

# Fly like a goose, work like a lion, live like a dragonfly

Martha Bushong | Staff Writer



*Image used with permission from Kerri Farley/Kreations by Kerri*

## On the ground or in the air, Defense Contract Management Agency employee Binh Thanh Nguyen has

dedicated much of his life to flight and flying. An aerospace engineer at DCMA Hamilton Sundstrand, Windsor Locks, Conn., Nguyen began his experience with aircraft as a helicopter pilot for the South Vietnamese Air Force. Flying figured prominently in his escape from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, and it continues to dominate his career. Currently, he works with DCMA as a member of the program support team for the F-135 engine. He previously served as an engineer in the NP-2000 Program helping to develop eight-blade composite propeller systems for aircraft.

Nguyen's first experience with flight, however, was not with fixed-wing aircraft, like the Hawkeye or F-35. It was with the unstable rotary wings of helicopters. "Flying a helicopter is a lot like my life's journey," he said. "I have traveled many different directions and sometimes just hovered. Sometimes I had to go backward,

and other times I had to make split-second decisions."

One of those decisions — the one to leave Vietnam — changed life completely and forever for Nguyen. Looking back, he said, "I can vividly recall the last days of turmoil that took place in my homeland. I was assigned as a duty officer with a helicopter squadron, having graduated from the Vietnamese Academy Air Force School as a pilot in 1972. We had received reports that Saigon had fallen, but we weren't quite sure because our base was still under heavy attack by North Vietnamese forces."

At first, Nguyen thought he would stay in South Vietnam, even after the North Vietnamese took control, but when the moment to decide came, he decided to leave. Even now, he can't say what made him change his mind, but he has kept moving, adapting and changing.

"We kept asking our commanding officer for confirmation as to whether we should continue to fight or get our helicopters in the air so they wouldn't

fall into enemy hands. When we saw him break for his helicopter, we decided to do the same thing."

Nguyen said he made secret arrangements with the maintenance officer to get a helicopter out of the hangar and to land it on his complex so that he could use it to escape. "We were waved off when dozens of people began to climb all over the chopper," he said. "Even as I took off, people were hanging on the skids. I can still see the horrified looks on their faces as some of them began losing their grip and falling to the ground."

Someone suggested that the helicopter land at a political prisoner island where they could refuel. Swarms of helicopters fought for fuel, and without air traffic control, chaos reigned. Somehow, miraculously, Nguyen said no accidents happened.

"We kept contacting the U.S. Seventh Fleet for landing permission," said Nguyen. "Finally, when it was granted, all copters took off carrying in each of them only about two and a half hour's worth of fuel. After a one-hour trip, along with three



*Binh Nguyen, second from left, poses for a photo with Keith D. Ernst, third from left, former Defense Contract Management Agency director, and other DCMA employees in front of a commercial six-blade propeller, which is similar in design to the NP-2000. (Photo courtesy of Binh Nguyen)*

other copters, I spotted the small carrier and decided to land rather than taking the risk to search for a bigger one. Four helicopters landed on the carrier *Hancock*, which was part of the Seventh Naval Fleet evacuation team on April 30, 1975 — the same day that the North Vietnamese Communists took over South Vietnam.

“I breathed a sigh of relief when the skids touched the carrier deck because, somewhere along the way, we had picked up 10 or 15 more people than the helicopter was designed to hold. A helicopter will fly with more people than the maximum capacity, but it is harder to get airborne. In these types of situations all a pilot can say is, ‘I’ll try my best.’ You don’t want to leave anyone behind because most of the time you can’t go back.”

Nguyen described the process as flying like a goose. Which means the aircraft must fly and glide, fly and glide, fly and glide. Finally, it creates enough lift for takeoff.

“Because the carrier was so crowded with refugees, mechanics removed the chopper’s engine and then dumped it in the ocean. I saw the pictures in *Newsweek* a short while later, and it just reinforced my feelings about how lucky we were to have escaped.”

“When I got to the U.S. mainland,

my first job was working at a Chinese restaurant in Providence, R.I. I made a terrible waiter because I had no experience doing that kind of work. There was a huge language barrier. I worked one night and then asked my sponsor if I could please do something else. My sponsor at the Congregational Beneficial Church in Providence found me a job at the Tower Manufacturing Company doing piecework. I worked there for a year and a half earning \$70 a week.”

Nguyen remembers the days at the manufacturing company fondly. “Those were happy, carefree days. I had my friends. We went fishing, grilled outdoors in the summer and really enjoyed our freedom. We didn’t have much money; of course, we didn’t have any bills either.”

“But I was always thinking about education. I had a feeling my college career could lead to something else, so one day I asked my supervisor to lay me off. He was surprised that I would ask and told me he was sad to see me go, but I told him I wanted to go back to school. I picked the University of Rhode Island, where I



*Binh Nguyen in his South Vietnamese Air Force dress uniform. After arriving in America, he considered joining the Army Reserves, but he instead chose to support America’s warfighters through service with the Defense Contract Management Agency. (Photo courtesy of Binh Nguyen)*

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— Binh Thanh Nguyen, Defense Contract Management Agency engineer

majored in mechanical engineering.”

“During my senior year,” said Nguyen, “I had the opportunity to be interviewed by many major companies. I decided to accept Hamilton Standard’s offer, which came even before my graduation in May 1980. While working at Hamilton Standard, I studied toward my master’s degree. I graduated with an M.S. in mechanical engineering in 1982 and earned another master’s from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1984.”

Later, Nguyen combined his knowledge of flying and mathematics into a career in aerospace engineering. For almost three decades, he has served the people of the United States and its warfighters. First, he worked at Hamilton Standard, which became Hamilton Sundstrand, and later joined the DCMA team.

Patrick McMann, a former supervisor who worked with Nguyen for more than 12 years on the NP-2000 Program, said, “Binh was one of those people who always did more than expected. There are some people who like to swim in their own lane, but he was not one of them. For a while, he essentially did two jobs. He worked as the engineer and as the program integrator. He always put the needs of the customer ahead of his own needs.”

When Nguyen describes his work philosophy, he talks about the way big cats hunt. “Tigers,” he said, “hunt by themselves, but lions work together. They hunt with their pride. I like to work more like the lion. As humans, I think we are stronger as a group than we are individually. For me, the more collaboration and interaction I have the better.”

“One of the highlights of my career,” said Nguyen, “was having the opportunity to meet the E-2 Hawkeye pilots and talking with them about the eight-blade propeller system we were developing to replace the

four-blade propellers on their aircraft as part of the NP-2000 Program. I was very excited to see the result of our work and to have the opportunity to meet with our end-users.”

Nguyen looks forward to his recent shift in duties from work with the NP-2000 to opportunities with the new F-135 program. With his experience and expertise for the mature NP-2000 Program, he hopes to provide great DCMA support to the new program.

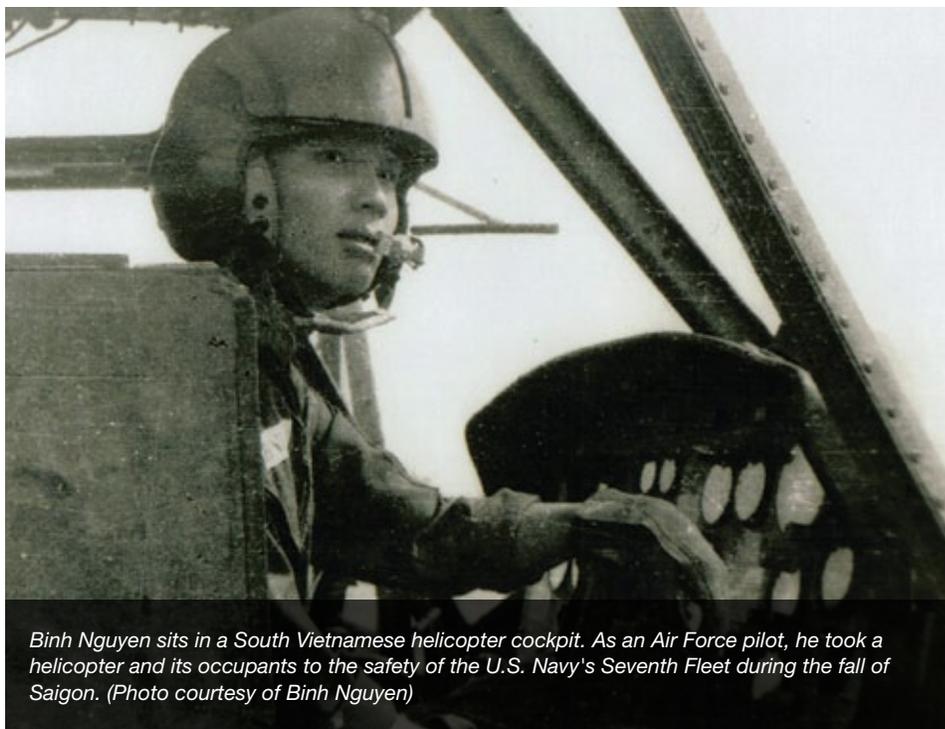
“I haven’t flown a helicopter since I left Vietnam,” said Nguyen. “I thought about joining the Army Reserves when I first came to this country and serving as a pilot, but by the time I got my citizenship, I had a job on the ground and wasn’t willing to risk flying. Everything above the ground is dangerous. When I was young, I didn’t consider the risks.”

The helicopter is much like a dragonfly. Both are marvels of flight engineering, and both the helicopter pilot and the dragonfly

use their incredible flying skills to evade capture. In Eastern cultures, the totemic dragonfly symbolizes strength, peace and harmony. The dragonfly lives a short life and is known for its ability to make the best of any environment.

As an immigrant, Nguyen learned how to make the best of his new life and still works to improve life for himself and for others. His service to Asian-American immigrants won him honors from the state of Connecticut. Over the years, he has helped community service organizations support families with job placement and training, health, business opportunities and citizenship.

“I tell new immigrants this is the opportunity country. They need to understand life is different here and accept the fact that they are new and the old ways are no more,” said Nguyen. “We have to work hard, study hard and help others.”



*Binh Nguyen sits in a South Vietnamese helicopter cockpit. As an Air Force pilot, he took a helicopter and its occupants to the safety of the U.S. Navy’s Seventh Fleet during the fall of Saigon. (Photo courtesy of Binh Nguyen)*