

## *What was Left Behind after America Withdrew from Vietnam?*

by Anh Tran Tram Vo

Born in 1947 in Vietnam, Xuan Vo learned to be an independent woman after marriage at the age of eighteen. She and a professor, Nhan Le, met at her high school in South Vietnam and quickly fell in love. After getting married, Mrs. Vo opened an office supply store at home while her husband continued to work as a teacher. In 1965, the first American troops arrived in Vietnam; the U.S. army rapidly increased military forces as tensions between the Northern and Southern governments grew. Despite tense political moments, the couple enjoyed their peaceful life with two boys and three girls, until the American withdrawal from Vietnam.

America brought troops to South Vietnam and stepped into the war, an internal conflict between South and North Vietnam, with the purpose of eliminating the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Shooting and fighting continued for years; eventually, the American combat troops withdrew from the South and signed the Paris Peace Accords, which resulted in two separate governments in Vietnam. According to the document, leaders from both political systems agreed to respect the other and promised not to use force to unify Vietnam.

While the Southerners expected to start a new life in peace, the Northern government broke the agreement. At midnight on March 11, 1975, a sudden explosion broke the silence of the neighborhood and woke up Mrs. Vo's family. Around 3 o'clock the following morning, a troop of armed men with pale-green uniforms marched into Daklak, the first province in the South to be taken by the North's army. Year after year, combat after combat, the communists finally took over the South's government and reunified the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Under the act of postwar economic recovery, the authority took away the property of the rich and shared them with the poor, discriminated against the civilians and officers of the old government, and awarded jobs for people who supported the North during the war. Since Mr. Le had worked for the South's government, the authority reasoned that he was unfaithful to the new political system. He was laid off and could not find another job. To make the situation worse, Mrs. Vo's store was closed down, and they had no income to support the family with five children. Furthermore, attending school was problematic for children of the families who originally lived in the South; most children were treated unfairly in schools if their parents' records related to the old government. "My kids

were denied admissions to schools for a year", she said, "not only education, they had disadvantages in all aspects and were at the bottom of the society."<sup>1</sup>

Feeling powerless, Mrs. Vo's family moved to Ninh Thuan Province, asking her parents-in-law for help in October 1975. They not only shared their house but also paid for living expenses while Mrs. Vo gave birth to a daughter. After Mrs. Vo's family had lived there for a year and a half, they moved to Khanh Hoa Province and joined the agricultural co-operative. Not long after her family had adapted to the new economic system, the government took all lands, forced civilians to grow crops on lands once belonging to them, and paid them only labor wages. With Mrs. Vo's quick-witted mind, she managed to feed her family by selling pigs from farmers to small businesses. Although she drove at midnight to avoid the police, they caught her twice and took away her pigs. Once, she unfortunately got caught while carrying nine pigs, five for her and four for a co-worker. Not only did she lose money for her pigs, but she also had to pay for her friend's pigs, which cost her dearly.

Getting angry with the political system and the inequality in the society, Mrs. Vo let her second son flee Vietnam in a refugee boat and escape to America. Although he barely survived on the ocean, her son managed to get to Palawan Island in the Philippines. In 1989, a group of representatives from America interviewed Vietnamese refugees; he luckily was accepted, and moved to Texas the following year. After settling, he sponsored his parents for temporary citizenships. In 2000, Mrs. Vo and her husband immigrated to America. Eventually, by 2012, the whole family had reunited in Plano, Texas after years apart. In fact, I am Mrs. Vo's niece, and I am blessed to be a part of her family. Hearing her story makes me admire her strong mind, independence, and courage.

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<sup>1</sup>Xuan Vo, interviewed by Anh Vo, March 1, 2017.