

# *The Freedom Voyage of the Truong Xuan*



*“...to save one is to save thousands”*  
*Captain Pham Ngoc Luy*

## TRANSLATORS' ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Captain Pham Ngoc Luy for giving us the opportunity to translate from Vietnamese the section "The Ship Named *Truong Xuan*" from his autobiography "Memoir of a Life". As translators we have the privilege of reading in the Captain's own words the story of how he managed against all odds to carry four thousand Vietnamese refugees on his boat to flee the Communists in May 1975. Amid the horror and chaos of the collapse of South Vietnam, Captain Pham led his people to safety through a journey of danger, anguish, despair, hunger and thirst on the sea. It is a true story yet it has all the suspense, action and drama of a Hollywood blockbuster. This chain of events is so extraordinary yet authentic that its occurrence could only have been an act of fate.

When translating Captain Pham's words we feel close to him, understanding his and the refugees' pain of fleeing the country to go through an incredible ordeal. We are also happy to read passages the Captain writes about former *Truong Xuan* people now settled in the United States, Canada, France, Austria, Australia and other countries. A great number of those people have been leading successful lives in exile. There is absolutely no hint in his writing that he is aware that he is a hero. Hero is not the term to use in praise of the Captain, "greatest humanitarian" would be a better one.

We thank Le Giang Huong and Steven Dam for reading and editing the translation, and Stephanie Le Bao Chau for typing parts of the manuscript.

Phan Dam, P.Eng  
Professor of Civil Engineering  
Technology (retired)  
Centennial College  
Toronto, Canada

Thien Vo-Dai, Ph. D.  
Professor of Computer Science (retired)  
Laval University  
Quebec City, Canada

Bản danh cho con gái Pham Thu Giang  
cũng là một thuyền nhân bỏ nước ra đi  
tìm hi vọng trên tàu *Truong Xuan* cùng 3627 đồng  
bào vì biển cô 30/4/75.

Pham Ngoc Luy  
Thủ *Truong Xuan*  
McLean ngày 28/8/2014

<https://truongxuanvoyage.com/photos>

## ***About Captain Pham Ngoc Luy***



Captain Pham Ngoc Luy is well known in Vietnamese communities around the world for having carried nearly four thousand Vietnamese refugees on his ship to escape communist occupation in May 1975. Born in 1919 in An Le, Nam Dinh, North Vietnam, Captain Pham studied at Thang Long High School in Hanoi. He taught for some time at Saint Joseph Catholic Boy's School in Hai Phong before studying merchant marine. He graduated in Captain of Merchant Marine in 1951. He captained the ship named Truong Xuan when it left Saigon at 1:25PM on April 30, 1975 with 3628 refugees onboard after communist forces occupied the Capital. This was also the last trip of his marine career. In November 1975 he settled in the United States. He has since traveled to many countries to help establish numerous Vietnamese overseas fraternities and associations. With senior members of Vietnamese families such as the Buis, Dinh and Phams, he has promoted and worked on the idea that each Vietnamese family living overseas should maintain an "ancestor temple" that can also be used as a place of meeting for family relatives as means of keeping Vietnamese values and traditions, and helping future generations to remember their roots.

## The Freedom Voyage of the Truong Xuan

Excerpts from Captain's Log.....	1
Truong Xuan's Last Trip.....	5
The Dark Days.....	13
Sparks of Hope.....	17
Leaving the Country Behind.....	25
To the High Sea.....	41
Man Overboard.....	51
SOS.....	57
Aboard the Clara Maersk.....	65
Days of Refugees at Hong Kong Refugee Camps.....	73

### *Supplemental Documents:*

- Article published in *Maersk Post*
- Article published in *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1976
- Article published in the *Patriot-News*, Harrisburg, PA, April 22, 1979
- Letter from camp chief David Weeks to the Captain of Truong Xuan
- Song by Lam Phong
- A poem (in French) by Nguyen Van Hien

## *Excerpts from Captain's Log*

- Dec 11, 1974: Truong Xuan ship leaving Saigon for Hon Khoi to pick up salt for Singapore.
- Dec 29, 1974: Leaving Singapore for Bangkok.
- Jan 3, 1975: Leaving Bangkok for Cebu.
- Jan 25, 1975: Leaving Mindanao for Makassar.
- Feb 11, 1975: Vietnamese New Year "At Mao", Year of the Cat – Leaving Manila for Ternate.
- March 7, 1975: Leaving Batangas for Borneo.
- March 13, 1975: Arriving at Balik Papan.
- April 2, 1975: Leaving Balik Papan for Pare-Pare.
- April 3, 1975: 6AM, Radio Australia announces " Communist troops were 60 km from Saigon marching toward the capital without any resistance."
- April 4, 1975: Meeting with the crew to send a message to the ship headquarters to cancel the contract in order to return to Saigon.
- April 7, 1975: Leaving Pare-Pare for Singapore.
- April 14, 1975: Leaving Singapore for Saigon.
- April 17, 1975: Docking at Pier 5, Khanh Hoi at 2PM – ebb tide.
- April 18, 1975: Requesting the ship company to provide 180 tons of fresh water, 1 ton of rice in 10 separate bags and fuel for the next ocean trip.
- April 20, 1975: Proposing to the ship owner, Mr. Tran Dinh Truong, "(1) Volunteer to provide transportation and means to anyone who wants to flee by boat in order to save the whole fleet of the company". (2) Request to appoint Mr. Le Hong Phi as the chief engineer because of rumor of engine sabotage. Reply from the ship owner: "I already have my own plans."
- April 21, 1975: Start loading scrap metal to head for Manila. The ship crane had to be repaired, I needed to rent a mobile crane.
- April 26, 1975: Scrap metal was adequately loaded into cargo hold. Customs and Visa papers were done and cleared. Steam boiler was still being repaired.
- April 27, 1975: The ship did not have a substitute chief engineer yet as the former one had already quit. Company still did not O.K. my request for replacement. Plan to escape by Truong Xuan looked grim, to be scrapped?
- April 29, 1975: Tan Son Nhat airport was heavily shelled by the Communists. Transportation by air was paralyzed.

- 1PM: Arriving at company headquarters at 36 Hong Thap Tu for the last time. Did not meet the owner.
- 4PM: The ship owner met with me to O.K. my request as per April 20 memos. He gave me papers from the government to ship Vietnamese citizens to Phu Quoc. Ship owner's words: "As the ship captain, you have all the rights and authority to use the Truong Xuan ship."
- 6PM: Did not see Le Hong Phi at the ship, Phi had accepted his role as the chief engineer before that time. Gave orders to the second mate, Tran Van Chat "Ship will leave on April 30, around 12 noon."
- 8PM: Arrived at my house. Curfew ordered day and night. Could not get a wink of sleep the whole night. Had to decide: to leave or not to leave. Totally obsessed by the refugees fleeing in Central Vietnam
- April 30, 1975:
  - 6AM: Left for the harbor to assess the ship's condition.
  - 7:45AM: Got back to our house.
  - 9:30AM: Around 200 relatives and neighbors were loaded into the 2 GMC trucks. Trucks were stopped at the harbor entrance even though we had shown them the permit from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. One of my relatives gave the policeman a thick envelope. The door was slowly lifted up and the 2 GMC trucks went in with a few dozens of people clinging to them.
  - 9:45AM: The telecommunication officer requested to stay back because he lost contact with his family...Fortunately, Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Thanh, a telecommunication officer from another ship company took over. More and more people boarding the ship.
  - 10:25AM: Radio announced the surrender news...Hundreds of soldiers and civilians rushed to board Truong Xuan from everywhere.
  - 12 Noon: The Independence Palace, the National Bank were taken over by the Communists.
  - 12:30PM: The chief engineer reported that the engine was running o.k. Order to depart was immediately sent out. The steering system was sabotaged. Water was pumped into the system instead of oil. Ordered to use rising tide to turn ship 180 degrees, pointing toward the sea, ready for departure.
  - 1:30PM: Departure, using the emergency steering system, something that a ship captain should not do when the ship is running in a river. Heard about the disorder of people fleeing Central Vietnam...A committee was formed immediately:
    - Executive Committee consisting of:
      - A Lieutenant Colonel pilot
      - A Major from the 25BB division
      - A dentist

- A professor
  - A lawyer
  - Two naval officers
  - A business administration student from Minh Duc University.
- Security committee consisting of:
    - A Lieutenant Colonel from the field combat police
    - A parachutist Major and many officers and soldiers
    - A civilian
  - Medical Committee consisting of:
    - A medical doctor.
    - Other volunteers.
- 5:00PM: The generator went dead. The ship ran aground. Dozens of young men came down to the engine room to pump by hand to increase the compression for the starting motor.
  - 7:30PM: The tugboat named Song An pulled Truong Xuan off the ground.
  - 11:00PM: Tugboat Song An hit a fishing net. The ex-soldiers tried their best to cut the cables and fishing net off the propeller of Song An.
- May 1, 1975: The tug cable continued to snap. The tide rose fast.
    - 5:00AM: Truong Xuan ran very near to Vung Tau Mountain to avoid the sunken ship named Kagwamaru. The cable snapped again, the ship drifted backwards further away from the mountain. Ex-soldiers were ready to fight back if the ship was attacked.
    - 7:30AM: Passing Bai Truoc beach.
    - 8:00AM: Passing London Maru buoy, about 45 nautical miles away from Saigon.
    - 10:00AM: Truong Xuan was 16 nautical miles south of Vung Tau. Engine started again, big applause from everyone. Gave order to surrender all weapons. 50 guns of different sizes were kept in the map room, which was then securely locked.
  - May 2, 1975:
 

After many continuous incidents despite hunger and thirst and thanks to the good will and understanding of everyone on board, 4000 Vietnamese refugee compatriots safely boarded the Danish Clara Maersk at 4PM on May 2, 1975, while the seawater was flowing into the engine room of Truong Xuan.

## *Truong Xuan's Last Trip*

Around 2:30PM, May 2, 1975, after all the refugees had been evacuated to the Clara Maersk, the ship crewmembers remained behind. The crew consisted of the second mate Tran Van Chat, telecommunication officer Nguyen Ngoc Thanh, chief engineer Le Hong Phi, mechanic Ton Hoa, cook Chung A Can and myself.

I handed to Thanh my communiqué to leaders and the presses of the free world.

*"Truong Xuan ship carries more than 3000 Vietnamese fleeing Saigon from the Communists after the Communists invasion. The engine room is deep in water. The ship will likely sink. We were lucky to be rescued by the Clara Maersk ship, of Denmark. On behalf of all the refugees onboard, I hereby appeal to all the free world countries to accept and save all of our fellow refugees."*

Signed: Captain Pham Ngoc Luy

The communiqué was not sent. Holding it in his hand, Thanh looked upset and told me in trembling voice:

- Captain, I cannot send it, the generator room was submerged in water. I sent for Chief engineer Phi to come up to report to you, Captain."

Phi looked haggard, his face and clothing were stained with grease. He reported that while the ship stayed stationary to allow passengers to board the Danish ship, the pump did not operate, consequently water was leaking into the engine room and paralyzed the generator. Every hour that the pump was not working, water was flowing at a rate of 100 tons per hour. His worries could be seen in his eyes.

The ship was in a sinking state and there was no chance that it could run again. Thinking of the safety of the crewmembers still onboard, I ordered without hesitation:

- Leave the ship everyone!

Three days without sleep, my nerves were totally wrecked. Every fiber of my muscles was exhausted. I was sick. My health condition was at its worst. My country had already fallen to the Communists. I felt overwhelmed with responsibilities, yet I still had to keep calm and steady at this hopeless moment. Could physical fatigue have empowered the mind?

According to the marine tradition, I was the last person to leave the ship. Truong Xuan was left behind, unattended. I felt a sharp pain in me. I bid farewell to my dear ship, the last piece of my country.

The sea was so calm, not a single breeze. Our national flag, still onboard above the poop, appeared as if it were in a state of mourning. The small ship had carried almost



4000 of my fellow Vietnamese running away from the Communist grip until its last and most painful moment.

Truong Xuan was 93 meters long, 12 meters wide, 1500 horsepower and had a loading capacity of 3000 tons. Truong Xuan was a cargo ship built in Japan in the late fifties and had already out-performed its capacities. It had been jammed with people loaded with worries, anxieties and hope. It was now left behind. Its cranes were still towering in the sky. The deck was indescribably deserted.

I left the ship that had carried so many happy and sad memories. It had cruised in the calm ocean. It had been beaten up by storms. It had helped us escape our country, now full of hatred. I tried my best not to shed tears. What would have happened to my ship? Where would it have ended up? Would it have sunk to the bottom of the sea?

Vu Ba Hung wrote me a piece entitled: "Viet Nam My Land" when he was in the refugee camp in Hong Kong:

*"Vietnam, My land!*

*The words Viet Nam are those that our future descendents all over the world will write in their best calligraphy possible.*

*My country is not a vast land, not so immense as the Soviet Union that extends from Europe to Asia. My country is not a land rich with natural resources and fertile like America. Viet Nam, my land, is just a small and modest country. It leans against the Asian continent and it faces the Ocean. However, despite its smallness and modesty, it has been weathered with so many misfortunes, more so than any other country in the world in the last quarter of a century.*

*And now, Viet Nam, my land, my country, is just like this song lyric... " the last two words we say before we die."*

*Truong Xuan! The name of our ship should be also the two words that our descendants will write in their best calligraphy. Truong Xuan our ship was not as famous and noble as the Queen Elizabeth. It was not as big and elegant as the ship La France.*

*Truong Xuan, our ship was just a small cargo ship, and was just as modest as our country. It was only a small ship like thousands of other small ships running across the ocean.*

*Despite having a small identity, our ship had already carried with it a "grandiosity" that had spread all over the world. Our ship had brought along with it a piece of Viet Nam. Also with its own tiny identity and modesty, the ship had faced many threats, not to mention that it had often been spied on. It had to deal with so many dangerous risks before it could sun-bathed in the Ocean.*

*Truong Xuan, our ship, had absorbed so many misfortunes, just like our country, much more so than any other ship in the world. Many of us had thought that it would have eternally slept in the bottom of the Ocean.*

*Up to now, Truong Xuan our ship is still there but it is drifting away without its owner, without anyone.*

*A piece of Viet Nam had already quietly left Saigon on board the ship in the midday of April 30, 1975 when the capital was struggling with its last breath. Twenty years ago, many of us had often sung " I left Hanoi at the age of 18, just starting to know love". Now, many of us can sing: "I left Saigon at the age of 18, just starting to know love. Better still, they also know "hatred ".*

*Four thousand people were in the same state of mind, four thousand people shared the same agony. Four thousand people left their land with broken heart. Yet, they had to leave. Our land still exists, but we already lost our freedom as well as our people.*

*We were to face a choice beyond our imagination. We did not want to lose everything, we just wanted to have our freedom, to be nurtured in the heartfelt spirits of our countrymen when leaving Viet Nam behind. This we carried with us with the hope that we could bring it back to our country again.*

*Four thousand citizens of Viet Nam had to agonizingly break loose from the force that pulled us back to our country, in order to leave in silence. There were crying outbursts that had to be kept within our lips. When the ship got to the Ocean, our worries overcame our sense of loss. While Truong Xuan was looking for its sea direction, its passengers were busy looking toward the Vietnamese shores trying for the last time to capture the familiar scenery of our country. On board, passengers started worrying about misfortunes that could have trapped them anywhere. They were afraid of the bushes. They were scared of even the romantic looking forks of the rivers.*

*After so many obstacles, threatening risks, hunger, despairs, and five days of miraculously floating in the Ocean, we arrived at a piece of land extended from in-land China bearing the sweet name of Hong Kong.*

*In the history of all the immigrants in the world, I would say that no other race could have ever gathered a more varied group of people on board. Amazingly, there were members of Parliament, doctors, dentists, judges, ... among 4000 citizens of South Viet Nam. We also had Navy, Air Force and Armed Forces personnel ranking from Colonel to Private. There were one Buddhist Monk, 2 Catholic Priests and 2 Nuns as representatives of religious leaders. There were students from all Universities including the Universities of Van Hanh and Minh Duc. There were journalists both civilian and military reporters. We also had on board many public servants and private office workers of various professional fields.*

*The ship brought along singers and song writer such as Tuy Hong, Lam Phuong, rising star Elvis Phuong, Quang Minh, the singer of the popular "Mau Tim Hoa Sim" (a famous Vietnamese song) and, last but not least, female singer Dang Lan.*

*Among Truong Xuan's 4000 passengers there were 15 doctors and 7 dentists creating such a high percentage of medical professionals.*

*A piece of Viet Nam was drifting away, washed ashore at Hong Kong. I feel sad knowing it would be unavoidable that this piece of Viet Nam would finally be broken into many smaller pieces to be spread all over the world.*

*Here, we were literally transformed into a flock of birds seeking for a peaceful "good land" to make our nests. Among us, there were people who already had found their own "good earth" and had flown away.*

*Very soon afterwards, we would all depart, flying away to all the directions of the world to make our homes in many "good land" places. We all long for the Reunion Day so that we may altogether come back to our country now becoming the "evil land" that we sadly had to leave behind. We all pray that the "evil land" would someday become the "good land" again that we could fly back to."*

*(Excerpts from Doi Moi Magazine, July, 1975)*

The Clara Maersk headed for Hong Kong. Truong Xuan was left behind; it appeared smaller and smaller until it was lost in the horizon. After Truong Xuan totally disappeared, my seaman's memories flooded my mind with images so sharp and vivid. Events that had occurred mere months ago now seemed so far away in the past.

Early in October of 74, Truong Xuan left Tsukumi Harbour of Japan; there were 3 or 4 storms, which started from the East of the Philippines blowing out toward the South Sea. When our ship moved toward Okinawa Island, the Gloria typhoon started. It moved so fast and powerful that it caught up with our ship by the next day, around noon. Truong Xuan had to throw anchor at Sakishima despite the fact that the cable could break because of the coral at the bottom of the sea. The ship agency sent a cable from Tokyo suggesting that we should look for a better place to anchor our ship. Taking advantage of the storm moving slower, we pulled the anchor. We planned to move toward the North side of Taiwan in order to dock at Keelung harbour but the waves were so strong that our ship could capsize. Having no other choice, we had to move toward the southern side of Taiwan. The ship's canvas cover was burst open by the fierce waves. Crewmembers had to painstakingly nail it to the cargo hold cover. Everything on deck was shifted; a few things were broken. Crewmembers who were on duty had to stay put, while all the rest had to report to the control room and no one dared to stay in his own room. We were in a state of emergency as the wind was blowing from the back of the ship; wave after wave beat down on our ship. There were moments that I thought the ship was sinking. We were proceeding at a speed of a mere 2 knots; Truong Xuan was about 15 hours away from Taiwan. We were all anxious to see the mountains and the sign of land. A slight miscalculation, a tiny technical mistake could potentially result in the sinking of our ship. Truong Xuan took shelter in the Kaohsiung harbor at 7AM and the typhoon arrived at the Taiwan straight around 2PM.

We were away from our homeland when the country was under flames and smoke. Truong Xuan left Saigon on December 11, 1974 for Hon Khoi to pick up salt. According to the contract, our ship had to provide service in South East Asia until the end of June 1975 before returning to Vietnam. Despite the Paris peace agreement, I had doubted that South Vietnam could have ever survived due to poor leadership and corruption of the government. Our leaders in South Vietnam depended totally on foreigners. Worst of all, there was strong disunity among Nationalist parties in the South. The allies wanted to flee. South Vietnam had to deal with the cunning communists with all of their devious tactics. The South had a good ideological cause but unfortunately they lost it. Patriotic people did not have the chance to lead the country. I left Vietnam with so many worries on my mind.

Truong Xuan was anchored in Hon Khoi more than a week but we could only load around 400 tons of salt. The southeast wind was blowing with violent force, through the mountains into the gulf, creating huge turbulence. Small boats carrying salt were not able to come near our ship. It was so difficult to load salt onto our ship. The ship's cargo hold was not yet full however we could not stay any longer; Truong Xuan lifted its anchor and headed for Singapore. The Weather Forecast had reported an end of the season storm starting at 200 nautical miles East of Con Son. To avoid this storm Truong Xuan had anchored at Cam Ranh Bay, which was so beautiful, large, deep and well protected by mountains. Cam Ranh was an ideal military base, it would also be an important commercial harbour as anticipated.

After unloading our salt cargo in Singapore, Truong Xuan arrived at Bangkok on December 29, 1974 but there was nowhere in the harbour to dock our ship. We had to drop anchor in the river instead. Thai women brought all sorts of fruits to our ship with very cheap prices. Thai longan fruits were big with small seeds; they were as sweet as our Hung Yen's ones (from north Vietnam). The taste of the small Thai apples brought back wonderful memories of the time I was five or six back in my village in North Vietnam. How I yearned for a more peaceful time.

The peacefulness of Thailand only increased my longing for peace in my homeland. The whole crew went out to visit the villages and farms nearby along the Menam river, opposite to Bangkok capital. We wanted to befriend the Thai villagers and converse with them but as soon as they realized that we were Vietnamese citizens, they became aloof. We met a Vietnamese woman married to a Thai man, she seemed as happy to see us as she would have been to see her own relatives, yet she spoke to us in whispered tones.

"Here in Thailand they are very afraid of Vietnam. Please do not tell them that I am Vietnamese. I have been a Thai citizen for a long time." She continued: "They feel threatened by the Vietnamese as there are many Vietnamese communist agents from the North East area sneaking in here to run their activities".

Truong Xuan left Bangkok for Cebu on January 3, 1975 fully loaded with raw jute. It was a very hard sea journey from Thailand to the Philippines. The north East wind was blowing hard causing seasickness among some of our crewmembers. There were times when dinner was being served and all the plates and bowls on the table were thrown to the floor even though they were safely secured.

When I first started with my seaman career I suffered from amazing bouts of seasickness where I violently vomited out everything. As time went on I overcame my seasickness and now all trips on high seas to me were like journeys of discovery to new horizons. In my later years, onboard larger vessels when the seas were calm and placid, like that of a lake, I could not fall asleep.

When we reached the Philippine Sea, Truong Xuan was travelling among many islands. All crewmembers felt fresh after stormy days. We all went up to the deck to casually sit and relax. My crew was missing the comfort of their families. They were thinking of their wives, children and girlfriends back at home. Two opposite forces attracted them: the adventure of the sea and their loved ones waiting for them at home.

The news of Phuoc Long falling to the communists caused concerns in all of us. Once anchored at Cebu, the company agent was already present and he helped us with all the landing paper work. Dozens of dinghies surrounded Truong Xuan. Many amateur artists drew up colourful pictures of Truong Xuan to sell to our seamen. Young Filipinos cordially greeted us and some were selling cigarettes and liquor. The agent told me to dock the ship in the harbour before the night fell. He warned us that right there, a foreign ship had been ransacked the year before and the ship captain was murdered. Philippines also had their own unsafe internal securities.

Truong Xuan stayed at Cebu for 2 days. It then left for Mindanao, a big island in the south. After being fully loaded with cement, Truong Xuan left for Ujung Pandang in Indonesia.

Coming back to the Philippines once more, Truong Xuan left Manila at 10am on our Vietnamese Lunar New Year of Quy Mao (Feb 11, 1975). Its destination was Ternate Island in the Molucca Sea. Because Saigon Radio emitted weak signals, we received our news through Australian Radio, VOA, and BBC. On the way back from Ternate to Batangas, we were shocked and dismayed to hear of war losses in the Central Plateau.

Truong Xuan departed Batangas with its full load of cement, heading for Balik Papan of Borneo. Right after we docked on March 13, I was stunned to hear that Ban Me Thuot had fallen to the Communists. Truong Xuan stayed at Balik Papan until April 2 before we sailed to Pare Pare, a port near the south of Celebes. We picked up the 6am news on April 3, from Australian radio: "The communists were only 60 km from Saigon, without any resistance." I sent an urgent cable to my family urging them to find all means to leave Vietnam in the event that the communists marched into Saigon. I also sent a

cable to request that First National City Bank help Dan Ha get out of Vietnam. Dan Ha is my daughter. She was the assistant manager at the time.

Once we arrived at Pare Pare on April 4, I called for an urgent meeting to inform all the crewmembers of the emergency situation in South Vietnam. I immediately sent a cable to the ship company back home requesting that they cancel all contracts so that Truong Xuan could have returned to Saigon immediately.

Within one month, more than ten provinces in the Zone 1 and 2 fell to the communists. Some South Vietnamese generals ran away from the war. Vietnamese citizens who were fleeing were in such panic that some were even trampled over. The fear of the communists and of their threats made people desperate to leave the country. Some people even clung to the wheels of planes that were taxiing for departure. They either fell to the ground or were crushed to death. People were left starving or dying of thirst on big barges floating on the sea.

I had no choice but to go back home. To do what, I was not sure but I knew that I had to return home. Truong Xuan left Pare Pare on April 7, stopped over at Singapore to pick up food and arrived at Pier 5 of Khanh Hoi port at around 2PM on April 17. Saigon was in an utmost disturbing state.

## *The Dark Days*

Phuoc Long was lost on January 6, 1975 when Truong Xuan had just left Bangkok. It was ironic that the whole province fell to the communists after the Paris cease-fire had been signed. This was the first defeat in 3 months. Phuoc Long had always been threatened and under tremendous pressure by the communists. In the mean time our South Vietnamese resistance was weak because of unfavorable logistics. The communist tanks and their guns had overrun Phuoc Long. The South Vietnamese airplanes had been badly damaged by "made in the U.S.S.R." SA.7 missiles. The inability to recapture Phuoc Long by the South Vietnamese army had created adverse psychological effects. Civilians as well as military personnel were demoralized as the communist forces became stronger and stronger. This battlefield could also have been the way the Communists tested our reaction.

Truong Xuan continued to load and transport cement sailing from the Philippines to various islands of Indonesia. The communists started their plan to attack our military zones 1 and 2 throughout the whole month of March 1975. Route 19 in the East, Route 14 in the south of Pleiku, and Route 21 in the west of Ban Me Thuot, were partly destroyed in the early days of March 1975.

The communists started their attack at Quang Tri, Thua Thien on March 8. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Division of the Army Zone II was brought in to reinforce Phuoc An but failed to stop the advancing communist troops. There was a long commentary on the failure of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Division, on a foreign radio. Ban Me Thuot finally fell on March 13.

Viet Cong took over Kontum then Pleiku on March 17. They crossed over Thach Han River and they attacked Quang Tri that fell to them on March 20. Quang Duc followed suit with defeat on March 22. Quang Ngai, Tam Ky fell on March 24. Our South Vietnamese troops left Hue on March 25.

It was disheartening to listen to Australian Radio and the BBC describing the collapse of Army Zones I and II. Thousands of our elite troops had disintegrated even before the fight. It was such a frightening and demoralizing news.

There were bizarre scenes on Route 7. The retreating South Vietnamese troops were in complete disarray and were trapped and ambushed. There was shoving and trampling among civilians and military personnel. Old people, women and small children who fell were crushed by armored vehicles and cars. There were explosions from landmines and communist guns. Really hell on earth! The survivors of the attacks trampled on the bodies of the dead. Everyone was for himself, creating a scene of mass chaos. The enemy attacked both from the front and back of the defeated army of troops

and civilians. People died like an army of defenseless ants with their bodies piling up along the road, the creek and along the edge of the forest. Bodies were strewn everywhere.

Of 60,000 troops retreating from Pleiku, around 20,000 of them reached Tuy Hoa but by then they lost their fighting spirits. Civilians were tragically worse: just 100,000 out of 500,000 civilians were about to reach the coasts. Army Zone 1 didn't fare that well either. According to Radio Australia and BBC, there was bad news for the South. Unfortunately, BBC news was only helping the communists as a propaganda tool to demoralize the fighting spirit of our South Vietnamese army. Was it an international plot? Do you still remember the world division act under the influence of Russia and the United States of America according to the Yalta agreement?

The Army was in disarray and hundreds of thousands of refugees were feverishly fleeing. These broadcast news reports only served to bewilder and totally demoralize radio audiences. According to the news, Nha Trang and Phan Rang had fallen to the communists, but in reality they were still under government's control. They announced that negotiation between the two sides, "us and the enemy", was possible only if the South simply surrendered.

On April 3, Radio Australia broadcasted that the Communists were just about 60km from Saigon while in reality Phan Rang and Phan Thiet were not yet lost. I was one of the witnesses who had closely listened to the news of Radio Australia and BBC. So I followed all the news about the situation in Vietnam, from outside of Vietnam. I realized that the foreign news had been a helping hand to the Communists and they had largely contributed to the quick collapse of South Vietnam.

Danang was the largest commercial port in the Centre of Vietnam. During the Communist attack in the mid summer of 1972, 100,000 fleeing refugees, from Quang Tri for Danang, had already created a lot of trouble for this city. Officials did not know how to solve the problem of overcrowding. Air ticket agencies and bus companies had a good opportunity to make money from the fleeing refugees. Poor people had to shelter themselves in burning hot tents set on the sand. The situation was getting more and more tense as more refugees arrived at Danang. I requested the Truong Thanh ship to transport 300 passengers to Saigon. From that point, all civilian ships took their turn to give free transportation to the refugees.

The first load of refugees had given me a big headache. The agency in charge of food supply for the refugees had conveniently dumped its duty to our ship, without saying anything. Out in the ocean, we "discovered" that there was no food. I had to order the crew members to bring up all the waste rice that came out of torn bags, and stored in the ship so that we could have cooked rice soup for everyone. Upon docking, the ship owner provided 20 trucks to take all the refugees to Long Khanh for their settlement. I wonder how many refugees on Truong Thanh ship were able to escape Vietnam on April 30, 1975.



Hue was abandoned, so was Chu Lai and Quang Tri was lost. People fled in mass. The rumors created a shaking sense of loss among the troops. Some soldiers deserted the army to look for their families. Civilians, old and young, were frightened. A wave of people headed for Danang seeking refuge. The BBC broadcasted the frighteningly the scary news.

People rushed into Danang and headed towards its port, dashed into the airport, wave after wave. It was chaos, the sense of order no longer existed. Many army units deserted their outpost as troops looked for their families; officers left their units to look for their children and wives. Danang's population doubled from its 700,000 people. Hundreds of thousands of people had been waiting for transportation means for days. Orders to use all civilian ships had not been signed by the Transportation minister. This delay created a bottleneck situation, resulting in an unsolvable traffic jam.

Frightened Vietnamese men crammed themselves into airplanes in order to escape. Civilian ships were also on their panicked way to escape. They dared not come in to dock.

The Army Corps commander with his normal 250,000 soldiers now only had a handful of men left. The Navy fleet, in peaceful time, having 150 military ships now did not have any means to move while retreating. Some 3 million people from Thua Thien, Quang Nam, and Quang Ngai were running away from the communists but less than 100,000 persons could really have escaped.

On Truong Xuan, we heard that Ban Me Thuot fell when we reached Balik Papan. When leaving Balik Papan on April 2, we heard that Qui Nhon and Tuy Hoa were taken over by the communists. The next day, South Vietnamese troops abandoned Nha Trang, Dalat, and Dalat Military Academy. Some of my crew started showing sympathy for the Communists.

The Xuan Loc battle started on April 7. On April 14, a new Premier and Cabinet were formed but, unfortunately, they could not have brought back any hope. The Communists took over Phan Rang Airport on April 16, and they captured the South Vietnamese commanding staff of the second army corps. The Xuan Loc battle ended because of the retreat of the 18<sup>th</sup> division. Ironically, there had been news that our South Vietnamese Army had destroyed thirty-seven T54 tanks and 5000 Viet Cong soldiers had been killed.

From April 21, on, there was no more resistance from the South Vietnamese Army; 13 Viet Cong divisions were on the outskirts of Saigon. On this same day, Nguyen Van Thieu resigned as President of South Vietnam. It was too late for the South Vietnamese.

On April 28, Duong Van Minh became the new president who unconditionally surrendered to the Communists on April 30, 1975.

The surrender created a dead end for our people. Thousands of South Vietnamese left Vietnam. Where were they going? They were helpless and hopeless. Before them,

“there was just a white infinity, overcast by the foggy mist”. Behind them, hatred was burning the country, stopping them from returning. People were fleeing at any cost, any means, flowing out of Vietnam like water falls and rising tides. Even wild and virgin forests could not have stopped them. They were not even afraid of deep oceans. They departed to warn humanity about the danger of Communism. They left with the hope of one day they could return to a free and peaceful land.

## *Sparks of Hope*

According to the Australian broadcast, the communists were marching toward Saigon. To come home or not to come home, that was the question. I was so preoccupied with this question. While Truong Xuan was docking at Pare Pare, an Indonesian man, Mr. Inkiriwang, who hired us to ship cement from the Philippines to Indonesia, had promised to shelter me at Makassar if Saigon would have fallen, a promise that he said he kept secret for me.

Only the second mate, Mr. Tran Van Chat, agreed to seek political asylum. I was ready with all the necessary paperwork and clothing in the event that the Communists had already occupied Saigon. We would have kept Truong Xuan and asked for political asylum and we would have called for a press conference to tell the world that we could have never lived under a communist regime. We were not able to save our country, the only thing we could do was to divulge to the world communists' crimes.

My mind was confused and disturbed, the whole day I had to calculatingly face difficult situations: anything bad could have happened at any time ... Chat had started doing physical exercises. "In order to gain physical strength to work just in case of political asylum", he told me.

Saigon was threatened but not yet occupied by the Viet Cong. Truong Xuan did not stay back at Pare Pare for political asylum; instead it headed back for Saigon. On our voyage back to Saigon, my heart was filled with both hope and anxieties.

Saigon was in a state of much uncertainty. On April 20<sup>th</sup> 1975 I met Mr. Tran Dinh Truong, the owner of Vishipcolines shipping company, I requested of him:

- We should use the company's fleet to transport overseas all of those Vietnamese who will try to escape in the event that Vietnam falls. The fleet of ships is national property, they should not belong to the communists."

I strongly added:

- We have got to recruit Mr. Le Hong Phi as chief engineer. The second mate reported that there was a plan to keep the ships in Vietnam"

The ship owner replied:

- I am still young, but I already have observed everything and I have my plans. If the river route from Saigon to Vung Tau is out of security, there would be American Marines to look after it (!). You do not have to worry about that, Captain.

Truong's words only brought me despairs. Had I had the full authority to use the whole company's fleet of ships, it wouldn't have been that difficult to ship out 30 or 40 thousand refugees. The world still did not know the Communists' cunning plans. They

do not want to take over South Vietnam alone but they also wanted to invade South East Asia, and the whole world as well. So many refugees running away from them, to a certain extent, had echoed to the world the danger of Communism.

Unable to use the company's fleet to ship out refugees, Truong Xuan was my last hope.

Truong Xuan started loading scrap metal on April 21, 1975, ready for Manila. It was the time for major repairs to the ship, but because of the emergency situation we only had time to repair the absolutely necessary parts. The dry dock time for the ship had to be postponed. Our loading crane was not functioning and we had to rent a new crane to load the cargo. The steam boiler was turned off in order to gut out all the rusty areas.

The scrap metal was totally loaded as of April 26. All the paperwork for customs and overseas visas had been completed, yet the ship still did not have its chief engineer.

While on the trip around South East Asia, the chief engineer T., 60 years old or more, had often listened to the pro communist news from Radio Australia and the BBC. When Truong Xuan arrived at Singapore, T. went shopping alone and was quite drunk. T. fell and became unconscious upon arrival at the port. The local police had to take him to the hospital because of his head injury.

I told T. at the hospital:

- You have a head injury, it is quite dangerous. You'd better stay in the hospital until you are totally recovered. I will arrange with the company so that you are fully paid while resting."

T. begged the hospital staff to discharge him. He went back to the ship still in pain and he could not work. When we got back to Saigon, T. had to quit his job, as he had not recovered from his head injury.

We resolved the first step with T. quitting his job. Until April 27 there was still no chief engineer for Truong Xuan. Cao Trung who was originally a mechanical engineer, later becoming a major in the army corps of engineers, accepted the chief engineer position. Interestingly, he was also a famous practitioner of Feng Shui. But only one day after, he left the ship in order to escape by air. He probably recognized the many problems that ship was saddled with.

Tran Dinh Truong, the ship owner, was still very optimistic that the ship captain was still level headed enough to control the ship during critical and chaotic times. In order to run the ship smoothly, there should have been enough crewmembers; the chief engineer and the telecommunication officer hold the most important position onboard. The ship owner did not share the same view as the ship captain.

In my 30 years of sea journey experience, I observed that the majority of my Southerner colleagues who had not lived under the communists tended to believe in the communist propaganda. Consequently, they were rather unsympathetic to the Northern refugees when they moved to the South in 1954. I had to be extremely cautious when dealing with them on my plans to flee from the Communists. Had the ship company not

agreed to hire Le Hong Phi as the chief engineer, the use of Truong Xuan to transport refugees would not have been realized.

Many of my friends and relatives had asked me to be their means of escape. I had to tell them about the ship's condition, the difficulties that we had and the actions that we had to take.

There was a huge crowd at the American Embassy and Tan Son Nhut airport. Everyone was struggling to get in so that they could escape by air. Saigon was at its boiling point. Everyone was trying to escape.

Those who were lucky enough to be picked up by the Americans already knew their destinations. But for thousands of those who were frightened by the cruel Communists' atrocities, the sea was their only means of escape. They did not know where to go, they did not know what would have happened to them. People were looking for ways to escape; the highways were full of standing traffic. The Communists blocked the route from Phu Lam to Hau Giang. The escape routes through the American Embassy and through the airport were only reserved for those who had money and power.

Groups and groups of people were running around as if they were sucked into a twister. They were running in confused directions as if they were hypnotized. They were frightened and desperate. Rockets and missiles were exploding. Colonel Vu Lo came to see me. He told me that approximately 300 discharged soldiers were exploiting lands in Go Cong as a settlement. He and his army friends had spent most of their lives in the war; it was a certainty that they would be in the Communists' reprisal list. I told him: "Truong Xuan always accepts people like you as well as any other refugee compatriots who want to escape together. But the ship needs its chief engineer. Please follow the news to be well informed."

While writing about my journey of escape, 8 years later, I wondered about what had happened to the colonel whom I met at the end of April 1975. Where were they (the colonel and his troops)? Were they able to escape? Were they fighting in the forests or were they miserably in jail? According to the latest news, Vu Lo and his family arrived in South California as H.O. members.

Phuong Chi, my youngest sister, came to bid me goodbye before she left with her Defence Attaché Office. Dan Ha, my daughter, departed with her First National City Bank company workers. My elder sister-in-law also came to say goodbye before leaving with the Free World Radio staff members.

Going to sea was an easy route for me, as I had been going around South East Asia for the past 30 years. But now I felt hopeless and helpless, as I couldn't figure out how to escape to the sea, by ship or by boat. My older brother Kha lamented that our relatives did not want to leave the country. We had signed the house transfer paper to him. Thu Giang, my daughter, also gave him the full authority to use her dental office. My brother Chac had bluntly refused "to go as a refugee with the Americans because of

their betrayal” even though one of his nephews who was a major in the Air Force had flown his helicopter to pick him up at Lam Dong. So many of the Pham family members had left North Vietnam after the Geneva Agreement was signed in 1954. None of us could have ever predicted that we were totally shattered refugees again. Whoever could have fled would have escaped. No one could have helped anyone else.

I dared not promise anyone any means of escape. I did not want to give anyone any false hope as I myself was not given the authority to command the ship the way I wanted.

I had so many plans before leaving Pare Pare, but my hopes to carry them out were slowly dying, if not already killed.

Vu Quoc Trinh, one of my countrymen - born in North Vietnam - came and asked me to allow him to go with us; he even offered to pay for all the expenses. I honestly told him:

- I myself am not in control of the ship because of lack of crewmembers. If the ship is able to sail, please join us. No one has to pay for the fare as we are losing our whole nation.

Tan Nam Viet ship was docking at Pier number 5, right next to Truong Xuan. There were soldiers guarding the gate. People were able to peacefully and safely board the ship. Soldiers guarded the gangway. I met the ship owner on April 26. He wanted me to be the captain of this ship. I asked him:

- What about my family?

And he replied:

- Yes, your family members are all welcome.

It was a very important decision. I thought of my family, and I thought of the moments I had to take control when the ship faced technical problems, and of the possibility that people became rebellious just like what had happened when people left central Vietnam. What could the ship captain have done when everyone was in panic, looking for his or her survival?

I did not accept the proposal as the Tan Nam Viet ship captain. It left Saigon early in the morning of April 30, just before the surrender time, without a ship captain.

My wife’s younger brother, who was living in the United States, had sponsored us and sent us the papers that had the signature of the secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, allowing family to escape by air. After my wife and three daughters (Giang, Hoai and Dung) had entered the Tan Son Nhat gate, I went back to my house with my youngest son, Pham Truc Lam, who was a Minh Duc University student. If it was only for the two of us, we could have easily found our way to escape even during the most difficult time.

I still did not give up my hope to help people escape by sea, as many of them as possible, despite the fact that I felt hopeless at times. When my wife and three daughters came back home from the airport, I sank down into a chair in disbelief. They had only allowed my wife to board the airplane explaining that the travelling documents did not

show all the names of my family. I had thought that my mind would have been clearer at this point but with this twist of events I was now even more confused and worried.

On the way to Saigon harbour, the houses and streets had not changed but they appeared more desolate. All the houses were closed, streets were littered with garbage. People in the streets were aimlessly in a hurry, and they all looked worried. It was dead quiet at some places while it was so noisy in others. Truong Xuan was still quietly at anchor in the dock. Chat informed me that the ship's condition was no better. We still did not have a chief engineer. The mechanics onboard looked rather suspicious. Chat recounted the words he heard from the chief officer:

-Who are the communists? Aren't they Vietnamese? Why are you so afraid of them that you need to run away?

The majority of the crewmembers were born in the South and they did not understand communism. People who had not fully understood communism had to live under the communists in order to know them. Unfortunately, by that time, it was too late. One of my colleagues, Hoang Phuoc Qua, stayed back in Saigon after April 30. He had his means of escape as he was a navigator. He wrote to me four years later from a refugee camp in the Philippines:

- My family, myself, some friends and Nguyen Van Diet (the telecommunication officer of Truong Xuan who resigned in order to stay back in Saigon at 9AM on April 30, 1975) we all left Saigon in a small boat. We were chased away at Singapore. Our dinghy continued its journey to the Philippines. Thanks to my experience as a navigator, we luckily survived. Everyone onboard was safe. Now, I am one of the happiest people on earth as I have really understood the meaning of Communism..."

His words were simple but he was able to express his despair because before 1975, he had not really had any experience living with the Communists.

What could I have done without the help of a reliable chief engineer? I wanted to recruit Phi, who had previously worked on Truong Thanh for 2 years. He was extremely resilient, intelligent and competent. His technical knowledge far exceeded other chief engineers. Yet, the ship owner still had not agreed recruiting him.

I met with the ship owner everyday but my hope of evacuating refugees by sea just faded away each time. I asked Chat to tell the ship owner that if they could not find a chief engineer soon, Truong Xuan would be left back in Saigon. The ship would not have functioned properly if we could not mechanically control it.

I came home in the evening, in total despair. The American offices had been ransacked of furniture and other equipment. Lawlessness had clearly reigned the Capital.

I met one of my nephews, Major Tran Khac Thuyen who had come back from his outpost in Van Kiep in order to ask his aunt to look after his very sick father. He was stuck back in Saigon as the Saigon-Vung Tau highway had been occupied by the Communists.

I became more and more disturbed as I was not able to be in full control of my ship. I did not know of any organizations that helped people get out of Vietnam. I was not even sure that the US Seventh Fleet would have rescued escapees on the Ocean. Nor was I informed of any country in the world that would have accepted Vietnamese refugees.

The ship owner telephoned when I was in this state of mental turmoil:

- Captain, please take your whole family to stay on Trinh Minh The Street (near Khanh Hoi harbor). When Truong Hai ship is ready to sail, I will let you know right away. Right now, as you are staying at Cong Hoa Soccer field. It is too far away and I am not sure that you can be informed fast enough.

I acknowledged Truong's good intentions for my family. But he had his own motives. He had to look after his own fleet of ships first. As for me I wanted to help my family and my compatriots run away from the Communists, the more the better. Pity that he and I could not have compromised any earlier.

Tran Dinh Truong rarely told Ship Captains about plans for his company's ships. For that reason, I did not totally believe him. As for me, I had to be totally in control of what I had to do. Unsure about his plan, I decided not to take my family to Khanh Hoi harbour. Besides, I could not have afforded to pay for any other kind of accommodation for my whole family.

Strangely, Truong never mentioned about Truong Xuan. Perhaps he was not able to meet my demands. Perhaps he suspected that I would have taken advantage to charge refugees money for my own pocket?

I still hung on to my thin hope of being able to ship out people escaping the Communists. I did not accept the position of ship captain for the Tan Nam Viet ship. I had no hope of using Truong Xuan. There was no way out. The situation became more and more critical. I felt so guilty each time I thought about my family being stuck back in Vietnam.

I visited Truong Xuan daily, sometimes more than once. The ship was totally deserted in the morning of April 28, not even a sailor onboard. Chat, the officer on duty and his sailor crew had left the ship. The ship owner still had not agreed to appoint Le Hong Phi as the chief engineer. My hope just disappeared. The political situation changed every hour.

I left the company office, heading back toward Truong Xuan. I was not sure how to cope with the ever changing situation. I wanted to see Chat in the hope that he would be able to give me some ideas. He lived in the Hang Xanh area and had no telephone. The whole crew had deserted the ship. The war situation already influenced even the harbour. Everyone had to look after himself and his family. I left the harbour totally heart broken. Truong Xuan still did not have its chief engineer.

I told my family that here was no hope to escape by means of Truong Xuan. In the afternoon, I went to Phu Nhuan to visit my relatives in order to get more recent news



so that I could plan for our escape. I also wanted to keep myself occupied in order to stay away from hopeless thinking. My health was getting worse and worse.

The telephone rang as I was having dinner at my sister-in-law's. It was my wife on the phone:

- Vuong telephoned from Tan Son Nhat airport. At 8PM tonight, we will be picked up by Ky's (General Nguyen Cao Ky) men. We will then fly out.

I was somewhat encouraged at this news. At least my wife and my children could have escaped without so much trouble. Once the plane took off, Lam (my youngest son) and I being left behind would have acted on our own as I had planned when I was still at Pare Pare harbour.

Le Dinh Vuong picked up my wife and our four children (3 daughters and 1 son) together with Tran Dinh Thang's family at 8PM on April 28. They picked me up at Phu Nhuan. I was reluctant to get into the car. I still had the idea that I myself would have shipped out my fellow citizens but not the idea that I was being picked up for the escape of just us alone.

The car stopped at the airport. It did not move for an hour. Up until now, I still couldn't figure out why so many soldiers ended up at the airport. Guns and ammunitions were left on the street before entering the gate. I personally witnessed the disintegration of the South Vietnamese army in such a bizarre order. These courageous soldiers of the past were entering the airport, but where would they have gone? Who would have collected those piles of guns and ammunitions? These questions continued to haunt my mind for many years.

It was 10 PM already. Everything was strictly checked. But when the guards recognized Le Dinh Vuong's car, we were able to get through easily. General Ky's residence was full of relatives, including my sister-in-law's family.

It was 11PM then 12PM. Every body was waiting. I did not hear any news about evacuation. I followed Vuong like a robot. I met his wife, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Huyen, but I was not in the mood to say hello. By 1AM, Mrs. Huyen whispered into my ears:

- Brother Ky had already gone for a meeting (General Ky was Vice-President). According to him the plane was to take off before 2AM. According to the intelligence source the Communists would have begun shelling sometime that morning.

At that moment, Lieutenant-Colonel Nguyen Van Phuong, the chief pilot of the C123 Airforce Unit took the refugee's list. Many people were rejected. My family was on the list of the lucky ones.

The reception hall was large, but dimly lit and full of people. There was only quiet whispers. Everyone was lost in thought.

Around 4AM on April 29, 1975 there was a sharp noise piercing the air followed by the thundering of explosions. The airport was under attack by rockets; brick debris was flying all over, making a loud noise on the roof. Houses were directly hit by rockets and burning like huge torches. Everyone lay flat on the floor. We stayed where we were

as we did not know where to go to hide ourselves. I was not scared of the rockets. I was only afraid of being killed for no valid reason at all and being ridiculously hit by them.

Rockets continued to explode for 2 hours until sunrise. Nguyen Van Phuong, the chief pilot, disappeared. Nguyen Cao Ky came back at 7AM and told us that everyone would be transported to Can Tho by helicopter, then we would be flown out to the Philippines or directly to Guam, via Con Son Island first. Ky was standing at the entrance door and I did not want to ask him for any news. To avoid wasting our time, I urged my wife and our children to head home from the airport.

My wife quietly told me at the airport gate:

-Cousin Ky reassured all his relatives that Tan Son Nhut Airport would be well defended. It would take the Communists 10 days to capture the Airport if they decide to attack.

Again rockets continued to explode. Areas surrounding the airport such as Phu Nhuan, Chi Lang...were shelled. Many people died. One helicopter was hit, it exploded right by Thai To street, near Nga Bay district.

Around 4 PM on April 29, a familiar Mercedes Benz stopped in front of our home. Tran Dinh Truong gave me a document and said in an exceptionally grave voice:

- You are the only one who was granted this permit. This is a permit issued by the Interior Department to allow you to ship out our people to Phu Quoc Island. You have your own authority to use the ship. Chief engineer Le Hong Phi will board the ship...Goodbye captain, I will fly out by helicopter.

Truong hopped into his car and drove away. Holding this permit in my hand, I was both hopeful and worried.

The rocket shelling early in the morning of April 29 that started the communist attack on the Tan Son Nhat Airport had suddenly changed Truong's mind.

## *Leaving the Country Behind*

Saigon suburbs were continuously shelled with rockets. There was no sign of soldiers and police in the streets. Ignoring the curfew, people ran away in the streets. Everyone thought that the battle in Saigon would have been a big one and that they had to leave the capital.

Having the permit to transport people I felt more hopeful but I also felt nervous at the same time. Lam, my son, gave me a ride to Pier 5. It was already 6PM. Truong Sinh ship came back on April 25 and it docked next to Truong Xuan. During this critical period, Truong Sinh's main engine had been dismantled for repair. It lay immobile in the dock and was left behind.

Once onboard of Truong Xuan this time, my heart beat much faster than other times. Something unusual had happened or was happening. Nobody was found on the deck. The door to the engine room was shut. Lam quietly followed me, saying nothing. During the last turbulent days of April 1975, my son Lam and myself were always together.

It was getting dark. I wanted to stay back to wait for Phi. I was wondering whether I should have really stayed back to meet Phi when Chat came up and told me: "Chief engineer Phi boarded the ship at 4PM today. He told me that we could start leaving tomorrow around lunchtime, after he'll have checked everything. He's gone home to pick up his family."

- What about the crewmembers? How come no one is on duty?

I asked, just for the sake of asking. The troops were falling apart. Law, order and discipline were deteriorating. People were treating each other according to their own relationships and friendships.

I picked up a piece of chalk and wrote on a small blackboard to be hung on the gangway:

**TRUONG XUAN WILL LEAVE SAIGON**

**11:30AM, APRIL 30,1975.**

I did not specify the destination. I planned to head for Phu Quoc in the event that the war against the communists still continued. In the event that South Vietnam was defeated and it had to surrender to the Communists, Truong Xuan would have headed for overseas.

I was hoping to be able to ship out as many refugees as possible if they wanted to leave on their own free will. My countrymen and women should have made up their own

minds to avoid regrets later on. They should have only left if they decided not to stay back.

I left Truong Xuan at 8 PM. Saigon was under curfew day and night. The gate to the harbor was locked. Streets were ghostly quiet. Lam drove me in our small car. From Khanh Hoi back to the Cong Hoa soccer field, we passed by familiar streets: Trinh Minh The, Ham Nghi, Le Van Duyet, Hong Thap Tu, Ly Thai To, Tran Quoc Toan, Nguyen Kim and then Tan Phuoc...I had passed by these streets so many times during my seaman career.

They kept on with their shelling...

I had to run away from the war so many times before, since the Viet Minh (Vietnamese Communists at their early stage) took over in 1945. I left my village at the end of 1946. I ran away from Hai Phong when the French landed there. After I had left Hanoi for Ha Dong at 5pm of December 19, 1946, the French started their attack at midnight. We had to retreat to Nho Quan, Hoa Binh, Viet Tri, staying at the edge of the jungle of Lang Sao located at Phu Tho, along the Lo River. In 1954, our whole family had to flee to the South to seek freedom. Then, 21 years later, we had to flee again.

Our greatest emotional loss was the loss of our villages, our country. Walking in Saigon, our capital, in the middle of the quiet night gave me a big chill. I was totally preoccupied with our journey to be taken the following day. To go to Phu Quoc or to leave our country forever?

I wondered whether Phi would be able to cope with sabotage in the event that we left our country. I shuddered at the idea of the ship losing control on the ocean with its engine totally paralyzed. Hunger and thirst, mutiny, killing, rape...

As soon as I got home, I told my family that Truong Xuan would be departing the next day. I reminded them to pack their luggage which consisted of a small bag of clothing for each person, some pills for the cold and stomach upset, personal papers and some photo albums. I also told my relatives and neighbors about the ship departure. It was up to them to make their own decision about leaving the country.

Special Forces Lieutenant-Colonel Nguyen Van Nghe who lived nearby voluntarily offered 2 GMC trucks to transport my people. Tran Dinh Thang was to prepare a passenger's list, just in case we had problems at the harbour gate. Le Dinh Vuong who had picked us up the previous night at Tan Phuoc for the Tan Son Nhat Airport was now with us ready to escape via Truong Xuan. Le Van Ty who was the richest among our neighbours was appointed as the "diplomat"...

I did not get a wink of sleep throughout the whole night. I was tense and exhausted. I had longed for this journey in order to ship out my fellow countrymen. I had abandoned my sea trips around South East Asia, just to come back to Saigon with the hope of helping my country, even with a small gesture so that I would not have felt guilty for the rest of my life. I had not lost my initiatives but I had to cope with so many difficulties and dangers that it really slowed me down. Late in the night, some cousins

from Phu Nhuan told me on the phone that the Communist troops had occupied many places. Hearing the news, I made up my mind: I had to leave Saigon at all costs. There was no other way.

At 5AM on April 30, 1975, I asked Tuan Son to send my message to my nephews Pham Quan Hong and Le Tat Dat who lived in Trieu Da district, that they had to leave immediately. Thuyen, Lam and myself went to the port to check the ship condition. I told everyone to wait for me at home and not to leave without me. The route from Ly Thai To to Tran Hung Dao was barricaded. The route from Minh Mang to Phan Thanh Gian was also blocked. We had to return to Tran Quoc Toan, turned to Le Van Duyet, to Ham Nghi then to Tran Minh The. Just a few passengers boarded Truong Xuan at 7:30AM. A young man, Loc, a paratrooper, knew me (I met him again in 1977) and asked:

- Will the ship operate O.K.?
- Yes, for sure.

I nodded while talking. I did not ask anyone to leave the country except for my relatives who had had their own experience living under the communists' rule. Yet, I would have never refused those who wanted to flee when they boarded our ship. Leaving for good should truly have reflected one's own wishes.

Phi and Chat's families had arrived here the night before. They had to pay money in order to get through the gate at Pier 5. Phi confirmed that Truong Xuan would have been ready to sail out as planned. There were no crewmembers yet. In this situation, it was totally up to the crewmembers to come along or not; it was pointless in forcing them to leave against their will. Lam stayed back in the ship. Duong who was Chat's younger brother drove Thuyen and me back to the house.

The two GMC trucks were standing still at the crowded intersection of Tan Phuoc and Nguyen Kim. All my relatives and neighbours were in the trucks, about 200 of them altogether. Thuyen guided the truck drivers toward the port, just to make sure that they wouldn't get lost somewhere. I came back to pay my last visit to the house that had sheltered my family for twenty years. I had been a seaman for many years, the two-story house was as small as ever, just 3.3 meters wide and more than 7 meters long. Its veranda extended to the curb, we often sat there to enjoy the cool breeze in the evening. The front yard was very small, yet we were able to plant a star fruit tree. In its flowering season the star fruit tree bloomed luxuriously. I had the strange feeling that I was visiting another garden when I looked at the flowers with purple petals mixed with white petals. Leaving behind such a modest house, I felt a pain in my heart. Our dear little house had nurtured so many of our memories. I was considered as the richest person in my Pham family, even though I lived in this "slum house". Twenty families of the Pham's who had left North Vietnam for the South, were probably the poorest among the North Vietnamese refugees. We all had to struggle to make a living on a daily basis. None of us could have helped others financially. I was the one with the highest salary but it was so costly to

raise 9 children that we could not have bought a big house and a nice car like my colleagues. We had to take the bus, the tricycle, and the cyclo...

While I was reminiscing next to the star fruit tree, my older brother Kha came to bid me goodbye. He was frail and looked haggard. Suddenly, I felt so sorry for him and loved him so much. He sent his two sons, Tuan Son and Tuan Hung, to go with me to the ship. His eldest son was a major, who as a pilot had to leave his wife and his children behind in order to flee to Can Tho with his strategic committee. My brother Kha had been put in jail at Dam Dun (a prison where the Communists kept their opponents) for 2 years. He was jailed for his "plot to overthrow the government". I dared not think about his fate when he decided to stay back. We tightly held hands. I dared not look at him in order to avoid my emotions. I was in a haze, yet I can still vividly remember him when we bid goodbye. My brother did not say anything, only quietly walked away into the house, alone.

I visited him two days before and gave him \$US 20 from my "cash capital" of \$US 200 that was given to me by a Singapore company. My wife had saved more than 100,000 Vietnamese Piastres (or Dong in Vietnamese), several gold rings, a couple of bracelets and one ounce of gold. Our family's financial resources were only that much when we fled.

To me, money or gold was meaningless in a time like this. Emotional and spiritual losses and nervous breakdowns were the only important events for me.

After 15 minutes of visiting our house for the last time, I went into the car with Duong and Thuyen who had waited for me at the front door. The GMC trucks had just arrived when we got to Pier 5. Dang Giao, my nephew arrived with Le Tat Dat's family in his car. The gate at the port was still closed. Dat and his wife sat still in the car.

I told them in a loud voice:

- Please get out of the car and get into the GMC truck immediately.

They and their 8 children just got out of their car, then Hoa quickly picked up their youngest child and shoved him into the truck.

Dat's wife screamed:

- My God! What about my belongings, cousin Hoa?"

Hoa shouted loud:

- Christ Lord! Just save the people first...Get in quickly! Whatever you can bring, bring them and leave the rest behind.

Dang Giao came to me:

- Uncle, please allow Mr. Chu Tu (a famous writer) and my brother in law's family to come along with you!

- Yes! Please take them here. I will wait. You are not coming?

- No uncle, I am not leaving.

I went to see the policeman at the gate and asked him to open the gate.

- You are transporting whom?

- My family and my fellow refugees. I have the permit to transport them to Phu Quoc Island.

- No way! How come your family is so big, about 200 people?

- What do you mean? I have the authority to transport any refugee to Phu Quoc.

How come other people were allowed to get in over there?

Hung, who was Nghe's son and a special force lieutenant with a revolver in his trousers, was anxious to take action. But Le Van Ty was quicker with his envelope from his briefcase, and gave it to the policeman. The gate was open wide and the barbed wire barricade was removed. After the 2 GMC trucks had entered the gate, a crowd of people followed suit and they got in safely. Le Van Giep, an architect, and his younger brother were among this crowd.

Around 9AM, a crowd of about 300 to 400 people had been waiting at the dock. The gangway to the ship was left open; any one who wanted to board the ship was welcome. People asked me:

- Captain, is the ship in good condition? When will you depart?

I replied with a very short sentence:

- Yes, it operates OK."

People stormed the ship either through the gangway or by means of the crane that had been used to load scrap metal a few weeks before. Mrs. Pham Xuan Mai, who had phoned me early in the morning to ask me about the escape, was already onboard. She told me:

- Lan was on the ship looking for you. She has probably returned to the gate already.

I got off the ship in a hurry trying to find my sister Lan, but I could not find her. She left her eldest son on the ship. Outside the gate at Pier 5, the situation looked very unusual, it appeared so different from just an hour before. People were frightened and they shoved one another. It looked as if something bizarre was happening.

The telecommunication officer, Nguyen Van Diet, explained:

- My family is not allowed to get through the gate.

- I will ask the police to interfere for you.

Diet and I rushed to the gate. The wild crowd flooded into the port through the barbed wire barricade. The police shot in the air to stop them. The wave of people suddenly stopped moving. Everyone appeared hopeless, they looked frightened with their pale faces. Diet did not find his family. He said:

- My family is lost somewhere, I have to stay back.

His words upset me but I tried to remain cool and collected:

- Well if you decide to stay back, there isn't much I can do.

Just as Diet left, Nguyen Ngoc Thanh, a telecommunications officer from another ship, volunteered as a substitute. I was so relieved! Thanh was with his son. His wife and their other children were still stuck behind. I gained my confidence, having my most

important assistants, chief engineer Phi and telecommunication officer Thanh, in the last minute.

The radio announcement at 10:25AM bewildered listeners. Duong Van Minh, the President of South Vietnam at that time, surrendered to the Communists without any conditions. He appealed to all the South Vietnamese troops to surrender their weapons. Such chilling news had created total hopelessness to people. I looked at the Saigon River. Hundreds of private and navy boats, ships were leaving Bach Dang port in a hurry. They passed by the main harbour, heading toward the sea. The unusual fleet moving at the same time had created big waves in the river, as if it were in a tropical storm.

Thirty years of war had ended in anger, fright and despair. To avoid losing our minds, I ordered everyone to turn off all radios. There was no other choice but to depart as soon as possible. There was no colleague to help me and I could not share my responsibilities with anyone. Besides, I could not find anyone reliable enough to delegate my responsibilities to. I constantly reminded myself: "Be calm, be determined, be tough..." just to keep me calm and levelheaded. I told myself that I was fortunate enough to have the chance of being the Captain of this special ship in this unique situation. Was it God who had chosen me for this opportunity, the Godly opportunity of being with so many of our compatriots in the most painful and frightening moments of our heart-breaking history. Many years after, upon reflection, I still did not understand how I could have been so calm and steadfast.

Waves of people suddenly rushed through Pier 5. The crowd was bigger and bigger heading toward Truong xuan. They came from the river, through the riverbank, behind the stern, around the front. They came up by all means: steps, cables, people's shoulders and anything they could have thought of. Veteran poet Bao Van was hoisted up into the ship from his small boat. Too heavy with his big body, he slipped into the water several times.

As people were more and more panicky, I felt more burdened with my own responsibilities but tried my best to keep calm. I asked Phi to speed up:

- Turn on the boiler to its maximum so that we can leave as soon as possible!

The higher the smoke came up, the larger it spread out. From afar, people saw the smoke and they headed toward Truong Xuan. This noiseless call had been an effective and miraculous sign of running away together.

There were many soldiers among civilians. They had been courageous fighters but the order to surrender had driven them to dead ends. I can still vividly remember the look on their faces. They appeared saddened and frantic. They had been fighting their whole live but now their hands were tied. They had to bow their heads in defeat as they were running away. I stood behind the bridge's door and dared not look at them in the eye. I loved and respected them all. I could have burst out crying if my eyes met theirs.



I was tormented and seriously obsessed by Chat's news about the sabotage. I knew what I had to do and how I had to act in order to ship our compatriots away from the land that had been our shelter for so long. I was not afraid of dangers but being easily emotional was my weakness. To be able to hold my tears was difficult for me. I would have lost my compatriots and my loved ones onboard, had I not been able to control my emotions and my head. Mental devastation and loss of my level headedness would only have created mental instability. I kept on telling myself to keep cool, and to avoid fear and panic.

Thanks to my many years on the high seas, I was accustomed to the large waves, and I became modest and cool. How else could a timid Captain have controlled the ship, particularly in such a crucial time? The seaman life had also given me more feelings, the feelings for my country and my family had grown more intense over the years as I had sailed on the high seas for so long. It must have been around 14 or 15 years that I had lived away from our country. As we normally joked among ourselves as sailor: "Marital life for sailors is more fascinating and it last longer as the spouses do not have enough time to argue between the times the sailors have to sail!"

A group of combat policemen in full uniform went up into Truong Xuan with their weapons drawn. Lieutenant-Colonel Luu Binh Hao who had been in charge of his troops quietly told me:

-As we were on the way to the suburbs to stop the communists, we heard news to surrender, we had to retreat.

When he finished his sentence he leaned his head against the wall, totally quiet saying absolutely nothing more.

After destroying a Communist tank at Bay Hien intersection, paratrooper Major Do Duy Nghia with some of his troops had to flee as he lost contact with his headquarter. Phan Thanh Binh, another paratrooper hero, who had destroyed a T54 tank at Ba Queo, fled toward Phu Lam. He intended to head for Luc Tinh (Southern provinces) but the Communists already occupied the route. He had no choice but to take the route to Khanh Hoi. By coincidence, he joined the wave of refugees and ended up in Truong Xuan.

Air force Major Dinh Quoc Hung, who was a pilot, passed through the crowd with his wife and four children, to meet me.

- Does the ship run O.K. Captain?

-Yes, sure it does!"

He was big with his strong voice and very bright eyes. He knew me through his sister Tuyet, who was a classmate at Trung Vuong high school with my daughter Dan Ha. He looked at me with his rather strange looking eyes as if he were trying to ask me for a favour. He said he had no money except for US \$100 that his mother gave to his family after selling her house. He had already spent some of this amount in order to sneak onto the ship. I immediately understood what he wanted to say, and I assured him:

-We are lucky to have survived, no one has to pay anything.

-Captain, if you need me to do anything, I'll help.

-You can not fly up there, but yes you can help me at sea!

I was in danger of having not enough staff and Hung came to me at the right time.

People onboard told me that some T54 tanks had already entered the Capital palace. Communist troops were marching into Saigon. They already occupied some important places. The South Vietnamese National Bank had already fallen into the Communists' hands.

I felt as if in a burning flame when I heard the news that the Communists were occupying Saigon. I had to remind myself often: "Got to keep cool! Fear will destroy everything!" I dared not meet with my wife and children, as I had no courage to see them. I tried not to imagine that the Communists were heading for Pier 5 in order to capture me, just to shoot me in front of my relatives.

Suddenly there was a dead silence on the ship, not a single whisper heard.

Hatred could not have given courage. Only love could have given me determination. The journey had to be safe. It was fortunate that I was still able to think clearly. Several thousands of compatriots and my family trying to escape the Communists were the main encouragement for me to try my best.

Chief engineer Phi told me that we could leave at 12:30PM.

Within 15 minutes, the executive committee was formed, consisting of:

- Tran Khac Thuyen, a Major from Van Kiep unit.
- Tran Van Duong, a teacher from Ho Ngoc Can high school.
- Le Dinh Hoa, a dentist.
- Pham Truc Lam, a student from Minh Duc University.
- Dinh Quoc Hung, a lieutenant colonel.
- Nguyen Huu Thong, a lawyer.
- Ngo Dinh Thien, a retired navy sergeant.

The security committee was assigned to the soldiers:

- Lt. Colonel Luu Binh Hao who was in charge with the help of:
- Paratrooper Major Do Duy Nghia
- Civilian Nguyen Quang Hai.
- Young military personnel such as Vinh Ta, Bui Ngoc Hoa...

Dr. Tran Van Kim entered the command room just in time to volunteer himself as the chief medical officer.

No one was forced to join the committees, they were all volunteers. In our utmost crisis, we had found solidarity among troops and civilians.

It was unbelievable that we could form the executive committee, the security committee and the health committee in such a record-breaking time. On reflection, I regret not having formed a supply committee.

I met Do Duy Nghia again in 1979 at Ulm in West Germany. Nghia told his friends during this occasion:

- When I was with the paratroopers I was careless and stubborn. But when I was on Truong Xuan I was of such disciplined character!

Everyone just burst out laughing.

At 12:30PM I gave orders for the ship departure. When we returned from Singapore, Truong Xuan was docked during ebb tide and had its bow pointing in land, facing Nha Rong. Thuyen and Duong released the mooring line when the engine started. The ship moved slowly. We tried to turn the ship around when the ship reached the wide space in the river, but it would not respond. It kept running straight as we steered it to the right. At the max right position of the steering wheel, the ship still did not respond. The steering system failed, we had to stop the ship and dock it again.

Phi dismantled the steering components and found water in the oil tube. He looked pale as he realized that there had been sabotage. Momentarily, I thought that the journey had to be cancelled. Without the steering system, not much could have been done, even with a very good engine.

I anxiously asked Phi:

- Can we change the oil now?

Phi hesitatingly replied:

- We've got to use the emergency backup steering system. But let me check it first, I'll let you know.

15 minutes passed and then another 15. Time seemed to stop. I felt as if I was in hot water. To wait in this condition at this moment was quite a torture for me. Phi told me finally that the standby system was possibly in order. Right at that moment a naval man volunteered himself to control the servomotor of the backup system which was located in a small room about 20 meters from the command room.

The tide was rising. Seizing this opportunity I gave order to release all mooring ropes and cables except for the headline. High tide slowly pushed to stern away from the shore. People were everywhere. Smoke rose up high into the sky. News about the Communists entering the Capital kept on coming. I held my breath as I watched positioning across the river. Big and small boats, even some navy boats full of people, clung to Truong Xuan. They kept on embarking Truong Xuan and the crowd got bigger and bigger. Bang Thanh Duc got into our ship at this moment.

With the headline holding the bow close to the dock, the rising tide kept on pushing the stern away from the dock until the ship turned 180 degrees. Truong Xuan was still in the port, pointing itself toward the sea.

Phi had accepted his chief engineer position at the last minute when the Communists started shelling Saigon. Thanh had replaced Diet the minute Diet left us. The main steering system was not working but we had the backup system. No ship captain would have dared operate his ship in such a critical condition. The sudden high tide had helped us turn our ship 180 degrees when it was still in the harbour. I consoled myself in order to build up my courage: "Yes, there was luck!"

At 1:25PM, three hours after the news of surrender, Phi rang the bell signaling the good news of our ability to depart.

Just as the headline (front mooring cable) was released, the wind coming from the riverbank pushed the ship further and further away from the port. Thank God for such a breeze. I closely followed every movement of the ship. When the ship was about 30 meters from the shore, it started moving slowly forward. The engine revved smoothly. I could never describe such a joyful feeling. I ordered through the loud speaker:

- Port 10 (10 degrees to the left).

Truong Xuan did not shift to the left but instead moved to the right.

- Zero, starboard 10 (10 degrees to the right).

The ship moved to the left. I immediately realized that the volunteer operator was not familiar with the backup steering system. He did not realize that he took the wrong direction since he could not see anything outside. I couldn't afford any time to explain to him. Whenever I wanted him to steer to the left or to the right, I just told him the opposite. It went along the river that way.

The ship moved faster as we passed Pier 18. I took a last look at Saigon harbour. I turned to my left to bid farewell to Thu Thiem that I would have left behind for good. A river breeze came. The engine took its momentum and the ship really sped up.

I stood behind the glass door that enabled me to discretely observe everything. Just a few people knew that I was the ship captain. The ship was crowded with people from bow to stern. Total dead silence. Just a few people moving. The security committee members did not have to take any action yet. The executive committee members were all present. Several young men were standing with their elbows resting on the ship railing. They looked down to the river, in deep thought. I wondered what was going through their heads. In front of the command room to my left, a young woman burst out crying. I guessed she was totally by herself on this sea journey.

As we reached Nha Be, across the fuel station, a few motorboats were rushing toward Truong Xuan. We slowed down in order to pick up some more passengers.

Thanh had been busy the whole morning trying to activate the telegram equipment. He announced:

- The Vietnam Thuong Tin ship was ambushed at Rung Sat. Dead people had been pushed into the sea. There was an S.O.S. message. The Tan Nam Viet was also ambushed.

These two ships had left before us. The person who was killed on Vietnam Thuong Tin was Chu Tu, a writer. Had Dang Giao left his father-in-law with us on the ship, would Chu Tu have been saved, I wondered. Some people philosophically concluded that life and death were dictated by our karmas when they heard of Chu Tu's death. Chu Tu's death had been predicted by this explanation: Chu means ship, Tu means death. Death on the ship was his destiny alright.

I asked Thanh:

- Can we send any message yet?

- Not yet Captain. I am still trying to figure it out.

Past Da Han, we got to a very sharp turn. While having not yet figured out how to cope with the possible enemy's attack, I suddenly heard some one proposing:

- Captain, please raise a white flag

- No, it's impossible. It's so obvious as it showed our location.

- How about the French flag?

I felt sad, we had already lost our country, yet people still were seeking protection from foreigners. We tried to keep the news of Viet Nam Thuong Tin and Tan Nam Viet being ambushed to ourselves for fear of creating panic among passengers.

The river got wider near Dong Tranh intersection. Suddenly, I heard the emergency bell; the generator failed. I was totally shocked. As we had no power to control the steering system, I had to depend on my instincts to keep the boat running at its very slow speed heading toward the wide space of the river so that I would have had my chance to cope.

Anchor the ship? Who would have been able to do that? There was not enough time to anchor properly. It happened so fast, so suddenly and worst of all we did not have the proper staff. Leave the ship in its wandering condition? It was also impossible as it would have run ashore. If it got stuck along side with the shore, how could we have gotten out of this situation afterwards? The ship could even have overturned if the riverbed was too steep. The ship dipped toward the riverbank and the engine reversed in order to slow the it down. Its bow slightly touched the shallow riverbed. The rest of the ship was still floating thanks to my experience to halt it in this "ideal" position.

I hid my face behind my hands and quietly uttered, just loud enough for myself to hear: "God!"

I tried to appear calm. Big disasters were waiting for us. How could I have kept my cool, not only for me but also for all passengers?

I went down to see Phi.

- Phi, please get ready with the air compression so that we could move backward freeing the ship from the bank. Try to get to the sea. It is already late. It's 5PM now!

- Captain, we don't have enough pressure to operate the main engine.

- Use the generator to charge compressor. It's very late already.

- We don't even have enough compression to start the generator. We need 16 kilos of pressure to start it. The dial only shows 12 kilos. That rascal Hoa had shut off the valve of the water cooling system that's why the generator stopped!

- Chief Phi, send him back to his room. Do not leave him in the engine room. Please do not let anyone know about this O.K.?

I was afraid that Hoa would have been killed onboard if Phi spread the bad news. It would be very hard to control violence once it exploded. Major Phan Huy Hoang was guarding the engine room with his M16 gun.

Ton Hoa was the grease man of the ship; he was still a bachelor. Intentionally or not, he had shut off the valve of the cooling system. He never had to come back to the engine room since we got aground.

I anxiously looked at Phi:

- What to do now?

- Captain, get young men to pump the compressor by hand.

The security committee started their duties. The appeal to young men to “pump the compressor and to pump out the water” was announced through the loud speakers.

I got back to the command room totally upset. How to overcome this deadly destiny? The ship was stuck in such a critical time. It tilted to its left. We asked passengers to move to the right. They did not respond and many of them remained immobilized instead. People started praying. Some passengers took out their wallets and started tearing up their personal papers and threw them down into the river. Some even chewed up their dollar bills. Truong Xuan in its grounded condition was a perfect target. Everyone was in fear of being captured by the Communists. Small navy boats with their white flags coming from Vung Tau were rushing toward Truong Xuan. They thought that our ship was waiting for nightfall to set sail for full security. They boarded our grounded ship.

Phi came to see me:

- Captain, in order to save time, please ask them to tow us out if you see any tug boat. I'll try to look after the engine in the mean time.

Just 10 minutes later, Song An boat, a river tugboat came along from Vung Tau. Many people shouted to Song An for help but it ignored us. Song An was forced back by many warning shots from automatic machine guns. Several paratroopers jumped onto Song An. I ordered them not to create any violence.

Song An fastened its cable to Truong Xuan and it tried to pull Truong Xuan away from the riverbank. Several times the cable snapped. The ship still did not move. A few more navy small boats helped but it was useless. One of the passengers showed his “expertise” by saying:

- Why pulling from the rear? I have never seen any ship being pulled from the rear to get out of its aground position. Got to be pulled from the front.

The snapped cable hit Nguyen Van Hau's face, damaging one of his eyes. He was seriously injured. He thought he would die as he was seriously in pain, with no available first aid, no medication, no friends nor relatives. In his despair, a young woman gave him a few spoons of condensed milk that was supposed to be food for her young hungry infant.

Once settled in England, Hau wrote to me in 1976 and asked for the address of Mrs. Nguyen Huu Thong. The latter had been a lawyer turned samaritan onboard with her kind act. He wanted to thank her as he believed that he survived thanks to the condensed milk that she gave him.

We gained confidence as we got help and effort from everywhere to pull our ship away from the shallow riverbed. In the mean time, the Communists celebrated their victory with their fireworks that well lit bushes of Rung Sat. A robust and active young man rushed his way to me. I asked him:

- What are you doing here?

- I came to help you with security. Captain, please, just say something so that I could predict...

I asked:

- Will we be able to get out of this bank? When will we get to the sea? Will it be safe?

After some deep thinking by working with his fingers, he replied:

- Yes, for sure, we'll get to the sea alright. According to my I-Ching predictions, there would have been some bloodshed but not so much of that. You'll be OK. Don't worry, Captain!

His words gave me confidence somewhat. Could people survive just by hanging on to their hope? I wondered. I asked him again:

- How do you know that we can get out of this situation?

- I practice my I - Ching predictions and my Astronomy...

I looked up at the sky. The stars looked so bright and so clear, particularly those that I was familiar with. I used them for calculations to determine the coordinates for my ship as we traveled across the ocean. The darker the sky, the brighter the stars appeared.

I was just about to drink a glass of milk given to me by Dr. Nguyen Dinh Bang when there came the news that Phi collapsed behind the engine. I was very hungry but I decided to personally bring the glass of milk to Phi. Dr. Tran Van Kim also gave Phi a shot to energize him.

After drinking the glass of milk, Phi recovered but he looked desperate:

-The pressure went up to 16 kilos. Everyone was trying to pump, hoping that they could get 19 kilos so that we could start the generator at least twice. Unexpectedly, at 18 kilos of pressure, the valve head broke, and pressure went down to 11 kilos. We tried to weld the broken valve, and to our surprise, the welding hose had been chopped off. The cutting appears very recent.

We kept this news only among ourselves as we realized that we were in a very critical situation.

When I visited my friends in West Germany in 1979, I met Thuan who was the ship mechanic. He told me:

- I was looking for a substitute valve everywhere, through all the boxes. Suddenly, to my big surprise, I found an old valve right at the foot of the generator. Thanks to this valve, we were able to continue to pump up the pressure by hand."

Finally Song An was able to pull free Truong Xuan from the bank. It got to the middle of the river and towed Truong Xuan with the headline. The night was dark and a

small navy boat guided our ship. After a while, the light from the navy boat faded away and it disappeared totally. Truong Xuan was a heavily loaded ship, it was too big for Song An to tow. Song An struggled to pull our ship. It moved slowly in its tilting position. A young man volunteered to come over to steer Song An. Just as he disappeared through the crowd, I realized that he was short sighted. A shortsighted seaman, how come? Only at the refugee camp did I realize that he was Dr. Bui Ngoc Diep.

Truong Xuan got out of the shallow water. The man who predicted this was Hoang Quan, one of the most famous astrologers and psychics named by a journal on Metaphysics. I am not superstitious but I want to record some facts for us to ponder.

I want to tell you some "Metaphysics Science" stories. At the beginning of 1974, when Truong Xuan arrived in Bangkok, an Indian psychic showed me his notebook that contained many compliments from foreign ship captains: "A famous fortune teller...heavenly...unbelievable." On the last page there was a comment from a Vietnamese ship captain: "He was able to say as if he were your relative..."

The Indian fellow asked for 400 baht. I told him I had only 100 baht with my intentions to decline his offer. To my surprise he accepted to read my fortune. According to him, I had intended to quit my seaman career a long time ago. With my friends and relatives, I would have bought 400 hectares of forest. We would have led a simple life working on the land and we would have planned to create a model village.

After giving him my date of birth, I asked the fortuneteller:

- When will I be able to quit my seaman career?

After some thinking, Singh firmly told me:

- Next year, in 1975

- What month?"

- May

- What date?

-The twenty-second

I could not believe him:

- Without any savings, how can I quit working?

- You will have 100,000.

- 100,000 Vietnamese dong would be only worth 100 US dollars.

- No, you'll get 100,000 US dollars.

After pausing, Singh continued: "US \$95,000, but you have to keep it as a secret, you should not tell even your wife and children."

I wrote my family about this story, just for fun.

Believe it or not, I actually left Truong Xuan to embark Clara Maersk on May 2, 1975 along with 3628 fellow Vietnamese refugees. I ended my seaman career since then. As for the amount of US \$95,000 it never came. In June 1975 at the Hong Kong Refugees camp, some of our children were about to leave for Canada. We gave money to



them, each receiving US \$50. By August 1975, we ran out of money. While we were still at the Hong Kong Refugees camp, Lam, our youngest son, had started working in Toronto and he was the first one to send US \$200 to us. Dan Ha, my eldest daughter, started working right away upon arriving in the US and she sent us US \$400. My other 4 children who were living in the US could not have helped as they were students and they were not allowed to work. Cat, my eldest son, left the US in February 1975 after his 12 years of studying there; he was still stuck in Paris. Cao Trung who was one of my childhood classmates had explained to me according to his Feng Shui style:

- The Indian fortuneteller was right. You left Vietnam with so many fellow citizens. That good news and good deed would be worth a big fortune. His predictions were quite accurate...

\*\*\*

As we passed by Mui Nuoc Van, we met high tide. Truong Xuan was pulled into high speed. We saw light coming from the lighthouse. Through the binoculars I saw a big black stretch in front of Song An. I ordered:

-Turn right totally.

Song An did not have a chance to react then we heard a big noise that broke the serious silence of the dark night around our ship. People screamed. We had entered the river area where people had laid their fishing nets. The nets wrapped around Song An and its propeller. Song An was stuck. Truong Xuan was floating in the river, as if it were tied to a big float. The float happened to be Song An in its stuck and immobilized position.

It was 11PM or 12 midnight. A number of military and civilian men went to Song An to free it from the nets. Suddenly a burning torch shined the dark night. Some people in a small boat shouted and waved the torch. But they ran away when hearing gunshots from our boat and the light was gone too.

- Oh no! They have notified the Communists!

- What do we do now captain?

I assured them:

- It's OK, they are shouting because they lost their nets.

From Song An someone yelled:

- We got rid of the nets. We just need to cut off the parts that got stuck to the propellers.

In Hong Kong, Dao Van Dam later told us that the only hand saw on Song An snapped just after the last cable wrapped around the propeller was cut loose.

Truong Xuan was tugged on. When we arrived at the Can Gio Ha lighthouse, the tides were very strong. The towing cables snapped several more times. The harder Song An tried to pull, the more unstable it became. Each time the cable burst, Truong Xuan floated backward. To avoid hitting sunken ships, Song An had to pull Truong Xuan closer to the mountain.

- Why are we going toward Rach Dua?

- Gosh, we're getting to Ben Da!

People started making noise as they believed that they were about to be surrendered to the Communists.

At 5AM, there were pink clouds on the East horizon. The ship had not moved out of Ganh Rai yet. The security committee was prepared to exchange gunfire in the event that Communist boats chased us. Everyone was ordered to lay flat on the floor in order to not catch the attention of the Communists hiding in the mountains. But there was no room for that. Dozens of boats came toward us but then left. Song An slowly moved on. At 7AM Truong Xuan was still sluggishly moving across Bai Truoc. Time seemed to have stopped as an air of suspense hung over us. Through my telescope, Vung Tau beach looked deserted; there was no sign of people in the street. Not a single sign of a dinghy. To calm myself down, I told myself: "The Communists are busy celebrating their Labour Day this morning!" We just held our breath for a few minutes and then we were out to sea safely.

8:05AM, May 1, we passed by London Maru float. Now I could really exhale, releasing anxieties that had burdened me so heavily in the past few weeks. We had traveled more than 45 nautical miles under anxieties and fear.

The horizon opened up in front of us. We had survived but where could we go now? We did not know yet but luckily we had just escaped a whole bunch of vicious beasts!

Ngo Quang Phuong was also a ship Captain. In the morning of April 30 he told me that he was going home to pick up his family so that they could come along with us but he never did make it back. When I met him in 1980, Phuong told me: "About 5 minutes after Truong Xuan had passed Pier 18, the Communists' tank ran over the harbour gate and they took over the entire port of Khanh Hoi."

## *To the High Sea*

The sea was beautifully calm as the Northeast wind had stopped blowing. The tide was strong. Song An was cruising at a speed of approximately 5 knots per hour. The sun had risen and Truong Xuan bathed in its bright sun rays. We the refugees had escaped menacing darkness and now met a new horizon with the hopeful rays of the sun.

Vung Tau scenery reminded me of the good old days when I was on the way home returning from my sea journeys. I vividly remembered the curvy mountains and hilltops.

Cap O Quan disappeared. The lighthouse became smaller and smaller. Suddenly, explosions echoed to the sea, columns of black smoke from the cities rose up into the sky. These were our last sights of our dearest country.

It was already too humid, even at 9AM. A few motorboats and some sea-boats loaded with people waving their arms were trying to catch up with Truong Xuan. The ship had about 1000 tons of scrap metal onboard. It also stored approximately 300 tons of fuel and water. Its deck would have stood up to 200 tons of passengers (4000 people with an average of 50kg/person). The ship was still quite stable.

A dinghy came nearby, trying to run alongside Truong Xuan. The security members looked at me and waved them off:

- Impossible, the ship is too crowded as is. It is too heavy and we could all sink and die at any time!

I had quietly observed that a young man standing at the front of the dinghy looked desperate. I wrote a note to Hung as I had lost my voice. Hung announced loudly:

- The Ship Captain has agreed to allow all of you to embark."

The security members quickly threw cables to the dinghy. All men, women and children were quickly picked up. The motor boat was left behind, floating away in the ocean.

I received a letter from Austria in 1976, the writer had introduced himself as an ex-officer and department head of Psychological Warfare Units.

"Dear Sir, I did not embark Truong Xuan at Pier 5, but I boarded Truong Xuan in the sea off Vung Tau. Had you not interfered at the time, the security members would not have picked us up."

A group of Truong Xuan friends from the US went to Austria in 1979 to visit other Truong Xuan people. We all met on the outskirts of Wien. The reunion took place in an outdoor garden, just like in Vietnam. Truong Van Minh named the meeting that took place "Vien Do" (pronounced as "Wien Do" with Do meaning 'Capital', implying Saigon). Phan Quoc Bao introduced his wife and children to me. He reminisced about

his embarking moment in the sea. His wife was pretty and sociable. She introduced their children:

-They do very well in school. My daughter has to study every subject in Austrian but she is a top student in her class.

- Why did you choose Austria?

- We made a mistake, Captain! We were mixed up between Austria and Australia! We meant to go to Australia but anyhow that's fate. Everywhere outside of Vietnam is just a foreign land. We lead very comfortable lives here.

- Are Austrian people kind and sympathetic to our refugees?

- Excellent, Captain! Families with daughters feel very safe here in Austria. Austrian girls under the age of 18 are not allowed to go freely with boys in the streets.

I met this couple again in July 1992 when I was in Orange County. They were on their trip to celebrate their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They escorted their youngest daughter Bao Han to the US to tape her songs for Video Thuy Nga Paris by Night. Bao Han was 2 years old when they fled and now she was the Miss Vietnam Paris 1991 runner-up. Mr. Pham Thanh Liem gave her a gift brought from Vietnam. Le Van Bao was looking for an old negative taken at the Refugees Camp 17 years before so that we all could have a print as a souvenir. Pham Manh Nam, who acted as Khoa in the film "Summer Rain", organized a picnic at Laguna Beach. Pham Truc Lam, my youngest son, took me to his pizza shop a few times. Brothers Doan Van Tien and Doan Van Think who are now two famous lawyers in Southern California hosted Bao and his family in Laguna Hills. They had a few weeks of reunion. Back in Austria, Bao wrote to his clan: "Friendship among Truong Xuan refugees makes life better from this Good Heart ship!"

\*\*\*

Another boat was running after us. Some shots were fired as a signal for us to stop in order to pick them up. The security committee was ready with some M79 and automatic guns.

If the security committee members were allowed to shoot back, I wondered what would happen then. All the people in the motorboat were ordered to throw their weapons into the sea before they were allowed to embark Truong Xuan. In February 1982, in Sydney, we had a reunion among 201 refugee members who had been settled down in Sydney since June 20. This "Truong Xuan People's Chapter" had organized an annual reunion to celebrate their settlement in Australia. I was introduced to group members with a long and loud applause.

At 9AM, May 1, Dr. Nguyen Dinh Bang offered me a bowl of noodles. I had not eaten anything since two days except drinking a glass of milk. My throat was dry and my tongue was so sore that I could not swallow the noodles. I caught Hung's eyes as he tried to turn his face away. I guessed he was quite hungry and he needed some food. I gave him the bowl of noodle soup and said:

- Please eat to gain strength, I am so tired that I cannot eat.

He timidly accepted the bowl of soup, but looked rather happy. He did not eat it yet, he left it on the podium next to the steering wheel instead. He walked toward the command room and waved to everybody while talking aloud:

- Stay calm, ladies and gentlemen! Good news to everyone, the ship engine is being repaired and it is almost finished.

Finishing his words, he returned to the podium, trying to eat his noodle soup but to his surprise the bowl was now empty.

I turned away pretending that I knew nothing. While Hung was eloquently speaking, T. came close to the bowl of soup and at first he hesitated. Perhaps at first he was just taking one bite to appease his hunger, but he swallowed the whole bowl in one shot instead. The whole act only lasted for a period of 5 to 6 seconds. T. ran away immediately trying to avoid everyone. This fast scene got me more and more worried.

The telephone rang and I was told:

- Captain, please tell the crew to get ready. The engine will be started in 5 or 10 minutes.

- Are you sure, chief engineer? What about the Song An ?

- Yes, Captain. We can let Song An go.

- Is the seawater still leaking in?

-Yes, Captain! But not a lot! We have not been able to locate the leak yet.

All the security and executive committee members cautiously listened to our conversation.

10AM, May 1, the whole ship vibrated. Smoke circles started rising up as the engine roared. The sea was suddenly loud with applause. Truong Xuan was filled with astounding happiness. The headline was released and Song An now cruised along side with Truong Xuan. The committee members recommended people onboard making contributions for the tugboat Song An. The donations took place right away; all the money collected was counted in the command room under the supervision of Tran Van Duong. 9 million Vietnamese Dong was raised and contained in 2 bamboo baskets.

Truong Xuan's engine suddenly stopped running after 15 minutes and Song An had to tow it again. Truong Xuan ran again after 20 minutes and once again Song An traveled along side of us. Duong passed the baskets full of money and Song An's captain opened one of them up and waved to us:

- You gave us too much money. Thank you but please do not give us anymore.

Before turning back Song An gave us dozens of containers of drinking water. Passengers shared among themselves, a drop of drinking water was worth more than gold during this moment. The command room was supplied with one container. Some seven or eight people jumped over to Song An to go back home.

Truong Xuan was loaded with scrap metal heading for Manila but we planned to go first to Singapore, which was the nearest port. Truong Xuan was not safe enough in this condition. One of the passengers came up to the command room and said:

- We are now safe in the ocean. Captain, please allow us to tell passengers to make contributions to you.

I declined this proposal from Dao Manh Dat, who had been the guidance counselor at Chu Van An high school. I was going to ask Hung to make this announcement that I did not want any contributions to assure the people. But after a few seconds of reflection, I decided not to make any announcement fearing this could cause chaos and violence since I knew some people onboard had already taken this opportunity to get money from passengers, pretending that they were collecting for Truong Xuan.

We took the sea route 195 without any fear of being attacked by the Communist forces. We reached the international water. We now had to face the urgent problems: hunger, thirst, and possibly rape and mutiny. I closed my eyes as I tried not to think of such things.

The order to disarm all weapons was announced through the loudspeakers. Automatic guns, shotguns, M79, M16 and all kinds of weapons and ammunitions were collected. They were kept in the command room. All committee members had done a marvelous job. Everyone onboard had seen that themselves. They happily gave up their weapons, particularly the ex-soldiers. A nice and gentle sea breeze blew by as Major Thuyen snaked his way through the crowd to secure the 8 cargo hoists from swinging.

It was a more relaxing atmosphere now. I could see smiles. I left the bridge to visit my family that I had not seen since we left Saigon. It was not that easy to pass through the crowd onboard. There were almost 20 people in a room of 3.5 m width and 4 m length. As soon as I entered the room, I smelt suffocating hot human odor. My wife was rubbing medicated oil on my two daughters who had fainted. She said:

- I am rubbing this oil on Dung and Giang because they have fainted from hunger and heat. They have not eaten nor drunk anything since yesterday.

Dr. Bang has given them a shot to revive them. Bang's wife was my wife's niece. I asked people to move out a bit but there was room outside only for 3 people. Giang recovered, looking around her.

I had to continuously face problems. Incidents kept on occurring, one after another. As a result, I could not have afforded my time looking after anyone, including my own family. Chat had left the command room. My children were starving and my wife could have only endured it in silence.

I said to chief cook Chung A Can:

- You have not served me any food since yesterday, how come? My whole family hasn't had anything to eat, myself included. Why is that?

- Captain, as soon as the rice is cooked people start eating it in the kitchen area. It's all gone so fast.

- Please cook a pot of rice for us and when it is almost done let me know.
- But Captain, there is not anymore fresh water for cooking.

Vinh Ta gave me 2 bottles of fresh water. On my way back to the kitchen people asked me for water. A western looking woman was leaning against the kitchen door and was the last one to show me her glass for water. She was pregnant. I poured her a full glass. She was Mrs. Truong Dinh Thu who now resides in Bordeaux, France.

Chung A Can took the half full water bottle from me and said:

- Captain, how am I supposed to cook rice with this much water?
- Just add seawater to it then!

Chung A Can had to cook rice with some seawater. A volunteer brought the cooked rice to the room for my family. My wife divided rice into portions, as big as two fingers and she equally distributed to all those around her. I had my share as well. I took a small bite yet my mouth was dry and the rice tasted bitter. I was not able to swallow. I was only thirsty. I gave my rice portion to Hung and said:

- Just keep it for your kids, OK?

Hung gave the rice to Phuong, who was his eldest daughter. He looked at me with tears in his eyes and emotionally said:

- My parents decided to stay back in Vietnam. Please consider my wife and me as your godchildren.

Early in February 1983, knowing that I was coming to Australia he arrived at the Sydney airport to pick me up. He and his family hosted me for 3 days. Phuong was now a grown up girl and was preparing to enter medical school. The whole family warmly hosted me as if I were their own family.

People were moaning and crying out:

- I'm thirsty! I'm thirsty!
- My child is so thirsty, he might die!

The moaning of young women and young mothers made me think of problems and obstacles that we had to overcome. The Communists' threat of ambush was over but now we were facing the real threats of hunger and thirst.

I gave order to the security committee to take water from storage and distribute to everyone. After filling a few bottles, Phi told me that we had run out of water. Sixty tons of stored fresh water had disappeared so fast. Had people tried to hide it so that they could sell it to make a profit? Lam, my son, took a look at the reservoir and confirmed that we had really run out of water. I was trembling and shaken. Where did it go? Who pumped it out? When did this happen? Even as I write these lines, I still do not know what happened.

When I was in Wien in 1984, Tran Ba Ky confided in me:

- Was there water on Truong Xuan? I was branded as a rascal who "sells water" (in Vietnamese, it also means that he "sells the country").

Ky was absent in the following meetings in Wien.

I occasionally received a glass of milk from either Bang or Thang some days before. Yet, late in today's morning I still had not received any milk. I was so tired that I did not even feel hungry. Yet I still had to stand, in the steadfast position. I dared not sit down. If I lost my confidence even for a very short moment, I would feel totally hopeless and I would give up.

People were stunned by a loud warning shot. Bui Ngoc Hoa was trying to interfere with some people shoving each other. He explained:

- They were fighting for water. I had to fire a warning shot.

I asked Lt. Colonel Hao to confiscate the M16 from Hoa.

Phi reported from his engine room:

- More and more water is leaking into the ship, even though we are continuously pumping it out.

A message to request food, medication and fresh water had been sent out but we had not received any reply yet. Further ahead, the Long Chau and Long Ho ships were just idling. Truong Xuan approached these two ships and I hoped that we would have gotten water supplies or been able to transfer some of our passengers to them. They sped away instead as we approached them.

Lam whispered in my ear:

- Mr. Vuong fainted, he's lying unconscious near the cargo hold opening.

Vuong was a big man and looked haggard. He lay on the floor with both hands flat on the floor. Lam lifted him up to the deck to give him some fresh air. I received a small piece of paper with a scribbled note from Lan:

- My four children and I are so thirsty. Captain, please call my husband, Tran Phong Van, who is currently working as chief engineer on an American ship named...

Lam, my son, was able to get half a bottle of water to supply Lan and her children. Her husband was previously the chief engineer for the Phong Chau ship.

Another young woman collapsed. She was with her mother and her younger sister. I recognized her later when we got to Indiantown Gap Refugees camp in November 1975. Do Thi Bang Tam who had the most beautiful black eyes wrote to me: *"Captain, I was so happy when I heard that you're writing the story of 4000 Vietnamese refugees seeking freedom on your ship. Please describe all the details. Please tell people that I fainted because my female friend had stolen the water bottle from me. Dear Captain, many times when I reflected, I had the feeling that I was just in a dream. I am currently studying to be a medical technologist and at times I felt depressed but when I think of my father, brothers and sisters still behind in Vietnam, I feel quite encouraged and I study hard again. I hope that you will be able to complete your book as you wish and that you will be able to describe exactly the way it was."*

Someone shouted loudly from the middle of the ship:

- A lady is in labour! We need a doctor to come and help deliver the baby!



Dr. Kim said aloud: "Would the Doctor nearest to her please help her!"

During our Truong Xuan reunion in Montreal in 1977, Dr. Nguyen Huu Tung, who is currently a professor of medicine in Montreal, told us about the childbirth in the utmost inadequate conditions with respect to sanitary facilities. After that, there was another childbirth. According to the letter of Professor Bui Nhu Hung who is the father of the baby born aboard Truong Xuan: "*...after many days of worries, my family finally settled down in Montreal. Immigration Canada had looked after our country fellows very well. Thanks to them we are now well settled.... The little girl who was born on the deck of Truong Xuan is now two and a half months old. Time has passed by so fast. We took her to the hospital for some immunization shots. The X-ray showed she had a broken left collarbone but now it has healed nicely, not 100 percent but the break will not cause any further problems. No one knows when her bone was broken. She did not show any sign of pain when we were at the Hong Kong camp. Maybe she was pushed against the crowd but she was still so young that she did not feel the pain, I guess. A friend of ours wants to know a lot of our sea journey so that he can write the life story of our young daughter. Captain, please write to us to let us know your major problems on that ship that only you, as the Captain, would know...*" I only quote here a part of his two-page letter.

To solve problems onboard, everyone looked for the ship captain as if he would have known all the solutions. The sun was glaring, it was suffocating with human heat and sweat. S.O.S. messages were sent out, one after another. The American Washington ship appeared, it came closer and stopped for a while and then left. A warship from the seventh fleet came afar, and then it turned away. Thanh was not able to get contact with the seventh fleet to get S.O.S. help.

At 4PM and then 4:15PM on May 1, two suicides happened on the deck creating chaos and panic. Blood and brains splashed the clothing of Hong Khac Bang, Nguyen Thanh Lam and Phan Thai who were among other people around the incident. Within half an hour, the two dead bodies were thrown overboard. It became more and more tense on the ship. There was a risk of mutiny and violence. Would Truong Xuan have been able to reach its destination?

There were only Hung and Lam in the command room now. Hoa, Thien and Chat had disappeared. Everyone was tired and stressed out. Their bodies ached.

Around 8PM, Phi screamed desperately through the loudspeaker:

- Water has flooded the engine room. Captain, please be prepared to land as soon as possible!

- Understood, please do not let anybody know about this.

I was torn apart by the worry that the ship might sink. Luckily no one was able to see my worry stricken face in the dark night. I lowered the lamp so that I could clearly read the map. From where we were to the northern beach of Malaysia it would be roughly 300 nautical miles, according to my measurements.

Truong Xuan had to change its direction. Abandoning our route to Singapore, we headed straight to Poulo Redang instead. As I leaned over the map to draw up the sea route, I tried to stay calm. I was sweating profusely as if I was taking a shower. Sweat was running down my forehead, along my cheeks, creating a sad and uncomfortable feeling. I stood upright, hiding myself in the dark. I used my shirtsleeves to wipe off my sweat in order to avoid the attention of all the committee members in the command room. I tried my best to keep my worries to myself while every eye in the command room followed my every move.

Hai asked me:

- Where do you plan to head, Captain?
- Toward Poulo Redang, the nearest land destination so that we can all land.
- When will we reach there?
- It will take 30 hours.
- I will contribute my money to buy rice for our people.

Lawyer Nguyen Huu Thong and Major Hung urged me to send the message still kept in my pocket and I replied:

- Please wait until 10PM, after we have passed Con Dao. Right now the Communists' boats might know our coordinates, they can run after us, it is too dangerous.

At 9PM, the engine stopped again. Phi told me:

- The oil pump system is clogged.

Alls lights were suddenly gone. The ship was without its engine. The moonlight, immensely bright, reflected on the water. The sea was serene and still. We could hardly hear the small waves lapping on the ship. The cargo of passengers stayed deadly immobilized. At time one could have heard a long sigh that melted into the atmosphere. Passengers had not realized the dangers that lay ahead.

Someone shouted and his voice broke the silence:

- Where are you going in the night? Why are you walking over my shoulders?
- Why are you pushing me so hard?
- God! Someone has stolen my water bottle!
- Curfew, please!

I heard the word "Curfew" just when I thought of the rape incidents that happened as people escaped from the center of Vietnam to the South.

I ordered the curfew law during the night. No one was allowed to move anywhere until 6AM. It was an absolute curfew, to be followed by every passenger.

Phi was using his flashlight to work. Young men took turns pumping water from the engine room. The ship was just floating by during the night. It could possibly have drifted toward the Con Dao mountain area. At around 1AM, a woman came up to the command room and quietly reported:

- At the bow of the ship, two Communist agents are planning to set explosives. I was so scared. I tried to come up here to tell you, Captain.

- Can you lead the security members down there to capture these two men?

- I dare not captain. They will kill me. They wear white short sleeve shirts. They are lying at the left side of the anchor hole.

Everyone was soundly sleeping around me. I woke Lt. Colonel Hao up. He was so sleepy, he uttered a few words and did not want to be woken up. With some care, he stretched his hands, shoulders and legs. He stood up and rubbed his sleepy eyes. I pointed at the woman and told Hao:

- This lady told me that two terrorists are planning to plant some explosives, please investigate.

- Let me tell the security members and assign them to each side of the ship.

Orders to approach the terrorists were heard in the middle of the night.

- Left move 2...left move 2...

- Right move 2...right move 2...

- Reach our target...

The unusual code signals were sent to and replied back, just like during an operation to attack the enemy. I had goose bumps when I heard these signals.

The two teams of security members came back after an hour and they reported to Hao:

- Nothing suspicious.

I was not sure whether the woman reported correctly or not. She might have been so scared that she imagined it all. Hao went back to sleep after an hour of "operation". I felt very uncomfortable with his loud snore.

After the woman had left, Tran Dinh Thang went up to the command room and whispered to me:

- I saw a few young men wandering around as if they were trying to enter your room.

- It's curfew time! Do they have any weapons?

- Captain, please, interfere right away. I suspect that they have shotguns.

Hao checked on these young men. It turned out that they were actually security members.

On May 2, around 4AM, there appeared several well-lit ships around Truong Xuan at a distance. They seemed to stay at their predetermined positions. Years later, Admiral Hoang Co Minh told us that his South Vietnamese fleet anchored at Con Son until May 5, 1975 before leaving for the Philippines. As I am writing these lines, Mr. Hoang Co Minh is somewhere at the border of Thailand and Cambodia. I cannot check with him whether it was his fleet that surrounded us at dawn May 2. This fleet of ships disappeared before sunrise.

The sun came up on the eastern horizon. It was 6AM. The Con Dao ridge appeared faintly in the southern horizon. Chat and Thien took turns measuring the coordinates of the mountains that enabled us to find our location.

Truong Xuan drifted toward the northeast position of the lighthouse of Con Son Island at a distance of 12 nautical miles.

# *Man Overboard*

I remember having read, about eight or nine years before South Vietnam entirely collapsed, in the French versions of *Constellation* or *Selection of Reader Digest*, a story about a captain who had saved a man from the sea in an extraordinary circumstance.

...At 8AM on 12/25/196... a captain in Northern Europe counted his sailors and found one missing. After a thorough search of the ship, he concluded that this sailor ought to have fallen into the sea probably having drunk too much at Christmas Eve. Guessing the time the sailor fell, and with good estimates of the ship's speed, the wind's velocity and the current's strength, he decided to turn back the ship to look for the victim. Sailors are mobilized to search the sea.

Five, ... ten hours had passed but the captain was not discouraged. He kept on searching. Suddenly from a distance, through his binocular, right ahead and in line with his ship, something was moving. When the ship approached, the sailor was still swimming in the water. The victim was rescued after almost 24 hours in December winter cold water.

The above story had left a very profound impression on me. I admired the captain for having succeeded in saving a man under those circumstances and wished I could achieve something similar in my life. Having an occasion to save people from the sea as in the story I read was something I found impossible to attain, thinking that I was only dreaming and that it could have happened to me only in my imagination.

The Northern European captain had made me more fully aware of the responsibility of a captain. He taught me to be a humanitarian, and to be calm, smart and patient when trying to save people. He had made his calculation extremely well to the point of being able to find the sailor 24 hours after he had fallen, right on the return path of his ship. The sailor did not remain at a same place but was constantly pushed away by the wind and the current. A man is just minuscule in the immensity of the sea.

The extremely lucky sailor had also taught me a lesson. He had an extraordinary strength. He proved to be a champion of endurance. He showed me that we might all have a great potential for extraordinary achievements. If he did not fall into the sea, fight against the deadly cold, and get soaked in the deep water of the vast ocean, he would not have known that he was of supreme endurance. How did he get enough strength to fight against death, chill, and despair to be finally saved?

Truong Xuan had also carried someone who had fallen into the sea in extremely unusual circumstances.

Our SOS telegram, sent out the morning of May 1, had not brought any response for rescue from any ship. Hunger and thirst appeared to be eminent. Two men had just committed suicide, blood splashed from their head, adding fear and despair. The size of the crowd huddling one another on the deck, from bow to stern, worried me although I tried stay calm. Small but heavy black clouds hung in the sky. I wished a shower had come to bring more drinking water, to freshen the suffocating air, to soften the despair that was weighted heavily on each of us. The gentle late southwest season winds that riddled on the sea were not enough to comfort the people. They faced an uncertainty with no clear boundary between life and death. Being fortunate not to be ambushed by the Communists at Rung Sat, everyone now wondered: What will be next? Will it be life or death?

I was also preoccupied with so many questions. Would the security committee have had enough credibility and power to maintain discipline? Would the people have had enough strength to face danger and overcome hardship? If everyone was selfish, each for himself, chaos would have reigned. Would a call for calmness have had an effect on anyone?

Everyone around me was quite tired. Lt. Colonel Hung had hollow eyes and cheeks only after a day. Lawyer Thong in the telecommunication room often had worry eyes on his wife and children outside. Officer Chat, dentist Hoa, and ex-navy sergeant Thien were all out of sight. Lieutenant-colonel Hao was still sitting on the lifejacket box looking sad and lost in thought, probably thinking of being separated from his family or of the abandoned war. He had not smiled since getting onboard. Only Hai was in relatively good shape, perhaps having brought enough provisions. He still had a good complexion.

Three men were normally besides me: Lieutenant-colonel Hung, Major Thuyen and Lam (a martial arts student) whose mother instructed him to protect me.

An hour after the sea burial of the two suicide victims, while despair was still being felt, a distressed cry was suddenly heard from the left side of our ship:

- A man fell overboard
- A suicide

From the commander post, I noticed a lot of people stayed close to the deck edge to get fresh air and to avoid the odorous overcrowded middle. Some young men climbed on the barriers. The man fell into the water probably because he was careless or he committed suicide out of despair.

Truong Xuan was like a seriously wounded giant beast. The emergency backup steering system was still being used. Water leaked slowly in the engine room. I thought of the lives of four thousand people and of the life of one person. To turn back the ship or to keep on going? In a moment, I remembered the story of the Northern European captain but realized that it was in a different situation. What if I turned the ship back only to find the victim already gone? Time was crucial. What if the engine broke down

when the ship turned back? It was possible that a Communist ship was chasing us. Pressure was heavy on me. I wanted to turn back the ship but could not make up my mind. I was in a dilemma. What must be done to gain trust? People must help one another during difficult time. Otherwise all would have been lost. The worst would have happened.

A lot questions with no answer. The ship still continued its course...I looked in the west direction; the sun was only a league above the sea. Thirty minutes had gone by. I decided to turn back the ship. The victim, if alive, should have been about five nautical miles away. If we found the victim, it would have raised our morale considerably.

I looked into the eyes of the young man who had cried:

- Did the man really fall into the sea or was it a suicide?

- It wasn't a suicide. He fell really.

The young man replied with imploring eyes.

Some nearby people, seeing that the ship was about to turn back, had a look of disapproval. They probably thought that it was a senseless thing to do.

I rang the bell signaling Phi that the ship was turning back to look for the man who had fallen overboard.

It was 5:35PM on May 1. To turn the ship 180 degrees, I applied Admiral Boutakoff's method, one that I learned some decades ago and applied it for the first and also the last time. I still do not know how I could have had such presence of mind to remember what I had learned. Handing my binocular to Lam, I asked him to watch carefully on both sides and in front of the ship and, if he spotted the man, use a cloud as reference to keep track of the target.

Half an hour later, eyes glued to the binocular, Lam pointed his hand:

- Here he is. Dad, look in the direction of the bright cloud, a little bit to our left and you will see him.

Was Lam mistaken? Holding the binocular and looking in the direction of the cloud as reference, I scanned the calm sea. The victim was battling but still swimming quite well. Overcome by joy, I forgot for the moment all the worries. I asked Lam to closely keep track of the victim, not to take his eyes off the binocular, and I told Hai and Thien to cut a lock rope about two hundred meters long and attach it to a round float. The ship approached the victim slowly, steering slightly to the left then came to a complete stop, shielding the quite naked man from the wind.

When the ship was about 10meters from the victim, the float was thrown into the water. The victim seized the float and was pulled toward the ship. Four or five men pulled him up onto the deck. The sun had already well set into the sea. Blood-red clouds glowed in the west.

Having picked up the man, the ship resumed its course to the south. I was happy not only to have saved the life of a man but also to have shown to the people that life, even it was of only one person, was worth saving. I wanted the people to understand that

whether or not our ship would have reached safety, everybody had to be responsible for one another. The people had to stay calm, not pessimistic, to keep discipline and especially not to be selfish. Was it God who had helped us to save a man from the water, and blessed the four thousand souls with good spirit to protect one another in a desperate time?

I did not have time to meet the man to ask him how he had fallen into the water. Rumors had it that it was a vengeance, a robbery or a suicide. Each had his own guess and belief as if it was the only truthful one.

- He was an army colonel and a province chief in the Center. He had enemies.

- No, he was a police lieutenant-colonel, who committed suicide, I know him well.

The rescued man was a former colonel who was head of a city, as affirmed by three or four people. They said it as if they knew the victim personally. To be convincing, they said that the victim was still under shock and did not want to admit that he had fallen into the sea. He appeared to have lost his mind.

After my arrival in the US, at the Indiantown Gap Camp, I met by chance Mai Cong Tri and asked him:

- When you were at the Harcourt Road camp, did you meet or hear of the man who fell overboard and rescued from the sea?

- Don't you remember? When you visited the Camp of the Singles, he did come to greet you. He told it to me and he said he owed you for having saved his life twice.

- Why twice?

- I don't know, he only said that.

- Can you tell me his name and a bit about his background.

After a moment of silence, Tri said hesitantly:

- His real name is Vu Van Thu, but after arriving in Hong Kong he changed his name to Ho Phai Nam.

- Can you tell me why he fell overboard?

- Let me write him so that he can tell it to you himself more accurately. He is married to my cousin's daughter. He has eight children, all left behind in Saigon.

- There are too many rumors, it's difficult to verify.

- I know. It was not a suicide. But he's now not in his right mind.

- It couldn't be a suicide. If it was a suicide, how could he have swum so forcefully? Has Thu been settled somewhere?

- No. He wants to go back to Viet Nam. About the story of how he fell into the sea, I don't want to tell you what he has told me in Hong Kong. I am not sure to be able to recount it exactly.

Tri did not want to tell the whole story. Maybe he did not remember all the details. An "inch" of error is a "mile" of consequence!

I asked again:



- Some said that he was a saboteur, some said that he was robbed and then pushed into the sea?

- It is certain that Thu did not voluntarily jump into the sea. Thu was a street photographer working on Tu Do Street in front of the Parliament Building... Thu will write to you more about the incident. I'll tell him to write to you.

The "rescue of the man who fell overboard" episode is one of the most memorable ones of my life, but I still regret for not having a chance to meet the victim. I received everyday letters from Truong Xuan refugees from many countries. The letters, about 800 in number, were carefully kept in a hardcover box, as my spiritual heritage. In five years, I moved seven times with my children. At one time, the box was lost, probably thrown away by my family thinking it was unimportant papers. Fortunately, there still remain to date four or five special letters, thanks to being classified as "Truong Xuan Documents".

I received in early 1976 a letter from "the man who fell overboard" sent to the USA from Hong Kong.

*"...Around 3PM, the broadcaster on the radio announced the unification of the country and Saigon was celebrating the victory. I thought it was ridiculous for me to leave Vietnam when the country just gained its independence. I wanted to go back. Several people near me threatened me. One guy pushed me overboard. That was about 5PM. I heard people yelling to get help for me..."*

*"...After being pulled out of the water and examined by the doctor, then with the assistance of my friend, I hid in the cargo hold, near the restroom. The guy who pushed me overboard came looking for me, tried to finish me off. I was lucky to survive because several people nearby interfered..."*

A number of Truong Xuan refugees had sent me 200 dollars to help the refugees who still remained in Hong Kong. This amount of money was forwarded to Sister Nguyen as sympathy for the unlucky people who were still being kept in Hong Kong. Vu Van Thu received a special gift of 20 dollars.

Early in 1992, I met again Mai Cong Tri after seventeen years. Tri invited me for dinner at his home. At Tri's I also met Mai Cong Cau, recently reunited with his children in the US, whom I knew since the time I lived in Hai Phong. Cau and Tri were first cousins. Cau's mother was from the Nam Hung district of An Le village. Cau told me that Thu was living in Hong Kong with his wife and a son. Thu and his wife had sometimes gone back to Viet Nam to visit. His eldest daughter had been married and was living in the US.

\*\*\*

Nguyen Dinh Bang offered me an 8mm film containing very special images of the Truong Xuan, still docked in Saigon in the morning of April 30, 1975, after the surrender. It had also the scene of Nguyen Van Thu being pulled out of the water. This film has been shown on many of my visits to former "Truong Xuan people". On my visit in Montreal, I met again Dr. Tran Van Kim, who had been head of the medical committee, and Dr. Nguyen Huu Tung who had assisted in some child births on Truong Xuan, and quite a few others. After only about ten minutes of pleasant chatting about the incident, Dinh Vu came to sit beside me and asked me unexpectedly:

- Why did you risk the lives of 4000 people just to try to save one?

From the way he put his question, I knew Dinh Vu had been long time troubled by my action that he thought unjustified even though it was to save the life of a person. He had his own reasons but he was not in the place of a captain to understand my view. Dinh Vu was not aware of the extreme difficulties that were awaiting us, did not understand that, at a certain time it may have become so tense that the captain may have lost control, his order may not have been listened and followed and the situation may have turned chaotic.

I replied to Vu:

- I saved one man in order to save 4000 people.

Dinh Vu looked at me without saying a word. Maybe he has now understood the reason why Truong Xuan had to turn back to find Thu.

# SOS

The dim and misty moonlight made this region of the South Sea look even more deserted. Truong Xuan wandered slowly into an immense unknown. Stars twinkled high in the sky. Moonlight riddled on the water that gently tapped onto our ship making sounds that, in the silence of the night, whispered like prayers.

The engine and the light system were out of order. Many young men took turn to pump out the water that was leaking into the engine room. On both sides of the command room, women with young children looked for shelters from the night, sitting and lying everywhere; it was impossible to walk through. Many times I wanted to use the sextant to check the position of the North Star in order to determine the latitude of our ship but I was unable to move far enough to the outside.

My heart rushed whenever I thought of the possibility that the ship would have sunk if the water leaked to the point of flooding the engine room. There was no mean to communicate to the "outside world" to call for rescue. The command room was dark, there was not even enough light to study the map. I worried that chaos would have taken place if this tragic situation were revealed to the people.

The first colorful sun light of dawn signaled the end of a night of terror. Our ship's position was determined thanks to the sight of the distant mountains of Con Dao Island. The curfew was lifted. Phi informed me that the oil system had started working. Our ship was able to move steadily again. The pump, however, worked barely enough to keep the water level in the engine room from rising up.

Our first SOS telegram was sent out on May 2: "From the captain of XVLX. Water leaks into engine room. Stop. Danger of sinking. Stop. More than three thousand Vietnamese fleeing the Communists are suffering from hunger and thirst. Stop. Many children are sick. Request for emergency rescue. Position: Latitude North 8 degrees 35 minutes, Longitude East 107 degrees 00 minute. The Captain."

XVLX was Truong Xuan's code name belonging to Viet Nam and recognized internationally. Since the SOS telegram was sent in the international emergency frequency by a captain, I was certain that ships navigating in this region that intercepted the message would have come to our rescue. That was why I was not in real worry when I accepted on board a great number of refugees.

In just ten minutes, Thanh announced that Clara Maersk (OWIK) of Denmark had received our SOS message. I was staying constantly in the telecommunication room to wait for a response message and to promptly answer it.

- Has Truong Xuan communicated with the American Seventh Fleet?
- No. We don't know their frequency.

- Clara Maersk has room only for 1500 people. Women and children must be evacuated first, the remaining people will have to be evacuated by another ship."

- Thank you very much, Captain. Please come to our rescue. XVLX is now at ..., on route 175, at speed of 6 knots/hour.

- OWIK will meet XVLX at about 12:00 Noon.

At 11AM, we sent a confirmation telegram to Clara Maersk: "Thanks to the Captain of the Clara Maersk for having accepted to rescue us. Stop. Route 175. Speed 6 knots/hour. Captain Pham Ngoc Luy."

In the afternoon of the day before, when the ship Washington and a ship of the American Seventh Fleet approached Truong Xuan, everybody was so happy; some took out their bottle of drinking water and poured it from head to feet and some washed their hands with it. But these two ships had gone away.

When the Danish ship had confirmed the time of the rescue, Hung cried out loudly to announce the good news. In a strong but a little trembling voice, Hung said:

- Your attention please. Please listen to the Captain's announcement... The ship Clara Maersk will rescue us. It is heading toward us and will arrive at 12 Noon. Please remain calm."

Hung had barely finished when people roared. The joy was greater than any words that can describe it. Everybody knew that they were still alive and were about to be rescued. But I was not entirely relieved. My mind was still preoccupied by the content of the telegram: "Clara Maersk has room only for 1500 women and children that need to be evacuated first...."

I talked to Phi through the speaker tube:

- Chief engineer, please tell me the exact conditions of the engine and the pump so that I can report them to the Captain of the Danish ship, which is on its way to come to rescue us.

- Water is still entering the engine room. We haven't found the hole. Our pump is just enough to keep the water level steady. You should ask the captain to lend us a pump.

In the three hours of waiting for the Clara Maersk, my mind was preoccupied with finding answers for numerous questions:

- The Danish ship has room for only half of the refugees, only women and children. Who would go? Who would stay?

- With the actual condition of the engine, with water in the engine room, what is the real degree of danger? What will be the fate of the remaining people, of the sailors if the oil system gets blocked again or the pump stops working?

- What has to be done to keep the ship from sinking?

At 11: 35AM a black spot appeared on the horizon. The black spot became clearer and clearer and nearer to us. Truong Xuan stopped its engine, waiting. Clara Maersk, in a

sky blue color, showed up and then stood tall at about 300 meters from us. Without any signal, a resounding applause filled this corner of the sea.

Vu Ba Hung had written about the "black spot":

*"Four thousand people, after days of wandering hopelessly on the high sea, kept their eyes always fixed on the horizon in search of a magical black point.*

*Four thousand bodies had endured three days of heat from above, and nights of cold from below, in addition to the wind that itched their eyes and gave their lips a salty taste.*

*Hunger, thirst and despair had almost killed all their hope and exhausted all their strength when came the magic. It came under the form of a ship bearing a compassionate blue color and bringing along a captain and a crew of angels. The ship also had a name that sounded legendary: CLARA MAERSK.*

*Four thousand exhausted bodies had a sudden burst of energy and a common impression: "We have just been elevated."*

*Thank God. Thank Humanity.*

*Thank the River. Thank the Sea. "*

For a moment, I forgot all the troubles. I forgot the three days of danger and misery when I was almost cracked. Everybody around me was happy. But there were some who were not in their right minds.

Mrs. Nghe shook my wrists and said:

- "Please. Please. My husband is weird. He'd lost his mind. Please help me".

Before I had time to answer Mrs. Nghe, a canoe from Clara Maersk carrying an officer and a sailor had already drawn alongside Truong Xuan.

I asked lawyer Nguyen Huu Thong, Lt. Colonel Luu Binh Hao, Mr. Nguyen Quang Hai, Colonel Vu Van Thinh and lawyer Mrs Nguyen Thi Truyen to form a delegate and to get on Clara Maersk to negotiate with the Danish Captain. For our ship's safety, I could not have left our ship to go with the delegates. But the delegates did not want to embark on the canoe without me.

After having assigned Chat, Hung and Lam to the task of safeguarding Truong Xuan, I was helped by people who gave their hands to slowly lower me down into the canoe. I was too weak to climb down with a rope. Mrs. Anh, still quick and in shape, jumped into the canoe hurting a toe that took a few months recover.

On the Clara Maersk, I asked to see right away the Captain, Mr. Anton Olsen. The captain was about 50 years old, looking nice and pleasant.

I told him at once:

- Captain, please lend us a pump. The water is leaking into our engine room.

- Clara Maersk doesn't have a pump.

- Excuse us for insisting, Captain. Could you ask your chief engineer whether there is any way to help us pump the water out of the engine room?

The chief engineer confirmed there was no pump on board.

Without hesitation, I told Mr. Olsen:

- Truong Xuan can use its pump only when it is in motion. If the engine stops, the situation may be very risky. I implore you to rescue everybody.

With no hesitation, Mr. Olsen accepted to evacuate everybody. I immediately told the news to the delegate.

The negotiation between the two of us was quick and easy, taking only five minutes. We both understood the danger that threatened the lives of four thousand people. Seeing me in a state of exhaustion, clothes all dirty, the chief engineer showed me a nearby washroom. So thirsty, I drank at once two full glasses of water instead of washing my face as I used to do to get refreshed.

Before I got in the canoe, Captain Olsen told me to keep Truong Xuan stationary and Clara Maersk will come alongside. The canoe had barely left Clara Maersk when Truong Xuan abruptly sped away in full throttle. I was startled in complete confusion. Then Truong Xuan turned back in a sudden, at full speed. We waved our hands, we whistled, we made sign for the ship to stop. Truong Xuan slowed down then came to a complete stop.

Before the delegate had time to get back on our ship, two young men jumped into the water and clung to the canoe. There were loud shouts:

- Catch them. Catch them.

- Beat them up. They'll denounce to the world that they were forced to flee away.

The two young men were pulled up and were attacked by a number of people. One was let go. The other, about 17 or 18 years old, received slaps in the face. It was impossible to know what was going on. The young man was beaten up and I ask the people to hand him over to me. A careful search of his pockets found nothing suspicious.

As soon as the canoe had pulled alongside Truong Xuan, I went directly to the command room. Looking stricken, Hung said:

- Chief engineer Phi reported that the water level has risen because the ship has stopped for too long. The ship has to move for the pump to work.

An urgent telegram was sent to Clara Maersk: *"There is a lot of water in the engine room. Request that Clara Maersk waits half an hour for us to pump the water out."*

Truong Xuan continued to move while the water was pumped out. After about twenty five minutes, the water level came down, and another telegram was sent to Clara Maersk: *"To gain time, request that Clara Maersk stays where it is. Stop. Truong Xuan will draw alongside."*

Captain Olsen agreed. Truong Xuan moved slowly and came alongside Clara Maersk. As soon as our ship stopped, Clara Maersk quickly lowered its ladders. Along its wall, sailors stretched cargo nets to protect those who would have fallen.

The news that water was flooding the engine room was not divulged to the refugee delegates. The security committee proposed to evacuate children and old people first. Someone reminded me that we should do our best to give a good impression to our hosts.

Time was crucial. Members of the security committee were asked to stand along the ship to help people to climb over to the Clara Maersk. Those near the ladders went first. The ship was too crowded to be able to select people in any order.

The sea was as calm as we would have wished. The rescue of four thousand people from Truong Xuan, in danger of sinking with water leaking into the engine room, by the humanitarian Clara Maersk, took place far away in the South Sea, in an ideal meteorological condition and in a surprisingly orderly fashion. People climbed the ladders. Some were still strong enough to climb the nets. Some pushed and got kicked in the face by members of the security committee. Some took time to use their plastic water containers to get seawater to bath. I urged everybody to move on quickly.

People had already been moving over to Clara Maersk for half an hour when Lam came up from our room and asked:

- Does our family have to leave too?

I urged Lam and Thuyen:

- You all have to leave the ship at once.

It was only then that my family and relatives hastily left Truong Xuan.

Phi was still at his post in the engine room. Thanh was in the telecommunication room. Watching people leave the ship from the command room, I was seized with a dilemma: To abandon or not to abandon the ship?

As Captain, I could not leave the ship if it was still possible to save it. The engine still worked. The pump still functioned, the ship had not sunk yet, how could I have abandoned it? But if the engine turned dead, the pump quit, the telecommunication facility damaged, who would take responsibility for the sailors' lives? If I left, my crew would have followed me. If I stayed, they would have stayed with me.

In the command room, the young man who had been beaten was still sitting in a corner, daring not move. Thien asked me:

- Captain, would you like me to take anything from the room? I'll do it for you.

- Take what you can.

Fortunately, Thien had grabbed some clothes that I used later. The stairway to the command room had collapsed, the deck was deserted, scattered with open suitcases, empty bottles and abandoned shoes. It was like the aftermath of a storm.

On the deck there remained two people. A young man with a large figure tried to carry an old woman on his back over the ladder. He tried to make a step up but backed down. The old woman, paralyzed, was not able to stand up. He held the woman and pulled her up but, being too tired, he was unable to. He was very embarrassed when a Danish sailor ran down, took away the woman, carried her on his shoulders, and galloped up the steps.

The man who attempted to carry the paralyzed mother was Phan Huy Hoang, a Parachutist lieutenant colonel. It was Hoang that guarded the engine room with an M16. During my visit to Truong Xuan friends in Northwest USA in October 83, I learned that Hoang's mother had recently passed away in Houston, Texas.

While I was watching Hoang staggering to carry his mother, a man in his thirties went up the commander room and told me in an urgent voice:

- Captain, you should leave the boat now. It's getting very dangerous.

- How do you know?

- I was the one who helped pumping out the water in the engine room. The water is flooding. It's frightening. You should leave the boat now. You cannot stay any longer.

- I know. Thank you very much.

The "refugee passenger" walked away but turned his head to look at me with a very friendly expression. To date, I have not seen the friendly man again.

Ton Hoa showed up for the first time in three days. Hoa asked permission to make a complete check of the ship. After having checked everywhere from top to bottom, Chat reported that there was the body of an old man near the door of the cold room where the food was stored. Chat even cocked his arms and legs in imitation of a cadaver posture. It was the body of Vong A Sang who fled with his family. A leader of the Nung populace, Sang was once a senator and a colonel of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Chan Tak Lim, his son-in-law, who was also on Truong Xuan, had obtained a death certificate for his father-in-law. Two months later, Truong Xuan was towed to Hong Kong. His relatives recognized his body thanks to an identification card found in his trouser pocket. They brought his body ashore to be buried.

All my family had now gone onto the Danish ship. Checking some luggage, my wife loudly shouted over to Truong Xuan that a small but heavy handbag containing all of my daughter's dentist instruments was missing. Someone had probably taken it for a gold bag. A small briefcase that I had always carried with me was also lost. There was no money in the bag, only two bottles of cough syrup, a camera, my captain certificate and several documents related to the ship. I missed the two cough syrup bottles that could have been useful, and the captain certificate that I considered as an invaluable souvenir. I regretted to have lost important documents that a captain should always take with him when abandoning his ship.



A Danish sailor was ordered to go to Truong Xuan to make a last check whether anyone was still left behind. The weapon room was still locked. I wanted to throw all the weapons in the water but did not have enough strength left.

It was not possible to send the last telegram appealing the world to help the four thousand Vietnamese refugees who had been luckily rescued by Clara Maersk; the main reason being the generator was half submersed in the water. Only then did I give order to abandon the ship.

Thanh, Chat, Phi... and the young man in custody climbed one after another over to Clara Maersk. I was the last one to leave Truong Xuan.

Setting foot on Clara Maersk, I was truly relieved and, to the bottom of my heart, I felt as if the big burden had been removed.

I could not help having tears in my eyes. My heart ached when I looked at my dear ship that had carried my family and thousands of people to run away from hell, the ship that had traveled with me all over Southeast Asia. It was my own little world that was being abandoned to the ocean.

## *Aboard the Clara Maersk*

The crowd of refugees that had fled the Communism paradise, exhausted, leaving behind their homeland of thousands years, got on Clara Maersk, the rescuer. People were all preoccupied with the same question of where they were going spend their lives. The outside world was so unknown to them.

People lay disorderly on the deck and in empty containers. Some used their hands to catch water from hoses that were already open for them at many places. Some was so tired that they threw themselves on the deck, arms and legs stretched out, as if they were alone. The two newborn babies, Nguyen Van Hau, Nguyen Kim Cuc and others, who had fainted, were brought into the medical room to be treated by Vietnamese physicians. An old monk, in a brown traditional Buddhist robe, poured water into the mouth of an old man who was out of breath.

In 1978, on passage to San Francisco, I paid a visit to the Buddhist monk Thich Tuong Van. I told him about my regret that, on my visit of former Truong Xuan refugees in Montreal, I was unable to see again the two catholic priests, and that I was able to speak on the phone only to father Nguyen Gia De. Venerable Tuong Van, eyes wide open at my words, thought for a moment then spoke cheerfully:

- It's true. On the Danish ship, one of the two priests lay unconsciously on the deck, just beside me. Though quite exhausted myself, I was still able to give him water by pouring into his mouth. He then gradually regained consciousness.

The unexpected story was so beautiful.

Nguyen Van Nghe looked at me, laughing loudly:

- Where are we going now? Are we going back home near the Cong Hoa Stadium? Is that right, Mr. Luy?

Nghe's wife shook his arm:

- Why, are you dreaming? This is Mr. Luy. Why go home? Do you want to live in hell with the Communists?

Then she turned to me:

-You see, my husband and my brother Vuong are acting as if they have lost their minds. They seem to live in a different world.

Nguyen Thanh Lam tried to carry fainting people on his back while holding his child. Elvis Phuong, though a big guy, staggered and almost fell down. Lam, having not enough strength to carry people, was only able to assist them to the medical care room.

My responsibility as "Captain of Truong Xuan" was supposed to be over. We were now in a Denmark territory. All my family sat together in a corner. The clothes that Thien took for me were thrown on the deck. I took a shirt to change into. The khaki

shirt I used to wear when on duty now dirty and stained with oil was carefully folded and kept as souvenir. I looked at my wife and children and realized that we were very, very lucky.

Our country having been torn apart, how many families could have stayed together intact? Who would have ever thought that the Vietnamese, a people that had always lived on their land, now had to flee their country in mass? My family had been for me a source of encouragement in the darkest moments.

Its last mooring line released, Clara Maersk started its direct route to Hong Kong leaving Truong Xuan alone to its fate. After Clara Maersk had moved for a while, we caught glimpse of tens of warships gathering together at one place far to our left, probably belonging to the American Seventh Fleet.

I sat with my family for fifteen minutes then I went to see Captain Olsen to tell him why the refugees had fled their country. I also informed him that all the arms that had been confiscated stayed on Truong Xuan, but I dared not guarantee that no refugee was armed; Communist saboteurs may have been among the refugees.

Mr. Olsen asked:

- Is your family with you?

- Yes, Captain. I am with nine family members.

Captain Olsen took me to a room, not small like I had asked it to be, but a large reception room that was reserved for officers, about eight meters wide and ten meters long. The room was nicely furnished with table, chairs, lounge chairs as well as liquors and soft drinks. In the middle of the room, there was a parrot that spoke constantly, probably in Danish.

Mr. Rasmus P.E. Mortensen, the chief engineer of Clara Maersk, told me when he gave me the room:

- This room is specially reserved for your family only.

I was very moved and able only to say thanks to Mr. Olsen and Mr. Mortensen. It's the same for every ship; the reception rooms are always nicely furnished and kept impeccably clean. I felt uncomfortable to accept such a good hospitality. My wife, my daughter Thu Giang, who had fainted during the evacuation, and my three-year old niece Quynh Giao, who was having fever, were the only ones who spent the night in the room.

Suddenly caught by the thought that Communist saboteurs may have forced the Captain to change direction to North Vietnam, I went to the command room, introducing myself to the officer on duty, and asking him for permission to visit the pilot room, a pretext to verify whether the ship was truly heading for Hong Kong. Back to the reception room, I was astonished to find, not three people, but dozens of people in the room.

Clara Maersk was Denmark territory and we were no longer on Truong Xuan, but people did not understand and did not listen to my explanation. The dining room had been beautifully set. My family had been invited to dinner, but only four of us were

supposed to come. I had invited some members of the "provisory representative committee" to come to the dinner which was good but not big because the ship had to feed an unexpectedly great number of people.

I went to see Mr. Olsen to apologize for having too many people in the room and asked him to use his captain position to talk to people. I felt extremely bad for failing to do what Mr. Mortensen had asked.

Captain Olsen told me:

- You have to talk to your own people.

His words struck me like cold water. In my room, tired and discouraged, I looked for a long chair that enabled me to look outside through a porthole. I thought that I could have had a good night sleep to regain my strength but for the whole night instead, I stayed awake in order check the stars as I was worried and obsessed with the thought that the ship could be forced to change its direction.

It was only early in the morning but the deck was littered with papers and leftover food. The toilets were disgustingly dirty. Lieutenant-Colonel Hung and Lieutenant-Colonel Hao had to appeal to the people to keep the ship clean. On any ship, keeping it clean is always a high priority task for sailors. I saw that a lot of things would have to be done in order for the international community to have a good impression of the refugees.

In the morning of May 3, 1975, the reception room of the Clara Maersk became the meeting room for the provisory representative committee consisting of Lawyer Nguyen Huu Thong, Lieutenant-Colonel Dinh Quoc Hung and Mr. Nguyen Quang Hai. Although I had many times refused to be part of the Representative Committee, I was unanimously requested to preside over the Committee. The telegram that had been drafted on Truong Xuan but had not been sent yet (because the generator was flooded) was used as the base for another draft. The new telegram was drafted in Vietnamese and was translated into English by Thong who was delegated to bring the telegram to Captain Olsen and to request him to send it to the free world and to news agencies.

Captain Olsen accepted the telegram with kindness. Half an hour later, while we were still in discussion about other tasks, Mr. Olsen informed us that we forgot to include England and Japan in the telegram.

While waiting for a response to the telegram calling for help, we emphasized the necessity for the security committee to maintain order and to help people in areas of food and common hygiene.

On Clara Maersk, lunches and dinners took place in the dining room. Seats were all occupied long before I came in.

The representative committee had meetings the whole day, almost without any breaks. Past noon, everybody was hungry and expected that the provision committee would have brought in some food. Having waited for too long, Hung went to the kitchen to find out that all the food had been long gone. We all went hungry until supper. But this time we did not forget to tell the provision committee not to starve us.

*You should ask them to guarantee in writing that they will not send us back to Viet Nam.*  
*Huyen”.*

Huyen was the sister Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and a cousin of my wife.

I put away the piece of paper in my pocket, smiling to myself: “Can beggars be choosy? Will see!”

At 9:30AM, a helicopter landed on Clara Maersk delivering medicine and food. A British warship accompanied the helicopter.

At 10AM, an authority of the government of Hong Kong met with the representative committee, saying:

The governor and the government of Hong Kong on behalf of her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, have, in response to your call for help, granted you a temporary stay in Hong Kong while waiting to be settled in countries of the free world.

Mrs. Huynh Ngoc Anh expressed the opinion that had been discussed within the representative committee:

- We, more than three thousand refugees, wish to express our gratitude to her Majesty, to the people, the government and the governor of Hong Kong, for having the humanitarian kindness to help us. We wish, however, to ask you to assure us that you will not return us to Vietnam or to send us to any Communist country.

The Hong Kong representative stood up at once and said he will return in an hour with an answer. We guessed that he left to discuss with the government of Hong Kong.

Forty five minutes later, he came back and announced:

-No, no, no (three times). Never will we return you to Vietnam or send you to Communist countries.

An announcement was drafted, typed and displayed everywhere on the ship to inform the people the result of our negotiation.

At noon, the security committee brought two young men before the representative committee saying that they looked like suspects, as they had no identity papers. It turned out they were students and they had their student cards, nothing happened.

At 4PM, I got the news that a number of youngsters were caught placing plastic explosives at the poop of Clara Maersk. The news took everyone by surprise. Invited to come to the scene, I said at once to the messenger as I became worried about possible violence:

- We are on a Denmark territory. We are subjected to Denmark’s law. Everything had to be reported to Captain Olsen.

Having never seen plastic explosive before, I wanted to see how it looked and, because it was an important matter, I immediately followed the messenger. Nguyen Quang Hai went with me. At the poop of the ship, three youngsters were held in a corner, looking terrified. Major Do Huy Nghia was beside them.

I asked a member of the security committee ( I forgot his name):

- Why were these young men arrested?

- They were hiding in a lifeboat. These bags look very suspicious.

Next to the youngsters, there were seven or eight plastic bags, labeled in English. They were dried-food bags, enriched with vitamins that the youngsters took from a lifeboat.

Nguyen Quang Hai told me:

- It's fortunate that we came. It could have been a big disaster.

I told the youngsters that they had behaved very badly and explained to them that the food and water stored in lifeboats were only for use in case of shipwreck and it was forbidden to take them away.

It was the first time since getting on Clara Maersk that I had the chance to be on the open-air deck. The sea was calm and the sky was very clear. The wind had a light taste of salt and it reminded me of my own long trips sometimes navigating for four weeks on the Pacific, sometimes away from home for half a year. My recent trips had been about a month ago but they seemed to me to be a long time away, in a very remote past.

Familiar mountains appeared nearer and nearer. Clara Maersk was approaching Hong Kong, where I had come to visit many times. This time, however, I was entered Hong Kong in anxiety. I was no longer a captain and this ship was not a part of my beloved Vietnam. Arriving as a refugee, all my personal qualification papers were no longer internationally valid. I felt clearly the pain of someone who just had lost his country and had to live on charity and wait for open arms in order to get refuge. I closed my eyes and turned away from the surrounding scenery.

I went to see the representative committee and proposed that, once the ship docked, people should not get off until we got a firm and clear guarantee. Clara Maersk docked at 6PM, May 4. The representative of the government of Hong Kong said, after hearing me repeat the demand that we had made in the morning:

- No, no, no (also three times). Never will we do that. Take our words for it.

A few months later, I met Mr. Gately, head of the "Camp of the Singles" Harcourt Road and Mr. David Weeks, head of the camp Dodwell's Ridge. I reminded them that the refugees feared that, under the pressure of the Communists, the government of Hong might return them to Vietnam. We were like wounded birds.

Mr. David Weeks said:

- Never. We are British.

People followed the line to get off the Clara Maersk in an orderly fashion. They then got on buses that formed a long line. Some handed their weapons to the authority.

At 12PM, I went to see Captain Olsen and his officers and on the behalf of all the refugees, I thanked them and all the sailors for having rescued us, helped us, and generously sheltered us. Finally, speaking in my name as a seaman, I thanked Mr. Olsen and his crew for their great help and also for having saved me.

Mr. Anton M. Olsen only smiled. But the chief officer, Mr. Torben V. Blichfeld, still very young, about thirty years old, shook my hand and said:

- You don't have to thank us, Captain. We only did our seamen's duty. Who knows, some day we might have an accident and you might be our rescuer.

We laughed together understandingly.

Before bidding farewell, I offered Mr. Olsen a chronometer, a particularly accurate watch that is used for timing in astrological calculations. I also gave him a binocular and a compass, as souvenirs. Captain Olsen accepted the souvenirs, saying that he only kept them for me and would give them back to me the next time when we met again.

The representative committee and my family were the last ones to leave Clara Maersk. We arrived at the camp Sekkong at four o'clock in the morning of May 5, 1975.

# *Days at Hong Kong Refugee Camps*

*"All ship captains should be the last persons to leave their ship"*

At the beginning of June 1975, Phuong Lan sponsored our whole family to come to Canada. Lan, who was Giang's (my daughter) high school classmate, had been a student in Canada and was living in Toronto. All our family was allowed to immigrate to Canada. We bid farewell to our son Pham Truc Lam and our daughters Pham Thu Giang and Pham Ngoc Dung and Dung's husband, who decided to go to Canada. My wife was crying as she gave each of them some money. Lam said:

- Mother, please keep the money. I am a grown man now. Worst comes to worst, I can find a job. Please don't worry mother!

Lam had just turned twenty. He turned his face away as he became emotional but he still listened to my wife's words:

- Yes, son, they'll feed you over there but for your first few days it's best to have some money, even a small amount O.K.?"

Mother, son and two daughters were crying. I had trained all my sons and daughters to become independent after they finished high school. As our country was endlessly at war, my children were encouraged to be well prepared to face difficulties. "Young birds with their new feathers have to be able to fly by themselves", I told them!

I reminded my children:

- Be courageous and have self-confidence. Do not rely on anyone else. Your future lies in your own hands and empty hands do not mean bad luck. Your mother and I have nothing now to give you in foreign countries. Please look after yourselves.

The buses left the camp to head for the Kai Tak airport. Our family was now split. My wife went to the camp headquarters to check for our mail.

Our eldest son, Pham Trinh Cat, had been studying in the US since 1963. He left the US for Paris on his way back home in February of 1975, during the most chaotic time for South Vietnam. As a result, he was stuck in France. My wife was in tears as she read Cat's letter. We had not seen him in 12 years and he wrote at the end of his letter:

*"...People told me that you always had a fan in your hand, gently fanning yourself. When people talked to you, you said: "What a misery!" Mom, don't be sad! You have so many children. You also have so many relatives. Your children and relatives are your own good fortune indeed! How many people can have that kind of fortune like you, Mom?"*



His words were simple. His letter reminded me of so many Vietnamese women who had unselfishly devoted their whole lives to their families and had never asked for anything for themselves in return.

The camp was still full of Truong Xuan refugees. I could not give them material support but I felt that by staying back, I would have been a morale support for them. Besides, deep down inside I wanted to live in the US so that I could do something rather than passively contemplating a "History chapter just recently closed and a new one just turned over". As a result, I declined to go to Canada.

Singer Elvis Phuong gave me a music tape before he left for New Caledonia to join his girl friend. The lyrics such as: "Returning to you, My Darling..." "Duy Tan Boulevard...", "Dear Sir, My Teacher...", "Fatherland Vietnam with 4000 years of Culture...", "100 years under French Domination...", "20 years of Slavery..." were so touching, so sad that they could have made my heart bleed. Yet, the song about "Minced Pork and Cucumber" created a sudden impact: it gave the cooks here a tip to provide Vietnamese refugees with our typical food.

Elvis Phuong wrote a note to go with the tape that he gave me:

" To Mr. Pham Ngoc Luy, Truong Xuan Ship Captain- In memory of those moments when death came so close to more than 3000 refugees who had left their dearest country to look for freedom in foreign countries. I hope that this tape will bring you deep and unforgettable memories of those extraordinary moments of our lives".

He also sent me a copy of "L'Adieu a Saigon" by Larteguy together with a letter in which he asked me to become his Godfather. I met him in 1983 at Oklahoma when he sang for the cause to liberate Vietnam. Since then, I have only seen him singing in the tapes produced by 'Thuy Nga Video, Paris By Night."

By July 1975, the rest of my family had been interviewed and permitted to live in the US. We were admitted rather early because our other three children were students in the US. In addition, my wife's younger brother who was a naturalized American citizen had also sponsored us. A large number of Truong Xuan refugees were still waiting for their turn at the Camp. Each one of them was anxious to know about their future. Some felt hopeless because of their uncertain future and their broken families: they were separated from their parents, wives, and children. Some felt they were living in a prison because they were not allowed to go out of the Camp. Those who were lone refugees suffered from loneliness. There were all sorts of crises in the 3 camps: Dodwell's Ridge, Sai Kung and Harcourt Road.

Camp representatives organized a farewell dinner party in my honor. Although we were poor refugees, the menu looked so attractive and the food was so good thanks to our ladies who did the cooking themselves. There were about 40 persons at the party that night.

Nguyen Huy Hoang led me through dozens of guards of honour who were all volunteers in the representative committee. They were the ones who had been looking

after refugees at the camp. The camp chief, Mr. David Weeks, and everyone were already present when we walked into the dining room.

Before sitting down, I thanked all those who were present and I said:

- Since the time I left my country, I have known the most painful moments as well as the most touching ones of my life. We shall no longer live together here, nor shall we share moments of anxiety and hopefulness as when we were onboard of Truong Xuan. I hope that this dinner tonight will bring to all of us the most memorable and beautiful souvenirs as we are on the way to our new lives in exile.

I turned toward Mr. David Weeks and said:

- As refugees, all of us are grateful to the authority and people of Hong Kong and particularly to the camp chief. My responsibilities onboard of Truong Xuan have come to an end. I understand Truong Xuan's passengers and I sympathize with them with respect to all the sorts of trouble that they have to deal with. If you think that I need to stay back, I'll remain here for a while...

On the way out after the farewell dinner party, Weeks told me:

- All ship captains should be the last persons to leave their ship!"

# CLARA MÆRSK

## redder 3628 vietnamesiske skibbrudne

En af  
søfartshistoriens  
største redningsaktioner,  
dygtigt og fremragende  
gennemført af  
»CLARA MÆRSK«s  
besætning

Da »CLARA MÆRSK« den 30. april om aftenen afgik fra Bangkok med kurs mod Hong Kong, drømte ingen blandt skibets besætning om, at de i løbet af de næste 5 dogn skulle blive genstand for opmærksomhed og beundring fra den ganske verden.

36 timer efter afgang var de dybt involveret i en af de mest dramatiske redningsaktioner til søs i nyere tid og samtidig den største, der nogensinde er gennemført af et handelsskib.

Fredag den 2. maj om morgenen opfangede »CLARA MÆRSK« følgende nødsignal ud for Mekong-deltaet i det Sydkinesiske hav: »from master truong-xuan/xvix have about 5000 refugees from saigon onboard they are hungry and thirsty stop engine broken down and leaking stop our position estimated 8 degrees 35 min. north 107 east at 2100gmt request assistance immediately master«.

Det stod straks klart for kaptajn Anton M. Olsen og hans besætning, at der her måtte handles resolut. Og det blev der! Kursen ændredes mod havaristen, alt imedens man forberedte sig til ombordtagning, indkvartering og bespising af de mange skibbrudne.

Det lykkedes utroligt nok via lodsledere, gangvej, netslæng og via havaristens brovinge, der lå på højde med »CLARA MÆRSK«s lønning, at tage hver og én om bord uden tab af menne-

skeliv. Ja, »CLARA MÆRSK« kunne endda sætte flere vietnamesere i land i Hong Kong, end det reddede ud for Saigon, idet der fødtes flere børn om bord, hvoraf ét fik navnet Clara.

De skibbrudne viste sig at være meget udmattede, først og fremmest af mangel på vand. De mest medtagne kom straks under tilsyn af læger fra deres eget skib.

Takket være dygtigt sømandskab om bord forløb turen til Hong Kong vel, alt taget i betragtning. Der nedsattes komiteer til varetagelse af sygebehandling, maduddeling, rengøring og sikkerhed, og de skibbrudne placeredes overalt på skibet, hvor der var plads, i lugerne, i tomme containers, i aptering og på dæk.

Frygt for, at der skulle opstå panikagtige scener om bord, når den sparsomme proviant skulle fordeles, viste sig at være aldeles ubegrundet. Kabysbesætningen bistået af medsejlende hustruer og vietnameserpiger, der skrællede kartofler, arbejdede praktisk taget i døgndrift, ligesom den øvrige besætning, der kun afbrudt af et par timers søvn hjalp til med at fordele vand og mad til de 3.628 uventede gæster.

Lægemidler blev hurtigt en mangelvare om bord, og søndag den 4. maj om formiddagen blev »CLARA MÆRSK« modt af den britiske fregat »CHICHESTER« fra Hong Kong, som medbragte læger og forskellige medikamenter, bl. a.

(1)

Det nødstedte, overfyldte skib, TRUONG XUAN, lå med motorstop og lækage





til operation af et spædbarn. 4 alvorligt syge afhentedes med helikopter.

Søndag aften stod »CLARA MÆRSK« ind i Hong Kong, og landsætningen forløb uden episoder af nogen art. Myndighederne i Hong Kong havde givet de skibbrudne midlertidig opholdstilladelse i kronkolonien. Den storstilede redningsaktion, som frelste de mange vietnamesere fra forlis, var til ende, da en meget udmattet besætning mandag kl. 0300 hjalp de sidste i land i Hong Kong.

En umådelig dygtig dansk indsats var afsluttet – en indsats, som på bedste vis fulgte søens stolte traditioner.

A. Høy-Nielsen.



(2)

De skibbrudne blev placeret i hold overalt på »CLARA MÆRSK«

(3)

Mange af børnene var trods alvoren glade og forventningsfulde, da de var kommet ombord på »CLARA MÆRSK«

(4)

Alle trængtes langs lønningen for at få det første glimt af land ved ankomsten til Hong Kong



CLARA MÆRSKs besætning på rejsen:

Navn	Rang
Anton M. Olsen	kaptajn
Torben V. Blichfeld	overstyrmand
Steen Graversen	1. styrmand
Gert K. Thomsen	2. styrmand
Martin Holroyd	telegrafist
Rasmus P. E. Mortensen	maskinchef
Jens E. Larsen	1. mester
Carl J. H. Pedersen	2. mester
Dan Christiansen	3. mester
Ingvert B. Jensen	maskinass.
Eydalvur Niclasen	elektriker
Jorgen Pedersen	maskinasp.
Harry Hansen	hovmester
Aage F. Hansen	kok
Jesus B. Chinor	ungkok
Angel Fernandez	steward
Fernando Dimarucot	steward
Catalino Ibarrola	steward
Erik H. Hansen	kokasp.
Dorthe Eriksen	kokasp.
Søren C. Andersen	dæksasp.
Erik A. H. Poulsen	dæksasp.
Ito L. Nielsen	bådsmand
Svend A. Nielsen	matros
Knud H. Olsen	matros
Bjarne Nørholt	matros
Peter O. Christiansen	matros
Arvid E. Kirkevik	matros
Francisco Cubela	matros
Wilfredo Fajardo	dæksdreng
Leo Trøstrup	donkeymand
Rodolfo Mendoza	motormand
Jose G. Florendo	motormand



(5) En syg kvinde knuger sit barn til sig på bårn ved ankomsten til Hong Kong. Hun blev få minutter senere bragt til hospitalet



(6)

Kaptajn Anton M. Olsen blev ved en højtidelighed i New York dekoreret med Ridderkorset af Dannebrogordenen som en anerkendelse fra Hendes Majestæt Dronningen i anledning af redningsaktionen. Den danske generalkonsul E. Krogh-Meyer overrakte ordenen ombord på »CLARA MÆRSK«. Samtidig modtog kaptajn Olsen en plakette fra handelsministeriet til ophængning i skibet som en anerkendelse til hele besætningen for deltagelse i aktionen. Til venstre ses direktør for MOLLER STEAMSHIP Co., hr. Poul Rasmussen

# CLARA MAERSH CỨU 3.628 NẠN NHÂN VIỆT NAM ĐẮM TÀU

Trích báo Maersk Post của hãng tàu A.P. Moller  
(hãng này có tàu Clara Maersk)

Chiều 30-04 khi Clara Maersk trên đường từ Bangkok tới Hồng Kông, không ai trong thủy thủ đoàn có thể tưởng tượng được rằng, trong suốt 5 ngày sắp tới, họ sẽ được cả thế giới chú ý và thần phục.

36 giờ sau khi rời bến, thủy thủ đoàn đã bị lôi cuốn vào một cuộc cứu cấp trên biển cả xúc động nhất và cũng lớn lao nhất chưa từng có trong các chuyến hải hành của một tàu buôn.

Sáng thứ Sáu ngày 2-05, Clara Maersk nhận được điện tín cầu cứu tại khu vực sông Cửu Long ở Thái Bình Dương: "Từ thuyền trưởng Trường Xuân /xvlx có khoảng 3.000 người tị nạn từ Sài Gòn trên tàu đói khát. Stop. Máy hư và rỉ. Stop. Vị trí của chúng tôi phỏng chừng 8 độ 35 phút bắc 107 độ đông 21.00 gmt cần giúp đỡ ngay lập tức. Thuyền trưởng".

Thuyền trưởng Anton M. Olsen và thủy thủ đoàn hiểu ngay rằng phải quyết tâm hành động. Và ngay lập tức, tàu đổi hướng về phía con tàu bị nạn, trong khi thủy thủ đoàn chuẩn

bị việc đón người, dọn chỗ, thực phẩm cho những người tị nạn.

Thang, lưới, cầu bắc qua mạn tàu Trường Xuân đã đưa từng người một sang Clara, không ai bị thiệt mạng. Clara Maersk cũng đã đưa nhiều người tới Hồng Kông hơn số người đã nhận, vì nhiều trẻ em đã mở mắt chào đời trên tàu, một em được đặt tên là Clara.

Đám người đắm tàu mệt mỏi, lý do chính vì thiếu nước. Một số được đưa ngay tới bác sĩ của chính tàu họ để khám nghiệm.

Với sự khéo léo tài giỏi của thủy thủ đoàn Clara, chuyến đi Hồng Kông an toàn và tốt đẹp. Những hội đồng được thành lập để chuyên lo về săn sóc người bệnh, phân chia thực phẩm, vệ sinh, an ninh, ... người bị nạn ở khắp nơi trên tàu: dưới hầm, trong những thùng chở hàng trống, phòng tàu, trên boong ...

Mối lo sẽ có rối loạn trên tàu khi số thực phẩm ít ỏi được phân chia đã không xảy ra. Nhà bếp với những bà vợ đi theo tàu và những thiếu nữ Việt Nam gọt vỏ khoai, làm việc đêm

ngày, cũng như những người còn lại của thủy thủ đoàn chỉ với vài giờ ngủ, giúp phân phát nước và thực phẩm cho 3.628 người khách bất ngờ.

Thuốc men trên tàu vơi dần. Trưa Chủ nhật 4-05, Clara Maersk gặp tàu Anh Chichester từ Hồng Kông, được tàu này giúp cho một bác sĩ và các loại thuốc men, đã dùng để giải phẫu một em bé sơ sinh. Bốn người bệnh nặng khác được trực thăng bốc mang đi.

Chiều Chủ Nhật Clara Maersk cập bến Hồng Kông. Người tị nạn được chuyển xuống bến trong trật tự. Chính quyền Hồng Kông thuận cho người tị nạn cư trú tạm thời tại đây. Công cuộc cứu người vì đại kết thúc khi đoàn thủy thủ mệt mỏi giúp người bị nạn cuối cùng xuống bến 03g00 sáng thứ Hai.

Hành động tài khéo vô cùng của Đan Mạch chấm dứt, tuyệt vời nhất theo truyền thống hào hùng của biển cả.

□ A. HO/Y-NIELSEN  
Mỹ Linh dịch

(1) Con tàu Trường Xuân đông nghẹt người trong tình trạng khẩn cấp, chết máy và rỉ nước.

(2) Những người bị nạn ở từng nhóm khắp nơi trên tàu Clara Maersk.

(3) Những em bé trong nguy hiểm vẫn vui vẻ và tràn trề hy vọng khi được bốc lên Clara Maersk.

(4) Đông nghẹt người trên mạn tàu nhìn ngắm quang cảnh đầu tiên của mảnh đất Hồng Kông.

(5) Một nữ bệnh nhân nằm trên cang ôm chặt con vào lòng. Bà ta được chở tới bệnh viện ngay sau đó vài phút.

(6) Thuyền trưởng Anton M. Olsen được trao thưởng bội tinh tại một buổi lễ ở Nữu Ước, như một chứng nhân từ Nữ Hoàng thân phục công cuộc cứu nhân của ông. Ông lãnh sự Đan Mạch E. Krogh-Meyer trao bội tinh cho thuyền trưởng trên tàu Clara Maersk. Thuyền trưởng Olsen cũng được nhận một huân chương từ Bộ Thương Mại để treo trên tàu như một tưởng thưởng toàn bộ thủy thủ đoàn đã tham gia vào công cuộc trên. Bên tay trái là giám đốc hãng Moller Steamship Co. (chi nhánh của A.P. Moller tại Nữu Ước), ông Poul Rasmussen.

## Những bức hình khó quên.



- Lần đầu tiên sau những ngày âu sầu ảm đạm, dân Trường Xuân lấy lại nét hân hoan ngược lên nhìn vị cứu tinh.



*Thoát khỏi nguy cơ vùi thây dưới đáy biển, Trường Xuân đã bình an trong lòng con tàu cứu tinh.*



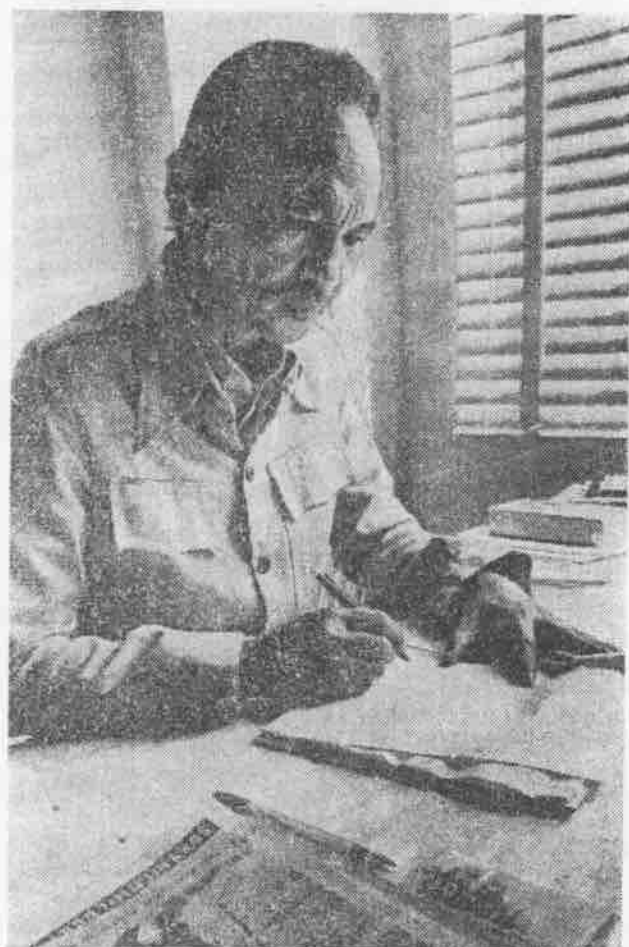
• Một khu trục hạm của Hải Quân Hoàng Gia Anh hộ tống Trường Xuân trên con tàu Clara tiến vào cửa biển Hồng Kông.



• Dân Trường Xuân tại Đan Mạch vây quanh Phu nhân và Thuyền Trưởng Anton M. Olsen ; người đã ra lệnh đổi hướng con tàu Clara tới cứu Trường Xuân.



MONDAY, JULY 19, 1976



By Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

Luy Ngoc Pham patiently answers countrymen's letters.

## Man Who Saved 4,000 Still Wants Own Ship

By Judith Valente

Washington Post Staff Writer

In his native South Vietnam, Luy Ngoc Pham was a merchant marine captain for a Saigon shipping firm. On April 30, 1975—the day North Vietnamese communists captured Saigon—he took 4,000 refugees on board a battered, malfunctioning cargo ship and eventually led them to safety in a Hong Kong refugee camp.

Pham now lives with his 24-year-old son in an efficiency apartment at 2801 Quebec St. NW. The captain, 57, has no job and no furniture in his apartment. He lives on the money his son makes as a researcher for Inter-Development, Inc., an Arlington consulting firm.

Sometimes he takes walks—to the zoo on Connecticut Avenue near his home or to Georgetown. But most of the time he writes, in a tiny scrawl on loose leaf paper, seated at a small, unvar-

nished wooden desk near the window in his apartment.

The captain is writing the story of the two days he and other refugees spent aboard the *Truong Xuan* (the ship's name means "forever young" in Vietnamese) before it was rescued—adrift in the China Sea—by the Danish vessel, the *Clara Maersk*. The *Clara Maersk* took all the refugees on board and brought them to Hong Kong.

It's a story that reads like a film scenario—full of violence, desperation and death, ending in victory and hope.

Pham, a slight, soft-spoken man with a gray Fu Manchu moustache, said he is writing his memoirs, "for my family and the descendants of all Vietnamese ref-

See REFUGEE, C3, Col. 2

# Man Who Saved 4,000 Wants Own Ship

## REFUGEE, From C1

ugees so that they will know there was no corruption aboard my ship, but that there was respect for human life."

On April 3, 1975, the captain was on a voyage to several South Pacific cities when he heard over his ship's radio that communist forces were within 45 miles of Saigon. Most of the ship's crew had family in Saigon and begged Pham to return to the capital. Pham's wife, three daughters and a son were also there. Pham agreed to return.

On April 29, after a night of heavy shelling that almost destroyed the Saigon airport, Pham persuaded his employer to give him a ship to help his family and some 200 neighbors and friends flee Saigon.

The flight out of the capital was delayed a day because the Truong Xuan's boiler needed repairing. As Pham's family and friends were boarding the ship on

the morning of April 30, word came that communist tanks had entered Saigon and were moving toward the president's palace.

The next thing Pham remembers is seeing thousands of people rush to the gate where the ship was docked and begin climbing aboard the vessel.

When his ship finally left Saigon, there were 4,000 refugees on board and only 10 bags of rice and 180 tons of fresh water. Normally, Pham would have had a 25-member crew to assist him. His crew that day consisted of a chief mate, chief engineer, an oiler and a radio operator—a refugee who had volunteered for the job.

"I was torn between the desire to help these people and my own fear. I knew they were all looking at me and believing in my ability to help them.

"I couldn't look at them, though. I saw only a mass of heads, not anyone's face. I stayed far from my family

because I didn't want to see fear in their faces," the captain explained in Vietnamese. His son, Son, a business student at American University, translated for him when Pham felt it was necessary to switch from French to Vietnamese to express himself.

The fear was justified. The captain tells of refugees who drank their own urine when the water supply ran low, of a man who shot his head off and had to be thrown into the sea, of a woman who wanted to give her baby sleeping pills because it was dying of thirst.

Pham does not dwell long on these memories, but passes quickly to those he says "show the value of human life. He likes to tell of turning his ship around to search for a man who had fallen overboard because he thought the man might still be alive.

"I read once in Reader's Digest that a man survived 20 hours in the water. I felt it was my duty to search for

this refugee. We found him just before nightfall. He was alive."

The engine of the Truong Xuan broke down on the second day, and the ship was drifting in the China Sea when the Clara Maersk came along. That ship's captain, Anton Olsen, agreed to take the refugees on board and carry them to Hong Kong. The Truong Xuan was left behind.

The refugees spent several months in the Hong Kong refugee camp where they slept on blankets on the floor and ate cucumbers and rice. Most of them since have found sponsors in several American cities and foreign countries.

The captain has received about 1,000 letters from refugees and spends several hours a day answering them. One of the letters he received conveys the gist of all of them; "We shall never forget you and our future generations will remember you."

When Pham writes back, he asks his countrymen to send money to the 35 refugees who are still in Hong Kong and have not yet found a sponsor in a foreign country.

Of Pham's own family, two daughters and two sons have settled in Toronto, another son and two daughters are in Rockville, and another daughter is in Queens, New York. Mrs. Pham lives with her sister in Falls Church.

Pham decided to live with his son rather than his wife because the apartment where she lives was too cramped, he said. But the Pham children are all putting money aside to buy a house for their parents. The family reunites each weekend at the captain's eldest son's home.

Despite his age, Pham hopes to become a sea captain for an American shipping firm when his two-year parole as a refugee in this country is up and he can apply for status as a permanent resident alien.

"As a sea captain, I had a private bath, private dining area, good food to eat on board my ship," he said, looking at the two floor mats in the middle of the apartment that are his and his son's beds.

# Captain of Viet Freighter Is Refugees' Greatest Hero

By **BARKER HOWLAND**  
Staff Writer

Four thousand Vietnamese men, women and children all over the world swear that Capt. Pham Ngoc Luy, who was skipper of the Vietnamese freighter *Truong Xuan* (Eternal Spring), is the greatest hero that ever lived. All 4,000 owe their lives to him.

The modest and shy captain, a veteran of 30 years on the high seas, was in Harrisburg for a few days visiting with local Vietnamese and told his story about how he saved the lives of his fellow countrymen.

Now a resident of Washington, D.C., Luy, who had been employed by the Nishipco Lines from 1970 to 1975 and was the captain of the *Truong Xuan* for a year, had taken a load of scrap iron to Hong Kong and was returning to his home port of Saigon in April 1975.

Not far from the coast of South Vietnam, the captain had the radio on and heard of the surrender. Most of the ships who heard the news turned around and sought out the protection of United States Navy ships. Not so the *Truong Xuan*.

The captain ordered his ship to put into Dock No. 5 in the large port of Saigon. His vessel was the only one which elected to go back to the capital of South Vietnam.

"I saw a huge crowd of people trying to get out of Vietnam," Luy said. "I felt that I could help them and save them so I let down the planks and 3,500 came aboard, although we could normally carry only 12 passengers. Our ship left three hours before the Communists came in."

Meanwhile, half of the crew decided to go to their homes in Saigon so the captain was left with only half of his complement.

He asked for volunteers among the refugees to help him maneuver the ship. A student became the navigator and a member of the South Vietnam Army Engineers Corps was named first mate. The commander of the police force of a town just outside Saigon became the security officer.



**Capt. Pham Ngoc Luy**

With 3,500 aboard, Luy and his freighter proceeded down the river towards the ocean mouth. As they moved along many Vietnamese were trying to escape in small boats and were having problems so the skipper brought 500 more aboard giving him a total of 4,000 people on his hands.

"I had people from every part of Vietnamese society aboard," he said. "There were doctors, lawyers, senators, fishermen, farmers, merchants and soldiers. It was a cross-section of the people, including 15 doctors, a Buddhist monk, two Catholic priests and two Catholic sisters. I asked the soldiers to disarm and we confiscated about 50 machine guns and many small arms. There was no panic aboard."

As might be expected with such a large group aboard, someone fell overboard. By the time the freighter was safely out into international waters, the captain was notified. When he heard about it, he decided to return toward Saigon and was

able to fish the man out of the water and save him.

"This was one of the biggest decisions I ever had to make," Luy said. "It was one life against 3,999 but I decided one human was worth saving."

During the course of the voyage to a hoped-for safe haven, "two babies were born and two people died. One man shot himself and a 70-year-old senator who was in a great deal of pain, died," the captain said. "One of the babies was named after my freighter and the other was named after the *Clara Maersk* which came to our rescue. All the time we were at sea there was no food to eat and very little water to drink."

As for the aid rendered by the Danish vessel, the *Maersk*, the captain said that his engine room began to take on water and the ship was in danger of sinking with all 4,000 aboard.

"I sent out a SOS to every ship in the area," he said. "The Danish ship came to our rescue. We were 950 miles from Hong Kong and we moved alongside the Maersk and that ship took us in tow."

When they were within 100 miles from Hong Kong, the freighter was really in trouble and its captain appealed to the Danish skipper to take the Vietnamese aboard. He replied he would take the women and children — to which Luy replied that he'd have to take all of them or none and the Maersk skipper agreed.

"On May 4, we arrived in Hong Kong," Luy said. "At that time Hong Kong had no refugee camps like there are today. The authorities said that the people couldn't be landed. I sent a message to Queen Elizabeth who was visiting Japan, appealing to her to let the people land. She gave orders that they were to be admitted."

"Hong Kong set up three camps to put them in, one in the city and the other two right near the border of Red China," he added.

Although two of Captain Luy's children were living in the United

States and he could have gone to live with them immediately, he chose to remain in Hong Kong to see that the refugees were taken care of.

He stayed for six months before he and his wife made their journey to the states to live in Washington, D.C. where he and his son are in business operating a copying center. He has two daughters and a son living in Toronto, two daughters in New York City, a son in Pittsburgh and two sons in the Washington area.

As if he hadn't done enough for his countrymen, "a few months ago I asked World Vision International if I could volunteer to help them in their work with the boat people and I'm waiting for an answer."

If the answer is favorable, the captain could possibly be aboard the boat, Operation Sea Sweep run by World Vision which patrols the South China Sea bringing fuel and provisions to boats with Vietnamese refugees aboard.

What was the captain doing in Harrisburg? Participating in a series of workshops attended by Vietnamese leaders and such local church leaders as Dr. William G. Rusch, executive of the Presbyterian Synod of the Trinity, which tried to determine what could be done for the "boat people."

What is he doing in his spare time? Going throughout the country meeting in such widely scattered places as San Francisco, Houston and New Orleans with those folk who were his passengers in 1975. And unless he is called to duty aboard Operation Sea Sweep, he will be flying to Europe to meet with some of his former passengers who are now living in West Germany, Belgium, England, Austria, France and Denmark.

How do the Vietnamese feel about him? Their leading song writers have written a song that has become the theme song of the refugees — which tells the story of Captain Pham Ngoc Luy, their self-effacing hero, who says he did only what any human being should be willing to do.

Flat E2,  
39A Conduit Road,  
Hong Kong.

10 May, 1976.

*Mon Che Capitaine Lay,*

First of all allow me to apologise for this impersonal form of writing, but I owe letters to so many of you that to write individually would take several days of hard work!

Most of you are probably not aware of the final outcome of the Hong Kong exercise. This was, at last, very successful, with only 35 refugees still remaining here. Most of these last 35 have found jobs or are now attending school, and they will move out of the camp this week. You will probably be interested to know the final scoreboard for immigration; it was:-

USA	2,575	Belgium	24
H.K.	145	Germany	27
Canada	373	Switzerland	1
Taiwan	1	Denmark	101
Australia	209	Austria	62
France	362	Italy	2
New Zealand	1	U.K.	35

I often see Ray Humphrey (Sai Kung Camp), Charles Gately (Harcourt Road) and Jim Derrick (U.S. Consulate), and, as you may expect, conversation always turns to those hectic months, starting for us on May 4, 1975, when all of us had such an interesting time.

Dodwell's Ridge Camp actually closed down at the end of October last year, when the bulk of you had left. I then took two weeks holiday in North Thailand, where I spent most of the time walking in the hills near the Burmese and Cambodian borders. At Tet I spent five days in Manila, and this Easter I went to Thailand, this time for 17 days, and enjoyed myself immensely. Now I'm back at work, but already planning my next holiday in Thailand (hopefully in August or September).

Thank you for your letters, cards, photographs and gifts, and please be assured that, although I may not reply as I should, I remain very interested in news of your collective and individual "Doi Moi".

Best wishes to you all

*Sincèrement votre*

*David Weeks*

(David Weeks)

P.T.O.

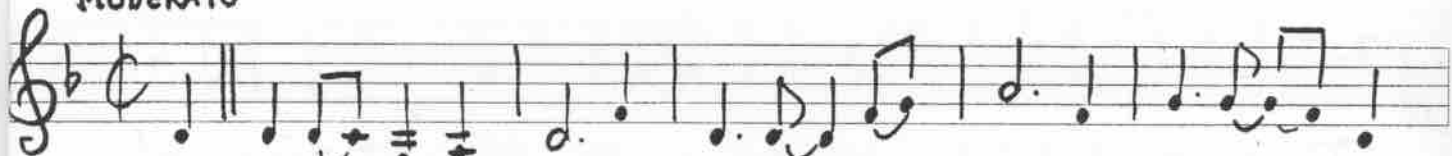
P.S. Les trois belles filles vietnamiennes tiennent  
la place d'honneur dans ma maison. Elles  
présentent toujours un distinctif souvenir  
des soirées à Dodwell's Ridge.

QJW Mai, 1976.

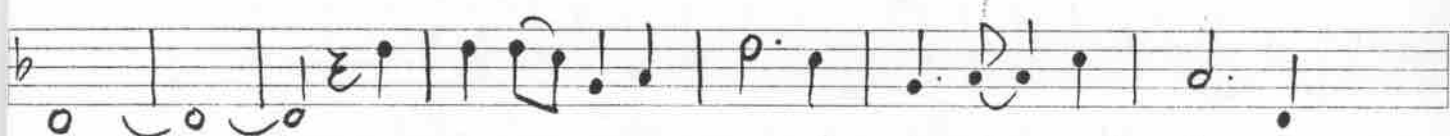
# Bon Tàu Định Mệnh

Lam Phương.

MODERATO



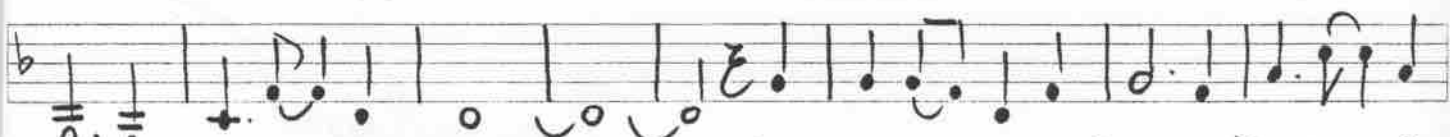
Khi đi thấy đường đã xa, bây giờ đường về xú còn xa hơn nghìn



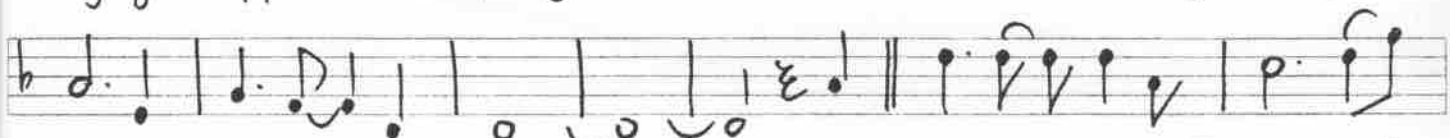
lần. Trên hai mươi vạn bàn tay dặt. diu nhau đến đây ngàn



đôi xa cô - hương. Ra đi trong gió đàu thường lúc quê hương bâng -



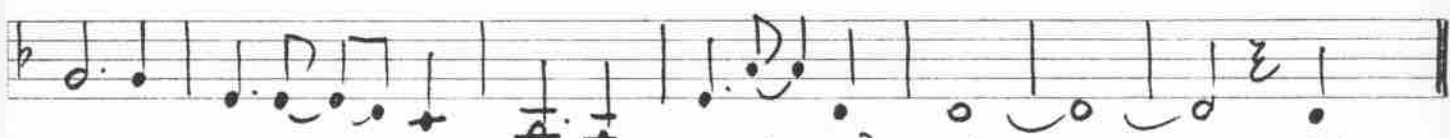
hoàng người say phút vinh - quang - Ai đi ai ở' nào hay người đồng kẻ hương



Tây cũng sống trong đọa - đày. Trưng đường bát ngát người đi. Sống



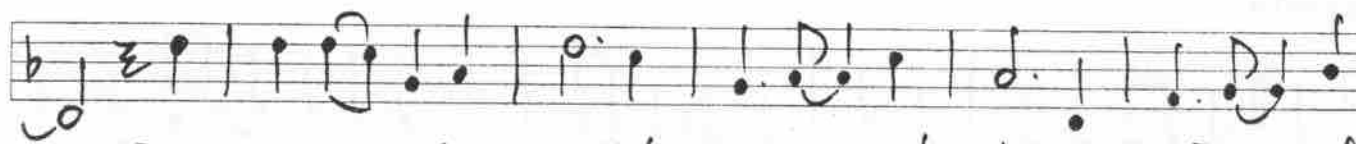
dâng cao vôi - vôi thuyền trôi biết về đâu? Vầng trăng soi biển



Sầu giúp cho tôi nhiên mâu lăm Sao bớt nỗi Sầu. Tôi



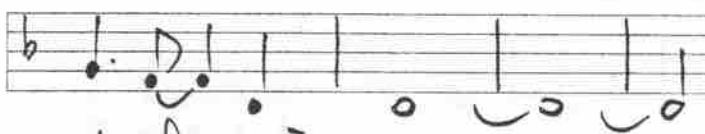
Yêu con Tàu Trường Xuân con Tàu nhiên Sống gió mà tình thương thật đây.



Tôi xin đưa tay bắt đầu con đường này ngàn đời xin khác



ghi Mai ta phiêu bạt nơi nao đừng quên phút gian lao cũng



Sốt chia ngày nào -

Liêng táng  
4000 con tim thép  
trên con tàu định mệnh  
TRƯỜNG - XUÂN

*Lampson*

