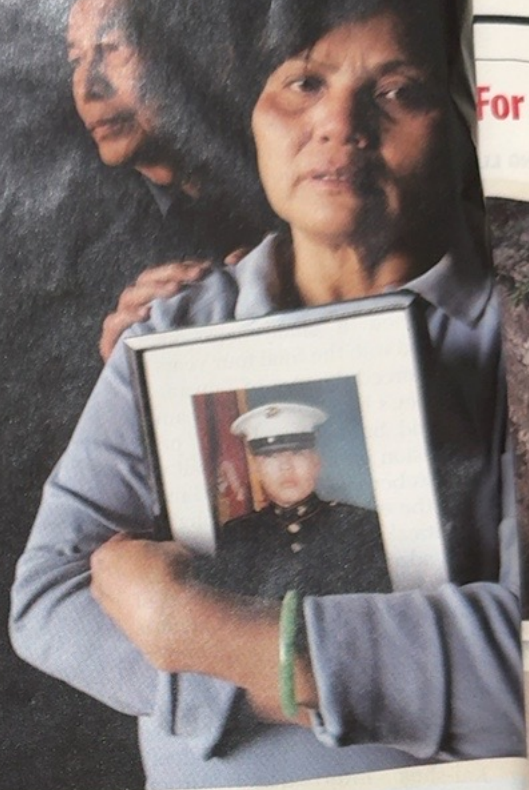


A Journey From War To War

Victor Lu was as proud of the country of his birth as his Vietnamese parents were keen to forget the trauma of theirs. Then he died in Iraq



By **BILL POWELL** LOS ANGELES

JUST BEFORE LEAVING FOR HIS SECOND tour of duty in Iraq last September, Lance Corporal Victor R. Lu of the U.S. Marine Corps took his mother aside in their family home in east Los Angeles for a quiet conversation. The fourth of six children—

and the first boy in the family—Lu, like many other young Americans, had enlisted in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001. In the three years that had passed, the change in him was unmistakable. He had been an indifferent student, a bit of a troublemaker in a mischievous, harmless sort of way. But after 9/11, after he had joined the



Saigon, April 29, 1975



Marines, he had grown up in a hurry. In this conversation with his mother, he would acknowledge adulthood.

When he returned from this tour in Iraq, he told her, he would assume more responsibility as the man of the house; as the eldest son in a large family, that was his responsibility. His father was in his mid-60s, and after working up to three jobs at a time to support the family, he deserved a break. Days later, Victor's Marine unit, nicknamed "Havoc 2," shipped out of Camp Pendleton, California, destined for Fallujah. It was the last time his mother would see her son.

Every parent has fears when their

sons or daughters go off to war. In the case of Xuong and Nu Lu, Victor's parents, those fears were shaped in part by their memories of another war that ended a generation ago. Like more than half a million of their countrymen, the Lus came to the U.S. as refugees from Vietnam, having fled their native Saigon with their two young children after the Communist government took power in 1975. They made their home in east Los Angeles and had four more children. Victor was born in the summer of 1982. As the family built a new life in the U.S., the memories of the war that wrenched them from their homeland receded, until they

were rekindled when the

decided to become an American v

It has been 30 years since a helicopter fluttered off the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon on April 30, 1975. The images of desperate Vietnamese clinging to the chopper's landing slats as it fled into both countries' consciousness that moment marked the end of a debacle that claimed more than 58,000 American lives—and more than 1 million Vietnamese. For years, many Americans like the Lus, have sought to forge a new age of the U.S.'s ignominious retreat from Vietnam—but to the American

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But to many other Americans, it is precisely the memory of that day that fuels a determination to stay in Iraq as long as it takes to avoid seeing history repeat itself.

For a handful of others, like the family of Victor R. Lu, the two wars have become bookends of tragedy, conflicts that upended their worlds forever. Xuong and his wife Nu lived in Saigon, and he worked as a skilled technician in a profitable machine shop. Like millions of other Vietnamese, the

Lus are ethnic Chinese, and were residents of a part of Saigon known as Cholon, where many Vietnamese of Chinese descent had settled. Like Chinese diaspora the world over, the one in Saigon was tight knit, industrious and relatively prosperous. Even as the war in Vietnam intensified in the late '60s, Lu says, he was able to make a decent living. "We just tried to live, make the best of it," he says. "What else could we do?"

But even to those determined not to get involved, the reach of the war was inescapable. Xuong Lu did not escape the war's reach. His skill as a machinist meant that the South Vietnamese army asked him to go to combat zones to help repair critical equipment. He would be away sometimes for a month or more at a time, and occasionally witnessed heavy fighting. When her husband was away, Nu sold cigarettes on the streets of Saigon to support their two children. By 1974, Xuong's concerns about the war's course had grown. He had never thought the United States would leave without at least ensuring a viable South Vietnam. And like many in the large ethnic Chinese community in Saigon—which would provide the majority of the boat people fleeing to the U.S. after the war ended—he dreaded the idea of a Communist regime ever coming to power. "We had never thought about

leaving," he says. But when the North rolled into Saigon, and the Americans beat a retreat, that changed.

Xuong's younger sister had fled almost immediately, and she eventually made her way to the U.S. She worked tirelessly to sponsor all of her siblings—eight in all—to emigrate. Xuong and Nu eventually left Vietnam in 1981, and found themselves in an entirely new world, speaking little English, but relieved to be free of the Communist regime in Vietnam. When the Lus got off a plane for the first time in the United States, in Seattle, the eldest sister, Nanci, then just a girl, remembers charity workers giving the entire family warm winter coats to ward off the unfamiliar chill of the Pacific Northwest. "I was only 7, but that's something I'll never forget." The Lu family had finally left the war behind.

When Victor Lu joined the Marines in the wake of 9/11, the Vietnam War, as far as he was concerned, was ancient history. If it ever entered his thoughts—as he worked out in order to lose enough weight to qualify as a Marine—no one in his family is aware of it. Friends say he was a highly motivated young man, keen to serve his country. His parents rarely talked about their own history at home, and it seemed of little concern to Victor.

Xuong Lu made sure, though, that his children embraced their Indochinese heritage. Victor did so with particular verve. He eagerly took up martial arts—winning a black belt in kung fu by the time he was 17—and delighted his father by participating in Chinese lion dances at local festivals in Los Angeles. As a teenager he'd got a Chinese warrior's tattoo on his left arm. A close grade-school friend, Arturo Fematt Jr., recalls that Victor tried to persuade him to get one, too. "I used to joke with him: 'Oh, man, you know I can't get one of those. I'm Mexican!'"

But as is often the case for the children of immigrants, Victor sometimes found himself torn between his ethnic heritage and his American identity. He slept through many of the Saturday-morning Chinese classes that his parents sent him to. When Victor said that he wished to pursue a career in the Los Angeles Police Department (L.A.P.D.), his father was pleased because he said, it would set a good example for "others in the Indochinese community



DARK MEMORIES

Clockwise from left: Vietnamese boarding a U.S. chopper; the Lus with a picture of their late son; Victor at his base in the U.S., Camp Pendleton; his Iraq memorial; and seated with his unit

and political establishment, the legacy of that war has become steadily more haunting as the U.S. struggles to contain the insurgency in Iraq and design a successful "exit strategy" for another deeply controversial war. Vietnam and Iraq, in that sense, are inextricably linked. Critics of today's war point to the similarities with Vietnam—the flaws in the initial strategy, the bad intelligence about a shadowy enemy. To some, the seemingly intractable chaos in Iraq has raised fears that the U.S. may someday be forced to depart Baghdad the way it did Saigon in 1975.

“We don’t view Victor’s life as a tragedy, because he died doing what he wanted to do. His life just ended too soon—he had much more to do.” —XUONG

Slightly annoyed, Victor replied, “Dad, we’re Americans.”

Like most Americans, Victor was enraged by the attacks on New York and Washington, and quickly shifted his desire to serve from the L.A.P.D. to the Marine Corps. The U.S. military draws heavily from the families of first-generation immigrants. Many Vietnamese Americans in particular are fiercely patriotic, grateful that the country took them in and let them be in the wake of the war. An estimated 200 Vietnamese-American military personnel have served in Iraq to date. When Victor decided to enlist in 2001, his parents and his family supported his choice without hesitation. In early June 2003, Victor Lu headed for his first tour in Iraq.

DURING THE SUMMER of 2003, the insurgency had not really begun in earnest, and Victor’s time there was quiet. His unit, the so-called 3/5, part of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, was based in Diwanayah, and during its three-month tour was in only one firefight. The highlight for him came when an angry Iraqi attacked the 3/5’s unit commander with a knife. At 1.9 m and well over 90 kg, Victor stopped the assault, then lifted the assailant overhead and dumped him into a nearby river. “He was an incredibly strong dude,” says Derrick (Doc) Griffin, who served in Lu’s unit.

When Victor returned home three months later, his parents were thrilled—and privately hoped he would not have to go back. The Lus were so elated that they even threw a celebratory barbecue in the small backyard of their home in a pouring rainstorm. For the next year, as Victor trained with his unit at Camp Pendleton just north of San Diego and the insurgency in Iraq intensified, the specter of the U.S.’s failures in Vietnam was not something that anyone in the family would discuss. Victor knew he was going back to Iraq—he told his family, and that was the end of it. “It’s not something that my parents would ever talk about,” says

Nanci. “They were supporting Victor. That is what they saw as their role.”

More than ever, Victor was true blue, relishing the job that lay ahead. At a party just before he left, recalls neighborhood friend Fematt, Victor told him he believed in the idealistic justification for the Iraq war. “We’re bringing freedom to people who deserve it,” he told Fematt.

Victor’s parents concede their concern about his well-being had only escalated as the fighting intensified in Iraq. His mother, Fematt says, was particularly upset. But Victor’s father says their worries were not rooted in the past, in the memory of the war

early that morning, Victor used his and enormous strength as a battering ram, knocking in a front door that was locked. Just as he did, three Iraqi insurgents inside opened fire. Before he could get a shot in return, Victor was hit with eight or ten rounds. He fell at the feet of his close friend Griffin, who returned fire and tossed a fragmentation grenade in defense. Two other Marines joined in, killing the insurgents, and Griffin started administering first aid to his friend. Within 30 seconds a humvee had come to get Victor to a medevac. “I knew it was bad,” says Griffin.

The next day, at their base outside Fallujah, his Havoc 2 comrades nailed together a small wooden cross, stuck it into the sun-baked dirt. They placed Victor’s helmet on top, and wrote on the cross simply, **MEMORY OF VICTOR REST IN PEACE.**

The Lus know all the questions that still swirl over America’s war in Iraq; they know that its harsh critics believe it is Vietnam all over again. The legacy of this war—for Iraq, the Middle East and the United States—still hangs in balance. Devastated by the loss of their son, they

they do not question the cause for which he gave his life. Having migrated to Vietnam a quarter-century ago only to find their eldest son in Iraq, the Lus believe the best outcome would be an Iraq that was a country better than it was under Saddam Hussein. And if that requires U.S. troops to be there a while longer, so be it. That would make Iraq different from Vietnam.

For the Lu family, this is not a political position—Xuong insists he has never had any interest in politics, either in Vietnam or in the U.S. It is, instead, a deeply emotional one, the outcome that their son wanted. “We don’t view Victor’s death as a tragedy, because he died doing what he wanted to do,” his father says. “His life ended too soon, because he had much more to do.” As his wife Nu quietly says, “We are very sad, but we are still so proud of our son. He was a very American boy.”



HAPPY DAYS Victor with his father and sisters in front of their L.A. family home

that ravaged the country in which he had been born. It was, simply, the love of a mother and father for their son. “Victor was happy, we could see that. He loved the Marines. But, of course, we were concerned for him.”

On Sept. 11, 2004, Havoc 2 headed back to Iraq. By the first week of November, the unit had mustered outside Fallujah, readying for one of the most pivotal—and most lethal—battles of the war. Victor’s buddies had taken to calling him “Buddha”—a big, gentle Asian presence with god-like strength. He liked the nickname and scribbled it on the back of his Kevlar vest.

On Nov. 13, Havoc 2 was clearing out one of the most heavily defended areas of Fallujah. At the second house they entered