

Saigon Roots, American Soil

A Family Narrative

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Introduction

My family's narrative mirrors the essence of the American Dream—a testament to people who arrived with nothing but forged a life through unwavering determination and hard work. However, achieving this dream was far from easy and did not come without sacrifice. Given its profound significance in our family identity, I wanted to document these stories before they are lost.

This narrative chronicles the journey of my family's immigration and settlement in America after the Vietnam War. Woven together are the stories from both sides of my family, a collective tale based on accounts of my grandparents, parents, and other family members.

Before the Fall—Dad

On March 2, 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder ignited the beginning of the Vietnam War.

Dad tells me stories about running around the neighborhood. The echoes of shelling and explosions were a constant backdrop, and funeral processions frequently haunted the streets. American GIs occasionally strolled through the neighborhood. Children, including Dad, would rush up to them, eyes wide in awe—towering, muscular, and strong—they were the embodiments of classic comic book superheroes.

At the time, Ông Nội¹ was a pilot for the Southern Vietnamese Army. He flew helicopters—deploying soldiers, picking up the wounded, and assisting in rescue missions. Dad was about five years old when Ông Nội was dispatched to Long Beach, CA to train with American troops. He returned to Vietnam after a year, flying for the CIA.

By 1975, U.S. support for South Vietnam had already withdrawn, and victory for the North was inevitable. Ông Nội is renowned for his prideful nature, and despite his denials, every member of our family knows he would have stayed and died fighting in Vietnam. But Bà Nội² was steadfast in her resolve and told him she was going to take the kids to America—with or without him. He prepared the papers to leave.

On April 29, the government closed off all the airports. Only officials and their families were given privileges to leave. Dad recalls being dropped off at the airport by a relative. Bà Nội was carrying Dad's two youngest sisters, both girls about one and two at the time. Ông Nội took care of Dad's oldest sister who was three, and the boys took care of themselves (the oldest being barely nine). Among the eight of them, they shared two luggages and nothing else.

It must have been 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning when they arrived at the airport. It was complete chaos—people pushing, shoving, crying—desperate to get through. Ông Nội had military credentials and was able to get our family through the frenzied crowd. By this point, the only individuals gaining entry were

¹ Vietnamese for paternal grandfather

² Vietnamese for paternal grandmother

those with significant connections or military affiliates—everyone else was locked out.

The evacuees were informed that an American plane was coming. So, they waited. Hours had passed, and there was no sight of the promised plane, no reassuring message, just an unsettling void of uncertainty. The air was heavy.

Amid what must have been a mid-afternoon lull, the sudden roar of engines shattered the tense atmosphere. However, the noise wasn't the American planes they were promised. Instead, a fleet of bombers thundered overhead, bombing the airport runways. The building reverberated, debris falling to the ground. Hysteria broke out as everyone fell to the floor, shaking, sobbing, petrified with fear. When bombs go off that close, it's scary. It's a deep bass you can feel vibrating through your bones.

Ông Nội suspects they were Southern Vietnamese traitors trying to gain favor with the Viet Cong.

The bombings persisted for an agonizing 20 minutes, leaving the runway completely decimated. And there were still no signs of an American plane. Gripped with terror, about half the evacuees fled the airport. However, Bà Nội was determined to stay. She understood that if they went back, they would be killed. At least by staying, they had a fighting chance. More families left as the day dragged on, and hope was waning. Where there were thousands of people in the morning, only a few hundred remained by the evening.

And so, my family stayed and continued to wait.

Around 2:00 in the morning, a bus arrived at the airport and everyone was swiftly ushered on board. The bus drove out past the bombed runway before parking. Stepping out, Dad remembers the night being eerily calm. The sky was pitch black, a slight breeze blew, and it felt like everyone was holding their breath. Suddenly, a burst of flashing lights lit up the sky and the sound of engines tore through the silence, revealing a fleet of 12 cargo planes.

The planes touched down, propellers still going full speed. As the doors dropped open, everything turned into a frenzy as people scrambled on board. Ông Nội told the boys to just run and get on by any means—he and Bà Nội had three girls to watch out for.

Picture a cargo plane with no seating. Just a vast, empty space with cold metal floors, where people squeezed and packed in like sardines. Onboarding everyone must have only lasted a few minutes and as soon as the last person got on, boom—the pilot revved engine and the plane soared off, the door still half open. Dad vividly recalls the sharp staccato of machine gun fire, bullets clanging against the body of the plane. Soldiers were positioned at the entrance, shouting orders and commanding everyone to lower their heads. The plane ascended to the sky and the doors finally sealed shut. And everything went silent.

My family left April 29, 1975.

On April 30, Saigon fell.

After Saigon Fell—Mom

Mom stayed after the fall of Saigon. Her dad, my Ông Ngoại³, was a marshal for the South Vietnamese Army.

When the Viet Cong came, they declared that all government and military personnel would have to attend a re-education camp. They promised that soldiers would have to attend for only 10 days, and higher-ranking officials a month.

³ Vietnamese for maternal grandfather

Ông Ngộai spent the next four years in these “re-education” camps.

Mom recalls only being able to visit him for 15 minutes a year. They visited him in a warehouse, alongside other families, always under the watchful eyes of Viet Cong soldiers. Ông Ngộai wore shackles around his ankles, a cruel reminder of his captivity. When you only have 15 minutes to see your dad, there isn’t much to say. Words are inadequate. There are just emotions. Lots of hugging and crying.

Ông Ngộai’s health eroded with the passing years. Once a big, strong man, he became a frail shadow of his former self.

Mom was twelve when they received a letter bearing the news of Ông Ngộai’s death.

It is estimated that between 200,000 to 300,000 people were imprisoned in these camps, where they were forced to endure intensive labor, starved, beaten, tortured, and killed⁴.

My Ông Ngộai is not here today to tell the story. But many survivors of the camps have come out to speak about their experiences, including Hien Van Le who served as the Head of Military Intelligence of the South Vietnamese Marine Corps and spent 21 years in these prison camps: “The Communist government were not going to kill hundreds and hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers. They wanted to kill us slowly...We had to do hard labor, hard labor every single day for many hours. What did we have for breakfast? Corn. I counted 90 kernels for breakfast.”⁵

The Viet Cong denied my family the opportunity to bid Ông Ngộai a proper farewell, only offering the number that marked his grave. After many years, Bà Ngộai ⁶ eventually went back and found his grave. Everything was still preserved in a plastic bag—his comb, his toothbrush, his bones...except there was no skull. This void still remains a haunting thought. She cremated what was left and placed him in a temple.

With Ông Ngộai now gone, Bà Ngộai decided it was time to leave Saigon—they had only waited for his potential release. But now, Saigon had nothing left for them.

During this period, the oversight on entries and exits to and from the country had become increasingly stringent, if not outright prohibited to the general public. Through family friends and connections (specifically Ông Ngộai’s best friend), Bà Ngộai caught word that a group of people were attempting to pool together enough money to buy a boat and escape Vietnam. She paid five gold bars to secure my family a place on that boat.

In the quiet of the night, disguised as beggars in old rags, Bà Ngộai left with Mom and Mom’s younger sister. Already, their journey was laden with risks. The consequences of getting caught were severe—they would be charged with treason. And treason meant imprisonment, if not death. Mom recalls a stricken fishing boat. They were swiftly guided inside, cramming into the underside of the boat with about 30 other people.

Mom describes the bottom of the boat as so dark you couldn’t see your hands in front of your face. People were packed in so tightly that it was difficult to draw a breath, movement being a luxury rarely afforded. All you could hear were the sounds of people retching and vomiting on one another, the air heavy with the acrid stench.

The boat set sail into the open ocean; its course directed toward the shores of Indonesia. In total, the boat sailed about the span of a week. On the fifth night, they encountered Thai pirates. There are

⁴ Porter, Gareth, and James Roberts, “Creating a Bloodbath by Statistical Manipulation: A Review of A Methodology for Estimating Political Executions in Vietnam”.

⁵ Van Le, Hien. “South Vietnamese Veteran Describes Experience in Re-Education Camp After the Fall of Saigon.”

⁶ Vietnamese for maternal grandmother

many accounts detailing the harrowing experiences of theft, rape, abduction, and even murder endured by Vietnamese boat people at the hands of Thai pirates.

But Mom was lucky. The pirates who boarded their boat were solely interested in extracting gold and valuables. She vividly recalls one of them probing into her pants, searching for hidden gold. Other than that, no one was harmed.

The next morning, they were rescued by a Norwegian oil ship. The ship brought them aboard and provided the refugees with food and water before sailing them to a remote island in Indonesia.

Mom doesn't remember much from this time, other than the fact that the island was completely empty, a couple and their son being the only other people on the island. They stayed on this island for two weeks before the Norwegian ship came back and brought them to Galang Island. Mom's boat was the first wave of the refugees to be admitted into Galang. From 1979 to 1996, it is estimated that about 250,000 refugees passed through Galang⁷.

They stayed in army warehouses for six months, living off canned foods donated by American organizations like Red Cross and UNICEF. Eventually, our family was given priority for resettlement in the states, as Ông Ngõai had served in the South Vietnamese Army. They were soon headed to Garland, Texas.

Heading to America—Dad

The cargo plane touched down in the Philippines at dawn. Weary from the journey, everyone descended off of the plane and the GIs handed out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Dad remembers the taste being very distinct. Thick, sweet, and strange, Dad asked Bà Nội what it was. She responded that this was true American butter.

There are three military waypoints between the Philippines and Hawaii: Guam Island, Wake Island, and Midway Island. While most refugees went to Guam, the sheer influx of people led my family to Wake Island.

Dad recounts Wake Island being like paradise. He and his brothers enjoyed going to the chow hall, where they were fed 3 square American meals a day. They spent about three weeks on the island.

Eventually, they made their way to Hawaii, and from Hawaii to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

Fort Chaffee was a Vietnamese refugee camp that opened May 2, 1975. Within 22 days, there were 25,812 refugees⁸. My family was a part of this initial wave.

Fort Chaffee became a temporary home as thousands of families anticipated sponsorships from churches, organizations, and charitable individuals. Dad remembers watching nightly screenings of American movies at the camp, and while he and his siblings didn't know a word of English, they thoroughly enjoyed it. Dad also remembers being gifted a football from one of the toy drives. He and his brothers played with it, kicking it around like a soccer ball. But the ball bounced oddly, going off in wonky directions every time they tried to kick it. Dad assumed it was broken and tossed the ball aside.

With two adults and six kids who were too young to work, finding a willing sponsor was no easy task, as no one wanted to take on a family of that size. However, an Oklahoma farming family reached out with an offer; they agreed to provide our family with food and housing in exchange for working on their farm. But Bà Nội declined. While most families were desperate to get out and took whatever sponsorships

⁷ Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation, "Pulau Galang Refugee Camp."

⁸ Wiggins, Melanie Spears. "Escape to America: Evacuees from Indochina arrive in Fort Smith-1975-1979."

they could get, Bà Nội was determined to go to a big city with a university. Even then, she understood that education was the only way out of poverty.

And so my family stayed a total of three months, which was longer than most other families. Finally, a Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio agreed to sponsor them. The journey from the camp to Columbus marks a significant transition in our family's history. From here, they began building a new life on new soil.

Life in the States—Mom

When they arrived in Garland, my mom's family was placed in government housing. The community comprised of not only Vietnamese residents, but people from diverse backgrounds and cultures who had been relocated for various reasons.

Bà Ngõai found employment at Sunbar, a phone manufacturing company. She worked in the factory assembly line from the hours of 5:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. putting together circuit boards. But getting paid two dollars an hour wasn't nearly enough to take care of herself and two young girls. So, she picked up a second job at Jack in the Box from 5:00 p.m. to midnight. This was her schedule seven days a week.

During the 1980s, public sentiment towards Vietnamese refugees was often unwelcoming. Bà Ngõai shared her experiences of people being terribly mean to her, such as spitting at her when she walked past. But these attitudes were not uncommon at the time, as shown in a New York Times article capturing sentiments and quotes from everyday Americans that reflected a less-than-positive view of the Vietnamese:

“They are a burden on this society.”

“They are out of their environment. They can't speak English, and they will be on welfare before they get off the plane.”

“It's a hard world everywhere...Keep the Vietnamese in Vietnam.”⁹

But it wasn't just local Americans. Even other Vietnamese refugees scorned her because she was widowed and alone. Especially in older generations, patriarchy runs strong in Vietnamese culture, and a woman without a man is looked down upon. Too poor to afford a car, Bà Ngõai often begged the next-door neighbor if she could carpool with her to work (as they both worked at Sunbar) and Bà Ngõai always compensated her for gas money. But on occasion, the next-door lady would take Bà Ngõai to work, only to refuse her a ride home just to humiliate her.

Since Bà Ngõai was always working and could barely afford to care for her, Mom was enrolled into a Baptist children's home throughout middle and high school. Mom doesn't remember much from the children's home, only that she constantly studied because she was told that was the way to a better future. She graduated high school with straight A's and earned a full ride to the University of Texas, Austin, where she enrolled in pharmacy school.

Life in the States—Dad

Dad started kindergarten in Columbus. On his first day, Ông Nội told him that whatever American kids say, to just smile and say two things: “hello” and “thank you.” Dad and his siblings had no problems assimilating and received help from American students and church volunteers who tutored them. Within a month, Dad and his siblings were all speaking English. Despite Columbus being a predominantly white community, the people from church and school embraced my family with open arms. Dad credits our

⁹ Kneeland, “Wide Hostility Found to Vietnamese Influx”

family's success to the goodness of the people they met.

Bà Nội spent the first three years at home while Ông Nội worked at a farm. Every day, he would bike five miles to the farm and five miles back. Eventually, he saved enough money for a car. With that car, he found a job at a welding company downtown. It wasn't a fancy car; in fact, it was a beat-up Station Wagon in pretty bad shape. But Ông Nội drove it with a sense of pride—he finally owned a true American car.

While washing his laundry, Bà Nội would often notice holes in many of Ông Nội's shirts, places where embers from welding had singed through his shirt and to his skin. When asked about it, he told her that he traded his flesh for freedom. He still bears the scars to this day.

As Dad's sisters reached schooling age, Ông Nội transitioned to a factory job, manufacturing parts for B1B bombers, with Bà Nội joining him. Despite well-intentioned offers from church members to help them secure welfare, both of my grandparents staunchly declined, asserting that welfare was for those in need. They insisted that they could work and earn their own way. Dad vividly remembers the sight of Bà Nội's hands after a day's labor—blue and bruised. He says that image of her worn hands fueled his motivation to succeed in school.

Dad continued schooling through the American education system and landed a scholarship to Ohio State University, where he earned a bachelor's in aerospace engineering. He later pursued masters in both mechanical engineering and computer science.

Today—Me

Being Asian American, there's a lot of grappling with mixed identities, especially growing up in a predominantly white community. There's a desire to assimilate, but it's near impossible to do when you are not like everyone else. However, even within the Asian American diaspora, there's another aspect to embracing being Vietnamese American. Unlike other Asian countries like Korea, Japan, and China, Vietnam isn't necessarily cool in the mainstream. Vietnam isn't known for its high-quality cuisine, savvy dance groups, or cutting-edge technology.

In fact, it's quite the opposite. It's the third-world country that you have to get vaccinated before you go to, you must be wary of traveler's diarrhea from the food, and here in the states, there's a running joke that we're "jungle Asians." For a long time, while it wasn't quite embarrassment, being Vietnamese wasn't necessarily a source of pride for me.

But thinking about it, it hasn't even been 50 years since the end of the Vietnam War. And since then, my grandparents witnessed a war devastate their home, fled to a foreign country, and built a new life. My parents struggled through poverty, attained an education, and went from "rags to riches." It's nothing short of admirable, and it's humbling to absorb this history as a part of my own identity. My family's story is a rich one and even still, there are treasures I have yet to uncover.

Today, I feel a deep sense of pride in being Vietnamese. The collective tale of the Vietnamese people is vast and deep and is still fresh with raw emotion—my own family's being only a sliver of a greater whole. Like the lotus flower that closes and sinks each evening, we are a people whose journey has been marked by many long and dark nights. And yet, just like the lotus flower that rises untouched by the mud and blooms every dawn, we are a people characterized by our vibrant spirit and unwavering resilience.

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