

## Truong Xuan's Last Voyage

It was 2:30 in the afternoon on May 2, 1975. After all the refugees had been evacuated to the Clara Maersk, the crew members and I remained behind to say a final farewell our ship, Truong Xuan. The crew consisted of the second mate Tran Van Chat, telecommunications officer Nguyen Ngoc Thanh, chief engineer Le Hong Phi, mechanic Ton Hoa, cook Chung A Can and myself, the captain.

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

*“Truong Xuan ship carried more than 3,000 Vietnamese fleeing Saigon 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 on board, I hereby appeal to all the countries of the free world to accept and save my fellow refugees.”*

Signed: Captain Pham Ngoc Luy

The communiqué was never sent. Holding it in his hand, Thanh looked upset and told me in a trembling voice, “Captain, I cannot send it. The generator room is submerged in water. I thought Chief engineer Phi had reported that to you.”

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

The ship was sinking 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!”

After three days without sleep, my nerves were totally wrecked. Every muscle fiber was exhausted. I was sick – physically and emotionally – the sickest I had ever been in my entire life. My country had fallen to the Communists, and my ship was sinking. I felt overwhelmed with responsibility and sorrow, yet I had to keep calm and steady at this hopeless moment. Could physical fatigue have empowered the mind? How else could I have kept going?

According to marine tradition, I was the last person to leave the ship. Truong Xuan was left behind, unattended. I felt a sharp pain in my soul. I bid farewell to my dear ship, the last piece of my country. The sea was calm, not a breeze in the air. Our national flag, hanging lifelessly above the deck, appeared as if it were in a state of mourning. The small ship had carried almost 4,000 of my fellow Vietnamese fleeing the Communists at the last and most painful moment on April 30, 1975.

Truong Xuan was 93 meters long, 12 meters wide, powered by 1,500 horsepower and had a loading capacity of 3,000 tons. A cargo ship built in Japan in the late fifties, it had already out-performed its capacities. It had been weighed down with people loaded with worries, anxieties and hope. Now its burden was lifted and its cranes towered in the sky above an indescribably deserted deck.

I left the ship that had carried so many happy and sad memories. It had cruised the calm ocean.

It had been beaten up by storms. It had helped us escape our country. I tried my best not to shed tears. What would happen to my ship? Where would it end up? Would it sink to the bottom of the sea? What would happen to Viet Nam? Where would the people still there end up? Would my heart sink to the bottom of the sea?

Vu Ba Hung wrote a piece for me entitled, “Viet Nam My Land”, when he was in the refugee camp in Hong Kong. It best describes the loss of a homeland that only a refugee can know.

*Viet Nam, My land!*

*The words Viet Nam are those that our descendants all over the world will write in their best hand. Viet Nam is not a vast land, not as immense as the Soviet Union that extends from Europe to Asia. Viet Nam is not a rich land, not as fertile as America with her amber waves of wheat. Viet Nam, my land, is a small and modest country. It leans against the Asian continent and it faces the ocean. However, despite its smallness and modesty, it has weathered so many misfortunes.*

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

*The words Truong Xuan are those that our descendants all over the world will write in their best hand. Truong Xuan, our ship, was not as famous and noble as the Queen Elizabeth. Truong Xuan, our ship, was not as grand 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.*

*Despite having a small identity, our ship had carried with it greatness that would be spread all over the world. Our ship had brought along with it a piece of Viet Nam. Like Viet Nam, Truong Xuan, the ship had faced many threats. It had to deal with so many dangers before it could sunbathe 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 sleep eternally at the bottom of the ocean.*

*Truong Xuan, our ship, is still there but it is drifting away without its captain, without anyone. A piece of Viet Nam quietly left Saigon on board the ship in the midday of April 30, 1975. 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 sing again, “I left Saigon at the age of 18, just starting to know love, but more than that to 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 hearts. 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 and to be nurtured in the heartfelt spirits of our countrymen. Leaving Viet Nam behind, we carried with us the hope that we could*

*bring everything 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. Crying outbursts had to be kept within our lips. Once the ship made its way to the ocean, our worries overcame our sense of loss. While Truong Xuan was looking for its direction toward the sea, its passengers were busy looking back at the shores of Viet Nam. We were trying for the last time to capture the familiar landscape of our country. As we started worrying about the possible misfortunes that lay ahead, the familiar landscape no longer provided comfort. We were afraid of the beautiful scenery at the river's banks. We were even afraid of the romantic and melancholic forks of the river.*

*After facing so many obstacles, hunger, despair, and five days of miraculously floating in the ocean, we arrived at a piece of land extended from inland China bearing the sweet name: Huong Cang (The port of perfume) or Hong Kong.*

*In the history of all the immigrants in the world, I would say that no other ship could have ever carried a more varied group of people on board. Amazingly, there were members of Parliament, doctors, dentists and judges among 4,000 citizens of South Viet Nam. We also had Navy, Air Force, and Army personnel ranking from Colonel to Private. There were two Catholic Priests, two nuns, and one Buddhist Monk. There were students from all of Viet Nam's universities including the Universities of Van Hanh and Minh Duc. There were both military and civilian journalists. There were many public servants and private office workers of all fields. The ship brought along popular singers, song writers, and actors such as Tuy Hong, Lam Phuong, Elvis Phuong, Nhat Minh, Quang Minh, and last but not least, female singer Dang Lan. Among Truong Xuan's 4000 passengers, there were 15 medicine doctors and 7 dentists, which created 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 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 in all directions of the world to make our homes in many "good lands". We all long for the Reunion Day when we may all flock back to our country that we sadly had to leave behind. We all pray that Viet Nam will be a "good land" again, and that we will be able to fly back to it.*

*(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 sharp and vivid images. Events that had occurred mere months ago now seemed

so far away in the past.

We were away from our homeland while it 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 Viet Nam. Despite the Paris peace agreement, I doubted that South Viet Nam could survive that long. South Viet Nam was plagued with poor leadership and government corruption. Patriotic people did not have a chance to lead the country. Worst of all, there was disunity among the Nationalist parties in the South. Where had the good ideological cause of the South gone? Our leaders in South Viet Nam depended totally on foreigners. Eventually our allies would flee and we would be left to deal with the Communists alone. I left Viet Nam that December with so many worries on my mind.

Truong Xuan was anchored in Hon Khoi more than a week but the weather permitted us to load only 400 tons of salt. The ship's cargo hold was not yet full, but we could not stay any longer due to the approaching storm. Truong Xuan lifted its anchor and headed for Singapore. To avoid the storm Truong Xuan anchored at Cam Ranh Bay, which was beautiful, deep, and well protected by mountains. Cam Ranh was an ideal military base; it was also an important commercial harbor.

After unloading our salt cargo in Singapore, Truong Xuan arrived in Bangkok on December 29, 1974, but there was nowhere in the harbor to dock. We had to drop anchor in the river. Thai women brought all sorts of fruits to our ship. Thai longan fruit were big with small seeds; they were as sweet as the ones from North Viet Nam. The taste of the small fruit brought back wonderful memories of a time when I was a small boy in my village in North Viet Nam. 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 along the Menam River, opposite the Bangkok capital. We wanted to befriend the Thai villagers and converse with them, but as soon as they realized that we were Vietnamese, 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 Viet Nam. 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 sneaking in here to run their activities." My worries for Viet Nam mounted with each word she spoke.

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 northeast wind was blowing hard, causing seasickness among some of our crew members. When I first started my seaman career, I suffered from amazing bouts of seasickness. As time went on, I overcame my seasickness and trips on the high seas were like journeys of discovery to new horizons. In my later years, on board larger vessels, when the seas were calm and placid, like that of a lake, I found that I could not fall asleep.

When we reached the Philippine Sea, Truong Xuan traveled among many islands. The crew members felt fresh after the stormy days. We all went up to the deck to sit casually and relax. The crew

was missing the comfort of their families. They were thinking of their wives, children, and girlfriends back at home. Two opposite forces compelled them: the love of adventure at sea and the love of those waiting for them at home.

While traveling among the islands, the news of Phuoc Long falling to the Communists caused concern in all of us. Once anchored at Cebu, the company agent was present to help us with all the landing paperwork. Dozens of dinghies surrounded Truong Xuan. Many amateur artists drew up colorful pictures of Truong Xuan to sell to our seamen. Young Filipinos greeted us cordially and offered cigarettes and liquor.

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.

We returned to the Philippines once more, and then Truong Xuan left Manila at 10 AM on February 11, 1975, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year of Quy Mao. Our destination was the Ternate Island in the Molucca Sea. All during our travels, we listened intently for news about Viet Nam. Because Saigon Radio emitted weak signals, we received our news through Radio Australia, Voice of America, and the BBC. On the way back from Ternate to Batangas, we were shocked and dismayed to hear of losses in the Central Plateau.

Truong Xuan departed Batangas with its full load of cement and headed for Balik Papan of Borneo. When 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 6 AM news on April 3 from Radio Australia: "The Communists were only 60km from Saigon, meeting no resistance." I sent an urgent cable to my family urging them to find any means to leave Viet Nam in the event that the Communists marched into Saigon. I also sent a cable to request that First National City Bank help my daughter, Dan Ha, get out of Viet Nam. She was the assistant manager of the bank at the time.

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

Within one month, more than ten provinces in Zone 1 and 2 of South Viet Nam fell to the Communists. Civilians were fleeing in such a panic that some were even trampled. The fear of the Communists and of their impending victory made people desperate to leave the country. Some people clung to the wheels of planes as they taxied 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. No risk was too great; any option was better than staying and living under the Communists.

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 on the afternoon of April 17. Saigon was in an utterly disturbed 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 even after the Paris cease-fire had been signed. This was the first defeat in 3 months. Phuoc Long had always been under tremendous pressure from the Communists. In the meantime, our South Vietnamese resistance was weak because of unfavorable logistics – there was a severe shortage of supplies. The Communist tanks and their guns had overrun Phuoc Long. The South Vietnamese airplanes had been badly damaged by Soviet SA.7 missiles. The inability to recapture Phuoc Long by the South Vietnamese army was the beginning of the end for South Viet Nam. That loss was the first seed of doubt. Civilians as well as military personnel were demoralized as the Communist forces became stronger and stronger. The victory encouraged the North.

During this time Truong Xuan continued to load and transport cement, sailing from the Philippines to various islands of Indonesia. The Communists started their plan to attack military Zones 1 and 2 throughout the 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 Army Zone 2 was brought in to reinforce Phuoc An, but they failed to stop the advancing Communist troops. As the Communist forces advanced, foreign radio reported their victories and ran long commentaries that served only to further demoralize the South while emboldening the North. Foreign radio played right into the Communist propaganda machine. Ban Me Thuot finally fell on March 13.

The Viet Cong took over Kontum, then Pleiku, on March 17. They crossed over Thach Han River, and they attacked Quang Tri. Quang Tri 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 Radio Australia and the BBC describing the collapse of Army Zones 1 and 2. Thousands of our elite troops had disintegrated even before the fight. It was such frightening and demoralizing news. If the news had such an effect upon me, what effect did it have on the troops, both South and North?

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. Those who fell, many of whom were elderly, women, and small children, were crushed by armored vehicles and cars. There were explosions from landmines and retorts from Communist guns. The survivors of the attacks trampled the bodies of the dead. It was hell on Earth, and every man was for himself. The enemy attacked both from the front and rear – both military and civilians were under attack. Bodies were strewn everywhere: their corpses piling up along the road, the creek, and along the edge of the forest. Of the 60,000 troops retreating from Pleiku, only 20,000 of them reached Tuy Hoa. Civilians

fares tragically worse: just 100,000 out of 500,000 civilians were able to reach the coast. Army Zone 1 didn't fare well either. According to Radio Australia and the BBC, there was more bad news for the South. BBC news was only helping the Communists propaganda machine to further stamp out any remaining fighting spirit in our South Vietnamese army.

The Army was in disarray, and hundreds of thousands of refugees were feverishly fleeing. These broadcast news reports served only 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 the government's control. The radio 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 60km from Saigon while in reality, Phan Rang and Phan Thiet were not yet lost. I had listened closely to the news of Radio Australia and the BBC; unlike my countrymen, I was in the unique position of following all the news about Viet Nam from outside of Viet Nam. I came to realize that the foreign press had unwittingly aided the Communists, and that their eager reporting contributed to the quick collapse of South Viet Nam. Whatever role the media played, there were greater problems left by the rapid withdraw of US forces and support. South Viet Nam's rapid collapse was due to the strategy of static defense and dependency on sophisticated logistical components, both of which were inherited from US Military involvement, and the vacuum that was left when the US withdrew. As aid to the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) was drastically cut and the world's oil shortages greatly hindered, the South's ability to redistribute its forces along the length of South Viet Nam in any effort to compensate for the Communist attacks were crippled. General Ngo Quang Truong and President Thieu's efforts to re-allocate ARVN forces were drastically complicated by their lack of logistical resources. The shifting of troops quickly became disorganized as the means of transporting troops became limited. Disorganized troop movements may have appeared to the foreign press more like a retreat than a tactical repositioning of troops. To better prepare South Viet Nam for the lack of aid and the hardships that began in late 1974, President Thieu should have communicated better to the civilian population and senior generals, and encouraged all to do better to build troop morale.

Danang was the largest commercial port in the Center of Viet Nam. During the Communist attack in mid-summer of 1972, 100,000 refugees fleeing from Quang Tri to Danang, had already created a tense situation for the city. Officials did not know how to solve the problem of overcrowding. Air ticket agencies and bus companies were mercenary and took advantage of the fleeing refugees by charging inflated prices. Poor people had to shelter themselves in burning hot tents pitched on the sand. The situation was getting more and more tense as more refugees arrived at Danang. I requested the Truong Thanh ship, the ship that I captained at that time, to transport 300 passengers to Saigon. From that point, all civilian ships took their turn and gave free transportation to the refugees.

The first trip with the refugees from Danang was terrible. The agency in charge of food supply for the refugees failed to complete its delivery before we set sail, and it failed to inform us of the food

shortage. Once at sea, we discovered that there was no food for the refugees. I had to order the crew members to save every grain of rice that came out of torn bags so that we could make rice porridge 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 from the Truong Thanh were able to escape Viet Nam on April 30, 1975.

Hue was abandoned; Chu Lai and Quang Tri were lost. People fled *en masse*. 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 frightening news.

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

Frightened Vietnamese crammed themselves into airplanes in order to escape. Civilian ships were also in a panic 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 times, having 150 military ships, 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 realistically 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 the Dalat Military Academy. Some of my crew started to show sympathy for the Communists.

The battle for Xuan Loc started on April 7. On April 14, a new Premier and Cabinet were formed but, unfortunately, they were too late. 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 when the 18<sup>th</sup> division retreated. There had been news that our South Vietnamese Army had destroyed thirty-seven T54 tanks and 5,000 Viet Cong soldiers had been killed, but it wasn't enough.

After April 21, there was no more resistance from the South Vietnamese Army. On that day, 13 Viet Cong divisions were on the outskirts of Saigon, and Nguyen Van Thieu resigned as President of South Viet Nam. It was too late for the South Vietnamese.

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

The surrender created a dead end for our people. Thousands of South Vietnamese left Viet Nam. Where would they go? 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, by any means, flowing out of Viet Nam like tides of rising and falling water. They were not even afraid of deep oceans. They departed to warn humanity about the dangers of Communism. They left with the hope that 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 entirely 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 live under a Communist regime. We were not able to save our country; the only thing we could do was to divulge to the world the Communists’ crimes.

My mind was confused and disturbed. 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 to Saigon. On our voyage back to Saigon, my heart was filled with both hope and anxiety.

Saigon was in a state of much uncertainty. On April 20, 1975, I met Mr. Tran Dinh Truong, the owner of Vishipcolines shipping company. I made a request to him: “We should use the company’s fleet to transport all those Vietnamese who want to escape in the event that Viet Nam 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 has reported to me that there is a plan to keep the ships in Viet Nam.”

The ship owner replied, “Though I am still young, I have seen things, and I have made my plans. If the river route from Saigon to Vung Tau is not secure then there will be American Marines to look after it. You do not have to worry about that, Captain.”

Truong’s words only brought me despair. Had I had the full authority to use the whole company’s fleet of ships, it wouldn’t have been difficult to ship out 30 or 40 thousand refugees.

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 time to make 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, so we had to rent a new crane to load the cargo. The steam boiler was turned off in order to gut out all of its rusted parts.

By April 26, the scrap metal was completely loaded. 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 got quite drunk. Upon arrival at port, T. fell and became unconscious. 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, and 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 came 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. This left us without an engineer.

Up 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 on April 28, he left the ship in order to escape by air. He had probably recognized the many problems with which the ship was saddled.

Tran Dinh Truong, the ship owner, was still very optimistic that I was still level-headed enough to control the ship during these critical and chaotic times. In order to run the ship smoothly, I needed enough crew members; the chief engineer and the telecommunications officer hold the most important positions onboard. The ship owner did not share the same view, but a chief engineer was eventually hired. Had the shipping 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.

Over the years, I observed that the majority of my Southern colleagues, who had not lived under the Communists, tended to believe the Communist propaganda. Consequently, they were rather unsympathetic to the Northern refugees when they fled to the South in 1954. I had to be extremely cautious when discussing with them my plans to flee from the Communists. 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. The escape routes through the American Embassy and through the airport were reserved for those who

had money and power. But for hundreds of thousands of those who were frightened by the record of Communist atrocities, the sea was their only means of escape.

People were looking for ways to escape, but the highways were full of standing traffic. The Communists blocked the route from Phu Lam to Hau Giang. In the cities, groups of people were running around as if they were sucked into a tornado. They were running in confused circles, 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 seeking refuge on unsettled lands in Go Cong. He and his fellow soldiers had spent most of their lives in the war; it was a certainty that they would be on 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. But the ship needs its chief engineer."

While writing about my journey of escape, 8 years later, I wondered about what had happened to the colonel who I met at the end of April 1975. Where was the colonel? Where were his troops? Were they able to escape? Were they hiding in the forests, or were they miserable 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 the Defence Attaché Office with whom she worked. Dan Ha, my daughter, departed with her fellow 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. Those that could flee escaped. There was no time to help others. 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. My older brother Kha lamented that our relatives did not want to leave the country. We signed papers to have the house transferred to him. Thu Giang, my daughter, also gave him full authority to use her dental office as he saw fit. My brother Chac had bluntly refused "to go as a refugee with the Americans that had betrayed us" even though one of his nephews, a major in the Air Force, had flown his helicopter to pick him up at Lam Dong. Many of the Pham family members had left North Viet Nam after the Geneva Agreement was signed in 1954. None of us could ever have predicted that we would be totally shattered refugees again.

I dared not promise anyone a means of escape. I did not want to give anyone false hope as I had not been given authority to command the ship the way I wanted. I had many plans before leaving Pare Pare, but my hopes to carry them out were slowly dying, if not already dead.

Vu Quoc Trinh, one of my countrymen - born in North Viet Nam - 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 am not in control of the ship due to a lack of crew members. If the ship is able to sail, please join us. No one has to pay for the fare as we are losing our whole country."

The Tan Nam Viet ship was docked 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 his ship. I asked him, "What about my family?" He replied, "Yes, your family members are all welcome."

It was a very important decision. I thought of my family. I thought of moments that I might have to take control when the ship faced technical problems. I thought of the possibility that people might become rebellious as they had on the ship leaving central Viet Nam. What could a ship captain do when everyone was in a panic, looking to his or her own 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, without a ship captain.

My wife's younger brother, who was living in the United States, had sponsored us and sent us papers that had the signature of the United States Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, allowing our 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 the two of us, we could have easily found an escape, even in the most difficult circumstances.

I still did not give up my hope to help as many people as possible escape by sea, despite my feelings of overwhelming hopelessness at times. My wife and three daughters came back home from the airport. I sunk down into a chair in disbelief. They had allowed only my wife to board the airplane, explaining that the travel documents did not show all the names of my family. I had been counting on my wife and daughters' departure to help clear my mind – but with this twist of events, I felt more confused and worried.

On the way to Saigon harbor, the houses and streets had not changed, but they appeared more desolate. All the houses were closed and the streets were littered with garbage. People in the streets were aimless but hurried, and they all looked worried. It was dead quiet in some places while it was very noisy in others. The American offices had been ransacked of furniture and other equipment. Lawlessness had clearly reigned in the capital.

Truong Xuan was still quietly at anchor in the dock. Chat informed me that the ship's condition was no better: there was still no chief engineer, and 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 crew members were born in the South and did not understand communism. People who have 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 since he was a navigator. He wrote to me four years later from a refugee camp in the Philippines:

My family and I, some friends, and Nguyen Van Diet (the telecommunication officer of Truong Xuan who resigned in order to stay back in Saigon at 9 AM on April 30, 1975)

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 really understand the meaning of Communism and no longer have to live under them.

His words were simple, but he was able to express his despair because before 1975, he had not had the experience of 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 to recruit him.

I met with the ship owner every day, but my hope of evacuating refugees by sea faded 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.

I met one of my nephews, Major Tran Khac Thuyen, who had come back from his outpost in Van Kiep to ask his aunt to look after his very sick father, my brother-in-law. He had been stuck in Saigon since the Saigon-Vung Tau highway had been occupied by the Communists, and he was unable to rejoin his division. It was a strange twist of fate that left him in Saigon.

I became more and more disturbed as I was not able to be in full control of my ship. The inability to gain any control was debilitating. There were so many uncertainties ahead. I did not know of any organizations that helped people get out of Viet Nam. I did not know if the United State's Seventh Fleet would even rescue escapees on the ocean. I did not know if there were any countries that would accept Vietnamese refugees. The ship owner, Truong, telephoned as all these questions swirled in my head.

"Captain, please take your whole family and wait near Khanh Hoi harbor. When Truong Hai ship is ready to sail, I will get word to you. Your current location at Cong Hoa soccer field is too far away and I am not sure that I can reach you there quickly enough."

I acknowledged Truong's good intentions towards 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 escape the Communists. It is a pity that he and I could not have compromised any earlier. 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 knew I had to be in total control of my fate. Unsure of his plan, I decided not to take my family to Khanh Hoi Harbor. Besides, I could not have afforded to pay for accommodations for my whole family at the harbor.

Strangely, Truong never mentioned Truong Xuan. Perhaps he was not able to meet my demands. Perhaps he suspected that I would have taken advantage and charged refugees fare for safe passage on the ship?

I still clung to the hope of helping refugees escape the Communists, but it was looking near

impossible. I had not accepted 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, and feelings of guilt welled up in me each time I thought about my family being trapped in Viet Nam with the Communists.

I visited Truong Xuan daily, sometimes more than once. The ship was totally deserted on the morning of April 28, not a sailor onboard. Chat, the officer on duty, and all crew had left the ship. The ship owner still had not agreed to appoint Le Hong Phi as the chief engineer. My hopes disappeared that day. The political situation changed every hour. 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 but had no telephone. I left the harbor totally heart broken.

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; I needed to plan our escape. I also wanted to keep myself occupied so that hopelessness could not set in. I could feel that my health was deteriorating. 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 8 PM tonight, we will be picked up by General Nguyen Cao Ky's (Vice President of Viet Nam) men. We will then fly out.”

I was somewhat encouraged by this news. At least my wife and my daughters could escape. Once the plane took off, Lam (my youngest son) and I could act on our own and make our way out – just as I had planned before.

Le Dinh Vuong picked up my wife and our four children together with Tran Dinh Thang's family at 8 PM on April 28. They picked me up at Phu Nhuan. I was reluctant to get into the car. I still held the idea that I would stay and try to ship out my fellow citizens. There was something wrong with the idea of being picked up to escape alone.

The car was stopped at the airport, and we did not move for an hour. Everything was strictly checked. The airport was a bizarre scene. The images haunt me to this day. Many soldiers ended up at the airport; they left their guns and ammunition on the street before entering the gate. It was the total disintegration of the South Vietnamese army. These courageous soldiers of the past were entering the airport, but where would they go? Who would collect all of those piles of guns and ammunitions?

When the guards recognized Le Dinh Vuong's car, at approximately 10 PM, we were able to get through easily. General Ky's residence was full of relatives, including my sister-in-law's family.

It was 11 PM – and then it was midnight. Everybody 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 1 AM, Mrs. Huyen whispered into my ears, “Brother Ky has already gone for a meeting. According to him, the plane was to take off before 2 AM. Intelligence sources say that the Communists will begun shelling sometime this morning.”

At that moment, Lieutenant-Colonel Nguyen Van Phuong, the chief pilot of the C123 Air Force Unit took the refugee 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 were only quiet whispers. Everyone was lost in thought.

Around 4 AM on April 29, 1975 a sharp noise pierced the air and was followed by thundering explosions. The airport was under attack by rockets; brick debris was flying everywhere. Houses had been directly hit by rockets and were burning like huge torches. Everyone laid down flat on the floor as we did not know where to go to hide ourselves. I was not scared of the rockets, but I was afraid of being killed for no reason at all. If you have never been under rocket attack, I suppose that you could not understand. But the idea of some random pile of metal ending your life was enough to make you insane.

Rockets continued to explode for 2 hours. Nguyen Van Phuong, the chief pilot, disappeared. Nguyen Cao Ky came back at 7 AM 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. Ky was standing at the entrance door, and I did not want to ask him for any news. To avoid wasting time, I urged my wife and our children to head home from the airport.

My wife quietly told me at the airport gate that Cousin Ky had assured all his relatives that Tan Son Nhut Airport would be well-defended and that it would take the Communists 10 days to capture the airport if they decided to attack. I thought of all of those guns and ammunition at the airport gate and doubted anyone's ability to defend the airport.

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. We made our way home.

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. Good-bye, Captain. I am flying 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, which was the start of the Communist attack on the Tan Son Nhat Airport, had changed Truong's mind.

### ***Leaving the Country Behind***

The suburbs of Saigon were continuously being shelled by rockets. There was no sign of soldiers or police in the streets. Ignoring the curfew, people were running in the streets. Everyone thought that the battle in Saigon would be 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. Lam, my son, gave me a ride to Pier 5. It was already 6 PM. Truong Sinh ship had docked on April 25 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 would be left behind.

Once onboard the Truong Xuan, my heart was beating much faster than at any other time aboard the ship. 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 those last turbulent days of April 1975, my son Lam and I were always together.

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

"What about the crew members? 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. I picked up a piece of chalk and wrote on a small blackboard to be hung on the gangway:

### **TRUONG XUAN WILL LEAVE SAIGON**

**11:30 AM, 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 Viet Nam was defeated and it had to surrender to the Communists, Truong Xuan would head overseas.

If they wanted to leave by their own free will, I would ship out as many refugees as possible. My countrymen and women had to decide for themselves in order to avoid any regrets.

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.

The shelling continued.

War had made me a refugee so many times. When the Viet Minh (Vietnamese Communists in their early stage) took over in 1945, I left my village in North Viet Nam at the end of 1946. I went to Hai Phong. I fled Hai Phong when the French landed there. I then fled to Hanoi. But at 5 PM on December 19, 1946, I left Hanoi for Ha Dong. The French started their attack at midnight of that day. We had to retreat to Nho Quan, then Hoa Binh, then Viet Tri, and finally stayed at the edge of the jungle of Chang Sao located at Phu Tho, along the Lo River. By 1954, our whole family had to flee to the South. Now, 21 years later, we had to flee again. Our greatest loss was the loss of our villages, our country.

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

I wondered whether Phi would be able to cope with potential sabotage by the passengers if the decision was made to leave the country. Some would not want to leave the country and might resort to desperate measures to stop the ship. I shuddered at the idea of the ship's engine being paralyzed in the middle of the ocean. Hunger, thirst, mutiny, murder, rape – it was all possible.

As soon as I got home, I told my family that Truong Xuan would be departing the next day. I instructed them to pack a small bag of clothing for each person, some pills for colds and upset stomachs, personal papers and some photo albums. I also told my relatives and neighbors about the ship's 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 harbor 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, the richest among our neighbors, was appointed as the "diplomat".

I did not get a wink of sleep that night. I was tense and exhausted. I had longed for this journey in order to ship out my fellow countrymen. My planned trip around South East Asia was abandoned to come back to Saigon with the hope of helping my countrymen and women – a small gesture so that I would not feel guilty for the rest of my life. Late in the night, some cousins from Phu Nhuan phoned and told me that Communist troops now occupied many places. Hearing the news, I made up my mind: I would leave Saigon at all costs.

At 5 AM on April 30, 1975, I asked Tuan Son to send a message to my nephews Pham Quan Hong and Le Tat Dat, who lived in Trieu Da district, that they had to leave immediately. Thuyen, my nephew who had been stranded in Saigon after caring for his father, Lam and I went to the port to check the ship's 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. In order to return to Tran Quoc Toan, we turned on Le Van Duyet, to Ham Nghi then to Trinh Minh The. At 7:30 AM, just a few passengers were aboard Truong Xuan. A young man, Loc, a paratrooper, knew me (I met him again in 1977) and asked, "Will the ship operate OK?"

"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 in the North. Yet, I would have never refused those who wanted to flee when they boarded the ship. Leaving Viet Nam forever was a decision that had to truly reflect one's own wishes.

Phi and Chat's families had arrived the night before. They had to pay money in order to get through the gate at Pier 5. Phi confirmed that Truong Xuan would be ready to sail out as planned. There were no crew members yet. It was totally up to the crew members to come along or not; it was pointless to force them to leave against their will. Lam stayed back on the ship. Duong, 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 neighbors 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 went 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 memories. I was considered the richest person in the Pham family, even though I lived in this slum house. The twenty Pham families who had left North Viet Nam 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 very costly to raise 9 children. Unlike my colleagues at work, I could not afford a big house or a car. We had to take the bus, use a bicycle, or hire a 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. He sent his two sons, Tuan Son and Tuan Hung, to go with me to the ship. His eldest son was a major and a pilot but 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 jailed 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 weeping. I was in a haze, yet I can still vividly remember him as we bid goodbye. My brother did not say anything; he just quietly walked 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. That was all we had when we left. To me, money or gold was meaningless in a time like this. Emotion and spirit were the only things of value.

After 15 minutes of visiting our house for the last time, I got into the car where Duong and Thuyen were waiting for me. 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 got out of their car, too slowly for Hoa, who 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 loudly, "Christ Lord! Just save the people first. Get in quickly! Whatever you can

bring, bring. Leave the rest behind.”

Dang Giao came to me, “Uncle, please allow Mr. Chu Tu and my brother in-law’s family to come along with you.” Mr. Chu Tu was a famous writer.

“Yes! Please bring 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.

“Who are you are transporting?”

“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? There are more than 200 people here.”

“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 Forces Lieutenant, had a revolver in his trousers and was anxious to take action. But Le Van Ty was quicker with an envelope from his briefcase. He discreetly gave it to the policeman. The gate was opened wide and the barbed wire barricade was removed. After the two GMC trucks had entered the gate, a crowd of people followed suit, and they all got in safely. Le Van Giep, an architect, and his younger brother were among this crowd.

By 9 AM, a crowd of 300 to 400 people was waiting at the dock. The gangway to the ship was left open; anyone 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 that Lan, my sister, was on the ship looking for me and that she had probably returned to the gate already.

I got off the ship in a hurry trying to find my sister, 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, and their faces were pale. 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 left behind. I gained confidence, having been joined by my most important assistants, chief engineer Phi and telecommunication officer Thanh, in the last minute.

The radio announcement at 10:25 AM bewildered listeners. Duong Van Minh, the President of South Viet Nam at that time, surrendered to the Communists unconditionally. He appealed to all the South Vietnamese troops to surrender their weapons. Such chilling news had created total hopelessness. I looked at the Saigon River. Hundreds of private and navy boats and ships were leaving Bach Dang Port in a hurry. They passed by the main harbor, heading toward the sea. This unusually large fleet moving simultaneously had created huge 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 whom I could delegate my responsibilities. I constantly reminded myself, “Be calm, be determined, be tough.” Just to keep calm and level-headed, I told myself that I was fortunate to have the chance of being the captain of this special ship in such a unique situation. Was it God who had chosen me for this opportunity, the opportunity to deliver so many of our compatriots in this most painful and frightening moment of our heart-breaking history?

Waves of people suddenly rushed through Pier 5. The crowd heading towards Truong Xuan was getting bigger and bigger. They came from the river, through the riverbank, behind the stern, and around the front. They came up by all means: steps, cables, people’s shoulders – anything they could do to board the ship. The famous poet Bao Van was hoisted up into the ship from his small boat. His big body slipped into the water several times.

As people grew more and more panicky, I felt more burdened with responsibility. I asked Phi to speed up, “Turn the boiler to its maximum so that we can leave as soon as possible!”

The smoke from the ship rose higher and spread far into the sky. People saw the smoke from afar, and they headed toward Truong Xuan.

There were many soldiers among the civilians. I can still vividly remember the look on their faces. They had been courageous fighters, but the order to surrender left them saddened and frantic. They had been fighting their whole lives, 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 them in the eye. I loved and respected them all. I would have burst out crying if my eyes met theirs.

I was tormented and obsessed with Chat’s news of possible sabotage to Truong Xuan. I knew what I had to do and how I had to act in order to sail my compatriots away from the land that had sheltered us. I was not afraid of dangers at sea, but I was afraid of my own emotions. My being easily emotional was a weakness. To be able to hold back my tears is difficult for me. I thought that I would

lose my compatriots and my loved ones onboard if I were not able to control my emotions and my head. I kept telling myself to keep cool and to avoid fear and panic. The seaman's life caused great yearning in me for my country and my family. It must have been nearly 15 years that I had lived away from my country. We sailors joked that marriage for us is more fascinating and lasts longer because the spouses do not have enough time between voyages.

A group of combat policemen in full uniform boarded 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, and we had to retreat." When he finished his sentence, he leaned his head against the wall and stood there silently.

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

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

"Does the ship run OK, Captain?"

"Yes, sure it does!"

He was big, with a 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 rather strange eyes, as if he were trying to ask me for a favor. 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 it 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 in the sky now, but 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 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 I was burning in a white flame when I heard the news that the Communists were occupying Saigon. I had to remind myself often: "Keep cool! Fear will destroy everything!"

I dared not meet with my wife and children. I did not have the courage to face them. I would have cried if I had to look into their eyes. I tried not to imagine that the Communists were heading for Pier 5. But it was hard to avoid imagining my capture and execution in front of my family. Hatred for the Communists could not give me the courage I needed. Only love for my family and countrymen could have provided the determination that I needed.

There was a dead silence on the ship.

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

Within 15 minutes, an 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.

A security committee was also formed, it consisted of:

Lieutenant-Colonel Luu Binh Hao, head of the security committee;  
 Paratrooper Major Do Duy Nghia;  
 Civilian Nguyen Quang Hai;  
 Young military personnel such as Vinh Ta, Bui Ngoc Hoa, and others.

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

On reflection, I regret not having formed a supply committee.

I met Do Duy Nghia again in 1979 at Ulm in West Germany. On this occasion Nghia reflected, "When I was with the paratroopers, I was careless and stubborn. But when I was on Truong Xuan, I was of such disciplined character!"

At 12:30 PM I gave orders for the ship to depart. When we had returned from Singapore, Truong Xuan had docked during ebb tide; thus, its bow was pointed inland, facing Nha Rong. Thuyen and Duong released the mooring line once the engine was started. The ship moved slowly. We tried to turn the ship around once we reached the widest part of the river, but the ship would not respond. The steering system was failing; we had to stop the ship and dock it again.

Phi dismantled the steering components and found water in the oil tube. His face paled as he realized that the ship had been sabotaged. Momentarily, I thought the journey would have to be cancelled. What good is a ship without a steering system?

I anxiously asked Phi, "Can we change the oil now?"

Phi hesitatingly replied, "We'll need to use the emergency steering system. But let me check it first. I'll let you know."

15 minutes passed...and then another 15 minutes. Time seemed to stop. I felt as if I was being boiled in oil – the pressure was tremendous. The wait was torture. Finally, Phi told me that the emergency system seemed to be in order. Right at that moment, a naval man volunteered himself to control the servomotor of the backup system.

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 the stern away from the shore.

People were everywhere. Smoke rose up high into the sky. News about the Communists entering the Capital kept coming. I held my breath as I watched our positioning across the river. Big and small boats, even some navy boats full of people, clung to Truong Xuan. They kept boarding Truong Xuan, and the crowd on deck got bigger and bigger. Bang Thanh Duc got onto our ship at this moment.

With the headline holding the bow close to the dock, the rising tide kept pushing the stern away from the dock until the ship turned 180 degrees. Truong Xuan was in port, pointing toward the sea. The sudden high tide had helped us turn the ship 180 degrees when it was still in the harbor. I consoled myself in order to build up my courage, "Yes, there is luck!"

At the last moment, when the Communists started shelling Saigon, Phi had accepted the position as chief engineer. Thanh had replaced Diet the minute Diet left us. The main steering system was not working, but we had the backup system. In any other circumstance, I would not have dared to operate a ship under such conditions.

At 1:25 PM, three hours after the news of surrender, Phi rang the bell signaling our departure.

Just as the headline was released, the wind coming from the riverbank pushed the ship further and further away from the port. The wind was heaven-sent. 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 that 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. The location of the backup steering system did not afford him a view of the river. He did not realize that he was going the wrong direction since he could not see anything. I couldn't afford the time to explain it to him. Whenever I wanted him to steer to the left or to the right, I just told him the opposite.

The ship moved faster as we passed Pier 18. I took a last look at Saigon Harbor. I turned to my left to bid farewell to Thu Thiem. A breeze came off the river. The engine picked up some momentum and the ship began to speed up.

I stood behind a glass door that enabled me to observe everything discretely. Just a few people knew that I was the ship captain. The ship was crowded with people from bow to stern. There was dead silence, only the occasional sound of a few people moving about. The security committee members did not have to take any actions as of yet. All of the executive committee members were 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 minds. In front of the command room, to my left, a young woman burst into tears. I guessed that she was totally alone on this journey.

As we reached Nha Be, across from the fuel station, a few motorboats were rushing toward

Truong Xuan. We slowed down in order to pick up their passengers.

Thanh had been busy the whole morning trying to activate the telegram equipment. He announced, “The Viet Nam Thuong Tin ship has been ambushed at Rung Sat. Dead people have been pushed into the sea. There was an S.O.S. message. The Tan Nam Viet ship has also been ambushed.”

These two ships had left before us. The person who was killed on Viet Nam Thuong Tin was Chu Tu, a writer. Upon hearing this news, some people on Truong Xuan concluded that life and death is dictated by karma. Chu Tu’s death was predictable as “Chu” means “ship” and “Tu” means “death”. In the Vietnamese language, words often have more than one meaning. Death on a ship was Chu Tu’s destiny.

I asked Thanh, “Can we send a message yet?”

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

Past Da Han, we made a very sharp turn. Not yet able to lay out a plan in case of enemy attack, I suddenly heard someone propose, “Captain, please raise a white flag.”

“No, it is impossible. It will show our location.”

“How about the French flag?”

I felt sad. We had lost our country, and as we were fleeing our country, we still had to seek the protection of foreigners. We tried to keep the news that Thuong Tin and Tan Nam Viet had been ambushed to ourselves for fear of creating panic among the passengers.

The river got wider near the Dong Tranh intersection. At that point, 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 a slow speed as we headed toward the wider area of the river.

Anchor the ship? Would we be able to do that? There was not enough time to anchor properly. We did not have the proper crew. Leave the ship in its wandering condition? We would run aground. If it got stuck along the shore, how could we get out of that position? The ship could overturn if the riverbed was too steep. The ship dipped toward the riverbank, and we reversed the engine to slow down the ship. The ship’s bow just touched the shallow riverbed. The rest of the ship was still floating.

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

I went down to see Phi.

“Phi, please get ready with the air compressor so that we can move backward and free the ship from the bank. We need to get to the sea. It is already late. It’s 5 PM now!”

“Captain, we don’t have enough pressure to operate the main engine.”

“Use the generator to charge the 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 shut off the valve to the cooling system – that’s why the generator stopped!”

“Chief Phi, send Hoa back to his room. Do not let him in the engine room. Please do not let

anyone know about this.”

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

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.

I anxiously looked at Phi.

“What do we do now?”

“Captain, get some young men to pump the compressor by hand.”

The security committee started recruiting people.

I went back to the command room totally upset. The ship was stuck. It tilted to its left. We asked passengers to move to the right. They did not respond – they were immobilized. People started praying. Some passengers took out their wallets and started tearing up their personal papers, throwing them down into the river. Some even chewed up their dollar bills. Truong Xuan, in its grounded condition, was the perfect target. Everyone feared being captured by the Communists. Small boats with white flags coming from Vung Tau were rushing toward Truong Xuan. They thought that our ship was waiting for nightfall to set sail. They boarded our grounded ship.

Phi came to see me.

“Captain, in order to save time, please find a tug boat to tow us out. I’ll try to look after the engine in the mean time.”

Just 10 minutes later, Song An, 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 fired from automatic machine guns from a nearby navy boat. Several paratroopers aboard Truong Xuan jumped onto Song An to ensure that Song An would assist Truong Xuan. I ordered them not to create any violence. Song An fastened its cable to Truong Xuan and tried to pull Truong Xuan away from the riverbank. Several times the cable snapped. The ship still did not move. A few more small boats joined in but it was useless. One of the passengers showed his “expertise” by saying, “Why are they pulling from the rear? I have never seen any ship being pulled from the rear to get out a grounded position. We have got to be pulled from the front.”

Just then the cable snapped and hit Nguyen Van Hau in the face. One of his eyes was badly damaged. He was in so much pain that he thought he would die. There was no available first aid, no medication, no friends, no relatives. Seeing his despair, a young woman gave him a few spoonfuls of milk that she had saved for her hungry infant.

Once settled in England, Hau wrote to me in 1976. He asked me for the address of Mrs. Nguyen Huu Thong. The latter was a lawyer, but onboard the ship she had become a Samaritan with her kind act. Hau wanted to thank her, as he believed that he had survived thanks to the milk she had given him.

We gained confidence as we received help from everywhere to pull our ship away from the shallow riverbed. In the meantime, the Communists celebrated their victory with fireworks that lit up the

bushes of Rung Sat. A robust and active young man rushed toward me. I asked him, “What are you doing here?”

“I came to help you with security. Captain, please, ask me to predict something.”

“Will we be able to get off of this bank? When will we get to the sea? Will we be safe?”

After some deep thinking and working with his fingers, he replied, “Yes, for sure. We’ll get to the sea alright. According to my I-Ching predictions, there will be some bloodshed, but not too much. You’ll be OK. Don’t worry, Captain!”

His words gave me confidence. Could people survive just by hanging on to hope? I asked him another question.

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

“I practice I-Ching predictions and astrology.” I looked up at the sky. The stars looked so bright and so clear. I had often used the stars to determine the coordinates for my ship as we traveled across the ocean.

I was just about to drink a glass of milk given to me by Dr. Nguyen Dinh Bang when I heard news that Phi had collapsed behind the engine. I was very hungry, but I decided to take my 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 was up to 16 kilos. Everyone was helping to pump, hoping that they could get up to 19 kilos so that we could start the generator. At 18 kilos of pressure, the valve head broke, and pressure went down to 11 kilos. We tried to weld the broken valve, but to our surprise, the welding hose has been cut. The cutting appears very recent.”

We kept this news to ourselves. We were in a very critical situation, and the news would have caused a panic.

When I visited my friends in West Germany in 1979, I met Thuan, the ship’s mechanic. He told me, “I was looking everywhere for a substitute valve, going through all the boxes. Suddenly, to my surprise, I found an old valve right at the foot of the generator. Thanks to that valve, we were able to continue to pump by hand.”

Finally, Song An was able to pull Truong Xuan free from the bank. The night was dark, and a small boat guided our ship. After a while, the light from the boat faded away, and it disappeared completely. Truong Xuan was a heavily loaded ship, and it was too big for Song An to tow. Song An struggled to pull our ship. It moved slowly, and in a tilting position. A young man volunteered to board Song An to help steer. Just as he disappeared through the crowd, I realized that he was short sighted. Only later did I realize that he was Dr. Bui Ngoc Diep.

Truong Xuan was out of shallow water. The man who had predicted this was Hoang Quan, an astrologer and psychic. I am not superstitious, but I want to record the facts for all to ponder. This was not my first experience with a fortune teller. At the beginning of 1974, when Truong Xuan arrived in Bangkok, an Indian psychic showed me his notebook that contained many compliments and

recommendations from foreign ship captains whose futures he had foretold. One comment read, “A famous fortune teller, heavenly, unbelievable.” On the last page there was a comment from a Vietnamese ship captain: “He was able to tell me things as if he were a close relative.”

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

After giving him my date of birth, I asked the fortuneteller, “When will I be able to quit my seaman’s 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 is 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 a secret. You should not tell even your wife and children.”

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

Along with 3,628 fellow Vietnamese refugees, I actually left Truong Xuan on May 2, 1975. My seaman’s career ended. As for the US\$95,000, it never came. In June 1975, in the Hong Kong refugee camp, as some of our children were about to leave for Canada, we gave them each US\$50. By August 1975, we ran out of money. While we were still in the refugee camp, Lam, my youngest son, started working in Toronto; he was the first one to send US\$200 to us. Dan Ha, my eldest daughter, started working immediately upon arriving in the US, and she sent us US\$400 as soon as she could. My other 4 children, who were living in the US, could not have helped as they were students and were not allowed to work. Cat, my eldest son, had left the US in February 1975, after 12 years of studying. He was stuck in Paris.

Cao Trung, who was one of my childhood classmates, explained to me that the Indian fortuneteller was right. I left Viet Nam with my relatives and fellow citizens – this was my 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 binoculars, I saw a big black stretch in front of Song An.

“Turn right!” I ordered.

Song An did not have a chance to react, and we then heard a loud noise that broke the silence of the dark night. 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, tied to a big bobber. The bobber happened to be Song An, stuck and immobilized.

It was near midnight. A number of military and civilian men went to Song An to free it from the nets. Suddenly a burning torch shined in the dark night. Some people in a small boat shouted and waved a torch. But they retreated as they heard gunshots from our boat. The light of the torch was gone.

“Oh, no! They have notified the Communists! What do we do now, Captain?”

“It’s OK. They were shouting because they lost their nets.”

Later, Dao Van Dam told us that the only handsaw on Song An snapped just after the last cable wrapped around the propeller was cut loose.

Truong Xuan continued to be towed. At Can Gio Ha lighthouse, the tide was strong. The towing cables snapped several more times. The harder Song An tried to pull, the more unstable it became. Each time the cable snapped, 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?”

“We’re going to Ben Da!”

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

At 5 AM on May 1, 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 deck in order to not attract the attention of Communists hiding in the mountains, but there was not enough room. Song An slowly moved on. At 7 AM Truong Xuan was still sluggishly moving across Bai Truoc. Time seemed to have stopped, and an air of suspense hung over us. Through my telescope, Vung Tau beach looked deserted: not a single dinghy in the water. To calm myself, I told myself that the Communists were busy celebrating their Labor Day.

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

The horizon opened up in front of us. We had survived, but where would we go now? We did not know yet, but we had just escaped.

Ngo Quang Phuong was also a ship captain. On the morning of April 30, he told me that he was going home to pick up his family and that they would join us on Truong Xuan. He never made it back. When I met him in 1980, Phuong told me that about 5 minutes after Truong Xuan had passed Pier 18, a Communist tank ran over the harbor gate. 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 rays. We refugees had escaped menacing darkness and now met a new horizon with the hopeful rays of the sun.

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

Cap O Quan disappeared. The lighthouse became smaller and smaller. Suddenly, explosions echoed in the sea, and columns of black smoke rose into the sky from the cities. That was the last sight of our dear country.

It was already humid at 9 AM. 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 1,000 tons of scrap metal onboard. It also stored approximately 300 tons of fuel and water. The deck would hold up to 200 tons or approximately 4,000 people. The ship was still quite stable.

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

"It is impossible for you to board. 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 a young man standing at the front of the dinghy looking 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, Phan Quoc Bao, introduced himself as an ex-officer and Department Head of the Psychological Warfare Unit.

"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 on my behalf 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 met on the outskirts of Vienna; the reunion took place in an outdoor garden. Phan Quoc Bao introduced his wife and children to me. He reminisced about embarking Truong Xuan at 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 mixed up Austria and Australia! We meant to go to Australia – but anyhow, that’s fate. Everywhere outside of Viet Nam 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 a trip to celebrate their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and they escorted their youngest daughter, Bao Han, to the US to record her songs for a popular Vietnamese video series. Bao Han was two years old in 1975; in 1991, she was the Miss Viet Nam Paris runner-up. Mr. Pham Thanh Liem gave her a gift he brought from Viet Nam. Le Van Bao was looking for an old negative taken at the Refugees Camp seventeen years before so that we all could have a print as a souvenir. Pham Manh Nam, who played Khoa in the film “Summer Rain”, organized a picnic at Laguna Beach. Lam, my youngest son, took me to his pizza shop. Brothers Doan Van Tien and Doan Van Thinh, now two famous lawyers in Southern California, hosted Phan Quoc Bao and his family in Laguna Hills. They had a few weeks of reunion.

Another boat was running after us. Shots were fired as a signal for us to stop in order to pick them up. The security committee was ready with an M79 grenade launcher and automatic rifles.

If the security committee members were allowed to shoot back, I wondered what would have happened. All the people in the motorboat were ordered to throw their weapons into the sea before they were allowed to embark Truong Xuan.

At 9 AM, Dr. Nguyen Dinh Bang offered me a bowl of noodles. I had not eaten anything for two days. My throat was dry and 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.

“Please eat to gain strength. I am so tired that I cannot eat.”

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

“Stay calm, ladies and gentlemen! Good news – the ship’s engine is being repaired, and it is almost finished.”

Finishing his words, he returned to the podium 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. approached the bowl of soup, and at first he hesitated. Perhaps he had intended to just take one bite to appease his hunger. He swallowed the whole bowl in one shot instead. The whole act only lasted for 5 or 6 seconds. T. ran away immediately. This scene made me worry.

The telephone rang.

“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 water still leaking in?”

“Yes, Captain, but not a lot! We have not been able to locate the leak.”

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

At 10 AM, the whole ship vibrated. Smoke circles started rising up as the engine roared to life. 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 that people onboard Truong Xuan make contributions for the tugboat Song An. All the money was collected and counted in the command room under the supervision of Tran Van Duong. Nine million Vietnamese Dong – equivalent to over ten thousand US dollars – was raised and put into two bamboo baskets.

Truong Xuan’s engine suddenly stopped running after 15 minutes, and Song An had to tow us again. Truong Xuan started running again after 20 minutes, and once again Song An traveled along side of us. Duong passed the baskets full of money to Song An’s Captain who opened one of baskets and waved to us.

“You gave us too much money. Thank you, but please do not give us any more.”

Before turning back to Viet Nam, Song An gave us dozens of containers of drinking water. Passengers shared the water; a drop of drinking water was worth more than gold. The command room was supplied with one container. Seven or eight people jumped aboard Song An to go back home.

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

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

We took the Sea Route 195 without any fear of being attacked by Communist forces once we reached international waters. We now had to face the urgent problems of hunger, thirst, rape and mutiny. I closed my eyes and tried not to think of such things.

The order to surrender all weapons was announced through the loudspeakers. Automatic guns, shotguns, M79’s, M16 rifles and all kinds of weapons and ammunitions were collected. They were kept in the command room. All the committee members had done a marvelous job of re-assuring the passengers, and people happily gave up their weapons, particularly the ex-soldiers. A gentle sea breeze blew as Major Thuyen snaked his way through the crowd to secure the eight cargo hoists.

It was a more relaxed atmosphere now. I could see smiles. I left the bridge to visit my family; I had not seen them since we left Saigon. It was not easy to pass through the crowd onboard. There were almost twenty people in a room that was no more than 3.5 meters wide and 4 meters in length. As soon as I entered the room, I smelled the suffocating odor of sweat. My wife was rubbing medicated oil on my two daughters who had fainted.

“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 gave 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 hardly any room. Giang recovered and looked around her.

There had been so many problems that I could not afford time to look after anyone, including my own family. My children were hungry, and my wife could only endure 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 has had nothing to eat.”

“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 let me know when it is almost done.”

“But Captain, there is no more fresh water for cooking.”

Vinh Ta gave me two 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 asked for a glass of water. She was pregnant. I poured her a full glass. She was Mrs. Truong Dinh Thu; she now lives in Bordeaux, France.

Chung A Can took the half-full water bottle from me.

“Captain, how am I supposed to cook rice with this much water?”

“Just add seawater to it!”

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

“Keep it for your kids.”

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

“My parents decided to stay back in Viet Nam. 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 grown up and was preparing to enter medical school. The whole family 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 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 threat of hunger and thirst.

I gave orders for the security committee to take water from storage and distribute it 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. Had people tried to hide it so that they could sell it to make a profit? Lam took a look at the reservoir and confirmed that we had run out of water. I was trembling and shaking. Where did it go? Who pumped it out? When did this happen? Even as I write these lines, I do not know what happened.

When I was in Vienna 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, the word for water is also the same word for country. Ky was absent in the following meetings in Vienna.

I had occasionally received a glass of milk from either Bang or Thang. Yet it was late in the morning, and 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; sitting down could have resulted in feelings of hopeless. If I lost my confidence even for a very short moment, I would have given up.

People were stunned by a loud gunshot. Bui Ngoc Hoa was trying to interfere with some people shoving each other.

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

I asked Lieutenant-Colonel Hao to confiscate the M16 from Hoa.

Phi reported from the engine room that more and more water was leaking into the ship, even though we were continuously pumping it out.

A message to request food, medication and fresh water had been sent out. We had not received a reply. Further ahead, the Long Chau and Long Ho ships were merely idling. Truong Xuan approached these two ships, and I hoped that we could get water and other supplies, or transfer some of our passengers to them. They sped away 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 was lying with both hands flat on the floor. Lam carried him up to the deck to get him some fresh air.

I received a small piece of paper with a scribbled note from Lan. It read, “My four children and I are so thirsty. Captain, please call my husband, Tran Phong Van; he is currently working as chief engineer on an American ship.” Lam, my son, was able to get half a bottle of water to 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 temporarily resettled in Indiantown Gap Refugee Camp in November 1975.

Do Thi Bang Tam, who had the most beautiful eyes, wrote to me. “*Captain, I was so happy*

*when I heard that you were writing the story of the 4,000 Vietnamese refugees seeking freedom on your ship. Please describe all the details. Please tell people that I fainted because my friend had stolen the water bottle from me. Dear Captain, many times when I reflect, I had the feeling that it was all just a dream. I am studying to be a medical technologist. At times I feel depressed but when I think of my father, brothers and sisters still behind in Viet Nam, 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 labor! We need a doctor to come and help to deliver her baby!”

Dr. Kim yelled, “Would the doctor nearest to her please help her!”

During our Truong Xuan reunion in Montreal in 1977, Dr. Nguyen Huu Tung, currently a professor of medicine in Montreal, told us about the childbirth. There was also another child born aboard Truong Xuan. According to a letter from Professor Bui Nhu Hung, father of one of the babies born aboard Truong Xuan, *“After many days of worrying, my family finally settled down in Montreal. Canadian Immigration has looked after our fellow countrymen very well. Thanks to them, we are now well settled. My 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. An x-ray showed she had a broken left collarbone, but that it was healing nicely. No one knows when her bone was broken. She did not show any signs of pain when we were at the Hong Kong Refugee Camp. Maybe she was pushed against the crowd. She was still so young that she did not feel the pain, I guess. A friend of ours wants to know about our sea journey, so that he can write the life story of our young daughter. Captain, please write to us to let us know the major problems on the ship that only you, as the Captain, could know...”*

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

At 4 PM and then 4:15 PM on May 1, two suicides happened on the deck. Blood and brains splashed the clothing of Hong Khac Bang, Nguyen Thanh Lam and Phan Thai. 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.

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 8 PM, Phi screamed desperately through to the loudspeaker in the command room, “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 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 read the map clearly. From where we were, the northern beach of Malaysia would be roughly 300 nautical miles away.

Truong Xuan had to change direction. Abandoning our route to Singapore, we headed straight to Pulau Redang instead. As I leaned over the map to draw the sea route, I tried to stay calm. I was sweating profusely; it was like a shower of sweat. Sweat was running down my forehead and along my cheeks, creating a sad and uncomfortable feeling. I stood upright, hiding myself in the dark. I used my shirtsleeves to wipe off the sweat. I tried my best to keep my worries to myself. Every eye in the command room followed my every move.

Hai asked me, "Where do you plan to head, Captain?"

"Toward Pulau Redang, the nearest land."

"When will we reach there?"

"It will take 30 hours."

"I will contribute money to buy rice for our people."

At 9 PM, the engine stopped again.

"The oil pump system is clogged."

All the lights were suddenly out. The ship was without its engine. The moonlight, immensely bright, reflected on the water. The sea was serene and still. You could hardly hear the small waves lapping against the ship. The passengers stayed deadly immobilized. At times, one could hear a long sigh melt into the atmosphere. Passengers did not realize the dangers that lay ahead.

Occasionally a voice would break 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" and thought of the rapes that had occurred when people escaped from Central Viet Nam to the South. I ordered a strict curfew at night. No one was allowed to move until 6 AM. 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 drifting during the night. We could possibly have drifted toward the Con Dao mountain area. At around 1 AM, 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."

"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 Lieutenant-Colonel Hao. He was very

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 tells 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 placed in the middle of the night.

“Left move 2~::~left move 2.”

“Right move 2~::~right move 2.”

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

The two teams of security members came back after an hour. They reported to Hao that there was nothing suspicious.

I was not sure whether the woman had reported correctly or not. She might have been so scared that she imagined it all. Hao went back to sleep an hour later. I felt very uncomfortable listening to his loud snores.

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, do something right away. I suspect that they have shotguns.”

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

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

The sun came up on the eastern horizon. It was 6 AM. 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 the fall of South Viet Nam, a story about a captain who had saved a man from the sea under extraordinary circumstances. A captain in Northern Europe counted his sailors and found one missing. After a thorough search of the ship, he

concluded that one sailor must have fallen into the sea after having drunk too much on 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 were mobilized to search the sea.

Five, and then ten hours passed, but the captain was not discouraged. He kept searching. Suddenly from a distance, through his binoculars, dead ahead and in line with his ship, something was moving. When the ship approached, they found the sailor still swimming. The victim was rescued after almost 24 hours in the cold water of that wintry December.

That story 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.

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 calculations extremely well – to the point of being able to find the sailor fully 24 hours after he had fallen, right in 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 minuscule in the immensity of the sea.

The extremely lucky sailor also taught me a lesson. He had extraordinary strength. He proved to be a champion of endurance. He showed me that we all have great potential for extraordinary achievements. If he did not fall into the sea and fight against the deadly cold, 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 finally be saved?

Truong Xuan also rescued someone who had fallen into the sea.

Our SOS telegram, sent on the morning of May 1, had not brought any response for rescue. Hunger and thirst appeared to be imminent. Two men had just committed suicide, adding to the fear and despair. The size of the crowd huddling on the deck from bow to stern worried me. I tried to stay calm. Small but heavy black clouds hung in the sky. I wished a shower would come to bring drinking water, to freshen the suffocating air, to soften the despair that weighed heavily on each of us. The gentle late southwest season winds that riddled the sea were not enough to comfort the people. They faced an uncertainty between life and death.

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

Everyone around me was quite tired. Lieutenant-Colonel Hung had hollow eyes and cheeks. Lawyer Thong in the telecommunication room often kept worry-filled eyes on his wife and children outside. Lieutenant-Colonel Hao was 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 coming aboard. Only Hai was in relatively good shape, perhaps having brought enough provisions. He

still had a good complexion.

Three men were normally beside me: Lieutenant-Colonel Hung, Major Thuyen and Lam. Lam was a martial arts student, and his mother had instructed him to protect me.

An hour after the sea burial of the two suicide victims, despair hung in the air. A distress cry was suddenly heard from the left side of the ship.

“A man fell overboard!”

“Another suicide!”

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

Truong Xuan was a giant wounded beast. The emergency backup steering system was still being used. Water leaked slowly into the engine room. I thought of the lives of 4,000 people and of the life of one person. To turn back, or keep going? In a flash, I remembered the story of the northern European captain but realized that I 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 but could not make up my mind. What must be done to gain the trust of the people? People must help one another during this difficult time; otherwise, all would be lost. A lot of questions, but no answers. The ship still continued its course. I looked in the westerly direction; the sun was only a league above the sea. Thirty minutes had gone by. I decided to turn the ship around. The victim, if alive, should have been about five nautical miles away. If we found the victim, it would raise our morale considerably.

I looked into the eyes of the young man who had cried out.

“Did the man really fall into the sea, or was it a suicide?”

“It wasn’t a suicide. He fell.”

The young man spoke 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 to Phi that the ship was turning back to look for the man who had fallen overboard.

It was 5:35 PM. To turn the ship 180 degrees, I applied Admiral Boutakoff’s method, one that I learned some decades ago; this was the first and last time that I applied it. I still do not know how I even managed to remember what I had learned. Handing my binoculars 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 binoculars, Lam pointed his hand.

“There 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 binoculars and looking in the direction of the cloud as reference, I scanned the calm sea. There he was. The victim was battling and still swimming quite well. Overcome with joy, I forgot for a moment all the troubles that lay ahead. I asked Lam to keep close track of the victim, not to take his eyes off the binoculars. 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 naked man from the wind.

When the ship was about 10 meters 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 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 the man but also to have shown the passengers on board that even a single life was worth saving. I wanted the people to understand that whether or not our ship would reach safety, everyone 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 4,000 souls aboard with good spirit to protect one another in a desperate time?

I did not have time to meet the man to ask how he had fallen overboard. Rumors were that it was a vengeance, a robbery, or a suicide. Each rumor was certain in its version of the story.

“He was an army colonel and a province chief in Central Viet Nam. He had enemies.”

“No, he was a police lieutenant-colonel. He 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 in shock and did not want to admit that he had fallen into the sea, and that 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 was rescued from the sea?”

“Don’t you remember? When you visited the Camp of the Singles, he came to greet you. 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 to him so that he can tell 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 find the truth.”

“I know. It was not a suicide. But he’s now not in his right mind.”

“It couldn’t have been a suicide. If it was a suicide, he would not 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 told me in Hong Kong. I am not sure I will 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 a letter to you.”

The rescue of the man who fell overboard was one of the most memorable incidents of my life, but I still regret not having had a chance to meet the victim. I received letters everyday from Truong Xuan refugees in 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 some point, the box was lost, probably unwittingly 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”.

In early 1976, I received a letter from the man who fell overboard. It was sent from Hong Kong.

*“Around 3 PM, the broadcaster on the radio announced the unification of Viet Nam, and Saigon was celebrating the victory. I thought it was ridiculous for me to leave Viet Nam 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 5 PM. I heard people yelling to get help for me. After being pulled out of the water, I was 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. He wanted to finish me off. I was lucky to survive and I survived because several people nearby intervened on my behalf.”*

A number of Truong Xuan refugees had sent me money, a total of US\$200, to help the unlucky refugees who still remained in Hong Kong. This money was forwarded to Sister Nguyen. Vu Van Thu received a special gift of US\$20.

Early in 1992, I met 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. I knew Cau from 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 sometimes go back to Viet Nam to visit. His eldest daughter married and was living in the US.

Nguyen Dinh Bang offered me an 8mm film containing very special images of Truong Xuan, still docked in Saigon on the morning of April 30, 1975, after the surrender. It also contains the scene of Vu Van Thu being pulled out of the water. This film has been shown on many of my visits to former Truong Xuan passengers. On my visit in Montreal, I met Dr. Tran Van Kim, who had been head of the medical committee, 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 4,000 people just to try to save one?"

From the way he put his question, I knew Dinh Vu had been long troubled by my action. He thought it unjustified, even though it was to save the life of a person. He had his own reasons, but he was not in my place at that time. Dinh Vu was not aware of the extreme difficulties that were awaiting us. He did not understand that, at any time, it might have become so tense that the captain would lose control of the crew and passengers, and that his orders would not be followed.

I replied to Vu, "I saved one man in order to save 4,000 people."

Dinh Vu looked at me without saying a word. Maybe he now understands 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 rippled on the water that gently tapped against our ship, making sounds in the silence of the night like whispered prayers.

The engine and the light system were out of order. Many young men took turns pumping out the water that was leaking into the engine room. On both sides of the command room, women with young children looked for shelter 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 to determine the latitude of our ship but I was unable to get close to it.

My heart rushed whenever I thought of the possibility that the ship might sink if enough water leaked in to flood the engine room. There was no means to communicate to the world to call for rescue. The command room was dark; there was not even enough light to study the map.

The first colorful ray 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 just enough to keep the water level in the engine room from rising.

Our first SOS telegram was sent out on May 2: *"From the captain of XVLX. Water leaking into engine room. Stop. Danger of sinking. Stop. More than 3,000 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; it belonged to Viet Nam and was recognized internationally. Since the SOS telegram was sent in the international emergency frequency by a captain, I was certain that ships navigating in the region that intercepted the message would come to our rescue. That was why I allowed such a great number of refugees to board.

In just ten minutes, Thanh announced that Clara Maersk (OWIK) of Denmark had received our SOS message. I was constantly in the telecommunications room waiting for a response.

“Has Truong Xuan communicated with the American Seventh Fleet?”

“No. We don’t know their frequency.”

“Clara Maersk has room only for 1,500 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 on Route 175, at a speed of 6 knots per hour.”

“OWIK will meet XVLX at about 12:00 Noon.”

At 11 AM, we sent a confirmation telegram to the 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.”

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

When the Danish ship confirmed the time of the rescue, Hung cried out loudly to announce the good news. In a strong but slightly 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 be used to 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 1,500 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. What would happen to those that stayed? With the current condition of the engine, and

with water in the engine room, what was the real degree of danger? What would be the fate of the remaining people if the oil system were to get blocked again or the pump stopped working? What has to be done to keep the ship from sinking?

At 11:35 AM, a black spot appeared on the horizon. The black spot became clearer and clearer as it neared us. Truong Xuan stopped its engine, waiting. Clara Maersk, a sky blue ship, 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 wrote about the “black spot”.

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

*Four thousand bodies had endured three days of heat from above, three nights of cold from below, and wind that scratched their eyes and left a salty taste on their lips.*

*Hunger, thirst and despair had almost killed all their hope and exhausted all their strength when the magic appeared. It came in the form of a ship colored in compassionate blue and bringing along a captain and a crew of angels. The ship 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 where I had almost cracked. Everybody around me was happy. But there were some who were not in their right minds.

Mrs. Nghe shook my wrists.

“Please. Please. My husband is weird. He’s lost his mind. Please help me!”

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

I asked lawyer Nguyen Huu Thong, Lieutenant-Colonel Luu Binh Hao, Mr. Nguyen Quang Hai, Colonel Vu Van Thinh, and lawyer Mrs. Nguyen Thi Truyen to form a delegation and to go on board the Clara Maersk to negotiate with the Danish Captain. For our ship’s safety, I could not leave 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 and slowly lowered 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 the Captain Anton Olsen. The captain was about 50 years

old, looking nice and pleasant.

I told him at once, "Captain, please lend us a pump. 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 become very risky. I implore you to rescue everybody."

Without hesitation, Mr. Olsen agreed to evacuate everyone. I immediately told the news to the delegates.

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 4,000 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.

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

Before the delegates had time to get back onboard our ship, two young men jumped into the water and grabbed onto the canoe. There were loud shouts.

"Catch them! Catch them!"

"Beat them up! They'll announce to the world that they were forced to flee away!"

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

I went directly to the command room. Looking stricken, Hung said, "Chief engineer Phi reports that the water level has risen because the ship has been 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 might have fallen.

The news that water was flooding the engine room was not divulged. 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 could have hoped. The rescue of 4,000 people from Truong Xuan to the Clara Maersk took place in the South Sea, in ideal meteorological conditions, and in a surprisingly orderly fashion. People climbed the ladders. Some were still strong enough to climb the nets. Those that pushed got kicked by members of the security committee. Some took time to use their plastic water containers to get seawater to bathe. I urged everybody to move quickly.

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

“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 yet sunk -- how could I have abandoned ship? But if the engine went dead, the pump quit, or the telecommunications system failed, 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 grabbed some clothes that I would later use. 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 large-framed young man tried to climb over the ladder with an old woman on his back. He climbed up a step but backed down. The old woman, paralyzed, was not able to stand. He held the woman and pulled her up, but he was too tired to carry her. 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 his paralyzed mother was Phan Huy Hoang, a parachutist Lieutenant-Colonel. It was Hoang who had guarded the engine room with an M16. During my visit to Truong Xuan friends in the northwestern US in October 1983, I learned that Hoang's mother had recently passed away in Houston, Texas.

While I was watching Hoang struggling to carry his mother, a man in his thirties came up to the command 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 pump 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 that 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 storage room where the food was kept. Chat even cocked his arms and legs in imitation of a corpse's posture. It was the body of Vong A Sang who had 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, obtained a death certificate for his father-in-law. Two months later, Truong Xuan was towed to Hong Kong where his relatives recognized the body thanks to an identification card found in his trouser pocket. They brought his body ashore to be buried.

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

A Danish sailor was ordered to board Truong Xuan to ensure that all passengers had abandoned ship. The weapons 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 a last telegram appealing to the world to help the 4,000 Vietnamese refugees who had been fortunate enough to be rescued by Clara Maersk. The generator was half-submersed in the water. Only then did I give the order to abandon the ship.

Thanh, Chat, Phi, the remaining crew, 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 a huge 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 away from hell. I had traveled throughout Southeast Asia aboard Truong Xuan. It was my own little world that was now being abandoned to the ocean.

### **Aboard the Clara Maersk**

A crowd of refugees, fleeing Communism, exhausted, leaving behind their homeland, boarded Clara Maersk. People were preoccupied with the same question: where would they spend their lives? The outside world was so unknown to them.

People laid disorderly on the deck and in empty containers. Some used their hands to catch water from hoses. Some were so tired that they threw themselves prostrate on the deck, arms and legs stretched out. The two newborn babies, Nguyen Van Hau and Nguyen Kim Cuc, and those 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 through San Francisco, I paid a visit to the Buddhist monk, Thich Tuong Van. I told him about my regret that on my visit to former Truong Xuan refugees in Montreal, I was unable to see the two catholic priests; I was only able to speak on the phone to Father Nguyen Gia De. Venerable Tuong Van, eyes wide open at my words, thought for a moment and then spoke cheerfully.

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

The unexpected story was so beautiful.

On the Danish ship, 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.

“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 act 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 large man, 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 finished. We were now on

Danish 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 clothes. The khaki shirt I wore when on duty was now dirty and stained with oil. It was carefully folded and kept it as a souvenir. I looked at my wife and children and realized that we were very, very lucky.

Our country had been torn apart. How many families could have remained intact? Who would have thought that the Vietnamese, a people that had always lived on their land, would have to flee their country en masse? My family had been my source of encouragement in these darkest of moments.

Its last mooring line released, Clara Maersk started a direct route to Hong Kong, leaving Truong Xuan alone to its fate. After Clara Maersk had moved for a while, we caught a glimpse of dozens 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 and then went to see Captain Olsen to tell him why the refugees had fled. I also informed him that all the arms that had been confiscated had remained on Truong Xuan, but I dared not guarantee that all the refugees were unarmed; 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 the one I had requested, but a large reception room that was reserved for officers, about eight meters wide and ten meters long. The room was nicely furnished with a table, chairs, and lounge chairs as well as liquor 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 especially 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 accepting such hospitality. My wife, my daughter Thu Giang, who had fainted during the evacuation, and my three-year old niece Quynh Dao, who had a 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 Viet Nam, I went to the command room, introducing myself to the officer on duty, and asked him for permission to visit the pilot room, a pretext to verify whether the ship was truly heading for Hong Kong. Once I had been reassured, I headed back to the reception room. I was astonished to find, not three people, but dozens of people in the room.

Clara Maersk was Danish 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 to attend. I had invited some members of the provisory representative committee to come to the dinner, but I did not want many people to attend

because the ship had to feed an unexpectedly large number of people.

I went to see Mr. Olsen to apologize for allowing too many people into the reception room and asked him to use his captain's authority 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 would enable me to look outside through a porthole. I thought that I could get a good night's sleep to regain my strength. Instead, I stayed awake to check the stars the entire night. I was worried and obsessed with the thought that the ship could be forced to change its direction.

It was still early in the morning, but the deck was littered with papers and leftover food. The toilets were disgusting and 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. I saw that a lot of things would need to be done in order for the international community to have a good impression of the refugees.

On 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 unsent telegram that had been drafted on Truong Xuan was used as the basis for another draft. The new telegram was drafted in Vietnamese and was translated into English by Thong. He was delegated the task of taking the telegram to Captain Olsen to ask 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, which was a plea for help, we emphasized the necessity for the security committee to maintain order and to help people in the areas of food and common hygiene. The representative committee held meetings the whole day, almost without any breaks.

At 9 AM, Captain Olsen announced that the government of Hong Kong had agreed to help and would send delegates the day after, May 4, at about 10 AM. He said that his ship was not equipped, especially in hygienic facilities, to go further than Hong Kong.

Nguyen Quang Hai opened a bottle of champagne and served each of us a glass and proposed a toast for all the refugees. Everybody wondered where Hai had found the bottle. It turned out that Pham Truc Lam had taken some bottles of liquor that had been strictly saved for special occasions from my room on Truong Xuan. Mr. Mortensen came in, and we invited him to share our Martell bottle. Gaining spirit, he spoke fondly with his parrot.

I went to bed late. I sat up from time to time to look at the stars to check the ship's direction. The stars, twinkling in the dark sky, were rocking back and forth outside the porthole like fireworks.

They looked so beautiful. Everyone else was probably sound asleep, but I was still worried and making checks on Clara Maersk's route.

At about 1 or 2 AM of May 4, a small number of young men came into the room looking for beer and soft drinks. Their thoughtless behavior, disrespectful to our rescuers, would have given the refugees a bad reputation.

At 5 AM, the noise of footsteps and water hoses woke us up. Captain Olsen and his sailors were using brooms and the elephant hose to clean the boat. Lieutenant-Colonel Hung, Lieutenant-Colonel Hao, and other members of the security committee ran up and cleaned the deck that was littered with waste and garbage. We felt ashamed in front of Captain Olsen.

The news that the Government of Hong Kong had agreed to host the refugees gave us some confidence, but we were all very worried. Leaving Viet Nam to flee the Communists in order to live next to Red China was not great comfort to us. The image of the people escaping mainland China by swimming and having their legs bitten off by sharks frightened us. The fact that the Allies had sworn "to live and to die together", but then had suddenly abandoned their friends to the Communists was still in our heads.

Our situation and status was very delicate. Like a bird that had just been shot, we had not forgotten our wounds. A warship of the American Seventh Fleet went away without offering any help to Truong Xuan in the afternoon of May 1, 1975. Being refugees, we depended on the charity of others. We had no choice but to land in Hong Kong, but on what condition? We planned to ask the government of Hong Kong to guarantee that they would not hand us over to North Viet Nam nor send us to any other Communist country. Only when they agreed to that would we disembark at Hong Kong.

A small piece of paper was brought into the meeting room.

*Dear Luy,*

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

*Huyen*

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

I put away the piece of paper in my pocket, smiling to myself, "Can beggars be choosers? We'll see!"

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

At 10 AM, a representative of the Government of Hong Kong met with the representative committee.

*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 awaiting 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 Viet Nam or send us to any Communist country.”

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

Forty-five minutes later, he came back and announced:

“No, no, no. Never will we return you to Viet Nam or send you to any Communist countries.”

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

At noon, the security committee brought two young men before the representative committee saying that they seemed suspicious since they had no identity papers. It turned out that they were students who had their student cards.

At 4 PM, I got the news that a number of youngsters were caught placing plastic explosives on the poop deck of Clara Maersk. The news took everyone by surprise. I became worried about possible violence, and I said to the messenger at once, “We are on Danish territory. We are subjected to Denmark’s law. Everything has to be reported to Captain Olsen.”

Having never seen plastic explosive before, I wanted to attend to the matter personally because it was important. I immediately followed the messenger. Nguyen Quang Hai went with me. Three youngsters were held in a corner, looking terrified. Major Do Huy Nghia was beside them.

I asked a member of the security committee, “Why were these young men arrested?”

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

Next to the youngsters were seven or eight plastic bags, labeled in English. They were bags of dehydrated food enriched with vitamins that the youngsters had taken from a lifeboat.

Nguyen Quang Hai told me, “It’s fortunate that we came. This could have been a major 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. It was forbidden to take them away.

It was the first time since boarding Clara Maersk that I had 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 on the Pacific, sometimes away from home for half a year. My recent trips, only a month ago, seemed to me like distant occurrences 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 entered Hong Kong in anxiety. I was no longer a captain, and this ship was not a part of my beloved Viet Nam. 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 the open arms of 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 6 PM, 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. Never will we do that. Take our word for it.”

A few months later, I met Mr. Gately, head of the “Camp of the Singles” on 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 King might return them to Viet Nam. Mr. David Weeks said, “Never. We are British.”

People disembarked the Clara Maersk in an orderly fashion. They then got on buses. Some handed their weapons to the authorities.

At 12 PM, I went to see Captain Olsen and his officers. On behalf of all the refugees, I thanked them and all the sailors for having rescued us, helped us, and generously sheltered us. Finally, speaking as a seaman, I thanked Mr. Olsen and his crew for their great help and also for having saved my life. Captain 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 duty as sailors. 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 my binoculars and a compass as souvenirs. Captain Olsen accepted the souvenirs, saying that he would hold them for me and would return them the next time we met.

The representative committee and my family were the last ones to leave Clara Maersk. We arrived at Camp Sekkong at 4 AM on May 5, 1975.

### ***Days in the 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 my daughter Giang’s high school classmate, had been a student in Canada and was living in Toronto. Our entire family was allowed to immigrate to Canada. We bid farewell to our son Pham Truc

Lam, our daughters Pham Thu Giang and Pham Ngoc Dung, and Dung's husband, who also 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. 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, OK?"

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 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 to give you in foreign lands. 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 our mail.

Our eldest son, Pham Trinh Cat, had been studying in the US since 1963. He left the US for Paris, and then he headed for Viet Nam in February of 1975, during the most chaotic time for South Viet Nam. 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. 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 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! 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 give them morale support. Besides, deep down inside, I wanted to live in the US. 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 girlfriend. Lyrics such as, "Returning to you, My Darling", "Duy Tan Boulevard", "Dear Sir, My Teacher", "Fatherland Viet Nam with 4,000 years of Culture", "100 years under French Domination", and "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 the idea to provide the Vietnamese refugees with more familiar foods.

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 3,000 refugees who left their dearest country to look for freedom in foreign countries. I hope that this tape will bring back deep and unforgettable memories of those extraordinary moments.*

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 in Oklahoma when he sang for the cause to liberate Viet Nam. Since then, I have only seen him singing in the tapes.

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 was a naturalized American citizen who had also sponsored us. A large number of Truong Xuan refugees were still waiting their turn. 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 leave the camp. Those who were lone refugees suffered from loneliness. There were all sorts of crises in the three 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 the ladies who did the cooking. There were about 40 people at the party that night.

Nguyen Huy Hoang led me through dozens of honor guards, all of whom were 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 else was 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 the moments of anxiety and hopefulness onboard Truong Xuan. I hope that this dinner tonight will bring to all of us the most beautiful memories as we start 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. 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 person to leave their ship!”