

# One Civilian's Experience of Triumph Over Polio, the Fall of Saigon, and the Reinvention of Herself

### SHATTERED DREAMS

Memories of April 1975 are seared into my brain like a branding iron stamped on the flesh of a cow. I remember the events vividly, as if they happened yesterday. My heart thunderously pounds in my chest as I share my story with you.

My new rattan suitcase with red leather trim sat in the corner of the living room. It was filled to the brim with hope of a new life.

Mom and I had spent several days shopping for new clothes for my trip to West Germany. She carefully packed each item with love and care. My favorite outfit was a big orange-and-white polka-dot shirt and pants. This colorful, cool pantsuit was the last item packed. Mom placed my travel documents on top of my mod-looking outfit. I was scheduled to leave Saigon on June 14, 1975.

I needed to be brave. I was five years old, and I was going to travel from Saigon to West Germany for polio rehabilitation therapy. My leg muscles had atrophied, and my left leg bent at an odd angle, like a broken pencil, as I crawled along the floor. My clothing had ragged holes in the knees from my aggressive movements to keep up with my older brother, Quang Phuong, my sister, Linh Phuong, and the neighborhood kids.

If I could have looked at a map, I would have seen that the Viet Cong had conquered all of the country north of Saigon. The Viet Cong were moving rapidly from the eastern Cambodian border into an area south of Saigon and

north of Can Tho. The city of Saigon was being encircled by Communist troops.

We began hearing thunderous bombs and explosions along with the wailing of sirens in the early morning hours of April 29. I was petrified and frozen in my spot. I was not sure what to do, and Mom looked like a lost child. Our burly neighbor banged on our door, came running inside, and began digging a shelter under our kitchen floor, close to our front door. Mom and Uncle Dinh immediately began helping him dig.

Mom yelled to my brother Quang Phuong to break the legs off of one of our kitchen chairs. Our neighbor grabbed a hammer and nails and quickly constructed a crude ladder for our shelter. Uncle Dinh noisily climbed on our roof and, with the help of other neighbors, ripped off two sheets of metal, which were placed on top of the shelter. After several hours of digging, we had a hiding place that would hopefully keep us safe from bombs, mortar fire and enemy soldiers. Homemade shelters in Vietnam were called *hams*.

Uncle Dinh was the last person in the ham. He placed two large metal sheets over the top of the bunker. Once the ham was covered, the air became hot and sticky, and it felt like living inside a coffin. I felt like I was suffocating and couldn't breathe, but I didn't dare complain.

The noises outside were horrendous. There were deafening explosions that shook the ground like a never-ending earthquake. We heard artillery shells dropping on our rooftop, and it seemed like our home was going to crumble and bury us alive. Then it became eerily quiet and still. We were unsure if we should come out of the bunker. Each time we thought about venturing out of the ham, another rocket exploded nearby.



On the morning of April 30, we crawled out of the ham when we hadn't heard any artillery chatter from the M-16s and AK-47s or any overhead screaming rockets for several hours. We quickly used the bathroom and began searching for scraps of food in the kitchen. We shared some dried instant noodles, a stale piece of bread, and a rotten guava.

Suddenly, our neighbor burst into our house carrying his Sony transistor radio. "Hurry, President Minh is about to make an important announcement. Come over to my house to listen." As we walked outside, we gagged on the acrid smell of explosives. Our family quickly arrived next door and crowded into his home, which already had many neighbors, friends, and relatives packed inside.

At five years old, I didn't understand what was being said on the radio until someone yelled, "The war is over!" Some people were crying, some were cheering, and others sat in stunned silence. The radio announcer described the chaotic scene in Saigon from the day before, when last-minute helicopter evacuations occurred from the grounds of the US Embassy. Thousands of South Vietnamese had surrounded the wall of the embassy and were desperate to be one of the lucky ones chosen to fly to freedom.

The radio announcer's voice went up several octaves as he announced that a Viet Cong tank had just smashed through the elaborately decorated steel gates of the Presidential Palace. A single soldier ran across the palace grounds carrying the flag of our enemy: crimson red on top and blue on the bottom with a bright yellow star in the middle. The flag was hoisted up and flown from the Presidential Palace. Then the streets of Saigon were flooded with Viet Cong tanks, trucks, and troops weary and intoxicated with victory.

As we walked back into our home, I noticed that the heart of my small rattan suitcase had been pierced by shrapnel. The guts of my dreams were strewn with clothing and rubbish on the floor. In the flash of an instant, our entire world had turned upside down on April 30, 1975. ■

Excerpt from *Standing Up After Saigon: The Triumphant Story of Hope, Determination, and Reinvention*.



Thuhang Tran

***Standing Up After Saigon: The Triumphant Story of Hope, Determination, and Reinvention*** is the incredible memoir of Thuhang Tran as told by author Sharon Orlopp. With a scarcity of personal, civilian memoirs from Vietnam, this story provides a unique window into a particular era in history.

Born in Saigon near the end of the Vietnam War, Thuhang was two-and-a-half years old when she contracted polio, which left her legs partially paralyzed. Orlopp recounts how Thuhang's parents and siblings cared for her and sacrificed

to get her the treatment that would enable her to walk again. But their efforts were disrupted when communists invaded South Vietnam and her father, Chinh, an air traffic controller in the South Vietnam Air Force, was lost in evacuations and presumed dead.

This powerful memoir follows Thuhang and her father Chinh through their respective struggles, from Thuhang's battle with polio and the impact of her father's absence to Chinh's immigration to the United States and his desperate fifteen-year mission to be reunited with his family. Thuhang remained hopeful and resilient through all the seemingly impossible hurdles she's faced and lives today to tell her story and inspire those around her to find strength through perseverance.

Thuhang's journey is a gift of courage, hope, perseverance and family love. She wrote this memoir hoping to inspire those who "feel invisible, under-appreciated, under-utilized, made fun of, disrespected and not valued. I hope my journey as a person who is an immigrant and differently abled will build bridges, encourage cultural understanding and give inspiration for treating all people with dignity, respect and inclusion."

To learn more about Thuhang Tran's triumphant story, view the book trailer at <https://youtu.be/94UGIGuSq48> or visit [www.StandingUpAfterSaigon.com](http://www.StandingUpAfterSaigon.com).

*Standing Up After Saigon* is available at Walmart.com, Amazon and Barnes and Noble.