

*Interview between Teresa Mei Chuc and her father on her father's experience surviving nine years in a Vietcong Reeducation Camp. February 1, 2015, 8:23 a.m. Translated from the original Cantonese into English by Teresa Mei Chuc.*

## **On the Vietnam War, the Military Machine and the Consequences of War**

*“In the end, only kindness matters.”*

In Vietnam, I studied law. During the time of war, I was in the second year of high school, and I had to be in the army where they trained officers because I had a degree. I studied for a year and then I became first lieutenant. And then, in the army, I worked in the Ministry of Justice for ten years. I went from first lieutenant to captain. Then, the communists took over on April 30, 1975. I wanted to take my gun and shoot myself. I always had a gun by my side. Your mother told me not to kill myself and said they would make me go to prison camp for seven days and I said, “No, it would be for at least seven years.”

Then, I went to reeducation camp. When I went to report to reeducation camp, that night the communists came to your mother's house to see if I had reported. If I hadn't reported to reeducation camp, they would have taken me outside and shot me. So, I told your mother that I would be gone for maybe seven or eight years, but I really didn't know if I would come back. At the time, your mother was pregnant with you.

We were in the Saigon prison camp for six months. On the first day, we had nothing to eat but some dry yucca root. There were one to two thousand people in the camp, from lieutenants to generals. Before, the people were very fat, but after a month, everyone was very skinny. There was nothing to eat. The Vietcongs would not even let us exercise. If we exercised, they would say that we were being rebellious.

I slept next to a man whose hair turned white overnight. He said that his wife was also in the army and had to go to reeducation camp. He was also in reeducation camp, so his two children were left with no one to take care of them. There wasn't anyone at home and he didn't know what would happen to them. He was thinking a lot about his responsibility so his hair became white overnight.

We were in the camp in Saigon for six months and then the Vietcong took us by automobile to a seaport. We had to get on a very small boat. Two thousand of us were on the boat. We could not move, we couldn't even go to the bathroom. We couldn't eat or drink. For three days and three nights we traveled from the South to the North.

When we were in the North, once we got off the boat, there were a few hundred guard dogs. We couldn't run away, we thought we were going to die. The Vietcong led us and the whole way, the guard dogs followed us. We went up, up and eventually got to small boats. About fifty of us were on a boat. They brought us all the way North near the border with China, deep into a jungle.

They left us there surrounded by soldiers. In the jungle, we had to build our lives ourselves. The Vietcong said, "I don't need to kill you with a bullet, I'll let you die slowly day by day. You will work for me and die day by day. If you don't obey, you will get killed. If you obey me, you will last longer."

I thought that I was going to die for sure. We were brought deep into the Northern forest with nothing. Luckily, the prisoners had knowledge. The military prisoners had a lot of knowledge. There were engineers; there were some very brilliant people. The prisoners used bamboo trees to build their own houses, to make beds to sleep in. The Vietcong military surrounded the camp so there was no escape. Every day from early morning, we had to plant trees, farm and bring bamboo back to the camp to build things for the Vietcong. Bamboos can be used to make a lot of things. I was in the forest for eight years. In the prison camp, there was a person who was in something like the Navy Seals in the U.S. He taught me how to go into the forest and find food, to find food that was not poisonous because there are a lot of things that are poisonous in the forest. He taught me that I should always have some chili peppers on me. If I wanted to drink some water, I put a pepper in the water. The water in the jungle was very clear. If you put a pepper inside the water and the pepper turns, then the water has poison. If the pepper is still, then there is no poison. In the forest, we could not drink the water. If we wanted to drink water, then we had to use a knife to cut open a bamboo tree. There is water inside the bamboo tree. When it rains, the water is contained in the bamboo; that water is the best for you. The second best way to get water is from the banana trees. If you cut open a banana tree, the heart of the tree is filled with water - that water is pure.

We lived and survived like this and worked like this until...I had many friends who were farming and would collapse down and die, they had no more energy.

When we ate, we ate yucca root. We would never be full. We ate corn. For each meal, we had fifty corn kernels. After hard labor, we had fifty corn kernels to eat. Do you know how we ate the corn? Each corn kernel, we chewed until it was completely broken down, we chewed slowly until it melted so that when we ate it, it could infiltrate into our system so that our bodies would have some nutrients. Otherwise, we would surely die. This was the only way.

Also, every night, we chanted Buddhist prayers. We were afraid to sleep. We had nothing to eat. No salt. No sugar. Our bodies were deficient of a lot of nutrients. Some of my friends had family that came to visit them. I had a very good friend. When his family came to visit, they would bring sugar and he would give me some sugar. So, I would have a little bit of sugar to eat so that my body would have some sugar. Some colonels in the military had a lot of knowledge and education, but when a human body is missing sugar, a person would steal. They still did such things as steal from us. Then, we were younger, in our thirties, so we closed our eyes and let the elder colonels eat whatever they needed because they were older and needed the food more.

I was already thinking that I would die for sure. In the forest, that day I went and saw a group of people and we greeted each other. I asked them where they came from. They said that they were in the South Vietnamese Army and were captured during the war by the Vietcongs in the North. I asked them how long they have been in the jungle. They said that they have been here for forty something years. Forty something years. Everyone was very old already. They were already in their fifties. I thought, wow, if I am here for forty something more years, I will die. So, I lost hope. They were scouts for the South who traveled to the North and were captured in the North. Forty something years. They thought that their families must already believe that they were dead.

One of the prisoners in the group was from China; he was working on the border as a businessman selling things. And the Vietcongs said that he was a spy and captured him for forty something years. His family in China must have thought that he was dead. So, I thought that I would never be able to leave this prison camp and that I would surely die.

Suddenly, that night a meeting was announced for the next morning. It was on a Sunday. During the meeting, the Vietcongs said, "Now, we are going to release seven prisoners." There was no sentence for the prisoners. They could stay their whole lives in prison and the Vietcongs would release you when they wanted to. That morning they said that they would release seven people. When they read my name aloud, I felt that I was rising from the dead underneath the earth back to life. I was so happy. They said that my family was doing well and farming so they weren't home. You already went to the U.S. so they couldn't trace where you were. They released me.

When they released me, it was so pitiful. You know, for nine years, I didn't eat a piece of meat or a piece of candy. I didn't eat one grain of rice. When they released me, they gave me back a blanket. The blanket was made in the U.S. I took that blanket made in the U.S. to the city and sold it. I had to take the train to Saigon to see your maternal grandpa and grandma. The train ride was for three days.

I arrived in the city Son Pha. I saw people selling chickens. The chickens were very small. They hung them on their heads to sell. Three or four dollars each. I bought three chickens and ate them all on the train. When I saw your grandpa and grandma, it was one o'clock in the morning. Grandpa and grandma thought that I was a ghost. Suddenly, I'm home and nobody knew that I was coming. They were so happy. They cried so much. I said to them, "I am so hungry." Grandpa immediately went to buy something for me to eat.

You know, for one week, I was able to eat seven bowls of rice a day. For nine years, I did not eat any rice. You know how pitiful that is. I worked and struggled very hard. During times of struggle, I needed to have determination that I must survive to see my children and my wife. If one doesn't have this determination to survive, then one would slowly, slowly lose one's energy and one's will would dwindle and one would slowly die. You have to have the energy to struggle and struggle so that you could return. That's why I was able to return to see you all. It was very hard work. And in the midst of such hard work, I had to think - I must, for my children and wife, survive.

The will is very important. The will will save you. You know that I worked very very hard and so many times I was suffering so much. During the war, I was a military captain and had twenty soldiers and an automobile and a house and everything and then suddenly, I had nothing. Life is a rising and falling current.

*Teresa: When you were in the Ministry of Justice, what did you do? Did you work in the courts?*

I was a judge in the courts. I judged the communists.

*Teresa: You sentenced them to prison?*

I sentenced them to prison or depending. I would sentence them to the island Con Son, so that they would live there and not be able to fight us. [*Teresa's note to self: Tiger Cages on Con Son Island*]

I was a prosecutor.

I was suppose to be promoted to major but the communists came.

When I was in prison, they made us do hard labor. We had to defecate in a hole and then they would use the waste for fertilizer. They made us collect the defecation by going into the hole with our entire bodies so that our bodies were covered up to the shoulders in defecation and worms were wiggling around us. How can you do it? That's life. When you have struggled so much in life, then you realize that living is not so easy. I struggled until now and in the present, it is very good. I struggled until now.

In the past, I was lazy and didn't do anything. You see, I do everything now. I love children and I love you. I don't know why we didn't get along. I hope and I want us, after this, to be able to communicate. You have a mother and father. And your mother and father love you very much, understand?

You are older now and you should know that your father and mother love you. When you were little, I was not there to love you and take care of you. I hope that one day you understand that we love you.

In the jungle, if I knew that I would be released one day, I would have studied and learned a lot while in reeducation camp. There was a great acupuncturist that was a prisoner, but I didn't have any will to learn. I thought that I would die, so I didn't have any will to learn. He was an amazing acupuncturist. If you were sick, he would do his acupuncture and you would get well right away. In the forest, there wasn't any medicine. He had his acupuncture needles and helped the other prisoners. He also taught us which leaves cured what illness and we brought the leaves back to cure the prisoners who were sick.

I was in the mountains and fell down and broke my leg and couldn't walk. The acupuncturist used lemon leaves to help me. He grounded the leaves and mixed it with salt to wrap around my leg. After a week, I was able to walk again. To this day, my leg is fine. Can you believe it?

Life is a rising and falling current - up and down. As long as you have the will and determination...and family, you have happiness. There is nothing greater than family. I am happy that we are a family.

*Teresa's note post-interview:*

*The burden of knowledge is quite heavy on my heart. With this new revelation and the telling of our stories, hopefully, we can be on the path of healing this deep wound gouged in the fog of war...even guilt and I know I shouldn't be feeling guilt.*

*I will find my own ways to heal and now have a better idea of what soldiers and other children of veterans must feel and perhaps why so many do not tell their stories...but our stories are an important thread in our shared humanity and shared imperfections and in our working towards a greater ability for compassion towards others and towards ourselves.*

*This interview will be published in Teresa Mei Chuc's poetry book, Song of Bones, forthcoming from Many Voices Press in 2016.*