

Capture by the Communists at the Tet Offensive

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For Vietnam: A Television History

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Capture by the Communists

[SYNC]Okay. Could you just tell the story as it unfolded?

[SYNC]Ton-That: Well... '68 was a very, eventful and memorable year for me because I nearly got caught by the Communists in Hue and also I lost my mother during that offensive. Now in previous years four or five years before that, I always refrained from going to Hue because my family home is outside the city, about two, three miles outside the city, practically in the countryside, and there was too much risk security-wise for someone like me. I knew that the Communists didn't (chuckles) like me because I had worked for President Diem and all that, but that year my father was ill. There was a risk that he might die and it is part of our customs that in such circumstances all the children should visit their father. That's what I did.

But then there was this truce which was announced to last for seven days so I said to myself even if the Communists were treacherous and start attacking right on twelve midnight on the last day of truce and if I go to Hue on the 29th and the 30th and the 1st then leave back for Saigon the 2nd, I still have five days before the communist attack but, of course, I was (chuckling) wrong. The communists attack on the night, on the night of the last day of the year, that the thirtieth of the Lunar year . . . No, on the first, I think on the first, not the 30th, the first. That is New Year's Day. The night of New Year's Day. That's why on the next day when I got ready to leave for the airport and got out of the house and to the road, I was told by people coming back from the city that the bridge leading to the city was occupied by the Communists and so I got stuck. also the Communists on the hills across the ah field from my house and they on the other side of the river. My house was on the on the on the riverside. And, then also up the road. So, my house went right in the middle of communist occupied area and there's nothing we could do but just wait.

[SYNC]And the Communists came down from the hills. I think on the 5th because there was some fighting around the city and the Communists were not sure whether the road was safe, but when they were certain that the road was safe, they came down and searched each house, went to check each house, and...ah...they came to our house and they asked who's so-and-so. We were three. We supposed to be three brothers, and according to the information, we were all three directors; important people from Saigon.

[SYNC]And, the list was supplied, ironically by the local chief of the village. That is, he's supposed to represent the National Government, but well I didn't blame him for it. Probably he was acting on a threat for his own life. So, I was and another brother was there but my third brother was not there. He was in the Citadel with his in-laws, but they didn't believe us. They kept searching for this third director, and they did it for two or three days running. They came, kept coming back and back and back and back. In the end, they didn't find him.

Interrogation by the Communists

[SYNC]Ton-That: So after that first visit, they left. The next day they came with armed troops and took us away into the hills where they...ahh...what I thought was the headquarters and we stayed there for a whole day, and then they asked us just very perfunctory questions and sent it back. Obviously, the people in charge were not high enough in the hierarchy, so they told us to go back and two or three days after that, they took us back into the hills again. And this time we had to wait for the whole day until the afternoon, late afternoon and obviously, someone from the North, very well-dressed, you know, clean. Very well-dressed came and then started interrogating.

[SYNC]So everyone as you know had to write his autobiography, that's a communist standard practice. So, we all did and he just after the man called us, each in turn, to interrogate and then he took our ID card and he asked me a question. Now on the card I must explain, on my card, my card reads just like an American green card or the Canadian Citizenship card, and very small like this and about this high. There's not much room in there to write everything. Now I was, that card was delivered to me during President Diem's time when I was press secretary of the presidency. But, because of course the card was so small (chuckle) there was no room to write "of the presidency" in there so the only thing was written on there is technical expert which was my technical administrative function in the palace.

[SYNC]So, the the man asked me what is this technical expert and I said I'm an expert in languages. I do translations and things like that. And that ended the interview, they didn't ask any further questions. But, later, another man came and he was still more probably important because he's still better dressed than the first one and he made a political speech.

[SYNC]And the first sentence he said and I remember it all my life and this is why I left a full seven days before the Communists moved into Saigon in 1975, and that's why I told General Minh in April that I was going to leave because I escaped the Communists three times and I'm not going to try a fourth time. And, he said, you are all guilty towards the revolution because you have lived in Hue and that is illegitimate that's the occupied area. So, no matter what you do you are a criminal in regard to the revolution and people who forgot that in 1975 had hope of cooperating with the Communists and all that, made a big mistake in their lives because they will always have a reason to accuse you and put you on the defensive or out. But that is for later.

[SYNC]Now after that, they sent us back again, but this time they said well we call you back and give you assignments so in my mind I think this means big trouble because if they assign you something, you cannot refuse. In fact, during the last trip to the headquarters, the local headquarters a student who was armed and was supposed to be on their side and escorted us to the road and he slowed down. I was the last in the file. He slowed down and spoke very softly to me and said don't argue with them because they are going to shoot you right away if you do. Which means that all the people with guns and with the Communists were not on their side. So, I didn't say anything; unless I was asked questions. I didn't answer. Then that was, that must have been the 8th or the 9th.

[SYNC]Interviewer: The ones who came to search your house, who were they?

[SYNC]Ton-That: Oh, they're locals, but they are [inaudible].

[SYNC]Interviewer: OK, pick it up...Tell about the cadres.

[SYNC]Ton-That: Well, the thing that impressed me most and which I would remember all my life was that in the late afternoon when this northern cadre, well dressed in fatigues, perfectly clean and well-pressed, and clean. No mud, nothing on it, and came to lecture us on the revolution, on the situation.

[SYNC]The first sentence that he said, you are all criminals in regard to the revolution because you live in the Hue-controlled area, and that I can never forget and that was to guide my action afterward because I knew that no matter what you do, whether you have committed a crime; you have been in the army, police, civil service or not. The fact that you have not lived in the forest makes you a criminal and the Communist was always finding ways of putting you in jail or accusing you as they wish.

The Americans take Hue

[SYNC]Ton-That: Now, but that was at that day. Then, they sent us back, for the next three days. Those people left, but, in the meantime, they are in our home. Troops are coming in and out all the time and these troops were, as you now know dressed in the northern uniform with the famous hat, the famous so-called Ho Chi Minh sandals, well-dressed and they talked to us freely and they told us they were sent to occupy the city. There was to be a big review, a victory parade and they had a special uniform for that. Each of them has a special uniform that was made for parade. But, all these people are from the north, and they told us that we didn't have to ask because we recognize this hat, we recognize the northern accent and when we asked them, they told us.

[SYNC]So there's no secret about that. So, the three days there was fighting and nothing really happened. They must have sent us back on the uh 8th, I think, 8th of a lunar year. And, then, we just start to live through three or four very tense days. For some strange reason, they didn't take

away our radio. So, we just secretly listened and occasionally these boys would come in and ask are you listening to radio? We were listening (chuckle) to the BBC at the time. So, we had to switch to something else immediately. But, through the BBC then we learned that the reinforcement would come from the south, that the American Marines have landed in Hue that is downtown in the...ah...near the bridge. Everyone knows about that area, and just, we just wait and prayed that the companies wouldn't take us away in that time. And, for some reason, they, they didn't. Either they were too busy or for some other reason, I...I...I don't know. But the fact is that on the 12th, I think, of the lunar year the Marines rushed from, arrived at the railway station which is about a mile, a mile-and-a-half from our home, and the next morning, this is one of the surprising thing about American fighting tactics, they simply run one stretch from that bridge to our home. That is about half, one-and-a-half miles, and I found out afterwards that they did so because there was fire by a mortar, and when they came into my home in the back yard and we were in the house, and they came in the back and we were afraid they would shoot.

[SYNC]So, I came out and all the time I said don't shoot, don't shoot, don't shoot all the time. And, then I found these Marines very tense, you know. And so, they said, they said "VC where's the VC?" And then I was very cool at that time. I said let me talk to your skipper. Call your skipper and then the little man came. He said where's the VC, and I said the VC is gone but my family's there. I said, I beckoned ... everyone to come out. So, everyone came out and they said VC, they fired from here. But, I showed them the hatch. You know they always, the Viet Cong practiced us to cut a retreat path. And I say, you see the, the hatch Viet Cong cut this for their retreat.

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[SYNC]But, the lieutenant insist and they say that we were far from here. Oh, I said, I understand now. The Viet Cong had a long tube and they occupy the house across the street, so go and check there. So he went and checked and of course the Viet Cong had started a mortar position there. So, when he came back, it's all right, it's just, they relaxed. And then I told the lieutenant that I had to get out. My brother too. And he said, well, we have a jeep. We can take you out but just don't worry. You could sleep there. I say I'm not going to sleep here because you're going to pull out and the Viet Cong's coming back tonight. There's no doubt about that so I insist so much, they ... there's room for one. I said there's also my brother and my sister-in-law, they have to ... So, in the end they took us, all three down to the station, the radio station.