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Vietnam War: The Life and Times of a South Vietnamese Special Police Officer

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The Vietnamese perspective is rarely found in English language books about the Vietnam War, especially regarding the CIA's "liaison" relationship with South Vietnamese police and security officials. Which is why I considered myself very fortunate when I was introduced to ***Lê Xuân Nhuận****.*

Nhuận's Wikipedia bio provides a comprehensive account of his life and accomplishments. He is a noted poet and author of three Vietnamese language books about his experiences as a "Special Police" officer. Two of the books are currently available. The first, **The Police Plan** (Cảnh-Sát-Hóa) (2002) tells of his service as Director Security and Counter-Intelligence in Region II from 1960 to 1973 and focuses on his corruption investigations within the provinces and capital cities in the region. Nhuận's second memoir, **Biến-Loạn Miền Trung** (2012) focuses on his service as Director of Security and Counter-Intelligence in Region I from 1973 to 1975. It reveals more about his personal life, and why he protested the militarist system that doomed democracy in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

Captured by the North Vietnamese in 1975, Nhuận spent more than twelve years in a re-education camp and five years under house arrest before emigrating to America in 1992. And yet, despite 20 years of war and 17 years of internment, he remains an optimistic and engaging individual whose extraordinary life and accomplishments have inspired me and advanced my understanding of the war.

Nhuận also has an irreverent streak that is rare among police and military veterans in the Vietnamese exile community. Although a dedicated anti-communist, he was a maverick who opposed all the political regimes in Vietnam: what he describes as "France's colonialism, **Emperor Bảo Đại**'s feudalism, **President Ngô Đình Diệm**'s dictatorship, and **President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu**'s stratocracy (government by military forces)."

Educated in Huế (the old capital and cultural center of Central Vietnam) where his first poems were published, Nhuận as a young man worked as a journalist for two newspapers. His interests were literary – he created the "Xây-Dựng" group composed of well-known poets and writers – but he was politically active too, and in 1949 he was jailed for writing a novel criticizing the French and Emperor Bảo Đại.

His fated involvement with Americans began in mid-1954 while he was serving in the French-controlled Vietnamese army as a war correspondent, psychological warfare lecturer, and Chief of the Voice of the Army in Central Vietnam. At this critical juncture, which was prior to the partition of Vietnam, he met **Thompson A. Grunwald**, a young, enthusiastic, crew-cut American.

> "Tom was the first American to come to Huế as Director of the US Information Service," Nhuận recalled.

Grunwald had an office, a library, and a room for showing propaganda films. He organized the first Vietnamese-American Association, and advised and equipped Vietnam's Information Services. As de facto chief of the US consulate in Central Vietnam, Grunwald also had extensive contacts with most of the top government officials and military officers.

> "Tom helped me organize an English course on Radio Huế," Nhuận continued. "It was the first ever English radio program in Vietnam. He gave me a manual tape-recorder and batteries to use when I went with the commanding generals to the units to record what was said for radio broadcasts and to publish in military magazines and papers. I appeared with him in many public events."

Nhuận left the military in 1956 and joined the Huế city police force, but he and Grunwald continued to collaborate; they showed propaganda films inside police stations and to the public, taught English to policemen and women, and sent English language lessons to listeners and students across the country. Nhuận introduced Grunwald to influential people and helped him collect information for the Thế Giới Tự Do (Free World) magazine. Grunwald in turn introduced Nhuận to the US military officers who came to his Voice of the Army readings.

> "Tom picked up any Americans who happened to be in Huế to participate in my English course," Nhuận added. The USIS films were showed to the public too, on Saturday evenings, at the square next to the Huế police office.
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> "Tom left some years later," Nhuận said, "and became the first Chief of Vietnam Desk at the Radio Voice of America and organized the first VOA's English course by radio for Vietnamese listeners in Vietnam. Here in California, I met Tom again, and we had family tours and dinners together some years ago."

The Ubiquitous American

After the partition of Vietnam, the US military assistance advisory group (MAAG) in the capital city of Sài Gòn focused on modernizing the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces (RVNAF). The CIA, meanwhile, dealt with the civilian branches of government, especially the security police and intelligence services.

For example, the CIA organized and trained the Vietnamese Special Forces, the Lực Lượng Đặc Biệt (LLDB) to conduct paramilitary intelligence operations in North Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea. The LLDB, notably, reported directly to the Presidential Survey Office, not the RVNAF. In their role as a "palace guard", they "were always available for special details dreamed up by President Diệm and his brother Nhu." Those "special" details involved "terrorism against political opponents."[1]

> "There was also a presidential intelligence service, the Office of Political and Social Research (SEPES) directed by **Dr. Trần Kim Tuyến,**" Nhuận recalled, "which was also a hammer used by President Ngô Đình Diệm against his domestic political opponents."

President Diệm and his brothers **Nhu** (the political boss in Southern Vietnam) and **Cẩn** (the boss in Central Vietnam) were obsessed with protecting the Catholic Ngô regime. To that end, they staffed the government and military with loyal members of their Cân Lao (Personalist Labor) Party, which promoted the idea that people owed allegiance to a charismatic leader rather than a party or ideology. To enforce loyalty to President Diệm, SEPES chief Tuyến created a vast intelligence network of Catholic emigres and beholden Can Lao cadres to control and influence all levels of the administration. Tuyến likewise used the Military Security Service (An-Ninh Quân-Đội) to monitor the many unhappy military officers who were plotting coups.

To finance this ubiquitous security apparatus, and thus control the political environment in South Vietnam, Tuyến in 1958 started importing a steady supply of Laotian opium using Corsican airlines and a faction of the South Vietnamese air force. All of this was done with tacit CIA approval.

Indeed, the Americans were determined to protect the Ngô regime at any cost. To that end, the Michigan State University Group (MSUG) was sent to Sài Gòn in 1955 to manage a massive "technical assistance" program that focused on four areas: public information, public administration, finance and economics, and police and security services. Over the ensuing seven years, MSUG's Police Administration Division would spend 15 million dollars beefing up the Government of Vietnam's (GVN) array of internal security programs. [2]

MSUG recruited primarily from the existing French colonial police forces: the Gendarme (Hiến Binh) which operated in rural areas; and the Sûreté, composed of plainclothesmen handling investigations, customs, immigration, and revenue. MSUG combined the Sûreté with the municipal police (uniformed police in 22 autonomous cities and Sài Gòn) into a General Directorate of Police and Security Services (Tổng Nha Cảnh-Sát Công-An) within the Ministry of the Interior.

The police (Ty Cảnh-Sát) and security services (Ty Công-An) were separate commands and functioned autonomously in the provinces and cities until 1962, when they were combined into the National Police (Cảnh-Sát Quốc-Gia). As Nhuận explained,

> "the Tình-Báo (Intelligence), Công-An (Security or Public Safety) and Cảnh-Sát Đặc-Biệt (Special Police) services always existed and were particularly important."

Most MSUG police advisers were former state troopers or big city detectives, but the five men who trained and advised the plain-clothed Special Police were undercover CIA officers hidden within MSUG's Internal Security Section. Under **Raymond Babineau**, this CIA team worked at Special Police headquarters inside the National Police Command headquarters at 258 Võ Tánh Street.

The Võ Tánh facility also housed the infamous National Police/Special Police Interrogation Center, which as author Graham Greene wrote in **The Quiet American**, "seemed to smell of urine and injustice."

The Special Police always had a reputation for brutality. **General Edward Lansdale**, who managed the CIA's nascent "covert action" programs in South Vietnam, was highly critical of Babineau's team. In his autobiography, Lansdale recalled that in 1956,

> "several families appeared at my house one morning to tell me about the arrest at midnight of their men-folk, all of whom were political figures. The arrests had a strange aspect to them, having come when the city was asleep and being made by heavily armed men who were identified as `special police'."[3]

The Americans were aware that the Ngô regime used the Special Police to suppress its domestic political opponents. But they did nothing to stop the abuses, because the Special Police produced the essential "Vietcong order of battle" (Bản Trận Liệt) that mapped out the organizational structure and membership of the burgeoning Communist-led insurgency. Suppressing communism was America's top priority, and the Special Police were viewed as the best means to accomplish this goal. Consequently, the Special Police received the lion's share of US technical aid, while the most promising Special Police officers were trained by CIA and FBI personnel at the International Police Academy at Georgetown University.

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NOTES

1 Keven M. Generous, "Vietnam: The Secret War" (1985), p. 94.

2 Warren Hinckle, Robert Scheer and Sol Stern, "University on the Make", Ramparts, April 1966.

3 Edward Geary Lansdale, In the Midst of Wars (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 340.

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