

Come hell or high water

April 17, 2005



Melissa Chew looks at one of the refugee boats abandoned on Galang Island. Below: Refugees arrive at Bidong Island in June 1979.

Photo: *Eddie Jim*

Death, disease and pirates. Fleeing communism was a perilous journey. A group of Vietnamese refugees revisited the camps they stayed in while waiting to find new homes in Australia. Peter Wilmoth went with them.

They are going back for different reasons, to the refugee camps where more than two decades ago one life ended and a new one began. Often it is to give thanks to the countries that gave them a gateway to freedom; sometimes it is to return as an adult having had then only a child's perspective; or it may be to mentally revisit the hardships they endured and to feel grateful they were able to live for the past 25 years a free and happy life in Australia, the US, France or Canada.

Three buses are lined up outside a Singapore hotel as 142 people - almost all former refugees from Vietnam who escaped the communist regime and survived an often perilous journey to freedom by boat between 1979 and 1987 - climb aboard for a 10-hour trip to north-east Malaysia. Of the group, 45 are from Melbourne and 30 from

Sydney. We are heading to a tourist resort from where, across the hazy water that night, the group will, some of them for the first time in 25 years, see the outline of Bidong Island, where several lived for up to a year in makeshift huts before being accepted for citizenship by another country.

On the bus, there's a jovial mood, laughter, bursts into Vietnamese songs and clapping. People are asked to come to the microphone to tell their stories. There is some friendly heckling. There is a stop for lunch and to buy mandarins and mangoes at a roadside stall. There is an icecream stop at a petrol station and, when the bus arrives in northern Malaysia at 10pm, good-natured banter as 142 people wait for their hotel keys.

With their name-tags, yellow peaked caps, video cameras and the guitar at the front, it could be any tour group, except that everyone on these buses has a story that is astounding, often tragic, inspirational and life-affirming, stories of exodus and renewal, and of rebuilding lives. They are stories that are essential for an understanding of how the Vietnamese came to settle in Australia 30 years ago, what they brought with them, and, as we're about to discover, what they left behind.

As the motor boat to Bidong Island lurches around in the swell, Than Nguyen sits wearing her life-jacket, staring ahead, silent, a look of utter desolation on her face. Twenty-one years ago, Than spent three days in an open boat with her husband and four children, aged four, seven, 10 and 12. During the voyage, her four-year-old son became ill with a high temperature. "When the boat sailed past Thailand he became sick, vomiting," she tells me in a quiet voice. "After two days he died." She knew there was no way to save him, but at least he could receive a proper burial. She asked the boat's owner to go to land so she could bury him but the engine wouldn't start. As the stricken vessel floated, some men on board found a piece of tin and fashioned a barrel. They put the boy's body in and pushed it out to sea. She is going back to honour him.

Thanh Thai is a 49-year-old Melbourne architect who escaped Vietnam in 1980 and spent six months on Bidong. He is going back to find the grave of his aunt, one of 15 people killed when a boat capsized just a few metres from shore. "On the first day we found three bodies, on the second we found two and on the third we found five, of which she was one. The function of this trip is to find out where I buried my auntie. I trust with my heart I will find her."

Also on the boat is Andrew

Doan, a 34-year-old computer analyst from Melbourne. He came to Bidong aged 11 in 1981 and stayed three months before being accepted by an Australian delegation. Along with his digital camera to record Bidong for his large family back in Melbourne, Andrew is carrying a Buddhist bible. "Two years ago I saw a film about Bidong which made me want to go back and pray for the spirits of those who didn't survive."



Kim Huynh and his parents, Thiet and Van, revisit Bidong Island.

Photo: Eddie Jim

Dr Kim Huynh is 27 and a lecturer in political science at the Australian National University in Canberra. He has written a "personal, political biography" of the South Vietnamese people's flight from the communists, with the experience of his parents, Thiet and Van, as the centrepiece. He's going to Bidong to see for himself where his parents and thousands of others lived, and hoped for a better life. "Writing the book has been good for my self-discovery," he says. "I didn't know anything about Vietnam."

After a 40-minute ride from mainland Malaysia, the boat arrives at the jetty. It is oppressively hot. No one is talking now, partly due to some seasickness, and partly to the import of what is about to be experienced. After so many years, the people on this boat will revisit Bidong to see where several of them once lived, where they watched countless boatloads arriving and, if lucky, departing with citizenship papers, where they watched the agony of parents whose daughters had been kidnapped by pirates, where they saw the shattered lives of the often teenaged victims of rape on the pirates' fishing boats, where they saw little children die of thirst. And where they began their first steps into another world.

With eyes half-closed Bidong looks like paradise, its jungles spilling down to white coral sand beaches and coconut palms lapped by azure waters. But as you walk into where the camp used to be, past the skeleton of a boat on the shore, you realise what this place once was. Behind overgrown vines and trees is a shell of a hut, once the bedroom of one woman on our trip. Amid the weeds and thick, overgrown foliage there are derelict temples and monuments in bad repair. You can see the foundations that were once the school, the hospital, the supply store and the water and rations distribution points. Most structures have been destroyed by storms and time. No one visits here from mainland Malaysia. The once rat-infested settlement is now a ghost town.

Established in July 1978 by the Malaysian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a place for stateless Vietnamese to seek asylum in another country, Bidong in its first year of operation received more than 52,000 refugees from 453 boats. In 1979, with about 10,000 re-settled to other countries, 40,000 refugees were living in an area of less than one square kilometre. It had an 11.30pm-6.30am curfew, enforced by a "taskforce" of Malaysian police. It operated for 13 years until the last refugee left in 1991.

In mid-1978, the island, according to Bruce Grant in *The Boat People, An Age Investigation*, was uninhabited. A year later "it bore the scars of a sudden, massive human invasion". Bidong became "a dangerously congested slum", a shanty town

"grafted onto a bit of off-shore Malaysia". This is where Vietnamese families often stayed up to 10 months, watching new boatloads of people arriving, smashing holes in their boats so as not to be pushed out to sea by the taskforce, and preparing for the big day when delegations from various countries would interview them with a view to accepting them as citizens.

Having researched the island and his family's time on it for his book, this trip is poignant for Kim Huynh. "As you sit there now," his mother told him as he researched his book, "I can't explain to you how frightened I was. I was always so frightened, so terribly frightened."

Fearful of exposing their two boys to "indoctrination by communist thoughts" - there were rumours that children were encouraged to "spy" on their parents - and the climate of fear and suspicion under the new rulers - Kim's father Thiet, who worked for the local electrical authority, and mother Van decided to build their own boat and flee the country. The boat was never built, but Kim's parents paid to join hundreds of others on the KG-1170, an unremarkable wooden boat 20 metres long and four metres wide. Kim was just two when his parents arrived here after a terrifying 28-day voyage on the boat groaning with the weight of 507 people. "There were two to three dozen people crammed into the cabin which was no larger than the kitchenette in their abandoned apartment," Kim writes.

During the trip, the boat was regularly terrorised and robbed by Thai pirates, Kim was extremely ill with what was thought to be dysentery and the dangerously overcrowded boat was tossed around in storms as it headed for the sanctuary of land. There were "scores of children on board, but none were as young and feeble as Kim, which was why they had been allowed into the cabin". Kim writes about one night of the trip: "KG-1170 was flung about like a kite without strings. From Van's cloistered position in the steering hut, the ocean was not so much powerful but omnipotent . . . At the other end of the cabin, there was a dim bulb that lit the driver and steering wheel. Other than that, Van was totally disoriented as she held on to Kim and thought about Thiet and (four-year-old) Thac outside. She had little comprehension of how long the journey would take and had never been out on the ocean, but was certain that the boat would not hold together if these conditions continued." One day, when Thiet saw pirates approaching, he was not afraid. "By that stage," Thiet told his son years later, "there was very little distance between life and death for us. I did not know what harm pirates could inflict that was much worse than we had already suffered." Resistance would almost certainly have been lethal. "The pirates made it clear that if one person resisted or made trouble, then the boat would be rammed . . ."

Van, meanwhile, was so thirsty "she could smell water". Her focus was on tiny Kim to whom she would hum songs. "Van's humming was just as much for herself as for Kim," he writes. "But by that stage her altruism had become so complete that there was little difference between what she sacrificed for her child and what she did for herself. So while Kim was completely reliant upon his mother, Van also needed Kim to survive. Her focus on his wellbeing distracted her from the despondency that might have otherwise been debilitating. From his frailty she gained strength."

The Huynh family landed on a Malaysian island and were transferred to Bidong, part of the 397th boatload of people to arrive on the island. Amid Bidong's garbage and

filth, they built a small shack out of scrounged wood and plastic and waited to meet the various delegations. But now Kim's brother Thac fell dangerously ill. Both boys were transferred to a ship moored offshore called The Lumiere, a floating French hospital which was treating refugees who had been raped or ransacked by pirates, or people close to death in boats that had drifted for many days without food or water.

Kim wrote later: "There were many times when they thought not only that their sons would die, but that they had killed them. In Vietnam, Thiet and Van had determined that escaping and dying was better than living with communism. But during that (time) on Bidong, they often wondered 'Was communism really so intolerable compared to life without their sons?' " Thiet and Van one night decided that if their sons died they would both kill themselves.

Today, on the beach at Bidong, Van is wearing the same orange top she wore for her interview with the Australian delegation. She says she lent it to a friend for her delegation interview. She points out to Kim the exact place where she would wash his tiny body in the sea. For Thiet it has been an emotional experience. "I can't stop the tears," he says.

Andrew Doan is photographing the site of the camp to show his family. He remembers the night his family of eight children fled. "I got tricked by my sister - 'Come to this place and we'll get you a bicycle', she told me. She didn't tell me we were escaping from Vietnam."

Andrew and his family hid in a hut near Saigon for a week before the boat owner told the 92 passengers, "we're going tonight." The crowd walked five kilometres along a river and stepped on to a boat 13 metres long and 2.5 metres wide. Andrew and his seven brothers and sisters - their parents stayed behind, joining them two years later - travelled four days and five nights. By the fifth day food, water and fuel had run out, and the boat was drifting. Andrew remembers the exhaustion and, among the mass of bodies, leaning on his brother to sleep. Eventually, an English oil tanker picked them up. The family climbed up the rope thrown down by the sailors. "We looked down and our boat was tiny," Andrew remembers. "When they cut the rope our boat smashed against the tanker and sank."

The captain radioed Singapore but was told the refugees were not wanted. The family was transferred to Bidong where they stayed three months before being accepted by an Australian delegation and flying to Melbourne.

Under a large tent in a clearing, there is a buffet lunch and bottles of water. The group wanders around, many trying to locate sites of personal significance. Derrick Nguyen stands on a bluff overlooking the water. From here you look down on the island's jetty, where the delegations would arrive by boat, causing an excited ripple to move through the crowd. It's here 25 years ago that Derrick would sit on one of the monuments and "contemplate what life was going to be for me". He would watch the boats carrying people who'd been granted citizenship to another country leaving for the Malaysian mainland. "When the boats left with my friends on them, I used to run from one end of this bluff to the other to wave to them, and I'd keep on waving until I couldn't see them any more. I feel ashamed to say I cried. While I was happy for them, I was sad for me."

Derrick's brother-in-law settled in Adelaide while he settled in the US, becoming a lawyer and a member of the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. He came back here because "I feel a sense of owing everyone who helped me".

Hue Nguyen, a Melbourne producer at Radio Australia, was 31 when he arrived on Bidong. He remembers travelling with 18 others in "one of the smallest boats that ever escaped from Vietnam". "The boat was so old, so fragile, even the friend of the boat's skipper refused to go. I was sure that I would die, but I thought I'd prefer to die at sea rather than go back, which would mean jail."

Sister Maureen Lohrey was the headmistress of a Melbourne Catholic school before spending three years on Bidong. She and two other Catholic nuns - Sister Carole McDonald and Sister Joan Campbell - lived and worked with the Vietnamese boat people, calling themselves The God Squad.

Sister Maureen remembers lying in her hut at night hearing new boats arriving. "My hut was right on the beach. In the stillness of night I would hear 'putt, putt, putt'. Boats limping in. If you saw the boats you'd wonder how they'd ever float. The UN rep lived next door and I'd knock on the wall and say 'Alan, quick, there's a boat coming in' and we'd run for the jetty. It was important that we got to the boat before the taskforce could, but if we didn't the taskforce would push them back out to sea. Often the boats would smash a hole in the bottom so they'd sink and have to be rescued. Some of them were turning up having navigated from a page torn out of an atlas."

Sister Maureen remembers the passengers climbing on to the jetty, many unable to walk, all needing food and water. She will never forget the fear in the children's faces. "I stood there and cried when I saw the little kids - dirty, hot, hungry, scared. Often they couldn't stand because they'd been cramped for so long. I'd want to take them away and give them something to eat and drink but the official processing would take hours, finding out who they were, where they were from. And they wouldn't give the little ones anything to drink. There was no compassion shown to them, which was very hard for us to put up with."

As more people settled on Bidong, the stories emerged of families torn apart, teenage girls abducted on the sea, parents and grandparents left behind in Vietnam. Often there was just a day or so to say goodbye, such was the secrecy that surrounded a family's departure. Most of the refugees wondered whether they would ever see family members again.

To help take the children's minds off their loneliness and the squalor they lived in, Sister Maureen would take them swimming after school. One day during a game of keepings-off a 16-year-old girl fainted after seeing some blood in the water from a coral cut. It was only when she was revived they heard her shocking story. She was one of only two survivors (the other was an old man) of a boat that had been attacked by machete-wielding pirates. She had seen the pirates cut off people's fingers to get rings and slashed with the machetes. During the pirates' rampage, she had pretended she was dead by floating in the water. Sister Maureen took the girl to the sick bay and stayed with her until she regained consciousness. The girl was processed quickly and

found asylum in California.

During Sister Maureen's time on the island, a new policy adopted by several countries meant refugees from a certain date were screened to ascertain whether they were genuine refugees. "On 13 March 1989, an announcement came through on the loudspeaker: 'Any boat that arrives today will not be refugees'," she remembers. Meanwhile, those seeking asylum became increasingly frustrated. "Their future just hung in the balance all the time," she says.

She remembers a hunger strike during which a group of 20 refugees wore headbands saying "Freedom or death". A riot squad sat on a boat just offshore. At 11.30 this night, the curfew bell sounded and most went to their shacks. But one man at midnight stood on the beach and slashed his stomach open. "There was blood everywhere," she remembers. "I went down to help and they pushed me back. They soaked up the blood with a Vietnamese flag. The man got stitches but didn't die."

After interviews by delegations from various countries processing asylum applications, the refugees would wait up to three months for an answer. "Their names would be called out over the loudspeaker and they would receive a letter which they were too scared to open. 'Can you open it for me, Sister?' If they'd been told no, then they had to be repatriated, which many thought of as a death sentence."

Sister Carole McDonald spent six years from 1985 helping the refugees on Bidong. She remembers one boy of 14 arriving having crouched in a boat in the same position for so long he had to go to hospital for days. A former principal, she started a junior high school with 600 children studying for two hours a day. "They were so lonely and sad without their parents that you saw them letting go, giving up," she says. "You had to persuade them, encourage them, love them."

Sister Carole was amazed at the stoicism of so many of the refugees. "The huts were awful, 15 to 18 people to a room, people sleeping side by side. But there was always a smile for us. They would get a sauce bottle, rub it in the sand to make it smooth and invite us in to have a cup of tea."

But many had suffered unbearable tragedies and wandered Bidong in a daze. "A lady came into my office one day and her eyes were kind of staring," Sister Carole said. "I asked my interpreter what the problem was. I was told she'd been on a boat with her husband and six children when pirates came on board, held a knife to the throat of her four-year-old and demanded that two of her daughters, aged 14 and 15, go to their boat. They wanted her to go too but they were persuaded. The girls were likely raped or murdered or sold into prostitution. I used to talk to her quite often. She said she hardly slept, she just walked around like a zombie."

The nuns did what they could to maintain a humanity amid the tension and uncertainty. "No one was allowed to fish or get coconuts, which was ridiculous because they didn't have enough food," Sister Maureen said. "We became like criminals ourselves. The kids would climb up the coconut trees and drop them onto a blanket. They would have look-outs and we'd keep an eye out too. Of course we became complicit."

Son Lam, a 41-year-old tiler, is standing in a derelict Chinese temple. Aged 19, he performed in plays here, but the stage has rotted away. Son met his wife in the Bidong school, and acted in plays with her in this room. He stands quietly looking around. On the bluff overlooking the jetty, he approaches a monument containing small thanksgiving plaques, bearing people's names and the number of the boat in which they arrived. Son finds his plaque. It's an extraordinary moment. He brushes the dirt off and decides to take it home to Sydney.

It's late afternoon and time to leave Bidong. It's been an emotional and often sad day. Near the jetty a group of 20 people gather to sing a famous song, *Vietnam*, waving the Vietnamese flag and clapping while others take photographs. The dead have been honoured, curiosity satisfied, and some ghosts laid to rest. On the boat trip back to the Malaysian mainland, a cake for Sister Maureen is brought out and everybody sings *Happy Birthday*.

In 1975, when the Communists from the north stormed the southern Vietnamese city Saigon (and renamed it Ho Chi Minh City), thousands of mostly middle-class Vietnamese gave up hope of a future in the land of their birth and made plans to flee by boat to Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia and, even in some cases, Australia. Some left to avoid conscription, others claimed they were victims of political persecution, still others feared the "re-education" camps for which members of the defeated South Vietnamese army were forced to register. Others were repulsed by the new regime's indoctrination - subliminal or direct - whereby "Uncle Ho" and his regime were to command loyalty greater even than for one's family. In all, the brutal new regime, it was feared, would mean a life without freedom and no hope for their children.

Nhat Tien, who settled in California, described the passengers on his boat which left Vietnam on October 19, 1979, heading for Malaysia. "Our party consisted of 81 persons, composed of families who had never met before . . . We were, looking at us, a rather complex group. Some were artists, writers . . . others came from sciences, including university professors, agricultural engineers . . . there were even priests and nuns, officers from all ranks who had escaped the Communist re-education camps; yet the largest component . . . was the students (from Saigon University of the age for military duty)."

The exodus was exponential. In 1975, according to Bruce Grant, 377 boat people fled and arrived safely at a refugee camp. In 1976 the figure was 5619 and in 1977, 21,276. Between 1975 and mid-1979, 292,315 left Vietnam by boat and reached other countries. Of those who fled, 53,815 settled in the United States, 7429 in Canada, 5527 in France and 17,571 in Australia.

Many, unsurprisingly, perished on the way. The engines of the vessels they crammed into were designed for small journeys in the deltas, not for weeks on the open sea with often hundreds of people on board. Some say between 100,000 and 200,000 people died during those four years, often by drowning. The Red Cross estimated in 1981 that half the Vietnamese fleeing their country by boat were killed by pirates.

Luu Glenister grew up in the countryside several hundred kilometres from Saigon. She remembers the feeling towards the communists. "Life in Vietnam changed after 1975," she wrote in a book for her family. "It changed so much that nobody trusted

each other and there was no freedom to talk; no one was allowed to comment on government policy, you were not allowed to stay overnight at someone else's house or have a party without applying and paying for a permit. You couldn't travel to another municipality without first consulting the police who could make you pay. If you had worked hard to build up a business the new government would take it over. Everyone had to have Ho Chi Minh's photograph on the front of their house and in their lounge room; failure to do this would bring about severe beatings, large fines and prison, even death."

It's a long time ago, but the memories are fresh and painful. Luu Glenister, who lives in Melbourne, sits on the bus and pulls her legs up and puts her arms around them. "This is how we sat, for so long," she says. She is pensive because tomorrow we will visit Galang, the first place of sanctuary for her and her brothers, aged 13 and 10.

Batam Island is one of 17,000 in the Indonesian archipelago. This is where the Galang camp was established to temporarily house thousands of Vietnamese refugees. And today, for some of them, it's their turn to go back. After a 45-minute boat trip from Singapore, the boat docks and, in a gracious reception, the passengers are presented with flowers.

As the bus brings us into the camp, we drive past the cemetery and into the main camp. It is much more structured than Bidong, with sturdy barracks, temples and administrative offices still in good condition.

Luu Glenister spent eight months at Galang. Today, she has found the foundations of the building that was her bedroom. She has written about the night she fled, with her two younger brothers, and her cousin and her cousin's 10-day-old baby. "Although our escape had been planned for years this was a very frightening time, for even helping us to escape meant prison with over 100 of us scattered throughout the countryside, we would all have to arrive to board the boat at the same time.

"Well after dark we left the house and walked quietly through rice fields guided by local people, stopping and lying down, having to stay quiet at designated places to wait for more people and supplies. Finally, after falling in a few rice ponds and tripping over many times, we reached the coast, but still had to wade about 50 metres through the surf to the boat. I lost all my possessions when I was knocked down by a large wave."

Luu's trip was relatively safe, though even a small storm could have sunk their boat.

But storms were just another danger. The stories of the Thai fishermen preying on unarmed passengers on overloaded boats are chilling. Nhat Tien wrote of boats being attacked, rammed and sunk when all money and gold had already been stolen, and women raped. One boat was attacked 47 times. "Each attack was simply a repetition of the scene before: they drove the refugees onto their boat and divided them into two groups, men and women (many pirates drove the men into the ice hold for preserving fish, and some men died from being kept there too long); then came the painstaking search, the tearing up of the boat to look for hidden gold . . . (some boats were) so riddled with holes that they began to sink; finally came the rape of the women, even of girls around 11 or 12."

Once on land, the men would help the women hide from the pirates. He describes the terror on a Malaysian island for one group before they were rescued by the UNHCR. "As dusk fell, a band of Thai fishermen bearing rifles, hammers and knives came to us with torches. They gave us a thorough search, took some clothing and went away. Just after they were gone, another band came to take their place. The last one, completing their search, drove all the men and youths into a cave and stood guard over it while they took the women away to rape them. In the dark mist and the cool wind, we could only listen to the cries of the children being torn away from their mothers' arms . . . We could do nothing but . . . swallow our anger and shame beneath the barrels of their guns. That was the only way we could be sure no one died.

"It was dawn when the incident ended. The women were brought back to us and lay on the coral exhausted. Many were sobbing, collapsing in grief and humiliation in the arms of their loved ones."

The women refugees, on boats and land, were regularly brutalised by the pirates. The men and boys, too, suffered. "Some of us were beaten and forced to point out their hiding places," writes Tien, "others were choked with a cord to make them divulge where gold or dollars were supposedly hidden. Most tragic was a case where a man tried to save the virtue of a relation. First he was hit with an axe until his forehead split open, then he was thrown on the rocky shore. By some luck he did not die there. One old gentleman with a few gold teeth had these prised out with a knife."



Left: The family's refugee cards. Right: A newspaper article tells of their desperate journey.

Nhat Tien documents the terror for the young people on one island after surviving the sea journey. "Up to 100 people gathered around the refugees. Old women brought baskets of bread or cakes to distribute among them. In the meantime came 50 to 70 men, forcing all the women and girls to stand straight up with their hands held high in the air so that these men could feel them freely along their entire bodies. Imagine a young girl, starving and nearly exhausted, one hand clutching at a basket of cakes that an old woman was bringing by, tears flowing as she devours the food with her other hand raised to gratify the Thai youths who acted as they wished."

On a cleared field stand three of the boats that carried refugees to new shores. Melissa Chew was 13 when she was at Galang for a year. Now 40 and living in Sydney, Melissa boarded a boat in 1979 with her family from a town called Rach Gia, in the south of Vietnam, the point of departure for many refugees. The boat was meant to carry 90, but 280 squeezed on. The family sat close together, her mother giving each child one teaspoon of water a day.

Her journey was a typical one. "We were adrift for 28 days. We ran out of water and 28 people died. We were robbed 30 times by pirates. One night a woman was taken to their boat to be raped, but she resisted and jumped overboard and we never saw her again. One particularly vicious pirate boat arrived one day promising to pull us to shore. Instead, they took a woman in an orange top to their boat and I heard 'Help me, help me' coming from their ship. The next day we saw a body floating in the water wearing an orange top."

Melissa remembers the mass of bodies, and movement being almost impossible. "It was so cramped under the deck. One woman had a baby who would have been about three months old. The mother was so tired, she handed the baby to a 12-year-old boy so she could have a sleep. When she woke up she said 'Where's my baby?' The baby had slipped underneath the deck and drowned."

Melissa became used to seeing death. "When you see the first person die, they'd let the body down into the water with dignity - they'd dress them up properly, then as the deaths went on, they put them in the water wearing their shorts."

She remembers a storm lashing the boat one night. "Dad said 'Children come here, hold hands, Daddy is very sorry I am taking you to hell. But if we are to go, we will go together'."

Father Anthony Quang fled Vietnam in 1981 with 74 others in a boat seven metres long and three metres wide. A big storm gave the boat cover from the police boats intercepting escapees. He found himself at Galang.

Father Quang tells a shocking story. A boat with 125 people aboard ran out of food, water and fuel and drifted for three months. All passengers except one died of hunger and thirst. "I met that survivor," he says. "He'd had the most terrible experience. He had to eat the other bodies. He would cut the flesh off a body and dry it. He watched the last person die one month before he was picked up, so he ate human flesh for a month."

Frank Andrews has travelled to Galang from New York City where 15 years ago he "adopted" (though not legally) two brothers whose mother had had a quadruple bypass operation. He was friends with the family and "at that point I became Daddy".

After finally escaping, one of the brothers, Kien Nguyen, found himself in Galang, and was later granted American citizenship (he is now a dentist in New York). Frank remembers hearing Kien as a teenager shouting in his sleep. "He was having all these nightmares. I said to him the best way of getting rid of pain was to write, get it out of your system." In 2001 Kien's book about his experiences, *The Unwanted*, was published. "It was a heart-wrenching read," says Frank. "I was so upset at one of the chapters I would walk around the block a couple of times. Kien said to me when he'd finished 'I don't know that child any more'."

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