

## Việt Nam vinh danh thâm lặng người gián điệp toàn hảo

Lê Dân, phóng viên đài RFA

Phạm Xuân Ân là cái tên Việt Nam trong những năm gần đây xuất hiện trên rất nhiều sách báo nước ngoài. Lễ tang ông vừa diễn ra tại Sài Gòn, trang nghiêm với đầy đủ lễ nghi quân cách nhưng được mô tả là "thâm lặng".



Hình bìa cuốn sách "Un Vietnamien Bien Tranquille".

Lý do không hẳn là vì tính đặc thù của nghề tình báo, mà dư luận quốc tế cho rằng Hà Nội không muốn mẫu người như ông được nhân rộng ra. Tổng hợp một số thông tin liên quan, Lê Dân phác họa sự việc như sau.

Hồi đầu năm nay, nhà xuất bản Editions des Equateurs của Pháp ấn hành cuốn "Un Vietnamien Bien Tranquille", xin tạm dịch là "Một người Việt Nam Trầm Lặng" của ký giả Jean-Paul Pomonti, nhà báo kỳ cựu của nhật báo Le Monde và thông tin viên của tờ này thời chiến tranh Việt Nam.

Trước đó, tên Phạm Xuân Ân đã xuất hiện nhiều lần trên các cuốn sách của David Butler, của Stanley Karnow, của David Halberstam, và nhiều người nữa. Phần lớn họ là những người từng quen biết, làm việc với ông trong nhiều năm trời tại Sài Gòn vào lúc lửa đạn triền miên.

### Ngạc nhiên

Hầu hết đều ngạc nhiên, có người không tin, vào khoảng 3 năm sau ngày chiến tranh chấm dứt, tức khoảng 1978, có những tin đồn nói rằng ký giả Phạm Xuân Ân của báo Time suốt 11 năm, là gián điệp cho Mặt trận Giải phóng Miền Nam và cho Hà Nội.

Nguồn tin đó có lẽ phát xuất cùng sự ra đời của Viện Bảo tàng Cách mạng ở đường Võ văn Tần Sài Gòn, tức đường Trần Quý Cáp cũ. Nơi đó trưng bày chiếc xe Renault 4 cũ kỹ với ghi chú là chiếc xe chở cấp chỉ huy Việt Cộng đi thị sát Sài Gòn sau Tết Mậu Thân. Đó là chiếc xe của ký giả Phạm Xuân Ân.



Ký giả Dan Southerland đang giúp di tản những thường dân Sài Gòn

bị thương sau đợt tấn công của Việt Cộng năm 1968. Photo courtesy Dan Southerland.

Các nhà báo trong và ngoài nước thời chiến tranh Việt Nam hầu như

không một ai tin là ký giả Phạm Xuân Ẩn là gián điệp. Anh Nam Nguyên của ban Việt ngữ đài Á châu Tự do, vốn là một ký giả thời đó, kể lại:

*“Trước năm 1975, tôi làm phóng viên ở đài phát thanh Sài Gòn. Những năm ấy giới nhà báo thường có dịp gặp mặt ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn, hoặc là trong các cuộc họp báo, ở các biến cố, hay là những lần họ đi công tác.*

*Tôi nghĩ nhiều người khác cũng như tôi là không thể ngờ rằng ông Ẩn là một điệp viên của Hà Nội, một điệp viên hoàn hảo trong vai trò của mình trong suốt thời gian chiến tranh. Mãi sau này khi hồ sơ của ông được công bố thì chúng tôi hết sức là kinh ngạc.”* Khi những bức hình về chiếc xe Renault 4 trưng bày ở Viện Bảo tàng Cách mạng ra tới nước ngoài và có người ký giả ngoại quốc nhận ra chiếc xe quen và nêu vấn đề, ông Ẩn mới thừa nhận công tác bí mật mà ông đã thực hiện suốt 20 năm. Lúc đó ông mang quân hàm đại tá tình báo và đã được Hà Nội phong danh hiệu Anh hùng Quân đội từ năm 1976.

### **Bị ngờ vực**

Dù vậy, những năm sau 1975, ông bị Hà Nội ngờ vực do hành động và những mối quan hệ của ông, như cố tìm cách cho bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyền, cựu giám đốc Nha Nghiên cứu Chính trị-Xã hội thời chính phủ Ngô Đình Diệm, đáp chuyến trực thăng chót của Hoa Kỳ rời khỏi Việt Nam, như lời kể lại của ký giả Dan Southerland, là người mà ông Ẩn nhờ nói dùm với sứ quán Hoa Kỳ vào ngày 29 tháng Tư.

Lý do ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn vào giờ chiến thắng lại cố trợ giúp một người chống cộng nhiệt thành, một người mang lý tưởng mà ông Ẩn đã suốt đời chống lại, vẫn còn là một ẩn số vào khi cả hai người trong cuộc là bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyền và bản thân ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn đều đã ra đi.

Lại còn trường hợp những người thân tình mà ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn vẫn lui tới viếng thăm sau ngày 30 tháng Tư, ngay như ông chú ruột của ông Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, vốn là một bác sĩ thú y sống ở Thủ Đức và một số người khác nữa.....



Tang lễ của ký giả-thiếu tướng tình báo Phạm Xuân Ẩn hôm 23-9-2006. AFP PHOTO

Tính nhân nghĩa đó của ông Ẩn bị Hà Nội ngờ vực. Nhiều năm sau này, khi gặp lại được một số ký giả ngoại quốc thân thiết, ông tiết lộ là phải ra Bắc "cải tạo tư tưởng" cả năm trời, mục đích là để "tẩy xóa hết những tàn dư Mỹ-Ngụy" mà Hà Nội cho là ông có thể đã bị tiêm nhiễm trong bao nhiêu năm làm việc đơn tuyến.

### **“Vỡ mộng”**

Những cái bị xem là "tàn dư" đó, có lẽ chỉ là những nhận xét của riêng ông về những gì thật sự xảy ra sau ngày 30 tháng Tư năm 1975. Từng tuyên bố với nhiều nhà báo, học giả nước ngoài đến thăm ông trong thập niên 80 trở về sau, là lúc ông đã được quản chế rộng rãi hơn, ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn khẳng định rằng ông toàn tâm, toàn ý chiến đấu cho nền độc lập dân tộc và sự bình đẳng xã hội.

Ngày chiến tranh kết thúc, có thể xem là ngày cuộc chiến đấu của ông thành tựu. Thế nhưng mục tiêu chiến đấu có thành đạt hay không, thì lại là chuyện khác.

Trong cuộc gặp gỡ tại nhà riêng của ông Ẩn ở đường Lý Chính Thắng quận 3 Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh hồi năm ngoái cùng 2 nhà báo ngoại quốc khác, ký giả Dan Southerland đã hỏi ông về việc có nghe nói là ông "vỡ mộng" vì những kẻ chiến thắng tỏ ra không tử tế hơn những kẻ bị họ đánh đuổi, ông Ẩn đã xác nhận không chút e dè.

Tính nhân nghĩa, lòng ái quốc và tính thẳng thắn đã tạo cho ông cả năm trời phải cải tạo tư tưởng ngoài Bắc vào năm 1979, mấy năm quản chế ngặt nghèo ở trong Nam, đơn xin chiếu khán xuất cảnh để thuyết trình trước hội nghị quốc tế tại New York hồi năm 1997 về chiến tranh Việt Nam bị Hà Nội từ chối. Mãi mãi, có lẽ ông vẫn là một con người hoàn toàn độc lập, như lời nhận xét của bạn thân giao, ký giả Jean-Claude Pomonti của tờ báo Pháp Le Monde.

## Tại sao ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn giúp Bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyển rời khỏi VN?



Vào khi ký giả-thiếu tướng tình báo Phạm Xuân Ẩn qua đời tại Sài Gòn, dư luận báo chí nước ngoài lại sôi động lên, bàn về tác động của báo chí trong thời chiến tranh Việt Nam.

Ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn tại Sài Gòn năm 2005.

Photo: Dan Southerland © RFA

Để tìm hiểu thêm về một cuộc đời sống và làm việc khá hi hữu của ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn, Lê Dân trao đổi với một ký giả Mỹ từng làm việc tại Việt Nam trong nhiều năm, đó là ông Dan Southerland, hiện là Phó tổng giám đốc đặc trách chương trình của đài Á châu Tự do.

### Người bạn ký giả

Thật ra từ sau ngày ông Southerland viếng thăm Việt Nam lần thứ nhì hồi năm ngoái và trở về Mỹ, ông đã khoe chúng tôi một bức ảnh và đố cho tôi đoán là ai.

Chúng tôi nhận ra đó là hình ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn nhờ đã thấy trên báo chí. Ông Southerland cho biết lần này ông mới được gặp lại người bạn cùng nghề sau bao nhiêu năm xa cách.

*“Lần thứ nhì tôi mới gặp được ông vào tháng Tư năm ngoái, nhân kỷ niệm 30 năm ngày Sài Gòn sụp đổ. Tôi gặp ông Ẩn do một người bạn Mỹ dàn xếp. Tôi tin là ông Ẩn có báo cáo với ai đó, nhưng cuộc nói chuyện diễn ra tự do, không có sự hiện diện của ai khác. Dù ông bệnh, nhưng minh mẫn. Chúng tôi đã trò chuyện trong vài giờ đồng hồ, và tôi tin rằng tôi là nhà báo phương Tây cuối cùng gặp ông.”*



Ký giả Dan Southerland khi còn tại Việt Nam trong những năm 1970.

Photo courtesy Dan Southerland.

Ngay sau khi ông Dan Southerland trở về Hoa Kỳ, dù đề nghị nhiều lần, ông không đồng ý cho chúng tôi phỏng vấn về cuộc gặp gỡ ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn, cho đến ngày hôm nay, khi ông Ẩn đã qua đời. Có thể do ông cẩn trọng không muốn những lời nói của mình gây thêm khó khăn cho người bạn ký giả-gián điệp đã không còn được tin dùng, dù Hà Nội vẫn ca ngợi, đánh bóng công trạng của ông Ẩn.

Ông Southerland kể lại những ngày mới biết ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn. *“Tôi không nhớ rõ ngày nào, nhưng biết đó là vào khoảng thập niên 60, khi ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn cộng tác với tờ báo Christian Science Monitor và tôi làm việc cho hãng thông tấn United Press International.*

*Đến thập niên 70 thì tôi qua làm cho tờ Christian Science Monitor, nhờ đó mà tôi được biết ông ta khá rõ. Tôi thường nghe ông trình bày về những gì đang xảy ra, nhận xét của ông và ông tỏ ra khá am hiểu về sức mạnh của quân đội miền Nam, của quân đội Hoa Kỳ và phía Bắc Việt. Ông ta có vẻ là một nhà phân tích thông minh.”*

## **Nhà phân tích tài ba**

**Lê Dân:** Học giả Thomas Bass sau cuộc phỏng vấn ông Phạm Xuân Ân hồi năm ngoái nói ông Ân khoe là ông Hồ Chí Minh và tướng Võ Nguyên Giáp nói nhờ báo cáo của ông mà Hà Nội như có mặt tại phòng Chiến tranh của Lầu Năm Góc. Ông nghĩ sao về việc đó?

**Ông Dan Southerland:** *Đúng, về một nghĩa nào đó thì đúng. Ít nhất là ông ta có thể cung cấp thông tin cho Hà Nội về một số việc, chẳng hạn như cách suy nghĩ, lý luận của người Mỹ. Đó là khả năng lớn nhất của ông Ân. Ông ta có thể cảm nhận sự thật.*

*Nhiều người Việt Nam tôi biết, người phía Nam Việt Nam, rất thông minh, rất luận lý, thường cho là nước Mỹ rất hùng mạnh có thể làm tất cả mọi sự. Nếu Mỹ muốn chiến thắng thì họ đã có thể thắng ngay lập tức.*



*Ông Ân lại có một cái nhìn rõ nét hơn về những điểm yếu của phía Hoa Kỳ, về hệ thống hoạt động, về mối tương quan kiểm tra chéo nhưng hữu hiệu giữa Hành pháp và Lập pháp. Kiến thức đó dĩ nhiên là giúp ích Hà Nội rất nhiều, vốn không có chuyên viên đầy đủ kiến thức về đối phương như ông Ân.*

Ký giả-thiếu tướng tình báo Phạm Xuân Ân. AFP PHOTO

## **Giúp đỡ bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyến**

Về những năm tháng ông Phạm Xuân Ân hoạt động đơn tuyến ngay tại Sài Gòn cho tới ngày 30 tháng Tư năm 1975, điều gây nhiều tranh luận và có thể đã khiến ông bị Hà Nội ngờ vực về sau là ông đã góp phần giúp đỡ một số người.

Trong đó có ký giả Robert Sam Anson, đồng nghiệp ở tuần báo Time, mà ông Ân đã vận động để Mặt trận Giải phóng và phe Khmer Đỏ trả tự do khi ký giả này bị họ bắt bên Kampuchia. Hoặc trường hợp bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyến, nguyên giám đốc Sở Nghiên cứu Chính trị thời đệ nhất Cộng hòa.

Khi được hỏi về chuyện này ký giả Southerland xác nhận ông chính là người mà ông Phạm Xuân Ân nhờ giúp tìm cách đưa bác sĩ Tuyến rời Việt Nam vào ngày 29 tháng Tư năm 1975:

*“Đêm 29 tháng Tư ngay trước khi các trực thăng chuẩn bị rời Việt Nam, tôi đang gọi các trụ sở truyền thông nước ngoài ở Sài Gòn. Tôi gọi tuần báo Time, biết ông ta còn đó dù đã gởi vợ con di tản.*

*Ông ta nói có một vấn đề hệ trọng là cần tìm ra cách nào cho bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyến ra đi. Tôi sau khi liên hệ với một giới chức cao cấp của tòa đại sứ Mỹ và được bảo là nói cho ông Tuyến hay rằng có thể đến số 22 đường Gia Long, là nơi bác sĩ Tuyến sẽ gặp một số quan chức miền Nam Việt Nam như tướng Trần Văn Đôn và một số người khác, để được máy bay trực thăng bốc đi khỏi Sài Gòn.”*

Về việc tại sao nguyên ký giả-đại tá tình báo cộng sản Phạm Xuân Ẩn vào giờ chót lại cố hết sức để giúp nguyên giám đốc phản gián Trần Kim Tuyền của chế độ cộng hòa, là một sự kiện hiếm có. Ký giả Southerland hồi tưởng :

*“Ông ta đã giúp người vốn chống cộng cuồng nhiệt. Tôi muốn nói là ông Ẩn đã giúp một người có lý tưởng mà ông Ẩn đã hoạt động gần hết đời để chống lại nó.”*

### **Chỉ thuần về ân nghĩa**

Ký giả Dan Southerland giải thích lý do sâu xa là khi ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn đi học báo chí ở Hoa Kỳ trở về Việt Nam năm 1959 trong một tâm trạng hết sức lo lắng vì người chỉ huy trực tiếp của ông đã bị chính quyền bắt.

Ông Ẩn lại có một cái nhìn rõ nét hơn về những điểm yếu của phía Hoa Kỳ, về hệ thống hoạt động, về mối tương quan kiểm tra chòng chéo nhưng hữu hiệu giữa Hành pháp và Lập pháp. Kiến thức đó dĩ nhiên là giúp ích Hà Nội rất nhiều, vốn không có chuyên viên đầy đủ kiến thức về đối phương như ông Ẩn.

Thời gian trước và sau năm 1960, chính phủ ông Ngô Đình Diệm truy quét hầu hết các phần tử Việt minh cài lại miền Nam. Ông Ẩn đã trốn trong nhà cả tháng trời và sau đó nhờ mối quan hệ gia đình, bắt liên lạc được với bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyền, lúc đó đang là giám đốc Sở Nghiên cứu Chính trị của chính phủ ông Diệm, tức là cơ quan mật vụ của chế độ, có trụ sở ngay dinh Độc Lập.

Nhờ mới du học về báo chí ở Hoa Kỳ về, ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn được bác sĩ Tuyền bố trí phụ trách các ký giả nước ngoài làm việc cho Việt Nam Thông Tấn Xã. Nhờ vô bọc này và nhiệm vụ phù hợp, ông Ẩn dần dần xây dựng niềm tin và phát triển hoạt động, chuyển qua làm việc cho hãng thông tấn Reuters, nhật báo The Christian Science Monitor và rồi tuần san Time.

Sau đó, vào đầu thập niên 60, ông Ngô Đình Nhu ngờ vực bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyền nghiêng về phe đảo chính nhưng không có bằng cứ xác đáng, điều ông Tuyền sang làm Tổng lãnh sự Việt Nam tại thủ đô Cairo của Ai Cập.

Sau khi ông Ngô Đình Diệm bị lật đổ, bác sĩ Tuyền trở về Sài Gòn và nối lại mối liên lạc với ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn và trở thành bạn thân thiết với nhau, vô tình cung cấp cho ông Ẩn nhiều thông tin quý báu về các nhân vật miền Nam và những dự án của Mỹ trước kia.

Do đó có thể kết luận việc ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn hết sức giúp bác sĩ Trần Kim Tuyền ra khỏi Việt Nam là chỉ thuần về ân nghĩa và tình bằng hữu, mà chuyện này có thể đã khiến ông Ẩn mất sự tin cậy của Hà Nội.

Bản tin của AFP hôm sau khi ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn qua đời, viết rằng khi Sài Gòn rơi vào tay cộng sản năm 1975, Hà Nội thoát tiên đã định đưa ông tham gia cùng những nhân vật nằm vùng chưa bị lộ diện chạy sang Hoa Kỳ tỵ nạn để tiếp tục hoạt động. Nhưng rồi họ đổi ý, ngờ rằng lập trường ông đã có thay đổi.

### **Thất vọng và bất mãn**

Về những năm sau ngày 30 tháng Tư, khi ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn sống trong cảnh hưu trí tại một biệt thự ở quận Ba, ông đã cay đắng đưa ra nhận xét rằng những người chiến thắng đã không hành xử đúng mức theo như ông nghĩ. Ký giả kỳ cựu Dan Southerland hồi năm ngoái đã hỏi và được xác nhận.

*“Vâng, tôi nói với ông Ẩn rằng tôi nghe nói là ông rất bất bình vì những người ngoài Bắc vào đã chiếm vài ngôi nhà, địa ốc tốt nhất ở Sài Gòn lúc đó, và họ còn tham nhũng hơn các quan chức chế độ cũ.*

*Ông Ẩn trả lời rằng điều tôi nghe là đúng, họ tham nhũng tệ hại hơn nhiều lắm, ông vỡ mộng vì đã hỗ trợ họ hết sức mình, để rồi họ hành xử không xứng đáng khi chiến thắng.”*

Năm ngoái, tạp chí The New Yorker ấn hành một bản tiểu sử ông Phạm Xuân Ẩn dài tới 10 ngàn chữ, nhắc tới cảm nhận của ông về lý tưởng đã suốt đời theo đuổi để rồi bị phản bội khi thành công.

Trong bản tiểu sử dù nhận là không còn khỏe nữa, ông tự khẳng định là chưa thể chết được. Lý do : Không có chỗ nào giành cho ông cả. Địa ngục chỉ dành cho những tên bọm bãi, mà Việt Nam đang còn quá nhiều, nên chật chỗ rồi.

## Un Vietnamien bien tranquille

JEAN-CLAUDE POMONTI

*Un Vietnamien bien tranquille* dresse le portrait très vivant et attachant de Pham Xuân An, qui a été à Saïgon le correspondant au-dessus de tout soupçon de l'agence de presse Reuters, puis du magazine américain *Time* dans les années 1960 et 1970, du temps du régime pro-américain. Pourtant, à l'étonnement de tous, quelques années après la fin de la guerre du Vietnam, ce journaliste bien informé et très écouté, qui avait ses entrées à l'ambassade des Etats-Unis et auprès des dirigeants de la Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), s'est avéré avoir été l'un des principaux espions de l'état-major vietminh. A travers la carrière de cet homme âgé aujourd'hui de 79 ans, Jean-Claude Pomonti, correspondant du quotidien *Le Monde* à cette époque, retrace en filigrane l'histoire de la deuxième guerre d'Indochine et des années souvent difficiles qui ont suivi. Enjeux politiques, guerres de renseignement, ce livre se laisse aussi parcourir comme une chronique baignée de l'ambiance de la fin du Saïgon colonial, et il est traversé par des anecdotes dont les protagonistes sont le président Ngô Dinh Diêm, l'empereur Bao Dai, ou le général Vo Nguyễn Giáp.

## Death of a Super Spy

To the North Vietnamese communists, super-spy Pham Xuan An was a patriot and a hero. To many South Vietnamese, he was a traitor.

Following a long battle with emphysema, An died on Sept. 18 at the age of 79 in a military hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon.

An was given full honors at a funeral on Sept. 23. He had been granted the title of Hero of the People's Armed Forces and retired with the rank of major general.

The death of Pham Xuan An, a Viet Cong spy who worked for *Time* magazine and other U.S. news organizations during the Vietnam War, will surely stir new debate over the role of the media in that conflict.

Some contend that An was an agent of influence, using his wide contacts with the Western media to sow disinformation and doubt about the value of supporting a "corrupt" South Vietnamese regime. An himself said his role consisted only of gathering strategic intelligence and assessing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the combatants. He often said that peddling false information to the Western press would have exposed him.

Bruce Palling, writing for *The Independent* of London says An should rightly be viewed as one of the greatest spies of the 20th century.

Nearly everyone agrees that An was well connected with both U.S. and South Vietnamese officials, military officers, and intelligence agents. He had a dry, caustic sense of humor and a seemingly laid-back, unhurried style that he could use to draw all sorts of people into lengthy conversation.

An's name means "hidden" in Vietnamese.

## Learned from Americans

Larry Berman, a professor of political science at the University of California in Davis, is close to completing a book about An based on more than 100 interviews with An in Ho Chi Minh City. He says An picked up many of his skills while studying at Orange Coast College (OCC) in Costa Mesa, California.

“He learned from the Americans how to be a schmoozer,” says Berman. “He had great wit. He was always joking around. . . . But he also had a photographic mind.”

An was in many ways the perfect spy. He led a modest but bourgeois lifestyle. He enjoyed songbirds and gambled on fighting cocks. He loved dogs, especially the big German shepherd that kept him company at the time.

He would sit for hours chain-smoking American cigarettes and trading stories with other South Vietnamese journalists at Givral’s coffee shop in the center of Saigon.

He adopted several humorous titles for himself, such as “General Givral.”

But we now know that he turned to deadly serious work at night, photocopying documents, typing up reports, and hiding film inside grilled pork wrapped in rice paper.

### **Disillusioned after Communist takeover**

An quickly became disillusioned with the Vietnamese communists once they took power. In answer to a question last year from three journalists, including an editor from RFA, he said that the communists had become “much more corrupt” than the leaders of the old South Vietnamese regime.

In the end, the new regime distrusted An. In 1979, they sent him to Hanoi for a year of “reeducation.”

Then they kept him under virtual house arrest for several years. They barred him from traveling abroad, refusing to give him a exit visa for a conference on Vietnam in New York.

The regime appears to have regarded An with suspicion because he was close to many Americans and because he helped a number of South Vietnamese former officials and others escape from Saigon just before the city fell in 1975.

Most prominent among those rescued by An was Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, former head of an intelligence network in the early 1960s under then South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. An managed to get Tuyen on one of the last U.S. helicopters leaving Saigon before North Vietnamese tanks crashed into the city.

An owed a great deal to the diminutive Tuyen, whom some Americans called “the little doctor.” When An returned to Saigon in 1959 after studying in the United States, the Diem regime was on the offensive against communist agents. Many had been killed.

An used his family connections to secure a job under Tuyen in Diem’s presidential palace. This gave An excellent cover. When Tuyen was ousted for plotting against the Diem regime, An moved on to a job at the Reuters news agency. After Diem was overthrown, Tuyen became a major source of information for An.

### **Assessing the damage**

Bruce Palling, a former Vietnam War correspondent, writes that An deserves high ranking as a spy because he played a crucial role in two turning points in the war – the battle at Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta in 1963 and the 1968 Tet offensive.

An’s analysis of U.S. counter-insurgency strategy and tactics was apparently perceptive enough to help give the Viet Cong confidence that they could take on major South Vietnamese army units for the first time in the early 1960s.

They did just that in January 1963, outside the Mekong Delta hamlet of Ap Bac, 40 miles southwest of Saigon. Three well-prepared Viet Cong companies battered an entire South Vietnamese army division that was supported by artillery and U.S. advisers and helicopters.

In advance of the Tet offensive, An helped to select targets in Saigon for the Viet Cong, driving agents around Saigon in his old Renault car. The car can now be seen at a military museum in Hanoi. The Tet offensive was a military disaster for the Viet Cong but turned into a psychological victory because of its impact on the United States.

But many questions remain.

Was An really one of the greatest spies in world history, as Bruce Palling suggests? Palling qualifies this by acknowledging that it's "tricky ... to attempt to quantify the impact of secret intelligence on the outcome of a prolonged war."

How much damage did An do? No one really knew or knows for sure, except perhaps An himself, a few key agents in the South and An's masters in Hanoi.

And as Larry Berman puts it, even after numerous lengthy conversations with An, An "told me what he wanted to tell me."

*Dan Southerland is Executive Editor at Radio Free Asia. In the 1960s and 1970s he covered the Vietnam War for United Press International and The Christian Science Monitor.*

## **The Perfect Spy**

On April 28 I meet with a man who was one of the top Viet Cong spies during the Vietnam war. I had known Pham Xuan An when he worked as a *Time* magazine correspondent. I learned a year or two after the war that An had had a second job - spying for Hanoi.

At age 78, he's now a retired general in the People's Army.

When I think of An, I always think of the last day of the war, at the end of April 1975, when he told me over the phone that an old source of his and mine, Tran Kim Tuyen, could not find a way to flee the city. Tuyen had been national intelligence chief for South Vietnam in the early 1960s. He would have been in mortal danger had his Communist enemies captured him.

Getting ready for my own departure by helicopter from the U.S. embassy, I was able to reach an American official who could help. He told me where Tuyen could find a helicopter leaving from an apartment building rooftop.

I called An at the *Time* magazine office with that information before the embassy phone system broke down. An rushed Tuyen to the designated address - and to freedom.

In 1982, I was in Saigon for a few days on my way to Cambodia. In those days any reporter passing through Saigon ended up with a Viet Cong "handler." Mine was an old cadre, Phuong Nam. I asked him if I could see An. Phuong Nam told me that he'd check, and then came back with the answer: "He's not seeing foreign visitors."

"He lied to you," An says shortly after I enter his Saigon villa for our first meeting in 30 years. "I did want to see you."

I'm with my son, Matt, and two old Associated Press colleagues.

Educated at a community college in California in the mid-1950s, An was in many ways the perfect spy. At the time most of us knew him, he led a modest but bourgeois lifestyle. He enjoyed song birds and gambled on fighting cocks. He loved dogs, especially the big German Shepherd that kept him company at the time.

Like many other reporters, I used to meet An and other South Vietnamese journalists at Givral's coffee shop near the old Continental Hotel in the center of Saigon. The wiry An chain-smoked American cigarettes. I drank strong black coffee laced with condensed milk.

An seemed to know a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of the American and South Vietnamese military forces. But I can't remember ever pursuing a story based on what he told me. Later,

An told returning reporters that he'd never tried to plant a story on any of them because it would have blown his cover.

What strikes me first about An upon seeing him for the first time in 30 years is how little he seems to have changed.

I had been told that he had emphysema and was in extremely bad health. But he speaks almost effortlessly for two to three hours, pausing only to sip juice brought in by a maid. An oxygen tank sits in the corner of the room, but he doesn't touch it.

An has spoken a number of times since the end of the war of his disillusionment with Vietnam's Communist leaders. In answer to a question, An says that they're "much more corrupt" than the leaders of the old South Vietnamese regime.

I tell him of my impression that the government is following the Chinese model - opening up the economy to foreign investment and private enterprise while tightly controlling dissent. He agrees but argues that they may be making a mistake in adapting aspects of the Chinese banking system. It's burdened with bad loans, he says.

At the end of the war, perhaps in part because he helped a number of anti-Communists like Tran Kim Tuyen to flee the country, An was not entirely trusted by the new regime. He lived under virtual house arrest for a year or so. And because he had been so close to many Americans, he had to take "reeducation classes."

In 1997, the Vietnamese government denied An an exit visa that would have permitted him to appear on a panel in New York City to discuss the legacy of Vietnam.

Meeting a top Viet Cong spy for the first time in 30 years should have meant a chance to gain new insights. But I only come away with more questions.

How much damage did he do? Did people I knew die because of his reports?

We'll never know, because An won't say. Perhaps he himself doesn't even know.

I can only say with certainty that on the last day of the war he helped to save the life of a man who strongly opposed the goals that An secretly worked toward most of his life. I will always remember An for that.

## Vietnam double-agent Pham Xuan An

**By Richard Pyle and Margie Mason, Associated Press Writers | September 20, 2006**

In the history of wartime espionage, few were as successful as An. He straddled two worlds for most of the 15-year war in Indochina as an undercover communist agent while also working as a journalist, first for Reuters news service and later for 10 years as Time magazine's chief Vietnamese reporter -- a role that gave him access to military bases and background briefings.

He was so well-known for his sources and insight that many Americans who knew him suspected he worked for the CIA.

Before Saigon fell to the communists, An worked to help friends escape, including South Vietnam's former security chief who feared death if he was found by northern forces. An later revealed his true identity as a Viet Cong commander, but said he never reported any false information or communist propaganda while in his role as a journalist.

In a 2000 interview with The Associated Press, An said he always had warm feelings for his press colleagues and for the United States, where he attended college at Fullerton, Calif. But deep down he remained a "true believer" in the communist cause as the best way to free Vietnam of foreign control.

"I fought for two things -- independence and social justice," he said.

An's political and military contacts made him an essential source for other Vietnamese reporters working for foreign news organizations. He was known as the soft-spoken, chain-smoking oracle of "Radio Catinat," as the Saigon rumor mill was called.

But few, if any, suspected he was a communist spy.

Former media colleagues expressed mixed feelings, from bemusement to a sense of betrayal, after An revealed in the 1980s that he had been a spy.

Outside critics vilified An for his role in espionage activities that may have led to the deaths of many Americans and South Vietnamese. But most of An's ex-colleagues refrained from criticizing his deception.

"If ever there was a man caught between two worlds, it was An. It is very hard for anyone who did not serve in Vietnam in those years to understand the complexity," said David Halberstam, who covered the early years of the war for The New York Times

Stanley Karnow, a former Time-Life correspondent in Asia and author of the seminal 1983 book, "Vietnam; A History," said that despite his secret role, An was always reliable.

"I was struck by how much he knew and was willing to share," Karnow said. "He said later that his function as a spy was not disinformation, it was to gather the best info he could for them (the Viet Cong)."

An, by his own account, was born near Saigon and at age 16 joined a nationalist movement that later became the communist Viet-Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh.

Following Vietnam's independence in 1954, he served as an aide to Col. Edward Lansdale, the U.S. intelligence officer who played an instrumental role in early U.S. support for the fledgling anti-communist regime in Saigon in the late 1950s. Lansdale was believed to be the model for a main character in Graham Greene's novel, "The Quiet American."

An told ex-colleagues in later years that he made secret trips to the jungle to confer with Viet Cong leaders. He said he knew in advance of major communist initiatives, including the 1968 Tet Offensive and North Vietnam's 1972 invasion aimed at destroying the Saigon regime.

An insisted he remained true as a journalist -- never planting false or misleading information, realizing this could reveal his clandestine role.

"The truth was that I knew many things that I never told anyone," he said. "And because of this I was able on a couple of occasions to save Time from major embarrassment by telling them that a certain piece of important information was not true."

His greatest risk of exposure might have been in secretly arranging freedom for another Time staffer who had been captured by guerrilla forces in Cambodia in 1970.

Just days before Saigon fell in 1975, An helped his family to escape along with some Vietnamese news assistants and the former South Vietnamese security chief. But he stayed behind, and his relatives eventually returned.

An's Western connections caused senior Hanoi officials to distrust him despite his wartime record. They sent him to a postwar "re-education" school, and in 1997 refused him an exit visa to take part in a Vietnam War symposium in Washington, D.C.

He sometimes spoke candidly of being disillusioned with Vietnam's victorious leaders. In a meeting with three former American press colleagues in Ho Chi Minh City in 2005, An described them as "much more corrupt" than the Saigon officials he knew during the war.

At the same time he was made a brigadier general in retirement and a few years ago was promoted to major general.

Given his familiarity with the French, Viet-Minh, Viet Cong, South Vietnamese and American armies, An said in the 2000 interview, "I told them they should make me a five-star general. I don't think they understood my sense of humor."

## **Pham Xuan An, 79; Reporter for Time, Spy for Viet Cong**

By Patricia Sullivan

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, September 21, 2006; B07

Pham Xuan An, 79, the Viet Cong colonel who worked as a reporter for U.S. news organizations during the Vietnam War while also spying for the communists, died of emphysema Sept. 20 in a military hospital in the former Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City.

The secret of Mr. Pham's double life was kept for almost 30 years, from 1959 until the 1980s. He was the first Vietnamese to be a full-time staff correspondent for a major U.S. publication, working primarily for Time magazine.

Although his job as a spy was to uncover and report the plans of the South Vietnamese and U.S. military, he was so good at collecting and analyzing information that he was considered the best

Vietnamese reporter in the press corps. He said he did not lie, tilt the news or spread disinformation in the stories he filed.

"It would have been stupid to do that. He would have been found out in an instant," said Frank McCullough, a retired newspaperman who was Time's bureau chief in Saigon and who hired Mr. Pham. "He used the bureau as a listening post. He was an extremely sophisticated understander of not only Vietnamese culture but its politics."

By night, he photographed intelligence reports that then were smuggled out of Saigon through the Cu Chi tunnel network. He disguised the film canisters as grilled pork wrapped in rice paper, according to one account, or hid them in the bellies of rotting fish. Other times, he wrote his reports in primitive invisible ink made of starch, author Stanley Karnow wrote.

"The most remarkable thing was how he was able to pull it off for such a long time, to be such a successful spy and a good journalist," said Larry Berman, whose biography "Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent" will be published in the spring.

"He never had to steal a document because he was such a professional journalist and professional spy. His closest mentors were [Col. Edward] Lansdale and [later CIA chief] William Colby. People were always showing him things to get his opinion and analysis because he was so smart."

Mr. Pham was able to alert the communist troops to the impending buildup of U.S. troop strength in the mid-1960s, which the Pentagon denied when McCullough tried to report it in Time. Much of what the Viet Cong wanted was what the news media wanted, just in greater detail.

"It was not especially confidential stuff -- the government army's deployments and strength, which commanders were capable or incompetent or corrupt. And there was gossip -- who's sleeping with whose wife or girlfriend," Mr. Pham told Karnow in 1990.

His intelligence was good enough that he was promoted to colonel while working as a reporter. He secretly arranged for the release of reporter Robert Sam Anson, who had been captured by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and he was responsible for getting South Vietnam's former security chief Tram Kim Tuyn on the last U.S. helicopter that left Saigon. His own wife and four children left Vietnam aboard a plane provided by Time. He stayed. "It was the stupidest thing I ever did," he said later.

After the Americans left, Mr. Pham cabled Time's headquarters as its last staffer in Saigon and filed three more stories as the North Vietnamese took over the city. In 1976, the bureau closed and Mr. Pham endured a year of "reeducation" in Hanoi. He was suspected of becoming too close to Americans and was kept under house arrest, barred from seeing returning veterans or reporters. He was still nominally a military intelligence officer.

By 1990, as Vietnam was reopening to Western visitors, Mr. Pham was promoted to major general and was named a Hero of the People's Armed Forces, with four military-exploit medals. Karnow, CBS reporter Morley Safer and others began to report on Mr. Pham's life as an undercover agent, and the New Yorker published a profile of him in 2005.

Born in Hai Duong, Mr. Pham dropped out of high school in 1945 to enlist in the Viet Minh, which fought for Vietnam's independence from France. After a short time, he left for Saigon, where he

organized student demonstrations against the French. The Viet Minh anticipated that the American presence would grow after the French left and decided to train Mr. Pham as a spy. Inducted into the Communist Party in 1953, he volunteered as a press censor at the Saigon post office.

He could not avoid being drafted into the South Vietnamese Army, but using family connections, he got himself assigned to Lansdale, the U.S. colonel who ran the CIA's covert operations in Vietnam, and began to learn spycraft. The Viet Minh raised money to send Mr. Pham to college in the United States, and with the help of a State Department scholarship, he enrolled at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, Calif., and studied journalism for two years.

Mr. Pham worked as an intern at the Sacramento Bee newspaper and then drove cross-country and interned at the United Nations.

Summoned back to Vietnam in 1959, he began working for VTX, the Viet News Agency, and then for Reuters. He became immensely popular with newsmen, often sharing tidbits and explaining relationships while smoking cigarettes at Saigon's street cafes, accompanied by his two German shepherds.

Slender, engaging and at ease with nuances that escaped reporters who did not speak the language, Mr. Pham warned his superiors against launching the Tet Offensive, which they believed would spark a popular uprising, Karnow said. They disregarded his advice, and he helped scout targets for the attack in Saigon. He later counted the dead while driving around the city in his green Renault.

Survivors include his wife, Thu Nanh, and four children.

Mr. Pham never expressed regret about his role, biographer Berman said.

"He didn't believe we belonged in his country. He was a nationalist," Berman said. "He felt this is something the Vietnamese had to settle between themselves. To put it another way, he thought America got in the way of Vietnam's history."

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## Pham Xuan An Dies at 79; Reporter Spied for Hanoi



Pham Xuan An

Reuters, 2002

Pham Xuan An, who led a double life as a trusted reporter for Western news organizations during the Vietnam War while spying for North Vietnam, died Wednesday in Ho Chi Minh City. He was 79. His death, at a military hospital, was reported by his son Pham Xuan Hoang An, who told The Associated Press that Mr. An had emphysema.

As a reporter for Reuters and then for Time magazine, Mr. An covered American and South Vietnamese military and diplomatic events and was one of a handful of reporters admitted to off-the-record briefings by American authorities. Time made him a full staff correspondent, the only Vietnamese to be given that distinction by a major American news organization.

At the same time, however, Mr. An was delivering a steady stream of military documents and reports to North Vietnamese authorities, writing in invisible ink and leaving the material in containers at designated spots around Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City.

It was only after the war that correspondents like Frank McCulloch of Time, David Halberstam of The New York Times and Morley Safer of CBS News learned that their colleague had been a colonel in the North Vietnamese Army.

“He was among the best-connected journalists in the country,” Mr. Safer wrote in “Flashbacks: On Returning to [Vietnam](#)” (Random House, 1990), in which he devoted a chapter to Mr. An. “It was always An who would brief new correspondents; it was An whom even the competition sought when trying to unravel the hopelessly complicated threads of Vietnamese political loyalties.”

Mr. An proved invaluable to his spy masters. “I had access to all the Vietnamese bases and their commanders,” he is quoted as telling Mr. Safer in the book. “My superiors wanted to know the strengths of various units. They wanted estimates of the capabilities of commanders — who was corrupt and who was corruptible. They wanted all the political stuff, the same stuff you guys wanted.”

Mr. An was born on Sept. 12, 1927, outside Saigon. In 1944, when he was 16, he became a courier for the Vietminh, the Communist national liberation movement, which was then fighting the Japanese occupation of Vietnam. After the country was partitioned with the defeat of the French occupation in 1954, Mr. An, then an agent for the Communist government in the North, infiltrated the South Vietnamese Army. His South Vietnamese commanders later assigned him to work with the [Central Intelligence Agency](#), and so he became a double agent.

In 1956, Mr. An received a State Department scholarship to attend Fullerton College in California, where he worked on the school newspaper and as an intern at The Sacramento Bee. A year later, he returned to Saigon to work part time for The Associated Press and then for Reuters. He worked for Time from 1965 to April 1975, when Saigon fell.

In the last days of the war, he persuaded American officials to fly several Vietnamese friends out of the country, saying they would be punished by the Communists if they were left behind. His wife and four children were also taken to the United States, but he remained. His family later returned. In April 1997, Mr. Safer and some former colleagues met at the [Asia Society](#) on Park Avenue in New York to discuss the legacy of Vietnam. Mr. An, by then a retired general, was denied an exit visa by the Vietnamese government.

His former colleagues had conflicting reactions to his dual life.

“He felt it was doing his patriotic duty by being an agent,” Stanley Karnow, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and a reporter for The Washington Post, said at the meeting, “but we were his friends, and he had great admiration for the United States.”

Mr. McCulloch, the Saigon bureau chief for Time during the war, said: "It tore him up. If circumstances had been reversed, if hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese had occupied my land, I probably would have done the same thing."

But Burton [Yale](#) Pines, a Time correspondent during the war, said he was shocked. "Worse," he said, "I am embarrassed that I trusted Mr. An as enormously as I — and my fellow journalists — did." Mr. An had no regrets about his double life during the war. "The truth? Which truth?" he said in his interview with Mr. Safer. "One truth is that for 10 years I was a staff correspondent for Time magazine, and before that Reuters. The other truth is that I joined the movement in 1944 and in one way or another have been part of it ever since. Two truths — both truths are true."

Pham Xuan An, a Vietnamese man who led a perilous double life as communist spy and respected reporter for Western news organizations during the Vietnam War, has died, according to his son, Pham Xuan Hoang An. He was 79.

An suffered from emphysema, and died at a military hospital Wednesday in Ho Chi Minh City, his son said. He had lived in the city, formerly known as Saigon, since South Vietnam fell to North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975.

In the history of wartime espionage, few have been as successful as An. He straddled two worlds for most of the 15- year war in Indochina as an undercover communist agent while also working as a journalist: first for Reuters news service and then for 10 years as Time magazine's chief Vietnamese reporter - a role that gave him access to military bases and background briefings.

He was so well known for his sources and insight that many Americans who knew him suspected he worked for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Before Saigon fell to the communists, An risked his own life to help friends escape, including a former South Vietnamese security chief who feared death at the hands of northern forces. An later revealed his true identity as a Viet Cong commander, but said he had never reported any false information or communist propaganda as a journalist.

He had been in and out of consciousness since being hospitalized in July and had fallen into a coma days before his death, a doctor at the hospital said. An's wife and four children were at his bedside when he died, his son said.

In a 2000 interview with The Associated Press, An said he always had warm feelings for his press colleagues and for the United States, where he attended college at Fullerton, California. But deep down he remained a "true believer" in the communist cause as the best way to free Vietnam of foreign control.

"I fought for two things - independence and social justice," he said.

An's political and military contacts made him an essential source for other Vietnamese reporters working for foreign news organizations. He was known for his role as the soft-spoken, chain- smoking oracle of "Radio Catinat," as the Saigon rumor mill was called.

But few, if any, ever suspected he was a communist spy. He was, in fact, an officer for the Viet Cong, the insurgency that sought to topple the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government.

While outside critics vilified An for his role in espionage activities that may have led to the deaths of many Americans and South Vietnamese, former media colleagues expressed mixed feelings, from bemusement to a sense of betrayal, after An revealed in the 1980s that he had been a spy.

"If ever there was a man caught between two worlds, it was An. It is very hard for anyone who did not serve in Vietnam in those years to understand the complexity," said David Halberstam, who covered the early years of the war for The New York Times.

Following Vietnamese independence in 1954, he served as an aide to Colonel Edward Lansdale, the legendary U.S. intelligence officer who played an instrumental role in early U.S. support for the fledgling anti-communist regime in Saigon in the late 1950s. Lansdale is believed to have inspired Graham Greene's novel, "The Quiet American."

An told ex-colleagues in later years that he made secret trips to the jungle to confer with Viet Cong leaders. He said he knew in advance of major communist initiatives including the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion aimed at destroying the regime in Saigon.

An insisted that he remained true as a journalist - never planting false or misleading information, for he realized this could reveal his clandestine role.

"The truth was that I knew many things that I never told anyone," he said.

## The Journalist Who Spied

Pham Xuan An, a reporter for TIME during the Vietnam War who was later revealed to be a communist agent, has died. TIME's former Saigon bureau chief remembers him

By [STANLEY CLOUD](#)

- **Archive:** [An's Dispatch on the Fall of Saigon](#)



Posted Thursday, Sep. 21, 2006

*The Vietnam war produced astonishing stories and personalities. But nothing quite like TIME correspondent Pham Xuan An. An's secret life as a spy for Hanoi was not uncovered till long after the fall of Saigon. Until then, he was known simply as the brilliant contributor to TIME's coverage of the Vietnam war. An died Wednesday at the age of 78 in what is now called Ho Chi Minh City. Stanley Cloud, TIME's Washington Bureau Chief from 1989 to 1993, worked with An from 1970 through 1972, including a period as Saigon Bureau Chief from the summer of 1971 to December 1972. He has written this remembrance of a colleague who loved journalism and his country when it could be dangerous to do both.*

He had a life none of us knew about, a life involving invisible ink and microfilm, the tunnels at Cu Chi and mail drops in the Ho Bo woods. He had a rank (colonel then, major general when he died this week) and, no doubt, a serial number. But to those of us who worked closely with him, as I did for three years, Pham Xuan An was nothing more (or less) than a first-class journalist, with better sources in the South Vietnamese government and a better understanding of the war's historical and political meaning for Vietnam than we would ever have.

He was part Confucian scholar, part medieval monk. His little office in the TIME bureau on the second floor of the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon was piled almost to the ceiling with stacks upon stacks of dusty documents, reports and newspapers, any one of which he was magically able to locate at a moment's notice, although such notice was rarely necessary, because he seemed to have committed it all to memory. He smoked constantly, drank rarely, laughed easily, bred and raised German shepherds and drove a tiny, rattling Renault through whose floorboards you could see the road going by. I felt I knew him well, but I was wrong.

Just above my computer in my office at home hangs a photograph of An and me, taken in 1990 during our first postwar reunion. We are in his driveway in Saigon, he in the loose trousers and white shirt he always wore. His little Renault, which had long since given up the ghost, is lying in state behind us, covered in years of grime. We had just spent the afternoon talking about the past — his as well as mine — and the present. Ever the reporter, An was deeply concerned about Vietnam's economy and the corruption that was making it worse. "If I had known during the war that we would just be trading the Americans for the Russians," he said, "I'd have stuck with the Americans." When his secret life came up, he said, "I always tried to tell you the truth." I believed him. Indeed, I recall any number of times — especially during the period when Henry Kissinger was bare-knuckling South Vietnam into accepting his "peace-is-at-hand" terms — when An saved us from reporting things that *weren't* true.

He always said that the reason why communists had so much support in Vietnam was that they were the only force that had struggled effectively over the years against foreign occupation and influence: against the Japanese in World War II, against the French for a decade after that, and against U.S. — what? — "nation building," for lack of a better term, for two more decades. An grew to maturity in the immediate post-World War II years and eventually attracted the attention and sponsorship of Saigon spooks of all sorts — from the CIA's Edward Lansdale (who arranged for An to study journalism during the late 1950s at California's Orange Coast College) to the communists' Muoi Huong (who became his case officer after his return to Vietnam).

But in certain profound ways I think the spooks didn't understand An any better than we journalists did later. He was, above all things — including journalism — a nationalist; he loved, above all things — including communism — Vietnam. He liked the French and the Americans he knew and spoke their languages well, but he didn't want to see his country Frenchified or Americanized. Or, for that matter, communized, which is probably why he was placed under house arrest and "re-educated" after the Vietnam War ended.

During the war, a colleague of ours said to me, "I think Pham Xuan An is the perfect example of the very best in Vietnamese society." I felt that way, too. I still do.

## **Pham Xuan An, a General of the Secret Service (Chapter 40)**

**Nam Xuan on Pham Xuan An**

Senior general Mai Chi Tho (alias Nam Xuan), former member of the Political Bureau and former Minister of the Interior (now Ministry of Public Security) was among the founders of the intelligence system in the resistance war against the Americans. After the signing of the Geneva Accords, on October 16th 1954, the Nam Bo regional Party Committee set up the intelligence and counter-intelligence body under the guise of the Research Department. It was led by comrade Le Duan, secretary of the regional Party Committee. The department's head was Van Vien, deputy head was Nam Xuan, and its members were Cao Dang Chiem and Muoi Huong. In mid-1955, Van Vien died in action, so Nam Xuan became department head. The department was entrusted to build and develop the intelligence capacity and thoroughly understand the enemy in all aspects.

The department received agents from many sources from the Southern Viet Nam Police forces such as military police, civil forces and units of intelligence networks. The Research Department operated until 1960, when the intelligence mission was transferred to the Regional Party Committee's Department for Enemy Activities Research, then the Regional Military Intelligence Bureau, and later Regional Intelligence Bureau. In the context of so many ordeals and difficulties when the Southern revolution was drowned in blood, the Research Department was able to lay valuable foundations for the intelligence system. Many intelligence networks established by the Research Department were brought into full play and brilliantly fulfilled their orders in the later stages of the resistance war. Pham Xuan An himself was commissioned by the Research Department.

Nam Xuan said: "Pham Xuan An was fully qualified to be an excellent intelligence agent, if one does not dare call him great. He had all three great virtues: humanity, wisdom and courage.

"Humanity means unselfishness, fidelity, friendliness and charity. Wisdom means a far-sighted vision and a sharp mind. Courage means steadfastness, bravery and a willingness to sacrifice one's life for a just cause. All of these virtues are imbued in Pham Xuan An. He was a true hero.

Nam Xuan began talking about the political situation in which Pham Xuan An worked: "From 1954 to 1959, the rightist movement led the southern regional Party Committee to a very critical situation. From 1954 to 1956, the policy of passive resistance was accepted, because under the Geneva Accords, this was the period before the general election. From July 1957, we were not allowed to wage an armed struggle even though the situation really required that. Only political struggle was allowed. As a result, the revolution suffered heavy losses. In the eastern region of Nam Bo alone, there initially remained a large force of 20,000 cadres. However, in 1959, when we started to launch attacks, this number sharply dropped to about 800.

"Without armed resistance, we couldn't protect ourselves. After the Second World War and the Korean War, the socialist bloc tended to be pacifist, which exerted great pressure on Viet Nam. The southern Party Committee was on the razor's edge. Its members were all well known. It was extremely difficult for them. The regional Party Committee's deputy secretary, comrade Hoang Du Khuong, was arrested. Comrade Le Duan had to leave Sai Gon for Bac Lieu. Comrade Vo Van Kiet, secretary of the Bac Lieu Party Committee was in charge of his security. However, when people saw that there was a person held in high regard, suspicions emerged as to who he could be. Comrade Le Duan grew a beard as a disguise. However, with the beard, he looked slightly like Uncle Ho, which might have drawn people's attention. As a result, he had to leave.

At last, the regional Party Committee dispatched two members, Hai Xo and Phan Van Dan (with comrade Le Duan), to the north to ask the Party Central Committee to give the green light for armed resistance. They had to wait for over a year. In early 1959, the Party Central Committee convened a meeting, but issued no resolution on this matter. Comrade Le Dun strongly supported armed resistance. Hai Xo and Phan Van Dan went to meet him, saying that they wanted to return to the south. Le Dun told them to meet Uncle Ho. When talking with them, Uncle Ho inquired very carefully about the situation. After hearing their report on the situation, Uncle Ho said: "We cannot let the southern revolution suffer further losses."

"Also during that period, Viet Nam committed errors in land reform. The socialist bloc started to witness initial divisions; Khrushchev publicly denounced Stalin's errors while he was still an icon, since the Soviet Union had been the main force in defeating the fascists. This created more difficulties for the southern revolution. Many comrades had been imprisoned, tortured and murdered. Some, failing to endure atrocious challenges, surrendered to the enemy. Others became demoralized. The Party Central Committee later acknowledged this dark period. Pham Xuan An, as well as many other intelligence agents and the people, were still firmly confident and remained firmly devoted to the revolution although their direct senior leader, Muoi Huong, had been arrested.

"After saying that the revolution in the south could not suffer any further losses, Uncle Ho continued: 'The regional Party Committee is the representative of the Party. You are responsible to our people. You must study the situation carefully before making decisions. The central committee is far away and can't grasp the situation as thoroughly as you.' Hearing his words, the two men were inspired and immediately left for the south. At that time, communication was very difficult and it took them six months to reach the regional Party Committee (in late 1959). The regional Party Committee was greatly encouraged by Uncle Ho's guidance and started to prepare for armed resistance. In November, the 15th resolution of the Party Central Committee reached them, allowing them to undertake armed self-defense and Explaining why American intelligence could not plant their men deep in our ranks, Nam Xuan said: "To do that, they had to use their Vietnamese henchmen. However, they always feared death and were unable to endure hardships." Once, in an interview with a foreign journalist, Nam Xuan delivered this remark about American intelligence: "The CIA is qualified in all measures. But their shortcoming is that they invaded our nation. When they came here, they encountered the struggle of tens of million of our people who were determined to defend their fatherland. Their shortcoming lies in their invasion of other nations, rather in their own capability."

*Story from Thanh Nien News*

*Published: 18 September, 2004, 21:55:17 (GMT+7)*

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## **THE SPY WHO LOVED US**

The double life of Time's Saigon correspondent during the Vietnam War.

by THOMAS A. BASS

The New Yorker

Issue of 2005-05-23

Posted 2005-05-16

"Here is Pham Xuan An now," *Time's* last reporter in Vietnam cabled the magazine's New York headquarters on April 29, 1975. "All American correspondents evacuated because of emergency. The office of *Time* is now manned by Pham Xuan An." An filed three more reports from Saigon as the North Vietnamese Army closed in on the city. Then the line went dead. During the following year, with An serving as *Time's* sole correspondent in postwar Vietnam, the magazine ran articles on "The Last Grim Goodbye," "Winners: The Men Who Made the Victory," and "Saigon: A Calm Week Under Communism." An was one of thirty-nine foreign correspondents working for *Time* when the Saigon bureau was closed and his name disappeared from the masthead, on May 10, 1976.

Recognized as a brilliant political analyst, beginning with his work in the nineteen-sixties for Reuters and then for the New York *Herald Tribune* and *The Christian Science Monitor*, and, finally, as a *Time* correspondent for eleven years, Pham Xuan An seemed to do his best work swapping stories with colleagues in Givral's café, on the old Rue Catinat. Here he presided every afternoon as the best news source in Saigon. He was called "Dean of the Vietnamese Press Corps" and "Voice of Radio Catinat"—the rumor mill. With self-deprecating humor, he preferred other titles for himself, such as "*docteur de sexologie*," "*professeur coup d'état*," "Commander of Military Dog Training" (a reference to the German shepherd that always accompanied him), "Ph.D. in revolutions," or, simply, General Givral.

We now know that this is only half the work An did as a reporter, and not the better half. An sent the North Vietnamese a steady stream of secret military documents and messages written in invisible ink, but it was his typed dispatches, now locked in Vietnam's intelligence archives and known to us only through secondhand reports, which will undoubtedly rank as his chef d'oeuvre. Using a Hermes typewriter bought specially for him by the North Vietnamese intelligence service, An wrote his dispatches, some as long as a hundred pages, at night. Photographed and transported as undeveloped rolls of film, An's reports were run by courier out to the Cu Chi tunnel network that served as the

Communists' underground headquarters. Every few weeks, beginning in 1952, An himself would leave his Saigon office, drive twenty miles northwest to the Ho Bo woods, and descend into the tunnels to plan Communist strategy. From Cu Chi, An's dispatches were hustled under armed guard to Mt. Ba Den, on the Cambodian border, driven to Phnom Penh, flown to Guangzhou (Canton), in southern China, and then rushed to the Politburo in North Vietnam. The writing was so lively and detailed that General Giap and Ho Chi Minh are reported to have rubbed their hands with glee on getting these dispatches from Tran Van Trung—An's code name. "We are now in the United States' war room!" they exclaimed, according to members of the Vietnamese Politburo.

As Saigon fell to the Communists, An, like his fellow-correspondents, was hoping to be evacuated to the United States. Vietnam's military intelligence agency planned to continue his work in America. The Politburo knew there would be a war-after-the-war, a bitter period of political maneuvering in which the United States launched covert military operations and a trade embargo against Vietnam. Who better to report on America's intentions than Pham Xuan An? In the last days of the war, An's wife and their four children were airlifted out of Vietnam and resettled in Washington, D.C. An was anxiously awaiting instructions to follow them, when word came from the North Vietnamese Politburo that he would not be allowed to leave the country.

An was named a Hero of the People's Armed Forces, awarded four military-exploit medals, and elevated to the rank of brigadier general. He was also sent to a reeducation camp and forbidden to meet Western visitors. His family were brought back to Vietnam, returning a year after they left. The problem with Pham Xuan An, from the perspective of the Vietnamese Communist Party, was that he loved America and Americans, democratic values, and objectivity in journalism. He considered America an accidental enemy who would return to being a friend once his people had gained their independence. An was the Quiet Vietnamese, the representative figure who was at once a lifelong revolutionary and an ardent admirer of the United States. He says he never lied to anyone, that he gave the same political analyses to *Time* that he gave to Ho Chi Minh. He was a divided man of utter integrity, someone who lived a lie and always told the truth.

"An's story strikes me as something right out of Graham Greene," says David Halberstam, who was friends with An when he was a *Times* reporter in Vietnam. "It broaches all the fundamental questions: What is loyalty? What is patriotism? What is the truth? Who are you when you're telling these truths?" He adds, "There was an ambivalence to An that's almost impossible for us to imagine. In looking back, I see he was a man split right down the middle."

In his 1965 book on Vietnam, "The Making of a Quagmire," Halberstam described An as the linchpin of "a small but first-rate intelligence network" of journalists and writers. An, he wrote, "had the best military contacts in the country." Now that Halberstam knows An's story, does he bear him any grudges? "No," he says, echoing the opinion of almost all of An's former colleagues. "It's a story full of intrigue, smoke and mirrors, but I still think fondly of An. I never felt betrayed by An. He had to deal with being Vietnamese at a tragic time in their history, when there was nothing but betrayal in the air."

Ho Chi Minh City—or Saigon, as it is still commonly called—is a single-mindedly commercial place. Lined with pushcarts and venders selling everything from soup to CDs, the streets are roaring rivers of Chinese two-stroke motorcycles. The exhaust fumes are so thick that Saigon's famously beautiful women have started covering their faces with scarves. "We are all Muslims now," says Viet, my Honda man, on the back of whose motorcycle I travel around the city.

Approaching An's house—a villa in District 3, a densely settled neighborhood near the train station—we pass an intersection full of motorcycle-repair shops and come to a street that specializes in selling tropical fish, including the Siamese fighting fish that An admires. I tug on the bell that hangs on his green metal gate. The dogs start barking, and I peer through the grille to see An shuffling down the

driveway. A wispy figure, he wears a striped short-sleeved shirt with a ballpoint pen in the pocket, gray trousers flapping around his legs, and rubber sandals. He arrives winded but smiling, and greets me with a handshake that involves only the tips of his fingers. He was recently admitted to the hospital with a collapsed lung, the result, perhaps, of a lifetime of smoking Lucky Strikes, but General Givral, with his full-toothed grin, looks, at seventy-eight, as puckish as ever.

I had last visited An in the early nineties, while writing a book on Amerasians—the children of American soldiers and their Vietnamese lovers. When it was published, I sent him a copy, and I sent him other books when mutual friends visited Vietnam. An knew that I was interested in hearing his story. He was a gracious host to the visitors who were allowed to see him after Vietnam adopted *doi moi*, its version of perestroika, in the late eighties. He would spend hours explaining Vietnamese history and culture. But there was one subject on which he was silent: his life as a spy. It looked as if he would be a sphinx to the end, whether out of loyalty to his friends or fear of government reprisals. In January of 2004, though, I received a message that he might finally be willing to talk, not in formal interviews but in friendly conversations. These began at Tet, the lunar New Year, and resumed later for another couple of weeks at the onset of the rainy season, in May. (I saw An again for a few days in March of 2005.)

An leads me through his garden, a tropical enclave lush with star fruit and bushberry trees. It is perfumed with frangipani and splashed with color from the flowering apricot blossoms and orchids. Staring at us from cages under the trees are a hawk and An's three fighting cocks. We stop in the middle of the garden to admire a porcelain statue of one of An's beloved German shepherds. An says he learned about using dogs for intelligence work from C.I.A. agent Colonel Edward Lansdale—the supposed model for Graham Greene's *Quiet American*. "I trained my dog so that he could alert me when the police were searching people's houses, even a kilometre away," An says. "He was a good spy."

An's wife, Thu Nhan, works in front of the house, sweeping the porch with a short-handled broom. She is a pleasant, round-faced woman with her hair tucked into a bun. Ten years younger than An, she is busily cleaning before the rush of visitors who will be coming for Tet, including their daughter, who lives in California. Hanging on the porch and from poles set in the driveway are the cages where An keeps his laughing thrushes, golden-fronted leafbirds, magpies, canaries, and other songbirds. A blue Indian mynah with a yellow bill announces, in Vietnamese, "Grandfather, telephone call for you!" The bird is mimicking the voice of An's grandson, who lives here along with An's three grown sons.

We kick off our shoes and enter the large room that used to serve as An's office and library, as well as the reception and dining room. Lining the far wall are the glass-faced shelves that hold his books. A Chinese landscape painting hangs above a green upholstered sofa and chairs. Below the open windows sits a fish tank that holds the third component in An's menagerie. Dogs are loyal, he says. Birds are always hopping around in their cages, keeping busy. "Fish teach you to keep your mouth shut. Unfortunately, while I was in the hospital most of my fish died."

The room has been changed since I last visited. In the alcove near the front door, in place of An's desk and filing cabinets and the piles of magazines and papers, which used to reach toward the ceiling, sits his son's piano. Later, I discover what happened to An's office when he and I walk past the family altar and out through the kitchen into the driveway at the back of the house. "Here's where my wife threw all my papers," he says, pointing to two gray filing cabinets and a desk piled with yellowing documents. All that protects them from the elements is a narrow plastic roof.

As we stare at the papers heaped in the driveway, An cracks a joke. "My wife tells me it's time to make room for the younger generation, but I can't die yet," he says. "There's nowhere for me to go. Hell is reserved for crooks, but there are so many of them in Vietnam, it's full."

An has pendulous ears, a high, square-domed forehead, close-cropped dark hair, and lively brown eyes. His left eye is slightly larger than the right, as if he were simultaneously taking both the long and the

short view of the world's affairs. In the pictures of him from the fifties, showing him wearing narrow suits, white shirts, and black trousers, An looks like one of the nice, clean-cut young men who joined fraternities and mastered social drinking. He was taller than the average Vietnamese, a scrappy young boxer and swimmer, who once thought, after failing his school exams for the second year in a row, that he might have to become a gangster. He doesn't want to talk about himself, he says—there is too much to remember. "It's too difficult. And too long. And I am old." Then, leaning forward, he begins talking about himself, recalling in minute detail scenes from fifty years ago. He gesticulates with his fingers, which are long-boned and nearly translucent with age. He shapes the air in front of him as if it were a doughy ball, taking a punch at it from time to time. He divides his remarks into Confucian triads and pentads or draws a flowing curve that represents one of the *déesses*, the protective goddesses to whom he credits his success in life. An can talk for hours about world events, drawing parallels, for example, between Vietnam and the Iraq war (he says techniques first developed in Asia have been moved to the desert) or evaluating the world's intelligence services ("The Americans are masters at gathering intelligence, but they don't know what to do with it").

Pham Xuan An was born in the Vietnamese Year of the Cat, at the Hour of the Buffalo, on September 12, 1927, twenty miles northeast of Saigon, in the Bien Hoa psychiatric hospital. At the time, this was the only medical facility in Cochin China open to Vietnamese. As the firstborn son of a *cadre supérieur*, an educated member of the colonial administration, An had the rare honor of receiving a French colonial birth certificate.

Originally from Hai Duong, the heart of North Vietnam, in the densely populated Red River Delta lying between Hanoi and the coast, An's great-grandfather, a silver- and goldsmith, was recruited by the Nguyen dynasty to make medals for the royal court at Hue, in central Vietnam. An's grandfather, who rose through the mandarinship to become a teacher and the director of a primary school for girls, wears one of these gold medals on his chest in the photograph which stands as the centerpiece of An's family altar. Given to him by the Emperor, the large tulip-shaped medal, called the *kim khanh*, signifies that An's grandfather held a rank equivalent to that of a secretary in the government. Later, An shows me a picture of himself as a baby with this medal hanging around his neck. I ask if he still owns it. "It was sent to Ho Chi Minh for the Gold Campaign," he says, referring to the huge bribe that Ho paid the Chinese occupation forces in 1945 to persuade them to withdraw from North Vietnam after the Second World War.

An's father, trained as an engineer at the university in Hanoi, worked as a cadastral surveyor, establishing property lines and tax rolls in Vietnam's southern frontier. He laid out roads in Saigon and canals through the U Minh Forest, along the Gulf of Siam. While surveying in Cambodia, he met An's mother, another emigrant from the North. She was an industrious woman whose second-grade education allowed her to read and write. The work of a colonial surveyor in what was then the wilds of South Vietnam involved press-ganging peasants into carrying chains through the Mekong marshlands and building towers in the jungle to establish sight lines. "When you do land surveying and build canals and roads, you see the poor Vietnamese workers eking out their living," An says. "You see the French system of forced labor, beatings, and other abuses. The only way to oppose these abuses is to fight for independence." He adds, "The Americans did the same thing in 1776. My family was always patriotic in their desire to remove the French from Vietnam."

In his early childhood, An was living on a sampan in the cajeput forests at the southern tip of Vietnam when he was swept overboard during a typhoon and nearly drowned. He was sent to stay with his grandparents in Hue, returned to the South on the death of his grandmother, and sent north again when he flunked his exams in the third grade. His father separated him from his siblings and exiled him to Truoi, in the countryside, where life among the peasants was supposed to scare him into working harder

in school. Instead, An delighted in playing hooky and larking around the countryside. When he flunked his exams again, he was caned by his father and moved back to Saigon for a stricter regimen.

An fell in love with Saigon, which at the time was a lazy colonial outpost surrounded by rubber plantations. He spent hours along the Saigon River, swinging in the banyan trees and jumping into the water. He made friends with the workers in the Ba Son shipyard, who cast fanciful coins for him to play with. He rode the electric train to Cholon, the Chinese district, and then rode back to the movie theatre near the bridge at Dakao. Here he watched all the films with Johnny Weissmuller swinging through the trees as Tarzan. "It was a beautiful dream of freedom in the jungle," An says of those movies. "I thought under Communism I would live like Tarzan. I put this dream into the revolution."

"Look at Tarzan!" An exclaims. "What does he have? Only his loincloth." This is Communism as a pure state of nature, a Rousseauian idyll. It is the high-school-philosophy version of Communism, which An acquired from books sent to students in the colonies by the French Socialist Party. "Yes, I am a Communist," he says. "Communism is a very beautiful theory, the most human theory. The teaching of God, the Creator, is the same. Communism teaches you to love each other, not kill each other. The only way to do this is for everyone to become brothers, which might take a million years. It is utopian, but it is beautiful."

An the political analyst knows that Communism was responsible for millions of deaths in the twentieth century, and he knows intimately the limits of the Communist regime under which he lives. But An the patriot made a choice when he was young to fight for an independent Vietnam, and the most effective force in leading this struggle against the Japanese, French, Americans, Chinese, Cambodians, and other invaders of his divided country was the Communists. "Here in Vietnam, which organization did you have to join in order to carry on the fight for your country?" he asks. "You had no other choice but to join the Communist Party."

An was an eighteen-year-old high-school student at the Collège de Can Tho, in the Mekong Delta, when he dropped out of school, in 1945, to enlist in a Vietminh training course. For more than a hundred recruits there were only fifty weapons, some left over from the First World War. Trainees had to pick up spent cartridges to make new bullets. Though he was involved in fighting first the Japanese and then the French, An dismisses this experience as little more than running errands. But a government Web site, recounting his activities as a Hero of the People's Armed Forces, describes An as "a national defense combatant who participated in all battles in the western region of South Vietnam."

By 1947, An had left his position as a platoon leader, involved mainly in propaganda, and moved back to Saigon to care for his father, who would have a lung removed and spend the next two years in the hospital with tuberculosis. An organized student demonstrations in Saigon, initially against the French and then against the Americans. He worked as a secretary for the Caltex oil company until, in 1950, he passed the exam to become a French customs inspector.

During the Tet New Year celebration in 1952, An was summoned into the jungle north of Saigon to meet the Communist officials who were setting up C.O.S.V.N.—the Central Office for South Vietnam. C.O.S.V.N. would lead the war against the Americans, who, even before the end of the First Indochina War, in 1954, were beginning to replace the French as the primary enemy. An was excited about this call to the war zone, where he hoped to join his sister, who had moved to the jungle three years earlier to become "the Voice of Nam Bo," a radio broadcaster for the Communist network. An visited her sometimes, taking her food or medicine, and staying overnight in the Vietminh tunnel network, where the cooking fires were vented through termite mounds in order to evade the French spotter planes that flew overhead. (In 1955, An's sister moved to North Vietnam to work for the state-run coal mines.)

An was disappointed to learn that he wouldn't be joining his sister in the jungle but, instead, was being recruited to work as a spy in Vietnam's newly established military intelligence service. "I was the first

recruit,” he says. An found his new assignment ignoble. Spying is the work of hunting dogs and birds of prey, he says. “I had been beaten by the riot police during student demonstrations in Saigon, and I had no desire to be a stool pigeon or an informer.”

The first problem An confronted on slipping back into Saigon as a newly recruited spy was how to avoid being drafted into the French colonial forces. To practice the English that he was learning at the United States Information Service, he volunteered his services as a press censor at the central post office. Here he was told to black out the dispatches written for British and French newspapers by Graham Greene, a “troublemaker” who the French assumed was working for British intelligence during his frequent visits to Vietnam.

An was formally inducted into the Communist Party in 1953, at a ceremony in the U Minh Forest presided over by Le Duc Tho. Tho, who was in charge of the southern resistance against the French, would later spend four years negotiating with Henry Kissinger at the Paris peace talks. Tho’s younger brother, Mai Chi Tho, as the head of security for the Communist forces in the South, was An’s boss.

In spite of his freelance work for the French intelligence agency, the Deuxième Bureau, An was drafted in 1954. To avoid getting shot during the waning days of the French colonial war in Indochina, An played on the family connections by which business gets done in Vietnam. He asked a cousin, Captain Pham Xuan Giai, for help. Giai, who commanded G5, the psychological-warfare department of the Army general staff, made An an adjutant, the highest-ranking noncommissioned officer, and put him to work at Army headquarters on the Rue Gallieni, near Cholon.

This is where Colonel Edward Lansdale found An when he came to offer his services—and money—to Captain Giai. Lansdale, a former advertising man and an expert in psychological warfare, had been sent to run the C.I.A.’s covert operations in Vietnam. Arriving in the country soon after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, Lansdale found G5 and the rest of the old colonial military apparatus in a shambles. They were totally demoralized, with no idea what to do with themselves, until Lansdale and his innocuously titled Saigon Military Mission began turning South Vietnam into a country, complete with an army, a President, and a flag.

Finding a promising student in the young Pham Xuan An, Lansdale and his colleagues began teaching him the tradecraft that he would employ in his next twenty years as a Communist spy. “I am a student of Sherman Kent,” An says, referring to the Yale professor who helped found the C.I.A. Strategic intelligence, Kent wrote in his classic text, “Strategic Intelligence for American World Policy” (1949), is a “reportorial job” based on studying the “personalities” of world leaders. “It must know of their character and ambitions, their opinions, their weaknesses, the influences which they can exert, and the influences before which they are frail. It must know of their friends and relatives, and the political, economic, and social milieu in which they move.”

Pham Xuan An, the psyops intelligence agent, was beginning to acquire the “reportorial” method that he would later employ so brilliantly as Pham Xuan An the *Time* correspondent. “People usually have one career, while I had two, the job of following the revolution and the job of being a journalist,” An told the writer Nguyen Thi Ngoc Hai, who has published a Vietnamese monograph about him. “These two professions were very contradictory, but also very similar. The intelligence job involves collecting information, analyzing it, and jealously keeping it secret, like a cat covering its droppings. The journalist, on the other hand, collects information, analyzes it, and then publishes it to the world.”

As a quadruple agent moonlighting for France’s Deuxième Bureau, working for his cousin’s indigenous Vietnamese intelligence organization and its C.I.A. sponsor, and reporting to his Communist handlers, An was beginning to live along the edge of his own personal nightmare. “I was never relaxed for a

minute,” he says. “Sooner or later as a spy, you’ll be captured, like a fish in a pond. I had to prepare myself to be tortured. That was my likely fate.”

It was scant solace that most of An’s colleagues in G5 were in a similar predicament. “When we weren’t spying on each other, we smoked opium and played together as friends,” An says. “That was just the way things worked. I had to compartmentalize.” He acknowledges that it was hard to do. “But you can’t kill all the time. When the war was over, these were the people I would have to live with.”

It was Mai Chi Tho and Muoi Huong, An’s case officer, who decided to send him to the United States to be trained as a journalist. Muoi Huong, in an interview with the Vietnamese newspaper *Thanh Nien*, said that he got the idea to make An a journalist from Ho Chi Minh, who himself had worked as a reporter. It was the perfect cover for a spy, granting him access to obscure places and elevated people. The plan was approved at the highest levels of the Vietnamese Politburo, but it took several years to execute. An’s father was dying. An won a government scholarship which was rescinded and given to someone who was better connected. Then his visa was blocked by French-trained administrators who didn’t like the idea of sending a Vietnamese student to the United States. The Communist Party had a hard time finding enough money. Finally, Mai Chi Tho scraped together eighty thousand dong, which, at the time, was worth about a thousand dollars. This was sufficient to buy An’s airplane ticket to America and four new suits of clothing. An’s father died in his arms in September, 1957. A month later, An arrived in Costa Mesa, California, to enroll as a freshman at the local community college.

An was a thirty-one-year-old Communist spy, a retired customs officer, and a psywar specialist when he began studying at Orange Coast College, which had been recommended to him by an American adviser in Vietnam. He was possibly the first Vietnamese to live in Orange County. (It is now home to a hundred and fifty thousand Vietnamese.) Called Confucius by his classmates, An studied political science, American government, economics, sociology, psychology, Spanish, and journalism. He chaperoned eighteen-year-old coeds to the beach and spent a lot of time working on *The Barnacle*, the school newspaper, for which he wrote occasional articles, such as a movie review of “The Quiet American”—the first, anti-Communist version of Graham Greene’s book. Finding the movie potentially confusing, An recommended that it “not be shown in Vietnam.”

An describes his two years in the United States, which included internships at the Sacramento *Bee* and the United Nations, as “the only time in my life when I wasn’t anxious.” (His travels across America were financed by the Asia Foundation, which was later revealed to be a C.I.A. front.) He fell in love with America and he fell in love with an American, Lee Meyer, a lithe blonde who was his editor and writing coach at *The Barnacle*. “She knew I loved her, but I never told her,” An says. “We Vietnamese never tell what we really feel.” An’s sunny years in California were the darkest time in the history of the southern Vietminh, the Communists who had remained below the seventeenth parallel when Vietnam was divided in 1954. By 1959, as many as eighty-five per cent of these Vietminh fighters, numbering about sixty thousand, would be killed or arrested. An learned in a coded letter from his younger brother that Muoi Huong, his case officer, had been arrested and was being tortured. He also learned that he was being summoned home because the Vietminh—soon to be reborn as the Vietcong—were finally embarking on the armed struggle that would launch the Second Indochina War.

An vividly remembers standing on the Golden Gate Bridge in October, 1959, wondering what he should do next. In his pocket was an airplane ticket to Saigon. Rising below him in the harbor were the solitary tower and concrete walls of Alcatraz, the notorious island prison. He feared this was a sign of the fate that awaited him if he returned to Vietnam—years of prison and torture in the tiger cages of Vietnam’s own Devil’s Island. He had been offered a job teaching Vietnamese at the military language school in Monterey. He could travel to Cuba and try to get back to Vietnam through Russia. He could exile himself to France. Finally, An the loyal patriot, who had in his possession four suits that belonged to the

Communist Party of Vietnam and should rightfully be returned to the people, boarded his plane and flew home to Saigon.

“I have two loves, like Josephine Baker,” he says. “I love my country, and I love the United States. When the war was over, I wanted them to get back together.”

On returning to Saigon, An was so frightened that he hid in his house for a month. Then, in a bold stroke, he used family connections to call on Tran Kim Tuyen for help. A former military surgeon, Tuyen was the brilliant, diminutive figure who ran South Vietnam’s intelligence network for President Ngo Dinh Diem and his younger brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. This vast C.I.A.-sponsored network of spies and clandestine military forces operated out of the President’s cabinet under the anodyne name of the Office of Political, Cultural, and Social Research. If Tuyen hired him, An figured he would be safe, at least for the moment, from arrest.

Tuyen put An in charge of the foreign correspondents working for V.T.X., the Viet News Agency. Many of them, with no training in the profession, had never filed a story as a journalist. An ordered them to write a story a week. They complained to Tuyen, saying that doing journalism would get in the way of their work as spies—their real job. Supporting An, Tuyen instructed his foreign agents to get “serious in your work” and start filing stories like the “professional pressman” An.

Tuyen fell out of power, after a failed coup, and An moved from V.T.X. to Reuters and from there to *Time*. Recognized as one of the most hardworking journalists in town, always ready to help his colleagues with informed opinions or telling anecdotes, An gave information in order to get it. Describing to Ngoc Hai the similarities between journalists and spies, An said, “Their food is information, documents. Just like birds, one has to keep feeding them so they’ll sing.”

“From the Army, intelligence, secret police, I had all kinds of sources,” An says. “The commanders of the military branches, officers of the Special Forces, the Navy, the Air Force—they all helped me.” In exchange for this steady stream of information, An gave his South Vietnamese informants the same thing he gave his Communist employers. “We discussed these documents, as the South Vietnamese tried to figure out what they meant. They had a problem. How were they going to deal with the Americans?” An then turned around and advised the Americans on how to deal with the Vietnamese. It was a high-level confidence game, with death hovering over him should he be discovered photographing the strategic plans and intelligence reports slipped to him by his South Vietnamese and American sources.

An worked through the night photographing these documents. Then his film cannisters were disguised to look like *nem ninh hoa*, grilled pork wrapped in rice paper, or hidden in the bellies of fish that had begun to rot. More fish or *nem* would be piled into baskets made to look like offerings being presented at a Buddhist funeral. In the morning, when An walked his German shepherd at the horse-racing track, he would deposit his *nem* cannisters in an empty bird’s nest high in a tree. For larger shipments, he hid his rolls of film under the stele of what he pretended was a family grave. An’s wife sometimes followed him at a distance. If he was arrested, she could alert his couriers.

Using live drops, dead drops, couriers, and radio transmitters that linked him through C.O.S.V.N. to military headquarters in North Vietnam, An was supported by dozens of military intelligence agents who had been detailed to work on his behalf. Of the forty-five couriers devoted to getting his messages out of Saigon, twenty-seven were captured and killed. “There were times before my departure on a mission when my wife and I agreed, if I were arrested, it would be best if I were killed,” An told Ngoc Hai. “It would be more horrible if they tortured me for information that put other people’s lives at risk. Sometimes it got so dangerous that, while my hands were steady, my legs were shaking uncontrollably. Despite my efforts to keep calm, the automatic reflexes of my body made me shiver with fear.”

“An was of paramount importance to the Communists, not only for getting information to the North but also for corroborating what they were receiving from other sources,” says former C.I.A. interrogator Frank Snepp. Author of “Decent Interval,” about the chaotic collapse of Saigon in 1975, Snepp now works as a television-news producer in Los Angeles. “An had access to strategic intelligence. That’s obvious,” Snepp says. “But no one has ‘walked the cat backward,’ done a postmortem of the damage he did. The agency didn’t have the stomach for it.” Snepp suggests that one source for An’s intelligence was Robert Shaplen, the *New Yorker* correspondent. Close friends and collaborators, An and Shaplen spent hours closeted in Shaplen’s room on the third floor of the Continental Palace Hotel, occasionally stepping out on the balcony to avoid being overheard. “Shaplen was one of our favorite journalists,” Snepp says. “We had orders from the top to give him unbelievable access to the embassy and high-level intelligence.”

“We estimated there were fourteen thousand spies operating in South Vietnam. The Communists infiltrated right to the heart of the enemy. It was a government of Swiss cheese.” Describing turning points in the war, such as Henry Kissinger’s secret negotiations in Paris and the decision by the South Vietnamese government in 1975 to abandon its positions in the Central Highlands, Snepp says, “The Communists knew what was happening before the U.S. Embassy knew.”

“We didn’t understand the degree of corruption in the South Vietnamese government,” Snepp goes on. “We didn’t want to look at corruption or morale. We didn’t want to know we were backing the wrong horse. This was true in Iran or Iraq or anywhere else where we’ve supported corrupt governments. An, of course, wanted very much to know these things. He knew under these conditions that Vietnamization would never work.”

My daily conversations with An begin to fall into a pattern. I arrive at his gate in the morning and pull the bell. An shuffles down the driveway and shakes my hand with his bony fingers. We stroll through the garden, admiring his cocks and singing birds, greet the two little dogs he keeps tied near his front door, and then sit for hours in his *salle de séjour*. His voice is low, hardly a whisper over the sound of the traffic roaring outside his gate. As the hours advance, I move from the couch to sit in a chair next to him. Pretending to adjust the microphone at his throat, I lean my ear toward his lips. Like a Vietnamese Jean-Paul Sartre, who preferred to conduct his political battles over a cup of coffee at the Café de Flore, An rarely claims to have done anything more during the war than observe and analyze events. But we know of several occasions when he reached behind the curtain to adjust the scene. One was the battle of Ap Bac, in 1963, which marked a turning point in the expanding American war. For the first time, the Vietcong fought at battalion strength and won a decisive victory against Vietnamese troops supported by American helicopters, armored vehicles, and artillery. Two Vietcong soldiers received North Vietnam’s highest military-exploit medal for winning this battle. One was the commander of the Communist forces. The other was Pham Xuan An, who devised the winning strategy.

An comes into focus again at the Tet Offensive, the simultaneous attack on more than a hundred South Vietnamese cities and other targets during the New Year’s ceasefire of 1968. Planning for the offensive had begun two years earlier, when the head of An’s intelligence network, a colonel known by his nom de guerre, Tu Cang, moved from the jungle into Saigon. Tu Cang was a famous cowboy, a hearty, affable man, who packed a pair of K-54 pistols and could plug a target at fifty metres with either his left or his right hand. A former honor student at the French lycée in Saigon, Tu Cang had lived underground in the Cu Chi tunnels for so many years that by the time he reentered Saigon he had forgotten how to open a car door. An replaced Tu Cang’s jungle sandals with new shoes and bought him a suit of clothes. Soon the two men were driving around town in An’s little Renault 4CV like old friends.

Pretending to be chatting about dogs and cockfights, they were sighting targets for the Tet Offensive. Tu Cang proposed attacking the Treasury to get some money. An told him the Treasury was the wrong

target—“They only hand out salaries there.” An said a better target was the courthouse, where lots of gold was stored as evidence in the trials of South Vietnam’s legion of burglars and smugglers. He advised Tu Cang to bring an acetylene torch.

Tu Cang isolated twenty targets in Saigon, including the Presidential Palace and the United States Embassy. He personally led the attack on the palace, where fifteen of the seventeen members in his team were killed outright. He himself barely escaped to a nearby safe house, and he hid with his two pistols held to his head, vowing to kill himself rather than be captured. The following day, he and An were driving around the city again, this time counting the bodies of the Vietcong soldiers who had died in the attack. (To commemorate the role these two men played in the battle, Tu Cang’s pistols and Pham Xuan An’s green Renault are on display in the museum of military intelligence at Army headquarters in Hanoi.)

Later that spring, in what was called the mini-Tet offensive, the Vietcong began shelling Saigon indiscriminately, blowing up buildings and killing scores of civilians. An sent a note into the field. “I told them to stop the shelling. It had no military objective and was alienating people.”

“What happened next?” I ask.

“The shelling stopped.”

In 1970, An’s fellow *Time* correspondent Robert Sam Anson was captured by North Vietnamese soldiers and Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, where at least twenty-five other journalists were already dead or unaccounted for. After Anson’s wife pleaded with An to help her, he secretly arranged for Anson’s release. It would be another seventeen years before Anson learned the story of what An had done for him. When Anson saw An again in 1987, he asked him, “Why did you save me, if you were an enemy of my country?” An replied, “Yes, I was an enemy of your country, but you were my friend.” To this day, Anson works with a photo of An on his desk.

An won his final military-exploit medal for the role he played in the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, which ended with the Communists seizing Saigon on April 30, 1975. His last deed in the war was another act of friendship. Hours before the city fell, An arranged the escape of his old patron, the South Vietnamese spymaster Tran Kim Tuyen. In the famous photo showing the helicopter taking off from the roof of what is usually misidentified as the United States Embassy (it was actually a C.I.A. safe house two blocks away), the last person climbing the rickety ladder to get on board is Tran Kim Tuyen. Out of the frame, waving goodbye, stands Pham Xuan An.

When An’s former colleagues first learned his story—from rumors that began circulating in the eighties—they invariably recalled a scene, a revelatory moment, which was suddenly explained by the news. Nick Turner, An’s former boss at Reuters, confirmed his suspicions about An’s unannounced absences from the office. H. D. S. Greenway, known to his friends as David, suddenly understood why his former colleague at *Time* knew more than he did about Lam Son 719, the disastrous attempt by the South Vietnamese Army to attack Laos in 1971.

“I had been up on the border near Khe Sanh, watching badly mauled soldiers retreating from Laos,” Greenway told me. “I described them as survivors from the original column leading the attack. ‘No,’ An said, without the slightest hesitation. ‘The original column was wiped out. What you saw was survivors from the attempt to rescue the column, which also failed.’ Later, when I thought back on it, he seemed remarkably well informed. It’s the kind of insight you’d have only from knowing what both sides in the battle were doing.”

Nayan Chanda, who was working for Reuters and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, remembered seeing An standing in front of the Presidential Palace on the last day of the war, as Communist tank No.

843 smashed through the iron gate. “There was a strange, quizzical smile on his face. He seemed content and at peace with himself. I found it odd,” Chanda says. “His wife and children had just been airlifted out of the country, and he didn’t seem to have a care in the world.” Chanda later realized that An was celebrating the Communist victory, for which he had worked for thirty years.

Aside from Chanda’s fleeting glimpse, An kept his cover in place after 1975. “It was a dangerous moment for me,” he says. “It would have been easy for someone to put a bullet through my skull. All I could do was wait for someone from the jungle to come out and recognize me.”

An and his mother moved into the Continental Palace Hotel. They lived first in Robert Shaplen’s old room. Then An moved into *Time’s* two-room office. He was repeatedly summoned for interrogations by the police, until intelligence officials intervened. People began to suspect that he was “a man of the revolution” when they saw him ride his bicycle to the military supply depot and leave with bags of rice and meat tied to the handlebars. They assumed that he was an “April 30th revolutionary,” someone who had jumped to the Communist side after the fall of Saigon.

Not even military officials as highly placed as Bui Tin knew An’s story. Tin was the North Vietnamese colonel who accepted the surrender of the South Vietnamese government. He was working as the deputy editor of *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, the North Vietnamese Army newspaper, when he rode a tank up to the Presidential Palace on April 30th. Accidentally finding himself the highest-ranking officer there, Tin accepted the surrender of the South Vietnamese government and sat down at the President’s desk to file a dispatch for his newspaper. Like most journalists newly arrived in Saigon, the next thing he did was go looking for Pham Xuan An. “On the morning of May 1st, I went to meet An at his office in the Continental Palace Hotel. I had no idea at the time that he was a spy,” Tin says. “All he told me was that he was a correspondent working for Time-Life. He introduced me to all the journalists in town, and I helped them send their articles abroad. Three months after the end of the war, I still didn’t know An was a spy.”

Hints of the power struggle over An—pitting the military intelligence agents who wanted to send him to the United States against officials in the Politburo—were revealed to Bui Tin only when the government moved to get An’s wife and children repatriated to Vietnam. Bucking the tide of refugees flooding out of the country, An’s family spent a year trying to get back into Vietnam by means of a circuitous route that passed through Paris, Moscow, and Hanoi. The first official announcement of An’s wartime allegiance came in December, 1976, when he flew to Hanoi as an Army delegate at the Fourth Party Congress. Friends who saw him walking around Hanoi in an Army uniform, which he was wearing for the first time in his life, were astounded by the transformation of the journalist into a beribboned hero.

“After 1975, Saigon turned into Ho Chi Minhgrad,” An says, speaking of the year that he spent manning *Time’s* Saigon bureau, before it closed in May, 1976. “The censorship was so tight, it was like back in the days of Graham Greene. I didn’t file many stories, because I didn’t know how to dodge the censors. I spent my days going to cockfights and fish fights.”

As hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese disappeared into prisons and labor camps, An was also forced into “reeducation.” In August, 1978, he was sent to Hanoi for ten months’ instruction at the Political Institute of the National Defense Department, a training camp in Marxist-Maoist thought for mid- and high-level cadres. “I had lived too long among the enemy,” he says. “They sent me to be recycled.”

Always a bad student, An finished near the bottom of his class. “They didn’t like my jokes,” he says of the dour Northerners who were trying to teach him to speak “new” Vietnamese, full of political terms borrowed from China. An suffered through the bone-chilling rains of a Hanoi winter, sleeping on a wooden bed with a cotton mattress. “I wore a Chinese cotton jacket that made me look like a mummy,” he says. “I asked for a Russian jacket. But I was still cold, so I went back and asked for a ‘hundred-and-eleven-degree jacket’—three girls, one sleeping on my right, one on my left, and one on top of me.”

“They didn’t like me at all,” An says of his political reeducators. “But I haven’t made a big enough mistake to be shot yet.”

In 1990, Colonel An was elevated to the rank of general. At the time, Vietnam had begun to adopt *doi moi*, the “renovation policy” that opened the country to the West. Whether the Communists were recognizing An’s merits, ashamed of the threadbare penury in which he lived, or maneuvering to keep him on a tighter leash is open to interpretation. An, as usual, explains his promotion with a joke. As Western journalists began returning to Vietnam, people would ask to see “General Givral.” To avoid embarrassment, the government decided to raise his rank to match his title.

In 1997, the Vietnamese government denied An permission to visit the United States for a conference in New York to which he had been invited as a special guest, and it was not until March, 2002, that the seventy-four-year-old, emphysema-stricken general was allowed to retire. “They wanted to control me,” he says. “That’s why they kept me in the military so long. I talk very wildly. They wanted to keep my mouth shut.” This is one possible explanation, but, as always with An, there could be another figure in the carpet. All we know is that, for at least twenty-seven years after the end of the war, An was still an active member of Vietnam’s military intelligence service.

Some of An’s former colleagues have accused him of being an “agent of influence” whose job was to manipulate the news and plant stories in *Time*. “We thought this was a joke,” says David Greenway, who left *Time* in 1973 and eventually became the editorial-page editor of the Boston *Globe*. “The editors at *Time* weren’t listening to us. None of *Time*’s reporters was manipulating the news. He wouldn’t have had any better luck than the rest of us.”

Far from planting stories, says Richard Pyle, the former A. P. Saigon bureau chief, “An saved *Time* from embarrassing itself by publishing stories that weren’t true. It was sleight of hand on his part. Without revealing how he knew what he knew, he’d let you know whether you were on the right track.”

An was also accused, according to former *Time* correspondent Zalin Grant, of being “the first known case of a Communist agent to appear on the masthead of a major American publication as a correspondent.” Murray Gart, the chief of correspondents at *Time* during the war, is reported to have said, after he learned the news, “An, that son of a bitch. I’d like to kill him.”

Another reporter who is critical of An, though for different reasons, is Peter Arnett. An rented a house from Arnett’s Vietnamese in-laws, and the two journalists would meet often at Givral’s to swap stories. “It’s still a raw point for me,” Arnett says. “Even though I understand him as a Vietnamese patriot, I still feel journalistically betrayed. There were accusations all throughout the war that we had been infiltrated by the Communists. What he did allowed the right to come up and slug us in the eye. For a year or so, I took it personally. Then I decided it was his business.”

With these few exceptions—and even Arnett ends our conversation by praising An as a “bold guy”—An’s colleagues are united in their support of him. “Was I angry when I learned about An?” says Frank McCulloch, who was the head of *Time*’s Asian bureaus when he hired An to work in the Saigon office for seventy-five dollars a week. “Absolutely not. It’s his land, I thought. If the situation were reversed, I would have done the same thing.”

“An was my colleague and star reporter,” says McCulloch, who is now retired after a distinguished career as the managing editor of the Los Angeles *Times*, the Sacramento *Bee*, and other papers. “An had a very sophisticated understanding of Vietnamese politics, and he was remarkably accurate.” McCulloch bursts into laughter. “Of course he was accurate, considering his sources!”

McCulloch remembers An with tremendous fondness and respect, and he says it was a “great pleasure,” in 1990, to organize a subscription fund, which raised thirty-two thousand dollars, to send An’s eldest

son, Pham Xuan Hoang An, known to everyone as Young An, to journalism school at the University of North Carolina. The list of subscribers to the fund reads like a *Who's Who* of Vietnam War reporters. (Hoang An, who earned a law degree from Duke University in 2002, now works for Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)

Mai Chi Tho, An's former boss, emerged after the war as one of Vietnam's most powerful figures, serving as regional Party committee head, governing South Vietnam, and as Minister of the Interior. At Tho's villa in central Saigon—the former Swiss Embassy—I am ushered into a sumptuous reception room on the ground floor, which is filled with mahogany furniture and sculptures carved from rocks gathered at Vietnam's famous revolutionary sites. Dominating the far end of the room is an altar covered with flowers, bowls of fruit, and four hand-tinted photographs of Mai Chi Tho's parents and his two famous brothers: Dinh Duc Thien, the two-star general who helped build the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Le Duc Tho, the Nobel Peace Prize winner who snookered Henry Kissinger at the Paris Peace Accords.

Mai Chi Tho is standing at the altar, holding a lighted bundle of incense in his hand and bowing in front of his father's picture. Today is his father's death day, not a time, customarily, for receiving strangers, but Tho knows that my stay in the country is short. He places the incense on the altar and comes to shake my hand. Dressed in gray slacks and a purple shirt, he is an imposing, white-haired man with a direct gaze. Bigger than most Vietnamese, Tho had to have an extra-large tunnel made for himself during the ten years that he spent living underground at Cu Chi.

Schooled in all the best prisons in Vietnam, including what was later known as the Hanoi Hilton, where John McCain spent five years, and Poulo Condore, the Devil's Island where, Tho says, two-thirds of his fellow-inmates died before he was released in 1945, General Tho is a war-hardened opponent, who today is an affable host offering his American visitor tea and fruit. "It was really hard work, but we had to do it," he says of his effort to raise the money that sent An to America in 1957. "The Party had very little money, but we thought the effort was worth it—An was the first person we sent to America—to learn the culture of the people who were taking over from the French to become our enemy.

"An was the perfect man for the job," he says. "It was a major coup for us."

I ask Tho about the other opportunity, which Vietnam did miss—the chance to send An to the United States again in 1975. He stares at me through his steel-frame spectacles. "I don't know how this story got out in the open," he says, obviously regretting that I know enough to ask this question. "He would have been great if we had sent him to the United States." This is the only hint of Tho's opinion in the matter, before he switches to the Party line that An had suffered enough from working for so many years behind enemy territory and that he should be allowed to retire in peace.

I know before I ask it that my next question will go unanswered. "What, exactly, did An do for you?"

Minister Tho smiles and offers me another cup of tea. "An had the best sources and access to secret information," he says. "He had his ear to the ground like no one else in Saigon. If you wanted to know what was happening, An was the man to ask. After the war, we made him a general and Hero of the People's Armed Forces. Without giving you any details, that alone should tell you the importance of what he did for his country."

I ring the bell for my final meeting with An. Last night, a typhoon blew in from the east, and showers have been falling off and on all morning. Now that the rains have come, An's room fills with the smell of damp dogs and bird droppings, and my ankles turn into a mess of red dots and begin to swell from flea bites. By midmorning, the air thickens with the smell of frying peppers and vegetables and then dissipates as An continues to talk through the lunch hour and into the afternoon. Fortunately, I have learned to eat a substantial breakfast before going to see him.

Great streaming sheets of water are puddling in the garden and filling the air with mist. I worry about An's yellowing books, which are getting foxed with mold and slowly dissolving into unreadable pulp. An pauses occasionally to get up and reach for one of these books. He searches for a quote or presses a text into my hands to confirm his analysis. Many of An's books are signed, either by their authors or by the people who presented them to him. Of his two copies of Neil Sheehan's "A Bright Shining Lie," one is inscribed by Sheehan, the other by CBS correspondent Morley Safer.

In the afternoon, when the rains have blown off, An rises to shuffle through the kitchen and out the back door into the driveway. He opens his desk drawer to show me some old photos. He dismissively flings aside some newer pictures, showing him in his general's uniform standing next to members of the Vietnamese Politburo. "They wanted to see what I looked like," he says. "They spent the war in the jungle and had never met me."

I fish out of the drawer a medal attached to a red ribbon. "What's this?" I ask. "They just give me these things," he says. "I have no idea what they mean."

"I worked in obscurity. I die in obscurity," he says, shutting the drawer.

Walking back into the house, we again pause in front of An's library. "I'm going to miss these when I'm no longer around," he says. "I'm the only one who cares about these old stories."

I remark that An's collection of books includes volumes in French and English but very few in Vietnamese. "People here can't write freely," he says. "This is one reason I won't write about my life. I'd get in trouble if I talked about my life or what I know."

I sometimes feel as if the books An presses into my hands are coded messages, ways of talking about experiences that are still too dangerous to confront directly. For each day's visit, An seems to have chosen a text or a passage around which to weave our conversation. One day it is Dickens, writing, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Another day, the lesson is drawn from the "Fables" of Jean de La Fontaine. An delights in these stories of beasts acting like men, and men like beasts.

At our final meeting, An shows me a book by Gérard Tongas, a French educator who went to Hanoi to help the Communists establish a high school after their victory over the French in 1954. According to An, Tongas, like Edward Lansdale, had an intelligent dog that one day saved him from being poisoned to death.

I see from the inscription on the flyleaf that Tongas's book was given to An by the head of the Asia Foundation, the group that sponsored his travels in America. The title alone seems pregnant with meaning: "J'ai Vécu dans l'Enfer Communiste au Nord Viet Nam et J'ai Choisi la Liberté" ("I Have Lived in the Communist Hell of North Vietnam, and I Have Chosen Liberty").

"It's a very important book, a true book," An says. "You must read it before you write anything."

## **One of the Five People You Meet in Purgatory from the Vietnam War - Double-Agent Pham Xuan An**

Written by [Wayne Lusvardi](#)

Friday, May 20, 2005

*"There's nowhere for me to go. Hell is reserved for crooks, but there are so many of them in Vietnam, it's full." -- Pham Xuan An*

A recent popular book **The Five People You Meet in Heaven** by Mitch Albom is a story about five people you meet in the afterlife reminiscent of Frank Capra's classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. But in the 1300's, the Italian poet and statesman Dante Alighieri formulated the concept of purgatory as a place neither of heaven nor hell but of suffering in which souls remain until they have expiated their sins. Dante's metaphor for purgatory is a lofty island mountain with seven terrace steps, each one of which represents the seven deadly sins.

If there is a modern earthly image of Mount Purgatory it might be the infamous photo inset below of South Vietnamese climbing the up the terraced-like roof of a C.I.A. apartment building (mistakenly reported as the U.S. Embassy) to evacuate during the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, at end of the Vietnam War. Out of the frame of this indelible photo waving goodbye to a South Vietnamese government officer was the shadowy figure of Tham Xuan An, who worked for Reuters, the New York Herald Tribune, and finally Time magazine during the Vietnam War. The role played by An in undoing the American effort in the Vietnam War has heretofore been little known by the American public.



Writer Thomas A. Bass has a fascinating story (“The Spy Who Loved Us”) in the May issue of **The New Yorker** magazine (not online) about An who he describes as “something right out of a Graham Greene” novel. Incredibly, An went to Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, and had internships at the Sacramento Bee newspaper and the United Nations. An was in a clique of elite journalists during the Vietnam War including David Halberstam, Morley Safer, Peter Arnett, David Greenway, and Robert Sam Anson. Frank McCulloch, who hired An, later became managing editor of the Los Angeles Times and the Sacramento Bee.

Bass's blockbuster article exposes for the first time that An was also a double “agent of influence” for the Viet Cong, smuggled microfilm of U.S. intelligence and war plans to which he was privy to the Viet Cong through the underground tunnel network in Cu Chi, and was a co-conspirator of the plans and

targets for the Tet Offensive in 1968. An was eventually commissioned a general in the North Vietnamese military after the war which gives an indication of how much damage he had done.

Bass's article in *The New Yorker* is not only a revelation about the double life of Pham An, but of the social world of wartime journalism. Incredible as it sounds, as recently as 1990 An's eldest son, Pham Xuan Hoang An, reportedly was awarded a fund to go to the journalism school at the University of North Carolina, and later Duke University law school, from a list of donors that "reads like the Who's Who of U.S. Vietnam War reporters." The junior Mr. An now reportedly works for the communist Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Confronted with the news that the senior Mr. An was a master spy, all that journalist Peter Arnett had to state was that An was a "bold guy" who "let the (R)ight to come up and slug us." Frank McCulloch who was head of the *Time's* Asian Bureau states he was not mad at An and he "would've done the same thing" if roles were reversed. Not all journalists lack a moral compass though as Murray Gart, the chief correspondent for **Time** during the Vietnam War is cited as calling An an SOB he would like to kill.

Bass's article is a revelation on many fronts. First, Bass traveled to Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon, to interview An. A motorcycle cabbie describes Saigon as "all Muslim now," indicating a mutual affinity of Islam with communism and a possible banishment of the Buddhism and Christianity that was prevalent in the war years.

An's life is reminiscent of the story of Truong Nhu Tang in his book **A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath**. Tang was also a double agent but became disillusioned with communism after the war when he witnessed the persecutions, food shortages, and murders and ironically finally fled as one of the "boat people" refugees. Bass's interviews with Tham Xuan An reveal no such disillusionment, apologies, or contrition.

Today the mainstream press seems preoccupied with false and exaggerated reports of prisoner abuse related to the Iraq-Afghan Wars while real religious and political persecution of the Montagnards, the Hmong, Buddhists, and Christians in post-war Vietnam continues.(see: [1] [http://www.unpo.org/news\\_detail.php?arg=30&par=2210](http://www.unpo.org/news_detail.php?arg=30&par=2210) [2] [http://www.unpo.org/news\\_detail.php?arg=01&par=2518](http://www.unpo.org/news_detail.php?arg=01&par=2518) [3] <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=17369>. Whether you are religious or not, such acts are so monstrous that they can only be addressed using religious language evocative of Dante's **Inferno**. As sociologist Peter L. Berger has written, "deeds that cry out to heaven also cry out for hell."

One of An's favorite books on his bookshelf is reported to be post-colonialist Frenchman Gerard Tongas's "**I Have Lived in the Communist Hell of North Vietnam, and I have Chosen Liberty.**" An is reportedly not suffering from physical want or ill health today, nor is he apparently tormented in his old age for his actions despite the "re-education camps," "killing fields," and the flight of the "boat people" after the war. An states that he can't die yet because "there is no place for me to go. Hell is

reserved for crooks, but there are so many of them in Vietnam, it's full." Surely, Pham Xuan An is a candidate to be one of the five people you meet in purgatory from the Vietnam War.

*Author's anecdote - This writer served in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Cu Chi, South Vietnam during the Vietnam War and witnessed firsthand the underground tunnels through which An smuggled his wartime intelligence to North Vietnam. During my duty in Cu Chi I routinely had my hair cut by a Vietnamese barber who later was purported to be a Major in the Viet Cong.*

*Correction added 5-26-05:*

Corrections: Reader Matt Zeitlin has found significant errors in my article "One of the Five People You Meet in Purgatory from the Vietnam War" (May 20). The statement that Vietnam may be turning Muslim and that there may have been some connection between Islam and communism was a gross error of reading miscomprehension. The statement that double-agent Pham Xuan An was not suffering from ill health was also in error as he was reported to have a collapsed lung from undisclosed causes. My point, however, was that it was not clear that An had suffered from his stay in a post-war re-education camp as many of his fellow Vietnamese have. Zeitlin also believes that An's noting of the book "I have lived in the Communist Hell of North Vietnam and I Have Chosen Liberty" may have been a wink and a nod to journalist Thomas A. Bass about his own issues with Vietnam's communism; although I am more dubious about this. I am responsible for these errors and thank Mr. Zeitlin for bringing them to my attention. That many Vietnamese suffered and continue to suffer in an earthly purgatory from Mr. An's role as a double agent in the Vietnam War is not in error

## **Vietnamese spy and journalist An dies**

HANOI (Reuters) - Pham Xuan An, a Vietnamese spy who worked for Time magazine and other Western news media in Saigon during the U.S. war in Vietnam, died on Wednesday after a long illness, a government official said. He was 79.

"He died this morning," said the official by telephone in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, where An had been admitted to a military hospital with emphysema. A heavy smoker, An was first admitted to hospital with emphysema in June 2003.

Foreign correspondents considered him the dean of Vietnamese journalists working for Western news media, but he doubled as an undercover agent for communist North Vietnam.

Born in Bien Hoa about 40 km (25 miles) north of Saigon on September 12, 1927, he worked for Reuters in the 1960s, the New York Herald and the Christian Science Monitor.

He spent 11 years with Time magazine and was its last reporter in Vietnam when the communists took Saigon in April 1975 from the U.S.-backed South Vietnam government.

According to a 2005 profile in The New Yorker magazine, on April 29, the day before the takeover, An cabled Time headquarters in New York:

"Here is Pham Xuan An now. All American correspondents evacuated because of emergency. The office of Time is now manned by Pham Xuan An."

An, whose given name means "hidden" in Vietnamese, filed three more reports from Saigon. The Communist Party unified the Southeast Asian country and have ruled ever since as the sole legal political party.

## NO GRUDGE

Reporting jobs helped An collect top-secret military information for Hanoi. But reports over the decades indicate that most of An's former U.S. correspondent colleagues did not bear a grudge against him when they later found out he had smuggled information through the Cu Chi tunnel network to communist leader Ho Chi Minh.

A report on Wednesday by the online Tuoi Tre (Youth) newspaper said An went to study journalism in the United States in 1957 before working for Reuters in the 1960s. An told Reuters TV in 2002 that he started intelligence work in 1952.

He had dropped out of school in 1945 and joined the Vietminh military force. He fought the Japanese and French colonialists. After the French were forced out in 1954, he was recruited to spy in Saigon on the Americans who were getting involved in Vietnam.

"People usually have one career, while I had two, the job of following the revolution and the job of being a journalist," An told Vietnamese writer Nguyen Thi Ngoc Hai.

The 2005 New Yorker profile, titled "The Spy Who Loved Us; Annals of Espionage" quoted author David Halberstam, a wartime New York Times correspondent, as saying An's story was "full of intrigue, smoke and mirrors, but I still think fondly of An. I never felt betrayed by An."

An, with the rank of major general in the Vietnamese People's Army, was awarded Hero of the Armed Forces in early 1976.

His funeral was scheduled for later this week in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese officials said.

## **More on Phạm Xuân Ân:**

See website: [http://www.viet-studies.org/PXAn\\_WeeklyStandard.pdf#search='pham%20xuan%20an'](http://www.viet-studies.org/PXAn_WeeklyStandard.pdf#search='pham%20xuan%20an')