Oral History Interview of Dinh Xuan Ba [Đinh Xuân Bá], Entrepreneur and Former Assault Youth Member
DVD 03
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I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow
DB – Dinh Xuan Ba

I [In English]: Today is Tuesday, June the 5th, and this is an interview of Mr. Dinh Xuan Ba of SECOIN Company, [1] and he is a veteran of both the wars against the French and against the Americans. [Switching into Vietnamese] To begin, could you please tell me when and where you were born?

DB: I was born in 1935

I: 1935?

DB: Yes, ten years before you were born.

I: And where were you born?

DB: Nghe An. Thanh Chuong District, Nghe An Province.

I: Was your family from the businessman class, or were they farmers, or…

DB: First of all, do you know Nghe An?

I: Yes, I know of Nghe An. It is near Ho Chi Minh's birthplace, right?

DB: Yes, but do you know Nghe An's most unique characteristic?

I: For one thing, …

DB: Hardship. Poverty. But very stalwart, very determined. For example, at the University of Arts and Sciences, two-thirds of the deans and department heads of the university are from Nghe An. Nghe An natives have an academic tradition, a tradition of study.

[1] Dinh Xuan Ba is President of the Secoin Company, Ltd., 59 Hang Chuoi Street, Ha Ba Trung District, Hanoi, Vietnam.

I: The people of Central Vietnam are famous for being good students and for being good politicians, right? (DB laughs loudly). Were you from a poor family?

DB: No. If we use Vietnamese terminology, they were petit bourgeois [tiểu tư sản].

I: Petit bourgeois.

DB: Government officials. My mother was a teacher.

I: A high school teacher?

DB: An elementary school teacher. And my father, using the French term, was a "sep ga".

I: What was a "sep ga."

DB: In today's vocabulary, he was a railroad station manager, in charge of a railroad station.

I: Oh, yes! The director of a railroad station.

DB: Yes, of a railroad station.

I: So he was a technical specialist.

DB: Yes. And my mother spoke French extremely well.

I: And what about your father?

DB: Naturally, he spoke French very well. After all, he was the chief of a railroad station.

I: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

DB: My mother gave birth to 15 children.

I: 15! Wow!

DB: Eleven of the children survived to adulthood. My oldest brother is named Dinh Xuan Giap [Đinh Xuân Giáp], but his French name is Xavier Dinh. He was a visiting professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris. He is currently living in Paris.

I: He is living in Paris. How long has he lived in Paris?

DB: Counting back, let’s see, he went there in 1944.

I: 1944? Oh!

DB: So he has now been there for almost 60 years [sic].

I: So he probably has taken French citizenship, right?

DB: Yes, he has been a French citizen for a long time. His wife is French. He was Deputy Chairman of “Mutualitie [French word] Agricole de France.” That means the Mutual Agricultural Insurance Company of France.

I: Insurance…?

DB: Mutual insurance.

I: So this is a type of agricultural insurance?

DB: Agricultural insurance, but limited – mutual insurance. It is a very large French organization. He was deputy chairman of that organization. And when he retired, he became the Secretary General of the FIAPA organization, which is a United Nations advisory organization. FIAPA is an abbreviation for “Fédération Internationale des Associations des Personnes Agées,” meaning the federation of associations of elderly people throughout the world, and Vietnam is a member of this organization.

I: So that means you were growing up when the August Revolution [1945] occurred. You were ten years old when it happened, right?

DB: Yes, I was ten years old.

I: At that time, what were your family’s views about the August Revolution? Because both of your parents worked for the French. Did they have nationalist tendencies, or what were their political tendencies?

DB: To tell the truth, the views of my parents, as I understand them at least, were that they were patriots. They loved our country, and they loved justice, and added to that was the self-respect that is naturally felt by intellectuals. Now, why do I say, "plus self-respect"? That is because I remember one story: Once my mother was traveling by train from Hanoi down to Thanh Hoa. She was riding in a private car. There was a Frenchman on that car – and you must understand that my mother was very beautiful. The Frenchman came over and tried to flirt with her, and he touched her – he stroked her. She turned to him, cursed him in a long stream of French words, and slapped his face. Then she called the station manager and demanded that they throw this guy off the car. Why did she dare to do such a thing? It was because my father was a railway station manager (laughs).

I: That is a good story.

DB: That story tells you what kind of a woman my mother was. Now, why do I say that they were patriots and that they loved justice? About that, Le Tat Dat [spelling?] at that time was a revolutionary cadre, a Viet Minh cadre. Later he became a deputy minister of Vietnam's Ministry of Interior. He escaped from the Hoa Lo Prison, here in Hanoi. He fled down to Thanh Hoa, and he hid in our house.

I: Is that so?

DB: Why? If at that time you had said that it was because my mother loved the revolution or something along those lines, you would be wrong. It was because Le Tat Dat had been a classmate of hers in school.

I: A classmate from long before?

DB: Yes, a classmate from long before. My mother fed him and hid him in our house to keep the French secret police from finding him.

I: When was this? Before the French…?

DB: It was in 1944. 1944. Then in 1945 Le Tat Dat became the Chairman of Thanh Hoa Province, and he invited my mother to become the leader of the Thanh Hoa women's association, but she refused the offer. She did not have a problem with ideology or anything. She loved her country, and she loved her friends, and she liked truth and justice.

I: She was motivated more by emotions, but she had nationalist tendencies. What about your father? Did he join the Viet Minh?

DB: My father was neutral. He was very neutral. My father was a very quiet, gentle man. He had few political views. He just wanted to go to work in the morning and come back home in the evening. He was a civil servant. And he was completely honest. He never took a bribe – not even a single penny. He was well known for being honest and incorruptible.

I: And a man who had to raise 15 children had to be cautious. He had to take care of his family first, right?

DB: No. At that time our family did not yet number fifteen. The last child in the family was not born until 1948.

I: When did you learn French?

DB: Before the revolution. I learned it in a French elementary school in Thanh Hoa city. After the revolution in 1945, I went to the Vietnamese high school in Vinh City. This meant I was going to school in Nghe An Province, which was my native area. Then,

while I was still in school, the French occupied Vinh City, so I had to flee back up to Thanh Hoa. Then I evacuated out to a district.

I: Did your entire family evacuate, or was it just you?

DB: It was my entire family.

I: Your entire family, huh? And in Thanh Hoa, you lived in the Viet Minh war zone [chiến khu]?

DB: They did not call it a war zone. They called it a secure zone. It was very large, covering several provinces. After we moved out there, my father continued working as a railroad station manager.

I: So the trains were still running?

DB: They were still running, but very infrequently. But he worked in Binh-Tri-Thien – which was Quang Binh, Quang Tri, and Thua Thien provinces. He worked for the revolution, still as a civil servant. He did not work for the sake of ideology but just out of the diligent, conscientious devotion of a civil servant. He just continued to follow his profession and to do his job.

I: When you moved back up to Thanh Hoa, did you continue to go to school, or was it impossible for you to continue your schooling up there?

DB: I continued to go to school in the free zone – it was called the free zone. I continued to go to high school until I finished the ninth grade – that is what is now the tenth grade. Back then there were only nine grades, so ninth grade was the highest level of education.

I: Later it was increased to ten grades, right? There was a period when it was ten grades, right?

DB: No, back then it was nine grades, and then later it was raised straight to twelve grades. During the resistance war high school education went only up to the ninth grade, but the level of education was almost up to that of what is now the twelfth grade level. Not quite as high, but relatively close to that of today's twelfth grade. At that time it was called public high school [trung học phổ thông]. After ninth grade, students entered university preparatory classes. I did not go to that level, but that was the educational system at that time. After ninth grade, a student attended two years of university preparatory classes, and after two years of university preparation, the student entered the university. At that time, however, there was no university.

I: So two years to prepare for the first and second baccalaureate exams?

DB: No. Completion of ninth grade was viewed as the baccalaureate degree.

I: Oh, I see.

DB: When you finished ninth grade, you were considered as having completed your baccalaureate degree.

I: After you finished ninth grade, what did you do? Did you go to work?

DB: I joined the assault youth.

I: The assault youth?

DB: Yes. I joined several months after finishing the ninth grade.

I: How old were you at that time?

DB: I was 18.

I: 18 years old.

DB: Yes. It was 1953.

I: I have heard that working in the assault youth was very difficult and arduous.

DB (laughing): Do you know the special characteristics of Vietnam's assault youth?

I: They had to be very enthusiastic and they had to work very hard. They had to do jobs that in the army are called rear services [logistics support] jobs.

DB: Yes, rear services jobs supporting the various military operations and campaigns.

I: Transporting supplies, building roads, that kind of thing.

DB: The Assault Youth, both during the time I was a member as well as later on, was different. This is not something that was put into words, but it was how everyone viewed things. The army was considered to be the troops of Vo Nguyen Giap; cadres belonged to Truong Chinh; and the assault youth were Ho Chi Minh's troops – they were Uncle Ho's soldiers. That was how people viewed things. So when you wanted to join the assault youth, they did not accept everyone who wanted to join. You had to come before the people of your entire hamlet, and they had to recommend you; they asked whether this person is worthy of being a member of the assault youth. Only if you were considered worthy were you accepted. To join the army, all you had to do was sign up and they took you. But to join the assault youth, the people of your hamlet had to come forward to recommend you and to evaluate you to determine if you were worthy. Only then were you allowed to join.

I: So what year did you join the assault youth?

DB: 1953.

I: 1953. That was one year before the battle of Dien Bien Phu, right?

DB: No. I joined at the time the Dien Bien Phu Campaign was just beginning.

I: Were you sent up to support the Dien Bien Phu Campaign?

DB: No. In my family, three of us joined – me and two of my younger brothers. My younger brother was sent to the Dien Bien Phu Campaign, but I was sent up to ATK. Do you know what ATK is? ATK is an abbreviation…

I: For secure zone [An Toàn Khu].

DB: Right, secure zone. It constituted the outer perimeter protecting our national government and the Party Central Committee.

I: Ah yes, up in the Viet Bac zone.

DB: Right, the Viet Bac – in Thai Nguyen-Tuyen Quang. Then later I was sent up to Lang Son to build roads to bring in weapons from China – to bring in Chinese weapons and Chinese military specialists [advisors]. Every night, after we finished our road-building work, we had to receive weapons and military specialists from China.

I: And whenever the French bombed the road, you had to make repairs, right?

DB: That's right. When there were delayed-action bombs [bombs with time delay fuses], we had to destroy them, etc.

I: Did you go with your father or…

DB: No, my father stayed behind.

I: ..with your younger brothers?

DB: Yes, with my younger brothers.

I: How many younger brothers?

DB: There were three of us. One of my younger brothers was sent up to Dien Bien Phu, and one younger brother with my group got sick along the way and had to return home. However, I went all the way, right to the end. I stayed with the group until we moved in to take over control of Hanoi City.

I: Really? So you worked the entire time, five or six months?

DB: 14 months.

I: 14 months?

DB: Yes, 14 months. And then I transferred over to the security service – to the Vietnamese CIA (both laugh loudly).

I: Before that, I would like to have you describe your living conditions during the battle of Dien Bien Phu, during the fighting against the French. You were in a remote area, an area of many mountains, so there were difficulties finding enough food and water, right? And there was malaria, and French bombing raids [interruption as DB's cell-phone rings].

DB: Sorry.

I: You are the director of several companies, so you have a lot of work to do. So now can you describe for me the living conditions for the assault youth? What your lives were like, what the work was like, etc. Did you all live together, or did each person live separately?

DB: The assault youth were different from the army in this respect: they were an all-volunteer force. I remember one time, when I went to South Korea for discussions with a corporation over there. During a recreational outing, a Korean secretary confided in me. She said, "My father was almost sent to fight in Vietnam with Park Chung Hee's forces." I asked, "Why do you say 'almost'?" She said, "Because in the end, he did not go." She said, "You must remember that my father was extremely brave, and my entire family agreed with my father's decision – we were all extremely brave." I asked, "How could you all be brave if none of you were soldiers?" She answered, "Because back then we

were starving. We were very poor. If my father had joined the army, his salary alone would have been enough to feed the entire family. It would have been enough for the entire family to live on. So when he refused to go, that was an extremely courageous act." I sat back and thought about this, and I said, "That means all of us Vietnamese are heroes." We went, and we did not get paid – not a single penny. We did not get an expense account. We ate only whatever food was available, and if we got sick, we only got whatever medicine they happened to have on hand. None of us had anything personal, nothing of our own. So the young people at that time – I tell you the truth – people talk about participating in combat, in the fight against our enemies, and in later years we played that up to make it sound glorious and heroic, but during that time, it was the romanticism of youth that truly was the decisive factor. No matter what the difficulties, we just charged forward straight into them. During that period the assault youth experienced a different type of hardship than did the soldiers. For the soldiers it was life and death, but for the assault youth it was constant, protracted hardship, day after day after day. And we essentially had no source of logistics support. Food for instance – if there wasn't any rice available, we went out and collected roots and vegetables in the forest. And the worst thing was the malaria.

I: Yes, I had planned to ask you about malaria, because I know that in that region malaria is a very serious problem, and it is a very dangerous strain of malaria. Did many people die of malaria?

DB: As for deaths, perhaps there were, later on, but malaria does not kill right away. For instance, in my unit virtually everyone had malaria. People called it having a swollen stomach. There was a lump, and that type of malaria was incurable, and it became

chronic. Like you had something in your gut. And those who did not have malaria had what was called, "falling in water" [ngã nước] There were sores all over, and on my body I still have the scars from those sores. If you had sores, that meant the poison went out into your skin, and so you avoided catching malaria and you didn't have the swollen stomach. I didn't have the swollen stomach, but I had sores all over my body.

I: That makes you very weak, so the fact that you still kept on working was really something; it was really good. Now, you had both boys and girls in the assault youth, right?

DB: Yes, females were very common.

I: There were a lot of women?

DB: Yes, a lot. Initially we had a lot of women, but later on there were fewer. Gradually, as time went on, there were fewer and fewer.

I: Why was that? Was it because they were sent back to the rear, or because they got sick?

DB: Some were sent back to the rear, but it was also because we had to walk so far. We traveled from Thanh Hoa all the way to Lang Son, and we had to walk the whole way.

I: You went the whole way on foot?

DB: Yes, entirely on foot.

I: For the trip, did they provide you with sandals or with clothing, or did you have to provide everything yourselves?

DB: We had to provide everything ourselves. We had to provide our own rubber sandals. It was only some time later that they issued us a few items of clothing, but otherwise all we had was the clothing that we brought with us from home. We carried rice in packs on

our backs, and we just walked all day and then rested at night. I felt sorry for the girls, because we were building roads. I have read in the newspapers articles about similar phenomenon occurring to female high school students. The females were organized separately – they had their own unit, a platoon. And suddenly they all just passed out.

I: They all passed out?

DK: All of them collapsed and passed out.

I: Why?

DK: The nurse came and just laughed about it. The nurse said, "Just take them back and let them rest." I though it was because of sunstroke or exhaustion. But the nurse said to let the girls rest. And after massaging them a little, the girls regained consciousness. In later years the medical community developed a term for this phenomenon [DB's secretary, in the background, suggests an unclear word] No, that's not it. It happens to females when they reach the age of puberty and have to live with men and in rough circumstances. At some point, this kind of thing will occur.

I: Really? So is that because…?

DB: This was a great sacrifice that they made, because at that age girls should be pampered, cared for, and loved; an age when they should be in school. But they gave up everything to come out with us to work. People see courage and heroism in grabbing a gun and shooting it, "Bang! Bang! Bang!," in charging forward and falling on the battlefield. But they do not recognize the courage, the heroism of stolidly enduring constant hardship, day after day after day – the sacrifices of a group of people who all volunteered for these hardships.

I: What kind of tools did you have to build the roads? Shovels and that kind of thing? Did you have any type of machinery?

DB: No, we had no machinery. But we did have something we then called a stake – something we now call a 'crowbar." But they were very sharp. And you would hold it, and two people would pound it in with big hammers. And after you had bored a hole with this thing, they would put some explosive in the hole, and then run a fuse away from the hole. Everyone would then take cover, and they would bang on a gong to warn everyone, and there would be an explosion. Rocks would come out. Some of the rocks were this big, and some were bigger. We would then use hammers to break the rocks up.

I: When you build roads through mountainous areas, you often have to have steep grades, and you have to go through rock caves.

DB: Yes, we had to build the road through rock. And the road we built was not just a little trail, like the ones built later on. This road was eight meters wide.

I: So it would be wide enough for trucks.

DB: That's correct.

I: At that time the Chinese had just given trucks to Vietnam for the very first time, right?

DB: Yes, trucks and artillery.

I: Trucks and artillery?

DB: Yes, they gave us artillery too.

I: During the road building, did military engineers assist you?

DB: No, it was just the assault youth.

I: Really? So who taught you how to build the road?

DB: I think that the military engineers built the road section closest to the front lines at Dien Bien Phu, but we were very far from the front. We were near China, in Thai Nguyen-Tuyen Quang, and farther on. We built the section of road from the Chinese border to Thai Nguyen.

I: You worked on the section of road in Lang Son, right?

DB: From Lang Son to Thai Nguyen-Tuyen Quang.

I: So you worked on that entire section of road? Did you have to go back and forth repairing the road, or did you usually work in just one spot? Were you responsible for just a single section of road?

DB: Every assault youth company was responsible for one section of road. Once that road section was completed, the company would pack up and move on to another section.

I: A company was about 100 people?

DB: I do not remember exactly, but a company had three platoons. At that time I was a squad leader (laughs).

I: So the assault youth was organized along military lines, is that correct?

DB: We were organized completely along military lines, just like the army. We had only a few guns, just for self-defense. Otherwise, we were armed only with picks and shovels (laughs).

I: When French aircraft bombed you, you did not have any guns to defend yourselves? There were no anti-aircraft guns?

DB: We were not allowed to shoot. We were under strict orders not to shoot. If we fired our weapons, we would reveal our presence and the fact that there was a road there. So we had to just sit there and endure the bombing.

I: Were a lot of people killed by French bombs during these attacks?

DB: No, because the French did not bomb that section of the road very heavily. They did drop a few delayed action bombs. I took part in dismantling them – well, we really did not dismantle them. We just dug up the area around the bomb so that experts could then come in and dismantle the bomb.

I: Digging up a bomb with a time delay fuse is extremely dangerous.

DB: Yes. We even sat right on top of the bomb. Later on my company told me to write all this down. So I wrote it up, and then the entire company gathered together in a big circle as I sat there and read it aloud to them so that they could decide which parts were accurate, which parts needed to be corrected, and they suggested additions to the story. After that, I submitted my write-up to our company commander. When we finally got to Hanoi, I went to see an exhibition with my younger brother – my younger brother is now a professor of literature. My brother pointed to something at the exhibition and said, "Hey, there's the name Dinh Xuan Ba!" It was the book I had written. That book is now in the National Library. I wrote about this period because they all wanted to have a record of it. They told me to write it up because I had a good education. I was just about the most well educated person in the entire company.

I: Was that book published officially, or was it just…

DB: I don't know exactly. I laughed about it, because they published my manuscript in a small, thin volume with a very stupid little title: "Chúng Ta Quyết Tâm Bảo Vệ Xe" [We Resolve to Protect the Trucks]. That was the title. I have no idea when they printed and published it. They never informed me that they had done it. And even today, I do not

have a copy of my own book. Once I got curious and searched for it at the National Library. I looked up the name "Dinh Xuan Ba," and there it was.

I: In an assault youth company like yours, was everyone in the company from the same area, or were they from different places?

DB: Many places.

I: So they were from many different places?

DB [nodding affirmatively]: But most of my company were from Region 4 – meaning they were from Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, or Quang Binh provinces. And we were all young – very young. When we were sent down to help take over control of Hanoi, we marched across the Long Bien Bridge into the city, and I will never forget my feelings that day. We crossed under the glare of bright electric lights. Today those lights would not be considered bright at all, but back then, you must remember that just to be able to wear a white scarf [white towel] over your shoulder made you feel great. This was because previously no one could ever wear white, because white could be seen and your position would be exposed to the enemy. But when we entered Hanoi, not only did we wear white scarves over our shoulders, there were bright electric lights shining down, lighting our way. We felt incredibly happy.

I: And that was the first time you had ever been to Hanoi?

DB: Yes, it was the first time. Our forces took over Hanoi in October, and my group arrived there 15 days later.

I: At that time you were 19 years old?

DB: Yes, I was 19.

I: And were you still single?

DB turns to his secretary and tells her to go get a photograph off of his desk

DB: I want to show you a photo of me taken when we took over Hanoi. I was very handsome, and many girls fell in love with me (both laugh loudly). It got to the point that, ah, when my group arrived we were stationed and quartered in Gia Lam. The Gia Lam youth group came to see us, and they really loved us. They said, "You guys are different than the soldiers. You all look distinguished and gentlemanly. You look like university students, like scholars." Because we all had been high school students. During the resistance war, you attended school up through the ninth grade, and then you had to choose which path to follow to move on from there. Back then there was no university to attend, so we joined the assault youth. To choose a path to follow is a human need, and the choice was not solely out of patriotism. Now when we sit here and talk to each other, we can say this. Patriotism certainly was a factor – 80% to 90% - but there were not a lot of other options back then, not like there are today. Now youths have many options.

I: There was no other path to follow.

DB: Today one has many options, but back then young people had virtually only one path open to them, and that was to participate in the resistance war to defend and protect our people, our nation, and our country.

I: And to give this country a better future, and to give yourselves a better future?

DB: We must be a little more objective, a little more honest about this. Today many people look back on the past and they tend to overestimate the nobility of our motivations back then. We must realize that our motivation was something that came to us very naturally. The primary motivation still was patriotism, that is true. Ah, you must have been "infected by the West" [bị dính tây] You have been living with the enemy here in

Hanoi. In the past, we called this "being infected by the West." Do you understand the meaning of this term?[2]

I: It must mean something like "going over to the other side."

DB: Right, following the other side, joining the other side. [Looking to one side] Here it is. Here is the photo of me taken when we took over control of Hanoi [Secretary says something indistinct]. Handsome, right?

I: Very handsome. How old were you when that photo was taken?

DB: 19 years old.

I: 19 years old?

DB: It was taken when we took over control of Hanoi [pause as camera view is adjusted to show the photo]

I: This is a beautiful picture.

DB: And you imagine something for a second? When you look at that face in the photo, do you see the naiveté? We were naïve and immature, but it was this very kind of people, young kids with babyish faces, who participated in the resistance war under incredibly arduous and harsh conditions. However, they had romance in their souls, and that romanticism seems to have been given us the motivation in our lives back then.

I: Do you remember the day that the battle of Dien Bien Phu was won? What were the feelings of your group when you got the news?

DB: We were overjoyed, ecstatic. Before the day that peace was announced, ah, half a month before that we were not in the assault youth anymore. We had been transferred to

[2] The term, "dính tây", probably dates back to the war against the French. At that time the term "tây" was used to mean "France" as well as its standard meaning of "west" or "western." The term "dính tây" became a slang term used to denounce people who had worked for the French or been influenced by the French, and/or by the West.

the army and were being sent to fight on the Dien Bien Phu front. We had traveled about half the way to Dien Bien Phu when we were ordered to halt, and in the jungle that evening we were told that peace had been restored. Oh, it was unimaginable. You cannot imagine what peace meant to us at that time.

I: At that time was your entire company, or your entire group, transferred to the army?

DB: The entire group, but only for 15 days.

I: 15 days?

DB: Yes, 15 days. We were supposed to have gone all the way to Dien Bien Phu to fight there, but then we got the order to halt where we were. We were told that there was peace, and then we were transferred back to the assault youth. Do you know what we were supposed to do after we transferred back to the assault youth? Can you imagine what it was?

I: What was it?

DB: At that time our national government decided to send us all abroad to study.

I: Really?

DB: And why were we sent to Hanoi? To prepare to go abroad to study. Then each of us was given a letter of introduction to the local authorities in our home area giving us permission to go home to visit our families before we were sent abroad. The letter of introduction stated clearly which country we were being sent to. So we went home, said goodbye to our families, and reported to our local authorities that we were being sent abroad to study. When we got back, however, we were told, “Wait. You guys will have to wait a little.” And then we were told that after our forces took over control of Hanoi we had a serious shortage of security cadres. Since the assault youth did every type of

job, we were told, "You guys got back first, so you are being sent to security. They need you over there right away." So I was sent to the Security College, ah, it was called C something; it provided basic training for security officers.

I: C-500.

DB: Yes, that's it! C-500. Yes, I was one of the students in that C-500 class.[3] And then the assault youth group that was up in the Northwest Region came down, and they took our places. They were sent abroad to study instead of us. This was because we had come back down first, and security needed people right away. Then they came back down later. Originally the group that returned later was supposed to have been assigned to security, but security needed people, so the state assigned us to security in their place, and so we lost our opportunity to go abroad to study.

I: It's the same in every country and every army – when a requirement comes up and they need a certain number of people, they just take them …

DB: That's right.

I: … and it doesn't matter what those people want to do.

DB: When you're in the assault youth, you have to do whatever job the state requires, no matter what that job is.

I: Did anyone in your family die, or did any of them give their lives in battle, during the war against the French?

DB: This was a matter of great good joy for my family. My family had eleven children, and only three of them were girls. Eight were boys. The oldest son had left; he had gone

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[3] "C-500" was the Public Security Officers Training Academy, providing university-level education to officer candidates who were commissioned as public security lieutenants when they graduated. C-500 was the Public Security "West Point."

to France in 1944. That left seven of us. All seven of us served either in the army or in the assault youth. All of us went, and not one of us died (laughs).

I: Your family was very fortunate.

DB: It was a source of tremendous happiness for our family. All seven of us served, and later all seven of us were transferred to work in the academic field at universities. That is why [North Vietnamese Prime Minister] Pham Van Dong came to visit my family, because he knew that ours was a poor but intellectual family. Counting all eleven of us, including in-laws, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, all of worked as teachers at the university level. He liked that, so he came to visit us, and on the second day of Tet, the Lunar New Year celebration, he invited my father to come visit him, and he and my father sat there together and recited poetry to each other.

I: What year was that?

DB: I believe it was 1962. And from then on, until the day my father died, he kept in touch. Pham Van Dong was in Saigon when my father died, but he sent a very large memorial wreath for my father's funeral. There was one thing about Dong – he treasured intellectual families very much. When my brothers and I were serving in the army or in the assault youth, each one of us always carried a book us. My book was a trigonometry book – I was never without that book at my side.

I: What kind of books did you all carry?

DB: Math books. My book was "*Trigonometry*". Once, I was riding on an electric trolley car in Hanoi, and I was wearing my assault youth uniform, like in this photo. I noticed two Hanoi students, both wearing glasses. They were sitting there going over a trigonometry problem that they couldn't solve. I was standing beside them, and I was

just itching to say something to them. I wanted to say, “That’s so easy! Why can’t you two solve it?” Finally, I got up my nerve and said to them, “Lend me a pencil and I will solve the problem for you.” And I solved it. The two of them stared at me in amazement, and one of them said, “We always say that the assault youth are Uncle Ho’s soldiers. That is really true! Assault youths are really good! (laughs).

I: So you must have had a natural talent for mathematics. Some people have talents from the time they are children, for math or for literature or whatever. Did you have an interest in math from childhood?

DB: I liked literature. I liked literature and writing, but life led me into mathematics instead.

I: So when you were transferred over to security, you had to attend a security school?

DB: Yes, C-500.

I: How long did you study there?

DB: Ah, let me see – Ten months.

I: Ten months?

DB: From January 1955 to October 1955, at which time I was assigned to the Ministry of Public Security. There were 2,000 students in my class.

I: 2,000.

DB: 40 of us were selected for assignment to the reconnaissance [surveillance or intelligence] branch, and of these 40, six were selected for assignment to the Ministry of Public Security Headquarters. I was one of those selected for assignment to Ministry Headquarters.

I: So you worked in the Public Security Ministry Headquarters?

DB: Yes, I worked in the Ministry Headquarters.

I: At that time, you were still single, right?

DB: Oh, I was single for a long time. At that time I did not dare allow myself to fall in love. This was because when we went out into the streets, we had to go in threes – three people together.[4]

I: Really?

DB: And you must remember that when we first came in to take over control of Hanoi, I did not have a [French word], a belt. My pants were tied up with rope. I did not know how to ride a bicycle. And fingernail clippers – when I first saw fingernail clippers in a store, I loved them, because during the resistance war I had to chew on my fingernails with my teeth to keep them short. We had no scissors to cut our fingernails. So when I saw fingernail clippers I thought they were great. And when I went out to eat noodle soup [phở] – can you imagine an assault youth, a young man who could sit down and solve a trigonometry problem for two Hanoi students with ease, but when I went to a shop to eat noodle soup, they gave me a bowl and several pieces of paper. I had no idea what the paper was for. I didn't know that it was for wiping the bowl and utensils clean.

I: You had never seen anything like that, right?

DB: That's right, I had never seen anything like that before. It was the ignorance and naiveté of a young man who had just come in from the jungle, but that ignorance was just on the surface, and beneath it was someone with a good mind. (laughs) I didn't know how to ride a bike. Only after I was assigned to the Ministry of Public Security Headquarters did I finally learn to ride a bicycle.

I: Back then you probably had to…

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[4] This probably refers to DB's surveillance work. Surveillance teams usually consisted of three members.

DB [interrupting]: But I knew how to shoot. I was good with a gun, but I didn't know how to ride a bike.

I: Did you learn how to shoot when you were up in …?

DB [interrupting]: At C-500.

I: Oh! At C-500?

DB: Yes, at C-500. I did not receive any firearms training while I was in the assault youth. However, at C-500 we were given practice in shooting pistols.

I: Now, to go to the period of the resistance war against the Americans – during the late 1950s you were working in the Ministry of Public Security Headquarters?

DB: Yes, I worked there until 1957 – for more than two years.

I: More than two years? And then when did you go off to fight the Americans?

DB: No, I didn't fight the Americans. At that time the Ministry of Public Security decided to set up its own scientific laboratory, and they sent me to Hanoi University to study chemistry so that when I returned I could help set up a scientific testing laboratory for the Ministry of Public Security.

I: An office to conduct scientific tests?

DB: An office to conduct chemical testing – analytical testing.

I: Oh, so you had to study chemistry – chemistry and math.

DB: Chemistry. But during my study of chemistry, my ability in mathematics was discovered. I remember one time I was taking a test in chemistry, and one of my professors, Professor [Chung? - name unclear], asked me a question. Now, I was a cadre sent to attend this class, I was not an ordinary university student, so the professor used a familiar form of address when talking to me.

I: This was a class at the university, right?

DB: Yes, at Hanoi University. At that time I told my professor, "You taught us that this formula was derived from experimental results, meaning that the overall formula of the (unclear French word) was derived experimentally, meaning that it was extrapolated from experimental data – the data was used to derive this formula. But I don't believe that." So I sat down and derived the formula mathematically. I set up the primary equation and worked out a proof of what the result would be, and in the end it worked out to be this exact formula. So I brought my proof in and showed it to my professor. I said, "I have not been able to learn one single thing because I have spent this entire year proving this formula." My professor loved this, and he gave me the highest grade in the class. I had proved the formula using pure mathematics. So this meant that this formula was not derived from experimental data, but instead was derived from the theory, and this would also allow us to define the limits within which this formula could applied, and the conditions under which this formula could be used. But if this formula was derived from experimental results, then you could not do that.

I: Experimental results provide only an approximation, but if it is derived from theory it will be very precise. You can confirm the results are accurate, you can guarantee the results 100%, right?

DB: So after my second year in school the university pulled me out of the program and had me start teaching mathematics. I had only completed my second year of the program, but the university granted me a degree in chemical engineering. However, they asked that I be assigned to the university to teach mathematics. Why did they do that? Because they had a shortage of professors. They did not have enough instructors. Do

you know the saying – It is a bit vulgar – a Vietnamese folk saying that goes, “If you don’t have a dog, make the cat eat the shit” [không có chó, bắt mèo ăn cướt]. Dogs eat shit, so if you don’t have a dog, get a cat to do it. So I was the cat, meaning that I did not have any training in mathematics, but they grabbed me and made me do the job.

I: So then you taught mathematics, huh?

DB: Yes. They had me teach mathematics.

I: At the university level.

DB: Yes, university level higher mathematics.

I: So you spent the entire time of the war against the Americans teaching at Hanoi University?

DB: At the Polytechnic University [Trường Đại Học Bách Khoa]. And I also participated in a number of research programs to support the fight against the Americans. For example, improved gravel road networks to support our various military campaigns - I worked on the program to support the Laotian campaign. When you build a road, ah, we have electric calculators today, so that makes it simple to calculate the plans, but back then we did not have calculators, so I developed a mathematic model. For instance, you have a diagram of the road, and the model tells you that, for a gravel road that is a certain length, how much rock is required, etc.

I: I see. It is used to compute how much rock must be supplied, and how much of various other types of materials, to build the road.

DB: And this is done using the mathematic model I devised. That model was used for road building projects supporting all the military campaigns. And after that, all the artillery firing slide rules, including for night firing – either I personally devised them

myself or I had to sign off on them, to certify that the slide rule was accurate. At that time I was listed as a senior consultant to the Artillery Command.

I: That's interesting. My son used to be an artillery officer in the United States Army, and he complained that his class was the last class that was given training in how to do the mathematical calculations needed to fire the artillery. After his class, everything was done by computer, so the officers no longer knew how to do the mathematical calculations by hand.

DB: I made these computing devices out of plastic, and the artillery commander would move the slide, and where the red line touched the blue line, that gave him his firing solution.

I: That means you had to make these things for many different types of artillery, right? Including rockets?

DB: No, not rockets. Back then when I made these things there were no rockets involved. They were all for field artillery and coastal artillery. I remember that they were used to support the defense of our coast.

I: For artillery pieces, like the 85mm gun, the 100mm gun, the 122mm, etc.

DB: Yes. These were called artillery firing slide rules. Virtually all of the artillery slide rules had to have my signature approving their use.

I: The U.S. military has said that, ah, what they called the "Viet Cong" artillery was very good. Historically, Russian artillery has been famous for being very good, so the Americans thought that the Viet Cong gunners must have studied in Russia – otherwise, how could they have gotten to be so good, so accurate? But perhaps it was also because of your mathematical calculations.

DB: The artillery slide rules were very good, but now they have computers (laughs). They have forgotten the slide rules, but back then they were very important. And the slide rules had to have raised markings on them, so that if it was dark, if there was no light, you could still use them like a blind person, by feel, pulling the slide out and getting the solution in order to be able to give the firing orders.

I: This information you have provided is very valuable, because in the U.S. everyone things that all of your artillery and other high technology abilities were the result of help provided to you by Russian or Chinese advisors. But that is probably not true, or is it?

DB: No, it's true, it's true. To make those slide rules, I had to use data tables provided by the Russians. There were Russian theoretical tables, but the Russians were not allowed to touch our artillery. We did not disclose those kinds of things to them. But we did use their theoretical studies, from other areas, not artillery.

I: Oh. Ah, do you mean like using field artillery to fire at targets at sea?

DB: Yes, we used field artillery to fire at targets at sea in order to defend our coastline.

I: Or, for example, firing in mountainous areas, in areas with high mountains?

DB: Yes.

I: Let me stop temporarily right here [videotape ends].

Oral History Interview of Dinh Xuan Ba [Đinh Xuân Bá], Entrepreneur and Former Assault Youth Member
DVD 04
Hanoi, 5 June 2007

I – Interviewer Merle Pribbenow
DB – Dinh Xuan Ba

I: At the time of the war against the Americans, had you started a family yet?

DB: I got married in 1961.

I: 1961. At the time the Americans began bombing North Vietnam, how many children did you have?

DB: I had two children.

I: Two?

DB: My wife is a chemical engineer who graduated from the Polytechnic University. She graduated in 1961, and I married her right after she graduated.

I: You had to wait for her to get her diploma before you could get married, right?

DB: I had to marry her right away or someone else might have sabotaged me. So I grabbed her as soon as she graduated (both laugh). That is her sitting over there. My daughter studied mathematics and then she graduated as class valedictorian from the Technical Physics Institute of the Polytechnic University. She then went to Russia, where she worked as a researcher in solid-state physics in Moscow. All the work was done using "simulations." Everything was done on computers.

I: I don't understand anything about that kind of thing.

DB: And my son is an engineer in automatic controls. He is currently Director General of this company. My daughter is one of the Deputy Directors, and my daughter-in-law is also a Deputy Director, and my wife is [unclear word] of the company.

I: So your entire family works here. That is great.

DB: This is a family corporation. This company is now eighteen years old.

I: Oh! Eighteen years old! Now, during the period of the American bombing campaign, was your family forced to evacuate from the city?

DB: Yes. The entire Polytechnic University moved up to a place right along the border with China.

I: And you went up there too?

DB: Yes. At that time the University had a total of seven faculties – seven different "departments." I was the Assistant Dean of the Faculty of Mathematics. I had to go up there, but the dean of the faculty remained behind in Hanoi. So I went up there and I was in charge of the university's entire mathematics program. That was up on the Sino-Vietnamese border.

I: So they had to build a special facility for the university up there – places for the students to live, places to work, etc?

DB: Yes. They told us that American aircraft did not dare fly over the area that was right along the Chinese border (laughs), so it was safe up there.

I: I believe the forbidden zone extended 30 kilometers from the border, meaning it extended about 45 kilometers deep into Vietnamese territory from the Chinese border. Bombing was forbidden inside that zone.

DB: We built the entire school – the offices, the laboratories, everything – all by ourselves.

I: Oh? And you did it in such a remote location, too.

DB: Yes, it was a very remote location. And we built everything ourselves.

I: Living conditions up there were probably very difficult, right? Did you have enough to eat?

DB: We had enough to eat.

I: Did you have enough medicines?

DB: We had enough to get by, temporarily at least.

I: Was there a problem with malaria?

DB: No. The climate up there was relatively cold. It was a cold area. Girls who moved up there put on a little weight and became more attractive (I laughs). Girls who were considered ugly down here grew prettier after moving up there to the Lang Son-Dong Dang area. Their skin became whiter. It was strange. But a number of my students from that period were later killed in battle.

I: Oh really?

DB: Yes. I regret their loss very much. These were some of the greatest losses of the war. Many very intelligent people, very talented and gifted people, gave their lives in this war. And this does not apply just to the Vietnamese side – it is true of the American side as well. Mankind lost a number of tremendous talents during the course of this war.

I: I understand that when your first missile regiments were formed, the best engineers and the best university students were selected for assignment to the Missile Branch.

DB: Those were ***my*** students! There was a young man named Tong Phuc Chinh [Tống Phúc Chính] who left a very deep impression on me and my life.

I: Tong Phuc Chinh?

DB: Yes, Tong Phuc Chinh. Two years ago Vietnamese television broadcast a 30-minute film about my life, and during that program I told the story of this young man, Tong Phuc Chinh. Now, Tong Phuc Chinh, ah, do you know who Truong Chinh is?

I: Who?

DB: Truong Chinh, the General Secretary of the Party.

I: Yes.

DB: Tong Phuc Chinh was Truong Chinh's adopted son.

I: Is that so?

DB: Why did Truong Chinh adopt Tong Phuc Chinh? Tong Phuc Chinh's father died – ah, Tong Phuc Chinh grew up in prison.

I: In prison?

DB: Yes, in a French prison. When his father died, Tong Phuc Chinh was entrusted to Truong Chinh's care, for Truong Chinh to raise. And when Tong Phuc Chinh grew up, Truong Chinh sent him to study at the Polytechnic University. Now, one day I was teaching, and I checked Chinh's exercise book. He hadn't done the day's assignment. The third time this happened, the third time I found he hadn't done the assignment, I said to myself, "This kid must think that he can get away with this because he is Truong Chinh's adopted son." So I threw him out of the class. After I threw him out of my class, I informed the school – ah, because I was afraid the school might intervene to prevent me from kicking him out of the class – I informed the school, "If the school intervenes and directs that Tong Phuc Chinh be readmitted to my class, I will resign. I will refuse to teach any more classes." My threat frightened the school. Two days later, Tong Phuc Chinh came to see me and he apologized to me. I told him, "For two weeks

you will not be permitted back into my class. Instead, you are to stay at home and complete all of the assignments that you have been given since the beginning of the school year. Then you can come back and turn them in to me." But he didn't finish all the assignments. He came in to me and said, - he used a familiar term of address because at that time I, too, was very young – he said, "Older brother, I could not finish them all. Some of the problems were too hard. Could you review those lessons with me to show me how to solve them?" So I sat down with him and reviewed the lessons. Then he came back to class. During the course of reviewing the lessons with him, I discovered that he was really a very good kid. In the end, I grew to love this kid, the kid I had kicked out of my class. I let him back into my class. Six months later he came in to say goodbye to me. He said, "Older brother, I have been chosen for assignment to our country's first missile regiment."[5] Two years later, while Hanoi was being bombed and all the electricity was out, he managed to find his way to my house. He presented me with a piece of shrapnel as a memento, and he said to me, "If you want to say something to me, please write it down, because I am deaf." His missile battalion had been attacked by an American missile, and the explosion had deafened him. He said to me, "I want to inform you that I have shot down two American aircraft." (DB laughs) You know, the saddest thing is that later on he was killed in battle. Out of all the things that happened during my entire career as a teacher, I have always remembered that one, about the young kid whom I initially wanted to expel from my class, but whom I later grew to love.

I: And he was someone who made a great contribution to your Fatherland.

DB: Yes. I said to him, "I don't care whose son you are! I am the teacher! That means I am in charge of this class. I don't care whose son you are – I'll kick you out!"

[5] The first Vietnamese SA-2 surface-to-air missile regiment was the 236th Missile Regiment.

I: That was very good. That was very just and fair. Sometimes in the U.S., if they want to expel the child of some rich person, the parents might contribute money to the school to try to change their minds. This can be a difficult problem. So what you did in this situation was very good.

[Extended interruption as DB tries to adjust the air conditioner using a remote control. He apologizes, blaming his secretary for setting the temperature too high.]

DB: My specialty is "fuzzy" math – "fuzzy motion," "fuzzy control," "fuzzy logic," meaning vague motion, vague control, vague logic - All these fuzzy, chaotic concepts.

I: Those concepts are all very important in computers, right?

DB: There are two types of data. One is the type that we may for the moment call "precise," and computers can process that type of data. But there is also fuzzy data, vague data, and basically, back when I first started, computers could not handle that type of data. The fundamental strength that humans have over computers was that people can process fuzzy data, vague data. Later on, I came up with a form of equation that allowed computers to process fuzzy data, or at least low-level fuzzy data. For that, if you want it to work you need to use computers wired in parallel, parallel processors. This computer over here is "sequential," meaning that it first has to finish one task before moving on to the next. But parallel means the computer must process the data in parallel. Back then we did not have parallel processor computers. That was back in 1983. Back then there were no parallel processor computers. All we had back then was a theoretical model, and I used that theoretical model. But now we have that kind of computer. India recently purchased a parallel processor computer from the U.S. It cost 160 million U.S. dollars – for just one computer! That computer can process fuzzy data, vague data – but only at a

low level, that's all. People are still better. Take the concept of beauty, for instance. Beauty is a fuzzy concept.

I: That's right.

DB: You see? Every person has a different concept of beauty. There are many such concepts. Some are concepts that you think are very clear – for instance, the "China is one country," the "one China" concept. That is also a concept – "one China." But Taiwan understands that concept one way; the U.S. understands it another way; and China understands it yet another way. It sounds very clear when you hear it, but it isn't. Or the concepts of plants versus animals. There are types of creatures that swim in water, and so they are animals, but they live on sunlight, their food is sunlight, so that would make them plants. And then there are the concepts of male and female (laughs). So mankind has gone from the vague up to the very precise, and now we are moving back to the vague, the fuzzy. There are many things in the world today that are fuzzy, and we must learn their vagueness, their fuzziness. Socialism, for example, is a fuzzy concept. Because there is the socialism of Sweden and northern Europe, and there is the socialism of Pol Pot, and the socialism of Venezuela, …

I: And Cuba's socialism.

DB: Yes. So mankind must be intelligent about how it handles these kinds of fuzzy data.

I: And you have worked out mathematical formulas for how to handle fuzzy data, right?

DB: Yes. The father of "fuzzy" theory is Mr. Zadeh. He is an American.[6]

I: Zadeh?

DB: That is spelled Z-a-d-e-h : Zadeh. Oh, I love Zadeh's theory. I am one of Zadeh's disciples (laughs).

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[6] Professor Lofti I. Zadeh, Professor of Computer Science at University of California-Berkeley.

I: To get back to our subject, during the war your oldest brother was already in France, isn't that right? Was he able to maintain contact with your family?

DB: From 1944 until 1966 or 1967, sometime around then, we had no contact with him.

I: Why was that? Because there weren't adequate communications, or…?

DB: We could not establish contact because of the war. Finally, my mother published an ad in the newspaper, *L' Humanité*, the French Communist Party newspaper. My brother did not read *L' Humanité*, but a friend of his did. His friend told him about the ad, and he finally made contact with our family.

I: By that time it was possible to send letters from France to North Vietnam, right?

DB: Yes.

I: And your older brother was a professor in France?

DB: He was the Deputy Chairman of the Mutualité insurance company, but at the same time he was also a visiting professor who taught at the university.

I: And did he participate in the, ah, what was it called?…

DB: FIAPA.

I: No, I mean the Overseas Vietnamese Association [Hội Việt Kiều].[7]

DB: Oh, the Overseas Vietnamese Association. No, he wasn't a member of that.

I: He was not a member? OK. So what were his opinions about your resistance war? Was he neutral, or what?

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[7] The Overseas Vietnamese Association in France was under the control of the North Vietnamese mission in Paris. See former Ambassador Vo Van Sung [Võ Văn Súng], "*Chiến dịch Hồ Chí Minh giữa lòng Paris*" [The Ho Chi Minh Campaign in Paris], People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 2005, pages 32-49, and Party Secretariat Directive No. 186-CT/TW, 17 December 1970, published in Trinh Nhu [Trịnh Nhu] (Chief Editor), "*Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập, Tập 31, 1970*" [Collected Party Documents, Volume 31, 1970], National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2004, pp. 356-360.

DB: He was a patriot, but he was also violently opposed to our land reform program. He wrote a letter home in which he said, “Mother, I just cannot imagine a situation like that, in which a child could denounce his parents or a wife could denounce her husband.” The land reform program had a very powerful impact on his thinking. But it was only temporary, for a period of time. After that…

I: In 1956…

DB: The errors were corrected in 1956.

I: The rectification of errors – that was when Truong Chinh lost his position, isn’t it?[8]

DB: Yes. After that, ah, my brother originally intended to return to Vietnam to live, but then he decided that remaining abroad and helping Vietnam from there would be better. He has returned to visit Vietnam many times, and he brought with him money from FIAPA to assist Vietnam’s Old People’s Association [Hội Cao Niên]. He gave them quite a bit of money – over a dozen old people’s associations and old people’s clubs received eight to ten thousand dollars each.

I: A great many families were divided by the war, with some family members on one side and some on the other. That was very hard on everyone.

DB: But there was something special about my brother. Over there in France he had opportunities to meet with prominent figures from the Nguyen Van Thieu government. In the letters he wrote home to us he was very critical of these figures. He was very critical of the level of education, the level of knowledge, the level of thinking of the Saigon government. We didn’t have any way of knowing anything about this kind of

[8] The North Vietnamese land reform program, 1954-1956, was extremely violent and controversial. Finally, the Party decided to end the program in 1956 and rectify the mistakes that had been made in the program. Truong Chinh, who had been in charge of the land reform program, was removed from his post as General Secretary of the Party as a result of the “mistakes” in the land reform program.

thing, but he did. So in his letters home, on the one hand he would write, “Mother, I could never had imagined that these kinds of mistakes could be made, that a child would be forced to denounce his parents and a wife would have to denounce her husband,” but on the other hand the things he said about the type of people they had in the South Vietnamese regime – oh, the words he used to criticize them were very harsh: “uneducated,” “opportunists.” He wrote, “Mother, I have no desire to meet with or talk to those guys.” Later, in 1983 I went to study in France.

I: You did?

DB: Yes. In 1983 I went to study in France. By that time my brother had forgotten a lot of his Vietnamese, but from 1983 on, after he met me and began to have a chance to speak Vietnamese again, he slowly began to be able to speak Vietnamese again.

I (laughing): This was probably because he had lived in France for so many years, and because he had married a Frenchwoman. He probably had grandchildren by then, right?

DB: Yes. But I discovered something – I found that although he could only remember a little Vietnamese, he used the Vietnamese words he knew very exactly, in just the right way. For example, when I was there, I said to him, “You need to think about our family” [Anh cần phải quan tâm tới gia đình]. When I used the word “quan tâm” [to care for, to be interested in, to think about], he asked me, “What does ‘quan tâm’ mean? Or when I said, “We need to make the time…” [Mình nên tranh thủ thời gian ...] to do something, he asked me, “What does ‘tranh thủ’ mean?” So I would take out a dictionary and show him. And when he read the definition, he said, “quan tâm” means “không xao nhẵng” [to not forget about]. I thought to myself, “Hey! His use of the term ‘không xao nhẵng’ is

better than the word 'quan tâm' that I used. My word, 'quan tâm' is a little too Chinese, but 'xao nhẵng' is pure Vietnamese." (laughs)

I: During the war, many new words came into use in North Vietnam, and in South Vietnam they used different words, so sometimes people could not understand one another. For instance, the word, "tranh thủ" – that word was seldom used in South Vietnam. They used words differently. I remember that during the war the U.S. military had to set up a special class for native Vietnamese translators to teach them how to translate communist documents, because they did not understand the terminology used by the communists.

DB: Since our country was unified [1975], however, our language has become much richer. Many people in North Vietnam have learned the Southern way of speaking. But they have some ways of saying things that Northerners cannot learn. For instance, Mr. An, sitting over there, they would say, "Ông An hơi bị đẹp trai" [Mr. An is afflicted by being a bit handsome]. Why would they say "***bị*** đẹp trai"? These are ways of saying things that foreigners could not understand, but our people, here in our country, use these words very precisely, in just the right places. This is the result of the unification of our county - many things have been reconciled and integrated (laughs). This is also a vague, a "fuzzy" concept.

I: No one in your family was killed during the entire course of the war. Is that correct?

DB: Yes, no one was killed.

I: That was very lucky.

DB: My older brother, the second oldest son after my oldest brother, died young, in 1976, but he died of illness. It was a result of the war, so it would be more accurate to say that no one in my family died in battle.

I: In the U.S., if someone dies of wounds suffered in a war, or from a disease contracted during a war, they are still counted as having given their lives for the country – in your terms, they are considered "martyrs."

DB: My family had seven sons, not counting my oldest brother. All seven of us served either in the army or in the assault youth. The four oldest served during the war against the French, and the youngest three served during the war against the United States.

I: So the three youngest served during the war against the Americans, huh? Were any of them sent to fight in South Vietnam?

DB: No, not in the south. They all served in North Vietnam. And in the end the military selected them for assignments in other fields – they did not bear arms [they did not carry guns]. For instance, one of my younger brothers became Deputy Director of the Army's Culture and Ideology Department [Cục Văn Hóa Tư Tưởng], which is part of the General Political Department. He is a senior colonel. He became the Deputy Chief of Political Affairs for Military Region 4.

I: Oh, so his rank must have been at least senior colonel.

DB: Yes, he is a senior colonel, and he al holds the rank of associate professor. He studied in Germany. The army sent him to study in Germany. He is now the Chief of the Publications Bureau of the Central Ideology and Culture Section [Ban Tư Tưởng Văn Hóa Trung Ương]

I: Oh? The publishing house for…

DB: No, the publishing bureau [Vu Xuất Bản]. The Central Ideology and Culture Section is a very important section of the Party Central Committee. That section has a Publications Bureau, an Arts Bureau, and a number of other bureaus. He is the chief of the Publications Bureau. The army also sent another of my younger brothers abroad to study in India.

I: And you studied in France?

DB: Yes. Vietnam has one good feature, and that is that even during wartime the government still planned and made provisions for the future.

I: I have heard that even when the war was at its most ferocious level, Vietnam still sent a large number of students to China and Russia to study. And it was not just for military training, but all to study theory, science, and all kinds of subject.

DB: Yes.

I: When did you establish this company?

DB: In 1989.

I: 1989? That was after the start of renovation [đổi mới], isn't that right?

DB: At that time they said we had renovation, but renovation existed only in the resolutions of the Central Committee. There was not yet any renovation in our daily lives. There was still a tremendous amount of prejudice against private business at that time.

I: At that time had you retired already, or were you still working?

DB: No, I was still working as the Dean of the Information Technology Faculty [Khoa Tin Học] of the Polytechnic University. I was also the deputy chairman of the Vietnam Information Technology Association. At that time there was still no law for companies

[corporate law]. There was no law on companies [no corporate law] until the 1990s – not until 1993. The U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam was still in effect back then. For that reason very few companies were formed back then. To set up a private company in 1989 was …

I: Setting up a private company at that time was a very risky thing to do.

DB: It was very risky. My friends often laughed at me for doing it, because at that time I was a very well known professor at the Polytechnic University. People laughed at me for going down that road. They almost looked down on me, but I was confident. I believed that this was the path that I had to take. However, setting up a company during that period, while the U.S. trade embargo was still in effect, was a very difficult thing to do. It was very difficult, and at that time I was working in information technology. Therefore I moved my entire business overseas. I moved the whole thing overseas, and I was the company's only person her in Vietnam. I was the director, I was the secretary, and I was even the janitor. I sent everyone else – my wife, my children, and my friends and comrades-in-arms – overseas to set up six companies abroad. My company in Poland was named "Secopol." It's in Poland. The "Seco" is from my parent company "Secoin," and the "pol" is from "Poland." So it's "Secoin in Poland." I named it Secopol. My company in Russia is "Secomus;" I named it for Moscow. My company in the Czech Republic is "Secopra," and my company in Germany is "Secobe" – "Secoin in Berlin." I set up a total of six companies like that, but they all had to maintain their roots; they all belonged to Secoin. Now, why did I have to play that little game? Can you guess? It was because of the American trade embargo. Those other companies were all legally foreign

company – one was a legally a Russian company, another was legally a Polish company, etc.

I: So those companies served as the middlemen for sending goods back to Vietnam?

DB: No. They served as the middlemen for exporting Vietnamese goods to Eastern Europe.

I: Ah, I see.

DB: Oh, I exported a tremendous quantity of clothing. When I set up the company, I had nothing – I was broke. But you know, to evade the barrier established by the U.S. trade embargo, I had to sneak underneath the barrier. Even though my company was still a Vietnamese company, I sent my people out to set up companies abroad – companies that would have legal status as foreign companies. The U.S. could do nothing about it.

I: So you set up a "multi-national" company.

DB (laughing loudly): But once I learned how to conduct business and transmit funds, then, ah, for example, take the company Secopol. To transmit even just a single U.S. dollar, the company still had to go through an American bank. But the U.S. couldn't do anything to Secopol, because it was a Polish company – or to Secomus, because it was a Russian company. The U.S. couldn't do anything about these companies. Even though it knew that these companies were owned by Dinh Xuan Ba, the U.S. still could not do anything about it. However, one time my people made a little mistake. They sent $605,000 US dollars, or was it $650,000 US dollars? I don't remember exactly, but I still have all the paperwork. I kept it as a memento. My people forgot, and instead of listing the company name as Secopol, they wrote down the company name as Secoin. The funds

were sent, and just like clockwork, within a few hours we received an order blocking these funds. The order was issued by the U.S. Treasury.

I: So they held up the funds?

DB: They held up the funds.

I: How long did they hold the funds?

DB: They held them up until the day the trade embargo was finally lifted.

I: Ah! And only then were the funds released?

DB: That's right. They then returned the funds to me, along with interest. They even gave us the interest. The year that happened was 1992 or 1993. And you know, the money wasn't mine. I did not have that much money – where would I have gotten $600,000 dollars. We were transmitting the funds for others, and we were making a fee off the fund transfer. Officially we got one or two percent of the amount transferred, and we were obligated to deliver the money to the sender within one week. So we had to take that American order blocking the funds to an Eastern European bank and use it as collateral to take out a loan.

I: Oh! (laughs). In order to be able to deliver the money as promised.

DB: The American order blocking the funds was considered as collateral for a loan so that we could make the payment. However, we could not borrow the full amount. We were able to borrow most of the money, but the rest we had to pay out of our own pockets. Oh, that incident almost killed me. The U.S. almost killed me!

I: Back then, there were many aspects of the trade embargo that just did not make sense. They were illogical. We called it a vestige of the war.

DB: One day after the trade embargo was lifted, I sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Finance. One week later, they gave us back the full amount. (laughs).

I: Now, with regards to your parents, your father died early, isn't that right?

DB: My father passed away while I was studying in France, in 1983. My mother passed away in 1977.

I: And their deaths were not due to the war, but to illness or some other cause?

DB: My father died in 1983, so he was 83 years old. As for my mother, she died early, because she had led a difficult life. She gave birth 15 times, she raised eleven children to adulthood, and all this in the middle of a war. Throughout her entire life, only when she was young did she experience peace, and she lived the rest of her life during wartime.

I: Her entire life was lived under wartime conditions.

DB: Yes.

I: She must have endured a lot of hardship, because her sons were all either sent off into battle or out to dangerous, remote places, so her life must have been filled with constant tension.

DB: Her contribution was very great.

I: During that period, during the resistance war against the French, what did members of the assault youth like you think about the French? For example, you were fighting to drive out the French government, the French regime, but as for French people, ah, I believe there were some Frenchmen who joined the Viet Minh, isn't that right? There were a number of Frenchmen who deserted the French ranks and joined the Vietnam Minh, right? (DB nods affirmatively). So you fought not because you hated the French, but just to gain independence, right?

DB: That is correct, but there was one other thing. My parents were intellectuals who lived during that period, so they had a lot of contact with the French. General speaking they had sympathy and warm feelings for the French, because most of the French people are good people. But later on, after the war began, ah, once you are in a war, there will inevitably be losses, and a nation that endures even just ten years of war can easily fall behind, because during those ten years society will have advanced. There will have been tremendous advances. Vietnam, however, had thirty years of warfare. Now we have to run just as fast as we can to try to make up for all the losses we suffered during that long period of time.

I: And it wasn't just 30 years for Vietnam. During the period from 1975 all the way up until …

DB: 1988.

I: …until 1988 Vietnam still was at war, right?

DB: That is right.

I: So that was terrible for the entire country of Vietnam. Vietnam endured tremendous losses.

DB: Now we must do something to make up for those losses. But now we have talked a lot and haven't eaten anything (DB laughs and invites I to have some fruit, videotape ends).