

Courage, Survival and a life today in America

The story of An Nhu Phong
By MSgt Al Loreth USMC (Ret)

I left Vietnam for the last time in 1971. While there I worked almost exclusively with a Vietnamese Interpreter, named An Nhu Phong. We were together so often, that without our knowing other Marines called us brothers, we were surprised to learn Vietnamese referred to us as brothers too.

After the war, someone had told the North Vietnamese he was an interpreter for the CIA. Not true, but he was arrested and spent about a year in a bamboo cage too small to lie down, and too small to stand. When he was released it was to clear ground for crops. In this situation he was able to improve his meager diet by eating roots and other vegetation. Two years later, family members raised enough money to bribe the guards to let him go. The family then got him passage on a boat to Malaya. Enroute pirates boarded the boat, and committed some atrocities, but he survived.

Looking for asylum in America, he wrote a letter from Malaya to the commanding general at Camp Pendleton saying he had once been an interpreter for Marines. The General contacted his Interrogator/translator Teams to see if anyone knew An Nhu Phong but by then I was retired so there was no one to vouch for him. But eventually my "brother", An Nhu Phong did make it safely to America.

Some time later I was talking to a former Marine officer who had sponsored a number of Vietnamese refugees. During this conversation, he mentioned a Vietnamese named Phong. I told him that I had a "blood brother" by that name, and wondered if this could be the same An Nhu Phong? The officer thought he lived in Escondido, which was only about 19 miles east of us.

When I got home I looked up all the Vietnamese names in the telephone book and began calling around. After about 20 calls I found a person who knew where An Nhu Phong lived and she gave me his number. When I telephoned, the woman who answered told me he was there, but since he worked nights, he was sleeping. I told her I was his brother and to please wake him.

Soon after we met at our home. That was in 1980 or so. Eventually I moved to Colorado and he moved to Pomona, CA. We lost track and I thought I'd never hear from him again.

Early in 2005 I spent some considerable time scanning some old photos that were too stuck in my photo albums to remove. Among the photos, were some of An Nhu Phong and his family.

I manipulated the photos in my editor and printed them out. Unbelievably coincidental, that night, I received a telephone call from An Nhu Phong. Among the many things we spoke of was the fact that he had just found a photo that included us both. I told him this very day, I had also just found and scanned the photos of him taken in CA with my wife Dee and our dog.

The photo he spoke of is at the right; I am the Marine on the right with my hand on his shoulder. The Marine with the eyeglasses, died of cancer in about 1980. He hadn't reached his 40th birthday. I have no memory of where the photo was taken; it must have been Da Nang, although Phong and I spent a lot of time south of there at a place called Que Son. We also worked together at the army 95th Evacuation Hospital.

The additional photos below are of An Nhu Phong and his wonderful family.

