

The Liberation of Tam Minh Pham

By [Chip Scanlan](#) ([more by author](#))

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It's a long way from Saigon to West Point; from the United States Military Academy to the re-education camps of Vietnam; and from the camps to D.C.'s Cardozo High School. But geography is only the beginning of this survivor's story

As usual, bribes loosened the guards' tongues. Another transfer was coming. But this time, after four years in jungle camps guarded by the North Vietnamese army, the inmates were going to a prison run by the Cong An, the security police. When he heard the rumor, Tam Minh Pham knew what to do. For years, he'd heard the stories about the cruel men in yellow uniforms who took people away in the dead of night, about the torture, the killings. He waited for the camp to quiet down and the night air to fill with the scent of cooking fires, and then he crept out of his bamboo hut to the garden.

Each barracks was permitted a tiny plot -- sweet potatoes, lettuce and herbs -- to supplement the meager rations of sand-tainted rice and the snakes and rats the prisoners could catch. Glancing over his shoulder, Pham dug in the dirt until his fingers touched metal.

The rusting box once held 200 rounds of ammunition for an American M-60 machine gun. Now it contained 10 notebooks, the kind he used to fill as a schoolboy. For months, he'd been scribbling his life story. He wrote in English for protection, but it also was the appropriate language for a young man's odyssey from Saigon to the United States Military Academy at West Point, from which he graduated in 1974, the first South Vietnamese ever to wear the gold academy ring. Faithful to the West Point credo of duty, honor and country, Pham returned home to rejoin the Army of the Republic of Vietnam -- just in time to experience its final, humiliating defeat. Then, like hundreds of thousands of others abandoned by the Americans when they withdrew in April 1975, he disappeared into the gulag of reeducation camps scattered in the jungles.

He fantasized sometimes that his West Point classmates would rescue him. Knee-deep in a rice paddy, laboring at gunpoint for the new socialist regime, he imagined a spaceship swooping out of the clouds and cadets in dress gray carrying him and his friends to freedom.

Crouching now in the dirt, he took the tattered notebooks out of the ammo box and leafed through the pages. It was all there, good and bad: the Tet Offensive, his turning point; his four years at West Point with McBrayer, Hogan, Ciupak and his other buddies in Company I-2; the chaotic April day he lost his class ring and his country. But it was more than words on a page: Writing had kept him going. He thought of the memoir as his breath, his heartbeat, the child of his soul.

How he wished that spaceship would come now; he'd even stay behind if they could just take his memoir back, so cadets could learn what he had learned about survival. He didn't dare risk trying to smuggle it into the police camp; a written tribute to democracy and friendship with Americans might as well be a death warrant. He opened his Zippo, struck the flint and began feeding the notebooks to the flame, a few pages at a time, afraid that a larger fire might attract the guards.

In all the months of starvation and sickness, brutality and despair, Pham had never broken down. Not when he left his parents and family behind in Saigon, nor when he dug a grave for a friend who had slit his wrists and dived into a river to find the only escape possible. Not even in the darkest moments, when he contemplated suicide himself. The air was alive with cricket song, the distant calls of ducks, the hissing of campfires. But he had never felt so alone or forgotten. He looked up at the sky, shot with stars. How vast the universe, he thought, and yet there was no room in this world for these pages. Tears rolled down his cheeks as the wind took the ashes of his life story and carried them, dancing like fireflies, into the jungle beyond.

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In an attic on a wooded street in Arlington, Tam Minh Pham sits in front of a computer screen, typing. Nights and weekends he is in this chair, trying to resurrect the words that went up in flames 13 years ago, he says, "to share my experience so people can benefit without having to go through the ordeal."

He is 43 now, a gaunt man with straight black hair, wearing jeans that he buys in the boy's department. After arriving in the United States in May 1991, he Americanized the order of his Vietnamese name -- Pham Minh Tam -- putting his given name, Tam, first. It sounds like "Tom."

The liberation of Tam Minh Pham, for that is what finally happened, the happy conclusion of a journey that began with so much hope and then detoured into tragedy, is one man's story and two nations'. It is yet another way that Vietnam stays with us, nearly two decades after the last helicopters of Operation Frequent Wind lifted off the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, taking the last lucky few. Its elements of heroism and loyalty and betrayal echo the ordeal of countless Vietnamese who ended up on the wrong side of the only war the United States has ever lost. And so while it's a story about friendship, family ties and a brotherhood, it's also about turning your back on someone who once mattered. And ultimately, because of a determined few unwilling to forget, it became the story of a rescue. The author must work from memory, but there's an outline for his book in his résumé:

1970-1974: Student -- United States Military Academy at West Point

1974-1975: Tactical Officer -- Vietnamese National Military Academy

1975-1981: Prisoner of War -- Vietnam

1981-1991: Professor of English -- Teachers Training College, Saigon, Vietnam

1991-present: Teacher's Aide -- Cardozo High School, Washington, D.C.

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At Vo Truong Toan High School in Saigon, Pham wanted to be an electrical engineer; maybe even study in the United States like his father, who attended Michigan State in the 1950s and later became a high-ranking aide to the prime minister. But all that changed after the Tet Offensive.

When the crack of AK-47s filled the air on January 31, 1968, Pham, and most everyone else in the South Vietnamese capital, assumed they were fireworks heralding the lunar new year, not part of a surprise North Vietnamese attack. After the shooting stopped, he got on his bicycle to see what had happened. Riding along streets decorated for the holiday with the yellow blooms of the mai apricot, he spied the corpse of a dead Viet Cong. It was a boy, maybe 17, lying face down outside a neighbor's house. He was dressed all in black, thin cotton shorts and shirt. "There was blood all over his body. And that was a shocking sight," Pham recalls, the image still vivid. "We hadn't had any chance to see a real Viet Cong. We just read about them in the newspapers . . . The way he was dressed I thought he must have been so cold." But even though the dead boy was about his own age, he felt no pity, only rage at an invader.

In the United States, the sight on the evening news of other dead guerrillas, sprawled on the manicured lawns of the American Embassy, triggered a different reaction that marked the first step of our retreat from Vietnam: If Gen. William Westmoreland says the Viet Cong are so close to defeat, then what the heck are they doing in downtown Saigon?

But while Tet spurred our eventual disengagement from the Vietnam War, for Pham it was only the beginning. That summer, as American kids took to the streets in Chicago, he applied to the Vietnamese National Military Academy in Dalat, a beautiful mountain resort and honeymooner's favorite known as the "City of Love." Founded by the French, the academy "was like a college, so one could be a scholar and a soldier at the same time," he says. Still, its military training was so fierce his parents had to sign a waiver absolving the school of liability if their son were killed. He did so well that in 1970, during his second year, he was picked to compete for a unique opportunity: a West Point education.

That spring, West Point got a new superintendent, Gen. William A. Knowlton, a veteran of the Vietnam War who was determined to add a South Vietnamese to the ranks of incoming cadets. Although the academy had graduated more than 100 foreign cadets since Antonio Barrios of Guatemala received his diploma in 1889, most came from Latin America and the Philippines. With the Vietnam War on, Congress created four new all-expenses-paid slots for our Southeast Asian allies. South Koreans and a Thai took the first three. "Everybody kind of forgot about the Vietnamese," says Knowlton. The academic board had settled on two finalists for the remaining spot: a Malaysian with excellent English and a not-as-fluent South Vietnamese candidate. The Malaysian had the edge, until Knowlton spotted a note from an instructor in the Vietnamese candidate's file: Cadet Tam Minh Pham thinks in English.

By the time Pham arrived at West Point in July 1970, Henry Kissinger had already begun his secret peace talks in Paris with the North Vietnamese. Of course, the class of '74 didn't know that.

"We all assumed we were going," says Patrick A. McBrayer, who roomed with Pham at West Point. Back then, he was an idealistic, sandy-haired kid from Forest City, N.C., who decided on West Point in sixth grade, inspired by "The Long Gray Line," director John Ford's sentimental 1955 ode to the academy. He and Pham were assigned to the same company, I-2. Together they ate, studied, marched, looked out for each other. "Cooperate to graduate" was the rallying cry. Pham coached McBrayer in math. McBrayer's lessons helped Pham graduate from the "Rock Squad" of non-swimmers. The day Pham plunged into the swimming pool from an Olympic platform in fatigues, combat boots and a rucksack weighted with a brick, McBrayer was there praying, "Come up, come up," and cheering when he surfaced, "looking like a wet rat."

Pham assimilated. He dated a general's daughter. He got drunk on blackberry brandy before an economics test. Dwarfed in a land of Brobdingnagians, he mastered karate. Required to attend church (West Point featured no Buddhist pagodas), he dutifully attended Protestant services. His company mates gave him a nickname: Gooky. The war hovered like a storm cloud. Walking into class one day, McBryer watched a maintenance man add a plaque to the wall with the name of yet another West Point casualty. In the era of Kent State and My Lai, cadets were reluctant to wear their uniforms in public, knowing they risked taunts of "baby killer." As a constant reminder of an unpopular war, Pham knew, without a word spoken, that some cadets resented him. Reading the New York Times left at his door every morning, he could see his country falling apart.

Gradually, it became clear that only one member of the class of '74 would be going to Vietnam after graduation. In January 1973, when the news of a peace agreement was broadcast, Pham was watching. He remembers his feelings this way: "In my heart, signing a peace treaty is like signing a surrender. But I knew the American people were impatient because lots of their folks died in Vietnam, which is a long way away from home, for a cause that is so distant and so abstract . . . So I didn't feel angry at all. Just depressed."

On graduation day, Pham and McBryer, dressed in gray swallow-tailed uniforms, tossed their caps into the air. Outside the stadium, they embraced and pledged to stay in touch.

"West Point's loss is Viet-Nam's gain," reads Pham's entry in the 1974 Howitzer, his class yearbook. "No doubt, stars in his eyes will soon be on his shoulders."

"I'm sometimes asked by people, 'Didn't you counsel him to stay here?' " says former superintendent Knowlton, now retired. "And I say no, because this is not his country. There was no doubt in his mind either; that's where he should go."

Pham agrees: "At West Point, I believed what we were taught about duty, honor, country. That was what drew me back."

The new lieutenant strode off the plane at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport in August 1974, resplendent in dress whites. A saber with a gold hilt gleamed at his side. The sight dazzled his younger sister Thanh-Dung, who was preparing to leave Vietnam to study in America. She would carry that fairy-tale vision of her brother for years.

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April 30, 1975. Second Lt. Pham and 60 Vietnamese military cadets were holed up at Thu Duc, an infantry school just outside Saigon. They'd been in retreat for a month, trying to stay ahead of the North Vietnamese. Pham had just lost his West Point ring, inscribed with the class motto: "Pride of the Corps '74."

A month earlier, the black sapphire stone had dropped out somewhere. A bad sign, he'd thought. The North Vietnamese had already captured the province of Tay Ninh. Then the town of Ban Me Thuot, perilously close to Dalat, fell in a single day. The military academy was evacuated, officers leading the cadets toward Saigon. For safekeeping, Pham put the ring with its empty socket in the shirt pocket of his fatigues. And now it too was gone. There are West Pointers who never take off their ring from the moment during Ring Weekend when their girlfriends slip it onto their finger. Plebes learn to define it -- "the crass mass of brass and glass, sir!" -- while envious Army colleagues demean its wearers as "ring-knockers" purportedly equipped with a golden phone to the Pentagon. In a culture steeped in symbolism, the class ring is the most potent icon, a sign that "I made it" through one of the toughest schools in the world. "Nothing is more demanding, nothing more commanding or consuming than a West Point experience -- unless you were a tortured POW for years," says novelist Gus Lee, whose forthcoming book explores his experiences as a Chinese-American cadet at West Point in the 1960s. "The ring says you went through a very intense experience with lifetime comrades. You have all these brothers who wear the ring, and it bonds you." Heartsick, Pham searched the barracks, but had to give up the hunt when two North Vietnamese tanks, hulking Soviet-made T-54s, rumbled through the camp gates. The retreat from Dalat, where Pham had taught cadets the tactics, leadership and other skills he acquired at West Point, had come without a shot fired. But his men were equipped with antitank guns. Now Pham positioned a fire team in a barracks window. "San sang," he ordered. "Nham." They took aim. "Ban!"

One of the enemy tanks rocked to a halt, billowing smoke and fire. The other fled. The cadets cheered, but victory was brief. "We were only single swallows which could not make a whole spring," Pham says.

Under smoky skies, Pham and his men joined the surreal exodus along Highway 1. The road was jammed with wild-eyed men on motorbikes, terrified women balancing their entire households on pedicabs and -- the only happy faces -- jubilant prison inmates in tiger-striped uniforms, freed when their jailers took off. Taking a jungle path, Pham could hear the enemy tanks clattering beside them on the macadam, victors and vanquished both aiming for the capital. Shortly after noon, a North Vietnamese tank burst through the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon. The war was over. But at first, nothing happened. Pham shed his uniform. He and a buddy supported themselves as sidewalk bicycle repairmen. Eventually, the North Vietnamese began summoning the nguy, the "puppet" soldiers

and administrators of South Vietnam, for "reeducation." For junior officers like Pham, the sentence was supposed to be 10 days.

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Nguyen Van Nhan, a former South Vietnamese infantry officer, entered a bamboo hut at the reeducation camp somewhere in the province of Phuoc Long. The new inmate saw he was not alone. Another prisoner was lying on a bamboo bed, shivering under a blanket. He was moaning and scratching himself. His skin was dark, and every inch of it, except for his palms and face, was covered with scabies that left bloody welts. There was a bowl of rice on his bed; a chicken was pecking away, eating the prisoner's rations. Nhan, who had been trained at Fort Benning, Ga., soon learned he had something in common with his new hut mate, late of West Point and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Because they were trained in the United States, they were treated like dirt, says Nhan, who now inspects shoes at a factory in Texas.

By then, June 1976, Pham had been a prisoner of war for nearly a year in a camp so deep in the jungle bordering Cambodia that there was no need for a fence. Every couple of weeks, the cadre who ran the camp would call the prisoners in for a marathon haranguing session, but Pham recalls no education; just the painful lessons of revenge, hard labor and deprivation. At night, the prisoners scribbled the next day's jobs on slips of paper -- chop wood, harvest rice, clear minefields -- and drew lots. Pham had the good fortune to never draw the minefields. Sometimes, busy at another task, he would hear in the distance the muffled bang of an exploding mine.

Before the collapse of South Vietnam, U.S. officials warned of an inevitable bloodbath if the Americans pulled out. "One of the great false alarms of all time," George McGovern told the Senate in 1976. Not so, according to a 1985 study published in the *Washington Quarterly* by Jacqueline Desbarats and Karl D. Jackson, two Vietnam experts then at the University of California, Berkeley. Based on an international survey of 800 Vietnamese refugees, they asserted that between 1975 and 1982, "at least 65,000" people were executed in Vietnam.

The researchers said they did not count those consigned to what refugees called the "slow death" in the reeducation camps and prisons, "those who died by accident (such as cleaning minefields), those who died from malnutrition, disease, or exhaustion, those who committed suicide, or those who simply disappeared." So that figure doesn't include Pham's hut mate who walked outside one night and dropped stone dead. Or the son of a wealthy Danang family who killed himself after the new regime took over his family's gas station. "You today," Pham whispered to his friend lying in the grave he dug for him. "Me tomorrow."

If the prisoners were lucky, they got a bowl of filthy rice a day, or an undigestible sorghum cereal usually fed to horses, called bobo. Pham says he learned to make something he called "rats seven dishes," to make a meal of snakes, a snack of ants and worms. Allowed to visit, his mother brought him a copy of *Gone With the Wind*. Pham convinced the guards that Margaret Mitchell was a Russian writer. But they always had the upper hand. Guards surprised him and his friends one night as they discussed the inevitable collapse of communism, and threatened for hours to shoot them. Moments like that, he says, taught him more than four years at West Point. They are the reason he has titled his book-in-progress *Rendezvous With Yourself*.

"Despite all this, and this is what I want to remember -- there is a positive side to what we underwent," Pham writes. "It is that, the more you suffer, the more you come to know yourself. In prison I realized there is a price to be paid for everything. The price of self-knowledge and calm is hardship and suffering. This produces the kind of freedom that money cannot buy, power cannot touch and fame has nothing to do with."

In February 1981, after Pham had spent five years and eight months in captivity, the police unexpectedly set him free -- by an administrative mistake, he thinks. His detention camp release permit branded him a "member of previous military body and organizations involved and responsible for anti-communist activities." He returned home to Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City. With its informers, disease and poverty, it sometimes seemed like just a larger prison.

Pham eked out a living teaching English to Vietnamese like himself: "socially dangerous persons" tarred by their links to the United States whose only chance for a better future was getting out.

For support, he and his family depended on his sister, who was stranded in America after Saigon fell and her scholarship to Duke University evaporated in an administrative foul-up. Living in Washington, Thanh-Dung worked three jobs to send money, medicines and consumer goods her family could use, barter or bribe with. She sent a stream of letters to West Point, the State Department and Capitol Hill in a fruitless quest to win their release. "I keep the fire burning, but it's just not enough to make any miracle happen," she recalls. Pham's class president, Robert Mixon, wrote Secretary of State Alexander Haig, a West Point grad. He never heard back.

In 1984, Pham tried to get a boat out, but the police showed up just before the sampan pushed off; he had to give them all his money to escape arrest. Write your friends at West Point, his mother said. When I get a chance, he said. By then, he had received just two pieces of mail from the States, a form letter soliciting donations to the West Point Fund and an invitation to his 10th reunion.

During his State of the Union message in 1985, President Reagan introduced Jean Nguyen, a Vietnamese refugee due to graduate from West Point in the spring. Newspaper stories erroneously described her and another cadet as the academy's first Vietnamese graduates; there was no mention of Tam Minh Pham, class of '74.

He couldn't tell his mother the real reason why he didn't write. "I was miserable . . . It had been a long time and nobody paid attention, so I thought I was forgotten."

That same year, a friend of Pham's mother introduced him to her niece, Kim Chi Trang, a soft-spoken 23-year-old who lived at home caring for her handicapped mother. They dated, meeting in cafes after his classes and talking for hours about many things -- except his imprisonment. They married three years later. The newlyweds, like many Vietnamese, honeymooned in Dalat, the "City of Love." Pham wanted to show his bride the national military academy where he had gone to school and later taught, but it was now off-limits and heavily guarded. The closest they could get was a hilltop a few miles away.

When the Vietnamese government, desperate for economic aid, began to open its borders in the late 1980s, a West Pointer named Thomas Marks, class of '72, was among the first visitors. Marks, who had become a schoolteacher in Hawaii and "chief foreign correspondent" for Soldier of Fortune magazine, attached himself to an American business group scouting for opportunities and looked up his old friend. He and Pham met in 1988 at the Caravelle Hotel, where American reporters had once watched the war from the rooftop. "He was not in the greatest shape, psychologically or otherwise," says Marks.

Back home, Marks wrote a bitter article about the trip, disguising Pham's identity but using his story "to explain what happened to these people when we just pulled the plug, because there are so many like him that had their lives turned into pieces of garbage. We left an entire army we created, all of our intelligence people. There are some guys who are still hiding to this day." Soldier of Fortune headlined the piece, "Ho Chi Minh City's Living Dead. Abandoned ARVN Vets: Outcasts in a Troubled Land."

Meanwhile, Pham himself finally wrote to his classmates. "Hi, I am really at a loss of what to say after 15 years not having been able to see you guys!" the letter began. "I surmise, however, that you must be in pretty much better shape than I am." The letter was carried to the United States in 1989 by one of the American businessmen he had met through Marks. It eventually made its way into the July issue of the Assembly, West Point's alumni magazine. In the letter, Pham mentioned McBrayer and other friends, but only touched on his ordeal. "I was sent to camp right after April '75 and, thank God, got out of it in 1981." He said he had eventually tried contacting the Association of Graduates, West Point's alumni group, and officials at the American Embassy in Bangkok for help. "But there has been no real response yet."

The letter was signed, "P.M. Tam USMA '74."

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"Daddy, why don't you help him?"

Carson McBrayer, 6, asked her father that question soon after the Assembly with Pham's letter arrived at their house in Yardley, Pa. They were standing in the upstairs hallway, a gallery of his family's military history: a portrait of his great-grandfather who lost an arm at Petersburg fighting for the Confederacy; a photo of McBrayer receiving his diploma; his West Point company posing stiffly at Trophy Point their plebe year.

Carson and her 4-year-old brother loved the stories behind the pictures. McBrayer pointed out the short Asian cadet squinting in the sun in the first row. He told his kids how his friend had gone back to defend his country, how the enemy threw him in jail, how no one knew for years if he was dead or alive. And now he wanted to come to America, but no one seemed able to help him.

His daughter's question, so obvious and innocent, pierced McBrayer. He'd wondered what happened to Pham. He had made occasional calls to the Association of Graduates, checked with the State Department, even tried to send money through a relief agency. Of McBrayer, the Howitzer yearbook noted, "We will remember him as one who valued ideals and friendship as his most cherished possessions." But he knew his attempts had been halfhearted. After five years as an infantry officer, McBrayer had gone to work for Johnson & Johnson, shifting from command of a company of soldiers to leading a production team that made OB tampons. In 1987, venture capitalists had asked him to help start a new company, Osteotech, an orthopedic specialty firm.

Now he made a vow to his wife, Leslie. "I'm going to do something. I made things happen in the military. I made things happen in business. I can make things happen here." But when he tracked down Pham's sister in Gaithersburg, Thanh-Dung was skeptical. Now an American citizen married to Henry Cohn, a Department of Veterans Affairs lawyer, she had a folder bulging with platitudes and buck-passing, the legacy of her losing battles with bureaucracy. But McBrayer persisted. His weapons were the phone, the fax machine and West Point connections. He organized a "Free Tam Committee" and persuaded the accounting firm of Coopers & Lybrand to set it up and a New Jersey bank to run it, free. His company paid for a direct-mail campaign that sold T-shirts and netted \$15,000 from classmates and other West Pointers.

By Christmas 1989, he had a man on the ground in Thailand, an Asian businessman with high-level contacts, who was cutting through the red tape that snarled the Orderly Departure Program. ODP is the well-meaning but tortuous obstacle course set up by the United Nations in 1979 after the international outcry over the plight of Vietnamese refugees forced to run the gantlet of South China Sea pirates. Through his sister's efforts, Pham's name had been on the list of refugees acceptable to U.S. officials since 1984 -- a roll that five years later still had 600,000 names. The catch: The Vietnamese had to agree.

Behind the scenes, high-powered ring-knockers had also been busy. Former superintendent Knowlton, who had written Pham several letters he never got, pleaded Pham's case to Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who is the presidential emissary to Hanoi for POW-MIA affairs. Tipped off by Marks, a Thai West Pointer also got word to Vessey. During a negotiating session, Vessey handed the foreign minister of Vietnam an envelope. Inside was a pitch for Pham's release. A COMMUNICATION FROM THE FREE Tam Committee:

"To: The Pride of the Corps '74

"At 22:45 hours on May 31, 1991, Pham Minh Tam returned to the United States, seventeen years after our graduation. He was accompanied by his wife Kim Chi. After many years of waiting and hoping, this mission has been accomplished."

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"I don't think we'll ever know exactly what triggered the Vietnamese to let him go," says Vessey. In the end, it may have been simply the growing chorus of voices calling for Pham's release. McBrayer insists he was a "small player" and is quick to credit Knowlton, his classmates and, most of all, the tireless efforts of Pham's sister, who never gave up, even when it seemed everyone else had written her brother off. She and Pham, however, have no doubt about their greatest benefactor, who waited nervously with the Cohns at National Airport a year ago for a plane from Bangkok. Lewis Sorley, a West Pointer who has befriended Pham, says it best: "The day West Point assigned Pat McBrayer as Tam's roommate was the luckiest day of his life."

The night Pham arrived in America, he and McBrayer were sitting around the Cohns' kitchen table in Gaithersburg. Thanh-Dung excused herself and went upstairs. She's now a successful benefits consultant for the Wyatt Co. But in 1976, when she didn't know if she would ever see her brother again and she was a cashier at Blackie's House of Beef and working two other jobs that netted her only \$300 a month, she had wanted to buy something by which her parents could remember their eldest son. From the upstairs linen closet, she brought down a copy of the Howitzer, his class yearbook. The other gift she had needed a general's permission to buy.

"Does this look familiar?" she asked her brother, placing on the table a glistening saber of German steel, a scarlet tassel hanging from its gold hilt, just like the one he had carried so proudly the day he came home from West Point.

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Through the years Pham was held without trial, surviving death threats and scabies, living on vermin, his classmates were rising through the ranks, going to graduate school, falling in love, getting married, having children, getting out of the service and discovering that a West Point ring could be the key to the executive suite.

Now in their early forties, the men of West Point, class of 1974 (female cadets wouldn't arrive for another two years), are hitting their stride. The 400 or so still in uniform are majors and lieutenant colonels; 70 to 80 will soon command battalions. Many of those who left the Army have found success in business and the professions. For his first six months in America, Pham couldn't even get a job washing floors or dishing out ice cream. Last fall, he finally found work as a teacher's aide at Cardozo High School, a massive complex of brick in a struggling Northwest section. He still hasn't left Vietnam behind: His days are spent helping Vietnamese immigrant children, many of them Amerasians, the abandoned offspring of GIs. His one-year contract, which pays \$15,900 a year, runs out in September. His wife works as a home attendant caring for their wheelchair-bound landlady.

The couple shares a tiny room with slanted walls, twin beds, cast-off furniture. Between them they were only allowed to bring 40 pounds of belongings into this country -- among them clothes, Pham's West Point diploma and dog-eared books and tapes with the favorite sermons of his Zen Buddhist masters, who taught him that the only prison is the mind and passed on their preternatural capacity for calm acceptance. "You could put a bomb under him," his sister jokes, "and he wouldn't jump."

Pham seems free of any bitterness about the years that went by without a word from his American friends. "That's understandable," he says. "It's like a wound. No one wants to open it up. Why should we?" The soldier who endured six years of prison emerged a serene philosopher. "I don't blame anyone . . . If I had stayed back here after graduation I would be so rich now, but I wouldn't have the mental attitude I have."

Enlightenment hasn't immunized him completely from worldly delights. With gifts from friends and their own earnings, he and his wife have acquired the American passion for consumption. They have a new Toshiba color

television and a VCR. Their favorite tape displays the date "Sep.28.91," and features the Corps of Cadets marching under a crisp blue sky, commands echoing across the parade ground at West Point.

Guests of honor that day, they sat in the superintendent's box for the Army-Harvard football game. When the announcer introduced Pham at half time, the Corps of Cadets rose in a standing ovation. The superintendent gave him a brass medal with the words "Welcome home" inscribed on the back.

"It may not be the nicest thing to say, but this guy got lost in the shuffle," Pat McBrayer says, trying to explain why it took 17 years for Pham to be returned to the fold.

Oh, there are lots of good explanations. The communists stonewalled. "We weren't getting anyone out," argues Vessey. "The fact is we did not have much influence." People tried, although none with a sister's tenacious devotion; there were, after all, lives to live, careers to forge, families to raise, other battles to fight.

But there may be another, more fundamental reason, one that perhaps only someone like McBrayer, 13 years out of uniform and no longer dependent on the goodwill of superior officers, is able to talk about.

America's focus, understandably, was on its own POWs and MIAs, McBrayer says. "As a country we were concerned about other things. We had El Salvador and Panama; and Vietnam was something everybody wanted to forget. And Pham was part of Vietnam. And he was forgotten."

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In a science laboratory at Cardozo High School, the steps of cell division are outlined on posters written in English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Vietnamese.

Tam Minh Pham's days are spent circulating from class to class in the school's English as a Second Language program, juggling roles -- translator, instructor, booster, social worker. Hispanics dominate the ESL program, and the dozen or so Vietnamese children often ended up getting ignored, teachers confess. When Pham first arrived at Cardozo, some of his students were skipping out after lunch.

Whatever their nationality, his students "are faced with lots of problems, both domestic and academic," says Pham. "They look at each other through a mist of prejudices, and they don't always get along. I serve as kind of a bridge to help them come closer together, to help them know each other."

But the day he arrived at Cardozo was almost his last. He found himself at his first pep rally, a raucous display of American school spirit that deafened and terrified him. Cardozo was nothing like his school in Vietnam, where students quietly walked the halls and people rarely revealed their feelings. Pham went home and was sick for the next week. "I said to myself I wouldn't come back for anything." Then he realized what he had was a dose of culture shock. "People just behave in their own way," he told himself, "so why should you feel scared? Just get back and understand them." It's what he tries to get across to the kids who are struggling to fit in, just as he is. "The key is mutual understanding and respect. As long as you have that, you have no problem dealing with each other, no matter what skin color you have, what culture you were raised in."

Before and after classes, he waits in his office, a large room on the third floor with three desks and a copier. "They just pour in," he says, "with questions, looking for advice, for anything they have in mind." Chau wants help finding his American father. An wants a pass. A teacher wants to know how a new student who speaks little English is managing. There are always cultural gaps, little ones like when a boy uses a comma for a decimal point, Vietnamese style, instead of a period. And there are deeper fissures. One day recently, Pham had to break up a beef between Chau and a Hispanic classmate who had greeted him with a noisy, "Hey, how ya' doing, man" and a slap on the shoulder. "Chau mistook that for an act of aggression, so he fought back," Pham says.

Today's science lesson is based on the periodic table. At a lab counter, a Salvadoran teenager named Juan hunches over his notebook. His black pants are emblazoned with silver stars and the legend "Never legal." Pham peeks over his shoulder.

"Is it iron?" Juan nods. "How do you know?" Pham demands. Juan pauses. Then, firmly, "Because it's in the table." Pham gives his shoulder a friendly cuff. "Good man." "I never consider myself a Vietnamese who should take sides with the Viet- nameese kids," Pham says later. "I just want to make different groups of students mix better. I look at the kids as my own brothers."

* * *

West Point rings gleam on the hands of most of the men sitting in Salon B of the Corcoran Ballroom at the Four Seasons Hotel. It's Valentine's Day, and Thanh-Dung Cohn and her husband, Henry, have joined about 25 West Pointers for a tribute organized by McBrayer. The night before, Pham's former company mates, the men of I-2, drank beers and swapped tales in McBrayer's suite. Summer Field Training Exercises, 1973: Cadet Pham's job is to fire a flare at the approach of helicopters. But his flare hits a chopper, forcing it down. The pilot emerges, unscathed but ripping mad. "I can't believe it!" he says after the frightened cadets explain what happened. "Two tours in Vietnam, and I get shot down by a Vietnamese in Fort Hood, Texas!"

Beside each china dinner plate is a program for the evening's tribute. On the cover is Pham's graduation picture, the one that appeared in the *Howitzer*. Below it is a verse from the "The Corps," a West Point hymn:

"The long gray line of us stretches
Through the years of a century told,
And the last man feels to his marrow
The grip of your far off hold."

Pham and Kim Chi are beaming at the center table. It's been quite an evening already. Vincent Stafford, a producer for NBC, has showed a tape of "Portraits of Freedom," an upcoming documentary that features Pham's story. The hotel has presented them with an all-expenses-paid weekend. McBrayer's company has given the budding author a personal computer and printer. There is even a 1986 Oldsmobile represented by a photo. Pham seems in shock, dazzled at the riches.

The friends of Pham have another mission now. They're working with Rep. Jack Reed (D-R.I. and West Point '71) to get a private bill through Congress to win Pham speedy citizenship, which would help his permanent job prospects. There is one more item of unfinished business, a final act of healing. Classmate James Hogan, now a corporate vice president in California, takes the podium. "Kim Chi, could you come up here, please?" From the pocket of his pin-stripe suit, Hogan removes a thick 14-karat-gold ring emblazoned with the class crest and its motto, "Pride of the Corps '74."

"Oh. Oh," Pham says, shaking his head when he realizes what it is. He whispers, "I'm so honored."

Hogan helps Kim Chi slip the ring on her husband's finger. The room erupts in applause. Pham looks as boyish as a cadet at the Ring Hop 20 years ago. He lifts his hand in a gesture that somehow seems caught between a salute and a blessing. Light from a chandelier catches the gold as Tam Minh Pham turns from side to side on the platform, bowing to his friends, his class ring held high, flashing.

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