

Brief Biography of Nguyen Ngoc Hanh, Vietnamese American photographer-soldier

Nguyen Ngoc Hanh's military career began with the French in about 1936, when he was taken from a Catholic orphanage in Hadong, North Vietnam at the age of ten. Like many unprotected colonial children he accompanied the French army in the forests of Vietnam in the *enfante de troupe* – living with the army and acting as servants. He was brought to France with the *troupe* in 1937 and educated under the Catholic Normal Section. He became part of the Vichy French army living in German-occupied France between 1940 and 1945, returning to his homeland (then called Indochina) under Free French recolonization in 1946, as a staff sergeant in the newly organized Vietnamese Airborne.

In the War of Resistance Against the French, about 1947, the young Nguyen Ngoc Hanh secretly joined the Youth Communists. He liked the black uniform and dashing red scarf and its effect on ladies. But when he was asked to prove his loyalty to Ho Chi Minh by killing a French family—father, mother, and three children—he could not carry it out. Listening to their pleas in French, he hid them instead. Large numbers of Russians and Chinese were coming to Saigon, and Nguyen Ngoc Hanh realized that Vietnamese communism was simply a new colonialism.

By the time he was twenty-three (1950) Nguyen Ngoc Hanh was transferred to the *Quoi gia Vietnam* (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) as a second lieutenant. He returned to France in 1952 to attend logistics training. He attended the French Photography School in Toulouse, graduating in 1956 as a photographer.

Captain Hanh of the Airborne Division returned to South Vietnam in 1956, two years after the Geneva Accords mandated partition of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. He served in the 1st and 3rd Battalions. His photographs during that period are often taken in the air, where he parachuted from 40,000 feet, free-falling for a considerable time before pulling the rip cord so that his parachute would not obscure the photograph. He founded the KBC Photography Club in 1957.

By the time he was thirty-four (1961) Nguyen Ngoc Hanh was assigned as the official war photographer for the South Vietnam Armed Forces. He was promoted to the rank of major through field commissions, and in 1968, the time of the Tet Offensive, was a Lieutenant-Colonel at forty-one years of age. He was wounded three times in combat between 1970 and 1975, primarily from groundfire directed toward the two-seater C-47 planes that the South Vietnamese Air Force reconnaissance flew underneath the Americans in the larger C-130s.

Nguyen Ngoc Hanh was attached to the JGS (Joint ARVN-USA Staff) headquarters, Political Warfare branch, with a special pass from President Thieu that entitled him to personal helicopter escort anywhere he was assigned, to both ARVN and American stations. All the film was held and distributed by the JGS. During the battle of Khe Sanh his film was taken at gunpoint by an American officer, a circumstance that he describes as the fastest way to get the message across because of the language barrier. Col. Hanh stated at a public program in 2005

that he believed the Associated Press film showing an execution of a Viet Cong officer caught murdering civilians in Saigon during the Tet Offensive should have been confiscated by the officer in charge, General Loan.

As a photographer Nguyen Ngoc Hanh is internationally renowned. He was elected to the Top Ten Photographers of the Photographic Society of America in 1968. The same year he was “Top Ten” in PSA, he received a Gold Medal of the “Fotografika la Presidenza Delta Camera” Italy; in 1969 he received the Excellence Award of the Federation Internationale Arte Photographie in Sidney and the Gold Trophy of the Fourth International Salon of Pictorial Photography in Thailand. His photographic honors include the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain. New photographers that he has trained have themselves been accepted to R.P.S.

Vietnam in Flames, a book of photographs with Nguyen Manh Dan—whose current work may be seen on www.shcd.de—was published by the government of South Vietnam (*Khoi Lua*) in 1969. The English language version, translated by Tran Nha, was published approximately in 1986; the source is unclear. Copies of either edition are extremely hard to find and plans are underway by the Vietnamese International publishing group to republish, to which Mr. Hanh has given permission. The too-generous photographer gave a Vietnamese language copy—his last one—to the library at the Oakland Museum of California. The photographs in The History Channel presentation on the Tet Offensive in April, 2006, are from an English language copy which was purchased online at a military bookstore by historian Jean Libby, Fed-Exed to the filmmakers in Washington, D.C., and contract arranged so that Mr. Hanh would be paid for their publication. That copy is now donated to the VICANA group for publication.

The photographer Nguyen Ngoc Hanh is a portraitist. That is the power of his war photos. Seeing the portraits of the apprehensive, brave in battle, and so very youthful soldiers is enough to understand that they are his heart and soul. His photos of captured Viet Cong are equally compelling portraits—and also show that the prisoners were given proper medical treatment. His moving close portrait of a young widow in Hue in tears receiving her husband’s effects was widely published.

His response to the surrender of South Vietnam to the invading North Vietnam Army on April 30, 1975, will come as no surprise to those who know him. He did not use his personal pass for helicopter transport because he “did not want to take pictures of generals running away.” He chose to remain with the soldiers who had no way out.

The consequences of his remaining in Communist Vietnam was imprisonment that was harsh, cruel, and personally vicious. He was “fingered” by a camp inmate as the photographer for JCS. He lived in a metal container in which he could neither stand up nor lie down for a year and four months. During this period he was removed for two hours daily and forced to kneel fettered on the ground in broken glass, facing and staring at the sun.

In 1983 a German amnesty group, probably Amnesty International, negotiated his release with the Socialist government of Vietnam and Nguyen Ngoc Hanh became the first

political prisoner to be released from the camps. He does not know why this group selected him for rescue. The most likely reason is the scope of his photographic reputation throughout Europe and included the German “Fotomundi Excellence” prize.

Still, Mr. Hanh was not free in his own country as long as the Communists are in control. In an interview with journalist De Tran in San Jose in 1995, the sad story of separation and ultimate estrangement of his family when his home was confiscated by the cadres at the end of the war was revealed. He made four attempts to escape by boat, the last one successfully taking him to Thailand in 1985. “Sooner or later they would have come to arrest me again,” he told me in interview in 2005.

The first thing Nguyen Ngoc Hanh did in San Jose, California, when he immigrated in 1989 (at age sixty-two) was organize a professional photography association. The second was to get a job, which he did in 1990, delivering mail to employees at a Fremont computer technology company, Cirrus Logic. This required facility with English, which he taught himself with the help of others in the company. Soon he was creating photographs with models among his co-workers and even his Chinese American supervisor, who is the subject of an art series. His knowledge of French enabled him to grasp English quickly; the president of the company was a French-speaker and enjoyed talking with him.

Nguyen Ngoc Hanh is still (in 2006) a working photographer: teaching, exhibiting, and creating. He has been able to work through some of his anguish of loss by carefully re-enacting some of his photographs taken in Vietnam with people in the California community at locations that “look like Vietnam.” He especially works with waterfalls, traveling great distances with an American travelguide author to get just the right time of year and foliage. The photograph appended to this article shows “Autumn, 2004” which was taken on September 21 in Oregon for his exhibition at De Anza College at the seminar on Vietnamese American Achievement on October 22, 2004. The organizers of this exhibit are hoping to distribute a DVD of the photographs and Mr. Hanh that was taped on the day of the seminar, showing not only the vast scope of his work but his irrepressible spirit in talking about his national history.

Article and photograph by Jean Libby, editor, Viet-Am Review.

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