

The Man in the Snow White Cell

Merle L. Pribbenow

“
Nguyen Tai’s book may provide insights into the problems, both practical and moral, facing our interrogators today.
”

Merle L. Pribbenow is a retired CIA operations officer.

The war on terror is frustrating and confusing. It is a war of shifting targets and uncertain methods, a war that is unconventional in every sense of the word. One of the most difficult parts of the war for the average American to understand is the trouble we have had in obtaining information from some of the captured terrorists being held at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and other locations around the world.

A college classmate of mine, someone who knows I am a retired CIA operations officer, recently expressed to me his frustration with the pace of the war on terror. He said he believed that the terrorist threat to America was so grave that any methods, including torture, should be used to obtain the information we need, and he could not understand why my former colleagues had not been able to “crack” these prisoners.

Our current war on terror is by no means the first such war our nation has fought, and our interrogation efforts against terrorist suspects in the United States, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay are (hopefully) based on lessons learned from the experiences of past decades. This article details one particularly instructive case from the Vietnam era.

Nguyen Tai

More than 30 years ago, South Vietnamese forces arrested a man who turned out to be the most senior North Vietnamese officer ever captured during the Vietnam War. This was a man who had run intelligence and terrorist operations in Saigon for more than five years, operations that had killed or wounded hundreds of South Vietnamese and Americans. US and South Vietnamese intelligence and security officers interrogated the man for more than two years, employing every interrogation technique in both countries’ arsenals, in an effort to obtain his secrets.

Frank Snepp, the CIA officer who conducted the final portion of the interrogation, devoted a chapter in his classic memoir of the last years of the CIA station in Saigon to the interrogation of this man, whom he called the “man in the snow white cell.”¹ Snepp thought that the South Vietnamese had killed this prisoner just before Saigon fell in April 1975 to keep him from retaliating against those who had tormented him in prison for so long.

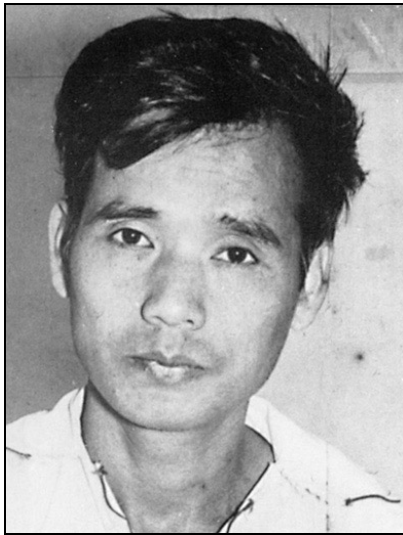
¹ Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1977). Although I was assigned to the CIA’s Saigon station at the time of Tai’s arrest and interrogation, I knew little of his case. The material below is based almost entirely on public-source documents.

“

Like Osama bin Laden, Nguyen Tai was a sophisticated, well-educated man from a prominent family.

”

Snepp was wrong. The prisoner survived. A few years ago, he published a slim memoir of his years of imprisonment and interrogation titled *Face to Face with the American CIA*.² It is an extraordinary book that describes how he resisted years of unrelenting interrogation by some of the CIA's most skilled, and South Vietnam's most brutal, interrogators. His book may provide some insights into the problems, both practical and moral, facing our interrogators today.



Nguyen Tai (Photo courtesy of author)

Early Nationalist

Like Osama bin Laden, Nguyen Tai was a sophisticated, intelligent, well-educated man from a prominent family. His father, Nguyen Cong Hoan, was one of

² Nguyen Tai, *Doi Mat Voi CIA My* [Face to Face with the CIA], (Hanoi: Writers Association Publishing House, 1999),

Vietnam's most famous authors. Tai's uncle, Le Van Luong, was a member of the Communist Party Central Committee and the second-in-command of the communist Ministry of Public Security (Vietnam's espionage, counterespionage, and security organization, patterned after the Soviet KGB).

Tai joined "the revolution" in 1944 at the age of 18. By 1947, when he was only 21, he was Chief of Public Security for French-occupied Hanoi city.³ Throughout the war against the French, Tai operated inside Hanoi, behind French lines, directing communist intelligence collection activities and combating French efforts to penetrate and eliminate the communist resistance. This covert war was a difficult, dirty, "no holds barred" struggle that employed assassi-

³ *Bao Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh* [Ho Chi Minh City Public Security], newspaper, 13 June 2002, accessed on 15 June 2002 at:

<http://www.cahcm.vnnews.com/1051/10510010.html> Note: From the 1960s to the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Public Security was called the Ministry of the Interior, even though it was still referred to officially as the "Public Security Service," and its officers were called "public security officers." For simplicity, I have used the term "Ministry of Public Security" throughout.

nation and terror as its stock in trade.

Tai was ruthless in the conduct of his duties. According to a history of Hanoi Public Security operations, in April 1947, just after Tai took over command of security operations in the city, his office formed special assassination teams called "Vietnamese Youth Teams" [*Doi Thanh Viet*] to "eliminate" French and Vietnamese "targets." The Hanoi history devotes page after page to descriptions of specific assassination operations conducted by these teams.⁴ In September 1951, as part of a classic operation run jointly by the national-level Ministry of Public Security and Tai's Hanoi security office, a woman pretending to be the wife of the leader of a pro-French resistance faction operating behind communist lines sank a French naval vessel with a 60-pound explosive charge she carried aboard in her suitcase. The woman kept the suitcase next to her until it exploded, thereby becoming perhaps the first female suicide bomber in history.

Following the communist victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the communist takeover of North Vietnam that followed, Nguyen

⁴ Nguyen The Bao, Hanoi City Public Security Historical Research and Analysis Section, *Cong An Thu Do: Nhung Chang Duong Lich Su (1945-1954)* [Capital Public Security: A History (1945-1954)] (Hanoi, Vietnam: People's Public Security Publishing House, 1990), pp. 124-25, 132-33.

“

One aspect of his rise was said to have been his assistance in the prosecution of his own father for anti-regime statements.

”

Tai rose quickly in the hierarchy of the communist Ministry of Public Security. One aspect of his rise was said to have been his assistance in the prosecution of his own father for anti-regime statements.⁵ In 1961, Tai was appointed director of the Ministry of Public Security's newly reorganized counterespionage organization, the dreaded KG-2—Political Security Department II [*Cuc Bao Ve Chinh Tri II*].⁶

In that capacity, he directed double-agent operations against South Vietnamese and American forces, including the successful effort to capture and double back US-trained spies and saboteurs dispatched into North Vietnam by parachute and by boat during the early-to-mid-1960s.⁷

Tai was also responsible for a ruthless crackdown on internal dissidents and directed the initial investigations that resulted in the infamous “Hoang Co Minh” affair, a purge of senior communist party “revisionists.” The operation sought out allegedly pro-Soviet and pro-Vo Nguyen Giap elements—including members of the party's central committee and the cabinet, and several army generals—opposed to the policies of then-

Communist Party First Secretary, Le Duan.⁸

Moving South

In 1964, leaving his wife and three young children behind, Tai was sent south to join the struggle against the Americans in

⁷ Nguyen Tai, p. 157; Phung Thien Tam, ed., *Ky Niem Sau Sac Trong Doi Cong An* [Profound Memories From the Lives of Public Security Officers] (Hanoi: People's Public Security Publishing House, Hanoi, 1995), p. 71. For a detailed account of the successful North Vietnamese effort to capture these spy/commando teams and redirect them against US-South Vietnamese forces, see Sedgewick Tourison, *Secret War, Secret Army: Washington's Tragic Spy Operation in North Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), and Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andrade, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000).

⁸ The Hoang Minh Chinh Affair, still one of the Vietnamese communist party's darkest secrets, is referred to in: Public Security Science Institute, *Cong An Nhan Dan Viet Nam, Tap II (Du Thao); Chi Luu Hanh Noi Bo* [People's Public Security of Vietnam, Volume II (Draft); Internal Distribution Only] (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Ministry of Interior, 1978), p. 206; and in: Nguyen Tai, pp. 166-67. A fuller account of the Hoang Minh Chinh Affair can be found in: Bui Tin, *Their True Face: The Political Memoirs of Bui Tin* (Garden Grove, CA: Turpin Press, 1993), pp. 187-90, 370-87.

South Vietnam. He became the chief of security for the Saigon-Gia Dinh Party Committee in 1966.⁹ In one respect, at least, Tai's assignment made sense: He had extensive experience at running a similar clandestine security/intelligence/terrorist organization behind enemy lines from his work as Chief of Hanoi Public Security during the war against the French. However, Tai carried in his head some of North Vietnam's deepest, darkest secrets—including the fact that all the US and South Vietnamese “spies” in North Vietnam were now working for the North Vietnamese; the identities of communist spies in South Vietnam's leadership; specific points of friction in North Vietnam's relations with the Soviet Union and Communist China; and internal splits and factionalism within the North Vietnamese leadership. Therefore, sending him to operate covertly behind enemy lines was a tremendous risk for the Hanoi regime.

Tai immediately threw himself into his new assignment. One of his mission orders, contained in a 17 May 1965 memorandum from the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Security office, directed him to “exploit every opportunity to kill enemy leaders and vicious thugs, to intensify our political attacks aimed at spreading fear and confusion among the enemy's ranks, and to properly carry out the task of

⁹ *Ho Chi Minh City Public Security* newspaper, 13 June 2002.

⁵ Snepp, p. 35.

⁶ Lt. Col. Hoang Mac and Maj. Nguyen Hung Linh, Ministry of Interior Political Security Department II, *Luc Luong Chong Phan Dong: Lich Su Bien Nien (1954-1975); Luu Hanh Noi Bo* [Anti-Reactionary Forces: Chronology of Events (1954-1975); Internal Distribution Only] (Hanoi: Public Security Publishing House, 1997), p. 183.

recruiting supporters among the lower ranks of the police.”¹⁰

Tai attacked this mission with a vengeance, launching a program of bombings and assassinations against South Vietnamese police and security services and leadership figures. According to a Vietnamese Public Security press release in 2002, “Making great efforts, Public Security forces under Tai’s command recruited agents, transported weapons into the city, and conducted many well-known attacks that terrified enemy personnel. Of special note were the assassination of a major general assigned to the Office of the President of the Saigon government and the detonation of a bomb in the National Police Headquarters parking lot....”¹¹ Tai directed many other terrorist operations, including numerous bombing attacks against police personnel and locations frequented by police and security officers; the assassination of a senior member of the Vietnamese National Assembly; an assassination attempt against future South Vietnamese President Tran Van Huong; and assassinations of individual police officers and communist Viet Cong defectors.¹²

¹⁰ Hoang and Nguyen, Ministry of Interior Public Security Department II, p. 229.

¹¹ *Ho Chi Minh City Public Security* newspaper, 13 June 2002. Note: According to the *New York Times*, 1 February 1969, the general involved, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Kiem of President Thieu’s military staff, was wounded in this attack, but did not die.

“
**Tai provided only
information that was
already known or
would not be checked.**

”

Capture

In 1969, Tai was forced to move his operations to a more secure area in the Mekong Delta, following the decimation of the communist infrastructure in the Saigon area by the Americans and South Vietnamese in response to the 1968 communist Tet offensive. While traveling to a political meeting in December 1970, he was arrested by South Vietnamese forces. The cover story and the identity documents carried by Tai and his traveling companions were quickly discovered to be false.

After an initial interrogation and physical beating by South Vietnamese security personnel, Tai shifted to his fallback position to avoid being forced to reveal the location and identities of his personnel in the area. He “admitted” to being a newly infiltrated captain from North Vietnam. When the interrogation became more intense, he

¹² Hoang and Nguyen, Ministry of Interior Public Security Department II, pp. 234-37; Ho Son Dai and Tran Phan Chan, War Recapitulation Section of the Ho Chi Minh City Party Committee, *Lich Su Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh Khang Chien (1945-1975)* [History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh (1945-1975)], Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1994), pp. 575-76.

“confessed” that he was really a covert military intelligence agent sent to South Vietnam to establish a legal identity and cover legend before being sent on to France for his ultimate espionage assignment (which he claimed to have not yet been fully briefed on).¹³ Each time he shifted to a fallback story, Tai made an initial show of resistance and pretended to give in only when his interrogator “forced” him to make an admission. He did this to play on the interrogator’s ego by making him think that he had “cracked” his subject’s story and to divert attention from the things that Tai wanted to protect—such as the location of his headquarters, the identity of his communist contacts, and his own identity and position.

Tai’s effort succeeded in buying time for his colleagues and contacts to escape to new hiding places and in diverting his “enemy’s” attention onto a false track. But his claim to be a covert military intelligence agent ensured that he would receive high-level attention. Instead of being detained and interrogated by low-level (and less well-trained) personnel in the Mekong Delta, Tai was sent to Saigon for detailed questioning by South Vietnamese and American professionals at the South Vietnamese Central Intelligence Organization’s (CIO) National Interrogation Center (NIC).¹⁴

¹³ Nguyen Tai, pp. 27, 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

Counter-Interrogation Strategy

As any professional interrogator will tell you, the most important requirement for a successful interrogation is knowledge of your subject. The problem facing the interrogators at the NIC when Tai first arrived was that no one had any idea who he really was. Tai devised a cover story, complete with fake name, family and biographic data, and information on his work assignments. He pretended to be cooperative, but provided only information that was either already known or that could not be checked. To claim ignorance about the local communist organization and local contacts, he said he had just arrived from the North on an infiltration boat (one whose arrival was already known because the South Vietnamese had attacked and destroyed the boat when they discovered it at a dock in the Mekong Delta in November 1970). He stated he had been selected for the assignment in France because of his excellent French language skills and had been told that for reasons of security he would be informed of the precise nature of his mission in France only after he established a cover identity and received legal papers in Saigon for his onward travel.

The information Tai provided about his military intelligence training and instructors in North Vietnam was information he knew had already been compromised by communist agents captured previously. He was

“
Tai’s memoir provides a fairly accurate description of the CIA psychological and polygraph tests administered to him.
 ”

thus able to give his interrogators what seemed to be “sensitive” information they could confirm, thereby enhancing their belief in his story while at the same time revealing nothing that might cause further damage to his cause. The fact that he had initially “concealed” this information and only “confessed” after being beaten by South Vietnamese officers would, he knew, enhance the story’s believability.

Tai said his first CIA interrogators, an older man named “Fair” [sic] and a younger man named “John,” believed his story. Tai’s memoir provides a detailed and fairly (but not entirely) accurate description of the CIA psychological and polygraph tests administered to him in an effort to confirm his story.

Suspicions began to surface about Tai’s cover story. Tai claims that his story began to fall apart when members of his Saigon Security Office staff, desperate to find out what had happened to their boss, asked one of their agents inside the city to try to locate him, giving the agent his alias (but not his true name and identity) and the date and place he was arrested. When the South Vietnamese arrested

this agent, Tai says that the South Vietnamese CIO began to wonder why an agent from Public Security would be trying to locate someone who claimed to be from military intelligence, an entirely separate organization.

Tai may believe this version of how his story began to come apart. But, in fact, he may not have been as successful at deceiving the Americans as he thought. According to former CIA officer Peter Kapusta, who told author Joseph J. Trento in 1990 that he had participated in Tai’s interrogation, “John” quickly became suspicious of Tai’s cover story and launched an investigation.¹⁵ Tai admits that after the polygraph examination he had a confrontation with “John” when “John” tried to reinterview him about his biographic data.¹⁶ Whatever the origin of the suspicions, Tai was turned back over to the South Vietnamese, who decided

¹⁵ Joseph J. Trento, *The Secret History of the CIA* (New York, NY: Prima Publishing, 2001). On p. 352, the author writes: “In 1971, Peter Kapusta was the CIA’s top hostile interrogator of non-military North Vietnamese intelligence officers at the National Interrogation Center in Saigon. His colleague John Bodine handled military intelligence interrogations. One day, Bodine came to Kapusta with a plea for help. Something about a North Vietnamese captain he was interrogating did not ring true. Kapusta began to work on the case. It did not take him long to establish that the “captain” was in fact the North Vietnamese general in charge of counterintelligence. The general turned out to be one of the most important prisoners the United States ever captured in Vietnam.”

¹⁶ Nguyen Tai, pp. 71-73.

“

**The South Vietnamese
tortured Tai . . .
but he held to his
cover story.**

to conduct their own interrogation using their own methods.

Extracting a Confession

The South Vietnamese set to work to force Tai to admit his real identity, the first step in breaking him. They began confronting him with gaps in his story and tortured him when he maintained he was telling the truth. They administered electric shock, beat him with clubs, poured water down his nose while his mouth was gagged, applied “Chinese water torture” (dripping water slowly, drop by drop, on the bridge of his nose for days on end), and kept him tied to a stool for days at a time without food or water while questioning him around the clock. But Tai held to his cover story.

After showing Tai’s picture to the large number of communist Public Security prisoners and defectors then in custody, the South Vietnamese quickly learned Tai’s true identity as the chief of the Saigon-Gia Dinh Security Section. They began to confront him with informants, former security personnel who knew him and identified him to his face as the chief of Saigon Security. One of these informants was a female agent who, according to Tai’s account, had planted a bomb at the South Vietnamese National Police Headquarters on Tai’s orders.¹⁷ Tai continued to maintain his cover story, and his attitude toward his confronters was so threatening (when combined

”

with his past reputation) that he thoroughly terrified his accusers, one of whom reportedly committed suicide shortly afterward.¹⁸

The South Vietnamese tried a new ploy. They told Tai they were planning a secret exchange of high-ranking prisoners, but he would only be exchanged if he admitted to his true identity. They promised that he would not have to tell them anything else, but they could not exchange him if he did not confess his true identity.¹⁹ They confronted him with captured documents he had written and with photographs of him taken years before when he served as a security escort for Ho Chi Minh during a state visit to Indonesia. Exhausted and weakened, both physically and psychologically, and comforting himself with the thought that, whether he confessed or not, the enemy clearly already knew his real identity, he finally gave in. Tai wrote out a statement admitting that, “My true name is Nguyen Tai, alias Tu Trong, and I am a colonel in the National

¹⁷ A post-war communist account describes this woman as the daughter of a senior South Vietnamese police officer who had been seduced by one of Tai’s Public Security assassins. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-06; Phung Thien Tam, pp. 224-28.

¹⁸ Nguyen Tai, pp. 100-02; Snapp, p. 31.

¹⁹ Nguyen Tai, p. 95.

Liberation Front of South Vietnam.”²⁰

No Respite

As Tai must have anticipated, his confession did not end his ordeal. After giving him a short rest as a reward, his South Vietnamese interrogators came back with a request that he provide details about his personal background and history. Tai refused, and the torture resumed. He was kept sitting on a chair for weeks at a time with no rest; he was beaten; he was starved; he was given no water for days; and he was hung from the rafters for hours by his arms, almost ripping them from their sockets. After more than six months of interrogation and torture, Tai felt his physical and psychological strength ebbing away; he knew his resistance was beginning to crack. During a short respite between torture sessions, to avoid giving away the secrets he held in his head during the physical and psychological breakdown he could feel coming, Tai tried to kill himself by slashing his wrists. The South Vietnamese caught him before he managed to inflict serious injury, and then backed off to let him recuperate.²¹

Tai says he sustained himself during this period by constantly

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-48. Tai says that when he was finally released in 1975 and told his story to his communist superiors, he was criticized for his suicide attempt, which some of the communist leaders viewed as a sign of weakness (p. 145).

remembering his obligations to his friends and his family. At one point, when he was shown a photograph of his father, he swore to himself “that I will never do anything to harm the Party or my family’s honor.”²²

Exactly what motivated him is difficult to say, but the key appears to be the reference to “my family’s honor.” As the educated son of an intellectual rather than a member of the favored “worker-peasant” class, it is likely that Tai’s loyalties to the Party had been questioned many times. Tai does not disclose, nor does any outsider really know, what happened between Tai and his family when his father was criticized and fell out of favor with the Party shortly after the communist takeover of North Vietnam in 1954. He may have felt a need to prove his loyalty at that time. If, as Snepp wrote and Tai’s interrogators believed, Tai helped prosecute his father during this period, his memoir suggests that he subsequently reconciled with his father and appears to have resolved never to cause such pain to his family again. Human psychology is a tricky business, of course, but in this case what appeared on the outside to be an exploitable weakness—Tai’s apparent betrayal of his father—had been turned into a strength.

Lest anyone be too quick to condemn Tai’s South Vietnamese interrogators, we should remem-

²² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

“
**Lest anyone be too
 quick to condemn [the]
 interrogators, we
 should remember that
 Tai had just spent five
 years directing vicious
 attacks against these
 same men.**
 ”

ber that the prisoner had just spent five years directing vicious attacks against these same men, their friends, their colleagues, and their families. They knew that if Tai escaped or was released, he would come after them again. During 1970, the last year of Tai’s freedom, in spite of the losses his organization had suffered during the Tet offensive, communist accounts boast of at least three bombings and several assassinations conducted by Tai’s personnel against South Vietnamese police and intelligence officers in Saigon.²³ It was as if members of the New York Police Department were suddenly handed Osama bin Laden and asked to extract a confession. If things got “a little rough,” that certainly should not have come as a surprise to anyone. In addition, accounts by US prisoners of war of their torture by North Vietnamese interrogators at the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” reveal that the methods of physical torture used on them were identical to methods Tai says were used on him. The war was vicious on all sides; no one’s hands were clean.

²³ Ho Son Dai and Tran Phan Chan, pp. 575-77.

The White Cell

What might have happened if the torture had continued can only be guessed. In the fall of 1971, Tai’s superiors made a move that ensured his survival. On 9 October, US Army Sgt. John Sexton was released by his communist captors and walked into American lines west of Saigon carrying a note written by Tran Bach Dang, the secretary of the Saigon-Gia Dinh Party Committee. The letter contained an offer to exchange Tai and another communist prisoner, Le Van Hoai, for Douglas Ramsey, a Vietnamese-speaking State Department officer who had been held by the communists since 1966 and whom the communists believed was a US intelligence officer.²⁴ Tai’s torture and interrogation immediately ended. Even though the negotiations for an exchange quickly broke down, Tai had suddenly become, as his communist superiors intended, too valuable for his life to be placed in jeopardy.²⁵ He was now a pawn in a high-level political game.

In early 1972, Tai was informed he was being taken to another location to be interrogated by the Americans. After being

²⁴ Nguyen Tai, p. 145; Snepp, pp. 32-33; *New York Times*, 9, 10, 12 October 1971.

²⁵ Tai claims that North Vietnamese Minister of Interior Tran Quoc Hoan told him after the war was over that the leadership had realized that the chances for an actual prisoner exchange prior to a final peace agreement were poor, but their immediate objective was to “make it impossible for the Americans and their puppets to kill me” (Nguyen Tai, p. 145).

blindfolded, he was transported by car to an unknown location and placed in a completely sealed cell that was painted all in white, lit by bright lights 24 hours a day, and cooled by a powerful air-conditioner (Tai hated air conditioning, believing, like many Vietnamese, that cool breezes could be poisonous). Kept in total isolation, Tai lived in this cell, designed to keep him confused and disoriented, for three years without learning where he was.²⁶

Tai's interrogation began anew. This time the interrogator was a middle-aged American whom Tai knew as "Paul." Paul was actually Peter Kapusta, a veteran CIA Soviet/Eastern Europe counterintelligence specialist with close ties to the famed and mysterious chief of CIA counterintelligence, James Jesus Angleton.²⁷ Even by Tai's account, Kapusta and the other Americans who interrogated him ("Fair," "John," and Frank Snepp) never mistreated him in any way, although Tai was always suspicious of American attempts to trick him into doing something that might cause his suspicious bosses back in the jungle to

²⁶ Only when released in April 1975 did Tai discover that he was back at the National Interrogation Center in Saigon, the same place where American officers "Fair" and "John" had interrogated him a year earlier. Nguyen Tai, pp. 149-51; Snepp, pp. 31, 35.

²⁷ William Corson, Susan Trento, and Joseph J. Trento, *Widows* (London, UK: Futura Publications, 1990), pp. 98, 219, 260; David Wise, *Molehunt* (New York, NY: Random House, 1992), p. 219.

“
**The Americans placed
Tai in a completely
white, sealed cell that
was lit 24 hours a day
and cooled by a
powerful air-
conditioner.**
”

believe he was cooperating with the "enemy." Kapusta and the other American officers tried to win Tai's trust by giving him medical care, extra rations, and new clothing (most of which Tai claims to have refused or destroyed for fear of compromising his own strict standards of "revolutionary morality"). They also played subtly on his human weaknesses—his aversion to cold, his need for companionship, and his love for his family.²⁸

According to his memoirs, Tai decided he would shift tactics after learning that he was being returned to American control. Rather than refusing to respond with any answers other than "No" or "I don't know," as he had with the South Vietnamese, he now resolved: "I will answer questions and try to stretch out the questioning to wait for the war to end. I will answer questions but I won't volunteer anything. The answers I give may be totally incorrect, but I will stubbornly insist that I am right."²⁹

²⁸ Nguyen Tai, pp. 155-56, 182; Snepp, pp. 35-36.

²⁹ Nguyen Tai, pp. 161-62.

In other words, Tai would engage in a dialogue, something he could not trust himself to do when being tortured by the South Vietnamese out of fear that his weakened condition and confused mental state might cause him to slip and inadvertently reveal some vital secret. He would play for time, trying to remain in American custody as long as possible in order to keep himself out of the hands of the South Vietnamese, whom he believed would either break him or kill him. This meant he would have to engage in a game of wits with the Americans, selectively discussing with them things they already knew, or that were not sensitive, while staying vigilant to protect Public Security's deepest secrets: the identities of its spies, agents, and assassins. This was, however, a tricky strategy, and even Tai admits that it led him into some sensitive areas. Interestingly, Tai blames the communist radio and press for broadcasting public reports on some sensitive subjects, thereby making it impossible for him to deny knowledge of such areas. Sounding not unlike many American military and intelligence officers during the Vietnam War, Tai writes:

I had always been firmly opposed to the desires of our propaganda agencies to discuss secret matters in the public media....Now, because the "Security of the Fatherland" radio program had openly talked about the [Ministry's] "Review of Public Security Service Operations," I was forced to give them [the

Americans] some kind of answer.³⁰

Peter Kapusta worked on Tai for several months and believed he was making progress. Then he was reassigned. Washington sent Frank Snapp to take over the case.

Snapp decided to try a new ploy to crack Tai's facade. Like other American officers who had interrogated Tai, Snapp did not speak Vietnamese. Interrogations were always conducted using a South Vietnamese interpreter, usually a young woman. Snapp decided to cut the South Vietnamese completely out of the interrogation to see if this might lead Tai to speak more freely. One day he brought in a Vietnamese-speaking American interpreter to take over the duty.

Tai, ever suspicious, believed that as long as Vietnamese were directly involved in his interrogation, there was a chance that word about him might leak out to his "comrades" on the outside. If the Americans took over completely, Tai's superiors would have no chance of locating him, or of verifying his performance during the interrogation. Tai was always desperately concerned with leaving a clear record for his superiors to find that would prove he had not cooperated with his interrogators. He believed this was essential for his own future and that of his family. As a profes-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

“
**American
 interrogation ended
 after the agreement in
 Paris, but Tai remained
 in the snow white cell
 for another two years.**

”

sional security officer, Tai was well aware of the Vietnamese communist practice of punishing succeeding generations for the sins of their fathers. He decided to force the Americans to bring back the South Vietnamese interpreter by pretending not to be able to understand the American, whom he admits spoke Vietnamese perfectly well.³¹

The ploy worked in the end. Meanwhile, however, it led to the author's only involvement in this case. As Tai had planned, Snapp became angry and frustrated, blaming the American interpreter for the lack of results. After the session, Snapp came to see me (we had become friends during his first tour in Vietnam), told me of his unhappiness with the "performance" of the interpreter (who was a close colleague of mine), and asked if I would be free to interpret for him in future sessions with Tai. As it happened, I was not available, and Snapp was forced to return to the use of an ethnic Vietnamese interpreter. I always wondered what could possibly have caused the problem that Frank described to me that afternoon. Thirty

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-04.

years later, when I read Tai's memoir, I finally understood.

Impact of the Paris Accord

On 27 January 1973, the Paris Peace Agreement was signed, calling for the release of all prisoners of war and civilian detainees. In compliance, Snapp, without obtaining prior authorization from the South Vietnamese CIO (which was still the organization officially responsible for Tai's detention), informed Tai and other communist prisoners of the agreement and its prisoner exchange provisions. Tai, totally isolated from information about the outside world, was suspicious at first. Finally, he managed to persuade one of his guards (who were under instruction not to talk to the prisoner unless absolutely necessary) to confirm Snapp's information.³²

The American interrogation ended with the signing of the agreement in Paris, although he remained incarcerated in the snow white cell. Tai was able to use the information Snapp had given him about the prisoner exchange provisions to resist further efforts by the South Vietnamese to interrogate him. He was left isolated, but in peace, for the next two years, until Saigon fell in April 1975. He credits Snapp's information on the Paris accord with enabling him to resist and survive until

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 214-17; Snapp, pp. 36-37.

his final release. Frank Snepp may have saved Tai's life.

According to his memoirs, Tai maintained his sanity and survived by reminding himself of his allegiance to his nation, his Party, and his cause, and by constantly thinking of his family. He followed a strict daily ritual of saluting a star, representing the North Vietnamese flag (a red flag with a single gold star in the center), that he had scratched on his cell wall and then silently reciting the North Vietnamese national anthem, the South Vietnamese Liberation anthem, and the Internationale, the anthem of the world communist movement.³³ He wrote poems and songs in his head, memorizing them and reviewing them constantly to make sure he did not forget. While some of these poems were the obligatory paeans to the Party, most were about his love for his children and his family.³⁴

Just before communist troops entered Saigon on 30 April 1975, a senior South Vietnamese officer ordered Tai's execution to prevent his release by victorious comrades. By some measure at least, it was not an unreasonable order—as Frank Snepp noted, "Since Tai was a trained terrorist, he could hardly be expected to be a magnanimous victor."³⁵

³³ Nguyen Tai, pp. 70-71, 82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 71, 186, 210-11.

³⁵ Snepp, p. 37.

“

In June 2002, Tai was officially honored with Vietnam's highest award.

”

The order came too late, however. All of the CIO's senior personnel were in the process of fleeing the country, and the junior enlisted men entrusted with the task of disposing of Tai, men who had no opportunity to escape, understandably decided that they might have more to gain by keeping the prisoner alive. They were afraid of retribution if the communist victors learned that they had killed him and they might even have hoped for some reward.³⁶ Tai survived and returned to his family in Hanoi in the fall of 1975. Tai went on to other important positions, including a term as an

³⁶ Nguyen Tai, pp. 243-44.

elected member of the reunified nation of Vietnam's National Assembly. In June 2002, in a solemn ceremony held in Ho Chi Minh City (the former Saigon), Nguyen Tai was officially honored with Vietnam's highest award, the title of "Hero of the People's Armed Forces."

Reflections

What conclusions can we draw about the efficacy and appropriateness of the interrogation techniques used by the South Vietnamese and the Americans in the Tai case? While the South Vietnamese use of torture did result (eventually) in Tai's admission of his true identity, it did not provide any other usable information. The South Vietnamese played the key role in cracking Tai's cover story, but it was their investigation and analysis that put the pieces together to make a



Nguyen Tai receiving his "Hero of the People's Armed Forces" medal in June 2002. (Photo: www.cahcm.vnnews.com)

solid and incontrovertible identification of Tai, not their use of torture, that scored this success. A sensitive, adept line of questioning that confronted Tai with this evidence and offered him a deal—like the offer by his torturers to exchange admission of his identity for consideration in a notional prisoner exchange—would almost certainly have achieved the same result. Without doubt, the South Vietnamese torture gave Tai the incentive for the limited cooperation he gave to his American interrogators, but it was the skillful questions and psychological ploys of the Americans, and not any physical infliction of pain, that produced the only useful (albeit limited) information that Tai ever provided.

“

**There are limits
beyond which we
should not go if we are
to continue to call
ourselves Americans.**

”

This brings me back to my college classmate's question. The answer I gave him—one in which I firmly believe—is that we, as Americans, must not let our methods betray our goals. I am not a moralist. War is a nasty business, and one cannot fight a war without getting one's hands dirty. I also do not believe that the standards set by the ACLU and Amnesty International are the

ones we Americans must necessarily follow. There is nothing wrong with a little psychological intimidation, verbal threats, bright lights and tight handcuffs, and not giving a prisoner a soft drink and a Big Mac every time he asks for them. There are limits, however, beyond which we cannot and should not go if we are to continue to call ourselves Americans. America is as much an ideal as a place and physical torture of the kind used by the Vietnamese (North as well as South) has no place in it. Thus, extracting useful information from today's committed radicals—like Nguyen Tai in his day—remains a formidable challenge.