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Written on July 23, 2015 at 6:00 am by [svanderwerff](#)

[Across Oceans to Root Canals Pt. 1](#)

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By Naval Hospital Guam Public Affairs



Editor's Note: Editor's Note: Cmdr. Vinh Doan, director of dental services, Naval Hospital Guam describes his amazing escape from Vietnam and starting a new life with his family in the U.S.



Cmdr. Vinh Doan

In a world of make believe, a story filled with pirates, gun fire, stormy seas, and a mysterious submarine might make an exciting adventure, but in 1977, it was part of the real-life story of then, six-year old, Cmdr. Vinh Doan.

It began several years earlier when Doan's school teacher father was commissioned in the South Vietnamese Army to fight against nationalist forces fighting to unify Vietnam under communist rule. Unfortunately, the South eventually surrendered and the country was reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After the war military officers and educators were placed into re-education camps. It was supposed to be short-term, but ended up being much like a prison.

Doan's father, Con, was placed in the camps for two years. His wife Yen was left to care and support four young children on her own. After his release, Doan's father decided there was no real future for his children in Vietnam. He then began planning their escape. Con wasn't alone in his idea. Many professionals and intellectuals had already begun escaping from Vietnam. He and a few other like-minded individuals secretly met to hatch an escape plan. Because they couldn't buy a boat and just leave they pretended to sell fresh water and other goods, so people would get used to seeing them down near the bay.

On the night of their escape it was much like Paul Revere and his lantern. In the dark the group, including Doan and his family, waded several small boats and canoes out into the water. When they were far enough from land compatriots on a mother boat lit a lantern to signal it was safe to board. In a scene straight out of a movie, their escape came to life. Once the group was aboard the larger vessel they drifted out to sea until confident they were far enough to turn on the engine. When they turned on the engine, they heard voices in the distance yelling, 'escaping, escaping...' A patrol boat pursued, firing at them. Fortunately they were too far and escaped capture or worse.

For almost two-weeks it was smooth sailing for the boat, about the size of three small cars. However, no one aboard was an experienced sailor. The crew soon became disoriented and were lost at sea. When all hope seemed lost, they saw something in the distance that boosted their confidence. As they got closer, what they had thought to be land, turned out to be a U.S. Navy submarine. To Doan who was now age seven, it was surreal when the submarine's hatch opened. Luckily, his father was able to speak broken English and explained their situation to the submariners. The Americans gave them food and supplies

and pointed them toward Thailand. As the days went by the group grew restless, and tension rose when their supplies began to run low.

During the time people fleeing Vietnam became known as Vietnamese refugee boat people, hoping to start a new life. Unfortunately, they were fell victim to Thai pirate attacks. According to some accounts assaults were often brutal. The pirates would rape the women, kill all on board, including children, and then dump the bodies out to sea. "It was a scary time. We got pushed and hit, but nothing as extreme as some of the others you hear about," said Doan. Because most of the refugees aboard their boat weren't carrying a great deal of valuables the pirates eventually had nothing more to take. Doan's group were robbed many times. When there was nothing left to steal a pack of pirates stole their boat's engine, leaving the group to drift out to sea.

Dismayed, but not broken the group of refugees remained optimistic. After several days adrift another boat came by, but there was nothing for them to steal. However, to their good fortune it turned out to be Thai fisherman who provided them with food and helped pull them ashore. While making their way toward shore a Thai patrol boat intercepted them, instructing the fisherman to tow them back out to sea; far enough that land couldn't be seen.

"At that point everyone was out of ideas. I remember my mom telling me they thought about making a raft from what was available on the boat and putting the kids on it and trying to swim in," said Doan. So the group built a raft. When it was finished, just like they planned, all the children were loaded on top, but it wasn't strong enough and the raft flipped completely over. The adults scrambled to get it back around! When they did all the kids were still there, hanging on, it was crazy."

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[Across Oceans to Root Canals Pt. 2](#)

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By Naval Hospital Guam Public Affairs



When deciding on a career path for himself, Doan never thought of becoming a dentist and certainly had no interest joining the military.

Editor's Note: We continue with Cmdr. Vinh Doan's, director of dental services, Naval Hospital Guam, true story about escaping Vietnam and starting a new life with his family in the U.S.



“My job is to help folks, patients, our active duty and their dependents. That is what I do; provide a service—I just happen to be wearing a uniform as well.”

Eventually another group of fisherman came by, recommending that they get close to shore and make a hole in their boat, and sink it if another Thai patrol boat came by, and forced them back out to sea.

Sure enough, this time when they were once again intercepted by a Thai patrol boat they sunk their boat. Close to shore, the adults grabbed the kids, jumped into the ocean and swam the rest of the way to land. While the group swam warning gun shots came from the patrol boat, reminding them they weren't welcome in Thailand.

Doan remembers reached land his mom was crying and soon after a truck with a cage attached to its bed arrived out of nowhere. The group was rounded up and put in the cage until their captors could figure out what to do with them.

Even though the Thai government didn't want more refugees, the people of Thailand were very kind and generous and gave them food, water, and blankets. Eventually they were placed into a refugee camp with thousands of others. It was dirty and close to a cemetery. They slept in tents on bamboo beds and there were many mosquitoes.

After a gathering of the United Nations, many western nations agreed to open their doors to the refugees. Those who sought America as their new home required sponsorship. Doan and his family were sponsored by the Maxwell Presbyterian church in Kentucky.

“When we first arrived all I can remember is that everyone was tall and big,” said Doan.



After a gathering of the United Nations, many western nations agreed to open their doors to the refugees.

He fondly recalls the kind people who helped his family; Dr. M. Johnson, the Nadig family and many others. To this day he and his brothers refer to their main sponsors, the Logan's, as grandmother and grandfather.

Two weeks after arriving in America, his parents found work and the family was set up in government housing. While the church helped the family learn English, the children were enrolled in a nearby elementary school.

“There was no option, but to succeed. We sacrificed our life to come here,” said Doan.

When deciding on a career path for himself, Doan never thought of becoming a dentist and certainly had no interest joining the military. He made good grades and he began studying to become a medical doctor, but then realized that it might not be the right fit for him.

At the time he had a friend whose dad was a dentist. When Doan visited, his friend's dad told him to check out dentistry. Soon after Doan began volunteering at a dental school, discovering that dentistry was the perfect occupation combining medicine, science, art and patient care.



It has been a great journey and has defined who I am. I owe a lot to Navy Medicine.

Doan entered dental school. When he graduated he knew he didn't want to be stuck in a small town in Kentucky. He was uncertain of what he wanted to do or where he wanted to go, but after doing some research, he decided to join the U.S. Navy.

"It has been one of the best decisions I have made. It has been a great journey and has defined who I am. I owe a lot to Navy Medicine," said Doan. "I try to do what I can to help Sailors. I don't feel like I'm a great role model. The real heroes are my parents, but I do what I can to help out."

As Director of Dental Services, Doan appreciates his influence on decisions regarding things that happen in dentistry.

"I like the fact I have a voice. If something is headed in the wrong direction I can impact the outcome to better help patients, and the Navy. I always tell people, I am a naval officer, but also a provider," said Doan. "My job is to help folks, patients, our active duty and their dependents. That is what I do; provide a service—I just happen to be wearing a uniform as well."

Additional statistics:

From 1975 to 1985, two million Vietnamese attempted to escape to Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. Approximately 500,000 people drowned.

Between 1975 and 1979, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, between 200,000 and 400,000 boat people died at sea

U.S. studies show that between 1975 and 1979 private organizations placed approximately 220,000 Southeast Asian refugees within the U.S.