

Escaping Vietnam:
by Melissa Bower
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Editor's note: This is the first part of a series about two Americans who escaped Vietnam when they were children.

Two boys who escaped Vietnam—one in the belly of a boat and the other clinging tightly to his family on deck—have chosen to serve the U.S. military that saved them as children.

Maj. Lan Dalat, now an Intermediate Level Education student in the Command and General Staff College, has served the U.S. Army for 24 years, the past 14 as an officer. Anthony Lang, a military police officer for nine years, now works as an Army civilian at CGSC.

Dalat, who changed his last name when he became a U.S. citizen to reflect the Vietnamese city of his origin, was 13 when his journey to the U.S. began. Lang was 6. Their mother and two sisters, Michelle and Christine, then 12 and 7, were also part of the journey.

The family escaped Vietnam in a fishing boat with 138 other people. The boat's engine died in the South China Sea and left them adrift for seven days with no food or water until they were rescued by a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier, the USS Ranger, CV-61, on March 20, 1981.

While living in Vietnam, the family of Thai Lang and Cam Quy Ton, a journalist and a teacher, were considered neutral after the fall of Saigon and not a threat to the government, Dalat said. But there was still concern.

“The communists believed that everybody should be able to survive off the land, and because of that, my family were taken from our family home (after 1975) and moved to an area where we could produce our own food,” he said.

Dalat's mother had been a teacher, a highly revered position in Vietnamese culture, but she didn't know about farming. Both parents were well educated and had enough money to survive.

“They felt that as kids, we would not have any future whatsoever in Vietnam,” Dalat said. “And so, based on that, they risked everything and we escaped.”

Of even more concern to his parents, Dalat at 13 was already at the age when he could be drafted to serve in the Vietnamese military to fight against the Cambodians or the Chinese.

Dalat and his father had already tried eight times to escape the country.

It was common for the older boys and men to flee to another country, then work and send money to sponsor the rest of the family. Someone had to stay behind, or the government would seize all property once the family was gone. Each previous attempt by Dalat and his father had failed.

“My mom finally just got fed up, and said she would just do it,” Lang said.

Escape

On March 8, 1981, Cam Quy, at 41, awoke her four children before sunrise and told them to get dressed to go visit their grandmother. Dalat soon figured out they were about to escape.

For the first leg of the journey, the family travelled in canoes on the river. They spent five or six days in the canoes until coming to a larger fishing boat.

“I remember Lan being on a different boat,” Lang said. “He was in the front boat, my mom was in the rear boat with me and my sisters. And somewhere along the way, our boat capsized and I didn’t know how to swim. My mom’s hanging onto us two kids trying to swim with us to this other canoe.”

They had dressed in street clothes, but eventually had to change into fishermen’s rags to blend in.

“By the fifth day, we looked like them anyway,” Lang said.

They couldn’t stop and buy food, because they were supposed to be in hiding. Dalat remembers being told that to eat, he had to hunt for crabs hiding in little holes in the mud.

“And I remember the first time I tried to reach down there and tried to search for something, and after a few attempts finally found one,” he said. “And thank goodness, it was a softshell crab And I brought that up and just rinsed it off with the muddy river water and ate.”

They reached their rendezvous point early and had to wait until nightfall so they wouldn’t be seen. When they approached the boat, people on board recognized Cam Quy’s central accent. Because of this, they knew she was of the class that had prepaid for the journey.

Limited supplies on the boat were further burdened when many Vietnamese who had not prepaid found out about the journey. There wasn’t enough room on the boat for everyone.

“There were so many people who found out the operation that they jumped on board,” Dalat said. “Now it was night, it was dark, and they didn’t know who was who. It was so chaotic, it was terrible.”

Dalat was grabbed and shoved toward the bottom of the boat, underneath a grating used to hold luggage and cargo. A second child was shoved next to him, and lucky for Dalat, it was his sister. They tried to yell, but with all the noise, it was difficult to hear. He remembers his mother shouting “Lou!” the name she used for him.

“And I could hear her, so she knew that I was on board,” he said.

The boat pulled away, with people still trying to jump on board. At first, everyone cheered when it pulled away from shore.

Then, they entered the ocean.

“We were still in the face of the river at the time, so the water was relatively calm where we entered,” Lang said. “But once the boat started entering the sea, it was some rough seas.”

Dalat likened the waves to those in the movie, “The Perfect Storm.” The boat slammed up and down among them, making the passengers sick.

“Everybody was puking,” Dalat said. “And guess who they puked on? I was on the bottom. So I couldn’t puke, because everybody was puking on me. Oh, it was just horrible, it was so disgusting.”

The boat

Dalat said he must have fallen asleep, exhausted, at some point. The next morning, his mother finally was able to get her children out of the bottom of the boat. The boat captain apologized, especially since Cam Quy was a paying customer.

The boat had been disguised as a cargo ship carrying cola. The captain thought that he would be well prepared for the voyage by providing soda to hydrate his travelers and feeding them rice.

“So, we were hydrated off the soda,” Dalat said. “The first day was great.”

Lang remembers vividly begging for water.

“You got so sick of soda,” he said. “They got to the point where they were rationing water. You got one capful.”

Because they didn’t have any fresh water, they couldn’t cook the rice.

“At first, they tried to cook the rice with the soda,” Dalat said. “It was terrible. Nobody could eat it. And so they tried it with the salt water. And that was even worse.”

Dalat said the boat could hold about 75 people. He was told that supplies for the trip had been planned for that number of people. Unfortunately, so many people had rushed the boat when it first left Vietnam that 138 people had climbed on board.

The one thing the captain had prepared for were Thai pirates. The boat had some small firearms on board so the refugees could defend themselves. Thai pirates were notorious for robbing the fleeing Vietnamese. They would kill the men and take the women and children off to an island and force them into sexual slavery. Somehow, the Lang family was able to escape without encountering any pirates.

Their biggest threat was dehydration and starvation.

Eventually, the fresh water supply ran out completely.

A few days later, the engine died on the boat. They started drifting. The captain decided to try rowing, but they didn't have any paddles. They took the panel on the upper deck off the boat, but that didn't work.

“So, we were adrift for seven days, no food, no water,” Dalat said.

At age 6, Lang couldn't understand why his family had gotten into such a predicament. Dalat remembers his little brother begging for water.

“And my mom could only say, as soon as we get to shore, I'll buy you water, you'll be OK,” he said.

Dalat remembers many discussions on the boat. People said they would rather die on the open sea than to live under the communists. And many believed they were about to do so.

One night, he remembers a man with a guitar, singing.

“I don't know what song he was singing. He was just singing another old lady asked, “Why are you singing? We're about to die here. There's nothing to live for -why are you singing?”

“And he said, “Well, if there's nothing to live for, then I'd rather die happy.””

People were losing hope that they would be rescued.

“I was hallucinating all the time,” Dalat said. “I thought, when I closed my eyes, I thought I was back at home walking the dog but then when I woke up, I realized, I'm still on the boat, stuck. Ready to die.”

Dalat said his mother was one of the first to see the airplanes. He doesn't know if she was hallucinating or not. She began trying to signal using her makeup mirror. People around her tried to tell her she was wrong, but she was certain she had seen a plane.

“The reason I doubted her was because there were people around us who didn't see anything either,” Dalat said. “But my mom thought she saw it.

“The very next day, sure enough, those two aircraft flew so low, right over our boat, so low and so loud, it woke everybody up. That was a sound of joy passing overhead.”

Escaping Vietnam: Two brothers tell story of their journey to America.

This is the second part of a series about two Americans who escaped Vietnam when they were children.

For Vietnamese refugees starving near death on a fishing boat in 1981, watching an American aircraft carrier come to rescue them was an out-of-this-world experience.

Among them were brothers, future Army Maj. Lan Dalat and Army military police officer Anthony Lang, then 13 and 6.

“I remember approaching the ship and it was like a city, from my perspective,” Lang said. “This thing was the biggest thing I had ever seen in my life. It was like a starship.”

The USS Ranger, CV-61, at over 1,046 feet long, was equipped to carry more than 70 aircraft and about 5,600 Sailors. The ship’s captain was Navy Capt. Dan A. Pedersen, who had been the senior officer in a group of nine men who developed a tactics program for the F-4 Navy Fighter Weapons School at Naval Air Station Miramar, nicknamed “Top Gun.” In fact, the movies *Top Gun* and *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* were both filmed aboard the USS Ranger.

Pedersen told Good Morning America 15 years later that he remembers the day the crew of the Ranger saved 138 Vietnamese refugees stranded on a fishing boat in the middle of the ocean. March 20, 1981, was a hot day with no wind to power the boat. Its engine had died seven days earlier, leaving those on board to starve to death in the middle of the ocean.

“Two of my airplanes reported into the control center that they had spotted a boat full of people adrift,” he said. “So, we altered course and went down there and found this wooden craft dead in the water ...”

All four children of Thai Lang and Cam Quy Ton had escaped Vietnam with their mother, while their father stayed behind to keep the government from seizing the family’s property. Dalat and Lang’s sisters, Michelle and Christine, were 12 and 7. The children Americanized their names upon becoming U.S. citizens.

Both brothers went on to eventually serve in the U.S. military that saved their lives. Dalat is now an Intermediate Level Education student at the Command and General Staff College and Lang, a former military police captain, works as an Army civilian at CGSC.

Dalat said those on board the Vietnamese fishing boat had lost all hope of rescue. They had awoken in the middle of the night by planes flying overhead. But the planes didn’t return for many hours.

The people on board wondered if the planes were Russian or Chinese, because surely if they were American, they would have come back to rescue them, Dalat said.

Dalat said he knows now, through his CGSC education, that on the surface of the ocean, it is not possible to see more than 22 miles.

The Ranger was on its way, but it wasn’t until late afternoon that someone on the Vietnamese boat spotted the ship.

“So when we actually saw it, it was a sight to see,” Dalat said. “It was amazing. It was like, seven ships on a straight line on the horizon.”

He thinks now, with his military experience, that the smaller boats were U.S. Marine patrol boats, sent out before the carrier to make sure the Vietnamese were not hostile. When the refugees first sighted the planes, they had fired three shots with rifles on board, believing that to be a signal for help.

There was a helicopter overhead, and Dalat believed it might have been somehow pushing or pulling the boat, with no working engine, toward the ship.

Dalat could see the faces of what seemed like a million American Sailors peering down from every open space on the ship.

“And I remember seeing so many flashes going off, because it was getting dark, and I knew there were a lot of people out there taking pictures,” he said. “It was fascinating.”

Aboard the Ranger

The Vietnamese boat was docked and Dalat saw some kind of crane lowered down from the ship. He remembers the crew of the Ranger tried to find someone to translate. None of the Vietnamese could speak English. After one failed attempt, they found a Canadian liaison officer on board who could speak French. He told the refugees to drop their weapons, and Dalat remembers the “plop” sound of weapons being dropped into the ocean.

“Once we get on board of the aircraft carrier, I remember everybody was like giants to us,” he said. “Because first of all, I was a little kid. So walking down the corridor, I was so small and people lined up against both sides against the deck.”

The refugees were separated by gender and sent directly to the showers. Dalat doesn't know what happened to the rags they arrived in, but thinks they were probably burned. At the end of the shower line, each person was given a towel and a uniform.

Some of the children were so small, they just wore a shirt with a cord tied around to keep it on.

“We got our uniform, and I was old enough to get pants, but the pants didn't fit, so I rolled it up like 10 times and put the 550 (parachute) cord around my waist,” he said.

After getting dressed, the refugees were taken to a doctor and given water.

“They treated us with dignity and respect,” Dalat said, “even though we looked like a bunch of little wet rats, hungry and miserable.”

Pedersen later told Good Morning America that it was just the type of mission his Sailors wanted, to rescue people.

“I think for many of the crew of the Ranger, about 5,600 Sailors ... these are the kinds of things that the Navy’s mission enjoys doing — save people on the high seas,” he said. “And these people needed help.”

Bugs Bunny and M&M’s

After being washed, dressed, and seen by a doctor, the Vietnamese were taken to an open bay where there was one small television set showing a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

To Lang, who had never seen cartoons before, it was like watching movies on a giant screen.

“They turned on all sorts of cartoons,” he said. “There was one TV in that bay and I think I parked myself in front of it the whole time.”

The Vietnamese spent five days aboard the Ranger, their first taste of American culture. Pictures, which Dalat found many years later during his research, show young Vietnamese children in oversized uniforms sitting, eating and watching television.

“They were so hospitable to us,” Lang said of the Sailors. “They’d pick me up, take me through the chow line, they’d give us toys they had purchased for their kids back home.”

The Vietnamese were amazed at the quantity of American food. The refugees hadn’t eaten for a whole week, and now each person received more food than they had ever seen.

“We had never had half a chicken for a family ever,” Dalat said. “That’s rare. But each person who got in line, we all had half a chicken. More rice than we had ever seen in our lives.”

“And that was just a side dish,” Lang added.

One thing that disappointed the children was American milk. Vietnamese children had grown up on sweetened condensed milk.

“Everybody knew the rumors,” Dalat said. “‘Hey, you’ve got to drink American milk, you’re going to grow up, you’re going to be big.’ So everybody got in line to get the milk. But then after we took the first taste...there was no taste.”

So, they all got in line to pour sugar in their milk.

One of the Sailors wanted to treat the children to candy. He took them to the snack bar on the ship and asked them what they wanted, but none spoke English or had ever seen American candy. So finally, the Sailor picked out a brown package of M&M’s candy pieces.

“He cut it open and gave me a little bit,” Dalat said. “I had no idea ... these colorful things were just so pretty. We all looked at each other, ‘What is this?’ I thought it was medicine.”

The Sailors signaled to the children to eat the candy.

“And it was so good,” Dalat said. “After that . . . we followed him everywhere, just trying to get the M&M’s.”

Refugee camp

Because they were rescued by a U.S. flagship, Cam Quy and her four children were automatically granted refugee status in the United States. But they weren’t able to enter the United States right away.

The Ranger took the Vietnamese refugees to the processing center in Manila, Philippines. They were named 138 Subic Bay, after the number of Vietnamese and the location where they first arrived.

After that, they were sent to the island of Palawan, where the United Nations had established a Vietnamese refugee camp in Puerto Princesa.

More than 3,500 Vietnamese were already there. They had little food and no running water.

“It was overpopulated,” Dalat said. “The facilities were nonexistent, really, but while we were there, the UN started giving them more money to build up the facility a little bit, but it was still in pretty bad shape.”

They lived in straw huts. Dalat remembers attending the refugee school where they were taught English by British volunteer Muriel Knox.

They endured tough conditions in the camp for about six months, but were granted status to enter the United States. On Sept. 29, 1981, Cam Quy and her four children arrived in Seattle. They would eventually settle in Orange County, Calif.

With green cards, the Lang family had legal resident alien status, so they could work and go to school. Cam Quy was entitled to Aid to Family with Dependent Children and worked for a few years at a garment factory. The children were in school, but Dalat remembers working part time at a swap meet on the weekend, selling fruits and vegetables for a vendor.

The family’s father, Thai Lang, joined them in November 1984. The elder Lang also escaped Vietnam by boat, aided by a commercial oil rig off the coast of Singapore.

Through his research, Dalat said about 1.2 million people escaped Vietnam and reached asylum, either through a refugee camp or sponsor country. About half a million died at sea.

Lang said with the statistics, it’s not only amazing to him that his family survived the voyage, but also amazing they were picked up by a U.S. aircraft carrier. Many people attempted to escape

communist Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Not only were the conditions harsh, but Vietnamese boat people risked running into pirates who would rob, kill and rape the refugees.

The United Nations and partner nations, including Germany and France, sent out rescue ships to look for stranded boat people. The USS Ranger hadn't been looking for the fishing boat, but was encouraged to provide rescue.

“When I think about how we ended up here, it’s pretty amazing,” Lang said. “Because the statistics of surviving a voyage like that is—it’s very slim. And then to get rescued by a U.S. ship was even rarer.”

Escaping Vietnam: Brothers share their story. By Melissa Bower

Fort Leavenworth Lamp

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Fort Leavenworth, Kan. — Editor’s note: This is the third and final part of a series about two Americans who escaped Vietnam when they were children. In part one, Maj. Lan Dalat and Anthony Lang described their family’s escape from Vietnam and subsequent ordeal at sea. In part two, the pair told of their rescue by the USS Ranger and life in a refugee camp.

It was the culmination of years of searching when Army Maj. Lan Dalat could thank former crew members of the USS Ranger CV-61 in September 2010.

Dalat, part of a Vietnamese family who escaped Communist rule in that country by boat, was stranded on the South China Sea with no food or water for seven days until rescued by the American aircraft carrier on March 20, 1981. Led by Cam Quy, their mother, Dalat, his brother Anthony Lang and their sisters, Michelle and Christine, the family immigrated to the United States. Their father, Thai Lang, was able to join them a few years later.

Dalat remembered the number “61” on the ship, but little else. Before the Internet, it was difficult to find out more.

Dalat, who changed his last name after immigrating to reflect the city of his birth, enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1986, soon after graduating high school.

“My dad believed you have to be a public servant in order to repay a debt that you feel so strongly about repaying,” he said.

The next in line to enter the workplace was his sister, Michelle, who began working with their father as a graphic designer in an advertising firm.

Lang remembers his sister felt a strong obligation to get a job and help pay the family bills.

“She’s always been that way; she’s the oldest sister, and she’s always taken care of me and Christine ... when she graduated high school, she went to work, and she was paying half the rent for the house,” Lang said. “She was raising the family.”

A few years later, the younger sister, Christine, entered college. Determined to be the first among her siblings to obtain a college degree, Michelle quit her job and entered an accelerated program at San Diego State University to be an accountant.

“The company was going to move her up into a higher level position and she quit,” Dalat said of Michelle.

Michelle graduated a year before her sister and began working in business. She was on the 22nd floor inside the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, when it was attacked. Michelle was pregnant at the time with her oldest son, and both survived unhurt.

Michelle lives in Switzerland with her husband Jon and two children. Christine, a certified public accountant, lives in California with her husband Greg and two children.

While still in high school, Lang heard stories of his brothers’ adventures in the Army. Lang was accepted to the United States Military Academy prep school, but decided not to go.

Dalat remembers his younger brother waving around his letter of acceptance. “He’s waving this letter of acceptance, saying ‘Well, bro, in four years you’re going to have to salute me,’” Dalat said.

Although he passed up the prep school, Lang would become a commissioned officer in the Army. He entered the ROTC program at the University of California at San Diego as a sophomore as a way to pay for college.

“He was in the ROTC program and I’m prior enlisted, so I’m like, man, this is not going to be good, I’m not going to have my little brother outshine me,” Dalat said.

So, in 1993, Dalat also entered college and the ROTC program at California State University, Fullerton. Both brothers were set to graduate in 1996.

Around that time, Dalat began searching in earnest for the crew of the ship that had rescued his family. He found a cap at a military surplus store with the “61” he recognized from his youth. By the time he found out the ship had been the USS Ranger CV-61, it had been decommissioned. Dalat created a website hoping someone would recognize his story.

A few months later, he received an e-mail from Patrick Coffee, former intelligence specialist seaman apprentice, who had served aboard the ship. Coffee provided Dalat with a binder full of photographs from the boat rescue in 1981.

Dalat wanted more information. He got in touch with Navy public affairs, which found the captain of the ship, Dan Pedersen.

“I told them I would love to find the captain of that ship and have him commission us, to let him know that the people he rescued are now productive members of society,” Dalat said. “I really want him to be proud of the thing he did to rescue our family.”

The retired Navy captain and Dalat met for the first time on “Good Morning America” in 1996. “The story of each of the individual children is just remarkable, what they’ve done within the American system since then,” Pedersen told “Good Morning America.” “Every one of them are college graduates now.”

That same year, Pedersen commissioned Lang into the U.S. Army. Dalat had intended him to commission both brothers, but Dalat’s own commission was held up by about six months and he didn’t want to bother Pedersen twice. For Pedersen, it didn’t matter. He attended both ceremonies anyway.

Dalat named his oldest son Dan in Pedersen’s honor.

Lang, then a military police officer, was among the first to deploy in Operation Enduring Freedom in Kuwait and Afghanistan in 2001. He served nine years in the Army and is now a planner at the Command and General Staff College. He lives in the area with his wife, Meredith and their children Amelia, 7, and 1-year-old Alice.

Dalat, a Signal Corps officer, came to Fort Leavenworth as a CGSC student in the Intermediate Level Education class this year. Here, he and his brother are challenging each other once again — this time, to obtain master’s degrees.

Dalat said he sometimes feels a bit awkward discussing his past.

“Throughout my military career, a lot of people don’t know about what I came from, because as officers and U.S. citizens, most people assume you’re born here and you grew up in the United States,” he said.

Not only is it an unusual story, but he also doesn’t want to feel as though he’s publicizing himself.

“I get choked up every time I think about it because it’s just a humbling experience,” Dalat said. “Having been at the very bottom of the boat ... and be able to come to America, and I was given the same exact opportunity as every other American living here.”

Dalat will share his story with those who ask. Before he deployed to Afghanistan in 2009, he made a video at www.tinyurl.com/landalat. The video is for his son, confused about his identity because Dalat’s wife Minnie is Korean, he is Vietnamese, they were living in Italy at the time and spoke English. Dalat wanted to make sure his son Dan and, later, his two daughters Daisy and Hanna, would have the story in case anything happened to him while deployed.

Dalat said his proudest moment was when he commanded a NATO unit in Italy between 2003 and 2007. As an American officer, he was put in charge of German, Canadian, British, Turkish, Spanish and other international military partners.

“All these different countries that I was leading, and you know, because when they see me, they see me as an American,” he said. “I wear an American flag, but I see myself as somebody so fortunate, so lucky, a low Vietnamese boat person now was given the trust by the American people to stand in front of NATO troops, enabled to lead them.”

Dalat continues his mission to search for crewmembers of the USS Ranger and thank them. Through Pedersen, he became connected with the USS Ranger Reunion Association, which is attempting to turn the decommissioned ship into a museum.

At the September reunion, Dalat was able to meet one Navy veteran who was attending the reunion for the first time. Like many Vietnam-era veterans, he had been quiet about his military service because of the way veterans were treated by the American public at that time. Dalat especially enjoys thanking these veterans and proving to them that their service did save lives — his own.

“Your action that day allowed me to stand here in front of you as an American Soldier,” Dalat told former Seamen. “It was the humanitarian effort conducted by the crew of the Ranger that allowed my family and others to live the American dream.”