

National History Challenge 2009

Triumph over Adversity

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Today, Vietnamese 'boat people' have successfully established many vibrant community centres throughout Australia. The success that 'boat people' have achieved is apparent, but do we know their stories? How did they triumph over adversity during their migration experience? How did the strength of their character help them to achieve their goals?

After 116 years of continuous conflict, Vietnam finally saw its independence at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 (Tucker, 1999). However, this was not good news for people who formerly stood on the side of South Vietnam because they did not want to live under the communist regime. Many of them risked their lives to escape from the ruins of post-war Vietnam and the communist government. A large number of these people arrived on Australia shores in fishing boats and were referred to as 'boat people'. However, before they could start a new life in Australia, they had to endure all sorts of hardships, from escaping the communist government and surviving the harsh voyage in fishing boats, to struggling with language barriers, racist views and employment disadvantages. 'Boat people' have truly triumphed over adversity. Today, Vietnamese refugees have successfully established many vibrant community centres throughout Australia. The success that 'boat people' have achieved is apparent but do we know the stories of adversity behind their triumph?

The continuous conflict in Vietnam and their persecution by the communist government were the reasons why 'boat people' decided to find a new life elsewhere, knowing difficulties were imminent. The Vietnam war broke out between North Vietnam and South Vietnam in 1965. The war brought conflict and destruction to rural areas of Vietnam; many were killed, injured, or left homeless. In 1975, South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam and the communist government took control (Tucker, 1999). Although the war stopped, peace did not return because the new government soon started to imprison or execute people who were said to have supported South Vietnam during the war. Land and property were taken away by the government. Religion was banned (Courtney and Massola, 2004). Most people lived in poverty with little freedom of speech. Since 1975, more than 575,000 Vietnamese have fled the country by sea, an unknown number have died or kidnapped and never heard from again (Archives of Vietnamese Boat People, n.d.). Vietnam had experienced many conflicts in the past, but never before had so many people left the country; people were so afraid for their safety that they left in their thousands.

The first trial for the 'boat people' was to master their fear of being caught and punished by the government as they left their shattered homes behind. If people were caught trying to escape, they were imprisoned. Boats were organised secretly. People had to pay a large sum of money in gold to get a place on the boat (Courtney and Massola, 2004). Many families faced separation if they could not afford to escape together. Those families would pay for one member of the family to escape and he or she was supposed to sponsor the rest of the family after settling in destinations such as Australia. Jack Ly and two hundred others left Saigon by boat on Christmas Day and escaped from Vietnam on New Year's Day, 1979 (Courtney and Massola, 2004). They chose to escape on those two days because the police were distracted by celebrations. Instead of celebrating, Jack and his family were running for their lives. It took a lot of courage for people to escape Vietnam, knowing the consequence they might face but they knew in order to succeed, they had to be courageous, even if it meant risking their lives.

On the journey to reach their destination, 'boat people' had to survive some extremely adverse conditions. The fishing boats they travelled in were leaky and overcrowded. The boats were not designed to sail in open seas, therefore it was extremely dangerous during storms. Some boats were lucky enough to be rescued by naval ships and transferred to refugee camps in Hong Kong, Thailand or other South-Eastern Asian countries. The passengers of these boats would then wait to be interviewed by Australian Immigration officers. Those who passed the interview would be transported to Australia via airplanes or ships. However, many 'boat people' were already on the brink of death before they were rescued or arrived at a port. There was not enough water or food to sustain them during their journey. They relied on rainwater for their fresh water supply but their boat would be at risk of sinking in the rain. A large number of the refugees became terribly ill and seasick,

some died from sickness or dehydration. According to the report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately one third of Vietnamese 'boat people' died as a result of storms, illness and food shortages whilst at the sea (Archives of Vietnamese Boat People, n.d.). The worst danger of all came from the Thai pirates. When the 'boat people' faced a pirate boat, they were absolutely defenseless. The pirates would rob them of all of the money and valuables they had (Vo, 2005). Out of the 455 boats that landed in Thailand in 1983, 352 of them were attacked for an average of 3.2 times. 571 refugees were killed by the pirates and 599 women were raped (Archives of Vietnamese Boat People, n.d.). Hue, 35 at the time of interview, recalled that on the third day of their journey, a pirate raped her as ten other pirates clapped and cheered in a circle. They then beat her with such force that she had to undergo surgery to reconstruct her mutilated breasts (Archives of Vietnamese Boat People, n.d.). Such horrific experiences are certain to be a nightmare for the victims, but in order to survive and tell their stories and those of others who did not survive, they had to recover from these terrible memories. By not giving up hope and living with their experiences, the 'boat people' triumphed over adversity once more, helped by their determination to survive.

The first boat to arrive in Australia, was a 17-metre fishing vessel carrying five Vietnamese which landed in Darwin Harbour on the 26th of April, 1976 (Farouque, 2006). Within three years, a further 53 refugee boats arrived on Australian shores (Immigration Museum Victoria, 2009). Following a request by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees on 11th of November, 1976, Australia agreed to take more Vietnam refugees. By the end of 1979, 2011 Vietnamese arrived in Australia, although many more died during the 'perilous voyage' (Thompson, 2007). The vast majority of the 90 000 Vietnamese were transported to Australia from various Asian refugee camps in South-East Asia countries (Courtney and Massola, 2004). The welcome of the 'boat people' also signed the end of the 'White Australia Policy' and the start of multiculturalism in Australia. 'Boat people' have combated the remaining prejudice and racism in the Australian society and helped to change forever the Australia they have sailed to.

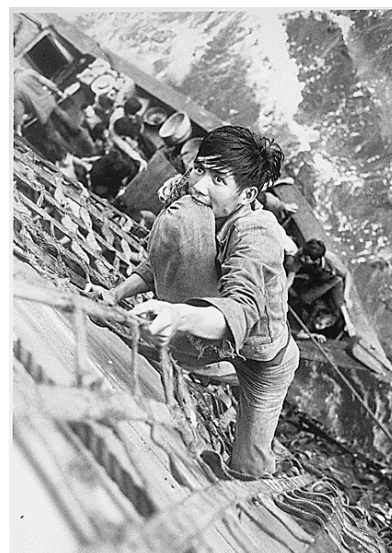


Figure 1: A Vietnamese refugee with his belongings secured in between his teeth, climbs a cargo net to the deck of an American navy ship 'White Plains'. The ship is picking up 29 refugees from a 35 foot wooden boat on 30th July 1979. (Image: Naval Photographic Centre, National Archives of US.)



Figure 2: Vietnamese 'boat people' in Darwin Harbour aboard several small wooden fishing vessels which brought 259 Vietnamese to Australia in November 1977. (Image: National Archives of Australia.)

Upon their arrival in Australia, the refugees struggled to start afresh. However, the surviving spirit they had shown on the voyage helped them to settle in quickly. Many 'boat people' were firstly housed in migrant hostels. There were no family members waiting to help them settling in or tell them about the Australian way of life. No Vietnamese community existed back then to provide the early refugees with company and support (Chapman 2007). Refugees who were separated from their family in the haste of flight, often experienced loneliness. Like any other group of migrants, 'boat people' had to deal with homesickness. However, with a hard-working attitude many 'boat people' had, they soon triumphed over these early problem. This hard-working attitude also helped them to overcome the language barrier.

Most 'boat people' spoke or understood very little English when they first arrived. Many of the adults could not take English classes due to the poor English as a Second Language programmes offered at the time. The work load they took to earn a living and save money also prevented many from going to school. Some 'boat people' only learnt English through work, but they eventually learnt enough English to communicate and live comfortably. It was easier for younger refugees. 'I had zero English when I came here', said Kenny, 27 at the time of interview, who came on a boat as a child (Farouque, 2006). He later went to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and now enjoys a successful career in the IT field (Farouque, 2006). Kenny is only one of the many 'boat people' who have triumphed over the language barrier thanks to their hard-working attitude.

Another challenge the Vietnamese 'boat people' had to face was racism and intolerance from a minority of the local community. This they had to face alongside the 'dislocation' of being refugees (Jakubowicz, 2007). Some procedures the refugees had to follow when they applied for Australian visas or formally entered the country made them feel unwelcome and discriminated against. 'Before we boarded the plane to Australia, we were sprayed with an insecticide which was meant to kill lice and fleas - this made us feel bad', Anna Wang recounted (Courtney and Massola, 2004). Such experiences as being being sprayed with insecticide was interpreted as an insult. Anna is now settled with her husband and three children. She volunteers to help people from Vietnam with gambling problems: 'Australia accepted me as a citizen and gave me the chance to start a new life. Now is the time to give back to this country.' (Courtney and Massola, 2004). As a young 'boat child', Kenny experienced unfriendliness from his peers: 'They use to call me Dim Sum, but I just ignored it' (Farouque, 2006). White children often made fun of oriental objects and students from an Asian background. Racism was still common during the 1970s and many refugees suffered from unofficial discrimination, yet the strong-minded 'boat people' always lived according to their own values and triumphed over racist views by gradually being accepted into Australian society.

Securing employment became the next challenge the 'boat people' had to overcome. As soon as they arrived, many Vietnamese began to save money to sponsor their family members back in Vietnam. This not only put pressure on the new arrivals, but it was difficult to save money because they often had to work in low-paid jobs. Many skilled workers back in Vietnam had to abandon their jobs in their haste to flee the country and others had been put out of work when the communists invaded. Very few could find jobs in their own professions in Australia and they were forced to accept whatever jobs were available. People who had formerly been business managers in Saigon became fruit pickers and factory shift workers in Australia (Chapman 2007). Many women from Vietnam worked in the clothing industry as outworkers. They were poorly paid and were often denied of the benefits of a worker such as sick leave. Hien Tran, an Vietnamese outworker, said that 'I found out that I was not fairly paid, and yet I still had to work... When I looked for another job, I couldn't find one at the time I needed it... At daytime we go to English class, at nighttime we sew at home' (Australians At Work, 2001). Many women were forced to work as outworkers to sustain their families.

Outworker remains an issue today. It is yet another difficulty 'boat people' have to deal with. Even though work was hard for the newly arrived 'boat people', they believed that any form of paid work was better than unemployment. This realisation helped them to maintain a connection with Australian society through the workplace as they often became friends with their workmates which made socialising with local people possible. The 'boat people' saw education as a way to beat unemployment and poverty: 'For Vietnamese, their children are their future, they are making money for them, and the children will go on to university' (Vietnamese Outworkers in Brisbane, 2004). As a result, the descendants of 'boat people', 'Generation Two', were often well educated and able to overcome the obstacle of difficult employment.

The tables below contain evidence of Vietnamese's success in seeking employment. Five years after the initial landing of the first group of 'boat people' (Figure 1), 80% of Vietnamese worked as labourers and tradesman. Twenty years after (Figure 2), Vietnamese population were employed in a range of occupations. Today, one in four Vietnam-born people is a white collar professional (Immigration Museum Victoria, 2009 - entry no. 8). This enormous improvement was due to the early migrants' vision of education; 'boat people' always give their children the best opportunity possible to receive higher education and often have high expectations of them. They had triumphed in the employment sector through education and hard-work.

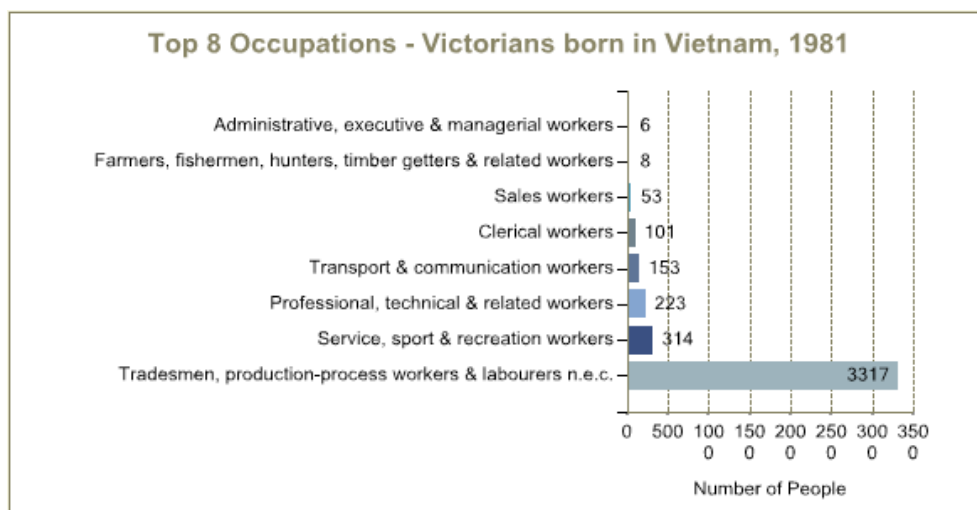


Figure 3: the top 8 occupations for Victorians born in Vietnam in 1981. (Chart obtained via <http://museumvictoria.com.au>)



Figure 4: the top 8 occupations of Victorians born in Vietnam in 1996. There was a dramatic change in the type of occupation Vietnamese migrants had; a very big improvement in a relatively short amount of time. (Chart obtained via <http://museumvictoria.com.au>)

The prosperity of today's Vietnamese communities is further evidence of their triumph over the adversities they encountered during their settlement in Australia. Many Vietnamese cultural centres sprung from suburbs such as Gootsray and Richmond in Melbourne, Cabramatta in Sydney, and Croydon Park in Adelaide where the population of Vietnamese refugees were concentrated (Jakubowicz, 2007). These areas and the small businesses of 'boat people' gradually transformed into vibrant restaurants and retail centres. Victoria Street near Richmond is the home to many Vietnamese restaurants and grocery stores. These places are very important to the 'boat people' and new migrants in sourcing daily supply of authentic ingredients and help them to remain in connection with their culture. The development of these suburbs is further evidence of 'boat people's' persistence and survival spirit. The liveliness of these Vietnamese communities is also testimony to the triumph and achievement of Vietnamese people in Australia.

Today, with 1% of Australia's total population being Vietnamese descendants and the flourishing Vietnamese communities throughout Australia, the once called 'boat people' are rightly very proud of their achievement. 'Boat people' have much to tell about what they overcame in order to succeed. Firstly they had to escape from their homeland not knowing where the boats would take them. As they sailed away into the open sea, starvation and pirates made this 'Voyage of Hope' extremely dangerous. When they finally arrived in Australia, starting a new life presented many obstacles such as homesickness, unemployment and racism. During the four stages of their migration, 'boat people' faced many adversities. However, these hard times could not stop the Vietnamese from thriving in this new country. 'Boat people' triumphed over many adversities as a result of the strength of their character and the courage, persistence, hard-working and resilience they displayed as they clung to a belief in freedom and a determination to flourish on this land. The Vietnamese in Australia have made and will continue to make contributions to our society and enrich its culture. The Australia they sailed into over 30 years ago is forever changed for the better.

(word count: 2447)

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This short video provides visual material of outworkers' working condition and a primary account of their experience.

Boat People: A Refugee Crisis. (2000). CBC Digital Archives, Toronto. [Online]. <http://www.archives.cbc.ca> (30 August 2009).

This article gives useful facts on Vietnamese refugees but some of the data was Canadian based.

Chapman, Garry. (2007). *Multicultural Australia - The Vietnamese in Australia*. Macmillan Education, South Yarra, Victoria.

This book contains useful and informative primary sources and secondary sources. Photographs in this book are also visual evidence relevant to 'boat people'.

Courtney, Luois. Massola, Linda. (2004). *Australian Immigration Stories 1960-1980*. Heinemann Library, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

This book contains two 'boat people' case studies, with information on their reason for escaping, how they survived the journey and the problems they faced as well as how they live now. Quotes are also contained which are very useful as primary sources.

Dan Nyugen's story. (2008). Imperial War Museum, London. [Online]. <http://www.throughmyeyes.org.uk> (30 August 2009).

This webpage provides a story about a Vietnamese refugee child in Britain along with some primary accounts. This website also provides images of refugees from various sources (Figure 1).

Farouque, Farah. (2006). '30 years ago today, the first Vietnamese boat people arrived'. *The Age*. Melbourne, 26 April 2006. [Online] <http://www.theage.com.au> (23 August 2009).

This newspaper article highlights a story of a family who were once 'boat people'. Kenny's own description of the difficulties and unfriendliness he encountered was useful as a primary source. Other information on the size of Vietnamese population at different times and their occupation is also helpful.

Horrible Statistics of Thai Pirates vs Vietnamese Refugees. (n.d.). Archives of Vietnamese Boat People, US. [Online]. <http://www.vietka.com> (30 August 2009).

This document includes information sourced from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on pirate attacks and the number of deaths, rapes and abductees from 1981 to 1983 for refugee boats that landed in Thailand. This website also provides other stories of 'boat people', including primary accounts.

Image Gallery. (2009). Immigration Museum Victoria, Melbourne. [Online]. <http://museumvictoria.com.au> (23 August 2009).

The gallery provides visual evidence of the conditions of boat people departing for Australia from South-East Asia ports. (Figure 2)

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Lawton, Lindl. (ed.). (2006). *Tu Do Refugee Boat c. 1970s*. Migration Heritage Centre, NSW. [Online]. <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au> (24 August 2009).

The review includes analysis of the usefulness of the visual evidence and helped me to better understand the journey of 'boat people'.

Pung, Alice. (ed.). (2008). *Growing up Asian in Australia*. Schwartz Media, Melbourne.

This collection consists of short stories by various author who grew up as Asians in Australia. The stories reveal a lot about the emotional and practical difficulties Asian migrants have experienced. It inspired me to research on the experience of a group of Asian migrants and how they have triumphed over adversity. The editor Alice Pung is also an inspirational person who has a lot of influence on me.

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This source provides some accurate data and processed information, mainly on the employment of Vietnamese population in Australia and key dates in the Vietnamese migration history.

Thompson, Stephen. (2007). Collection Description: *Vietnamese Model Fishing Boat c.1980*. Migration Heritage Centre, NSW. [Online]. <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au> (24 August 2009).

This article provides an overview on the journey of the 'boat people' and how they changed Australian society forever. The website also includes a picture of a model boat made by a Vietnamese refugee when he was in a Malaysia refugee camp. This is an excellent opportunity to examine a primary object.

Tucker, Spencer. (1999). *Vietnam*. University Press of Kentucky, US. [Online]. <http://books.google.com.au> (27 August 2009).

The online PDF files provides primary and detailed secondary sources on the Vietnam War.

Vietnam Country Brief. (2009). Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ACT. [Online]. <http://www.dfat.gov.au> (25 August 2009).

This webpage contains a paragraph on *The Vietnamese Community in Australia* and some good overviews. It also includes other relevant and reliable information for all aspects of Vietnam, which is helpful when familiarizing with the subjects of my essay.

Vietnamese Outworkers in Brisbane. (2004). University of Queensland, Brisbane. [Online]. <http://www.uq.edu.au> (30 August 2009).

This report provides comprehensive information on the outworkers, their motives and current issues. It also contains some primary sources. The report's URL was found on Australian Policy Online (<http://apo.org.au>).

Vo, M Nghia. (2005). *The Vietnamese boat people, 1954 and 1975-1992*. McFarland, Jefferson NC, US. [Online]. <http://books.google.com.au/> (30 August 2009).

The chapter 'Southeast to Australia' includes three case studies, one of them is of the group of Vietnamese first arrived in Darwin on April 26, 1976. This is the most detailed reference to this group of boat people.