

One boat with 110 passengers escaped from Vietnam

After 37 days of drifting, only 52 survived

This is their story



WINNER OF 2 REGIONAL EMMY® AWARDS

OUTSTANDING DOCUMENTARY

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2009

BOLINAO 52

A documentary by Duc Nguyen

DISCUSSION GUIDE

bolinao52.com

KTEH



CENTER FOR
ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA

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The Filmmaker's Statement

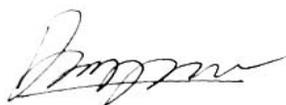
In many ways, retelling the Bolinao 52 incident is part of the journey to find myself. This journey began in April 1980 when we left the shores of Vietnam. After five years living under the new communist government, my family had no choice but to leave. We lost our home, our way of living and our identity. After many failed attempts, and even a period in detention, we braved the seas to find a new home. Very similar to the Bolinao 52, our small wooden boat took 107 people across the South China Sea. Putting our lives at risk, we could have been swallowed by the ocean. However, our boat was eventually rescued by the USS *Long Beach* of the U.S. Navy on April 29, 1980. For a long time I thought it was luck that saved us, but later I realized that the rescue of our boat was not simply chance.

The story of the Bolinao 52 is one of those horror stories that has haunted me most of my adult life. What if our boat had suffered the same fate? What if our boat had not encountered the USS *Long Beach*? What if we had run out of food and water? The question that remains with me was, "WHY?" Why were we rescued, but not the Bolinao 52? The horrifying ordeal that the Bolinao 52 endured was always a taboo topic among the boat people community. We could never talk about it. If we did, we made light of it. But this darkness troubled me deeply and I felt driven to find out what was it like to be in the shoes of a survivor.

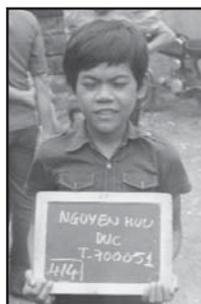
In the summer of 2002, I started to search for my subjects. For two years, I had no luck finding any of them. In the meantime, I met Bill Cloonan, a Chief Petty Officer on the USS *Dubuque* when the U.S. Navy ship came across the Bolinao 52. He had been deeply disturbed by what had happened, and the interview with him strengthened my resolve to search for the Bolinao 52 survivors, since it was also his wish to see them again. In 2004, I refocused my search and came to Orange County, California, to enlist the help of the Vietnamese American media. We conducted a radio interview with a Vietnamese language station in Little Saigon, Westminster, California, and after the broadcast a woman called and told me about the whereabouts of one of the survivors. I contacted the number she gave me, but was repeatedly denied an interview by the man on the other line. Finally, I convinced him to meet with me for coffee. When we met, I realized that this was Xuan Trinh, the man who swam over to the USS *Dubuque* during the encounter, only to be shaken off when he climbed on the monkey line. He appeared in the *60 Minutes* program when Diane Sawyer interviewed Captain Alex Balian before his trial. Xuan wouldn't grant me an interview because he wanted to forget the terrible ordeal. But he told me that his sister might be interested. About a month later, his younger sister Tung Trinh called me. She acknowledged that she and her son were on that boat with Xuan and his son. In November 2004, I finally sat down face-to-face with one of the Bolinao 52 survivors.

Tung remembered the ordeal vividly. Her candid and emotional interview boosted the project forward. Her one wish was to return to Bolinao, to find her rescuers and thank them for saving her life. In July 2005, we packed our bags and headed to Asia for the final stage of the production. On the way to the Philippines, we stopped in Japan to visit Tung's son, Lam Phan, who was 21 years old at the time and stationed in Okinawa as a U.S. Marine. While in Japan, we met up with Bill Cloonan, the witness on the USS *Dubuque*. The meeting was cathartic for both of them, allowing them to express feelings that had troubled them deeply for so long. What followed is in the film.

In making this journey, I learned valuable lessons from those who shared their stories with me. It was an experience that validated my identity as a Vietnamese boat person. But the most important lesson I learned from this journey was about life. In Tung Trinh's words: "You can do anything if you are alive."



Duc H. Nguyen



Film Synopsis

Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, millions of refugees took the perilous voyage across the South China Sea to find freedom. Many drowned or died of thirst and starvation. Some were lost at sea for days while others were pillaged, robbed and raped by pirates. More than thirty years later, filmmaker Duc Nguyen, himself a boat refugee, retraces the odyssey of the Bolinao 52 and reveals an incredible tale of survival, reconciliation and closure.

One hundred and ten refugees boarded a crowded boat one night in May 1988. Soon after leaving Vietnam, the boat's engine died. They were ignored by over 20 passing ships. Nineteen days later, the USS *Dubuque* stopped, but the ship's captain refused to pick up the dying refugees. Facing death, they resorted to cannibalism. After 37 days at sea, only 52 people survived. Finally, humble fishermen rescued and brought them to a town called Bolinao, Philippines. 17 years later, a survivor came forward with her side of the Bolinao 52 story.

Main Characters in the Film

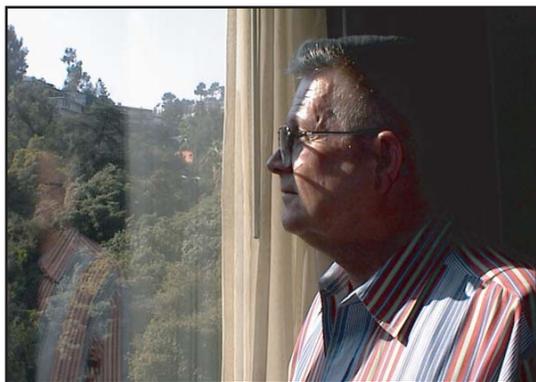


Tung Trinh, Bolinao 52 survivor

Tung Trinh resettled in California in 1990 after spending two years in a refugee camp in the Philippines following her harrowing escape. She yearned to return to the town of Bolinao to find her rescuers. Today Trinh works as a hair stylist, a profession she's held since coming to the United States.

Lam Phan, Tung Trinh's son

Lam was only five years old when his mother took him on a fateful trip. He does not remember much of the trip but is happy that he and his family survived. Lam served in the U.S. Marines.



William E. Cloonan, U.S. Navy (Retired), Eyewitness

Cloonan served as a Chief Petty Officer aboard the USS *Dubuque* when it encountered the Bolinao 52 in 1988. Cloonan had been involved with two other rescues of Vietnamese boat people before the Bolinao 52 affair. The incident left Cloonan with deep guilt, but he was glad to meet with survivor Tung Trinh. Cloonan currently lives in Japan.



Carlos Cagusaan, Bolinao 52 rescuer

While fishing along the coast of the Philippines in 1988, Carlos "Caloy" Cagusaan and his friend found the Bolinao 52. They took turns rescuing the survivors and brought them to the town of Bolinao. Today, Cagusaan still lives in the hut on the shores of Bolinao where he has been living since 1981.

Historical Background

At end of the Vietnam War following the fall of Saigon in 1975, waves of refugees fled communist controlled Vietnam fearing the "reeducation camps," "new economic zones" and other forms of reprisal from the new communist government. They escaped en masse in dangerous and crudely constructed boats, braving the dangers of the high seas and raids from pirates who preyed on the refugees, only to be turned away by governments that would not allow them to land. It is estimated that half of those who fled died during these horrific voyages. Lost at sea for days, drowning or dying of hunger and fatigue, they were exposed to pillage, rape, torture and killing on an unprecedented scale. Some were even captured and enslaved.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, they became commonly known as "boat people," their plight becoming a humanitarian issue of international concern. In July 1979, President Carter increased the refugees monthly quota and instructed the U.S. *Seventh Fleet* to aid the Vietnamese boat people and to assist them to safety, and U.S. Navy aircrafts and surface units of the *Seventh Fleet* stepped up rescue efforts.

By the late 1980s, the involvement of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf began to slow down the rescue operation. However, the Vietnamese boat people continued to take to the sea as their preferred escape route. As the refugee camps in surrounding countries became overcrowded, their governments became impatient with the influx of unwanted people. Officials of the countries embarked upon an effort to refuse asylum and to, in effect, push the boat people back into the sea.

In 1989, at the *2nd International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees* held in Geneva, the *Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA)* program was adopted. Under the *Plan*, any Southeast Asian refugee who arrived to a first asylum country after the cutoff date would not be granted automatic asylum status. Instead, they would have to go through a rigorous screening process. Those who were screened out would be sent back to their countries of origin to reapply for asylum again through the *Orderly Departure Program (ODP)*.

Glossary of Terms

Boat people

At the end of the Vietnam War, after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, thousands of refugees escaped from Vietnam, fleeing by sea in small, unsafe and poorly equipped boats. Many did not survive the journey, starving, dying of thirst or drowning at sea.

New Economic Zones

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the new communist government introduced this population resettlement program to relieve congestion in cities, ostensibly to increase food production and also to gentrify the city's population with a new class of cadres from the North. The internees undertook agricultural work involving hard physical labor, which they were unused to as city dwellers. They were also forced to attend political indoctrination classes.

Fall of Saigon

In 1975, the capture of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, by the North Vietnamese marked the end of the Vietnam War and unification of the country under communist rule.

Reeducation camps

Extended from the North to the South by the communist victors after the fall of Saigon, the new government imprisoned tens of thousands of former South Vietnamese military personnel, officers and government workers, and people thought to be allies of the former anti-communist government. Reeducation involved reforming counter-revolutionaries and training them through hard labor to be rehabilitated into the new social order.

Refugee

According to the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, a refugee is a person who flees to a foreign country to escape danger or persecution. While seeking recognition as a refugee, such a person is termed an "asylum-seeker."

TIMELINE: HISTORY OF VIETNAM & VIETNAMESE REFUGEES 1975 - 2005

1975

 North Vietnam launches a major military offensive and ends the civil war. Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, falls, captured on April 30, a date that has been commemorated as "Black April" by the Vietnamese refugee community overseas. The new communist regime rounds up senior government officials, military personnel and civilians that had ties to the South Vietnamese government or the U.S. public or private agencies. Sent to reeducation camps, they are "reeducated" in communist ideology and forced into hard labor. Intellectuals, writers, religious leaders and leaders of ethnic minority groups are detained in reeducation camps for several years, some for as long as 17 years. President Gerald Ford signs the *Indochina Migration and Refugee Act*, admitting 130,000 Southeast Asian refugees into the U.S. Almost 120,000 are Vietnamese, the rest Cambodians. They are sent to relocation camps at military bases in the U.S.

1976

 Saigon, capital of the Republic of Vietnam, is renamed Ho Chi Minh City, commemorating the father of Vietnamese communism, and becomes the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Party Congress calls for rapid socialization in the economy, mass relocation of people and collectivization of agriculture, industry and commerce. This leads to new waves of refugees.

1977

 The U.S. continues its embargo on Vietnam, which becomes isolated from most of the non-communist world – limiting aid and investment. Vietnamese continue to flee to other Southeast Asian countries at about 2,000 refugees per month, starting the "Second Wave" of Vietnamese refugees.

1979

 Vietnamese refugees increase dramatically, from 19,200 in October 1978 to more than 65,000 in May 1979. Some escape Vietnam traveling by land north through China or west through Cambodia to Thai border camps. Others escape by boat to Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia or Hong Kong. Refugees leaving by sea become known as the "boat people." Five Southeast Asian nations issue a warning that they will not accept any new refugees. Boat interdiction and push-backs become routine along the coasts of Malaysia and Thailand, killing several thousands of boat people. An international conference is hurriedly convened in Geneva in June 1979 and the first asylum crisis is relieved with the U.S. and other resettlement countries' promise to increase refugee admission numbers. President Jimmy Carter announces his decision to take 14,000 refugees per month and orders the U.S. Navy to help vessels in distress in the South China Sea.

1980

President Jimmy Carter signs the *Refugee Act of 1980*, creates the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and sets the refugee admission ceiling at 168,000 per year. It allows a refugee to become a permanent resident after 1 year, and after 4 more years, to become a U.S. citizen. Although the refugee arrivals decline, the exodus continues and the human cost is immense. A great number of boat people (between 250,000 to 500,000) perish during their journey. Thousands fall victim to Thai pirate attacks. Many refugee women are raped and/or abducted to be forced into prostitution. To make matters worse, Western countries begin to show "compassion fatigue," and many policy-makers start calling boat people economic migrants. Resettlement numbers do not match the rates of new arrivals in first asylum countries. As a result, by the late 1980s, a new and more serious refugee crisis is looming. Malaysia and Thailand resume their push-backs of new boat arrivals more rigorously.

1981

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) is formed in Washington, D.C., to provide services and resources to the Vietnamese refugee population in the United States.

1983

The U.S. has received a total of 678,057 refugees from Southeast Asia, and almost two-thirds of these refugees entered the U.S. between 1979-82, during the period of the refugee crisis. Vietnamese refugees accounted for about two-thirds of all Southeast Asian refugees in United States.

1987

Congress passes the *Amerasian Homecoming Act*, to resettle Amerasians, the children of American servicemen and Vietnamese women, in the U.S. Amerasian children face severe social and economic discrimination in Vietnam. About 75,000 Amerasians and family members come to the U.S. under this Act.

1989

On July 30, Vietnam and the U.S. sign an agreement on the resettlement of former reeducation detainees, officially called the *Humanitarian Operation (H.O.) program*. The *Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA)* adopted in Geneva in June 1989, closes refugee camps in Southeast Asia and repatriates Vietnamese refugees. Asylum-seekers from Vietnam now must be screened for refugee status. Many are deemed economic migrants, not refugees. Over the next 10 years, 110,000 people are forced to return to Vietnam.

1995-2005

Although all first asylum camps were closed in 1995, more than 2,000 Vietnamese refugees from the Philippines refuse to be repatriated to Vietnam. They scatter throughout the island and fend for themselves without any civil rights until U.S. officials revisit their cases in 2005. By the end of 2005 and early 2006, the U.S. accepts 1,600 of these refugees and their resettlement is completed in 2007. Thanks to last-ditch lobbying efforts and the commitment of the overseas Vietnamese community, some of the remaining refugees are accepted by European countries and the rest by Canada.

How to use this discussion guide

Screening *Bolinao 52* offers opportunities to engage individuals and communities in a variety of ways and settings. The personal stories in the film can be used to explore the following themes:

- ❖ The Vietnamese American experience – especially through the personal stories of refugees
- ❖ The experience of displacement and resettlement
- ❖ The formidable ordeal of boat people and the struggles they endured physically and psychologically
- ❖ The principles of asylum and international responsibility
- ❖ The history of Vietnam and the upheavals in Indochina after the fall of Saigon
- ❖ Refugee resettlement and community-building
- ❖ The role of international communities in building peace, refugee treatment and durable solutions dealing with the root cause of refugees

The DVD chapters and discussion prompts can help to focus discussion around these themes. In addition, key words and topics are identified for each DVD chapter. Relevant subjects are indicated to suggest contexts for viewing the film within programs of study. Finally the glossary offers a resource, providing explanation of terms and historical references.

Suggestions to help you plan your event:

1. Goals/Focus

Be clear about goals, i.e., what are you hoping to achieve? This will help determine the key issues to be addressed and clarify the structure of the event, whether this is to be a large screening event or involve a smaller, more focused dialogue.

2. Target audience

With clear goals in mind, who do you want to reach and involve in this discussion? Think about interested parties or allies who may also be drawn into the discussion and offer different perspectives, a broader context, support, speakers, panelists or even sponsorship. Clarifying these questions will help target promotion and publicity efforts.

3. Partners

Goals will shape the choice of partner organization(s). Partner with organizations that represent/advocate for the communities under discussion. They offer expertise and maybe different perspectives, whether generational or cultural. Involve partners in the event planning – they can help with outreach, promotion, publicity and with finding panelists and speakers.

4. Panels

Draw the panel from practitioners who are experts or work in the field portrayed in the film, and if possible, include the voices of the community(ies) represented; for example, "experts," "academics" and speakers that articulate the voices of stakeholders. Plan for diversity of representation on the panel in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation and encourage intergenerational perspectives where possible. It makes a difference.

5. Moderator

Enlist a moderator or facilitator to manage the program, keep time and ensure the audience has sufficient time to ask questions, comment and contribute to the discussion. It is their event after all. The moderator also needs to make sure people feel respected and comfortable sharing their feelings. Establishing ground rules at the start can help with this.

6. Engagement or planning for action

Allow time to plan action, whether future discussions or campaigning events, and to provide opportunities for information sharing, such as resources, contact details and networks. A sign-in sheet at the door can help with sharing e-mail addresses and contact information.

Potential Partners

❖ **Health practitioners**

To promote cultural competency, i.e., understanding of the immigrant experience through the personal stories of their clients/patients, is important for health practitioners. The film can illuminate the psychological trauma refugees with similar histories may have suffered, or explain the culture shock many refugees have experienced or continue to face.

❖ **High school and college departments of U.S. History, Political Science, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, World Literature, Multicultural Education, International Policy, Social History**

The film can offer understanding of the history of the Vietnam War and the aftermath in terms of the tremendous upheaval and displacement of millions of refugees from Indochina. Through the personal stories of refugees and Vietnamese Americans, this history becomes lived experience.

❖ **Community-based organizations; for example, refugee organizations**

Provide support for refugees through fostering understanding and empathy. For Vietnamese Americans, understanding history is important inter-generationally and between diverse communities. It is central to building connections and community.

❖ **Peace and social justice organizations**

The film illuminates the suffering of people displaced by war and raises questions about humanitarian and international responsibility.

❖ **Interfaith groups**

Screening the film supports congregations through community-building, and inspires compassion and peace.

❖ **NGOs and policy-makers**

This film can be used as a tool for study and research in policy-shaping around immigration law or refugee aid.

Example:

We incorporated the theme- **Remembrance, Reconciliation and Healing**, in a screening and panel discussion event at the Bowers Museum on April 26, 2009. The goal was to promote the use of the film as an educational tool for mental health professionals and educators' teaching and training curriculums. We targeted the Vietnamese community in Orange County, Southern California as the main audience, along with museum members. Partnering with the Bowers Museum, we structured the event into an outreach program to encourage reconciliation through remembrance. A panel discussion followed the screening with the participation of Dr. Mai-Phuong Nguyen, former co-chair person for Project Ngoc, an advocate group for refugee rights in (in the late 80s), and current medical physician, Dr. Suzie Dong-Matsuda, a clinical psychologist and Behavioral Health service chief for Orange County Health Care Agency, and filmmaker Duc Nguyen.

During the discussion period, we were able to stress the importance of grieving collectively in the process of healing. The event features an in-depth discussion and provides an opportunity for the audience to express their own ties to the boat people experience.

The event generated a healthy discussion among the Vietnamese American media long after the evening ended, as several newspapers and radio stations featured the film in their programs.

DVD Chapters

Chapter 1. Vietnamese Boat People (7:13min)

Video description

The clip opens with Tung Trinh, a Bolinao 52 survivor, floating candles in the water in Bolinao, Philippines. She is commemorating 58 companions who escaped with her from Vietnam in 1988, and died in the terrifying journey at sea. The opening title depicts a montage of images from the Vietnam War. We follow Tung as she revisits different locations from her past, such as the hospital which treated her when she was rescued after 37 days at sea. We feel her distress, and glimpse the horrors of her ordeal through a montage of images of Vietnamese boat people. We meet Duc Nguyen, the filmmaker, who was also a boat person but was lucky to be rescued after 4 days at sea. He feels it is important to understand and tell her story.

Discussion prompts

- ❖ Have you heard of the Vietnamese boat people? Who were they? Why did they seek to escape? What obstacles did they encounter?
- ❖ Do you personally know refugees from Vietnam? Have you talked to them about their histories? Do you know refugees from other parts of the world? From where?
- ❖ Why was there controversy about these refugees? Do refugees today generate controversy?
- ❖ Is it important to remember the refugees who fled Vietnam and the trials they endured? Why? Discuss the importance of knowing about these historical experiences.
- ❖ Have you heard of the “re-education camps”? What was their purpose? Do you know of other examples of social education endeavors like this in history?
- ❖ What lessons do you take from seeing this film? How can the film or DVD chapters be used with students, young people, professional health workers, social workers, etc?

Keywords and Terms: New Economic Zones, Reeducation Camps, Fall of Saigon, Vietnam War

Themes: refugees/asylum seekers, displacement, human rights, international responsibility

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, World Literature, Multicultural Education, International Policy, Social History

Chapter 2. Leaving Viet Nam (7:12min)

Video description

As Duc enters Tung’s house, she tells her story. She talks about her family’s background and the reasons why she left Vietnam, describing the boat trip and how the engine died at the beginning of the journey. Ships saw the refugees, but passed them by, even abandoning the five men, who at one point swam to a Japanese ship. Duc describes the mental strength that a refugee needs to survive. Tung reflects on fate, a recurring theme in this film, since most Asian cultures strongly believe in fate. Duc also talks of fate as he explains that his boat was rescued by a U.S. Navy ship after only a few days at sea. The clip introduces the U.S. Navy’s role in rescuing boat people.

Discussion prompts

- ❖ Tung offers her personal story in this film. Why did she leave Vietnam? Does her story help explain how people become refugees and why they leave their homes? Does it help you to understand what it may be like to be a refugee - to lose everything and be separated from friends and family?
- ❖ “For a refugee staying strong mentally was as important as staying strong physically.” Reflect on the demands of the journey in terms of the risks, the fear and suffering. Does the film offer a deeper understanding of the ordeals the refugees faced?
- ❖ Loss and abandonment are central themes in the film. These traumas have been experienced by different waves of immigrants from all over the world – do you know people who have been displaced in this way?

- ❖ How can knowing this history help professionals, such as teachers or mental health practitioners, support their students or clients? For example, how can an understanding of this history impact a teacher’s pedagogical practice?
- ❖ Are there questions you would have liked to ask Tung or any of the people in the film?
- ❖ The film introduces fate as an important belief in Asian culture. “Everyone has their own fate.” Discuss this view of life.
- ❖ Talk about what it means to have an uncertain future. Do you agree “Hope is a provision for survival”?

Key Phrases: “Hope is provision for survival.” “Everyone has their own fate.”

Themes: hope, fear, fate, abandonment, loss, rejection

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, World Literature, Multicultural Education, International Policy, Social History

Chapter 3. The U.S. Navy and Vietnamese boat people

Video description

We are introduced to the U.S. Navy and Bill Cloonan, who explains that he was with the U.S. Navy for 26 years, and served on two ships that rescued Vietnamese refugees. Tung talks about her fears of death and how she thought her prayers had been answered when the *USS Dubuque* approached. Bill Cloonan tries to explain his thoughts and feelings as Tung recalls the incident.

Discussion prompts

- ❖ What was the U.S. Navy doing in the South China Sea in the 1980s?
- ❖ What was the humanitarian role of the U.S. Navy after the Vietnam War?
- ❖ Can you understand the U.S. military personnel’s perspective in this incident? Can you understand Captain Balian’s action in relation to the refugees? Why did he refuse to rescue them? What options did he have?
- ❖ Discuss Bill Cloonan’s feeling about the Captain’s decision and his actions.
- ❖ What emotions did you feel as you watched Bill Cloonan? Do you judge him?
- ❖ “It’s your soul. It’s your moral obligation to pick them up.” Explore Bill Cloonan’s words. Does moral obligation conflict with a military officer’s obligation in time of war?
- ❖ Is it appropriate to make moral judgments in history? Why is it easier to judge in hindsight?
- ❖ America has historically offered a safe haven for refugees. Under the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, refugees have a right to protection. Under what circumstances should a country have the right to turn away refugees? Should the *1951 Convention* always prevail?

Key Phrases: “It’s international law. People at sea, if something befalls them negatively, it’s your soul, it’s your moral obligation, to pick them up.”

Themes: humanity, international law, maritime law, obligation and moral conscience

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, Government and Politics, International Policy, Social History.

Chapter 4. Compassion Fatigue (4:07min)

Video description

Duc uses the term *compassion fatigue* to represent the waning compassion of the international community toward the Southeast Asian refugee problem. We meet Lam, Tung’s son, now a U.S. Marine, who talks of his distant memories and feelings about the trip. Tung describes her suffering during the journey, the lack of food and water and especially the terrible thirst which compelled her to drink her son’s urine to survive.

Discussion prompts

- ❖ Discuss the compassion fatigue of the international communities. Is this understandable?
- ❖ What was the *UNHCR Comprehensive Action Plan in 1989* and how did it impact the refugees?
- ❖ Tung drinks her son's urine, giving him the little water they had. She sacrificed herself for her son. Explore the notion of "surviving by any means necessary."
- ❖ Lam describes his personal process in thinking about his history. How do you respond to his reflections and sense of identity?
- ❖ Throughout history, different countries, such as the U.K. and America, have accepted immigrants and refugees, allowing them to seek asylum. Is this an obligation or only permissible in certain circumstances?
- ❖ Were the boat people of Vietnam entitled to refuge?
- ❖ Is it important to be informed about human rights issues and controversies? Why or why not?

Key Phrases: "While the compassionate arms of the international community had helped my family and other boat people, they stopped reaching out for refugees when the compassion fatigue set in."

Themes: survival, sacrifice, compassion, humanity

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, Government and Politics, International Law, Immigration Law, Social History

Chapter 5. Survival (6:08min)

Video description

Tung describes the desperation of starvation and the arduous bailing of water to save the boat from sinking. She explains that one of the refugees, Minh, took charge of the food and everyone had to bail water to receive food rations. Duc gently asks Tung about cannibalism, and with great difficulty she describes how it happened. He also asks her about news reports that killing had taken place on the boat, and she denies seeing any such thing. She credits Minh for his efforts to take charge. We see a montage of photographs of boat people. The filmmaker poses questions about morality and choice, seeking to comprehend what choices the boat people had. Can we pass judgment on them?

Discussion prompts

- ❖ What is your response to Minh's actions? Is he a cannibal or a savior?
- ❖ Does he bear responsibility for transgressing a code, for taboo behavior?
- ❖ Explore the question of choice when faced with survival. Imagine what you would do in a situation like that.
- ❖ How does a traumatic event, such as resorting to cannibalism, affect a person?
- ❖ What lessons do you take from this chapter? How can this segment in the film be used with students, young people, professional health workers, social workers, etc?

Key Phrases: "As human beings, we use morality to make choices. But as boat people, what choices did we have?"

Themes: fate and choice

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, Government and Politics, International Policy, Social History, Human Rights, Psychology

Chapter 6. Returning (8:00min)

Video description

Tung describes being rescued by Philippine fishermen. We see a montage of the Bolinao 52 as Duc reflects on the lessons of the terrible journey, "Healing is not to hang on to old wounds, but to move on graciously." She explains her need to return to Bolinao and express her gratitude to the fishermen who rescued her and her companions. We witness Tung meeting up with Carlos, the fisherman who rescued her, and he describes the rescue scene. As Tung leaves Carlos, she repeats the phrase: "Each person has their own fate."

Discussion prompts

- ❖ What is significant about going back to Bolinao for Tung?
- ❖ What would offer closure for her? Can expressing feelings offer catharsis?
- ❖ What is your feeling as you watch the encounter between Tung and Carlos?
- ❖ Is the filmmaker making a point here? Could this be his journey too?
- ❖ Does the rescue counterbalance the actions of the U.S. Navy in offering a sense of hope for humanity?

Key Phrase: "Healing is not to hang on to old wounds, but it is to move on graciously."

Themes: closure, resolution, healing

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, World Literature, Multicultural Education, International Policy, Social History

Chapter 7. Reconciliation (7:54min)

Video description

Tung flies back to Japan. She talks about her disdain for the U.S. Navy, while Bill Cloonan explains his guilt about the incident. Tung agrees to meet Bill and both acknowledge that the meeting is necessary for healing. At the meeting, Tung asks Bill whether everyone felt the same way as the Captain. Bill explains his own feelings about the incident. Tung weeps. Then she, Bill and Lam embrace, signifying forgiveness and reconciliation.

Discussion prompts

- ❖ What does closure mean in the context of this film? Is it possible?
- ❖ How important is it for Tung and Bill to meet after all these years? How do you respond to the meeting between them and Tung's son, Lam? What emotions does Bill Cloonan evoke? Why do you think Tung asked Bill if his shipmates felt the same way as he did?
- ❖ U.S.- born Vietnamese, and those like Lam who arrived as infants or young children, may have no clear memory of Vietnam, the refugee camps or the ordeal of escaping by land or sea, but they will carry the imprint of their family history. How will this history affect them?
- ❖ What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant? Does it make a difference that Vietnamese youth are refugees, not immigrants? In what way?
- ❖ What are some of the challenges Vietnamese Americans face when assimilating into American culture?
- ❖ Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. have different histories, depending upon whether they are U.S.-born, escaped the country as refugees, lived in refugee camps, experienced reeducation camps in Vietnam, etc. Why is it important to know this as a teacher, a professional health worker or social worker?
- ❖ How may this knowledge inform professional practice?

Key Phrase: "People don't want to carry a guilty conscience. And maybe, after our meeting, his guilt will disappear."

Themes: forgiveness, closure, resolution, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD)

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, Government and Politics, International Policy, Social History, Human Rights, Psychology

Chapter 8. Epilogue (1:07min)

Video description

A closing montage explains the consequences of the Bolinao incident for Captain Balian, of the USS *Dubuque*, for Minh and Tung. Tung conducts a memorial ceremony in Bolinao to honor 58 companions who died at sea, and she explains that she hopes, in paying off her debt, she can move on to live a happy life. Text montage enumerates statistics of Vietnamese boat people refugees from 1975-1995. Half of those who escaped never made it to safety (exemplified by the 52/110 ratio in the case of this story).

Discussion prompts

- ❖ As a result of this incident, Captain Balian was court-martialed and Minh was not permitted to enter the U.S. Discuss these consequences for Captain Balian and for Minh. Are these outcomes just?
- ❖ Return to the key themes in this film – loss and separation, survival, morality and responsibility (both individual and international), memory and history, guilt and healing. What you will take away?
- ❖ Are there lessons to be learned from these discussions? Are they political, moral, or spiritual?
- ❖ Is it important to remember “When you eat the fruit, remember who planted the tree”? Why?

Key Phrases: “When you eat the fruit, remember who planted the tree.”

Themes: justice, judicial ruling, fairness, fate, appreciation

Subjects: U.S. History, World History, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, Government and Politics, International Policy, Social History, Human Rights, Psychology

Resources

WEB SITES

American Experience: Vietnam Online

History and timeline at <http://www.vietnamwar.com/warhistory.htm>
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/timeline/>

A Modern Day Exodus: Vietnamese Boat People History

<http://www.asian-nation.org/exodus.shtml>

UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency

<http://www.unhcr.org/publ.html>

Statistics, publications, research about refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons in more than 150 countries

The State of The World's Refugees 2000 - Chapter 4

<http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/3ebf9bad0.pdf>

Addresses Indochina – Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos - and the mass exodus of refugees from these countries after the fall of Saigon in 1975

Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center

<http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp>

See 'Vietnamese Americans' curriculum – includes a brief history, timelines, lessons plans and background on boat people

See Lesson 1 - The Boat People • Separation and Loss at

http://www.tolerance.org/teach/web/vietnamese/vac_pdfs/vac_lesson_1.pdf

This introductory lesson helps students explore and understand the many complex issues regarding refugees

Timelines at <http://www.tolerance.org/teach/web/vietnamese/timelines.jsp>

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Refused: The Agony of the Indochina Refugees, Simon & Schuster, Barry Wain, 1982.

Voices from the Camps: Vietnamese Children Seeking Asylum, Freeman, James M. and Nguyen Dinh Huu. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003.

Brother Enemy: A History of Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon, N Chanda, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986.

Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States, M. Zhou & C.L. Bankston, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998.

Sponsorship and Employment Status Among Indochinese Refugees in the United States, International Migration Review, T.V. Tran, 25.3. 1991.

Symptoms of War Trauma Induced Psychiatric Disorders: Southeast Asian Refugees & Vietnam Veterans, International Migration Review, T.V. Tran, 25.3, 1991.

The Boat People and Achievement in America: A Study of Family Life, Hard Work, and Cultural Values, N Caplan, J.K. Whitmore, & M.H. Choy, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989.

Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992, Nghia M. Vo, McFarland & Company, 2005.

Voices of Vietnamese Boat People: Nineteen Narratives of Escape and Survival, ed. Mary Terrell Cargill & Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh, McFarland & Company, 2001.