



A COUNTRY STAYS
ALIVE WHEN ITS
CULTURE IS ALIVE.

HOPE NEVER DIES IN
THE
INDOMITABLE
VIETNAMESE MIND.

- SACEI Newsletter updates you on the latest news about Vietnamese-America.
- It serves as a link between SACEI members and those who are interested in the Vietnamese or Vietnamese-American culture.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

An Interview with Thurston	1
Honorable Exit	3
Vietnam's Empty Forest	3
Khanh D. Pham, PhD, Aero-space Engineer	8
2019 Mother's Day in Communist Vietnam	9

SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 128

JUNE 2019



An Interview with Thurston Clarke

Tom Glenn, April 30, 2019

<http://www.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/features/an-interview-with-thurston-clarke>



Thurston Clarke is a seasoned author known for the variety of his subjects. His newest book, *Honorable Exit* (Doubleday), tells of Americans still in Vietnam as it fell to the North Vietnamese and their struggle to rescue the South Vietnamese threatened by the conquering north-erners.

I escaped under fire when Saigon fell and am one of the men Clarke writes about in *Honorable Exit*. The author and I spoke recently.

***Honorable Exit* is unique among the books I've read about the Vietnam War. Instead of criticizing American actions, you focus on the determination of so many of us to save our South Vietnamese allies. How and why did you come to write about this subject?**

The idea for the book came when I read in an article about our current immigration policies that the United States in 1975 had accepted 130,000 South Vietnamese refugees, transporting them first on U.S. military planes and ships to the Philippines and Guam and then flying them to relocation camps on the U.S. mainland and putting them on the road to American citizenship. I was staggered that such a large number had come in such a short period of time and decided to find out more. The deeper I dived into the subject, the more apparent it became that dozens if not hundreds of Americans had been involved in this clandestine evacuation, far more than I had imagined at first.

Of the many stories you told of heroic rescues, which ones moved you the most?

I was moved by particular events happening in the course of several of the rescues described in the book: by the snap decision of Foreign Service Office Theresa Tull to agree to adopt three of Lieutenant General Truong's children and raise them as her own; by Walter Martindale's heroism while leading a convoy of several hundred Vietnamese to safety; and by O.B. Harnage's decision to ride on the skids of the helicopter collecting Vietnamese from a Saigon roof in order to make room for a few more evacuees.

Now that I think about it, there are so many instances of courage that it is hard to decide, but I would also have to include Bill Bell's insistence on returning to Saigon from California to help evacuate Vietnamese just days after losing his wife and son on the Babylift crash, and Jim Parker's insistence on driving an aging tank-landing ship into the harbor of Vung Tau and collecting refugees while under continuous shellfire from North Vietnamese forces.

Your knowledge of the Saigon-Cholon-Tan Son Nhat region is remarkably accurate and detailed. How did you achieve that? Did you visit Vietnam?

I have visited Vietnam twice. In 1998, I spent several days in Saigon and then a week on the island of Phu Quoc. I was writing a book about islands and included Phu Quoc in my chapter about notable prison islands. The government of South Vietnam had incarcerated Communist prisoners on Phu Quoc, and although the prison had closed by 1975, the Thieu government used the island briefly in 1975 to house refugees from the north of the country.

Continue on next page

Disclaimer: The listing in this newsletter of a book title or a film does not mean endorsement or approval by SACEI.

Interview wt Thurston Clarke...

I returned to Vietnam in 2016 so that I could accurately describe some of the buildings, streets, and neighborhoods in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) that are featured in *Honorable Exit*. Although the city is several times larger and far busier than it was in 1975, the historic hotels and buildings in the historic center have mostly survived.

The apartment building at 22 Gia Long Street that was made famous by Hubert Van Es' iconic photograph of a helicopter perched on its roof on the last day of the war is still there, and its distinctive roof can be seen from across the street. I also toured President Thieu's former Independence Palace and checked out the riverfront, the cathedral, post office, and Cholon, all sites of various events described in the book.

I suspect that you'll be hearing from many Vietnam vets who, like me, for decades didn't speak of the "shameful" war we participated in. You've told of the honorable side. How will you respond?

I will stress that the instances of heroism and sacrifice that I have related in *Honorable Exit* are only a few of many similar stories that came to my attention. I had to cut several from the text because of space constraints, and there were others that I did not have the time to investigate. The accounts that I did include were not isolated cases but part of a widespread movement to reclaim some measure of American honor.

I will also stress that many of my heroes who were working for the State Department, CIA, and other government agencies in 1975 had previously served tours of duty in South Vietnam with the military, and because of their experiences, they felt an added responsibility to help evacuate their former allies. Finally, without the collaboration of serving U.S. military personnel such as Major General Homer Smith and Colonel Jack Madison, the evacuation would have been smaller and less successful.

Reading *Honorable Exit* brought tears to my eyes repeatedly. Yet the tone is one of journalistic detachment. How did you achieve that?

I am flattered by this question. Since I never served in Vietnam during the war and was not in Saigon during the evacuation, I was naturally observing the events of March and April 1975 with a certain detachment. I also think that accounts of heroism and sacrifice are more powerful if they are delivered in a matter-of-fact manner, and that overheated prose can diminish their impact.

How would you characterize the behavior of the U.S. government during the fall of Vietnam? How do you judge those of us who broke laws, violated regulations, and ignored orders in order to rescue as many as we could?

One finds that during the first half of April, President Ford, Secretary of State Kissinger, and others in the Ford administration often spoke about the United States having a moral responsibility to protect and, if necessary, evacuate its South Vietnamese allies. These comments were made in public and during meetings at the State Department and White House. However, during this period, there were no concrete plans or programs to fulfill this oft-stated moral responsibility, leading to criticism that some in Washington were trying to create a bureaucratic record that would allow them to say, "See, we tried," if there was a debacle.

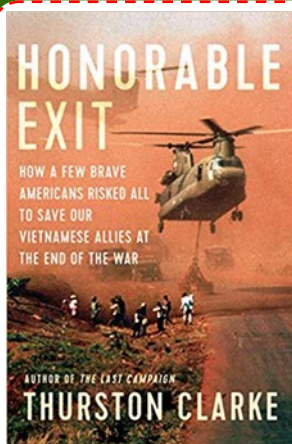
It was, in part, because of the actions of the American rescuers in South Vietnam who violated the laws and regulations of that country and the United States that the Ford administration had to finally play catch-up, putting a legal framework in place for the thousands of potentially illegal immigrants who were being temporarily sheltered in U.S. military facilities in Guam and the Philippines. This was one reason among others that President Ford prevailed upon his attorney general, Edward Levi, to issue 130,000 emergency visa paroles for refugees from Indochina and to designate 50,000 of them for so-called "high risk" South Vietnamese.

You now have 13 books in print. What are you working on now and what does the future hold?

During the last year, I have been doing research centered on the U.S. embassy in Tokyo on the eve of the war with Japan. *Every year between 1962 And 1975, Tom Glenn, who speaks Vietnamese, Chinese, and French, spent at least four months in Vietnam as a clandestine signals intelligence operative before escaping under fire when Saigon fell. He has 17 short stories and four novels in print, with another novel and a collection of short stories due out next year. His latest novel, Last of the Anamese, is set during the fall of Saigon.*

Honorable Exit

Thurston Clarke



In 1973 U.S. participation in the Vietnam War ended in a cease-fire and a withdrawal that included promises by President Nixon to assist the South in the event of invasion by the North. But in early 1975, when North Vietnamese forces began a full-scale assault, Congress refused to send arms or aid. By early April that year, the South was on the brink of a defeat that threatened execution or years in a concentration camp for the untold number of South Vietnamese who had supported the government in Saigon or worked with Americans.

Thurston Clarke begins *Honorable Exit* by describing the iconic photograph of the Fall of Saigon: desperate Vietnamese scrambling to board a helicopter evacuating the last American personnel from Vietnam. It is an image of U.S. failure and shame. Or is it? By unpacking the surprising story of heroism that the photograph actually tells, Clarke launches into a narrative that is both a thrilling race against time and an important corrective to the historical record.

For what is less known is that during those final days, scores of Americans—diplomats, businessmen, soldiers, missionaries, contractors, and spies—risked their lives to assist their current and former translators, drivers, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and even perfect strangers in escape. By the time the last U.S. helicopter left Vietnam on April 30, 1975, these righteous Americans had helped to spirit 130,000 South Vietnamese to U.S. bases in Guam and the Philippines. From there, the evacuees were resettled in the U.S. and became American citizens, the leading edge of one of America's most successful immigrant groups.

Into this tale of heroism on the ground Clarke weaves the political machinations of Henry Kissinger advising President Ford in the White House while reinforcing the delusions of the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, who, at the last minute, refused to depart. Groundbreaking, page-turning, and authoritative, *Honorable Exit* is a deeply moving history of Americans at a little-known finest hour.

Vietnam's Empty Forest

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/travel/vietnam-wildlife-species-ecotravel-tourism.html>

By Stephen Nash April 1, 2019

Despite long and tragic wars with the Japanese, the French, the Chinese and the United States during the last century, Vietnam is a treasure house. It is one of the world's hot spots of biological diversity, according to the science [research](#). There are 30 national parks in a country a bit larger than New Mexico, and [about as many](#) kinds of animals as in those pre-eminent safari destinations, Kenya and Tanzania.



In fact, hundreds of new-to-science species of plants and animals have been discovered in Vietnam during the last three decades, and more are recorded each year. The antelope-like saola, for example. Its gentle, streaked face looks as if it has just escaped from a jungle-dream painting by Henri Rousseau. Heralded as “the last unicorn” for its rarity, the saola is the largest land-dwelling animal discovered anywhere since 1937. A small herd of long-lost rhinos, a barking deer and a striped rabbit have also turned up. So has a giant, 21-inch-long walking-stick insect, and many kinds of birds — laughing thrushes! — fish, snakes and frogs hitherto unknown or thought to be extinct.

Vietnam's forests shelter two dozen species of primates — gibbons, macaques, lorises and langurs, often in colors that make the human tribe look banal by contrast.

Continue on next page

VN's Empty Forest...

A promotional email I received from [Cuc Phuong National Park](#) was tantalizing: "The ancient forest contains almost 2,000 species of trees and among them live some amazing and rare animals including the clouded leopard, Delacour's langur, Owston's civet, otters and Asian black bears! ... owls, flying squirrels, lorises, bats and cats."

But in trying to make arrangements to visit, the travel fixers my wife and I contacted were oddly hesitant about natural areas and wildlife, and they kept nudging us back toward mere scenery, or to cities. And then this email: "Have you been to Vietnam before, or know of the situation there? It's pretty dire if you are not aware."

Dire for wildlife?

"Very much so. In Vietnam, national parks are primarily in name only, and poaching (often practiced by park rangers) and worse has decimated wildlife."

Calls to conservation personnel who live and work in Vietnam reconciled the seeming contradictions. Yes, the country is an epicenter for wild species diversity. No, wildlife travel is not much pursued, and Vietnam has also become a [world center](#) for criminal wildlife trafficking.



Its wild populations, already hemmed in by habitat destruction because of an exploding human population, are also being shot, snared and live-captured so efficiently that national parks and other natural areas are now mostly afflicted with "empty forest syndrome": suitable forest habitat from which even small animals and birds have been hunted into local extinction. Other Asian countries are in various stages of the same convulsion. It's frequently said that many [new species vanish before science can even discover them](#).

Vietnam's decline is especially intense. For example, in a single remote national preserve set aside for the saola and other rare animals, 23,000 cheap but fatally efficient wire snares were found in 2015, the most recent year [tallied](#). Tens of thousands more of these snares are placed each year, as fast as they can be confiscated. Despite intensive surveys, no verifiable sighting of a saola has occurred since a photo was taken of one, six years ago. The [last rhino was shot by poachers](#) in the Cat Tien National Park in 2010. Tigers have been effectively hunted out of existence. Only tiny populations of bears and elephants hang on in small, vulnerable pockets. Nearly all of the many primate species are at risk of extinction.

Some of this carnage supplies national appetites for Eastern traditional medicine in Vietnam and neighboring China. Examples from a lengthy catalog of purported remedies include: tiger penises for impotence, bear bile for cancer, rhino horn for a hangover, loris bile to ease the serious airway infections that arise from Vietnam's air pollution.

Even more of the motivation, surveys have found, "is to supply the rampant demand for wildlife meat in urban restaurants, which is very much a status issue," said Barney Long, director of species conservation for the nonprofit group Global Wildlife Conservation.

"This is not bush meat where poor people are hunting for food," he said. "It's a status symbol to take your business or government colleagues out for a wildlife meal. And honestly it's on a scale that is mind boggling. We're talking not about one or two species, but whole communities of wildlife disappearing."

After further scouting, my wife and I decided to go anyway, arranging to fly into Hanoi, in

Continue on next page

VN's Empty Forest...

the north, and move quickly to Vietnam's green outback. Then we would head south to Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon, for a circuit of the parks and natural areas there.



Over the course of our two-week trip, we found that some exquisite wild species hold out, though in threatened circumstances. And we were fortunate, if half-willing, witnesses to the struggle by native Vietnamese, and their international conservation allies, to halt what amounts to animal genocide.

Cuc Phuong, the nation's first national park, is a couple of hours south of Hanoi. It was created in 1962 by Ho Chi Minh, who prophesied that "the current destruction of our forests will lead to serious effects on climate, productivity and life. The forest is gold. If we know how to conserve and manage it well, it will be very valuable."

But despite the blandishments in that government-issued invitation to the park we'd received, there are no more Delacour's langurs in these forests, nor any other kind. No bears, leopards or smaller cats either, unless they are so well hidden that even scientists cannot find them, Adam Davies, director of the Endangered Primate Rescue Center, told me.

Instead, the richest collection of rare animals can be found along a quiet narrow park road lined by animal rescue centers that amounts to a kind of conservation superhighway. At the Primate Rescue Center, visitors can see four species of nearly extinct langurs (also called leaf-eating monkeys), gibbons and lorises, many of which were rescued from wildlife traffickers. They are doctored back to health, bred when possible, and in especially fortunate circumstances, are returned to the wild. Poachers make the rest of this national park too hostile a landscape to risk releasing most kinds of animals, Mr. Davies said.

A few steps away are two other rescue centers. One protects dozens of species of turtles, many of striking beauty, all of them endangered. The other is for confiscated leopard cats, civets, the binturong or bearcat — which has been compared to a dust-mop that smells like fresh popcorn — and the pangolin, an armadillo-like animal whose meat and scales can [command](#) \$500 a pound on the menus or in the folk-cure apothecaries of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. "Pangolin is currently the world's most trafficked mammal, which is a very unwanted title," Mr. Davies said.

His center reintroduced some critically endangered Delacour's langurs to the wild in [the Van Long Wetland Nature Reserve](#), about 90 minutes down the road. There we boarded a small rowboat at a landing, plied by one of a cluster of local guides, for a half-day float within a protected gorge.

We veered off, along a route no one else in the pack of boats had taken. The langurs, now breeding successfully somewhere out there, stayed hidden. That's the nature of such quests, of course: Enjoy the pretty sojourn, even if your quarry eludes you. Maybe all those other little boats had gone in a better direction?

Then heading back we heard shouts from a farmer, off in the brush. He was pointing excitedly at some shaking trees on the opposite shore. A rowdy group of 10 langurs ultimately emerged — this species is black with what look like mutton-chop side whiskers and white pants — and we spent most of a transfixed hour watching them groom and chase and bask in the intense subtropical sun. With luck, they'll continue to be

Continue on next page

VN's Empty Forest...

protected here and not become fodder for the meat or pet trades.

To see bears, we drove to [Tam Dao National Park](#), high on a long ridge north of Hanoi. A resort town within the park bristles with construction cranes and heavy backhoes, part of the national building boom.

In the valley below is a bear sanctuary operated by [Animals Asia](#) and sometimes open to visitors. We watched two species — moon bears and the smaller sun bears — romp, swim and climb within a specially constructed recreation habitat. Both look like wild-haired, punk-rock versions of North American black bears and have vivid white chevron collars. They have arrived here from bear bile farms where they live in cruelly close confinement, as their bile is repeatedly extracted until they expire.

The practice is now illegal, though loopholes make the law difficult to enforce, said Tuan Bendixsen, the director of the center. “Bear bile extraction is still going on,” he said. “You can still buy it down in Hanoi if you want to.”

Many of the bears he gets “are missing limbs, or are damaged in other ways,” he said, which makes their chances for return to the wild slender. And suitable wild land for such releases is increasingly rare, he said, as the human population and the national economy grow.

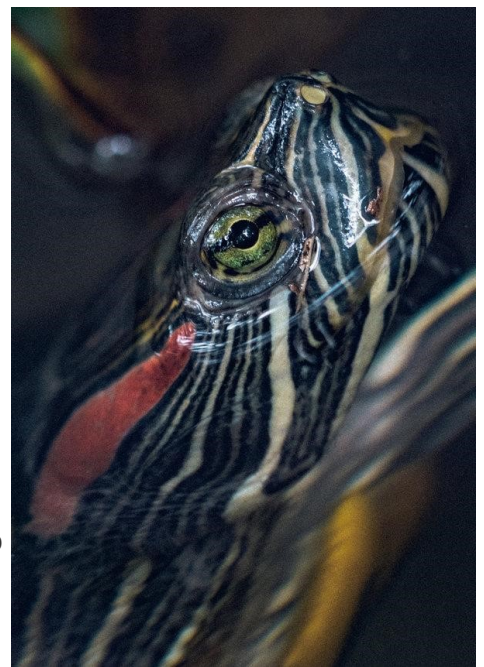
The corruption that afflicts Vietnam's one-party government, along with the growing economy, are major factors in the disappearance of natural habitat and endangered species. Corruption was given as a major reason for weak protections and slack enforcement by the conservation groups we spoke with.

“There are issues with corruption in all segments of Vietnamese society, and forest protection is no different,” said Andrew Tilker, an American field researcher who tracks the saola and other rare species.

Some courageous officials push back, and both homegrown and international conservation groups can cite successes. But the consensus view is that the wider prospect for Vietnam's wild species is quickly deteriorating. The country's government has earned a [corruption ranking](#) from the group Transparency International that could be charitably summarized as “dismal.”

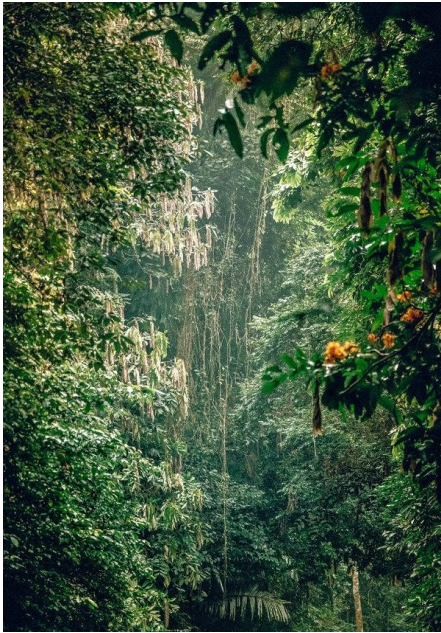
We witnessed that clash of aspirations during a stay near Ninh Binh, a couple of hours south of Hanoi. There we had found the loveliest lodging of our trip — and the competition was keen — at a place called [Tam Coc Gardens](#). It's a few stone bungalows hidden within a lush landscape, ringed by colossal limestone rock formations and plateaus we had only seen in watercolor paintings. We had picked the place because it is a half-hour bike ride from the [Thung Nham Bird Park](#).

We rolled into the park one late afternoon and wondered if we had somehow lost the way. Though touted as an “ecological” destination, the park has been taken over by a tourism corporation with big



Continue on next page

VN's Empty Forest...



plans. We walked past broad lawns and wide lakes fringed with forest, all heavily manicured and completely bereft of bird life. On the near shore, jackhammers, chain saws and grinding trucks battered the air in the ambitious expansion of a lakeside resort — not well calculated for maintaining bird habitat.

At length, we located a boat shed and found a woman with a traditional conical hat and a big oar. For a small fee she rowed us and three other passengers out onto the barren-looking lake and toward a wall of bamboo. Stow the binoculars. No birds to see, or hear. Maybe it was just the weather.

Ten minutes in, we began to hear what sounded like an agitated conversation among members of the world's biggest book group, somewhere out of view. Then our boat glided into a rookery with hundreds of herons and storks, each one as big as a 2-year-old child, perched, preening or at times filling the sky overhead. It was a delight, but its future may depend on that construction project, and whether the solemn, barren-seeming lakes next door are symptomatic of how this landscape will be managed.

Vietnam is not alone in failing to protect its wild species, of course. In the United States, many of our own “protected” animals are being [pushed](#) nearer the edge. Initiatives from the Trump administration have [rolled back the designation](#) of some national monuments and would weaken the [Endangered Species Act](#).



If there's hope for Vietnam's natural heritage, we learned, some of it resides with creative, sometimes courageous conservation groups like [Education for Nature-Vietnam](#). They push research, criminal investigations, political fights and legal maneuvers forward. Those bring risk.

Another source of hope for Vietnam lies in engaging local communities in wildlife protection with economic incentives. [The World Wildlife Fund](#), for example, sponsors sustainable rattan and acacia farming as buffer zones for beleaguered natural preserves along the western border with Laos. In other places, environmental groups pay local people a living wage to patrol the rain forest and collect those thousands of deadly snares.

Tourism, growing quickly in Vietnam, can also sustain wild areas, though only if it is carefully managed. International tourism [arrivals](#) neared 15.5 million in 2018 — a startling 64 percent jump above the 2016 figure, which explains the forest of construction cranes we saw ringing the shoreline at the far end of Halong Bay, as high-rise hotels surge into Cat Ba National Park's environs. They, in turn, explain the habitat fragmentation and near-extinction of the Cat Ba langur and other species that used to inhabit this landscape. About 60 of the animals remain in isolated populations, where feeding and breeding options are nearly foreclosed. In the 1960s, there were some 3,000.

We headed south toward Ho Chi Minh City and from there I took a solo trip, riding three or four hours north to spend a couple of days in [Cat Tien National Park](#). On a sweltering afternoon, a dapper young park ranger led a couple of us on a two-hour “wildlife trek.” This time we really were in a silent forest.

Continue on next page

VN's Empty Forest...

The only thing we encountered were squadrons of dry-ground leeches. They found us very quickly: Blood blossoms appeared on my socks as I stooped to pick the creatures off my ankles. (The ranger was wearing high boots.)

The [Dao Tien Endangered Primate Species Centre](#), on an island a few minutes downriver, can show visitors several species, including gloriously exuberant gibbons that careen through the high tree canopy. At times they commence a sudden, nearly deafening concert. It sounds like a symphony of demented slide-whistles, sirens and the world's loudest theremins. Gibbon song betrays the locations of these, our kindred species, to hunters in the national park across the river. They are sometimes shot out of the trees over there, and sold to be eaten in the cities.

Park rangers and others I spoke with at Cat Tien affirmed that its animal populations are declining; that some rangers have been caught colluding with hunters to bring down high-value animals (though they are said to be severely dealt with), and that the rangers earn something like \$200 a month to start, which makes this a less-lucrative career option — and poaching an attractive one.

I stayed at the edge of the park in the well-appointed [Cat Tien Jungle Lodge](#). Its proprietors, Duong Thi Ngoc Phuong and Gary Leong, work to help protect Cat Tien from mass tourism and to build economic ties with impoverished local communities to dissuade them from poaching. "Without the animals, there is little reason for the park's existence," Mr. Leong said. "We have to give everyone a stake in protecting them."

That means, at least in part, creating economic incentives for local people to preserve native species in their natural habitats. And it needs to start soon, wildlife advocates say.

"Every day we all wake up and say, 'do we have time? Do any of these species have time? Are we just fighting a war that we've already lost?'" said Quyen Vu, the executive director of Education for Nature-Vietnam. "But if we don't fight, then we definitely have lost."

Khanh D. Pham, PhD, Aerospace Engineer

Dr. Khanh Pham is a senior aerospace engineer at the Air Force Research Laboratory-Space Vehicles Directorate at Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, USA. He is a Senior Member of Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), a Fellow of SPIE and an Associate Fellow of AIAA. Dr. Pham currently serves as a Technical Editor for Intelligent Systems of the IEEE Transactions on Aerospace and Electronics Systems. His research interests have focused on statistical optimal control and estimation; decision analysis of adversarial systems; fault-tolerant control; dynamic game decision optimization; security of cyber-physical systems; satellite cognitive radios; and control and coordination of large-scale dynamical systems.

Master Sciences Degree, Electrical Engineering, University of Nebraska
PhD, Electrical Engineering, Notre Dame University

2007: Assistant Research Professor,
Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM.

2012: Graduate Faculty Scholar
College of Graduate Studies,
University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL.

2014: Senior Aerospace Engineer
Space Vehicle Directorate, Albuquerque, NM.
Air Force Research Laboratory



2019 Mother's Day in Communist Vietnam

