

Father's decision creates future for Airman

by Airman 1st Class
DAVID OWSIANKA

56th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

"I still remember how the ground felt — rumbling from the tanks rolling through the city as chaos took over," said Lt. Col. Quy Nguyen, 56th Comptroller Squadron commander, speaking about living in Saigon, South Vietnam, when the communist took over after the Vietnam War ended.

During the war Anh Nguyen, Colonel Nguyen's father, served in the South Vietnamese army as an interpreter with the U.S. First Marine Division for the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, based in Saigon.

North Vietnam captured Saigon April 30, 1975, which marked the end of the war. This began a transitioning period leading to the formal reunification of Vietnam under communist rule.

The philosophy of communism is no one should be wealthier than anyone else, and business owners are considered to have an advantage over the next citizen.

"After Saigon fell, my family lost our book and fabric stores and endured tough times," Colonel Nguyen said. "Food was scarce. I remember going to sleep dreaming about food only to wake up to an empty stomach and thinking to myself, 'if only I could eat when I wanted to.'"

Once the North took control of South Vietnam, the leaders wanted to break the will and morale of the former military members so there would be no further resistance. South Vietnamese service members spent time in re-education camps to learn new trades.

Over the next five years, after Anh Nguyen's release from the re-education camp, the family made six attempts to flee the country in order to escape political persecution and the tyranny of communist rule.

"At the time I didn't know what we were doing, why the adults were always whispering in private or why we were always hiding," he said. "My family told me we were going to the countryside to see family out of fear

for my siblings and me speaking about what we were truly doing."

The family's first attempt to escape was by plane. In the midst of the flight the plane turned around because Colonel Nguyen's mother was about to give birth to her son, Binh.

"During one escape attempt, I remember running through rice patties with bullets whistling by kicking up dirt and water," he said.

On the sixth attempt, Colonel Nguyen, along with his two brothers and father, boarded a crowded riverboat carrying 64 men, women and children.

"Since my mother had been arrested on a previous attempt, my family wanted to reduce the risk of being separated again and decided to escape at different times," Colonel Nguyen said.

Shortly after leaving the shoreline the engine failed. Everyone on the boat floated at sea without food or water for about seven days, while enduring stinging hot temperatures during the day and bitter cold at night.

On the last night, after passing in and out of consciousness, Colonel Nguyen awoke shivering in the cold to find the boat violently rocking due to a storm.

"I gathered enough energy to hold up my head and saw what looked like a giant wave about to smash down on the boat," he said. "I closed my eyes for what I thought was my final moment."

When he awoke everyone was being rescued by a Hong Kong fishing vessel.

"Because it was in the midst of a storm, the vessel's captain didn't want to pick us up," Colonel Nguyen said. "The captain's wife convinced him to let us board because she wanted to do

the right thing."

The Chinese on board the vessel provided food, helped the Vietnamese fix the riverboat's engine and towed it near a Malaysian Island.

"Once everyone was on land, we trekked through a wild jungle making noise to keep the animals away, Colonel Nguyen said."

After some time in the jungle, the group encountered a Malaysian army camp. They called the United Nations, who sent a boat to take the Vietnamese to a refugee camp on the island of Pulau Bidong. There Anh Nguyen worked as an interpreter for the United Nations.

After six months of processing paperwork, the Nguyen family requested to move to the United States. Before leaving for the United States the family was transferred to the Philippines for nine months to learn English.

"Once we reached the United States, we got word to my mother and her siblings that we were safe, and then they made their escape to America in 1983," Colonel Nguyen said. "Although my mother left several weeks after we did, we didn't reunite with her until 1985."

Upon arriving in Colorado Springs, Colo., in 1982, Colonel Nguyen was amazed at the sights around him.

"I remember going to a Safeway for the first time and saw the rows and rows of food without anyone watching it," he said. "I also remember all the little things

most people take for granted that I had never had; there was hot water coming out of the faucets, toilets that flushed and snow."

Living near the foothills of the Air Force Academy, Colonel Nguyen made numerous visits to see the cadets. He

also remembered seeing his father strap on boots to serve South Vietnam, and Colonel Nguyen was influenced to join the Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps at the University of Colorado.

"I wanted to give back to the nation that gave my family a second chance," he said. "I also wanted to be able to make a difference so that someone else walking a similar path as I had could get a second chance."

Colonel Nguyen began his career in 1995 as a finance officer for the Information Operations System Program Office at Hanscom AFB, Mass.

"At the start of my career I was timid, because I had to command in a second language," he said. "What I learned from that part of my career is that I will face tough challenges throughout my career and I have to trust that it will work out in the end."

Colonel

Nguyen became 8th Comptroller Squadron commander in 2007 at Kunsan Air Base, Republic of Korea.

"Colonel Nguyen leads by example," said Senior Master Sgt. Marlin Hill, 56th Comptroller Squadron section chief. "He allows the members under his command to be innovative in their thinking and in the execution of their duties. He has helped me realize that everyone on the team plays a specific role to help with the unit's success."

Having experienced what he did as a child has allowed Colonel Nguyen to become an outstanding leader, and he provides great decision support to fellow Airmen and civilian employees in executing the financial mission, Sergeant Hill said.

Colonel Nguyen has spoken to numerous immigrants who have joined the Air Force about their journey and the struggles they went through.

"When I face issues as an Airman or leader I know there is hope and no matter how bad things can get, they get better," Colonel Nguyen said. "From the struggles and challenges I went through, I learned the ability to sacrifice. To me freedom is worth the sacrifice, and that's why I decided to serve."



Courtesy photo

FROM LEFT: Aunt Loc, Lt. Col. Quy Nguyen, 56th Comptroller Squadron commander, brothers Phong and Phu and father, Anh, pose for a photo in downtown Colorado Springs.



Courtesy photo

Lt. Col. Quy Nguyen, 56th Comptroller Squadron commander, left, and brother, Phu, in Saigon, Vietnam.



Courtesy photo

FROM LEFT: Brothers, Phu and Lam; Lt. Col. Quy Nguyen, 56th Comptroller Squadron commander, mother, Lieu; brother, Phong; and father, Anh pose for photo in their Colorado Springs home in 1990.