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THE WANDERERS FROM VUNG TAU

Troubled Odyssey of Vietnamese Fishermen

By HARVEY ARDEN

Photographs by STEVE WALL

THE STORY keeps changing even as I write, eluding my grasp like a handful of smoke. But let me tell you what I’ve learned, to this point anyway, about the extraordinary group of survivors I call the wanderers from Vung Tau—a people with the special knack of always riding the last wave out to freedom.

Composing but a single thread in the vast unraveling tapestry of humanity to flow out of Southeast Asia in the past six years, this close-knit group of Vietnamese fishermen and their families—numbering perhaps 1,300 persons in all—have made family togetherness the instrument of their survival.

Originally from North Vietnam, this particular group fled to South Vietnam after the 1954 Communist takeover, settled for a time around the resort and fishing town of Vung Tau, then fled again with the fall of South Vietnam in 1975—this time halfway around the planet (map, page 380).

Now they are recongregating in Biloxi, Mississippi, as one of several groups of Vietnamese fishermen scattered along the Gulf coast from Florida to Texas. But all their troubles are not behind them.

As one of the wanderers from Vung Tau expresses it: “All our lives we have been at war, have known nothing but war. First it was in Vietnam. Now it is here in America—a war for our people to be accepted.”

The poignant symbol of their exodus takes shape in a dockyard among the shrimp exchanges and cat-food factories of Biloxi’s Back Bay waterfront. Disentangling itself from milky fog drifting in off the Gulf of Mexico, the roughed-out wooden hull of a half-finished fishing boat emerges like an apparition. In the curve of its deck and its sweeping lines there’s a striking amalgam of Oriental and American boat design.

Up on the deck silhouetted workmen move about. The clamor of saws, hammers, axes, and an electric drill rings out on the raw January air in shrill counterpoint to the singsong chatter of workmen’s voices.

Crossing a dockyard graveled with crushed oyster and barnacle shells, I board the seeming phantom vessel via a makeshift ladder. With Ba Van Nguyen, co-owner and

EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of the possibility of reprisals against their relatives still living in Vietnam, and in light of some recent attacks in Vietnamese communities on the Gulf coast, the names of certain individuals mentioned in this article have been changed or omitted, at their request.

Mail call in Mississippi keeps refugee Chac Van Nguyen in close touch with his far-flung relatives. Having fled the 1975 Communist takeover of South Vietnam, he and his fellow fishermen now pool their resources to reunite their extended families in a new land that is, by turns, friendly, hostile, and bewildering.
With all the horrors the Indo-Chinese refugees have suffered, and suffer still, the fishermen from Vung Tau were fortunate in one respect—they were able to escape in their own boats.

While their old boats saved them, the first boats they bought in the United States led to trouble. A small Vietnamese shrimper (above) passes larger American counterparts in Empire, Louisiana. But the tranquility is deceptive, for local antagonism forced most Vietnamese fishermen to leave Empire. The Vung Tau contingent then took their hopes to nearby Biloxi, Mississippi, where somehow to their old life as fishermen, while others

The boat people—still they come

Biloxi, half a world from Vung Tau, is now the focus of the refugees' lives. After three evacuations and relocations, the wanderers from Vung Tau hope they have at last dropped anchor in their final port.

take any odd job available. A fortunate few have prospered; now there is even a jointly owned Vietnamese-American shipyard and shrimp-buying facility.

But tens of thousands of Vietnamese escapees remain mired in refugee camps scattered across Southeast Asia. Some will be resettled in the United States, but most will wait months, some even years, before a host country can be found.

In May 1981 alone, 14,300 Vietnamese escaped their country by boat, an upsurge that may be due in part to relaxed government vigilance, since many Vietnamese troops are tied down on the border with China and in Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Laos.

Vietnamese refugees newly arrived in the U.S. receive aid from individuals and from private and government agencies. They tend to be quickly self-supporting, and within five years their employment rate is the same as the average for all Americans. Indo-Chinese refugees (some 491,000, 70 percent of them Vietnamese) tend to settle where their families or compatriots are established; California has by far the largest number.

captain of this vessel-in-the-making, I unroll a map of Southeast Asia.

Ba’s eyes light up with recognition. He jabs a trembling finger to a point on the map just to the southeast of the city once called Saigon on the coast of the country once called South Vietnam.

“There!” he exclaims. “Vung Tau!”

A PEERS into the map as if seeing right through the colored ink and paper to a lost world of white sand beaches, forest-covered coastal mountains, thatch-and-bamboo villages, and blue-green seas that teem with fish, shrimp, and lobster ready for the taking.

He is moved, but can’t understand why a stranger would want to know his personal history. Because Ba speaks only rudimentary English, my translator, Hung Van Nguyen, a young Vietnamese fisherman nicknamed “Sonny,” helps to paraphrase:

We were always fishermen, back to the beginning of memory, long before we came to Vung Tau. We lived in the far north, near Haiphong. That was the happy time. We fished the seas and the seas fed us. Then came the Communists....

Ba recalls their 1954 takeover of North Vietnam that ended French rule.

Our people didn’t like the French, but we liked the Communists even less. They wanted to make us work like slaves. When the French left, we went out to the open sea where the big American ships were waiting for us. But we had to let our own fine boat drift away on the waves forever. That was the saddest time—the women cried. That was boat number one....

American ships took the fleeing fishermen to South Vietnam, resettling them in coastal towns, mainly around Phan Thiet.

There we built boat number two. Then, in 1968, the Communists bring the war to Phan Thiet, so we sail farther south, this time to Vung Tau. There we live and fish until 1975, when the Communists take over the whole country. Once more we went out to sea, and the American ships were waiting. Boat numbers two floated away on the waves, yes, but we saved our freedom.

Most of the families were taken to Guam, then, finally, to the United States, to be scattered across the land.
Catch weighed and counted, a Vietnamese crew relaxes as Sinh Van Nguyen talks shop with Biloxi shrimp buyer Larry Jones. Some buyers won't deal with the Vietnamese, and some local fishermen don't want them “poaching in our waters.” Others
respect them for their hard work and self-sufficiency. Some friction was understandable, since Vietnamese began to work waters already overfished and, at first, fouled nets of local shrimpers through ignorance of fishing regulations and customs.

Troubled Odyssey of Vietnamese Fishermen
Some families go to Minnesota, some to Pennsylvania, some to Oklahoma. The Americans don't understand that we want to keep our families together in one big family. And we don't like the cold weather. Many of us come to Louisiana, where it is warmer and we can fish for a living again.

But local Louisiana fishermen proved less than welcoming.

They say there's not enough shrimp and fish for all. They won't let us dock, won't buy our shrimp. They shoot our boats, make threats, chase us. But where can we go?

Then we find that, nearby, in Biloxi, people don't seem to mind so much if we come. We work hard, save our money, so we can start buying small fishing boats. We even start building new ones...

Ba smiles, rapping the solid cypress planking of his new vessel. "This," he says, "this is boat number three!"

Throughout their generation-long exodus the wanderers from Vung Tau have always kept what they call the big family together.

The big family—their notion of it is different from our own. We Westerners, too, have our nuclear family unit and our larger extended family. But among the Vietnamese people, the extended family is paramount, providing the context for the nuclear family.

Each small family unit pools its savings with the larger family, thus enabling family leaders to finance major projects—the buying of a home, the sending of a child to college, the building of a boat.

RICHARD GOLLOTT had no intention of getting involved in anything as epic as an exodus. He merely wanted to hire some extra oyster shuckers.

"That was early 1977," he remembers, sitting at his desk in the small office of Cap'n Gollott Seafood on Biloxi's Back Bay. "It was a bad time. We had two trailerloads of oysters and no one to shuck 'em. People just don't want to shuck oysters any more. The work's too messy, and it's just plain back-breaking to sit there on a little stool all day making the same motions hour after hour.

"Anyway, I heard about these Vietnamese refugees who'd been settling around New Orleans. We drove a van over there, picked up a dozen or so, and brought 'em back here to work during the day. I never saw people so eager to work! They wouldn't work for wages—wanted to be paid by the amount of work they did. They learned real quick, and pretty soon lots of 'em were making six or seven dollars an hour. What's more, they were honest—you could always
With only mental blueprints and yardsticks, a fisherman and a helper measure the spiling of the hull planking of a new boat (above). Every available member of the extended family volunteers for months of work, mainly with hand tools and chain saws, to finish a boat (below) for the start of the shrimp season.
leaves tools lying around and they would stay right there.

"But it was expensive driving to and from the New Orleans area every day. So we got two Vietnamese families to come and live here. Pretty soon others followed. Before you knew it, we had a whole community of Vietnamese refugees growing right here in Biloxi."

ENTER FATHER THANG, the fisherman priest who has played the role of a Moses to his people. Shortly after the first fishermen's families started gathering in Biloxi, this diminutive Vietnamese clergyman, a refugee himself, turned up at the Biloxi office of Roman Catholic Bishop Joseph Lawson Howze. He wanted to minister to the new Vietnamese community, he said. The bishop directed him to Monsignor Gregory Johnson of St. Michael's Church on the waterfront.

"These fishermen are Catholics, you know," Monsignor Johnson explains. "They are a very, very devout people, and Father Thang, or Father James as we call him, has become their shepherd here just as he was back in Vietnam.

"He fled from North to South Vietnam in 1954, then studied for the priesthood in Saigon while working as a taxi driver. After he was ordained in 1956, he went to Vung Tau and founded a church in the fishing village of Phuoc Tinh nearby. There he gathered his flock and kept them together.

"He's doing the same here, under what we call a spiritual apostolate—taking care of baptisms, marriages, services, Holy Communion, all their spiritual needs. He's also working to bring together families that have been separated, arranging to bring them down here to Biloxi."

A choir of indescribably sweet and angelic voices lured me into St. Michael's on a Saturday morning. Within, Father Thang officiated at a wedding of two young Vietnames, both from Vung Tau.

The black-garbed priest raised his hands in blessing over the youthful couple—the lovely bride, Nhut Thi Nguyen, in exquisite white gown, and the groom, Lam Thuy Nguyen, in a natty yellow tuxedo.

The sun beamed through the church's stained-glass windows, which depict the Apostles holding out a large net. It seemed particularly appropriate: the Apostles and Father Thang—all fishers of men.

I caught Father Thang after the ceremony, congratulating him for his work in bringing together the once scattered fishermen's families from the town of Vung Tau.

He shrugged. "I only do what I must do. The people come here, so I come here. I come here, so the people come here. It's all the same. We stay together.

"But, please, you must forgive me," he said, "I am needed. . . ." And off he went on another errand of the spirit, shepherding his wandering people.

BUT THERE ARE TROUBLES. The wanderers from Vung Tau want to do more than shuck oysters. They want to resume their lives as fishermen. Even before they came to Biloxi, the families around New Orleans—those that could scrape up the money—began buying whatever small fishing boats were available, many rusted and leaking. For a time whole families lived aboard these decrepit vessels.

A few started docking in Empire, Louisiana, an hour's drive from New Orleans.

"I've fished here all my life," a fisherman in Empire told me. "Mostly I keep to a certain territory. Then, all of a sudden, these Vietnamese start puttin' in here—35 or 40 boats at first, then more and still more. My catch went down a third this past year. I don't want them poachin' on me. We got a hard enough time makin' ends meet as it is."

The wanderers from Vung Tau quickly got the message that they were unwelcome. Signs appeared: No Vietnamese Wanted. Docking privileges for Vietnamese were sharply restricted. They found it hard to sell their catch to local shrimp and seafood buyers. There were even incidents of physical harassment and threats of worse—though no one was hurt. Not in Empire, anyway.

But over in Seadrift, Texas—450 miles away—the mounting violence exacted its toll. An American fisherman was shot and killed by a Vietnamese member of a group of fishermen similar to the one from Vung Tau. The case went to court. Verdict: justifiable homicide in self-defense, prompted by intolerable harassment. But this hardly mollified sentiments on either side.
Shrimping the beds off the Mississippi coast (above), some Vietnamese use old boats they have modified with larger cabins to add bunk and cooking space.

A license-plate slogan and a bumper sticker transmit contradictory messages (below) from the rear of a pickup. While trouble only simmers in Biloxi, it has boiled over in nearby Texas, where shootings have occurred and the Ku Klux Klan has accused Vietnamese fishermen of “Communist infiltration.”
It's all work and little play for Biloxi's struggling new Vietnamese community.

Seventeen-year-old Thuy Le (left) gets instructions from her new boss, James Moore, at a local fast-food restaurant. Some of her pay will be turned over to her parents, who will pool savings with other members of the extended family for joint expenses.

Crowding around a worktable at a shrimp unloading dock in Biloxi (below), Vietnamese girls and women prepare newly caught Gulf shrimp for shipment.

Out on the Gulf, retired U.S. Army Sgt. Bill Seaborn pilots his trawler (far right) as his wife, Hia, a Vietnamese war bride 13 years ago, culls trash fish from the catch with the help of refugee Le Van Loi.
TURNED AWAY from Empire, the wanderers from Vung Tau hoped to reassemble the scattered fragments of their lives in Biloxi.

“They nearly got turned away from here too,” the owner of a shrimp unloading dock told me. “There were threats, some sabotage of their boats and nets, the usual thing. But it was only a few people who got riled up.

“Shrimping’s been real bad these past few years. Too many fishermen already. And then we had heavy rains in April 1980 that ruined the spawning. Some locals blamed the Vietnamese for the drop in catch, but, heck, how can you blame them for that?

“Truth is, if we had a real abundance of shrimp, the big outside trawlers would come over here and scoop ’em up anyway. If you ask me, the Viets don’t make much difference. They’re catching a lot of shrimp no one else would try for. They don’t mind staying out longer hours, working the poor beds.

“Lots of places around here wouldn’t buy from ’em, but me and a few others. We figured, why not? This is America, isn’t it? These are hardworking, honest people. Good fishermen and good businessmen. Absolutely trustworthy.

“I’ve often tried to act as mediator when they have troubles with other people here in Biloxi. The language can be a real problem. The Vietnamese often find Gulf fishing rules and customs confusing.

“For instance, they like to shrimp from north to south like they did in Vietnam, while around here the boats traditionally move from east to west. Unless everyone moves the same way, trawl lines and nets get crossed and tangled. And they didn’t understand at first about light signals, docking procedures, all the fishermen’s rules of the road. This caused friction with the locals
and still does. But they’re getting the hang of it fast. Some folks still don’t like ’em, but we’re learning to live and let live.”

STOPPED in Thua’s grocery store on East First Street. Vietnamese pop music blared from a cassette player. Oriental groceries and sundries crowded the tightly spaced shelves. Near the counter a woman crouched before a large cardboard box filled with merchandise.

“She sends it to the family left in Vietnam,” Thua told me. Among the neatly packed contents: yards of fabric, toothpaste, aspirin and other medicines, monosodium glutamate, perfume, cosmetics, bicycle inner tubes, miscellaneous new clothing, including a pair of jeans.

“Most goes for the black market,” Thua said. “Today in Vietnam a family can live for weeks with the money they get for one pair of blue jeans. And if you get a bicycle through, the family can live for many months. The Vietnamese government taxes it heavily, of course. And much gets stolen—sometimes by Soviet soldiers, we hear. But still, some gets through.”

An elderly fisherman showed me faded photos of family members he is still trying to get out of Vietnam. He pulled out a list of names that he has submitted to the U.S. Catholic Conference Office of Migration and Refugee Services. It included his wife, two sons, three daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren—a dozen in all.

“They are my life,” he said simply. “I fill out many forms, but no one tells me when they will come. I keep waiting year after year after year. Perhaps the next time the telephone rings . . . .”

*Home is where the tradition is,* with the old ways cherished. There, life is little changed for the family of Chuc Van Nguyen (*below*), eating shrimp and rice with herbs and vegetables they grow in a small garden plot. Devout Catholics,
Under an agreement negotiated by the United Nations in 1979, the Vietnamese government has agreed to the orderly release of thousands of citizens, many with relatives already in the United States. But there's no telling who will be among them.

There are other methods of escape.

"Getting out a particular family member can take as much as $3,000 worth of gold," Thu said to me. "We send the money through an agent in Paris. He gets it to Vietnam. Then the government lets them go—but only after taking everything they own."

These, of course, are the "boat people." The original wave of wanderers from Vung Tau missed this particular horror: They had boats of their own, took along their savings, and escaped the routine brutalization by pirates that afflicted those who fled later.

"We had 350 people in one boat," recalls a fisherman who arrived in Biloxi in late 1980. "It takes only two and a half days to get to Malaysia, but pirates board our boat five times. They take our money, our clothes. They attack the women. They throw our water and rice into the sea. Twice they ram our boat and try to sink us.

"But then two big fish come up and keep us afloat until we reach Malaysia..."

Deliim? Folklore in the making?

Several times I heard similar stories of big fish, or whales, miraculously rescuing boat people at sea. Whales, I discovered, are sacred to these fishermen.

"One time I was going to shoot a whale that came up near our boat," my guide Sonny once told me. "My daddy, he scream and stop me. Never shoot a whale, he told me. They bring good fortune to fishermen."

Outside of Vung Tau, it happens, the

the Vung Tau fishermen share the use of a portable shrine of the Virgin Mary (right), which they reverently carry from home to home. Family members join in frequent communal prayer for reunification with relatives still in Vietnam.
The soft sway of a Vietnamese hammock and the cool breeze of an American
air conditioner give double comfort to three-year-old Mary Thi Vo.
bleached skeleton of a whale guards the town’s entrance. Who’s to say where symbolism ends and the miraculous begins?

"WHEN YOU REALIZE what these children have seen with those lovely eyes of theirs!” exclaimed Susan Hunt, principal of Biloxi’s Gorenflo Elementary School, as we toured her classrooms for several hours one weekday morning.

“They’re doing very well here. They excel in math and art, and most of them pick right up on English. They can speak it much better than their parents. At home they are the ones to answer the phone, read the mail, talk to visitors. But it does cause some problems within the family. Among the Vietnamese, children are traditionally seen, not heard. But here they know much more about what’s going on than their elders. It makes the parents feel inferior, and the children even start talking back—which used to be unheard of.

“But aren’t they beautiful?” Susan asked, as we sat down at a cafeteria table to share lunch with a group of Vietnamese children. One little girl’s sparkling eyes attracted mine. She looked perhaps eight, but Susan told me she was actually 14—old enough to remember the war, the boats, the pirates.

“Once in a while a few of the other children, they pick on us,” the girl told me. “They laugh at us and throw things. They call us names—Vietcong, gooks. They try to beat us up.” Her eyes gleamed with dark defiance. “But we don’t run away,” she said. “We don’t scare. . . .”

I ATTENDED A NIGHT CLASS in English as a Second Language at a local high school in Biloxi. Sponsored by the state of Mississippi and funded by the federal government, the classes are organized by program coordinator Jane O’Brien for Catholic Social and Community Services of Biloxi. Jane sat beside me as a score of young Vietnamese grappled with the maddening complexities of the English language.

“It’s a very difficult language for them,” Jane explained. “Cambodians, for instance, have an easier time learning English than the Vietnamese. English has so many sounds that don’t exist in Vietnamese, and vice versa. Even when it seems to them that they’re saying it right, it can be hard for an American to understand them.

“We teach classes entirely in English here. And what we teach you might call survival English—how to read signs, understand grocery advertisements, get on a bus. It makes no sense trying to teach grammar and parsing sentences to someone who can’t read a Fire Escape sign.”

She pointed out something else. “Do you notice,” she asked, “how the younger children walk compared with the older ones? Like Americans, with free-swinging steps instead of the smaller, tighter steps the older ones learned in Vietnam. And they don’t squat down on their haunches the way the older ones do. They’re becoming more and more Americanized.”

A MONTH LATER, while writing this story back in Washington, D.C., I see on TV that a group of Ku Klux Klan members in Texas have burned a mock Vietnamese fishing boat effigy, just before the start of the spring shrimping season. The image of the Klansmen with their torches and white hoods burns into my mind like a branding iron. What must the wanderers from Vung Tau be thinking as they watch the evening news in Biloxi? But, then, terror is nothing new to them. They’ve rarely lived without it.

I think of the little Vietnamese girl in Gorenflo Elementary School. Her words ring in my inner ear: “We don’t scare. . . .”

I remember, too, Ba Van Nguyen’s boat number three out there on the Biloxi waterfront, emerging ghostlike from the fog, its lines as graceful as a gull in flight.

And I wonder . . . I wish I didn’t but I do . . . has the exodus of the wanderers from Vung Tau ended yet?

Swinging between two worlds, young Christopher gets a push from his father, Hung Van Nguyen, known as Sonny, and sails toward his American mother, Veronica, in the yard of their Biloxi home. "My daddy, he still doesn’t accept Veronica," says Sonny, "but he say Christopher going to be one heck of a fisherman!"

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