

ABSTRACT

Finding Refuge After The Fall

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American service men, service women and many others around the world who were affected by the Vietnam War would be reluctant to discuss their experiences and emotions even decades after the denouement of the historical event. According to one military journalist, many people think of war in terms of the military. However, he said those who suffered the most are the people—citizens of the country where war is present. Many Vietnamese, from the north and the south, would experience great loss, witness the Communists' cruelty and live with the tragedies of war and its aftermath. An intensified uncertainty plighted their lives after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Some of the Vietnamese survivors would flee the country, enduring the struggles as a refugee. Many of them would later find safety, freedom and opportunities to rebuild their lives in a new place. However, other Vietnamese would remain under the Communists' regime, living in fear and without freedom. My thesis recounts the stories of the Vietnamese during their war. It documents some of the major events retold by refugees, American troops, journalists at the scene and others who were thrust into the Vietnam War.

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FINDING REFUGE AFTER THE FALL

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INTRODUCTION

March 29, 1973, signaled the final march for active duty American troops. They departed from the battlefields of South Vietnam and soon arrived in the land of the free once again. More than 2.5 million United States military veterans returned home empty without the clear-cut victory for which many had fought.

Included in their losses were companions and civilians, limbs left decaying in the killing field, the innocence of youth, the sounds of both cyclic gunshots and unexpected explosions, the sights of mass graves and the inhumanity of war. Many of those veterans as well as people in South Vietnam would continue to be haunted by these events and would remain reluctant to discuss for decades.

The Vietnam War veteran returned home with experiences that set them apart from civilians, but they also returned to a very different home. The troops, servicemen and service women, came home to a country divided by the Vietnam War. They had also been losing the support of their country, which influenced the outcome of the war in which they invested their lives.

Several factors complicated the relationship between the public and the politics for the Vietnam War. According to Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology Alan Schultz, who also holds an MPH in Epidemiology from the University of Iowa and a Ph.D. from the University of Florida, one reason for the complexity is that “so many young men were drafted into this war, further complicating allegiances, belongings and betrayals of loyalty and fortune for the American public.” About 25 percent of the soldiers were conscripted while about 66 percent volunteered,

according to *Resistance and Revolution: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement at the University of Michigan, 1965-1972*.

“I think a lot of the tumult is explained by the moral mess created by conscription into the war, the high rate of casualties for all in combat zones and the lack of support for it,” Schultz said. “It’s pretty hard to separate support for war and support for troops, when three-fourths signed up and one-fourth were forced into it. Thirty percent of draftees died.”

Retired Navy Captain Richard Whitenbach-Santos, who holds a doctorate in political science said that, in the end, the American public was able to pressure Congress to force an end to the long war in Southeast Asia.

When Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger negotiated the Paris Peace Accords on Jan. 27, 1973, Whitenbach-Santos said it temporarily stopped the conflict between North and South Vietnam and ended direct military involvement by the United States. Also called the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, Whitenbach-Santos said that in the agreement, Kissinger even promised South Vietnam if they signed and got invaded in the future, the United States. would return and help.

“Kissinger wanted to get the POWs home,” Whitenbach-Santos said, “Kissinger wanted to end the war with a viable South Vietnam.”

Many people blamed Kissinger’s negotiation for the fall of Saigon at the hands of the Communists in 1975. However, Whitenbach-Santos said Kissinger’s negotiation had made Congress bitter and resentful. It was Congress that passed the laws that restricted U.S. operations and the flow of aid to South Vietnam following the treaty.

“It was Congress. The American public just did not want to continue anything,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “The American public pressured Congress to pass the law. So it was not Kissinger; it was the American public.”

International relations with China were also at stake with the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, or Paris Peace Accords, Whitenbach-Santos said. These relations also tied the two countries both economically and politically.

“His hands were tied by the Congress,” Whitenbach-Santos said. The end result was that South Vietnam, whose armies fought to the bitter end, were left without the replacement parts, airpower or financial resources needed to hold off a North Vietnamese army fully supported by the Soviet Union.

Whitenbach-Santos returned to American soil in 1973, along with many thousands of Vietnam War veterans.

“There was never any welcome home. There was no parade,” he said.

According to Whitenbach-Santos, it was not until more than ten years later that America at large opened its arms to Vietnam vets, both servicemen and women. One long overdue commemoration for their service took place in Chicago in 1985. Others, including, Charlotte, N.C. welcomed home the veterans in 2012 and Baltimore followed in 2016.

“In 1985, Chicago gave us a welcome home parade for Vietnam. Ten years later,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “Chicago gave us a welcome home parade, and I was in tears.”

Whitenbach-Santos said that he believes that the American public today treats soldiers more adequately. For example, he said because of the bad homecoming

experiences given to the Vietnam War, the prisoners from the two Gulf Wars receive much kinder, more humane treatment.

“But that’s because the public learned a lesson on Vietnam,” he said. “They were able to separate the politics from the soldier. They’re not going to blame the soldier for the politics when in 1975 they blamed the soldiers for the politics.”

Retired Marine Colonel Chuck Meadows also said that the U.S. media’s portrayal of the Vietnam War did not always mirror the actuality of the experiences the troops and the Vietnamese. For example, he said that news outlets at the time did not publish stories about the mass graves found at Hue after the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Hue.

Meadows said that the mass graves of South Vietnamese civilians and government officials massacred by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese army soldiers was a topic the American media did not cover because neither the public nor the politicians wanted to hear it.

“And that’s a very, very sad part of that whole conflict,” Meadows said.

However, while the media focused on the U.S. defeat in the war, Meadows said that America lost nothing in relation to the magnitude of the losses of the Vietnamese people. Unlike South Vietnam, life in the United States was virtually unimpacted by the conflict in Southeast Asia.

“For the folks back home, that’s terrible, and the news of the day then was Walter Cronkite saying it’s all over and we lost the war,” Meadows said. “For those of us in Hue, we sure didn't think we lost anything.”

Many of the Vietnamese interviewed by the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation for the Vietnamese in the Diaspora Digital Archive (ViDDA) recount the

horrific experiences of life under Communist rule, the feelings of living in a warzone, the uncertainty of being in limbo as a refugee, of betrayal and the loss of their beloved country. However, despite it all, these former refugees also express deep gratitude for the denouement of their journey. For many Vietnamese refugees, the American soldier had been their rescue and America their refuge.

“We lost the war, and Saigon was being overrun. It was an emotional time for the American military,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “All of a sudden we didn’t have time to dream about it, we had to turn to for the refugees.”

According to military journalist Marc Yablonka, people tend to think of wars in terms of the experiences of military personnel.

“But the people who suffered the most are the people,” Yablonka said. “[The Vietnamese] were thrust into a war.”

CHAPTER ONE

Before the Vietnam War: The Communists' Actions and Agenda

Agricultural Land Reform

“Not many people understand the Communist. Wherever they go, they try to erase the rich people and the educated people. Everywhere,” former refugee Nam Nguyen said.

The North Vietnamese Communist leadership organized a movement they called an “agricultural reform” in the 1950s. Nguyen said the main idea of the reform was to confiscate the land of the rich and evict them.

“My father was very smart. He saw it,” Nguyen said.

Whoever owned property and had land to rent was seen as being the enemy of the communist doctrine, Nguyen said. Likewise, whoever worked for the French was equally suspect. Unfortunately, for his family, Nguyen’s father did work for the French, along with tens of thousands of other Vietnamese intellectuals, doctors, lawyers and educators.

With apprehension boiling in the North, Nguyen and his family sought the South, which they believed would be a safer place. With their resources, the family arrived safely and secured their immediate future.

However, a smooth transition into safety was not the norm for many other businessmen, landowners and wealthy civilians. For those who—initially—stayed behind, the confiscation of property and public denouncements became the percolating fear they did not anticipate and reality they could not avoid.

Refugee Nguyen Thanh Chieu's uncle owned a chinaware factory. His uncle was one of the thousands of businessmen whose businesses and reputation fell into the hands and control of the Communists.

The Communists organized the workers in Chieu's uncle's business to publicly denounce him. However, Chieu said that their denunciations against their employer were not voluntary. They were forced by the Communists.

"They established a people's court," Chieu said, "[they] forced my relatives to stand there. They gathered the workers together and asked them to recount all of my relatives' crimes, crimes that never happened, crimes that were made up."

The Communists next plundered the workers, Chieu said. They accused the employees themselves of being friendly with the enemy and spies for the French. Chieu said the workers who participated in the hearings later regretted what they had said against his uncle.

"They were forced to say those things," Chieu said. "If they didn't follow, their own lives would be in danger. They had to do it to stay alive. They knew that they had committed a crime against their previous employer."

Chieu's uncle's factory was just one of many businesses that was confiscated and that entered into the Communists' collective model.

The Communists were relentless, even against their own supporters. Chieu said he knew another case of public denunciation against Cat Thang Long, a wealthy plantation owner in northern Vietnam.

Her son was a leader in the North Vietnamese Army regiment. According to Chieu, people considered him a hero because he resisted the French. Cabinet members,

army men and other North Vietnamese officials were cordial with her. She would often feed them as they passed through.

Still, her son's status and reputation did not spare her property nor her life. Chieu said that because of the plantation reform policy and its hidden agenda, no one could protect her against the Communists. Eventually, Chieu said, the Communists shot Long and confiscated her property because she was the richest person in the area.

"At first, they dragged her out," Chieu said. "They brought the son home to watch his mother's denouncement."

The Communist functionaries also organized another people's court for the workers to denounce her. They again influenced the workers to turn against their owner.

"And then they executed her," Chieu said. "The incident reverberated throughout the country."

Chieu said the North Vietnamese continued to attack other plantation owners after that, especially people who owned at least three acres of land because they were considered landlords. Even people who did not own land and were not educated were in danger of the Communists' control.

"They were more susceptible to galvanization," Chieu said. "Even if they didn't want to do it, they would not be left alone. So they had to do it."

Both the *petit bourgeoisie* and property owners of the country side were trapped under the grip of the Communists.

"[Land reform] was very scary, especially in the case of Mrs. Cat Thang Long" Chieu said.

Chieu even experienced his own denouement when the policy began in 1953. All because, he said, his family had a little money. He said he was studying at Ngo Sy Lien High School during that time.

“They categorized my family as *petit bourgeoisie*—class enemy,” Chieu said. “The school’s leadership also identified me as such, and they promoted an anti-*petit bourgeoisie* campaign. I was their first victim.”

Chieu said his class and the entire school gathered, and girls were allowed to curse at him. He said even his girlfriend hurled disrespectful accusations at him.

“[They would] accuse my family of following the imperialists, of being capitalists, of being unawaken by the revolution. From then on, I was cursed,” Chieu said. “I was completely paralyzed by fear. They could do whatever that they wanted to me.”

Chieu said his curse would affect his studies. He had to switch schools a couple times, first to Thai Nguyen, and then Han Thuyen. He said the latter school mobilized people to join the Resistance, and he was the only one willing to join.

“When it came time to sign up, they refused to let me participate because I belonged to the ‘bad elements,’ Chieu said. “Later on, it became a black mark that slowly spread inside me until I came back to the City.

“My anticommunist sentiment emerged from that period, from my childhood to college,” Chieu said. “I could not live with a regime that saw me as an opponent that needed to be eliminated.”

The Great Migration

“Safer.” That is how refugee Nam Nguyen described his feelings about moving to South Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Conference.

In 1954, representatives from several world-powers met in Geneva, Switzerland, in attempt to settle the already bloody and exhausting conflict in Vietnam. One outcome from the conference included a treaty that divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel. While the South flatly refused to sign the treaty, the communist-dominated North reluctantly agreed.

About two million people from the North moved to the South within two months of the signing of the treaty, Nguyen said.

“I was one among them,” he said.

Nguyen said his family actually had to sneak out of the north.

“One rainy night, we left the house.” Nguyen and his family trekked through the woods until reaching the beach town of Ha Long Bay. There, they met sailors and ships from the American Seventh Fleet. “[They were] helping us to get out from the North and into the South,” Nguyen said.

“We lost a lot, but we were happy because we have freedom,” he said. “And when we were in the South, we rebuilt our lives. It was a very happy life.”

Refugee Nguyen Thanh Chieu said many Vietnamese were still stuck after the Communists took over Ha Noi. Chieu said the millions of people who were able to make it out of the North were the fortunate ones.

“The transference took 100 days,” Chieu said. The migrators went to Hai Phoung, had to pass many Communist check points and finally boarded ships to go South.

Chieu was at Da Lat studying in the Vietnamese National Military Academy during the migration.

“At the time, the evacuation movement had just begun,” he said. “The streams of people who came out to greet the newcomers were very large, terribly large. They came from the different northern districts. There were also people from Ha Noi. Almost all the capitalists and the *petit bourgeoisie* left.”

Chieu said he would often go to the Saigon Harbor to see if his relatives had been able to evacuate the North.

“There were many amphibious vessels carrying thousands of people,” Chieu said. “Everybody was afraid of the communists, especially after the numerous public denouncements and the religious discriminations occurred. The people felt that their lives were threatened.”

CHAPTER TWO

The War: The Fall of Saigon and the Start of New Stories

The Vietnamese civilians' growing fear of the Communists' threats and their agenda continued to escalate once war broke out again. Prior conflict in the country included World War II, when Japanese forces invaded Vietnam, and the struggle against the French who occupied the country. However, political leaders in Vietnam also wanted a unified Vietnam separate from the French colonial rule. The anticolonial sentiment developed into contention that set the stage for the Cold War, in which former President Dwight D. Eisenhower firmly pledged his support for the South.

According to a former naval officer who also served in the Department of Defense Richard Armitage, the United States in 1945 was seen as heroic in all of Southeast Asia.

“We vanquished the Japanese, and then we turned around and we freed the Philippines again from our colonialism,” Armitage said. “The United States in 1945, ‘46, ‘47 was viewed as number one because we were anticolonial.”

Armitage said American forces freed Indochina from the Japanese invaders and that the United States was very well-regarded—until it began supporting the French.

According to Retired Navy Captain Richard Whitenbach-Santos, the Vietnam War was part of a larger agenda.

“Many people say that we really won,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “The whole big picture of the world was to contain Russia until it imploded. That was the ‘containment theory’: contain Communism until it was imploded.”

Whitenbach-Santos said that, under that geo-political theory, the western democracies actually won the strategic picture in Vietnam by holding off the marauding Communist expansionism for 21 years. He said the war gave time to Hong Kong, Malaysia and Indonesia to establish their own stable, democratically based governments—governments strong enough to resist the advance of Communism—and it gave time for the Russian system to collapse.

“Some people say it’s an anti-colonialism war, a war of liberation. It had all those elements in there,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “But the South Vietnamese military, they fought hard. It gave time for Soviet Union to collapse.”

Whitenbach-Santos said that in that theory, Vietnam was just a delaying tactic, and unfortunately the Vietnamese people were sacrificed.

While American and other of the world’s leaders primarily contended on the political field, Vietnamese civilians more intimately experienced the war around them and in their home villages.

Refugee Wendy Tuyet Tougher said she grew up knowing the war was around her. The noise was one of the most frightening sensations of war.

“All the time, we could feel the vibration you could hear and the noise,” Tougher said. “At night, when everything was quiet, you could always hear in the distance the booming, the shaking. And the noise, the noise was really scary. It’s just the noise.”

Tet

Thundering, reverberating noises especially mark one significant day in Vietnamese culture—Tet. The Vietnamese New Year or Tet normally welcomes celebratory fireworks, firecrackers and cascades of red décor. However, a different kind

of noise, fire and red flames characterized the country's observance of Tet in 1968. A surprise—not one of serendipity—from the enemy forever destroyed the celebratory ambiance.

The combined forces of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam launched a surprise attack against the South and their allies on January 30, 1968. Former council member for the Thua Thien Province and refugee Vo Van Bang said he was home in Pho Tay Village, about two kilometers away from Hue, when he heard shots fired. Bang said the sound of bullets began at dawn on the second day of Tet.

“I heard gun shots and screams coming from the direction of Hue City,” Bang said. “I knew that it was the sound of AK guns—the guns of the North Vietnamese Army, the Communist army—so I guessed that the Viet Congs wanted to do something to signal their presence in the area. But the sound of gun shots became louder and louder.”

Bang said he decided to leave his home to check the surrounding situation and seek shelter elsewhere because his village was located in a remote area. He said he rode his bicycle toward Phu Vang District, which was in the opposite direction of Hue, just as dawn broke that second day of Tet.

“I was riding and perhaps it was because of the urgency of the situation in that life and death moment that I had an incredible strength to ride on,” Bang said.

Bang said the conditions in Phu Vang seemed normal when he arrived. However, he was not able to go beyond the gate of the district, even as a council member.

“I told the standing guard to let me enter the district,” Bang said. “But he kept refusing me, saying that the district's chief had ordered that no one can enter or leave the district.”

He instead sought shelter at a nearby maternity home. Bang said he pleaded to the custodian to let him stay and lie for him if the nurses became suspicious.

“I didn’t dare to go outside, but I met some people I knew in there when they went in,” Bang said. “I thought that if I stayed here long, I’d be discovered.”

Bang said he instead traveled toward Thuan An where the South Vietnamese Army, American soldiers and the naval post were located.

“I would be safer, so I went down there,” Bang said. “In Thuan An, I felt like I was going there to celebrate Tet.”

Bang said that in Thuan An, he played the typical games of the holiday, gambled at the market and visited the locals.

“Things were normal [in Thuan An],” Bang said. “Everything was peaceful.”

However, only 12 kilometers away, the noise from enemy bullets continued to rumble and shake away the celebration in Hue.

“We came under heavy enemy fire, machine gun, and automatic weapons, RPGs, rocket propelled grenades,” retired Marine Colonel Chuck Meadows said. “That’s when we say we've entered into something we had no idea would be happening.”

On January 30th, one day before, Meadows was currently deployed to the Phu Bai area, about seven miles from Hue, and from the base in An Hoa. Meadows said that and he and his troops had left the perimeter of the unit at Phu Bai, digging into the hills the evening of the 30th.

“We watched the rockets fired from out there into the base,” Meadows said. Shortly thereafter, Meadows and his team came under attack as well. He said they did not have much ammunition, aside from some rocket rounds that came in later. Still, they

fought throughout the night into the following day. Meadows said he and his troops returned to the base camp at Phu Bai at first light on the 31st.

“Now the attack throughout the country had started,” he said, “but nobody had any kind of feel for the enormity of that at all.”

Meadows said while the troops refueled at breakfast, he got called to the operations center. He said he received information about a mission to head towards Hue later that afternoon on the 31st of January. However, the atmosphere that greeted Meadows and his troops was strangely calm, what he termed an “almost eerie and out-of-place serenity.”

“The thing we noticed in going [into Hue] was how quiet everything was,” Meadows said. “There weren't people on the side of the road. There was no bustle of movement the closer we got to the city, and even more striking there were no chickens on the road running around like we'd normally see. It gave you pause to think something was going on here, but I don't know what that is.”

Suddenly, when they reached the first major intersection on the south side of Hue, Meadows said they went under heavy enemy fire.

“We didn't know that a marine unit in front of us had taken enemy fire,” Meadows said. “We knew something was going on but we didn't know the severity of what was going on.”

Meadows said he was unaware of previous attacks to the units in Hue the night before.

“Tet in Vietnam, it couldn't happen,” Meadows said. “Nobody was prepared for that.” The American troops were also surprised by the enemies who were shooting at

them.

“They were regular North Vietnamese Army soldiers,” Meadows said. “They had pith helmets on. Their khaki kind of uniforms. But that was a real soldier, wasn’t the V.C. [Viet Cong]”

Shaken but undeterred, Meadows and his troops proceeded to carry out their mission.

“All along there were destroyed vehicles, couple of tanks, South Vietnamese tanks had been destroyed,” Meadows said. “A lot of people shooting at us—so you know something big is going on here.”

The early destruction they encountered as they entered Hue was only a prelude to the gravity of the Tet Offensive that would continue as Meadows and his men moved further into the city. Meadows said he and his troops continued on foot after the first wave of attacks.

“The mission we were then given was to continue on,” Meadows said. He said they were told to enter the historic Citadel side of Hue by crossing a bridge.

“As we moved over the bridge, we came under again, very intense automatic weapon fire, machine gun fire, R.P.G.s again,” Meadows said. “And we did secure the bridge and got to the other side, but that’s where we started taking our first casualties.”

Meadows said he and his troops continued to fight their way towards the old Citadel entrances.

“When we got to that corner, we were even under even more intense fire and we were taking many more casualties,” Meadows said.

Meadows said the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) were entrenched within

buildings and fired from there. The NVA even manned the top of the moat surrounded the citadel. Meadows said the American forces did not have the means or heavy firepower to combat the North's attacks.

"We couldn't use the weapons systems that we had," Meadows said. "We couldn't fire anything larger than small arms or 60mm mortars. We could not use artillery; we could not use air support. We were badly outgunned."

He said higher headquarters limited their rules of engagement were limited and restricted weapons they could use.

"The biggest reason I've been told was the fact of the cultural history of Hue," Meadows said. "[It would be] like us trying to go in and shoot up the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. Those kind of facilities [are] very revered by the Vietnamese people."

The American's artillery restriction intensified the fighting. Meadows said he initially entered Hue with 160 troops. He lost a total of 50 in that first afternoon.

"We had seven killed and about 45 wounded," Meadows said. The intensity did not subside after the first day.

Almost three weeks later, Bang returned to Hue from the Thuan An, hoping that the fighting from the Tet Offensive finally ended. Bang said Hue Radio Broadcast called on all civil servants and troops, especially hospital nurses, to report to their posts and resume their duties.

"I was very happy at that point because I thought that everything had calmed down," Bang said.

Bang said he hitched a ride on a naval vessel to return to Hue.

“However, it was not yet very calm at that time,” Bang said. “When we crossed places like the Bai Dau area between Gia Hoi and Tay Thuong, we were shot at. Two vessels sank.”

The vessel Bang was on made it back to the city. Bang said he only survived because of luck.

“Probably 50 percent [of the people on the naval vessels died],” he recalled. “It was only when I got there that I realized the degree of destruction to the people as well as to the scenery, the dilapidated conditions of Hue City.”

When he arrived back, Bang said he disembarked at the Thu Phu Harbor. Only one ferry remained—the one that had carried him back. Some naval personnel told Bang that the Viet Cong forces had sunk the other ferries.

“I thought that it was luck that I survived,” Bang said.

Bang said the first thing he did when he returned was search for his relatives. He said his wife, children and other family members sought refuge when the Communists harassed the Tay Thuong area where their village of Pho Tay was located.

“I went to see where my wife was. However, the streets were still unsafe,” Bang said.

Bang said one common place where people sought shelter from the Communists was the model school. He said the fighting still continued only about one kilometer away.

“It was very crowded,” Bang said. “There, I was looking for my wife and children, my relatives.”

While Bang did not find his relatives at the model school, he said he instead witnessed a tragic scene.

“Who were those people? They were civilians, non-military folks, non-communist folks. Civilians,” Bang said. “Old men and women and children were living in deplorable conditions. Why did they go there? They went there because it was near the center. They were looking to the government for assistance, they were looking for light. They could have gone to somewhere else, to the countryside, to the Communists, but they ran to the government.”

However, Bang said no one was there to help them. No one offered any assistance, care or aid. Bang said the building lacked water, electricity and even sanitation facilities. Bang smelled the results of thousands of people crammed in a building without bathrooms.

“The stench of that place wafted from inside out. It was full of suffering,” he said.

Bang witnessed another shelter with a similar scene. He said he later found his wife working at Hue Central Hospital where she reported when she heard the duty call for civil servants. Bang said the conditions at the hospital were only slightly better than that of the model school because nurses were there to care for people.

“Inside the hospital, people were everywhere, injured people, healthy people,” Bang said. “They were all looking for shelter.”

Bang said again set out to look at and observe the scene around him. About 25 days after the American and South Vietnamese troops freed Hue city, Bang said the scene was one of desolation. He said the scariest scene was the dead bodies.

“Dead corpses were still lying on the sides of the streets,” Bang said. “Animal and human corpses and dead trees. Together they created a stench.”

He said the majority of the corpses were of civilians who tried to flee the fighting.

“Among them were also government officials and soldiers. When Communist soldiers saw young men from the South Vietnamese army, they would kill them right then and there,” Bang said.

He said some corpses were stuck on fences, and others were laid in a corner. Only a few of the dead were buried—a once-active battleground now silenced.

“One could see dead bodies that just got buried on the sides of the roads, the new graves temporarily made by their relatives,” Bang said. “Some were in front of houses, others scattered on the sides of the roads. People just buried their dead relatives right there. That scene made me feel eerie.”

In addition to the increasing casualties, many families began to notice an increasing list of missing people. Bang said many had gone missing during the Tet celebration. He said people often traveled home, to the country side or other nearby areas.

“That’s our tradition,” Bang said. “Many people were arrested. Everywhere I went, local people complained that their brothers, their fathers, their husbands had been taken away to reeducation, but they neither knew where this reeducation took place nor the fates of their loved ones. When I called a meeting with the people, some came forward to tell me a very high number of missing people. They requested that I take responsibility for the search. So, I established that committee, ‘The Committee to Search and Rebury Victims of the Tet Offensive.’”

Bang’s committee would soon uncover the thousands of corpses of South Vietnamese people massacred by the North, which would later be remembered as the mass graves in Hue.

Mass Graves in Hue

Many refugees, military personnel and reporters have varying sentiments about the accuracy and completeness of American histories and accounts Vietnam War-era events. According to Retired Marine Colonel Chuck Meadows, some published content may have been tied politically or tied to the media desires of the American public. The events in Hue soon became one small tick mark in history that was absent in the news.

Meadows said the scene in Hue was inhumane, unthinkable. He said mass graves filled with about three thousand innocent civilians were found just outside the city.

“How you feel is appalling, [it is] an atrocity,” Meadows said. “I’ve seen some that were shot, back of their heads, or just shot. Others had their throat slit. But by the time we got there, a lot of the bodies had been in the ground and were still badly decomposed.”

Meadows said some were even found buried in their front yards. Others were found in ditches around the city.

“The local people dug those [graves], Meadows said. “They were forced to do that. What we found was that some of those were filled up, and the local people were in them.”

Much of the United States media, both official and commercial, did not portray these large-scale massacres. Rather, Meadows said, they wrote only about the U.S. losing the war. when America lost nothing in relation to the magnitude of Vietnam’s loss.

“For those of us in Hue, we sure didn't think we lost anything,” Meadows said. “Matter of fact, it was just the opposite. But media in the United States did not cover that.”

Instead, Meadows said the mass graves he witnessed were not news the U.S. media, politicians and people wanted to hear.

“And that’s a very, very sad part of that whole conflict,” he said.

While Meadows said the events were not widely reported, some reporters on the field have a different outlook. According to retired correspondent for the Associated Press (AP) Richard Pyle, reporters did their job. They covered stories as the events occurred. Hue was one event that reporters reported but some editors neglected to publish in their news outlets.

“I know that because I covered it,” Pyle said. “I was there in 1969 when the bodies were discovered in Hue.”

Pyle said AP sent several reporters to Hue. There he said they witnessed the excavation of the mass graves.

“These were really by definition, atrocities. People being executed and dumped in mass graves is an atrocity against the rules of war,” Pyle said. “We saw the bodies being pulled out of the ground. We saw the fact that they had in many cases they had their hands wired behind them. They had been shot in the head. They were executed.”

Pyle said the mass graves in Hue was a story that could have received more attention. However, he said the lack of attention was not due to lack of coverage. Pyle said he and the reporters filed the stories of the atrocity from Saigon. He said it was up to the news outlets themselves to decide whether or not to use the information and how much “play” or display space to afford that coverage.

“I think that the public perception of war was changing,” Pyle said. “People in this country were getting tired of that war and that might have been a factor.”

In Vietnam, refugee, journalist and war correspondent Nguyen Thanh Chieu said he sent reporters to Hue. Chieu said it was confirmed that the victims found in the graves were mostly ordinary people. He said more than hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians were murdered and thrown into the graves.

“That is 100 percent true,” Chieu said. “That was an act of liquidation, of personal vendetta. They used that opportunity to kill people.”

While the people who the enemy killed and buried were primarily ordinary people, Chieu said many of the government officials were searched for and shot on the spot.

“Think the death toll reached hundreds of thousands at least and hundreds of thousands equal an entire division,” Chieu said. “Our officials alone wouldn’t cover that number, it included ordinary people.”

Chieu said when the north finally retreated after a total of 26 days in Hue, they forced the captives who were not officials to follow them.

“When [the North] retreated to the forests, they buried those people alive. We saw their skulls, their bodies,” Chieu said. “They used hammer and sticks to bash the heads in to save bullets.”

Chieu said the relatives of those who died searched for them. He said most of the victims were small time government officials, teachers and other professional people.

Refugee and former council member for the Thua Thien Province, Vo Van Bang, helped organize the search committee that uncovered and identified three thousand corpses.

“After that a year, a year after, the people in the countryside, especially those

taken by the Communists for so-called ‘reeducation’ [came to me],” Bang said.

“Everywhere I went, local people complained that their brothers, their fathers, their husbands had been taken away to reeducation, but they neither knew where this reeducation took place nor the fates of their loved ones.”

Bang said it was not until 1969 that people discovered that the people who the Communists took away were actually killed.

“In reality, [the Communists] were burying them slowly, slowly, but people didn’t discover it until a year later,” Bang said. “At that time, as a council member, I organized, I gathered the victims’ families together. They also requested that I organize the search for the bodies.”

When they found the graves, Bang said the bodies “all smeared together,” lying on top of each other. He said many were buried with smashed, broken and beaten skulls with holes in them. Bang said the poor conditions of the bodies and the grave made it difficult to sort and identify the people.

“The people who were asked to dig up the bodies were doing a very sacred deed,” Bang said.

He said the team was only able to identify some people because of certain clothes, accessories or other things left behind.

Bang said Father Dong was someone who had only brought peace to the people and his followers.

“When I saw the cross, the cross on [Dong’s] body, my tears suddenly ran down,” Bang said. “I saw an incredible loss.”

Bang said because of the cross, his family was able to recognize the beloved local

priest and his family would not have received his belongings he left behind, including an eyeglasses case, which contained three letters Dong had written as he knew his death was approaching.

“A letter was addressed to his parents,” Bang said. “It lamented his lack of filial piety because he could not serve his parents, but died before them. Another letter was addressed to his flock. Another letter was addressed to the Catholic Church. In [these letters] he wrote movingly.”

Bang said Father Dong’s “crime” was to advise his flock to continue attending church, to learn about Christ and to pray. Dong knew the Communists were the killers. Still, he was full of forgiveness.

“He knew that death was coming, but he welcomed it with calmness,” Bang said. “He didn’t show any anger or resentment. That was from his merciful soul, his forgiving soul, he didn’t harbor any resentment. Perhaps he had absorbed Christ’s teaching, wherever there is suffering, wherever there is misery like during the time of Christ, one must endure it to see the truth, to see where good and evil lie.”

Father Dong was only one of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives lost to the inhumanity of the Communists. According to Bang, the evil existed within the Communists themselves.

“I don’t know what evil reincarnation of the red devil appeared in the communist types, who have lost their humanity,” Bang said. “They lacked humanity. Even when two sides are fighting each other, there are quicker ways to kill each other. But they were so cruel.”

The torture and inhumanity of the innocent South Vietnamese civilians would last for a few more years until the fall of Saigon when the country finally—if forcibly—unified. However, it was not a peaceful unification. Many Vietnamese felt they lost their homeland as well as the war. Unfortunately, for the vast majority of the citizens of the former South Vietnam, there were more—equally torturous—experiences still to come.

The Fall of Saigon

“All my life I’ve always known there was a war, but towards the end things got really scary because we saw people rushing as the war proceeded,” refugee Wendy Tuyet Tougher said. “People just rushed down. There were literally strangers coming through just running and crying and injured.”

As the war came to a close, Tougher remembers the noise and the sight of strangers fleeing from the oncoming North Vietnamese armies. She said she knew the war was coming to an end because of the loud noises.

“[They] seemed so close to us that it felt like it was there right next to you,” Tougher said. She said people would run through her village crying, “Run, they’re coming.”

However, the fear was not limited to Vietnamese civilians. Refugee and former soldier in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Nguyen Thi Hanh Nhon said she burst with tears when she heard news of the South’s surrender.

“Suddenly, all was at a loss,” Hanh Nhon said. “And that was a deep sorrow that we had to undergo but could not do anything because the last president already surrendered.”

The fall of Saigon now meant a new type of uncertainty, different than the uncertainty of active war. Though Tougher was able to escape, she faced the limbo of a refugee's journey.

In contrast, Hanh Nhon had to report to reeducation—she had to experience the torture and a dubious future in the new country. Some Vietnamese who stayed did not enter reeducation, but they still feared for their lives.

When Saigon fell, refugee Robert Michael Nam Nguyen said he had to run away from his home. He said he grew up with the war. He remembers the fighting, the bombing and how close the Communists would come to his village.

“[In] 1975 before Saigon, I was running away for life with my family from Phan Thiet to Vung Tao and stay there until everything calmed down and return home and live under the Communist regime for three years.”

Nguyen said it was his mother's decision to stay under the regime. Just as the South Vietnamese who decided to flee the country feared for their expected oppression and lack of opportunity in the new regime, Nguyen's mother feared for her three son's future if they left.

Nguyen said the hardest part after the fall was that the Catholic school was taken away. He said the North Vietnamese Communists replaced the Christian cross and the crucifixion with pictures of Ho Chi Minh.

“We grew up on that school and now [it was] replaced by all the government teachers,” Nguyen said. “At the same time, the church was confiscated and shut down and we have no place to go, nowhere to worship.”

Nguyen said his mother and other women would sleep around the church to

protect it. He said the Communists would often come at night and secretly place grenades or guns in the church so that they could later accuse the pastors of treason and confiscate the church without a court order

“And it happened. It happened,” Nguyen said. “You know how it is with the Communists: when they want to arrest the leader, they find way. And they accused to get him.”

Like Nguyen and his family, refugee Mylene Huynh and her family also continued to live in the country after the fall of Saigon. Huynh said even though the war had ended and bombs no longer fell, fear and sadness lingered.

“I think our freedom was lost,” Huynh said. “There was no freedom. There was a fear that we didn’t know what the men were all taken away [for].”

Huynh said her family was originally from Nga Trang and returned from Saigon after the fall. She said her mother was a pharmacist and had taken all her medication with them to Saigon.

“We had to take [the medicine] all back on a big truck, and I remember the roads were very difficult [and], as you can imagine, everything was destroyed,” Huynh said. “It was a very arduous trip where there [were] no facilities. I remember we would stop along side of the road and [when] it was the time to go to the bathroom, you couldn’t go far into the field.”

Huynh said there were leftover landmines in the field. They had to relieve themselves by the truck to avoid danger.

“It was a very scary trip because everybody was making the same trip, and as soon as we got back to Nga Trang, my dad had to report to the official,” Huynh said.

“Word went out [that] if you served in the South Vietnamese Army, you have to go and report in.”

Huynh said her mother was now the primary care-giver for her family, and she reopened her pharmacy in 1975. However, Huynh said there was a new sense of gloom and sadness. There was uncertainty, of not knowing enough or of not knowing even anything. She said the old sense of joy and happiness was lost.

“You just didn’t see that,” Huynh said. “There was no beauty.”

There were further changes under the communist regime. Huynh said the Communists instituted mandatory physical education, even while wearing the white dresses they ordered all girls to wear. People also had to wear a red kerchief when leaving home, and there was obligatory weekly upkeep of the roads and street, Huynh said.

“There were teachers who were prying us for information about our family,” Huynh said. “As a child, you didn’t know better so you would just tell the truth about what is going on at home.”

Huynh said that was all different for them. She said there was a deep fear of saying something wrong because anyone could be taken away, but she also said that some people perhaps did not know they were scared because all expression was stifled. People did not speak of anything potentially taboo under the new regime.

“There was no free expression, and there [was] certainly no laughter like before,” Huynh said.

Huynh said she remembers that her mother was required to attend community meetings.

“The Communist Party organized meeting that everybody had to go,” Huynh said, “there [was] always the sense of sadness.”

Huynh said there was also fear of lack of food. She said she remembers her family supplementing their rice with potatoes. They also did not have toothpaste at one point. She said they would use the ashes from cooking rice and bamboo as toothpaste.

“We [would] use that as friction to brush our teeth,” Huynh said. “We had to brush our teeth with a straw.”

Huynh said people in the city of Nga Trang tried to help each other; they worked together.

“Things were different, but I think as an eight-year-old you just try to find comfort in each other,” Huynh said.

Huynh said she did not know what really happened to her father. She said she knew a lot of her friends lost family members and were uncertain of what happened to their fathers, their uncles or others, as well. She said it was so common for people in Nga Trang to have the male figures taken away that she did not have too much difficulty knowing that her father was gone, perhaps forever.

“Every family all had the same situation with their dad or their uncle were taken away,” Huynh said.

However, her father had an early pardon. She said he was released one year later, perhaps because he was a physician who delivered care in the “concentration camp.”

“That’s really early,” Huynh said. “I heard that’s very unusual.”

The Fall of Saigon was a prelude to the events to come for many: escape stories, stories of a new life under a new regime or reeducation, stories of unbearable loss and

sadness. As those stories continued to circulate, Huynh said that within a week of her father's release, her family planned and executed their escape.

CHAPTER THREE

The Communist Regime: “Reeducation” for the Remaining

The fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, signaled the end of the decade’s long conflict and the urgency, for most South Vietnamese, to escape. However, those who remained in the country were subject to a different fate determined by the new Communist leaders.

Refugee Nam Loc Nguyen said that those who remained would experience the retribution of the enemy who took over. He said the surviving Vietnamese could not survive. Nguyen said that their new rulers said that those who lived in the South could no longer own a home, they could not find a job and they had to move to their assigned economic zone.

According to thevietnamwar.info, more than one million Northern Vietnamese migrated to the south and central regions under the Communists’ “New Economic Zone” system. It displaced an estimated 750 thousand to over more million Southern Vietnamese in forced relocations in uninhabited, mountainous and forested areas. The former South Vietnamese also had to perform hard labor in these economic zones. An estimated 20 to 155 thousand Vietnamese died during this exile, according to thevietnamwar.info.

French Journalist Jean Lacouture described these areas as “a prefabricated hell and a place one comes to only if the alternative would be death.”

“There would be discrimination, and there could be abuse,” Nguyen said. “And there was.”

Nguyen said when the Communists did not force the Vietnamese into an economic zone, they would force the survivors into reeducation camps or simply push them to the ocean.

“They don’t care that people can die [or] can get out as long as they can take over their property and their house. That’s how their policy [is],” Nguyen said. “You have no future and then you’ll die. You’ll die in reeducation camp.”

Reeducation

Education is one of the first casualties in any war and refugee Tan Trinh experienced the war as a young girl. She said school was her main priority as a child, and she remembered how schools predating the communist conquest prioritized teaching about freedom and civil rights. However, she said that from the beginning she could feel the introduction of a new system under the Communist.

“We could feel what [the old education] was saying about freedom of speech and human rights. That was when we really knew how the communists were squeezing us or [suppressing] us,” Trinh said.

Reeducation was even worse. The hundreds of Communist “reeducation camps” throughout Vietnam “were places where individuals could ‘learn about the ways of the new government’ through education and socially constructive labor,” according to thevietnamewar.info. The reeducation camps had five different divisions, with each division holding about four to five hundred people. Many of these political prisoners were often relocated from camp to camp as well.

Some Vietnamese quickly saw through the façade of reeducation. Refugee Vo Van Bang said there were some lucky people who did manage to avoid the prisons by whatever means necessary.

“There were brave people who knew that the Communists would kill them because the Communists said ‘It’s better to kill the wrong person than to leave him behind.’ So sooner or later, they would die,” Bang said. One man, Bang said, even escaped as he was marched along the road to one of the Communist bases, with hands bound behind his back.

For most Vietnamese, however, the inhumane conditions of the reeducation camps and possibility of sudden death awaited the majority of Vietnamese now under the thrall of the Communist regime. Well over a million people were forcibly interred in the camps, and Tru Dinh Tran was one among them.

Tran was a former naval commander for the Republic of Vietnam who had evacuated to Guam in April of 1975 after the collapse of the South, but he later decided to return to Vietnam like many others who missed their homeland.

“When we first found out that they permitted those of us who wanted to return to Vietnam to sign up for repatriation, I immediately decided to go back,” Tran said. “I felt miserable at that time because I had lost everything. My wife and children were still in Vietnam, If I [had] continued to America, I didn’t know what for and what I would do.”

Many of those who initially wanted to return were military personnel or civilians, Tran said. They boarded the *Vietnam Thuong Tin* and sailed from Guam back to Vietnam with Tran steering the ship.

Interrogating North Vietnamese soldiers and functionaries with heavy Northern

accents greeted them home at Vung Tau. The northern voices over the radio ordered them to head to Nha Trang, where ships from the North Vietnamese navy waited for them.

“When I boarded the Communists’ ship, I saw approximately ten people already sitting at a long table. They requested that I also took a seat. And from thence, they interrogated me,” Tran said.

Tran said the Communists were suspicious of the returning Vietnamese, fearing that they might possibly be working for the American CIA or planning sabotage.

Tran said when he disembarked from their ship, there was a caravan of covered vehicles waiting for the repatriating Vietnamese at the famed Nha Trang Stone Pier. But instead of their homes or reunions with their families, the returning South Vietnamese quickly found that their captors had other plans.

“We climbed on the trucks in small groups and they took us straight to prison from there,” he recalled. “The prison in Nha Trang.”

The camps were built on lies, he said. The Communists lied about the reasons for putting people in these camps and lied about the length of time people had to serve there.

“I didn’t pay attention to what they had to say because those words had no meaning,” Tran said. “They were the victors, so they could say anything that they wanted.”

The Communists’ stated reasons for the camps were for the reeducation of the returning Vietnamese. However, the real reasons for the camps were to punish the Vietnamese prisoners, Tran said. Those who entered reeducation were often former officers associated with the previous government, religious leaders and intellectuals.

“‘Reeducation,’ that was just their discourse, but that was not reeducation,” Tran

said. “Reeducation was just a word that they made up to fool people, but we knew for certain that there was no reeducation. They put us in prison. That was prison, not reeducation.”

The new Communist government claimed each person’s reeducation period would last a few days to a few weeks. However, many were imprisoned for several years.

“I spent a total of 13 years in prison,” Tran said. “All Army of the Republic of Vietnam officers were imprisoned in the so-called reeducation camps. They said we were brought there to be ‘reeducated’ and that we would be released once our reeducation efforts are deemed satisfactory. They always said that, but we understood that this was indefinite imprisonment. Once we entered the prison and having lived in it for a time, we knew that there would be no release day.”

Even though Tran endured the physical and mental torture of reeducation, Tran said he did not ultimately regret his decision to return to Vietnam.

Reeducation upheld the Communists’ agenda similar to that of their agricultural land reform. People who had status, property, money or other valuables fell within the Communists’ stated goals to redistribute the nation’s resources.

Nguyen Thanh Chieu—whose anticommunist sentiment grew daily from witnessing and hearing about public denunciations during their agricultural land reform and experiencing his own denunciation during his youth—experienced the brutal camps first-hand as well. He said he was sent to reeducation all because his family had “a little bit of money.”

“After we came back from the Resistance, they classified my family as *petit bourgeoisie*—class enemy,” Chieu said. “I was targeted as an example of what they were fighting against.”

Chieu said the victorious North Vietnamese officials forced him to join reeducation classes for about two weeks.

“They made me write self-reflection and acknowledge my family’s faults, and faults that I never committed in my youth,” Chieu said.

Reeducation also included hard labor that was especially onerous to the people coming from higher social status—those who the Communists, in particular, had targeted.

As a young man, Chieu said that he had never “had to suffer” the back-breaking labor of so many Vietnamese peasants.

“I never had to pretend to be a laborer who had to transport soil and rice through forests and mountains littered with mines and unexploded ordinances dropped by French airplanes,” he said.

However, he quickly learned the toils of labor during the summer months of his reeducation. Chieu said he had to learn how to perform labor and live through other difficulties that “no one can withstand.”

“I thought that my situation was unique, but later on, I met so many of my friends who were all categorized as ‘bad elements.’ All of us were in the same place,” Chieu said.

Vo Van Bang was another one of the millions of Vietnamese who suffered the physical and mental exhaustion and abuse of “reeducation.” As a former council member,

he had organized search committees to search for missing people and uncover the thousands of corpses in the mass graves at Hue after the Tet Offensive and Battle of Hue.

“I was among the first to report for reeducation after April 30th,” Bang said. “We had to report, report for reeducation. But in reality, it was prison.”

Like Chieu, Bang said the labor component of reeducation was brutal, especially for older prisoners and those who never before performed labor in the fields.

“Every day, we bled because when we cleared the bushes. We got scratches all over us. Blood was everywhere,” Bang said. “They banished people through hard labor. I was weak, so they beat me all the time.”

Bang illustrated his experience in reeducation with a poem he wrote after the experience:

Heard the penal clanging

Sprung up like a machine

Opened eyes to bitterness

The coward ox had to plow.

Bang said that the sound of the wheel imprinted in his mind. The clangs signaled that it was time for meals, sleep or work. The sound of the cold metal turned humans into something more like a machine than a human being.

“Everything was dictated by that sound,” Bang said. So when I woke up, my mind was already numb. I sprung up like a machine to follow my habits.”

Bang said that one of the most grueling experiences in reeducation was the feeling of prolonged hunger. Hunger was another level of separation from the outside world. He

said even when his wife and children came to visit, he could only stare at the bag of goods they brought for him.

“I realized that they made you lose all of your feelings, they turn you into a machine,” Bang said. “That regime starved you so that you lose your feelings, your rationale. You have to see hell to appreciate heaven.”

The experiences of reeducation do not fade into another memory. Today Bang said he sometimes dreams that he is still in reeducation, only to feel elation when he wakes up and his night terrors are not a reality.

“I am in heaven. Here.”

Similar to Chieu, Tran said he did not feel like a human while in reeducation.

“I must say that staying [in] prison alone is terrifying,” Tran said. “There was nothing [there] that allowed a person to live like a human being. I was not a human being at that time, but an animal. It was so terrible.”

Reeducation was not limited to men. The Communists targeted all members of the high social classes and political and military ranks from the previous regime, including women. Both had to endure the harsh conditions of the reeducation. Nguyen Thi Hanh Nhon was part of the Vietnamese armed forces who bravely fought for the South until 1975.

“I was group chief of the Women Soldiers division at the Air Force Headquarters at Tan Son Nhat Airbase,” Hanh Nhon said. In the South Vietnamese military, she estimated that there were more than 1,500 lieutenant colonels, but she was one of only three women.

Hanh Nhon said the officers were preparing for bed when hundreds of *Molotova* trucks came rumbling in to the base following the fall of Saigon.

“We were ordered to get in to be sent to appropriate places for education,” she said. “We later came to realize that we were in the forest, living in dingy old thatched and metal-roofed houses that needed repairing to live in while waiting for education.”

Hanh Nhon said she was supposed to report to jail for 30 days, but she spent almost five years in reeducation. One of her main duties was to clear the dense tropic rainforests where they had been banished.

“We cleared the forests with our hands,” Hanh Nhon said. “There were very big trees requiring [four or five people] to shake and pluck them loose, then haul them away on [metal] stretchers.”

Hanh Nhon said the men mostly performed the heavy work, while women cultivated fertilizer from trash and the trees’ remains to grow their food. Prisoners in reeducation worked relentlessly.

“We had to work extremely hard and we could never stay at one place for more than six or seven months,” she said. “After finishing planting, we moved to another location to prepare the soil for planting, and continued on.”

Refueling with food and water after a long day of work was not an option. Tran and Hanh Nhon said they could not have enough to eat after each day’s labor.

“We had no strength to do these tasks, but we had to do them every day,” Tran said.

Tran said what made reeducation more bearable was the companionship among the prisoners.

“Those of us in prison loved each other, took care of each other,” Tran said.

“Whoever had more shared with those who did not have anything.”

However, like Chieu, Hanh Nhon also said family members were still allowed to visit the prison. They would bring food to their relatives in reeducation about every two or three months.

“That time we could eat our fill,” Hanh Nhon said.

Both Tran and Hanh Nhon said their diets primarily consisted of a few sweet potatoes—far less than the energy that their labor required. Tran also said some people, desperate for protein, even ate insects, such as grasshoppers and crickets.

“They ate them all. When people are so hungry, they can’t think anymore,” Tran said.

Hanh Nhon recalled that even the little food the Communists allowed them was usually spoiled, rancid and often dangerously diseased.

“At meal time, there was one bowl of soup for six people, with maggots floating on top and the vegetable underneath,” Hanh Nhon said. She said they needed to eat the vegetables but also lacked water to wash off the vegetables that had been fertilized with human manure.

In one particular place, in Ham Tan, Hanh Nhon said there was no water for sanitation and not enough water for all the people. People had to shower in streams, and at first with their clothes on to avoid embarrassment. They eventually were told to wash themselves and their clothes at the same time. Moreover, the lack of sanitation also meant cleaning up after their own manure. People defecated on lots, and then had to clean it up.

“We were not allowed to use gauze masks,” Hanh Nhon said.

Hanh Nhon said one woman died in her camp. Women who were pregnant before reeducation had to give birth within the campsite. The babies had to remain in reeducation with their mother until they were 3-years-old.

Many parents also missed the development and growth of their children, who were sent and educated elsewhere. Hanh Nhon said her children were all grown after she was released in 1992.

“In 1975, the oldest was 11. When I came home,” Hanh Nhon said, “he was already in his late teens, early 20s.”

Even though their parents were the ones the Communists punished with imprisonment, the children of the prisoners also faced repercussions.

“Families of ex-South Vietnamese officers were treated differently,” Hanh Nhon said. “They tested and checked [these families] very rigorously. There were many kids who graduated from college but couldn’t do anything. So they studied for the sake of studying because there was really no future.”

Those who died during reeducation were not honored. Instead, the Communists continued their stream of lies and mental abuse.

Hanh Nhon said she heard a rumor that the husband of her friend Lt. Col. Ho Thi Ve had been beaten to death.

“They let us know that he committed suicide by cutting [his] veins,” Hanh Nhon said.

The Communists also seemed to test Hanh Nhon and her friendship with Ve, the new widow. The Communists did not inform Ve of her husband’s death, but instead told Hanh Nhon about his death one week before Hanh Nhon’s proposed release date.

“If I told her that her husband died, she must keep calm and wait until someone else informed her,” Hanh Nhon said. “I told her to pretend not knowing it and not crying, or else I would be kept longer in jail. So, she kept calm until a week later she was convened to the office and I knew what had happened. I waited for her at a tree nearby until she was staggering out from the office door. We embraced each other, crying out loud.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Fleeing the Fall: Escape Stories

The Escape of Mylene Huynh

“I remember my parents waking us up and [saying], ‘It’s time to go. We are going to go to an island,’” Huynh said.

She said before 1975, they would often take a boat trip out to an island for a weekend as a family.

“They woke us up saying, ‘Get your bathing suit, get a float and we’re going to go to an island for the weekend to celebrate dad’s return.’”

Huynh said her parents were very clever. They played along with the Communists’ restrictions. The Communists imposed a 5 a.m. curfew, and Huynh said her mother set their watches one hour ahead when they left for freedom at 4 a.m. Huynh said they then headed toward the beach and toward Pasteur Institute of Nga Trang. She said she later discovered that the flood lights surrounding and shining into the building created a blind spot on the beach where she and her family hid to avoid any patrolling Communists. From the shore there, they swam out to her uncle’s fishing boat.

“I had no fear at that time because I really thought we were going to an island,” Huynh said. “Had my parents told us that we were escaping, I would think I will be so, so scared. That moment of leaving was almost joyful until we got on the boat and went out to sea.”

Huynh said the boat was extremely small and that she remembered the seas as being uncommonly rough. She said her family escaped with two fishing boats. However,

she said on the first night one of boat's engines gave out. It was the boat that carried their water and oil supply. She said her father at one point released a flare, and the boat proceeded its way. Later, a second, larger boat, pulled up.

“They came around they said look at us and they saw that the engine was still running and they just turned around and laughed,” Huynh said. “My parents told us that we were very fortunate because it turned out that ship had a Russian Flag.”

Huynh said that if they boarded, the Russians would have known they were attempting to flee Vietnam. Instead, the family transferred all their belongings and supplies to one boat. Six nights at sea later, they arrived at the Philippines.

“We probably had angel guiding us along the way because I remember I was sick most of the time, but the moments I would not sick I would see dolphins jumping along our boats and when we got close to the Philippines,” Huynh said. “Half-way through the boat [ride], when I woke up from my sea sickness, I asked my dad, ‘Where is this island? Why is it taking so long us for us to get there?’ And he said, ‘Well, we are going to America.’ And I always had this beautiful vision of America being like paradise.”

She said her family exchanged some Vietnamese beer with fishermen who showed them the way to Manila.

“We actually [docked] our boat right in the central park of Manila, [a] couple [of] blocks on the U.S. embassy,” Huynh said.

Huynh said it really was like heaven when they arrived. She thought they had all died and went to heaven.

“I remember we were right next to the huge ship that looks like a love boat,” Huynh said. “It was just a magnificent ship, and I looked up and there [were] all these

people with beautiful gowns. There [were] all these lights and music.”

However, she and her family still faced the extreme seasickness. Her father and uncle went to look for help.

“We didn’t eat enough and probably looked very frail,” Huynh said. “My dad couldn’t walk straight because [if] you had been on boat for so long, you can’t walk straight.”

Huynh said her father stopped by a policeman. He said he was a refugee seeking refuge in the Philippines.

“They thought he was drunk,” Huynh said. “They made my dad do the alcohol straight line walk and everything. Finally, they believed us, went back to the boat and then they called the Red Cross, who brought us rice and water. And then the next day we went to the refugee camp.”

Huynh said there was never much to eat, and they only had mats to sleep on. However, she also said they did not mind. She said liked to explore the refugee camp, especially a psychiatric hospital on the grounds.

“My parents sold the boat, and they divided the money to everybody who got a little share,” Huynh said. “We used that money to buy an outfit to go to America. I still remember it—the ‘over outfit’—and everybody got a loaf of bread.”

Huynh said they landed in Honolulu, which she remembered as being particularly beautiful—the colors, the cleanliness and the order.

“My first time in a super market, it’s like you [died] and gone to heaven,” Huynh said. “There is so much food everywhere.”

From Honolulu, they flew to Virginia. She said they were met with extreme

kindness.

“The pilot of that plane actually found out that we were [refugees,] and he came back on the plane and then visited with us. And my parents still keep in touch with his family,” Huynh said. “I think we just was so lucky to [be] met by such kindness everywhere.”

Huynh said she did not speak English when she arrived in America, but her father spoke some English. She said she also went to the elementary school that was right in front of her mother’s friend’s home, where they lived in her basement.

“I remember the first day looking, peering out the window and looking across the street to see the school and seeing children in beautiful clothes,” Huynh said. “In Vietnam, as you know, we were [always] in uniform. Here is just so much color. I just remember that how beautiful that was.”

America was heaven for Huynh.

The Escape of Robert Michael Nam Nguyen

“We made a decision to leave and [to not] come back,” Nguyen said. “We relied on the grace from above to lead us to safety.”

Refugee Robert Michael Nam Nguyen fled the country during his early teen years. He said that every refugee has his or her own story.

“Mine? I was almost fourteen at that time, and we had no way to escaped unless we create a situation,” Nguyen said. “That was difficult.”

Nguyen said his escape situation was by boat. He said that after the conquest by the North, before fishermen left the dock, security would check the fuel levels and number of people aboard to discourage potential escapes.

“They only limited the amount of fuel for one day,” Nguyen said. “What we did is that we secretly [bought] fuel and [had] someone submerge the container in the ocean with [a] sinker in order to hold [down] the fuel.”

Nguyen said they also had to buy alias names from other fisherman so that they would be allowed to board the fishing boats. He said after roll call, he and other refugees set out at 5 a.m. from the beach to pick up the others.

“I was almost dead at the time because the rope of the anchor [got tied] to my foot and pulled me in the ocean,” Nguyen said.

He said when they anchored the boat at the next stop to pick up people, his father and brother jumped into the ocean to untie his foot. It seemed all would go smoothly from there.

“Unfortunately, after we picked up all the people, [we] then went to look for fuel,” Nguyen said, “the undercurrent swept it away.”

He said they had no fuel for the journey, but they could not return. He said they knew if they went back, they would be met with—at the very least—additional hardship, or—at the worst—imprisonment. If caught, they would immediately be arrested and sent to “a hard labor camp.”

“Our house will be confiscated, and [we will face] a lot of hardship afterwards,” Nguyen said.

However, hardship still met them at sea. Nguyen said that when the fuel ran out, they floated for 15 days, beset with hunger, thirst and dejection. Also without fuel, Nguyen said they would only crank up the engine when they most needed it. He said they just let the boat drift, heading closer to Malaysia. After many days, he said they were

eventually met by a ship from the United States Navy.

“They stopped, they gave us drinks and water and fuel,” Nguyen said. “They told us the direction to go to Malaysia. We let [the boat] go slowly, and finally we found a fishing boat from Malaysia and we gave them all the jewelry exchange for food, drinks and direction.”

Nguyen said they did make it to Malaysia, but the Malaysian Coast Guard pushed them away. They instead traveled to Singapore, where they were met at the docks by demands of gold before they could secure a spot. However, they did not have gold so he said they decided to return to Malaysia.

“[We] sunk the boat after we have dropped children and women to the beach,” Nguyen said. “The young men [turned] the boat around, let it go by itself and sunk the boat, [letting] it sinks slowly. That’s how we got in.”

While Nguyen and his boat made it to land, too many refugees’ stories end at the sea. Nguyen said his sister who tried to escape one year later was at sea for 30 days.

“[She] died from starvation,” Nguyen said.

The Birth of Chieu Anh Vu

Starvation, seasickness and sagging spirits are all symbols of a refugee’s journey. Their frightened uncertainty undeniably would be magnified as they sailed in search for refuge. Chieu Anh Vu’s mother’s story of her harrowing escape at sea differs from that of other refugees.

“After the fall of Saigon, my mother was in the hospital and they were trying to induce labor,” Vu said.

She said her father, meanwhile, had connections with the CIA, and tried to plan

an escape as the North Vietnamese armies neared.

“He said, ‘Let's go now. Let's go to the U.S. Embassy and try to escape by helicopter,’” Vu said.

However, Vu said the airport was bombed. She said her parents watched as their escape helicopter continued to circle around, trying to avoid the Communist guns. She said the Communists kept shooting at the helicopter so it never landed.

“Then, the communist infiltrated the U.S. Embassy,” Vu said.

Vu said her family hid in a closet. Fear filled her two-year-old brother, and Vu said her mother had to put her hand over his mouth.

“She heard the soldiers pass right by,” Vu said. “When it was safe, they went to the port and they saw a ship in the water.”

Vu said the crew took pity on her mother when they saw her belly—she was nine months pregnant. She said there was already almost four thousand people aboard the *Truong Xuan*.

“They threw a rope down,” Vu said, “and she climbed this rope to get onto this ship. She was a really, really brave woman.”

Vu said her family sailed on the ship for 15 days when the water pumps on the *Truong Xuan* failed. She said people aboard the ship sent SOS signals as water entered the ship. It was this time when Vu came into the world. She was born on a sinking ship.

“I was born on the ocean on May 2, 1975 while my parents were escaping Vietnam,” Vu said. “My birth certificate said I was born on the *SS Clara Mærsk*. It was actually the ship that came to rescue the *Truong Xuan*”

The boat and its conditions was no place for a newborn. Vu said her collarbone

was broken and her eyes were infected shut. She was even coddled too tightly. Vu said x-rays later showed that her shoulder blades were curved into a u-shape because of how tightly she was held.

“They were scared of dropping me,” Vu said. “Imagine all the people around. You can't even sit down. You have to stand. You're like sardines.”

Vu said she did not realize how important it was that she was born on a sinking ship. Her nationality and citizenship would be a hazy truth with which she said she would later have difficulty mentally processing. Vu said she was a Danish citizen by default. She said it was the Danish counsel who helped her family settle in Quebec City.

“I think my family put down the Danish stuff because there was no more nationality to the *Truong Xuan*. Imagine—it fled Vietnam,” Vu said. “It was sinking, so there would be no record of it. We had no idea that now there are so many survivors around.”

Vu said she has tried to reconnect with the survivors of the *Truong Xuan*. She said a small group of refugees still use email to stay in contact, including the captain of the ship, called Captain Sam.

“Captain Sam. He's like the glue,” Vu said. “He's 94 years old and he can still e-mail. It's fantastic.”

The Escape of Wendy Tuyet Tougher

“I remember him saying, ‘Go to the ocean.’”

Refugee Wendy Tuyet Tougher said her grandfather thought they had a better chance of survival if they fled Vietnam. As the country collapsed under a new regime, Tougher and her sought the sea.

“He took a chance, and he asked his godson, who had a little fishing boat, ‘Could you do me a favor? If my daughter and her family show up, just take them,’” Tougher said.

On the appointed hour, Tough said her grandfather stayed behind as the war was coming to end, shouting at her and her mother to meet his godson at his boat. Tougher said her mother took off running, and she and her siblings had to fight to hold, to avoid getting lost through the screaming, shouting crowds of people.

“The ocean’s where they’re running to, there was just people running, running, running,” Tougher said. “We get to the ocean and of course there is no line, there is no one telling you what to do, where to go.”

Tougher said she did not know how to swim and was afraid of drowning. However, her fear of staying behind was greater.

“I just said, ‘I got to go. Go to the boat,’” Tougher recalled. “I go treading out there feeling like I was [going to] drown. Someone grabs me, yanks me up and down and throws me on the side of the boat. I’m hanging on, and eventually we get on a boat.”

Tougher said she and the other panicked refugees crammed into the boat. She said she was certain the boat’s capacity was about ten people.

“We ended up with more people, and he couldn’t turn them away. They were hanging on and climbing on,” Tougher said.

Tougher said her family fled without a plan, like many of the hundreds of thousands of refugees stunned by the chaos of the fall. They boarded without shoes and only with the clothes that hung on their bodies.

“There was no water, no food, a lot of sea sickness,” Tougher said. “Eventually

we went out and they were still shooting, and hand grenades were thrown out and you could see it all around you.”

Tougher said along with her little boat, there were many other tightly packed boats that fled the shore. She said some capsized. Tougher sat atop the tiny boat, watching the war end in their fishing village.

“We went out to the point where it was safe from the shooting, so I felt a sense of relief,” Tougher said. “The noise was behind us, but then it was the next phase of how to survive the ocean. You know, the ocean looks so beautiful when you look out from the shore. But it’s tremendous when you’re out there, and it’s just endless. And the motion, and the sickness, and the sun, and there was no coverage and it was so scary.”

Tougher said they floated out in the open ocean for what seemed like three days. First came the thirst that would never leave her memories. She said her thirst was so great it was able to quench her hunger.

“Eventually, your body just becomes weak and your stomach becomes numb and you don’t feel hungry anymore other than the weakness and other than just breathing and sitting up was an effort.

“But when you’re thirsty, that feeling of hunger goes away. But when you’re thirsty, *that* feeling just never goes away,” Tougher said. “I am always afraid of being thirsty now.

“I did a lot of praying. Sometimes I thought, ‘This is it,’” Tougher said. “But, eventually there was a U.S. ship that came.”

Tougher said she remembers looking up at the ship, amazed at its enormity. However—with fear instilled—she said she was also afraid as she first watched it

approach from afar.

“I wasn’t sure if they were a friendly ship or if they were there to hurt us,” Tougher said. “I was very worried and I kept on looking around to make sure that the adults were happy, because if the adults were happy that would be good news.”

Tougher said she also feared that the ship would turn away, leaving them abandoned in the ocean once again.

“But they picked us up, and once we got on that big ship [I saw that], there were even more Vietnamese people on there,” Tougher said.

She said they were in the same situation as her, “little boats floating all over the ocean.” Tougher said the ship continued to pick up stranded people.

“Then we landed. We arrived at a harbor,” Tougher said. “The worst is over. We were safe. We will live now.”

Tougher landed in Guam at Gab Gab Beach, where they then proceeded to temporarily settle in what was called Tent City. Tougher said it was the first time she felt safe because she could eat twice a day.

“We stood in long lines in the sun, but twice a day I could eat,” Tougher said, “and that was a lot better than where I came from where every day it was thinking on how to outsmart someone, how to snatch and run. Standing in line was no big deal at all. So, twice a day we got to eat and life was very carefree.”

Tougher said her family actually thought they landed in America. Tent City had more than a fleeting feeling of refuge.

“Though the tents were, in my mind now, were flimsy. It was really permanent for us. It was pretty permanent. You know, sturdy. The living condition was great. I

didn't have shoes, but my feet were really tough back then, and we stood in line twice a day to eat.”

Tougher said they attended mass every day and continued to gratefully stand in the camp lines for all of the necessities of life. She said eventually they would walk along Gab Gab beach. They would play.

“I think for the first time in my memory, life was young and carefree,” Tougher said. “So that was a good thing, [my grandfather] thought of us.”

More on Guam

Wendy Tuyet Tougher was one of the 130,000 refugees who evacuated to Guam from the end of April to the beginning of November of 1975. Masses of refugees arrived by plane or boat at Anderson Air Force base, were processed through Orote Point and assigned to various camps through Operation Baby Lift and Operation New Life.

Raymond Baza was one of the influential leaders in the evacuation of and processing of incoming Vietnamese refugees in Guam. Baza said that in April of 1975, he was working with naval security forces in the Pacific.

“Admiral Morrison at that time pulled me off from my work and asked me to be the head personnel for the incoming over ten thousand Vietnamese refugees on the island,” Baza said. “They called it ‘Operation New Life.’”

Baza said Governor of Guam Ricky Bordallo, and First Lady Madeleine Bordallo, showed extreme generosity, kindness and humility to the exhausted refugees. While many countries and states turned them away, the Bordallos accepted the refugees who had fled their fallen homeland.

“They are the first [governors] that opened their arms for the refugees to come to the island,” Baza said. “The fluctuation of incoming [refugees was] so tremendous. People crying, people want to be hugged, kids just want to be [held].”

Retired Navy Captain Richard Whitenbach-Santos said other governors and even cities and states in the mainland had actually refused to accept the refugees. However, Guam wanted to help. According to Whitenbach-Santos, Guam always said yes.

“The governor of Guam says, ‘I welcome it,’ Whitenbach-Santos said. “So they just piled up here.

“The main thing we were proud of was that Guam always said yes, even the business men, all the construction companies, everything,” Whitenbach Santos said. “The volunteers were unbelievable: the teachers, the catholic church, the social services. Everybody wanted to help.”

Whitenbach-Santos said they were initially expecting only five to 10 thousand refugees. However, he said they received 50 thousand refugees, and an additional 132 thousand refugees arrived in the following months. Whitenbach-Santos said the sheer number of refugees actually outnumbered the amount of local people—about 75 thousand—and military personal—about 10 thousand—present in Guam at the time.

“They were exhausted,” Whitenbach-Santos said.

Whitenbach-Santos also personally sponsored a refugee and his two daughters. He said his refugee was in the field for six months before boarding a ship and sailing the ocean for about 10 days.

“On the ship, they took away his cigarette lighter, which he had kept since 1954. His souvenir lighter. They took away the lighter, and he never got it back,” Whitenbach-

Santos said. “He’s lost a war he’s been fighting since 1954. He’s from Hanoi, and he had moved down in 1954. He’s got that emotional devastation. His favorite little article’s taken away. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen to the two girls. He’s in shock.”

Whitenbach-Santos said his two young Vietnamese girls also had major psychological problems. When threatened, uncertain or frightened, he said they would go into a catatonic stage, shaking

“The impact of a war, whether you win or lose it, is forever,” Whitenbach-Santos said.

While Guam offered the refugees comfort and freedom from the war and trauma they faced in their homeland, the camps were not free of problems. According to Whitenbach-Santos, there were technical issues of varying magnitude and even crisis-like situations.

“We discovered that one old man was starving because he had a suitcase that he would not leave, and so he would not go get food.” Whitenbach-Santos said.

In response to cases like this, Whitenbach-Santos initiated projects such as developing a “Vietnamese Boy Scouts” within the camp to help serve the elders and a bank system for the refugees. Many other activities and projects were pioneered in camp to help the refugees readjust to a new life. Whitenbach-Santos also said people and organizations from all over the United States also provided various forms of aid to the camps and refugees. For example, the camp had an overflow of donated chopsticks.

“The Admiral had a press conference every day and mentioned we’re short on chopsticks,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “Chopsticks come in from all over the nation. We had way too many chopsticks.”

Pastor of San Juan Bautista Church in Guam, Monsignor David I.A. Quitugua, was another leader who was involved with caring for the refugees. Quitugua said he helped settle and sponsor about three to four thousand families and unaccompanied children coming through Orote Point.

“It was like a hurricane. It was like a typhoon. It was like a tsunami,” Quitugua said. “All of a sudden, we had thousands of people coming.”

Whitenbach-Santos said the military worked intensely to help organize and prepare camps for the mass of incoming refugees.

“The Marines renovated the wooden buildings at camp Asan,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “They would be cleaning out the building as the buses came to the other end of the building. That’s how fast it was.”

Whitenbach-Santos said the Army also joined the Marines in the effort to help prepare a camp known as Tent City.

“They could put up those huge tents in only 15 minutes each,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “We’d just put a whole city there.”

According to Baza, the military was actually able to prepare Tent City for the thousands of refugees in only a single day.

Baza said when the refugees arrive, they were welcomed with food, clothing, a place to sleep and other amenities that would finally allow them to re-experience comfort. He said he processed over seven thousand Vietnamese families. He moved them to Orote Point, to Camp Asan and some to Tumon Heights.

“When I first experienced the incoming fluctuation of refugees—mothers, fathers, children, babies that are taken care of by their families—they really graced me and

hugged me and said, ‘Thank you for my freedom,’” Baza said. “Their state of mind is they just want to be free. They just want to be welcome in a new country, on a new island. To be treated the same as we treat others because their country is lost. When you lose a country you lose part of your life.

“They brought clothes [and] anything valuable to buy their life, their freedom.” Baza said. “I said, ‘You don’t need any money for freedom. Keep what [you’ve]got.’

“I said, ‘That is yours. You left your country with this, get yourself something to live your life.’”

The 130 thousand refugees had the opportunity for a new life starting in the camp. However, Baza said he also buried about four thousand lives during Operation New Life, about ten of those lives belonging to children.

Baza said the first group of refugees actually came through Operation Baby Lift.

“Baby Lift is all about the younger infants no more than 10-years-old who [came] to the island first because of lack of nutrition, hunger, sickness,” Baza said. “Sometimes they [had] malaria.”

Baza said after processing, the young refugees were sent straight to the Navy Hospital or the Guam Memorial Hospital where doctors, nurses and volunteers could help aid the newborns and the infants arriving on the island. Baza said the operation allowed all the professional medical staff on the island to focus on the children.

“They came in wrapped [only] with cloths,” Baza said.

Baza said the most difficult case during Operation Baby Lift was a baby who arrived nearly lifeless. He said the infant did not survive an hour.

“Right then, I volunteered to go and have it buried at the Navy Cemetery at that

time,” Baza said. “This is my second time to see an infant that critical to die.”

Baza said out of the 500 or 600 unaccompanied refugee infants who arrived in his care, he remembers about eight babies who died.

“The worst experience that I encountered is children, infants,” Baza said. “They are so hungry and [malnourished.] You can pick up an infant with one hand. When they depart Vietnam in boats for 21 days on the ocean, you’re starving, you’re thirsty. There’s nothing to eat because people are so crowded on that boat.”

Baza said the babies’ plight especially moves him because kids cannot speak. He said they are not able to voice their wants.

“They’re in pain, but we cannot feel their pain,” Baza said. “That really, really hurts me.”

Baza said these experiences are the sources of his nightmares. He said he must constantly remind himself that the babies who pass away no longer need to endure the pain. At the same time, the children from Operation Baby Lift who survived were also the people who most encouraged him to continue serving. Baza said the best thing that has ever happened in his life is the sight, feeling and experience of kids running to express their gratitude.

“I have so many kids come to me and say, ‘Thank you. Thank you for my freedom,’” Baza said. “It really touches me because they needed help, and we helped them. They needed love, we [gave it to] them. They needed shelter, give shelter. They’re hungry, we fed them.”

Quitugua served as a social worker who helped children who came without parents, mothers or fathers and was intimately involved in processing and settling them,

including processing prospective parents for them. And like Baza, Quitugua said that these now-orphaned children faced the greatest issues and challenges.

“Their parents were left in Vietnam,” Quitugua said. “[Whenever you] could escape, and if you are a neighbor and you know a child being left behind, you just take that child.”

Quitugua said one of his social workers even took a child home. He said they cared for him as if he was their own. The refugee child eventually attended college, completed a graduate degree and married in the United States.

“This child was really taken care of,” Quitugua said. “He thinks he is the natural son of this family, [he] never thought himself as a refugee. That’s one of the many success stories.”

Quitugua said one of the greatest difficulties the refugees experienced was the uncertainty. He said they had to think about whether or not they will have food to eat tomorrow, find shelter or if they would find work. He said they were not only displaced physically they also lost a sense a time.

“It’s constantly thinking about not only themselves for survival but also for their family that they left behind,” Quitugua said. ““Are they dead or when am I going to see them? Am I going to see them sometime?””

Quitugua said one way the refugees coped was by attending mass. He said that it was in that setting that they would be able to gather together, support and help each other.

“And sometimes they’re so busy, too, [that] they don’t think much of homesickness,” Quitugua said. “They just want to survive. That really helped them, too.”

Still, he also said once in a while they may think about their families left behind or remember some of the atrocities perpetuated by the victorious Communist forces and their administrators.

“It’s really the hardest thing,” Quitugua said.

The Escape of Tru Dinh Tran

Refugee Tru Dinh Tran is another one of the tens of thousands of refugees who evacuated Saigon on April 30, 1975, and headed towards Guam. Tran was a deputy commander of a South Vietnamese coastal region based in Nam Can-Ca Mau during that time. He said on that day, he heard General Duong Van Minh announce the surrender and cease fire. Saigon had fallen.

“Of course, everyone was astonished. No one could believe how quickly it happened,” Tran said. “And at that moment, I was very sad and distraught.”

Tran also said it was a very chaotic time. His unit could not contact Saigon, so he said he left Ca Mau to check on the situation in Saigon.

“I wanted to return to my post, [but] there was no means to do so,” Tran said. “Things were very urgent, and I followed the ships out to sea and headed to Guam.”

Tran said he left with a Vietnamese naval fleet consisting of about 30 to 40 ships, and he said each vessel had several thousand people on it. Tran said he was no longer a commander, but a passenger aboard *HQ800*.

“Departing from the Saigon Harbor and entering the open sea, all those ships were full of evacuees,” he recalled. “Each vessel had several thousand people on it.”

Similar to the tens of thousands of other refugees who evacuated in the heat of the moment, Tran said he left alone. He left without his family. He said his children and wife

were still in Nam Can.

“So my state of mind was hopeless, depressed. I didn’t know what was going to happen,” Tran said.

Tran said that each ship only received one order, to go out to sea. Not even the officers or crew knew a subsequent plan.

“At that time, everyone on board knew that we had to leave, but no one knew where to,” Tran said. “We lived in uncertainty. No one said anything about where we would go and what we would do. All we knew was that the Communists came and everyone was afraid and climbed aboard to leave.”

Tran said the Vietnamese naval fleet traveled to Con Son Island, leaving behind Vietnamese waters the following day. He said the American naval ships guided them as the fleet followed the American vessels to Subic Bay.

“At that time, there was no other vessel at sea,” Tran said. “When the fleet left Vietnamese waters and headed further out to sea, no ship was visible. Nothing was visible, only the naval ships that were tailing each other.”

Tran said the journey to Subic Bay in the Philippines lasted about four or five days. Tran said during this time, the Americans held the responsibility and the care of the small armada of refugees.

“Any vessel entering Filipino waters must have permission and the way that we left, we obviously didn’t have any permission,” Tran said. “We were just following the Americans. The Americans were in charge of the fleet. That was the truth.”

Tran also said while they were in the Philippines, the Americans ordered all the Vietnamese vessels to take down their flags. Only then were they allowed to enter into

Filipino waters.

“Of course that was a painful moment for those of us who have lost everything, our flag, and our country,” Tran said.

Moreover, Tran said the majority of Vietnamese military onboard took their uniforms off.

“They took off their lapels, their hats, everything,” Tran said.

Tran said once the refugees reached Subic Bay in the Philippines, they were then transferred to American freighters that would take them to Guam. Tran said the journey from the Philippines to Guam took another six or seven days.

“In Guam, we disembarked the ships and entered the refugee camp at Orote Point.”

Tran said he had previously visit Guam to study or work abroad. He said that was always an honor.

“Now, coming as a refugee, in the position of a refugee who had lost everything, I felt very downtrodden and very sad,” Tran said.

However, Tran said Guam welcomed them. He said people greeted them with good hearts and good intentions.

“They took care of us in every aspect and did nothing to cause us to feel sad because of them,” Tran said.

Tran said he stayed in the refugee camp for nearly six months. While it was meant to be a place of refuge, Tran said he was still miserable.

“I had lost everything,” Tran said. “My wife and children were still in Vietnam. My house and everything that I owned I lost. If I continued to America, I didn’t know

what for and what I would do. I also didn't know how I would work and for whom. I had no desire to live a lonely life while my wife and children were stuck in Vietnam.

“During that entire time, I also thought about a lot of things,” Tran said. “When we first found out that they permitted those of us who wanted to return to Vietnam to sign up for repatriation, I immediately decided to go back.”

Tran said he decided to return even though he knew he would be returning to a possible death or imprisonment.

“I understood the Communists well,” Tran said. “But at that time, I was so hopeless, and I didn't have faith in anything else. I decided that even if I might die, I would still return.”

Tran said he also felt that the Americans had abandoned South Vietnam. He did not see purpose in pursuing an American life.

“I clearly saw that it was senseless, completely senseless. That was the reason why I decided to return,” Tran said.

Tran said that the refugee camp had daily flights to other refugee camps in the United States. However, after a couple of months, they offered flights to other places other than the U.S., including Vietnam. Many refugees signed up to go back. This was only the beginning of a long repatriation process. It also required a middleman, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), or the UN Refugee Agency.

“After we signed up to return, the UNHCR handled us, only those who wanted to return,” he said. “Their goal was to establish contact with Vietnam to ask for permission for us to return. And they had to wait until the Vietnamese side agreed before they could let us go.”

Tran said the waiting period took a very long time. He said those who wanted to return were left wondering; they did not want to continue onto the next destinations but to return home. They grew restless and strikes and protests occurred.

“Those who were interested in returning got together and protested, organized protests, and demanded that they be taken back to Vietnam—the sooner the better,” Tran said. “These protests, these strategies finally led to the U.S. government’s decision to provide the returnees the *Vietnam Thuong*.”

Tran said the sign-up list initially had four to five thousand names listed. However, Tran said 1,652 people returned in the end. He said many people became depressed and hopeless during the repatriation process.

“Many people waited for so long that they gave up wanting to return, so they went on [to resettlement],” Tran said. “In some cases, people changed their minds at the last minute. If we had been permitted to return right away, more people would have done so.”

Tran said an American navy admiral advised them many times not to return to their country. He said they knew the Vietnamese Communists had not yet said they would allow them to return and that returning too soon would endanger their lives. Tran also said the UNHCR officials advised the refugees not to return.

“The U.S. government was willing to help the potential returnees find opportunities to rebuild their lives in the U.S.,” Tran said.

Guam also wanted to support the refugees in rebuilding their lives. Tran said Governor Bordallo and his wife personally promised they would assist the refugees on all fronts during their time in Guam.

“We understood the good intentions of those advices and appreciated their

kindness, but in our minds, the majority of us did not change our minds because we had lost our family, our wives and children, our homeland,” Tran said. “All we wanted to do was to return. Those advices didn’t really have any impact on us.”

Tran said the Americans were very accommodating to whatever decisions the refugees made.

“The refugees wanted to return, the Americans let them return,” Tran said. “The refugees changed their mind and wanted to resettle, the Americans also let them resettle.”

In the end, Tran boarded the *Vietnam Truong*. Many people actually came to the harbor for a farewell. However, the Bordallos did tell those who were returning to Vietnam that if he and his crew decided to return to Guam, the locals would be willing to help.

After returning to Vietnamese shores, Tran would head straight to reeducation. Still, despite the hardships that would follow, Tran said he did not regret returning to his country.

The Escape of Nam Loc Nguyen

Other Vietnamese refugees also arrived in their various destinations after fleeing Vietnam with feelings of extreme loneliness, anger, continued uncertainty and daily worry for their families left behind in the Fall. One refugee even began serving in his camp to prolong his stay, hoping to reunite with his family.

Refugee Nam Loc Nguyen said he was in the first wave of refugees to come to the United States after the fall in April of 1975. Nguyen said he was a reporter working for the Vietnamese Air Force. He said he was not actually on the list of people eligible to evacuate because he was in the military. However, Nguyen said in the last moment he

was able to get out through Clark Air Base while his family, who was supposed to be evacuated because his sister worked for the U.S. government, was tragically left behind.

“I actually arrived in Camp Pendleton the first week of May, and I remained in the camp until the camp closed, which is October 31st,” Nguyen said. “I arrived in the camp unexpected that [it was] only me, and I still [hoped] that my family somehow [got out.]”

Nguyen said he was also one of the last refugees who left the temporary camp at Pendleton when it was shut down. He said asked the camp commander for permission to stay, and he was granted it on the condition he volunteer to help other refugees during his time there.

“Number one, I’m so lonely and worried about my family,” Nguyen said, “and number two, I just don’t want to get out of camp. I want to be with my people, hopefully to join my family.”

Camp Pendleton offered a contrast to the confusion, cries and chaos the refugees had become accustomed to on their journey. Nguyen said the camp was well organized and the Marines welcomed them.

“[They were] serving [refugees] with the love and dignity,” Nguyen said. “But [it was] still very difficult to heal the wound that we [had] at that time.”

For Nguyen and many other refugees, the organized conditions of the camp and the open arms of the Marines did not replace all of their losses. Nguyen said there was no joy at all among the recent refugees. He said many people were lonely, confused, hopeless and angry. Nguyen said he actually grew increasingly angry as he ruminated on the evacuation plan.

“I don’t mind for those who have been evacuated and on the list of high [ranking officers] or [had] close contact with the U.S. government,” Nguyen said. “What about regular people like me, like my friend, like my people over there? How [is] their life is going to be filled when the Communists [take] over? What about my coworker and my teammate? The soldier that we fought alongside?”

Nguyen said he looked for his family members every day. He said he looked for a future every day. He found neither in the camp.

“My [feelings were] so painful,” Nguyen said. “I even wrote a song, the song [is titled] *Farewell Saigon*.”

Nguyen said he completed the song when he was in the camp. He said he wrote that song for himself, for his country and for the city where he lived. Nguyen said it suddenly became a well-known song among the refugee community.

“I have no idea that a lot of people feel the same way,” Nguyen said. “The pain that I have, the [anger] that I have, the love that I have for my country, and the [longing] that I have [for] my family [helped] me to create that song.”

CHAPTER FIVE

After the War: Assimilation and Americans' Perspective

Nearly two million refugees from Vietnam resettled in other areas of the world within 20 years after the fall of Saigon. In many cases, their feelings of uncertainty and loss that haunted their journey are still raw and sometimes frightening, and many emotions still linger today. Now, decades after the chaos of the war and their flight, many of these same refugees are able to reflect on the same pain, anger and sorrow refugee Nam Loc Nguyen felt.

However, their new-found freedom, a successful resettlement and the rare opportunity to rebuild their lives after the war would also bring stories of success and celebration. The difficult storyline of refugees' journeys continues today, but many choose to focus on gratitude, rediscovered joy, assimilation and merged cultures in America and around the world. They have added to the melting pot of America (and on Guam as well); they contribute to the economy, culture, the arts, religious expression and philanthropy. Many Vietnamese have seen success, which many military personnel involved in the Vietnam war also perceive as a success for America.

"I am a Vietnamese American," refugee Mylene Huynh said. Huynh said she views herself and other Vietnamese Americans as a cherry blossom tree.

"The cherry blossom trees were a gift from the Japanese government to America, and they are now planted on American soil," Huynh said. "We came from Vietnam, but we are planted here in America."

Huynh said people view cherry blossom trees as both American and Japanese. Likewise, she is both Vietnamese and American.

“I think we carry a bit of Vietnam wherever we go, and I don’t think Vietnam is actually a place,” Huynh said. “It’s actually us, all of us here.”

Vietnamese Refugees’ thoughts about the war and their home country

While the refugees have resided in the U.S. and other areas for nearly four decades, many still hold precious memories of, longing for and empathy for their old homeland.

Refugee Nam Nguyen said after resettling in America, he was often homesick. Nguyen said he spent most of his time alone when he was not teaching high school students.

“During the free periods, I went to the library and read documents about Vietnam,” Nguyen said, “and I cried a lot.”

From what he read and accounts from other escapees, Nguyen said he found that his beloved country had become a dark and dangerous place.

On the surface, present-day Vietnam bears little resemblance with the oppressive, war-torn country of the 1960s and early ‘70s. Retired Associated Press correspondent Richard Pyle said Vietnam today has a booming economy. While the scars of war are diminishing, they still exist. Pyle said Vietnam today is more than what people would have anticipated.

“They have tolerated a lot of deprivation, discomfort and political repression,” Pyle said. “The most amazing thing about Vietnam today is that if you go to Saigon and look around, you wouldn’t know this [is] a Communist country.”

However, Pyle also said there is still some deception in how Vietnam is today. For example, he said people are still unable to speak their mind.

Nguyen said his generation is often concerned with a country's destiny, and many refugees today are particularly concerned with Vietnam's political conditions. He also said the form of government does not matter if there is respect for and freedom given to the people because, he says, a corrupt, autocratic government and its officers make people miserable.

"Everyone wants the country to be restored again," Nguyen said, where people can contribute in building the country. However, he says, he sees that this is an obstacle for Vietnam.

Refugee Nguyen Thi Hanh Nhon's hope is that one day the people in Vietnam could live in freedom and democracy and that the young ones could help rebuild the country.

"Now the country [is] divided and disintegrated," Hanh Nhon said.

For refugee Nam Loc Nguyen, he said his one wish is to be able to return to his country both the democracy and freedom he said he enjoys in the United States.

"Freedom of speech, freedom [to] exercise their rights, freedom of choosing their leader and [being able to] live like the rest of the world," Loc Nguyen said. "That is how I wish I'll be able to go back and live in my country, with my people and with original Vietnamese who love freedom, who love democracy who love the human rights and who can speak for their rights."

Refugee Tan Trinh says the people there seem to have freedom, but they do not realize that the government still has control over many areas of life, including media and the news.

“That is not freedom of speech,” Trinh said. “I still feel and I can still see that the people there do not know what freedom of speech is.”

Trinh said she would endure her dangerous journey to escape to freedom all over again. The only regret she said she had leaving Saigon was leaving her family behind.

“I missed my parents, my family,” Trinh said. She said she could have never imagined never being able to see her father again after their last farewell before she fled Saigon.

“And I missed the old times,” Trinh said, “the time prior to ‘75. How I was a teen and how I had nothing to worry about.”

Some refugees understand that the events leading up to ‘75 were necessary. Loc Nguyen said he never wanted a war. However, he also said it was necessary to protect and defend their freedom. He said those who wanted or advocated to stop the war were naïve.

“They have no idea either they are Communist or they are a Communist supporter.” Loc Nguyen said. “They didn’t know that the U.S. and the Vietnamese fight alongside just [to] protect their freedom.”

Loc Nguyen said many people who at first supported stopping the war regretted their initial position. Military journalist Marc Yablonka is one American whose views changed. Yablonka said when he first heard about the Vietnam War as a 15-year-old, he

developed an anti-war stance. He said his anti-war sentiment continued to be molded through college by his professors and others with strong “left-wing” views.

“I was against the war from what I read,” Yablonka said. “I considered myself a pacifist. I was all against violence. I now realize, as a 63-year-old man, that I had taken the wrong stance.”

After getting to know people who served in Vietnam and refugees who lived through the war, Yablonka said he now feels the cause was noble. He said he now has a greater understanding of the Vietnamese people and their experiences, and he believes they suffered the most during the war.

Today, Hanh Nhon said she always reminds her children and grandchildren that their country was Vietnam, “on the other side of the Pacific where people were suffering.”

“They should always remember the poor people living there,” Hanh Nhon said.

Many refugees also recognize the importance of Vietnam’s rich history and culture even being settled elsewhere in the world. They have not forgotten the conflict, violence and life with the Communists. Many refugees still encourage their children and even grandchildren to continue seeking their Vietnamese culture and understand their roots.

While Chieu An Vu did not grow up Vietnam—she was born on a boat during her parent’s escape—she said she still understands the sacrifice her mother and father made for her to have freedom. Years later, Vu said she was able to visit Vietnam with her mother.

“It's not the same anymore, of course. Nothing is left like it was, but I got to see where she grew up, where she went to school,” Vu said. “It was so nice to see that—a part of her that I didn't know about. I realize how much she sacrificed.”

Vu said both her parents suffered for their freedom as a family. She said she and perhaps other second generation Vietnamese now take their lives in America for granted. She wants people to remember their parents' journeys—as well as the war.

“We can't forget how many people sacrificed,” Vu said. “People in Vietnam or the U.S. soldiers, anyone who helped with the war, and what the price was for freedom. Just live your life to the fullest and appreciate that and to remember those that we left behind, too.”

After experiencing the war and seeing the suffering all wars create, refugee and physician in the Air Force Colonel Mylene Huynh said all she desires is peace. She said many people—not only Vietnamese—have experienced war, conflict and their compounding conditions in some form.

“We saw war in Afghanistan, in Iraq, for so many years. I've seen the suffering of war,” Huynh said. “For my patients [and doctors] who are not military, they don't wear the uniform they are civilian. I always tell them that they don't have to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq to see the conflict and war because in medicine the war comes home. They see the suffering every day in the clinic, in our troops, so if we see that why wouldn't want to strive for peace. So, I just want peace.”

Just as Huynh desires peace, refugee Vo Van Bang said he has found peace after the war in the America. Bang said the memories that he has kept in his mind have already passed. He said he is happy and fortunate here, in America.

“Perhaps at the age of 75, life is impermanent, but my center force is being at peace with my mind,” Bang said. “In the beginning when I came to the U.S., I missed my homeland very much, perhaps because I’m so emotionally bounded to my homeland. However, eventually, as I slowly entered this society, the American society, I see how wonderful it is. Finding it wonderful does not mean that I lose my homeland. I am not stateless. What’s wonderful is that in the U.S.—a multicultural, multinational, and multiethnic country—I don’t need to miss my homeland. I brought my homeland with me.”

Life after Refuge

“It was hard to grow up in between two worlds,” Chieu Anh Vu said. “Imagine—my mother had to start her life again. My father had to start his life again.”

However, Vu said that growing up between her parents’ Vietnamese traditions and the American life that she now only knew has made her a stronger person. Vu did not grow up in Vietnam. Rather, she was born in the midst of her parents’ transition to American.

“I feel like a bold person,” Vu said. “I’m a survivor and it helped me overcome many obstacles in my life.”

Vu said not belong to only one cultural group has even helped her take more risks in business.

“I don’t fit in anyways, so I might as well go for it, right?” Vu said.

Vu said she had difficulty fitting in at school when she was younger, and the costs of her education was another struggle for the family. She said she did not think she was the best in school. Still, she strived to be the best.

“I had to work so hard, and at the end I ended up with 10 different scholarships,” Vu said. “I got a gold symbol from Parson's School of Design in New York.”

Vu's successful educational career, launched her into an even more successful vocational career. Vu has worked with couture brands and participated with other fashion projects. She launched her own fashion brand and travels the world dressing celebrities. Vu also said she enjoys doing charity work even more.

“I feel like if I can use my background and my talents, maybe I can help raise up more money and just give back to the community and I think that's just really important,” Vu said.

Vu especially focuses on the younger generation of Vietnamese. She said she tells Vietnamese American girls that it is OK to be both Vietnamese and American.

“You have a voice, use it,” Vu said. “I'm proud to be Vietnamese. Whether it's Vietnamese Canadian, Danish, or American. Whatever it is, I'm proud to be Vietnamese.”

Refugee Nguyen Thi Hanh Nhon said she also encourages her children and grandchildren to remember their Vietnamese roots.

“[The younger generation's] parents knew how to teach them to follow [the proper customs and traditions,]” Hanh Nhon said. “But we had to adapt to the traditions and habits of this country. They were bilingual, so they realized that they [are also] Vietnamese and they should maintain the culture of Vietnam.”

Hanh Nhon said one wish she has for Vietnamese and American children today is to learn the truth of Vietnam.

“I felt sad that the Americans did not know that a lot of memoirs written by the Vietcong were introduced to the schools, so the students learned from those history

distortions,” Hanh Nhon said. “I therefore wished to have this chance to introduce the translations of the correct memoirs to teach the students about the true history of Vietnam, to make them feel proud of the Vietnamese, intelligent and brave, whose parents and grandparents were good and talented soldiers who had contributed greatly to their country.”

Refugee Mylene Huynh and her family are among the thousands who have contributed both to Vietnam and America. Huynh said her father served in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam as a physician and her mother was a pharmacist. Once resettled in the United States, her family worked hard and continued their education to rebuild their lives. Huynh said her father studied for the medical exam while working night shifts at K-Mart. She said her mother did not restudy for her pharmacy degree but received a medical technician degree instead.

Today, Huynh is a physician and a colonel in the United States Air Force, and she also encourages her sons to serve the country. However, Huynh said service does not only have to be through the military. She said people can contribute in many different ways.

“Serve in some way to give back to this country,” Huynh said. “I think freedom is so precious that we have to figure out a way to continue to protect it.”

Huynh said she is not only proud of what Vietnamese Americans have accomplished but what Vietnamese all over the world have been able to do.

“When I read reports about Vietnamese Australian, Vietnamese Canadian, Vietnamese—they are doing such great things,” Huynh said. “And we are all connected through our roots.”

Huynh also encourages people to not forget where their opportunity originated. She said Vietnamese today cannot forget the sacrifices their parents made for them to have freedom today.

“Wherever we are we have [become] very successful, and that’s through our work and then of all the sacrifices our parents have made for us,” Huynh said. “I always say live life in a way that you embrace liberty in pursuit of happiness. That’s the American way.”

Nam Nguyen is another refugee who continually gives back. Nguyen works today as a professor at the University of Houston while serving his church and the Vietnamese community in the Houston area. He also volunteers as a social worker with a non-profit organization to help Vietnamese from disadvantaged backgrounds. Nguyen said the reason he continues to work so hard is because he has received a lot.

One of Nguyen’s role models was his father, who is “a very special person.” Nguyen said his father was a dedicated man who generously and deeply cared for people.

“I remember when I was very young, he built a house for us to live in,” Nguyen recalled, “and he built a small one next to it.”

Nguyen asked his father why he built a second home. His father replied that it was for travelers passing through: “If they don’t have any place to stay, they can stay.”

Besides working, Nam said his father spent all his remaining time serving for the church.

Nguyen said he still tries to live by his father’s example. “But I’m far behind.”

Refugee Wendy Tuyet Tougher is another refugee with deep gratitude for her life in American and who encourages her children to contribute and give back to America—

just as many other refugees have also stressed to the younger generations of Vietnamese-Americans.

“I tell [my children] to make [America] as good as you can,” Tougher said. “It’s your country, and it’s going to be your children’s country. Vietnam was my country, and I want it. You’ll always love your country. You always want the best. I tell them to contribute most of all in life. Always contribute into the world that we live in. If you’re [going to] take, make sure you give back more than you take. Just mostly to work hard. Try hard and keep on trying.”

Tougher said when she rebuilt her life in American, it was hard. Education was an obstacle she had to overcome to pursue a better life. Tougher thought the reason why her siblings and family lived in poverty in Vietnam was because of their lack of education.

“I thought going to school was like a magic wand and if you didn’t go to school, you’d live in poverty, like the way we did,” Tougher said, “and if you *did* go to school, then you could at least help yourself and have something to eat and not live in poverty.”

Tougher said she thought she did not have a choice whether to attend school or not once she was in America.

“I didn’t know that in America, you could still get a job even if you didn’t have a college degree,” Tougher said. “That you could still provide for yourself and take care of yourself. For me, it was just that black and white. I never want my life to be that horrible and desperate again.”

Although funding an education and completing the requirements for admission was another obstacle, it was not a choice for her to not continue her education. She said she had to figure it out.

“It was just like breathing, in and out, in and out,” Tougher said. “You got to go to school.”

The Vietnamese refugees who settled in America and other areas of the learned the customs of their new country. They also strived to maintain their Vietnamese roots and identify as Vietnamese-American. However, American assimilation and maintaining their Vietnamese culture was not always easy. They had to learn by hard experience.

Refugee Vinh Nguyen said one of the greatest challenges was living with constrained financial circumstances. Nguyen said he first worked as a laborer, assembling windows and doors for a manufacturing company. He said his family did not have enough money, which made their living America hard at first. However, Nguyen was determined to rebuild his life.

“After about a couple months, I applied for a job in [for the state of] Oklahoma,” Nguyen said. “I was a counselor for the Vietnamese refugees.”

Nguyen said he helped the refugees find jobs and connected them with means to learn about American culture, such as the rules of driving and how to drive. Nguyen said the most difficult challenge of his journey—as well as for many other refugees endeavoring to assimilate—was the language barrier. However, the greatest advice he also stresses to Vietnamese Americans is education and to continue learning.

“I didn’t speak English before,” Nguyen. “I came here. I studied.”

Nguyen also said he was in his 30’s when he enrolled in university.

“Some people [there were] old, [and] they still [go] to study. Why don’t I study?” Nguyen asked himself. “After fours I got a Bachelor’s of computer science at [Central State University in Edmond, OK].”

Nguyen said after he graduated, he continued to study for about two and a half years. He then completed his MBA at the same school. Nguyen said his life was better after he achieved his degrees. He said he believes he has also achieved the American dream.

“Here, if you are willing to do something, you got it” Nguyen said. “But in Vietnam it’s not [the same.] We don’t have the opportunity to grow up, to move up. But here, there [is] a lot of opportunity for you to succeed. If you want to study, you got it. If you want to do business, you might get it.”

After being a counselor in the state of Oklahoma, Nguyen said he applied for a computer science job in the Federal Government for the Internal Revenue Services. He then moved up to become a manager there. He retired after about 25 years from the IRS.

“I have a pension. I have everything,” Nguyen said. “I’m okay now. Life is good.”

Nguyen’s second advice for people is to stay united. He was also the former chairman of the Vietnamese American Community of Oklahoma for 10 years. Nguyen said he discussed with other Vietnamese in the area to set up a community organization for the people, and together they created the association to “care for the people”. They often host ceremonies throughout the year to celebrate major historical events, such as the 30th of April and the Vietnamese New Year.

Nguyen said he also has a “big project” underway with the city of Oklahoma to build a bronze monument. He said he had to raise 230 thousand dollars for it.

“[It] is a Vietnamese soldier and an American soldier,” Nguyen said. “The reason I [am doing] this is to remember [that] a lot of Vietnamese died for the country and to

remember 58 thousand [Americans who] died for the freedom of Vietnam.

“Millions and millions of people died for Vietnam during the war, during 20 years of war,” Nguyen said. “It’s a terrible war.”

Nguyen said he also wants to remember his Vietnamese roots and encourages the younger Vietnamese generations to also remember their heritage.

"I want to keep our tradition. Even [if] you are a U.S. citizen here, you always remember your root," Nguyen said. "I do remember my root, and I teach my children to remember their root. Never ever forget the Vietnamese tradition."

Still, Nguyen recognizes the freedom that he has in America. He also notes how the American traditions extend to his children.

“In Vietnam it’s different.” Nguyen said the kids must obey the parents and the parents choose the professional lives of their children. However, in America the children have a choice.

“They choose whatever they want,” Nguyen. “They feel freedom.”

Nguyen said he raises his children with the “American way” while also embracing their Vietnamese traditions. Merging into the American life while also attempting to remember one’s own roots would be a conflict other refugees and their posterity would continue to wrestle.

“I’m caught in between the two worlds, and I would say the core of me is more the Vietnamese way,” Tougher said. “The outer part of me perhaps, the more the Western, American way.”

America holds a special place in stories and lives of many Vietnamese refugees. Nguyen said he thinks American is a dream land for people, but they must strive to understand its society.

“When you come to a country, you need to learn the customs, the language of that country. When I came to this country, I understood that,” Nguyen said.

“There is a saying in Vietnamese: ‘Whenever you get into the river, you need to look at the stream to see which way it goes.’ The tide may be up; the tide may be down. When you get into a family, you need to know about their culture of that family. So I tried when I first came to this country. I tried. I didn’t know the American society very well, but I learned. I tried to keep my eyes open, and I learned.

“I often say: ‘Become American but stay Vietnamese,’” Nguyen said.

Americans’ perception of the Refugee’s story and settlement

Just as refugees express their gratitude for resettlement and being able to rebuild their lives in America and Guam, many locals are also grateful for the impact refugees have had on their culture and economy. They also recognize how well the refugees have assimilated into American life and how their success has continued through their generations.

Remnants of retired Navy Captain Richard Whitenbach-Santos’ history with the Vietnamese still lingers today in Guam where he lives.

“If I didn’t have Vietnamese restaurants, I wouldn’t know what to do,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “It’s added so much to the life.”

Whitenbach-Santos said his sons still even have souvenirs from the war. His children would walk along the refugees' camp every day, interacting with the children on the other side.

“They would be trading toys for the Vietnamese money because Vietnamese money was worthless. My kids were giving away all their toys in exchange for paper Vietnamese money,” Whitenbach-Santos said. “My kids still have their Vietnamese dollar bills.”

Raymond Baza, who is “a Chamorro” (a native son of Guam), said the Chamorro people welcome the Vietnamese, even after nearly four decades. Baza said the Vietnamese and the Chamorro people are alike in many ways

“We open up our hands to the people coming here,” Baza said. “We love the idea of having Vietnamese because we, here on the island, [are] like Vietnamese people.”

Baza said one way the Chamorro and Vietnamese share a bond is because they look similar.

“Vietnam and Guam is no different,” Baza said. “The culture is almost the same, the customs are almost the same.”

Moreover, Baza said Guam and the Chamorro have also seen “war life.” He said they experienced war from the Japanese in World War II, and some Chamorro were even sent to South Vietnam to serve.

According to Baza, soldiers from Guam suffered the “highest per capita death in Vietnam.” He said war is cruel, there is no enjoyment in war and that people tend to spar and hold negative sentiment against other races.

However, Baza said the Chamorro are humble and welcoming. Because they have

also endured the hardships and experienced the destruction of war, they welcomed the Vietnamese refugees on the island.

“We grow and learn differently. The Chamorro people learn differently because they have experienced war,” Baza said.

Monsignor David I.A. Quitugua, who is also a resident of Guam, said that the islanders do not have time for violence.

“We are very peaceful, loving people,” Quitugua said. He said the people of Guam really welcomed and accepted the refugees.

Like Baza, Quitugua also said that many people on Guam were sent to Vietnam to fight, which allowed them to empathize even more when the refugees arrived.

“Because they already know Vietnam, [the locals] already are familiar with the people. They [got] to know them,” Quitugua said. “So when [the Vietnamese] came to Guam, they accepted them. [We] welcomed them.”

Quitugua said like the Chamorro and the locals, the Vietnamese are friendly, peaceful and loving people. He said he never experienced a single problem while sponsoring approximately four thousand refugee families.

“They’re fallen,” Quitugua said. “Our people here are very friendly, and all they need to do is just help [the refugees] start. Find them work and new housing, and they’ll be on their own.”

Moreover, Quitugua said the refugees who came from Vietnam were already professionals and were very willing to work.

“They know their work. They’re very intelligent,” Quitugua said

Quitugua said many of the Vietnamese have become successful, and the people on the island have benefited from their success as well.

“They own an air conditioning company, they own a construction company, they’re farmers,” Quitugua said.

He said if he needs his car or air conditioner fixed, he knows a Vietnamese person who is able to perform the job. He said a Vietnamese farmer even helps him tend his garden at the church.

“Guam is better because they’re here. I know the expertise they have,” Quitugua said. “They’re very smart, very smart people.”

“They became doctors, nurses, lawyers that I have helped,” Baza said. “Some of them, their children are in the military right now fighting in harm’s way in Afghanistan, Iraq or Korea—wherever they got sent.”

A former naval officer who also served in the Department of Defense, Richard Armitage said he also recognizes the success of Vietnamese refugees elsewhere in the world. He said his family sponsored more than thirty Vietnamese families who today are all working and have jobs.

“[It] took a while,” Armitage said. “There was a struggle.”

However, Armitage said today Vietnamese serve in Congress, the Navy, the Air Force, the Army and the Marine Corps. He said they are also officers, not just enlisted men.

“We’re very much enthusiastic about that,” Armitage said. “You go in the U.S. government now and there are even organizations of young Vietnamese Americans who are doing quite well.”

“About 20 years after the fall of Saigon, as I've had read graduation lists of high schools, very often the names of the top one and two in the class were Vietnamese because of the high value that Vietnamese families put on education,” Armitage said. “It's filled me with a great deal of enthusiasm.”

Quitugua also recognize the brilliance of the new Vietnamese-American generation just from graduation results. He said these top-student children, who have no idea of what living in Vietnam was like, learn from the example their mothers and fathers set.

“The only type of life they know is American type of life,” Quitugua said. “But they are filled with hope. The values of their hope are Vietnamese values, family values, and do your very best, work hard, do not associate with bad people, be responsible for what you do and study hard.”

Quitugua said these values are what set Vietnamese children apart from other students. He said while they grow up in western culture, have the same freedom other children have and the same facilities and technology, they return to different homes. Their parents raise them based on what they learned in Vietnam.

“When they come home they were taught by the tradition of their father and mother,” Quitugua said. “That is the difference between young Vietnamese people and western culture.”

Quitugua said the Vietnamese are now at peace and they are “all emerged” in the culture in Guam. Many also say the Vietnamese have adapted and been well accepted in the American life. Military journalist Marc Yablonka has worked with Vietnamese refugees and their stories. He initially was opposed to the war, however he said he has

come to learn about, empathize with and support the war. He said the Vietnamese people who he has come to know over the years are wonderful, caring people. Yablonka said they have “really endeavored” to assimilate into American life.

“I’ve worked with minorities and immigrants from all over the world,” Yablonka said. “To me, the Vietnamese are the people who have come here and pitched in extraordinarily so to make this country as great as it is.”

Retired correspondent for the Associated Press Richard Pyle is another journalist who said he shares the same views. He said like other immigrant groups who have contributed to America, the Vietnamese have done a “wonderful job of assimilation.” Pyle said their ability to merge into America often takes away bitterness that otherwise would exist in the minds of some people.

“[It’s a] combination of assimilating to American life and culture but at the same time preserving their own culture, which is a very strong ancient culture,” Pyle said. “And it’s really gratifying for someone like me to see this. That the Vietnamese, like all other immigrant groups and communities have come to the United States over the years, were able to come here and fit in and adapt, and find their own place in the American society. It’s a great thing to see.”

Armitage said Vietnamese Americans have enriched the “educational fabric” of the country and accepted its national values.

“And so I’m very proud,” Armitage said.

Many refugees who have resettled in the United States identify themselves as both Vietnamese and American, and local Americans welcome their dual identity.

“There’s an inexplicable bonding,” Yablonka said, “between America and

Vietnamese people that will always be there because of the experience that we had together.”

CHAPTER 6

Reflection, Methods and Concluding Remarks

Reflection

Writing my thesis over the Vietnam War primarily from the perspective of Vietnamese refugees was a challenge logistically and even emotionally.

The quotes and information used were primarily based on story-value and how well each refugee or serviceman's experiences fit into the goals of my thesis. As I read and wrote, I continually wanted to include more accounts of different events. Still, I was not able to include the full story of each refugees' journey. I also was not able to add in the smaller, special moments that hold significance and uniqueness to some of the refugees. I sometimes feel as if I have done an injustice to the magnitude of refugees' personal life stories and the servicemen's duties. However, I am humbled to have been able to hear and learn about these refugees and military personnel's experiences with the Vietnam War.

Throughout my research, I also encountered unexpected themes from refugees and servicemen that I did intend to find.

First, I thought I would have found many more refugees with resentment and anger with America and the unfortunate situations through which they lived. However, many Vietnamese surprisingly said they have been fortunate and lucky. Some even said they have not experienced much trouble or burden throughout their lives. These were primarily the refugees who were also of Catholic faith. The Catholic refugees seemed to focus less on the turmoil and burdens throughout their lives and more on how these

events have instilled resilience, humility and a deep understanding of suffering among other aspects. They appreciate the grace they have received from God for their opportunities to escape, find safety and rebuild their lives for themselves and their family.

Moreover, I also thought I would find more information about refugees' lives before the war. However, most interviews only briefly covered their time as children, long before the war with the North or interaction with the Americans. Some simply did not focus on this part of their lives at all in the interviews. Perhaps this was not an important aspect of their story in relation to the climax of their experiences with Communism.

I was also moved to find the depth of the refugees' appreciation for America and their willingness to assimilate into the country. As a child of a refugee and immigrant family, I understand the yearning to want to return to one's homeland. Also surprising was the immensity of the locals' appreciation for refugees. As a minority, I often feel as if I am contained by my culture and not free to fully and comfortably express it. America's acceptance was an encouraging motif to hear and read.

Finally, I was intrigued to find high levels of success many refugees have reached, given the difficulty of social mobility with their circumstances and demographics. Nearly all of the refugees interviewed said they have achieved the American dream or some aspect of it. According to an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Baylor and one of my readers for my thesis, Alan Schultz, the end of the war in 1975 was "at the nadir of inequality in the U.S. and also when the march to our new highs of inequality began. In many respects, '75 was peak equal opportunity for immigrants and citizens," which may explain the socioeconomic

achievements of the Vietnamese refugees. As a first-generation student, I understand the desire for non-American families to stay in a country that offers opportunity, but I also understand the corresponding and increasing difficulties over time that accompany these endeavors for achievement.

I hope my thesis is able to recount the refugee story and express their gratefulness for American troops, safety and refuge, and the opportunity to rebuild their lives in a country that accepted them. I also hope it provides evidence for the loyalty and cultural enrichment these former refugees continue to offer to the places they settle, and evidence for the locals' acknowledgement of the refugees' plight—and their potential power. I hope my thesis provides a voice for refugees—either resettled, resettling or still enduring for the possibility of fleeing their war-torn home.

Methods

Most of the sources I used were from the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation's Vietnamese in the Diaspora Digital Archive (ViDDA). I also included some information from interviews I organized through the VN Teamwork, Inc. in Houston and The Vietnamese American Community of Oklahoma City.

VN Teamwork, Inc. and the Vietnamese American Community

I researched Vietnamese-American based organizations in the two closest cities I most often frequent, Oklahoma City and Houston, because I knew these were also cities with well-established Vietnamese-American communities. I contacted the Vietnamese American Community in Oklahoma City first. Unfortunately, they did not initially return my emails or calls. I then sought out VN Teamwork, Inc. in Houston, which was eager to

help me connect with refugees. The Oklahoma City association later contacted me and also appeared excited to help me with my project. I continue to stay in-touch with people from both of these organizations today.

I then organized in-person interviews with volunteers after announcements and messages were dispersed through these two organizations. Executive Director of VN Teamwork, Inc. Mike Nguyen referred me to Nam Nguyen and Tan Trinh, both of whom volunteer in the organization. The Chairman of the Vietnamese American Community of Oklahoma City, Michael Do, connected me with the former chairman of the association, Vinh Nguyen.

I thought I would have been able to receive more interviews from VN Teamwork, Inc. and the Vietnamese American Community in Oklahoma City. However, only three people were willing to be interviewed and share their stories. Nam Nguyen said the English language barrier may have been an issue that hindered some refugees from volunteering to set up an interview.

I then included the stories and experiences from the three interviews with refugees I personally conducted for my thesis research.

Name	Organization
Nam Nguyen	VN Teamwork, Inc.
Tan Trinh	VN Teamwork, Inc.
Vinh Nguyen	The Vietnamese American Association

Table 1: Individuals I interviewed whose stories and experiences I included

The Vietnamese in the Diaspora Digital Archive

After Tan Trinh's interview, I next contacted the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation (VAHF). She recommended that I explore their webpage and project.

According to their website, the organization "is dedicated to the preservation, promotion,

and celebration of the history and heritage of Vietnamese Americans.” They also have a growing digital archive of interviews, the Vietnamese in the Diaspora Digital Archive (ViDDA), through which they uphold their stated goals.

Because I did not have enough sources to create my project, I sought out President of the VAHF Nancy Bui to ask if I could serve on their project and also use their online resources for my thesis. Bui, like Mike Nguyen and Michael Do, said she was thrilled to have me involved. She referred me to Director of Oral History Archives Linda Ho Peché, with whom I discussed my volunteering role and usage of their online archive.

Criteria for Inclusion. Peché said that the interviews are accessible to the public, “made available for research and education purposes,” and available for me to cite as sources.

Most of the uploaded interviews have both video and audio recording and some have complementary transcriptions. Peché continually adds sources to the archive. There were 112 interviews uploaded at the time of my data gathering.

My first criteria for inclusion was that the interview was done in English or (if the interview was conducted in Vietnamese) had a provided transcription with English translation. I eliminated 53 sources that were conducted in Vietnamese and still without a transcription with English translation. At this point, I had:

1. English interviews with a transcription
2. English interviews without a transcription
3. Vietnamese interviews with a transcription that also had an English translation

For the English interviews without a complementary transcription, my next criteria for inclusion was if the interview was at least short enough for me to transcribe or listen fully without hindering the overall completion of my thesis. I was primarily looking

for recorded interviews of about 45 minutes or less. However, I still included some longer interviews because of the power and value of the interviewee’s experiences and stories I found as I began reading the synopsis and listening to the interview. These interviews were included into my next step. In addition to the first 53 sources, I eliminated 17 more sources. Many of these 17 were over one hour long with some nearing two hours or even about three hours and without pertinent information to my story.

My final criteria for inclusion blends with my previous step. I eliminated interviews—based off the provided synopsis on the webpage, reading through the transcription or listening to the interview—if the sources did not contain pertinent information to my thesis. With that in mind, I eliminated interviewees who were not refugees, did not connect with the Vietnam War or interact with refugees in some manner. Many interviews eliminated were of either of leaders of Vietnamese-based organizations, professors or other title-holding people sharing about their work. I eliminated 26 additional sources because of primarily non-pertinent information.

I included 16 sources from ViDDA. A table of individuals whose experiences and stories I included in my thesis follows.

Page number on the ViDDA webpage	Name	Interview conducted in Vietnamese or English	English Transcription available
9	Richard L. Armitage	English	Yes
9	Richard Pyle	English	Yes
9	Nam (Michael) Nguyen	English	Yes
10	Mylene Huynh	English	Yes
10	Nam Loc Nguyen	English	Yes
10	Marc Phillip Yablonka	English	Yes
11	David Quitugua	English	No

11	Richard Whitenbach-Santos	English	No
11	Raymond T. Baza	English	Yes
11	Wendy Tuyet Tougher	English	Yes
11	Nguyen Thi Hanh Nhon	Vietnamese	Yes
11	Charles (Chuck) Meadows	English	Yes
11	Chieu Anh Vu	English	Yes
11	Tru Dinh Tran	Vietnamese	Yes
12	Nguyen Thanh Chieu	Vietnamese	Yes
12	Vo Van Bang	Vietnamese	Yes

Table 2: Individuals from ViDDA whose stories and experiences I included

If the interview did not have a transcription available, I submitted these to Peché part of my volunteering role. Thus, there is a complementary transcription for the particular interview provided on the webpage today.

Concluding Remarks

The interviews I utilized I believe contained the greatest story-telling power that best illustrated the Vietnam War experience from the perspective of the refugees. However, I also recognize the importance and legitimacy of each individual story. While I pieced together a total of 19 refugees, military personnel and journalists' stories in my thesis, many other stories remain untold. Almost 100 interviews from ViDDA were not used in my thesis, and millions of other personal accounts have not even been recorded and archived. I believe it is worthwhile to pursue preserving and providing attention to personal stories. Narratives open the opportunity for humanity to understand plight, suffering, resiliency and gratitude among other human experiences through the lens of another person. Their value exists in daily life as we sympathize for, empathize with and understand our peers.

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