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Talking to Foreigners Column

Last week in Washington DC, the book “Perfect Spy” (Harper Collins Publisher) by Larry Berman, a book about the famous Vietnamese intelligence agent Pham Xuan An, was officially introduced to the American reading audience (the Vietnamese edition, which will be published by the Vietnam News Agency’s (VNA) News Agency Press, will be published in September 2007). The VNA correspondent based in Washington DC interviewed Larry Berman about his book:

LARRY BERMAN

“I WROTE WHAT PHAM XUAN AN WANTED ME TO WRITE”

**Mr. Larry Berman, when did you decide to write a book about Pham Xuan An’s life?*

-I met Pham Xuan An for the first time in July 2001. I had not known anything about him before that time. I was then writing the book “No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam,” which was about the Paris talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. While talking to him, I concluded that, of all the people that I had met up to that point, he might be the one who understood these talks the best. During the conversation, I also learned that he had studied journalism at Orange Coast College in California during the years 1957-1959, and during his internship at the Sacramento Bee newspaper he had visited the University of California-Davis, the school where I am a professor. It was only after that evening that I learned that he had been an intelligence agent who had later received the honorary title of “Hero of the Army,” but who had lived for a long time under the cover of a journalist in Saigon without every being exposed. I decided that the stories about him were very interesting and so I wanted to write a book about him. But he refused. For two whole years, 2001 and 2002, I tried to persuade him many times, but he always said “no.”

**But in the end An agreed?*

-Yes. In 2003 Pham Xuan’s health began to slowly deteriorate, and perhaps he knew that he did not have long to live, so he told me, “I have ready the books you wrote on Vietnam. I know you are a scholar and an excellent historian, so now I agree to allow you to write a book about me. I want an American historian to write about me, and I want the American people to understand the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese people better.

**How did you go about collecting material for this book?*

-It took me almost five years to complete the book, but I formally began the book in 2003, after Pham Xuan An gave me permission to write a book about him. I visited Vietnam 17 times, interviewed a great number of people, and most of all I spent a great deal of time talking to An. During one two-week period I talked to him seven days a week, and for four to eight hours each day, until he finally became tired and asked me to stop. Perhaps he knew that his health was declining, so during the last period he became more open and permitted me to look at his personal documents that he kept in his house. I suggested that I meet with a number of his commanders, such as Mai Chi Tho, and with a number of the people he had worked with, such as Mrs. Nguyen Thi Ba, his courier. I

also met with many authors who had written books about Pham Xuan An and people who were making a documentary film about him in Ho Chi Minh City. In the U.S. I sought out the personal papers of his former colleagues and acquaintances, people like Neil Sheehan, Robert Shaplen, Stanley Karnow, David Halberstam, etc., and I looked through U.S. government libraries, the Library of Congress, and the American press. Through the documents and my interviews, I learned that he was not just a talented spy; he was also an excellent journalist who was extremely serious about his work. All these sources, which I later collated and verified, revealed that he had never supplied false or slanted information (disinformation) – that is something that is considered very important in the United States. I believe that Pham Xuan An may have liked the craft of journalism more than the craft of intelligence. He truly loved being a journalist. But during the decisive moments, he always carried out the “mission” of an intelligence agent.

**Some people say that Pham Xuan An was a “double agent,” or perhaps even a “triple agent.” What do you think?*

-The fact that he was awarded the title of “Hero of the Army” and that he was one of a very small number of Vietnamese intelligence officers who were promoted to the rank of general proves that the Vietnamese Government officially considers that he was their intelligence agent, and that he was working for them alone. Personally, I truly believe that he was working only for Vietnam. Even though many of his friends were Americans, even though he admired and had great empathy for the American people and American culture, An was someone who was always loyal to his Fatherland and to his people.

**You had intended to come to Vietnam again in October 2006 to let An read the final draft of your manuscript, but that turned out to be impossible, because An died in September 2006. Do you believe that the book “Perfect Spy” contains all of the necessary information for this story and that it contains the things that An wanted to have included in it?*

-I think that this book has all of the information necessary. An always told me that he did not want to read the manuscript before it was published and that he did not want to change or correct any of the things that I wrote, because if that was what he wanted he would have written a book about his life himself a long time ago. I believe that I have written enough and that I have written those things that Pham Xuan An wanted to be told – except for some information that he told me just for background and that he said I should not put in the book because the information might harm some individuals.

By Le Phuong (Washington)