

7 April 2007

Bui Van Phu

A Perfect Spy – For Which Side?

While the war in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s was active and “hot” on the battlefields, in the rear intelligence operations, although silent and unknown, were also tense and were of decisive importance. The outcome of a battle often is not dependent on the amount of bombs dropped and shells fired or the number of enemy soldiers killed, but on the military secrets that the two sides are able to collect before the battle is fought. There were many reasons for the U.S. defeat in the war in Vietnam, and one of them is that it lacked the strategic intelligence it needed to develop a plan to fight the war effectively. Meanwhile, many communist spies at all levels had been able to penetrate all levels of the U.S. military’s commands and of the Saigon government. These spies included Pham Ngoc Thao, Huynh Van Trong, and Vu Ngoc Nha.

One spy, one journalist who had close and intimate contacts with important people on South Vietnam’s political scene, in military circles, and in the American press, was Pham Xuan An, a correspondent who worked for various press agencies and for Time magazine. After April 1975 Hanoi promoted An to the rank of general.

At least two books have been published in Vietnam about the life and intelligence activities of Pham Xuan An. This April, for the first time a book about Pham Xuan An by an American scholar will be published. This book is “Perfect Spy,” by Professor Larry Berman of the Political Science Faculty of the University of California-Davis. After the war ended, Pham Xuan An became a subject of discussion, because although people with Vietnam experience has suspicions about him, no one was prepared to declare definitively that he had been Hanoi’s man. General Edward Lansdale did not believe he was a Communist spy. American journalists from Neil Sheehan, Dan Southerland, and David Halberstam to Robert Shaplen and Stanley Karnow who had been in contact with An all had good impressions of him, because he had saved many people’s lives, people like CIA spy Mills C. Brandes, Time magazine reporter Robert Sam Anson, and Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, the former chief of South Vietnamese intelligence during the Ngo Dinh Diem regime.

Who was An? Why, only a few years ago, did American Ambassador Raymond F. Burgardt invite An to the Ambassador’s farewell party at the completion of the Ambassador’s assignment in Vietnam? Several days before the party An was bitten by a dog and so could not attend, but later the American Ambassador went to An’s home to say farewell. Why was An so respected that American Consul General Ei Lynn Yamauchi paid a Tet visit to him at the beginning of the Lunar New Year? What kind of connection did he have with the CIA that caused former Director William Colby to unsuccessfully try to meet with him several times after 1975. Although he had supplied valuable information to Hanoi for more than 20 years, after April 1975 Pham Xuan An was so carefully and closely watched and Hanoi’s harsh policies made him despair of the realization of his dream of a progressive, free Vietnam. He was not allowed to leave the country, even though he tried to arrange to travel abroad many times and in many different ways.

The Vietnamese Communists acknowledged that Pham Xuan An was their spy. They gave him awards and promoted him to the rank of general. However, some of them did not believe that he was just working for Hanoi. So, did Pham Xuan An work for the French G-2, for Ngo Dinh Diem's intelligence organization, for the CIA, for South Vietnamese intelligence, or did he work for all sides? And was his work so important that he should have been awarded the rank of a four-star general, as he joked when he was promoted to the rank of major general and awarded the title of "Hero of the People's Army"?

Those are the fascinating details recorded in the book, "Perfect Spy." The book follows the secret and overt activities of Pham Xuan An through the entire more than decades of the American involvement in the Vietnam War. Professor Berman used documents from archives in the U.S. and Vietnam and interviews with his friends, his commanders, his colleagues, his relatives, and with An himself to reconstruct the story of An's life.

The story begins when An infiltrates himself into the U.S. Military Mission in the mid-1950s, takes him through his travel to the U.S. to study journalism during the years 1957-1959, then his return home to work at a correspondent for the Republic of Vietnam's Press Agency and for international news agencies and magazines in Saigon. Sometimes what he did was based on his own initiative, and sometimes it was on the orders of the Party. The book covers important events in South Vietnam, such as when the Ngo Dinh Diem regime acted to consolidate its power by assassinating General Trinh Minh The (An says the assassination was carried out by Cao Dai Major Ta Thanh Long on orders from Ngo Dinh Nhu), the battle of Ap Bac in 1963, the strategic hamlet program, the coup that overthrew the Ngo family, the struggles for power between the South Vietnamese generals, the American commitment of combat troops to the war, Operation 719 in Southern Laos, the Vietnamization program, the 1972 Easter Offensive, the Paris Peace Talks, and the final days of the Republic of Vietnam. An obtained information on all of these events from his contacts and then wrote strategic analyses that helped Hanoi devise plans to deal with these events.

During the planning for the 1968 Tet Offensive, Pham Xuan An was the person who took a communist cadre all over Saigon to select the targets to be attacked.

He transmitted his information to the communists in reports written with ink made from white rice and in photographs of enemy documents concealed in spring rolls, meatballs, or in plastic sandals or baskets of fish. An made his deliveries and received his orders at locations ranging from the Saigon bird market to the battlefields of Cu Chi.

Those who knew An during the war, and especially American journalists, all concluded that he had a deep understanding of both cultures and was able to accurately analyze current events.

Pham Xuan An understood the psychology of the Americans because he had studied in the United States. His study in the U.S. had been arranged and approved by Mai Chi Tho, the younger brother of Le Duc Tho. The arrangements had been facilitated by an introduction by General Edward Lansdale and by the intervention of South Vietnam's Number One spy, Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen.

During his years of study at Orange Coast College in southern California, Pham Xuan An demonstrated that he was a student who quickly assimilated American culture, even though by that time he was 30 years old. He had many close and dear friends. At one point he wanted to marry an American girl. He edited and wrote for the student

newspaper, the Barnacle. After completing his studies, the Asia Foundation, which the CIA used for cultural and educational operations, gave him a fellowship to intern, observe, and learn working as a reporter for a daily newspaper, the Sacramento Bee, in the California state capital, where he had a chance to meet Governor Edmund Brown. When he was invited to stay in the United States, he went to the Golden Gate Bridge, looked out at the prison on Alcatraz Island, and thought of Con Son Island in Vietnam. But he decided to return to Vietnam, even though he was secretly afraid that he would be arrested because Muoi Huong, the chief of his espionage cell, had already been arrested, and he knew that his identity might have been exposed.

But he was not. During the turbulent years of the war, Givral Café on Tu Do Street in downtown Saigon was Pham Xuan An's headquarters, where many American correspondents sought him out to exchange information and to look for leads. He was given the nickname, "General Givral."

The book, "Perfect Spy" tells the story of how in late 2003, when the American destroyer U.S.S. Vandegrift arrived in Saigon for the first U.S. naval visit since the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the U.S. Embassy invited An to visit the ship. He was so pleased with the visit that he told the author that now he could now close his eyes and die happy. His statement was understood to mean that An had finally been able to again set foot on American soil, because a U.S. warship is considered to be the sovereign territory of the United States, and because the two countries were expanding their relations toward becoming strategic partners. That had been his dream when the war ended almost thirty years before.

Aboard the warship, a People's Army Colonel recognized the intelligence general and jokingly asked him which side he belonged to. Without hesitation, An replied, "Both sides," and then added, "I am just joking." An told this story to Professor Berman and then said, "Do you see? That is why they could not let me leave the country; they still are not sure who I am."

The pages of "Perfect Spy" will draw the reader into the life and activities of an extremely talented and dangerous spy, whose work began when Le Duc Tho himself, using the alias "Sau Bua", inducted An into membership in the Communist Party in Ca Mau in 1953. Because of the prospects that the United States would replace the French and would intervene deeply and powerfully into the affairs of South Vietnam, the Party ordered An to study to learn to understand Americans and American culture and to infiltrate into the ranks of the American press.

Pham Xuan An accomplished the mission he was given perfectly, serving as a strategic intelligence agent whom the various parties involved in the war never made trouble for, never arrested, or never tried to eliminate. Was someone keeping a watchful eye on him or protecting him? In fact, what side was Pham Xuan An really on? "Perfect Spy" does not give the reader a clear answer to that question.

Perhaps An took the true answer to that question with him when he died in Saigon on 20 September 2006, at the age of 79.