Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone, I am conducting an oral history interview on September 25, 2002 with Mr. Nguyen Xuan Phong and we are in the Special Collections Library on the Texas Tech campus in Lubbock, Texas. Phong, would you like to start with some thoughts and discussion about your childhood and where you grew up in Vietnam, where you were born and so forth.

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, that would be really difficult to remember everything, but the things that I can remember when I was very young was that, at that time we were in the very deep south of Vietnam, in the peninsula, the point of the peninsula in the Ca Mau area, that is very deep south. My father was at that time responsible for the buildings of roads and bridges. He remained in that area for over twenty years and most of the time as I remember we were on the sampans living in tents along the roadside in the marshes where have got some swans there. That was kind of the early childhood. I was born in the village of Vinh Loi, of the province of Bac Lieu and Bac Lieu was also the name of the provincial town. So as far back as I can remember was probably about three or four years old and our house was at that time just beside the girls’ school and for some unknown reason I was allowed to attend the girls’ school, not even a kind of first grade, because I was the only one there when I was three or four years old and must be about five or six years old to be admitted in that school. That was
completely a girls’ school so I was the only boy, about three and a half, four years old at the time to attend that girls’ school so that’s how I began my schooling.

RV: Why did your parents send you there, do you know why?

NXP: Because it’s just beside the house and I could make a hole in the fence between our house and the school, I made a dog hole there and went to school through the hole instead of going round in the street.

RV: The teachers and the other students were okay with that?

NXP: Oh, yes I was very special. I was put at the back of the classroom and I did what I wanted with my pencils paper because I was not able to attend the class, not big enough. There was an incident there because one time there was a visit by the general inspector of the schools, of Indochina so he was a French high official and I was told that when asked how old I was, I must say in French, I am five because that’s the age that you are permitted to the school. But then I forgot completely and when the correct man came and asked me how old I was, I said, three and a half. And he said, go home right away.

RV: Did you?

NXP: Well, I pretend to go home because the next day he was off and he was no longer there and I returned to school of course so that was the incident that I remember, that far. So we remained there until the Japanese came, so that was the French colonial ruin and we had to study French at that time, that way all the kids there have to learn that our ancestors were the gods with long hair. So all the Vietnamese had to learn that history lesson.

RV: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

NXP: Well, my parents had altogether five, so I have a sister, the eldest, who is now, eighty, eighty-one and then there was another sister, then another brother, but the second and the third died when they were very young, about three or four years old, when my father was down there building the roads, they died of dysentery because they ate something, both of them, within five days. Then later on there was another brother and me, the last one, so the other brother also is now in France and he was with our national carrier airline, the Vietnam airline for twenty years, from 1956 to 1975 and he was the
last executive director of Vietnam Airline. He took about nine years of re-education in North Vietnam too so he is now living in France with his children and grandchildren.

RV: Can you tell me about your parents, what do you remember about them in your youth?

NXP: Well, probably like most kids, we had the impression that they were there but we didn’t know much about what they were really. I knew that my father was a civil engineer, building roads and bridges. He built thousands of mines and roads and hundred of bridges in that southern part of Vietnam over, twenty-thirty years. My mother, she barely finished elementary education in her native village, but she was extremely intelligent, very logic in her thinking and she took care of everything. My father was not very good for family affairs and he was most of the time on the roads and so I always had the impression that my father was very kind man, and he was open and very ready to listen to other people’s view and he didn’t try anything very grandiose but his life was very simple and he did his job. My mother was a very good housewife, that was my impression.

RV: So your father was gone a lot working on the roads, he was not at home a lot?

NXP: Most of the time, yes, he was on the road but later on when he was promoted to be Chief of the Public Works so then he had more of a desk job. but he liked be in the fields rather than sit at a desk, so altogether he had about forty-seven years into public service, just in the public works.

RV: So he’s working for the French and the Japanese?

NXP: Well, eh worked for the French and then there was the Japanese, no because Japanese did not stay there very long. Afterwards there were five and the Viet Minh for a while when they were there and then the return of the French, that is the French under Gaulle, after the [?], French and then afterwards there was Bao Dai and then Diem and San. He went through all kinds of political regimes; it did not bother him at all.

RV: He just did his job.

NXP: Apolitical, completely.

RV: Okay, and was your mother also apolitical?
NXP: Completely, even more. But I must tell you an anecdote here because my father had a very dear friend and that was Engineer Bich, B-I-C-H his name was. He was a French trained civil engineer, from Poltechnic school; it is the crack school of Paris of civil engineering. They were very close and then one time, after the return of the French, the Second World War and my father was then on the side of the non-Communists, but Engineer Bich was on the Bilmans side still but often, they met in the evenings, indeed at Engineer Bich’s place, sometimes at our home and then the two discuss ways, who to blow up bridges and how to repair them. Bich would say I will blow up your bridge as a V. My father said it doesn’t take me three days to get the dops; in that case I would a W, my father said six days then. They went on for years like that.

RV: Can you tell me about your village that you grew up in?

NXP: Oh, the village rather it would be the villages of my parents. I was born in deep south, the Bac Lieu, Ca Mao area, Bac Lieu which is now called the Minh Hiai province, M-I-N-H H-I-A-I, but my parents were both from the Ben Tre province against the Mekong area and Ben Tre province always been known as the home of the uprising in the south against the French administration. So they were both there, but the story of my parents was also quite amusing because my father got scholarship to the French system to become a technical agent in public works and when he graduate as a technical agent he went home and he was about twenty-four years old at that time. But in our native villages, families make arrangement for them to get married, as tradition, customs required. He was supposed to go to my mother’s village; it was about thirty miles away to have a look at his future bride. That day he forgot, so he took the country bus the following day. When he arrived there, my maternal grandfather said, well we waited for you the whole day yesterday, you didn't come, but then in the afternoon there was an official delegation came here and recommended by the French provincial chief into using kind of a deputy, provincial deputy, very powerful man, rich too, who expressed the desire to marry my eldest daughter because my grandfather had three daughters, nineteen, seventeen and fifteen. So yesterday with that powerful delegation, I couldn’t say no, so I gave your future bride to the deputy, so she’s gone. My father said that that is very awkward because the family had to make arrangements, what would I say to my parents now. So my maternal grandfather said well, I still have two more girls but the next one is
only seventeen. So, would you agree, I can give you the second one. My father said if
that’s possible, that would solve the problem, so that’s how he married my mother. They
lived for seventy years together, it was one month before he died my father celebrated
with my mother, seventy years wedding anniversary, 1990, there you are. She was barely
seventeen.

RV: What has your mother said about that story?
NXP: Well, she just obeyed her father, that’s it.
RV: No question.
NXP: Yes, and then they had the wedding and both of them went to Saigon, but
he was twenty-four, she was seventeen and seven months. They started their lives there.
RV: In Saigon?
NXP: In Saigon, saw the whole thing.
RV: So eventually they moved back?
NXP: No, and then they went to the deep south because my father was assigned
an area, building up the roads and bridges and stayed there for over twenty years. So after
the Second World War, the return of the French and Song then eventually in Saigon with
the Ministry of Public Works.
RV: What do you remember as a child about the French?
NXP: Well, I don’t think that many of us paid much attention so here you have to
try understand what kind of people were involved under French colonial rule. The French
were a very clever, not to touch what we call the Council of Notables. That Council of
Notables was there for centuries, was composed to twelve officials and then we elect
chief. It was very well organized, one responsible for the birth and death registry, one for
education, on for agriculture and so on, so forth, well one for security, which is the local
policeman. So they operated on the basis of spontaneous consent of the villagers, with all
those families living there for generations, everybody knew everybody. So the
Consididatat elder was good to be a village chief and he became the village chief so he
had direct to motives and that, and the French didn’t touch that tall, at that grass root
democracy. That’s how it operated and in Ben Tre, in my maternal native village of Ba
Tre, they were known to be very half heads, that is to say when they were not happy with
the local government there that is the village chief and someone, they went to the
imperial capital of Hue to complain. There was an old guy from Bac Tre village who
walked.

RV: Who walked to Hue?

NXP: Yes, three hundreds miles to Hue to complain to the emperor, the King, that
time he was unjustly treated in his village, so there was very well known story in
Vietnamese history. So that’s why Ben Tre province was also known for the seat of
insurgency, complaints and opposition to oppression. So during that French colonial
period, they maintain exactly the same thing at the grass root and the French presence
was felt only from the district level by the presence of provincial chief, who was a French
official who had then the control of the district chief, but then from the district chief
down to the villages, the hamlets, there was no French presence, nothing at all. So my
maternal grandfather who was kind of a village chief didn’t have any contact with the
French and then he tried to manage his village thinking that’s just hundred percent
Vietnamese. So the presence of the French colonists were done on another plane and
then you have of course a segment of the Vietnamese society at that time and mostly the
precklin onus, so they cooperated with the French authorities. They had to pay their
dimes to the French authorities and that is how the French authorities managed to exploit
the resources of Vietnam. Eventually they went into the rubber plantations and le lation
but the basic commodity, rice, were then done by the large majority of the Vietnamese
without any knowledge without any knowledge of the French at all, through first the
small landowners, who literally share the half life of the farm ants, and then they were
under the, I been called exploitation of the larger landholdings, then they had their deals
with the French authorities. So those very poor families would be about 80% of the
Vietnamese population, the rural areas continue as they had been doing for centuries and
that was the situation. Now, besides the large landowners, you have a kind of
intelligentsia, the Vietnamese who were able to have relations with the French, the
French authorities, that would be in the city. No these cities you have the beginning of a
kind of workers’ movement, because you have factories, the fregisters set up lots of
factories and then you have the beginning, that was, now referred, that’s the proletariat,
so that is literally imported from the west because we were entirely agricultural, there
was no industry in Vietnam during that time. So that is the beginning of the contact with
the west, the beginning to have western values come in, so you have a kind of
to intelligentsia and you have many of the big families in Vietnam and mostly landholders.
Then you have also people who managed to become well known professors, intellectuals
and so went to France to study and those things. Then you have that kind of
intelligentsia, but the large majority of the people were just peasants in the countryside,
unaware of anything. But there was a feeling of peace, there was no war. Life was hard,
probably much harder than in central part of Vietnam, but in the south with the paddy
fields and sun and they can catch their fish and frogs and snails, they can survive easily
so it was not too hard in the south and so you can say they were exploited, they were
exploited by the people in Europe in the ages, everywhere in the world and that is the
historical evolution of civilizations everywhere. So the impression I had was that I
belonged to a kind of middle class. We had enough to eat, we didn’t socialize a lot and
we had a good life until World War II.

RV: How often would, you said your maternal grandfather was a village chief,
how often would they see a Frenchmen in their village?
NXP: Very seldom because in the villages was of no interest to the French, in the
strength at all but they had their constant visits from the district chief but they were
organized when, you know those villages they were organized in a kind of cam don,
C-A-M D-O-N, that would be four or five villages and my maternal grandfather
eventually promoted to that cam don chief, he is to be responsible for four or five villages
but then among the cam don chiefs eventually they would pick out to become district
chief and so on, if you were good enough with the French, so that was the path. In the
cities, there you see the chance for you to go up the social ladder was to know some
French to begin with and then to pass an exam, administrative exam to become a
secretary and secretary of the government, so that would be about a tenth grade because
that is the maximum education level allowed to Vietnamese. You were not allowed to go
over the tenth grade unless you get the scholarship, exception like my father who finished
the high school as they are called in U.S., your high school and then go over to
university.

RV: How do they choose who would get the scholarships and who would go past
tenth grade?
NXP: In the schools, they pick up the bright guy to eventually become they have French public servants.

RV: So, since you started your education at three and a half years old, you were on a good track.

NXP: Yes, I was [?] in the system. Even my father was up in the system and he was bright enough to go up and up and up, in the end to the top, in the educational process. So there was a big school in Saigon [name of school] at that time it was called and even [name of person] went to that school too in Saigon and my father went to that school and I also learned at that school later on. Then in Hanoi you had the Ambersaro School, that is to complete your secondary education. Then after that in Hanoi, only in Hanoi, in Saigon they didn't have it, but in Hanoi then you have the specialized schools, public works, medical school and law school, so mainly was for the French nationals but then eventually you see they have a zone, a number of Vietnamese nationals were selected or the rich ones and so my father, my father was no rich but he was bright enough to be selected, but many of the rich Vietnamese families were able to send their children to those French schools and many of those rich Vietnamese families, they opted the French nationality and our family, we didn’t do that, we remained Vietnamese nationalists, all the way until now. But then many of those families became French nationals.

RV: How effective do you think this system was?

NXP: It was quite effective. You must crance credit to those French colonialists, that they were very good administrators ad their yearly; they are in France because the public servants in France is very well organized. They run the country rather than the politicians who come in and out all the time. Very stable in their system.

RV: So, the basic Vietnamese peasant had very, very little contact if any, with any French colonial administrator and they didn’t hear French spoken very often?

NXP: Not at all, not very much. But of course, troubadare traveled to the provincial cities and so on, they knew there was a French presence, but an hour must have been their student until you began to have the so-called traditional political parties but that was much more in the north than in the south because in the north they were, we had always considered the northerners were more intellectuals than in the south. It’s cold
there, life’s more difficult in the south, they don’t pay much attention to those things.

There was of course a feeling of the French colonial rule and of course, as anybody anywhere in the world would feel if you were a colony, that you were under the rule of some mother country of a foreign power and I think they impression was rather, it’s a natural thing to accept, it’s almost everywhere. We are not the only one, and also have, so that must be the general train, so you may have heard of the Spanish empire, the Portuguese empire, the French empire, the British empire, made us seem silly to think anywhere in the world and so you accepted your lot. Then you began to feel, is there a possibility to get out of it or not but I doubt very much that most of the Vietnamese, 80% of the peasants in the Vietnamese come to say thought that there was any chance at all. We changed that and if the few shall we say leaders of Vietnam, of the traditional political parties, the Buc Yum Dang party, the Patch you whaty party, which may also be called the Guomindang because they were related to the Chinese government Tang and then the Dai Viet later on came, maybe those people; of the higher intellectual capability may have thought that well, we have to try and shuck off the French colonial rule, ask anybody else in other parts of the world, they had to throw away the British empire in India, some things, but the large majority of Vietnamese wouldn’t have the slightest idea how to do that. So that was I think the state of mind at that time.

RV: So to really throw off the yoke of French colonialism the Vietnamese intelligentsia would have to convince the population to go forward with that path?

NXP: And that would be interesting to have a look at it, to compare to example, previous periods of foreign domination, that is about a thousand years of Chinese domination, how those enemies reacted to that kind of Chinese rule at that time. I have the impression that the Chinese also, during those thousand years, they didn’t send their troops to clam down on the enemies people but they just asked the Vietnamese so called imperial court to recognize the power of China and then pay tributes to them, that’s all, it was not really Chinese presence in the countryside of Vietnam. Then we had insurrections against Chinese rule, many times on a dime we were able to throe them away when the were so bad at home, we tired to rise up but when they are stronger then we try to be quiet and pay the tributes, that’s all. With the French it was only I think with the second World War that the number of people Ho Chi Minh included who saw the
opportunity to regain independence, sovereignty for the Vietnamese people, but that
would be, I would say honestly something new to their history to withstand what would
mean independence and sovereignty, even less democracy, that is not a notion very
familiar to them. That democracy that they knew was at the village level, but not he
Constitution, division of powers, you had the deputies, the Senators, the President, the
Prime Minister, that was completely foreign and very western concept to the
overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people.

RV: How accepting were the Vietnamese intelligentsia to this idea of western
type democracy?

NXP: If you try and go through the historical evolution of that, they also learned
that from the west and then they realize that would be much nicer if we have a credit to
say in the government of our own country. I don’t think they really hoped to overthrow
French rule but then if you look at their requests of these writers they ask to have more
participation in French colonial rule. It was the best hope that they could imagine, it was
only with the ugly disruption of the second World War, with the fall of the Axis powers
and then with the surrender of Japan, the Japanese troops in south, that they have the
opportunity, very short opportunity, very small opportunity to claim that they regained
sovereignty independent, but the large majority of the Vietnamese people at that time, I
don’t think they were much aware of those things and if you claim at that time to
represent the Vietnamese people, well it’s not completely untrue but if you honestly say
that it don’t mean much to the Vietnamese people in the countryside. They just wanted to
be left alone, go and plow their field, have enough to feed their kids. So, if they can do
that under French rule, why they would do it. They would do it under Vietnamese rule,
Vietnam, Vietminh rule, they would do it. But then there’s a process of vacation going
on, getting more and more because of the having economic difficulties and it is only true
that you would like to have more political freedom, more political power and that is the
process that they went through very slowly, then boom you have the Vietnam War. I
honestly say that the Vietnamese did not understand much why they had the Vietnam
War.

RV: The American War or the French.
NXP: The French, the American, that means a second war, why should there be a second war in [?????], which in the end amounted to five million dead and 20 million maimed. They did not consciously, intentionally say I go to war, I am prepared to sacrifice five million lives to fight my country’s own, I don’t think so. Nobody can honestly say that, that you were prepared to sacrifice five million lives and twenty million maim and wounded for the defense of independence of sovereignty and democracy and freedom, I don’t think so. We can be honest there, see. It was too big for them to understand and in fact we have to eventually come to understand why we have to be in another war.

RV: What did your parents tell you about the French administration, as you got older?

NXP: Well, I didn’t talk much with my parents about those things because I left rather quite young in the early teens to France so I didn’t have much of a family life. Then before I left for France, I can’t remember much what happened then.

RV: Do you remember anything about the Japanese occupation of Vietnam?

NXP: Yes, the only thing I was very young, ten years old. Of course when they came, took over from the French then they had the French authorities of the Bit and the Di Shi government, they left images of violence, they even commentated. They were really hard on themselves to begin with and then on the people around them. Discipline, hard guys, and they also had the tradition, custom to incinerate and then so I was able to witness all the political, the corpses on the pile of wood and then burn those things. We witnessed those things; we were horrified, very young at that time. We were hard back to see the bodies bound like that and set up there. But they left and even it showed cruelty, a violence and then they had to surrender at the end and give up. Then the French obligung returned, liberated French, returned and that was the souvenir of those years.

RV: Did you see actual Japanese soldiers walking in your village, occupying it?

NXP: Yes, we were at that living in the deep south and then eventually the so-called Allies returned, that is with the French took, then the British then some, then we evacuated, went back to my parents villages and stayed there for awhile and then moved to Saigon later. So we had the money from the French against the Japanese and some, but that didn’t last very long because they surrendered very fast. Then the French
returned and occupied for the six millionth time. In the North was the Chinese troops from, General [?], 150,000 of them, but to the South then start coming to the freemen with President Truman. The French then had the civility to reoccupy Indochina.

RV: Did you ever witness any Japanese atrocities or cruelty as you said?
NXP: No, I heard about it.
RV: You just heard stories.
NXP: There were, there were atrocities.
RV: Such as what, what did you hear?
NXP: Executions, the Vietnamese would say they acted not very different from the Nazi, that is to say one of their soldiers were killed they would take hostages and they would kill them and saw something off them, that’s the methods. That was the stylish pickets at that time I think.

RV: So your parents, they were able to deal with the French colonialism and the Japanese occupation they were able to return to the French?
NXP: It was like most people, they tried to be out of those things, tried to get through the safety zones and not be doing anything. There was also the case that we had the period of the Vietminh were able to have power for a few months there. Of course they imprisoned all the landowners, whomever had any kind of function under French rule and then some, so my maternal grandfather was jailed, was imprisoned because he was a village chief. That's a loot, living off land, not very big, he was a landowner and he was imprisoned. Luckily my uncle, that is the younger brother of my mother who knew the Vietminh chiefs or leaders they had, so they were schoolmates one time and they are friends and that uncle, mine went to see his schoolmate, say why you put my father in jail, he was a harmless man, he hadn’t done anything cruel so he was released after a few days, so that’s it.

RV: Was your father okay, I mean he had this civil engineer job?
NXP: Yes, he worked for the Vietminh. Because you know they didn’t care, as a civil engineer, my father didn’t have any political views, he just did his dad, keep the damn roads repaired, whoever said, said told him to repair job, association would do it and that’s all. And there was also a very funny thing because he was given all kinds of decorations and awards by everybody, you got far in repairing roads in three days by
everybody, so including the French so the Legion D’enoir, and then the War Cross because when he repair a bridge the forces can go through so he was given military cross and some of the highest was of the French government. Then he had a decoration from Bao Dai, from Im, and from everybody, I think from the Vietminh too. He had lots of, assorted gifts of satisfaction, you repair well the road. He never appeared to receive those things. [Laughter]

RV: He did not. Someone just brought them to him at the house?

NXP: Yes and then by courier, he was not interested.

RV: What did he do with the medals?

NXP: I don’t know, he threw some away; I think sold it, but what mattered to him was to have funds to repair his roads and bridges, that’s all. He didn’t care from whom. That’s along I said, I don’t think, I was able to understand in the end, for him it didn’t matter who, because he thought the money would belong to the people anyway and so whatever. These scoots were mayhem, the roads and bridges are still there for the people to use so we’ve eaten up their money, whether it’s French money or Vietminh money or imperial money or republican money, it’s the same to him. It’s mostly what paid for the roads and bridges. He didn’t make any money out of it; in fact he was well known to build roads and bridges cheaper than anybody else.

RV: Did you ever go see him work, do his work?

NXP: Yes, many times. I was very young and enjoyed it very much be we were on the sampans for a while because in the Bai Deep, Sau, Cau Mau area.

RV: Living on the sampans?

NXP: On the Sampans, there was no road, he was the one who started the roads and in fact now you have a town called Nam Keng, which means five compartments and that was the five compartments, which the compartment that he built for his tools and there was no town there, there was nothing there. It was just an outpost for these public works people and they just used the word Nam Keng which means the five compartments to refer to it and now it has become the name of the town there, Nam Keng, that is the farthest south that you can go. There was jungle there, marshes and of course we didn’t have much to eat at that time so we ate a kind of chimpanzee, a kind of monkey, with very long arms, half the face is black, the other half is white. It just swang on the trees
and kind of [tum sound]. The flesh is not too bad, it’s very tender. It’s almost chicken, I remember but the horrible thing was the workers, they killed those poor beasts by dozens to feed everybody with meat and when it was horrible I remember, one of the horrible things I remember was the skulls, tiny skulls like this, like oranges, those little monkeys and there were piles and piles of those skulls hacked off the stem.

RV: You remember seeing piles of monkey skulls?
NXP: Yes, but that didn’t prevent me to eat the meat. It was good.

RV: Did you see them on these hunting expeditions, would they go out as a group or would your father go?
NXP: No, we just traveled and then when we saw one we just shoot, they just shoot it. Those carom, they’re kind of cowards. There was also a kind of small alligator, small, it was about, three, four feet long and the meat is almost kind of veal beef taste which is not bad. We ate that too.

RV: Did you ever find and catch snakes and eat snakes?
NXP: Oh, the snakes, the snails, the frogs, that’s the usual thing. That’s what a souvenir, kind old souvenir, so coming back to the kind of living conditions that most people had, those in the cities and those who manage to have some education. Those who travel in to the factories, that is the beginning of the intelligentsia, but the large majority, 80, 90% were the rural peasants and you are not much aware what was going on.

RV: Did your parents push you to go to school for education?
NXP: Yes, very much.

RV: They emphasized this?
NXP: Yes, that was one of their main priorities because most of those families they just wanted to have their children to be educated somewhere, so you had also good schools. The French did a lot of good schools, under the French system you only allowed to the tenth grade, they called it a diploma, so when you have a diploma, you can get a job through the offices but after the diploma you can sit for an exam to join the public service, so you become the secretary of administration, that is the beginning of the social ladder, you go up and up and up and up. If your family is wealthy and I was wealthy enough and then had opted for the French nationality then you could go all the way up and go to France, preferred education.
RV: Was there any expectation from your father that you would follow in his footsteps and be a bridge builder?

NXP: I don’t think so. His concern was to give us the best education possible and he was able financially to send us to Europe because I think he had the impression that the education that you may have in France, much better than the one you would ever dream of in Vietnam, so that was the reason when we had the opportunity, he had the opportunity he would send us there.

RV: I’ve heard from a number of people that I have spoken with, that they have this image of Vietnam under the French that the Vietnamese were kind of captive in their country, that they weren’t free to travel anywhere really, to Laos, Cambodia or outside of Southeast Asia, so Vietnamese, if they had the funs if they could go.

NXP: That’s not true because under French rule the three Indochinese separate countries were one, so you were free to move anywhere. The main thing is that wherever you went would you be able to make a living out of it, so the main thing is to find a place where you have a work to do and then to survive, so and if you look into the history of the new China under French rule you would see that many of the public servants, government servants in Laos, in Cambodia were Vietnamese. So, except for the rich people in Laos and in Cambodia, the other people were not much in a position to fill those positions in that administration and so that is why you have a large community of Vietnamese in Cambodia. Then eventually were absorbed in the Cambodian society and the Camdos, half-breeds of a Vietnamese Cambodian. They were not prevented to move, but they were not able to move, not of legislation, but the economic opportunities.

RV: In 1948 at age thirteen, you went to Paris?

NXP: Yes.

RV: Before you went to Paris you went to school in Saigon; tell me about your experiences in Saigon.

NXP: That is a very well known school. Admiral [name] was the name of the Admiral, the French admiral who came to Lo Chang. And that was a school for the French boys; it was a boy’s school. There was another for the girls called the Marie Curie, the French woman scientist and that was for the girls’ school. Parallel to that, there were also two other schools, one for girls and one for boys but they are reserved
completely for the Vietnamese. But the Chesller Loba schools and then for the few North
Vietnamese who were able to get in. And then there was also a very good school for
people from Laos and Cambodia, that’s why Prince Yanup when they are two.

RV: Did you go to school with French boys?
NXP: Yes, the majority were French boys.

RV: So you weren’t segregated, the Vietnamese boys weren’t segregated away
from the French boys; you were all in the same classroom?
NXP: That school then you have integration because the Vietnamese who were
accepted there were supposed to be already under French influence and rule. But the
other Vietnamese boys school and have to go to another school called the Petrasky
school; there they were allowed only to go up to the tenth grade.

RV: What was your impression of the French boys, this is the first time I assume
that you were around them?
NXP: Yes, there was a very clear impression that they were superior to begin
with, economically, socially and everything. Of course the Vietnamese boys who were
there were considered as the lucky ones and were more or less accepted by the French
community already to be there you see. So we were, they asked exceptions, privileged
boys to be among the French boys. I think we were considered more or less French too.
I did have that impression but the large majority of the people outside would oh, those
Vietnamese boys attending those French schools, they actually are French, turned French
which mean not me too, but at least the general impression, that would be understandable
of course.

RV: You were made to speak French or did you?
NXP: We spoke French always; it was a French school, completely.

RV: Did you receive a good education, you thought?
NXP: Yes, darn good education.

RV: What kind of subjects were you taught?
NXP: Well, it was like in all French schools in France right now.

RV: The same thing?
NXP: Exactly. As you know the French curriculum is very broad they cover
everything, that’s why the French they are very good talkers.
RV: So how many years were you there in Saigon at this elementary school?

NXP: Well I was up there until I left for France, so that is after the war, just for
two or three years I think, two or three or four years.

RV: When you were expecting, when you went to this school, did you think that,
okay, yes when I finish this then I’m probably going to go to Paris to continue my
studies?

NXP: No, didn’t have any idea what was happening to me. In fact I was still very
young there, probably ten or twelve years old. There was an incident too, at that time,
there was a movement from Ho Chi Minh, at that time or in the late ‘40s, I think and
there were agitations in the Vietnamese schools rather, but there was also at that French
school. They were circulating photographs of Ho Chi Minh side by side with Lenin, Karl
Marx, there was photographs of Mao Zedong, Stalin, something if I remember outrightly.

RV: The Vietnamese boys were circulating these?

NXP: Yes, circulating in the French school. I was one of those boys who
distribute those photographs too. I didn’t know what they were, but then we were caught,
we were caught of course and my father was called and I was in principle expelled. So
my father took me home, spanked me a lot, why do you do things like that, don’t do
things like that. I don’t know, guys gave me those things, then they just disappeared,
that’s so. So he managed somehow to explain and then I was returned to the school,
probably it was clear I didn’t know what I was doing. I had no connection organizations,
groups and anything so it was accepted and I was returned school. That was an incident
but that will show you that there was some agitations already.

RV: So apparently some of the Vietnamese boys were aware of Ho Chi Minh’s
movement and what was going on in the north.

NXP: Probably much more of the southerners, rather than be actions but of course
they knew about Ho Chi Minh and Song and Saul but I think that most of the Southerners
down there were motivated, with the intelligentsia motivated, much more in the southern
frame of mind. I didn’t have impression that they were very well organized so ealted it
would be krypton in north Vietnam. I didn’t have the impression still now. They wanted
to be, to shake off the French rule, colonial rules, that was everywhere. That was the
general feeling, we didn’t like the French on our back although we enjoyed the kind of
life that they offered but I think that there was some relatively, we may say that in the
cities and the countryside there was a relative impression of peace. There was no war,
maybe some action from the Vietminh here and there but it was preclisable at that time.
RV: There was this feeling of peace, then Ho Chi Minh is basically declaring war
on the French in the north and wants to oust them, did that run against what people in the
south wanted. They wanted the French off their backs?
NXP: Of course, that is the general impression that the French have returned, so
maybe you can’t do anything against it, still be here. On the other hand there was a
relative feeling that they want to live in peace, they could continue to plow their little
piece of land, lot of land, and then they could meet people, why though to have the fights
going on. Just after the second World War is was hard for everybody, so to tell them that
is life is hard because of the French colonial rule, that would not really catch on but life
was hard for everybody after the second World War and they were aware of it. But then
there was in the delay intelligenstsia and in some quarters the desire to shake off colonial
rule. That was clear, but I wouldn’t say that was conscious in the majority of the people
in the countryside. As long as they were not disrupted by either side, the French or the
Vietminh then they would be happy.
RV: I’m just curious, something just occurred to me, going back to the Japanese
and their defeat in World War II, were the majority of the Vietnamese aware of the
atomic bombing, of how the war actually ended?
NXP: I think they heard about it but they could not imagine the magnitude of such
an action. Probably they were horrified but I doubt very much that most of the people
how were not very educated were very aware what kind of weapon was that. They heard
that hundreds of thousands of people died but they heard that also that during a simple
World War millions of people died too. As I said, except for the Japanese presence,
didn’t touch the Vietnamese much compared to other countries, for example even
Singapore, Thailand, Burma, they had really fighting there with the Japanese. But in
Vietnam you didn't find the Japanese very much, they just took over from the French and
then they surrendered again and they left. They were there just a few months.
RV: For those Vietnamese who were aware that the United States had dropped
two atomic bombs on Japan, these huge massive weapons, do you think that shaped at all
their idea of the United States later when America had a presence in the 1950s that these
are the guys who used an atomic bomb, they have this massive firepower, did that shake
the Vietnamese thought at all, toward the Americans?

NXP: I’m sure that the uneducated Vietnamese were able to understand what was
going on, but the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese did not have any idea about
the United States. They had an idea about Mother France and then somehow remotely
there was a country called the United States that were called the Americans and were not
probably even aware of the proper names, United States of America, there were
Americans somewhere out there, supposed to be rich and rich mean powerful but they
wouldn’t understand what powerful would mean, you see, but think that with the help of
the Americans, Europeans were able to defy Hitler, they were able to understand Hitler
was a bad man and then they were really sure happily, impressed that the Allies, so that
was the term that they were familiar with, the Allies, see not the Americans, the Allies
and when the French returned they returned also in the name of the Allies, because they
were the British and Indian, I don’t know, so the French were clever there to return as the
Allies. Then the people who come to side, did not hear that the French came back and
the French bomb us and so on. There was some bombing, it was only later, after that
building up of the Allies right after the second World War, that then well same friendly
guys came back. That was the impression that most people had. Then it would at that
time come to another country, completely different countries. That is to say the French
came back the same guys, but they came back now to a different thing, to a different
situation. It was not like in the old time.

RV: Would you like to take a break?

NXP: Oh, sure anytime. Any good?
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone resuming the interview with Ambassador Phong and it is now Thursday, September 26, 2002 and we are at the Texas Tech University Southwest Collections Special Collections Library building. This morning Ambassador Phong, we left off when we were discussing your time in Saigon, and elementary school there and your transition is upcoming to Paris, this was in 1948, you believe you were thirteen years old at the time. Could you discuss a little bit about, how did you make the decision or did your family make the decision for you to go overseas to Europe to continue your studies.

Nguyen Xuan Phong: Well, I must say I’m happy to continue with the interview and it’s rather hard to remember more than half a century ago but I try my best. As I said yesterday we were there after the Second World War and then the French were back at that time and things seemed to resume as they were before the Second World War. That is to say we didn’t have much yet of any resistance movement, any kind of warlike acts against the French. There were a bit, much more I am sure in the north but in the southern part of Vietnam, you can travel by day and night easily, there were occasionally acts of shall we say sabotage or I would say reprisals against the administrative machinery of the French in the countryside, the villages, the districts and so on. So at that time there was a general feeling that there was some kind of resistance against the return of the French, but relatively speaking you see, the resistance movements were nothing to
match against the French forces which were called expeditionary forces and they were
back there. But there was a beginning of a feeling of resistance and actions of resistance
against return of the French, so for unknown reasons, I don’t know, my father decided to
send my brother and me to France, maybe because we had also a cousin, much older at
that time, the son of the eldest sister of my mother by the name of Cac, C-A-C and his
father was one of the provincial deputies of our native province of Ben Tre. He was in the
rice business, he was quite wealthy and if you remember he was the one who married my
mother’s sister who was supposed to be my father's wife, so that was my case. Probably I
think that my father made the decision to send my brother and me with that cousin when
his father decided to send him to France. So my brother who is about four years older
than I am, he was at that time, and as most of those youngsters who were very fortunate
to go to France at that time, we took a very old boat, I think it was called the [French
name of boat], that’s the name of the French archeologist who worked on the pyramids in
Egypt [name]. I think he was the first one to decipher the hiero crafts, writing on the
Egypt. So I register in this world so May 1st through [French city] which is just the
outskirt of Paris, of the Pap De’saille and it was a boarding school. We were able to stay
there and the associate deputy, head of that school was the designated as a kind of leader,
tutor for us, so he took care of us, so that was the first contact I had with a French family,
the man was a very good man, with a real typical French wife, housewife type and he had
only one daughter by the name of Yvonne and he was also in the Second World War,
veteran, fought very hard, was wounded at Somme. Eventually he became the head of
one of the largest schools, in high school in Paris, [Le Se Mu te] many years later and he
was also president of the Association of Headmasters or something so he did very well. I
was able to see him again when I returned for Paris Peace Talks, in fact he came to my
house for dinner and then passed away the next day so that was really exceptional that I
was able to meet him again just in extremus. So we were at the [name of school] there
and you can imagine the kind of life we had after the Second World War in France. There
was almost nothing, not much food, not much clothing and we had to go to the flea
markets to find something to wear, things like that. So that was the kind of life we had.

RV: Do you remember when you initially left Vietnam how did you feel, were
you excited, were you sad?
NXP: Well, exciting yes and sad at the same time because we had to leave the parents there. We were so young and I’m sure the excitement took over, the whole thing, adventure.

RV: So tell me about your schooling in Paris, when you got there?

NXP: Well I went there to finish my secondary education so I correct myself quite well because I moved from the French schooling system and then move continuously to the French system in Paris, so there was no problem at all. In fact I was rather a bright student because I think I jumped one or two classes when I was even in Saigon after the war. They found out that I could be of the upper forum and I did quite well and in Paris I did quite well too because I was really excited to be able to be in Paris and study and been a boarder. I didn’t have anywhere to go weekends, most of the other boarders went home but we stayed there and we had that tutor who is the living there too in the school and so it was a very good life that we had, it was a good school, beautiful school, large grounds and a small wood the back we have all these park grounds and a swimming pool. I must have a very funny story here too because when I was with the French school district over there in Saigon, I was very good in swimming among the youngsters. I stood out, I was swimming and the teacher of swimming in Saigon, his name was Tarus, T-A-R-U-S, I think Tarus, or T-A-R-R-I-S, something like that, and well he said Phong, you have skills for swimming, you should try and develop those things. When I arrived at the [name of school] in Paris I found him there again.

RV: Your Saigon teacher?

NXP: Yes, the Saigon teacher and he was there also teaching swimming and so I continued with my swimming and there was another chap too who was in Saigon, but he’s in French by the name of Eve Lou Wa and he was me, say we say the hopeful, future swimmers and we found ourselves there in the same school with the same swimming teacher so we continue our training and Eve Lou Wa eventually became a professional swimmer, represented from the European countries in championship was on he did very well. I was able to see him again the late ‘60s when I returned for the Paris Peace Talks and there you are. I missed my vocation for to be a professional swimmer.

RV: So your classmates, these were Vietnamese students and French students all together?
NXP: Yes, there were many Vietnamese students at [name of school] and we have maintained relations even until now and many of them passed away.

RV: How were they accepting of you, I mean again were they?

NXP: No problems.

RV: No problems?

NXP: I think this was, the French they traditionally the integrate people easily, much easier in the past then now because now probably you have other problems.

RV: What were your favorite subjects, what did you study?

NXP: Well, I like history quite a lot. That was the time I was first very impressed with the Diaries of Anne Frank, that impressed me very much. Then I was really also interested in the writing of Jean Jacques Rousseau and I was also very touched and impressed by the poems of Musset, M-U-S-S-E-T and Musset as you know has always been considered as the poet of love but especially sufferings from love.

RV: Broken hearts.

NXP: Yes, I think it was the bold trend of Josh Rouson the French writer who tried to be a man, that’s why she took the men’s’ name Josh, just the same, correct friends writer who will also after Musset had all the old friends of course, musicians and other artists.

RV: What besides history and literature did you enjoy, economics or politics?

NXP: Not much. I was in the influence of the French, rather romantic than practical.

RV: What did you think of the French culture, this is your first time out of Vietnam, you arrive in Paris?

NXP: The first thing which me was the Vietnamese presence and the Vietnamese communities there because as you know the Vietnamese went to France very early, at the First World War so many of them were sent there to fight among the defense troops and many of those Vietnamese remain in Paris and in France and many of them also became workers of the Vernal car manufacturer in [name of city]. There you see even in the early 19, the time of the First World War you have the beginning of that Vietnamese presence in Paris so they have been there for generations. So we were able to mix with that Vietnamese community easily of course because many of them were my parents’
acquaintances and so we were able to visit them. Then I must tell you that a couple of years later my mother was missing me very much, I had been the Benjamin, the youngest and so they had also the opportunity to go to France in the summer of 1950. My father who was not French nationality and so was remain, but through his work he was considered as equivalent to a French national under the public service of the French there and he was permitted to have his annual vacation, all paid by the French authority, but he had also another good reason because my mother had an ulcer of the stomach and they were prepared to pay for her to go into France for the treatment of that, very funny thing because they contacted a very famous French professor, a specialist in that kind of ulcer and he treated my mother but with no result whatsoever. Then she said she would try traditional medicine that she has been used to in Vietnam and then they sent her the medicine from Vietnam when she was in Paris and then she continued those traditional medicine things. Then the French specialists were very amazed that she improved. She put on weight and everything. So we are able to have our parents there. They were there in the summer of 1950.

RV: How long did they stay?
NXP: They stay probably six months or something like that.
RV: Wow, so they were able to visit nicely with you.
NXP: Yes. It was also at that time that we went on summer vacation in the south of France and my father and my mother took me to visit emperor Bao Dai who had the castle just outside Cann, de la Canne, that is the Chateau de Torrance and because my father had opportunities to meet the emperor before in Saigon and that was the only visit that I had with Emperor Bao Dai.

RV: What do you remember about that visit?
NXP: Not much, I was so young but I was really impressed by the house, enormously and when he tired to keep up with the King Farooq who was then in the south of France, gambling and womanizing and such so Bao Dai was also a kind of playboy as well, tried to keep up with the Jones but then went bankrupt and had to sell his castle. But his next neighbor was Agathan, so he was rich.

RV: So you were what, fifteen, at this point.
NXP: Yes, around that, fourteen, fifteen or something.
RV: Did you stay there in the castle, when you went to the south of France?
NXP: Oh, no just a visit. We went there for vacation, summer vacation, just a few weeks there, I think two weeks or something. Then I continue with the [name of school], my parents went home.

RV: Did you feel like you got a good education there at this school in Paris?
NXP: I think so because I think the French educational facilities and system, and especially [name of school], very well known, it’s one of the larger schools in Paris, many famous people went through there too. It was a good boarding school for us so we were quite happy. At that time in the late ‘40s in Paris, you had the Exis son cealese, jean core sat was simon de bovour hat, and then you had that kind of a crowd, very progressist thinking, materialistic and even very much on the left side of the Secahmento pray where you had those cellars where you had jazz and then the influence of the American Jazz coming there with sinaviche and some New Orleans and the Be Bop dons. That was the whole atmosphere of this period.

RV: So you remember this music?
NXP: I remember that very well, because I used to dance the be bop rather well too. I was fourteen or fifteen I think.

RV: Tell me about what would you do after school for your entertainment, you would go to those clubs?
NXP: Well occasionally on Sundays, because we were in a boarding school we were not allowed to get out of school at all.

RV: During the week?
NXP: Yes, the week.

RV: And so on weekends you would go.
NXP: Yes, then we would be allowed to go out in groups. We have to ask permission and those of us who did not have any family, so were allowed on Sunday to get out.

RV: Any opportunity to date girls?
NXP: Well, I didn’t have any idea about dating girls at that time. We went out, there were girls but I was our school was a boys school, completely boys school but one
of your French friends, often they took their sisters with them and friends with them, so
we were able to mix with all kinds of people but that was it.

RV: What do you think was the hardest thing for you while you were there in
Paris?

NXP: The hardest thing, of course I was homesick at that age and then also the
material situation. The food, we had plenty of food but it was not really palatable, lots of
mashed potatoes and things like that and not much meat. We had rabbits runner, never
had beef or anything more expensive, big schools it must be difficult for them you buy
those good things and have lots of camovayo, the fen cheese, that’s very cheap. Lots of
bread and things like that.

RV: What was the, do you have an outstanding memory of these days, what was
the best thing that you can remember about your time there?

NXP: Nothing special. It was the whole general thing which was good in almost
all aspects. I was also impressed, was on tour by the French film, French film industry,
while I’m beginning to develop. Their summer festival, film festival in Paris and so I
remember I went there and met the film stars and saw them and there was one by the
name of Martin Carol and she was probably the leading lady star at that time and she took
a liking of me because she was the godmother of the Vietnam house and the Paris
vinveste compound and I was with the elder Vietnamese chaps there and one evening she
was there, she recognized the area of Vietnam, and Cambodia and Laos, the called it the
Mizzon de Landosheef, Indochina house and then she took a liking to me, I was the
youngest, then she became Carol, god mother to me to, so that was my friend Carol. She
had a tragic end with those I think, she drowned somewhere in one of the French islands
with some other kid, so that was the two things I managed to remember.

RV: This is your first exposure to western culture up front?

NXP: Yes, besides the French boys in Saigon, yes.

RV: What did you think; you mentioned some of the American culture you
experienced, the jazz music?

NXP: Yes, all the French in Paris at that time, they were also very impressed by
anything American, anything American, after the Second World War, anything American
was good.
RV: How large was that Vietnamese community in Paris?

NXP: Oh, very large, I mean hundreds of thousands and many of them were in the call, what they all the Gackilacane she was and still is the students area, that is the fifth and the sixth district, so we have lots of Vietnamese restaurants there, they lived there. They set a poster ringlet around there. Now, they have moved to the thirteenth district which is kind of a china town of Paris now, lots of Vietnamese living there, but lots of Chinese too.

RV: Did you go to the Eiffel tower?

NXP: Not at all, as a good Parisian at that time, I didn’t go tot the Eiffel tower. It was only later when I returned for the Paris Peace Talks that I had the first opportunity to climb the Eiffel tower. You know the chuck that the good, real and true Parisian, never goes to the Eiffel tower. He may pass by every day but never have the time to go. That’s probably the same as New Yorkers that pass that building as it was.

RV: its just part of the landscape, another building. Well, from Paris you transitioned to London, how did that decision come about?

NXP: Well, I have no idea at all again. My father just decided that we finish our French secondary education and probably I guess only that he might have thought that the conditions for studies would be much better than in France because at that time as I mentioned to you, lots of jazz and dancing and all that in Paris and always that impression that he had, wrongly or rightly that the gay Paris, so he sent us to London, both my brother and me in 1952. There was also a friend who was there by the name of Tan Wi Ton, who is now in California, much older than my brother and me but he was a graduate of the LSE, the London School of Economics and he was with the Shattard Bank in London, training. His family, his elder brother was kind of an assistant to my father in Vietnam for the road building, in fact my father taught him all the trade to the elder brother. So there was that family friend, Tan We Ton, who eventually was also a kind of minister of Saigon government in 1964, ’65 with General Canopy when Bren Wen Ken was Prime Minister. He is now in California. So eh was willing to take care of us in London when we first arrived there in the summer of 1952 and the arrangements was made with him to find a place for us to stay in London and it was also decided between my father and Mr. Ton there that we would try to improve our English language
at the French institute in London, which was a kind of bilingual institute in the South
Kensington area of London. So we were put in the care of a family and very funny, the
family name there was Mr. Brown. We had billing with a Mr. Brown and we stay in
these family, we had a room in his house and he provided the meals so we continued.

RV: Your brother is with you at this point?

NXP: Yes, we were together. We went there at the same time together and that
was the idea. My father put us together so the elder brother would take care of the
younger brother. We were at the French institute to improve our English too, which was
very poor. We only had knowledge of English in Paris through the French educational
system as the first foreign language, which the gudon la angle vie von, live English. So
we started there, but very soon the French institute also helped us to get some kind of
their own professional skills while improving our English there. So both my brother and
I, we were sent to a kind of a school which was named London Foreign Trade school or
something. These are the kind of schools that came off the professional guilds of Britain
centuries ago when they had those guilds by profession, the carpenters, the masons and as
you know they have that kind of guild for all the fields, like the bankers, the architects
and so on. So the British system of education, they weren’t parallel with the universities
but much more on the practical side and so they had equivalents, people from university
can join them to go down for example in the institute, bankers, then do work with banks
while you are attending the university and on these side too, they can go to university but
they belong to those professional organizations. Those professional organizations, trade
guilds they call it, they make you associate fellow of those guilds, which would be the
equivalent some would say of the bachelor’s degree or the Master’s degree or the PhD, as
you go up. You belong to those professional things, so I again out of the blue I joined the
commerce course, commerce and shipping in fact it was. So it was over there, because it
was foreign trade, so you have the foreign transactions. I stayed there for four years while
improving my English at the French institute. They had also lots of those people at the
French institute too, learning French, probably for their commercial purposes, so that was
how it went.

RV: And you were there for four years?
NXP: We were there at the French institute and the London School of Foreign Trade for four years. And then my brother went home because my father said that he has obtained a job for my brother at the Vietnam Airlines, the national carrier there. So my brother left me in 1956, in the summer.

RV: He completed his schooling or no?

NXP: Yes, as the same, he did also the commerce course and so he went home, so I was really lost but during those years in London, many times I had the opportunity to visit Oxford with friends, English friends and I was really bewildered by the place, if you know the place, it’s beautiful. I didn’t know what to do with myself at that time. I was twenty years old then, in ’56, that summer and I just went to Oxford and try and find out how I can get in the university, very hard to get in because Oxford and Cambridge, they are the two residential universities so your admission is limited to the beds they have there. It is not that you can stay home and go there, you have to complete your terms and some the presence there and that is much more important than even attending lectures. It is a whole life that you have to live through, which they call your Oxford career, participating in all kinds of things and the main things for you to see are tutors and write your oclan or essays and present those essays to them and they didn’t pay much attention to lectures you attend or what you have, your hours and such credit because that’s not the main worry, that is the terms of residence if you hand there. So the people down there advised me that the quickest thing for me to get in and the easiest thing for me to get in, probably to take that course in economics and political science. As you know with the Oxford system when you go in you have get your BA and your BA, the nearest to me at that in economics and commerce would be the PPP or the PPE, philosophy, politics, economics, philosophy, politics and psychology, which would then give you a BA. The people there advised me there is no need for you to take the BA, just enroll in one of the specialized diplomas, like diploma of agriculture, diploma of statistics, that would serve the purpose with the home office to renew the visa to remain in England because we were on the student visa and we much have a school to accept us so that’s why blindly I just enrolled for the Diploma in Economics and Political Science, but with the computers they had it was understood that they will organize a kind of program for me, rather in international relations, international economics with emphasis on the political and
philosophy aspects of things, so it was rather extracurricular program. The thing is for you to organize with the deans to accept you who will be your tutors in a certain subject, so each term you have two or three subjects, political history, political theory and all these things, so I had in fact a four year research study course there, but in order to satisfy the legal requirements of immigration I had to have that diploma economics, political science, which I passed in ’58 and then I just continued the course in international relations and international politics.

RV: Was there a cost involved, how did you pay?
NX: Oh, yes there was a cost involved but my father paid. By that time he was also the chairman of the Telly Vietnam which is the wireless radio communications between Vietnam, it’s a kind of a French company, private company and it was called Telly Vietnam. They paid him to be the chairman and that kind of remuneration was just good to pay for my studies at Oxford, just right, which was well twenty pounds a month or something at that time, so that would be fifty dollars in 1956 a month. So that would be $600 a year.

RV: To attend Oxford University, that’s a pretty good bargain. Can we go back to London for a moment?
NX: Yes.

RV: What was the flavor of London in the early 1950s, you were there from 1950-56?
NX: I was very much within the French community there, south Kensington, you have French coffee shops, the French community around there. I had a great time. I was able to be in a French atmosphere which was not too difficult for me to integrate in and at the same time I was able to learn more about the British and the English people and the English ways of life, I like very much. They are peculiar, I assume for the British.

RV: Peculiar as in?
NX: Different from the French. In France we try very much to try to have best food usually and drinks and wines you see. The French didn’t pay much attention to their living accommodations, that’s why you have a shortage of housing in France because they prefer to eat, even then if you lived in France at that time you would find out that many of the houses there don’t even have enough facilities for taking a shower, a bath,
those things. On the contrary, the British they were very clean, their living accommodations, there was no problem to find a place, a nice place, a roomy place, lots of bathrooms but the food was lousy with the British. Then we arrived there and there was still rationing, you know what ride a week, you can’t even buy a chewing gum or candies without your sweet coupons and things like that.

RV: Even this is ten years after World War II, and they’re still rationing?
NXP: Yes, it stopped I believe in ’55. We arrived there in ’52, so the next year was the coronation of Elizabeth the 2nd so I was able to witness that in the streets of course but rationing was still on until ’55, amazing, they didn't have any black market thing because the British were not interested to buy anything to eat on the black market, happy with one egg a week and that’s it and their potatoes.

RV: What was your impression of the British people, were they friendly?
NXP: Well, at first I found them less friendly than the French.

RV: Excuse me. They were friendly?
NXP: Well, at first I thought they were less friendly than the French, they’re most reserved, pragmatic, British pragmatic attitude but once you know them they open up completely in private homes, but in the street would be much different from the French.

You don’t talk easily to a British on the street; he would be on his defensive. Usually you went to start it, not to worry him too much you say nice day today and things like that before you ask for directions to the post office.

RV: How did you like London itself, is it comparable to Paris?
MXP: It’s different, completely different. People behave in a different way, much more disciplined. When you go to the bus stop you sit down and they cue right way. You stop like in France, everybody by himself rushed to the bus, up to the subway and so they are much more disciplined. It’s a different way of life, they prefer their clubs, much more private way of things. In the street they behave, it’s not like the French, yelling, kissing everywhere.

RV: You mentioned the food was not so good there, what else bothered you about London; did you find anything difficult there living in London?
NXP: The fog and the drizzle. A fine rain coming down all the time and you may
not have the sun for weeks. It’s gray and of course the houses are gray too.

RV: What about the nightlife?

NXP: Oh, we didn’t go out much but we went to the student’s clubs and things
like that, so also music and dancing, things like that, as all young people. We had a very
respectable life, probably hearing from our customs and traditions. What I must say is
this, when we arrived in England in the early ‘50s there, I was told and we were able to
meet some, there were probably about twenty Vietnamese in England at that time.

RV: Big difference from Paris.

NXP: Yes, big difference, very big difference. We were able to meet
occasionally; it was all students, from both north and south Vietnam, from the families.
We stayed there, I stayed there almost ten years, eight years in England so we had the
opportunity to know one another among the Vietnamese in London and it was so far
amazing that in the end, those twenty Vietnamese who were in England returned home
and exactly ten of them went to Hanoi and ten of them went to Saigon. When I was in
prison in Hanoi, I was able to relocate a few of them who was in Hanoi, one of them was
working for Hanoi radio because I heard him on an English program of the Hanoi radio
and I said that must be Cong, his name was C-O-N-G, that must be Cong, I can recognize
his voice and it turned out that through connections that was the guy I knew in England.
He was responsible for the English broadcast of I give a round to Hanoi.

RV: Did you ever get to meet up with any of them?

NXP: No, I couldn’t because after I was released from prison in the north I was
sent back to Saigon right away so I would have been able to contact that many in Hanoi,
didn’t have the opportunity, so that was a derinsing tool.

RV: In London, did you, this was in the early 1950s, mid-1950s, did you hear of
American rock and roll music, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, any of this?

NXP: Through the films but in England at that time there was the first appearance
of the mambo, cha-cha-cha, like in American things, that was the influence also of Sally
Cougat and his orchestra, one with the Chihuahua dog and that was the beginning of the
craze at that time. They were like in America; it was very new to the British, mambo,
cha-cha-cha and these things. As you know as far as music as concerned the British were
still very much in the foxtrot, quickstep time, maybe with their tails, dancing with big
boom-booms, that was the British style.

RV: So when you went to Oxford, did you find the curriculum challenging?
NXP: Very, and of course that was completely different from what I had known
up to there. As you know they don’t ask you what do you study, what do you read and
that implies that you read all the time. The system there as you know, they called it the
tutorial system, you have a tutor who will give you a subject each week to write the essay
initially by customs that you are supposed to read to him. You’re meeting once a week,
just you and him and then you are supposed to read your essay about half an hour and
then the remaining half they would comment and discuss with you and that would go on
like that, week after week. Each term you have two or three tutors like that to cover two
or three subjects, you go on like that term after term. As you know you must have
completed your mid-month terms of residence and it was very tough because as you
know your name can only appear on the list of candidates for the examination only once
in your life and you are only allowed to present your application in the third year, that is
to say at the tenth, eleventh term to pass that exam, before your are called that are not
allowed to present the application after the twelfth and thirteenth term, it’s too late for
you unless you have a valid reason you’re late or something. If not then you had to
change subject and present yourself to another examination, don’t do the same
examination twice so you were given just one chance your lifetime, that is why its so
tough. Then the collections every term, at the end of each term you have the collection
papers and if you don’t do well with your collection papers they say good-bye to you.
Very tough, I was told by one guy, who is there, accepted, middling, about six or seven
people waiting outside to take your bed there. While they were telling all the universities,
London, something and you have to be careful, you don’t goof around.

RV: How did you like that?
NXP: I liked it very much.

RV: Well, the pressure.
NXP: Yes, it is the whole atmosphere. You have your bicycle running wild and
then you go to lectures, you listen to people, but most interesting was the activities. You
have to join various clubs in the evenings; I’m not supposed to goof around. If you had
philosophy, you have to join the club of the philosophers and the engineers and so forth. The hostile debating union society there for future politicians to play the games of power they have there, you know that. So that was very exciting and they were very enthusiastic in those activities. I had the impression they were even more interested in those activities that to me carry out your real studies.

RV: Which clubs were you a member of?
NXP: I was with the [?] union and debate team society that various clubs of literature and philosophy. I was attracted to the philosophers.

RV: Which one did you enjoy the most of those clubs?
NXP: I think I enjoyed all of them because with friends you’re all together, it’s not something you’re very aware of, you’re drawn into those things and then you’d have to participate in the students newspapers and write things and all good students to know.

RV: Were there any other Vietnamese there at Oxford?
NXP: No, there was none at my time. Prior to me there was one Vietnamese that was from the north who was also a schoolmate in London. His father was Dr. To Van Dong, and he was in the early ‘50s, it was the mid-50s, the Vietnamese Massacre in London, so that’s why Robert was able to go to Oxford, but I think he stayed just a year, didn’t go gowned. So he went to Paris and tried better at the school of political science in Paris and became big lament of Saigon. He was with me at the Paris Peace Talks and he was also the younger brother of General Tho Manh Do, who went over through Nottingham with big me and some. So, he is now in Washington DC.

RV: Would you like to take a break?
NXP: Okay.

RV: Okay, so Ambassador Phong, let’s talk about, if you will, some of the friends and acquaintances you made in England while you were there.
NXP: Well, of the friends, really friends that I haved in England during my stay there, Merica who I met at the French Institute, she was there at French Institute in London when I was there. We would have the book of America eventually if you are interested. The other two great friends that I had was when I was at Oxford, they were roommates at the beginning. One was Tom Pendry, P-E-N-D-R-Y, Tom Pendry was a very nice looking guy and he came from a very working class family and he belonged to
the Electrical Workers Union or something when he got his scholarship and went to
Oxford as an adult student. Tom Pendry used to wake us up in the morning, with
imitation with Frank Sinatra and he sang very well too, very nice guy. After our
graduation in 1958 he went into politics. He married very wonderful girl, who became an
alderman somewhere in the north of England, that is a kind of counselor, amusement
counselor, but he was in politics and was elected to Parliament as a member of
Parliament for the Labor party, he was very labor, worker’s union. He stayed a Member
of Parliament for over twenty years. The last time I talked with him and we met again
when I was at the Paris Peace Talks, I went to London at the invitation of the House of
Commons to give a presentation about the Paris Peace Talks, the positions we took viz
viz, the Vietnamese Communists in Hanoi and the National Liberation Front. It was very
funny meeting at the House of Commons because the Labor party was a bit more inclined
to the left and the cores of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. After the
presentation there was very little intervention by the other MPs, questions and Tom said
to me afterward that we tried to support you; he said you are a friend so we didn’t ask
many questions and that’s Tom Pendry. Eventually he became Chairman of the
Entertainment committee or something of the House of Commons, he was responsible for
the film industry and all these things and he enjoyed himself very much. But then it was
also a sad story that his wife was in the north of England and he was in London most of
the time and they said to me, Phong, their marriage couldn’t hold any more and I said,
why, we are so apart and besides I have new girlfriend he said, and she’s a film star. He
was in entertainment business, so that was Tom Pendry, that good friend. The other one is
Jonas Mensley. I think he was about a year younger than we were, but Tom Pendry, after
Oxford, went to work with the OECD in Paris.

RV: Jon or Tom?
NXP: Jon, other one was the MP, but Jon Mensley joined the OECD which is the
organization of government corporations and development, which is the organization of
all the capitalist countries as we know, He stayed there until the ‘80s, I think he retired
now and living in Paris. He married an Indian, was in Paris too, very nice couple. He was
a rather easy on the bottle, Jon Mensley as a good Englishman but he was responsible for
all these years for the G-7 meetings and prepare and he could call in the President, Prime
Minister, to get the fines ready, with G-7, now it’s G-8 meetings, quite a good guy, still there. I was very impressed when I saw him again in the late ‘60s when I was in Paris for the talks; he drove a Bentley, a vintage Bentley, really British, much more than Tom Pendry and much more conservative. So these were the two really good friends. There was another who was a really good friend too by the name of Mike N. O’Flanagan. He also got scholarship from Ireland and he was from a poor family, as most of those Irish who went there for their studies. Eventually he became the chairman of the Economic Board of Ireland so we were all economists, fit very well. But he said to me, he went to Paris to see me when I was there for the talks, he was not very interested in politics, he was more often economics, but he said something that touched me very much, that was by ’68, ’69, when we met again after ten years. He said Phong, whatever, you are a marked man. That is to say you have picked a side. I was on the American side in that Vietnam War, so you say whether thou like it or not, and he knew me well, and Mike's always been a very liberal guy, said anybody with will and sincerity, but I said well you’ll have to pick a side. You are a marked man, whatever you may try to do, you have to consign to shoot, you have to. So that was Mike N. O’Flanagan. Now coming to Merica, I met her at the French Institute, South Kensington and we became friends right away.

RV: How old was she, was she your age?

NXP: She was exactly my same age and she was born only one month after me, that is the say I was born in February she was born in March of the same year. What happened to her was that during the Second World War her father was a university professor in Tallinn, the capitol of Estonia but they were under the Soviet Union of course so he was drafted and joined the Red Army and became a Captain in the Army, but he was a philosophy professor. He just disappeared in those war years so Merica was left home with her mother; she was there with a child of the couple. Then eventually the Germans took the right, they pushed up there and then in the later part of the war when the German Army had to retreat under pressure of the Soviet Red Army they were used in the hunt of the Palhoun people to the human shield between the German and the Red Army so with the retreat of the German forces, they hid up the mother and this daughter in Berlin, so they went through the whole way down from north Europe down to Berlin,
didn’t have anything to eat, people die everyday around them and she said she even cut with the rubber sole of their shoes to eat, they eat anything, and they got to they have food to eat, but then they ended in Berlin at the end of the war, at the fuller Berlin they were there. What happened to them was that the Red Cross took care of them, ask most of those people and they tried at that time to find out what happened to the father. They can’t trace him any more and so the Red Cross took them to England as refugees, they were treated as silent in England. The mother then found kind of work in a jeweler’s shop, didn’t speak English but Merica by that time was a kind of a poey clot, she spoke her own language to begin with, she spoke German, she spoke English of course when she was in England. She went to the French institute, she spoke French and was able from the French to understand Spanish and Italian but she was really gifted for the language and she spoke French fluently like a French girl. She was not very good in math, good in languages, but not very good in math, so I was the one who helped her with the math problems and we were very close and we were very young, we were sixteen, seventeen at that time. The mother liked me very much, they lived in the Harbor on the Hill, just a suburb of London and very poor of course, with some allowances and small jobs. Then in the Estonian community in London they had a kind of internal newspaper, they have news on Poland and Estonia and also what the Estonians were doing in England and found. They found then, got in contact, their father was alive, was also taken to England by the Red Cross, he tried to find his wife and daughter, couldn’t find after the war and so they said that they disappeared during the war, so he went to Exeter, she’s in Congor and became a gunman there. He didn’t know much English, he married an English nurse. So they discovered that they were alive so what happened was that at the suggestion of the mother he agreed to move to London from Exeter with his English wife, the nurse who found a job in England too and they managed to find a house not too far away from the mother, so that Merica could then visit her father and be with her mother there. So we became very close and on Sunday I would have lunch at the father’s place with Merica and then dinner on Sunday with the mother and then I would return to my family, Mr. Brown in London. So in all that I became kind of part of the family. After those years when we were about twenty at least, when my brother left, went back home, then I made the decision to go to Oxford and Merica then was looking
for a job. Together we went to look for a job so we went through the ads in the newspaper
and there was an ad that a firm located in high strip Kensington which needed a secretary,
which would know foreign languages so we went to that place and we couldn’t even find
the place because the address given there did not appear in the street. At that place there
was a small tiny alley used to take out the dustbins from the back so we went into the
alley, in the back of courtyard, well you had all the dustbins there, there was a door
leading you to a stair, going up and there was a small room with the name of the
company there. So we pushed the door, we went in and we said they could still respond
to the ad offering a position of secretary for the company. So the guy who was in there,
sure so she asked Merica a few questions and said okay, you can do it. One of it those
guys were involved in what they called selling additives, and older three were also out for
Congress, two chemical engineers and one civil engineer and they started their own
company, pay me hole in that courtyard and they start the Simmin additives, that is to say
chemical things that you put when you prepare your mortar and stuff that would give
bubbles in it, colors or other kind of qualities, that they would break the slower, less
crispy and things like that. They made a fortune; eventually they grew to over 400
workers. Merica was involved in that growth because those three guys said that they had
the factory outside in the summer, which they’re about to build garage but they were very
clever. They had beautiful literature printed to publicize the qualities of their Simmons
additives. There was some vogue introduction, they began to sell those things to the
construction industry and Merica with her foreign languages had also the habit of buying
foreign newspapers, German, French, Italian and she by herself responded to the tender
calls the build this and that all over the world. One, she had the response from the people
who were building the Aspern Dam in Egypt, enormous thing and then the airport in
Beirut or something and another one was the highways network in Germany. They said
they would be interested in those Simmon additives so she was the marketing job in the
crew and they said well, they would be happy to talk to the experts in those things when
they want to and they got the contracts, for those three enormous things. In a couple of
years they grew to about four hundred people. Those three guys were very good too.
They recognized the merit of the girl to get those contracts for them so they share the
equity in four, gave her 25% of the company.
RV: So she was able to build some profit?
NXP: So she became very rich but at the time I was at Oxford, still a poor student there.
RV: Did you keep in touch with her all the time?
NXP: Oh, yes all the time. We came, she would go to Oxford, I would go to London during the vacation we would stay together. So during my stay at Oxford there, the parents, the father and the mother said well, Phong are you thinking of marrying Merica because we would be very happy and she has bought a new house for the mother and a new house for the father and everything. She would be a wonderful partner, practical litigler. She bought herself a sport car, Triumph, small thing, to go to work so I was rather the difficult position but I held the line. It was hard when you mix with those successful people, although I was presented at a student at Oxford but they were very nice to me. They were in business; I was rather an academic, so it’s okay. Of course when it came to pick up the bills, even for her spare pocket money, that would pay for my studies and she bought a Ming vase and toss cash in there, five pound notes in there and just say that is pocket money, that pocket money would see me through a year at Oxford and so that was the situation, that was the hard situation. I held the line for the sake of her boffiness. That lasted until the end of 1959 when I said well, I also have sufficient time at Oxford and my mother was always missing me and that was the moment when I had to make a choice, get a job and stop and also marry Merica. But then it turned out that my parents wanted me to return and my father managed to get a job in Saigon with the foreign ministry that would be a very good job, things like that. But until now by the end of 1959 I was invited to have lunch with Josh P. Case who was the general manager of Steinbeck in Saigon, so Steinbeck was kind of a joint venture between SO, Standard Oil, New Jersey and Mobil, so eventually the early of 1960 we agreed, Merica and I, that I would go home, pick up the job with the SO people and eventually we’d get married.
RV: So you would move back to Saigon, take a job with SO and then she was going to join you in Saigon?
NXP: That’s what we thought, that if I don’t like it in Saigon I will return to London. At that time I was also offered a job by the European Common Market in Brussels, that was the beginning thing because I wrote the paper on the European
Common Market at that time, that is try to have projections to see whether it would be better for England to join the European Common Market or the Free Trade Area with the Scandinavian countries, which would be more Anglo-Saxon tied. It turned out that I came to the conclusion that it would be better for Britain, I looked through the automobile industry, into the machine tools and all those things and I came to conclusion with donna sadouf putz that it would be in the long run more beneficial to Britain to join the European Common Market rather than stay in the Free Trade Area with the Scandinavian countries. So maybe that paper impressed the people of the European Common Market in Brussels, where they had there seat there and they offered me a job but I think in the end I was drawn by the fact that I had to see my parents again and I was away so long. It was a good job at the SO too so I decided to go back but it was tough thing too. The decision was very tough because I must say until the last minute before I took the plane back to Saigon Merica had hoped I’m sure that I would remain in England, but that was half for me. I was still a young guy of twenty-four years old and I thought that well I have the duty to go home to my parents. Then after that I could always return to England, any time, so that was the state of my.

RV: Now, you were the youngest son?
NXP: Yes, the last one.
RV: So, you still feel the duty to go back to your parents, even though your older brother was already there?
NXP: Yes, very much.
RV: Were you homesick a lot for Vietnam while you were in Paris, London and Oxford?
NXP: Very often, yes, very often.
RV: What kind of communication did you have?
NXP: Letters.
RV: Just letters.
NXP: They didn’t have much telephone at that time.
RV: Before we transition back to Saigon, what were your thoughts on the French war in Vietnam while you were in England?
NXP: I didn’t think much but I was very much aware during my stay at Oxford about the conflict between Communism and the capitalists, the Western World.

RV: The Cold War?

NXP: I think at that time we didn’t use much the term Cold War, in the mid’50s, I think the term Cold War came much later but I was really interested in those aspects because I think in ’67 or something, if I’m not mistaken about the date, we’ll have the Spring of Prague, and also we took in about seventeen students, refuges from Prague and I was, I became conscious of the problems of Communism because I was really interested in philosophy and particularly in ethics, in the philosophy of religions. I had friends with the religious circles there a lot when I was at Oxford. I was with the Catholics, that is the Newman society and then I had friends with the Dominicans, they had a college called the Black fires. I took philosophy courses there with them, the gray fires, that’s another college of the Franciscans and then you had also Cam Kyen Hoe, that is the Anglicans so I had friends in all those religious groups. They teased me very often that I was the most Christian among the pagans and that was it. I was very influenced by the Christian in my thoughts and I became aware of the problem of Communism and the problem of Communism to me was first of all, their rejection of the individual, that was the very first impression. The second thought which came to me about Communism was that the system couldn’t be workable and my own don and tutor and Joe Kerwin, Joseph R. Kerwin, told me something which impressed me very much and you cannot blame the hands that how many eggs to give everyday, to give to your people, there are things you cannot blame that way, how many hats per year, how many umbrellas per year, how many hens per year. I was never really impressed by the Socialist notion really, but I crown throughout the Communists the sincerity of their ideals, of social justice, brotherhood, love among nations and things like that. But I also had the impression that ideals like that is not the monopoly of the Communist ideology. Their idealists, old times, while everybody, everywhere in the world but to make it into a political system and then impose your values on the people in the name of social justice, I didn’t believe it because that wouldn’t be a realistic, to bring the human nature, what human needs are, so that was a very short impression of the whole thing.
RV: One of the criticisms of Marx is that he really leaves out the individual, that
the forgets this part of the equation that the individual can make his or her own decisions,
his or her own passions, their choices in vocation and that to put them in a system
squelches that.

NXP: That is where Jen Jacques Rousseau came in again in my mind, that is say,
granted the ideals of social injustice and all these things but then to understand it, in the
historical context, I was able to understand it, Marxism, socialism, communism, came out
into something in historical context with the industrial revolution, with the abuse of labor
and all those things but it is not because of that historical context that you can reduce a
person to a number and deny other aspects of his human dignity, of he’s right as
individuals. I was impressed by the sentence of Jean Jacques Rousseau that maybe you
have to force people to be free. That’s rather difficult, but I had very good lessons from
Job Be’etchcole, who was at Oxford college and he was teaching a particularly theory,
imperfect thoughts and he was one of the authority of Marxism, he was a Marxist
himself, he was the WEPS, that is say we belong to what we would refer to, the 2nd In the
half International, is from the socialist thinking, moved from the dirty national of Lenin
and refused to join Lenin and his methods and his interpretation of Marxism. Maybe
again it is not the right time yet to move to Communism, and that kind of so-called
dictatorship of the proletariat, of the working class and that overcome the dilemma of the
oppressed and oppressors. I was very impressed by George Bowie and in a way you can
say that I’ve been influenced by that masses thinking but I would go on the way be it
wouldn't be valid in my mind for the reasons I just said. But it came out, the whole thing
of a separate historical context with the industrial revolutions in England you have to
defend the interests and rights of the workers but not to make it an ideology and call it as
a historical interpretation of the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors, that is
too far fetched for me. Whatever system that I thought would work except you must have
first of all the respect of the individual. I was probably influenced quite heavily by family
values and to me the family is the most basic, so it was a cell of society and if you deny
that sense of the family as the Maoists would do later on, as you can see, complete
rejection of the family, a unit, that you fail because you go against the very nature of
man, so that was my very youthful way of thinking at that time.
RV: So, back in Vietnam the French and the Vietnamese are fighting, while you are in England?

NXP: Yes, but by that time you see it’s also the end of the French period with the Geneva Accords, 1954-55 then Vietnam moved into the second phase with President Ngo Dinh Diem, the overthrow of emperor Bao Dai, the declaration of the republic and so we begin at that time. But I was not very aware of what was happening in Vietnam, only through the newspapers but became slowly into the notion of the conflict between ideologies without knowing very much about those ideologies, what Capitalism was really, what Communism was really. More and more I was drawn to think that Communism has an international vocation and so maybe will spread but I didn’t understand it very well, yet.

RV: Any of your classmates, where they more aware of what was happening in your country and they bring this to your attention?

NXP: Not at all.

RV: No?

NXP: I don’t think they have any interest in those things. They were much more interested in the British problems, much more practical there, but that seems to be a bit far away. We have the impression that some problems in the so-called Soviet Union at that time but I don’t think that people were much aware at that time in mid-50s or in 60 what Communism was; I don’t think so, really. I doubt very much that people in the Soviet Union at that time behind the Iron Curtain were also aware what Lenin and Stalin were doing to them. They just accepted it like, which was very hard after the Second World War, whether you like it or not, the Russians took probably the hardest blow of the Second World War.

RV: Can you describe how you felt returning to Vietnam when you went back in 1960?

NXP: Well, it was really happy and also a bit proud to return home, not as a lame duck and then there was getting a very good job, very well paying job. I earned something at that time about four times a Colonel, with SO my salary was about four times more than the salaries of a Colonel at that time or a director in the ministry.

RV: Do you remember how much you were paid?
NXP: 2,000 dongs a month or something of that kind. Why the director of the ministry of the Foreign Affair where I was supposed to have a job, my father managed to find a place there for a position there for me was making about 50,000, so free enterprise. And with the largest company in the world, SO.

RV: How did your father feel about you not taking the foreign ministry job and taking?

NXP: Oh, he was happy whatever decision I made. They were happy to have me back to begin with.

RV: Right, and so your first day on the job was April 16, 1960?

NXP: June or something, not that date. That was before the summer of 1960, anyway, I remember.

RV: You were in Saigon.

NXP: Well, I return and then took a few days off because I promised Josh Case that I would report to work as soon as I returned to Saigon and I began the job right away. When I started at SO, the general manager Mr. Case, had then put me on initially with the training program, which would last for two year, so the SO people are really good in training their executives so I was their asset and their executive trainee. There were two of us and we started there and then I rotated in two years in all the departments so I think we started with the operations department, that is the technical aspect of the business and so I went to the oil depots, reception of the tanks that is coming in and then distribute the products. Then you go and do refueling airplanes at the airport and then afterwards I was moved to the sales department, that is they learn people sell kerosene and gasoline and subway stations, how to set up these things and after the sales department I was then put to the finance accounting to learn how to keep the books and I went then to the human resources, the organization of manpower and in the end of the two year program and up with the general manager’s officer to see the total combination, the complete organization of the whole business. So by that time, that would be about ’62, ’63. There was the problem with the petroleum workers’ union; they demanded all kinds of things, salaries, wage increases and things like that. By that time that Josh Case said why don’t you join the human resources, which could be personnel department and I gave them a hand on the conversations with the workers’ union so that’s why I joined the negotiations in March
'63, tat lasted for two years. It became, the negotiation industry with Shell and CanTex and so I conducted those negotiations of the management side with the workers’ union there for two years. We charted the first collective agreement, industrywise in Vietnam history and we signed that by ’64 or beginning of ’65, which then became the model right away for the plantation workers and the banks, so they took our model adapted to their industries and they signed the following two collective agreements of Vietnam, there were three collective agreements by 1965 in Vietnam. So, I knew well the workers’ unions, the people at the Labor ministry and the leaders there, and it was tough negotiations but everybody was happy, so I was also very proud because at that very age and I conducted very tough negotiations on a very friendly basis and they were very happy because those oil companies, with Shell and Cantex and SO, all the big shots were foreign, expatriates and they were happy to find someone in me who could talk to them, first of all, more or less fluently and understand them and be able in Vietnamese to deal with the Vietnamese workers’ unions and so that was a tough job for them to find someone. They were happy that I was instrumental in negotiations

RV: Did you feel like you had found a really good place for your career?
NXP: I was very happy because that was the first time that anything really practical besides academic work.

RV: Did you see yourself staying with SO and staying in the private sector?
NXP: Yes, sure I was very interested in their retirement plan.

RV: We’re almost out of time here on this disk, I want to ask you one other question before we have to switch disks, can you describe Saigon at this time, you came back in 1960?
NXP: Yes, so in the 1960 there was not much fighting. You can travel in day and night; I used to drive from Saigon to Da Lat twelve even at night without much fear of being attacked or something. There was subversive actions, but scattered and like in the late ‘40s and even in the ‘50s or the resistance movements were in position only to have kind of sabotage work or even to, how do you call it, reprisals against the Vietnamese who were not in the Vietminh ranks or the Communist ranks.

RV: You’re talking about the Vietcong in the south doing this?
NXP: Yes, so at that time I think we started to use the expression Vietcong.

President Ngo Dinh Diem pleased himself to call them the Communist pirates, rather
Dong Fe, which means the highway brigands and robbers and things like that. Which
was the way he labeled them but they blew up movie houses and markets and killed
village chiefs. It was not the fashion to use the term at that time but they were terrorists.
They’d use acts of terrorism, that is they way of fighting which would lead you to
reassess your concept of warfare, that was the beginning. No one was aware very much
the terrorism would be a way of fighting, that was the beginning.

RV: Were you fearful in Saigon?
NXP: I was not. I had a good job with a powerful American company, well paid,
had my car, company car and I lived with my parents, so good life but very busy because
that area was extremely busy. I was not much aware of the Saigon government doing, I
thought that they were the authority, they have to deal with some kind of resistance from
the Communists and President Ngo Dinh Diem claimed to be apos of the free world. We
had the beginning of the American presence more and more everyday, but I was so busy
with other things that I didn’t pay attention to those things. The first clash I had with the
regime was a very funny incident.

RV: Before we get into that, let me change this disk out, okay. Ambassador
Phong and I are going to stop the second session of our interview today and we will
resume tomorrow at nine AM. Thank you sir.