



Hau Thai-Tang

By Jan Schlain Photography by Randy G.

Dearborn, Michigan—

HAU THAI-TANG, LIKE THE MUSTANGS he has built, has a way of confounding expectations. Mr. Thai-Tang, forty, readily explains how his family escaped from war-torn Vietnam, what it's like to work with the legendary Carroll Shelby, and how he became chief engineer of the Ford Mustang.

"Here's where the story gets interesting," Hau said. "As we were getting ready to launch the Mustang, Ford's Public Affairs team came to me and said, 'Hey, we need to develop your perspective on the Mustang, because we're going to talk to the media. It would be nice to have a personal connection.'"

Hau did have a connection with the Mustang; American men generally do. "For most guys, it's that their dad had one, or they worked on one, or bought a used one in high school." But Hau told the Ford publicists something different: "I saw one when I was a kid in Vietnam."

"For Public Affairs, this was a gold mine," Hau said, imagining their headline: "Freedom! Boy Sees Car in Vietnam—He Immediately Wants To Be Mustang's Chief Engineer!" Actually, I just wanted to get out of the country.

"We found the guy who brought the cars over." It was Elton "Al" Eckstrand.

Al, a drag racer and a former Chrysler Corporation attorney, wanted to do

something for the servicemen. Eckstrand complained at the time

that, "We were losing as many servicemen on the roads as we were in the military." Eckstrand, Hau said, "was part of a goodwill tour for the armed forces, and he

"I always had these visions of big people, powerful country, wide-open spaces, the sense of optimism and freedom."

brought seven Mustangs. The reason was to promote safe driving and to improve troop morale.

"Eckstrand made three trips to Southeast Asia from 1970 to 1972," Hau said. "One [Mustang] was destroyed during unloading from the ship when a five-ton container was dropped on the car.

"I always had these visions of big people, powerful country, wide-open spaces, the sense of

optimism and freedom," Hau said. "All of those things the Mustang embodied. When I saw that car, it reinforced those things. That we left the country and I ended up working for Ford is luck and good fortune."

Al brought his own blue 1970 Super Boss Lawman, with a modified 429 Boss engine and 6-71 Hampton supercharger making around 780 horsepower. For Hau, this was a taste of the American Dream. He remembers,

"I was thinking and saying what a five-year-old would think and say—"Wow, that's neat."

The bigger surprise for many, said Hau, is that he had a happy childhood. "Yes, there was a war going on," he said, "but there was a war going on since anybody could remember.

"We had a two-story house with a terrace. My dad had a car—a late-'50s Citroën 2CV. It had a crank start on it. We were driving along the countryside, and my dad hit a dog. The dog was fine, but the car fell apart."

This may help explain why Hau did not grow into a tough-talking macho type.

Clean-cut and wearing a navy blue suit, Hau, who is now director of Ford's Advanced Product Creation and Special Vehicle Team, sits with his hands folded at his office conference table; a beautiful, solid milled-titanium model of the 2005 Mustang is the centerpiece. His desk is piled with papers, and his walls are lined with framed career highlights at Ford.

"I remember the evacuation," Hau said.





Mr. Thai-Tang's office doesn't want for lack of Mustang memorabilia.

"Shortly before April of 1975, when Saigon fell to the Communists, Chase Manhattan Bank [where his mother was manager] developed an evacuation plan for their American employees and Vietnamese nationals. We had a very small family, so we were selected.

"We were allowed one carry-on bag each. We had to tune in to Armed Forces Radio and listen for Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas.' As soon as that came on, we had one hour to get to our rendezvous point. We kept our carry-on bags by the door.

"One day in April, 'White Christmas' came on the radio. Our parents grabbed us, grabbed our bags, and drove us to my grandfather's house. He took our car and house keys, and we left the country from there." He never saw his paternal grandparents again.

Hau's family members were airlifted by U.S. military cargo to Guam, where they saw tanks roll into Saigon the next morning while watching television. "We literally got out the day before," Hau said. "Once the paperwork was in order, we were flown to

Camp Pendleton." They stayed at the camp until a Chase Manhattan family sponsored them.

Within weeks they were moved to Brooklyn, and eventually the family settled on Staten Island. Hau's mother continued to work for Chase Manhattan Bank. "I am a product of the New York City public school system," Hau said. "My wife and I joke about that.

"One of the neat things about my story is that a lot of these things happened to me at an early age. The significance didn't become evident until much later," Hau said.

The most poignant of these connections happened in the late 1990s when Hau, married just weeks, was sent on assignment by Ford to Cologne, Germany. "It was a difficult period," Hau said. "My wife and I were adjusting to marriage and Europe. We had no support network. But then I thought, 'I have a job. Germans speak English. The company is paying for our housing, leased car, German tutor. It is a lot better than my parents had it.'" Hau says his parents are still his greatest inspiration.



“A lot of my job is advanced product creation. We’re constantly grasping: who is the customer, what do they want?”

“Hau’s a great family man,” says Carroll Shelby, speaking by phone from his farm in Texas. The two men talk almost daily. “Hau is very trustworthy; what he tells you is the way it is. He has a very, very solid knowledge of the racing business and how to work within big companies. Most of those guys might as well be selling refrigerators—have you found that out? They don’t care about cars.”

Hau’s father wanted him to become an engineer. When Hau came to the States he was in the third grade and knew only a handful of English words from watching American shows like *The Wild Wild West* and *Bonanza*. But once enrolled in school on Staten Island, he discovered that math is the great equalizer. Hau graduated, went on to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and received his BS in

mechanical engineering before joining Ford’s College Graduate Program in 1988. While working, Hau attended night school; he received his MBA from the University of Michigan in 1993.

Today his life includes his wife Jenny, two young daughters, and a rigorous weekday schedule at the office, complete with thousands of decisions. “It’s an all-consuming job when you’re doing it. One day you’re on top of the world; the next you think, ‘They’re going to fire me any moment.’”

“A lot of my job is advanced product creation. We’re constantly grasping: who is the customer, what do they want? I want Joe Novice to get in the car and feel like he is a race car driver.

“When we do high-performance cars, there is this machismo about it—unless you’re a race car driver, you can’t drive it.

“The really good car should flatter the driver. You want to be able to get in it and show it off to your spouse, to your neighbor, to your friends, and not be embarrassed about stalling it. It should be intuitive and easy to drive.

“Henry Ford had a saying, ‘If I asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse.’ The message is not that we ignore the customer, but to really deliver a breakthrough product, you have to deliver a product the customer doesn’t even realize [they] need. No one would have said, ‘I want a car with an internal-combustion engine.’ A lot of what we do is future scenario planning: ‘How do we stay on the leading edge so we’re not in a reactive mode? How do I deliver to our customers something they don’t even realize they want yet?’”

In the summer of 2004, Hau gave Shelby a 2005 Mustang prototype; he began exploring ways to modify it into a Shelby Mustang. “That became the inspiration for the 2007 Shelby GT500,” Hau said.

Hau and Shelby formalized their partnership in 2005. Shelby assisted Hau and his team with the design and the development of the Shelby GT500 and is now helping to produce the Mustang GT.

We set out from Hau’s office in the high-security wing of Ford Motor Company’s Product Development Center for a test drive. Walking down a long corridor, there

didn't seem to be much of the old Ford grandeur and elegance. "Have you been reading the papers lately?" Hau asked. We passed through the east lobby and out into cool autumn air, and there it was: a pre-production 2007 Shelby GT500, the flagship Mustang delivered by SVT.

"We want our customers to fall in love with our car," Hau said. "Sometimes it is politically incorrect, but there needs to be physical attraction. The styling of the car is the physical attraction. That comes first.

"Once you get beyond that,

"I don't listen to the radio: I love the sound of the engine."

then we need to deliver things like fuel economy, make sure the car won't leave you stranded, and build in trust, safety, all the emotional aspects. The romance is the driving experience."

We got in.

Before starting the car, Hau was retrospective about the original Mustang. "It was so different from everything else," he recalled. "It changed the paradigm of what a sporty car was. Up until then, two-doors were essentially four-door cars with two less doors. When

Ford developed the Mustang, it broke the mold—the long hood, the short deck, the fast roofline. All those things were revolutionary. To transplant that into a third-world country, it was unbelievable!

"It's a 5.4-liter supercharged engine rated at 500 horsepower," Hau said. "It is the most powerful Mustang ever produced by Ford for mass production."

I felt a touch weak in the knees from the interior alone—the wrap-around black leather dashboard, the feel of the leather seats.

Hau relaxed behind the wheel on our way to the test track.

"Sixty percent of Mustangs are automatic," Hau said. "For the Shelby, we only sell it as a manual.

"Consumers expect more," he explained. "Air bags and other safety features, crash requirements, customer wishes like bigger engines, bigger brakes—all these things throw weight into it. As you add more content—whether regulatory or customer-demand—you have to beef up the chassis to carry that extra weight. It gets



heavier and heavier. Weight is the enemy of performance."

Hau points out that they raised the car's hip point for baby boomers, the Mustang's primary audience. "But from a styling standpoint, you want to bring the roofline down," he said. "It's like doing a Sudoku puzzle—you can get one cell right, but the goal is to get all eighty-one cells right."

Hau said he loves to drive. "My wife is always yelling at me to slow down," he said, "but there are tons of great roads. Highway 1 in

California is great. Out in Ann Arbor where friends live, down Huron River Drive, heading out to Half Moon Lake; North Carolina toward Asheville; northern Georgia—there are some great roads there."

The radio was silent. "I don't listen to the radio," Hau said. "I love the sound of the engine."

As we drove up to the track, the track engineers smiled and waved.

"This is our proving grounds," Hau said. "We do our vehicle testing here. For over 100 years the perimeter has been untouched. Our top »

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speed is only about 130—it's not a big enough oval to go any faster.

"As you get higher in the company, you have less and less opportunity to drive," he said.

"That's something I really miss."

Hau picked up the track radio. "Control, this is Hau Thai-Tang in the Shelby Mustang seeking permission to get on the high-speed track."

"Ten-four, Shelby."

Hau pressed the accelerator, gripped the gearshift,

and started to say, "We'll do a very aggressive..." and off we went. My feet were pressed against the floor, my heart pumping. I felt safe in the car, in Hau's hands—I heard myself let out a

surprised shriek at six seconds into what felt like warp speed. I thought I was about to re-create that joyous scene from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, only I was in a Shelby—what better fantasy. Hau, with grace and ease, said, "If we drive much faster, we'd have to put helmets on."

I smiled, recalling Shelby saying in his warm Texas twang, "Oh, man, there are a hundred thousand

little girls named Shelby running around. David E. will tell you. I never dreamed it would be what it is!"

"Control," announced Hau, "red Shelby Mustang is leaving the high-speed track."

Hau Thai-Tang, Al Eckstrand, and Al's 1970 Super Boss were reunited at the All-Ford Show in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, last June. (Al's car is now owned by professional wrestler Bill Goldberg,

"There have been some shitty Mustangs," Shelby said. "But someone always comes back with the vision of how the Mustang should be—and that's Hau Thai-Tang."

who was also on hand.) The official event directory read as Hau imagined: "Hau was wide-eyed when he saw a blue 1970 Mach One... The five-year-old swore that someday he would do something with Mustangs, and thirty-five years later, he is in charge of Mustang engineering."

Hau, a bit exasperated, said, "It was just a weekend outing."

Up on the stage next to Al's car was a red 2005 Mustang GT with a Ford Racing pack.

"We gave Al a new Mustang," said Hau. "Al's going to do another one of these goodwill tours for the troops some thirty years later," he explained. "It really is a great American feel-good story. I'm waiting for the movie rights."

"Ford has been building Mustangs since 1964," said Carroll Shelby. "GM goes in and out. Chrysler goes in and out. GM comes out with a new Camaro. For Chrysler, it was the Charger. The latest BMW M6 is a very, very fine car, but it sells for \$110,000. How many people do you knock out of the box for that?"

"There have been some shitty Mustangs," Shelby said. "But someone always comes back with the vision of how the Mustang should be—and that's Hau Thai-Tang. Hau brought the Mustang back. It took John [Coletti] ten years to get rid of a bunch of crap. And now, as long as Hau is there, long after Carroll Shelby is gone, the Mustang will be around." ♦

