

Boat people, the refugees at Thailand.

“An excerpt from “Life’s Changes,”
(Memoir of a Vietnamese veteran, Minh-Chau Nguyen)

“ Life is a long way of melancholy,
So few with happiness; only with much misery. ”

Fellow Vietnamese veterans and dear friends,



Every year at Halloween I remember my first step on this land of freedom; a place of temporary survival. I was very fortunate, among thousands whom were not lucky of never finding liberty. There were those who gave their lives to the sunken boats as a result of high ocean winds and large waves. If not, then it was the pirates who killed them or sank their boats. Among these unfortunates there was Mr. Canh (my assistant of administration from Duc Hoa District, Hau-Nghia province), who drowned swimming towards the Thai beach. There was also another one of my personal assistants who was thrown into the ocean for resisting the pirates. They insulted his wife. Out of respect for the deceased and not wanting to remind the family of this tragedy, I choose not to mention their full names.

These two District Administrative assistants were capable and well qualified in what they did. They helped me tremendously in managing operations of the District, Villages and Hamlets. Their short years of life made me sad. However, it was comforting to hear from my previous employees that their wives and children had settled peacefully in foreign lands. My wife and I would like to send our congratulations. We would like to think that the men could finally rest peacefully.

Recently the former Colonel Ngo Van Bui, former Trang Brang District Chief of Hau Nghia province, phoned me to say that Mrs. Canh led her children across the ocean. They settled and established a successive business in Southern California. We would like to congratulate Mrs. Canh and her children.

The tale of crossing the Ocean.

Being a handicapped soldier, the North Communists released me early from “re-education” camp, a POW camp. For over a year of seemingly prolonged months, I hid from local Viet Cong. They searched to capture me for a terrible revenge because my troops at Di An District destroyed all of their infrastructures. Twice my wife found ways for me to escape by boat at Nha Trang but twice the plans were discovered. Thus I had to

return to Sai Gon. There was a third opportunity to escape at Ca Mau (southern tip of Viet Nam). However due to a long delay, I had to abandon the plan.

Finally for the fourth time, I made it on a small boat just a bit over nine meters in length. My brother-in-law organized this escape to depart from Vam Lang, Go Cong province. The trip cost me a compass, normally used by fishermen, and to serve as a navigator to guide the small boat towards Thailand's gulf.

All the women and children hid in the lower cargo compartments while a few men disguised as fishermen sitting on deck. We also took turns driving the boat and helping to getting rid of water when a big wave would make it into the boat.

We started on a bus from Xom Cui Cho Lon (a section of Chinatown in Sai Gon) to the District of Can Giuoc. From there we walked to Can Giuoc River to transfer onto a small boat, which traversed the river during daytime. When our boat engine started, the local Viet Cong discovered we were boat people so they fired a few shots with their AK-47s to stop us. Our driver applied full engine thrust and we escaped.

We made it out to the ocean, as it was getting dark, with the city lights of Vung Tau barely visible in the distance. On top of the Big Mountain behind us, there were bright spotlights. These lights helped orient us to head out further into the ocean.

Our tiny boat, which was equipped with a powerful engine, carried a small group of people on board. We quickly and safely reached the international water at break of dawn the next day. Everyone on board breathed sighs of relief because we escaped the hands of communists.

At that moment I thought if I drowned on this ocean quest, then we would be able to die in cleaner water. Better to die here than to die regretfully in water that stank of communist blood. Now all I had to do was keep this boat on course and continue our journey in the middle of this vast beautiful ocean; a beautiful sky that night. We had passed the moment of fear and no more:

Uneasy feelings ... oh how many worries
In all directions fleeing, yearning to free from danger
Distracted, absent minded from looking, from observing
The moon, stars, clouds, water ... to make poetry

(Excerpt from my wife's poetry titled "Crossing the Ocean")

Now we were adrift on international water; our mind at ease. At that moment, I remember those bright lights from Vung Tau and thank them for helping me gain direction for heading out to sea.

A few memories crossed my mind that made me sad. They made me remember the times when I was driving my Jeep up that Big Mountain for a scenic drive. It was a beautiful

sunrise I remembered overlooking Vung Tau beach from top. This was the early months of 1965 when the 3rd Marine Corps Battalion spent a week off to rest at Bai Dau beach, Vung Tau. It was a break for us from an exhaustive three months of fighting at Phu Quoc island of 4th Corps and another two months at Binh Gia jungle of 3rd Corps, a mountainous area.

It was the beginning of 1965 when the war intensified due to several well trained fighting Communist divisions sent from the North into Tactical Regions I and II. This was the North's tactic to infiltrate our existing presence in remote area along the Hoang Son Mountains.

Several units of Vietnam Marine Corps and Vietnam Airborne had to march the long years of hardship to find and destroy Viet Cong units. Suddenly I remembered the days when our comrades-in-arms would march together in all four directions of tactical regions. It was also an opportunity to view the many beautiful scenes of Vietnam, a country that today I began to abandon it and not never knowing of a return date.

Around one o'clock in the second morning when our small boat continued to ride the ocean waves, we were hit by a strong storm of high wind and large waves. Ocean water splashed on to the boat so all men were busy draining out the water. We saw death at close proximity. But I had to remain calm to drive this boat in cutting the waves and moved forward.

After four days adrift on the ocean we ran out of drinking water. With a lot of luck we were rescued by a Thai boat. The captain of the fishing boat saw the small size of our boat with women and children aboard. If it was not for that captain, then we would not survive more large waves and surely we would be good meals for the big sharks. Our group as boat people had to accompany the fishing boat for two weeks as they continued to fish. Their plan was to head for Singapore to sell their catch and also let us off. Within two weeks on board this fishing boat, we were fed and were treated very well.

When the Thai fishing boat approached Singapore beach, a patrol airplane spotted us boat people so they reported to the authority. We were uneasy and anxious most of the day waiting for a response, allowing us to enter or not. Afterwards, not only did Singapore did not let the fishing boat enter to sell their fish but they sent a patrol ship to escort us back out to Thai and Malaysia's water.

The captain did not dare come near Thai's beach to let us off. He also requested that we do not let Thai authority know that it was his boat that assisted us. He personally instructed his sailors to make a raft for us to sail to the beach. Women and children were seated on top while the men and male teenagers swim along side to push the raft into land.

Because my left arm and leg were weak, I dropped a small bag containing clothes and some extra under garment I wore during this trip. When arriving at the beach, I only had a torn (at the back) pair of shorts.

Till now I regret loosing those clothing, which I wore from South to North prison camps, from North returning to the South. Each time changing POW prison camps it was also these clothes. Three times attempting to escape and the fourth and last time, a success, I was also wearing these clothes. My plan was when arriving to the USA. I would keep them as a precious souvenir, a historical antique of my life's journey filled with misery.

Approaching the land of freedom.

We approached Thailand's beach safely and felt so happy, so emotional that we were still alive. Enthusiastically, I took a long deep breath with ease on this land free of communism. From now on I could live safely and free, although far and in a strange place. Other boat people like me I thought must feel the same happiness; as if reborn because escaping death while crossing this ocean.

My fate was now at ease, but my wife and children were left behind. Thus my feelings were troubled and worried, missing my wife and children, and missing my homeland not knowing of an opportunity to return. Great sadness I had because:

With just this body ... without a country and family
Lost in a strange land ... looking, searching for freedom
My country small and in poverty
But nowhere is to compare to Viet Nam, my home

This body far from home, my loved-ones left behind
Lots of sadness with so few happiness; my life in exile.

(Excerpt from my wife's poetry titled "Wandering on the ocean")

Where we beached was a district located on the southern tip of Thailand. Across the river there was Malaysia's territory. Local authorities allowed us boat people to temporarily settle on top of a public stage. This was a place for public entertainment on holidays or on weekends and was thus located in downtown.

With the spreading news of boat people from Vietnam arriving here, Thai citizens including men, women and children in turn came in larger crowd to watch us. They spoke in Thai, pointed their fingers at us, and laugh at us boat people. We did not understand what they were saying. It was quite humorous for me as well as if they were watching a band of monkeys in a circus. Perhaps, the people here had never seen Vietnamese people before.

From an adult to a small two year old girl, everyone of us boat people were burned-out because of mal-nutrition, lack of sleep and of dehydration. The weather was scorching hot at daytime and deafening cold at night. Personally for me being a guide sitting on top of the bow for four straight days and nights. It was under direct sunlight and cold nights so my face was broken with blisters and darkened like an Indian.

One funny story that I never forget was that every time moving across back and forth on stage, I had to place my hand behind my butt to cover the torn pants. The torn was getting bigger with each time I move. A Thai lady teacher next to the stage noticed. Out of pity and also humor she gave me an old, bright-yellow pants. By cutting the pant legs I wore it like a pair of comfortable shorts.

It was such a feeling of self-pity I felt! Just a few years ago I was a high-ranking Marine Corps officer. Also I was a District Chief managing an entire administration and commanding soldiers under my supervision. Now I am but a body without citizenship, homeless and no career. Moreover, I did not even have a piece of clothing for shelter.

However, I had hoped that Americans would accept me into their country as refugee status and from there I would put all my efforts to building a new life.

To the promise land I shall come
With strong efforts, I would find a new home.

Songkla refugee camp.

Within the period that we boat people stayed at Tarkpay District, Thailand, we were given food. Also the locals on occasions gave us food so we were not worried of hunger and thirst. However we were most worried whether a higher authority would allow us to stay.

After three weeks of providing entertainment for the locals on public stage at Tarkpay District, we boat people were allowed by Thailand authority to enter a refugee camp at Songkla, South of Bangkok. It was indescribable joy because Tarkpay District authorities intended to pull us out to sea. At that time the general order was not accepting any more boat people.

A few years before, Songkla refugee camp located more inland. Because of a growing number of boat people, Thailand authority had to move the camp near the beach, with more space. The existing rows of barracks were not enough to house new comers. Thus we had to beg or borrow money from existing boat people who came before us. They had money because of support from relatives abroad. With the money we bought bamboo and palm leaves to build a simple roof for shelter from sun and rain. Also we built decks to sleep on.

Living conditions were truly dirty because of the constant flies and mosquitoes everywhere. It was easy for boat people to catch many forms of illnesses. The camp lack sufficient restrooms to provide for the amount of crowd existed. Pity to those stood in long lines and could not wait for their turns. They had to squat in the middle of the field, in the distance without anything to provide shielding for privacy, to take care of their urgent needs.

Everyday we boat people were given food like meat, fish and sugar by the UNHCR. It was sufficient for daily life. Thailand's rice, sweet fragrance and good, were given in plentiful amount. Looking at the left over rice that had to be discarded, I felt sorry for my wife and children at home. They had to eat oatmeal, hard like rocks, and did not have enough to eat so they were malnourished.

Personally I had lived in a poor condition during my childhood. But never had I observed lack of food, lack of clothing and basic needs for the daily lives of Vietnamese people, under the heartless communist regime.

While waiting for an interview from representatives of different countries, I dedicated time and effort in learning English. Through reviewing newspapers and books, I brushed up on English vocabularies. My English skills then were enough for conversational; thanks to having an opportunity before to work with American advisors. Nevertheless, my basic skills were more than many others, who did not know a single English nor French word. A few people would bring their English books to me for tutoring. Feeling like a good opportunity for me to learn and review my English, I readily accepted to help out. Thus they respected me like a teacher.

Now I felt a bit of a humor in that it reminded me of a common saying "Within a group of blind people, the one-eye person was the King;" and so I was.

In addition, I also taught French because in the past I studied with the French system. By teaching English and French I was able to get by the two daily meals. It was enough to comfort my feelings from loneliness at this refugee camp.

Within the time living at Songkla refugee camp, I had written a few letters to friends. It was to announce this good news of escape. Moreover it was my intention to ask for some money; to buy new clothes for coming to America. But I was too bashful to ask in writing.

Receiving the first letter I was extremely happy. It also came with US\$50 from Warrant officer Phang Van Nguyen, previously in charge of current affairs at Di An District. He was happy to hear from me. In his letter he also expressed his apologies for not following my order of staying behind to defend. Instead of staying, he left for a refugee boat before April 30th.

Hearing this I very much sympathized and understood him. At that time even Leaders such as many Generals and high-ranking officers abandoned the country and escaped. For a small District like Di An, loosing one Warrant officer was nothing in comparison. The reason for Mr. Phang leaving, although he had great respect for me, was because of his experience with Viet Minh. He witnessed their lies and had often told these stories to my wife and me. His experience was as an immigrant from the North in 1954, after the Treaties at Geneva, France. He was then a Corporal in a French Commando unit, stationed in the North.

Also I had received US\$50 from former Admiral Cang. A total of US\$100 in Thailand at the time was a sufficiently large amount for me to buy new clothes.

Other than those two replies, I did not receive any others, from those whom were very close and respected my wife and me. Such a disappointment! Only during time of hardships would you know the true meaning of “friendship.”

Mr. Phang passed away because of heart complications; after ten years of residence in Denver, Colorado. Till now I missed him very much because he was close my wife and me. Moreover, he was my savior when I was in need at refugee camp. Admiral Cang was also another kindness I would remember. He was readily to help me in difficult times.

Restoration Movement.

All Vietnamese people were waiting for a restoration movement from an outside influence. It was to reclaim the South from the dictatorship ruling of red demons. There were a lot of rumors within the country that such a Colonel ... had returned and was leading a group of soldiers on the Mounts of Ba Den, Tay Ninh Province; at another place one General ... returned to lead a Division of Marine Corps at Rung Sat jungle.

Being in the AFRVN for over twenty-one years and a District Chief for eight years, I know a lot of military commanders and administrators. Although a number of leaders left the country before April 30th, there were still a good number of them stayed. Just alone in my Marine Corps Division, a Deputy Commander of Division and many Brigade Commanders went to POW camps. There was no one left to lead remaining soldiers. The muddy and small Rung Sat jungle could not be a location for a Division to camp. Only civilians not having any knowledge of military would believe such a rumor.

Before the escape, my wife and I already knew that there would be some kind of movements, especially at refugee camps. My wife predicted this so gave me the following suggestion: “I understood that your life as a soldier had so much suffering. From being wounded that made you handicapped, to imprisonment, to being hunted down after you return home (escaping death), to hiding in many places from the Communists; so much suffering. Our children live in hardship. When they got sick, I had to sell each piece of clothing to afford medicine for them. Do you see it? Now our family had to take on this suffering, this burden alone. As a result of today, you and I have nothing. Now is there anyone that can help our family? You are now but a worn body. If you arrive at a refugee camp and some ones would ask you to join their movements, then just be done with it and say no. When you arrive in America, concentrate on finding a job to stabilize your life so that you can send money home to save your children. When you are successful in this escape, then I will find a way for our children to abandon this country. We will follow you so that our children can have a stronger and better future. The Communists I know will never let our children go up with their lives.”

Listening to my wife's explanation and suggestions, I painfully realized this was my life, a twenty-one year dedication to the military career. It was such a sad realization that made me tear up.

Just like our prediction, the moment I entered into Songkla refugee camp, Mr. Tuy Quoc Le, arriving from France, had sent out an invitation. He invited me, a number of ex-military officers and administrators to his speech about his restoration movement. He introduced himself as an ex-military Air Force officer of the old colonial French and that he belonged to Huu Van Tran government, living in exile from Diem Dinh Ngo Presidency. Mr. Tuy also revealed that he would lead this movement, managed public relations and had visited refugee camps to recruit and motivate soldiers. There would be two former Generals to head up the military operations. Being a friend of Thailand's Prime Minister's brother, Mr. Tuy gained the permission of visiting any refugee camp to recruit soldiers.

Knowing and trusting that I was an ex-military Lieutenant Colonel and District Chief, recently returned from Yen Bai POW camp, he showed me pictures of the two ex-military Generals. They were those I had relationship with before. Also shown were pictures of two ex-military Colonels, both my friends, to prove and gain trust from people at this refugee camp.

By which path, through which country and who were the sponsors of this restoration movement I asked Mr. Tuy Quoc Le. He replied: "soldiers will go through Cambodia and this movement was sponsored by the Red China." With some basic ideas, I told Mr. Tuy that currently there were dozens of VN Communist Divisions already stationed in Cambodia region. Thus it would not be easy to sneak through that path. One more point I did not agree with was that VN Communists succeeded due to Chinese Communists' support. Thus it was like asking a robber to help find your lost items.

After a few weeks, Mr. Tuy and an ex-military Colonel, my friend, came to Songkla refugee camp to recruit volunteers. They were preparing a list of people.

At that time, Songkla refugee camp was very much heated with this restoration movement. The majority who signed up were teenagers, a few former captains. The rest were troopers. Many volunteers were teenagers who have never been soldiers before and they were proud to be heroes of a return; to rescue the country of Vietnam.

My decisive response was already not to participate. However, Mr. Tuy and my friend, the ex-military Colonel, asked that I tell others one thing. If asked, then I should tell others these gentlemen were really from the South and not the Viet Cong trying to set a trap.

A few former soldiers did ask me: "Lieutenant Colonel Chau ... how do you analyze this situation? We very much would like to participate ... let us know if this was OK or not?"

This movement was a fight of idealism; not certain of success or failure. Thus I did not have an idea for others whether to join or not. However I felt sorry for those destined to return and said: “a return to reclaim a country is a grand ideal for those who loves their country ... However, you should know that this fighting will be a tremendous hardship and a huge sacrifice. The choice is up to you ... I will not encourage you nor will I discourage you.”

After establishing a list, the two organizers of this organization announced a date and time for pickup. They would send automobiles to the camp. When the time came, GMC trucks entered the camp and announcements were made over loud speakers. Names on the list were called so that they may be transferred out of camp to another location. Despite the loud speakers, only a small squad of former soldiers showed up at the Camp Headquarters. The rest of the hundreds of names hid somewhere and refused to step up for role call.

After officially accepted to enter America, I was transferred to Bangkok for further processing. Also there was a health examination before entering the USA. At Bangkok, I visited two former Colonels involved in the restoration movement. They revealed to me that in a few days, one former General would arrive to lead. Also I met again a few of the people who were staying at Songkla refugee camp with me. They were all waiting for Mr. Tuy to recruit more people from camps on the border of Thailand and Cambodia.

At that time I felt a tremendous love and respect for these men; knowing that they would soon face a lot of suffering and enduring. This was a big sacrifice for loving their country. A few months after I arrived to America, I heard that Mr. Tuy, the entire staff including two ex-military Generals and Colonels disagreed on various issues. They departed in separate ways. All those who were involved in this movement returned to America.

A few years later I heard news that this organization returned to Vietnam with another group, but was discovered and thus it failed. Nevertheless, I admired Mr. Tuy for his effort and to those with a noble sacrifice for the country. They bravely enlisted to reclaim the country. Years later, I had received sad news that Mr. Tuy passed away in France.

Waiting for an interview.

Every boat people must go through an interview by some members of the interview team from the country of their choosing to migrate. There were those who would get qualified by their relatives' sponsorship (considered “1st” or “2nd Status”). For those former soldiers like myself, without relatives abroad, we were given “3rd Status” for entry by the United States.

One thing that frustrated me and I strongly disagreed with was some American representatives ; those that I thought were not VN Veterans. They were unfair and did not treat us as soldiers of the Allied Army with the U.S., who fought together side by side with us during the Vietnam War.

When first entering Songkla refugee camp, I had heard that: "First priority was ladies ... second was children ... third was dogs and cats ... then men like us." Such was true. Within two months at Songkla, I observed that those ladies of "graceful looking" were most pleased to those interview members. That was a positive factor to gain immigration status.

At the same time, some former military officers were harassed with lots of questions. It was too much I thought. There were a few young ex-military officers who were asked how much a Colt-12 weighed and how long in inches it was.

It was sad for us as former soldiers who lost their fight, their country, and now in exile. Boat people recently stepped foot onto Thailand. They were like being reborn after a perilous escape by small boats on the sea; our body and mind still exhausted. Perhaps the names and ages of our wife and children were not even clear, how remembering such insignificant things. One young Lieutenant shared his feelings with me: "Lieutenant Colonel Chau! If they had asked me to describe the Colt, then I would remember. But when asked of the weight and length, I made a mistake so they said I lied. They said if I was an officer, then why not remember. They told me to wait for their decision. That would take months from one interview to the next ... how frustrating!"

"Such events made me think and feel sad for the fate of Vietnam, a small country enduring the influences of world politics. "

After the war, allies abandoned a Vietnam to suffer. Ex-military officers and employees of the previous regime were sent to labor camps. We were stripped of our dignity as human beings. Our country's leaders and our commanders of South Vietnam must be busy with building their new lives in foreign land. Thus they must not have had time to think of ways to rescue us, their comrades-in-arms, in POW camps. America as well as the international community had forgotten us. Communists were free to persecute their adversaries, the people of Saigon government.

Each day we waited and listened for any news, any voice, from the outside world. We hoped that with humanitarian consciences, the peoples of the world would try to protect and rescue us. However, our hopes were a disappointment. At that moment I think, it was as if Vietnam was separated by an iron curtain, shielding us from the rest of the world. It was free for the VN Communists, who won the war, to do freely as they wish.

Vietnamese could not live under such dictatorship so they risked their lives to cross the ocean. It was an exchange between small boats for a single word, freedom.

We were ex-military officers, insulted and persecuted by Communists. We also felt dishonored now for asking a third country to allow us entry. During an interview, even the most young and timid soldiers had to be nervous and scared. For if they failed this interview, then they would have to wait for many more months until the next opportunity.

With luck, a retired US Army Major full-heartedly helped me. At the moment, he was a high-ranking administrator of the UNHCR for Thailand refugee camps. Although he did not serve in Vietnam, he was an advisor for Cambodia Army. He had heard that an ex-military Lieutenant Colonel of Marine Corps, returning from the North POW camp, reached a refugee camp in Songhka. Thus he invited me to this office to hear about my POW experience. With details, I described the living conditions at Yen Bai POW camps. During our conversation I revealed my military rank, job duties and the three US medals to prove myself of who I was. Also I said that I had known Mr. White House, currently Ambassador to Bangkok, before 1975 he was a consul at Bien Hoa of 3rd Corps. This retired US Army Major trusted my words and thus helped me full-heartedly. Till today I still remember a Marine Corps T-Shirt that he gave me as a gift. He helped me in getting an early interview.

Within the two months in Songkla refugee camp, I personally heard of barbaric acts carried out by Thai pirates. During that time, many people died as a result of being raped or of sunken ships while crossing the ocean; such tragedy for a single word, freedom. During the years of VN war, many of my comrades-in-arms spilled blood fighting for freedom. Also now trying to find their liberty, they continue to sacrifice more in many ways when sailing small boats on the sea. This was the consequence of a dictatorship, Communist regime as they created this never ending suffering for the unfortunate people of Vietnam.

At the end, an American family in Carmel at Monterey County of California sponsored me. My feelings were mixed of joy, sadness, and worrisome.

With a chance to step foot in this land of freedom I was happy. Without a career and handicapped, I was worried. My wife and children were still not free at home and we were separated for many months without news. I was sad. Was there anything wrong with my wife and children at home? I was so frustrated!

Also I could not forget my comrades-in-arms, those still in refugee camps waiting for an interview from American representatives to gain immigration status as soon as possible. If for any reason they had to stay for six months, a year or two years, then it would be such a waste of time in their life.

My fate was now at rest
But still so much worries, and sadness.

Former Lt. Colonel Nguyen Minh Chau of VNMC