



Southeast Asia

HISTORY

Escaping from Vietnam

Vo Thi Tam was one of the Vietnamese “boat people.” She fled South Vietnam after communist North Vietnam took over that country in the mid-1970s. Here, she explains why she and her family decided to leave, and she describes the first part of her dangerous escape.

They [the Communists] gave us tools and a little food, and that was it. We just had to dig up the land and cultivate it. And the land was very bad.

It was impossible for us to live there, so we got together with some other families and bought a big fishing boat, about thirty-five feet long. Altogether, there were thirty-seven of us that were to leave—seven men, eight women, and the rest children. . . .

After we bought the boat we had to hide it, and this is how: We just anchored it in a harbor in the Mekong Delta. Its very crowded there and very many people make their living aboard the boats by going fishing, you know. So we had to make ourselves like them. We took turns living and sleeping on the boat. We would maneuver [move] the boat around the harbor, as if we were fishing or selling stuff, you know, so the Communist authorities could not suspect anything.

Besides the big boat, we had to buy a smaller boat in order to carry supplies . . . little by little, on the little boat to the big boat. To do this we sold jewelry and radios and other things that we had left from the old days.

On the day we left we took the big boat out very early in the morning—all the women and children were in that boat and some of the men. My husband and the one other man remained in the small boat, and they were to rendezvous [meet] with us outside the harbor. Because if the harbor officials see too many people aboard, they might think there was something suspicious. I think they were suspicious anyway. . . .

Anyway, the big boat passed through the harbor and went ahead to the rendezvous point where we were to meet my husband and the other man in the small boat. But there was no one there. We waited for two hours. . . . After a while we could see a Vietnamese navy boat approaching, and there was a discussion on board our boat and the end of it was that the people on our boat decided to leave without my husband and the other man.

When we reached the high seas, we discovered, unfortunately, that the water container was leaking and only a little bit of water was left. So we had to ration the water from then on. . . . After seven days we ran out of water, so all we had to drink was the sea water, plus lemon juice. . . .

During this time we had seen several boats on the sea and had waved to them to help us, but they never stopped. But [one] morning . . . we could see another ship coming and we were very happy, thinking maybe it

was people coming to save us. When the two boats were close together, the people came on board from there—it happened to be a Thai boat—and they said all of us had to go on [their] boat. . . . They pried up the planks of our boat, trying to see if there was any gold or jewelry hidden there. And when they had taken everything, they put us back on our boat and pushed us away.

They had taken all our maps and compasses, so we didn't even know which way to go. And because they had pried up the planks of our boat to look for jewelry, the water started getting in. We were very weak by then. But we had no pump, so we had to use empty cans to bail the water out, over and over again.

That same day we were boarded again by two other boats, and these, too, were pirates. They came aboard with hammers and knives and everything. But we could only beg them for mercy and try to explain by sign language that we'd been robbed before and we had nothing left. So those boats let us go and pointed the way to Malaysia for us.

That night at about 9:00 P.M. we arrived on the shore, and we were so happy to finally land somewhere that we knelt down on the beach and prayed, you know, to thank God.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why did Vo Thi Tam want to leave Vietnam? What did she have to sacrifice to accomplish this?

2. Why was it necessary to purchase two boats?

3. What events made the refugees' voyage more difficult? What act of mercy allowed their escape to finally succeed?

Activity

Compose a poem that tells the story of Vietnam's “boat people.”