


ESCAPE

FROM VIETNAM:

Two perilous flights from a war-torn country to **America**





The Vietnam War, the longest military battle in the history of the United States, lasted from 1959 to April 30, 1975. The war was fought between North Vietnamese communists and the U.S. supported South Vietnamese. More than 1.4 million military personnel and an estimated 2 million civilians were killed in the war.



>> Duy and Thu-Huong Pham Tran in their Caledonia home

Duy (pronounced Zwee) Tran can still picture the skid marks left by the North Vietnamese missile that skipped down the street past his childhood home on the day that Saigon fell.



>> A school photo of Duy, age 12.

The missile did not explode, but its untimely arrival signaled the start of a historic day – April 30, 1975 – that would alter the future of Duy’s country and his family. On that day, Duy’s father made a life-or-death decision to leave Vietnam.

An executive for Exxon Oil Company, Duy’s father worked at the airport in Saigon where the company had built a tennis court for employees and their families. Duy enjoyed a carefree life-style, attending school and learning tennis from a former Vietnamese tennis star who was a friend of his father’s. However, life as Duy knew it was forever changed on that fateful April day.

“We had nothing when we left. It was tough,” he recalled. But staying would

have been far worse.” Looking back on that time, Duy now feels that after the communists took over, his father’s association with a U.S. corporation “would have been a death sentence.”

“My dad said, ‘Well, we better just go ... there was no turning back,’” Duy recalled. Duy, then 17, left home carrying only his beloved tennis racket and wearing a belt that his parents filled with some gold. In the event he became separated from his family, Duy carried a note asking whoever found him to take care of him.

“We were just trying to get away from all the chaos and shooting,” Duy said.

Duy and 14 family members squeezed into his father’s Toyota and followed a stream of people heading to a nearby

>> Duy Tran holds his infant sister in 1975 just before the family left Vietnam.



>> Duy Tran (second from left) pictured in the United States with his mother Nha (far left), his father Đinh (center), brother Khanh (right) and sister Hoa (far right).

harbor to escape before communist troops marched on the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon. The family joined hundreds of other South Vietnamese on a commercial boat designed to hold just 27 people. During the next two nights and three days the family endured uncertainty, an on-board explosion, and dehydration sickness.

Devout Catholics, the family prayed while they waited to be rescued.

“(Prayer) is the only thing that kept our hope,” said Duy, who believes God protected them. “We were really lucky, because we could die any time on the open sea.”

Rescued from the roof of the U.S. Embassy

Just a day before Duy’s family fled Saigon, Thu-Huong (pronounced Too-hoong) Pham and her family were also escaping the turmoil of the city. Both teenagers at the time, Duy and Thu-Huong would meet and marry nine years later in the U.S.

Thu-Huong’s family fled Vietnam on April 29. As a driver for the U.S. Embassy, Thu-Huong’s father was among those invited to evacuate; he said “yes” without hesitation.

“My father said, ‘communism is communism. What we have here will become nothing. It’s a chance for us to go abroad, to get out of the country, so why not?’ So he decided to take that chance,” recalled Thu-Huong, who has seven sisters and three brothers, two of whom were born in the United States.

Some of the most widely recognized scenes from that time in 1975 include those of people being precariously airlifted from the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Thu-Huong and her family were among those rescued from that location. Then, only 15, Thu-Huong remembers the pandemonium surrounding the building and the sound of the rotors overhead as her family boarded a Chinook helicopter that had landed on the Embassy roof.

A portion of the U.S. Embassy staircase used by Thu-Huong, her family and hundreds of other fleeing South Vietnamese and Americans airlifted from the Embassy roof is housed in a permanent exhibit in Grand Rapids’ Gerald R. Ford Museum. Also displayed there is an authentic Vietnam-era UH-1 Huey helicopter.

“It was chaos that day,” recalled Thu-Huong. “People had the feeling something is going to change. You can see the emotion, the anxiety within the Vietnamese. My father said you can feel the tension everywhere in Saigon at that time.”

Like Duy’s family, Thu-Huong’s family also relied on their faith to help them through the political turmoil. As part of their daily lives in Vietnam, both families had attended Mass and feared not only reprisals from the Communist regime, but loss of religious freedom. The desire to continue to embrace their faith was part of what compelled both families to leave Vietnam.

“Number one, we were Catholic,” said Thu-Huong. “We wanted to have (religious) freedom.”

Once they were aboard the helicopter, Thu-Huong’s family was flown to an aircraft carrier, where empty choppers were tossed overboard to make room for the mounting numbers of passengers fleeing Vietnam. The carrier took them to Guam and from there a plane transported them to a refugee camp at a military base in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

Meanwhile, Duy’s family endured an even more difficult journey.

Vietnamese found refuge in West Michigan

>> On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon was captured by the North Vietnamese army. The event marked the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of the formal reunification of Vietnam under communist rule. By the afternoon of April 30, North Vietnamese forces had raised their flag over Saigon's presidential palace and renamed the city Ho Chi Minh. Along with American civilian and

military personnel, tens of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians who feared for their lives evacuated the city. As part of the response to this mass exodus, President Gerald R. Ford set up an interagency task force that resettled 130,000 South Vietnamese refugees in the United States.

In the mid-1970s, about 600 South Vietnamese individuals and families were resettled in West Michigan by the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids through the agency then known as Catholic Human Development Outreach (CHDO). CHDO, which became part of Catholic Charities West Michigan in 2007, worked in conjunction with the

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). During its 30-year existence, CHDO assisted over 12,000 refugees and their families in making Grand Rapids their home by helping them locate jobs, housing, and parishes; assimilate their children into school, and purchase groceries, transportation and other necessities. In the process, it was CHDO's goal to instill hope, dignity and offer new respect to these immigrants. In turn, the West Michigan community benefitted by receiving refugees who enriched the community through their social and cultural backgrounds; fueled the economy through new business development; and added to the consumer base.

“No matter what generation, no matter what time of life, there are still uncertainties,” said Thu-Huong. “War, the economy ... So what do you turn to? Of course, you turn to God.”

An uncertain future

The first night aboard the small commercial boat, communists on-board disabled the engine. Duy remembers South Vietnamese soldiers shooting those communist insurgents who attempted to thwart their escape. Mechanics on-board were able to fix the engine. On the second night, a suicide bomber blew a hole in the boat. Duy spent that night helping bale out water. By day three, drinking water was scarce and Duy's father feared the worst. Duy and his parents and siblings took sips of water, saving the most of what they had for Duy's five-month-old infant sister.

Three days after boarding the boat, Duy, his family and the rest of the passengers were rescued by a ship from Denmark. Duy guesses that they would not have survived if the ship had not picked them up. He remembers climbing nets to board the much larger ship as he fought illness brought on by dehydration.

The ship took them to Hong Kong, where they would wait in uncertainty in a refugee camp for several months.



>> Thu-Huong Pham Tran (right) and her daughter Ngoc-Anh (Maria) stand near the Vietnam-era Huey helicopter that is part of a permanent exhibit at the Gerald R. Ford Museum.

Settling in America

After several months in the camp, Duy's family learned that Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Comstock Park would sponsor them. They would be coming to America, joining Duy's older brother who had been in the United States as an exchange student before the fall of Saigon.

The church helped settle Duy's parents, himself, six brothers and sisters, an aunt, uncle and first cousin into a modest home in Comstock Park. His father, the former executive, took a job as a janitor at Holy Trinity.

“He went from a CEO to cleaning toilets,” recalled Duy. “He was trying to raise a family.”

Duy took on a paper route and his father would go on to become an electrician at American Seating Company and later Steelcase.

After three months at the refugee camp in Arkansas, Thu-Huong's family learned that a Catholic church in Lansing could sponsor them. The church rented a three bedroom, one bathroom house for Thu-Huong's family of 11. Church volunteers assisted Thu-Huong's father in finding a job

>> Four generations of the Tran family.



as a custodian at Michigan State University, and helped settle the children into the school system.

“We had faith in God, and so we trusted the church people,” recalled Thu-Huong, noting that they helped the family with grocery shopping, banking and other necessities. A few years later, the family had saved enough to buy a home. Her father is now retired.

Trust in God carried the family through the many challenges they faced, Thu-Huong said.

“Sitting back, (I think) how God planned out everything when you put your trust in him,” she said.

As they settled into their new lives in the United States, Thu-Huong’s and Duy’s families were both involved in the small, but active Vietnamese community in Michigan. Both served in their local churches – she in the choir and he as an altar server.

A few years after resettling in Grand Rapids, Duy would meet his wife Thu-Huong. They met when Duy’s brother invited him to Thu-Huong’s sister’s birthday party.

“I told him I’d never get married; my only love is tennis,” Duy recalled. “He said ‘I have a girl for you.’ I went to the party and we started talking.”

The Caledonia couple will be married 25 years in October and have six children: Thu Anh, 24, a University of Michigan graduate who works for Edward Jones in New York City; Duy-Anh, 22, a senior at Michigan State University; Tuan-Anh, 20, a student at Aquinas and a member of the tennis team; Ngoc-Anh (Maria), 16, a sophomore at East Kentwood High School, Tien-Anh, 11, who is in the sixth grade, and Kim-Anh, 9, in the fourth grade.

Thu-Huong, 49, attended Lansing Community College where she earned an associate degree and now works part-time as a translator for Spectrum Health.

Duy attended Grand Rapids Central High School and later Grand Valley State University, where he played on the tennis team. He left college for a job at Steelcase, where he worked for 25 years. For the last two years, Duy, 51, has worked full-time as a professional tennis instructor and coaches boys’ and girls’ tennis for East Kentwood High School.

The Trans are members of and attend Mass at St. Mary Magdalene Church in Kentwood where Maria is a peer ministry

counselor. Duy and Thu-Huong share not only a history, but a strong Catholic faith and values. They credit their families’ faith and trust in God with helping them survive the tumult in Vietnam, and begin new lives here in the United States.

“The only thing that will carry you through is your faith,” said Thu-Huong.

On holy days of obligation, they still get a call from their parents reminding them that it is a church day.

Duy and Thu-Huong say they are thankful for the sacrifices their parents made.

“We were the lucky ones,” said Duy. “Many people couldn’t escape. We were very lucky, very fortunate. So we’ve got to make the best of whatever we’ve got. That is what drove me.”

Their families’ faith through the struggles they faced remains a constant for Tran family today.

“(Faith) starts with your parents, and just keeps going down to our children,” Duy said.

That faith remains just as central to their lives now as it was during their harrowing escape from Vietnam and journey to America.

“No matter what generation, no matter what time of life, there are still uncertainties,” said Thu-Huong. “War, the economy ... So what do you turn to? Of course, you turn to God.” ☩



>> Thu-Huong next to a portion of staircase removed from the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam and now a part of a Gerald R. Ford museum exhibit. Thu-Huong and her family were airlifted from the roof of the U.S. Embassy as they escaped Vietnam in April 1975.