

Reminiscing the Early 80s

Lê Minh Tân – Liên Đoàn Trường Sơn Explorer from 1981-1984



The early 80s. It was a typical weekend like any sun soaked weekend in OC. We were young, teens, full of life. Our girls looked fabulous. We boys, well, nothing to brag about. FOB, the boys were sun tanned, yet for some inexplicable reason, ... not very gorgeous, perhaps due to our very long hair? Or maybe because we were “xi-ke” slim (overweight was still a concept quite foreign to us). We would hang around a park, either La Palma Park or Ponderosa Park in Anaheim. After a third of a century, those places still look the same whenever we drive by. The grass, the trees, the benches, they all still look pretty much the way they were. We all wore jeans and khaki shirts (many were home sewn), garrison hats or red berets. We threw a rope over a branch and raised a couple flags. Then we did “our thing”, the thing that has also remained the same, at least in spirit, through many years.

After “our thing”, sometimes we would take a joy ride in a beat up car down Bolsa. No seat belt law yet, so a small sedan could sit 6, or even 7 easily. Some angels must have been watching over us. Things have changed, but still standing today is Thành Mỹ Restaurant, a reminder of many bittersweet memories. Behind it was Tú-Quỳnh Bookstore, where in later years with a bit more green in our wallet, we would stop by to look for Vietnamese music cassette tapes (if anyone still know what these are). In the very early 80s, most tapes were just copies of those produced in Saigon before 1975. Toward the mid-80s, some hot new faces

appeared: Như Mai, Linda Trang-Đài, Ngọc Lan. One of them, the mesmerizing Ngọc Lan who melt the heart of many of us, would remain forever young.

At the corner of Bolsa and Bushard was Mỹ Hoa Supermarket, whose owner was thought to be related to the owner of Hòa-Bình Supermarket down the street (in the Hanoi Plaza today). Those two were in a price war against another Vietnamese supermarket, Dân Tiếp Vụ. The Phước Lộc Thọ Mall had not come into existence yet, some plant nurseries were on its spot. Where ABC Supermarket would stand today was Alpha Beta, an American chain supermarket. Around OC, there were such supermarkets and department stores as Lucky, Zody’s, GemCo, FedCo, FedMart, Federated Group, Montgomery Ward, Bullocks, and May Company. The Montgomery Ward department store even had a small section selling Boy Scout uniforms and badges.

Some other times, the boys would go watch Chinese kung-fu movies at one of the only two Vietnamese-Chinese theaters ever exist in OC: Triều-Thành (on Harbor Blvd) and Đại-Nam (on Garden Grove Blvd). Thành-Long (Jackie Chan) was still a young rising star. One might wonder how the boys get the money to go watch movies. That still remains a secret. Whatever happened at Triều-Thành shall stay at Triều Thành (which fortunately already closed down). Once in a while, we boys and girls went camping. A favorite spot was O’Neill Regional Park. The picturesque oak lined drives are still there nowadays as they have ever been. Back then, tents were a luxury. In short, we almost had no tent. The girls slept in cars. For the boys, we often hung a tarp between trees to shelter us from the night dews, then spread our sleeping bags underneath. Some creative guys actually discovered that the park bathrooms were warmer and clean enough to ... sleep in.

We boys and girls went to high schools. Yet no one pressured us to get A’s, no private tutoring, no piano lesson, no swim meet, no sport practice. In fact, many of us didn’t even have our parents around. There is a Vietnamese song called “The Anguished Half of my

Soul”(Nửa Hồn Thương Đau) by composer Phạm Đình Chương. The first few lines of the lyrics go something like this:

“Close my eyes. Let me find the scents of old time.
Let me find the old way of my memories.
Let me find the ones in my dreams.”

For some of the boys and girls, either one parent or both parents, plus siblings and other beloved relatives, were half the world away, where they subsist in a life with no future. Our emotional burden was that half of our soul still lingered in Vietnam, still yanked by the loved ones we left behind. The hope of seeing them again was fragile, yet it was something that pushed us forward.

Vietnam in the early 80s was not a Vietnam with ritzy beach resorts, not a place with swarms of motorbikes clogging the streets, with long leg models, Vietnamese Idols, and smartphone games. It was a Stalinist state, a bit less suffocating than today's North Korea, but not too far from it. In our recurrent dreams, we teens often found ourselves back in Vietnam. We cried our heart out when we saw our family, but then we suddenly realized with terror how on Earth we could get out of Vietnam again.

For many of us, neighbors and friends filled the hole left void by our far away family. The boys and girls we hung out with, in a way had become our family, our emotional support. We were fortunate that

this surrogate family gave us the right values, and all of us grew up decent and successful. Out there, some guys and gals of our age were not that fortunate. They also tried to find solace from their friends, who instead led them to stealing car stereos and burglarizing homes. “Home invasion” suddenly became an epidemic in the OC Vietnamese community toward the late 80s. Private parties were often crashed by tough looking Vietnamese punkers sporting colored mohawks.

We were fortunate because at that time, the schools somehow were not too hard on us. Perhaps because the US did not have too many economic competitors back then: half of the world was under Communism; for the remaining half, a majority was ruled by dictatorial or inept governments that had neither clue nor incentive to make their country more prosperous. Due to this misfortune of the world, our still shell shocked adults could secure some decent jobs on many electronics assembly lines around the county (most had become dinosaurs). Even with struggling English, we managed to get to college and graduated with degrees that could earn us decent money to survive on our own, and to help our family back home.

Those boys, now, are either gray haired, bald, or having their head shaved. Those girls, still fabulous. Yet in spirit, we are still the same (or at least we hope we are).



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