

Tim Tran Questions for the Media

1. Tell us about your experience when you first stepped onto American soil to attend college in 1970. What was your first impression of the culture, and was it a lasting one?

I was totally overwhelmed when I first stepped onto American soil to attend college in 1970. Looking out the window of the bus that took us from Honolulu International Airport to East West Center of the University of Hawaii, I was amazed at the busy but smooth automobile traffic, the clean streets, and the nice homes with green lawns. When we arrived at the University of Hawaii, the first thing I noticed was how beautiful the campus was, with a lot of colorful flowers, the very modern dormitory and, especially, the very friendly American students who always said “hello” with smiles. That was my first and lasting impression of America.

2. Why did you return to Vietnam in 1974, and how aware were you of the political climate in your homeland at that time?

One of the conditions of receiving USAID scholarship was that I had to return to South Vietnam after graduation: its “one degree, no exception” policy. Some students fled to Canada, some stayed illegally in the United States, but those were not my choices. I watched the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite every evening and was very aware of the political climate in South Vietnam at that time. By 1972, the Nixon administration had reduced the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam from a peak of over 500,000 to 69,000. In 1973, The U.S. and North Vietnam signed the Paris Peace Accords, calling for American troops to depart South Vietnam but allowing North Vietnam’s troop to remain in the South. After that, U.S. military aid to South Vietnam was reduced substantially, making it very difficult for South Vietnam troops to fight the ever-stronger North Vietnamese forces with full military aid from the USSR and China. I understood that the future of South Vietnam in 1974 looked bleak, but I held on to the hope that American administration(s) would never abandon South Vietnam, and North Vietnam would not violate the Paris Peace Accords. Three months after my return to Saigon in September 1974, events proved that I was wrong on both counts.

3. What effect did the anti-war movement in the states have on you?

The anti-war movement in the states had a huge impact on me. In my mind, the U.S. was helping the people of South Vietnam fighting against Communist aggression to defend their freedom. But the vast majority of my fellow American students (except for a few conservative “young Republicans”) had already made up their minds and protested against the war. Furthermore, since my arrival in the U.S. in 1970, some events such as the May 1970 shooting of students at Kent State University, the introduction of the draft lottery, and the 1971 publication of the Pentagon Papers only made the anti-war movement stronger.

4. Like hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese refugees, you fled by boat in 1979, risking your life and the life of loved ones. Speak to us about that event.

By 1976, a year after the Communist victory, it was clear that I had no future in Vietnam. My American education and my degree from Cal Berkeley was not an asset but a very dangerous liability. I was suspected of being a CIA agent, and I was fired from my job at the nationalized Shell Vietnam. My life in South Vietnam had become more difficult and dangerous. I had no choice but to escape. On the one hand, the escape attempt was fraught with dangers: if I were caught, I would be imprisoned; furthermore, the danger of going across the ocean in a rickety, overcrowded boat included starvation and death. I also knew the reward I would get if I succeeded: building a new life, achieving professional success with my college education, and living in freedom. With these considerations in mind, I accepted the risks, looked forward to the rewards, and told myself, “I must get the hell out of here.”

5. During one of your aborted attempts to escape, your father was murdered in the Saigon River, and his body was never discovered. What do you suppose happened?

Whenever I think about the murder of my father, it brings back to me a tremendous sadness about the worst period of my entire life. I thought it was Song who murdered my father with a knife and disposed of his body in the river. The body of my father sank to the bottom of the Saigon River. The police refused my request to launch a search for his body. What finally happened to my father’s body is known to no one but God.

6. You made it to Malaysia and ended up in the Pulau Bidong refugee camp off the coast. What were the conditions of the camp and how did you make ends meet?

By the time I reached the Pulau Bidong refugee camp, its population was approaching 40,000 people. Pulau Bidong, a three-hour boat trip from the mainland, was an inhabited island until it was used to keep the refugees since mid-1978.

The refugees received their rationed drinking water and food from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees by boat. Food consisted of canned food, but there was some occasional serious food shortage. The refugees lived in a very congested cluster of rickety huts made from salvaged timbers from wrecked boats and trees cut down on the mountain slopes. Most of the structures had very little sidings patched from low grade rice or sugar bags, and the roof was covered with blue tarps or plastics. These structures were no match for the heavy rains, especially during the monsoon season.

There were no latrines or sanitation. People simply disappeared into the wooded mountainside or waited for night fall to relieve themselves on the beach.

Fortunately, the refugee population was well-organized under “quasi-governmental committees”. There were a lot of medical doctors among the refugees, but pharmaceutical drugs and medical supplies were grossly lacking. Fortunately, the Doctors without Borders organization (Medecins Sans Frontieres) sent the ship L’Ille de Lumiere (The Island of Light) to provide some badly needed medical aid to the refugees.

7. When you made it to America for the second time, you had nothing but a few belongings in a small sack. One of them was a portable stove that you used to make tea. Where did you get the stove and what was its significance to you?

My next “hut” neighbor on Pulau Bidong was an ethnic Chinese Vietnamese named Tam Map, which literally means “Big Fat Eight,” who was very talented with his hands.

Using the discarded tin cans from the UNHCR food supply, Tam Map made a small stove and used the oil that came with the sardine cans for fuel. Tam Map asked me to teach English to his young son and daughter, and he returned the favor by inviting me to have tea with him most mornings. He would carefully boil the water, add the tea leaves, and brew one cup at a time. As the perfect host, he always insisted that I drank the first cup.

On his last morning on the island, before leaving for re-settlement in Holland, we drank tea together as we had every day. Then he handed me the stove, the leftover tea leaves, and said, "I won't need this in Holland, but you'll need this here. Why don't you keep it?"

Whenever I look at this stove, it reminds me of our friendship and the quiet moments we savored every morning in the refugee camp.

8. Back in the US, you immediately got to work job hunting and landed a low-level accounting position with Johnstone Supply where you worked your way up the ladder, eventually becoming Chief Financial Officer. What do you attribute to your success?
There were a number of factors that attributed to my success. First of all, although I had a very good education at Berkeley and very good management training at Shell, I always improved my professional knowledge through readings, seminars, and college courses. Secondly, I possessed good work ethics: I was willing to put in the required time and the effort to get the job done right. Thirdly, I tried to be intellectually honest: if I didn't know the answers, I just said so and asked for some time to research. I was never comfortable providing a wild guess! Last but not least, I enjoyed connecting with all kinds of co-workers and did my best to fit in.

9. When did you become a naturalized American citizen, and what do you remember most about the ceremony?

On a bright morning in May 1986, dressed in my best dark suit, I went to the Federal Courthouse in Portland, Oregon, for the naturalization ceremony. Upon checking in, I was given a welcome package, which included an American flag. When the ceremony started, we listened to a welcome speech from the presiding judge, who also gave a short talk about the responsibility of US citizenship. Then came the time to stand, raise my right hand, and recite the Oath of Allegiance. The ceremony ended with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, closing comment from the judge, and the singing of the national anthem. Finally, I was handed a Certificate of Naturalization. Exiting the building, I felt the ceremony was an inspiring, moving, joyous, and solemn experience all at once. And unlike Philip Nolan, I was no longer "a man without a country"

10. *American Dreamer* is a powerful testament to your hard work and perseverance.

What do you want readers to take away from your memoir?

I would like the readers to appreciate that “the American Dream is alive and well” and with hard work and some luck “America is truly the land of opportunity.”

11. What would surprise most people to learn about you?

Due to my diminutive size, my accent, and possibly my minority status, people who don't know me tend to underestimate me. They may think I am naïve, weak, or uninformed.

Once we work together for some time, they realize that I am intelligent, well-prepared, hard-working, and funny. They are also surprised to learn that I graduated from one of the most prestigious universities in the US, worked for a big international company, survived the treacherous boat trip as a boat person, and was featured on the cover of a professional magazine and much more. Recently, a lot of my friends were surprised when they read the article in the Oregonian (Oct 22, 2017) describing me as “he worked his way from penniless refugee to successful businessman to university benefactor.” Most of my friends know some parts of my life, but not all.