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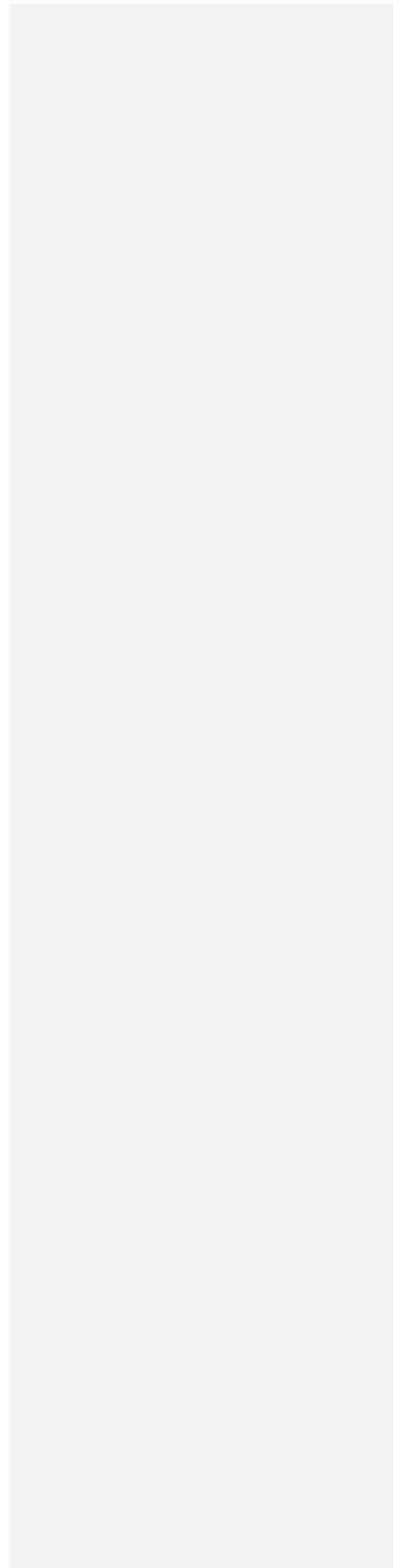
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## EAST MEETS WEST

*Flight of the Eagle*

My Eighty-Year Odyssey

from the Mekong Delta to the San Francisco Bay

### Introduction

By fate or by destiny my grandmother decided that I would be named “qui Dieu”, the Vietnamese word for “Eagle.” Little did she know how appropriate the name would be, for the eagle has come to symbolize my life - through all of my journeys and aspirations to fly above the rest and thrive in spite of the challenges that have come before me - in both the East and the West. My first flight across the Pacific was for education. My last flight across the same ocean was for survival. According to Rudyard Kipling “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” But I have asked myself, when “East meets West, then what?” Since the melding of East and West has truly defined my life, I have chosen to tackle this question by sharing the story of my life - from my childhood in the Mekong Delta to the latter half of my life in San Francisco, where I ended up after coming to America as a refugee following the Vietnam War.

I have never written a book in my life, so why would I do so now at the ripe old age of eighty plus years? Well, when you reach this stage of your existence, there is a popular saying in Vietnam reminding you that “you have come much nearer to the bosom of the earth, and a bit farther away from heavens above,” or as one would say in the west, I am close to the point of “ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” This is the time of life when all kinds of memories begin to flash back to you with increasing intensity. Very often in the evening, when sitting alone in the quiet of my back garden, all kinds of things surge into my head with a multitude of images from my distant past. These moments of reminiscing can be extremely emotional and quite chaotic at the same time. For this reason, I have tried to put this kaleidoscope of memories, which in fact consists of my life’s story, into some semblance of order. I decided to start writing down these memories in case they might not come back to me

again, and the pages just piled up. This prompted me to organize them, not only in terms of time and space, but together with the thoughts, feelings and emotions that I felt along the way - all of which have helped me to become the person that I am today. I have accumulated several hundred pages of memoirs over the past few years of my retirement, so upon the insistence of many of my friends and relatives, I have chosen to share them in the form of this book.

So much for the origin of this book and its title. Beyond simply recording the events of my life, this book is, above all, dedicated to my beloved parents, to my dearest wife Marie who has stood by my side for better and for worse over the past 55 years, and to the members of my extended family as well as numerous friends in Vietnam, the US, and elsewhere in the world who may wish to know more about the story of my life. I spent the first half of my life in tumultuous Asia, specifically Vietnam. I lived through French colonialism, the Japanese invasion followed by the return of the French expeditionary troops with more war and re-occupation until the Geneva Accords of 1954 which partitioned Vietnam at the 17th parallel thus establishing communist North Vietnam and nationalist South Vietnam. The predominant context of this first half of my life was, of course, the war in Vietnam which came to an end in 1975 but has remained a subject of endless and heated debate to this day even among the experts and pundits. The war in Vietnam must be remembered as one of the greatest collective tragedies of the 20th century, the most devastating armed conflict in the 4,000 years of Vietnam's written history, and the longest foreign war for the American people since the birth of their nation more than two hundred years ago. For me, having been exposed to both the Vietnamese and American ways of life, that dreadful war represents an enormous and violent clash of civilizations, and the terrible consequences of when "East meets West" in the land of my ancestors.

The second half of my life began in April 1975 when I arrived at Camp Pendleton, California. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, at age

44, I lost my country, my home, and my possessions -all things I held dear in my life. Stepping out of Camp Pendleton, I had to overcome the extreme hardship and challenges of a refugee with nothing to my name but \$150 in traveler's checks and a handbag of old clothes. This second half of my life has encompassed 22 years of hard work, followed by almost 20 years of comfortable retirement in my adopted country.

I must thank my Creator for giving me this second chance in America and not somewhere else, for I deeply cherish the privilege of living in a country of freedom and opportunity. I had never wished to abandon, or be separated from, my native homeland but remaining in Viet Nam under the totalitarian communist regime was never an option for me and my wife, Marie. It is quite amazing that the fateful and dramatic year of 1975, which has left a deep and indelible scar, sliced my entire life story into two almost equal periods of 40 years. Both parts have been filled with mixed feelings of great joy and happiness, along with profound pain and suffering. During these two long periods of my life, I had three major encounters of "East Meets West." First, during my stay in America for my education from 1952 to 1958, then back in Saigon and through the war which seemed to prove Rudyard Kipling correct, and finally from 1975 on, as a refugee in America with my laborious efforts to secure a meaningful life during which I have shown that East and West can successfully meet in America!

As an American citizen with a hybrid Eastern and Western viewpoint, a Chinese-Vietnamese cultural background, and a combined Vietnamese, French and American education, I want to retrace my journey from my peaceful life in the Mekong Delta of the 1930's to the high tech San Francisco Bay Area of the 21st century. In 1952, long before the American intervention in Viet Nam, I left Saigon to pursue a Fulbright scholarship in the US. Over the next seven years I was fortunate to receive an excellent education from Lafayette College, then the prestigious MIT, and later from Columbia University. In 1958, I returned home to serve in the nationalist South Vietnamese government in Saigon until

April 1975 when I was thankfully able to escape the violent Bolshevik-like takeover of the whole country. A new era, the "rebirth of the eagle," had started - going through the full circle of riches to rags, and from rags to riches once again. My initial Trans-Pacific journey from the East to the West in 1952 quickly and drastically changed my life. I left an underdeveloped French colony in old Indochina and flew over the Pacific Ocean to study engineering in America, the most advanced country of the world after WWII. The trip itself was incredible for a Vietnamese youngster in the early 1950s. For me, it was my maiden flight from the shores of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam to the San Francisco Bay in America. It was also the beginning of my personal adventure of "East Meets West."

My Fulbright scholarship allowed me a few days of orientation in the great city of San Francisco to prepare myself for my very first contact with life in America. After that initial clash between East and West, my journey continued smoothly to Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania. In all respects, I was "thrown into the ocean to learn how to swim" instead of being gradually immersed into my new environment and the use of the English language. Being uprooted from my traditional Asian family life was, of course, a real nightmare. Homesickness, loneliness, and the language barrier were my worst enemies. Somehow, by surviving all of these challenges, I became a lot stronger and my skin became thicker. These first four years in Pennsylvania transformed my life, making me more independent and more prepared for the tough steps ahead. The next challenge was MIT, along with my head-grinding efforts to complete my graduate studies as quickly as possible and acquire the professional skills I needed before returning home.

I was determined to study very hard during my years of schooling in America, even if I had to sacrifice fun and leisure in order to succeed academically. The results were simply astonishing. I was consistently at the top of my class, even though many of my classmates were much more intelligent than I was. After graduating from MIT I spent some time working and enjoying

myself in New York City. Then finally, in 1958, I made the memorable decision to return to Vietnam, with a ticket on Pan American Airways that enabled me to travel the world for 90 days en route.

Returning home was a real life “Rip van Winkle” experience for me. As soon as my parents and relatives appeared at Saigon Tan Son Nhut airport to welcome me home after our long separation, I realized that my years in the US had been a period of luxury living and a safe haven from the escalating war in Viet Nam. The stark realities about my homeland hit me in full force. And so began a completely new chapter of my life in South Viet Nam. Before getting too settled, I took care of my top priorities - I got married, I bought a house, and began my career.

During my 17 years of hard work in Saigon in the government civilian sector, I did my best to contribute and serve my beloved country which was impoverished by continuous enemy infiltration and armed aggression by communist North Vietnam. In 1966, at age 35, I was the youngest ever Deputy Minister of Economy of South Vietnam, managing an \$800 million civilian aid program and millions of dollars of Viet Nam's own foreign exchange. I had the chance to form a strong team of “young Turk technocrats.” They created the entire necessary infrastructure for the economic development of war-torn Vietnam. In 1967, together with the Vietnamese Minister of Economy & Finance Au Truong Thanh, I had the opportunity to visit President Johnson and his adviser Mr. Walt Rostow in the White House. Also in attendance was McGeorge Bundy, US National Security Advisor. The purpose of the meeting was to review the economic challenges in our struggling country that had been so impacted by the war. My dream to see a peaceful and prosperous South Viet Nam never did come true. By April 1975, the situation became a nightmare, and the subsequent fall of Saigon precipitated my second journey to the U.S. - but this time with shock and surprise. The next thing I knew, my wife and I were alive and uninjured in Marine Camp Pendleton in California where my fellow refugees elected me mayor of the camp to take care of thousands of Vietnamese

families arriving day after day. From there, a new chapter of my life began, with years of hard work, stress, sweat and fun, followed by my current happy, prosperous and, most of all, healthy retirement in my adopted hometown of San Francisco. My second phase of "East Meets West" is surely now reaching its final stages. I feel lucky and gratified to be able to record these two long journeys: first from a relatively peaceful Viet Nam, and then the second from a Viet Nam that had been destroyed by war. When I first left Vietnam, it was only to pursue my education, but when I left my native country for the second time, I had the distressful feeling that this goodbye was for good. I was filled with profound sadness at the loss of freedom and democracy for the Vietnamese people, and also for the painful thought that I would never again see the land of my ancestors, and I cried...

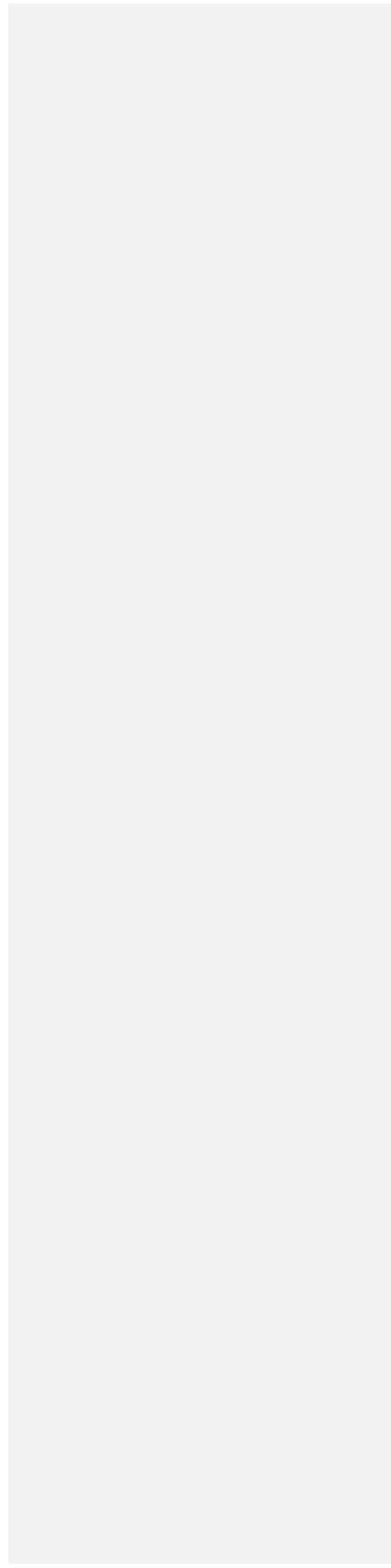
Looking back at these memories, spanning the Pacific Ocean and over eight decades, my journey of "East Meets West" has also been an inner one, which has deeply affected my heart and mind. With the amazing human capacity for evolution and adaptation, I remember gradually integrating into the American lifestyle. Little by little I was able to understand the so-called "melting pot," which has made it possible for hundreds of millions of people from different races, creeds and cultures to have succeeded in creating a society in which to live together in peace. Collectively, they have made extraordinary achievements, by way of tremendous sacrifice, sweat and tears, in all fields of human endeavors. Whether one likes it or not, the melting pot of America has proven to be a unique, but successful, experiment in the history of humankind.

After four continuous decades of living in the United States, I can say that the second half of my life was filled with great challenges. But in this land of the free, I have learned that honesty and hard work can claim its legitimate rewards for people who wish to have a decent and respectable life. For me, America is exceptional, not because it has become the richest and most powerful nation in the world, but because it has propagated its ideals of freedom and democracy to the four corners of the earth, ever since its birth as

a nation in 1776. It continues to do so and is a beacon of light for oppressed people everywhere who are fighting against totalitarianism and dictatorship. Nowadays, many millions of people continue to look at America as the land of asylum, refuge and survival, as I did in 1975.

It has been a worthwhile and exciting journey. Let me now tell you my unique and personal story of "East Meets West"- My flight of the Eagle from the shores of the Mekong Delta to the San Francisco Bay.

**Khuong Huu Dieu**  
**The Golden State**  
**2015**





## CHAPTER 1

### My Early Years as Teenager in Vietnam

#### *The Family Founder*



My Grand Mother Khuong-Huu Luong in 1936  
Founder of Khuong-Huu family

Though most people who know me would agree that I am a straight talker and a straight shooter, there is nothing straight about the circumstances surrounding the date, place, and parents' names on my birth certificate. I can assure you with a straight face that all those facts are plainly verifiable and known to a small circle of family members or close friends but they were kept from my knowledge for quite a long time. As a straight talker,

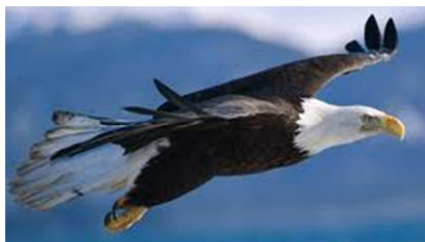
I feel that I owe the readers some explanations. I would like to set things straight so that there is no misunderstanding about my identity.

Long before I came into this life, my paternal grandmother had decided that my father would name his children in this sequence “Ngân, Đáng, Ngân, Côn, Súng, Lắm, Quí, Điều.” This phrase, literally translated, means “Precious Bird Worth Matching Really Thousand Pound Silver.” From that phrase, it was apparent that



The Twins, 1931 “Precious Bird”

she intended for my father to have at least eight children. As my wife would later remark with a touch of humor, when my mother became pregnant for the 7<sup>th</sup> and also last time, to please her mother-in-law, she made sure that she would give birth to *twins* in order to complete the name sequence. I was lucky to be her eighth child and was given the name “**Quí Điều=Precious Bird=Eagle.**”



Thank God it was the name of a valiant, precious bird - not that of a crow or a turkey! Only an Eagle can soar. My whole adult life has been guided by that soaring image. Later I learned to “soar with the eagles, not run with the turkeys.”



My birthplace: Mytho Maternity Hospital

Things so far look simple and straightforward enough. Now comes the confusing part. My father’s brother number seven,” “Uncle Seven,” had no children. According to Vietnamese tradition, each family should have a son to carry on the family name and take care of the ancestor’s altar or organize the “Đám Giỗ,” or annual Memorial Service. So, my father decided to give me to him for adoption. I said it’s confusing because now I had to call my father “Uncle Five” and my Uncle Seven “father”.

The confusion did not stop there. Both sets of parents did not want me to know that I was adopted. My twin brother and I were born at the Mỹ Tho Provincial Maternity Hospital. Yet on the birth certificates, we were given different birth places, birth dates, and sets of parents:

**Khương Hữu Điểu**

**October 7, 1931**

**Thiên Đức Village**

**Vĩnh Long Province**

**Father: Khương-Hữu Bày**

**Khương Hữu Quý**

**Septembre 19, 1931**

**Điền Hòa Village**

**Mỹ Tho Province**

**Father: Khương-Hữu Lân**

**Mother: Nguyễn thị Nhi**

**Mother: Nguyễn thị Vàng**

**Vinh Long and Mytho are 70 Km apart!**



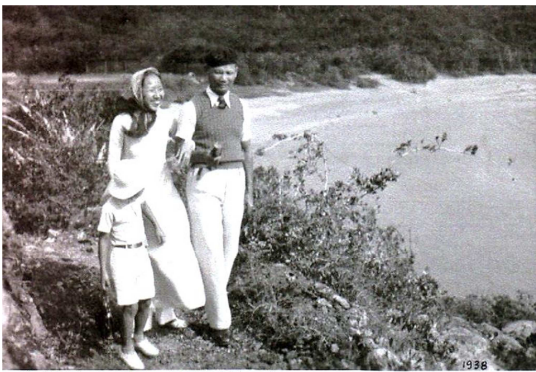
**My grandmother and biological parents with uncle Nine**



**My bio parents**



**My adoptive parents hereinafter referred to as my parents, 1936**



**Trip to Nha Trang with my parents, 1940**



**My father and me, 1944**





**"Tet" family photo on the home roof garden at 59 Quai Gallieni, Mytho, 1944  
L to R: My Father, Me, Mother, Sister Six, Aunt Five, Sister Two, Brother Five  
& Wife, Sister Two's daughter Ho, Sister Seven**



My Parents

My father

The parents' game plan of splitting the twins on the birth certificates seemed to work quite well because now at 85, I still cannot call my biological father "father" and my biological uncle "uncle." When I was five years old, my sisters would attempt to cajole me into calling my biological mother "mother." I just could not do it. They had to bribe me with chocolate bars or some other tempting things each time they wanted to hear me say it.

During our early years, because the twins looked so much alike, to avoid calling us by the wrong name people combined our first names and called us "**Quí-Điểu**" or "Precious Bird." I knew the truth about my situation in the family and my parent's decision about this switching process only when my brain became good enough to catch the rumor about me. My father and uncle lived and worked together as a team and I, therefore, spent a lot of time among my siblings. Ah! The mysterious ways of the East!

In traditional Vietnamese families, children of younger brothers occupy lower ranks than those of elder ones. That's the underdog

lot, the first cross I had to bear! Furthermore, children of richer brothers have higher status than those of poorer ones. My biological father, Uncle Five was the best and richest entrepreneur in the family. As a result, he was wealthy enough to bail out all the other brothers in need including my father. Another unwanted load that was mine to shoulder! Nevertheless, the silver lining to all this was that it rendered me better equipped or prepared to deal with adversities in my later years. Every Tet “Vietnamese lunar New Year” my bio parents, in traditional gown, had a group photo with children and grandchildren.



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From left to right:

Standing in the back row: my sister Seven, myself, my father, sister Six, sister Four, my twin, and my mother. The kids in front were children from sister Two and sister Six. This photo was taken at my father’s rice mill property and fruit plantation. My Tho, 1948.





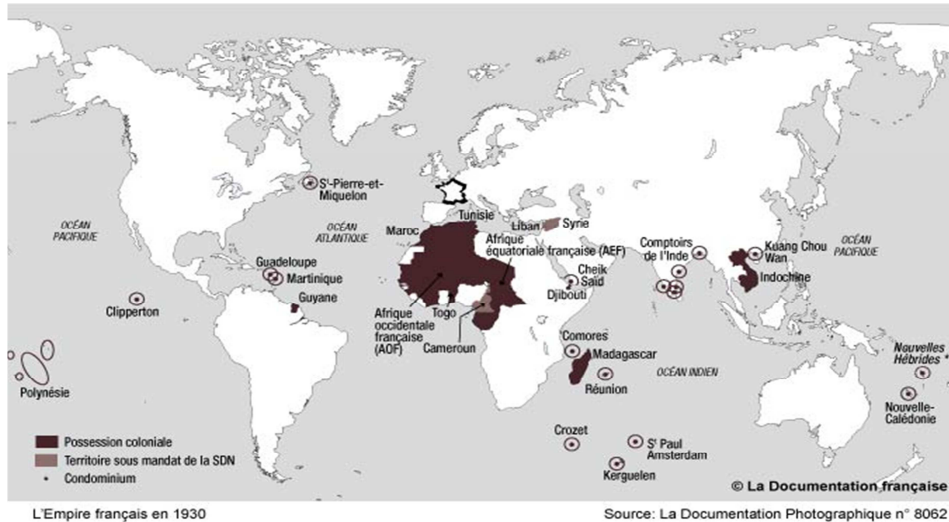
### Building KHUONG HUU Mytho

Born in the 1930's, my generation was the one that lived under numerous foreign occupations over the history of Vietnam. In the first half of my life, about 44 years after birth, I experienced a long succession of either foreign rule or involvement to include French oppressive colonial rule, Japanese imperial militaristic invasion, French bloody reoccupation of the colony, then later the costly American intervention which was first conditioned by the "Domino Theory." It was President Eisenhower who originally coined the term "Domino Theory" in response to a journalist's question about Indochina in a news conference on April 7, 1954. He explained that if the first domino (Vietnam) were to be knocked over, then the rest of the dominos (Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma) would topple in turn.

As a teenager living in a colony, I did not know or understand the real history of the French presence in Vietnam. The general information and school books were purposely adapted to serve colonial rule and brainwashed the Vietnamese natives. I was taught in history classes to recite the phrase "nos ancetres les Gaulois avaient des cheveux blonds!" (Our ancestors the Gauls had blond hair!) In what kind of country did I grow up during my teenage years?

Now, working on my memoir in the information age in America, I feel like walking into a gold mine of facts and information. Thanks to IT, Intelligence Technology's Google, I found so many interesting news items about my motherland's history from so many independent sources at the tip of my fingers. In the old days

I would have to go to the library and look for the same information. It has been fascinating for me to search for facts about the past of my country. The following is, in a nutshell, the complex history of contemporary Vietnam. For the first time, I can now say I am able to discover and understand clearly how the French came and occupied Vietnam.



French Empire in 1930

French interest in Vietnam began in 1658 through the work of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (M.E.P) or Society of Foreign Missions of Paris, now known as Séminaires des Missions Étrangères. This institution was established by Rome's Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1659 under the instigation of Alexandre de Rhodes, a Jesuit priest. It was not a religious order but a grouping of secular priests and laypersons who were dedicated to missionary works in foreign lands. The priests sent to Vietnam went with the clear objective of proselytizing the natives to the Christian faith. Once in the country, they tried their best to adapt to local customs and establish an indigenous clergy while keeping close contact with the Vatican. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Vietnamese Court's persecution of the missionary priests of the Society of Foreign

Missions of Paris gave the French government a pretext to justify their military intervention in Vietnam. The admirals Jean-Baptiste Cécille and Rigault de Genouilly led an expeditionary naval force to Vietnam and captured Saigon on February 18, 1859, initiating the French conquest of Cochinchina (South Vietnam). More than a century later, on June 19, 1988, Pope John-Paul II canonized 117 martyrs of Vietnam including priests of the M.E.P, 11 Dominican fathers, 37 Vietnamese priests, and 59 of the Vietnamese laity.

For a number of complex reasons, the French government led by Napoleon III decided to solicit the help of Spain to conquer the six southern provinces of Viet Nam: **Biên Hòa, Gia Định, Định Tường (my birthplace) Châu Đốc, Hà Tiên, and Vĩnh Long (my ancestral home town.)**



**Emperor Bảo Đại**  
(Reign: 8 January 1926 – 25 August 1945)



**Empress Nam Phương**  
(Reign: 8 January 1926 – 25 August 1945)

### **Establishment of French Indochina, 1887 - 1954**

France obtained control over northern Vietnam following its victory over China in the Sino-French war (1884–1885). French Indochina was formed in October 1887 from Annam (Central Vietnam), Tonkin (North Vietnam) and Cochinchina (South Vietnam) which together now represent modern Vietnam. The French were also able to include under their colonial rule the Kingdom of Cambodia and the kingdom of Laos. This latest kingdom of Laos was added to Vietnam and Cambodia after the Franco-Siamese War to form the so called (French) Indochina. The

French formally left the local rulers sitting on their thrones to be called the emperors of Vietnam, kings of Cambodia and kings of Laos. In fact, all powers were in the colonists' hands and the local rulers acted only as figureheads.

My youth and my education were under a typical French Empire system. As a result, I knew French history and geography better than the average French citizen and not much about my own country. I knew very little about the 4909 Km Mekong River running from the Tibetan Plateau through China's Yunnan province, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. However, I could draw by heart and in detail the 1000 Km Loire River and remember most of its Chateaux. Of course the funniest and most unforgettable souvenir of my childhood has remained that juicy sentence recited by heart in my history class ("*Nos ancestres les Gaulois avaient des cheveux blonds!*") "Our ancestors, the Gauls had blond hair!"



French Foreign Legion and Senegalese soldiers; annual July 14<sup>th</sup>, Bastille Day parade in Saigon

To show off French military might and to impress the natives, France organized every year a spectacular show of force. I was always looking forward to the annual July 14<sup>th</sup>, Bastille Day parade with the latest armament and the famous French Foreign Legionnaires. Their precision and cadence march was very spectacular. I saw also for the first time the scarred face black Senegalese soldiers in the French colonial army. The prestigious 75mm canons always wrapped up the show off parade with tanks and amphibious vehicles.

### **Confused history of Vietnam During and After WWII**

In a nutshell: The Germans occupied France. France continued to occupy Vietnam with Marshall Petain collaborating with Hitler. By working with the Vichy French administrators, Japan used Vietnam as its war supply line. The end of WWII and the departure of the Japanese troops marked the end of French colonial rule but also the gathering of the dark clouds for the First Indochina War to begin!

My school life was in great turmoil due to the many political changes that modified my education program accordingly. From a French education system using Latin alphabets, I had to switch to the new Imperial Japanese program in Kanji, adopted Chinese characters. Then after the defeat of Japan in WWII, I went back to the previous French colonial system. My second language was Vietnamese then Japanese and back to Vietnamese.

This period was probably the most confused and complex one in contemporary history of Vietnam. The Japanese bombed the French in Vietnam. Then the Americans bombed the Japanese in Vietnam. The British captured the Japanese at the end. I witnessed under constant fear a clear cut case of a small country becoming a real pawn in a chess game played by France, the US, UK and Japan.

**Roosevelt insisted on Vietnamese independence.**



President Roosevelt wanted to change the history of Vietnam by restoring independence to all the colonies in the world. During WWII, he announced his firm opposition to a restoration of the European empires in Asia. Franklin D. Roosevelt was more direct when he spoke about French Indochina. In January 1944 he wrote to Secretary of State Hull that “France has had the country... for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning... France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.” An Allied victory would result in the dismemberment of the French Empire. ( Franklin Roosevelt Conversation with Charles Taussig on French Rule in Indochina, March 15, 1945, from *Major Problems in American Foreign Policy, Volume II: Since 1914*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by Thomas G. Paterson and Dennis Merrill (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), p. 190.)

The American President said he was concerned about the brown people in the East. He said that there are 1,100,000,000 brown people. In many Eastern countries, they are ruled by a handful of whites and they resent it. Our goal must be to help them achieve independence. Roosevelt restated this foreign policy goal several times at various international conferences. However in public, Roosevelt had to keep friendly relations between allies, notably with the British and the French as well. De Gaulle was well aware of the tensions in U.S. policy but had no means of gaining the sort of commitment from Washington that Churchill was receiving for keeping India. De Gaulle turned to his fellow imperialist for aid. The result was one of the most serious disputes in the Grand Alliance but eventually Britain’s control of Indochina was turned over to France after the surrender of Japan.

During World War II, French Indochina was administered by Nazi Vichy France under Marshal Petain. In South Vietnam labeled Cochinchine, I lived under French Rule while France itself was occupied by the Germans.

**1** Une flamme sacrée  
Monte du sol natal,  
Et la France enivrée  
Te salue, Maréchal !  
Tous tes enfants qui t'aiment  
Et vénèrent tes ans,  
A ton appel suprême  
Ont répondu : Présent.





**2** Tu as lutté sans cesse  
Pour le salut commun ;  
On parle avec tendresse  
Du héros de Verdun..  
En nous donnant ta vie,  
Ton génie et ta foi,  
Tu sauves la patrie  
Une seconde fois.

**R** Maréchal, nous voilà !  
**E** Devant toi, le sauveur de la France,  
**F** Nous jurons, nous tes gars,  
**R** De servir et de suivre tes pas,  
**A** Maréchal, nous voilà !  
**N** Tu nous a redonné l'espérance,  
**I** La Patrie renaîtra Maréchal, Maréchal,  
**N** Nous voilà !

**REFRAIN**

**3** Quand ta voix nous répète,  
Afin de nous unir :  
"Français, levons la tête,  
Regardons l'avenir !"  
Nous brandissant la toile  
Du drapeau immortel,  
Dans l'or de tes étoiles,  
Nous voyons luire un ciel.

**4** La guerre est inhumaine,  
Quel triste épouvantail !  
N'écoutons plus la haine,  
Exaltons le travail,  
Et gardons confiance  
Dans un nouveau destin,  
Car Pétain, c'est la France !  
La France, c'est Pétain !!

This song, 'Maréchal, nous voilà!' (Marshal, here we are!) replaced the French National Anthem, the 'Marseillaise'

From 1940 to 1944, every morning, I had to sing this new French patriotic song, while saluting the French flag in the center courtyard of the Mytho public primary school. I had to raise my right hand, Nazi style, to salute the French tricolor while singing this famous anthem at the top of my lungs. To this day, I still remember every word of it after 4 years of practice in the classroom during my early teens!

(English translation of the song)  
 Marshal, here we are!  
 Behind you,  
 The savior of France.  
 We swear this,  
 We, your boys,  
 To serve you and follow your footsteps.  
 The nation will be reborn  
 Marshal, Marshal, here we are!

Now living "in the land of the free and the home of the brave" I feel very bad because I do not remember all the words of the Star



**Spangled Banner. During WWII, the US wanted to cut the Japanese oil and raw materials supply line from Asia. As a result, Japan attempted to occupy Vietnam to construct military bases to strike against the Allies in Southeast Asia.**



**January 12, 1945, US Task Force 38 strikes Saigon**

**The United States did all it could to encourage Japan's fears. Viet Nam was now within easy reach of American fighter-bombers flying from Vice Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey's Third Fleet, and later B-24s and B-25s taking off from Clark Field in the Philippines. On January 12, 1945, Halsey struck at Saigon as thousands of French and Vietnamese watched, hundreds from the city's roof tops. Five hundred American fighter-bombers sank four cargo ships and two oil tankers in Saigon harbor. Oil storage tanks along the river front exploded. Towering columns of black smoke reached a mile into the sky. In all, fourteen Japanese warships and thirty-three merchant ships were destroyed, the largest number sunk by the U.S. Navy in any one day in the entire war.**



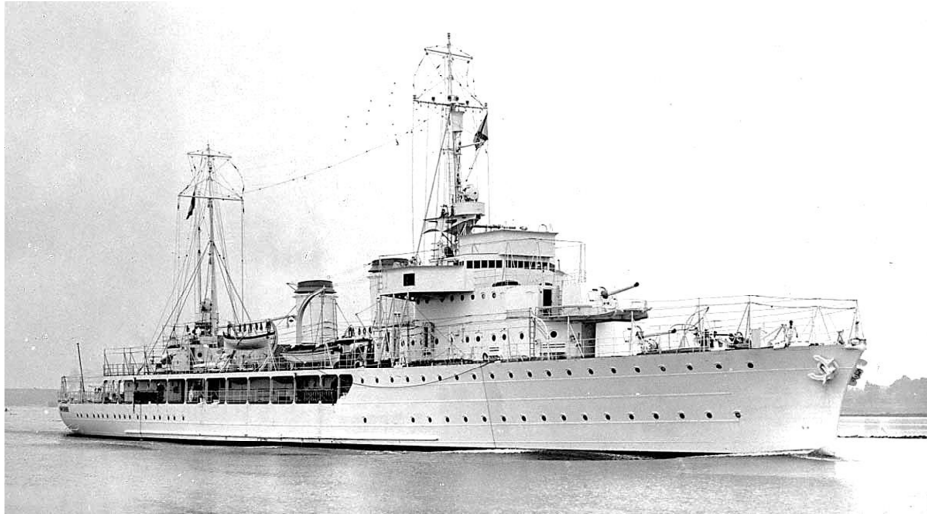


Japanese Empire 1942 in red



Japanese troops entering Saigon during WWII

On March 9, 1945, Japan ended nearly one hundred years of French rule in Indochina. Shortly before midnight on March 9 Japanese soldiers entered the governor general's palace and arrested French Admiral Decoux. Simultaneous attacks secured all the major administrative buildings, public utilities, and radio stations for the Japanese. French troops throughout the country were caught off guard. Whole regiments surrendered without a shot, though many others fought bravely even when encircled and out-numbered. Thousands of French were taken prisoners.



French sloop Admiral Charner sunk in Mytho 10 March 1945  
by Japanese plane

I was thrilled to watch the Japanese planes diving and bombing this war ship in plain daylight in the Mekong River like in a movie.

Meanwhile, playing the role of liberators, the Japanese attempted to secure their hold in Viet Nam with the establishment of an “independent” government. On March 9 Emperor Bảo Đại had been in Quang Tan Province, entertaining French officials at a hunting party. Upon his return to Huế, he was informed by a Japanese commander that his country was free and asked to assume his full responsibilities as emperor. **Bảo Đại** convened his cabinet and on March 11 accepted the Japanese offer to head a new government.

It was a shock for me to see for the first time in my life, Japan controlling a French territory. In Mytho, I saw a half-naked French soldier tied to a post and exposed to the tropical sun by a Japanese MP. The Japanese administration played psychological warfare about the end of the white man dominating Asia.

My French schooling system was changed to Vietnamese. I had to learn to write Kanji, Japanese-Chinese characters for the first time. My second language was Japanese. Before the Japanese occupation, my first language was French and my second language was Vietnamese. This transition period was to be short-lived.

After two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945. On August 28, the occupation of Japan by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers began. The surrender ceremony was held on September 2 aboard the U.S. battleship Missouri, at which officials from the Japanese government signed the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, ending World War II.

On the same day, September 2, 1945 Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed Vietnam's sovereignty. Unfortunately, FDR died April 12, 1945. Roosevelt's insistence on Vietnamese independence faded away.



President Truman



De Gaulle

President Truman did not continue FDR's decolonization policy and was blackmailed by De Gaulle: "help me reoccupy Viet Nam and I will help you in NATO."



Hitler in Paris



French crying



French troops in Vietnam



Natives crying!



French reoccupying Vietnam with American aid: troop transports, tanks, amphibians and foods, GI's C-ration...

Already the French were regrouping, waiting to reenter the colony on the heels of the British occupation force's withdrawal in southern Vietnam. There would be a year of negotiations with Viet Nam, an attempt to create a new relationship between Viet Nam and France. But the die was already cast. France, now under the political leadership of Charles de Gaulle, was simply unwilling to give away the 'jewel' of its empire.

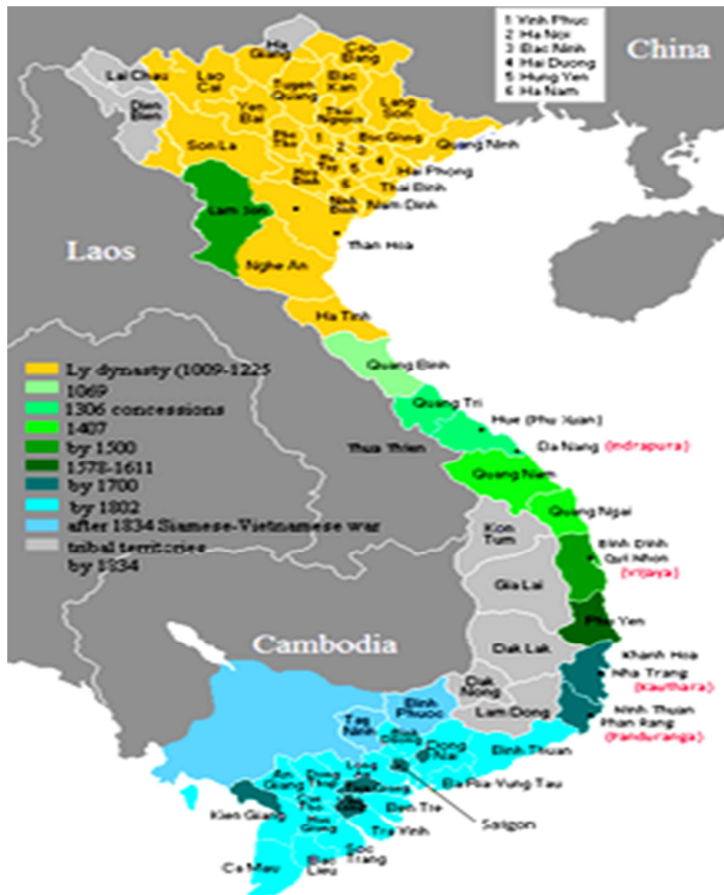
After WWII, I remembered vividly the horrible day my father and I escaped from our home when the French Marines landed in my village of Rach Mieu and burned our house with American flame throwers! We were almost killed that day by the French with US made machine guns. It was indirectly an act of war crime committed by the United States. If you were me, what would be your feeling toward the USA? It was a pity, a clear case of a small country being abused as a pawn by great powers.

As of April 1946, allied occupation of Indochina was officially terminated, and the U.S. acknowledged to France that all of Indochina had reverted to French control. Thereafter, the problems of U.S. policy toward Vietnam were dealt with in the context of the U.S. relationship with France.

### **The First Indochina War (also known as the French *Indochina War*)**



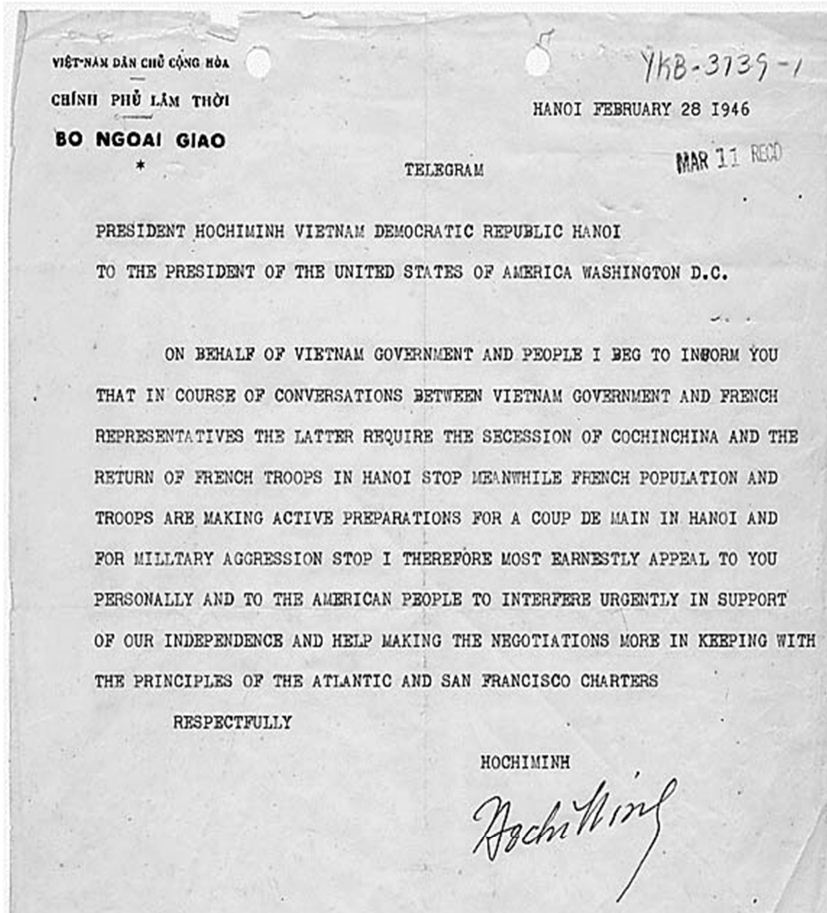
French troops in 1946 in Vietnam



Map of French Indochina during WWII

President Harry S. Truman stepped up America's involvement in the French re-colonization of Indochina under the Truman Doctrine. A Telegram from Hồ Chí Minh to U.S. President Harry S. Truman requesting support for independence (Hanoi, Feb. 28, 1946) was never answered.





The telegram from Ho Chi Minh to President Truman stated, in part:

**“I THEREFORE MOST EARNESTLY APPEAL TO YOU PERSONALLY AND TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE TO INTERFERE URGENTLY IN SUPPORT OF OUR INDEPENDENCE AND HELP MAKING THE NEGOTIATIONS MORE IN KEEPING WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ATLANTIC AND SAN FRANCISCO CHARTERS.”**

Earlier, on February 16<sup>th</sup> 1945, Ho Chi Minh had written a letter to President Truman asking for American assistance in gaining Vietnamese freedom. The letter closed with the remarks:

*“We ask what has been graciously granted to the Philippines. Like the Philippines our goal is full independence and full cooperation*

*with the UNITED STATES. We will do our best to make this independence and cooperation profitable to the whole world.*

*I am dear Mr. PRESIDENT,*

*Respectfully Yours,*

*Ho Chi Minh”*

***[The letter was not declassified until 1972.]***



**Ho Chi Minh, and Vo Nguyen Giap (in white suit)  
meet with Americans from Office of Strategic Services**

Bao Dai's choice for prime minister was Ngô Đình Diệm, but the Japanese vetoed that appointment. A new Government of middle class intellectuals was formed. They quickly realized that Japan's defeat was imminent and that they, in the process, would be discredited. This chilling reality paralyzed the government, and it accomplished almost nothing of substance. Japan exercised real control over the country. After the final capitulation of the Japanese Empire in August 1945, Japanese troops still occupied Vietnam. But in what was perhaps a final attempt in defeat to keep "Asia for Asians" they surrendered to Ho chi Minh, rather than to Allied forces.

The French were gone, the Japanese had surrendered but meanwhile in Việt Nam, a country deemed "incapable of self-government," order prevailed, not anarchy. There was no secret to the HCMinh success. He had simply done what generations of Vietnamese had wanted to do: proclaim Việt Nam's independence.



The author of the Vietnamese Proclamation of Independence was none other than Ho Chi Minh. As early as May 1945 Ho had sought out a young American Lieutenant who had parachuted into the northern Vietnamese mountains with the OSS. "He kept asking me if I could remember the language of our declaration," the lieutenant later recalled. "I was a normal American, I couldn't." Eventually he realized that Ho knew more about the American proclamation of freedom than he did himself. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh addressed a crowd assembled in Hanoi, and indeed, the entire world, with these words:

*"We hold truths that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.:"*

*"This immortal statement is extracted from the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776.*

*"Understood in the broader sense, this means: All have the right to live to be happy and free. These are undeniable truths.*

*"We, the members of the Provisional Government representing the entire people of Viet Nam, declare that we shall from now on have no connections with imperialist France; we consider null and void all the treaties France has signed concerning Viet Nam, and we hereby cancel all the privileges that the French arrogated to themselves on our territory."*

After eighty years of Western rule, Viet Nam was again independent and again united. That unity, more than just political, expressed the deepest wishes of the Vietnamese people. HCMinh had taken control of the country virtually without opposition; a Viet Minh army of only two thousand men had been sufficient to secure the city of Hanoi for the new government. Within days, Emperor Bảo Đại abdicated, promising to support the new government as a private citizen. This peace in Viet Nam was to be short-lived.

The CEFEO, Corps Expéditionnaire Français en Extrême-Orient was created in 1945 to rescue the overwhelmed "Indochina French Forces" fighting the Japanese. General Leclerc was nominated commander of the CEFEO in June 1945 and by August 15 received command of the Far East French Forces.

The CEFEO was made up of troops from the WWII free French army and from the French Union colonial territories and the French Foreign Legion. The entire staff was from the metropole as well were volunteers from the colonial airborne units. Already the French were waiting to reenter the country on the heels of the British occupation force in southern Vietnam. It was the beginning of the bloodiest and most destructive thirty years in Vietnam's history. Hội đồng Tư vấn Nam Kỳ gồm bốn thân hào Pháp, tám thân hào Việt Nam. Cũng hội đồng này đã cử bác sĩ Thịnh làm thủ tướng lâm thời vào ngày 26 tháng 3 năm 1946, và ủy nhiệm thành lập thành lập chính phủ lâm thời. Chính phủ mới ra mắt dân chúng vào sáng ngày 2 tháng 6 năm 1946 trước Nhà thờ Đức Bà Sài Gòn với thành phần như sau:

- Thủ tướng kiêm Bộ trưởng Nội vụ: Bác sĩ Nguyễn Văn Thịnh
- Phó thủ tướng kiêm Bộ trưởng Bộ quân đội trong nước: Đại tá Nguyễn Văn Xuân
- Bộ trưởng Tư pháp: Trần Văn Tỳ
- Bộ trưởng Công chánh: Lương Văn Mỹ (ông ngoại của Marie)
- Bộ trưởng Y Tế: Bác sĩ Khương Hữu Long (Bác Tư của tôi)
- Bộ trưởng Tài chánh: Nguyễn Thành Lập
- Bộ trưởng Công Nông: Ung Bảo Toàn
- Bộ trưởng Giáo dục: Nguyễn Thành Giung
- Bộ trưởng An ninh: Nguyễn Văn Tâm
- Thứ trưởng Công an Đô thành Sài Gòn - Chợ Lớn: Nguyễn Tấn Cường.

Cố vấn: Hồ Biểu Chánh

Trong khi đó những người bảo hoàng cố thương lượng với Pháp về chủ quyền đất nước. Theo Thỏa ước Vịnh Hạ Long ngày 6 Tháng Chạp 1947 giữa Cao ủy Bollaert và Bảo Đại thì

Pháp thừa nhận nước Việt Nam độc lập nhưng có điều kiện hạn chế về ngoại giao, quốc phòng và quy chế dân tộc thiểu số. Để xúc tiến việc trao trả độc lập hoàn toàn và sửa đổi những khoản trên, ngày 26 Tháng Ba, 1948 ở Hương Cảng Bảo Đại tuyên bố thành lập chính phủ trung ương của Quốc gia Việt Nam. Năm người được đề cử làm thủ tướng lúc bấy giờ là Ngô Đình Diệm, Lê Văn Hoạch, Trần Văn Hữu, Khương Hữu Long, và Nguyễn Văn Xuân nhưng Ngô Đình Diệm, Khương Hữu Long, và Lê Văn Hoạch khước từ vì không tán thành nghị định thư của Thỏa ước Vịnh Hạ Long. Bác Sĩ Khương Hữu Long đề nghị với Bảo Đại và toàn quyền Pháp cho Trần Văn Hữu. Cuối cùng Trần Văn Hữu nhường cho Nguyễn Văn Xuân làm Thủ tướng Chính phủ lâm thời Quốc gia Việt Nam.

On June 30, 1950, the first U.S. supplies for Vietnam were delivered. In September, Truman sent the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Saigon to assist the French.



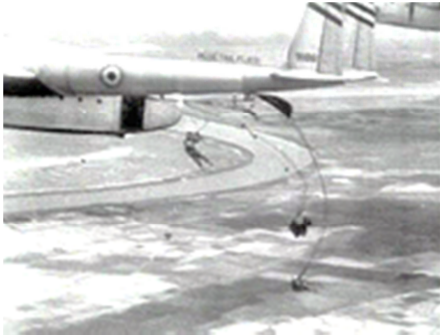
USS Belleau Wood transferred to France in 1953



French Union troops in 1953

To reoccupy Vietnam, De Gaulle, after the German occupation, had not even ships to transport his troops overseas. In an irony of history, the French Indochina war was financed by the US: from ships to planes, guns, ammunitions, even C-rations. I knew well

because I bought from the French soldier's chocolate and sliced bacon from their USA cans!



French 2nd Armored Division

French-marked USAF C-119 flown by CIA pilots over Dien Bien Phu in 1954

A vicious war of independence erupted between the Viet Minh and the French until after the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Two US pilots were killed in action during that siege. These facts were declassified and made public more than 50 years after the events, in 2005 during the Légion d'honneur award ceremony by the French ambassador in Washington.

After eight years of fighting and \$2.5 billion [1954 dollars] in U.S. aid, the French lost the crucial battle of Dien Bien Phu and with it, their Asian empire. That was the end of French Indochina Federation.

After the war, the Geneva Conference on July 21, 1954, made a provisional division of Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, with control of the north given to the **Việt Minh** as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under **Hồ Chí Minh**, and the south becoming the State of Vietnam under Emperor **Bảo Đại**, in order to prevent **Hồ Chí Minh** from gaining control of the entire country. A year later, **Bảo Đại** would be deposed by his prime minister, Ngô Đình Diệm, creating the Republic of Vietnam. Diem's refusal to enter into negotiations with North Vietnam about holding nationwide elections in 1956, as had been stipulated by the Geneva Conference, would eventually lead to war breaking out again in South Vietnam in 1959 .

My early years went through a very turbulent political period in French Indochina. It began with the Great Depression of 1929-39. Then I lived under constant fear during WWII when Hitler invaded France. French Marshall Petain cooperated with the Germans and

continued to occupy Vietnam. From 1952 to 1958, I was a student in the United States.



**Ngô Đình Diệm**, accompanied by U.S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, arrives at Washington National Airport in 1957. Diệm is shown shaking the hand of U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In retrospect, it was an eye opening for me to learn that truly the US went to Vietnam for its own interest more than for the democratization of Vietnam. It wanted to contain Communist China. I understand now why for a guerilla war, the US built the huge Cam Ranh Bay base with an airfield ready for B-52's and Boeing 747's in the early 60's.

Eventually, the Vietnamese domino did fall but the rest of Asia did not fall. South Vietnam paid a very high price for the American Domino experiment. I also wish my readers to remember the fact that F. D. Roosevelt wanted Europeans to decolonize their empires in Asia after WWII. *"He said that there are 1,100,000,000 brown people. In many Eastern countries, they are ruled by a handful of whites and they resent it. Our goal must be to help them achieve independence."*

As stated earlier, unfortunately for both the U.S. and Vietnam, right after FDR's death, Truman decided to finance several billion dollars for the French re-colonization of Indochina under his new doctrine. The end result was another 58,209 dead and 153,303 wounded of U.S. servicemen and women together with billions and billions of US\$ in American taxpayers' money for the so-called Vietnam war during three decades. That's a long story which will fill exactly the first half of my 80-Year Odyssey "East Meets West" from the Mekong Delta to San Francisco Bay. Let me now return to the 1930s and 1940s of my teenage years.

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CHAPTER 2

Peaceful Life Along the Mekong Delta

*Calm and romantic*

*A small village of the Mekong River*



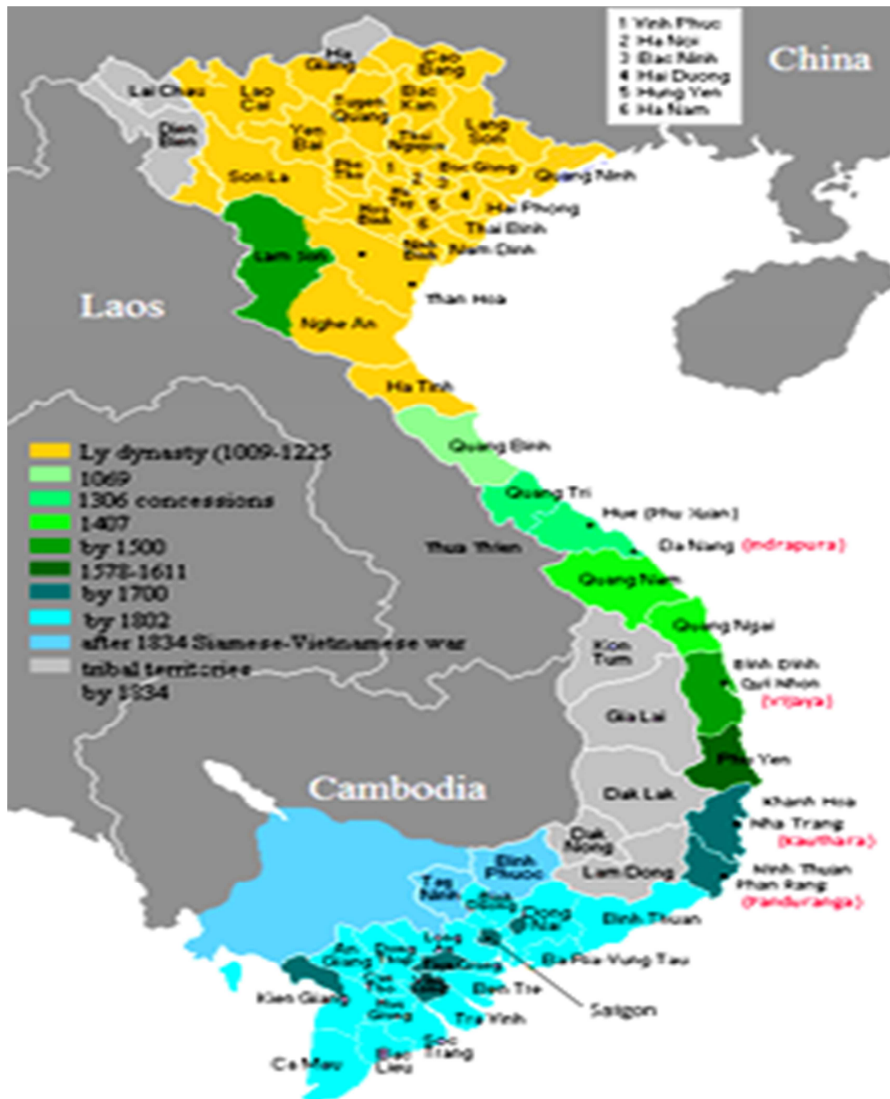
### **Calmness of the Mekong Delta**

A man is, in part, the sum of his life experiences, and having lived through the most tumultuous time in the history of Vietnam, those events have been key in molding me into the person I am today. It is worth pointing out, however, that I was equally impacted by the tranquil and happy days of my youth growing up along the Mekong Delta. In this chapter, I would like to set the stage of my early childhood and explain what life was like at that time.

### **What a Peaceful Life in the Mekong Delta**

To fully understand the nature of the Vietnamese people, and the lifestyle of those living in the Mekong Delta, it is worth taking a look back at the migration of their ancestors into this area. In the 7th century, the small kingdom of Champa was formed along the coastline of central Vietnam where its people spoke the Malayo-Polynesian language. Starting in the 9th century, Cambodia, with its world renowned Khmer civilization, dominated Southeast Asia. Eventually, by the early 1800's, both Champa and what was formerly the southern part of Cambodia along the Mekong Delta, were conquered by Vietnamese from the Red River Delta in the North. The migration of people moving from north to south in Vietnam can be compared to the westward movement of settlers in the United States.





Map showing the conquest of Vietnam from North to South

The phrase "Go west, young man" came to symbolize the migration of people in the United States moving westward in hopes of staking out a plot of fertile farmland, where they could build themselves a new life away from the hardships and poverty from which they came. Similarly, in Vietnam, one of the principal motivations for the "March to the South" was the frequent

and uncontrollable flooding of the Red River in North Vietnam. Political rivalry and unrest between various factions in the region also drove people to seek a better life in the south. Remarkably, the proud people of Vietnam were able to maintain their identity and national characteristics over the period a thousand years of foreign domination spanning four Chinese dynasties. Eventually, the Vietnamese were able to overcome Chinese invasion, and the Vietnamese authorities rewarded their fighting men with farmland in the south. Behind these aggressive pioneers came other settlers, meeting the resistance of the native Chams who gradually yielded their ground. The long "March to the South" could not be stopped. It continued from the 11th century to the mid-18th century. After nearly 700 years, Vietnam's territory gradually increased by three times from its original heartland in the Red River Delta to become the size and shape that it is today. The Mekong Delta, with its Khmer Krom inhabitants of Cambodian descent, formally became part of South Vietnam as an outright French colony with the name Cochinchine by the mid 19th century. This history of the Mekong Delta explains the interracial blending of Chams, Melanesians, Khmers and Tieu Chau Chinese that make up the population of modern day Vietnam.

The gradual migration of people towards the south led to the blending of cultures, races and philosophies. This also led to a transformation in the outlook and character of the people in the south. Overall, one can describe the South Vietnamese as more liberal, easy-going and open-minded than the North Vietnamese. When you think about it, the people moving south were forced to be more accepting of new ideas and customs in order to get along with the rest of the population. On the flip side, the people in the north, having been dominated by the Chinese for a thousand years, had to secretly cling to their beliefs. They became accustomed to hiding their thoughts and feelings as a way to survive, and henceforth became more reserved and introverted by nature.

As in most hybrid cultures, the ideas and strengths of each population in the new hybrid South were incorporated to

everyone's benefit. For example the Tieu Chau Chinese, well known for their agricultural skills, used their knowledge to produce a bountiful food supply from the rich, fertile delta, thus enabling the people in South Vietnam enjoy a richer life, different from that of their countrymen in North and Central Vietnam. And hence, the abundant Mekong Delta became a rich agricultural area with a peaceful and slow paced lifestyle. This is the area where all of my happy childhood memories were formed.

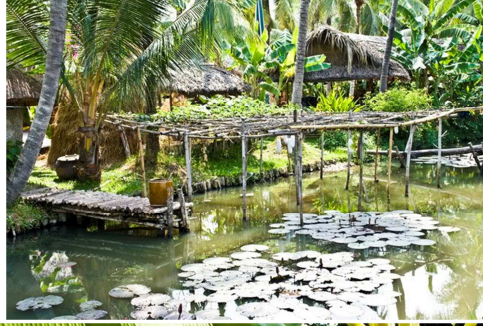
Life was simple then. It was peaceful in the city, and even more so in the countryside. One could drive or take the train from the capital of Saigon to Mytho, the gateway to the Mekong Delta, and then travel by boat on the countless little rivers to visit the tropical fruit gardens, see the peasants' houses on islets, and admire all the vast paddy fields. Like most people living in the Mekong Delta, I was raised on the water. The house where I grew up was actually in the peaceful village of Rach-Mieu that was separated from the big city of Mytho by the mile wide Mekong River. My father built a 12x20 meter home near the ferry boat landing. Like many homes in the area, our house was half on land and half over the water, supported by concrete piers. The roof was made of water palm leaves, similar to thatch roof, which kept the house cool year round.

Back then, no one was stressed. No one was in a hurry. With the slow moving sampans on the rivers there was no rush hour. The people were not exposed to or tempted by consumer goods and their basic needs for food, clothing and shelter were provided by the fertile soil and the mild year round climate of the delta. In stark contrast to the big U.S. cities that I would later find myself in, there was no pollution from noise, dust, and car exhaust in the Mekong delta.

To cross the many waterways slim “monkey bridges” were built at a minimum cost with the abundant bamboo available in any village. The name “monkey bridge” probably came from the assumption that people must be agile like monkeys in order to cross without difficulty. Some did not even have handrails.

**Village scenes with cute “monkey bridges”**









**“Monkey bridges”**

Despite being a predominantly rural region, the Mekong Delta was one of the most densely populated areas in Vietnam with most of the land under cultivation. In addition to rice, the delta also produced an abundance of coconut, sugar cane, tropical fruits, flowers and fish.



**Working in the rice paddies**



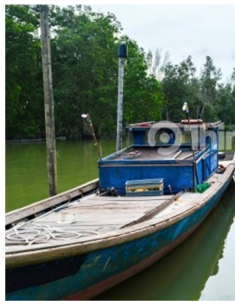
**Kids taking care of their families' water buffalos**







Ducks farm for egg production



Various Junks



### Sampans and Water Taxis



Various Junks

Floating markets were common, and were truly an integral part of the daily life and culture of the Mekong Delta. The markets were busy, bustling and crowded like a floating city offering a broad variety of goods. Amongst the floating vendors, were other small boats selling drinks and other products so that tourists and shoppers alike could enjoy a bowl of steaming hot noodle soup or sweet-smelling cup of morning coffee while they shopped from their boats.

Our family would frequent the large Cai Be floating market, near Mytho city, which served as the hub for transporting local products to many regions in Vietnam. Hospitable local sellers at the market offered surprisingly cheap prices for fresh and delicious products. At the Cai Be, and other floating markets in the delta, sellers did not cry out to invite guests to buy their goods. Instead, they attracted shoppers with strings of hanging samples hung above their junk. The larger floating markets operated 24 hours a day. When the sunset came, the market sparkled with lights from the junks and other boats with business activities carrying on until dawn.

Vietnam imported abundant live fish from the immense Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia. The live fish were transported downstream

using huge wooden barges with screened sides and big floats at either end. All the barges stopped at the port of Mytho where the fish would be loaded onto delivery trucks to bring the fish to Saigon early each morning.



**Floating Markets**





**Floating Markets**



**Passenger boat for longer distance trips**



**Floating Freighters**



**Different sampan and boat designs**





**Water taxis**



**Ferry boat**



**Local traffic**



**Typical delta town with an embarcadero**





Map of the Mekong Delta with province names



Farmer's house



Harvesting lotus flowers and seeds

During my childhood, the fertile Mekong Delta was famous for its tropical fruits and flowers, and it remains so today. In the province of Bentre, coconut plantations and orchards were so dense that sunlight could hardly reach the ground. As a result, the girls growing up in this area were known for their delicate fair skin. In those days, Vietnamese girls did everything possible to avoid a suntan, and many covered their bodies completely from head to toe.

With water everywhere, houseboats were common, and rural peasants had a relatively easy life. They used the abundant water palms that lined the canals for making shelters. Rice was plentiful and cheap, and the numerous waterways provided an endless supply of fish and shrimp. They could plant vegetables and fruits trees near their houses, and each family could raise chickens and one or two pigs. Simple shirts and shorts sufficed for clothing in the mild year round weather.

Visitors to the region could take a cruise on the roof of a boat at sunset, looking at the distant and endless lines of coconut trees,



with oil lamps flickering here and there, while listening to the cacophony of night birds, crickets, toads, and barking dogs. I have many happy memories of doing this with my family.

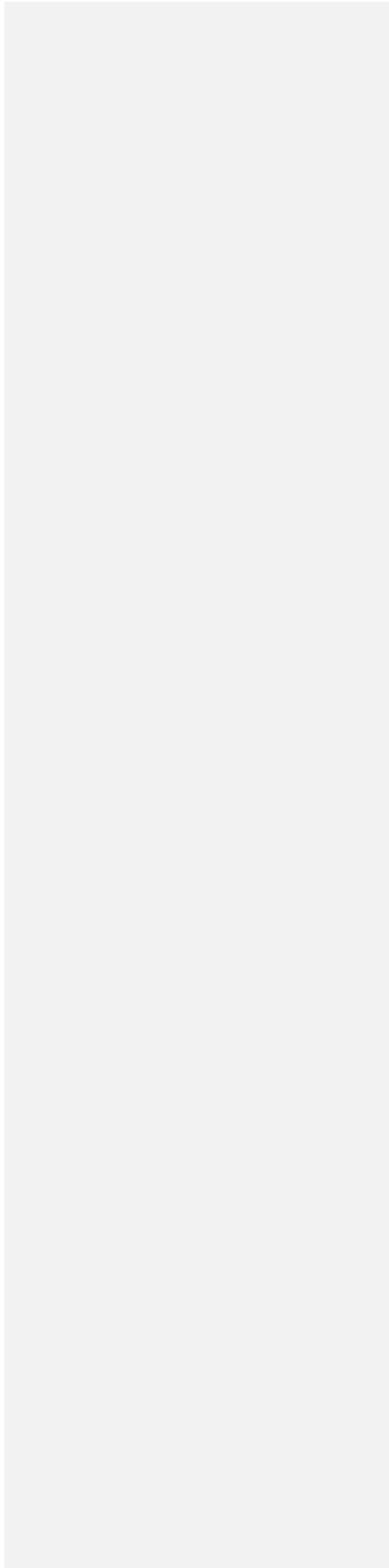


**Low Cost Shelter from palm leaves**

**Palm-lined Canal**



**Family Compound**





Fishing





**Mekong delta houseboat**



**Tropical fruits on their way to market**



**Mangoustan**



**Cashew nuts (inside the black seeds  
at the end of the cashew fruits)**



**Jack fruits**



**Dragon fruits**



**Tamarind**

**Banana with its purple blossom**

**Papaya**





**Durian**



**Milky breast fruits**



**Star fruits**



**Trai coc or "frog fruits"**



**Lecuma fruit**



**Custard apple. "Mang Cau fruit"**





**Chamoya**



**Pineapple**



**Chum ruot' fruit**

**Lychee fruit**



**Chamoya**



**Chamoya**



**Hairy fruits**



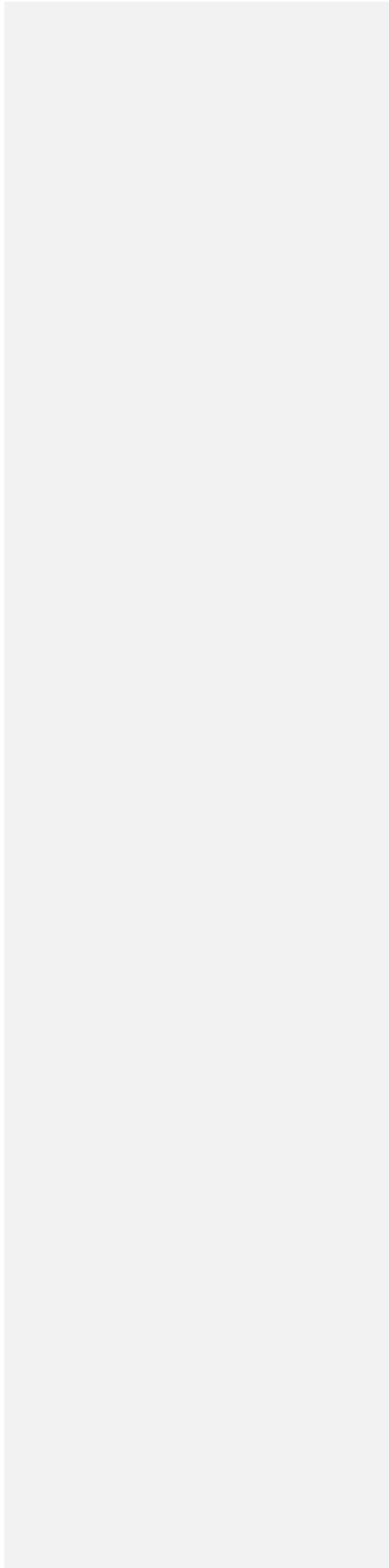
**Sapotilla**



**Tropical plums**



**Tropical plums**





Village fruit cart

Small quantities of fruit were sold in the local village markets, but most fruit produced in the Mekong Delta was consumed in other parts of Vietnam. The fruit was brought to the wholesalers' warehouses by boat, and then it would travel by truck to the capital city of Saigon, or by rail to Mytho.





Rice field

The delta, made up of low lying alluvial deposits near the end of the 4,500 km long Mekong River, was the rice bowl of Vietnam – producing three harvests per year. During my youth, the rice was harvested by hand and sun dried. Manually operated wooden equipment with circular fans to produce air flow was commonly used to blow sand, dirt and straw away from the rice. Prior to World War II, Vietnam was the world's greatest exporter of rice.



Harvesting the rice



**Rice processing equipment**



### Drying paddy

During the 30's and 40's China was poor and underdeveloped, and they had no means to build dams on the upper reaches of the Mekong River. Therefore, the alluviums from the high mountains of Tibet, and the thousands of miles upstream of Vietnam provided natural organic fertilizers for the whole region. Later, however, communist China built so many dams upstream of Indochina that the water flow in the Mekong was radically reduced, creating panic downstream because salt water began to flow back into the Mekong delta. As a result, fish, fruit and rice production all suffered.

The delta was not a primary battle ground during the Vietnam War, but communist rule imposed on the entire country upon their takeover created great hardships including acute food shortages. This was not mitigated until 1985 when the Hanoi administration introduced its "renovation" policy. The people in the Mekong Delta area were then able to cultivate their fertile land to become the great rice bowl of Vietnam once again. Vietnam is now the world's second largest exporter of rice.

Life in the cities during my youth was also unhurried and calm. In **Mytho**, much of the architecture was French by design. The most impressive building was the residence built for the chief of the province.





Residence of French Province Chief

It faced our local “Champs Elysees” where the military parade was held each year on the 14 of July, Bastille Day. Other structures built by the French included the beautiful Catholic Church, the court house, an administrative building, the barrack, the maternity hospital and the stadium, plus a tall reservoir to supply the city with a gravity fed water distribution system. There was also an impressive club house built over the Mekong River where French officials would go to enjoy happy hour.

During colonial times, the omnipresent French police exercised strict local gun control and other tight controls over the native population. I have vivid memories of the French chief of police inspecting the town by bicycle in his impressive khaki uniform with his big revolver in a shiny leather case at his belt.

From a practical viewpoint, however, it can be said that people throughout the country were able to live safely, day and night. My father, for example, a well-known businessman in town, could apply only for a simple compressed air gun for bird hunting. As a result of this tight security, there were almost no guns in the entire



province. Nor were there any hoodlums or street gangs. One of our family's businesses, a jewelry store, operated for 50 years without any security problems, or even a security guard.

Each week my father took a train to Saigon, carrying an ingot of gold in his leather briefcase that weighed several kilos. He would take the ingot to the Indochina Bank where it was tested for gold content and exchanged for cash. The gold came from used jewelry sold to our family store by people from all over the province. For years my father traveled alone and never worried about his safety. It was very a different time.

My father would give me a bit of pocket money for helping him melt all the used jewelry. We would use a furnace heated by mesquite charcoal, and my job was to crank a hand driven high speed fan that would keep the fire hot enough to melt the gold. The liquid gold that would end up in the crucible was then poured into a rectangular steel mold. The end product was an ingot that looked like a gold brick. This is the gold that he would bring to Saigon each week. I remember that he took the early train. I was allowed to walk with my father to the station. We would stop at a nearby restaurant for breakfast where I would have my favorite – café au lait (coffee with milk) and a delicious "Hu Tieu Mytho," Mytho Noodle Soup, a specialty famous in the whole of Cochinchina even in today's Vietnamese communities in America. After breakfast I returned home for my schooling. I would then walk back to the station to meet my father at 6 pm.

Every so often, as a special treat, we would return after dinner for a very special train ride. You see, when the train stopped at Mytho station, it had no room to turn around for the return trip to Saigon. Therefore the train had to back-up to an area in the outskirts of the town where it could make the 180 degree turn. Then it would back up once again to the station where it would be ready for the early

trip to Saigon the next morning. That short trip to the country side was always an exciting ride for me!



Mytho-Saigon train 1938

I can go on and on with the numerous and very pleasant recollections of my teenage years in the Mekong Delta. I often say to myself that I am quite fortunate being a Vietnamese from the Mekong Delta instead of somewhere in north or central Viet Nam. It is well known that, compared to people in Ha Noi or Hue, the "Saigonese" are more open-minded and tolerant but rather loud-mouth and prone to disputes, are quick with hot temper and a brawl but also quick to forgive and forget. That could be an honest description of myself, a youngster from the Mekong delta and a typical Saigonese!

Little did I know during my teenage years in the 1930s and 1940s that the waters of that great Mekong river were running through my hometown of Mytho and then across the vast Pacific Ocean to reach the shores of San Francisco Bay, my future hometown in America, my adopted land in the 1970s.

Quite a journey, I must say, but this had to wait for "Điêu" - the little Mekong Eagle - to begin and complete its flight across the Pacific Ocean, my 80-year Odyssey that I have been trying hard to remember and describe in the following chapters of this book. The year 2015 will exactly mark the 40th anniversary of my arrival at Camp Pendleton as a refugee and the beginning of the second half of my life as an American citizen. I still sadly miss the Mekong Delta with the precious memories of my beloved parents, relatives and childhood friends there in the land of my ancestors.

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