

THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON VETERANS AND COMMUNITY

It is a great honour for me to be invited to speak at this conference as a guest speaker.

My name is D.N. I was born during the First Republic of Vietnam and grew up during the Second Republic. I served in the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam for five years. After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, I was sent to four different re-education camps, where I spent a total of 78 months in detention.

Later, I came to Australia as a political refugee, and I have now lived here for more than half of my life. This journey has allowed me to experience three profoundly different worlds: the Republic of Vietnam, Socialist Vietnam, and free Australia.

Today, I stand before you not with anger or hatred, but with sincerity, respect for history,

My purpose is simply to share personal experiences and truths about how the Vietnam War and its aftermath deeply affected the veterans, civilians, and communities of South Vietnam.

The Vietnam War left profound and lasting physical, psychological, economic, and social scars on South Vietnamese society.

In the immediate aftermath of April 1975, some people in the South — particularly in rural areas and families connected to the National Liberation Front or North Vietnamese forces — initially welcomed the new government. However, this support quickly faded as harsh policies created fear, suffering, and widespread disappointment.

One of the earliest painful moments for many South Vietnamese veterans and families was the destruction of the statue of the soldier of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam at the entrance of Bien Hoa Military Cemetery, where more than 16,000 soldiers and generals were buried. Whether or not this act was official government policy, it deeply shocked the community because it violated an important Vietnamese moral value: respect for the dead. In Vietnamese culture, there is a saying, “Nghĩa tử là nghĩa tận,” meaning that once a person has died, regardless of who they were in life, their death should be treated with dignity and respect.

At the same time, wounded soldiers and their carers were forced to leave military hospitals, often with nowhere to go and no support to continue treatment.

South Vietnamese culture and education also suffered greatly. Books, music, literature, and publications from the South — including religious and educational materials — were banned or destroyed. This not only erased much of the cultural heritage of South Vietnam but also deprived future generations of access to diverse ideas, history, and knowledge.

Economic hardship soon followed. Private homes, businesses, factories, and farms were confiscated. Families associated with the former government were often forced to move to so-called “New Economic Zones” — remote and undeveloped areas lacking electricity, clean

water, schools, hospitals, or proper infrastructure. Many families were separated, children's education was interrupted, and countless people were pushed into poverty.

Freedom of movement was also severely restricted. Travelling between districts or provinces required complicated permits and approvals. Daily life became controlled by bureaucracy, fear, and constant surveillance, weakening social trust and community connections.

By 1976, even the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam was dissolved, as political power became fully centralized under the North Vietnamese government. For many people in the South, hopes for reconciliation or an independent southern voice disappeared.

However, the harshest policy — and the one that left the deepest emotional scars on veterans, families, and communities — was the mass detention of former soldiers and officials in so-called “re-education camps.”

In May 1975, shortly after the fall of Saigon, the Military Management Committee of Saigon–Gia Dinh issued public announcements ordering former military personnel and government officials to report for what was described as a short period of “study” or “re-education.” The notices assured people that the process would last only a few days, ten days, or at most one month, depending on rank.

This became a carefully planned trap.

Those who obeyed the order had little choice, because refusal could endanger both themselves and their families. Believing they would soon return home, thousands reported as instructed — only to be sent to re-education camps for years, and in some cases more than a decade, without trial.

Families were often denied contact during the first years of detention. Prisoners endured severe hardship, including forced labour, malnutrition, disease, and emotional suffering.

In the camps, we quickly learned the true meaning of hunger. There were two forms of hunger. The first was physical hunger — the constant craving for food, sugar, and fat as our bodies weakened. The second was psychological hunger — the pain of missing our families, living with uncertainty, and never knowing when, or if, we would be released.

Compared to many others, my suffering was less severe. Some detainees had young children. Some had only recently married before being taken away. Many captains, majors, and generals were sent to remote camps in the cold northern highlands, where harsh weather and distance made it extremely difficult for relatives to deliver food or medicine. As a result, more detainees died in the North than in the South.

The suffering extended far beyond the camps themselves. Children grew up without fathers. Wives struggled alone to feed their families, and some remarried simply to survive and provide food for their children. Tragically, some even remarried former enemies of their husbands. Many veterans returned home with broken health, emotional trauma, and difficulty reintegrating into society or even into his own family because of his inferiority feeling

Some generals and senior officers remained imprisoned for more than seventeen years.

In the early 1990s, the Humanitarian Operation (HO) Program established by the United States gave many former detainees and their families an opportunity to rebuild their lives overseas. While the program offered hope and freedom, it could not erase the trauma of lost years, broken families, the deaths of relatives and comrades, damaged health, and separation from children and loved ones.

More than fifty years, the pain may have softened with time, but the traumatic memories remain alive in the hearts of countless not only Veterans but also the first and the second generations of Vietnamese people around the world.

After 50 years the political and emotional gap remains between the Viet Nam government and the Vietnamese Communities around the world and more than half of a century the Vietnamese Government still lacks a healing process which is very important for any country after war to reunite its people and develop the nation.

Let me give you 3 examples in 3 countries to the important of healing process.

First, the American civil war 1861-1865

When General Robert. Lee the commander of the defeated side, the South, enter the Hall to sign the surrender Agreement, the winners, generals of the North stood up and showed him respect. The soldiers of the South were allowed to keep their horses so that they could return home and resume farming. Many bodies of Soldiers from both sides were honourably buried in Arlington national Cemetery. No, revenge. no hatred no prison The United States went on to be the most powerful nation in the world.

Second, to end the World War II, the United States dropped 2 atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, hundred thousand Japanese killed Yet recognising that The Japanese people were starving and needed help. The Japanese cooperated fully with the American Authorities; Japan rapidly built and became one of the worlds 'leading economy and IT.

Last, The German Reunification (1889-1990)

The Berlin wall collapsed Millions of East German many of them were poor moved to the West. There were no hatred, revenge or discrimination. The West Germany welcomed their brothers and sisters. The reunification was successful and Germany remains Europe's leading economy. Notably, Angela Merkel who grew up in East Germany was elected Chancellor of the Reunited Germany and served with distinction for many years.

I do not have formal conclusion for my presentation instead I have my personal expression, before sharing this with you, I would like to dedicate my remarks to the five Generals and hundreds of The Republic of Vietnam soldiers who chose to sacrifice their lives rather than surrender to the victorious side after the fall of South Vietnam.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Imagine 50 years ago in dark concentration camps, there was a broken man 37 kilogram, walked unbalance sometime , more than the first 2 years in the camp, his dream was very simple : a small piece of sugar or few spoons of fat and every night he imagined the faces of members of his family, his released day was uncertainty.

Today he is given the honour, the privilege to stand in front of you to share his personal story as well as his own opinion on Vietnam war. This is a miracle the miracle is made by the passion, the kindness and the generosity of Australia and the Australian people.

Thank you



Dinh Nguyen

REFLECTIONS: THE IMPACT OF THE WAR ON VETERANS AND COMMUNITIES

ABOUT MYSELF





Before



After

THƯƠNG TIẾC STATUE

“Thương Tiếc” means “mourning and remembrance,” reflecting the grief and respect felt for the fallen soldiers of the former Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which is why the statue carries this name.

Before

The statue was installed at the National Military Cemetery in Biên-Hòa

After

The statue was demolished after 1975 following the Fall of Saigon.



KICKED OUT OF MILITARY HOSPITAL

Sergeant First Class Võ Phùng Dương of the former Army of the Republic of Vietnam was one of many wounded ARVN soldiers forced out of Cộng Hòa Military Hospital in Saigon following the fall of the Republic of Vietnam on 30 April 1975.



BOOK BURNING

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, communist authorities launched campaigns against so called 'reactionary culture,' resulting in the mass burning and confiscation of books, music, and literature from the former Republic of Vietnam.





- New Economic Zones
- Property Confiscation
- Civilian Displacement
- Restrictions on freedom & basic human rights

**ECONOMIC HARDSHIP SOON
FOLLOWED**

THÔNG BÁO

CỦA ỦY BAN QUÂN QUẢN THÀNH PHỐ SÀI GÒN - GIA ĐỊNH

VỀ VIỆC TRÌNH DIỆN HỌC TẬP CẢI TẠO

Để thực hiện chính sách khoan hồng của Chính phủ Cách mạng lâm thời Cộng hòa miền Nam Việt Nam đối với quân nhân, viên chức và các nhân viên phục vụ cho ngụy quân, ngụy quyền Sài Gòn cũ, nay yêu cầu:

Tất cả sĩ quan, hạ sĩ quan, binh sĩ, cảnh sát, nhân viên tình báo, chiêu hồi và mọi thành phần phục vụ cho chế độ cũ phải đến trình diện để đăng ký học tập cải tạo theo thời gian quy định.

- **THỜI GIAN TRÌNH DIỆN:**

Từ ngày 13 đến ngày 16 tháng 6 năm 1975.

- **ĐỊA ĐIỂM TRÌNH DIỆN:**

Tại Ủy ban nhân dân địa phương nơi cư trú.

- **KHI ĐI TRÌNH DIỆN MANG THEO:**

- Quần áo
- Giấy tờ cá nhân
- Mùng mền
- Lương thực hoặc tiền đủ dùng

- **THỜI GIAN HỌC TẬP:**

1. Binh sĩ và hạ sĩ quan: 3 ngày.
2. Sĩ quan cấp úy: 10 ngày.
3. Sĩ quan cấp tá trở lên: 1 tháng.

Yêu cầu mọi người nghiêm chỉnh chấp hành.

Ai không trình diện sẽ bị xử lý theo chính sách của Chính quyền Cách mạng.

ỦY BAN QUÂN QUẢN
THÀNH PHỐ SÀI GÒN - GIA ĐỊNH

Tháng 5 năm 1975

NOTICE TO REGISTER

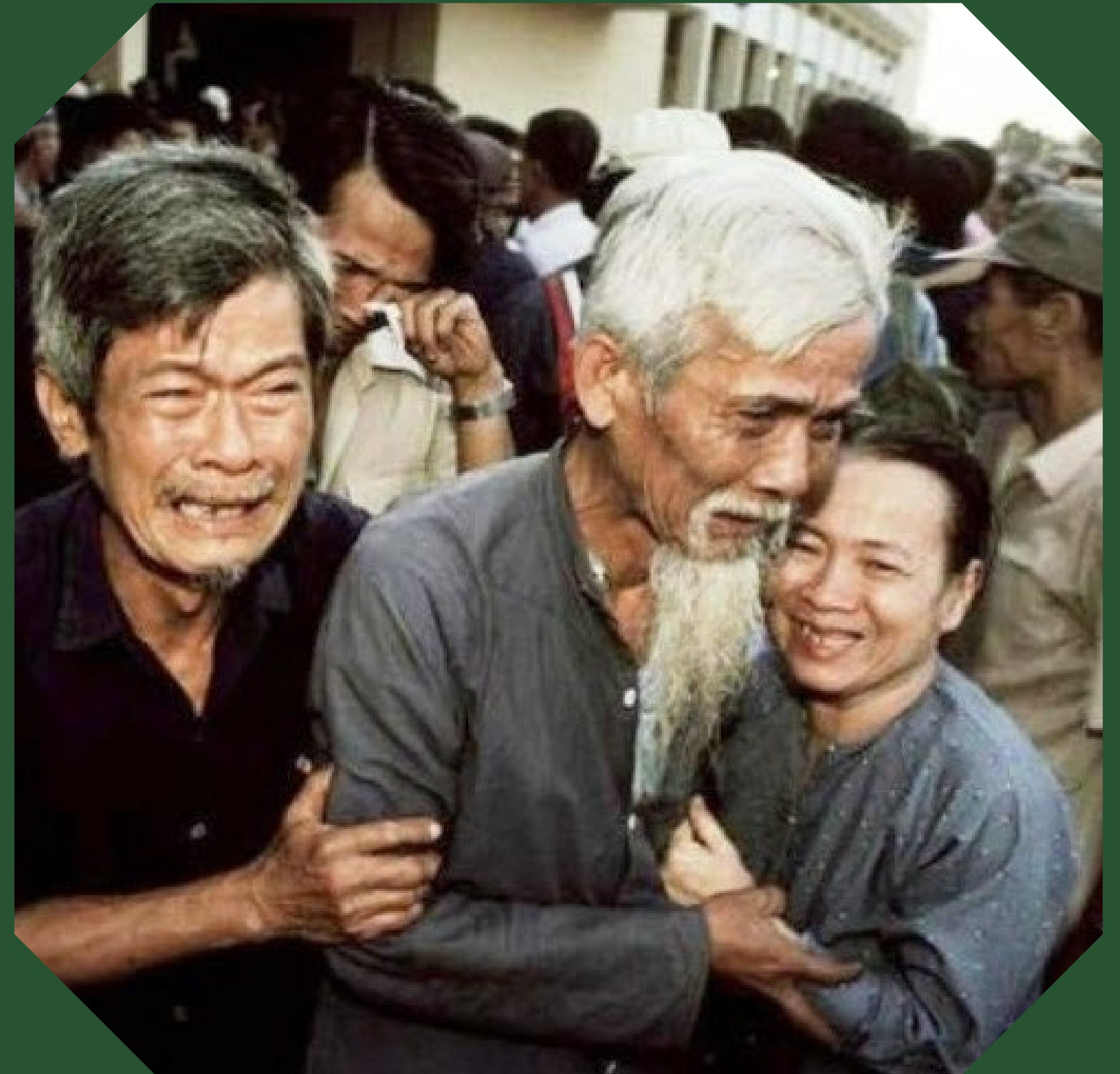
-- Low -ranking officers (e.g., second lieutenant to captain), low -ranking police, and intelligence cadres : Bring enough paper, pens, clothes, mosquito nets, personal effects, food, or money for 10 days from the day of arrival.

•- Higher -ranking officers/officials (majors and above), senior officials, legislators, etc .: Similar items for one month.

****DISCLAIMER: THIS IMAGE IS A RECREATION OF THE NOTICE AS AN EXAMPLE ONLY****

REUNION AFTER RE - EDUCATION

Colonel Nguyễn Công Vĩnh, a former officer of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), reunites with his family after spending years in a communist re-education camp following the fall of Saigon in 1975.



MY RELEASE

Căn cứ quyết định số 10/QĐ ngày 10/12/1981 của Bộ Nội Vụ
 phân bổ hạn quân chế đối với anh Nguyễn Đình Cử là 12 tháng
 và phải 6 tháng nữa đã ghi trong giấy ra trại do trại Xuyên Mỗ
 Ngày 4 tháng 4 năm 1982
 TL. BỘ Trưởng BỘ NỘI VỤ
 (đã ký và đóng dấu)
 Số 490/CAQ4
 Đăng ký tại CA Q4 ngày 3/8/82
 (đã ký)
 HẠN KẾT QUẢ THỰC HIỆN

BỘ NỘI VỤ
 TRẠI CẢI TẠO MỘC
 SỐ: 2012/01
 (43)

CỘNG HÒA XÃ HỘI CHỦ NGHĨA VIỆT NAM
 ĐỘC LẬP - TỰ DO - HẠNH PHÚC 21/12/

LẤY RA TRẠI

Theo Thông tư số 966-HĐA/TT ngày 31/5/1961 của Bộ Nội vụ
 Tại hành quyết định của số 101 ngày 10/12/1981 của Bộ Nội
 vụ. Nay cấp giấy cho anh ở tên sau đây :

Họ và tên: NGUYỄN DINH CỬ
 Sinh ngày: 13/4/1949
 Nơi sinh: Thủ Đức, Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh
 Nơi đăng ký trước khi bị bắt: 69/8 Nguyễn Tất Thành Quận 4
 TP. Hồ Chí Minh.

Căn cứ: Quyết định của Thủ tướng Tôn Cảnh Hiến
 28/6/1975 của Bộ Nội vụ
 Theo Quyết định số 148 ngày 22/8/1978 của Bộ Nội vụ
 Về cư trú tại Trú quán trên - Quán số 06 tháng

HẠN XÉT QUÁ TRÌNH CẢI TẠO

Từ trước vào đến nay, anh đã được hưởng lương, tổ ra an tâm, chịu cải tạo để trở thành
 lao động lương thiện. Trong lao động có nhiều cố gắng, anh
 đã hoàn thành các tiêu mức khoán của bộ gia, học tập chăm
 chỉ tham gia đầy đủ, ý thức thái độ học tập, được chấp hành
 nội quy kỷ luật của trại rất nghiêm chỉnh, cải tạo năng lực
 đạt trung bình.

Để người chấp quản địa phương giúp đỡ thêm.
 Ngày 19/12/1981
 Giám - Trại
 (Đã ký và đóng dấu)

Họ tên thủ ký
 người được cấp giấy
 (Đã ký)
 Nguyễn Đình Cử
 CHỨNG NHẬN
 Giám đốc trại cải tạo 8/5 xuất trình
 Ngày 09 tháng 03 năm 1983
 T.Ư.UBND. F. 13

Trung Tá : VÕ CẨM

Nguyễn Thị Tuyết



FAMILY REUNITED



THE FIVE ARVN GENERALS



LÊ VĂN HƯNG

Known as the “Hero of An Lộc.” He defended An Lộc during the 1972 Easter Offensive and died by suicide on 30 April 1975 in Cần Thơ.



NGUYỄN KHOA NAM

Commander of IV Corps. He refused evacuation and died by suicide on 1 May 1975 in Cần Thơ.



TRẦN VĂN HAI

Commander of the 7th Division. He died by suicide on 30 April 1975 after refusing to surrender.



PHẠM VĂN PHÚ

Commander of II Corps during the Central Highlands campaign. He died by suicide shortly after the fall of Saigon.



LÊ NGUYÊN VỸ

Commander of the 5th Division. He died by suicide at Lai Khê on 30 April 1975 rather than surrender.



**THANK
YOU**