

A Panel Discussion with Tom Bowman, Tom Jones,
Patrick Lam and Pham Thien Khac
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Kranich: Good evening everyone; thank you Eileen. WILL - Illinois Public Media is pleased to be working again with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum to collect and preserve the firsthand experiences of Illinois's veterans, those who stayed behind, and those who made Illinois their new homeland as a result of the war.

When I first met Mark DePue, it was 2006. He had just become the director of oral history, a newly created position at the library. He told me that the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library wanted to be the repository for the oral histories of Illinois veterans. If you look at the library's website today, you will see hundreds of stories posted there already, from World War II onward, including the forty plus oral histories donated by WILL. There are other oral histories there as well, stories that document Illinois's



Kimberlie Kranich, Director of Community Content and Engagement at Illinois Public Media, welcomes the audience to the event in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum's Union Theater.

history with agriculture, immigration, education, politics, political activism, sports and more.

This is not the first time that WILL and the museum and library have shared this stage to talk about war and its long lasting consequences. In 2007, we partnered to bring you Central Illinois World War II stories. WILL is collecting and preserving dozens of oral histories about the Vietnam War and turning them into lesson plans, so that social studies teachers in Illinois have local material to present during their units on the Vietnam War. These stories, lesson plans and oral histories will be distributed, free of charge, through the Illinois edition of PBS Learning Media, a media on-demand service, designed for K-12 classrooms. Our thanks to the Illinois Humanities Council, who helped fund the gathering of these oral histories by Illinois public media stations. Tonight we welcome you to “Vietnam, First Encounters,” the first of several events in the coming year and beyond, co-presented by WILL and our downstate library and museum partners.

The Vietnam War had many first encounters for the American soldiers who fought there, the South Vietnamese soldiers who trained in the U.S. and fought in Vietnam, and the civilians who, after the fall of Saigon, became refugees and eventually residents of Illinois. Some of these soldiers and refugees are here with us tonight for a panel discussion, moderated by Mark DePue. We thank them for their survival, their courage, their willingness to share their firsthand experiences of war in oral history interviews, and their participation in tonight’s panel. For it is only when we hear the stories of war from multiple perspectives that we can know war’s true impact.

Before we turn to our local panel, we are going to be watching a short clip.

I do want to say, WILL, through the museum, is videotaping tonight’s presentation, and we will put it on our website for future on-demand viewing. We’re going to show you a twenty minute clip from a ninety minute Oscar-nominated film called *Last Days in Vietnam*. The film will be broadcast on WILL-TV on Monday, May 31, at 5:00 PM. Most of you have a flier about that. The film details the days leading up to the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1975, as North Vietnamese communist forces encircled what was then called Saigon and efforts by some U.S. personnel to save as many of their colleagues as possible. This excerpt shows the tensions, the costs, and the betrayal that were the undeniable consequences of the Vietnam War. A warning, some of the scenes may be graphic and disturbing.



The panel members for Vietnam First Encounters relax while waiting for the evening to begin. From left to right are Tom Bowman, Tom Jones, moderator Mark DePue, Pham Thien Khac and Patrick Lam.

(pause in recording to view film excerpt)

DePue: While all of you are taking your seats, I want to make a very brief observation. I think almost everybody in the audience, and certainly this group here, with the exception of

Patrick, grew up hearing all of the stories about World War II, about our fathers and our grandparents and our uncles and that generation. It was what? Twenty, twenty-five years removed from World War II?

We are now fifty years removed from the beginning of when the U.S. really started to ramp up in Vietnam and forty years removed from the end of that war. I don't know about you, but to me, it hardly seems possible that that much time has elapsed. I've had questions recently, as everybody understands the emotions that the United States and Vietnam were going through at the time. Is it time now that we can deal with that, the emotions? Have we gotten beyond that? I'm not sure we'll ever get beyond the emotions of the war, but it seems definitely the time that we do start reflecting, and at least preserving these memories and talking about them.



The panel members for Vietnam First Encounters included (L-R) Tom Bowman, Tom Jones, moderator Mark DePue, Pham Thien Khac and Patrick Lam.

I want to thank all four of our panelists for being here today. We're going to be talking for roughly twenty minutes or so, and then we'll turn it over to the audience, who will have a chance to ask questions as well. I'll remind you when we get to that point. We're filming this and want everyone to be able to hear the questions, including ourselves up here. We have microphones, so when you get the chance, please wait for the microphone to get to you before asking your question.

I'll begin with brief introductions of our participants, starting from my right, Tom Bowman. I've known Tom for quite a while. He graduated in '67. You were drafted and ended up in the Medical Service Corps as a medical service specialist. That meant you were doing paperwork. But, as the Army oftentimes does, by the time you got to Vietnam, you were doing paperwork and a whole lot more, to include working in a hospital at Cam Ranh Bay, I believe, doing lots of triage, and unfortunately being there when a major Viet Cong sapper raid hit the hospital.¹ That was a very trying moment for Tom, who came back home and has since had a very long and illustrious career—if I can

¹ A sapper is a soldier who performs a variety of military engineering duties, such as breaching fortifications, demolitions, bridge-building, laying or clearing minefields, preparing field defenses, as well as working on road and airfield construction and repair. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sapper>)

say that—in the National Guard. It took a while, Tom, but you finally stood up, because you're an Iraq War veteran as well, Tom Bowman (applause).

We have a surplus of Toms tonight. On my immediate right is Tom Jones. I got to know Tom because he wrote a book, and I tracked him down. I'm sure glad that I did. Tom grew up in Peoria and then Chicago. When he was taking his test, at the time, and knew that he was going to be heading to the military, he scored very well as a dental technician and as a corpsman. As Tom tells the story, (quoting from Jones' interview) "I'm not sure exactly what a corpsman is. I don't think I want to be a dental technician." So, he ended up being a corpsman, and then found out, in the process of training, that corpsmen in the Navy ended up being medics with the Marine Corps. And maybe—I don't know if you would express it this way—the second mistake was when you got to Vietnam and didn't complain too loudly, when they said, "How about you sign up with this long-range reconnaissance patrol," without knowing too much about what that was. But in Tom's experience he quickly found out that was the guys in small groups of anywhere from seven to ten, in that neighborhood, who dropped behind enemy lines.

Now, behind enemy lines, is a misnomer in Vietnam. It meant being deep in enemy territory, with the goal of making sure that the enemy never found him. Survival was what it was all about. Tom came back, did an awful lot of counseling, and—I think it's fair to say—some struggling yourself, adjusting with the experiences in Vietnam and what it took to stay alive and then coming back to the United States where sometimes things just didn't make sense, based on the experiences you'd just had. That's Tom Jones' experience. (applause)

Mr. Pham, Pham Thien Khac, born and raised in Vietnam. Mr. Pham's understanding of English is a little bit better than his speaking of English, so Patrick Lam is going to be helping this evening with translating for Mr. Pham. Your family was Catholic. By 1967, I think, you found yourself in an officer training program, was commissioned as an engineer officer, and was doing construction engineering. So, Mr. Pham didn't see a lot of combat, but he saw enough to have a flavor of it. He was there, in the northern parts of South Vietnam, in 1973, when the Paris Peace Accord was signed.²

One reason I put the Vietnam map in your handout was to show you all of the terrain that the Paris Peace Accords essentially handed over to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. It was a sizable chunk of South Vietnam. You look at it and say, "How could they ever have figured out that that was going to work in the long term?"

Anyway, by 1973, the United States was seriously scaling down, and Mr. Pham was still in the military. Fast forward two years later, and the country is crumbling, as we just saw in this film, and Mr. Pham has a decision to make. He did not participate in a formal surrender ceremony to the North Vietnamese Army. Instead, he just kind of disappeared into the woodwork of rural Vietnam. He was able to stay there for a few months, until something happened. Probably a neighbor turned you in, and you spent one year in a re-education camp. It sounds rather innocuous; it wasn't.

²The Paris Peace Accords, officially titled the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam, was a peace treaty signed on January 27, 1973, to establish peace in Vietnam and end the Vietnam War. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Peace_Accords)

It was just like being in a prisoner of war camp, if not worse. After one year, Mr. Pham's health was completely broken. He was not able to perform any hard labor any more, and they released him. It was... I'm not sure how long. But some time a few years later, you decided to change your name, to change your identity, to move to a different part of Vietnam. This began a long journey, for Mr. Pham's family especially.

By 1989, still worried that the Vietnamese officials were going to discover who he was and put him right back in prison, he made the very tough decision for himself and his oldest son to escape from Vietnam, 1989. They made their way eventually to Thailand, leaving the rest of the family back in Vietnam. After a few years in Thailand in a couple of different refugee camps, he was faced with a real dilemma.

I'm not sure how I could every possibly deal with this, but it was explained that the Thai government was tired of all these Vietnamese refugee camps, and they were going to close them. The only real alternative for Mr. Pham and his son was to return to Vietnam, with the promise that the American Embassy would assist them in, eventually and in the near term, getting out of Vietnam. You made that very, very tough decision, returned to Vietnam in '96, and it was 1998 that you eventually were able to immigrate to the United States and become, eventually, American citizens. You moved to Springfield, I believe, in 2000. Your son was running a nail salon at the time, and that's what brought you to Springfield, probably not the place you anticipated coming to when you first moved here. (applause)

Now, Patrick Lam, on my far left. You have a very different story, Patrick. You were two years old at the time of the collapse of Saigon and the fall of Vietnam. In 1979, as I understand your story, your grandmother decided there was no future for your family in South Vietnam, in Vietnam at that time, no future in Ho Chi Minh City [now Saigon], that it was time to leave the country. But—and this is the amazing part of Patrick's story as he described it to me—the decision was made that Patrick would leave, that his parents and his other siblings would stay in the country because the chances of survival in 1979 were roughly 50 percent. That's what they figured, 50 percent.

So they took their son, who was seven years old at the time, and ended up on a boat that snuck out of Vietnam—200 people on the boat—and eventually, after being adrift in the ocean, the South China Sea, for many, many days, saw an oil derrick on the horizon and made its way to the oil derrick. There they were given the challenge, only if you jump in the water will the people on the oil derrick, the oil workers, rescue you. Otherwise, they're not going to take you onboard.

Patrick and his family decided to jump into the ocean and were rescued. Most of the other people stayed on the boat. Eventually they were put on another ship and taken to Koh Kood Island, a tiny little place. It was uninhabited, I understand, at the time you got there, just kind of abandoned to a certain extent, given just barely enough to survive. They next had to learn how to be castaways, essentially, for a while, until the Indonesian government finally came back and rescued them and took them to another island. It was not until 1980 that you... I think it was at San Francisco that the plane landed. That was Patrick's journey to the United States. (applause)

Now, maybe that's a little bit more of an introduction than I had anticipated giving, but I think it's important to understand where you all are coming from. Let me

just start with this question to open things up, and I will turn it over to anybody [on the panel] who wants to jump in on it. What were your impressions of what we just saw in the film, basically setting up this incredible, painful dilemma that the United States military and the State Department and those officials still in Vietnam had in trying to rescue as many of these people who had bet their lives on the United States and on the future of South Vietnam?

Bowman: We abandoned them. We abandoned the vast majority of those people that worked with us during the entire time that we were there. We had Vietnamese scouts; we had Vietnamese interpreters; we had Vietnamese people working with us, side-by-side the whole time, and we abandoned most of them, bottom line.

DePue: Mr. Pham, this had to be difficult for you to watch tonight. What were your feelings as you were watching this film?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: He said, “Very painful,” that he would never be able to forget, probably for the rest of his life.

DePue: But would want to forget, I would assume?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: “Yes, cannot.”

DePue: Okay, anybody else? Tom?

Jones: *Pham Thien Khac, a former South Vietnamese officer, and Patrick Lam discuss Mr. Pham's experiences after the fall of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War panel discussion.*



Well, I think it was abandonment. I was in a unit that we had very little interaction. We didn't exist. The enemy knew more about us than the people who were h in South Vietnam. They didn't know we existed, our own folks didn't. I was sort of used to this dichotomy kind of thing with Vietnam. I mean, I was a corpsman, but I was with the long range reconnaissance, so until someone got shot, I was a Marine and then became a corpsman. But by the same token, I used to go in to Huế, you know, and hold medical call with doctors, which is where I saw the human side of what was going on.³

Huế was a beautiful place, and I saw the destruction of that. So, I've had two different senses of my time in Vietnam, one operating with the doctor and holding medical call and seeing the injured and the kids that were coming with limbs blown off and all that, and then going out on a six-man recon team where the only thing that counted was the six of us.

DePue: What I want to turn to next—and I'm going to start with this side of the panel and ask the two of you—is your perceptions of Vietnam, what the name conjured up, before you even went there? Tom?

³ Huế is a city in central Vietnam that was the capital of Đàng Trong from 1738 to 1775 and of the Nguyen Dynasty from 1802 to 1945. A major attraction is its vast, 19th-century citadel, surrounded by a moat and thick stone walls. It encompasses the Imperial City, with palaces and shrines. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hu%E1%BA%BF>)

Bowman: My perception before?

DePue: Yeah.

Bowman: It was almost null and void. I didn't really have a perception. I was in college and focused on my career, what I thought was going to be my career. Of course, you saw things in the paper, heard things on the news, and *Life* magazine was a big thing, but how it applied to me... I just didn't apply it to me.⁴ That draft notice was the first realization that Vietnam was real.

DePue: I think yours is the only draft notice that I actually have a picture of, that I've recorded with the collection.

Bowman: My draft notice came four days before I was to enter college, down at Southern Illinois University. It was kind of a shock to my system.

DePue: So your perception is, my plans just changed.

Bowman: They just went in the toilet. (laughter)

DePue: Tom?

Jones: You had to see where it started from. What was a jungle? When I was growing up, a jungle was Tarzan's neighborhood—and he could make elephants stampede—until I went to Jungle Warfare School in Panama, and I found out that wasn't true (laughs), in terms of it. Like I said, it was—and I didn't think about it then—that on this one side I was doing all this medical...trying to save people, help people. And on the other side, if you weren't part of the six of us that came off the helicopter, you didn't count because everywhere we went was enemy country.

I tell people, you know, I needed a passport for the number of countries I've been in, that nobody knew I was there. At that time, I was just going to... I had two years of college and was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I really thought going in the service would give me something in terms of the medical training because I was in school for medical technology before I went in. It was great at first because I was at San Diego at Balboa Hospital, working.

Then I went to do my sea duty. They said I was supposed to be on sea duty. I'm thinking it would be on a ship, and they sent me to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. That didn't sound like no ship I knew about (laughter). Then I went to Jungle Warfare Training in Panama. That's when I knew I was in trouble, because from there, I went straight to Vietnam. When I got there, the guy said he needed three folks for this long range reconnaissance. He said, "You and two others." You do not let things get on your record.

But interesting, when I was coming back home I ended up getting orders to go to the Radioisotope Nuclear Medicine School at Bethesda, Maryland. I have no idea why that happened. I left from there, and I ran the radioisotope lab at Great Lakes Naval Hospital. So, you know, it's sort of a circular. I ended up at a higher place in the medical

⁴ *Life* was an American magazine published weekly from 1883 to 1972, as an intermittent "special" until 1978, and as a monthly from 1978 until 2000. During its golden age, from 1936 to 1972, *Life* was a wide-ranging weekly general interest magazine known for the quality of its photography. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_\(magazine\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_(magazine)))

field than I would have been if I did not go into service. But, boy, on the way was certainly interesting.

DePue: Well, Mr. Pham, the question is quite different for you. When you were going through your military training in the first couple of years, in 1971, '72, what was your impression of Americans and of the United States?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: He was very interested...

DePue: Speak up.

Lam: ...and excited to be able to learn the ways of the Americans, new culture, the technology that was brought over to Vietnam. So there was a challenge and also excitement, for him to have all that knowledge that's never been exposed to Vietnam before.



Tom Bowman and Tom Jones, Vietnam veterans, listen intently to the discussion between Patrick Lam, who served as the interpreter, and Mr. Pham during the Vietnam War panel discussion.

DePue: Part two of this question, Mr. Pham, what was your feeling in 1973, when we signed the Paris Peace Accords, and you knew the United States soldiers were leaving very quickly?⁵

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: Mr. Pham said, as soon as they found out that the treaty was signed, basically they lost all hope, especially with the troops pulling back, no more supplies for them to fight with. It was pretty much doomsday for them. They realized that.

DePue: My next question then—kind of in this journey and in keeping with the theme of encounters, if you will—is talking about the experiences of coming home. Tom Bowman, you have a very strong memory about that experience of coming home. I wonder if you can share that? That would be a good way to start this portion of the questions.

Bowman: You mean the flight?

DePue: The flight, yes.

Bowman: For those of you that don't understand, when you're getting close to the end of your tour—and you had 365 days—usually about a week before, you would report to what we called the Repo-Depo, or Replacement Station. You get in there, and you go to what they call a manifest reading, where some sergeant will get up at noon, 2:00, 5:00, 7:00, whatever, and he'll read a list of names that are going out on the next flight. Once your

⁵ The Paris Peace Accords, officially titled the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam, was a peace treaty signed on January 27, 1973, to establish peace in Vietnam and end the Vietnam War. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Peace_Accords)

name is read, you gather up all your gear, take it over to kind of...basically a big open building and kind of hang out there until you're ready to go.

At that point in time, it gets really uptight. There's a lot of tension, not a lot of kidding around, not a lot of joking, because everybody is thinking one thing; in a matter of hours, I'm going home. And everybody's afraid of that mortar round or that rocket coming in and not being able to get on that plane. I mean, it gets real quiet.

My flight left about 11:30 that night. About 10:00 they came in. They picked up all the bags, put them on a truck, and took off. Then they came in and said, "The buses are here." So we all go out, single file, and you line up, getting on the bus. It's quiet; nobody speaks; nobody's talking. It's just the tension; you feel the tension in the air. It's deathly quiet. On the bus, the ride down to the air strip is about a thirty minute ride. We get down there, and like I say, on the bus ride there's not a word; not a word was spoken, by anybody. I mean, you've got generals on that bus, and you've got privates on that bus, and nobody's talking about anything.

So you get down to the flight line, and the buses go right out onto the flight line. The airplane's there, a 707 commercial airliner. Everybody gets off the buses, up the steps, on the airplane, quiet; it's deathly, deathly quiet. The stewardesses are trying to welcome you on board. Nobody talks to them. Nobody hardly says anything, other than a nod, but it's deathly quiet. You go back; you sit down, find a seat, and the tension... You can just feel it.

One of the things that we were all afraid of was that freedom bird—that's what they call those civilian aircraft that were coming in to take us home—that freedom bird, sitting on the end of that runway, was a prime target. There was no place in Vietnam that was totally safe. You're just sitting there, waiting for a mortar round to hit that airplane and it just... You're just uptight. I'm sure that those Vietnam veterans that are sitting in this audience can relate to what I'm saying.

Then the engines fire up, and you feel it rolling down that runway. As soon as that airplane lifts off the ground, the place just goes crazy. The deathly quiet ends, and it just... Everybody is just hooting. As soon as you can feel them wheels take off, it's just a feeling of elation. You're going home; you made it; all your parts are still with you, and you're going home. On our flight there was a group of senior officers that were up in the first class area of the aircraft. Somehow or another—nobody questioned how they did it—they smuggled onto that aircraft several cases of booze. They broke that out immediately. (laughter)

The pilot makes one last turn. He's out flying down the coast of the South China Sea. He makes the announcement, says, "Anybody wants their last view of Vietnam, it's off to the left of the aircraft." And the ecstatic...the feeling of you made it; you're going home, and that was just... I don't know how to describe it.

DePue: I think you described it in a way we'll easily visualized.

(addressing Mr. Lam) I need to make an apology because I overlooked asking you a question about your impressions of the United States when you were growing up, but it needs to be changed just a little bit from the way I asked other people, especially Mr. Pham here. What was it that you were hearing from the Vietnamese government as

they were trying to tell you about what the United States was? What were you learning about this country while you were growing up, while you're still in-country?

Lam: I remember watching cartoons, depiction of American soldiers as the bad guys. The Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, at the time were the good guys, jumping into tanks, throwing grenades and fighting against the Americans. For me, I was so young, but that's what they were instilling in our brain, that the Americans were the bad guys, as far as we know.

DePue: Do you remember ever hearing your parents or relatives talk about the United States or Americans or their experiences with the United States?

Lam: No, we were just trying to survive then. I think it was just a struggle under the new government, which ultimately led to my departure of Vietnam in '79. But from '75 to '79 we were just trying to survive, keeping our heads above our neck and just go about business and surviving day by day, living off the field, working in the farmland, whoever had it, and just trying to keep everything together at that point.

DePue: Growing up in the United States as a very young lad, that's the last thing that you're normally worried about. You're not concerned about what's going on in the rest of the world because your world is rather small. I suspect it was the same thing in your case.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: I'll take it back to you then, Tom. Talk about your experiences of coming back home, probably, more appropriately, about once you actually got to the United States and were dealing with the adjustments.

Jones: Right. First of all I wasn't... I went through a two-step [process], you know. You went to one step; you came down. (addressing Bowman) How long were you there?

Bowman: At the repo?

Jones: Yeah, the repo.

Bowman: Probably about six days, five or six days, something like that.

Jones: Where I just came off patrol, half the team had got killed or wounded, so they just wanted to get me out. They sent me down, but I ended up in the 3rd Shore Patrol. Sure, I said, "Well, this is neat." You're just supposed to move big things around for people.

Well, they took all the grunts, these guys were on the line. So every night we got hit. One day, they finally got their got on the plane, and what you say is right, everybody... Once those wheels go up, it's like you're leaving, and you're going to another world.

Bowman: Going back to the world.

Jones: Going back to the world, right. But then you get home. You land, and then you walk off. Now, what happened is most folks kissed the ground. I'm back home; I'm in America, oh yeah. Then you walk through the terminal, and people start calling you names and spitting on you. And then a whole lot of folks in colorful clothes would be dancing around you calling you baby killers, you know. All of a sudden, it's like where am I? This does not seem like home. This is not like where I left from because there's so much

turmoil going on, you know, the challenge of authority and everybody... The youth were trying to find new ways of expression. I'm not sure what it was, but I'm sure some folks have written a lot of books about it.

When you are coming home as a person, you've been in that fight for your country. You get off the plane, and you walk through the terminal, and you almost feel like you're being attacked for serving the country. Then, you don't realize how much of Vietnam stays with you. It takes a long time for it to get out of... You don't get rid of it; you never do. It took me two years to stop before I could walk down a street and didn't look for snipers or ambushes.

Bowman: Or react to a mortar round?

Jones: Or any sound like a mortar round (laughs), any big boom sounds. And you don't realize it because these are all survival instincts. I couldn't go into a room unless I knew where everybody was going. Is he coming towards me? You know, you kept doing threat analysis—Is he going around, or he's going over there?—because you still had it all inside of you.

But people around you, they look at you like, you're at home now; you should have no problems. Well, it's not a switch you could just turn off and turn on. Then, when you run into the kind of things that people, with their beliefs that every Vietnam veteran had to be some guy that's going to get a sniper and go in the bell tower and start shooting people.⁶ All of a sudden you come home, and your family is scared of you because they've seen what's on TV. The first TV war, you know; it was the first time TV was in the war. It took a while, and you thought, and you felt at different paces than people around you. It seemed like you were used to living in a do or die, and all of a sudden you come back, and folks say, "Well, this is going to go over here." Maybe, yeah, could be...a lot of grey area. You were looking; well, are we going or not? But you were moving at a different tempo than everything around you. It took a long time before I actually would say I was home, in my heart.

DePue: Mr. Pham, this question has to be different for you. What I want to know is, when you left Vietnam in 1989, at that moment, as a refugee, what was your goal? Was it to get to the United States or to go someplace else?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: Mr. Pham said that, when they departed in '89, the only goal was to leave Vietnam, to leave the oppression of communism. They didn't care where they went; it was just to get out of the country.

DePue: What was your reaction when you realized Thailand didn't want you, and other countries didn't want you, that there weren't many options, except maybe the United States?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

⁶ The Texas Tower shooting of 1966, also called University of Texas clock tower shooting, was a mass shooting in Austin, Texas, on August 1, 1966, in which Charles Whitman, a student and ex-Marine, fired down from the clock tower on the campus of the University of Texas, killing 14 people and wounding 31 others. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Texas-Tower-shooting-of-1966>)

Lam: When he was returned and forced to go back to Vietnam, very depressed, loss of all hope. His only goal at that time was to just go in hiding, be very elusive, stay away from public view and just survive day by day.

DePue: Then what was your reaction when you found out that you and your family were coming to the United States?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: The first time, when he was called to the embassy for the interview, for paperwork to come to the United States, he was very at disbelief. He doubted that it was real until the second time, when his son was called up again, to go up and complete some more paperwork. That's when things started to sink in. He was still holding in his excitement, still in disbelief and didn't think that this was true, but still was very hopeful at that time.

DePue: And the question is pretty similar in your case, Patrick. When you accompanied your aunt and your uncle and cousins and other family members, but leaving most of your family behind in Vietnam, what was the initial plan? Was it to get to the United States or just to get out of Vietnam?

Lam: I was a kid at that time. I just remember being very sad leaving my home. It was the middle of the night, and it was raining. We all lined up in this little boat, and we started docking the boat, crying with my mom. She said, "I'll see you whenever I see you." I went with aunts and uncles, whom I've never lived with before, leaving my siblings behind. I didn't know where we were going. My mom just said, "I'll see you next time, hopefully. Just listen to your aunts and uncles." Then I went on board, and then it was a journey after that. But for me, personally, I didn't know where I was going. I was just told to go and go ahead and just go along for the ride.

DePue: Then you end up in the water at that oil derrick and then at Koh Kood Island.

Lam: Yes.

DePue: A tiny little island. Tell us about life on that island.

Lam: You know, I'm sure you've all heard of the scene in *Castaway* with Tom Hanks and [the story of] *Robinson Crusoe*.^{7, 8} For me, as a little kid, that was an adventure. I think it made me who I am. I was younger then; I fit right in. I grew up in Vietnam those years, surviving in the farmland. My dad passed away during the war. He was an interpreter for the U.S. Embassy and was ambushed by the Viet Cong when he left in the middle of the night to return home to see my mom, who was in labor with my youngest brother. I don't remember him very much but, you know, I was prepared for this trip, I suppose. That's why my mom picked me out of the other siblings.

⁷*Castaway* is a 2000 American survival drama film directed and produced by Robert Zemeckis and starring Tom Hanks. Hanks plays a FedEx employee stranded on an uninhabited island after his plane crashes in the South Pacific. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cast_Away)

⁸*Robinson Crusoe* is a novel by Daniel Defoe, first published on 25 April 1719. The first edition credited the work's protagonist Robinson Crusoe as its author, leading many readers to believe he was a real person and the book a travelogue of true incidents. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robinson_Crusoe)

I fit right in. I went up to the mountains, chopped the trees, whatever I had to help out with. When we were on that island, they divided little lots of land for family members. I participated in building little huts. For me it was like a Boy Scout, let him free, do whatever he wants for eight months on that island. (laughter) So it was a real adventure for me.

I didn't think about the danger of the trip. A lot of people died. You know, you hear stories about cannibalism. They are all true. The boat that we jumped off left because the captain, we were told, didn't want to sink the boat because he had jewelry and valuable stuff hidden inside the boat. So, as soon as he pulled out of sight, we were rescued by that oil rig. But my adventure didn't stop there.

They put us on another boat that was attacked by Malaysian pirates. Women and children were gone. The only people on board... I remember images that are just men. They were standing there with blisters the size of a balloon under their feet when the pirates attacked. So we were the first boat on this island. After eight months it became a village. I didn't want to leave, you know; it was so fun. But everybody waited there, and over the months we built a landing pad for helicopters. That's when an organization—I'm not sure what it was, United Nations or Red Cross—they came and started sponsoring us.

My sponsor happened to be in Texas. We went to another island after that and then went to Singapore and then to San Francisco, after that to Port Arthur. Then decided to go up to Chicago to start a life.

DePue: I've asked the other two gentlemen here about their memories of coming back to the United States. Patrick, what were your memories of first arriving in the United States?

Lam: Barbecued chicken. (laughter) We didn't have chicken back home. There was no barbecue. Apples, I had an apple in my hand, and I licked that apple. I didn't want to eat it. I saved every bite of it. I think it was a Fuji apple; I don't know. But once in a while, now these days, when I eat an apple it brings back that memory. I remember being served a plate of rice with **meat** on it.

Growing up under communism, you have a wedding and one chicken or bird would be made to feed the whole party. We eat everything out of the chicken, bones, you name it. So, for me to have a whole chicken leg on my plate, that was amazing. I never forget that moment. It was cold when we landed in San Francisco—they gave us blankets—and then, getting on a plane. After that, it was just meeting up with the new relative sponsor in Texas, Port Arthur, Texas.

But it was an adventure, and I didn't want to leave the island. You know, here I am, free as a bird on this island and all of a sudden cooped in this house with people I didn't know. Then, when we went to Chicago, it was even worse because we didn't have money. So my aunt and uncle, they had to go to school. They had to work at the university to make money. I was left at home as a kid, in this housing project, you know, and broken windows.

I cried every night. I cried because then I realized...then I started missing home, Vietnam, my family, because I was having fun for eight months on that island. That was when I was just very sad. Then you get used to it as a kid, and you learn to adapt.

DePue: You learned to adapt pretty well, I understand. You earned a medical degree eventually.

Lam: Yes, and I left that behind. I think a lot of change in the health field in this country, so I went into research for a while. Then [I] was very fortunate enough to have found a company that needed a director. Right now, I run an assisted living facility, Reflections Memory Care, in Chatham.

I think everybody needs help along the way, and we needed help from the Americans. We needed help from a lot of people. No one ever gets to be successful without help from somewhere. So, I wish I could teach the younger generation that I see these days with their work ethics, that life is precious. It's how you make it. You have to work hard to earn it. I think the American dream is still there. It's sad that they don't see that, and they don't appreciate that.

I try to teach that for my kids, that Vietnam was my birthplace, and I try to show them that, but America is my home, and I think I always appreciate the Americans. Any soldiers that would go into a country and sacrifice their lives for the freedom that we didn't have, throw in this country that blanket of freedom that's provided, it's truly amazing. I wish people could see that. America for me is heaven, compared to a lot of other countries around the world. (applause)

DePue: Mr. Pham, I want to get your reaction, your memories of...the first memories you have of landing, getting in to the United States.

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: When he first landed in the United States, his first feeling was just disbelief. He couldn't believe that he made it to America. And once he landed here, then it started sinking in, and that lift of worry, the lift of living in a communist country just slowly lifted. That's when he realized that he's free from the oppression of communism and started appreciating the people that were involved to help him, the Americans especially, who gave him his freedom in this country that we're all enjoying right now.

DePue: We need to go to the audience, but I wanted to ask you, Mr. Pham, one more question. I understand you just came back from Vietnam; is that correct?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

DePue: After all these years in the United States, do you have any reflections on how Vietnam has changed? And what are your thoughts about being back in the United States?

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: Mr. Pham noticed that the country of Vietnam is flourishing now because of money pouring in from tourism, money that's not tangible in the long run, a lot of debt that the country of Vietnam is borrowing from foreigners to build. It's used for getting cheap labor from the people. He feels that, in the future, it will be the younger generation that will be paying for what the government is doing right now in Vietnam. And it was very sad there, he says. There's a big gap between the rich and the poor. The rich will get richer. The majority, 90 percent, if not more, will be working for this rich class that just constantly will be controlling the country.

DePue: We've been talking quite a bit. I think it's time now to turn it over to the audience. We'll have to turn the house lights up a little bit, so I can see you out there. There you are. Again, I would ask that you raise your hand, and someone will get a microphone to you. We would certainly love to hear your questions. You can ask the panel in general, but it might work better if you ask individuals as well, once you have a chance. Right up here. (indicating questioner)

Questioner: I'd like to ask Mr. Pham to describe what life was like in a concentration camp and also to ask him if he knows how many of the South Vietnamese the communists killed after the war.

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: Life was like—in the prison camp—was basically, in the morning when they get up—He can only tell you from what he's seen in that region; he can't tell you beyond that—Basically they are provided a half a can of rice to eat. Once they've done that for breakfast, then they go in to the field and plant potatoes for crops. That was basically what they start out for the day.

Pham: (additional response in Vietnamese)

Lam: He remembers one incident that stuck in his head forever. [It] was that one of the prisoners retaliated and was shot and left slowly to die in the middle of the field, in front of everybody. And the guards wouldn't let him or anybody cover him up. He was slowly just covered with flies the size of his thumb, and that's some of the things that happened there.

Pham: (additional response in Vietnamese)

Lam: He himself cannot tell you how many Vietnamese or soldiers were killed in the war, but he remembered, in the camp, that [a] soldier was shot. The other one incident was another prisoner committed suicide by slashing his wrists. Another one was caught in a land mine, when they were out there planting potatoes in the field, and they left him there to die and didn't provide any care whatsoever.

Pham: (additional response in Vietnamese)

Lam: Every day was pretty much a struggle to live and just survive for as long as they could.

DePue: Another question then. Right here, in the back.

Questioner: I'd probably direct this to Mr. Pham or Patrick, either one. What do you think became of the wives and children, Vietnamese wives and children, of the American servicemen over there? I'm sure not too many ended up getting to come over here.

Pham: (response in Vietnamese)

Lam: He can say that only a very few were able to leave the country during the evacuation. The majority were left behind. A lot of them went in to hiding, afraid of expressing to the government that they knew an American soldier. Those who [the government] knew were involved in a relationship with a soldier were spied on or were checked on every day, were monitored by the government. They were considered an enemy of the state because they were involved with an American soldier.



U.S. Embassy evacuation from Vietnam, April 30, 1975.

Questioner: I don't have a question, but I wanted to... What Mr. Jones said, the reception when he got back... I actually went over later. I was there in '71 and '72. I was in Quảng Trị Province at the air base, and I did aerial reconnaissance for the United States Army. And what it was, was I had a decent room and three meals a day and had young women that did our laundry for us. One day the woman that did our laundry came in. She didn't speak real good English, but she was trying to describe what she had done that day. Finally I figured out what she had done; she had voted that day and was very proud of that. That made me feel very proud. And nothing said to me coming back bothered me after that.

Jones: Very good.

DePue: You have one there.

Questioner: This is for Tom Jones. Tom, you were there pre-Tết [New Year's], and you were behind enemy lines, so to speak.⁹ We all learned that the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese were very capable of inflicting a lot of damage, but you were seeing this firsthand at a time when the American public was led to believe that we were making progress and inroads. What was your perception when Tết [Offensive] occurred?

Jones: I was there during Tết. The fact is, we were one of the last recon teams that walked out of Khe Sanh. We didn't stay out long, but the one thing I did see in Vietnam, I've been to Huế. Huế I tell people is a beautiful city; it had girls' finishing schools. I mean, it was just beautiful. And then, after Tết, it was just rubble. I saw that, I mean, just the destruction.

Then I had this other dichotomy I had to deal with, was I've had to take care of men who I shot that were trying to kill me. That's the dichotomy of war, you know? Huế was just beautiful, and then after Tết it was just rubble, the destruction. You know, we come from somewhere, we may see something bad happen, but what we don't see is

⁹ The Tet Offensive, or officially called The General Offensive and Uprising of Tet Mau Than 1968 was a major escalation and one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tet_Offensive)

American destruction. I didn't understand nothing about Vietnam when I went, because I went there, and the unit I was in was so secretive; even our own people didn't know who we were.

But as I went and started writing my book, then I started doing research on Vietnam. Then I began to understand and learn about Vietnam. But, you know, it happens to us so often; we go someplace, and we have one intention, in terms of from a military viewpoint, but we are in a different culture, and we have no understanding of their culture usually, until after we lose the battle. One of the things that has always bothered me as I thought about it is, when was the last time America won a war? (no response) Ahhh!

Bowman: About three times?

Jones: Three times? (laughs) World War II was the only time we signed a piece of paper saying, we won; you lost. Everything else has been a 38th parallel, DMZ [demilitarized zone], different times.

DePue: I think, if I can elaborate on that question and answer very quickly, before Tết did you feel like we were winning the war?

Jones: You know, I never had a sense of win or lose. We were always on patrol, the six of us, doing our job. We didn't have no lofty, historical forward thinking. It was very basic.

Bowman: I don't think Tết changed the attitude of the soldier as much as it did the civilian population here.

Jones: Right, as I was trying to say about Huế and all of this.

DePue: Up front, here. Yes.

Questioner: Mr. Jones, why were the soldiers called baby killers?

Jones: Why were they called baby killers? (laughs) I never saw babies, by the way, except when I was doing medical, but I think there was some images that were on TV, about a little girl running down the road, burning. I think that's where that really started. Now they talk about the United States being baby killers?

You know, I've been to a lot of events and lectures when someone would say about, you know, you were baby killers and things. Wait a minute. If a kid runs by and there's six Marines in a truck and [the kid] throws a charge in there and blows them up, they are not kids or babies no more; they are the enemy. That was our mindset. They were the enemy. We weren't looking at it as we were killing babies or killing kids.

I remember sometime after the war, two guys were saying, you know, we came back. The veterans from the previous wars did not want to embrace those who came back from Vietnam, and they would say, "Well, you were over there killing women and children." And I'd look at them, and I'd say, "Wait a minute, World War II, you dropped bombs, had firestorms and all. Did you tell the women and children to leave before the bombing? No. War is ugly; I don't care who... It's ugly. And you've got two things, surviving it or winning it. We survived, not doing too good on this win stuff.

Bowman: A lot of those concepts came out of an incident called Mỹ Lai. If you look that up and you see some of the pictures that were taken following the discovery of the incident,

you'll understand where some of that comes from. But most of it was... That was a very limited incident.

Jones: Right.

DePue: I think we've got time for a couple of more questions. In the back here.

Questioner: I'd like to thank you all for coming tonight and sharing your stories with us. I think this has been a very moving evening. Mr. Bowman, you brought up the concept of this idea that we abandoned some of our friends that had helped the American forces in Vietnam. The movie seemed to reinforce that concept. Given your unique background and the time that you spent in Iraq, do you think we have learned from that experience? We hear about reprisals by ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] now, against people that had helped us in Iraq, so I just think you have a unique perspective. Do you think we've learned from the experience in Vietnam and have been able to do a better job of protecting those friends and assets?

Bowman: Yeah, I did a tour in Iraq in '06, '07, and there's a lot of similarities that are happening today that... We were just sitting here a while ago and talked about the fall of Saigon, and if anyone was reading the papers recently, in the last couple of days there was a story about the fall of Ramadi. Those kind of things just bring back some really bad memories, in that a lot of time, a lot of treasure, and a lot of blood was spent trying to secure a government in Iraq.

I was there in Iraq during the first election, and I just was... You'd be amazed at the celebration of the Iraqi people after they came out of their polls, after they had voted. One way that you could always tell that someone had voted was that, after they voted, they stuck their hand, finger, their thumb into a bottle of purple ink, and for days after that... The ink wouldn't go away; it was indelible for like eight or ten days. And for days after that, they would go around... You'd think they were giving you the thumbs up. They were just showing you that they voted. (laughter) There's a lot of similarities there, and it's kind of scary to see what's going on, as far as the stuff in comparison between Iraq and Vietnam.

DePue: So, did we learn anything?

Bowman: Like I said, there's just too many similarities, and it's there, no.

Jones: I wonder who put the lesson plan together?

Bowman: Right. (laughter)

Bowman: There's a few things that have changed and that are different. Tom talked about coming home. That's one thing that I wanted to say too, was that when we came home from Vietnam they threw stuff at you. When we came home from Iraq they threw confetti at you, and there was a celebration.

Jones: Right.

Bowman: I developed a sense of the military when I was first drafted. I was drafted, and the character and the experience of being in the military I felt was good. So the draft turned into a lifetime experience, and I stayed for thirty-nine more years. When I came home from Iraq, the celebration was there. I finally got what I felt we didn't get, coming home

from Vietnam. I know a lot of you feel that way. One thing I want to share with you all is, those guys that stood up when they were asked, who were Vietnam veterans, I just want to say thank you for your service. (applause)

DePue: And this gentleman here gets the last—whoops, right up here—gets the last question. (to the rest of the audience) You're going to have to come up and talk to them afterwards.

Questioner: I have great concern for the servicemen who come back. For Tom and Tom, what do you think can be done to help the servicemen that come back with post-stress, and how could we promote this with our government to help them?

Bowman: I'll defer to Tom because he's dealt with this stuff.

Jones: Post-traumatic stress, first you have to realize it. That's the most difficult part. There's an incident that happened while I was involved with the Lincoln carriage; it was all built by combat veterans.¹⁰ I was at a meeting, and one of the young men went through a post-traumatic stress incident, actually went through it. Now my immediate response was to go over, start talking to him, slowing him down, [his] breathing, dealing with him because he crawled into my car. People just froze because they had never seen nothing like that, so folks froze. I and a couple of them, we helped talk to him, got him out and got him going, got him away from the scene and all, so he could do better.

The government has said they want to take care of those who go and fight for this country. All we ask is for them to do it. Post-traumatic stress is one of a—... It could be affected by anybody. Now, one of the things to say that this is, sort of to tie this to what he was saying about the difference coming back from Vietnam and then coming back from Iraq. To me it's been a National Guard—there's a few of the National Guards around—because if the National Guards wouldn't be involved, we wouldn't have women getting wounded because they're combat support. They're not part of the combat; they're combat support.

And the other thing is that, when National Guard goes over, families in the community know that's their kids. They're not just going from some base in some other state, over to Vietnam. They're leaving the community as a group, and when they come back, they come back as a group. So, families know them, you know; there's a social interaction; there's the civic interaction; they go to high school together. I think that's one of the big things that we need.

Bowman: That's absolutely a major part of it because it makes the community a part of the conflict.

Jones: Right.

Bowman: Because you know somebody, you've got family members. I'd almost bet that everybody in this room has got someone that they know personally that has served in Afghanistan or Iraq because of all of the guard units that have deployed.

Jones: So, a lot of it is... Unfortunately, what happens is folks come back. They go through like the VA [Veterans Administration]. They've got to go into the bureaucracy, and it's a

¹⁰As a way to work through his own issues and offer a helping hand to fellow veterans, Eric Hollenbeck, a master craftsman who was grappling with PTSD, founded the Blue Ox Veterans group and tasked them with the auspicious project of recreating Lincoln's funeral carriage. (<https://funeralcarsblog.com/veterans-come-together-to-recreate-the-lincoln-hearse/>)

process; it's a process. Sometimes I think the bureaucrats think that what they do is a good job, so that's what you should be competing for.

But I really saw this with the kid putting the Lincoln hearse together, that these were young men, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, combat veterans, who were learning a skill, craftsmanship. It gave them something to do with their hands, something to learn. And that's really helped them.

I don't know; there's no easy answer, saying throw more money at the problem because there's a lot of money being thrown at it now. But there's still something else that needs to be done there to make sure that the veteran connects with the folks who **can** help him, not with just an organization that's there supposedly to help.

Bowman: We all need to understand what it is. Post-traumatic stress can be a lot of things to a lot of people.

Jones: A lot of things.

Bowman: It doesn't necessarily have to apply to people coming home from the military. If you've had a traumatic experience in your life—you were in an accident, a severe accident someplace—those kinds of things are post-traumatic stress. Just to help you understand, it's the same kind of thing that you see in day-to-day life. If you, like I say, if you've experienced a serious accident, where someone has been killed, or it was extremely—I don't know—memorable.

I can give you an example. I worked an accident. I was with the State Police for thirty years, and I worked an accident one afternoon. It was a young girl, and she died in my arms. Every time I go back, past the location of that accident, I have a flashback to that. I mean, it's instant. I can see her laying in my arms, dying. That, to me, is a certain level of post-traumatic stress. So, if you've seen anything, relate that stuff to the military people you know that are coming back, and to try understand that it's not just combat that causes that. It can be anything.

Jones: All America, all America had post-traumatic when they blew the twin towers [911 attack on New York City] down.

Bowman: There you go.

Jones: Nobody could believe it could be done. Nobody could believe it happened. So, that sense that you had that day of seeing that, you had some degree of post-traumatic stress.

DePue: I'm going to take the opportunity, being the clock watcher (laughter) among the group here, to bring the evening to a close. But to try to wrap up what we have just experienced tonight, it's important to hear these stories. It's my job to have... It's my honor to have the opportunity to talk to people, and I think you can see why we've selected the people who are involved tonight, because they are able to communicate in very strong and clear ways about their experiences and, at the same time, make connections with... Hey, this isn't just something that's abstract, in the past, in history. Some of these things have a lot of relevance to our lives today. So, thank you very much for coming, and I especially thank you on our panel this evening. (applause)

(end of transcript #1)