

Former refugees retrace their path to freedom

PULAU GALANG, Indonesia – On the sands of a dried-out lagoon on the remote island of Pulau Galang sits the remains of a tiny Vietnamese fishing boat. On the side of the boat, the registration number can still be seen: TV 4050 TS.

Local residents still remember the day the boat washed up on their shore. It was in 1985 when fishermen found the boat floating near the island, bobbing up and down without any sign of life. The fishermen pulled near and climbed aboard. Only then did they find there were five people on board, including a small child.



This is a Vietnamese fishing boat that was founded in 1985 by Indonesia fishermen, in Pulau Galang. Lost at sea for two months, the last five living souls of 21 people in the boat had to resort to cannibalism to survive. On the sands of a dried out lagoon in the remote island of Pulau Galang in Indonesia sits the remains of a tiny Vietnamese fishing boat, TV 4050 TS.

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The Orange County Register partnered with Nguoi Viet Daily News for this project. Ngoc-Lan Nguyen and Thai Dinh are employees of Nguoi Viet Daily News, who traveled to the refugee camp sites in Asia last month.

Remembering 'Black April'

Ceremonies: Two separate "Black April" ceremonies to commemorate the fall of Saigon will take place April 30 – from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and again from 5 to 9 p.m. – at the Sid Goldstein Freedom Park, 14180 All American Way. The first will be organized by O.C. Supervisor Janet Nguyen's office and several community groups. The second, which will feature a candlelight vigil, is hosted by the Vietnamese American Community of Southern California.

villagers, whom they fondly remember.

All five were barely alive. They were the only ones left of 21 people who had made the journey trying to get out of communist-ruled Vietnam. Lost at sea for two months, the last five living souls had to resort to cannibalism to survive.

Today, 35 years after Saigon fell to communist forces and 25 years after the fishing boat arrived – like thousands of others that reached neighboring countries – a group of Vietnamese visitors from Orange County and elsewhere are standing around the boat.

They are here on a pilgrimage, remembering their own journeys to freedom. Each year, the Australia-based Archive of Vietnamese Boat People organizes one or two trips like this. People who are now doctors, businesspeople and factory workers travel to the former refugee camps in Southeast Asia to relive the days when they were hungry, thirsty, seasick, robbed by pirates and landing on these islands.

They also bring gifts of thanks to the local

On this trip, the Vietnamese visit two local schools and pitch in to buy power generators for them. The group also plans to raise funds to buy goats for the poorest families in Galang.

"Indonesians are Muslim. They don't eat pork, so goats become their choice for source of meat," says Dong Tran, director of the archive and the group's tour guide.

The 'vuot bien' exodus

No one knows exactly how many "boat people" perished on the way out of Vietnam. The United Nations estimates that about 500,000 died at sea.

The Vietnamese have a name for these journeys. They call it "vuot bien," which means to cross over the border. Tiny little boats, designed for a handful of fishermen, became the escape vessels on which were crammed 100 people or more.

Nguyet Huong Nguyen tried and failed six times before she successfully made it out of Vietnam in 1983. Starting in Saigon's Chinatown, she was taken by a rowboat to a local riverboat. Snaking through the city's numerous canals, the riverboat took Nguyen to the fishing boat that would be an escape for her and more than 60 others.

"We took off at midnight, and we had barely left when the police found out," she said. "They chased us in their patrol boats and shot at us."

After a two-hour chase, the boat outran the police. Seasick, Nguyen laid in the fish hold for the entire trip. Early morning on the fourth day, the refugees saw land.

That night, they heard another boat approaching. Fearing pirates, Nguyen's boat took off. Only after the other boat had caught up did they learn it was Indonesian fishermen.

"They gave us noodle, water and showed us the way to another island," she said. "We came to Pulau Laut. The local people came out, even local officials came out to greet us."

Nguyen and her boatmates were in Pulau Laut for two weeks before they were transferred to Kuku, a refugee camp set up on its own island. After a week in Kuku, Nguyen transferred again, to Pulau Galang. It was another 10 months before Nguyen resettled in Canada.

Refugees by the hundreds of thousands

Nguyen is not alone. By 1983, when Nguyen arrived in Indonesia, more than 410,000 Vietnamese had arrived at camps throughout Southeast Asia, according to estimates by Boat People SOS, an advocacy group for Vietnamese refugees.

The Carter administration asked the U.N. to convene a special refugees conference in Geneva in 1979. The 65 nations at the conference agreed that countries in Southeast Asia would give Vietnamese refugees temporary asylum, while other countries would allow them to eventually immigrate. Throughout Europe, North America and Australia, as well as some lesser-known places such as Israel and the island nation of Vanuatu, Vietnamese refugees were resettled, forming the backbone of future "Vietnamtowns" and "Little Saigons."

With hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people landing on its shores, and with assistance from the U.N., the Indonesian government set aside a number of islands to set up as refugee camps.

Pulau Galang was the main camp and the processing point for any Vietnamese who landed in the country.

By the late 1980s, however, Southeast Asian nations were feeling compassion fatigue, tired from having to care for Vietnamese refugees who kept landing on their shores. And the camps were cleared out.

The dead left behind

The pilgrimage led by the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People also stops by Letung to visit the cemetery. The graves, hand-dug and hand-built by the boat people, lie interspersed with the graves of local villagers dotting a small green mountain.

These graves would have been lost if it weren't for the efforts of a determined, young Vietnamese Australian woman, Carina Hoang.

Hoang was just 16 when she helped bury a 10-month-old baby in Letung. She was at camp with her younger brother and sister. Next to them were a young couple whose baby had diarrhea and fever.

"That night, I heard the wife wake her husband. And then I started hearing her cry, 'Oh God, no, God, no.' They held each other and cried, that's when I knew the baby had died."

Hoang helped bathe the dead child and change her clothes.

The father made a coffin from the baby's bed. Hoang put clothes in and placed the baby on top.

Hoang's brother and sister survived, but she lost a cousin in Letung in 1979. Nearly 20 years later, in 1998, Hoang came back looking for her cousin's grave.

She found the burial place. Nearby, she also found a number of other Vietnamese graves.

She published her diary on her website, carinahoang.com, and Nguoi Viet Daily News, a Vietnamese newspaper based in Westminster, published a story about Hoang, listing the graves she found.

Vietnamese the world over found their loved ones that way. Nguoi Viet's managing editor Hao-Nhien Vu recognized his friend's name, Nhan Thi Mong Ha. "Mong Ha was the top student in my class, an awesome writer. I still remember some of her poetry," Vu says.

Another writer, Van Kim Vuong, now working at Viet Herald Daily News, also in Westminster, saw a familiar name as well. Vuong had lost his sister in 1979 when she was about 8 years old. Ten years later, Vuong's father flew to Indonesia looking for his daughter's grave, but couldn't find it.

"When my sister died, we were only able to make a wooden marker for her grave," Vuong remembers.

After Vuong's family had been in the U.S., his father asked an Indonesian friend – a policeman who lived on an island 24 hours away by boat – to build her a stone marker.

"We were so touched when we saw the picture of the grave," he said. "Not only we now know where our sister is, but we also know (our friend) kept his word and traveled 24 hours to build the stone marker."