and then, you know, I go back to do Graduate school. And it was that war, Vietnam War, trained me very well. You know? Put myself in any situation and I would never say, "Oh, I'm too tired" or "I can't do that." It'll make yourself if people can do, you can do — that kind of thing that Vietnam War, that I'll get from Vietnam war. So, I am, I'm doing that now.

Roffman: Is there any final thoughts you'd like to add?

Trinh: No, I really don't want to talk too much about the Vietnam War. Uh, it's not because I hate it because I love it. It's just that thing, I believe, is bad memories. I don't — I wish that things could be better of my country, I wish that things could be better for everybody. But I mean overall, I don't hate it because I have to leave my country because if I stayed there, I don't think I

would have the life the way I have right now. But definitely I still pay big price because most of my relatives are still back in Vietnam. So uh, you know, it's half and half; you know, you gain something, you lose something.

Roffman: I just wanted to say thank you for the interview again and as a reminder that it was being recorded and that this will be in the Oral History Program at Florida State University and um, if you could say your name one more time —

Trinh: Ah, well again — my name is Vu-Trinh.

Roffman: Thank you so very much.

Trinh: Okay.

END